

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

THE AGE OF  
ATTILA



*Edited by*

MICHAEL MAAS

*Rice University*



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net outcome was surely a sizeable increase in the number of individuals held in captivity or slavery. Rome itself was, of course, a slaveholding power of long distinction, but ironically, as its power declined and its ability to protect its subjects diminished, these became increasingly subject to slavery themselves.

## 14: MIGRATIONS, ETHNIC GROUPS, AND STATE BUILDING

Walter Pohl



In the Age of Attila, new kingdoms began to form on the territory of the western Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> This was a gradual process, punctuated by wars and usurpations. In 416, the Visigoths, after long marches through the Balkans, Italy, and Gaul, and repeated negotiations with government officials, were settled by Roman authorities in Aquitaine. At the same time, Vandals, Alans, and Suebi imposed a precarious control over much of Hispania. In 429, Vandals and Alans moved to Africa, and, when they conquered Carthage in 439, the Vandal kingdom extended over most of the African provinces. In the 440s, after a crushing defeat by Huns in Roman service, the Burgundians obtained land in the southeast of Gaul around Lyons and Geneva. At around the same time, Angles and Saxons seem to have begun spreading across the eastern half of the British Isles. When the Hun empire fell after the death of Attila, several new kingdoms emerged from its remains: most notably, that of the Ostrogoths who eventually conquered Italy in 493, but also a chain of smaller, and mostly very short-lived realms along the Danube, governed by Rugians, Heruls, Suebi, Sarmatians, and Gepids. Towards the end of the fifth century, two of the most successful peoples began to extend their rule: the Franks in northeastern Gaul, who conquered most of Gaul under their king Clovis around

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples* (Berkeley, 1997); Walter Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 2005); Peter J. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London, 2005); Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007). The research leading to these results has been conducted in the context of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) Project F 42-G 18 – SFB “Visions of Community” (VISCOM).

500, and the Lombards in Pannonia, from where they would eventually move to Italy in 568.

The stories about the migrations of Huns, Goths, Vandals, or Burgundians have been enriched by successive generations, in Nordic sagas and medieval chivalric epic, by the emphatic identification of early modern German humanists with what they regarded as their forefathers, or, in the Romantic period, by vivid images of wandering tribes in search of new homelands. All of these layers have added to the wide appeal and the load of positive or negative emotions connected with the master narrative of the migration period. This again provided the basis for its appropriations in nationalistic movements, most of all, in the identification of ancient Germanic warriors with modern Germans.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, images of waves of barbarian immigrants and of their destructive sweep through the civilized Roman world were always available for negative stereotypes of migrants. Most educated people nowadays would rather identify with late Roman civilization than with the immigrants that threatened it – an “us” against “them” that seems increasingly familiar to Europeans and North Americans today. Once again, the kaleidoscope history of the end of the Roman Empire in the West is about to acquire a new, highly charged significance. This emotional charge of identification or condemnation still overshadows scholarly debates today.<sup>3</sup> Ethnicity, migration, and barbarian state-building are highly controversial topics. This is not the place to do justice to all the individual contributions to these discussions; rather, this essay will briefly sketch some of the basic problems, and look at different ways to address them.

Several contested issues are intertwined in these debates, and it is hard to disentangle them.<sup>4</sup> First, there is the old debate about why and how the Roman Empire fell, which was made popular by Edward Gibbon in the later eighteenth century: was it for internal reasons, such as a decline in population, the loss of traditional political and military virtues, the impact of Christian otherworldliness, civil strife that got out of hand, natural disasters, or prolonged economic crisis? Or were the barbarian invasions directly responsible for the end of imperial rule

<sup>2</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Ian N. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Pohl, “Rome and the Barbarians in the Fifth Century,” *Antiquité Tardive* 16 (2008): 93–101; and see the contribution by Michael Maas in this volume.

in the West?<sup>5</sup> Second, there was disagreement about the extent of the rupture between antiquity and the Middle Ages. Some scholars maintained that the end of empire in the West in 476 was little more than a regional regime change, while the Roman Empire in the East continued to rule extensive, if shrinking stretches of land for almost another millennium. In the late twentieth century, the focus of research shifted to the long-term process of social and cultural change that could also help to explain the political ruptures: a fundamental but gradual “transformation of the Roman World.”<sup>6</sup> This transformation was not simply a process of decline, and much recent research has underlined the creative impulses and robust culture of the ages of Attila and of Justinian.<sup>7</sup> Recent critics of the “transformation” model have returned to the paradigm of a catastrophic “end of civilization.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, many features of classical civilization faded out in the fifth century. But was that simply the result of barbarian invasions? Or could the barbarians only grab power in many provinces because something fundamental had already changed in the Roman west? The significance of migrations, ethnicity, and state-building should be discussed in the context of these complex changes. Scholars may legitimately highlight one or the other of its aspects, but monolithic explanations are unlikely to help our understanding.

