

The Ruinous Northern Frontier:  
The Decline and Collapse of Frontier and Roman Civilizational Integrity on the Danube,  
A.D. 370 - 500

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## Abstract

The imperial Roman advance to and entrenchment along the Danube from the times of Augustus to Aurelian, mirrored by the slow development of various Germanic peoples beyond the 1,700-mile river's northern bank, set the stage for a series of climactic engagements between the late Roman Empire and their various barbarous neighbors along what had quickly become the Empire's most important and unstable frontier. The immigration and settlement of Goths from the Pontic Steppe, fleeing the Huns as they emerged from Central Asia, within the Roman Balkans undermined the Danube frontier, eviscerated the Eastern Roman field army, and enabled Alaric's role as a destabilizing free radical between the estranged imperial Roman courts at Rome and Constantinople from 395 to 410. At the same time, the Huns, colliding with the Roman frontiers on the Middle and Lower Danube, began to amass on the Pannonian and Romanian Plains, and exerted a steadily increasing pressure on the Roman frontier. After having buckled several times, particularly in Roman Pannonia on the increasingly isolated Middle Danube, from the 410s to the 430s, Attila led two major invasions of the Eastern Roman Empire in 441-442 and 447. Recognizing the importance of the Danube frontier to safeguarding imperial security, Attila forced the Eastern Romans to completely abandon the Middle and Lower Danube, evacuating all military posts and major populations at least a five-days march south of the river, thereby destroying the Roman Danube frontier as the weakening Empire advanced into late fifth century.

## List of Key Terms

*Barbaricum* – The lands populated by various Germanic and otherwise non-Roman tribes not occupied by Roman forces beyond the Rhine or Danube frontiers.

*Canaba* (P.: *Canabae*) – Frontier civilian settlement which emerged in the vicinity of a *Castrum* (Legionary Fortress).

*Castellum* (P.: *Castella*) – Fortlets, towers, and roadside Stations, considerably smaller than *castra*, and formed the chain links along the *Limes* between the *castra*.

*Castrum* (P.: *Castra*) – Frontier Legionary Fortress, housing the main body of a legion assigned to defend a specific segment of the *limes* of an imperial frontier.

*Comitatenses* – Mobile forces of infantry, cavalry, and other support units comprising the field armies in the late Roman Empire.

*Foederatus* (P.: *Foederati*) – A people, settled or migratory, contracted under a *foedus* (treaty) to serve the Roman state; by the time of the Roman Empire, the term was used to refer to barbarian mercenaries in the service of the Roman legions, typically in exchange for the right for their native tribe(s) to settle within imperial territories.

*Foedus* (P.: *Foedera*) – A Treaty, typically a treaty of alliance or federation with the Roman state, and typically used in reference to a *Foederatus* (Contracted People or non-Roman Mercenary Group).

*Limes* (P.: *Limites*) – A modern term used to refer to Roman frontier fortifications, particularly along the German frontier along the Rhine; while a common Latin term used to refer to property boundaries and geographic markers, the term was not used by the Romans for this purpose.

*Limitanei* – Roman forces specifically assigned to man the *limes* and otherwise maintain the imperial frontiers. These forces were sometimes withdrawn from their posts for other uses, including occasional employment alongside the regular *comitatenses* in major campaigns.

*Magister Militum* (P. *Magistri Militum*) – The ‘Master of Soldiers;’ this was a senior military command of the late Roman Empire used in both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires from the fourth century well into the Byzantine period. There were originally two distinct *magistri*: one for the infantry, the *magister peditum* or ‘master of the foot,’ and one for the cavalry, the *magister equitum* or ‘master of the horse.’

*Magister Utriusque Militiae* (Alternatively, *Magister Equitum et Peditum*) – This role, the ‘master of both forces’ or ‘commander-in-chief,’ occasionally used from the later fourth century onwards, imputed the authority of both the *magister peditum* and the *magister equitum* to a single individual.

## Introduction

...This was strife enough  
having to own up to the past  
by the Danube, whose gentle waves  
embrace the past, present, and tomorrow.  
The battles our ancestors had to fight  
resolve into peace in remembrance's light.  
It is time to work together at last  
on our affairs in common—no small task.—József Attila

They were many: Sarmatians, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, and Huns. Such were only the largest of the ‘barbarian’ ethnicities to buffet and breach the Roman Empire’s frontier on the Danube River over the course of the late fourth and fifth centuries. These were far from the first incursions of foreign peoples into the distant frontier provinces of the Roman Empire, as the legionnaires who had manned the *Limes Germanicus* for centuries could well attest. Devastation wrought by such influxes were recurring and exacting, as they damaged local infrastructure, plundered vulnerable farmland and dwellings, and occasionally involved the losses of entire Roman *villae rusticae*, fortifications, and other emplacements. Due largely to the Hunnic migrations between the 370s and 450s, the Danube frontier was subject to an unprecedented weight of both Germanic and Hunnic invasions that would virtually destroy Roman civilization in the riparian region, accelerating the breakdown of imperial governance in the face of barbarian imminency and contributing to the famed “fall of Rome” in 476.

In the centuries since the collapse of the Roman West, Western historians, while continually building upon the knowledge of the history of the later Roman Empire and its Eastern Roman successor, have tended to perseverate over how to address many of the empire’s frontiers. Academic attention paid to the Danube specifically has until recently been fragmentary, with different aspects of the boundary analyzed across various topical studies. There have been as of yet no comprehensive historical studies of the Roman Danube frontier

from Rome's earliest activities in the region with the Illyrian Wars in the 230s BC to the cessation of Byzantine presence on its banks following the death of Emperor Manuel I Komnenos in 1180. As such, the historiography behind the Roman Danube, particularly during the late fourth and fifth centuries, remains highly irregular, running as a fine thread through the fields of Roman and Byzantine history, Hunnic history, early Germanic history, early Slavic history, and late antiquity studies. Perhaps this is unsurprising seeing that the late antiquity studies themselves are not altogether that old and include the histories of the origins of present-day nationalities inhabiting the Danube region and studies written on the processes of interregional diplomacy, geostrategy, polity collapse, and other subjects as they pertain to one of history's most remarkable civilizations.

Between the writings of Roman and Byzantine historians themselves—regrettably not all the writings of which have survived to the present day—and Enlightenment scholars, the Roman Danube was typically remembered and written on in passing, predominantly for its role as the incidental setting for numerous developments which factored into the eventual collapse of the Roman Empire in the late fifth century—a subject which would have featured more prominently in the minds of educated Europeans prior to early modernity. Edward Gibbon's six-volume work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), the wellspring of modern Western historical studies on Roman civilization and its titanic demise, remains foundational among them. Taking a great deal of inspiration from earlier works like Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (1734) and Jacques Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History to Monseigneur le Dauphin* (1681), Gibbon assigns the collapse of civil virtue under societal decadence, a protracted development he controversially correlated to the adoption of Christianity as a state religion and

“the total extirpation” of the old Roman Paganism, which he saw as to blame for instigating the collapse of Rome.<sup>1</sup> In tandem with this thesis, Gibbon emphasized the barbarian migrations from Eastern Europe and the steppes beyond to central Europe, and the subsequent invasions of the Empire between the third and fifth centuries on the Rhine and Danube, as being the critical external force to coincidentally exploit Christianity’s allegedly degenerative internal influence on Roman civilization.<sup>2</sup> Despite being met with considerable hostility from many historians and laymen alike for his portrayal of Christianity, Gibbon’s writings would nevertheless provide the literary foundation for foregoing studies on Roman history, and his theses, however controversial, would remain uncontested by alternative interpretations for the nearly a century.<sup>3</sup>

Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* in many ways reflected both the historical interests and popular concerns of his time. Composing his masterpiece throughout the 1770s and 1780s, he bore witness to a number of critical setbacks to the imperial ambitions of his native British Empire, including wars with most neighboring European great powers from Spain to the Netherlands, ongoing colonial conflicts on her distant frontiers around the globe, and the loss of the Thirteen Colonies in 1783. He was not alone in drawing cautionary parallels with the Roman Empire as a model for European empires of his own time, as his work would be echoed and referenced to no end by scholars and government fonctionnaires on both sides of the Channel.

By the 1850s, Theodore Mommsen, a rising classical scholar and jurist of Germany, began to see a similar relatability of the Romans with his time. The transitional phase of Roman

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1. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993.), 3:136, 160-169; 4:120-121.

2. *Ibid*, 4:122-127.

3. In fact, Gibbon faced criticism for his accusatory thesis beset against Christianity almost immediately after the publication of his second volume, as chapters 15 and 16, contained in the first and second volumes respectively, were the first to cast the faith in unfavorable light. In particular response to an attack on his first volumes by Balliol College academic Henry Davis, among others, Gibbon composed *A Vindication* (1779) to publicly defend his composition from its first detractors. While Gibbon would claim a celebrated victory, historical posterity would gradually dismiss his thesis on the supposed fault of the Christian faith.

history from the late republic to the empire, wherein nascent imperialistic sentiments as portrayed by Caesar and his fellows in the first century BC, bore a familiarity to Germany in the mid-eighteenth century in the wake of the abortive revolutions of 1848. While politically opposed to Bismarck and his methods later in life, as a German, Mommsen nevertheless desired a unified German state rather than the rabble of various minor polities much of Germany consisted of by his time. This greatly impacted his *History of Rome* (1854-1856), which reflected the gradual collapse and reorganization of a failing republic, yielding particular deference to Caesar, while an incipient empire-state led by a strong central authority emerged from the chaos. The third of this three-volume history reflects on the process of the Roman Republic's expansion to what would later be the Empire's frontiers on the Danube and elsewhere across its fifth, eighth, and ninth chapters, though analysis of the Danube frontier under the empire would remain noticeably absent; while ultimately lauded as a classic of Roman historical literature, Mommsen's work would remain unfinished as his career drew him to other projects. Fortunately, two later publications would broaden the scope of his original work.

In 1885, Mommsen published his *The Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian* as a continuation of his previous series, entreating each provincial region of the Empire as a distinct subject deserving of its own chapter while omitting the overarching Roman narrative that characterized his *History*. Furthermore, in 1992, recently rediscovered lecture notes taken by attendees of his lectures on early imperial politics were edited and compiled into a fourth volume, continuing the narrative of his *History* into the first centuries AD. All three works, especially *The Provinces*, contributed welcome attention to the Danube frontier and its tumultuous history to the time of Diocletian, providing a strong foundation for more pointed

studies to be undertaken on the subject, particularly of its later years as the frontier holding back the Goths and Huns, in the next century.

While Mommsen was beginning to labor on his *The Provinces* in the early 1880s, new studies began to emerge focusing on the barbarous peoples on Rome's frontiers as subjects of study in their own right, not merely as opponents to or subjects of Rome's ambition to spread its vision of civilization as typically seen in the works of Gibbon and Mommsen. Thomas Hodgkin, a nineteenth and early twentieth century banker and minister of the Society of Friends, committed a considerable measure of his time to private historical study. Over nearly two decades, he published his eight-volume *Italy and Her Invaders* (1880-1899), later republished as *The Barbarian Invasions of the Roman Empire*, depicting the onset of the slow transition of the Roman world into medievalry. Following a brief introduction of eighty-seven pages in his first volume, wherein he summarizes imperial history from the times of Caesar and Octavian to the 370s, Hodgkin dedicates his work to the detailed analysis of the barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries through to the death of Charlemagne in 814:

The story opened by the death-bed of Julian in a tent on the Assyrian plain; it closes by the tomb of Austrasian Charles, with the notes of the *Planctus de Obitu Karoli* ringing in our ears. In that space of half a millennium, kingdoms have risen and fallen; the one great universal Empire has crumbled into hopeless ruin; the Teuton, the Slave and the Hun have seated themselves in the cities of the old Latin civilisation ... It is true that the waters of Chaos will still for centuries continue to roll over Europe, but the old classical world has finally passed away, and we see fully installed before us those two great figures, the German Emperor and the sovereign Roman Pope, whose noisy quarrels and precarious reconciliations will be the central events of European history during the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

Hodgkin may have without saying as much have given a wordless label to 'late antiquity' nearly a century before the field would be famously codified by Peter Brown. His first three volumes,

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880-1899.), 8:303.

presenting a homogenous narrative from the 370s to the 530s, offer a litany of references to the affairs of the Danube frontier of the late Empire.

From the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth, most historical publications pertinent to the remembrance of the late Roman Danube contributed to the greater beneficence of the historical scholar than his lay fellow, though this was steadily changing. Founded by British publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin in 1885, while across the Channel Mommsen published his *The Provinces*, the famous *The Story of the Nations Library* (1885-1908) book series sought “to present in a graphic manner the stories of the different nations that have attained prominence in history,” with each national history contained comfortably within a single cover for popular readership.<sup>5</sup> Published twelfth among this innovative series, Henry Bradley’s *The Story of the Goths* (1888) presents a concise narrative depicting principally the story of the Visigoths and Ostrogoths specifically, from their nebulous origins beyond the Carpathians to their emplacements around the Mediterranean, although myriad Germanic peoples take to the stage at their side through their history. Over the first sixteen chapters, the Danube, along with the lands of Scythia and Carpathia to the north and the Roman Provinces on its southern shore, lies at the geographical center of the Gothic narrative between their migration southwards toward and later invasions of the Roman Empire. Bradley’s general history, the first modern publication to entreat the Goths to analysis on their own, would remain relatively unquestioned in its general findings for over sixty years; only in the wake of the world wars would radically new interpretations of their history begin to arise.

A noteworthy secondary effect of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* was the radical underemphasis applied to Eastern Roman or ‘Byzantine’ history by the global academic

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Bradley, *The Story of the Goths: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Gothic Dominion in Spain* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1888.), 377.

community; Gibbon's unreceptive writings on Byzantium and her empire over his history's latter three volumes, while eventually crucial to the creation of Byzantine history as a distinct field of study, was a fundamental cause of the lack of scholarly historical development in Byzantine studies throughout the nineteenth century, even though the same period witnessed the production so many classics in the history of the Roman Empire-proper.<sup>6</sup> Given his thesis presenting the whole of Roman history as a downward-spiraling corruption of the Roman state and its culture as the byproduct of Christianity's official adoption—a thesis the millennial history of the Byzantine Empire fundamentally invalidates—along with his likewise downward-spiraling health while composing his latter three volumes, his perspective is scarcely surprising. Edward Foord's *The Byzantine Empire* (1911) aided in providing a welcome break to the trend for public readership, “attempting to supply the need of a short popular history of the later Roman Empire, [as] there is at present ... no [such] book on the subject in the English language.”<sup>7</sup> This assessment is almost correct, as Sir Charles Oman's *The Byzantine Empire* (1892/1893), belonging like Bradley's work to *The Story of the Nations Library* series, presented the actual first comprehensive study on the Eastern Romans and their grand history.

By the close of the nineteenth century, John Bagnell Bury and Henri Pirenne was the first to dissent from Gibbon's theses and offer theses of their own on the fall of Rome and its frontiers. Both Bury and Pirenne were heavily involved in the formation of Byzantine history and what would later be termed 'late antiquity' as fields of historical inquiry distinct from both antiquity-proper and the medieval era. In his *History of the Later Roman Empire* (1923) and *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (1928), Bury emphasized the predominantly Germanic

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6. John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999.), xxxix.

7. Edward A. Foord, *The Byzantine Empire: The Rearguard of European Civilization* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911.), i.

migrations into Germania and Carpathia and their subsequent invasions of the Roman frontiers on the Rhine and Danube as a fundamental cause of the Western Roman Empire's fall.<sup>8</sup> "This long process," he writes, "shaped Europe into its present form," and provided a rich foundation for Roman historical study in the twentieth century, in no small part thanks to his editing and adaptation of Gibbon's masterpiece between 1898 and 1925.<sup>9</sup>

Conversely, Pirenne offered a composite thesis, termed by later historians as the "Pirenne Thesis," over the course of several historical studies, most notably his *Medieval Cities* (1927), *A History of Europe* (1936), *Economic History of Medieval Europe* (1936), and *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937). As an economic historian, Pirenne argued that while the Roman Empire collapsed in the late fifth century, Roman *civilization* continued on in the late empire's major cities around the coasts of the Mediterranean and in Europe supported by the same routes of commerce and communication which had enabled the empire's creation and survival, even without the imperial superstructure.<sup>10</sup> It was not so much the barbarian invasions, which Pirenne saw as a preserving influence for Roman civilization following the invasions, or the adoption of Christianity which ultimately ended Roman civilization in Europe and the Mediterranean, but it was instead the Islamic conquest of the Levant and North Africa in the seventh century which resolutely put an end to the pan-Mediterranean commercial and social systems that enabled Roman civilization to flourish throughout.<sup>11</sup> While Pirenne's writings and decentralized thesis would pull academic interest toward the Mediterranean core of the empire rather than its frontiers—though he would shed some light on the nature of the frontier provinces as a

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8. John Bagnell Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (London: N.p., 1928.), 7.

9. Ibid.

10. Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade - Updated Edition*, Trans. Frank D. Halsey. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.), ix-xxiv, 1-15.; Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2017.), 284-285.

11. Ibid.

collective—they would nevertheless serve as major influences for pioneer historians of late antiquity like Peter Brown and Edward Thompson in the 1960s and 1970s. For the time being, however, in the midst of the chaos of the early half of the twentieth century—in a vein not unlike that of Sir Walter Raleigh three centuries prior, much of Pirenne’s *A History of Europe* would be written while in captivity, albeit as a POW in Germany—Pirenne’s writings would remain unacknowledged.

Beyond obscuring numerous historical studies composed by historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for posterity, the world wars and the ideological conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s would have profound impacts on the historical discipline and the memory of the Roman Danube moving forward. Dr. Edward Arthur Thompson, a specialist in relations between the Romans and their myriad neighbors, published *A History of Attila and the Huns* (1948) in the efforts of analyzing the specific history of the Huns and their greatest leaders in their own right; the Huns “have a story which has been told before, but the available accounts in English are not altogether satisfactory.”<sup>12</sup> While explaining with reasonable clarity the general history of what to the 1940s was known of Attila and his people, including occasional insights into the affairs of the Danube frontier, Thompson’s history ought be read carefully due to its author’s affinity for Marxist interpretation. His revisionist agenda to fit the Hun’s history into the awkward frame of class conflict is most readily apparent in his discussion of the Hun’s origins among the steppes of Asia, wherein primary sources remain virtually nonexistent, and the allegedly confrontational affairs of the different economic classes of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Edward Arthur Thompson, *The Huns* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.), 3-4.

13. *Ibid.*, 48-51, 231-237.

While some of Thompson's arguments are dubious with insufficient sourcing, the perspective presented is nonetheless intriguing, and it stands as one of the first to integrate a range of ethnographic papers for the sake of speculating—over an entire chapter, no less—on Hunnic history prior to their engagement with the Romans in the 370s.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, *A History of Attila and the Huns* ought be credited for its attraction of academic interest towards the Danube, though its considerable shortcomings would draw sharp criticism from numerous scholars around the world—Dr. Otto Maenchen-Helfen standing foremost among them.

Maenchen-Helfen, formerly a leading specialist of Hunnic history and archaeology, expanded his search for information on Rome's barbarous European neighbors well beyond the traditional collection of literary primary sources on Hunnic and late Roman history composed by Priscus, Jordanes, and their fellow Roman historians to Russian, Central Asian, and Chinese literature and archaeology.<sup>15</sup> Whereas Thompson utilized academic convention to full effect, being among the first to integrate ethnology into his studies of late Roman and Hunnic history, Maenchen-Helfen scoured archives and archaeological sites from Central and Eastern Europe to China to support his understanding of steppe culture past and present, going so far as to live with and study Tuvan steppe nomads over several months in 1929.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately his untimely death in 1969 would prevent him from completing his life's work himself, leaving his lifetime of research to be posthumously arranged over four years by a legion of scholars into the landmark work in Hunnic and late Roman History, *The World of the Huns* (1973).<sup>17</sup> The book provides unique insights into all aspects of Hunnic life—many, like religion, pottery, art, and language having

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14. Ibid., 46-68.

15. Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*. Edited by Max Knight. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.), xv-xvii, xxiv-xxvii.

16. Ibid., xxiii.

17. Ibid., xv.

scarcely been studied in such detail before or since—and history, which presents in part a finely detailed narrative of their relations and exchanges with the Roman Empire along the length of the Danube.<sup>18</sup>

While Maenchen-Helfen's fellows at the University of California Berkeley were working to compile his masterpiece, Dr. Peter Brown published his *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), expounding upon and distinguishing late antiquity as a historical field of study in its own right, identified as spanning from AD 150 to 750, partitioning antiquity-proper and the medieval age.<sup>19</sup> This delineation simultaneously retro-categorized the works of Bury, Pirenne, and Thompson, among others, and made the period in question markedly more accessible to rising historians. Together, the works of Brown and Maenchen-Helfen served to roundly cap off the growing historiography of the late Roman and Hunnic worlds and the limited understanding of the Roman Danube itself to the early 1970s. In their wake, a rapidly growing multitude of Western historians began to contribute to the new field and diversify available perspectives on its integral subjects—the barbarous cultures on the Roman frontiers and the frontiers themselves well among them.

An early contributor to the understanding of the late Roman Empire's strategic layout, Dr. Edward N. Luttwak, a strategic analyst and international relations specialist rather than career historian, composed *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976) in the efforts of synthesizing the eclectic whole of the late republican and early imperial military experience into a concise process of strategic thought.<sup>20</sup> To this end, Luttwak fit the Romans' military history

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18. Ibid., xv-xvii, 18-165.

19. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971.), 7-9.

20. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century CE to the Third* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.), 1-5.

from the first century AD to the third into an evolutionary paradigm, depicting a gradual transition from scarcely defended, expansionist frontiers often managed through loosely aligned border states to elaborate frontier defense networks of forts, battlements, and roadways.<sup>21</sup> Luttwak would later write a sibling book, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (2009), describing a growing emphasis of the use of strategic diplomacy and the Byzantine way of war to neutralize threats, often by pitting foreign forces against one another, as decisively destroying or subjugating the peripheral threats to the empire was scarcely feasible in the centuries after the Romans' experience combatting the Huns.<sup>22</sup> Through these two books, Luttwak offers profound analyses of the Danube frontier's material evolution and the exchanges between the Romans and the Huns through the fifth century; though both have spawned considerable controversy within the academic community since their publications, they remain among the foremost studies in contemporary Roman and Byzantine military scholarship.<sup>23</sup>

While Maenchen-Helfen's monograph had provided for the remainder of the twentieth century a thorough foundation of the Huns' place in late antiquity, many of the Germanic groups beyond the Rhine and Danube frontiers had yet to be individually or comprehensively addressed. Bury and Thompson, together with segments of Maenchen-Helfen's studies, had provided a useful preamble to early Germanic history, but it would be left to Thomas Burns, Herwig Wolfram, and Peter Heather, among others, to provide comprehensive historical monographs for the various barbarous peoples beyond the riverine frontiers. Burns' *The History of the Ostrogoths* (1984) was among the first works to analyze the Germanic namesake of its title in

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21. Ibid.

22. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.), ix-xi.

23. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 98-118; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, 17-48.

specific detail, and it offers a few small glimpses of the Danube's role in the relations between barbarian realms before and, perhaps more interestingly, following the withdrawal of Roman authority in the mid-fifth century.<sup>24</sup> *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome* (1994) and *Rome and the Barbarians* (2003) shed light on the Roman perspective on and relations with their neighbors, with the lattermost work's fifth chapter discussing understudied segments of the Roman frontier on the Middle Danube in welcomingly novel detail.<sup>25</sup> A remarkable companion to Burns' topical studies, Wolfram is a leading historian in the affairs in of the early Germanic peoples. His *History of the Goths* (1979), initially published in German, has become a standard in early Germanic history and has since been published in a variety of languages, eventually reaching English in 1990.

Peter Heather, a leader in fields of Roman-barbarian relations, has published numerous works detailing the history of the barbarian migrations and the fall of Rome, including *Goths and Romans* (1991), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (2005), *Empires and Barbarians* (2010), and *Rome Resurgent* (2018), among numerous others. His *Goths and Romans*, an expanded rendition of his doctoral dissertation remains a well-known print in the field, as its focus is on critically analyzing the writings of Jordanes' *Getica* and describing the history of the barbarian migrations without relying on such a ubiquitous late Roman primary source.<sup>26</sup> Heather's more recent publications have largely expounded upon different aspects of Roman-barbarian relations and the collapse of the Western Empire, though some like his early Byzantine military history, *Rome Resurgent*, represent novel forays into sibling fields and time periods of study.

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24. Thomas S. Burns, *The History of the Ostrogoths* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.), 64-65, 148.

25. Thomas S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003.), 148-151, 194-247.

26. Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans: 332-489* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.), vi-ix.

Meanwhile, as Heather was working on his *Empires and Barbarians*, Dr. Christopher Kelly produced his *The End of Empire* (2009), a history on the role of the barbarians, Attila and the Huns foremost among them, in laying low the Roman Empire. While his book presents the reader with a conventional narrative, clearly written for the benefit of a public audience, the attention paid to the finer details of the Huns is commendable. The weary witness of the Roman defenders on the Danube to the seething storm of Hunnic and Germanic peoples beyond is effectively and colorfully portrayed throughout *The End of Empire*, although the occasional details on the Danube itself, detailing Roman-Hunnic exchanges between the AD 370s and the late 440s, remain solely within the book's initial chapters.<sup>27</sup> *Theodosius II* (2013), another of Kelly's studies, presents a fine anthology of recent articles published on the person, reign, and history of Rome's longest-reigning emperor, governing the Eastern Empire from Constantinople from AD 408 to 450. Theodosius II's reign witnessed the final wearisome decades of the Danube frontier, concluding with his death only a few years before its gradual destruction under the Huns and the migrations following the death of Attila in 453, and an analysis of his controversial rule would prove a welcome insight into the regime behind the empire's longest frontier.

More recently, Dr. Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* (2017) presents a highly original perspective on the causes, however indirect, of the collapse of the Roman Empire. While his eclectic bibliography acknowledges the forgoing theses on the subject, Harper postulates that changes in the Earth's environment during late antiquity, particularly the production of a cooler global climate in the fourth and fifth centuries, was a driving factor in the instigation of the

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27. Christopher Kelly, *The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009.), 11-18, 54-61.

barbarian migrations against and into the Roman world.<sup>28</sup> Supporting his unique analysis, Harper brings to bear a battery of environmental and biological studies on subjects ranging from ice cores and tree rings to critical viruses and pathogens common in the Mediterranean world of the fourth and fifth centuries, not infrequently noting their general and specific impacts on historical events such as Attila's invasion of Italy having been blunted by disease—possibly malaria.<sup>29</sup> While the focus of his history is on the general developments which ultimately produced the Western Empire's destruction, his perspective of late antique climate change, together with a limited overview of affairs on the Danube in his second chapter and sporadically over book's pages make *The Fate of Rome* a welcome, if minor, addition to the historiography of the Danube frontier.

One further recent publication of interest is Michael Schmitz' pointedly-named *The Danube Frontier* (2019). Despite the pointed title, this book, while original, detailed, and layman-oriented, far from covers the whole history of its title's namesake. Instead, following a preliminary chapter detailing the advancement of Roman forces into the Balkans of the last three centuries BC, the book focusses solely on the process of securing the Balkans up to the Danube and into Dacia from the times of Octavian to the close of the Marcomannic Wars in the late second century AD.<sup>30</sup> Given that this book is the final addition to the seven-book series *The Roman Conquests*, the narrative's abrupt cutoff in the AD 180s is scarcely surprising, as thereafter the Empire experienced little lasting advancement beyond the river's northern shore. Thus, halting well before the frontier's waning years, *The Danube Frontier* presents a lively

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28. Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.), 3-5, 159.

29. *Ibid.*, 13, 196.

30. Michael Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2019.), xix-xxi, 127-129.

invitation to engage in the honest inquiry as to the nature of the northern frontier, whose field of historical potential spans a breadth as wide as Pannonia and a depth as deep as the Danube.

