ABSTRACT

WARD, DONALD ALEXANDER. The Bacaudae: Peasant Rebellion and the Transformation of the Roman World. (Under the direction of Dr. Julie Mell).

The Bacaudae peasant revolts of late Roman Gaul and Spain have long been a source of wild speculation in the study of the western provinces in late antiquity. While the study of the oppressed classes in any period tends to be marked by a paucity of sources, this problem is particularly acute in the case of the Bacaudae, for whom we have only the most elusive references, written by mostly hostile elite observers. Chapter 1 is an overview of the documentary evidence relating to the Bacaudae and their context, providing the first compilation of Bacaudic sources in English. In chapter 2, I provide an overview of the different approaches historians have utilized in trying to make sense of the Bacaudae in the 20th century. From the 'revolutionary' approach of E.A. Thompson, to the 'reformist' approach of Raymond Van Dam, to the recent 'conservative' or 'minimalist' turn of various authors more recently, the historiography of the Bacaudae has over time tended to increasingly minimize the scale, scope, and historical impact of the peasant revolts. Though I agree broadly with the skeptical thrust of recent scholarship, which I view as crucial in avoiding the flights of fancy characteristic of earlier approaches, I argue that peasant agency has been lost along the way, with the Bacaudae receding as passive observers into the background of history. Pushing back against the 'conservative turn' in chapter 3 I propose a reading of Chris Wickham's discussion of the structural role of peasant resistance in precapitalist society that reaffirms peasant agency in the broader transformations occurring in late Roman Gaul.

The Bacaudae: Peasant Rebellion and the Transformation of the Roman World

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

History

Raleigh, North Carolina
2025

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BIOGRAPHY

Donald “Alex” Ward was born and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina. His academic interests span the humanities and social sciences, with particular attention to the ancient world and the history of philosophy. He earned a B.A. in Philosophy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2011, an M.A. in English from North Carolina State University in 2013, and completed this thesis as part of a second M.A. in History at N.C. State. He also maintains a long-standing affection for Dying Earth science fiction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Introduction

Who were the Bacaudae? It is difficult even to introduce them; for if there is one thing that dominates any discussion of these late antique peasant rebels, it is always the lack of evidence we have of their activities, whether material or documentary. What we do know is this: in the fifth century the Roman Empire had a tenuous grasp on Northern Gaul. There were periodic revolts there, and to a lesser extent in Spain as well, amidst the greater chaos surrounding the 'barbarian' migrations and the political dissolution of the western Roman empire.

Further, similar revolts had broken out in Gaul two centuries earlier, in the similar conditions of the third-century crisis, though we have even less in the way of documentary evidence for the third-century revolts than for the fifth. Beyond the mere registering of these episodes of rural revolt, the historical record is remarkably opaque concerning the composition, organization, and aims of the Bacaudae, even by the usually exiguous evidentiary standards for pre-capitalist subaltern resistance. All surviving contemporary references to the Bacaudae are to a greater or lesser degree hostile reports, written by Roman elites with an attitude ranging somewhere between outright contempt and paternalistic sympathy.

The first major Bacaudic rebellion occurred in Gaul between 284 and 286 C.E., at the tail-end of what historians have traditionally called the 'crisis of the third century'—a period marked by recurring civil wars, intensifying pressures along the frontiers, the near-collapse of the silver and gold coinage, pandemics, and widespread religious transformation. Characterized by a paucity of primary sources in comparison to the centuries that bookend it, the third-century crisis has long posed interpretive challenges for historians of the later Roman Empire. For the

British Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon, whose *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has cast a long shadow over generations of scholarship, the crisis marked the beginning of Rome's irreversible decline. In Gibbon's view, weakened by the twin evils of decadence and Christianity, the empire of the fourth and fifth centuries was little more than a dead man walking—propped up for two more centuries by the inertia of Roman dominance, before succumbing at last to the more vital Germanic barbarians of the north.[1]

Like his hero Tacitus, the senatorial historian of the early empire known for his baroque and biting prose, Gibbon had a deep-seated distrust of the masses. In Volume I of *Decline and Fall,* published in 1776, Gibbon characterizes the third-century Bacaudae in strikingly Hobbesian terms: "They asserted the natural rights of men, but they asserted those rights with the most savage cruelty."[2] When the emperor Maximian was sent to Gaul to suppress their rebellion, he notes, "the strength of union and discipline obtained an easy victory over a licentious and divided multitude."[3] But by the time Gibbon reached the fifth-century Bacaudae—two volumes, a decade, and one American Revolution later—his tone had shifted. Volume III of *Decline and Fall*, published in 1788 while Gibbon was a member of the British Parliament and the colonial crisis still loomed large in British political memory, is notably more ambivalent. Ever eager to draw contemporary lessons from the Roman past, Gibbon writes that "the Imperial ministers pursued with proscriptive laws, and ineffectual arms, the rebels whom they had made," describing the Bacaudae not as savages, but as a "disorderly independence."[4] In Gibbon's telling,

[1] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, 7 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1914). The majority of the 1200-odd pages of the first volume deal with Gibbon's view of the crisis of the third century; For Gibbon's general analysis on the causes of Rome's decline, see vol. 3, chapter 38, "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West."
[2] Ibid., vol. 1, ch. 13, p. 384.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., vol. 3, ch. 35, p. 507.

the real threat to civilization, both Roman and British, lay not in the rebellion of the oppressed, but in the incompetence and injustice of an empire in decline.[5]

While Gibbon's paternalistic Enlightenment vision still exerts a powerful hold on the popular imagination, historians have long since moved past it. Beginning with his groundbreaking *The World of Late Antiquity* in 1971, Peter Brown has produced in the intervening decades a convincing and influential vision of the later centuries of the Roman empire that aims to upend Gibbon's mere "melancholy tale of 'Decline and Fall'."[6] In his recently published autobiography, *Journeys of the Mind*, Peter Brown pinpoints the late 1960s as the "beginning of late antiquity as a distinctive field," when a generation of young classicists, "drawn to the fascinating transformations of the classical heritage in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries," joined medievalists like Brown himself, who "tended to look forward, to beyond the fall of Rome, to the legacy of late antiquity in future ages."[7]

For Brown, the greatest danger for any historian, whether ancient, medieval, modern, or anywhere in between, is that the proper, forward-looking posture of the historian will suddenly and imperceptibly transform into its opposite, 'hindsight'—the teleological gaze of Enlightenment historians like Edward Gibbon who attempt only to mine the past for evidence of what they already know is going to come next. Above all, this was a lesson reinforced for Brown by the French Philosopher Michel Foucault when he visited Berkeley, where Brown taught in the early 1980s. Foucault was eager to speak with Brown about his own budding turn towards late antiquity in his research for *The History of Sexuality*. For Brown, the distilled message of the

[5] G. W. Bowersock, "Gibbon on Civil War and Rebellion in the Decline of the Roman Empire," *Daedalus* 105, no. 3 (Summer 1976): 63–71.
[6] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 7.
[7] Brown, *Journeys of the Mind*, p. 279-80.

"Foucault Sound" that echoed through the halls of Berkeley in the 80s was clear: it is "only when we go back to the past, to see, precisely and without hindsight, how our own institutions and beliefs came about; when we strip them of the patina of the obvious: then we can do something about them."[8]

For Brown, late antiquity is just as much a period of "new beginnings"—the rise of Christianity and Islam, to name just the most obvious—as it is a time of 'decline and fall': "Looking at the Late Antique world, we are caught between the regretful contemplation of ancient ruins and the excited acclamation of new growth."[9] Further, Brown considered the 4th century, which he would later call the "Age of Gold," the high point of Roman wealth and power, a far cry from Gibbon's dying leviathan.[10] If the Roman empire was able not only to recover from the convulsions of the third century but to reach new heights in the fourth, then what are we to make of its eventual political involution in the west?

To answer this question, it is worth quoting Brown's treatment of the Bacaudae in *The World of Late Antiquity* in full:

> Furthermore, the peasants of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt were very different from the dragooned and excluded serfs of the western provinces. They could get a good enough price for their corn in the towns to pay both their rent and their taxes. They could, therefore, meet the demands of the government without being shepherded on to the estates of the great landowners. In the middle of the fifth century, the difference in

[8] Peter Brown, *Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 578.
[9] Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity,* pp. 7-8.
[10] See chapter 1, "*Aureas Aetas*: Wealth in an Age of Gold," in Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp 3-30.

> atmosphere between the two parts of the empire was largely due to the different role of the small man. When Gaul was being terrorized by peasants' revolts, provoked by taxation and rack-renting, the farmers of northern Syria were able to build substantial stone houses in villages that now shelter only a few nomads; the tenants of Palestine had maintained a hydraulic system that made the Lake of Galilee and the Negev a garden strewn with gay mosaic pavements; the peasants of Egypt were finding expression for the stubborn independence and ingenuity in the great monastic encampments of the Thebaid. The parting of the ways between western Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, which is the most important immediate legacy of the Late Antique world, goes back to such humble, concrete contrasts.[11]

For Brown, the Bacaudae were not a sign of inevitable imperial decline, but rather a striking example of the root cause of the divergent paths of the Roman empire, which collapsed politically in the fifth century west, but survived in the east until the sack of Constantinople in the west by the Ottomans in 1453 C.E. However, while Brown here refers to the Bacaudae and rural social conditions as a fundamental cause for this "parting of the ways" of east and west, he spends remarkably little time addressing the social and economic conditions of the peasantry of the later empire. As I hope to show in this thesis, historians in general have tended to yoke the poorly documented Bacaudae onto these broader historiographic narratives. Consequently, careful study of the Bacaudic evidence and the history of its reception in modern historiographic discourse serves as a remarkably effective divining rod for anyone interested in learning about the world of late antiquity.

[11] Brown, The *World of Late Antiquity*, p. 44.

While Brown's 'continuist' narrative of transformation and cultural effervescence has many followers, and though few historians of late antiquity any longer adhere to Gibbon's extreme 'catastrophist' vision of Roman decadence and Germanic vitalism, the relative weight of 'continuity' and 'crisis' continues to be *the* defining historiographical question of the study of late antiquity as a historical period. In response to the veritable "roar of a dam burst" of recent scholarship with a more social-economic and 'catastrophist' orientation in the 1990s and early 2000s—made possible by the steady flood of new archaeological material and international collaborations like the European Science Foundation's *Transformation of the Roman World* project—Peter Brown turned to the work of Chris Wickham.[12] It was perhaps out of a shared antipathy toward hindsight and teleology, a theme that also recurs throughout Wickham's work, that Brown engaged Wickham's research while investigating changing attitudes toward poverty and wealth in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in the mid-2000s for his 2012 *Through the Eye of a Needle*.[13]

Revamping his approach to history-writing with a renewed interest in the socio-economic framing of late antiquity, adopted primarily from Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Brown traces changing attitudes towards wealth and the poor within Christianity as the church went from being a 'junior partner' to the traditional aristocracy in the project of wealth and empire to being the single largest repository of landed wealth by the central Middle Ages. Yet,

[12] For examples of the 'catastrophist' position, see Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Neil Christie, *The Fall of the Western Roman Empire: An Archaeological and Historical Perspective* (London: Arnold, 1997).

[13] For Brown's debts to Wickham, see the "Preface to the 10th Anniversary Revised Edition" of *Rise of Western Christendom*, the introduction to *Through the Eye of a Needle*, as well as the postscript to *Journeys of the Mind*. Without Brown's remarkable forthrightness and charity in honoring his scholarly debts, the work of researching this thesis would have been much more difficult.

for Brown, the churches of the fourth-century 'Age of Gold' into which new wealth flowed represented an already very ancient Christianity, with habits of religious giving that "reached back for centuries to traditions and to texts" that were by no means the same as the dominant models of civic benefaction of the Greco-Roman world.[14] In this sense, the process Peter Brown calls the "pauperization of the poor"—the transformation of the limited classical category of the 'urban poor' of the polis, over whom traditional aristocrats competitively displayed their 'benefaction', to the radically expanded category of the 'holy poor', encompassing town and country alike, of early Christianity—is the crucial link in understanding the Catholic Church's eventual rise to being the largest repository of landed wealth in the Middle Ages. Donations to this new category of poor, mediated through the clergy and converted into "treasure in heaven," reflect the crisis of ruling-class hegemony that accompanies the broader economic crisis of the later Roman empire described by Wickham in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.[15]

In chapter one of this thesis, I will provide an overview of the extant literary sources typically taken to be related to the Bacaudae rebellions. Due to the limited quantity and fragmentary nature of these documents, this overview will include discussion of both their historical context, generic conventions, and the interpretive challenges they present. This chapter will be the first time these sources have been compiled comprehensively in English, making them accessible to a broader scholarly audience.

In chapter one I will argue that Brown's notion of the "pauperization of the poor" in late antique Christian discourse can be usefully applied to describe a subtle change in attitude

[14] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 528.
[15] See Part V, "Toward Another World," in Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* pp. 479-530, as well as Part III, "Peasantries," in Chris Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 383-589.

towards rural unrest in the Christian sources of the fifth century when compared to traditional pagan treatments of the subject. Put succinctly, elite pagan authors tended to regard rural unrest as an aberration of the natural order, representing an implicit threat to the legitimacy of civic power which must be swiftly crushed. Christian sources, by contrast—most notably in Salvian of Marseilles' *de Gubernatione Dei* (*On the Government of God),* our most detailed source on the Bacaudae—present the 'natural order' of the Roman Empire itself as the aberration, with the Bacaudae serving as a symptom of God's punishment for Roman sinfulness. For Brown, this universalized discourse of poverty, transcending the sharp divide of town and country characteristic of classical discourse, becomes the ideological basis on which the medieval Catholic Church begins to build its own wealth after the disintegration of aristocratic wealth in the crisis of the fifth century, as described by Wickham in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.[16]

Chapter two provides a general overview of the history of scholarship on the Bacaudae, tracing how interpretations have evolved since the mid-20th century. As a consequence of the generalized uncertainty surrounding the sparse sources on the Bacaudae revolts of the later Roman Empire, scholarship on the subject has been fertile ground for widely divergent interpretations in the second half of the twentieth century. The first extensive modern studies came from the British Marxist historian Edward Arthur Thompson,[17] who developed a "maximalist" interpretation of the Bacaudae beginning in the late 1940s, presenting them as a unified and continuous peasant movement from the second to the fifth century. Viewing the Bacaudae as an early form of class struggle, Thompson argued that they played a starring role in

[16] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp. 527-9.
[17] Not to be confused with his better-known colleague, Edward Palmer Thompson, who will also feature in this chapter.

the 'Fall of Rome,' paving the way for the development of the feudal mode of production. Thompson draws heavily on the elusive remarks of Rutilius Namatianus' nostalgic fifth-century poem *de Reditu Suo* (*On Returning Home)* and the anonymously-written fifth-century comedy *Querolus* (*The Complainer)* as the basis for his argument that the Bacaudae established themselves in Armorica in the revolts of the fifth century and carried out to some degree a program of expropriating their masters' land and even enslaving their former landlords, forcing them to work in the fields.[18]

Pushing back against Thompson's "maximalist" approach, Raymond Van Dam, in his chapter "The Bacaudae: Center and Periphery, A.D. 250—450" in *Leadership and Authority in Late Antique Gaul*, published in 1985, takes a "reformist" approach, drawing on the elusive references to the Bacaudic leaders Aelianus and Amandus in 4th century imperial histories of Aurelius Victor and Eutropius. Van Dam argues that the Bacaudae revolts were primarily an effort organized and led by disaffected members of the Gallic aristocracy, who were attempting something more along the lines of Gallic self-rule in the mold of the Gallic emperors of the third-century crisis who had come before them.

In subsequent years, the study of the Bacaudae can be largely characterized as taking an increasingly "conservative" or "minimalist" turn, both by calling into question the validity of various source materials on which Thompson and Van Dam drew, as well as in minimizing the potential impact of the Bacaudae on the transformations taking place in late antiquity. Beginning in the mid-80s and continuing into the 90s, John Drinkwater takes a rather skeptical position on the Bacaudae, front-lining the problems of connecting cryptic references with Bacaudic activity.

[18] Thompson, "Peasant Revolts," p. 318.

Drinkwater concludes that the Bacaudae do not represent a temporally or spatially cohesive social movement, with the term 'Bacaudae' changing in meaning over time to include both rebellious peasants, but also simple 'banditry'.[19] Clifford Minor, in a series of articles published between 1992 and 2010, takes a similar approach, systematically critiquing the leaps of logic in previous treatments of the revolts. It is ultimately hard to discern a coherent vision in Minor's articles, which is, perhaps, precisely his point. Nevertheless, Minor pushes back against Drinkwater's position of discontinuity between the third- and fifth-century Bacaudae, adopting a kind of 'Occam's Razor' approach that recenters the Bacaudae as discontented peasants responding to socioeconomic upheaval, though the details and broader significance of the rebellions remain shrouded in mystery.

The 'conservative turn' in Bacaudic studies reaches a culmination in the most recent work devoted to the Bacaudae, J. Grant Couper's 2016 "Gallic Insurgencies? Annihilating the Bagaudae." Drawing heavily on the work of Drinkwater, Minor, and Sanchez-Leon,[20] Couper provides a thorough overview of the Bacaudae. Citing Chris Wickham's discussion of the peasantry in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Couper writes, "The consensus is generally that the Bagaudae formed a *jacquerie*, a peasant revolt that expressed violent discontent rather than having any grand revolutionary aims."[21] Infused with a heavy dose of cynicism, Couper concludes his study of the Bacaudae as follows: "In all of this remains a crucial gap: what did the

[19] J.F. Drinkwater, and Hugh Elton, eds. *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; J.F. Drinkwater "Peasants and Bagaudae in Roman Gaul." *Echos du monde classique: Classical Views* 28, no. 3 (1984): 349–371.
[20] Unfortunately, all of Sanchez-Leon's work is in Spanish, which I am unable to read.
[21] J. Grant Couper, "Gallic Insurgencies? Annihilating the Bagaudae," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9, no. 1 (2016): 25-50; Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 529-33.

Bagaudae themselves think? The point this leads to is certainly pessimistic and perhaps nihilistic: what the Bagaudae thought does not matter and never has. Any trouble they caused to the imperial regime of the day was nugatory."[22] He continues, "More destructive than their defeat and dispersal by the armed forces of the Roman state and its allies, they were utterly annihilated by the labels attached to them, to the point where we can only see them through the eyes of people who were at best interested only in their own agendas, and at worst hostile."[23]

I conclude chapter 2 with an analysis of the role played by Salvian of Marseilles and the Bacaudae in the development of Wickham's thought, arguing that Couper misinterprets Wickham's role of the peasantry, whose struggle in all its forms represents the primary motor of historical change in pre-capitalist society. Further, I suggest that Couper's misinterpretation of Wickham stems from an ambiguity in Wickham's later portrait of the peasantry in *Framing the Early Middle Ages.* Wickham, himself a Marxist, developed his influential approach to late antique economic history in the 1980s amidst the theoretical debates of late 20th-century Marxism.

In my conclusion, I respond directly to Kelvin Knight's thoughtful reading of Wickham's oeuvre as the modern heir to the British Marxist school of historiography. Knight argues that Wickham, caught between the 'anti-humanist' structural Marxism associated with the French theorist Louis Althusser and the 'humanist' Marxism exemplified by the British Marxists, deliberately excises the language of 'moral economy' from his theoretical terminology, despite remaining largely consistent with it. For Knight, this excision stems primarily from Wickham's

[22] Couper, "Gallic Insurgencies?" p. 339
[23] Ibid.

somewhat misguided commitment to the anti-teleological thrust of 'structural Marxism' in his early work of the 1980s. Knight further argues that Wickham's theoretical framework—and his British Marxist commitment to peasant agency and struggle as the motor of historical change in pre-capitalist society—could be clarified by turning instead to neo-Aristotelian thinkers like Alistair Macintyre, who distinguishes sharply between historical teleology—which should be rejected—and the agential, ends-oriented nature of individual human action, which should be emphasized.[24]

While I broadly agree with Knight's insightful excavation of Wickham's theoretical commitments, I argue that Knight underestimates Wickham's enduring allegiance to structuralism, a position best appreciated when considering the explicitly political intentions of Wickham's early writings, which mounted a defense of the 'peasant socialist revolutions' of the 20th century. This underlying political stance persists in Wickham's later scholarship, notably in his retention of key tenets of structural Marxism, such as the critique of teleology and the insistence that multiple modes of production coexist simultaneously. I argue that it is precisely this continued commitment to key structuralist positions—embodied most clearly in the continuities between Wickham's early and late reading of Salvian—that creates ambiguity in Wickham's late picture of peasant agency, rather than simply Wickham's failure to update his terminology after an early structuralist phase.

I conclude by suggesting that rather than turning to figures like Macintyre, Wickham's approach might be more productively understood in relation to theorists like Frederic Jameson,

[24] Knight, "Agency and Ethics, Past and Present," pp. 168-171.

who preserves the analytical strength of structuralist 'synchronic' methods by embedding them within a broader Marxist allegorical framework inspired largely by the work of Walter Benjamin. Such an approach, I argue, remains fundamentally anti-teleological, while also rehabilitating 'hindsight' as a proper stance for a historian to take when thinking about the relationship between the past, the present, and the future.

Chapter One

The Bacaudae: The Sources and Their Problems

The Third-Century Bacaudae

The Third-Century Crisis and Imperial Panegyric

The sole surviving contemporary reference to the Bacaudae revolts of the third century is in a panegyric to the emperor Maximian in 289 C.E. Maximian had been appointed co-emperor by the emperor Diocletian a few years earlier, who had himself been proclaimed emperor by his troops in 284 C.E. [25] Diocletian's series of reforms, most notably the creation of the tetrarchy—a division of power between four co-emperors—along with his subdivision of the empire into eastern and western halves (each with their own senior *Augustus* and junior *Caesar*) and the provinces into smaller, more governable units, has traditionally been seen by historians as marking the end of the crisis of the third century.

As a frontier province, Gaul was particularly open to 'barbarian' raids from across the Rhine and was thus a heavily militarized region. Consequently, Gaul was a recurrent seat of power for usurping emperors in the third century, who typically began their careers as usurpers when their armies proclaimed them emperor in the provinces. These newly acclaimed emperors would then move south to fight rival claimants, leaving the frontier undefended. In 260, one such usurping emperor, Postumus, temporarily put a stop to this vicious cycle. Uniquely in Roman history, Postumus neither marched south to face the emperor Gallienus nor did he attempt to

[25] Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 137-45.

legitimate himself as a co-emperor—which had some precedent in earlier imperial history and became the norm after Diocletian's reforms. Instead, Gallienus decided to stay put in Gaul, forming what historians have traditionally referred to as a breakaway Gallic Empire. As Michael Kulikowski has noted, however, this view has led many to problematically see Gallienus' Gaul as a separatist movement, when Postumus never presented himself as anything other than *the* Roman emperor. Instead, it would be more accurate to see Postumus as a rival imperial claimant like any of the other usurpers of the third century, though one who diverged from the standard script.[26]

After resisting several attempts by Gallienus to reconquer Gaul, Postumus himself succumbed to usurpation from within in 269. However, the independent Roman empire of Gaul survived under a series of successors until 274, when the emperor Aurelian was finally able to divert his forces west and reconquer Gaul, after dealing with the similar 'breakaway' region of Palmyra.[27] It was in the aftermath of this reconquering, in a countryside despoiled by war, banditry, and 'barbarian' raids from across the frontier that the first Bacaudae revolts broke out. Maximian's first task as *Augustus* of the western empire was to pacify the unruly countryside of Gaul.

[26] Michael Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine* (London: Profile Books, 2016), pp. 170-5.
[27] The 'Palmyrene Empire' differed from the 'Gallic Empire' in that Odaenathus, its ruler, at first maintained a symbolic subordination to Gallienus in Rome. Once this was broken after Odaenathus' death, his successor and widow, Zenobia (ruling in her son's name) did indeed attempt to conquer the Roman east. Consequently, a strong case could be made that Zenobia was not only the first ruling Roman empress, but also the first eastern Roman emperor. See Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph*, p. 171.

