



The barbarian invasions

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The so-called ‘barbarian invasions’ have a vital role in, and in many respects stand at the beginning of, European history. Almost all national histories in some way or other go back to a group of invading or migrating barbarians: Anglo-Saxons in England, Goths and Lombards in Italy, Franks and Burgundians in France, Visigoths in Spain, or Scots in Scotland. The popularly perceived founders of the national histories of many western countries are those early medieval writers who are deemed to have offered ‘national’, ‘ethnic’ histories of these migrating peoples: Bede in England, who wrote na *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the 730s, Paul the Deacon in Italy, who wrote his *History of the Lombards* in the 780s, and Isidore of Seville, whose *History of the Goths, Sueves and Vandals* was written in Spain in the early seventh century. Gregory of Tours, author of *Ten Books of Histories* of his own times (the late sixth century), is classed as having written a *History of the Franks*. Although that was in fact the name given to an anonymous seventh-century six-book abbreviation of Gregory’s work including only the material to do with Franks, it has nevertheless earned him the title of ‘Father of the History of France’.

Most western national consciousness can thus be traced back to notions, however confused, of barbarian invasions or migrations. They are held to have swept away the ancient ‘classical’ world, the world of Rome, and to have introduced the Dark Ages. This was not always seen as a disaster; far from it, German and English historians in particular have been fond of picturing the barbarians as sweeping away a tired, effete and decadent Mediterranean civilization and replacing it with a more virile, martial, Nordic one. Even writers who modified the extreme versions of this view still often presented the Empire as weak and in decline. French and Italian historians, on the other hand, have tended to see the barbarians as a ‘bad thing’, destroying a living civilization, introducing a barbaric Dark Age. Whereas those historians refer to the barbarian invasions in pejorative terms (*les invasions barbares*) German and English historians simply refer to ‘migrations’, wanderings of peoples, *Völkerwanderungen*. In particular, the Germanic barbarians, who include most of the migrating groups, and are still often seen as unified by some kind of proto-German ethos or nationality, migrate along tortuously winding routes, represented in historical atlases as a spaghetti-like confusion of coloured arrows, to their eventual goals, almost as if these were predestined. Until recently, historians have agreed on two things: whether they saw them in positive or negative terms,

it was the barbarians who put paid to the Roman Empire; and these barbarians were largely 'Germanic'. The fall of the Roman Empire is to be attributed, in however short-term a perspective, to the barbarian invasions (or migrations). This led, in the nineteenth century, to what might be called the 'Germanist' view, which, put bluntly, holds that everything new and different about the fifth, sixth, seventh and later centuries must be attributed to 'Germanic' influence. Consequently, the works of thoroughly Roman writers like Gregory of Tours, Cassiodorus and Venantius Fortunatus were edited in the series of 'Historic Monuments of Germany', *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. The Germanist view also led to the description of post-Roman law codes as Germanic law, and, in archaeology, to the new types of rural settlement which replaced the old Roman villas being called 'Germanic', and to new burial forms, like furnished inhumation (with grave-goods), similarly being ascribed to Germanic influence. Changes in urban life, with the shrinking and even abandonment of Roman towns, and the end of classical urbanism were pinned, in a less positive way, on the Germans and either their savage primitive, destructive tendencies, or, alternatively, their noble adherence to more pristine, rural modes of life. The Germans are seen as flooding, or swamping, the provinces in the migrations of whole tribes or nations. The 'Germanist' view has been countered with the 'Romanist' or 'continuity' view, which holds that the Germanic barbarians created little that was new. In this picture, the migrations are the movements of small warrior elites (and some extreme versions come close to denying that anyone moved at all), and so are unlikely to have been able to bring about such sweeping changes. The administration of the former provinces was essentially that of the Roman Empire, run by Roman provincials for their new barbarian masters; barbarian kingship was largely modelled on imperial Christian Roman ideas; there was continuity of settlement patterns, even if the forms changed; the towns were simply continuing in a process of change which began as early as the third century; and so on. The Romanist argument has even been deployed in Britain, where there is a strongly held common view that the situation was very different from that on the continent.

Although there may be more to be said for the Romanist 'continuity' model than for the Germanist 'catastrophe' view, both models are misleading. There was indeed a great deal of social, economic and political change in the late fourth through to the sixth centuries, but the barbarians cannot be blamed for much of it.