

# Adrianople: Before and After

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## ABSTRACT

*The Battle of Adrianople in 378, fought between the Roman Empire and the Goths, is often overlooked in the field of Roman history. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the Battle of Adrianople is more important to Roman history than conventionally thought, and that it marked a major turning point for the Roman Empire. Throughout this paper I will argue that the Gothic victory at Adrianople caused a domino effect which led to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Using primary sources I show that many of the events that occurred after the battle, and played a role in the collapse of the Western Empire, can be linked together as aftereffects of the Roman defeat at Adrianople.*

The Gothic victory over the Romans at Adrianople in 378 brought with it vast changes to the Roman world. The battle had a domino effect on both halves of the Empire, but the West suffered the most severe consequences. The Western Roman Empire would never recover from the East's defeat in 378. The political fallout that followed Emperor Valens' death at Adrianople created hostilities between East and West that never dissipated. Moreover, a series of usurpers, some supported by Goths and others opposed by them, would plague the West. These usurpers would severely damage the Western Empire, forcing it to rely increasingly on barbarians, such as the Goths. These conditions allowed the Goths to remain a dominant power in Western Europe until the eighth century.

Italy suffered from multiple barbarian invasions, Rome itself was sacked twice, before the Western Empire fell. These events occurred because the Roman defeat at

Adrianople led the Eastern Empire to abandon the West. Without the help of the East, the economically weaker Western Empire was in no condition to properly defend itself. Thus in 476 the Western Roman Empire finally disintegrated, and by 493 Italy and Spain had emerged as independent Gothic kingdoms.

The major barbarian groups of the fourth century consisted of Germanic confederations who lived close to Roman borders, either to the east of the Rhine or north of the Danube. These confederations included the Franks, the Alamanni, the Quadi, and the Goths.<sup>1</sup> These confederations would all harass the Romans in their own way, but the Goths were the only ones to pose a serious threat to the Romans. The roots of the Gothic people are unknown, but they may have originated in Scandinavia before migrating to the Danube region. It is possible that before 376, there were several different Gothic tribes north of the Danube, but the historian Ammianus Marcellinus (330-395)

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<sup>1</sup>Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376-568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 118, 131.

only ever mentions two: the Tervingi, and the Greuthungi.<sup>2</sup> It is also possible that the Ostrogoths subsisted independently of these two groups before 400, as Claudian mentions a group of Ostrogoths mixing with a group of Greuthungi around 399.<sup>3</sup> Still, the Tervingi and Greuthungi culminated.

The Romans viewed the Rhine and the Danube as the edge of the civilized world, from their point of view these borders were definitive for the barbarians, but this was not the case for the Romans themselves. While the Empire did possess finite borders, they seemed to have established more for convenience rather than limitation. The Romans actually viewed the borders as being *sine finis*, or without a limit; more or less permeable for Roman citizens. Those lands across the border thus constituted an extension of the Empire.<sup>4</sup>

Despite their view of the border regions, the Romans still allowed groups of barbarians to enter the Empire and occupy lands. The Romans set up three categories of those who settled within the Empire. There were the *dediticii*, barbarians who had willingly surrendered themselves to the Empire. They were not awarded Roman citizenship but were provided land on which to settle and farm. It seems likely that the Goths may have been admitted as *dediticii*.<sup>5</sup> Second were the *laeti*, which means “the happy people.” This name is quite ironic, and possibly represents a joke on part of the Romans, because the *laeti* were barbarians who had been captured in battle and settled on Roman lands. They were more regimented than other settled barbarians.<sup>6</sup>

The third category included those who belonged to neither of the aforementioned groups. Those barbarians who served in the regular army, and they were quite numerous

by this time, were awarded Roman citizenship after their military service ended. The Romans named this third category *foederati*, those who had signed treaties allying themselves with Rome. Unlike the other two populations, the *foederati* did not live inside the Empire’s borders, as Romans did not form alliances with their own subjects. As such if any of the *foederati* wanted to settle within the Empire they had to become *dediticii*.<sup>7</sup>

Diocletian’s establishing the tetrarchy and dividing the Roman Empire into eastern and western halves laid the foundation for the eventual demise of the west, as did Constantine’s moving the Empire’s capital to Constantinople in 330. More immediately the disastrous events that took place from 376-378, can be traced back to the death of Emperor Jovian in 364. Upon Jovian’s untimely demise, while the Eastern field army was retreating out of Persia, civil and military officials with the army held a vote. According to Ammianus, these men unanimously declared Valentinian emperor of both the East and West. After the army reached Constantinople Valentinian made his younger brother, Valens, co-emperor awarding him the Eastern Empire. According to Ammianus, even though he held the same rank as his older brother, Valens served as Valentinian’s lieutenant.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to assess the validity of Ammianus’ statement, as there are no other contemporary sources which make mention of this hierarchical arrangement. Ammianus did possess bias against Valens as he blamed Valens for admitting the Goths into the Empire in the first place. Thus Ammianus may have sought to discredit Valens’ memory, a common practice among the Romans, since he was writing during the reign of Theodosius.

