the Vandals

Andy Merrills and Richard Miles
the Vandals
The Peoples of Europe

*General Editors:* James Campbell and Barry Cunliffe

This series is about the European tribes and peoples from their origins in prehistory to the present day. Drawing upon a wide range of archaeological and historical evidence, each volume presents a fresh and absorbing account of a group’s culture, society, and usually turbulent history.

**Already published**

- The Etruscans
  *Graeme Barker and Thomas Rasmussen*
- The Byzantines
  *Averil Cameron*
- The Normans
  *Marjorie Chibnall*
- The Norsemen in the Viking Age
  *Eric Christiansen*
- The Lombards
  *Neil Christie*
- The Serbs
  *Sima Ćirković*
- The Basques*
  *Roger Collins*
- The English
  *Geoffrey Elton*
- The Gypsies
  Second edition
  *Angus Fraser*
- The Bretons
  *Patrick Galliou and Michael Jones*
- The Goths
  *Peter Heather*
- The Franks*
  *Edward James*
- The Vandals
  *Andy Merrills and Richard Miles*
- The Russians
  *Robin Milner-Gulland*

* Denotes title now out of print

**The Mongols**
Second edition
*David Morgan*

**The Armenians**
*A. E. Redgate*

**The Britons**
*Christopher A. Snyder*

**The Huns**
*E. A. Thompson*

**The Early Germans**
Second edition
*Malcolm Todd*

**The Illyrians**
*John Wilke*

**In preparation**

- The Irish
  *Michael Herity*
- The Spanish
  *Roger Collins*
- The Picts
  *Benjamin Hudson*
- The Angles and Saxons
  *Helena Hamerow*
- The Celts
  *John Koch*
- The Romans in the Age of Augustus
  *Andrew Lintott*
the Vandals

Andy Merrills and Richard Miles
For Dick Whittaker
Contents

List of Illustrations viii
Preface ix
List of Abbreviations xii
1 The Vandals in History 1
2 From the Danube to Africa 27
3 Ruling the Vandal Kingdom ad 435–534 56
4 Identity and Ethnicity in the Vandal Kingdom 83
5 The Vandal Kingdom and the Wider World, ad 439–534 109
6 The Economy of Vandal Africa 141
7 Religion and the Vandal Kingdom 177
8 Cultural Life Under the Vandals 204
9 Justinian and the End of the Vandal Kingdom 228
Notes 256
Pre-1800 Sources 306
Works Post 1800 313
Index 341
Illustrations

1.1 North Africa in the Vandal period 2
2.1 The Danube frontier at the time of the Marcomannic wars 29
2.2 Gaul AD 406–411 36
2.3 Hispania AD 409–422 43
3.1 The genealogy of the Hasding family 57
3.2 The Vandal kingdom after the treaty of AD 435 62
3.3 The Vandal kingdom after the treaty of AD 442 64
4.1 Arifridos’ church: The Christian church constructed in the Temple of Ceres, Thuburbo Maius 87
4.2 The hunting mosaic from Bord Djedid, Carthage 90
5.1 The Vandals and the Moors 126
5.2 Vandal Sicily 130
5.3 Vandal Corsica and Sardinia 135
6.1 Economic life in the Mediterranean world 146
6.2 Economic life in North Africa under the Vandals 152
6.3 An oil press erected near the forum in Thuburbo Maius. The press itself is visible at the bottom left of the picture 155
6.4 The arcades of a Vandal-period church in the Kasserine survey region 157
6.5 Vandal coin issues 170
7.1 Religious buildings in Vandal Carthage 190
8.1 The theatre at Carthage 207
8.2 Private and public spaces in Vandal Carthage 208
8.3 The Antonine Baths at Carthage 209
9.1 The topography of early Byzantine Carthage 235
9.2 Isometric illustration of the Basilica at Damous El Karita (reproduced courtesy of the Austrian Archaeological Institute) 242
9.3 Reconstruction of the Basilica at Bir Ftouha (reproduced courtesy of the Journal of Roman Archaeology) 244
9.4 Isometric illustration of the Basilica at Bir Messaouda 245
9.5 The Byzantine fort at Ain Tounga 254
They were inured to hardship and coarse diet, which with nourishing liquors and constant exercise, greatly contributed to their bodily strength. Their spirits were not exhausted by speculative studies, nor were they enervated by early debaucheries, but entirely employed in manly exercise.

