The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395–600

The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395–600 deals with the exciting period commonly known as ‘late antiquity’ – the fifth and sixth centuries. The Roman empire in the west was splitting into separate Germanic kingdoms, while the Near East, still under Roman rule from Constantinople, maintained a dense population and flourishing urban culture until the Persian and Arab invasions of the early seventh century.

Averil Cameron places her emphasis on the material and literary evidence for cultural change and offers a new and original challenge to traditional assumptions of ‘decline and fall’ and ‘the end of antiquity’. The book draws on the recent spate of scholarship on this period to discuss in detail such controversial issues as the effectiveness of the late Roman army, the late antique city and the nature of economic exchange and cultural life. With its extensive annotation, it provides a lively, and often critical introduction to earlier approaches to the period, from Edward Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire to the present day.

No existing book in English provides so detailed or up-to-date an introduction to the history of both halves of the empire in this crucial period, or discusses existing views in such a challenging way. Averil Cameron is a leading specialist on late antiquity, having written about the period and taught it for many years. This book has much to say to historians of all periods. It will be particularly welcomed by teachers and students of both ancient and medieval history.

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The empire, the barbarians and the late Roman army

AD 476

The fifth century saw one of the most famous non-events in history – the so-called ‘fall of the Roman empire in the west’, which supposedly took place in AD 476, when the young Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman emperor in the west, was deposed and his place effectively taken by Odoacer, a Germanic military leader.¹ Odoacer differed from his barbarian predecessors in that he did not attempt to rule through a puppet emperor; he sent an embassy of Roman senators to the Emperor Zeno in Constantinople asking to be given the prestigious title of *patricius*. The emperor’s reply was equivocal, since the deposed Julius Nepos, who was also now seeking his aid, had been placed on the throne with eastern support (AD 473); but Odoacer satisfied himself with the title *rex*, and henceforth the only emperor ruled from Constantinople (Procopius, *BG* I.1.1–8; Anon. *Val.* 37–8).² Thus the date AD 476 has provided a convenient point at which to place the formal end of the Roman empire, and Procopius of Caesarea begins his history of Justinian’s Gothic war (AD 535–54) by recounting the history of Italy from that point. Gradually, though not immediately, the eastern empire came to terms with the fact that it was left alone as the upholder of Roman tradition, and invented its own myths of *translatio imperii* to justify its new role.³ But AD 476 has no significance in the context of the economic and social changes that were taking place in the period; it is doubtful whether even the population of Italy at first noticed much difference. Despite all the vast modern bibliography which has accumulated about this supposed ‘turning-point’, the changes which were taking place were long-term; it is much more helpful therefore to take a more structural view.
In political terms, the fall of Romulus Augustulus was entirely predictable. Odoacer himself came from the German tribe known as the Scirae, one of several which were by now heavily represented as federate troops in what was left of the Roman army; indeed, he was carried to power by these federates when their demands for a share of the land similar to that enjoyed by barbarian tribes in Gaul was refused. But he was only one in a long line of generals who had held the real power in the western empire since the late fourth century. When one of the first and most powerful of these, Stilicho, the Vandal *magister militum* of Theodosius I and regent for his son Honorius, fell in AD 408, suspected of treason (Chapter 1), he was succeeded by Romans in the powerful positions of *magister utriusque militiae and patricius*; but real power still lay with the barbarian generals, in particular Aetius (c. AD 433–54). After the murder of Valentinian III (AD 455) (Chapter 1), his successor Avitus, a Gallic senator, was defeated by a Suevian general called Ricimer and an uneasy period followed before Majorian was officially proclaimed emperor in AD 457, only to be killed by the same Ricimer four years later. Again Ricimer was kingmaker, but his undistinguished choice, Severus, who had not been ratified by the eastern emperor Leo, died in AD 465, again leaving the west without an official ruler. When Leo imposed his own choice, a easterner called Anthemius, the rivalry between Anthemius and Ricimer became first a scandal and then the occasion for open hostilities, in the course of which Anthemius was killed (AD 472). Ricimer’s final choice for emperor was Olybrius, the Roman husband of Valentinian III’s daughter Galla Placidia (Chapter 1); but both Olybrius and Ricimer died before the year was out, and the nominee of the Burgundian Gundobad was deposed by Julius Nepos with the encouragement of the Emperor Leo, only to be deposed in his turn in favour of the illfated Romulus Augustulus. It is a dreary and confused story, in which the principal players vary between barbarian or Roman commanders and members of the civilian aristocracy, with the eastern emperor at times invoked for the sake of respectability and at times interposing his own choice. Only occasionally did these power struggles at the top have a direct impact on government itself; Majorian, who did issue reforming legislation, soon fell at the hands of Ricimer. There was no western Leo or Zeno; in fact no western emperor ever succeeded in establishing strong government after the death of Theodosius I, and while the eastern government in the later fifth century under Marcian and Anastasius succeeded in becoming progressively more civilian in style, the exact
Figure 3. The Mediterranean world, early sixth century.
opposite happened in the west.

But the western government could hardly be said to represent strong military rule; on the contrary, both the territories occupied by the western empire and the Roman army itself had by now suffered fragmentation on a major scale. These processes are closely interconnected, with roots reaching back to the fourth century, but they will be treated separately here for the sake of clarity.

