Literary Perceptions and Social Change: Watching the Fall of the Roman Empire

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It is more and more common in history-writing to cast doubt on the totalising nature of major social changes. The French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and many more recent as well, used to be seen as major breaks, for better or for worse: in political structures, economic structures, cultural patterns, religion, language, all at once. It is increasingly argued that this is an illusion, or at best a half-truth. Above all at the cultural level; for the men and women who made these changes, or lived through them, or were subjected to them, had grown up in different worlds, with pre-revolutionary beliefs, systems of representation, and expectations, much of which inevitably survived the post-revolutionary environment, and inevitably contributed to the construction of that new environment itself.

When dealing with something as emotive as revolutions in the late modern period, some of this style of analysis is clearly polemical: hostile historians can move from the idea that revolution is a Bad Thing to the possibly more reassuring position that in people's hearts and minds it never actually took place at all. But this searching for continuities goes well beyond politically contested moments like these. Increasingly, historical analyses come to smooth every change away: in England, for example, the Norman Conquest, Henry VIII's break with Rome, the Civil War, and the Industrial Revolution have all been very substantially relativised in recent years. This tendency indeed seems to me, as a British historian, particularly strong in England, because one of the abiding English myths about their own history has been that it has no breaks (at least since 1688), dominated as the English supposedly are by sensible pragmatism—we do not have leaps in the dark into unknown futures, unlike the unruly (and largely Catholic) Continentals and Celts, not to speak of the world outside Europe— and recent English historiography has had the great generosity to export the image

of seamless pragmatism to other times and places as well. This caution about historical change is much less common in countries like France or Italy or Spain, by contrast; the argument that the Pétain government in Vichy France shared strong continuities in its practices, values and representations with the Third Republic before it and the Fourth after it remains a controversial one in France, for example, however obvious it may seem to outsiders.

I begin with these observations in order to make some general points explicit at the start. One is that looking for breaks and looking for continuities can both be misused. It is wrong to see discontinuities in the past as too complete; people do not wake up different from one day to the next, they try to live their lives as far as possible in the ways they know, and indeed they largely succeed. Conversely, it is dangerous to try to airbrush all change out of the past; change does take place, sometimes very quickly, and historians who try to deny it are often doing so for motives that are not fully scientific. We need to balance the two, with as much nuance as we can manage. A second point is that moments of major change sometimes set social history and cultural history against each other, with social historians focussing on the breaks and cultural historians on the continuities. This ought not to be the case, for these two types of history-writing are frequently allies, and the history of culture of course has its breaks too (the Reformation is a classic example, not to speak of the ever-contested concept of 'modernity'). Indeed, the relationship between the two is important for me; I am a social historian, but I want to use as much recent cultural history as I can. (I hope I can get around some of the more radical critiques of 'the social', which have anyway become more mediated in recent years.)[1] But, even if the two sub-disciplines maintain an alliance, there is a potential tension over the issue of change all the same; it is likely at the very least to be focussed on different phenomena, and there is a wing of cultural history that tends in practice to downplay change altogether. If we want to guard against this tension, we must at least recognise that it is there.

Medieval history is, I think, particularly prone to a tension between social and cultural analysis. This is because of its documentary source material, which is so restricted in quantity, before the late medieval explosion of archives at least, and also so restricted to probably atypical educated élites. For much of the medieval period, the most polished, 'literary' end of the range of source material is most of the written evidence we have. All sources are cultural constructs, of course, but polished texts are particularly complex to unpick. They are much more intertextual and consciously rhetorical; they are often seen as more fruitful

subjects for literary analysis than are account rolls or notarial registers. As historians have been more influenced by literary studies in recent decades, the analysis of the rhetorical styles and strategies of their sources has come increasingly to be seen as preferable to simply filleting them for their 'truth-content' in time-honoured positivist manner. And so it should be (including in the case of notarial registers, for that matter); even if all you want is 'the facts', you cannot understand what they are supposed to be until you understand the intent of your sources. But there is a risk here, that this becomes the sole aim of the historian. Studies of texts like Bede or Gregory of Tours or Orderic Vitalis or the *Grandes chroniques de France* can become analyses of the intention, the genre, the tropes, the literary models of the author, and not in any sense guides to their social context at all. The text-context relationship, a live issue in literary theory, can be conceived altogether more naïvely by historians, whose lack of interest in theory is well known. Bede and Gregory in the wrong hands could end up without any moorings at all, floating around in a sub-Derridean sea of textual interrelationships and strategies, at best bumping into each other, at worst perhaps sinking. Or, more prosaically, historians who follow this path risk the whole social environment vanishing, not because they have really absorbed post-structuralist tenets, but because they have lost interest in social reconstruction, whether static or dynamic. Such reconstruction is, however, essential if you want to face the issue of social change. What if change really *did* take place? Even rapid change? How could you tell?

