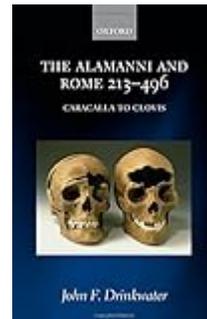




**John F. Drinkwater.** *The Alamanni and Rome 213–496: (Caracalla to Clovis)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xi + 408 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-929568-5.



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**Published on** H-German (February, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## Germany at the End of the Roman Empire: The Alamanni and Rome

This book offers a fine-grained account of the leaders and peoples on the Roman and Alamannic sides (more or less) of the Rhine and the events that defined their symbiotic relationship during the approximately three hundred years between Caracalla and Clovis. John F. Drinkwater seems to leave no leaf unturned in his interpretation of the sources, and he provides a lucid narration of a reconstructed history that illuminates Roman political and personal motivation in interacting with the Alamanni and other groups, importantly the Franks and Burgundians, primarily on the upper and middle Rhine.

Alamannic groupings were local in character and never formed any sort of unified polity, while the Franks emerged from their own disorganization to form a kind of national identity only in the fifth century, when Alamannia had ceased to exist as such. The Alamanni, like the Franks, had no unifying mythical past (as did, say, the Burgundians or Goths). Their names were generic, not ethnic. Drinkwater's programmatic statement is: "The aim of this book is to review this work [on the nature of

the people and the archeology] and to present my own ideas on the relationship between the Alamanni and imperial Rome.... [Those who] in their readiness to accept the Roman historical background as a datum run the risk of missing current shifts in opinion in this field" (p. 3). He rejects mass migration as the source of the Alamanni in favor of a process of ethnogenesis through gradually cohering warbands. Some scholars take their name to express an ancient, special relationship with the god Mannus: "The 'al' prefix of 'Alamanni' was exclusive, not inclusive. 'Alamanni' signifies 'Mannus' own people', created directly by him" (p. 65). These early "Alamanni" are hypothesized to have been an elite troop, that is, a warband, of the Juthungi, whom the Romans met as fierce warriors. The name of the elite Alamanni warbands was then extended to all Juthungi. Advances in archeology have aided in differentiating the Alamanni from, say, the Burgundians or Visigoths, although subgroups of the Alamanni, such as the Bucinobantes or Lentienses, cannot be identified distinctively through archeology.

The body of the book is an almost painstaking deconstruction or interpretation of the writings of Roman historians and inferences regarding the motives of all players. The Alamanni and the Roman army faced each other across the Rhine at the current Swiss-German border, and downstream between Gaul and Alamannia. The “barbarian threat,” created by raids and attempts to settle land on the left bank of the river, served the interests of Roman leaders by justifying taxation to maintain an army, which in turn offered a path to power. Even before the period of this book, Julius Caesar used the Germani as a reason to station an army in Gaul, which created the military and financial strength that propelled him to prominence in Roman politics. Not only were the Germani not a threat to Italy; they had been actively recruited into the Roman army approximately three hundred years before the Alamanni were portrayed as threatening the frontier. True enough, raids were conducted by various parties north and east of the Rhine into eastern Gaul and Raetia—and later by the Alamanni—but such actions fell far short of an invasion. The “threat” was proclaimed largely for political gain in Rome: “The ‘Germanic threat’ thus allowed western emperors, generals, administrators, and local aristocrats to validate their high position in society by allowing them to be diligent: diligently spending the taxpayers’ money, to their own economic and social advantage” (p. 361). By the year 240, however, a genuine threat had developed in the East from frequent raids by Goths on the lower Danube and at the Black Sea, which did call upon the emperor and his generals to succeed or be overthrown.

The interface at the Rhine was a land of opportunity for Alamannic leaders, who let themselves be co-opted by the Romans or used them to their own advantage for material benefit. During most of the period under consideration the only threat came through infrequent long-distance raiding by self-motivated warbands, certainly not a permanent problem for Roman forces on the lower and middle Rhine. But emperors needed to be generous to an army whose support they relied on. Furthermore, the reputation of a general depended on the victories he won. Repelling Alamannic threats solidified reputations; victories against eastern enemies, such as the Persians, brought glory. The end goal was to pacify groups; to do that, the cooperation of Alamannic leaders had to be achieved at the same time as victories were sustained against raids.

