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In Barbarian Times: State Formation and Land Redistribution in Ostrogothic Italy and Vandal North Africa

Taylor Williams

The period between c. 400 and c. 600 CE witnessed the collapse of the Roman Empire in western Europe and North Africa as a viable polity. While historians debate the causes of the fall of the Empire in the western provinces, the role of the "barbarian" tribes cannot be denied. Over these two centuries wave after wave of Germanic tribes crossed the traditional frontiers of the Empire for a variety of reasons (some were fleeing other tribes, while some were actually invited in as mercenaries). These tribes would forever change the landscape of Europe, as their ancestors would found the kingdoms of Early Modern Europe during the so-called "Dark Ages". This essay is concerned with two of these Germanic groups – the Ostrogoths and the Vandals – and examines the formation of their respective kingdoms in Italy and North Africa.

In the ashes of the western Roman Empire emerged powerful kingdoms from the various "barbarian" war bands that had brought about the final collapse of the West. Furthermore, as these Germanic groupings tended to be small in numbers in relation to the "Roman" provincials in the territories they occupied, some form of accommodation had to be reached between the conquering Germanic peoples and the land-working provincials.[1] However, while some systems did break down, it would be wrong to assume that there was a general collapse of government or state structure in the western Mediterranean. Rather, what arose were new forms of government that responded to the pressing problems facing these new political entities, while at the same time often attempting some form of continuation with the systems of late imperial rule. Examining Ostrogothic Italy, especially under its founder, Theodoric, and Vandal North Africa provides two illuminating case studies of different approaches to forging new states in the shadow of an empire that was deemed eternal

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even in its death throes. These case studies will reveal that the axis of accommodation between Roman and Germanic often turned on two key factors: religious tolerance and the treatment of the Roman landed aristocracy, especially the wealthiest landowners. Furthermore, a look at the differing factors at play in Italy and North Africa, especially in regards to state formation, will highlight why the Germanic rulers of these two regions approached the treatment of the Roman provincials in different ways. Crucially, Ostrogothic Italy was formed with imperial support and actively sought to court the Roman Senate, while Vandal North Africa was stolen from the Empire and witnessed profound dislocations of the Roman elite.

Before it is possible to examine Ostrogothic Italy and Vandal North Africa in detail, it is necessary to acknowledge both the limitations in primary and secondary scholarship. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence from the western Mediterranean during this period, and that that does survive is often heavily biased and authored by Romans.[2] The evidence from Ostrogothic Italy is better than the evidence from Vandal North Africa. For Ostrogothic Italy this essay will consider the *Variae* of Cassiodorus, letters written by him on behalf of the Gothic monarchs, and the account of an anonymous author called Valesianus. Victor of Vita describes life in Vandal North Africa in his *History of the Vandal Persecution*, but as the name indicates, this work is rather anti-Vandal. In terms of secondary scholarship, a general dichotomy between Gothic Italy being "good" for the Romans and Vandal North Africa being "bad" for the Romans has traditionally existed,[3] and while there is some truth behind these stereotypes, the state of things in both kingdoms was more complex than these simplistic descriptions claim. Several factors should be examined in both Ostrogothic Italy and Vandal North Africa; roughly, these are: 1) the formation of the state, i.e. how the Germanic *gens* became a *regnum*; 2) the process of land redistribution after the collapse of Roman authority; and 3) how the new polity acted in regards to religious tolerance. Furthermore, within these three categories issues of ethnic mixing and respect for/ renewal of "Roman traditions" should also be looked at.

In Barbarian Times

Portrait of Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator, (c.485-580), author of the *Variae*, and senior administrator in the Ostrogothic court. Late 12th century. (Wikimedia Commons)

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Ostrogothic Italy

The Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy was actually not a direct successor state to the Roman Empire in the sense that the Ostrogoths occupied land that had previously been controlled directly by Romans; rather, the Ostrogoths were the successors to another band of Goths led by Odoacer, who had deposed the last western Roman Emperor in 476.[4] In fact, the Roman Emperor ruling from Constantinople, Zeno, asked Theodoric to invade Italy and dispose Odoacer, claiming that this would "restore" Italy to imperial control. In reality, Zeno was probably hoping that Theodoric and his band of Goths, who had previously been causing a ruckus in the Balkans, would be eliminated and also weaken Odoacer.[5] Regardless of intent, in 488 Theodoric crossed into Italy and defeated and besieged Odoacer. A ruse eventually led to Odoacer's surrender and he was promptly murdered; Theodoric was now master of Italy.[6] Theodoric, however, occupied an ambiguous position within the imperial system until 497 when Anastasius, Zeno's successor, recognized his control over Italy as something akin to a viceroy. While technically subservient to the Roman emperor, Theodoric and his successors assumed the title of "king" and acted very much as independent rulers over their own kingdom in Italy.[7]

