The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages


“The period from 300 to 700 has often been at the heart of arguments about the modern world. It was central to debates about aristocratic privilege and about despotism in the eighteenth century; about class conflict, exploitation by foreign powers, and nationalism in the nineteenth; about the limits of Germany and the nature of Europe in the twentieth. Naturally, the circumstances in which they were discussed led the Fall of Rome and the early Middle Ages to be interpreted in particular ways.” vii-viii

Three views of period

1. end of Roman Empire
2. period of barbarian migration
3. period of Christianization

Historical Sketch

4th century Roman world survived onslaught from east and north as well as from Persians appeared to be on the road to recovery with institutional reform and army reorganization

Frankish kingdom in doldurms by late seventh and early eighth centuries

Visigothic kingdom entering period of crisis culminating with Muslim invasion in 711

Lombards in heyday

under Carolingians Frankish state enjoyed revival by and an alliance with the papacy that allowed it to crush Lombard state

376 Goths petition to cross Danube; battle in 378

Visigoth sack Rome in 410

more invaders cross Rhine in 406

“local leaders in Britain and Gaul to take matters into their own hands and to rebel against the Western Roman imperial court.” 6

François Hotman wrote Franco-Gallia in 1573/174 tracing the history of France from the Gauls to the end of the Capetian Dynasty and framing the work as a political treatise that saw the Gauls as a free people who were placed into servitude under Roman rule; Rome was oppressive while the later Franks were freedom loving

early medieval period often painted as a time of liberty and freeman in political discourse in 16th/17th/18th century and in particular in growing arguments against absolutism and monarchy

Tacitus’ Germania discovered in 1425: documented many of the Germanic tribes; used to validate arguments of barbarian migrations; played a role in defining German nation; key text in associating barbarians with liberty

period not just used in discussions of government but also in iscussion of privilege/class and nation/state from 18th c on

beginning of 18th c. Henri comte de Boulainvilliers used Frankish invasion to justify aristocracy but by the end of the century revolutionaries seeking to destroy privileges “established” by Frankish conquest

19th century dominated by nationalist discourse

Chapter 2 The Franks and the State of France

French torn between claiming ancestry of Rome or of Germania and thus greatly debated end of Roman World and coming of barbarians early on

writings of Boulainvilliers and response of Du Bos framed the Germanist and Romanist readings of the Fall of Rome

Hotman had discussed Merovingians in terms of monarchy while Boulainvilliers and Du Bos transformed the discussion into a historico-political discourse

both writing at the end of Louis XIV’s reign and thus during early phases of Enlightenment

prior to Boulainvilliers work there was a history of scholarship on feudalism going back at least 2 centuries (16thc)–figues such as Jean Le Laboureur; FrançoisEudes de Mézeray; Louis Dufort de Longuerue; Père Daniel

According to Boulainvilliers conquest of Gaul=foundation of state; king’s power limited; all Franks free and equal; Gauls=Gallo-Romans Franks conquered them; Franks=noble military elite
Boulainvilliers careful to address how the Frankish state had avoided the weaknesses of the Roman Empire end of Merovingian concerned with origins of feudalism rather than end of Roman Empire

Boulainvilliers reading of the Franks as noble, equal, military conquerers who had been corrupted through the creation of offices and despotism reflected his position that noble rights had been reduced during the reigns of Louis XIV and XV

Du Bos on the other hand focused on Roman continuity and saw Clovis as essentially taking over the imperial patrimony For Du Bos Gallo-Roman resistance was key to continuity between the Roman and Frankish periods

Du Bos reads the Merovingians as simply inheriting LEGALLY and with the BLESSING of Rome Roman administration whose great tragedy came with the usurpation of rights in the early Capetian

Du Bos' interpretation reflects his position as a monarchist and member of the bourgeois

"And in setting out the 'Romanist' reading of the establishment of the Frankish kingdom, in opposition to Boulainvilliers' 'Germanist' case, Du Bos essentially created the second great model for the interpretation of the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Between them the two models would dominate subsequent scholarship." 36

Chapter 3 The Old German Constitution

Montesquieu attacked Du Bos work and placed much emphasis on Tacitus

Montesquieu's reading fell in between Du Bos and Boulainvilliers in terms of conquering and the relationship between Gauls and Franks

