The End is Upon Us:
Attila the Hun and the Christian Apocalypse

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in History

Liberty University

2020
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Introduction:

Following a successful, albeit rather brief, campaign into northern Italy in A.D. 452, Attila the Hun returned to his court somewhere in the vast Great Hungarian Plain (the actual location remains unknown). Throughout the course of making preparations for a renewed campaign against the Eastern and Western Roman Empire, Attila decided to take another wife in early 453, adding to his many marriages. Once the wedding festivities were over, both Attila and his new bride, Ildico, retired to their bridal chamber. However, when Attila did not appear the following morning, Hunnic guards stormed the room to discover Ildico weeping over her husband’s lifeless body. Perhaps celebrating too hard, Attila appeared to have hemorrhaged through his nose during the night as no wounds were discovered on his body. Despite Ildico’s suspicion of murder, Attila’s death was generally accepted by the Hunnic populace as an accident and great periods of mourning immediately ensued. According to the sixth century Gothic historian Jordanes, “Thus did drunkenness put a disgraceful end to a king renowned in war.”

Therefore, Attila the Hun, the man who terrorized the Roman world and came to symbolize the very essence of barbarism, died an inglorious death.

Since his death, Western historians have traditionally preserved the Roman portrayal of Attila as a savage, but brilliant brute. From early histories by ancient authors such as Jordanes and Priscus of Panium, a Roman diplomat and historian who met Attila, to Edward Gibbon’s seminal work, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Attila and the Huns’ barbarism is denoted as particularly distinct amongst Rome’s subsequent barbarian conquerors. Although this ruthless image, combined with Christian depictions of him as the embodiment of God’s judgement on

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1 Jordanes, *Getica*, 49.254.
earth is certainly exaggerated, modern scholars today, nonetheless, still delineate the savagery of
Attila’s reign, but typically within a broader narrative of the Huns’ influence on the Roman
world. Consequently, very few historical monographs exist on Attila the Hun.

The first major historical works that not only incorporated Attila and the Hunnic peoples
within the broader context of the fourth and fifth centuries, but also pioneered the creation of the
modern discipline of Late Antique studies was historian J.B. Bury’s History of the Later Roman
Empire (1889) and historian Peter Brown’s, The World of Late Antiquity (1971). Although both
Bury’s and Brown’s work galvanized the establishment of an independent field, despite the
dichotomy of years between them, it is important to note that Late Antique studies broadly
emerged out of the historical field’s trend towards cultural studies in the 1970-1980s,
promulgated by the French Annales school. Because of these movements within the historical
community, both Bury’s and Brown’s work present Attila and the Hunnic peoples, not simply as
another avaricious and brutal barbarian tribe, but as a distinctly unique ethnic group.²

Similarly in scope, historian Peter Heather’s more recent The Fall of the Roman Empire
(2006) and Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe (2009)
incorporates Attila and the Hunnic peoples within a larger historical framework. As with many
other Late Antique scholars, Heather’s assessment of the Late Roman Empire is one of a
relatively stable, religiously vibrant, and financially sound world.³ While chronicling the various
barbarian incursions across the frontier and internal civil strife, which undermined imperial
authority, Heather, nonetheless, concludes that the empire was capable of successfully navigating

³ Peter Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians (Oxford:
Oxford University Press, 2006), 31-32.
the trials. His fundamental argument is that the process of Western imperial disintegration occurred in three distinct steps.  

Beginning with the arrival of Hunnic forces beyond the Roman frontier in the 370s, Heather notes that these initial movements from across the Great Eurasian Steppe to north of the Black Sea in the late fourth century ultimately resulted in the mass migration of several Gothic tribes into the Eastern Roman Empire, frightened by tales of violence and savagery of the newcomers. As the Huns migrated south towards the Danube River and eventually settled within the Great Hungarian Plain, many former frontier barbarian tribes moved into both the Western and Eastern Empires to escape their grip. Throughout the course of the following decades, the empire struggled to achieve a workable political balance with the newly arrived tribes, such as the Goths, Franks, Vandals, Suevi, and Burgundians. However, the sudden ferocity, swiftness and brutality of Attila the Hun’s campaigns in the mid-fifth century undermined the empire’s ability to militarily respond effectively, instead relying heavily on barbarian support.

The consequences of Attila’s ferocious campaigns and sudden death profoundly impacted the empire’s ability to survive. According to Heather, “This was the straw that broke the western Empire’s back. This started a bidding war in which the last of the west’s disposable assets were expended in a futile effort to bring enough powerful supporters together to generate stability.”

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4 Ibid., 433.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 434.
7 Ibid., 435.
8 Ibid.
Overall, it was the presence of the Huns that radically altered the balance of power in Europe that resulted in the collapse of Roman imperial power in the West.9

In Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe, Heather expounds on his earlier work by examining the migratory process that undermined the Roman Empire. While traditionally the movement of various barbarian tribes into the empire were categorized as invasions, through reassessments of archeological and literary evidence, Heather concludes that many of the tribes did not move as wholesale people groups. He writes, “Not even the largest groups were whole ‘peoples’ moving from one locality to another untouched by the process. They could both shed population and gain it.”10 According to him, even without the arrival of the Huns and the campaigns of Attila, the migratory process which began centuries earlier would eventually have undermined the Roman Empire.11 In this way, the Huns were merely the last domino in the chain of barbarian migrations.

In contrast to Heather’s argument, Adrian Goldsworthy’s How Rome Fell (2009) posits that while the Huns were a serious threat, it was internal strife that ultimately undermined the empire. From the outset, he takes issue with the Late Antique field’s shift towards cultural studies stating, “Switching the focus to society, culture, religion and even to government and law tends to produce a rather static view, emphasizing continuity rather than change. Events such as wars and revolutions, and the behavior and decisions of specific emperors and ministers, do not necessarily register, but it would be most unwise to see them as unimportant.”12 By this measure,
he argues that it is possible to gauge how Late Antique society eventually changed into the Early Medieval Period.

Instead of transformation and continuity, Goldsworthy’s narrative parrots that of a nuanced Roman view of collapse. While Romans tended to see their rise and fall in strictly moral terms, he argues that Rome’s fall was not primarily caused by outside forces, but rather internal corruption and civil war. Beginning after the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180, the subsequent civil wars that followed produced a new dynamic within the Roman world. In stark contrast with Heather’s work, Goldsworthy states, “Rome’s fall was to a great extent self-inflicted. It is hard to say when the process became irrevocable…Emperors tried to make themselves safer, and in doing so, weakened the capacity of the empire to act. They also failed to prevent the regular appearance of internal challengers.”\(^{13}\) As a result, although Hunnic activities throughout the fourth and fifth century were destructive and posed serious challenges, “The success of the Huns was to a great extent a product of Roman weaknesses.”\(^{14}\)

Michael Kulikowski’s *Rome’s Gothic Wars* (2008) traces the antagonistic relationship between the Eastern and Western Roman Empires and the Goths. It should be noted that while the Goths were not a single, homogenous people group, this work mainly focused on the Gothic tribe led by Alaric. Originally, the Goths lived across the Danube River beyond the Roman border. In similar fashion to Heather, Kulikowski argues that the Tervingi and Greuthungi tribes that fled into the Eastern Roman Empire did so in order to escape the Huns.\(^{15}\) So what began as a minor external migratory issue, developed by the late fourth and early fifth century into an

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 423.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 320.

existential internal crisis which culminated with the sack of Rome in 410.\textsuperscript{16} Although he does not specifically address Attila the Hun in this work, he provides key contextual information of the Roman world prior to the Huns’ arrival. He writes, “No longer products and victims of Roman history, the Goths - and the many other barbarian settlers who followed in their footsteps - now made Rome’s history themselves.”\textsuperscript{17} By the early fifth-century, Gothic leading figures were incorporated into both Roman Empires’ political system, with Alaric appointed *Magister Militum* (Master of Soldiers) by Eastern Emperor Arcadius and Western claimant Attalus. In Kulikowski’s estimation, the collapse of Roman power in the West was a result of internal strife rather than external invasion.\textsuperscript{18}

Several years later, Kulikowski expanded on his work in *The Triumph of Empire: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine* (2016) and *The Tragedy of Empire: From Constantine to the Destruction of Roman Italy* (2019). While Kulikowski writes much about the life and times of Roman emperors during his chosen period, a central theme throughout the book is the evolution and final dissolution of Roman governance. Since the founding of the Principate, the Roman central government remained relatively small, with only a few hundred positions and little interference with provincial governments. However, as the Principate gave way to the Dominate, emperors exerted more control over the provinces in order to solidify their political position, and in turn expanded the size of the central government. According to him, “By the time of Constantine’s death, the entire empire was integrated into a system of government that functioned…irrespective of who happened to be emperor, carried on the shoulders of an imperial

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 183-184.
elite that justified its existence not by senatorial birth, but by the roles it served in perpetuating the machinery of state.”\textsuperscript{19}

While the Roman Empire did not permanently split until 395, the establishment of Constantinople along with the gradual movement of much of the ruling elite dramatically affected the long-term viability of the west.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore, Kulikowski argues that the Western Roman Empire ceased to exist because its remaining ruling elite simply stopped supporting the central government.\textsuperscript{21} In regards to Attila and the Huns’ influence on the empire, particularly Attila’s 451 Gallic campaign, he writes, “For, despite the ‘leadership secrets’ (Wess Robert’s \textit{Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun} (1985), a biographical study of Attila primarily for business leaders) sometimes attributed to him, his later role as an all-purpose barbarian villain of historical memory, and the outsized significance which some otherwise sober historians accord him, Attila was a good politician, but an indifferent general.”\textsuperscript{22} In essence, “…we may remember that even the great bogeyman Attila very much wanted to be part of the empire.”\textsuperscript{23}

Recently published, Kyle Harper’s \textit{The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire} (2017) postulates that the emergence of a Mini Ice Age in Late Antiquity set off a chain of events, beginning with the mass migration of peoples, that would end with the collapse of Roman imperial power in the West.\textsuperscript{24} While presenting new archeological and scientific

\textsuperscript{19} Michael Kulikowski, \textit{The Triumph of Empire: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 264.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 308-309.

\textsuperscript{22} Michael Kulikowski, \textit{The Tragedy of Empire: From Constantine to the Destruction of Roman Italy} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 210.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 266.

evidence, particularly ice core samples from the north pole, Harper charts the impact that plague and climate change had on the waning empire. According to him, “The end of Rome’s empire, then, is the story in which humanity and the environment cannot be separated. Or, rather, it is one chapter in the still unfolding story of our relationship with the environment.”

In the end, the opening of Rome’s borders and the steady loss of territory and income to barbarians along with the transformation of the army, government, and society, are all consequences of the unwelcome presence of an evolving climate, which sapped the strength of the empire.

As with other Late Antique Roman historians, Harper incorporates Hunnic activities within the broader narrative of the decline of Roman power in the west. However, in regards to Attila’s invasion of Italy in 452, he does offer insight into the effects of disease, particularly malaria, had on the Hunnic army and its sudden retreat. He states, “What actually repulsed the invaders was seen, from one perspective, as ‘heaven-sent disasters: famine and some kind of disease.’ The retreat was in fact the predictable biological consequence of intruders colliding with the indigenous disease ecology.” Consequently, as the Hunnic army pastured its horses in the Italian, mosquito ridden, watery lowlands, they easily transmitted the deadly disease to the rest of the army.

Christopher Kelly’s The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome (2010), is among the more prominent historical monographs on Attila the Hun. While presenting a similar argument to others, tying the arrival of the Huns to the eventual collapse of Roman power in the

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25 Ibid., 5.
26 Ibid., 245.
27 Ibid., 196.
28 Ibid.
west, Kelly contends that it was the campaigns of Attila the Hun that tipped the scales unfavorably away from the Romans. Because of Attila’s invasion of Gaul in 451, Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III and Magister Militum Flavius Aetius were forced to recognize the Visigoths, settled near Toulouse, as an equal partner against the Hunnic invaders. Although the alliance was out of political and military expediency, this diplomatic reconfiguring would prove fatal for the empire. He writes, “It was that problem which fatally divided Aetius and Valentinian. After their deaths, the Western Roman Empire never recovered its balance. Its rulers were unable to prevent the expansion of the Goths or the invasion of the Franks now released from Hun domination.” Additionally, Kelly presents a nuanced portrayal of Attila as a capable ruler with apt political, diplomatic, and military skills while also describing the barbaric and apocalyptic depiction of Attila and the wider Hunnic people featured prominently in Late Antique histories.

Overall, while understanding the broader context and realities of Attila and the Huns’ influence on the Roman world is a crucial aspect of the historical process, it is also equally important to consider how the Romans themselves perceived these contemporary events. Since their arrival onto the European landscape from beyond Scythia, the land north of the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, the Huns were originally perceived by the Roman world as a seemingly unknowable, uncivilized barbarian group that instilled fear on the unfortunate peoples in their path. As the Huns migrated further south and eventually permanently settled in the Great

29 Christopher Kelly, The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009), 278.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 278-279.
32 Ibid., 90-91.
Hungarian Plain, the Romans’ original perception largely remained intact, but with great alterations.

By the campaigns of Attila in the mid-fifth century, as numerous cities and towns were utterly destroyed across the Balkans, Gaul, and northern Italy, Attila and the wider Hunnic peoples were no longer seen by the Romans as just another fearsome barbarian tribe, but instead became the embodiment of the apocalypse. As Attila proclaimed outside of Troyes in 451, he and the Huns were the “Scourge of God”, sent by the Almighty to punish the Christianized Roman world for their sins. Therefore, Attila and the Huns’ intrusion into the Roman world was not simply perceived as a minor obstacle to the continuation of Christianized Roman civilization and empire, but rather the direct fulfillment of the Christian apocalypse. From the establishment of traditional Roman paganism, to its infusion with Christianity forming a unique religious framework by the fifth century, particularly the concept of collapse, the ensuing Christian apocalyptic beliefs would alter the Romans’ perception of Attila and the wider Hunnic peoples.
Chapter One: Traditional Roman Paganism and Christianity

In spring A.D. 451, following a series of failed diplomatic initiatives and ultimatums, Attila the Hun, alongside a large conglomeration of Hunnic and subjugated Germanic warriors, invaded the Western Roman Empire, crossing the Rhine River into Gaul.¹ Unlike previous barbarian incursions across the empire’s border, which typically resulted in the sack of nearby villages and farming communities, Attila’s recent communications with Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III indicated that he intended to claim much more, perhaps permanent territorial acquisitions. From their base of operations in Pannonia (modern Hungary), the Hunnic army, veterans of several successful years of campaigns against the Eastern Roman Empire, swiftly entered Gaul, leaving a trail of destruction as numerous cities and villages were utterly ransacked and destroyed.² Additionally, as the Huns were fairly proficient in siege warfare, even well-fortified cities, such as Trier (Augusta Treverorum), once a strategic capital of the Western Roman Empire sporadically in the third and fourth centuries, were not spared destruction.³ For those who lay in the path of Attila’s army, panic quickly ensued with many hurriedly planning to escape. Unfortunately, as the Western Roman Empire was plagued by internal political divisions with ever-dwindling military resources, much of the Roman army under Master of Soldiers (Magister Militum) Flavius Aetius were not in a position to promptly repulse the Hunnic invaders. As a result, Attila’s army encountered little opposition as it initially swept through Gaul.

¹ Gregory of Tours, Historia Francorum, 2.6.
² Ibid.
³ Goldsworthy, How Rome Fell, 332.
According to an early sixth century Frankish chronicle, a certain young female virgin, Genevieve (Genovesa), convinced the people of Lutetia (modern day Paris) that through prayer and fasting, the Lord would spare the city from the wrath of Attila.\footnote{Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum Volume 3 (Edited by Bruno Krusch, Hannover, Germany: Weidmann, 1896), 204-38.} By extraordinary means, the city was spared destruction as the Hunnic army moved southward, and Genevieve was later made a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. However, doubt exists as to whether Attila intended to sack the city at all, since it was not only of minimal value, but also lay outside the main strategic route into Gaul.\footnote{Kelly, The End of Empire, 242.} Nevertheless, this legend is an instance that reveals the Hunnic army struck fear within the local Gallic populace by its mere presence.

Less fortunate then Lutetia, further east at Reims (Durocortorum), the local bishop, Nicasius, alongside his virgin sister, attempted to stop the Hunnic destruction of their city, but unfortunately he was decapitated while standing outside the cathedral doors.\footnote{Flodoard of Reims, History of the Church at Reims (Edited by Johann Heller and Georg Waitz, Hannover: Germany, Weidmann, 1881), 405-599. (Full Latin phrase: Adhaesit pavimento anima mea, mox insequente gladio cervieem, caesi verbum pietatis ab ore non defecit; capite in terram cadente, immortalitatis, ut traditur, sententiam prosecuto: Vivifica me, Domine secundum verbum tuum.)} According to the tenth-century Frankish historian Flodoard of Reims, while Nicasius recited the beginning of Psalm 119:25, “My soul clings to the dust…” (adhaesit pavimento anima), he was decapitated.\footnote{Ibid.} As the head rolled away from his body, it finished the verse, “…give me life, Lord, according to your word” (vivifica me, Domine, secundum verb tuum).\footnote{Ibid.} As a result, the talking head sufficiently scared the Huns into abandoning the city altogether.\footnote{Ibid.} Regardless of the veracity of
this tale, as the dread of the Huns increased, so too did the miraculous events, indicating the presence of the divine.

As the Hunnic army moved further south, it stopped outside the city of Troyes (Augustobona Tricassium) only to be greeted by the city’s bishop, Lupus. As recorded in a later chronicle, “…and S. Lupus went upon the gate, and demanded who he was that assieged and assailed him.” Attila replied, “I am he, Attila, the scourge and rod of God.”¹⁰ In a sorrowful reply, Lupus said, “I am Lupus that have wasted the flock of God and have need of the scourging of God.”¹¹ Immediately, Lupus ordered the gates to be opened and the Huns allowed to freely enter. Despite the prospect of certain death, “… all the people of Attila were so, by the will of God, blinded, and they passed through the town, and saw no men of the city, nor did no hurt to nobody.”¹² Because of Lupus’s penitent heart, the Lord had saved the city from utter destruction.¹³ As the thirteenth century Italian chronicler Jacobus de Voragine put into the mouth of Attila outside Troyes, he would henceforth be known as the ‘Scourge of God’ (Flagellum Dei).¹⁴ Although Attila may not have described himself as such, to contemporaries and later medieval chroniclers, he became the embodiment of God’s wrath upon the impious Roman world.

While the wanton devastation of Roman cities seemed incomprehensible to those within the area, these events were supposedly prophesied by the Apostle Peter. A few months prior to the invasion, Servatius, bishop of Tongeren (Atuatuca Tungrorum) near the Rhine River,

¹¹ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid.
appealed to the Lord that the Huns be prevented from marching against the empire.\textsuperscript{15} Greatly disturbed at the response he received, Servatius traveled to Rome and directly asked the Apostle Peter at a shrine dedicated to him.\textsuperscript{16} However, after several days of fasting and prayer, the response he received in a vision only disturbed him more,

> Why do you, most holy of men, disturb me? Behold! It has been unalterably decided in the counsels of the Lord that the Huns should invade France and that it should be devastated as if by a severe storm. Now follow these instructions: travel swiftly, put your house in good order, prepare your tomb, and make ready your burial shroud! Behold! Your spirit will have left your body so that your eyes will not see the evil deeds of the Huns in France. Thus the Lord our God has spoken.\textsuperscript{17}

Upon awakening, Servatius promptly returned to Tongeren and prepared for his death, neglecting the pleas from his congregation to remain. Shortly thereafter, Servatius died of a fever, but Tongeren was saved from the menacing Huns.\textsuperscript{18}

Likewise, prior to the destruction of Metz (\textit{Divodurum Mediomatricum}) soon after the Hunnic army crossed into Gaul, in another revelatory encounter with the Apostles, a man of faith supposedly saw in a vision the Apostles Peter, Paul, and Stephen in a heated conversation.\textsuperscript{19} As the city contained a chapel dedicated to him, Stephen implored them saying, “I beg you, my lords, to prevent by your intercessions the burning of the city of Metz by the enemy, because there is a place in it which the relics of my life on earth are preserved…but if the wickedness of the people has grown too great, so that nothing else can be done except deliver the city to burning at least let this oratory not be consumed.”\textsuperscript{20} While Peter and Paul may have refused to

\textsuperscript{15} Gregory of Tours, \textit{Historia Francorum}, 2.5.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 240 (Primary Source).
\textsuperscript{18} Gregory of Tours, \textit{Historia Francorum}, 2.5-6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
stop the Hunnic invasion, pronouncing, “For the sin of its people has increased, and the noise of their wickedness ascends to the presence of God; therefore this city shall be consumed with fire”, they did allow the chapel of Stephen to be preserved intact, as the surrounding city was completely destroyed.21

These accounts of the savagery and barbarism that accompanied Attila the Hun—and the Roman people’s desperation to avoid them—oddly seem more fitting amongst the pages of the Bible rather than historical texts. Yet, in the few sources that describe the 451 campaign, chroniclers repeatedly emphasized the direct correlation between the Romans’ impiety and Attila as an instrument of God’s wrath. As the seventh century Spanish historian Isidore of Seville poignantly observed, “For they [Huns] were the rod of the wrath of God. As often as his indignation went forth against the faithful, he punished them with the Huns, so that, chastened by their suffering, the faithful would force themselves away from the greed of their world and from sin and claim the inheritance of the celestial kingdom.”22 Harkening back to the Lord’s promise towards a sinful and unrepentant Israel in Isaiah 28:15-18 that, “…when the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down”, the invasion of Attila the Hun would be couched in strictly biblical terms.23

Nevertheless, despite the Christian apocalyptic overtones in the accounts of Attila’s 451 campaign and the acute possibility of them obscuring the historicity of the event, they clearly testify to the genuine fear experienced by the Roman people of Gaul. In order to understand why some Romans viewed Attila and the Huns as the embodiment of God’s wrath upon the Roman

21 Ibid.
23 Isaiah 25:15-18.
world, it is important to examine the religious disposition of the Late Antique empire within the broader context of Roman religious history. It is through the process by which Christianity became connected to the imperial administration, that its accompanying apocalyptic worldview, infused with traditional pagan ideals, became the barometer by which many Romans interpreted contemporary events.

Throughout its long history, ancient Rome had been a traditionally, deeply religious society, both individually and collectively. As retold by later Roman historians in the first century B.C., the Romans were intricately connected to the divine as Romulus and Remus, the legendary co-founders of Rome who survived the torrent of the Tiber River and subsequently suckled by a she-wolf, were the semi-divine offspring of the god Mars and a Vestal Virgin, a priestess of the goddess Vesta.24 Likewise, from the brother’s quarrel over the kingship of the city that resulted in Remus’s murder, to the consecration of the temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill, and the eventual heavenly disappearance of Romulus on the Campus Martius, the divine were active participants in the city’s early history.25 Indeed, as noted by the poet Virgil, the Romans were prophesied by Jupiter to rule over “…an empire without end.”26 This divine approval would form not only the basis for the myriad of religious traditions and sacrifices integral to the city’s governance, but also legitimize the expansion of Roman power (imperium).27

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25 Ibid., 1.8, 1.10, 1.12, 1.16-17.
Unlike modern concepts of religion, which often denote a set of distinct beliefs and practices that connect the worshiper to the divine and ultimately give meaning to life, Roman religion consistently emphasized ritual over theology. As historian Larry W. Hurtado notes, “…the Latin term religio had a certain variety of connotations, often designating sacred rites and sacrificial practices—that is, actions that can comprise reverence or worship given to this or that deity.” These religious practices typically centered on the sacredness of the city of Rome (Ab Urbe Roma)—personified by the goddess Roma—its divine relationship with the gods, and the conquest of new territory. In stark contrast to Roman religio was superstition, which included religious cults and practices regarded as foreign, dangerous, and wholly inappropriate. Throughout the entirety of the Roman period, superstition was also used as a slur against numerous cults such as Mithraism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. For a society deeply wary of foreign influence, particularly from eastern cultures, an individual’s exclusionary religious preference might demonstrate potential political disloyalty to Rome. Therefore, collective religious conformity, defined as the acceptance of Roman deities and rituals in addition to personal preferences, was strongly emphasized in Roman society.

