

Meet the New Boss

**Stilicho, the rise of the magister utriusque militiae and the path to
irrelevancy of the position of Western Emperor**

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Preface

This paper was inspired by a class I took several years ago about the Later Roman Empire. One of the elements of that class that really caught my interest was the dramatically different paths the two halves of the Roman Empire, east and west, took during the 5th century. The Western Empire slowly crumbled as it was carved up piece by piece by Germanic barbarians who in turn created successor kingdoms which in many cases became the foundations of modern Western European states. The Eastern Empire managed to survive the tempest and in the 5th and 6th centuries remained the pre-eminent state in the Mediterranean basin. The reasons for this divergence are complex, but one name stood out to me more than any other: Flavius Stilicho. The origins of many of the processes that led to the disintegration of the Western Empire seemed to swirl around this man and the thirteen years he spent as its de facto leader. I decided to learn more about Stilicho, so clearly important, yet so frequently overlooked.

The effort, daunting from the outset, proved to be even more difficult than I had anticipated. The time period was a turbulent and complex one, which would have made researching and understanding it difficult under the best of circumstances. The rather limited number of primary sources insured that this would not be the best of circumstances. Of these sources few are reliable or unbiased. Piecing together the narrative proved difficult, doing so without each writer's agenda coloring the process even more so. I did my best, however, to stick as close to the primary sources as possible, only using secondary sources to help fill the gaps in the narrative. The result is

a paper, for better or for worse, whose analysis is based for the most part on the primary sources themselves as opposed to blindly parroting the opinions of the secondary sources that I employed.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank several people without whose contributions this paper would never have reached completion. Professor Marco Maiuro, my tireless and endlessly patient thesis advisor first and foremost. I cannot thank him enough. In addition, in no particular order, Giovanni Ruffini, Nate Pilkington, Professor William V. Harris and last, but certainly not least, my mother, who was kind enough to read through the entire text and help correct the numerous and often silly grammatical errors. I hope those who end up reading this thesis enjoy doing so as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it.

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Introduction

Certain figures in history undertake actions that reverberate down through time; their successes and failures continue to have consequences centuries after they have died. One such man was Flavius Stilicho, *magister utriusque militiae* of the Western Roman Empire, guardian of the child Emperor Honorius, senior military commander of all Roman forces in the west and de facto ruler of the Western Empire from the death of Theodosius I in January 395 until his execution on August 23rd, 408. Thirteen years is barely a blink in time, but during his short reign Stilicho's establishment of an entirely new position amongst the western Roman military hierarchy, *magister utriusque militiae* or master of both services, led to the dawn of the pre-eminence of the senior military figure in the west; pre-eminent indeed over even the Emperor himself. Stilicho's aim had been to aggrandize the military power unto himself and then to use that military power to influence and control the civil and administrative power of the west. He did so out of necessity as the Emperor Honorius, his nephew and guardian, was a mere nine years old at the time of his succession. Stilicho succeeded in making the position he held powerful enough to successfully oppose the enemies of the Empire for over a decade despite having a child Emperor on the throne. The long-term consequences of his actions on the Empire were less than beneficial, however, as this shift in power to the titular head of the Western Empire's military led to the eventual demise of the position of Emperor in the west, as that role had become so entirely irrelevant that it was simply abolished by one of Stilicho's *magister militum* successors in 476 AD.

Stilicho had a larger aim however, than being de facto leader of the Western Empire. He wanted to become not just the senior military commander of the Western Empire and guardian of the Western Emperor Honorius, but to extend his control over all military forces in the Empire and to become guardian of the Eastern Emperor as well, Arcadius, the older brother of Honorius. His obsession with fulfilling this desire greatly influenced his actions and his failure to achieve this end had disastrous consequences for himself and for the Western Empire he ruled.

This paper will examine the reign of Stilicho from three perspectives: his military campaigns, especially those against his nemesis Alaric, his adversarial relationship with the eastern court at Constantinople and his internal political agenda through which he arguably managed to accrue more power to a non-Emperor than any other individual before him. These perspectives on Stilicho's career will be analyzed and a new picture of Stilicho, a figure much maligned as at least incompetent and labeled by some as a traitor, will emerge. Flavius Stilicho was a deeply flawed figure facing a myriad of problematic challenges during his thirteen years as de facto ruler of the West, but he was neither incompetent nor a traitor. He was a man who did not possess the necessary resources in money or manpower to defend the Empire and although a talented administrator and a skilled politician, he did not have the paramount skill set needed, especially in the military arena, to overcome this shortfall in resources and in the end the issues confronting him overwhelmed and destroyed him.

Chapter 1: The Roman Empire of the 3rd and 4th centuries

In order to examine Stilicho's career one must first understand the age within which he lived. The later Roman Empire had emerged out of the chaos of the third century reinvigorated, once again able to defend itself against its external enemies, most notably the Germanic barbarians along the Danube and Rhine and the Persians on the eastern frontier. For most of the 4th century Rome was stable and well ruled, able to maintain its territorial integrity while integrating the occasional barbarian interlopers that managed to make their way across the well-defended frontier. The Valentinian dynasty, which came to power in 364 in the persons of the brothers Valentinian and Valens, seemed capable of perpetuating the stability and success that had begun with the ascension of Diocletian to the throne in 284. This confidence in the House of Valentinian would prove to be misplaced.

Valentinian was a career soldier who served under the Emperor Julian during the latter's invasion of Persia in 363. Julian was killed in battle and his successor, Jovian, nominated by the senior military officers, died of natural causes shortly thereafter [Amm. Marc. 25.1-10]. Only after a second election was held and several candidates considered and rejected as unsuitable, was Valentinian raised to the purple [Amm. Marc. 26.1.5].

The obstacles facing the Empire were both numerous and dire. The Persian King with whom Jovian had concluded a peace treaty promptly invaded Armenia on the pretext that, with Jovian dead, he was no longer bound by the treaties terms. In other areas

of the Empire the Alemanni had crossed the Rhine and laid waste to Gaul, the Sarmatians and Quadi were rampaging in Pannonia, Britain was at the mercy of the Picts and Scots and Moorish tribesmen were raiding Africa with more than their usual vigor. No one Emperor could address all of these challenges confronting Rome; this much was clear to both Valentinian and to the soldiers of his army who clamored for a second Augustus to be raised at once.¹ Valentinian chose his younger brother Valens to be the junior Emperor and together they set out to defend the Empire [Amm. Marc. 26.4].

Valentinian setup court in Milan, as he had decided to take the western half of the Empire while Valens traveled to Constantinople, capital of the eastern half of the Empire to begin addressing the task at hand there [Amm. Marc. 26.5.4]. Valentinian campaigned with great success against the Germanic barbarians menacing the West while Valens faced the twin threats of continued warfare with the invading Persian host and a usurpation raised by one Procopius a distant relative of the deceased Emperor Julian [Amm. Marc. 26.5.7-13]. Valens was able to defeat and execute Procopius but not before having to destroy a war-band of Goths who had chosen Procopius side in the civil war and had crossed from their dominions north of the Danube into the Empire [Amm. Marc. 27.7.1-2; Eunapius 37; Zosimus 4.5-4.13]. This was far from the first time Rome had clashed with Gothic warriors and it would not be the last. If understanding the late Roman Empire is critical to understanding Stilicho, then understanding the Goths is absolutely required to understanding the time period.²

¹ Mathews 35

² Heather: 1996 61-62

Chapter 2: Houston, we have a problem: The Goths

The Goths were a Germanic people whose origin lay in modern day Scandinavia. They migrated first to Poland, then down to the Black Sea in the early 3rd century. According to Jordanes they defeated the other barbarian tribes already in the area and established hegemony in the territory bordering the Roman frontier in the province of Dacia in the northern Carpathian Mountains [Jordanes 14].

After subjugating their barbarian neighbors, the Goths turned their attention to a much richer prize: the Roman Empire. With the assassination of Severus Alexander in 235, the Empire descended into near anarchy, with a series of short-reigned Emperors seizing the purple at the point of a sword, dispatching the incumbent in the process and then being dispatched themselves by the next usurper. The Goths were quick to take advantage, with the first known attack, a raid on the city of Histria at the mouth of the Danube, occurring in 238.³

The Goths would continue to raid the Empire for decades to come, sometimes in small groups, other times in force. In 251 they killed the Emperor Decius after he was betrayed into a Gothic ambush by one of his generals [Zosimus 1.19]. In 268 they launched a massive seaborne invasion, coordinating with a number of other barbarian tribes in the effort. This force succeeded in breaking out of the Black Sea for the first

³ Heather: 1996 40

time, ravaging Asia Minor and the eastern Mediterranean until finally defeated by the Emperor Claudius [Isidorus 4; Jordanes 16; Zosimus 1.39]⁴.

Finally the Emperor Diocletian came to the throne in 284 and established the tetrarchy, a system with four Emperors who divided the territory and inherent responsibilities of Rome, thus insuring that no matter where the Empire was threatened, there was almost certainly going to be an Emperor and an army nearby to respond. Only then was the Empire strong enough not only to repel the Gothic attacks, but to intimidate the Goths enough to prevent them from attacking at all.⁵

For the first three quarters of the 4th century the Goths were sedentary, remaining on their lands around the Black Sea. Although they warred at times with other barbarian tribes they maintained a mostly peaceful, yet ambivalent posture towards the re-invigorated Roman Empire. The Gothic frontier along the Danube was open to trade, more so than other borders that Rome shared with potentially aggressive neighbors. In order to insure tranquility, annual payments were made to Goth leaders, while in turn the Goths gave hostages into Roman custody. The Goths also supplied soldiers as mercenaries to assist Roman military efforts, serving under Emperor Maximian in his campaign against Parthia [Jordanes 21].⁶

It wasn't until 366, after Procopius had been defeated, that a large Gothic force, warriors of the Tervingi tribe, entered the Empire once more. Valens had begun to prosecute the on-going war against the Persians when these preparations were interrupted by this Gothic incursion. Although the Goths were quickly defeated, Valens was deeply angered that they had not only chosen the side of Procopius but that they had entered into

⁴ Ibid

⁵ AHM Jones 38-42

⁶ Heather: 1996 58-59

Roman territory with hostile intentions [Zosimus 4.11-13]. This Gothic betrayal, as Valens viewed it and their subsequent swift defeat, would influence his decision making adversely when once again he was confronted by a Gothic force within the Empire [Amm. Marc. 27.4.1-27.5.1].

After imposing Imperial Roman will on the truculent Tervingi, Valens once again turned his attention to the Persians, becoming embroiled in a war over control of the client kingdom of Armenia [Zosimus 4.15]. Meanwhile, events elsewhere were developing that would dramatically change the balance of power. A new group had emerged onto the scene and a dangerous one at that. Enter the Huns.

The Huns began to migrate in force to the lands occupied by the eastern most Gothic tribes around the northern Black Sea during the mid 4th century. This group of Goths, the Greuthungi, attempted to resist Hunnic encroachment, but was defeated [Amm. Marc. 31.3.1-3]. The Huns then attacked and defeated the Tervingi, the Gothic tribe nearest the Roman frontier on the Danube. The survivors of both tribes decided to petition the Empire for sanctuary rather than continue to fight a losing battle [Amm. Marc. 31.38; Jordanes 24].⁷

These Goths sent an embassy to Valens, who was still conducting the war in Armenia and had moved his court to Antioch. Valens, seeing an opportunity to increase his pool of military recruits and most likely recognizing he lacked sufficient Roman forces to oppose a Gothic crossing given his involvement in the war against Persia, gave them permission to cross the Danube and settle on lands in Thrace and Moesia. In exchange he demanded the Goths practice his form of Christianity, Arianism, as well as

⁷ Heather: 1996 97-102

serve as auxiliary soldiers in the Roman military. Agreeing to this, the Gothic people crossed the Danube into Imperial territory in 376 [Jordanes XV, Amm. Marc. 31.4.1-4].

Difficulties between the barbarians and local Roman magistrates and military units began to arise almost immediately. The Goths, short on supplies and without land to farm, were starving. Their only recourse was for the Romans to supply them with sufficient food in order to survive long enough to farm their own. Local Roman officials were quick to take advantage of the situation selling the Goths dog meat in exchange for Gothic children that were then enslaved [Amm. Marc 31.4.9-13; Jordanes 16; Zosimus 4.21].⁸

An already tense situation exploded mere months after the Gothic arrival when the local Roman magistrate invited the Gothic chieftains to a banquet, ostensibly as a show of friendship. The Romans instead resorted to a long practiced tactic – the kidnapping and assassination of barbarian leaders in order to more easily cow and control their followers. This time the tactic backfired; most of the Goth leaders escaped and the Gothic revolt was on [Amm. Marc. 31.5.5-7; Jordanes 16; Eunapius 42].⁹

The Goths quickly defeated what few forces the Romans could muster locally and then promptly laid siege to Adrianople. Other warriors rampaged throughout Thrace, killing and looting [Amm. Marc. 31.6.3-7].

Valens, still in Antioch, received the news of the disasters in Thrace. After several more Roman defeats he decided to return to Constantinople and face the Goths himself arriving in Thrace during the summer of 378. Against the advice of his senior officers he decided to attack the Goths near Adrianople without waiting for the Roman

⁸ Heather: 1996 132

⁹ Heather: 1996 131

reinforcements being sent by the Western Emperor, his nephew Gratian, who had succeeded Valentinian in 375. Reportedly Valens was jealous of Gratian's recent success against a barbarian incursion in Gaul and given his previous military success against the Goths, wanted the credit for what he was sure would be an imminent Gothic defeat to be his and his alone [Amm. Marc. 31.12.5-7]. This proved to be a blunder as Valens suffered a catastrophic defeat, one of the worst that the Roman legions had suffered at the hands of barbarians since at least Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD, losing two-thirds of his men and his life [Amm. Marc. 31.13.10-14; Isidorus 9; Jordanes 16, Zosimus 4.22-4.24].¹⁰

¹⁰ Heather: 1996 133-34

Chapter 3: Cancer? What cancer? The Gothic state within a state

A new eastern Emperor, Theodosius, assumed the purple following the death of Valens, but he proved no more capable of bringing the war to a successful conclusion than Valens and his generals had been. The Roman military had been devastated at Adrianople and with the Goths having substantial forces remaining, the best the legions could do was contain and repeatedly bloody their barbarian adversaries; they could not defeat them or drive them out of the Empire. The Gothic forces, however, were not strong enough to overthrow the Roman state, or even carve out a piece of it as their own. Leaving the Empire wasn't an option either, not with the Huns still marauding in their former homeland. This parity of military strength resulted in a four year stalemate, ending only when Theodosius reluctantly concluded a peace treaty with the Goths, allowing them and their families to remain within the Empire, allocating them land to live on and farm and permitting them to remain under their own leaders and their own laws. In exchange he received thousands of hardened Gothic warriors as auxiliary troops to serve alongside the Roman legions [Jordanes 27-28; Orosius 7.34.1-2; Zosimus 4.25-26].¹¹

The Gothic people had undergone a remarkable evolution in a very short period of time. The Gothic kingdoms that had existed on the Roman frontier prior to the Hunnic invasion were the dominant barbarian power in Eastern Europe. Although technically subordinate client states to Rome and subjects of the Roman Emperor they were

¹¹ Heather: 1996 135-37

nonetheless an independent, autonomous people possessing a powerful military. The arrival of the Huns transformed their entire existence; they were defeated in battle, driven from their lands and either subjugated by the Huns or reduced to the status of refugees seeking asylum within an Empire with which they had frequently been in conflict. Every barbarian group that had preceded them had suffered the same fate; assimilation into the Roman Empire on exclusively Imperial terms with total loss of homogeneity and political autonomy. This assimilation process led to the prior socio-political tribal entity ceasing to exist; whoever and whatever they were before was gone as they were now Romans subject to the Emperors laws.

