The military transformation of the Roman world

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The Roman army and the fragmentation of the Roman Empire

As many ancient empires, Rome rose as a city state that gradually expanded its power over its hinterland and over many other cities. Rome's success in maintaining its empire for centuries, however, was not least due to the way in which it co-opted warbands and groups of soldiers of widely different origin. The late Roman *Notitia dignitatum*, a list of early-fifth century units of the Roman army, preserves this exceptional multiplicity. Many names represent the ethnic or territorial origin of the respective units, usually (and for the empire, quite conveniently) serving far from their places of origin: Sarmatians in Britain or Franks in Egypt. Even if they came from recently- or non-conquered regions, these soldiers enjoyed freedom and privileges, and their leaders had splendid career opportunities (HOFFMANN 1969; DEMANDT 1980; ISAAC 1990; SOUTHERN/ DIXON 1996; DEMANDT 2007: 303-24). Late Roman Emperors, who often had been successful generals before rising to power, could come from all parts of the Empire, from Spain to Syria. We may see the endless internal conflicts between emperors and usurpers in Late Antiquity as a sign of decline and weakness. That may not be wrong; but it also meant that power struggles revolved around the imperial throne, and therefore remained within the Roman system – no alternative power structure could emerge.

The successful integration of warriors and warbands into an overarching imperial system only reached its limits when several developments roughly coincided (In general, see POHL ²2005; WOLFRAM 2005; HEATHER 2006; HALSALL 2007; WICKHAM 2006; POHL 2008). The tax by which Roman citizens could buy themselves off from being drafted into the army, the *aurum tironicum*, was reformed and generalized in 375 (LENSKI 2002: 313-14; ROTH 2016: 38-39). This led to a growing demand for 'barbarian' soldiers, and increasingly, whole bands of warriors under their own commanders were drawn in (O'FLYNN 1983; MAC GEORGE 2002). The bitter throne conflicts in the empire were increasingly decided by barbarian contingents: for instance, one of the biggest battles of the period was the battle at the

Frigidus in 394, in which Theodosius I routed his rival Eugenius, not least with the help of Gothic federates (WOLFRAM ^{3}1990: 144-45; CAMERON 2011: 93–117). These conflicts, as the example shows, did not even subside under the rule of Theodosius "the Great", who was later remembered as the last emperor of the undivided empire, and as a Christian model ruler. We think of the early fifth century as the time of Alaric's raids in Italy, and of the invasion of the Vandals, Alans and Suebi in Gaul. But what captured the attention of the contemporaries as least as much were the unending usurpations in the Western empire: Constantine III, Gerontius, Jovinus and others (GOFFART 1989). The loyalty of Aetius and the threat by Attila's Huns provided some respite before the conflicts set in again after Attila's death. Unlike in the early 5th century, when most usurpations failed, now most of them were successful. The position of barbarian generals as impresarios of power became stronger, until the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was dethroned by Odoacer in 476.

Barbarian soldiers had come to play a decisive role in all these struggles, and every contender for the throne had to secure their support. The demand for them also led to a militarisation of barbarian societies beyond the Roman borders, and higher ambitions of their leaders, who became more willing to seek their fortune in the empire (HALSALL 1998). This movement was precipitated, but not caused by the arrival of the Huns in the Pontic steppes in c. 375. Barbarian commanders in Roman service could make splendid careers, for instance, the Vandal Stilicho, who became commander-in-chief in the Western empire around 400 and married an imperial princess. But his case also shows that there was a glass ceiling that blocked the ascent of these officers of barbarian origin to the throne. Suspicions arose that Stilicho plotted to become emperor or raise his son, and in 408, he was killed, upon which a pogrom against his barbarian soldiers ensued. This weakened the defences of Italy. Two years later, Alaric, who had negotiated in vain for a position comparable to Stilicho's in Roman service, plundered Rome with his Goths (VON RUMMEL/LIPPS/MACHADO 2013).