Our only contemporaneous witness to this rural unrest is a certain Mamertinus[28], who, in his panegyric to Maximian in 289 C.E., writes:

> *An non illud malum simile monstrorum biformium in hisce terries fuit quod tua, Caesar, nescio utrum magis fortudine repressum sit an clementia mitigatum, cum militaris habitus ignari agricolae appetuerunt, cum arator peditem, cum pastor equitem, cum hostem barbarum suorum cultorum rusticus uastator imitates est? Quod ego cursim praetereo; uideo enim te, qua pietate es, obliuonem illius uictoriae malle quam gloriam.*[29]
>
> Was this not similar to that calamity of two-shaped monsters in our lands, I know not whether to say suppressed by your bravery, Caesar, or calmed by your mercy? Inexperienced farmers sought military garb; the plowmen imitated the infantryman, the shepherd the cavalryman, the rustic ravager of his own crops the barbarian enemy. This I pass over in haste, for I see that such are your dutiful feelings that you prefer that victory to be cast into oblivion rather than glorified.[30]

Mamertinus' evocation of the Bacaudae as "two-shaped monsters" (*monstrorum biformium)* is striking. For Mamertinus, the Bacaudae were fundamentally an aberration: farmers (*agricolae*), plowmen (*arator*), shepherds (*pastor),* and rustics (*rusticus)* forgetting their nature and appearing as what they are not. The 'two-faced' nature of the Bacaudae is perfectly mirrored in Maximian's dual virtues of bravery and mercy. The subjugation of rebellious peasants is, fundamentally, not

[28] It is likely the name Mamertinus is a misattribution to the more well-known fourth-century Gallic orator, Claudius Mamertinus, whose own panegyrics precede this one in the manuscripts for *XII Panegyrici Latin.* See C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers. *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini*. Transformation of the Classical Heritage. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 10-11
[29] *Pan. Lat. XII* (10) 4.3-4; Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, p. 525.
[30] Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors*, pp. 60-1.

something seen by Romans as being a source of prestige, so it makes sense that Maximian would prefer Mamertinus not to draw too much attention to it, instead preferring his panegyrists to elaborate more on his other, more valorous victories. Unfortunately, there is very little in the way of larger historical works surviving from the third century to provide further contemporaneous contextualization.

The Third-Century Bacaudae in Fourth-Century Breviara

It is not until the more stable fourth century, in historical *epitomes* and *breviara*—abbreviated histories—that we encounter the actual word 'Bacaudae' for the first time.[31] The first such reference comes from the *Liber de Caesaribus (The Book of the Caesars)*—a brief reign-by-reign account of Roman history from Augustus to Constantius II by Sextus Aurelius Victor. Born in the countryside of rural North Africa sometime around 320 C.E., Victor was summoned sometime around the year 360 C.E. by the emperor Julian to serve as consul in Pannonia Secunda near the Danube frontier amidst civil war between the junior emperor Julian and his elder cousin Constantius II.[32] The civil war between Julian and Constantius II was rooted in the power-sharing arrangements established by Constantine.

Diocletian's tetrarchy, which had been designed to prevent civil wars of succession by ensuring an orderly promotion of the junior *Caesars* upon the retirement of the reigning *Augusti,* did not survive a single cycle of succession. When Diocletian and Maximian retired, Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, was promoted from *Caesar* of the west to *Augustus.*

[31] For an overview of the genre of epitome and *breviara*, see chapter 3 in Stover, Justin, and George Woudhuysen. *The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor*. Edinburgh Studies in Later Latin Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 44-95.
[32] Stover and Woudhuysen, *The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor*, pp. 27-38.

Constantius Chlorus, however, died shortly after his promotion and his troops acclaimed his son Constantine emperor in his place. At the same time, Maximian's son, Magnentius seized power in Rome, sparking civil war. Constantine eventually emerged as sole emperor by 324. After Constantine's death in 337, rivalry among his sons left Constantius II as sole ruler by 353, but his authority was soon challenged by his younger cousin Julian, whose successful campaigns in Gaul led his troops to declare him emperor in 360. Julian ultimately emerged victorious in 361, becoming sole emperor after Constantius II died unexpectedly of illness; as the last pagan emperor, Julian attempted unsuccessfully to restore traditional Roman religion, favoring pagans like Victor for administrative office.[33] It is in the context of the threat of renewed civil war that Victor composed his *Liber de Caesaribus*.

The life and work of Victor pose a number of problems. Admired by figures as diffuse as the historian Ammianus Marcellinus and Saint Jerome, neither of whom could it be said were mild in their judgment of the work of others, modern scholarship has since the late 19th century tended to judge Victor's work quite harshly as a short work written in second-rate Latin and with an overly moralizing style.[34] This harsh judgment largely stems from Alexander Enmann's influential hypothesis in 1884 of a lost *Kaisergeschichte* (history of the emperors) from the late third or early fourth century on which a number of fourth century historical works drew. For Enmann, the *Liber de Caesaribus* was a crude condensation of a much more ambitious history.

Finding the lost *Kaisergeschichte* has been something of a white whale for late antique philologists and historians ever since, and to little avail. In a recent and illuminating philological study of Victor and other related texts, Justin A. Stover and George Woudhuysen have recently

[33] See Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph*, pp. 194-216.
[34] Stover and Woudhuysen, *The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius,* pp. 193-228.

argued that the mysterious *Kaisergeschichte* was itself in fact written by Victor, with the *Liber de Caesaribus* being simply a self-epitomized version of his own longer text.[35] Whether Victor was epitomizing his own work or someone else's, however, the cursory nature of Victor's surviving testimony makes it difficult to place his discussion of the Bacaudae within the context of a larger historiographical narrative.

Of Maximian's pacification of the countryside, Victor tells us:

> *Namque ubi comperit Carini discessu Helianum Amandumque per Galliam excita manu agrestium ac latronum, quos Bagaudas incolae vocant, populatis late agris plerasque urbium tentare, Maximianum statim fidum amicitia quamquam semiagrestem, militiae tamen atque ingenio bonum imperatorem iubet. Huic postea cultu numinis Herculio cognomentum accessit, uti Valerio Iovium; unde etiam militaribus auxiliis longe in exercitum praestantibus nomen impositum. Sed Herculius in Galliam profectus fusis hostibus aut acceptis quieta omnia brevi patraverat.*[36]
>
> For when Diocletian had learned, after Carinus' death, that in Gaul Helianus and Amandus had stirred up a band of peasants and robbers, whom the inhabitants call Bagaudae, and had ravaged the regions far and wide and were making attempts on very many of the cities, he immediately appointed as emperor Maximian, a loyal friend who, although he was rather uncivilized, was nevertheless a good soldier of sound character. He subsequently received the surname Herculius from his worship of that deity, just as Valerius [Diocletian] received that of Jovius. This was also the origin of the names given

[35] Ibid., pp. 411-18
[36] Aur. Vict. Caes. 39.17-19.

> to those auxiliary units which were particularly outstanding in the army. Well, Herculius marched into Gaul and in a short time he had pacified the whole country by routing the enemy forces or accepting their surrender.[37]

There is much debate over the correct form and meaning of "Bagaudas." It has long been suggested that the word traces its origin to the Celtic root *bág* (fight), though Clifford Minor has more recently shown that the g-form, *Bagaudae*, which has long been the standard epigraphic form of the name, was in fact a later Medieval interpolation, with the c-form—"Bacaudae"—being older.[38] While acceptance of the c-form invalidates the Celtic connection through *bág*, the word could still derive from Celtic roots. However, there is no particular reason to assume a Celtic origin, aside from a weak nationalist impulse to project a unified Celtic spirit of resistance onto the Bacaudae, turning them into just another budding 'nation' among the wandering Germanic tribes, in a historical period that has often been misleadingly harkened back to as the 'origin of nations.'[39]

Eutropius was a Roman official who accompanied the emperor Julian on his Persian campaign in 363 and later served under the emperor Valens as *magister memoriae* (master of memories), a senior secretary responsible for official correspondence and records. Writing his *Breviarum ad urbe condita (A Brief History from the Founding of the City)* about ten years after Victor's *de Caesaribus*, Eutropius has, once again, long been assumed to be epitomizing the lost *Kaisergeschichte.* While Victor's brief history has been scorned by posterity, Eutropius'

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[37] Aurelius Victor. *De Caesaribus*. Translated by H. W. Bird. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994, p. 42-3.
[38] For an overview of this etymological debate see Clifford E. Minor, "Bacaudae: A Reconsideration," *Traditio* 51 (1996). Though 'Bagaudae' remains common in the literature, I follow Minor in using the c-form.
[39] For an overview of how the early Middle Ages have traditionally been pinpointed by modern nationalisms as a period of origins, see chapter 1, "How the West was Lost and Where It Got Us, in Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations,* pp. 3-34.

Breviarum has often been seen as a masterpiece of the genre, serving as a guide to the study of Roman history for centuries after its composition.[40] Whether Eutropius was epitomizing the lost *Kaisergeschichte* or Victor's own lost history, however, he provides a slightly different account from Victor's:

> *Is prima militum contione iuravit Numerianum nullo suo dolo interfectum, et cum iuxta eum Aper, qui Numeriano insidias fecerat, constitisset, in conspectu exercitus manu Diocletiani percussus est. Postea Carinum omnium odio et detestatione viventem apud Margum ingenti proelio vicit, proditum ab exercitu suo, quem fortiorem habebat, aut certe desertum, inter Viminacium atque Aureum montem. Ita rerum Romanarum potitus cum tumultum rusticani in Gallia concitassent et factioni suae Bacaudarum nomen inponerent, duces autem haberent Amandum et Aelianum, ad subigendos eos Maximianum Herculium Caesarem misit, qui levibus proeliis agrestes domuit et pacem Galliae reformavit.*[41]
>
> Thus Diocletian gained possession of the Roman empire, and when the country people in Gaul had incited a revolt and given their movement the name of Bagaudae and acquired as their leaders Amandus and Aelianus, he sent Maximianus Herculius as Caesar to crush them. He subdued the peasants in some petty skirmishes and restored peace to Gaul.[42]

In addition to the difficulties of determining what sources Victor and Eutropius were drawing on, it must also be remembered that both authors' accounts emerged nearly a century after the events they describe. Both assert that "Bacaudae*"* was the term used by the local

[40] Stover and Woudhuysen, *The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor*, pp. 228-32.
[41] Eutr. Brev. 9.20
[42]Eutropius, *Breviarium* 9.20.3, Bird (1993), p. 60-61

population. The fact that no earlier sources mention the Bacaudae by name raises an important about the continuity of the movement—did the peasants of the third century call themselves Bacaudae, or did they receive their name in a process of retroactive mythologization sometime in the fourth century?

Beyond the question of terminology, Victor's account suggests a relatively high degree of military organization with his assertion that the Bacaudae "made attempts on very many cities" (*plerasque urbium tentare*). If the Bacaudae were capable of coordinated assaults on urban centers, they likely had access to arms, leadership, and strategic organization beyond spontaneous rural revolt. This raises further questions about their enigmatic leaders, Amandus and Aelianus, whose backgrounds remain entirely unknown. Their appearance in both Victor and Eutropius—with no additional biographical details in any other source—leaves their social standing ambiguous. Were they disaffected provincial elites, army deserters, opportunistic bandit warlords exploiting unrest, or were they peasants themselves? Victor describes the Bacaudae as peasants and bandits (*agrestium ac latronum)*, though it is entirely possible the inclusion of *latronum* (bandits) serves primarily to equate rebellious peasants implicitly with criminals. Eutropius, by contrast, presents a more simplified version of events, portraying the conflict as a rural riot subdued by Maximian in minor skirmishes (*levibus proeliis agrestes domuit)*. Whether this represents a different source tradition or a deliberate minimization of the Bacaudae's impact, as in the case of Mamertinus' panegyric, is unclear, but Victor's slightly more detailed account suggests that the movement was more than a local peasant rebellion—it was a serious threat to Roman authority in Gaul.

A useful starting point to understand this rhetorical association of resistance with banditry is Eric Hobsbawm's influential concept of "social banditry," which describes bandits perceived by peasant communities not as criminals but as champions of justice, avengers, and heroes.[43] Yet, distinguishing between genuine "social bandits" and common robbers who themselves preyed upon the peasantry can prove surprisingly difficult, especially in antiquity. Brent Shaw, engaging critically with Hobsbawm, argues that in Roman literary and legal discourse the label "banditry" (*latrocinium*) functioned ideologically to distinguish illegitimate violence from the state-sanctioned violence of war. According to Shaw, Romans recognized only two legitimate forms of warfare: war against inferior enemies such as slaves (*bellum servile*), and formal war between recognized states (*bellum iustum*). All other armed actions fell under the category of banditry.[44]

For Shaw, however, the figure of the ideological function of the bandit goes beyond this simple classification. While conceding that the archetype of the "social bandit" did indeed exist in the popular imagination, Shaw emphasizes its importance primarily in elite literary discourse as a foil to imperial authority. Bandits appear repeatedly in elite writings as mirrors of illegitimate power, tyrants, or unjust judges. For Shaw, within elite literary discourse, the very existence of 'good bandits', like Maternus or Bulla Felix, is only possible when the normal functioning of legitimate authority has turned tyrannous. In this sense, bandits served as a kind of omen of misrule, a sign that the natural order of things was under threat, with outside figures like bandits attempting to usurp the legitimate authority that can properly only be exercised by a 'good emperor'. Shaw suggests that beneath this literary use was a powerful longing by ordinary

[43] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1972), p. 17.
[44] Brent D. Shaw, "Bandits in the Roman Empire." *Past & Present* 105 (1984), pp. 6-7.

people for a figure capable of rescuing them from oppression. This desire, however, existed more as a compelling literary ideal than a historical reality. For Shaw, actual instances of banditry were rarely genuine forms of social rebellion, but rather reproduced on a much smaller scale the very power structures they were often seen to reject in the popular imagination.[45]

The Fifth Century Bacaudae

After the interim of the fourth-century 'Age of Gold', during much of which the western imperial capital was located at Trier on the Rhine frontier, the early fifth century was once again a period of profound instability in Gaul and Spain, exacerbated by a series of military, political, and economic crises that followed the so-called "Barbarian Invasions" of 406 C.E. On the last day of 405 or the first of 406, a coalition of Vandals, Alans, and Suevi crossed the Rhine at Mainz, overwhelming the Roman defenses and setting off a cascading politico-military crisis across the western provinces. These groups, initially pushed westward by pressure from the Huns, moved across Gaul, looting cities and estates, and by 409 had crossed into Spain. The Roman response to this invasion was fragmented and ineffective. Just as in the crisis of the third century, rival generals and usurpers attempted to consolidate their own power rather than present a unified front against the incursions. The imperial administration, already struggling to maintain control over its frontiers, was further weakened by internal divisions and the growing autonomy of local aristocrats who had long been the backbone of provincial governance.[46]

[45] Ibid., 44-52.
[46] Halsall, *Barbarian Invasions,* pp. 210-19.

Against this backdrop, the Bacaudae reemerged as a disruptive force in both Gaul and Spain. While the exact social composition of these rebel groups remains debated, they appear to have consisted of disaffected peasants, fugitive slaves, and Roman soldiers who had deserted as imperial order along the Rhine frontier disintegrated. The growing inability of the central government to protect rural populations from both external threats and the predatory demands of local magnates may have fueled rural discontent, as communities sought their own means of defense and resistance.

Rutilius Namatianus, Aristocratic Nostalgia, and the Countryside

Rutilius Namatianus, a Roman aristocrat and poet of the early fifth century, provides a firsthand perspective on the imperial elite's response to the instability of the late empire. Likely born in southern Gaul, he rose to the high office of *magister officiorum* (master of offices) under the emperor Honorius before returning home around 417 C.E., a journey that became the subject of his long poem *De Reditu Suo* (*On Returning Home*), only about half of which survives.[47] Written in elegiac couplets, the poem describes his voyage up the western coast of Italy, injecting social commentary within his nostalgic reflections on the pastoral beauty of his homeland. As a staunch defender of traditional Roman values, Rutilius lamented what he saw as the empire's decline, blaming it not on imperial mismanagement but on internal enemies—Christians, barbarians, and rebellious provincials. His work is suffused with a deep nostalgia for the imperial past and, though most of the second book is lost, the decline and desecration of Rutilius' cherished Gallic countryside seems to be building towards the hope of rebirth and

[47] Martha Malamud, *Rutilius Namatianus' Going Home: De Reditu Suo* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

restoration. For Rutilius Namatianus, the recent political and military instability that had reduced his homeland to a series of ravaged ruins mirrors the yearly agricultural cycle of death and rebirth, thus projecting an ultimately optimistic vision of his faith in eventual Roman renewal.[48]

One such figure of restoration was Exuperantius, the father of Rutilius' traveling companion, whom Rutilius praises for pacifying a revolt in Armorica—the region in northwest Gaul between the Seine and Loire rivers including much of modern-day Brittany and Normandy. Though Rutilius does not refer to the Bacaudae by name, Armorica was perhaps the primary seat of Bacaudic activity in the 5th century and many historians have since taken his remarks as referring to the Bacaudae.[49] Rutilius writes:

Cuius Aremoricas pater Exuperantius oras

nunc postliminium pacis amare docet;

leges restituit libertatemque reducit

et servos famulis non sinit esse suis.[50]

Exuperantius, his father, educates

the coast of Gaul to love returning peace

by bringing back both law and liberty, forbidding

men to serve as servants to their slaves.[51]

[48] Ibid., pp. 36-7.
[49] See chapter 2 for my discussion of the 20th century historiography surrounding the Bacaudae.
[50] Rutil. Nam. Red. 1.213–16
[51] *Malamud, Rutilius Namatianus' Going Home,* pp. 48-9.

Rutilius' choice of language is striking. The phrase "forbidding men to serve as servants to their slave*s"* suggests that the Bacaudae were not simply rebels, but figures who threatened to overturn the natural order. Rutilius emphasizes his aristocratic worldview by referring to Exuperantius' crushing of the Armorican revolt as a form of 'education' and by equating this 'education' with the love of peace. For Roman aristocrats, an intensive rhetorical and philosophical education, along with distinctive military and state service, had long been seen as the primary markers of aristocratic status. This equation of education and peace thus posits a worldview in which peace is only possible under the firm rule of aristocrats like Exuperantius and Rutilius himself.

Rutilius' nostalgia for lost aristocratic vigor reflects the anxieties of the fifth-century Roman aristocracy. By the fifth century, the Roman aristocracy had largely split into separate military and civic aristocracies, with foreign 'barbarian' warlords and imperial administrators increasingly 'usurping' the military function of the traditional Roman aristocracy.[52] For Rutilius, Exuperantius thus represents an idealized Roman in the old mold, a symbol of hope for Roman imperial renewal. As Martha Malamud notes, Rutilius' work is infused with an idealized vision of Rome's past, and his treatment of the Armorican revolt is no exception.[53] Rather than acknowledging the causes of provincial unrest, Rutilius, much like Mamertinus the panegyrist, transforms their rebellion into an aberration—a temporary lapse in Roman authority that required swift and decisive correction by a renewed Roman aristocracy in full possession of all its supposed virtues.

[52] Wickham, *Framing*, pp. 158, 188.
[53] Ibid., 34-7.

Roman Comedy, the Carnivalesque, and Life on the Loire

The next source that has been taken as relevant to the fifth-century Bacaudae is an elusive passage from the anonymously written *Querolus* (*The Complainer*)—a curious early fifth-century Latin comedy regarded as the latest surviving Roman drama, and the only extant Roman comedy outside the canon of Plautus and Terence.[54] The *Querolus* is ostensibly written as a kind of sequel to Plautus' *Aulularia*, a second century B.C.E. comedy about the elderly miser Euclio, who jealously guards a pot of gold discovered underneath his house. Immediately before Querolus consults his *lar familiaris (household god)*, the play sets up the basic premise: Querolus, son of the deceased miser Euclio, is unaware that his father has left behind a hidden fortune in a funerary urn. The urn was entrusted to the protection of the *lar familiaris*, who, in the opening prologue, introduces himself to the audience and outlines the situation. The lar explains that although he could reveal the treasure directly, he prefers to let events unfold in order to demonstrate that no mortal can interfere with fate. Querolus, meanwhile, is introduced as a grumbling pessimist, constantly complaining about his misfortunes and jealous of others' perceived success.[55]

The play is explicitly dedicated to a certain Rutilius, leading many to assume it refers to Rutilius Namatianus, though this identification remains uncertain. At the moment of his consultation, Querolus receives a string of sardonic suggestions from his *lar familiaris*, who, between doses of practical wisdom and mocking rebukes, reminds him how fortunate he really is. Among these suggestions is a reference to life along the Loire—a passage that has

[54] Gesine Manuwald, *Roman Comedy* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), p. 56.
[55] Rosemary D. O'Donnell, trans., *The Querolus*, (dissertation, University of London, 1980), pp. 297-307.

occasionally been interpreted by modern scholars as a veiled reference to the social disruptions caused by the Bacaudae, though this remains a matter of scholarly debate:

> Lar Familiaris: Hahaha, you want brigandage, not influence. By Pollux, I really do not know how to grant you that. Yes, I have found it. You have your desire. Go and live by the Loire [in Northern Gaul].
>
> Querolus: Why there?
>
> Lar Familiaris: There men live by the law of nations; there no chicanery is present; there capital sentences are executed on oak and written on bones; there even the peasants are lawyers and private citizens judges; there everything is legal. If you are rich you will be called "patus," as we say in our Greek tongue. Oh you woods, oh you solitudes, who said you were free? And there are many worse customs which I am not mentioning. However, that is enough for now.
>
> Querolus: I am not rich, nor do I require the use of oak. I do not like these woodland laws.
>
> Lar Familiaris: Well then, choose something gentler and more honest, if you cannot fight.[56]

This passage from *Querolus* reflects broader Roman attitudes toward the marginal regions of the empire and their ambiguous relationship to Roman authority. As we have seen, the Bacaudae have already been associated with bandits when Aurelius Victor described Amandus and Aelianus as having "stirred up a band of peasants and robbers" (*agrestium ac latronum*). Even if the author of the *Querolus* does not label the Armoricans explicitly as Bacaudae, the

[56] Ibid., p. 308.

conflation of brigandage and regional autonomy mirrors the elite Roman rhetorical discourse surrounding brigandage described by Shaw, discussed above.

One can also see the *Querolus* as a more comedic portrayal of the same kind of nostalgia that animated Rutilius Namatianus' *de Reditu Suo*, in which the very existence of this society governed by "woodland laws" is only possible because a generation of Roman men have turned into complainers rather than fighters. For the anonymous author, it is not the puny Querolus who should go to the Loire, but a fighter like Exuparantius. The woodland laws described in the *Querolus*—summary execution by lynching on oak trees, judgments inscribed on bones, peasants acting as their own judges—are a rhetorical inversion of Roman legal norms, painting Armorica as a world turned upside-down. Such imagery inevitably calls to mind the Roman festival of Saturnalia, during which slaves could mock their masters, and social norms were suspended in a ritualized carnivalesque inversion.[57] For Romans, the festival of Saturnalia hearkened back to what Hesiod, in his poem *Works and Days,* called the Golden Age, a primordial past in which people lived in ease and abundance without the need for toil, a time that there was no returning to.[58] For the author of the *Querolus*, the 'freedom' of life on the Loire was no such thing, with Exuperantius evidently having failed to restore lasting 'liberty' to Armorica in 417. Querolus' *lar familiaris* is essentially mocking him: if Querolus thinks *his* life is hard, life on the Loire might be just the 'school of hard knocks' he needs.

Yet the irony of the *Querolus* is that the reversal it mocks—the imagined freedom of the Loire valley—is itself reversed by the end of the play. Querolus never ventures to the Loire, yet

[57] Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 50.
[58] Hes. Op. 109–126.

still finds himself robbed at home by a 'clever parasite', Mandrogerus. In the end, it is not the rustic "bandits" who upend the social order, but the rogues of the city.

This double reversal can be read fruitfully along the lines suggested by Amy Richlin in regard to late Republican comedy. In her *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic,* Richlin draws on James C. Scott's concept of the "hidden transcript" to argue against the long-standing view that the farcical 'reversal of roles' characteristic of Roman comedy serve to reinforce social hierarchy.[59] For Scott, any given speech act can simultaneously have a 'public' meaning and a secondary 'hidden' meaning, so that "a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse of subordinate groups."[60] Richlin and Scott argue that such inversions, acted out in festivals as much as in drama, keep alive the dream of resistance, allowing it to resurface when conditions are right. The Querolus, then, may be less a conservative satire mocking rural disorder than a coded commentary on the failure of Roman society to maintain even the basic securities of urban life. In mocking the fantasy of rural lawlessness, the play quietly suggests that the real banditry lies at the heart of civilization itself.

