

Experiencing the Frontier and the Frontier of Experience

Barbarian perspectives and Roman strategies to
deal with new threats

edited by

Alexander Rubel and Hans-Ulrich Voß



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Preface

This volume is the result of a longer collaboration of the two editors, one with another, and within their institutions, the Institute of Archaeology in Iași, Romania and the 'Römisch Germanische Kommission des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts' in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Already in 2014 we organized together a session on a related topic at the EAA-Meeting in Istanbul. The proceedings of this conference on 'The Other' in Action. The Barbarization of Rome and the Romanization of the World' just have been published (R.-C. Curcă, A. Rubel, R. Symonds and H.-U. Voß [eds], *Romanisation and Barbaricum. Contributions to the archaeology and history of interaction in European protohistory*, Oxford: Archaeopress 2020). As the interesting features of cultural contact and Roman influence in the *Barbaricum* east of the Rhine as well as north of the Danube still intrigued us very much, we agreed to develop and further foster our collaboration. In this respect, we organized several workshops and roundtable-meetings in Iași, as well as in Frankfurt, inviting colleagues from our countries and from other central European borderlands of the Roman Empire to work together with us on new perspectives of the 'silent service' of Roman diplomacy and the relations between the Romans and Barbarian communities outside the Empire. An official cooperation treaty between our institutions had been signed in 2016 and two major research programs, funded by the Romanian research fund (UEFISCDI, former CNCSIS) helped us to keep up and stay on the track. The last major event of this collaboration had been the organization of another session in the framework of the 2018 meeting of the EAA at Barcelona under the motto 'How to beat the Barbarians? Roman practice to encounter new threats (1st-5th century AD)', which finally led to the publication of this volume. We had been very happy to observe at Barcelona, that another session, organized by Annet Nieuwhof from Groningen, was dealing with a very much related subject (In the shadow of the Roman Empire: Contact, influence and change outside the Roman limes) and many participants of the two sessions managed to attend both events. The volume is in a large part a result of the combination of these two sessions, as Annet Nieuwhof and some of her session-colleagues agreed to publish their papers in this volume. In the light of this, we decided on the actual title of this volume, which includes also aspects, which had been in the focus of the second session. That a Romanian institution could take a lead in an international long-term project of this size, which results also in the publication of this volume, is due to the funding by the Romanian Government (UEFISCDI, project no.: PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2016-0669, with the title: Beyond the fringes of Empire. Roman influence and power north of the Danube and east of the Rhine). For this, the editors are very grateful to their funding institution. We also want to thank David Davison from Archaeopress, Oxford, for his kindness and his support as a publisher. Alexander Rubel wants to dedicate this volume to the memory of his late friend and colleague Octavian N. Bounegru (1956-2019) who had been despite his illness a part of this project.

March 2020

Alexander Rubel
Oxford

Hans-Ulrich Voß
Frankfurt a. M.

Beyond the Fringes of Empire: New Approaches concerning Roman Influence and Power in the *Barbaricum*. An introduction

Alexander Rubel and Hans-Ulrich Voß

The Roman Empire had always been a point of attraction for the different peoples who lived at the margins. Closeness to the Empire meant in fact sharing a part of the wealth of this unique and powerful superstructure, which emerged from the city of Rome. By trade, warfare, robbery, enrolment into the Roman army or diplomatic deals the Barbarian elites managed to profit from the superior economic structures of their powerful neighbours. In the 4th century we can observe an increasing trend among Barbarian tribes to get an even greater share by becoming a genuine part of this Empire. Thus, groups of neighbouring tribes tried to receive land inside the Empire, and to obtain, thus, the protection of the *pax romana*, especially in troubled times. This partly aggressive Barbarian Invasions, challenged the leading groups of the Roman Empire and first of all the Emperors themselves, to cope with a new situation. While the Roman Empire witnessed for centuries imperialistic extension till the end of the 2nd century AD, new tribal coalitions like the Alamanni or the Goths endangered the given structures of the Empire¹. For a reassessment of relations between ‘Barbarians’ and the Roman Empire, we have to ask first of all one crucial question that in the past was always answered affirmatively: Was the Roman Empire doomed since the 3rd century AD? The problem with this crucial question is virtually the same as with nearly all questions of the kind: there are still no definite answers. But with our approach we want at least to try to raise awareness of some of the intriguing issues of Late Antiquity that can help to reassess Imperial politics from the 3rd and 4th century in a context of rational and well reflected foreign policies. We cannot deal with all aspects of this complex matter in this short introduction, so we will focus only on three aspects. First: Recent archaeological evidence from Central Germany suggests that the whole so called ‘Germanic World’ was in turmoil after the Marcomannic wars, and that Roman foreign policy

