Creatures of the Long Night

John K. Hord
CREATURES OF THE LONG NIGHT: MAN AND SOCIETY AT THE END OF CIVILIZATION

JOHN K. HORD

Prefatory note. Historical events occur in specific individual contexts, and as a rule it is not the events themselves but their interpretation in such contexts that commands the attention of historians. Thus by rights any study across multiple civilizations should be a whole-volume or even multi-volume affair, in order to explore properly the contexts of the events being compared. But publication costs being so high nowadays, such a rule would serve only to render most comparative discussion impossible, and certainly to remove it from the purview of most journals. On the other hand, removal of events from their contexts carries the threat that an author may present as legitimate the proverbial comparison of apples with oranges. Each student of comparative civilizations must find his own way to steer a course between this Scylla and Charybdis. In this essay, in pursuit of this objective a practice will be followed which has been anathema in traditional Western scholarship: In most cases, evidence will be not just cited but quoted in the words of the cited sources. Such quotation will save the interested reader the trouble of digging out and verifying all the proposed evidence and also will provide some of that elusive flavor of implications, assumed background, and other context that comes with habituation to a field. This may be considered heteropraxy: In fact it is one of the oldest orthopraxies. 2500 years of Chinese historiography have been characterized outright as “the handing down of documents by continuous grinding out of quoted passages” [Balazs 1964:131]. This kind of quotation is not the fashion in the West, but one can hardly enter the comparative study of civilizations and then declare that only one civilization’s approach to the matter is legitimate.

This essay is based on an analytical system called by the author constitutional dynamics, and properly is only one fragment of a much larger corpus of interpretation. The lists of civilizations, of universal states, etc. is provided by constitutional dynamics based on a set of criteria and successive developments much too long for discussion in these few pages. Suffice for the moment that the governing criteria do exist and that chart I is the product of analysis based on them. For purposes of this essay the major comparison is drawn specifically between the Later Roman, the Gupta, and the Later Han empires. The Later Roman and Later Han empires have already been adjudged comparable elsewhere as noted in the text, and further evidence of this comparability is provided herein. The proposed comparability of the other situations listed in chart I must for the moment be assumed, so they are noted only peripherally.
I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion." So Edward Gibbon summarized the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. His title has become one of the great clichés of history, of such long standing that the questions raised against it have become clichés in themselves. But if any single event has achieved any acceptance as marking a transition between civilizations, that is the one. Several attempts have been made to define the place of such empires in history; for purposes of this essay they will be referred to under Toynbee’s label “universal states,” with a meaning similar though not identical to his. Thus if the fall of the Roman Empire marks some technically definable transition between civilizations, the terminations of the other candidate “universal states” should be other examples of the same class of event, and so also should be the basis for a comparative study. Chart 1 lists the candidate universal states, the periods of collapse afterwards, and the approximate dates of the beginnings of the proposed successor civilizations. Most of the information in this study will be drawn from the three complete sequences with historical records: the late Roman Empire and its successors, the Gupta Empire and its successors, the Later Han dynasty and its successors. Some will also come from the Sumerian empire of the Third Dynasty of Ur and its successors, from the late Parthian Empire (which is far less well known than its predecessor 2000 years before), and from such recent candidate universal states as 18th-century China and 19th-century Russia, Iran and Korea, most of which experienced only very short post-imperial periods before modernity intruded.

"The triumph of barbarism and religion": après Gibbon, I shall begin with the barbarians. One of the clichés of the fall of Rome has been the invasion by “barbarian tribes.” But just what defines a “barbarian” “tribe”? The word “barbarian” is a generic insult, applied to any people (including us) deemed uncultured by any other people, and so may be neglected beyond this general impression of uncultured otherness. The word “tribe” has some, albeit disputed, technical meaning in political anthropology, but whatever kindred organization the Germans may have had in early Roman imperial times was long superseded by the later Empire. And the Empire itself was directly responsible for this. It had no moral compunction whatever against aggression against these neighboring tribes, and in more peaceful times it modified them by extensive commercial intercourse as well. All through the principate (27 BC-ca. 185 AD) the barbarians were forming a kind of symbiosis with the Empire, if only for self-preservation. With the collapse of the principate and resumption of civil wars a new kind of barbarian appeared. Among
## CHART 1
### After Empire: Sample Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universal State</th>
<th>Resurrection State</th>
<th>Future Civilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd Dynasty of Ur</td>
<td>Assuria: Shamshi-Adad 1 ca. 1814 — ca. 1782 BC</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome 284 — 395</td>
<td>Assyria: Shamshi-Adad 1 ca. 1814 — ca. 1782 BC</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gaul: sons of Clovis 511 — 561</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spain: Leovigild and Reccared 568 — 701</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Byzantium: Justinian 527 — 565</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deccan: Pulakesin II ca. 610 — 642</td>
<td></td>
<td>COMPETING EMPIRES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tamil-nad: Narashima-varman I ca. 630 — 668</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Western Chin dynasty ca. 280 — 299</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Korea: Mi-ch’on ca. 300 — 331</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1987*
the candidate universal states this new organization is testified principally for the Roman and Han empires, but it became more and more predominant after the empires themselves had dissolved.

