

How Rome Described Their Barbarians

The term “barbarian” gets thrown around a lot, including by our Intellectual Takeout authors in their blogs.

In general, “barbarian” is the generic term used by Westerners for someone who do not conform to the dominant culture’s standards of civilization and, in some cases, seeks to actively undermine them.

Many scholars have argued that we are on the cusp of [a new Dark Ages](#), that the “barbarians” are threatening at the gates of Western culture. [Some](#) have even claimed that the barbarians [have been amongst us](#) for some time now.

Our standard point of reference for barbarians are the northern tribes that the Roman Empire battled for many centuries, and whom they eventually succumbed to. For the purposes of fleshing out the term “barbarian” a bit more, I thought I would post selections from historian [Herwig Wolfram’s](#) famous description of barbarians from the perspective of a 3rd century Roman:

“They remain outside the civilized world. They are barbarians; their language does not sound human, more like stammering and mere noise... Under the assault of their horrible songs the classical meter of the ancient poet goes to pieces... For barbarians can neither think nor act rationally... [T]hey are dominated by a horrible death wish: they actually look forward to dying. Even their women take part in battle. Barbarians are driven by evil spirits; ‘they are possessed by demons’ who force them to commit the most terrible acts. Barbarians simply resemble animals more than they do human beings, concluded contemporaries, wondering whether barbarians shared in human nature at all... As ‘two-legged animals’ the barbarians were

viewed as incapable of living according to written laws and only reluctantly tolerating kings... Their lust for gold is immense, their love of drink boundless. Barbarians are without restraint... The reproductive energy of the barbarians is inexhaustible."