

## **The Division and Fall of the Roman Empire**

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### **1. Introduction: Violent Transformations**

The political 'fall' of the Roman Empire (from 410 C.E.) has long been regarded as one of the pivotal events in world history. Ever since Edward Gibbon completed his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1788, there has been considerable debate on the causes for this 'event'. It must be stressed, first, that though there was a real decline of the political power and unity of the Western Roman Empire, the cultural heritage of the empire would persist in the West through the middle ages and in an altered form into the modern period (as noted by Brown 1971). The eastern portion of the empire continued as the relatively Byzantine Empire, which was eventually conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 C.E.. Second, it is wiser to speak of causes rather than any single cause; a series of interlocked conditions and their effects led to a radical change in the political condition of Europe during the 5th century. As noted by Michael Grant: -

It was brought down by two kinds of destruction: invasions from outside, and weaknesses that arose within. The invasions are easy to identify . . . However, they were not sufficiently formidable in themselves to have caused the Empire to perish. (Grant 1976, p19).

Here Grant is in direct opposition to a writer such as A.H.M. Jones, who argued that the 'internal weaknesses of the empire cannot have been a major factor in its decline' (Jones 1964, II, p1068; commented on by Ferrill 1976, p21). Though Grant might underestimate the military causes for Rome's fall, there are very good reasons to suggest that internal difficulties were directly connected with the West's weakening military power.

Nor should we assume that the Germanic tribes consciously, at least at first, wanted the destruction of the empire. As noted by Gibbon: -

But, in simple truth, the northern conquerors were neither sufficiently savage nor sufficiently refined to entertain such aspiring ideas of destruction and revenge. The shepherds of Scythia and Germany had been educated in the armies of the empire, whose discipline they acquired, and whose weaknesses they invade: with the familiar use of the Latin tongue, they had learned to reverence the name and titles of Rome; and, though incapable of emulating, they were more inclined to admire than to abolish, the arts and studies of a brighter period (Gibbon 1903, VII, pp347-8).

For Gibbon the fall of Rome was due to the influence of Christianity in sapping the moral and military unity of the empire, combined with contests between individuals for power, the divisions between east and west, compounded by external 'barbarian pressures'. In large measure the empire was sometimes an opponent, sometimes an opportunity for the Goths, the Alans, the Burgundians, who would trade with the empire, seek lucrative military service, and in the end hope to settle within her frontiers to avoid the pressure of larger and more aggressive tribal confederations (such as the Huns and Vandals) which emerged in the north and north-east. Policies of barbarian settlement began as early as Marcus Aurelius in southern Dacia (from the 160s C.E.), but continued with Constantine and Valentinian I. A settlement of Visigoths in Aquitaine in 419 C.E. was at first an example of such accommodation, but the Visigoths soon expanded their area of control across south-west Gaul, creating an independent state by the 420s (Wade-Perkins 2005, p15, p57). In the fifth century land was also allocated by treaty to the Burgundians on the upper Rhone around Lake Geneva, to the Alans in areas near Valence and other parts of northern Gaul (Wade-Perkins 2005, p54).

The Roman Empire in the late 4th century was still in many superficial ways strong. In 356 C.E., for example, the young Julian won a strong victory over the Germans in a battle near Strasbourg (Grant 1976, p28). Even as late as 363 C.E. the Empire was able to field major armies in the east which could successfully invade, if not permanently hold down, the Persians (see Ferguson 2005). In the west her difficulties were more severe, but Rome still held an extensively fortified northern frontier manned by several hundred thousand men, backed up by large mobile field armies. Valentinian I (C.E. 364-75), for example, would be able to defeat major German forces which broke across the Rhine and captured the fortress of Mainz (Grant 1976, p31), and in following years he was able to secure the Austrian and western Danube frontiers (Grant 1976, p32).

Nonetheless, during the fifth century we find major incursions of 'barbarian' tribes, including Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Alans, Burgundians, Franks, Vandals, and Huns. Many answers have been given for this radically altered state of affairs. One is that the supposed strength of the empire was largely superficial, that the long-term sources of her strength had already been eroded, and that almost irreversible disunities had already undermined the empire's ability to direct and project its power. Figure I provides a time-line provides a summary of key events and reigns.

*Figure I: Time-Line of Emperors and Key Events for Later 4th and Fifth Centuries. Eastern emperors are in square brackets. (following Grant 1976; Ferrill 1986)*

364-75 Valentinian I  
 [364-78 Valens]  
 376 Decisive defeat at Adrianople of Valens and Eastern army by immigrant Goths  
 375-83 Gratian  
 [379-95 Theodosius I]  
 383-92 Valentinian II  
 392-94 Eugenius  
 394-95 Theodosius I  
 394 The defeat of Argobast and the pretender Eugenius at the battle of Frigid River by Theodosius  
 395-423 Honorius  
 [395-408 Arcadius]

406-7 Penetration of Rhine frontier by mixed Germanic invasion force

[408-450 Theodosius II]

410 Rome sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths, who then moved through Italy.

412 Visigoths move into Gaul

421 Constantius 425-55 Valentinian III

[450-57 Marcian]455 Petronius Maximus

455-6 Avitus457-61 Majorian

[457-74 Leo I]

461-5 Libius Severus

467-72 Anthemius

472 Olybrius

473-4 Glycerius

[474 Leo II]

[474-91 Zeno]475-6 Romulus Augustus

476 Imperial Insignia of Rome sent back to Zeno

476 Kings and Popes rule Rome

These trends of barbarian incursion did lead to a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty within the empire. Thus St. Jerome could describe the Goths in the following terms:

May Jesus in future protect the world against such savage animals! They were everywhere. Their speed was such that they arrived even before the rumour of their approach. Neither religion, rank nor age caused any to be spared. The cry of the infant aroused no pity in them. (Jerome *Letters* 60.16 in Matyszak 2004, p256)