The type-example of this problem is, of course, the fall of the Roman empire in the West. This huge event changed the map of Europe and North Africa for ever; the medieval period itself began here. Until the last half of the twentieth century there was little doubt about it. As the traditional narrative runs, barbarian tribes broke the unity of the ancient world; illiterate military élites (and sometimes peasantries) undermined the resonant traditions of educated senatorial and governmental writing; the only literate people were henceforth clerics, and both the quantity and the style of our sources changed dramatically, not for the better; although there was more disagreement among historians about the date and extent of an economic breakdown, its existence was not in dispute; indeed, the population itself collapsed. The Medieval world appeared in some respects as a *tabula rasa,* and normality was only restored in one or more of the 'renaissances', or rediscoveries of the classical world, in the fifteenth century or the twelfth or (for the adventurous) under Charlemagne, according to choice. This is a simplistic set of images, but many elements of it survived as standard

assumptions into my time as an undergraduate student at least. (The east Roman or Byzantine narrative was just as strange, but different, and I shall not discuss it here.)

One obvious problem of this picture—apart from its obvious moralising agenda—is that so much of it is based on a naïve reading of the most polemical sections of our sources. 'All Gaul smoked in a single funeral pyre', as Orientius of Auch wrote in the 430s; Victor of Vita in the late 480s wrote that the Vandals in North Africa in the 430s tortured aristocrats, bishops and women to death, destroyed churches and major civic buildings, and even orchards, and extorted the wealth of the whole population of Carthage; and so on (Orientius II.184; Victor of Vita I.3–12). Historians mostly do not take this sort of thing literally any more, which is a relief; it is far more obvious today than it used to be how the rhetoric of violent destruction fitted a variety of polemical strategies. Instead, in recent years historians have swum hard in the other direction. They do not see political crisis in the fifth century, but, rather, transformation, which could be very slow. It is not to be doubted that 'barbarian' groups took over political power in the provinces of the western Roman empire, but they did so because they were accepted by Romans into the structures of political power (Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans* 3–35 and Durliat 186). They did not dress very differently from the Romans; most of them spoke Latin, perhaps exclusively; they were military leaders, and soldiers had long come from the frontiers of the empire, which were much the same in social/cultural terms on each side of the frontier (Pohl, 'Telling the Difference' 40–51 for dress; Amory 102–08 for Gothic language; Whittaker); Roman emperors were usually from military families, and 'barbarian' kings were culturally almost identical to them; the new ruling groups anyway used all the Roman infrastructure they could, and had the same relationships to local élites, including the intellectual élites who wrote our surviving written sources, that their predecessors had. Political culture and state administration did not have to change at all. Indeed, 'barbarian' identity itself was constantly in flux; hardly any of the new ethnic groups which took over Roman provinces in the fifth century had long histories as a single entity—though they soon invented them (for guides to the enormous literature on ethnogenesis, see Pohl, *Völkerwanderung*, Wolfram and Pohl, and Geary). This 'ethnogenesis' model is now widely accepted, and it has generated variants in which non-Roman ethnic identities have been increasingly seen as imposed by the Romans themselves. The Slavs can even be seen as an invention of Roman ethnographers, only subsequently being accepted as a label by a heterogeneous

group of peoples, not all of which spoke any sort of Slavonic language; the Goths in Italy can even be seen as nothing more than the Italian army, redefined in ethnic terms by the civilian Romans (Curta, Amory).

The 'barbarian invasions' thus, for many historians, collapse as a category. The empire had always been ruled by military figures, and its successor states still were: 'invasions' can largely be seen as rogue armies, soon bought back into normality by the granting of political power; and 'barbarian-ness' itself can be seen as an exclusively Roman preoccupation, a reshaping of cultural attitudes by civilians who had always been contemptuous of military culture while at the same time obsequious to the power of its bearers. What we see, that is to say, is only a surface cultural shift; militarised rulers are simply refigured by our sources, all of them the product of traditional Roman élites, from being not *fully* Roman (as with the condemnation of third-century emperors for their poor Latin), to not being Roman at all, being Gothic or Frankish, although still being capable of responding to the cultural superiority of those traditional élites, whether secular or, increasingly, ecclesiastical. Another cultural shift was the increasing role of Christian culture in élite education, which meant that it became by the seventh century much more important to know one's Bible than one's Virgil; as a result, the style of our sources changes substantially, creating the superficial impression of a literary downturn, but only to people who assume that only Virgil legitimises a literary culture. Actually, there is more writing surviving from the seventh century West than from any previous century except the fourth and the sixth; it is by no means a 'dark' age, although you have to like Christian rhetoric quite a lot to appreciate it fully. (Much the same is true, incidentally, of Byzantium; see Cameron.)

