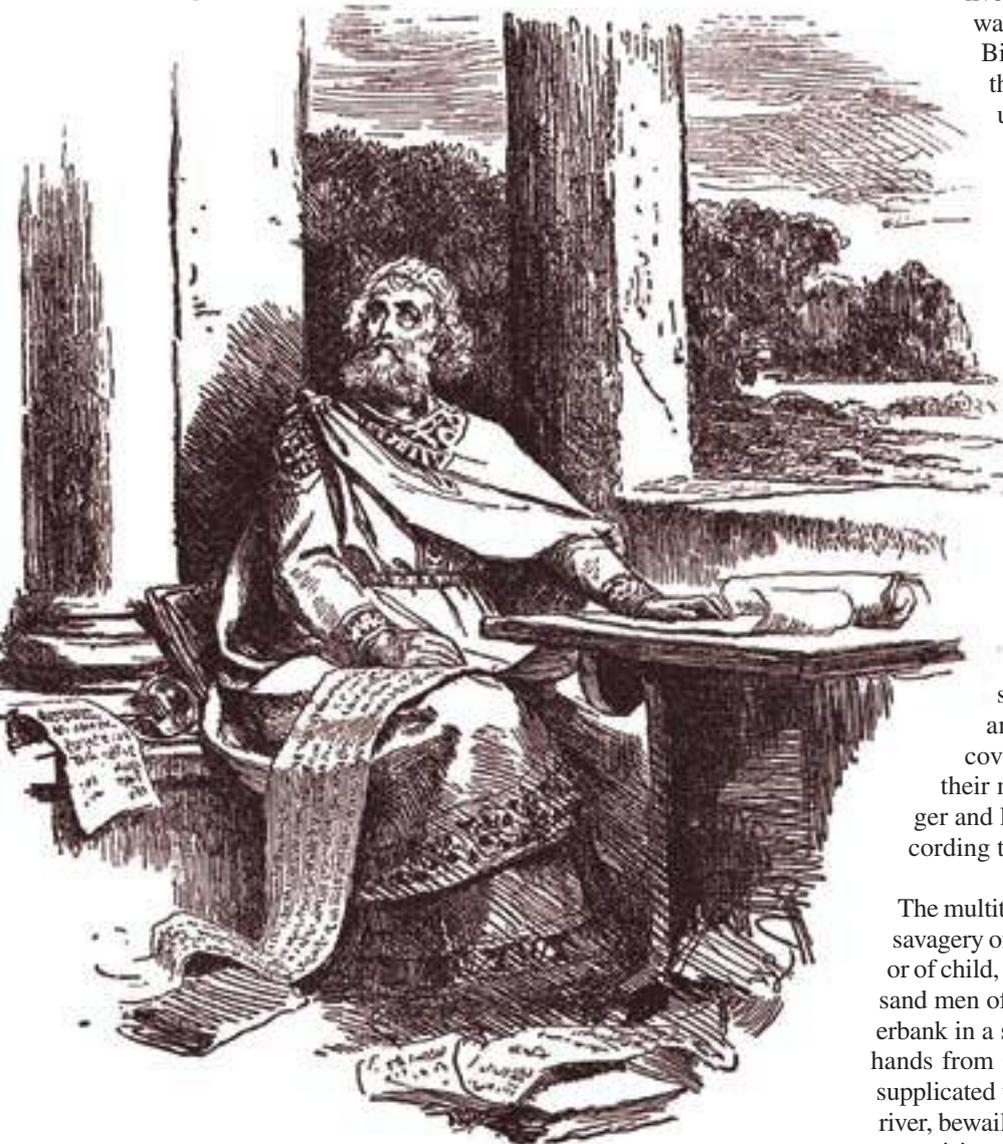


# The Fall of Rome

Beginning in the fourth century, an unprecedented wave of immigration washed over the Roman Empire, leading to the end of the empire in the West.



