

Barbarians and the Roman Empire – Towards a Framework for Comparison

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[English Version of the chapter published in Chinese *Manzu he Luoma diguo: Yi ge ke zi bijiao de kuangjia* 蛮族和罗马帝国-一个可资比较的框架), in: Qingjia Edward Wang 王晴佳, Longguo Li 李隆国 (eds.), *Between Empires – Rupture, Transformation and Transmission (Duanlie yu zhuanxing: Diguo zhihou de Ouya lishi yu shixue* (断裂与转型: 帝国之后的欧亚历史与史学)) (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Classics Press (Shanghai guji chubanshe (上海: 上海古籍出版社)) 2017) 38-48; ISBN 978-7-5325-8283-9].

The topic of this paper is complementary to Nicola di Cosmo's contribution on 'China-steppe relations in comparative perspective'; the theoretical framework he has presented is also useful to the study the Roman Empire. Similar to Nicola di Cosmo, I am going to argue that we should not take the basically useful shorthand dualism – 'Romans/barbarians' – for granted. Unlike him, I cannot resort to the 'steppe' as a rather neutral common denominator for the populations beyond Rome's frontiers, because many of the European barbarians lived in different ecological zones. I will call all these 'others' 'barbarians' although this is problematic. I am aware that this term was coined in a derogatory sense, and can still be used in that way. However, for want of a better designation it has become a household term in research about European Late Antiquity, and is intended in a purely descriptive sense. Greek and Roman Antiquity coined both the words for 'empire' and for the 'barbarians' still used in most European languages, and created their juxtaposition, so it is hard to avoid using this scheme.

The cultural significance of perceptions of alterity in Antiquity is still a matter of intense research and controversial debate. Benjamin Isaac has collected considerable material about prejudices against Jews and barbarians and interpreted it as "the invention of racism".² Erich S. Gruen, on the contrary, has tried to show "that ancient societies, while certainly acknowledging differences among peoples (indeed occasionally emphasizing them) could also visualize themselves as part of a broader cultural heritage, could discover or invent links with other societies, and could couch their own historical memories in terms of a borrowed or appropriated past."³ These two influential studies taken together mark out a wide range of cultural practices, perceptions, conflicts, interactions, exchanges and xenophobic reactions. Rather than controversial debate (was it racism or not?), what we need is differentiation. Greek/Roman–barbarian relations need to be set in different contexts in which they mattered:

¹ Research for this article was supported by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) in the SFB 'VISCOM' F42-G18.

² Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004); see also *The Origins of Racism in the West*, ed. by Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac and Joseph Ziegler (Cambridge, 2009).

³ Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton and Oxford, 2011), at pp. 1–2.

in the worlds of trade networks, of Greek colonies, of Hellenic/Roman culture and of empires, each of which implied different roles for such encounters.⁴ Many of them happened in the ‘middle ground’, a term coined in an anthropological study of early modern encounters between colonial settlers and the indigenous populations of North America.⁵ It has also become clear that the methodological problem is not limited to negative stereotypes, whether ‘racist’ or not. As Edward Said’s ground-breaking study of European “Orientalism” has amply demonstrated, positive stylization of alterity can also be a form of ‘othering’, which reduces foreign peoples (in this case, of Southwest Asia) to certain characteristics in a very static perception.⁶ Seen with European eyes, the “noble savage” still represents a subaltern form of humanity, and his positive traits are often highlighted for an implicit or explicit critique of (Classical/Western) civilization. That was certainly the intention of one of the most systematic works of ancient ethnography, the “Germania” by Tacitus, written around 100 CE.⁷ The “mirror of Herodotus”, as François Hartog has shown, should help the Greeks to perceive of themselves in the distant image of the barbarous Scythians as described by the Greek “father of history” and of ethnography, Herodotus.⁸

Therefore, we should not be misled by the Roman/barbarian dichotomy. It could be employed in a great variety of situations to make a distinction between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ people, countries, behaviour or material culture, or to make a point about proper behaviour in the civilized world. One could be more or less barbarian in one or several respects. For instance, the barbarian Goth Alaric could appear as “Christian and more like a Roman” and “less savage in his slaughter”, when compared to the Gothic leader Radagaisus, “a pagan and barbarian, a true Scythian, whose insatiable cruelty loved slaughter for slaughter’s sake.”⁹ Consequently, the Roman/barbarian dichotomy does not provide any clear overall classification or delineation between civilization and alterity, but just an often polemical means to accentuate difference in a continuum between the civil imperial elites on the one side and the most aggressive warriors from beyond the Roman frontiers on the other side.

