

The Vandals in History

The fifth century was a period of chaos within the Mediterranean world. As the political authority of the western Roman empire crumbled, powerful new groups rose to prominence in the provinces.¹ Among the most important were the Vandals. Under Geiseric, their most famous king, they invaded the rich Roman provinces of North Africa and captured the grand commercial city of Carthage in AD 439. For the next century, the Vandals prospered at the very heart of the dying empire. In AD 455, Geiseric unleashed a cataclysmic sack of the City of Rome, and Vandal piracy remained a constant plague on Mediterranean shipping for decades thereafter. Within North Africa itself, the century of Vandal rule was a period of extremes. Remembered by many for their heretical beliefs, and their vicious persecution of orthodox 'Nicene' Christians, the Vandals were also sensitive patrons of learning. Grand building projects continued, schools flourished and North Africa fostered many of the most innovative writers and natural scientists of the late Latin West.

The successes of the Vandals were intimately bound up in the prosperous kingdom which they inherited. At the height of the Roman period, North Africa had been a jewel in the imperial crown.² The wealth of the African cities, the rich grain fields of Zeugitana and Numidia, and the extensive olive groves of Byzacena and the Mauretaniae had become almost proverbial by the early fifth century. An anonymous merchant of the fourth century described Africa as 'exceptional and admirable'; to Martianus Capella, a scholar of the fifth century, it was 'awesome in its prosperity'.³ For two and a half centuries the African provinces had produced a massive agricultural surplus to be shipped to Rome as tax. Any grain, olive oil, wine and fish which were not appropriated by a hungry state had been sold, either within North Africa itself or in cities scattered around the Mediterranean. Not everyone in late Roman Africa was rich, but the region was certainly prosperous: its cities were ornamented with public buildings, baths, theatres and amphitheatres; olive oil burned

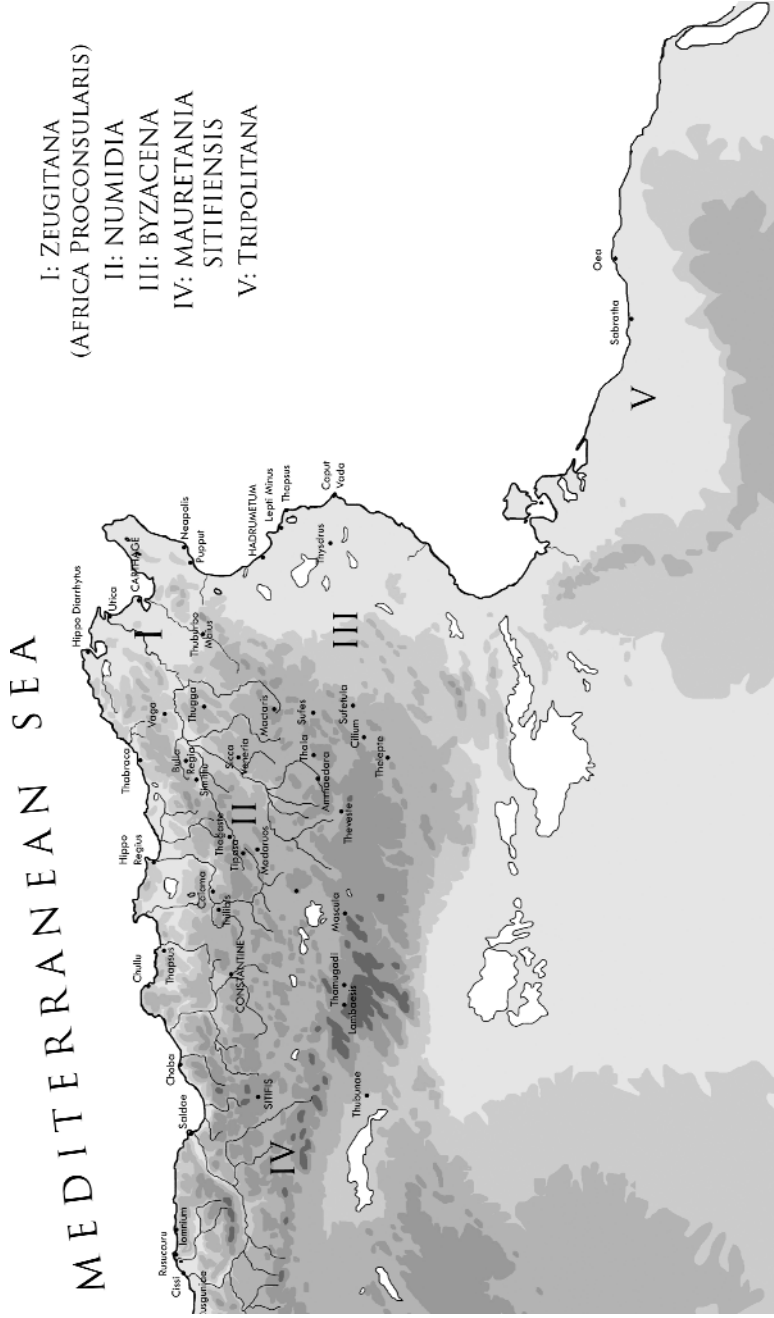


Figure 1.1 North Africa in the Vandal period

prodigiously in lamps throughout the region and farms continued to flourish in the countryside. Culturally, too, Roman North Africa was unusually vibrant. Christianity had been brought to the region during the second century AD, and thereafter the faith flourished there with particular strength. The African Church was defined by its saints and martyrs, but was shaped by its great theologians: Tertullian was prominent in the second century, Cyprian and Arnobius in the third, and Lactantius in the fourth. This tradition reached its peak with Saint Augustine, who was educated in the Carthage of the late fourth century, provided leadership as the bishop of the city of Hippo Regius in the early fifth, and eventually died in AD 430, as the Vandals lay siege to his adopted home.

Yet the Vandal kingdom proved to be short-lived. In AD 534, a little less than a century after they occupied Carthage, the Vandals lost the city, this time to the resurgent eastern Roman Empire of Justinian and his general Belisarius. Less than two centuries after that, this restored imperial authority was itself swept away by the expansion of the Islamic powers from the east. As a result, North Africa was dramatically severed from Europe, and a region which had once nestled at the very heart of the classical world was all but forgotten by the successor kingdoms of the west. The Vandals, too, drifted into obscurity. When the historians of these expanding Christian nations tried to make sense of the great decline of the Roman west, and developed heroic traditions around the Goths, Franks, Angles and Alemans, the Vandals were frequently cast aside as curious anomalies. With no historian to preserve 'their' side of the story, the Vandals were presented as cruel persecutors and violent savages, but also as once-proud barbarians who collapsed into moral degradation and lost themselves in the decadent excesses of the later Roman Empire, a pattern which dominated scholarship from the medieval period to the nineteenth century. Today, if the Vandals are remembered at all, it is through the negative associations of the term 'vandalism' – a censorious term for the wanton destruction of art and architecture that is shared by all of the major western European languages. Yet even here, the legacy of the group is uncertain. What was once a vivid metaphor for this destruction – Vandalism – has since lost its capital 'V', and with it its historical specificity. Even the popularity of this most chauvinistic of caricatures has not managed to save the Vandals from obscurity.