## MIGRATION

Traditionally, the period at the end of antiquity has been described as “the” migration period, or, in German, *die Völkervanderungszeit*: it was “the” migration at the beginning of “our” European history, usually dated to the time between the appearance of the Huns in around

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of all previous explanations, see Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt* (Munich, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Ian N. Wood, “Report: The European Science Foundation’s Programme on the Transformation of the Roman World and Emergence of Early Medieval Europe,” *Early Medieval Europe* 6 (1997) 217–227; Walter Pohl, ed., *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity, The Transformation of the Roman World* 1 (Leiden, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Peter R. L. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200–1000*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Michael Maas, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005).

375 and the movements of the Lombards and the Avars in 568. Many modern images of migrations, and the corresponding anxieties, were shaped in the period when Goths, Huns, and Vandals stood in the lime-light. The period is therefore important for a history of perceptions. Migrations are not simply social facts, but abstractions that subsume certain events, movements, and experiences and give them an overall explanation. To describe the origin of the medieval and modern West, however, the grand narrative of “destructive/foundational migrations” is at best misleading. The brief existence of the kingdoms of the Goths, Huns, Vandals, or Burgundians stands in remarkable contrast to their prominence in successive historical writing. The ruling elites of the barbarian kingdoms on Roman soil were small minorities, who sometimes imposed their names on the territories (France, Burgundy, Lombardy), but eventually became romanized. As to the numbers of migrants, the “migration period” is not exceptional in European history. The Roman Empire had already moved large numbers of slaves, soldiers and settlers throughout its sphere of power. And the medieval period also witnessed a steady flow of populations, not only of military elites (Normans, Hungarians), but also of colonists (German, English), precarious minorities (Jews, Roma), or mobile social groups. The Age of Attila was not “the great migration” that fundamentally reshuffled European populations, and the temptation to link genetic particularities in some European regions to these changes has little to recommend it from a historian’s perspective. It is likely that the study of ancient DNA, stable isotope analysis and other new scientific methods will bring further insights into routes and impact of fifth- and sixth-century migrations, but not about ethnic identities in the period, which are not determined by the genes.<sup>9</sup>

What was the impact of the migrations? In most Roman provinces, there was no major change of populations. Apart from the specific British case, the boundary between Germanic and Romance languages formed at relatively little distance inside the former Rhine and Danube frontier. What mattered politically was the gradual replacement of a Roman military by barbarian warriors, up to the highest officers. Migrating peasants (such as the so-called *Gothi minores* settled in the Balkans) did not challenge the Roman order. Immigrant warriors often were integrated in the flexible imperial military system, but eventually

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Geary, “Using Genetic Data to Revolutionize Understanding of Migration History,” *IAS eNews*, Spring 2013, <http://www.ias.edu/about/publications/ias-letter/articles/2013-spring/geary-history-genetics>, accessed 17 July 2013.

they could change the balance of power. The barbarians also had an impact on what we could call the social imagination. Many Roman sources of the period reflect the presence of barbarians in Roman heartlands: not only historiography, but also imperial law, the sermons of Augustine, the letters of the church father Jerome or of the Gallic aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris, a moral treatise by Salvian of Marseille, or the *Lives* of Severinus of Noricum or Germanus of Auxerre. On the other hand, it is also remarkable in which cases the events were met with comparative silence. In 406, Vandals, Alans, and Suebi crossed the Rhine and moved across Gaul into Spain; we would regard this as one of the major migrations of the period, but it received little notice in contemporary accounts. The only details come from a letter that Jerome wrote in distant Palestine.<sup>10</sup> In the same years, several Roman usurpers operated in Gaul, among them Constantine III, who removed the Roman troops from Britain in 407. Contemporary writers concentrate on their complicated manoeuvres, in which the barbarians hardly featured. Perhaps the “Vandalism” (a word coined in the polemics of the French Revolution) of the Vandals did not exceed the expectable.<sup>11</sup> At the time, nobody could have foreseen that the next Vandal generation would conquer Rome’s richest province, Africa, and establish their kingdom in one of the centers of the Mediterranean world, Carthage. In contemporary perspective, the real power games were between contenders for empire, not between Romans and barbarians.