⁴ Kostas Vlassopoulos, *Greeks and Barbarians* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 11. See also *Greeks and Barbarians*, ed. by Thomas Harrison (Edinburgh, 2002).

⁵ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991); a model used for Roman-barbarian contacts by Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Malden and Oxford, Pbk. edition, 2014), pp. 8–31.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978).

⁷ Tacitus, *Germania*, translated by James B. Rives (Oxford, 1999).

⁸ François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (Berkeley, 1988); see also *Ancient Ethnography – New Approaches*, ed. by Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner (London and New York, 2013).

⁹ Orosius, *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, 7.37.9, translated by Andrew T. Fear (Liverpool, 2010), p. 398.

Furthermore, these two extremes of civilization and barbarism were continually subverted in the Roman Empire because the most savage barbarian warriors were also the most valuable ones as soon as they could be won over to fight for the empire.

In fact, for a long time the Romans themselves had been regarded as barbarians by the Greeks who had coined the term ‘*barbaros*’, an onomatopoeic word mimicking the blather of foreigners. Most of Rome’s great conquests were cities and regions such as Carthage, Sicily and the Hellenistic kingdoms in the Eastern Mediterranean, richer and more civilized than Rome itself. Unlike these, Rome then proceeded to conquer barbarian hinterlands that had never been part of a large-scale polity before, such as the Iberian Peninsula, Gaul, Britain and the lands along the Danube. Rome’s capacity to integrate the most varied populations was exceptional. Soon many vestiges of Roman civilisation appeared in these regions: standardized military forts, cities, temples, theatres, brick houses, roads, statues, Latin inscriptions, mass-produced pottery and many other (initially) imported products.¹⁰ Historiography has consistently used the term ‘Romanisation’ for this process. Only recently, scholars have suggested that we should rather avoid it to escape from a Roman-colonialist perspective.¹¹ That may be going too far, and post-colonial theory or the idea of object agency can hardly provide an alternative narrative for the cultural flows from the Mediterranean centres to the periphery. Yet these theoretical approaches can make us think, and we should certainly not overestimate the cultural coherence and directionality of ‘Romanisation’. Roman culture created new inequalities in ‘barbarian’ societies; and Roman identity did not spread evenly across the conquered populations.¹²

Integration basically worked in three ways: first, through the Roman army, into which ‘barbarians’ were increasingly drafted, and which worked as an agent of cultural change in many peripheral regions; second, through co-opting local elites, who kept much of their autonomy and were rewarded for their loyalty to the Roman state by raising their wealth and status; and third, through a variety of goods and practices which might or might not be directly associated with ‘Rome’, but had the potential to reshape the forms of everyday life.

¹⁰ Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge, 1998); *Rome the Cosmopolis*, ed. by Catherine Edwards and Greg Woolf (Cambridge, 2003); Richard Hingley, *Globalizing Roman Culture: Unity, Diversity and Empire* (London and New York, 2007); David Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Princeton, 2011).

¹¹ For the debate, see Miguel John Versluys, “Understanding objects in motion. An archaeological dialogue on Romanization”, *Archaeological Dialogues* 21 (2014), pp. 1–20, with comments by Tamar Hodos, Tesse D. Stek, Peter van Dommelen, Greg Woolf and Miguel John Versluys, pp. 21–64.

¹² *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*, ed. by Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry (London and New York, 1999); Louise Revell, *Roman Imperialism and Local Identities* (Cambridge, 2009).

