Barbarian Art

In historical context it is very important to keep in mind that the word “barbarian” did not originally carry the same connotations as it does today. It comes from the Greek word “barbaros,” meaning simply “foreign.” So for our purposes “barbarian” will be used here as a blanket term for non-Roman, nomadic, and illiterate groups traveling throughout Europe during the middle ages. The cultural exchange that occurred in Europe after antiquity can be seen through artwork, among other things; Romans borrowed from “Barbarian” aesthetic, and vice versa.

The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus wrote about different Barbarian tribes he encountered during the 4th century in his Roman History. He admired their military prowess and fierceness: something all the barbarians had in common. While he complimented the Gauls on their cleanliness, and the Alans on their beauty, he held contempt for the nomadic and horse-loving Huns. The general trend is that when an outside group was more different (called “less civilized”), the members of that group were more likely to be hated and feared. The barbarians, being humans, had vices and virtues just like the Romans did. It is also important to keep in mind that the Roman empire contained many different ethnic groups, and people of “barbarian” descent sometimes considered themselves Roman.

Ammianus did not have kind words for the actual inhabitants of Rome after his visit in 400, stating, “Those few mansions which were once celebrated for the serious cultivation of liberal studies, now are filled with ridiculous amusements of torpid indolence, reechoing with the sound of singing, and the tinkle of flutes and lyres” (XIV.16: The Luxury of the Rich in Rome, c. 400 C). Much to Ammianus’s dismay, the grand reputation that Rome held during antiquity no longer had a foundation. His writings demonstrate that the early middle ages were a time of barbarian conquest and Roman decline. Luckily for us, the political unrest of the period makes studying medieval artwork and history so fascinating!