Many of the other aspects of political culture remained exactly the same, however. Most of the administrative building-blocks of the Carolingian period had Roman roots. Victory imagery in political ritual was largely unchanged (McCormick). The concept of public power and responsibility was invoked by Charlemagne in 800 much as it was by Theodosius in 380; the two cared about the importance of correct Christian belief as a basis for legitimate political power in similar ways, too, and were, although authoritarian, very respectful of the moral power of church leaders. It becomes, as a result, possible to discuss the Carolingian empire, into the ninth century now, *as if it was* the Roman empire (examples can be found in McKitterick, *Medieval History*). Imagery, collective political practice, even the textual strategies of writers, do not seem very distinct; Einhard, who modelled his *Life* of Charlemagne on Suetonius' *Life* of Augustus,

seems more and more part of an unbroken tradition, not in need of any renaissance, although it was more commonly the Old Testament and the Christian tradition of the late Roman empire, more than the pagan classics, that was the point of reference for authors of the period. (These extended well outside an ecclesiastical élite, we must recognise, for the Carolingian aristocracy, male and female, was largely literate; see McKitterick, *Carolingians*.) If we move away from political élites to the peasant majority, we can also identify strong continuities, for the agricultural world arguably changed less, both socio-economically and culturally, than any other sector of Western society; here, there are a few historians who propose that it changed so little that ancient slavery was still in existence until the eleventh century, although this is an extreme position, and can be set aside in practice (Bois 31–61). It is not that historians believe the Roman empire was still in existence in the West, under other names at least; actually, a handful of historians have argued that the Roman empire's institutions survived unchanged into the ninth century, so that the empire never actually fell, but they too remain a minority, and a beleaguered one—rightly, in my view (see Durliat; cf. Wickham, 'La chute'). But it has become increasingly easy to extend the relatively recent term 'late Antiquity' well past its initial identification with the late Roman empire, first into the Arab caliphate, whose Roman roots are fairly easily accepted, and now into the Carolingian West; the recent large-scale Harvard guide to *Late Antiquity* has an end date in 800, in West and East alike. Peter Brown has elsewhere seen this rough date as 'the true end of a very ancient world': the Carolingians may have been the heirs of Rome, but it was in their period, Brown argues, that culture decisively shifted, and a 'mandarin' western Church became separable from 'profane' society for the first time.[2] This end of Antiquity, all the same, has become profoundly separate from the fall of Rome, and this latter change is entirely a cultural one.

I characterise here a widely-accepted historiographical view, obviously very briefly and generically. Nor do I disagree with its broad lines. I disagree with some of its details, for sure, and I certainly reject some of its excesses. There are also disagreements among scholars over when the major moments of cultural change occurred; 600, 800 and 900 can be all found canvassed for, in more or less explicit terms, by recent writers. There are also national nuances. An overriding continuitism is assumed as normal by the 'pragmatic' English, and is seen in largely Romanist terms (at least outside the history of England itself); but a Romanist vision is the product of the crucial importance of the Christianisation of the Roman empire for a sector of the French, and is a conscious

sign of a rejection of Nazism, with its romanticisation of Germanic culture, for many Germans and Austrians (Pohl, *Germanen*), whereas in Spain it seems obvious simply because the Arab conquest of 711 was so much more important a break. The generalised image of a cultural late Antiquity extending to 800 or so is only really common in the USA. The Italians, together with another sector of the Germans, are the keenest to remain with an image of a sharp break in the fifth and sixth centuries (the best critique of the 'explosion' of late Antiquity is in Italian; see Giardina); it remains self-evident for both, although for different reasons, that Germanic societies were something new. Indeed they were, in part, of course; Anglo-Saxon England had few Roman elements in its political structures, before its conversion to Christianity at least; and even the Continental kingdoms, in which Roman structural elements were overwhelmingly dominant, inherited some practices from the Germanic past, notably the political importance of public assemblies. All the same, an implicit Romanist paradigm, a presumption of continuity, is increasingly dominant everywhere, and, *in the terms in which it is posed,* it is a convincing one.

But. There has to be a but, and in fact there are several; I wish to set out three. The first problem is that this presumption remains largely implicit. You do not find many historians actually *saying* that the Visigoths or the Carolingian Franks were much the same as the imperial Romans, still less explaining why and how, or what differences there actually were; it is rather that people often write *as if* they presume substantial continuities between them. As a result the Romanist paradigm remains strikingly unthought-out; it is assumed, rather than interrogated; even by the fuzzy standards accepted as normal by historians, this is an unfocused set of concepts, and it only gains paradigmatic status because of the weakness of its opponents, at least in the fields of cultural and political history. This lack of awareness has also led many historians in the last few decades simply to accept the assumptions of their sources. They may have rejected the rhetoric of catastrophe, but they have had no difficulty in accepting the rhetoric of accommodation, which is equally present in fifth- and sixth-century texts.