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34 It should be noted that although Roman religion emphasized collective reverence through public ritual, individuals did pray to particular deities for various personal reasons as exemplified by household shrines.
Initially depicted as natural or agricultural forces, Roman deities would not take the more commonly seen anthropomorphic shape "until the third century B.C. when they were incorporated into the Greek pantheon." According to historian Lesley Adkins, “By the end of the republic, state religion was substantially different from that of early Rome because of the absorption of gods from other cultures.” Therefore, much of what would constitute traditional Roman paganism was an amalgamation of Etruscan and Greek practices to form a distinctive Roman framework that intertwined the political and religious functions of the state.

Throughout the Roman regal period (circa eighth century B.C. to the sixth century B.C.) following Romulus’s heavenly departure, each of the six subsequent kings further developed the city’s institutions with Numa Pompilius credited with the establishment of Rome’s formal religious structure with the king as its hierarchical head (rex sacrorum). According to the Roman historian Livy, Numa created the various priesthoods designed to oversee the rituals and sacrificial practices of the city’s cults, including the Pontifex Maximus, the chief priest, and the all-female Vestal Virgins, whose sole function was the maintenance of the sacred flame that symbolized the eternal power of Rome. Likewise, Numa established a twelve month calendar that systematized the annual religious festivals and holy days. Notwithstanding later innovations by Julius Caesar and others, “the modern Western calendar remains a direct

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35 Connolly, The Ancient City, 170.
39 Connolly, The Ancient City, 172. Livy, Abe Urbe Condita, 1.19-20
40 Livy, Abe Urbe Condita, 1.19-20.
descendent of this early Roman version, as the names we give to our months show: every single one of them is Roman.” It is important to note that although the historicity of Rome’s early period remains questionable, as Livy wrote in the first century B.C., the Romans incontrovertibly believed the accounts of its founding era.

Enclosing the city proper was the *pomerium*, a sacred boundary that legally separated Rome from its territorial possessions (*ager*) while also symbolizing the expansion of Roman power. Because of its sacrosanct nature, there were several restrictions enforced within the boundary, including a prohibition on weapons, military deities, and even limits on a magistrate’s *imperium*. Originally conceived by Romulus and later formalized in the regal and republican period, a victorious Roman commander had the exclusive right to extend the *pomerium*, denoting not only the triumph of Roman arms, but also the gods. As historian Mary Beard eruditely notes, “Religion, in other words, underwrote Roman power.” However, more importantly, the *pomerium* demarcated the very essence of Romanness. As the Roman religious system emphasized collective reverence through ritual, centering on the sacredness of Rome, rather than

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41 Beard, *SPQR*, 104.
42 Beard, *SPQR*, 100.
43 Ibid. 61.
44 By the Principate, the *pomerium* would extend beyond the confines of the original boundary determined by Romulus to include sections of the Campus Martius and the Aventine Hill. Additionally, as the princeps would henceforth possess ‘proconsular *imperium*’ and ‘consular *imperium*’ powers after 19 B.C., the fusion of military and civic authority meant that temples dedicated to military deities, such as the god Mars, were allowed to exist within the sacred boundary for the first time.; Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, 186, 63. Beard, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1*, 180.
46 Beard, *SPQR*, 102.
individual conviction, the gods chosen for worship within the boundary defined the Roman sense of identity.⁴⁸

With the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus, Rome’s last king, and the establishment of the Roman Republic (res publica or more formally Senatus Popolusque Romanus), the Roman religious system became more formally part of the state.⁴⁹ Because the new political framework distinguished little between the realms of a magistrate’s authority, there was no separate professional cadre of priests to oversee the rituals of the state.⁵⁰ Instead, as with other magisterial offices, many of the priesthoods became elective positions, often for life.⁵¹ By the first century B.C., the number of elective priesthoods had evolved into four main colleges of priests: sixteen pontifices (bridge-builders) led by the Pontifex Maximus, the most important position within the religious system, sixteen auguri for divination, fifteen sacris faciendis for conducting sacrifices, and ten eupulones to organize feasts.⁵² As the more distinguished colleges, the auguri and pontifices were exceptionally competitive, but highly prestigious religious offices that could enhance an individual’s political career with no less a figure than Julius Caesar elected as Pontifex Maximus in 63 B.C.⁵³

Outside of maintaining the gods’ favor with Rome through sacred rites and sacrificial practices, the most important role of the priesthood, particularly the pontifices and augers, was divination for political magistrates.⁵⁴ Through the reading of a sacred animals’ entrails, the will

⁴⁸ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Connolly, The Ancient City, 171.
⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵² Ibid.
⁵⁴ Scheid, An Introduction to Roman Religion, 113.
of the gods could be determined for a variety of situations, such as the declaration of war or the outcome of an engagement. However, although divinations were conducted by the priesthood, “It was up to them [political magistrates] to accept and establish the significance of all signs noticed and announced…” Additionally, the priests could also consult the sacred Sibylline Books, a collection of Greek prophecies that “…were considered to be a talisman for Rome.”

As a result, the magistrate would be personally responsible in the event of a disaster if he willfully ignored the gods’ directive. On one occasion during the First Punic War (264-241 B.C.), Consul Publius Claudius Pulcher, in command of a Roman fleet, grew restless at his sacred chickens for not eating and so threw them overboard saying, “Since they do not wish to eat, let them drink!” His subsequent defeat was blamed on him for having ignored the omen.

Notwithstanding the importance of Roman religious practices in maintaining the gods’ favor, Roman writers typically stressed morality as the quintessential indicator of state success. According to Cicero, following the dictatorship of Sulla in the early first century B.C., the moral bankruptcy of Rome’s rulers caused enormous strains on the state. He writes,

[Before that era]…our imperium could be called more accurately a protectorate of the world than domination. This policy and practice we had begun gradually to modify even before Sulla’s time: but since his victory we have departed from it altogether. For the time

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55 As Peter Connolly explains, “A larger animal was stunned with a pole-axe, and then its throat was cut. As the blood ran out, the animal was cut open and its entrails examined. This was to ensure that the omens were favorable. It was then roasted over a fire: the best portions of meat were offered to the gods, and the worshippers usually feasted on the rest in the temple precinct. More modest, private offerings might be cakes, flowers or small votive offerings.” Connolly, The Ancient City, 171.
56 Ibid., 121.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Suetonius, De Vita Caesarum, 3.2.
60 Ibid.
had gone by when any oppression of the allies could appear wrong, seeing that atrocities so outrageous were committed against Roman citizens.\footnote{Ibid. 149 (Primary Source).}

In similar fashion, Livy implores his readers, “…then let him follow in his mind how, as discipline broke down bit by bit, morality at first foundered; how it next subsided in ever greater collapse and then began to topple headlong in ruin - until the advent of our own age, in which we can endure neither our vices nor the remedies needed to cure them.”\footnote{Livy, \textit{Ab Urbe Condita}, pr.9.} Even Caesar Augustus lamented Rome’s moral collapse and enacted wide-ranging legislation designed to curb unethical behavior, even banishing his own daughter for violating anti-adultery laws.\footnote{“His satisfaction with the success of this family and its training was, however, suddenly dashed by Fortune. he came to the conclusion that the Elder and the Younger Julia ad both been indulging in every sort of vice; and banished them.” Suetonius, \textit{De Vita Caesarum}, 2.65.}

For Livy and others, morality precluded state success, “My wish is that each reader will pay the closest attention to the following: how men lived, what their moral principles were, under what leaders and by what measures at home and abroad our empire was won and extended.”\footnote{Livy, \textit{Ab Urbe Condita}, pr.9.} Ultimately, upstanding moral principles were seen as a prime indicator of the state’s health. However, although modern Western connotations of morality typically denote Judeo-Christian values that stress a transformation of inward motivations, Roman morality was fundamentally different.

At the core of the Roman ethical system was a collective adherence to \textit{mos maiorum} (the way of the ancestors), or outward proper behavior.\footnote{Matthew B. Roller, \textit{Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21.} These behaviors can be defined, among many others, as \textit{virtus} (courage, character), \textit{pietas} (dutifulness), \textit{fas} (permissible, lawful), \textit{ius}

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\footnote{Ibid. 149 (Primary Source).}

\footnote{Livy, \textit{Ab Urbe Condita}, pr.9.}

\footnote{“His satisfaction with the success of this family and its training was, however, suddenly dashed by Fortune. he came to the conclusion that the Elder and the Younger Julia ad both been indulging in every sort of vice; and banished them.” Suetonius, \textit{De Vita Caesarum}, 2.65.}

\footnote{Livy, \textit{Ab Urbe Condita}, pr.9.}

(rights as a Roman citizen), fides (faithfulness), laus (glory, praise), honor (respect), nobilitas (noble birth, fame, excellence), and dignitas (prestige, charisma). Therefore, as historian Matthew B. Roller notes, “In traditional Roman ethics, the objective external criteria that underpin moral value are supplied by one’s community of moral obligation, which passes judgements regarding how effectively an individual’s observed actions serve its interests.”

With the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., a new religious phenomenon slowly emerged alongside traditional ethos described by some scholars as emperor worship/imperial cult. Although the Romans had venerated Dea Roma for centuries, the goddess of Rome and the personification of the Roman people, emperor worship would be the first significant instance that an individual would be revered as a divine being. The new imperial cult instituted by Augustus promulgated that the emperor and his family possessed numen (divine will) or genius (spirit), which the Romans believed contained the divine part of an individual.

As the Pontifex Maximus, Augustus also established a new priesthood (Augustales) to carry out the rituals of the cult. According to the Greek historian Appian in the second century A.D., “Every holder of the imperial office, unless he has been a tyrant or a blameworthy man, is paid divine honors by the Romans after his death.” Although Augustus did not allow the formal veneration of himself in Rome, subsequent emperors eagerly encouraged the practice, particularly while they were still alive, with Nero portrayed as the Sun God in the Domus Aurea

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 65.
69 Connolly, The Ancient City, 170.
71 Connolly, The Ancient City, 170.
72 Ibid.
73 Appian, Bell, Civil, 2.148.
(Golden House) and Domitian insist on being addressed as lord (*dominus*) and god (*deus*).\(^{74}\) The imperial cult would persist, though in various iterations, till its dissolution by Theodosius I in the fourth century.\(^{75}\) Yet, despite the religious trappings and imagery of the imperial cult, its origins and implementation throughout the empire denote the indivisibility of Roman religion and politics.\(^{76}\)

Beginning with the Senate’s deification of Julius Caesar following his public funeral, Suetonius notes, “…a comet appeared about an hour before sunset and shone for seven days running. This was held to be Caesar’s soul, elevated to Heaven; hence the star, now placed above the forehead of his divine image.”\(^{77}\) As his adopted son, Octavian capitalized on the divine elevation of Caesar and henceforth styled himself as *Divi filius* (Divine Son).\(^{78}\) In Egypt, some texts referring to Octavian translate literally to “god from god” or “a god himself, and the son of a god.”\(^{79}\) With his victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian would be ceremoniously granted the titles *Augustus* (Revered One) and *Princeps* (First Among Equals) in 27 B.C., indicating not only his religious and political authority, but also his elevated status.\(^{80}\) Just as traditional Roman religion focused on the sacredness of the city of Rome (*Abe Urbe Roma*), the imperial cult would underscore each emperor’s authority, both in Rome and the provinces.\(^{81}\)

\(^{74}\) As Mary Beard explains, “One of the most striking changes in the landscape of Roman religion under the empire was the impact of the new temples of deified emperors. Almost half the twenty or so new state temples built between the reigns of Augustus and Constantine were dedicated to the divi, for, at least up to mid second century A.D., almost all deified emperors had a temple built in their honor.” Beard, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1*, 253. Connolly, *The Ancient City*, 170.; Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 295.

\(^{75}\) Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, 162.

\(^{76}\) Ibid.

\(^{77}\) Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum*, 1.88.

\(^{78}\) Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 293.

\(^{79}\) Ibid.


\(^{81}\) Ibid.
Across the empire, the imperial cult “modeled on the traditional forms of civic cults of the gods, did not displace traditional cults; they fitted alongside them.”\(^{82}\) In the Hellenistic East, with a strong tradition of king-worship, the imperial cult was absorbed within pre-existing religious structures and served to both reinforce the elevated status of the emperor and buttress his political authority.\(^{83}\) For example, in one Macedonian town, a local citizen is recorded to have been a priest for Zeus, Roma, and Augustus simultaneously.\(^{84}\) While the cult was a voluntary matter in the Hellenistic East, it was more directly imposed in the western provinces with depictions of the emperor as either divine himself or under the protection of Roman gods.\(^{85}\) Yet, as with the east, local deities were either incorporated or rebranded as Roman deities, though now reoriented towards Rome and the emperor.\(^{86}\)

Indeed, unlike many contemporary cultures that scoffed at all outside influence, the Romans were quite open to foreign cults and traditions alongside their domestic religious practices. As historian Eric M. Orlin notes, “Rome continued to be open to foreigners through the end of the Republic and under the emperors, and the notion of openness became an important part of Roman ideology that played a significant role in holding the Empire together for more than five hundred years.”\(^{87}\) However, despite the Romans’ willingness to incorporate foreign

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\(^{82}\) Beard, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1*, 360.


\(^{84}\) Beard, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1*, 360.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 349, 352.

\(^{86}\) According to Beard, “A high ranking Roman recorded with approbation how he had seen in Germany a barbarian chief across the Elbe in a dugout canoe to touch the divine person of Tiberius (then Augustus’ heir); the chief in addressing Tiberius referred to the local worship of the divinity of the emperor.” Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome*, 7.
cults alongside domestic ones, there were limits, particularly when the cult clashed with the Roman sense of identity.\textsuperscript{88}

In 28 B.C. Augustus issued an edict banning the worship of Isis and Serapis from within the \textit{pomerium}, but provided state funds for rebuilding their shrines outside the boundary.\textsuperscript{89} Simultaneously, he dedicated a new temple to Apollo near his home on the Palatine Hill.\textsuperscript{90} By issuing funds for the Egyptian shrines to be rebuilt, Augustus signaled not only that Rome remained open to foreign cults, but also redefined the very essence of Romanness. As Orlin notes, “…the temple’s [Apollo] location on the Palatine Hill, inside the \textit{pomerium}, called attention to the permeability of the boundaries of Romanness; the Greek cult was marked as Roman, in contrast to the Egyptian cults.”\textsuperscript{91} This declaration by Augustus, epitomizing the incorporation of Greek culture into the Roman sense of identity, would become a significant factor in the subsequent adoption of Christianity within the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{92}

In the early first century A.D. a new religious cult emerged at an outpost of empire centered on the teachings of Jesus Christ alongside centuries old Judaic cultural and religious traditions. Originally perceived by the Roman government as an offshoot of Judaism, Christianity’s early development would be inextricably connected to the Judaic faith.\textsuperscript{93} However, in reality, Christianity was an entirely and new ‘religious cult’ drawing converts from all nations

\textsuperscript{88} Connolly, \textit{The Ancient City}, 174.
\textsuperscript{89} Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome}, 211.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 211-212.
\textsuperscript{92} Acts 17:23.
\textsuperscript{93} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 95.
and every social strata.\textsuperscript{94} While the emergence of new religious cults within the Roman world was not uncommon, such as Mithraism in the late first century, many of these new cults, including Christianity, were initially regarded by the Romans as entirely foreign (\textit{superstitio}) and dangerous.\textsuperscript{95} As historian Adrian Goldsworthy notes about early Roman perceptions of Christianity, “Critics claimed that converts were usually the vulnerable, poor and ignorant, often slaves or women - groups that educated men felt were by nature illogical. Rumors also spread of terrible secret rituals. The communion service, with its talk of eating flesh and drinking blood fueled tales of cannibalism.”\textsuperscript{96}

Although the rumors were grossly exaggerated, the Roman disdain for Christianity was primarily the incompatibility of Christian exclusive monotheistic theology and Roman inclusive polytheistic paganism.\textsuperscript{97} Yet, even beliefs concerning religious and political spheres of authority were deemed incompatible. When asked by the Pharisees if it was lawful for them to pay taxes to Caesar [Augustus], Jesus answered, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”\textsuperscript{98} To the average Jew, Hellenic Greek, and Roman, Jesus’s assertion that religious and political authority were separate would have come as a shock. For it countered

\textsuperscript{94} Acts 13:13-16. Acts 2:1-41. The historian Adrian Goldsworthy noted, “It appears to have been primarily an urban religion, but then we always know more about life in the cities than the countryside so this assumption may be mistaken.” Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 95, 99.


\textsuperscript{96} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 96.

\textsuperscript{97} Beard, \textit{Religions of Rome: Volume 1}, 359. Additionally, it is important to note that while initially considered a foreign cult (\textit{superstitio}) Mithraic theology was not entirely incompatible with Roman sentiments. According to Hans-Josef Klauck, “The devotees of Mithras were recruited from the imperial bureaucracy and the Roman army. Essentially, they were civil servants and soldiers. Loyalty to the Roman imperial house was one of the fundamental traits of the cult, and this is why the emperors regarded it with favor and supported it.” Klauck, \textit{The Religious Context of Early Christianity}, 148.

\textsuperscript{98} Mark 13:17.
basic assumptions “about the relationship between religious and political life.”

Yet, notwithstanding the dichotomy of beliefs, Christianity’s first decades would herald the abandonment of many Judaic traditions and cultural norms in favor of a more Romanized posture.

In accordance with Jesus’s instructions to proselytize “…in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”, early Christian missionary activity first concentrated on the Greco-Jewish community in the eastern provinces. Although non-Jewish peoples converted as well, Christ’s instructions were as later specified, “…to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” However, despite some initial success, the New Testament records fierce opposition to the Christian message. In an encounter with an angry Jewish crowd in Lystra (Asia Minor), the author of the Book of Acts records that the Apostle Paul, formerly a Jewish Pharisee, was stoned because of Christ’s proclamation.

Alongside Jewish recalcitrance to the Christian message, several Jewish converts to Christianity taught that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” In other words, even non-Jewish converts were to live according to Jewish law. The ensuing controversy resulted in a full council of Church apostles and elders in Jerusalem that determined that Christian converts were not bound to Jewish law. Consequently, with the Christian community theologically and culturally split from their Jewish

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101 Romans 1:16.
102 Acts 14:19.
103 Acts 15:1.
cousins, Christian missionaries henceforth went to more exclusively non-Jewish communities, particularly in Macedonia, Achaea, Asia Minor, and Italy, while still proselyting local Jewish populations.\textsuperscript{105}

It is after this religious split that Christianity began a very slow process of embracing Roman and Hellenic culture. While the process would certainly have accelerated after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70., and Bar Kokhba’s Jewish Revolt in A.D. 135, its antecedents were in the first decades of Christianity. In an extraordinary discussion with Athenian philosophers and political leaders at the Areopagus, the Apostle Paul remarked, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”\textsuperscript{106} Instead of immediately denouncing the pagan Hellenic gods, Paul often couched his Christian message in Greek religious terms, though still heavily Jewish. As a highly educated Roman citizen by birth, Paul understood well the common religious values and phraseology of the pagan Roman world.\textsuperscript{107}

Consequently, Paul’s missionary activities throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Italy would have tremendous influence on the future course of Christianity. By the death of the Apostle John, the supposed last writer of Christian scriptures, the New Testament would be entirely in Greek and converts were instructed to obey Roman authorities.\textsuperscript{108} Although Greek was the lingua franca of the eastern Mediterranean, the abandonment of Hebrew, the language of

\textsuperscript{105} Acts 16:6.  
\textsuperscript{106} Acts 17:22-23.  
the Jews and the Old Testament, symbolized a dramatic shift in the new religion. Indeed, by the late first and early second century, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, would emphatically declare, “It is outlandish to proclaim Jesus Christ and practice Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity - in which every tongue that believes in God has been gathered together.” Yet, despite the more nuanced Romanized posture, Christianity was still considered by the Roman government as a foreign (*superstitio*) and dangerous cult.

Initially, Roman authorities tolerated Christianity throughout the empire despite their disdain for the cult. Unlike modern definitions of toleration that suggest a deliberate imperial policy, it is prudent to recall that the Roman Empire was a myriad of local, provincial, and imperial authorities in a largely decentralized state. As such, the imperial government was not necessarily intimately involved in the daily governance of the provinces. Nevertheless, as Goldsworthy indicates, there was a distinct Roman governing philosophy, “The aim of Roman government was to keep the provincial communities stable, prosperous enough to pay their taxes in the long term, at peace with each other and content with imperial rule.” As its doctrine emphasized obedience to governing authorities, and was an infinitesimally small community, Christianity was not actively suppressed in the early decades of the religion.


111 Although Roman authorities did not actively suppress Christianity, as Cicero explained, new foreign religions were still regarded with suspicion, “Let no one have separate gods, either new or foreign, unless they are officially allowed” Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 10.


113 Ibid.


Outside of the Greek New Testament that describe several incidents involving local authorities, anti-Christian sentiment did not feature prominently in Roman sources. In Suetonius’s writings, Christianity is mentioned only once prior to Nero in connection with Claudius’s expulsion of Rome’s Jews in A.D. 49., “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Christ), he expelled them from the city.”\textsuperscript{116} It would not be until Nero’s reign and the Great Fire of A.D. 64. that the religion was both more frequently mentioned in Roman sources, and more actively suppressed.\textsuperscript{117} According to Tacitus, Nero’s decision to heinously persecute the city’s Christians was primarily due to his inability to change public perception that he ordered the blaze, despite lavish public gifts, sacrifices to the city’s gods, and consultation of the sacred Sibylline Books.\textsuperscript{118} Examples of Nero’s Christian persecution include crucifixion, eaten alive by beasts, and burned alive as “nightly illumination.”\textsuperscript{119} Although the persecution was lauded by Tacitus, Suetonius, and the Roman populace, the severity of the punishments engendered compassion for the religion’s followers.\textsuperscript{120} Nevertheless, Christianity was still regarded as a “hideous”, “shameful”, “mischievous” and now an imperially forbidden foreign (\textit{superstitio}) cult.\textsuperscript{121}

In the decades after Nero’s suicide in A.D. 68., Christianity continued to be largely tolerated throughout the empire, despite its illegality and a brief bout of persecution by Domitian. Under Trajan’s reign in the early second century, a distinct imperial policy towards the cult was

\textsuperscript{116} Suetonius, \textit{De Vita Caesarum}, 5.25.3.
\textsuperscript{117} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 96.
\textsuperscript{118} Tacitus, \textit{Annales}, 25.44.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
formalized, rooted in the Roman traditional governing philosophy. In an exchange of letters with Pliny the Younger, Propraetor (Governor) of Bithynia and Pontus in Asia Minor, regarding the imperial position on Christianity, Trajan states, “These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance, however suspect his past conduct my be.”

With few exceptions, particularly persecutions under Decius, Valerian, Diocletian, and Galerius, Trajan’s non-aggressive stance towards Christianity would become henceforth, established imperial practice.

By the early fourth century, Christian communities openly practiced their faith as churches were built in many cities across the empire, including right next to Diocletian’s palace in Nicomedia. As the religion attracted more converts from a wide range of backgrounds, such as the army and imperial bureaucracy, Christianity’s perception as a foreign (superstitio) and dangerous cult had nearly vanished. Nevertheless, although statistics are not available, Christianity remained small, possibly attracting ten percent or less of the empire’s population, concentrated in the eastern provinces, and indeed, quite fractured theologically, culturally, and organizationally, in the three centuries after Jesus’s death.

