



Rome and the Barbarians Europe during the Migration Period

22 August to 7 December 2008

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“The Roman world is in collapse.” Those were the horrified words of Saint Jerome in 396 AD. And indeed, the Migration Period is one of the most momentous episodes of European history. Research carried out over the last few years has significantly deepened our understanding of the events of this period which brought about the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages.

Tour of the Exhibition

The chronologically structured exhibition encompasses the period between the 2nd and the 6th century AD and is supplemented by an animated map of Europe that illustrates the massive shifts of populations and power of the time. Thanks to the generous support of some 70 European lenders the Art and Exhibition Hall has been able to put together a representative display of approximately 1000 pieces of jewellery, weapons, coins and other important objects.

Confrontation Between Romans and Barbarians

The first two rooms of the exhibition are devoted to the confrontation between Romans and barbarians. The Roman Empire had established itself as the dominant power in the Mediterranean by the 1st century BC. However, its appetite for further expansion was checked under the Emperors Augustus and Tiberius (1st century BC to 1st century AD), when large barbarian alliances began to emerge on the other side of the Rhine and Danube frontiers of the Empire. Keen to share in the wealth of imperial Rome, barbarian warriors became the antagonists of Roman emperors, whose portraits set an often imitated but never equalled standard of state representation in art. In the exhibition this confrontation is exemplified by the gold bust of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (c. 180 AD) and the most famous of ancient portraits of Germans from the bronze cauldrons discovered in Mušov (Czech Republic) and Czarnówko (Poland). The Roman weapons, items of daily use and gold and silver luxury goods shown here whetted the appetites of the barbarian neighbours.

Looting by Germanic Tribes

The exhibition next focuses on the large-scale incursions onto Roman territory by Germanic tribes in the last third of the 3rd century AD. The so-called ‘barbarian treasures’ discovered aboard sunken ships at the bottom of the Rhine provide eloquent testimony of the extent of the looting. However, the relationship between Rome and the Barbaricum was characterised not only by conflict but also by exchange. Germanic warriors demonstrated their new status with sacrifices of costly weapons and lavish burials, as evidenced by the valuable funerary gifts discovered in the so-called ‘princely graves’. Amber, the highly prized gold of the North, was traded along the famous Amber Road, connecting the Baltic Sea with the Mediterranean and the Roman Empire, where it was turned into luxurious items of jewellery such as the ones shown in Bonn.

The Huns

The sudden foray of the Huns into territories north of the Black Sea in 375 is widely regarded to have triggered the Migration Period and to have ushered in a new phase in the relations between Romans and barbarians. In order to avoid military conflict with the formidable foe, Rome agreed to enormous annual tribute payments in gold. Graves of Hunnic warriors, richly furnished with magnificent weapons and horse tack, jewellery and other status symbols, testify to the craving for recognition and conspicuous display on the part of barbarian elites.

A 'New World'

The events of the Migration Period changed the political map of Europe. The increasing barbarisation of the Roman army and the cultivation and management of large areas by the newcomers brought about a fundamental transformation of the political and economic structures of the Empire. The spread of Christianity and its newly created institutions favoured the formation of early medieval kingdoms (from the 5th century AD) on the territory of the Roman Empire. Lavish funerary gifts convey a differentiated image of Romano-barbarian culture between the Black Sea and the Atlantic.

The tour of the exhibition ends on a highly symbolic note with the oldest reliably dated manuscript from the abbey library of St. Gall (Switzerland) of 793. It is a copy of the *Lex Salica* (Salic law), in which the Merovingian king Clovis I compiled the tribal laws governing the Salian Franks for the first time in writing. With this body of law the barbarian ruler Clovis I cast himself as the heir to great Roman emperors and legislators.

An exhibition of the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn, in cooperation with the Palazzo Grassi, Venice, and the École française de Rome.

The exhibition is held under the auspices of the President of the Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano, the President of the French Republic Nicolas Sarkozy and the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Horst Köhler.

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