How strong were the invading barbarian armies? When, in 376, Goths retreating before the Huns crossed the Danube into the empire, “the ill-omened officials who ferried the barbarian hordes often tried to reckon their number, but gave up their vain attempt.”<sup>12</sup> Contemporary accounts often exaggerate the numbers of the barbarians; but rarely do they underline as frankly as here that attempts to calculate the numbers of “a countless swarm of peoples” had failed. Only sometimes do we get likely numbers. In May 429, the Vandals (and other barbarians) under

<sup>10</sup> Jerome, *Epistula* 123.16, ed. Isidor Hilberg, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae: Epistulae Pars III, CXXI–CLIV* (Vienna, 1996) 93.

<sup>11</sup> This is controversial, but there is little textual or archaeological evidence for extraordinary devastation in Gaul; see Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 2006) 73–118; Andy Merrills and Richard Miles, *The Vandals* (Chichester, 2010) 35–41; John F. Drinkwater and Hugh Elton, *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* (Cambridge, 1992); and Roland Steinacher, *Die Vandalen: Aufstieg und Fall römischer Barbaren* (Stuttgart, forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestarum libri*, 31.4.6, ed. and trans. John C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge, 1935) 3: 405.

their king Geiseric crossed the Straits of Gibraltar. Victor of Vita reports that Geiseric had his entire people counted, men, women, children, and slaves, and they were eighty thousand individuals, not warriors, as Victor underlines.<sup>13</sup> Procopius has the same number, but supports the interpretation that Victor rejects: Geiseric, he writes, had the "Vandals and Alans arranged in companies, appointing over them no less than eighty captains, whom he called *chiliarchs*, making it appear that his host of fighting men in active service amounted to eighty thousand. And yet the number of the Vandals and Alani was said in former times, at least, to amount to no more than fifty thousand men. However, after that time by their natural increase among themselves and by associating other barbarians with them they came to be an exceedingly numerous people."<sup>14</sup> Procopius was aware of the changes in size and composition of barbarian armies, but Victor's numbers are more likely. Belisarius's army that conquered the Vandal kingdom in 533–534 amounted to about twenty-five thousand men.<sup>15</sup> This corresponds to other estimates for the size of large late Roman and barbarian armies. If it really were eighty thousand who crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 429 they may have consisted of about fifteen to twenty thousand Vandal and Alan warriors, perhaps ten thousand more men who could take up arms if necessary (adventurers, servants, low-status Romans trying to improve their lot, and fugitive slaves), and about fifty thousand women, children, old men, and slaves. Some scholars, however, have argued for lower figures.<sup>16</sup>

Like the Vandals, few barbarian groups came into the Roman Empire directly from distant regions; most of them had already made some experience with the Romans when they attacked. That is even true for the Huns, who only launched their major campaigns against Roman provinces under Attila, more than sixty years after they had settled in the vicinity. Attila had a Roman secretary and was familiar

<sup>13</sup> Victor Vitensis, *Histoire de la persécution vandale en Afrique suivie de La passion des sept martyrs, Registre des provinces et des cités d'Afrique* 1.2, ed. and trans. Serge Lancel (Paris, 2002) 96–98.

<sup>14</sup> Procopius, *De bello Vandalico* 3.5.18f., ed. and trans. Henry B. Dewing, *History of the Wars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970) 3: 53.

<sup>15</sup> Proc. *BV* 3.11, Dewing 101–111.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans, AD 418–584: The Techniques of Accommodation*. (Princeton, 1980) 231–235; but see John H. G. W. Liebeschuetz, "Gens into Regnum: The Vandals," in *Regna et Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz et al., *The Transformation of the Roman World* 13 (Leiden, 2003) 67ff.

with Roman politics, and he knew how to organize a military expedition against imperial territory, although he never attempted to stay. Only rarely did large barbarian armies invade the empire without much knowledge of what they would encounter – that is usually a sign that they were pushed, and not pulled by the opportunities that the empire could offer. The year 406–407 seems to have been such a case, when both the Goth and "real Scythian" Radagaisus (as Orosius calls him) and the Vandals, Alans, and Suebi invaded, probably displaced by the Hun advance into the Carpathian basin.<sup>17</sup> But twenty years later, when Geiseric had taken power, a new generation of Vandal warriors was in charge. They had grown up on Roman soil and were more familiar with Roman ways. Unlike Alaric the Visigoth about twenty years earlier, Geiseric managed to cross over to Africa with tens of thousands of people, a considerable logistic achievement.

