

The transition from foederati status to Early Medieval statehood in Europe and the Mediterranean (IV – VII century)

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Introduction

In recent decades, many European and world historians pay more attention to a previously overlooked period, namely the period of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. For many researchers this is either a period of "decline" and "fall"¹ of the Roman Empire or the time of its "transformation"². This is also the time in which the first Barbarian kingdoms on imperial territory are formed. In the coming centuries these Barbarian kingdoms will largely determine both the shape of the political map of Europe and the Mediterranean and the development of the economy, culture, warfare, society etc. This period is often in the middle of various ideological confrontations and harsh scientific discussions. This largely prevents the elaboration of a comprehensive picture of the complex

¹ The idea of the decline and fall of the Empire, i.e. the idea of full discontinuity is elaborated by the English historian Edward Gibbon and can be found in his major work: Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I - VIII, G. Coure and Co. Poultry, London, 1825. Later this idea was supported and developed by many other researchers. Some of the most important studies with similar conclusions are: Burry, John. *History of the later Roman empire from the death of Theodosius I to the death of Justinian: (A. D. 395 to A. D. 565)*, vol. I & II, Macmillan and co., Limited, 1923; Rostovtzeff, Michael Ivanovitch. *The Social & Economic History of the Roman Empire*, Biblo & Tannen Publishers, New York, 1926; Tainter, Joseph. *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Cambridge University Press, New York & Cambridge, 2003; and Goldsworthy, Adrian. *How Rome fell*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009.

² The idea of the transformation of the Roman world into new Barbarian kingdoms, i.e. the idea of continuity between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is increasingly popular in recent decades and found serious support from the ESF, which funded a group named "The Transformation of the Roman world": (<http://www.esf.org/coordinating-research/research-networking-programmes/humanities-hum/completed-rnp-programmes-in-humanities/the-transformation-of-the-roman-world.html>) (accessed 14.08.2014). This group published 14 volumes of researches: <http://www.brill.com/publications/transformation-roman-world> (accessed 14.08.2014r.)

and multi-layered processes that took place in the period IV – VII century in Europe and the Mediterranean, resulting in the formation of the new early mediaeval reality where Barbarian kingdoms, which are the most common but not the only form of early mediaeval statehood, played their important role.

Furthermore, another problem is increasingly in the focus of historians and archaeologists and it is associated with the emergence, development, history and significance of the so-called "*foederati*"³. This is a special group of neighbours and partners of Rome, which receive the so-called "*foederati status*" on the basis of a treaty (*foedus*) with the Empire. This status makes them very interesting for researchers provoking discussions what are the main characteristics of this status and what is its significance.

Taking into account the current state of research on the period of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages I ask myself the following question: "Does the foederati status matter in shaping the early medieval statehood in Europe and the Mediterranean and if it matters how?". Leaving aside the theoretical discussions of continuity and discontinuity, transformation and destruction of the Roman world, we see that even today the role of the foederati status for the transition to early medieval form of statehood known as the "Barbarian kingdoms" (or "*regna*" in Latin) is not fully elucidated.

The study of the processes of emergence, development and shaping of the foederati status and its importance for the development of early medieval statehood among imperial federates is an extremely complex task. To be able to achieve maximum objectivity and to avoid unnecessary theorisation I have chosen to apply a not so common, but very convenient for this specific case research method – the so-called "case study". This method will allow me to judge what a serious role the foederati status played in shaping early medieval Barbarian kingdoms in Europe and the Mediterranean based on the evidence from three carefully selected cases. Furthermore, this research method will allow me to outline the specifics of each case and in the future my thesis can be used as a reference for scientific discussions on problems raised by me. This is one of the main objectives of my thesis – to lay

³ Bibliography on the subject is overwhelming. Overview of the main thesis and researches see in: ed. Pohl, Walter. *Kingdoms of the Empire: the integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, Brill, Leiden, 1997; Буданова, Вера Павловна. *Варварский мир эпохи Великого пересечения народов*, изд. Наука, Москва, 2000; ed. Goetz, Hans-Werner and others. *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, Brill, Leiden, 2003; Коростелин, В. А. *Договорные отношения Позднеримской империи с варварами – в: Вопросы Истории*, №8, 2006, с. 38 – 49, Москва and Halsall, Guy. *Barbarian migrations and the Roman West*, 376-568, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007.

the foundations for a much deeper study of foederati status and any related problems. At this stage I will primarily focus on the political side of the problem, i.e. the creation of early medieval Barbarian kingdoms. Certainly there is still a lot of work in studying of the cultural, economic and social processes that took place in different Barbarian kingdoms during this period.

