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# Terry Jones' Barbarians

Terry Jones and Alan Ereira



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TERRY  
JONES'

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## BARBARIANS

Terry Jones is best known as a member of Monty Python, but he has also written four books on medieval England – *Chaucer's Knight*, the highly acclaimed *Who Murdered Chaucer?*, *Crusades* and *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*, which accompanied a major television series he presented in 2004. He is the author of several children's books including *Fairy Tales and Fantastic Stories*, *The Knight and the Squire* and *The Lady and the Squire*. Terry has also directed several feature films – *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *The Life of Brian*, *The Meaning of Life*, *Personal Services*, *Erik the Viking* and *The Wind in the Willows*.

Alan Ereira has worked as an award-winning producer and writer of history programmes on radio and television for over 40 years, and has collaborated with Terry for ten years on a number of historical films. His previous books include *The People's England*, *The Invergordon Mutiny*, *The Heart of the World* and (with Terry Jones) *Crusades* and *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*.



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# TERRY JONES' BARBARIANS

TERRY JONES & ALAN EREIRA

**BBC**  
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# PREFACE

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It took some nerve to write this book and the TV series associated with it. It embraces over 700 years of history on three continents, and involves us striding into the territory of many dedicated and highly impressive scholars.

But it's been a bit of an obsession. We first proposed a TV series on this subject to the BBC in 1997 and have been coming back pretty much every year. And for some reason it's a subject that stirs the passions. What other TV project would have four grown men shouting angrily in an office over the significance of a gerundive in a line of Tacitus?

*Terry Jones' Barbarians* is about all those peoples whom the Romans wrote off as uncivilized, but it's also a chance to take a look at the Romans themselves from an alternative point of view – from the point of view of the people they trashed. And as such it fits into a thesis we've been banging on about in *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives* and in Terry's radio series *The Anti-Renaissance Show*. That thesis is that we've all been sold a false history of Rome that has twisted our entire understanding of our own history – glorifying (and glossing over) a long era of ruthless imperial power, celebrating it for the benefit of Renaissance tyrants and more modern empires, and wildly distorting our view of the so-called 'Middle Ages' and of the peoples whom Rome crushed and who were then blamed for its fall. Oh yes, and it includes a few measured comments on the Church while we're at it.

We are certainly not experts in the field, and we are indebted to the many real scholars and historians who have allowed us to pick their brains and stomp all over their patch in our inevitably heavy boots. Many thanks to all of them for being so tolerant and generous with their advice. We should particularly like to thank Dr Walter Pohl for his helpful comments, Dr Peter Heather for taking the time to explore answers to our occasionally obsessive questions, Dr Hartmut Ziche and, above all, Professor Barry Cunliffe, whose kindness in carefully steering us away from some real mistakes, and whose unfailing and discreet enthusiasm for the project, have been of enormous help. To all these people: our apologies.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the TV production team, especially Nick Kent of OFTV, who managed to get the BBC and the History Channel to sign up to the project and watched over it with a fatherly eye; to David McNab, the series editor; to the producer/directors Rob Coldstream and David Wilson (who had to master a vast amount of material and wrestle with us in the heat of pseudo-academic passion); and to the production assistants and researchers Clare Lynch, Susannah Davis and Sarah Veevers.

If you treat this book as a Lego construction, take it apart and reassemble it in chronological order, you will find a story that goes from the first stirrings of Rome around the fifth century BC through to the last Roman emperor nearly 1000 years later. But there will be odd-shaped gaps, and a number of left-over pieces scattered around the floor. This isn't a history of Rome, and the narrative here is a different one from the others that have been written.

There are, of course, hundreds of books in English covering the period, but no general look at it from a non-Roman perspective. The 'barbarians' of the early period, through to the first century AD, have been written about in books specifically on individual societies – mostly Celts and Germans. For the

later period, the general reader has had to browse among a series of huge narratives written in the shadow of Gibbon's great *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The people whom the Romans called Barbarians are either on the periphery of the main story, or come into it as invaders.

But we're looking at the world they created and inhabited, and it's Rome that is the intruder, or, later their sometime host, sometime prey. Our interest in Rome lies less in what these people did to the Empire than in what the Empire did to them. And since 'they' are actually the people who created the world we live in, this becomes quite literally a question of 'What did the Romans ever do for us?' The answer, as you will have already figured, is not usually very nice.

So what we have constructed here is not a chronological journey through the Empire's history. We have, instead, chosen to survey the non-Roman world in four sections.