There has been much debate over whether we should view this as the ‘fall’ of the Western Empire, or as a ‘transition’ which was not merely an invasion (see Ward-Perkins 2005; Brown 1971). Although there were serious military defeats involved, this was a complex process in which much of the cultural legacy of the west was saved or transformed. Complex societies emerged for a time in parts of Gaul, Spain and England, based upon a mixing of local elites mobilising around Roman traditions. However, it was also true that the fifth century was replete with invasion, death and suffering, the displacement of populations, the partial destruction of cultural resources, and the very real fracturing of the power of the Western Empire (see Ward-Perkins 2005). If this was a transformation, it based in part on violence and collapse, as well as some forced accommodation and innovation. If the Late Antique period should not be viewed just as a prelude to the ‘Dark Ages’ (see Brown 1971), it was nonetheless a period in which political and social structures changed rapidly, providing a new dynamic in Europe. Centralised Roman power could no longer guide events. Though the Eastern Empire might intervene at times, new tribal confederations would only slowly yield to territorially stable kingdoms that would underpin the nations of modern Europe.

## **2. Causes of the Decline and Fall**

Claimed causes for the fall of Roman imperial power have ranged from notions of immorality and decadence, either due to too much ‘paganism’ (St. Augustine and St. Jerome), loose morals (the Christian writer Salvian), too much Christianity (the fifth century historian Zosimus), climatic changes, declining elite fertility levels, general population decline (especially rural population in the theories presented by Boak 1974, p110), or even to the idea that lead poisoning may have effected the upper classes and city populations (see Ferrill 1976, p17; Ward-Perkins 2005, p34).

Michael Grant (1976) lists some 13 major overlapping trends connected with the fall of the empire which are likely to have some validity. In brief they include: -

1) The ambitions of generals either to have themselves proclaimed emperor, or to promote their own ambitions as 'Master of Soldiers' over and beyond the interests of empire or of legitimate emperors. This trend had continued from the third century, despite the stabilizing role of Diocletian's tetrarchic system (the coordinated rule of two emperors and two junior caesars), and a temporary centralization under the dynasty established by Constantine. A.H.M. Jones has well summarized this divisive trend of the fourth and fifth centuries, which was severe in the Western empire: -

Constantine II and Constans fought each other, Magnentius murdered Constans, Julian usurped the title of Augustus, Magnus Maximus rebelled against Gratian and Arbogast put up Eugenius against Valentinian II. Under Honorius there was a crop of tyrants - Attalus, Constantine and Jovinus, and after his death John. After the death of Valentinian III emperors were set up and deposed with bewildering rapidity. In Africa there a series of local pretenders - Firmus, Gildo, Heraclian, Boniface (Jones 1964, p1033).

2) The unwillingness of the general populations to be conscripted into the army, and their unwillingness to either support the army through the burden of taxation or of levies of goods. Thus it became increasingly difficult in the fourth century to support something like the 600,000 that were needed to fully defend the frontiers (Ward-Perkins 2005, p41). The emperor Theodosius, for example, specified that 'draft dodgers' who cut off their thumbs should not be burnt alive but conscripted in any case, counting as half a man (Ferrill 1986, p68). These trends resulted in manpower shortages (see Boak 1974), and in associated financial difficulties for imperial armies. From the fourth century we find sedentary frontier troops also encouraged to farm land assigned to them (Ferrill 1986, pp82-3), providing needed food resources but also limiting their mobility and increasing local attachments. As a result, the fifth century army was under-force and heavily reliant on Germans, many of whom existed in large federate units. This trend had begun as early as Julius Caesar's use of German cavalry in the first century B.C.E., but had been greatly accelerated by Constantine's use of Franks, Alamanni, Goths, Vandals and Burgundians as soldiers and officers in his armies (Grant 1976, p27). Thus frontier forces had to be maintained at 'public expense', and once these funds declined northern borders became especially vulnerable. As noted by the fifth century source Eugippius, speaking of the Danube frontier:

So long as the Roman dominion lasted, soldiers were maintained in many towns at the public expense to guard the boundary wall. When this custom ceased, the squadrons of soldiers and the boundary wall were blotted out together. The troop at Batavis, however, held out. Some soldiers of this troop had gone to Italy to fetch the final pay to their comrades, and no one knew that the barbarians had slain them on the way. (Eugippius *The Life of St. Severinus* 20.69-71).

This problem was connected with the next three causes. Issues 1 and 2 constitute the basis of an unnecessary military failure of the western imperial forces (Ferrill 1976, p19). The eastern empire, though suffering from similar problems, was generally richer and had a less influential aristocracy to grapple with to extract wealth and manpower for government purposes (Ferrill 1976, pp20-21).

3) The continued growth of wide gulfs between the various classes of the empire, with the poor both unable and unwilling to meet the work and tax demands placed upon them. The decline of their status from that of a Roman citizen down to that of *humiliores* (with diminished rites) or as virtually unfree bonded labour (*coloni*) would not solve the decline in tilled land in the empire, nor its loss in revenues (Jones 1964, vol II, p1027; see further St Croix 1981; Garnsey 1970). More importantly, such a class would not feel any loyalty to the government which was both crushing and restricting them. It is not surprising that many in these repressed groups were willing to opt out and find other modes of life where possible, either on the estates of rich landlords, joining independent communities (see below) or via banditry.

4) Above this mass of truly poor and oppressed people, there emerged an even more wealthy and powerful upper class. This comprised the senatorial classes of Rome and Constantinople, as well as a few very wealthy provincial land-owners. The members of these classes often owned huge estates, having swallowed up small landowners of earlier periods. Thus Rutillianus Namatianus (*A Voyage Home to Gaul*) on his voyage north along the coast of Italy can speak of huge estates where once there had been small villages. By the fifth century many of these became fortified homesteads, with the serfs and clients of senators acting as private armies to protect themselves against imperial tax collectors, conscription agents, or barbarians. There was also a trend for these wealthy land-owners not to be actively involved in government. This trend had begun in the third century with senators forbidden to hold military commands, but had become part of the culture of many elite Romans, whether pagan or Christians, who viewed public service as both demeaning and dangerous.

