THE BARBARIANS

The three elements that have been described above are the true foundations of European unity, but they do not of themselves constitute Europe. They are the formative influences which have shaped the material of our civilisation, but the material itself is to be found elsewhere, in the obscure chaos of the barbarian world. For it is the barbarians who provided the human material out of which Europe has been fashioned; they are the gentes as against the imperium and the ecclesia—the source of the national element in European life.

In the past the importance of this element was minimised by the scholars and ecclesiastics who controlled education and thought, for their attention was concentrated on the traditions of the higher culture, whether literary or religious, of which they were the appointed guardians, and they were naturally hostile to anything which savoured of barbarism. It was not until the nineteenth century that the vital importance of the national contribution to European civilisation was fully realised. Then at last there came a sweeping reaction, and the new current of romantic nationalism led writers to minimise the classical and Christian elements in our culture and to derive everything from the native energy of the national genius. This is the spirit which dominates the Teutonic school of nineteenth-century historians, both in Germany and in this country, the Pan-Slavonic writers in Eastern Europe, and the adherents of the Celtic
revival in Ireland and France. And to-day the tendency finds its culmination in the theories of writers like Strzygowski, who argue that European history has been progressively falsified by the malign influence of the classical tradition and of the Catholic Church, both of them originating in the Mediterranean—that forcing-house of effete and artificial culture—and who find the true affinities of the Nordic European spirit in the art and culture of the barbarians of the Asiatic steppes.

And, in spite of such exaggerations, this reaction has its justifications. For the barbarian peoples were not merely a passive and negative background for the creative activities of the higher culture. They had cultural traditions of their own, and we are only now beginning to learn from prehistoric research how ancient and deeply rooted these traditions were. As far back as the Bronze Age, and even earlier, there were centres of culture in Central and Northern Europe which had an autonomous development and which exerted an influence not only on the surrounding peoples but even on the higher culture of the Eastern Mediterranean.

It may seem at first sight unjustifiable to describe ancient cultures of this kind as barbaric. But barbarism in the sense in which we are using the word is by no means the same thing as savagery. It is applied to any stage of social development which has not acquired the higher organisation of a settled urban and territorial state—in short, to the culture of the tribe as against that of the city. The essence of barbaric society is that it rests on the principle of kinship rather than on that of citizenship or that of the absolute authority of the state. It is true that kinship is not the only element in tribal society; in practically every case the territorial and the military factors also intervene. But whereas in a civilised state the unit is the individual or the economic group, the unit of tribal society is the group of kinsmen. A man's rights depend not on his direct relation to the state, but on his position in the kindred, and in the same way crime is not conceived as an offence against the state, but as an occasion of feud or negotiation between two groups of kinsfolk. The guilt of blood lies on the whole kindred of the slayer and must be averted by compensation to the kindred of the slain. It is true that the higher political unit of the tribe or clan does not necessarily consist of men of common blood, though they are apt to
claim such unity by some genealogical fiction. It is usually a territorial or military union of groups of kinsmen.

Consequently, in spite of the protests of patriotic Irish scholars, such as Professor MacNeil and Professor Macalister, it is legitimate to describe the social organisation of Celtic Ireland as a tribal one, since it was, no less than that of the ancient Germans, based on kinship-groups, such as the sept or the clan. The reluctance to accept this definition is, of course, due to the suggestion of cultural inferiority which the word “tribe” carries with it. Nevertheless, though the tribe is a relatively primitive form of social organisation, it possesses virtues which many more advanced types of society may envy. It is consistent with a high ideal of personal freedom and self-respect and evokes an intense spirit of loyalty and devotion on the part of the individual tribesman towards the community and its chief. Consequently its moral and spiritual development is often far in advance of its material culture. The tribal ideal, at least in the case of the more warlike pastoral peoples, is essentially of the heroic type. In fact, we may say that all the great heroic traditions which are the inspiration of epic poetry and national legend, whether Greek, Celtic, Germanic or Arab, owe their existence to the tribal culture, though as a rule only at the moment when it has come into contact with the higher culture and is itself in process of dissolution.

