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Corsi e ricorsi storici or Why We Can't Stop Obsessing About the Fall of Rome

By presenting a 'traditional' interpretation of the role of barbarians and imperial borders, the lecture of Alexander Demandt entitled "Römisch-germanische Grenzpolitik" provides a learned, attractive, and quite convincing narrative of the fall of the Roman Empire. My contribution expands on a few aspects of Demandt's lecture and aims to highlight how the historian's interpretation of the fall of Rome fits within the contemporary academic and public debates about borders and migration.

Keywords: the fall of Rome / Late Antiquity / barbarian migrations / historiography / uses of the past

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Alexander Demandt is one of the most influential late antique historians of the last forty years.¹ In his short but dense essay, Demandt showcases his profound understanding of the sources and his undeniable capacity to formulate an argument in a captivating manner, a quality not always shared by many of his colleagues.

In the last fifty years² a widespread and renewed interest in Late Antiquity³ has recognized the period as an independent subject of historical research and challenged once dominant interpretations that characterized it as culturally stagnant, economically depressed, and politically in disarray. Today, even though historians are far from reaching an agreement on how traumatic the transition between the Roman and Medieval world was, or even from establishing when and where Late Antiquity started and ended, the implementation and further refining of old and new research methods,

¹ I wish to thank Danuta Shanzer for her invaluable feedback and the members of her *Privatissimum* for their advice.

² A most influential publication for the following debates was Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*, BROWN 1971.

³ A scholarly phenomenon defined as an 'esplosione di tardoantico' in GIARDINA 1999.

as well the intensive collaboration of experts across national and disciplinary boundaries, have greatly improved our understanding of this period.

In the on-going debate between historians who see Late Antiquity mostly in terms of ‘transformation’ and ‘change’, and those who cling to the analytical categories of ‘decline and fall’, Alexander Demandt has played a key role, especially when it comes to understanding the political events and institutional developments. He clearly enters the fray on the side of ‘decline and fall’ by highlighting the inability of the Roman authorities to adapt their policies to the new socio-economic circumstances they faced and by stressing the importance of phenomena of a military nature, such as the ‘barbarization’ of the Roman army, the creation of a ‘military nobility’,⁴ and the development of ‘personal armies’ in defiance of the Roman imperial aspiration to a monopoly of violence.

The paper in question, the written version of a lecture that was to have been delivered at the ÖAW in Vienna in December 2, 2021, is another work in which Demandt demonstrates his mastery of narrative. By presenting the fall of the Western Roman Empire as an event that developed in a linear pattern, he offers a clear, almost reassuringly inevitable explanation. He sketches the main factors behind this political collapse using a simple dichotomy of Rome versus barbarians. Thus, he offers a grand narrative, a *Meistererzählung* of events,⁵ that abounds with historical data and provides a generally plausible answer both for scholars and for the general public as to how and why Rome fell.

In this response, I will focus on a few aspects of Demandt’s lecture that merit particular attention and might spark further discussion. Overall, my take is that the main strength of this paper, how it explains the end of the Roman Empire in a clear and persuasive manner, is simultaneously its main weakness. First, as a written version of a lecture, the text does not contain the caveats that a different format would have allowed. For instance, the ethnonym ‘*Germanen*’ is used as a collective term for describing what are in fact very different groups of barbarians. With this terminology the lecture makes the subject matter accessible, but risks papering over the complexity of the events.⁶

Second, Demandt’s analysis seems to imply that morality, or better, the lack thereof, played a significant role in the outcome of historical processes. Thus, the negative impact of wealth on the military preparedness of the Romans and the alleged proclivity of the *Germanen* for violence are presented as self-evident. Such arguments are not necessarily, or even

⁴ DEMANDT 1980.

⁵ REXROTH 2007.

⁶ On the meanings of this ethnic name and category, WOLTERS 2020.

totally, unfounded, but the essay does not problematize them nor does it recognize the many exceptions to these supposed rules.⁷

If these aspects are perhaps only a consequence of the format – after all such lectures should provide a general picture and a straightforward argument, aims perfectly achieved by Demandt – there are two specific points that merit further investigation. First, Demandt tends to present the barbarians exclusively as military enemies of the empire or at the receiving end of imperial policy, i.e., as subjects to be chastised. Thus, for instance, while he rightly highlights the importance of deportations of non-Roman populations in both the early and the later empire, he downplays the agency of barbarians in resisting, adapting, or benefiting from Roman policies. Barbarians were not always purely external forces, but could shrewdly engage with Roman political actors and instrumentalize imperial internal strife for their own benefit. In particular, barbarian leaders could exploit the divergence of interests between the two halves of the empire in order to foster their own political and military agendas. For example, Alaric was twice let off the hook (in 395 and 397), when his army could have faced total annihilation, thanks to antagonisms between the Roman authorities,⁸ and Attila exploited a court scandal, the so-called ‘Honorius affair’, to legitimize his attack to the Western Roman Empire.⁹