saw a realignment of allies by preferring new partners (Schmidt/Voß 2017, Voß 2017, Wigg-Wolf/Voß 2017). This massive change in politics, which led to completely new arrangements, was probably the starting point for a complete reshuffle of the political order in the hinterland of the *limes*, where new groups of ‘Germanic’ warriors coagulated and thus gave birth to those major groups, which began to attack the Roman Empire with much more success during the 3rd century. This will be presented in detail by Hans-Ulrich Voß in this volume, who has studied these aspects, which until now were largely unappreciated, in the region between the rivers Elbe and Oder in Germany.

Secondly, we would like to outline the Roman Empire’s new diplomatic and strategic approaches, which became manifest especially from the beginning of the 4th century (Heather 2001, concerning diplomacy: Nachaeva 2014). To highlight the very flexible reactions of the Roman leadership towards the new threats of better organized ‘Barbarians’, who had improved their skills above all as vital parts of the Roman defensive strategy, allies or mercenaries of the Romans one day and enemies and raiders the next, we chose the example of the Alemannic leader Macrianus and his relationship with Rome. The aspects of new defence strategies as visible along the Danube in the so called ‘Innenbefestigungen’ or ‘inner fortifications’ will be treated in a paper in this volume (see Rubel in this volume), so that we can pass over this aspect at this stage (cf. also Rubel 2020). Finally, we would also like to touch briefly on the question of whether Edward Luttwak, with his idea of an explicit ‘Imperial Strategy’, should not be given more credit today than 40 years ago, when we did not know so much about Roman efforts to organize large campaigns even in Late Antiquity (beginning with the ‘Harzhorn-battle’), and our knowledge of Roman diplomacy was very limited (Luttwak 1976).

The so-called ‘Harzhorn-event’ or skirmish is a prime example for the evidence of archaeological sources in such considerations (Pöppelmann 2013). The site is on a hilltop spur and confirms the presence of a Roman army to the east of the river Weser in the first half of the third century, probably in AD 235 under the emperor Maximinus Thrax. It is hardly conceivable that a Roman army could have operated so deep inside *Germania* without secure supply lines and local allies. At about the same time, or a little later, in central Germany, in the present-day federal states of Thuringia and Saxony-

¹ The best account on the Migration Period remains Pohl 2005. There is an actual trend to interpret the fundamental change in the context of the fall of the Roman Empire as a kind of neutral ‘transformation’ towards medieval Europe (in the wake of Brown 1971). But recently Heather (2005) and Ward-Perkins (2005) reconsidered the brutal invasions of this period and the loss of civilization standards and quality of life in the context of these invasions, coming to the conclusion that the end of Antiquity marked a real turning point. We also want to mention that we could not cover in the introduction all relevant literature to the subjects touched here, and ask those colleagues whose writings are not mentioned in this short overview for forgiveness.