Following the classical scheme of a "case study", I decided to divide my thesis into four chapters. The first chapter is a theoretical one and puts the framework of the problem. In the next three chapters I study three separate cases and they are: the Gothic, the Vandalic and the Frankish. These cases were selected because in my opinion they are the three most distinctive cases of the formation of early mediaeval Barbarian kingdoms. My aim is to outline the key similarities and differences in the researched cases and then the basis to formulate some conclusions that allow us to understand better the complex and highly dynamic processes of formation, maintenance and development of early medieval statehood in Europe and the Mediterranean.

I. Foederati status and Early Medieval statehood

In the first chapter I thoroughly study the emergence and development of the foederati status and the basic characteristics of early medieval Barbarian kingdoms. I do this to create an adequate framework for the study of the individual cases, which also have their own specific characteristics and often go beyond the conventional models and standards. These cases cannot be thoroughly and objectively researched if they are considered completely isolated and without relation to the fundamental processes taking place in this period, first in the Roman Empire and then in the Post-Roman world of Western Europe and the Mediterranean.

Initially I research the emergence of the foederati status and its development to the III century. I study the relations of the Roman Republic with the so-called "*socii populi Romani*" and "*amici populi Romani*". I argue that some of them are actually one of the earliest "*foederati*" because they concluded treaties that give them special status in terms of Roman law. Then I study the emergence of two types of treaties: *foedus aequum* and *foedus*

iniquum, who, despite their theoretical differences, in practice create communities subjected to Rome.

Then the development of the *foederati* during the Principate is studied. The basic principles in this period are similar to those of the Republican times. If we apply the typology created by the Russian researcher V. A. Korostelin we can designate the treaties concluded during the period I – III century mainly as "*foedus solitum*"⁴, i.e. they represent a military alliance between the Empire and a Barbarian group most often aimed against other Barbarians. In the III century crisis the Roman Empire dramatically increased the number of Barbarians used in the army⁵. This is a result of the general political and demographic situation in the Roman Empire and along the Roman *limes* and I don't think that this is significant for some general change of policy regarding the Roman *foederati*.

The *foederati* institute experienced the most dynamic development during the IV – V century. During this period there are not only changes in the number of the *foederati* participating in the Roman army or in different Roman military campaigns, but there are big changes in the nature of the *foederati* Institute. In the IV century Barbarians are increasingly used in internal strives in the Empire and against the mighty Persia rather than against other Barbarians. This entails a change in the terms of the treaties which much more often look like relations between *patron* and *client*. Sometimes the Roman Empire sends annual gifts to the elites of the *foederati* in exchange for military assistance. In other cases, treaties resembled *foedera* from the period I – III century. Actually the terms of the treaties vary widely and some federates are far more favoured than others. This is indicative of the extreme flexibility of the Empire, which always seeks to protect its own interests in the best possible way. Shaping the *foederati* status as very attractive for the Barbarians became one of the most important tasks in the imperial foreign policy.