Salvian of Marseilles, God's Present Judgment, and the Wealth of the Church

The most extensive commentary on the Bacaudae that survives in the historical record is Salvian of Marseilles' *De Gubernatione Dei* (*On the Governance of God*). Writing in the mid-440s, himself a fugitive from northern Gaul who witnessed firsthand the violence that accompanied the collapse of the Rhine frontier, Salvian's tract is a fiery denunciation of Roman

[59] Amy Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic: Plautus and Popular Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 41.
[60] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 19.

morals, an excoriation of the deleterious effects of Roman tax policy, and an overall condemnation of what he saw as the contemptible state of the world in his time. Unlike other Roman commentators, Salvian did not bemoan the collapse of imperial authority—he framed it as a much-deserved act of divine judgment. For Salvian and his coterie of bishops and ascetics in southern Gaul, the ideal of *Romanitas* (Roman-ness) was under siege. Southern Gaul was an ever-shrinking holdout of Roman light, hemmed in from the north by 'barbarian' tribes and from within by stateless, Bacaudic zones.[61] But unlike the standard imperial rhetoric that painted the Bacaudae as brigands, whose mere existence threatened the natural order of Roman authority and legitimacy, Salvian viewed them as victims of the Roman state—citizens who had been abandoned and driven to rebellion by rapacious landowners and tyrannical tax-collectors.

For Peter Brown, Salvian presents a particularly thorny challenge for the historian of the late Roman West for three interconnected reasons.[62] First, Salvian has long been seen as *the* principal source for understanding the late Roman tax system in Gaul.[63] Secondly, in his vivid portrayal of the oppression of the peasantry by the great landowners of Gaul, Salvian has often been seen as describing an already fully-formed 'feudal' economic structure, thus marking the end of Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Last but not least, Salvian's characteristic rhetorical move of contrasting the moral decay of the Romans with the supposed virtue of the 'barbarians' has made him a favored source for arguments about the essential 'Germanness' of medieval society. Salvian, in other words, has been read as a prophet of decline, his testimony endlessly mined for signs of Rome's inevitable collapse. But as Brown cautions,

[61] Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* p. 434
[62] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp. 433-4.
[63] Here Brown cites Chris Wickham's discussion of the role of Salvian in late-Roman economic historiography. See Wickham, *Framing*, pp. 62-4.

this interpretive tendency has obscured the true strangeness of Salvian's text and the world it emerged from. "Salvian wrote," Brown reminds us, "no longer for the citizens of a world empire, but for the inhabitants of an enclave in which the grandeur of an *ancien régime* still lingered."[64]

In both *De Gubernatione Dei* and his earlier work *Ad Ecclesiam* (*An Open Letter to the Church*), Salvian blames the present crisis on the greed of Gallic landowners and Roman officials. As a response to this misrule, Salvian describes a kind of reverse 'barbarian migration', a mass exodus of the poor *away* from Roman rule: "They migrate either to the Goths or to the Bacaudae or to other barbarians everywhere in power; yet they do not repent having migrated. They prefer to live as freemen under an outward form of captivity than as captives under an appearance of liberty." *(itaque passim uel ad Gothos uel ad Bacaudas uel ad alios ubique dominantes barbarous migrant, et commigrasse non paenitet; malunt enim sub specie captiuitatis uiuere liberi quam sub specie libertatis esse captiui*). [65] The fundamental injustice of the empire, as Salvian saw it, was that men who should have been free citizens were forced into servitude, while those who fled were paradoxically the only ones to retain any semblance of Roman 'liberty'. In this sense, Salvian's picture of the Gallic countryside is a complete reversal of Rutilius Namatianus' vision of the general Exuperantius restoring 'freedom' to the rebellious coast of Gaul.

In order to understand why Salvian might say this, it is necessary to examine the context of mid-fifth century Gaul in which Salvian was writing. As Brown warns, "We who read Salvian's *On the Government of God* with the benefit of hindsight tend to treat the Roman

[64] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 434.
[65] Salvian, *The Writings of Salvian, the Presbyter*, trans. Jeremiah Francis O'Sullivan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1962), p. 136; *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Vol. 8 (Vienna: C. Gerold, 1887), 108-9.

Empire as a doomed institution. But this was not how it appeared to many contemporaries. The 430s and 440s were seen by many as a time of consolidation after the terrible events of the early decades of the fifth century."[66] As Guy Halsall has shown, the energetic Roman general Aetius and his "policy of government through 'punitive expedition'" did much to reverse, or at least temporarily halt, the unraveling of Roman authority in Gaul.[67] Likewise, Chris Wickham has argued that "the 440s was not a decade of crisis, at least in Gaul; Salvian, like Libanios, was inveighing against a situation of stable corruption, not fiscal breakdown—even for Salvian, the taxes were still being paid, and they continued to be for some time yet."[68]

Further, as Brown has shown, the 420s and 430s marked a time of major change in the structure and personnel of the Gallic Church. Many episcopacies came to be taken over by monks trained at the monastery of Lérins off the southern coast of Gaul, many of whom, like Salvian himself, coming from aristocratic families that had been hit hard by the convulsions of the early-fifth century.[69] By the mid-fifth century in Gaul, the aristocracy, weakened by the depredations of the early fifth-century, had come to use the church as a form of estate-planning, with richer families pressuring daughters and second sons to become ascetics, renouncing their share of the family inheritance. Previously, churches had tended to receive much of their wealth from wealthy converts; now the aristocracy sought to hold onto its wealth.[70]

For Brown, the *de Gubernatione Dei* "was an icy blast directed against the mood of recovery and consolidation that had comforted Salvian's compatriots."[71] Salvian does not merely

[66] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* p. 443.
[67] Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations,* pp. 248-51
[68] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 528.
[69] Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 128.
[70] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp. 437-8.
[71] Ibid., p. 444.

sympathize with the Bacaudae; he directly indicts the Roman system for their existence: "I am now about to speak about the Bagaudae who were despoiled, oppressed, and murdered by evil and cruel judges." (*De Bacaudis nunc mihi sermo est, qui per malos iudices et cruentos spoliati afflicti necat*i). [72] The Bacaudae, in his analysis, were not rebels by choice but by necessity. They had been strangled by an unjust system, crushed by corrupt judges, and forced to become outlaws: "For by what other means were they made Bacaudae except by our wickedness, except by the perversities of judges, except by the persecution and pillage committed by those who have turned what is called a public tax into profit for their own gain and made the tributary indictions their own objects of plunder." (*quibus enim aliis rebus Bacaudae facti sunt uisi iniquitatibus nostris nisi improbitatibus iudicum, nisi eorum proscriptionibus et rapinis, qui exactionis publicae nomen in quaestus propria emolumenta uerterunt et indictions tributaries praedas suas esse fecurunt*). [73] In Salvian's theological framework, the true crime was not rebellion, but the moral failure of Roman elites who had abandoned their duty to protect their fellow citizens.

For Salvian, the last judgment was not a distant event—it was already unfolding in his lifetime. The calamities of his day were the visible evidence of divine retribution for the sins of Roman Christians. This view was rooted in what Brown has called the "Gallic Consensus", a theological outlook that emphasized the "unrelenting rigor of the Law of God."[74] Brown writes, "Salvian's emphasis on the Law of God resembled the insistence on total obedience to the commandments of God that had been put forward in Pelagian writings that were still read in Marseilles. Human beings were free—but they were free only to serve God."[75] In the thought of

[72] Sullivan, *The Writings of Salvian the Presbyter,* p. 136; *CSEL,* p. 109.
[73] Sullivan, *The Writings of Salvian the Presbyter*, p. 136; *CSEL*, p. 109.
[74] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* p. 441.
[75] Ibid.

Salvian and his peers, God's law was clear and absolute—transgressions were met with punishment not in some distant afterlife, but in the here and now. The suffering of the empire was not the result of military failure or political mismanagement, but of moral decay from the ethical heights of the *Ecclesia Primitiva*—the Church in its earliest days.[76] For Salvian, Roman Christians had betrayed their obligations, particularly in their treatment of the poor, and the consequences were unfolding before them. This was a perspective deeply embedded in Gallic ascetic thought: the Roman Empire, like the Israel of the Old Testament, had been uniquely privileged by God, but that privilege came with obligations. When the empire failed to uphold justice, it lost divine favor.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Salvian's dramatic conclusion:

> *ac sic actum est, ut latrociniis iudicum strangulati homines et necati inciperent esse quasi barbari, quia non permittebantur esse Romani. Adqueuerunt enim esse quod non errant, quia non permittebantur esse quod fuerant, coactique sunt uitam saltim defendere, quia se iam libertatem uideband penitus perdidisse. Aut quid aliud etiam nunc agitur, quam tunc actum est, id est, ut qui adhuc Bacaudae non sunt esse cogantur? Quantum enim ad uim atque iniurias pertinent, compelluntur ut uelint esse, set inbecillittate impediuntur ut non sint. Sic sunt ergo quasi captiui iugo hostium pressi: tolerant supplicium necessitate non uoto: animo desiderant libertatem sed summam sustinent seruitutem.*[77]
>
> Thus it happened that men, strangled and killed by the robberies of judges, began to live as barbarians because they were not permitted to be Romans. They became satisfied to be

[76] For the role of the *Ecclesia Primitiva* in the thought of Salvian, see Lambert, David. "The Uses of Decay: History in Salvian's *De Gubernatione Dei*." *Augustinian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 115–130.
[77] *CSEL,* p. 110.

> what they were not, because they were not permitted to be what they were. They were compelled to defend their lives at least, because they saw that they had already completely lost their liberty. What else is being done today than was done then, for example, those who are not up to now Bagaudae are compelled to be? Insofar as force and injuries go, they are now driven so that they want to become Bagaudae, but they are prevented by weakness so that they are not. Thus, they are as captives oppressed by the yoke of the enemy. They bear torture out of necessity, not out of choice. In their hearts they desire liberty, but undergo the greatest slavery. [78]

The Bacaudae, in this telling, were not traitors to Rome but rather the ultimate proof of its moral failure. If Roman Christians wanted to survive God's present judgment, they would have to answer for their sins—and loosen up their purse strings.

Salvian's attitude towards wealth marks a crucial turning point in Brown's overall narrative of the transformation of classical attitudes towards wealth and its uses into the familiar medieval notion of giving gifts to the church for the sake of one's soul. For Brown, it is important to remember that in the ancient world,

> Wealth and "honors" were made to converge. The one could not be achieved or maintained without the other. For this reason, when approaching wealth in the later empire (as in most other periods of Roman history) we must make a fundamental transition "from a [modern] mental cosmos in which power depends largely on money to one where money depends. . . largely on power.[79]

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[78] Sullivan, *The Writings of Salvian the Presbyter,* p. 137.
[79] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 5; quoting J. Lendon, Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 30.

For Brown, classical attitudes towards wealth and its uses were primarily characterized by what Paul Veyne has called 'civic euergetism' in his influential book *Bread and Circuses*, first translated into English in 1976.[80] For Veyne, drawing on anthropological work on the social and economic logic of gift-giving in non- or pre-capitalist societies, civic euergetism describes the process through which wealthy citizens competitively displayed their wealth through public benefactions—sponsoring festivals, monumental architecture, etc.—in order to shore up their power and authority within the community of the polis.[81] In civic euergetism, for Brown, "love of the poor" was more about "love of one's fellow citizen" and "the world would have to change considerably (as it did in just these centuries) before a classical view of society as made up of a honeycomb of civic groups was replaced, across Europe, by the gray and universal vision of a world divided only between rich and poor."[82]

Salvian's treatment of the Bacuadae and how it differs from the pagan authors who preceded him can only be understood in relation to this 'universalization' of the categories of rich and poor in late antique Christian discourse. On the one hand, this universalization opened up the category of the rural poor as a powerful rhetorical tool for Salvian to enlist in his scathing critique of Roman corruption. For authors like Mamertinus the panegyrist, Rutilius Namatianus, and the anonymous author of the *Querolus*, rural unrest could only function symbolically in elite discourse as an aberration of the natural order, representing the implicit weakness of civic-based authority. This aberration could be mobilized rhetorically in diverse ways—to praise an emperor or general who has 'restored' the natural order (Maximian, Exuperantius), as nostalgic longing

[80] For more on Veyne's influence on Brown, see Brown, *Journeys of the Mind,* pp. 559-62.
[81] Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism*, trans. Brian Pearce (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 1-60.
[82] Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), p. 4; Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp. 70-1.

for a time in which such an aberration did not exist (Rutilius Namatianus), or farcically (as in the *Querolus)*—but in each the existence of rural unrest remains an aberration. In Salvian, however, the Bacaudae are not an aberration of the natural order, but a symptom of the aberration *of* the natural order, working as intended. Amidst the turbulent economic conditions of fifth-century Gaul, Salvian's rhetorical strategy proved remarkably effective.

On the other hand, the 'universalization' of the poor had the effect of what Brown calls "pauperizing the poor" and "divitizing [enrichifying] the rich"—splitting the world into two vast categories of abject poverty and outrageous wealth.[83] When reading late antique Christian sources, this shift in the discourse of wealth has the effect of obscuring the real subjects of such discourse. Brown writes, "When Salvian spoke of the *pauperculi*—the "poor little guys"—who were devastated by high officials, he did not mean the lower classes in the modern sense. His "poor" were rarely peasants. They were never the down-and-out poor of the cities. They were people like himself."[84] In the Gallic Christian mindset so sharply portrayed in Salvian's discussion of rural patronage's disastrous sociological effects, he spoke primarily about what sociologists call the 'conjunctural' poor—those who had once been relatively well-off but had fallen into poverty.

This category of the 'conjunctural' poor included what Brown calls the 'holy poor'—monks like Salvian whose family-wealth had been largely wiped out by the depredations of the early fifth-century and expected to live off the pious donations of the still truly rich.[85] But it also included former free-holding peasant families that had been forced into being the dependent

[83] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* p. 78.
[84] Ibid., p. 448.
[85] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, p. 438.

tenants of their wealthier neighbors. Salvian thus provides a two-fold warning to the remainder of the Gallic ultra-wealthy in the mid-fifth century: if you don't loosen up your purse strings, not only will your labor force flee or rise against you, but your soul will rot in hell too.

The Bacaudae in Fifth-Century Christian Chronicles

Our next two sources are both Christian chronicles, a genre that emerged in the 4th and 5th century partially as a continuation of the *breviarium* tradition discussed above, adapting the concise, annalistic style of writers like Eutropius and Aurelius Victor to a new theological framework. Whereas the earlier *breviaria* served as condensed political histories, often beginning with the founding of Rome, Christian chroniclers saw history, just as Salvian had, as a reflection of divine will, integrating secular and ecclesiastical events into a providential narrative beginning with creation. In Latin, Jerome's *Chronicon*, building on Eusebius of Caesarea's Greek model, set the standard for Latin Christian chronography —a genre of historical writing concerned primarily with systematically listing events in chronological order, typically organized around imperial reigns, consular years, or other recognized dating systems. By the fifth century, chroniclers like the author of the *Gallic Chronicle of 452* and Hydatius inherited this tradition, picking up in 378 C.E. where Jerome left off and using the chronicle form to interpret the troubles of the fifth century through the lens of salvation history. Their works, though sparse in detail compared to classical historiography, sought to explain political and social upheavals as manifestations of divine justice.[86]

[86] Muhlberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers*, pp. 8-47.

The *Gallic Chronicle of 452* was composed by an anonymous writer in southern Gaul during a period of intense imperial and ecclesiastical crisis. Written just three years before Prosper of Aquitaine issued the final edition of his own chronicle, the *Chronicle of 452* reflects a markedly different perspective on both secular history and theological developments. Prosper, a theologian and chronicler from southern Gaul, was a committed follower and defender of Augustine of Hippo, particularly noted for his vigorous advocacy of Augustine's teachings on grace and predestination.[87] While both Prosper and the anonymous chronicler were ascetic-minded Christians, they were opposed in key doctrinal matters.

Much like Salvian, the anonymous chronicler of 452 rejects Prosper's serene Augustinian optimism, which, in the words of Peter Brown, "cut the history of Christianity loose from the history of the empire."[88] For Augustine, as opposed to Salvian, the fate of the earthly city of Rome had little to do with the City of God to come. The chronicle was compiled in the wake of Attila's invasion of Gaul and during the ongoing devastation of Italy. Unlike Prosper's relatively measured and optimistic account of events, the *Gallic Chronicle of 452* presents a world in decline, in which both church and state suffer repeated defeats. Though little is known about the chronicler himself, his work, like that of Salvian, places strong emphasis on the role of monasticism and ascetic figures in guiding the faithful during these turbulent times.[89]

The entry for 435 C.E. in the *Gallic Chronicle of 452* stands out among all references to the Bacaudae for its use of the term as a prepositional phrase rather than a noun:

[87] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* pp. 426-32.
[88] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* p. 443.
[89] Muhlberger, *The Fifth-Century Chroniclers*, pp. 136-191.

> *Gallia ulterior Tibattonem principem rebellionis secuta a romana societate discessit; a quo tracto initio omnia paene Galliarum seruitia in Bacaudam conspirauere.*[90]
>
> Further Gaul followed Tibatto, the leader of the rebellion, and seceded from Roman society; after he took the initiative, nearly all the servile classes of Gaul conspired in Bacauda.[91]

Here, *in Bacaudam conspirare* suggests that rebellion was not an inherent condition but a shift in status—one did not *belong* to the Bacaudae so much as *become* Bacaudic through revolt. The chronicler also emphasizes the sheer scale of the movement, claiming that nearly all of Gaul's servile classes participated. While likely exaggerated, this framing presents the uprising as a near-total rejection of Roman authority by the lower orders. And shortly after, in 437 C.E.:

> *Capto Battone et ceteris seditionis partim principibus uinctis, partim necatis Bacaudarum Commotio conquiescit.*[92]
>
> With Tibatto captured and some of the other leaders of the rebellion either defeated or killed, the Bacaudic uprising came to an end.

The *Chronicle* mentions the Bacaudae one more time, in 448 C.E.:

> *Eudoxius arte medicus, praui sed exercitati ingenii, in Bacauda id temporis mota delatus ad Chunos confugit.*[93]
>
> Eudoxius, a physician by training, of corrupt but capable intellect, was implicated in the Bacaudic uprising at that time and fled to the Huns.

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[90] *Chron. Gall. 452*, 117; Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer, eds., *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 78-9.
[91] Since no English edition exists for the *Gallic Chronicle of 452* that I am aware of, the translations are my own.
[92] *Chron. Gall. 452*, 119; Mathisen and Shanzer, *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul*, p. 79.
[93] *Chron. Gall. 452*, 133; Ibid., p. 80

By the late 440s, the Huns had become a powerful and disruptive force in both Gaul and Italy. According to Halsall, Attila's campaigns from 441 to 451 placed enormous pressure on the Western Roman Empire, both directly through invasion and indirectly by weakening the empire's ability to control its provincial populations.[94] The Huns were not just an external threat but an active player in Roman internal politics, employed at time as Roman *foederati* (allied troops). Eudoxius' escape to the Huns suggests that at least some factions of the Bacaudae had connections beyond Armorica or saw potential in aligning with external powers hostile to Rome. Whether he sought refuge or sought to leverage Hunnic power for his own aims remains unclear, but his case illustrates how the Bacaudic movement, far from being an isolated peasant uprising, was entangled in the broader geopolitical struggles of the mid-fifth century. Unfortunately, the *Chronicle* does not reveal the fate of the 448 Bacaudic uprising.

Hydatius' *Chronicle* provides one of the most vivid and detailed contemporary accounts of the social and political upheavals in fifth-century Spain. Writing from Gallaecia in the far northwest corner of the Iberian peninsula, where he served as a bishop, Hydatius witnessed firsthand the region's struggles under Suevic rule, the collapse of Roman authority, and the widespread breakdown of imperial institutions. Born in the late fourth century, Hydatius had personally witnessed the slow unraveling of imperial control, from the barbarian invasions of 409 to the increasing dominance of the Sueves in northwestern Hispania. His chronicle, composed in the late 460s during his last years, reflects a world in which Roman governance had largely disintegrated, leaving provincial elites to negotiate their survival amid shifting political and military realities. A staunch defender of Catholic orthodoxy, Hydatius was deeply concerned

[94] Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 250-54.

with both the political decline of the empire and the rise of heresy, viewing both as signs of a world in crisis. Writing from a province that had been effectively severed from imperial structures for decades, his chronicle exudes a sense of isolation and urgency, offering a grim portrayal of a Roman world that, in his eyes, was slipping beyond recovery.

Hydatius' *Chronicle* records several significant clashes between Roman and barbarian forces against the Bacaudae, providing us with the sole surviving source that attests to the presence of Bacaudae in late Roman Spain. In 441, the Roman commander Asturius, sent to Spain as *dux utriusque militiae*, launched a violent campaign against the insurgents in Tarraconensis, where he "slaughtered a great number of Bacaudae" (*Asturius dux utriusque militia ad Hispanias missus Terraconensium caedit multitudinem Bacaudarum*).[95] And then, after an interlude in 442 in which a comet appeared in the sky for months and "presaged a subsequent disaster, namely a pestilence which spread over almost the entire world," his efforts were followed in 443 by his son-in-law and successor, Merobaudes, the poet-general, who "smashed the arrogance of the Bacaudae of Aracelli" (*Merobaudes Bacaudarum Aracelli elisit audaciam*).[96]

A few years later, in 442, Hydatius records an incident involving a certain Basilius, who, as an assertion of his daring, "assembled a group of Bacaudae and then killed federate troops in the church at Tyriasso" (*Basilius ob testimonium egregii ausus sui congregates Bacaudis in ecclesia Tyriassone foederatus occidit*).[97] In the ensuing violence, even Leo, the bishop of the church, was mortally wounded by Basilius' men (*Vbi et Leo eiusdem ecclesiae episcopus ab*

[95] *Hyd. Chron.* 116; Richard W. Burgess, *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana: Two Contemporary Accounts of the Final Years of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 96-7.
[96] *Hyd. Chron.* 120; Ibid., pp. 96-7.
[97] *Hyd. Chron.* 132; Ibid., pp. 98-9.

hisdem qui cum Basilio aderant in eo loco obit uulneratus).[98] That same year, Rechiarius, the Suevic king, plundered the region of Caesaraugusta alongside Basilius, and together they took a significant number of captives from Ilerda, which they had entered by deception (*Inrupta per dolum Elerdensi urbe acta est non parua captiuitas*).[99] Later, in 453-454, the Bacaudae suffered yet another crushing defeat. Frederic, the brother of King Theoderic II of the Visigoths, acting "under Roman authority," launched an assault on the insurgents of Tarraconensis, decisively defeating them (*Per Fredericum Theuderici regis fratrem Bacaude Terraconenses caeduntur ex auctoritate Romana*).[100]

The Bacaudae in Christian Hagiography

Returning to Gaul, the next appearance of the Bacaudae in the historical record is in *Vita Sancti Germani* (*The Life of Saint Germanus*), a hagiography written by Constantius of Lyon sometime around 480 C.E. Germanus, born sometime in the later fourth century, was a high-ranking aristocrat and Roman provincial official before abandoning his secular career to join the clergy. By the time Exuperantius had quelled the Bacaudic uprising of 417, Germanus had become bishop of Auxerre, a diocese located within Armorica. While the *Vita* primarily focuses on Germanus' two campaigns against Pelagianism in Britain, it also documents Germanus' attempt to mediate on behalf of the Armoricans with the Emperor Valentinian III, in the face of an attack by the Alans.[101]

[98] *Hyd. Chron.* 133; Ibid.
[99] *Hyd. Chron.* 134; Ibid.
[100] *Hyd. Chron.* 150; Ibid., pp. 102-3.
[101] Raymond Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 144; E. A. Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1984), pp. 1-6.

