

*the*  
**Vandals**

Andy Merrills and Richard Miles

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**Vandals**

*The Vandals* Andy Merrills and Richard Miles

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For Dick Whittaker



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# Preface

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.

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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 pre-conceptions; the Vandals would have appreciated him.

# Abbreviations

AE (date)	<i>L'Année épigraphique</i>
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
AL R	<i>Anthologia Latina</i> , A. Riese (ed.), Teubner (Leipzig, 1894), partially tr. in Kay (2006) and Rosenblum (1961)
ALS	<i>Anthologia Latina</i> D. R. Shackleton Bailey (ed.), Teubner (Stuttgart, 1982), partially tr. in Kay (2006) and Rosenblum (1961)
ANSMN	<i>American Numismatic Society Museum Notes</i>
<i>Ant. af.</i>	<i>Antiquités africaines</i>
ARTB	<i>Art Bulletin</i>
AT	Albertini Tablets
BCTH	<i>Bulletin Archéologique de Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques</i>
Budé	Collection des Universités de France publiée sous le patronage de l'Association Guillaume Budé
BZ	<i>Byzantinischer Zeitschrift</i>
CEDAC	<i>Centre d'Etudes et de documentation Archéologique de la Conservation de Carthage</i>
CIL VIII	G. Willmans, T. Mommsen, R. Cagnal and J. Schmidt, <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, VIII, Inscriptiones Latinae Africae</i> (Berlin, 1881)
<i>Cod. Iust.</i>	<i>Codicis Justiniani</i> , D. Albertus (ed.), <i>Corpus Juris Civilis</i> , vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1843)
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>
CRAI	<i>Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres</i>
CCL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i>
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
CCSL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i>