The fate of the Goths was entirely different. The inability of the Roman military to either destroy or drive them out and the peace treaty that ensued resulted in the Goths achieving a status unprecedented in the history of Rome; the establishment of the first autonomous barbarian group within Imperial borders. Although their status as subordinate non-citizens and subjects of the Emperor had not changed, they now dwelt within the Empire, lived on Roman land and not only served as auxiliaries, but often as officers commanding Roman troops. Within a generation of their arrival Gothic nobles occupied the position of *magister militum*; others became members of the Roman Senate in Constantinople.¹² These were hardly skin-clad, uncouth barbarians; they were in every way Roman. In every way, that is, but one: the Goths remained separate and autonomous, culturally Roman but rejected and hated by Roman society. Despite decades living within the Empire the Goths never fully assimilated; they Romanized but they did so on their own terms and they retained their own loyalties and their own

¹² Cameron: Arcadius 117

identity. They were always Goths first, Romans second, no matter what titles were conferred upon them, what positions they held, or how good their Latin was.

The Goths retention of significant military strength insured they would retain their autonomy even while dwelling inside the Roman Empire. The result was the creation of a state within a state; the Gothic people became a cancer on the body of the Roman politic, one that would continue to grow over time and whose presence would continue to weaken their Roman host enabling the Goths to increase their power and influence, as they slowly became major political players within the Empire.

The Gothic presence within Imperial borders led to a new twist on an old problem. The “barbarian question” was no longer one that involved only barbarian groups external to the Empire threatening Roman security and territorial integrity; now an autonomous, frequently hostile socio-political barbarian entity on Roman lands would have to be dealt with as well. The old calculus of Roman military victory followed by barbarian destruction, forcible ejection, or wholesale assimilation, no longer applied. The Goths would have to be bargained with, concessions would have to be granted and bribes would have to be made. The days of dealing with barbarian groups on exclusively Imperial terms was over, a new era had begun for both the Roman Empire and the barbarians it had previously dominated.

The surviving Goths were settled on lands within the Eastern Empire and began to serve as federates or allied soldiers. Long an Imperial practice, recruitment of barbarians into the military reached never before seen proportions under Theodosius; co-optation became the order of the day. This process was far from a smooth one; distrust was prevalent on both sides and outbreaks of violence between the new allies were not

infrequent. Theodosius attempted to slough off large numbers of Gothic soldiers to backwaters of the Empire where theoretically they could do less harm. Some were sent to Egypt, with Roman troops formerly stationed in that province being transferred to the Balkans to defend the restored frontier in Thrace and Greece. Conflict erupted between the newly arrived Goths and the local populace shortly after the transfer occurred [Zosimus 4.30]. In another instance of Romano-Gothic strife, an entire Gothic unit was wiped out by its Roman counter-part in the city of Tomi on the Black Sea coast. Theodosius, displeased by the outbreak and desperate to preserve the status quo given the weakened state of the Empire was only barely dissuaded from executing the commander of the Roman unit [Zosimus 4.41]. Incidents like these would continue sporadically throughout the reign of Theodosius during the years following the Gothic peace settlement.

Chapter 4: Theodosius: Holding onto power is harder than you think

These incidents would increase alarmingly in frequency and scope when a Roman civil war erupted in 388 between Theodosius and a usurper in the west named Maximus, who had defeated and killed Valentinian I's eldest son Gratian in 383, gaining control of Gaul and Spain in the process. Five years later Maximus invaded Italy, displacing Gratian's younger brother, Valentinian II and forcing the young emperor to flee to Constantinople and seek sanctuary at the eastern court [Orosius 7.34.3; Zosimus 4.35; 4.45]. Theodosius promptly married Valentinian's younger sister Galla, invaded Italy and defeated and executed Maximus, but not before enduring a full scale revolt of his Gothic federates, many of whom refused to take part in the western campaign [Orosius 7.35.1; Zosimus 4.46-48].¹³ These rebels remained behind, ravaging Thrace and Macedonia, while Theodosius was in Italy successfully restoring his new brother-in-law Valentinian II to the western throne. When Theodosius returned to the east he had to immediately conduct a campaign against the recalcitrant Goths, destroying them eventually but only after considerable difficulty [Zosimus 4.51-52].¹⁴

The cycle of reluctant co-optation, followed by barbarian rebellion, would then lead to barbarian pacification via Roman military action; inevitably another round of co-optation attempts would ensue. This rapidly became the established Roman methodology for dealing with the Goths. Theodosius' attempts at assimilating the Goths into the

¹³ Heather: 1996 138; Mathews 223-25

¹⁴ Heather: 1996 138

Empire through land allotments and military service only provided a stopgap. The Goths always wanted more land money and increasingly titles, particularly military ones, than the Romans were prepared to give them. This led to frustration and resentment on the Gothic side matched consistently by Roman hatred and unwillingness to extend full acceptance on the other. The Romans could not defeat the Goths. The Goths constant presence within the borders of the Empire, a presence that was frequently destructive at that, only served to exacerbate the damage done to the pride of the Roman people. The Romans had never before been forced to accept, even partially, barbarian terms. Theodosius, recognizing that his policy of co-optation could not succeed as long as the Goths remained sufficiently powerful militarily to resist full compliance with Roman authority, began looking for an opportunity to modify his Gothic policy. He would not have to wait long.

On May 15th, 392, Valentinian II was found hanged; a victim of foul play or his own hand no one could say. He had long been in conflict with his powerful barbarian *magister militum* Arbogast – left behind by Theodosius to keep an eye on the young, weak-willed Emperor. Valentinian II had even tried to rid himself of Arbogast, but the latter had torn up the letter of dismissal in contempt telling the man he supposedly served that his command had not been given by Valentinian II and therefore could not be taken away by him [Zosimus 4.56]. Shortly thereafter Valentinian II was dead and despite Arbogast's stringent denials of wrongdoing and strenuously expressed professions of continued loyalty to Theodosius, it was clear that another Roman civil war was rapidly impending [Eunapius 58.1-2]. Perhaps the death of another puppet Emperor, accidental or not, could have been forgiven, but this puppet Emperor was Theodosius brother-in-

law. Galla, Valentinian II's sister, went into public mourning and Theodosius went into a public rage. There would be no forgiveness [Orosius 7.35.3].¹⁵

With war imminent, Arbogast raised his own candidate to the western throne, a philosopher named Eugenius who, due to a complete lack of military experience, posed no potential threat to the *magister militum* who continued on as before in his role as the true ruler of the west [Orosius 7.35.4; Zosimus 4.56-57].¹⁶

Theodosius, meanwhile, prepared for war. He marshaled his forces, including a large contingent of Goths under their leader Alaric. He also appointed several Roman generals as his senior commanders, including his son-in-law, Flavius Stilicho, who was married to Theodosius favorite niece and adopted daughter Serena and was the son of a former Vandal cavalry commander and a Roman noblewoman [Eunapius 60; Zosimus 4.58].

Theodosius marched west, leaving his elder son Arcadius, eighteen years old and long an Augustus, as Emperor in the east and taking with him Honorius, his younger son, only recently elevated to the status of Augustus. In September 394 the usurper Eugenius and the army of the Western Empire met Theodosius at the River Frigidus in modern day Slovenia. The eastern barbarians were placed in the front ranks and suffered horrific casualties as the first day went poorly for the eastern army. The slaughter was great on both sides however and Arbogast and his exhausted army, were caught off-guard and defeated on the second day by a surprise early morning attack. Eugenius was captured

¹⁵ Mathews 238-39; O'Flynn 7-10

¹⁶ Mathews 239-40; O'Flynn 11

and executed; Arbogast fled to the mountains and then, despairing of escape, committed suicide [Orosius 7.35.4-5; Zosimus 4.58].¹⁷

In addition to his victory over the Western Empire's army, Theodosius introduced a new twist to his Gothic policy; by placing the Goth forces in the front ranks he insured heavy casualties. If Theodosius could not defeat the Goths in battle, or co-opt their loyalty through a policy of conciliation he would bleed their strength dry through ruthless deployment in battle against his enemies. So successful was this tactic that one historian of the period remarked that Theodosius had won two victories that day along the River Frigidus; one over the usurper and another over his Gothic allies [Orosius 7.35.5]. The point was not lost on Alaric or his people. The relationship between the Goths and the Romans, long strained, would soon be at the breaking point when, in exchange for this tremendous loss of life, neither he nor they were given what they felt were their well deserved rewards.¹⁸

¹⁷ Mathews 246; O'Flynn 13

¹⁸ Heather: 1996 139-40

Chapter 5: Enter the Vandal: Stilicho

Theodosius, unfortunately, would not long enjoy his triumph, dying of dropsy in January 395 [Orosius 7.35.5]. He left behind his two sons: Arcadius firmly ensconced in Constantinople and now Emperor of the eastern half of the Roman Empire and Honorius, ten, who was now to be Emperor of the western half of the Empire [Eunapius 62.1; Orosius 7.36.1]. At eighteen Arcadius was, by Roman standards, more than old enough to rule alone, particularly in light of the fact that he ruled from the court at Constantinople in which he had long resided and was ably assisted by ministers chosen by his father just for that purpose. Honorius, on the other hand was to require a guardian and strong advisor until he too was old enough to rule in his own stead. His father Theodosius, fore-seeing this need, had appointed Stilicho to just such a position in October 394. Stilicho was to command all armies in the west as *magister utriusque militiae* and act as guardian and informal regent on Honorius' behalf. No sooner had Theodosius died, however, then were his carefully laid plans for succession in complete disarray. Stilicho now claimed that with his last breath Theodosius had appointed him guardian over both his sons, not just Honorius [Zosimus 4.59; 5.3].¹⁹

This dying declaration was witnessed only by Stilicho himself and had no independent corroboration of any kind, making it, to say the least, suspect. The claim of guardianship over Honorius was easy enough to substantiate and was commonsensical as well. Many, especially the eastern court and its ministers, regarded the claim of guardianship over Arcadius, which would make Stilicho the de facto ruler of the entire Empire, with great antipathy. Regardless of this claim's veracity, these men, led by the

¹⁹ Cameron: Honorius 38; Cameron: Stilicho 247; 268; O'Flynn 13

Praetorian Prefect Rufinus, had no desire to give up their power and influence and disputed Stilicho's pretensions with great vigor from the very start. This contest for power would drive a wedge between the two courts and greatly weaken the Empire and its ability to defend itself against future threats.²⁰

Many of his contemporaries as well as numerous subsequent commentators regarded Stilicho's assertion of a dual guardianship with suspicion as well [Orosius 7.37.1; Zosimus 5.1-5.3]²¹ His attempt to extend the authority given to him by Theodosius is viewed almost universally as nothing more than a naked grab for power, an entirely self-serving act that could not be buttressed by any legitimate reasons. His guardianship of Honorius, an act publicly made by Theodosius and recognized as entirely legitimate, was still, at best, an informal arrangement. Honorius had already been crowned Augustus and there was no legal provision for an age of minority during which an Augustus could not reign in his own right; there was, in short, no minimum age for an Augustus and no one, not even a family member appointed as guardian, could have power over an Augustus' actions. The Romans did not have the concept of regent, thus the arrangement made by Theodosius placing his son in the care of Stilicho was strictly a familial one and did not affect Honorius' status as an Augustus. In regards to the guardianship, Roman civil law concerning guardians, called *tutela*, gave the minor full rights as an adult by the age of fourteen; thus a Stilicho guardianship over Honorius was both legal and commonsensical. A similar arrangement over Arcadius strained credulity. Stilicho's status then, vis-à-vis both Honorius and Arcadius was entirely dependent on

²⁰ Cameron: Honorius 38-39; Cameron: Stilicho 269; 274; 279-80

²¹ Bury 64-65

their voluntary acceptance of him. In this Honorius acquiesced, Arcadius did not.²² Stilicho's attempt to extend his guardianship over Arcadius, eighteen years old and Augustus for seven years, was therefore patently absurd. This has been the judgment of Stilicho's act for a millennium and a half and on the surface, a fairly easy judgment to make at that. A closer examination of Stilicho's days at the eastern court, however, casts new light on his decision to assert guardianship over Arcadius.

Stilicho had come up through the military system of the eastern court. Although the dates are uncertain, it is known that as a young man he had served as a member of the protectores, an elite corps whose ranks were comprised exclusively of members of the nobility, both Roman and barbarian. Eventually he became a member of the Imperial staff and in 383-84 he was sent on a critical diplomatic mission to Persia, apparently accomplishing his assigned task with some élan and drawing the attention of Theodosius. Not long after Stilicho and Serena married and he began to be promoted with great rapidity; far faster than his young age and limited accomplishments would warrant were he not a member of the royal family. In July 393, just prior to Theodosius' second western campaign, he reached the position of *magister utriusque militiae*, a rank which did not have a direct correlation to the military structure of the Western Empire. This ambiguity would be exploited by Stilicho time and again after Theodosius' death, in his efforts to concentrate all military power directly under his command even while his near complete lack of campaigning experience, normally a pre-requisite for such rapid promotion, would be a perpetual embarrassment.²³

²² Cameron: Honorius 39; Cameron: Stilicho 276-77; O'Flynn 45-47

²³ O'Flynn 15-17

Stilicho's long-standing association with the eastern military establishment put him, like many other military figures, at odds with court officials, most notably Rufinus. Stilicho's friend and mentor, Promotus, a fellow military officer, regarded Rufinus with such antagonism that he once struck the *prefect* in public. Rufinus, at best a vengeful sort and often downright murderous, promptly had Promotus exiled. Not long after Promotus was killed in Thrace and Stilicho's dislike of Rufinus hardened into enmity.²⁴ It is not a stretch to label Stilicho and Rufinus as personal enemies long before Stilicho's attempt to assert a dual guardianship over both sons of Theodosius. That attempt, however, elevated their enmity from personal to political and made impossible any possibility of reconciliation or even co-operation as *de facto* leaders of the two courts of the Roman Empire.

