

*Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages
Reconsidered*

Peter S. Wells

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Peter S. Wells is an archaeologist best known for his work on the Iron Age and early Roman periods in transalpine Europe. In *Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered*, a book aimed at a popular audience, he argues that historians have misinterpreted developments between A.D. 400 and 800 because they have relied on sparse and biased written sources instead of employing the relatively plentiful archaeological materials. Historians have thus failed to illuminate the “Dark Ages,” where they have placed “too much faith in texts concerning warfare and mass movements of people that can lead us astray.”

Wells describes his work as a “bottom up” rather than “top down” attempt to provide a reliable picture of barbarian culture over four centuries. To that end he presents a series of chapters on, among other themes, views of the declining Roman Empire, which actually continued to provide continuity in significant ways; “Dark Age kings” across northern Europe, whose panoplies contained both Roman and barbarian elements; Roman cities which continued as active urban areas throughout the period; a “revolution in the countryside” in which technological innovations and the three-field crop rotation system markedly increased food production; and the spread of Christianity, which is described as producing a syncretistic religion in which older practices continued under a thin coating of novelty. Older arguments about decline in these centuries are thus contradicted, and the period emerges as “a time of brilliant cultural activity” in which “the rantings of late Roman writers about societies they did not understand” are shown to be foiled by the creative dynamism of barbarian populations that led in important ways to modern Western civilization.

The present writer admits to ambivalence in reviewing this book because he shares Wells’s enthusiastic interest in barbarian culture and

its much-underplayed significance. One school of historians now exists in which the barbarian component in the threefold mix of Western civilization (the other two are the classical past and Christianity) is constantly minimized in order to emphasize an ideologically less-problematic Roman preponderance, less problematic that is, for elites of the European Union. Although Wells sometimes overstates the degree of Roman continuity (in terms of city life, for example) he performs a genuine service in seeking to rectify an imbalance. Unfortunately, he does not appear to be well read in the texts that he criticizes, and which do not, contrary to his constantly reiterated opinion, deal solely with the upper classes. It is, moreover, disconcerting to see Gregory of Tours, the author of a famous 6th-century history, portrayed as “a Frank himself,” whose work is thus an improvement over writers like Ammianus, Marcellinus, or Jordanes, who did not belong to the groups they described. Actually, Gregory was a Gallo-Roman bishop of aristocratic lineage who had a low opinion of Frankish culture. Nor does it build any confidence to read that the renowned Bede of Northumbria “wrote his history of England in the seventh century”—it was an 8th-century work—or to find that he is best known today “for his five-volume *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*,” when it is a single volume divided into five books for the sake of organization. Having referred to Bede’s work in this manner, it is further worrisome to find Wells stating that “In the British Isles, the inhabitants are known as Irish, Picts, Scots, and from the fourth century on, newly arrived Angles, Saxons and Jutes.” More than one thing is wrong with this sentence, but the most obvious error is the exclusion of the Britons, the vastly most numerous people whom Bede constantly excoriated, and who gave their name to the island itself. As for arguments about the nature of the so-called “Dark Ages,” most historians jettisoned that term over a generation ago because they recognized *then* its misleading implications. Wells’s revival of the corpse under these circumstances serves no purpose except to buttress a straw man and to dramatize his exaggerations about what texts cannot reveal and what material culture can.

Constrained here by space, only two other difficulties can be mentioned. One is the author's view that the migrating Germanic peoples were small in number and not particularly violent. That is a fairly recent thesis upheld by some scholars but opposed by others. In this case and elsewhere, Wells does not discuss contrary evidence and thus conveys a misleading impression to interested but uninformed readers. Similarly, Wells's chapter on the "spread of the new religion" is entirely inadequate. Matters of belief and intellectual commitment in this period cannot be accurately gauged by occasional pieces of material culture (which themselves present multiple interpretive possibilities), especially when only one percent of that material has been excavated. Syncretism certainly existed in the early Middle Ages, but a useful interpretation of the various beliefs and rituals encountered calls for the kind of sophisticated and nuanced analyses that are not to be found in *Barbarians to Angels*. In fact, the spread of Christianity is only in small part explainable through Wells's favored device of a substitution paradigm, a church at a former sacrificial site for example, because the substitutions that can be cited are mainly of a superficial character. Because Christianity was a *salvific* religion with a complex theology and organization, it cannot easily be compared to the elementary pattern of *do ut des* religiosity ("I give so that you may give") that typified Germanic, Celtic, and Roman paganism. Nor was the "new religion" always that new by 400. For example, the "little wolf," Ulfilas, the noted missionary to the Goths, had converted large numbers of Goths by 348, and the Goths of the 5th century may have been predominantly

Christian. In the final analysis, the "spread of the new religion" occurred because it offered the powerfully appealing quality of hope in an often dismal world. Any proponent of a "bottom up" approach to historical interpretation should be aware of this.

Over the past decade, publishers have responded well to a growing public interest in barbarian cultures of the late ancient and early medieval worlds. This is a good thing for archaeologists and historians alike. The resultant publications are of uneven quality, however, because the factual complexity of evidence tends to be sacrificed to market requirements of simplicity and drama. Therein lies the rub. By suggesting through continual usage that an outdated term possesses modern professional currency, by neglecting to discuss significant contrary evidence and argument, by exaggerating the originality of his own approach and finding, Wells has diminished the value of a book that might have done some good. The culture of the barbarian centuries is a fascinating topic of inquiry but it was only rarely "brilliant," and then only in certain times and places. Had Wells chosen to study serfdom, slavery, mortality rates, law, feud, warfare, and the sheer drudgery of daily life, he might have reached different conclusions. Even when balanced against extraordinary achievements in art and literature, the proverbial glass was never more than half full.

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