Review article

Rethinking the dichotomy: 'Romans' and 'barbarians'

Nicky Garland*

Sergio Gonzalez Sanchez & Alexandra Guglielmi. *Romans & barbarians beyond the frontiers: archaeology, ideology & identities in the north* (TRAC Themes in Archaeology 1). 2017. Oxford & Havertown (PA): Oxbow; 978-1-78570-604-2 £38.

Peter Bogucki. *The barbarians: lost civilisations*. 2017. London: Reaktion; 978-1-78023-718-3 £15.



Our understanding of the interactions between the Roman Empire and indigenous societies (or 'barbarians') that lay within or surrounding its borders has undergone considerable advances over the last 30 years. Stemming initially from a colonial perspective, which saw the Roman Empire as 'civilising' those who were subsumed into it, the study of these interactions now includes a wealth of diverse post-processual or post-colonial approaches that stress the complexity of interactions within and between these social groups. Even with these advances, the self-imposed opposition between prehistoric and Roman studies, whether in theoretical stance, approach or research frameworks, remains constant in modern scholarly debate (Hingley 2012: 629). As a consequence, and despite extensive debate to the contrary, the divide between 'Romans' and 'natives' endures in our current interpretations of the contact between pre-Roman and Roman society.

The two volumes under review each discuss modern scholarly perspectives on the interaction between the Roman Empire and the so-called 'barbarian world', albeit from different archaeological traditions. The first stems from an academic conference dealing with theoretical approaches to the Roman world, while the second takes a broad approach to the prehistoric societies of Europe for the general reader. The volumes each discuss so-called 'Roman/barbarian' interaction within Northern Europe.

The first volume, *Romans & barbarians beyond the frontiers*, derives from several sessions presented since 2013 at the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC), held annually since its inception at Newcastle University in 1991. In contrast to the "random collection of papers" often found in the TRAC conference proceedings (p. vi), this volume represents the first in a new thematic series concentrating on the interaction between 'Romans' and 'barbarians' beyond the northern frontiers of the Empire (p. viii). The volume consists of eight core papers, both from speakers from the conference sessions and invited authors, outlining an array of theoretical approaches and geographic case studies. The papers are sandwiched by two important overviews by Richard Hingley (Introduction) and David Mattingly (Conclusion).

Hingley (Chapter 1) deftly outlines past and current approaches to Roman Frontier Studies (RFS), including the influence of TRAC on this field. This is followed by the first of the case studies, written by Karim Mata, which provides a theoretically dense discussion of Cosmopolitan theory and the 'middle ground' (p. 12), a hybrid space across the Rhine Frontier. Gardner's discussion (Chapter 3) offers a fascinating comparison of the different social processes undertaken at the northern and western frontiers of Britain, as well as the successes and failures of applying different theoretical approaches (e.g. identity theory, globalisation, hybridity) to understand frontier zones. An outline of Roman

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material in Ireland is provided by Cahill Wilson (Chapter 4), who presents the results of the recent Discovery Program's 'Late Iron Age and Roman Ireland' project. This paper demonstrates the potential of challenging past preconceptions of zones traditionally viewed as beyond the remit of the Roman Empire. Two papers by Xenia Pauli Jensen (Chapter 5) and Thomas Grane (Chapter 6) present a historiographical enquiry of past Scandinavian research and the distribution of Roman material within this region. The following chapter (Voß and Wigg-Wolf) provides a skilful examination of the wealth of new data from Germany since the completion of the 'Corpus of Roman Finds from Barbaricum' project. Despite the limitations on space, Voß and Wigg-Wolf cleverly illustrate the potential of this dataset for future research into Germanic-Roman interaction by examining coins as a single case study (pp. 111–20). Moschek's (Chapter 8) historiographical analysis of how Rome was perceived in late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century Germany, particularly by German Emperor Wilhelm II, provides a thought-provoking study of the effects of past analysis on the formation of state identity. The final thematic paper (Irvin—Chapter 9) offers a comparative analysis of the perception of Rome in modern American society, and how systems of Roman government were refashioned and reformulated in Gallic society, over which they held direct control. Mattingly's conclusion (Chapter 10), provides a comparative perspective between these case studies and the southern borders of the Empire (North Africa and the Sahara), and presents a summary of the key themes throughout the volume, including the aptly named 'Sleeping Beauty Hypothesis', where indigenous societies may be viewed as "slumbering", awaiting the "kiss of a Roman prince" (p. 153).