Anhalt, ‘princely graves’ of the so-called ‘Haßleben-Leuna group’ richly equipped with Roman goods start to appear. The systematic recording of the entire spectrum of Roman artefacts in Germanic contexts, and a consideration of the first and second century AD, gives us a clue as to why Rome turned its attention to this region. The funerary customs of native elites from the Atlantic to the Caucasus, with characteristic sets of metal vessels, reveals a degree of standardization in Roman influence that was deliberately used to win allies during the first two centuries AD (Schlüter 1978, Droberjar 2007, Schuster 2010). On the other hand, other combinations, for example the use of bronze buckets as funerary urns covered with bronze bowls as lids, in combination with other grave goods, are evidence for Germanic elite networks that formed the basis of communication and exchange in the period up to the end of the Marcomannic Wars (AD 166/167-180) (Quast 2009, Voß 2017). The range of Roman finds allows us not only to recognise Roman impact with its chronological and chorological differences, but also helps understand the cultural individualities of different groups, whether among or between the Germans, Balts and Sarmatians. It becomes more and more apparent that the so-called ‘Barbarians’ are not only objects of Roman action, but also active parts in the arrangement of relations with the empire. The elite networks that we are able to identify in the early and late Imperial periods reveal a tendency that at a general level can be understood as the development of a growing self-confidence on the part of Germanic groups, and even emancipation from the Roman Empire. Rome responded with a strategy succinctly described by Tacitus, *Germania* 33, 2: ‘May the nations retain and perpetuate, if not an affection for us, at least an animosity against each other! Since, while the fate of the empire is thus urgent, fortune can bestow no higher benefit upon us, than the discord of our enemies.’ (*Maneat, quaeso, duretque gentibus, si non amor nostri, at certe odium sui, quando urgentibus imperii fatis nihil iam praestare fortuna maius potest quam hostium discordiam*).

As the archaeological record suggests, Rome used its influence subtly to fulfill this wish. Therefore, after the Marcomannic Wars during the crisis of the 3rd century², it was particularly important for Rome to have strategic allies in Central Germany and the Thuringian basin, in the rear of Rome’s immediate neighbours on the Rhine border, in order to provide a defence against Germanic invaders.

The direct and indirect control of the territories immediately outside the imperial border was of vital interest to the Romans. The Romans had a whole range of possibilities, from intelligence and intelligence

gathering to massive military intervention. The most important and effective, and at the same time the most favourable method of exerting influence in the border areas of the *Barbaricum*, however, was advanced ‘client management’, as Heather calls the differentiated shaping of relations with the ‘tribes’ and kingdoms on the northern edge of the empire (Heather 2001, 18-20). Even in the 4th century, the foreign policy of the Roman Empire oscillated between clever diplomacy, alliance politics and military pressure. In Late Antiquity, however, the treatment of the ‘client border states’ and their leaders increasingly changed to a variety of possible instruments of influence in the *Barbaricum*, while in the early imperial era military intervention (or even conquest) and the use or toleration of ‘client kings’ (think of the Herodian dynasty in Judea) dominated (Braund 1984). The extension of the options for action can be explained most impressively by means of an example. After 350 the empire had to concentrate on the conflict with the Persians and to deal with the usurper Magnentius in Gaul, and thus left the local chieftains on the Rhine border in peace for a time. In this context local Alemannic lords with their federations could penetrate the *limes*. Julian, who had been appointed as Caesar in Gaul, took successful action against the Alamannia near Strasbourg (357, see Amm. 16, 12), but then had to turn to other locations in his conflict with Constantius II. As Augustus he had to devote himself from 361 on to imperial affairs. When from 365 Valentinian I had to keep order on the Rhine, the minor king Macrianus, leader of the Alamannic tribe of the Bucinobants, was soon a thorn in his side, although he had previously been in agreement with Julian (events described in Ammianus: Amm. 28, 5; 29, 4; 30,3, cf. 18, 2, 15-18). The problem with the ‘client kings’ tolerated by Rome was, of course, always that such normally useful allies often became a danger when they became too powerful (precisely because of their increased prestige through their contacts with Rome. On the subject of client kings see especially the fundamental work of Kornemann 1934, further Kehne 2001 and Baltrusch/Winkler 2015). When imperial forces had to be concentrated in other parts of the Empire, some of the unstable Roman allies were easily tempted to invade poorly protected border areas. This was apparently also the case with the troublemaker Macrianus (*turbarum rex artifex*, Amm. 30, 3, 6), who soon became a priority for Valentinian I. Macrianus could only achieve his outstanding position within his peer-group and his ‘mini empire’ through his former alliance with the Romans, which underlines the potential danger of such arrangements for the Roman side.