The general process is herein suggested to be as follows. Barbarians living on the frontier of a universal state have as ever-present companion the threat of war. Once the empire's initial impulses toward conquest are over this may be a fairly stable threat, with a sort of balance of terror being the rule except when particular emperors decide to re-open the expansion. But collapse of the empire destroys this balance, because the end of unity means both diversion of imperial resources into civil wars and destruction of the empire-wide military reserve which could be mobilized for local conflicts. Moreover the regional warlords both find barbarian auxiliaries useful in their civil wars and have no objection to attacking and looting the barbarians on their own account. Likewise the barbarians by no means confine themselves to imperial targets; a
neighboring weaker tribe can be quite profitably subjugated. Thus any peaceful institutions the barbarians may have evolved are forcibly swallowed by the new military chaos. Any group which does not militarize will find itself looted or subjugated, by imperials or other barbarians as chance happens; any group which does successfully militarize will be dragged into the competition like it or not. The barbarians have no more choice in this matter than the imperials.

The nuclei for these war-units may be the old kindred organizations with elective war leaders, but these old established identities are so much excess baggage in the new situation. As the wars become permanent a new stripped-down organization becomes standard. The old terminology is adapted to a new hierarchy around a successful individual tribe or war-leader; the more successful such organizations conquer the others one by one and amalgamate them into a multi-unit conglomerate at the limit of locally available resources; in order to maintain itself, or because of pressure from other such units, the new military conglomerate invades the empire. These invasions place a premium on long-distance mobility, thereby further shearing away such settled institutions as may have existed earlier, in favor of greater emphasis on the military and even piratical elements of the organization. These late- and post-imperial barbarian military conglomerates are hereby labelled supertribes, i.e., more or less tribally-formed organizations superimposed on the smaller original units. This supertribe will be the basic unit of barbarian organization for roughly the next five centuries.

The nuclei for these war-units may be the old kindred organizations with elective war leaders, but these old established identities are so much excess baggage in the new situation. As the wars become permanent a new stripped-down organization becomes standard. The old terminology is adapted to a new hierarchy around a successful individual tribe or war-leader; the more successful such organizations conquer the others one by one and amalgamate them into a multi-unit conglomerate at the limit of locally available resources; in order to maintain itself, or because of pressure from other such units, the new military conglomerate invades the empire. These invasions place a premium on long-distance mobility, thereby further shearing away such settled institutions as may have existed earlier, in favor of greater emphasis on the military and even piratical elements of the organization. These late- and post-imperial barbarian military conglomerates are hereby labelled supertribes, i.e., more or less tribally-formed organizations superimposed on the smaller original units. This supertribe will be the basic unit of barbarian organization for roughly the next five centuries.

The Roman-German interaction provides the obvious first example:

Movements of big integrated tribes (gentes) were not at all common after the first century A.D. In face of Roman opposition, the gentes showed some disposition to break up into fighting bands. A group of such bands, perhaps from various gentes, might unite under one leader to seek its own fortune within the Empire, as mercenaries, as brigands... or as both. The leader of such a confederation would owe his position to his own strong right arm: in a word, to virtus... [Such leaders] equally appreciate certain sacral qualities; perhaps not those of the former thiodan [tribal leader], but rather qualities that go with war-leadership in the cult of Woden and with oath-taking on the part of their followers. It is under Woden, the war-god par excellence, that such confederations of warriors set out to win their way in the world (Wallace-Hadrill, 1982:154-155).

[The Germans] were also changing politically. When the historian Tacitus wrote about them at the end of the first century A.D. they were divided into a chaos of jealously independent tribes, some weak, some powerful, some dominating one area and some controlling another. But from about 200 A.D. on, various West Germanic tribes began uniting into confederations. One such
amalgamation, consisting of tribes east of the Rhine between the Main River and the Alps, was called the "Alemani." Its name apparently meant that "all the men" in that area belonged to it. The Alemanii had first made themselves known to the Romans early in the third century, when the emperor Caracalla (211-217) carried on a war against them. The other great confederation was called the Franks. It consisted of tribes living east of the Rhine where the river flowed through what is now northern Germany and the Netherlands to empty into the North Sea. The name "Frank," which meant "free," distinguished the men of this group from their tamed cousins in the westernmost or Roman part of Germany, the men who had to obey Roman laws and keep Roman manners (Brauer, 1975:75).

(There is some dispute on this; one source places the Frankish amalgamation as early as the first and second centuries AD [Lasko, 1971:14-15]. But the early to middle third century seems to be the consensus.)

The Franks were established from tribes long resident on the borders of the Empire, but the same process seems to occur regardless of the prior status of each people. The "Roman" army of Italy which deposed the last western emperor is reported as "composed of various small barbarian peoples"; the Burgundians, at least according to their historians, even "knew themselves to be descended from Romans" established by Augustus as forward defense units beyond the Rhine (as a historical people, they were East Germans). The Goths seem not even to have arrived on the Roman borders until the disintegration began, but

no smooth line of historical development can connect the Goths in south Russia to the heterogeneous peoples led by Alaric and his successors. . . . However Gothic in name, their following . . . is more evocative of the great company of successive condottieri than of a phenomenon of popular migration (Goffart, 1980:7, 9, 36).

