

**RALPH W. MATHISEN AND DANUTA SHANZER (eds.), *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. 378. ISBN 978-0-75466814-5. £65.00.**

**Reviewed by Christopher W. Malone, University of Queensland  
(c.malone@uq.edu.au)**

This volume is the product of the sixth *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* conference, held at the University of Illinois in 2005. Its twenty-five papers range chronologically from the third to the eighth century AD, and provide a mixture of historical, literary, and archaeological perspectives on perhaps the most salient feature of the Roman frontier – the barbarians living along it. The subheading of the volume, *Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity*, points to the central issue in the majority of papers – the appearance and alteration of barbarian identities, both within and outside the late Roman sphere. Not every paper in a wide-ranging collection such as this will be of interest to all readers, but all have something interesting to say, and the collection as a whole is an important contribution to debates on barbarian identity and ethnogenesis.

The book is divided into three main parts, on the construction of images of barbarians; Roman-barbarian interactions on the frontiers; and barbarian states in the post-Roman world. The final paper is given its own part as an epilogue. This organisation works well, although the further division of the first two parts into three subsections each seems a little arbitrary. The papers are varied, ranging widely not only in terms of the peoples studied, but also in scope. At one end, Patrick Périn and Michel Kazanski offer a wide archaeological survey of migration-period Gaul (ch.23), assessing what material culture can and cannot offer in terms of the identities of various groups moving in and out of the region. On the other, there are focused studies of specific topics, such as Steven Fanning on the term *regulus* (ch.3), and Jason Moralee on a recently-discovered epigrammatic inscription at Petra (ch.17).

As the editors explain in their general introduction, the collection poses a challenge to current theoretical models of the place of the barbarians in the political and cultural shifts of late antiquity, which focus on either the decline (and/or transformation) of Rome, or on barbarian ethnogenesis, however defined. This volume instead ‘aims to break down old stereotypes about the cultural and social segregation of Roman and barbarian populations’ (p.4), an approach which emphasises a high level of barbarian and Roman interaction. Although none of the papers offer this argument explicitly, the weight of contributions – much like in the Roman lists of exotic tribal names that Ralph Mathisen’s paper (ch.1) examines – demonstrates the point, that scholars ought avoid partitioning barbarian and Roman experiences and identities.

As a brief review cannot do justice to each individual chapter, we follow their pattern; some essays are more in line with the overarching theme than others. The maintenance of old classical ethnographic tropes, and their slow erosion through long-term contact with barbarians, is a recurring theme. Gillian Clark (ch.2) exposes Augustine’s lack of interest in barbarians beyond stereotypes, while Jan

Drijvers (ch.5) attempts to reconstruct a general Roman perspective on the 'civilised barbarian' Sassanians. Drijvers finds that late Roman authors continued to repeat tropes as old as Herodotus, but mixed in more accurate contemporary knowledge, and a fascination with the eastern Other that Said would have easily recognised. This perspective is tempered by Scott McDonough (ch.4), who examines sixth-century attitudes through the lens of Agathias' disagreement with contemporary Neoplatonic idealisation of the Sassanians, and suggests that the Persians themselves were not really the issue. Rather, they had value as a literary construct within internal imperial political discourse.

Hartmut Ziche (ch.15) discusses Roman barbarology in general, and likewise finds that the old stereotypes never really disappeared, despite barbarian settlement, and the economic and political realities of life alongside and even among the barbarians. This pattern loosened in the fifth century, allowing easier transition between Roman and barbarian identities, but 'ideological reality' still held precedence.

Valuable new approaches and reinterpretations are presented. Linda Ellis (ch.18) applies theoretical models from the study of geography to look at identity on the margins of Empire, the mental and physical landscapes of Scythia. Theories of place and its effects on people and politics seem very relevant to the study of the frontiers of Empire and the shift from a Roman world to smaller regional kingdoms. Chorology, 'a behavioral, rather than an ethno-linguistic approach to understanding identity' (p.241), thus seems a beneficial new perspective, and Ellis' paper shows how it can be applied in the case of Tropaeum Traiani.

Michael E. Jones (ch.24) surveys the quite recent field of genetic studies and its application to ethnicity, focusing on the complicated ethno-cultural morass of late antique Britain. No clear picture can be gathered, though mass Saxon migration seems ruled-out. Jones sees reason to return to linguistic and cultural identity, and a shift towards a dominant elite, rather than genetic turnover. A similar conclusion, though with much more traditional methods, is reached by Scott de Brestain in the case of the Vascones and their relation to the Basques (ch.22). The rejection of the strictly ethnic in favour of culture is by no means radical, but will invite debate.

Convincing new perspectives and reinterpretations on 'known' topics also appear. Cristiana Sogno invites a rather different view of panegyric by recasting Symmachus in the modern terms of an 'embedded reporter', used and manipulated by the Emperor just as much as the barbarians on show (ch.10). Amelia Brown reconsiders the evidence, literary and material, for barbarian incursions in Greece (ch.6), and sees their third century manifestation as really just raiding, not the conquests nor devastations often assumed, a pattern which changes after Alaric, and the co-opting of barbarians into imperial politics. Edward Watts (ch.7) explores the direct evidence for perceptions of Odovacar's role in the fall of the Western Empire, so often taken as read by moderns: things were not so clear cut in the minds of near-contemporaries.

Contact, interaction, and overlap – physical and conceptual – between Roman and barbarian links some of the more disparate papers. Noel Lenski (ch.14) offers insight into the 'interethnic collusion in human misery' (p.197) of Roman and

barbarian captives and captors, while Cam Grey assesses the links between the settlement of barbarians within the Empire and the late imperial *colonatus*, finding neither process as systematic as often thought. Salim Faraji (ch.16) investigates how porous and hybridised were the ethnic, cultural, and religious identities of southern Egypt and Kush, while Kevin Uhalde (ch.19) considers oathswearing, and demonstrates that despite the imprecations of Christian moralists, pagans, Christians, and barbarians were content to make (and break) oaths to each others' gods before the fifth century. The role of ethnicity and barbarian identities is considered in the context of treason and espionage in the latter fourth century (Kimberley Kagan, ch.12), sixth century Eastern diplomacy (Ekaterina Nechaeva, ch.13), Tetrarchic religious policy – in its effects on Jews and Samaritans (Yuval Shahar, ch.8) and its critique of the Christian violation of traditional Hellene/barbarian categories (Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, ch.9). Visigothic identity is examined from the perspective of economic-legal matters by Andreas Schwartz (ch.20), and that of aristocratic marriage, by Luis Garcia Moreno (ch.21).

The collection closes with a paper – characterised as an epilogue – particularly relevant to the conference's setting. Bailey Young and Barbara Oehlschlaeger-Garvey offer insights into the work of the pioneering nineteenth-century archaeologist Auguste Moutié, along with some discussion of Merovingian grave-goods held in the Spurlock collection at Illinois. This piece is perhaps largely of antiquarian interest. It also contains a significant amount of untranslated French, which may be off-putting to some readers; non-English text, mostly from primary sources, is in most papers at least glossed when not translated.

Typographic errors are rare (this reviewer spotted fewer than ten). The book includes a good general index but no bibliographies; each paper instead gives substantial citations in its notes. Helpfully, topics that are touched upon but not treated in detail are often supplied with notes pointing to further readings. The papers on their own are all worthy contributions on their particular topics. Taken as a whole, the collection is not a definitive statement on barbarian identity (nor is it offered as one) but is a set of important contributions to scholarly debate, and makes a call to reassess both the terms of that debate, and our theoretical models of Roman transformation and barbarian ethnogenesis.