Consider the position of the authors of our sources. They are a long-standing cultural élite, both secular and ecclesiastical, and they face, at the end of the Roman empire, the new political dominance of social and ethnic groups whom they had, before 400, either despised or feared or barely noticed at all. They face choices which you may recognise: either to valorise the culture of these social/ethnic groups, setting it on the level of Christian–Roman traditions, the multicultural choice; or else to argue (or pretend) that the new groups really

share Christian–Roman values and can be treated as if they did share these values, a choice which, even if false, may become true with time, with the experience of government, power, wealth, which are still figured in Roman terms—cultural difference here becomes cancelled. They may indeed make both of these choices at once; people are often contradictory, after all, and plenty of late Roman writers certainly were. By and large, however, those who fully committed to the multicultural choice were not our authors; they were those who joined the Frankish or Visigothic ruling élite, sent their sons to train with the sons of that élite, and thus became the military aristocracy which our authors wrote about. Our authors, by contrast, made the 'monocultural' choice; when they were seeking to accommodate the new ruling élite, which was usually, they wrote about it as if it was Roman. Sidonius Apollinaris describing Theoderic II of the Visigoths, Ennodius and Cassiodorus describing or speaking for Theoderic of the Ostrogoths, Florentinus describing Thrasamund of the Vandals, Avitus writing to Sigismund of the Burgundians, Venantius Fortunatus describing Charibert and Chilperic of the Franks, all figured them in highly Roman terms (Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistula* 1.2; Ennodius, *Panegyricus* n. 263; Cassiodorus 1.1, 11.1; *Anthologia latina* 1: n. 376; Avitus of Vienne, *Epistulae* 23, 77; Venantius Fortunatus 6.1_2, 9.1_3). For the most part, they were indeed rewarded by their patrons for doing so: these rulers wished to be describable in a traditional Roman language, in terms of traditional Roman and Christian values, at least some of the time. The 'monocultural' choice, however incomplete, that is to say, was not a deluded one. But it is almost all we have; and today's historians, precisely because they are so implicit about their assumptions, have very often taken that trend in our sources very literally. The early middle ages was, I do not doubt, far more Roman than most people thought in 1950, but it is made still more so by the literalism of some historians.

The second problem is that this *Romanitas* is figured above all in cultural terms. This to some extent mitigates the literalism I have just criticised; for some analyses of the authors of the fifth and sixth centuries are very sophisticated indeed. Just to take one example, Gregory of Tours is particularly well studied, as is proper: this late sixth-century bishop in Frankish Gaul (d. 594) was the author of some 800 pages of text in the standard edition, more than any other Latin writer in the four centuries after 430 save his contemporary in Rome, Gregory the Great. Gregory of Tours, author above all of a history of his times, used to be seen as a naïve chronicler of the brutal behaviour of a barbarised society. This is all nuanced now; Gregory is seen as an apostle for a dominant

episcopal Church, under whose guidance salvation can be obtained (and only without which is all 'rustic' and brutal); he is seen as a careful juxtaposer of narrative exempla for typological purposes; his lack of linkage between secular cause and effect is seen as a deliberate argument that only God determines human events; his immense interest in saints' cults and their legitimation is seen as a logical extension of late Roman (late Antique) religious practice. Gregory is seen, in sum, as a traditional late Roman urban aristocrat, bishop, and practical theologian. (The historiography here is now very large. See Goffart, *Narrators*; Brown, *Cult of the Saints*; Van Dam; Heinzelmann.) He was also fully part of Frankish political society, which he never regards as culturally distinct from his own traditions, and almost never even calls 'Frankish' (*Francus* and *Romanus* are words almost absent from his writing). This makes it easy to regard Merovingian–Frankish politics, as seen by Gregory, largely in Roman terms as well, which, as I have just argued, is a general trend. (There is here an alternative, much more Germanist, view of the politics of the period, mostly in German; but it pays much less attention to Gregory; see, for instance, Bergengruen and Grahn-Hoek). On the basis of that Romanist presumption, some very nuanced cultural history has been written about Gregory. Rather less of any other sort of history, however; social, economic, even political historians have tended to treat Gregory of Tours as a giant cake from which they restrict themselves to picking out the fruit. A socio-economic history of Tours which pays proper attention to Gregory's discursive strategies could be written, but has not been.[3] As a result, what is new about Gregory's immediate environment is also much less clear than it could be. As I said at the start, change gets effaced by this sort of analysis; or else is introduced rather jerkily, as an afterthought, and in a much more superficial form.

The third problem is that this assumption of continuity is only based on the written sources, and is dramatically falsified by our other major source, archaeology. In the West, the later Roman empire was one of expensive and ambitious building in both city and country, often on a very large scale; of a commitment on the part of élites to expensive clothing, jewellery and life-style (these are visible in texts as well, but they are systematically confirmed by archaeological finds); and of extremely complex patterns of the production and movement of goods, which could be made industrially and transported long distances in bulk (the best archaeological indicator here is ceramics, which survives well on sites and can be provenanced both through style and through petrological analysis). All these elements simplified radically in the centuries after 400, with the sole exception of clothes and jewels for the rich. Cities

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contracted in size; buildings became far smaller and simpler, except the residences and churches of political leaders, but these were relatively few—Charlemagne's Aachen and some of the early medieval churches in Rome stand out now, and certainly stood out in the ninth century, but would not have seemed at all remarkable in the fourth. The scale and complexity of the production and distribution of goods dropped substantially. This varied very much from region to region within the former empire, in the dating, the speed and the extent of economic simplification. All the same, if it was normal to transport bulk goods the length of the Mediterranean during the empire, it was rare to transport them more than a couple of hundred kilometres by 800. In many places, by then, people consumed food and artisanal goods which were exclusively produced in their immediate localities. Only in northern Gaul, the heartland of Frankish political power, was there an exchange network in the West that united a substantial region. Although there too, even under Charlemagne, that network was more tenuous than it had been under Rome; in all the post-Roman world only Egypt maintained a larger-scale regional exchange system by now (see Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages*).