Stilicho's decision to attempt to extend his influence into the eastern court was not simply based on previous conflict with Rufinus or desire for personal power; he had to regard Rufinus' position of control over his kinsman Arcadius with trepidation. Rufinus, in an age where political players were notoriously avaricious and ruthless, was exceptionally so on both counts [Eunapius 6.2]²⁵

²⁴ Cameron: Honorius 63

²⁵ Cameron: Stilicho 280

Chapter 6: Bad to the bone: Rufinus

Little is known of Flavius Rufinus prior to 388 when he appears as Theodosius' *magister officiorum*. His advancement was nearly as rapid as Stilicho's was at much the same time; by 392 he was named consul and was one of Theodosius' most trusted ministers. While consul, Rufinus engineered the downfall of two other powerful figures in the eastern government; the *praetorian prefect* Tatian and his son Proculus, the urban *prefect* of Constantinople. Proculus was executed, Tatian merely exiled. Rufinus assumed the position of *praetorian prefect* simultaneous with his tenure as *magister officiorum*, consolidating the two most powerful administrative posts in the Eastern Empire in the hands of one man, an unprecedented accomplishment.²⁶

Rufinus' position was not always secure; he had made many enemies and threats to his power were treated with a level of ruthlessness notable even for the time.. Those who crossed Rufinus were, more often than not, murdered, including friends and protégés such as one *Comes* Lucian, who had the poor judgment to become involved in a squabble with the granduncle of Arcadius. Rufinus responded to this potential threat to his position by personally traveling to Antioch and having the unfortunate Lucian tortured and then killed.²⁷

Rufinus' demonstrable ruthlessness was such that reportedly even Arcadius feared him and had to have factored into Stilicho's thrust for control of the eastern court. How could he allow someone like Rufinus to control both the eastern government and Arcadius and not betray the memory of his father-in-law and mentor Theodosius? Even

²⁶ Cameron: Honorius 63

²⁷ Cameron: Honorius 64

if he could justify rapprochement with Rufinus relative to what Theodosius would have wanted, the mutual hatred shared between Stilicho and the eastern minister would never be reconciled. Stilicho recognized the moment Theodosius died that he and Rufinus would be locked in a struggle for control of both the House of Theodosius and the Roman Empire itself; far from a short-sighted grab for personal power as it has been so often characterized, this was a pre-emptive strike on a long-standing enemy whose actions and behavior posed an imminent danger to both Stilicho and the Empire he served. This was not the decision of someone blind to the absurdity of a guardianship over an eighteen year old Augustus, but rather the sober action of a man thrust by fate into a conflict with an opponent who had shown no compunction at acts of violence and who, indeed, illustrated through both past and subsequent action to have designs on the eastern Imperial throne itself [Eunapius 64.1; Orosius 7.37.1].²⁸

Arcadius, in the position of Emperor, would normally have been the one to control or even remove an official like Rufinus, but the elder son of Theodosius is described by contemporaries as being weak, indolent and not particularly bright.²⁹ That Arcadius occupied the position of pre-eminent power in the East is indisputable. He did not, however, appear to possess the will to employ that power.. If anyone was going to temper the excesses of Rufinus and protect both the Empire and the Theodosian dynasty it was going to have to be Stilicho.

Stilicho was now in a potentially powerful position, not only acknowledged as *magister utriusque militiae* and de facto regent in the west, but also in command of the entire field army of Rome as Theodosius had brought with him all of the troops at his

²⁸ Cameron: Arcadius 5-6

²⁹ Cameron: Stilicho 280

disposal on his campaign against Eugenius these remained in the west, along with the survivors of the western legions, after his death.³⁰ That said, hostile relations with the eastern court were unfortunately only one of a myriad of complicated issues facing Stilicho immediately upon Theodosius' death. As a general he was inexperienced and most likely not prepared for senior command of a field army under the best of circumstances; that these were hardly the best of circumstances compounded these issues even further. Having all the troops of the Empire under a consolidated command proved to be less fortuitous than it might have appeared at first glance. The two halves of the Roman military, east and west, were only months removed from a ferocious and bloody battle and could not have regarded each other with much favor. Complicating matters further, the western army was still mostly made up of native Roman troops while the eastern army had a very significant barbarian component; this would make the attempt at reconciling the two halves of the Roman military even more difficult as Stilicho faced the task of imposing his leadership on not one, but two armies, one comprised of recent enemies and the other comprised of unreliable barbarians.³¹

³⁰ Cameron: Honorius 65

³¹ O'Flynn 31-32

Chapter 7: A bad first impression: The campaign in Greece of 395

The military challenges Stilicho faced were not, however, limited to his own army. Alaric and the Gothic forces he commanded had rebelled after the Battle of the River Frigidus and had once more returned to ravaging Thrace and the Balkans [Zosimus 5.4]. It would be up to Stilicho to try and pacify the Goths who were doubly enraged at their callous and costly deployment by Theodosius at Frigidus and at their perceived lack of reward for having demonstrated their loyalty by suffering such heavy casualties.

As much of a challenge for the Empire as the Goths had been so far, this group led by Alaric would prove to be even more so. Alaric had first emerged as one of the Gothic deserters who had troubled Theodosius so much during and after his campaign against Maximus. Around the time of this revolt, Alaric was elected the leader of his people and became a centralized authority in a way that leaders of the Goths had not been before the Danubian crossing of 376. Prior to this elevation there had been numerous princes and minor kings amongst the Goths, but no high king. As the pressure of the animosity of the Empire forged the disparate groups of Goths that had entered the Empire into a monolithic socio-political entity, the Visigoths, so did this pressure centralize Gothic leadership in the person of one man, Alaric.³²

Alaric obeyed when required by Theodosius to serve as a federate in the next western campaign, this time against Arbogast and Eugenius; his Gothic forces reportedly numbered 20,000 warriors. As many as half of these were subsequently lost and suspicions that the deployment of the Goths at the Battle of the River Frigidus were

³² Kulikowski 161; Wolfram 143-45

deliberately intended to lead to such heavy casualties were only reinforced by events that followed the conclusion of the campaign.³³

After the death of Theodosius, Alaric and his men who had survived the campaign were discharged by Stilicho and allowed to return east to the homes in the Balkans they had dwelt in since the peace treaty of 382. They were not, however, given sufficient supplies for the journey, and resorted to “requisitioning” the necessary foodstuffs. This, predictably, led to a rapid return to that favorite of Gothic past-times, pillaging and by the time they had reached the Balkans the resentful Goths were primed for a full revolt. The situation that greeted them once back in their homes only served as the final push towards rebellion.

Theodosius had mustered the majority of his forces in the effort against the Western Empire. By doing so he had stripped the defenses of the Danubian frontier nearly bare, thus creating a tempting target for any who had the opportunity to take advantage. The Huns, never shy to raid lands belonging to others when presented with an opening, attacked the areas south of the Danube in large numbers for the first time in the winter of 394-95 while the eastern army was on campaign. Using the frozen river as a conduit, they had struck at the exposed farms and families of the Goths and had caused much destruction and loss of life. Although Theodosius could hardly be blamed for the unusually cold winter that had resulted in the rare occurrence of the Danube freezing solid, to the already deeply suspicious Goths this was yet another act of treachery on the part of the Empire. They had had enough.³⁴

³³ Kulikowski 164-65; Wolfram 138

³⁴ Wolfram 139-40

Alaric, in the aggressive and direct manner that would become the hallmark of his career, decided to take his grievances straight to the Emperor Arcadius. To that end he marched his troops on Constantinople and laid siege to the capital city. Negotiations between Alaric and Rufinus ensued, although whether an agreement was struck or not is unclear. Some historians have speculated Rufinus bribed Alaric to leave the environs of Constantinople by giving him *carte blanche* to raid throughout the Balkans. Why Alaric would need Rufinus' by your leave at this point, however, is unclear, given the latter's minimal military strength. Regardless, Alaric did depart, not in peace, but to begin a rampage Greece had not seen the likes of in nearly a millennium.³⁵

Stilicho decided to move against Alaric and in September of 395 he transported his field army across the Adriatic Sea, landing in Thessaly. Stilicho did not obtain permission from the eastern court prior to his campaign, despite the fact that Thessaly was territory under the control of Constantinople. What happened next is not clear as the two primary sources available give very different accounts from one another. What is clear is that, although trapped by Stilicho, Alaric and his forces managed to escape. According to Zosimus, Stilicho lost control of his troops who proceeded to pillage everything not already taken by Alaric's Gothic host [Eunapius 64; Zosimus 5.7].³⁶ According to Claudian -officially the court poet of Rome, unofficially Stilicho's public relations master extraordinaire- Rufinus demanded Stilicho return the legions of the Eastern Empire immediately to Constantinople, this despite the fact that Stilicho was already engaged with Alaric. In what can only be described as a dramatic, nearly overwrought account, Claudian relates how the Roman legions were so distraught at not

³⁵ Kulikowski 165; Wolfram 140-41

³⁶ Cameron: Honorius 65-66

being able to engage their loathsome enemy and so heart-broken at being parted from Stilicho, their rightful leader, that they burned with fury and desired vengeance against Rufinus for this foul and treacherous deed [Claudian: *In Rufinum* 2.79].

Regardless of which source is to be believed, the barbarians escaped and the eastern troops returned to Constantinople. Either Rufinus had succeeded in getting his way, or Stilicho had tasked Claudian with providing cover for his failure to defeat the barbarians. The fact that the alternate version of events were related by Claudian, a man in the pay of Stilicho, his patron and that this was part of a larger diatribe trashing Rufinus at length, renders his account as one to be regarded with some dubiousness [Claudian: *In Rufinum* 2.73-77]. Additionally, according to Zosimus, Stilicho returned the bulk of the eastern army, keeping the best troops for himself, only after leaving the Balkans and returning to Italy [Zosimus 5.3]. Zosimus' account of these events seems a far more likely scenario; Stilicho as an eastern general and only months before an enemy of half the army he was now commanding, would most likely have had trouble controlling the western troops. Combined with the often troublesome barbarians of the eastern legions, Stilicho hardly had the force one would want to use on a campaign against a skilled general like Alaric commanding a group of hardened warriors like the Goths. The fact that the campaign did not go well is not surprising; the fact that Stilicho would risk bringing such a force on campaign at all, especially in the eastern half of the Empire without first obtaining permission from the court at Constantinople, borders on baffling. This is the decision of a leader lacking the quality of seasoned leadership due to a minimal amount of field experience. Not only did he fail to destroy Alaric, he infuriated the already antagonistic eastern court in the process; this would have meant

little to his relationship with Rufinus, already a determined foe, but Stilicho's actions could not have pleased Arcadius either.

Rufinus' triumph was not to last long however; the eastern troops arrived in Constantinople and paraded before the city. Rufinus came out to greet them and was promptly assassinated by Gainas, a Visigothic military officer formerly under the command of Stilicho [Eunapius 64; Zosimus 5.8]. Claudian records this event with great glee later in the same poem in which he blames his master's defeat on Rufinus and appears to place the credit and impetus for the assassination directly on Stilicho himself, although the benefits of doing so aren't made clear [Claudian: *In Rufinum* 2.88]. Stilicho's primary rival for power and his most formidable obstacle to achieving guardianship over Arcadius had been removed.

Despite Claudian's trumpeting of Stilicho's complicity in the murder of Rufinus, neither Stilicho nor Gainas would benefit from the *praetorian prefects* death. The Lord Chamberlain of the Palace, the eunuch Eutropius, immediately stepped into the power vacuum that had been created and became Arcadius' most influential minister. Eutropius would shortly become an even more obstinate and formidable opponent to Stilicho's eastern pretensions than Rufinus had been.³⁷

Historians have viewed Stilicho's campaign against Alaric in 395 in much the same way as they view his attempt at establishing a dual guardianship; either he was incompetent or a traitor or both [Zosimus 5.7].³⁸ Certainly his decision to move against Alaric with a field army of suspect quality and dubious loyalty has to be considered a major miscalculation. He did not succeed in destroying Alaric, many now cast serious

³⁷ Cameron: Honorius 84-85

³⁸ Bury 78-80

doubts upon his skills as a general and he alienated himself even further from the eastern court; it could hardly have gone worse. Stilicho's attempt to strike at Alaric makes more sense, however, when placed in the greater context of his career. Stilicho's over-riding ambition was to unite the entire Roman military under his command; this would give him power sufficient to become de facto ruler of the entire Empire. He could only do that by extending his guardianship over Arcadius as well as over Honorius. Arcadius was an Augustus; Stilicho's desire to be Arcadius' guardian could only come to pass if Arcadius chose to allow it. Therefore Stilicho had to prove his worth to Arcadius. What better way than by ridding the Eastern Empire of a destructive force such as Alaric? Stilicho gambled on achieving his goal of becoming de facto leader of both halves of the Empire by launching a quick strike against Alaric. He not only failed in his aim, but he accomplished exactly the opposite of what he set out to do; Arcadius was far from impressed and the eastern court was even more resolute in its determination to block Stilicho's eastern pretensions than it had been previously. The charge of incompetence is one that is easily supported by the result. Stilicho had not just blundered, he had blundered badly.

The accusation of treachery and possible compliance with Alaric, however, does not survive close examination. Stilicho's over-riding goal was to earn Arcadius' respect by proving his loyalty to the Empire and his skill as a general; this was a consistent theme throughout his career. Nothing could damage that goal more than creating a suspicion of collaboration with the hated Goths. The idea that Stilicho was soft on Alaric because they were both of German descent, or that he was taking the Theodosian policy of co-opting barbarians for use as potential future allies to the illogical extreme is absurd.

Stilicho could accomplish his primary goal of consolidating military command of all forces in the Empire only by defeating and if necessary destroying, Alaric's Gothic menace. Failure as blatant as the campaign of 395 was the worst possible outcome. The resulting insinuation that Stilicho was somehow in league with Alaric and that for whatever reason he cut a deal with the Goth and allowed him to escape in 395, should be rejected. Alaric was a direct threat to that which Stilicho most wanted; the idea Stilicho would spare Alaric on the off chance he might again be able to employ him and his Gothic forces as federates misses the bigger picture. Indeed, given the plethora of barbarians both within and immediately outside the Empire, Stilicho was hardly suffering from a potential shortage of barbarian military manpower. Eliminating the internal threat of the Goths would only strengthen his hand in recruiting other barbarians who would view Rome as a relevant force to be respected and joined with in order to reap the benefits of employment by a strong, vibrant Empire. Any conciliation with Alaric in 395, real or imagined, would be counter-productive to Stilicho's ambitions.

The Stilicho as traitor theory also assumes that conciliation with Alaric was possible. As future events would illustrate, Alaric could be placated, but never stayed satisfied for long. Alaric was an independently elected leader of his people as it was their mandate, not an administrative decision by the Empire, which placed him in power. While his intention of securing a place in the hierarchy of the Roman military, permanent employment for his soldiers and land for his people are clear enough, his status as an autonomous political figure made integration impossible. Alaric's status was as unique as the status of his people; his very existence violated the terms of the treaty of 382 and the long standing modus operandi of the Empire itself. The inability of the Empire to

resolve the conundrum he represented would lead to a drama being played out over the next thirteen years that would do much to sow the seeds for the future destruction of the Empire. By forging a power base within the physical confines of the Empire, but independent of the Empire at the same time, he established an entirely new model for a barbarian leader to follow. He proved to all that with the retention of military power sufficient to stay autonomous a barbarian general could play a significant role in Imperial politics without ever being part of the structure of the Imperial government. This unprecedented status led to Alaric being one of the most important and indeed transformative figures in the history of the Later Roman Empire.

Chapter 8: So you want to be a generalissimo? The history of the magister

militem

Once safely back in Italy and recognizing that, given his failure in Thrace the western military needed an overhaul, Stilicho began to consolidate the position he held in the western Imperial hierarchy. A brief history of the position of *magister militum* and the differences in the responsibilities and power that it held in the eastern and western halves of the Empire would seem necessary at this point in order to better illustrate Stilicho's career and his efforts to consolidate control of the western military.