**Bishop Ulfilas:** In the fourth century, Ulfilas, an Arian bishop, was a respected linguist and scholar, having translated the Bible into the Germanic language of the barbarian Goths. When the Goths were forced to migrate to the Roman Empire, Ulfilas, according to some ancient sources, served as their emissary to the Roman Emperor Valens.

by *Dennis Behreandt*

A monk or a priest or an emissary. “I wonder what I have become this day,” the man in the garb of a priest thought as he walked the muddy path between rows of shoddy hovels. Ulfilas, the Bishop, scratched his head and mused that, as a younger man, he had once had a full head of hair. God had compensated him, he thought, giving him a full, thick beard.

God had also seen fit to challenge him. The son of Cappadocian parents who had been captured in a barbarian raid and carried off, he had been raised amongst those barbarians, the Goths, who lived beyond the Danube River. Among them he was raised to manhood, and afterwards, as their Bishop, he brought them Christianity, albeit of the Arian variety. All had been well, it seemed, until recently. The Roman town in which he now resided with a small band of Goth immigrants was becoming palpably nervous.

Traders returning from Gothia told tales of disaster that some thought impossible. If they were to be believed, the Gothic armies, unmatched in military valor, had been routed in battle by the mysterious and terrifying Huns far to the east and were in headlong retreat. Whole families and villages, upon hearing of the disaster, had packed what belongings they could and abandoned their homeland. There would be no safety, they thought, unless they could reach Roman territory.

The fleeing Goths reached Roman territory at the shore of the Danube River. There they formed a vast horde, a seething mass of humanity unlike anything anyone had ever seen. Among them were men of fighting age and along with them their families. Children covered with mud and infected with lice clutched their mother’s legs, while infants wailed from hunger and lack of sleep. All of them were desperate. According to one contemporary:

The multitude of [Goths] escaping from the murderous savagery of the Huns, who spared not the life of woman or of child, amounted to not less than two hundred thousand men of fighting age. These, standing upon the riverbank in a state of great excitement, stretched out their hands from afar with loud lamentations, and earnestly supplicated that they might be allowed to cross over the river, bewailing the calamity that had befallen them, and promising that they would faithfully adhere to the Imperial alliance if this boon were granted them.

Such a request could only be granted by the emperor who, at the time, was in the city of Antioch. Ulfilas,

who was famous both among the Goths and the Romans, went to Antioch to plead the Goths' case with Emperor Valens. The emperor considered the request and days went by as he discussed matters with his advisers. Finally, he rendered his decision. Yes, the Goths could cross the river and live in the land of the Romans. Probably it was Ulfilas who journeyed back to the Danube to deliver the imperial decision. The warriors among the Goths would have to surrender their weapons upon crossing, and mothers would weep at the news that their young sons would be ransomed throughout the vast empire. The alternative was annihilation at the hands of the Huns. The Goths did not hesitate to agree to the Roman terms.

