

The Evolution of the Late Roman World:
Religious, Political, and Military Developments in Late Antiquity

by

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This thesis examines selected religious, political, and military developments of the late Roman Empire from the end of the second century through the end of the reign of Justinian I. The specific developments under consideration are the military reforms that occurred throughout the history of the Roman Empire and the growing importance of the Roman cavalry, the spread of Christianity, and the complex relationship between Christianity and politics in the late Roman world. These developments allowed the Roman Empire to transition from a concrete political entity, which ceased to exist in 476, into a set of various cultural ideals that influenced most of western Europe throughout the middle ages.

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Introduction

While the Roman Empire may have ceased to exist as a political entity in western Europe following Odoacer's overthrow of Romulus Augustus¹ it did not fall, at least not in the true sense of the word. Instead Rome survived in various forms that had a lasting impact on early medieval Europe. Three aspects through which Rome survived its "collapse" were the military, religion, and politics. While the Roman military in the west disappeared after Romulus Augustus was deposed, its traditions continued to live on. Early medieval armies, while not carbon copies of the Roman legions, carried on some of the traditions that had developed in late antiquity, namely the increased reliance on cavalry. The Empire also had a lasting impact on the political realities of medieval Europe as well; many of the kingdoms that formed in the late fifth or early sixth centuries used the same boundaries that Rome had used for its provinces, as did the church, whose diocese followed Roman political divisions. The Visigothic Kingdom in Spain, for example, controlled most of what was the Roman province of Hispania. Even Republican Rome had some level of influence on medieval Europe as many of the Italian city-states, like the Republic of Venice, revived Rome's earlier republican values.

Rome's greatest influence on medieval Europe, however, was through Roman Catholicism. Catholicism's roots can be traced back to the Nicene Creed adopted by the Church after the Council of Nicaea in 325. The Catholic Church permeated every level of society in medieval Europe, and it perpetuated many Roman traditions. The greatest influences on Catholic

¹ Flavius Romulus Augustus, the final Roman Emperor in the west, is more commonly referred to by the derisive nickname Romulus Augustulus, which means "Little Augustus".

beliefs in the early middle ages were Roman clergymen like Augustine and Eusebius, with whom the tradition of ecclesiastical history began.

The Empire's influence was also exerted, perhaps to a lesser extent, on Europe by the eastern Roman Empire as it carried on many of the traditions that developed in late antiquity. This is most evident in the development of the relationship between church and state. While this influence was mostly limited to eastern Europe after 476, the Empire did conquer Italy in the reign of Justinian and controlled parts of southern Italy until 1071. The eastern Empire also had some interactions with the rest of western Europe throughout the middle ages, chiefly because of the Crusades.

This thesis will examine the origins of these various traditions and how they developed throughout the period of late antiquity and continued to develop through the reign of Justinian in the east. More research can be done not only on these specific institutions, especially in the eastern Roman Empire as they continued to develop well after the reign of Justinian, but also on others. Rome's influence on the middle ages was not limited to the military, religion, and politics; the Empire had a lasting impact in many other ways as well. Virtually all of western Europe speaks a language that is descended from or heavily influenced by Latin; medieval architecture was heavily influenced by its ancient counterpart; Roman laws served as the basis for many legal systems in medieval Europe; and even Rome's infrastructure saw continued use throughout the middle ages.

Chapter 1 Historiography

Ancient Works

The primary sources for the late Roman Empire are few and far between, as few written sources from the period have survived to the present day. Sources like Ammianus Marcellinus' *The Late Roman Empire* and Procopius' *History of the Wars* will be used extensively throughout this thesis. Procopius is the only primary source cited in the chapter on Justinian's wars, as his *History* is the only surviving ancient source from the reign of Justinian that discusses the wars. What remains of Ammianus' history covers the period from 353 to 378, ending with the Roman defeat at Adrianople and the death of Emperor Valens. Procopius, on the other hand, recorded Justinian's wars in Persia, North Africa, and Italy. Ammianus was a soldier in the Roman military and was also a firsthand witness to some of the events and battles that he describes. Procopius was not a soldier himself, but he did accompany Belisarius, one of Justinian's most trusted generals, on several of his campaigns. As such, Procopius was present for all the wars that his *History* covers and had access to firsthand accounts from soldiers who fought in the battles that he did not witness in person.

There are some problems with the accounts of both men, as well as other surviving sources from this period. As with most ancient writers, Ammianus and Procopius are not free of bias. Ammianus, for example, expresses great disdain at Valens' decision to settle the Goths inside the Empire. While Procopius often can be as less biased in his *History of the Wars*, this is certainly not the case for his *Secret History*. In the *Secret History*, Procopius leveled several scandalous accusations at Justinian, the emperor's wife Theodora, and even Belisarius. Ancient

historians need to be read with great care, and in the context of their own times, if we are to understand what is true and what is biased.

While Ammianus and Procopius will be the most frequently cited sources for the chapters on the military and Justinian's wars, various Christian texts will be used throughout the chapter focusing on religion. These texts likely survived in greater numbers because they were written by prominent members of the early Church, and as such Christians wanted to preserve what these men wrote more than they did the various historical texts written by pagans. Eusebius of Caesarea's *History of the Church*, which was translated from Greek into Latin by Rufinus of Aquileia, begins with the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 AD and ends with Constantine's victory over Licinius in 324. His *Church History* is one of the most influential pieces of writing from late antiquity, because it began the tradition of ecclesiastical histories written by clergymen. This tradition was continued by Paulus Orosius in the early fifth century when he wrote his *Historiae Adversus Paganos*. Others who followed in this tradition include Gregory of Tours who wrote a Christian history of the Franks, and Bede who wrote an ecclesiastical history of England.

Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* is also a source for one of the most momentous events in Roman history, the conversion of Constantine and the story of Constantine's alleged vision of a cross emblazoned with the words "*In hoc signo vinces*," which translates to "in this sign, you will conquer." This text is problematic because it was written after Constantine's death to glorify the deceased emperor and will be explored further in the chapter on religion. This story is also recorded by Lactantius in *The Deaths of the Persecutors*, but his version is quite different than the one told by Eusebius.