A similar amalgamation is noted on the Korean frontier of China soon after the collapse of Former Han, in A.D. 18:

During this period the whole eastern coast of Korea would seem to have passed out of Chinese control. The Later Han government . . . formally confirmed in office the various native chieftains . . . who had established themselves in the old (district) towns from which the Chinese had administered the region in Former Han times. . . . (The government) . . . did nothing to prevent these petty principalities from warring with each other, and eventually they mostly became tributary to Koguryo (Chinese, Kao-kou-li), a kingdom founded by a group of tribes who had rebelled against Wang Mang in 12 A.D. and had established a powerful state with its capital on a tributary of the Upper Yalu. The Kao-kou-li dominated the mountain massif of northern Korea, the (province) of Hsüan-tu (Liao River area) being particularly exposed to their raids, and in 106 the Han
government was again obliged to shift the headquarters of this (province to the south). . . .

By 33 A.D., when the Kao-kou-li . . . (sent) their first envoy to the Later Han court at Loyang, we are told that their ruler "for the first time had the title of King." In all probability (he) at this time was little more than primus inter pares. In the original Kao-kou-li confederacy there were five tribes, and the leaders of some of these would appear to have had almost semi-royal prerogatives in early times. The original royal tribe . . . was displaced, probably sometime during the first century A.D., by another . . . (Gardiner, 1969:22, 23, 30, 31).

Koguryo developed warfare as a way of life, becoming at least partly dependent on conquest for daily necessities . . . The preoccupation of the Koguryo tribes with war and conquest is reflected in their social structure. League leader, tribal leaders, and clan patriarchs functioned like a military chain of command, with subordinates called haho. Military training was more or less constant for all the men of each clan (Han, 1971:27-28).

Other areas provide other suggestions of supertribe formation. During the Parthian Empire there is reference to an invasion of Parthia by "a portion of the Sacarauciae, together with a still larger body of the Massagetae and other groups attracted by the opportunity for new territory and plunder" (Debevoise, 1969:36); this certainly indicates military coordination both below and across formerly known "tribal" identities, though the organizational principle involved is not stated. In post-imperial times two candidate successor civilizations were founded by such conglomerate entities: in Spain, the kingdom of Asturias, by the "Visigoths" (including a conglomerate of Cantabrians and Basques) (Livermore, 1958:80, 81); in China, the empire of the Northern Wei dynasty, formed by the T'o-pa, a group which had been put together from 119 mixed Turkish and Mongol tribal remnants, some of them still nomadic and some already sedentary (Eberhard, 1977:136). Likewise the ethnic makeup and organization of the armies of the sons of Clovis in Merovingian Gaul "defies simple characterization"; eight major groups are cited (Bachrach, 1972:35).

There is next the question of the effect of these barbarians on the empire. The dismemberment and repopulation of the Roman Empire are too well known in general to need discussion here (and too little known in detail for useful statistical discussion). In India the fall of the Gupta Empire was accompanied by a "renewed invasions of the Hunas" (Ephthalites, White Huns) with far greater success than before" (Majumdar, 1970b:33) and "a large-scale displacement of peoples continued for some time" (Thapar, 1966:142). In China the process of barbarization is even directly compared at length to the Roman experience:

Hord: Creatures of the Long Night
Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1987 7
The roots of the barbarian disaster were struck deep in the Han, especially the Later Han, period. . . . Under the inclusive policy of the Later Han government, we find more and more barbarians inside the Chinese frontiers. . . . The danger of barbarian uprisings was directly created by the fact that along with (a thorough exploitation of the settled barbarians by imperial officials) a large number of them were also relied upon by the Chinese government as armed forces. (After the fall of Han), the Three Kingdoms all strove to strengthen their military power by introducing more barbarian soldiers into the armies. This fact probably also explains the rapid increase of barbarians in China in the third century. With the inner barbarians enslaved on the one hand and armed on the other, barbarian uprisings were but to be expected. . . . It is highly interesting to note that the dissolution of the Chinese Empire in the early fourth century amidst barbarian uprisings bears remarkable resemblance to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West in the fifth century in the face of the Gothic invasions. If we looked into the matter a little more deeply, we would find even more interesting similarities in details. (Similar employment policies for barbarian soldiers are discussed). . . .

Close Sino-barbarian intercourse, especially economic intercourse, also affected the way of life of the Chinese. . . . [It seems that Later Han society was far more barbarized than Former Han society. . . . Emperor Ling (168-188) is reported to have been thoroughly barbarized in his daily life. He liked not only barbarian clothes, curtains, beds, chairs, rice but also barbarian music and dance. This imperial example . . . was in turn followed by all the nobles in the capital (Yü, 1967: 202-214).