Valentinian’s first attempt to eliminate the unloved leader of the Bucinobantes in 369/370 was the most effective and economical method imaginable: he exploited the *discordia hostium* to take action against Macrianus in an alliance with the Burgundians, who at that time were settled further east and were enemies

² See Rau 2012 and – critical – Bemmann 2014 with further Literature. For the evidence of settlements and settlement finds from this period see e.g. Schmidt 2018.

of the Alamanni (Amm 28, 5, 8-13). It had apparently been Valentinian's plan from the very beginning to let the Burgundians and the Bucinobants fight each other in order not to have to engage his own resources in this proxy war. However, the Burgundians refused to take action against Macrianus alone when they realized that the Romans themselves were unwilling to take part in the fighting, and left angrily with their great army.

When this attempt failed, one year later (371) Valentinian tried to kidnap his unpleasant opponent with a targeted commando mission. When he heard of Macrianus's presence in his residence near today Wiesbaden (apparently Macrianus could move freely and relaxed in the border area), he sent a detachment across the Rhine which, however, made too much noise and thus warned the enemy who could quickly raise the alarm with their leader and bring him to safety at the last minute (Amm. 29, 4, 1-5).

Immediately afterwards, the Romans used another means: they appointed a certain Fraomarius as king of the Bucinobantes in order to depose Macrianus, who was still evading Roman intervention. However, Fraomarius could not prevail against the 'troublemaker', who may have been much detested by the Romans but was all the more popular among his own people. Fraomarius probably had to submit to his predecessor in 372 or 373 and was subsequently sent to Britain by his employers as commander of an Alamannic auxiliary force (Amm. 29, 4, 7).

When Valentinian had to prepare a campaign against the Quades in 374, he decided to offer peace to his opponent on the right bank of the Rhine in order to ensure security on this front. Macrianus celebrated his meeting with the emperor and savoured his increased prestige to the full. He appeared at the meeting point near Mainz on the right bank of the Rhine with a truly royal attitude: bursting with pride he presented himself as the actual peacemaker (Amm 30, 3, 4: *et venit immane quo quantoque flatu distentus ut futurus arbiter superior pacis*). While the emperor was negotiating on the Rhine from a ship, Macrianus had probably stayed on his own bank of the Rhine for security reasons and discussed the conditions with the emperor from equal to equal with his head proudly raised (*caput altius erigens*), not without also pulling off a 'show' by letting his men beat their shields wildly. The agreement arrived at by mutual accord probably provided guarantees for his possessions on the right bank of the Rhine in return for loyalty to the alliance. Interestingly, from then until his death in an ambush (around 380) in the land of the Franks, which he had probably invaded on a Roman mission, Macrianus turned out to be a loyal ally who caused no more problems (Amm 30, 3, 6-7). A useful modern account on these events is Drinkwater (2007, 285-310).

With the course of events on the Rhine in this short period, the various means by which the Romans were able to shape their foreign policy on the imperial borders can be seen as examples:

1. The proxy war using the motto *divide et impera*. The promotion of intra-Germanic conflicts and the targeted use of certain allies in a resource-saving fight against identified enemies is the most efficient form of 'client management'. Rarely described in the sources (but already masterfully implemented by Julius Caesar), there are some indications that the archaeological traces of massive conflicts inside Germania from the 3rd century onwards could have been the results of such a policy.

