

A BARBARIAN ALTERNATIVE OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION: PERIPHERAL SOCIETIES OF WESTERN EURASIA IN THE 1st MILLENNIUM AD IN LIGHT OF HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Within the paradigm of multilinear social evolution, this article introduces and conceptualizes the notion of a “barbarian alternative” of social evolution. It delineates a set of peripheral European societies spanning from the 5th century BC to the 11th century AD, extending from Iceland and Greenland to the Volga region, and from the Scandinavian Peninsula to the Balkan Peninsula. From a world-systems perspective, these societies are characterized as semi-peripheral communities that were gradually integrated into the Mediterranean fragment of the world-system, ultimately merging by the 11th century into the fully developed civilization of Christian Europe. These communities shared a broadly similar economic and cultural model, characterized by a combination of relatively mobile forms of arable farming, low-mobility livestock breeding, and a significant proportion of supplementary trades. Agricultural production was inherently risky due to natural, climatic, and technological factors, resulting in a chronic deficit of surplus produce. This deficit was compensated through various practices, chiefly long-distance trade and diverse forms of capitalizing on violence (robbery, racketeering, mercenary activities). Barbarian societies were distinguished by an established social hierarchy and differentiation; they were complex but not strictly stratified in a “class-legal” sense. The creation of stable, centralized polities was the exception rather than the rule. Political leaders were often either “bigmen”, mediators of economic and political communication, or chiefs relying on kinship networks and adopting quasi-kinship ties.

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Key social institutions included assemblies of full-right members, feasts, gift-giving practices, oaths, collective revenge, and other rituals rooted in isomorphic primordial pluralistic religious cults.

Keywords: barbarian society, barbarians, barbarian world, barbarian Europe, 1st millennium AD, social evolution, world-system, barbarian alternative of social evolution, historical anthropology.

Modern historical anthropology, encompassing cultural, social, and political dimensions, alongside the *multilinear theory of social evolution* (Bondarenko et al. 2002, 2002a), identifies several principal pathways in the development of human societies. Each invariant pathway comprises a set of distinct but related types of social systems, sharing core characteristics without being identical. First among these are the *primary civilizations* of the Old and New Worlds (Trigger 2003), alongside their geographically peripheral and chronologically subsequent derivatives — *secondary civilizations* — shaped by the diffusion of cultural patterns, social practices, technologies, and ideologies originating from primary civilizations. Second, there is the *nomadic pathway* exemplified by the Eurasian steppe nomads spanning from Pannonia and the Black Sea to the Mongolian-Manchurian steppe (Bondarenko et al. 2002a; Kradin 2021). I contend it is imperative to recognize another historically significant and expansive *alternative path of social evolution*: the so-called “barbarians” of Western Eurasia, inhabiting regions from Iceland and Greenland to the Volga area, and from the Scandinavian Peninsula to the Balkans. This represents a distinct trajectory of social evolution, comparable in scope and significance to the nomadic one (Bondarenko et al. 2002a). Unlike nomadic communities, however, the barbarian societies of Europe have been insufficiently conceptualized as a specific socio-economic and cultural type, one adapted to the unique natural and environmental conditions of northern and eastern Western Eurasia and characterized by distinctive social structures and mentalities.

The concept of the *barbarian world* as a historical phenomenon has been most thoroughly analyzed by Aron Ya. Gurevič (Gurevič 1982), Vera P. Budanova (Budanova 2000), and Karol Modzelewski (Modzelewski 2015). From their work, it is clear that the so-called *barbarian kingdoms* or *successor-states* within the former Western Roman Empire territory were not models of typical barbarian society, but rather continuations and transformations of Roman imperial authority and provincial socio-cultural identities (Reimitz 2015). The term “barbarian”, along with related lexemes such as “barbarian society”, “barbarian world”, as well as *Barbaricum*, is, of course, conventional; nevertheless, it is no more an abstract generalization than the terms “nomad” or “nomadic”. In this regard, the development of *nomadology* as a specialized sub-discipline within Ancient and Medieval history offers a useful model for the establishment of a corresponding sub-discipline — *barbarology*. Peripheral barbarian Europe constituted

a distinct socio-cultural world whose traditions form an integral part of the European civilizational heritage, alongside the classical Greco-Roman and Christian components (Modzelewski 2015).