From these nodes, Roman cultural idioms and identities could reach out further. However, the resulting identities were mostly “unachieved”, unfinished.¹³ No coherent ‘imperial’ Romanness developed; different forms of Roman identification existed side by side: the urban identity of the city of Rome; the traditional Roman nobility proud of its ancestry; the legal status of Roman citizenship; cultural “*romanitas*” with its different registers; various degrees of fluency in the Latin language; adherence to ‘Roman’ religion with its gods and public rituals; affiliation to the Roman army with its particular “*esprit de corps*”; and a loose identification with the Roman state, the “*res publica*”. These different ways to be (more or less) Roman became disaggregated in the course of the transformation of the Roman world and of the dissolution of the Western Empire.¹⁴ Besides, pre-Roman ethnic, linguistic and territorial identities lingered throughout the Roman period, and provincial identities had more or less impact on the allegiance of their populations. Yet after the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire, in many of its parts none of these identities proved strong enough to emerge as a post-Roman focus of identification. Thus, Frankish Gaul became France, Anglo-Saxon Britain became England, and other former Roman provinces are now called Burgundy, Lombardy or Bavaria after the ‘barbarian’ peoples who governed them after the 5th/6th centuries.¹⁵ Still, the fact that large parts of Western Europe still speak a Romance language attests to the gradual but lasting impact of Roman cultural idioms.

Roman expansion had stopped in the East where it was confronted with another formidable imperial power, Parthian and later Sasanian Iran (also often classed as barbarians, although Iran relied on ancient and sophisticated cultural traditions). Rome’s northern periphery was composed of two distinct ecological zones, although these were not clearly demarcated: the forest zone in the west, most of which the Romans called Germania; and the steppe zone in the east, which they named Scythia, with an extension into the grasslands north of the Lower Danube and of the Carpathian Basin. The difference in environment broadly corresponded to distinctions in habitus. The woodland populations were farmers and mostly fought on foot, those in the east were steppe riders and often, though not exclusively, pastoralists. However, given the rather fuzzy boundary, this cultural divide was repeatedly crossed; most famously,

¹³ Andrea Giardina, *L’Italia Romana: Storie di una identità incompiuta* (Rome, 2004).

¹⁴ Walter Pohl, “Romanness – a multiple identity and its changes”, *Early Medieval Europe* 22, 4 (2014), pp. 406–418; Walter Pohl, “Christian and barbarian identities in the early medieval West: introduction”, in *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 1–46; *Transformations of Romanness: Regions and Identities*, ed. by Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner, Cinzia Grifoni and Marianne Pollheimer (Berlin and New York, forthcoming).

¹⁵ Walter Pohl, “Migrations, ethnic groups, and state building”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. by Michael Maas (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 247–63.

by the Goths who gradually moved into the steppe zone in the 3rd century CE and became mounted warriors.¹⁶

Relations across Rome's Northern frontier were asymmetrical. Competing regional kingdoms or smaller tribal units surrounded the empire. The Sarmatians, who dominated in the steppes north of the Black Sea, consisted of several ethnic units who lived in separate kingdoms or tribal alliances; the Romans were mostly concerned with the Jazyges in the eastern part of the Carpathian basin, and the Roxolani along the Black Sea. The *Germani* north of the upper Danube and east of the Rhine were split into even smaller groups in the early imperial period, and tendencies to form larger kingdoms were subverted by tribal opposition and Roman diplomacy. Larger coalitions under a common ethnic name, such as the Franks and Alamanni, only formed from the 3rd century onwards.¹⁷

Rome classified all these neighbouring populations as *gentes*, ethnic groups, and assembled an impressive body of knowledge about their topography and manners.¹⁸ Their perception worked on several, still distinguishable levels. First, for the pragmatic purposes of the frontier troops and diplomats, very detailed intelligence was routinely collected and distributed, as we know, for instance, from the so-called Vindolanda tablets found in a fort along Hadrian's Wall in Britain. The soldiers who wrote them might use the derogatory diminutive "*Brittunculi*" for their British neighbours, but they were precise about arms and behaviour of the barbarians.¹⁹ Second, for a learned reading public, such information was blended with the stereotypes of classical ethnography going back to Herodotus in the 5th century BCE, which supplied models of barbarian behaviour according to ethnic classification.²⁰ Third, for the purposes of imperial legitimation, these barbarian stereotypes were puffed up into monstrous images in order to magnify the exploits of the emperors in holding the barbarians at bay. And fourth, ethnographic classifications were used to group single *gentes* into sweeping categories, such as Scythians for the steppe peoples or Celts, Gaul or *Galatae* for the Celtic populations in Gaul and elsewhere, which allowed establishing some basic distinctions between the

¹⁶ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley, 1988).

