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Alaric: King of the Visigoths and Tool of the Romans

Katie Sass

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Katie Lynn Sass

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Dr. Lezlie Knox
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In 410 Alaric, King of the Goths, and his army infamously sacked Rome, the once grand capitol of the world. This devastating incident for the Romans had long repercussions in terms of its historical memory. Early medieval writers like St. Augustine of Hippo would reflect on the meaning of the sack of Rome. Alaric died soon after, before the establishment of the Gothic kingdom that replaced the Roman state in the West. Contrary to the thought of the sack's grandeur importance, however, Godden notes that "The sack of Rome was by all accounts of little material significance in the long and complex history of Roman engagement with barbarians."¹ The sack of the city rather overshadowed the importance of Alaric's journey to that moment. He was able to both plunder the area which is now Greece and also hold a peaceful pact with Stilicho, the commander of the armies of the Western Empire under Honorius. Through Alaric we can understand the vulnerable state of the Roman Empire and the disassociation of its separated halves. Alaric exposes the weak structure of the Empire through the years 395 to 410 by his lootings, *foedus* with Stilicho, and his campaign to invade Italy, the heart of the Western Empire.

Historical sources around the time of Alaric are quite limited. The poet Claudian is one of the few people that lived during the time of Alaric and Stilicho whose works have been preserved. The Egyptian Claudius Claudianus, or Claudian, became a court poet for the Western Empire and served Stilicho, the overly praised subject of his poetic works.² Claudian's work is the only source that ends before the sack of Rome and therefore is not affected by the retrospection of the event.³ Thus Claudian contributes the events before the sack, despite his grand distortion of events towards Stilicho's favor. Olympiodorus of Thebes also lived around

¹ M. R. Godden. "The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: Rewriting the Sack of Rome." In *Anglo-Saxon England*, 47-68. (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47

² Michael Kulikowski. *Rome's Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 160-161

³ Michael Kulikowski. *Rome's Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161

this time; however, his works have only been preserved in several fragments, beginning with the death of Stilicho. Olympiodorus' work is special in that it lacks prejudice towards Stilicho and the barbarians and instead contains his own independent judgment of the events.⁴ The work of Olympiodorus therefore takes the stance of observing history rather than distorting the facts towards one side or another, making the fragments more trustworthy. The next closest historical work of this time, the *Gallic Chronicle of 452*, comes from an anonymous Gaul writer.⁵ This chronicle focuses only on what the writer perceived to be largely important events for each year rather than giving a historical narrative of the events. For this reason the events can be noted as true, however the author is not reliable with the exact years and dates of the events.⁶ One of the most thorough narrative historical authors is Zosimus, who was one of the last pagan historians.⁷ Zosimus writes a lengthy narrative about the events and ends his work before the sack of Rome occurs. But his work is not entirely trustworthy as he wrote at least a hundred years after the events; thus Zosimus only compiled contemporary sources such as Olympiodorus and added in his own bias about what had occurred.⁸ Although Zosimus' work is consequently problematic, it still contains essential events and facts in lengthy narratives. Thus Zosimus' large knowledge of contemporary sources led him to draw his own conclusions, most specifically about the enmity between Stilicho and Rufinus.

The separation of the Roman Empire was already evident before Alaric's revolt in part by the death of the Emperor Theodosius. Theodosius died in 395, ending seventeen years as

⁴ Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), li

⁵ Alexander Callander Murray, trans. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*. (Canada: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 76

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Zosimus. *Historia Nova*. Translated by James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1967), ix

⁸ Peter Heather. "The Creation of the Visigoths." In *The Visigoths*, edited by Peter Heather, 43-92. (San Marino: The Boydell Press, 1999), 48

