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# 1998 The Spoils of Alaric and Athaulf: Reflections on the Siege of Roman, AD 410

Christina H. Roseman  
*Seattle Pacific University*

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The Spoils of Alaric and Athaulf:  
Reflections on the Siege of Rome, AD 410  
by  
Christina Horst Roseman, Ph.D.  
C. May Marston Professor of Classics

I have long been fascinated by the half century between AD 375 and 425. These are the fifty years in which some almost indefinable shift occurred that set the eastern and the western portions of the Roman world on two separate paths. The Roman empire wasn't experiencing just another challenge from which it would soon recover, but something far more decisive. Things were different, this time. The East would survive, strongly connected to the Classical traditions of Greek philosophy and Roman law, while the West would fragment into barbarian chiefdoms that absorbed the existing Roman population, fused with it during long centuries of disorder, and became the foundation of modern Europe.

Clearly, the Gothic migrations are integral to understanding this change in balance, and ever since Augustine wrote his *City of God*, it has been customary to see the "Siege of Rome" as a crucial point. Tonight I would like to comment on some key players in the events surrounding that siege, detailing the strange ways their lives were interwoven. I hope you will find it an intriguing story, for it has all the proper ingredients: heroes battling to save their worlds, a beautiful and spirited princess, battles and treachery, self-centered pawns of Fate and a villain or two.

An astonishing number of key figures in the formation of the western Christian church were present during these decades: Saints Martin of Tours, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Germanus, Augustine, Paulinus of Nola. Roman emperors come in multiples, usually two at a time, but sometimes there are several rivals attempting to contest imperial control, as well. Then there are the barbarian princes: they are war chiefs, leaders of fighters who are true mercenaries seeking employment by Rome, and accustomed to raiding as a way of life. Christians come in two flavors, Arian (as most Christian Goths were) and what was just beginning to be called Catholic; they sometimes worked with and sometimes persecuted, the pagan educated class. It is a confusing cast of characters, and I hope that this list of principals will help keep them straight!

*Cast of Characters:*

- |            |                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Theodosius | a military commander who became Roman Emperor; father of Arcadius, Honorius and Galla Placidia                                                      |
| Stilicho   | half Vandal, top general to Theodisius and Honorius; married to Theodisius' favorite niece Serena and guardian of the emperor's motherless children |

Arcadius	senior emperor at Constantinople after AD 395
Honorius	Emperor of the West (Milan and Ravenna) after the death of Theodosius AD 395
Galla Placidia	only daughter of Theodosius (our heroine)
Alaric	King of the Goths and a war leader looking to Rome for employment
Athaulf	brother-in-law to Alaric and his successor as king; an honorable Goth and avid student of Roman politics (our hero?)
Constantius	Roman noble, probably involved in the murder of Stilicho; anti-barbarian, fixated on gaining power through Galla Placidia (the villain?)

*Assorted saints and church fathers*

*Appropriate numbers of Goths, Germanic types and a few Huns*

The siege of Rome, my central focus tonight, actually began in 408 when Alaric, the royal leader of a large force drawn from several Gothic tribes plus Alans and Vandals, encamped his troops outside the walls of Rome demanding “payment” from the Senate.

This was another move in a complicated chess game Alaric had been playing for almost twenty years. The Goths were originally a society of agricultural peasants supporting a warrior elite. They seem to have had a fluid organization based on loyalty to certain charismatic war leaders, who needed to provide a constant flow of plunder to their men in order to retain power. Within Gothic society, the war bands protected the lands and farmers who worked them. Thus, the system required safe and productive land, as well as neighbors who could be raided annually.

The appearance of the Huns decades earlier had upset the entire east central European territory within which the Goths had operated, for the Huns subjugated other peoples as they took over their lands. The arrival of desperate Goths by the thousands, demanding entrance into the empire in 376, set in motion the events which would culminate in Alaric’s siege of Rome, for the Romans had badly mishandled this flood of refugees. People do not starve quietly: the Goths certainly were not about to do so. By the time peace had been restored, the Roman empire had lost at least two thirds of its crack field troops, the borders along the Rhine and the Danube were in shambles, the senior emperor was dead, and the very word Goth raised paranoid anxiety in most parts of the empire.