The present book is an attempt to re-assess the Vandals from the perspective of the twenty-first century. It adopts a critical new assessment of the textual sources available to us – these are many and varied, including the lives and writings of saints, formal histories, chronicles, letters,

poems and estates records – and combines this with a detailed discussion of recent archaeological evidence. For the most part, then, it is a history of North Africa and the Mediterranean world in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. But the history of the Vandals did not simply end with the destruction of their kingdom. If the Vandals have slipped from the popular imagination in recent years, if images of fur-clad barbarians have been supplanted by graffiti artists or protesters as symbols of social instability, this in itself is an interesting legacy and deserves some attention.

This chapter will introduce the Vandals through the accounts of later writers – historians, novelists, playwrights and politicians, amongst others. These are arranged into three groups. The first considers the Romantic image of the Vandals, that is to say the more or less fictionalized use of the group within idealized accounts of prehistory or the medieval world. The second discusses the stereotype of the destructive Vandals, and the notion that the group was particularly violent, even by the standards of the time. The third examines the peculiar ‘pan-Germanic’ discourse which presented the Vandals as a specifically *German* people, and which sought to associate their portentous name with the ruling aristocracies of different Scandinavian and German territories in the early modern period. These sections are primarily concerned with later medieval and early modern accounts – down to the end of the eighteenth century. Although images of ‘Romantic’, ‘destructive’ and (especially) ‘Germanic’ Vandals continued to circulate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and indeed remain in popular currency), important changes in the writing of history from the end of the eighteenth century transformed scholarship on the group. The final section of the introduction discusses the emergence of modern historiography on the Vandals down to the present day, and explains the ambitions for the current book within this context.

‘The Romantic Vandals’

Within a generation of the fall of Carthage in AD 534, historians began to manipulate Vandal history to their own ends. The Vandals, after all, had risen from relative obscurity to a position of extraordinary authority within the Mediterranean in a remarkably short time, and then just as quickly had disappeared from view. Such a bizarre trajectory proved irresistible to historians who were anxious to identify moral exempla in a changing world.

One of the first of these writers was the historian Jordanes, a minor civil servant who wrote his *History of the Goths* (commonly known as

the *Getica*) in Constantinople in the mid 550s.⁴ The *Getica* is an important source for Byzantine history at the time of Justinian's reconquest, and will be used frequently in the study that follows, but the chauvinism of his treatment of the Vandals is apparent throughout. Within the *Getica*, the Goths are the obvious heroes – Jordanes himself claimed to be of Gothic stock, and his history was composed in part as a celebration of Justinian's achievement in overcoming the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy. The Vandals, by contrast, appear in consistently negative terms. Jordanes shows a grudging respect for their great king Geiseric (and his thumbnail sketch of the stocky, limping ruler is our only description of this key figure), but his followers are cast as weak-kneed cowards. The first movement of the Vandals into the empire is presented as the consequence of a massive defeat at the hands of the Goths; the invasion of Africa is similarly regarded as an example of Vandal cowardice in the face of the recent arrival of a Gothic army in Spain, and the complex diplomatic manoeuvrings of the early sixth century are predictably presented in terms which favour the Goths over their long-standing enemies.⁵ Persuasive as Jordanes' narrative details can be, it is the striking consistency of this view of animosity between the two peoples (and the one-sided nature of their conflicts) which suggest that the historian was simply using the Vandals as a useful device for highlighting the strengths of the Goths. As a once-powerful group, the Vandals made worthwhile antagonists for Jordanes' heroes, as a group who had vanished from the political map at the time of his writing, they were a perfect – and uncomplaining – foil.

Jordanes' contemporary Procopius projected a rather different image of Vandal decline in his Greek *Histories of the Wars*. Like Jordanes, Procopius wrote during Justinian's western campaigns, and was himself directly involved in Belisarius' conquest of North Africa and Italy.⁶ Where Jordanes remains positive about these long wars, however, Procopius is palpably more cynical, and his regard for the eastern empire seems to have cooled substantially as the reconquest wore on. Consequently it is not surprising that Procopius puts forward a more positive image of the Vandals than Jordanes did. For him, the collapse of the kingdom was not due to the inherent cowardice of the group, but rather to a tragic susceptibility to the temptations of the Mediterranean world:

For the Vandals, since the time when they gained possession of Libya, used to indulge in baths, all of them, every day and enjoyed a table abounding in all things, the sweetest and best that the earth and sea produce. And they wore gold very generally, and clothed themselves in the Medic garments,

which now they call 'seric' and passed their time, thus dressed, in theatres and hippodromes and in other pleasurable pursuits, and in all else in hunting. . . . and they had a great number of banquets and all manner of sexual pleasures were in great vogue among them.⁷

Procopius is not just talking about the Vandals here, of course: he is using the tragic decline of the kingdom of Carthage as a moral lesson for his readers. Later in the same passage, the historian goes on to talk about the Moors – the barbarians of the African mountains and pre-desert who continued to resist the Byzantine conquest. By contrast, the Vandals had lost their own barbaric vigour through their extended contact with the enervating luxuries of Carthage: a clear moral message to readers who had been brought up in just such an environment of theatres, hippodromes and fine dining.

Other historians of the early middle ages also found the Vandals to be useful illustrations for their more complex arguments. Isidore of Seville, who composed a bewildering variety of works in Visigothic Spain in the early seventh century, included an epilogue on the History of the Vandals to his long (and carefully crafted) *History of the Goths*.⁸ Like Jordanes, Isidore sought to contrast the fate of the Goths and the Vandals, but while the earlier historian had depicted two peoples in more or less permanent opposition, the Spanish historian presented the narratives of the two kingdoms side-by-side. For Isidore, the decline of the kingdom of Carthage could be explained by the refusal of the Vandal kings to convert from the Arian heresy to Nicene Catholicism and by their failure to move beyond the internecine squabbling of their troubled early history. The Goths, by contrast, had converted to the historian's own faith, and had established a strong monarchy. Again, the Vandals provided a useful moral and political counterpoint for the historians of other groups.

Historians of the Lombards, another barbarian group, followed the lead set by Jordanes in their treatment of the Vandals. In the seventh century the anonymous author of the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* (Origin of the Lombard People) suggested that the Lombards had defeated the mighty Vandals at a formative stage of their prehistory. The account, in which the twins Ibor and Aio use some quick-witted hairdressing tricks to defeat the Vandal heroes Ambri and Assi before the benevolent gaze of the god Wodan, and hence earn their name 'Long-beards', must have been a recently coined myth, rather than a long-standing historical tradition.⁹ The same narrative was then taken up in modified form in the eighth-century *History of the Lombards* by Paul the Deacon.¹⁰ For the *Origo*

author and for Paul, it was victory over the proud Vandals which won the Lombards the support of the gods – a triumph which was meaningful largely because of the later prominence (and decline) of the kingdom of Carthage. Here, the Vandals are little more than ahistorical monsters, lent a particular impact by the obvious resonance of their name.