After dealing with the Pelagian heresy in Britain for a second time, Germanus returns to Auxerre, where he is met by a delegation of desperate Armorican peasants. Though Constantius never explicitly names them as Bacaudae, E.A. Thompson and others have linked these supplicants to the same revolts described in the *Gallic Chronicle of 452*. The peasants plead for Germanus to intercede with the Roman authorities on their behalf, as the powerful *magister militum* Aetius, whom Guy Halsall has described as following a strategy of "government through punitive expedition," had dispatched an army of Alans to restore order in the region.[102] Aetius, effectively the most powerful man in the Western Roman Empire at this time, relied heavily on federate barbarian forces like the Alans to maintain control over unstable provinces. Germanus, renowned for his authority even among non-Christian groups, personally pardons the Armoricans and sets out to negotiate with the Alan leader, Goar. Constantius describes the scene in dramatic terms: "So one old man was matched against a most warlike people and an idolatrous king but, under the protection of Christ, he proved greater and stronger than them all."[103] After being rebuffed, Germanus boldly seizes Goar's bridle, halting not only the king but his entire army.[104]

Ultimately, Goar agrees to pause his campaign while Germanus travels to Ravenna to plead the Armoricans' case before Emperor Valentinian III. However, just as Germanus is negotiating their pardon, the Armoricans renew their rebellion. Constantius attributes this renewed uprising to the treachery of Tibatto, mentioned already in the *Gallic Chronicle of 452*: "Germanus would undoubtedly have had them settled as he wished, by obtaining for the Armoricans pardon and security for the future, if it had not been for the treachery of Tibatto, who

[102] Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, p. 250.
[103] F. R. Hoare, ed. and trans., *The Western Fathers* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), p. 308.
[104] Ibid., p. 309.

persuaded that fickle and undisciplined people to rebel again."[105] This identification of Tibatto as the leader of the revolt is problematic, as he had been captured years earlier—perhaps Constantius was misinformed, or Tibatto had managed to escape and resume his insurrection, or perhaps more likely, as Anthony Barrett and others have suggested, Germanus' second mission may have been a literary doubling of the first, with no historical basis.[106] Unfortunately for the Armoricans, Germanus dies in Ravenna before he can resume the peace negotiations and Constantius tells us no more about the fate of the Armoricans in his long description of the procession of Germanus' body back to Auxerre.

Zosimus and the Bacaudae in the Alps

The last reference to the Bacaudae of the fifth century comes from Zosimus, a pagan historian writing in the eastern Roman Empire sometime in the early sixth century (exactly when and where remain uncertain). Zosimus, in his *Historia Nova* (*New History)*, describes how Sarus, a protégé of the powerful general Stilicho, led an army into Gaul in 406, attempting and failing to subdue the usurper Constantine III, who had recently proclaimed himself emperor. While retreating back to Italy after a short siege of Valentia, Sarus was forced to pay tribute to a group of Bacaudae who blocked his path in the Alps:

> Sarus, fearful of their military experience and bravery, withdrew from Valentia after besieging it only seven days. Under the most vigorous attack from Constantine's

[105] Ibid. p. 317.
[106] Anthony Barrett, "Saint Germanus and the British Missions," *Britannia* 40 (2009): pp. 212-14.

magistri, he barely escaped and had to give all his booty to the Bacaudae he encountered near the Alps to gain their permission to cross into Italy.[107]

Zosimus' overarching aim in his history was to demonstrate how Rome lost its Mediterranean dominance in a rapid fifty-year period, mirroring the way Polybius had earlier chronicled Rome's rise to Mediterranean hegemony within fifty years of the Punic Wars. Zosimus considered Rome's decisive moment of collapse to be Alaric's sack of Rome in 410, with the death of Julian, the last pagan emperor, perhaps marking the starting point of this fifty-year decline. For Zosimus, the empire's decay was attributable primarily to the decline of pagan religious traditions and the increasing barbarization of Roman society.[108]

Immediately after his discussion of Sarus' encounter with the Bacaudae, Zosimus addresses Britain's revolt from Roman rule. According to Zosimus, following Constantine III's failure to prevent barbarian armies from crossing the Rhine and devastating northern Gaul and Britain, "The whole of Armorica and other Gallic provinces, in imitation of the Britons, freed themselves in the same way, by expelling the Roman magistrates and establishing the government they wanted."[109] Though Britain would never be reabsorbed into the Roman Empire, this Gallic revolt is likely the same uprising eventually quelled by Exuperantius, praised by Rutilius Namatianus in his poem *De Reditu Suo*. When read together, Zosimus and Rutilius raise an interesting interpretive problem: if the Armorican revolts suppressed by Exuperantius in 417 were indeed Bacaudic in character—as the description of Sarus' encounter strongly suggests—

[107] Zos. Hist. Nov. 6.2.5; Zosimus. *New History: A Translation with Commentary.* Translated by Ronald T. Ridley. Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982, pp. 127.

[108] Ridley, *New History: A Translation and Commentary*, pp. iii-vii.
[109] Zos. Hist Nov. 6.5.3; Ridley, *New History: A Translation and Commentary*, pp. 128-9.

does this imply the British revolt was similarly Bacaudic? Or, on the other hand, might it suggest that neither revolt was Bacaudic, given that Rutilius himself never explicitly refers to the rebels as Bacaudae? As we shall see in the following chapter, both positions have found support among twentieth-century historians.

As one can see even from this brief overview of the sources, the historical record does not give us anything close to a full picture of the social character of the peasant revolts in the later Roman empire. The Bacaudae are generally referred to in the literature as being some combination of primarily peasants, slaves, bandits, and army deserters, though with some possible upper-class leadership. References to the Bacaudae in the documentary evidence consist primarily of elite Romans presenting them as an aberration of the 'natural order' of civic authority and Christian authors using them as a set-piece to develop theological themes or hagiographic narratives. The tantalizing vagueness of many of these references certainly makes it tempting to think of the Bacaudae romantically, as roving bands of overly-oppressed peasants fleeing from their masters to join late antique Robin Hoods and their merry men, or even more to think of Armorica, the region in northern Gaul traditionally seen as the seat of Bacaudic activity, as some kind of revolutionary rustic utopia, where the landlords were expropriated by their former slaves. Just as paternalistic prejudices shaped portrayals of the Bacaudae in our ancient sources, so too do the rosy glasses of romanticism cloud modern scholarly approaches to the Bacaudae.

The Bacaudae in the 20th Century:

Reconsidering the Conservative Turn in Bacaudic Studies

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of different approaches historians have developed to explain the Bacaudae since the mid-20th century. First, I examine the 'maximalist' Marxist model developed by the Irish classicist E.A. Thompson in the 1950s, whose approach presents the Bacuadae as a widespread phenomenon and one of the main causes of the 'Fall of Rome'. Second, I examine the role Salvian of Marseilles and the Bacaudae play in Chris Wickham's early essay "The 'Other' Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism," published in 1985, in which Wickham, drawing on Thompson, presents the Bacaudae as crucial agents in the transition from an 'ancient mode of production' to 'feudalism'. I then turn to Raymond Van Dam's 'reformist' model of the 1980s, which argues contra Thompson that the Bacaudae were primarily disaffected aristocrats attempting something along the lines of Gallic self-rule. Finally, I will look at the more numerous recent studies that belong to the 'minimalist' or 'conservative' turn in Bacaudic studies, which is characterized both by a more skeptical approach to the sources as well as a general diminution of the Bacaudae's historical impact.

I conclude by offering my own critique of the 'conservative turn', as represented by its most recent advocate, J. Grant Couper. While I am sympathetic with the skeptical and critical thrust of the 'conservative' turn, I think Couper's conclusion that the Bacaudae revolts had a "nugatory" effect on the history of the later Roman empire is too simplistic. I further argue that

Couper's argument relies on a misinterpretation of Wickham's vision of the peasantry's role in the socioeconomic structure of the late Empire, which Couper cites at a crucial point in his argument. Though Wickham is broadly committed to the socioeconomic continuity of agrarian class relations between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, he is also, as a Marxist, careful to foreground the role of peasant resistance to exploitation (whether in the form of taxes or rents), with the relative autonomy of the peasantry in sections of the early post-Roman west compared to periods both before and after being a major recurring theme of his work.

E.A. Thompson's Maximalist Marxist Model

E.A. Thompson was an Irish-born Marxist historian who helped pioneer the study of late antiquity as a distinct field beginning in the 1940s. Deeply influenced by his time studying in Berlin in 1937–38, during the rise of Nazism, Thompson had joined the British Communist Party by the time he was appointed director of the classics program at the University of Nottingham in 1948. As Harvey Kaye has noted, the form of historical writing that emerged within and around the British Communist Party Historians' Group during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s constituted a clearly delineable historiographical tradition. The British Marxists, according to Kaye, were reacting not only against the 'great-man' histories of Enlightenment thinkers like Edward Gibbon—who saw historical change as resulting from the decisions of a few exceptional individuals—but also against the economic determinism of other Marxist traditions, in which historical change was seen as the automatic result of shifts in the economic 'base' of society. In contrast, the British Marxists sought to write 'history from below,' portraying the class struggle

of the oppressed as the 'prime mover' of historical change.[110] It was in this spirit that Thompson devoted much of his scholarly career to rewriting the history of the barbarian migrations 'from below,' aligning his work squarely with the core commitments of the British Marxist historians.

E.A. Thompson's work on the so-called 'barbarian migrations' played a key role in breaking the study of these groups free from the nationalist frameworks that had long shaped the field, in which 'barbarians' were often deployed as raw material for various modern origin myths. Though Thompson believed that archaeology—which has done much in recent decades to revolutionize our understanding of the migrations—was, at the time, too underdeveloped to be of much use, his studies remain a surprisingly strong introduction to the history of the barbarian world.

In *A History of Attila and the Huns*, published in 1948, Thompson makes it a central goal to dismantle the larger-than-life reputations of both Attila and the Roman general Aetius, the latter often cast as the last great commander of the western Empire. The book ends with a lengthy reflection on why Attila, far from being a diplomatic genius, fundamentally misunderstood the political dynamics of Gaul—especially in his failure to engage with the Bacaudae. Thompson writes, "the third reason why it seems impossible to agree that Attila was a diplomat of exceptional ability is the most compelling of all… that after his flight to the Huns in 448 we hear no more of Eudoxius."[111] Eudoxius, described in the *Gallic Chronicle of 452* as a physician, had fled from Armorica to the Huns sometime prior to 448. Though his role in any rebellion remains uncertain, his disappearance from the historical record after this flight suggests

[110] Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), pp. 1-22.
[111] E.A. Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 207.

to Thompson a missed opportunity on Attila's part. Had Attila allied himself with the revolting peasantry of Gaul, "Visigoth and Roman alike could have been swept out of Gaul in a few months."[112] But instead, the Armoricans—for Thompson the Armoricans and the Bacaudae are essentially synonyms—appear as allies of Aetius at the Catalaunian Plains.

For Thompson, this marks a clear limit of Attila's political imagination. He writes, "Attila could not possibly have appeared as the champion of a revolted peasantry. Parasitic marauders, such as the Huns, have other uses for peasants."[113] In Attila's eyes, the Bacaudae were not potential allies, but a resource to be captured—no different from the subjects of his subjugated German kings: "simply potential suppliers of grain and livestock to feed his men."[114] For Thompson, their goal—to overthrow the landed aristocracy of Gaul—was incompatible with Attila's own status. As Thompson sharply concludes, "Attila had no desire to overthrow landlords as such: he was himself the largest landowner in Europe."[115]

Thompson expands his analysis of the Bacaudae in his 1952 essay "Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain," the first major modern study dedicated to the Bacaudae. Though somewhat dated, Thompson's essay still serves as an excellent and engaging introduction to the Bacaudae. Thompson rightly makes clear early in the essay that there is an ideological barrier inherent to the study of the Bacaudae, as indeed there is in any study of the oppressed classes, especially when they rise up in resistance. Thompson writes, "The exploits, to say nothing of the aims and organization, of the Bagaudae are passed over almost in silence by writers of the time when they were active. All our authorities belonged to a greater or lesser extent to the propertied

[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., p. 208.

classes of the Empire, and therefore to a greater or lesser degree had reason to dread the Bagaudae."[116] Though it is perhaps doubtful that most Roman patricians lived in "dread" of the Bacaudae, as Thompson suggests, there is no denying that the upper-class Romans who were writing about them had reason enough to downplay their importance. As Thompson also points out, there is a long tradition of Roman panegyrists overlooking the less valorous victories of Roman Emperors and their generals, especially when these victories involved the slaying of other Romans. To counteract the erasure of the meddlesome Bacaudae, whether intentional or unconscious, by biased authors, Thompson adopts a maximalist approach to the evidence, reading between the lines to present the Bacaudae as a cohesive social movement centered around overthrow of the Roman state and existing continuously in some form from the second to the fifth century.

For Thompson, the first serious waves of discontent in Gaul and Spain that make up the 'prehistory' of the Bacaudae occur in the wake of Marcus Aurelius' Marcomannic Wars (166–180 C.E.), the Antonine Plague (c. 165–180 C.E.), and the crisis of succession surrounding the assassination of Commodus in 192 C.E. and the resulting Severan civil wars in the early third century. That is to say, they appear just as the Roman imperial apparatus requires more money in tax for its expenditures in the face of political and epidemiological crisis. Thompson writes, "It is likely that the great landowners did what they could to pass the colossal burdens created by these disasters onto the shoulders of the poorer classes."[117] Thompson argues that the army-deserter-turned-rebel Maternus, who raised the flag of revolt in 186 C.E., found support and manpower in the countryside of Gaul, evidenced by the continued difficulty in the suppression of Maternus

[116] Thompson, "Peasant Revolts," p. 305
[117] Ibid., p. 306

and his followers, thus making it a precursor to later revolts explicitly labeled Bacaudic.[118] Maternus' rebellion was cut short when he was betrayed, captured, and beheaded in the course of a failed plot to assassinate the emperor Commodus.

It was within this broader history of rural resistance in Gaul that Thompson situated the revolts of the third century, seeing them as a natural outgrowth of long-standing peasant unrest. In contrast to the accounts of Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, who portray Emperor Maximian as suppressing the Bacaudae with ease, Thompson emphasizes the difficulty Maximian faced in doing so. He draws particular attention to the legend of Saint Maurice as evidence that the suppression of the Bacaudae required reinforcements from the East. According to the legend, Maximian called upon the Theban Legion—an elite unit of Christian soldiers from Egypt—but they refused to carry out orders to massacre peasant insurgents in Gaul. Their leader, Maurice, along with his companions, was subsequently executed for his disobedience, becoming venerated as a Christian martyr. For Thompson, despite the unbelievability of the legend—not least the implausibility of a Christian legion in the third-century—the story nevertheless might retain a kernel of historical truth: that Maximian faced more trouble suppressing the Bacaudae than imperial panegyrists and historians would like to admit.[119]

Though the fourth century is quiet when it comes to direct mentions of the Bacaudae, Thompson takes Ammianus Marcellinus' reference to pervasive banditry in Gaul, and Valentinian I's difficulty in dealing with it, as evidence for the survival of peasant discontent in the region. After a discussion of Bacaudae military strategy, which he sees as being based on

[118] Ibid., pp. 306-9; For more on Maternus and his rebellion, see Hdn. 1.10.
[119] Ibid., p. 311; For the Theban Legion, see David Woods, "The Origin of the Legend of Maurice and the Theban Legion." *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45, no. 3 (1994): 385–395.

'barbarian' raiding tactics, Thompson writes, "A similar strategy seems to have been employed against Valentinian I (364-75) in the early years of his reign, when, according to Ammianus, 'many other battles (i.e. other than those fought against the barbarians) less worthy of description were fought throughout various regions of Gaul, which it is superfluous to narrate both because their outcome resulted in nothing worth speaking of (would he have said that if Valentinian had in fact succeeded in crushing the peasants?) and because it is unbecoming to prolong a History with ignoble details.'"[120] For Thompson, the suppression of the Bacaudae of the third century was not ultimately successful, with a tradition of resistance surviving in the Gallic countryside throughout the 'quiet' fourth-century, ready to burst back onto the stage in the more calamitous fifth century.

Thompson next turns to the uprisings of the fifth century, which exceeded both in scale and in scope the uprisings of previous centuries. Among the most significant of these was the Bacaudic uprising in Armorica, which broke out in 407 C.E. and was not finally suppressed until a decade later by the Roman general Exuperantius, as described by Rutilius Namatianus in his poem *de Reditu Suo.* Yet despite his efforts, revolt flared again in the 430s, this time under the shadowy leadership of Tibatto—whose leadership of the Bacaudae is attested in the *Gallic Chronicle of 451* and whose renewal of revolt cuts short Germanus' mission of intercession on behalf of the Armoricans in *The Life of Saint Germanus*.[121]

Thompson places particular weight on the elusive references to conditions in Armorica found in Rutilius Namatianus' *On Returning Home* and the anonymously authored *Querolus*.

[120] Thompson, "Peasant Revolts," p. 314
[121] Both Thompson and Halsall draw attention to the fact that this rebellion breaks out just as Britain has fallen out of Roman control, with Thompson going so far as to argue that the Armoricans were following their lead. See Thompson*, Saint Germanus of Auxerre,* p. 72; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations,* p. 218-19

The 'rustic laws' which Querolus' *Lar Familiaris* (family spirit) tells us govern life on the Loire taken together with Rutilius Namatianus' claim that the general Exuperantius had "restored the laws and brought back liberty and does not allow the inhabitants to be slaves of their own slaves" is, for Thompson:

> the sole evidence for the social aims of the Bacaudae, and they appear to mean that the Bacaudae had expropriated the landlords, and had made them toil in the fields which they had once owned. The laws and liberty which Exuperantius brought back were the laws and liberty of the former landowning class which he restored for the time being to something like its old position.[122]

These two mysterious references, for Thompson, are further corroborated by an offhand remark by the fifth-century panegyrist Merobaudes, who was a court poet active under the Western Emperor Valentinian III. Merobaudes, who himself led an army to suppress Spanish Bacaudae in 443 C.E., claims that after Aetius' campaigns in Gaul in the late 430s, "'laws' were restored in Armorica, and the tillers of the soil no longer hid their criminal plunder in the woods."[123] Taken together, Thompson uses these remarks as the basis for his argument that the Bacaudae established themselves in Armorica in the revolts of the fifth century and carried out to some degree a program of expropriating their masters' land and even enslaving their former landlords, forcing them to work in the fields.

Speaking of the "almost continuous" nature of the Bacaudae revolts in late antiquity, Thompson ties the Bacaudae revolts directly to the fall of Rome: "It would be strange indeed if this fact were considered to be of slight importance in the study of the fall of the Western

[122] Thompson, "Peasant Revolts," p. 318
[123] Ibid.

Empire: Empires only fall because a sufficient number of people are sufficiently determined to make them fall, whether those people live inside or outside the frontier."[124] However, because the revolts "released no new productive forces,"[125] even if the Bacaudae had managed to win permanent independence, "they would merely have started afresh that process which had caused the ownership of vast areas of land to concentrate into a few hands and which had brought about in Roman society the very state of affairs against which they themselves had revolted in the first place."[126]

Thompson's conclusion strongly echoes Friedrich Engels' analysis in his 1850 book *The Peasant War in Germany*. For Engels, the great German Peasants' War of 1524–1525—in which tens of thousands of rural peasants, artisans, and lower-class townspeople rose up across the fragmented Holy Roman Empire demanding relief from feudal burdens, legal reform, and greater political autonomy—was doomed to fail precisely because the "productive forces" were not sufficiently developed. With Germany still divided into a patchwork of semi-autonomous principalities, lacking both industrialization and centralized state structures, the peasantry was incapable of organizing itself beyond the local level. This completely negated the one advantage the peasants had—their sheer numbers—and allowed the ruling princes to suppress the uprisings in a piecemeal fashion, region by region. For Engels, the Peasants' War served as a historical analogue to the failures of the 1848 revolutions, which were likewise crushed in isolation, as revolutionary activity in the capitals failed to cohere into a broader class movement. The lesson,

[124] Ibid.
[125] In Marxist theory, the "productive forces" refer to the means of production (tools, technology, infrastructure) and human labor power as they interact in the production of material goods. See Chapter 13 "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" in Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1.* Edited and translated by Paul Reitter. Edited by Paul North. Foreword by Wendy Brown. Afterword by William Clare Roberts. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024, pp. 341-459.
[126] Ibid., pp. 318-9.

for Engels, was clear: the revolutionary future depended on a strategic alliance between the remnants of the peasantry and the emergent industrial working class.[127]

Writing from the perspective of 1952, in the immediate postwar years, Thompson's argument about the Bacaudae can also be read as a renewed call for a "united front"—a strategic alliance between different classes or political groups, particularly between the working class and the peasantry, aimed at achieving common revolutionary goals despite differing long-term interests. In the aftermath of the Allied victory over fascism and the rise of the Soviet Union as a global superpower, the shape of global revolution seemed, to many on the Left, to be shifting. The early stirrings of the decolonial movement were beginning to emerge, particularly in regions where large peasant populations remained a political and economic force. In this context, Thompson may have seen in the Bacaudae a historical precedent for the revolutionary potential of the peasantry when aligned with more organized political forces. Just as Engels had called for an alliance between the peasantry and the industrial proletariat in the wake of 1848, Thompson might have hoped that the combined force of the international working class—now led by the Soviet Union—could help shepherd the modernizing peasant societies of the Global South into the socialist future.

Thompson returns to the Bacaudae in his book *Saint Germanus and the End of Roman Britain*, originally published in 1984, further expanding his vision of the role of the Bacaudae in the dissolution of the western Roman empire to include Britain's secession. Thompson bases his

[127] See Chapter 7, "Significance of the Peasant War" in Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, trans. Moissaye J. Olgin (1850), Marxists Internet Archive, last modified 1999, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/peasant-war/index.htm.

argument on Zosimus' description of the barbarian invasions in the wake of Constantine III's usurpation:

> They reduced the inhabitants of Britain and some of the Gallic peoples to such straits that they revolted from the Roman empire, no longer submitted to Roman law, and reverted to their native customs. The Britons, therefore, armed themselves and ran many risks to ensure their own safety and free their cities from the attacking barbarians. The whole of Armorica and other Gallic provinces, in imitation of the Britons, freed themselves in the same way, by expelling the Roman magistrates and establishing the government they wanted.[128]

For Thompson, since Rutilius Namatianus' testimony reveals the 'Bacaudic' character of the Armorican rebellion suppressed by the general Exuperantius in the early fifth century, Zosimus' assertion that the Gallic provinces were imitating the Britons proves that the Bacaudae were active in Britain as well. Though Thompson only mentions Salvian in passing in his 1952 article, he explicitly refers to Salvian in his discussion of the social conditions of these three provinces: "What brought the Bacaudae into existence is no mystery: the main cause of the disaffection of the rural poor was the severity of the taxes and the corrupt methods of the tax-collectors and also the skill of the rich landowners in obliging the rural poor to pay the landowners' taxes as well as their own."[129] For Thompson, this description would have applied just as clearly to the situation in Britain.

In his chapter on Germanus' encounter with the Armorican delegation and his attempt at intercession with the emperor on their behalf, Thompson writes, "It is not at all clear, for

[128] Zos. 6.5.2-3.; Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, pp. 128-9.
[129] Ibid., p. 34

example, why the Armoricans should have renewed their revolt when Germanus was in the very act of negotiating an amnesty with the government at Ravenna."[130] It is certainly possible that Constantius is mistaken about this renewal of revolt altogether. Indeed, Constantius was writing around fifty years after the events happened. Unfortunately, Germanus dies shortly thereafter, failing to fulfill his task.[131] To make matters more complicated, Constantius himself seems to have a rather low opinion of the Bacaudae, referring to them as "fickle and undisciplined" despite his mentor's apparent sympathy, and does not provide any further resolution or explanation as to why the Bacaudae would seek out Germanus in particular.[132] For Thompson, Constantius' silence on the matter is a result of his social position and the audience for which he was writing, who would be more interested in seeing Germanus interact with the imperial court in Ravenna than in the reasons some Armorican peasants had for revolting against imperial rule.[133]

Wickham's 'Other' Transition: Marxism in the 1980s

Published in 1985 in *Past and Present*, "The 'Other' Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism" sought to cut through the knot of the ongoing mode of production debates within Marxist historiography. These debates grappled with the still unresolved tensions of the more

[130] Ibid., p. 75
[131] Much of Thompson's *Saint Germanus of Auxerre* deals with the problem of dating Germanus' episcopal reign, his two missions to Britain, and his death, as the timeline of his exploits are rather implausible. Thompson, noting the incompleteness of any reconstruction, proposes an earlier timeline, with Germanus holding the bishopric from 407 until his death in 437, syncing the year of Germanus' death with the rebellion of Tibatto. Critiquing Thompson's reconstruction, Minor (2004) provides an equally tentative dating of 418-48 for Germanus' episcopacy. There is a more recent scholarly consensus that there was, after all, only one mission, and that the duplication was a literary device. See Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, p. 244.
[132] Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre,* p. 76
[133] Ibid., p. 75

well-known Marxist discussions over the 'transition' from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, at a time when such questions of Marxist doctrine were increasingly losing relevance in historical scholarship.[134] To put the matter succinctly: if Marxist historians still could not agree as to when, where, why, or how feudalism gave way to capitalism, despite a relative abundance of archival material and Marx's own extensive treatment of the subject, then how could we ever expect them to agree about the dynamics of transition between pre-capitalist modes of production, at a time when many of Marx's recently published notes on the subject (the *Grundrisse*[135]) struck many archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians as not just teleological, but flat out wrong?