Thomas Nugent, *The History of Vandalia*, p. 50 (London, 1761)

The Vandals have not been treated kindly by history, or by historians. For almost a hundred years, the group exerted a massive influence over the crumbling Roman world. From AD 439 when the Vandals first occupied Carthage, they created a strikingly precocious kingdom in the shadow of the old empire. For half a century they dominated the politics of the Mediterranean, and for a further 50 years ruled a state which flourished both economically and culturally. But the end – when it came – was swift. In 534 the kingdom of Carthage was swept aside by the resurgent forces of Justinian’s Byzantium, and the Vandals vanished forever.

In the twenty-first century, the Vandals are remembered primarily as a metaphor for violent and uncultured destruction – the linguistic creation of an imaginative priest who wrote in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Their cause has not been helped by a peculiar neglect among professional historians. Some dedicated histories of the group have been written – including some remarkable works of scholarship – but they have been thin on the ground. The study that follows is the first dedicated history of the group to be written in English. It draws upon much recent scholarship from North Africa, Europe, and the United States, but seeks to present an original and provocative account of this much-neglected group.

This book is a collaborative project, and the different perspectives of the two authors may occasionally be glimpsed in the chapters that follow. Chapters 1–6 were written by AHM, chapters 7–9 by RTM, but
all have benefited from joint criticism and discussion. It is hoped that this
collaborative approach will result in a more wide-ranging assessment of
the Vandals than would have been possible for one author writing alone.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

(AHM) Much of the research for this project was completed with the
support of an RCUK Fellowship at the School of Archaeology and
Ancient History at the University of Leicester. It also benefited from two
long and pleasurable summers as a Margo Tytus Fellow in the Blegen
Classics Library at the University of Cincinnati. I am particularly grate-
ful to Getzel Cohen, Jacqueline Riley, and Mike Braunlin for their help
there.

Many individuals helped enormously by reading individual chapters,
and for suggesting many improvements. In particular Simon Loseby,
Christina Pössel, Jen Baird, Lesley McFadyen, Neil Christie, Anna
Leone, Guido Berndt, and Jeremy Taylor. David Mattingly and Dave
Edwards also listened to many less structured ramblings on matters
North African and shaped my thinking greatly. Bruce Hitchner, Rob
Wanner, Dan Stewart, David Stone, Roland Steinacher, François
Furstenberg, Mark Handley, Julia Farley, and Mark Gillings also helped
with many specific points. Parts of chapters 1, 4, and 5 were presented
in front of audiences in the universities of Birmingham, Nottingham,
Manchester, Leicester, and Palermo, and I am grateful to all participants
in those discussions for their suggestions, especially Doug Lee, David
Langslow, Andy Morrison, Eric Blaum, Wolf Liebeschuetz, Robert
Markus, and Roey Sweet.

(RTM) The majority of the research for the later chapters in this book
was undertaken whilst I held a Friedrich Solmsen Fellowship at the
Institute of Research into the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-
Madison. I would like to thank the Director, Professor Susan Stanford
Friedman, and the Fellows of the Institute, as well as the extraordinary
Loretta Freiling for creating such a hospitable and intellectually stimu-
lating environment in which to work. A number of the ideas that appear
in this book were first aired at seminars at the universities of Cambridge,
Chicago, Wisconsin-Madison, Princeton, St Andrews, and the Society of
Antiquaries of London. I would like to extend particular thanks to Peter
Brown, Heimo Dolenz, Peter Garnsey, Christophe Goddard, Jill Harries,
Walter Kaegi, David Morgan, Brent Shaw, and Claire Sotinel for their
hospitality and invaluable feedback.
We are grateful to the British Museum for permission to reproduce Cornelius Visscher’s 1650 print of a Vandal from their Prints and Drawings Collection, which provides the front cover of this book. The image of the Bord Djedid Mosaic and the selection of Vandal coins come from the same institution. We would also like to thank David Mattingly for his kind permission to reproduce the photographs at pp. 87, 155, 157, 207, 209, and 254, and Heimo Dolenz and Sue Stevens for permission to reproduce the images of the Byzantine churches in chapter 9.

