

Politics of the 5th Century

Church History

By Scott Carlson

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CHURCH AGES

The Early Church AD33-590

AD33-100 The First Century Church

AD100-300 The Patristic Age (Early Fathers)

AD300-590 The Imperial Church

The Medieval Church AD590-1517

The Reformed Church AD1517-1800

The Modern Church 1800-present

? What impact does the politics of a nation have on the kingdom of God?

? If the United States ceased to be, how might the church be affected?

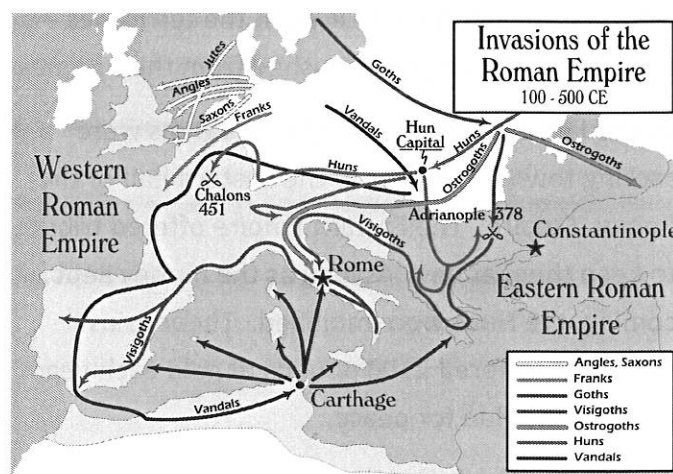
THE FALL OF ROME

Rome fell in 476 or so the history books tell us. If you are like me, you envision Rome falling to pagan barbarian hordes, a sudden and violent end to a kingdom that had lasted more than a thousand years. In that time, Rome had conquered much of Europe and Northern Africa, instigated the Pax Romana, and spread culture and civilization from Britain to Africa and, Spain to the Middle East. However, Rome's fall was not sudden. The barbarians were neither completely pagan nor really barbarians. The Fall of Rome was more political and economic than violent (though violence played a part). The fact is there were so many components to Rome's failure that you can't point to just one. And some would argue that Rome never really fell.

PRECURSOR TO THE FALL

THE GREAT MIGRATION

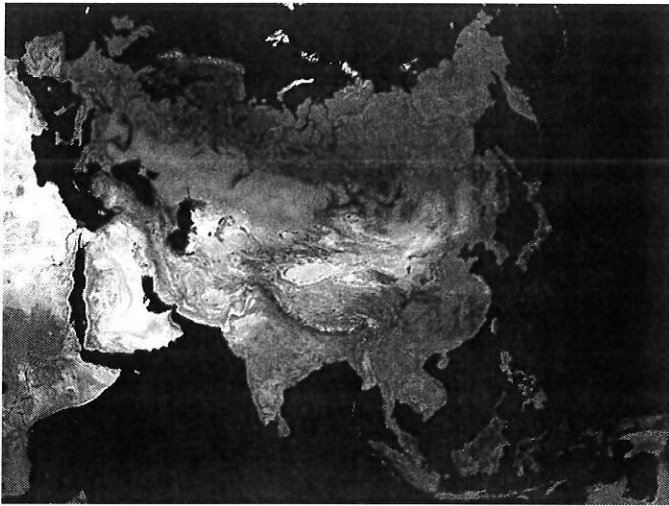
The Fall of Rome began centuries earlier as Rome was pushing north into "barbarian lands." At the same time, Eastern peoples were pushing West. The Germanic tribes of north central Europe were caught in a vice.



The Huns Push West

The Huns were a nomadic people group from Central Asia. Little is known about them, but descriptions of them by Romans at the time indicate that they resembled other people groups from Asia such as the Mongolians or Chinese. They were fierce and brave warriors employing tactics of the horse archers of Central Asia.

Something happened that prompted westward expansion, but nobody knows exactly what. Perhaps the building of The Great Wall of China prevented people from ranging south and east. The topography of Russia, flat and broad, makes running away from danger easier than taking your stand, so perhaps the Huns were pushed across the steppes by enemies.



As the Huns pushed west looking for more territory, the people that lived in the territories they overwhelmed, were pushed from their homes.