This ability to infiltrate the Roman political arena is mirrored by the narratives presenting barbarian movements not as invasions of unstoppable hordes, but as the consequences of Roman treason. The Greek and Latin authors who describe the generals Bonifatius and Narses inviting the Vandals into Africa and the Lombards into Italy out of fear of the Roman central authorities, portray military campaigns and political conflicts as personal vendettas and failures of integrity.¹⁰ Although such texts fulfil the primary rhetorical purpose of using the past to preach morals – the main villains in these narratives are women, Roman empresses envious of generals’ successes – there is no escaping the fact that they depict barbarians as ‘playing grown-up games’, that is to say, as being fully integrated into the power dynamics of the time. Add to these the series of Roman military officials of barbarian origins, such as Bauto, Stilicho, and Ricimer, whose

⁷ For example, barbarian invasions could be repelled by defences mustered on a local level. See the Augsburg Victory Altar, attesting a victory over the Juthungi in 260, and the Athenian militia that fought against the Heruli in 267. For the text, photos, and a large bibliography on the Victory Altar, <http://lupa.at/6338>; on the Herulian invasion in Attica, CHIOTI 2021. In general, on the role of local militias, BRUNT 1975.

⁸ See the overview in HUGHES 2010, 81–87. For the campaign in 397, BURRELL 2004.

⁹ See the reflections in MEIER 2017.

¹⁰ On Bonifatius and the Vandals, WIJNENDAELE 2015, esp. 74–78. On Narses and the Lombards, and a possible interpretation of the ‘invitation narrative’ within a Byzantine policy against the Frankish threat, MARAZZI 2019.

biographies make it difficult to draw a hard boundary between Roman and barbarian identities. These narratives and historical figures suggest that it is best to analyse developments in both worlds as densely interlocked, rather than as frozen in a unidirectional cause-effect relationship.

A new body of numismatic evidence confirms this proactive role of barbarians in Roman politics and suggests considerable and sophisticated economic integration between the empire and *Barbaricum*.¹¹ The wealth of coins found in *Barbaricum* challenges the idea of any clear-cut distinction between the prosperous empire and a starving barbarian world. In particular, the numerous imitations of Roman coins struck by barbarian elites in Central and Eastern Europe reveal the entrepreneurship of barbarian aristocracies in matters of economic policy and their integration into super-regional networks. The capture of the imperial treasure at the battle of Abritus in 251 and of the local mint of Alexandria Troas in 262, connected with the deportation of craftsman with invaluable know-how, sparked Gothic production of imitative coins on a large scale, that would later spread across *Barbaricum*.¹² If imitations of gold coins have commonly been interpreted as ritual or prestige objects, silver imitations, which were often not pierced nor provided with a loop, could serve as means of payment or for hoarding and are therefore a symptom of a society highly receptive of technological and economic developments.¹³

Another feature that I would like to focus on is Demandt's representation of Roman frontiers. Roman borders are essentially presented as linear barriers. However, this mental image of a frontier mirrors the reality of modern national borders rather than the *limes* of the Roman Empire.¹⁴ This is not to say that the Roman Empire knew no borders, as vaunted by the idea of an *imperium sine fine*, but to highlight that Roman authorities did not exercise a level of control over transregional population movements and commercial activities comparable to that of modern states. Even though the state bureaucracy expanded in Late Antiquity, it remained small and underequipped and hence unequal to regulating movements of peoples, given the vast territorial extension and the population of the empire.¹⁵ Furthermore, the European borders of the empire, as embodied in the rivers

¹¹ I am referring in particular to the results produced by the project 'IMAGMA: Imagines Maiestatis. Barbarian Coins, Elite Identities and the Birth of Europe'. On this, see the site, www.imagma.eu.

¹² BURSCH & MYZGIN 2015 and 2020.

¹³ DYMOWSKI 2019; MYZGIN et al. 2020.

¹⁴ Specifically on Roman frontiers, fundamental studies published in the 1990s are ISAAC 1990; LEE 1993; WHITTAKER 1994; ELTON 1996. On the role played by frontiers in the development of late and post-Roman ethnic identities, POHL et al. 2001; CURTA 2005. See also GRAHAM 2006; HEKSTER & KAIZER 2011.