All barbarian kings who managed to establish a relatively stable barbarian realm on Roman soil had already grown up there, and their peoples had spent at least twenty to thirty years in Roman provinces, usually as federates of the Roman army. The Visigoths reached a permanent settlement in the kingdom of Toulouse about forty years after they had crossed the Danube under pressure from the Huns; the Burgundians spent a similar period on the Roman side of the Middle Rhine before founding their kingdom around Lyons and Geneva; Theoderic, who had grown up as a hostage in Constantinople, led the Ostrogoths to Italy thirty-five years after they had been established as federates in Pannonia; and Clovis, who unified the Frankish kingdom around 500, was the son of Childeric, Roman commander at Tournai. One had to know how to rule over Romans, and perhaps more important, how to profit from the Roman system. Only the Angles and Saxons who came to Britain may have been less familiar with Roman ways, and it seems to have taken them a long time to establish their rule over parts of the island through an unstable succession of alliances and wars with the sub-Roman British kingdoms and with each other.

Barbarian migrations into the Roman world were a process full of war and plundering, conflict and bloodshed, and we should not forget that. More often than not, the conflict was not between Romans and invaders, but developed along different lines. Some of the bloodiest battles of the period were fought between contenders for the Roman

<sup>17</sup> Peter J. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London, 2005) 192–209; Orosius, *Historiae adversum paganos*, 7.37.9, ed. Karl Zangemeister (Leipzig, 1889) 539.

imperial throne, for instance, the battle at the Frigidus in which, in 394, Theodosius "the Great" destroyed the army of the pretender Eugenius. Thousands of Goths fell on the Theodosian side, thousands of Franks led by the educated Frank Arbogast died for Eugenius. Likewise, barbarian rivals fought endless wars with each other, often spurred by Roman money and diplomacy. In the 410s, the Christian historiographer Orosius welcomed as one of the most fortunate events in all of Roman history the fact that Visigoths and Vandals were decimating each other in Spain.<sup>18</sup> Such conflicts continued throughout the period: on the Catalaunian fields, both Aetius's and Attila's armies consisted mainly of barbarians, most prominently, of Goths; Odoacer destroyed the kingdom of the Rugi in 487; Theoderic the Ostrogoth destroyed Odoacer in 493; the Frank Clovis defeated the Visigoths in 508, and so on. One of the few all-out wars of the empire against barbarians was waged between Justinian's Byzantine armies and the Ostrogoths in Italy between 535 and 554; and that had been started by the Roman side to oust the highly romanized Goths from power, and was conducted largely by barbarian troops in Byzantine service.

Since the fourth century, barbarian soldiers had largely replaced Roman citizens in the army. These had to pay a tax in exchange for their military duties, and it had become much more profitable for the Roman state to draft ambitious barbarian warriors than often unwilling provincials.<sup>19</sup> Huns, for example, soon became attractive as army units and as bodyguards for Roman aristocrats. Later, Attila attempted to stop any movement from his realm to the empire, and repeatedly insisted on the return of fugitives from the Roman Empire, who were then executed with exemplary cruelty (some members of the royal clan were crucified immediately after they had been handed over).<sup>20</sup> There was a lucrative market for soldiers: a strong pull-factor in the migration of barbarian warriors to Roman territory. Since the late fourth century, barbarians increasingly came in large groups under their own leaders, and entered Roman service as fixed units. They were in a better position to negotiate with the imperial authorities, and to exert pressures to obtain additional benefits. Especially Gothic groups used the full range of opportunities between loyal service for Rome, negotiations for better

<sup>18</sup> Oros. *Hist.* 7.43, 565.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425* (Oxford, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Priscus, fr. 2, fr. 9.1, fr. 9.3, ed. Roger C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1983) 2: 227, 234, 238.

conditions, threats, reprisals, and full-scale raids. Regular supplies, better pay, and higher rank for the leader then meant the chance to attract a stronger following. Those barbarians who had been most successful as allies (*foederati*) and competitors within the Roman system were the ones who eventually built their kingdoms on west Roman territory.

## ETHNIC GROUPS

The Romans distinguished the barbarian groups that they were confronted with by ethnic names.<sup>21</sup> This was a coherent system of perceptions, and it is only rarely that we find other, mostly vague definitions in the sources ("the barbarians in these parts," "those who followed X"). For a long time, modern scholarship has taken this ethnic language as a direct testimony of self-assured ethnic groups. But it is not that simple. The Romans, like the Greeks before them, distinguished their barbarian neighbors by ethnic categorization, whereas they mostly described the inhabitants of the classical world by their city or their polity. The ethnic denomination of the barbarian "others" was a complex process. Some of the names were ethnographic classifications, such as "Germans" or "Scythians," based on territory and lifestyle. They hardly corresponded to any late antique self-identification – it is unlikely that the Franks regarded themselves as Germans or the Huns as Scythians, or the Goths as either of them (in the sixth century only, Cassiodorus and Jordanes constructed a grandiose history of the Goths in which they identified them with the ancient Scythians, Getae, and Dacians). Other names in the sources were literary reminiscences, and late antique panegyrics are full of lists of long-gone peoples reputedly annihilated by an emperor. Nevertheless, most ethnic names reflect consistent contemporary usage. It is often hard to prove that they were also used for self-identification, simply because genuinely barbarian voices are rather rare in the fifth century, apart from a few inscriptions and highly rhetorical speeches in the histories.