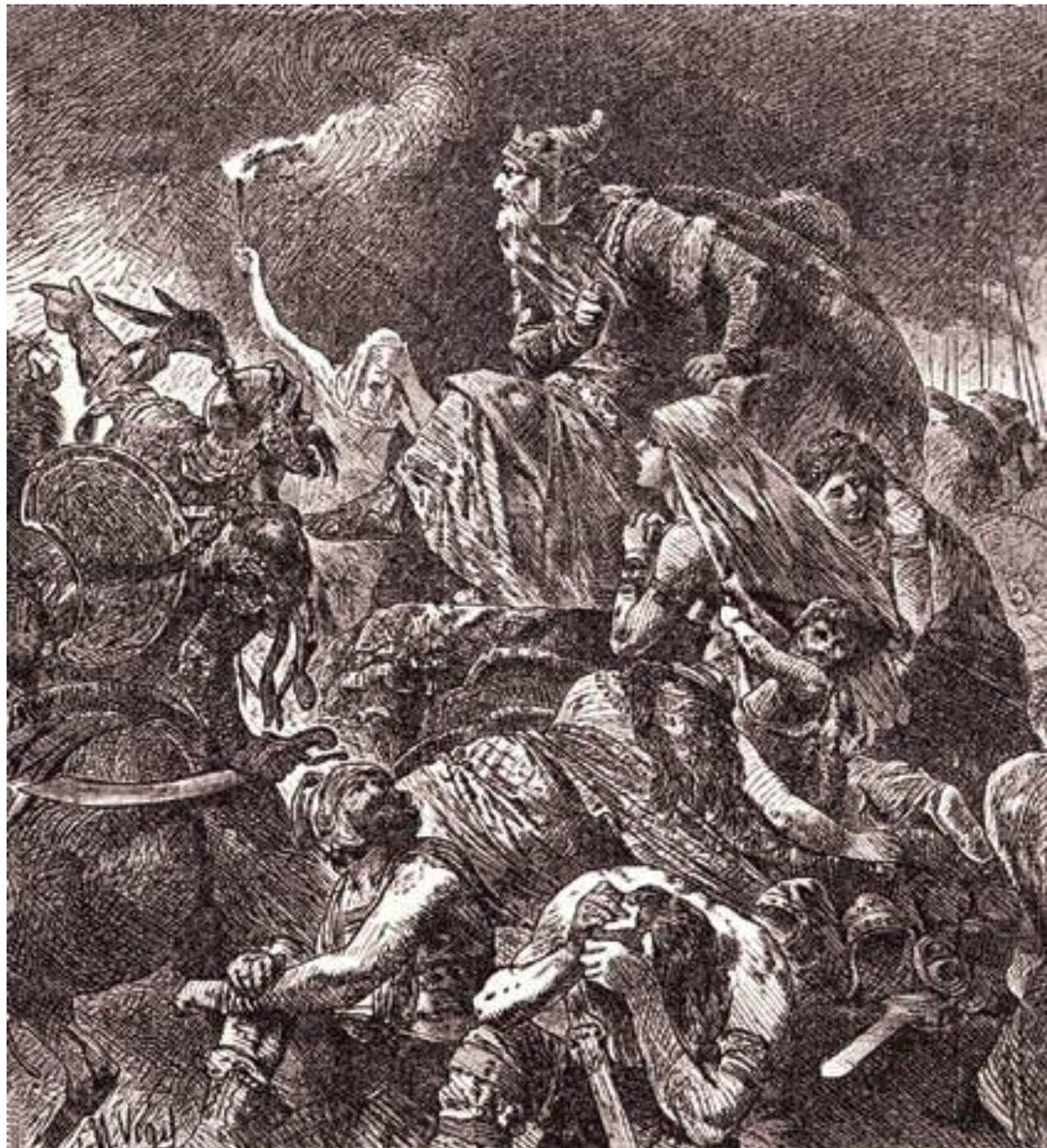
Ulfilas likely returned to his home in the town of Nicopolis ad Istrum, a few miles south of the river's banks. He had done his best for his adopted people. They would be safe, and grateful too. In return for their safety, they would become Foederati, allies that would be zealous defenders of the empire and would swell the ranks of the Legions. That, in any case, was what Ulfilas likely thought and what Valens, the emperor, fervently hoped. It wasn't to be. Instead, the decision to admit the Goths would be a disaster. Pandora's Box had been opened and the first act in the destruction of the Roman Empire, caused by an onrushing storm of mass migration, was about to unfold.

### **Total War**

Initially, the Goths must have been relieved to hear that the emperor would welcome them. But nothing about this migration would go smoothly, and any relief the refugees felt on hearing the emperor's decision would soon fade in the face of further misfortune. The Roman soldiers charged with ferrying the horde across the Danube, instead of doing

their duty to the empire and disarming the Goths before transporting them to safety, turned instead to theft and rapine. The Byzantine historian Zosimus recorded the Roman perfidy and its predictable result: "The tribunes and other officers ... went over to bring the Barbarians unarmed into the Roman territory; but occupied themselves solely in the

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**Attila the Hun:** The most famous leader of the barbarian Huns, Attila still symbolizes to this day the ferocity for which these nomadic warriors were known. It was their drive across the steppe to the West that forced the massive migration of Goths and other Germanic peoples to the lands of the Roman Empire.



**Defender of Rome:** Flavius Stilicho was the supreme military commander in the Western Empire at the beginning of the fifth century. In 406 A.D., he expelled a Gothic migration from Italy, but being the son of a barbarian father, was himself emblematic of the changes wrought in the empire by the barbarian migration.

gratification of their brutal appetites, or in procuring slaves, neglecting every thing that related to public affairs. A considerable number therefore crossed over with their arms, through this negligence. These, on arriving into the Roman dominion, forgot both their petition and their oaths. Thus all Thrace, Pannonia, and the whole country as far as Macedon and Thessaly were filled with Barbarians, who pillaged all in their way.”