In Part One the world of the Atlantic Celts is traced from its fullest flowering in the first century BC through to its final destruction by Roman armies 200 years later. We then look at the failure of the Roman state in Celtic territory during the third century, and the steady breakdown that led to the re-emergence of a separate Atlantic world in the old Celtic lands.

Part Two is about German territory (in which we include Dacia) and the Germans. So we look at the way in which the Germans resisted Roman occupation in the first century AD, the great civilization of Dacia, which Rome extinguished in the second century, and then the Goths and their attempts to integrate themselves into the Empire in the fourth and early fifth centuries.

In Part Three we turn to people who regarded the Romans as the Barbarians – the Greeks (who in the early period saw all outsiders as Barbarians, and found that the Romans took the same view of them) and the Persians – a 'barbarian' society that posed a successful military challenge to Rome and long outlived the Western Empire. To tell the Greek story we go back to the early fourth century BC, and for the Persians even further back, another 100 years, in an epic sweep that ends, for our story, with the arrival of the Huns in Persia nearly 800 years later.

So far we have looked west, north and east. Part Four of the book takes us south, into Vandal Africa with a narrative entirely set in the fifth century AD. But this is where we look at the Christian revolution and its impact on the very idea of 'barbarian', as well as on the Barbarians themselves, and also at the quite extraordinary reign of Attila the Hun, who probably (and quite inadvertently) did more to effect a transfer of power in the West from Empire to Church than anyone else.

There's quite a lot that may come as a surprise: the sophistication of Celtic engineering and mathematics, the highly developed religious philosophy of Dacia, the fact that the Greeks were evidently on the edge of an industrial revolution, the comfort of life in Vandal villas, Attila's remarkable 'Iron Curtain' between his kingdom and the Roman Empire. And much more besides.

So welcome to history from a different point of view.



# BARBARIAN TIMELINE

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A crude and somewhat primitive timeline of events covered in this book, but it may provide a sense of chronology to help you through the narrative.

c.576 BC	Reign of Cyrus I, King of Persia begins
c.550 BC	Great age of religious philosophy – Pythagoras and Zalmoxis (and Buddha)
522 BC	Reign of Darius I, King of Persia begins
486 BC	Reign of Xerxes I, King of Persia begins
406 BC	Syracuse–Carthage war
c.390 BC	Brennus' Celts attack Rome
336 BC	Alexander 'the Great' becomes king of Macedonia
330 BC	Persepolis destroyed
324 BC	Alexander dies
305 BC	Rhodes–Macedon war
282 BC	Colossus of Rhodes erected
279 BC	Celts attack Greece
212 BC	Romans take Syracuse
168 BC	Rome controls Greece
164 BC	Rhodes–Rome treaty
146 BC	Romans raze Corinth
c.70 BC	Reign of Burebista, King of Dacia begins
59 BC	Caesar appointed Protector of the Gauls
55, 54 BC	Caesar to Britain
53 BC	Vercingetorix victory: Battle of Harran
52 BC	Fall of Alesia
49 BC	Caesar invades Rome: civil war
44 BC	Caesar assassinated; Burebista assassinated
42 BC	Sack of Rhodes
27 BC	Octavian (Augustus) becomes first emperor
12 BC	Rome occupies Germany
AD 9	Varus' defeat
AD 14	Tiberius becomes emperor
AD 17	Germanicus' Triumph
AD 41	Claudius becomes emperor
AD 42	Cunobelin dies
AD 43	Invasion of Britain
AD 54	Nero becomes emperor
AD 60	Revolt of Iceni



AD 69	Vespasian becomes emperor, captures Rome
AD 81	Domitian becomes emperor
AD 87	Reign of Decebalus, King of Dacia begins
AD 98	Trajan becomes emperor
AD 105	Rome takes Dacia
AD 117	Hadrian becomes emperor
AD 196	Albinus proclaimed emperor; Septimius Severus loots Persia
AD 218	Elegabalus becomes emperor
AD 222	Alexander Severus becomes emperor; reign of Ardashir I, King of Persia begins
AD 235	Start of 50-year period when 49 people are proclaimed emperor
AD 241	Reign of Shapur I, King of Persia begins
AD 244	Gordian III killed
AD 259	Postumus sets up Gallic Empire
AD 260	Shapur I captures Valerian
AD 267	Zenobia declares her son emperor
AD 270	Aurelian becomes emperor, abandons Dacia
AD 272	Aurelian defeats Zenobia; Shapur I dies
AD 273	Aurelian reconquers Gallic Empire
AD 284	Diocletian becomes emperor, divides Empire and Maximian rules West
AD 286	Carausius makes Britain independent
AD 297	Constantius retakes Britain
AD 309	Shapur II crowned in womb
AD 312	Constantine captures Rome
AD 324	Constantine takes Byzantium, sole emperor
AD 325	Council of Nicaea
AD 337	Constantine I dies
AD 350	Huns attack Persia
AD 358	Shapur II resolves Hun problem
AD 363	Julian defeated and killed by Shapur II
AD 364	Valentinian I becomes emperor; Valens becomes emperor in East
AD 375	Valentinian I dies; Valentinian II becomes emperor in West; Huns Dacia; Goths cross Danube and convert to Christianity
AD 378	Valens killed at Hadrianople; Theodosius I becomes emperor in East
AD 391	Arianism and paganism outlawed
AD 392	Valentinian II killed
AD 394	Battle of Frigidus: Eugenius defeated; Theodosius I becomes sole emperor
AD 395	Theodosius I dies; Alaric rebels; Empire permanently divided into East and West