For the Wickham of the 1980s, no one had even yet managed to really analyze the problem of the "end of the ancient world" in economic terms: "even Marxists, who at least know that they should be looking at the underlying structures and contradictions of society, have usually found their focus slipping as the blurred edges of the vast cultural and political superstructure of the Roman empire swim into their vision."[136] Wickham makes his intent clear: "I will thus concentrate on the economic process of change; what I have to discuss has little direct relationship with, for example, problems of cultural history, which have preoccupied others."[137]

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[134] Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1976); T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[135] For background, see Marx's *Grundrisse*, especially the section often referred to as the *Formen*, where Marx sketches three major "pre-capitalist" modes of production—Asiatic, ancient, and Germanic—all defined by the extraction of surplus from peasant cultivators through extra-economic coercion. Though abstract and schematic, this typology became central to the mode-of-production debates that influenced Wickham's efforts to theorize the late Roman economy. Eric Hobsbawm's introduction to Jack Cohen's translation remains particularly insightful, especially as to the tendency within Marxism to radically expand the category of 'feudalism' to non-European societies, a tendency which Wickham himself ends up adopting in his later work. Marx, Karl; *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. Edited and introduced by Eric J. Hobsbawm. Translated by Jack Cohen. New York: International Publishers, 1965.

[136] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 3

[137] Wickham, "The 'Other 'Transition," p. 3

But Wickham does not issue a call for a return to a particular Marxist orthodoxy, nor does he offer to produce yet another new explanation for the fall of Rome. Rather, he proposes a "realignment in the placing of a number of reasonably well-known phenomena."[138] Wickham's key example, and the centerpiece of this realignment, is the case of the Bacaudae and Salvian of Marseilles, whose description of rural patronage and the Bacaudae bear sole witness to the structural transformation of the late Roman economy in the west. But in order to understand the significance of Wickham's argument, as well as its relation to Wickham's later historical work, to be discussed at the end of this chapter, it is necessary to grasp the theoretical context in which he was writing.

In this section, I will argue that what Wickham means by 'realignment'—a term that anticipates his later use of the metaphor of 'framing'—is an effort to preserve the anti-teleological core of what he later called the "abstract clarity of Althusserian thought," while combining it with a key insight drawn from the British Marxist tradition: that agency belongs to real human beings acting within real social, economic, political, and cultural contexts.[139] Althusser's structuralist Marxism, which gained traction in the 1960s and 70s, sought to move away from humanist interpretations of Marx, instead emphasizing the impersonal structures—economic, ideological, and political—that shape historical development, often at the expense of individual or class-based agency. Wickham's embrace of empirical history, then, may have been a difficult pill to swallow for more doctrinaire Althusserians to accept. Yet the political thrust of his historical argument carries a distinctly Maoist tone—one that may have appealed to those attempting to move beyond structuralism without abandoning either its analytical clarity or its

[138] Wickham, "The 'Other 'Transition," p. 4
[139] Wickham, "The Problems of Comparison," p. 225.

political leanings.[140] For Wickham, the socialist peasant revolutions of the twentieth century serve as proof that capitalism is not the only path out of pre-capitalist society.

In the wake of the publication of the *Grundrisse,* and with more and more professional Marxist historians focusing on periods outside northwestern Europe, the *Grundrisse* became a central text of the mode of production debates that filled the pages of journals like *Past & Present, The Journal of Peasant Studies,* and *The New Left Review*. The most useful of these, for Wickham, is Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst's[141] *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, particularly their distinction between the 'slave mode' and the 'ancient mode in its class form,' in which a dominant class of citizens uses the political power of the polis to dominate the surrounding countryside.[142] They also offer an expanded definition of feudalism based solely on the 'form of

[140] For the Althusserian turn to Maoism in the post-War years in France, see ch. 1, "The Advent of Western Marxism," in Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Fredric Jameson's extension of Anderson's argument in *The Political Unconscious*, as well as chapters 12 and 13 on Althusser in Jameson's *The Years of Theory*.

[141] It is important to note just how controversial Wickham's use of Hindess & Hirst would have been in 1985. Wickham has since remarked that he was something of a 'late-comer' to the kind of structural analysis that swept through a variety of academic disciplines in the 60s and 70s and that he was likewise late to move beyond it, too.[141] *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production,* acting as a prime example of Althusser's influence in English historiography, was a particular target of scorn in E.P. Thompson's scathing critique of structuralism, *The Poverty of Theory.* Thompson accused Althusser of a particularly insidious form of historical determinism.[141] For Thompson, the Althusserian 'theoretical anti-humanist' definition of history as a 'process without a subject or a *telos*'—intended to excise the residual 'humanist' idealism Marx had inherited from Hegel, which according to Althusser, Marx was never able to *fully* shed after his first discovery of the 'science' of historical materialism, reading and rereading the classics of political economy while holed up in the British Museum until he stumbled on the 'absent cause' of surplus-value—in fact ends up writing out the possibility of historical change altogether.[141] For Thompson, Althusser was not a determinist because he saw history as moving ever forward to some pre-ordained end, like some 19th century idealist, but because, in explaining the inexorable logic by which the various ideological structures of capital reproduce themselves without recourse to individual human agency, it was not at all clear how there could be anything but the endless reproduction of capitalism and its bourgeois ideological state apparatuses in our future. On Wickham's debt to structuralism, see Wickham, "The Problems of Comparison," p. 225; in general, Althusser, "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy," part 1 of *Reading Capital;* Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, especially pp. 19-34;

[142] Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. pp. 82-91.

exploitation'—that is, peasant cultivators paying rent to lords with swords—stripped of the 'superstructural' elements of political organization such as vassalage or the seignorie.[143]

It is precisely the inclusion of these 'superstructural' elements within Perry Anderson's definition of the 'mode of production' in his *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist State* that Wickham is responding to in this essay.[144] For Wickham, that allows Anderson to "discuss the collapse of the state in the west without keying it in more than nominally with the underlying economic changes of the third to sixth centuries," a problem Wickham seeks to avoid by adopting a more rigorously economic starting point.[145] For Wickham, modal change must be registered at the economic level and can only be accessed 'empirically' once the 'mode of production', which Wickham defines as an 'ideal construct', has been adequately defined 'theoretically'.[146]

For Wickham, the standard interpretation of the 'end of antiquity' is classically demonstrated by Marc Bloch, in his posthumously published "How and Why Ancient Slavery Came to an End," originally published in 1947.[147] For Bloch, by the time of the great wars of the fifth and sixth centuries, the massive slave *latifundia* (plantations) of the earlier empire had

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[143] Ibid., pp. 221-35.
[144] See for example Anderson's famous inclusion of the "parcellization of sovereignty" in his definition of feudalism in Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: New Left Books, 1974), pp. 147-8; For Anderson, pre-capitalist modes of production, characterized by 'extra-economic coercion', must be differentiated by the particular 'superstructural' form such coercion takes. To do otherwise would mean combining all of pre-capitalist history under the rubric of one 'extra-economic' mode of production, which he views as a great danger. Anderson discusses this extensively in his two postscripts to *Lineages of the Absolutist State,* "Japanese Feudalism" and "The 'Asiatic Mode of Production.'" See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 435-549.
[145] See "The 'Other' Transition," p. 3 for the comment on Anderson, p. 6 for his discussion of Hindess & Hirst.
[146] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 7.
[147] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 4-5; Bloch, Marc. "How and Why Ancient Slavery Came to an End." In *Critical Readings on Global Slavery*, edited by Paul E. Lovejoy. Leiden: Brill, 2017; For more recent studies on the problem of the *coloni*, see J.M. Carrié, "Le colonat du Bas-empire': Un mythe historiographique?" Opus 1 (1982): 351–70; Cam Grey, "Contextualizing Colonatus: The *Origo* of the Late Roman Empire," Journal of Roman Studies 97 (2007): 155–75.

broken down and the influx of new slaves were instead implanted on tenant plots. At the same time, the position of the free peasantry had declined over the years, forced to hand over their land to their richer landowner-cum-landlord neighbors in exchange for protection from the increasingly over-bearing taxes of the late Roman state necessary to fund ongoing war—a process Salvian has long been mined to demonstrate.[148] Over time, these two groups—the *coloni adscriptici* (literally 'colonists written onto the land', i.e. peasants bound to a particular estate by the letter of the law) and the *servi* (slaves)—fused into one social class—the 'serfs' that made up the vast underclass of the feudal Middle Ages.

Broadly speaking, for Wickham, Bloch's classic formulation is quite correct insofar as it describes how slavery transforms into serfdom, but the exact timing of the process poses considerable problems in light of the recent flood of research into late antiquity in the 1970s, in response to the pathbreaking work of Peter Brown, whose series of lectures, "The Transformation of the Roman World," Wickham attended during his time as a student in Oxford in the early 1970s as a postgraduate.[149] Put succinctly, the question Wickham was attempting to answer in this early essay was this: if, as recent archaeological work in Italy had seemed to prove, the *latifundia*-based agriculture of the early empire had all but disappeared by sometime in the third-century, then what are we to make of the late-Roman state?

Brown, and the many scholars whom he influenced, had demonstrated that the late Roman state was anything but a hollow shell of its former self. Far from merely stumbling on, drained of its former vitality by the twin 'infections' of decadence and Christianity—as Edward Gibbon and generations of decline theorists would have it—the late antique Roman state appeared in many

[148] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, pp. 433-5.
[149] For Wickham's attendance at Brown's lecture series, see *Journeys of the Mind*, p. 339.

respects to have been surprisingly robust. It maintained a sophisticated tax system, upheld complex legal and administrative structures, and continued to exert influence over vast territories through an increasingly Christianized imperial ideology. In this revised view, late antiquity was not a long twilight of decay, but a period of transformation and adaptation—one in which the disappearance of the latifundia did not necessarily signal systemic collapse, but rather a reorganization of agrarian production and the role of the state in managing surplus.

This tension between the apparent dissolution of Rome's traditional economic base and the persistence of an ideologically and institutionally powerful state is the core problem at the heart of Wickham's inquiry into the mode of production that defined the late empire.[150] The starting point for Wickham's empirical analysis of the late Roman economy is the 'Diocletianic State'. Wickham argues that by the time the Diocletianic state was established in the late third century, the slave mode of production had already ceased to be dominant. As a result, the state did not emerge as a continuation of a slave-based economy, but rather as a new political form suited to extracting surplus primarily through taxation, using the administrative apparatus of the city. The composition of this state—and its mechanisms of surplus appropriation—must therefore be understood in relation to the peasant-based economy that had already taken hold, not as a vestigial structure of a slave society. For Wickham, the structure of the late Roman state resembled what Hindess & Hirst called the 'ancient' mode of production, drawing on Marx's discussion of pre-capitalist economic formations in the *Grundrisse*. It was the *curiales* who were responsible for collecting tax—members of city-councils, often drawn from the local elite.

[150] See Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, published in 1971.

For Wickham, the issue at hand, at least for determining the dominant mode of production, is not so much the "absolute weight of taxation," but its "relative weight" compared to other forms of surplus extraction.[151] On this basis, Wickham refers to A.H.M. Jones' estimates for the *annona* (land tax) to rent ratio, which demonstrate the dominance of tax.[152] However, this 'quantitative' proof for the relative dominance of taxation is not, on its own, sufficient; it must be supplemented with a 'qualitative' analysis that considers the underlying social and institutional dynamics. For Wickham, working within a broadly structuralist framework, the key to understanding any given 'social formation'—in which elements of different modes of production coexist—lies in uncovering how the economic 'relations of production' specific to different modes of production are articulated within that society and, most importantly, which mode 'dominates' the others.

On the topic of Althusser's influence on Marxist historiography, Wickham has since remarked, in his Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture, which he received in 2006 for *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, "Almost the only lasting legacy of the Althusserian moment in Marxist history-writing has been the recognition that modes of production can easily coexist, but that only one of them will dominate the economic logic of the socio-economic system (the 'social formation') as a whole"[153] Here, again citing Jones, as well as recent work on taxation by Keith Hopkins and Walter Goffart, Wickham argues that the process of tax collection by the state was institutionally distinct from the process of rent-taking—that is, even when a cultivator was a

[151] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 14
[152] See Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, pp. 796-803
[153] Wickham, "Productive Forces," p. 7.

tenant, they paid tax directly to the state, rather than mediated through their landlord.[154] For the Wickham of 1985, it is only when this changes, when tenants come to pay taxes through their landlords rather than directly to the state—the so-called 'plight of the curiales' evocatively described by Salvian—that the transition from a society dominated by the 'ancient' mode of production to one dominated by the feudal mode can be said to be complete.[155]

The central contradiction of the 'ancient' mode, for Wickham, lies in its unstable relationship to landed property: the very elites who extract surplus through the mechanisms of the state tend to convert this power into private landownership, thereby eroding the civic foundations of the system itself. In this picture, the state concentrated immense wealth in the hands of its functionaries; but as in all pre-capitalist societies—where surplus-value derives ultimately from agricultural production—there was little to do with such wealth except to invest it in land, thereby transforming civic elites into a rural landowning aristocracy.[156] It must be emphasized here that for Wickham this does not mean that the newly landed aristocracy necessarily stopped being a civic aristocracy as well, occupying both structural positions simultaneously.[157] The *curiales* in charge of tax-collection, after all, had long been drawn from local landed aristocracies. Modes of production not only coexist within the social formation as a whole, but individual aristocrats can serve as both feudal, landed aristocrats, as well as civic, state-based aristocrats, in various proportions. For Wickham, this 'antagonistic' relationship

[154] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 14. See also, Hopkins, "Elite Mobility in the Roman Empire," and Goffart, *Caput and Colonate,* p. 67.
[155] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," pp. 15.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.

between landed and civic power, with the scales tipped in the balance of feudal power is, ultimately, the historical motor of the 'ancient' mode of production. Thus, for Wickham:

> The structures of the feudal mode were, in other words, more solid than the rival structures of the ancient mode, for those with the chance to choose between them. What happened in the fifth century, to be schematic, was that the barbarian invasions gave the western aristocracy for the first time this political choice, between the two poles of the contradictions: on the one hand, the Roman state and its patronage, which was becoming more and more expensive as more armies were thrown against the barbarian threat, and less worthwhile as the armies lost ground; on the other hand, the possibility of going it alone on the basis of property-owning in the context of the newly forming Germanic successor-states. They chose the latter.[158]

Aristocrats choosing feudalism over the state, however, is not the whole story. Thus far, Wickham has only succeeded in bringing an aristocratic 'subject' back into this structuralist history. For Wickham, the aristocrats were not the only 'protagonists' in this process.[159] In fact, "their interests would have been only marginal but for the intervention of the peasantry."[160]

Here, at last, Wickham comes to the Bacaudae, providing an overview drawn from E.A. Thompson's "Peasant Revolts" essay, referring to a "conscious conspiracy of silence" regarding the Bacaudae.[161] Wickham's remarks are consonant with Thompson's: "The exploits, to say nothing of the aims and organization, of the Bagaudae are passed over almost in silence by

[158] Ibid.
[159] Kelvin Knight suggests that Wickham uses 'protagonism' and 'autonomy' in place of 'agency.' See Knight, "Agency and Ethics," pp. 154-5.
[160] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 16.
[161] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p.16, footnote 18.

writers of the time when they were active. All our authorities belonged to a greater or lesser extent to the propertied classes of the Empire, and therefore to a greater or lesser degree had reason to dread the Bagaudae."[162] Following Thompson, the Bacaudae revolts "occurred at the weak points of state control" and in areas "where an independent peasantry (perhaps with some surviving collective organization) was probably relatively strong."[163]

Of Salvian, Wickham writes:

> Salvian rails, in striking rhetoric, against the inequalities of taxation. The poor have to face more supplementary taxes than the rich, and are the last to benefit from rebates and the cancellation of arrears. Taxation forces men, even the educated, to flee to the barbarians and the *Bacaudae*. And, still more, it forces the poor to give their property to the rich in exchange for *patrocinium*, protection against tax-paying, and receive it back as tenants; worse yet, they then find they are still liable for the taxes. This text is not the less clear for being rhetorical: independent peasants are prepared to become tenants rather than pay taxes. They do so, presumably, on the assumption that their patrons/landlords are going to be powerful enough, whether inside the state or outside it, to evade these taxes. When this is not true, the peasants' hopes are greatly deceived, for they end up paying tax as well rent, but this last twist is less important than the major point: that rent-paying is to many peasants preferable to tax-paying. . . Benefits from the state had never justified the weight of taxes in the eyes of peasants, and nor did they any longer for landlords. Tax evasion spread; the imperial machine began to be starved of funds. Large-

[162] Thompson, "Peasant Revolts in Late Roman Gaul and Spain," p. 305.
[163] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 16-17

> scale landed property increased too, partly indeed through the extension of patronage, thus increasing the possibilities of tax evasion. A vicious circle ensued, a fatal involution of the state.[164]

Ultimately, for Wickham, what Salvian reveals to us as taking place in the Gallic countryside is a "crisis of *hegemony*," brought about initially by the "external, almost contingent force" of the 'barbarian' invasions, but "from which much of the rest stemmed."[165]

Here, Wickham is drawing on the work of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci.[166] Wickham, in *Framing the Early Middle Ages,* defines hegemony as "not simply the dominance of a social class, but the acceptance of that dominance by the dominated, the internalization of the value-system of the ruling class, including those parts of the system which allow rulers to punish the dominated for not obeying the rules."[167] What Salvian and many others so vividly recount in the early 5th century is the belief "that the duration of the Roman empire might be finite."[168] In other words, for Wickham, the crisis in hegemony, itself the result of the 'contingent' or 'external' factor of the 'barbarian' invasions, provides for both the aristocracy and the peasantry the opportunity to *choose* between two rival economic logics. In the west, at least, and for different reasons, they both chose feudalism. Because of this, Wickham suggests that dating the 'transition' to feudalism to the time of Salvian's writings is as good a time as any.[169] Developments in the east, however, are proof that "contradictions do not necessarily get

[164] Wickham, "The 'Other Transition," pp. 17-18
[165] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 18.
[166] For the particular influence of Gramsci on Althusser, see Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, no. 100 (November–December 1976), pp. 32-37.
[167] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages,* p. 440.
[168] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 18.
[169] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 24.

pushed to the point where something breaks."[170] In the Eastern empire, without the right combination of contingency and choice, the 'ancient' mode continues on.

It might be argued at this point that Wickham's approach is really not all that different from Anderson's. They both, after all, are distinguishing between different modes on the basis of 'extra-economic' power, and they do so by analyzing the form of the state. But, in contrast to Anderson, for whom precapitalist modes, being characterized by 'extra-economic' coercion, are to be distinguished along 'extra-economic' lines (the 'super-structural' form of the state), Wickham sees the state merely as a starting point, a clue that points in the direction of what really matters—the relationship between peasant cultivators and their competing expropriators. Wickham writes, "it should be very apparent from this analysis: I do not consider the feudal mode, or even the feudal social formation, to be a "synthesis" between Roman and German, as Anderson and others would say, and indeed as both Marx and Engels said more than once."[171]

Instead of a *synthesis* between modes, Wickham's early picture of pre-capitalist social relations posits a single peasant productive class whose surplus two *antagonistic* classes, landed feudal lords and an 'ancient' state-administrative class, compete to expropriate. This triangulated struggle is, for early Wickham, quite simply the motor of historical change in pre-capitalist society. At moments of crisis, the peasantry has the potential to determine the outcome of this struggle, as the Bacaudae did in the fifth century, though the scope of this intervention ultimately amounts to a choice between masters. As I will discuss in the concluding section of this essay, Wickham abandons this modal distinction between rent-based feudalism and the tax-based

[170] Ibid.
[171] Wickham, "The 'Other' Transition," p. 25

'ancient' mode by the time of the publication of *Framing the Middle Ages* in 2005, though his interpretation of Salvian and the Bacaudae remains much the same.

Raymond Van Dam's Reformist Reading

In *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul,* published in 1985 around the same time as Wickham's essay, Raymond Van Dam presents a 'reformist' approach to the Bacaudae, in direct opposition to Thompson's 'revolutionary' approach. For Van Dam, in Thompson's model "the Bagaudae were peasants and slaves who imitated the barbarian strategy of small skirmishes in their attacks on large estates and even on cities, and whose aim was to set up an independent state separate from the Roman Empire in which former landlords would be reduced to slavery."[172] A major limitation of this approach, for Van Dam, is that it assumes a ""conflict model" emphasizing assimilation or (more often) resistance, and that there was an implicit animosity between peasants and lords."[173]

For Van Dam, also influenced by the recent birth of the field of 'late antiquity' inaugurated by Peter Brown, the deeper problem with Thompson's approach for Van Dam is that it is wedded to an orthodox Marxist historiographic narrative that emphasizes the discontinuity between the slave-mode of antiquity and the feudalism of the Middle Ages. For Van Dam, Thompson makes the Bacaudae "explain too much"–nothing short of the fall of Rome and a change in mode of production.[174] Instead, Van Dam proposes another perspective that highlights "the continuities that link Roman society with medieval society." [175] Like Wickham, Van Dam

[172] Van Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul,* p. 25
[173] Ibid., p. 26
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., p. 25

draws on Marc Bloch's famous observation that "medieval lords had as predecessors the masters of Gallo-Roman villas and even the village chieftains of ancient Gaul."[176] While not writing from a Marxist perspective himself, Van Dam nonetheless presents his approach as compatible with a Marxism that "emphasizes intrinsic contradictions in late Roman society" and is sufficiently flexible to accommodate "modifications in the composition and ideology of the dominant elites" arising from factors beyond class struggle alone.[177] This language is largely in line with the structuralism of Wickham, though Van Dam's approach will move the needle considerably further in minimizing the importance of the Bacaudae. Whereas Wickham's model, following Gramsci and Althusser, stressed the importance of *both* conflict and consent in the construction of Roman authority, Van Dam's model abandons the role of conflict altogether. Van Dam neatly summarizes his approach: "In this sense the Bagaudae represented not a revolutionary but rather a reformist social movement, since their aim can also be seen as the imposition of greater, not lesser, ties of social dependence, and as a return to traditional ties of dependence that, however oppressive they may seem to us, still guaranteed security and assistance."[178]

Van Dam takes the references to Amandus and Aelianus in a Greek translation of Eutropius as "native usurpers," along with some coins (now known to be forgeries), which depict Amandus as *Augustus,* to imply that the two were local leaders in the style of the recent Gallic emperors.[179] In Van Dam's interpretation, "the Bagaudae become men rallying around local leaders out of a need for security" in the absence of a legitimate emperor, perhaps from

[176] Ibid., p. 26
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid., p. 27
[179] With a close reexamination of the numismatic evidence, Minor shows that all coins attributed to Aelianus are now considered later forgeries. See Minor (1997), p. 171-2

'barbarian' or pirate raids.[180] Indeed, Van Dam emphasizes, when Carausius, a Gallic native himself, was left in charge of clearing out the pirates from the Saxon coast by Maximian, his success in the matter resulted in him being proclaimed emperor, showing that provision of security leads to authority in Gallic society.[181] The relative quiet of the fourth century, then, is mostly explained by the migration of the imperial court to Trier. For Van Dam, it is only when a legitimate imperial presence is distant or absent that local leaders rise up to fill the void. It follows that the Bacaudae reemerge in the early fifth century, when the situation on the frontier grows more unstable and the imperial court retreats from Trier. Van Dam writes, "these revolts of Bagaudae again indicate discontent, although not with the basic structure of Gallic society, which allowed local elites (among them the emperor, when he was there) to function as patrons and lords, but rather with the inability of the imperial administration to provide protection and security."[182]

As for the social program of the Bagaudae, Van Dam is skeptical of any desire on the part of peasants to overthrow and enslave their overlords. Citing Moses Finley, Van Dam argues that the only precedent for a utopian vision of social reversal was "the celebration of the Saturnalia, at which, because it was a festive ritual, the traditional roles were in fact being reinforced."[183] As discussed in chapter one in relation to Roman comedy, Van Dam is here following in the tradition of seeing carnivalesque rituals of reversal as primarily a 'safety valve' for the discontent of the oppressed—temporary opportunities to let off steam that ultimately reduce the likelihood of pressure building up to the point required for a more permanent reversal. For Van Dam the

[180] Van Dam, *Leadership and Community,* p. 31
[181] Ibid., p. 32
[182] Ibid., p. 37
[183] Ibid., p. 41

Bacaudae "probably had no vision of striving toward a totally different social order. . . Rather, than eliminating local leaders, whether landlords or emperors, they wanted them simply to function better."[184]

Salvian's discussion of the Bacaudae features prominently in Van Dam's argument. For Van Dam, Salvian focuses on what he sees as the perverse fact that those fleeing to the Bacaudae or the barbarians are doing so precisely because they want to remain free Romans. For Salvian, the blame for this sorry state of affairs lies firmly on the shoulders of the large landowners, who have misused their local authority and turned their patrons essentially into slaves. While Van Dam thinks Salvian is likely exaggerating, his basic narrative takes it for granted that local Gauls were fleeing to local aristocrats in a time of great social disturbance. Reading past the apocalyptic bias of Salvian's writing, Van Dam takes the Bacaudae, and the 'barbarians' too for that matter, to be merely alternative options of the same basic type–men of authority that local peasants look to for security. Likewise, Van Dam interprets the passage from *Querolus* as a kind of prejudiced confirmation of the basic structure of Gallic society, one which is still clearly governed by laws, even if they are of a 'woodland' sort.[185]

The Bacaudae's appearance in the *Life of Saint Germanus* serves to illustrate how his *longue durée* model of the continuity of structures of local authority in Gaul is still flexible enough to account for historical change in the shorter term. For Van Dam, Germanus represents an early example of the changing role of bishops in fifth-century Gallic society. Essentially, Germanus leverages his position as bishop of Auxerre to compete with more traditional forms of authority based in landownership. The citizens of Auxerre seek protection from taxes from both

[184] Ibid., p. 43
[185] Ibid., p. 47

Germanus and from the Bacaudic leader Tibatto, who in Van Dam's account is yet another local man of authority. For Van Dam, when Tibatto rose up in revolt he and his followers were branded Bacaudae, thus necessitating Germanus' intercession on their behalf.[186] Ultimately, Germanus was able to use his ecclesiastical status as an alternative source of local social power, foreshadowing the rise of powerful bishops in early medieval France.