Overall, while recent historiography has offered a wealth of new information on the various barbarian peoples beyond the Danube, as well as on the imperial frontier's early years, the history behind its occupation, operation, relations with major conflicts and other imperial affairs, and ultimate destruction in the fifth century has yet to be adequately addressed. By the late fifth century, the landscape along the Roman Empire's Danube frontier—bustling with commerce, legionary movements, and political attention little more than a half-century before—would lie pockmarked with scarcely inhabited ruins of the civilization which had for centuries previous taken root there. The goal of this study is to bridge the gap in Roman frontier history by synthesizing a narrative from the AD 370s to the campaigns of Attila, discussing the neighboring barbarous cultures, important conflicts, and local developments along the Roman Empire's greatest frontier that influenced its eventual destruction.

The first chapter begins with an abbreviated overview of the Danube's structure and history from the region's occupation in the first centuries BC and AD to the close of the Roman-Gothic War of 376-382, set in parallel with the developments in the contemporary and future enemies of Rome in the European *barbaricum* beyond the river. The Goths are of particular interest, as their migration from the vicinity of the Baltic Sea southeastwards into the Pontic Steppe, and once more into the Pannonian and Romanian Plains bordering the Roman Danube, provided important context to Roman operations along the river from the mid-second century onwards. Reactionary to the arrival of the Hunnic Horde from the Central Asian steppes in the late 360s and 370s, the latter Gothic migration saw the immigration of several tens of thousands of Goths into the Roman provinces along the river. Mismanagement of foreign refugees

immigrating into the Roman Empire from this westward procession by imperial authorities, coupled with the bulk of Roman field forces not being present near the Danube as they typically were, led to a series of climactic Roman defeats, most notably at Adrianople (Hadrianopolis) and Thessaloniki (Salonica), for the already stretched imperial military, and portended ill for the Danube frontier in the following decades. At the end of the Gothic War in 382, the remaining Gothic forces were settled as an imperial client (*foedus*) within the Empire along the Lower Danube, though they would not remain loyal to the emperors for long.

Chapter two discusses the Goth's further exploits under Alaric against the Empire and its forces from their revolt in 395 onwards, serving, as many Romans feared they would, as a destabilizing influence in the Roman Balkans and along the Danube. Meanwhile, the Huns continued to advance into Europe, settling throughout the Pontic Steppe and the eastern Pannonian Plain, destabilizing vast tracts of the riverine frontier and laying the foundations for a loss of Roman control over the Pannonian provinces within a few decades. The breakdown of Roman power in Pannonia, by far the most remote region of the Danube frontier, served as a bridgehead for hostile barbarian peoples to penetrate the Empire's defenses and invade its more prosperous interior. By the late 390s, mounting pressure on the frontier extended to the Upper Danube bordering on southern Germania as the Huns and their subjects moved westwards. As the Western Romans diverted increasing amounts of their increasingly limited resources to hold the Middle and Upper Danube over the early 400s, Alaric and his forces arose to devastate the undefended territories of northern Italia, enabling in turn the barbarian crossings of the Rhine in 406 and their overrunning of Roman Gaul over the following years, the loss of Britannia in 410, and finally the sack of Rome in the same year.

While the 410s, and to a lesser extent the 420s, are relatively quiet periods in extant primary sources, the Danube frontier was far from inactive. Chapter three discusses the barbarian—predominantly Hunnic—invasions of the East Roman Empire, the role of Danube frontier in the midst of such encounters, and the frontier’s gradual decline and ultimate destruction between the 420s and Attila’s last invasion of the East in 447. Between the late 390s and the 420s, Hunnic tribes along the Danube’s northern shore gradually agglomerated into regional confederacies led by one or more chieftains, culminating in the expansive Hunnic realms of Ruga and his brother Octar in the 420s. After the former kings’ deaths in the early 430s, the infamous Attila the Hun—the “Scourge of God”—and his brother Bleda, nephews of the late Hunnic kings, claimed the Hunnic throne and steadily advanced their influence in the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, subjecting the Danube frontier and its keepers to increasing external pressure. Facilitating the breakdown of the riverine frontier’s integrity, Aetius, supreme commander of Western Roman forces, relinquished control of a sizable piece of Roman Pannonia to the Huns as a recompense for their support in internal Western Roman political conflicts, severing the Upper and Lower Danube, and interposing an irreconcilable void in the Danube *Limes* that their organization was not designed nor able to accommodate. Using this area in the Pannonian Plain as a springboard and exploiting the distractions various foreign wars had provided for Theodosius II’s regime, Attila and his forces launched two major campaigns into the Eastern Roman Empire in 441-442 and 447, the latter of which finally destroying the Roman Danube, putting a resolute end to the region’s major fortifications, urban centers, and Constantinopolitan administration. Never again would the Romans see the lasting entrenchment of the Empire’s frontier along this once-prosperous frontier region.

## Chapter 1: Destabilization of the Danube Frontier, Roman Conquest—A.D. 382

*Here force and hardy deeds of blood prevail;  
There languid pleasure sighs in every gale.  
Oft o'er the trembling nations from afar  
Has Scythia breathed the living cloud of war;  
And, where the deluge burst, with sweepy sway  
Their arms, their kings, their gods were rolled away.  
As oft have issued, host impelling host,  
The blue-eyed myriads from the Baltic coast.  
The prostrate south to the destroyer yields  
Her boasted titles and her golden fields...—Thomas Gray*

**O**n August 9, 378, an estimated two-thirds of the Eastern Roman field army lay dead amidst the blood-drenched hinterlands a few hours' march from the city walls of Hadrianopolis.<sup>31</sup> Eastern Roman Emperor Valens and many of his chief aides and commanders were among them, all having fallen to a coalition of Goths from beyond the Danube that had less than a decade before bent the knee to Roman supremacy on the northern frontier. Despite their Gothic adversary's failure to seize Hadrianopolis, a major economic and governmental center in the Balkans, in the wake of the climactic Roman defeat—the greatest since 260 at the Battle of Edessa—the Battle of Hadrianopolis has often been ascribed as a major turning point in Roman history beginning the Empire's protracted decline and fall over the proceeding century.<sup>32</sup> However, unlike at the arguably larger catastrophe at Edessa, wherein the Persian Empire, which

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<sup>31</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3:52-55.; Zosimus, *New History*, 4.23-24.; The definitive number of combatants present at Hadrianopolis remains a matter of debate. Peter Heather has asserted a conservative 15,000 Romans arrived with Valens to meet the barbarian host—10,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry—as he could not leave the East without a proper garrison, whereas other scholars, including Christopher Kelly, Gerard Friell, and Stephen Williams, maintain the number was closer to 20,000 or 30,000. Heather asserts that the number of barbarians may have slightly exceeded the Romans' number, whereas Kelly maintained the two sides roughly matched one another. It ought to be noted that primary sources describing a barbarian horde of exceptional size (e.g., Eunapius' Fragment 42, describing a force of some 200,000 "Scythians") are writing less for factual accuracy and more for literary and rhetorical effect.; Eunapius, *History* 4.42.1-10; Gerard Friell and Stephen Williams, *The Rome That Did Not Fall: The Survival of the East in the Fifth Century* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998.), 5.; Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.), 181.; Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 1.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Alessandro Barbero, *The Day of the Barbarians: The Battle that led to the Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Walker & Company, 2007.), 12-16.; cf. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, 329-330.

the Romans regarded as a long-standing *regional* threat and a somewhat civilized rival among their myriad neighbors, had successfully killed or captured over sixty thousand troops and Emperor Valerian himself, the defeat at Hadrianopolis demonstrated that the barbarous, often nomadic peoples along the length of the Danube had matured sufficiently to endanger Roman control of the Empire's northern frontier.<sup>33</sup> It behooves us, then, to briefly explain the rather humble origins of the Goths and how they rose to prominence and eventual victory in such an astonishing manner.

By the late fourth century, the presence of Germanic peoples on Rome's periphery was anything but new. Their origins, while impossible to discern with certainty, traditionally lie in the vicinity of the Baltic Sea.<sup>34</sup> Their collective migration southwards into Central and Eastern Europe took place over two distinct periods.<sup>35</sup> The first migration (1000 BC – 200 BC), originating in the Baltic lands between the Elbe and the Oder, produced the Germanic tribes that would eventually settle throughout the lands of Germania, the name for which, as Tacitus recounts, was derived from the original name of the Belgic *Tungri* in the north of Gaul: the '*Germani*.'<sup>36</sup> The Romans began to encounter them in the last centuries BC on the Republic's Alpine frontier, and halted their movement towards Roman and Roman-aligned territory in the Alps and Transalpine Gaul along the Rhine through Caesar's Gaulic Wars (58-51 BC), as Tacitus records:

Amongst the people of Germany, I would not reckon those who occupy the lands which are under decimation, though they be such as dwell beyond the Rhine and the Danube. By several worthless and vagabond Gauls, and such as poverty rendered daring, that region was seized as one belonging to no certain possessor: afterwards it became a skirt of the Empire and part of a province [initially Gaul, later Germania Inferior and

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<sup>33</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 112.; Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 5.; Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 1.16-2.26.

<sup>35</sup> Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.; Tacitus, *Germania* 2.

Germania Superior], upon the enlargement of our bounds and the extending of our garrisons and frontier.<sup>37</sup>

As they approached and the Roman occupied regions along the Rhine and, eventually, the Upper Danube, the inhabitants of Germania slowly settled, adopting a semi-sedentary mode of living within the condensed living space and densely forested terrain, relinquishing their migratory origins.<sup>38</sup> This led the Romans to focusing on Europe's other great river as an imperial frontier first. Caesar's Gallic Wars had advanced the Roman presence to the Rhine and Augustus planned to continue the offensive to Elbe from 6 AD onwards, integrating Germania and its innumerable tribes into Rome's burgeoning empire.<sup>39</sup> However, after the Great Illyrian Revolt (6-9 AD) and Arminius' ambush of Publius Varus' legions at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest (AD 9) incurred so great a loss of materiel and manpower to Augustus' ambitions, the Germanic conquest was postponed indefinitely.<sup>40</sup> Despite later Roman attempts to regain the initiative on the peripheries of Germania, the imperial presence grounded on the Rhine and Upper Danube and steadily transformed into a fixed defensive border.

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<sup>37</sup> Tacitus, *Germania* 28-29.

<sup>38</sup> Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 8.; Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtzeff, *Iranians & Greeks in South Russia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922.), 214.

<sup>39</sup> Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier*, 51; Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History of C. Velleius Paterculus* 2.106-109.

<sup>40</sup> The Great Illyrian Revolt, also known as the Pannonian and Dalmatian War, erupted in Pannonia in AD 6, spreading thereafter into Dalmatia on the Adriatic coast, thus constituting most of regional Illyricum. Expounding upon Velleius Paterculus' account of the revolt, Thomas Burns writes, "Paterculus makes it clear that one of the many reasons for the severity of the revolt was the level of military training and the command structure that existed among the Pannonians and their allies because of their long exposure to Roman arms and culture." The Romans conquered Illyria and Pannonia gradually, thereby approaching much of the Middle Danube, between the First Illyrian War (231-228 BC), Rome's first conflict in the Balkans, and the close of Augustus' Pannonian campaigns in 8 BC; as Roman authority began to consolidate over the northern and northwestern Balkans, native Pannonian, Dalmatian, and other Illyrian tribes, themselves far from assimilated, rose in revolt. Edward Luttwak writes, "characteristically, a delay, sometimes of generations, would intervene between the initial conquest and the outbreak of revolt."; Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, 206-207.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 18.; Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History of C. Velleius Paterculus* 2.110-111.; Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier*, 1-52.

The second Germanic migration (600 BC – AD 200), originating in the lowlands between the Oder and Vistula, if not in Scandinavia beyond the Southern Baltic as Jordanes suggests, laid the foundation of the Gothic Germans.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the inhabitants of Germania gradually adopted sedentism and agriculture, binding them to the same locales throughout much of the Roman Empire’s history, the vast plains and steppes of Eastern Europe, bounded to the south by the Carpathians and Euxine Sea in the southwest and southeast, would enable the Goths to maintain and perpetuate their nomadic way of life as they migrated.<sup>42</sup> Jordanes recounts that the Goths settled in a particularly rich sector of Scythia they referred to as “Oium,” not far from Lake Maeotis before gradually dominating the region.<sup>43</sup> By the close of the second century, the Goths had superseded much of the native Scythian and Sarmatian tribes there and began the gradual expansion into Dacia, the Pontic Steppe, and the periphery of Roman influence on the Euxine coast and Lower Danube, laying the groundwork for them to play a central role in the events of the third and fourth centuries.

While the early Goths were still migrating, a new pattern of tribal organization began to emerge among their more-settled cousins in Germania. In the first and early second centuries, the Germanic peoples along the Danube existed as diminutive tribal polities, many of which maintained to varying extents mercantile or political relations with the Empire.<sup>44</sup> Many of these

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<sup>41</sup> Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 8.; Written in the 550s, Jordanes’ *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* is a universal history of the Gothic people, the contents of which, while subject to considerable academic debate, lend the most information of any primary source to the role of the Goths in European history prior to the Roman-Gothic War of 376-382.; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 2.25-26.

<sup>42</sup> Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Technically, Jordanes describes three distinct migrations of the Goths before finally settling in eastern Scythia: “We read that on their first migration the Goths dwelt in the land of Scythia near Lake Maeotis [Sea of Pontus/Azov]. On the second migration, they went to Moesia, Thrace, and Dacia, and after their third they dwelt again in Scythia, above the Sea of Pontus.” As no dates or other means of dating these migrations are listed (although most of his dates are worthy of a large grain of salt to begin with), nor are any noteworthy impacts of these supposed large migrations to be found outside of Scythia, the question of their existence is of scarce consequence to the present study apart from emphasizing their traditionally migratory nature.; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 2.27, 2.38.

<sup>44</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 19-21, 147.

small groups could be were subjected to Roman suzerainty as imperial “foederati,” client tribes subsidized and guaranteed by Rome in exchange for manpower to maintain the legions and the passive service as an outer barrier on the peripheries of Roman influence.<sup>45</sup> The latter service was critical to the early Empire, as the first permanent establishments of the rigid defensive infrastructure, or ‘limes,’ would not come into being at the earliest until well into the second century.<sup>46</sup> The sporadic raids of hostile tribes in early imperial history, typically characterized by poorly disciplined light footmen, could often be repulsed without extraordinary difficulty by their Roman counterparts along the Danube. However, by the third and fourth centuries, numerous tribes had congregated into powerful tribal confederacies—the Alamanni, Franks, Lombards, Saxons, Burgundians, etc.—capable of fielding far greater forces to weigh against the Roman frontier.<sup>47</sup> Luttwak attributes this development in part to the shared history of adversity against the Romans, stating:

Having for so long confronted a single adversary whose culture had infiltrated all their separate lives, different barbarian groups found a common basis for action against the empire. It became much harder for Roman diplomacy to contrive divisions among men who now had much in common.<sup>48</sup>

These groups were not perfectly united; many of their constituent tribes fought with one another for dominance in a given area or within the hierarchy of the confederacy.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, their potential collective power remained a considerable threat to the Empire’s European frontiers when they moved in unison.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 17, 19-21, 56.

<sup>47</sup> Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, 279-281.; Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.), 119-120.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 19-21, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 147.

<sup>49</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 121-124.

Growing mercantile exchange across the frontier also drove the establishment of conglomerate German states. As the frontier coalesced and the number of frontier fortifications increased, barbarian tribes in the hinterlands of Germania, Carpathia, and Scythia beyond the Danube engaged in a proportionally increasing measure of trade with the Romans. Roman merchants, regularly operating in the vicinity of Danube fortifications and townships, acted as the primary middlemen for ferrying various goods in and out of the Empire and maintained the dominance of the Roman trade throughout Scythia, Carpathia, Germania, and the Southern Baltic.<sup>50</sup> Even before they made direct contact with the Roman Empire, the Goths also actively engaged with the Roman trade; as they established themselves in Scythia, they maintained trade routes along the Dnieper between their new dwellings in Scythia and their former homeland around the Baltic and northern Germania by which they could indirectly access the flow of imperial goods from Gaul, Italia, and the Danube provinces.<sup>51</sup> Mercantile activity reached its height in the second and early third centuries, particularly between the reigns of Nerva and Antoninus Pius, eventually culminating in the Gothic takeover of the Greek trade ports of Olbia,

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<sup>50</sup> Roman mercantile interests were an important aspect of their justification for subduing the Danube. While the tribes beyond the Danube were constantly jostling with one another, shifting geographically closer to or farther from the Roman frontier, their demand for Roman goods was insatiable. In exchange for manufactured goods and refined materials like pottery, wine, glass, fine fabrics, bronze, brass, and gold, the Germans, Dacians, and Sarmatians, offered whatever they could exchange—pottery, various ores, lumber, salt (a product of particularly enduring value on the Danube into the Medieval Era), honey, wax, skins, wool, slaves, the loyalty of their tribe, etc. Additionally, the Amber Road, an ancient trade route flowing between the Southern Baltic and the northern Adriatic (in the vicinity of Aquileia) over the Upper Danube, presented the late Republic and Empire with a constant influx of Baltic amber. This amber, famed for a range of uses from medicine to jewelry, was a valuable commodity around the Empire and could easily fetch a hefty exchange in Roman goods. In fact, in capturing Noricum and advancing the Empire to the Norican segment of the Upper Danube in the last decades BC, Augustus not only gained for his countrymen a stronger presence on the Amber Road, but also direct access to the famed iron mines of the region; Norican iron was of such exceptional quality that Horace even makes mention of “swords out of Noricum” in one of his Odes.; Horace, *Odes* 1.16.; Eugenijus Jovaiša, "The Balts and Amber," *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* 22 (2001): 149-154.; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 124.; Keith Hitchins, *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.), 8.; Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1956.), 7.; Rostovtzeff, *Iranians & Greeks in South Russia*, 215-216.; Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Iranians & Greeks in South Russia*, 214-216.

Tyras, and others along the Euxine coast in the 230s, around the time of Severus Alexander's assassination on the Rhine and the initiation of the Third Century Crisis.<sup>52</sup> Gothic civil centers in Scythia, both those which they subjugated and of their own construction, would serve as important bases of operation for conducting trade with and launching limited offensives into the wealthy Eastern Roman provinces in the third and fourth centuries.

As the Goths dominated Scythia, geography and their semi-nomadic tendencies gradually emphasized divisions within the corporate Gothic demographic, producing large subdivisions comparable in size and strength to their federating counterparts in the west. The *Thervingi*, bounded by the Carpathian Mountains, Euxine, and the Lower Danube, dwelt around and west of Dniester and as far south as the Romanian Plain.<sup>53</sup> The *Greuthungi*, comprising the Gothic presence East of the Dniester, gradually expanded further east and north of Oium.<sup>54</sup> It would be from *Greuthungi* stock that the semi-legendary Gothic king Ermanric would arise to “subdue many warlike peoples” whose kingdom would eventually span the breadth of European Scythia from the close of the third century to the beginning of the Roman-Gothic War of 376-382, and whose reign would allegedly endure for an extraordinary breadth of time—as Jordanes claims, about 110 years.<sup>55</sup> Only with the approach of the Huns in the late 360s and 370s would the developing Gothic nations north of the Euxine Sea and the Lower Danube be forced to collide so precipitously with their Roman neighbors along and behind the river frontier.

By the beginning of the third century, the Roman frontier boasted an entrenched, yet increasingly unstable control of the imperial periphery. The conquest of the frontier began with

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<sup>52</sup> Theodor Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire: From Caesar to Diocletian*, trans. William P. Dickson (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996.), 1:239.; Rostovtzeff, *Iranians & Greeks in South Russia*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans: 332-489* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.), 84-86.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 88-89.; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, 2.116-120, 2.129-130; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.3.1.

the reign of Augustus and reached its apex in the final years of the Marcomannic Wars (AD 166-180), during which time the Danube had assumed its role as the Empire's primary strategic vulnerability.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Parthia—and later Sassanid Persia—in the east represented a sporadic regional threat in times of open warfare, and the Rhine and British Isles in the West represented native threats changing much more lethargically, the Danube presented the Empire with a permanent threat posed by an endlessly changing abyss of barbarous polities.<sup>57</sup>

It was during the Marcomannic Wars that the Germanic tribes began to exhibit signs of inter-tribal unity and a shared sense of awareness for the Empire's circumstances and their impact upon its northern frontier. Just after the Roman-Parthian War of 161-166 began, drawing Roman attention and resources, including numerous *vexillationes* from the legions of the Lower Danube provinces, eastwards, so too did the regular battery of the Danube frontier by the Germans, Sarmatians, Dacians, and others begin.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the migration of the Goths southeastwards to Scythia along the northern Carpathians applied immense pressure to the barbarian polities of Eastern Germania and Carpathia.<sup>59</sup> It was this critical combination of a perceptibly weakening static—that is, generally non-aggressive beyond the Danube's immediate vicinity—Roman frontier and the external pressures from the East by an openly aggressive migratory force, as Jordanes describes, which “added to their victories” the Ulmerugi and Vandals as they traveled, that drove the Germanic tribes along the Danube out of fear to begin

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<sup>56</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 167.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 158, 166-167.

<sup>58</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 166-167.; Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 1:229-230.; *Vexillationes* were sizeable detachments of Roman legions numbering between 1,000 and 2,000, typically with a numerical bias towards infantry. They were used increasingly in the mid- to late Empire as a rapidly deployable force able to function within a larger combat zone (e.g., a section of the Danube Frontier), while the main body of its parent legion remained in a designated *castra* (legionary fortress) along one the Empire's frontiers.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.), 103-107.

both their inter-tribal collaboration and their collective action against Rome.<sup>60</sup> A very similar process would occur among the Goths less than two centuries later as the Hunnic Horde advanced into Europe.

Nevertheless, by 180, having reallocated the bulk of its forces to the troubled frontier, the Empire boasted firm control over not only the entire course of the Danube, but also Dacia, conquered by Trajan in 105-106, and Aurelius' conquests north of the Middle Danube, "Sarmatia" and "Marcomannia," which he wished to organize into proper provinces over the late 170s.<sup>61</sup> However, as Avidius Cassius rose in revolt in the East in 175, forcing him to divert military resources east to handle the new threat, he would never get the chance.<sup>62</sup> Aurelius died on March 17, 180; Cassius Dio lamented in his Roman History, "Now if Marcus had lived longer, he would have subdued that entire region."<sup>63</sup> The late emperor's advisors pleaded with Commodus, his successor, to further the extraordinary offensive—the first campaign promising major trans-Danubian gains since Trajan's Dacian Wars and a considerable interruption to the federation of the Germanic tribes—"but," as Cassius Dio notes, "their suggestions and counsels Commodus rejected, and after making a truce with the barbarians he hastened to Rome; for he hated all exertion and craved the comfortable life of the city."<sup>64</sup>

As Aurelius' conquests were quietly subsumed back into the Germanic *barbaricum* between the 180s and 230s, the oncoming third century represented a dramatic shift in frontier policy. The slow economic growth and integration of the Danube provinces into the Mediterranean World, following the assassination of Alexander Severus in 235, was quickly

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<sup>60</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 2.25-56.

<sup>61</sup> *Historia Augusta, Marcus Antoninus* 24.5-6.; Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 1:235-236.; Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier*, 89-105, 113-126.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 72.33.1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.1.1-2.

replaced with continual invasions by the increasingly united barbarians beyond the opposing shore. Imperial policy transitioned from supporting a permeable frontier on the Danube, permitting open trade and routine political relations—especially the establishment and maintenance of *foederati*—with neighboring polities, to enforcing a fixed, monitored boundary against the shifting barbarous peoples beyond.<sup>65</sup> This change over the second and third centuries is evident in the layout of the Danube *Limes*.

Over the course of the second century, the legionary garrisons in the hinterlands of the Danube provinces from Noricum to Moesia were advanced to the shore of the river and were established in permanent stone “fortresses” (*castra*) constructed at strategically selected sites along the river, particularly at the termini of natural river crossings and nearby the mouths of major tributaries capable of being employed as invasion routes into the Balkan heartlands.<sup>66</sup> Before the Third Century Crisis, these emplacements were meant simply to provide housing to the legion residing within rather than to serve as active defensive hardpoints for potential invaders to have to overcome or bypass as they advanced; the true defensive infrastructure of the Danube *Limes* at this point lay in the Roman road network, which connected the frontier with the logistical and economic network of the Empire and enabled routine overland patrols.<sup>67</sup> Along the roadways, watchtowers, fortlets, and signal stations (*castella*) were erected at regular intervals between distant *castra* to keep surveillance over the river and its opposing shore and facilitate rapid communication.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, the effectiveness of Roman intelligence and surveillance along the river was greatly enhanced by naval patrols, the *Classis Pannonica* and

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<sup>65</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 66-67.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 74; C. T. Smith, *An Historical Geography of Western Europe Before 1800* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967.), 88-89.

<sup>67</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 74-76.; Smith, *An Historical Geography of Western Europe Before 1800*, 75-78.

<sup>68</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 69.

*Moesica*, present along the Danube since the reign of Augustus, based out of small dockyards built into the chain of frontier fortifications.<sup>69</sup>

This infrastructure, however, was meant to provide passive defensive effect for the frontier, rather than actively defending against assailing barbarians.<sup>70</sup> The *limes* were meant to serve as the support network for mobile Roman forces concentrated from reserves along the river front and the hinterlands of the Danube provinces as they offensively engaged with hostiles *beyond* the Danube.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the *limes* as they were prior to the Third Century Crisis served as a simultaneously physical and psychological barrier to partially-Romanized locals in the Danube provinces; it was a reminder of their residency within the Empire and reinforced their separation from their barbarous kin beyond the river.<sup>72</sup> In principle, the concept of the frontier as a boon to the process of assimilating barbarians was present until the very end of Roman control over the region in the fifth century, but its effect was often drastically hampered when the frontier's integrity was on a low ebb as during periods of internal calamity.

As the order and prosperity of the Pax Romana devolved into sanguinary chaos between the death of Marcus Aurelius and the beginning of the Third Century Crisis, wherein imperial resources and manpower were diverted from the frontier to brewing civil wars, barbarian hosts frequently breached the frontier and repeatedly raided the Upper Balkans so thoroughly as to lead Eutropius to ascribe the land as “depopulated.”<sup>73</sup> These barbarian offensives, however, revealed critical structural weaknesses in the Danube *Limes*. Spanning over 1,700 miles, concentrations of Roman defenders were necessarily spread thin; conversely, the offending

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<sup>69</sup> Octavian Bounegru and Mihail Zahariade, *Les Forces Navales du Bas Danube et de la Mer Noire au I<sup>er</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> Siècles*, ed. Gocha R. Tsetskhladze (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1996.), 7-22.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 85.

<sup>70</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 68-69.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>73</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.15.

barbarians, whose hosts could number by the third and fourth centuries well into the thousands, naturally concentrated their entire forces against singular points on the frontier.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, the hinterlands south of the river were largely devoid of major urban centers able to reinforce the scattered defenses along the river or hold invading forces long enough for a relief force to arrive from elsewhere in the Empire.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, Roman field armies were often well out of reach to shore up the frontier troops in the event of a major invasion, not infrequently being withdrawn from their posts to serve the reigning emperor or imperial pretenders.<sup>76</sup>

In the midst of the Empire's chaotic Third Century Crisis, Aurelian, "born of a humble family at Sirmium [on the Danube]," rose through the ranks of the defensive forces on the Danube, gaining an intimate awareness of the region's strategic importance.<sup>77</sup> After the death of emperor Claudius Gothicus, his troops hailed his brother, Marcus Quintillus, as emperor, after which the Senate swiftly followed suit.<sup>78</sup> Yet, after around seventeen days in office, Quintillus died, possibly having lost favor with the Danube legions, who instead appointed Aurelian as their new emperor.<sup>79</sup> Prioritizing the security of the Empire's most unstable frontier, he spent the first two years of his restorative reign prudently securing northern Italia and the Upper Danube, expelling Vandals, Sarmatians, Marcomanni and others invading through the Alps, though only so far as was necessary to rout them for long enough to recover the rebelling territories of Palmyra and Gaul between 272 and 275.<sup>80</sup> Given how far the barbarians had advanced into the Balkans and Italia while imperial forces were engaged

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<sup>74</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 147.; Schmitz, *The Danube Frontier*, 127.

<sup>75</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Iranians & Greeks in South Russia*, 217-218.

<sup>76</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 147-148.; An example would be when Septimus Severus recalled the Danube legions to march on Rome and claim the emperorship for himself.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 146.

<sup>77</sup> *Historia Augusta, The Deified Aurelian* 3.1-2.

<sup>78</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.11-12.