AD 401	Alaric attacks Italy; Vandals in Alps
AD 406	Vandals, etc., cross Rhine
AD 407	British proclaim Constantine III emperor
AD 408	Stilicho killed; Alaric's first siege of Rome
AD 410	Alaric's 'sack' of Rome
AD 411	Vandals in Spain
AD 412	Murder of Hypatia
AD 417	Visigoth Kingdom of Aquitaine; Visigoths attack Spain
AD 425	Vandals take Cartagena and Seville
AD 428	Gunderic dies; reign of Gaiseric, King of Vandals begins
AD 429	Vandals move to Africa
AD 434	Attila and Bleda rule Huns
AD 439	Vandals take Carthage
AD 441	Huns attack Balkans
AD 444	Death of Bleda
AD 447	Attila attacks Constantinople
AD 451	Huns invade Gaul
AD 452	Huns invade Italy
AD 455	Vandal 'sack' of Rome
AD 476	Last Western emperor deposed
AD 477	Gaiseric dies
AD 489	Ostrogoths take over Italy
AD 496	Clovis converts to Catholicism
AD 507	Franks conquer Visigoths
AD 526	Death of Theodoric
AD 533	Byzantine conquest of Africa
AD 535	Byzantine conquest of Ravenna



# INTRODUCING THE GOODIES AND BADDIES

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## WHO WERE THE BARBARIANS?

Nobody ever called themselves 'barbarians'. It's not that sort of word. It's a word used about other people. In fact, it's a term of otherness. It had been used by the Ancient Greeks to describe non-Greek people whose language they couldn't understand and who therefore seemed to babble unintelligibly: 'Ba ba ba'. The same word, *Barbara*, appears in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, meaning 'stammering, gibbering' – in other words, alien.

The Romans adopted the Greek word and used it to label (and usually libel) the peoples who surrounded their own world.

Once the term had the might and majesty of Rome behind it, the Roman interpretation became the only one that counted, and the peoples whom they called Barbarians became forever branded – be the Spaniards, Britons, Gauls, Germans, Scythians, Persians or Syrians. And of course 'barbarian' has become a by-word for the very opposite of everything we consider civilized. In contrast to the Romans, the Barbarians were lacking in refinement, primitive, ignorant, brutal, rapacious, destructive and cruel.

The Romans kept the Barbarians at bay as long as they could, but finally they were engulfed, and the savage hordes over-ran the Empire, destroying the cultural achievements of centuries. The light of reason and civilization was virtually snuffed out by the Barbarian hordes who swarmed across Europe annihilating everything the Romans had put in place, sacking Rome itself and consigning Europe to the Dark Ages. The Barbarians brought only chaos and ignorance, until the Renaissance rekindled the fires of Roman learning and art.

It's a familiar story, but it's codswallop.

The unique feature of Rome was not its arts or its science or its philosophical culture, not its attachment to law, its care for humanity or its sophisticated political culture. In fact, in all these areas it was equalled or even surpassed by peoples whom it conquered. The unique feature of Rome was that it had the world's first professional army. Normal societies consisted of farmers, hunters, craftsmen and traders. When they needed to fight they relied not on training or on standardized weapons, but on psyching themselves up to acts of individual heroism. Seen through the eyes of people who possessed trained soldiers to fight for them, they were easily portrayed as simple savages. But that was far from the truth.

We actually owe far more to the so-called 'barbarians' than we do to the men in togas. And the fact that we still think of the Celts, the Huns, the Vandals, the Goths, the Visigoths and so on as 'barbarians' means that we have all fallen hook, line and sinker for Roman propaganda. We are still letting the Romans define our world and our view of history.

