

## The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages

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The beginnings of Europe is not a very complicated historical subject. After the end of Roman domination in the fifth century CE, so-called 'successor states' grew up in the territories and around the margins of what had been the Western Roman Empire, and out of those states grew France, Spain, Italy and (with greater complications) England and Germany. Since the 'Fall of Rome' itself, historians have grappled with the questions of how and why the great Empire should have come to an end. Despite coming to different conclusions, historians share the view that whatever did happen was of massive significance for the development of Europe. Discussion of what we would now term 'the transformation of the Roman World' revolves around three contested areas: first, an assessment of Roman rule: was it so oppressive that it could not be sustained? Second, an assessment of the successors to the Romans, the 'barbarians': by conquering the Empire, did they free populations from Roman oppression, bringing to them new blood and new spirit? Or were the barbarians themselves the oppressors who destroyed Roman power and along with it the protection of Roman law and the preservation of ancient privileges? Third, what part did the rise of Christianity and the Catholic Church play in the ending of Roman rule? Was the influence of Christianity baleful or liberating? The very different answers to these questions depend on when they were posed, on who asked them and on where in Europe the questioners were located. In a book that can only be described as a 'tour de force', Ian Wood takes us through the permutations in the answers. He aims to show us how debates on the 'Fall of Rome' have tended to concentrate on those issues which reflect the social and political debates of the day. It is also a labour of love: noting the sheer amount of historical scholarship that has poured into the debates on, say, the establishment of the French monarchy, Wood regrets its relative neglect, and is concerned to rescue it 'from the amnesia which has drawn a veil over past history'. The author delights in the detail of these forgotten histories and in the lives of their progenitors. He includes here novels, opera and plays which reflect views of this past

*The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* is thoroughly researched and written with the great clarity that comes from an unparalleled knowledge and understanding of the subject. The centrepiece of the work is the development of scholarship in France, where debates about early history and identity had most resonance as the French grappled with the nature of monarchy and the legitimacy of the power of the few over the many. At issue was the relationship between Romans, Gauls and Franks, beginning with the notion that the Franks were free, equal and a source of nobility. Their conquest of France liberated the Gauls from the oppressive

Romans. At the beginning of the 18th century Boulainvilliers took this position in defence of the aristocratic privileges of his own times. An opposite view was put forward by the Abbé Du Bos who did not accept that there was a Frankish conquest as such. In his view the Franks were allies of the Romans who conferred offices on their leaders. According to Du Bos the crown's rights were thus derived from the Romans. It was a view that downplayed the importance of the aristocracy in favour of a bourgeois monarchist stance. To this there would be a reaction (principally in Montesquieu's *De l'esprit de loix*) which returned to the freedom of the Franks and a new beginning free of Roman oppression. After 1789 concern with the aristocracy and monarchy gave way to new ideas about race, nation and class in which saw despotism in both Roman and barbarian regimes (Sismondi, 1821: 'Society ought to exist for universal advantage, but under the Romans and the Franks this had not been the case'.) Now into the mix came the question of the influence of the Church, with a mid 19th-century reaction to Gibbon's famous view that the Church played a large part in Rome's demise. First Chateaubriand and then Ozanam emphasized how much the Church salvaged from Roman culture and how it had helped tame Germanic culture. The result was a French society derived from a powerful combination of Roman, Germanic and Christian elements. Finally, at the end of the 19th century we get a more nuanced and scientific picture from the great Fustel de Coulanges. He admitted that we know relatively little about the pre-migration Germans, and he, like Du Bos, emphasized the continuities between Roman and Frankish Gaul. He then charted and explained the subsequent social and institutional development of France in terms that did not necessarily depend on what happened at the end of the Roman period. Wood's natural sympathy clearly lies with Du Bos and with Fustel de Coulanges and with their emphasis on continuity, which is very much the consensus view of contemporary scholarship.

What Wood does not point out in all of this (though it is something he does understand deeply) is that until the later 19th century the discussion rested on a few quasi-canonical texts, and above all on the *Ten Books of Histories* by the late sixth-century author Gregory of Tours. Take, for instance, the incident at Soissons in which the Frankish king, Clovis, executed a soldier who had refused to hand over a vase that had been plundered from the Church. This incident was read from Romanist, Germanist and Christian points of view and different morals drawn from it. It is important to note that our different historians had this text in common, for this tells us much about the lines of discussion and it helps explain why Francia might seem to be the European melting pot, that is, because the accessible texts related to Francia, and, one might add, had been continuously read and commented on ever since they were first composed. It is partly for this reason that there is less to say about Italy, Spain and England, and there is less to say about regions where there was a less obvious fusion of 'Roman' and 'Germanic' traditions. Identity and history could be worked out in other ways, and national narratives dressed off from events in more recent history, such as the Norman Conquest in England or the Reconquest in Spain. What Wood shows to be the most interesting case here is that of Germany, which of course only came into being as a nation state in the later 19th century. In fact, Wood's treatment of German scholarship on the Early Middle Ages is little short of brilliant.