The *magister militum* was a purely military position created by the Emperor Constantine as part of the transfer of military responsibilities away from the *praetorian prefect* that represented the continuation of the policy of the separation of civilian and military functions in the Roman Empire.. Initially there were two separate *magistri militum*: a *magister peditum*, the commander of the infantry and a *magister equitum*, the commander of the cavalry. Both were employed in the command of the *comitatus*, the elite mobile field army that was not stationed in any one region but accompanied the Emperor and was separate and above the border troops, known as *limitanei*.³⁹ When there was more than one Emperor, each had his own *comitatus* and therefore his own *magister peditum* and *equitum*. As time went on *magister militum* positions were created to command regional field armies of the *comitatus* that were separate from the troops that remained with the Emperor; these latter troops were now referred to as the *palatini*.⁴⁰

³⁹ AHM Jones 97

⁴⁰ AHM Jones 608-9

As the military system continued to evolve the *magister peditum* in the west became the senior military rank, equivalent to a commander in chief. This was different from how the *magister militum* evolved in the Eastern Empire; in the east there were five *magister militum* in total by the early 5th century; two in *praesentales* at Constantinople at the disposal of the Emperor and three regional commanders, one each in the *Oriens*, Thracian and Illyricum provinces. Each was styled *magister utriusque militiae*, were of identical rank with one another and commanded equal sized armies that were of similar composition, containing both cavalry and infantry units. This arrangement was made in order to preserve a balance of power and to prevent any one military commander or army from becoming too strong.⁴¹ Stilicho, prior to coming west, was one of the *magistri utriusque militiae* of the east.

In the west there were two *magister praesentales* wherever the court happened to be located and one regional *magister militum* in Gaul.⁴² The position of *magister utriusque militiae* in the west was created by Stilicho, supplanting that of *magister peditum*. It became the position of supreme commander in a way that it never was in the eastern half of the Empire, where the strong offices of *praetorian prefect* and *magister officiorum* held the military in check.⁴³ Barbarians already dominated the lower ranks of the Roman military, they would soon dominate its top rank of *magister militum* as well, an illustration of the significance of the barbarians to the manpower needs of the

⁴¹ Herz, Peter (Regensburg) "Magister militum" Brill's New Pauly. Antiquity volumes edited by: Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Scheider. Brill, 2010. Brill Online. Columbia University. 03 April 2010. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?=bnp_e717030.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ AHM Jones 341-42

Empire.⁴⁴ Officially, with the addition of the honorific *patricius noster*, the *magister utriusque militiae* was the supreme head of government, as well as the supreme head of the military and second only to the Emperor.⁴⁵ In reality, however, the *magister utriusque militiae* became the power behind the throne throughout the 5th century, with men like Stilicho being the de facto rulers of the Western Empire.

Although Stilicho brought the *magister utriusque militiae* title with him, a title previously not used in the west, he did not create the tradition of a dominant senior military figure controlling weak Emperors in the west so much as he inherited it. The man who held the top military rank in the west previous to Stilicho, the Frankish barbarian general Arbogast, has already been mentioned. He was the most powerful *magister militum* in the west up to that point and had done much to elevate in status the title of *magister peditum praesentales* in the same way Stilicho would with the title of *magister utriusque militiae*. In neither case was the pre-eminence of these titles officially codified, rather it was the power and will of the man holding the title that gave these positions their supremacy. In the end the general who could inspire and control the loyalty of the troops held the power, a trend that was only accentuated by the on-going germanization of the Roman military given the barbarian tendency to throw their support behind the best general regardless of the titles he held.⁴⁶

Once Stilicho had the position of supreme military commander in the west, he moved to buttress his position even further, passing a law that all officers on the staffs of the *comites rei militaris*, the commanders of the elite *comitatenses* regional troops as well

⁴⁴ Herz, Peter (Regensburg) "Magister militum" Brill's New Pauly. Antiquity volumes edited by: Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Scheider. Brill, 2010. Brill Online. Columbia University. 03 April 2010. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?bnp_e717030.

⁴⁵ AHM Jones 343-44

⁴⁶ O'Flynn 5

as all officers on the staffs of the *dux*, the commanders of the *limatanei* or border troops, would be drawn from the ranks of the *magister utriusque militiae* staff.⁴⁷ This insured a constant stream of Stilicho military loyalists working their way up the ranks of the officer's positions amongst the troops Stilicho commanded directly in Italy and being promoted to command positions amongst troops stationed throughout the Western Empire, both in the provinces and on the frontier. By controlling the officer positions within all formation types in the Roman military, Stilicho centralized control of the army in a way that had never been accomplished in the Empire by a non-Emperor, reducing the young Honorius to a ceremonial figure, one without real power.

This aggrandizing of military power in the hands of Stilicho can be viewed in several ways. There are historians who contend that this represents a betrayal of both Honorius and the wishes of Theodosius by Stilicho. Certainly temporary military authority in the hands of someone strong enough to employ it effectively was entirely necessary at this point. The Western Empire faced numerous threats from external barbarians along its Rhine frontier and in England as well. The Alaric led Gothic forces, currently in Thrace, also remained a potential threat. Honorius was a child Emperor and the Western Empire was therefore in need of a strong military commander to safeguard his interests. The steps Stilicho took insured that he would be able to fill that necessary role and from that perspective it is difficult to find fault. That said, the steps Stilicho took to centralize military control in the hands of the senior general were not temporary; these steps fundamentally and permanently changed the balance of power within the Western Empire, shifting pre-eminence from a bureaucracy comprised of civilians centered on the Emperor based on rule of law to a military state centered on the *magister utriusque*

⁴⁷ AHM Jones 175

militiae based on the rule of the army. Perhaps it was necessary for the Western Empire to transform itself in this manner in order to survive; that is certainly a legitimate argument. There is no argument however that the position of Emperor in the west would never recover its former power and glory and responsibility for that must be placed, at least in part, at the feet of Stilicho.

Chapter 9: It's the same, old song: The continuation of the Theodosian regime

Stilicho had done much to strengthen his grip on the western military; his control over the regime was greatly enhanced as a result. This was not a new regime, however, but a continuation of the one that had been put into place by Theodosius in the brief period he had ruled the west prior to his death. Stilicho's initial rise to power had been through his marriage into the royal family. Recognizing his potential, Theodosius had groomed the young military officer, elevating him through the ranks quickly. Just prior to the invasion of the Western Empire in 394, Stilicho had been named both the senior military officer in the west, pending a successful campaign, and the guardian of Honorius. The latter designation was in anticipation of Theodosius' return to the east to campaign against various barbarian threats and the need for a trusted member of his administration to govern the western half of the Empire in the stead of Honorius until the boy was old enough to rule on his own [Zosimus 4.59.1].⁴⁸

The untimely and unexpected death of Theodosius threatened to upset all of these carefully arranged plans. As the two usurpations in the west had illustrated, power in the Roman Empire was not easily held. A transfer of power, with a boy Emperor coming to the throne and a half-barbarian military officer with minimal campaigning experience acting as his de facto regent, represented an opportunity that others with ambitions might take advantage of. There was no guarantee that Stilicho would be able to shepherd the process forward successfully; without support he was pre-disposed to fail.

⁴⁸ Cameron: Stilicho 269-70

Support would not be forthcoming from the fractious military given its dubious composition of western military elements, only recently battlefield opponents, and barbarians of equally questionable reliability. Assistance from the western Senatorial elite could not necessarily be counted upon either. Many had explicitly supported the regime of Eugenius, others had provided support less openly or at very least had not acted in opposition. Eugenius had been recognized as the legitimate successor as Augustus to the deceased Valentinian II as well. Clearly support from this quarter was to be as cautiously relied upon as from the legions.⁴⁹

With the army and the Senate eliminated as foundations of support in the early days of Stilicho's rule, the only remaining aspect of the western power structure was the Imperial court itself. It would be from here that Stilicho and by proxy Honorius drew not only their initial support, but indeed for the next thirteen years their most consistent and reliable support as well. Many of these men had come west with Theodosius in 394 and were operating in an environment as potentially hostile to them as it was to Stilicho. This group of palatine officials united behind Stilicho and Honorius, doing much to make the transition a successful one.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Mathews 240-41

⁵⁰ Mathews 258-259

Chapter 10: You think you've got problems? Eutropius, the Greek campaign of 397 **and the revolt of Gildo**

Stilicho was not the only power figure in the Empire consolidating his position in 396; Eutropius, the eunuch royal chamberlain was doing much the same. Prior to Rufinus death in November 395, Eutropius had made his opening bid for control of the eastern court by out-maneuvering Rufinus in a contest to see who could form a marriage alliance with the House of Theodosius. Rufinus had intended to have Arcadius marry his daughter only to have the Emperor chose a wife associated with Eutropius instead [Zosimus 5.1-5.2]. The woman in question was the daughter of the Frank Bauto, a former *magister militum* of the west and as the Empress of the east she represented another step in the long, slow germanization of the Empire.⁵¹ Not long afterwards Rufinus was assassinated. Stilicho, through his propagandist Claudian, would claim credit for this act, but serious suspicions could be cast the way of Eutropius as well. He was both ruthless enough to actively promote Rufinus' murder and the one clear beneficiary of Rufinus death, as he immediately became the chief minister of the eastern court. In a manner reminiscent of his predecessor, Eutropius ruthlessly moved to eliminate any threat to his position, real or imagined. He successfully plotted against a senior general named Timasius and the general's son Synegius. This move proved to be so unpopular with the people given Timasius' long-standing and loyal service to the court dating back to the reign of Valens, that Arcadius left the proceedings exclusively in the care of his court ministers. Timasius and his son were both found guilty and exiled and

⁵¹ Bury 64-65; O'Flynn 6-7

although no report of their execution exists, they were never heard from again [Zosimus 5.9-11].

Eutropius was now indisputably the supreme power in the east, dominating Arcadius in much the same way Rufinus had, but with the added advantage of having the confidence and affection of Arcadius, which Rufinus had not possessed.⁵² In addition, he had the eastern half of the army under his control; given the numerous threats faced by the Eastern Empire at this time, these forces would be greatly needed. Alaric continued his rampage in Thrace unabated throughout 396 and into 397 and the Huns launched a major invasion of Asia Minor around the same time.⁵³ The resultant chaos would not go unnoticed by Stilicho, still smarting from his reverse against Alaric several years before and given the content of Claudian's panegyrics of the time, still very much intent on bringing Arcadius under his control. Seeing an opportunity to try once again to prove his abilities as a general and his loyalty and usefulness to Arcadius, Stilicho launched a second invasion of Greece.⁵⁴

The primary source for this expedition is Claudian. Unfortunately his account is far from illuminating, even for the frequently shifty master of propaganda. Claudian's panegyric has Stilicho sending a major seaborne force to the Peloponnese, trapping Alaric – just as he had two years prior – and again having the Goth at his mercy, this time on Mount Pholoe. Then, silence. No final victory is reported, as the end of the campaign isn't even addressed. The narrative ends with Alaric, trapped and starving and Stilicho moving in for the kill. Clearly the long awaited extermination of this loathsome enemy

⁵² Cameron: Honorius 93

⁵³ Cameron: Honorius 125

⁵⁴ Burrell 251; Cameron: Honorius 86; Kulikowski 167

did not occur, but Claudian provides no illumination as to why [Claudian: *IV Cons.* 459-83].⁵⁵

The other primary sources aren't much help either. Zosimus appears to telescope the two Greek expeditions of Stilicho together, as his one account of the events mentions details that seem to pertain to both invasions, including mentioning Rufinus, dead since 395 and certainly not available as a participant in the events of 397 [Zosimus 5.7]. John of Antioch's account is not only fragmentary but clearly inaccurate as well since he claims Alaric and his forces were destroyed which, given Alaric's continued depredations against the Roman Empire for another decade or more, clearly cannot be the case [John Ant. Fr. 190]. A more holistic view of the situation at the time must therefore be taken in order to flush out what might have occurred.

Alaric was not the only problem Stilicho faced in 397. Eutropius, having secured his own position by eliminating his enemies at the eastern court, now looked to eliminate his enemies external to the court, namely Stilicho himself. He did so by striking at the very heart of the Western Empire, the food supply of Rome as obtained from Africa. He negotiated a deal with Gildo, the governor of Africa, to transfer administrative control of that province to the eastern court at Constantinople. It is not clear exactly when this transfer took place, but given the negative and potentially violent reaction that such a move on Gildo's part would engender from the powers that ruled from Rome the city threatened with the extinction of its primary food supply, it cannot have been a decision Gildo made quickly or lightly. The expedition of Stilicho, the exact timing of which is also uncertain, is thought to have taken place during the summer of 397.⁵⁶ Shortly

⁵⁵ Burrell 253; Cameron: Honorius 86; Mathews 271; O'Flynn 33-34; Wolfram 141

⁵⁶ Burrell 252

thereafter Eutropius had the Senate at Constantinople declare Stilicho a *hostis publicus* or enemy of the people and the deal struck with Gildo becomes public knowledge [Zosimus 5.12].⁵⁷ While it is clear that the decision to declare Stilicho an enemy of the Eastern Empire was due to his invasion of Greece, once again without permission of the eastern court, this was a political move that did not require a lengthy gestation to make and need not have been something previously under consideration. The negotiations necessary to pry an entire province away from the Western Empire, a province as critical to the continued survival of the capital of the west at that, cannot have been consummated quickly, nor is it likely it could have been conducted in secret for any great length of time. In addition, Gildo was far from a trusted subordinate; he had shown, at best, lukewarm support for Theodosius during the Emperor's campaigns in the west and indeed was suspected of outright treachery.⁵⁸ It is not difficult to surmise that Stilicho would have kept an eye on a Moorish prince in control of Rome's food supply with a history of fluid loyalties. Given the likelihood that Stilicho had become aware of such negotiations this knowledge might have prompted his invasion of Greece this second time around as a pre-emptive strike. The tendency in the past has been to place Gildo's revolt in the autumn of 397, occurring after the presumed timing of Stilicho's invasion of Greece during that summer. This reference by Claudian in his *Against Gildo* probably refers to the official outbreak of hostilities, not the initial onset of trouble [Claudian: *Gildo* 16]. As Burrell notes in her article on Stilicho's invasion of Greece in 397, Stilicho passed a law early that summer on June 17th, designed to increase the flow of recruits from within the Empire into the military. This law (CTh 7.13.12) communicates the need

⁵⁷ Mathews 272; O'Flynn 36

⁵⁸ Cameron: Honorius 95-96

to conscript soldiers and goes to the extraordinary length of specifying that not even the Emperor's property would be exempt from providing men for this need.⁵⁹ Such a specification was not intended to target the Emperor - certainly it can be assumed that Honorius would have to be onboard before such strong language could be included in a law passed in his name - but rather at the land-holding senatorial aristocracy traditionally reluctant to have the manpower from its estates siphoned off for military purposes. The clear emphasis on the severity of the need for immediate military manpower, the strongly worded law to that effect and the direct challenge to the senatorial class' primary source of income makes it likely therefore, that Stilicho had pre-existing knowledge of an impending deal between Gildo and Eutropius and recognized the need to begin building up his military in response. It is possible he sought to eliminate the threat at its source; invade Greece, destroy Alaric and use the leverage that victory would provide to win Arcadius over to his side and away from Eutropius. As challenging as a task as it proved to be, given Stilicho's on-going efforts to rebuild the western military – in addition to the conscription law he had only recently returned from a military recruiting drive amongst the Germanic tribes along the Rhine – it was certainly a less daunting proposal than invading Africa or attempting to take by force Constantinople itself [Claudian: *Stilicho II* 188; 231].⁶⁰ Indeed an attack against Constantinople, extremely difficult militarily given the city's impressive fortifications, would also have been political suicide by Stilicho. How could he claim guardianship and de facto regency over an Emperor he attacked? And what would Honorius reaction be to a violent assault on the capital city housing his brother?