Lactantius' *Death of the Persecutors* is used extensively in the religion chapter both to corroborate Eusebius and to offer a more complete picture of Christianity in the late third and early fourth centuries. While Eusebius had direct access to Constantine after his conversion, he had to rely on rumors and secondhand for many of the things that occurred during the reigns of Diocletian and Maximianus. In contrast, for Diocletian's reign, Lactantius had reliable first-hand information. He taught rhetoric at Nicomedia at the behest of Diocletian himself, and had close associations with the emperor's inner circle. Lactantius also met Constantine at this time and served as his advisor early in his reign, and also tutored Constantine's son Crispus. While Lactantius did have greater insight into the reign of Diocletian and the early reign of Constantine, his account still must be examined with great care. His bias against pagans is evident on nearly every page of *The Death of the Persecutors* and he had no problems with reminding his readers of how little he cared for non-Christians.

St Augustine's *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*, which can also be viewed as church history of sorts, will be cited as well as it was written to counter the anti-Christian sentiments that arose throughout the Roman Empire following the Gothic sack of Rome in 410. Orosius' *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* will also be used for this same reason, as both men wrote in response to the same event but took drastically different approaches. Orosius wanted to demonstrate the violent nature of Roman history before Constantine's conversion, whereas Augustine set out to prove that the Roman gods were useless idols and all of Rome's past and present glory could be attributed only to God.

One of the fundamental issues with religious texts such as these is that they often conflate the natural and the supernatural and leave key details out of their narratives to better portray

specific events as acts of God. A good example of this is Orosius' account of Radagaisus' invasion of Italy in his *Seven Books of History*.

Indeed against that most cruel enemy, Radagaisus, it was granted that the minds of other enemies with their forces be inclined to give us aid. Uldin and Sarus, leaders of the Huns and of the Goths, were on hand to aid the Romans; but God did not allow the fact of His power to seem to be the valor of men and especially of the enemy. He forced Radagaisus, struck with divine terror, into the mountains of Fiesole...no army was drawn up for battle; no fury and no fear presented the uncertainties of battle; no slaughter was done; no blood was shed...therefore, King Radagaisus by himself, taking hope for escape, secretly deserted his men...moreover so great a number of Gothic captives is said to have been made that...they were sold for an aureus a piece. But God did not allow anything to survive of this people, for immediately...all who were bought died.¹

While Orosius, who was a priest and student of St Augustine, gives all the credit to God for the defeat of Radagaisus' army there was nothing supernatural about what actually occurred. The Romans and their Gothic allies defeated Radagaisus at Faesulae and drove him back into the mountains and trapped him there where his men starved. When Orosius states that all the Goths who were sold into slavery were suddenly struck down by God he is almost certainly referring to a massacre that occurred after Stilicho was executed by Emperor Honorius in 408, two years after the invasion. After his execution, the families of many of Radagaisus' Goths, who had been conscripted into Roman military service, were killed.

This example also exposes another problem found in religious histories from this period. Like most Roman writers, both before and after this period, the authors of religious texts viewed non-Romans in a negative light and made little effort to keep this bias out of their writings. Christian writers often have an even greater bias against barbarians, and they never hesitated to describe them as heathens and enemies of Rome, even when they were allied with Rome as seen in the example from Orosius. This bias can make it difficult to determine what is true and what is

¹ Paulus Orosius, "Seven Books of History against the Pagans," *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 50, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 351-352.

a Roman fabrication. As such, historians who study barbarians and their culture in the late Roman Empire need to exercise caution when using these sources. For example, Ammianus' description of the Huns is extremely antagonistic:

The people of the Huns, but little known from ancient records ... exceed every degree of savagery ... the cheeks of the children are deeply furrowed with the steel from their very birth ... [so that] they grow old without beards and without any beauty, like eunuchs. They all have compact, strong limbs and thick necks, and are so monstrously ugly and misshapen, that one might take them for two-legged beasts or for the stumps ... although they have the form of men ... they have no need of fire nor of savory food, but eat the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any kind of animal ... They are never protected by any buildings ... For not even a hut thatched with reed can be found among them ... they learn from the cradle to endure cold, hunger, and thirst ... They dress ... in the skins of field-mice sewn together ... But when they have once put their necks into a faded tunic, it is not taken off or changed until by long wear and tear it has been reduced to rags and fallen from them bit by bit ... they are almost glued to their horses ... They are subject to no royal restraint, but they are content with the disorderly government of their important men ... No one in their country ever plows a field or touches a plow-handle. They are all without fixed abode, without hearth, or law, or settled mode of life, and keep roaming from place to place ... In truces they are faithless and unreliable ... Like unreasoning beasts, they are utterly ignorant of the difference between right and wrong.²

Ammianus' description of the Huns and their way of life is, of course, largely inaccurate, but it demonstrates the opinions that most Romans of this period held towards non-Romans. Even though Ammianus never met any Huns, he did not hesitate to paint a negative picture of them and their culture. As previously stated, Roman writers had no qualms with making sweeping generalizations about those they viewed as outsiders or looked on with disdain. These examples from Orosius and Ammianus demonstrate just how misleading ancient historical texts can be, and why they often must be read with some degree of suspicion. Because of these issues the ancient writers cited throughout this thesis will be examined thoroughly and carefully and supported by arguments from various secondary sources, and they will be compared to one another when there is overlap between two or more sources. On the other hand, Heather explains

² Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, trans. Walter Hamilton, (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 411.

that the *Getica* of Jordannes has many inaccuracies that cannot be explained simply because we no longer have access to the sources that Jordanes relied upon. The *Getica* is full of oral history, which can be problematic since it usually cannot be substantiated by written sources. Overall, for Heather, Jordanes' *Getica* is highly problematic, but does still contain some useful information on the Gothic peoples. That being said, the *Getica* will not be cited in this thesis as the aspects of Gothic history that are examined here are recorded in more reliable historical works like Ammianus' *History*.

This does not mean that ancient sources are completely unreliable, especially since there are only a few surviving texts from this period, and they are crucial to understanding the transition of the western Roman Empire into the kingdoms of early medieval Europe. Ancient sources provide valuable information that demonstrates how Rome's military, religious, and political practices not only evolved throughout the imperial period, but also how these practices influenced kingdoms in the early medieval period. As such, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the military, political, and religious traditions discussed by these works, and show how they developed over time through the end of the Roman Empire in the west.³

Modern Works

Most modern scholars of late antiquity view Rome's "fall" as more of a transition rather than a true collapse. This transition allowed the Roman Empire, or rather various aspects of the Empire, to survive well after the last emperor was overthrown in 476. Early medieval kingdoms often had militaries like that of the late Roman Empire, as well as similar political systems.

These kingdoms also used Roman laws that would have already been well established in western Europe. Religion, however, is where the Roman Empire had the greatest influence on medieval

³ There are other factors that could, and should, be considered in a study such as this, but I limit myself to politics, religion, and the military.