It is worth noting several things about the initial formation of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. First, the Ostrogoths, whatever the motives of Zeno, were technically acting with imperial authority when the invaded Italy; furthermore, they were invading to remove an occupier who could be regarded as "barbarian." The anonymous Valesianus narrates:

> Zeno accordingly rewarded Theodoric for his support, made him a patrician and a consul, gave him a great sum of money, and sent him to Italy. Theodoric stipulated with him, that if Odoacar should be vanquished, in return for his own labours in Odoacar's place he should rule in his stead only until the arrival of Zeno. Therefore, when the patrician Theodoric came from the city of Nova with the Gothic people, he was sent by the emperor Zeno from the regions of the Orient, in order to defend Italy for him.[8]

The anonymous Valesianus also smoothes over the fact that Anastasius did not officially recognize Theodoric in Italy for several years, as he merely mentions the transition between Zeno and Anastasius and then changes topics.[9] Futhermore, Cassiodorus records a letter between Athalaric, Theodoric's grandson and successor, and the Roman Emperor Justin in which Athalaric at least tacitly acknowledges imperial suzerainty over Italy:

> The purple-clad rank of my ancestors has done less to distinguish me, the royal throne to exalt me, than the far-reaching power of your favor to ennoble me….I seek peace not as a stranger, but as close kindred, since you gave me a grandson's favor when you bestowed on my father the joy of adoption….Therefore, I have seen fit to send X and Y as envoys to your serenity, so that you may accord me your friendship on those agreements, those terms which your glorious predecessors are known to have had with the lord my grandfather, of divine memory.[10]

This is not the language of someone hostile to the Roman Empire, and while it is certainly couched in the required political and diplomatic niceties of the period, clearly the Ostrogoths recognized some importance in being able to claim to be the legitimate rulers of Roman Italy.

While the Ostrogoths may have styled themselves the officially recognized authority in Italy, this does not mean that some Romans did not suffer under their rule. This suffering was most pronounced in the form of land redistribution between the new Gothic overlords and the existing Roman landowners. It appears that when Theodoric entered Italy his followers received one third of a good number of Roman estates.[11] The exact mechanisms behind this redistribution are unfortunately unknown, but it is likely that some estates witnessed direct Gothic settlement while others merely were taxed in lieu of being broken up. This is the theory advanced by Walter Goffart and

Theodoric, founder of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. Illustration from a 12th century text of Cassiodorus' *Gesta Theodorici*, c. 1176. (Public domain)

his evidence relies largely on the fact that there is little evidence of Roman aristocratic resistance to the redistribution of land, suggesting that much came in the form of taxation rather than in direct land redistribution.[12] Furthermore, it appears that most Gothic settlement was concentrated north of the Po, leaving the great senatorial estates in central and southern Italy largely undisturbed, though obviously subject to some form of taxation.[13]

If settlement was mainly north of the Po, this implies both a pragmatic strategy of leaving the major aristocratic estates intact and also the settlement of Goths along the major passages into Italy. In other words, the Goths were settled where their military skills would be most needed.[14] This reflects two general policies of the Ostrogothic Kingdom; namely, *civilitas*, i.e. the maintenance of public order, especially between Goths and Romans, and a rough division of labour along ethnic lines, i.e. Goths were soldiers and Romans were civilians.