From the standpoint of cultural regionalization and world-systems analysis (Kradin 2024), European history — defined here as Western Eurasia's history — can be understood as the interaction of two cultural-historical spheres, or local civilizations, without imposing rigid ethno-linguistic or confessional and cultural boundaries. The first, central or *circum-Mediterranean zone*, includes North Africa, Asia Minor, and the Black Sea region (Randsborg 1991; Braudel 2001; Norwich 2007; Abulafia 2011). The second, semi-peripheral *extra-Mediterranean zone*, extends from Iceland to the Volga area and from Scandinavia to the Balkans. As with the Great Eurasian Steppe nomads, the European barbarians existed in a symbiotic and parasitic relationship with the “high civilizations”. Barbarian societies and polities were a “shadow”, to use Barfield's (Barfield 2001) metaphor, of the Mediterranean communities. These societies differed markedly both from Mediterranean state and corporate structures and from the northern and eastern peripheries, where Mesolithic and other primitive economies and cultural patterns predominated. Semi-peripheral Western Eurasian societies were gradually incorporated into the expanding Mediterranean fragment of the Eurasian world-system, initially through the Roman world-empire and later via Romano-Latin, Greco-Roman, and, to some extent, Islamic cultural spheres.

The periodization of the history of the European barbarian world can be conventionally traced back to the 5th century BC, when the first relatively comprehensive written accounts by Greek authors, containing information about the “northern barbarians”, appear (Skinner 2012). In reality, since barbarian societies were predominantly illiterate and poorly documented, their history is only partially reconstructed through external sources or, subsequently, through descriptions by their “descendants”, who had adopted written culture.

My article focuses on the final and decisive phase of barbarian history, spanning from the 1st century BC to the 11th century AD. The lower boundary of this period is defined by the maximum territorial expansion of the Roman Empire, which intensified contacts between the Mediterranean “Greco-Roman” world and northern barbarian communities. The upper boundary, the 11th century, marks the emergence of “Christian Europe”, characterized by the consolidation of early and established states and the formation of “new Christian nations” (Wolfram 2001; Pohl, Wieser 2022). This period also witnesses the so-called “social mutation”, a prolonged process culminating in the establishment of the seigniorial-vassal and manorial-castle systems of “*dominium et ecclesia*” within Christian Europe (Guerreau 2001; Wickham 2016; Buc 2019).

The turn of the eras coincides with the period of maximum Roman imperial expansion, which can be regarded as a true world-empire,

exemplifying the zenith of Roman imperialism and the establishment of the Romans as an imperial nation (Revell 2016; Burton 2019). However, throughout the first millennium, Europe's geopolitical structure underwent significant transformations within the world-system. By approximately the year 1000, any Western Eurasian world-empire was no longer feasible, as the circum-Mediterranean area couldn't be the only geopolitical center. Europe increasingly became a battleground for various local political systems and global communication networks, some of which originated on the "barbarian" periphery (Heather 2014).

From a cultural geographical perspective, barbarian Europe in the 1st millennium AD comprised two principal components: the *Viking world* (Brink, Price 2008) and the communities and polities along the *Limes*, including the Western Roman, post-Roman, and Eastern Roman (*Romaioi*) empire (Curta 2022).

From a technological and historical perspective, barbarian societies emerged during the *Iron Age* in Europe. These societies primarily expanded into regions where landscape and geographic conditions permitted agriculture. The traditional economic and cultural model of barbarian societies was based on extensive arable farming combined with low-mobility livestock husbandry. In virtually all regions, these were zones characterized by risky farming and limited surpluses (Milov 1998). A distinctive feature of this agrarian-livestock economy was the complementarity of agricultural practices with hunting, fishing, gathering, and various specialized trades. Notably, forestry and water resources — ranging from seas to wetlands — played a crucial role in supporting these communities' livelihoods.

The formation of this economic and cultural model resulted from a long process of adaptation to Forested, Forest-Steppe, and, in some cases, Steppe and Taiga landscapes. Even in extreme environments, such as Iceland (Byock 2001), agriculture and livestock breeding remained the economic mainstays. The *segmentary societies* of mobile pastoralists and farmers in Africa are often cited as ethnographic analogues for understanding the social and economic organization of Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic-speaking peoples of Europe during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Curta 2001: 319–322; Tymowski 2008; Modzelewski 2015: 286).

The complex economic and cultural systems of peripheral extra-Mediterranean societies — characterized by a combination of agriculture, livestock breeding, hunting, fishing, and gathering in varying proportions — necessitated a flexible sedentary lifestyle and were generally extensive in nature. The scale of each community and the complexity of its governance structures were naturally constrained by the volume of surplus production and the availability of unique resources. Consequently, such societies could typically afford only a relatively modest "apparatus" of governance and control, lacking the resources to maintain both *general* and *specialized functionaries* or *military specialists* detached from productive labor.

Barbarian societies were in a persistent search for compensatory sources to counterbalance the chronic deficiencies of their agricultural systems. They thus readily engaged in *long-distance trade*, servicing trade and communication routes, as well as *racketeering* and *mercenary* activities within the regions — particularly in the *Limes* polities that developed in circum-Mediterranean Europe (McCormick 2001; Jesch 2015; Ling et al. 2018). As a result, individual communities frequently became hyper-militarized, organized around the concept of a folk of warriors: a community of combatants led by a military leader, comparable to a pack of predators subsisting on a predatory-extractive mode of production (Enright 1996; Cardini 2014; Earle 2021: 131–154).