ROMANS AND BARBARIANS FROM THE LATE FOURTH CENTURY ONWARDS

We have inherited a dramatic and overstated view of the Roman empire in the west being submerged by successive waves of northern barbarian invaders. In fact, the movement of barbarian tribes from beyond the Rhine and the Danube had already been a fact of life since the Marcomannic wars of Marcus Aurelius in the late second century. Up to the mid-fourth century, however, it had generally been possible to contain them by a judicious deployment of force and diplomacy. Moreover, these were settled peoples with social hierarchies. However, the arrival on the scene in AD 376 of the Huns, a nomadic people from the north-east, was a decisive moment; it forced the Tervingi under their leader Fritigern to cross the Danube into Roman territory and led to their settlement in the Balkans by the Emperor Valens (Ammianus 31.4f.; Eunapius, fr. 42). The Greek and Roman sources depict the event in lurid colours, but the Goths were no terrified rabble nor part of a great wave of invaders sweeping over the Roman empire. Complex social and economic factors lay behind their appearance in later Roman history, and when they came, they came as an organized military force. Only two years later, at the battle of Adrianople (AD 378), the Goths defeated a Roman army and killed Valens himself on the field. Rome never forgot the blow; the extent of the shock it caused is evident in the account of it given by Ammianus Marcellinus, and by the fact that he chose to end his history at this point (Ammianus 31.7–13). Huge losses were inflicted on the Roman army, and thereafter the Goths were free to roam and pillage freely. Moreover, the Roman defeat was the signal for other barbarian groups to cross into Roman territory. Though in AD 382 a formal treaty seems to have granted the Goths lands along the Danube and in the Balkans
(Jordanes, *Getica* 27.141–29.146; Synesius, *De Regno* 21.50), a certain Radagaisus collected a large barbarian army from across the Rhine and Danube and invaded Italy in AD 405; on his defeat by Stilicho 12,000 of them were enrolled in the Roman army (Olympiodorus, fr. 9; Zos. V.26). Almost at the same time the usurper Constantine moved from Britain into Gaul (Zos. VI.2–3). But we meet the barbarians most dramatically as they cross the frozen river Rhine in December AD 406; from then on Alans, Vandals and Sueves were on the move across Germany and Gaul and into Spain (Oros. VII.37).

The story is complex, and the course of events confused by rivalries between different groupings, not to mention the problems presented by the sources themselves; by the late 420s, however, the Vandals under Gaiseric crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into North Africa, reached Augustine’s see at Hippo by AD 430, received a hasty land settlement in Numidia in 435 and took Carthage, the capital, in 439. Despite the abortive attempts of the eastern emperor, Theodosius II, to send a fleet to control them in AD 441, Vandal rule of most of North Africa, including Africa Proconsularis, Byzacena and most of Numidia and Tripolitania, received de facto recognition in 442. By 455 Gaiseric had taken over Corsica, Sardinia and the Balearics, and on the death of Valentinian III in that year even entered and sacked Rome, taking Sicily in 468; the further naval expedition sent by the eastern emperor Leo in the 460s was an ignominious failure (see Chapter 1), and North Africa remained in Vandal control until the expedition of Belisarius in AD 533. Though it now seems that Vandal Africa was less isolated economically from the rest of the empire than has traditionally been supposed, the speed and ease by which one of the richest and most urbanized provinces, supplier of grain to Rome, was lost is sufficient indicator of the degree of change which the northern barbarians were to cause from now on.

The situation in the northern provinces was less clear-cut, but just as damaging. In the difficult conditions of the first decade of the fifth century, Zosimus tells us that the defence of Britain was formally abandoned by Honorius: ‘Honorius sent letters to the cities in Britain, urging them to fend for themselves’ (VI.10); some of the troops in Britain, who had apparently supported usurpers before AD 406, remained in the province, but there was no longer a central authority, and Saxon raids now exacerbated the already confused situation, which is made even more difficult to understand by the
disagreements in the few available sources. The rapid disappearance of Roman towns in Britain after several centuries of Roman rule is only one of the many puzzling features of the period. In mainland Europe, the fifth century saw a lengthy jostling for position as different Germanic groups competed against each other and with Rome for land and influence. The west more than once suffered from the greater ability of the east to avert the danger by financial and diplomatic means, most conspicuously in the case of Alaric and the Visigoths, who had been allowed by the eastern government to build up their strength in the Balkans, only to use it against Italy, demand large amounts of gold and silver and eventually to sack Rome in AD 410 (Zos. VI.6–13). The sack itself, while not apparently as destructive as it might have been, caused many leading members of the Roman aristocracy to flee and came as an enormous psychological blow to Christians and pagans alike. But the chance event of Alaric’s own death shortly afterwards, like that of Attila, the king of the Huns, in a similar situation later, saved Rome from the possibility of long-term occupation.

The aftermath depended on the changing configurations of the tribal groupings, and their respective success in dealing with the imperial government. Various means were used. Having left Italy in 412, the Visigoths turned to Gaul, where Athaulf, their king, married the captive imperial princess Galla Placidia, only to pass at once into Spain. Not long afterwards the Emperor Honorius was to use the same Visigoths, now under Wallia, against the Alans and Vandals, and to settle them in Aquitaine. Further settlements were made c. AD 440 by Aetius, of Alans in Gaul and Burgundians north of Geneva. Meanwhile, a new threat was being posed by the Hun king Attila, who, having already extracted large subsidies, crossed the Danube in the early 440s, defeated the Roman armies sent against him on two occasions and succeeded in obtaining even higher annual payments of gold. He eventually turned towards the west, accepted the advances of Valentinian III’s sister Honoria and demanded half the empire. The battle between the forces of Attila and Aetius on the Catalaunian Fields which followed (AD 451) was a temporary check, but did not prevent the Huns from invading Italy (Jordanes, Get. 180ff.). Again, the western empire had a lucky escape: Attila’s death (Chapter 1) brought the break-up of the Hun empire and removed the danger.

