

Visigothic Spain 409–711

Roger Collins

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A HISTORY OF SPAIN

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In memory of my father
John Howard Collins
(1919-2003)

Introduction: Visigothic Spain in the Twenty-first Century

The Visigothic period, from the early fifth century to the beginning of the eighth, has both gained and lost from recent changes in scholarly taste and methodology. While it could never be described as overwhelmingly popular, its history was one of the subjects that used to benefit from something like an official seal of approval, not just in the time of General Franco but for much of the twentieth century. This was thanks to the dominant ideology of the time encouraging study of periods in the Spanish past in which the central power of the state was strong, and in which political unification was a favoured goal.¹ For the medieval centuries this led to an almost exclusive interest in a succession of monarchies seen as contributing to the reuniting of the peninsula under strong royal and Christian leadership, with the concomitant destruction or ejection of those racial and cultural elements regarded as alien to the true Spanish identity or *Hispanidad*.

Success or failure in the *Reconquista*, the military recovery of Spain from Muslim Arab rule, was the bench mark against which individual kings or even whole dynasties could be judged. The approved line of succession ran from the Asturian monarchy (ca.718 to 910), to that of León (910 to 1037), and culminated in the kingdom of Castile (1037 onwards). Other peninsula states that were independent of or hostile to Castile in the high Middle Ages, such as the kingdoms of Aragón, Navarre, and Portugal, were hardly considered worthy of serious study. The loss of pace in the *Reconquista* and the weakening of Castilian royal authority in the second half of the fourteenth and much of the fifteenth century also condemned most of that period to scholarly

¹ Jocelyn Hillgarth, "Spanish Historiography and Iberian Reality," *History and Theory* 24 (1985), pp. 23-43.

neglect.² Only the emergence of the *Reyes Católicos* in the late fifteenth century, with the ensuing elimination of the Muslim kingdom of Granada and the beginning of the Spanish overseas empire, saw the return of history to the right track, on course for the Golden Age of the Hapsburg period.

The Visigothic centuries gained honorary membership of this elite sequence of approved periods and regimes, despite the fact that the supposed moral deficiencies of the last phase of its history were held responsible for the failure to resist the Arab conquest of 711. However, this regrettable lapse in competence was more than compensated for by other features of the Gothic legacy. In particular, it was under the Visigothic monarchy that the Iberian peninsula was unified for the first (and in practice the last) time. Although Roman *Hispania* had been ruled by a single authority, this was only as separate provinces of a much larger political entity that was of non-Spanish origin. It was the Visigothic kings who first created a monarchy that was purely Spanish in its geographical extent, and which at least in theory controlled the whole land mass of the peninsula. This became an ideal toward which medieval Castilian kings could aspire, though never attain.

At the same time, the intellectual, legal, and liturgical legacy of the Visigothic church contributed uniquely to the formation of a distinctively Spanish learned culture, at least until the various elements of it were suppressed in favour of modish ultramontane equivalents from France and Italy from the later eleventh century onwards.³ So, if the Visigoths could be blamed for letting the Arabs in, they also set the agenda for the many generations of Asturian, Leonese, and Castilian kings who claimed to be trying to restore what they had lost.

It was not just twentieth-century Spanish historians who liked the Visigoths. The smack of firm government resounded through the law books, both civil and ecclesiastical, that they created, and virtually everything toward which they aspired had to do with increasing the central power of the state and of the church. At the same time, thanks to the lack of literary historical narratives from the period,

² See Roger Collins, "Angus MacKay and the History of Later Medieval Spain," in Roger Collins and Anthony Goodman (eds.), *Medieval Spain: Culture, Conflict and Coexistence* (Basingstoke and New York, 2002), pp. vii-xvi.

³ Bernard F. Reilly (ed.), *Santiago, Saint-Denis, and St. Peter: The Reception of the Roman Liturgy in León-Castile in 1080* (New York, 1985).

there was little by way of detailed information on the realities of political life to contradict the desired image of church and state working hand in glove to build up their authority in a mutually supportive fashion. The Visigothic period, and the normative law texts that provide so much of the evidence upon which our understanding of it is based, could therefore be idealized by authoritarian regimes in twentieth-century Spain. Thus in the decree of May 6, 1969, establishing the new Museo de los Concilios y de la Cultura Visigótica in Toledo, General Franco praised the Visigoths for giving the Spanish their "national love of law and order." It probably came as a surprise to Spaniards then as it would now to feel that anyone might think they had a "national love of law and order," but this is just one example of how the Visigothic myth was manipulated.

