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The Sack of Rome

By

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Abstract

In 410, Goths under the command of Alaric sacked the ancient city of Rome. This event was significant in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. It may have been seen by some at this time as a massive shock that Rome could have been attacked like this, but in the previous decades, there were a host of warning signs that something like this lay in the near future for the empire. This sack could not have happened the way it did without the perfect conditions being established in the decades leading up to it. The Roman Empire had already entered a period of significant decline in the preceding two centuries. Constant changes in power along with incompetence and regional divisions weakened the empire, thus allowing outside forces to exploit these developments for their own benefit. The empire was also grappling with religious changes, as Christianity spread rapidly within its borders. Christianity soon began to supplant the established pagan religion that had played a central role in the Roman state and society for centuries. This thesis examines the forces that contributed to the sack and evaluates the significance of the sack in terms of the actual fall of the Western Roman Empire, which by 410, was already well underway, following decades of setbacks at the hands of barbarian tribes and incompetent and complacent leadership.

Introduction

On August 24, 410, a group of Goths under the command of Alaric besieged the city of Rome. These Goths pillaged the city, helping themselves to anything with even slight value. This attack plays into many stereotypes that have existed about the Goths and other barbarian tribes for nearly two millennia. As Douglas Boin writes,

What happened next can look in our historical imagination like a reel of images pulled from a Hollywood disaster movie. Wild-haired, leather-clad barbarians maraud through the streets. Wealthy citizens hoard their coins and jewelry as they stare at the realities of future financial ruin. Privileged senators, scared for their loves, dirty their white togas as they run to escape the devastation.¹

Peter Heather provides a much more nuanced view of the sack and directly contradicts this historical imagination:

That Rome should have seen a highly civilized sack conducted by Christian Goths who respected the sanctity of St. Peter's might seem a dreadful anticlimax compared with expectations of bloodthirsty barbarians running loose in the great imperial capital.²

But the above passages are significant generalizations that completely gloss over the nuances and finer details of what really happened and what motivated Alaric and the Goths. In actuality, the sack was not a stereotypical ransacking of a peaceful city by hostile outside invaders. Rather, the Goths respected major landmarks and structures in the city and did not burn it down completely. They even offered protection to civilians. Regardless of what actually happened, however, the situation for the Romans did not improve, and the empire's position only deteriorated further in the following decades so that, by 476, the Western Roman Empire completely ceased to exist. The eastern half survived and would continue until the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman

¹ Douglas Boin, *Alaric the Goth: An Outsider's History of the Fall of Rome* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2020), 165

² Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 228

Empire in 1453. The sack was a sign that the Roman Empire's geopolitical position had been forever changed. Even though Rome was no longer the seat of the imperial government, it was still important enough that people throughout the empire took notice of what had happened.

The sack of Rome was a culmination of a series of events that had taken place over the preceding decades. From the late third century to the fourth century, the Roman Empire underwent a series of seismic changes. One major change that profoundly affected the empire was a series of demographic shifts. Germanic tribes ("barbarians") such as the Goths, Franks, Alamanni, and many others began migrating westward towards Roman territory, fleeing the advancing nomadic Huns in the east. These tribes found themselves in opposition to Roman forces. Over time, however, they began to be brought into the Roman fold, with some of these warriors joining the Roman ranks. By 376, a tribe of Goths had crossed into Roman territory, which set the stage for the next three decades of Roman-barbarian relations. Roman authorities were harsh and cruel towards these migrants, selling them poor quality dog meat and selling their sons into slavery.³ Two years later, the Goths inflicted a major defeat upon the Roman forces at the Battle of Adrianople (modern Edirne, Turkey), which saw Emperor Valens killed in action, a sign that the Goths were a serious threat to the Romans.

Nearly 20 years after this, a younger Alaric the Goth began to demand acknowledgment by the Roman authorities for his service. He was in a rather precarious position at this point; he was far too young and lacked the required military experience to be eligible for a pension or land grant, but he also did not have a clear path to acquiring Roman citizenship.⁴ He ultimately departed for Constantinople to air out his grievances, garnering much support along the way

³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 38.

⁴ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 102.

from fellow Goths.⁵ He did not attack Constantinople, however. Following another 15 years of failure to negotiate terms with the Roman state under Honorius, who was largely uninterested in engaging in good-faith negotiations,⁶ he decided to send his followers to attack Rome, the symbolic heart of the centuries-old empire.

Historiography

Scholarship on the sack has been quite diverse. Depictions vary widely depending on the author. The idea of a “civilized” sack is repeated across many works of scholarship. Peter Heather argues, “By all accounts, there followed one of the most civilized sacks of a city ever witnessed. Alaric’s Goths were Christian, and treated many of Rome’s holiest places with great respect.”⁷ Heather goes on to argue that Alaric did not wish for the sack to happen; he had been seeking a change in the Goths’ status with the Roman authorities. The sack is depicted here as a failure for the Goths in terms of accomplishing their goals, rather than a real blow to the Roman Empire; according to Heather, Rome being attacked by the Goths meant little to an imperial court that was operating out of Ravenna, as Rome was no longer the imperial capital.⁸ Heather appears to prompt readers to take a broader view of the sack on a macro level, writing, “For although the sack was historically insignificant, the events of which it was a part had massive shock waves reverberating around the Roman world.”⁹

Douglas Boin presents a multitude of reasons behind the sack. This includes a refusal by Honorius to entertain demands made by Alaric for food and a designated place to live within the borders of the empire.¹⁰ Also noted is the earlier frustration felt by Alaric over the lack of a

⁵ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 104.

⁶ Thomas S. Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 244.

⁷ Heather, *A New History*, 227

⁸ Heather, *A New History*, 229

⁹ Heather, *A New History*, 229

¹⁰ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 159.

pathway to Roman citizenship. Boin contends that Alaric was young and he let his “youthful impatience” get the better of him, with regard to the way he went about making his demands for a military command and citizenship.¹¹ Alaric led a march on Constantinople to pressure the Roman authorities for a promotion in the army. Boin contends that this march may have been successful if not for the intervention of Rufinus, an advisor to Eastern emperor Arcadius. Rufinus convinced Alaric to change his plans as he sought to lobby the Eastern court to cut a deal.¹² In summary, Boin contends that there were fierce rivalries between Roman political figures that resulted in Alaric and the Goths being used as pawns by the different figures to gain advantages over their rivals.

Michael Kulikowski’s *Rome’s Gothic Wars* argues that “the trauma of the sack of Rome was as much psychological as physical.”¹³ Religion features prominently in his discussion of the sack, as pagans blamed it on the rise of Christianity and the abandonment of longstanding pagan practices.¹⁴ His depiction for the actual motives of Alaric discuss the march to Constantinople and Alaric’s status as a pawn in the rivalry between Stilicho and Rufinus.¹⁵ Ultimately, Kulikowski contends that Alaric had eventually had enough of being used by these Roman factions and the failed negotiations and decided to sack Rome.¹⁶ Kulikowski depicts the sack as being decided upon solely by Alaric, but other authors like Boin frame Alaric within a larger movement. Kulikowski also discusses the significance of the Stilicho-Rufinus feud. Stilicho and

¹¹ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 103.

¹² Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 104-105.

¹³ Michael Kulikowski, *Rome’s Gothic Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 178.

¹⁴ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 178.

¹⁵ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 165.

¹⁶ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 177.

Rufinus frequently used the Goths as pawns, sending them to march on each other's positions in order to gain an advantage over them.¹⁷

Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* offers a similar explanation. He contends that the "symbolic reverberations were profound."¹⁸ The sack marked the beginning of the end for the Western Empire. A number of western provinces came under the control of barbarian tribes; this included the Goths in Aquitaine, Burgundians in Savoy, Vandals in Africa, and Ostrogoths making inroads in Italy.¹⁹ The West was in no position to contest these losses and its only remaining option was to fortify its remaining positions on the Italian peninsula.²⁰ "Everywhere but narrow corridors of Italy and Gaul, the machinery of power ceased to be Roman,"²¹ Harper writes.

Sam Moorehead and David Stuttard place a great deal of emphasis on Alaric's grievances with the Roman state, similar to the above-mentioned works. On this, they write, "Frustration with the Roman Empire and the way it had treated them had been building up over many years. Now it was payback time."²² On the sack itself, they emphasize the symbolic aspect of the city of Rome, which had endured in spite of its loss of political influence in the empire as a whole. They note that "wholesale massacre and destruction would not be tolerated (by the Goths). Instead, the Goths would target iconic Roman buildings, whose significance resonated deep in the Roman psyche."²³ Also discussed is the sparing of Christians and Christian structures and artifacts within the city. Christians and Christian artifacts were ordered to be escorted to St. Peter's

¹⁷ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 165-166.

¹⁸ Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 161.

¹⁹ Harper, *Fate of Rome*, 195.

²⁰ Harper, *Fate of Rome*, 195.

²¹ Harper, *Fate of Rome*, 195.

²² Sam Moorehead and David Stuttard, *AD 410: The Year that Shook Rome* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010), 131.