From now on, however, as the western government became progressively weaker, it became less and less possible to sustain any coherent policy in relation to barbarian settlement. At the beginning of the fifth century, even
Plate 2. The artistic patronage of the late Roman aristocracy: a marriage casket for a Christian couple, Proiecta and Secundus, from the Esquiline Treasure, Rome, late fourth century.
in the vacuum left by the death of Theodosius I in 395, Rome still occupied the centre in the shifting game of barbarian movement; by the end of the century, on the other hand, no Roman emperor was left in the west, and we can see the first stage in the development of the barbarian kingdoms of the early Middle Ages. The first such kingdom to be established was, as we have seen, that of the Vandals in North Africa. However, it was untypical in that it was overthrown by the imperial armies under Belisarius in AD 534 and replaced by well-established Byzantine rule lasting until the late seventh century. North Africa, in fact, represents the success story of Justinian’s policy of reconquest; the irony was, however, that in contrast with the long history of Roman Africa before the arrival of the Vandals, the restored imperial province was governed by easterners from Constantinople whose language of administration was Greek. The longest lasting of the Germanic kingdoms was that of the Franks, established by their king Clovis (481–511) after their momentous defeat of the Visigoths at Vouillé in AD 507 and lasting until AD 751. Although it was the Franks who gave their name to modern France. Clovis’ descendants are usually known as the Merovingians. They found a vivid chronicler in the late sixth-century bishop Gregory of Tours, whose *History of the Franks* is our main source, remarkable not least for its unrestrained cataloguing of the bloodthirsty doings of the Frankish royal family.

Gregory provides a colourful account of the conversion and baptism of Clovis himself: the king’s wife Clotild was already a Christian and tried unsuccessfully to convert her husband, but his reaction when her first son died after being baptized was one of anger:

> if he had been dedicated in the name of my gods, he would have lived without question; but now that he has been baptized in the name of your God he has not been able to live a single day!

(II.29)

The king was finally converted after successfully praying to the Christian God for victory on the field of battle against the Alamanni, and was then baptized by bishop Remigius of Rheims, who, we are assured by Gregory, had raised a man from the dead. The scene of the king’s baptism was spectacular:
The public squares were draped with coloured cloths, the churches were adorned with white hangings, the baptistry was prepared, sticks of incense gave off clouds of perfume, sweet-smelling candles gleamed bright and the holy place of baptism was filled with divine fragrance. God filled the hearts of all present with such grace that they imagined themselves to have been transported to some perfumed paradise. King Clovis asked that he might be baptized first by the Bishop. Like some new Constantine he stepped forward to the baptismal pool, ready to wash away the scars of his old leprosy and to be cleansed in flowing water from the sordid stains which he had borne so long.

More than 3,000 of his army were baptized at the same time.

In Italy, the invasion of the Ostrogoths under Theodoric in 490 marked the beginning of the Ostrogothic kingdom (490–554), whose last king, Teias, was finally defeated by Justinian’s general Narses in AD 554 after nearly twenty years of warfare. But again in contrast to North Africa, the invasion of Italy by the Lombards in AD 568 meant that Byzantine control in Italy was not to last for very long, except in an attenuated (though still important) form, limited to the territory of the Exarchate with its base at Ravenna, which lasted from the late sixth until the mid-eighth centuries. After 568 the situation in Italy was confused and fragmented; for this very reason, it was in this period that the popes, especially Gregory the Great (590–604), acquired much of their enormous secular influence and economic power.

Ostrogothic Italy maintained many continuities with the Roman past; among the most important of these was the survival of many of the immensely rich and aristocratic Roman families who continued to hold office under the new regime. It is a remarkable fact that the Roman senate survived during the fifth century, through all the political changes, and its members continued to be appointed to traditional offices and to hold the western consulship even under the Ostrogoths; the consulship was in fact ended by Justinian himself in AD 541. Many of these Roman families were extremely wealthy, and Procopius, who describes the Gothic wars in detail from the eastern point of view, particularly identifies with this class, most of whom lost their land and position, and many of whom were reduced to a pitiable state by the Justinianic war unless they were able to flee.
to the east where they often also possessed estates. Like many others of this class, Cassiodorus Senator, whose highly rhetorical and bureaucratic Latin letters (*Variae*), many written as Theodoric’s secretary, are another of our main sources for the period, went to live in Constantinople during the wars. Before that, he had written a *Gothic History*, used by Jordanes in his *Getica*, and after the wars ended and he had returned to Italy, the *Institutiones*, precepts on Christian learning. Cassiodorus founded the monastery of Vivarium at Squillace, which was to become one of the most important medieval centres for the copying and preservation of classical texts. A traumatic event had taken place in relations between the Ostrogoths and the Roman upper class in Italy in AD 523–4, when Theodoric had unexpectedly turned on and eventually executed two of its most prominent members, Symmachus and Boethius, author of the Latin classic, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. The case was sensational – Symmachus held one of the most prestigious names among the late Roman aristocracy, Boethius’ two sons had both been given the consulship and he was himself Theodoric’s *magister officiorum*. Boethius’ great work, the *Consolation*, was written in prison as he mused on his fate; he imagines himself visited by the Lady Philosophy, and engages in extended discussion of fate and free will, and of the fickleness of fortune, and includes a number of long poems which are of great interest in themselves. But the deaths of Symmachus and Boethius were exceptional; Theodoric himself seems to have shared the general respect for Roman tradition, and the Ostrogothic regime was not in general oppressive.