5) Grant (1976) also argues that during this period there was a massive decline in the Middle Class, the vigorous merchants and artisans of the cities, largely due to taxation and the onerous duties of being placed on local city boards (as noted by Grant 1976, p142, the legal Code of Theodosius II has 192 edicts obligating their service and restricting their freedom). While the very real plight of this group is amply demonstrated in our sources, Grant is over-estimating their numbers in the empire and in the antique world, perhaps following the emphasis on the Middle Class ahistorically suggested by Mikhail Rostovtsev (1957). On the other hand, it is true that tight taxation and stultifying regulations on all trades greatly hampered the economic vitality of cities throughout the empire, including those in Greece and Italy.

6 & 7) Grant (1976) thinks that the above problems led to a 'credibility gap' opening up between the people and the government, and between the people and the emperor. The numerous bureaucrats upon which the working of empire depended were viewed as being venal, self-interested and inefficient. Evasion was the social standard of conduct. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of the emperors, as revealed on their coinage, in the speeches made in their courts, and in their legislation, revealed a complete remoteness from the real suffering and plight of the people of the empire. Although these slogans must be treated as aspirations rather than descriptions (Grant 1976, p179), they were nonetheless so removed from the reality of the fifth century that they made the government at Rome, then Milan and Ravenna, seem irrelevant and absurd.

8) Another major cause was the growing split between the eastern and western empires, which on occasion tried to help each other, but whose interests in the end began to drift apart. As such, there was no consistent means of coping in a coordinated way with

major challenges such as the Visigoths, and for the Eastern empire Rome took on a symbolic and historical meaning, rather than being a core component of the empire which must be defended at all costs (see Ward-Perkins 2005).

9) There was a failure to forge any overall alliance between the Germanic allies of Rome and the earlier Italian, Gallo-Roman and Greek societies into which they were introduced. Although Rome now relied for her northern defense upon large bodies of these Germans, had allowed many of them to settle in Gaul and the Balkans, and in the end would be forced to turn over one third of the land in Gaul and Spain for their use, there was no genuine cultural acceptance of Germans as equals. As early as Pliny the Elder and Tacitus (*Germanica*) there had been praise for their bravery and traditional virtues. Likewise, imperial leaders accepted their political and military usefulness. They were also viewed as being loyal once they had given their personal oaths, hence German troops had been used as bodyguards for the emperors during the early Principate. But even educated writers such as Symmachus, Orosius and Salvian would still find their personal habits and their 'friendship' distasteful (Grant 1976, pp218-220). Here the Romans had brought in a powerful ally whom they would neither assimilate nor appease. Only in later centuries would there be a two-way fusion based on the reality of Germanic military power and Roman culture, language and administrative forms (see Ward-Perkins 2005)

10) Grant also argues that both the pagan and Christian milieus of the 4th and 5th century would encourage a policy of political non-involvement among elite Romans. This was certainly true among the more pure strands of Christianity, as found in the ascetic movements in the east, especially Egypt, and the growing monastic tradition in the west. Leading Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine would have an ambiguous relationship with the power of Empire, while other thinkers such as Ambrose, Orosius, and Lactantius would regard the fall of empire as a necessary punishment for sin and a prelude to the end of times prior to the last judgement. Lactantius in the 4th century had written: -

The fall and ruin of the world will soon take place, but it seems that nothing of the kind is to be feared as long as the city of Rome stands intact. But when the capital of the world has fallen . . . who can doubt that the end will have come for the affairs of men and for the whole world? It is that city which sustains all things. (*Divinae Institutiones* vii.25, in Jones 1964, II, p1025)

Reclusion to a more pure and spiritual life was recommended, as was chastity, continence and where possible life-long virginity. The result was that thousands of people retreated from the demands of earthly and family life, including hundreds of the best-educated and some wealthy individuals. Though monasteries would become important centres for learning and economic revival in later periods, they also drew of some of these resources from the needs of the empire. This was already a result of the decline of the empire at several levels, a reaction to the palpable failure of the political system to meet the aspirations of ordinary people and their need for an embracing sense of security (spiritual and physical).

11) The state, already strongly autocratic, became even more intolerant of differences in viewpoints during the fourth and fifth centuries. In spite of some moderate emperors, e.g. Constantine and Valentinian I, there was an intensifying trend to punish the 'pagan', the heretic and the social non-conformist with a harsh and excessive application of 'law'.

The relative religious moderation of the Hellenic, Hellenistic, and the late Republican ages would be eclipsed. This intolerance flowed over into the schisms within the Church, slowing down reconciliation between the Eastern and Western parts of the empire (see below), as well as fueling differences between the Christianity of Rome and important Christian creeds such as the Arianism, favoured by the Visigoths and the Vandals (see Ward-Perkins 2005, pp68-69; Matyszak 2004, p257).

