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Why has there been such a fierce debate on the issue of 'barbarian'
ethnicity?

The question of barbarian identity and ethnogenesis has been an area of
prominent debate amongst early medieval scholars. The very definition of
'ethnicity' have produced significant controversy: starting with the
'primordialist' view of the early 19th century, which asserts a pseudo-
biological idea of race; the definition of ethnic identity have evolved to
include 'instrumentalist' ethnicity, a matter of belief in one's membership of
a group; and 'situational ethnicity', ethnicity which is employed when
situation demanded. The first definition is now largely outdated, though the
third 'situational' concept had been developed in an attempt to bridge the
gap between primordialist and instrumentalist ideas. Along with these
definitions of ethnicity came two modern approaches to the question of
ethnogenesis: philological (historical) and archaeological. The first approach
have produced a Traditionskern theory which advocates that group identity
is based upon the subscription of members to a common past, often in
mystic narratives, and traditions which are 'carried' by an aristocratic elite.
The second approach, on the other hand, maintain that homogenous
material goods do coincide with historically attested peoples.[1] Persisting
scholarly debate indicates that neither approach is wholly satisfactory;
indeed the lack of sources and subjectivity of the perception of identity have
rendered an authoritative definition of ethnicity difficult. Archaeological
cultures cannot always be equated with ethnic groups: they often reveal
geographical unities rather than ethnic realities.[2] A check-list of cultural

traits that once defined group identity in theory was found to be invalid in practice: they may continue to express and represent ethnicity, but they do not define it in exclusive terms.[3] The only common factor in defining ethnicity seems, therefore, to be the belief in the reality of your group and the difference of others, which suggests that ethnicity is by and large a cognitive concept. Often formed as a response to outsider cultures and influences, it is also multi-layered and performative. With the case of Romans and barbarians, the issue is made complex by the constant social, political and structural changes in the empire: the boundaries between 'Romans' and 'barbarians' were rigid and observable when the empire's frontiers also stood rigid and observable; once the physical frontiers collapsed, a slow but decisive progress of assimilation began to take place and the segregation of Roman and barbarian ethnicity could no longer be asserted.

Traditionally, a Roman mind might define barbarians on simple terms, somewhat anachronistically, and by no means as complex as the way they define their own. In their classicising work, both Greek and Latin writers would adopt the primordialist concept of barbarian identity: intricate in their choice of words, they would describe barbarians as their predecessors did, and refused steadfastly to acknowledge any political changes that might have altered their ethnic groupings. The peoples between the Rhine and Danube, for example, were all considered Germani well into the fourth century when their political configurations had already changed,[4] whereas Procopius had declared in the sixth century that 'Vandals' was a catch-all term for different ethnic groups in North Africa. Barbarians were considered

sub-human and treated as such; while 'even the poorest Greek considered themselves superior to the most powerful 'barbarian' and clung to their gods, ancestry myths, language and Homeric heritage'[5]. Almost every people of the antiquity had rested their sense of the right against the 'wrong' of the supposed rude and unintelligible ways of other communities, a sense which is reinforced by perceived external threat. The Persian threat, for example, had rallied a Hellenic unity into a cultural efflorescence which only strengthened the belief in Greek superiority and uniqueness over Persian 'servitude' and 'barbarian' illiteracy.[6] This 'them versus us' mentality was utilised not only to distinguish between Romans and their neighbours, but also as an antithesis on how Romans should behave. Such expression of ethnic consciousness in ancient texts have led to some efforts in establishing a general 'ancient writers view' of the barbarians, though such view would no doubt imply that each writer had a single one-sided opinion, and that a uniform reality of barbarism existed to allow such simplified opinions.[7] Neither of the assertion is of course true, for the barbarians was a 'floating, rhetorical category' which could be deployed to support different arguments in different ways. Ancient writers were aware of the significance of ideas and interpretations over facts, and were often expert on utilising the perceived difference between civilised and barbarian behaviour in order to advocate a moral lesson.