The Roman ruling circles in the IV century are pressured by geopolitical and geostrategic reasons to provide *foederati* status to more and more Barbarian *gentes*, living near the Roman *limes* or on strategically important locations inside the Barbaricum. The Romans sought to gain the greatest possible benefit from all these tribes and peoples who, for one reason or another, became their federates. The alternative was the vast majority of

⁴ Коростелин, В. А. Op. cit., p. 42

⁵ Strobel, Karl. Strategy and Army Structure between Septimius Severus and Constantine the Great – in: ed. Erdkamp, Paul. A companion to the Roman army, Blackwell publishing, Oxford, 2007, p. 278 – 279

these Barbarians to become obvious enemies of the Empire, something that the Roman emperors have tried their best to prevent. This is the reason for the conclusion of so many treaties which have an amazing variety of content during the IV and the V century. I also argue that almost until the very end of the IV century Rome tries its best to integrate different federate communities. If not in practice, at least in theory, the Empire was considered the *foederati* as their subordinates⁶.

During the IV century the nature of the *foederati* status changes along with a number of other structures and institutions in the Empire. If at the beginning of the century the federates are a way to conduct successful foreign policy beyond the Roman *limes* without big human or material losses, in the end of the century a part of the federates receives lands in the imperial territory and begin to play an increasingly prominent role in the domestic and foreign imperial policy. Simultaneously other imperial federates create "client states" on their own near the Roman *limes* or on strategic places in the Barbaricum.

In the following V century the *foederati* status experienced several changes in order to facilitate the emergence of the first Barbarian kingdoms on imperial soil. The new type of *foedera* is characterized by the transfer of a part of the imperial territory to a federate ruler with all the necessary titles, insignia and regalia⁷. There are some serious arguments to support the thesis that this is one of the fastest and easiest ways to transform a Barbarian enclave with a *foederati* status in a semi-independent or absolutely independent Barbarian kingdom⁸. However, we should not forget that during the same V century the Empire continues to attract federates to serve in its army and some of these *foederati* did not receive land for settlement, just annual donations or even only generous salaries for their service in the name of Rome⁹.

Then I study the so-called "late federates", i.e. communities that have signed treaties from the reign of emperor Justinian I (527-565) onward. These are communities that become permanent troops operating as a part of the Byzantine army¹⁰. I argue that the late federates have no desire and probably no opportunities to create their own kingdoms. They

⁶ This thesis is defended by Peter Heather, though his arguments are controversial and very specific: Heather, Peter. *Foedera and foederati of the fourth century* – in: ed. Pohl, Walter. Op. cit., p. 65.

⁷ Коростелин, В. А. Op. cit., p. 47

⁸ Ibid., p. 46 – 47

⁹ Stickler, Timo. The *foederati* – in: ed. Erdkamp, Paul. Op. cit., p. 509 – 510

¹⁰ Bachrach, Bernard S. Merovingian mercenaries and paid soldiers in imperial perspective - in: ed. France, John. *Mercenaries and Paid Men: The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages*. Proceedings of a Conference Held at University of Wales, Swansea, 7th-9th July 2005, Brill, Leiden, 2008, p. 173

just take advantage of the existing imperial states (there are similar federate groups that serve Persia¹¹) who offer military aid against payment and probably against granting land for settlement.

After I research as much as possible the emergence, development and importance of foederati status I briefly remark the existence of the so-called "*client states*" of the Roman Empire. There are client states since the late Roman Republic¹², but after the Marcomannic wars (166-180) the Barbarian world entered in a period of active creating of client states that act as a buffer zone, at the same time splitting and merging two worlds - Pax Romana and Barbaricum¹³. The creation and maintenance of the client states leads to the intensification of contacts between Rome and the Barbarians resulting in increasing the power of some individual Barbarian rulers and the elites consolidated around them. Thus numerous client states are formed in a natural way and from this moment they play an important role for the protection of the Pax Romana, and for the conduction of Roman and pro-Roman policy in the so-called "Barbaricum". Thanks to the client states many Roman structures, institutions and models enter in the Barbarian world and over time become the basis of some of the most advanced Barbarian societies that either directly borrow them or transform them according to their own traditions and needs.

In the last part of the chapter I research some very topical issues related to the early medieval statehood in Europe and the Mediterranean. First I try to clarify two key terms, namely "*gens*" and "*regnum*". In addition I try to analyze complex issues about the dynamics of identities in this age of transition, and in particular the problem of the presence/absence of distinct ethnic identity among the Barbarians. Then I study the processes that led to the emergence of Barbarian kingdoms in the former Roman provinces in Western Europe and North Africa, and I also try to define the main characteristics of this type of state. I make this to be able to create a universal framework that makes it easy to determine which structures are actually Barbarian kingdoms and which are proto-states or something else, but not *regna*.

