

# Alaric, King of the Visigoths

## The Sack of Rome

January 17, 395, Emperor *Theodosius I* died,<sup>1</sup> leaving his heirs, ten year old *Honorius* and eighteen year old *Arcadius*<sup>2</sup> under the regency of General *Stilicho*.<sup>3</sup> Stilicho once again divided the Empire, giving regency over Arcadius to the praetorian prefect *Rufinus*<sup>4</sup> (his bitter foe), to rule the East. Stilicho took regency over Honorius and ruled the West. These regents maintained an animosity between East and West. This paper follows the lineage of Honorius' regent Stilicho and the rise of the Barbarian Visigoth King, *Alaric*, by examining the politics of the inner courts, the desperation to be Roman, dynastic alliances and the failures of child Emperors, all leading to the sack of Rome.

Stilicho was raised in the court of Theodosius and aligned himself to the Emperor when gifted his niece (or adopted daughter<sup>5</sup>) Serena in marriage.<sup>6</sup> For Stilicho, a Roman marriage and title was a natural progression for his life, as he saw himself as Roman.<sup>7</sup> After the death of Theodosius he became master of soldiers (*magister militum*),<sup>8</sup> and Stilicho claimed that Theodosius, with his dying breath, had 'appointed him regent of both his sons'.<sup>9</sup> Stilicho's

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<sup>1</sup> A. Goldsworthy, 2009. *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*. 14:265

<sup>2</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:290

<sup>3</sup> P. Heather, 2010. *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*. 4:114

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. Rufinus

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Serena as being Theodosius's adopted daughter; A. Cameron & J. Long. 1993. *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*. 4

<sup>6</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 14:265

<sup>7</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:290

<sup>8</sup> *Jays Roman History*. <http://jaysromanhistory.com/romeweb/romarmy/art10.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Stilicho was the only one present at Theodosius' death. Cameron & Long. Introduction:3; Goldsworthy. 15:291

father was a Vandal, his mother a Roman.<sup>10</sup> His identification as Roman was symbolic at best. Therefore, after taking guardianship of Honorius, he merged his family with the young Emperor by giving his daughter Maria in marriage.<sup>11</sup> Now father-in-law to the Emperor, the very ‘fabric of the empire was being preserved by his barbarian arms’.<sup>12</sup>

Under Emperor Theodosius I, Stilicho was titled *Count of the Domestics* (commanding the Emperor’s household troops).<sup>13</sup> Post Theodosius, his distinguished career carried other great titles such as *magister peditum* (master of the infantry),<sup>14</sup> master of soldiers and at one point Stilicho was consul (400),<sup>15</sup> as well as regent over Honorius and Arcadius. Stilicho was known as ‘the most powerful man in the Western empire’,<sup>16</sup> but for all of his careful familial alignments, War with the Goths would keep him from maintaining Emperor Honorius’ ear.<sup>17</sup> That role was being filled by a palace official and envious courtier, Master of Ceremonies, *Olympius*.<sup>18</sup> Kulikowski writes that Stilicho had ‘general barbarian ambitions to dominate Roman interests’,<sup>19</sup> and he showed his steadfast loyalty to the Roman way, all in his efforts to be recognised as Roman. Gibbons notes that his early achievements ‘in an age less attentive to the laws of honor [sic], or of pride, the Roman generals might yield the pre-eminence of

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<sup>10</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:290

<sup>11</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 14:265

<sup>12</sup> *Sidonius Apollinaris, Letters*. Trans. O.M. Dalton (1915) pp. xi-clv ; Introduction

<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Flavius Stilicho

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Mitchell. *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, ad 284–641. Ed. 2. (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2015.) 3:95

<sup>15</sup> Cameron & Long. Aurelian's Consulate IV:165

<sup>16</sup> Michael Kulikowski. 8:160

<sup>17</sup> Michael Kulikowski. 8:172

<sup>18</sup> Olympius was extremely envious of Stilicho and his relationship with the Emperor Honorius. It was Olympius that put in motion the acts that would lead to Stilicho’s execution; Stephen Mitchell. 3:99

<sup>19</sup> Michael Kulikowski. 8:164

rank, to the ascendant of [his] superior genius'.<sup>20</sup> His time away on the battlefields also led to a long bloodied and sometimes fruitful relationship with the eventual Visigoth King, Alaric.

The Visigoths were a Germanic group known as the West Goths, who separated from the East Goths around the 4<sup>th</sup> C..<sup>21</sup> The West Goths became known as the Visigoths and settled in Aquitania.<sup>22</sup> Around this time Rome's lands had been ravaged and her armies depleted.