12 & 13) Michael Grant also argues that the entire trend of the mentality of the age undermined the notion of self-help. This could operate in two different ways, one as a mental orientation, the other a social one. There was a tendency to feel that problem was unsolvable, to place it at the feet of God or Providence, or, on the contrary, to look to great crises of the past which had passed away and argue that current troubles, too, would just pass away. Associated with this was very much an 'other worldly view', an argument that spiritual realities were more important than the physical world, and that any real solution must be concerned first with the condition of the individual soul and its relation with God. As such, there was no strong difference between the condition of a slave or an emperor, and no strong difference between the government of the empire or of some Germanic warlord. As such, all that mattered was that the soul could be kept untarnished from sin, and that any leader or state did not coerce people into unbelief or sin. Socially, other groups might have sought to opt out and form autonomous communities, deflecting both invading tribes and the imperial tax-payer where possible (see Ward-Perkins 2005). The *Bacaudae* in the fifth century (especially active in Gaul through 407-448) may represent one such group, joined by peasants and slaves, though their exact nature is unclear in the sources (Ward-Perkins 2005, pp15-16, pp45-48)

Michael Grant's analysis, taken globally, is quite powerful. However, he fails to spell out the interrelationship between these various causes in a systematic way, nor does he attempt to rank them in any order. To help explore this complex theme a little more, several key questions can be addressed. Was the main failure of the West a military failure, with the other causes related to this, or was the military defeat of western armies a purely secondary phenomena (as Thompson 1958 seems to suggest)? It seems that this military failure was interconnected with the more permanent division between the western and eastern empires that emerged in the fourth century.

### **3. The Division Between East and West**

The division between the eastern and western portions of the empire was already presaged by the recognition that one emperor, situated in Rome, could not effectively administer all the provinces, nor the wide-flung frontiers with their external threats. Diocletian attempted to reduce this problem in the setting up the tetrarchic system, whereby two senior emperors and two junior caesars controlled four large regions of the empire, supported by a strong army of some 400-500,000 professional troops (Ferrill 1986, p42). However, these regions were not intended to be strict and exclusive zones of administration, and the four tetrarchs supposedly shared power on a voluntary and mutually supporting basis. However, a division between east and west could already be seen in this administrative move. Likewise, this trend had already begun with the establishment of the eastern capital of Constantinople in 324 C.E., well-situated to control the Danube frontier, with access via Asia Minor towards the Persian frontier. The final split, however, did not occur until 364 C.E. when the vigorous Valentinian I appointed his brother Valens to command the eastern empire. In 395 C.E. Theodosius managed for a time to

reunite the empires, but his dynastic policy, giving the east to his eldest son Arcadius, and the west to the younger Honorius, would spell the end of any possible unification (Grant 1976, p35). It was not so much dynastic disputes which tore these empires apart, as the competition of their respective Germanic military commanders, Stilicho for the west, Rufinus for the east, that would make it impossible for the two empires to deal adequately with the Goths (see below).

At first these two empires supported each other quite well, with parallel legislative measures and coinages; the two emperors were portrayed as colleagues supporting each other. They also gave each other supportive military aid through the late fourth century (see Ward-Perkins 2005). Furthermore, there was a tendency Constantinople to be too heavily fortified and too-effectively backed by strong naval forces for barbarian armies to crack – this meant that attacking forces would sometimes be deflected westwards towards the more vulnerable western Balkans and the Italian peninsula, e.g. the Goths and the Huns (see Matyszak 2004). However, the divisions between east and west were more than administrative. The east was a largely speaking Greek world strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture with its long tradition of city life and kingship; the west remained Latin as its administrative language, and was based on a civic life closer to Roman republican models. This gap between a ‘Latin’ west and ‘Greek’ east complicated diplomacy and religious relations from the fifth century onwards, making any deep urge towards re-uniting the two sides of the empire problematic.

There were cases of east and west trying to help each other, e.g. in 376 (against the Goths), following the events of 410, and again in 468 C.E. However, as the pressure on their northern frontiers increased, we find that the eastern and western emperors had too limited resources to effectively intervene to support a remote frontier. Furthermore, a dangerous rivalry soon developed, focusing on control of strips of land on their mutual frontier in the Balkans, and a willingness to deflect barbarian enemies, whether Visigothic, Vandal or Hun, onto the other empire. As we shall see below, this was exacerbated the ambitions of leading Masters of Soldiers, such as Stilicho, who were willing to use the mistrust between east and west to increase their own importance. The division and following distrust between the western and eastern empire would be one of the most decisive factors in European history. It allowed an independence Byzantine empire and culture to emerge, and was one of the major reasons for the political collapse of the Western empire. This would largely shape the political map of Europe for over twelve hundreds years, and would form the basis of the division between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches of Greece and Russia. Religious tensions were already evident in the 6th century, though the final split did not occur until the eleventh century (see Roberts 1985, pp151-163).

In terms of the fall of the political structure of the western empire, however, this division simply meant that the two units of empire would not continue to effectively support each other against their northern threats, nor provide support for legitimate claimants across both thrones.

#### **4. The Military Explanation**

Although the military explanation is considered as one of the features of the fall of Rome, as we have seen, writers from Gibbon to Grant argue that it would have been insufficient to bring the sophisticated military and political machine of the west into ruin. Arthur Ferrill, however, has argued that the military causes have been underestimated by many modern writers and that the decisions of Roman generals and the erosion of their military power 'must be regarded as an essential component in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire' (Ferrill 1986, p7).



Roman military strength in the late empire relied on qualitative factors and a sophisticated support base:

The Romans had always enjoyed a number of important advantages: they had well-built and imposing fortifications; factory made weapons that were both standardized and of a high quality; an impressive infrastructure of roads and harbours; the logistical organization needed to supply their army, whether at a base or on a campaign; and a tradition of training that ensured disciplined and coordinated action in battle, even in the face of adversity. Furthermore, Roman mastery of the sea, at least in the Mediterranean, was unchallenged and a vital aspect of supply. (Ward-Perkins 2005, p34).