²³ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 126.

Basilica under the Goths' protection. "So began what must be one of the most unusual episodes of any sack in history,"²⁴ write Moorehead and Stuttard. This depiction of the sack resembles the one given by Heather; the notion that the sack was not a stereotypical ransacking of a city by a horde of barbarians.

Neil Christie portrays the Goths as opportunistic; Stilicho's arrest and execution in 408 rendered Italy vulnerable.²⁵ Christie contends that in general, the Goths were allowed by Alaric to freely ransack houses throughout the city.²⁶ Christie also portrays the situation as being representative of a world that had changed; barbarians could now project their power into the empire's borders, whether their intention was to work with the Romans or not.²⁷

Bryan Ward-Perkins contends that the ongoing barbarian incursions into Roman territory were what contributed to the instability in the empire, writing that, "There was, of course, a close connection between failure 'abroad' and the usurpations and rebellions 'at home.'"²⁸ He does not cover the 410 sack of Rome in depth, but still offers a useful account of how conditions in the empire deteriorated to the point where such a sack was possible.

Thomas S. Burns depicts the sack as a move that Alaric and the Goths had no choice but to go through with, as Honorius refused to even consider the demands they had made of the Roman state.²⁹ Burns does not depict it as a victory for Alaric, writing,

The 'Sack of Rome' in 410 was not the victory of barbarism any more than had been Constantine the Great's 'Sack of Rome' after his victory at the Mulvian Bridge in 312. From the perspective of the Roman Army both were the predictable consequences of civil war.³⁰

²⁴ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410* 128.

²⁵ Neil Christie, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: An Archaeological and Historical Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 38.

²⁶ Christie, *Fall*, 38.

²⁷ Christie, *Fall*, 39.

²⁸ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 45.

²⁹ Burns, *Barbarians*, 245.

³⁰ Burns, *Barbarians*, 245.

In other words, Burns believes that the sack was a failure in that Alaric was not able to achieve the goals he had outlined. He only resorted to sacking Rome because he found himself out of viable alternatives.

Ancient Scholarship

To better understand the sack as well as how ancient authors depicted it, it is important to also understand the background of the authors themselves. The ancient authors that wrote on the sack came from diverse backgrounds. There were both pagan and Christian writers from various different places across the empire. These writers' religious affiliations help to inform how they approach the sack in their writings.

Remarkably, some ancient authors writing not long after the sack were quite soft on the Goths, who were converts to Christianity. Authors such as Orosius and Augustine of Hippo, who were Christians themselves, spoke of how well the Goths allegedly treated Rome's inhabitants. They do not depict the Goths as overly violent, in contrast to the modern stereotypical view of "barbarians." This may come as a surprise to many, seeing as how modern popular culture has profited heavily from portraying them this way. The opening battle of the film *Gladiator* (2000) is an example of this.

Orosius, a Christian priest and student of Augustine of Hippo, was an example of an ancient author writing on the sack in its aftermath. His *The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* provides a history of Rome from a Christian perspective and seeks to discredit Roman paganism by blaming it for the state of the empire. He makes no effort to hide his religious affiliation. The title is a dead giveaway as to which religion he followed. The reason he offers, which differs from the notion that Alaric and the Goths were dissatisfied with their treatment from the Romans, is that it was a punishment that was inevitable for failing to show repentance:

“So, after such a great increase in blasphemies as this and no repentance, that final and long-impending punishment reached the city.”³¹ Based on this statement, it can safely be concluded that Orosius was a staunch Christian who believed that the continued adherence to paganism by many Romans caused God to punish the city for their infidelity, something that he perceived to be inevitable. Even though Christianity was made the official state religion under Theodosius, paganism continued to exist in the empire. Not everyone embraced the new religion, but many people who had been disadvantaged under the Roman regime and hierarchy were attracted to Christianity, such as the Gothic forces, led by Alaric. This also highlights Orosius’ agenda of advancing the idea that Christianity is a universal religion that was embraced by people of many different backgrounds. In summary, Orosius’ Christian background contributed greatly to his overall perceptions on the sack; he believed it was a punishment from the Christian God for the Romans’ failure to abandon their pagan beliefs and practices.

Augustine of Hippo, like Orosius, was a staunch Christian, having converted to the faith in the 380s. Augustine vehemently rejects any notion that Christianity was responsible for the sack. He contends that many wars were waged by pagan regimes dating back to the times of the Republic and the early Empire.³² Augustine does not mince words when criticizing paganism and the pagan deities:

In fact, to worship fallen gods as patrons and defenders is more like having poor odds than good gods. It is much more sensible to believe, not so much that Rome would have been saved from destruction had not the gods perished, but rather that the gods would have perished long ago had not Rome made every effort to save them.³³

³¹Paulus Orosius, and Roy J. Deferrari, *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans*. 1st Short-run Reprint. ed. Fathers of the Church ; v. 50. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 7.39.

³² Saint Augustine, Demetrius B. Zema, Walsh, Gerald G, Gilson, Étienne, and Gilson, Étienne. *The City of God, Books I-VII*. 1st ed. The Fathers of the Church: a New Translation Ser. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 1.2.

³³ Augustine, *City of God*, 1.3.

The Republic and subsequent Empire both went out of their way to preserve the traditional pagan religion; it was inserted into all facets of daily life across the entire Roman world. One of the actions undertaken by the Romans was persecuting early Christians, which I will discuss in a later section.

Augustine depicts the Goths as sincere Christians. Similar to Orosius, Augustine had an agenda of portraying Christians and Christianity in a highly positive manner. Augustine portrays the Goths not as bloodthirsty savages who took what they pleased, but as devout followers of Christianity who sought to uphold its tenets. Ancient sources like these sought to depict Christians and the Christian religion in a positive light so that they might attract new converts to the still rapidly growing faith.

Zosimus, a Greek historian who lived in Constantinople during late 5th-early 6th centuries, also provides an account of the sack in *The New History*. This work covers Roman history from the time of Augustus up to the fifth century. He depicts Alaric as not desiring an open conflict, but ultimately had no choice, as his peace demands had been rejected by Honorius.

Jordanes was a 6th century Eastern Roman bureaucrat, and later, historian. His work *The Origins and Deeds of the Goths* depicts the sack in a manner similar to the above-mentioned Christian sources. On the causes of the sack, Jordanes blames Theodosius' successors for souring relations with the Goths. While he depicted Theodosius as the "lover of peace and the Gothic race"³⁴, he recorded that the emperor's sons stopped giving gifts to the Goths and therefore angered them. This depiction is similar to that of the aforementioned modern scholars such as Kulikowski and Boin, who argue that one of the main motivations for the sack was the Goths being upset at the way the Roman authorities treated them.

³⁴ Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*. trans. Charles C. Mierow. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1908), XXIX.

Claudian was a Western Roman poet in Honorius' court who lived during the 4th century, and unlike the previously mentioned ancient sources, he was a pagan. While none of his works cover the sack of Rome, he does offer a useful account of the leadup to it, namely the heated rivalry between Stilicho and Rufinus. Claudian was a firm supporter of Stilicho; he heaps extensive praise on him. One example is as follows: "Yet is not the spirit of the great-hearted Stilicho broken by the same fear. Alone amid the general calamity he took arms against this monster of greed and his [Stilicho's] devouring maw..."³⁵ This passage refers to the aforementioned feud between Stilicho and his rival Rufinus, who was based in the East. With regard to Rufinus, all Claudian has for him is contempt: "Thus far Rufinus advanced his threats and stayed; then fell back in coward flight..."³⁶ Later on, Claudian writes that "...he held his head high in triumph, believing everything safe, and, anxious to seize power, inflamed his traitorous minions with this speech..."³⁷

The feud between Stilicho and Rufinus meant that it was unclear who exactly was in charge of Rome, allowing the Goths and other invading groups to do essentially whatever they pleased, including marching on Rome itself. Although Claudian is about as biased as one can get (Stilicho can do no wrong, and anything positive Rufinus may have done is immediately given a negative spin), it is a primary source account covering the Stilicho-Rufinus feud. With Stilicho and Rufinus mostly focused on trying to destroy one another, no one was paying attention to the fact that the Goths were gaining ground, exploiting the constant squabbling between the various Roman factions.

³⁵ Claudian Claudianus, *Claudian* (England: W. Heinemann; 1922, 1922), 45.

³⁶ Claudian, *Rufinus*, 45.

³⁷ Claudian, *Rufinus*, 77.

Another important ancient source covering the sack was Procopius' *The Wars*. Procopius was a sixth century Byzantine historian. His section on Alaric and the sack is very brief, but he does provide essential information on the sack. Procopius depicts Alaric and the Goths as having been "hostile to both emperors, and, beginning with Thrace, treated all Europe as an enemy's land."³⁸

The preceding years of instability and constant squabbling between these factions would finally come to a head in 410, as the effects of this strife would finally hit the ancient center of the empire, Rome itself.