⁵⁹ Burrell 252-53

⁶⁰ Cameron: Honorius 96-97

The defection of Gildo certainly could have been a spur to pursue Alaric again, one that reinforced a previously existent desire to eliminate Alaric both to remove a threat to the security of the Empire and to use a victory over a barbarian force that the military of the east had been unable to deal with as evidence of Stilicho's usefulness to Arcadius. Stilicho's inability to defeat Alaric can probably be attributed to the same reason he failed the first time; the western legions were, if anything, more difficult to control than they had been in the past given the very recent influx of Germanic mercenaries of dubious quality and suspect loyalty, as well as the addition of raw recruits from amongst the Roman native population. Men like the Germans were not motivated by a desire to serve the Roman state but rather by a desire to enrich themselves. This makes them as likely to loot and pillage when the opportunity presented itself as Alaric's Goths were. The newly recruited Romans were more likely to be an encumbrance than anything else. Even if Stilicho saw a way to both eliminate the threat of Alaric and that of the Eutropius/Gildo cabal, one has to question his judgment in fielding a force this potentially unreliable. It would seem he had not learned from the mistakes of 395. When Stilicho could not defeat Alaric quickly enough to force Eutropius to back down and therefore forestall Gildo's defection, his presence in Greece became counter-productive. The removal of its primary food supply was sure to cause great unrest in Rome and threaten his position with Honorius. By being so far removed from the capital he left Honorius' ear open to his enemies; his immediate return to Rome was therefore essential. The whispers regarding Stilicho's suspected collusion with the barbarians, begun after his first failed campaign no doubt grew louder after his second failure.

Once back in Italy, Stilicho's luck began to turn. Apparently just prior to his revolt, Gildo had engaged in an internal power struggle for control of Africa with his brother Mascezel. Mascezel had come out the loser and had fled to Rome [Orosius 7.36.2]. Stilicho feared to leaving Italy and Honorius behind for what could be a lengthy expedition; this would expose the Emperor to the influences of his enemies at the court. Simultaneously he was loath to attack Gildo, a legally appointed magistrate of Arcadius; this would as effectively end his quest for reconciliation with Arcadius as an attack on Constantinople would have. Stilicho maneuvered out of this quandary by sending Mascezel instead. The expedition left Pisa in November 397 and with surprising speed had successfully deposed Gildo by February 398 [Orosius 7.36.3-4]. Victory was achieved so quickly, in fact, that Eutropius did not have time to decide whether he should or dared send troops to support Gildo. The threat to the food supply of Rome and to Stilicho's political position, ended with a whimper [Zosimus 5.12].⁶¹ In a poem by Claudian extolling Honorius' fourth consulship a future victory of Stilicho's was hinted at; Honorius was to be married. In February 398, shortly after the victory in Africa, Stilicho succeeded in reinforcing his already existent familial ties with the royal family by having his elder daughter Maria, age 12, marry Honorius, age 14.⁶² From the nadir of potential defeat to the pinnacle of victory, Stilicho's position was now stronger than ever.

Or was it? Future events would show that his second consecutive debacle against Alaric would not be easily forgotten. The Goths remained undefeated and suspicions of the half-barbarian Stilicho's conduct against them lingered. Stilicho, however, was not the only one troubled by Alaric; the Goths were, after all, campaigning in eastern Roman

⁶¹ Cameron: Honorius 93-95; Mathews 267-68; O'Flynn 36-37

⁶² Cameron: Honorius 95

territory, not western. This made them a much more immediate problem of Eutropius. The eunuch, faced by the Goths to his west and the Huns to his east, chose the lesser of two evils and appointed Alaric *magister militum pro Illyricum* [Claudian: *Eutropius II* 211].⁶³ In an irony that was surely not lost on the denizens of that particular area of the Empire nor on other power factions at the eastern court, the despised Goth and his warriors were now to be the guardians of the very provinces they had only just recently been ravaging. Stilicho's complicity in dealing with the Goths was only surmised and rather illogically at that. Eutropius dealt with the Goths in what could have only been viewed as a disgraceful manner by the proud Romans in open, official fashion. As Claudian's future panegyrics denigrating Eutropius would echo, what more could be expected from a eunuch anyway? Perhaps Stilicho had not come off so poorly after all.

Eutropius, with his western flank somewhat secured by his alliance with Alaric, now moved against the Huns in Anatolia. He succeeded in defeating the Huns so thoroughly that the barbarian tribe ceased to trouble the Empire for a generation. Eutropius celebrated his military triumph by awarding himself a consulship [Claudian: *Eutropius I* 284-86].⁶⁴ The conservative Roman elite, already frustrated with the rather dubious deal Eutropius had cut with Alaric must have been absolutely aghast. A eunuch as royal chamberlain and senior Imperial advisor was one thing, a eunuch occupying the senior administrative position of the Empire, even if it had been reduced to an honorific without real power, was something else entirely. Eutropius had over-stepped himself; as a result forces internal to the eastern court were beginning to coalesce against Eutropius even as he was at the pinnacle of his power.

⁶³ Heather: 1996 143

⁶⁴ Cameron: Honorius 125-26

Chapter 11: Good help is so hard to find: The revolt of Tribigild and the failed putsch of Gainas

In 399, the Goth Tribigild, a soldier employed by the eastern court, rebelled against Constantinople, rampaged around Thrace and defeated a Roman field army under Leo, a protégé of Eutropius. Gainas, the Goth who had assassinated Rufinus, most likely in collusion with Eutropius, had been unemployed since 395 until circumstances pushed him to the forefront of events once more. Gainas had been promoted to *magister militum* of Thrace earlier in the year. Now he was further promoted to *magister militum praesentalis* and sent, with a force most likely consisting of both regular Roman army units and barbarian federates, after the troublesome Tribigild [Zosimus 5.14-16].⁶⁵

Gainas was unable – or unwilling - to catch or defeat his fellow Goth Tribigild. Eutropius, back at court, had his own problems, as he was not well liked by many; a fact Gainas was well aware of. Gainas used the Tribigild revolt to his advantage, writing Arcadius that he did not possess the necessary forces to achieve victory and that reconciling with Tribigild would be the wisest course. According to Gainas, Tribigild would come back to the fold if Eutropius were deposed. Reluctantly and seeing no other choice, Arcadius removed Eutropius, exiling him to Cyprus. Not long afterwards he was executed [Zosimus 5.18-19].⁶⁶

With this series of events Gainas had placed himself atop the military food chain in the eastern court. From here he could threaten the top of the power structure in the east, the Emperor Arcadius himself. In April 400, he did just that. Desiring honors and

⁶⁵ Cameron: Arcadius 7; 205; Cameron: Honorius; Heather: 1996 144

⁶⁶ Cameron: Honorius 135; Heather: 1996 145

titles commensurate with his rank, particularly the naming of himself as consul designate, as he so desired and seeing none forthcoming he took matters to head. He marched his army to Chalcedon demanded an audience with the Emperor. The terrified Arcadius acquiesced [Zosimus 5.20].⁶⁷

Those at the eastern court Gainas viewed as a threat to him were sent into exile. In addition, his demands of having the title as supreme commander of the military in the east bestowed upon him and being named consul for the following year -401- were met [Zosimus 5.21]. Gainas had reached his epoch. He was now lacking only marriage ties to the royal family in order to match Stilicho's accomplishments in the west. Unfortunately for him, openly threatening the Emperor had pushed things too far. The population of Constantinople was not as pliable as their brethren in the west. As a barbarian outsider, one without royal marriage ties and without the legitimacy of a guardianship to render him more acceptable in the eyes of the Roman populace, he, like Eutropius before him, was over-stepping himself. The precedent set by Stilicho in the west meant little here in Constantinople; an unfortunate fact Gainas was about to be made aware of. The people of Constantinople were not about to tolerate a barbarian as the power behind the eastern throne.

After receiving the demanded promises from the Emperor, Gainas moved swiftly to secure his position. He had a number of his barbarian soldiers move into the city, placing his Goth warriors squarely amongst a Roman populace of Constantinople already spooked by the defeat of Leo and the threatened invasion of Tribigild. Resentment of Gainas' high-handed treatment of the Emperor began to build. Fear and hatred for the Goths in their midst put both groups on edge. With tension building it wouldn't take

⁶⁷ Cameron: Arcadius 8; 203

much to escalate the situation. In all likelihood the confrontation that predictably followed was sparked inadvertently, fueled by mutual hatred and distrust. The Roman populace rose up, the Goths in the city were slaughtered, an attack of the Goths from outside the city that was most likely an attempt by desperate men to save their families - many of the Goths now trapped in Constantinople were women and children – failed. Seven thousand Goths were trapped in a church and surrounded by a mob. According to Zosimus, the Emperor himself ordered the roof of the church torn off and firebrands thrown inside, burning all those within alive. Constantinople had been purged [Zosimus 5.22-23].⁶⁸

With many of his Goths killed and the Empire as a whole roused against him, Gainas, after several days of inconclusive negotiations with the Emperor, fled across the Bosphorus with his remaining men. He was declared a public enemy and a short time later was defeated in a sea battle. He retreated back to Thrace, where his remaining Goths were attacked and defeated by a band of Huns looking to gain favor with the Empire. Gainas was killed and his head sent back to the Emperor [Zosimus 5.24-27].⁶⁹

Thus ended the attempt of Gainas to become the Stilicho of the east. The example that had been set by Stilicho, that of a military officer of barbarian origin rising to the pinnacle of power and becoming, indeed, even more powerful than the Emperor himself, had been avoided in the east. The civilian advisors and administrators that had been dismissed by Arcadius at Gainas' instigation were reinstated. Civilian rule was re-established and the barbarian military returned to its rightful station; subordinate to that of Roman civil authority.

⁶⁸ Cameron: Arcadius 8; Heather: 1996 145

⁶⁹ Ibid

The revolt of Gainas marked the high-water mark of barbarian influence in the Eastern Empire for years to come. The Eastern Roman Empire had narrowly avoided following the West down the path of the military becoming the dominant force in the state. In addition, the position of Emperor remained pre-eminent in the east, not just in theory, but in reality, even as the Emperor's position in the west began its slow fade towards irrelevance.

The events of 399-400, however, did not just impact the political situation in the east. The successful purge of the barbarian element from the Roman military was duly noted both by the senatorial aristocracy and the Roman elements of the Western Empire's army. The elite in the west, their pride stung by the defeats suffered by Stilicho against Alaric, began to bestir restlessly as the barbarian influence upon the western military and as a result, the western body politic, grew. It is not hard to imagine the haughty Roman aristocrats wondering why they too could not throw off the barbarian yoke and restore the power and glory that was the birthright of Rome. Seeds sown in the minds of the Romans in the west by the destruction of Gainas would bloom to fruition in the years to follow.

The fall of Eutropius and the purge of Gainas and his Gothic followers must have both pleased and worried Stilicho. His most ardent enemy in the east had been removed; could rapprochement with Arcadius follow? Conversely, a precedent had been set by the elimination of Gainas that would only serve to encourage the anti-barbarian elements in the Western Empire. Stilicho still firmly believed in the policy espoused by Theodosius of co-opting the barbarians and using them to fight Rome's battles. The fact that the

barbarians serving Rome were often pitted against others of their ilk only served to doubly further Rome's interests; dead barbarians, after all, were indisputably good policy.

Stilicho's hopes that the fall of Eutropius would lead to a fulfillment of his long delayed desire to extend his guardianship over Arcadius, illogical as that might seem with Arcadius now being 23 years old, would not be fulfilled. Although the ministers who succeeded Eutropius were far from avaricious and ruthless as their predecessors had been, they were no more enamored of Stilicho's eastern ambitions than Rufinus and Eutropius had been. The antagonism between the two courts, long simmering and often threatening to erupt into open confrontation, now settled into a cold war as distrust for one another eliminated any possibility of reconciliation. Still, Stilicho had outlasted another powerful rival and remained very much the de facto leader of the west.⁷⁰

Stilicho, although once more secure in his position, was not one to be content to rest on his laurels. He had Claudian begin to drop hints in a panegyric recited in 400 of yet another dynastic marriage, this time between Honorius' sister Galla Placidia and Stilicho's son Eucherius [Claudian: *Stilicho II* 29]. No doubt this did little to calm the fears of the eastern court. Clearly a child of Honorius' union with Maria, if one should be promulgated, would be both a grandchild of Stilicho and a member of the royal family, putting said child in a position to someday assume a place in the imperial college. With a marriage between Eucherius and Galla Placida, two more possible descendants of Stilicho would be in line for the western throne, Eucherius himself and any male children borne of that union. Stilicho was doing everything he could to insure that one of his progeny would someday be Emperor. His carefully nurtured plans of consolidating his position permanently were about to be interrupted. Alaric, his desire for land and titles

⁷⁰ Cameron: Honorius 135

satisfied for five years by his appointment as *magister militum* pro Illyricum, was on the move once more.

Chapter 12: Like a bad penny: Alaric's invasion of Italy 402-403

While the fall of Eutropius and the purge of the Gothic element of the eastern Roman military had consequences for Stilicho, he was far from alone; they had consequences for Alaric as well. Caesarius became the leading civilian administrator in the east and with Gainas and his Goths gone and the Roman bureaucracy once more the paramount power in the Eastern Empire, there was no longer any need to continue to pay off Alaric with titles and annual subsidies. Although it is not directly attributed to him in the sources, it is clear from Alaric's behavior following the ascension of Caesarius that the deal he had made with Eutropius was no longer in effect.⁷¹ Even more ominous from the perspective of the Goths was the fatal role played by the Huns in the death of Gainas. Perhaps the attempt by Gainas to re-establish hegemony over an area north of the Danube had provoked the deadly Hunnic reaction. Perhaps the Hunnic chieftain Uldin was simply looking to curry favor with the Empire. Neither of these motives can be discounted, but a third possibility existed. The employment Uldin and his band immediately garnered from the Empire following the death of Gainas is suggestive of prior collusion between the two parties. If the Empire had proved willing to play the Hun card against Gainas, then they would be willing to employ them against Alaric. Nothing could make a more forceful impression upon the Goths than the threat of their old enemy; the future of the Goths in the Eastern Empire was therefore approaching its terminus.⁷² Alaric would have to find a new deal; for this he looked towards the Western Empire.

⁷¹ Heather: 1996 146

⁷² Wolfram 150

With the resurgent Eastern Empire indifferent to a continued relationship and confident in its ability to rebuff him, Italy now offered the most tempting of potential targets.