At the time when Roman civilisation came into contact with the barbarian world, this warlike tribal culture of the Celts and the Germans was dominant throughout continental Europe and gave it a superficial appearance of national and cultural unity. Nevertheless, barbarian culture was never a single or uniform thing. There was an extreme variety of local types which crossed with one another and produced new mixed forms of culture. Just as in West Africa to-day we may see native states with a relatively high type of social and political organisation existing side by side with tribes whose way of life was hardly changed since remote prehistoric ages, so it was in barbarian Europe. The way in which we map out ancient Europe among a comparatively small number of historic people—Celts, Germans, Thracians and so on—gives a very misleading idea of the real situation. For these peoples were not, as we are apt to imagine, nations, but loose tribal groups which might em-
brace or overlie the remnants of numerous older peoples and cultures. A group of warlike tribes might overrun a great territory and give their name to it, but they did not thereby create a unified state and culture. Underneath the ruling society and the conquering warriors the life of the conquered peasants still went on, sometimes possessing its own language and religion, and always tending to preserve a distinct social and cultural tradition.

Consequently, the more warlike a society is, the more superficial and disjointed in its culture. Successive waves of conquest do not necessarily involve a change of population; in many cases they amount to no more than the substitution of one warrior aristocracy for another. The ruling class is often responsible for the introduction of the development of a new and higher type of culture, but it has no permanence and it may pass away without leaving any permanent impression on the life of the peasant population. On the other hand, in those regions which have been little affected by war and conquest, there are no sharp contrasts between the different elements of society. The whole people tends to possess a uniform culture, though it is often of simple and primitive type. Cultures of this type are naturally deep rooted and are not easily changed, but as a rule they are to be found only in the more backward and unfruitful regions which do not attract the greed of a conqueror. The richest and most favoured lands are those which undergo the most frequent invasions, and these are consequently the regions which possess the least social unity and experience the most rapid changes of culture.

These factors were of exceptional importance in barbarian Europe owing to the warlike character of the population and the numerous movements of invasion. In fact, we shall see that the duality of culture—the contrast between the warrior noble and the peasant serf—was not confined to the age of the Barbarians, but was transmitted to later periods, and had an important influence on the development of mediaeval culture.

Of all these warrior cultures the greatest and the most typical is that of the Celts. Starting from their homelands in south-western Germany and north-eastern France, the Celtic warriors with their broad swords and their war chariots swept over the whole breadth of Europe, sacking Rome and Delphi and conquering every people between the At-
lantic and the Black Sea. Their outlying settlements were established in the heart of Asia Minor and in the Ukraine, and the whole of Central Europe, including the valleys of the Rhine and the Rhone, the Danube, and the Upper Elbe, the Po and the Dniester, were in their possession.Obviously this vast extent of territory was not occupied by a homogeneous Celtic population. The Celtic tribesmen formed a warrior aristocracy who governed their conquered territories from the great hill camps or duns whose remains are still scattered over Europe. Wherever they went they brought with them a distinctive type of culture and art which was developed in the Alpine lands in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., and which takes its name from the Swiss station of La Tène. Thus for the first time in history the greater part of continental Europe was united in a common culture. From the Atlantic to the Black Sea there was one ruling race, speaking the same language, possessing the same type of social organisation and the same manners and way of life. But it was a culture of chieftains and warriors which did not deeply affect the lives of the subject populations or entirely replace the older local traditions of culture. Only in the extreme west, in Ireland, where the Celtic conquerors remained in undisturbed possession for a thousand years, did their culture permeate the whole society. Elsewhere it passed away as quickly as it had come before the advent of a stronger power—that of the Roman Empire, which reaped the fruits of the Celtic conquests. The Gauls who sacked Rome in the fourth century did not guess how the whole fortunes of their races were bound up with that of this contemptible little Italian city-state. Yet so it was to be.

Beginning with the Gallic tribes of North Italy, Rome gradually encroached on the territory of the Celts until the whole of their great empire was destroyed. Where the Celts had broken down the resistance of the local cultures, Rome followed. But when she came into contact with the simpler and more homogeneous society of the Germanic peoples, her progress was stayed. In fact, the extension of the Roman Empire in Europe coincides to a remarkable extent with that of the Celtic territories.