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122 Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 98.
124 Kulikowski, *The Triumph of Empire*, 179, 211.
125 Ibid.
Chapter Two: The Christianization of the Roman Empire

Amidst the backdrop of yet another contentious civil war and ruthless political machinations following the collapse of Diocletian’s tetrarchic system, proclaimed western Emperor Constantine I attacked his imperial colleague, Maxentius, in a bid for sole rulership over the western provinces in A.D. 312.¹ Easily dispatching Maxentius’s subordinates in northern Italy, Constantine’s veteran army arrived outside Rome at the Milvian Bridge astride the Tiber River.² According to two Roman sources, Lactantius, an advisor of Constantine’s, and Eusebius, a Christian bishop who spoke with the emperor years later, Constantine unexpectedly experienced a spiritual revelation prior to the battle. Notwithstanding that their accounts of the event are slightly different, Eusebius claims, “About the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he [Constantine] said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, ‘By this conquer.’ Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the whole company of soldiers.”³ That evening, as a bewildered Constantine pondered the spectacle’s meaning, Jesus Christ appeared in a dream urging him to adopt the symbol as his imperial standard.⁴

After careful consultation with Christian priests about the symbol’s meaning, Lactantius records, “He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their [soldiers] shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round at the top, thus ☧ being the cipher of Christ.”⁵ Consequently, with the conviction that the Christian deity supported them,

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¹ Lactantius, De Mortibus Persecutorum, 44.
² Ibid.
³ Eusebius, Vita Constantini, 28.2.
⁴ Ibid, 29.
⁵ Lactantius, De Mortibus Persecutorum, 44.
Constantine’s forces resoundingly defeated Maxentius’s numerically superior army the following day. Unfortunately for Maxentius, due to the great numbers of soldiers hurriedly streaming across the river in a panic frenzy, the fragile timber bridge collapsed and much of the army, including himself, drowned in their vain attempt to escape. To Eusebius, Constantine’s victory over the pagan Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge was akin to the destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the waters of the Red Sea.

Upon his triumphal entry into Rome, Constantine’s Christian conversion became plainly evident as he refused to offer the customary sacrifices to Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill. By deliberately neglecting a religious practice that symbolically underscored the triumph of Roman deities, Constantine signaled a dramatic shift regarding imperial religious preferences. To accentuate that message, while Constantine ceremoniously restored the ancient traditions and privileges of the Roman Senate, a bastion of Roman paganism, he had a statue of himself holding the Christian Chi-Rho symbol erected within Rome. The inscription in Latin read, “By this salutary sign, the true proof of valor, I liberated your city, saved from the tyrant’s yoke; moreover the Senate and People of Rome I liberated and restored to their ancient splendor and brilliance.”

Several months later, in conjunction with eastern Emperor Licinius, a Constantinian ally engaged against Maximinus Daia for sole rulership of the eastern provinces, they jointly issued

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6 Ibid.  
7 Ibid.  
8 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 38.2.  
10 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 40.2.  
11 Ibid.
the Edict of Milan (Mediolanum), though reluctantly on Licinius’ part, which granted full legal status (religio licita or approved religion) to all religions, including Christianity, and restoration of confiscated property.\textsuperscript{12} Shortly thereafter, Licinius successfully defeated his rival at the Battle of Tzirallum in 313 resulting in Daia’s death a year later. As Constantine experienced previously, Licinius also received a Christian exhortation in a dream prior to his victory.\textsuperscript{13} With Maxentius’s and Daia’s defeat, Lactantius rejoicefully records, “Behold, all the adversaries are destroyed, and tranquility having been re-established throughout the Roman Empire, the late oppressed Church arises again… For God has raised up princes (Constantine and Licinius) to rescind the impious and sanguinary edicts of the tyrants and provide for the welfare of mankind.”\textsuperscript{14}

However, despite the seemingly complete Christian victory, once sole ruler of the eastern provinces, Licinius aggressively persecuted Christianity, irrespective of his agreement at Mediolanum and his marriage to Constantine’s Christian half-sister, Constantia.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, due to his impertinence, Constantine waged war against Licinius between 316 and 324, successfully becoming the first sole ruler of the Roman Empire since Diocletian’s ascension in 284.\textsuperscript{16} In a statement reminiscent of the Homeric verse, “A multitude of lords is not good: let there be one lord, one king.”, Eusebius writes, “Now that the evil men were removed, the sunlight shone, purified at last of dictatorial tyranny…He brought under his control one Roman Empire united as

\textsuperscript{12} Although known as the Edict of Milan, in reality, it was not an imperial edict, but more of a return to the Edict of Toleration from the former Emperor Galerius.; Lactantius, De Mortibus Persecutorum, 48. Kulikowski, The Triumph of Empire, 241.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{15} As reported by Eusebius, “At first he [Licinius] did everything craftily and deceitfully under the guise of friendship, hoping that his crimes would remain undetected; but the other’s God exposed to him the darkly devised plots…His final madness was to take up arms against the churches, and attack whichever of the bishops he regarded as chiefly opposing him.” Eusebius, Vita Constantini, 1.50.2.

\textsuperscript{16} Kulikowski, The Triumph of Empire, 242 - 243.
of old, the first to proclaim to all the monarchy of God, and by monarchy himself directing the whole of life under Roman rule.”17 Hence, in Eusebius’s worldview, the united Roman Empire would be governed by one emperor, Constantine, in a single administrative capital, the newly Christianized Constantinople in 330, under the sovereignty of the Christian God.18

During his reign, Constantine demonstrated his support of Christianity through the construction of churches across the empire, most notably the Church of St. John in Lateran (324), the former headquarters of the disbanded Praetorian Guard, and the Church of St. Peter on the Vatican Hill (319-333).19 Unlike pagan temples that restricted public access to the cult’s inner sanctum, Constantinian churches were modeled on the basilica, the traditional Roman public meeting place and legal center with high vaulted ceilings that allowed large numbers of people to gather.20 Indeed, the form of these early Christian churches would be copied for centuries by both Western and Eastern sects of Christianity.21 To finance these construction projects, Constantine stripped many pagan temples of their sacred items, including golden statues, coinage, and goods dedicated to the gods.22 In several edicts preserved by Eusebius, Constantine simultaneously closed several pagan temples, forbade certain pagan sacrifices, and encouraged governors to observe Christian holidays.23

18 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 2.19.2.
20 According to historian Barry Strauss, “Seeing the architectural similarity, a Roman visitor in Constantine’s day took away the clear lesson that church and state were now connected.” Strauss, *Ten Caesars*, 297-298. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 185.
22 Ibid., 186.
23 Eusebius *Vita Constantini*, 2.24.1, 2.44, 3.3.1.
Perhaps more impressively, Constantine attempted to promote unity throughout the Christian Church by arbitrating fiercely debated doctrinal issues involving the nature of Jesus Christ’s role in the Trinity - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{24} In a Christian council that met under imperial auspices at Nicaea soon after Licinius’s defeat in 325, Constantine encouraged the bishops stating, “Let no jealous enemy ruin our prosperity; now that the war of the tyrants against God has been swept away by the power of God the Savior, let not the malignant demon encompass the divine law with blasphemies by other means.”\textsuperscript{25} After intensive debates, the council agreed on a singular creed that regarded Jesus Christ as ‘of the same substance’ as the Father and the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{26} According to Goldsworthy, “Constantine himself was credited with backing and perhaps devising this term.”\textsuperscript{27}

By his death in 337, Constantine had not only dramatically shifted imperial religious preferences by patronizing the Christian Church, but also ceremoniously entered the Christian faith through baptism on his deathbed after he transferred imperial authority to his sons.\textsuperscript{28} Although scholars have vigorously debated the genuineness or sincerity of his conversion, notwithstanding Lactantius’s and Eusebius’s Christian background and clear motives extolling the virtues and sacredness of Constantine, it is reasonable to conclude that Constantine’s Christian encounter prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge was truly an extraordinary transformative event.\textsuperscript{29} However, within the context of Roman religious history, Constantine’s

\textsuperscript{24} Strauss, \textit{Ten Caesars}, 303.
\textsuperscript{25} Eusebius, \textit{Vita Constantini}, 3.12.2.
\textsuperscript{26} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 188.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Eusebius, \textit{Vita Constantini}, 4.61-4.64.
\textsuperscript{29} Kulikowski, \textit{The Triumph of Empire}, 236.
religious experience and patronage of the Christian Church was, in fact, quite traditional.\textsuperscript{30} As seen on several occasions throughout his life, Constantine was not exclusively Christian.

Throughout the imperial period, Roman emperors often associated themselves with particular deities to not only elevate their status and prestige, especially if their legitimacy was in question, but also buttress their own political authority.\textsuperscript{31} Most notably in the third century, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Elagabalus) shirked many of his imperial duties in favor of his position as high priest of the Syrian god Elagabalus.\textsuperscript{32} Likewise, Aurelian, the soldier emperor who defeated both the Gallic and Palmyrene empires, patronized Sol Invictus (The Unconquered Sun), a favorite deity of soldiers, by commissioning several temples for the god in Rome.\textsuperscript{33} As senior emperor of the tetrarchy in the early fourth century, Diocletian closely associated himself with Jupiter, adding the title \textit{Jovinus} to his imperial name, while Maximian as junior emperor added \textit{Herculius}.\textsuperscript{34} Even Constantine’s father, Constantius, worshiped Sol Invictus, despite Eusebius’s claim that he was a Christian.\textsuperscript{35} Although traditional Roman religion was polytheistic, it is important to remember that Roman paganism was not intransigent.\textsuperscript{36} As Goldsworthy poignantly states, “Throughout the third century there was a tendency amongst many pagans towards a form of monotheism, revering one deity above all others, and perhaps seeing the various gods and goddesses as merely manifestations of a single divine being.”\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Richard Van Dam, \textit{The Roman Revolution of Constantine} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 81.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 80.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 81.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Van Dam, \textit{The Roman Revolution of Constantine}, 81.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 85. Eusebius, \textit{Vita Constantini}, 27.2.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 181.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
religious developments within Roman paganism offer tremendous insights into Constantine’s later acceptance of Christianity.

Within Constantine’s life, there are examples that indicate his polytheistic worldview. Prior to his war against Maxentius, a Roman panegyrist noted that while Constantine visited a temple to Apollo in Gaul, he received a vision similar to his later Christian encounter.\footnote{Van Dam, \textit{The Roman Revolution of Constantine}, 85.; Kulikowski, \textit{The Triumph of Empire}, 230.}

With this revelation associating himself with Apollo, Constantine had cleverly displaced his father’s earlier association with Sol Invictus and later Hercules.\footnote{Van Dam, \textit{The Roman Revolution of Constantine}, 85.} As historian Richard Van Dam noted, “In his guise as the Sun-god, Apollo was now ‘the companion of Constantine.’”\footnote{Ibid.} Once he became western emperor, and publicly proclaimed Christianity, Constantine still displayed traditional Roman pagan behavior. On the Arch of Constantine, memorializing his victory over Maxentius, Christian iconography is noticeably absent, including the Chi-Rho symbol supposedly painted on his soldier’s shields.\footnote{Michele Renee Salzman, Marianne Sághy, and Rita Lizzi Testa, Editors. \textit{Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome: Conflict, Competition, and Coexistence in the Fourth Century} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 20.}

Although the Arch was dedicated by the pagan Roman Senate in 315, Constantine certainly must have personally approved of its reliefs. As a result, the Arch reflects not only the Senate’s eagerness to support the new imperial administration, but also no overt aristocratic resistance to Constantine’s new religion.\footnote{Ibid., 11, 23, 29.}

In his war against Licinius, allegedly initiated to stop Christian persecution in the east, Constantine again displayed the malleableness of his polytheistic mindset.\footnote{According to Goldsworthy, “It is easy to forget that the polytheistic mindset made it easy to accept new deities, even if Christians themselves insisted that worshipping Christ must mean a denial of other gods. Philip is said to have been sympathetic to Christians - one later source even claims that he was one himself.” Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 99.}

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historian Michael Kulikowski, Constantine’s motives for the conflict were not high-minded Christian ideals as Eusebius claims, but rather traditional dynastic concerns. He writes, “But then, in 315, Constantia gave birth to a son named Licinianus, who might one day challenge Constantine’s family for predominance. Having already done away with a father-in-law, Constantine next turned the same technique against his brother-in-law in 316.” However, even in Eusebius’s account, the supposedly overt Christianized Constantine reveals both his willingness to abandon Christianity altogether and an underlying adherence to traditional Roman ethics. In a speech to his soldiers, Constantine proclaimed,

   Friends and Comrades, these are our ancestral gods, whom we honor because we have received them for worship from our earliest forefathers. The commander of those arrayed against us has broken faith with the ancestral code and adopted godless belief… If the foreign god whom we now mock should prove superior, let nothing stop us from acknowledging and honoring him too, saying goodbye to these, whose candles we light in vain.” After twelve years of intensive proselytization of the Christian faith, veterans discharged after the defeat of Licinius shouted: “Augustus Constantine! The gods preserve you for us! Throughout the remainder of his reign as sole Roman emperor and clearly supportive of Christianity, Constantine still behaved according to centuries old pagan traditions. As previous emperors persecuted Christianity to achieve religious unity throughout the empire, such as Decius, Valerian, Diocletian, and Galerius, Constantine similarly exhorted the Christian bishops at Nicaea stating, “For to me internal division in the Church of God is graver than any war or fierce battle, and these things appear to cause more pain than secular affairs.” However,
Constantine’s support of Christianity was selective, choosing to support “the Catholic Church of
the Christians” (Nicaean Christianity) as opposed to Arianism or Donatism.\textsuperscript{50} Likewise, although
Constantine retained the pagan title \textit{Pontifex Maximus} and later deified by the Senate, he
proclaimed himself “bishop of those outside” the church, thus symbolically “incorporating
Christian meaning within traditional imperial activities.”\textsuperscript{51}

In the end, the truth remains that Constantine was not the first Roman leader to believe
that he had been divinely supported. The difference here is that the divine help came from a non-
traditional deity.\textsuperscript{52} Notwithstanding the conventional nature of Constantine’s conversion and
imperial patronage of Christianity, his reign would herald a dramatic reorientation of the imperial
administration and even the well-entrenched pagan aristocracy towards the acceptance and
embracement of Christianity by the early fifth century.\textsuperscript{53}

Within Roman religious studies, many scholars have argued that Constantine’s
conversion, patronage of the Christian Church, and more importantly, the pro-Christian policies
of his successors, all nominally Christian, except Julian the Apostate, predominately explain the
complete Christianization of the Roman Empire between Constantine’s and Theodosius I’s death
(337-395).\textsuperscript{54} According to historian Ramsey McMullen, a leading proponent of this conversion
model, the Christian Roman emperors held enormous sway over the religious dispositions of
both the aristocracy and the general population. He writes,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{50}Beard, \textit{Religions of Rome: Volume 1}, 369.
  \item \textsuperscript{51}Michele Renee Salzman, \textit{The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the
Western Roman Empire} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 198. Peter Heather, \textit{Rome Resurgent:
  \item \textsuperscript{52}Salzman, \textit{The Making of a Christian Aristocracy}, 43.
  \item \textsuperscript{53}Ibid., 43, 198.
  \item \textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 51.
\end{itemize}
The conversion of Constantine radically and quickly changed matters. It had quite enormous consequences...But of far greater importance, and the chief reason for that enormous impact he had on the rate of the church’s growth, was the set of his measures making his favor explicit and official: first, toleration decreed; second, money or its equivalent assigned in such forms as tax exemptions and grand buildings.  

By Western Emperor Honorius’s reign (395-423), McMullen writes, “…it could be fairly claimed that non-Christians were outlawed at last, and (it followed) that a state religion had at last emerged.” Indeed, following Diocletian’s and Constantine’s administrative reforms that separated traditional military and civilian hierarchies, expanded the bureaucratic machinery of empire, and formally shattered the republican facade created by Augustus (*Princeps* (First Among Equals) to *Domus* (Lord/Master)), the emperorship was quite influential. Throughout the fourth century, there are numerous examples that support this conversion model.  

Following Constantine’s death, amidst the backdrop of another contentious civil war, his sons, Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans, largely continued their father’s patronage of the Christian Church and imperial promulgation of Nicaean Christianity. Although they did not legislate directly against paganism, Constantius II restricted certain pagan practices, such as sacrifices deemed too extreme and closed several pagan temples, while also guaranteeing the Constantinian privileges to the Church in Rome. As the ultimate victor of the civil war by 350, Constantius II explained, “For it is our will that they shall rejoice and glory always in the faith, since we are aware that our state is sustained more by religion than by official duties and...
physical toil and sweat.” In addition to his pagan restrictions, the zealous Constantius II supported two major Christian missions to the Goths beyond the Danube River and the desert tribes along the southern frontiers of the empire.

These overt Christianizing efforts, combined with continual imperial interference in doctrinal debates between Nicaeans, Arians, Donatists, and others, attracted sharp criticism from some Roman pagans, including the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, “The plain and simple religion of the Christians was bedeviled by Constantius with old wive’s fancies. Instead of trying to settle matters, he raised complicated issues which led to much dissension, and as this spread more widely he fed it with verbal argument.” Although he praised Constantius’s efforts to further enhance the prestige of the Roman Senate, Ammianus viewed Constantius’s religious meddling as a direct violation of Roman traditionalism that emphasized religious conformity regardless of individual conviction.

Decades later in 382, western Emperor Gratian confiscated money and property intended for the maintenance of public rituals in Rome, eliminated exemptions of pagan religious officials from taxation, and guaranteed Christian property ownership. Moreover, he publicly renounced the imperial title, Pontifex Maximus. Finally, perhaps most importantly of all, he ordered the removal of the Altar of Victory from the Roman Senate House, but not the golden statue of the goddess Victoria commemorating Augustus’s victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra. As

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60 Codex Theodosianus, 16.2.16.
64 Codex Theodosianus, 16.10.20.
66 Ibid.
Suetonius remarks that “each member should offer incense and wine at the altar”, thus denoting the success of both emperor and empire, the Altar of Victory was an important symbolic element of Roman paganism. Despite a petition for the Altar’s return from Urban Prefect, Senator Quintus Symmachus, Gratian and his successor, Valentinian II, refused.

Once Theodosius I became sole Roman emperor following another civil war, he similarly refused Symmachus’s renewed petition. According to the pagan Greek historian Zosimus, and the Christian Roman historian Prudentius, in a visit to Rome in 394, Theodosius I abolished all pagan sacrifices and personally urged the Roman Senate to “cast off their previous error [paganism]” and adopt Christianity “which promises deliverance from all sin and impiety.”

Upon careful consideration, Prudentius notes that the ‘un-coerced’ Senate voted for Christianity. Contrastingly, Zosimus claims that “no-one obeyed his summons or abandoned their ancestral rites…the observation of which had allowed them to live in a city unconquered for almost twelve hundred years.” Although the historicity of the event remains questionable due to a conflict among the source material, Theodosius I did legislate heavily in favor of Christianity.

In 380, he issued an edict stating, “It is our will that all the peoples who are ruled by the administration of our clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans [Nicaean Christianity], as the religion which he introduced makes clear even unto this day… We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace

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67 Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum*, 25.3.
70 Ibid., 1.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 183.
the name of Catholic Christians [Nicaean Christianity].” Later in 385, Theodosius I denied all legal testimonial rights for Christians that converted to paganism. As historian Michele Salzman noted, underscoring these imperial decrees was an overt willingness to use force to restrict these public pagan rites and privileges. By his death in 395, Theodosius I’s actions had propelled Christianity to become an imperially supported Roman institution.

Yet, it is important to consider that although the emperorship theoretically held supreme authority in all areas, as McMullen suggests, their influence was quite limited by contemporary political realities. For example, when Western Emperor Honorius tried to ban all pagans from holding office in 408, he received such an enormous backlash from a high ranking military official, Generidus, that the emperor “compelled both by necessity and shame, completely abolished the law, and gave all persons liberty of enjoying their own sentiments in all offices, whether civil or military.” If religious conversion was the overriding concern of the Christian emperors, then they would reasonably appoint only Christians to high office. Instead, despite an ever expanding pool of Christian candidates, they continued to appoint pagan officials throughout the empire, even up to the mid-fifth century.

74 Codex Theodosianus, 26.1.2.
75 Ibid., 26.7.2.
80 Likewise, throughout the fourth century, Christian emperors sponsored the restoration of many pagan monuments and temples throughout Rome, including the Temple of Apollo, the Images of the Consenting Gods (Di Consentes) in the Forum, and the Temple of Isis at Portus (near Ostia, the port of Rome). Despite their clear pagan origins, many of the temples “seem to have been detached from the taint of superstition (Christianity’s adoption had fundamentally swapped its former role as superstition with paganism’s religio) partly because of their prominence in the city’s history and heritage.” Beard, Religions of Rome: Volume 1, 373.
In fact, throughout the fourth century, approximately two-thirds of the imperial administration were non-Christian at any one time. As historian Alan Cameron poignantly notes, “Ecclesiastics might thunder against paganism in all its forms, but in the real world, government turned to those with influence, whatever their religious beliefs.” Because of the decentralized nature of the imperial system, even after Diocletian’s and Constantine’s bureaucratization reforms, Christianization efforts could go only so far. In the end, “The main consequence of all this was that the state was unable to interfere systematically in the day-to-day running of its constituent communities.” By the early fifth century, the imperial government, particularly of the Western Roman Empire, was run more by provincial administrators, courtiers or comites (companions), urban prefects, and even barbarian chieftains than the Christian emperor.

As Theodosius I’s disputed encounter in Rome illustrates, Christian emperors much preferred persuasion, symbolic action, and subtlety rather than forcible conversion. After Constantine’s conversion, old pagan ideologies about the sacredness of the imperial personage and their relationship with the divine were “quickly, and surprisingly, easily reworked” within a new Christianized framework. Although Christian emperors were no longer deified, particularly after Gratian and Theodosius I’s actions, they still retained their divine status as

81 MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire, 47.
82 Salzman, Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome, 108.
83 Rivers, Religion in the Roman Empire 200. Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 108.
84 Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 107.
85 Barnwell, Emperor, Prefects and Kings, 5, 49-51.
87 Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 123.
Christ’s regent on earth until the Second Coming. In an imperial edict issued jointly by Emperors Arcadius and Honorius soon after their ascension, they refer to themselves as “Our Imperial Divinity.” According to historian Peter Heather, “Thus, the emperor and everything about him, from his bedchamber to his treasury, could continue to be styled as sacred.” Above all, what radically changed after Constantine’s conversion was that each subsequent Christian emperor used his newly reworked position and prestige to incentivize the Roman aristocracy to swap religions.

Since traditional Roman paganism did not simply vanish after Constantine, but instead remained a powerful religious force most likely still among a majority of the empire’s populace, the Christianization of the Roman Empire cannot be explained just through the emperor’s actions. Likewise, Christianity was not a singular movement, but rather a multi-faceted religion that had already fractured theologically, culturally, and even linguistically across the empire by this period. Although Arian and Nicaean Christianity were the most dominant sects throughout the fourth and early fifth century, and imperially supported by the emperors, there were several other splinter Christian groups often opposed to one another. Nevertheless, perhaps the most important aspect that greatly explains the Christianization process was the convergence of

89 *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.3.3.
90 Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 123.
91 “In essence, the Christian emperor offered a new symbolic option for aristocrats to follow, one that offered the prestige and honor so much desired by aristocrats.” Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy*, 17.
94 Ibid.
Christian and pagan beliefs, practices, and symbolism that lowered many entry barriers into the
religion.95

Beginning in the decades after Constantine’s death, notable Christian leaders began to
incorporate old pagan Roman values, ideologies, and even “formal aspects of aristocratic status
concerns” within existing Christian concepts as a means to evangelize the Roman aristocracy.96
In a letter to Julian, a wealthy nobleman from Dalmatia, the Christian theologian Jerome explains
that the pagan concept of nobilitas, “an attribute derived from birth but joined in Roman
[aristocratic] thought to high public office”, is not at odds with biblical principles.97 Instead,
Jerome integrates the concept within Christianity stating, “You are of noble birth, so are they; but
in Christ they are nobler still.” By following Christ, Jerome argues that an aristocrat might
achieve even greater nobilitas.98

Similarly, Bishop Ambrose of Mediolanum argued in his De Officiis Ministrorum (On the
Duties of the Clergy) that the pagan philosophers, Cicero, Plato, and Aristotle, unknowingly
based their philosophy on biblical principles.99 He states, “From whence, then, Cicero and
Panaetius, or even Aristotle, got these ideas (fortitude) is perfectly clear. For though living before

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95 As Salzman notes about the Christianization process, “The willingness of Christian emperors to find
common ground with pagans in their religious and civic traditions is a result of the political reality of the
mid-fourth century; large numbers of pagans and Christians were living together still in the empire. To
persecute pagans outright would not work, as Diocletian’s failed persecution of Christians had shown. But at
a deeper level, Constantius’ support for pagan cults is tacit acknowledgement of a truth that tends to escape
modern historians, namely that Christian and pagans did, indeed, share certain beliefs, attitudes, and
practices.” Jörg Rüpke, Editor, A Companion to Roman Religion (Maden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007),
109.