Once again the sources are, at best, scanty. Zosimus does not mention the ensuing Italian invasion of Alaric that took place from 401 to 403. We are left to rely on Claudian exclusively; the poet from Alexandria is at his elusive best when recounting the events of those years in his poem *De Bello Gothico*. What is clear is that while Stilicho was out of Italy, campaigning in Raetia against a band of Vandals, Alaric took advantage and marched his forces over the Alps and down into the Italian peninsula in late 401 arriving on November 18th. [Claudian: *Getico* 241-57].⁷⁴ He defeated a Roman force at Timavus and then laid siege to Milan. Stilicho hustled back with a hastily cobbled together force, once again comprised primarily of barbarians of uncertain reliability, raised the siege of Milan and then at the hard fought battle of Pollentia in 402 on Easter Day, checked Alaric sharply enough that the Goths departed from Italy to regroup, leaving behind the spoils accumulated during the years spent terrorizing Greece and in some instances their families Alaric's among them [Claudian: *Getico* 474-82; 530-45].⁷⁵ The battle was marked by heavy losses on both sides and by the familiar bugaboo of Rome's barbarian federates behaving in less than exemplary fashion. Although the battle was at best a strategic victory for the Romans given the departure from Italy of Alaric, it was far from a total triumph and once again were heard whispers of Stilicho's unwillingness to finish off Alaric when given the opportunity.⁷⁶ Claudian himself admits that one troop of Alans was about to flee and was only prevented from doing so by Stilicho's timely intervention, it is fairly clear that even after seven years Stilicho still had

⁷⁴ Kulikowski 170; Mathews 273; Wolfram 150-51

⁷⁵ Bury 76-77; Mathews 274; O'Flynn 39

⁷⁶ Cameron: Honorius 180-82

not been able to mold the western military into an effective and reliable fighting force [Claudian: *Getico* 501-14].⁷⁷

Alaric, stung by his reversal as he might be, was not yet finished with Italy. He crossed the Alps once again in the spring of 403 and once again Stilicho was there to meet him. This time the Romans were ready and the resultant battle of Verona that occurred in late June or early July 403 was a more clear-cut victory than Pollentia had been [Claudian: *VI Cons.* 168-175]. Again Alaric was forced into a strategic withdrawal, his forces battered but more or less intact, this time departing Italy entirely, not to trouble the peninsula again for six years [Claudian: *VI Cons.* 202-225].⁷⁸

Stilicho had managed to survive once more, but the shock of this invasion would linger. Honorius was so traumatized that the capital of the Western Empire was immediately moved from Milan to Ravenna. The latter city was surrounded by ocean on one side and swamps on three, with access through a single causeway that could be disabled rendering this position nearly impregnable.⁷⁹ The damage done to both the territory and more importantly, the psyche, of the Western Empire would not soon be forgotten.

In addition the same problems that had cropped up as early as 395 both with his legion's composition and behavior as well as with his own tactical shortcomings remained. The problem was more complicated than just lack of ability on the part of Stilicho, although it can be argued that his limitations as a military leader were a major factor, but his failure was not the result of treachery as some have charged. Alaric and his Goths at this point were hardly the ill trained and poorly equipped barbarians charging

⁷⁷ Heather: 1996 146

⁷⁸ Bury 78; O'Flynn 40

⁷⁹ Wolfram 151

into battle half-naked that the Romans had defeated time and again; by 402 the Goths had called the Empire home for 26 years. An entire generation of their warriors had never known the Gothic homeland of the Black Sea as they had been born and raised exclusively within the confines of the Roman Empire. These were no longer barbarians in the traditional sense of the word. They were highly Romanized not just culturally, but in how they conducted themselves in war. Their leaders had served as Roman military officers; their men had served as barbarian allies and had campaigned side by side with the Roman legions comprised of native troops many times. They had the same equipment, the same tactics, the same training and years of difficult campaigning that had resulted in Alaric's Goths being among the most experienced and hardened troops around.⁸⁰ They were, in short, not easy targets no matter what the haughty Roman elite managed to delude themselves into thinking; those days were gone. Long for yesteryear as they might, the days of the Roman legions simply rolling over badly led, ill-organized barbarians were gone and they weren't coming back. Given the circumstances Stilicho had done well to retrieve the situation without suffering serious reverses.

The problems with the western legions ran deeper than the skilled war-craft of their Gothic opponents. The germanization of the legions had been notable under Theodosius; in the reign of Stilicho this trend accelerated, both as a continuation of the Theodosian policy Stilicho firmly believed in and out of necessity. This necessity was born of the *magister militum's* complicated and at times uneasy relationship with the senatorial aristocracy, particularly the land holding elite. Stilicho had a firm grip on the military hierarchy, marriage ties twice over with Honorius that gave everything he did Imperial legitimacy and through these military and familial positions he had a strong

⁸⁰ Cameron: Honorius 187

influence on the palatine bureaucracy. Where his influence waxed and waned was often with the Senate and in particular with the ultra-wealthy bluebloods of the ancient families of Italy. A brief discourse on the composition and character of the senatorial class would seem necessary here.

Chapter 13: With friends like these...Introducing the Senatorial class

The men who made up the senatorial class were a complex and diverse group who originated from every part of the Empire. They did not share a common ethnicity, native language or social class of origin, but once elevated to senatorial rank these differences no longer mattered as a near religious adherence to a common value system led to conformity as the prior identities of these men were subordinated to their new, shared class identity. Their membership in the political construct of the senatorial order represented a successful co-optation by the Empire of potentially refractory elites into a shared value system based on the established senatorial families that formed the core of the old senatorial aristocracy. This shared status culture Romanized and aristocratized new men as they joined the order and gave the class a sense of continuity and communality that regardless of the member's origin provided a unifying force powerful enough that it had to be taken into account by everyone, including the Emperor. This unifying force consisted of the senatorial orders institutions, values and lifestyle all of which revolved around a pervasive concern for status. Regardless of where the senatorial aristocrat lived their values and lives were remarkably similar.⁸¹

The name "senatorial order" is something of a misnomer however, as membership in the Senate was not necessary to be considered part of the class. Instead membership was based on an income qualification, the exact total of which remains unknown. The income was based on landholding and involved an official declaration by a new man of his total income and acceptance of corresponding senatorial rank. This income was employed to maintain the expected lifestyle of a member of the senatorial order, a

⁸¹ Salzman 19-24

lifestyle that involved significant and conspicuous expenditure. Class members owned expensive clothes, numerous slaves, villas and above all land. In addition members were expected to engage in cultural pursuits worthy of them, such as efforts in literature, philosophy and oratory. Most importantly this income was to be used to pursue public office, the ultimate mark of status. A political career was expensive at any stage, but the requirement that one must be wealthy and ready to spend immediately was especially onerous as the primary responsibility of the men elected to the lower ranking offices was the financing of public games and entertainments. These lower ranking positions did not come with salaries, so all the money would have to come straight out of the office-holders pockets.⁸²

The creation of this class represented an effort on the part of the Emperors, starting with Constantine, to bind the landed elite closely to the Imperial administration by reviving their traditional role from the days of the Republic of the holding of public office and the associated addition to their personal honor by doing so. Given the professionalization of both the military and the palatine bureaucracy, this office holding within the Imperial administration, mostly outside the court structure, became the primary outlet for the ambitions of the elite.⁸³ By channeling these ambitions into holding political office the interests of the landed elite and the Emperor became one and the same. By passing the costs of public games and entertainment to these office holders, the Imperial administration saved a great deal of money. Unfortunately these expenditures became so high and the competition for status became so great that the senatorial order became increasingly reluctant to pay into the Imperial system via taxes.

⁸² Salzman 19-25

⁸³ Salzman 27-29

This passed the tax burden increasingly unto those less able to afford it, those people who occupied positions in the social hierarchy below the landed elite. This hampered the Empire's ability to collect taxes sufficient to meet an increasingly large military expenditure necessary to defend the frontiers against an ever-growing threat of violent barbarian incursion. In addition, the landed elite were even more reluctant to allow military recruitment of the men who worked their estates from which the majority of their income was drawn; this lack of access to native Roman manpower only further hampered the efforts of the Roman military to fill out their ranks.⁸⁴ This led to an increasingly dangerous reliance on Germanic barbarians as mercenaries in the Roman military; Germanic barbarians often drawn from the same tribes that were harassing the frontiers of the Empire to begin with. An ever-growing population of armed Germanic warriors within Imperial borders, nominally serving the Empire, but more often than not of at best dubious loyalty led to the Germanic threat existing both without and within Rome. It is difficult to defend your frontiers by employing the fathers and brothers of those seeking to breach your frontiers. This policy conundrum would rapidly become untenable as Stilicho proved unable to continue to pry sufficient funds and manpower out of the elite in order to both fill the ranks of his military forces and to pay them enough to insure their loyalty. Making the task of convincing the senatorial elite to continue providing monetary support to the Empire even more difficult was the lack of a strong Emperor. Honorius was at best weak and as time went on his performance could often be described as rather pathetic. Contempt for the Emperor and distrust of the half barbarian Stilicho, a man through whose veins ran the same blood as Rome's enemies, led to the alienation of the senatorial order. When presented with a choice of helping to fund an ineffectual

⁸⁴ Mathews 277

imperial regime or retaining their money in an effort to maintain their place within their social class, the landed elite were increasingly choosing the latter.⁸⁵ In the end it was difficult to blame them for this decision; providing more funds to a regime that repeatedly failed to bring to heel Alaric and his Goths –mere brigands in the eyes of the Roman nobility- represented the throwing of good money after bad. This combined with the rather paradoxical view that, weak regime or not, Rome was still Rome and could therefore defeat barbarians at its leisure led to a lethal combination of distrust and apathy on the part of the very class whose support the Empire most needed.⁸⁶

Nearly a decade after he came to power, Stilicho still could not field the army that was required to provide sufficient force necessary to address the numerous threats the Empire faced. At best he was able to cobble together various groups of barbarian mercenaries to supplement a core of native Roman troops of ever decreasing size. This effort proved sufficient only to achieve results that could at best be termed tactical draws. Stilicho could retain the status quo; he could not achieve victories significant enough to tip the balance of power in Rome's favor. With the increasing reliance on Germanic barbarians and the growing reluctance of the Roman nobility to fund the system the maintaining of this status quo was proving increasingly difficult with every passing year. In spite of all his efforts, Stilicho had yet to win a clear-cut military victory. Stilicho recognized given the ongoing and indeed growing intransigence of the senatorial elite, continuing to operate the way he had up to this point would only lead to a perpetuation of the stalemate. This would only serve to further frustrate and alienate the Roman people. With Alaric operating within the Empire and various barbarian groups hostile to Rome

⁸⁵ Mathews 277-78

⁸⁶ Mathews 270

lurking on the Rhine and Danube successfully defending the frontiers was far from guaranteed. The events of 406 would serve to illustrate this quite starkly.

Chapter 14: More barbarians! The invasions of Radagaisus in 405 and the barbarian Rhine crossing of 406

The tenuous state of the Western Empire's frontier was exploited by the invasion of another force of Goths who, under the leadership of one Radagaisus, had burst through the poorly defended Alpine passes and poured into Italy, plundering and pillaging as they went. Stilicho mobilized what forces he had in Italy and complemented them with a second contingent of Roman troops from the Rhine frontier. This was not a quick process, however and for six long months Radagaisus terrorized northern Italy, eventually laying siege to Florentia. Stilicho marched his army to Florentia in the summer of 406, lifted the siege and in the ensuing battle crushed the Gothic forces [Zosimus 5.33].⁸⁷ Radagaisus himself was captured and executed while the bulk of his surviving warriors, some 12,000 men, were drafted into the Roman military [Isidorus 14; Olympiodorus 9]. The remainder, mostly women and children, were sold into slavery. This last group was so numerous that the Italian slave market bottomed out as there were now more slaves available than could possibly be sold at a profit [Orosius 7.37.4]. Stilicho had finally achieved the indisputable military victory he had sought for so many years. In an ironic twist of fate Claudian, the long suffering master of the panegyric and Stilicho's propagandist champion, was not there to bear witness and extol Stilicho's virtues. He had died, cause unknown, in 404.⁸⁸

Stilicho was at the pinnacle of his power; the barbarian threat represented by Radagaisus and his followers had not just been defeated, they had been obliterated.

⁸⁷ Heather: 2005 194-198; 205; Mathews 274

⁸⁸ Cameron: Honorius 418

There would be no aspersions cast on this victory, no questioning of tactics or allegiances; this was the triumph that had eluded Stilicho since 395. Unfortunately these Goths were not the only host of barbarians on the move. An age was coming to a close as beyond the Rhine and the Danube events beyond the comprehension, let alone the control, of anyone in the Roman Empire, Stilicho included, were sweeping forward.

In the mid to late 4th century the arrival of the Huns into the lands around the Black Sea led to a vast migration of the Germanic peoples already settled there. A half century later, the continued Hunnic expansion west would produce an even greater seismic shift amongst the German people as once more they fled west and south, desperate to escape the depredations of the Huns. Radagaisus was merely a harbinger of this movement, many others were about to follow.⁸⁹

On December 31st, 406, in the midst of a winter so bitter the Rhine itself froze solid, a vast host consisting of a confederation of Germanic tribes including Alans, Vandals and Suevi, took advantage of the passage into the Roman Empire the frozen river offered and swept into Gaul. The frontier, denuded of its normal garrison of troops as many had been moved to Italy to fight Radagaisus, simply collapsed. This vast host rampaged throughout Gaul, killing and looting, signaling the beginning of the long, slow downward spiral of the Roman Empires influence and power in the region. The terrified Roman inhabitants fled from this threat, desperately seeking sanctuary that would not be forthcoming. Roman nobles and peasants alike cast their eyes towards Rome, all asking the same question: where were Stilicho and the Roman legions of the west [Orosius 7.40.2].⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Heather: 1996 107; Heather: 2006 197; 201-02

⁹⁰ Bury 80-81; Heather 2006: 206; Mathews 275; O'Flynn 42

The denizens of Gaul would wait in vain. It had taken six long months to gather the forces used to defeat Radagaisus. If mustering the strength sufficient to defend the very heartland of the Empire took that long, help for Gaul would not soon be forthcoming. The men commanded by Stilicho in Italy represented the bulk of the Western Empire's field army. If Stilicho moved them into Gaul there would not be sufficient forces left to defend Italy and with Alaric still lurking in Dacia an undefended Italy was not a comforting thought. Equally problematic was the composition of Stilicho's forces; what had already been a dangerously barbarian heavy western military was now even more so given the dubious addition of the surviving warriors of Radagaisus' Goths, who were formerly invaders, but now were federates of questionable value. Stilicho needed to add Roman military recruits and he needed to counter the threat of Alaric in order to deal with the threat of the barbarian horde now rampaging through Gaul. Stilicho came to the realization that a change in the dynamic would have to be effected and that only desperate measures would achieve the desired results.

Chapter 15: If this be treason: Alaric as an ally?