¹⁵ EICH 2011.

Rhine and Danube, two great recognizable dividing physical barriers, adjoined a mosaic of polities that were often instable and whose own boundaries frequently changed.

In fact, if there was ever any sort of linear frontier, the kind of boundary sketched out by Demandt, it might have been the Roman-Persian border, which however is not discussed.¹⁶ Both literary, epigraphic, and legal evidence attests the presence of custom houses (*telonea*) in the border cities of this frontier. On the Roman-Persian frontier, the movement of persons could be regulated, even if not prevented. In his *Vita Malchi*, for example, Jerome recounts the life of Malchus, a *colonus* from Nisibis, who, having decided to leave his paternal home to avoid an unwanted marriage, had to travel to the West, because the tense situation on the frontier with Persia prevented him from journeying East.¹⁷ Similarly, Egeria, the female pilgrim who wrote a justly famous account of her journey to the Holy Land, was unable to visit Ur, the hometown of Abraham, because it was governed by the Persians: no Roman was allowed access.¹⁸ The circulation of individuals who could be in possession of sensitive information, such as imperial officers or soldiers, was even more strictly regulated, and their departure for Persia could be considered an act of treason.¹⁹ Precisely the breach of security that such movements could cause is behind a law dating back to 408/409 that establishes Nisibis, Callinicum, and Artaxata as the only places where commercial transactions between subjects of the two empires were permitted.²⁰ Finally, the depiction of this frontier on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, which, regardless of its much-debated date and origins, went through its final editorial phase at the beginning of the 5th c.²¹ seems to demonstrate that the Roman-Persian border was the only one intended to be conceptualized as a line that functioned as a barrier. This is, in fact, the sole border to be explicitly marked on the *Tabula*. In a heavily ideologically charged picture of the world, with Rome literally seated at its centre and no line marking the European and African borders, the captions *Are(a)e fines romanorvm* and *Fines exercitus syriatic(a)e et conmertivm Barbaror(vm)* are the only labels that came to terms with the unique nature

¹⁶ On this, SARANTIS, below, pp. 101-116.

¹⁷ Jerome, *Vita Malchi* 3.2.

¹⁸ *Itinerarium Egeriae* 20.12.

¹⁹ See, for instance, the case of a certain Antoninus, a merchant and financial officer, who defected to the Persians crossing the Tigris at night in 359, Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 18.5. On such cases, NECHAEVA 2014.

²⁰ *Codex Iustinianus* IV, 63, 4.

²¹ The bibliography is immense and not all scholars agree on the nature of the map and the date of its archetype. However, the majority does agree on this chronology for the last editorial work, RATHMANN 2016; WEBER 2016.

of the Persian frontier, without disrupting the overall image of a Roman universal dominion.²²

Overall, Professor Demandt's lecture compels us to tackle the eternal question of why Rome fell head-on. In the cyclical process of revision and counter-revision, which is inherent in all historical research, Demandt's reflections centre upon military events and political struggles. By focusing on the military feats of the *Germanen* and on the Romans' inability to secure their imperial borders, Demandt reminds us that Rome's fall was not a "tea party at the Roman vicarage",²³ and warns disciples of the theory of the 'Transformation of the Roman World'²⁴ not to forget or ignore the role of politics and military force in historical developments.

However, beyond this somewhat general point, and perhaps even more importantly, the lecture encourages us to understand the importance of offering an overarching narrative of the fall of Rome and the fascination that such a tale continues to exercise. Many of Demandt's reflections sound convincing not only because they are based on an exceptional knowledge of the sources, but also because they mirror our profound and enduring fascination with the concept of crisis.²⁵ No one, whether scholar or layperson, is immune from such sentiments when it comes to imagining how Rome could have fallen. There is perhaps no historical matter that has intrigued western intellectuals more and, as a recent social media trend claims to show, the Roman Empire continues to be an obsession for 21st-c. men.²⁶ Central to the political and philosophical lucubrations of humanist thinkers such as Flavio Biondo and Machiavelli,²⁷ the fall of Rome has constituted an ever-recurring archetype for European scholars intent on understanding characteristics and possible developments of the empires of their own times. Edward Gibbon published the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776, the year the thirteen American

²² For a more detailed analysis, LICCARDO 2023, 228-233.

²³ Expression used by Bryan Ward-Perkins for criticizing the supporters of a 'sunny view' of the fall of the Roman Empire, see WARD-PERKINS 2005, 82.