2. Abduction (or murder) of undesirable enemy leaders. Late Antiquity in particular is characterized by this form of elimination of potential and current dangers posed by barbarian neighbours (Lee 2009). The model for Valentinian had undoubtedly been Julian, who kidnapped the Alamannic warlord (Gaukönig) Vadomarius when he unsuspectingly accepted an invitation to a feast with the Caesar (Amm. 21, 4). Another dangerous feast was prepared in 377 for the leaders of the Goths Fritigern and Alavivus who had reached *Scythia minor* crossing the Danube with many compatriots and caused their host Lupicinus permanent problems (Amm. 31, 5). The half-heartedly attempted assassination, to which only the bodyguards fell victim, sparked off an uprising among the Gothic refugees, which after the defeat of Hadrianopolis (378) and the settlement of the Goths under their own right (in 382) was to have enormous consequences for the inner constitution of the empire (keyword *foederati*). Another famous example is the attempted assassination of the Hunnic leader Attila by a treacherous relative, which was thwarted to the great misfortune for the empire (Priscus, Fr. 11:1; 15). Lee (2009, 8-22) has collected a large number of other examples. This quite perfidious method, which was often used under blatant abuse of the rights of guests, likewise brings the advantage of maximum efficiency since usually the 'Barbarians' had no institutions or established royal dynasties, and thus just gathered around influential leaders. With the 'surgical' elimination of such a leader the problem was usually solved immediately for a long time.

3. The establishment of a client or puppet king by Rome's grace. Replacing insubordinate rulers on the periphery with a pretender by the grace of Rome had been a tried and tested means of foreign policy since Republican times. This works either directly (as in the not entirely happy case of Fraomarius) or indirectly by supporting a usurper or a dissatisfied

relative of the leader who was to be replaced (examples in Winter 1952).

4. The classic bilateral peace treaty (with or without provisions for an alliance). Contractual agreements entail obligations for both sides and always mean a compromise, but offer the advantage of maximum conservation of resources, which was often the order of the day, especially in times of comprehensive military engagement on several fronts.

There were significant shifts from the 5th century in particular, as the subsidy payments which previously had been a form of stimulus for former opponents and current allies (also important for the prestige of the leaders most benefiting from the payments), or almost funds for 'reconstruction' or 'development aid', increasingly (especially since Attila) became a form of blackmail to maintain the status quo (Gordon 1949). Contrary to the often-circulated image of subsidies as morally questionable bribes or protection money, payments and gifts to barbarian princes were of outstanding importance for both sides. On the one hand, they guaranteed the Romans a buffer zone protected by 'friendly kings' basically acting in Rome's interest; on the other hand, the Germanic leaders were dependent on the gifts, because they could only maintain their position of power by redistributing to their followers the wealth that was guaranteed from outside. In principle, subsidies and gifts thus belong to the classic arsenal of diplomatic influence and were essentially centred on three political objectives: Payment for alliances against a more powerful enemy; the 'buying' of peace (standstill agreement); and also discord between the neighbouring barbarian groups, inciting them to warlike conflicts against each other. Many items labelled as 'Roman imports' probably had been such diplomatic gifts or stimuli (see on imports Wolters 1990 and 1991).

This is just a small detail of a much larger picture, but it should give us some hints for a possible reassessment of Roman foreign policy in Late Antiquity. When the political analyst Edward Luttwak published his book *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century AD to the Third* (Luttwak 1976), most critics were sceptical. Indeed, the ancient literary sources do not discuss an imperial strategy at all, and every new administration under a new emperor seems to have pursued a separate agenda. But archaeological evidence from recent years seems to indicate a certain mutual understanding of the main issues of a strategic foreign policy, which included several scenarios for dealing with enemies and allies at the border of the Empire in different ways. This issue will be touched again in this volume (Rubel on the settlement of Ibida on the Lower Danube). In this general context we hope that new archaeological data from the eastern *Barbaricum* can support this

rather new perspective, and that a lot of prestige goods (such as those put together by Schmauder in 2002 for example, see also Naecheva 2014) can be identified or reassessed as diplomatic gifts and payment for services rather than commercial 'import' or booty.

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