"One should not underestimate the amount of the historical scholarship that had poured into the debates on the establishment of the French monarchy, which is impressive for its quality as well as its quantity. Its neglect is symptomatic of the amnesia which has drawn a veil over past history-writing and which even afflicted an appreciation of Gibbon as a historian in the years before the celebration of the bicentenary of Decline and Fall in 1976. It may be easy to pick holes in the arguments of the likes of Boulainvilliers, Du Bos, and Mably, but the scholars themselves were formidably learned, and the protagonists essentially laid down the lines along which the Fall of the Roman Empire would be debated, down to the early twenty-first century. What was the state of the Empire itself? How happy were its inhabitants? How much did the barbarians contribute to its fall? How much survived in the way of Roman administration? And how much of what followed has its origins in the world of the Germanic peoples? These fundamentally important questions were debated in the long eighteenth century, and above all in France. Admittedly they were asked because they had contemporary relevance..." 51

Chapter 4 The Barbarians and the Fall of Rome

"A more accurate impression might be gained from what Smyth had to say in Cambridge lectures: ...the dark ages are almost the first subject that is to be encountered by the student of history. This is unfortunate--unfortunate more especially for the youthful student. Look at the writers that undertake the history of these times. They oppress you by their tediousness; they repel you by their very appearance, by the antiquarian nature of their researches, and the very size of their voluments."

"That the Founding Fathers saw themselves as descended from the early Germans is clear from Thomas Jefferson's 1776 proposal that Hengest and Horsa should feature on the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States." 54

Chapter 8 Heirs of the Martyrs

"As we have seen, the history of the Fall of Rome and of the establishment of the Merovingians was caught up in debates about politics, society, and the economy in the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, it was deeply affected by the religious changes of the period: above all by the Catholic revival which began in France, but which also had its reverberations in Italy, as well as Germany and England, even reaching some strands of Protestantism." 137

"while the work of Montalembert and Ozanam can be situated firmly within the French Catholic revival, it was not just disseminated within France, or indeed confined to the Catholic community."

"Nor was France alone in experiencing a religious revival in the first half of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, the plight of the Irish Catholics was an issue that attracted Montalembert as early as the 1820s." 149

Chapter 9 Language, Law, and National Boundaries

"When Mme de Staël came to write De l'Allemagne she defined Germany in terms of its culture rather than its history or politics. Historians have talked of a Kulturnation. There was, of course, a good reason for this. Germany did not exit as a clearly defined political entity, but was made up of a series of principalities: on the other hand by the end of the eighteenth century it boasted significant works of literature and philosophy, which could be seen as defining what it was to be German: this was central to de Staël's argument." 155-156

Chapter 10 Romans, Barbarians, and Prussians

"In 1905, a few months after the establishment of the reactionary monarchist movement L'action française, Maurras, who claimed that Fustel was being forgotten (hardly likely given the string of posthumous publications edited by Jullian), decided that what would have been the great man's seventy-fifth birthday should be the occasion of a national celebration. This hijacking of Fustel's memory was to mean that he became a problematic figure in French historical discourse, and he was rarely cited by the intellectual left, although Marc Bloch did acknowledge his importance in the creation of the discipline of sociology." 189-190
Chapter 11 Teutons, Romans, and 'Scientific' History

"Sheppard, with his reference to the hand of God, presented an essentially Biblical reading of the Fall of Rome. Others were more inclined to stress the impact of new scientific ideas, relating to biology and to race." 202

"Others writing about the Fall of Rome were more inclined to see echoes of the Roman Empire in its British counterpart. In the late nineteenth century Rome’s expansion and its treatment of its provinces, and above all of Britannia, provided something of a blue-print for Britain's colonial administrators, as they headed to distant parts of the Empire." 220-221

"Like the British, the Germans also looked back to the end of Rome when considering the present. For them, however, it was not empire, civilization, and decadence that were central issues but rather land and race. A rather different discourse would dominate studies of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries for the first half of the twentieth." 221

Chapter 13 Past Settlements Interpretations of the Migration Period from 1918 to 1945

The fact that early medieval studies fed into Nazi ideology has meant that the study of the Migration Period in the 1930s has become a particularly delicate subject. Indeed, for a considerable period of time the matter was sidestepped, particularly in West Germany. In the East after 1945 there was less concern to cover up the problems of Nazi historiography, with the result that, until recently, there was a good deal more awareness of political contamination of the Ostforschung (studies of the eastern borders of the Reich, and the lands beyond) than there was of the Westforschung (studies of the West). The Nazi associations of most of those who retained their academic positions in the West were quietly forgotten, both by the individuals themselves, and by their students. Within the historical and archaeological communities it was not until the late 1990s...that the subject boiled over." 245-246

