Barbarian Kingdoms: Migration and State Formation after Rome

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Introduction

This book tells the political and cultural history of the western provinces after the Roman Empire ceased to rule them. It follows the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Franks, and their neighbors as they moved, settled, and built new regimes upon Roman foundations. Rather than a story of simple collapse, it is a study of adaptation: of how institutions, laws, and identities were recalibrated in conversation with an imperial past that never entirely disappeared. Readers will see how migration reshaped political geography and how new rulers negotiated legitimacy with local elites, clergy, and communities.

“Barbarian” was never a neutral word. For Romans it marked the boundary between civility and otherness; for the peoples so labeled, it became a tool for self-description, coalition-building, and sometimes resistance. This book treats ethnonyms—Visigoth, Vandal, Frank—not as fixed biological realities but as political projects, constantly reworked under pressure of war, diplomacy, and opportunity. Coalitions formed around leaders and promises of land or status, and they hardened into kingdoms only when institutions and narratives made them durable.

The successor states did not spring from a vacuum. They inherited and reshaped a Roman world of tax registers, municipal councils, episcopal networks, and legal traditions. Ostrogothic Italy governed in the language of Roman law; Visigothic Hispania convened councils that bound kings and bishops; Vandal Africa fused maritime power with an administrative apparatus drawn from provincial precedent. Even the Merovingian Franks, often portrayed as disruptive conquerors, built their authority through courts, charters, and alliances with Gallo-Roman elites. The making of these kingdoms was less a break than a refitting.

Law sits at the center of this story because law organized people, property, and memory. Compilations such as the Breviary of Alaric and the Lex Salica did not merely record customs; they crafted identities and allocated rights. Legal pluralism—Romans and “barbarians” under different rules—could separate communities, yet it also provided a flexible toolkit for governance. What mattered was not ancestral purity but the ability of kings and councils to align norms with power and to persuade subjects that justice had a recognizable shape.

Religion, too, was politics by other means. Arian and Nicene affiliations attracted and divided communities, but they also offered languages of legitimacy. Conversions—above all the conversion of Frankish rulers—were not sudden civilizational turns so much as strategic realignments that reconfigured alliances among bishops, nobles, and royal courts. The church mediated migration and

settlement, brokered peace, and turned local saints and urban centers into anchors of authority across a rapidly changing map.

Material life reveals the textures beneath the chronicles. Burials, dress fittings, hoards, and coins trace movements, aspirations, and experiments in power. Villas became monasteries or royal estates; frontiers shifted from lines of defense to corridors of exchange across the Mediterranean and the North Sea. Environmental stresses and plague punctuated these transformations, testing the resilience of institutions and sharpening the choices of rulers and subjects alike.

The chapters that follow move from structures to case studies and back again. We begin with the late Roman frame and the jolts of the fourth and fifth centuries, then track the formation of Ostrogothic, Visigothic, Vandal, and Frankish polities. Subsequent chapters explore law, church, economy, writing, and material culture before returning to warfare, diplomacy, and the larger Mediterranean context. The final chapters trace the long afterlives of these kingdoms—from Merovingian to Carolingian reconfiguration—and ask how memories of “barbarians” helped make medieval Europe.

This is a comparative history with a simple claim: after Rome, western Europeans did not start anew; they renegotiated an inheritance. Migration was not an endpoint but a political process, state formation not a single moment but a series of settlements—legal, territorial, and cultural. By placing movement and adaptation side by side, the book invites readers to see the so-called barbarian kingdoms not as detours from Europe’s story, but as the workshops in which its post-Roman orders were made.

CHAPTER ONE: The Late Roman Frame: Institutions, Frontiers, and Peoples

The Roman Empire, by the fourth century CE, was less a monolithic entity and more a vast, interconnected tapestry of provinces, cultures, and administrative practices, all bound by the often-strained threads of imperial authority. To understand the "barbarian kingdoms" that emerged in its wake, we must first grasp the late Roman world they inherited and, in many cases, actively sought to emulate or adapt. This was a world characterized by sophisticated bureaucratic structures, a highly militarized frontier, and a diverse populace whose identities were often fluid, shifting between local allegiances and a broader Romanitas.

At the heart of the Roman system lay its intricate administrative machinery. The empire was divided into dioceses, which were further subdivided into provinces. Each province boasted a governor, responsible for justice, finance, and public order, supported by a retinue of scribes, accountants, and various other officials. This administrative framework, honed over centuries, was remarkably resilient. Even as central imperial power wavered, these local and regional structures often continued to function, providing a ready-made apparatus for new rulers. Tax collection, for instance, remained a cornerstone of governance. The Roman system of land assessment and census-taking was designed to extract resources efficiently, a practice that successor states were keen to maintain, albeit with varying degrees of success. The continuity of this fiscal infrastructure often meant that the day-to-day lives of many Roman subjects did not dramatically alter with a change in overlordship.