That disaster had happened in 378, and the battle was Adrianople. Three important results were the elevation of one Theodosius to command of the Eastern empire; the inescapable fact that Rome could not replace the lost manpower from her own reserves; and a mistrust, among Roman bureaucrats, of tribal Goths.

Rome was accustomed to absorbing and using barbarians and had several time-honored ways to do this. All included the immediate disarming of groups that were allowed entrance. Individuals could then be admitted to the defensive forces, commanded by Roman officers and trained in Roman discipline. The critical emergencies following Adrianople, however, forced Theodosius into negotiating with the various Gothic bands, not from a position of demonstrated superiority, but on the basis of mutual interests. He set a precedent

by taking the Goths directly into military service under their own leaders, and of dedicating an assigned area of Roman land to their upkeep.

The district identified in the treaty of 382 was on the south bank of the Danube (roughly Macedonia/Bulgaria today), too close to the Hunnic border for Gothic taste, and not prime farmland, either. Furthermore, the treaty agreement was with Theodosius personally, and would need re-negotiation whenever a new emperor appeared.

The Goths that he added to the legions fought well, however, and he used them as shock troops in two bloody confrontations with Roman rivals, so that he could husband his Roman field strength. These federated Goths lost up to fifty percent of their warriors and resented being expended in fights that weren't in their interests; they were in no mood to be satisfied with the land assigned to them, when they were dismissed from active service.

By 390 Theodosius had rebuilt the military strength of the East, largely from established Gothic levies (that is, integrated rather than "wild" Goths), but had had to make different decisions in the West. He wished to install his own two sons as his successors, so he blocked and controlled the juvenile heir to the Western Empire with a military commander devoted to his own interests, and of barbarian descent. Theodosius was thus already beginning to move events in the West with an eye to his personal goals, rather than protecting the long-term best interests of this half of the empire.

Also, at the urging of Ambrose, the fiery bishop of Milan, he had reversed himself on the issue of pagans and engaged in attacks on this faction, which was still strong among the educated senatorial class that staffed the enormous civil bureaucracy.

These conflicts--a different and alarming use of Gothic troops, and the savage attacks on paganism, together with a command structure that ignored western provincial problems--meant that public support was fragmented, and when Theodosius died in 395, the city of Rome was alienated from the Western court at Milan and Ravenna. The areas which are now England, France, Belgium and the Spanish peninsula had become seriously disaffected, and they were ready to support anyone who could maintain order.

The Empire, East and West, passed to his young sons, Arcadius at Constantinople and Honorius in Italy under the guardianship of Theodosius' adopted son-in-law Stilicho. There were immediate problems, among which we hear of Alaric. The Huns had, for the first time, crossed the Danube a few months earlier, and Alaric led the federated Goths south toward Constantinople, raiding on the way. His people needed a new treaty and he needed to demonstrate that his demands had to be taken seriously. The advisors to young Arcadius were shrewd enough not to waste legionary forces in battle against him. Instead, they restated the treaty, granting Alaric a Roman military rank and giving him lands further west on the Adriatic coast. That got Alaric into western territory, and shifted the problem to Stilicho.

In the West, Stilicho was faced with trying to hold imperial control in the name of eleven year old Honorius. As guardian by the terms of Theodosius' will, the general was essentially a regent although the Roman constitution had no such office. He was committed to handling the empire as a unit, and much of his conflict with Constantinople can be understood on the assumption that he was fighting to keep the empire together. To do so, he needed to assert his authority over Arcadius. It was to be a losing battle, and ultimately, a wasteful one.

Stilicho had the same man-power needs that had led to Theodosius' dependence on the Goths. His goal was to manage them as a resource, integrate them culturally, and direct their zeal for warfare into imperial defense. Alaric, on the other hand, was not willing to see his Goths lose their identity through absorption. His goal was recognition as both a Gothic king and a Roman field commander, with an independent, permanent land allotment well inside the Roman borders.