By the late fourth century several limiting trends began to emerge. This was due both to an over-dependence on Germanic federate forces, and to a severe decline in the numbers and level of training of the Roman infantry units of the west. Furthermore, the shift of strategy from preclusive frontier defense to a system of 'defense-in depth' backed by large mobile field armies held in reserve was not entirely effective (Ferrill 1986, pp45-7). Frontier troops became rather second-rate and defense oriented, which meant that the frontiers were more regularly turned, while the mobile army was unable to maintain sufficient numbers and quality to avoid being beaten on occasions - and being beaten by a barbarian army loose inside the frontiers was disastrous for imperial security. Nor can the victory of the 'barbarians' be regarded as the victory of the 'horse warrior' over the infantry legions of the empire. By the fifth century the Roman cavalry was quite strong, have learnt valuable lessons from their conflict with the Parthians, while both the Goths and the Huns maintained large infantry forces (Ferrill 1986, p8). Paradoxically, it was the skill, armourment and training of the Roman infantry which declined during the fifth century (Ferrill 1986, p47-50). Likewise, by the fifth century many Roman infantry soldiers followed the barbarian custom of wearing little or only light body armour, making them more mobile but also more vulnerable to archers and even to massed cavalry attacks.

In particular, any theory has to explain why the western empire fell but the eastern went on for almost another thousand years. Here strategic and military theories are quite successful. Basically, the eastern empire was less geographically vulnerable, managed to maintain a slightly stronger and better trained army, and managed by the fortifications of Constantinople to 'deflect' major enemies such as Alaric and the Goths and Attila and the Huns 'onto' its weaker western brethren (Ferrill 1976, p18; Jones 1964, vol II, p1027, p1030), though this may not have been intentional. In the words of A.H.M. Jones, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, and the Huns 'all realised that Constantinople was too tough a nut to crack' (Jones 1964, II, p1031). Furthermore, the eastern empire, though it soon lost much of its tax revenues in the Balkans, was able retain a strong economic base in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, allowing it to support strong armies (Wade-Perkins 2005, p61). By contrast, much of northern Italy, parts of Gaul and Spain, and eventually North Africa by the early fifth century had been subject to repeated incursions and then conquest, severely eroding the revenues and manpower available to the western empire (see Ward-Perkins 2005, p62).

We can examine some of these features through the events surrounding the Battle of Adrianople in 376 A.D. (where a large Roman army was destroyed by the Goths), which had a decisive bearing on our story, and which begins a hundred years of military decline (Ferrill 1986, pp14-15). In brief, the eastern empire was forced to admit a large, organized body of federate Germans within the frontiers of empire: when these began to act in an independent and hostile

way, the western empire found itself unable to deal with simultaneous threats on the Rhine frontier, which collapsed in 406-7 C.E.

The Visigoths had been placed under enormous pressure by the migrations routes of the Huns from central Asia across the regions north of the Black Sea, who had displaced the Ostrogoths and then pushed the Visigoths onto Roman frontiers (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.1; Matyszak 2004, p257), which in turn forced the Alans to migrate as well (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.2). With the Huns putting so much pressure on the Visigoths they asked to be allowed to cross south over the Danube and be allowed to settle peacefully within the empire in Upper Macedonia (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.3-4; Ferrill 1986, p59). The eastern emperor Valens agreed to this proposal, partly to have a new body of good recruits for his border armies and for these groups to act as a buffer to external tribes (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.4; Matyszak 2004, p257). Ammianus Marcellinus specifically argues that these Goths were the very people 'destined to overthrow the Roman Empire' (31.4), largely because their migration and subsequent treatment was very badly handed. It possible that something like 200,000 people were involved in this migration (Ferrill 1986, p59). Ammianus recorded that imperial officials used the weakened and famished Goths upon their arrival in Thrace to make themselves rich. He states that:

The barbarians after crossing the river were distressed by want of food, and these loathsome generals devised an abominable form of barter. They collected all the dogs that their insatiable greed could find and exchanged each of them for a slave, and among these slaves were some sons of leading men. (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.4)

The Goths were not being suitably treated, housed or fed on their arrival across the Danube (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.5). This, along with mutual mistrust, led to the Goths revolting and pillaging large tracts of the country-side. The rebel Gothic forces, with some allied Alans, posed a very serious threat to the eastern empire now that they were inside its Danube defensive systems. Valens sent forth two generals, Profuturs and Trajan, to attempt to deal with the situation, while Gratian send his commander of household troops from Gaul, Richomer. Unfortunately, this was no more than a token force (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.7-8) and the west was not able to send decisive aid in time to help Valens. Gratian had mobilized a large field force to send to the east, but the news of his imminent departure resulted in the Lentienses (an Alamannic tribe from south Germany) crossing the iced-up Rhine. This kept Gratian busy in a major and successful campaign in which some 35,000 'barbarians' were destroyed, including their king, Priarius (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.10).

The following battle between the Goths and Roman forces at Adrianople (Hadrianopolis) in August 378 C.E. was a disaster for the empire. Ammianus Marcellinus specifically blames Valens for a hurried encounter with the Goths before reinforcements could reach him from Gratian, 'whose exploits irked him, and who wanted a glorious victory of his own' (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.12). Some of Ammianus' views may have been formed in hindsight, but in any case, after sporadic attempts at negotiation, Valens' army marched out and encountered the enemy before they had properly formed their battlefront (Ferrill 1986, p62). Lightly armed skirmishers engaged too closely (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.12; Ferrill 1986, pp62-3), and were thrown back onto their own lines. Meanwhile, the Alan cavalry, allies of the Goths, arrived and managed to force the Roman cavalry away from their flanks. The left infantry flank was exposed and crushed, with the Roman soldiers being gradually worn down, with two-thirds killed by sunset (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.13; Ferrill 1986, p63). Valens died during the battle, his body not being recovered.

This was one of the most crushing defeats in Roman history, with the result that the Romans were unable to stop attacks throughout Thrace, and even an attempt to take Constantinople had to be beaten off by allied Saracen troops (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.16). Fortunately, the Goths had neither siege trains nor adequate naval forces (Ferrill 1986, p64). Throughout the eastern cities many other Gothic immigrants who had already arrived were collected together and massacred (Ammianus Marcellinus 31.16), but this was far from a final solution.