These are shifts which are archaeologically certain. They entailed sharp changes that must initially be described in economic terms, production and distribution, but they had, of course, social implications. They have led some archaeologists to continue to use the traditional imagery of catastrophe with the same enthusiastic naïvety that some historians display when they talk about continuity. But, even if we seek to avoid that—and we have no choice, for the two sorts of evidence must somehow be reconciled—we have to recognise the existence of substantial social changes. I have argued elsewhere that the notable economic simplification visible everywhere in the former Roman empire (except Egypt) is a marker above all of the lessening of aristocratic and state wealth. The post-Roman kingdoms of the West ceased to tax, not immediately, but increasingly, above all in the sixth century; by 700 there was nothing left except fragments of the Roman fiscal system in any of the Romano-Germanic kingdoms. This dramatically lessened the resources available to rulers; one would have to have access to enormous amounts of public land (and thus the rents due from agricultural labour), or else to the booty deriving from consistently successful war, to be able to match the receipts of even a moderately well-organised fiscal system. The Franks under Charlemagne, and maybe some of his sixth-century predecessors, arguably managed this, but one cannot suggest it for anyone else, and even the Franks did not maintain it by 900. At the same time, however,

aristocrats also became less wealthy. The lists of properties that survive in early medieval written sources allow us to see that the scale of private landowning dropped substantially in all the Western provinces, except, once again, in the Frankish heartland, and there too that scale decreased later, in the tenth century.

There were fewer concentrations of wealth in the early medieval West, then, than there had been under late Rome, and this meant fewer foci of stable demand, for construction or artisanal production; hence the economic simplification visible in the archaeology. But the lessening of élite wealth also had a profound impact on social hierarchies. Poorer aristocrats means more landowning peasants; poorer and thus weaker states means less political control over local societies. The early medieval period was one of an intense localisation; relationships between social groups were negotiated differently from county to county, city to city, village to village. Without an articulated state system and without so much private wealth, aristocratic dominance was more difficult. Not impossible, by any means—there were plenty of people for whom subjection did not substantially change at all—but, globally, more difficult. And also more direct; aristocrats needed their own armed men to dominate their neighbours. This was that much more easy because of another social change of the period, the militarization of aristocratic social practice; the civilian senatorial aristocracy of the Roman empire vanished. This in itself had a considerable impact both on material culture and on written culture, as early medieval military aristocracies were less interested in either architectural display (the flashy rural villas found by archaeologists) or in the secular literary expertise that underpinned so much imperial Roman writing. But, to return to domination, it must be added that the private armies of the early middle ages were also expensive, probably more expensive than the rich aristocratic lifestyles of late Rome had been. Aristocrats who wished to dominate wide areas had to bear a considerable additional cost, at a moment when their resources were fewer. Not all of them wanted to do so, not for many centuries. This, too, had an effect on the firmness of social hierarchies in the early middle ages.

Obviously, I cannot encapsulate and explain all the changes (and continuities) of half a millennium in the equivalent of fifteen modern countries in the space of this essay. All those local differences must be taken on trust here. But it can at least be added that the economic and social changes I have just sketched owe very little to the 'barbarian invasions'; they can be found in the parts of southern Italy and south-west France and western Britain where few if any immigrants settled. They are a product of systemic changes, and they do not have to disturb

the consensus, which I have already sketched, that now sees the post-Roman world very much in a Romanist paradigm. Change was for the most part internal. But it did take place, all the same, and in some places that change was very sharp. And that can cause problems for a bland continuitism, seen in exclusively cultural terms. Gregory of Tours wrote as a late Roman senatorial and episcopal aristocrat, and the city he was based in is seen in his writings as a vibrant centre, with churches, a collectivity of *cives,* citizens, at least one aristocratic residence, and a major cult centre, St.-Martin, less than a kilometre away. But the archaeological work of the 1980s showed only a tiny late and post-Roman occupied area around the cathedral of Tours, and then almost nothing until the pilgrimage complex; its excavator, Henri Galinié, argued that Tours was by now not an urban centre in economic terms at all. If you look carefully at Gregory's words, you can then see that his *cives* and *Turonici* do not need to be dwellers in the city itself, and that his large church congregations included both country-dwellers and pilgrims. Tours is pictured by Gregory in classic late Roman terms, but it was important for him as a religious, rather than as a secular, centre. Gregory himself was probably as rich as most late Roman aristocrats in Gaul, but his environment, whether or not he realised it (and the odds are that he did not) was substantially simpler than was the norm during the Roman empire.[4]