97 Ibid. Jerome Ep 118.5;
98 Salzman, The Making of a Christian Aristocracy, 17. Historian Chris Wickham expands on this by
stating, “Changing people’s minds was harder, however, and, at the level of everyday morality and values,
Christianization changed much less.” Chris Wickham, The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Age
these two, Job had said: ‘I delivered the poor out of the hand of the strong, and I aided the fatherless for whom there was no help. Let the blessing of him that was ready to perish come upon me (Job 29:12-13).”  

In essence, Ambrose’s Christian message incorporating traditional pagan ideals merely assigns higher motives to their writings. Instead of revealing significant truths about mankind, the pagan philosophers had unknowingly based their findings on biblical truths.

While performing a eulogy for Theodosius I, De Obitu Theodosii (On the Death of Theodosius I), Ambrose again incorporated pagan philosophy within Christian belief stating, “They say the greatest of the philosophers [Plato] granted immunity from punishment to those crimes which had been committed through anger, but divine scripture says something better: Be angry and do not sin. It is better in a moment of anger to win praise for mercy rather than to be roused by rage to retribution.” This tacit approval and incorporation of pagan philosophy into the Christian ethos clearly indicates an expanded Pauline style of evangelization, though with a much broader biblical exposition. Yet, these clear efforts towards harmonizing Christianity and traditional Roman paganism did not just include morality, theology, and philosophy.

Throughout the fourth century, the Christian Church slowly began to incorporate aspects of Roman culture within the fabric of the religion. Traditionally associated with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the language used by the biblical authors, the Church switched its liturgical

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100 Ibid.
101 Alcuin F. Coyle, “Cicero’s De Officiis and De Officiis Ministorum of St. Ambrose.”, 256.
102 Ibid.
103 Ambrose De Obitu Theodosii 14. (Direct comparison to Plato Laws 9.7-9)
104 Coyle, “Cicero’s De Officiis and De Officiis Ministorum of St. Ambrose.”, 256.
105 Rüpke, Editor, A Companion to Roman Religion, 425.
language from Greek to Latin, exemplified by Pope Damasus I’s (366-384) promotion of the *Canon Romanus* and Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation.\textsuperscript{106} As one modern scholar explains, “All these examples show the desire for the church to become the pillar and agent of renewal for ‘classical’ Latinity. This conjured up the former greatness of Rome, which was now defined entirely in terms of the church.”\textsuperscript{107} Likewise, as Christianity continued to embrace Roman culture, some Christian imagery, subsequently, became devoid of any meaning. Originally an exclusive Christian image, the Chi-Rho symbol had, by the 350s, lost all of its original significance, so much so, that even the pagan pretender, Magnentius, adopted it as his standard.\textsuperscript{108}

With imperial funds diverted from pagan institutions towards the construction of Christian Churches, there was also a similar adoption of classical Roman architectural forms.\textsuperscript{109} In a continuation of Constantinian styled churches, later fourth and early fifth century churches, such as Saint Apollinare Nuovo and Saint Apollinare in Classe at Ravenna, adopted Roman arches, vaults, and mosaics within a basilica-type structure.\textsuperscript{110} Within Saint Maria Maggiore in Rome, built by Pope Sixtus III (432-440), its architects deliberately copied old pagan classical styles, including triumphal arches, and an elaborate representation of the Virgin Mary as a Roman empress.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 426.
\textsuperscript{108} MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 48.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
As Goldsworthy reminds about the period, “It is easy to forgot that the polytheistic mindset made it easy to accept new deities.”\textsuperscript{112} Since Christians were also Romans at the same time, and likely received the same common education, they inhabited the same “mental universe” as all other Romans.\textsuperscript{113} In \textit{Consultationes Zacchaei et Apollonii}, an anonymous fourth century text, the recorded conversation between the pagan philosopher Apollonius and his Christian friend Zacchaeus suggests that both men understood the relative ease in which they could switch religions.\textsuperscript{114} In a fascinating account by the Emperor Julian the Apostate, a virulent and largely unsuccessful anti-Christian emperor (360-363), he comments about a trip to visit Pegasius, Bishop of Illios in Asia Minor, after hearing reports of unmaintained pagan temples. Surprisingly, he found that Pegasius

\begin{quote}
…was not lacking in right sentiments towards the gods…Now I found that the altars were still alight, I might almost say still blazing, and that the statue of Hector had been anointed till it shone. So I looked at Pegasius and said: "What does this mean? Do the people of Ilios offer sacrifices?" This was to test him cautiously to find out his own views. He replied: "Is it not natural that they should worship a brave man who was their own citizen, just as we worship the martyrs?"
\end{quote}

For Bishop Pegasius, the dichotomy between Christian and traditional Roman paganism was nearly indistinguishable.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{112} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 99.
\textsuperscript{113} Rüpke \textit{Religion of the Romans}, 243.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Julian the Apostate \textit{Letter}, 19.
\textsuperscript{116} Although purely conjectural, as Philostorgius claims that Julian renounced Christianity in his early life because paganism was “grounded in reality”, one wonders if Roman Christianity’s malleability impacted his religious decision. On his deathbed, Julian cried out, “‘You have won, Christ! Have your fill, Galilean!’ And thus he died a frightful, horrid death, reviling at length his gods as he departed from life.” Philostorgius \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica}, 6.5, 7.5.
In another striking account of the Late Antique Christian world, the Church at Cyrene petitioned for Synesius, a neoplatonist philosopher at Alexandria, to become their new bishop.\(^\text{117}\) Obviously befuddled why a Christian church would ask a pagan to be their leader, Synesius writes, “I am waiting to learn exactly what the nature of this office is. If it is possible, I will perform the duties with philosophy, but if it cannot be reconciled with my school of thought and sect, what better could I do than sail straight for illustrious Greece?”\(^\text{118}\) Surprisingly, after learning that Synesius refused to abandon his pagan philosophy, the Cyrenaean Church still wanted him.\(^\text{119}\) He later writes, “I was unable, for all my strength, to prevail against you and to decline the bishopric, and this in spite of all my machinations…I would rather have died many deaths than have taken over this religious office, for I did not consider my powers equal to the burden.”\(^\text{120}\) As Julian’s and Synesius’ accounts indicate, religious malleableness was not just confined to pagans.\(^\text{121}\)

Therefore, the Christianization of the Roman Empire can be described as occurring in two phases. First, following Constantine’s conversion, the Christian emperors slowly withdrew imperial support, and most importantly wealth, from pagan institutions.\(^\text{122}\) Although pagans continued to hold office throughout the fourth and early fifth century, their religious beliefs were no longer imperially sanctioned, as evidenced by Symmachus’ failed attempts to restore the Altar

\(^{118}\) Ibid.
\(^{120}\) Ibid.
\(^{121}\) As Holland observes, “‘Naturally, the Christ to whom Constantine and his successors compared themselves bore little resemblance to the Jesus who had died in excruciating and blood-streaked agony upon a rough-hewn cross. Indeed, whether in the meditations of theologians or in the mosaics of artisans.’ Tom Holland, *Millennium* (London: Abacus Books, 2008), 8.
of Victory in the Senate House.  

Second, with the convergence of Christian and pagan beliefs and culture, alongside imperial incentives, the benefits of conversion slowly outweighed intransigence. As Salzman eruditely notes, “In essence, the Christian emperor offered a new symbolic option for aristocrats to follow, one that offered the prestige and honor so much desired by aristocrats.”

By the fifth century, Christianity was nearly synonymous with Romanness. To be a Roman was to be a Christian as well. The Christian Church (Nicaean Christianity), with its existing elaborate structure, had become an integral of the imperial administration, so much so, that by the mid-fifth century, Eastern Emperor Theodosius II’s closest advisor/co-ruler was his Christian sister, the virgin nun Pulcheria.

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123 Ibid., 183. *Codex Theodosianus*, 16.10.20.
125 Ibid.
Chapter Three: Late Antique Christian Apocalyptism

In America’s Jacksonian Era, characterized by great political division, American artist, Thomas Cole, created a series of five paintings dubbed “The Course of Empire” charting the life-cycle of a Greco-Roman themed civilization.1 Because of the Early American Republic’s ties to the Enlightenment, which engendered the idea of a “Noble Experiment” to emulate Greco-Roman civilization, Cole’s paintings were in line with many American scholars and even artists that juxtaposed the ancient world with contemporary America.2 Set around a single bay with a mountainous peak in the background, the depicted sequence of civilization: “Savage”, “Pastoral”, “Consummation”, “Destruction”, and “Desolation of Empire”, poignantly illustrates not only Cole’s nihilistic perspective concerning the inevitability of destruction in classical antiquity, but also his apocalyptic attitude about early nineteenth century America.3

While working on the series throughout 1835-1836, Cole noted in his journal, “It is with sorrow that I anticipate the downfall of this republican government.”4 Similarly, in the advertisements for the series, Cole borrowed a literary phrase from Lord Byron’s work, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, “First freedom, and then glory - when that fails, wealth, vice, corruption.”5 Before his death in 1848, Cole summarized his bleak outlook for the nation in the futuristic story

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2 As Goldsworthy notes, “In the Victorian era the British were fond of comparing their empire to the Roman, confident that their own territories were significantly large. Nowadays, comparisons tend to be made to America…Modern America is not perfectly efficient - no country has ever or will ever achieve this. Some of its weaknesses and problems may seem echoed in the Roman experience, but none are anywhere near as pronounced. Nothing suggests that the United States must inevitably decline and cease as a superpower in the near future. Goldsworthy, How Rome Fell, 416, 422.
3 Hay, Post Apocalyptic Fantasies 106 - 107. Although the “Empire” depicted is never specified within the series, Cole later revealed that the dazzling city in the “Consummation” painting was “a la mode New York”, and the subsequent images of “Destruction” and “Desolation” were reminiscent of New York’s Great Fire of 1835.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
called “Verdura or a Tale of After Time.” Set in the twentieth century, the forces of overpopulation, over-cultivation, and “the pride of man” destroyed “the states which once held the proud title of ‘United.’”

Unlike many of his contemporaries, “Cole stands out...for his prediction of certain doom in an otherwise optimistic era of future anticipations.”

Throughout history, apocalyptism, whether fact or fiction in both literary and artistic form, has been a consistent staple of human civilization. From the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh describing the destruction of the Mesopotamian world to Thomas Cole’s “Course of Empire” series, and more recently HBO’s 2019 Chernobyl miniseries depicting the very real horrors of a nuclear meltdown, end of civilization scenarios have long captivated humanity. As historian Bernard McGinn noted, “We are, in fact, surrounded by prophets of approaching doom who base their reading of the times on scientific revelations at times as obscure and controversial as the religious showings of old.” However, notwithstanding its universal application, apocalyptism has traditionally been understood within a religious context, particularly Christianity in the West.

Defined as a subset of eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things, apocalyptism, from the Greek (apokalypsis) meaning revelation, is a divine message of the “imminent end of the world, or at least the end of the present form of the world.” Unfortunately, this simplistic definition does not sufficiently distinguish apocalyptism from a confusing array of kindred terms

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
such as millenarianism, chiliasm, and messianism. Rather, apocalyptism, as a particular form of eschatology, is part of a “broader genus that covers any type of belief that looks forward to the end of history as that which gives structure and meaning to the whole.”¹¹ In contrast to Jewish prophetic eschatological and even later Christian belief, such as Augustinian’s unmistakably anti-apocalyptic outlook, though he was in the minority among Christian leaders, apocalyptism is separated from more general eschatology by its supposed proximity to the end times.¹² Likewise, although virtually every eschatological text provides a framework towards understanding times of crisis and the assurance of eternal reward, apocalyptism “is a particular form of pre-understanding rather than a mere way of responding.”¹³ In other words, the apocalyptic message provides not only consolation for the suffering believer, but also the motivation to endure or oppose the approaching calamity.¹⁴

Because of the focus on the structure of history, Christian apocalyptic literature tends to have broad political implications expressed in two distinct forms of interpretation, a priori (from the earlier) and a posteriori (from the later) modes.¹⁵ In the a priori mode, the apocalyptic message, profusely laden with symbolic imagery and immensely destructive conflicts, is used towards understanding contemporary political events.¹⁶ According to McGinn, “By fitting a present situation into the framework of an inherited prophetic message, the believer is not only

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¹¹ McGinn, _Apocalyptic Spirituality_, 5.
¹³ McGinn, _Apocalyptic Spirituality_, 8-9.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid.
enlightened, but also motivated to take a stand.” As a result, the apocalyptic message reinforces Christian belief, encourages unbelievers towards repentance, and galvanizes both passive and active resistance against evil, either spiritually, or more likely, politically.

In similar fashion, the apocalyptic message in the *a posteriori* mode is used to support “institutions it apocalypticized.” In other words, the prophetic message tends to incorporate contemporary institutions, or more specifically, Christianized institutions and Christianized political leaders, into an eschatological framework. Although both modes are used to buttress Christian belief, the apocalyptic message in the *a posteriori* mode specifically encourages constant vigilance against the Antichrist, the ever present and ever scheming individual who could irreparably damage or destroy the apocalypticized institution. As Christianity became an integral part of the Roman imperial government, and the overall Roman identity throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, both modes of apocalyptic interpretation would be integral to how they interpreted contemporary events.

Within the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament, there are three key texts that formed the basis for early Christian eschatological belief. In Matthew 24, prior to Jesus’s arrest and crucifixion, his disciples came to him privately and asked about the approaching end

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17 Ibid.
18 As noted by McGinn, there are strong elements of this literal apocalypticism in many modern fundamentalist groups, “The success of the works of Hal Lindsey is evidence enough of how many millions of readers still are convinced by literal applications of biblical prophecies to events present and soon to come. (One presumes that at least some of Lindsey’s readers go to him for enlightenment and not for entertainment.).” Ibid., 1-2, 9.
19 Ibid., 11.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
times, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

Jesus answered them saying,

See that no one leads you astray…And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Although initially vague, once he exhorts his disciples to remain faithful, Jesus unambiguously outlines the future stating,

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. For then there will be great tribulation,…Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man.

To the disciples, well versed in Hebrew Old Testament scriptures, Jesus’s apocalyptic message directly referenced centuries old writings by the prophet Daniel.

In the final years of the Babylonian Kingdom, the Jewish prophet Daniel recorded a vision of four large, terrifyingly strong, and dreadful beasts that ruled the earth each in succession. According to Daniel,

As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there [angel] and asked him the truth concerning all of this… ‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth.’ Then I desired to know the truth about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet…until the Ancient of Days came, and judgement was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time

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22 Matthew 24:3.
23 Matthew 24:4-8.
came when the saints possessed the kingdom. As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces...And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions shall serve and obey him.

Daniel’s prophetic vision of four beasts, akin to Nebuchadnezzar’s vision in Daniel 2 concerning a large statue made of four different metals, has traditionally been understood by Christian expositors as delineating God’s overall framework of world history, culminating in the return of Jesus Christ. Indeed, this interpretation of the four successive kingdoms: Babylon, Persia, Greece/Macedon, and Rome, would later be described by Augustine as, “…an excellent suggestion” and that any person “half asleep” could plainly understand Daniel’s vision.

Therefore, Jesus’s followers would have reasonably interpreted his apocalyptic message in Matthew 24 within the context of Daniel’s vision: once the Roman Empire, the fourth beast, collapsed, Jesus Christ would return and establish his supremacy.

Perhaps the most influential text delineating early Christian eschatological belief is the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse). Traditionally attributed to the Apostle John on the island of Patmos in the late first century, Revelation describes the utter wickedness of mankind, God’s wrathful actions to punish sin, and the establishment of the heavenly kingdom upon Jesus Christ’s return. Following a divine vision, John chronicles several calamitous periods befalling

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26 Daniel 7:15-22.
29 Augustine, De civitate Dei, 20.23.
30 Daniel 7:21-22.
mankind. The first calamity, involving seven broken seals, unleashes four horsemen that devastate the world,

Now I watched when the Lamb [Jesus] opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer…And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword…And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!”…And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.32

This initial prophecy of the four horsemen sets the stage for the increasingly catastrophic events that will precipitate the world’s demise.33 The climactic end of the apocalypse occurs when Satan is released from his prison after the conclusion of Christ’s millennial kingdom, and “will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle.”34 These devilish forces of Gog and Magog accordingly, “marched up…and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them”35 By the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the eternal heavenly state, Satan, the Antichrist, and their followers are utterly defeated and cast into Hell.36

This final battle between the saints and the devil with his minions, Gog and Magog, is based on an Old Testament prophecy by Ezekiel stating,

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33 Revelation 7-20.
34 Revelation 20:7-10.
35 Revelation 20:7-10.
36 Revelation 20:7-10.
The word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of Man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog,…and prophesy against him and say, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, O Gog… And I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horseman, all of them clothed in full armor, a great host, all of them with buckler and shied, wielding swords.

However, although John’s foreshadowing of Old Testament prophecy and its fulfillment in the future profusely illustrates the joyful conditions for believers and the dire apocalyptic scenario for the wicked, that is not his sole intention. Instead, John’s purpose is to not only remind Christians of Christ’s return, but also encourage them to remain faithful, penitent, and vigilant.37

At the beginning of Revelation, John addresses seven churches in Asia Minor saying, “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’”38

Afterwards, he relays each church a tailored message from Jesus Christ exhorting them to repent of their sins and return to the faith, otherwise God will make war against them.39 This concept of mankind’s moral collapse, even among believers, and God’s call for repentance is strewn throughout both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. Therefore, early Christian eschatology assumes an increasingly bleak outlook towards mankind’s moral compass as the apocalypse approaches. According to the Apostle Paul, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and

38 Revelation 1:7-8.
39 Revelation 2:16.
wander off into myths.” By the fifth century, this Christian pessimism, intermingled with traditional Roman pagan ideals of morality, which emphasized correct public behavior as an indicator of state success, would profoundly influence the Romans’s response to Attila and the Huns.

Following Jesus’s response in Matthew 24, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”, each successive Christian generation has believed to a certain extent that the apocalypse might be imminent. According to the author of Hebrews, the eschatological timeline began with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, “but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” However, because of the prolific ambiguities within each prophetic message, interpretations of the apocalypse, expressed in both a priori and a posteriori modes, drastically evolved throughout the early centuries of Christianity.

Prior to Jesus’s ascension into heaven from the Mount of Olives, his disciples asked him, “Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” With an understanding of Jewish prophetic scriptures, particularly Daniel 2 and 7, the disciples reasoned that Jesus (Ancient of Days) would destroy the fourth beast (Roman Empire) and establish the heavenly kingdom under his authority. Notwithstanding their logic, Jesus replied, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” After an encounter with two angels stating, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up

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40 II Timothy 4:3-5.
41 Roller, Constructing Autocracy, 21, 65.
42 Matthew 24:36.
43 Hebrew 1:2.
from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven,” the disciples and the early Christian Church abandoned this apocalyptic interpretation.\textsuperscript{45}

Decades later during Nero’s hedonistic and orgiastic reign, the Thessalonikian church wrote to the Apostle Paul concerned that Christ had already returned and that they were left behind to face God’s judgement.\textsuperscript{46} Additionally, because of Nero’s persecution of the Roman Church, rumors abounded claiming that Nero was the prophesied Antichrist.\textsuperscript{47} Replying to their concerns, Paul wrote, ”Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”\textsuperscript{48} As with the disciples previously, the Thessalonikian church and the wider Christian community abandoned this apocalyptic interpretation, particularly after Nero’s suicide in 68.\textsuperscript{49}

Although early Christian apocalyptic interpretations varied, there is a glaring omission in early Christian writings: the inclusion of the Roman Empire in the heavenly state. According to John in Revelation, Rome, and the entire imperial system, is unmistakably designated as a prostitute drunk on the saint’s blood, “This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads

\textsuperscript{45} Acts 1:11.
\textsuperscript{46} I Thessalonians 4:13-18.
\textsuperscript{47} Historian John Granger Cook noted concerning an imperial inscription proclaiming Nero as Zeus Liberator, “The inscription and many of the questions that are relevant (Nero as Zeus Liberator) to its interpretation do show that the ancient Christians in Greece would have found it difficult to cope with such honors for Nero.” John Granger Cook, \textit{Roman Attitudes Towards Christians: From Claudius to Hadrian} (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 37-38.
\textsuperscript{48} I Thessalonians 5:1-11.
\textsuperscript{49} It should be noted that according to Augustine, Christians in the fifth century still believed that Nero was the Antichrist and that he would return from the grave, “There are those who find hidden allusion to the Roman Empire which St. Paul did not care to make explicit, for to have done so would have been misunderstood as a gratuitous slur on those who thought of the Empire as everlasting. In this view, the expression, 'the mystery of iniquity is already at work,' is a reference to Nero, whose deeds already seemed worthy of Antichrist-so much so that, in one hypothesis, Nero is to return to life to become Antichrist.” Augustine \textit{De civitate Dei}, 20.19.
[Satanic Beast] are seven mountains on which the woman [Prostitute] is seated… And the woman that you saw is the great city [Rome] that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”\(^50\) As historian Adela Collins eruditely notes, “The fact that the author chose to write an apocalypse [Revelation] and one which involves such a thorough-going attack on the authority of Rome is an indication that he shared the fundamental theological principle of the Zealots: the kingdom of God is incompatible with the kingdom of Caesar.”\(^51\) Throughout the subsequent second and third centuries, despite eschatological disputes concerning the nature of the millennial kingdom, there remained near unanimous agreement amongst Christian writers, such as Irenaeus, Polycarp, and Hippolytus, that Rome’s collapse must precede Christ’s return.\(^52\) Indeed, briefly mentioned within his commentary on Ephesians, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch concluded that the apocalypse was at hand stating, “These are the end times…For we should either fear the wrath that is coming or love the gracious gift that is already here - one or the other, so long as we acquire true life by being found in Jesus Christ.”

Beginning soon after the imperial embracement of Christianity in the early fourth century, apocalyptic teaching slowly tilted towards a more radical exposition: the Roman Empire as the vessel of Christ’s redemption of earth.\(^53\) Constantine and his Christian imperial successors became what Eusebius recorded, “friends of the sovereign God, and was established as a clear

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\(^50\) Revelation 17:9.


\(^53\) As historian Karl Shuve puts it, “What we see in the late fourth and early fifth centuries is a new approach to the interpretation of Revelation.” Shuve, “The Transformation of the Apocalyptic Heritage”, 181. Holland, *Millennium*, 8-9. It is also important to remember that Christians were Romans as well. As historian Jörg Rüpke stated, “I want here to emphasize that Christians were at the same time also Romans. Common education and values meant that the mental universe they inhabited was just the same as that of other contemporary Romans; only then, and often only just recently, were they Christians.” Rüpke *Religion of the Romans*, 243.
example to all mankind of the life of godliness.”\textsuperscript{54} Similarly, Lactantius proclaimed Constantine as the “Most Holy Emperor…which the Most High God raised…up for the restoration of the domicile of justice and the protection of mankind.”\textsuperscript{55} Despite their exuberance, this apocalyptic reinterpretation presented a serious problem regarding the Book of Revelation’s unequivocal anti-Roman position.\textsuperscript{56} According to McGinn, following Constantine’s conversion, “Many Christians felt that any expectation of the downfall of the empire was as disloyal to God as it was to Rome.”\textsuperscript{57} Consequently, as with other theological issues throughout the period, both eastern and western sects of Christianity dealt with the book quite differently.