¹⁷ Edward James, *Europe's Barbarians, AD 200–600* (Harlow, 2009).

¹⁸ For this and the following, see Walter Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of identification. A methodological profile", in *Strategies of Identification. Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 1–64.

¹⁹ Vindolanda, T32, ed. Robin Birley, *Vindolanda's Roman Records* (Greenhead, 2nd ed. 1994), p. 44. See also <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/4DLink2/4DACTION/WebRequestTablet?thisLeafNum=1&searchTerm=all&searchType=number&searchField=TVII&thisListPosition=47&displayImage=1&displayLatin=1&displayEnglish=1>, tablet 164: "... the Britons are unprotected by armour (?). There are very many cavalry. The cavalry do not use swords nor do the wretched Britons (*Brittunculi*) mount in order to throw javelins."

²⁰ Hartog, *The mirror of Herodotus*; Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians*.

northern neighbours. Where an adequate umbrella term was not available, Julius Caesar invented a new one: *Germani*, Germans. We have no proof that apart from a few officers in Roman service along the Rhine the name *Germani* ever corresponded to a relevant self-designation.²¹ It certainly never materialized into any form of political solidarity or joint action, and it does not provide a meaningful frame for defining the archaeological evidence of the wide territory of scattered Germanic settlements ranging from the Danube and Vistula rivers to the Rhine, and beyond it. Germans spoke related languages which modern philology classes as Germanic, and generally gave the Romans the impression that because of their love of freedom and their rudimentary civilisation they were not really worth conquering. Remarkably, in the course of the 4th and 5th century, exactly at the moment when many of these ‘Germans’ moved into the empire, the Romans stopped using this designation – obviously they realized that their diversity made the general label unhelpful. On the other hand, they continued to employ the name of the long-gone Scythians as an umbrella term for the steppe peoples, including the Goths (whom modern scholarship because of the related language classifies as Germans).

In spite of all stereotypes, the ‘barbarians’ kept the imperial system in motion in many respects. Having subdued, defeated or pacified them was part of imperial legitimacy. It not only attested to an appropriate use of tax revenues, it also proved that the gods (and later, the Christian God) continued to favour Rome and its emperor. Besides, much of the basic workload rested on the shoulders of slaves of barbarian extraction. And the growing need for soldiers was increasingly met by drafting barbarians from across the borders.²² There had been barbarian auxiliary units even in the heydays of empire, often with an ethnic name; these units were usually stationed far from their area of origin, so that ‘Sarmatians’ served in Britain and ‘Franks’ in Egypt, and thus could become rather mixed over time. In Late Antiquity, it became common for Roman provincials to pay extra taxes instead of being drafted into the army, which increased revenues and led to a further barbarization of the Roman army. The senatorial aristocracy had already been banned from positions of command in the army in the 3rd century, and barbarian officers increasingly made splendid careers in Roman service.²³ The significance of the army as an agent of Romanisation increased, but this

²¹ Walter Pohl, *Die Germanen* (Munich, 2nd ed. 2002).

²² C.R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore and London, 1994); Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe A.D. 350–425* (Oxford, 1996); Pat Southern and Karen R. Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (New Haven and London, 1996).

²³ Alexander Demandt, *Die Spätantike: Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian, 284–565 n. Chr.* (Munich, 2nd ed., 2007), p. 319 (aurum tironicum), p. 330 (edict of Gallienus).

was not ‘classical Romanness’ as we moderns would see it, but rather an increasingly hybrid way to represent status and military identity.