Matters continued to degenerate after the crossing. The province was unprepared to feed the vast multitude of new arrivals, and no doubt balked at the thought that they should. Moreover, Roman officials would only sell the worst, rotten meat to the Goths at exorbitantly high prices. With this as backdrop, the Roman general in the province, one Lupicinus, invited Fritigern, the leader of the Goth immigrants and a

warrior with a fearsome reputation, to a banquet. During the feast a scuffle broke out between Fritigern’s warriors and some Roman soldiers. It was quelled, but Lupicinus ordered the Goth commanders put to death. Drawing his sword, Fritigern rushed out of the banquet to the cheers of his troops. The peaceful immigration was over. The amnestied Goths would now lay waste to the Roman Balkans at the point of the sword.

In 378 A.D., conditions of total war prevailed in the Balkans as the migrating Goths who had crossed the Danube prepared to engage the formidable military might of the empire. The climactic battle came on August 9 of that year. The Emperor Valens, tired of waiting for support from the Western Empire, marched his army north to meet the Goth warriors. What ensued was a battle of military giants. The

Romans, as always, were disciplined, ferocious, and well trained. But so were the Goths, who never failed to give a good account of themselves in battle. After much hard fighting, though, the Roman infantry began to crumble under the weight of the Gothic cavalry, and the battle turned into a rout. Worst of all, the emperor himself fell in battle, though precisely how is unclear. The Roman orator Themistius described the bleak outcome from the Roman point of view: “After the indescribable Iliad of evils on the Ister [Dniester] and the onset of the monstrous flame [of war], when there was not yet a king set over the affairs of the Romans, 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.” Themistius’ soaring rhetoric aside, the Gothic War was a catastrophe: the Romans had lost an emperor, a province, and a war.

The Gothic War was not the end of the empire in and of itself, but it was a prelude of sorts. Legally, the Balkans remained Roman, but demographically, the leading residents were now Goths. Moreover, they retained their autonomy. More ominously, a precedent had been set and additional migrations were to threaten the integrity of the empire on other frontiers. Twenty years after the events in the Balkans, the Goths and Vandals and other Germanic peoples were again pressing to the west, again probably being propelled by pressures from migrating Huns in the east. In the first decade of the fifth century, the Germanic migration moved into Italy and into Gaul — the heart of the Western Empire.

These were tremendous movements of people. If not as large as the Gothic migration 30 years earlier, they were substantial nevertheless. Oxford historian Peter Heather, in his recent study entitled *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, estimates that each of the three migrations in the first decade of the fifth century comprised approximately 100,000 people. “Such a scale is more than enough to explain how the immigrants were able to force their way across the Roman frontier in the first place,” Heather writes. “Late Roman military [garrisons] ... were designed to counter only endemic

small-scale raiding.... Tens of thousands of barbarians, even if many were noncombatants, were well beyond the competence of border troops.”

What would seem to have been the most serious of these migrations was repulsed in 406 A.D. The Goth Radagaisus, who by reputation was the most fearsome of the Gothic warriors, led as many as 100,000 migrants, of which about 20,000 were warriors, into Italy. The supreme Roman military commander in the West at the time was Flavius Stilicho. The son of a barbarian father in the service of Rome and a Roman mother, Stilicho was himself emblematic of the barbarian encroachment on the empire. In spirit, though, he was Roman through and through and in Italy he marshaled overwhelming force against Radagaisus. The barbarian was captured and put to death and his horde of followers dispersed into the empire, where in defeat they continued to shift the demographics of the realm.

The Romans were much less successful in Gaul. As Italy was breathing a sigh of relief at the defeat of Radagaisus, Vandals and other barbarian peoples swept across the Rhine and into Roman Gaul. In a little over two years, they had surged through the territory of what is today modern France and then poured into Spain. There was no question that these provinces had passed into the hands of the German immigrants. According to the historian Hydatius, in Spain they “apportioned to themselves by lot areas of the provinces for settlement: the Vandals took possession of Gallaecia, and the Sueves that part of Gallaecia which is situated on the very western edge of the Ocean.... The Spaniards in the cities and forts who had survived the disasters surrendered themselves to servitude under the barbarians, who held sway throughout the provinces.” This wasn’t military conquest alone. By sheer weight of numbers the immigrants established themselves in their new homelands. Roman authority, outnumbered and ignored, withered away.