In 400, Stilicho was involved in the elimination of Arcadius' top advisors, which also removed the top barbarian general. Thus the Roman signatories to Alaric's treaty were dead, and Alaric invaded Italy, needing a new treaty. Over the next few years Stilicho confronted and harried Alaric's Goths but avoided destroying them: they were still a potential resource. By 405 Stilicho was ready to negotiate with them for services.

During the next twelve months, both Rhine and Danube borders collapsed. In 407 a Roman usurper emerged to take power in Britain, Spain and Gaul. This was one Constantine, who brought his troops from Britain in an effort to protect Gallic landholders, since Stilicho remained concentrated on the east. Alaric watched and, when a Goth who had defected from his command over to Stilicho proved unable to stop Constantine, he marched into Italy demanding fulfillment of treaty obligations. Stilicho could not spare Roman field armies to put down the Gallic rebellion. Then Arcadius died suddenly, leaving the Eastern empire to the regency of his ambitious empress and an infant son, and Stilicho prepared to head east with all available troops. He was desperate enough to propose leaving Alaric with the highest western command and the mission of removing Constantine. This was very early in January of 408.

Not surprisingly, Honorius quarreled with him over this plan, and turned to intrigue. Within days Stilicho was accused of fomenting a plot to install his own son on the Eastern throne, and then he was treacherously assassinated. The families of his (many) loyal Gothic troops were massacred, and the wife and son of Stilicho were also killed. as Alaric moved south (a new treaty was needed with Stilicho's death).

Reacting to the massacre of their families, most of Stilicho's Goths transferred their allegiance to Alaric; this undercut the Western armies and added enormously to his own strength. Nor did the West have any general with experience comparable to Stilicho. Thus, the late summer of 408 found Alaric encamped with an impressive force, and it now included elite Gothic cavalry units brought to him by his brother-in-law Ataulf.

As we have seen, Alaric had years of experience dealing with Romans. The goal for which he had been working for years had been within his grasp, only to be snatched away by the murder of Stilicho. He still needed a long-term solution in order to maintain the tribal identity of his people, and over the years his original band had been joined by fighters from other tribes within the amorphous German associations. With the addition of the well trained and supplied Goths from Stilicho's armies, he was in a very strong position: there was no Western field army that could be sent against him, and the East was unwilling to send its own valued troops to Italy.

Rome's food supply was dependent on grain shipped from north Africa; interfering with this seemed to Alaric a tactic that might work. Leaving him to demand cash and treaty concessions, while the Roman senatorial aristocracy debates how to respond, let us consider for a moment some issues tying taxation and military recruitment together.

Legionary enrollments traditionally came from those citizens who owned land, but by AD 400 the recruitment pool had been badly diminished by population losses from disease, famine and invasion, and by the large number of exempted estates controlled by the church and various nobles. The unexempted wealthy elite contributed only a fraction of what they should have turned over to the imperial coffers in taxes, and they were not eager to send manpower either: thus the blood-drain created by repeated coups-de-e'tat, plus the terrible losses inflicted by the Goths at Adrianople, was more than the West could replace.

By Theodosius' time, the assessment of taxes included a certain portion designated for support of the military. Troops needed supplies, and in many cases one could pay in kind rather than cash. Theodosius' new way to get barbarian troops, Goths specifically, involved eliminating the middle-man--the bureaucrat responsible for transferring material from landowner to troops. The treaty which Alaric was determined to obtain assigned the military part of imperial taxes from certain areas directly to his forces, and took that percentage of the assessment off the tax books. The military leader then became responsible for collecting his due allotment directly from the landowner.

If we accept this interpretation of the ambiguous documentary references, which was cogently argued by Goffart in his Barbarians and Romans, then both bureaucratic resistance to this and Alaric's determination become understandable. He didn't want land ownership, he wanted ownership of enough supplies without Gothic absorption into the larger Roman body. Since most members of the bureaucracy expected to enrich themselves at every step of the way, they can hardly have supported this policy. It is interesting to find that Stilicho was attacked soon after renegotiating with Alaric.