Alaric at the Gates

On August 24, 410, the city of Rome experienced a shock that reverberated across the empire. A tribe of Goths under the command of Alaric entered the city, let in by someone inside, one of their sympathizers.³⁹ Orosius writes,

Thus, in the one thousand one hundred and sixty-fourth year after the founding of the City, an attack was made upon the City by Alaric; although the memory of this event is fresh, nevertheless, if anyone sees the multitude of the Roman people themselves and hears their talk, he will think that nothing took place, as even they themselves confess, unless by chance he is informed by the ruins of the fire still remaining.⁴⁰

The Roman people, based on Orosius' account, managed to mask the traumatic feelings they held about the sack, even as physical evidence of the sack, such as lingering fires, remained.

The sack was the culmination of over three decades of mistreatment of the Gothic peoples at the hands of the Roman state, and the Goths were determined to strike at what they believed to be the heart of the empire to even the score (although Rome had considerably declined in significance in the preceding centuries, as I will discuss later). For Alaric, much of

³⁸ Procopius of Caesarea, *The Vandal Wars of Procopius* (Loeb Classical Library, 1916), 1.2.7.

³⁹ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 125-126.

⁴⁰ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.40.

this was personal, as he had spent the last fifteen years constantly lobbying the Roman state for recognition of his service in their ranks, as well as citizenship and a place for his tribe to settle within Roman territory.⁴¹ Another demand he made was for “Roman weaponry and military equipment to fit out his men.”⁴² He did eventually receive recognition from Priscus Attalus, the Prefect of Rome, around 409. He received the title of *Magister Utriusque Militum*.⁴³ However, this proved to be too little, too late. The remainder of his demands were ultimately ignored by the Romans, one of the main reasons the sack was carried out (although this was definitely not the only reason, as I will discuss in later sections). The Romans were also responsible for serious atrocities against the Gothic people, including, but not limited to the killing of unarmed children in retaliation over a previous military defeat, providing Gothic migrants with limited supplies of inferior quality, and forcing Gothic parents to sell their children into slavery in exchange for the provisions they needed.⁴⁴ In other words, tensions had been building in decades. The Sack of Rome was illustrated that the Goths could take no more of this constant mistreatment.

Sacking Rome was not necessarily something that Alaric wanted to do. However, he was left with little choice, as negotiations with the Roman state had proven to be unsuccessful.⁴⁵ He knew full well that going forward with the sack would permanently erase any hope he had of securing the concessions for himself and his followers that he had spent the last several years lobbying for. Knowing this, he did wait a full two years camped out near the city before making the fateful decision to march on Rome, a decision he did not make lightly.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Christie, *Fall*, 69.

⁴² Christie, *Fall*, 70.

⁴³ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 113-114.

⁴⁴ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 131.

⁴⁵ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 4.

⁴⁶ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 4.

On the Goths' efforts to secure concessions from the Roman state, Jordanes writes the following:

But as I was saying, when the army of the Visigoths had come into the neighborhood of this city, they sent an embassy to the Emperor Honorius, who dwelt within. They said that if he would permit the Goths to settle peaceably in Italy, they would so live with the Roman people that men might believe them both to be of one race; but if not, whoever prevailed in war should drive out the other, and the victor should henceforth rule unmolested. But the Emperor Honorius feared to make either promise. So he took counsel with his Senate and considered how he might drive them from the Italian borders. He finally decided that Alaric and his race, if they were able to do so, should be allowed to seize for their own home the provinces farthest away, namely, Gaul and Spain.⁴⁷

Essentially, Honorius did not wish to commit to allowing the Goths to permanently settle this close to the heart of the empire and wanted them to remain in the periphery of the empire as they had been. If the Goths prevailed militarily over the Romans, they would gain an immense amount of leverage over the Romans and be able to exert control over much more territory. This was definitely not something Alaric wanted; he wanted the Goths to be regarded as equals to the Romans, entitled to the same protections that were afforded to Roman citizens.

The Goths' primary targets within the city included the mausoleums of emperors Augustus and Hadrian. Their contents were pillaged, and the ashes of the emperors were dispersed.⁴⁸ All of this was seen by the Goths as targeting Rome's cultural identity and historical legacy.⁴⁹ This is further reinforced by the fact that Christian structures in the city, i.e. churches, were ordered to be spared and Christians protected and offered sanctuary if they wanted it. In a way, they were more apt to target anything related to Rome prior to the advent of Christianity and anything related to the pre-Christian pagan religion (after all, the Goths were Christians).

Jordanes' account is as follows: "When they finally entered Rome, by Alaric's express command

⁴⁷ Jor., *Origin*, XXX.

⁴⁸ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 126.

⁴⁹ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 126.

they merely sacked it and did not set the city on fire, as wild peoples usually do, nor did they permit serious damage to be done to the holy places.”⁵⁰

Zosimus depicts the outbreak as being in addition to the prior famine that had afflicted the city. It was, he wrote, “in danger of being depopulated by an additional cause, and though no want of provisions had subsisted, yet the stench arising from the putrid corpses was sufficient to infect them with disease.”⁵¹

The sack is a prime example of just how weak and vulnerable the Western Roman Empire had become; even the heart of the Roman world, the place where it all began, was not safe from attacks from hostile forces both inside and outside the empire’s borders. The Roman regime in Ravenna had proven itself incapable of protecting the residents of Rome. It is quite likely that they had long since stopped caring about the city. This lack of concern on the part of the Roman state is echoed by modern historians such as Moorehead and Stuttard, who write, “Exhausted by starvation and drained by false hopes, its people knew that they have been abandoned, that their emperor, Honorius, has washed his hands of them.”⁵² Rome had stopped being an actual political capital long ago; as the empire expanded, many emperors spent the bulk of their reigns overseeing military campaigns in the northern and eastern frontier regions, with many making only brief token visits to the city.

To understand fully how the Roman Empire got to this point, it is important to understand several factors, such as changing demographics (due in large part to the Gothic migrations), the rapid spread of Christianity, and the aforementioned decades of mistreatment of Gothic peoples by the Romans. The seeds for this sack had been planted well over a century before its primary

⁵⁰ Jor., *Origin*, XXX.

⁵¹ Zos. 5.164.

⁵² Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 16.

instigator, Alaric, was even born. The sack was ultimately instrumental in further destabilizing the Western Roman Empire, as it showed the world that the Empire was no longer capable of protecting even its core territories in Italy.

The East-West Divide

As the Roman Republic and Empire grew, it came to encompass a diverse group of regions across parts of three continents, from as far west as modern Portugal to as far east as modern Iraq. Even as the Roman authorities sought to impose their rule in these regions, regional divisions remained, namely between the Western and Eastern portions of the empire. The East was wealthier than the West, and was home to places that had once been powerful ancient societies in their own right.

Under Diocletian (r. 284-305), an attempt was made to divide up rule of the empire among two emperors (Augusti), one for each half along with their chosen successors (Caesares), in hopes that this would lead to a more efficient administration of an empire that had grown to a nearly unmanageable size⁵³ and had just endured over five decades of political instability that included a rapid fire succession of different emperors that began in 220. However, this system failed to remain in place for very long after Diocletian was out of the picture following his retirement in 305. Without Diocletian's strong hand to keep the other three members in check, they began to fight amongst themselves for power. However, Diocletian's system still had some impact. Even after the Tetrarchy as he established it was dissolved, there continued to be two imperial courts throughout much of the fourth century, one each for the Eastern and Western halves (Constantine did rule over both halves during his reign). On some occasions, they would assist each other, but this did not always happen, as it quickly became apparent that the two

⁵³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 5.

halves had their own separate interests. There continued to be a singular “Roman” identity, but the two halves ultimately had their own leadership and chains of command.

Once Constantine had consolidated his power, he set about implementing his own changes to the way the empire was run. He commissioned the construction of a new capital city on the site of Byzantium, which became known as Constantinople. It would later serve as the Eastern capital and would remain so even after the Western empire’s demise. Constantine’s Edict of Milan declared an end to the state-sanctioned persecutions of Christians, and in 312, Constantine himself formally converted to Christianity.⁵⁴

Ultimately, Theodosius’ death in 395 would make this long-standing divide between the East and West a permanent one, with each half coming under the control of one of his sons and the two halves becoming separate political entities entirely. This division is significant, as the East soon turned away from the West and focused instead on its own interests, often failing to come to the West’s aid during moments of difficulty. Arcadius inherited control of the East (based in Constantinople) and Honorius the West (based in Ravenna). Honorius would be the Western Emperor when Alaric and the Goths stormed into Rome in 410.

The Goths and other groups would ultimately exploit this instability for their own gain. After the permanent division of the empire into eastern and western halves, these two entities would largely turn away from each other, as they came to have separate interests. One effect of this division was the emergence of the rivalry between Stilicho and Rufinus.

Stilicho declared that Theodosius had named him regent over his son Honorius, who was not yet of age. This was quickly accepted in the West, but wholesale rejected in the East.⁵⁵ Even

⁵⁴ Heather, *A New History*, 121.

⁵⁵ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 67.

after Rufinus' assassination, relations with the East remained tense. Eutropius also disliked Stilicho and simply replaced Rufinus as his chief political rival in the East.