Sometime during 406 Stilicho entered into the negotiations with his erstwhile foe that his enemies had accused him of conducting all along. Stilicho desperately needed to buttress his military with native Roman troops; even he had come to recognize the dangerous over-reliance created by the use of Germanic barbarians. Few native troops would be forthcoming from the current territories of the Western Empire however; the political opposition Stilicho had faced over the prior nine years was evidence enough of the futility of attempting to persuade the recalcitrant senatorial aristocracy to provide any more than they already had. No, other arrangements would have to be made in order to procure a consistent stream of Romans into the western military. To this end Stilicho turned his attention to the disputed territories of Illyricum.⁹¹

Illyricum lay between the areas controlled by the two halves of the Empire and had long been renowned for its hardy peasant stock which had provided the Empire a source of tough, reliable, native soldiers with which to staff out the legions. Its consistent provision of these recruits made it an extremely valuable area to both the east and the west that in theory split the province in two. By agreement between the two courts Honorius was given control of the western half and Arcadius control of the eastern half. The reality was far different. Since being appointed *magister militum per Illyricum* by Eutropius in 398, Alaric had de jure control of the area; that is until the repudiation of his deal with Eutropius by the new administration of the eastern court. This change in eastern policy led to his invasions of Italy in 402-3.⁹² These incursions were failed

⁹¹ Heather: 1996 146

⁹² Cameron: Honorius 158

attempts by Alaric to wrest a similar deal from the west as he previously had in place with the east. Once expelled from Italy for the second time after the battle of Verona, Alaric returned reluctantly to Illyricum, master de jure no longer, but master de facto nonetheless. His control, while existent, was potentially untenable; he was now deemed an outlaw by both courts, he no longer had an indemnity to rely upon and he and his soldiers had suffered tremendous losses in manpower and accumulated booty during the Italian campaigns. Alaric was as desperate to change the dynamic as Stilicho was. The result of this mutual desperation was the striking of a bargain between the two former enemies to unite and act in concert against the eastern court in an effort to achieve both of their goals. Stilicho would use Alaric and his forces to secure control of all of Illyricum; by doing so he would have access to the source of native Roman military recruits he so desperately required. Alaric and his men would be paid for their services through an annual indemnity and Alaric himself would be given the titles and military rank he coveted [Olympiodorus 1.2; Zosimus 5.33].⁹³ This deal, in short, would replicate that which Alaric had previously in place with the eastern court; only the master he nominally served would change. A stunning *volte face* to be sure, even for the bewilderingly complicated politics of the time, but a brilliant political *riposte* by Stilicho nonetheless. With one move he had secured the prime military recruiting ground of the Empire, thus greatly strengthening the western army, while simultaneously removing one of the primary internal threats to western security by purchasing the loyalty of Alaric and his Goths. As a bonus Alaric would not only be an ally but an ally employed against those in the east opposed to Stilicho. The opportunity for an extension of guardianship over the twenty-seven year old Arcadius –Emperor now for nine years- had long passed; even the

⁹³ Heather: 1996 146; Mathews 274

stubborn Stilicho recognized that. Given that realization, coupled with the dire need for native Roman troops, Stilicho made the best of the situation. Those in power at Constantinople hated him regardless and Arcadius was now beyond his reach; there was nothing left to lose through the further antagonism between east and west that was sure to be generated by this diplomatic *détente* with Alaric and the subsequent ensuing military action against eastern Illyricum. The securing of Illyricum would lead to a steady infusion of desperately needed Roman blood into the western legions. By employing Alaric to do the bulk of the fighting, Stilicho secured his eastern flank leaving him free to deal with the situation in Gaul.

Man plans and plans and God laughs. The fruit of Stilicho's political labors was about to be spoiled. As arranged, in the spring of 407, Alaric marched his Gothic host out of the Pelponnese -where he once more had been raiding with tremendous enthusiasm- and into Epirus, part of western Illyricum, where he awaited word from Stilicho. None would be forthcoming as events external to Stilicho's control in both Britain and Gaul prevented him from taking advantage of his political triumph [Zosimus 5.33].⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Mathews 275

Chapter 16: Not so fast: the usurpation of Constantine III and a payoff too far

Britain was the most remote of all the provinces of Rome, east or west. The isolated island lay off the northwestern coast of the European continent and its denizens and more importantly its military garrisons, often felt forgotten by the central Roman authority and deprived of what they considered to be their fair share of whatever rewards were available. As a result these legions were often restive and not infrequently, mutinous, with an eye towards procuring what they deemed were their just rewards by force, which they were not being given as a matter of course [Heather: 2006 209].

In late 406, just prior to Honorius seventh consulship, the British legions rebelled once more, first raising a military officer named Marcus, then another named Gratian to the purple before murdering each in turn as these candidates failed to satisfy the demands of the legionaries. Finally another military officer named Constantine was elevated to Augustus and somehow managed to avoid being lynched by his own troops long enough to consolidate the unruly legions into something resembling a cohesive force. Constantine then staged a successful crossing of the British Channel into Garland. Now known as Constantine III, he setup his new headquarters in Boulogne in the spring of 407 most likely around the same time as Alaric was setting up camp in Epirus to await Stilicho. The usurper moved quickly, winning over the remaining Roman military forces in Gaul, forming treaties with those barbarian tribes that remained outside the Empires borders in order to secure his flanks, while initiating a campaign against those barbarians

that were still pillaging Gaul with great gusto, entirely unopposed by central Roman authority [Olympiodorus 5.2; Orosius 7.40.2; Zosimus 5.33].⁹⁵

Instead of having a loosely federated group of barbarians raiding in a number of bands throughout northern Gaul, Stilicho and Honorius now faced a full usurpation by a Roman military officer in command of a number of Roman legions from both Britain and Gaul. Sending the promised military forces to Alaric in an effort to aid in the takeover of Illyricum was clearly no longer an option. The best Stilicho could do was to send one of his generals, yet another Goth by the name of Sarus, to Gaul to try and defeat Constantine III, while Stilicho himself contemplated what had gone wrong with his master plan and tried to figure out his next move. Sarus failed, leaving Constantine III to consolidate his hold on Gaul down to the Alps and leaving Alaric unsupported and unpaid in Epirus –no doubt less than happy at the turn of events. An unhappy Alaric had proven to be all Stilicho could handle in the recent past. With an even more dangerous foe in Constantine III setting up his new headquarters in Arles in southern Gaul, Stilicho found himself threatened once more by potentially hostile forces via both the western and eastern passes of the Alps.⁹⁶

The Western Empire's unenviable situation would not soon improve and indeed would only grow worse. The sources are not clear as to exactly when, but sometime during 407 the Empress Maria, Honorius' wife and Stilicho's oldest daughter, died. Honorius was without issue and Stilicho had had his marriage ties to the royal family reduced by one. Given the tenuous political and military position Stilicho held this was a problem that had to be addressed immediately. To that end Stilicho hurriedly arranged

⁹⁵ Heather: 1996 147; Heather: 2006 210-11; Mathews 275; O'Flynn 42

⁹⁶ Heather: 2006 221-22

for his youngest daughter, Thermantia, to marry Honorius, thus becoming the next Empress of the Western Empire and a human buttress against Stilicho's worsening fortunes [Olympiodorus 3; Zosimus 5.34].⁹⁷

All the marriage ties in the world weren't going to improve the bleak military situation Stilicho found himself facing, however. Constantine III was still hovering on the doorstep of the Italian peninsula and acting in an increasingly aggressive and at times openly hostile manner. To make matters worse, Alaric was once again on the move.⁹⁸

By the spring of 408 Alaric and his men had been encamped in Epirus for a year. Alaric, at best an impatient sort, was becoming increasingly restless and true to form decided to attempt to force the issue rather than wait for events to develop. He marched his Goths from Epirus west to Noricum and hovered menacingly by the entrance to the Alpine passes, presenting a mirror image to the threat posed by Constantine III who continued to occupy southern Gaul and to conduct himself in a bellicose manner. Constantine III was looking for recognition of his status of Augustus from Honorius and was more than willing to take advantage of Stilicho's and Honorius current state of weakness in order to further his own cause. Alaric shared Constantine III willingness to further his own ambitions at the central Imperial administrations expense; he already had the recognition he wanted in the form of the *magister militum* title bestowed upon him by Stilicho. Now he wanted to get paid. His demand: 4,000 pounds of gold as compensation for his time [Olympiodorus 7.2; Zosimus 5.35].⁹⁹

Stilicho was in a quandary. The military strength of the Western Empire had been greatly reduced by the loss of the legions of Britain and Gaul, now controlled by

⁹⁷ Bury 84; Mathews 61

⁹⁸ Heather: 2006 221-22

⁹⁹ Heather: 2006 221; O'Flynn 42

Constantine III. Only Italy, Spain and Africa remained under Ravenna's control and between the barbarians moving south towards the Pyrenees and Constantine III continued territorial aggrandizing, it was questionable how long Spain would stay within their grasp. The men available to Stilicho were only sufficient to defend Italy against one threat; defeating both Constantine III and Alaric was a dubious proposition and as long as both were hostile commencing with offensive operations to regain Gaul was simply out of the question. Constantine III showed no inclination to negotiate. Alaric, conversely, made it quite clear that he was open to continuing with the military alliance he had concluded with Stilicho the year before as long as he was paid [Zosimus 5.35].¹⁰⁰

Stilicho convened the Senate and tried to convince them to pay Alaric in order to both retain the Goths services and avoid having to fight a two front conflict. The Senate and Honorius both preferred refusing Alaric's demands and declaring war instead. Stilicho, in the face of determined opposition, rammed home his request of payment for Alaric, with the Senate agreeing on a sum of 3,000 pounds of silver. He did so at great cost, however; the political alliance he had so painstakingly built with the Senate splintered with one of his primary supporters, Lampadius, declaring "*Non est ista pax, sed pactio servitutis.*" This is not peace, but a bond of servitude. Lampadius, fearing retribution from Stilicho, then fled the Senate, taking sanctuary in a church [Zosimus 5.35-36].

Stilicho had secured his deal with Alaric and had avoided having to fight two opponents simultaneously. The political cost he had paid was high; losing the support of the powerful Lampadius was worrisome and could lead to other defections. Of even greater concern was the very public disagreement with Honorius. The Emperor had

¹⁰⁰ Heather: 2006 221

eventually acceded to Stilicho's wishes regarding Alaric, but he had done so reluctantly. Stilicho could not afford to even appear to lose the support of Honorius, as it was the most critical aspect of his base of power. Stilicho knew his domestic enemies were watching and that any sign of weakness on his part would lead to their moving against him.

Chapter 17: Breaking up is hard to do: The Death of Arcadius and the fall of Stilicho.

May 1st, 408. An incredibly complicated situation grew even more so. Emperor Arcadius, ruler of the Eastern Empire and the elder brother of Honorius was dead at the age of thirty-one. The successor to the eastern throne: his son the seven-year-old Theodosius II. The events of 395 had been repeated as a child Emperor succeeded to the throne upon the untimely death of his father. The opportunity presented was also the same as whoever managed to become the primary political advisor to the young Emperor would be the de facto leader of the eastern half of the Empire. Suddenly the opening in the eastern political dynamic that Stilicho had been waiting thirteen long years for had appeared. With this unexpected death the situation had completely changed once more [Zosimus 5.38].¹⁰¹

Stilicho wanted to travel east to Constantinople and take charge of Theodosius II. He immediately faced two problems: Honorius also indicated a desire to go to Constantinople and take Theodosius II in tow and Alaric, although now ostensibly bought off, remained a threat ready to take advantage of whatever openings the situation offered. Both the Emperor and the barbarian would have to be placated before Stilicho could depart Italy [Olympiodorus 5.2; Zosimus 5.38].¹⁰²

Stilicho applied what leverage he had available. With Honorius, Stilicho played up the threat that Constantine III represented. Nothing focused the attention of an Emperor quite so wonderfully as a usurper. Arguing that it would be far too risky for

¹⁰¹ Heather: 2006 222; Mathews 279

¹⁰² Ibid

Honorius to depart Italy for the east with Constantine III and his forces lurking just on the other side of the Alps, Stilicho managed to convince the Emperor to remain in Ravenna [Olympiodorus 5.2; Zosimus 5.38].¹⁰³

Stilicho next turned to dealing with Alaric. The highly volatile Goth, often unpredictable in his behavior was eminently predictable in his demands. Alaric wanted a military alliance with the central Imperial administration and the economic benefits such an alliance would provide. Stilicho needed Alaric fully aligned with him and he needed to counter the threat of Constantine III. Stilicho decided to address the threats posed by the Goth and the usurper simultaneously by hiring one to destroy the other. He replicated the Illyricum deal with Alaric, but instead of sending the Goth after the forces of Constantinople he hired him to move into Gaul and attack Constantine III. This would leave Stilicho and a significant portion of the forces he commanded in Italy free to march to Constantinople to press the western courts claim to a guardianship over Theodosius II. Once again Stilicho had maneuvered brilliantly; pitting his enemies against each other and keeping the forces he had under his command intact [Zosimus 5.38].

Stilicho had addressed the external threats he faced through adroit political maneuvering. Unfortunately he had badly miscalculated the effect these deals would have domestically as his continued policy disagreements with Honorius combined with the growing disaffection at the perceived appeasement of the hated Alaric led to discontent amongst the ranks of both the Senate and the native Roman element of the western army. Those who opposed Stilicho and his policies began to coalesce into a faction that moved to take advantage of the *magister militiae* growing unpopularity [Zosimus 5.39].

¹⁰³ Heather: 2006 222

Stilicho's enemies made their move when Honorius went to Ticinium to exhort the legions concentrating there for the impending campaign against Constantine III. Stilicho was at Bononia gathering the barbarian federates together; with the Emperor and his *magister militiae* separated, those officials accompanying the Emperor who opposed Stilicho began to conspire against him. Led by a palatine administrator named Olympius, a man appointed to his position by Stilicho, they began spreading rumors amongst the troops gathered at Ticinium that Stilicho's intentions were to usurp the eastern throne from Theodosius II and to place his own son, Eucherius, on the throne. The legions, already incensed by the appeasement of Alaric and the recruitment of the Goths formerly under Radagaisus as federates, proved to be a receptive audience. Incited to a fever pitch they exploded, massacring any and all administrators and military officers deemed to be creatures of Stilicho. Among those killed were the *prefect* of Gaul as well as the *prefect* Italy, the Emperor's private treasurer, the commander of the palatine guards and several other high ranking military officers [Olympiodorus 5.2; Zosimus 5.39].¹⁰⁴

Stilicho received word of the revolt while still in Bononia. The reports were conflicting; it remained unclear whether the Emperor had been among those who had died. Summoning together all the barbarian federate commanders, Stilicho pondered what his response to the crisis should be. Given the uncertainties, particularly pertaining to the survival of the Emperor, two plans were agreed upon. First, if the Emperor were among the dead, Stilicho would lead the barbarians against those legions in rebellion and destroy them. Second, if definitive word was received indicating the Emperor had

¹⁰⁴ Bury 86; Heather: 2006 222

survived, the barbarians would assist him in capturing and executing the ringleaders, thus suppressing the revolt [Zosimus 5.40].¹⁰⁵

Not long after, word was received that Honorius had indeed survived. It was now left to Stilicho to decide whether to put the second plan he had agreed upon with his federates into motion or not. The barbarians pushed for him to act against the recalcitrant legions, but Stilicho hesitated. The specter of fighting a civil war against the same Roman troops he had long commanded and using his recent Gothic enemies to do it haunted him. To his credit Stilicho decided not to further incite the brewing civil war. Instead, leaving the Goths at Bononia he traveled to Ravenna in hopes of finding Honorius with only his personal retainers accompanying him. The reception awaiting him was entirely uncertain; it was far from a safe assumption that the Emperor remained his friend but rather than pit the Roman legions against the federates that remained under his command he chose to risk a hostile reception from Honorius in hopes of avoiding a further escalation of violence [Zosimus 5.40].

