CHAPTER 9

Habitus Barbarus: Did Barbarians Look Different From Romans?*

The Problem

The purpose of my lecture is simply to argue that the barbarians who entered the Roman Empire in the so-called Age of Migrations could be recognised, that their appearance was different from that of the older inhabitants of the Roman Empire. I don’t mean that every barbarian could immediately be distinguished as such. The Gothic king Theoderic is reported to have said that that the poor Roman imitates the Goth, and the well-to-do Goth the Roman. Theoderic tells us that Romans and Goths adopted each other’s habitus, but in doing so he takes it for granted that there was such a thing as a typical Goth for a Roman to imitate.1 I am therefore in good company when I argue that it is meaningful to talk of a typical barbarian appearance.

Why is it worth while to argue a point that might seem common sense, and in no need of discussion? Certainly many generations would have taken the reality of a habitus barbarus for granted. Why should it be necessary to argue the point now? There are two principal reasons. One reason is that: there is a very strong tendency among some historians of this period today to minimise the importance of barbarian ethnic identities and hence also to minimise the impact of the barbarians on the empire. One aspect of this is a strong desire also to reduce to a minimum the differences between barbarians and Romans, and to exaggerate the extent to which the barbarians were romanised.

The other reason why the distinctness of the gentes now needs to be emphasised is archaeological. For many years archaeologists believed that they could establish the presence of settled barbarians from grave goods, especially metal ware, belt buckles, brooches, jewellery with garnet and glass cloisonné ornament, gilt bronze eagles. Now it has been established that the assumption that the presence of such objects is certain proof of the presence of barbarians is a mistake. These objects were also worn by Romans, and what is more, even the barbarians themselves seem not to have used many of these items before they

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1 Romanus miser imitatur Gothum et utilis Gothus imitatur Romanum (Anon. Vales. 61).
entered the Empire. So many archaeologist have concluded that this evidence is completely irrelevant.

I am not an archaeologist and I am not going to discuss the significance of grave goods. This paper will be concerned with literary sources and with the fact that there are dozens of passages in Roman authors which seem to assume that barbarians could be recognised by appearance, for instance length of hair, and shape of beard, as well as by dress, notably the wearing of trousers, and distinctive boots. To make a case that the barbarians were indeed so assimilated that they were indistinguishable from Romans you must disqualify all the literary evidence. Arguments can certainly be found which can be applied more or less plausibly to a large number of descriptions of barbarians to support the case that these descriptions are not to be taken at face value. I will return to these arguments later. Here there is not the space to look at the material as a whole and to discuss in every case whether a text describes a stereotype or the reality. Six examples will have to suffice. But I think that together they make a strong case that there was indeed such a thing a as *habitus barbarus*, and that in general barbarians could be distinguished from Romans by their outward appearance, even if Roman fashions were sometimes, and in some circumstances, adopted by barbarians and vice versa. My interpretation of the texts is argued in each case against that argued by von Rummel. This unfortunately

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