Rome's Goths, free and captive, were enlisted into Roman armies.<sup>23</sup> It fell to Stilicho to oversee the training and loyalty of the Goths. The young Alaric<sup>24</sup> was a Goth captive sent to train as a Roman soldier following the 382 Stilicho-Gothic treaties.<sup>25</sup> It was in his role as Master of Soldiers that Stilicho first met Alaric. Many depict their interactions in unfavourable terms,<sup>26</sup> though it is thought that Stilicho and Alaric were friends.<sup>27</sup> Claudian wrote panegyrics in praise of Stilicho and Serena (who was strangled on suspicion of collusion with Alaric around 410<sup>28</sup>), and Stilicho's success against the Goth, Alaric.<sup>29</sup>

Cameron and Long note that *Synesius of Cyrene* composed a detailed account of the history of the Goths, citing that Synesius viewed the Goths as a people 'always fleeing their own country... driven out by invaders before finally arriving as suppliants to the Romans'.<sup>30</sup> He

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Gibbon. 2001. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 1158

<sup>21</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 17:328

<sup>22</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 17:328

<sup>23</sup> John Henry Haaren. 1904. *Famous Men of the Middle Ages: Alaric the Visigoth King from 394-410 A.D.*  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/etc/fmma/fmma05.htm>

<sup>24</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Alaric

<sup>25</sup> P. Heather, 2010. 4:115

<sup>26</sup> A. Cameron & J. Long. 112

<sup>27</sup> *Jays Roman History*. Alaric the Visigoth and Stilicho the Master General.

<http://jaysromanhistory.com/romeweb/romarmy/art11.htm>

<sup>28</sup> Michael Kulikowski. Prologue:9

<sup>29</sup> Claudian *Claudian Volume II Loeb Classical Library No. 136*

<sup>30</sup> A. Cameron & J. Long. 112

went on to write that they became insolent, but Theodosius took pity on them and gave them Roman land, noting that 'the barbarian does not know the meaning of goodness... the most conspicuous among those who remained with the federates in the lands granted by the treaty of 382, and who "treated us with derision" was the young chieftain Alaric...'.<sup>31</sup> Not all historical accounts view Alaric in the same light. His aspirations are said to have been 'to secure a place in the Gothic war empire's military hierarchy for himself, permanent employment for his followers, with food, land and security for their wives and children', yet he was betrayed by the Roman's at every turn.<sup>32</sup>

The first time the Roman's felt the determination of the Goths was at the battle of Adrianople in 378, where the 'Gothic victory wiped out the larger part of the Eastern Roman army',<sup>33</sup> and brought about the death of their Emperor, Valens.<sup>34</sup> Valens was co-Emperor with his brother Valentinian (364), and they divided Rome into East and West. Valens ruled the East and Valentinian the West.<sup>35</sup> With the death of Valens (378),<sup>36</sup> Theodosius became Emperor of the East.<sup>37</sup> When Valentinian died (375),<sup>38</sup> Theodosius became sole ruler of both the East and West until his death.<sup>39</sup> These were the last of the adult Emperors during this period: ten year old Honorius now ruled the West, and eighteen year old Arcadius ruled the East. The road to Rome's decline began at Adrianople in 378.

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<sup>31</sup> A. Cameron & J. Long. 112

<sup>32</sup> Michael Kulikowski. Prologue. 1:2

<sup>33</sup> M. Kulikowski. 5:100

<sup>34</sup> M. Kulikowski. *Prologue*:11; *Britannica*. Valens

<sup>35</sup> A. Cameron & J. Long. Introduction:3

<sup>36</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Valens

<sup>37</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Theodosius I

<sup>38</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Valentinian I

<sup>39</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 14:265

Following the great loss at Adrianople, it was decided that the Barbarians would be used to replenish the ranks as Roman soldiers.<sup>40</sup> Stilicho was entrusted by Theodosius to reach an accord with the Goths. In the 382 treaty, the Goths traded their services as soldiers for lands.<sup>41</sup> They were permitted to work and farm the land and be self governed. Essentially they were given the right to claim Roman land as being *Tervingi* and *Greuthungi* lands.<sup>42</sup> Emperor Theodosius, although agreeing to the treaty, recognised the danger of a barbarian army and so conceived a plan to prune its ranks.<sup>43</sup> His actions ensured that the 382 treaty became the leading cause to the first major betrayal by Rome against the Goths.