Europe, as the Catholic Church's core beliefs can be traced back to the earliest days of the Empire and the Council of Nicaea, in 325, saw the formulation of the Nicene Creed.

While this idea of a transition is not brand new in the field of late antiquity, it is nevertheless not as widely known among those who do not study Roman history and the general public. The topic of Roman history, however, is one quite popular outside of scholarship, and it also tends to lag behind said scholarship as well. Therefore, this thesis will not only examine the evolution of military, political, and religious practices, as mentioned above, but will also lend further support to the idea of the late fifth century being a period of transition for the Roman Empire rather than a period of collapse. While most historians of late antiquity do agree that Empire went through a transition, they do not all agree on which Roman traditions and practices were the most significant during this period. This has caused some of these traditions being studied far more than others, such as the military. In addition, these topics are sometimes viewed through too narrow of a lens instead of being viewed in the context of other changes occurring at the same time, such as the religious influence on Roman politics or the military in late antiquity.

Peter Heather's *Rome Resurgent*, published in 2018, is a prominent exception to this. While *Rome Resurgent* is focused on the reign of Justinian and his wars in North Africa and Italy, it examines both the religious and political developments of his reign as well as military matters. A decent portion of the book is focused on the wars against the Vandals and Ostrogoths as well as Justinian's religious activities throughout his reign. Heather also examines the impact that the Nika Riot had on Justinian's reign, both its immediate aftermath and its long-term consequences. In several places Heather discusses how religion and politics. Despite this, *Rome Resurgent* is not cited in the religion chapter of this thesis as that chapter is focused on Constantine, but it is used in the chapter focused on Justinian.

Heather, who is a leading figure in the field of late antiquity, has also written several books that focus on the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, including works that focus specifically on the Goths. In his *Empires and Barbarians*, Heather briefly mentions, though he does not go into great detail, that modern scholars have reacted too strongly to the overemphasis that was placed on the barbarian migrations by earlier historians. This in turn caused them to place too little emphasis on these migrations when it comes to the overall picture of late Roman history. In truth, Heather believes that these things must be studied in the context of each other. Specifically, he mentions that social and economic developments were directly influenced by the politics of the regions in which they took shape.⁴ *Empire and Barbarians* was published only three years after Heather's 2006 book, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, where he does not discuss these ideas at all. This shows that in those three years Heather realized the importance of examining how these factors influenced one another.

Heather's *Goths and Romans* (1991) specifically focuses on the relationship between the Roman Empire and the Gothic tribes between 332 and 489. The book is divided into three parts that each have their own focus: "Jordanes and Gothic History," "The Transformation of the Visigoths: Goths and Romans, 376-418," and "The Formation of the Ostrogoths: Goths in the Balkans, 450-489". In the first section Heather demonstrates how Jordanes' *Getica* has influenced modern historians who study the Goths, as well as showing its unreliability. As indicated previously, because Heather has shown its unreliability, the Jordannes' *Getica* will not be cited in this thesis. Parts two and three of Heather's book, as their titles imply, focus on Roman-Gothic interactions, as well as the formation of the Vesi and Ostrogoths. Throughout these sections Heather discusses the interactions between the Empire and the Goths before the

⁴ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), ix-x.

arrival of the Huns and the Gothic migration into the Roman Empire. For the section on the Ostrogoths, Heather discusses their rise out of the remnants of the Hunnic Empire, their expansion into the Balkans, and the inevitable conflict with the eastern Roman Empire that came out of their expansion.

The Roman military is one of the topics that has been studied extensively by a plethora of scholars, focusing on a multitude of different aspects of the military. Few of the works produced by these historians, however, have looked at the transition of the Roman military from the Principate through the end of the Dominate. Instead they tend to be focused on specific aspects of the military during a specific period of Roman History. Patricia Southern was one of the first historians, if not the first, to do a comprehensive study of this transition period for the military. Southern's main complaint of the contemporary scholarship of the Roman military is that historians had largely ignored the specific transition that saw the military transform into the mobile field armies and frontier forces introduced in the late third or early fourth century.⁵

Because of the lack of scholarship on this topic, Southern wrote *The Late Roman Army*⁶ to examine the transition mentioned above. While *The Late Roman Army* does not examine, in great detail, other factors like politics and religion and the influence these had on one another, it is still an important work in the development of the idea of Rome's transition. Southern's study of the military's evolution in late antiquity helps demonstrate why other facets of the Roman Empire should be examined in this way. The Roman Empire of the Principate did not suddenly become that of the Dominate over the course of a few short years. This transition took more than a century and even in the fourth century the military continued to change in several ways. In that same vein, the Roman military did not disappear overnight in 476 after Romulus Augustus was

⁵ Patricia Southern and Karen Dixon, *The Late Roman Army*, (Yale University Press, 1996), ix.

⁶ *The Late Roman Army* also contains many illustrations drawn by Karen Dixon

deposed, and even when it no longer existed its influences remained. The same can be said of the other topics, including those not discussed in this thesis, and that is why their transitions throughout this period should be studied as well.

While most historians date the late Roman army itself to the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, this work begins with the reforms of Septimius Severus as his Principate laid the groundwork for what would eventually become the late Roman army. This also allows Southern to better show when the Roman military began its transition into the field and frontier armies that were present by the reign of Constantine. She identifies several changes that were implemented by Severus, including permission for soldiers to legally marry, increased army pay, and making it easier for soldiers to move up the ranks. For them the increased access to promotions was one of Severus' most important contributions, perhaps even the single most important, to the Roman military. She explains how this last change may have made recruitment easier as well, because the increased potential of becoming an officer served as an incentive to many potential recruits.

She also refers to *vexillationes*, which were groups of soldiers that were collected from one or more provinces and then sent to another province to supplement the troops stationed there. These units would typically be sent back to their parent armies when they were no longer needed. She discusses the new field armies that had become part of the Roman military no later than the reign of Constantine (r. 306-337). She goes on to examine the army up until the end of the reign of Justinian I. While there is some overlap between this book and the section in *The Roman Army* that focuses on the late imperial army, this work presents a much more detailed study of the late army.