In the last 30 years, however, the story has begun to change. Archaeological discoveries have shed

new light on the ancient texts that have survived, and this has led to new interpretations of the past. We now know that the Roman Empire brought much of the development of science and mathematics to a grinding halt for about 1500 years, and that a great deal of what was known and achieved before Rome took over had to be relearned and rediscovered much more recently.

Rome used its army to eliminate the cultures that surrounded it, and paid its soldiers with the wealth it took from them. It 'Romanized' these conquered societies and left as little record of them as possible. The truth is that much of what we understand to be 'Roman civilization' was plundered from the Barbarian world. The Romans conquered with swords, shields, armour and artillery that were copied from the people they fought; their cities were built with the loot from the wealthier cultures that surrounded them; and as for the famous Roman roads, well, read on ... Sadly, many of the engineering and scientific achievements of the Barbarian world were destroyed so completely that, even when evidence of them turned up, it was either disbelieved or the achievements attributed to the Romans themselves. Now, however, we are beginning to realize that the story of a descent from the light of Rome to the darkness of Barbarian dominion is completely false.

Of course, it was thoughtless of the Celts not to leave us anything much in the way of written records – they should have known that the lack of books putting forward their own propaganda would weight the evidence firmly in favour of the Romans. But even so, we shouldn't believe everything the Romans tell us. Here, for example, is Julius Caesar's considered opinion about elks. Elks, the great statesman and general informs us, are

destitute of horns, and have legs without joints and ligatures; nor do they lie down for the purpose of rest, nor, if they have been thrown down by any accident, can they raise or lift themselves up. Trees serve as beds to them; they lean themselves against them, and thus reclining only slightly, they take their rest; when the huntsmen have discovered from the footsteps of these animals whither they are accustomed to betake themselves, they either undermine all the trees at the roots, or cut into them so far that the upper part of the trees may appear to be left standing. When they [the elks] have leant upon them, according to their habit, they knock down by their weight the unsupported trees, and fall down themselves along with them.<sup>1</sup>

This interesting piece of zoological observation was solemnly repeated by the Greek geographer Strabo<sup>2</sup> and the encyclopedist Pliny the Elder.<sup>3</sup> It seems to be a confusion with an identical story about elephants told by Aristotle, and which, having also been repeated by Strabo, became part of the 'standard truth' about elephants right into the late seventeenth century, when Sir Thomas Browne complained that, even when people could see the animals perfectly clearly, and watch them kneel and stand, the determination to cling to the security of classical authorities made them deny what was in front of their own eyes.<sup>4</sup>

Just as people were prepared for centuries to deny that animals had knees even when they could see them, Western society's enthusiasm since the Renaissance for all things Roman has persuaded us to see much of the past through Roman eyes even when contrary evidence stares us in the face. Of course, we now have a better working knowledge of elks than Julius Caesar had, but when it comes to

Barbarians we still tend to accept his estimate of them – the estimate of a conqueror with an agenda to push.

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But once we turn the picture upside-down and look at history from a non-Roman point of view, things start to look very different. For example, the Roman depiction of the Vandals gave us the term 'vandalism', and yet, as we shall see, the Vandals were highly moral, educated, literate and often a lot more civilized than the Romans.

The sacks of Rome by the Goths and Vandals were not great acts of destruction. The Goths destroyed only one building, the Vandals none at all. Both were armies of Christians. But the Roman Empire itself had already adopted a particular form of Christianity – Catholicism – and, being Rome, it was trying to impose this form of the religion on everyone else.

The Catholic Church triumphed, and – again in the great Roman tradition – did all it could to remanage people and history as it wanted them. The Church decided which documents would survive and which would not: all our sources come to us from medieval Catholic copyists. So again, our picture of the past has been given to us in a very particular way.

This book is an attempt to reconsider the vast numbers of European and Asian peoples who have been written off as the villains of history – the Barbarians – and, at the same time, to re-evaluate those paragons of civilization: the all-conquering Romans.

## **WHO WERE THE ROMANS? WELL, THEY WEREN'T BARBARIANS**

Because the word 'barbarian', as we use it, is essentially a term that the Romans used to describe those who weren't Roman, we have to start with Rome. The Romans had a very clear concept of themselves. They called it *Romanitas* or 'Roman-ness'. It meant using the Latin language, respecting Latin literature, obeying Roman law and tradition, and even following the custom of having three names. Everyone else, everyone foreign, was a Barbarian and was to be feared.

Oddly enough, fear seems to have played a key role in the history of Rome, and despite the might and power of the Romans, there is something curiously desperate about their whole story. It's almost as if the grandeur of Rome was born of paranoia and desperation. Another odd thing is that the major event in Roman history that kicked off this paranoia may never have happened at all – it may just have been a legend. But true or false, the great Roman historian Livy (59 BC-AD 17) wrote it down, and his account became the standard historical text for every Roman ever afterwards. This was where Roman children learned to fear the Barbarians.