In Sumer the relevant barbarians were the Amorites (Sum. "Martu", Akk. "Amurrum"). who under the Third Dynasty of Ur were widely employed by the throne "while, at the same time, the majority of the tribes remain unreconciled to civilization and pose a constant threat to the security of the state" (Edzard, 1967a: 156-157). Afterwards, besides individual Amorite rulers of the successor states, "[o]ne of the official posts mentioned in the sources is the wakil Amurrum, 'Overseer of the (Amorites)'. This officer was at first leader of the Amorite contingents in the army, in charge also of the fields allotted to individual Amorites in payment for military service; the title then becomes a military rank, whether the troops under its incumbent are Amorites or not" (Edzard, 1967b:215). Very little if any new barbarian influence is reported from late Parthian times, such that in this instance it would seem either than the invasions were repelled or that the newcomers were very thoroughly absorbed. In the 19th- and 20th-century collapses the barbarian invasions were also massive, and barbarian influence even more so—although of course since the West has been the invaders, our histories have preferred to list us under some other brand name.

The collapse is also economic. This development is rooted far back in the universal state, and its immediate cause never seems quite the same...
from one empire to another, though the disruptions caused by barbarian invasion seal it in place. The founding of a universal state can be economically a very healthy thing; with local barriers removed trade can flow freely and commercial prosperity ensue. But it does not last. As the universal state develops, sooner or later the imperium comes to be strapped for ready cash. For this problem it has two ready solutions: Expropriate the wealthy aristocracy or raise taxes on everybody who can be taxed. The wealthy answer by tending to remove their wealth and then themselves from the government’s reach, into non-liquid investments such as, particularly, land. The government’s response is to lay even more burdens on the accessible taxable population, which replies by trying to cut the government’s access, that is by finding such powerful local protectors as these resettled urban aristocrats. While the government remains powerful it can squelch this tendency, but once the barbarian invasions begin the government must concentrate on far more immediate dangers than local complications of tax evasion. The Roman emperors even tried to repair matters by recognizing the process and settling tax liability on the aristocrats; my sources do not report such flexibility elsewhere. Even in Rome efforts against land concentration continued, but were quite ineffective—which was to be expected, since “the landlords . . . were after all by and large identical with the official aristocracy who controlled government policy” (Jones, 1964:777, 796). Such otherwise familiar problems as debt settlement will also tend to increase the concentration of land into wealthy hands. By the time the imperial government collapses, the territories of the former empire have become a mosaic of autarkic rural communities, and this continues throughout the following period.

The word “autarkic” should also be understood in much more than a merely economic sense; the rural aristocrats, no longer having available or being subjected to imperial protection, quite commonly form their own armed forces and become independent mosaic polities, small and scattered but quite protective of what they still have left. In Rome this applies not just to the fragmented and barbarized West but equally to the long-civilized and theoretically still unified East, where “Leo in 476 forbade private landowners to maintain gangs of armed slaves, buccellarii (privately employed soldiers) or Isaurians (Anatolian hill tribesmen), but the practice, though illegal, remained common among great territorial magnates like the Apion family of Egypt” (Jones, 1964:666). Landownership records in post-Gupta India are confined to official epigraphy, but it is known that grants to state functionaries and various others were
historically tax-exempt (Kher, 1973:352-360), and that "especially from Gupta times certain political and administrative developments tended to feudalise the state apparatus," including the "growing hereditary character of the divisional and district officers from the Gupta period onwards" (Sharma, 1980:1, 17). By the late 500s AD land title was coming to include the cultivators on it (Sharma, 1980:46-48). Such a situation would seem ideal for manorial concentration, though this is not attested. In Later and post-Han China a situation very like Rome's is specifically reported:

By the second half of the second century A.D., or perhaps earlier, a new class was arising. This was formed by disaffected small-holders or peasantry, who had been forced to flee from their homes as a result of natural disaster, civil warfare or the stringent demands of the tax collectors. . . . From about the second century these families were finding advantages in linking their destinies with those of the great landowners, and were willing to become the retainers of the great houses, which provided them with security, livelihood, and a settled existence. In the prevailing absence of strong central government, the great families could protect both themselves and their retainers from the interference of officialdom; in return, the retainers were ready to be used as a labor force, or if necessary to act as armed bands in defence of the great families' interests (Loewe, 1966:132-133).

These conditions were also accompanied by a more general economic collapse. Thus for example Rome:

The salient fact of the economic life of the late Roman Empire was gradual impoverishment. . . . Commerce decayed, not only because of piracy and barbarian inroads, but mainly because customers disappeared. The best clients, the city bourgeoisie, decreased constantly in numbers and in purchasing power. The peasants reverted to an almost pure 'house-economy,' each home producing for itself what it needed (Rostovtzeff, 1926:470-471).

In India only one of the Gupta emperors issued any coins other than copper, and even these copper coins are rare; from 600 to 900 "hardly any coin can be ascribed with certainty" (Sharma, 1980:53-54). (This is disputed: see Majumdar, 1970c:43.) "The cities declined rapidly, (Pataliputra, the former imperial capital) becoming a village by A.D. 600; the royal court and camp amounted to a moving capital" (Kosambi, 1965:96). In one northwestern area visited by a Chinese pilgrim "the towns and villages were desolate and the inhabitants were very few" (Tripathi, 1959:82-114). In China the first emperor after the fall of Han made grain and silk the official media of exchange, and by the reign of his successor "coins had long been abolished" (Yang, 1963:191). The successor tried to reverse this, but unsuccessfully, and "China, from e. 
200 A.D. on until the eighth century, remained in a period of such partial 'natural economy' " (Eberhard, 1977:118).

