The Short Oxford History of Italy

General Editor: John A. Davis

Italy in the Nineteenth Century
edited by John A. Davis

Liberal and Fascist Italy
edited by Adrian Lyttelton

Italy since 1945
edited by Patrick McCarthy

Early Modern Italy
edited by John Marino

IN PREPARATION, VOLUMES COVERING

Italy in the Later Middle Ages 1000–1300
Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300–1550

The Short Oxford History of Italy

General Editor: John A. Davis

Italy in the Early Middle Ages

476–1000

Edited by Cristina La Rocca

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Abbreviations

Aistulf	*The Laws of Aistulf*, ed. K. Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws* (Philadelphia, 1973).
CDL 1	*Codice diplomatico longobardo*, I, ed. L. Schiaparelli (Rome, 1929).
CDL 2	*Codice diplomatico longobardo*, II, ed. L. Schiaparelli (Rome, 1933).
Liutprand	*The Laws of Liutprand*, ed. K. Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws* (Philadelphia, 1973).
Manaresi, Placiti	*I placiti del regnum italiane*, ed. C. Manaresi, (Rome, 1955).
Pauli, *Historia Langobardorum*	*Paul the Deacon's History of the Lombards*, trans. W. D. Foulke (Philadelphia, 1907).
Ratchis	*The Laws of Ratchis*, ed. K. Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws* (Philadelphia, 1973).
Rothari	*Edict of Rothari*, ed. K. Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws* (Philadelphia, 1973).
Sett. CISAM	*Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* (published papers).

Introduction

Cristina La Rocca

The identity of a distant past

An introduction to this volume on Italy in the early medieval period has to start by explaining how historical approaches to this period have changed in recent years. This is not a question of discussing more general shifts in historical interpretation or the influence of different historiographical schools, but rather of positioning the essays that make up the volume in their specific historiographical context, since each of the topics addressed in this book has been deeply influenced by new research, by the new methods that have been adopted, and by the conclusions that have been drawn from them.

In fact, the early medieval period is now one of the most interesting and innovative fields in European historical writing in Italy in general, and perhaps the one that has been most open to new interpretations. The scale and quality of recent research has been impressive; the new interpretations that are beginning to emerge are only partly the result of the use of new and much wider types of source, and have more to do with the new perspectives that historians have brought to the study of the early Middle Ages. The very varied backgrounds of the scholars currently studying the early medieval period in different European countries has been an excellent antidote to the exclusively national perspectives in which each European society had previously studied its own early medieval past. In those perspectives, the early Middle Ages were invariably treated as the moment when the national history of each society began, and in which the distinctive features of the modern national society were already formed and visible. Put another way, the early Middle Ages often simply served as a mirror to the cultural and political aspirations of

nineteenth-century elites.[1] But although the period between the fifth and the tenth centuries has been studied as fully in Italy as elsewhere in Europe, and despite the importance and quality of recent research and the new archaeological excavations on urban and rural sites that have been started since the 1980s, this period continues to be considered as one of only minor interest in Italy.

The fact is that ever since national unification in the mid-nineteenth century the Italians have looked on the early medieval period with diffidence. For writers of the *Risorgimento*, the period from the fifth and the tenth centuries was associated primarily with the dispersion and fragmentation of the territorial unity that had been achieved in earlier Roman times as a result of the invasions by 'barbarian' and 'foreign' peoples who destroyed the political freedom of the local inhabitants and took the place of the Romans as rulers of Italy. In this way the rhetoric of *Risorgimento* associated Italy's lost territorial unity with the suffocating presence of the foreign invaders and oppressors. The 'Germans' were held to have been responsible for the decline in every aspect of Italian society and for the political subjection of the 'Italians'. In fact, the early medieval period came to represent the condition of Italy before Unification and independence, so that while other European nations looked to the early Middle Ages as the period from which they had originated, in Italy, by contrast, the period was seen simply as one of abject subordination and decline.[2]

Despite new research and changing attitudes this ideological matrix has gone unchallenged for a very long time, and has continued to condition the ways in which Italian medieval historians viewed the early medieval past. Had they been asked to define the distinctive features of Italian history in this long period of time, they would have replied unequivocally in one of two ways. Either they would have stressed the continuity with earlier Roman traditions that was evident in the survival of lively urban centres as well as in many other aspects of institutional and material life, or they would have regretfully

[1] A. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentea, santità e onore alle origini dell' Italia unita* (Turin, 2000); E. Artifoni, 'Il medioevo nel Romanticismo. Forme della storiografia tra Sette e Ottocento', in G. Cavallo, C. Leonardi, and E. Menestò (eds.), *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo, i: Il Medioevo latino*, iv (Rome, 1997), pp. 175–221.