The Vandals also had a role in the ecclesiastical histories and saints' lives of the medieval period. Gregory of Tours, a Gallic writer of the late sixth century, presents a garbled image of Vandal Africa as a violent, dysfunctional and heretical kingdom in his long history of early Merovingian Frankia. The Vandal kings of his account are more or less recognizable early medieval rulers, and may well have been drawn from a lost African source, but bear the obvious marks of caricature.¹¹ This is still clearer in Agnellus of Ravenna's eighth-century *Book of the Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna*, in which an unnamed Vandal king is said to have wished to plunder a rich church of the city, some 20 years after the final defeat of the group.¹² Similar traditions abound in Italian and French hagiography, and the mysterious African barbarians proved to be a popular ingredient in countless exotic religious traditions.¹³

The Vandals were peripheral in the chivalric myths of the later middle ages. No members of the group appear in the *Nibelungenlied*, the Arthurian cycle, or the poems of the Cid, all of which helped to secure the position of the earlier medieval period in the romantic imagination. There is a brief allusion to the Vandals in *Don Quixote*, Cervantes' great pastiche of the chivalric tradition. A brief episode in the second book describes Don Quixote's meeting with the Knight of the Mirrors, heart-sick for the beautiful Casildea de Vandalia.¹⁴ This imagined land of Vandalia is a mythologized rendering of al-Andalus, (or Andalusia) in the south of Spain, a place-name which had long been associated with the Vandals, for obvious reasons, but which had no direct historical connection with the group.¹⁵ Cervantes' allusion does not amount to much in itself, but it does show that the Vandals retained some positive associations (albeit of a rather peripheral kind).

But the Vandals were not forgotten entirely. The group are included briefly in the sprawling early seventeenth-century novel sequence *L'Astrée*, originally written by Honoré D'Urfé from 1607, and completed by Balthasar Baro after D'Urfé's death in 1625.¹⁶ For much of its length, *L'Astrée* is a bucolic romp through fifth-century Gaul, in which the grim realities of late Roman society are replaced with an idealized image of Merovingian and Gallo-Roman chivalry. A similar tone is maintained in a substantial passage in Balthasar Baro's fifth book, when the action briefly switches to Vandal Carthage.¹⁷ In a plot loosely based

upon the Vandal sack of Rome in AD 455 and the kidnap of the imperial women (a historical episode discussed more fully in chapter 4, below), Baro traces a complex web of courtship and love. Two Roman knights, Olimbre and Ursace, are smitten with the imperial women and seek to win their freedom. Obstructing them are the ambitions of the Vandal king Géneric (Geiseric) and the rather more wholesome love of his son Trasimond (Thrasamund). The plot takes several turns, including a North African beach scene and a substantial palace fire lifted almost directly from the pages of the *Aeneid*, but all turns out well in the end – the heart of the king is softened, and the various couples are allowed to attend to their nuptials in freedom.

This short episode was revisited twice over the course of the seventeenth century, in two plays inspired by the text. The first of these was *Eudoxe* (1641), a tragi-comedy by Georges de Scudéry, written in a period which saw several plays and poems on a late Roman theme.¹⁸ The second was a rather bloodier (and rather more successful) tragedy, *Genserik*, composed by Mme Deshoulières for the Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1680.¹⁹ Both plays largely kept the structure of Baro's text, but by the final version, the optimistic and bucolic tone had been entirely erased. In Deshoulières' *Genserik*, the Roman knights are entirely absent, and are replaced with a tragic African princess, Sophronia. By the end of the play Sophronia, Trasimond and the imperial princess Placidia lie as corpses on the floor of the stage and the two remaining principals – Genserik and the empress Eudocia – are left to live out a life of mutual hatred together.

The Vandals never dominated in popular narratives of the fall of Rome, but they did appear in some surprising contexts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nicholas Brady's 1692 play *The Rape Or the Innocent Imposters* was a tragi-comedy about a star-crossed (and cross-dressing) royal couple at the court of the Vandal king Gunderic. In its heady mixture of extraordinary violence and sexual ambivalence, it neatly encapsulates one popular view of the tyrannical and corrupt Vandals.²⁰ A year later Johann Georg Conradi's opera *Geiseric: The Great King of the African Vandals* was performed for the first time in Hamburg.²¹ This was one of the earliest operas with a 'barbarian' theme – a motif explored more fully by Jomelli and Handel during the eighteenth century, and by Richard Wagner in the nineteenth. Incidentally, its revival in the 1720s was the first opera to be reviewed in Matthesen's influential periodical *Critica Musica*.²²

The Vandals were not central figures in this imaginative tradition, but they were familiar enough as supporting players. Much the same was true of the genealogical associations which developed around the group.

From the early sixteenth century, the Swedish and Danish royal families and the Dukes of Mecklenburg (later Mecklenburg-Strelitz) on the Baltic coast of Germany all claimed that they were descended from the Vandals, among other barbarian peoples.²³ Among the Swedes and Danes this was simply one claim among many – a point illustrated particularly clearly in the Swedish royal title *Svecorum Gothorum Vandalorumque rex* ('King of the Swedes, Goths and Vandals'), and in the three crowns of the Swedish royal standard. In Mecklenburg-Strelitz the claim to Vandal heritage was taken more seriously, and was based in part upon a convenient conflation of the Vandals who were supposed to have originated in the area, with the Slavic Wends, who settled there in the eighth century AD. These claims to Vandal royal heritage crossed the channel into Britain through the marriage of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz to George III in 1761, and from there (perhaps surprisingly) migrated still further west to the American colonies.

In the early 1770s, the Grand (or 'Great') Ohio Company proposed to establish a new colony in the lands of the Ohio River Valley to the west of the Alleghenies: roughly the area that is now West Virginia and north-eastern Kentucky.²⁴ Among the names proposed for this putative colony (which won support from Ben Franklin, among others), was 'Vandalia', in honour of the Queen consort.²⁵ Despite a decade of wrangling, the proposal was not taken up, and both the proposed colony and its name were quietly shelved after the American Revolution. In spite of this, the dim traces of the 'Romantic' image of the Vandals may still occasionally be discerned in the United States today. A handful of settlements in the Midwest still bear the name Vandalia, including a city in Illinois, which was briefly the state capital. Still further west, the sports teams of the University of Idaho are collectively known as 'The Vandals' – a last idealized memory of the barbarian group.

'The Destructive Vandals'

This idealization of the Vandals lasted from Procopius to Franklin, but was not to survive in popular currency much longer. In 1794, less than two decades after the abandonment of the planned 'Vandalia' colony, the French Bishop Grégoire de Blois coined the phrase 'Vandalisme' to refer to the widespread destruction of works of art in the aftermath of the French Revolution.²⁶ Within months, the term had been adopted by journalists throughout Europe, by 1798 it had been enshrined in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, and by the early years of the

nineteenth century the term was a commonplace in all of the major European languages. From then on, the Vandals were no longer remembered simply as one barbarian group among many, but as particularly powerful agents of destruction. ‘Vandalisme’, ‘vandalismo’, ‘Vandalismus’ and ‘vandalism’ increasingly came to define the way in which the barbarian kings of Carthage were remembered.

