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6. Rome: The Barbarians

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6. Rome: The Barbarians

Abstract

North of the Rhine and Danube Rivers there lived people known to the Romans as Germans, and often called the barbarians. One of the meanings of the word "barbarian" refers to people who are uncivilized in the sense that they are primarily pastoral and semi-nomadic; they lack a written language; and they possess little in the way of government except in time of war, which may be frequent, since warfare and hunting are usually the chief preoccupation of the males. What agriculture barbarians have generally is carried on by women and slaves. This description fits their northern neighbors at the time the Romans first came in contact with them and for centuries thereafter. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Rome, Greece, Germans, barbarians, Baltic Sea, uncivilized people

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Cultural History | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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6. The Barbarians

[North of the Rhine and Danube Rivers there lived people known to the Romans as Germans, and often called the barbarians. One of the meanings of the word "barbarian" refers to people who are uncivilized in the sense that they are primarily pastoral and semi-nomadic; they lack a written language; and they possess little in the way of government except in time of war, which may be frequent, since warfare and hunting are usually the chief preoccupation of the males. What agriculture barbarians have generally is carried on by women and slaves. This description fits their northern neighbors at the time the Romans first came in contact with them and for centuries thereafter.]

In the four centuries preceding the empire, the Germans had maintained a slow but steady movement southward from the shores of the Baltic toward the Rhine and the Danube. Republican armies had turned them back to the Elbe, on which Caesar Augustus had once hoped to establish a northern frontier. Although during the Pax Romana there was almost constant petty fighting along the frontier (which for a time extended beyond the rivers in the extreme west and extreme east), there was also a certain degree of accommodation. Germans, especially those in the west, could observe Roman Civilization in its military outposts across the border and could receive some of its material benefits from traders who visited their settlements. By this time, the Germans were approaching civilization by developing agriculture and a more settled, complex life. It was with an attitude of fascination, awe, and envy that German eyed Roman.

This particular modus vivendi was upset when, for reasons that are not clear, a tribe of Germans known as the Goths began moving from their homes toward the Danube River and the Black Sea. The migration set other tribes in motion, and beginning about 165 the resultant pressures were felt along the imperial frontier. The Romans defeated the Goths in a decisive battle (269), but then evacuated a province beyond the Danube which they had held for more than two centuries and subsidized (or bribed) the Goths with large sums to keep them on friendly terms.

A new accommodation, a sort of coexistence, resulting from this turn of events, lasted during roughly a century of relative peace, from about 275 to 375. Along the Roman side of the frontier, many barbarians were given land and occasionally whole tribes were settled, made allies of Rome, and put under obligation to protect the empire from other barbarians. Even earlier than this, during the second century, the government had settled Germans in small numbers on empty lands deep within the empire, both to relieve the pressure and to assist declining agriculture. As it became increasingly difficult to recruit for the imperial army, Germans were drawn into the military service. By the fourth century, they were in the majority in the ranks; and then, by the fifth century, in the command posts. In time they were chosen to fill positions in the civil service as well. During the fourth century, many of the barbarians were Christianized, although it was the Arian rather than the orthodox faith which they adopted. The chief missionary among the Goths apparently compiled an alphabet and translated the Bible into Gothic, providing the first known German literature.

[It is interesting to speculate on how the subsequent course of European history might have been changed had this slow and rather peaceful infiltration of men, women, children, and herds, with its inevitable intermixing and intermarriage of peoples, been allowed to continue for several centuries. But such was not to be the case. From out of western Asia about 375 there stormed a band of ferocious barbarians, known in history as the Huns, who finally entrenched themselves in east-central Europe, with Hungary as their base. Until their defeat and disappearance from Europe shortly after 450 they collected subsidies from the Eastern emperor and mounted sporadic raids in many directions.]

The appearance of the Huns set in motion a new phase in the barbarian penetration of the Roman Empire, which lasted for more than two centuries. If the previous phases can be described as infiltration, this phase can be called invasion. The Visigoths (West Goths), perhaps 200,000 strong, crossed the Danube as an entire people in flight from the Huns. At first given permission to enter, they were so badly treated by imperial officials that they rebelled and defeated the Romans in the battle of Adrianople (378), referred to in the previous section. After overrunning the Balkans and Italy -- sacking Rome in 410 -- they marched into Gaul, finally after more than

forty years in the empire establishing what was virtually an independent kingdom in southern France and northern Spain. They settled down among the earlier inhabitants, who greatly outnumbered them, on lands granted by the Roman government.

This pattern was repeated, with variations in each case, as other tribes followed the example of the Visigoths. There was, it seemed, nothing which could be done to stop them. The Vandals, in fleeing from the Huns, swept into Italy, Gaul, Spain, and finally (about 430) were driven into North Africa, from which they raided Rome in 455. The Burgundians, in fleeing from the Huns, were given refuge by a Roman governor of Gaul (443) in the Rhone valley. After the Romans withdrew their garrisons from Britain, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes began the invasion of that island, about 450. There were other tribes, such as the Alemanni, Ostrogoths, and later the Lombards, but of these only one needs mention here: the Salian Franks.

[The Salian Franks were probably the most important of all the barbarian tribes. From their homes on the lower Rhine, they began moving into northern Gaul early in the fifth century. Unlike that of most other barbarians, their movement was in the nature of an expansion rather than an invasion. They were able to preserve their own identity and homogeneity in a way that was impossible for tribes such as the Visigoths or the Vandals. Furthermore, they were often loyal allies of Rome, helping defeat the Huns and campaign against other barbarians.]

[Only a few years after the deposition of the last Western Roman emperor, a Frankish chieftain named Clovis set out on a remarkable career (481-511). He seized the last Roman territory in Gaul; he extended his power over virtually all of the Franks; he began conquering other barbarian tribes; and when he died he could claim (but he could not actually govern) a kingdom almost as large as modern France. The Eastern emperor recognized Clovis as a consul of the Roman Empire, a gesture which Clovis undoubtedly welcomed, since in his way he had a deep respect for Roman culture. Finally, in the year 496 he and his followers became orthodox Christians.]

The events described in the preceding paragraph contain the germ of Western Civilization. The constituent elements are there in the year 500: German, Greco-Roman, and Christian. These elements could be brought together by the Franks better than by almost any other of the barbarian tribes, the majority of whom were Arian Christians, far outnumbered by the people among whom they settled, and exposed to attack. The other barbarian kingdoms disappeared, but the Franks remained, and Gaul became France. In northwestern Europe another accommodation between Roman and barbarian was now being made possible, from which eventually was to emerge a new civilization. To this accommodation the Franks brought their own limited culture, the physical strength of their bodies, and a capacity to learn. Although the Roman Empire had collapsed in the West with no

immediate possibility of reviving it, there was remaining a very valuable deposit of Roman culture with its many Greek strands which the Franks could attempt to assimilate. And there was a religious faith which had demonstrated its vitality by spreading through the Roman Empire, victorious over numerous competing beliefs.