<sup>79</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.12-13.; *Historia Augusta, The Deified Aurelian*, 16.1-2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.13-15.; *Historia Augusta, The Deified Aurelian*, 17.1-35.5.

elsewhere, Aurelian commissioned the establishment of a vast ring of walls and turrets around Rome, known thereafter as the ‘Aurelian Walls,’ the likes of which would in the coming century become increasingly common around the Empire, especially in the Rhine and Danube provinces.<sup>81</sup>

However, Aurelian’s restoration of the Empire, legionary casualties and depopulation of the riparian provinces aside, cost the Romans a heavy price on their Danube frontier. Dacia, having been repeatedly raided on all sides from the beginning of the Crisis, was abandoned by the Empire by the end of Aurelian’s reign.<sup>82</sup> Its continued defense proved too costly in light of the Empire’s already exasperated manpower reserves, strapped finances, and more imposing threats in Palmyra and Gaul. Much of Dacia’s Roman and Romanized populace was evacuated south of the Danube to a new ‘Dacia’ carved from Moesia Superior and Inferior, later divided under Diocletian into ‘Dacia Ripensis’ directly on the Danube and ‘Dacia Mediterranea’ to its south, expectant of a Roman reconquest that would never materialize; as Eutropius later recounts,

The Roman citizens, removed from the town and lands of Dacia, he settled in the interior of Moesia, calling that ‘Dacia’ which now divides the two Moesiae, and which is on the right hand of the Danube as it runs to the sea, whereas Dacia was previously on the left.<sup>83</sup>

Instead, in the absence of Roman opposition, the Thervingi and Vandals moved into Dacia between the 270s and 290s, pressuring the remaining Sarmatians, Carpi, Bastarnae, and other smaller groups in the region against the Roman frontier.

The withdrawal from Dacia, coupled with his immediate successors Tacitus and Florianus, each reigning as emperor for mere months, not having the time or opportunity to

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<sup>81</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.15.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 187.

<sup>82</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.15.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

maintain Roman momentum on the frontiers, enabled barbarian hostilities along the Rhine and Danube to steadily resume between 276 and 280.<sup>84</sup> Instead of permitting the frontier to be overrun again, Emperor Probus, ascending the throne in the summer of 276, reasserted not only Rome's preeminence on the Rhine and Danube frontiers as temporarily recovered during Aurelian's reign, but elevated the integrity of the frontiers to their pre-Third Century Crisis stature. By conducting numerous wars along the Rhine and Danube, he reestablished the old practices of both *foederati* relationships with various Germanic tribes, some among them even belonging to larger federative Germanic peoples, as well as routine Roman preemptive offensives into the *barbaricum*.<sup>85</sup> In so doing, he reintegrated numerous rural communities and barren hinterlands along the frontiers, throughout the latter of which he ordered his troops to plant vineyards—seeking to keep them too busy to plot a rebellion similar to those which saw the overthrow of his predecessors—in the efforts of invigorating lost economic potential.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 85.; As the author of the biography of Tacitus tersely writes it in the *Historia Augusta*, “So then there arose two princes from one house, of whom the one ruled for six months and the other for scarce two—merely regents, so to speak, between Aurelian and Probus, and themselves named princes after a regency.” The same tone is reflected in Eunapius’ *Abridgement*.; Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.16.; *Historia Augusta, Tacitus* 14.5.

<sup>85</sup> Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, 296-297.; Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire: AD 284-430* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.), 30-31.; Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.17.

<sup>86</sup> Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, 297.; Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.17.; Sextus Victor Aurelius, *Epitome De Caesaribus* 37.3-4.; Technically, the wine trade had been active along the Danube for centuries by the time Probus rose to the throne. The wine of ancient Greece gained an economic foothold in the region before the fifth century BC, having been imported either overland through the Balkans or aboard ship via the Euxine and up the Danube from its mouth. The prominence of the wine trade thereafter varied widely, but depended upon the geopolitical stance of Greece relative to its neighbors. The arrival of Roman influence in the Upper Balkans in the first century BC brought with it the practice of viticulture on a small scale, with most wine along the Danube originating either in Italy or the Aegean, but it was only under Probus that the practice became widespread and in some areas survived the withdrawal of Roman power. Asterius of Amasea remarked in his fifteenth *Homily* that the Huns, having recently arrived from Asia in Scythia, “Living without bread and wine, are nevertheless manly, and are ready to wage war against entire nations and subjugate many to themselves; nor does the absence of bread and wine bring forth any harm to them.” As Priscus’ visit to the court of Attila over fifty years later would display, the Huns of his time, having settled largely on the Pannonian Plain and along the Middle and Lower Danube, had developed an endless thirst for Probus’ agricultural progeny. While Rome would suffer at the hands of Attila, Danubian viticulture as a regional tradition has stood the test of time, as the nations which line the Danube’s banks boast innumerable unique wine traditions.; Asterius of Amasea, *Homily* 15.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 189.; Priscus, Fragment 13.1.40-65.; Tom Standage, *A History of the World*

However, his most enduring precedent lay in the practice of settling large numbers of barbarians within the Empire behind and along its frontiers.<sup>87</sup> The frontier conflicts of the Third Century damaged and destroyed numerous settlements and minor fortifications along the Danube, creating gaps in the Roman defensive line; by settling large barbarian groups within the imperial frontier, Probus aimed to solve both the problem of barbarian hostilities and the weaknesses of the Danube *Limes* at the same time.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, these resettled barbarians, as they were gradually assimilated, could fill in the rugged hinterlands of the Rhine and Danube to provide deep logistical support to the Empire's immediate defense, as well as taxes and manpower for governmental and military affairs.

Probus' policy offered his successors a profoundly useful secondary tool for maintaining the Empire's European frontier, and some accounts of its early employment during his reign have survived in primary sources. In addition to several smaller groups of Germans, Sarmatians, Carpi, and others, the *Historia Augusta* records that Probus settled approximately 100,000 Bastarnae, a group that had plagued Roman efforts at conquering the Balkans and subduing the Danube for centuries, in the heavily-Romanized province of Thrace; even when other smaller groups of recently settled barbarians arose as "brigands" to be quashed by Roman detachments, the Bastarnae remained loyal to their adoptive emperor.<sup>89</sup>

Eutropius makes mention of a second major settlement of Bastarnae by Diocletian not long after his engagements with Narseh, King of Persia, which places it in the mid- to late-290s.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the Carpi, having harassed the Lower Danube since the 230s and having

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*in 6 Glasses* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005.), 67.; J. J. Wilkes, "The Roman Danube: An Archaeological Survey," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 95 (2005): 169, 170, 172.

<sup>87</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1:366-368.; Zosimus, *New History* 1.67.1-1.68.3.

<sup>88</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1:366-368.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:366-368.; *Historia Augusta, Probus* 18.1-3.

<sup>90</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.25.

been repeatedly defeated throughout the Third Century, were resolutely crushed and largely resettled within the Empire under the campaigns of Diocletian in the late 290s and Constantine in 318.<sup>91</sup> In both cases, after a single generation, the Bastarnae and Carpi almost completely vanish from written accounts, likely having assimilated fully enough into Roman society as to be scarcely distinguishable from native born Romans along the Danube and throughout the Balkan provinces.<sup>92</sup> Aurelius Victor later wrote of the latter, “the Marcomanni were slaughtered and the whole nation of the Carpi was transferred to our soil, where some of them had already been settled from the time of Aurelian.”<sup>93</sup> For over a century after his death in 284, Probus’ method of barbarian resettlement would see the integration of innumerable smaller bands from beyond the frontier into Roman territories.

Complimenting Probus’ new frontier policy, his successors set about radically updating the *limes* and the operational structure of the military. Between Diocletian and Constantine, the Roman army gradually segregated into two distinct bodies: the ‘*limitanei*’ constituted the frontier forces dedicated to holding the imperial borderlands along the *limes*, whereas the ‘*comitatenses*’ were the main field armies, typically commanded by the reigning emperor, constituted by partial or whole legions and their auxiliaries.<sup>94</sup> This format would remain in place to the fall of the West in 476 and well beyond, laying an important part of the groundwork for Byzantine tactics and strategy from the fifth century onwards.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Eutropius, *Abridgement of Roman History* 9.25. Sextus Victor Aurelius, *De Caesaribus* 39.43.

<sup>93</sup> Sextus Victor Aurelius, *De Caesaribus* 39.43.

<sup>94</sup> Hugh Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.), 97-98.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 195-199, 206-207, 215-216.

<sup>95</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.), 3.

Diocletian, already famed throughout the Empire's interior for his governmental and monetary reforms, undertook several construction efforts along the Empire's frontiers, especially the Danube, and implemented a series of policies dictating the nature of their management.<sup>96</sup> The old fortresses and encampments along the frontier were expanded and reconstructed, the main *castra* receiving massive concave bastions, dedicated artillery, and higher walls, which, unlike the low walls of the previous model *castra*, supported broad combat platforms at the top.<sup>97</sup> The Romans had observed that many of their barbarian neighbors, most notably the Goths, did not possess the technological or tactical understanding of how to conduct effective sieges of fortified strongholds; increasing the defensibility of static fortifications therefore served as both a weighty deterrence against and a severe obstacle for barbarian incursions.<sup>98</sup> Complementing the refurbished fortresses, road forts along major routes of travel and rural fortlets were vigorously built throughout the Danube provinces.<sup>99</sup> Even advance forts, largely unseen since before the Third Century Crisis, and fortified landing stages were erected on the opposing side of the river in critical areas.<sup>100</sup> Galerius, Constantine, Constantius II, and Valentinian, among others, also occasionally undertook additional construction efforts on the Danube in the early to mid-fourth century; in 364, Valentinian directed Tautomedes, the governor of Dacia Ripensis to, "annually

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<sup>96</sup> Jill Harries, *Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363: The New Empire* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012.), 55-59.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 148, 151, 202-206.; Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (New York: Routledge, 1997.), 75-77.; Going beyond merely building and rebuilding fortifications on the frontiers, as John Malalas reports, Diocletian also built arms factories at Edessa and Damascus.; John Malalas, *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott (Leiden: Brill, 2017.), 12.307-308.

<sup>97</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 172.; Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 155-156.

<sup>98</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 156.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-154.

<sup>100</sup> Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, 75-77.

construct towers in suitable places” in addition to repairing and maintaining those already extant and in service.<sup>101</sup>

Additionally, as Roman units on the frontier entrenched themselves, many of the original *castra* built over the second and third centuries had become the nuclei of large civilian settlements, known as ‘*canabae*.’<sup>102</sup> While many of these sizable townships were fortified with walls and redoubts as their *castra* were, this development had the effect of tying troops to a certain area, as their departure to serve in the Empire’s interior or beyond the frontier would leave their families increasingly vulnerable.<sup>103</sup> While limiting strategic options for regional commanders, regionalization of the *limitanei* at least reduced the risk for internal disruptions, though not direct orders from regional authorities, to swiftly compromise the *limes*.

Nevertheless, the remarkable accomplishments of Aurelian, Probus, and Diocletian did not unilaterally solve the profound weaknesses of the frontier. Instead, almost every Constantinian and Valentinianic emperor whose reign lasted more than a year spent considerable time on campaign along the Danube frontier, micromanaging the Empire’s foreign relations with those along its northern frontier more so than any other. While unable to maintain peace throughout the Upper Balkans, continual punitive campaigns, revolving treaties, and ongoing construction and reconstruction efforts set at maintaining and improving upon the frontier’s infrastructure, at least preserve the *status quo* on the Empire’s northern periphery and peace in the Empire’s core provinces. The corresponding status quo of the European barbaricum remained relatively static but well beyond the Empire’s ability to control.

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<sup>101</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 15.1.13.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, *An Historical Geography of Western Europe Before 1800*, 86, 88-89.

<sup>103</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 147-148.; Smith, *An Historical Geography of Western Europe Before 1800*, 88-89.

The existing balance of power between the Romans and their ever-shifting European neighbors, albeit pockmarked by sporadic raids into Moesia, Pannonia, and Rhaetia, remained relatively stable until the early 370s when, emerging from the vast steppes of Central Asia, the Hunnic Horde set foot on European soil. Sweeping westwards, the Huns quickly overran the Alans, Greuthungi, and Sarmatians among others dwelling north of the Euxine Sea, migrating as far as the Pannonian Plain by the mid-380s.<sup>104</sup> The Gothic kingdom of Ermanric, whatever its ultimate extent, was demolished and its holdings subjected to Hunnic dominance; Ammianus later wrote,

He was astonished at the violence of this sudden tempest, and although, like a prince whose power was well established he long attempted to hold his ground, he was at last overpowered by a dread of the evils impending over his country, which were exaggerated by common report, till he terminated his fear of great danger by a voluntary death.<sup>105</sup>

As they expanded westward, the Huns' reputation of ruthless ferocity preceded them. They overwhelmed Gothic Scythia and approached the northern bounds of the Romanian Plain in 375 and early 376.<sup>106</sup> The Thervingi residing there, pressured in much the same way their ancestors had pressured the Germanic tribes on the Middle and Upper Danube before and during the Marcomannic Wars, steadily amassed on the Lower Danube across from Durostorum and appealed to Emperor Valens for admission into the Empire.<sup>107</sup> As Probus' policy of settling large numbers of barbarians within the Empire was still an integral facet of late imperial frontier

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<sup>104</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 4.126.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 43.

<sup>105</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.3.2.; The actual means of Ermanric's death is a matter of dispute between the writings of Ammianus and Jordanes, the only two Roman works to mention him. While Ammianus declares Ermanric's death to be of his own election, Jordanes ascribes it to the vengeance of Sarus and Ammius, the brothers of a certain Sunilda, whom Ermanric ordered to be executed for belonging to a tribe that betrayed him as the Huns approached.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.3.1-2.; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 2.129-130.

<sup>106</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 145.

<sup>107</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.1.

policy, the Visigothic request and its promise of additional manpower for the Eastern Roman army must have appeared somewhat enticing to two reasons.

Firstly, at the time of their request, Valens was in Syria waging a major war against Persia over the suzerainty of Armenia.<sup>108</sup> After the Third Century Crisis, manpower proved increasingly difficult to come by during major wars far from the eastern metropole of Constantinople (Constantinopolis) and Empire's core provinces, and the Goths had as a condition of their entry into the Empire offered a force of their own number as disposable manpower.<sup>109</sup> As the Goths would scarcely have anywhere to flee if they rebelled, and as they had over the previous two centuries learned to fight in the saddle from their nomadic neighbors, particularly the Sarmatians and Alans, Gothic contingents in his retinue would be extremely advantageous against his Persian adversaries.<sup>110</sup>

Secondly, despite frequent punitive campaigns beyond the Danube over the previous half-century, border skirmishes and raids had nevertheless taken a weighty toll on the frontier troops stationed along the Danube's southern shore. In 375, mere months before the Goths would make their request, two elite legions of the Moesian and Pannonian *limes* under the command of Equitius, Emperor Valentinian's *magister militum* of Illyricum, were lost combatting an offending force of Sarmatians in Pannonia.<sup>111</sup> The loss of such experienced forces—outlying instances in a decades-long period of the continual accrual of casualties—would have been fresh in the minds of Roman officers and officials as the Visigoths began to amass, and only elevated the need for fresh recruits on the Danube. Ammianus himself

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<sup>108</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 13.

<sup>109</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.1.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Brzezinski and Mariusz Mielczarek, *The Sarmatians: 600 BC–AD 450* (Botley: Osprey Publishing, 2002.), 11, 41.

<sup>111</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 2:588.

acknowledged the worrisome state of the frontier, writing, “At that time the defenses of our provinces were much exposed, and the armies of barbarians spread over them like the lava of Mount Etna.”<sup>112</sup> At the same time, in the case of Roman refusal, the frontier defenses in the area were likely not strong enough to repulse the Goths in the event of a forced crossing, though Durostorum, one of the few *castra* on the Lower Danube, was well fortified and could provide the immediate surroundings with a safe haven in such an event.<sup>113</sup>

As the permittance of a barbarian population to enter the Empire was a matter disposed with solely at the emperor’s discretion, negotiations must have taken several months.<sup>114</sup>

Travelling along the Roman roads, unladen couriers could manage in optimum conditions no more than fifty miles each day on horseback, though such speeds were uncommon and no travelling baggage train or stock of provisions could keep pace.<sup>115</sup> As a round trip from Durostorum to Valens’ emplacement in Syria constituted over 1,200 miles of riding, the emperor’s reply could not have reached the frontier until the autumn of 376.<sup>116</sup> As no

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<sup>112</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.9.

<sup>113</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 13.; Michael Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.), 130.

<sup>114</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 129, 131.

<sup>115</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 152-153.; In fact, those travelling to conduct the negotiations may not necessarily have been Roman at all; a close reading of Ammianus’ account describes how “they [the Gothic refugees] occupied the banks of the Danube; and having sent ambassadors to Valens, they humbly entreated to be received by him as his subjects,” and how those which came before the Emperor at Antioch were “foreign ambassadors.” Naturally such foreigners would require Roman guides and interpreters for their venture to Syria, but if no experienced Roman diplomats were present to conduct the affair, the foreign ambassadors’ language barrier and difference of culture and custom could only slow the journey and the negotiations.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.1., 31.4.4.

<sup>116</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 13.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 129.; In theory, a voyage by sea from the Lower Danube to Syria may have produced a faster turnaround for those conducting the negotiations. However, setting aside the lack of such a proposition being mentioned in primary sources, there are a few problems with this postulation. Assuming a point of departure at one of the major cities on the Euxine coast (e.g., Tomis or Odessus), the journey by sea would present a similar length to that by land, around 2,000 miles of open water, in addition to between one and two weeks of riding between Durostorum and the Euxine and two to six weeks between a major Syrian port (e.g., Seleucia Pieria or Laodicea) and wherever Valens was encamped in Syria. While this method of venture would be feasible in principle, travelling by sea introduces a range of variables (swiftly finding a vessel for hire or under the control of Roman mercantile auxiliaries in the Euxine; making routine stopovers for resupply at other Roman ports in the Southern Euxine, Aegean, and Eastern Mediterranean Seas; hoping for fair weather and good wind;

contradictory primary sources are mentioned, the Goths' collective behavior in the meantime must have been relatively tractable, given it would be a foremost factor in the Roman decision regarding their entry into the Empire.<sup>117</sup> The crowd of Gothic refugees were almost certainly not a homogenous collective, being composed of a slew of distinct tribes and clans; Alavivus and Fritigern, the only Gothic leaders of sufficient consequence among the Thervingi to appear in contemporary sources by name, were likely solely leaders of large tribes within the growing throng. Valens' decision to grant the Goths their request arrived sometime around the autumn of 376 permitting tens of thousands of desperate Gothic men, women, and children to cross the Danube into the Roman Balkans unopposed.<sup>118</sup> Ammianus paints a grim scene:

Having obtained permission of the emperor to cross the Danube and to cultivate some districts in Thrace, they crossed the stream day and night, without ceasing, embarking in troops on board ships and rafts, and canoes made of the hollow trunks of trees, in which enterprise, as the Danube is the most difficult of all rivers to navigate, and was at that time swollen with continual rains, a great many were drowned, who, because they were too numerous for the vessels, tried to swim across, and in spite of all their exertions were swept away by the stream.<sup>119</sup>

Following this event, the crossing lasting for several days, the Goths were contained in an improvised camp outside of Durostorum.<sup>120</sup> For the time being, as their safe presence within the Empire was largely dependent upon their quiescence to Roman authority, the refugees could only sustain themselves on what the Romans gave them. Insufficient Roman support, exhibited by

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having sufficient money in hand to cover additional expenses for commissions, rations, and other expenses; etc.) to what on land could be a comparatively simple venture of journeying by horse from city to city and road station to road station. Additionally, if the Gothic delegation was being presented by Gothic foreigners rather than experienced Roman officials, that may complicate or preclude the employment of naval or maritime assets. As no evidence presents a ready case for assuming a maritime route of transit, however, and as it is not the purpose of this study to offer such an extreme supposition on this subject, an overland route of travel is assumed.

<sup>117</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 129.

<sup>118</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 163.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 129.

<sup>119</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.5.

<sup>120</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 163.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 13.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 130.

inadequate food shipments and exacerbated by the outbreak of disease, sowed the seeds of unrest among the refugees; given the crossing had happened after the harvest and most food for the winter season had already been gathered into walled towns and fortified strongholds, those managing the Goths, Lupicinus, a *comes et militaris* and commander of Lower Danube, and Maximus, *dux* of either Moesia or Scythia, were likely struggling to acquire sufficient food for them.<sup>121</sup>

It was amidst this already tense setting that, as Ammianus records, “those detested generals conceived the idea of a most disgraceful traffic: and having collected hounds from all quarters with the most insatiable rapacity, they exchanged them for an equal number of slaves, among whom were several sons of men of noble birth.”<sup>122</sup> Following several increasingly restless months of internment, Lupicinus and Maximus elected to escort them directly southwards to Marcianople where they could set about effectively distributing them where necessary along the frontier and throughout the Balkan hinterlands.<sup>123</sup>

Enabling this procession, not unlike as often occurred during the Third Century Crisis, as there were no other nearby forces to supervise the Visigoths, the *limitanei* were pulled from their posts on the Lower Danube to form the Goths’ escort, greatly weakening the already overstretched frontier defenses.<sup>124</sup> This created enough of a defensive void along the Lower Danube to permit a sizeable host of Greuthungi under Saphrax and Alatheus, veteran commanders in combatting the Huns, to quietly penetrate the frontier further downstream fully

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<sup>121</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 177.; Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 163.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 14.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.9.

<sup>122</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 177.; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 3.134-135.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.11.

<sup>123</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 177.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 14.

<sup>124</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 177.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.2.

armed and without notable Roman resistance.<sup>125</sup> The Thervingi, in close communication with their Greuthungi brethren both before and after crossing the frontier, deliberately slowed their progression southwards to permit the force of Saphrax and Alatheus to keep pace.<sup>126</sup> Aiding this process, much of the Greuthungi were mounted. After shadowing the column of Visigoths and their Roman attendants to Marcianopolis, pillaging segments of the Roman countryside as they went, the Greuthungi set camp further afield from their fellows and waited for further developments.<sup>127</sup>

They would not have to wait for long. Once the mass of Thervingi had encamped a few miles from Marcianopolis, Lupicinus and Maximus elected to invite Alavivus, Fritigern, and their attendants to a night of feasting and entertainment in the city. The details as to what exactly transpired that night are lost, but following an armed scuffle between a party of Goths, who were barred from entering the city to purchase food and supplies, and the Roman garrison, Lupicinus decided to have the Gothic leadership put to death while within the city.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, Roman forces botched the collective assassination attempt; while Alavivus appears to have fallen amidst the chaos, thereafter completely vanishing from the historical record, Fritigern by some means managed to return to his increasingly agitated people beyond the walls.<sup>129</sup> After rejoining his people, Fritigern committed his people to rebellion and sought to gather as many willing Gothic volunteers settled in Moesia as possible to his banner:

[Fritigern's Goths] mounted their horses and fled, in order to kindle wars in many quarters. ... The whole nation of the Thuringians [Thervingi] became suddenly inflamed with a desire for war; and among many preparations which seemed to betoken danger, the standards of war were raised according to custom, and the trumpets poured forth sounds

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<sup>125</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 177.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 132.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.3.

<sup>126</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 164.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.4.

<sup>127</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 132.

<sup>128</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 3.135-136.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 133.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.5-6.

<sup>129</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 133.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.7.

of evil omen; while the predatory bands collected in troops, plundering and burning villages, and throwing everything that came in their way into alarm by their fearful devastations.<sup>130</sup>

As the Thervingi took up arms and set about pillaging the local landscape, the Greuthungi under Alatheus and Saphrax arrived to join them.<sup>131</sup> Lupicinus gathered as many Roman troops from the city garrison and the escort force of *limitanei* as he was able to bring the rouge barbarians into subjection, and met them in pitched battle within ten miles from the city center.<sup>132</sup> The following Battle of Marcianopolis was a disaster. Despite the Romans' resolve, the superior Gothic numbers charged Lupicinus' force before they were fully deployed, killing approximately half their number and entire junior officer corps, seizing their unit standards, and driving the remainder, including Lupicinus, from the field.<sup>133</sup>

Equipping themselves with the arms and armor of fallen Romans, though not having the numbers or technological capabilities to lay siege to Marcianopolis, Fritigern led his forces along the Roman roads and throughout the Moesian hinterlands east and south of the city.<sup>134</sup> Having bypassed the frontier and dispatched the only Roman force of consequence in the region, the Goths were free to spread out and plunder the fertile agrarian countryside of Moesia Inferior as they went, and put all they could not take with them to the torch, as Jordanes dismally reports, "thus, that day put an end to the famine of the Goths and the safety of the Romans, for the Goths no longer as strangers and pilgrims, but as citizens and lords, began to rule the inhabitants and to hold in their own right all the northern country as far as the Danube."<sup>135</sup> Taking place not long after their victory at Marcianopolis, Ammianus describes a brief foray of the Goths south to

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<sup>130</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.7-8.

<sup>131</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 177.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.5.9.

<sup>133</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 134.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.5.9.

<sup>134</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 134.

<sup>135</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 3.137.

Hadrianopolis, seeking to winter there, but after failing to take the walled and fiercely defended city by storm, Fritigern:

Perceiving that his men, who were unaccustomed to sieges, were struggling in vain, and sustaining heavy losses, advised his army to leave a force sufficient to maintain the blockade, and to depart with the rest, acknowledging their failure, and saying that "He did not war with stone walls," advising them also to lay waste all the fertile regions around without any distinction, and to plunder those places which were not defended by any garrisons.<sup>136</sup>

Additionally, numerous Roman malcontents, many among them knowledgeable of the Roman road network and agricultural centers in the Balkans, volunteered with Fritigern's force, enabling him to better plan his route of plunder through the provinces in the coming months.<sup>137</sup> Having failed to take Hadrianopolis, the Goths retreated northwards to Moesia to endure the winter.

The effects of the Battle of Marcianopolis along the Danube in particular cannot be understated. Following the Gothic victory, no Roman reinforcements able to repair and garrison the *limes'* damaged infrastructure existed in the northern Balkans. Furthermore, by virtue of the Gothic presence in Moesia, directly between Constantinopolis and other major population centers in the southern Balkans and the Lower Danube, and their having ravaged the region's farmlands to sustain themselves, no Eastern Roman force would be able to reestablish the frontier's cohesion for the foreseeable future. Much of the Lower Danube was thus virtually left open to other parties of barbarian refugees and raiders to venture into the Empire without any formal arrangements having taken place to officiate their status as subjects of the Empire or to direct them to regions in which the imperial government deemed best to settle them. This weakness would be exploited by Fritigern to calamitous effect late in the following year.

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<sup>136</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.6.4.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.6.5.

By collecting the survivors of the Battle of Marcianopolis, drawing on scattered units of Roman auxiliaries from elsewhere in the southern Balkans, and receiving a collection of Western Roman cohorts under the command of Richomer, the Romans formed a substantial, though far from overwhelming, second army to confront the wandering Goths.<sup>138</sup> This force advanced north beyond the Haemus Mountains and engaged the Goths in Scythia Minor near the end of the campaign season at *ad Salices*, '[Town] by the Willows;' the location of this engagement is not known with certainty, nor the specific sizes of the opposing forces or the order of battle, but the cost to both parties was considerable.<sup>139</sup> In the wake of the inconclusive Battle of the Willows, the Eastern Roman leadership planned to utilize the remainder of 377 and 378 to starve Fritigern's force into submission by withdrawing from Moesia and occupying the few passes of the Haemus Mountains lining the southern bound of Moesia Inferior.<sup>140</sup> In so doing, the Roman forces cut off Fritigern's access to the rich farmlands of the Thracian Plain; as the Goths numbered at least 50,000 men, women, and children and were unable to breach fortified cities to seize agricultural stockpiles therein, the resources of Moesia Inferior and Scythia Minor would be unable to sustain the combined Gothic host for more than a year or two. Fritigern therefore faced a critical decision: either the Goths could retreat back across the Danube to fend for themselves against the Huns, risk a confrontation in the near future in unsuitable mountain terrain outside of the campaign season against dug-in Roman defenders, or seek a pitched battle later in 378 after the Romans had had ample time to regather themselves. In the meantime, Valens and his staff had been sent word of the affairs in the Balkans, and were preparing to venture westwards to counter the Gothic threat.

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<sup>138</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.7.4.