[2] C. Wickham, 'Problems of comparing Rural Societies in Early Medieval Western Europe', in *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European Social History, 400–1200* (London, 1994), pp. 201–26.

insisted on the total nature of the break with the past that followed the Lombard invasions of 568 or 569 which marked the true beginning of the 'Dark Ages'. This clash of opposites was epitomized in the image of the encounters between the civilized locals (the Romans) and uncouth and ignorant barbarians (the Lombards) that would over time result in what was termed a process of 'acculturation' (a term first used by anthropologists and then adopted by archaeologists to describe the fusion of formerly separated and distinct traditions). The argument was that the Lombards learned from the Romans to appreciate and exploit the external forms and apparatus of power (first of all the use of Latin in its written form) while Italian society would become structured hierarchically along 'typically Germanic' models that derived from a military lifestyle. The fusion between Romans and Lombards was complicated by the successive Carolingian domination in northern Italy, and by the Byzantine and Muslim presences in central and southern Italy. This would finally be the cause of the crisis of the tenth century (the 'iron century', as it was significantly termed) when these internal contradictions would finally explode in ways that enabled Roman legal traditions to resurface, paving the way for the recovery of the original and 'civilized' features of Italian society. In this perspective, however, the early Middle Ages in Italy were simply a long and painful period of labour during which the new elements of civic consciousness and institutional maturity that would characterize the Italian *comuni* from the late eleventh century onwards were emerging.

Even though the terms have obviously changed since the nineteenth century, the period continued to be portrayed in ways that underlined the distinctions between the traditions and cultures of the 'invaders' and of the 'invaded' and relied on adversarial dichotomies: Romans and Germans; Arians or pagan Lombards and Catholic Romans; 'rural' Lombards and 'urban' Romans; and so forth. Driven by the desire to separate the two distinctive souls of early medieval 'Italian' society, historians were more interested in juridical institutions than in society itself, in norms rather than practice, in terminology rather than substance, and finally in the period that followed the Lombard migration rather than that which preceded it.[3] As a

[3] G. Tabacco, 'Problemi di popolamento e di insediamento nell'alto medioevo', *Rivista storica italiana* 79 (1967), pp. 67–110; G. Tabacco, 'Latinità e germanesimo nella tradizione medievistica italiana', *Rivista storica italiana* 102 (1990), pp. 691–716.

result they turned the early Middle Ages into a remote and incomprehensible past, a time when foreign, 'typically Germanic', and deeply alien mentalities and institutions were forced on the native populations, in the process sacrificing the distinctive 'indigenous' features of local cultures. This also meant that the period from the fifth to the tenth centuries was studied and evaluated primarily in moral terms.

Although the period attracted a considerable amount of research, especially in the years immediately after national unification and again after the Second World War, this was largely concerned with constructing a 'reality' that no longer bore any relation to fact. Yet these studies became a sort of academic testing ground, and no one could progress in the academy without being able to show that they understood the intricacy of the mysterious 'Germanic' universe, even though the belief that this period was of any significance for understanding the origins of contemporary society was rapidly waning. This was evident, too, in the terrible monotony of the subjects studied and the very limited variety of the sources used. While it is true that there was a radical decline in the number of written sources that began in the sixth century and got worse in the seventh century, for a long time historians continued to rely almost exclusively on just two passages from Paul the Deacon (who was writing at the end of the eighth century) and a few paragraphs from Tacitus' *Germania* (written in the first century AD) to describe the status of the subjugated Romans and the destruction of their elite during the Lombard invasion. From these narrow and anachronistic sources historians drew images that emphasized on the one hand the survival of 'ancestral' and immutable customs and habits and on the other the prevailing conditions of violence and destruction to portray the melancholic landscape of a decaying society.