In general, Ostrogothic Italy was organized such that the Goths served as the military protectors of the kingdom while the Romans remained its principle civil servants.[15] For example, Cassiodorus writes: "While the Gothic army wages war, let the Roman be at peace."[16] He also writes in relation to the division of land:

> It is my delight to mention how, in the assignment of one-third shares, he [the Praetorian Prefect tasked by Theodoric to perform the land redistribution] united both the estates and the hearts of Goths and Romans. For, although neighborhood usually causes men to quarrel, for them the sharing of property seems to have inspired harmony. For it so befell that either nation, while living in common, arrived at a single mind. Behold, a new, and wholly admirable achievement: division of the soil joined its masters in good will; losses increased the friendship of the two peoples, and a share of the land purchased a defender, so that property might be preserved secure and intact.[17]

While this passage is definitely propaganda, it must contain a kernel

of truth. Furthermore, it highlights both Theodoric's desire for *civilitas* between Goths and Romans and also subtly hints at the role of the Goths as soldiers: "a share of land purchased a defender". However, the simplistic binary of Goths:Romans::soldiers:civilians must naturally be questioned, as there is evidence that members from each group crossed over and served a variety of roles within both the Ostrogothic military and civil administration.[18]

Though united in estates and hearts, the Goths and Romans were technically kept separate under the laws of Ostrogothic Italy. A dispute between two Goths was to be handled by Gothic magistrates, a dispute between two Romans by Roman magistrates, and a dispute between a Goth and a Roman by a Gothic magistrate with a Roman acting as legal adviser.[19] This was another attempt by Theodoric to bring about *civilitas* between the two major groups he ruled, which in turn would hopefully provide stability to Ostrogothic Italy.

Another key component of ensuring *civilitas* came through Theodoric's religious tolerance, which by the standards of the period appears exceptional. Theodoric and most of his Goths were Arians at the time of their conquest of Italy, while the vast majority of his Roman subjects were Catholic. However, it looks as if Theodoric actively tried to pursue a policy of religious tolerance in his kingdom, not only towards Catholics but also towards Jews.[20] The anonymous Valensius writes: "He so governed two races at the same time, Romans and Goths, that although he himself was of the Arian sect, he nevertheless made no assault on the Catholic religion".[21] Furthermore, Theodoric was called in by the citizens of Rome to resolve a disputed papal election, a strange move if he was not at least recognized as somewhat interested in the welfare of his Catholic subjects.[22] The anonymous Valensius will later claim that at the end of Theodoric's reign he began to reverse this policy of religious tolerance, but this appears to be in response to the Roman Empire's refusal to grant tolerance towards Arians, especially Goths, within its borders.[23] In general Theodoric seems to have cared greatly about maintaining religious freedom within his realm, a pragmatic strategy for ensuring the support of his Roman population.

A final and crucial way that Theodoric gained support from his

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Europe in 526, showing both Vandal North Africa (blue) and Ostrogothic Italy (red). Map collection, Perry-Castañeda Library, University of Texas-Austin.

Roman subjects was through authorizing urban and infrastructure renewal throughout Italy, but especially in the key cities of Rome and Ravenna. For example, Cassiodorus records how Theodoric set about reclaiming marshland to the south of Rome:

> He [Decius, a Roman Senator and agent of Theodric] has promised to drain the marsh of Decemnovium, which ravages the neighborhood like an enemy, by opening channels. It is a notorious desolation of the age, which, though long neglected, has formed a kind of marshy sea, and, spreading by its waters a hostile deluge over cultivated ground, has destroyed the kindly arable equally with shaggy woodland….Hence, he has requested orders from my serenity in this affair, so that he may take on, with public authority, an outstanding work, that will benefit all travelers.[24]

Likewise, Cassiodorus describes a decree from Theodoric addressed to restoring Rome: "I strive to restore all things to their original condition, the improvement of the city of Rome still binds me to a special concern; there whatever is spent on adornment is furnished for the joy of all."[25] This is not the language of a barbarian tyrant, and it appears that Theodoric actively courted the Senate, both in Rome and on their estates, through his attempts to improve the city and the infrastructure of Italy.

Indeed, all of these moves towards *civilitas* must be seen as attempts to keep the peace in Italy. The most powerful group in Italy at this time was still the Roman Senate comprised of wealthy aristocratic landowners.[26] Theodoric's relatively benign land redistribution policies, treatment of the Goths and Romans in the eyes of the law, respect for the Catholic sect, and attempts to restore the urban and provincial infrastructure thus should be seen in light of trying to court the Senate, i.e. the landed aristocracy. Theodoric shrewdly realized that he would be unable to rule Italy without their support and thus was both deferential to them in word and pragmatic in deed. While obviously aberrations exist to this model of rule, e.g. the Boethius affair, in general it seems

as if the rulers of Ostrogothic Italy were aware of whom they needed to court and they actively tried to do so. The treatment of the Roman elite in Vandal North Africa would be very different.