In 365 Valentinian left Constantinople for

<sup>2</sup>Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire: AD 354-378* trans. Walter Hamilton, (Penguin Books, 1986) 415. The historian will hereinafter be cited in the text as Ammianus

<sup>3</sup>Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans 332-489* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 89.

<sup>4</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 140-141.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 124.

<sup>6</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations* 152-153.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ammianus, 314, 317-318.

the West, and shortly afterwards Procopius, who was related to the deceased Emperor Julian, declared himself emperor in the East. Despite some initial setbacks on the part of Valens, Procopius' reign only lasted nine months before the former defeated and executed him. According to Ammianus, Valens went to war with the Tervingi because Athanaric had allied himself with Procopius. Up to this point the Goths had been at peace with the Eastern Empire since the time of Constantine.<sup>9</sup> This constitutes, perhaps, the most interesting facet of Procopius' reign, because he managed to convince Athanaric to betray a peace that had lasted nearly four decades.

Although the Huns typically receive the majority of the blame for the Gothic migration in 376, much responsibility actually lies with Valens because of his war against the Tervingi, which stemmed from their supposed alliance with Procopius. While largely unsuccessful Valens did manage to cause vast amounts of destruction, and forced the Goths to sign a treaty which favored the Romans. This in turn led to a civil war among the Tervingi, and Athanaric, who was now seen as a disgrace, was defeated by Fritigern. This civil war also had affected the Greuthungi Goths and Alans, who were actually an Indo-Iranian group. Despite the aforementioned turmoil, the Danube border actually remained intact, allowing Valens to focus his attention on Persia, until the Huns arrived in the 370s.<sup>10</sup>

Valens first crossed the Danube in 367, and the Goths immediately retreated into the Carpathian Mountains. Because of this Valens was only able to apprehend a handful of stragglers, thus his first invasion proved unsuccessful. He returned in 368 but due to flood his army had to remain encamped until

winter. Valens then withdrew to Marcianople. In 369 he again crossed the Danube and finally experienced some success. He actually won a skirmish against the Greuthungi, before defeating a Tervingi army led by Athanaric. At this point the Tervingi sent envoys to Valens, Ammianus would have us believe they begged Valens for peace. Thus while only one of the Emperor's three crossings brought success, and only marginally so, his army's continued presence near the Danube, and the negative impact on trade probably influenced the Goths to seek peace.<sup>11</sup>

During the seven years between Valens' peace with Athanaric and the Tervingi crossing the Danube, the Goths experienced internal strife. Athanaric had initiated a persecution of Christians, fearing that they were pro-Roman.<sup>12</sup> After three years of warfare with Valens the Gothic chieftain needed to reassert his control over the Tervingi, and persecuting Christians could have represented a ploy to regain the trust of more traditional Goths. Whatever his plan, it quickly backfired, as a rival faction led by the aforementioned Fritigern, who was a recent convert to Christianity, began to oppose him, and war broke out. The Romans may have even supported the persecuted Christians to gain Fritegern's trust: any backing would have led to further instability in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The first people north of the Danube who experienced the Hunnic invasion were the Alans. Ammianus tells us that a large number of Alans were killed in this initial encounter, and that the survivors became "friends" of the Huns, but subjects, or maybe even slaves, is likely the more appropriate term for the new political situation. The Huns next invaded the territory of the Greuthungi, eventually driving King Ermnerich to suicide, and his people to defeat. Curiously, Ammianus

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 320-321, 329-332, 336.

<sup>10</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 171-175.

<sup>11</sup>Ammianus, *Later Empire*, 336-337.

<sup>12</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 174.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

explicitly states that the Greuthungi were defeated by the Alans, it could be that these were the Alans fleeing from the Huns, or they were simply the Alans now under Hunnic rule. Nonetheless with the Huns defeating the Greuthungi, the Tervingi remained as the only free people left in the region. Athanaric apparently tried to take the fight to the Huns, but he was easily defeated by a surprise attack. It was at this point that the Tervingi led by Fritigern and Alavivus departed for the Danube.<sup>14</sup> As such, the Hunnic invasions of the Gothic territories still played a large role in causing the eventual battle at Adrianople, even if that role is often exaggerated.