Rome had always respected, if not encouraged the particular identities of the auxiliary units in its service, and in most cases, it could rely on their loyalty. The troops received regular pay and supplies, and occasional benefits. Even in the fifth century, when the Western Roman Empire dissolved, most barbarians were mostly loyal to its emperors. Increasingly, though, there was more than one contender to the throne, and more than

one option in the power games in which the empire gradually lost its authority in the West. The so-called 'migration period' was not simply a confrontation between invading barbarians and the Roman state, as it has long been interpreted. Several different types of armed groupings competed on the same playing-field: tax-funded regular Roman army units of drafted soldiers; barbarian mercenaries paid by the late Roman state or by private power brokers; mixed units loyal to a particular Roman or barbarian warlord; ethnic groups of 'barbarian' extraction operating on Roman territory under their own kings, in Roman service or in confrontation with the Roman state; and large and heterogeneous armies put into the field by the Hun empire of Attila. There was quite an amount of fluctuation between all these military groupings, depending on their success or on the charisma of their leaders.

The cohesion of warbands

The history of all these conflicts was complicated; but the result was clear: the ones who grabbed power in the Roman provinces were large barbarian armies led by their own kings and distinguished by ethnic denominations: Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, Franks and others. They were usually supported by factions among the Roman elite, and had been integrated into the Roman system as federates, under a treaty that had entrusted them with the defence of one or several Roman provinces. A main asset that they had seems to have been their ethnic identity. To an extent, that is quite paradox because we know that most of these groups had formed only recently from quite disparate elements (WOLFRAM 2005; WOLFRAM 2012). However, the prestige of these partly ancient ethnonyms, their success in a potentially hostile environment and their joint perspectives of privilege seem to have reinforced their sense of belonging.

A comparison may make the effect clearer. When the Roman warlord Boniface died in 432 from a wound he had received in a fight against his arch-rival Aetius, he advised his wife on his deathbed to marry none other than Aetius, and bring his armed retinue into the union (WIJNENDAELE 2016). Likewise, when Stilicho or Aetius were killed, their armies dissolved or went over to a rival. When, on the other hand, Alaric I died soon after the sack of Rome, two of his successors were murdered one after the other; yet the Goths elected new kings and stayed together even in situations when royal succession was highly contested. Thus, they finally managed to be settled with his army in Aquitaine by treaty. Being a *gens*, a people, seems to have made an important difference

(CLAUDIUS, IV Cons. Honor.: 474, 320; ZOSIMOS: 5.5.4, 11; POHL 2011). Kingship created institutional continuity in the warband, and the Romans had to accept these choices, which in turn determined command positions in the Empire.

Contemporaries were aware that ethnic cohesion was an asset. More than a century later, in the *History of the Gothic War* by Procopius, the speech of the Gothic king Totila before the decisive battle against the army sent by Emperor Justinian makes that point clear. Totila denied the coherence, and the Romanness of the Roman army: “The vast number of the enemy is worthy only to be despised, seeing that they present a collection of men from the greatest possible number of peoples. For an alliance which is patched together from many sources gives no firm assurance of either loyalty (*pistis*) or power, but being split up in origin (*genesis*), it is naturally divided likewise in purpose” (PROCOPIUS, Bella: VIII, 30.17-18, 367). This patched-up army would only pretend to fight, and then retire at the orders of their respective leaders, while the Goths would risk their lives for their own cause. Ironically, the Goths lost the battle, but Procopius’s critique of the Roman mercenary force is obvious.