The defeat of the Visigoths by Clovis at Vouillé in AD 507 put an effective end to their kingdom in Gaul, which had had its capital at Toulouse since AD 418, and to the legitimate descent of the Balt dynasty which had ruled since Alaric I at the end of the fourth century. In the troubled period which followed, the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, whose daughter had married the son of the Visigothic Alaric II, intervened, and Visigothic rule passed temporarily into Ostrogothic hands. More important in the longer term, however, was the movement of the Visigoths into Spain, which had already happened before the end of the fifth century; there, especially from the time of the Ostrogothic Theudis (431–48), they were to establish a kingdom which despite some Byzantine success in the context of Justinian’s reconquest lasted until the arrival of the Arabs in the early eighth century.
With the establishment of the barbarian kingdoms we pass into the traditional realm of early medieval history. But the continuities are such that it is also possible to see the period up to the later sixth century in terms of a still surviving Mediterranean world of late antiquity; despite the obvious changes in settlement patterns in the west, the available archaeological evidence seems to show that long-distance trade and travel still went on, even if the details are still contentious, and that the urban change which has been such a controversial issue in recent historical work was a Mediterranean-wide phenomenon evident in east and west alike in the late sixth century. It can therefore be distinctly misleading to think too much in terms of separation between east and west. The western kingdoms themselves retained many Roman institutions, and even saw their relation with the emperor in Constantinople in terms of patronage; their kings received Roman titles. The former Roman upper classes survived in substantial numbers and adapted themselves in various ways to the new regimes. One such was Sidonius Apollinaris, bishop of Clermont in the later fifth century, who complained bitterly in his elegant poems and letters about the uncouth local barbarian overlords, but adapted nevertheless to the changed situation. Gregory of Tours writes of Sidonius,

he was a very saintly man, and as I have said, a member of one of the foremost senatorial families. Without saying anything to his wife he would remove silver vessels from his home and give them away to the poor. When she found out, she would grumble at him; then he would buy the silver vessels back from the poor folk and bring them home again.

(II.22)

Both Gregory of Tours, the historian of the Franks, and Venantius Fortunatus, another Merovingian bishop, Gregory’s contemporary and friend and the author of Latin poems on political and contemporary subjects, came from this class, as indeed did Pope Gregory the Great. Germanic law existed in uneasy juxtaposition with Roman; the Ostrogothic kingdom had one law for the Goths and another for the Roman population, while successive Visigothic law-codes, beginning with the Code of Euric (c.
AD 476) and the Romanizing *Lex Romana Visigothorum* of Alaric II (AD 506) and followed by an extensive programme of law-making in the Visigothic kingdom of the sixth and seventh centuries, gradually brought about a unification of the German and the Roman traditions. The term ‘sub-Roman’ is sometimes used to designate these kingdoms in this period, and with its denigratory overtones is closer perhaps to the way in which they were regarded by the eastern government. The latter had pursued a pragmatic policy, knowing that it was in no position to impose a western emperor, but not admitting that the regimes were permanent. When the time came, it was very ready to use one against another. The fact that the Goths in Italy, like the Vandals and, at this period, the Visigoths, were Arian was a help to imperial diplomacy, for it made it possible to represent Justinian’s invasion of Italy in AD 535 as something of a crusade: seeking aid from the orthodox Franks, the emperor wrote:

> The Goths have seized Italy, which is our possession, by force, and have not only refused to return it, but have committed wrongs against us which are past endurance. For this reason we have been forced to go to war against them, a war in which both our common hatred of the Goths and our orthodox faith dictates that you should join us, so as to dislodge the Arian heresy.

*(Procopius, *BG* I.5.8–9)*

Prudently, the rhetoric was backed by gold, and by the promise of more if the Franks agreed; not surprisingly, perhaps, they were not to prove very loyal allies.

In studying the process of barbarian settlement in the territory of the western empire, we must try to distinguish between formal grants made by successive emperors and governments and the longer process of informal settlement change. In practice, a continuous process of ‘unofficial’ barbarian settlement, reaching back at least to the fourth century, had long ago undermined Roman control of the west. Though literary sources give us only a very imperfect and one-sided picture of this, its course can be partly reconstructed from archaeological finds, especially those from graves, though here again the record is still very patchy in geographical terms. The reasons for settlement could vary greatly, from invasion and imperial grants of land to resettlement through service in the Roman army, and it is often difficult to identify the reasons in individual cases. In the
same way, it is often impossible to connect known historical events such as
invasions, or even in some cases longer-term settlement known from literary
evidence with available archaeological remains. In addition, the newcomers
often tended to take over the customs of the existing provincial population,
making traces of Germanic settlement even harder to detect. Nevertheless,
late fourth- and early fifth-century Germanic graves are attested from
between the Rhine and the Loire, and in some cases seem to indicate the use
of barbarians in the local forces of the Roman army. Strikingly, some of
these cemeteries show Roman and Germanic burials side by side. The
earliest phase of Germanic settlement in Britain, though on a small scale,
nevertheless dates from the early fifth century, before the main wave of
invasions. It is true that the remains left in northern Gaul and around
Cologne by the Franks, who are much better attested historically, are thin
for the fifth century. But even allowing for the gaps in the archaeological
evidence, it is obvious that a steady process of small-scale cultural and
demographic change had been taking place in the western provinces long
before the formation of the barbarian kingdoms as we know them later. By
the mid-fifth century the former Roman villas in the western provinces have
in many cases been abandoned or gone into decline, and the role of the
former Roman landowning class, which will be discussed in more detail in
Chapter 4, becomes a major issue in tracing economic and social change.