Due to Ammianus' portrayal of the Tervingi, one assumes the Tervingi were terrified of the Huns. According to Ammianus the Tervingi begged and prayed for Valens to admit them into the Empire. Of course, Ammianus may have written from a biased point of view, and thus negatively recounted the Goths' entreaties. This bias is quite evident in his writing: "And the greatest care was taken to ensure that, even if they were suffering from a mortal illness, none of those destined to overthrow the Roman Empire should be left behind."<sup>15</sup>

This bias, however, does not make his depiction of the Tervingi false. One also has to take into account the fact that Valens was in Antioch at this time. This means communication between the Romans and the Goths would have taken weeks, rather than days. Thus the Tervingi had to wait on the north side of the river while envoys were sent to Valens, and then sent back. If the Tervingi so feared the Huns as Ammianus suggests, then there is certainly no reason they would have waited so long to hear back from Valens. Additionally, when the Huns raided the Empire in 395, they invaded by way of the Caucasus Mountains, rather than crossing the

Danube. If they did indeed occupy most of the Gothic territory at this time, their crossing into the Empire by way of the Caucasus would have taken them thousands of miles out of the way. Thus most of the Huns had to have been far to the East of the Carpathian Mountains, likely still in the territory of the Alans.<sup>16</sup> If the Huns were indeed still in Alan territory, then there is good reason to discount Ammianus' description of the Tervingi. It would have taken a lot of planning for tens of thousands of people to make the long trip from the Tervingi territory to the Danube River, it is very unlikely that they migrated devoid of a plan. Additionally, the Tervingi would have been widely dispersed, for the most part, and thus it would have taken time for the different settlements to communicate with one another. Whatever the case Valens admitted the Tervingi into the Empire, and things quickly spiraled out of control.

There is no direct evidence that the Tervingi were admitted into the Empire as *dediticii*, as the Romans most likely did not keep extensive records in regards to these categories, but they seem to have been treated as if they were. The historian Zosimus Historicus, who lived during the late fifth century, claims that Valens ordered the Goths to surrender their weapons upon crossing the Danube;<sup>17</sup> this action does not, however, appear in Ammianus' writings. It is unlikely that the Tervingi would even agree to such terms. Given their recent hostilities with the Empire, moreover, had such an order been given, the Roman officials would not have been negligent enough to let the Goths retain their arms.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Rome allowing the Goths to hold onto their weapons contributed little to the latter's later rebellion, as other factors held more weight.

More so, the Tervingi would have rebelled, weapons or no weapons. Due to the Roman negligence in handling their *receptio*.

<sup>14</sup>Ammianus Marcellinus, *Later Empire*, 414-416.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 416-417.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163.

<sup>17</sup>Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, (London: Green and Chaplin: 1814), 4.104.

<sup>18</sup>Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 125.

Ammianus claims that the blame for all of the Empire's trouble with the Goths lay with their generals: Lupicinus and Maximus. These two were the Roman commanders at Marcianople, and as such they were in charge of the Tervingi's *receptio*. According to his history, the corrupt Lupicinus and Maximus purposefully withheld food from the Tervingi, so that they could sell it to them at exorbitant prices.<sup>19</sup> Ammianus is only partially correct here. It is more likely that the food was being moved to a location where it could be guarded, thus creating a food shortage. It appears that Lupicinus and Maximus exploited the situation by selling the scarce food they did have to the Goths.<sup>20</sup> Because the Tervingi had not settled on available land, the only food available came from their own reserves, and the food the Romans supplied. It would have been quite disingenuous for the Roman generals to intentionally starve people who Valens hoped to enlist in his army. Whatever the case, food shortages did not sit well with the Goths, no matter the cause. It should also be noted that the Romans treatment of the Goths proved unsurprising, considering the Romans, including their generals, disdained the Germans as savages. The Goths were just another source of tax income, and new recruits to enlist for their wars.

In 377 Lupicinus committed his second folly, his first being the disdain with which he treated the Tervingi. He decided to move the Tervingi to Marcianople, Ammianus claims this was done out of fear of a revolt. Lupicinus needed all of his soldiers in order to move the Tervingi to Marcianople; this left the Danube relatively undefended and the Greuthungi, having been denied entry earlier, quickly crossed into the Empire. These same Greuthungi Goths would go on to partake in the battle at Adrianople, alongside the Tervingi, and played an important role in

the battles outcome. Lupicinus then invited Fritigern and Alavivus, the other Tervingi leader, to a feast inside the city, where he attempted to kill both Tervingi leaders.<sup>21</sup> Ammianus leads us to believe that this idea was Lupicinus' alone, but he probably had orders from Valens. It may even have been Roman tradition to kill the leaders of admitted barbarian groups to replace them with someone who was pro-Roman.<sup>22</sup> Tradition or not, Lupicinus' treachery seems to have been executed with Valens' assent.