In 382 C.E. the new eastern emperor, Theodosius, had to accept the Gothic presence in the Balkans, so long as they provided soldiers and extended the agriculture of the region (Grant 1976, p34). What was unusual was that they were allowed to settle under their own laws with their own leaders, intact as a separate people with their own cohesion (Ferrill 1986, p69).

In the west, after Gratian's death, the young Valentinian II was 'supported' by the master of Soldiers Arbogast: it was probably Arbogast who had the young emperor killed, then through the pagan rhetorician Eugenius took control of Italy and the Spanish provinces (Grant 1976, pp34-5). Theodosius in 394 C.E. moved eastward against this 'upstart' pagan dynasty, bringing with him a large army and managed to decisively defeat Arbogast's forces in a bloody and crucial battle held north of Aquileia, in the Alpine passes above the head of the Adriatic (Ferrill 1986, p71). In doing so we can see how the times had changed. Theodosius largely relied on the 20,000 federate Goths who came with him to give him a bloody victory (Ferrill 1986, p69-74). If for a short time Theodosius was sole emperor of east and west, his appointed his sons Honorius and Arcadius soon succeeded him as separate rulers of these two regions.

We can gain a clear idea of Theodosius' reliance on 'barbarian' forces from a panegyric delivered to the emperor on behalf of his *consilium* (advisory council) and the Senate of Rome sometime during 389 C.E.. It was spoken by a professor or rhetoric from Gaul, Pacatus, and labours the following points: -

Finally you [the emperor] granted the privileged status of fellow-soldiers to the barbarians peoples who promised to give you voluntary service, both to remove from the frontier troops of dubious loyalty, and to add reinforcements to your army. Attracted by your kindness, all the Scythian nations flocked to you in such great numbers that you seemed to have imposed a levy upon barbarism from which you exempted your subjects. O event worthy of memory! There marched under Roman leaders and banner the onetime enemies of Rome, and they followed standards which they had once opposed, and filled with soldier the cities of Pannonia which they had not long ago emptied by hostile plundering. The Goth, the Hun and the Alan responded to their names, and stood watch in their turn, and were afraid of being marked down as absent without leave. There was no disorder, no confusion and looting, as is usual among the barbarian. (Pacatus *Panegyric* 32.3-5)

Such panegyrics, of course, are often filled with exaggerations if not downright lies (see Augustine *Confessions* 6.6). The point here though, is that the exaggeration is aimed at smoothing over real worries about, and resistance to, the use of such federate forces (Nixon, 'Introduction' and 'Notes' to Pacatus, p11, p69, p92-3), while elsewhere the emperor's own military virtues are emphasized (Pacatus *Panegyric* 10). Contemporaries such as the Bishop Synesius of Ptolemais, for example, were greatly critical of this reliance on 'barbarians' (Ferrill 1986, p70).

## **5. Stilicho and Alaric**

Stilicho, half Roman and half-Vandal, became at first a Field Marshal for the region of Thrace (Ferrill 1986, p88), then Master of Soldiers under Theodosius I, and had married his niece

Serena. There is little doubt about Stilicho's great abilities and his initial loyalty to the house of Theodosius. Stilicho was certainly regarded by western court poets such as Claudian as a fearless defender of Rome (Claudian *First Book Against Rufinus*, lines 261, 274, 332, *Second Book Against Rufinus*, lines 225ff), while it is argued that he would have destroyed Alaric and the Goths completely if it weren't for the actions of his opponent Rufinus, an adviser in the eastern court, who persuaded the eastern emperor to order Stilicho to leave the Balkans (Claudian *First Book Against Rufinus*, line 21; Claudian *On Stilicho's Consulship*, I, lines 112-115). The writings of Claudian may have been viewed as useful promotional tools by Stilicho, who immediately after Claudian's death had all his 'political poems', minor pieces and unfinished works republished (Cameron 1970, p227). Such court propaganda aside (discussed in detail by Cameron 1970), Stilicho's motivations may have been more complex.

Upon the death of Theodosius, Stilicho claimed to be regent not just for Honorius in the east, but also for Arcadius in the east, a claim which was strongly rejected by Arcadius' courtiers, especially Rufinus and then Eutropius. There are major disputes between modern historians about the character and motivation of Stilicho: -

- 1) Was he really appointed guardian by Theodosius on his deathbed to both heirs, or was this a political fiction?
- 2) Was he actively hostile to the eastern empire, hoping to take territory from it, or was this friction merely the product of different imperial policies?
- 3) Did he, after defeating Alaric, King of the Goths, several times on the battlefield, let him escape in order to use him as a pawn against the eastern empire and against those senators opposing him in Rome?
- 4) Did he intend to make his son, the grandson of Theodosius, emperor?

Michael Grant places a considerable responsibility for the following disastrous events on Stilicho. He argues that: -

Towards the Eastern authorities, Stilicho behaved in a cool and finally hostile manner, because he wanted to prize the Balkan region out of their hands once again - and this alienation created a disastrous disunity between the two Empires. To the Visigoths on the other hand, and particularly their very able ruler Alaric (395-410), Stilicho was not as hostile as he might usefully have been. On the death of Theodosius I, Alaric had broken into rebellion, complaining that subsidies promised his people had not been paid. Later, Stilicho fought a number of battles against him - and could have broken him, but never did so, because he believed that his fellow-German might prove a useful counterweight against the Eastern Empire. Yet Alaric, although initially aiming at a peaceful settlement with the Imperial authorities, had as time went on become their enemy, and it was perilous to let him be. (Grant 1976, p36)

Arther Ferrill strongly disagrees with this interpretation, regarding Stilicho as a loyal supporter of the Theodosian house into which he had intermarried (Ferrill 1986, pp88-90), arguing that he had fought hard against Alaric but lacked the well-trained army needed to pursue and destroy the mobile Gothic armies (Ferrill 1986, p91, p96).