On the other hand, it would seem that the barbarian tribes were more receptive to other gentes than their Roman counterparts. The Goths, for example, included anyone in their group who were allowed to fight with the tribe, regardless of his ethnic or social background.[8] But once they settled

down they faced similar problems to the Romans: ethnic differentiations presented themselves as social injustices, and intensified the polarisation of society. The Goths are defined by their poly-ethnicity, consisting of Alans, Huns, Finns, Slavs, Antes, Heruli, Sarmatians, and Aesti,[9] and burial practices and pottery types have attested to an extent the material cultures which are utilised to maintain differences between these different sub-groups. As a single, larger 'ethnic' group, however, their sense of solidarity rested upon religious denomination: the Tervingis periodically persecuted Christians and enforced public acts of conformity to the traditional Gothic religion because Christianity was associated with the roman state; and even when the Goths were assimilated into Christianity, they would strictly adhere to the teachings of Ulfila thus creating a distinctive cultural feature different to that of Roman Catholicism. [10] Similar to the Romans who saw their superior culture under threat by these barbarians, the Goths would define themselves more strongly and aggressively in face of a growing power of the Roman state. Identity, therefore, is forged not by self-image alone, but by the perception of such self-image in relation to the outside world. Where the ethnic boundaries between Romans and barbarians once stood firm, therefore, it was a boundary of cognitive perception, and indicators of such boundaries would often be invisible to archaeology.

Later in the imperial period, a Roman mind would place a paramount difference between civilised and barbarian not on race, but on character. Rational behaviour and subjection to government and law was central to this concept of Romanness, as opposed to the more primitive form of life which the barbarians seemed to lead.[11] Barbarism was in essence equated to

unauthorised authority: its definitive characteristic of the inability to live according to the law meant that bandits and brigands would become barbarians too, as would other enemies of the public order such as wielders of illegitimate force.[12] As nearly all inhabitants were born citizens in the late Roman period, the performance of Romanness was now more significant in being considered as a 'Roman' than pure acquisition of citizenship. Writers of the late antiquity constantly expressed this notion of civilisation based on Romanised behaviour, rather than biological descent, as Roman identity became fluid: The Visigothic king Theoderic was attributed the highest compliment by Sidonius, who described him in a Roman fashion, and 'worthy of a Roman'. Just as those born Roman could be considered as barbarous in their less-than-Roman ways, so could biologically non-Romans enter the Roman civilisation by behaving in an accepted way. Furthermore, once a barbarian kingdom was absorbed into mainstream Roman culture, by ways of either behaviour or religious conversion, their ancestral roots were also to be assimilated into acceptable Roman or Greek heritages. The Merovingians, following their conversion to Christianity under Clovis, adopted a 'Trojan lineage' tracing their line to Aeneas and his band of exiled Trojans. Like many barbarian rulers of the time, they realised such adoption of a classical pedigree would legitimise their authority and make their rule more acceptable to their Romanised populations. [13] The fact that these key factors underlining Romanness could be imitated by 'barbarians' have effectively made the ethnic boundaries permeable, and much less rigid in definition.

The definition of Roman and barbarian ethnicity took another turn when Roman rule began to be toppled everywhere in the empire, and replaced by new Germanic masters. At first the boundaries remained artificially intact: the Gothic legal sources from around 475 AD identified two ethnic groups: Goti and Romani, who were kept apart by the prohibition of inter-marriage. [14] Religious denomination was always the irreconcilable gap; just as once they were pagans and the Romans Christians, now they were Arians and Romans Catholics. Co-existence by no means suggested friendly assimilation: when a Roman fled to the Gothic kingdom, it was because the tax burden there were lower; and sympathisers of the Gothic peace were doing so to prevent worse from happening. Similarly in Ostrogothic Italy, the Goths were clearly identified as 'soldiers', and separated from Romans, who were 'civilians'. Though in this case the distinction was not for segregation purposes but for allocation of different roles: the rhetoric of Cassiodorus Variae suggests that Goths and Romans were to thrive in the res publica in a state of civilitasi through utilitas, as consortes, and partners in the Ostrogothic settlement agreement. [15] The Roman role within the system was to supply the army with food and salary, and in return they could 'live in peace' while 'the army of the Goths wages war'[16]. Theoderic wanted his Goths to recognise civilitas and to imitate Romans just as he did, and by introducing Roman legal culture into the Ostrogothic identity, he helped to transform the meaning of 'barbarus' from 'hostile foreigner' to 'servant of the Roman state'. [17] Such was Theoderic's ideology. There remains one problem: ideology is often different from reality, and what Theoderic might envisaged does not necessarily imply it could be executed as easily. Society did not consist solely of two groups, not all Romans were civilians, and

