

**Helmut Castritius.** *Die Vandalen: Etappen einer Spurensuche.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2007. 190 pp. EUR 17.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-17-018870-9.



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The Vandals have had terrible press through the centuries, based on an incident in Rome in June 455, when they did not destroy the city but "only" plundered and murdered. Who the Vandals turned out to be, where they came from, what they were doing in France, Spain, and North Africa, and what happened to them is the subject of this volume. The book is well organized and thorough, offering a comprehensive history of the group from its earliest traces, now veiled in myth, and the inaccurate geographical characterization of their whereabouts by early Greek and Roman historians, to the well-documented and rather abrupt end of Vandal power in North Africa.

This pocketbook-sized, perfect-bound book provides a detailed history of the Vandals, beginning with the chapter "Statt einer Einleitung: Vandalenbilder," in which Helmut Castritius considers the earliest written sources on and earliest traceable settlement areas of the Vandals, their appearance on the periphery of the Roman world, and their later penetration into it by the third century CE. The author interrupts the historical pro-

gression by inserting sections on the sacral status of the rulers ("Die Sakralität der Herrschaft") and on kingship, nobility, and freedom ("Gemeinfreiheit"). The history continues with fourth-century Vandals and the Goths' contribution to Vandal identity. The attention of the Romans was drawn to the Vandals in the "short" fifth century from 405-06 to 484, when the group pushed across the Rhine on the way to a sojourn in Gaul, crossing the Pyrenees to Spain in 409, and crossing the Mediterranean to North Africa in 429. The next chapter treats the rest of the Vandal period in North Africa from 484 to 530. Subsequent chapters consider state and society, "Die Usurpation, die ein Ende war," Vandal hegemony in North Africa as a failed experiment, and the current evaluation of the Vandals. The volume ends with footnotes, references to sources and literature, a family tree of the Hasding dynasty, and registers of maps, names of persons and peoples, places and areas, concepts and things.

The author begins with images instead of an introduction, and considers the need of the Ro-

mans and others to name groups of "barbarians," moving in whole family units through territory east of the Rhine, who were only dimly perceived by the Romans and posed no threat to them. Along with other Germanic social groups, however, the Vandals began to move toward the Roman boundary on the middle and lower Danube after about 375 due to incursions by the Huns from the east, bringing the various groups into better focus and giving the Romans a good reason to try to differentiate among them. Castritius cites the elder Pliny in his second chapter, "Die Anfänge im Licht der Schriftquellen," who had already named the Vandals (located somewhere south of the Baltic east of the Elbe, but also somewhere in eastern Europe) among five large Germanic groups in his encyclopedic work of 77 CE. Tacitus, in the year 98, characterizes "Vandalians" as having a truly genuine and original name. In later writings, the royal line and on occasion the whole people were known as Hasdings, a word with an etymology that has to do with hair and the concept of "long-haired kings" and their numinous quality of leadership, which were also known in Merovingian times.

A story of the Langobards from their stay in Italy tells of their victory over the Vandals in a battle thought to have occurred sometime in the last three centuries BCE on the eastern edge of then-Celtic Europe. It remains speculative, based merely on third-hand stories passed on by poorly informed historians writing in Latin much later. Centuries later, Cassius Dio reports that the Roman commander Drusus encountered forces in the Vandal Mountains (*vandalische Berge*) in 9 CE, which are taken to be the Krkonoše (*Riesengebirge*) or the Sudetenland. Cassius Dio also reports that in the year 171 or 172 CE, the Hasdings came to Dacia, hoping to settle there. The Vandals were early adapters of the horse for battle, acculturated in the opinion of Castritius through contact with peoples of the steppes who transformed Vandal farmers and herders into raiders and plunderers, perhaps rather akin to the Vikings, farmers who