The study of settlement patterns represents a major advance towards
understanding the process of change in the western empire, and especially
towards circumventing the problems inherent in the literary sources. Much
of the evidence so far collected remains incomplete, and in some cases
controversial; interpretation is very much a specialist matter. But there is
enough that is clear to show that the Roman government was not so much
faced with discrete incursions as with a slow but steady erosion of Roman
culture in the western provinces from within. The process was not of course
understood in these terms by contemporary writers, who are inspired by
ethnographic and cultural prejudice and tend to paint a lurid picture of
Romans versus ‘barbarians’; contemporary interpretations of highly
charged events such as the battle of Adrianople and the barbarian
settlements which followed it are thus liable to mislead if taken too
literally. Their moral and political explanations are not adequate to
explain what was happening on a broader scale, and most of the long-term
changes lay outside government control. Yet it was these changes, rather
Plate 3 Composite buckle, Ostrogothic style, inlaid with cloisonné garnets, green glass and shell in gold cellwork, late fifth-early sixth century. Found in a female grave near the gate of the church of St Severin, Cologne. Grave goods, of which this is a particularly fine example, are one of the main ways of tracing the movements and settlement of the Germanic tribes.
than any political events, which would in the long run detach these areas from effective imperial rule, and particularly so once that control passed from the hands even of a weak western emperor to those of a government in far-away Constantinople.

The impact of this process on the late Roman economy in general was obviously profound (see Chapter 4); in turn, the cessation of centralized Roman taxation on the former western provinces must have been of importance in stimulating their own economic development. But the possession of wealth also played a direct role in the empire’s dealings with barbarians in the fifth century in the form of the ‘subsidies’ paid by the Roman government to various groups, either as reward for quiescence or as inducements to go elsewhere. Although the eastern government was better placed to make use of this device than the western (Chapter 1), it proved useful at different times to both, and was still a key element in imperial policy in the sixth century when it was scathingly criticized by the conservative Procopius:

On all his country’s potential enemies he [sc. Justinian] lost no opportunity of lavishing vast sums of money – on those to East, West, North and South, as far as the inhabitants of Britain and the nations in every part of the known world.

\textit{(Secret History 19)}

By then (allowing for Procopius’ rhetorical exaggeration), the practice was built into Byzantine diplomacy and was indeed in many cases unavoidable – very large sums were paid to Persia, for instance, under the peace treaties of AD 531 and 562. The convenient practice of using barbarian troops as federates for the Roman army, which is a prominent feature of this period, was also expensive, and their maintenance could involve money as well as supplies. An extreme case can be seen in AD 408 when Alaric demanded 4,000 lb of gold for his recent operations on behalf of the imperial government in Epirus. The example of Alaric and his Goths also shows how easily clever barbarian leaders could play off east and west. They are said to have invaded Italy in 401 because the eastern government had cut off their regular subsidies (Jordanes, \textit{Get.} 146). Why this should have happened is not clear, but Thrace was also threatened at the time by Goths under Gainas and other barbarians described as Huns; at any rate, Alaric saw more advantage in moving against Italy, where he was alternately fought and bought off by
Stilicho. The latter’s dangerous policy of attempting to buy the service of Alaric and his troops ended when he himself fell in AD 408; but when this happened and Alaric’s demands for payment in return for retreating to Pannonia were rejected (Zos. V.36; Oros. VII.38), he besieged Rome itself (AD 408–9) and fixed the price of movements of food into the city at 5,000 lb of gold and 30,000 lb of silver (Zos. V.41). The aftermath of the capture and sack of Rome in AD 410 is highly confused, but enough is clear to show that the situation was quite different from that of the Vandals in Africa twenty years later: long-term occupation was not the issue at this point, and we still find Alaric’s successor Athaulf alternately plundering Italy and taking on the role of federates in Gaul. ‘When Athaulf became king, he returned again to Rome, and whatever had escaped the first sack his Goths stripped bare like locusts, not merely despoiling Italy of its private wealth but also of its public resources’ (Jordanes, Get. 31). Athaulf now took Galla Placidia captive and married her, giving both sides a sense of false security:

when the barbarians heard of this alliance, they were the more effectually terrified, since the Empire and the Goths now seemed to be made one. Then Athaulf set out for Gaul, leaving Honorius Augustus stripped of his wealth, to be sure, yet pleased at heart because he was now a sort of kinsman of his. (ibid.)

Now, however, grain was demanded rather than gold and silver, and by a momentous step, in AD 418 what remained of the Gothic army of Alaric was settled on Roman land in Aquitaine: ‘they received land in Aquitaine from Toulouse to the ocean’ (Hydatius, Chron. 69). The twenty or more years of plundering, negotiating, bargaining and fighting before the Goths were settled in Aquitaine vividly demonstrate the ambiguities, the cost and the dangers with which the Romans were faced in their attempts to deal with the barbarians.