Lupicinus' plot achieved only partial success, as he only managed to kill, or perhaps capture, Alavivus. According to Ammianus, Fritigern managed to negotiate his own release by promising to mollify the Goths outside the city, who were now quite disruptive. Ironically, after the Tervingi heard what had happened to Fritigern, they immediately revolted and killed most of the Roman soldiers at Marcianople.<sup>23</sup> When he heard news of this uprising, Valens sent two of his generals ahead of him, with a small force, while he remained at Constantinople. These men, Profuturus and Trajan, managed to drive the Goths back across the Haemus Mountains, but proved unable to win a decisive battle. The Goths then managed to break out and ravaged Thrace for a short period.<sup>24</sup> According to Zosimus, when Valens heard that the Goths were ransacking Thrace he sent a cavalry force against them. Zosimus also says that this cavalry force proved rather successful and managed to annihilate a large number of stragglers.<sup>25</sup> There is no mention of this by Ammianus, but he does mention a battle that occurred in Thrace in which the Goths were defeated by Frigeridus. It's possible that this is what Zosimus is referring to, except Frigeridus was one of Emperor Gratian's, Valens young nephew in the west, generals. Nonetheless, while Frigeridus did

<sup>19</sup>Ammianus Marcellinus, *Later Empire*, 417.

<sup>20</sup>Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 132.

<sup>21</sup>Ammianus Marcellinus, *Later Empire*, 418-419.

<sup>22</sup>Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 133.

<sup>23</sup>Ammianus Marcellinus, *Later Empire*, 419-420.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 425-426.

<sup>25</sup>Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, 4.104.

defeat the Goths in Thrace, a large number of them managed to escape. Moreover, as winter approached, Gratian was forced to recall Frigeridus as he now had his own border issues with the Alammani.<sup>26</sup>

At this point Valens enlisted another general, a man named Sebastian, to take charge of the army he had recently sent to fight the Tervingi. Sebastian managed to defeat some of the Tervingi near Beroea. Ironically Valens, who still did not have claim to a glorious victory in his own name, resented the successes of his generals. To make matters worse, Gratian, who was only 18 and had only been emperor since 375, now had a victory of his own while Valens still had none.<sup>27</sup> Tradition mandated that an emperor be victorious in battle against the barbarians, and Valens was likely feeling the immense pressure from this tradition. Moreover, given the earlier usurpation by Procopius, and the fact that the Goths he had admitted were now ravaging the Empire, it is possible that Valens felt quite inadequate. This jealousy also explains why Valens decided to engage the Goths, now a mixed group of Tervingi and Greuthungi, in battle, without waiting for Gratian's reinforcements. It should be noted, however, that Ammianus was writing during the reign of Theodosius I, and so he may have had reason to make the previous emperor appear incompetent. Nonetheless, Valens' decision to engage the Goths without assistance would lead to his downfall at Adrianople.

Even if Valens' resentment was exaggerated by Ammianus, Zosimus tells us that Valens was convinced to do battle on his own by his councilors. Apparently these men were opponents of Sebastian.<sup>28</sup> Ammianus also mentions this, except according to him Sebastian wanted Valens to give battle immediately and it was the others who had urged

him to wait. Whatever the reason for Valens' recklessness, these political divisions likely kept both parties from coming to an agreement. Not only did political fragmentation result Valens' downfall, but it also set in motion the events that would help bring about the end of the Western Roman Empire.

To further appraise the foolhardiness of Valens' expedition, his scouts informed him that the Gothic force included only about 10,000 men, but this number proved far larger. Nobody would realize this mistake until it was too late, and Valens was now completely determined to engage the Goths on his own. When Valens' army finally came within view of the Gothic force, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, according to Ammianus, the Goths became distressed as part of their force had yet to arrive. They apparently sent envoys to Valens asking for peace, supposedly in hopes to stall the Romans until the Gothic cavalry came on the scene. At some point during the negotiations some of the Roman archers, without orders, fired at the Gothic position. This led to a counterattack by the Goths. Ammianus contends that the Gothic cavalry returned at this very moment and tore through the Roman lines.<sup>29</sup> This is probably a romanticized exaggeration on his part; it is more likely that the battle was briefly a stalemate, before the Gothic cavalry arrived.