<sup>139</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 178.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.7.5-16.

<sup>140</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.8.1.

While the Roman occupation of the mountains dissuaded the Goths from attempting to venture southwards, their proximity to the partially-collapsed frontier enabled them to communicate with the barbarians of the Romanian Plain and beyond—before the close of the year, Fritigern had found an escape to his strategic dilemma. Promising “extensive plunder” in the rich Roman provinces, a sizeable party of Huns and Alans breached the frontier and joined the Gothic force.<sup>141</sup> As news of this development spread southwards, anticipating a barbarian force now easily able to overwhelm any single mountain pass and thereby encircle the rest from the south, Roman leadership elected to withdraw the Roman units in the mountains southwards.<sup>142</sup> In response, the Goths immediately began to migrate southwards towards Thrace.

While most Roman forces guarding the mountains retreated swiftly and successfully, those holding the easternmost passage along the coastal road south to Dibaltum could not withdraw in time. A mass of Goths, Huns, and Alans—the combined barbarian cavalry and Gothic footmen complimenting one another—fell upon the Romans while setting a marching camp as they withdrew; like the Battle of the Willows, little information exists on the Battle of Dibaltum, but the Roman force appears to have been utterly destroyed, after which the barbarians proceeded southwards to sack the undefended city of Dibaltum and other townships in the region.<sup>143</sup> With the Roman blockade along the Haemus range broken, Thrace was open to the taking from the beginning of 378.

Valens, having brokered an unfavorable though necessary peace with the Persians, set out on the lengthy journey back to Constantinople in early 378. His reception at the capital was less

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 31.8.4.

<sup>142</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 175.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.8.5.

<sup>143</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 175.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.8.9-11.; Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.), 123.; Given the losses at Marcianopolis and Valens’ concentration of troops in the Persian frontier, this force likely wasn’t more than 1,000-2,000 men. The numbers of barbarian attackers remain indeterminate.

than warm among the city's inhabitants, given the two years of pillaging the combined barbarian forces had enjoyed throughout Moesia Inferior, Scythia Minor, and, most recently, the Balkan agricultural hinterlands of the great city itself.<sup>144</sup> He left the city after a mere twelve days and by June was once again among his field forces beyond the old Constantinian Walls.<sup>145</sup> He advanced his force approximately twenty miles from the city to a private villa at Melantius where his host could prepare for the coming campaign as Western Roman forces advanced to their aid.<sup>146</sup> Likely before the close of 377, Valens and his entourage had received word that Western Emperor Gratian and veteran forces from the Rhine were mustering to jointly quash the marauding barbarians.

While a few elite detachments of Western Romans under Richomer had successfully traversed the Succi Pass to join the Romans in preparation for the Battle of the Willows in the previous year, the main body of the Western Roman forces proved unable to depart from Gaul.<sup>147</sup> The federative barbarians of Germania, particularly the Alamanni, quickly noticed the thinning lines of Roman defenders manning the Rhine and Upper Danube *Limes*, and began probing the frontier for viable points of armed intrusion.<sup>148</sup> His forces tied down holding the Rhine and Upper Danube, Gratian, while still promising to come to Valens aid at the earliest opportunity, could not meet his colleague's need for support until well after the summer of 378 had passed.

While residing at Melantius, Valens had received intelligence of a band of Gothic raiders in the vicinity of Hadrianopolis approximately 120 miles northwest of his position and ordered an advance column of his forces to ambush them.<sup>149</sup> After a swift night attack, the Romans

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<sup>144</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 19.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 139.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.11.1.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 177.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.11.1.

<sup>147</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 177.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 137-139.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 177.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.11.2-3.

easily overwhelming the foragers, Fritigern, sensing the vulnerability of his raiding and foraging parties, regathered his forces and advanced southwards from the upper bounds of the Thracian Plain to Hadrianopolis.<sup>150</sup> By early autumn, Gratian's advance forces has wrested control over the Succi Pass 120 miles northwest of Hadrianopolis, preventing barbarian forces from advancing into Moesia Superior and the Middle Danube territories beyond, and enabling Gratian's force to advance directly to Hadrianopolis along the *Via Militaris*.<sup>151</sup> After the Westerners' arrival in the last months of 378, the combined Roman force at Hadrianopolis would easily outmatch the barbarian host.

Yet while encamped in the southeast of Thrace, Valens received faulty intelligence denoting the number of hostile combatants to be around 10,000.<sup>152</sup> In reality, this number may have described merely the number of the Thervingi.<sup>153</sup> Given this misinformation, from his perspective Valens' field army likely well outnumbered his adversary's combined force. Additionally, letters depicting and exaggerating the accomplishments of Gratian against the Germans continued to arrive elevated Valens envy and impatience; unlike Gratian, the eastern emperor did not have any great victories to his name—a fact only compounded by months before having to make an unfavorable truce with Persia.<sup>154</sup> As he waited for Gratian to arrive, the morale of his increasingly restless army was waning and the campaign season was moving into its closing autumn months. In early August, Valens advanced his army to Hadrianopolis, encamping in the suburbs of the city.<sup>155</sup> Ammianus wrote that even Richomer himself arrived to inform Valens of Gratian's approach, and "to wait a little while for him that he might share his

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<sup>150</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 177-178.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.11.4.

<sup>151</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 177.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 138-139.

<sup>152</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.3.

<sup>153</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 178.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 140.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.4.

danger, and not rashly face the danger before him single handed.”<sup>156</sup> After having discussed the situation with his command staff, who were themselves divided over the prospect of giving battle without Western Roman support, sensing an opportunity to bolster his prestige without the support of his accomplished fellow emperor, Valens ignored Gratian’s pleas and elected to roll the dice.<sup>157</sup>

The results were disastrous. The Romans left Hadrianopolis on the morning of August 9 to meet the Gothic host, having marched south to meet them from northern Thrace over the proceeding weeks, a few miles from the city walls.<sup>158</sup> By the afternoon, however, when the two forces faced one another across an open field, the Romans were not as well prepared for combat as when they had departed Hadrianopolis; there was rampant hunger through the ranks, as they had just marched with full equipment around eight miles, and were made to stand continuously in battle array.<sup>159</sup> The heat of summer had been augmented by dust and ash whipped up by the Goths, as they set local crops ablaze to make the battlefield all the more miserable for their foes.<sup>160</sup> Valens, seeing the weakening state of his troops, relented, seeking to take up Fritigern’s continual requests for peace.<sup>161</sup> Yet, during a hostage exchange, part of the Roman lines advanced without orders, enkindling the battle which moments before seemed likely to be avoided.<sup>162</sup> The two forces crashed against one another with many perishing in the crush; while the battle was a stalemate for its first hours, the sudden arrival of the Greuthungi cavalry on the scene—as to that point they had been raiding the countryside—quickly caused the Roman force

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<sup>156</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.5.

<sup>157</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome’s Gothic Wars*, 140.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.5-7.

<sup>158</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 20., Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.10-11.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 126.

<sup>159</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 20-21., Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.13.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 126-127.

<sup>160</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.12.13.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.12.13-17.

to buckle from the flanks.<sup>163</sup> By the end of the day, between half and three-quarters of the Eastern Roman field army, its entire command staff, and its emperor fell on the field.<sup>164</sup>

The Roman defeat at the Battle of Hadrianopolis, while not the last major defeat the Romans would receive in the Roman-Gothic War, was the climax of a destructive, and ultimately fruitless, campaign in which the Romans fought themselves to exhaustion. The annihilation of Lupicinus' *ad hoc* force at Marcianopolis, having been composed largely of Lower Danube *limitanei*, left the already buckling frontier open to whomever wished to cross into the vulnerable Balkans. The imposition thereafter of Hunnic and Alanic reinforcements undid the Romans' defensive strategy in the Haemus Mountains, leading to the devastation of most of the rich Thracian farmlands and laying the foundations for a crippling loss at Hadrianopolis. In the immediate aftermath of the climactic battle, the Eastern Roman Empire's defense, internal and external, lay in its infrastructure—what was left of the Danube *limes*, city walls, and isolated hardpoints such as road forts, watchtowers, and fortified farmhouses—and the scattered troops and desperate locals defending them, as well as whatever Western Roman forces were able to attend to the devastated Balkans.

Following their unprecedented victory, and failing to breach fortified Hadrianopolis for a second time, Fritigern led his forces south along the *Via Militaris* to the foot of Constantinopolis, only to be so disheartened by the extensive Constantinian Walls, and by the tendency of the Arabic warriors manning the defenses to drink the blood of their enemies after having slit their throats, to return to sacking the rich Thracian countryside.<sup>165</sup> After retreating from

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 31.13.2-11.

<sup>164</sup> Thomas S. Burns, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome: A Study of the Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, Ca. 375-425 A.D.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.), 33.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 21.; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.13.18.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 127.

<sup>165</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.15.1-15, 31.16.4-7.

Constantinopolis, a large segment of the Greuthungi under Alatheus and Saphrax, perhaps nearly all present, separated from the barbarian force. These Goths ventured over the following months along the Roman roads northwestwards through Illyricum to Pannonia, wherein, likely following an arrangement with Gratian, they would settle in the hinterlands of the Middle Danube.<sup>166</sup>

Pannonia was a region already accustomed to the process of assimilating non-Roman peoples into the Empire, as it already boasted a considerable population of partially Romanized Vandals, Sarmatians, and other groups from beyond the river, but the settling of another large body of barbarians in an already inherently unstable region as pressures on the Danube frontier mounted weakened the province's integrity more than the Romans likely realized. In the meantime, over the following two years, Fritigern and the Thervingi ravaged Thrace and Macedonia before finally being cornered by the newly reconstituted Eastern Roman army under Theodosius I, Gratian's replacement for Valens as of January 19, 379, at Salonica only for the Romans to suffer a second major defeat.<sup>167</sup> After this defeat, Gratian resumed control in subduing the Goths, driving them back to the war-torn lands of Moesia beyond the Haemus over the following two years and forcing them to sue for peace on October 3, 382.<sup>168</sup>

The typical peace the Romans enforced throughout the Empire's history in the wake of a major victory over the barbarians, usually along or beyond the Rhine and Danube frontiers, entailed the subjection of barbarous peoples to the will and suzerainty of the Empire as client states of one form or another, mass enslavement or impressment into the Empire's agrarian centers and armed forces, and, in the case of a large population entering the Empire, dispersal amidst provinces far from the frontier of their nativity to ensure assimilation and dissuade

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<sup>166</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 183.; Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996.), 135.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 132.

<sup>167</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 188.; Heather, *The Goths*, 135.; Zosimus, *New History*, 4.24.3.

<sup>168</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 183.; Heather, *The Goths*, 135.

revolt.<sup>169</sup> The peace deal settled in 382, however, dramatically diverged from standing precedent and had profound implications for the Danube frontier and the Empire at large going forward.

While the exact stipulations of the agreement are lost to history, Themistius, an aged Roman orator and rhetorician, preserved the official narrative of the nature of the peace:

We have seen their leaders and chiefs, not making a show of surrendering a tattered standard, but giving up the weapons and swords with which up to that day they had held power, and slinging to the king's [the emperor Theodosius'] knees more tightly than Thetis, according to Homer, clung to the knees of Zeus when she besought him on her son's behalf, until they won a kindly nod and a voice which did not rouse war but was full of kindness, full of peace, full of benevolence, and the forgiveness of sins.<sup>170</sup>

The Romans played off the uneasy peace established with Goths in benevolent terms for the sake of the commoner's perspective.<sup>171</sup> In truth, the Eastern Roman Empire was militarily exhausted after the defeats at Hadrianopolis and Salonica, and was therefore unable to seek a more typical retributive response to a barbarous group responsible for such widespread devastation in the Balkans, the deaths of so many civilians and soldiers alike, and the loss of an emperor on the field.<sup>172</sup>

Instead of cutting them down wholesale or settling them as imperial clients beyond the Danube from whence they came, to arrest the potential for a popular Gothic rebellion for the time being, the Romans made a critical change to their policy towards the frontier and their treatment of barbarians. In a combination of the precedent established by Probus and the Roman policy of seeking the creation of loyal barbarian client states beyond the frontiers, the Thervingi—and possibly the Greuthungi—would be settled as *foedera within the Empire*. The Thervingi were permitted to settle in the Eastern Balkans, particularly the regions of Moesia

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<sup>169</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 184-185.

<sup>170</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 184.; Themistius, *Orations* 16.210.

<sup>171</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 184-185.

<sup>172</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 188.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 152-153.

Inferior and Scythia Minor between the Danube frontier and the Haemus to which Roman forces had concentrated them, while the Greuthungi that split from the barbarian force and ventured to Pannonia remained in place.<sup>173</sup> After they had settled, as with typical Roman foederati arrangements, the Goths would provide taxes and manpower to the Empire. Gothic manpower in particular proved increasingly important as the Romans had lost so many troops during the Gothic War and the pressures on the Roman frontiers only continued to grow. As they were not broken up and resettled around the Empire, but were instead permitted to settle as whole populations in regions with only scattered Roman civil centers, both groups of Goths were able to maintain the integrity of their tribal identities and act with their own distinct wills, either in obeisance or defiance of their Roman masters, as it suited their ambitions.

The dubious loyalty of the Goths presented the *limitanei* with a logistical and strategic dilemma. Instead of merely facing the veritably unending sea of constantly shifting barbarians beyond the opposing shore, the once-barren hinterlands south of the Lower Danube now presented the frontier troops with considerable populations of likewise potentially hostile Goths. The exact same problem, arguably on a lesser scale given the Greuthungi's smaller number and the greater number of Roman cities in the region, could be said of the frontier on the Middle Danube beyond the Iron Gates. This tense *status quo* remained in place along the Danube for less than thirteen years before new geopolitical developments within and without the Empire upset the peace of 382.

After the close of the Gothic War, the Romans hastily repaired and garrisoned vulnerable tracts of the frontier, but while significant concentrations of disloyal barbarians in Pannonia, Moesia, and Scythia, along with a temporary shortage of fielded troops in the East, exacerbated

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<sup>173</sup> Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 133.

geographical problems for the Roman Danube and other frontiers, the Empire was still predominantly sound in its structure.<sup>174</sup> Within a few years, the Eastern Roman field army could be restored to exact a brutal vengeance upon the Empire's unwelcome Gothic residents, dispersing the survivors around the Empire to suit its economic and logistical needs. Themistius' rose-tinted account of forgiveness and fatherly kindness on the part of emperor Theodosius and the Empire belied the undeniable resentment the Romans bore towards the newcomers. A mere four years following the peace of 382, a Greuthungi chieftain from beyond the Lower Danube named Odotheus led a large population of men, women, and children to cross the Roman frontier as they fled the oncoming Huns; accounts as to the degree of success he and his people had in the crossing vary, but within days, his host had been soundly defeated, and the Romans dispersed the survivors throughout Anatolia, particularly in Phrygia, as per their usual fashion.<sup>175</sup> Yet as the Huns continued to advance into Europe, displacing still greater numbers of peoples endemic to the steppes of Scythia and the forested mountains of Carpathia, the pressure on the Danube frontier only grew. Having lost so many elite units and needing to rebuild the Eastern Roman field army from the ground up whilst concurrently maintaining a perilously unstable riverine frontier against a growing composite barbarian threat from the north and east, the Romans would never find the opportunity to properly redress the Goths, enabling their internal threat, much like that of the external Huns, to snowball into ultimately fatal proportions, both for the aging frontier and the Empire it was established to defend.

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<sup>174</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 185, 189.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 134-135.; Zosimus, *New History* 4:35.

## Chapter 2: Decline of the Danube Frontier, A.D. 382—A.D. 420

*...the following spring they collected such a large army that the land of the Huns was swept bare of fighting men and there were five 'thousand' in each legion, each 'thousand' containing thirteen 'hundreds,' and each 'hundred' four times forty men; and these legions were thirty-three in number. When these troops had assembled, they rode through the forest which was called Myrkviðr, and which separated the land of the Huns from that of the Goths...—Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr*

**D**uring the Roman-Gothic War of 376-382, while the Goths unilaterally disrupted the Danube *Limes*' defensive integrity, the Huns, having served as their impetus for crowding upon the Roman Empire's borders, began to amass in the Pontic Steppe and the fringes of the Danubian territories. From the perspective of Oescus, Durostorum, or any other *castra* on the Danube—let alone Constantinopolis—the thought of this new, barely recognized collection of various steppe tribes from the ether of Central Asia having such a uniquely deleterious impact on the Empire's most critical frontier between the early 370s and the emergence of a unified Hunnic Empire in the 420s would have been unthinkable. After all, once Fritigern and his forces had been pacified in 382, the Romans had reclaimed control over the Danube and Theodosius I was in the process of building a new Eastern Roman army. Nevertheless, in proceeding westwards, the Huns drove native Gothic, Sarmatian, and Dacian populations into the Empire *en masse*, and would follow suit to do so themselves with increasing frequency and ferocity from the 370s onwards. Between their disorderly migration into Europe to their reemergence as a tribal empire worthy of rivalling Rome's supremacy over the European continent, Hunnic incursions against and beyond the Roman Danube set a dangerous precedent, portending the destructive nature of future Hunnic affairs in the mid-fifth century.

The dynamic process of Roman-Hunnic relations—hostilities along the Danube gradually arising as one their recurrent central features—began from the Roman perspective almost passively. During the Gothic War and the years of recovery which followed it, Greek and

Roman historians paid the peoples of the steppes beyond the Euxine, the Hunnic newcomers from beyond the Caspian foremost among them, comparatively scant literary attention, leaving the subject of their origins a matter of protracted academic debate for posterity.<sup>1</sup> Their lack of knowledge regarding the geographical and tribal layout of the lands to the north and northeast of the Euxine, was not, however, without precedent. Capturing the Mediterranean perspective on the region 800 years prior to the Gothic War, Herodotus wrote in his *Histories*,

With regard to the regions which lie above the country [Scythia] whereof this portion of my history treats, there is no one who possesses any exact knowledge. Not a single person can I find who professes to be acquainted with them by actual observation. The country has no marvels except its rivers, which are larger and more numerous than those of any other land. These, and the vastness of the great plain, are worthy of note.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his limited writings on Scythia, contained mostly in his *Histories*' fourth volume, Herodotus remarked with considerable frequency for the reader's sake just how little he and his countrymen truly knew of the vast, sparsely populated steppes on the fringe of the Mediterranean World. Strabo, composing his *Geographica* around the turn of the first century AD, paints a similar picture:

We are acquainted with the mouths of the Don, ... but a small part only of the tract above the mouths is explored, on account of the severity of the cold, and the destitute state of the country; the natives are able to endure it, who subsist, like the wandering shepherd tribes, on the flesh of their animals and on milk, but strangers cannot bear the climate nor its privations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The traditional thesis regarding the Huns' origins, developed by Joseph de Guignes in his *Histoire Générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartares Occidentaux, &c. avant et depuis Jesus-Christ jusqu'a Present* (3 Vols., 1756) and cemented in Roman and Hunnic historiography by Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (6 Vols., 1776-1789), ascribes them as the descendants of the ancient Xiongnu Confederacy infamous in ancient Han Chinese sources, which, between the first and fourth centuries AD, migrated westwards across Asia. De Guignes' thesis, while important for instigating discussion of the Hun's early history and for at least presenting a superficial plausibility, has since been called into question by various historical and archaeological experts in the fields of Roman history, Hunnic history, Mongolian studies, and sinology, most notably John B. Bury, Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen, and David C. Wright, among others. Detractors of de Guignes' thesis highlight instead the plausibility of the Huns' relation to various other nomadic peoples present in Central and Southern Asia at the time. Both parties have remained active in historical and archaeological circles to the present day.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* 4.16.

<sup>3</sup> Strabo, *Geographica* 11.2.2.

By the reign of Valens, the Roman perspective of the steppes had become mired in routinized ignorance, reinforced by an expectation of discovering nothing of note, leaving curiosity as the sole impetus—and a weak one at that—of any potential expedition into the barren territories beyond the Euxine. Greco-Roman awareness of the steppes and their inhabitants reached its limits either in the unsteady writings of foregoing historians and geographers or, more empirically, the string of ancient Greek trade ports founded between the eighth and sixth centuries BC along the northern shore of the Euxine to facilitate maritime trade with the natives.

As these venerable mercantile cities aged and the steppe peoples with which they traded steadily supplanted one another over the centuries, the nature of traditional life on the steppes of Central and Western Asia had changed relatively little. The rugged conditions of the barren rolling grasslands had so conditioned the disparate tribes that eventually comprised Huns and their migratory horde that, by the mid-fourth century, they were eminently capable of overrunning the nations which lay before them on the Pontic Steppe and Central Europe beyond.<sup>4</sup> While the exact migration routes and methods of conquest employed by those constituting the Hunnic Horde are lost to history, the invasion clearly consisted of two distinct offensives. The majority of the Horde proceeded directly over the Don River into the territories of the Greuthungi Kingdom of Ermanric, while a much smaller contingent ventured southwards across the Straits of Kerch into the Crimea, driving the Goths living there into the mountainous southwestern quadrant of the peninsula or off of the peninsula altogether via the isthmus in the

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<sup>4</sup> The Pontic Steppe is roughly analogous to Western Scythia and constitutes the Western portion of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe. For all intents and purposes, the present study generally considers the boundaries of the Pontic Steppe to lie between the eastern limits of the Carpathian Mountains and Romanian Plain in the west, the Euxine in the south, and the Caucasus Mountains and Volga River in the east. The northern bound of the steppe is more difficult to define, as the open steppes and plains of southern Russia blend with the varied forestlands of Polesia and Southern Russia approximately 200-400 miles north of the Euxine coast.

north, before moving across the isthmus themselves to rejoin their countrymen in the westward advance.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the once-flourishing trade ports along the northern coasts of the Euxine, generally loyal to the Roman Empire—though their political orientation depended in part on that of the peoples inhabiting the Pontic Steppe around them—and representing the northeastern extreme of its sphere of influence, vanished from the historical record in the years following the Hunnic invasion of the Gothic territories.<sup>6</sup> As they were only lightly defended, having existed on reasonably amicable terms with their neighbors and trade partners in the Goths, Sarmatians, and other natives of the Pontic Steppe, and were conspicuously wealthy, they represented undeniably attractive targets for the Huns as they migrated westwards. Chersonesus, a sizable, fortified trade hub on the west coast of Crimea, whose fortifications were greatly enhanced by Valentinian, was one of the few civil centers to survive the arrival of the Huns and the only township in the Crimea to remain independent of both the Goths and the Huns as Rome's last stronghold in the northern Euxine.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Effectively every Roman and Byzantine historian recounts the legendary accounts of the Huns venturing over the Maeotis [the Straits of Kerch] in pursuit either of a cow stung by a botfly or a deer during a hunt. In either tale, the fleeing animal, cow or deer, is pursued by a band of Huns into the shallow waters across to the previously unknown inhabited land mass of Crimea, and, after reporting their discovery to their countrymen, the Huns elect to seize the attractive territory by force. The parallel accounts were first transcribed by Eunapius, whose now-fragmented history remains among the earliest detailing the events of the Hunnic invasion of the Pontic Steppe. Alexander Vasiliev has postulated that the crossing may have been facilitated in part by the Maeotis' tendency to freeze over during the winter season—a theory backed both by the region's exceptionally frigid winters enticing it to freeze over to the present day and the accounts of numerous ancient writers discussing the region's climate and geography.; Alexander Alexandrovich Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936.), 23-32.

<sup>6</sup> Rostovtzeff, *Iranians And Greeks In South Russia*, 217.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea*, 23.; Chersonesus, abbreviated to 'Cherson/Kherson' under Eastern Roman rule, would feature prominently as a midway point of interactions between the Eastern Roman Empire and numerous pastoral peoples between the fifth and twelfth centuries. It would feature most famously in the interactions, as preserved in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* [*The Tale of Bygone Years*], among other documents, as the place of Vladimir the Great's conversion to Orthodox Christianity and the beginning of the Christianization of the Kievan Rus' in the tenth century.; Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953.), 111-122.

Chersonesus' remarkable survival notwithstanding, while the specific dates of their individual destructions are indeterminable, the loss of the ancient Euxine trade ports represented the subtle first stage of the Huns' repulsing Roman power to the Danube. As the Hunnic Horde thundered into Europe, its leadership occasionally struck alliances with defeated peoples that had offered especially staunch resistance and folded them into the Horde, such as in the case of the Alans of the eastern Pontic Steppe; Jordanes wrote, "The Alani also, who were their equals in battle, but unlike them in civilization, manners, and appearance, they [the Huns] exhausted by their incessant attacks and subdued."<sup>8</sup> These arrangements were enabled by the structure of the Horde; effectively a migratory confederacy akin in form to those of Germania, the Horde was comprised by a large collection of individual tribes and clans.<sup>9</sup> Its social and administrative construction was markedly flexible, able to attach or detach individual tribes as necessary, and could to muster a much greater host of mounted warriors than any singular tribe.<sup>10</sup> Most native peoples, such as the Thervingi and Greuthungi Goths, Vandals, and Carpi, were however either brought under Hunnic suzerainty by conquest or driven westwards beyond the Huns' reach. Between the early 370s and the mid-380s, while the bulk of the Horde had slowed in the Pontic Steppe with many of its clans electing to settle in a landscape similar to that from whence they came, some Hunnic groups would ride further westwards into the Romanian and Pannonian Plains.

The small band of Huns and Alans that joined Fritigern in the Gothic War demonstrates that at least some of the Hunnic Horde had successfully reached the Romanian Plain directly opposite the Lower Danube by 377. Between 377 and 378, several bands of Huns had proceeded

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<sup>8</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 2.126.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *The Huns*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

further westwards, crossing the Carpathian Mountains into the southeast corner of the Pannonian Plain. Otto Maenchen-Helfen, citing passages in Zosimus' *New History*, Ambrose's *De Fide*, and Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History*, has argued that these pathfinding tribes of the Hunnic Horde, having entered the Pannonian Plain beyond the Danube, forcibly drove whole barbarian populations across the Middle Danube in such numbers as to delay Gratian's relief force while on its way to aid Valens against the Goths.<sup>11</sup> Pannonia Valeria, the northeastern-most Pannonian province, bounded in the north and east by half of Roman Pannonia's segment of the Middle Danube, was completely overrun.<sup>12</sup> From Valeria, innumerable Sarmatians, Goths, and Huns, pushed inland to the rest of Pannonia, though Gratian's force was able to maintain the relative security of Pannonia Secunda in the south.<sup>13</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzus, seeking a contemporary allusion for championing peace in a theological tract on the subject, remarked on the affairs of the Danube frontier:

But horrible are what we both see and hear in our own day too: regions depopulated, casualties in the thousands, an earth groaning under the weight of blood and corpses, a race speaking a foreign tongue overrunning a country not their own as if it were their private preserve.<sup>14</sup>

With communication and logistics disrupted along the Middle and Lower Danube, Gratian could not, for the time being, effectively command the entire theatre as well as the rest of the Empire's affairs. It was for this reason that the Western Roman Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum was divided in two, with Dacia and Macedonia being officially transferred to the governance of Constantinopolis.<sup>15</sup> Sometime between 387, after Maximus forced Valentinian II from Italy, and

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<sup>11</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 30-35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 22.2.

<sup>15</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 34-35.

392, the entirety of Illyricum would fall under the administration of Theodosius.<sup>16</sup> This division, gradually encumbering frontier command and logistics from the late 380s onwards, would remain an ongoing controversy in imperial politics and an internal frontier between the Eastern and Western Roman governments for decades to come.

After the defeat of Valens and his standoff with Fritigern no longer a pressing issue for Gratian to have to attend, the latter was free to sort out the mixed barbarian invasion of Pannonia. Some months after the invasion of Valeria, Theodosius arrived from his abode in Hispania to take up a command along the Danube. Before long, he would claim a number of modest victories, particularly over the Sarmatians, and it was this scarcely documented period of open warfare along the Danube *Limes* and in the Pannonian hinterlands that underscored his candidacy for the Eastern Roman throne.<sup>17</sup> Orosius even mentions that Gratian “invested him with the purple at Sirmium,” the capital of the Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum and major administrative center for the Middle Danube.<sup>18</sup> Not long after he was appointed emperor, Theodosius initiated a massive recruitment drive, impressing as many able-bodied men as he could to bolster the armies, including those which had maimed themselves in the hopes of escaping the draft.<sup>19</sup> Before long, his new recruits—the East would remain strapped for manpower for the foreseeable future—and capable leadership would see the conflict through. By mid-379, after the better part of a year of border wars, the Middle Danube appeared to have sufficiently stabilized for Gratian to leave the region in the care of his commanders and returned to managing the affairs of the Western Roman Empire.