But however widely this was the case in ancient post-imperial times, the modern universal states and their following collapse periods are very different; industrialization has become the order of the day. This certainly occurred as part of the Western presence, and (nationalist preferences notwithstanding) seems entirely ascribable to it. Take for example China. The China trade is barely mentioned in the history of the economic development of the West, and then largely because of the vogue for chinoiserie. China was a vastly older and vastly more populous land, but the effects there were profound:

For rather over two centuries the sea-borne trade of China had been conducted through the single port of Canton, yet, in spite of this restriction, and the hampering limitations which were imposed on the merchants both Chinese and foreign, the Canton trade had effected far-reaching changes in the economic life of the empire. Enormous wealth—for that age—came to Canton, and was distributed throughout the producing provinces of the south, and at the capital. In 1805 the value of the trade as computed by the East India Company was over six and a half million (pounds) sterling, and the quantity of silver imported to Canton exceeded four and a half million dollars, but the revenue of the Chinese government (apart from official peculations and extortions) did not amount to more than 1,300,000 taels, or somewhat over 400,000 pounds. Individual Hong Kong merchants accumulated vast fortunes, even though they had to make constant heavy payments to the officials and the Court. . . . The sea-borne trade with Europe thus completed an economic change which had been in progress since the T'ang dynasty—the rise of the south and the decay of the northwest. From the reign of Ch'ien Lung onwards the south, and in particular the Yangtze delta and the tea-producing districts along the coast, became by far the wealthiest and most populous part of the empire, the centre of trade and industry, the focus of economic life (Fitzgerald, 1954:566).

One may suggest that such a vast difference in effect indicates an equally vast difference in economic level of the areas involved.

There is next the question of thought and culture in post-imperial times. Culture is so subjective an entity that I prefer not to attempt any assessments; one period's peak of development can too easily be judged by the next period as a valley. But thought itself does seem to become concentrated in one particular direction, which Toynbee noted long ago: During and after a universal state the many local cults and religions of the empire become syncretized into empire-wide systems of faith and understanding, called by him "universal churches."

Rome provides a famous stewpot of religions, but is aberrant in one respect; Christianity won somewhat more easily and quickly than is the
rule. In India the situation is somewhat confused, since the texts are composites produced over some centuries and religious evolution continued through all this period. But the following comments on Gupta developments may be indicative:

The religious movement definitely swings from the abstract to the concrete. The ceremonial worship of the images of Vishnu, Siva, and other gods ... takes the place of sacrificial offerings to the host of unseen Vedic gods of vague personality. Even the austere and rigid morality of Buddhism and Jainism gives way to devotion to the concrete personalities of Buddha and Mahavira. Soon ... hosts of lesser divinities gather round these primary figures. The resulting changes are great indeed in all cases (Majumdar, 1970d:370).

Another source refers to "the new upheaval of Hinduism under the Guptas" such that the Hinduism "established through the Puranas during the Gupta era became the religion of the Indian people" (Bhattacharji, 1970:19, 99).

Han and post-Han China show a development very similar to Rome's:

New deities, hitherto worshipped only at local centres, became popular throughout the unified empire. ... The popular religion of the Han period ... was developing into a many-sided polytheism, a synthesis of all the local cults of the empire, now spread abroad and served by a numerous priesthood. ... The Precious One of Ch'en, a god of Ch'in, had a great popular following. ... Another deity, who received the patronage of the Court, was the Princess of the Spirits. ... The worship of the eight principal gods (of Shantung) was transplanted to the capital and flourished exceedingly. ... (Fitzgerald, 1954:218, 223-226).

By the fall of Han the victor in this contest was apparent: The Taoist philosophy had become "a Taoist church with its disciplines and dignitaries, its festivals, fasts, and sacred texts (Loewe, 1968:124-125)" and "commanded the allegiance of the masses in eight provinces which then constituted two-thirds of the empire" (Wright, 1959:24-25). But by this time a foreign competitor had entered the lists. Buddhist ideas are being mentioned with familiarity in Chinese literature of the 100s A.D. (Zürcher, 1969:28-29), and after the fall of Han it "began to capture the popular imagination in China and spread with great rapidity in the strife-torn country" (Tuan, 1969:91). As will be noted below, by about 300 AD Buddhism was firmly in place in official Chinese circles.