With Stilicho and his wife Serena both dead, Honorius barricaded against Alaric in Ravenna, and a regency in Constantinople which was uninterested in western problems, Theodosius' nineteen-year-old daughter Galla Placidia was left to control her own household. She had been designated royal by her father, the equivalent of junior emperor in a male, and any astute observer realized her importance, for Honorius was widely rumored to be sterile; her children would be the legitimate heirs to the Western half of the Empire.

Let us now return to Rome and Alaric's siege. The last weeks of 408 saw fervent negotiations on the part of the Senate and the aristocracy of Rome, pagan and Christian alike; Alaric finally received a large payment to lift his blockade so the city's food could get through, and the Senate also agreed to get Honorius' endorsement of a treaty. Alaric seems to have policed the country-side well, putting down brigands and controlling his troops as they moved north to Etruria in January of 409, thus demonstrating his ability to provide defensive services.

Honorius, safely remote and surrounded by the same advisors who had poisoned him against Stilicho, refused concessions. There was another problem, as well. The Count who controlled North Africa and who was, practically speaking, independent of Western imperial control, did not see fit to send the grain which supplied Rome, and it was his refusal to do so throughout most of 409 that created the famine under which the city languished by 410.

In Gaul, Constantine the usurper had established his capitol at Arles and successfully resisted sporadic efforts to defeat him. Honorius now decided to recognize him as a legitimate imperial associate. Probably he hoped for assistance in getting rid of Alaric's

army; if so, he was unsuccessful, since Gothic cavalry under Ataulf seems to have assisted Constantine for some months instead.

In the autumn of 409 the Goths were back in Italy. Alaric had carefully tracked Honorius' inability to rid himself of a rival emperor in Gaul, and tried a new tactic. Allying himself with factions inside the city, Alaric created his own emperor. The Senate recognized his appointee, an experienced politician named Attalus, as another imperial contender. Attalus, as a Roman aristocrat, had support from the pagan faction; he was also willing to accept Arian Christian baptism as the price of his elevation. As emperor, he then appointed the two Gothic leaders as his official Roman field commanders.

Attalus staunchly maintained the traditional Roman policy of keeping barbarians away from ships, however. It had long been recognized that if North Africa ever fell under non-Roman control, the essential grain supply would be in constant danger of black-mail; and in fact, when the Vandals acquired a navy and took control a few years later, the result was swift disaster for Roman Italy. Attalus effectively prevented Alaric from reaching Africa to address the grain problem in person.

As the months wore on, famine became a critical factor in negotiations because of the lack of North African grain--NOT from Gothic siege, because there wasn't one yet. And where, one may ask, was the princess Placidia during these troubled times? Probably not in Rome any longer, but likely under some kind of protective custody from the Gothic king. Perhaps Ataulf had the assignment of dealing with the princess, although if there were Gothic expectations that she had any influence with Honorius, they were soon dispelled.

With Alaric's attention on affairs in Rome and Honorius concentrated on dealing with him, the Gallic pretender Constantine attacked Ravenna, but retreated when the Eastern regent sent temporary reinforcements, probably as a show of conciliation. At Rome, with Attalus unable to supply grain either to the city or the Goths, Alaric publicly deposed him in the summer of 410. (He wasn't punished, he just temporarily retired from sight.) Then, during a promising stage in the negotiations, Honorius set Alaric up so an old enemy could attack him. Provoked beyond all patience, Alaric brought his troops to Rome in mid August, and on the 24th sympathizers within the city opened the gates to the Goths.

The "siege of Rome" became history, although in many ways the effect was more psychological than destructive. The Goths spent only two complete days in plundering, and left on the third. There were few fires, and almost all public buildings were still undamaged. Civilians were roughly treated if they resisted Gothic demands for treasure, but few were killed. When the Goths left on August 27, they carried vast booty--and the princess Galla Placidia.