## **THE STORY OF BRENNUS**

In the late fourth century BC, when the city of Rome was beginning to dominate central Italy, a community of very different people crossed the Apennines from Gaul and settled on the Adriatic coast between what are now the towns of Rimini and Ancona. They were called the Senones, and they founded a town called Senigallia. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a great place for a beach holiday

but not much use agriculturally. Their search for a better spot wasn't easy – other Celts had already bagged the best places. So, in 390 BC, the Senones' warriors turned up at the gates of Clusium (modern Chiusi, in Tuscany), 'strange men in thousands ... men the like of whom the townsfolk had never seen outlandish warriors armed with strange weapons'.<sup>5</sup> Clusium didn't seem as well protected as the other places they'd tried, so these fearsome newcomers demanded they be given better land on which they could settle.

The inhabitants of Clusium appealed to Rome to help them negotiate, and the Romans duly sent three brothers from the Fabii family to act as arbitrators. According to Livy, when the Roman envoys asked the Celts what gave them the right to demand land from the people of Clusium, 'the haughty answer was returned that they carried their right in their weapons, and that everything belonged to the brave'.<sup>6</sup>

The Fabii brothers were young, arrogant and not the most tactful negotiators in the world. They were, according to Livy, 'envoys of a violent temper, more like Gauls than Romans'. In fact it was the Celts who seemed to have the greater respect for international law. When the talks broke down, the Fabii brothers joined the townsmen in fighting the Senones; one of the brothers, Quintus Fabius, even killed one of the Celtic chieftains. As both Livy and another historian, Plutarch, observed, it was 'contrary to the law of nations' for a negotiator to take arms to support one side against the other. The Senones were rightly outraged and decided to send their own ambassadors to Rome to complain,<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the Fabii brothers belonged to a very powerful family, and when the Senate referred the matter to the people of Rome the brothers' actions were endorsed and – to make matters worse – the Fabii were heaped with honours. The Celtic ambassadors warned the Romans that there would be repercussions and then withdrew to Clusium. There it was decided to teach these upstart Romans to respect international legalities in future. According to Plutarch, the army, under the command of Brennus, marched the 80 miles from Clusium to Rome in a highly orderly manner: 'Contrary to expectation, they did no injury as they passed, nor took anything from the fields; and, as they went by any city, cried out that they were going to Rome; that the Romans only were their enemies, and that they took all others for their friends.'<sup>8</sup>

This 'strange enemy from the ends of the earth' then smashed the Roman army and swarmed through the city, burning and looting. Many Romans fled, and those who did not took refuge on the Capitoline Hill. Brennus and his army laid siege to them for six months, but finally agreed to withdraw in return for 1000 lb of gold.

Three hundred years later, Livy narrates the horror and the shame of that event, which was to haunt the Roman psyche for eight centuries: 'Insult was added to what was already sufficiently disgraceful, for the weights which the Gauls brought for weighing the metal were heavier than standard, and when the Roman commander objected the insolent Barbarian flung his sword into the scale, saying "Vae Victis" – "Woe to the vanquished!"'<sup>9</sup> Actually, what really seems to have got up Livy's nose was the fact that the Celts had been bought off so cheaply. Imagine, he writes, 1000 lb of gold as 'the price of a nation soon to rule the world'!

At the time, according to Livy, the Romans seriously considered abandoning their city. But they decided instead to rebuild it, and never again to be put in the shameful position of being the

vanquished. The legend of Brennus became one of the motors driving Roman expansion. Out there were Barbarians, terrible savages, and Rome needed to strengthen its frontiers. Not just strengthen them, but push them away, further and further away, until eventually there would be no place left for Barbarians unless they had been thoroughly Romanized. From now on Rome would follow the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes to subdue all the peoples on its frontiers and thus make the Roman world safe from otherness.

Although we no longer believe that there are quadruped mammals without knees we still accept the Roman view of their world, in which the word 'barbarians' goes together with 'hordes'. They painted a picture of themselves as civilized people whose Empire held at bay a world inhabited by incoherent tribes of violent savages.

The Roman legend begins with the story of Romulus and Remus, two lost babies who were suckled by a she-wolf. The Romans did not see that as a charming story; they meant to show that they had imbibed wolfish appetites and ferocity with their mothers' milk. It's time to ask what the world would be like if, instead of feeding them, the wolf had eaten Romulus and Remus. What if there had been no Rome?

What if there had been only Barbarians?



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