Emperor.⁹ Theodosius' sons then became the Emperors of the Empire, Arcadius in the East and Honorius in the West. This division of the Empire between the sons set up the further disassociation of the halves. Zosimus describes how the actual rulers of the halves of the Empire were the guardians of the sons, Rufinus in the East and Stilicho in the West.¹⁰ He tells that both of the guardians had individual secret plans to capture all of the power of the Empire for themselves. To achieve their goals, both Rufinus and Stilicho decided to increase their stake at power through marriage. Rufinus, however, was not able to secure his daughter in marriage to the Emperor Arcadius.¹¹ In the Western Empire Stilicho did manage to give his daughter, Thermantia, in marriage to Honorius, "and his power became greater still."¹² So Stilicho effectively tied himself further to the Emperor Honorius, and to power, on top of already being the "Count and Master of all Soldiers"¹³ in the Western Empire. Stilicho's power would be shown to great extents in his dealings with Alaric and his plans against the Eastern Empire at the start of the 5th century. The rivalry between Stilicho and the guardians of the Eastern Empire, Rufinus and then Eutropius, shows the further split between the halves of the Empire. It is after the creation of the separation of the Empire in 395 that Alaric begins his revolt.

The lootings of Alaric and his army in Greece show the weak and separate structure of the Empire, specifically the Eastern half. In 395 Alaric decided to revolt against Roman authority. According to Zosimus, Alaric was angry because he was not promoted to a higher status in charge of more soldiers after helping to win the battle against Eugenius when

⁹ Alexander Callander Murray, trans. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*. (Canada: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 79

¹⁰ Zosimus. *Historia Nova*. Translated by James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1967), 193

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195

¹² Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 5

¹³ Adrian Goldsworthy. *How Rome Fell*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 290

Theodosius was still alive.¹⁴ Up to the year 397 Alaric and his army, whose soldiers were based in the Eastern Empire's controlled Balkans,¹⁵ looted and burned the towns of Greece.¹⁶ Alaric was, for the most part, free to loot Greece for over a year with little confrontation. Zosimus informs that Rufinus did not stop Alaric's conquest because he supposed that "with the commonwealth thrown into utter confusion, no roadblock would appear against his enterprise,"¹⁷ (his plan to have the Roman throne for himself). But Rufinus never had the chance to take over the throne, because another plot was brewing within the Western Empire. Stilicho decided to assassinate Rufinus by informing Honorius that he should "send some military cohorts to his brother Arcadius to assist the nations under his sway that were in sorry case."¹⁸ The sorry cases of these nations were due to Alaric's pillaging. These soldiers, led by Gainas (who was in on Stilicho's plan) then marched to Constantinople and murdered Rufinus.¹⁹ Thus Stilicho used Alaric's devastation of Greece to successfully plan Rufinus' murder, thereby weakening the other half of the Empire. But Constantinople's regency was soon filled by Eutropius, Arcadius' grand chamberlain.²⁰ Stilicho still did not help the East defeat Alaric even after Rufinus' death, and instead decided that "leaving him at large could only help undermine Eutropius" since Alaric was no threat to the Western half of the Empire yet.²¹ Stilicho's plot to kill Rufinus shows how separated the Empire is at this point, especially since each side had their own goals to obtain power. But even though the Empire's leaders were hardly unified, the lands of the Empire

¹⁴ Zosimus. *Historia Nova*. Translated by James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1967), 197

¹⁵ Walter Goffart. "The Barbarians in Late Antiquity and How They Were Accommodated in the West." In *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, edited by Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein, 25-44. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 27

¹⁶ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 45

¹⁷ Zosimus. *Historia Nova*. Translated by James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1967), 199

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Michael Kulikowski. *Rome's Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166

²¹ *Ibid.*

between Rome and Constantinople still needed to be, so Alaric could no longer be left at large.²² The Eastern Empire then decided to make Alaric *magister militum per Illyricum*, or master of soldiers in Illyricum, and “was also given imperial authority to oversee the public services of these lands, arms, shops, storage facilities and the like.”²³ Part of the reason for his new status was that the Empire had no soldiers available to control that part of the Empire, so they used Alaric’s force.²⁴ The fact that Alaric, who was allowed to steal Greece’s wealth, was given an important status in the Empire, that was only subordinate to the praetorian prefect,²⁵ demonstrates how needy the East’s weak position truly was. The East could not muster the forces necessary to even attack Alaric’s forces, and in the end resorted to dealing with Alaric by appeasing him, until he was no longer needed.