"This esoteric approach to Aryan origins appealed to Himmler a good deal more than it did to Hitler, who remarked in 1933 that '[t]hese professors and mystery-men who want to found Nordic religions merely get in my way'. ...Hitler was not alone in thinking that the enthusiasms of Himmler and the Ahnenerbe were somewhat fantastical. Heinrich Dattenbauer, despite being a party member who would lose his post after the War as being 'politically incriminated', attacked the idea that the deutsche Volk was an unchanging entity, arguing that it was historically constructed." 251 easy to construct a blanket of uniformity over Nazi Germany outlook but not universal acceptance of argument or ideas

"Just as the evidence for Frankish settlement in Flanders was used in plans for redrawing the boundaries of the Reich, so too Burgundian settlement was noted in discussions about the boundaries further south." 259

"The conquests and settlement of the Migration Period could thus be integrated into aggressive patriotism, which went back at least as far as Ernst Moritz Arndt. Archaeology and toponymics could be combined with Lamprecht's sense that Flanders was culturally German. Such attitudes were shared by scholars who regarded the Versailles settlement as an injustice that had reversed the rightful occupation of Alsace-Lorraine following the Battle of Sedan. Similar views were held with regard to the eastern frontiers of Germany, but for most, their medieval origins were to be found in a slightly different period of time, and there the initial historical conflict was not one between the Germanic barbarians and Rome, but rather between the Germans and the Slavs." 260

"For most German scholars, however, Italy presented a very different set of issues than did the lands of the western frontier of the Reich, and that was above all because of a longstanding scholarly love of the classical past." 261

"The 1920s and 1930s had marked the final development of a position that had its origins in the ideas of Arndt and Grimm, which had been set out in the context of German aspirations for national unity. The patriotic and linguistic arguments of the nineteenth century had been bolstered with more detailed philology, with archaeology, anthropology, and with a sharper, and supposedly more scientific, sense of race. For the early medievalist, the added poison of anti-Semitism rarely featured in the interpretation of the Völkerwanderungzeit, but that was only because Jews played a minor role in events: Jewish early medievalists, like Ernst Stein and Wilhelm Levison, inevitable suffered along with their fellows. Levison, a Mitarbeiter of the Monumenta, and subsequently assistant of Bruno Krusch, lost his academic post in 1935, and fled to England at the last minute in 1939. Yet if the racial and territorial implications of the arguments over the Germanic settlement impinged only indirectly on the Jewish question, they had a direct and devastating impact on millions of Belgians and French. The legacy of the Nazi historiography of the early Middle Ages could not compete with the shadow of the Holocaust: nevertheless, the history of the Völkerwanderung had been put to malign use and had thus played its part in the devastation of the 1930s and 40s." 267

"After 1945 Dawson's stress on European unity again fitted the mood of reconstruction in the western part of the continent. Not surprisingly, The Making of Europe, which had been reprinted throughout the 1930s, was reissued in 1954." 274 Christianization had united Europe in the Dark Ages

"Marrou, like Dawson and Cochrane, had continued a tradition of cultural history which looked back to the nineteenth century. He, like Cochrane, had done something new with it. All three of them wrote explicitly Christian history, as well as history that engaged implicitly with the horrors of war and totalitarianism." 286
Chapter 15 The Emergence of Late Antiquity

"Much of The Nationalities of Europe is an analysis of the pre-historic and early medieval past, and how it had been misused by scholars in recent generations.” 299 subject of history of interpretation not even new post-processual approach

"This calmness contrasts with that of several of the leading French scholars of the post-War period, both at an institutional and at a personal level. In 1950 another meeting of the Congrès international des sciences historiques, the ninth, was held in Paris—a follow-up to those of Brussels in 1922 and Oslo in 1928. There had been further meetings in Warsaw in 1933 and Zurich in 1938. Like their Belgian counterparts in the period after 1918, the French were determined to prevent Germans from attending: this time only those of ‘un passé absolument sans reproche’ were allowed. If one turns to the work of an individual, the most famous description of the Fall of the Roman Empire made by a late-antique scholar in the aftermath of 1939-45 was that of André Piganiol, who announced in no uncertain terms at the end of his account of L’Empire chrétien, published in 1947, that the Roman Empire had been assassinated: the closing words of the book state badly: La civilisation romain n’est pas morte de sa belle mort. Elle a été assassinée. (Roman civilization did not die a natural death: it was assassinated.)” 292

