

# The Barbarian Invasions

The decline of the Western Roman Empire took place over many years. Its final collapse was the result of worsening internal problems, the separation of the Western Empire from the wealthier Eastern part, and outside invasions.

Since the days of Julius Caesar, Germanic peoples had gathered on the northern borders of the Empire. Some groups settled into a peaceful farming life. Eventually they adopted Roman ways, such as speaking Latin and becoming Christians. Other groups remained nomads. From 376 to 476, huge numbers of Germans poured into Roman territory—Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, Angles, Saxons, Burgundians, Alemanrii, and Vandals. Gradually, they overwhelmed the structures of Roman society. Finally, they drove the last Roman emperor from the throne.

## **The Huns Move West:**

The main reason for the Germanic invasions of the Empire was the movement into Europe of the Huns. The Huns were fierce Mongol nomads from central Asia. They began invading the frontier regions of the Rhine and Danube rivers around 370, destroying all in their path. The pressure from the Huns forced other groups to move as well—into the Roman Empire. The following description from a fourth-century Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, in his *The Chronicle of Events*, shows how intensely the Huns were feared and scorned:

The people called Huns, barely mentioned in ancient records, live beyond the sea of Azof, on the border of the Frozen Ocean, and are a race savage beyond all parallel. At the very moment of birth the cheeks of their infant children are deeply marked by an iron, in order that the hair, instead of growing at the proper season on their faces, may be hindered by the scars; accordingly the Huns grow up without beards, and without any beauty. They all have closely knit and strong limbs and plump necks; they are of great size, and low legged, so that you might fancy them two-legged beasts or the stout figures which are hewn out in a rude manner with an ax on the posts at the end of bridges.

They are certainly in the shape of men, however uncouth {unrefined}, and are so hardy that they neither require fire nor well-flavored food, but live on the roots of such herbs as they get in the fields, or on the half-raw flesh of any animal, which they merely warm rapidly by placing it between their own thighs and the backs of their horses.

They never shelter themselves under roofed houses, but avoid them, as people ordinarily avoid sepulchers {graves} as things not fit for common use. Nor is there even to be found among them a cabin thatched with reeds; but they wander about, roaming over the mountains and the woods, and accustom themselves to bear frost and hunger and thirst from their very cradles. . . .

There is not a person in the whole nation who cannot remain on his horse day and night. On horseback they buy and sell, they take their meat and drink, and there they recline on the narrow neck of their steed, and yield to sleep so deep as to indulge in every variety of dream.

And when any deliberation is to take place on any weight matter, they all hold their common council on horseback. They are not under kingly authority, but are contented with the irregular government of their chiefs, and under their lead they force their way through all obstacles. . . .

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The nation of the Huns . . . surpasses all other barbarians in wildness of life. . . .And though [the Huns] do just bear the likeness of men (of a very ugly pattern), they are so little advanced in civilization that they. . .feed upon the. . .half-raw flesh of any sort of animal. . . .When attacked, . . . they fill the air with varied and discordant {jarring} cries. . .they fight in no regular order of battle, but by being extremely swift and sudden in their movements, they disperse, , ,spread havoc {chaos} over vast plains, and. . .pillage {rob} the camp of their enemy almost before he has become aware of their approach.

## Germanic Invasions:

Germanic people near the Rhine River—Franks, Burgundians, and Vandals—fled the invading Huns and sought refuge in Roman lands. When the Rhine River froze during an especially cold winter in 406, Vandal warriors and their families swarmed across the ice. They met little resistance and kept moving through the Roman province of Gaul. The Western Empire was now so disorganized that it was unable to field an army to stop them.

By the early fifth century, the city of Rome itself was vulnerable to attack. More than 600 years had passed since a foreign army, that of Hannibal, had threatened Rome. Then in 408 Visigoths, led by their king, Alaric (AL-ur-ihk), marched across the Alps toward Rome. After putting the city under siege, hordes of Germans stormed Rome in 410 and plundered it for three days.

## Attila the Hun:



ATTILA, WITH GOAT HORNS  
16th c. medallion at Pavia, Italy

Meanwhile, the Huns, who were indirectly responsible for the Germanic assault on the Empire, became a direct threat. In 444 they united for the first time under a powerful chieftain named Attila (AT-uhl-uh). With his 100,000 soldiers, Attila terrorized both halves of the empire. In the East, his armies attacked and plundered 70 cities. (They failed, however, to scale the high walls of Constantinople.)

The Huns then swept into the West. In 452, Attila's forces advanced against Rome, but they were weakened by famine and disease. As a result, Pope Leo I was able to negotiate their withdrawal. Although the Huns were no longer a threat to the empire after Attila's death in 453, the Germanic invasions continued. In 455 Vandals, under Gaiseric, sacked Rome, leaving it in chaos. Famine struck, and its population eventually dropped from about one million to 20,000.

## Rome's Last Emperor:

The Roman emperor in the West had become practically powerless. Germanic tribes now fought one another for possession of the Western provinces. Spain belonged to the Visigoths, North Africa to the Vandals. Gaul was overrun by competing tribes—Franks, Burgundians, and Visigoths. Britannia was invaded by Angles and Saxons. Italy was falling victim to raids by the Ostrogoths.

The last Roman emperor was a 14-year-old boy named Romulus Augustulus. In 476 he was deposed by a German general named Odoacer (oh-doh-AY-sur) and sent into exile. After that, no emperor even pretended to rule Rome and its western provinces. Roman power in the western half of the Empire had disappeared.

The eastern half of the Empire, which came to be called the Byzantine Empire, not only survived but flourished. It preserved the great heritage of Greek and Roman culture for another 1,000 years. The Byzantine emperors ruled from Constantinople and saw themselves as heirs to the power of Augustus Caesar.

The empire endured until 1453, when it fell to the Ottoman Turks. Even though Rome's political power in the West ended, its cultural influence, through its ideas, customs, and institutions, continued to be deeply embedded in Western civilization.



**SOURCE:** *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal-Littell: 1999, pp. 160-162.