Bishop Grégoire himself (or the Abbé Grégoire, as he is most commonly known) was a prominent Revolutionary and a devout French Catholic. Best remembered now for his agitation against racial discrimination within the Revolutionary state, his putative formulation of a national policy on heritage was a relatively minor feature of an impressive curriculum vitae. In his *Rapports sur le vandalisme* (Reports on Vandalism), issued in the summer of 1794, Grégoire advocated a national policy of protection for the arts. In doing so, he drew upon an existing stereotype of the Vandals. Whilst many historians, poets and playwrights regarded the group relatively fondly, the collapse of the western Roman empire was still viewed with a sort of awed horror, and the Vandals were among the barbarians felt to have been responsible. Consequently, the group had long been viewed as agents of destruction, even as they appeared in Romantic novels and elaborate genealogies. In a letter to Pope Leo X in 1517 for example, the artist Raphael condemned the builders of modern Rome, who plundered ancient ruins to beautify their own houses as ‘Goths and Vandals’.²⁷ Rather closer to Grégoire in time, and feasibly a direct influence upon him, was the English poet William Cowper. In circumstances strikingly similar to those faced by the French Abbé, Cowper lamented the destruction of the library of Lord Mansfield during the Gordon riots of 1780:

So then – the Vandals of our isle, | Sworn foes to sense and law, | Have
burnt to dust a nobler pile | Than ever Roman saw!²⁸

Other references abound. Alexander Pope referred to the decadent Catholic Church as ‘these Holy Vandals’ in his vitriolic *Essay on Criticism* in 1711; in 1734, John Theophilus Desaguliers happily condemned Descartes and all opponents of Isaac Newton as ‘this army of Goths and Vandals in the philosophical world’.²⁹

Grégoire, then, drew upon a well-established tradition in invoking the barbarians of the dark ages to express his horror at contemporary events. Prior to Grégoire, however, that it was the Goths, rather than the Vandals, who were the most common emblems of barbarian destruction. While the Vandals do feature occasionally in these jeremiads, the Goths

appear with almost monotonous regularity. Indeed, the negative associations of the group were so strong that Gibbon remarked in the tenth chapter of his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

So memorable was the part which they acted in the subversion of the Western empire that the name GOTHs is frequently but improperly used as an appellation of rude and warlike barbarism.³⁰

Two decades after Gibbon had published this observations, Grégoire's coinage had made it redundant. From 1794 on, it was the Vandals who stood as symbols for the violent destruction in the Age of Revolutions. Grégoire's motives in making the Vandals as the point of his metaphor are not clear. 'Vandalisme' certainly has a pleasing phonic quality, and trips off the tongue more readily than 'Gothicism' or (say) 'Langobardisme', and it is likely that this influenced the initial coinage of the term, and would certainly have helped its later popularity. While the Goths were familiar characters in the popular imagination, moreover, and had lent their name to styles of medieval architecture and an embryonic form of literature, the Vandals had few such associations: in invoking the Vandals, therefore, Grégoire did not have to compete with other contrasting usages. Finally (and perhaps most importantly), the short Vandal occupation of Gaul in AD 406–9 had become a subject of considerable interest to French historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a particularly vivid episode in the great narrative of Roman decline. While many of these historians shared the idealized view of fifth-century history propounded by poets like D'Urfé and Baro, they regarded the Vandals as violent interlopers within this world, and were scathing in their criticism of the group.³¹ Grégoire knew his history (and particularly his French history), and may well have been drawn by these traditions in his condemnation of the most zealous revolutionaries. Probably influenced by all of these factors, and apparently indifferent to the more positive associations that the group enjoyed at the time of writing, Grégoire cheerfully determined that the Vandals would forever be remembered as the agents of destruction.

'The German(ic) Vandals'

Grégoire's calumination of the Vandals was met with horror from some quarters. The bishop himself acknowledged this controversy in his *Mémoires*:

Those respected scholars, born in that part of Germany, whence the Vandals had once come, claimed that the meaning which I gave to the term 'vandalisme' was an insult to their ancestors, who were warriors, and not destroyers.³²

These critics actually went rather further than Grégoire was willing to admit. Influenced by the historian August Ludwig von Schlözer, the scholar and travel writer Friedrich Meyer attacked Grégoire's chauvinism in his *Fragments sur Paris*, published in 1798. His argument includes the improbable defence that Geiseric's thorough despoliation of Rome in AD 455 indicates that the Vandals were connoisseurs of art, and not mindless barbarians, and ends with a passionate plea to his French audience to end the unjust denigration of a proud and free 'German' people.³³ This plea fell on deaf ears, of course, and most contemporaries probably shared Grégoire's view that the hurt feelings of a few German scholars were largely immaterial in the face of more pressing social concerns, but the objection highlights a third view of the Vandals within early modern society.

The complaints of von Schlözer and Friedrich Meyer demonstrate that the historical Vandals of the fifth century had not been entirely forgotten amid the romanticism and hostility of the seventeenth and eighteenth. Their insistence upon a direct connection between the Vandals of the early medieval period and the inhabitants of the modern Germany also highlights a central theme within much of the historical scholarship of this period. For many historians and antiquarians of the Enlightenment, the study of prehistory and the migration period was not simply an academic pursuit, it was the search for national origins.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the first reliable editions of texts relating to the history of the Vandals became available. It was the rediscovery of Tacitus' *Germania* during the fifteenth century which had the greatest effect upon the study of all 'barbarian' groups, including the Vandals.³⁴ The *Germania* was written in the late first century AD, and is largely concerned with the detailed description of the politics and social practices of the inhabitants of the lands beyond the Rhine and the Danube, chiefly as a contrast to what Tacitus perceived to be the moral failings of the contemporary Roman world.³⁵ The first printed edition was published in 1470, and the text attained particularly wide readership through the scholarly edition of Justus Lipsius in 1575.³⁶ To the Northern European humanists of the sixteenth century, the *Germania* promised a revolution in the understanding of the distant past. Tacitus seemed to offer a perfect taxonomy of ancient Germanic

culture to a scholarly world increasingly captivated by the order and patterns they felt to be inherent in nature. At the centre of their reading of Tacitus was the notion of the Germani as a distinct biological group – proud, martial and morally superior to the peoples around them. Tacitus’ statement that the Germani were divided into smaller sub-groups, including the Marsi, Gambriuii, Suebi and (crucially) the Vandilii, could then be used as the starting point for the investigation of specific Germanic ‘peoples’, linked by blood and culture to their neighbours, but each worthy of historical study in its own right. Passing references in other classical sources – like the Elder Pliny’s *Natural History*, or Ptolemy’s *Geography* – could then be stitched together in a more or less coherent composite image of a thriving German ‘golden age’. When coupled with early medieval texts, like Jordanes’ *Getica* and Paul’s *History of the Lombards*, which described the fourth- and fifth-century migrations of groups with the same names, the armature for coherent histories of these ‘tribes’ or ‘peoples’ came into focus. As shall be discussed, attitudes to ethnicity, particularly of the ‘Germanic’ barbarians, have been utterly transformed over the last two generations, but the notion of distinct, identifiable ‘peoples’ as worthy subjects of history was a dominant theme of antiquarian scholarship from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries down to the middle of the twentieth.