Rufinus, a praetorian prefect, also had political ambitions of his own. He sought to further his own position by marrying his daughter to Arcadius, the Eastern emperor.⁵⁶ He also led efforts to encourage the Goths to divert away from Constantinople and move towards the west, thereby sparing his interests in the East. Consequently, the Goths began to pillage Greece, catching the attention of Stilicho.⁵⁷ Rufinus' plan to marry his daughter ultimately failed as a result of the machinations of his rival, Eutropius.⁵⁸

Rufinus was assassinated in 395, but the damage was already done. His role was subsequently filled by the eunuch Eutropius, who continued to oppose Stilicho. In Stilicho's employ was Claudian, who did not mince words when describing Eutropius' appearance:

Already his skin sagged with age, and his face, more wrinkled than a raisin, was furrowed by the deep grooves on his cheeks- deeper than the furrows in the golden cornfields, cut by the deep-pressed plough, or than the folds of ships' sails flapping in the wind. Repulsive grubs gnawed at his head. Bare patches of his scalp showed where his hair had fallen out, like wisps of dry dead corn, which struggle on a cracked, parched field, or like a moulting swallow that sits drying on a tree in winter, shedding its feathers in the icy cold... His pallor and cadaverous appearance disgusted his masters, and his anaemic face and emaciated form repelled all who met him, frightening the children, sickening everyone who dined with him, shaming fellow-slaves, an ill-omen to any who crossed his path.⁵⁹

Zosimus also has a rather negative depiction of Eutropius. He contends that he was

...drunk with wealth. He imagined he was floating on the clouds. His spies were almost everywhere, keeping everyone under surveillance and gathering information about what each person was doing. There was nothing from which he did not profit... No one in all of Constantinople dared look Eutropius in the face. He had only Stilicho in the west to contend with."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 67.

⁵⁷ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 70-71.

⁵⁸ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 67.

⁵⁹ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 73; Claudian, *Against Eutropius*, 11off.

⁶⁰ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 73; Zos. 10.4, 11.1.

This constant squabbling was a major reason why the Goths and other barbarian tribes were able to gain so much ground. The Romans were unable to coalesce into a single force that could oppose these advances. In other words, Roman territory was ripe for plunder by virtually any force that wanted to attack.

Another possibility is that Stilicho and Rufinus intentionally allowed the Goths into Roman territory. As the two sought to gain an advantage over each other, this is hardly a surprise. The Goths spent the years following the death of Theodosius serving as pawns who would do whatever Stilicho and Rufinus wanted them to do to get back at each other. On this, Orosius writes:

...what each one did, or what he tried to do, the result in each case has shown, since the one, seeking royal dignity for himself, and the other, for his son, in order that in a sudden upheaval of events the necessity of the state might cover his criminal ambition, brought in the barbarian tribes and the other favored it.⁶¹

Essentially, Orosius is contending that both Stilicho and Rufinus used the apparatus of the state to mask their shady activities and further their competing political agendas. They also made use of barbarian tribes to serve their interests.

The splitting of the empire between its eastern and western halves made both sides less strong on their own, but the Western empire was the weaker of the two and suffered from greater infighting that the Goths and other barbarian tribes sought to exploit for their own gain. As Ward-Perkins writes, “As in other periods of history, failure against foreign enemies and civil war were very closely linked, indeed fed off each other.”⁶² In other words, internal strife and setbacks against external rivals can become a constant cycle in which one leads directly into the other. It was impeccable timing that Alaric and the Goths were upset about their demands not

⁶¹ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.37.

⁶² Ward-Perkins, *End of Civilization*, 45.

being entertained by Honorius; the Western empire was already in a rather precarious position, as it could no longer count on help from the East, which had itself taken on an adversarial role, with the Stilicho-Rufinus feud. The Roman world as a whole was in a difficult position at this point, as the status quo was about to be upended by the arrival of nomadic tribes whose origins lay far beyond the boundaries of the empire.

Changing Demographics and Migration

As the Roman Republic and subsequent Roman Empire expanded, it absorbed many diverse groups of people across Europe, Africa, and Asia. With each new group that the Empire conquered, it faced the question of how to integrate them into the Roman fold. This became a major issue as the Empire expanded to the north and east, encountering various Germanic tribes who were quite distinct from the Romans from a cultural standpoint. Douglas Boin writes, “As the borders of the Roman Empire expanded and incorporated many different communities, however, there remained a nagging fear of people who looked or sounded different.”⁶³ Many of these “barbarians” were successfully integrated, even serving in the Roman legions. Alaric himself even served. He was given the position of general of Illyricum in 397 by Arcadius.⁶⁴ However, he was ultimately forced out of the position by 401 after the military redrew the boundaries of the prefecture, leaving him outside Constantinople’s jurisdiction.⁶⁵ At this point, Alaric was left without a way to provide for the people who had come to count on him as their ruler.

One of the earlier examples of the early Republic integrating a non-Italic group of people into its ranks was the Gauls of present-day France, who were a Celtic group.. To become a

⁶³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 5.

⁶⁴ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 124.

⁶⁵ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 137-138.

Roman was not something that happened immediately. It took a long time for one to be fully accepted by other Romans as such. Rome engaged in a lot of gatekeeping under both the Republic and Empire; in their minds, only they were qualified to assess whether someone else was “Roman” or not. On this, Greg Woolf writes,

Becoming Roman was a slow process. An Aeduan who had fought for Caesar in his youth would have had to have lived to a ripe old age to have seen the foundation of Augustodunum. His childhood would have been spent in an iron age farmstead, or perhaps in one of the defended hilltop sites that appeared in Gaul in the last decade.⁶⁶

Rome also used a Gallic elite class to integrate them into the empire. Many supported the Romans and any who did not were eliminated and replaced with supporters.⁶⁷ This elite class was granted certain legal privileges, land, and support from the imperial government that protected them from rebellions by the lower classes. Woolf depicts these actions as both rewards for past loyalty displayed by the elite and a tool to help integrate the Gauls into the Roman war machine; the Gauls began to contribute troops to serve in the Roman armies.⁶⁸ This is similar to what would happen centuries later with the Goths. Alaric and his forces served Roman interests on a number of occasions in the years before the sack of 410.

Becoming Roman was also not something that remained the same across the centuries. Behaviors and attitudes considered “Roman” changed over time. As Woolf writes, “Becoming Roman was not a matter of acquiring a ready-made cultural package, then, so much as joining the insiders’ debate about what that package did or ought to consist of at that particular time.”⁶⁹ In other words, once one successfully gained acceptance by their peers as a “Roman”, they got to

⁶⁶ Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

⁶⁷ Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 33.

⁶⁸ Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 33.

⁶⁹ Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 11.

create their own definition of what that entailed and debate with their peers' conceptions of Roman identity, which were often quite different from their own. Woolf continues:

Two conclusions can be drawn. First, culture has a degree of autonomy, and does not simply respond to other social forces. Second, the practices, beliefs, and things out of which culture is comprised are interconnected to the extent that it is not always easy to pick and choose, to select what is strategically useful while rejecting other elements outright.⁷⁰

For centuries, Roman citizenship had been painstakingly difficult to obtain and was nowhere near universal. It was only granted to certain groups of people, often for specific purposes such as rewards for military service.⁷¹ However, in 212, the emperor Caracalla published the Antonine Declaration, conferring Roman citizenship upon every free-born resident of the Roman provinces.⁷² The Roman identity evolved further as a result of this policy, as more people from diverse backgrounds across the Roman Empire were now able to lay claim to being called "Roman." This radical (for its time) change in policy would eventually benefit Maximinus, who was half-Goth, half-Roman. A chance encounter with the emperor Septimius Severus granted him entry into the Roman political world. Severus had been impressed with the ambition Maximinus had displayed.⁷³ In 235, he became the first beneficiary of the Antonine Declaration to become Emperor. As Boin describes it, "Three generations before him, Rome had come to the frontier. In the year 235, the frontier came to Rome in the person of Maximinus."⁷⁴

By the late fourth century, the demography had changed even more drastically. In 376, a tribe of Goths, estimated to be about 200,000, appeared on the north bank of the Danube seeking

⁷⁰ Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 13.

⁷¹ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 22.

⁷² Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 21.

⁷³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 24-25.