In the eastern provinces, Revelation was generally omitted from the biblical canon, because it conflicted with the Christianized Empire, or as historian Tom Holland writes, “St. John’s Revelation had long been an embarrassment.”\textsuperscript{58} Accordingly, in two eastern Christian Ecumenical Councils in 338 and 363, Revelation is the only Greek New Testament book excluded from the canon.\textsuperscript{59} Even among prominent eastern theologians, such as Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem, venerated by both sects of Christianity, Revelation is disregarded as a divinely inspired work.\textsuperscript{60} As a result, Revelation would not be restored to the canon in the east until the seventh and eighth centuries when a rejiggered apocalyptic framework emerged that incorporated

\textsuperscript{54} Eusebius, \textit{Vita Constantini}, 1.3.4-17.
\textsuperscript{55} Lactantius, \textit{Institutiones Divinae}, 7.27.
\textsuperscript{56} Holland, \textit{Millennium}, 8-9.
\textsuperscript{58} Holland, \textit{Millennium}, 8-9. There were notable exceptions, such as Anthanasius in 367 wrote about the biblical canon, “And besides, the Revelation of John.” Anthansius, \textit{Letters}, 39.5.
\textsuperscript{60} Cyril of Jerusalem, \textit{Catechetical Letters}, 36.
the Roman Empire into the divine timeline, exemplified by Pseudo-Methodius’s Last Emperor a posteriori apocalyptism.61

Not too dissimilarly, western Christians still regarded Revelation as a biblical text, but understood it within the new apocalyptic framework espoused by Eusebius and others.62 Once the Christian Church gradually became part of the imperial administration throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, exposition of Christ’s millennial kingdom shifted, “from either an earthly or a heavenly kingdom to the present political kingdom.”63 In other words, the Christianized Roman Empire, and the “Most Holy Emperor”, would be a divine stalwart against barbarism and paganism.64 This sentiment would be strongly emphasized following the Visigothic Sack of Rome in 410. According to historian Peter Brown, “Immediately after the Sack of Rome the Catholic Church asserted its unity…In a world increasingly conscious of the presence of the non-Roman, Catholicism had become the single ‘Roman’ religion.”65 Therefore, any foreign threat against the empire served as a divine reminder towards repentance and preparation for Christ’s imminent return.66

61 Written approximately in the late seventh century and falsely attributed to St. Methodius, the Christian Last Emperor, “with links to both Byzantium and to Miaphysitism” would unify Christianity, defeat the demonic forces of Gog and Magog, and then voluntarily lay his crown at Calvary in Jerusalem. Afterwards, the Antichrist is revealed and subsequently Jesus Christ returns to triumph over evil. Michael Philip Penn, “Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius”, In When Christian First Met Muslins: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 113-114. Holland, Millennium, 8-9.


63 As Kulikowski writes, “The ideological, political and economic power of the Christian church, the entrenchment of its priestly hierarchy, and its ever greater patterning on the geographies of the Roman state were all far advanced by the century’s end, as too was a growing body of canon law meant to guide and bind Christian believers.” Kulikowski, The Triumph of Empire, 308. Ferguson, “Millennial and Amillennial Expectations”, 230.

64 Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, 84. Lactantius, Institutiones Divinae, 7.27.

65 Brown, The World of Late Antiquity, 126.

66 Kelly, The End of Empire, 244.
As Late Antique source material is rather scarce compared to earlier periods, it is important to remember that these eschatological views were not necessarily universal. Although the Christian Church had considerably expanded its hierarchical structure and systematized much of its beliefs, many culturally and theologically diverse communities remained, such as the Donatists, Arians, Copts, Miaphysitists, and Nestorians. Instead, the evolution of broad eschatological beliefs can be traced more accurately, particularly within Nicene and later Chalcedonian Christianity, the largest and imperially supported sect. Above all the disputes over the Book of Revelation’s inspiration, there was near unanimous acceptance of an apocalyptic timeline most notably described by Lactantius.67

Written in the early fourth century, Lactantius’s Institutiones Divinae (Divine Institutes) is a Christian apologetic work designed to both buttress the faithful with reasoned arguments and answer pagan detractors. Amongst numerous topics discussed, including the errors of classical philosophy, the divinity of Christ, and Christian conversion, Lactantius provides a detailed outline of the impending apocalypse. He writes,

Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days [and rested on the seventh], it is necessary that the world remain in this state for six ages, that is, for six thousand years. The great day of God is terminated by the circle of a thousand years, as the prophet indicates who says: ‘In thine eyes, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day.’68

67 Augustine, De civitate Dei, 20.7. Holland eruditely writes, “The terrors of the age were a summons, not to panic, but to repentance. They should be met, not with wild prophecies, but with prayer, and contrition, and penance, and good works. To imagine otherwise was the very height of sacrilege.” Holland, Millennium, 44.

Following Christ’s return, the seventh day/thousand years would herald the establishment of the millennial kingdom, the final triumph over evil, and the foundation of the eternal heavenly state.\(^{69}\)

Interestingly enough, for a book dedicated to Constantine, Lactantius begrudgingly admits, “This will be the cause of the destruction and confusion, that the Roman name, by which the world is now ruled - the mind shudders to say it, but I will say it, because it is going to be - will be taken from the earth.”\(^{70}\) In a direct reference to Daniel 7 about the apocalyptic future, he writes,

Now how this is going to take place, lest anyone believe it impossible, I will show. In the first place, the dominion [Roman Empire] will be multiplied [split], and the highest power of all states, cut up and scattered among many functionaries, will be lessened. Then, civil discords will be sown perpetually, nor will there be any rest from deadly wars, until ten kings rise up on an equal basis who will share the world-not for ruling it, but for consuming it. These, having increased their armies to an immense size by leaving the fields destitute of tillers, which is the beginning of an overthrow and disaster, will lose everything, and will break up and destroy, and will greedily devour. Then suddenly, there will rise up against them a very powerful enemy from the farthest regions of the North who, destroying three tribes of that number which will then hold Asia, will be taken into alliance by the others and will be set up as chief of all of them. This one will pillage the earth with insupportable domination; he will mingle the divine and human; he will contrive execrable things, wicked to mention; he will stir up in his breast new plans so that he may establish for himself a proper empire, change the laws and sanction his own; he will contaminate, plunder, despoil, kill. Finally, changing his name and transferring the seat of empire, he will bring about the confusion and disturbance of the human race.\(^{71}\)

Outside of a clear intention to parallel much of the biblical texts, it is his start-date of the apocalypse that strikingly reveals why Late Antique Christians might have viewed contemporary events, particularly the arrival of new barbarian peoples, as the harbinger of the end. Concluding

\(^{69}\) Ibid. Ferguson, “Millennial and Amillennial Expectations”, 230.

\(^{70}\) Lactantius, \textit{Institutiones Divinae}, 7.15.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 7.16.
his remarks, Lactantius incorporates Christian eschatology and surprisingly Christianized pagan oracles in his timeline. He writes,

> Though they may vary and disagree somewhat in the sum-total, however, the entire expectation or length of time left seems to be no greater than two hundred years. Even the general condition itself makes clear that the fall and ruin of things will be soon, except for the fact that with the city of Rome being unharmed, it seems that nothing of that sort has to be feared. But when the head of the world shall fall and the onrush begin to take place, which the Sibyls say will take place, who will doubt that the end has then come for human affairs and for the world? That is the state which up to now holds up all things, and we must pray and adore the God of heaven, if His statues and decrees can, however, be put off, lest that abominable tyrant come more quickly than we think, that one who works such great havoc and wipes out that light at whose destruction the world itself will collapse.\(^{72}\)

In essence, once the city of Rome falls, the Book of Revelation’s calamities would promptly begin. While it is impossible to gauge how widespread Lactantius’s apocalyptic interpretation was among the Christian Church, there indications in the writings of late fourth and early fifth century Church Fathers demonstrating at least an awareness, if not outright belief, in this apocalyptic timeline.

Written at the request of western Emperor Gratian before his departure to assist his uncle, eastern Emperor Valens, against a conglomeration of rebellious Goths in the late 370s, Bishop Ambrose wrote a series of treaties, *De fide ad Gratianum Augustum* (On Faith, Gratian Augustus), in defense of the Nicene Christian faith. Since Ambrose was also the former governor of Liguria, whose provincial seat at Mediolanum was the imperial capital of the western provinces, his deep connections to the Roman imperial system engendered respect by his contemporaries. Among the series of Christian apologetic topics, including a rebuke of Arianism, and Manichaeism, among several others, Ambrose reminds the emperor of the apocalyptic nature

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\(^{72}\) Ibid., 7.25.
of the forthcoming campaign against the Goths. He writes, “For Ezekiel, in those far-off days, already prophesied the minishing of our people, and the Gothic wars…That Gog is the Goths, whose coming forth we have already seen, and over whom victory in days to come is promised, according to the word of the Lord.” Although it is difficult to ascertain Gratian’s response to Ambrose’s apocalyptic interpretation, based on the emperor’s pro-Christian policies throughout his reign it is probable that he might have taken the interpretation seriously. Either way, barring any attribute to Lactantius, Ambrose’s treatise certainly indicates that not only contemporary interpretations of the Christian apocalypse were part of Late Antique Christian discourse, but also part of Roman imperial discourse as well.

By the early fifth century, this tendency to interpret contemporary events within an apocalyptic framework seems to have become a mainstay of Christian thought. Understanding recent history within Lactantius’ apocalyptic timeline, events such as the permanent division of the Roman Empire between Honorius and Arcadius in 395, the subsequent civil wars within the empire, the incessant barbarian incursions from the north, and most importantly the Visigothic Sack of Rome in 410 most certainly would have prompted grave concern for the future. In his treatise, De civitate Dei (The City of God), the decidedly anti-apocalyptic Bishop Augustine of Hippo attempted to counter this interpretative approach. He writes,

The notion was that the saints were destined to enjoy so protracted a sabbath of repose… that is, after the labors of the six thousand years stretching from the creation of man, his

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73 Ambrose, De fide ad Gratianum Augustum, 2.16.136.
74 Ambrose additionally writes, “I must no further detain your Majesty, in this season of preparation for war, and the achievement of victory over the Barbarians. Go forth, sheltered, indeed, under the shield of faith, and girt with the sword of the Spirit; go forth to the victory, promised of old time, and foretold in oracles given by God…Nor, furthermore, may we doubt, your sacred Majesty, that we, who have undertaken the contest with alien unbelief, shall enjoy the aid of the Catholic Faith that is strong in you. Plainly indeed the reason of God's wrath has been already made manifest, so that belief in the Roman Empire was first overthrown, where faith in God gave way.” Ibid., 2.16.136-139.
great sin and merited expulsion from the happiness of paradise into the unhappiness of this mortal life. The interpretation was worked out in the light of the Scripture text: 'One day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.' Thus, there was supposed to follow upon the six thousand years taken as six days a seventh day or sabbath taking up the last thousand, and to be given over to the resurrecting saints for celebration.75

Yet, even as Augustine reminds Christians that the definitive timeline of the apocalypse is unknowable, he reveals striking details how other contemporaneous Christian theologians explained the biblical apocalypse.76 In a statement likely referring to Ambrose’s evaluation of the Gothic peoples, Augustine writes, “The peoples John calls Gog and Magog are not to be thought of as some definite barbarians dwelling in a certain part of the earth, such as the Getae and Massagetae (as some have imagined on account of the initial letters), or any other foreign tribes beyond the pale of the Roman Empire.”77 It is important to note that the Getae and the Massagetae referred to by Augustine did not exist by the fifth century.78 Rather, as will be explained in more detail in the following chapter, the Romans continued to refer to tribes living beyond the Danubian frontier by these ancient names.79

In line with Ambrose’s pronouncement of the Goths as Gog, once the Huns had migrated from beyond the Eurasian Steppe into the Great Hungarian Plain between the 370s and 420s, they were subsequently mentioned by both Christians and secular Roman historians as the Massagetae. In his Ecclesiastical History written just twenty five years after Attila the Hun’s death, Evagrius Scholasticus writes, “and in Thrace, by the inroads of the Huns, formally known

75 Augustine, De civitate Dei, 20.7.
76 Ibid., 20.30.
77 Ibid., 20.11.
79 Kulikowski, Rome’s Gothic Wars, 15.
by the name of Massagetae.” Likewise, several decades later, the Roman historian Procopius notes, “and Aigion was by birth of the Massagetae whom they now call Huns.” Therefore, just as the Goths/Getae were equated with Gog, the Huns/Massagetae and the future campaigns of Attila would be heralded as the fulfillment of the apocalypse, the arrival of Magog. 

80 Evagrius Scholasticus Historia Ecclesiastica, 3.3.2.
81 Procopius, De Bellis, 3.11.
Chapter Four: The Arrival of the Huns

Late in the fourth century, rumors of devastating wars and the mass movement of peoples from the region north of the Black Sea reached the Roman *lime* forts along the Danube River, the northern frontier of the eastern Roman Empire.\footnote{Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 31.4. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 145.} According to Ammianus Marcellinus, a contemporary Roman historian, “Our people paid little attention to this at first, because news of wars in those parts generally reaches distant hearers only when they are already over or at least quiescent.”\footnote{Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 31.4.} Yet, despite the appearance of gross incompetence, the local Roman officials had no cause to suspect anything from across the river.\footnote{Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 145.} For throughout the previous century, Roman, Gothic, and Germanic activity along the Danube River had produced a relatively stable frontier.\footnote{Ibid.} As historian Peter Heather poignantly states, “You could hardly blame the imperial authorities for not taking the matter too seriously.”\footnote{Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 145.} By the 370s, the seemingly incredulous rumors had finally materialized into what would eventually herald the arrival of the apocalypse.\footnote{Ibid., 146. Harper, *The Fate of Rome*, 193.}

In the summer of 376, a large group of Gothic peoples amassed at the far bank of the Danube River claiming to have been driven off their ancestral lands by the arrival of new peoples.\footnote{Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 31.4.} Led by Alavivus and Fritigern, the throngs of Gothic refugees, composed of the
Tervingi and other smaller ethnic groups, sought admittance to the empire.\footnote{Ibid. Barbero, \textit{The Day of the Barbarians}, 18-19. It seems that the Tervingi might also have been Arian Christians by this point, although the source material is fragmentary. According to Kulikowski, “Still more obscure than the rise of Tervingian Christianity is the Gothic world beyond the Tervingi. There is no contemporary evidence, and almost everything we know about the larger Gothic world of the middle fourth century - apart from the archaeological evidence for its social structures, comes from retrospective accounts written after the disaster at Adrianople.” Kulikowski, \textit{Rome’s Gothic Wars}, 111.} Although initially suspicious of their intentions, Roman officials quickly understood that this was not merely a localized displacement of Gothic peoples, rather the mass emigration of an entire tribe.\footnote{Harper, \textit{The Fate of Rome}, 193. Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 246.} One Ancient source indicates that the total number of refugees was between 100,000 and 200,000, but this certainly is widely exaggerated.\footnote{Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 249. (Primary Source from Eunapius, \textit{fragment}, 42 gives the figures). Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.4.} One modern estimate suggests some 10,000 effective Tervingian warriors alongside several times as many women, children, and elderly but, despite the plausibility, this too is no more than conjecture.\footnote{Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 249. Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 145.} While Ammianus did not specifically quantify the Gothic multitude, he simply stated that the frontier soldiers gave up counting the vast horde.\footnote{Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.4.}

Throughout the next several months, Alavivus and Fritigern negotiated with the Emperor Valens to “be admitted to his dominions, and promising that they would live quietly and supply him with auxiliaries if the need arose.”\footnote{Ibid.} As Valens was in Antioch preparing for an expedition against the Sassanid Persian Empire, he was all too happy at the Goth’s proposal.\footnote{Ibid. Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 25.132.} With the prospect of cheap foreign auxiliaries that would give him what Ammianus writes, “an invincible army”, as well as new Christian converts, Valens granted the Goth’s request.\footnote{Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.4. Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 162.} Since cross-river
traffic between the empire and barbaricum, the land of the barbarians, had been ongoing for centuries, the immigration process typically implied a loss of autonomy and arms in exchange for Roman protection.\textsuperscript{16} However, although not directly specified by Ammianus, the Thracian Diocese commanders, comes rei militaris Lupicinus and dux Maximus, later described as “equally reckless”, neither disarmed the Gothic refugees nor provided enough military assets to securely ferry the Goths across the immense river.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, thousands sadly drowned in the overflowing river, when their disproportionate numbers overturned few available boats.\textsuperscript{18}

To add insult to injury, once across the river, imperial officials artificially created a food shortage to profit from Gothic misery.\textsuperscript{19} Although Roman officials were expected to profit from their office, Ammianus scathingly describes the “sinister greed” of Lupicinus and Maximus offering dogmeat in exchange for an enslaved Gothic child.\textsuperscript{20} No doubt this blatant exploitation of the Goths, combined with the dreadful river crossing, only furthered an already seething resentment towards the Romans. Additionally, once news of Valen’s decision became known across the frontier, another displaced Gothic group called the Greuthungi, led by Alatheus and Saphrax, arrived at the Danube River and requested admittance to the empire, but was summarily rejected.\textsuperscript{21} But, as imperial officials began relocating the Tervingi to Marcianople, some distance south of the river, the Greuthungi seized the opportunity and crossed into the empire encamping near their Gothic kinsmen.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} Kulikowski, \textit{The Tragedy of Empire}, 86. Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.4.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
Once the Tervingi arrived at Marcianople and stationed outside the walls alongside units from the Thracian field army to guard them, Lupicinus invited Alavivus and Fritigern to a banquet.\textsuperscript{23} Since they were shortly to become Roman auxiliary officers, this was certainly intended as a respectful gesture. However, as the Tervingi were barred from entering the city, “The latter [Tervingi] made repeated requests to be allowed to enter to buy victuals [food]…and finally quarrels broke out between the inhabitants and those excluded on such a scale that fighting became inevitable.”\textsuperscript{24} In an utter display of utter rashness, Lupicinus panicked and ordered the assassination of the Tervingian leadership within the city.\textsuperscript{25} Henceforth, Alavivus was no longer mentioned in Ammianus’ account and therefore, presumed dead, but Fritigern skillfully managed to escape.\textsuperscript{26} Reeling from this travesty, Fritigern’s Tervingi, joined by the nearby Greuthungi and other ethnic Gothic groups, rebelled and defeated Lupicinus’ hastily assembled force in battle.\textsuperscript{27}

As a collective Gothic force, henceforth referred to as \textit{Gothi} since Ammianus dropped the Tervingian and Greuthungrian names, they systematically raided the region.\textsuperscript{28} Forced to indefinitely delay his Persian expedition, Valens returned to Constantinople and coordinated with western Emperor Gratian, his nephew, to defeat the uprising.\textsuperscript{29} Yet, because of his abiding jealously of Gratian’s stunning successes in the west against Germanic incursions, Valens

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 31.5.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 31.5 - 31.8. Kulikowski, \textit{The Tragedy of Empire}, 88-89.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.5.  
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 31.7, 31.10.
foolishly marched his Roman army against Fritigern’s Goths.\textsuperscript{30} As a result of his recklessness, the ensuing Battle of Adrianople on August 9, 378 would see Valens killed alongside a large portion of the eastern field army.\textsuperscript{31} According to Ammianus, “In this mutual slaughter so many were laid low that the field was covered with the bodies of the slain, while the groans of the dying and severely wounded filled all who heard them with abject fear.”\textsuperscript{32} Although precise figures are not known, and thus largely conjectural, modern estimates indicate approximately 10,000-20,000 Roman soldiers died at Adrianople, or roughly ten percent of the entire Roman army.\textsuperscript{33} According to Heather “The arrival of the Goths on the Danube [in 376] marked the start of the reshuffling of Europe-wide balances of power.”\textsuperscript{34} Yet, as the Romans were soon to discover, the impetus for the Goth’s emigration from their ancestral home was the arrival of a terrifying new threat from beyond the known world.\textsuperscript{35}

Among all ancient peoples, the Huns are perhaps one of the most enigmatic. From their entrance onto the European landscape in the late fourth century to their dissolution as a cohesive strategic power in the mid-fifth century, the Huns did not leave any literary records.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, as Peter Heather poignantly reminds, “It is not even clear what language they spoke.”\textsuperscript{37} Outside of precious few archeological finds, almost all that is known about the Huns comes from their

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\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 31.12; Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 258.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 31.13.
\textsuperscript{34} Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 146.
\textsuperscript{37} Heather, \textit{Empires and Barbarians}, 209.
enemies. First identified by Ammianus, the Huns are described as a savage, almost sub-human society that disregarded the advantages of civilization, albeit defined by Ammianus within Roman terms. He writes,

> From the moment of birth they make deep gashes in their children’s cheeks, so that when in due course hair appears its growth is checked by the wrinkled scars; as they grow older this gives them the unlovely appearance of beardless eunuchs. They have squat bodies, strong limbs, and thick necks, and are so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two-legged animals, or the figures crudely carved from stumps which are seen on the parapets of bridges. Still, their shape, however disagreeable, is human;…but live on the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any sort of animal, which they warm a little by placing it between their thighs and the backs of their horses.

Likewise, purposefully avoiding the confines of buildings, the Huns lived much of their life on horseback. In fact, all commerce, political debates, and even sexual intercourse was conducted while on horseback or within a wagon,

> They have no buildings to shelter them, but avoid anything of the kind as carefully as we avoid living in the neighborhood of tombs; no so much as a hut thatched with reeds is to be found among them. They roam at large over mountains and forests, and are inured from the cradle to cold, hunger, and thirst. On foreign soil only extreme necessity can persuade them to come under a roof, since they believe that it is not safe for them to do so… Buying or selling, eating or drinking, are all done by day or night on horseback, and they even bow forward over their bests’ narrow necks to enjoy a deep and dreamy sleep.

Ammianus concludes his ethnographic study by stating that the Huns are “ignorant of the distinction between right and wrong” (*inconsulorum animalium ritu, quid honestum
inhonestumve sit penitus ignorantes*), “are entirely at the mercy of the maddest impulses” (*totum
furori incitatissimo tribuentes*), and “so fickle” (*infidi inconstantes*) that peace treaties are entirely meaningless as they are “consumed by a savage passion to pillage the property of

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
Because of their barbaric nature and avariciousness, the Huns arrived like a plague from beyond the known confines of Scythia, the land north of the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and the Caucasus Mountains, and overran the territory of the Alans, who bordered the Gothic Greuthungi tribe. Once the Alans were subjugated and incorporated into the Hunnic confederation, the “emboldened” Huns ruthlessly attacked the Greuthungi like a “unexpected storm”, thus sparking the chain of events leading to the Gothic exodus in the 370s. However, while Ammianus’ contemporary account is fairly reliable, though seemingly exaggerated, much of his ethnology and history of the Huns is rooted in traditional Greco-Roman understandings of barbaricum.

In the fifth century B.C., the Greek historian Herodotus provided one of the first detailed ethnographic studies of the lands beyond the Mediterranean basin. An amalgamation of peoples collectively known as the Skolotoi, the Scythians were a highly mobile nomadic tribe (nomades in Greek) of shepherds and cowherds who supposedly preferred to live in wagons rather than settled communities. Originating from the lands north of the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea, the Scythians were “pressed in war by the Massagetai” (or Massagetae in Latin) and migrated across the “Araxes River (modern Syr-Darya River or Don River) into Cimmerian territory.” Living beyond them were the Androphagoi or Man-eaters, “who are in no way

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 31.2 - 31.3.
44 Ibid., 31.4.
45 It is important to remember that Roman attitudes towards the barbarians was highly influenced by Brennus’ sack of Rome in 387 B.C., the invasion of the Cimbri and Teutoni tribes in the second century B.C. and incursions of Goths, Franks, and Alamanni warriors throughout the third and fourth century A.D. Kulikowski, Rome’s Gothic Wars, 34. Barbero, The Day of the Barbarians, 13.
46 Herodotus, Historia, 4.6, 4.11.
47 Ibid.
Scythian, but a completely distinct people.” For Herodotus, there is a standard pattern of habitation: beyond the Mediterranean basin, each subsequent people group is increasingly more barbaric, savage, and ruthless. Although he readily admits his limited knowledge, Herodotus’ account would form the foundation for much of later Greco-Roman understanding of the region.

By the late fourth and early fifth centuries A.D., Greek and Roman writers still referred to barbarians beyond the Danube River in Herodotian terms, despite the Scythian’s disappearance in prior centuries. According to Kulikowski, “the Greeks and Romans of the civilized imperial world really did believe in an eternal barbarian type that stayed essentially the same no matter what particular name happened to be current for a given tribe at any particular time.” Almost certainly intentional, Ammianus’ work directly parallels not only Herodotus’ ethnographic descriptions, but also his historical progression with the Huns as the terrifying sub-human Androphagoi. Deliberately shunning civilization, the Huns were a primitive, feeble-minded, terrifying people, or as historian Christopher Kelly writes, “Even among barbarians, the Huns were the ultimate outsiders.” With such a horrifying reputation, it is not surprising that

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48 Ibid. Though certainly sensationalized, archeologists have discovered evidence of cannibalism in the area that the Androphagoi supposedly lived.
49 Ibid., 4.6-4.18.
51 Kulikowski, Rome’s Gothic Wars, 14-15.
52 Ibid.
53 Kelly, The End of Empire, 25, 33-34. Despite Ammianus’ clear agenda, Kelly reminds “That said, it should not immediately be discarded as worthless, especially in the absence of any other contemporary report. Some of the information may have had a reliable foundation, even if distorted to fit conventional ideas of nomades or exaggerated in the terrified telling by Goths eager to explain away their failure to withstand this new enemy.” Thomas S. Burns, Rome and the Barbarians: 100 BC - AD 400 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 331.
54 Kelly, The End of Empire, 33.
Christianized fifth century Romans knowledgable of Ammianus’ work understood the Huns within their apocalyptic framework.  