Van Dam concludes his discussion of the Bacaudae with a lucid analysis of how the changing attitude towards the Bacaudae in the Christian sources lays the groundwork for the later tradition of the heroic Christian 'bandit'. In his treatment of banditry, Van Dam relies on Hobsbawm's theory of 'social banditry', discussed in chapter one, though Van Dam's bandits are of a quintessentially 'reformist' type.[187] While the traditional Roman attitude towards the Bacaudae essentially equated them with bandits and barbarians, Salvian added a dash of heroism to the picture—the Bacaudae were persecuted Romans forced into a life of brigandage by the avarice of the rich. In the mid-fifth century, Eucherius of Lyon—like Salvian, an admirer of the ascetic community at Lérins—wrote a letter to Salvian in which he sketched out the beginnings of the legend of Saint Maurice. As we saw in Thompson's model, Maximian's need to summon foreign troops was cited as evidence for the difficulty the Roman army had in suppressing the Bacaudae.

For Van Dam, although Eucherius does not connect these Christians explicitly with the Bacaudae, it was already part of the historical tradition that Maximian had been sent to Gaul to

[186] Ibid., p. 46

[187] Though Van Dam does not cite Brent Shaw's "Bandits in the Roman Empire," published in the previous year, his account of banditry closely resembles that of Shaw, discussed in chapter one. Van Dam does cite the influence of Shaw as a friend and colleague in the preface to the book, however, so it is plausible he at least knew of Shaw's ideas.

pacify the countryside. Perhaps more importantly, Maximian and his fellow tetrarchs had already long functioned as arch-villains in hagiographic literature, due to their execution of the Great Persecution in 303 C.E. "Whatever the Bacaudae may have been in the later third century," Van Dam writes, "Christians of the fifth century remembered only the tradition of dissent and resistance to an unfair and persecuting emperor."[188] Van Dam observes, "although the contrast between bishops and oppressive landowners must not be drawn too sharply, the emergence of bishops as local leaders in the fifth century seems to coincide with sympathy for the Bagaudae."[189] Van Dam ends his chapter on the Bacaudae by pointing forward to a medieval tradition of seeing the Bacaudae as persecuted Christians, which could form the prehistory of later medieval Christian bandits.[190]

The Conservative Turn in Bacaudic Studies

In his 1984 article, "Peasants and Bagaudae in Roman Gaul," John Drinkwater criticizes what he sees as the central problem of Thompson's approach to the Bacaudae, which he sees as lumping all peasants together into "an undifferentiated mass of rural poor."[191] Drinkwater cites the influential Marxist anthropologist Eric Wolf's definition of peasants:

> Peasants. . . are rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surplus to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the

[188] Ibid., p. 54
[189] Ibid., p. 55
[190] See *Passio SS. Mauritii et Thebaeorum* 1-2 (*Acta Sanctorum Sept. VI*, p. 345),; and *Vita S. Baboleni,* in M. Bouquet, ed., *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France III* (Paris, 1869), pp. 568-9.
[191] John F. Drinkwater, "Peasants and Bagaudae in Roman Gaul," *Échos du monde classique: Classical Views* 28, no. 3 (1984), p. 354.

> remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn.[192]

Drinkwater emphasizes that "although we may legitimately include all peasants within the same overall definition, we must never presume that each will be of exactly the same economic and social condition."[193] Following Wolf, Drinkwater argues that richer peasants might have very different motivations than their poorest compatriots.

For Drinkwater, the socioeconomic conditions of Gaul in the third century varied dramatically from those of the fifth century, so any attempt to apply the same explanation–the overexploitation of a homogenous mass of overly oppressed peasants, in Thompson's case–ends up lumping together as one 'Bacaudic' phenomenon what is essentially two distinct series of rebellions. For Drinkwater, the problem lies in historians' backwards-projection of the horrors of tenancy (associated with the *coloni* and the Middle Ages*,* a la Marc Bloch) into the third-century, before the tax-reforms of Diocletian, which ultimately made the *coloni* possible.[194] While Drinkwater concedes that 'over-exploitation' may have been a driving factor in the fifth-century rebellions, he argues that in the third century, it was the traditionally somewhat well-off "middle range of peasantry" in Gaul which revolted. Drinkwater argues that this relatively prosperous middle-range of the peasantry, coming into existence from the downstream benefits of the *Pax Romana* of the early imperial period, would have been eager to take up their posts as local magistrates in the civic administration of the cities. There was only one problem, however: there

[192] Eric Wolf, *Peasants*, Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 3-4; see also Eric Wolf, "On Peasant Rebellions." *International Social Science Journal* 21, no. 2 (1969): 286–293.
[193] Drinkwater, "Peasants and Bacaudae in Roman Gaul," p. 353
[194] Ibid., pp. 358-9.

were very few cities in Gaul, as compared to the provinces of North Africa, where we can indeed see an explosion of upwardly mobile peasants entering civic administration in the second and third centuries.[195] By the later third century, these relatively prosperous but disgruntled peasants revolted, in response to a "crisis in authority" opened up by the depletion of the traditional Gallic aristocracy in civil war.[196] Put simply, for Drinkwater, the middle peasants finally had their chance to take the place of their richer superiors.

Drinkwater returns to the problem of the Bacaudae in his 1989 essay "Patronage in Roman Gaul and the Problem of the Bagaudae," where he seeks to reassess the relationship between peasant uprisings and the institution of patronage in the Gallic provinces. He begins by noting that the existence of patronage in Gaul stretches at least as far back as Julius Caesar's account in the *De Bello Gallico*.[197] However, Caesar also provides a darker image that closely resembles Salvian's later account, in which poorer Gallic men, seeking the protection of wealthy compatriots, effectively become their slaves.[198] While it is evident that patronage was a longstanding aspect of Gallic society, the question for Drinkwater is not whether it existed, but whether it was *continuous*. He directs his critique primarily at Van Dam, who Drinkwater sees as seeing the roots of medieval feudalism as existing more or less fully-formed underneath the surface of Roman imperial domination. As we just saw, Van Dam emphasizes what he calls "the structural continuity of Gallic society," defined by "small tyrannies" and entrenched systems of personal dependence.[199] For Drinkwater, however, Van Dam's approach "is no greater than that

[195] Ibid., pp. 360-5.
[196] Ibid., p. 365
[197] Caes. B.G. 6.11.4
[198] Caes. B.G. 6.13.1-3
[199] Van Dam, *Leadership and Authority,* p. 14.

of its predecessor," as it fails to account for the profound disruptions that periodically fractured Gallic aristocratic leadership (198).[200]

The heart of Drinkwater's critique lies in what he sees as Van Dam's inability "to identify any Bagaudic leader as a usurping Gallic aristocrat or, conversely, any usurping Gallic aristocrat as a Bagaudic leader."[201] More fundamentally, Drinkwater challenges the assumption that the Gallic aristocracy maintained a continuous, stable identity. To argue for the continuity of patronage, he writes, Van Dam "must ignore the severe disruption suffered by this society on at least four and possibly five occasions over the four hundred years of Roman rule."[202] These disruptions, for Drinkwater, make it unlikely that the same aristocratic families could have consistently provided local leadership, since "old families disappeared, and were replaced by new."[203] The relationship between the Bagaudae and the structures of Gallic patronage, then, must be understood in terms of rupture rather than continuity. Periods of unrest, he argues, "resulted not from the success but from the failure of the established system of patronage," especially in the wake of barbarian invasions or civil wars.[204] When imperial authority was reasserted—often alongside the reimposition of taxation or the punitive degradation of local populations—unrest could flare again. In the end, Drinkwater rejects any overarching or unified theory of the Bacaudae. The name itself, he suggests, had likely "lost its exact meaning" by the fifth century and had simply come to denote "outlaws" or "bandits," a pejorative term recycled to

[200] John F. Drinkwater, "Patronage in Roman Gaul and the Problem of the Bagaudae," in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 198.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid., p. 199.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid., p. 200

describe a range of uprisings that shared little more than a general climate of rural disorder and the absence of traditional leadership.[205]

In his short 1992 article "The Bacaudae of fifth-century Gaul," Drinkwater turns to the fifth-century Bacaudae. He argues that the fifth-century sources can be put into two categories:

> (i) those that mention the Bacaudae specifically by name, and show them causing trouble in many areas of Gaul and Spain from 408 to c. 448 (Zosimus, the *Chron. Gall. 452,* Hydatius, Salvian); and (ii) those that scholars consider as referring indirectly to Bacaudic activity, and which seem to indicate particular unrest in the region of Aremorica, in the period c. 410–c. 449 (Zosimus, Rutilius Namatianus, the *Querolus*, Sidonius Apollinaris, Constantius' *Vita Germani*, Merobaudes).[206]

As we have seen, both Thompson and Van Dam relied heavily on sources that do not refer to the Bacaudae by name. For Drinkwater, Rutilius Namatianus' elusive comments and the equally elusive *Querolus* are simply too vague for the historian to firmly connect with the Bacaudae. In the case of the *Querolus*, Drinkwater suggests that the author may be referring to what he sees as strange monastic practices in Gaul, rather than a breakaway peasant state.[207] Drinkwater argues, contra Thompson, that the indirect sources must be ruled out as inadmissible for the study of the Bacaudae.

With the Querolus and *De Reditu Suo* dismissed as viable source material for understanding the Bacaudae of the fifth century, Drinkwater turns instead to Salvian as the most promising witness to the social conditions of the time. His stated aim is to propose "various

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[205] Ibid., p. 201
[206] John F. Drinkwater, "The Bacaudae of Fifth-Century Gaul," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 30, no. 4 (1981), p. 209
[207] Ibid., p. 209

models of economic development and social behaviour," testing each against the evidence, "in particular Salvian, who, for all his faults, relates much of significance concerning the conditions of his day."[208] Drinkwater begins with the "vital statistics of early fifth-century Gaul," which he characterizes as bleak. If the sources are to be believed, the region had been ravaged by barbarian invasion, civil war, and epidemic disease. Drawing on the work of Le Roy Ladurie, whose analysis of demographic recovery and rural labor dynamics in post-Black Death Languedoc provides a model for understanding pre-industrial economies, Drinkwater hypothesizes that the generation of Gallic peasants born around 410 would have suffered the worst effects of invasion, war, and famine.[209] Yet those who survived, he argues, might have stood to benefit from a reduced labor force. Drinkwater writes, "Under normal circumstances," Drinkwater writes, such peasants could anticipate "more freely available land, at lower prices and lower and longer rents… and a generally more mobile employment market."[210]

But the fifth century was anything but normal. Faced with the collapse of imperial administration and widespread economic contraction, Gallic landowners may have sought to consolidate control, both by tightening their hold over tied tenants and by manipulating their position within the tax system to pressure freeholders into dependency. This would, in effect, constitute "a protection racket, *latrocinium*," Drinkwater notes, "which is a major theme in the *De Gubernatione Dei.*"[211] However, as Drinkwater points out, Salvian does not identify the Bacaudae with the lowest strata of the rural population. On the contrary, he insists they included

[208] Ibid., p. 211
[209] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The French Peasantry, 1450–1660*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), ch. 1.
[210] Drinkwater, "The Bacaudae of Fifth-Century Gaul," p. 211.
[211] Ibid., p. 212.

"the better born and well educated."[212] This leads Drinkwater to offer a second hypothesis: that the Bacaudae were not impoverished peasants, but rather displaced members of the Gallic gentry. He highlights a largely overlooked development in fifth-century Gaul—the migration of well-off refugees from the war-torn north to the more stable south. These migrants, like Salvian himself, would have sought to acquire land or expand existing holdings, fueling increased competition for property even amid depopulation. This pressure may have resulted in the expropriation of both freeholders and vulnerable members of the curial class—Salvian's "widows" and "orphans."[213] In this context, their only options, according to Salvian, were flight to the barbarians or the Bacaudae. While Drinkwater concedes that this scenario does not fully explain "who the Bacaudae actually were and, in particular, how they might be conceived as offering a comfortable haven for refugee gentry," it does, in his view, align closely with the social portrait offered by Salvian.[214]

The next major intervention in the 'minimalist' camp comes with Clifford Minor's 1997 article, "Reclassifying the Bacaudae: Some Reasons for Caution: Who Were the Third Century Bacaudae?" In this article, Minor offers a sustained critique of Van Dam's interpretation, challenging both his evidentiary basis and his broader assumptions about the social character of the Bacaudae. In addition to disproving the validity of the Amandus coins and challenging Van Dam's reliance on a bad Greek translation of Eutropius describing Amandus and Aelianus as "native usurpers,"[215] Minor also questions one of the basic prerogatives of Van Dam's approach. For Minor, although it is certainly true that high-born Romans were chauvinistic towards the

[212] Ibid.; Salv. Gub. Dei 5.21; see also my discussion of Brown's interpretation of Salvian in chapter 1 above.
[213] Salv. Gub. Dei 5.8.
[214] Ibid., p. 214.
[215] Clifford Minor, "Reclassifying the Bacaudae: Some Reasons for Caution Part I: Who Were the Third Century Bacaudae?" *The Ancient World* 28, no. 2 (1997), pp. 172-3.

lower classes, it is also true that panegyrists tended to amplify the valor of their subject by valorizing his enemy. Minor writes, "If the Bacaudae were "local men of authority" the eulogist could easily play up the vanquished as valorous, noble warriors, and so enhance Maximian's triumph."[216] Instead, "He only tersely commemorates Maximian's victory over farmers, plowmen, shepherds, and rustics–a surprisingly modest expression for a panegyric that suggests that the Bacaudae were exactly as Mamertinus described them, humble peasants who could not qualify for consideration as Gallic worthies."

Overall, Van Dam's approach is just as totalizing to Minor as Thompson's was to Van Dam. For Minor, Van Dam's picture of rural social relations presents the 'peasantry' as a homogenous class whose only choice is which local 'man of authority' to ask for protection. Though the actual details of Gallic land-tenure remain obscure, here echoing Drinkwater, "a peasant society can include considerable stratification," from rich peasants to poorer small holders, tenant farmers, migrant laborers, and slaves.[217] In the face of the glaring lack of evidence required to reconstruct the details of rural social relations, Minor proposes a kind of Occam's Razor approach that brings the peasants back into the picture. Minor writes, "An alternative reconstruction regards the convulsions of the late third century as a form of liberation for Gaul's peasantry through the unforeseen dissolution of bonds between peasants, a shaken upper class, and an impotent government."[218] Essentially, for Minor, it was the reimposition of these traditional bonds of subservience which had largely dissolved in the calamitous third century that sparked the initial Bacaudic rebellions.[219] After some initial success, the movement

[216] Minor, "Reclassifying the Bacaudae: Some Reasons for Caution: Who Were the Third Century Bacaudae?," p. 175
[217] Ibid., p. 176
[218] Ibid., p. 178
[219] Ibid., p. 178

spread and consolidated, perhaps under the leadership of people like Aelianus and Amandus, before succumbing to Maximian's strategy of exhaustion and clemency. Overall, Minor is careful to present only a tentative and broad-strokes reconstruction, skeptical of approaches like Thompson's and Van Dam's that present a single "key" to understanding the socio-economic make-up and aims of the rebellions.[220]

J. Grant Couper, In his recent overview of the Bacaudae "Gallic Insurgencies? Annihilating the Bagaudae," explicitly positions himself as following in the "conservative movement," inaugurated by Drinkwater and Minor, which he sees as having "generally sought to ascertain which sources can be safely taken as referring to the Bagaudae, and which are to be excluded from the field. It tends to emphasize the limitations of the sources more than some previous attempts, which tried to fit the evidence into particular theoretical models, leading to interpretations that were complete, but sometimes quite fanciful."[221] Couper is highly critical of Thompson's approach in particular, arguing that "Thompson makes the mistake of projecting a unified class consciousness onto peasants" and that consequently, "his interpretation sees the Bagaudae practically everywhere, all of the time, in late Roman Gaul and Spain."[222]

Though Couper may be right that Thompson's presentation of the Bacaudae is a little too fanciful and far-reaching at times, I take issue with his dismissal of peasants' capacity for class consciousness. As the English Marxist historian E.P. Thompson argued famously in "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", deriding the 'irrational' and

[220] It is only in this first article that Minor offers such a 'reconstruction', turning mainly to critique in the subsequent articles in the series. Due to the 'disjointed' nature of Minor's series, I have indicated in various footnotes some of Minor's critiques.
[221] J. Grant. Couper, "Gallic Insurgencies? Annihilating the Bagaudae." In *Brill's Companion to Insurgency and Terrorism in the Ancient Mediterranean*, edited by Timothy Howe and Lee Brice, 253–274. Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 312-13
[222] Ibid., p. 317

'emotional' actions of the rural poor in revolt is a form of chauvinism that masks the fundamental rationality at work in their collective action. The grievances of the poor were, E.P. Thompson argues "grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action."[223] It should come as no surprise, then, that when the Empire failed to uphold the internal peace that was the fundamental guarantor of the economic stability in the Mediterranean, that the oppressed classes would see the Roman state as failing to play its "proper economic function."

While Couper takes care to closely align himself with the 'conservative turn' discussed above, he also moves beyond the skepticism characteristic of Minor and Drinkwater's work, ending his overview of the Bacaudae with the positive claim that "any trouble they caused to the imperial regime of the day was nugatory" and that, in addition to being wiped out militarily, "they were utterly annihilated by the labels attached to them, to the point where we can only see them through the eyes of people who were at best interested only in their own agendas, and at worst hostile."[224] Citing Chris Wickham's discussion of the peasantry in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Couper presents this conclusion as a natural extension of what he sees as the 'consensus' of the conservative movement, "that the Bacaudae formed a *jacquerie*, a peasant rebellion that expressed violent discontent rather than having any grand revolutionary aims."[225] Couper specifies further that the "Bacaudae formed a socially heterogeneous movement with the

[223] E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971), p. 188.
[224] Couper, "Gallic Insurgencies?" p. 339
[225] Ibid., p. 319

overall goal of freedom from misrule and violence (albeit whose individual members may have had varied motivations), which was probably rooted ultimately in socio–economic breakdown in the western provinces during the later centuries of the Roman Empire."[226] I take issue with Couper's use of Wickham here, as Couper frames this conclusion in a way that minimizes peasant agency, as if what they were doing was *just* a *jacquerie*. As we have seen above, Wickham's early portrayal of the Bacaudae in "The 'Other' Transition" presented their impact on history as anything but "nugatory."

Salvian and the Bacuadae in Wickham's Framing the Early Middle Ages

In the passage which Couper cites, Wickham states that "Salvian says flatly that the Bagaudae were the result of oppressive taxation and the injustices of the judicial system. This is the sort of thing Salvian always says, and we must be very cautious about it, but it does at least fit the profile of peasant revolts elsewhere."[227] Wickham continues, "The relative quiescence of peasant political protagonism after the mid-fifth century underpins the basic point that such revolts were the sign of a system that was losing hegemony but had not yet lost its force and coherence."[228] Nowhere in his discussion of the peasantry in Gaul does Wickham imply that the Bacaudae revolts were of minimal importance. Instead, Wickham is pushing back against what he sees as an over-reliance in past scholarship on Salvian's exaggerated account of the late-Roman tax system.

[226] Ibid., p. 319-20
[227] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 532
[228] Ibid., p. 533

As discussed in chapter 1, Salvian's writings were long considered the starting point for understanding the breakdown of the late Roman tax system in the western provinces, especially his emphasis on tax-evasion and rural patronage. In this classic reading of Salvian, the excessive greed of the *curiales* (town-councilors who double as tax-collectors) forces poor but freeholding Roman peasants who are unable to pay their taxes to give over their land to richer rural patrons, in exchange for paying their share of the tax. Further, the Diocletianic and Theodosian laws tying the *coloni* to the land are seen as integral to this process, initially created to *prevent* the flight of peasants to the estates of powerful landowners, but ultimately functioning as a first step in turning semi-free *coloni* into hereditary serfs and Roman aristocratic landowners into medieval lords.[229]

This picture is, more or less, the one Wickham himself adopted in the 1980s in "The 'Other' Transition," discussed above. From the vantage point of the early 20th century in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Wickham challenges this view, building on the critical studies of the of the *colonate* by Jean-Michel Carrie´ and Domenico Vera. Thus, Wickham writes:

> I would, however, be more cautious than I was two decades ago about the relationship between tax-evasion and the crisis of empire. Actually, the 440s was not a decade of crisis, at least in Gaul; Salvian, like Libanios, was inveighing against a situation of stable corruption, not fiscal breakdown—even for Salvian, the taxes were still being paid, and they continued to be for some time yet. Nor did this form of rural patronage necessarily turn into stable patterns of local domination, except at least when it resulted in the successful expropriation of peasants, which it presumably sometimes did. Earlier,

[229] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, p. 520-23.

> patronage was briefly discussed as a means through which the pressure of taxation could be negotiated with, and thus (on occasion) defused. This can be generalized: patronage of this type was a spin-off from taxation, its evil twin; it was a form of rural power that depended for its existence on the continuing structure of the state, and it was illegal because it was against the interests of the state. But this means that if tax-raising ended, which it slowly did in the West, then patronage against it would lose its purpose; such patronage would not itself *substitute* for the state.[230]

While rural patronage by local aristocrats could certainly exist without the state, it would necessarily be of a different form. Thus, for Wickham, Salvian's apocalyptic and dramatic writings, while providing insight into the period in which he wrote, should not be taken as the definitive starting point for a reading of the dissolution of the Roman tax system.[231]

As discussed above, Wickham's earlier Marxist vision of most pre-capitalist society was one in which two antagonistic modes of production based on the expropriation of agricultural surplus from a peasant producing class—the 'ancient' mode and feudalism—coexisted. In the 'ancient' mode, the ruling class consisted of a civic aristocracy who wielded the political power of the state to expropriate peasant surplus in the form of tax. In the feudal mode, the ruling class consisted of rural landowners who wielded their own private power to extract surplus from tenant peasants bound to their land. While the boundaries between these two exploiting classes could appear blurry, with individual oppressors sometimes functioning as both landowners and

[230] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages,* p. 528.
[231] For Wickham, the collapse of the tax-system had less to do with long-term instability from over-taxation, and more to do with the contingency of the Vandal conquest of north Africa. For more on Wickham's influential thesis about how the Vandal conquest served as a point-of-no-return by breaking "the Carthage-Rome tax-spine," see *Inheritance of Rome,* Chapter 4.

administrators, the relationship between these roles was seen by Wickham as structurally antagonistic. For the early Wickham, the 'end of the ancient world' was *not*, as in most Marxist approaches of the time, a transition from a slave mode of production to a feudal mode of production, but simply a shift in the balance of power between two already existing precapitalist modes within the social formation of the later Roman empire. In order to understand Wickham's account of Salvian and the Bacaudae in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, it is necessary to look to the critique which led Wickham to abandon his earlier model, which centers on Wickham's earlier conception of the relationship between the late-Roman state and its mode of production.