In many ways, the genesis of this study can be attributed to Mike Clover who has provided invaluable support and encouragement to both of its authors. The book, however, is dedicated to the memory of Dick Whittaker, who passed away as it was being finished. Dick fought long battles on the Roman frontiers, recast Roman social and economic systems in important new ways, and was an individual who was well aware of the power of North Africa to challenge assumptions and preconceptions; the Vandals would have appreciated him.
**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AE (date)</td>
<td>L’Année épigraphique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/JA</td>
<td>American Journal of Archaeology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANSMN</td>
<td>American Numismatic Society Museum Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ant. af.</td>
<td>Antiquités africaines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTB</td>
<td>Art Bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Albertini Tablets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCTH</td>
<td>Bulletin Archéologique de Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budé</td>
<td>Collection des Universités de France publiée sous le patronage de l’Association Guillaume Budé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZ</td>
<td>Byzantinischer Zeitschrift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDAC</td>
<td>Centre d’Études et de documentation Archéologique de la Conservation de Carthage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIL VIII</td>
<td>G. Willmans, T. Mommsen, R. Cagnal and J. Schmidt, Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, VIII, Inscriptiones Latinae Africae (Berlin, 1881)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Classical Philology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRAI</td>
<td>Comptes-rendus des séances de l’Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSEL</td>
<td>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EME</td>
<td><em>Early Medieval Europe</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FC</td>
<td><em>Fathers of the Church</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHG</td>
<td><em>Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCS</td>
<td><em>Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILC</td>
<td>E. Diehl (ed.) <em>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres</em> (Berlin, 1925–31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILT</td>
<td>A. Merlin (ed.) <em>Inscriptions Latines de la Tunisie</em> (Paris, 1944)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JECS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Early Christian Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRA</td>
<td><em>Journal of Roman Archaeology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JRS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Roman Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JTS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Theological Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCL</td>
<td><em>Loeb Classical Library</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEFRA</td>
<td><em>Mélanges d’Archéologie et d’Histoire de l’École Française de Rome, Antiquité</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGH</td>
<td><em>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td><em>Auctores Antiquissimi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ep.</td>
<td><em>Epistolae</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRL</td>
<td><em>Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI–IX</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRM</td>
<td><em>Scriptores Rerum Merowingicarum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCT</td>
<td><em>Oxford Classical Texts</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBSR</td>
<td><em>Proceedings of the British School at Rome</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procopius, BV</td>
<td>De bello vandalico, H. B. Dewing (ed. and tr.), LCL (Cambridge MA, 1914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Sources Chrétiennes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCNC</td>
<td>Sources Chrétiennes. Sér Annexe de textes non chrétiens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEG</td>
<td>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum (Leiden, 1923–)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAPA</td>
<td>Transactions of the American Philological Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teubner</td>
<td>Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRHS</td>
<td>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTH</td>
<td>Translated Texts for Historians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fifth century was a period of chaos within the Mediterranean world. As the political authority of the western Roman empire crumbled, powerful new groups rose to prominence in the provinces. Among the most important were the Vandals. Under Geiseric, their most famous king, they invaded the rich Roman provinces of North Africa and captured the grand commercial city of Carthage in AD 439. For the next century, the Vandals prospered at the very heart of the dying empire. In AD 455, Geiseric unleashed a cataclysmic sack of the City of Rome, and Vandal piracy remained a constant plague on Mediterranean shipping for decades thereafter. Within North Africa itself, the century of Vandal rule was a period of extremes. Remembered by many for their heretical beliefs, and their vicious persecution of orthodox ‘Nicene’ Christians, the Vandals were also sensitive patrons of learning. Grand building projects continued, schools flourished and North Africa fostered many of the most innovative writers and natural scientists of the late Latin West.

