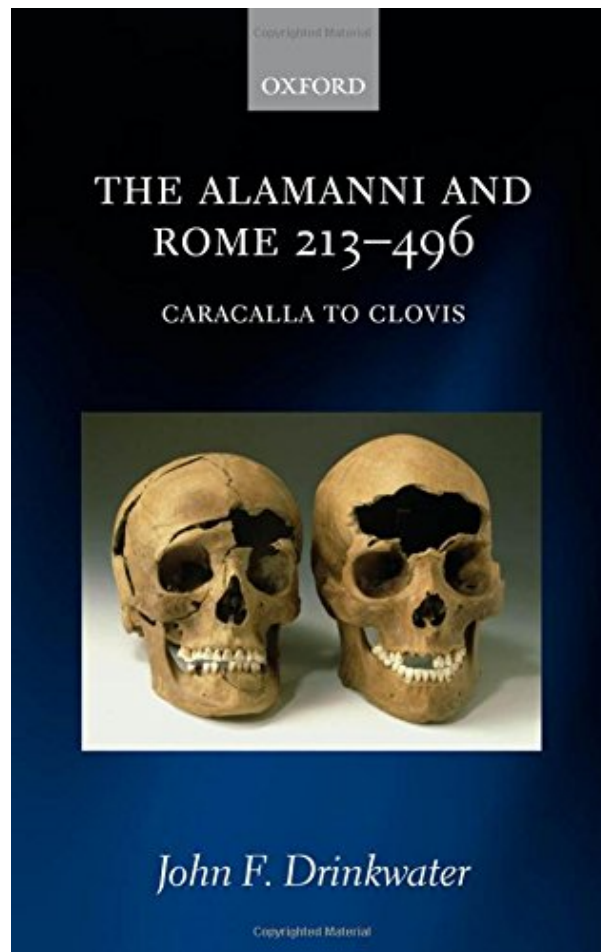


**THE ALAMANNI AND ROME 213-496
(CARACALLA TO CLOVIS) BY JOHN F.
DRINKWATER**



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Review

This is much the best book on Romano-barbarian relations published in the past decade. Michael Kulikowski, *Journal of Roman Studies* Drinkwater's book immediately takes its place as one of the most focused and detailed analyses of the Alamanni in existence, certainly the best available in English. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* ...This book, remarkable for the depth of its consideration, is hugely rich, for the scope of its conceptions as for the multiple detailed analyses ... Alain Cahuvot, *GNOMON*

About the Author

John F. Drinkwater is Emeritus Professor of Roman Imperial History, Department of Classics, University of Nottingham.

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The Alamanni and Rome focuses upon the end of the Roman Empire. From the third century AD, barbarians attacked and then overran the west. Some--Goths, Franks, Saxons--are well known, others less so. The latter include the Alamanni, despite the fact that their name is found in the French ("Allemagne") and Spanish ("Alemania") for "Germany." This pioneering study, the first in English, uses new historical and archaeological findings to reconstruct the origins of the Alamanni, their settlements, their politics, and their society, and to establish the nature of their relationship with Rome. John Drinkwater discovers the cause of their modern elusiveness in their high level of dependence on the Empire. Far from being dangerous invaders, they were often the prey of emperors intent on acquiring military reputations. When much of the western Empire fell to the Franks, so did the Alamanni, without ever having produced their own "successor kingdom."

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Most helpful customer reviews

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Roman "bullies" and Alamanni "victims"

By JPS

This is a very interesting, original and, at times, fascinating book on the relations between the Alamanni, a confederation of Germanic tribes on the right bank of the Upper and Middle Rhine, and the Roman Empire between the third century and the fifth century, from the reign of Caracalla to their defeat and conquest by Clovis and his Franks.

The book's originality lays in the author's thesis, with John Drinkwater developing the case that the Germanic tribes along the Rhine, in general, and the Alamanni, in particular, did not represent a deadly threat to the Romans, or even to Gaul. Rather, Rome, ever since Julius Caesar and Arioviste, tended to use them and make them into terrifying "bugbears", playing on Romans' ingrained terrors going back to the Cimbri and the Teutons of the late second century BC. In a way, they were a kind of convenient "punching ball" each and every time that an Emperor needed to burnish his military credentials and win some quick victories for "internal consumption".

The author does not, however, go as far as to state that they were harmless, but the damage they could do was limited to frontier raids by war bands, mostly relatively small (the maximum for each war band seems to be about a thousand warriors). These raids, many of which came for further inland, as opposed to coming from the populations settled along the frontier, lead to harsh Roman reprisals. The real danger that they represented was in times of Roman civil war when they could (and did) take advantage of the undermanned frontier garrisons but, here too, they were reacting to their much more powerful neighbour.