The Late Roman Army is not limited in scope to military reforms and organization, however. Southern examine how the barbarians and Roman military interacted (including some

of the same things that Halsall discusses in *Barbarian Migrations*) regarding how the Romans faced them in battle and recruited them into the army. She discusses such things as the “barbarization” of the Roman arm and barbarians serving in the regular army as both common soldiers and officers. In addition, there are chapters that focus on the recruitment of soldiers, the conditions of Roman military service, military equipment, fortifications, and so on. These chapters demonstrate how the army had evolved from the Principate of Augustus through the fourth and fifth centuries. This work also contains many excellent drawings, mostly drawn by Dixon, of military equipment from this period, as well as some photographs of military equipment. These drawings and photographs, which are lacking in her book-length history of the Roman army, make it easier to visualize the equipment that would have been worn and used in battle by Roman soldiers.

Southern’s *The Roman Army* is, in many ways, an expansion of *The Late Roman Army*. This book covers all of Rome’s military history starting with the Roman Kingdom and ending in 476. In *The Roman Army* Southern is once again focused on how the military changed and evolved continually from the time of the Roman kings to the final western Roman emperor. While *The Roman Army* covers a much broader period of time than this thesis, it is, nevertheless, important because it shows that the Roman military was constantly changing and evolving at all points in its history, and that none of the changes were sudden. They all occurred gradually as Rome faced new challenges or made technological developments.

This work is divided into three parts, with parts two and three focusing on the imperial military. These last two sections are the most relevant to my argument. Her focus on the evolution of the Roman military system over time emphasizes issues such as the composition of armies and how they were used in different periods of the Empire. She also examines what life

was like for Roman soldiers and how the military and civilians interacted with one another. Each section begins with a chapter that focuses on the historical overview of the military for that period (for example, the first chapter of part two is “Historical Overview 30 BC-AD 260”).

Southern’s examination of the reorganization of the army during the latter half of the third century is invaluable for its in-depth look at the ways in which the army evolved over this relatively short period of time. For example, Southern discusses the mobile cavalry that was used by Emperor Gallienus and disagrees with previous scholarship regarding that cavalry. Previous historians were under the impression that Gallienus’ army was the direct predecessor of Constantine’s mobile field army. Southern, however, argues that Gallienus was simply following an already established tradition, and that because he only controlled Africa and Italy the cavalry was simply the best military force available to him. So, rather than creating something that was entirely original, Gallienus followed an already established tradition, at least partially, out of simple necessity. The military was one of the major influences on imperial politics throughout the lifespan of the Roman Empire, and many found themselves overthrown because they lost favor with the legions, this is why it has heavily emphasized in this chapter.

Chapter 2: The Evolution of the Imperial Military

The Reforms of Augustus and the Army of the Early Principate

The Roman military had undergone several significant changes by the end of the fourth century. While the legions remained a capable fighting force all the way up to the final days of the Empire in the west, the military no longer resembled the army that had been established by Augustus. This evolution closely mirrored the constantly fluctuating state of Roman politics, as various emperors reformed and reorganized the military to suit their needs at the time. Extended periods of tumultuous chaos often brought with them momentous changes to military institutions. As the western Empire reached an irreversible state of degradation, so too did the western Empire's military. One major, and problematic, development of the imperial period was that the legions were able to declare their own commanders as emperor, which caused Rome to become embroiled in numerous civil wars throughout the imperial period. By the fifth century many of the battles that the legions stationed in the west fought were against their fellow Romans, or against armies of barbarians¹ commanded by usurpers.

The military had become increasingly dependent upon barbarian soldiers throughout the imperial period. As such, barbarians began to have much larger roles as this development became more solidified in the fourth and fifth centuries. By the fifth century the Roman Empire not only employed large numbers of non-Roman soldiers, but also generals who were often only half-Roman or not Roman at all. The most prominent of these men were appointed to the office

¹ While the term barbarian has a negative connotation, and is somewhat problematic in its own right, it will be used throughout this thesis as terms such as "Germanic" are problematic and in many cases largely inaccurate.

of *Magister Utriusque Militum*, which effectively made them the overall commander of the Roman military.² This was especially true in the west following the death of Theodosius I, as men like Stilicho and Flavius Aetius, both of whom had barbarian³ ancestry, were more powerful than the emperors they served. Based on the track record of the legions in the fourth and fifth centuries the increased presence of non-Romans in the military did not have any drastic effects on their effectiveness of the Roman legions, as they continued to defeat most barbarian forces that they encountered throughout this period. It did not matter if a soldier was a Goth, a Vandal, a Suebi, or a Roman, they were all as effective as their training and equipment allowed them to be.

One of the very first changes that Augustus introduced to the Roman military was the oath of loyalty that the legions had to swear to the emperor every year. Before Augustus individual legions were loyal to their generals, because the generals were responsible for the soldiers' pay. Augustus made the legions swear an oath of loyalty directly to him, which meant, in theory at least, that they were now loyal to the Emperor first and their generals second. Augustus also turned the legions into a permanent standing army, and they were now paid by the state directly rather than their generals. Augustus also made all higher appointments within the legions, which meant that even the higher ranked officers were loyal to him because he was responsible for their promotion. In addition to this he also appointed all provincial governors, which meant that there was nobody in the Empire in charge of soldiers who did not owe their

² The *Magister Utriusque Militum* was the commander in charge of the infantry and cavalry. It was originally a combination of the titles "magister peditum" and "magister equitum". It evolved into a "commander-in-chief" type of rank, and in the east, there would be two generals who were appointed to the office of "magister militum praesentalis" which made them commanders of the armies in the emperor's presence.

³ The Greeks and Romans used the term barbarian to denote anyone who did not speak Greek or Latin. The term will be used occasionally throughout this thesis because it is how the Romans described the various peoples that they came into contact with. Other terms will also be used to refer to these people (non-Roman for example) in an attempt to avoid the more negative connotation that comes with the term barbarian.

position to the emperor.⁴ This did not completely solve the issue of split loyalties among the legions but it did help to alleviate it. Augustus was now the commander-in-chief, so to speak, of the Roman military. His role as overall commander also made it easier to further reorganize the army as he saw fit, as would be the case with subsequent emperors as well.

Reorganizing the legions into a permanent army, a path that had been necessitated by the continual warfare in the one hundred years before Augustus became emperor, expanded the recruitment pool of the legions, because a permanent army meant the soldiers would have a guaranteed income. Augustus also introduced guaranteed veterans' bonuses, which meant more men could afford to join the army, especially men who owned agricultural land.⁵ Another, perhaps less obvious, benefit of a standing army is that the Romans would always have active legions stationed throughout the provinces to counter any possible external threat. In the days of the Republic generals had to recruit and then properly train their legions before they could deal with any threats, and training did not even become standardized until the end of the second century BC. The Empire, however, garrisoned its standing army strategically throughout its territories, and was able to respond quickly to threats with the legions that were stationed nearby.