The successes of the Vandals were intimately bound up in the prosperous kingdom which they inherited. At the height of the Roman period, North Africa had been a jewel in the imperial crown. The wealth of the African cities, the rich grain fields of Zeugitana and Numidia, and the extensive olive groves of Byzacena and the Mauretaniae had become almost proverbial by the early fifth century. An anonymous merchant of the fourth century described Africa as ‘exceptional and admirable’; to Martianus Capella, a scholar of the fifth century, it was ‘awesome in its prosperity’. For two and a half centuries the African provinces had produced a massive agricultural surplus to be shipped to Rome as tax. Any grain, olive oil, wine and fish which were not appropriated by a hungry state had been sold, either within North Africa itself or in cities scattered around the Mediterranean. Not everyone in late Roman Africa was rich, but the region was certainly prosperous: its cities were ornamented with public buildings, baths, theatres and amphitheatres; olive oil burned
Figure 1.1  North Africa in the Vandal period
prodigiously in lamps throughout the region and farms continued to flourish in the countryside. Culturally, too, Roman North Africa was unusually vibrant. Christianity had been brought to the region during the second century AD, and thereafter the faith flourished there with particular strength. The African Church was defined by its saints and martyrs, but was shaped by its great theologians: Tertullian was prominent in the second century, Cyprian and Arnobius in the third, and Lactantius in the fourth. This tradition reached its peak with Saint Augustine, who was educated in the Carthage of the late fourth century, provided leadership as the bishop of the city of Hippo Regius in the early fifth, and eventually died in AD 430, as the Vandals lay siege to his adopted home.

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

The present book is an attempt to re-assess the Vandals from the perspective of the twenty-first century. It adopts a critical new assessment of the textual sources available to us – these are many and varied, including the lives and writings of saints, formal histories, chronicles, letters,
poems and estates records – and combines this with a detailed discussion of recent archaeological evidence. For the most part, then, it is a history of North Africa and the Mediterranean world in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. But the history of the Vandals did not simply end with the destruction of their kingdom. If the Vandals have slipped from the popular imagination in recent years, if images of fur-clad barbarians have been supplanted by graffiti artists or protesters as symbols of social instability, this in itself is an interesting legacy and deserves some attention.

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

‘The Romantic Vandals’

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

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

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

For the Vandals, since the time when they gained possession of Libya, used to indulge in baths, all of them, every day and enjoyed a table abounding in all things, the sweetest and best that the earth and sea produce. And they wore gold very generally, and clothed themselves in the Medic garments,
which now they call ‘seric’ and passed their time, thus dressed, in theatres
and hippodromes and in other pleasurable pursuits, and in all else in
hunting... and they had a great number of banquets and all manner of
sexual pleasures were in great vogue among them.7

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

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

Historians of the Lombards, another barbarian group, followed the
lead set by Jordanes in their treatment of the Vandals. In the seventh cen-
tury the anonymous author of the Origo gentis Langobardorum (Origin
of the Lombard People) suggested that the Lombards had defeated the
mighty Vandals at a formative stage of their prehistory. The account, in
which the twins Ibor and Aio use some quick-witted hairdressing tricks
to defeat the Vandal heroes Ambri and Assi before the benevolent gaze
of the god Wodan, and hence earn their name ‘Long-beards’, must have
been a recently coined myth, rather than a long-standing historical tradition.9
The same narrative was then taken up in modified form in the eighth-
century History of the Lombards by Paul the Deacon.10 For the Origo
author and for Paul, it was victory over the proud Vandals which won the Lombards the support of the gods – a triumph which was meaningful largely because of the later prominence (and decline) of the kingdom of Carthage. Here, the Vandals are little more than ahistorical monsters, lent a particular impact by the obvious resonance of their name.