On the ethnolinguistic map of the barbarian world, speakers of Celtic, Paleo-Balkan, Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, and other often unidentified linguistic groups expanded to dominate vast territories at various stages. Nevertheless, these ethnocultural and linguistic distinctions were not determinative in shaping differences in social and political organization, which often exhibited isomorphism across peoples with markedly different cultural traits. More pronounced were the differences between societies in direct contact with, or migrating into, territories inhabited by peoples of the circum-Mediterranean area — such as the *Limes* of the Roman Empire — as well as those under the direct or indirect influence of Mediterranean agents, and those groups residing on the more remote periphery.

The social organization of European societies unexposed to “Mediterranean culture” was founded upon a personal, emotional relationship with one’s land, cultivated plot, or share of ancestral property; this connection constituted a fundamental component of a free individual’s identity. Without it, one became, at best, “dispossessed” and, at worst, dehumanized — reduced to an “outcast wolf”. Hereditary landholdings — known as *óðal*, *folcland*, or *(в)отъчина* — were simultaneously the property of the individual family and subject to the external control of a local community, defined as a collective of neighbors and distant kin. “Full ownership” of a plot or territory was less a legal status than a genealogical and ancestral right, which was intimately sacred; it was the dwelling place of the individual’s kin, where deceased ancestors continued their posthumous coexistence (Gurevič 1982).

Barbarian society was characterized by a well-established social hierarchy and differentiation; it was complex, though not strictly stratified in a “class-legal” sense. The societies of the peoples inhabiting *Northern* and *Limes* Europe developed a sociocultural organizational pattern that can be understood as a distinct form of complex social organization — an alternative pathway in social evolution.

Barbarian economic practices, on one hand, were fundamentally rational and market-oriented. Individual communities actively integrated into *long-distance* and *maritime trade networks*, the *exo-exploitation* of developed states, as well as engaging in various forms of racketeering

and mercenary activities. This survival economy demanded rational adaptation and the efficient utilization of available resources (McCormick 2001). On the other hand, the maximization of surplus production and profit-making were neither the foundations nor the guiding principles of these economies (Tschajanow 1924). Furthermore, all economic transactions, including monetary operations, carried moral, magical, axiological, or even narrative dimensions (Gurevič 1968; Zori et al. 2013; Palsson 2016).

Communities within the barbarian world were diverse in scale and differentiated according to various identification criteria. Individuals possessed multi-layered identities, simultaneously belonging to nuclear families, extended genealogical-generational groups of kin and in-laws, their territorial communities, professional groups, and occasionally an ethnic community (a people) or polity (the so-called “barbarian kingdom”).

The establishment of stable, centralized polities was exceptional rather than normative. Political leaders were typically either *bigmen* — mediators of economic and political communication who acted as paid intermediaries — or *chiefs* who derived power through kinship and quasi-kinship ties and could transmit authority hereditarily (Lewellen 2003: 16–41; Sahlins 1963). The most frequent form of political organization was the *chiefdom*, exhibiting varying degrees of complexity (Skalník 2004; Earle 2021; Urbańczyk 2008; Machaček 2009). *Early states* were rare exceptions, their emergence often contingent upon substantial external resource infusion from Mediterranean states or successful integration into regional segments of the broader Eurasian world economy (Claessen et al. 2021; McCormick 2001). Similarly, all projects of new post-Roman empires were linked to attempts at its revival (Heather 2014).

It is evident that there exist undeniable typological parallels in the socio-cultural structures of groups conventionally labelled “Celts”, “Germans”, “Slavs”, and other macro-communities; however, attributing unique or exclusive cultural characteristics to these groups is unnecessary (Modzelewski 2015). Indeed, communities speaking, for example, a Germanic language may closely resemble Slavic-speaking communities due to similar formative and developmental conditions. Conversely, two Old Slavic-speaking communities may exhibit radically divergent social and political structures.

The social structure of European barbarians was, first and foremost, remarkably isomorphic, spanning from Iceland to the Volga area and from Norway to the Balkans. Secondly, a consistent tripartite social structure is evident almost universally: *slaves* excluded from society; *semi-free individuals* with limited rights; and *free people* endowed with full rights, regarded as proper members of society who constituted distinct nations long referred to as “tribes”, but now this umbrella term must be decisively abandoned. Thirdly, social differentiation among these free individuals was present in all communities but varied considerably and defied reduction to a single common denominator across the entire barbarian world. Some groups had a distinct “privileged” stratum, loosely described

as an *aristocracy*, whereas others did not. The criteria for ranking free individuals differed across regions, with some societies exhibiting elite dominance and others activating mechanisms to neutralize social stratification. In certain areas, leaders, traditionally called “kings” or “princes”, rose to prominence; elsewhere, they were forcibly removed, and their return was actively suppressed through violent means.