A two-day battle at Frigidus in 394 against a usurper known as Arbogast (said to have murdered Valentinian II (392)), saw Theodosius send the barbarians to the front line, Alaric included.<sup>44</sup> Zosimus writes: 'the Arbogastes were well disposed to the Romans, quite beyond bribery and renowned for their mental and physical qualities in battle'.<sup>45</sup> 'In the heat of the battle, a violent tempest suddenly arose over the alps from the East. Theodosius army was sheltered by their position from the wind, that blew a cloud of dust into the faces of their enemy'.<sup>46</sup> A battle won of luck, from a position of certain defeat, added another notch to the Empires declining grip on power. After the battle was over, Alaric saw that his kinsmen had been led to the slaughter by Emperor Theodosius, and this was the beginning of Alaric's reign as leader of the Goths.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Mitchell. 5:177-8

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Mitchell. 5:178

<sup>42</sup> *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Alaric. <http://www.ancient.eu/Alaric>

<sup>43</sup> Edward Gibbon. 2001. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: Volume 2:1119

<sup>44</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:163

<sup>45</sup> Zosimus the historian & R. T Ridley. Munchen: C. H. Beck, 1972. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* Vol. 65:286

<sup>46</sup> Edward Gibbon. 2001. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: Volume 2:1119

<sup>47</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:291

395 saw bands of Huns raiding Sassanid Persia and Rome's Eastern provinces, and although the raids were on small communities, fear of attack struck at the hearts of those in neighbouring provinces.<sup>48</sup> Regents Stilicho and Rufinus continued tensions between East and West. Goldsworthy argues that 'the many Eastern army units with Stilicho may have reduced the capacity of the local commanders to deal with the attacks'.<sup>49</sup> Under the dual Emperors of Honorius and Arcadius the Roman Empire languished beneath the ignorance, inexperience and indifference that these two young Emperors lethargically embodied.<sup>50</sup> Stilicho maintained a working government and an army in the West, whilst Arcadius had named the eunuch Eutropius, Consul (383).<sup>51</sup> The two young Emperors were easily controlled by their courts, for a time.

After Theodosius' betrayal, the 382 treaty was broken, it is said that Alaric took his men on small raiding parties to pillage food and saleable items for survival for more than ten years.<sup>52</sup> After the betrayal Goths were drawn to their King, Alaric. Heather argues that 'no Roman commentator lists in detail the manpower resources drawn upon by Alaric in 395'.<sup>53</sup> Zosimus records that 'Alaric was seeking a Roman command and the title of Master of Soldiers for himself',<sup>54</sup> others note that he may have been promised this title in his deal with Stilicho. The writings of Claudian have a bias towards the greatness of Stilicho, as he and Serena patronaged his journey to Africa where he married (404), they also had his statue erected in Rome.<sup>55</sup> Claudian reveals that Alaric approached Rufinus in the East offering his armies

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<sup>48</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:291

<sup>49</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:291

<sup>50</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:290

<sup>51</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:292; *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Eutropius: Byzantine official.

<sup>52</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:294

<sup>53</sup> P. Heather, 2010. 4:121

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Mitchell. 3:95

<sup>55</sup> Claudian *Claudian Volume II Loeb Classical Library*. 136:429

services to Emperor Arcadius. He writes that Rufinus however, ‘bribed Alaric to withdraw from the city by giving him leave to sack provinces elsewhere in the Balkans’.<sup>56</sup> In 395, Stilicho marched across the Alps and into the Balkans to battle with Alaric,<sup>57</sup> although Kulikowski writes that ‘Stilicho returned the eastern army to Constantinople under the immediate command of the Gothic general *Gainas*. He had retired from the campaign against Alaric without having brought him to battle.’<sup>58</sup> 396 kept Stilicho out on the battle fields and Honorius had been listening to the jealous whisperings by those seeking their own political gain, with Olympius plotting the death of Stilicho.

In 401, Alaric invaded Italy and after the battles of 402,<sup>59</sup> he joined with Stilicho’s army’s (408). Alaric made a deal with Stilicho for title and gold, and in return Alaric promised to help Stilicho invade the East.<sup>60</sup> However, with a rising threat from Constantine in the West, Stilicho made the decision to deal with Alaric to replenish the dwindling ranks of the Roman army.<sup>61</sup> With 4,000 lb of gold promised to the barbarians, Rome was stripped bare to ensure it had an army to defend it.<sup>62</sup> Rome’s senators did not want to pay, with one senator describing it as ‘not a treaty, but a pact of slavery’.<sup>63</sup> Stilicho had been away from court for many years and the envious Olympius had been filling the now 23-year old Honorius’ head with tales of Stilicho’s intent to take the throne for himself.<sup>64</sup> Stilicho underestimated Emperor Honorius

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<sup>56</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:165