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<sup>16</sup> Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 164.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>18</sup> Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* 7.34.2.

<sup>19</sup> Lars Brownworth, *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire that Rescued Western Civilization* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009.), 42.

After the invasions of 378 and 379 had been quelled, and after Gratian and Theodosius I, newly appointed as emperor of the East, had departed from the Middle Danube to deal with Fritigern, the Pannonian *Limes* were greatly reinforced, but they were not free from barbarian raids. Hostilities with some peoples in the Pannonian Plain, most notably the Sarmatians, lingered intermittently until around 383 or 384.<sup>20</sup> By around 384 or 385, perhaps slowed by the imposition of the Carpathian Mountains, the Huns and their subjects had settled large tracts of the increasingly overpopulated Pannonian Plain.<sup>21</sup> Some Hunnic and Alanic tribes continued further west, with the Alans serving as the Hunnic Horde's vanguard, pressuring the Germanic nations beyond Carpathia against the Rhine and Upper Danube and creating ample living space for the Huns as far as southern Germania.<sup>22</sup> While documentation regarding the affairs of the Huns beyond the Danube flatlines after 386, by the late 380s, the Huns had permeated to varying degrees every territory bordering the Middle and Lower Danube.<sup>23</sup> Roman Pannonia would never fully recover from the invasions of the 370s and 380s, and the weakening of its frontiers, compounded by the Pannonian Plain's indefensible geography and the increasing pressures from the populations of Huns and other peoples beyond the Middle Danube, enabled the slow dissolution of Roman control over the Pannonian provinces from the 390s onwards.

By the early 390s, with effectively all Roman-aligned settlements beyond the Euxine having been raised to the ground and the northern bank of the Danube bearing a mixed population of barbarians under increasing pressure from the oncoming Huns, the Hunnic Horde

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40.; The victories Theodosius gained over the Sarmatian tribes during his few months of service on the Danube (December 378 to spring of 379) were only achieved against some of the Sarmatian tribes inhabiting the Pannonian Plain. Those which had not been fought and defeated perpetuated the conflict into the 380s.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>22</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 40-44.; George Vernadsky, *Ancient Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943.), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 44-51.

had driven the northern bound of Roman influence squarely back to the banks of the Danube and the southern Euxine coast.<sup>24</sup> The decentralized power structure and inter-tribal organization of the Hunnic Horde notwithstanding, the Huns and their subjects as a demographic unit possessed the geopolitical initiative in the hinterlands beyond the Roman Danube frontier, but a lack of information regarding their impact on the layout of various barbarian realms, coupled with pressing internal affairs within the Empire, led to the Romans making no particular efforts to alter their management of the frontier from its regular patterns of operation after 382. Ongoing maintenance and permanent garrisons of *limitanei*, riverine patrols by the *Classibus Flavia Moesica* and *Pannonica*, and land patrols along the roadways of the Danube *Limes*, largely restored after the Gothic War, continued as usual, completely unprepared for the coming wars that in less than a century's time would prove the undoing of both the Empire and its Danube frontier.

These brewing conflicts were, however, not to say that the Romans had absolutely no idea that something unusual was brewing in the wild north. Undoubtedly, at the very least, as north-south trade over the Euxine dried up between the 370s and 380s, those dwelling in the ports and market towns ringing the southern Euxine would have had some vague perspective on the affairs of the Pontic Steppe. Those living near to the Danube would also be aware of new movements among the barbarians in the lands beyond the opposing shore. Echoing the writings of his literary forerunners—for Herodotus and Strabo, the Danube would have seemed almost as remote as the Pontic Steppe relative to the prosperous cities of the Mediterranean—Ammianus

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<sup>24</sup> Vasiliev, *The Goths in the Crimea*, 23.; Cherson's survival may have enabled the Eastern Romans to maintain a marginal exchange of goods and information regarding the affairs of the Crimea, and while the Romans made a deliberate effort to supply arms to and defend the township, its maintenance was not in the immediate a platform for Roman power projection beyond the Euxine. The Empire had more pressing domestic issues to handle.

communicates as much himself, as in referring to the gathering of the Goths on the Danube, he wrote:

While these events were passing in foreign countries, a terrible rumour arose that the tribes of the north were planning new and unprecedented attacks upon us ... At first this intelligence was lightly treated by our people, because they were not in the habit of hearing of any wars in those remote districts 'till they were terminated either by victory or by treaty. But presently, as the belief in these occurrences grew stronger, being confirmed, too, by the arrival of the foreign ambassadors...<sup>25</sup>

Clearly the news of increased activity in the north was readily available information to the common citizen—at least to those living in or around townships capable of communicating with the Empire at large. Why, then, were the Danube *Limes* not bolstered to meet the potential threat of oncoming barbarians, either before the Roman-Gothic War or in the years immediately thereafter?

Throughout the fourth century, the Eastern Roman emperor never admitted a force of barbarians across the frontier on the basis of trust alone.<sup>26</sup> Instead, the Emperor was always present at the head of an overwhelming force of *comitatenses*, and had a pre-arranged network of supply lines able to support the logistical weight of his field armies and the barbarian immigrants during the immigration and settlement process.<sup>27</sup> The crossing of the Goths in 376 had no such organization, as Valens and effectively his entire field force was committed against Persia on the other end of the Eastern Roman Empire; his distant campaign, having removed the only reserve forces typically available to the *limitanei*, paved the way for the Gothic War and the frontier's initial collapse.<sup>28</sup> The Goths, both as a force directly between Constantinople and the Danube, and having thoroughly ravaged the farmlands of the Eastern Balkans necessary to support both

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<sup>25</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 31.4.2-3.

<sup>26</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 160-161.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 118-119.

local populations and a north-bound Roman relief force, prevented Roman high command from reorganizing the frontier during the conflict. Only after the Goths had been contained in Moesia Inferior and Scythia Minor, largely by Gratian's Western Roman forces, over the course of 381 and 382 could the decrepit Lower Danube be restored and managed from Constantinopolis once more. The reestablishment of Eastern Roman control over the Lower Danube in the early 380s proved fortunately timely; recording the events of the winter of 381-382, Zosimus writes:

Theodosius had other fortunate successes, when he defeated the Sciri and the Carpodaces, among whom were some Huns, and forced them to cross the Danube and return home. This heartened the soldiers and they seemed for a short time to recover from their previous misfortunes, while farmers were able to attend to their land, and farm animals and their young grazed without fear.<sup>29</sup>

Having to rely on the aid of Western Roman troops to maintain the Danube frontier aside, the critical defeats at Hadrianopolis and Salonica only compounded the Empire's martial and administrative difficulties. Themistius later lamented:

Although it is possible for me to go through the man's valorous exploits in the war, I think I will leave these for the poets and historians whose task it is to celebrate and exalt 'battles and slaughterings of men.' For my part, inasmuch as I am a lover of peace and peaceful and untroubled words, I will proceed to these things, having first brought to mind some small matters, so that you may realize more fully the kind of circumstance from which, and to which, through the king's foresight we have passed. For after the indescribable Iliad of evils on the Ister [Danube] and the onset of the monstrous flame [invasions and border warfare], when there was not yet a king set over the affairs of the Romans [referring to the interregnum between the death of Valens and the appointment of Theodosius I], with Thrace laid waste, with Illyria laid waste, when whole armies had vanished completely like a shadow, when neither impassable mountains, unfordable rivers, nor trackless wastes stood in the way, but when finally nearly the whole of the earth and sea had united beside the barbarians, and from here and there, encircling them on one side and another Celts, Assyrians, Libyans, and Iberians, as many as faced the Romans.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Zosimus, *New History* 4.34.5-6.; The exact dating of this event is impossible to discern with certainty. Maenchen-Helfen dates the brief combined barbarian raid Zosimus describes to the winter of 381-382, as, given the lack of legislation passed in Constantinopolis between January 13, 382 and February 20, 382, and given the freezing of the Danube in the winter season, this time best fits with the sparsely available facts.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Themistius, *Orationes* 16.206c-207a.

After the Gothic War, Theodosius spent the rest of his reign working to rebuild the Eastern Roman field army from the ground up.<sup>31</sup> This herculean effort, complicated by the need to put down two imperial usurpers in 388 and 394, both heightened the inward focus of Eastern Roman military administration and consumed most remaining Eastern Roman manpower. In other words, by the close of 382, the Eastern Roman military was utterly exhausted and its leadership, while slowly learning through continual frontier warfare, remained largely ignorant of the nature of the force bearing down on the Roman Danube. Thus, the frontier, having been repaired as immediately necessary after the Gothic War, was left without considerable augmentation, and was therefore vulnerable to the aggression of the Huns and their thralls. Their remarkable prowess in conducting both maneuver and siege warfare against their sedentary Greek and Roman counterparts had been profoundly exhibited in their westward campaigns through Gothic Scythia and against the scattered townships along the Euxine coast and in the Pontic interior—within years, their martial skill would see the offending steppe nomads deep into the Roman provinces on the Danube and elsewhere.

By the early 390s, the Goths that had settled on imperial soil, particularly the Thervingi, had rebounded from the losses incurred during the Gothic War, and had maintained their distinct Gothic identity in the face of a pervasive, hostile Roman culture to the chagrin of the Roman leadership that had begrudgingly officiated their continued presence.<sup>32</sup> As part of the peace of 382, the constituent *foederati* arrangement, necessitated by Eastern Roman losses throughout the recent conflict, facilitated the Goths quick accession to the Roman ranks. Amplifying the slow Germanization of numerous Roman units, among both the *limitanei* and *comitatenses*, Theodosius also sought to attract recruitable barbarians from along the opposing shores and

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<sup>31</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 188-189; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 180.

hinterlands beyond of the Rhine and Danube—a move which the archaeological record from Gaul to the Middle East seems to indicate was at least somewhat successful.<sup>33</sup>

By the late 380s, even a number of officer's positions in the reconsolidating Eastern Roman field armies had been occupied by barbarian recruits, and while some probably came from Germanic populations from beyond the Rhine and Danube, many among them were veterans or the sons of veterans of the recent Gothic War.<sup>34</sup> Gothic commanders like Gainas, Tribigild, and Alaric all possessed remarkable martial ability in the service of the Roman state, yet the intense distrust of the barely settled barbarians in the Roman Balkans, both among the common imperial citizenry and the Eastern government at Constantinopolis, led to their careers never acceding to the heights they had imagined. Gainas was among the first Gothic commanders of note in the Eastern Roman army, rising through the ranks gradually in the 380s and early 390s under Theodosius to a limited command over a force consisting primarily of Goths; his role in Eastern Roman politics would arise later in the 390s, but his command in the meantime witnessed the rise of a much more impactful Gothic leader.

In the summer or autumn of 391, the Moesian Goth Alaric led a sizeable inter-tribal confederation south across the Haemus into Thrace. Among his eclectic host appear numerous long since extinct barbarian peoples; Claudian records Bastarnae, Getae, Alans, Huns, and Sarmatians having joined Alaric's march.<sup>35</sup> While the actuality of these groups is doubtful, they do reveal that the Goths had enrolled the assistance of various peoples from beyond the Lower Danube.<sup>36</sup> Theodosius I marched out to meet them with his reconstituted field army, only for Alaric's forces to ambush the Roman columns while on the march in the vicinity of the Maritsa

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<sup>33</sup> Burns, *Barbarians within the Gates of Rome*, 354-356.

<sup>34</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 153.

<sup>35</sup> Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis* 1.94-111.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 137-138.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 138.

River. The following defeat must have set Eastern Roman recruitment and morale back several years; Theodosius retired from the war effort after having been pulled from the slaughter at Maritsa by his faithful commander Promotus, the latter famed for having quashed Odotheus' attempt at crossing the Danube in 386.<sup>37</sup> For his service, Theodosius gave Promotus command over the remains of the Eastern Roman forces to crush Alaric and his entourage, only for his to fall in the line of duty within a year's time.<sup>38</sup> He was replaced by Stilicho, who whittled down and encircled Alaric's force over the course of 392, but instead of executing the marauder and selling off his following into slavery throughout the provinces as was so common in such cases, Theodosius had other things in mind.<sup>39</sup>

Alaric was let off lightly and enrolled with several contingents of Goths within the Eastern Roman army under Gainas' command.<sup>40</sup> Given the losses incurred by the already strapped regular Eastern Roman field army in attempting to put Alaric's forces down, forcing the Goths to fight *and die* in the place of Roman troops in Rome's conflicts, so long as they could be kept in line otherwise, seemed to best service the Empire's present needs. Theodosius and his government would not have to wait long to put its dubious new arrangement to the test. On September 5-6, 394, Theodosius led his forces under Stilicho, Gainas, and Alaric against imperial usurper Eugenius and *magister militum* Arbogast at the Battle of the Frigidus in the effort of securing the Western Roman throne for his son and recently-appointed *Augustus* Honorius.<sup>41</sup> Alaric commanded Theodosius' vanguard, comprised mainly of Goths, which sustained a disproportionately high casualty rate due to their placement in the battleline, though,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 136, 138.

<sup>41</sup> Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 199.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 138.

after the Eastern Romans proved victorious, this was not seen as a particularly grievous loss.

Orosius recounted the Roman perspective on the fallen Goths with

Thus in this case too, the fires of civil war were quenched by the blood of two men, leaving out of account the ten thousand Goths, who, it is said, were sent ahead by Theodosius and destroyed to a man by Arbogastes; for the loss of these was certainly a gain and their defeat a victory.<sup>42</sup>

Between the loss of nearly the entire Gothic contingent in the battle and not receiving a noteworthy command in the Roman army for his gallantry and the sacrifice of so many of his countrymen, mistrust and resentment for the Roman regime on both the part of Alaric as well as his fellow Goths only grew.<sup>43</sup>

Since the close of the Gothic War, Theodosius I's appointment to the Eastern Roman throne provided a stabilizing influence for the Roman Empire. His reign oversaw the dispulsion of several threats to imperial integrity, including the repair and garrisoning of the Middle and Lower Danube *limes*' most critical regions in the 380s, the beginning of the slow process of rebuilding the Eastern Roman army after the defeats at Hadrianopolis and Salonica, the defeat of the usurper Magnus Maximus at the Battle of the Sava River (388), and, near the end of his reign, the defeat of usurper Eugenius at the Battle of the Frigidus. After the lattermost victory, Theodosius I was left indisputably as the Roman World's sole emperor, and would enjoy a brief few months of peaceful unitary governance, the last such period in Roman history before the Fall of the Western Empire in 476, before his death of a severe edema on January 17, 395 in Mediolanum.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* 7.35.19.

<sup>43</sup> Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 199-201.

<sup>44</sup> Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* 7.35.22.; Mediolanum was the Roman precursor to present-day Milan, Italy.

His death in early 395 sent destabilizing shockwaves through the Empire. Imperial authority was spilt between his two young sons, Arcadius and Honorius, both of whom were inexperienced and susceptible to political subversion by ambitious Roman officers of their late father's regime.<sup>45</sup> For his years of faithful service to the ailing emperor, Theodosius "commended his children to the care of Stilicho," and while Honorius, merely ten years old at the time of his father's death, acceded to the Western throne under his careful guardianship, Arcadius would not prove so easy to maintain influence over.<sup>46</sup> Philostorgius described the seventeen-year-old Arcadius as:

short of stature, and weak in bodily frame; his personal strength was slight, and his complexion dark. The sloth of his natural disposition showed itself in his speech, and in the blinking of his eyes, which remained closed like those of persons asleep, and were kept open with an effort.<sup>47</sup>

As Stilicho remained at a considerable distance to Arcadius' Eastern Roman court at Constantinople, the dimwitted Eastern Emperor quickly fell under the influence of Rufinus, Praetorian Prefect of the East.<sup>48</sup> Before long, the two halves of the Empire, divided more so by the rivalry between Stilicho and Rufinus than any other factor, were vying for dominance.

Apart from splitting the Empire's political consciousness in two, Theodosius' death had profound implications for the Empire on a strategic level. While the integrity of the frontier as a whole had been reestablished after 382, segments of the Danube *limes* remained in an enervated state as Theodosius, strapped for new recruits in the wake of the Gothic War, pressed several frontier detachments and local garrisons into his composite field army to adequately address and

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<sup>45</sup> John Bagnell Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958.), 1:106-108.; Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 31-32.; Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* 7.36.1.

<sup>46</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:106-107.; Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.3.

<sup>48</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:107-108.; Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 33.; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.3.

dispatch the civil wars of 388 and 394. Such was the fate of various internal defensive networks, most notably the defensive infrastructure—road forts, *castella*, and other local defensive hardpoints—of the Julian Alps, the bulwark guarding eastern overland access to the Italian Peninsula, as it was stripped virtually bare of manpower in the mid-380s.<sup>49</sup> While economical in the face of Rome's immediate civil wars, Theodosius' failure to redeploy men to these areas after his victory at the Frigidus left the northwesterly route into Italia open to any enterprising hostile force south of the Middle or Lower Danube.

As Arcadius rose to the throne in Constantinopolis, the Eastern Roman Empire had only scattered field units and local garrisons at its immediate disposal. Most of Theodosius' Eastern Roman units had been with him when he died in Italia and had defaulted to Stilicho's command.<sup>50</sup> Political disorder precipitating from Theodosius' death only further compounded the martial convalescence of the Eastern Roman Empire as recruitment and training efforts rapidly faltered across its holdings, particularly in the Balkans; the Hunnic presence beyond the Danube also made Roman recruitment directly from the barbaricum unfeasible.<sup>51</sup> Sensing the weakness of Roman defensive potential, as much of the Balkan and Anatolian regions were unprepared to rebuff endemic rebellions and hosts from beyond the Danube and the Euxine,

The momentum of Hunnic immigration into Europe had begun to subside over the 380s and, as both greater volumes of land fell under their dominion and the greatest hostile forces among the native barbarous peoples were either subjected to Hunnic suzerainty or driven into the Roman Empire, the intertribal unity that perpetuated the intertribal structure of the Hunnic Horde steadily weakened. Between the 370s and 390s, individual Hunnic tribes dispersed over Pontic

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<sup>49</sup> Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 107-108, 110.

<sup>50</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:108.

<sup>51</sup> Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 174-175.

Steppe and Carpathia with varying degrees of intertribal cooperation, though the Roman Danube, a more robust, albeit degraded, obstacle than the forests and mountains of Eastern Europe, presented the oncoming Hunnic tribes with a common impasse. The Hunnic tribes venturing westwards thereby created a pileup in the plains beyond the Middle and Lower Danube, and within a couple generations, intertribal confederation would produce the first localized Hunnic kingdoms.

At the same time, Theodosius' conservative employment of his field forces after the Gothic War and in the face of the civil wars of 388 and 394, coupled with the lack of preemptive strikes into regions beyond vulnerable sections of the frontiers, as had been common under Valens and his predecessors, enabled large numbers of Hunnic tribes to gather and cooperate beyond both the Danube and Caucasus frontiers uncontested. By his death in 395, two major Hunnic invasion forces had coalesced beyond these frontiers. The first came during the winter of 394-395, as Philostorgius records:

The Huns, who had seized upon that part of Scythia [Romanian Plain and the southwestern Pontic Steppe] which lies across the Ister [Danube] and laid it waste, afterwards crossed the river when it was frozen over, and made an irruption into the Roman territory: then spreading themselves over the entire surface of Thrace, they laid waste all Europe.<sup>52</sup>

While the existence of scattered Huns settled in and around Thrace in the first decades of the fifth century would point to a number of these Huns having established permanent residences within the Roman Balkans, literary sources fail to detail the fate of this invasion force.<sup>53</sup> As the Eastern Romans did not have the requisite forces to blunt the Hunnic offensive, the raiders likely

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<sup>52</sup> Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.8.

<sup>53</sup> Otto Maenchen-Helfen has asserted that Philostorgius' account of the 395 Hunnic invasion of the Balkans was in actuality a telescoping of three or more decades, as no other primary source, particularly Socrates or Sozomen, definitively corroborates this account despite detailing the Hunnic invasion of the eastern provinces of the same year. While this could account for the lack of information on what became of this body of marauders, the subject remains a matter of academic debate.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 53.

either withdrew the way they had come of their own accord or dispersed so thoroughly into the Balkan demographic as to no longer constitute a discernable population. A combination of both potentials is also possible.

Later that year, in the summer of 395, another large force of Huns advanced through the Caucasus and Roman Armenia into the borderlands between Rome and Persia:

But the Eastern Huns crossed the river Tanais, and pouring into the provinces of the East, made an irruption through the Greater Armenia into a district called Melitine. Thence they proceeded to attack the parts about the Euphrates, and penetrated as far as Coele-Syria, and having overrun Cilicia, destroyed an incredible number of its inhabitants.<sup>54</sup>

This force segmented into at least three distinct detachments, mutually venturing into Eastern Anatolia, Syria, and Persia's Mesopotamian heartlands as far as the vicinity of Ctesiphon.<sup>55</sup>

While the Hunnic raid of the eastern provinces in 395 would inflict scarce permanent damages on the Roman or Persian landscapes of the Middle East, their presence would take the Eastern Romans two years to forcibly dissuade from their looting campaign, distracting what few resources Constantinopolis had at its disposal after the death of Theodosius from brewing conflicts in the Balkans.

As the Hunnic raiders advanced over the Danube in 395, the imperial territories settled by the Thervingi in Moesia Inferior and Scythia Minor were first to be pillaged.<sup>56</sup> Only months prior, Alaric's Gothic contingent served as collateral at the Battle of the Frigidus in a Roman civil war with little bearing on the Gothic communities along the Danube.<sup>57</sup> Both events demonstrated that the Goths' fortunes and security, ostensibly under the protection of the

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<sup>54</sup> Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.8.; Sozomen recounted the same events in comparatively brief detail: "Armenia and the Eastern provinces were at this time overrun by the Huns." Unlike Philostorgius, Sozomen did not mention the Hunnic invasion of the Balkans.; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.1.

<sup>55</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 139-140.

<sup>57</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 213.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 138.

Romans—both those defending the Danube *limes* in the immediate, and, more holistically, those governing the Empire—could not be guaranteed so long as the nature of their existence within the confines of the Roman world remained unchanged.<sup>58</sup> As little remained to bind his countrymen to their ravaged homesteads in the Upper Balkans, Alaric and the Goths under his limited command in the Roman army, enkindled the Lower Danube Thervingi and numerous Gothic volunteers in the Balkans, to war. Before long, Alaric found himself elevated to the status of ‘king’ over the largest armed force in the Roman Balkans, whose collective exploits against Rome cemented a new poly-Gothic community which, before long, was ascribed the name ‘Visigoths’ by their Roman observers.<sup>59</sup>

Early in 395, he set out towards Constantinopolis, reaching the perimeter of the Constantinian Walls within weeks, though his purposes in doing so are not entirely clear.<sup>60</sup> He may have sought, as some assert, merely to demand the proper command as *magister militum* he believed his actions before and during the Battle of the Frigidus warranted, although, given the all but undefended state of Eastern Rome, it is plausible he sought to instill new living and social arrangements for his Gothic kinsmen within imperial affairs.<sup>61</sup> In any case, upon reaching the city walls a few months thereafter, in much the same fashion as Fritigern had experienced a few decades prior, the imposing façade of *Nova Roma*’s Constantinian Walls turned his attention to softer targets elsewhere in the Balkans, pillaging through southern Thrace, Macedonia, and down the Greek Peninsula.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 211-212.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 143-146.

<sup>60</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:110.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Stilicho had in the meantime mustered his combined host, comprised of some of the Empire's most veteran field units, and began marching long the Dinaric Alps to deal with Alaric.<sup>63</sup> Yet, despite having ample forces to corner Alaric's roving force in Greece and destroy it in pitched battle, Stilicho released the Eastern Roman units under his command to Constantinopolis for redeployment.<sup>64</sup> Claudian spun this event as being Stilicho's dutiful response to a request sent by Arcadius to yield the East its field army, though this just as well could have been a response of his own initiative to the East's indefensibility along the Danube as well as his recognition of the difficulties of logistics and effective command in directing both a large segment of the Western Roman field army and virtually the entirety of its Eastern counterpart at the same time.<sup>65</sup>

Stilicho sent the Eastern troops, already composed in part by Germanic barbarians, along with a considerable detachment of Gothic auxiliaries to Constantinopolis, all under the leadership of Gainas, still an Eastern Roman field commander just as he had been under Theodosius.<sup>66</sup> After detaching Gainas and the Eastern Roman units, Stilicho withdrew from the northern Balkans to his quarters in Italia for the winter, after which he spent the bulk of 396 restoring Roman control of the Germanic frontiers on the Rhine and Upper Danube neglected during the recent civil wars and his abortive campaign into the Balkans.<sup>67</sup> Arriving late in the autumn of 395, Gainas was met a short distance from the capital by an imperial delegation consisting of the young Arcadius, Rufinus, and numerous other attendants. The personal weaknesses of Arcadius as emperor, Philostorgius explains:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 111-112.

<sup>65</sup> Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis* 2.95-96.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 166.

<sup>66</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:112.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 118-119.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 166.

caused Rufinus to miscalculate his chance, for he thought that at the very first sight the army would gladly choose him as emperor, and depose Arcadius. Moreover, the soldiers having cut off Rufinus' head, inserted a stone into its mouth, and carrying it about upon a pole they marched forth in every direction. They cut off his right hand too, and carried it about through all the workshops of the city, adding these words, "Give something to the insatiate one." In this way they collected together a large amount of gold, for they who saw the head, gladly gave their gold on account of the pleasure they derived from the spectacle. The ambition and thirst after power which marked Rufinus met with this end.<sup>68</sup>

With the Praetorian Prefect having been dispatched, Gainas assumed martial control over Constantinopolis with his Gothic forces. Guardianship over the young emperor, however, was seized by Eutropius, an influential Eastern Roman eunuch serving as Arcadius' head chamberlain and the leader of a faction opposed to the governance of the late Rufinus.<sup>69</sup> The relationship between Gainas and the emperor's new regent was quickly strained by their mutual ambitions, and as Gainas received little recognition from his role in bringing Eutropius to power, his dissatisfaction with the sitting Eastern Roman regime only grew.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, Alaric ravaged Greece as far south as the Peloponnese.<sup>71</sup> While Constantinopolis was embroiled in repulsing the Huns terrorizing the eastern provinces, Stilicho, having satisfactorily reasserted Roman control over the Rhine and Upper Danube, launched a new offensive against Alaric in the spring of 397.<sup>72</sup> Having made landfall in Thessaly, Stilicho bottled the marauding Goth and his forces into the mountains of Epirus and southern Illyricum with only light fighting, causing an anxious stir among the government offices at Constantinopolis.<sup>73</sup> Eutropius, more threatened by Stilicho than the Goths, convinced Arcadius to proclaim Alaric as *magister militum* of Illyricum, giving him the requisite civil and military

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<sup>68</sup> Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.3.; Zosimus, *New History* 5.7.6.

<sup>69</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 166.; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.4.; Zosimus, *New History* 5.8.1.

<sup>70</sup> Zosimus, *New History* 5.13.1.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.5.5-8.

<sup>72</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:120.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

authority to requisition food and supplies from the various townships in the Western Balkans for sustaining his countrymen.<sup>74</sup> Having been politically outflanked, Stilicho embarked his landing force once again and returned to Italia only to find that, in an effort to ostracize him from Eastern Roman affairs going forward, Eutropius had implored Arcadius to declare Stilicho a *hostis publicus*, thereby depriving him of the same logistical support to which Alaric had recently been granted access.<sup>75</sup> This arrangement quelled Alaric's pillaging for the next few years, but by no means offered a solution to the potential for chaos his people represented to both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires.

As he continued to consolidate his control over Eastern Roman affairs, Eutropius gathered what Eastern Roman units he could, many among them having come from Stilicho's command, and launched a counteroffensive in 398 against a second major Hunnic raid into the Eastern provinces, successfully repulsing them in Roman Armenia and returning to the capital in triumph.<sup>76</sup> With a victory over the Huns behind him, Eutropius convinced the Eastern Emperor to appoint him as consul in 399 to the Eastern Roman Senate; such a move was unprecedented, given that he was both a eunuch and a former slave, and instigated a sea of intrigue in Constantinopolis and a political crisis throughout the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>77</sup> Eunapius wrote of the situation:

The eunuch held power in the palace and, coiling around through the halls, like a true serpent seized everything and dragged it off to his lair. Eutropius made endless and eager use of his opportunities and good fortune and he immersed himself so much in his meddling that if a father hated his son, a husband his wife, a mother her daughter, none escaped his notice.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.; Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 167.

