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The barbarians who destroyed the glory that was Rome demolished civilization along with it, and for the next four centuries the peasants and artisans of Europe barely held on. Random violence, mass migration, disease, and starvation were the only way of life. This is the picture of the Dark Ages that most historians promote. But archaeology tells a different story. Peter S. Wells, one of the world's leading archaeologists, surveys the archaeological record to demonstrate that the Dark Ages were not dark at all. The kingdoms of Christendom that emerged starting in the ninth century sprang from a robust, previously little-known, European culture, albeit one that left behind few written texts. This recently recognized culture achieved heights in artistry, technology, craft production, commerce, and learning. Future assessments of the period between Rome and Charlemagne will need to incorporate this fresh new picture.

Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered Details

Date : Published July 17th 2008 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 2008)

ISBN : 9780393060751

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Format : Hardcover 240 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Historical, Medieval, Archaeology, Medieval History, European History

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From Reader Review Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered for online ebook

Rindis says

Peter S. Wells' book is a look at the Dark Ages in the 'cultural continuity' tradition that started in the 1970s. It is mostly aimed at dispelling the extremely bleak view of post-Roman history taken by the early Humanists to Gibbon and through most of the twentieth century.

And it's a certainty that things weren't as bad as the traditional view represented them. However, the arguments presented that the post-Roman world continued without major disruptions are often nebulous, ill-supported, and lacking any degree of detail.

The strongest assertions are with the continuance with cities. The older view generally asserts that post-Roman cities were abandoned, or greatly reduced in size. Wells talks about what archaeology has found in several cities throughout Europe that show these cities did not show disruption in the post-Roman era, as well as several sites outside the Roman world that developed in this time frame. However, one city did indeed shrink massively in this period (Rome itself), and there's no discussion of if there are any cities from that period where there has been a conspicuous absence of any meaningful finds. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, but the comparison would provide a useful baseline for better theorizing.

Still, archaeology is the best parts of the book, and I wish he had gone into more detail about what has been found. New finds are made all the time, and this book does touch on several more recent ones. I think a more systematic examination would have helped develop his argument much better. As it is, he shows that there were *new* sites, outside the Roman world (in the Baltics) that were developing, and trading. And while that does support his refrain that Europe did not turn into a howling wilderness, it does speak to the potential of large economic shifts, which would disrupt ordinary life.

Moreover, Wells asserts at one point that the finds of exotic luxury goods in graves and the like disproves that trade declined in the post-Roman period. No, it only shows that luxury goods continued to be traded; it says nothing about bulk non-luxury goods, the part that only sees trade when there is a well-established infrastructure in place.

In the end, I suppose I was expecting a more scholarly work, while this is really a very introductory text. It is also aimed at traditional rut of learning about the period, which is not where I am. It's not a bad book, but not what I'm looking for.

Tanya says

"Barbarians to Angels" uses archaeological evidence - largely from burials - to fill in gaps left by written sources about the "dark ages," from the 5th to 8th centuries. Because the contemporary writers were elites from the Roman tradition, they focused on the fall of the Roman empire and what they saw as decline of civilization. Wells points out that these centuries were actually full of a re-establishment of local architecture and personal art, and a strong continuation of long-distance trade. He argues that progress toward the glories of the high middle ages was actually quite linear, and that there was no "dark" vacuum between the collapse of Roman empirical administration and the Carolingian Renaissance of the early ninth century. Wells' evidence is strongly presented, and his arguments solid. My complaint is that he presents his view as something new, a voice in opposition to the historical establishment, which is not the case. My graduate

studies in medieval history taught the same premise, though without the focus on material evidence.

Mary Catelli says

The Dark Ages -- not the entire Middle Ages that used to be called the Dark Ages, just the era that gets called the Dark Ages now -- as viewed by the eye of archeology.

Let us say that it looks kinda different to them.