Other texts were also examined critically by these manuscript scholars, and began to circulate in ever-improving scholarly editions. The *Historia Persecutionis* of Victor of Vita was perhaps the most important of these, and remains a text of central importance to the understanding of the Vandals. Originally written in the late 480s by a vicious critic of the Vandal kingdom, and largely concerned with the sufferings of the Catholics under their rule, the *Historia* widely circulated in manuscript form during the medieval period. From the late fifteenth century the *Historia* appeared in print, and several different translations into modern languages were known in the sixteenth and seventeenth, including one (now lost) Italian translation by Niccolò Machiavelli.³⁷ Most important was the edition with extensive notes produced by Thierry Ruinart in 1694, which provided a platform for all subsequent scholarship on the text. Procopius’ Greek *History of the Wars* is the other crucial text for the study of Vandal history.³⁸ The African sections provide a detailed account of the fall of the Vandal kingdom, as well as some discussion on the background of the group. Like Victor, Procopius had long been known to scholars and his text had circulated for centuries in a variety of Latin translations. Surprisingly, printed Latin translations of the work were published only relatively late, and those relating to the Vandals

were the last to appear. The text became known widely to western European scholars through Hugo Grotius' compilation *Historia Gothorum, Vandalorum et Langobardorum* in 1655, and later in a similar compilation of Lenain de Tillemont in the early eighteenth century.³⁹

This interest in the critical compilation of classical and medieval histories coincided with a growing fascination with the physical remains of the European past, as well as with the gradual rise to prominence of confident new early modern monarchies, particularly in the north of the continent. The result was the efflorescence of a variety of new 'national' histories from the early sixteenth century. Drawn by the wealth of newly uncovered historical material, scholars turned again to the twilight years of the Roman empire and the early centuries of the medieval period in the search for their national origins. François Hotman suggested that the political systems of contemporary France were to be found in the peculiar fusion of Gallic and Frankish identities from the sixth century in his *Franco-Gallia* (1573) – a lead that was widely followed over the course of the following century.⁴⁰ Scholars like Olaus and Johannes Magnus, and Drouet de Maupertuy traced the origins of the Swedish monarchy to the heroic Gothic past, in the direct hope of winning royal favour.⁴¹ Robert Sheringham's *De Anglorum gentis* in 1670 identified the origins of the English among the Angles, just as Johann Jacob Mascov's, *Geschichte der Teutschen* (1726–37) traced modern German identity to the Germani known to Tacitus.⁴² Politically infused as these histories certainly were, all demonstrated a fascination with the minutiae of human history that reflected the scholarly spirit of the age.

The Vandals were generally shunned by these scholars for two reasons. First (and most obvious) was the fact that the Vandals established their kingdom in North Africa – a region that was later to be occupied during the Arab conquests of the later seventh century and consequently absorbed within the broader cultural milieu of Islam. When the scholars of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe came to write the histories of 'their' nations, then, few had any particular interest in a long-forgotten group on the Barbary coast. Second was the fact that no major 'Vandal' history, written by the group itself survived from antiquity. While captivating narratives like the *Getica* or the *History of the Lombards* were not the only means by which the early modern scholars could investigate the medieval past, they did provide inspiring heroic stories and clear, coherent narratives to make sense of the jumbled world of the fifth and sixth centuries. Consequently, the absence of a similar 'Vandal' history deprived later historians of an obvious narrative scaffold against which to construct their own histories.

As we have seen, however, Baltic royalty and their court historians were not above claiming descent from the Vandals when this would add an extra crown to their coat of arms, and this proved to be a major catalyst to serious academic scholarship. To accomplish this, scholars concentrated upon the supposed prehistory of the Vandals within the north, and regarded their successes in North Africa as tangential to an essentially *European* history.⁴³ One of the earliest writers to attempt to compose a dedicated Vandal history was Albert Krantz, a professor at the University of Rostock, who composed his *Wandalia* in 1517 in honour of the Duke Magnus von Mecklenburg.⁴⁴ Krantz was not interested in telling the history of the Vandal state in Africa (although a brief narrative of the history of the kingdom of Carthage is included in his opening chapters). Instead, his concern was to locate the Vandals within the modern political map of Europe, and the approach which he adopted goes some way toward explaining the peculiar claims of the Baltic aristocracy to Vandal heritage. At the centre of Krantz's argument was the assumption that the Hanseatic towns of Lübeck, Rostock, Stralsrund, Greifswald, Elbingen, Königsberg, Wismar and Lueneburg could trace their origins to a Vandal past. In fact, the towns were commonly assumed to have Slavic origins, but in certain medieval traditions the name 'Wenden' (or 'Wends') was frequently employed to refer to the Slavs of this region, and the towns were collectively known by the Latin term *vandalicae urbes* ('Vandal' or 'Wendish' towns – the ambiguity is important). By systematically conflating ancient references to the 'Vandals' with medieval references to the 'Slavs' or 'Wends', Krantz was able to provide these towns with a proud antiquity that was at least the equal of others' pretensions to Gothic ancestry. This confusion of the Wends and the Vandals did not withstand scholarly scrutiny for long, but proved to be so convenient politically that it took a long time to disappear entirely. In 1555, the Polish scholar Martin Cromer convincingly refuted Krantz's argument, only to see the *Wandalia* reprinted in 1575. Thereafter, a succession of Swedish and Finnish antiquarians returned to the issue throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁵

Two further studies of the Vandals were written during the later eighteenth century. The first of these, Thomas Nugent's *The History of Wandalia*, comprises a detailed history of Duchy of Mecklenburg from the Roman period to the later Middle Ages and was inspired by the marriage of George III to Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in 1761.⁴⁶ As might be expected, Nugent followed German practice in focusing upon the supposed homeland of the barbarians, rather than their excursions in the empire, but an opening section does briefly consider the kingdom

established by Geiseric in Carthage. Far more impressive from a scholarly point of view, and less immediately compromised by issues of royal genealogy, was Konrad Mannert's *Geschichte der Vandalen*, arguably the first narrative history of the Vandals worthy of the name. In striking contrast to Krantz and his successors, Mannert focused primarily upon the history of the Vandals within the empire, and argued that the Slavic occupation of the Vandals' original homeland had effectively ended their history as a 'German' people.⁴⁷ Mannert passes over the prehistory of the group relatively quickly, and closes his account with the Byzantine occupation of Carthage in 534. This was an approach which was to prove popular among the great German scholars of the nineteenth century, but was unusual among the continental historians of the eighteenth.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the basic outlines of Vandal history were clear. Although the confusion between the Vandals and the Wends had generally been resolved, the history of the Vandals remained an essentially northern European history. For scholars like Krantz or Nugent, the Vandals' occupation of North Africa was a largely peripheral episode to a proud European history. These historians regarded the passing references in Pliny, Tacitus and Ptolemy as proof positive that the Vandals had originated in the German territories, and most probably in the lands around the mouth of the Vistula. This approach was based more on tradition and scholarly consensus than on anything else. By contrast, the history of the group within North Africa – the period of Vandal history for which we have by far the greatest body of evidence – was relatively neglected, and came to be represented by a small handful of illustrative episodes.