barbarians could just as well possess prudentia. Neither does Theoderic undermine the Franks simply by their lack of Roman culture and law, indeed he praises their warlike virtues by comparing to those of the Goths, which is inconsistent with his civilitas ideology. The words 'Goths' and 'Romans' were therefore not sufficient to describe or indeed construct respective communities, and ethnic tensions remained. When put under pressure in 552, the seemingly peaceful coexistence between Goths and Romans would relapse into bloodshed.

As we have seen, the barrier between the Romans within the empire and barbarians outside of its frontier was a formidable one, and one that died hard. The Goths in Italy continued to speak their own language well into the latter half of the sixth century, with some Romans acquiring it too. Theoderic, Roman in behaviour as he was, seemed to have retained at least one aspect of un-Romanness: the famous moustache. Nevertheless as the years progressed, Roman and Germanic administration were increasingly difficult to distinguish from one another. A Roman was in command of Goths' Atlantic fleet, and several Roman generals continued their careers as Gothic comites and duces during the course of Euric's expansion.[18] This is perhaps unsurprising, as Germanic kings often needed to work closely with Roman ministers and advisers from the beginning to ensure both a smooth running of administration and local political support. Yet assimilation did not only occur in ministerial or military posts: eventually the boundaries between the new Germanic rulers and Romans disappeared altogether. In the Frankish Salic Law of around 500AD, the amount of wergild on a Roman landowner was still half of that of a normal free Frank,[19] though two

centuries later Gregory of Tours would seldom mention whether a person was a Roman or Frank in his work. The merge of a common identity in Frankish Gaul saw the disappearance of 'Romans' altogether, replaced by a single identity of Franks. The sources are scarce for why and how this assimilation came into being: we can speculate that it was due to the aspiration of the Roman subjects, who wanted to take advantage of the culture of their new masters for political gains. But the end result is clear: the Romans adopted the identity of their new masters and became 'Visigoths' or 'Franks', whereas the Germanic peoples adopted much of Roman culture, in particular language and religion.[20]

There is no simple chronology here regarding the change in Roman and barbarian ethnicity. Limited literacy of the Germanic people and consequent lack of sources dictate that our understanding of barbarian ethnicity almost always rested on the view of the Romans, or in relation to the Romans; a view that has such ideological significance prescribed to it that ancient writers could rarely provide an objective analysis. This is the definition of barbarian ethnicity at its most difficult: often forged in response to outsiders, self-image of ethnic groups would emerge out of perceived differences with others, rather than a clear independent image of their own. Barbarian ethnicity cannot be defined without the context of Roman identity, and vice versa. Categorised as simply the antithesis of Romanness in the fourth century, their physical penetration across the frontier led to a psychological flexibility in the behavioural adoption of Roman identity. Once their supremacy is established over the Romans in parts of the empire, assimilation seemed inevitable: Roman culture was preferred over that of

'barbarian' due to the century-long idea of its superiority, and a barbarian political identity was adopted due to the change of rulers at the top. Though the people living under Germanic rule no longer called themselves 'Romans', their cultural and ancestral traditions would continue to thrive as a part of their new identity. The physical collision and forced coexistence of Romans and barbarians inevitably led to the assimilation of their respective identities, therefore by the end of the late antiquity, Romans were no longer 'Romans', and barbarians no longer 'barbarians'. The issue of defining and analysing their respective ethnicities in relation to one another would be at the centre of scholarly debate for generations to come.

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