For one thing, all the stories about invading barbarian hordes are -- overstated. Archaeological evidence does not point to many people moving during the time. The artifacts in locations said to be invaded, like England, did not change, and the skeletons' teeth can apparently be analyzed and find the people born where they were buried. In Eastern Europe, you have some migration; the Huns and the like did move in from Asia, and their practices of shaping the skull make it easy to identify. And many of the stories told of migrations that ended up in lands look to be myths of origin to explain (and justify) the position of kings and nobles.

There appears to be a whole Europe-wide practice of regal burial. The sorts of grave goods that are found in royal graves are remarkably uniform in nature -- and rich. (By the way, did you know why Napoleon chose the bee as his symbol? In one of the first scientific archaeological digs, during the reign of Louis XIV, they dug up the grave of Childeric, one of the earliest kings, and they found a lot of golden and garnet bees in it.)

The cities were seldom abandoned or even declined. True, the people gave up building monumental stone buildings after the Roman manner, but they thrived. A lot of them still do. It used to be thought that the Saxons lived in a different spot, near where the Romans had but not on it, in what is now London, but construction keeps on turning up new sites and it looks like the Dark Ages London sits where the Roman London sat.

Plus there were a lot of agricultural innovations. The moldboard plow was a vast improvement on the Roman scratch plow, and they invented crop rotation. Which meant that the skeletons we find prove to rather tall and healthy.

The graves of craftsmen and other loose things tell us more about trade and crafts. Like the grave of a master smith, buried with his tools. It included molds for fancy brooches, and a polishing stone for silver -- and interesting, all of his tools look like he could have carried them on his travels. And the lost bronze brooches, or glass beads, or (in some locations) great clay pots for importing wine from the Mediterranean, point to a thriving trade.

Plenty of changes, of course. Art underwent many a metamorphosis. And the advent of Christianity produced many -- interesting finds. The practice of throwing swords into rivers lasted for quite a bit. And the graves at first still contained grave goods, though that trailed off later.

Fascinating book.

David R. says

Wells' objective, and I worthy one, I think, is to demonstrate that the so-called "Dark Ages" (ca. 400-800

C.E.) were not so dark after all. That is, that European polities were more dynamic, prosperous, and vital than has been imagined in recent centuries. In support of his thesis he musters a mix of source literature, archaeological discoveries, and deduction. Unfortunately the end product doesn't quite get there. The evidence is not well documented and various supporting points do not truly support their point. The elephant in the room is the lack of source literature. The paucity of written material is a critical reason we call this period the "Dark" Ages. And I don't believe there has been much dispute that the more important European polities did trade abroad, or innovate in the face of a collapsing central authority in Rome, etc. Wells does well to get us thinking about this often disregarded period in history, but I needed a good deal more.

Monica Willyard says

I enjoyed reading this book because it captivated both my imagination and my logic. Am used to be somewhat uneasy of the description of the dark ages as a sudden, drastic decline from culture to anarchy. However, since I'm not a historian by training, I felt I couldn't argue with when I was reading and being taught. This book is based on archaeological evidence from digs throughout Europe. It makes sense that many of the people's during the dark ages were not literate, and so there were few surviving texts. We are Hanford anyway when studying early history because most of what we have for evidence are writings that are somewhat subjective, writings where scholars, nobility, and military leaders wrote about who they thought themselves to be rather than expressing what life was like in all stratospheres of society. It is natural that Roman citizens would write of other peoples as barbarians since they were at war with each other. It is also natural that they would call them barbarians since they could not write and used different building and social structures. Until recently, we didn't have A wide range of tools to help us understand earlier cultures. I think this book is important in our understanding of what life was like in the supposedly dark ages.

Dan says

If you enjoyed either of Peter Wells' prior books, *The Barbarians Speak* or *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, then his latest work will be a delight. If you haven't read any of Wells' books, I highly recommend them, but especially *Barbarians to Angels*. I discovered the book in the midst of researching the Migration Era and after having encountered Walter Goffart's critique of current scholarship about both the end of the Roman Empire and the "German-ness" of the barbarians who both attacked and defended the Empire (*Barbarian Tides: the Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*). Goffart asserts (rather stridently) that the Empire was not destroyed by barbarian hordes and that those same barbarians did not self-identify as German, Germanic, or any other cohesive rubric based on language or land. He also exposes (what he sees as) a bias of German nationalism, even to the present day, in scholarship on the Migration Age, the Dark Ages, and the rise of medieval Europe.