Augustus also created the Praetorian Guard early in his reign. The Guard was composed of nine cohorts⁶ of veteran soldiers, three of which were stationed in Rome itself. This was also the first time that soldiers had been permanently stationed in Rome. The commanders of the Praetorian Guard, Praetorian Prefects, came from the equestrian class rather than the senatorial

⁴ Patricia Southern, *The Roman Army: 753-476*, (Gloucestershire: Amberly Publishing, 2014) 206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 209. In the days of the Republic men who served in the legions ran the risk of losing their farms because they might not get back from the campaign in time to harvest their crops. This meant that anytime that Rome was in a drawn-out war there were multitudes of Romans who found themselves in inescapable debt when they returned home. The fact that men originally had to own land to serve in the legions meant that the Republic faced a manpower shortage as more and more of its citizens became landless and poor.

⁶ Cohorts at this time usually had 500 men

class like the commanders of the legions. There were also two Praetorian Prefects that commanded the Guard jointly. There were some Prefects, such as Tiberius' Prefect Lucius Sejanus, who would kill their colleagues to ensure that they were the only Praetorian Prefect. While the Praetorian Guard did accompany various emperors on campaign, they also had several roles that were largely ceremonial.⁷

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Praetorian Guard, in the overall scheme of Roman history, was the role they played in assassinating and selecting emperors. Within twenty years of Augustus' death the Praetorian Guard had already grown beyond their original role. In AD 26, when the Emperor Tiberius withdrew from Rome, he allowed Sejanus to govern the city in his stead. Sejanus removed from power anyone who opposed him and had them exiled. When Tiberius had Sejanus executed for his transgressions in 31, he replaced him Naevius Macro. Macro then supposedly murdered Tiberius in his sleep in 37. Only seventy years after their formation, the Praetorian Guard was apparently in the business of assassinating Roman emperors. After just another four years they also assassinated Caligula and slaughtered the imperial household, and then proclaimed Claudius as the next emperor. The second and third emperors of the Roman Empire had been assassinated by the very force that Augustus had created with the sole purpose of protecting them.

The next major development of the Roman military occurred in 69, the first time that a Roman was made emperor away from Rome itself. The ability of the legions to declare a new emperor, especially away from the city of Rome, was a dangerous development that led to a multitude of civil wars throughout imperial Roman history. In theory the oath that all the legions had to swear still ensured they were loyal to the emperor first and foremost, but in practice the

⁷ Southern, *The Roman Army*, 211-212.

reigning emperor now had to continually ensure that the legions were loyal to him and not to their commanders. This was usually achieved through increased pay, or cash bonuses, or more often both, which was effectively bribery. In a way the emperors were now being extorted by their own legions to ensure that they would not be overthrown.

In fact, this was the very issue that brought about the events of the Year of Four Emperors. In 68 the military had become discontent with Nero, who had executed several generals to suppress dissent; he also delayed the payments to soldiers. The legions in Gaul and Spain then rebelled against Nero's rule, and they proclaimed Servius Galba as emperor. The Praetorian Prefect then defected to Galba, and the Senate followed soon afterwards. Nero then committed suicide. Galba, however, had learned nothing from Nero and made the exact same mistakes. In response to Galba's withholding of the soldiers' pay, another revolt broke out in Gaul on the first of January in 69, and this time Aulus Vitellius was proclaimed emperor by his legions. A few weeks later Galba was murdered by the Praetorian Guard, who had been bribed by Salvius Otho. Then Vespasian, who had been in Judea to put down the Jewish revolt, was proclaimed emperor by the prefect of Egypt. Vespasian ultimately won the short, but brutal, civil war that followed.⁸ In the course of only a few months' time three different men had been made emperor by their soldiers. The events of 69 would forever change the state of Roman politics, many Roman Emperors, such as Trajan and Hadrian, from this point on led successful military careers before becoming emperor. During the Crisis of the Third Century (235–285) fourteen of the twenty-seven men who ascended to the imperial throne were so-called barrack emperors, which means they were proclaimed emperor by their legions. This trend remained alive in the eastern half of the Empire even after the west was lost to the barbarians in 476.

⁸ Jonathon P. Roth, *Roman Warfare*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 192-193.

During Hadrian's reign (117-138) the Roman army underwent what was probably its most dramatic change since the reign of Augustus. Hadrian viewed the military as more of a defensive institution rather than an offensive one. He relinquished the new provinces that Trajan had acquired, such as Armenia and Mesopotamia, to create a buffer zone between the Empire and the Parthians. Hadrian also built a series of forts along the Empire's borders, such as the Rhine and Danube Rivers, where legions would now be, more or less, permanently stationed.⁹ These forts were typically about eight miles apart and were accompanied by supporting auxiliary forts. Hadrian also placed more emphasis on the Danube border, and thus thinned out the defenses along the Rhine so as to move troops to the Danube.¹⁰ Some historians, such as Roth, have even proposed that with the legions stationed along the border they could also act as a form of border police and prevent merchants from smuggling goods back and forth across the borders.¹¹ Nonetheless, this was probably nothing more than an unintended side effect of Hadrian's decision to station the legions along the borders.

Hadrian's decision to reinforce the borders, while undeniably wise to a certain extent, meant that the legions would now be unable to deploy rapidly in response to threats in the Empire's interior. During times of extended peace this would not necessarily be an issue, especially since the legions would typically be able to repel any threat from beyond the borders. If there was an internal threat, such as a usurper or a provincial revolt, the legions would have a harder time responding to the threat before it grew out of control. On the other hand, the legions could presumably respond to external threats more easily now, since they were now stationed along the Empire's borders. The soldiers also became less accustomed to fighting as they spent

⁹ Roth, *Roman Warfare*, 203-205

¹⁰ Southern, *The Roman Army*, 349-353.

¹¹ Roth, *Roman Warfare*, 205.

much of their service along a peaceful stretch of the border. This does not necessarily mean that the legions were now less capable in battle; in fact, Hadrian also introduced regular field exercises, but it certainly must have had an adverse effect on individual soldiers whenever they were in actual combat for the first time.¹²

The legions' new duty as a border patrol, for lack of a better term, also meant that the Empire now had more "solid" borders, rather than permeable ones. This, of course, mostly just applied to the barbarians who had to stay on their side of the border, whereas Roman citizens had more freedom to cross back and forth. In fact, from the Roman perspective, borders were often viewed as *sine fine*, quite literally without end, which also meant that it was easier to turn way groups of barbarians who wanted to enter the Empire.¹³ This is not to say that the Romans could not turn them away before, but they had tighter control of things now that large numbers of soldiers were permanently stationed along the borders. Presumably this also would have made it much easier to recruit new auxiliary troops whenever replacements were needed, both from barbarians already inside the Empire and from those on the other side of the borders.