Whatever the timing, the arrival of the Gothic cavalry marked the turning point in the engagement, as they managed to rout their Roman counterparts. This turn left the Roman infantry undefended, and they were slaughtered until they too retreated. Valens was mortally wounded during the battle. After their victory the Goths attempted to take the city of Adrianople as well. They managed to defeat a small Roman force outside the gates, but were held at bay. They were eventually forced to retreat, as they did

<sup>26</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Later Empire*, 427-428.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>28</sup> Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, 4.106.

<sup>29</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Later Empire*, 432-434.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 439-441.



not want to engage in a prolonged siege.<sup>30</sup>

Sometime after the Battle of Adrianople had ended, Valens' cavalry commander, who apparently managed to escape the battle, informed Gratian of the defeat. Zosimus says that Gratian was not bothered by the news of his uncle's death. Gratian then went to Constantinople where he installed his general, Theodosius, as the new Eastern emperor.<sup>31</sup> Gratian was probably able to choose the new emperor because most of Valens' army had perished alongside him. This meant there were few significant military officials in the East who could choose a new emperor, and they certainly did not have the where-withal needed to oppose the will of Gratian. They readily accepted Theodosius as the new emperor, and he quickly prepared to go to war with the Goths.

According to Saint Gregory of Tours, from his *History of the Franks*, Theodosius fervently embraced Christianity: "Theodosius put all his hope and all his trust in the mercy of God. He held many peoples in check, more by vigils and prayer than by the sword."<sup>32</sup> While Theodosius may have been a better Christian than his predecessors, Gregory, as a cleric, may have exaggerated the Emperor's piety. Moreover, Gregory's claim that Theodosius controlled people through prayer rather than by the sword holds no credibility. The first three years of Theodosius' reign were marked by his Gothic war, and he waged two civil wars against usurpers. Nonetheless, Gregory's writings, despite their overt bias, are still important because they chronicle Theodosius' decision to make Christianity the state religion, a decision that would have very significant consequences. There is no evidence of Gratian allowing Theodosius to keep his own legions with him in the East, but seeing as how the Goths had recently

decimated Valens' force only with his own soldiers could Theodosius have made war so quickly. Theodosius' reign also hastened the decline in relations between the two halves of the Roman Empire, as the historians in the East began to redact Gratian from their work. Theodosius' policies, moreover, did not sit well with the man who had raised him to the purple, beginning an East-West rivalry that would never abate.

After three years of war, Theodosius managed to defeat the Goths, although not severely enough to actually remove them from the Empire. Another factor that would help to destabilize the West. The emperor most likely fragmented the Goths and then settled them on land that had been deserted. There is also no Gothic leader mentioned by any sources for at least the next ten years.<sup>33</sup> This lends further evidence to the theory that Theodosius dispersed the Goths across the Empire.

In 383 the Western Empire entered into a period of great internal strife, which was exacerbated by external problems. Firstly Magnus Maximus, who was only the first in a long line of Western usurpers after Adrianople, was declared emperor in the West by his soldiers and revolted against Gratian's rule. There is no evidence of Gratian asking for assistance against this pretender, nor of Theodosius offering any. It is possible that due to the growing dissension between East and West neither man wanted to help, or be helped by, the other. One might contend that if Valens had still been emperor he would probably be more willing to help his nephew, despite their disagreements. Either way Gratian took an army to Paris in order to deal with the usurper, but he was betrayed by his own men. Magnus, the aforementioned usurper, then had Gratian executed. Theodosius allowed Maximus to retain

<sup>30</sup>Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, 4.107.

<sup>32</sup>Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Penguin Books, 1974), 92.

<sup>33</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 180-183.

control of Britain and Gaul, and Gratian's half-brother Valentinian II, who was only 12, was awarded the rest of the Western Empire. This agreement stayed in place until 388 when Maximus invaded Italy and was then defeated by Theodosius, who transferred the rest of the Western Empire to Valentinian's control.<sup>34</sup> Theodosius' later wars, especially against the usurper Eugenius, would give rise to one of the biggest nemeses the Western Empire ever faced, the Goth Alaric.

The peace that Maximus' death brought would only last six years; the young Valentinian died under suspicious circumstances in 392, and Eugenius was declared emperor by the general Arbogast. According to the historian Orosius (c. 375-418), Eugenius was nothing more than a figurehead for Arbogast.<sup>35</sup> In 394 Theodosius raised a large army which also contained a large number of Goths, who were led by Alaric.<sup>36</sup> In the ensuing battle a large number of Theodosius' barbarian allies were killed<sup>37</sup>, but Eugenius was also eliminated, and Arbogast committed suicide, and Theodosius thus emerged victorious.<sup>38</sup> With his credibility restored, Theodosius was able to place his young son Honorius on the throne in the West. Theodosius did not live much longer after this victory, dying in 395, after a period of illness.<sup>39</sup>