The cohesion of any barbarian people comprising free men and women depended on numerous kinship ties — including artificial kinship and fictitious genealogies — property relations (notably the “exchange of women” and associated treaties), and territorial (neighborly) connections. Consequently, each individual embodied multiple intersecting, sometimes competing, identities. The barbarian world of Western Eurasia comprised *segmentary societies*, that is, systems of heterogeneous and diverse linkages among nuclear and extended families (lineages and genealogical confederations), territorially related communities, tribes in narrow sense (networks of community groups), ritual and cult leagues, chains of linguistic continuity, and various other variable and overlapping identity forms, each with differing levels of expression.

Fundamental social institutions included *assemblies* of full-right community members, *feasts*, *gift exchanges*, *oaths*, *collective vengeance*, and other rituals embedded within a framework of isomorphic primordial-pluralistic (“heathen” or “pagan”) religious cults (Gurevič 1982; Modzelewski 2015). Overall, these societies tended towards *collectivism* (Modzelewski 2015), *egalitarianism*, *anarchism*, and *heterarchy* (Bondarenko 2007). Nevertheless, community leaders possessed inherent advantages that later became the foundation of centralized polity formation. The leader personified the people: serving as an “elder relative”, an “influential neighbor” in all subordinate territorial communities, a “great warrior” or “comrade-in-arms” to all male members, and a natural mediator between the community and the sacred realm (Modzelewski 2015). These roles endowed the leader with exclusive rights and inherent responsibilities.

The principal challengers to aspirants who gained ascendancy in power struggles were leaders of other noble families fulfilling comparable roles on a lesser scale, alongside priests (“shamans”) controlling their own local cults. The leader’s power was principally constrained by the community’s capacity for “collective action” (Blanton, Fargher 2008) enacted independently of the “blessed of the gods” elder relative, influential neighbor, and great warrior (Modzelewski 2015). Periodically, such *collective action* might be directed against one or more community leaders.

Barbarian sociocultural norms and mentalities combined elements of *individualism* and *collectivism*, *personal freedom* and *readiness for extreme violence*, *greed* and *generosity*, *attachment to ancestral homelands*, and a *desire for wanderlust*. They maintained their own *primordial*, *pluralistic religious traditions* while remaining open to *new spiritual influences* (Jones, Pennick 1995; Petts 2011; Modzelewski 2015).

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ВАРВАРСКАЯ АЛЬТЕРНАТИВА СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ЭВОЛЮЦИИ: ПЕРИФЕРИЙНЫЕ ОБЩЕСТВА ЗАПАДНОЙ ЕВРАЗИИ I ТЫС. Н.Э. В СВЕТЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ АНТРОПОЛОГИИ

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В статье в рамках парадигмы многолинейной социальной эволюции вводится и концептуализируется понятие варварской альтернативы социальной эволюции — совокупности периферийных обществ Европы V в. до н.э. — XI в. н.э. от Исландии и Гренландии до Поволжья и от Скандинавского до Балканского полуострова. С точки зрения мир-системного анализа это были полупериферийные сообщества, которые постепенно включались в средиземноморский фрагмент мир-системы, в результате к XII в. они влились в окончательно сформировавшуюся локальную цивилизацию христианской Европы. У этих сообществ был фактически одинаковый хозяйственно-культурный тип, основанный на сочетании относительно мобильных форм пашенного земледелия, маломобильного скотоводства с большой долей дополнительных промыслов. Сельскохозяйственное производство в силу природно-климатических и технологических причин было рискованным, и сообщества существовали в режиме хронического дефицита прибавочного продукта. Этот дефицит компенсировался различными промыслами, основными из которых были дальнемагистральная торговля и различные формы капитализации насилия (грабёж, рэкет, наёмничество). Варварское общество отличалось сложившейся социальной иерархией и дифференциацией, оно было сложноустроенным, но не строго («сословно-юридически») стратифицированным. Создание устойчивых централизованных политий в этом ареале являлось исключением, а не правилом. Политические лидеры были либо бигменами (медиаторами экономической и политической коммуникации и платными посредниками), либо вождями, которые опирались на родственников и адаптированных квазиродичей и могли передавать свою власть по наследству. Основные социальные институциональные практики включали в себя собрания полноправных членов коллектива (сходки), пиры, дары и процедуры дарения, коллективно-солидарную месть и другие коллективные обряды в рамках изоморфных примордиально-плюралистических («языческих») религиозных культов.

Ключевые слова: варварское общество, варвары, варварский мир, варварская Европа, I тыс. н.э., социальная эволюция, мир-система, варварская альтернатива социальной эволюции, историческая антропология.

Л И Т Е Р А Т У Р А

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