built highly developed ships and went raiding in the Baltic and beyond. The Romans were able to contain the Vandals and other peoples then in a sort of protectorate northwest of the bend of the Danube along the upper river Theiss. The Hasding Vandals attempted to break free of this containment along with Goths, Ostrogoths, Taifals, and other peoples under the cover term of the so-called Skythian War of the third century (described rather confusedly by the Romanized Goth, Jordanes, in the sixth century), which even involved marine operations in the Black and Aegean Seas. The Vandals were, however, repulsed again by Aurelian in what is now eastern Hungary, when they had to send hostages and provide two thousand riders for the Roman army, some of whom formed a mounted unit that was stationed in Syria and Egypt. The historian Zosimos writes c. 500 that Semnons, Burgundians, and Vandals were defeated at the River Lech (in southern Germany), but these were likely not the Hasdings but the Siling Vandals—another subgroup, then located in Silesia, according to Ptolemy, writing in the first half of the second century.

Castritius interrupts his chronology at this point to consider the issue of the sacred status of kingship. The ancient feature of Dioscurian double leadership can be traced to the Indo-European period through comparative mythology and remained in place for millennia, either literally, with two rulers, or in royal titles. The early concept was that of divine twins, sons of the sky god, incorporated as royal representatives on earth. No direct evidence for the mythological validity of the royal concept lies behind the alliterative names of the Vandal period, but abundant comparative analogues can be found elsewhere in ancient times. The nobility among the Vandals shared the aura of the long hair with their rulers and shared power until King Geiserich later consolidated a sole kingship in Hasding North Africa.

The chronology continues with the fourth century and the later contribution by the Goths to

the identity of the Vandals. Byzantine historian Procopius characterized the Vandals as having "Gothic" (*Getae*) names along with white skin and blond hair, speaking Gothic, and belonging to the Arian faith, though he is known to have penned many inaccuracies and to have followed the custom in classical ethnography of lumping previously unknown peoples into known groups. Positing close contact between the Goths and Vandals west of the Black Sea is, however, not controversial. In any case, the incursion of the Huns around 375 caused Germanic peoples in modern-day Bulgaria and Romania to flee westwards. Around 400, the Vandals, along with the Alans, moved west along the Danube picking up the Sueves and other smaller groups as they went. By 405 the Vandals had crossed the middle Danube into the northern Alpine regions with an "avalanche of people" (p. 48), which led to the weakening or abandonment of Roman border controls on the middle and upper Danube. The disruption must have been enormous, given that members of warrior bands were also accompanied by their families, dependents, oxen, and supplies. The site of the crossing(s) of the Rhine is disputed--perhaps across a Roman bridge in Mainz on the last day of 405--but various different groups were involved: Alans (perhaps including the Siling Vandals, who were their direct neighbors in Spain) and the Hasding Vandals under King Godegisel, along with the Quads (later called Sueves in Spain).

The sojourn in Gaul remains obscure. Confusion reigned in Roman politics during this period with the incursion of Goths into Italy in 406 and troubles in Britain. Exactly where the wandering peoples were during this period is not known. It is known, however, that the Hasding Vandals, Quads-Sueves, Siling Vandals, and Alans crossed the Pyrenees in late summer 409. In order to counter the usurper Constantine III, the Roman commander Gerontius in Spain offered regions designated by treaty to the groups escaping from Gaul. The Hasdings were given parts of Asturia and Galicia; the Quads-Sueves, western parts; the

Silings, Baetica in southern Spain; and the Alans, Portugal and western Spain and southeastern Spain. The distribution was decided by lottery, according to Orosius, in an ancient Germanic way. The number of persons accommodated can only be estimated, but it may have been as many as one hundred thousand.

This seemingly settled period ended with Gerontius's death in battle. His protégé, Maximus, was forced to flee from his own forces, and the Vandals' land claims were declared invalid. Following political confusion, some level of cooperation seems to have emerged between the recently settled groups and the local inhabitants. This temporary calm was interrupted by the West Goths, who after failing in an attempt to move through Spain to North Africa, turned against the Alans and Silings before withdrawing to Gaul. The surviving Alans and Silings joined the Hasdings. The title "Rex Vandalorum et Alanorum" held by the Hasding kings stems from this time.