The Vandals in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

After the publication of Gibbon's colossal *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the 1770s and 1780s, the study of the *Völkerwanderungszeit* or 'migration period' was dominated by scholars in Germany and France. Throughout the nineteenth century, considerable methodological advances in scholarship, including the development of major research institutions and the application of new standards of source criticism, were coupled with a burgeoning romantic nationalism. It proved to be a heady combination. The concoction was at its most potent among scholars in the German provinces where the Germanic family of languages was increasingly regarded as a defining feature of social and cultural identity among prehistoric groups. Vandals, Goths,

Alemans and Franks were thus lumped together as different tribes drawn from the same 'German' stock. The scholarly foundations for these assumptions were impressive. From the early nineteenth century, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* set about the colossal task of collating and editing all texts from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages which bore any relationship to the history of these 'Germanic peoples' (a remit that was very broadly defined).⁴⁸ Simultaneously, antiquarian research throughout the German provinces was bolstered by the foundation of a number of archaeological societies and the institutionalization of this study in the major universities. The same patterns were evident throughout western Europe, but it was the remarkable industrialization of the German historical tradition which had a particular effect upon the study of Vandal history.

This had a catalytic effect upon synthetic scholarship, and several new histories of the Vandals were written. Of these, the most important were Felix Papencordt's *Geschichte der vandalischen Herrschaft in Afrika* (History of Vandal Rule in Africa), published in 1837 and Louis Marcus' *Histoire des Vandales* (History of the Vandals), published in 1838. Other works included Carl Meinicke's short study of early Vandal history *Versuch einer Geschichte der Vandalen bis zu ihrem Einfall in Afrika* (Towards a History of the Vandals up to the Invasion of Africa) (1830), and Ferdinand Wrede's later examination of the Vandalic language *Über die Sprache der Wandalen* (Regarding the Language of the Vandals) (1884). Most important of all was the *Geschichte der Wandalen* of Ludwig Schmidt, first published in 1901, reissued in 1942, and later published in a French translation in the early 1950s. Schmidt was one of the central scholars of the *Völkerwanderungszeit* within Germany, and his studies remain standard works of reference for the modern historian.

What is striking about all of these histories is their application of the rigorous new scholarly practices of the nineteenth century with several long-standing assumptions about the nature of Vandal identity. Papencordt, Marcus and Schmidt all benefited greatly from the improved editions of texts available to them, and placed particular emphasis upon hitherto neglected sources like the *Historia Persecutionis* of Victor of Vita. But they were also concerned to tell the story of the Vandals as an essentially *German* history. Despite the almost total absence of textual evidence concerning the supposed 'homeland' of the Vandals, the historians of the nineteenth century placed particular emphasis upon the northern origins of the group, on the understanding that their political, social and cultural institutions were essentially unchanged from their earliest prehistory.

New methods of archaeological research accentuated this emphasis upon the Vandals' prehistory, and provided dubious scientific support for these assumptions. Within Northern and Central Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the archaeologists of prehistory were concerned primarily with the identification of different ethnic groups within the material record.⁴⁹ Gustav Kossinna was the most famous proponent of this approach, and was among the most influential archaeologists of his age, despite only once directing an excavation in person.⁵⁰ Kossinna's most lasting contribution to scholarship was his argument that certain recognizable 'material cultures' could be identified in the settlement and (especially) funerary archaeology of northern Europe. He then proposed that these cultures could be identified with the named peoples listed in the classical geographies of Tacitus, Pliny and Ptolemy. Kossinna concluded from these accounts that the Vandili were located around the Vistula basin during the first century AD, and deduced that the material culture found in the region was typical of the group. From here, Kossinna and his supporters argued that whole movements of peoples could be inferred from the changing distribution of certain typological artefacts, and hence wider patterns of migration could be traced through the archaeological record. Kossinna's arguments were widely accepted, first that the classical geographers were essentially trustworthy in their locations of 'Germanic' peoples, and second that the Vandals had probably originated in the Jutland peninsula or the Baltic littoral before moving south to Poland.⁵¹ These findings were supported in contemporary studies of place-names, which saw in toponyms like Vendyssel in Jutland the indelible traces of prehistoric Vandal occupation.

The Vandals were of rather less interest to the historians and archaeologists working in North Africa in the same period. The French occupation of Algeria and Tunisia in the 1830s did trigger a concerted programme of research into ancient North Africa, under the Académie Royale des Inscriptions. Significantly, both Louis Marcus and Felix Papencordt drew upon this work in their histories of the Vandal kingdom. But the archaeologists working in the region had little interest in the Vandal or Byzantine past, and preferred to bash through the remains that they had left in the search for the splendours of the Roman period. Many of these excavators were officers in the colonial army, and recognized in the physical traces of Roman rule the antecedents to their own pretensions to pacify and civilize the continent.⁵² The Vandals, as late-comers and unsuccessful colonists, who bore an unhealthy association with Germany, were largely irrelevant to this discussion, and consequently were rarely studied in detail.

Similar assumptions underlay contemporary French histories of North Africa, which relied upon textual sources. François Martroye's *Genséric: La conquête Vandale en Afrique et la destruction de l'empire d'occident* (Geiseric: The Vandal Conquest in Africa and the Destruction of the Western Empire) (1907) and Emile Gautier's *Genséric, Roi des Vandales* (Geiseric: King of the Vandals) (1932) are both impressive historical studies, but both focus primarily on the Vandal conquests, rather than the functioning of the North African state which followed. More striking still are the historical and archaeological surveys of the middle years of the century. The second quarter of the twentieth century was an unusually fertile one within French historical scholarship, and the history of North Africa was a particular beneficiary of this efflorescence. Grand projects like Stéphane Gsell's *Atlas Archéologique de l'Algérie* (Archaeological Atlas of Algeria) (1911), Pierre Monceaux's *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique Chrétienne* (Literary History of Early Christian Africa) (1905–27) and C.-A. Julien's *Histoire de l'Afrique du Nord* (1931, rev. edn. 1951) all promised to set Roman North Africa within its historical context, and have proved enormously influential among later scholars, but again, all tended to peter out before the Vandals took occupation of Carthage.

To simplify only slightly, the Vandals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to be viewed primarily within a Germanic (and German) context. It was assumed that the central social institutions of the group, including language, law and patterns of government, had evolved fully in prehistory, and were exported as fixed traditions to the south during the fifth century. Although the theme was rarely addressed directly, most scholars assumed that these authentic 'Vandal' or 'Germanic' traditions disappeared in North Africa, in the face of cultural and military forces that the group was no longer able to withstand. Like Procopius, a millennium and a half earlier, these modern historians implicitly regarded Vandal history as a gradual narrative of Germanic virility and triumph, followed by cultural decay.