⁷⁴ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 25.

refuge within Roman territory.⁷⁵ These Goths were fleeing another nomadic tribe, the Huns, who were rapidly advancing westward from Siberia. Emperor Valens ultimately allowed the Goths to enter, believing that it would amount to additional soldiers and tax revenue to feed the Roman war machine.⁷⁶ Or, as Kulikowski writes, “The Tervingi (Goths) could be admitted as humble supplicants, and then formed up into units to be dispersed to the eastern frontier.”⁷⁷ Allowing this tribe of Goths to resettle in Roman territory would ultimately create new headaches for the Roman state, although this was largely a consequence of their own creation. After the Goths were admitted in 376 and the subsequent defeat in 378 following the Romans’ refusal to grant concessions to the Goths, the Romans sought to manage the situation by maintaining control over supply centers and engaging the Goths in siege warfare and ultimately forcing them to disperse.⁷⁸ As a result, with regard to the provisions needed by the Gothic migrants, the quantity demanded greatly outstripped the quantity supplied, which contributed to Gothic dissatisfaction and eventual rebellion against the Roman authorities.⁷⁹ As the Gothic migrants began to run out of essential supplies, Roman officials exploited this, forcing migrant parents to sell their children into slavery in exchange for these provisions.⁸⁰ The supplies provided were often of inferior quality, another example of the Romans preying on the Gothic migrants’ weak position. These acts would not be forgotten by the Goths and are one of the main factors that contributed to the breakdown of Gothic-Roman relations in the following decades. On this, Zosimus writes,

⁷⁵ Heather, *A New History*, 145.

⁷⁶ Heather, *A New History*, 158.

⁷⁷ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 129.

⁷⁸ Burns, *Barbarians*, 42.

⁷⁹ Burns, *Barbarians*, 41,
Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.33.

⁸⁰ Heather, *A New History*, 159.

When he had by these methods cut off great part of the Barbarians, and the remainder felt such dread of him that they dared not attempt to forage, an extraordinary degree of envy was excited against him. From this envy proceed hatred...⁸¹

The event that contributed the most to this sentiment was the Gothic defeat of an Eastern Roman army that also resulted in the death of the Eastern emperor and would show the world that the Roman Army was not an unbeatable force.⁸²

378 saw the Battle of Adrianople, a battle that showed that the Goths were a force to reckon with and were not to be taken lightly. The Goths had asked the Roman state for additional land to farm on in hopes that they could become more self-sustaining and chart their own futures.⁸³ However, the Eastern Roman Emperor, Valens, refused to even discuss the possibility, contending that the land the Goths wanted access to belonged to the Roman people. Fighting began once the Goths concluded that they would not be able to negotiate with the Romans, which began with them encircling the Roman wagons.⁸⁴ The Goths defeated the Roman force at Adrianople (modern Edirne, Turkey), a battle in which Valens was killed. The Eastern half of the Roman Empire also lost about two thirds of its entire field army.⁸⁵ The Goths who emerged victorious in this battle were the same exact Goths who had previously crossed into Roman territory two years earlier, with the consent of the Roman state.⁸⁶ Jordanes' depiction of the battle is as follows:

Thus that day put an end to the famine of the Goths and the safety of the Romans, for the Goths no longer as strangers and pilgrims, but as citizens and lords, began to rule the inhabitants and to hold in their own right all the northern country as far as the Danube. When the Emperor Valens heard of this at Antioch, he made ready an army at once and set out for the country of Thrace. Here a grievous battle took place and the Goths prevailed. The Emperor himself was wounded and fled to a farm near Hadrianople. The

⁸¹ Zos. 5.106

⁸² Jor., *Origin*, XXVI.

⁸³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 40.

⁸⁴ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 41.

⁸⁵ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 123.

⁸⁶ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 123.

Goths, not knowing that an emperor lay hidden in so poor a hut, set fire to it... and thus he was cremated in royal splendor.⁸⁷

With this passage, Jordanes indicates that this battle resulted in the Goths no longer being foreign to the Roman world. The Romans could be defeated militarily by a barbarian force. More barbarian incursions like the sack of Rome in 410 became possible due to the Romans' vulnerability having been exposed at Adrianople. Other ancient sources emphasize the significance of Christianity rather than the barbarian migrations.

Orosius depicts the Romans' defeat in the battle and Valens' death as having been a punishment inflicted by the Christian God. The Goths are depicted as having received quality training and a wealth of resources.⁸⁸ Following his summary of the battle, Orosius writes the following:

Let the wretched and stubborn heathen take consolation in this alone, that in Christian times and under Christian rulers, such great disasters coming together at once overburdened the neck of the state already oppressed: the ruin of the provinces, the destruction of the army, and the burning of the emperor. This, indeed, contributes much to our grief, and it is the more wretched as it is new.⁸⁹

The Battle of Adrianople was a sign of what was to come. The emboldened Goths were no longer just another barbarian group living on the fringes of Roman territory. They saw what they were able to accomplish against a supposedly superior Roman military force. This would lead to them beginning to demand even further concessions from the Roman state, as their leverage had increased. After Adrianople, they almost instantly became one of the most salient forces in Roman imperial politics.⁹⁰ Their victory also paved the way for even more permanent Gothic settlement in Roman territory than before.

⁸⁷ Jor., *Origins*, XXVI.

⁸⁸ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.33.

⁸⁹ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.33.

⁹⁰ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 145.

It did not come without a price for the Goths, however, as the Romans swiftly retaliated against them. Roman town councils were ordered by Julius, the highest ranking remaining official, to gather the Gothic refugee children, promising them financial aid. This was a trap, as archers were placed on the roofs of houses and fired upon the children one by one, killing them.⁹¹ This was almost certainly another strike against the Romans in the eyes of Alaric and his followers. The Romans luring unarmed children into towns under false pretenses and killing them in retaliation is something that would be described in modern contexts as a war crime. Alaric was not yet a prominent Gothic figure (he was no older than ten at this time), but he no doubt was aware of what transpired here and was affected by it.

The fourth century saw a major change in the demographics of the Roman world. Nomadic tribes from beyond the empire's borders were on the move, likely fleeing other advancing nomadic tribes, and they eventually found themselves on the border, seeking refuge. These settlers were a subject of much controversy in the empire, as much of the Roman elite deemed them inferior and incapable of ever becoming Roman. Even after settling, they continued to experience systemic discrimination by the state, which angered them. There is another force that is essential to understand when discussing the sack, however. That force is Christianity. Similar to the aforementioned demographic changes, Christianity upended the centuries-old status quo in the empire.

The Rise of Christianity

For centuries, the Roman Republic and the subsequent Roman Empire practiced Roman paganism, a polytheistic religion that borrowed extensively from Greek and other cultures. Their pantheon is depicted as representations of various aspects of the world.⁹² The deities were fairly

⁹¹ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 41.

⁹² James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 15.

diverse, with each one possessing its own distinct personalities and many intertwined with the Roman state, and leaders under both the Republic and Empire used it to legitimize their positions, with some emperors going so far as to declare themselves to be gods among mortals.

Paganism played an outsized role in shaping pre-Christian Roman politics and society. As the republic evolved into the empire, emperors began to be deified, or regarded as gods among men. This likely has its roots in Hellenistic cults in Greece that later inspired the west to adopt similar religious practices, with some modifications.⁹³ Temples dedicated to specific emperors could be found throughout the empire's territory; besides the obvious religious purposes they served, they also served as physical manifestations of the power Rome projected across its territory. One example of this is the Traianeum, dedicated to Trajan (r. 98-117 CE).⁹⁴ The "imperial cult" as Louise Revell calls it, had a full calendar of festivals, largely based on imperial anniversaries.⁹⁵ For example, September 23 was the birthday of Augustus, who had been deified. The day was marked by sacrificing an ox.⁹⁶ These traditions were used by the Romans to foster a shared identity across the various regions under their control. According to their pagan beliefs, if the prescribed traditions were properly adhered to, the gods would be happy and the empire would prosper as a result.⁹⁷ Another way it affected Roman politics was that political activities were not allowed to be conducted on days of festivals related to the pagan religion.⁹⁸ The imperial cult was an all-encompassing affair, in that residents of the towns were

⁹³ Louise Revell, *Roman Imperialism and Local Identities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 90, Paula Fredericksen, "Christians in the Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries CE," in *A Companion to the Roman Empire* ed. David Potter (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 593.

⁹⁴ Revell, *Imperialism*, 91.

⁹⁵ Revell, *Imperialism*, 97.

⁹⁶ Revell, *Imperialism*, 97.

⁹⁷ Fredericksen, "Christians," 593.

⁹⁸ Revell, *Imperialism*, 97.

made to participate in the festival and ceremonies. Residents would visit the temple, often followed by public games or shows at the local amphitheater.⁹⁹

The imperial cult also had several differences from other religions. One example is that pagan temples were not perceived as homes of congregations like churches or synagogues, rather, they were buildings built for the purpose of honoring the gods.¹⁰⁰ Temples were also not the only place religious functions could be performed. Practitioners were allowed to make offerings to the gods anywhere they wished.¹⁰¹ There was also no single set time for worship; that was up to individuals as well.¹⁰² Pagans also sometimes regarded their religious works as having been of divine inspiration, but unlike Jews and Christians, they did not necessarily see them as being the “Word of God.”¹⁰³ Pagan doctrine was rooted in myth, which started as an oral tradition passed down over the course of several centuries before eventually being written down. Over this long period of time, these myths were always being changed by successive generations,¹⁰⁴ unlike Judaism and Christianity, whose scriptures remained relatively unchanged save for translations from their original languages into others.

This established order would find itself challenged by a new religion that originated in the region of Judea that began attracting converts in large numbers in a very short period of time and directly challenged the centuries old notions of how Roman society should function. This religion was Christianity.