During their residence in Spain, the Vandals became familiar with ships and the sea. North Africa--at the time the main supplier of grain and olive oil to Italy--must have appeared a promised land in comparison with their ancient homeland on the Theiss and Danube and the meager existence endured on their journeys. Even so, translation from Spain to North Africa was no easy matter for thousands of people, their horses, other animals, and possessions. Geiserich's organizational talents must have been prodigious; the estimated fifty thousand who landed in North Africa in May 429 were obviously transported on requisitioned ships, most likely from the southernmost point in Spain at Tarifa. The landing site is not known, though Castritius indicates four possibilities. Castritius devotes several pages to pondering how the thousands made their way. Little or nothing in written sources is available to answer his questions.

Before his death on August 28, 430, Saint Augustine witnessed the first three months of the

fourteen-month siege of Hippo Regius, which included a battle with Roman forces under the commander Bonifatius. The Vandals won, Bonifatius departed by sea for Italy, and the Vandal forces bypassed Hippo Regius and continued on to lay siege to Carthage. By 435, Geiserich had settled in Hippo Regius and concluded a treaty sanctioning the presence of the Vandals in North Africa, albeit by making significant concessions to the western Roman empire, including giving his son, Hunerich, as a hostage in Ravenna. But it was preoccupied in Europe with the Visigoths, Burgundians, and rebellious peasants in Gaul, and by October 439, the Vandals had taken Carthage and its trading fleet.

Geiserich now saw himself as an equal of the rulers of Ravenna and Byzantium and his people as citizens of a sovereign state. To consolidate his power, he persecuted Catholic orthodoxy in favor of Arianism. The Vandal fleet was, furthermore, sent out to probe lower Italy and Sicily in 440. The Vandals did harry and plunder in Sicily and attack Catholic sites but refrained from attacking walled cities. Ravenna entered into a second treaty with the Vandals in 442 in an effort to contain them. Promotion of Arianism as the state church of the Vandal realm, often to the brutal detriment of the Catholic Church, its priests, and its congregations, intensified after the treaty of 442 as an instrument of political consolidation. The tactic was, however, subject to outside politics and was thus a balancing act. By 454 a Catholic bishop could again be ordained in Carthage.

Turmoil resulting from the assassination of Valentinian in 455 brought Petronius Maximus to the position of ruler of the western Roman empire. Geiserich considered the treaty of 442 to have lapsed with Valentinian's death; two months after the murder of Valentinian a Vandal fleet sailed up the Tiber, reaching Rome on June 2, 455. Pope Leo I was sent to meet the invaders and evidently persuaded them not to destroy the city. Meanwhile, the panicked citizens of Rome stoned

Petronius Maximus to death. The Vandals restricted themselves to heavy plundering and murder in the Eternal City for the next two weeks. That, along with removal of treasures, left an indelible association with the name of Vandal. The sack was at least partially a personal matter, conducted by Geiserich to retrieve the promised bride of his son Hunerich, Eudocia, who had been promised in marriage to Petronius Maximus in the wake of Valentinian's death.

After these events, the Vandals had sunk again to the status of rogue nation. Renewed discrimination in Vandal-controlled North Africa against Catholics played into the predilection towards Catholic martyrdom in that place and time, but the expedition to Rome was just one of many after 455, when the Vandals established bases on the coasts of Spain, Italy, Gaul, and on the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, and Corsica that endured to the end of Vandal rule. Sardinia was especially important for its forests. The Vandals used the island as a place of banishment and enslavement of internal enemies, who were put to work cutting and working trees for the large Vandal fleet. A bold attempt was made to defeat the troublesome fleet when a large flotilla with troops sailed west from Constantinople in 468 and anchored off Cape Bon, sixty kilometers east of Carthage. Negotiations ensued during which Geiserich feigned cooperation, only to let his burning ships bear down on the Byzantine fleet later and destroy all but a few that fled to Sicily. The western realm fell into confusion, and Byzantium sought a *modus vivendi* with the Vandals that extended Vandal rule over North Africa for two more generations. Arrangements were also made with Odoacer, the new power in Italy.