How could successful rulership (or could not) be built on the *pistis*, the loyalty of a faithful army? In Late Antiquity, the art of domination required a leader to inspire in his army a sense of belonging. Ethnic loyalty emerged as a resource for creating new centres of power that could challenge, and eventually overcome the imperial administration. When Procopius wrote, in the middle of the sixth century, this seemed obvious. But where had it come from? If we follow traditional scholarship there is no question. The barbarians had come as peoples, and it was to be expected that they shared a sense of ethnic solidarity. But this is debatable; and the Goths around 400 have served as the bone of contention in that debate. Research in German-speaking countries was long dominated by the concept of *Heerkönigtum*, military kingship, as an institution that could create the resonance necessary for a successful transmission of ethnic traditions (SCHLESINGER 1956). But *Heerkönige* were late to appear, without Germanic precedent and only on Roman territory. In English-speaking research, the army as a whole was often seen as the cradle of barbarian identities. Michael Wallace-Hadrill wrote: “War-bands are tribes in the making” (WALLACE-HADRILL 1970: 11). Wolf Liebeschuetz, in his article on ‘Alaric’s Goths: nation or army’, put it in more flowery words: “Patriotic community-building forces radiated from Germanic war-

bands and emerging Germanic kingdoms" (LIEBESCHUETZ 1992: 83). Michael Kulikowski was much more skeptical in his rephrasing of the problem, "Nation vs. army: a necessary contrast?" (KULIKOWSKI 2002: 82-83). Still, his history of 'Rome's Gothic Wars' ends with the assertion: "No longer products and victims of Roman history, the Goths – and the many other barbarian settlers who followed in their footsteps – now made Rome's history themselves." (KULIKOWSKI 2007: 184) What was the relationship between ethnic groups, kingdoms and armies (GOETZ/JARNUT/POHL 2003)?

Ethnic identities could mean different things in different contexts. In the fifth and sixth centuries, they clearly could be mobilized for state-building. Ethnic identities, as Procopius knew, could safeguard the loyalty of an army that could not be motivated by 'law and good government' of the empire any more. Did ethnic identities already inspire a sense of loyalty and belonging in the fifth century? Salvianus, in his *De gubernatione Dei* written in the 440s, seemed to think so: "Almost all barbarians, provided they are of one people and king (*qui modo sunt unius gentis*), love each other; almost all Romans persecute each other." (SALVIANUS, De Gubernatione Dei 5.15). This is, of course, a tendentious statement to chastise the bad Christians in the empire; but as such, it at least had to be plausible. Obviously, many groups of barbarians go by an ethnic name in the sources. This certainly is the case for Alaric's and Theoderic's armies who are repeatedly called Goths (while their leaders figure as the *hegoumenoi*, *phylarchoi* or *reges* of the Goths). Many other groups of Goths existed simultaneously, but few reached a critical mass. In the narratives of military events, the actions of these armies are often personalized; it is Alaric who acts in Olympiodorus, analogous to Constantine, Gerontius and all the other military leaders on the chessboard.

Not all wandering armies receive clear ethnic designations. The barbarian groups that crossed the Rhine in 405/06 are quite consistently perceived as an aggregate comprising Vandals (Hasdings and Silings), Alans and Suebi, and do not have a common denominator (STEINACHER 2016). Only after the reshuffling of forces in Spain, and the secession of the Suebi in Galaecia, does the single name Vandals emerge in the sources. However, the complicated description of the invading army demonstrates that ethnic denominations in Roman sources were not simply wholesale classifications, but

based on more precise distinctions – otherwise, the invaders could simply have been called ‘Vandals’ or even ‘Goths’. Later, several ethnic affiliations were famously ascribed to Odoacer in the sources, and connected with Sciri, Turcilingi, Huns, Heruls, Rugians and Thuringians. Such ambiguities may have been deliberate, because those were also the elements of the multi-ethnic ‘Roman’ army that had raised him as a king in 476. Clearly, the sources about the 5th century can hardly narrate the pursuits of barbarian leaders, even if they personalize their exploits, without recourse to ethnic labels. However, the sources do make a difference between the ethnic origin of barbarians (often attributed to individuals and to groups regardless of their size) and ethnic agency (a group that establishes itself as a recognizable actor on the political scene, such as Alaric’s Goths).