Hadrian is also most likely responsible for a drastic change among the cavalry units of the legions. He introduced the *cataphractii*, which were cavalry soldiers who wore heavy armor and were equipped with lances, they were effectively heavy shock cavalry. Another unit of heavy cavalry was the *clibanarii*, though this possibly may have just been another name for the *cataphractii*. Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote his *History* in the late fourth century, described the *cataphractii* as: "mailed cavalymen, the so-called Ironclads¹⁴, wearing masks and equipped

¹² Roth, *Roman Warfare*, 205.

¹³ Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376-568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 140-141.

¹⁴ Ammianus uses the term "*clibanarios*", which had more or less had come to mean "mail-clad", despite literally meaning oven, by the fourth century

with cuirasses and belts of steel; they seemed more like statues polished by the hands of Praxiteles than living men. Their limbs were entirely covered by a garment of thin circular plates fitted to the curves of the body so cunningly articulated that it adapted itself to any movement the wearer needed to make.”¹⁵ Although Ammianus wrote his *History* well after Hadrian introduced the *cataphractii* to the Roman military, those of the fourth century had not changed much since Hadrian’s reign. The *cataphractii* were originally a Parthian cavalry, and Hadrian likely introduced it to the legions after seeing how effectively they were used by the Parthians against the Romans. While this does not necessarily mean that the cavalry had become an integral part of the legion, which would first begin to happen later in the third century, it was probably the first step towards this development. Presumably the legions needed larger, and better, cavalry units now that they were stationed on the borders of the Empire, as these cavalry units would have been able to respond to threats in the Empire’s interior faster than the infantry could have.

Septimius Severus and the Severan Reforms

The next major developments of the Roman military came during Septimius Severus’ reign (r. 193–211). Severus came to power in 193 after the assassination of Commodus (r. 177-192). Soon after he became emperor, Severus increased the soldiers’ salaries and allowed them to marry. The latter was merely a formality as many soldiers had already started families during the reigns of other emperors even though it was against the law for them to do so. As for the former, Severus was heavily criticized by his contemporaries such as Cassius Dio and Herodian. Herodian in particular was quite harsh on Severus regarding the increased pay and his allowing soldiers to marry. He explicitly accused Severus of undermining military institutions:

The soldiers too were given a very substantial sum of money and with this many other privileges that they had not had before such as an increase in pay...and the right to live at home with their wives. All these things are considered to be

¹⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire: AD 354-378* trans. Walter Hamilton (Penguin Books, 1986) 100.

inimical to military discipline and to a state of prompt readiness for action. Severus was certainly the first to undermine...their obedience in the face of hardship and their disciplined respect for commanders, by teaching the men to be greedy for riches and seducing them into a life of luxury.¹⁶

Herodian clearly believed that Severus' reforms had undermined the discipline for which the legions had become well-known and had weakened the military overall. Severus continued success as a military leader, as well as the success of the legions in the decades after his death, immediately disproves Herodian's beliefs. If anything, Severus' reforms made the legions more loyal to him. Herodian's claim that soldiers being allowed to have wives would have a negative impact on the soldiers is completely unfounded. As mentioned, soldiers had already been taking wives well before Severus was emperor, and none of his predecessors had done anything to stop it, nor were the legions any less effective because of this. Severus was a successful military officer who became emperor by defeating his rivals, and therefore it is safe to say that he knew what was best for the soldiers. At the very least he would have known better than Herodian. It also seems very unlikely that Severus would actively undermine the effectiveness of the same troops that he needed to maintain his own power. Thus, it seems more likely that Herodian just disliked Severus in general. It could be that Herodian was unhappy with the increasingly authoritarian nature of Severus' reign.

Severus also made it easier for common soldiers to earn promotions and attain higher military offices. Legionnaires could now rise through the ranks to become commanders of whole legions, or even *praefectus urbi*. Severus also completely reorganized the Praetorian Guard. He dismissed all of its members and then reconstituted it with men from across the Empire. Before his reign only native Italians and citizens from a select few provinces, could serve in the Guard.

¹⁶ Herodian, *History of the Empire from the Time of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. C.R. Whittaker, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.) 307-311

Now any eligible soldier no matter their ethnic background was able to join them. This too brought Severus much criticism from his contemporaries. They accused him of intentionally omitting Italians from the Praetorian Guard and the army. These claims were, of course, almost entirely unfounded. For example, Severus also raised three new legions for his war against the Parthians, and all three of them were founded in Italy and composed almost entirely of ethnic Italians. While two of these legions were stationed in Mesopotamia to act as a garrison, the other, the *II Parthica*, was stationed only twenty miles from Rome. In addition to his increasing the size of the army, Severus also increased his newly reorganized Praetorian Guard. He now had 30,000 men under his direct control in Italy alone.¹⁷

While Severus' stationing of such a large amount of men just a few miles outside of Rome most certainly seems ominous, it is possible that it was not quite his intention. It could be that the *II Parthica* and the enlarged Praetorian Guard were more of a precursor of sorts to the mobile field armies that developed later, though there is no evidence that Severus employed the *II Parthica* in any of his later campaigns. Therefore, it could be that the legion was simply meant to be a reserve legion, or a subtle reminder of Severus' power anytime he was away from Rome.¹⁸

Severus' increasing of the size of the army and the Praetorian Guard could be a byproduct of his increasingly authoritarian rule, but the overall context of his reign should be taken into account as well. Before he could completely consolidate his control over the Empire, he had to defeat two other generals whose soldiers had proclaimed them to be emperor, one of whom he even temporarily allowed to be his co-emperor. From the very beginning of his reign Severus had to secure his power through military might. Therefore, it should come as no surprise

¹⁷ Patricia Southern and Karen Ramsey Dixon, *The Late Roman Army*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 5-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

that he felt the need to increase the strength of the military in order to secure his own power. On top of this Severus had grand ambitions to expand the Empire; in fact, when he died Severus was on campaign in Britain, attempting to conquer Caledonia. An enlarged army would not only have helped him to keep his power secure, but it would have helped him fulfill his ambition for conquest as well.