After an introduction, Drinkwater divides his presentation into nine chapters: “Prelude,” “Arrival,” “Settlement,” “Society,” “Service,” “Conflict 285-355,” “Conflict

356-61,” “Conflict 365-94,” and “The Fifth Century.” He adds an appendix on the Lyon Medallion, references, and an index. “Prelude” posits the inferiority of the Alamanni to Rome and sketches the background of raids into Roman territory, beginning with the Cimbri and Teutones in the late second century BCE, showing how Julius Caesar’s exploits with the Gauls set the stage for later “barbarian threats.” “Arrival” concerns the settlement history of what is now southwest Germany. The first brush east of the Rhine with a Germanic group, called Alambannoi by Cassius Dio, occurred when Caracalla encountered a raiding party in 213 at the Main River. The Roman *limes* yielded to pressure in the mid third century, as more Germanic groups filtered south “thanks to the availability of the imperial road network” (p. 70). The Alamanni may have come from the western part of modern-day Mecklenburg or, more generally, from groups living between the Elbe and Main. Repeated raids by warbands led to southern settlement up to the Rhine. At the same time that the *limes* was being breached in the West, the East was threatened by incursions of Goths on the lower Danube in the 240s, which diluted Roman defenses.

“Settlement” describes developments in the northwest, near the *limes*. The author posits the size of a warband at about six hundred-plus women and children. Since warbands most likely also quarreled, settlements would have been widely spaced. Drinkwater posits “a maximum resident population of c. 120,000 for the fourth century. The third-century figure must have been considerably lower” (p. 81). Not all settlements were primarily agricultural. There were also (at least count) 62 *Hill settlements*, or “hill settlements,” constructed from the late third to early fourth centuries that were used—likely by Alamannic kings with entourage—until the Franks assumed power in the sixth century. The Romans encouraged such settlement, hoping to pay some Alamanni settlers to help protect the Roman Empire against others. Thus began subsidies that persuaded some Alamannic leaders to stay in place. The Alamanni were, however, not the only group in the region; the originally East Germanic Burgundians, who had come west as warrior bands that settled along the upper Main, were also in the region, occasionally complicating intergroup relations.

“Society” begins with a disclaimer that other than the warriors having had “long hair, dyed red, and [liking] strong drink we know little about them. As far as, for example, the lives of women are concerned, we know nothing” (p. 117). The Alamanni were pagan before the seventh century. Farming may have been viable near the

Rhine and captured Romans may even have been used as slaves. Their political and military structures are recounted in commentaries by Julian Libanius and Ammianus Marcellinus, who described superior kings, kings, lesser kings, and princes. Petty kings or chieftains with transitory reigns are known from Scandinavian sources. Drinkwater comes down on the side of hereditary as opposed to elected chieftainship, due to the reports of sons following fathers in office. The Alamannic laws reveal what other Germanic laws reveal: a violent, impoverished society with a vendetta code. As Drinkwater puts it, “one suspects that it was never easy to be an Alamannic chief. This explains the attractiveness of Roman support” (p. 122). Alamannic kings were “in a cultural and strategic cul-de-sac. For a leader to emerge, he would have to be victorious in battle, and the sole worthy opponent was Rome. But Alamannic leaders relied on Rome for pay and goods” (p. 124).

They often served the Romans militarily. Drinkwater profiles fourth-century Alamannic chieftains by name and follows their entry and departure from imperial duty on a model established by Julius Caesar. Whereas Caesar employed Germani as cavalry, the Alamanni in some instances “mixed with the cream of imperial society” (p. 147) and “lived dangerous but generally successful lives as Roman grandees. Their descendants may have gone on to do even greater things—hidden from us by Roman names” (p. 153). This happy integration waned in the later fourth century due to a change in policy by Valentinian I, after which Frankish rather than Alamannic chieftains joined the Romans. The author proposes models for recruitment in the early period: short-term hires of warband leaders who returned home after mercenary service and/or sons of chieftains forming warbands from local young men and serving under treaty. Other sources included individual crossings to the Romans for personal gain, prisoners of war, and long-term hiring of Alamanni for specific tasks, such as replacement of Roman troops sent to face the Persians.