This has not done the Visigothic period any favors now that political and other conditions have altered. The most marked and immediate change that took place in Spanish university departments of history in the aftermath of the Franco period was the emergence of interest in regional identities as opposed to national ones. At the same time, public criticism of the methodological backwardness of the historical establishment began to appear even in the daily papers by the early 1980s. The intellectual agenda of *Hispanidad*, and the obsession with strong central government and national unity, all gave way to the study of the history of regions and then of micro regions. Much of this is now being funded by autonomous regional governments, and in consequence some of it is published in local dialects, real and imaginary.

The Visigothic period, relegated to the field of ancient history once more, might have expected to receive some punishment for its previous popularity with centralists, but worse still is the fact that it has proved to be shockingly lacking in good regionalist credentials. As just mentioned, there is a lot of evidence for what secular and ecclesiastical rulers in Toledo were thinking in those centuries, but exceedingly little to show what was happening on the ground in Galicia, León, the Basque country, Navarre, and so on.⁴ Archaeology can compensate, but the lack of literary texts makes it very difficult to put any flesh on very bare bones. A few scholars have managed to

⁴ A rare exception would be Francisco Salvador Ventura, *Hispania Meridional entre Roma y el Islam: economía y sociedad* (Granada, 1990).

work the Visigothic period into a chronologically broader survey, of the *longue durée* variety once popular with French historians of the *Annales* school, but most are happier to start their surveys in the centuries after 711.

Rather than be allowed to go into a peaceful intellectual retirement until fashions change once more, the Visigothic period has in recent years instead been required to contribute to a project that is currently in vogue among Spanish medieval historians; this is the study of feudalism. It used to be held that Castile, unlike Aragón, was singularly deficient in traces of any kind of feudal system, and that this was further evidence of its unique and distinctively Spanish character. In the light of the earnest desire for Europeanization, a macro counterpoint to micro regionalization, that has swept over Spain since Franco, and the vogue for French historiographical methodology, a reexamination of this issue under new management has led to a plague of conferences on feudalism, following on from the all too predictable discovery that Castile too could be called truly feudal. Thus, as has rightly been pointed out, Spanish historians have been desperately seeking to make their country's past feudal at a time when their counterparts in the rest of Europe are trying to rid themselves of the concept and all it stands for.⁵

As it has never been suggested that "the feudal system" existed in the seventh century, let alone the fifth, and that therefore the study of feudalism has not formed a part of the historiography of Merovingian Gaul, Ostrogothic Italy, or Anglo-Saxon England, it might have been hoped that the Visigothic period in Spanish history would escape embroilment in this new scholarly obsession. Unfortunately, as if to prove that such things are contagious, a hunt has been started for evidence of what has been called "protofeudalism," an ancestral form of the later phenomenon. Belief in this now seems to be obligatory, but has not been helpful to the serious study of this period.⁶

⁵ Peter Linehan, "The Toledo Forgeries c.1150–c.1300," in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter*. (6 vols. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Schriften* 33, Hanover, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 643–74, especially pp. 643–6.

⁶ Luís García Moreno, "El estado protofeudal visigodo: precedente y modelo para la Europa carolingia," in Jacques Fontaine and Christine Pellistrandi (eds.), *L'Europe héritière de l'Espagne Wisigothique* (Madrid, 1992), pp. 17–43, who proclaims that there exists *unanimidad internacional en adjetivar de protofeudal a la formación social y política encarnada por el Reino de Toledo a principios del siglo VIII* (p. 17). I think not.

"Protofeudalism" is not the only linguistic horror spawned by the current desire of Spanish historians to prove themselves good Europeans. The most prominent sign of the dominant taste for French methodology is the difficulty in avoiding the word *espacio* or "space" in recent writings on almost any period. Conceived as a way of seeing history in terms of a series of overlapping political, social, and economic categories, this may once have been liberating, but its novelty value and intellectual utility have long been exhausted. What survives is a kind of jargon that reduces the comprehensibility of almost anything that employs it. Thus a kingdom has to be called *un espacio monárquico*, "a monarchical space," and daily life is lived in *espacios cotidianos* or "daily spaces."⁷

While the Visigothic period in general may be rather out of favor, good work has continued to be done despite the difficulties just described, and many useful studies have been published. Particularly valuable has been a series of new critical editions of several of the major texts produced in these centuries, not least the historical ones.⁸ In that sense research on the period is now much better equipped than it was in the past, when reliance had to be placed upon a range of often very old and frequently defective editions, not all of which were easily accessible.