Crisis of the Third Century and Gallienus' Mobile Cavalry

After Severus the next significant development of the Roman military came during the reign of Gallienus (r. 253-268). Gallienus was one of the more successful barrack emperors; his fifteen-year reign during a period of great upheaval is evidence enough of that. He became sole emperor in 260 when his father was captured by Shah Shapur I. Roth contends that Gallienus is the man that saved the Roman Empire, at least for the time being.¹⁹ While this is somewhat of an overstatement, Gallienus did help the Roman Empire escape the chaos that had enveloped it for the majority of the third century. He made several important changes to the structure of the Roman military. He removed senators from command positions and replaced them with equestrians. This improved the effectiveness of the legions, and maybe even increased loyalty as the equestrians owed their position to Gallienus. He also greatly increased the size of the legions' cavalry contingent. Now that the legions had larger cavalry forces, they could respond much more quickly to emergencies, as they could just send out the cavalry. Before Gallienus the limited number of cavalry soldiers in each legion likely meant they would not be an effective fighting force on their own. Now, however, they were much more capable of fighting major engagements away from the rest of the legion, especially the heavily armored *cataphractii*. Gallienus also created a mobile reserve, and unlike Severus's *II Parthica* this force was

¹⁹ Roth, *Roman Warfare*, 223.

definitely created with the intention of being a mobile reserve army, which he stationed near Mediolanum. These new troops were called *comitatus*, more or less meaning companion, and were largely a cavalry force²⁰

Gallienus created his mobile cavalry units sometime around 255, when he was defending the Rhine from repeated barbarian invasions. This cavalry force was originally composed of units from several different legions that Gallienus combined into one army.²¹ According to Zosimus' *Nova Historia*, Gallienus stationed the *comitatus* in Mediolanum to keep an eye on the usurper Postumus: "Aureolus, who was commander of the cavalry posted in the neighborhood of Milan to watch the motions of Posthumus..."²² This would certainly have made sense on the part of Gallienus as he spent most of his reign away from Rome defending the Rhine. Placing a sizeable force in northern Italy would have made it more difficult for Postumus to march on Rome. Southern, however, contends that there was another factor that was more influential on this decision than Postumus: the presence of the Alemanni in Switzerland, who would have been a great threat to the security of Italy.²³ Southern's argument that the Alemanni influenced Gallienus' decision is a strong one. Given the weakened state of the Empire at this point in time any Alemanni invasion into Italy would have faced less resistance than in previous centuries. Either way, Gallienus' decision was a wise one as the positioning of this army protected Italy from both Postumus and the Alemanni.

Despite the importance of Gallienus' reorganization of the Roman cavalry into a force independent of the legions, if it was ever truly independent of them, it is impossible to determine

²⁰ Roth, *Roman Warfare*, 223-225.

²¹ Southern, *Late Roman Army*, 11.

²² Zosimus, *Nova Historia*, (London: Green and Chaplin: 1814), 1.22

²³ Southern, *Late Roman Empire*, 11.

whether or not this force was a blueprint for future emperors.²⁴ Claudius Gothicus (r. 268-270) did place the future emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) in charge of the cavalry, though it is possible that this force only contained a small number of those that originally formed Gallienus' mobile cavalry. Nonetheless, Aurelian did employ a mobile cavalry army throughout his reign, and according to Zosimus they played an integral role in his defeat of the Palmyrene heavy cavalry. Zosimus also lists the regions from which Aurelian's cavalry originated, and these regions are the same ones from which Gallienus recruited his cavalry. "Finding the Palmyrene army drawn up before Emisa...he opposed to them the Dalmatian cavalry, the Moesians and Pannonians."²⁵ While Gallienus' cavalry came from these same regions, it does not mean that these were the same soldiers that had been in his mobile army. It is quite possible that their term of service had ended sometime before this battle. Aurelian may have simply recruited their replacements from the same province, because he already knew that they made for reliable cavalymen. During the Republic and the early days of the Empire the Romans had relied on their various barbarian allies to supply most of their cavalry. As such they would have had a reputation for being skilled horsemen by this period. Gallienus and Aurelian likely recruited men from these regions, and others well-known for their horsemen both for this very reason, and because they would have made up a large portion of the cavalry already in the military.

Another change that Gallienus made to the army was the establishment of the *protectores divini lateris*, quite literally the "protectors of the divine side." This title was typically given to legionary prefects and tribunes of the Praetorian Guard but was later given to centurions as well.

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

²⁵ Zosimus, *Nova Historia*, 1.26.

By the time Diocletian became emperor these men had become a kind of imperial bodyguard, of which Diocletian was a member when he was proclaimed emperor.²⁶

Even though Gallienus' reign was followed by nine emperors, most of whom were quite unsuccessful, his reign and military reforms certainly helped set the stage for Diocletian's stabilization of the Empire. Aurelian used his own mobile cavalry force to defeat Palmyra and the Gallic Empire, and thus reunited the Roman Empire.²⁷ Even if Gallienus' mobile army did not influence the decisions of later emperors to employ similar cavalry forces, it did help Rome emerge from the Crisis of the Third Century.

The Dominate and the Reforms of Diocletian and Constantine

When Diocletian became emperor in 284 whatever remained of the Principate founded by Augustus had disappeared, and the Dominate began to emerge. Diocletian reorganized the Roman provinces so that they would always be prepared for war. He also formed the Tetrarchy with two Augusti and two Caesars, one of each for the east and the west. Diocletian also introduced conscription and raised new legions. Diocletian's *comitatus* may have been the precursor to Constantine's own *comitatenses*, which were mobile field armies. Even if this is true, it does not mean that Diocletian had a mobile army that accompanied him everywhere. The *comitatus* had become more militarized by the time Diocletian had come to power, and very well could have been an official imperial bodyguard. If so, it may have been composed of the *equites promoti* and the *lanciarrii*. Constantine's personal bodyguard did contain *lanciarrii*, which means that his *comitatus* may have been based on Diocletian's own. That being said, it is not certain if Diocletian's *comitatus* was a reserve force or a legitimate imperial bodyguard.²⁸ In addition to

²⁶ Southern, *Late Roman Army*, 15-16.

²⁷ Aurelian conquered Palmyra in 272 and Gaul in 274.