In reality, the Huns were simply another nomadic group from the Eurasian steppe. As a highly mobile society driving flocks across boundless pastures, the Huns had no historical ties to any geographic location. Since livestock provided only limited sustenance, the Huns most likely formed close ties with settled agricultural communities to obtain most of the food and even manufactured goods needed for travel. However, problems arise when locals do not produce enough supplies to sustain the nomadic group. As a result of this fragile existence, the Huns, like many other nomadic societies, used military force or threat of force to survive.  

Unfortunately, since the Huns largely did not remain in a particular area till the fifth century, it is nigh impossible to trace their movements. Although modern scholars, as with their ancient fore-bearers, have laboriously pondered Hunnic origins, no definitive answer has been found. According to the sixth century Christian Gothic historian Jordanes, the Huns were a scarcely human race born from evil spirits. He writes,  

We learn from old traditions that their origin was as follows: Filimer, king of the Goths, son of Gadaric the Great, was the fifth in succession to hold the rule of the Getae after their departure from the island of Scandza - an who, as we have said, entered the land of Scythia with his tribe - found among his people certain witches, whom he called in his native tongue Haliurunnae. Suspecting these women, he expelled them from the midst of his race and compelled them to wander in solitary exile afar from his army.

55 According to Kelly, “What made the Huns so threatening was their utter rejection of the benefits of a settled society. For Ammianus, they were a primitive menace to be feared by all those who peaceably plowed their fields, valued the rule of law, lived permanently in settled communities, and cooked their food.” Ibid.  
There the unclear spirits, who beheld them as they wandered through the wilderness, bestowed their embraces upon them and begat this savage race, which dwelt at first in the swamps, a stunted, foul and puny time, scarcely human and having no language save one which bore but slight resemblance to human speech. Such was the descent of the Huns who came to the country of the Goths.61

Describing the Huns as bloodthirsty, savage creatures from the pit of Hell, he writes, “For by the terror of their features they inspired great fear in those whom perhaps they did not really surpass in war…Though they live in the form of men, they have the cruelty of wild beasts.”62 Rhetorically similar to Ammianus, Jordanes’ account of Hunnic origins from beyond Scythia., though sensationalized, does not provide any specificity aside from a geographic direction.63

Current scholarship of the Huns wildly fluctuates with some, such as historians J.B. Bury, and Philip Matyszak postulating that the Huns were a Mongolian-type tribe called the Hiung-nu or Xiongnu that lived in the vast expanses of the Great Eurasian Steppe and harassed the northern frontier of ancient China in the first century A.D.64 However, as Heather notes, although the Eurasian Steppe, which stretches approximately 3,500 miles from Ukraine to western China, “is a vast place, but it didn’t, even then, take 300 years to cross.”65 Other scholars simply resign that the Huns roamed somewhere on the steppe.66 Because numerous nomadic tribes, including the Turks, Avars, Magyars, Sarmatians, Alans, and many others lived within the Eurasian Steppe, it is very difficult to differentiate between each individual tribe.67

61 Jordanes, Getica, 24.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 According to Bury, “It is supposed that the name Huns is simply a Greek corruption of Hiung-nu; and this may well be so.” Bury, History of the Later Roman Empire, 101.
65 Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 146, 149.
66 Ibid. Woolf, Rome: An Empire’s Story, 240.
The only direct evidence that provides some indication of Hunnic origins is many of the rulers’ recorded personal names, such as Attila, Bleda, Rua, and Octar. However, by Attila’s kingship, Germanic was the lingua franca of the Hunnic Empire and many of the names are either Germanized or closely associated with the language family. With such a paltry number of literary and archeological source material regarding the Huns, their origins will unfortunately simply remain mysterious. Likewise, the impetus for their entry onto the European landscape remain just as enigmatic.

According to Ammianus, the wealth of the barbarian tribes north of the Black Sea first attracted the attention of Hunnic raiders and eventually the entire tribe to move westwards. He writes, “This wild race…advanced robbing and slaughtering over the lands of their neighbors till they reached the Alans… This success emboldened them to make a sudden inroad on the rich and extensive realm of Ermenrich [leader of the Greuthungi Gothic tribe].” Similarly, despite explicit Christian rhetoric, Jordanes also suggests that the Huns were simply envious of Gothic wealth. Although rather simplistic, these explanations for Hunnic movements are perfectly plausible.

According to historian Kyle Harper, the Huns were not simply avaricious raiders that burst onto the European landscape, but rather climate refugees. He writes, “…the migration of the Huns deserves to be considered, among other things, as an environmental event.”

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68 Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 209.
69 Ibid.
72 Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 150.
74 Ibid.
Throughout central Asia, a mostly dry and continental plateau caused by the leeward winds from southern Asia, much of its climate hinges on the westerlies, prevailing winds that bring moisture from Atlantic air masses. These winds in turn are strongly influenced by the North Atlantic Oscillation, a weather phenomenon of fluctuating atmospheric pressures. When the NAO is positive, central Asia is mostly arid, but when negative, storms are pulled towards the equator and rain covers the region. Based on a series of Juniper tree rings from Dulan-Wulan on the Tibetan plateau, and the work of climatologist Ed Cook, Harper writes, “The two decades from ca. AD 350 to 370 were the worst multi-decadal drought event of the last two millennia. The nomads who called central Asia home suddenly faced a crisis as dramatic as the Dust Bowl.”

As “armed climate refugees on horseback” the Huns consequently sought out better conditions westwards, across the Volga River and into ancient Scythia.

Notwithstanding that a definitive answer regarding Hunnic emigration westwards remains elusive, ultimately, it was their superb military capabilities that greatly determined their success against other barbarian groups and their accompanying fearsome reputation. In stark contrast to both the Romans and Germanic barbarian armies dominated by infantry, Hunnic military strength relied mainly upon the sophisticated use of the composite reflex bow alongside incredible horsemanship. The composite bow, made from bone, sinew, and horsehair was very difficult to manufacture, so much so that even Germanic populations under Hunnic overlordship

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75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 191-192.
79 Ibid.
throughout the late fourth and fifth century did not adopt the weapon. Because the manufacturing process involved a multi-layering of materials, each composite bow took years to fully assemble.

Likewise, unlike swords, spears, and simple bows that could be handled by raw recruits, the composite bow is as equally difficult to string, let alone even use. According to military historian Edward Luttwak, “Once strung, the composite reflex bow is still too resistant to be employed with any accuracy without much practice, preferably starting in childhood, with yet more practice needed to use the weapon usefully on horseback and on the move.”

In experienced hands, modern reconstructions indicate that the composite bow had an effective range of up to 150 meters and an accurate range of up to 75 meters. Against well armored foes, Hunnic arrows could easily penetrate both thick wooden or metal shield and body armor from ranges long thought impossible by the Romans and Germanic barbarians. Recounting the capabilities of the composite bow, Sidonius Apollinaris, a fifth century Roman bishop, wrote, “Shapely bows and arrows are their delight, sure and terrible are their hands; firm is their confidence that their missiles will bring death, and their frenzy is trained to do wrongful deeds with blows that never go wrong.”

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 25.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 26.
87 Ibid., 27.
88 Ibid., 22 (Primary Source).
As a highly mobile nomadic society, the Huns were expert horsemen.\textsuperscript{89} Trained since childbirth to ride a horse, Sidonius remarks that an observer would have difficulty differentiating the rider’s limbs from the horse.\textsuperscript{90} According to Ammianus, they “remain glued to their horses” (\textit{verum equis prope adfixi}).\textsuperscript{91} As a result of their horsemanship skills, the Huns had a tremendous mobility and strategic advantage over their enemies, capable of covering some 30 to 50 miles per day in favorable conditions.\textsuperscript{92} Once engaged in combat, the Huns tactically used their speed and maneuverability to overwhelm even numerically superior forces.\textsuperscript{93} Additionally, since the stirrup was unknown across Europe, the Huns used a wooden frame saddle that helped stabilize the horse archer.\textsuperscript{94} When deployed on the battlefield the secure seat allowed the rider to use both hands to fire his missile while his knees controlled the horse, ensuring the horse archer had both a mobility and firepower advantage over the enemy.\textsuperscript{95} Although the Romans had encountered horse archers in the past, particularly the Sarmatians and Alans, the Huns’ combination of advanced bow technology, horsemanship, and archery skills presented a new military challenge.\textsuperscript{96} Against them in battle, Ammianus states, “Being lightly equipped and very sudden in their movements they can deliberately scatter and gallop about at random, inflicting

\textsuperscript{89} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 318-319.
\textsuperscript{90} Luttwak, \textit{The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire}, 28 (Primary Source).
\textsuperscript{91} Ammianus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 31.2.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.; It should also be noted that each Hunnic warrior had multiple extra horses with them on campaign so as to extend their operational capabilities. Luttwak, \textit{The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire}, 32-33. Philip Matyszak, \textit{The Enemies of Rome: From Hannibal to Attila the Hun} (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 271.
\textsuperscript{93} Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 155.
\textsuperscript{94} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 317-318.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} According to Goldsworthy, “Composite bows were widely known in the ancient world. The Persians used them, as did nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples like the Sarmatians and Alans. Composite bows had been standard in the Roman army for centuries and laths are relatively common finds from military sites. Hunnic bows were unusually large - especially for use on horseback - and thus more powerful.” Ibid.
tremendous slaughter; their extreme nimbleness enables them to force a rampart or pillage an
enemy’s camp before one catches sight of them.”

However, there were limits on their tactical and operational capabilities.

Since the composite bow is made from glue extracted from tree bark, it absorbs moisture
from the air. As Luttwak poignantly states, “For this reason alone, the mounted archers of the
Eurasian steppe could not prosper in wetter northern climates, limiting the geographic reach of
their conquests.” In addition, as the Huns had limited numbers of effective warriors, they
supplemented their armies with large contingents of allied infantry, mainly from the numerous
Germanic barbarians tribes within their sphere of influence. With several thousand allied
spearmen, javelin-men, and swordsmen, Hunnic armies consequently were operationally limited
Nevertheless, even in defeat, “they could often escape with only minimal losses”

Following their entry onto the European landscape north of the Black Sea in the late
fourth century, the nomadic Huns slowly shifted the focus of their activity further south until
they permanently established themselves along the middle Danube River within the Great
Hungarian Plain. Throughout the next fifty years, from the 370s to the 420s, scant ancient
sources indicate that a series of Hunnic kings: Balamber, Uldin, Donatus, Charaton, and
Mundiuch not only raided across the Roman frontier, but also methodically subjugated several
Gothic, Germanic, and even ethnic Hunnic tribes not under their dominion north of the

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100 Ibid.
Huns*, 27.
Danube. According to Jordanes, it was Balamber’s ruthless attack against the Ostrogoths, a retroactively applied late fifth century name for the Gothic tribe beyond the Danube, that precipitated the 376 Tervingian and Greuthungian flight into Roman Thrace. Because of their fearsome reputation, many terrified Gothic and Germanic tribes fled the approaching Huns and actively sought refuge within the empire in the following decades.

By the early fifth century, many more former frontier barbarian tribes, including the Visigoths, Franks, Suevi, Burgundians, and Vandals abandoned their ancestral homes for lands across the Roman frontier. How much these mass migratory movements were caused by either Hunnic aggression or Roman weakness is still debatable. In fact, although several Gothic tribes were forcibly integrated within the Hunnic confederation as Jordanes records, thus triggering a domino-effect across the entire Roman frontier, many other tribes willingly joined the Huns as loyal subordinate allies under their own leadership. As shifting political arrangements across the border were a normal occurrence throughout the entire Republican and Imperial period, Roman authorities initially regarded the Huns as merely another plentiful source of recruitable auxiliaries. In time, many of them would understand that while these new barbarians were

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102 Although the Huns are typically perceived as a single political entity, it should be noted that there were several independent ethnic European and central Asian Hunnic tribes across the frontier. In fact, the central Asian Huns, or Hephthalites (White Huns), are reported to have raided the Sassanid Persian Empire during the early fifth century, but were swiftly repulsed. In a conversation between the Greek historian Priscus, an Eastern Roman diplomat, and Romulus, a Western Roman diplomat, it is revealed that Attila had seriously contemplated a campaign against the Persians so as to dominate the entire known world and elevate his status. Priscus, fr.8.138. Kelly, The End of Empire, 50-51, 89. Kulikowski, Rome’s Gothic Wars, 154-155. Matyszak, The Enemies of Rome, 272.

103 Jordanes, Getica, 24.130-25.131.


106 The Roman historian Olympiodorus records that the Huns were employed by Stilicho, the Magister Militum of the Western Roman Empire, to fight alongside Roman forces against Radagaisus’ Gothic invasion of Italy in 405-406. Olympiodorus, fr.2, fr.9. Bury, History of the Later Roman Empire, 103-104. Kulikowski, The Triumph of Empire, 85.
particularly of great use against other barbarian groups and internal Roman rivals, the Huns were also “capable of the utmost atrocities.”

In August 423, at the imperial capital of Ravenna, Western Emperor Honorius died, possibly due to edema, a condition in which the body retains fluids often leading to kidney failure or heart attack. Since he was childless and exiled his sister, Galla Placidia, alongside the boy presumptive heir, Valentinian III, the late emperor’s death instantly triggered a succession crisis. For Eastern Emperor Theodosius II, his uncle’s untimely death was an opportune moment to seize the Western throne from his family and unite the whole empire under his sole rule. Additionally, since he successfully negotiated a treaty with the Sassanid Persian Empire and the new Hunnic leaders, brothers Rua and Octar, pledging 350lbs of gold annually after a devastating Hunnic raid the previous year, Theodosius was reasonably confident of victory. However, the plan quickly backfired as Western Roman courtiers and military officials, who strongly objected to Theodosian rule, acclaimed a senior bureaucrat (Primicerius notariorum), named John, as Western Emperor.

Faced with an imperial pretender and the possibility of a protracted civil war, Theodosius reversed course, recognized Valentinian III as the legitimate heir, and sent a hastily assembled army under Flavius Aspar to forcibly secure his cousin’s claim. Arriving in early 425, the

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107 Thompson, The Huns, 41.
108 Kelly, The End of Empire, 79.
109 Ibid., 79-80.
110 Ibid., 80-81.
113 Kelly, The End of Empire, 81.
Eastern Roman army captured Aquileia in northern Italy and advanced on Ravenna, a well defended city surrounded by marshes. After a shepherd led Aspar’s forces through the marshes along a secret pathway, the city quickly surrendered.\textsuperscript{114} With John’s forces resoundingly defeated and the Western Imperial capital captured, John was unceremoniously paraded around Aquileia’s hippodrome on a donkey until he was cruelly beheaded with Galla Placidia and Valentinian III as callous onlookers.\textsuperscript{115} However, their celebrations were precariously premature. For in the months before Aspar’s arrival, John had sent Flavius Aetius, a relatively unknown Roman official, across the Danube River with gold to entreat Rua’s support.\textsuperscript{116}

Hailing from Durostorum in Roman Moesia, Aetius was born into a wealthy and influential family.\textsuperscript{117} As the son of a prominent Roman North African governor who subsequently was killed during a mutiny in Gaul, Jordanes describes Aetius as, “a man fitted to endure the toils of war, born expressly to serve the Roman state.”\textsuperscript{118} During this youth, Aetius was sent as a hostage, along with other aristocratic teenagers, as collateral to secure a diplomatic arrangement between Honorious and the Huns in 409.\textsuperscript{119} After living several years among the Huns, and treated with the utmost respect, Aetius returned to the empire a capable horseman, an excellent archer, and intimately aware of Hunnic military tactics.\textsuperscript{120} Likewise, contrary to Roman descriptions of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 82.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 34.176.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 327. Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 82-83.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 327.
\end{itemize}
the Huns as uncivilized brutes, Aetius cultivated a number of friendships with important Hunnic leaders, including a young Attila.121

Because of his experience and connections with the Huns, Aetius was the perfect choice for John to secure his throne. Unfortunately, although Aetius’s mission was a success, he returned to Italy with 60,000 Huns three days too late.122 With a keen appreciation of the new political environment, Aetius quickly abandoned the pretender’s cause and negotiated with Galla Placidia for an important position within the new regime. In exchange for the Huns’ return to the Great Hungarian Plain, Aetius was appointed Magister Militum of Gaul.123 While Valentinian III was the undisputed Western Roman Emperor henceforth, as Kelly poignantly notes, “Aetius had exposed the damaging possibility that Hun mercenaries might be used not to defend the empire, but to advance the factional interests of ambitious Roman generals.”124

Throughout the following decade, Aetius would employ Hunnic mercenaries not only against hostile barbarian tribes on the empire’s borders, but also relied on his Hunnic connections to once again shore up his position as Magister Militum after he foolishly tried to outwit his political opponents.125 In his Historia Ecclesiastica, Greek historian Socrates Scholasticus

121 Ibid.
123 Elton, The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, 186.
124 Kelly, The End of Empire, 84. Thompson, The Huns, 40.
125 Between 435-439, Aetius used the Huns to destroy the Christianized Burgundians and Bagaudae in Gaul in exchange for Roman dispossession of Pannonia and Valeria. These regions became virtually uninhabited buffer zones between the Western Roman Empire and the Huns across the Danube. Although the 439 campaign against the Goths was a disaster, with the Roman commander Litorius captured and the Huns routed, Roman writers became quite suspicious of the merits of employing pagan Huns to combat fellow Christians. Kelly, The End of Empire, 95, 115. John of Antioch, fr.196, fr.201. Jordanes, Getica, 34,177. J.R. Moss, “The Effects of the Policies of Aetius on the History of Western Europe,” Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte (1973: 711-731), 716.
records a failed Roman sponsored Hunnic expedition, led by Octar, against the Burgundians along the Rhine River in 430,

Then they marched against the Huns, and were not disappointed in their hopes. For when Uptaros [Octar], king of the Huns, burst during the night as a result of his overindulgence, the Burgundians attacked the Huns, who were not leaderless…The Burgundians were only three thousand men, but they destroyed around ten thousand of the enemy. From then on, the Burgundians were fervent Christians.126

Because Hunnic power derived from the application of military force, the failure against the Burgundians warranted a response. A few years later, now led by Rua’s nephews, Attila and Bleda, Roman historian and monk Prosper of Aquitaine notes that “the Huns destroyed the Burgundians root and branch.”127 For all their benefits as a tool to defend the empire and advance Aetius’ career, the events of the early fifth century conversely taught Hunnic leaders the enormous potency of their presence and influence on the empire’s northern border.128 When the next imperial crisis arose, the Huns would exploit Roman weakness to enhance their political position as the leading force beyond the Roman frontier. In so doing, the Huns were thought of by the Romans in apocalyptic terms.129

Since their victory over the Carthaginians in the Third Punic War in 146 B.C., North Africa (modern day Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco) had been a Roman controlled province.130 With an abundance of resources, including wine, olive oil, and grain, the agriculturally rich and commercially prosperous region was in essence “the granary of the

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127 Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 113 (Primary Source).
128 Ibid., 115-116.
130 Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 88.
Roman world.”131 With the permanent division of the empire following Theodosius I’s death in A.D. 395, North Africa became even more important as a significant portion of the Western Empire’s income and food stuffs derived from the province.132 However, due to the westward migration of the Huns, the Germanic Vandal tribe crossed the Rhine River in December 409 and, within twenty years, had reached the Straits of Gibraltar and invaded North Africa.133 If the province fell to a Vandal invasion, the Western Empire would not only lose a valuable province, but also precariously expose largely undefended interior regions. Therefore, in the early 431, Theodosius II sent an Eastern Roman army under Flavius Aspar to reinforce Boniface, the Western Roman governor.134 Three years later, and several surprising defeats, the combined Roman force could not dislodge the Vandals from the area.135

Taking advantage of the situation, Rua sent an embassy to Constantinople in early 434 demanding all Hunnic fugitives that joined the Roman army be returned immediately alongside an increased subsidy or he would devastate the Danubian provinces.136 Theodosius II, “being informed of this, immediately, as his custom was, committed the management of the matter to God” and sent ambassadors to resolve the situation.137 By the summer, his calculated risk of diluting frontier troops to reinforce Aspar’s forces had failed when Rua’s Hunnic army unexpectedly crossed the Danube and ravaged the lightly defended region.138 In an equally

131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 The Vandalic tribe was led by King Gaiseric and his son Huneric. Ibid., 88-89. Jordanes, Getica, 33.167.
134 Kelly, The End of Empire, 88-89.
135 Ibid.
137 Socrates Scholasticus, Historia Ecclesiastica, 7.43. Kelly, The End of Empire, 89.
surprising turn of events, just a short time after commencing their raid, the Hunnic army returned home.\textsuperscript{139}

Although no definitive answer has been discovered, it is likely that Rua’s death while on campaign caused this sharp reversal.\textsuperscript{140} According to Socrates, the fiercely pagan Huns fled back to the Great Hungarian Plain because Rua was divinely struck down by a lightning bolt filling “the barbarians with the utmost terror; not so much because they had dared to take up arms against a nation of such valor as the Romans possessed, as that they perceived them to be assisted by a mighty God.”\textsuperscript{141} In a similar celebratory sermon, Constantinople’s Bishop, Proclus, declared that the Huns were the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s apocalyptic prophecy concerning Gog and Magog,

And you, son of man, prophesy against Gog and say, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, O Gog… And I will turn you about and drive you forward, and bring you up from the uttermost parts of the north, and lead you against the mountains of Israel. Then I will strike your bow from your left hand, and will make your arrows drop out of your right hand. You shall fall…, you and all your hordes and the peoples who are with you.\textsuperscript{142}

As the sermon was “received with great applause”, the large crowd, no doubt including the imperial family, would have interpreted the Huns as an apocalyptic force.\textsuperscript{143} For following both Ezekiel’s and the Apostle John’s prophecy of Gog and Magog, the Lord ushers in the heavenly

\textsuperscript{139} Priscus, \textit{fr.1}. Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 90.

\textsuperscript{140} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 90.

\textsuperscript{141} Unlike most of the barbarian tribes that converted to Christianity, albeit Arianism, once they entered the Roman Empire, the Huns fiercely clung to their pagan beliefs, despite missionary efforts by Theodosius II. Socrates Scholasticus, \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica}, 7.43. Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 102.


kingdom.\textsuperscript{144} However, with the death of Rua and the ascension of his nephews, Attila and Bleda, the Romans were to discover that the Christian apocalypse was not entirely over.

Chapter Five: The Campaigns of Attila the Hun

Attila the Hun was born likely at the beginning of the fifth century somewhere on the Great Hungarian Plain. As the son of the Hunnic king, Mundiuch, Attila was born into a privileged environment and part of the “most powerful family north of the Danube.” Alongside his elder brother, Bleda, they were raised to become not only excellent warriors, but also future leaders of the Hunnic confederation. This elite training would have included lessons in horsemanship, archery, and most certainly Latin and Gothic/Germanic in order to communicate with their subjects and the Romans. One modern scholar speculates that Attila and Bleda might “also learned something of military and diplomatic tactics. They may have been present, somewhere quietly in the background, when Rua and Octar received Roman ambassadors.”