After 399 Alaric no longer had a status in the Empire in Illyricum,²⁶ and decided to invade Italy in 401.²⁷ The battles of 402 ultimately led to Alaric and Stilicho striking a deal, where Alaric receives a title in the Empire, and, in return, Alaric helps Stilicho invade the East, which never occurred in part by Arcadius’ death. Stilicho’s desire to invade the East shows the lack of unity with both sides the Empire. Stilicho obviously saw the Eastern side of the Empire as a distinct governmental body. If he had not made this distinction, then a plan to invade the East would not have been necessary since he was the guardian of the Emperor Honorius. During the first battle, at Pollentia, Stilicho’s army surprised Alaric on Easter day.²⁸ Instead of destroying Alaric and his army, Stilicho made a truce with Alaric and withdrew.²⁹ Claudian, however, tells that “Alaric, his hopes ruined by his bloody defeat at Pollentia, though policy

²² Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 187

²³ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 45

²⁴ Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 187

²⁵ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 45

²⁶ Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 183

²⁷ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 46

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Michael Kulikowski. *Rome’s Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 170

dictated that his life should be spared, was nevertheless deserted by all his allies and bereft of all his resources. He was forced to leave Latium and to retrace his steps in ruin.”³⁰ The truth of this “bloody” battle is under some dispute. Later that year, at Verona, Stilicho’s army surrounded Alaric and his soldiers on a hill.³¹ Alaric and Stilicho made a deal, a *foedus*, at Verona, but what this deal entailed is disputed among scholars. But what can be supported is that this secretive deal gave Alaric a title in the Roman Empire. The power-aspiring Alaric would accept such a title since he “embarked on explorations” to obtain authority, given to him by already “existing Roman hegemonic bodies.”³² Instead of creating his own powerful state, Alaric wanted to gain power from already powerful governmental institutions. Burns supposes that Stilicho made Alaric *comes rei militaris* in Illyricum in order to have soldiers stationed in that area so that Alaric would be “between the East and West effectively blocking an invasion or...poised to launch one to the East.”³³ But Wolfram concludes that Stilicho made Alaric the *magister militum per Illyricum* because Stilicho wanted to separate from Constantinople, and, furthermore, giving Alaric this title would violate the East’s autonomy since Illyricum was under the Eastern Empire’s jurisdiction.³⁴ Whichever title Alaric received, both scholars agree that Stilicho planned to attack the East. Olympiodorus of Thebes does not take in to account this deal of invasion and instead informs that “Alaric the phylarch of the Goths was summoned to occupy Illyricum for Honorius, because Illyricum had been assigned to his Empire by his father

³⁰ Claudius Claudianus, *Claudian*. Translated by Maurice Platnauer, vol. 2. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1817), 83

³¹ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 46

³² Hagith Sivan. “Alaricus Rex: Legitimizing a Gothic King.” In *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, and Helmut Reimitz, 109-121. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 112-113

³³ Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 193

³⁴ Herwig Wolfram. *History of the Goths*. Translated by Thomas J. Dunlap. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 153

Theodosius.”³⁵ This statement shows no tension between the two sides of the Empire, when there should have been tension, since Illyricum was a part of the Eastern Empire. Olympiodorus neither states the reason for Alaric’s assignment to this area. However, Zosimus agrees that Stilicho was plotting against his enemies in the West as he informs that “Stilicho was preparing to take his army over to the cities of Illyria and with Alaric’s help to wrest them from Arcadius and gain them for Honorius’ realm.”³⁶ But this invasion never occurred since there was a rumor that Alaric was dead and Constantine was rebelling in Gaul.³⁷ Even though the invasion did not occur, the fact that Stilicho was planning to take over lands that were in the power of the East with Alaric’s help shows a significant separation between the sides of the Empire. If the Empire had been unified, then plots to attack one side or the other would not have occurred. At this time the Empire lacked cooperation and instead strived for each side’s own plans.

