

# ATTACK OF THE BARBARIANS!

## INTRODUCTION

The term "barbarian" comes from the Greek word βάρβαρος (*Bárbaros*) which meant a non-Greek, someone whose language was not Greek. The Greeks originally used the term to describe most of the peoples of Northern Europe because to them, the harsh "barking" sound of their speech sounded like "bar-bar-bar", similar to "blah blah" or "babble" in English. Since these strangers from the north did not understand the Greek language, the Greeks believed them to be "illiterate." The term also came to mean "stranger" or "wanderer", since most of the barbarians with which the Greeks came in contact were nomadic travelers.

To the people of ancient Greece and Rome, a barbarian was anyone who was not part of their culture. Because most of these "strangers" regularly practiced raids upon these civilizations, the term "barbarian" gradually evolved into a negative term: a person who was sub-human, uncivilized, and regularly practiced the most disgusting and inhuman acts imaginable. Nothing could have been farther from the truth.

Many barbarians were a tall, fierce, fair-haired, and fair-skinned people. They kicked out or forced the people of the regions they entered to adopt their ways. They never truly settled anywhere, ever-moving as their needs and resources changed. Eventually they did settle and create homes and lifestyles for themselves, yet their culture was never elaborate.

Those who they came in contact with considered them uncivilized, and yet were fascinated by their strength, stamina, force of will, charisma, and versatility. They were respected by those they made friends with, and feared by those who opposed them. Even within their own society, they fought amongst themselves, seeking power over, and control of, the lands they conquered.

The Romans, on the other hand, saw themselves as having a highly advanced civilization, and they looked down on the cultures of the people who lived beyond the borders of their empire. In 122 AD, Emperor Hadrian built a wall separating the Roman part of Britain from the mountainous land now called Scotland. The Romans called the Scottish people "barbarians," possibly because their native Celtic language sounded like the bleating of sheep. The term was eventually used to describe anyone who lived beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, in the *barbaricum*.

## MAJOR GROUPS OF BARBARIANS THAT GAVE ROME THE MOST TROUBLE

Angles / Saxons / Britons  
Visigoths / Ostrogoths  
Vandals  
Lombards  
Franks  
Celts (Gauls)  
Huns  
Vikings (Norse / Danes / Swedes / Finns)

The people who lived northeast of the Roman Empire spoke languages similar to modern German. These "Germanic tribes" included the Vandals, Goths, and Franks. Most of the tribesmen did not know how to read, but unlike the Huns, they were farmers and were not nomads.

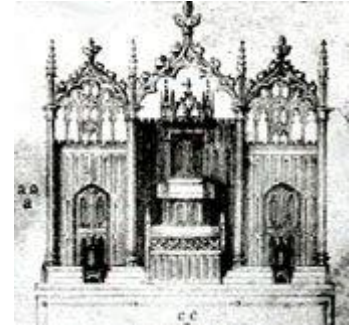


In 376, the Huns forced the Visigoths, or "western Goths", to leave their homeland near the Danube River in modern Austria. The Visigoths asked Emperor Valens permission to settle inside the Roman Empire. Valens agreed, but charged the Visigoths unfair prices for food and other supplies. When the Visigoths protested, Valens ordered them to leave. The Visigoths refused, and formed an army that defeated and killed the emperor in 378 at the Battle of Adrianople.

Alaric was a Visigoth who joined the Roman army and rose to a high rank. He left the army when his father died and became king of the Visigoths. In 410, the Romans refused to pay the customary “protection” money to the Visigoths to keep them from attacking the Empire, so Alaric’s soldiers formed a siege around Rome. When the city was close to starvation, the Roman citizens opened the gates and allowed the conquering army to enter. The Visigoths rampaged through the streets for three days, pillaging and burning. Alaric ordered his army not to rape women or destroy churches (pretty civilized for a barbarian). Rome was not completely destroyed, but for the first time in nearly 800 years, the “eternal city” had been defeated.

Germanic tribes overran what was left of the Roman Empire. The Ostrogoths, or “eastern Goths,” came from land we now call the Ukraine (just west of modern-day Russia). The Ostrogoths conquered most of Italy, Greece, and the western Balkans. The Vandals took control of the Roman territory in North Africa. The Franks overran France, while the Saxons conquered the southern part of England.

The Goths left behind a great impact on art and architecture in Europe. Gothic architecture features sharp lines and precise angles. Gothic churches and cathedrals have tall spires. Gothic literature refers to gloomy stories with supernatural themes. Some teenagers use the term Gothic to refer to music and fashion described as gloomy, dramatic, and dark.



The Huns were a nomadic people who originated in North Central Asia and appeared in Europe in the 4th century AD. They were organized militarily and were divided into hordes. Their military superiority was due to their small, rapid horses, on which they practically lived, even eating and negotiating treaties on horseback. The Huns appear in history in the 3rd century BC, when part of the Great Wall of China was erected to exclude them from China.

They crossed the Danube River, penetrated deep into the Eastern Roman Empire, and in 432 forced Emperor Theodosius to pay them tribute money. Attila, their greatest king, had his palace in Hungary. Most of the territories that now constitute European Russia, Poland, and Germany were controlled by him. When Rome refused in 450 to pay further tribute money, the Huns invaded Italy and Gaul and were defeated in 451. However, they continued to ravage Italy before withdrawing after Attila’s death in 453.

