

Fifth-century Gaul:
a crisis of identity?

Edited by

John Drinkwater and Hugh Elton



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Introduction

In 375, no one could have doubted that Gaul was an integral and important part of the Roman empire. By then, Rome had been the dominant power in the country for five centuries; and in that year, the seventeen-year-old Gratian, having succeeded Valentinian I as effective ruler of the west, showed himself eager to continue his father's policy of locating the imperial court in Trier, on the Mosel. What is more, during the early years of Gratian's reign many native Gauls rose to great prominence in the imperial administration, thanks to the patronage of the emperor's former tutor, now senior counsellor, Ausonius of Bordeaux. One hundred years later, however, the situation was wholly changed, as a western imperial government now firmly based in Italy abandoned its Gallic subjects and ceded the last of its possessions in Gaul to king Euric of the Visigoths. The beginning of the establishment of the barbarians as sovereign powers in the land is conventionally dated to the invasions of 406–7 and their aftermath.

The disappearance of Roman power from Gaul and all that this implies for the decline and fall of the Roman empire and the transformation from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages have long exercised the minds of scholars. The papers presented in this volume seek to identify and discuss the factors that so radically altered the position of Gaul in the Empire. Their authors were invited to consider the ways in which the inhabitants of Gaul reacted to the military, political and social changes consequent upon the invasions of 406–7 and, in particular, the manner and extent to which these people altered their perceptions of themselves as citizens of a world Empire: in brief, whether they suffered 'a crisis of identity'.

Such questions are usefully – indeed, given the fragmentary condition of the evidence, are perhaps best – approached from a

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number of different directions, employing the expertise of a wide range of disciplines. Contributions were therefore sought from archaeologists, genealogists, church historians, secular historians, literary scholars and numismatists. In order to give so varied a volume structure and coherency, and to make its contents as accessible as possible to the reader, the editors have taken the liberty of ordering its papers in roughly chronological sequence, and of allotting them to discrete Parts, for each of which they have provided introductory commentary. They would, however, emphasize that throughout their aim has been to allow the form and direction of the work to emerge without strain from the essays of which it is made up. They trust that their editorial contributions will be seen as pointing up those ideas which were at the forefront of their authors' minds, and not as attempting to trim these ideas to fit their own conceptions of the evolution of fifth-century Gallic history. They leave it to the reader to form his or her own general picture of the age, and of the problems involved in its study.

Given the theme of 'a crisis of identity?', it is not surprising that authors pay relatively little attention to straightforward reconstruction of political and military history; in fact, a number of them express serious doubts as to whether the writing of a narrative history of fifth-century Gaul is possible, or even proper. The emphasis is instead on the complex of social, economic, cultural and even, one might say, ideological processes by which Gaul slipped from Roman to barbarian rule. Much is made of the inherent brittleness of Roman control over Gaul following the settlement of barbarians west of the Rhine, and of the ways in which local ambitions, concerns and imperatives inexorably brought the leaders of Gallo-Roman society, lay and clerical, 'official' and 'unofficial', into contact and co-operation with Germanic kings and aristocrats not averse to adopting a Gallo-Roman lifestyle. Conversely, some Gallo-Roman leaders are characterized as acting themselves like barbarian kings. The distinction between 'Roman' and 'barbarian' is seen to blur. On the other hand, clear recognition of the emergence of a new order was remarkably slow to develop and, as a number of contributors stress, as far as the individuals involved were concerned, the change was often disruptive, costly and confusing: a matter of necessity, not choice. Gaul was destined to leave the womb of Rome but, like any other birth, her departure was laboured and painful.

Introduction

Throughout, for the reasons already stated, the editors have avoided any direct attempt to set these papers in a general historical or historiographical context, or to offer direct comment on the validity or priority of particular issues raised. However, they would here draw attention to two points which seem likely to attract further comment and encourage more work. First, the 'maximalist' interpretation of the effect of the fifth-century disturbances on Gallo-Roman society stands in marked contrast to the 'minimalist' view – the emphasis on continuity – which has held sway in recent years. This may, in part at least, be attributed to the circumstance that many of the contributors to this volume can be categorized as scholars of the 'Ancient' as opposed to the 'Medieval' world; and it gives promise of a lively debate to follow. Second, a recurrent sub-theme throughout the book is the importance of Africa, and the disastrous consequences for the western empire of civil war and barbarian invasion in the African provinces. It appears that 'fifth-century Africa' would be an ideal subject for a similar multi-disciplinary investigation in the near future.