Wells deftly avoids this debated territory while throwing fresh (and revealing) light on the character of the Dark Ages. As he states in his conclusion (on page 200):

"For the auxiliary soldier serving on the Rhine frontier at the end of the Roman period, for the farmers in villages in central France, and for the elites in northern centers such as Gudme, in Denmark, and Helgö, in Sweden, there was no abrupt fall of the imperial power. The changes that were taking place from the fifth to the eighth century were gradual; they would not have been perceived as abrupt or transformational to anyone living at the time. It is the way we think about change in the past, and the way we sometimes place too much faith in texts concerning warfare and mass migrations of people, that can lead us astray. If we examine instead the material evidence left by people who lived during these centuries, we come to a very different understanding of what those times were like."

This paragraph is, in my opinion, the best summary of the book and an example of Wells' style throughout: respectfully critiquing past scholarship, clarifying the current evidence available, and painting a portrait of the time with particular case studies that illustrate both the Roman and barbarian perspectives on events. The first four chapters of the book introduce the reader to the history of the time period and address some of the past trends in scholarship on that history. Much the same information could be gleaned from dozens of other books aimed at the general reader, such as *The Early Germans* by Malcom Todd, but I found Wells' summary of the history far better. Perhaps it is just that I've read a lot on the subject already and reading Wells helped me think about it all cohesively, but I like to think Wells writes with more clarity for a lay reader than anyone else I've read.

Beginning with Chapter 5, "What Happened to the Roman Cities?" and continuing through Chapter 7, "New Centers in the North", Wells begins considering the archaeological evidence for the Dark Ages, which reveals continuous occupation and growth in former imperial cities like Regensburg, Mainz, and Cologne, as well as in sites like Gudme, Helgö, and Hedeby which were beyond the Roman frontier. Chapter 6, with its in-depth look at London, is particularly helpful for gaining a sense of how settlements continued, yet developed differently, from imperial times. The remaining six chapters build on this theme, detailing aspects of daily life, trade, religion, agriculture, crafts, and the arts. Wells gives the reader a very tangible impression of what it was like to live in the Dark Ages: a time which was very prosperous in spite of frequent political upheaval. Thanks to the spread of the moldboard plow, introduced in the 5th century, and other agricultural improvements of the time, most individuals had sufficient nutrition to grow to "average heights [that:] were not achieved again until the twentieth century" (page 140). Extensive trade, in addition to raiding for plunder, allowed considerable hoards of treasure to be collected by elites and then deposited either as offerings or for safekeeping. Northern art styles of semi-abstract, interlocking animals and faces, flourished and further developed in Christian monasteries to create such works as the Book of Kells.

In his treatment of religion, Wells proves almost friendly to a Heathen reader. I have never before encountered a historian of this period who favors continuity in traditional belief and practice from pre-Christian Europe into the Christian Middle Ages. This is a point that Wells stresses several times, especially in Chapter 11, "Spread of the New Religion", citing archaeological evidence of traditional burial practices in Christian contexts, traditional artwork and mythological themes incorporated (or even hidden) alongside Christian imagery, and similar examples. While it is true that Christianity changed the cultures it converted, that change was considerably more gradual than prior histories of the time have allowed. Not only was the general populace very slow to adopt proper Christian practice, but even recently converted rulers held to old traditions. How long, and how many of, such traditional practices survived is debatable, but as Wells puts it: "Wearing or carrying charms, saying prayers before meals, decorating Christmas trees, colouring eggs at Easter, and tossing coins into fountains are parts of practices that were carried out by the prehistoric peoples of Europe. What people think today when they toss their pennies, dimes, and quarters into water may not be very different from what eighth-century Britons thought as they threw their swords into the Thames at London" (pages 184-5).