Or take seventh-century Spain. Isidore of Seville (d. 636) wrote his *Etymologiae*, one of the major intellectual points of reference of the medieval period, in a sort of time-warp: he, at least, was still using Virgil, of whom there are over 250 citations in the text; by contrast, there are only four of Jerome, and only one each of Augustine and Ambrose (although, to be fair, he knew them well), and there is only one reference in the whole book to the ruling Visigoths in Spain (although, again to be fair, Isidore did also write a brief history of them). The Visigothic state, for its part, had a very Roman political style, particularly visible in the seventh century; its legislation was heavily influenced by late Roman law and also by a violence of tone typical of late Roman legislative language; its elaborate ceremonial ritual was also inherited from late Roman practice; major innovations were borrowed from the Old Testament, not from any post-Roman model, unless it was Byzantium, the empire of New Rome. Visigothic kings were ambitious, and saw themselves as following and developing traditions that were either old or very old. It is far from unreasonable to compare them to contemporary Byzantine emperors, and they did so themselves.[5] But that political-cultural self-confidence, creativity and complexity existed inside a Spain whose economy was rapidly becoming more localised than almost anywhere

else in the West, and in which artisanal skills were in some areas virtually disappearing as demand dropped (Gutiérrez Lloret, Juan Tovar and Blanco García, and Vigil-Escalera Guirado). Not that this means that the Visigothic kings were weak, or their state doomed to failure, as a persistent historiography claims on different grounds; but it is at least clear that it was easy for them to continue to invoke a Roman political practice inside a peninsula that was rapidly losing an economic coherence that Romans would have regarded as self-evident, and at least some of the aristocrats and bishops who bought into that practice must have had resources far inferior to that considered normal for politicians under the empire. I am sure that the kings, precisely because of this, had their élites under control, but local societies in Spain will have been moving apart, inexorably, for all the centralising ambition of the royal palace.

I am counterposing political-cultural imagery with socio-economic patterns here, and I am arguing that the second could change dramatically without the first shifting very much at all. This creates the disjuncture I began with, of a 'fall of the western Roman empire' that can be made invisible in the authors contemporary with it. In a strict sense, no-one was *watching* the fall of the empire; even when they lamented disasters, the authors of our sources were doing their best to avoid any such perception (many of them took for granted, after all, that if the Roman empire ended, the Last Judgement would immediately occur; see Paschoud). But I do not want to appear to counterpose cultural 'image' and social 'reality'. The Romanising politics of the Visigothic kings was perfectly real, and it was also not self-deceiving. It was just that the social context had *also* changed, in some places radically. I have, however, offered you a social context visible thanks to non-written, material, sources. These have their own cultural identity, their own systems of signs, sometimes their own rhetoric, but their patterns are at least external to the written word. If we did not have the archaeology, what sorts of social change would we be able to deduce from the sources? Can we, indeed, make such deductions at all? I would argue that we can, but that we have to do it in full awareness of the rhetorical and other discursive strategies our authors engage with. I will finish this essay by taking one example of this, the image of taxation, tracked through some of the authors of late Rome and the early middle ages living in Gaul, later the Frankish kingdoms.

Salvian of Marseille wrote his *On the Governance of God* in the 440s. It is a long sermon about the awful state of the Roman empire in the age of invasions. All the bad events of the previous generation are the fault of the Romans. Now the Romans are Christian, they should know better, but they don't, whereas pagans and

barbarians have the excuse of Ignorance. Barbarians are more moral, but they are naturally inferior, in effect noble savages; so if they defeat the Romans it is a really serious indictment of Roman sin. The Romans sin a lot; merchants are perjurers, city councillors are tyrants, soldiers are robbers, senators and rich people are criminals (Salvian, *De gubernatione Dei* 3.50–55). In particular, Salvian focuses on the evils of taxation, public entertainment, and sex. He makes the most vibrant and detailed denunciations of these that I know from this period, largely because he gets less sidetracked than do some into long scriptural quotes. His tax section has been much used because of its detail. The land tax is intolerably high, and unfairly exacted, for the rich get tax privileges; the poor cannot pay it; they enter the clienteles of the rich to protect themselves. They also sell their property to avoid the tax burden and become tenants; but this is a confidence trick, for they end up paying it anyway, and lose their freedom as well. This section has been taken literally by a large number of historians (including me, twenty years ago), who see in it a demonstration that the Roman fiscal system was collapsing under its own weight, that patronage undermined it, that the poor lost their lands, and that people preferred barbarian rule, since the barbarians did not tax (Salvian says this too). This is naïve (*De gubernatione Dei* 5.17–45; for comments see Wickham, 'The Other Transition' 17–18; or, preferably, Krause 233–331). Salvian is self-contradictory, in that the poor who physically cannot pay tax obviously could not pay tax and rent as well; he is also demonstrably inaccurate when he says that barbarians do not tax. But it is naïve above all for two other reasons. One is that Salvian is inveighing against a system which he clearly believes is working, simply too well, and unjustly; he is no evidence at all for a system in decline. The second is that he is writing a sermon, not an article in the *British Journal of Sociology*. He is *supposed* to denounce; his aim is not to describe, but to get people to repent. He claims that everyone is destroyed by the tax system; but he also claims that the whole population of Africa is totally given up to evildoing, and that huge numbers of the population of Carthage are homosexuals and transvestites (*De gubernatione Dei* 7.54–83). If we doubt the second, then why accept the first as literal?