The repetitious nature of this research went hand in hand with a total lack of interest in uncovering, never mind editing or analysing, new written or material sources for the early medieval period. Although from the beginning of the eighth century onwards the repertory of documentary sources became wider and more varied for Italy than for anywhere else in Europe, publication of editions of royal charters and private documents did not start until the 1920s, and even then was done without any real system and not always to the highest scholarly standards, while the editions of private documents

still remained far from complete. But that was not all: even during the heyday of nineteenth-century positivism, interest in the materials found in 'barbarian' tombs with grave-goods—which in other European countries provided the evidence around which the material culture of these societies was reconstructed—also declined before completely disappearing in the Fascist era. The problem was that the archaeological sources did not seem to answer the key questions posed by historians: How many types of 'invader' had there been? How could they be distinguished from 'Italians'? What were their 'strategies' in occupying the territory? Since archaeologists seemed unable to give any clear and satisfactory answers, these sources were deemed to be of no public interest and of relevance only for purely local history or for historians of the minor arts.[4] These distinctions between national and 'official' and 'local' and amateur studies gave rise to a dual, albeit hardly compatible, set of classifications. For academic historians the early Middle Ages were considered a part of the past to be dispensed with as quickly as possible, whereas at a local level the sites and documents from the period were a source of civic pride, making some king or queen, lord or bishop, or benefactor or founder of a monastery an illustrious fellow citizen and hence a 'local hero' who by association boosted the community's status.[5]

Gian Piero Bognetti's reworking of the early Middle Ages

The idea that the Lombard era marked a break between what preceded and what followed it (since Theoderic's Goths had been forgiven and accepted within the 'civilized' world, because of their generally respectful behaviour and the homage they paid to the Roman world) was given a new lease of life during the 1950s by the work of Gian Piero Bognetti. As historian of the legal institutions in

[4] C. La Rocca, 'Uno specialismo mancato. Esordi e fallimento dell'archeologia medievale italiana alla fine dell'Ottocento', *Archeologia medievale* 20 (1993), pp. 13–43.

[5] E. Artifoni, 'Ideologia e memoria locale nella storiografia italiana sui Longobardi', in G. P. Brogiolo and C. Bertelli (eds.), *Il futuro dei longobardi. Saggi* (Brescia 2000), pp. 219–27.

the early medieval period, Bognetti became known as the 'inventor of the Lombards' because in a number of influential studies he argued that the Lombards had created a completely new society that was quite different from the past. According to Bognetti, the great innovation of the Lombards was to get rid of the corrupt, bureaucratic, and decrepit society based on Roman and Byzantine models, and replace it with one that was youthful and vigorous, primitive and naive but therefore also strong and lively. The traditional contrast between the two rival souls of early medieval 'Italian' society as a result not only became sharper but was now also the basis for measuring the long-term political and social consequences of the invasion.

Bognetti's concern was not to measure what had been lost from the past, but to gauge what had been gained from the infusion of the new 'Germanic' elements that now became a part of Italian history and survived down to the late Middle Ages and beyond. The historian's task was to identify what was 'new' and what was 'old' in every aspect of society, and what had survived in the long term. This meant addressing new questions and using new types of evidence to reconstruct the primitive and original world from which the new had originated. This had often to be invented. The strong Catholic convictions of Bognetti and his followers, for example, led them to argue that the conversion of the Lombards to Catholicism was the principal source of stability in their 'new' society, and to attribute a fundamental and active role to the papacy in shaping the organization of Lombard society. Insisting on the stubborn and primitive features of Lombard paganism, and especially Arianism, Bognetti described the difficult and praiseworthy intervention of the Roman church and its unrelenting efforts at evangelizing to the point of proposing genuine 'missions' of conversion, similar to those of Boniface in Germany, whose success would lead to the founding of new churches built on former Arian or heathen shrines and dedicated to saints that 'specialized' in this symbolic function. Through the fundamental teachings of the papacy and the bishops, the primitive strength of the Lombard thus became an 'educated' and enduring strength.