At the time of his death Theodosius left two young sons, Honorius who was only 10 and Arcadius who was 17. They were crowned as the Western and Eastern emperors respectively. Since Arcadius was still a child he was left in the care of the half-Vandal Stilicho, the most powerful man in the West. Arcadius, despite being of age in Roman society, was left under the care of Rufinus,<sup>40</sup> and because he proved to be no more capable than his younger brother, political factions

controlled the East. Problems quickly arose; as Stilicho claimed that he had been left in charge of both boys, and tensions began to rise between East and West.<sup>41</sup> None of the contemporary sources give a reason for Stilicho making this claim, but it is entirely possible that he simply wanted to be the most powerful man in the Roman world. It was not uncommon for powerful Roman generals to further their own careers at the expense of the Empire, and Stilicho himself would later try, on multiple occasions, to take Illyricum from the Eastern Empire. No matter his reasoning, he did not have the well-being of Arcadius as a permanent concern. This would lead to the first of Alaric's three rebellions, which would begin to bring about the end of the Western Roman Empire.

The fallout from Theodosius' death, and the tensions between Stilicho and Rufinus, created a favorable political environment for Alaric's rebellion in 395. In that year, Alaric and his Gothic troops left Italy and marched north to the war ravaged Balkans.<sup>42</sup> Here Zosimus is rather vague in his description of what occurred. The only thing that is certain is that Stilicho had marched East with an army comprised of soldiers from both halves of the Empire, and Arcadius, probably under Rufinus' influence, ordered Stilicho to hand over the Eastern soldiers. Stilicho did as he was ordered, and the Eastern troops led by Gainas, who was Gothic, met Rufinus near Constantinople. Gainas, possibly under orders from Stilicho, had his troops kill Rufinus. Gainas, however, was unable to take his place as Arcadius' "advisor," because Eutropius, a court Eunuch, assumed the title.<sup>43</sup> Given Stilicho's claim that he was the one left in charge of Arcadius, and his willingness to go to war over said claim, Gainas' assassination of Rufinus represented

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 187.

<sup>35</sup>Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos*, accessed April 29, 2017, [https://sites.google.com/site/demontortoise2000/orosius\\_book7](https://sites.google.com/site/demontortoise2000/orosius_book7).

<sup>36</sup>Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, 5.133.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 4.128.

<sup>38</sup>Orosius, *Historiae Paganos*, 7.35.

<sup>39</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 188

<sup>40</sup>Orosius, *Historiae Paganos*, 7.37.

<sup>41</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 189.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>43</sup>Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, 5.137



a component of Stilicho's master plan. He ordered the assassination, because he realized it would be too difficult for him to control two emperors. Thus by having Gainas take Rufinus' place as Arcadius' chief advisor, Stilicho was able to directly control the Western emperor, and would have had a puppet advisor controlling the East. Given the turbulence of Roman politics this theory holds water.

It is also known that at some point in 395 Alaric had marched south towards Greece, but it is unclear exactly when he did so or why. According to Zosimus' *Nova Historia*, Alaric's raiding in Greece occurred before Rufinus was killed, and Rufinus convinced a disgruntled Alaric to take his troops into Greece.<sup>44</sup> Still, Zosimus cannot be completely trusted here because he was favorably inclined towards Rufinus. Another possibility is that Alaric was in Greece because he had originally intended to attack Constantinople, but after Stilicho's forces returned it proved too heavily defended. One might then conclude that Alaric may have been in Greece under orders from Rufinus, he was either forced to remain there after the latter's death, or did so under his own authority.<sup>45</sup> Even though we do not have much information on Alaric's presence in Greece, it is known that sacked several cities while he was there. According to Zosimus these included Athens, Sparta, and Megara.<sup>46</sup>

By 397 it appears that Alaric was once again serving Rome, possibly as the *Magister Militum of Illyricum*, as he fought off Stilicho who was trying to take the Peloponnesus for the Western Empire. Two year later, things once again began to spiral out of control. Gainas, the same Goth who had killed Rufinus in 395, allied himself with a rebel force, and forced Arcadius to dismiss Eutropius. Gainas

then quickly took Eutropius' position as Arcadius' chief advisor, but this arrangement proved ephemeral. In 400 a large portion of Gainas' barbarian troops were slaughtered, and he fled north where he was killed by Uldin, who was the Hunnic king.<sup>47</sup>

After Gainas' death it seems that Alaric had fallen out of favor in Arcadius' court, and after the murder of Fravitta, another prominent Goth, Alaric probably felt that his own life was at risk. It is also possible that he lost his position as *magister militum*, which meant that he could no longer pay or feed his men.<sup>48</sup> If Alaric was indeed stripped of his title, then he probably saw little choice but to rebel. It had already become apparent that the Goths were no longer as welcome in the East as they had been, and Alaric probably would have been forced to disband his troops. Moreover, given recent events, he probably feared that he would be next on his enemies' list. Given the Gothic chieftain's actions after his invasion of Italy, it seems as if he rebelled out of necessity, rather than choice.