The Goths may have originated from the area of Poland or perhaps from Gotland in Sweden, moving southeastward and becoming two related groupings, the Ostrogoths (Eastern Goths) and the Visigoths (Matyszak 2004, p257). During their stay in the Black Sea area, they had learnt the art of heavy cavalry warfare (perhaps from the Scythians), and could field large, mobile armies (Matyszak 2004, p261). It was these same Gothic peoples who had in 395-396 C.E. headed down to ravage southern Greece (Matyszak 2004, p262), and then in 401 moved on to invade the richer Po river valley in northern Italy. Stilicho defeated them in 402 A.D., forcing

them out of Italy for a time. Soon after, Stilicho had to cope with a massed invasion of Ostrogoths and others into Italy, defeating them near Florence (Grant 1976, p37), but was unable, or unwilling, to stop a massed invasion in 406-7 across the frozen Rhine by Vandals, Suevi, Alans and Burgundians, who swept down into and occupied large sections of Gaul (Ferrill 1986; Wade-Perkins 2005). The Rhine frontier was no longer Rome's frontier, while Stilicho's armies remained in northern Italy. After 406 the Goths had moved into Noricum, not far north, and demanded 4,000 pounds of gold in return for an alliance to help with the crisis - Stilicho urged acceptance of this alliance (Ferrill 1986, pp100-1). This outraged the 'nationalist' anti-barbarian party in Rome even further. But fatally, when the eastern emperor Arcadius died in 408 C.E., Stilicho urged Honorius to send him east to establish a regency over the young Theodosius II. Stilicho now looked excessively ambitious and seemed to be ignoring the real crisis in Gaul. He lost the support of the courtiers and a portion of the army and rumours were circulated that he was aiming for the throne (Matyszak 2004, p264). He was executed in Ravenna in August 408. A pogrom was then launched in northern Italy against the families of the German soldiers serving in the Roman army (Ward-Perkins 2005, p27). Shortly thereafter thirty thousand allied barbarian soldiers moved north to ally themselves with Alaric (Ferrill 1986, pp101-102). One of the most intriguing and competent men in the history of the west had died, and with him fell the last possibility of a lasting concord between Rome and the Goths.

In 409 the Goths moved back into Italy, and after negotiations with the western Emperor Honorius broke down, turned south to blockade and then sack Rome on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 410 C.E. The fate of Rome as capital of the western empire and as a Roman and Christian symbol shocked contemporaries:

We received a terrible rumour about events in the West. They told us that Rome was under siege, and the only safety for its citizens was that which they could buy with gold, and when that had been stripped from them, they were besieged again, so that they lost not only their possessions, but also their lives. Our messenger gave the news in a faltering voice, and could hardly speak through his sobbing. The city which had captured the world was now itself captured. (Jerome *Letters* 127 in Matyszak 2004, p268 )

Elsewhere Jerome stated that 'the whole world has died with one City' (in Ward-Perkins 2005, p28).

The level of violence involved has been debated, based on the view that the Goths mainly took removable wealth and as Christians limited their violence, in particular respecting the churches and those who had found sanctuary in them (see Matyszak 2004, p267). St. Augustine, seeking to explain how the Christianized Roman Empire could nonetheless fall, argued that:

And now these wretches do not thank God for his great mercy . . . that he should decree if Rome were to be taken, it should be by barbarians who, despite the practice of all wars that have gone before, protected, through the respect for Christianity, everyone who sought refuge in sacred places. These barbarians were very much opposed to demons and the rites of impious sacrifices, so they appeared to be conducting war with them which was much more terrible than their war with men. So the true Lord and ruler of all scourged the Romans mercifully . . . (St. Augustine *The City of God* 23, in Matyszak 2004, p268)

Apologetics aside, the fall was a very real one, though the destruction was less severe than the later Vandal naval attack on the city in 455, when it was occupied for two weeks, with wealth and slaves being taken back to Carthage, including the widow and two daughters of the western Emperor, Valentinian III (Wade-Perkins 2005, p17)

The Germanic presence within the border of the empire and the army had been strong for over a century. Now the myth of the imperial invincibility of 'eternal Rome' collapsed as a result of the events of 376-410 C.E. Here we can see many of the 'causes' linking internal decline with military collapse. The Roman army lacked the internal manpower and wealth to maintain an army sufficiently strong to resist the combined efforts of several barbarian peoples. It had long relied on barbarian auxiliaries and conscripts. Now whole federate peoples with their own social structure and leadership intact had been moved within the frontier. Far from being assimilated and accommodated, they were abused and misused by an imperial system used to exploitation and corruption (see Ste Croix 1981). Furthermore, the eastern empire by virtue of its own defensive strength deflected some of these peoples onto the west, while in turn the western court had connived through Stilicho at forcing a new unity on the eastern court. All the players, as it turned out, underestimated the threat of Germanic kings such as Alaric. Soon thereafter the Western court would try to isolate itself in the security of Ravenna, and virtually abandon Britain and Gaul, in due course losing control of Spain and Africa as well and finally Italy itself.

## **6. Further Invasions and the Collapse of the West**

For a time an alliance was patched up between Rome and the Goths, with their leader Ataulf marrying the emperor Honorius's sister Galla Placidia. Spain and Gaul were partly stabilized by the presence of Gothic armies, though the Burgundians created a separate kingdom centred on the city of Worms on the Rhine (Ferrill 1976, p122). However, from 416 C.E. we find Alan and Vandal forces penetrating south into Spain, while by 429 the Vandal king Gaiseric had assembled some 80,000 people ready to invade north Africa, most of which they held by 432, a situation which the Roman government was forced to accept by 435 (Ferrill 1986, p137). In 439 C.E. Carthage, one of the most developed of provincial cities, fell to the Vandals, and most of north Africa was in their hands (Wade-Perkins 2005).