Beginning in the first century, Christianity spread across the Roman Empire; the Romans saw this as a threat to their established order that governed them for centuries. As Paula

⁹⁹ Revell, *Imperialism*, 97.

¹⁰⁰ Rives, *Religion*, 27.

¹⁰¹ Rives, *Religion*, 27.

¹⁰² Rives, *Religion*, 27.

¹⁰³ Rives, *Religion*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Rives, *Religion*, 28.

Fredericksen notes, “Conversion to Judaism, however, and later to Christianity, demanded the convert’s renouncing of the worship of his native gods and pledging exclusive allegiance to the god of Israel. [...] such activity did indeed lead to social disruption.”¹⁰⁵ Before Christianity arose, similar conflicts affected Jews who settled throughout the eastern Mediterranean region. Per Jewish law, Jews could not worship any god other than their own.¹⁰⁶ This led to pagans labeling them as “disloyal” and “irresponsible”, among other terms.¹⁰⁷ However, in many cases, laws were made exempting Jews from certain pagan practices that were required for everyone else, both before the rise of Rome and after. Rome went so far as to codify these exemptions into Roman law.¹⁰⁸

As Christianity expanded its membership to include non-Jews (gentiles), a conflict quickly emerged. Converts to the emerging movement were not required to convert to Judaism, but they were required to discontinue practicing their previous pagan religions.¹⁰⁹ On paper, they were no longer pagans, but since they were not Jewish, they could continue to publicly act as if they were still pagan, despite no longer actively worshiping the pagan deities. This complicated matters because, as stated above, only Jews were granted exemptions from pagan worship, out of respect for their distinct religion and traditions that dated back millennia.¹¹⁰

Under Roman rule, Christians across the empire refused to perform state-mandated sacrifices (like the ones described previously) to the pagan deities¹¹¹ and perform mandatory military service for the empire, as these things contradicted fundamental Christian doctrines.

¹⁰⁵ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 592.

¹⁰⁶ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 595.

¹⁰⁷ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 595.

¹⁰⁸ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 595.

¹⁰⁹ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 596.

¹¹⁰ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 597.

¹¹¹ Fredericksen, “Christians,” 601.

Roman emperor Decius (r. 249-251) issued a mandate that required all Roman citizens' participation in the pagan cult. These practices included performing blood sacrifices and honoring the emperor.¹¹² Since these practices are diametrically opposed to Christian teachings, this resulted in the Roman authorities finding out who was a Christian and who was not. Paula Fredericksen argues that these persecutions overall served to weaken the empire, writing,

The persecution of its own citizens is to a society what an auto-immune disease is to an individual: it wastes resources, squanders solidarity, and ultimately leaves the whole much weakened. Within Mediterranean culture in particular, religious persecution was an anomaly. Yet from the mid-third century on, the Roman government, whether pagan or Christian, pursued such policies.¹¹³

As a result, the Roman state accused them of treason and state-sponsored persecutions began, which persisted throughout the second and third centuries while the Empire was at the height of its power and prestige. The intensity of these persecutions varied; some emperors such as Diocletian placed greater emphasis on them than others. While ancient sources are inclined to depict this persecution as having killed many Christians, Edward Gibbon, citing Eusebius, offers a different perspective on the persecutions of the late third and early fourth centuries:

The more ancient writers content themselves with pouring out a liberal effusion of loose and tragical invectives, without condescending to ascertain the precise number of those persons who were permitted to seal with their blood their belief of the gospel. From the history of Eusebius, it may however be collected, that only nine bishops were punished with death; and we are assured, by his particular enumeration of the martyrs of Palestine, that no more than ninety-two Christians were entitled to that honourable appellation.¹¹⁴

Regardless of the actual number of Christians killed, the martyr status that those killed attained only emboldened Christians to maintain their faith. Eventually, it became quite clear that the Roman persecutions were untenable, as any Christian killed instantly became a symbol for others

¹¹² Fredericksen, "Christians," 602.

¹¹³ Fredericksen, "Christians," 602-603.

¹¹⁴ Edward Gibbon. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Abridged Edition* (New York: Penguin Press, 2000, originally published 1776, 1781, 1785), 190.

to rally behind. In other words, Christians appeared to be more powerful dead than alive, which meant that the persecutions were backfiring on the Romans.

By the early fourth century, Constantine had become Emperor. He issued the Edict of Milan in 311, declaring an end to the persecutions of Christians in the empire. Christianity had continued to spread despite the persecutions, but with them over and Christian theology becoming favored over that of paganism, it was soon on the verge of replacing Roman paganism as the dominant religion in the empire. In the late fourth century, Theodosius replaced Roman paganism with Christianity as the official Roman state religion via the Edict of Thessalonica. Christianity had become quite popular with groups disadvantaged under the old Roman order.

The Roman state and Christian church became highly intertwined very quickly. Soon after Constantine legalized Christianity, North African bishops reached out to him to arbitrate a dispute between them. This set the stage for subsequent emperors involving themselves thoroughly in the business of the church.¹¹⁵ The Roman state began exerting influence on the selection of new bishops and delegating a significant amount of authority to them.¹¹⁶ In the decades following Constantine's conversion, it began to appear that emperors preferred Christians when it came to being selected to hold major offices. This facilitated the widespread conversion on the part of the Roman elites.¹¹⁷ Paganism was affected by these changes as well, as blood sacrifices were banned "from an early date"¹¹⁸, and in areas that came to have Christian majorities, pagan temples were shut down permanently.¹¹⁹

One of these groups that converted to Christianity was the Goths. The Goths knew a lot

¹¹⁵ Heather, *A New History*, 125.

¹¹⁶ Heather, *A New History*, 126.

¹¹⁷ Heather, *A New History*, 126.

¹¹⁸ Heather, *A New History*, 127.

¹¹⁹ Heather, *A New History*, 127.

of cruelty at the hands of the Roman state. They were almost certainly attracted to the idea that everyone was equal in the eyes of one God. As Edward Gibbon writes, “The Christian religion, which addressed itself to the whole human race, must consequently collect a far greater number of proselytes from the lower than from the superior ranks of society.”¹²⁰ Although Gibbon was not directly referring to the Goths, this could definitely apply to them, as they were not well regarded by the Roman elite. The Goths’ version of Christianity did differ from the version that the Romans would eventually adopt. The Goths were converted to Christianity by an Arian Christian missionary, Little Wolf, who created the Gothic alphabet and used it to translate the Bible into the Gothic language.¹²¹ Arian Christianity’s origins can be traced back to the Council of Nicaea in 325, where Arius of Alexandria proposed that Jesus and God were made of a “similar” substance, and ended up in total disagreement over the presence of a single letter in one term.¹²²

By the time of the sack of Rome, most Goths had converted to Christianity, which influenced the Goths’ actions towards the city’s inhabitants and structures. On the subject of the role of Christianity in the sack, Augustine writes the following:

All the destruction, slaughter, plundering, burning, and distress visited upon Rome in its latest calamity were but the normal aftermath of war. It was something entirely new that fierce barbarians, by an unprecedented turn of events, showed such clemency that vast basilicas were designated as places where refugees might assemble with assurance of immunity. There, no one was to be slain or raped; many destined for liberation were to be led there by the compassionate enemy; from there, none was to be dragged away into captivity by a cruel foe. That this was in the honor of the Name of Christ and to the credit of Christian civilization is manifest to all.¹²³

¹²⁰ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 183.

¹²¹ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 81.

¹²² Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 80.

¹²³ Augustine, *City of God*, 1.7.

It must be noted that Augustine was writing with the intent to portray the Christian religion in the best manner possible, but this passage still stands out as one that directly contradicts the stereotypical narrative of bloodthirsty barbarians attacking everyone and looting everything in sight. This is a sign that Alaric was never completely on board with the idea of sacking Rome (although he ultimately felt he needed to), which I will discuss in a later section.

Immediately following the sack, there emerged a discussion of the role that religion played in causing it. Many pagan practices that had once been commonplace had fallen out of fashion. For example, the old ritual of offering sacrifices to the gods to keep Rome safe had largely been sidelined as the Roman state began to embrace the Christian religion. Pagans began to contend that if they had kept up the tradition of offering sacrifices, it would have ensured favor with the gods and kept Alaric and the Goths at bay. Many educated pagans went so far as to claim that the sack represented the illegitimacy of the Christian religion, as Alaric and the Goths were Christians themselves. Many pagan scholars who had fled to North Africa following the sack openly endorsed this line of thinking.¹²⁴

Christian authors were forced to defend their positions, and many accepted the challenge of countering the pagans' accusations, including Orosius and Augustine.¹²⁵

As the Goths were Christians as well, these Christian authors sought to downplay the sack's significance, discussing Alaric's orders not to target the holy sites in the city and to minimize the amount of bloodshed.¹²⁶ Orosius wrote of Alaric ordering artifacts of St. Peter to be escorted to St. Peter's Basilica:

Alaric was on hand, and he besieged, confused, and broke into fearful Rome, but after having first given the order that if any if any should take refuge in the holy places, especially in the basilicas of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, they should permit these,

¹²⁴ Heather, *A New History*, 229.

