



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity by Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer

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Source: *The English Historical Review*, DECEMBER 2013, Vol. 128, No. 535 (DECEMBER 2013), pp. 1525-1527

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24473897>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011; pp. 378. £65).

This volume originated with the sixth 'Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity' conference, held in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2005. The Shifting Frontiers conferences—not normally anything to do with the Roman *limes*, but rather with the political, religious and cultural shifts of Late Antiquity—have been held every two years since the inaugural conference in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1995, and the proceedings were published by various presses before Ashgate took over in 2006, with Hal Drake's *Violence in Late Antiquity*. In 2009 Ashgate published the papers from the 2007 conference (*The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Cain and N. Lenski); and they are due to publish the proceedings of the 2009 conference in 2012 (*Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. D. Brakke, D.M. Deliyannis and E. Watts). It was at a Shifting Frontiers conference that the Society for Late Antiquity was founded, and, later, the *Journal of Late Antiquity* launched; Ralph W. Mathisen, editor of the *Journal* and co-editor with Danuta Shanzer of this volume, has been the main driving force behind the whole enterprise, and thus a crucial figure in the flourishing state of Late Antique studies in North America, of which this volume is an elegant demonstration.

Not all the twenty-five essays published here originated at the conference: some were written specially for this volume, and the other contributions have clearly been updated. They range very widely across the theme of Romans and barbarians, being grouped together into three main sections, dealing with the construction of images, with cultural interaction, and with the creation of identity. The geographical range is also considerable, from an evaluation of the DNA evidence for Anglo-Saxon migration and a discussion of the emergence of the Vascones/Basques through to, at the eastern end of the Empire, two papers on the Sasanians, one on the Saracens, and one on the barbarians in Kush, south of Egypt. In common with the previous six Shifting Frontiers volumes, this one is well-focused on its theme, which has as much to do with the tight organisation of the conferences as with the determination of the editors.

Romans were probably less obsessed with barbarians than historians of our own day have been. They enjoyed lists of barbarians, but, as Mathisen argues in the opening chapter, largely for the evocation of exotic otherness. Some Romans had no interest in barbarians at all: Augustine was one, as Elizabeth Clark shows, and he had no truck with Orosius' idea of the merciful barbarian, which offered a way forward for a post-Roman world. Barbarians could be useful polemically or ideologically, and Roman writers use them in ways that tell us as much about themselves as about the barbarians; thus, Scott McDonough suggests, Agathias' negative assessment of Sasanian Persia was an attack on the enthusiasm of some of his contemporaries—whose own

EHR, CXXVIII, 535 (December, 2013)

praise of Persia was nonetheless a way of criticising their own society and government. His paper asks 'Were the Sasanians barbarians?'; but he does not provide an unequivocal answer any more than does Jan Willem Drijvers in his related paper. Drijvers compared the three main writers to discuss Persia at any length, and notes that, although Ammianus and Procopius both give the Persians some of the same characteristics as were generally ascribed to northern barbarians, they never use the word 'barbarian', while Agathias used that word in relation to the character, activities, and inferior culture of Sasanian rulers, not of their peoples. Other papers in this first section look at the treatment by Roman writers of barbarian raiders and generals in the Roman Empire, at the 'barbarian' characteristics of Jews and Samaritans, and at the personal reaction to barbarians of the ultra-traditionalist senator Q. Aurelius Symmachus. Even when it came to the 'end of the Roman Empire', barbarians were not always viewed as significant: Edward Watts shows how John Rufus, writing in the early sixth century, viewed Odovacar's deposition of Romulus Augustulus not as a barbarian triumph, but as the judgement of God upon the heretical *Tome* of Pope Leo I.

With the second section we move from image and prejudice to something of the reality of the collision between Roman and barbarian. Cam Grey starts from Sozomen's description of the settlement of captured Sciri in order to develop a wide-ranging discussion of the use of legislation related to Roman *coloni* to define the status of barbarians settled on the land within the Empire. Kimberley Kagan examines interaction in the case of traitors and spies. Noel Lenski, in what is for me the most exciting paper in the collection, examines the evidence for the Roman enslavement of barbarian captives, and vice versa. Here we get close to the real miseries of the time, even though perhaps positive conclusions might result: cultural interchange, interethnic collusion, and religious conversion. Other essays offer snapshots of often neglected parts of the Roman world—the southern frontiers of Egypt and Tunisia, the eastern frontiers of Palaestina Salutaris, and the province of Scythia Minor, the Dobrudja, at the mouths of the Danube—which are proffered as examples of such interchange.