¹¹ Ball, Warwick. Rome in the East, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 96 – 102

¹² Cagniard, Pierre. The Late Republican Army (146–30 bc) - in: ed. Erdkamp, Paul. Op. cit., p. 88; de Blois, Lukas. Army and General in the Late Roman Republic - in: ed. Erdkamp, Paul. Op. cit., p. 169

¹³ Буданова, Вера Павловна. Op. cit., p. 31

II. Gothic case

First of all I must emphasize that under the general term "Gothic case" in my research I have studied both the creation of the Visigothic kingdom in Aquitaine and its later development within Spain and the emergence of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy. The historiography dedicated to studies of the Goths, is huge in volume and is really overwhelming¹⁴. However, there are still unsolved problems.

Primarily in this chapter I trace the first reports of the Goths, which can be found in the Roman sources and I attempt to reconstruct the history of the earliest contacts between *gens Gothorum* and *Imperium Romanorum* as far as possible through the sources and archaeological data.

In the period from the end of the II – beginning of the III century the Goths begin to replace the Scythians as the main opponent of Rome in the Black Sea steppe region and they create problems on the Danube limes. It was in the III century when the Roman historiography ultimately imposed the ethnonym "*Goths*" instead of the formerly used "*Gutones*". At the end of the III – beginning of the IV century a division among the Goths appears. Some sources mention the groups *Tervingi* and *Greutungi* while others write about *Visigothi* and *Ostrogothi*. The boundaries between the two groups are the rivers Dniester and Prut¹⁵.

In the following part of chapter II the data for the first treaties (*foedera*) between the Roman Empire and the Goths is analyzed. Then the possibility that the Goths became federates of Rome as early as year 238 is highlighted. The relations between the Empire and the Goths become especially intense in the last three decades of the III century when the triumphant title "*Gothicus*"¹⁶ is used for the first time.

In the IV century three important treaties between the Goths and Rome are concluded. These treaties define the relations between the two sides and suggest a gradual change occurring in the nature of the foederati statute. These are the *foedera* of years 332,

¹⁴ However, to acquire an overview of the historiography on the subject you can look at the bibliography in: Herwig. *History of the Goths*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990 and Heather, Peter. *Goths and Romans 332 – 489*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003 and Visigoths: Ferreiro, Alberto. *The Visigoths in Gaul and Iberia. A supplemental bibliography (1984 – 2003)*, Brill, Leiden, 2006.

¹⁵ Wolfram, Herwig. *Op. cit.*, p. 57

¹⁶ Trebellius Pollio. *Historiae Augustae. Claudius II Gothicus*, footnote №48 – http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Claudius*.html (accessed 14.08.2014)

369 and 382. Thanks to these three treaties the Gothic group first consolidates itself, then gained military and administrative experience and eventually settled in the lands of the Empire maintaining its own military and social organization, i.e. creating a state within a state.

Soon the Goths are relegated to the West and there as a result of complex and dynamic processes in the western part of the Roman Empire, they get the opportunity to create their own kingdom on the former territories of the Roman Empire in the provinces of Aquitania, Novempopulana and Narbonensis Prima.

This is the first Barbarian kingdom emerged on imperial territory and the next few paragraphs of chapter II are dedicated to a study of causes for its emergence, of characterization of its institutions, and of the pattern of settlement used by the Visigoths. I also discuss other important issues of internal and foreign policy of the Kingdom that allow me to elucidate the specifics of the early medieval Visigothic statehood.