Thus the formation of most of the great universal churches bequeathed by the ancient world. There were also two others: in Iran, Zoroastrianism, but in almost unknown circumstances; in late Egypt, those modifications which produced the pre-Hellenistic version of the
"church" of Isis, in even less well known circumstances. However, the period 900 BC-300 AD seems to have been a much more efficient producer of such syncretic faiths than other historic times. Modern universal states have produced some syncretic faiths, such as Baha'ism in the Middle East, Sikhism in India, the tao t'ai-p'ing in China and the tonghak in Korea, but none has been able to challenge the pre-eminence of the classical churches. In earlier times, the third millennium BC saw universal states in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Egypt produced two reconstructed faiths, the state church of Re and the more popular "church" of Osiris, but the resemblance of these two to the classical faiths is questioned. In the Sumerian universal state and its following period the closest approach to a general faith is a vague tendency toward recognition of some supremacy in the moon god Sin (Lewy, 1966:10), but this never achieved anything like the general role gained by the classical churches—and Mesopotamia had a later development quite different from regions which had developed such churches. It may be that the universal church is a product of a special set of circumstances even among universal states, but the evidence is far too sparse to make any real comment on that possibility.

Thus "the triumph of barbarism and religion." The barbarians and their customs, the syncretisms of older faiths and philosophies, are two of the great inputs to each embryo new civilization. The physical plant is a third; much of agricultural and craft technique survives and joins with the local natural resources to control the physical opportunities available for future development. But these vary enough from one civilization to another that no attempt will be made to assess them here. (It is, for example, very difficult to render a comparative judgment on the importance to Byzantine history of that natural resource called Constantinople.) There remains a fourth major component. The old empire is shattered and gone, or at best only a shell of its former self, but even lost it is for the ex-imperials the very key and core of all preceding history. This memory is sealed in an event which marks a transition in historical development. Some hundred years or more into the post-imperial chaos there occurs a sudden and unpredicted resurgence of the old empire, different from the prior experience in two ways. First, it is very short, generally lasting only some twenty to thirty years. Second, it occupies only a region within the old empire, and it is an importantly defined region. When a universal state occupies a very large territory, its impoverished and barbarized successor usually is not able to reconquer the whole, and the result is multiple successors. Call these short-lived re-
integrations "resurrection states": Each region has one, and only one, resurrection state, and each resurrection state stands at the head of its own embryo civilization. This statement is a derived rule, which is to say that it depends on one's list of civilizations. But with that one caveat and except in one circumstance this rule holds. The circumstance which can obviate it arises from the very common occurrence of massive invasions after the end of the resurrection state. If these invasions are by a civilized people, as for example Egypt was conquered repeatedly from 500 BC on, later development may be aborted. But barring such outright conquest, a universal state will have exactly as many following civilizations as it has following resurrection states. The causes behind this remain unknown.

Thus it would seem that the resurrection state is a very important polity indeed, however short-lived. In poorly chronicled milieus, meaning especially seventh-century India, this importance is missed by present historical assessments; there the emperor Harsa-vardhana and his competitors stand forth as brilliant moments in an otherwise disturbed and chaotic period, but not as much else. For China of the Western Chin dynasty (effectively ca. 280-299 AD) the case is somewhat better:

In the late third and early fourth century we find the first unmistakable signs of the formation of an intellectual clerical elite . . . creators and propagators of a completely sinicized Buddhist doctrine which from that time onward starts to penetrate into the Chinese upper classes. . . . There are several facts which point to the years 290-320 as the period in which this supremely important development took place,

principally in that the extant literature begins to mention Buddhism increasingly and in increasingly important circumstances just at this time (Zürcher, 1959:71). By AD 300 the imperial capital "boasted forty-two pagoda temples" (Tuan, 1969:91). This religious victory was not complete, being shared with Taoism, and may have occurred somewhat later than in other civilizations, but as of this time the twin churches Buddhism and Taoism set the pattern for medieval China.

The historians of Mesopotamian civilization remark the transition much more strongly regarding the fall of the Sumerians and the ensuing prospective Babylonian resurrection state:

The fall of Ur at the close of the third millennium B.C. is one of the major turning points in the history of ancient Iraq: . . . it marks the end of the Sumerians as a ruling nation . . . . The division of the country into kingdoms (after the fall of Ur) erased all traces of the city-states, and with the city-states disappeared most of the principles upon which they were founded. . . . [T]he traditional view [that] no prince could rule over Sumer and Akkad unless he had been elected by Enlil in
Nippur became obsolete. . . . When Babylon became the capital-city of Mesopotamia, the name of its god Marduk was substituted for that of Enlil in the Epic of Creation. Nothing could better symbolize the end of the Sumerian supremacy (Roux, 1974:150-152).

Regarding the prospective resurrection state itself:

[Hammurabi’s empire] was of short duration, but its significance for the later history of Mesopotamia knew no limit in time. Babylon became the metropolis of Sumer and Akkad; the whole country took its name, “Land of Babylon” first appears as a designation for what we now call Babylonia in the Middle Babylonian period (after Hammurabi). . . . The Akkadian language is called “Babylonian” in the Hittite archives at Hattusas. Babylon had become the symbol of the Semites of southern Mesopotamia (Edzard, 1967b:199).

In the post-Roman world the transition is quite obvious. Regarding the prospective pre-Byzantine resurrection state:

The epoch of Justinian doubtless bore many marks of late antiquity but it also showed many signs of the new Byzantine civilization that was coming into being. The age of Justinian is essentially the time of transition from the world of late antiquity to that of Byzantium (Haussig, 1971:75).