Complementary to the increased weight of the ‘inner’ barbarians, a group of ‘outer’ barbarians served as a catalyst in the process. These were the Huns, who arrived from Central Asia in c. 375. Their arrival was certainly contingent from the perspective of Roman-barbarian relations in Europe, but contributed to changing the balance of power.²⁴ The Huns were the first steppe people that established an empire in Europe. Interestingly, an imperial concentration of power under the rule of a monarch was only achieved after half a century marked by inner divisions. The Hun Empire reached its striking but brief peak in the middle of the 5th century under Attila.²⁵ These years, relatively well-documented in the fragments of the Histories of the Roman diplomat Priscus who had first-hand knowledge of Attila’s court,²⁶ also saw the emergence of something resembling the *ho-ch’in* policy of the Former Han. The Huns received yearly Roman subsidies in gold and rich presents. These treaties did not prevent extensive Hunnic raids in both the Eastern and the Western Roman Empire, mostly ended by new treaties that augmented the subsidies. Trade agreements established border markets. Symbolical gestures raised the question of equal or unequal status. Reputedly, when Attila had taken the city of Milan, he gave orders to change a painting in the imperial palace on which the emperors were represented above defeated barbarians – Attila should now be painted above them, while they paid him tribute.²⁷ There was even, rare in the West, a marriage project of Attila with the imperial princess Honoria, clearly opposed by the emperor but likely enough to be exploited by Attila’s propaganda. His next moves were major raids on Gaul and Northern Italy, but whether he encountered serious resistance (as in the battle on the Catalaunian Plain in Gaul) or not (as in Italy), they remained raids after which the Huns withdrew again. Attila did not attempt to control any relevant Roman territories. After Attila’s death, it became evident that his empire had been based more on his personal prestige than on

²⁴ Peter J. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London, 2005), sees the arrival of the Huns as the first impulse in a fatal chain of events that would bring down the Roman empire. He has produced a convincing narrative of the military logic of events, but does not adequately show how far these events were embedded in an inner dynamic disgregating the Western Roman Empire at the same time. For a critique of this and other approaches to the “fall of Rome”, see Walter Pohl, “Rome and the Barbarians in the Fifth Century”, *Antiquité Tardive* 16 (2008), pp. 93–101.

²⁵ Still fundamental: Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in their History and Culture* (Berkeley, 1973). See also Christopher Kelly, *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 2008); *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. by Michael Maas (Cambridge, 2015); Walter Pohl, “Goths and Huns”, in *Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. by James McInerney (Oxford, 2015), pp. 555–68.

²⁶ Priscus, fr. 11–14, ed. by R. C. Blockley, *The fragmentary classicising historians of the later Roman empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, vol. 2 (Liverpool, 1983), pp. 222–377, at pp. 243–295.

²⁷ Priscus, fr. 22,3, ed. Blockley, p. 315.

any durable structure. The Hun empire collapsed, and many of his former subjects crossed into imperial territories.

The Hun-Xiongnu link, across the Eurasian continent and across several centuries, has recently been underlined by Étienne de la Vaissière and by Hyun Jin Kim.²⁸ De la Vaissière's sophisticated argument has indeed made links between Xiongnu, Hunnic peoples north of Iran and the European Huns likely. These may be seen as ethnic links, if we understand 'ethnic' not as actual common origin, but as continuities of identification with a heterogeneous group.²⁹ However, it would be hard to assume any continuity of political culture between the Xiongnu empire and the Hun realms of the 4th to 6th centuries; their rulers bore very different titles and seem to have followed regional political models rather than any Xiongnu imperial precedent, which becomes very clear from the coinage of Hun realms along the Sassanian frontiers.³⁰ Still, the question of "the transmission of knowledge of imperial statecraft" across discontinuous steppe empires that Nicola di Cosmo has raised remains open.³¹ Can memories of Xiongnu dealings with China have survived among European Huns? Negotiations with East Rome display some remarkable similarities with those between Xiongnu and Han. In any case, the European Huns did not achieve anything like the stability of Xiongnu rule. After the fall of their empire, Attila's many sons dispersed, and smaller steppe realms formed north of the Black Sea. It was only the Avars from 568 onwards who were capable of continuing an imperial policy in the steppes. In contrast to the Huns, they had a strong political identity centred around the khagan and other Central Asian titles, whereas their ethnic continuity with the Rouran was at least questionable.³² Otherwise, their strategy was similar to that of Attila. They did not strive to occupy Roman territory, but challenged the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire with a mix of raids and treaties that successively increased their subsidies. This flow of gold and precious objects fuelled a prestige economy which was necessary for the expansive dynamics of a steppe empire, and is demonstrated by an extraordinary wealth of grave goods found in the Carpathian Basin.³³ On the other hand, the survival of Avar society