Before unification under Bismarck, a national historical narrative in Germany was hindered by confessional divide and tensions between Prussian North and Hapsburg South. Historical identity (the *Kulturstaat*) was constructed through shared culture and language, a construction which emphasized the contribution of 'Germanic' culture to European civilization. German scholarship on the Early Middle Ages was in this sense a late starter, but over the 19th century it caught up fast and by the end of the century was regarded with enormous admiration. What Wood brings out as no-one has ever done before is how the machinery of scholarship masked the isolation of German scholars from political reality. Their rather naïve pursuit of 'Germanism' contributed to growing militarism and a sense of rightful cultural hegemony. A key figure here is the economic historian Karl Lamprecht, an enthusiastic supporter of the Kaiser's imperialist project. Lamprecht devoted himself to 'showing' how Belgium was properly part of the Germanic world, and this was important in the justification of the German occupation of Belgium from 1914 onwards. Wood brings out the shock this caused in scholars who had previously believed that the Germans were at the cutting edge of scientific history. Pirenne, a Walloon, was particularly disillusioned and his reaction in coming up with a history of the end of the Roman world which more or less cut out the Germans is famous. To the story of Lamprecht's unscientific behaviour we can add a footnote from Manchester, which shows how spot on

Wood is in his appraisal. In 1912 the great F. C. Tout, Professor of Medieval History at Manchester, persuaded a promising young researcher, Mark Hovell, to join Lamprecht's seminar in Leipzig in order to widen his understanding of economic history (Hovell was in fact writing a book on the Chartists). Hovell quickly learned German and was received with great warmth by Lamprecht. In his letters back to Tout, however, Hovell was critical of his host on two counts: first, Lamprecht declaimed rather than taught in the seminar: he was opinionated and cavalier with the detail of history, and second he 'Germanicized' history to a ridiculous extent. He stated, for instance, that the origins of America were essentially 'teutonisch': 'he persistently depreciates the English element on the strength of the existence of a few Swedish, Dutch and German settlements' The history of America down to 1763 was, according to Lamprecht 'an episode in the eternal struggle between the 'romanisch' and 'teutonisch' peoples. Hovell was plainly shocked and rather disappointed by this rigid mindset. At the end of the academic year (1913) Hovell returned to Manchester. When war broke out, Tout tried to persuade him not to join up, but in 1915 he did so and he died in action in Belgium in 1916, which is incidentally the same year that Lamprecht also died in Belgium, and as Wood hints, in slightly mysterious circumstances. Tout, to his great credit, then oversaw the completion of Hovell's book and guided it through the press.

In the years after 1918 German historians were unsurprisingly cold-shouldered by the European scholarly establishment. But in the inter-war period, work on the early Middle Ages that was based on race and language fed into the rising Nazi ideology, and the identification of lands where 'Germans' had once held sway but which now lay outside the *Reich* was important in Nazi plans for territorial expansion. On all of this, Wood is excellent, and he is just as good on the rehabilitation of German scholarship in the post-war period. When we get to the Vienna School and the question of ethnogenesis (which basically replaced the conquest narrative) and the European Science Foundation project on the 'Transformation of the Roman World', Wood speaks with great authority on work in which he has been personally involved. If this last section of the book feels a little rushed, it is because it is in a sense a post-script to the main story of how thinking about the early Middle Ages reflected major concerns with the nature and legitimacy of the social and political order. It is also the case that discussion about how and why Rome 'fell' has been superseded by an appreciation of 'Late Antiquity' as a creative period in its own right. The invention of 'Late Antiquity' was largely down to the work of Peter Brown, with whom Wood worked in London in the late 1970s. Finally, says Wood, there has been a shift from arguments between academics about the origins of the various European states towards the presentation of remains of the past to the general public on a more pan-European basis. But one thing is clear from Wood's survey and that is that the same arguments come round again and again. The same questions about continuities and new beginnings will continue to be asked, and as we have seen, the answers display endless permutation.

Ian Wood's book will have a long shelf life because it is near authoritative and surely no-one for a long time to come will have such a command of the detail. It will, as Wood hopes, prevent our amnesia, although it is uncomfortable to be reminded that so much of contemporary scholarship on the early Middle Ages returns to questions first aired in the early modern period. If there are two basic criticisms of this erudite and utterly engaged work, one must be that the detail sometimes overwhelms the argument, so that one doubts whether the author has really established the importance of the subject rather than his own interest in it. A case in point would be Wood's discussion of Chateaubriand's novel *Les martyrs*, published in 1809. In three pages we are given details of Chateaubriand's life and then a synopsis of his novel, which Wood admits is full of 'narrative hokum and chronological impossibilities'. The point is that the novel presented the late Roman Church as a model to be emulated, and should be read in the context of the revival of Catholic history in the Napoleonic era. Of the overall significance of the work we cannot tell, though we are told that it inspired a play by Alexandre Soumet, which in turn was the basis for the libretto of Bellini's opera *Norma*. Or, for another instance, why are we given so much detail on Charles Kingsley, his failed academic career and his novel *Hypatia* (1853)? Here the 'debate' may reflect the issues of the day, but in this case it looks more as if we have a reflection of the micro-politics of mid 19th-century Anglicanism. If the detail is sometimes overwhelming, the second criticism of the book is that the intellectual framing is underwhelming. We cannot really understand the importance of thinking about the origins of early medieval Europe without knowing a bit more about what other things people were thinking about. Does the historical discourse have parallels in

other disciplines concerned with identity and with political justification? Wood does make glancing references to, say, Darwinism or Marxism, but the reader really has to be conversant with a broad history of ideas before being able to take on board the particular ramifications of the debates around the end of Rome. Those most interested in this work will be historians of early medieval Europe who already know the intellectual terrain and who will appreciate the detail. It will explain to them why we keep coming back to particular debates and show them how the field has developed over the last 300 years. The detail will make this book a durable work of reference although by the same token non-specialists might find it an effort to get through the detail to see the overall picture. That effort would, however, be strongly repaid.

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