By the late 300s and early 400s The Huns were sacking towns and cities of the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. The Eastern Empire offered tribute to keep them at bay. As long as the money kept coming, the Huns were mollified. Theodosius II reportedly offered 2100 pounds of gold each year to Attila the Hun for peace.

The Goths Push South

The Goths, Visigoths, Franks, Vandals, etc. long held at bay by the Roman Army on their borders, faced the Huns to their East and a depleted Roman Army to their West and South. Over several centuries, due largely to political and economic instability in Rome, the borders of Rome gave way to the Germanic tribes, with the Germans slowly infiltrating Roman territory, settling in Gaul and Italy.

There they survived, not by attacking locals, but by trying to assimilate into the culture. They built farms. They raised families. What they wanted most of all was to be considered Roman.

The Roman Economy Could No Longer Afford Bribes To The Enemies At The Border

Often, tribute or bribes were paid to the Germans on the border to keep them from invading when they grew restless. A downturn in the economy, meant that tribute could not be paid to ward off the barbarians.

A Divided Empire Was Not Prepared For An Attack

When Emperor Diocletian divided the Empire into four regions, each with their own emperor, his hope was to end the political chaos of the 3rd century. (Remember in the course of 50 years, there were 54 men who claimed the title.)

This division into a tetrarchy didn't completely solve the problem of political chaos, however, it did allow for a more peaceful transition of power. It also divided the interests of the empire. With the seat of power now in the East in Constantinople, leaders were less concerned with politics of the West.

Theodosius was the last emperor of a united Rome. You will remember him as the Emperor whom Ambrose denied communion. He was that pious man with a bad temper when it came to his enemies. All in all, he was a good ruler. With the reality of the Goths within the borders of his kingdom, he put together a program to assimilate them. Unfortunately, he died in 395AD, at the age of 48, leaving much undone, including his program of assimilation.

He appointed his two sons to be his heirs. **Arcadius** in the East was 17 and **Honorius** for the West was only 11. He also appointed mentors for them in Flavius Rufinus and **Flavius Stilicho**. Arcadius, you may remember, as the husband of Eudoxia who

had John Chrysostom banished. Arcadius was not a strong man, being dominated by the greater influence and power of Stilicho and Eudoxia.

He was of short stature, of dark complexion, thin and inactive, and the dullness of his wit was betrayed by his speech and by his sleepy, drooping eyes. His mental deficiency and the weakness of his character made it inevitable that he should be governed by the strong personalities of his court.¹

Nevertheless, it was Arcadius' prejudice that sealed the fate of Rome.

Elitist Romans Were Not Accepting of Immigrants

Arcadius hated the German barbarians. They weren't civilized (meaning they didn't like wine, preferred animal fats to olive oil, didn't speak Greek and didn't take baths).

Alaric was a powerful, but petty and boastful Visigoth chieftain. He had helped Arcadius' father defend the empire against the Franks, losing several thousand men in the process. The emperor gave him land in the Balkans, but what Alaric really wanted was respect from the Romans, and specifically, to receive the title *magister militum*, "Supreme Head of the Military."

THE FALL OF ROME IN THREE EVENTS

While there was a succession of events that brought about the end of political Rome, we will look at three significant events.

THE FIRST SACKING OF ROME, 410AD

When Arcadius denied Alaric a title, Alaric began plundering towns, moving from the Balkans toward Italy. Stilicho, the last great Roman general, who had been defending Rome in Gaul, eventually engaged Alaric at Pollentia in 402AD, defeating him

and forcing him to leave Italy. Stilicho didn't want to subjugate Alaric, rather to win him as an ally.

Stilicho was highly regarded for his abilities, but he himself was not accepted by many Romans because his father was a Vandal. Rufinus especially hated Stilicho. Stilicho had stopped Alaric from pillaging and finally won Alaric's allegiance to fight against barbarians who were causing havoc by now in every region.

Several years later, Alaric demanded 4,000 pounds of gold, lest he march again on Italy. Rome wouldn't pay it, but Stilicho did, preventing another rebellion. However, this along with other unpopular decisions diminished his influence in Honorius' court and led to a bloody purging of all Stilicho's supporters in the emperor's court.