Another long-term weakness of the old tradition of historical research in Spain was its deeply entrenched geographical isolationism. This applied not least to the Visigothic period. All aspects of the society were examined in an exclusively Hispanic context. Comparisons with equivalent societies of the same period, such as Merovingian Francia or Lombard Italy, were never made, and their history was not taught. This encouraged the maintenance of the highly idiosyncratic agenda revolving around the identification of the true elements of "Spanishness" and the moralizing explanations for the success of the Arab conquest, which justified it: Spain was unique and so there was no point wasting time looking for parallels or methodologies from

⁷ It would be unfair to single out examples in that this phenomenon is in danger of becoming universal in Hispanic historiography.

⁸ For example Carmen Cardelle de Hartman (ed.), *Victoris Tunnunensis Chronicon cum reliquiis ex Consularibus Caesaraugustanis et Iobannis Biclarenensis Chronicon* (= CCSL vol. CLXXIII, 2001), José Carlos Martín (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis Chronica* (= CCSL vol. CXII, 2003), A. Maya Sánchez, *Vitas Sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium* (= CCSL CXVI, 1992).

outside the peninsula. This has changed since the 1980s, again for both better and worse. Really valuable collaborative and comparative international projects that have broadened intellectual horizons have been undertaken.⁹ On the other hand, while much excellent work is being done in local studies, there exists a real danger that the current vogue for purely regional history could make the wider Hispanic perspective of earlier generations look positively broad-minded.

After a long period of apparent stagnation, in which the orthodoxy of the received wisdom of the late nineteenth century went unquestioned, studies of the civil law of the Visigothic period are asking challenging questions of the evidence and are starting to undermine old certainties. Some important new discoveries have been made, resulting in the nature and purposes of the seventh-century Visigothic law code known as the *Liber Iudiciorum* or “Book of the Judges” being seen in a new light.¹⁰ The critical edition of this made in 1902, and long regarded as an invaluable aid in the study of this period, may become more of a hindrance than a help, as its editor sought to standardize a text whose real significance may lie in its variants and in the apparent errors of the individual manuscripts containing it.¹¹

The question of what constitutes best editorial practice has not become as controversial as it probably should. While there have been several new editions of theological and other literary works of the period in recent years, the assumption remains that their texts should be normalized to make them look as if they had been written by classical authors of the first century AD.¹² In part this derives from a far too optimistic assessment of the level of classical learning in late Visigothic Spain, for which there is all too little real evidence, and in part from an unwillingness to take the testimony of the manuscripts seriously. While all too few are of Visigothic date, most of them are

⁹ A good example is the Spanish-Italian conference whose acts are published in Javier Arce and Paolo Delogu (eds.), *Visigoti e Langobardi* (Florence, 2001), and also some of the volumes produced by the *Transformation of the Roman World* project that have Spanish content.

¹⁰ Leading the way is Yolande García López, *Estudios críticos de la “Lex Wisigothorum”* (Alcalá de Henares, 1996).

¹¹ Karl Zeumer (ed.), *Leges Visigothorum* (= *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Legum sectio I, vol. 1*, Hanover, 1902).

¹² Particularly stimulating are the arguments of Roger Wright, “On Editing ‘Latin’ Texts Written by Romance-speakers,” in his *Early Ibero-Romance* (Newark, DE, 1994), pp. 109–26.

much closer in time to the authors of seventh-century Spain than was Cicero.

While the Visigothic kingdom has left us far fewer original administrative and legal documents written on parchment than its Frankish neighbors, and the only detailed study of them remains unpublished, there is weighty compensation in the form of 100 or so texts of this kind scratched on slate. While their existence has been known for several decades, the quantities discovered have gradually increased, and the errors made in the earliest attempt to edit them have been corrected in an authoritative new version and an accompanying study.¹³ The purposes served by the slate documents are far wider than those of their surviving equivalents on parchment or papyrus. The durability of the medium has preserved ephemeral doodles, curses, and school exercises that otherwise would have long since been obliterated. These materials have hardly begun to be integrated into the wider study of this period; they offer exciting new possibilities for further research.