The circumstances had been dire, however. Death by starvation is ugly. Hunger drove all who could afford to flee into the countryside. Months later Honorius was still issuing regulations to force artisans and craftsmen back to Rome so the economy would function again. Missing, however, from accounts written by people living in Italy and Gaul is any sense that this time Rome wouldn't recover: for that perspective, one has to turn to the polemic and apologetic writing of figures like Augustine and Jerome, far from the event.

The Goths were wealthy now, but still short of food until they could acquire supplies, and Alaric still had no treaty. Understandably, he was motivated to take North Africa and eliminate the offending count. I suspect he also was looking for a way to

convince the court that he would provide solid defensive services if he had official recognition. During his search for ships in the last weeks of 410 Alaric died, and leadership of the host fell to Ataulf, who succeeded him as king.

Ataulf was a proven warrior and, as Alaric's first officer, may well have served as liaison to Roman officials during the many tedious negotiations. It is probable that he was responsible for the princess' well-being, as well. He certainly acquired a deep understanding of Roman culture and politics from somewhere, and all sources are clear that Galla Placidia was an honored guest of the Goths, and treated with utmost courtesy.

During 411, Ataulf led his troops north through Italy, and by early in 412 the Gothic army was across the Alps and into Gaul. At Arles, the usurper Constantine was under attack from Spanish dissidents, and Honorius decided the time was right to re-establish official control. He dispatched an officer named Constantius, who successfully retook much of Gaul and brutally executed the pretender. Lack of confidence in official government, however, meant that within months a new usurper appeared, on the Rhine. Constantius, flushed with victory, undoubtedly expected to be given authority to suppress this new pretender. At this point, however, Ataulf used his forces in a pre-emptive move and put down the Rhine uprising. The sources suggest he was already requesting to marry Galla Placidia. I suspect she was the one who urged Ataulf to counter the rising reputation of Constantius, for this was a man she hated and feared. Our sources indicate that at the court of Honorius Constantius had been vocal in agitating for her return by the barbarians, claiming she had been betrothed to him--by whom, is unclear. He may have conducted his campaign against the Gallic pretender as savagely as he did in an attempt to pressure Honorius into agreeing that he could marry Placidia. Was it the princess who urged Ataulf to check the rising power of her unwanted suitor by swift military success, and thus also demonstrate his good faith to Honorius?

Certainly the emperor could not have been unaware of Constantius' ambition. While he needed an able Roman military commander (neither Honorius nor his advisors were willing to trust barbarian generals), it would be dangerous to allow so aggressive a man as Constantius to marry the princess: if she produced a son, he would be in a very strong position to oust Honorius himself. At all events, the next time Ataulf requested permission to marry Placidia, Honorius showed a willingness to discuss the matter, while her Roman suitor fumed. The on-going negotiations resulted in a number of services rendered to Roman law and order by the Gothic king. He controlled the brigandage by Franks and Burgundians, after capturing the Rhenish usurper for Honorius, but since no treaty was forthcoming, he retained the princess.

She accompanied the forces as they attempted unsuccessfully to take Marseilles by siege (Ataulf was still trying to solve the problem of North African grain), and then to Narbonne, where supporters opened the gates to them. Note that the Goths lacked equipment to batter down defensive walls: when their sieges were successful, it was because local factions supported them. At Narbonne, in 414, Ataulf's wedding to Galla Placidia was celebrated.

Our information about this surprising event comes from some odd sources: a fragmentary poem by one Olympiodorus, and second-hand gossip Orosius says he heard about Ataulf the Goth when he was visiting Jerome in Bethlehem. (Jerome had lots of



visitors, most very talkative, and exchanged numerous letters with similarly chatty correspondents.) Orosius was told that Ataulf himself said that he originally had intended to attack the power of Rome, but had come to understand that Roman rule was based on law and resulted in order and peace. This he admired, and it was now his goal to support the civilization and culture of Roman rule with Gothic military ability, by unifying the two peoples.