One of the ministers at court, Olympius, promised Stilicho that his life would be spared if he gave himself up voluntarily. Stilicho tried to quietly retire to his estate, but was executed anyway. Olympius also led a campaign against barbarians throughout the empire, many of whom Stilicho used to pad the ranks of his army. Several thousand from these tribes fled to Alaric and filled his ranks. Because Alaric was considered an ally of Stilicho, he lost any official position in Rome, which left him without the ability to collect taxes and provide for his people.

Alaric appealed to Rome for modest means and the lesser title, *comes*. Rome refused and Alaric marched to Rome, bypassing the then capital of Ravenna.

He laid siege to Rome whose hungry citizens agreed to give him 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, 4,000 silken tunics, 3,000 hides dyed scarlet, and 3,000 pounds of pepper to

withdraw. Alaric did withdraw, but Emperor Honorius refused to pay the ransom which included the coveted title sought by Alaric, "head of the Roman Army."

Alaric again marched on Rome, his patience at an end. He promised to spare anyone who took refuge in a church. For three days, he caused much damage to the city, but in the end Alaric saw the sacking of Rome as unfulfilling. He gained nothing of what he had been striving for over the past 15 years. He had no legitimate place in Rome and no title.

The sacking of Rome had more symbolic significance than political because by then the Senators were in Ravenna and the Emperor travelled to different cities. The sacking of Rome was disheartening to Romans because it had not happened for 800 years.

Imagine what that would do to your resolve, what had been the center of power and culture for almost a millennium was sacked. And the first sacking let the Germans know that if Rome was sacked once, it could be sacked again.

Jerome

My voice sticks in my throat, and, as I dictate, sobs choke me. The city which had taken the whole world was itself taken.

THE SECOND SACKING OF ROME, 455AD

Following the death of Honorius, several political figures claimed the title of emperor. The Vandal King, Genseric, was at war with one of the usurpers to the Roman title. In the political intrigue, he marched on Rome, destroying its aqueducts on the way.

The story goes that the Bishop of Rome, Leo I, met Genseric at the gate of the city and begged him not to burn the city or murder its people. Genseric

agreed, but he did loot the city, carry off slaves and damage some culturally significant locations. It was regarded as more devastating than the attack of 410AD, perhaps because the previous attack lasted only 3 days, whereas the 455AD attack lasted two weeks.

THE END OF POLITICAL ROME, 476AD

After the Germans gained a political foothold in Roman affairs, different emperors were put forward by individual tribes. The emperors really didn't have much more power than their tribes and own armies could afford them. In 475AD, a general named **Orestes** gained favor in the Imperial court, deposed the sitting emperor, Julius Nepos, and elevated his own son, **Romulus** to the position of Emperor. He was only 15 at the time.

As had happened before, one of the barbarian tribes, led by a man named **Odoacer**, demanded Italian lands to settle on. When Orestes refused, Odoacer killed him, deposed his son and set himself up as King of Italy. Even though two men who had claimed the title "emperor" were still living, neither had the power to rule the western empire and the eastern empire never again acknowledged an emperor in the west.

RESULTS OF THE FALL

In one sense, Rome has never fallen. It continued in the East as Byzantium for another 1000 years until the Ottomans conquered Constantinople. Before Byzantium fell, The Holy Roman Empire was established. That lasted until in to the 1800s. But really, Rome continued on in the Western Church as we will see the Roman Catholic adopting many of the attributes and nomenclature of political Rome. Rome continues in our architecture, our

legal system, and our philosophy. Nevertheless, after 476AD Rome would never be as it had been.

? How do we view the Fall of Rome from History?

? How did the Fall of Rome affect the Church?

Following the sacking of Rome in 410AD, Augustine wrote the City of God, which was a way for us to consider the transitory nature of this world.

The book presents human history as a conflict between what Augustine calls the Earthly City...and the City of God, a conflict that is destined to end in victory for the latter. The City of God is marked by people who forgo earthly pleasure to dedicate themselves to the eternal truths of God, now revealed fully in the Christian faith. The Earthly City, on the other hand, consists of people who have immersed themselves in the cares and pleasures of the present, passing world.ⁱⁱ

IN TWO WEEKS

In two weeks, we will look at the Church councils of the 5th century and chart some key figures of the era, even the beloved St. Patrick.

ⁱ Bury, J. B. (1889). A History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene I. p. 107.

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_City_of_God. September 2021.