The settlement of the erstwhile federate Goths in Gaul marks a critical stage in the gradual transformation of landholding in the western provinces. Here, however, we reach highly contentious matters, for the terms on which the land was granted, or on which later settlements were made, are very far from being clear. The traditional view is that the barbarian hospites, beginning with the Visigoths, were to be entitled to a share of the land on which they were settled, in the surprisingly high proportion
of two-thirds to one-third. Other examples would be the settlements of Alans and Burgundians in AD 440 and 443 (Chron. Min. I.660) and Ostrogothic Italy, where, however, the share may have been one-third rather than two-thirds; the rent paid on the share thus received was itself known as ‘thirds’ (tertiae). But there are many uncertainties, arising not least from discrepancies among the sources themselves. W. Goffart has proposed a quite different reading of the evidence from the later German law codes, according to which it was not the land itself, but the revenues from the estates, which were divided between barbarians and Romans. Controversy surrounds the meanings of the Latin terms hospitalitas and sors. However, our evidence is very incomplete; arrangements probably changed with changing conditions, and while land does seem to have been at issue in the settlement with the Visigoths in AD 418, it may not have been, for example, in the case of the Ostrogoths. By contrast, there is no evidence from northern Gaul, for example, to tell us about the arrangements which were made there.

BARBARIANS AND THE LATE ROMAN ARMY

Why was the Roman army so spectacularly unable to defend the western provinces? R. Collins (Early Medieval Europe 300–1000, London, 1991) calls his chapter on the fifth century ‘The disappearance of an army’, and one must indeed ask what had happened to the Roman army and why it seems to have been so unsuccessful. The very question, however, presupposes (as the Romans did themselves) that the preferred response to barbarian incursions would be to continue to defend the frontiers and keep the invaders out. When they consider the loss of the western empire, therefore, contemporary sources accordingly blame either the poor performance of the army or the weakening of frontier defence, usually attributing the latter to a particular emperor – thus the pagan historian Zosimus lays most of the blame on the Christian Constantine. Soldiers are regularly depicted in the sources from the fourth century onwards as debauched, ‘soft’ and undisciplined. The late Roman practice of billeting soldiers in towns often lies behind such criticisms; in the early empire, citizens of the more peaceful provinces had rarely seen soldiers at first hand, much less experienced their rough behaviour. The anonymous author of the treatise known as the De Rebus Bellicis (late 360s) complains both of the
high cost of the army and of the weakening of frontier defence (*De Rebus
Bellicis* 5), and the peasant-soldiers settled on the frontiers known as limitanei
are frequently blamed for alleged poor performance, although contrary to
common assumptions they are not securely attested before the late fourth
century.\(^4^6\) The fact that these complaints tend to come in so stereotyped a
form should make us suspicious that their form has much to do with the
prejudices of the contemporary sources. Moreover, as we have seen, the
outcome of the barbarian migrations, in the formation of the Germanic
kingdoms, was not simply a matter of the failure of the Roman army to deal
with a threatening situation, whatever the Romans may have thought
themselves.

Nevertheless, the army of the late fourth and fifth centuries was indeed
very different from that of the early empire. Many of the changes, such as
the stationing of troops in or near cities rather than in large masses on the
frontiers as before, stemmed from the fact that under the reforms of
Diocletian and Constantine the late Roman army was paid in supplies as
well as in cash: there was a simple need for troops to be near the sources of
collection of the taxes in kind which were now among their chief sources of
pay. According to the sources, Diocletian had strengthened frontier defence
installations throughout the empire, but it appears, perhaps for similar
reasons, that the size of late Roman frontier fortresses and of the legions
which manned them was far smaller than in the early empire. It is better to
view the late Roman army as the product of gradual evolution than of
sudden change introduced by Diocletian and Constantine, as the sources
would have us believe. This evolution in fact arose from a combination of
different reasons, though it is true that the effects were felt acutely in the late
fourth- and fifth-century west. By the sixth century, however, interruptions
in army pay were also a constant complaint in the eastern sources, and the
government was finding it increasingly hard to keep numbers up and was
able to field only very small forces even for its prestige endeavours in Italy.
Roman/Sasanian military dealings in the sixth century were also hampered
by the fact that the eastern frontier areas were progressively denuded of
troops (see Chapter 5).\(^4^7\) Barbarian bands known as *bucellarii* had come very
near to being the personal retainers of individual generals, and the typical
soldier of the period was a mounted archer, part of a trend towards cavalry
which had been taking place gradually over a long period; things had moved
a very long way from the days of the Roman legionary in the early imperial
period.
A major difference was that the Roman army itself now contained a very high proportion of barbarian troops. From the late fourth century federate barbarian troops had constituted a crucial element in late Roman military organization, although they are for the most part not listed in the Notitia Dignitatum. This in itself tells us that the Notitia, which gives a set of ‘paper’ figures, is an unreliable guide to the nature of the Roman army as it was in practice. Barbarians could appear in several different guises – as tribal units, in relatively small groups or as mercenaries enlisted by commanders for individual campaigns. In any of these cases, they had to be paid, whether through the annona, the official distribution of corn to the troops via the tax system, or directly in money and supplies. Such barbarian troops had frequently in the past been drawn from outside the empire, but with the process of barbarian settlement a fundamental change now took place: the federates came more and more from within the confines of the empire itself, and their numbers increased to such an extent that the army came to be substantially barbarian in composition and was effectively transformed into an army of mercenaries. There was an obvious political danger in this; it has been forcibly argued that the effective replacement of a citizen army whose soldiers fought for their own future by an army of mercenaries drawn from the very peoples against whom the Roman army was supposed to be fighting was a major factor in the fragmentation of the western empire. There was also much contemporary concern in the aftermath of the battle of Adrianople, and the military treatise of Vegetius, probably of this period, reflects the conservative view. But the evidence does not bear out the supposition that the barbarian troops were any less loyal, or fought less well, than Roman volunteers or even Roman conscripts. We have already seen the power gained by individual barbarians holding the highest office of magister militum: Stilicho, Ricimer and Odoacer are the most conspicuous examples. Like most of the other drastic changes which took place in the late Roman army, this too had begun in the fourth century, and barbarian officers in general are frequently mentioned in the military narrative of Ammianus, covering the years AD 353 to 378. In the ranks, barbarians held a variety of statuses, including those of laeti and gentiles, both referring to groups of settlers with an obligation to military service, as well as foederati, individually recruited barbarians, and dediticii, prisoners of war from beyond the frontiers. It seems that Germans were (as we might expect) most concentrated in the field armies in Gaul. But they were also used in the east, and there is evidence from the fourth century of troops of this kind being
supplied to the east. In practice, there were probably barbarian troops in all the many different units of the army. The reasons for this development, which seems at first sight to have been an extremely dangerous one for the empire, are not immediately easy to discern, and cannot be plausibly tied in in all areas with the supposition of a drop in citizen population, which has often been invoked to explain the ‘fall’ of the western empire.\(^5\) One explanation is simply that it was easy. Barbarians were available in large, if not massive, numbers,\(^5\) and utilizing them in the army was a convenient way of deciding what to do with them. They were easier to recruit than peasants, and the process did not interfere with the interests of the landowners who were emerging as more and more powerful in this period. Besides this, there was also the fact that some tribal groups had the reputation of being good fighters.