<sup>76</sup> It ought to be noted this was not the last Hunnic raid into Armenia; several more would take place later in the fifth century.; Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:126.

<sup>77</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 168.

<sup>78</sup> Eunapius, *History* 9.65.2., 9.52.5.; Evidently, Eutropius' position was so astounding to his fellows that, as Eunapius records, many sought to mimic his nature: "In the time of Eutropius the eunuch, the guardian of the Emperor Theodosius, because of the former's importance and power the tribe of the eunuchs became

In Phrygia, many of the Greuthungi which had been resettled there during the 380s and 390s, took advantage of the political disorder and rose in revolt under a Gothic *comes* named Tribigild, pillaging the Anatolian interior and demanding the deposition of Eutropius.<sup>79</sup> Arcadius dispatched a sizable host under *magister militum* Leo, noted as “a placid man and easily led because of addiction to drink,” only for it to be defeated with months of its departure from Constantinople.<sup>80</sup> Sensing an opportunity to undermine his rival after Leo’s defeat, Gainas met with Arcadius and convinced him of the Anatolian Greuthungi’s invincibility, advising him to accede to their demands.<sup>81</sup> Within days, Eutropius’ power base collapsed beneath him as his assets were seized, edicts repealed, and influential seat in the palace replaced with a grim banishment to the island of Cyprus.<sup>82</sup>

In the meantime, Gainas, recently appointed as Leo’s replacement for the East’s *magister militum*, amassed a second army to engage with Tribigild’s forces, yet after having marched into Anatolia, he elected to finally brake with Roman authority and joined the rouge Greuthungi forces.<sup>83</sup> While Tribigild would by some means perish along the way to Constantinople, Gainas led the combined force of Goths across the Hellespont to collectively occupy Constantinople in early 400. His rule, markedly unsuccessful due to both his own tyrannical incompetence as governor—while in control of the Roman court, he would even have the disgraced Eutropius put to death—and the mass resentment of the predominantly-Christian,

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so numerous that even some persons who had beards, in their eager haste to become eunuchs and Eutropiuses, lost their wits and their testicles, enjoying the advantages of Eutropius. Golden statues of him were set up everywhere, and he built splendid palaces more magnificent than the whole city.” Eunapius, *History* 9.65.7.

<sup>79</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 168-169.; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.4.

<sup>80</sup> Eunapius, *History* 9.67.5.

<sup>81</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.4.; Zosimus, *New History* 5.17.5.

<sup>82</sup> Zosimus, *New History* 5.18.1.

<sup>83</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 200.

Graeco-Roman Constantinopolitans of their predominantly-Arrian, barbarian occupiers, lasted several months, but by the summer of 400, the social and political tension behind the Constantinian Walls had reached a boiling point. In July, while Gainas and much of his Gothic force was beyond the walls in the Thracian countryside, the citizenry of Constantinopolis took up arms, barred the gates, and slew 7,000 Goths trapped within the city's confines, constituting perhaps one fifth of the Gothic host.<sup>84</sup> In the wake of this sudden, costly rebellion, Gainas took what remained of his barbarian host and attempted to cross the Hellespont back into Anatolia. At was at this critical moment that Fravitta, a Gothic general in Roman service, having been indisposed suppressing "brigands" in Cilicia and the Levant since 395, as Eunapius wrote, "so that brigandage almost disappeared from the lips of men," returned to the vicinity of Constantinopolis.<sup>85</sup> His host annihilated the Goths at sea as they attempted to cross to Anatolia, trouncing the final major Gothic force east of Illyricum and returning to Arcadius' court to receive an appointment as consul in 401.<sup>86</sup>

In the wake of the Gothic defeat, Gainas took what little remained of his forces and retreated northwards through the Balkans, crossing the Danube, and attempted to settle just north of the Lower Danube "in his native land."<sup>87</sup> By the early 400s, the Huns had taken thorough possession of the lands beyond the Danube frontier, and while the Hunnic Horde had effectively dissolved by the beginning of the fifth century, local Hunnic tribes throughout the territories it had conquered had begun to produce small semi-nomadic kingdoms of their own, particularly along the Danube frontier. Not long after their arrival in the Romanian Plain in the autumn of 400, a Hunnic king named Uldin, having taken note of the newcomers' activities, amassed a host

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.; Zosimus, *New History* 5.19.4.

<sup>85</sup> Eunapius, *History* 9.69.2.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 9.69.4.; Marcellinus Comes, *Annales* 2.13.

<sup>87</sup> Zosimus, *New History* 5.21.6.

of Hunnic warriors and, through a series of bloody pitched battles, wore down Gainas' numbers and finally slew him on the field in the vicinity of the Roman *castrum* Novae.<sup>88</sup> The existence of an independent Gothic settlement on the periphery of Hunnic territory posed a serious threat to Uldin and his countrymen as it presented a rallying point for the Goths living under Hunnic dominance, and, if left unopposed, could in time serve as a major point of Germanic resistance to the Huns.<sup>89</sup> Worse still, as Gainas had remained near to the Roman border, despite his history with the Eastern Roman court, his presence could potentially have been used as a tool to extend Roman influence beyond the Danube once more. After his short campaign, Uldin fixed the head of the former *magister militum* on a pole and sent it to Constantinopolis as a diplomatic gift, receiving in turn a peace agreement with the Eastern Romans.<sup>90</sup> While such an exchange portended good relations between the Empire and its Hunnic counterparts along the Danube frontier, Uldin would engage in a range of operations to the benefit and detriment of both halves of the Roman Empire over the coming decade.

In the meantime, between the summer and autumn of 401, Alaric mustered his forces and proceeded to advance against Italia. His reasons for this move are not specified by primary sources, but any combination of various factors could have driven him to take up arms against the domain of Stilicho. With the fall of Eutropius in 399, the official sanctioning of his role as *magister militum* of Illyricum dropped out from under him; the loss of official logistical support for his Gothic forces from Roman settlements in the region, coupled with the comparatively sparse agricultural facilities present amidst the Dinaric Alps, would have put a serious supply constraint on the Visigoths. Venturing into the fertile plains of northern Italia could certainly

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<sup>88</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 59.; Zosimus, *New History* 5.22.1-2.

<sup>89</sup> Zosimus, *New History* 5.22.1-2.

<sup>90</sup> Marcellinus Comes, *Annales* 2.14.; Zosimus, *New History* 5.22.3.

alleviate this difficulty. Alternatively, their reasoning could just as easily have been the desire “to seek out a kingdom by their own exertions rather than serve others in idleness” as Jordanes later describes.<sup>91</sup> Such a motive had precedent among the Goths which settled south of the Danube in 382; Fritigern made overtures at being recognized as the overall leader of the Goths within Roman territory multiple times during the Gothic War, and while his death prior to 382, compounded by Roman efforts to keep the Thervingi divided, may have made such a reality impossible in the immediate, the idea of a Gothic kingdom not unlike that of Ermanric gained a new lease on life in the reign of Alaric, even if he was for the time being merely the king of an army.

Having remained relatively stationary in Illyricum, situated on the overland route of communication between East and West, Alaric and his Visigoths could have been well informed as to the strategic position of the Empire and the frailty of its frontiers, exhibited along the Rhine in Stilicho’s frequent combat tours against the tribes of Germania, and along the Danube in Gainas’ apparent ability to cross the river with a modest entourage of Goths. He could have just as easily known about the sparse defenses throughout the Julian Alps, still all but unmanned since Theodosius I stripped Italia’s foremost northeastern defenses in the mid-380s.<sup>92</sup> Whatever his reasoning, Alaric breached the perimeter of Italia between the autumn of 401 and the spring of 402, threatening the historic heartlands of the entire Roman World.

This development was far from a welcome one for Stilicho. The Upper Danube in the latter months of 401 was already unstable enough, as a combined force of Vandals and Alans,

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<sup>91</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 3.147.

<sup>92</sup> Jordanes made specific mention of Alaric’s uncontested entry into Italy, stating, “in the consulship of Stilicho and Aurelian he [Alaric] raised an army and entered Italy, which seemed to be bare of defenders, and came through Pannonia and Sirmium along the right side.,” Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 3.147.

their westward migration at the forefront of the Huns having stalled at the southeastern perimeter of Germania, were assaulting the Rhaetian and Norican segments of the Upper Danube.<sup>93</sup> As Stilicho had deployed all available forces on the peninsula to the Upper Danube to face these threats, Honorius' court, situated at Mediolanum on the western face of northern Italia, was vulnerable to Alaric's host; while the emperor had planned to evacuate the city for a temporary residence in Gaul, Stilicho persuaded him to remain in place.<sup>94</sup>

Stilicho immediately began to bolster his field forces with numbers from the nearby Gallic legions and barbarian mercenaries from beyond the frontier.<sup>95</sup> During this brief period in the closing months of 401, along with detachments from the Gallic legions, Stilicho enticed several thousand Alans and Vandals and various detachments from the Danube *Limes* into his composite field army.<sup>96</sup> While his recruitment from his former enemies had alleviated some pressure on the Danube, his recruitment from the defensive forces along the frontiers with Germania would have problematic implications for handling Alaric a year later. Between January and March of 402, Stilicho traversed the Alps, forced and crossing of the Adda, and moved to intercept the Gothic host before they could reach Honorius and his court, hoping the threat of retaliation would be sufficient to hold the increasingly tempestuous peoples of Germania at bay.<sup>97</sup>

Alaric, having learned of Stilicho's approach, proceeded southwest away from the capital. Within days they came upon the township of Hasta, only for Stilicho to arrive with his army before extensive Gothic siege operations could get underway, driving them further

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<sup>93</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, 201.; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 150-151.

<sup>94</sup> Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 151.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

southwards into increasingly unknown territories. The Goths set camp near Pollentia wherein Alaric chose to begin preparations for a pitched battle.<sup>98</sup> Yet, while the predominantly Arian Goths celebrated the festivities of Easter on Sunday, April 6, 402, the Roman army befell their unsuspecting numbers.<sup>99</sup> The battle proved a modest yet important victory for Stilicho, and saw the capture of numerous Gothic prisoners of war, including Alaric's own family, and a great deal of loot the Goths had plundered over the previous several years.<sup>100</sup> In the wake of the battle, as the majority of his cavalry had reportedly survived the engagement, Alaric and his forces fled and encamped on a nearby mountain after which talks began.

Stilicho probably offered the Visigoths a typical *Foedus* arrangement, including subsidies, a command within the Western Roman military, and the return his prisoners if Alaric swiftly departed the Italian peninsula.<sup>101</sup> After some deliberations, Alaric and his men agreed and moved northeastwards from whence they came, all the while a suspicious Stilicho kept tabs on the barbarians' movements. His concern soon proved well-founded; having discontentedly remained on the Italian border through the remainder of 402, Alaric began to plan a new offensive into the West, targeting the Gallic provinces by way of the mountain passes north of Verona.<sup>102</sup> If the Goths could traverse the Alps into the already weakly-held frontier provinces of Rhaetia and Germania Superior, the consequences for both the Upper Danube and Rhine frontiers could be severe. Not unlike when Fritigern bid a modern band of Huns and Alans to join him during the Gothic War whilst enclosed between the Haemus and the Lower Danube, Alaric, having approached the Upper Danube defenses from the rear, could have easily

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<sup>98</sup> Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars*, 170.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*; Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 152.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 208-209.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

perforated the *Limes* and beckoned untold numbers of his Germanic cousins into the Roman West.

Recognizing the threat, both immediate and, potentially, existential, to the Western Roman Empire, Stilicho sent an advance force ahead to occupy the mountain passes from the north while the main body of his army slowly corralled the Goths into the ambushade they had lain. By June of 402, the Goths were entrapped in the mountains not far from Verona, completely cut off from the plunderable farmlands of northern Italia.<sup>103</sup> With no other option, Alaric turned to give battle, losing in the process the vast majority of his once vaunted host.<sup>104</sup> In the aftermath, despite being utterly at the mercy of Stilicho's combined army, the Western Roman *magister militum* merely reiterated the terms of their previous agreement, after which Alaric and the tattered remains of the Visigoths departed Italy.

By autumn of 403, the would-be Gothic king had encamped in one of the Pannonian provinces. His presence there introduced yet another uncontrollable variable into a rapidly destabilizing region of the Danube frontier; while in the years since 395 the Upper Danube was managing to hold the lines against the *barbaricum*, albeit with considerable micromanagement under Stilicho, the Middle Danube was slowly weakening. By 392 at the latest, Pannonia was transferred to Eastern Roman command as part of the Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum, rendering it the most distant, and arguably most exposed, of all Eastern Roman segments of the Danube frontier commanded from Constantinopolis.<sup>105</sup> Given the distance and geographical obstacles between the Pannonian *Limes* and the agricultural centers of the southern Balkans, the material upkeep of the area's *limitanei* must have been extraordinarily taxing. The Huns

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<sup>103</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:162.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 164.

migration onto the Pannonian Plain, compounded by the instability of Roman Pannonia's partially-Romanized populace of Goths, Vandals, Sarmatians, and others, applied extreme external pressure on the already exasperated defenders. "During the early years of Honorius," Bury writes, "the Pannonian frontier was almost abandoned," and while Roman Pannonia alone would be returned by the East to Honorius' governance around late 399 or early 400, solidifying the political boundary between the East and West going forward, the years of neglect and atrophy from the 380s onwards enabled much greater threats to endanger the most remote segment of the Danube frontier.<sup>106</sup> The presence of Alaric and his unassimilated Visigoths furthermore offered the inhabitants of Roman Pannonia a de-Romanizing alternative to life as imperial citizens—should the thinning Roman frontier separating the barbaricum from Roman Pannonia collapse, it could quickly lead to a permanent loss of the region for the Empire.<sup>107</sup>

Two years after Alaric's arrival in Pannonia, a new threat emerged from the Pannonian Plain beyond the Danube. Led by a Gothic king named Radagaisus, a large band of Goths, Suevi, Vandals, and Alans broke through the weakening Middle Danube *Limes* in the closing months of 405 and proceeded towards Italy, sacking vulnerable cities as they went.<sup>108</sup> Unlike many Goths who by this point had adopted Arianism, Orosius described Radagaisus as, "by far the most savage of all our enemies ... who, according to the custom of the barbarous tribes, had vowed the blood of the entire Roman race as an offering to his gods."<sup>109</sup> For the first six months of 406, Radagaisus and his forces held sway in northern Italy. In the meantime, Stilicho again set about organizing a new force to face the offending Goths. He managed to recruit around

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 175.; Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:167.

<sup>107</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:167. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 194-195.

<sup>108</sup> Flavia Solvia and Aguntum, both major regional cities, were largely destroyed by fire around this time. Flavia Solvia resided at the westernmost corner of the Pannonian Plain, whereas Aguntum lay deep in the Italian Alps due north of Aquileia.; Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 194.

<sup>109</sup> Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* 7.37.4-5.

fifteen thousand from the frontiers beyond the Alps, virtually liquidating the Rhine *Limes* of their garrisons, and enlisted the aid of several thousand Huns and Alans.<sup>110</sup> The Huns in his service originated very likely from the westernmost quarter of Uldin's Hunnic kingdom.<sup>111</sup> With this force in hand, the Romans marched south to intercept the Gothic king.

By the early summer of 406, Radagaisus and his followers had advanced southwards on their way towards Rome as far as Florentia and elected to put the latter to siege; nevertheless, the loss of as much as one third of his fighting force in doing so demonstrated that the Goths had still not mastered the practice of taking fortified strongholds.<sup>112</sup> Stilicho and his forces arrived on the scene not long thereafter, easily dispatching a large portion of the Goths' number and putting the rest to flight. What remained of their force encamped a few miles away, after which Radagaisus abandoned his people and attempted to flee only to be captured and executed on August 23.<sup>113</sup> Stilicho then proceeded to divide up his people. Desperate for new troops, both to hold the frontiers and reconstitute the core of his field army, he pressed 12,000 of the best Gothic warriors into his ranks.<sup>114</sup> The rest, along with the bulk of the non-combatant populace were then sold off to the Roman slave markets—in fact, so many were sold as slaves that under the glut of people the Roman slave market briefly collapsed, as Orosius writes, “The Gothic captives are said to have been so numerous that droves of them were sold everywhere like the cheapest cattle for an aureus apiece.”<sup>115</sup>

In the wake of Radagaisus' defeat, the slave market was not the only thing to implode. As Stilicho had stripped the Rhine of most of its manpower, in the summer and autumn of 406,

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<sup>110</sup> Zosimus, *New History* 5.26.4-5.

<sup>111</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 55, 59.

<sup>112</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 194.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>115</sup> Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, 7.37.16.

numerous peoples from Germania and beyond migrated steadily towards the Rhine.<sup>116</sup> Living on the opposing side of the river, the Franks offered staunch resistance to the oncoming Goths, Vandals, Alans, and others, but were overcome by their opposition's sheer numbers. On December 31, as the Rhine had frozen over in the harsh winter, the Rhine *Limes* and Northern Gaul were swiftly overrun by a human wave, the momentum of which Stilicho could not hope to arrest with his meager forces.<sup>117</sup> In the wake of the Rhine crossing, as Britannia feared the potential of the barbarians crossing the English Channel, the island revolted under an imperial pretender by the name of Marcus in 406.<sup>118</sup> This first pretender, after reigning for less than a year, was deposed and replaced with Gratian who reigned until 407.<sup>119</sup> His successor, a soldier entitled Constantine III, later spread the Britannic rebellion into Gaul wherein he won the loyalties of the Gallic legions and achieved some success in stemming the tide against the people flooding over the Rhine; as Honorius was unable to dispel this revolt, Constantine was simply affirmed as co-emperor in the West in 409.<sup>120</sup> The Rhine crossing, losses of control over Britannia and Gaul, and other internal political and military failures precipitated the deposition and execution of Stilicho in August of 408. The death of the Western Roman Empire's foremost general enabled the Alaric—whose numbers were greatly reinforced after the Goths Stilicho had enrolled in his army from the host of Radagaisus fled to him following Stilicho's execution—to inflict a terrible vengeance upon the dominion of Honorius less than two years later in the Sack of Rome.

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<sup>116</sup> Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 38.

<sup>117</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:169.; Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 194-195.

<sup>118</sup> Peter Hunter Blair, *Roman Britain and Early England: 55 B.C. – A.D. 871* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963.), 155.; Olympiodorus, Fragment 13.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

In the meantime, Uldin and his Huns were proving themselves a threat to the integrity of the Lower Danube frontier. Some months before the intrusion of Radagaisus and his people into Pannonia, in late 404 or early 405, Uldin led a sizable force of Huns across the Lower Danube to raid the Roman Balkans as far as Thrace.<sup>121</sup> The fine details of this invasion—numbers of combatants, routes of travel, and dates—are not known, as Sozomen, the only writer of the time to make note of it, does so only in passing.<sup>122</sup> A few years thereafter, in the summer of 408, he initiated a second major offensive over the Danube. This invasion was well timed; as Alaric's Goths were migrating back to Italy in the wake of Stilicho's fall and many of the troops stationed along the Lower Danube *Limes* had been pulled from their posts and sent eastwards to the Persian frontier in anticipation of renewed hostilities with the Empire's eastern neighbor.<sup>123</sup> By treachery, Uldin and his forces seized control of Castra Martis, a *castrum* situated twenty miles southwest of the riverfront *castrum* Bononia along the road from Bononia to Naissus.<sup>124</sup>

While situated there, he proceeded to plunder the surrounding countryside. Sozomen notes, "the prefect of the Thracian cohorts made propositions of peace to him, but he [Uldin] replied by pointing to the sun and declaring that it would be easy to him to him, if he desired to do so, to subjugate every region of the Earth that is enlightened by that luminary."<sup>125</sup> He demanded heavy tribute from Constantinopolis in exchange for his withdrawal.<sup>126</sup> While he certainly boasted leadership of a strong unitary polity beyond the Danube and held a fortified position within Roman territory, his position was far from secure. While the Roman commander engaged him in pursuit of peace, secret negotiations were also carried out between the Romans

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<sup>121</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 62-63.; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.25.

<sup>122</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 63.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>124</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 64.; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5.; Thompson, *The Huns*, 32.

<sup>125</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

and Uldin's officers; they were told of the emperor's humanitarian benevolence and rewards he offered to brave soldiers in his ranks.<sup>127</sup>

Before long, the bulk of Uldin's host deserted him for the Roman camp, after which only through sanguinary difficulty were he and a handful of his loyalists able to battle their way back to and across the Danube.<sup>128</sup> While Uldin quickly fades from the historical record after his withdrawal from the Roman Balkans, peace between his purportedly mighty Hunnic kingdom and the Eastern Roman Empire was not yet a certainty, as neither Sozomen nor any other contemporary writer make any reference of when the conflict drew to a close.<sup>129</sup> However, evidence for a peace of sorts—however formal or informal is indeterminable—forged in the spring of 409, along with a series of building campaigns set on repairing the Eastern Empire's strategic and defensive infrastructure, may be found in the decrees of the Eastern Roman court and those controlling it.

After the death of Arcadius' wife Eudoxia in October of 404, who had battled Constantinopolitan Archbishop John Chrysostom for the role of the impressionable Eastern emperor's foremost influencer after the death of Gainas, an experienced Praetorian Prefect by the name of Anthemius arose to manage the emperor and his government's affairs.<sup>130</sup> Having steadily arisen through the ranks of the Eastern Roman bureaucracy, the veteran administrator was elected the Eastern consul in 405, after which he was elevated to his enduring role as Praetorian Prefect of the East. Arcadius "slumbered" on his throne for the final three and a half years of his reign, dying on May 1, 408.<sup>131</sup> However, unlike when he and Honorius had

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<sup>127</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5.; Thompson, *The Huns*, 33.

<sup>128</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5.

<sup>129</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 66.

<sup>130</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:155-159.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

ascended to the throne after the death of Theodosius I, the transition of power to his seven-year-old son Theodosius II went uninterrupted by the all-too familiar Roman tradition of succession crises, as appointed the young sovereign as co-emperor back in 402.<sup>132</sup>

Serving as the young ruler's regent, Anthemius set about reestablishing Eastern Roman authority along the Empire's frontiers. In 408, he reaffirmed the Empire's non-aggression pact with Yazdegerd I of Persia that he had assisted in negotiating eight years earlier; once any doubts regarding security of the Empire's eastern frontier had been set aside, the praetorian prefect was free to turn his attention towards the Empire's less stable northern periphery.<sup>133</sup> On March 23, 409, in the wake of Uldin's failed invasion, the Eastern government passed a law provisioning for the division and dispersal of barbarian loot seized by the military; this included persons bound for slavery, as many of the thousands who had defected to the Romans were destined to be dispensed with via the markets.<sup>134</sup> Many among them were Germanic Sciri, who were "conveyed in chains to Constantinopolis."<sup>135</sup> The authorities therein feared the prospect of a popular revolt if they should be permitted to live as a single population, as had been the case with the Thervingi settled along the Danube, and mandated that they should be distributed "throughout the transmarine provinces" to those desiring to take them on as slave labor, thereby facilitating their assimilation into the imperial populace.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 75.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.

<sup>134</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 5.6.1-2.

<sup>135</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5.

<sup>136</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 5.6.3.; Sozomen makes note in his *Ecclesiastical History* of having seen a number of these Sciri "cultivating the earth in Bithynia, near Mount Olympus." Bithynia constitutes the coast and hinterlands of the extreme northwest of the Anatolian Peninsula, and the "Mount Olympus" Sozomen refers to is not the famed dwelling of the gods comprising the Hellenic pantheon, but Uludağ, the anomalous mountain towering over the horizon on the Anatolian shore of the Sea of Marmara, known to the ancients as the Mysian or Bithynian Olympus.; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5.

Once Stilicho had fallen from power in the West, Alaric had marched westwards from Illyricum, and the Huns along the Lower and Middle Danube had been temporarily humbled, Anthemius began a radical reconstruction and reorganization campaign along the increasingly fragile frontier. The territories around the Danube *Limes*, especially the *castra*, and their possessors were of especial importance to Anthemius and his advisors, as a measure passed on April 29, 409, stipulated:

Whereas we have learned that the tracts of land which had been granted by a benevolent provision of the ancients to the barbarians for the care and protection of the border and of the border fortifications are being held by some other persons, if such persons are holding these lands because of their cupidity or desire, they shall know that they must serve with zeal and labor in the care of the border fortifications and in the protection of the border, just as did those persons whom antiquity assigned to this task. Otherwise, they shall know that these tracts of land must be transferred either to the barbarians if they can be found, or certainly to veterans, not undeservedly, so that by the observance of this provision there may be no suggestion of fear in any portion of the border fortification and the border.<sup>137</sup>

Clearly Anthemius recognized the danger of resettling barbarians within imperial territory as homogenous populations as had been done in 382, and while this measure clearly casts preference for Roman veterans to hold frontier territories, he does at least—possibly wishing to avoid sowing the seeds of dissent among them—give the partially- and non-Romanized barbarians still dwelling in Scythia Minor, Moesia, and Pannonia the sanctioned opportunity to help hold the line.

These defensive measures continued beyond the *Limes*' static infrastructure and their surroundings. Stilicho in his final months had established garrisons along busy points of entry into the Western Roman Empire, particularly major highways, harbors and trade ports, and coasts suitable for landing ships, in an effort to preclude the growth of Eastern Roman power

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<sup>137</sup> *Codex Theodosianus* 7.15.1.

beyond Illyricum.<sup>138</sup> After his death the Eastern Roman government would decry and demand the removal of this “unaccustomed practice,” highlighting its detrimental effect upon travel and economic ties between the East and West, they would enact the exact same measure in the East in April of 410.<sup>139</sup> Nearly two years later, in January of 412, the *Classis Flavia Moesica* received a seven-year shipbuilding program, as Anthemius ordered the restoration of all aging vessels and the construction of a minimum of 225 new riverine ships for the purposes of reinforcing surveillance patrols and the efficient transport of men and materiel along the river as needed.<sup>140</sup>

However, what was undoubtedly Anthemius’ most abiding contribution to the Eastern Roman Empire’s defense lay well south of the Danube. As the Constantinopolitan population grew and its urban layout sprawled well beyond the confines of the original Constantinian Walls it had received as part of Constantine’s rededication of the city as *Nova Roma*, its continued defense required a grossly expanded defense system.<sup>141</sup> Demarcating its bounds a mile west of the existing defenses, Anthemius oversaw the construction of the great Theodosian Walls, so named for the young Eastern emperor; these extraordinary defenses, complete with ninety-six towers standing over sixty feet in height represented the most formidable battlements of the late Roman World, attested by the Eastern Roman Empire’s survival at Constantinople for the next millennium.<sup>142</sup> As desperately needed and impressive as Anthemius’ administration and defensive reorganization were, they represented the last period of Roman supremacy along the Danube frontier. After 414, the uniquely capable praetorian prefect vanished from the historical

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 7.16.1.

<sup>139</sup> *Codex Theodosianus*, 7.16.1-2.; Thompson, *The Huns*, 34.

<sup>140</sup> *Codex Theodosianus*, 7.17.1.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 77.; Thompson, *The Huns*, 34.

<sup>141</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:69-70.

<sup>142</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 77-78.

narrative, leaving the fifteen-year-old Theodosius II and his ministers to maintain the strengthened Eastern Roman realm.

The period in which he reached majority and began to reign with full imperial authority was far from typical for the Empire and its frontiers. While much of the Eastern Roman Empire was politically and economically stable, the West was in a state of disarray. In 410, Roman control of Britannia began to rapidly dissolve as imperial forces had been steadily withdrawn from the island to help combat internal disorder, such as was created by the barbarian migrations over the Rhine.<sup>143</sup> In the same year, Alaric sacked Rome itself, sending shockwaves through the Roman World, only to die of disease in southern Italy a few months later.<sup>144</sup> He was buried in a secret location in the bed of the Busento River, after which he was succeeded by Athaulf, who proceeded to lead the Visigoths westwards into southern Gaul.<sup>145</sup> Honorius, unable to repulse them from so deep in Roman territory and so far the crumbling frontiers, settled them as *foederati* in the southern Gallic regions of Aquitania and Occitania where their ties to the land would deepen over the proceeding decades.<sup>146</sup>

The Danube frontier was another matter. In the words of Maenchen-Helfen, “no period in the political history of the Huns is darker than the 410s and 420s.”<sup>147</sup> A similar lack of specifics on the other barbarian peoples beyond the Danube and their relationship to the various authorities throughout the domain of the Hunnic tribes leaves the state of riverine border and the fortified settlements along it without much historical context or contrast. Scant references to the barbaricum do, however, hint at murmurs and subtle movements in the lands of the Huns; a

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<sup>143</sup> Blair, *Roman Britain and Early England*, 155-156.