The success of the volume stems from the geographic scope of the regions studied (Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, France, Germany and North Africa), but also from the differing perspective of the authors, reflecting their different nationalities and archaeological traditions. Mattingly's conclusion remarks on both the exceptional detail presented and the lack of space for comparative analysis (p. 152). Comparisons between areas is somewhat lacking, albeit with some exceptions, while the application of theory is uneven across chapters. These critiques may be unfair, however, considering the ambitions of the volume to integrate the data and traditions for the whole of Northern Europe. While the nature of the short individual papers does not allow for the in-depth analysis of each area, the papers expertly provide a background analysis and the current state of research for each tradition. Although undoubtedly useful for those new to RFS, the volume will also provide an important resource for more established researchers attempting comparative analysis across Northern Europe.

The second volume under review, Peter Bogucki's *The barbarians*, takes a 'very high-level overview' of the range of indigenous prehistoric groups across Europe. The volume considers prehistoric societies across the *longue durée*, charting social and technological changes from after the last Ice Age up to the immediate post-Roman period. As a book aimed at a general readership, the author provides some overviews of useful themes for the novice that are vital in the interpretation of archaeological evidence for pre-literate societies (pp. 14–20).

The first three chapters are constructed around Thomsen's Three Age system, each beginning with a discussion of technology (i.e. stone, bronze, iron) and concluding with an overview of the 'barbarian world' for that period. These and later chapters are punctuated by interesting discoveries from across prehistoric Europe, including the Amesbury Archer (pp. 26–28), the Hochdorf 'prince' (pp. 104–106) and the settlement at Uppåkra (pp. 167–68). At times this structure can feel somewhat contrived, perhaps to tell specific stories, yet it simultaneously allows for a great level of detail in some instances within what is a general overview of the topic. Even though terms such as 'Stone Age' give the impression of the use of outdated concepts, modern archaeological interpretations are expertly incorporated into the general overview for each period. Chapter 3, for example, includes a discussion of the ritual importance of watery contexts in the Bronze Age, drawing together themes of performance and temporality (pp. 75–77). Chapters 5 and 6 detail the impact of the Roman Empire on the 'barbarian world' and the continuation of so-called 'barbarian society' beyond the Roman frontier. Despite containing less detail than the TRAC volume discussed above, Chapter 5 reveals the complexity of interaction between social groups both inside and outside the Roman Empire, from the subjugation of Gaul and Britain to the defeat of the Roman armies beyond the Rhineland. The use of historical sources, archaeological evidence and material culture provides

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a detailed overview of a multifaceted period. The stylistic peculiarities of the Gundestrup Cauldron offer a notable case study (pp. 149–52). Chapter 6 details the interaction between Rome and groups beyond the Frontier and expands the story after the end of the Empire and into the early medieval period. The author's depth of knowledge is apparent in the similar discussion of regions detailed in the TRAC volume, including, but not limited to, the evidence for Roman material culture in Ireland (pp. 157–60). The final chapter, 'Barbarians live on', provides an intersection between the prehistoric past and the twenty-first century, including modern depictions of the prehistoric past (e.g. Asterix, p. 192), and how the interpretations of these societies have been manipulated to 'serve' nationalistic identities.

Several overlapping themes emerge from the review of these two volumes, including the problematic but systemic definition of indigenous groups as 'barbarians' and the implications for modern society to be gained from an understanding of social interactions between indigenous groups and the Roman Empire. It strikes me that the use of the term 'barbarian', in both general texts and academic volumes, only strives to propagate negative characterisations of indigenous groups and pigeonhole them into restrictive categories, which have been apparent in historical and archaeological studies for the last 200 years. While each of these volumes recognises this dilemma and argues over its implications (TRAC—p. 155; Bogucki—pp. 13–14), even calling for action to move beyond this term, the attempts within both volumes to provide a less encumbered interpretation of social groups during the Iron Age/Roman transition are not always successful.

Importantly, each volume also highlights the potential of understanding the interaction between indigenous groups and the Roman Empire for the formation of academic traditions and modern identity. Although already examined in part (Hingley 2000), several important contributions in this volume strengthen the link between these interactions and the modern political situation (TRAC—Gardner, Moschek, Irvin; Bogucki—pp. 198–205). As such, it may be even more significant to realise that the categorisation of past societies, implicit in terms such as 'Romans' and 'barbarians', may have negative effects on academic discourse and, more significantly, lead to the misappropriation of archaeological information for forging new identities within modern states.

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