In addition to the lack of unification, the West showed itself to be in a dire predicament with Constantine. After Alaric stopped his march eastwards because of word of Arcadius’ death in 408,³⁸ Alaric demanded money for the campaign.³⁹ Olympiodorus states that Alaric received four thousand pounds of gold from the West.⁴⁰ But this money never was given.⁴¹ In place of the invasion of the East, the West was forced to “concentrate all its resources on quashing Constantine’s rebellion,” and so was forced to give up Stilicho’s plans of invasion.⁴² Alaric was appointed the master of soldiers in Gaul by the West and was supposed to lead the attack against

³⁵ Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 7

³⁶ Zosimus. *Historia Nova*. Translated by James J. Buchanan and Harold T. Davis. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1967), 222

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Philip Matyszak. *The Enemies of Rome*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004), 263

³⁹ Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 215

⁴⁰ Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 14

⁴¹ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 47

⁴² Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 223

the usurper Constantine, but this did not occur either.⁴³ In a twist of events Stilicho was murdered in 408 due to a charge of treason, effectively eliminating one of the finest commanders in the Roman army. The *Gallic Chronicle* simply states that the death of Stilicho was “in the interests of the state.”⁴⁴ But Olympiodorus tells that Olympius led the “bloody and inhuman plot” to kill Stilicho.⁴⁵ Olympius was a *Magister Officiorum*, a bureaucratic head of a government department in the Empire.⁴⁶ Stilicho’s death left Rome nearly defenseless while hoards of Goths crossed into the Empire and while Constantine rebelled. The *Gallic Chronicle* even states that this “host of enemies” weakened the Empire “to their very foundation.”⁴⁷ His death also ended the *foedus* with Alaric, as Stilicho was the one figure that promoted the continuation of this deal. The end of the *foedus* would prove disastrous for the Western Empire.

Now that Roman leaders had demonstrated their weak position by killing their most capable general during Constantine’s usurpation, Alaric found a pristine opportunity to take advantage of the Empire’s weak state. Stilicho was no longer alive to stop Alaric from attacking with his army. Thus Alaric’s true invasion of Italy with his forces demonstrates the crippled state of the West. The events that followed the invasion, specifically the negotiations with Honorius and the sieges of Rome, demonstrate the weakness of the West. Isidore of Seville supposed that Alaric decided to attack Rome because “now that Radagaisus was dead, Alaric, his colleague in kingship, who was a Christian in name but professed himself a heretic, grieving that so great a number of Goths had been slain by the Romans, waged war against Rome to avenge his

⁴³ Daniel Costa. *The Lost Gold of Rome*. (England: Sutton, 2007), 47

⁴⁴ Alexander Callander Murray, trans. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*. (Canada: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 80

⁴⁵ Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 5

⁴⁶ Adrian Goldsworthy. *How Rome Fell*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 299

⁴⁷ Alexander Callander Murray, trans. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*. (Canada: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 80

countrymen's blood."⁴⁸ But this summary of events is not historically accurate about Alaric's true reason. Radagaisus died in 406,⁴⁹ years before Alaric's invasion of Rome and still during the time when Alaric and Stilicho had their *foedus* in place. Furthermore, the relationship of Radagaisus and Alaric has been analyzed to suggest that Alaric held Radagaisus "as a competitor for leadership over any still restless barbarians on Roman soil,"⁵⁰ not a comrade. Alaric's invasion of the West was certainly not caused by the need for revenge. Olympiodorus of Thebes explains Alaric's actions by stating that "because of Stilicho's murder, and because he did not receive what had been agreed, Alaric besieged Rome."⁵¹ Olympiodorus' explanation is drastically different from Isidore's simple summary about receiving vengeance. After Stilicho's death, Alaric must have felt angry, and as he marched to Rome, his army grew in size with the addition of more fellow barbarians.⁵² Alaric was angry because he no longer held a beneficial relationship with the West. Stilicho's punishment of death because of his treason discredited Alaric aiding the Empire, and so Honorius disbanded the agreement with Alaric and rejected any notion to negotiate.⁵³ This refusal to negotiate would prove fatal to the Empire, as Honorius did not prepare for war and Alaric's army was now reinforced with the army of his brother-in-law Athaulf.⁵⁴ When the preliminary negotiations were not successful, Alaric decided to increase his demands and so he wanted the imperial title of "*magisterium utriusque militiae*, or commander of both services," that had been Stilicho's title before his death, but was again rejected.⁵⁵ After these rejections, Alaric grew bolder and even appointed his own Emperor, the Roman Priscus