The barbarian federates were displeased with Stilicho's decision and being as equally uncertain as to their standing with Honorius resolved to remain together in order to better insure their safety until it was determined what the Emperor's intentions were. Not all the barbarians in Italy remained loyal to Stilicho, however. One of his former subordinates, the Goth Sarus, attacked Stilicho's Hunnic personal guards and slaughtered them in their sleep after Stilicho had arrived in Ravenna. Stilicho, fearing that this act would lead to reprisals against the civilian population by the other barbarian troops, warned the cities in Italy that housed the families of Radagaisus Goths as hostages to insure the federates loyalty not to allow any allied troops to enter. Then, hearing that

¹⁰⁵ Heather: 2006 223

Honorius had issued an arrest warrant for him at the urging of Olympius, now the Emperor's senior advisor, he took refuge in a church along with those retainers that had survived the attack by Sarus. Soldiers arrived with the warrant for Stilicho's arrest. They swore to the Bishop of the church where Stilicho had sought sanctuary that the *magister militiae* would not be harmed, but once outside they produced a second order with instructions to execute Stilicho immediately. Despite being in the company of his armed retainers Stilicho did not resist and ordered his men not to either as, resigned to his fate, he submitted to the executioner's sword. The reign of Stilicho was over. It was August 22nd, 408 [Olympiodorus 7.6; Zosimus 5.41].¹⁰⁶

If Stilicho had thought that by going to his death without resistance a full outbreak of violence would be avoided he was mistaken. Italy erupted as the Roman legions, long frustrated at the growing presence of Germanic mercenaries within the Empire, went on a rampage. The barbarian families held hostage in cities throughout the Italian peninsula were massacred. Infuriated, the Gothic federates revolted and marched to join forces with Alaric, swearing vengeance. Their addition increased the Gothic king's army to 30,000 warriors [Olympiodorus 7.6; Zosimus 5.43].¹⁰⁷

Meanwhile, the barbarians were not the only victims of the post-Stilicho purge. Olympius had been appointed *magister officiorum*, the head palatine administrative post. He now controlled the court and more importantly Honorius as well. Moving swiftly to consolidate his position, supporters of Stilicho were arrested. Many were tortured, but even under duress none would admit that Stilicho was the traitor and usurper that Olympius had claimed him to be. Honorius quickly annulled his marriage with Stilicho's

¹⁰⁶ Bury 87; Heather: 2006 222-23

¹⁰⁷ Heather: 2006 223-224; Wolfram 154

younger daughter Thermantia, returning her to her mother, Serena. Eucherius, Stilicho's only son, had fled Ravenna when his father was executed. Taking sanctuary in a church in Rome afforded him no more safety than it had his father. He was arrested and promptly executed. The dismantling of Stilicho's regime was complete [Zosimus 5.42-44].¹⁰⁸

The repudiation of Stilicho's policies would have grave consequences for the Western Empire. Pushed by Olympius, Honorius refused to negotiate with Alaric, who, strengthened by the infusion of Radagaisus Goths and the arrival of another Gothic force under his brother-in-law Athaulf, marched from Noricum into Italy. The next several years would see multiple sieges of both Rome and Ravenna culminating in the stunning sack of the Eternal City, the shining light of western civilization untouched by the hand of foreign invaders for 800 years on August 24th, 410. The earth moved; Rome was inviolate no more and the age of dominance of the city on the Tiber had come to an end [Isidorus 15; Olympiodorus 6; Zosimus 5.44].¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Bury 87; Heather: 2006 223

¹⁰⁹ Heather: 2006 227

Chapter 18: Conclusion

Stilicho's reign as guardian of Honorius, *magister utriusque militiae* and de facto leader of the Western Empire was immediately marred by the opening of the conflict with the eastern court that persisted throughout his time in power. The legitimacy of his positions as guardian and supreme military commander in the west was never disputed by his contemporaries or by subsequent historians. His role as de facto leader of the Western Empire, while resented by some, was an obvious necessity given the tender age of the Emperor Honorius. Rather it was his attempt to extend his guardianship over Honorius to include Arcadius as well that is the source of both controversy and condemnation. This was not, however, the naked power grab ascribed to him by many but rather the logical reaction to the recognition of the political reality of having to deal with the ruthless and ambitious Rufinus. Rufinus was already a personal enemy and now through their simultaneous elevation to de facto leadership of their respective halves of the Empire, a political enemy as well. Although Rufinus would be assassinated in rather short order –possibly through the machinations of Stilicho- this latent hostility, exacerbated further by Stilicho's unauthorized incursion into Greece in 395, would set the tone for all future interactions between the two courts for the remainder of Stilicho's lifetime.

The death of Rufinus led to the ascension of the eunuch royal chamberlain Eutropius. Eutropius was a far more likely source of the conspiracy that led to the death of Rufinus than Stilicho and was equally as ruthless and avaricious as his predecessor had been. Relations between the two Imperial courts would only worsen during his five years in power due primarily to Stilicho's second unauthorized invasion of Greece, which

occurred in 397. Once again Stilicho's intervention in eastern affairs had the dual purpose of illustrating his value to Arcadius and his desire to eliminate the wayward Goths under Alaric once and for all. It is possible that this venture was prompted by a third concern as well; the knowledge that Eutropius was plotting with the Moorish *comes* Gildo, in charge of the province of Africa from whence came the food supply for the city of Rome. Regardless of motivations the invasion was a failure: Eutropius remained in power, Alaric remained on the loose and Gildo transferred the administration of Africa to Constantinople anyway. Worse, Eutropius used Stilicho's expedition as impetus to convince the eastern Senate to declare Stilicho a public enemy. Although the resultant crisis was averted as Gildo was defeated in a remarkably short period of time and Eutropius would fall three years later in much the same manner Rufinus had, relations between Stilicho and the east were beyond repair. Although future eastern leaders were not as overt in their hostility as Eutropius and Rufinus had been, preferring instead to settle into a cold war, the hostility remained nonetheless. This hostility would continually handicap Stilicho; not only could he not count on the eastern half of the Empire for support he had to keep a wary eye upon it as a potential foe. At a time when a united Empire was desperately needed to fend off its barbarian adversaries both inside and outside its borders, the leaders of Rome succumbed instead to counter-productive internal squabbling.

Stilicho fared somewhat better in managing the internal affairs of the Western Empire. Although the support he enjoyed from the court officials who had comprised the western administration of Theodosius was critical, the foundation of Stilicho's power originated with his marriage relations with the royal family while his ability to maintain

and expand that power emanated from the position he held as *magister utriusque militiae*, the supreme military commander of the Western Empire. Stilicho was fully cognizant of this fact and did what he could to strengthen his position politically by reforming the administrative processes of the military. Most notably he passed a law that specified that all officer appointments to the *comitatus*, the elite mobile field army, and the *limitanei*, the troops comprising the frontier garrisons, would be promotions from the ranks of the staff of the *magister utriusque militiae*. This insured that the majority of officers throughout the western Roman military would be Stilicho loyalists. Although centralizing the military infrastructure around the person of the strongest figure in the Western Empire at the time, Stilicho himself, was a justifiable necessity of the moment, it also set in motion the process which led to the elevation of the position of *magister utriusque militiae* over that of Emperor. Stilicho's successors would continue to push this process forward as a series of military strongmen would come to dominate a succession of weak Emperors reducing the latter position to a ceremonial prop. Eventually the western Emperor devolved into a state of such irrelevance that the last of these strongmen abolished the position altogether when he deposed Romulus Augustulus in 476. Although Stilicho could not possibly have foreseen this eventuality it is clear that the responsibility for putting this chain of events in motion must be placed, at least partially, at his feet. That said Honorius must bear some of the criticism as well. Blameless as he was for having the misfortune to ascend to the purple as a child, in adulthood he did himself and the position of Emperor in the west no favors. If Stilicho bore responsibility for the rise of the military, Honorius bore responsibility for the deterioration of the position of Emperor. His behavior and ineffectual leadership, which

continued after the death of Stilicho, set as much of a precedent for his successors as Stilicho set for his.

The law restructuring the process of military advancement was not the only legislation enacted by Stilicho in an effort to address the deteriorating military of the Western Empire. During the crisis of 397, desperate to increase the flow of native Roman troops into the legions, Stilicho passed a military conscription law specifically targeting the manpower resources of the Senatorial estates. The struggle to keep the Western Empire intact was as much a struggle between the Imperial administration and the land-holding Senatorial class over an ever shrinking supply of resources of men and money as it was a struggle between Rome and its barbarian adversaries. Stilicho was forever engaged in a delicate balancing act between maintaining good relations with the Senate and the landed elite and obtaining the necessary resources from them required for the funding and staffing of the military. In the end it was his defeat in this struggle and not any loss on the battlefield to a barbarian foe that brought about his downfall. He pushed the landed elite too far by forcing a sum of money out of the Senate to payoff Alaric after the abortive attempt to wrest eastern Illyricum away from the Eastern Empire went awry. His political coalition splintered, he alienated the Emperor and the very public nature of his disagreements with the Senate and Honorius gave his enemies the opening they needed.

Stilicho's inability to build a strong military left him unable to address the fundamental problem facing the Empire as a whole, east or west; the ubiquitous presence of the Gothic people. This presence represented a malignant tumor on the Roman body politic, a parasite that slowly drained the strength of its host. Stilicho inherited the

Gothic quandary from his predecessor Theodosius I who had been forced to set the dubious precedent of being the first Emperor to conclude a peace treaty with a barbarian adversary that was not entirely on Imperial terms. This treaty contained the remarkable and alarming concession of allowing the Goths to remain within the Empire's borders as a distinct socio-political entity with their own leaders thus retaining their autonomy. This concession was made in the face of the Roman recognition that the Empire was simply not strong enough at that point to defeat or drive out the Goths and thus was made, at best, grudgingly. Clearly there was an eye towards the future when the Empire would theoretically be strong enough to rectify the situation. The hostility engendered through a century and a half of conflict and the resentment generated by the unwanted presence of former enemies led to the process of assimilation failing to take place. The Goths dwelt within the Empire, but were separate from it. The Goths became Romanized, but never attained a Roman identity. The Goths served in the Roman armies and fought in Roman wars, but just as often used their military strength to fight the Empire itself. The hostility directed towards the Goths by the Empire only served to forge their previously disparate groups into a cohesive monolithic entity that would eventually form its own kingdom and nation known as the Visigoths. Ironically, in the end, the Roman Empire was at least as responsible for the creation of one of the groups that led the process of the dismantling of the Western Empire, as the Goths were themselves.

The Gothic problem that had persisted throughout the reign of Theodosius would only worsen as Alaric continued to emerge as the foremost leader and first centralized authority of the Goths within the Empire. Stilicho and Honorius set precedents through their behavior that would have long term negative effects on the Empire; so did Alaric.

He created a template, one that proved highly destructive to the Empire, which would be emulated time and again by barbarian leaders that were to follow. By maintaining military strength sufficient to retain political autonomy, Alaric proved that a barbarian leader did not have to follow the model set forth to him by the Empire. He did not, in short, have to follow the rules; he could create his own. By operating outside the Imperial hierarchy and employing the judicious application of violence as leverage, Alaric could obtain what he desired for both himself and his people on his terms, not on the Empires. Alaric was the next step in the evolution of the Goths that had begun with the treaty of 382; no longer content to settle on land specified by Rome and no longer willing to serve as federates to be deliberately sacrificed in Rome's wars, Alaric's ability to operate in a militarily autonomous fashion enabled him to gain the upper-hand on the Empire. The need of the Empire to deal with him, either through negotiations that often proved politically unpopular or through military action that often proved costly in men, money and material, siphoned off already limited resources away from their application towards external threats. Alaric and his Goths were slowly bleeding the Empire white to the point where it was no longer able to deal with him or with the barbarians external to its borders.

Immediately upon ascending to power in 395, Stilicho had moved to establish a claim of guardianship over Arcadius, in addition to the already acknowledged guardianship and de facto regency over Honorius. Arcadius, however, gave no indication of being willing to accede to this guardianship and his ministers, led by Rufinus, were demonstrably hostile to the notion. At approximately the same time as Stilicho was consolidating his position, Alaric was looking to improve his as well. Disgusted by the heavy casualties his Goths had suffered at Frigidus, and seizing the opportunity the death

of Theodosius offered, he revolted and began marauding throughout the Balkans with the intent of forcing the Empire to renegotiate the terms of the treaty of 382. Clearly this rebellion had to be addressed and Stilicho found himself in the position of being the only person capable of doing so as he had the entire Roman field army, still in the west after the defeat of Eugenius, under his command. Stilicho recognized the threat represented by Alaric. He also recognized that neutralizing Alaric, while a necessity, was also an opportunity to further his own ends. By destroying Alaric he could remove the two decade old problem of the presence of the Goths and prove his value to Arcadius. A successful campaign in Greece against Alaric, in other words, could potentially seal his rise to de facto leadership of the entire Empire. The resultant campaign was a failure, but the accusations that Stilicho colluded with Alaric to make it so are ridiculous. Stilicho had missed his opportunity to rule the entire Roman world via the only route available to him at the time; the destruction of Alaric. The idea that he would have deliberately sabotaged the campaign against the Goths and therefore his own ambitions as well is simply inexplicable.

Inexplicable or not, the idea that Alaric and Stilicho were somehow in collusion with one another stuck. These suspicions would only be reinforced after another failed campaign against Alaric in 397. Although he managed to thwart Alaric's invasion of Italy in 402-3, twice winning strategic victories that forced the Goth off the peninsula, Stilicho's inability to destroy Alaric gave his enemies more suspicions upon which to play. Ironically the one clear cut military victory of Stilicho's career, the crushing defeat of Radagaisus, most likely only made matters worse. How could Stilicho obliterate one Gothic host and still be so incapable of wiping out another? Treason his enemies cried,

that was the only logical explanation. When Stilicho finally did begin negotiating with Alaric –out of recognition of the need for the Goth’s services given the Western Empire’s manpower shortages and not as an act of treason- every aspersion cast his way seemed justified. Emboldened by the destruction of Radagaisus and the purge of the German federates from the ranks of the eastern military during the abortive *putsch* of Gainas in 400, the Senate and the Emperor obstinately refused Stilicho’s initial attempts to negotiate with Alaric in 407. Although Stilicho successfully overcame this opposition, the monetary appeasement of Alaric that followed split Stilicho’s political coalition; the deal he made in 408 to have Alaric campaign against Constantine III, destroyed it completely. Conversely, if Stilicho hadn’t had to worry about Alaric, he might have been able to counter the barbarian invasion in Gaul. Instead he was forced to remain in Italy, thus creating a power vacuum into which stepped the usurper.

The Western Empire was dealing with numerous simultaneous threats while lacking the military sufficient to counter anymore than one. Stilicho’s repeated negotiations with Alaric which began in 406 and persisted to the end of his life were a clear attempt to address both the threat the Goth represented and the native military recruit shortfall. By appeasing Alaric in the short-term Stilicho could build the western legions to strength sufficient to avoid ever having to appease anyone again. This represented a rational and well thought out plan but one that had the downside of playing into his enemies’ accusations of collusion and treason. Logical as it may have been from a macro perspective it displayed either a lack of understanding of the domestic political situation or an over-estimation on the part of Stilicho of his own ability to deal with the fallout that the deal would generate. In some ways brilliant, in the end it was a political

miscalculation of immense proportions that left him open to his enemies and led to the end of his regime.

The reign of Stilicho is both a complex and controversial issue. Few that possess an opinion on the man and his times are ambivalent and passions run high with terms like traitor bandied about with great regularity. The truth, as is generally the case, lies somewhere in the middle. Stilicho was flawed and certainly desirous of accruing personal power, but no more than other Roman politicians of the time and indeed demonstrably less so than his direct contemporaries. Stilicho's misfortune is the same as any other historical figure confronting a dangerous and volatile transition period in history while not possessing the abilities necessary to overcome the challenges he was faced with. In the end, he was not the right man for the moment, but that does not make him a traitor. That he was able to hold together a decaying Empire in the face of tremendous adversity for thirteen years is a remarkable achievement, even if in the end he fell under those adversities. Many a greater man would have fared no better.