Described by Jordanes as a short, broad-chested man with a large head, flat-nose, small eyes, and a thin grey speckled beard, Attila’s features were clear “evidence of his origins.” Additionally, he also states that Attila was “a lover of war, yet restrained in action, mighty in counsel, gracious to supplements and lenient to those who were once received into his protection.” A temperamental men, Attila “always had great self-confidence” that the pagan gods favored him. For in contrast to many Germanic and Gothic barbarian tribes that converted to Christianity, albeit Arianism, the Huns were fiercely pagan, even resisting Eastern Roman

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3 Ibid.
4 Jordanes, Getica, 35.182.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 35.182-183.
sponsored missionary efforts. According to Priscus of Panium, the only ancient historian to have actually met Attila, this self-confidence was rooted in the coincidental discovery of a sword by a local shepherd. He writes,

> When a certain shepherd beheld one heifer of his flock limping and could find no cause for this wound, he anxiously followed the trail of blood and at length came to a sword it had unwittingly trampled while nibbling the grass. He dug it up and took it straight to Attila. He rejoiced at this gift and, being ambitious, thought he had been appointed ruler of the whole world, and that through the sword of Mars supremacy in all wars was assured to him.

As swords were of great significance to steppe peoples, Attila’s immediate reaction to its discovery reveals unique political and propaganda abilities. By evoking the old Roman war-god, interestingly enough not a Hunnic god, Attila not only signified that he was blessed by the gods above all other Huns, but also the superiority of paganism over Roman Christianity. This dualist message would feature prominently throughout his entire kingship.

Throughout their uncle’s kingship during the 420s and 430s, the brothers most likely would have participated in the many military campaigns to expand Hunnic power and extract gold from the Roman world. In one instance, Priscus indicates that under Rua, the Huns brought the “Amilzouri, Itimari, Tounsoures, Boïski and other peoples who dwelled along the Istros [Danube] River” within their confederation. As the tribes were “seeking refuge in alliance with the Romans” Rua determined that brute force would prevent Roman encroachment

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on their sphere of influence. Unfortunately, it is not known the extent to which the brothers actively engaged in these expeditions, nor whether they were present when Rua suddenly died on campaign in 434. If they were part of Rua’s last expedition into Roman Thrace, their withdrawal back to the Great Hungarian Plain to consolidate their rule would explain why the Huns abruptly ended the campaign.

With the death of both uncles in quick succession, Attila and Bleda were elevated as co-rulers of the Huns. Much like many other cases of co-familial rulership, the brothers ardently disagreed with one another, particularly concerning Bleda’s entertainment choices. According to Priscus, Bleda thoroughly enjoyed the comedic sayings of Zerkon, captured Roman described as “short and hunchback.” Because Bleda entreated advice from Zerkon, gave him the daughter of a high-ranking Hun, and seemingly could not stop laughing at Zerkon’s antics, “Attila could not bear the sight of him.” However, as the younger brother and reliant on Bleda’s prestige for legitimacy, Attila stayed his anger until the opportune moment for him to seize power presented itself.

Over the next several years, the Roman frontier along the Danube River remained relatively quiet as the brothers methodically used both military force and Roman gold to consolidate their hegemony over the numerous subordinate tribes within their confederacy.

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13 Ibid.
17 Priscus, fr.11.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., fr.8.38.
439, Aetius once again employed several thousand Hunnic mercenaries to destroy the Christianized Visigoths in southern Gaul.\textsuperscript{21} Under Attila and Bleda’s personal leadership, alongside the Roman commander Litorius, the Romano-Hunnic army defeated the Visigothic field army and besieged their capital at Toulouse.\textsuperscript{22} The night prior to the final battle, the monk Prosper of Aquitaine indicates that Litorius abandoned his Christian faith by not only allowing the Huns to perform pagan rituals, but also relying upon their soothsayers for strategic advice.\textsuperscript{23} No doubt that the overwhelming and surprising Visigothic victory the next day only strengthened Prosper’s claim that paganism led directly to their defeat.\textsuperscript{24} Nevertheless, the vanquished and politically weak, but always opportunistic brothers returned to the Great Hungarian Plain determined to restore their fortunes.

In the winter of 439, Attila and Bleda met with an Eastern Roman delegation at Margum, modern Orašje, to renegotiate Rua’s old 422 treaty with Theodosius II.\textsuperscript{25} Since the Vandals under Geiseric had resumed their invasion of North Africa, even seizing Carthage on October 19, alongside further redeployments of Eastern Roman troops to reinforce Western Roman forces in the Mediterranean, the brothers took the opportunity to extort the empire.\textsuperscript{26} In accordance with Hunnic tradition, and not desiring to offend the Hunnic kings, the Roman ambassadors, Plinhas and Epigenes, joined their Hun counterparts and “held their summit outside the city on horseback.”\textsuperscript{27} After laborious negotiations, both parties reached a four-part agreement: the

\textsuperscript{22} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 34.
\textsuperscript{23} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 115-116.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Priscus, \textit{fr.1.1.1}. Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 440.
\textsuperscript{26} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 119.
\textsuperscript{27} Priscus, \textit{fr.1.1.1}. 

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Romans were to return all Hun refugees and refuse all future refugees from across the Danube into the empire, the Romans were forbidden from securing any alliances with Hun enemies, equitable tradings rights across the frontier were to be secured, and finally, an annualized tribute from the Eastern Roman Empire of seven hundred pounds of gold. Although the treaty seemed rather one-sided, both parties greatly benefited from it. With a secure southern border, Attila and Bleda could both rebuild their shattered forces and consolidate their fragile political position with more Roman gold. Conversely, the wealthy Eastern Roman Empire could easily afford the tribute to secure the Danubian frontier, and subsequently, concentrate on the Vandal threat. However, as Goldsworthy eruditely notes, since “blackmailers inevitably interpret compliance as a sign of weakness and increase their demands”, the negotiated peace would not endure for long.

With the Vandalic seizure of Carthage in the fall of 439, alongside its impressive naval base, Geiseric decided to press his advantage further and launch a combined land and naval force against Sicily. In response, Theodosius II and Valentinian III jointly issued an imperial edict on June 24, 440, stating, “Geiseric, the enemy of our empire, is reported to have issued forth from the port of Carthage with a large fleet whose swift transit and capacity for opportunistic marauding is to be feared along all coastlines (Gensericus hostis imperii nostri non parvam classem de Karthaginensi portu nuntiatus est eduxisse, cuius repentinus excursus et fortuita

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29 Kelly, The End of Empire, 118.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Goldsworthy, How Rome Fell, 320.
depraedatio cunctis est litoribus formidanda.)”\(^{34}\) In a rather stunning lack of forethought, Theodosius II confidently assumed that his Hunnic peace treaty secured his northern frontier as before, and therefore, committed troops against Geiseric in spring 441.\(^{35}\) He was soon to realize that his relatively unguarded and wealthy Danubian frontier presented a tempting target for opportunistic raiders.

Once Attila and Bleda learned of the Roman redeployment, their Hunnic forces struck out across the Danube River and sacked Constantia, a Roman fort and market-town across the river from Margum.\(^{36}\) After sending an imperial delegation, led by Flavius Aspar, accusing the Huns of treachery, “The Scythians [Huns] replied that they had not acted preemptively but in self-defense. For, they said, the bishop of Margos had crossed into their land, tracked down their royal tombs and looted the buried treasures. And, they said, unless the Romans surrendered him and, according to their agreements… they would launch a war.”\(^{37}\) As negotiations dragged on, with the Romans vehemently denying the charge, the anxious bishop made a deal with Attila to save his life.\(^{38}\) According to Priscus, “When night fell, having positioned an ambush right opposite the river bank, he rose up at the agreed signal and caused the city to fall to its enemies. Thus Margos [Margum] was sacked, and the barbarians’ accomplishments rose to a still greater level.”\(^{39}\)

\(^{34}\) *Codex Theodosianus, Novelle*, 9.


\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Priscus, fr.2.1-3.


\(^{39}\) Priscus, *fr*.2.6-7.
Throughout the following two years, Hunnic forces continued their campaign deep into Roman Thrace and Illyricum without any considerable Roman resistance, sacking the cities of Sirminium, Singidunum, Virminacium, and Serdica. In 443, the major walled city of Naisus, birthplace of Constantine, was burned to the ground by Attila and Bleda’s army. Unlike many other Gothic and Germanic barbarian groups, who did not possess adequate siege technology, the Huns used simple battering rams, ladders, and mounted archery platforms throughout the siege. Although it is not known how they acquired the technology, it is likely that captured or refugee Roman/Greek engineers taught the Huns siege techniques. The city was so utterly destroyed that several years later, Priscus and other Roman travelers found the city desolate, with only a few stubborn monks living in the few remaining buildings and numerous scattered bones of the city’s former inhabitants. As Kelly so poignantly summarizes, “For these Christian holy men, the burned-out shell of a once great imperial city must have seemed a fitting place to wait patiently for the Apocalypse.” With the sword of Mars at their helm, Attila and Bleda’s Huns became the very symbol of wanton destruction.

As ever more Roman cities were sacked by Hunnic forces, Theodosius II finally realized his error and recalled the Eastern Roman army after concluding a treaty with Geiseric. Once the army disembarked in Constantinople in spring, 443, Attila and Bleda quickly led their forces

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42 Ibid., *fr*.1B.1.3-5.
45 Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 127.
back to the Great Hungarian Plain. Negotiating from a position of strength, Attila successfully extorted the Romans for a tripled annualized tribute of 2,100 pounds of gold alongside a reaffirmation of the previous treaty’s clauses. At some point after the campaign and confident of his position amongst the Huns, Jordanes indicate that Attila murdered Bleda in 445 and established himself as sole ruler of the Hunnic confederation. With more Roman gold and control over an enormous swath of territory and peoples from the Black Sea to the North Sea, Attila, henceforth, singularly ruled over the largest barbarian confederation not seen throughout the entire Roman period.

With the renewed Romano-Hunnic Treaty of 443, the Danubian frontier remained uneasily quiet as Attila consolidated power and Theodosius II steadily reinforced the border fortresses. Yet, the characteristically opportunistic Attila could not resist making further demands from the emperor, particularly for the return of Hun fugitives. In late 446, he sent an ultimatum to Theodosius II, “about the fugitives and the tribute. He commanded that all the fugitives and tribute that had not been sent - the Romans were alleging the present war as an excuse - should be sent to him immediately.” Because Priscus’ account is only fragmentary, it is

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51 Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 132.

not certain when or how long Theodosius II cancelled the annual tribute.\textsuperscript{53} Nevertheless, Attila threatened war if ambassadors were not immediately sent to rectify the alleged misgivings.\textsuperscript{54} When the emperor flatly refused to either send the gold or return the named fugitives, Attila’s Hunnic forces crossed the frontier, brushing aside the frontier \textit{lime} forces, and sacked Ratiaria, the headquarters of the Roman Danube fleet.\textsuperscript{55}

As if invasion were disastrous enough, on January 26, 447, an enormous earthquake struck Constantinople, destroying vast sections of the seemingly-impregnable tripled layered Theodosian Walls.\textsuperscript{56} With several large gapping holes within its facade, the city lay open to Attila’s Hunnic hordes. The city’s Christianized residents took the event as a sign from God of His displeasure with them and a call to repentance. Even Theodosius II laid aside the richly jeweled imperial regalia and trod from the Great Palace to the city’s walls barefoot, wearing only a while tunic, crying out, “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us.”\textsuperscript{57} For those that remembered Proclus’ sermon declaring the Huns as the fulfillment of Christian apocalyptic prophecy, the sight of an unadorned, humble, and contrite emperor must certainly have terrified them of the future. The simultaneous Hunnic invasion and earthquake were visible signs of God’s displeasure of their sinful ways.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{53} One scholar suggested the later 6,000 pounds of gold payment was a punitive payment for the breach of the peace treaty of 443 or 439, “Since the evidence indicates that the Romans were paying the required sum until 441, the 6,000 pounds of gold cannot be a round sum for tribute not paid since 438. It must rather be a punitive payment demanded by Attila for what he chose to regard as a breach of the Peace of Margus.” Bayless, “The Treaty with the Huns in 443”, 179.

\textsuperscript{54} Priscus, \textit{fr}.3.1.


\textsuperscript{57} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 131 (Primary Source).

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 243-244.
Upon hearing the news, Attila rapidly reacted and steered his army towards Constantinople.\textsuperscript{59} Within the city, the Praetorian Prefect Flavius Constantinus hastily organized the city’s Hippodrome fans, often bitterly opposed to one another, to competitively rebuild the Theodosian Walls.\textsuperscript{60} Completed in record time, an inscription next to a gate reads, “By Theodosius’ command, Constantinus triumphantly built these strong walls in less than two months. Pallas could hardly have built such a secure citadel in so short a time.” (Theodosii Ivssis Gemino Nec Mense Peracto Constantinus Ovans Haec Moenia Firma Locavit Tam Cito Tam Stabilem Pallas Vix Corderet Arcem).\textsuperscript{61} Thwarted from the imperial capital, Attila turned his army back towards Thrace and defeated a Roman army under Eastern Magister Militum Arnegisclus near the Utus River.\textsuperscript{62}

With victory secure, Attila’s Hunnic hordes returned to the Great Hungarian Plain, but not without another treaty recognizing the 439 provisions, an annualized tribute of 2,100 pounds of gold, an immediate payment of 6,000 pounds of gold, and a strip of depopulated territory along the Danubian frontier.\textsuperscript{63} According to Priscus, the treaty nearly bankrupted the empire’s treasury and forced Theodosius II to repeal senatorial tax exemptions. He writes,

> The Romans professed to make this treaty voluntarily. Really it was by necessity that they gladly accepted every injunction, difficult as each one was, because of the inordinate fear constraining their commanders. They were eager to obtain peace...however burdensome it was, even though both their private assets and the imperial treasury had been exhausted.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 133. Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 322-323.
\textsuperscript{60} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 133.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 134 (Primary Source).
\textsuperscript{64} Priscus, \textit{fr}.5.4.
Afterwards, he sadly relates that several people, out of despair, committed suicide because of the financial strain.\textsuperscript{65} Despite the sensational narrative, it should be noted that the immediate payment was not an entirely disproportional expense. In a detailed survey of Late Antique Roman administration, Kelly notes that the numerous Roman provincial governors received an imperial stipend between 10 and 20 pounds of gold annually, totaling thousand of pounds.\textsuperscript{66} Additionally, historian Hugh Elton notes that by the end of Emperor Marcian’s short reign (450-457), Theodosius II’s successor, the imperial treasury had a surplus of over 100,000 pounds of gold.\textsuperscript{67} In the end, while the punitive tribute may have devastated certain individuals, but not fatally undermine the empire’s financial integrity, it was not in Attila’s interest to topple the empire.\textsuperscript{68} He would have lost an enormous source of revenue for his fledging confederation.\textsuperscript{69}

With the Eastern Roman Empire humbled after the disastrous 447 campaign, Hunnic activity along the Danubian frontier significantly slowed once again. However, Attila was always an uneasy and unpredictable neighbor. Revealing in his newfound political position, and no doubt aware of the frightening Roman image of him, Priscus relates that Attila greatly enjoyed sending Hun ambassadors to Constantinople claiming Roman treachery, “The barbarian, seeing the Romans’ generosity as they avoided transgressing the treaty, kept sending whichever of his retainers he wanted to treat well, inventing reasons and finding empty pretenses.”\textsuperscript{70} In 448, Attila sent two senior Hun ambassadors, a Roman man named Orestes, and a Hun named Edeko,

\textsuperscript{65} Priscus, \textit{fr.5.6-8}.  
\textsuperscript{66} Christopher Kelly, \textit{Ruling the Later Roman Empire} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 65.  
\textsuperscript{67} Elton, \textit{The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity}, 172.  
\textsuperscript{68} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 147.  
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{70} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 35.176. Priscus, \textit{fr.6.1}.  

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accusing the Romans of harboring more Hun fugitives. Of the high-ranking Roman officials chosen to negotiate with Attila were Vigilas, an invaluable Hunnic interpreter, Maximus, an imperial advisor, and the historian Priscus himself.73

Leaving Constantinople in early spring 449, the ambassadors traveled through territory utterly devastated by Attila’s forces, including towns still in ruins from nearly a decade prior. In an encounter while encamped near Naissus, Edekon and Orestes became greatly angered at the Romans’ suggestion that Attila was merely a “man” and Theodosius II a “god.” Even a half-century after the acceptance of Christianity as an imperially-supported institution, it is striking that old pagan Roman traditions of emperor worship were reconstituted within a new Christian framework. After brandishing gifts upon Edeko, but curiously not Orestes, their anger quickly vanished. However, unbeknownst to Priscus and Maximus, they were unwittingly part of an assassination plot to kill Attila. Before their departure for the Great Hungarian Plain, an imperial eunuch, named Chrysaphius, under orders from Theodosius II and Eastern Magister Offiorum (Master of Offices) Martialis, secretly arranged a deal with Edeko and Vigilas to kill Attila in exchange for gold and a comfortable life in Constantinople. “They also decided that Vigilas, as

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71 Interestingly enough, once Attila’s Hunnic empire dissolved in the years ahead, these two individuals and their children would play leading roles in the final collapse of the Western Roman Empire (Orestes’ son was Romulus Augustulus, the last Western Roman Emperor, and Edeko’s son, Odoacer, removed 12 year-old Augustulus from the throne in 476). Priscus, fr.7.1.
72 Ibid., fr.7.4.
73 Ibid., fr.8.1-2, 5.
74 Ibid., fr.8.13.
76 Priscus, fr.8.6-8.
77 Ibid., Kelly, The End of Empire, 165.
78 Priscus, fr.7.5-14.; fr.8.1. Elton, The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, 170-171.
a pretense, should keep occupying the translator’s post and should do whatever Edeko thought best, and Maximus, since he knew nothing of their plans, should deliver the emperor’s letter.”

Arriving at Attila’s capital after a lengthy trip, the Roman delegation initially were denied access to the Hun king, but were treated, nonetheless, with the utmost respect and hospitality. The location of the Hun court still remains a mystery today, but Priscus describes the palace as a magnificent wooden structure, indicating a dramatic Hunnic shift away from nomadism towards permanency along the Roman frontier. After several days of following Attila as he toured his realm, the ambassadors were finally granted an audience to discuss the present crisis.

In an extraordinary encounter before the Hun king, Attila treated the Romans with a panoply of emotion. While Priscus and Maximus were respected according to “sacred diplomatic law”, Attila “turned his attention straight to Vigilas, called him a shameless beast…Growing angrier and reviling him all the more, Attila shouted that he would have crucified him and given him as food to the birds.” Feverishly contemplating Attila’s emotional outburst after the encounter, the Roman delegation were unaware that soon after their arrival, Edeko double-crossed Vigilas and informed Attila of the assassination plot. Over the next several days, under orders from Attila, Edeko continued his ruse until Vigilas was caught in-the-act of paying the

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79 Ibid., fr.8.1.
81 Bury writes, “Since their entry into Europe the Huns had changed in some important ways their life and institutions. They were still a pastoral people, they did not learn to practice tillage, but on the Danube and the Theiss the nomadic habits of the Asiatic steppes were no longer appropriate or necessary.” Bury, History of the Later Roman Empire, 278.
83 Priscus, fr.8.43-44.
assassins.\textsuperscript{85} Surprisingly, Attila did not condemn any of the Roman ambassadors to death, but instead invited Priscus and Maximus to a banquet.\textsuperscript{86} As Kelly notes, “If all had turned out as Chrysaphius expected - and Attila had behaved like a barbarian tyrant - then Priscus would never have survived to write his \textit{History}. The truth should have been buried with him somewhere beyond the Danube”\textsuperscript{87}

While at the banquet hall, decorated with fine linens and drapery arranged according to Greek and Roman custom, Priscus notes the incredible dichotomy of lifestyle choices between Attila and the Hunnic nobility.\textsuperscript{88} He writes,

> For the other barbarians and for us lavish meals had been prepared, placed on silver trays, but for Attila there was nothing more than meat on a wooden platter. He showed himself moderate in everything else too. Gold and silver goblets were given to the feasters, but his own cup was wooden. His clothing too was frugal, since it cultivated no quality except cleanliness.\textsuperscript{89}

Although the encounter baffled Priscus, Attila’s public display of humility illustrates an important aspect of his rule. As the younger brother, Attila was always politically reliant on Bleda’s prestige for legitimacy during his early kingship.\textsuperscript{90} But with each successive military campaign that brought more Roman gold across the frontier, Attila was able to compensate for his weak political position.\textsuperscript{91} By the late 440s, as Onegesios, one of Attila’s deputies, stated to the Roman ambassadors, “He replied that no one any longer doubted Attila deemed his words and

\textsuperscript{85} According to Priscus, Attila demanded that Chrysaphius be handed over to him as well, but following more negotiations, Attila relented and freed Vigilas on receipt of a ransom payment. Ibid., \textit{fr.}8.1.1-7. fr.12.4.; fr.14.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., \textit{fr.}8.154.

\textsuperscript{87} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 214.

\textsuperscript{88} Priscus, \textit{fr.}8.154.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., \textit{fr.}8.161-163.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., \textit{fr.}8.38. Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 128-129.

Therefore, Attila’s simple attire and food choices at the banquet reveal a man supremely confident in his position. Roman gold, military victory, and a fearsome/apocalyptic reputation underscored Attila’s power.

Not long after the Roman delegation returned to Constantinople, their mission undercut by Vigilas’ and Chrysaphius’ failed assassination plot, Theodosius II unexpectedly died in late July 450 after a riding accident. In a clear divergence from his predecessor’s policy of “peace by money, not arms”, the newly installed Emperor Marcian stopped the annual tribute to the Huns. Additionally, he told Attila that if he “remained peaceful…they would give him gifts; if he threatened war, they would lead against him arms and men not inferior to his force.” By this point in the summer of 450, Marcian’s decision presented a problem for Attila. Although he could once again invade the empire, and forcibly renew his extortion racket, he risked defeat in open battle with the Eastern field army in Thrace, which was strengthened after a peace agreement with Geiseric’s Vandal kingdom. Likewise, he had received news from the Western Roman Empire indicating deep internal divisions that presented auspicious opportunities to expand his sphere of influence. According to Priscus, “Attila’s mind was divided and he was unsure which side he would attack first.” The news that would so trouble Attila’s mind would not come from an Western imperial pretender, but a very unhappy woman.

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92 Priscus, fr.8.38.
93 Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 188.
94 Ibid., 232.
96 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
Since the foundation of the Theodosian dynasty in the aftermath of Adrianople in 378, the family featured powerful mothers, such as Galla Placidia, prestigious sisters, such as the virgin nun Pulcheria, and conniving male siblings.\textsuperscript{100} By the mid-fifth century, the imperial family’s characteristic internal rivalry and dysfunctional behavior had now expanded to the wider non-Roman world. In the months prior to Theodosius II’s death, Attila received a letter from Valentinian III’s sister, the imperial princess Justa Grata Honoria.\textsuperscript{101} Unhappily married to Flavius Bassus Herculanus, an older Roman senator, by Valentinian as punishment for her affair and pregnancy with Eugenius, a private servant, Honoria was desperate to escape her predicament.\textsuperscript{102} Along with her ring, some gold, and a letter, Honoria sent a trusted servant, Hyacinthus, to Attila’s palace in the Great Hungarian Plain and begged him to “avenge her marriage.”\textsuperscript{103} Always looking for an advantageous opportunity, Attila conveniently interpreted the ring as a marriage proposal and sent a reply to Theodosius II, the senior \textit{Augusti} (Emperor), accepting her offer.\textsuperscript{104} Additionally, as Honoria was an \textit{Augusta}, an imperial empress, he claimed half of the Western Roman Empire as dowry.\textsuperscript{105}

Once informed of the affair, Valentinian III was furious at his sister. Arresting and torturing Hyacinthus for information, the seven century Christian chronicler John of Antioch states, “after inflicting many bodily tortures on him, he ordered that he be beheaded.”\textsuperscript{106} In fact, Valentinian was so angry that he contemplated killing Honoria as well, but this was too far for

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\textsuperscript{100} John of Antioch, \textit{fr.196}.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., \textit{fr.199}. Priscus, \textit{fr.15.1-2}.
\textsuperscript{102} Priscus, \textit{fr.15.1-2}.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
his mother. After Galla Placidia “persistently asked for her”, Honoria was allowed to leave with Herculanus and live a quite existence away from Ravenna.\(^{107}\) In his reply to Attila, Valentinian flatly rejected the marriage proposal and informed him that since females were ineligible to inherit the supreme imperial title, they could not just simply give away whole provinces.\(^{108}\) Using the refusal as a pretext to extort gold and a new bride (Attila had multiple wives by this point) from Valentinian, Attila unleashed his Hunnic forces against the Western Empire in spring 451.\(^{109}\) However, while Honoria was the publicly stated reason for Attila’s campaign, Jordanes and Priscus reveal a much different motive.