Justinian was the last Roman emperor to occupy the Byzantine throne (Ostrogorsky, 1957:70).

Regarding the prospective pre-Hispanic resurrection state it is noted that “Leovigild [568-586] was the first (Visigothic king) to invest the monarchy with its full dignity and splendor, wearing a crown and sitting on a throne” (Atkinson, 1960:39), that his “new monarchy had more in common with the Roman empire than with the brittle barbarian kingships based on personal sentiment” (Livermore, 1971:160). His son Reccared began the formal legal amalgamation of Goths and Romans into a single people, a process which evidently involved more than just law:

Archaeology has shown that the period (of Reccared) coincides with the final abandonment of the old Gothic form of dress . . . the end of the custom of burying goods along with the dead, and the beginning of a time when the influence of East Roman crafts makes itself strongly felt among the Goths of Spain: in the finds of the seventh century the Germanic element has almost disappeared” (Thompson, 1969:108-109).

And of course it was Reccared who abolished the great religious distinction of the times, formally converting the Goths to the Catholic religion of the Roman, the future Spanish, populace.

The prospective pre-Western resurrection state is obvious as a general event but somewhat harder to pinpoint within a specific frame of years. The ruler famous for converting the Franks to Catholicism and creating
the enlarged Frankish kingdom is Clovis (ca. 482-511), but the date of the conversion is debated and the elimination of competing Frankish rulers was still in process in the last four years of his reign. The amalgamation of peoples was also incomplete; the historian St. Gregory of Tours (ca. 540-594) "emphasizes clearly enough the distinctness of the Franks of the generation of Clovis" but for his own day lacks any such distinction, even in the recently conquered south (Wallace-Hadrill, 1982:60). Most probably the transition should be dated to the joint reign-period characterized as "of the sons of Clovis" (511-561). Merovingian family relations were little better then than later, but somehow the frequent attempts of one king to murder the others amounted to no more than skirmishes, settled quickly, and the family remained united in outside adventures. The rulers themselves are little more than names, but one of them, Theodebert I (534-548) is the only king of the period to be awarded the title "the Great," and was able to brag to Justinian that he ruled all northwestern Europe "from the Danube and the frontiers of Pannonia to the Ocean" (Collins, 1983:7, 11). Afterwards this collapsed; the very year after the death of the last of the sons of Clovis saw the beginning of a dynastic warfare that continued until the dynasty was no more than figureheads (Bachrach, 1972:36).

In Gothic Spain the amalgamation of peoples seems to have been mostly in favor of the Romans; in Frankish Gaul, with due note of Wallace-Hadrill's emphasis on certain political Romanisms, it was mostly in the other direction:

Within a few generations the Gallo-Roman gentleman, even a member of the senatorial nobility, had adopted the warlike habits, together with the costume and arms, of the barbarian tribesman. To maintain his social position, in other words, he had to be a Frank; he married his daughters to Frankish warriors and gave his sons Frankish names. The inevitable result was the disappearance of Romans, as such, throughout the Merovingian kingdom; through still differentiated in the Salic Law (ca. 500 AD), they cease to appear in the later enactments (Stephenson, 1962:61).

The prospective pre-Britannic resurrection state has the problem of a lack of formal chronicles, such that argument rages even whether its prospective ruler ever existed. But one source provides an assessment which should be illustrative of the times, whatever may be said of the ruler:

The age of Arthur ended Roman Britain, and created the nations of modern Britain. His short empire crowned the efforts of the fifth-century British to retain their island; its dismemberment compelled the peoples of the sixth century to
define their identity. . . . In name [Arthur] was the last Roman emperor [of Britain], but he ruled as the first medieval king (Morris, 1973:132-133, 140, 212, 506).

And the Cambridge Medieval History makes the following assessment of the importance of the period at large:

The first question that has to be considered in laying down the plan of a Medieval History is, Where to begin? Where shall we draw the line that separates it from Ancient History? . . . We should do better . . . by dividing in the middle of the Gothic War (535-553). . . . The Rome which Belisarius delivered (536) was still the Rome of the Caesars, while the Rome which Narses entered sixteen years later (552) is already the Rome of the popes. It is the same in Gaul. The remains of the old civilisation still found under the sons of Clovis are mostly obliterated in the next generation. Procopius (ca. 500-ca. 560) witnessed as great a revolution as did Polybius (historian of the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean, second century BC) (Gwatkin 1924:1,1).

With the end of the resurrection state there usually comes another set of invasions, often much worse than the ones before. The Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain will illustrate, and a similar situation is reflected in the post-Sumerian milieu 2000 years before:

The Hurrians had already penetrated into northern Mesopotamia [some 500 years before]. However, under the Third Dynasty of Ur, their main centres of population were still to the east of the Tigris. The situation does not appear to have changed during the period of (the resurrection states). (Afterwards), a thick veil now falls over Upper Mesopotamia. For the Amorite principalities which dominated the greater part of the country . . . that silence was to be final; one after the other they were engulfed in the Hurrian tide. When the darkness disperses, nearly three centuries later, it is the Hurrian state of Mitanni which emerges in full power (Kupper, 1966:24, 31).