If we do not accept Salvian's tax descriptions as literal, however, as I now would not, we still have to recognise that, in a denunciation of the age, he chose to focus on taxation, alongside sex and public spectacles, more classic Christian targets. That is to say, taxation is for him the guiding metaphor for the whole of the wickedness of public life, rather than, let us say, judicial corruption or military oppression. Once he has chosen tax, the way he writes about it unfolds according to its own logic; but the choice is still important. And, one can add, unjust taxation

reappears prominently in other critiques of Roman politics of the same period; it is for many people the least acceptable injustice (here, one must add, judicial corruption does come close as an image). Salvian clearly expects his audience to react to a tax denunciation, and so do other late Roman writers: Priskos, Sidonius Apollinaris, Victor of Vita, Prokopios (Priscus 268–72; Sidonius, *Epistula* 2.1; Victor of Vita, *Historia persecutionis* 2.2; Prokopios 7.1.32). Not that such denunciations can in themselves be taken as proof of the force of the system; moral panics can be very phoney indeed, as we know. But tax also gets into largely positive rhetorical tropes as well, as when Sidonius elsewhere, in the 470s, berates false accusers, who begrudge 'rest to the retired, salaries to the active, properties to the provincials, priesthoods to city councillors, tax-deferments to cities, taxes to tax-collectors' and so on: clearly things that go together normally in his world (Sidonius, *Epistula* 5.7, cf. 7.12, 8.8). Tax and its assessment pervades the rhetorical palette of late Roman writers, and it is this that is a marker of its normality.

Gregory of Tours, writing in the 570s–590s, disliked tax as well, and assumed his audience did, for the same sorts of reasons. He gives more specific instances, because he is writing a history, but it is a history with a moral and polemical intent, as we have seen, and it is significant that for him, too, political injustice and taxation go together. This Roman cultural image has remained, that is to say, one of the signs of continuity discussed earlier. But there are differences. Tax is unjust, but it is particularly unjust in Tours, where it had been previously remitted; indeed, good kings, overall, remit taxes (Gregory several times uses the image of throwing registers in the fire). Also: tax is unjust, but it is particularly unjust if assessments have not recently been updated, because the wrong people are having to pay it. No tax system can survive without regular reassessment, and in the fifth century updatings were normally yearly; Gregory's imagery assumes that they may be delayed fifteen years, even several generations (*Libri historiarum* 3.25, 5.28, 34; 6.28; 9.30, 10.7). So, the overall insistence on taxation survives, but the logic of presenting its injustice focuses on permanent remission (or its absence) and delayed assessment, and these images are largely new. Actually, if you take Gregory's descriptions literally, tax is also rather lower than it was before as well, but I want here to focus on his imagery, which I think is a surer guide to the things he took for granted, and supposed his audience would. Gregory's wider rhetoric can be instructive, too. King Chilperic, whom Gregory hated, was assassinated in 584. Gregory does a set-piece denunciation of him as an obituary, at some length: Chilperic ravaged his kingdom, showed no remorse, confiscated land unjustly, ate

too much, wrote bad poetry, hated the poor, hated clerics and the church, tore up wills, ignored the law, tortured people sadistically (6.46). This *damnatio* is of course a detailed portrait in negative of Gregory's sense of good rulership, rather than an accurate account of Chilperic. But, in this context, it is significant that it does not mention tax. Chilperic did tax unjustly in Gregory's eyes, as his more detailed instances of taxation show; but tax imagery was not in the front of his mind when he listed the king's misdeeds. This is very different from Salvian and Sidonius, and is itself a clue to the changed role of taxation in the political structures of the 580s. Gregory stresses a standard set of misdeeds in many ways here (except Chilperic's poetry), but tax has gone from it.

The next centuries see plenty of denunciations of oppression and abuse in our sources. These show the increasing influence of Biblical imagery, and the Old Testament becomes ever more visibly a model for kingship, both good and bad. The moralisation of political discourse reached a peak under Charlemagne and the following two generations, a period when, as already noted, most of the political élite were literate, and Biblical knowledge was common. A bad king in the Bible such as Rehoboam was in large part bad because of his taxation; his famous phrase 'I will chastise you with scorpions' relates precisely to his planned tax burden. This sort of behaviour was available as a rhetorical device to ninth century writers, that is to say. But Rehoboam was not used as an image to attack unjust kings; and the image of royal *tributa,* the term used in the Latin Vulgate, barely appears, and is given no prominence. Injustice and illegality are now differently figured, and taxation is, even more completely than for Gregory, no longer part of it.[6] The demise of the land tax can be tracked in a variety of sources. In the Frankish lands, it can be dated to the seventh century, with some fragmentary tributes surviving into the eighth. The Carolingians did not exact it, although some tributes, associated in particular with the avoidance of army service, sometimes seem to have been fairly regular; Charles the Bald even exacted two taxes to pay the Vikings, in 866 and 877, which were based on an organised fiscal assessment, although these were not repeated (*Annales Bertiniani*, s.aa. 866, 877; see in general W. Goffart, 'Old and new in Merovingian taxation'; Lot 83–118; Gockel 96–100; Innes 153–59). If one wanted, one could argue for a partial re-establishment of a Carolingian fiscal system. It would be very important indeed for a rereading of the state structure of the ninth century, and for the issue of the accumulation of wealth, as mentioned earlier, if you could show the Carolingians taxed. I think it would be a mistake to do so; the absence of any evidence for the documentation of tax assessment except for brief chronicle