From a methodological point of view, Bognetti's work focused attention on the search for the roots of Lombard society and culture through the study of the linguistic, terminological, and institutional traces that had survived in documents of later times, so that both 'local' and national historians now redrew the 'Dark Ages' from late

medieval sources. Despite the great variety of local contexts and of written documents, these reconstructions followed the lines already set out by Bognetti himself.[6] In every location it was claimed that the Lombards had settled 'strategically' next to a road, a river, or a border, taking as proof of this terms like *fara* and *sala* which were typically Lombard and therefore certainly originated from the period of their rule (while, in fact, these were two quite common terms that quickly became part of everyday language), or the churches dedicated to St George, St Martin, or, better still, St Michael, the foundation of which could be safely dated beyond doubt.

Emphasis on the uniform character of the Lombard settlements in every region of Italy gave rise to an unspoken assumption that everything had now been said on the subject of Lombard culture and society. Research on early medieval Italy based on written sources therefore shifted to later periods, taking the innovatory character of the Lombard era for granted and of relevance only for tracing the prehistory of later phenomena. The strong local perspective of the surviving Italian documents also encouraged the study of the institutional organization of the local societies that had originated after the Carolingian conquest of the Lombard kingdom, and these studies focused primarily on the development and transformation of territorial organization and on the shift from public to private power with the rise of new dynastic properties among the seigneurial elite which was completed during and after the eleventh century.[7]

Back to the sources

The turning point in academic research on early medieval Italy took place in the 1970s, and was driven by a much more thorough and direct use of the sources. In the case of written sources, this took the form of much closer analysis of familiar materials. In palaeography, for example, it meant returning to the originals of preserved documents

[6] G. P. Bognetti, 'I loca sanctorum e la storia della Chiesa nel regno dei Longobardi', in *L'età longobarda*, iii (Milan, 1967), pp. 305–45; on Bognetti's historiography, see G. Tabacco, 'Espedienti politici e persuasioni religiose nel medioevo di Gian Piero Bognetti', *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* 24 (1970), pp. 504–23.

[7] e.g. G. Sergi, *I confini del potere* (Turin, 1995).

and the careful study of their external as well as their intrinsic features (that is to say their form, the graphic materials, and the language used) in addition to their contents and the formulas they used. The study of codices as material objects also led researchers to consider them not as separate single texts but rather as groups of texts connected to each other, and as objects designed to be ordered, read, and preserved. A catalogue of the rich epigraphic materials that had previously been completely ignored is currently being compiled, and will enable these materials to be analysed in ways that are both formalistic (with reference, for example, to the writing techniques used) and also oriented towards the purchasers and the uses to which epigraphy could be put. Inscriptions are now studied as products whose purpose was to express—through their graphic form and their texts—the social status of the purchasers.

As well as new ways of studying the wealth of written sources, the new ways of writing the history of the early Middle Ages have been made possible by the veritable explosion of new data derived from archaeological sources. It has been the birth of medieval archaeology as an academic discipline distinct from Christian archaeology, which traditionally has been concerned primarily with studying the monumental traces of early Christianity, that has given the strongest impulse, in Italy as elsewhere in Europe, to the study of early medieval history. The new archaeological research has followed two main paths. It has enabled historians to reconsider subjects that had previously been studied only on the basis of written sources. But it has also brought to light new questions and offered new ways of understanding the history of early medieval Italy. The study of towns, for example, has now been completely freed from the old question of continuity and discontinuity with earlier Roman structures, and is set instead in the perspective of different patterns of regional transformation and above all in the shifting relations between political and economic organization, The fundamental importance of archaeological evidence can also be seen in the new questions being asked about the differing organizational patterns of the rural landscape, which can be reconstructed through the study of the changing functions of buildings and settlements, changing economic resources, types of land use and farming. It has also made possible study of the role played by the aristocracy in founding residential buildings and monasteries, while information on the circulation of certain types of

ceramics has made possible the study of commercial and economic activities.