In *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production*, published in 1993, the Byzantine historian John Haldon argues forcefully against Wickham's distinction between tax and rent as constituting a modal difference.[232] Haldon argues that the distinction between surplus extracted through taxation (by the state) and surplus extracted through rent (by private landlords) is not a modal one. Instead, it is a variation *within* the same overarching mode of production. As Haldon puts it, tax and rent represent "a differential relationship internal to a mode, not between different modes. As such, it is a political relationship, and represents no fundamental difference in either the mode of surplus appropriation or the ways in which producers are combined with the means of production."[233] In other words, the key distinction between state-based and landlord-based surplus extraction lies not in the structure of class relations or in the particular form of economic domination, but in the distributional mechanisms through which the agricultural surplus is

[232] John F. Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London: Verso, 1993),70-139; For Haldon's earlier formulation, put forth in an earlier response to Wickham, see John Haldon. 1989. "The Feudalism Debate Once More: The Case of Byzantium." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 17, no. 1: 5–40.; and also Halil Berktay, "The Feudalism Debate: The Turkish End—Is 'Tax – vs. – Rent' Necessarily the Product and Sign of a Modal Difference?," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 14, no. 3 (1987): 291–333.
[233] Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production,* p. 85.

channeled—whether toward state centers or provincial landowners. These distributional channels are, for Haldon, politically differentiated *within* a single tributary mode, rather than indicative of separate modes of production.

Haldon bases his analysis on a well-known passage from Marx's chapter on "The Genesis of Capitalist Ground-Rent" in Volume III of *Capital*, which is worth quoting extensively:

> The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant. On this is based the entire configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relations of production, and hence also its specific political form. It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers—a relationship whose particular form naturally corresponds always to a certain level of development of the type and manner of labour, and hence to its social productive power—in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the specific form of the state in each case. This does not prevent the same economic basis—the same in its major conditions—from displaying endless variations and gradations in its appearance, as the result of innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural conditions, racial relations, historical influences acting from outside, etc., and these can only be understood by analysing these empirically given conditions.

For Haldon, surplus appropriation by means of tax and rent both share the same fundamental relations of production between the "owners of the conditions of production" ('feudal' lords on the one hand, the state on the other) and the "immediate producers" (peasants in both cases). As we have seen in the case of the 'plight of the *curiales',* tax-raising by the state was itself farmed out to local landowners, such that which portion of the surplus was precisely rent and which tax was deeply entangled. Even Wickham, as Haldon notes, concedes that states often tax landlords, effectively appropriating a portion of surplus already extracted via rent. Further, Haldon cites Wickham's own empirical work demonstrating limited landlordly and state ability to meaningfully affect the labor-process of their dependent tenants.[234] On Haldon's reading, such overlap reveals that the state and landlord class are not two distinct ruling classes, but rather fractions of the same dominant class, differentiated by their position within the apparatus of surplus distribution, not by fundamentally distinct relations to the peasantry.

Consequently, for Haldon, these problems make it hard to see the late Roman state as serving anything other than landed interests. Haldon's book is largely written in response to so-called 'autonomous' theories of the state, in which the state functions as a kind of open arena for class struggle, rather than as a de facto instrument of the ruling class. Following the structural Marxist political theorist Nicos Poulantzas, who argued forcefully for the "relative autonomy" of the state first in *Political Power and Social Classes* in 1968, many Marxists influenced by structuralism in the 1960s and 70s, including Wickham, adopted just such a view.[235]

[234] Ibid., p. 82.
[235] Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*. Translated by Timothy O'Hagan with assistance from David McLellan, Anna de Casparis, and Brian Grogan. London: New Left Books, 1975. First published 1968, pp. 255-74.

After the general decline of structuralism in the 1980s, state theorists in the 1990s like Michael Mann (the primary target of Haldon's book) developed influential approaches that assumed not just a 'relative' autonomy of the state, but its absolute autonomy.[236] Instead, for Haldon, "The inherent contradiction between the need for the state to collect its revenues directly, and the inevitable process of delegation and the competition over surplus offered by dominant social-economic elites. . .renders the nature of the limits on state autonomy fairly clear."[237] In other words, for Haldon the precapitalist state cannot hope to survive for long if it acts against the interests of the ruling class. Due to the direct nature of precapitalist expropriation, in which those with 'extra-economic' power demand a portion of the peasants' surplus, the state by definition relies on such power to reproduce itself. Even if the state attempts to bypass the landed aristocracy by delegating tax-raising to civic administrators paid by the state, these civic administrators can simply use their new wealth and delegated state power to install themselves as a new landed aristocracy. Nevertheless, Haldon's theory of the pre-capitalist state is not a return to an earlier instrumentalist and mechanistic Marxist theory of the state, in which the behavior of the state is always a simple reflection of ruling class interests. Such instances of 'autonomous' state action against the established aristocracy do indeed arise, but they do not represent conflict between separate ruling classes, as in Wickham's early work, nor do they open up the possibility for the creation of a new *kind* of state.[238]

[236] Haldon, *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production,* pp. 1-13; For Wickham's own treatment of Mann, see Chris Wickham, "Historical Materialism, Historical Sociology," *New Left Review* I/171 (September–October 1988): 63-78.
[237]Ibid., p. 263.
[238] Ibid., pp. 264-73.

This does not mean, however, that there is no difference from the perspective of peasants between tax and rent. Wickham writes:

> when it comes to large-scale revolt, most historic examples occur in the framework of resistance to states: they are struggles against military service, laws on status, and, above all, taxation. . . speaking very broadly, however, peasants tend to revolt when they see weaknesses in the structures of domination around them, in the context of lost wars, for example, both because revolt seems actually practicable in such circumstances, and because such weaknesses undermine the ideological hegemony of their dominators, whether aristocracies or the state (cf. above, p. 440).

Here Wickham refers back to an earlier discussion of hegemony in village society in *Framing*, which reveals another subtle shift in Wickham's theoretical outlook. Here, Wickham writes:

> Peasants have accepted aristocratic hegemony often enough in history, at least in part. This has not prevented them from engaging in the small-scale signs of disobedience and disaffection that James Scott analysed in his classic account of Malaysia in the 1970s, *Weapons of the weak;* but it has made it harder for them to organize their own societies autonomously, or to move towards the clearest sign of protagonism of all, that is to say revolt.[239]

In his footnote to this discussion, Wickham notes that "Scott sees his resistances as proof that Gramsci was wrong, and that peasants do not collude in their subjection. . . The two seem to me to be able to coexist."[240] As discussed in chapter 1 in relation to Roman comedy, Scott developed his notion of the 'hidden transcript' in direct opposition to the Gramscian/structuralist notion that

[239] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages,* p. 440.
[240] Ibid.

carnivalesque rituals of role-reversal ultimately served to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing forms of domination and control.[241] It is precisely how these two notions 'coexist' for Wickham that provides the key to understanding his analysis of the Bacaudae in *Framing the Middle Ages*, and which Couper misrepresented in his essay.

Of the Bacaudae, Wickham writes:

> The Bagaudae appeared, both in the third and fifth centuries, after local political crises, when the social order had been undermined by civil war and invasion. In that context, taxation and injustice, which had previously been seen by peasants as inescapable burdens, could more easily have come to be regarded as something that resistance could overcome. It is important, as with patronage, not to link them too tightly to the teleology of the fall of the state; they were over by 455, when imperial rule in most of Gaul and in the Ebro valley was still fairly firm. They were revolts against a weakened but still functioning imperial regime. Nor were they a pro-barbarian choice (and barbarians seldom supported them); we have no reliable indication that the end of imperial rule was seen by peasants as liberating, and in fiscal terms, at least initially, it was not. But the Bagaudae do indicate that taxation was something that peasants could reject when the ideological hegemony of the Roman state was weakened. . .If there were no weaknesses in the hegemony of tax-raising states over peasantries, then, if tax was perceived as too high, peasants would normally just seek to evade it, by seeking powerful patrons or by flight; but if cracks began to be visible, they could and did resist.[242]

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[241] James C. Scott. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 314-50; Ibid., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 70-107.
[242] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages,* p. 532.

For Wickham, much as in his earlier account in "The 'Other' Transition," peasant revolt remains tied to a crisis of hegemony. Further, given Wickham's adoption via Haldon of a radically expanded definition of 'feudalism', in which both the Roman empire and the post-Roman successor states equally qualify as being characterized by feudal relations of production, the eventual collapse of tax-raising would no longer in and of itself mark a transition between modes production. If this were all there was to Wickham's vision of peasant resistance, Couper's diminished view of the Bacaudae's impact would not be far off the mark.

However, immediately after his discussion of the Bacaudae, Wickham concludes, "But in general we have to conclude that crisis, confusion, and political involution and decentralization did not favour the aristocracy as a class, which instead lost rather than gained wealth and local power."[243] For Wickham, while there was no overall transition in mode of production resulting from the slow dissolution of the Roman state, there were, in fact, multiple localized transitions to what Wickham calls the "peasant mode of production." These scattered enclaves of essentially pre-class relations existed in a "leopard-spotted pattern" amidst a larger feudal landscape. Wickham describes the "peasant-mode":

> Peasant-mode societies are not necessarily egalitarian. The household generally contains internal inequalities, as already noted, and so can the community. We have seen that household surplus is generally distributed around other households, but this comes at a price. Gifts and the underwriting of collective festivities are acts of power, as Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu, among others, have stressed; people negotiate socially through reciprocity, aiming to increase their local position. Basically, people who give

[243] Ibid., p. 534.

> more than they receive gain status, social rank; they have more ritual importance, or more of a leadership role in decision-making in the community; they can get poorer people to respond to their gifts by doing things for them. People who aim at that local status may indeed choose to work harder or to develop their productive technology, for the rewards of status are sufficient for them to do so, even if the surplus they produce is eaten or otherwise consumed by others almost at once. But, in the ideal-type peasant mode, ranking is not structurally permanent. People have to work for their practical power, by their generosity, by their charisma, or by a capacity to negotiate for others; if they fail at these, or if they overreach themselves and become oppressive, others will withdraw their support. They cannot take power for granted. These societies are, then, at least *relatively* egalitarian.[244]

Wickham emphasizes throughout his work the importance of examining historical agency in the terms of the agents themselves, on their own terms. The Bacaudae, just as much as the Roman general Aetius and his machinations, or the various 'barbarian' groups and their migrations, reacted to the circumstances they found themselves in, and in so acting contributed to the dramatic transformations happening in the fifth century. As Wickham argues in *The Inheritance of Rome*, the Vandal take-over of North Africa marks something of a point-of-no-return for Western Roman political unity, breaking the "Carthage-Rome tax spine."[245] Wickham writes, "Not to foresee that Geiseric [the king of the Vandals] would take Carthage, notwithstanding a treaty agreed in 435, is arguably the main strategic error of the imperial

[244] Ibid., p. 538-9.
[245] Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400-1000* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), p. 78

government in the fifth century."[246] Of course, the Vandals are on the move, first through Gaul, then Spain, and finally into North Africa, precisely over the same time-period as the ongoing rebellions in Armorica. If the Bacaudae and their suppression were one of Aetius' strategic goals at the time of this blunder, as evidenced by his enlistment of the Alans and other 'barbarian' tribes to deal with Bacaudic rebellions, I would argue that, even on this level of high politics and military strategy, it is impossible to conclude that the Bacaudae's impact was "nugatory."

Wickham notes a fundamental trade-off for peasants and their relation to the state in late antiquity and the early middle ages: either peasants are subject to high levels of expropriation, whether through tax or rent, and thus offered some degree of protection from incidental violence, or conversely they are relatively autonomous and thus more at risk to these types of predations.[247] It is precisely the inverse of this predicament that turns into an ongoing problem for the Roman state in the early to mid-fifth century: during times of increased threat of incidental violence on the peasantry, whether by 'barbarian' raids or by Roman armies themselves, the Roman state, in order to respond to these threats, dramatically increases the extraction rate of the oppressed. While we may never have the type of evidence needed to determine which of Wickham's two options actual peasants would prefer—and here Wickham explicitly states that he thinks they would prefer autonomy—it should come as no surprise that, when subjected to high levels of extraction *and* high levels of incidental violence, the peasantry would choose to revolt.[248]

[246] Ibid., p. 78
[247] See Wickham, *Framing,* p. 557-9. Wickham suggests that this trade-off is fundamental to all pre-capitalist societies.
[248] Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome,* p. 559.

Wickham is part of a growing tradition that sees the political collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century as far from inevitable. Rather, in this view, the Western Empire very well might have recovered from its struggles in the fifth century, as it did after the crisis of the third century, if not for the choices of individuals from all strata of the social field. Finally, though the Bacaudae do not wrest control of the machinery of the state themselves, the peasantry, as Wickham argues throughout his work, is in a (relatively) stronger position structurally in the post-Roman successor states, despite the "radical simplification of material life," as Bryan Ward-Perkins calls it, that marks the post-Roman west. To put this succinctly, I am arguing that the Bacaudae played a crucial role in the making of the post-Roman west. Though they may not have had a clearly defined set of social aims. They fought for their class interests and, to some extent, succeeded.

Conclusion:

Looking Forward, Looking Back

> We are oppressed not only by new dire circumstances but also by an array of inherited ones that still occur because antiquated, out-of-date modes of production have managed to keep limping along, accompanied by their entourage of anachronistic social and political relations. The living make us suffer, and the dead do, too. Le mort *saisit le vif [the dead seizes the living]*![249]
>
> —Marx, Preface to the 1867 edition of *Capital*

In the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that, when read against the work of Peter Brown, the limited and fragmentary Bacaudic evidence reveals a striking shift in attitude towards rural poverty and peasant protagonism in the minds of the elite Roman writers who wrote about them (not one of our sources mentioning the Bacaudae, it must be remembered, was penned by a peasant hand). According to Peter Brown, elite attitudes towards wealth underwent a profound transformation between the third and fifth centuries, arising from a confluence of a number of factors: the radical critique of wealth that formed a major current in early Christianity, the

[249] North, Reitter, Marx, *Capital*, p. 6-7, 793 for the translation of the French. Here, from the preface to the 1867 edition of *Capital*, Marx is speaking specifically of Germany in the 19th century.

eventual adoption of Christianity as a state religion by the Roman state in the third century, the political involution of the western Roman state in the fifth century, and the rapid disintegration of the aristocracy legitimated by that state over the course of the fifth and early sixth centuries.

For Brown, the traditional Greco-Roman elite discourse surrounding wealth is best described by what Paul Veyne has termed "civic euergetism." Drawing on the tradition of substantivist anthropology, particularly Marcel Mauss' influential argument in *The Gift*, Veyne understands gift-giving in non-capitalist societies as neither purely altruistic nor purely economic; rather, gifts created and reinforced bonds of obligation and dependence, serving an ideological function by legitimizing and naturalizing existing social hierarchies. For Brown and Veyne, wealth in premodern societies was fundamentally an instrument for accruing power and prestige—rather than, as in modern capitalist societies, power being primarily an instrument to accumulate wealth. In Marxist terms (discussed in chapter two), this corresponds to the "extra-economic coercion" which served as the ultimate guarantor of elite dominance in pre-capitalist modes of production. In the Greco-Roman world of cities, the civic elite competed with one another for prestige by lavishly pouring their wealth into the cities whose politics they sought to dominate—by building temples, sponsoring games, or, to invoke the title of Veyne's influential book, providing *Bread and Circuses* for the citizens of the polis.

Within this elite discourse, rural poverty was effectively invisible. This attitude is particularly evident in the pagan literary sources concerning the Bacaudae, beginning with Claudius Mamertinus, our earliest and only contemporary source for the third-century Bacaudae. In his panegyric to the emperor Maximian, who oversaw the pacification of the Gallic countryside in the third century, Mamertinus described the Bacaudae as "two-shaped monsters" (*monstrorum biformium),* an unnatural fusion of peasant and soldier, whose very existence challenged the

legitimacy of civic-based authority. Later pagan authors largely followed Mamertinus in depicting rural unrest as an aberration of the natural order, though they developed this basic theme in different rhetorical directions.

Writing in the fourth century, Aurelius Victor and Eutropius largely followed Mamertinus in presenting the suppression of the third-century Bacaudae primarily as an imperial triumph, demonstrating the effectiveness of emperors like Maximian in restoring order after a time of crisis. Rutilius Namatianus, writing nostalgically after the sack of Rome, mourned the disruption of his cherished Gallic countryside, implicitly invoking an imagined Golden Age of a more stable civic past in which Roman aristocrats had not yet lost their martial vigor. The anonymous author of the *Querolus*, by contrast, depicted rural unrest satirically, further highlighting its unnatural and farcical character. In each case, the pagan tradition consistently portrays the Bacaudae not as genuine social rebels, but rather as symbolic anomalies whose existence underscored the fragility and occasional failure of legitimate civic authority. This rhetorical framing echoes Brent Shaw's observation that within elite literary discourse, banditry served as a mirror reflecting illegitimate power or tyrannical misrule, figures whose appearance signified disorder and who thus reinforced the normative ideal of the "good emperor" capable of restoring the natural order.

According to Brown, the classical ideology of civic euergetism underwent a dramatic transformation in late antiquity, developing within Christian discourse as Christians wrestled with the implications of the influx of new wealth into the church during the fourth century 'Age of Gold'. Drawing on both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions of giving and hearkening back to the mythological poverty of the *Ecclesia Primitiva*—the Christian community in its earliest

days—the new Christian attitude towards wealth and its proper uses was characterized by its universality.

For late antique Christians, the world came to be divided into two vast categories of rich and poor, undivided by the sacred boundary separating the city from its rural hinterland. With the city no longer serving as the privileged repository of competitive elite largesse, the church took its place. Instead of injecting their wealth into the cities themselves, elite Christians gave to the "holy poor" associated with churches and monasteries, whose ascetic practice qualified them to act as mediators in the exchange of elite wealth for 'treasure' in heaven.

Yet, the particular workings of this system were never set in stone. As familiar as the medieval notion of giving alms for the sake of one's soul has become to the modern reader, the medieval Christian discourse on wealth was the result of a series of explosive doctrinal debates—most notably the Pelagian controversy waged between Augustine and Pelagius. For Pelagius, the implication of Jesus' commandment to the rich young man (*"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.")* was clear. Human beings, endowed by God with free will, could avoid sin and enter paradise only through the total renunciation of wealth to the church.

It was against Pelagius' doctrine that Augustine developed his influential notion of divine grace and the necessity of regular small acts of giving alms for the expiation of sin. As opposed to Pelagius, Augustine believed that human beings could not live without sin, and so the gradual, daily accumulation of sin must be matched with equally regular acts of charity, which through the grace of God purges the soul of this everyday wear and tear.

From a contemporary vantage point, it is tempting to see in Augustine's victory the seeds of a repressive and wealthy medieval Catholic Church, prevailing against Pelagius' seemingly

radical and egalitarian demands. Yet, for Brown, such a reading would be a major error, one that overlooks the social profile of Pelagius' converts and the social effects of their giving. In Brown's narrative, the wealthy aristocrats who followed in Pelagius' path of renunciation, like Melania the Younger of the fabulously wealthy Anicii family, did not turn into paupers. Rather, they channeled their enormous wealth into new institutions—monasteries where they retained privileged control over the uses of their wealth.[250]

The critical issue is thus not which doctrine was more radical in a "proto-socialist" sense (neither, it must be said, would meet such an expectation), but rather the extent to which each position facilitated wealth entering the church as an independent institution. For Brown, the radicality of Augustine's position lies precisely in its potential to free the church of its dependence on lay aristocratic wealth, which continued to dwarf the wealth of the church in the fifth century. Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle* traces the story of the church's transformation from a being a "junior partner" to the lay aristocracy in the political project of the Roman empire to becoming the primary repository of landed wealth by the central Middle Ages.

It would be equally misleading, for Brown, to close the book on this development with Augustine's theological 'victory' over Pelagius, whose position was finally declared heretical at the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E. Doing so would overlook the continuing resonance of Pelagian tracts, especially among the monks of fifth-century Gaul, many of whom had lived through the worst of the socio-economic convulsions of the early fifth century. In Brown's account, fifth-century Gaul serves as a kind of testing ground for doctrines fleshed out in the intellectual dual between Augustine and Pelagius, for lay aristocratic wealth largely disintegrated

[250] Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle,* 308-321.

in Gaul over the course of the fifth century. The monks of Gaul who gravitated around the monastery of Lérins off the coast of southern Gaul, influenced by both Augustine and Pelagius, developed what Brown calls the "Gallic Consensus" in Christian theology, characterized by a sharp focus on the "unrelenting rigor" of the law of God. This development is most clearly seen in the writings of Salvian of Marseilles, whose major work, *de Gubernate Dei*, is also the single most extensive source dealing with the Bacaudae of the fifth century.

As I argued in chapter one, Salvian mobilized the universalized Christian discourse on wealth and poverty described by Brown to portray the Bacaudae in a radically different light than his pagan predecessors. For Salvian, the Bacuadae were not simply an aberration of the natural order of civic authority to be pacified by a 'good emperor' like Maximian, but a *symptom* of the aberration of the 'natural order' itself. In Salvian's vision, the Bacaudae were driven to revolt by the real "two-shaped monster" of oppressive taxation and landlordly greed. These landowners, whose wealth had drastically declined in the early fifth century, adopted a defensive siege mentality by the mid-440s, seeking to hold onto and expand their wealth at a time when conditions in Gaul seemed to be stabilizing.

Yet, as Peter Brown has shown, Salvian's universalizing rhetoric of poverty obscures as much as it reveals. Brown characterizes this aspect of late antique Christian discourse as the "pauperization of the poor," a radical rhetorical division of society into two vast and oppositional categories—abject poverty and outrageous wealth—that hides beneath its surface the real identities of Salvian's subjects. Just as charity was limited to the *citizen* poor in the imaginative logic of civic euergetism, when Salvian denounces the oppression of the *pauperculi*, the "poor little guys," he rarely means peasants or the urban destitute in the modern sense. Rather, Salvian's poor primarily belonged to what sociologists call the "conjunctural poor," those who

had once been relatively prosperous but had fallen into poverty amidst the upheavals of the fifth century. This category encompassed monks and ascetics like Salvian himself, whose familial wealth had been severely depleted by the early fifth-century invasions and economic crises. But it also included formerly free-holding peasants who had been reduced to dependency on their wealthier neighbors.

For Brown, this transformation in the discourse on poverty had profound implications for the relationship between wealth, poverty, and salvation in the Christian imagination. The broader Christian moral category of the universalized poor became the necessary symbolic recipients of elite largesse, gifts that served simultaneously to alleviate poverty and to secure the eternal welfare of the donor's soul. Brown terms this reciprocal logic the "ransom of the soul," emphasizing the paradoxical nature of the Church's wealth, which existed explicitly to connect two invisible and paradoxical categories: the socially invisible poor and the physically invisible souls of the dead.[251]

Because neither the poor nor the souls of the departed could directly stake a claim on ecclesiastical property, Church wealth was uniquely insulated from secular interference, thus providing both material security and spiritual reassurance to a weakened aristocracy seeking simultaneously to rebuild its wealth and secure its salvation. Salvian, in this sense, issued a two-pronged warning to the remaining wealthy aristocracy of Gaul: if they did not voluntarily open their coffers to the church—whose "holy poor" functioned as divine intermediaries and reinforced the Church's symbolic role as patron of the "real poor"—they risked not only losing their earthly power to rebellion but also forfeiting their eternal souls.

[251] Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul,* p. 130.

Finally, this perspective, while most clearly articulated by Salvian, is also reflected, albeit more fragmentarily, in the other fifth-century Christian sources dealing with the Bacaudae. In chronicles such as the anonymous *Gallic Chronicle of 452* and the *Chronicle* of Hydatius, the Bacaudae similarly appear not merely as rebels or criminals, but as symptoms of deeper societal dysfunction, moral decline, and divine judgment. A similar portrayal emerges in Constantius of Lyon's hagiographical *Life of Saint Germanus*, in which the Bacaudae are depicted as desperate fugitives driven to seek saintly intercession by excessive taxation, harsh punishment at the hands of the 'barbarian' Alans, and the moral failures of local elites. While Constantius places greater emphasis on the saint's personal intervention and miraculous powers than on systemic critique, his narrative nonetheless aligns broadly with Salvian's interpretive framework. Constantius presents Germanus' leadership as a morally superior alternative to traditional Roman rule, a clear reflection of the broader Christian theological and moral anxieties of the mid-fifth century. In this sense, *The Life of Saint Germanus* recodes imperial authority along lines consistent with Salvian: Germanus' role as a righteous protector of the poor casts him as a kind of sanctified Roman official, an image of what imperial leadership might become if reformed through Christian virtue. Thus, even within the terse annals of chronicle-writing and the sometimes-formulaic conventions of hagiography, the Bacaudae consistently embody the moral and social anxieties of an era in which the Roman Empire's failings were interpreted explicitly through the lens of Christian providence.