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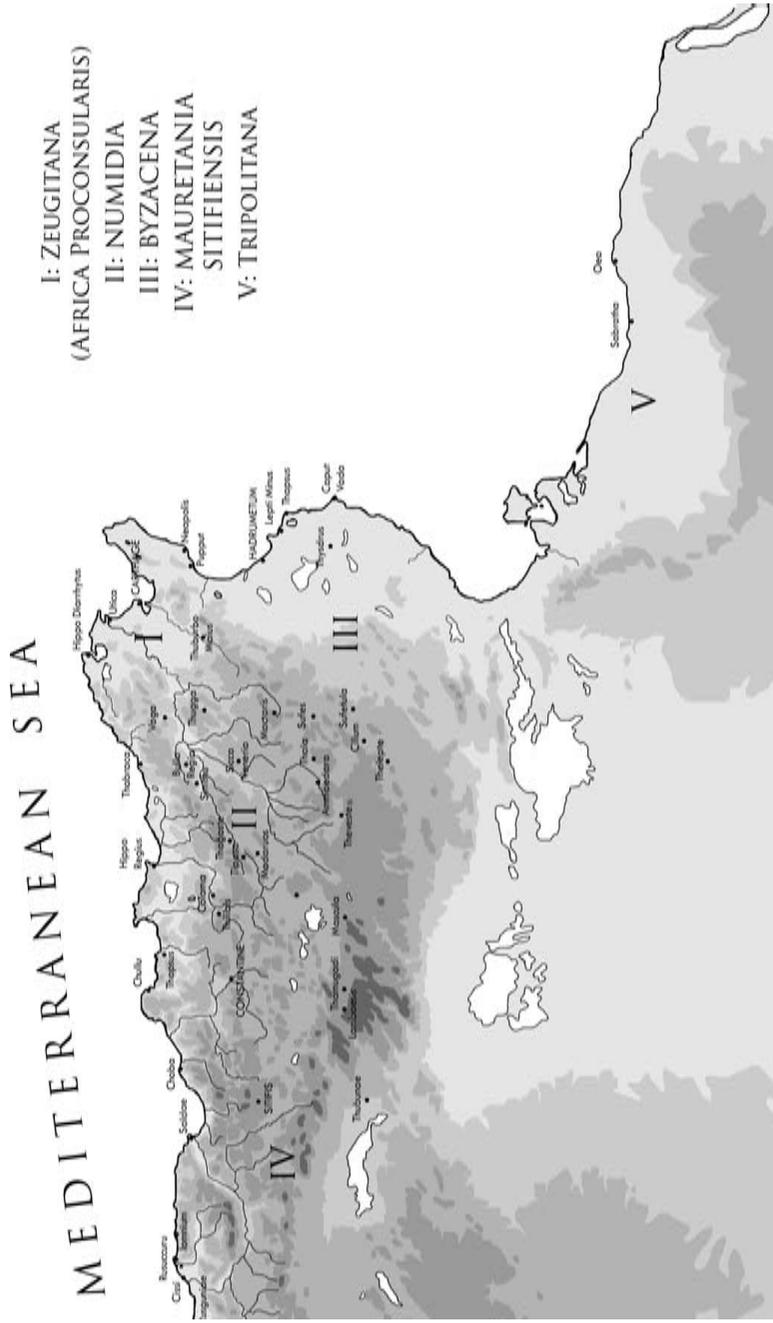
<i>C.Th.</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i> , T. Mommsen and P. Meyer (eds.), 3 vols. (Berlin, 1905); tr. C. Parr, <i>The Theodosian Code, Novels and Sirmundian Constitutions</i> (New York, 1950)
<i>EME</i>	<i>Early Medieval Europe</i>
<i>FC</i>	Fathers of the Church
<i>FHG</i>	<i>Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum</i>
<i>GCS</i>	Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
<i>ILC</i>	E. Diehl (ed.) <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres</i> (Berlin, 1925–31)
<i>ILT</i>	A. Merlin (ed.) <i>Inscriptions Latines de la Tunisie</i> (Paris, 1944)
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JRA</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>MEFRA</i>	<i>Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'École Française de Rome, Antiquité</i>
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
<i>AA</i>	Auctores Antiquissimi
<i>Ep.</i>	Epistolae
<i>SRL</i>	Scriptores Rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI–IX
<i>SRM</i>	Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum
<i>Not. Prov.</i>	<i>Notitia provinciarum et civitatum Africae</i> , M. Petchenig (ed.), CSEL, 7 (Vienna, 1881), 118–134; S. Lancel (ed. and tr.), Budé (Paris, 2002)
<i>Nov. Just.</i>	Justinian I, <i>Novellae</i> , R. Schoell and W. Kroll (eds.), <i>Corpus Iuris Civilis</i> , III, 15th edn. (Berlin, 1970)
<i>Nov. Theod.</i>	<i>Theodosius II, Novellae</i> , in <i>C.Th.</i> vol. 2, pp. 1–68
<i>Nov. Val.</i>	<i>Valentinian III, Novellae</i> , in <i>C.Th.</i> vol. 2, pp. 69–154
<i>NPNF</i>	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second series
<i>OCT</i>	Oxford Classical Texts
<i>PBSR</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British School at Rome</i>
<i>PCBEA</i>	Mandouze (ed.), <i>Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire. 1. Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne (303–533)</i> (Paris, 1982)
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris)
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris)

PLRE II	J. R. Martindale, <i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire. Vol. II. AD 395–527</i> (Cambridge, 1980)
PLRE III	J. R. Martindale, <i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire. Vol. III. AD 527–641</i> . 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1992)
Procopius, <i>BV</i>	<i>De bello vandalico</i> , H. B. Dewing (ed. and tr.), LCL (Cambridge MA, 1914)
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SCNC	Sources Chrétiennes. Sér Annexe de textes non chrétiens
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> (Leiden, 1923–)
TA (number)	Albertini Tablets, in C. Courtois, L. Leschi, C. Perrat and C. Saumagne (eds.), <i>Tablettes Albertini: actes privés de l'époque vandale (fin du Ve siècle)</i> , 2 vols. (Paris, 1952)
TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Society</i>
Teubner	Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
Vict. Vit., <i>HP</i>	<i>Historia persecutionis</i> , M. Petchenig (ed.), CSEL, 7 (Vienna, 1881); S. Lancel (ed. and tr.), Budé (Paris, 2002); tr. J. Moorhead, <i>Victor of Vita: History of the Vandal Persecution</i> , Translated Texts for Historians, 10 (Liverpool, 1992)

# The Vandals in History

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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,