From the context of the discovery of some of them in rural settlement sites of Visigothic date, these slates must count as archaeological as well as historical and literary evidence, and thus as part of a new wave of discovery in this field. Important excavations in urban centers such as Mérida, Cartagena, and Tarragona have proved extremely revealing of conditions in their Visigothic counterparts. Equally important have been sites in the countryside of what were once significant early medieval towns, such as *Reccopolis* (Zorita de los Canes in the province of Guadalajara) and *Ercavica* (Tolmo de Minateda, near Hellín in the province of Albacete). Rural settlements of Visigothic date have also begun to be discovered in increasing numbers, despite the technical difficulties of locating them.¹⁴

All is not entirely rosy in the archaeological garden. Variations in funding and in local and regional government enthusiasm can encourage or retard work on this period. Money that would be better spent on excavations is often put into fatuous restoration of

¹³ First and not always very accurately edited in Manuel Gómez-Moreno, *Documentación goda en pizarra* (Madrid, 1966), but now to be consulted in Isabel Velázquez Soriano, *Las pizarras visigodas. Edición crítica y estudio* (Murcia, 1989), or in the much more expensive but possibly now more accessible eadem (ed.), *Documentos de época visigoda escritos en pizarra (siglos VI-VII)* (2 vols., Turnholt, 2000).

¹⁴ For references and further details on these sites see chapter 8 below.

monuments to make them look appealing. Too many restored monuments look as if they were built the day before yesterday, and the decisions made as to the idealized state to which they are to be reconstructed usually conflict with taste and common sense, and can lead to the destruction of important evidence.¹⁵ Publication of archaeological results also remains a problem. A few crucially important sites have been excavated but never published, even decades later, depriving other scholars and the interested public of vital information.¹⁶ It would be wrong to end on a negative note when so much good work is being done, but non-publication is worse than neglect, in that sites thus affected are in effect destroyed to no purpose and with no benefit.

Because there is so much that is ongoing in both the historical and the archaeological study of Visigothic Spain, some of the conclusions offered in this book must be considered provisional. The book itself should be seen as a report on various aspects of the new work being done on the period, with some doubtless idiosyncratic interpretations and judgments on the part of its author being thrown in to help stir the pot. It falls into two parts, with the first providing a historical overview and the second more of a survey of different key features of this society in its three centuries of existence and of the evidence that has to be used to evaluate them. Its author is more than delighted to find that he now disagrees with well over half of his own former views on most matters here discussed.

¹⁵ Examples may be found in Roger Collins, *The Oxford Archaeological Guide to Spain* (Oxford, 1998); Spanish translation as *España - Guía arqueológica* (Madrid, 1999).

¹⁶ See pp. 211–12 below.

Part I

A Political History

1

From Empire to Kingdom, 409–507

A Turning Point

If a date had to be set for the ending of Roman imperial rule in the Iberian peninsula, the autumn of 409 would be as good a one as any. On either September 28 or October 12 of that year – an all too typical contradiction between two contemporary sources makes it impossible to choose between them – a loose and recently formed alliance of “barbarians,” who had spent the previous three years making their way from the Rhineland and across Gaul, came through the passes over the the Pyrenees into Spain.¹ These invaders are reported to have been made up of three distinct ethnic components: the Alans, the Sueves, and the Vandals. The latter group was subdivided into the Silings and the Hasdings. Both Sueves and Vandals were thought by the Romans to be Germanic peoples, originating in lands to the east of the Rhine.²

The Alans, on the other hand, would have been seen as far more recent and exotic arrivals in the West. They were one of the peoples of the steppe of probably Iranian origin, who were mainly to be found in the area of the northern Caucasus and the lower Don in the third and fourth centuries. Some of them may be assumed to have moved westward in the years following the arrival of the Huns on

¹ Orosius, *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, VII. 40, ed. C. Zangemeister (Vienna, 1882; reprinted Hildesheim, 1967), pp. 548–52; Hydatius 15th year of Arcadius and Honorius, *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana*, ed. R. W. Burgess (Oxford, 1993), p. 80; on Hydatius see also Carmen Cardelle de Hartmann, *Philologische Studien zur Chronik des Hydatius von Chaves* (Stuttgart, 1994), and Steven Muhlbberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers* (Liverpool, 1990), pp. 193–266.

² Tacitus, *Germania* II. 4 and XXXVIII. 1–3, ed. J. G. C. Anderson (Oxford, 1938).