In chapter two, I provided a historiographical overview of twentieth-century interpretations of the Bacaudae, charting a trajectory of increasing skepticism and diminishing assessments of their historical importance. Beginning with E.A. Thompson's "maximalist" Marxist reading in

the mid-twentieth century, the Bacaudae were initially seen as a widespread peasant revolutionary movement central to the "Fall of Rome" and the broader modal transition from the slave society of antiquity to the feudalism of the Middle Ages. Thompson presented the Bacaudae as a class-conscious collective of oppressed peasants who not only revolted against their landlords but sought to fundamentally restructure social relations, at times even enslaving former masters.

Chris Wickham, writing in the mid-1980s and influenced by then-contemporary developments in Marxist theory, developed a perspective that sought to wed Althusserian 'structuralism' to the more empirically minded approach of English Marxism. While drawing heavily on E.A. Thompson's insights, Wickham reframed the Bacaudae as emerging from a crisis of elite hegemony, caught between competing systems of extraction—the rent owed to feudal landlords and the taxes owed to the Roman state and its administrators. Wickham saw the Bacaudae as critical agents navigating these structural transitions, though their agency was ultimately limited to choosing the lesser evil of feudal expropriation.

In contrast to Thompson's revolutionary reading, Raymond Van Dam presented a "reformist" model, arguing that the Bacaudae were less radical peasants than local elites and their loyal retainers pursuing regional self-rule, reacting primarily to imperial absence or incompetence rather than class oppression per se. Deeply influenced by Brown's early groundbreaking work on late antiquity, Van Dam explicitly rejected Thompson's "conflict model," which had emphasized resistance and animosity between peasants and their lords. Following Brown, Van Dam critiqued Thompson's narrative for being overly committed to an orthodox Marxist historiography that saw the collapse of Rome and the emergence of feudalism as a radical discontinuity. Instead,

Van Dam emphasized continuity and transformation rather than rupture and collapse, drawing on Brown's influential notion that the historical period now colloquially referred to as late antiquity should be understood primarily in terms of gradual adaptation and transformation rather than abrupt crisis and decline. Thus, rather than positioning the Bacaudae as agents of revolutionary class struggle, Van Dam argued that their goal was to reinforce existing structures of local patronage and dependence—however oppressive these relationships might seem to modern observers—since such ties were understood as essential sources of protection and social stability during times when imperial power was absent or weakened.

By the late twentieth century, historians such as John Drinkwater and Clifford Minor advanced increasingly "conservative" or "minimalist" interpretations, significantly reducing the historical scope and impact attributed to the Bacaudae. This conservative turn culminated in J. Grant Couper's recent dismissal of the Bacaudae's historical impact as "nugatory," a stance grounded in skepticism toward the reliability of sparse and often hostile primary sources. While I share the cautious and critical spirit behind this skepticism, I argued that Couper's argument ultimately relies on misreading Wickham, whose nuanced Marxist framework in *Framing the Early Middle Ages* both implicitly and explicitly affirms peasant resistance—including both outright revolt as well as more everyday forms of resistance—as integral, if often overlooked, drivers of historical change. Rather than passive or marginal actors, the Bacaudae represent for Wickham a key example of peasant protagonism amidst the broader historical transformations of the late Roman world.

In Wickham's later work, peasant resistance continues to play a central, though more ambiguously theorized, role in his Marxist framework. As I argued in Chapter 2, this ambiguity

emerges in part from tensions inherited from his earlier structuralist phase, in which the state and landed elites represented distinct but coexisting exploitative modes of surplus extraction—tax and rent—within the late Roman social formation. Following John Haldon's critique of this position in *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production*, Wickham eventually abandons the notion that these antagonistic forms of expropriation correspond to distinct modes of production, adopting instead a radically expanded vision of feudalism in which both tax and rent function as variable expressions of the same exploitative logic. Yet Wickham retains the structuralist and Gramscian position that peasants are most likely to revolt during a crisis of hegemony—when the ideological justification for their domination begins to falter. With no overall modal transition on the horizon, it is easy to misread Wickham's later account of Bacaudic resistance in response to a crisis of hegemony as having an ultimately "nugatory" effect on the later course of history. Further, Wickham's continued reliance on Gramsci's notion of hegemony becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile with other elements of his schema, especially his growing appreciation of the effectiveness of everyday forms of resistance as theorized by the anarchist anthropologist James C. Scott.

This tension is especially evident in Wickham's discussion of the peasantry in *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, where Wickham explicitly endorses both Gramsci's concept of hegemonic consent and Scott's theory of the "hidden transcript" and the "weapons of the weak." For Scott, the hidden transcript—the subterranean culture of resistance maintained through gossip, tax- and rent-evasion, irony, and passive non-compliance—exists in tension with the Gramscian view that peasants internalize elite ideology. Whereas Gramsci's model frames social rituals of inversion and even instances of revolt as social safety valves that ultimately reinforce the dominant order,

Scott argues that these rituals preserve a culture of resistance that undermines domination over time. Wickham attempts to harmonize these views, claiming they can coexist, but the result is a productive ambiguity: is peasant resistance a symptom of ideological collapse, as Gramsci suggests, or is it an ongoing and rationally organized feature of peasant life, as Scott insists?

This synthesis culminates in Wickham's concept of the "peasant mode of production," a relatively egalitarian form of social organization that emerged unevenly across the post-Roman landscape in a "leopard-spotted" pattern. These enclaves did not result from an overall western European transition in mode of production but arose locally in contexts where aristocratic wealth had largely disintegrated and peasant communities could assert greater autonomy. Though Wickham is careful not to romanticize these peasant societies—acknowledging that internal hierarchies and power imbalances persisted—he emphasizes their historical significance as zones of resistance and alternative development. In this light, the Bacaudae appear not as historical footnotes or aberrations, but as early expressions of a broader dynamic of struggle and structural change. Their revolts, sparked by the breakdown of imperial hegemony, may not have destroyed the Roman state or inaugurated a new social order on their own, but they contributed materially to the conditions in which post-Roman peasant societies could emerge. That Couper interprets their impact as "nugatory" stems, I argue, from a failure to fully appreciate the complex and sometimes contradictory theoretical registers through which Wickham narrates the transformations of late antiquity.

Though they differ in method, emphasis, and style, Peter Brown and Chris Wickham are united in their rejection of teleology. Each in his own way has worked to displace the Enlightenment narrative structure bequeathed by Edward Gibbon, whose *Decline and Fall of the*

Roman Empire long defined, whether positively or negatively, the historiographical terrain of late antiquity. For Brown, the danger of hindsight lies not merely in misinterpreting the past, but in the subtle transformation of historical inquiry into an unconscious search for origins—a temptation to see the past as meaningful only insofar as it culminates in what comes next. His critique of Gibbon was not simply aimed at the particular vision of a decaying empire succumbing to decadence and religion, but at the deeper epistemological posture it represented: a history read backward from a known outcome. This, for Brown, is the true violence of hindsight—it smooths the jagged edges of the past into the clean arc of a morality tale, rendering contingency and conflict invisible.

Wickham, a Marxist historian with very different intellectual roots, converges with Brown in his rejection of teleological certainty, though he arrives there through structuralist rather than cultural channels. In his early work, Wickham attempted to preserve a commitment to large-scale social and economic transition while avoiding the stage-based determinism of classical Marxist historiography. This project led him to experiment with structuralist models of modes-of-production that emphasized contradictory coexistence and uneven development over linear succession. But following Haldon's critique, Wickham abandoned the idea of a distinct modal transition between the "ancient" and the "feudal" in favor of a more synthetic model in which tax and rent represented not distinct modes but intra-modal variants of surplus extraction. Ironically, this move brought Wickham closer to Brown's emphasis on continuity—but without abandoning his historical materialist commitment to the peasantry and their struggle as the primary motor of historical change. In *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Wickham succeeds in narrating a history of profound change without appeal to inevitability.

It is out of this shared rejection of teleology that Brown turned to Wickham's work in the early 2000s, a turn that marked a subtle rupture within Brown's own long-held emphasis on cultural continuity in late antiquity. Confronted with a resurgence of socio-economic "catastrophism" in the 1990s and early 2000s in light of accumulating archaeological evidence for drastic material simplification across the post-Roman west—epitomized by Bryan Ward-Perkins' stark vision of civilizational collapse in *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*—Brown explicitly incorporated Wickham's materialist analysis of the *crisis* of the late-Roman economy into his own narrative framework. In *Through the Eye of a Needle*, this debt is unmistakably registered in Brown's integration of Wickham's analysis of the economic structure of late Roman society, especially in his treatment of the post-Roman West as a landscape not merely of transformation but of dislocation, simplification, and the strategic recalibration of wealth and power.

Yet this shared refusal of hindsight, while it may have liberated historians from the shadow of Gibbon, comes with its own ambiguities. In sidestepping teleology, both Brown and Wickham leave themselves vulnerable to readings that mistake contingency for irrelevance —like Couper's dismissal of the Bacaudae as historically "nugatory". The crucial question left unanswered by their combined approach is: *What do the Bacaudae mean for us?* As I have argued throughout this thesis, the work of Brown and Wickham makes clear that the course of history was never inevitable. Rome was not destined to fall in the west, the Church was not bound to become the greatest landholder in Europe, and the post-Roman West could have evolved along very different lines. Perhaps, in another world, the "leopard-spotted" pattern of relatively egalitarian peasant enclaves that Wickham describes might have coalesced into something more uniform and

enduring. However open we believe the past to have been, we nonetheless live with the consequences of one particular path taken—and it is from this vantage point that the Bacaudae demand to be remembered.

In his article "Agency and Ethics, Past and Present," Kelvin Knight argues that Chris Wickham's work embodies an "ethic of praxis" drawn primarily from the British Marxist tradition of historiography, making Wickham the most illustrious modern heir of historians like E.P Thompson, Rodney Hilton, and Eric Hobsbawm.[252] Yet for Knight, this intellectual genealogy is obscured by the residual effects of Wickham's early interest in structuralism. In attempting to avoid any whiff of teleology, he argues, Wickham has also suppressed the language of moral agency so central to the humanist tradition of E.P. Thompson and his contemporaries. Knight suggests that Wickham's early structuralist leanings led him to conflate the original Aristotelian notion of teleology as an aspirational horizon essential to all forms of human agency—the self-making goals or ends which motivate action—with teleology in its vulgar, historical form: the enlightenment notion that history itself necessarily unfolds toward a predetermined end.[253] As a result, Knight claims, Wickham's notion of "peasant protagonism" becomes flattened, devoid of the moral weight that animated the work of earlier generations of British Marxists.[254] To correct this residual structuralist holdover, Knight proposes turning to neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy, particularly the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, to reintroduce a robust ethical dimension to Wickham's Marxism.[255]

[252] Knight, "Agency and Ethics, Past and Present," p. 146.
[253] Ibid., p. 158.
[254] Ibid. pp. 146-153.
[255] Ibid., pp. 160-8.

While I agree with Knight that Wickham's structuralist inheritance generates certain theoretical ambiguities, as I have discussed extensively above, I would argue that Knight nevertheless undervalues the depth of Wickham's debt to key structuralist tenets. Rather than abandoning structuralism in favor of neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy, I would instead argue that Wickham's heterogenous Marxism can be more productively interpreted through the lens of Walter Benjamin and Fredric Jameson. For Benjamin, to eliminate 'hindsight' is not in itself a sufficient critique of teleology. On the contrary, disavowing 'hindsight' is the characteristic move of vulgar 'historicism', which seeks to relive the past in isolation, essentially as a form of escapism that implicitly renounces the ethical claims which the past still exerts on the present. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Benjamin writes: To Historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken."[256]

Against this nostalgic view of homogeneous, empty time, Benjamin juxtaposes his own concept of heterogenous time: a jolting recognition that the suffering of the past is not sealed off behind us but continues to exert a claim on the present.[257] His famous image of the Angel of History, blown helplessly into the future with eyes fixed on the ever-accumulating ruins of the past, reminds us that the task of revolution is not to accelerate 'progress' but to halt it.[258] The only thing that can motivate us in the present to pull the emergency brake on the locomotive of history, Benjamin insists, is the "weak messianic power" of remembrance—the debt we owe to

[256] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* p. 199.
[257] Ibid., 205-6.
[258] Ibid., p. 201

those who came before us, whose utopian longings for a more egalitarian future remain unredeemed and demand fulfillment.[259]

I am also following the lead of the late Fredric Jameson, who, in the *Political Unconscious,* historicized the rapid growth of 'Althusserian' Marxism in the 60s and 70s across many academic disciplines and its even more rapid collapse in the late 1970s and early 1980s against the particular context of ideological struggle within the French Communist Party. In *The Political Unconscious*, written during the context of the very same 'crisis of Marxism' within which Wickham was writing his own early essays, Jameson provocatively aimed to salvage the Althusserian approach by subsuming it as merely one allegorical level in a multi-tiered, totalizing Marxist analysis, alone capable of connecting the various partial theories emerging in the post-Althusserian academic environment of late capitalism in the 1980s.[260] For Jameson, himself deeply indebted to Benjamin, the importance of this kind of anti-teleological 'structuralist' analysis is not that it eliminates 'hindsight' once and for all, but rather that it is the very precondition for hindsight at a different level of Marxist analysis. For it is only when the historian, much like Benjamin's angel of history, is able to look back from the vantage of the present on the vast wreckage of the past and grasp the "failure or the blockage, the contradictory reversal or functional inversion, of this or that local revolutionary process" as, strictly speaking, inevitable, that they can begin to ponder "the essential mystery of the cultural past" which is nothing other than "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of

[259] Ibid., pp. 198-9.
[260] For the classic presentation of this argument, see *The Political Unconscious,* ch. 1, "On Interpretation." Jameson goes over much of the same territory in his recent posthumously published seminar, *The Years of Theory*. See also, Montag, *Althusser and his Contemporaries.*

Necessity."[261] It is the intention of the remainder of this conclusion to show that such a utopian vision exists implicitly within the subsoil of Wickham's impressive synthesis of the history of Mediterranean economic development, not despite his anti-teleological methodology, but precisely because of it.

In this spirit, I propose a reading of Wickham's narrative of medieval economic development not merely as a rejection of teleology, but also as an allegory for Wickham's own disappointed utopian longings as a Marxist the 20th century. While Wickham consistently avoids engaging directly with the "transition to capitalism" debates that preoccupied earlier generations of Marxist historians, his work—seen most clearly in the combined vision of *Framing the Early Middle Ages* and the recently published *The Donkey and the Boat*—can be understood as an effort to construct a new narrative frame through which those older debates might one day be reactivated. This project emerges out of the collapse of "actually existing socialism" in the 1980s and 90s and the generalized disillusionment of the Marxist left that followed.

In contrast to the optimism of the 1970s, when Wickham, fresh from Birmingham and the influence of Rodney Hilton, attended Peter Brown's lectures at Oxford and engaged with the structuralist ferment of Italian Marxism, the Wickham of *Framing* presents a more resigned, even bleak vision. In 1970s Italy, where Wickham studied archaeology as a postdoc, structuralism was not only intellectually dominant, but politically charged, deeply shaped by Maoist conceptions of peasant revolution, the tumultuous and violent 'Years of Lead', and Eurocommunist parliamentary hopes. In this context, the idea that peasants might "skip over" capitalism and establish socialism directly—a belief central to the 'Third-Worldist' vision of

[261] Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, p. 3, 87-8

Samir Amin, whose work influenced the early Wickham—might have appeared not only plausible but historically imminent.

Despite early Wickham's hesitance to adopt Amin's concept of the 'tributary mode of production' as a global pre-capitalist mode of production, which functionally corresponds to Wickham's 'ancient mode of production', Wickham's early work nevertheless clearly situates itself within this political tradition. Wickham has since complained that his early essays "about the fall of the western Roman empire" were read "as neutral pieces of structural analysis" and not "in political terms."[262] In his essay "The Uniqueness of the East," published shortly after "The 'Other' Transition" in 1986, in which Wickham extended his discussion of the eternal structures of feudalism and the 'tributary' mode—now adopting Amin's term in place of the 'ancient' mode—to eastern Eurasia, Wickham proposed that "socialist relations can ensue" directly from pre-capitalist society when peasants "win," as in "twentieth-century Albania or China or Cuba."[263]

But it is in his later work that Wickham's historical vision most clearly refracts the trajectory of what Samir Amin called *delinking*—the strategic withdrawal of peripheral societies from the structural domination of the global capitalist system. In *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*, published in 1985, Amin proposed that postcolonial nations, particularly those with large peasant populations, could chart an alternative path to socialism by prioritizing internal development and severing their dependence on international capital.[264] In Wickham's early work, this 'Third-

[262] Chris Wickham, "Memories of Underdevelopment: What Has Marxism Done for Medieval History, and What Can It Still Do?" In *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Chris Wickham, London: British Academy, 2007. p. 33.
[263] Wickham, *Land and Power*, p. 71.
[264] Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World*. Translated by Michael Wolfers. London: Zed Books, 1990.

Worldist' political horizon is clearly visible. Yet the irony is that it is only in *Framing the Early Middle Ages* that something like *delinking* appears as a historical form—after Wickham adopts a globalized version of the 'tributary mode of production' , via Haldon, (though he prefers to call it "feudalism"). Against the backdrop of a still 'feudal' or 'tributary' world, the "peasant mode of production" exists in fragmented "leopard spots" across post-Roman landscape: egalitarian, low-extraction, and largely autonomous peasant societies that had slipped free, temporarily, from both tax and rent. These enclaves bear a striking structural resemblance to Amin's vision of delinked socialisms in the 20th century.

But in contrast to Amin's political optimism, in Wickham's narrative the enclaves of peasant-mode societies eventually become reintegrated into feudal relations of production between the eighth and tenth centuries, a process Wickham refers to as the "caging of the peasantry."[265] The revolutionary horizon of his early work—so clearly aligned with the optimism of 1970s structural Marxism—is now displaced into a more ambiguous narrative, of alternatives that existed, but did not endure. In Wickham's later writing *delinking* exists, but only in the past tense. By the tenth century, the utopian impulse that animated it has been hollowed out by historical necessity.

Wickham never names capitalism as the final object of his inquiry—but its presence structures his narrative at every turn. In this sense, his work resembles the eponymous novel described in Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths*.[266] In Borges' story, the narrator, an unnamed Chinese spy working for the Germans during World War I, flees through the

[265] Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*, pp. 529-552.
[266] Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 119-128.

English countryside after his cover is blown. Hunted and desperate, with little time left to complete his mission, he stumbles into the home of a reclusive Sinologist named Stephen Albert. By surreal coincidence, Albert is an expert on the narrator's own ancestor, the legendary Ts'ui Pen, a governor and scholar who had mysteriously renounced power to write a novel and construct a labyrinth. For generations, readers believed Ts'ui Pen had failed at both, leaving behind a chaotic, unreadable manuscript and no trace of the promised maze. But Albert reveals the truth: the novel itself is the labyrinth.

Ts'ui Pen's baffling book, long dismissed as incoherent, is in fact a metaphysical riddle about time—structured as a narrative that endlessly bifurcates, each decision forking off into parallel and divergent paths, a vision of temporal multiplicity rather than linear succession. Strangely, the word *time* never appears in the novel. When the narrator puzzles over this absence, Albert explains by posing the question: "In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only word that must not be used?" The narrator responds correctly, "The word 'chess.'"[267] Ts'ui Pen's novel, by never naming its subject, calls maximal attention to it. Time, as it happens, is also what the narrator himself is running out of—urgently needing to transmit information to his handlers before his capture. The story concludes with another surreal coincidence: in order to signal the name of the city to be bombed, the French town Albert, the narrator murders the Sinologist Stephen Albert in his last moments before capture, knowing that the incident will appear in the next day's newspaper, thus serving as a bloody cipher to communicate his message.

So too in Wickham's narrative: capitalism, like *time* in Borges' riddle, is the structuring absence. Its very omission is what calls attention to its spectral presence. Wickham never stages

[267] Ibid., p. 126.

the "transition to capitalism" directly—rather, he explicitly distances himself from the classical Marxist transition debates, arguing that nearly all previous Marxist analyses of the more distant past have tended to have "at the front or back of their minds, the problematic of the transition to capitalism."[268] For Wickham, the inescapable gravity of the transition debates in 20th century Marxist discourse functions as a teleology, one that has set Marxist attempts to analyze the more ancient past off on the wrong foot. And yet, I would suggest that the whole arc of Wickham's work is just as haunted by the questions those debates posed. His refusal to thematize the transition is, in Fredric Jameson's sense, the clearest sign of its presence within his *political unconscious*—not as a historical endpoint, but as an "absent cause," a gravitational center that quietly structures his narrative form.

The recent publication of Wickham's *The Donkey and the Boat* in 2023 makes this subterranean structure all the more apparent. Taken together with *Framing the Early Middle Ages* and *The Inheritance of Rome*, the scale and ambition of Wickham's later work amounts to the first serious attempt to synthesize the economic history of the medieval world since Henri Pirenne's *Mohammed and Charlemagne* nearly a century earlier. Pirenne had famously argued that it was not the Fall of Rome but the Arab conquests of the seventh century that ruptured the continuity of Mediterranean commerce—cutting off the flow of luxury goods and strangling economic integration.[269] This vision of economic disruption driven by "external" shocks—later taken up by Paul Sweezy in his critique of Maurice Dobb—became a cornerstone of the

[268] Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat,* p. 682.
[269] Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), pp. 163-85.

transition debates within Marxist historiography.[270] Sweezy's emphasis on trade as a force undermining the internal logic of feudalism influenced world-systems and dependency theory, especially in the work of Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein.[271] For Amin, the capitalist world system emerged only through the subordination of peripheral regions to the demands of core capitalist states, and the revolutionary possibility lay in delinking: the severing of dependent economies from the global capitalist market in favor of autonomous development.

Wickham rejects Pirenne's model directly on account of its overemphasis on elite demand for luxury goods as an indicator for overall economic development.[272] Wickham constructs a comparative framework capacious enough to accommodate Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic world, but always with one eye on the long-term dynamics of economic transformation. In doing so, he "covertly" sets the stage for a future revisiting of the question of the transition to capitalism. Like Ts'ui Pen's *Garden of Forking Paths*, Wickham's narrative may never name its central subject. But it is precisely through its silence that the question of capitalism looms largest.

Jameson contends that the Marxist historian must confront history not as a reified "object of representation" or as a "master code among many others," but as "the experience of Necessity"—not as content to be narrated, but as "the inexorable form of events."[273] History, he writes, "is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as

[270] Paul Sweezyl, Maurice Dobb, Christopher Hill, et al. *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism.* Introduction by Rodney Hilton. London: NLB; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1976, pp. 41-45.
[271] Samir Amin, *Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis*, trans. Brian Pearce (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980, pp. 57-60.
[272] Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat,* pp. 634-5.
[273] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious,* p. 87

collective praxis," a force that cannot be apprehended directly but only "through its effects."[274] Conceived as "an absent cause," history resists symbolization, even as its formal pressures inscribe themselves in narrative form.[275]

Wickham's sober acknowledgment that feudalism, a structurally robust and dynamic mode of production that ruled human social relations for millennia across the globe, did in time give way to capitalism offers no easy consolation. But it does suggest that capitalism, too, might not be eternal. That the Bacaudae were ultimately defeated does not make their struggles meaningless. On the contrary, the defeat of past struggles is what renders them legible, as fragments of a collective longing that continue to resonate with contemporary struggles. Like Wickham and Brown, Benjamin presents a philosophy of history that is radically 'continuist', if only in the sense that the entire history of class society is characterized by the continuity of catastrophe. Benjamin calls us to recognize in these past struggles not inevitability, but urgency. "To articulate the past historically," he writes, "does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[276] Wickham's work, read allegorically as an expression of his own experience as a Marxist in the 20th century, invites us to do just that—not to relive the past, but to remember its unrealized possibilities, and to ask what they still demand of us.

[274] Ibid., p. 88.
[275] Ibid.
[276] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* pp. 198-9.

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