Fearful for his life, Alaric launched a surprise invasion of Italy in 401, while Stilicho was away. The latter, however, returned to Italy and fought Alaric to a standstill twice.<sup>49</sup> According to Orosius, Stilicho then concluded a secret alliance with Alaric, because the former wished to make his own son the emperor.<sup>50</sup> While Stilicho did parley with Alaric, the results were not as nefarious as Orosius contends. For whatever reason Alaric remained silent from 402~405, he had probably been given another military command, and by 405 he was most certainly serving Honorius.<sup>51</sup>

According to Orosius, Alaric was the Gothic king when he sacked Rome in 410.<sup>52</sup> It would make sense for Alaric to take this role, especially in 400. He did it to ensure the

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 195.

<sup>46</sup>Zosimus *Historicus*, *Nova Historia*, 5.137

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 5.144, 5.148.

<sup>48</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 201.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Orosius, *Historiae Paganos*.

<sup>51</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 202.

<sup>52</sup>Orosius, *Historiae Paganos*.

loyalty of his men now that he had lost his Roman titles. Yet, considering he most likely invaded Italy to force the Emperor to award him a new title it would not make sense for him to claim the title of king, one not recognized by the Roman Empire. Perhaps Alaric knew that he would have to give up his title as king after coming to terms with Rome. Still, it is almost impossible to prove that Alaric was ever a king; it is more likely that his brother Athaulf was actually the first to hold this position.

After 405 Alaric re-emerged onto the scene. Later that same year the Goth Radagaisus, whom Orosius also designates as king, invaded Italy with a large force of barbarians. Radagaisus was supposedly driven back into the mountains, without food to feed his armies. Orosius says that the Romans employed no army at this point, and the barbarians quickly began to die off. He, of course chalks this up as being a miracle from God.<sup>53</sup> It is more likely that the Romans actually did send an army to besiege Radagaisus in the mountains, and instead of fighting, the starving barbarians surrendered. Interestingly, Orosius also notes that a large number of the captives quickly dropped dead after being sold into slavery, because God willed it.<sup>54</sup> What Orosius is most likely citing is the massacre of the families of these barbarians that occurred upon Stilicho's execution, as most of the captives had been drafted into the Roman army. Considering the fact that Orosius was a contemporary of Stilicho, he probably knew exactly what had happened, but being a cleric, he simply said it was God's will.

In 407 Stilicho intended to go to war with Arcadius over the province of *Illyricum*; Alaric agreed to help Stilicho and was sent East. In 408, however, Arcadius died and

Stilicho's plans were abandoned. This did not sit well with Alaric, and he demanded that the Roman senate give him 3,000 pounds of silver. In order to maintain peace Stilicho convinced the senate to pay Alaric, but according to Zosimus the senate assented more because of their fear of Stilicho than a fear of Alaric.<sup>55</sup> It is not too hard to believe Zosimus here, considering the fact that Stilicho was the West's greatest general, and Alaric had yet to defeat him in battle. So the senate did not have much of a reason to fear Alaric, but angering a man as powerful and talented as Stilicho would have been detrimental.

The year 400 also marked the beginning of the end for Stilicho, and by extension Rome's hope of holding off Alaric. When Arcadius died in 408, Stilicho apparently marched east, hoping to become the young Theodosius II's guardian. Rumors quickly began to circulate, however, that Stilicho actually intended to put his own son on the Eastern throne. By this time Stilicho had gone back to Italy and was in Ravenna, when one of Honorius' magisters ordered that he be captured. A large number of Stilicho's supporters were killed, and he himself was captured and executed.<sup>56</sup>

Stilicho's execution only served to exacerbate the West's barbarian problem, because, as mentioned earlier, a large number of his soldiers' families were killed as well. When they discovered what had happened to their families these barbarians, many of whom had invaded Italy with Radagaisus, promptly rebelled and cast their lot with Alaric. According to Zosimus, these troops swelled Alaric's force to some 30,000 men, which is a credible number. Despite having such a large force, Alaric still preferred peace over war. Honorius, however, refused to negotiate with Alaric, thus forcing Alaric to make a crucial decision.<sup>57</sup> If Alaric did in fact have 30,000

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Zosimus Historicus, *Nova Historia*, 5.153-155

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 5.159.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 5.161.

men, as Zosimus claims, then he probably did not pursue peace out of fear of defeat. With Stilicho, dead there was not a general in the West who would have been able to easily defeat such a large Gothic force. Instead Alaric probably knew he would be better off negotiating a peace treaty, because he may have been able to obtain land for his soldiers. Whereas if he had gone to war, even if he would have won, he would have made the Romans resent him even further. Therefore choosing to seek peace marked the most practical option for Alaric.