All these examples illustrate the fundamental importance of archaeology in stimulating new historical debates, which increasingly engage archaeologists as well as historians. This does not mean, however, that the conclusions and interpretations reached by archaeologists and historians on the basis of their own particular sources are always compatible. More often than not, as can clearly be seen in the essays in this volume, they are not compatible at all. But these disagreements and the alternative explanations to which they give rise are in themselves a measure of the vitality of current research and debate on this period. The great expansion of the source materials thanks to new archaeological data has made a major contribution to every field of research, and archaeological data have made a fundamental contribution to the ways in which all the topics and themes addressed in this volume are now studied. Even when it comes to questions like the changing nature of public power, or that of ecclesiastical institutions and the papacy, the sources used in the past can now be augmented by information derived from the material manifestations of power (such as the symbols of power, the material wealth, the siting and organization of solemn public meetings, and the types of building associated with power). Taken together with the data on the institutional and juridical dimensions of power, these sources enable us to study not only institutional changes but also of the reasons that lay behind them and the context in which they took place.

Two more aspects deserve to be mentioned in terms of new perspectives and the demise of established traditions. The first is the question of 'ethnicity', which has now been replaced by the study of the cultural and social identities of the elites. Secondly, contemporary research has by and large abandoned the idea that the lay and ecclesiastical spheres were rigidly separated, and has shown instead the considerable degree of interlinkage between the two, especially in terms of family strategies. On the other hand, recent studies have also challenged the widely accepted view that a written culture that emanated exclusively from the ecclesiastical world was the single vehicle of cultural transmission, taking evidence from the study of epigraphs, codices, and private charters to demonstrate the existence of alternatives.

There is a great deal still to be done, however. To justify at least in part the thematic and regional gaps that will be evident in this volume, it has to be said that the new research has been more vigorous in central and northern Italy, while in southern Italy and the islands institutional themes like the structure of monarchy and of vassalage continue to dominate. These essays will also show how the period with which this volume ends—the one around the turn of the millennium—is studied in ways that look forward towards the development of the more complex ecclesiastical institutions that accompanied the later Reformation of the eleventh- and twelfth-centuries. In the case of the reconstruction of settlement patterns and rural landscapes, however, the cut-off point is, by contrast, the tenth century. These different chronologies relate in part to the timing of changes in particular areas. But it is not a matter of chance that the tenth century emerges in a somewhat fragmented and irregular form. It has an ambiguous status, being both the last century of the early Middle Ages and the beginning of the central part of the Middle Ages. Depending on each scholar's field of specialization, it is as a result either a period of final breakdown or the point of departure. Almost certainly it will be on this century that future research in all the fields discussed in this volume will come to be focused.

As this volume goes to print, I would like to take the opportunity to thank John Davis for his unfailing assistance with every aspect of the book's preparation, as well as Andrew MacLennan, Fiona Kinnear, Jo Stanbridge, and Matthew Cotton for their technical support and their great professional skills, the translators: Andrea Pennacchi (Introduction), Antonio Sennis and Nichola Anderson (chapter 2), Geraldine Ludbrook (chapters 3, 4, 5, 7), Jeremy Scott (chapter 8), Richard Davis (chapter 9), Eric Ingaldson (chapter 10), John Davis (chapter 11), and finally, all the authors for their punctuality and willingness. I hope that this volume will play a part in bringing to an end both the ethnic prejudice against the 'German invaders' and the more contemporary ethnic *topos* reflected in the words of an anonymous reviewer of this project: 'Italian scholars are not usually renowned for their brevity and even the most laconic of scholars would find it difficult to do justice to some of these complex topics in 5,000, 7,500 or even 9,000 words.'

Padova, October 2001

1

Invasions and ethnic identity

Walter Pohl

Romans and barbarians in late Roman Italy

To modern eyes Roman Italy had a very distinct identity, and its Romanness was expressed in numerous cultural features: architecture and crafts, mosaics and inscriptions, institutions and law, literature and education. Indeed, few pre-modern societies have left such lasting marks on the landscape, and in the memories of many generations to come. Still, as Andrea Giardina has argued, Roman Italy had not quite achieved an identity of its own; his book is appropriately titled *Roman Italy: Histories of an Incomplete Identity*. Early Rome had conquered an ethnically heterogeneous country, with *Veneti* and Celts in the North, Etruscans in the Centre, several regional peoples in the South, and Greeks along some of the coastlines. The Romans, in turn, cherished their mythical Trojan origins. Paradoxically, it was the very success of Roman expansion that left little room for the development of an ethnic Roman-Italian identity. In 48 AD, when the emperor Claudius opened the senate to non-Italians a ferocious debate ensued about the value of Italian *consanguinitas*, blood relationship, which proved to be too artificial to be convincing for many contemporaries.[1] As a result, Romanness remained what it had always been: a political identity that easily accommodated those who had the means, and the conviction, to live by its rules. It was precisely this