<sup>144</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 226-228, 345.; Olympiodorus, Fragment 11.

<sup>145</sup> Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 159-160.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>147</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 73.

fragment of Olympiodorus' *History*, for example, depicts a Western Roman embassy sent between late 412 and early 413 to the court of a Hunnic king named Charaton somewhere in the Pannonian Plain.<sup>148</sup> While their realms certainly could have overlapped, the relation of Charaton to Uldin, if there was in fact one to begin with, is unknown and very likely indeterminable, as is the potential for any relation between the Hunnic tribes that comprised the populations of their respective subjects.

Their distinct governances along the Roman Danube frontier nevertheless represent an emerging pattern in Hunnic organization. From the disintegration of the Hunnic Horde to the early 410s, the disparate Hunnic tribes operated without continual inter-tribal unity, and their attacks on the Roman frontiers, while considerable, were of a manageable size for the Romans.<sup>149</sup> Yet, by the early 430s, Hunnic chieftains in the Romanian and Pannonian Plains began to bend the knee to a singular monarchical authority and could boast an incipient empire-state of their own whose weight of arms and geo-political gravity would soon rival that of the stricken Roman Empire.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 73.; Olympiodorus, Fragment 19.

<sup>149</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 80.

### Chapter 3: Collapse of the Danube Frontier, A.D. 420—A.D. 447

*...And, with that word, an universal blast  
From thousand instruments of warlike breath  
Gave note of stem defiance, and rang forth  
Of stirring music a sonorous peal  
From gong and cymbal, many a clashing sword  
Resounding to the buckler's iron orb;  
And, midst that clang, the multitudinous shout  
Of all those uncouth nations, that, erewhile  
Downcast and mute, by those bold words aroused  
Breathed new confliction, and by hate assured  
Trampled e'en now, beneath the hoofs of war,  
Byzantium and the stately halls of Rome...—William Herbert*

Writing in the early sixth century, Marcellinus Comes, while noting the major events of 422, tersely scribed in his Chronicle, “The Huns devastated Thrace.”<sup>1</sup> No mention of the purpose, duration, or major engagements—if there were any—were listed, nor do any other primary sources of the time make any direct mention of this nebulous Hunnic campaign at all.<sup>2</sup> Such is the nature of the Danube’s history in 420s and early 430s, though this far from alludes to a relative lull in the activity of the frontier. During such years, the Hunnic tribes, having thoroughly dispatched the sovereignty of the mighty Gothic, Carpo-Dacian, Sarmatian, and otherwise barbarous realms, gradually reconvened the bygone unity of their defunct migratory horde, having butted up and partially settled against the Roman Danube frontier, as the Hunnic Empire. From the mid-430s onwards to the death of the infamous Attila the Hun in 453, after which the Huns’ incipient Empire rapidly dissolved, the northern frontier withered under

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<sup>1</sup> It ought to be noted that the lack of evidence for this particular invasion, as well as the general lack of specific data regarding the Roman-Hunnic exchanges along the Danube of the 420s and 430s, has caused a wide range of chronologies and interpretations of the evidence throughout modern scholarship. Generally, the a given historical interpretation will fall into one of two camps. The dominant interpretation relies on the identification of three distinct Hunnic invasions of the Roman Balkans: The first is dated definitively to 422, and the second and third come between 422 and 434. John Bagnell Bury, Peter Heather, and Christopher Kelly among others lean this way. The compelling alternative composed by Brian Croke was published in an article entitled “Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422” (1977) wherein the “various scraps of evidence” portray the three aforementioned invasions as one singular campaign in 422.; Marcellinus Comes, *Annales* 422.3.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 18, no. 4 (1977): 347-348.

continual contestation to point of destruction. Only in the last cataclysmic years of the ‘scourge of God’ did Rome’s greatest and most inherently unstable frontier finally implode.

While the Hunnic invasion of 422 marks the beginning of the steady, marching decline of the Danube frontier over its last decades, the slow crumbling of its lofty ramparts, while caused by the barbarians from across the waters, received an important instigation from the affairs of the east. Prior to the 420s, the Roman Empire and Sassanid Persia had successfully maintained the peace agreement they had signed in late 386—an amended redraft of the peace hurriedly negotiated in 377 as Valens scrambled to remove his forces from the Persian frontier to the west in the aforementioned effort to dispatch Fritigern’s Goths.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, renewed state-sponsored persecution of Christians in Persia, one of the first since the reign of Constantine the Great and the officiation of Christianity in Rome nearly a century prior, among other civil and mercantile disputes, warranted an official Roman response, as Socrates writes:

Isdigerdes [Yazdegerd I], king of the Persians, who had always favoured the Christians in his dominions, having died, was succeeded by Vararanes [Bahram V] his son. This prince, at the instigation of the *magi* [Zoroastrian clerics], persecuted the Christians there with so much rigour, by inflicting on them a variety of punishments and tortures, that they were obliged to desert their country and seek refuge among the Romans, whom they entreated not to suffer them to be completely extirpated. ... The bad feeling which these things produced, was greatly increased by the flight of the Persian Christians into the Roman territories. For the Persian king immediately sent an embassy to demand the fugitives, whom the Romans were by no means disposed to deliver up; not only as desirous of defending their suppliants, but also because they were ready to do anything for the sake of the Christian religion.<sup>4</sup>

As noted by Edward Gibbon, “The gentle mind of Theodosius was never inflamed by the ambition of conquest or military renown; and the slight alarm of a Persian war scarcely interrupted the tranquility of the East. The Motives of the war were just and honorable.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.18.

<sup>5</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3:365.

Doubtless the Romans perceived the prospect of a new war with their Eastern neighbor and historic rival to be nothing less than wholly justified, perhaps even welcome, as Theodosius II declared war on Persia—insofar as Socrates seems to describe—immediately following the address of Bahram V's delegation.<sup>6</sup> Hostilities had after all been potentially brewing between the two powers since as early as May of 420.<sup>7</sup> However, the sudden declaration of war, seemingly justified, failed to take into account the situation beyond the Danube or the Hunnic threat that had developed in the stated regions.

Since the dissipation of the Hunnic Horde, the Hunnic tribes had gradually agglomerated into regional confederacies, of which the realms of Uldin and Charaton were early recorded examples in contemporary Roman histories. The relationships between their two personages and multi-tribal petty kingdoms, as well as any potential ties between them and later Hunnic leaders (such as Ruga, Octar, Mundzuk, Bleda, and Attila,) cannot be ascertained with certainty.<sup>8</sup> However, what is clear from Roman sources is that between the 380s and the 410s the Lower Danube and the Middle Danube—the latter more so than the former—separated from one another by the imposition of the Western Romanian and Serbian sectors of the Carpathian Mountains, constituted the two most frequently and ferociously contested segments of the Roman Danube. It was along these two regions of the frontier that the main bases of Hunnic power developed, insofar as it was relevant to the affairs of Roman government officials, military officers, and historians. After the death of Uldin, amidst the lack of any definitive successor to his reign along the Lower Danube, the open plains, gentle hills, and scattered forests of the eastern Pannonian Plain became the dominant center of Hunnic power to the continual

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<sup>6</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.18.

<sup>7</sup> Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 348.

<sup>8</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 85.

detriment of adjacent Roman Pannonia, especially Pannonia Valeria. For succeeding Hunnic rulers, from the rise of Ruga to the death of Attila, the same appears to have remained true; Priscus states plainly that his diplomatic mission from Constantinopolis to Attila's court in 448 or 449 took them past Naissus, located in Moesia Superior directly between Thrace and Pannonia and along the *Via Militaris* directly connecting the two, and beyond the Danube.<sup>9</sup>

The Pannonian Plain serving as the Hunnic metropole from the 420s onwards fits the Huns' geopolitical stance. Since their migration into the Pannonian and Romanian Plains and subsequent collision with the Danube *Limes*, the Roman Empire, by far the most powerful and wealthy polity on the continent, became the dominant focus of their attention. Within decades of their arrival on the periphery of Roman influence, the Huns—or at least Hunnic leadership—must have come to realize that the authority of the Roman Empire existed between two imperial courts in two imperial capitals; establishing the center of Hunnic power on the Pannonian Plain, a geographic mid-point between Rome, Mediolanum, and Ravenna in the West and Constantinopolis in the East, with direct routes of travel to either along the Roman road network, enabled Hunnic leadership to interact with or manipulate the affairs of either half of the Empire in parallel. In time, they would exploit this geographic advantage to the fullest.

Hostilities between Persia and the Eastern Romans began along the Eastern Frontier sometime in early 421 and concluded approximately one year later in *status quo ante bellum*; as Gibbon wrote, “a truce of one hundred years was solemnly ratified, and although the revolutions in Armenia might threaten the public tranquility, the essential conditions of this treaty were respected near fourscore years by the successors of Constantine and Artaxerxes.”<sup>10</sup> Given the

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<sup>9</sup> Priscus, Fragment 11.2.60-90.

<sup>10</sup> Marcellinus Comes, *Annales* 422.4.; Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 348.; Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3:366.; Gibbon overlooks the brief East Roman-Persian War of 440 in this paragraph, but discusses it later in his work.

ongoing hostilities with Persia, Marcellinus Comes' laconic recounting of the devastation so wrought by the Huns upon Thrace is less surprising; the Goths' petition to enter the Empire and their subsequent pillaging campaigns, albeit brought on in part by carelessness on the part of Roman officials in Thrace, occurred under very similar conditions. During another brief period of Roman-Persian antagonism in 386 which ultimately produced the ratification of the peace of 377, while ultimately bloodless, was when Odotheus attempted to force a crossing of the Danube with his following of Greuthungi.<sup>11</sup>

As Eastern Roman manpower and military resources were stretched across its frontiers, particularly the Danube, the government at Constantinopolis likely had to defer forces from the riverine frontier to the East, weakening the *limes*.<sup>12</sup> Sassanid Persia was, after all, just coming off of its first golden age and was internally enjoying one of its most stable and prosperous periods, thanks in large part to the extraordinarily lengthy and successful reign of Shapur II and the lengthy, virtually unbroken peace with Rome after 377; the fact that the limited Eastern Roman forces under the command of Romano-Alanic general Ardabur were able to achieve numerous modest victories, as Socrates recounts in embellished detail, is no mean feat.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that the war with Persia overlapped with the winter of 421-422 is also significant, as this season, by virtue of historic precedent for barbarian invasions—particularly by mounted forces—to invade when the frontier was at its weakest and the Danube's ill tendency to freeze over in the winter, likely afforded the Huns their best opportunity to cross into the

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 49.; Zosimus, *New History* 4.35.1-3.; Notice that as conflict was averted in the East by Roman and Persian negotiators, Odotheus' attempted invasion was cut short by Promotus and his field forces before the Greuthungi had the opportunity to run amuck through the Upper Balkans.

<sup>12</sup> Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 366.

<sup>13</sup> Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.18-21.; Percy Sykes, *History of Persia*, 3 ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1951.), 1:425-426.

northern Balkans and proceed towards Thrace.<sup>14</sup> In light of this potential, a law passed on March 3, 422 must be considered:

Our loyal soldiers returning from combat service or setting out for war shall take for themselves the ground floor rooms of each tower of the New Wall [Theodosian Wall] of this sacred City [Constantinopolis]. Landholders shall not be offended on the ground that the order which had been issued about public buildings has been violated. For even private homes customarily furnish one third of their space for this purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Nine years prior, on April 4, 413, the Eastern Roman government under the leadership of Praetorian Prefect Anthemius requisitioned the holdings of local landowners to lay the foundations of the Theodosian Walls:

We command that the towers of the New Wall, which has been constructed for the fortification of this most splendid City, shall, after the completion of the work, be assigned to the use of the persons through whose lands this wall was duly erected by the zeal and foresight of Your Magnitude, pursuant to the decision of our Serenity. This regulation and condition shall be observed in perpetuity, so that said landholders and those persons to whom the title to these lands may pass shall know that each year they must provide for the repair of the towers at their own expense, that they shall acquire the use of these towers as a special favor from the public, and they shall not doubt that the care of repair and the responsibility therefore belongs to them. Thus the splendor of the work and the fortifications of the City shall be preserved, as well as the use of such fortifications to the advantage of private citizens.<sup>16</sup>

When one considers how grievous the social and fiscal responsibility of having to quarter soldiers was for the typical Constantinopolitan urbanite, the former regulation must have been a welcome comfort for those whose property had been commissioned by the emperor for the common defense and welfare of the city. The fact that the latter measure revoked the former exemption, which was to “be observed in perpetuity,” speaks volumes to the state of the Thracian countryside in early 422.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 348.

<sup>15</sup> *Codex Theodosianus*, 7.8.13.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 76.; Croke noted, “Maenchen-Helfen was the first to relate this law to events in Thrace in 422.,” Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 348.

<sup>16</sup> *Codex Theodosianus*, 15.1.51.

<sup>17</sup> Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 348.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 76.

Nevertheless, the lack of primary source literature on the subject prevents a more protracted investigation of the Huns' activity south of the Lower and Middle Danube in the early 420s. The same problem plagues the remainder of the decade and the early 430s, with scattered fragments offering details to seemingly two additional different Hunnic invasions of the Danubian provinces of unknown dates between 422 and 434. Theodoret of Cyrus offers through his *Ecclesiastical History* the depiction of one such invasion in parallel with an unspecified war with Sassanid Persia:

So when Rhoilas [Ruga], Prince of the Scythian Nomads [Huns], had crossed the Danube with a vast host and was ravaging and plundering Thrace, and was threatening to besiege the imperial city [Constantinopolis], and summarily seize it and deliver it to destruction, God smote him from on high with thunderbolt and storm, burning up the invader and destroying all his host. A similar providence was shown, too, in the Persian war. The Persians received information that the Romans were occupied elsewhere, and so in violation of the treaty of Peace, marched against their neighbours, who found none to aid them under the attack, because, in reliance on the Peace, the emperor had dispatched his generals and his men to other wars [?]. Then the further march of the Persians was stayed by a very violent storm of rain and hail; their horses refused to advance; in twenty days they had not succeeded in advancing as many furlongs. Meanwhile the generals returned and mustered their troops.<sup>18</sup>

In this account, Ruga dies amidst his leading Hunnic forces against the Eastern Romans after having thoroughly looted Thrace and threatened to set the Eastern Roman capital to siege—the lack of information regarding the status of the garrisons and the dubious prospect of attempting to besiege the Theodosian Walls with a cavalry-centric force notwithstanding, to Theodoret such a situation must have appeared dire enough to attribute the Empire's deliverance to divine intervention.

Embellishments aside, Theodoret's description offers numerous details for Roman-Hunnic engagements not found in any other source; at the same time, he stands in direct conflict with the historical account of Priscus over the nature of Ruga's death:

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<sup>18</sup> Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.36.

When Rua [Ruga] was king of the Huns, the Amilzuri, Itimari, Tounsoures, Boisci and other tribes who were living near to the Danube were fleeing to fight on the side of the Romans.? Rua decided to go to war with these tribes and sent Eslas, a man who usually handled negotiations over differences between himself and the Romans, threatening to break the present peace if they did not hand over all who had fled to them. The Romans wished to send an embassy to the Huns, and both Plinthas and Dionysius wished to go. Plinthas was a Scythian, Dionysius a Thracian; both were generals and had held the Roman consulship. Since it seemed that Eslas would reach Rua before the embassy was dispatched, Plinthas sent along with him Sengilach, one of his own retainers, to persuade Rua to negotiate with none of the Romans but himself. When Rua died, the kingship of the Huns devolved upon Attila and Bleda, and the Roman senate recommended that Plinthas be sent as ambassador to them.<sup>19</sup>

The eventual product of these negotiations was the Treaty of Margus—so named for the fortified city at which the Hunnic and East Roman dignitaries met and drafted it, which stipulated that the Roman Empire refuse to permit tribes hostile to the Huns to immigrate, that the Romans return those which had already done so, that “there should be safe markets with equal rights for Romans and Huns, and that the Romans annually pay seven hundred pounds of gold to the Scythian [Hunnic] kings [Attila and Bleda], as previously the payments had been three hundred and fifty pounds.”<sup>20</sup>

The distinct narratives of Marcellinus, Theodoret, and Priscus present the only direct evidence for the Hunnic invasions of the Roman East in the 420s and early 430s; the invasion recounted by Marcellinus in 422 is the only such encounter with a discernable date and a reasonable degree of corroborating material, whereas the invasions described by Theodoret and Priscus, occurring sometime between the invasion of 422 and Ruga’s death in 434, dated by the Gallic Chronicle of 452, cannot be accurately dated.<sup>21</sup> Modern historians have offered a diverse

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<sup>19</sup> Priscus, Fragment 2.1-17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.18-39.

<sup>21</sup> The *Gallic Chronicle of 452* does not state the date of Ruga (rendered ‘Rugila’) explicitly, but rather lists it in the “eleventh year,” which, per the Chronicle’s timeframe, corresponds to 434. Additionally, as Croke notes, “this date accords with the information of Socrates, who tells us that Rua [Ruga] was struck dead by lightning when Proclus was bishop (7.42-43). Since Proclus became patriarch of Constantinople in April 434, the Gallic Chronicle and Socrates do not conflict on the date of Rua’s death;” Croke, “Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422,” 355.; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.42-43.

series of dates for the Hunnic invasions, but the common consensus is that the three accounts describe three separate invasions, each breaching the Danube *Limes* and withdrawing from whence they came. Arnold Jones, Brian Croke, and Christopher Kelly have postulated that the 350-pound subsidy described by Priscus was likely a stipulation of the peace negotiated with the Huns in 422, and while this fits the evidence, it cannot be confirmed either.<sup>22</sup>

Regardless of the specific dates, the fact that the Danube *Limes* had been broken through on three separate occasions and much of the richest parts of the Roman Balkans had been pillaged at least twice would have been for the Eastern Roman Empire and its riverine frontier a protracted disaster. If earlier and later precedent in Hunnic invasions carry—though the lack of hard evidence bars absolute certainty—local fortifications on the river and in the Danubian hinterlands to the south in the vicinity of the Hun’s point of crossing on the Middle Danube likely suffered considerable damages. The devastation of the Thracian farmlands, as during the Gothic War, would have put an immediate logistical strain on both the rural populace and the security of the Danube frontier. While any singular invasion would have certainly hampered Roman operations throughout the Balkan Peninsula and along the frontier, the suppressive factor on both civilian and military logistics and morale would have meant a distinctly lethargic recovery for the Eastern Roman Empire, and paints a distinctly unfavorable picture for its *limitanei* and *comitatenses* when Attila invaded for the first time in the early 440s.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 351-352.; Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602, A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964.), 193.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> If, however, Brian Croke’s thesis regarding the Hunnic invasions is correct, and there was merely a single invasion in 422, the picture of the Roman Balkans and frontier on the Middle and Lower Danube moving through the 420s and early 430s changes dramatically. As Ruga’s invasion of 434 was cut short by his demise, much of the Roman Balkans—and, indeed, likely all of Thrace—would have been spared destruction from the Hunnic withdrawal in 422 to Attila’s campaigns in the early 440s. In turn, the Danube frontier, albeit compromised in Pannonia after the early 430s by Aetius, would have been in relatively good condition by the close of the 430s and in ideal circumstances may have been able to give the Huns a better, more organized fight.

The Eastern Romans, however, were not alone in their dealings with the trans-Danubian Huns over the 420s and 430s. In the interregnum following the death of Honorius in 423, the Western Roman court, headed by *magister militum* Castinus, elevated a certain *primicerius notariorum* named Ioannes, or ‘John,’ in Rome to the position of *augustus* in the West.<sup>24</sup> This appointment was met with immediate hostility from the Eastern court, who viewed the rise of John as illegitimate; Theodosius replied later in the year by elevating the six- or seven-year-old Valentinian III, his cousin and the nephew of the late Honorius, to the purple. A succession war thus ensued as political hostilities spilled over into the affairs of the Empire’s eastern and western armies.

Late in 424, John sent Flavius Aetius, a promising young Western Roman politician and *curi palatii* (lit. “Steward of the Palace”), east with a “huge sum of gold” to bolster his field forces with Hunnic mercenaries against an expected Eastern Roman campaign.<sup>25</sup> Aetius was undeniably the most prudent choice for such negotiations; as a teenager, he had been sent as a political hostage to the court of Alaric for three years and thereafter to the realm of the Huns, most likely to the court of Uldin or Charaton.<sup>26</sup> During these years, he learned much of the Huns, possibly including their language, and would utilize his experience to great effect throughout his life as one of the Western Roman Empire’s last great defenders.<sup>27</sup>

While Aetius was still seeking the Huns, Theodosius arranged for a campaign to be undertaken against the Western court, having relocated to Ravenna to wait for Aetius’ forces, commanded by Ardabur and his son Aspar.<sup>28</sup> Early in 425, after having marched through the

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<sup>24</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:222.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:223.; Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum* 2.8.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 82.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:224.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars* 3.3.8.

Balkans and into northern Italia, the Eastern Roman army successfully took the city and captured the Western pretender, after which, as Procopius later wrote:

[Valentinian and his keepers] brought him out in the hippodrome of Aquileia with one of his hands cut off and caused him to ride in state on an ass, and then after he had suffered much ill treatment from the stage-performers there, both in word and in deed, he put him to death. Thus Valentinian took of the power of the West.<sup>29</sup>

Around the same time, Castinus was banished.<sup>30</sup> Merely three days after the execution of John, Aetius returned at the head of an army of Huns, 60,000-strong.<sup>31</sup> Following a series of indecisive engagements with the Eastern Roman forces in which “many fell on both sides,” during which he must have learned of the invalidation of his cause, Aetius came to an arrangement with the Galla Placidia and the Eastern Roman commanders, and permitted peace between the two halves of the Empire to be restored.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, he granted his Hunnic army a generous payout for breaking off the campaign abruptly, and sent them on their way after an exchange of hostages and oaths.<sup>33</sup>

After the Huns departed, the Western Romans imparted to Aetius the titles of *comes* and *magister militum* of Gaul, and sent him to manage the military administration of his new command.<sup>34</sup> Over the following years, his command saw a range of successes in maintaining a measure of order in Gaul; the prestige from his campaigns in Gaul, along with his ability to “summon the power of Hunnic forces at his will,” enabled him to compel an otherwise unwilling Galla Placidia—she never trusted him due to his faithfully having served John in attempting to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 3.3.9.

<sup>30</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:224.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3:374.; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 12.14.

<sup>32</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:224.; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 12.14.

<sup>33</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 77.; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 12.14.; Briefly mentioning this engagement, Maenchen-Helfen goes on to say, “it is almost certain that they [the Huns] were promised annual tributes.” Unfortunately, he does not cite any source or postulate any argument to support this assertion.

<sup>34</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 77.; Philostorgius, *Ecclesiastical History* 12.14.

keep the throne from her son Valentinian—to appoint him as *magister utriusque militum* (lit. ‘commander of both forces,’ infantry and cavalry) of the Western Roman Empire in 429.<sup>35</sup>

During his time on campaign in Gaul away from the offices of Ravenna, the Western Romans elected to launch a campaign against the Huns in Pannonia; Marcellinus Comes recorded that in the year 427, “the Pannonian provinces, which had been retained for fifty years by the Huns, were retaken by the Romans.”<sup>36</sup>

Neither details of this campaign nor the reasons for it have survived. Perhaps with Aetius preoccupied on the opposite face of the Western Roman Empire, Galla Placidia in recognition of his rising star and familiarity with the Huns sought to weaken them and drive the bound of their territory further from Italia. Pannonia had, after all, been a West Roman holding since the turn of the fifth century.<sup>37</sup> Maenchen-Helfen has postulated that the lack of Alans’ having been mentioned in tandem with Huns in primary sources from the early 410s onwards may have pointed to a break between the two groups.<sup>38</sup> The Alans had served as the vanguard of the Hunnic Horde and a critical part of the Huns’ collective fighting force as they moved into Europe, and if they largely left the Huns for open lands in which they could settle in Eastern Europe, the forces Ruga and his fellow Huns could summon to defend their territories could certainly have been weakened.<sup>39</sup>

This campaign speaks to the state of Roman Pannonia by the early 430s. Many of the major cities in and along the perimeter of the half of the Pannonian Plain which Roman territory

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<sup>35</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* 1:243-244.; Felix, the previous *magister militum*, had been deposed from his position by Galla Placidia not long before; in the Bury’s words, “it is said that he then caused Felix to be killed on suspicion of treachery.” There is no consensus between the primary sources, namely Prosper of Aquitania, John of Antioch, and Hydatius, as to this incident.

<sup>36</sup> Marcellinus Comes, *Annales* 427.1.

<sup>37</sup> Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 80-81.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Vernadsky, *Ancient Russia*, 137.

constituted had been plundered between the early 400s and the 420s. Ravaged—and likely partially settled—by countless barbarian immigrations after an untold number of uncontrolled river crossings over the previous decades and standing at the periphery of both Eastern and Western Roman power, Roman Pannonia had been gradually occupied by the Hun forces originating from the lands directly across the Middle Danube. The extent to which the Western Romans were able to restore imperial control over the region is also highly suspect; whether the region, replete with partially depopulated cities and derelict fortifications, was largely reconquered or partially occupied by modest Roman force cannot be ascertained with certainty.<sup>40</sup> What is clear, however, is that Roman action drove local Hunnic forces from at least some measure of the Pannonian provinces, and, by the inference of Marcellinus' account, managed to hold the territories beyond the close of the year. Despite the fifty years Marcellinus perceived the Pannonian provinces as lost, their lauded reclamation would not last the decade.

While still sparse, compared to the extant materials discussing the 410s and 420s, primary source literature detailing Roman-Hunnic affairs in 430s “flow comparatively copiously,” Maenchen-Helfen writes, but “it is not easy to reconstruct even the main events.”<sup>41</sup> In 432, Aetius held the Western Roman consulate, but his power in this influential role was not remain stable for long. Bonifacius, another Western Roman general that had been jostling with Aetius, and until 429, *magister utriusque militiae* Flavius Felix, for influence in Valentinian's court, and who had been in rebellion against Galla Placidia's regime since 427, returned to Italy in 432 at the *Augusta*-regent's summons to make amends with her and Valentinian.<sup>42</sup> Almost

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<sup>40</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 80-81.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Felix and Bonifacius had waged bloody civil wars in the West between 427 and 429. When Felix prepared to mount offensives against his rival (Bonifacius was governor of the African provinces), Aetius notified him so that the African force might hold themselves against Felix's forces.

overnight, Aetius, still the object of Placidia's ire, suddenly found himself politically marooned. Not long thereafter, Placidia revoked Aetius' command in absentia, appointing Bonifacius the title of *comes* and the office of *magister utriusque militiae*.<sup>43</sup> Aetius responded by rising in revolt and clashed with Bonifacius' troops at the Battle of Rimini:

On the instigation of Placidia, the mother of the emperor Valentinian, a great battle was waged between the patricians Boniface [Bonifacius] and Aetius. Aetius engaged Boniface and wounded him, with a longer sword [or 'Lance'] than that of Boniface, which had been made for him the previous day. He himself was unscathed. Three months later Boniface died from the injury he had incurred, imploring his very wealthy wife Pelagia to marry no one other than Aetius.<sup>44</sup>

Despite his initiative and having mortally wounded his rival, Aetius nevertheless lost the engagement and withdrew to his private country estate. Bonifacius' position was swiftly taken up by his vengeful son-in-law, Sebastianus, who orchestrated a botched assassination attempt on his late father's adversary.