Geiserich died on January 24, 477, after having ruled the Vandals and Alans with an admixture of Goths and others for almost fifty years. He ended the double monarchy in 428 and instituted the succession of the eldest surviving son. The maintenance of the large transportation fleet for

export of foodstuffs across the Mediterranean was for Hunerich of continuing economic importance and persecution of Catholics was continued as a state policy. A nagging problem was increased pressure by Berber groups to the south. A succession crisis was exacerbated by the Arian-Catholic conflict that ultimately led to further repression of Catholics. External pressure from the Berbers and internal turmoil due to the failed attempts to get or force cooperation from the Catholic Church weakened the Vandal polity.

Hunerich died unexpectedly in the summer of 484 and was succeeded by his oldest nephew, Gunthamund. A more tolerant policy toward Catholics beginning in August of 484 was due to the need to reduce Catholic-Arian domestic antagonism in the face of the Berber threat, and perhaps to the strengthening in Italy of the Ostrogothic Arians under Theodoric. Gunthamund died in October 486 and was succeeded by his brother Thrasamund, who reigned for twenty-seven years. On the whole, although Thrasamund was somewhat more enlightened than his predecessors, persecution against Catholics continued. Meanwhile, Theodoric extended his realm after 507 to include southern Gaul and Spain along with alliances with other Germanic peoples in various territories. The widowed Thrasamund entered into direct alliance with now-Arian Ravenna through his marriage in the year 500 to Amalafri-da, Theodoric's sister. Arian hegemony seemed secure.

The geopolitical stage was, however, turning as Constantinople increased its efforts to intervene on behalf of Catholics and as stronger, more sophisticated Berbers and other North African tribes continued to nibble at the fringes. When Thrasamund died on May 6, 523, Geiserich's son Hilderich assumed the throne. Before he officially became ruler on the following day, despite his promises to maintain Arianism, Hilderich, a Catholic, invited the Catholic bishops back to Carthage and returned church property. This rec-

onciliation, along with a renewed alliance with Constantinople, meant both distancing from Ostrogothic Arianism and accusations of treason from the Arian church and Vandal patriots. Amalafri-da was taken prisoner and her Goth retinue killed. These actions and losses in the field against the Berbers set the population against Hilderich, who was thrown into prison along with his immediate family on June 15, 530.

The last ruler of the Vandals was Gelimer, a great-grandson of Geiserich. Hilderich's actions had led to the increased isolation of the Vandal realm. Gelimer endured rebellions that deprived the Vandals of Sardinia and Tripolitania, for which he sacrificed a great number of ships and troops. At the same time Constantinople under Justinian I had dispatched five hundred ships with about fifteen thousand troops in his direction that landed on the coast of present-day Tunisia in August 533. Gelimer fled after military defeats into the mountains west of Hippo Regius, where he surrendered with his entourage at the end of March 534. The Vandal forces were integrated into the Byzantine army and the realm of the Vandals thus came to an end.

In the chapter "Staat und Gesellschaft im vandalischen Nordafrika," Castritius includes sections on the monarchy, army and fleet, administration, economics and society, culture, and minority religions under the Vandals. Castritius includes much that deserves a close reading, even beyond the chronology of the political history.

Quite independently of this volume, a book was published about the Vandals by Guido Berndt in 2007. The books can be read side by side for complementary detail. Berndt is especially good on ancillary matters and circumstances not treated in depth by Castritius, but Castritius also provides commentary not present in Berndt.[1]

Note

[1]. Guido M. Berndt, *Konflikt und Anpassung: Studien zu Migration und Ethnogenese der Vandalen* (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 2007).

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