²⁴ Between 1993 and 1998, the European Science Foundation funded a large project called 'The Transformation of the Roman World', which resulted in fourteen edited volumes that had a significant impact on the scholarly debate on Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. For some reflections on this project and a summary of the outcomes, POHL 2002.

²⁵ "Crisis" was the Special Thematic Strand for the International Medieval Congress at Leeds, 2024.

²⁶ The Roman Empire went viral on TikTok and X, formerly known as Twitter, in 2023, when thousands of videos and posts featured men reacting to the question "how often do you think about the Roman Empire" with replies such as "constantly", "every day" or similar. On this, the New York Times article, HOLTERMANN & ROJAS 2023.

²⁷ On how Italian humanists advocated leaving behind the scheme of *translatio imperii* and created the "myth" of decline and fall of Rome, POCKOCK 2003, 151-236.

colonies declared independence, at a time when the British Empire was first faced with the concrete possibility of losing overseas possessions. Even if Gibbon himself was rather hesitant about making direct comparisons,²⁸ in the 19th c. the parallel between imperial Rome and the British Empire permeated the thinking of many classically educated politicians.²⁹ In recent decades, historians and political scientists have again resorted to the Roman analogy in discussing the crisis of the American global hegemony.³⁰ More broadly, the fall of Rome continues to represent, at least for some, the paradigmatic example of what happens when “civilizations” decay. A recent book by another leading historian of the Roman Empire, Peter Heather, revolves around this very perspective, highlighting how much the economic and political evolution of the modern Western world followed in Rome’s footsteps and how the factors that caused the collapse of Rome may still be at play in the current decline of Western civilization.³¹

If the memory of the Roman Empire, constantly re-created both in academia and outside, influences scholars’ understanding of contemporary empires, the opposite is equally true. All historians’ quests to interpret the past are informed by the needs of their own times,³² and even when they exercise extreme caution and refuse to provide totalizing explanations, their interpretations will inevitably be read by their audiences against their respective contemporary backdrops. As vividly set out by Alexander Demandt himself in his *Der Fall Roms*,³³ the factors that historians have adduced over the centuries as causing the end of the Roman Empire tell us as much about the historians that proposed them, as about the actual historical phenomena. The social and political turmoil of the historian’s time leave their mark on his or her work. To cite one of many possible examples, it is difficult not to see the impact that the unfolding Russian revolution had on the work of Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtzeff.³⁴ The latter, one of the most prominent scholars of the 20th c., interpreted the crisis of the 3rd c. as a war between the peasant masses and the army against the urban classes, which eventually caused the destruction of civic life and culture. Rostovtzeff had fled from Saint Petersburg in 1918 and sought refuge in western Europe and later the United States of America. One cannot avoid seeing this event behind his description of the fall of the Roman urban bourgeoisie.³⁵

²⁸ LOUIS 1999, 3.

²⁹ HINGLEY 2000, 25-37, 157-159.

³⁰ See for example, TODD 2002, 75-96.

³¹ HEATHER & RAPLEY 2023.

³² A concept most clearly expressed by Benedetto Croce, for example in CROCE 1938.

³³ DEMANDT 1984, 695. Demandt lists 210 causes. Among the most imaginary ones, we find “culinary excess”, “enervation”, and “soil erosion”.

³⁴ See the reflections of SHAW 1992.

³⁵ BOWERSOCK 1974.

For his part, Demandt does not shy away from active engagement with current events. He has even embraced a public intellectual commitment. As most clearly expressed in the article “Das Ende der alten Ordnung” for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,³⁶ Demandt presented his theses on the barbarian invasions while discussing the 2015 European migration crisis.³⁷ By offering such comparison, he has provided the general public with something worth thinking about seriously. In particular, he has offered a detailed description of the possible catastrophic consequences that political short-sightedness can cause. Regardless of the dissimilarities between these historical events and the limits of the adage *historia magistra vitae*, spreading the knowledge of the past in a clear and easily-accessible manner is a fundamental duty of an historian and intellectual. Thus, if today researchers often tend to prefer abstract and structural concepts that allow for the possibility of different explanations, Demandt’s lecture reminds us of the importance of creating a *story* when writing history, an account that can identify the general forces behind historical developments, as well as the centrality of personal involvement in historical research.

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³⁶ For the article, www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/staat-und-recht/untergang-des-roemischen-reichs-das-ende-der-alten-ordnung-14024912.html.

³⁷ On November 16, 2015, the historian Niall Ferguson published an article that caused just as much of a stir, if not more, invoking the fall of Rome as a comparable example to understand the significance of the Paris attacks, www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/11/16/paris-and-fall-rome/ErlRjkQMGXhvDarTlxXpdK/story.html.

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