The points are well-made, well-argued, thoroughly discussed, and mostly convincing. The rather revisionist conclusion drawn by the author - that the Roman Emperors deliberately magnified the threat that these tribes represented in order to justify the huge costs of maintaining large forces on the Rhine and in Gaul - seems, at first look, difficult to dispute, although it is quite controversial.

The author's sections on Ammianus Marcellinus are particularly good and convincing as they show how the Roman author's biases lead him to magnify the threat on the Rhine frontiers. Julian and his entourage are presented as rather devious. According to Drinkwater, they largely engineered the troubles that lead to the Caesar's victory at Strasbourg, giving him the military glory he needed to challenge Constantius II, and destroying the latter's policy and alliances with the Alamanni. In addition, the author also questions the numerous "victories" that Valentinian the First won over them a decade later, reducing them to punitive expeditions and mostly small engagements.

After reading these fascinating and somewhat revisionist interpretations, I could not help wondering. Although I was not entirely convinced, it seemed clear that the "Germanic" threat had been often exaggerated by the Roman Emperors. I was not quite certain; however, to what extent this might have been the case. This is because the author tends to rather systematically minimize almost all Germanic incursions and to downgrade them to mere raids.

Regardless of whether you are entirely "sold" on the author's thesis or whether you remain somewhat sceptical, there is much more to this book than that. Three main additional items stand out - there are others as well, but to keep this review reasonably short, I will only mention these.

One is the author's skill in showing that most of these Germanic tribes, and the Alamanni in particular, mainly intended to integrate, and that this was mostly achieved through service in the Roman army. The examples of Alamanni officers found in the written sources and serving in the army show to what extent some of them achieved this. This is completed by the second element, which is the rather skilful use of archaeological findings that give glimpses on the arrival, settlement, living conditions and society of the Alamanni how it evolved over time, and how they seem to have mostly wanted to preserve close links with Rome and become part of the Empire.

The third element is that this book, beyond the thesis presented, is perhaps the most valuable of all. This is because it brings to (relative and partial) light the history of and life on a large part of the Rhine frontier and it largely succeeds in demystifying the "Barbarians". These were clearly not so "Barbarian" as the Roman

propaganda tended to portray them. Moreover, they did not want to remain "Barbarian" at all: they seem to have wanted to become Romans...

After hesitating, because some of the author makes interpretations that are somewhat speculative and at times far-fetched to build his case, I will settle on five stars because this is a superb book and a must read for anyone interested on the Roman Empire, even if you do not end up convinced by the author...

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

The mutually beneficial but nevertheless abusive relationship between Romans and Alamanni

By Marcel Dupasquier

John F. Drinkwater has written an excellent book about the Alamanni, where he follows their development from their first appearance in the sources until their takeover by the Franks. It teaches you all you need to know about the Alamanni, and I would even say, all there is to know about them. I, in any case, am not planning to read any more books about them, I do not think that any other book could teach me more than is written in this book. In this respect, the book is fairly conclusive, only new archeological findings could probably further confirm or contradict its thesis. John F. Drinkwater makes thereby a convincing point that the Germani behind the Rhine frontier and the Alamanni among them in particular were never a serious threat to the Romans. On the contrary, they were constantly bullied by their Roman neighbors whose leaders were continually in a need to establish themselves as able generals and military leaders. Consequently, every emperor sought for himself and/or his minor successor(s) a magnificent battle and a glorious victory against the Alamanni, which would establish them as capable war leaders. Only like this could they ensure themselves of the loyalty of their troops; the 'crisis' of the third century was thus also to a certain degree overcome by the realization of the men at the top that they needed to 'stage' themselves in some way as capable military leaders. This whole bureaucracy of military and civil administration on the Rhine eventually kept itself going, until it finally broke down in the fifth century, to be replaced by nothing similar. The Franks who, in contrast to the Romans, would not draw any advantages out of the Rhine frontier would under a capable rex quickly overcome the Alamanni and conquer their territory.

The only negative point about this book that I can make from my point of view is that John F. Drinkwater sometimes argues the cases to an utmost extreme, even if I was believing him already for a long time and therefore was starting to feel bored. But I guess this is necessary to convince other historians and therefore best practice in the field. And as far as the prize is concerned, happily there are public libraries... But besides these minor nuisances, I can all in all warmly recommend this book to everybody who is interested in the origin, history and fate of the Alamanni.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

expensive but well done

By adkad

First it seems to me that academic and scholarly books are way overpriced. Paying almost a hundred dollars for a book is a lot to ask of the fan of the Roman history. That said, this is an excellent study of the relations between Rome and its Germanic neighbors, and raises a number of interesting new ways to look at this topic. For example, Drinkwater argues that the threat from Germanic neighbors, up until the 5th century, was greatly exaggerated by the Roman emperors for political reasons. I would recommend this book highly and gave it four stars instead of five because of the price.

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