Map 1 The provinces of Visigothic Spain

the fringes of the Carpathians in the 370s.³ Others of their number seem to have become subject to the Huns on the plains north of the Danube soon afterwards, and yet others were driven southward into Roman territory. How those Alans who moved west came to find themselves associated with the Vandals and the Sueves on the east bank of the river Rhine opposite Mainz in late 406 remains entirely unknown.

In the winter of that year the river froze over, and the three groups crossed into Roman territory where, despite initial resistance by some Frankish allies of the empire, they were able to force their way into the otherwise undefended Gallic provinces. Following a three-year period in Gaul, of which virtually nothing is recorded, they reached the western Pyrenees in the autumn of 409, and were able to cross unopposed,

³ Ammianus Marcellinus XXXI. ii. 12–25 and iii. 1–3, ed. J. C. Rolfe, vol. III, pp. 386–96. On the Alans in this period see Vladimir Kouznetsov and Iaroslav Lebedynsky, *Les Alains* (Paris, 1997), pp. 35–54.

possibly as the result of deliberate treachery on the part of Roman units supposed to be defending the passes across the mountains.⁴

These imperial troops were in the pay of a rebel emperor, Constantine III (407-11), who had been set up by the army in Britain in 407 and had then made himself master of much of Gaul and Spain in the ensuing period of confusion.⁵ Whether the Spanish priest Orosius, writing his *Seven Books of Histories Against the Pagans* in 417, was right in suggesting that Constantine's soldiers deliberately allowed the Vandals and the others across the Pyrenees in order to conceal the looting of the civilian population they themselves had been carrying out is impossible to tell. But the Roman government of the legitimate western emperor Honorius (395-423) was never able thereafter to reimpose its authority on all of the Spanish provinces.

As can be seen from what was happening elsewhere in this period, the migrating armies that were the Vandal, Sueve, and Alan confederacies were probably seeking to reach some form of accommodation with the Roman government, by offering to provide military service in return for regular pay and supplies and some degree of integration into the imperial administrative structure. This is what Alaric and his Gothic confederacy had been trying to persuade the emperor Honorius to agree to up to the sack of Rome in 410, and some of his successors were able to make such arrangements with the imperial government on at least two occasions in the succeeding decade.⁶

Roman military power had come increasingly to depend on the employment of soldiers, both individuals and whole units, drawn from the populations who lived beyond the empire's borders or who had been permitted to settle in it by treaties of federation. Such groups as the Vandals, driven into imperial territory, could provide valuable resources of military manpower relatively cheaply for Rome, but in such periods of disturbance there were more potential soldiers looking for government subsidy than either were required or could be afforded by the depleted imperial treasury. For their part, such relatively large bodies of non-Roman soldiers in a potentially hostile

⁴ Orosius VII. 40, ed. Zangemeister, pp. 551-2.

⁵ *PLRE* vol. 2: Constantinus 21, pp. 316-17.

⁶ For the events of these years see Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332-489* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 193-224; also Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe, 300-1000* (2nd edn., London, 1998), pp. 47-60.

new land needed to make some kind of agreement with the imperial administration for their own security as well as employment. They were not able to maintain themselves as armies without access to regular food supplies, and they could not disperse widely over the countryside if faced by a military threat from hostile Roman forces.

The Alans, Vandals, and Sueves, after a brief but savage period of looting and destruction, seem to have made a treaty of federation with a Roman government. The two main Spanish literary sources for the history of this period, Orosius, an exact contemporary, and Hydatius, a bishop who wrote a short chronicle in northwest Spain around the year 468, agree that a period of famine, starvation, and cannibalism followed the entry of the Alans, Sueves, and Vandals into Spain in 409.⁷ While the two chroniclers' sympathies lay with the suffering civilian population, what they describe implies that the invaders were having to take short-term and desperate measures. Once they had taken what food was available and had reduced the inhabitants to starvation, they either had to move on, to inflict similar misery on other untouched areas, or to change the nature of their relationship with the Roman ruling classes. As they had devastated their way across Gaul between 406 and 409 and were at this stage unable to cross into North Africa, the latter policy was the only alternative left to them if they were not to join the civilians in starvation.

Conditions in Spain at the time meant that the ensuing treaty of federation had to be made with a rebel imperial regime that had been set up in the peninsula in 409. The emperor with whom they made the agreement was called Maximus, and his rule was centered on Tarragona and Barcelona on the Mediterranean coast, an area not then directly threatened by the presence of the invaders.⁸ Maximus had been created emperor by Gerontius, one of the generals of Constantine III, who had rebelled against his former master and in 410/11 was besieging him in Arles.⁹ In the circumstances, neither Gerontius nor Maximus was in a position to resist the Alans, Sueves, and Vandals, and might in any case have hoped to make use of them in an attempt to overthrow Constantine III and gain control of Gaul.