Unsurprisingly, this caricature – or at least the first half of it – was taken up with alacrity in popular historical works of the same period. Geiseric is held up as a quintessentially 'German' hero in John H. Haaren's *Famous Men of the Middle Ages* – an American school-text of 1904. Here, the history of the Vandals is traced from 'the shores of the Baltic' to Africa, but only down to the death of Geiseric in AD 477, when the African kingdom was at its height.⁵³ What we see, in other words, is a triumphant narrative of Vandal (and hence *German*) success, with little attention paid to the kingdom that Geiseric founded, or its fate after his

death. As might be expected, this view proved popular in Nazi Germany during the 1930s.⁵⁴ Richard Theiss and Hans Friedrich Blunck both wrote solemn biographies of *Geiserich* which begin with the hero as a wide- (blue-) eyed German youth and end with his death at the head of a vast Mediterranean kingdom.⁵⁵ Most notable of all is the account of the king presented in Poultney Bigelow's eccentric *Genseric: The First Prussian Kaiser* (1917). Bigelow was a prominent American historian of Prussia whose formerly close relationship to the German royal family soured during the First World War. His peculiar work systematically compares Geiseric with Kaiser Wilhelm II, including amongst other things the striking (and completely unsubstantiated) suggestion that Geiseric's birthplace was exactly the location where the palace of Potsdam would later be built.⁵⁶

The most important study of the Vandals to be written in the twentieth century was unquestionably Christian Courtois' *Les Vandales et L'Afrique* (1955). Courtois taught at the University of Algiers, where he had previously published a critical study of Victor of Vita, and had been involved in a collaborative publication of the Albertini Tablets – a collection of wooden estate records discovered in southern Tunisia and dating from the late fifth century.⁵⁷ By any standards, *Les Vandales et L'Afrique* is an exemplary scholarly study, and firmly placed the Vandals within their *African* context. Yet even this work was deeply influenced by the long-standing assumptions regarding the Vandals as a group. In a long opening section which he terms 'L'épopée Vandale' ('the Vandal Epic' is perhaps the best translation), Courtois describes the supposed origins of the group in Eastern Germania, and traces what he imagines to be their long migration south.⁵⁸ A second preface to the study proper is then provided through his substantial description of Roman Africa down to the time of the Vandal occupation. As a result, it is only on page 155 that Courtois' treatment of 'The Vandal State' begins in earnest. Conspicuously, this too is heavily influenced by the later colonial context in which the study was produced. As several later critics of the study have pointed out, the opposition between the 'changeless' semi-transhumant 'Moorish' populations of North Africa and the progressive Roman and Vandal colonizing powers forms a central explanatory device within the work.⁵⁹ This is not to dismiss the importance of the work – and Courtois' study remains a magnificent example of French scholarship of the Annaliste tradition at its finest – simply to note that all histories of the Vandals have been profoundly shaped by those that came before.

In the half-century that followed the publication of *Les Vandales et L'Afrique*, the Vandals suffered somewhat from scholarly neglect. In

part, no doubt, this was because of the status of the book itself: Courtois' treatment of the topic seemed so thorough as to preclude any serious attempt to supplant it. But his study could scarcely claim to be definitive. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a massive expansion of archaeological research which promised to support or challenge many of Courtois' conclusions. This has helped uncover the urban fabric of late Roman, Vandal and Byzantine Africa through prestigious excavations like the UNESCO project at Carthage and major research projects at Leptiminus and Lepcis Magna, and has enabled the study of patterns of rural exploitation through extensive field surveys like those in Caesarea, the Segermes Valley and the region around Kasserine.⁶⁰ The development of new pottery typologies and an increasing concern for the study of Late Antiquity have ensured that modern scholars have far more information at their disposal than was available to Courtois or his predecessors.

Changes in political perspective have had a still greater effect upon our view of Vandal history. In many ways, Courtois was the last great voice of French colonialist scholarship on classical North Africa.⁶¹ Following the Algerian Wars of Independence, the ancient North African past became a crucial intellectual battleground for the post-colonial writers both in France and the *maghreb*. Philosophers like Marcel Benabou in his *Le resistance africaine à la romanisation* (The African Resistance to Romanization) (1976) saw the notion of 'Roman' Africa itself as a problematic construct to be challenged, and replaced by a history which emphasized demographic, institutional and cultural continuity through successive imperial occupations.⁶² While the ideological foundations of Benabou's scholarship have themselves been challenged – the image of 'continuous' African history which he propounds is just as simplistic as the model of straightforward 'Romanization' which he rejects – post-colonial approaches have revolutionized the understanding of North Africa during the first millennium.⁶³ The Vandal period itself rarely features within these debates and discussions, but its study is equally implicated within them.⁶⁴ Histories and archaeologies which increasingly talk about social and economic integration, and of cultural 'creolization', provide important models for the appreciation of the nuances of Vandal society.⁶⁵ The explosion of interest in the archaeology and history of the Moorish polities which developed during the same period has a still more obvious importance to the student of the Hasding state in Carthage.

Understanding of ethnicity has also changed profoundly over the last half-century, and this too has had a dramatic effect upon the study of the late Roman and early medieval period. Here again, recent political history has had a direct impact upon this scholarship. The horrific events

of the 1930s and 1940s, and the hateful philosophies propounded at the time, prompted German and Austrian scholars in the generations that followed to examine critically notions of ethnicity within the migration period. Scholars like Reinhard Wenskus and his pupil Herwig Wolfram argued strongly that the 'tribes' of the *Völkerwanderung* were not immutable biological entities, which remained pure and unsullied throughout their history, but rather should be viewed as constantly shifting political communities, which were only solidified at a relatively late stage in their history.⁶⁶ These views have proved enormously influential in Europe and the United States, and later historians, notably Walter Pohl and Patrick Geary have done much to refine and further complicate this study of 'ethnogenesis'.⁶⁷ Since 1992, in particular, when contemporary notions of what it meant to be 'English', 'French' or 'Austrian' were brought into the limelight by the signing of the Maastricht treaty, 'identity' has become a major theme in early medieval scholarship.⁶⁸ The approach has also won its critics, often vitriolic, who have questioned some of the methodologies employed in this work, and have challenged the tendency to view very different barbarian groups through the same 'Germanic' lens.⁶⁹ But even in provoking this debate, the impact upon modern studies of the period has been profound. In numerous individual works of scholarship and in grand collective projects like the international *Transformation of the Roman World* project, the study of changing 'identities' in Late Antiquity found a place alongside such traditional historical subjects as political, economic and military history.

Over the course of the last decade, there has been something of a resurgence in studies of Vandal North Africa. A number of scholarly conferences have attempted to reintegrate the Vandal period into the wider currents of classical African and early medieval history. No less important have been some important recent editions and translations of the major texts, the publication of a number of crucial survey and site reports and the production of several important books from different parts of the EU. María Elvira Gil Egea's *Africa en tiempos de los Vándalos* (Africa in the Time of the Vandals) (1998) and Guido M. Berndt's *Konflikt und Anpassung: Studien zu Migration und Ethnogenese der Vandalen* (Conflict and Accommodation: Studies on the Migration and Ethnogenesis of the Vandals) (2007) focus respectively on the African kingdom of the group, and their slow migration across Europe and early successes under Geiseric. Other books and articles have examined the development of Vandal political institutions, literary activity within Africa under the group and (at some length) the religious politics of the fifth century.