⁴⁸ Isidore of Seville. *History of the Goths, Vandals, and Suevi*. Translated by Guido Donini and Gordon B. Ford. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 8-9

⁴⁹ Michael Kulikowski. *Rome's Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 171

⁵⁰ Thomas S. Burns. *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 197

⁵¹ Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 25

⁵² Michael Kulikowski. *Rome's Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173

⁵³ Adrian Goldsworthy. *How Rome Fell*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 299

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Michael Kulikowski. *Rome's Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 174-175

Attalus, who was the prefect of Rome.⁵⁶ That Alaric could even have enough power to make himself able to institute new Emperors showed his power over the West, as “no barbarian monarch had previously aspired” to this level.⁵⁷ But creating his own Emperor did not help in the negotiations. On the way to negotiate with Honorius yet again in 410, Alaric and his army were attacked by Sarus, another Gothic general, and it was at this point where Alaric decided that negotiating was futile and so turned his army against Rome for the final time.⁵⁸ An estimation of the population of the city of Rome during the second half of the fourth century comes to around a million inhabitants.⁵⁹ The large size of the city informs how many people were subjected to the siege by Alaric. The anonymous Gaul writer had this to say: “Finally, the capital of the world, Rome herself, was most foully exposed to sack at the hands of the Goths.”⁶⁰ However most foul the siege was, it could very well have been prevented if the negotiations had been successful in coming to some sort of a compromise. But the siege also could have been prevented if Stilicho had not been murdered and if Honorius had sent an army to counterattack Alaric. Honorius’ lack of compromise and lack of forming an army against Alaric can be seen as showing his incompetency as a ruler and his weak position to lead the disassociated Empire. Alaric shows the weakness of the West by his ability to demonstrate his own powers. Alaric had the power to successfully attack the Western Empire and also to instate his own Emperor. During these demonstrations of power, Alaric met no resistance on the battlefield. The West was not strong

⁵⁶ Christopher Chaffin. *Olympiodorus of Thebes and the Sack of Rome*. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 54

⁵⁷ Hagith Sivan. “Alaricus Rex: Legitimizing a Gothic King.” In *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, and Helmut Reimitz, 109-121. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 118

⁵⁸ Michael Kulikowski. *Rome’s Gothic Wars*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 177

⁵⁹ Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse. “The Decline of the Western Empire.” In *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*, edited by Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein, 58-72. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 70

⁶⁰ Alexander Callander Murray, trans. *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*. (Canada: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 81

enough to stop Alaric's invasion, revealing its weakness. The East did not step in to stop Alaric either, which shows the East's separation from the other side of the Empire.

The events from 395 to 410 are critical in order to understand the weak position of the Empire. Alaric successfully looted the East of its treasures and then invaded the Western Empire, starving Rome, while gaining imperial titles in between these events. Alaric demonstrates how a barbarian leader could upset the Empire in its weak state through such lootings and campaigns. The King of the Goths met little resistance during his campaign after Stilicho's death, a fact that reflects the poor leadership of the Emperor to the army. Emperor Honorius certainly did not have the ability to be a strong leader, as can be seen by a popular story after 410 about the Emperor supposing that his chicken named "Rome" had perished instead of the city.⁶¹ The separated Empire of East and West resulted in its own weakness and lack of leadership, eventually leading to the disintegrated end of what was once the grand Roman Empire.

⁶¹ Matyszak. *The Enemies of Rome*. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004), 268

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