If you have an interest in the Migration Age or the fall of the Roman Empire or else the origins of medieval Europe, *Barbarians to Angels* is an excellent introduction to the time period. Wells provides a current understanding of the period, from history to archaeology, with an ear for the evidence itself rather than for the rhetoric of past historians. It is also a most enjoyable book to read. Wells' style is very direct and tends to tell a story, making it far more appealing than histories beholden to a particular theoretical stance. One comes away from the book with a clear sense of the reality of the Dark Ages, which was quite far from the incoherent image of violence and deprivation that we've all grown up with.

Terence says

I would describe this book as a professor's collection of undergraduate-level lectures about the Dark Ages - which, as he correctly points out, weren't quite as "dark" as the general public might think. Of course, John & Jane Q. Public don't often consider the Dark Ages except when they're watching scurrilous TV shows or movies, and then, do they care?

Probably not.

Among the cognoscenti of amateur and professional Late Antiquity/Early Medieval historians, Wells is not exactly breaking new ground.

Among this collection of lectures, he does present some interesting information about the evidence for trade and culture and wealth that refutes the hoary notion of howling barbarians, burning cities, ravished populations and empty landscapes.

If I had come across this book in high school or early in college, I'd probably be more excited about it. As it is, I've read this before and at much greater and incisive depth (Goffart's *Barbarian Tides* and Whittaker's *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* immediately come to mind).

James says

I read this book, somewhat coincidentally, just after *The Swerve*. It's another book I wish went further than it did. Like a few other recent works on the early Medieval period, it's setting up an argument against the unsubtle view that after the Western Roman Empire fell, everything went completely to hell in a handbasket and there wasn't any real progress again until the Renaissance. Well, that's an unsubtle view (and tends to ignore anything happening elsewhere in the world), and Wells argues against it. I don't think he does it very well, though—Chris Wickham's *The Inheritance of Rome* did it much more comprehensively and carefully. One example which stood out for me was Wells arguing that the huge drop-off in sophisticated stone building work in Britain after the Romans left wasn't a sign of technological decline, just different cultural choices. Ummm ... no. Anyway, read the Wickham book instead, as huge as it is.

Steve Bivans says

As the defender of barbarian complexity and contribution, Peter Wells stakes a claim in the larger debate on the nature of the Fall of Rome, and with some interesting modifications, comes down on the side of continuity and gradual transition. *Barbarians to Angels* continues the basic thesis of his *The Barbarians Speak*; simply put, that the barbarians possessed a complex society of their own. While adapting to Roman culture, and integrating and modifying Roman institutions of government, they retained much of their own culture and institutions during the so-called Dark Ages, a period that Wells works diligently to dispel once and for all. Wells proposes to tackle this with an examination of the archaeological materials to construct a "bottom-up" picture of barbarian society in northern Europe.

In general, this is a well-written book recommended for undergraduates taking a survey course in the early middle ages, as an engaging introduction to barbarian archeology. The tone and style of prose is probably intended for a more general audience. It is an easy read, with numerous photographs and maps. However,

some of the photographs add little or nothing to the readers understanding of the subject. The most important contribution is probably as a counterpoint to scholars who have underestimated the contributions of the barbarians to the culture of the Early Middle Ages.

Othy says

This is a tough book to review. On the one hand, Wells' main argument (that the so-called "Dark Ages" were a time of great culture and trade) is well-needed, even today. The medieval period as a whole is even still a period that is looked down upon by popular culture and scholars alike. That said, I think Wells argues his case too far. In his final chapter, he makes the claim that the people of the 4th-5th centuries experienced **no** sense of the fall of Rome. I think this is too much. Wells' evidence even argues against him at times: for example, the reuse of stone materials from public buildings in London for private homes shows a distinct move from a community-based culture to an individual or personal one. In the end, I think Wells' main point is well-taken, but there are other sources that do the argument better justice.