The earlier chapters serve as an extended introduction; later chapters proceed chronologically. In “Conflict 285-355,” a close reading of Ammianus leads Drinkwater to conclude that “from the later third to the early fifth centuries ... Alamanni and Franks were never a menace to Rome” (p. 177). Disturbances were exaggerated for internal Roman purposes, while occasional attacks by warbands intruding from the interior of Alamannia were repulsed. Any real or exaggerated engagements suited the purposes of Roman generals. The subsequent “Conflict 356-361” turns on the change in relations when the Ala-

manni settled on the Roman side of the Rhine, an action Drinkwater suggests was not aggressive but witnessed to their desire to become Roman subjects; the chapter illustrates his point about the illusory nature of the Alamannic threat. We read that Julian (a cousin of Constantinus II who became Caesar of the West in 355 BCE) retook Strasbourg, Brumath, Seltz, Rhinezabern, Speyer, Worms, and Mainz in 356, with resistance only at Brumath. In the following year, Alamanni blockaded the roads and fled to islands in the Rhine. Seven chieftains under Chnodomarius demanded that Julian retreat, but he attacked instead. The Battle of Strasbourg was hailed as a glorious victory and Julian spared Chnodomarius and sent him to Rome. Julian proceeded to Mainz, put a bridge over the Rhine, and invaded Alamannic territory. The Alamanni eventually sued for peace and Julian added to his glory by defeating six hundred Frankish raiders who had attacked while he was busy with the Alamanni. In subsequent seasons Julian continued to penetrate Alamannic territory, in part to suppress suspected hostile districts and in part to secure the Main frontier against the Burgundians. Julian was able to “proclaim himself conqueror of Germani, Franks, and Alamanni” (p. 252). He assumed the title of Augustus and used his military dealings in the West to set him up for honors and transfer East to face the Persians. By 361 he had left Gaul.

“Conflict 365-394” begins with the death of Julian in June 363, which led to the reign of Valentinian, whose career is hard to follow due to gaps in the record. The chapter again illustrates the Roman exploitation of a “barbarian threat” for individual political gain. Ammianus, useful as a source for the year 378, provides news of Alamannic incursions into Gaul early in the reign of Valentinian. The Alamanni became troublesome after 365 when the Romans changed long-standing agreements on gift exchanges to seal treaties. The unilateral termination of an established diplomatic custom was offensive to the Alamanni. Drinkwater writes: “The wholesale alienation of border communities so soon after his accession and arrival in the west would have been needlessly risky. What we see is Valentinian acting like Julian in both cowing and provoking the western enemy of choice... Most Alamannic communities would fall into line, but ... Roman action would inevitably goad some hotheads to fight. These could be picked off once Valentinian had reached the Rhine; but other events prevented this” (p. 272). Hotheads did act. A raid by perhaps a few thousand Alamanni had the indirect effect of provoking the main Roman field army at Rheims. Valentinian’s field marshal Jovinus rolled up the Alamanni from behind and

conquered them at Châlons-sur-Marne.

A victory by one of his generals thus rhetorically bolstered Valentinian's presence in the West (so that he did not go to face the Persians). After a raid into Mainz and a separate assassination of a major Alamannic leader, Vithicabius, Valentinian launched a campaign over the Rhine and established fortifications on the river and east of it, one at Mons Piri—now Bierhelder Hof in Rohrbach near Heidelberg. The successor of Vithicabius was subsequently rewarded with the construction of the Zähringer *Bergburg*. Valentinian fortified the Rhine frontier from Basel north to Mainz and east to the Iller and Danube Rivers, including fortified landing sites for warships.

Drinkwater states that Valentinian “never intended to conquer the Alamanni” (p. 299) but rather engaged in a defensive strategy that allowed him to call containment a victory. The Alamanni were exploited as the emperor saw fit: as recipients of imperial clemency or as victims of imperial intolerance. The occasional goading of neighboring Alamannic communities into revolt was useful in maintaining the illusion that they constituted a major enemy, requiring the permanent presence of a large

(and growing) army and a senior emperor and his court. “The Fifth Century” recounts in more rapid sequence the events leading to the dissolution of the Alamanni as a defined group to contend with and the reasons for the rise of the Franks.

This account of the rise and fall of the Alamanni and their manipulation by the Romans is a book highly recommended as a compendium of scholarship by Drinkwater himself and others over the course of investigation into this period of Roman and Germanic history.

Drinkwater integrates (with great detail) scholarship from a great many sources and thus provides both a thorough survey and a guide to further reading. A good companion volume would be Karlheinz Fuchs et al., *Die Alamannen* (1997) with fifty-four essays on aspects including anthropological considerations, law(s), dress and weapons, working with metals, burial customs, the early church, and language—among others. Drinkwater's volume should be of interest to historians and to those who have sought a good source on the interaction between the Romans and the Alamannic people(s) in the earliest period of their history.

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**Citation:** James E. Cathey. Review of Drinkwater, John F., *The Alamanni and Rome 213–496: (Caracalla to Clovis)*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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