"While Piganiol was extreme in his emphasis on barbarian destruction, he was not alone in implying modern parallels to the Fall of the Roman Empire, and thus in presenting the period as one of disaster. Ferdinand Lot’s pupil Robert Latouche painted a picture of destruction, with obvious echoes of the recent war in Les Grandes Invasions et la crise de l’Occident au Ve siècle published in 1946...[André Loyen] approach is explicit in the title of one of his articles analysing the events of the mid-fifth century in Gaul: ‘Résistants et collaborateurs en Gaule à l’époque des grandes invasions’. Resistance and collaboration were loaded terms in post-1945 France. Loyen was not alone in presenting the fifth century as a period of débâcle, occupation, and collaboration.” 293

"There were, of course, scholars who were rather more interested in looking at the post-Roman period from the barbarian point of view. As early as 1952 French archaeologists held a conference in Poitiers under the title Journées mérovingiennes, which was to be the first of a long sequence of conferences that provided a showcase for early medieval archaeology in France.” 294 Why?

"Volksgeschichte, or the history of Germanic peoples, was scarcely addressed by anyone in Germany in the fifteen years after 1945. Then in 1961 Reinhard Wenskus published a major work of interpretation of the Germanic ...”299

"Thompson was a meticulous reader of texts. Among the points he saw in them were, on the one hand, Roman exploitation of their barbarian neighbours—something that he described as ‘economic warfare’—and on the other a tendency among the barbarians themselves to lose any sense of solidarity when faced with the possibility of gaining wealth of their own, and instead to enter a world of incipient class division and conflict. This was not to be the only Marxist reading of the end of Rome to come from the pen of a historian writing in England.” 304

Chapter 16 Presenting a New Europe

"As a result the dominant discourse shifted: the most substantial of the exhibitions, needing European-wide funding, have tended to address the notion of Europe Itself.” 310

"In a review article that appeared in 1999 Guy Halsall categorized what he regarded as the two main camps in the interpretations of the Fall of Rome published in the closing decades of the twentieth century. ‘Movers’ were those who placed a great deal of emphasis on the impact of incoming barbarians, while ‘Shakers’ were those who saw the ‘tensions and changes within the Roman Empire’ as being the dominant factor in the developments of the fourth to sixth centuries, and who consequently placed little emphasis on any Germanic incomers. In fact, the division between ‘Movers’ and ‘Shakers’ has a good deal of common in the well-established distinction between ‘Germanist’ and ‘Romanist.’ “311

“Movers and Shakers’ is one very clear and useful way of categorising debates on the Fall of Rome, although as Halsall noted, it can give too clear-cut an impression: at the end of his article, while noting that there are extreme proponents of each approach, he acknowledge that there are those, including himself, who are not entirely convinced by either reading. Moreover, there are considerable differences within both the ‘Mover’ and the ‘Shaker’ parties. Thus, in a work published since Halsall’s article, Bryan Ward-Perkins, most certainly a ‘Mover’, not only placed a great deal of emphasis on barbarian incomers, he also saw them as causing ‘the End of Civilization’. By contrast, a number of scholars who have accepted the importance of the barbarians, have seen them as struggling to continue Roman institutions and culture. The most substantial of the numerous volumes on the late and post-Roman period to have been published since Halsall’s article, Chris Wickham’s Framing the Early Middle Ages, which owes something to Brown in its geographical vision, though not in its exclusion of religion, moves judiciously through many of the debates relating to the social and economic structures of late antiquity, presenting a largely ‘Shaker’ vision in the Mediterranean region, while acknowledging greater disruption in the North.” 312

"Alongside the use of sociology to define the peoples of the Migration Period has been a greater use of literary theory and of deconstruction in the analysis of source material...[Patrick Amory] turned away, as did others, from notions of ethnicity and ethnography, putting emphasis rather on ‘imagined community’ (although in so doing he did not cite Anderson).” 313