Because Honorius refused to negotiate, however, Alaric had no choice but to march for Rome. He captured Rome's port and then besieged the city itself. The inhabitants of the city quickly ran out of food, and famine swept the city. The Romans also could not bury the dead outside of the city because of the siege, and thus the corpses just piled up. Eventually, envoys were sent to Alaric to tell him that the senate would accept any reasonable demands. The members ended up giving him several thousand pounds of silver and gold. Thus Alaric lifted his siege and marched away from Rome.<sup>58</sup>

Honorius, however, continued to refuse Alaric's demands for peace. Again, Alaric returned to Rome and besieged the city. Again he was paid off by the senate and spared Rome. Despite having already besieged the Eternal City twice by this point, Alaric's demands were once again refused by Honorius. Thus Alaric returned to Rome, however this time he was allowed into the city and spent three days stripping it of its wealth.<sup>59</sup> This marks Alaric's well known Sack of Rome in 410. After this Alaric knew he had to do more than just sack Rome, which was just a tourist destination by this point, if he wanted Honorius to heed his demands.

This is because Ravenna had replaced Rome as the capital of the Western Empire. In order to obtain more leverage Alaric decided to gain control of the African grain supply. He marched his army south and intended to invade Africa by way of Sicily, but died of an illness in 411. His brother Athaulf then took his place as the Gothic leader.<sup>60</sup> Honorius' repeated refusals to give in to Alaric's demands severely hampered the Western Empire's chances of defending themselves from future invasions.

Even though Alaric never won a true victory over any Roman force during his rebellions, his impact on the Western Empire proved quite immense. He was able to derive favorable terms from the Empire on multiple occasions, and had it not been for his leadership the Goths under his command probably would not have left such a large mark on history. Had it not been for Alaric these Goths probably would have remained under the command of the Eastern Empire, or possibly even killed during the turmoil of 399. Alaric managed to rebel against the Romans on three occasions, and avoid a major defeat every time. Had he actually managed to invade Africa, it is quite possible that he would have succeeded in his goal.

After Alaric's death the Goths would return to Roman service, and fought against several barbarian groups in Spain. They would eventually be settled in Toulouse by Constantius, creating a buffer between Italy and northern Gaul (which the Romans no longer controlled). After being settled in Gaul, the Goths would continue to rebel on several occasions, but would always experience defeat.<sup>61</sup> It is possible that the Romans allowed the Goths to remain in Gaul, despite the multiple rebellions, because they knew that they could not defend Gaul by

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 5.163-165.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 5.166-167.

<sup>60</sup>Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 217.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 223, 224-230

themselves.

By this point the Western Emperor only controlled Italy, some of Gaul, and a small portion of Spain. The Empire was in complete disarray, and things would only get worse. Attila the Hun twice invaded the West, first ravaging Gaul, and then Italy itself.

By 455, the year in which the Vandal king Genseric sacked Rome, the Vandals controlled most of North Africa, and Spain belonged to the Visigoths, the Goths who had followed Alaric. Then in 476 the Western Roman Empire dissolved. Emperor Romulus Augustus abdicated and Odoacer refused the imperial standards and proclaimed himself to be the King of Italy.

The defeat at Adrianople can be seen as catalyzing all these events. Due to the fissure between East and West that began during Theodosius' reign, which was only brought about because of Valens' death at Adrianople, the Eastern Empire slowly began to stop cooperating with the West. The Goths who gained a place inside the Empire with their

victory at Adrianople, would prove an intermittent thorn in the Empire's side for the next fifty years. The Western Roman Empire became increasingly unstable in the years after Adrianople, and was plagued with a series of usurpers before finally collapsing. Since it could no longer rely on help from the East, the Western Empire had to use more and more barbarians, often the Goths, in their civil wars, relinquishing to these groups more and more political power. Had the Romans won at Adrianople, they may have been able to defeat the Goths and remove them from the Empire. If this had been the case Valens would not have died, and both halves of the Empire may have retained better relations with one another. As such the West would not have become so unstable, and since there would be no Gothic threat, they might have fared better against the usurpers. Alas the Romans did lose at Adrianople, and the dominoes began to fall until the Western Empire ceased to exist.

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