According to Priscus, Attila’s main goal was to “fight not only the Italians [Romans] but also the Goths and Franks - the Italians [Roman] to get Honoria and her money, the Goths to establish favor with Geiseric.”\(^{110}\) This last phrase, “establish favor with Geiseric”, is a rather puzzling statement from Priscus. For why would Attila, the most powerful barbarian leader north of the Danube, need to entreat Geiseric, who just recently established himself in North Africa? In Jordanes’ account, he tells that Geiseric “incited Attila by many gifts to make war on the Visigoths, for he was afraid that Theodorid [Theodoric], king of the Visigoths, would avenge the injury done to his daughter.”\(^{111}\) The incident referred to by Jordanes was the shameful conclusion of the marriage between Geiseric’s son, Huneric, and Theodoric’s daughter.\(^{112}\) Accusing his wife of attempted poisoning, Huneric cut off her nose and ears in anger, and sent her back to Gaul.\(^{113}\)

\(^{107}\) Ibid.  
\(^{109}\) Priscus, *fr*:15.3.  
\(^{110}\) Ibid.  
\(^{112}\) Ibid.  
\(^{113}\) Ibid.
As a result, Geiseric wished Attila to help him before Theodoric reacted. In two separate letters, one to Valentinian III and the other to Theodoric, Attila craftily informed them that his campaign into Gaul was to attack the other and “sow strife between the Goths and the Romans, thinking to shatter by civil discord those whom he could not crush in battle.”

The most likely answer as to why Attila decided to invade the Western Roman Empire is found in a small fragment by Priscus and John of Antioch. Priscus states, “As a pretext for war against the Franks, Attila used the death of their king and the king’s sons’ disagreement about their realm. The elder son was determined to ally himself with Attila, the younger son with Aetius.” John of Antioch reveals, “He [Attila] wanted to capture Aetius first, for he thought he would not otherwise attain his end unless he put him out of the way.” It is not known whether Aetius and Attila knew one another personally, but throughout the 440s, they jostled for control over the Frankish tribe. By 450, the Franks were divided between the Ripuarian Franks, who lived along the eastern bank of the Rhine River, and the Salian Franks, who emigrated into Gaul and supported Aetius. Since Roman Thrace had been sufficiently drained of its wealth throughout the past decade, an expedition against Aetius in Gaul provided a ripe opportunity to expand Hunnic influence across the entire Roman frontier and extort gold from Valentinian. If

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114 Ibid.
Geiseric’s and Honoria’s personal problems could be exploited to further sow discord among Hun enemies, Attila’s campaign might be that much easier.\textsuperscript{121}

Therefore, in spring 451, Attila led his army, probably numbered between 20,000-40,000 effective warriors, across the Rhine River into Gaul, leaving a trail of destruction as numerous cities and towns were ransacked and utterly destroyed.\textsuperscript{122} According to several Christian accounts of the campaign, the Roman people of Gaul, genuinely frightened of Attila’s Hunnic hordes, pleaded with God for salvation.\textsuperscript{123} Yet, despite the chronicler’s clear religious motives, they do reveal the role of Christian rhetoric on how the Romans perceived the invasion. In line with many Christian theologians such as Proclus, Augustine, Ambrose, and Lactantius, apocalyptic prophecy is designed to compel sinful believers towards action and repentance. As Kelly poignantly notes, “For many committed Christians…the Huns’ invasion had been ordained by God as a punishment for the erring cities of central France.”\textsuperscript{124} However, this apocalyptic Christian rhetoric was not reserved just to Roman audiences. In his encounter outside of Troyes, Attila reveals that he too is fully aware of his fearsome image.\textsuperscript{125} When asked by the city’s bishop, Lupus, to identify himself, Attila replied, “I am he, Attila, the scourge and rod of


\textsuperscript{122} It should be noted that Attila’s army was not composed entirely of Hunnic warriors, but a conglomeration of allied auxiliaries. Peter Heather reminds, “As Sidonius Apollinaris, a more or less contemporary Gallic poet, put it: “Suddenly the barbarian world, rent by a nightly upheaval, poured the whole north of Gaul. After the warlike Rugian comes the fierce Gepid, with the Gelonian close by; the Burgundian urges on the Scirian; forward rush the Hun, the Bellonotian, the Neurian, the Bastarnian, the Thuringian, the Bructeran, and the Frank. Sidonius gives names of groups not in Attila’s empire and those within it.” Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 337 (Primary Source Inside).


\textsuperscript{124} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 244.

\textsuperscript{125} Jacobus de Varagine, \textit{The Golden Legend}, 206.
If the thirteenth century account is accurate, then Attila expertly used Christian imagery to compel the frightened Romans into compliance. As a characteristically opportunistic individual, and had already used Roman religious imagery to advance himself, this account of Attila seems reasonably plausible.127

Confronting Attila in Gaul was a hastily assembled Roman force led by *Magister Militum* Flavius Aetius.128 But, unlike the professional Roman armies of the past, which were well trained, highly disciplined, and as Goldsworthy states, “capable of defeating any of the opponents faced in Late Antiquity,” Aetius’ force can hardly be described as Roman.129 Instead, his army was a conglomeration of *foederati* (allied) barbarian troops, mainly Goths and Alans, alongside a small Roman contingent.130 Because the Western Roman Empire had lost several wealthy provinces throughout the fifth century, including North Africa to the Vandals, and southern Gaul to the Visigoths, among several others, the empire did not possess sufficient resources in men and material to maintain a professional army.131

As a result, Attila’s invasion forced Valentinian III to entreat his barbarian neighbors for help. In an embassy to Theodoric, he stated,

Bravest of nations, it is the part of prudence for us to unite against the lord of the earth who wishes to enslave the whole world; who requires no just cause for battle, but supposes whatever he does is right….Bear aid also to the Empire, of which you hold a

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126 Ibid.
part. If you would learn how such an alliance should be sought and welcomed by us, look into the plans of the foes.\footnote{132}{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 36.186-188.}

Once Theodoric realized that Hunnic hegemony threatened his kingdom, particularly if Geiseric’s machinations prevailed upon Attila, the Visigoths joined their former Roman enemies.\footnote{133}{Ibid., 36.189.} By June 451, the allied Romano-Gothic force under Aetius’ and Theodoric’s dual command, which numbered approximately 20,000-40,000 men, marched towards Attila’s army, which was currently besieging Aurelia, modern-day Orleans.\footnote{134}{Ibid., 36.191. Within this allied Romano-Gothic army were also contingents of Franks, Alans, Burgundians, and Saxons as well. Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 332.}

Of the surviving accounts of the battle, later called the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains or \textit{campus Mauriacus}, there is conflicting information about how the engagement began.\footnote{135}{Heather, \textit{The Fall of the Roman Empire}, 338.} In Jordanes’ detailed account, he claims that the local Aurelian ruler, the Alani king, Sangiban, was so frightened of Attila’s army that he secretly arranged to surrender the city, but upon hearing the news, Aetius and Theodoric set up earthworks to prevent the city’s capitulation.\footnote{136}{Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 37.194-195.} Conversely, Gregory of Tours recounts that when Attila’s Hunnic army had nearly destroyed Aurelia’s walls, the local bishop, Annianus, directed the city’s inhabitants to plead for God’s aid.\footnote{137}{Gregory of Tours, \textit{Historia Francorum}, 7.} After prayerfully beseeching God’s mercy, the Romano-Gothic army appeared on the horizon and forced Attila to abandon the siege. Based on these two accounts, together with a brief statement by Priscus, it seems most likely that while negotiating with Sangiban for Aurelia’s surrender,
Attila received news of the approaching Romano-Gothic army and decided to lift the siege to confront them.  

On the morning of June 20, both armies met on the vast open Catalaunian Plains. Aetius deployed his army with Sangiban’s Alani forces in the center, the Visigoths on the right wing, and the Romans and Franks on the left. Since Sangiban and his troops displayed a willingness to extricate themselves from the conflict earlier, Aetius posted them in a position where they were forced to fight. Opposite them, Attila easily recognized the weakness of the Roman formation, and consequently, placed his Hunnic forces in the center, with contingents of Ostrogoths, Gepids, Franks, and other allied troops on the wings. Before the battle commenced, Attila decided to consult his soothsayers for guidance. According to Jordanes, “…they prophesied that the chief commander of the foe they were to meet should fall and mar by his death the rest of the victory and the triumph.” Concluding that Aetius would be killed in the upcoming battle, and “a thing to be desired…for Aetius stood in the way of his plans”, Attila decided to risk a major engagement, something that was a rarity in Late Antiquity, and moved his army forward.

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139 As historian Simon MacDowall notes, “The actual manpower that could be raised by some of the 5th-century barbarian tribes was nowhere near as great as many fearful Roman writers recounted. The only reasonably reliable numbers we have for a non-Roman army of the period is that of the Vandals who crossed into Africa in AD 429 with 80,000 people. This would give around 10,000 to 15,000 fit and able fighting men. The Huns probably could raise more than that but even so the problems of logistics remained.”; MacDowall, Catalaunian Fields, 29. Fields, Attila the Hun, 33. Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 338.
140 Jordanes, Getica, 38.197.
141 Ibid. Fields, Attila the Hun, 36.
142 Jordanes, Getica, 38.198.
143 Ibid., 37.195-196.
144 Ibid.
The battle commenced in the late afternoon with a race by both forces for a steep ridge that dominated the battlefield. Despite the best efforts of the Hunnic army, the Romano-Gothic army reached the summit first, and after a ferocious struggle, drove Attila’s forces back down the ridge. With his army initially driven back, at this point, Jordanes claims that Attila tried to rally his men with a lengthy rousing speech. Although not out of the realm of possibility, it is hard to image that in the middle of an engagement, Attila would have intentionally stopped to deliver a speech to his men. Likewise, because the sixth century Gothic historian’s purpose in his account is to extoll the accomplishments of his people, and could hardly have known the exact wording, Attila’s speech is most likely just a rhetorical ornament. Nevertheless, the Hunnic army tried once again to take the ridge, but because of the determination and strength of the Romano-Gothic army, they could not dislodge its defenders. In an ironic fulfillment of Hunnic prophecy, Theodoric was thrown from his horse and tragically died as he was trampled underfoot by his own troops. His son, Thorismond, quickly rallied the wavering Visigothic warriors and “repulsed the enemy from the higher ground.” Even as daylight quickly faded, both armies continued to fight on, with all three remaining leaders almost killed in darkness.

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147 Jordanes, *Getica*, 38.201.
148 Ibid., 39.202-206.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid., 39.207-208.
152 Ibid., 40.209-211.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid., 40.211-212.
Finally, after realizing that the battle was lost, the Hunnic army withdrew from the battlefield behind the protection of their wagon lager. In his despair, Attila is said to have built a funeral pyre of saddles, “so that if the enemy should attack him, he was determined to cast himself into the flames, that none might have the joy of wounding him and that the lord of so many races might not fall into the hands of his forces.” Described as a “lion pierced by hunting spears” Attila as the Scourge of God with an aura of invincibility had finally been defeated in open battle. Thankfully for Attila, even as Aetius’ army possessed the battlefield and moved to besiege the Hunnic camp, his forces were still largely intact and ready to defend their position.

After consultation among the allied leaders, Aetius decided to break up his allied army and encourage Thorismond, the new king of the Visigoths, to hurriedly secure his political position at Toulouse. Although Jordanes lamented the lost opportunity to crush Attila, Aetius’ decision to withdraw from the battlefield was based on sound military and wider political considerations. He writes, “Aetius feared that if the Huns were totally destroyed by the Goths, the Roman Empire would be overwhelmed.” As the embodiment of the apocalypse, Gog and Magog, the Huns were useful adversaries to prevent further barbarian aggression against the Western Roman Empire.

156 Jordanes, *Getica*, 40.213.
157 Ibid., 40.212.
158 Ibid., 41.214-215.
159 Ibid., 41.215-216.
160 Ibid., 41.217.
161 Ibid., 41.216.
Once assured that the Romano-Gothic army posed no serious threat, Attila hastily extricating his army from Gaul back to the Great Hungarian Plain.163 Determined to restore his fortunes and fearsome image, Attila sent two embassies to Constantinople and Ravenna, over the following winter, demanding the resumption of the annual tribute and Honoria.164 Denied on both accounts, Attila’s reorganized and resupplied army invaded Italy in spring 452.165 This time, however, Aetius was occupied in Gaul and so Italy was left relatively undefended against the Hunnic hordes.166 Traversing across the Alps and down into the Po River Valley, Attila’s army besieged the city of Aquileia, reportedly after he spotted a group of storks leaving their nests on the walls. According to Procopius,

> When Attila saw this (he was very clever at putting everything together and interpreting it), he ordered the army to remain in place, explaining afterwards the unlikelihood that the bird would have flown away from there with his young unless he had divined that something bad would happen there in the near future. Thus, they say, the barbarian army re-established itself for the siege, and not much later the portion of the city wall which had held the bird’s next fell down suddenly without cause. The enemy, they say, gained access into the city and so Aquileia was captured by force.167

Subsequently, the surviving inhabitants abandoned the charred remains of the city and ventured into the lagoon to founded a new settlement, today known as Venice.168

Following the sack of Aquileia, Attila’s army continued deeper into the Po River Valley, sacking Verona, Vicentia, Ticinum, and Mediolanum, the former capital of the Western Roman

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165 Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity*, 191.
166 Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 264.
167 Procopius, *De Bello*, 4.31-35.
Empire. While touring the imperial palace, Priscus relates, “When [Attila] saw [in Milan] in a painting the Roman Emperors sitting upon golden thrones and Scythians lying dead before their feet, he sought out a painter and ordered him to paint Attila upon a throne and the Roman emperors heaving sacks upon their shoulders and pouring out gold before his feet.” For Attila, this portrayal of his superiority over the Roman world is exactly how he wished to be remembered. As a Western Roman ambassador said to Priscus while at Attila’s court, “No ruler of Scythia…or any other land ever accomplished so many things in such a short time: ruling the islands in the Ocean and requiring even Romans, let alone all Scythia, to pay tribute.”

After departing Mediolanum, Attila hesitated to continue south towards Ravenna and Rome. Although he threatened terrible reprisals if he was not given Honoria, Attila was advised by his own men to avoid Rome. According to Jordanes, “They felt anxiety for the fortune of their own king because, after Alaric had crushed Rome, he did not survive very long but soon departed from human affairs.” During this delay, a Western Roman delegation led by former Consul Avienus, Prefect Trygetius, and even, Pope Leo I, arrived at Attila’s camp near the Mincio River and entreated him to leave. While the conversation between Attila and Pope Leo I is, unfortunately, not preserved, Jordanes states,

Soon, the anger of the army was soothed and Leo returned to where he had come from. Peace was promised and so Attila again departed beyond the Danube, but not before he announced the peace in public and threatening resolved to bring greater trouble upon

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170 Ibid., 260 (Primary Source).
Italy if they did not send him Honoria…with a portion of the imperial wealth owed to him.\textsuperscript{174}

Without Honoria or a treaty for more Roman gold, the question remains as to why Attila suddenly abandoned his campaign after meeting the Roman Pontiff.\textsuperscript{175} As Matyszak noted, “Later writers give more elaborate accounts of the meeting, with the apostles Peter and Paul appearing at the Pope’s side, and the mighty Attila almost prostrate with awe.”\textsuperscript{176} Although this account of the Apostles’ intervention is consistent with their involvement in the summer 451 campaign, and certainly furthers the apocalyptic image of the Huns, the reason for Attila’s sudden withdrawal is likely grounded in the consequences of a long military campaign in enemy territory.\textsuperscript{177} The onset of plague within the Hunnic camp, an overly extended supply line, and having reached the limits of their operational capacity due to large amounts of captured loot are all more probable reasons for Attila’s departure.\textsuperscript{178} Harper poignantly observes, “As its last line of defense, the Roman Empire was protected by the invisible rink of germs that lurked in wait for unsuspecting invaders.”\textsuperscript{179} In the end, without any detailed ancient narratives of this event, there will be no definitive answer to this question.

\textsuperscript{174} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 42.222-223.
\textsuperscript{175} Interestingly enough, the only reference by Pope Leo I about Attila is a small phrase in a letter to the Emperor Marcian. He writes, “But the necessities of the present time under no circumstances permit the bishops of all the provinces to congregate, for these provinces from which bishops ought particularly to be summoned, being disturbed by war, do not permit them to leave their churches. Hence, your Clemency should order it put off to a more opportune time when, though the mercy of God a more dependable security has been restored.” Pope Leo I, \textit{Letters}, 83.
\textsuperscript{176} Matyszak, \textit{The Enemies of Rome}, 278.
\textsuperscript{177} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 261-262.
\textsuperscript{178} As Harper points out, “What actually repulsed the invaders was seen, from one perspective, as ‘heaven-sent disasters: famine and some kind of disease.’ The retreat was in fact the predictable biological consequence of intruders colliding with the indigenous disease ecology.” Harper, \textit{The Fate of Rome}, 196. Michael Maas, Editor, \textit{The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 127. Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 333.
\textsuperscript{179} Harper, \textit{The Fate of Rome}, 196.
Following the checkered success of his Italian campaign in 452, Attila returned to the Great Hungarian Plain determined to reinstate the annualized tribute from the Eastern Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{180} According to Priscus, “After enslaving Italy, Attila…proclaimed to the Eastern Roman rulers war and enslavement of their country because the tribute arranged by Theodosius had not been sent.”\textsuperscript{181} However, only a few months upon his return, Attila unexpectedly died in early 453 of a nasal hemorrhage on his wedding night after celebrating too hard.\textsuperscript{182} When he was discovered unresponsive in his bedchamber beside his frightened bride, the entire Hunnic court sorrowfully mourned his loss in a traditional Hunnic ceremony, “His body was placed in the midst of a plain and lay in state in a silken tent as a sight for men’s admiration. The best horsemen of the entire tribe of the Huns rode around in circles, after the manner of circus games, in the place to which he had been brought and told of his deeds in a funeral dirge.”\textsuperscript{183} Interned in a tripled layered coffin of gold, silver, and iron, Attila’s body was buried somewhere on the Great Hungarian Plain along with the gravediggers to maintain the location’s secrecy.\textsuperscript{184} Therefore, Attila the Hun, the man who terrorized the Roman world received, as Jordanes states, “the hideous consequences of his own cruelty.”\textsuperscript{185}

Across the frontier, the demise of the Hunnic leader was met with much joy within the imperial courts of Ravenna and Constantinople.\textsuperscript{186} Supposedly on the night of Attila’s death, 

\textsuperscript{180} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 264-265. 
\textsuperscript{181} Priscus, fr.19. 
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{185} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 35.181. 
\textsuperscript{186} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 265-266.
For in a dream some god stood at the side of Marcian, Emperor of the East, while he was disquieted about his fierce foe, and showed him the bow of Attila broken in that same night, as if to intimate that the race of the Huns owed much to that weapon. This account the historian Priscus says he accepts upon truthful evidence. For so terrible was Attila thought to be to great empires that the gods announced his death to rulers as a special boon.\textsuperscript{187}

While both Priscus and Jordanes, whose narrative remains the sole record of the event, believe in the veracity of Marcian’s claim, it is interesting that the broken bow corresponds not only to the main Hunnic weapon, but also that of the biblical Gog and Magog apocalyptic forces and the first horseman described by the Apostle John.\textsuperscript{188} Even in death, Attila and the Huns held a powerful grip upon the Roman world, both in spiritual and temporal worlds.

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\textsuperscript{187} Jordanes, \textit{Getica}, 49.254-255.

Conclusion:

In the years following Attila’s death in 453, Marcian’s divine vision of imminent Hunnic collapse proved quite auspicious. For almost immediately, the seemingly unassailable Hunnic confederation splintered as each of Attila’s sons clamored, “that the nations [subjugated peoples within the confederation] should be divided among them equally.”¹ As a result, this internal division spawned a series of rebellions throughout the Hunnic dominion, culminating in a titanic clash between the Huns and their subject peoples at the Battle of Nedao in 454.² After a fierce engagement, the Huns were utterly crushed, with Attila’s favored son, Ernak, killed and the remainder of the Hunnic army scattered.³ Concluding his account of the Huns, Jordanes writes, “Thus did the Huns give way, a race to which men thought the whole world must yield. So baneful a thing is division that they who used to inspire terror when their strength was united, were overthrown separately.”⁴

Without a strong Hunnic presence across the Rhine and Danubian frontiers, many former Hun subject peoples, such as the Ostrogoths, Heruli and Franks, emigrated into the Western Roman Empire and claimed large swaths of territory.⁵ Already weakened after decades of conflict, both internal and external, the empire, henceforth, struggled to achieve a workable political arrangement with the newly arrived tribes. However, by conceding territory to barbarian tribes in exchange for military support and gold, “this started a bidding war in which the west’s

¹ Jordanes, Getica, 50.259.
² Kulikowski, Tragedy of Empire, 212.
³ It should be noted that the Huns did not disappear after the Battle of Nedao, several Hunnic tribes continued to live along the Roman frontier and were used as mercenaries by the empire, but their collective power was broken in 454.
⁴ Jordanes, Getica, 50.263.
⁵ Kelly, The End of Empire, 273-274.
disposable assets were expended in a futile effort to bring enough powerful supporters together to generate stability.” As Aetius foresaw after the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains, without Attila’s leadership, the Hunnic confederation’s collapse “overwhelmed” the west throughout the following decades. Interestingly enough, Attila’s death would also have great personal consequences for many leading individuals of the period as well.

According to Priscus, during a financial planning meeting in Ravenna in September 454, Valentinian III murdered Aetius because of an abiding jealousy of the Magister Militum’s influence over the empire. With the help of a eunuch, Heraclius, “Valentinian at once sprang up from his seat with a cry and said that he would no longer bear being the victim of so many drunken depravities. By holding him responsible for the troubles, he said, Aetius wanted to deprive him of power in the West.” Soon afterwards, a boastful Valentinian remarked to a Roman politician, “Did I perform the killing of Aetius well, my man?” He replied, “Whether well or not, I do not know. But know that you cut off your right hand with your left.” By summer of the following year, the short-sighted emperor was himself assassinated by political opponents and Rome was devastatingly sacked by Geiseric’s Vandals.

Across the frontier, Attila’s former ambassadors and confidants, Orestes and Edeko, along with their children, would play a large role in the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. After a series of short-lived and unsuccessful western emperors, Orestes capitalized on his position as newly appointed Magister Militum of Italy and placed his twelve year old son, Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 435.

7 Jordanes, Getica, 41.216.
8 Priscus, fr:69.
9 Ibid., fr:70.
10 Kelly, The End of Empire, 272-273.
Romulus Augustulus (meaning little Augustus - an amalgamated name of Rome’s founder and first emperor) on the throne in 475.\textsuperscript{11} However, because of the empire’s ever shrinking financial resources and dependence on barbarian troops for support, Orestes’ unpaid foederati troops, led by Edeko’s son Odoacer, rebelled and executed him in late August 476.\textsuperscript{12} A few days later, on September 4, Odoacer deposed the pre-teen and permitted him to live quietly in retirement.\textsuperscript{13} As Kelly reminds about the period, “It was a measure of Romulus’ unimportance that he was not even thought worthy of assassination. The Roman emperor was now an irrelevance…the western empire did not fall. It was simply declared redundant.”\textsuperscript{14}

In the end, although the Huns did not destroy the Roman world since their arrival onto the European landscape in the late fourth century, they contributed mightily to the final dissolution of the Western Roman Empire. To many Romans, their mere presence invoked a genuine fear unlike any other barbarian tribe before or since. For Attila and the Huns’ intrusion into the Roman world was not simply perceived as a minor obstacle to the continuation of Christianized Roman civilization and empire, but rather the direct fulfillment of the Christian apocalypse. Tracing its origins from the establishment of traditional Roman paganism, to its infusion with Christianity forming a unique religious framework by the fifth century, particularly the concept of collapse, the ensuing Christian apocalyptic beliefs would alter the Romans’ perception of Attila and the wider Hunnic peoples.

\textsuperscript{11} Goldsworthy, \textit{How Rome Fell}, 367.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Kelly, \textit{The End of Empire}, 275.
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