Some scholars have used the relative lack of self-identifications in our sources to argue that ethnic identities were rather meaningless in the period, a mere literary convention.<sup>22</sup> However, the barbarian

<sup>21</sup> For the following, see Walter Pohl, "Introduction: Strategies of Identification: A methodological profile," in *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout, 2013) 1-64.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*.



*gentes* were very much part of the everyday political reality of fifth-century Rome. The Romans may have underestimated the dynamic that growing military forces of barbarian origin within their empire could develop, or treated some of them rather inadequately. They could not, however, afford to use a completely imaginary system of names to distinguish among them. Ethnicity is not a quality that particular groups have or have not; it is a system of distinctions that allows defining social groups in relation to each other. Such distinctions are necessarily fuzzy, and they become even fuzzier in times of uncertain or shifting identities, which was certainly the case in the fifth century. Yet they allow group members or newcomers to identify with a group, and outsiders to know with whom they are dealing. Communication between Romans and barbarians was intense, and Roman officers and diplomats had to have a differentiated knowledge of their adversaries. An author-diplomat such as Priscus was very well informed about the Huns. Mistakes could be fatal, as he noted repeatedly: for instance, Roman diplomats had distributed presents among the leaders of the Akatzirs (a Hunnic people north of the Black Sea) not quite according to their current status in the tribal hierarchy. As a result the pro-Attila faction among them came to power.<sup>23</sup> In another case, the Romans got it almost right: Attila's Roman secretary Orestes had complained on a mission to Constantinople that his colleague Edekon had been invited to dinner without him; but the interpreter Vigilas explained to Priscus that Edekon was a Hun, whereas Orestes, although powerful, was only Attila's Roman servant.<sup>24</sup> Being "of Hun origin" counted. It is ironic that Edekon is later attested as Edica, king of the Sciri, and it was his son Odoacer whose military coup removed Orestes and his son, the last western emperor Romulus Augustulus, from power in 476. Odoacer is variously identified in our sources as Scirian, Turcilingian, Thuringian, Herul, or Goth, but not as a Hun. Ethnic identities could change, and they could also remain somehow ambiguous; Odoacer may have deliberately left his identity open in order to appeal to his army, which comprised all these components. That does not mean that ethnicity did not matter – in Odoacer's case, it probably reflected the continuing significance of ethnic identities in his army.

This is what makes understanding late ancient ethnicity so difficult: ethnic identities were not clearly circumscribed and could change. They might matter to some and not to others, and they were distorted

<sup>23</sup> Prisc. fr. 11.2 (Blockley 247).

<sup>24</sup> Prisc. fr. 11.2 (Blockley 249).

by outdated conventional names, ethnographic perceptions, and literary fabrications. Last but not least, we have relatively little evidence what people called themselves. Still, it would be wrong to conclude that ethnicity was insignificant. Changes of identity do not invalidate the importance of having an identity. The anthropologist Fredrik Barth, in his 1960s studies of the Pathans, noticed that the boundaries between ethnic groups were frequently crossed; such changes in ethnic identity did not erode, however, but reinforced the ethnic boundaries.<sup>25</sup> Most major barbarian figures of the period get clear ethnic labels in the sources, and their use is relatively consistent in different texts. The Huns are a good example that identifications remain relatively coherent even between sources that are unlikely to be derived from each other, for they appear not only in Latin and Greek, but also in Armenian, Iranian, and Sogdian texts. Furthermore, it is quite likely that these "Huns" corresponded with the Xiongnu of the Chinese sources in some way (see la Vaissière's chapter in this volume). Fifth-century coins from a Hun kingdom in the periphery of the Sasanian empire bear the legend "HWN," offering a rare case of Hun self-identification.<sup>26</sup> An indirect example is found in Priscus, where the Roman officer Chelchal is quoted saying that he was proud of his Hunnic origin.<sup>27</sup> The exact relations between the European Huns, the Central Asian Huns of the fourth century and the earlier Xiongnu are debatable, but the Huns who arrived in 375 are surely part of a general movement of Hunnic groups in the period. Whether they were of predominantly Xiongnu origin is not a very meaningful question. They may very well have been a mixed group of refugees, fleeing from power struggles farther east, who had adopted the most prestigious name available on the steppe, like many other steppe peoples. What mattered is how they were identified, and identified themselves. When the Avars arrived from Central Asia in the sixth century, a Byzantine chronicler reported that in fact they were only Pseudo-Avars and had wrongly adopted that awe-inspiring name; but the name stuck.<sup>28</sup> That does not prove that ethnicity was

<sup>25</sup> Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo, 1969).