One gets the strong impression that Placidia nourished this dream, which was an extension of her father Theodosius' policies, and that she welcomed Ataulf as husband. Roman and Goth alike rejoiced, the wedding was done in accord with ancient Roman ritual (to impress Ataulf's pagan supporters?) and presided over by high-ranking Christian churchmen. The Wedding Hymn, written for the occasion, was sung by that Attalus who had been emperor--briefly--at Rome, and who would soon be reinstated by Ataulf when Honorius again favored Constantius and turned hostile.

The princess and her Gothic husband spent some months at Bordeaux, but the machinations of Constantius brought an abrupt decision to cross the Pyrenees, and now looting and pillage accompanied their departure from Bordeaux. The promised grant of Aquitaine as a permanent base for Gothic settlement had been withheld once again; Ataulf needed to demonstrate that offending his Gothic force was ill-advised.

Constantius had been sent to Africa where he destroyed the rebellious count, receiving wealth and honors from Honorius in the same year Placidia married Athaulf: reassurance, perhaps, to keep the Roman loyal? In some ways, one can sympathize with the dilemma faced by the emperor. Defense and food supplies were constant problems, but so was the threat that powerful commanders would move against imperial control, and Constantinople could rarely spare aid of any kind. Gothic fighters, especially the heavy cavalry which had become essential to military success, were the best available, but Alaric had consolidated small fighting bands into one group behind his demand for settlement as a kind of independent kingdom. The Goths would no longer agree to the old land grant status that turned them into subordinate Roman peasants who paid their taxes with young military recruits.

Ataulf's host settled at Toulouse, and here, in January of 415, the little son of Placidia and the Gothic king was born. Since he was given the name of his imperial grandfather, Theodosius, one can guess at the hopes that his parents had for him, but he lived for only a few months.

Constantius had not given up. In the fall of 415, at Barcelona, Ataulf was murdered by a personal enemy in his own stables, and for a week his Roman widow was humiliated by anti-Ataulf factions before his brother Wallia was elected king. Wallia proved willing to return Placidia at once to Roman hands, and spring of 416 saw her transferred to Constantius at Arles, in exchange for a generous grant of supplies and a Roman assignment to restore order in Spain. By 418 the Goths at last had a treaty settling them in Aquitaine to protect the Roman land-owners who supplied them. It seems to have been a satisfactory arrangement for all.

Whatever she expected upon being returned to Ravenna, Placidia was forced to marry Constantius in January of 417, while the officiating bishop ignored her protests. Barely nine months later she bore him a daughter, and then in 419, a son. In 421

Constantius received elevation as co-emperor; but considering that usurpers had held that title from Honorius when it suited him, I wonder how much it signified. At all events, Constantius died within the year and Honorius exiled Placidia, with her children, to Constantinople.

Here she was not respectfully treated by court social circles, but she had retained her connections with Gothic military elements. The following year Honorius himself died, and an Eastern army returned Galla Placidia, with her son the Emperor Valentinian III, triumphantly to Ravenna. Once again the Western empire had a regent for an underage emperor. All the old problems -- manpower for Roman armies, ambitious military commanders, and desperate refugees from the Huns -- were still present. The patterns were similar, the players had changed.

Placidia never forgot her years with the Gothic host, or her grief over the loss of her first little son by Ataulf. Years later, she made the effort to return to Toulouse, exhume the body of little Theodosius, and bring it back for reburial in her family tomb.

The Goths, in the years leading up to the Siege of Rome, had found themselves trapped between conquest by the Huns and absorption by the Romans. Under the leadership of Alaric and Ataulf they were able to adapt and survive by merging fractious tribal groups into a federation that was strong enough to bargain for their independence inside Roman borders. The resulting Visigothic Kingdoms kept their identities for a significant period of time. The events of 410 are simply part of the desperate game they played. Realistic Roman leaders recognized the worth of their fighting numbers, and played an equally desperate game of their own.

Galla Placidia followed policies already begun by her father Theodosius, though I doubt he ever entertained the notion of a marital bond between Goth and Roman. Had Placidia's little Gothic prince lived, or Ataulf escaped his murderer, perhaps the fate of the Western Empire might have been rather different.

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