Then I research the Visigothic history after the disastrous defeat in the battle of Vouillé against the Franks. After this defeat the Visigoths moved the centre of their kingdom in Spain. I study the Visigothic kingdom in Spain with a special emphasis on the meaning of the concepts *gens* and *regnum*, reflected in the decisions of the so-called "*Councils of Toledo*". Furthermore, the evolution of institutions in the Kingdom, the formation of powerful local elites and the weakening of the central government are traced. All these processes in some way facilitate the Arab invasion on the peninsula and lead to the conquest of the greater part of the lands of the Visigoths and their annexation by the Caliphate.

The Ostrogothic kingdom is another example of a state, established by the Goths. Theodoric the Amal (475-526) plays a major role in its creation. I study his relations with the Eastern Roman Empire and make clear the fact that he gets foederati status while he is still in the Balkans. But soon a conflict between him and the authorities in Constantinople starts and in the end it leads to the movement of Theodoric to Italy, where he is presented as a legitimate Roman governor of the region, but at the same time as *rex Gothorum*. The complex and dynamically changing symbiosis between the Gothic statehood and the Roman provincial government transforms the Ostrogothic kingdom in one of the most specific and dynamic Barbarian kingdoms during the period of transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. The short life of the Kingdom does not allow us to trace the possible evolution

of its ideas, institutions and structures and to understand whether the Ostrogoths would have had the opportunity to go beyond the limits of the *foederati* status or not.

III. Vandalic case

The third chapter of my research is directed at one of the most neglected Barbarian kingdoms, namely the Kingdom of the Vandals and Alans in North Africa. Its history is not subject to such strong research interest as the history of the Goths and the Franks for example. However, in recent years studies dedicated to the Vandals and their kingdom in North Africa increasingly appears¹⁷.

The beginning of the chapter is about studying of the early history of the Vandals, their first mentioning in Roman sources and their first recorded contacts with the Empire during the Marcomannic wars. In the early period of the history of the Vandals (II – early IV century) there is evidence for the existence of two separate powerful Vandalic groups – *Silingae* and *Hasdingi*. The migrations of the Vandals at the end of the IV century and their attempts to settle on imperial territory in the provinces of Pannonia Prima, Noricum and/or Raetia to escape the Huns are also traced. These Vandal penetrations on imperial soil lead to the intervention of the *magister militum* Stilicho who makes the Vandals *foederati* of the Empire. However, in the year 406/407 the Vandals, the Alans and the Suevi (Suebi) cross the Rhine limes and begin to ravage the provinces of the Empire, and especially the rich provinces of Gaul. Later on the three Barbarian *gentes* move to Spain. Ultimately the king of *Hasdingi* Geiseric (428-477) takes the decision to move with his subordinates to North Africa, which has a number of strategic advantages over Spain. The most important advantage is that North Africa is located further away from the imperial centre of the Western Roman Empire and it is easier to defend, especially because the Vandals have their own fleet.

Moving from Spain to North Africa took place in year 429 and a few years later the Vandals managed to conquest the major urban centres of Africa Proconsularis, Numidia and Byzacena. Ten years later, on 19th October 439, king Geiseric seize Carthage, the second

¹⁷ A more complete picture of the recent studies you can acquire if you look at the bibliography in: ed. Merrills, Andrew. *Vandals, Romans and Berbers: new perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Aldershot, 2004 and Merrills, Andy and Miles, Richard. *The Vandals*, Wiley – Blackwell, Chichester, West Sussex, 2010

largest city in the Western Roman Empire. Soon thereafter a *foedus* with Rome (year 442) was signed. Unlike the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths, the Vandals settled in North Africa not on a basis of an agreement with the Empire and it was necessary after stabilizing their power to conclude a treaty with the imperial authorities.

In this chapter several important questions about the specifics of the early medieval statehood are also researched – namely, the meanings and the importance of the terms *gens* and *regnum* in the Kingdom of the Vandals and Alans; the existence of different types of ethnic identity and other identities; the history of the Homoian church in North Africa, which is actually a history of the Vandal church established through purposeful efforts by the central authorities. This church is used to create an ideological system that put the Vandals on a par with the Romans and present the former as universal Christians and as an imperial nation.