<sup>26</sup> Walter Pohl, "Huns, Avars, Hungarians: Comparative Perspectives Based on Written Evidence," in *The Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium AD*, ed. Jürgen Bemmman and Michael Schmauder (forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Prisc. fr. 49 (Blockley 357).

<sup>28</sup> Theophylactus Simocatta 7.7, 7.8, ed. and trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford, 1986) 187–189.

meaningless: on the contrary, it was important enough to make faking it worthwhile.

What ethnicity can help to explain is the relatively greater coherence of ethnic groups as compared to the very diverse group of recruits who filled the ranks of "normal" armies or retinues. When the Roman count (*comes*) Bonifatius died, he told his followers to join his arch-rival Aetius, and his wife, to marry him. Likewise, when Stilicho or Aetius were killed, their armies dissolved or went over to a rival. After the deaths of Alaric and Athaulf, however, their Goths elected new kings and stayed together even in situations when royal succession was highly contested. Being a *gens*, a people, seems to have made an important difference.<sup>29</sup> Recent exploits surely contributed to this shared identity; yet Aetius's troops had also been through many battles together. We do not know whether origin stories mattered, and which ones, but it is unlikely that all memories of pre-Roman times had been erased. Military exploits alone were not a sufficient basis for building a kingdom, and neither was personal loyalty to a warlord. Except for the short-lived rule of Odoacer and a few ephemeral regional Roman realms in Gaul and Spain, all post-Roman kingdoms became known by their ethnic labels. On the other hand, they were not simply the creation of self-confident Germanic peoples, as former generations of scholars believed. At least as much, as will be argued below, these kingdoms stabilized and shaped the ethnic identity of the barbarian-Roman elites that governed them.<sup>30</sup>

### BUILDING KINGDOMS

In fifth-century Europe, Attila's kingdom was an exception. In many respects, it followed the model of empires as they existed in the vast Central Asian steppes: an enormous, but rather volatile concentration of mobile warriors who flocked around a center of power that could give its expansionist dynamic a sense of direction and successful

leadership. Such a steppe empire consisted of various groups, clans, and peoples with different status, governed by a ruling dynasty or clan (in Priscus's terminology, the "royal" or "imperial" Scythians – he uses the Greek word *basilikós*, which is also used for the emperor). Its formidable military power could hold all subjects and neighbors in check, secure victory and plunder in war, and put such pressure on a sedentary empire that it preferred to buy peace at exceptional cost by paying a tribute only thinly disguised as "presents" or rewards for military service. The ruler of such a steppe empire could use the influx of gold, silver, and prestige goods to demonstrate his invincibility, and to keep his warriors satisfied by gifts and benefits. Food and the necessities of daily life were procured by a traditional pastoral economy, and by the agricultural production of the subject populations, in part resettled near the core areas of the empire. These steppe empires usually exhausted their expansive dynamic within a few generations, and were soon replaced by another one.<sup>31</sup>

Attila's kingdom corresponded to the model, but with some interesting differences. In spite of their dramatic impact when they arrived in Europe, the Huns did not establish a unified empire at first. Several kings and leaders seem to have coexisted, each with limited powers. Only in the 430s did the Huns begin to pose a threat to the Roman Empire, and Attila's empire reached the apex of its glory a few years before his death and the dissolution of the kingdom. Unlike many of the steppe empires bordering on Sasanian Iran or China, Attila obviously did not aspire to conquering imperial territories and to appropriating its infrastructure, its cities, fortresses, mints, or tax systems. When his raids had depopulated a broad strip of Roman land south of the Danube, he even requested that it should not be resettled. The expeditions to Gaul and Italy in 451 and 452 indicate that the range of strategic options under these premises were limited. Paradoxically, many powerbrokers of the future met at Attila's court, men whose sons would follow a very different strategy, and who were to rule Italy for more than half a century: Orestes, father of the last western emperor; Odoacer's father Edekon; and the Ostrogothic king Thiudimir, father of Theoderic "the Great." Yet none of them followed Attila's model of an empire outside