Sara says

Peter Wells deftly tackles the bizarrely persistent idea that the early Middle Ages (c. 400 to 800 AD) were, as the old moniker would have it, actually "dark". Crucially, Wells' research is based on archaeological evidence rather than textual evidence.

The primary literate document producers of this 400-year period, namely clerics, subscribed to the late Roman Empire's school of thought regarding what makes "culture" and "civilization". According to these criteria - which are much like our own: monumental stone buildings, written law codes and official correspondence, a strong centralized political authority, etc. - the 400 years following the effective waning of Roman imperial power looked dark, chaotic, decentralized.

But archaeological evidence speaks to the contrary. It tells of a culturally and materially, if not politically, unified Europe holding strong manufacturing and trade relationships with empires as far away as Egypt and India. Rather than some interruption in "civilization", the archaeological record displays a fascinating hybridity during this period between pre-Roman and Roman European cultures that gesture toward the florescence of the high Middle Ages and Renaissance. If anything, this evidence demonstrates how the Roman Empire was a mere interruption of pre-Roman European culture. Roman culture influenced and was blended into, but certainly did not determine the ways people lived, the buildings they built, the rituals they practiced. Once Rome's authority declined, the people of Europe continued to construct the buildings, craft the jewelry and weapons, perform the sacred practices their ancestors had done. And their activity led directly to the Carolingian "Renaissance" of the 9th century and all of the cultural productivity that lay beyond it.

This is an enjoyable and enlightening read. Unfortunately, its readership has probably been small enough, that people will continue to call this period the Dark Ages, without realizing how vibrant it really was.

Elentarri says

In *Barbarians to Angels*, Wells discusses his basic thesis that the “Dark Ages” weren’t quite so dark. That the barbarians “invading” the Roman Empire, adapted, integrated and modified the Roman government institutions, but also retained a great deal of their own complex culture and institutions after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Wells decides to focus his attention on the examination of archaeological materials to construct a picture of barbarian society in northern Europe.

In my opinion, Wells’ argument may well be correct, but he doesn’t convey this adequately (in this book) due to poor argumentation and the questionable interpretation and use of evidence. The author continually states that the Dark Ages were a time of brilliant cultural activity, but fails to show this. He keeps going back to the archaeological evidence and ignores any other type of evidence. While Wells describes the archaeological features in detail, he fails to place these objects in a wider context or compare them with similar findings in the rest of Europe. Wells’ also tends to focus on sites on the edge of the Roman Empire or even beyond its borders. There is rarely any discussion of sites within what once was the Western Roman Empire. There is also a lack of information of how his findings compare to what was happening in the area before the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. The author does present some interesting information about the evidence for trade and culture and wealth that refutes the common misconception of savage barbarians plundering cities, ravished populations and empty landscapes. But he doesn’t provide enough information to compare economic complexity during the Roman period and the post-Roman period. For example, Wells demonstrates that Dark Age Europeans were capable of creating sophisticated goods and distributing them, but the why, how, and its relation to the earlier Roman period is not explained.

In general, this book is rather basic and bland and may well be intended as an introduction to the early Middle Ages or as a limited survey to the subject. The writing style is easy to read with many photographs and maps, however, the argument is weak and unsatisfactory.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

Wells uses archaeological evidence to argue that the Dark Ages weren't so dark after all, and that a vibrant culture of nobles and merchants, ruling over newly productive agriculturalists, thrived between 400 and 800 C.E. For the average worker living in the cities of the Rhine basin, the Baltic Sea, or London, there wouldn't have been much change from year to year as Rome weakened. New forms of art around finely crafted gold brooches and animal designs represent a shift away from Mediterranean culture to local cultures.

It's a compelling argument, and the included images of gold artifacts are quite beautiful. This book is aimed quite clearly at college freshmen and the casual archaeologist, who'd be scared off by footnotes or inline citations. Normally, I'd give this book three stars as in introduction to the topic with an axe to grind, but I'm knocking off a star for oddities in included images, such as talking at length about Childeric's unique signet ring without showing it, and including several pictures of the author's European vacation rather than site maps.