references to Charles the Bald's two taxes is for me decisive proof against it, for you cannot tax without some form of assessment, and assessment documentation, or at least references to it, have certainly survived from the Roman empire, again in a variety of sources, and so ought easily to have survived from the Carolingian period. But, even without that, it is equally important that tax *imagery* had vanished from our sources.[7] Notwithstanding all of their dependence on Roman and Biblical traditions, where such imagery was strong, it had become meaningless to authors (and presumably to their audiences) even as rhetoric. This is a significant cultural change, if you compare major Carolingian writers such as Agobard and Hincmar to Salvian. Indeed, the absence of current tax imagery may even have made it harder for kings and princes to think their way to re-establishing it. The abandonment of tax imagery on the cultural level is, of course, once more a clue to the abandonment of the practice of taxation on the institutional or social level, if that is what you want to study. But it is also a significant internal shift, even if you are above all interested in culture. When constructing the image of the bad king, *tributa* ceased to be relevant to our authors as a discursive element. Tax did not add to the conviction of an argument; it might even have made it seem too arcane, too textual, although it is hard to be sure about that. We are, all the same, looking at change.

Culture and society used to be seen holistically; it used to be assumed that they had homogeneous structures, which could be described in the round, and which had straightforward internal relationships, as with the Reflection Theory of some forms of Marxism, or Braudel's tripartite division of the historical process. This is now almost wholly out of date; thirty years of social history and twenty years of cultural history have insisted on difference, the dissolution of overarching models, the creation of microhistories, of cultural dissonances, of competing images and narratives. This is entirely positive; but it seems to me worthwhile considering that we could also be putting these different elements back together again. Microsocieties can be compared; competing narratives, or the audiences for such narratives, can be put into dialogue, with each other and with the social environments authors and audiences lived in. And this comparison, this dialogue, is vital if we want to understand change. Edward Thompson famously said that, if you wanted to understand class, it was wrong to stop the time-machine and look at its elements, because it was the '*way the machine works* once it is set into motion' which was what you had to be concerned with (*Poverty of Theory* 85). This is still true, and not only for class. Take history apart, separate out all its relationships and discourses, like a watch, and all you get is bits. You will

understand its complexity much better, in all its contradictoriness, but all you will have is bits. The watch has to be put back together for it to be able to run again. If you want to understand *change*, it has to run again. So you really do have to bring cultural and social history together again at the end—with material culture too for that matter—if you want to understand the total historical process. The fall of the western Roman empire is only one out of a legion of test cases for that, but its utility is that it is an acute example of social change, which forces recomposition on us in the end. The history we write if we do put it all together will be awesomely, perhaps impossibly, complicated, but it is worth the effort.

NOTES

1. For a revaluing of the social by the cultural avant-garde, see e.g Bonnell and Hunt, esp. the introduction and chapters 1 and 2. I am very grateful to Leslie Brubaker and Mayke de Jong for reading and commenting on this text.

2. Bowersock et al. vii–viii (though not all its contributors really got the idea; the book has very little on the West after 550); Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom* 232 (quote), 264–98; for 'mandarin'; De Jong, 'Some reflections' 61–69, although she sees (as do others) ecclesiastical and secular élites as united, not separated, by language in the ninth century. Carolingian élites also saw themselves as clearly post-Roman, one must add: see, for instance, Garrison 129–31, commenting on *Lex Salica* 6-9; McKitterick, *History and Memory* 206–10.

3. L. Pietri, *La ville de Tours du IVe au VIe siècle* ought to be that book, and is good, but has a very literal view of Gregory as a source.

4. See for example Gregory of Tours 2.38, 5.18, 6.22, 23, 47 (with Pietri 339–430, 448–59), set against Galinié.

5. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* (compare his *Historia Gothorum Wandalorum Sueborum* 267–303); for comments on political culture, see, for instance, De Jong, 'Adding Insult to Injury', and Herrin.

6. *Biblia vulgata*, 2 Paralipomenon 10.11, 14, 18. To Carolingian writers, Rehoboam's political failure was caused by his youthful excess, not his oppression (see, for instance, Alcuin, *Epistula* 281; and his oppression was, as far as I have found, universally seen as standing for *mali rectores in ecclesia*, i.e. wicked bishops, not kings at all: see for example Hraban Maur, cols. 483–4; Walafrid Strabo, col. 681.

7. As it did not in contemporary critiques of tax-raising states: e.g. *Crónica mozárabe de 754*, cc. 51, 62, 76, 82, 91; Theophanes 375, 443, 475.

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