There was, however, an important exception. Owing to the fact that the Romans adopted the line of the Danube as their frontier, two of the most ancient and important centres of culture in continental Europe—Bohemia-Moravia and Tran-
sylvania-Wallachia—remained outside the Empire. Nevertheless in these regions also the Celtic hegemony disappeared in the first century B.C., and new states were founded as a result of Germanic invasions and of the reassertion of the native element in the population. In 68 B.C. Burebista founded the Dacian kingdom on the Lower Danube, and seventy-four years later Marboduu, the King of the Marcomanni, conquered Bohemia and organised a powerful state. These kingdoms, and especially the latter, were the chief intermediaries between the barbarian world and the Roman Empire. They were in close contact with the Roman provinces and adopted many elements of the higher culture from the Roman traders and craftsmen who established themselves in their territories.

In this way there arose a mixed Roman-barbarian type of culture which spread far and wide through Continental Europe. Even in the far north the whole material culture of Scandinavia, which had remained in a backward state during the earlier part of the Iron Age, was now transformed by the influence of Mediterranean civilisation, which reached the Baltic not only by the maritime trade route from Northern Gaul and the mouth of the Rhine, but also directly from Central Europe by way of the Elbe and the Vistula. The use of classical ornament in design, such as the meander pattern which characterises the art of the period in Jutland, the adoption of Roman types of weapons and armour, the importation of Roman glass-ware, bronzes and coins, all testify to the strength of the current of influence from the south which was at this time affecting Nordic culture. Professor Shetelig even goes so far as to suggest that the appearance in southeast Norway and in Gotland of a new type of burial and tomb-furniture resembling that of the Roman borderlands is to be attributed to northern warriors who had returned to their homes after having served as mercenaries in the armies of the Marcomanni. And the same writer believes that the earliest Teutonic system of writing—the Runic alphabet—originated in the Marcomannic kingdom in the second century A.D. rather than, as it has usually been supposed, in the Gothic kingdom of South Russia in the following century.4

But however this may be, there can be no doubt that South Russia was the principal channel through which the influence of Mediterranean civilisation reached the eastern part of the
barbarian world. From the first age of Greek colonisation down to the Byzantine period the Greek cities of the Crimea and the neighbouring regions—especially Olbia and Chersonesus together with the Hellenised native state of Bosporus—carried on an active trade with the peoples of the Russian steppe. South Russia was one of the chief sources of corn supply in the ancient world, and the Greek, Scythian and Sarmatian tombs of the region are full of the finest products of Greek, Campanian and Alexandrian art and industry. During the Roman period the Sarmatians, an Iranian people from Central Asia, had taken the place of the Scythians as the dominant power in the steppes, and Iranian influences began to affect the Graeco-Scythian culture of the coastland. But the Greek cities still flourished under Roman protection, and the products of Mediterranean industry continued to find their way far into the heart of Russia.

Thus, in the second century A.D., the barbarian world was exposed from every side to influences coming from the higher civilisation of the Mediterranean world, and the whole of Continental Europe seemed in a fair way to become Romanised. By the following century, however, the situation had completely changed. The influence of Roman civilisation was no longer in the ascendant, and the increasing pressure of the barbarian world threatened the very existence of the Empire. Henceforward Rome stands on the defensive, and even her own civilisation begins to show traces of barbarian influences.

Nevertheless, this reassertion of the barbaric element in European life was itself in a large measure due to the work of Rome. The pressure which the Empire had exerted for centuries on the Germanic peoples by its military power and its civilising influence had transformed their culture and changed the conditions of their national life. They had acquired new methods of warfare and had been forced to combine in resistance to the disciplined power of Rome. Moreover, their natural tendency towards expansion had been checked by a relentless pressure from the Roman frontiers, so that the border peoples had been forced back on the interior. Already in the second century A.D. the whole of the outer lands were seething with the suppressed agitation of forces which could only find their outlet by some violent explosion. The wars on the Danube in the time of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius,
though apparently successful, did nothing to allay this agitation. On the contrary they brought the crisis nearer by the destruction of Dacia and the Marcomannic Kingdom, which were the only stable elements in the barbaric world and the main channels for the diffusion of Roman cultural influence. Henceforward the screen of half-civilised buffer states is destroyed, and the Empire is brought into immediate contact with the moving forces of barbarism of the interior.