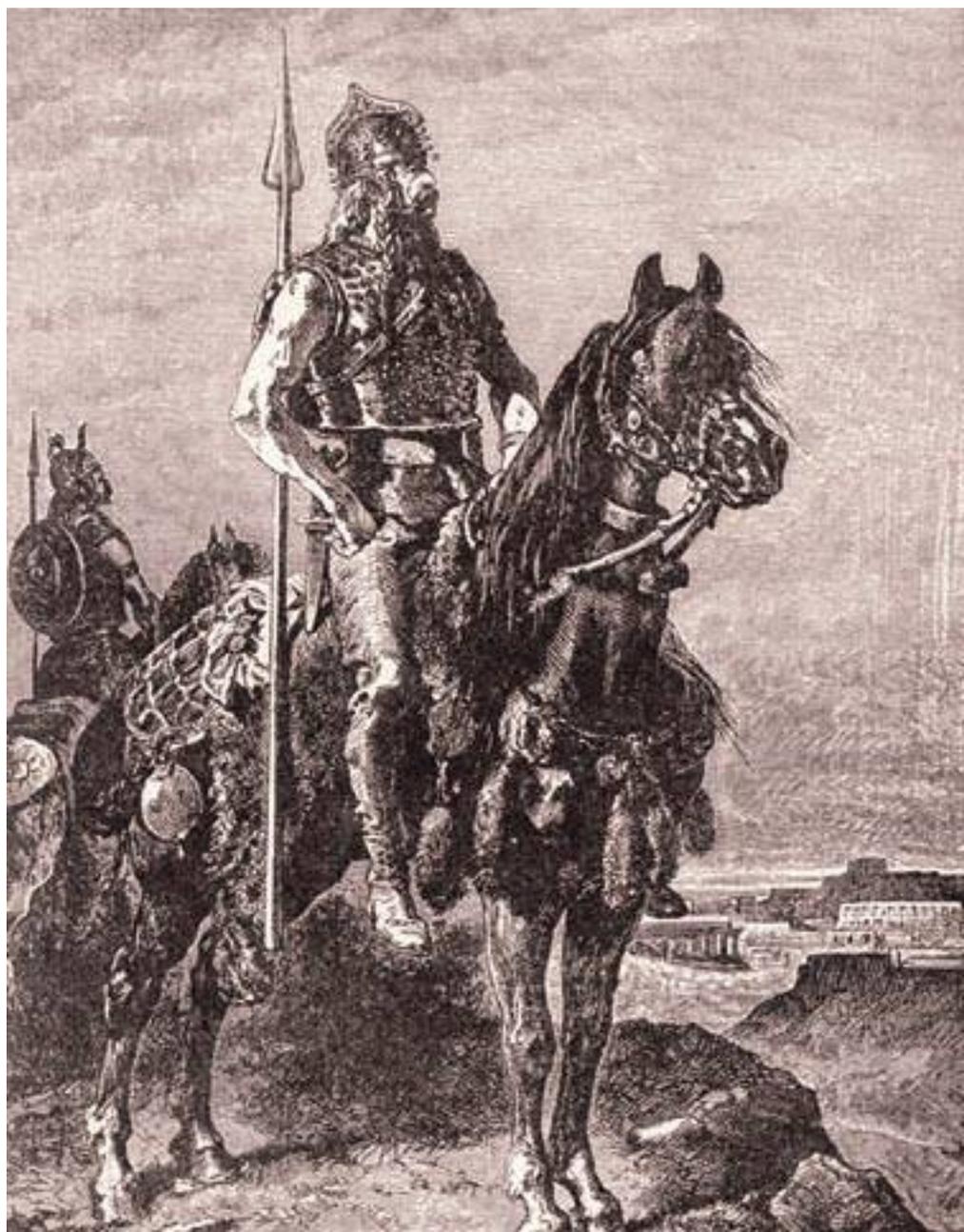
### **The Empire Struck Down**

Where Radagaisus failed in Italy, another Goth king was having more luck. This was Alaric, the head of those Goths who had once followed Fritigern. Desiring to live in Italy instead of the Balkans, Alaric led his followers into the Roman homeland, bent not on destruction, but on immigration.

