

## Book Review

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**BOOK REVIEWED:** CURTA, FLORIN (ED.), *NEGLECTED BARBARIANS*, STUDIES IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES, 32 (TURNHOUT: BREPOLS, 2011), XX + 656 PP. 152 B/W, 35 COLOUR ILLS. ISBN: 978-2503531250

*Neglected Barbarians* is an ambitious volume intended to begin redressing the historiographic bias toward studies of those barbarian groups which have featured more prominently in the national discourses of modern states. Certainly, it is largely successful in achieving this objective, but one significant caveat must first be aired. Several of the barbarian groups considered within the volume do possess formidable bibliographies in their own right as the contributors are often quick to point out; for example Philipp von Rummel notes that the thirty-six page bibliography of Yves Modéran's recent monograph attests to the vibrant French scholarly interest in the Mauri ('The Frexes', p. 573). As such, it must be emphasised that the barbarians under consideration in this book are often only neglected in relative terms: the Gepids, for example, though understudied in comparison to the Goths, have attracted more attention than other, more shadowy groups. Those readers that yearn for studies on the Taifali, Nori, Iuthungi and other 'even-more-neglected' barbarians must hope for further volumes inspired by this worthy project.

Nevertheless, no study within this work is undeserving of the title 'neglected'. To be sure, none of the barbarian groups have attracted the attention that has been given to Goths, Franks and Anglo-Saxons. However, as Peter Heather observes in the Afterword, even scholarship on these heavily-studied groups pales in comparison to that concerned with the 'civilised' world of the Mediterranean. Even the Vandals, perhaps the least neglected group to feature within the *Neglected Barbarians*, have a somewhat limited presence in Anglophone historiography, whilst the Olsztyn Group of Mazuria, the subject of Wojciech Nowakowski's article, are almost unstudied in the English-speaking world. This is surely one of the triumphs of the book; it provides a forum where diverse works of scholar-

ship, touching on peoples from Crimea to Galicia and the Baltic coast to the hinterland of North Africa, can coalesce and inform one another.

This impression of regional diversity is accentuated by the geographical structure of this work. Following an insightful conceptual introduction by the editor, the first articles in the volume consider peoples and culture groups in the north and east of late antique Europe, between the Baltic and the Caucasus, with later articles gradually progressing south and west to the northern Balkans and the Carpathian basin. This arc is briefly broken by the relatively well-documented regions such as northern Italy and southern Gaul, but is renewed in Iberia before continuing into North Africa. As such, sixteen articles in the book collectively cover a sizable proportion of the periphery and border-provinces of the Roman Empire, but this is split into two blocks within which the chapters are complimentary to a greater general comprehension, but between which there is a significant contrast in methodology.

The former block begins on the outer fringes of the Roman Mediterranean-centric consciousness, with articles on the backcountry Balts (*Aesti*) and Mazurians by Audronė Bliujienė and Wojciech Nowakowski respectively. Given and understood in conjunction, these two articles, like most others within the collection, are greater than the sum of their parts. This mutual benefit is notable, for example, in the wider perspective gleaned regarding the regional trade in Baltic amber and the role of the Mazurians as middlemen between the Baltic producers and southern and western markets.

Next follows a series of similarly harmonious pairings, particularly the articles discussing burial practice in the region of Budapest by Margit Nagy and Ágnes B. Tóth, and those focussing on the Gepids (Radu Harhoiu and Anna Kharalambieva), the Herules (Roland Steinacher and Alexander Sarantis) and the Antes and Slavs (Bartłomiej Szymon Szmoniewski and Florin Curta). It is, however, perhaps unfortunate that these two articles by Szmoniewski and Curta on intimately related groups of barbarians are separated by over three hundred pages of text rather than contiguous like the other pairs. The remainder of this block is completed by less overtly symbiotic but nevertheless valuable contributions regarding the Tetraxite Goths (Igor O. Gavritukhin and Michel Kazanski) and Bohemia (Jaroslav Jiřák).

Since the peoples in question generally lived or came from outside the Roman Empire, many of these articles necessarily focus on archaeological material. This will surely be welcome for most readers who lack the resources to consult this research directly. However there is, throughout this section, a pervasive caution about the accuracy and application of labels. Those articles with an archaeological emphasis tend to favour geographic markers over ethnonyms, whilst those which are more grounded in historical sources sometimes struggle to accurately locate their subjects geographically. The reader is left with the impression of a late antique version of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: one can know who or where a neglected barbarian group is, but generally not both. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the necessity of this prudent approach since, as Curta points out, the incautious interpretation of early medieval history can have worrying consequences both in academic and political spheres ('Introduction', p. 4).

The second, shorter block of articles differs significantly from that of the first. The geographical territories in question were not peripheral to the Empire, but integral to it. As such, contemporary written source material is relatively abundant, so the methodological focus in this latter section tends to be less archaeological and more historical, though not exclusively, as the numismatic contribution of

Fernando López Sánchez attests.

It is not just the general methodological focus that changes in this latter section, but the definitions according to which labels are applied. In the first block it is clear that, despite uncertainties over specific labels, the groups in question were, from a Roman perspective, uncivilised outsiders and therefore unarguably 'barbarian' – an 'Other' against which they might define themselves. However, in the latter block this becomes a less definite characterisation. The Sueves and Vandals were certainly barbarian outsiders, but both were settled within Roman provinces and alongside its citizens. The Sueves, as Sánchez argues, were clients of Rome in much the same manner as the Visigoths, and minted their own coins to establish political prestige, whilst the Vandals, as Guido M. Berndt notes, had had a long diplomatic relationship with the Empire by the time they established their base at Carthage. Indeed, their kings would even go on to intermarry with the imperial family. These groups could not simply be dismissed as distant or irredeemably unsophisticated, but were rather engaged in an intimate, if often raucous, relationship with the Empire.

Even more troublesome for the term 'barbarian' are the Astures, Cantabri and Vascones (Santiago Castellanos) and the Fraxes (Philipp von Rummel). These groups were not outsiders who had come to terms with the Empire or its inhabitants, but former citizens who had sought or arrived at autonomy as a result of the political collapse of the Western Empire in the fifth century. Discussion of how these groups came to be, and came to be seen as something other than Roman, provides a fitting conclusion to a book which, throughout, applies a sustained scrutiny to the concepts of identity in Late Antiquity.

The final contribution is provided in an Afterword by Peter Heather which, in contrast to the other contributions, ranges widely in a discussion of the general neglect of all early medieval barbarian peoples relative to other eras and topics of European history. This consideration, though necessarily lacking the revelatory detail of earlier chapters, is a useful survey of current historiography and an accurate and timely reminder of the need for this volume.

Throughout the *Neglected Barbarians*, the chapters are helpfully formatted, with clear, subtitled sections and distinct conclusions that will surely be a valuable aid for students and researchers alike. Where appropriate, there is no shortage of well-labelled maps, diagrams and illustrations of artefacts to aid comprehension and to elucidate relevant archaeological finds. This attention to accessibility, together with a structure which accentuates the complimentary nature of the various detailed chapters within, serves to make this academically rigorous, 656-page volume impressively welcoming. This work will surely contribute considerably to relieving the neglect of its subjects.