²⁸ Étienne de la Vaissière, "Huns et Xiongnu", *Central Asiatic Journal* 49 (2005), pp. 3–26; Hyun Jin Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge, 2013).

²⁹ For definitions of ethnicity, see Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of identification".

³⁰ See Walter Pohl, "Ethnicity and empire in the Western Eurasian steppes", in *Eurasian Empires in Late Antiquity*, ed. by Michael Maas and Nicola di Cosmo (forthcoming).

³¹ Nicola di Cosmo, "China-Steppe Relations in Historical Perspective," in *The Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. by Jürgen Bemmman and Michael Schmauder (Bonn, 2015), pp. 49–72, at p. 56.

³² Walter Pohl, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa, 567–822 n. Chr.* (Munich, 3rd ed. 2015), English translation forthcoming.

³³ Falko Daim, "Avars and Avar Archaeology: an Introduction", in *Regna and Gentes: the Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-

was achieved through the work of subject populations (mainly the emerging Slavs) and settled captives. Thus, even when systematic raiding had ended after the failed Avar siege of Constantinople in 626, Avar rule was maintained for almost two centuries at a reduced scale in Central Europe.

Not Hun or Avar invaders, but other barbarians grabbed power in the Western Empire in the course of the fifth century, better integrated and more familiar with the workings of the Roman system. Yet they were not the well-integrated regular Roman army commanders of barbarian origin either. None of these tried to become emperor himself; some of them ‘made’ emperors whom they sought to control. Odoacer, a regular Roman general who had grown up under Attila’s rule, overthrew the last Western Roman emperor in 476 and reigned as king in Italy for 13 years. This was important as a symbolical act, but his rule was an exception. Those who formed their kingdoms on Roman territories were barbarian federate armies that had moved into the empire since 375, when large Gothic groups fled from the Huns.³⁴ Their leaders operated within the Roman system and could hope to receive Roman titles, stipends and commands, but continued to lead their own armies. These Gothic, Burgundian or Vandal armies were identified by an ethnic label and used to raise their own kings and commanders.³⁵ For a while, they competed with commanders and warlords of more Roman extraction, who led patched-up forces of regular Roman troops, personal guards, and newly-recruited barbarians. The commanders of ‘ethnic’ armies had the advantage of slightly more homogeneous military forces, whose loyalties often outlasted the death of their leader. In the early fifth century, these barbarian armies on Roman territory began to carve out their own polities from the Roman Empire, to which they were still bound by treaties. These were the groups that established the new, post-imperial kingdoms: Visigoths, Burgundians, Ostrogoths, Franks, and later Lombards. The element of conquest was more marked in the case of Vandals, Angles and Saxons (who, however, initially seem to have been called to Britain as federates) and Lombards, whereas negotiated settlements were reached in the case of Visigoths, Burgundians and Franks.

Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut and Walter Pohl (Leiden and Boston, 2003), pp. 463–570; Michael Schmauder, “Huns, Avars, Hungarians: Reflections on the Interaction between Steppe Empires in Southeast Europe and the Late Roman to Early Byzantine Empires”, in *The Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Jürgen Bemmman and Michael Schmauder (Bonn, 2015), pp. 671–692.

³⁴ Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007).

³⁵ Pohl, “Migrations.”