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

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

But the Vandals were not forgotten entirely. The group are included briefly in the sprawling early seventeenth-century novel sequence *L’Astrée*, originally written by Honoré D’Urfé from 1607, and completed by Balthasar Baro after D’Urfé’s death in 1625. For much of its length, *L’Astrée* is a bucolic romp through fifth-century Gaul, in which the grim realities of late Roman society are replaced with an idealized image of Merovingian and Gallo-Roman chivalry. A similar tone is maintained in a substantial passage in Balthasar Baro’s fifth book, when the action briefly switches to Vandal Carthage. In a plot loosely based
upon the Vandal sack of Rome in AD 455 and the kidnap of the imperial women (a historical episode discussed more fully in chapter 4, below), Baro traces a complex web of courtship and love. Two Roman knights, Olimbre and Ursace, are smitten with the imperial women and seek to win their freedom. Obstructing them are the ambitions of the Vandal king Génseric (Geiseric) and the rather more wholesome love of his son Trasimond (Thrasamund). The plot takes several turns, including a North African beach scene and a substantial palace fire lifted almost directly from the pages of the *Aeneid*, but all turns out well in the end – the heart of the king is softened, and the various couples are allowed to attend to their nuptials in freedom.

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

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

The Vandals were not central figures in this imaginative tradition, but they were familiar enough as supporting players. Much the same was true of the genealogical associations which developed around the group.
From the early sixteenth century, the Swedish and Danish royal families and the Dukes of Mecklenburg (later Mecklenburg-Strelitz) on the Baltic coast of Germany all claimed that they were descended from the Vandals, among other barbarian peoples. Among the Swedes and Danes this was simply one claim among many – a point illustrated particularly clearly in the Swedish royal title *Svecorum Gothorum Vandalorumque rex* (‘King of the Swedes, Goths and Vandals’), and in the three crowns of the Swedish royal standard. In Mecklenburg-Strelitz the claim to Vandal heritage was taken more seriously, and was based in part upon a convenient conflation of the Vandals who were supposed to have originated in the area, with the Slavic Wends, who settled there in the eighth century AD. These claims to Vandal royal heritage crossed the channel into Britain through the marriage of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz to George III in 1761, and from there (perhaps surprisingly) migrated still further west to the American colonies.

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

‘The Destructive Vandals’

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

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

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

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

Other references abound. Alexander Pope referred to the decadent Catholic Church as ‘these Holy Vandals’ in his vitriolic Essay on Criticism in 1711; in 1734, John Theophilus Desaguliers happily condemned Descartes and all opponents of Isaac Newton as ‘this army of Goths and Vandals in the philosophical world’. Grégoire, then, drew upon a well-established tradition in invoking the barbarians of the dark ages to express his horror at contemporary events. Prior to Grégoire, however, that it was the Goths, rather than the Vandals, who were the most common emblems of barbarian destruction. While the Vandals do feature occasionally in these jeremiads, the Goths
appear with almost monotonous regularity. Indeed, the negative associations of the group were so strong that Gibbon remarked in the tenth chapter of his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

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

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

‘The German(ic) Vandals’

Grégoire’s calumniaion of the Vandals was met with horror from some quarters. The bishop himself acknowledged this controversy in his *Mémoires*:
Those respected scholars, born in that part of Germany, whence the Vandals had once come, claimed that the meaning which I gave to the term ‘vandalisme’ was an insult to their ancestors, who were warriors, and not destroyers.32