⁷ Hydatius, 15th–17th years of Arcadius and Honorius, ed. Burgess, p. 82; Orosius VII. 41, ed. Zangemeister, pp. 552–4.

⁸ On Maximus see *PLRE* vol. 2: Maximus 4 and Maximus 7, pp. 744–5.

⁹ *PLRE* vol. 2: Gerontius 5, p. 508.

In practice this was not to be. In the winter of 410/11 the Visigoths withdrew from Italy, and the army of the legitimate emperor Honorius was thus free to try and reestablish his rule in Gaul. This was achieved quite rapidly in the course of 411. Gerontius was forced to abandon the siege of Arles and retreat toward Spain, only to be killed by his own men, while Constantine III had to surrender to Honorius, who had him executed. The ephemeral regime of Maximus on the Catalan coast collapsed and he had to take refuge with his new Alan and Vandal allies in the interior of the peninsula, while expecting an attack by Honorius's armies.¹⁰

This was slow in coming because conditions in Gaul remained chaotic, and it was not until 416 that the western imperial government, dominated since 411 by the *Magister Militum* or Master of the Soldiers Constantius (died 421), was in a position to try to regain control of the Iberian peninsula.¹¹ This operation was to be carried out not by imperial forces, but by those of Rome's new ally, the Visigothic king Wallia (415-19). The campaign that he launched on behalf of the emperor Honorius against Maximus and his Alan, Suevic, and Vandal federates saw the Visigoths make their first appearance in Spain.

The Visigoths

To attempt a synoptic history of the Visigoths in the centuries preceding this point would not be easy. This is not just due to the size and complexity of the subject, but results from the continuing high level of scholarly disagreement about it. Above all this focuses on the central questions of who "the Visigoths" actually were, and what kind of an entity did they form? The fact that the name probably ought to be put in inverted commas may give some indication of the difficulties to be faced in trying to establish even the most basic consensus on these issues. The difficulties of definition in trying to answer such questions apply equally to all comparable research into the nature and composition of the other Germanic and non-Germanic peoples to be found in the historical sources relating to these centuries. In the case of the Alans, Sueves, and Vandals, the evidence relating to

¹⁰ Heather, *Goths and Romans*, pp. 219-24.

¹¹ For Constantius see *PLRE* vol. 2: Constantius 17, pp. 321-5.

them is so limited in extent that it has seemed better to wait until the Visigoths entered the story before trying to tackle the difficulties involved in trying to make sense of the character, composition, and development of the so-called barbarian peoples.¹²

A few decades ago there would seem to have been no difficulty to be faced in trying to answer such questions. The various peoples who settled in the territories of the western Roman empire from the fourth century onward would have been taken to be just that: separate and coherent ethnic groups, united by their common culture, history, and genetic inheritance. In terms of their government, they would have been seen either as being led by war leaders elected from within their own number in times of military need, or as being permanently ruled by dynasties of kings of ancient lineage, whose authority might stem from their special relationship to or descent from the gods whom the people worshiped. Such a population group was usually called a tribe. Some elements of the culture of each tribe might be shared with others. In particular, several of them shared a common language, such as proto-Germanic or Gothic, but no doubt with dialectical differences to match their political separateness. While their particular tribal histories could include long-term rivalries and feuds between them, the mutual comprehensibility of their speech would be expected to provide a sense of Germanic solidarity in the face of the alien civilization of Rome.¹³

According to such an interpretation, the histories of these peoples had long been transmitted orally, but came to be written down only in the period after their establishment inside the frontiers of the former Roman empire. As such, they testified to the long-term survival of each individual tribe over centuries, and to the great distances that most of them may have traveled in the course of their existence, either buffeted by conflicts with their neighbors or taking advantage of Rome's increasing weakness. Some of these histories also seemed

¹² On the Alans see Kouznetsov and Lebedynsky, *Les Alains*, pp. 11–34; on the Sueves Wilhelm Reinhart, *Historia general del reino hispánico de los Suevos* (Madrid, 1952) remains the only monograph, but see the four articles devoted to them in E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison, WI, 1982), pp. 137–229. On the Vandals the main treatment is still that of C. Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique* (Paris, 1955).