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## NOTABLE BARBARIANS WHO MADE TROUBLE FOR ROME

### ALARIC (370-410)



Alaric I (ăl'ərĭk), c.370–410, king of the Visigoths from 395–410 who plundered Greece in 395 and attacked Italy, conquering Rome in 410. He headed the Visigothic troops serving Emperor Theodosius I. After the emperor's death, in 395, the troops rebelled and chose Alaric as their leader. Alaric devastated Thrace, Macedonia, and Greece. In 401 he invaded Italy, where after some indecisive warfare he agreed to withdraw. The Romans were persuaded to buy Alaric's alliance, by paying tribute money on a regular basis.

The Romans soon broke their agreement, and Alaric again invaded Italy and laid siege to Rome in 408 and again in 409. Unable to negotiate an agreement with the Senate for an acceptable amount of tribute money, Alaric stormed and sacked Rome in 410 and then marched south to attack Sicily and Africa.

A storm destroyed his fleet, and Alaric, having turned back, died of an illness. His brother was elected his successor. It is said that Alaric was buried in a secret burial place, and the slaves who dug his grave were killed to protect the secret.

### ATTILA THE HUN (406-453)

Attila (ətĭl'ə, ät'ələ), 406?-453, king of the Huns from 433?–453 and the most successful of the barbarian invaders of the Roman Empire. In 434, Attila became co-ruler with his brother, whom he murdered in 445. In 434, Attila used his mounted army to force a treaty with the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II. Through this treaty, he obtained tribute money and vast areas of land for the Huns. In 447 he again attacked the empire and spent the following three years negotiating a new peace treaty.



In 450, however, the new Eastern emperor, Marcian, refused to pay any more tribute money to the Huns. Emperor Valentinian III of the Western Roman Empire refused to pay the Huns as well. Valentinian's ambitious sister, Honoria, attempted to form an alliance with Attila. Attila took her proposal as a marriage offer and demanded half of the Western Empire as a dowry, a demand that emperor Valentinian refused.

Leaving Hungary with an army of perhaps half a million Huns and allies, Attila, who had by this time gained the nickname "the scourge of God", invaded Gaul in 451. He was defeated by the Gallic tribes and Attila turned back and invaded Northern Italy in 452. He abandoned his plan to take Rome itself, however, after Pope Leo I personally asked Attila and his army to leave. Attila did just that, much to the surprise of the Romans. Soon afterward in Hungary, Attila died of a nosebleed while celebrating his marriage to his recently acquired bride Ildico.



### **GAIŠERIC, A.K.A. GENŠERIC "THE LAME" (390-477)**

Gaiseric (gī'sərik) or Genseric (gĕn'sərik, jĕn'sərik), c.390–477, king of the Vandals and the Alani from 428–477. In around 428 or 429, Gaiseric led approximately 80,000 Vandals from Spain to Carthage in North Africa where he ravaged Roman cities there and established a Vandal kingdom with Carthage as his capital. From there he crossed the Mediterranean Sea in 455 to attack and plunder Rome. He also attacked other Roman positions around the Mediterranean (Egypt, Thrace and Asia Minor)--and brought Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica under his direct rule.

### **ODOACER, A.K.A. ODOVACAR (434-493)**

Odoacer (ōdōā'sər) or Odovacar (ōdōvā'kər), c.435–493, Germanic tribal leader who in 476 deposed (removed from power) the Roman emperor Romulus Augustulus, bringing the Western Roman Empire to an end. Odoacer, who was rumored to be half Hun, was chieftain of several Germanic "barbarian" tribes. He and his troops were mercenaries (professional soldiers) in the service of Rome, but in 476 one of the Germanic tribes revolted and proclaimed Odoacer their king.

Odoacer defeated the Roman general Orestes and deposed Romulus Augustulus, last Roman emperor of the Western Empire, by crowning himself king (not emperor). The date 476 is often accepted as the end of the Western Roman Empire. However, Odoacer's action made little difference in the status of Western Rome, which had long been prey to the barbarian armies; most of the Roman emperors during this time had been mere puppets, doing the bidding of the barbarians.

Emperor Zeno of the Eastern Empire, considering himself heir to the Western Empire, reluctantly recognized Odoacer's authority over Italy and granted him the title of patrician. In 488 however, as Odoacer's power grew, Eastern emperor Zeno sent Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, into Italy to expel Odoacer. Several times defeated, Odoacer gave in to Theodoric in 493 and agreed to a treaty by which he was to share his authority with Theodoric. Invited to a "friendly" banquet by Theodoric, Odoacer was cleaved in two by Theodoric and his son and chief officers were also assassinated; thus Theodoric made himself master of Italy.



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## **BARBARIAN INVASIONS**

167 AD - Germans invade Italy and Greece.

367 AD - Picts and Scots invade England.

370 AD - Huns invade Europe.

406 AD - Vandals, Alans and Suevis invade Gaul (France).

410 AD - Visigoths, led by **Alaric**, capture Rome; settle in Spain and southern France.

421 AD - Angles and Saxons invade Britain.

429 AD - Vandals invade North Africa. Burgundians and Franks invade France and Italy.

451 AD - Huns, led by **Attila the Hun**, invade France, but retreat at the request of Pope Leo I in 452 AD.

453 AD - Attila dies of a nosebleed.

455 AD - Vandals, led by **Gaiseric**, conquer Rome.

476 AD - Several tribes converge on and conquer Rome; **Odoacer** is proclaimed king of Rome.