[1] A. Giardina, *L'Italia romana. Storie di una identità incompiuta* (Rome, Bari, 1997), pp. 3–10.

tension between a strict definition of what it meant to be Roman, and a considerable flexibility as to who could become Roman, that made the Roman model so successful, even in times of crisis (for instance, in the third century). It also coexisted perfectly with civic, regional, or even 'ethnic' identities, many of which survived, however transformed, the centuries of Roman rule in Italy. Thus, for instance, Greek identities in the South going back to the pre-Roman *Magna Grecia* could provide a basis for Byzantine rule up to the eleventh century.

The barbarian invaders of Italy constitute another clear-cut image in the modern mind: fair-haired and blue-eyed heavy-drinking and riotous Germanic warriors, clad in filthy furs, whose plain but violent ways replaced the decadent sophistication of late Rome. The modern image of the barbarian goes back to the long tradition of ethnocentric stereotypes and perceptions in antiquity. The word 'barbarian' itself is of Greek origin, and meant those who could only mutter indistinct gibberish instead of speaking proper Greek. It was then used simply to describe non-Romans, so that barbarians came to be seen as uncivilized, violent, and treacherous, although critics of Roman decadence such as Tacitus and later critics of Christian sinfulness sometimes depicted them as uncorrupted and noble savages.

Like Gibbon watching the sun set over the Roman forum, generations of Europeans have wondered why Rome fell to those barbarians. Down to the present, historians remain divided, with Italian, French, and Spanish historians speaking of 'invasions', while German and English scholars call the same process 'migrations'. Did Rome 'decline and fall', or was it destroyed by invading barbarians? A less controversial and more inclusive concept is the 'transformation of the Roman world'. In this perspective the antagonism between Romans and barbarians was not the key issue as it had been in ancient, medieval and modern thought, and newer approaches have placed greater emphasis on the more complex processes through which the barbarians were integrated into changing late Roman societies. These processes were full of contradictions, conflict, and bloodshed; but more often than not the conflict was not between invaders and others, but developed along different lines.

Italy, as the heart of the empire, had always been a focus of migrations and communications in the Mediterranean and beyond. Italy needed its barbarians: it imported and attracted them. The number

of foreign slaves who came to Italy in the centuries of Roman rule can only be guessed at, but there is no doubt that their manpower was essential to the ancient economy. Prisoners of war were regularly sold as slaves; entire groups of defeated barbarians were settled as *laeti* or *dediticii* in late antique Italy and in other provinces. At the imperial court in Rome (and later, Milan and Ravenna), noble barbarians lived as hostages or refugees, and barbarian soldiers played an important role in the emperor's bodyguard. In fact, it was in the army that barbarians were increasingly welcome. Here, in late antiquity, soldiers of barbarian origin could also rise to the highest ranks. By the time of Theodosius I (d. 395), a majority of 'Roman' officers were in fact barbarians. The most successful among them, the Vandal Stilicho, became consul and patrician and dominated politics in the west after the death of Theodosius. From the third century onwards, internal conflicts and the needs of defence against barbarian incursions had increased Rome's need for soldiers, and many barbarians were prepared to face any risk in return for a share in Rome's goods and prestige. In times of relative peace, Italy saw little of its barbarian defenders. But slowly, they moved closer to the inner circles of power.

The gradual militarization of the Roman world meant that civil society increasingly lost its control over the armed forces. But much of the inner unrest of the fifth century was also due to the attempts by senatorial aristocrats to expand their power. The leading senators still enjoyed a unique position, with huge estates scattered across the empire, traditional careers in the civil service that gave access to the inner circles of power, and political networks that could be the basis for far-reaching alliances. But parallel to the conservative outlook of this ruling elite, a different Roman-barbarian culture of power also came into being. For a long time the army had been an agent of Romanization, but now it also encouraged the rise of sub-imperial identities. The *esprit de corps* cultivated in Roman army units paradoxically encouraged the growth of new ethnic identities within the late Roman system. As political control over the army declined, these more particular loyalties gradually became more important than obedience to the empire. The power of many commanders, for example the fifth-century Roman general and warlord Aetius, was now based on the personal devotion of their soldiers in ways that had some precedent in earlier Roman history. But when they died or were removed from their commands, the armies they had built around

their personal leadership were disbanded. Their position in court politics was also precarious and when Stilicho was overthrown in 407 a massacre of barbarians followed and the core of his troops joined Alaric's armies. Because Alaric, a Roman general of Gothic origin, succeeded in attracting different ethnic loyalties to his army, it proved less vulnerable to defeat or to a change of leaders.