Vandal North Africa

While the generalization that Vandal North Africa was a hostile environment for all Romans has been debunked in recent years, there is some truth to the assertions of Roman writers that this period was devastating for many Roman elites in what were once the wealthiest provinces of the Empire.[27] One Roman writer recounts:

> Where is Africa, which was for the whole world like a garden of delights….There is no one to bury the bodies of the dead, but horrible death has soiled all the streets and all the buildings, the whole city [Carthage] indeed. And think on the evils we are talking about! Mothers of families dragged off into captivity, pregnant women slaughtered….The impious power of the barbarians has even demanded that those women who were once mistresses of many servants, have suddenly become the vile servants of the barbarians.[28]

This certainly paints a bleak picture of the Vandal occupation of Carthage, and indeed in the eyes of many Romans things would only continue to get worse. It is useful to examine the Vandal policies towards the formation of their state, the redistribution of land, and the treatment of Catholics (as the Vandals were, like the Ostrogoths, Arian) in order to compare Ostrogothic Italy to Vandal North Africa.

If the Ostrogoths ruled Italy with something resembling an imperial mandate, the Vandals seized North Africa and then later negotiated control over it from the Empire. In the 420s the Vandals crossed from Spain and occupied several Roman provinces in North Africa, a *fait accompli* that was recognized by treaty in 435.[29] However, the Vandals did not abide by this treaty for long and in 439 they seized Carthage, the dominant city in Roman North Africa and undeniably one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. This event provoked panic

Nineteenth century engraving showing the traditional portrayal of the Vandal sack of Rome of 455. (Heinrich Leuteman, c. 1860-1880, Wikimedia Commons.)

in Italy, as the fall of Carthage also gave the Vandals access to ships to raid the western Mediterranean, but once again the Empire was forced to sign a treaty and recognize the Vandal possessions in 442.[30]

Thus, unlike the Ostrogoths, the Vandals seized land that was directly controlled by Romans. Furthermore, the Vandals then imposed harsh land redistribution and religious policies on formerly Roman North Africa. In terms of land redistribution, it appears that the Vandals directly appropriated many estates of wealthy Roman landowners within certain parts of their newly acquired territories. This seized land was referred to as *sortes Vandalorum* (shares of the Vandals) and was given over to the Vandal elite.[31] Additionally, the Vandal monarchy, led at this time by Geiseric, took over control of great tracts of land, ensuring that it was the richest group within the kingdom.[32] Procopius relates: "And he [Geiseric] robbed the rest of the Libyans of their estates, which were both numerous and excellent, and distributed them among the nation of the Vandals….And it fell to the lot of those who had formerly possessed these lands to be in extreme poverty and to be at the same time free men; and they had the privilege of going away wherever they wished."[33] Furthermore, the Vandal estates do not appear to have been taxed at all while the Romans bore the brunt of the tax burden.[34] The evidence also suggests more disruption under the Vandals than under the Ostrogoths, as there was large-scale flight of Roman aristocrats from North Africa and attempts made by the court of Valentinian III to aid the refugees to an extent that did not occur when the Ostrogoths occupied Italy. However, as Liebeschuetz notes, it would be wrong to assume that Roman aristocrats completely fled Vandal North Africa or that their way of life was totally destroyed by the conquest.[35]

Besides hostile land redistribution policies, the Vandal Kingdom is noted for its general lack of religious tolerance towards its Catholic inhabitants. While certainly Roman authors of this period were writing with a clear religious and cultural bias, it is noticeable that Ostrogothic Italy produces nothing on the scale or in the terms that Vandal North Africa produces regarding persecutions of Catholics. This lack of religious tolerance would have done much to divide the

populace, especially as most Romans remained Catholic and most Vandals remained Arian. The Vandals are known for confiscating Church (Catholic) property, expelling Catholic bishops, refusing to replace Catholic bishops who passed away, and banning Catholic attempts to convert Arians.[36] Victor of Vita writes that during the reign of Huneric:

> First of all the tyrant decreed, in a dreadful command, that no one could hold an office in his palace or carry out public duties without becoming an Arian. There was a great number of people in these positions, who, unconquered in their strength, abandoned temporal office so that they would not lose their faith; afterwards they were cast out of their homes, despoiled of all their possessions, and banished to the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. On one occasion he hurriedly issued a decree throughout all Africa that the fisc was to claim as its own the possessions of our dead bishops, and that the successor of a dead bishop could not be ordained until he had paid 500 solidi to the royal fisc.[37]

However, enforceable these anti-Catholic measures were, they certainly created disharmony in Vandal North Africa between Vandals and Romans and are the opposite of Ostrogothic attempts to promote *civilitas* through religious tolerance.