Unlike the loyal armies of fifth-century Roman warlords such as Gerontius, Boniface or Aetius, the core of the Gothic army stuck together even in times of hardship. Alaric must have enjoyed a quite extraordinary degree of loyalty from at least a core group of considerable size, who followed him after the crushing defeats inflicted by Stilicho in the years after 400, and through the long years of uncertainty and maneuvering before the sack of Rome. When Attalus sent Alaric to reinforce the troops of the latest insurgent, Jovinus, the rebel “was distressed by the presence of Athaulf and in oblique terms blamed Attalus” (OLYMPIODORUS Fr. 18). Was that because Jovinus, who already had the support of the Burgundian *phylarchos* Guntarius and of the Alan leader Goar, was afraid that the Goths could not be harnessed to his purposes? In fact, this is what happened, for Athaulf straightaway went out to kill Sarus when he arrived with reinforcements for Jovinus from Italy. Soon after, Athaulf had Jovinus and his brother arrested and sent them off to Honorius (OLYMPIODORUS Fr. 20). Again, the Goths seem to have maintained their basic coherence and negotiating power, until they were settled in Aquitaine after 416. This type of stability of an army was rather unusual in the Western Empire around the time. It seems that groups that are more consistently described by an ethnic label in the sources were more stable, even in defeat or after the death of their commander. We may imagine the Goths around their campfires telling stories about their ancestor Gaut (JORDANES, Getica: 14.79, 76) and the *haliurunnae*, the Gothic witches from whom the Huns had originated (JORDANES, Getica: 24. 121, 89); but it may very well have been otherwise. However, some idea of a common fate in a hostile Roman environment under adverse conditions, and of a joint achievement must

have existed, similar to that of many migrant groups in the contemporary age that have been studied by social scientists. In the long run, barbarians were better off under their own leaders, and they obviously realized that.

What was decisive in these games of power? Was it simply the amount of barbarian manpower which increasingly turned against Rome, and left an empire whose tax-proceeds had plummeted increasingly defenceless? It is certainly true, as Peter Heather has argued, that step by step the strategic situation of the emperors at Ravenna became more difficult (HEATHER 2005). But we should be careful not to reduce our model of the fall of the Western Empire to a matter of grand strategy: Rome against the barbarians. It was never simply Rome against the barbarians at any point (POHL 2010; POHL 2015). The question was who could mobilize more lasting loyalties, or, as Procopius puts it, inspire *pistis* in his army. Military impresarios of Roman or barbarian origin increasingly resembled each other. Rome could inspire high hopes, and the wish to become a Roman, in many barbarians. But who represented Rome could change very quickly, and dramatically. Little wonder that many barbarians felt more comfortable under their own leaders, especially if they tried to steer clear of the hazards of Roman power politics. It is hard to believe that the outcomes of battles alone determined the gradual shift in the balance of power, in which Rome – or rather, Ravenna – lost its hegemony over the west in the fifth century. Alaric's Goths or Geiseric's Vandals did not win many major battles. But they outlasted defeat and hardship much better than the armies of their Roman competitors (POHL 2005).

From warbands to ethnic states

Thus, the most successful of the ethnic warbands operating on Roman territory gradually turned into royal armies. These soon ceased to be tax-funded, but were largely constituted by possessors of estates who owed military service in return for land-leases or -endowments. Groups of 20-30,000 warriors with their families and dependents now ruled over a population of millions in Gaul, Italy or Spain. The new kingdoms that emerged from the dissolution of the empire in the West were not named after the old provinces, but after the people who ruled them: kingdoms of the Goths, Vandals or Franks, and later, Lombards, Angles and Saxons. This has always been taken for granted; but in fact, it is very different both from the Roman system, and from the result of the Islamic conquests in the Eastern Roman empire. What emerged in the 7th century

was a Caliphate governed by dynasties and structured in regional units. Distinctions between Arabs, Persians, Turks, and more specifically, between Arabic tribes played major roles in early Islamic politics, but they did not serve for the legitimation of the regime (POHL/GANTNER/PAYNE 2012). A similar comparison can be made with the contemporary fragmentation of the Han Empire in China. Similar to the post-Roman kingdoms, the so-called 'Northern Dynasties' were parts of imperial territory ruled by a military elite of barbarian origin with the help of a somewhat down-sized Chinese administration. Some of these elites did maintain their identities within a largely Chinese cultural sphere, in particular the Tuoba-Wei. Yet in the long run their alterity faded, and they were retrospectively integrated in the Chinese history of a succession of dynasties. While France and England are still named after the distant Franks and Angles, the names of Tuoba or Xianbei soon disappeared from the Chinese political landscape.