<sup>29</sup> Claudian, *De IV consulatu Honorii Augusti C. Claudiani*, 474, ed. and trans. Maurice Platnauer (London, 1922) 1: 320; Zosimos, *Historia nova*, 5.5.4, ed. François Paschoud, vol. 3 (Paris, 1986) 11. Walter Pohl, "Pistis e potere: Coesione etnica negli eserciti barbarici nel periodo delle migrazioni," in *Archeologia e storia delle migrazioni: Europa, Italia, Mediterraneo fra tarda età romana e alto medioevo*, ed. Carlo Ebanista and Marcello Rotili (Cimitile, 2011) 55–64.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Walter Pohl, eds., *Regna et Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, *The Transformation of the Roman World* 13 (Leiden, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*, ed. Max Knight (Berkeley, 1973); Walter Pohl, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa 567–822 n. Chr.* (Munich, 2002); Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in World History* (Oxford, 2011); Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas, eds., *Eurasian Empires: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe in Late Antiquity, ca. 250–650 C.E.* (forthcoming).

the Roman empire.<sup>32</sup> In the meantime, Attila's sons, and increasingly, other "Hunnic" steppe peoples lived in an unstable landscape of regional kingdoms and powers north of the Black Sea, until the Avars built a similar empire from the 560s onward.<sup>33</sup>

The future post-Roman kingdoms began more inconspicuously than Attila's empire. The Visigoths were the pioneers of a stable settlement by treaty of a barbarian army in a Roman province. They were granted the province of Aquitania, but it had taken almost a generation of conflicts and negotiations before this arrangement was reached, and it entailed the consent of at least part of the Roman elite in Gaul.<sup>34</sup> In theory, the Visigoths represented imperial rule, and in practice, they controlled, but were also dependent on, the Roman administration in their province. This arrangement did not bring lasting peace, for the Goths tried to extend the area of their control, while Roman commanders and other barbarian groups strove to contain them. The stable settlement of barbarians, however, resulted in limiting the range and intensity of military conflict. The Visigothic "kingdom of the empire" gradually slipped out of imperial control, but as most other barbarian kingdoms, it continued, and eventually down-sized the Roman administration and its tax system.<sup>35</sup>

The situation was much more precarious in Hispania, where Vandals, Alans, and Suebi had carved out rough areas of dominance in endemic conflict with each other, with Roman commanders, and with the Visigoths who repeatedly attacked them with or without an imperial mandate. It is an example of an integration that never quite worked, so that King Geiseric decided to move on. When his Vandals and Alans crossed over into Africa in 429, there were rumors that the Roman governor Boniface had called them in to assist him in internal struggles. But they came as conquerors, not by way of a negotiated settlement – a rare case. Still, Geiseric found ways to collaborate with the Roman administration, and to settle his army comfortably without disrupting the provincial economy too much. The Vandal kingdom threatened the grain supplies for Rome, which had come from Africa, cut off the tax proceeds from one of the richest provinces, and challenged imperial naval control over the western Mediterranean – severe blows for the

empire. Still, Emperor Valentinian III tried to come to terms with Geiseric, whose son Huneric was then married to a Theodosian princess. When Attila died and his empire collapsed, the Vandal kingdom seemed to be built on much more solid ground; in 455, Geiseric directed his fleet to Rome to avenge the murder of Valentinian III, and had the city plundered for two weeks.

Whereas the Visigothic kingdom was built on negotiations, and that of the Vandals on conquest, the Burgundian kingdom in southeastern Gaul started with defeat.<sup>36</sup> In the 440s, the Roman general Aetius transferred them from the agitated Rhine frontier to a quieter province further inland. They were to provide military services when required, and indeed, members of the Burgundian royal family repeatedly took high military office. In the last years of the western empire, their later king Gundobad acted as military commander and impresario of power in Ravenna for some time, until he withdrew to Burgundy. In these years, the elites of the Burgundian kingdom had no sense that something fundamental had changed. The sixth-century *Lives of the Jura Fathers* underline how the Burgundian king Chilperic in circa 470 publicly criticized the ascetic abbot Lupicinus for having prophesied the collapse of the Roman order in the province, and shouted at him: "Are you not the impostor who . . . proclaimed to this region and to our fathers that ruin was imminent? Why, then, I ask you, have terrible predictions that you made publicly not been confirmed by any unfortunate event? Explain that to us, you false prophet!"<sup>37</sup> In these kingdoms, the empire was still a reality, although mediated through barbarian kings and officials who were often more accessible than the distant imperial court. It is remarkable that although the kingdoms of the Visigoths, Vandals, and Burgundians had been established under very different conditions, their basic policies and political conduct did not differ fundamentally. Their kings were proud of their rule over imperial territory, but still operated within the imperial framework.