¹²⁵ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 178.

¹²⁶ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 179.

in particular, although they were eager for plunder, to remain unharmed and unmolested and then, insofar as they could, should refrain from shedding blood.¹²⁷

In short, Alaric and the Goths are portrayed by Orosius as sincere Christians. Orosius writes of an instance during the sack in which Alaric ordered the “sacred vessels of the Apostle Peter” to be returned to the church under escort.¹²⁸ A hymn to God was also sung by both Romans and Goths.¹²⁹ It is important to note that these authors were following ancient tradition with regard to how they portrayed the sack and its perpetrators. Christian authors of this era had much incentive to portray Christians in a positive manner, so that converts would be drawn to the faith.

This ancient tradition had an impact on modern scholarship as well. Modern scholars like Heather also contended that the pagans were not completely blameless, either. Heather writes, “This bunch of vociferous pagans just hadn’t read their history. The Roman Empire had endured many a disaster long before Christ had appeared upon the earth, without blame having been laid at the door of the divine powers.”¹³⁰ Heather also cites Augustine:

Where were [the gods] when the consul Valerius was slain in defending the Capitol, which had been set on fire by exiles and slaves?... Where were they when Spurius Maelius, because he distributed free corn to the hungry people as the famine increased in severity, was accused of aiming at kingship and was slain?... Where were they when the Roman army had for ten years fought without success and without intermission at Veii?... Where were they when the Gauls captured Rome, sacked it, burned it, and filled it with the bodies of the slain?¹³¹

Augustine also completely flips the script on the angry pagans, writing:

Just think of the kind of gods to whose protection the Romans were content to entrust their city! No more pathetic illusion could be imagined. Yet the pagans are angry with us because we speak so frankly of their divinities. However, they feel no anger against their

¹²⁷ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.39.

¹²⁸ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.39.

¹²⁹ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.39.

¹³⁰ Heather, *A New History*, 230.

¹³¹ Augustine, *City of God*, 3.17,
Heather, *A New History*, 230.

own writers. They even pay them a fee to teach such nonsense and think such teachers worthy of public salary and honors.¹³²

Although Augustine is writing with a distinctly Christian agenda, this argument is not a far-fetched one. For centuries, the Romans sought domination over the known world, and were willing to do whatever it took to achieve that goal. Many people in areas they conquered were brutally subjugated, in an effort to punish them for whatever resistance they may have put up against the Roman forces.

Other Christians perceived the sack as a sign that the end of the world was near. More radical Christian thinkers argued that God had punished Rome for its “wicked ways” like others before it.¹³³ Orosius was a prime example of this, believing that Rome had failed to repent.¹³⁴ Comparisons to Sodom and Gomorrah emerged not long after the sack, and a line in the Book of Ezekiel that warned of “the Gog” was interpreted to refer to the Goths, rhetoric which persisted well into the Middle Ages that referred to other outside invading forces that threatened the status quo.¹³⁵ Boin depicts Augustine as a hardline Christian who sought to ensure that Rome did not return to its pagan past believing that it would be in the empire’s best interests to retain Christianity as the official state religion.¹³⁶ *The City of God* is depicted as “part pastoral letter, part rant against Roman society’s evils.”¹³⁷ On the sack, Augustine writes that the inhabitants of Rome:

...should thank Christ for the boon that, out of regard for His name and in disregard for the traditional usages of war, the barbarians gave them immunity in spacious Christian buildings. What is more, they treated both the genuine followers of Christ and many who

¹³² Augustine, *City of God* 1.3.

¹³³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 169.

¹³⁴ Orosius, *Pagans*, 7.39.

¹³⁵ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 169.

¹³⁶ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 171.

¹³⁷ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 171.

through fear pretended to be such with great concern. They refused to take measures against them which the laws of war permitted.¹³⁸

Here, Augustine is essentially painting the Goths as good Christians who respected both Christians and pagans in the city, even though they were under no obligation to do so.

Christianity's rise as a major religion in the empire contributed extensively to not only how the sack's perpetrators conducted themselves, but also to the way contemporary writers depicted the sack in their scholarship. Christian writers were quick to blame the pagans' infidelity for the sack and praise the Christian Goths for treating the city's residents with respect and dignity. The Goths embraced Christianity in the first place because they, like many other marginalized groups within the empire, were attracted to the idea that "everybody, no matter what his economic or social status, had a soul and an equal stake in the cosmic drama of salvation..."¹³⁹

The Sack's Impact on "Rome"

The city of Rome itself had seen its status within the empire change over the course of the preceding centuries. As the empire expanded and waged campaigns far away, many emperors spent less time there and more time closer to the fronts, and many of them never actually paid a visit to the city. As Kyle Harper has noted, for years it had been the case that "Rome is where the emperor is."¹⁴⁰ In other words, "Rome" had come to mean potentially anywhere in the empire's borders, not just the city. It was to the advantage of emperors to set up their courts close to active war fronts, so that they could more effectively coordinate military operations in these regions, as well as bolster the Romans' territorial claims. Honorius set up his court at Ravenna, located near

¹³⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 2.1.

¹³⁹ Heather, *A New History*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ Harper, *Fate of Rome*, 167.

the eastern coast of the Italian peninsula.¹⁴¹ The Western court would remain here until its deposition in 476. Milan was another city where many emperors set up their courts, owing to its proximity to the empire's northern frontier, where the Roman forces frequently clashed with Germanic tribes, and had been doing so for the past few centuries.

There was still some nostalgia for the old days in which Rome was the center of the empire, however. After assuming power in the West, Honorius sought to win the support of the city's residents by promising them that Rome's status as the imperial center would be restored. In 404, he rode into the city in a triumph.¹⁴² Poets of the era, namely Claudian, played Rome up as this magnificent city that projected power.¹⁴³ Praising the majesty of the city, Claudian writes,

Nothing of her ancient dignity has she lost, no regret has she for the age of republican freedom, since it is she who bestows the consular honour, she who gives the order for battle. Nay, she sees the growth of her power. Whose memory can recall a time when the fields of Gaul and the hoes of the Senones were at our service? Has it ever happened before that Tiber's wave has carried grain from the fertile north over the ploughing of whose fields the Lingones have toiled? Such a harvest not only fulfilled Rome's needs but also demonstrated the greatness of her power; it reminded the peoples who was their mistress and brought in triumph from those chill climes a tribute never before paid.¹⁴⁴

This could arguably be seen as propaganda meant to highlight the significance of the thousand-year-old city. The Roman calendar that measured time based on the founding of the city in 753 BCE, *ab urbe condita*, was still widely used as well.¹⁴⁵ The city where it all began nearly a thousand years before would not simply be forgotten. Contrary to Claudian, there was also Ammianus Marcellinus. In the early fourth century, he accompanied Constantius II on his

¹⁴¹ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 18.

¹⁴² Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 16.

¹⁴³ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 16-17.

¹⁴⁴ Claudian, *On Stilicho's Consulship*, 3.6.

¹⁴⁵ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 18.

first and only visit to Rome (Constantius had spent the majority of his reign in Antioch¹⁴⁶). In this piece, he paints a picture of a rather decadent city:

But this magnificence and splendor is marred by the rude worthlessness of a few, who do not consider where they were born, but, as if licence were granted to vice, descend to sin, and wantonness.¹⁴⁷

Ammianus continues:

Other men, taking great pride in the coaches higher than common and in ostentatious finery of apparel, sweat under heavy cloaks, which they fasten about their necks and bind around their very throats, while the air blows through them because of the excessive lightness of the material; and they lift them up with both hands and wave them with many gestures, especially with their left hands, in order that the over-long fringes and the tunics embroidered with party-coloured threads in multiform figures of animals may be conspicuous. Others, though no one questions them, assume a grave expression and greatly exaggerate their wealth, doubling the annual yield of their fields, well cultivated (as they think), of which they assert that they possess a great number from the rising to the setting sun; they are clearly unaware that their forefathers, through whom the greatness of Rome was so far flung, gained renown, not by riches, but by fierce wars, and not differing from the common soldiers in wealth, mode of life, or simplicity of attire, overcame all obstacles by valour.¹⁴⁸

Based on these ancient accounts, it is safe to conclude that late fourth-early fifth century Rome still captured the imagination of its contemporaries as both a spectacular city and a decadent, sinful one. It was no longer the center of the empire; a new capital city was rising in the East, but it continued to wield significant cultural influence.

Despite these changes, the name *Rome* still carried a lot of currency. While it was no longer a political or even an economic center, it remained a center for culture. It hosted many pagan temples, as well as statues and memorials dedicated to past emperors like Augustus. Many Christian churches such as St. Peter's Basilica acquired a great deal of importance. By 410, the

¹⁴⁶ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 17-18.

¹⁴⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Loeb Classical Library Edition Volume I, 1935), 14.7.

¹⁴⁸ Ammianus, *Histories*, 14.9-10.

