

Effect on Western Europe

The Roman Empire had a long association with its Germanic neighbors. Referring to these neighbors as “barbarians,” a term originally used by the Greeks to denote peoples who did not speak the Greek language and adopted by the Romans to denote peoples who did not live in cities, Roman expansion to the north brought the empire in contact with various migratory tribes as early as the first century. In the provinces, especially the northern ones in the west, Rome maintained steady interaction with these tribes. Military commanders hired Germanic mercenary soldiers to fill out their armies. The gifts and honors Roman generals gave to distinguished warriors began to transform some of these tribes by promoting steady leadership. Instead of disbanding after battle, which was the customary practice, warriors began to gather under particular military leaders and to stay more or less together. As the supply of Roman troops dwindled, partially due to overreach and partially due to the effects of economic crises such as that of the third century, the imperial army in the west came to rely more and more heavily on alliances with Germanic troops. Receiving the status of *foederati*, Germanic troops fought under their own leaders alongside Roman troops to protect the borders. It was from this allied status that the Visigoths petitioned the emperor Valens in 376 for admittance and protection from a fierce new threat from Asia: the Huns. Moving west from Mongolia and China, these expert horsemen had already enslaved the Ostrogoths, a neighboring tribe. Fearing the devastation the Huns meted out and needing to maintain the alliance to ward off further invasion, Valens set up camps in Thrace for the Visigoths. This was the first time an entire people under their own rulers were admitted into Rome’s borders. As the fourth century came to a close, large scale migrations continued and more tribes were admitted in this way.

The whole scale movement of new peoples inside the borders of the empire would have serious long-term consequences for the west. The relative ease with which this happened at the end of the fourth century, however, was in large part the result of internal circumstances peculiar to the western half of the empire. Cities began to decline as the wealthiest citizens took refuge at their fortified country estates during the third century. This made taxes more difficult to collect and the tax burden fell on the poor. Many elected to attach themselves to the estates of the wealthy to escape the tax burden and receive protection behind the fortifications, which depleted the tax base even more, as well as the supply of soldiers. It was in this way the western armies came to rely so heavily on Germanic mercenary soldiers and alliances with entire tribes. Cities in the west remained political and religious centers, but they did not thrive as they did in the eastern half of the empire. The steady flow of trade and wealth in the east enabled emperors to bribe Germanic invaders and avoid large scale migration, at least during the fourth and most of the fifth centuries. The vulnerability of the west became painfully obvious after the Visigoths revolted in 378. Mistreated by Roman opportunists and feeling betrayed by Valens when supplies to the camps began to run dry, the Visigoths left the camps and moved into the countryside, pillaging along the way.

Valens sent troops to put down the revolt but was defeated by the Visigoths at a battle fought at Adrianople. A tentative peace followed but began to dissolve when the new king of the Visigoths, Alaric (ca. 370–410), was denied a post in the government in Constantinople. The eastern emperor, Arcadius, urged Alaric to take his troublesome followers and try his chances in the west. Hearing this news, the western emperor, Honorius, fortified himself in Ravenna and pulled troops from the Rhineland to protect Italy. This action resulted in the unopposed movement of more tribes, including the Vandals, Alans, and Sueves, into the empire through Gaul in 406.

The biggest blow to the west, however, was Alaric's entry into the city of Rome itself. He and his Visigoth warriors attacked the city in 408 and broke through in 410. The Visigoths were Arian Christians and respected the sanctity of the churches, leaving them alone, but they carried off as much of the movable wealth as they could before heading toward North Africa, from where Rome received most of its grain. North Africa's grain supply also attracted another tribe, one that entered the borders in 406: the Vandals. After subduing the wealthy province, the Vandals moved on the city of Rome in 455, sacking the city. In the aftermath of this second sack, a Visigoth general, Ricimer, rose to power. Ricimer appointed a series of puppet emperors, although real rule rested with him. In 476 when a military revolt deposed the last of these puppet emperors, Romulus Augustulus, the military commander who wrested control, dispensed with appointing a figurehead: Odovacer (r. 476-493). He sent the imperial regalia back to Constantinople. In response, the emperor Zeno sent the king of the Ostrogoths, who were released from enslavement with the demise of the Huns, to overthrow Odovacer. The Ostrogoth king, Theodoric, had spent a considerable amount of time in Constantinople as a hostage. He was well versed in Roman institutions and held them in high regard. Once in power, Theodoric retained the bureaucratic administration of Rome, entrusting the civil bureaucracy to Romans while the army came from the Ostrogothic and other Germanic troops. Like the Visigoths before them, the Ostrogoths were Arian Christians, but they respected the Roman church. For nearly thirty years, peace reigned again in the west, fostered through intermarriages with other Germanic royal families, steady doles of grain, a reformed tax system to alleviate pressure on the poor, and repair of the aqueducts.

The stability created during Theodoric's reign evaporated after his death in 526. For the remainder of the sixth century, Rome and the Italian peninsula would face invasion by the Lombards, the Byzantine attempt to reconquer the western provinces, and the growing strength of the only unifying power left in the west: the church. In the provinces, bishops came to take over the civic responsibilities of city management. In Rome, the pope conspired to protect the eternal city from the Lombards. He turned to a rising power to the north in Gaul: the Franks. When the ruler of the Franks, Clovis, converted to Roman Christianity, the culture of the empire, the culture of the Christian church, and the culture of Germanic tribes grew closer together to create what historians characterize as medieval civilization.