Anatolikon says

To start off, I think that Well's thesis is correct. Much of the cultural baggage attached to the term "Dark Ages" is Enlightenment Romanophilism and that picture deserves thorough revision (which has been done in the academic sphere with major works like Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800*)). Unfortunately, Wells' attempt to bring such research the popular sphere falls

rather flat due to poor argumentation and highly questionable use of evidence. Although the book promises in the preface to demonstrate that the Dark Ages "were a time of brilliant cultural activity" Wells fails to do this. Instead, regardless of the chapter heading, he turns time and time again to archaeological finds from the Dark Ages. This in itself is not a problem, as the archaeological record is an invaluable part of our understanding of the history of this period. The problem lies with the fact that it is all the Wells uses. Again and again he goes off describing the features of this belt buckle or that fibula. Although many of the ceramics and pieces of metalwork from the early Middle Ages are quite impressive, Wells' fails to put them into any sort of wider context, which leads into the next problem. A significant part of this book deals with sites on the fringes or beyond the former borders of the Roman Empire. I expected this book to be a popular response to Bryan Ward-Perkins' *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization* but Wells rarely engages with sites inside the former Western Roman Empire and instead prefers to discuss fancy grave goods from sites beyond the borders. I do not think his information is incorrect. For example, his discussion of the continuity of pagan practices in supposed Christian burials is quite good. However, it frequently lacks context, such as in the section in which he talks about the average height of men and women from (guess where?!) grave finds. His numbers come from two sites, and he never addresses the question of the rest of finds in the rest of Europe. This is a problem that is repeated throughout the book. Again and again each chapter continued to discuss grave goods, while Wells never really discussed other important archaeological finds, like relative economic complexity of sites during the Roman and post-Roman period. This is why this book falls flat. Wells consistently demonstrates that people in the Dark Ages were capable of creating sophisticated goods and moving them widely, but why, how, and how this related to the earlier Roman period is not explained at all. The argumentation of this book is weak and although it is a simple read, you would be much better off with something by Wickham or Ward-Perkins.

??????? says

What an absurd book.

After rapid growth in the latter part of the first century, London emerged as a stunning center of the Roman Empire on its northern edge, with monumental architecture, a thriving commercial center, and a military base characteristic of the greatest of Roman cities. The third and fourth centuries at London are marked by a stoppage in the major architecture and a reverse of that process, the dismantling of major stone monuments, at the same time that much of the formerly urban areas seems to have reverted to a non-urban character.

To call these changes "decline," "collapse," or "abandonment" - as has been done in the past - is to adopt a conservative Roman attitude toward change. [p. 112:]

Really? The Aztecs, Incas, Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Chinese, Indians, Hebrews, Greeks and whoever built Timbuktu seem to have been pretty into putting up impressive stone structures too, so it's hard to see how grandiose architecture is particularly Roman in outlook. Even Mr. Wells (or is it Dr. Wells?) can't help but reveal his "Roman attitude": he describes first century London as "monumental," "thriving," and "greatest." If fourth century London was the "reverse" of that, wouldn't that mean...um, yeah, they were living in huts. If your Revisionism-o-Meter doesn't burst into flames on the mangled logic put forth above, you should have the thing checked.

Mr. Wells (or is it Dr. Wells?) confuses humanity's dogged determination to live - no matter what the circumstances - with "civilization." Just because life continued in fourth century London doesn't mean it was on par with life in first century London. Teeming millions now live in slums in Mumbai, Mexico City and Manila, and are sure to leave a nice healthy layer of "dark earth" for future archaeologists, but not even the most generous liberal anthropologist would call those slums "civilization." "Life" yes, "continuity" yes, "civilization" no. Why else would the UN be trying to put an end to it?

The back-flap says "future assessments of the centuries between Rome and Charlemagne will to incorporate the important new insights detailed in the pages of *Barbarians to Angels*." This is indeed true if the one doing the assessing happens to be a writer for Monty Python II; there is a raft of material here.