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

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

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the first reliable editions of texts relating to the history of the Vandals became available. It was the rediscovery of Tacitus’ Germania during the fifteenth century which had the greatest effect upon the study of all ‘barbarian’ groups, including the Vandals.34 The Germania was written in the late first century AD, and is largely concerned with the detailed description of the politics and social practices of the inhabitants of the lands beyond the Rhine and the Danube, chiefly as a contrast to what Tacitus perceived to be the moral failings of the contemporary Roman world.35 The first printed edition was published in 1470, and the text attained particularly wide readership through the scholarly edition of Justus Lipsius in 1575.36 To the Northern European humanists of the sixteenth century, the Germania promised a revolution in the understanding of the distant past. Tacitus seemed to offer a perfect taxonomy of ancient Germanic
culture to a scholarly world increasingly captivated by the order and patterns they felt to be inherent in nature. At the centre of their reading of Tacitus was the notion of the Germani as a distinct biological group – proud, martial and morally superior to the peoples around them. Tacitus’ statement that the Germani were divided into smaller subgroups, including the Marsi, Gambrivii, Suebi and (crucially) the Vandili, could then be used as the starting point for the investigation of specific Germanic ‘peoples’, linked by blood and culture to their neighbours, but each worthy of historical study in its own right. Passing references in other classical sources – like the Elder Pliny’s Natural History, or Ptolemy’s Geography – could then be stitched together in a more or less coherent composite image of a thriving German ‘golden age’. When coupled with early medieval texts, like Jordanes’ Getica and Paul’s History of the Lombards, which described the fourth- and fifth-century migrations of groups with the same names, the armature for coherent histories of these ‘tribes’ or ‘peoples’ came into focus. As shall be discussed, attitudes to ethnicity, particularly of the ‘Germanic’ barbarians, have been utterly transformed over the last two generations, but the notion of distinct, identifiable ‘peoples’ as worthy subjects of history was a dominant theme of antiquarian scholarship from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries down to the middle of the twentieth.

Other texts were also examined critically by these manuscript scholars, and began to circulate in ever-improving scholarly editions. The Historia Persecutionis of Victor of Vita was perhaps the most important of these, and remains a text of central importance to the understanding of the Vandals. Originally written in the late 480s by a vicious critic of the Vandal kingdom, and largely concerned with the sufferings of the Catholics under their rule, the Historia widely circulated in manuscript form during the medieval period. From the late fifteenth century the Historia appeared in print, and several different translations into modern languages were known in the sixteenth and seventeenth, including one (now lost) Italian translation by Niccolo Machiavelli. Most important was the edition with extensive notes produced by Thierry Ruinart in 1694, which provided a platform for all subsequent scholarship on the text. Procopius’ Greek History of the Wars is the other crucial text for the study of Vandal history. The African sections provide a detailed account of the fall of the Vandal kingdom, as well as some discussion on the background of the group. Like Victor, Procopius had long been known to scholars and his text had circulated for centuries in a variety of Latin translations. Surprisingly, printed Latin translations of the work were published only relatively late, and those relating to the Vandals
were the last to appear. The text became known widely to western European scholars through Hugo Grotius’ compilation *Historia Gotthorum, Vandalorum et Langobardorum* in 1655, and later in a similar compilation of Lenain de Tillemont in the early eighteenth century. This interest in the critical compilation of classical and medieval histories coincided with a growing fascination with the physical remains of the European past, as well as with the gradual rise to prominence of confident early modern monarchies, particularly in the north of the continent. The result was the efflorescence of a variety of new ‘national’ histories from the early sixteenth century. Drawn by the wealth of newly uncovered historical material, scholars turned again to the twilight years of the Roman empire and the early centuries of the medieval period in the search for their national origins. François Hotman suggested that the political systems of contemporary France were to be found in the peculiar fusion of Gallic and Frankish identities from the sixth century in his *Franco-Gallia* (1573) – a lead that was widely followed over the course of the following century. Scholars like Olaus and Johannes Magnus, and Drouet de Mauperty traced the origins of the Swedish monarchy to the heroic Gothic past, in the direct hope of winning royal favour. Robert Sheringham’s *De Anglorum gentis* in 1670 identified the origins of the English among the Angles, just as Johann Jacob Masov, *Geschichte der Teutschen* (1726–37) traced modern German identity to the Germani known to Tacitus. Politically infused as these histories certainly were, all demonstrated a fascination with the minutaie of human history that reflected the scholarly spirit of the age.

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