The texts routinely use ethnic labels for these kingdoms, and ascribe agency to the *gens*, the people. The *gentes* wage war, conclude peace, extend their kingdoms, elect their kings, are friend or foe to the empire. These perceptions of practical politics do not quite correspond

<sup>32</sup> For the "Hunnic alternative," see Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples* (Berkeley, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Pohl, "Huns, Avars, Hungarians."

<sup>34</sup> Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain, 409–711* (London, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Walter Pohl, ed., *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity. The Transformation of the Roman World 1* (Leiden, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Reinhold Kaiser, *Die Burgunder* (Stuttgart, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> *Vitae Patrum Iurensum*, trans. Tim Vivian, Kim Vivian, and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Life of the Jura Fathers: The Life and Rule of the Holy Fathers Romanus, Lupicinus, and Engendius, Abbots of the Monasteries in the Jura Mountains*, 2.92–95 (Spencer, Mass., 1999) 144ff.

to the formal self-representation of the new rulers. In the fifth century, they rarely advertised the ethnic background to their rule. They mostly used *rex* (king) as their title, without any ethnic qualification. This is understandable, because they claimed to rule not only over their own people, but also over other barbarians and over a vast majority of Roman provincials. To call oneself king of the Goths (*rex Gothorum*) or Vandals would have implied a limitation of their rule. Still, in certain occasions, the ethnic title is also attested. A North African inscription, for instance, gives Huneric's title as *rex Vandalorum et Alanorum*; it was a time when Geiseric's son, husband of a Theodosian princess, had to secure the loyalty of his more traditionally minded nobles.<sup>38</sup> Around 500, a seal ring of the Visigothic king Alaric II conserved in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum gives his title as *rex Gothorum*.<sup>39</sup> In some manuscripts of Burgundian law, Gundobad is presented as *rex Burgundionum*.<sup>40</sup> The use of the title was obviously situational, and depended on the audience. It took centuries until the use of the ethnic title as self-representation became standard.

This is not surprising, the political situation was complex and in many ways experimental. The *gentes* had been regarded as barbarians, pagans (*gentes* or *gentiles* was the Christian term for them), minorities, and outsiders. Now they ruled over large swaths of imperial territory. We still do not understand properly why and how this change to hegemonic ethnicity happened. Why were the new kingdoms not simply defined by dynasty or province?<sup>41</sup> For a long time, scholars have taken it for granted that the conquerors should assert their ethnic identities in their new kingdoms. However, the contemporary sources attest to little ethnic self-assertiveness. Yet ethnic identity could now offer privilege, and the new rulers had to be careful to control access to what later on, in Ostrogothic Italy, was to be called *libertas Gothorum*, the

<sup>38</sup> Vict. Vit. 2.8 (2.9); 3.3, 125, 175; Herwig Wolfram, *Intitulatio I: Lateinische Königs- und Fürstentitel bis zum Ende des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Graz, 1967) 79.

<sup>39</sup> Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, "Gemme: Siegelstein Alarichs II., König der Westgoten," Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Bilddatenbank, <http://bilddatenbank.khm.at/viewArtefact?id=71108>, accessed 16 July 2013.

<sup>40</sup> *Leges Burgundionum*, Praef., Extravagantes XIXf., ed. Ludwig Rudolf von Salis (MGH LL Nat. Germ. 2, 1, Hannover, 1892), 29; 118f.; Ian N. Wood, "Ethnicity and the Ethnogenesis of the Burgundians," in *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern 1*, ed. Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl (Vienna, 1990) 53–69.

<sup>41</sup> 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. Walter Pohl et al. (Farnham, U.K., 2012).

freedom of the Goths.<sup>42</sup> The *gens* had to be big enough to impose its rule and small enough to provide a fair share in the benefits. It was this innovative political role that made ethnic identities significant in a new way. Visigoths and Burgundians issued their own law codes, Goths and Vandals distinguished themselves by their Arian creed, and all of this was part of a complex effort to maintain difference in a process of integration into the Roman and Christian world. The Age of Attila saw the beginning of a specifically European process: the development of a political landscape structured by ethnic (and later, national) distinctions.<sup>43</sup> That was not the natural result of a "migration of peoples." It was the eventual outcome of arrangements between the Roman elites and ethnically defined armies that gave them control over Roman provinces.

<sup>42</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley, 1985) 301.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Pohl, "Introduction: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West," in *Post-Roman Transitions: Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout, 2013).