<sup>57</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:165

<sup>58</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:166

<sup>59</sup> Alaric invaded Italy; besieged Milan; 2 - 3 battles were fought in Italy-Stilicho's army against the Gothic army; Stilicho captured Alaric's wife and children but failed to win a decisive victory; there was a brief truce; a battle was fought outside Verona with no clear victor; A. Goldsworthy. 15:294

<sup>60</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:296

<sup>61</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:296

<sup>62</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:296

<sup>63</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:296

<sup>64</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:297-8

when after the death of his older daughter Maria, he arranged the marriage of his younger daughter, Thermantia, to the Emperor.<sup>65</sup> Honorius was no longer a child to be manipulated by Stilicho, but child enough to be manipulated by his court.<sup>66</sup> Stilicho warned Honorius that if the Goths were not paid, they would revolt. On August 22, 408, Stilicho and his supporters were executed after his desire to capture Illyricum,<sup>67</sup> with the aid of Alaric, ignited the simmering hatred of Honorius' inner circle towards this Vandal-Roman.<sup>68</sup> Stilicho's death became the catalyst to the first sack of Rome (410).

It began when payment was not forthcoming from the empire to Alaric and his soldiers, despite years of service to Honorius via Stilicho. Stilicho's execution unleashed Roman attacks on barbarians from Ravenna to Italy.<sup>69</sup> This systematic slaughter saw to the changing of allegiances, and the surviving Goths joined up with King Alaric.<sup>70</sup> 408-9 was the beginning of Alaric's three sieges of Rome, with the third siege (410) seeing Alaric and his army invade Italy, and launch assaults on Rome.<sup>71</sup> At this stage Honorius still refused to negotiate.<sup>72</sup> However, safe in Ravenna, Honorius and his court conceived a plan to wipe out Alaric and his Goths, so invites Alaric for talks. On the road to Ravenna, Alaric and his men are ambushed by the Gothic officer *Sarus*,<sup>73</sup> whose presence was secured by Stilicho before

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<sup>65</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:172

<sup>66</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:172

<sup>67</sup> P. Heather. 4:115

<sup>68</sup> Begrundet Von Karl Krumbacher. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift: Zosimus the Historian*. Trans. Herausgegeben von, Hans-George Beck, Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Herbert Hunger & Funfundsechzigster Band (R. T. Ridley, Melbourne, Australia. 1972) 289

<sup>69</sup> M. Kulikowski. *The First siege of Rome*. 8:173

<sup>70</sup> M. Kulikowski. *The First siege of Rome*. 8:173

<sup>71</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:173

<sup>72</sup> M. Kulikowski. *The Second Siege*. 8:174

<sup>73</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:301

his death, to protect the West alongside Alaric.<sup>74</sup> This is the last betrayal Alaric was willing to shoulder at the hands of the Roman Empire.<sup>75</sup> In 409 the ‘Roman’s finally gave in and begged for a truce’.<sup>76</sup> However, when Alaric demanded the title master of Soldiers, Olympius refused.<sup>77</sup> In retaliation, Alaric’s forces marched on Rome, August 24, 410 and sacked the city itself. Shock and terror reverberated around the city as the Visigoths plundered Rome for three days. Many Romans were spared by the Goths as Alaric was only interested in what was owed to himself and his men.<sup>78</sup> Rome was sacked for the first time by the Visigoth King Alaric.

In a time of bloodshed and slaughter, both Stilicho and Alaric maintained more imperial qualities than the Roman Emperors of the time. Two barbarian-Roman soldiers had risen up through the ranks. One was given the authority and respect of Rome, the other of his kinsmen. One held regency over two Emperors; one became King of the Visigoths. Alaric created a kingdom in the midst of a crumbling empire. Theodosius I left Stilicho regent over his two sons. Both were child Emperors in hiding, fearful of life and all too willing to be figure heads whilst others ruled Rome. Honorius willingness to listen to those who would covert power, led to the death of Stilicho. Stilicho was the saviour of Rome until his death.

This paper has examined the political and familial lineage of Honorius’ regent Stilicho, the rise of the Barbarian Visigoth King, Alaric, and the politics of senators and courtiers, all seeking their own advancements, to Rome’s detriment. It has discussed the desperation to be Roman, and the dynastic alliances foisted upon child Emperors, that played their part in their failures as rulers, and the eventual sack of Rome.

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<sup>74</sup> A. Goldsworthy. 15:295

<sup>75</sup> Stephen Mitchell. 3:100

<sup>76</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:173

<sup>77</sup> M. Kulikowski. 8:174

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Mitchell. 3:101

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