Against this long tradition of scholarship, the problems associated with attempting to write a history of the Vandals in the early twenty-first century stand out clearly. Can we really talk about *the* Vandals in a post-colonial world? If we accept the view that ethnic affiliations and identities are always in a constant process of change – as surely we must – is it possible to write a single history of a single ‘people’ like the Vandals? How should our approach to such a history change when we go from the writing an account of a small mercenary warband, fighting its way across a collapsing empire from 406–429, and gaining and losing members over the course of this long struggle, to the more complex narrative of a developing kingdom in North Africa? How can we integrate this with the problematic archaeological evidence for the prehistoric origins of the group? Or with the abundant evidence which demonstrates that the ‘Roman’ inhabitants of Africa readily integrated with the Vandals as their kingdom developed?⁷⁰ Does a ‘Vandal’ history demand that attention be paid to all citizens of the kingdom of Carthage: those who resisted, those who collaborated, and those who continued their lives more or less uninterrupted? And what of the varied outliers who bore the Vandal name? The *Notitia Dignitatum* – a puzzling Roman military list of the early fifth century – lists a unit of Vandal cavalrymen in imperial service in Egypt⁷¹: should these men be in our history? The western Generalissimo Stilicho and the usurper John, who briefly claimed the western throne in the 420s, were both occasionally condemned for their ‘Vandal’ heritage, but had little direct contact with the warbands who terrorized Gaul and Spain during the same period. Both figures should appear in a history of the early fifth century, but should they assume a central role in a history of the Vandals?

Faced with this army of anxieties, the authors of the present book have adopted an approach that is both conservative and radical. The principal focus of this book will be on the Vandal kingdom of North Africa between the arrival of Geiseric and his followers in 429, and the final defeat and deposition of Gelimer, the last of the Hasding kings in AD 534. As such, the discussion of the social and political history, religion, culture and economy of the region will not be limited to the contributions of the ‘Vandals’, but will also discuss the role played by the other groups within the kingdom, whether ‘Roman’, ‘African’, ‘Moorish’ (or indeed ‘Alan’, ‘Sueve’ or ‘Hasding’). Precisely what each of these terms meant during the period of the Vandal occupation, the extent to which different ethnic affiliations changed and the capacity of individuals to identify with more than one group, will be discussed in some detail in chapter 4. But for the most part, this will be a study of North Africa in

the Vandal period, not a prosopography of the Vandals in Late Antique history.

The rise and fall of the North African kingdom provide the clearest chronological parameters for this book, but they are not observed with absolute fidelity. A substantial epilogue discusses the fate of North Africa in the years which followed the Byzantine conquest, not least because the crises of this period reveal a great deal about the final years of the Vandal kingdom. For similar reasons the present history opens, not with the crossing to Africa in 429, or with the capture of Carthage ten years later, but with the first appearance of groups of 'Vandals' (in fact 'Hasdings') on the Roman Danubian frontier in the middle of the second century AD. Chapter 2 provides a brief narrative overview of the events which saw a variety of different 'Vandal' groups in action along the imperial frontier, and eventually witnessed the long expedition into Gaul and Spain during the first decades of the fifth century. The origins and composition of these warbands are poorly understood, but the relation of Geiseric's heterogeneous band of fortune hunters to the 'Vandal people' which eventually dominated Carthage and the Western Mediterranean remains a crucial question. As a result, the murky origins of the Vandals within this context are explored in some detail.

The decision to begin this study of the Vandals in the second century, and not to trace the history of the group still further back deserves some brief explanation.⁷² As we have seen, modern histories of the Vandals have conventionally begun in what is now Northern Poland, either by discussing the appearance of the Vandals in the origin myths of the Goths and the Lombards, or (increasingly) through the discussion of the archaeology of this region and its relation to the classical ethnographies of Tacitus and Pliny. Both of these writers refer to a group called the Vandili somewhere in the murky regions of *barbaricum*.⁷³ It has been argued that these texts place the group around the Lower Vistula, at the heart of what modern archaeologists have identified as the 'Przeworsk' culture: a more or less coherent area which is defined by recognizable forms of coarse cooking wares, as well as some decorative metalwork and certain burial practices.⁷⁴ While few scholars would now claim that the settlement of the Vandals could be mapped precisely onto the extent of the Przeworsk culture – indeed most would argue vigorously against such assumptions – the association between the prehistoric 'people' and their supposed material culture remains close in much scholarship. The apparent spread of the Przeworsk culture into the Carpathian basin from the third century AD has often been read as evidence for the gradual migration of the Vandals south, and would appear to tally neatly with

the earliest appearances of the group on the Roman frontier. If a relationship can be assumed between the Vandili of Tacitus and Pliny and the Przeworsk material culture, if these peoples were connected to the groups who later appeared on the Danube and the Rhine, and eventually conquered Carthage, then the Vandals quite clearly had an impressive prehistory.

Regrettably, such assumptions cannot be sustained, and it is for this reason that the present volume begins its Vandal history where it does.⁷⁵ Both Tacitus and Pliny do refer to groups of Vandili, but neither does so with any geographical precision. We can assume that groups of 'Vandals' did exist somewhere in the barbarian territories (or at least that Roman authors believed that these 'Vandals' existed), but we cannot say precisely where they were. Consequently, the link to the Przeworsk culture area is far from clear, and the subsequent assumption that the expansion of this region reflected either the migration or the expanding cultural influence of the Vandals and their neighbours cannot be sustained. Without this link, and the crucial assumption that the spread of this culture into the Carpathians represented a genuine migration, there is no link between the Vandili confederacies mentioned by our first-century ethnographic sources, and the 'Hasdings' and 'Vandals' who appear in historical texts of the later period. The historians and geographers of the later Roman empire commonly employed archaic names to refer to new groups who came to their attention on the frontier. Consequently, the fact that the warbands of the third- and fourth-century frontier bore the same name as the tribal confederations mentioned by Tacitus and Pliny several centuries earlier need not be taken as evidence for a direct connection.

This observation has some important implications for our understanding of the earliest stages of Vandal history. The association with the Przeworsk culture worked on the assumption that the Vandals of prehistory were a large and influential group, and itself helped to sustain this impression. When we look at conventional archaeological maps which depict north-eastern Europe in the later iron age, the Vandals seem to occupy an impressive chunk of territory beyond the Roman frontier. This, in turn, helps to foster the illusion that the later movement of the Vandals into the Roman empire had a devastating historical momentum, and provides a satisfying explanation for the group's eventual conquest of North Africa. This is not the narrative that appears in the contemporary sources. The Vandals who first appeared on the Roman frontier in the second and third centuries do not appear to be the representatives of a vast barbarian confederacy, but a rather small and

mobile group of soldiers. Nor were the Vandals who moved through Gaul and Spain an irresistible military force, destined for great things in the rich provinces of North Africa. Instead, they were a small and unprepossessing military group. They developed in the shadow of larger military powers, and their movement through the western provinces took the form of a series of haphazard and stuttering steps through an empire collapsing in upon itself. They rose to power in North Africa not because of their long and proud heritage, but in spite of a history that was both short and undistinguished. But their history – and their brief moment in the Mediterranean sun – is all the more fascinating for that.