Beyond the paperwork, Roman institutions also encompassed the legal system. Roman law, codified and refined over centuries, provided a comprehensive framework for everything from property rights to criminal justice. While its application could be uneven, especially in the more distant provinces, its principles permeated society. Judges, lawyers, and legal scholars were vital figures, and their expertise would prove invaluable to the emerging kingdoms. The idea of a universal law, applicable to all Roman citizens, stood in contrast to the more customary laws often practiced by incoming groups. This juxtaposition would become a defining feature of the post-Roman legal landscape, leading to fascinating adaptations and innovations.

The Roman military, the ultimate guarantor of imperial power, also shaped the late Roman frame. By the fourth century, the army was a professional force, often stationed along the vast *limites* or frontiers. These frontiers were not always impenetrable walls but rather complex zones of interaction, trade, and occasional conflict. Forts, watchtowers, and military roads crisscrossed these areas, projecting

Roman authority and regulating movement. The soldiers themselves were a diverse lot, recruited from across the empire and often including a significant number of "barbarian" auxiliaries. This constant interaction at the frontiers meant that many individuals from outside the traditional Roman sphere had intimate knowledge of Roman military tactics, organization, and even language.

The presence of the army also had profound economic and social implications. Military garrisons stimulated local economies, creating markets for goods and services. Veterans often settled in frontier regions, contributing to a diverse and often hybridized population. Furthermore, the army was a significant consumer of imperial resources, and maintaining its effectiveness was a constant drain on the treasury. This financial burden contributed to the late Roman state's ongoing fiscal challenges, a problem that would be inherited by its successors.

Urban centers, too, formed a crucial part of the late Roman frame. Cities were not merely concentrations of population; they were hubs of administration, commerce, and culture. They boasted basilicas, forums, baths, and theaters, symbols of Roman civilization and centers of elite life. Municipal councils, composed of local aristocrats, played a vital role in civic governance, maintaining infrastructure and collecting taxes. While some cities experienced decline in the later Roman period, many remained vibrant centers, offering a ready-made administrative and social infrastructure for new rulers. The continuity of urban life, particularly in regions like Italy and Gaul, provided a foundation upon which the barbarian kingdoms could build.

The population of the late Roman Empire was far from homogenous. While a shared Roman identity, or *Romanitas*, was promoted by the imperial state, local and regional identities remained strong. Celtic, Germanic, Iberian, and other linguistic and cultural traditions persisted, often alongside Latin and Roman customs. This cultural mosaic meant that the incoming groups were not arriving in a blank slate, but rather into a deeply stratified and culturally rich environment. The interactions between these existing populations and the new arrivals would be complex and multifaceted, leading to new cultural syntheses and adaptations.

Christianity, by the late fourth century, had become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, transforming its cultural and political landscape. The conversion of Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century had propelled Christianity from a persecuted sect to the favored religion of the state. Bishops, particularly in major urban centers, became powerful figures, wielding significant spiritual and often secular influence. They acted as intermediaries between the populace and the imperial administration, and their networks extended across provincial boundaries. The Christian Church, with its hierarchical structure and widespread presence, offered another robust institution that would persist beyond direct Roman rule. Its role in mediating relationships between incoming groups and established Roman populations would be crucial, often providing a common ground, albeit one fraught with theological

differences.

The economic landscape of the late Roman Empire was characterized by a complex interplay of agriculture, trade, and taxation. While localized economies were prevalent, long-distance trade networks connected the various provinces, facilitating the exchange of goods like grain, olive oil, wine, and luxury items. The Mediterranean Sea, despite its occasional hazards, remained a vital artery for commerce. This interconnected economic system, though facing challenges from political instability and monetary shifts, provided a foundation for economic activity in the successor states. The desire to control and profit from these existing trade routes and agricultural resources would be a significant driver for the actions of the new kingdoms.

The land itself, and its ownership, was a fundamental aspect of the late Roman frame. Vast estates, often owned by wealthy aristocrats, dominated the agricultural landscape. These estates, worked by a combination of free tenants and semi-free *coloni*, formed the backbone of the Roman economy. The control of land and its associated labor force was a primary source of wealth and power. When new groups arrived, the allocation and administration of these landholdings would become a central concern, necessitating negotiations and adaptations of existing Roman practices. The continuity of land tenure, even under new rulers, highlights the deep roots of Roman economic structures.

Finally, it is essential to consider the psychological and ideological framework of the late Roman world. The idea of Rome, its eternal city, its universal laws, and its civilizing mission, exerted a powerful influence. Even as the empire fragmented, the prestige of Roman institutions and the allure of Roman culture remained potent. Incoming groups, often referred to as "barbarians," did not necessarily seek to destroy Rome but rather to participate in its legacy, to carve out their own place within its grand narrative. They adopted Roman titles, emulated Roman administrative practices, and sought legitimacy through alliances and interactions with the remnants of Roman authority. This enduring pull of Romanitas provided a crucial context for the formation and development of the barbarian kingdoms. The late Roman frame was, in essence, a complex inheritance, a ready-made stage upon which new actors would perform, adapting the scripts and costumes to fit their own evolving narratives of power and identity.

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