¹³ e.g. Franz Altheim. *Die Krise der alten Welt* (3 vols., Berlin-Dahlem, 1943), vol. 1, pp. 83–116.

to be confirmed by what earlier generations of Roman authors, such as Tacitus, had written about the empire's previous contacts with the various Germanic peoples.

From such a perspective there was nothing inherently incredible about the narrative that could be composed from a mixture of Roman and Germanic sources about the history of the Visigoths, which would have been presented along the following lines.¹⁴ Their origin in Scandinavia, probably southern Sweden, where Götland remains a regional name, could be dated to around the first century BC. This period of genesis was followed by a migration of the tribe across the Baltic to northeastern Germany, beyond the Elbe, in the course of the first century AD, and then a gradual southerly movement, gravitating toward the Danube. The first significant impact of the southward-migrating Goths on the Roman empire, the frontier of which was fixed on the southern bank of that river for much of its course, occurred in the mid-third century. Following their crossing of the Danube and a dramatic victory over the emperor Trajan Decius in 251, the Visigoths remained within the empire, looting and destroying for 20 years, until expelled by Claudius II Gothicus (268-70) and Aurelian (270-5).¹⁵

Likewise, a second Gothic people, who would become known as the Ostrogoths, followed a similar pattern of migration southward out of Scandinavia over the same period, but adopting a more easterly line of march than their Visigothic relatives. They eventually fetched up in the steppes of southern Russia along the shores of the Black Sea, having subjected a number of indigenous peoples in the region, thereby creating a Gothic empire. The Visigoths, finally pushed out of Roman territory in the early 270s, then established themselves between the Danube and the larger realm of their Ostrogothic cousins to the northeast, while continuing to threaten the imperial frontier.¹⁶

It was generally accepted that all of this was changed by the appearance of the Huns, a nomadic confederacy from Central Asia,

¹⁴ The classic presentation of the once generally accepted view being described here is that of Ludwig Schmidt, *Geschichte der deutschen Stämme bis zum Ausgang der Völkerwanderung: die Ostgermanen* (2nd edn., Munich, 1933).

¹⁵ For a good overview of the historiography see Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 1-18.

¹⁶ On this "Ostrogothic Empire" see T. S. Burns, *A History of the Ostrogoths* (Bloomington, IN, 1984), pp. 18-38.

whose sudden attack around 370 led to the collapse of the Ostrogothic kingdom, then ruled by Athanaric, and the flight of some of the survivors into Visigothic lands to the southwest.¹⁷ Under these pressures the Visigoths too soon packed their bags and begged to be admitted into the Roman empire. Once this had been conceded by the emperor Valens (364–78) in 376, the Gothic refugees quickly began to be exploited by the local imperial officials in the Danube region, upon whom they had to rely for supplies. The ruthless ill-treatment to which they were subjected led the Visigoths to revolt, aided by some smaller groups of Ostrogoths, who had accompanied them into the empire in 376. In attempting to suppress this Gothic revolt, Valens was defeated and killed at the battle of Adrianople in 378, leaving the Visigoths masters of much of the eastern half of the Balkans. Under the next emperor, Theodosius I (379–95), whose home had been in Spain, the various Gothic groups were soon brought to sign a treaty with the empire, and thereafter served in his armies in a series of civil wars fought against rival emperors in the West in 388 and 394. In the process they were reunited under the leadership of Alaric, a member of the ancient ruling house of the Balt dynasty.

Following Theodosius's death, Alaric tried to play off the imperial regimes in the two halves of the empire, now ruled by the infant sons of the late emperor, to secure a position for himself and an assured source of pay and supplies for his Visigothic followers. In the course of his attempts to coerce the western government, he led his forces into Italy in 408, and to stave off a crisis brought on by the emperor's refusal to compromise, he sacked the city of Rome in 410, shortly before his own death from natural causes. Alaric's successor Ataulph (410–15) led the Visigoths out of Italy into Gaul later that year.

This account of Gothic history seems a simple and comprehensible enough tale, and it is one that can easily be illustrated, as it always used to be in historical atlases and textbooks, by a long arrowed line that snakes all across Europe, from Scandinavia, through Germany and Hungary, into and across the Balkans, on into Italy and then France, finally ending in Spain. This line represents the movement of the Visigoths from their first home to their last, and all their travels as a migratory people in between.

¹⁷ E. A. Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 20–4.