In most of the new kingdoms, many elements of the Roman political order were initially preserved (Theoderic's Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy can serve as an example).³⁶ They more or less respected the old senatorial and civic aristocracy as long as it was loyal, although the Roman elites suffered considerable losses in these agitated times. They preserved the Roman administration and the tax system, although they tended to down-size it. Over-taxation was one reason for the waning of loyalties with the Roman state, and the new kingdoms could more easily do without it: taxes ceased to be sent to the imperial centres, and the barbarian armies could also be maintained by the distribution of land, a momentous if often gradual change.³⁷ A Latin language of state, Roman law (soon supplemented by barbarian law-codes in Latin), and even Roman citizenship were maintained. Christianity eased the integration of Romans in the barbarian kingdoms.³⁸ After the Emperor Constantine I, in the early 4th century, it had seemed for a while that Christianity and the Empire could become coterminous. But after c. 500 CE, Christian religion also came to provide common ground for different polities, at the expense of the empire. The Christian church organisation, especially the bishops, extended its range of responsibilities after the erosion of Roman civil administration. What disappeared was what Peter Heather has called central Romanness, which entailed imperial career opportunities for regional elites.³⁹ However, the royal courts provided an alternative which many Roman aristocrats seem to have grasped without inhibition. That required serving a new military elite of barbarian origin that now ruled these kingdoms. They employed many elements of Romanness, but towards their own goals.⁴⁰

In these kingdoms, access to privilege was more or less channelled according to ethnic affiliation. Ethnicity had been a way in which Romans ordered the confusing barbarian world beyond their frontiers, and, on Roman territory, an option for barbarian armies on the move to maintain a sense of solidarity in a hostile environment. Now it became a strategy of distinction by which the new barbarian elites set themselves off both against their provincial subjects and against other kingdoms.⁴¹ Yet however fierce the competition between these kingdoms might be, the relationship between them was essentially symmetrical. Thus, Europe

³⁶ Wolfram, *History of the Goths*; Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996); Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554* (Cambridge, 1997).

³⁷ Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford, 2005).

³⁸ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200–1000* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 2003).

³⁹ Heather, *Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 432–43.

⁴⁰ Yitzhak Hen, *Roman Barbarian: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West* (Basingstoke and New York, 2007).

⁴¹ Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of identification"; Walter Pohl, "Introduction: ethnicity, religion and empire", in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100*, ed. by Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner and Richard Payne (Farnham and Burlington, 2012), pp. 1–23.

was transformed from an empire in asymmetrical relationship with its barbarian neighbours into a multitude of peoples and polities in an essentially symmetrical relation with each other. Powerful states repeatedly tried to re-establish an empire (as the Frankish king Charlemagne did in 800 CE), following the highly attractive Roman model; but they never really escaped the ethnic and political symmetry at the basis of the European political landscape.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest a few points where comparison between Roman-barbarian and Chinese-steppe relations might be fruitful:

1. Interactions and forms of interdependence

Rome had permanently integrated many former barbarians on its territory; it also continued to rely on imports of barbarian labour and military manpower. The legitimacy of empire was not least based on maintaining the Pax Romana against barbarian danger. The barbarians lived in relatively small communities and mostly loose political structures. Temporary service in the Roman army provided opportunities, which in the long run led to increasing social differentiation and militarisation of barbarian societies and to the emergence of larger units. Yet Rome's barbarian periphery remained politically fragmented throughout; the short-lived Hun Empire of Attila was the only exception.

2. Imperial perceptions of the barbarians

Views of the barbarians were structured by stereotypes and their elaborations in the course of a millenary ethnographic literature. Their essential otherness was never in doubt. However, there were also many pragmatic ways of registering differences between barbarians, and of acknowledging their progress in conforming to Roman standards. Rome distinguished between its neighbours according to ethnic categories, which implied an ideological element (their communities were shaped by nature, those of the Romans by law and citizenship), but also allowed largely adequate orientation.