It was at this point, with nowhere else to turn and evidently beset by hostile forces in Italia, that Aetius fled to the Huns, quietly slipping across the Adriatic to Dalmatia and travelling by night overland to Pannonia and thence to the Middle Danube.<sup>45</sup> Between late 432 and early 433, he arrived at the court of Ruga deep in the Pannonian Plain, and, while the details as to his methods of petitioning the Hunnic king for aid have not survived, reportedly set out for Italia at the head of a substantial troop of Huns.<sup>46</sup> Whether or not he truly was on the march with Hunnic units, or if he was, whatever their number happened to be, is indeterminate.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, in

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<sup>43</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:248.

<sup>44</sup> Marcellinus Comes, *Annales* 432.2-3.; The Battle of Rimini (432) is occasionally referred to as the 'Battle of Ravenna,' as the coastal township of Rimini is only thirty miles southeast of Ravenna, as well as the 'Battle of Ariminum' as per Rimini's traditional Latin name.

<sup>45</sup> Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians*, 55.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 109.

<sup>46</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:248.; Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 262.; Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, 176.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 110.; Christopher Kelly offers an interesting speculative account of the main points of the discussion between Aetius and Ruga in his *The End of Empire*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>47</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 110.

the face of this oncoming juggernaut, Sebastianus either fled or was banished from Italia, after which he retired Constantinopolis where he would remain in relative obscurity for the next decade.<sup>48</sup> Galla Placidia, caught without recourse, ultimately accepted his supremacy in Western affairs. By the end of 433, thanks to the timely imposition of Ruga's Huns, Aetius had fully reclaimed his former post in the Western Roman court. Not long thereafter, Valentinian reached majority, consigning his mother to a position away from the locus of Western Roman power, and leaving the ascendent Aetius in a position of almost absolute authority in the affairs of the Western Roman military and political machines.<sup>49</sup>

Aetius' repeated reliance on the Huns had important ramifications for the Middle Danube. In exchange for Hunnic assistance, according to an excerpt from Priscus, it seems that at some point he deliberately ceded at least a part of Pannonia to the Huns:

Edeco, a Scythian who had performed outstanding deeds in war, came again as ambassador together with Orestes, a Roman by origin who lived in the part of Pannonia close to the river Save which became subject to the barbarian by the treaty made with Aetius, the general of the western Romans.<sup>50</sup>

If such an interpretation is correct, while the holdings of distant Pannonia Valeria were admittedly in some ways indefensible, the layout of the Danube frontier would have been grossly violated, and for the first time, formally and deliberately by treaty with an external power of nebulous—potentially hostile—intent.<sup>51</sup> Roman roads, blazing through the otherwise rugged

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<sup>48</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 262.

<sup>49</sup> Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 1:248-249.

<sup>50</sup> Priscus, Fragment 11.1.1-5.

<sup>51</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 112-113.; Kelly postulates that Aetius could not control both the unstable Gallic provinces and the whole of the more remote, less wealthy Danubian provinces at the same time.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 87-90.; Priscus, Fragment 11.; The concept of a Roman cession to Ruga in exchange for his assisting Aetius in 432, while upheld by numerous historians throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has been called into question by Otto Maenchen-Helfen. He attributes this concept as a “misinterpretation” of Priscus' eleventh fragment, citing that its proper translation alludes to Aetius ceding “Pannonian territory,” rather than the whole of Roman Pannonia or any specific Pannonian province, to Attila rather than Ruga. In any case, later in the same fragment, Maenchen-Helfen notes that the specification, “Constantiolus was a man ‘from the land of the Paionians [referring to

Alpine and Balkan terrain, stretched out to the hinterlands of both halves of the Empire, lending the Huns and their subjects prefabricated express routes for the invasion of either. Additionally, the uniformity of the Danube frontier, while arguably dubious prior to, as well as after, the Roman offensive into Pannonia in 427, had degenerated in such a manner as to suddenly bestow the Lower and Upper stretches of the frontier with an additional flank for which their design had not incorporated a defensive contingency. By 435, the eastern extreme of the Styrian Alps and the southern extreme of the Carpathians represented the vague limits of the frontier on the Upper and Lower Danube respectively.

Within about a year's time of Aetius' reclamation of the role of *magister utriusque militiae*, according to the corroboration of the *Gallic Chronicle of 452*, Priscus, and Socrates, Ruga would die on campaign a short distance into Eastern Roman territory.<sup>52</sup> Some years prior, his brother Octar, allegedly king over the Huns and their subjects west of the Pannonian Plain, had perished on campaign against the Burgundians, and it is not clear if their brother Mundzuk ruled over any land himself—the Hunnic throne over tribes of Ruga and Octar was thus left open.<sup>53</sup> In 434 or 435, Attila and Bleda, sons of Mundzuk, acceded to the Hunnic throne and set about securing their authority within the Hunnic realm.<sup>54</sup> Not long thereafter, they met with Roman dignitaries at the frontier city of Margus to sign a Treaty of the same name, appeasing the

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Pannonia] that were ruled by Attila,"" alludes to the existence later in Attila's reign (448) that at least part of Pannonia was still under at least nominal Roman control.

<sup>52</sup> Croke, "Evidence for the Hun Invasion of Thrace in A.D. 422," 355.; Priscus, Fragment 2.1-17.; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.42-43.

<sup>53</sup> Primary and secondary sources differ on whether their brother Mundzuk was a Hunnic leader or merely a member of the Hunnic royal family (and the father of Attila and Bleda). If he was, he may have been a chief over the Eastern Huns living on the Pontic Steppe. Priscus alone notes that there was also a fourth brother named Oebersius who was still alive in 448 and present for the reception of the Roman delegations dispatched to Attila's capital.; Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 95-96.; Priscus, Fragment 14.25-30.; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.30.

<sup>54</sup> The precise nature of Hunnic kingship—or some form of dual-kingship, as it seems—as well as the precise chronology of successions from Ruga and Octar to Attila and Bleda remains a mystery to modern scholars. For an excellent overview on the subject, see Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 84-86.; Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths* 3.180.; Priscus, Fragment 2.15-39.

Huns with 700 pounds of gold per annum, a generous trade agreement, and immigration and extradition rights along the Danube frontier in which the Hunnic word would carry substantial weight thereafter.

For the Eastern Romans, despite the Middle Danube having been strategically compromised, this conciliatory measure kept the peace between the Roman and Hunnic Empires for the remainder of the decade. The Huns were for the time being contented to trade with the Empire whilst securing their own internal and frontier affairs; in the same passage in which Priscus laid out the stipulations of the Treaty of Margus, he recorded, “when they had made peace with the Romans, Attila, Bleda, and their forces marched through Scythia subduing the tribes there and also made war with the Sorosgi.”<sup>55</sup> At the same time, they conducted numerous joint operations with Aetius and his Western Roman forces, including the conquest and destruction of Gundahar’s Burgundian Kingdom on the Rhine and the failed siege of the Visigothic capital at Narbonne.<sup>56</sup>

It was not until the early 440s that renewed tension between the realms of Attila and Theodosius, coupled with troubles elsewhere throughout the Roman Empire, once more threatened to undermine the existing *status quo*. On October 19, 439, the Vandals, under the leadership of Gaiseric, successfully took Roman Carthage, and with it the North African farmlands from which much of the Empire’s grain supply was derived.<sup>57</sup> The Vandals had initially been invited to North Africa by Bonifacius, who sought to use them to dispel Western Roman general Sigisvult, having commanded one of armies Galla Placidia had sent to reign the in errant North African during his time of rebellion. Since the 420s, they had gradually migrated

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<sup>55</sup> Priscus, Fragment 2.44-46.

<sup>56</sup> Thompson, *The Huns*, 72-77.

<sup>57</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 119.

eastwards along the coast, defeating Bonifacius multiple times along with various additional forces sent to him under Western Roman general Flavius Aspar; in recognition of their inability to defeat the Vandals in light of their other European campaigns, the Western Romans signed a treaty with the Vandals in 435, granting them a considerable portion of Mauretania and Numidia.

Gaiseric elected to dispense with this treaty four years later, moving with his people to Carthage; as much of the populace was engaged in the city's Hippodrome at the time of his arrival, the Vandalic takeover was virtually bloodless. Nevertheless, Vandalic occupation of Africa Proconsularis—to be followed by a methodic occupation of the Baleares, Sardinia, and Corsica—proved a severe threat to the Empire's logistics and the security of its coastal cities. In recognition of the new naval threat, the most severe non-Roman naval force loose in the Mediterranean since the Punic Wars, Theodosius expanded the limited sea walls of Constantinopolis to connect with the Theodosian Walls and issued a decree restoring the public right to bear arms.<sup>58</sup>

Yet, while Vandals acted with impunity in North Africa and throughout *Mare Nostrum*, as much as Galla Placidia besought the aid of her nephew in Constantinopolis, the Eastern Romans could not address them in the immediate. When he died in 440, Bahram V had left Sassanid Persia at the zenith of its power; Yazdegerd II, shortly after acceding to the throne, declared war on the Eastern Romans, citing frontier encroachment by the Romans along their shared border as his *casus belli*.<sup>59</sup> Neither side's forces were able to swiftly gain a decisive advantage as the Romans, who saw the Vandals as a more pressing threat, fought defensively, hoping for an opportunity to sue for peace.<sup>60</sup> By June of 441, the brief conflict was over; both

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<sup>58</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> Sykes, *History of Persia*, 1:435.

<sup>60</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 109.; Sykes, *History of Persia*, 1:435.

parties vowed to refrain from establishing new fortifications in Mesopotamia for the foreseeable future and the Romans agreed to pay an annual subsidy.<sup>61</sup> After this brief conflict, Sassanid Persia would turn its attention eastwards towards India and Transoxiana—there would not be another war between Eastern Rome and the ailing Empire’s ancient rival for the next sixty-two years.<sup>62</sup>

It was during this war with Persia that tensions along the Danube began to actively flare once more. During the annual fair at one of the Danubian outposts beyond the river, a number of Huns attacked the Roman merchants and tradesmen present without provocation, killing many present.<sup>63</sup> When the Eastern Roman government raised this issue with the Huns, the latter retorted that their actions had been made as a riposte; Priscus writes:

For they claimed that the bishop of Margus had crossed over to their land and, searching out their royal tombs, had stolen the valuables stored there. Furthermore, they said that if they did not hand him over and also hand over the fugitives as had been agreed (and there were very many amongst the Romans), they would prosecute the war.<sup>64</sup>

The Romans never acceded to the Huns’ demands. One year later, after Theodosius’ field forces had embarked and departed Constantinopolis for Vandal-occupied Sicily—many among them likely having been pulled from posts along and behind the Danube to oppose Yazdegerd’s abrupt offensive—and Bleda and Attila followed through with their threat.<sup>65</sup>

As the sound of thunder heard remote, the Huns fell upon the Danube *Limes* lining the southeast extreme of the Pannonian Plain, their forces concentrated against Viminacium and Margus, the region’s foremost fortified cities, whilst detachments dispersed to “ravage very

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<sup>61</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 109.; Sykes, *History of Persia*, 1:435.

<sup>62</sup> Sykes, *History of Persia*, 1:435.; The next major Roman-Persian War would be the Anastasian War of 502-506.

<sup>63</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 109-110.; Priscus, Fragment 6.1.1-4.

<sup>64</sup> Priscus, Fragment 6.1.5-10.

<sup>65</sup> Kelly, *The End of Empire*, 122.

many cities along the river.”<sup>66</sup> Before long, the gates of Viminacium had been broken in and the Huns plundered the ancient city. Margus, however, fell by less honorable means:

Some were arguing that the bishop of Margus should be handed over, so that the whole Roman people should not be endangered by the war for the sake of one man. He, suspecting that he would be surrendered, slipped away from those in the city, crossed over to the enemy and promised that he would betray the city to them if the Scythian kings made him any reasonable offer. They said that if he fulfilled his promise, they would treat him well in every way, and hands were shaken and oaths given for what had been promised. He re-crossed to Roman territory with a large force of barbarians, which he concealed right by the river bank, and, rousing it during the night, he handed the city over to the enemy.<sup>67</sup>

After Margus was sacked, Priscus recorded, “the position of the Huns was greatly improved,” with the two frontier hardpoints of Viminacium and Margus quashed, the roadway south to Naissus lay open.<sup>68</sup> Naissus held for some time, being a “populous and well-fortified city” even among the defensible cities of the Roman Balkans, but was ultimately taken by a sophisticated battery of Hunnic siege engines.<sup>69</sup> Great old Roman cities, having enjoyed resounding growth and prosperity for centuries, fell to the Hunnic onslaught as titanic dominoes—Naissus, Singidunum, Sirmium, and countless townships and villages bedighting the crests of the landscape, lay in ruin.

Despite the fearsome destruction along the Middle and Lower Danube and throughout the Balkan hinterlands, Attila’s first major invasion of the Eastern Roman Empire does not have a readily identifiable endpoint, but events over the following years suggest that it drew to a close in late 442 or early 443. On September 12, 443, Theodosius passed a law dictating the reclamation of the frontier and the restoration of the Danube *Limes* that had been so devastated; new and existing troops were to be trained and drilled, the Classis Flavia Moesica—and what

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<sup>66</sup> Priscus, Fragment 6.1.14-17.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 6.17-25.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6.1.25-27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 6.2.

remained of the *Classis Flavia Pannonica*—were to be restored to operability, additional rations were allotted to the Danubian *limitanei*, and severe punishments for officers daring to dip into their soldiers' keep were reiterated.<sup>70</sup> Land in the immediate vicinity of frontier fortifications were also rededicated to the private use of the *limitanei*.<sup>71</sup>

Ultimately, with little other option available to him, Theodosius elected to buy the Huns off, likely doling out a considerably heftier tribute to his quasi-suzerain residing on the Pannonian Plain.<sup>72</sup> The Eastern Romans has signed a begrudging peace with the Vandals earlier in 442 and had begun to bring their forces home, but they would not reach Constantinopolis in time to give their emperor deployable the game pieces he needed to stave off a costly Hunnic ultimatum.<sup>73</sup> Within a year or two following their return, probably in 443 or 444, all the while Theodosius and his staff had been rebuilding the defenses and preparing for a future engagement, the Eastern Romans reneged on their treaty.<sup>74</sup>

Encouraging their sudden rebellion were reports of a schism forming in the realm of the Huns. Sometime between the conclusion of the Roman-Hunnic War of 441-442 and the resumption of hostilities in 447, Bleda appears to have died at his own brother's hand, leaving Attila the Hunnic Empire's sole leader.<sup>75</sup> Whether Bleda was murdered, along with the potential means, specific motive, and particular opportunity accompanying such information has regrettably been lost, but that the event delayed Attila's response to the Eastern Romans, as he reassessed his power base, cannot be denied. Nevertheless, by 447, he had prepared a response in the form of a cataclysmic invasion.

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<sup>70</sup> *Theodosian Novels* 24.1-3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.4.

<sup>72</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 117.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 306-307.

<sup>74</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 117.; Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 307-308.

<sup>75</sup> Priscus, Fragment 9.4.1-10.

Over the mid-440s, Attila dispatched diplomatic envoys to enquire as why the Eastern Romans had not been paying their tribute nor extraditing fugitives to him as agreed.<sup>76</sup> Priscus wrote:

Moreover, concerning the future tribute, ambassadors should come to him for discussions, for, if they prevaricated or prepared for war, he would not willingly restrain his Scythian [Hunnic] forces. When those at court read these demands, they said that they would by no means hand over the fugitives amongst them and that, along with these, they would submit to war; but they would send ambassadors to settle the disputes. When the views of the Romans were reported to him, Attila reacted in anger and ravaged Roman territory, destroying some forts and attacking Ratiaria, a very large and populous city.<sup>77</sup>

Ratiaria was an integral part of the *limes* on the Lower Danube; along with the smaller riverfront cities of Bononia, Drobeta, and Dierna—all within 150 miles upstream—these fortified cities guarded the Lower Danube’s western approaches through the southern Carpathians, and they would not be the only losses for the Eastern Romans. “Philippopolis, Arcadiopolis, Constantia, and very many other cities” from the Danube to Greece would in the process of Attila’s invasion suffer similar fates.<sup>78</sup> After 447, while scattered peasant dwellings and villages would slowly creep out of the ashes, most of the major urban centers on the Danube and throughout the Upper Balkans would quite simply never recover.<sup>79</sup>

The attacks on the Danube fortifications, minor *castella* and the cities that had grown from the frontier *castra* alike, were distinctly methodical. While in the face of Attila’s overwhelming forces, the Roman’s static defensive hardpoints, either on the frontier or the interior, could not hold indefinitely, they certainly provided unwelcome obstacles to his forces, costing them in kind considerable manpower and, perhaps even more so, considerable time to

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<sup>76</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 308.; Priscus, Fragment 9.1.1-7.

<sup>77</sup> Priscus, Fragment 9.1.8-13.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.4.8-11.

<sup>79</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 311.; Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 124.

effectively besiege.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, just as they had against smaller disorganized raids from the Pontic Steppe decades and centuries prior, they could still pose a serious threat to Hunnic supply in the event of future Roman-Hunnic exchanges.

But destroying the cities and infrastructure of the Danube Limes was not enough for the rampaging Hunnic king and his forces. After Attila had annihilated two Roman field armies and captured every fortification in the Thracian hinterlands except for Hadrianopolis and Heracleia, Theodosius was forced to sue for peace. The costs were unsurprisingly harsh; the Romans were forced to pay arrears of 6,000 pounds of gold to accommodate the original terms set in 442 along with an additional 2,100 pounds per annum.<sup>81</sup>

While crippling for the potential of rebuilding devastated Thrace and raising a new field army, the greatest penalty of the peace of 447 lay in the demilitarized zone Attila established south of the Danube. This region, a full “five days’ march” in breadth from the river southwards, extending from Pannonia to the smoldering wreck of Novae on the center of the Lower Danube, was to be evacuated of Roman populations, fortifications, or frontier outposts.<sup>82</sup> In forcing the creation of such a geopolitical no-man’s-land, the Eastern Roman Empire had been deprived of its most critical fixed defensive asset, and while the Haemus Mountains and Dinaric Alps could offer some limited geographical means of defense as in the case of the Roman-Gothic War of 376-382, following Attila’s peace deal of 477, Nova Roma existed solely at his mercy. Thus, with the Eastern Roman treasury running on fumes, the once-grand cities and fortresses of the Danube having been reduced to smoke and rubble, and the bound of Constantinopolis’ expansive

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<sup>80</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 124.

<sup>81</sup> Priscus, Fragment 9.4.15-20.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.1.9-14.

influence and administration forcibly curtailed well south of the old frontier for the foreseeable future, the Hunnic offensive of 447 marked the end of the old Roman Danube frontier.

## Conclusion

*For all we have and are,  
For all our children's fate,  
Stand up and take the war.  
The Hun is at the gate!  
Our world has passed away,  
In wantonness o'erthrown.  
There is nothing left to-day  
But steel and fire and stone...—Rudyard Kipling*

It is as of yet unclear what the status of the Danube was when the first Roman expeditionary forces arrived at its shorelines, but few likely anticipated that it would, short centuries later, have become the greatest and most calamitous frontier of the burgeoning Empire's history. In his posthumously published *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, as echoed by his various other studies, Belgian historian Henri Pirenne wrote of the extraordinary lost potential of the Danube for the affairs of Medieval Europe:

It might be, and indeed it has sometimes been, thought, that the valley of the Danube took the place of the Mediterranean as the great route of communication between the East and the West. This might indeed have happened, had it not been rendered inaccessible from the very first by the Avars, and, soon afterwards, by the Magyars. The sources show us no more than the traffic of a few boats loaded with salt from the salt-mines of Strasburg.<sup>1</sup>

While it would not reach the same level of urban development until the early modern era, nor ever again boast the same weight of defensive infrastructure it had attained before the Huns' arrival in Europe, the destruction wrought by Attila in 447 did not yet spell the frontier's end.

In 451, the decisive Hunnic conqueror invaded Gaul, wherein he was famously defeated on June 20, at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains. Herein, Aetius had mustered a meager force of Roman veterans and conscripts, bolstered by additional contingents of barbarians from around Gaul—the decedents of those that had fatefully crossed the Rhine at the end of 406—and the

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1956.), 7.

levies of Visigothic King Theodoric I for a valiant last stand against the Huns. Undaunted, Attila regathered himself and his forces on the Pannonian Plains, and in 452 launched a second campaign into Italia, crossing the undefended Julian Alps early in the year, and razing the northern Italian countryside and its foremost cities from Aquileia to Milan, to the ground. Turning southwards later in the year, intending to do the same to the *Urbs Aeterna* itself, he was met some distance from the city by a desperate delegation headed by Pope Leo, whose legendary conversation with Attila, possibly compounded by tribute and disease among his ranks, having miraculously convinced him to turn away from his destructive aim and withdraw with his loot from Italia, belongs to the ages.

Later in 453, whilst celebrating his marriage to his latest wife, a beautiful young Goth named Ildico, the Scourge of God suffered a hemorrhage and died a poetically anticlimactic death, thereby alleviating the citizenry of the beleaguered Roman Empire of its gravest and most feared external threat. Nevertheless, the damage wrought by the Huns and other barbarous peoples upon the structure of the Empire had been done. The Western Roman Empire would continue to crumble as immigrants from Germania and beyond steadily settled in the formerly imperial territories, erecting in its place their own various kingdoms, setting the stage for the rise of European Medievalry. David Nicolle writes:

Despite massive desertions by the often-unpaid frontier *limitanei*, archaeology shows that soldiers were now bringing their families within the forts. ... to the very end, plaintive messages came from units of *limitanei* on the Danube frontier begging for back pay until in 476, the last Western Emperor was finally deposed by his own Germanic *foederati*.<sup>2</sup>

With the fall of the West, the frontier on the Upper Danube, the oldest and perhaps the most stable segment of the river frontier, quickly dissolved in the face of barbarian immigration and

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<sup>2</sup> David Nicolle, *Romano-Byzantine Armies: 4th-9th Centuries*. (Botley: Osprey Publishing, 1992.), 6.

the rise of various new states in much the same way as its Middle Danubian counterpart had in the 430s.

In the East, the Lower Danube alone would soldier on as a region of import for the Romans. After the death of Attila, his sons would attempt to hold the de-Romanized border strip for some years, but as inter-tribal Hunnic organization broke down and the Huns slowly effervesced into the fabric of other Eastern European tribes, the trickle of information regarding activity around the Danube quickly dried up and from between the late 460s to the 490s, the lands beyond the Haemus lay virtually silent in written record. Roman interests in the region resurfaced in the late 490s, as, with nothing barring the crossing of the former frontier, numerous Slavic, Bulgar, and Avar tribes began to move south through Moesia.<sup>3</sup> As had so often happened over the recent centuries, conflicts on the other side of the Empire, namely the Isaurian War (492-497) and the Anastasian War (502-506), caused Constantinopolis to pull troops from their posts in Thrace and Greece eastwards beyond Anatolia, leaving the Roman Balkans gravely exposed. As trans-Danubian barbarians plundered the vulnerable hinterlands, Emperor Anastasius constructed the Anastasian Wall—a massive earthen bulwark spanning over 30 miles from the southern Euxine coast to the Sea of Marmara—to protect Constantinopolis and its immediate surroundings.<sup>4</sup>

While Eastern Roman influence gradually began to creep back to the Lower Danube under Anastasius and Justin I, it was under the guidance of Justinian the Great that the foundations of its resurgence, albeit brief, were to be laid.<sup>5</sup> While the line of fortifications was a

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<sup>3</sup> Peter S. Wells, *Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.), 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> James Allan Evans, *The Emperor Justinian and the Byzantine Empire* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005.), 55.

mere shadow of its former self, not possessing as much structure as that of the frontier under Valens and Theodosius I, numerous derelict forts and largely ruined cities were reconstituted and returned to service.<sup>6</sup> The remains of Singidunum, razed to the ground by the Huns, wavered between Hunnic tribes, Gepids, and Ostrogoths, until the early 510s when it fell back into imperial hands; by the 530s, Justinian had rebuilt much of it to its former glory, after which it resumed its role as a frontier bastion. Viminacium, one of the first Eastern Roman cities razed by the Huns, was restored in like manner. Sirmium, one of the Roman Empire's most important urban centers and the former capital of the Praetorian Prefecture of Illyricum, was reconquered from the Gepids in the late 560s and restored under Justin II, which demonstrated that Justinian's efforts at securing his northern flank did not cease with his death. Continual Eastern Roman counteroffensives had slowly restored a considerable fraction of the Balkan Peninsula to the holdings of Constantinople, successfully preventing the establishment of Slavic settlements within imperial territory until the late sixth century.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, gradually increasing pressure from the various peoples beyond the river, particularly the Slavs and Avars, coupled with the omnipresent tension of the eastern front, did not portend well for the fragile integrity of the new Danube frontier.

Arising to the throne in 582, Emperor Maurice made a concerted effort to hold the Danube against the barbarians, waging war continuously for his entire reign. He had inherited a brutally destructive war with Persia begun in 572 when his predecessor, Tiberius II, refused to pay Persia a previously arranged tribute. The resulting disparity between forces in the Eastern provinces and the Balkans had predictably detrimental results; in 582, the underdefended Sirmium was leveled by the Avars who began to systematically destroy scattered Roman

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 58.

fortifications in the Upper and Eastern Balkans, threatening Constantinopolis itself in 584, and plundering Roman territory deep into Greece.

In 591, Roman involvement in a two-year Persian civil war resulted in a favorable peace for the Empire, entailing the reacquisition of numerous critical fortresses along the Persian border as well as a new partition of the Caucasus region. Moving his forces westwards, Maurice began to gain the upper hand over his Avarian nemeses, steadily recovering the Danube defenses and launching numerous punitive campaigns into the heartlands of the Avars; by the end of the decade, Maurice was in firm control of the Danube frontier and Balkan hinterlands. Over the course of his Balkan campaigns, the embattled emperor seems to have come to a unique understanding of the strategic difficulties of the Balkan defenses even in times of peace with Persia, devoting several pages of his *Strategikon* to warring against Slavs, Antes, and other similar peoples from the Lower Danube; he wrote:

They live among nearly impenetrable forests, rivers, lake, and marshes, and have made the exits from their settlements branch out in many directions because of the dangers they might face. ... Do not station these troops close to the Danube, for the enemy would find out how few they are and consider them unimportant. Nor should they be stationed very far away, so their will be no delay, if it becomes necessary, to have them join the invading army. They should stay about a day's march from the Danube.<sup>8</sup>

The barbarians' awareness of the Romans' numbers on any of the Roman frontiers, proved to be a universally destabilizing factor for Roman frontier management; "the faith of the barbarians and the ancient terror of the Roman name," as Gibbon put it, was not enough to hold the Rhine when Stilicho stripped it of its garrisons to counter the Goths invading Italia in the early 400s.<sup>9</sup> The realization of this fact would not save the new Danube frontier.

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice, *Strategikon* 11.4.

<sup>9</sup> Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3:209.

In 602, Maurice was deposed, and with him went the integrity of the Danube frontier. With the veteran emperor Maurice having been dispatched from his appointment, Khosrow II of Persia declared war on the politically disjointed Eastern Roman Empire. In the process, troop redeployments weakened the Danube frontier for the last time, and within years of the war's instigation, thousands of Avars, Huns, Bulgars, Antes, and others would pour across the northern frontier, capturing several of the frontier's key defensive cities for themselves and settling throughout the formerly Roman hinterlands of the Balkan Peninsula. While in the centuries thereafter, Roman influence and armies would occasionally grace the territories of the Empire's former frontier, the Romans would never see a definite boundary established where once their most critical lay.

The problem of the Danube was unsolvable. The Danube river frontier, in ideal circumstances, offered the legions the tactical benefits of the defense in a forced crossing scenario, but it offered the Roman Empire holistically a strategic catch-22; there was no more homogenous landform better suited for providing a fixed physical and psychological border, transport, and intelligence gathering opportunities than the Danube, yet the river was so long and the territory which lined its banks was so diverse and rugged—so naturally unsuited to the Roman way of war—that it stood as an ultimately untenable defensive system in the threat of pervasive, ineradicable, hostile forces on the opposing shore. From the perspective of the average legionnaire stationed on the Danube, the barbarian threat sprang from an endless of geographic abyss of unassailable depth. Whenever any other frontier, most notably that which was shared with Persia, became spontaneously active, thereby pulling *limitanei* and reserve

*comitatenses* from their posts along the river, the Empire's core provinces behind it invariably suffered, obfuscating the security and stability Augustus dreamed for the Empire.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ceterum autem censeo Carthaginem esse delendam!*

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