



The Roman Empire and the Germanic tribes

As early as the final centuries BC, Rome emerged as the dominant major power around the Mediterranean basin, permanently expanding its territories by a policy of war and diplomacy.

However, only in the first century AD were small areas of the lands beyond the Rhine and Danube rivers brought directly under Roman control. Rome's lack of interest in territorial expansion here was not only due to military setbacks but, above all, the poor prospects of ever establishing permanent and profitable provinces.

The Roman state was extremely well organised on all levels, with an urban infrastructure, an effective administration, a "world-wide" economic area and high standards of civilisation. In striking contrast, the Germanic tribes beyond the Roman Empire's borders lived in small villages and were unable to generate agricultural surpluses or impose their political structures over larger regions. This "culture and prosperity gap" posed considerable potential for conflict and repeatedly led to flare-ups in border provinces, though without ever seriously endangering Rome's existence. In AD 166 this situation changed. 6000 Lombards and Obi invaded Pannonia (southern Central Europe) and triggered the Marcomannic Wars. The wars lasted nearly 15 years and forced the Roman Empire to a turnaround in policy.

The Germanic tribes invade the Roman Empire

During the Marcomannic Wars (AD 166–180), the Roman forces could still repel the invading tribes. Two generations later, the situation had changed. Accounts exist of an invasion in AD 233 in Upper Germania and Rhaetia by Germanic hordes described in later written records as Alamanni. From AD 238, groups of Goths repeatedly crossed the lower Danube, entering the territory of the Roman Empire and even carrying out raids down into Greece, the Aegean and Asia Minor. The extent of the invasions by the Germanic tribes in the period from AD 250 to 270 forced the Romans to abandon their Upper Germanic and Rhaetian Limes border fortifications.

The Germanic raids were about booty rather than settlement, as is eloquently illustrated by the so-called "Barbarian Treasures" recovered from the River Rhine – apparently abandoned when returning plunderers were unable to carry their booty safely back across the river border. The rapid increase of non-ferrous scrap metal of Roman origin in the settlements of Germanic peoples in central and south-western Germany points to the geographical origins of the successful warriors, whose newly acquired status found expression in their elaborate tombs and funeral goods. This phase of conflict only ended after the consolidation of the Roman Empire under Diocletian and Constantine at the end of the 3rd century AD.



Amber – the coveted gold of the north

The Mediterranean peoples regarded the fiery translucent amber as mysterious as it was marvellous. In their imagination, the shores of the *Northern Ocean* where amber was found had all the legendary trappings of a place at the end of the world, shrouded in mystery. In the first century AD, a Roman expedition first reached the shores of the Baltic Sea; it brought back a vast amount of amber.

Emperor Nero (ruled AD 54–68) used the new gemstone for ceremonial show and had gladiatorial games held in an amphitheatre decorated with amber. Rome fell helplessly under the spell of this strange "stone". Amber came to epitomise luxury and was exchanged at exorbitant prices: one small amber figure cost more than a good slave.

The following centuries saw a flourishing trade in amber, which was brought down the Amber Road from Sambia on the south-eastern Baltic shore to the city of Aquileia. When the Western Roman Empire fell, the trail of the Amber Road gradually disappeared. But the memory of the mysterious land that was home to the gold of the north could still be found even at the court of the Ostrogoth king Theoderic the Great (ruled AD 471–526).

Huns – Mounted warrior nomads from the Eurasian steppes

The completely unexpected Hun invasions in the northern Black Sea region in AD 375 are regarded as triggering the barbarian migrations. Shortly before AD 370 individual groups of equestrian nomads had formed into successfully operating units of warriors, rapidly expanding as they absorbed the subjugated tribes. As early as AD 376, these groups were already penetrating as far as the south-Romanian Walachia. At this stage, though, individual Hun leaders still entered into shifting alliances, guided by the prospects of the greatest booty and the largest profit. On this basis, they also fought for the Romans against other barbarian groups.

The Hun tribes were only first united and emerged as a major military power under their leader Attila (AD 434/445–453), making them into a serious threat to the Roman Empire. To avoid military conflicts, the Romans transferred vast sums of gold across the Empire's borders, as is evidenced by the richly furnished Hun tombs of the first half of the 5th century. When Attila died in AD 453, the Hunnic Empire fell just as rapidly as it had risen.

In the spotlight of events:

The Carpathian Basin in the 5th century AD

For centuries, the barbarian tribes were not a serious threat to the Roman Empire. Rome's relationship to the peoples and tribes around its borders was marked by confrontation and integration. Loyal members of the tribes could serve in the Roman army, and even reach the highest military ranks, enabling them to enjoy the social advancement they desired.



After the powerful Hunnic Empire rose, though, members of the tribes had an alternative source of prosperity and prestige. Successful military actions could result in greater power and the increased wealth to maintain their own steadily growing group of followers. At the same time, the Roman Empire saw itself forced to buy peace by shipping vast amounts of gold across the River Danube. The finds of rich tombs and treasure troves document the prosperity of the elite among the barbarian tribes. After the Hunnic Empire collapsed (AD 453), the area around the Danube returned to a power structure coined by competing warlords ruling smaller territories. The Goths and the Gepids were the two peoples most successful at expanding their hegemony north of the borders of the Empire and inside the Empire itself. Earlier, defeated groups of Goths fleeing from the Huns were permanently integrated into Roman Imperial territories. The insights into the Roman military and administrative structures gained by the barbarian leaders provided the foundation for the creation of the Romano-Barbarian kingdoms that came to replace the Western Empire.

The Romano-Barbarian Kingdoms

The events during the migration period changed the political map of Europe. The Germanic kings now ruling the lands of the old Western Empire did not rely on a power base created by short-term military conquests. All the Germanic peoples that established successful kingdoms had previously lived for at least a generation in the Roman Imperial territories. There, they became familiar with military and civil society administrative structures. The kings of the Goths, Vandals and Franks continued to draw their military might from their barbarian armies, but the civilian administration was adopted from the late Roman Empire, often together with the administrative staff. For this reason, those kingdoms are no longer termed "Germanic" but are nowadays referred to as "Romano-Barbarian".

Permanent kingdoms could only flourish where the various sections of the population were successfully assimilated. In this process, Christianity came to have a particular significance. Members of old-established Roman families exploited church structures to be appointed as bishops and retain their social status. Ultimately, the foundation of medieval Europe was forged in this interplay of worldly and clerical power.