The final section looks at the new identities of the post-Roman world. Luis A. García Moreno uses the *Formulae wisigothicae* to show the survival of Gothic legal ideas into the seventh century in Spain. Between the Visigoths and the Franks are the Vascones, whose controversial early history is examined by Scott de Brestian. Two leading Frankish archaeologists, Patrick Périn and Michel Kazanski, discuss the problems of using archaeology (primarily cemetery archaeology) to understand such crucial but complex issues as migration and ethnicity, and we can see how far the consensus has moved from the simplicities of a generation or two ago. The volume ends with a piece not wholly on topic, but perfectly appropriate given the venue of the conference: Bailey Young looks at the artefacts from a Frankish cemetery excavated in the 1840s by a pioneer of Merovingian archaeology, Auguste Moutié, who, unlike some of his contemporaries, recognised them for what they were. Moutié's collection was split up on his death, but a substantial part of it was bought for the Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois in 1924, and was exhibited at the conference.

The editors, in their introduction, say that their subtitle was intended as a nod to the European Science Foundation's project, 'The Transformation of the

EHR, CXXVIII. 535 (December. 2013)

Roman World', which ended in the publication of fourteen volumes offering a bewilderingly varied collection of views of the problem. Their own book, they claim, is more coherent. The editors assumed that changes in Roman culture ('decline' or 'transformation') and changes in barbarian self-identification (so-called ethnogenesis) were part of the same process; and that this process occurred within a Roman intellectual and geographical-political context. This book is about 'the creation of [a] late antique polyethnic cultural world, with cultural frontiers between Romans and barbarians that were increasingly permeable in both directions' (p. 4). It is not the only way to approach this period, but the debate is one with which every scholar working on this period has to engage, and this volume is a significant contribution.

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doi:10.1093/ehr/cet270

The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World. Vol. I: The Arab Period in Arminiya, Seventh to Eleventh Centuries, by Seta B. Dadoyan (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011; pp. xxvii + 208. £35.50).

It is one of the more striking paradoxes of the history of the medieval Armenians that they were seemingly everywhere and nowhere. To read their own histories up to the end of the eleventh century gives the impression that they were a nation apart, with little interest in the outside world except where it concerned their temporal and religious autonomy. Yet by 1100 migrant communities of Armenians, some of several centuries' duration, thrived throughout the Near East and are mentioned frequently, if incidentally, in historical records left by all of their Near Eastern neighbours and a few farther afield. Byzantine history is a well-known case in point: many of the emperors of the period, as well as a large proportion of their soldiers, are reputed to have been fully or partially Armenian, but there is very little examination by Byzantine authors of the Armenian communities within the Byzantine Empire itself. The portrait of Armenians as segregated from the world around them cannot stand, and Seta Dadoyan's study is one of the first dedicated attempts to correct it with specific reference to the Muslim world.

Dadoyan begins from the premiss—almost revolutionary in the field of Armenian Studies but utterly straightforward from her perspective as an Armenian of the Lebanon—that throughout their history the Armenians have been regarded as full (if distinctive) constituents of the empires to which they were subject, and that this includes the empires of the Muslim world. This book, the first of the series to appear, covers the period from shortly before the rise of Islam (Armenia became subject to the Caliphate in 652) to shortly after the rise of Turkish power and the loss of Armenian autonomy in the Caucasus c.1050. Central to her argument are the themes of 'borderlands and dissidence'; the great majority of Armenians made their home in the large swathes of territory that were under perennial dispute between Constantinople and the Caliphate. These were the borderlands, the world best known through the Greek poetic epic *Digenes Akrites*, where cultures and faiths must necessarily meet and mix. This provided fertile ground for the syncretistic and heretical movements,

EHR, CXXVIII, 535 (December, 2013)