One way that Ostrogothic Italy and Vandal North Africa are similar, however, is how they treated ethnic identity under the law. As discussed above, Ostrogothic Italy maintained separate legal administration for cases involving Goths and cases involving Romans. Likewise, Vandal Africa also maintained legal distinctions between Romans and Vandals. For example, Romans were forbidden to wear Vandal dress outside the Vandal court.[38] However, just as with the religious punishments, the extent to which certain prohibitions regarding Vandal and Roman mixing were enforced is impossible to tell, but given the state of bureaucracy in Late Antiquity, it is likely many laws were more guidelines than actually enforceable. It is worth noting, however, that

when the Romans conquered Vandal North Africa they were able to deport many Vandal men, indicating that the Vandals probably did retain something of a distinct, separate status even a hundred years after the founding of their kingdom.[39]

Conclusion

Thus, it appears that Ostrogothic Italy and Vandal North Africa pursued radically different policies in terms of land redistribution and religious tolerance. Both of these would have in turn affected how the Romans, especially the Roman elite, perceived the conquerors and the relationship between the Germanic overlords and the Roman provincials. Furthermore, Ostrogothic Italy ruled with an official, albeit tenuous, imperial mandate and had emerged as a successor to a successor state of the Roman Empire, while Vandal North Africa was the product of a series of violent seizures of Roman land. However, both states also drew a distinction between Germanic and Roman, although the extent to which this was actually practiced is impossible to determine. It is likely that more Goths "Romanized" than Vandals "Romanized," but the evidence for this is biased and spotty. Ultimately, it appears that the two largest factors influencing how the Roman provincials and their Germanic overlords interacted were the policies regarding land redistribution and religious tolerance. This is not surprising, as both of these policies would have directly affected the provincial elites, who were both landowners and prominent ecclesiastics. Late Antiquity was a world dominated by its elite class, either Roman or Germanic, and thus appealing to the interests of this class was key to holding power. Taking this hypothesis further, how the kingdom was formed was also key – the Roman provincial elite appreciated at least tacit recognition of their cultural superiority and status, and Ostrogothic Italy offered this both through the way in which it was formed, i.e. with an imperial mandate, and the steps Theodoric took to ensure *civilitas*, especially his favorable treatment of the Senate and projects aimed at urban and provincial infrastructure. Vandal North Africa, by contrast, was stolen from the Roman Empire and then the provincial elite were deigned to suffer violent land seizures and lack of respect towards their form of

Christianity. It seems then that the best indicator of how a "barbarian" state would get along with its Roman provincial subjects stems from how it treated its remaining Roman elite, a class born in self-superiority and used to exercising at least nominal control over its own affairs and the local community.

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[4] Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe* 142-143.
[5] Ibid., 143-144.
[6] Ibid., 144.
[7] Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Europe* 144. C.f. Roger Collins, "The Western Kingdoms," *New Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 14, eds. Av. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 126.
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[9] *Pars Posterior* 12.57-58.
[10] Cassiodorus, *Variae* (trans. S.J.B. Barnish) 8.1.1,4-5.
[11] John Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 33.
[12] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 33-34.
[13] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 68-71.
[14] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 71.
[15] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 71.

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[16] Cassiodorus, *Variae* 12.5.4.
[17] Cassiodorus, *Variae* 2.16.5.
[18] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 72-73.
[19] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 75-77.
[20] Moorhead, *Theodoric in Italy* 89, 91-92, 97.
[21] Anonymous Valensius, *Pars Posterior* 12.59.
[22] Anonymous Valensius, *Pars Posterior* 12.65
[23] Anonymous Valensius, *Pars Posterior* 15.88-91.
[24] Cassiodorus, *Variae* 2.32.2-3.
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[32] Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals* 68-69.
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[34] Liebeschuetz, "*Gens* into *Regnum*: The Vandals" 75.
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