One of the other major challenges to the Roman Empire was the movement of the Huns westward. They were a steppe people who had originated in inner Asia, and are probably the descendants of the Hsiung-Nu who had threatened the Chinese empire hundreds of years before (Matyszak 2004, p270). For a time the Romans were willing to use groups such as the 'White Huns' as a threat to the Persian Empire, and in the early fifth century had paid subsidies to the Huns to secure the empire's northern frontiers (Matyszak 2004, p272). This peace could not be sustained and from 447 the Huns attacked Constantinople (but did not breach the walls), ravaged Greece and sought territories on the middle reach of the Danube river (Matyszak 2004, p273). Under their brilliant King, Attila, they then targeted the western empire, first moving his massive army, combined of Huns and vassal Ostrogoths, Gepids and Alans, into Gaul. However, the city of Orléans withstood a siege, and Roman forces of under Aetius came to its relief. The Huns were then forced to turn back from northern Gaul due to a defeat by a combined Roman, Gothic, Alan and Frank army. This Battle of Chalons (fought on the Catalaunian Plains in September 451) was crucial, forcing the Huns north of the Rhine and stabilizing Gaul for a time (Matyszak 2004, p276).

But Attila then moved into Italy (452 C.E.), savaging the northern cities, and heading towards Rome, once again claiming that he sought the hand of Honoria, sister of Valentinian. Honoria had apparently made such an invitation after her forced seclusion following an illicit affair (see Matyszak 2004, p274). Legend has it that Pope Leo convinced Attila not to sack the city, but logistic problems, bribery, and the plague decimating his army were more likely causes (Ferrill 1986, p151). It was left to a major naval expedition by the Gaiseric's Vandals to enter the city in

455 C.E., which was not effectively defended. Later attempts by Rome and Constantinople in 468 to evict the Vandals from North Africa would fail, while in 474 the Gothic leader Euric would declare his large kingdom in Gaul totally independent of Rome. Meanwhile, military 'Master of Soldiers' such as Ricimer and the Burgundian Gundobad controlled Italy.

In the end, the German troops in Italy tired of their puppet emperors, who were controlled by their own military commanders. One of their leaders, Odoacer, after a successful military coup, took direct control of affairs:

Augustulus, who was called Romulus by his parents before he mounted the throne, was made emperor by his father, the patrician Orestes. Then Odoacar made his appearance with a force of Sciri and killed the patrician Orestes at Placentia, and his brother Paulus at the Pine Grove, outside the Classis at Ravenna. . . . Then he entered Ravenna, deposed Augustulus from his throne, but in pity for his tender years, granted him his life; and because of his beauty he also gave him an income of six thousand gold-pieces and sent him to Campania, to live there a free man with his relatives. [Anonymus Valesianus 8.37-39]

Thus in 476 C.E. Odoacer retired the ruling emperor Romulus Augustulus, who had no forces with which to resist and who was not supported by the eastern Emperor Zeno (Matyszak 2004, p282). Odoacer then ruled Italy as a king, *rex*, a hated term in early Roman political thought. The cowed or relieved Roman Senate sent back the imperial regalia to Constantinople, 'saying that there was no longer any need for an emperor in the West' (Ferrill 1986, p160). In theory Zeno was now emperor of the two halves of the empire, but in reality had little influence in Italy. The western Roman Empire had 'finished not with a bang, but with a whimper' (Matyszak 2004, p282)

During the following centuries Italy would be ruled by kings, whether Goths, Ostrogoths or Lombards. Only for a short time in the 6th century would the eastern empire be able to reassert itself. Meanwhile, Gaul would settle down to new patterns of accommodation between tribesmen and the Gallo-Roman population (Goffart 1980, pp3-39). With the emergence of Clovis as King of the Franks in 481, a new phase of nation building would begin in the west.

However, the reality of the collapse of Roman power within the century from 376 to 476 C.E. should not be underestimated. As noted by Arther Ferrill: -

In fact the Roman Empire of the West did fall. Not every aspect of the life of Roman subjects was changed by that, but the fall of Rome as a political entity was one of the major events of the history of western man. It will simply not do to call that fall a myth or to ignore its historical significance merely by focusing on those aspects of Roman life that survived the fall in one form or another. At the opening of the fifth century a massive army, perhaps more than 200,000 strong, stood at the service of the Western emperor and his generals. In 476 it was gone. The destruction of Roman military power in the fifth century AD was the obvious cause of the collapse of Roman government in the West. (Ferrill 1986, p22)

The strategic and military defeat of the west was crucial, but this was not just based on the external barbarian problem, nor on the barbarization and decline of the imperial armies. The Roman army relied upon a secure access to resources, manpower, bullion, and goods. In the past it had been superior in its organization, logistics and administration to the armies opposing it, while its tactical and technical abilities were only slightly better than those of the Germanic tribes. Without a stable system of government, administration and taxation to secure these advantages, the Roman army had to decline both in numbers and quality. These problems of supply and an absence of stability were exacerbated by intensified class conflicts described by Michael Grant (1976) and de Ste Croix (1981). However, changes in mentality, the dominance

of non-worldly religions, and a growing tendency to turn away from public duties are secondary issues, as much effects as causes of the decline of the western empire.

The final decline of political western unity is one of the great formative dramas in world history. Not only does it remind us that periods of relative stability and welfare, such as the 2nd century empire (Ferrill 1986, p12) can radically decline, but it also formed the basis of Late Antique culture and the following Middle Ages. Indeed, the two centuries after the collapse of the western empire shaped the beginnings of the modern map of nations of Europe (see Ferrill 1986). The dream of western political union, of course, was not dead. It was implicit in Christian theories underpinning the influence of the Pope and Church across Christendom, while from 800 C.E. onwards the 'Holy Roman Empire' retained a shadow of this legitimacy and unity.

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