The Goths were the most successful of these groups. Even though the two strongest Gothic powers north of the lower Danube and the Black Sea had succumbed to the Huns around 375, the Goths enjoyed an unrivalled prestige as barbarian soldiers because they were both ferocious fighters and willing to adapt to Roman ways. Whether derived from genealogy, tradition, or imitation, Gothic identity opened the door to military careers in the empire. After the emperor Valens had lost the battle of Adrianople (378) against a Gothic-led alliance of recent immigrants, Rome had been forced to accommodate groups of Goths as quasi-autonomous federates in Roman provinces. Technically, these were components of the Roman army, but at the same time they were able to improve their position through negotiation and blackmail. Alaric, king of the Goths, who moved to Italy around 400 and sacked Rome in 410, was the first barbarian leader who successfully built up an autonomous, albeit precarious non-Roman power base in Italy which enabled him to negotiate a key role in western Roman politics for his Goths. But even his dazzling victories were not sufficient to guarantee a secure hold in the shifting sands of the Italian balance of power; his heirs would prove more successful elsewhere, establishing the Visigothic kingdom in Aquitaine and Spain. In Italy the political elite carefully avoided allowing the Goths to become too strong as a single group, although this required occasional purges in the army.

Other barbarian leaders chose a different strategy. They raised large and heterogeneous armies, and marched into Italy. This was the case of the Goth Radagaisus, whose forces were crushed by Stilicho at Fiesole in 406. Better known is Attila's invasion in 452, after his attack on Gaul had been halted at the Catalaunian Fields in the previous year. Attila assembled a huge army of several tens of thousands of Huns, Goths, Gepids, Heruls, and others, besieged and took Aquileia, and marched as far as Milan, which offered no resistance. Nobody in Italy could have stopped him at this point. But disease and lack of supplies became a problem, while his warriors were already laden

with booty. The example of Alaric, to whom the sack of Rome had brought little lasting success, may have served as a warning, but in any case Attila decided to return to Pannonia, where he died soon after. Papal propaganda soon attributed this to Pope Leo's intervention—a legend that has stuck (the scene can be admired on Raphael's fresco in the Vatican). The Huns had long been pictured by Christian preachers as the apocalyptic people of Magog who were sent as a scourge by God to punish the sinful—more a moral drama than a political event in fact. The incursion of Attila's Huns thus became one of the best-known events of the period, although it was in reality little more than an episode whose outcome showed that even an extraordinary concentration of military force was not sufficient to take control over late Roman Italy (which was almost certainly not Attila's aim anyway). Cities abounding in riches could still easily be plundered, as the Vandal king Geiseric proved when he mounted a sudden raid on Rome from the sea a few years later, in 455. But to gain mastery of the old heartland of the empire, it was necessary to employ the machinery that had been set up by the Romans to govern it.

Odoacer and the kingdom of Italy

From 395 until 476, the western emperors were at the mercy of mainly barbarian commanders (the Vandal Stilicho, the Suevian Ricimer, the Burgundian Gundobad), and often the only option the emperors had was to play their generals off against each other. These barbarian generals held the title of *magister militum* as commanders of the field army as well as that of *patricius*. They received yearly subsidies that allowed them to entertain a large retinue of personal followers, called *buccellarii* after the superior type of bread they received compared to ordinary soldiers. In the highest ranks of this military aristocracy the difference between Romans and barbarians was slight; their families intermarried, and they used similar strategies to compete for the same positions. The 'barbarian' Stilicho celebrated his consulate in the traditional Roman way on an elaborate ivory consular diptych, whereas Aetius, the 'last Roman', as Procopius called him, owed much of his success to a devoted retinue of Huns. The only difference