At the end of the chapter I analyze the reasons for the relatively facile conquest of the Kingdom of the Vandals and Alans by the forces of the Eastern Roman Empire.

IV. Frankish case

The last chapter is dedicated to the third selected case, namely the Franks and their Kingdom¹⁸. It is an interesting example because it survived much longer than the kingdoms of the Visigoths, Ostrogoths and Vandals and moreover because the Franks managed to become a true imperial centre, recognized even by Constantinople.

At the beginning of this chapter I study the early history of the Franks and their first contacts with the Roman Empire, focusing on the fact that many Franks settled on imperial territory as *laeti*¹⁹, not as *foederati*. Then the conclusion of the first *foedera* between the Empire and the Frankish groups is researched with a particular emphasis on the fact that the Franks were one of the most consistent, loyal and active Roman allies²⁰. That results in the

¹⁸ Bibliography dedicated to the Franks is immense like this related to the Goths. You can get some insight if you look at the bibliography in: Bachrach, Bernard. *Merovingian Military Organization, 481-751*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1972; Wood, Ian. *The Merovingian kingdoms (450 – 751)*, Longman, New York, 1994 and Halsall, Guy. *Cemeteries and society in Merovingian Gaul*, Brill, Leiden, 2010

¹⁹ Geary, Patrick. *Op. cit.*, p. 79

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80

participation of some Frankish leaders in the highest ranks of the Roman army and administration.

Then I trace the fate of the Franks after the deposition of Romulus Augustulus (475-476) by researching the process of the emergence of Frankish kingdom under king Clovis (c. 466-511). I analyze the foreign policy of Clovis and his desire to become not only a unifier of all the Franks, but also to be a legal Roman governor of Gaul. Most likely this is one of the main reasons which made king Clovis to convert his people in Nicene Christianity.

After this I study the development of the institutions of the Frankish realm and especially the specific type of succession of power that leads to serious instability of the kingdom at certain times. The history of the Frankish kingdom is researched almost to the end of the reign of the Merovingian dynasty, with an emphasis to the kings Chlothar II (613-629) and Dagobert I (629-634).

Then I study some other issues which reveal how the different mechanisms related to the foederati status and the creation of the Barbarian kingdom function. These issues include: the gift-giving in the Frankish society²¹ and the formation of local and central elites; the existence of distinct ethnic identities; the meaning of the concepts *gens* and *regnum* among the Franks.

At the end of the chapter I try to answer the question: "Why the Frankish kingdom is the most sustainable Barbarian kingdom in Western Europe and the Mediterranean?". The complex geopolitical situation in which it is created and develops its ideology proves to be a good environment for the improvement of the institutions of the Frankish state, which pressured by the Barbarians, and sometimes by the actions of the emperors in Constantinople was forced to form a stable government organization able to survive in the dynamic world of post-Roman West. The Franks manage to do this, unlike many other Barbarian *gentes*.

Conclusion

Thanks to the chosen "case study" research method there is an opportunity to build a relatively objective view of the transition from foederati status to early medieval statehood

²¹ Interesting study on this subject you can see in: ed. Theuvs, Frans and Nelson, Janet L. Rituals of power: from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, Brill, Leiden, 2000.

in Europe and the Mediterranean on the basis of the identified similarities and differences in all three cases. I think that we should strongly consider the possibility that the foederati status is some kind of favourable and acceptable framework that allows Barbarians to create their own kingdoms on the former territories of the Western Roman Empire instead of the possibility strong local elites to usurp the power for themselves. The foederati status given to the Barbarians played its positive role for the Empire and its heritage and even after the deposition of the last Roman emperor in the West there remain many institutions and structures that are typically Roman.

My dissertation allows us to create a little more complete and comprehensible picture of some key elements in the complex transition period from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages and it helps us orientate ourselves in a labyrinth of states, institutions and identities that emerged in the Post-Roman world. My goal is not to give an answer once and for all to all the questions, but rather to provoke discussion, that could allow elaboration on a more objective picture of the foederati status and the early medieval statehood through interdisciplinary research involving historians, archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists and various other professionals.