From the time of the Marcomannic wars the Germanic world begins to assume a new form. The old peoples of whom we read in Caesar and Tacitus have vanished and in their place we find new groups of peoples formed either by the coming of new peoples from the north or by the fusion of the broken remnants of the older tribes in new warlike confederations or national leagues.

On the lower Rhine the Franks make their appearance, in Southern Germany the Alamanni are the dominant power, while to the east there are the federation of the Hermunduri, the Vandals in Silesia and, greatest of all, the Goths in the Ukraine and South Russia.

The latter had migrated in the second century from their old homes on the Baltic to South Russia, where they came into contact with the Iranian Sarmatians of the steppe. Early in the third century they advanced to the Black Sea and founded a powerful state of mixed Germanic and Sarmatian elements. The Greek cities of the Crimea, the third great centre of civilising influence in the barbarian world, lost their independence. Olbia and Tiras were destroyed, while Cherson and the Hellenised kingdom of Bosporus were subjugated. Henceforward the region ceased to be the main source for the diffusion of Graeco-Roman culture in Eastern Europe and became instead the centre of a new barbaric culture from which new oriental, and especially Iranian, influences were transmitted to the whole of the Germanic world.

For together with these changes there was taking place a general shifting of the axis of culture which had a profound influence on European civilisation. On the one hand the culture and economic life of the Empire was progressively losing its vitality owing to the causes that have already been described, and on the other the Oriental world was awakening to new cultural activity. The foundation of the new Persian kingdom of the Sassanids in A.D. 226 was the most epoch
making event of the third century, for it marks not only the rise of a new oriental world-power but even more the reassertion of the native Iranian tradition of culture against the hegemony of Western, or rather Hellenistic civilisation which had dominated both East and West for five hundred years. The Mediterranean world was now threatened not only by the Northern Barbarians but by the challenge of a civilisation even older than its own, which had recovered its vitality and now sought to impose its supremacy on its former conquerors.

In the middle of the third century the storm burst. The Empire, weakened by civil war and continual mutinies, was attacked by its enemies on every frontier—by the Persians in the East, by the Goths and Sarmatians on the Danube, and by the Franks and the Alamanni on the Rhine.

Throughout the reign of Gallienus (253-268) the Empire was devastated from end to end by the ravages of barbarian invasions, civil war and pestilence. Antioch was sacked by the Persians, Athens was taken by the Goths, and the temple of Diana at Ephesus was burnt by the Sarmatians. The Franks and the Alamanni ravaged Gaul and Italy, and even in distant Spain the rich city of Tarragona was destroyed. Nevertheless Rome did not perish. It was saved by the Illyrian soldier-emperors, Claudius, Aurelian and Probus, who beat back the barbarians, defeated the attempts of provincial usurpers to disintegrate the Empire, and re-established the frontiers of the Rhine and the Danube, sacrificing only the outworks of Dacia and south-west Germany.

But, as we have seen, it was no longer the same empire. The new empire of Diocletian and Constantine was a semi-oriental state that resembled the Persian monarchy more than the Roman republic. It no longer rested on the foundation of a citizen army, but on a semi-barbaric militia, supported by barbarian auxiliaries from beyond the frontiers. And, in the same way, the emperors were no longer the presidents of the Roman Senate and the representatives of the old civic tradition, like Augustus and the Antonines. They lived either on the frontiers, surrounded by their barbarian men-at-arms, like Valentinian I, or surrounded by their eunuchs and officials in the oriental seclusion of the court life of Constantinople or Ravenna, like Honorius and Theodosius II. In fact the Empire itself had changed its orientation. It no longer looked inwards
to the Mediterranean world of city-states with its centre at Rome, but outwards from its new capitals of Treves and Milan and Sirmium and Constantinople to the frontiers of the Rhine, the Danube and Euphrates. The great age of Mediterranean culture was over and a new period of continental development had begun.