Christian sites were important enough for the Goths to avoid destroying them during the sack.¹⁴⁹ Much of the architectural designs in the city were and still are highly influential. Furthermore, even though he was alive long after Rome ceased to be the empire's political center (between the late 4th and early fifth centuries), Claudian held the city in very high esteem, writing:

Of a truth, no other city could fitly be the home of the world's rulers; on this hill is majesty most herself, and knows the height of her supreme sway; the palace, raising its head above the forum that lies at its feet, sees around it so many temples and is surrounded by so many protecting deities.¹⁵⁰

The sack's effects were still felt outside of Rome itself. Since Rome was a notable ancient capital, people would absolutely notice it being attacked the way it was. As Kyle Harper writes,

The violation of the ancient capital was damaging enough, but the symbolic reverberations were even more profound. 'The frame of the fragile world' had collapsed. Rome did not fall in a day, but still the sack of the city stands as a pivotal moment in a pivotal generation, where the central imperial power lost control of the western provinces. This time, the losses were to prove irreversible. Over the course of the fifth century, the western Roman Empire fell apart. No one, in any corner near or far, was untouched by an event of this magnitude.¹⁵¹

After Alaric's sack, Goths and other Germanic tribes began establishing their own kingdoms within Roman territory, replacing Roman rule. Sometime around the sack, Britain appears to have separated from the Romans; the Saxons continued launching raids on the island.¹⁵² By 429, the Vandals and Alans had moved into North Africa, which was the Western empire's primary breadbasket.¹⁵³ In short, the sack precipitated the splintering of the Western empire's territory into barbarian-controlled local polities, reducing the Western empire to a rump state whose territory was eventually limited to only the Italian peninsula.

¹⁴⁹ Heather, *A New History*, 227.

¹⁵⁰ Claudian, *The Sixth Consulship of Honorius*, 77.

¹⁵¹ Harper, *Fate of Rome*, 161.

¹⁵² Heather, *A New History*, 245.

¹⁵³ Heather, *A New History*, 270.

Even though figures like Claudian continued to revere the city of Rome, it does not change the fact that Rome's influence within the empire it created had become severely diminished in the preceding centuries. It had become quite a decadent city by the start of the fifth century. On this, Ammianus writes,

Furthermore, there is no doubt that when once upon a time Rome was the abode of all the virtues, many of the nobles detained here foreigners of free birth by various kindly attentions, as the Lotus-eaters of Homer did by the sweetness of their fruits. But now the vain arrogance of some men regards everything born outside the pomerium of our city as worthless, except the childless and unwedded; and it is beyond belief with what various kinds of obsequiousness men without children are courted at Rome.¹⁵⁴

This decadent state that Rome had devolved into is one of the reasons Alaric's sack has been downplayed and even depicted as an abject failure. Going back a century, when Diocletian came to Rome to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his reign, it is possible that this may have been his first time in the city.¹⁵⁵ Many other emperors never visited Rome at all during their reigns. Alaric likely grossly miscalculated how significant Rome really was to the imperial administration, at least from a strategic perspective (there were still Claudian-type people who believed it continued to be important from a cultural and historical perspective). By the fifth century, the Western court was based in Ravenna and the Eastern court was based in Constantinople. Heather states, "The sack of Rome was not so much a symbolic blow to the Roman Empire as an admission of Gothic failure."¹⁵⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Kulikowski, who writes, "We may be sure that his followers enjoyed themselves. But for Alaric the sack of Rome was an admission of defeat, a catastrophic failure."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ammianus, *Histories*, 14.21-22.

¹⁵⁵ Harper, *Fate of Rome*, 167.

¹⁵⁶ Heather, *A New History*, 229.

¹⁵⁷ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 177.

Alaric and the Goths' long-standing grievances against the Roman state remained unresolved even after the sack. They still did not have the place to live that they desired or a clearly defined path to recognition as Roman citizens, nor did Alaric have any realistic chance of acquiring the military recognition he was seeking.¹⁵⁸ It is arguable that the sack made conditions within the empire worse for the Goths, not better. Alaric's decades of campaigning on behalf of his people for a better life were truly in vain.

Following the sack, Alaric named a noble, Attalus, emperor before he left the city.¹⁵⁹ He hoped that Attalus would serve as his puppet ruler in the Western empire in place of Honorius, although this ultimately went nowhere after Attalus made a number of poor military decisions.¹⁶⁰ This resulted in Alaric reversing his decision and removing Attalus from his position.¹⁶¹ Leaving Rome, Alaric and his forces moved south, possibly towards Sicily or Africa. Boin offers speculations that "perhaps the Goths' good fortune lay there, in the empire's agricultural heartland."¹⁶² The Goths may have been able to find allies who opposed Honorius for whatever reasons to help them with whatever their next move would be.¹⁶³ It is difficult to discern exactly what the next move was going to be for Alaric, but Jordanes did write that Sicily, and then Africa, were their next destinations after sacking Rome.¹⁶⁴ After the empire was split and Egypt came under the rule of the East, Africa became extremely important for the West, as it was one of the few remaining provinces with a large agricultural output. The rest of the Western empire was completely dependent on imports from here, especially since it no longer controlled Egypt's

¹⁵⁸ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 177.

¹⁵⁹ Procopius, *Vandal Wars*, 1.2.27.

¹⁶⁰ Procopius, *Vandal Wars*, 1.2.30

¹⁶¹ Procopius, *Vandal Wars*, 1.2.37.

¹⁶² Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 173.

¹⁶³ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 173.

¹⁶⁴ Jordanes, *Origins*, XXX.

Nile Valley.¹⁶⁵ When Heraclian blocked shipments of grain in late 409-early 410 from departing Africa for Rome, the city starved.¹⁶⁶ In other words, the Goths may have seen Africa as an ideal place where they could regroup and maybe even solicit support from Honorius' political opponents. However, this journey failed for unknown reasons, either due to a storm at sea or other far less likely causes.¹⁶⁷

The plan the Goths had set in motion ultimately fell apart, as Alaric died within months of the sack, while waiting for passage to Africa.¹⁶⁸ He ultimately was unable to accomplish his goals of a home and recognition for his years of military service to the Romans. Over a decade of negotiations and pressure for these things went to waste in the end, as Alaric died an early death and the Goths were left without their leader that had led them for the past decade.

Conclusion

The Sack of Rome in 410 was a culmination of decades of failed policy on the part of the Roman state for addressing the Goths' and other barbarian tribes' demands. It brought to light the issues that the empire was facing, particularly in the West. The Goths had successfully exploited the West's incompetent leadership for their own benefit. The rapid spread of Christianity despite attempts by the pagan regimes to curtail it also served to weaken the empire, as it was essentially Roman-on-Roman violence. The persecutions did not weaken Christians' commitment to their faith like the pagans hoped they would. The social and political structure that the Romans had lived under for the last several centuries was also not compatible with Christianity, meaning that by the time the Romans accepted Christianity within their borders, Roman society further transformed.

¹⁶⁵ Moorehead and Stuttard, *AD 410*, 115.

¹⁶⁶ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 173.

¹⁶⁷ Kulikowski, *Gothic Wars*, 180.

¹⁶⁸ Boin, *Alaric the Goth*, 174.

While the sack did not completely erase the Western Roman Empire as a political entity, it served to further expose its inability to secure its territory. More barbarian attacks would follow, including another sack of Rome by the Vandals in 455 that saw more brutality than 410.¹⁶⁹ The Goths' sack sent a message to all throughout the empire and beyond that the imperial government could not even protect its heartlands in Italy from attackers.

If the Goths were looking to hasten the fall of the Western Roman Empire, they were definitely successful. However, they themselves were no better off after the sack than they had been before. Alaric had spent the previous decades pressing the Roman state for military acknowledgements and lands within Roman borders for himself and his followers. Alaric had helped the Romans in several key battles and wanted his presence within the Roman state to be validated. He entered negotiations with Honorius' regime in good faith, hoping something could come of them. The negotiations were ultimately a failure, which left him with the feeling that sacking Rome was the only option he had left. After the sack, however, he ended up dying, leaving his followers without their leader to fight for their interests. They still did not have their desired concessions even after the sack, however, meaning that the sack was an unmitigated disaster with regard to the Goths' primary objectives.

By the fifth century, the city of Rome was no longer the center of the empire that it had created. "Rome" no longer just referred to the city, but to the entirety of the territory it had brought under its control. Alaric believed sacking Rome was the only option available to him by 410, but his understanding of Rome's relationship to its empire was inaccurate. The Western court was set up in Ravenna, while Constantinople had long been the home of the Eastern court. Simply put, Rome did not matter to the empire on a macro level. While it still housed a number

¹⁶⁹ Heather, *A New History*, 379.

of cultural and historical sites, it was no longer a political capital. By 410, Rome was mostly home to ordinary people, pagan and Christian, who were just trying to make it through the day, similar to countless other cities across the empire. Alaric and his tribe of Goths were examples of such people who just wanted to get through the day and be treated with the same dignity and respect as other Romans.

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