**THE LATE ROMAN ARMY**

Together with internal weakness, barbarian invasion is one of the classic explanations put forward for the fall of the empire. It further implies the ineffectiveness of the late Roman army to contain the situation.\(^5\) One issue is that of size: how large an army was at the disposal of the late Roman state? While calculations based on the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which lists the eastern army establishment c. AD 394 and the western one of c. AD 420, are difficult to make, they seem to suggest a size well over 400,000 or even more, depending on one’s interpretation.\(^5\) The mid-sixth-century Byzantine writer John the Lydian gives a figure of over 435,000 (*De mens. I.27*), and slightly later Agathias gives one of 645,000 (*Hist. V.13*), but the latter must be much too high even as a paper calculation. It is simply incredible that the empire could have sustained so vastly increased an army, and such totals must be treated with extreme caution. As we have seen, the *Notitia* also fails to take into account the very large proportion of barbarian federate troops who actually did much of the fighting. Agathias admits that by his own day the actual overall size had been reduced to 150,000: ‘whereas there should have been a total effective fighting force of six hundred and forty-five thousand men, the number had dropped during this period to barely one hundred and fifty thousand’ (*Hist. V.13*). Indeed, the armies fielded in Italy in Justinian’s wars of reconquest seem to have been very small indeed, while in the fifth century the withdrawal from Britain, the loss of North Africa
virtually without resistance and the extent of barbarian penetration in
general, all make it obvious that large troop mobilizations were no longer
possible. From the fifth century, at least, the western government was
simply no longer in a position to control the empire by military means. We
must therefore conclude that the high figures tell us little or nothing about
actual troop deployment. It is hard enough to believe that the army of
Diocletian consisted of as many as 400,000 men; even this would have been
an enormous burden, and it is equally clear that it soon became hard if not
impossible to maintain. Why that should have been so has to do with
political as well as economic factors, and, so far as the west was concerned,
also with the increased wealth and power of the great landowners, and the
inability of the central government in the west to retain sufficient resources
in its own hands (see Chapter 4).

Similarly, the changes in, or, as Roman writers saw it, the progressive
weakening of the frontier system should also be seen in the contexts of the
long-term transformation of local settlement-patterns and of economic and
social change. For contemporaries the concept of the frontier had become
an emotive issue; a simple equation was made between failing to keep up the
frontier defences and ‘letting in the barbarians’. Diocletian was
remembered for having strengthened the frontiers by the building and
repair of forts, Constantine for having ‘weakened’ them by supposedly
withdrawing troops into a mobile field army:

Constantine destroyed this security [i.e., Diocletian’s alleged strong
frontier defence] by removing most of the troops from the frontiers
and stationing them in cities which did not need assistance, thus both
stripping of protection those being molested by the barbarians and
subjecting the cities left alone by them to the outrages of the soldiers,
so that henceforth most have become deserted.

