

The Germanic Invasions

The Huns, an invading Asiatic tribe of horsemen, began menacing the Ostrogoths of eastern Europe in A.D. 372. The Romans observed these events with a watchful eye. While the Eastern Gothic people fell under the influence of the Huns, another Germanic tribe, the Visigoths (meaning the West Goths) began to fear their new Asiatic neighbors.

In 376, the Visigoths turned to the Roman Empire and requested permission from Rome to cross the Danube River into Roman lands. By doing this, the Visigoths were asking Rome for protection. When the Romans agreed, the Visigothic people streamed into the Empire. The Roman emperor, Valens, allowed the Visigoths to enter the Roman frontier lands with the intention of using them in the Roman army.

However, all did not go well. Roman officials along the frontier regions treated the Visigoths with little respect and did not distribute land to them as they were promised. Desperate for food and a home, the Visigoths turned on their hosts, the Romans, and began attacking Roman towns and villages. When Emperor Valens led an army against the Visigoths at Adrianople (modern-day Edirne, Turkey), the Visigoths defeated them and killed Valens.

The Emperor Theodosius managed to fend off most invasions during his reign, but after 395, a Visigothic leader named Alaric, led raids onto the Italian peninsula and attacked the city of Rome in A.D. 410, sacking the Imperial capital. To bring peace, the Imperial government was forced to give Roman territory in southern Gaul to the Visigoths, where they established an extensive kingdom.

Soon after this defeat, other barbarian tribes began to menace the Empire, invading at will across the frontier borders. After being pushed out of Gaul by the Visigoths, a tribe called the Vandals migrated to Roman Spain and then to northern Africa, where they established a kingdom. In 455, the Vandals reached their height of power and campaigned across the Mediterranean, landed in Italy and succeeded in sacking Rome. During the same period, the Burgundians moved into central Europe and the Franks settled in northern Gaul.

Ultimately, a weakened Rome had no alternative but to retreat in the face of these repeated German



invasions into its territories. Roman army units were withdrawn from frontier posts, and legions of border troops were pulled deeper into the Empire. After the withdrawal of such troops from England in A.D. 407, the British Isles were left without Imperial protection. Over the next 50 years, German tribes—including the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons—raided the countryside. The Celtic people there, left by the Romans, were nearly destroyed by these Danish invaders.

Few of these new Germanic kingdoms lasted longer than a couple of centuries. Only two—the Angles and Saxons in Britain, and the Franks in Gaul (the name would later be used in renaming the region *France*)—managed to remain powerful over the long run.

All these invasions, even the sacking of Rome twice, did not bring the Empire to an immediate end, however. But Roman rule was slipping fast. Germans were serving as officers and soldiers in the Roman army by this time. In 475, a German commander of Roman forces named Orestes led a coup and had his son, Romulus Augustus, placed on the Roman throne. The next year, another German commander, Odovacar, killed Orestes and deposed his son. This coup in A.D. 476 is considered by some historians as the year of the fall of the Roman Empire.

Review and Write

Why did the Roman government have so much trouble coping with German tribes on their borders?