And the contemporary Kassite invasions engulfed Babylonia even more thoroughly.

In this long chaos the resurrection state appears only as a bright moment amid the violence. Thus even besides the problems of barbarian invasions, the chronicler of Gothic Spain mentions for each king "his name [and] the dates of [his] accession and his murder"; "throughout the entire history of Visigothic Spain only two kings were followed on the throne for more than a couple of years by their sons" (Thompson, 1969:7, 19). In Byzantium:

When the powerful figure of Justinian disappeared from the stage of history, his entire artificial system of government, which had temporarily kept the empire in proper balance, fell to ruin. "At his death," said Bury, "the winds were loosed from prison; the disintegrating elements began to operate with full force; the
artificial system collapsed; and the metamorphosis in the character of the empire... now began to work rapidly and perceptibly." The time between the years 565 and 610 belongs to one of the most cheerless periods in Byzantine history, when anarchy, poverty, and plagues raged throughout the Empire. The confusion of this period caused John of Ephesus, the historian of the time of Justin II (565-578), to speak of the approaching end of the world. "There is perhaps no [other] period of history," says Finlay, "in which society was so universally in a state of demoralization" (Vasiliev, 1961:169).

The total length of the dark age is quite variable, from some 250 years in China, with its already considerable development, to some 450 years in Christian Spain, which suffered the disaster of the Arab invasion and was pushed into an infertile corner. But each resurrection state is also the promise of a civilization yet to come, and eventually this new cultural amalgam does cohere. Just what shape it takes depends on its own peculiar combination of universal church, barbarian custom, imperial memory, and physical plant. However, at least at first, the emphasis is always on the church. This is regardless of the relative strength of the imperial and barbarian contributions. There was, for example, no civilization with a stronger sense, a more self-consciously direct link, to its preceding imperium than Byzantium.

If we say that Justinian I was more of a Roman than of a Christian emperor, the statement requires several qualifications. But it nonetheless embodies a profound truth. Justinian I was in thought far more akin to Constantine the Great, or for that matter, to Augustus Caesar, than to Heraclius (610-641), who was so much closer to him in time. Would it be going too far to suggest that the Christian religion was to Justinian scarcely more than a prop or adjunct of Roman imperialism and unification, whereas to Heraclius and his successors it was the inspiration, the justification, the very marrow of that concept (Jenkins, 1969:379)?

At the other extreme, no immediately sub-imperial people is known to have laid greater stress on its barbarian heritage than the Franks. It was proposed earlier in this paper that the Franks are an example of a normative barbarian reaction to imperial decline, labelled the supertribe. The eventual fate of the Franks illustrates the destiny of these supertribes.

Charlemagne's conception of the function of a ruler was basically primitive. This should not be taken in a derogatory sense. It simply means that Charlemagne saw himself as a tribal chieftain and, since he was a Christian, he derived much of his knowledge of human affairs from the Bible. . . . (He saw) himself as a new David. He was the anointed of the Lord who held power over his tribesmen under God, and they owed obedience to him because he was to them what God was to all creatures. . . . In order to promote unity, stability, and hierarchy, Charlemagne and his scholar friends threw their whole weight behind the propagation of the
Christian religion. . . . They all thought that the Christian religion they were so earnestly preaching and promoting was a tribal religion and that its chief merit was to define the membership and the limits of the tribe which had espoused it. The tribe thus envisaged was, of course, a very large one . . . but a tribe it nonetheless was. It was called populus Christianus, the Christian people (Munz, 1967:56, 135-136).

The mechanics of the growth of these proposed new civilizations will be investigated in a later paper.

All that said, why should we study these rather distressing episodes of barbarism, violence, and low culture? Conan the Barbarian makes a good movie, but surely Leonardo da Vinci and William Shakespeare have more to teach us.

I shall propose two reasons. First is that these dark ages, however unpleasant, are civilization in its purest state—or, one may prefer, its rawest state. Here civilization is stripped to its very basic requirements for survival, its leanest and meanest condition. The summer growth of a later date is much handsomer, but it is the bare limbs of winter that hold the essence of the future growth. And here I speak from personal experience: It was investigation of the survival of civilization across these dark ages which identified the key elements to be researched in prehistory, with such results as “The Twilight of the Goddess” in an earlier number of this journal. These endings and beginnings are lowly and despised, but they hold the keys to civilization.

The second reason comes from constitutional dynamics itself. Chart I indicates which parts of the world have been in post-imperial collapse and when, and a very quick scan will show that the list for our own 20th century includes Russia, China, India and the Middle East, and those are only the obvious ones. The weakness of much of the world before the onslaught of the West was no accident; these foreign civilizations had been tearing themselves apart for centuries, and were already well on their way to the pit. What is civilization like in a state of collapse?—We can see that now in the roughshod course the West was able to exercise; but as citizens of our own century our vision is somewhat distorted by the natural assumption that whatever we know is the normal way of doing things. What can civilization do getting out of a state of collapse? There are plenty of examples around from these older times that are not distorted by our ingrained expectations, and study of them may teach us something.

Fort Walton Beach, Florida
BIBLIOGRAPHY


https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol17/iss17/6