(Zos. II.34)

The actual situation was much more complex. Although the literary
sources are unsatisfactory and the archaeological evidence hard to assess
overall, the latter shows clearly enough the steady development of what are
often termed defences in depth, behind the frontier zone itself; by this is
meant a whole range of installations such as watch-towers and fortified
stores-bases whose functions included ensuring the supply-system to such
forward troops as remained, as well as watching and if possible controlling
barbarians within Roman territory. It was now impossible to maintain a
defensive line which could really keep barbarians outside the empire, and a
variety of local expedients recognized the contemporary realities.\textsuperscript{56} The
expedients chosen differed very much from one part of the empire to
another, depending on the terrain and the nature of the threat; in northern
Gaul a series of coastal forts had gradually come into being over a very long
period; in North Africa the so-called \textit{fossatum Africae} to the south was no
help against Vandals arriving from across the Straits of Gibraltar; in the east,
where there had never been a fortified line as such, the desert zones, on the
one hand, and the powerful military organization and aggressive policies of
the Sasanians, on the other, presented a totally different situation. Current
research suggests that the many defensive installations in the eastern
frontier region in the later empire were designed not only for defence
against invaders from outside the empire but also for the maintenance of
internal security. The apparently successful defence system of the early
empire had worked largely because in most areas there had been no serious
threat; once, however, nearly all the erstwhile frontier was under pressure
there was no serious chance of maintaining it in the same way, and recourse
was made of necessity to whatever best fitted local conditions. The change
is best seen in the case of the northern provinces, where the old
concentrations of force on the Rhine and Danube can now be seen to have
been replaced by a fragmented and complex mixture of ad hoc and often
unsuccessful defences.\textsuperscript{57} In the confused conditions of the fifth century it
must often have been difficult to know exactly not only who was defending
and who was attacking but also what was being threatened. Political factors
compounded the local ones. Already in the third century, when Gaul had
been the scene of a so-called separatist ‘Gallic Empire’, the line between
legitimate rulers and usurpers was a fine one;\textsuperscript{58} in the fifth century, when, as we have seen, real power was often held by Germanic military leaders, the
official abandonment of Britain by Honorius had been preceded by the
suppression of Constantine III, proclaimed by the soldiers in Britain; it was
followed by the proclamation of another counter-emperor, Jovinus, at
Mainz, whose support seems to have lain among Burgundians, Alans and
Franks. In the confused conditions which followed, the elevation in AD 421
of Constantius, who had defeated Constantine III and married Galla
Placidia, marked merely another passing event in a situation in which it
must for much of the time have been difficult simply to know who was who.\textsuperscript{59}

When for some periods in the west, at least, it is hard to see the Roman army as anything other than a hotchpotch of different units without unitary structure or control, it is hardly surprising that the organization, supply and command of the diverse units which made up the late Roman army in the empire as a whole should have proved so difficult. Even if we take a more common-sense view of the actual numbers of troops than has previously been common, the sheer maintenance of the army can be seen to have posed a variety of problems in the fifth century, of which cost was only one. Once barbarian settlement was allowed and encouraged, the frontiers no longer even pretended to keep out barbarians in any meaningful sense, while the growing presence of barbarians within the empire, combined with the activities of barbarian leaders such as Alaric and Gainas, meant that the army itself was in danger of becoming an army of barbarians. Difficulties of recruitment in the face of the mounting power of landowners and their unwillingness to release labour, supply problems and the weakening of government structures, especially in the west, all contributed to make the late Roman army difficult, and in the west impossible, to maintain and control. We can easily see this with the benefit of hindsight, and on the basis of archaeological evidence, difficult though the latter can be to interpret. Moreover, a moment’s thought about the political opinions expressed in our own society should remind us that we do not need to take at face value all the complaints about the army which proliferate in our sources, most of which are harked back to supposedly better days which had gone for ever. The literary sources had a rhetoric of their own, of which we need to be sharply aware. When Synesius in Cyrenaica, who had lived with the bitter realities of provincial life for himself, says with tired resignation ‘Pentapolis is dead’, that is one thing;\textsuperscript{60} but when conservative historians like Zosimus and Procopius, who also tended to be the most vocal, fail to understand the depth of the structural change that had taken place, and prefer to lay the blame on moral factors or individuals, we should be fully aware how far such judgements have been conditioned by the nature of their education and cultural background.

It is indeed hard not to conclude that the single most important factor in the so-called ‘decline’ of the late Roman empire and its failure to retain political control of the west was the totally unforeseen factor of the
barbarian migrations. However, to think of this merely in terms of invasion is to miss the point: it was less a matter of military conflict with purposive aims than a gradual and inexorable seepage of barbarian peoples into the former imperial territories, and at all levels of Roman society. As is now realized, it was not a case of enormous numbers of invaders swamping the existing population. Since the reasons for this continuous migration of northern peoples remain obscure, one might be tempted to conclude that the voluminous historical literature on ‘decline and fall’ has in fact failed in its attempt to explain the end of the Roman empire in the west. But simple explanations are always inadequate for complex historical change. The negative attitudes of the Romans themselves towards barbarians, and their own tendency to see the problem in very black and white terms contributed largely to the problems and made serious integration and acculturation of barbarians more difficult. At the same time the process of barbarian settlement in the western provinces, whether ad hoc or officially encouraged, and the recourse to barbarian troops for the Roman army, brought to social, economic and military structures, which were in many cases already precarious, profound changes, the nature of which was not readily understood by contemporaries and which they had few means of controlling. We can see, as perhaps they could not, that the state was becoming demilitarized; soldiers were now regularly used for essentially civilian tasks, while the state had become dangerously dependent for its security on barbarian mercenaries whom it was not able to control effectively. But we must also remember that the east in the fifth century, even while undergoing similar processes and facing similar dangers, supported a strengthened civilian government and increasingly prosperous economy, and kept its administrative and military structures sufficiently in place to be able to launch offensive wars in the west on a large scale under Justinian; this fact alone should be enough to make us remember the critical importance of local differences in explaining historical change.