Despite the rhetoric within some sections of the debate, rather than clear camps holding distinct views, what has emerged is a body of scholars who have been sharply attuned to developments in other disciplines, although they naturally do not all privilege the same models to the same extent. The fact that we are dealing with a spectrum of opinions rather than two sharply divided camps...”313

"What dominated the nature of the discussion of the late and post-Roman periods from the late 1980s onwards was not, in fact, a set of questions, but rather the existence of a project on ‘The Transformation of the Roman World’ funded by the European Science Foundation. This dominated discourse, in part, simply because of the scale of what was set up. In was initiated in 1989, when a working group was established to consider the feasibility of the topic. Thereafter a scientific programme was funded from 1992 to 1998.” 315

"Yet while it would be wrong to see the project as deliberately opting for a ‘Shaker’ dominated view of the End of the Roman World, there was
truth in Ward-Perkins’ claim that the project should be seen in the light of the need of the European Union ‘to forge a spirit of cooperation between the once warring nations of the Continent…” 316

"It is not only Europe that can claim to have an interest in the Fall of Rome. Already there are indications that Americans are finding in the subject analogues for the current experiences of the USA. As early as 1976 the American historian and strategist Edward Luttwak turned his attention to The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire. More recently, in 2007, Cullen Murphy published a volume entitled Are we Rome? The End of an Empire and the Fate of America. Further echoes are apparent in Adrian Goldsworthy’s How Rome Fell: The Death of a Superpower. So too, a specialist in late Antiquity, James O'Donnell, has interpreted Byzantine policy of the sixth century so as to draw out lessons for the United States, pausing to note the ways in which the period was already exploited in the nineteenth century, not least by Felix Dahn. It may well be that the changing position of the US will come to be the major prism through which Late Antiquity is read.” 317

"Equally a sign of the times is the increased emphasis on climate and natural disaster. Long an issue in debating migration...the question of climate has, of late, been given considerably more widespread significance.” 317

"More significant in indicating possible new areas of study (or rather the reopening of old areas) was the growing accessibility and regular display of finds from eastern Europe....Collaboration between scholars from western and central Europe has been a particularly pronounced feature of exhibitions mounted in Austria and Hungary.” 324

"Thus, alongside the national pasts and the past and present of the European Union, exhibitions since the early 1990s have also marked the reintegration of Central Europe into the Western European tradition, and in so doing they have made accessible material from the Migration Period that had been almost inaccessible for decades. With 1989 not only was a new European future possible, but at the same time opportunities for a re-evaluation of the European past, and not least the distant European past of the centuries including and following the Fall of Rome, were opened up.” 325

"...the early Middle Ages have been interpreted and reinterpreted through various discourses, each of which has embedded narratives of cultural and national creation and change. In the course of this book we have traced the Fall of Rome and the coming of the barbarians through debates of the rights of the French nobility, the origins of democracy, the oppression of indigenous populations by alien rulers, calls for religious revival, the creation of the German nation, the establishment of Germany's frontiers, and finally the new search for European unity. Although some of these discourses have been superseded, others still inform modern interpretations, sometimes unconsciously. The past is always being used and abused—and while it may be true that the majority of the greatest abusers have been politicians, there are many professional historians and archaeologists who are equally complicit in distorting the past to fit present-day agendas. Indeed, one is often left to wonder who has played the greater role in misrepresentation: academics or politicians?” 327

"Moreover, the distinction between the professional historian and the amateur is rather less easy to draw than is sometimes assumed. The professionalization of history was largely a development of the nineteenth century, resulting from the creation of university courses. There was, therefore, no division between the professional historian and the amateur in the eighteenth century.” 328

"It is an act of hubris for the scholarly community to demand that self-professedly unbiased professionals should police the work of amateurs, allegedly more prone to bias. Yet, for as long as the past attracts the attention of politicians and the general public, there will be a need for critical debate to test what is and what is not supported by the evidence, and it should be as open and as well-informed as possible. At any one time there will always be one or more discourses that dominate the way in which the past is being read. It is, therefore, not just the interpretation of individual events that should constantly be held up to scrutiny; so too should the more general discourse in which the interpretation is situated.” 329

we cannot assume a default superiority over so-called amateurs but we can evaluate their work with the same system as "professional" data

Themes: liberties/despotism; where does political power lie>nobles or pop.?; where should an army be drawn from; origin of classes; law; revival of religion; race; savagery(WWII)