The incursions caused the embattled empire to denude the outlying provinces of troops. In Britain, the 20th Legion, stationed there for centuries, was withdrawn. Stilicho, the general and Consul in the West under the Western Emperor Honorius, first parried Alaric, then partnered with him in an aborted campaign against

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**The sack of Rome:** In 410 A.D., the city of Rome fell to the Goths and their leader, Alaric. When news of the sack of Rome reached St. Jerome in Bethlehem, he asked: “What can be safe, if Rome in ruins fall?”



**“In my view,” concluded historian Peter Heather, “it is impossible to escape the fact that the western Empire broke up because too many outside groups established themselves on its territories.” Thus the Roman Empire perished under an onslaught of uncontrollable migration.**

the Eastern Emperor. When this campaign did not occur, Alaric appeared in Italy again with his army, demanding payment. Stilicho advised payment, but he was falling out of favor with the emperor and, in fact, was executed in 408. Charged with disloyalty, he was guilty only of rising too high in the esteem of his fellow Romans.

Stilicho was the only general capable of opposing Alaric and the Goths. With him gone, they now maneuvered freely, but with caution, trying to achieve their ends. In 410 A.D., on the night of August 24, Alaric’s Goths entered Rome itself. In the Eternal City, they plundered and destroyed, but as Christians, were scrupulously careful not to damage or despoil the belongings of the Church. The magnitude of this sack of Rome can be felt through the reaction of St. Jerome. “What can be safe, if Rome in ruins fall?” he wondered when news of the sack reached him in Bethlehem.

And still the empire lingered, but it was now a Romano Gothic empire. Then came the penultimate blow, when the Vandals in Spain invaded Africa, traditionally the source of much of the grain that fed Rome. By 442 A.D., the Vandals had wrested Carthage from imperial rule and Rome was forced to agree to a treaty formalizing the Vandal seizure of important North African territories. Finally, at the same time, came the Huns. Now under the infamous Attila, they rampaged irresistibly through the Balkans. Germans and Huns alike then moved en masse westward and into Gaul, a further immigration that again diluted the empire’s rule.

By this time Rome, in the imperial sense, was no longer Rome. The barbarians controlled vast swaths of territory and dictated in some cases imperial succession. The empire in the West lived on in name,

until the barbarian Odoacer, the real power in Italy, wrote to the Eastern Emperor and proposed that there was no longer a need for a Western Emperor. In Constantinople, the Emperor Zeno agreed and Romulus Augustulus, the Western Emperor in name only, was allowed to retire. Odoacer “sent the western imperial vestments, including ... the diadem and cloak which only an emperor could wear, back to Constantinople,” wrote historian Peter Heather. “This momentous act brought half a millennium of empire to a close.”

It took 100 years for the Roman Empire in the west to disappear. It is noteworthy that, while it was incredibly violent, it

didn’t happen through conquest alone. The Goths Christianized by Ulfilas did not seek to overturn imperial authority, nor did the Goths under Alaric seek the end of the empire. Nor for that matter did the Vandals in Africa or Attila in central Europe. They all sought, to greater or lesser degrees, accommodation and self-rule within the empire, and settling there, eventually transformed Europe from the homogeneous state ruled by Rome into a continent of independent kingdoms. “In my view,” concluded historian Peter Heather, “it is impossible to escape the fact that the western Empire broke up because too many outside groups established themselves on its territories.” In the end, the Roman Empire, built by controlled immigration, perished under an onslaught of uncontrollable barbarian migration. ■



**The end of empire:** In 476 A.D., Romulus Augustulus, the last of the Roman emperors in the West, was deposed by the barbarian Odoacer. Romulus Augustulus had been emperor in name only and, recognizing this, Odoacer effectively dissolved the Western Empire by sending the Imperial vestments to the Eastern Emperor Zeno in Constantinople.