3. The role of barbarians in the dissolution of the Western Roman empire

Did the barbarian invasions spark off a process of decline, or was the fall of the empire due to a more deeply-rooted dynamic in which it gradually lost its capacity to maintain its power? The Western Empire was not simply overwhelmed by invaders; the integration of barbarian soldiers and armies who eventually established regional powers played a major part. This was not a continuous process, but was connected with prolonged conflict, ruptures and processes

of involution. It is still debated whether these changes were due to structural developments within the empire and in its relationship with the barbarians, whether they were the result of a fatal military logic which reversed the balance of power, or of a series of basically contingent events (such as premature deaths of emperors or natural disasters). All three elements played a role, but the question is to what degree. I would argue that for mainly structural reasons: the empire gradually lost its capacity to react adequately to unfavourable shifts of power and to contingent events, and we need to understand the long-term transformation beneath that. After all, we need not only explain why the Western Empire was destroyed, but why it was not replaced later, and why it became so difficult to re-establish an empire in the West in the long term.

4. Forms of political integration 'after empire'

The success of supra-regional kingdoms founded by Western barbarians (mostly of Germanic origin) on Roman territory depended on their capacity to integrate Romans on all levels (including the elite) and to preserve some of the administrative and economic infrastructure of the empire. But this process was not without conflicts and contradictions; typically, the tensions were not so much between Romans and barbarians, but between competing Romano-barbarian alliances or networks. In the process, the often already precarious loyalties to the empire eroded, and the new kingdoms provided an alternative. This form of integration did not succeed in all former Western Roman provinces. In Britain or along the Danube, Roman infrastructure almost disappeared, and no stable supra-regional polity could emerge without this basis. Mostly, these were frontier regions in which prosperity had mainly depended on the Roman army and on a transfer of funds from the centre to sustain it.

5. Social and cultural consequences of the end of Roman rule

The comparison between the rather different ways in which in the fifth to seventh centuries Roman rule was replaced by Germanic-speaking barbarians in the west, by steppe powers and by Slavs in Southeast Europe, by Islamic conquerors in the Eastern Mediterranean, or was transformed in the Byzantine Empire shows that very different elements of the Roman world could be maintained or abandoned: the modes of agricultural production and exploitation, urban economy, the tax system, administration, imperial ideology, the language of state and/or the lingua franca, forms of cultural expression, and, of course, religion. In a Eurasian perspective, it is remarkable how different the role of religion in the process could be. From the fourth century onwards, Christianity had been the religion of the Roman Empire, but later

it could equally help to stabilize post-Roman polities. Islam was the religion of the Arab invaders and initially their mark of distinction from subjected populations. And in China, it was a foreign religion, Buddhism, which became politicized in the post-Han period, for instance in the Tuoba-Wei; but it never became the only option for a religion of state as in Islam and Christendom.

6. Comparative outlook: different political cultures after the end of imperial rule

Polities that replace imperial rule may follow imperial models, or rely on ethnic distinctions, on dynastic legitimacy, on a religious mission or on military prowess.⁴² These different forms of legitimation are of course always mixed to some extent, but in very different ways. In the former Western Roman Empire, the new kingdoms came to be distinguished by their ethnic denomination. Initially, that was mainly an outside perception, but it soon acquired increasing prominence in self-representation of, for instance, the *regnum Francorum*, the Frankish kingdom. As I have argued, these new, ethnically-defined kingdoms created a political landscape of essentially symmetrical relations between several states, which permanently replaced the asymmetrical relations of the Roman Empire with most of its neighbours. In many respects, Rome remained a model, and in the course of European history was often emulated – most directly, by Charlemagne in 800, a new ‘Roman Empire’ that was to exist for over a thousand years. But it never reached a comparable level of stability and dominance, like all the other attempts to revive an empire modelled on Rome in European history. Things evolved very differently in the Chinese case where an empire in more or less the traditional form was re-established even after conquest by outside forces. This is a particularly interesting line of comparison. The present volume places this issue in a broader context of ‘rupture, transmission and transformation’, and raises many interesting points worth pursuing further in collaborative international research.

⁴² This was the topic of two workshops in Vienna in 2014 and 2015, which were thematically linked to the conference at Peking University in 2015 which is at the basis of the present volume. The proceedings of these workshops will be published under the title of “Shadows of Empire”.

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