The fragmentation of the Roman Empire in the West in the 5th, and in the East in the 7th century can usefully be compared with other cases of the replacement of imperial rule by warbands who came to core areas of Mediterranean culture or to China from much harsher environments. The dissolution of the Western Roman empire developed rather differently from most other cases: it led to a plurality of kingdoms, while most others resulted in another empire, sometimes after an intermediate period characterized by dynastic regimes. The mostly Germanic-speaking conquerors in the West had already spent a few decades on Roman territory and had been more or less integrated in the imperial administrative system. They were professional officers and soldiers who increasingly shared many characteristics with their Roman counterparts, who in turn had come a long way from classical Romanness.

For a while, the Empire provided common ground for all the different armies and warbands on its territory. They were in fierce competition with each other, and those whose cohesion was enhanced by their respective ethnic identity finally came out on top in the West. They soon adopted the Christian religion of their subject populations, although for a while some distinguished themselves by a Christian creed that had been condemned as heretical. In the end, military leaders of barbarian origin grabbed power not so much by defeating the Roman army, but by replacing it, and by keeping their barbarian competitors at bay (POHL 2016). The result was a multitude of kingdoms

identified by their ethnic denomination, in which they constituted ruling minorities. These kingdoms conserved part of the Roman infrastructure, Christianity and a Latin language of state, while they gradually abandoned the empire and the Roman tax system, and thus also the standing army. On the other side, the Arab armies that conquered most of the Eastern Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran were united by their common, if only recently adopted Islamic creed. Tribal and genealogical conflicts could prove disruptive, but did not lead to a plurality of states. The new empire was integrated by dynastic rule. The early Islamic empire kept much of the Roman infrastructure, including the tax system, but had a completely different political system and geographic extent. Its armies were at least initially financed by taxes, through the diwan. Thus, a standing army remained available, often garrisoned apart from the population in newly-founded cities (WICKHAM 2006).

In the new kingdoms of the West, armies were not financed by taxes anymore, but maintained by the landed wealth of its soldiers (or their lords). This allowed reducing taxes and simplifying administration. As a consequence, mobilizing the army became more difficult, and required a certain consensus about the importance of the war between the warriors and their leaders. Landholding soldiers seem to have preferred theatres of war that were not too far away, gave some occasion for plundering, and did not require fighting to the bitter end: limited inner conflict thus must have seemed more interesting than expeditions to some distant frontier. Once the successful kingdoms had consolidated in c. 600, the Early Middle Ages, in spite of their bad reputation, were one of the most peaceful periods in European history, at least on the interstate level. Only in a few periods did military expansion acquire an imperial dynamic, such as during the rise of the Carolingian empire in the eighth century. When the Visigothic kingdom had subdued the Suebi and the Byzantine enclaves in the seventh century, it was hardly involved in wars with other kingdoms any more, until the fatal defeat against the invading Muslim armies in 711. The most conspicuous war of the seventh century in the Iberian peninsula was, not by coincidence, Wamba’s expedition against the usurper Paul. Minor internal struggles were of course endemic, just as in the contemporary Frankish and Lombard kingdoms (WOOD 1994; WICKHAM 1981). This structure tended to hold any excessive expansion of power on every level in check, and thus served as an antidote to imperial expansionism. In a paradox way, this system led to the emergence of a rather stable political topography of Western Europe, in which empires

could hardly unfold. The aristocracy and the armed forces had become regionalized, and now had something to loose. The post-Roman kingdoms of the West had become rather inward-looking, far from the almost ceaseless wars in the imperial East.

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