²⁸ Southern, *The Roman Army*, 455.

this, if Gallienus' mobile cavalry still existed by the time Diocletian came to power, then he may have disbanded it. He may also have dispersed it along the Empire's borders, which he wished to strengthen. If his *comitatus* was indeed a military force, whether it was a bodyguard or a reserve force, then Diocletian may have absorbed the remnants of the mobile cavalry into the *comitatus*.²⁹

While there may never be enough evidence to definitively say whether or not Diocletian's *comitatus* was the precursor to Constantine's *comitatenses*, it is not hard to believe that the former had some influence on the latter. Constantine was influenced by Diocletian in several other ways, and was first made Caesar in the west in 306, only two years after Diocletian's retirement from the imperial throne. While Diocletian was still emperor, he led several successful campaigns against Rome's enemies. He defeated the Alamanni in 288, and the Sarmatians in 289 and again in 292. He defeated a revolt of the Blemmyes, in Upper Egypt, in 297. Given Diocletian's great military success, it would have made sense for Constantine to be at least somewhat inspired by him. At the very least if the *comitatus* of Diocletian was not the precursor to the *Comitatenses*, they likely did inspire Constantine's personal bodyguard.

The first mention of Constantine's field army came in 325, when it was distinguished from the *ripenses* armies that were stationed in the frontiers of the Empire. Considering that Constantine defeated Licinius at the Battle of Chrysopolis in 324, this makes a great deal of sense. After the defeat of Licinius, Constantine would have been in control of his own troops and those that remained from the armies of Licinius and Maxentius. Many of Constantine's military reforms are hard to pinpoint, and some could have been adapted from earlier emperors.³⁰ While Constantine certainly did introduce his own reforms, he must have adapted some as well. It is

²⁹ Southern, *The Roman Army*, 455.

³⁰ Southern, *The Late Roman Army*, 18.

unlikely that Constantine would have been able to reorganize the army in a timely manner if he only used his own innovations. Adapting the changes that previous emperors had made would have sped up this process considerably. Constantine would have been aware of the major reforms of previous emperors; such as Gallienus' mobile cavalry or Diocletian's *comitatus*. Constantine also would have probably needed to introduce his reforms into the military as soon as possible to ensure that his power remained secure.

Constantine's *comitatenses* were ranked above the *ripenses* that were stationed on the frontier, which implies that they would have had better equipment, training, and pay than the border troops. This would have been especially true of the cavalry, as they were taken from the cavalry units of the legions. If this is the case, then Constantine surely would have only taken the best cavalymen from each legion, especially if the *comitatenses* were supposed to be the field armies. This may also have applied to the first infantry units that were added to the *comitatenses*, as Constantine may have drawn them from the *Ioviani* and *Herculiani* legions of Diocletian and Maximianus.³¹ The *comitatenses* were commanded by the *magister peditum* and the *magister equitum*, who commanded the infantry and cavalry respectively. These were new ranks that Constantine created specifically for the *comitatenses*, and they answered directly to him.³² In addition to the field army stationed in Italy, Constantine stationed them throughout the provinces that faced external threats. These field armies were also commanded by *magistri*, but they were of a lower rank than the *magistri* of the main field army. The main field army that followed the emperor on campaign was further distinguished from the regional armies with the title *comitatenses palatini*, which designated them as palace troops, or the emperor's own personal

³¹ These legions were founded by Diocletian and Maximianus in the early stages of their reigns and were so named because the two emperors viewed themselves as the personal representatives of Hercules and Jupiter (Jove).

³² Southern, *The Roman Army*, 462-463.

field army. At some later point some of these regional armies were commanded by *comes* instead of *magistri*.³³

It is possible that Constantine established the *ripenses* as well, sometime before the *comitatenses*. There is some direct evidence that the *ripenses* may have been established as early as 311, but, just as with the *comitatenses*, they are first mentioned explicitly in 325. There was also the *limitanei* who were border troops as well but were possibly closer to a militia than they were a professional force. The higher ranked frontier soldiers were referred to as *ripenses*, whether they were infantry, cavalry, or auxiliaries. With this distinction between *comitatenses* and *ripenses*, Constantine had finalized the separation of the mobile armies and the frontier soldiers.³⁴

Constantine also abolished the Praetorian Guard 330 years after their establishment, and made the *scholae palatinae*, which had been previously established by Diocletian, the new imperial bodyguard.³⁵ The *scholae* were under the direct command of the emperor, which eliminated the risks that came with Praetorian Prefects who attained too much power. While it is not known how many men were in the *scholae* under Constantine, it contained five hundred men in later times.³⁶ Constantine's abolition of the Praetorian Guard is perhaps just as important as his establishment of the *comitatenses*. The Praetorian Guard had ceased to be an effective imperial bodyguard, given their tendency to assassinate emperors that they disliked. The position of Praetorian Prefect was especially troublesome as the Guard was under his command rather than the emperor directly. The larger size of the Praetorian Guard likely also emboldened them, whereas the five hundred men of the *scholae* would not have had as much influence. Placing the

³³ Southern, *The Late Roman Army*, 463-464.

³⁴ Southern, *The Late Roman Army*, 35-36.

³⁵ Southern, *The Roman Army*, 438.

³⁶ Southern, *The Late Roman Army*, 19.

scholae under his direct control, most certainly made them more loyal to Constantine and future emperors. In fact, unlike their Praetorian counterparts, the *scholae* did not enter the practice of murdering emperors, further demonstrating their increased loyalty to the emperor.

Constantine enacted some of the most thorough military reforms in Roman history, perhaps since the time of Marius. He established the *comitatenses* and possibly the *ripenses*, and likely restructured the *limitanei*. His abolishment of the Praetorian Guard in exchange for the *scholae palatinae* certainly had influence on the course of Roman history, given the Praetorian Guard's penchant for assassination. Stationing his new mobile field armies throughout the Empire allowed for quicker responses to external threats, as this eliminated the need to form armies from several different legions before responding to a threat. While Constantine's reforms would not be the last that the Roman military underwent, they were the last significant changes before the disaster at Adrianople in 378.

The Roman Empire's Reliance on non-Roman Soldiers

Throughout the decades after Constantine's death, the Roman army became even more integrated with barbarians. While Roman citizens still composed the bulk of the Empire's manpower, more and more units had a large barbarian presence. Some even began to adopt the names of various barbarian tribes as their unit names, even ones where every soldier was a Roman citizen. This was done because by the late fourth century barbarians had come to be associated with ferocity, especially in battle, and many Roman soldiers wished to emulate that perceived ferocity. For example, while discussing the siege of Amida in 359, Ammianus specifically refers to the Gallic legions of the emperor Julian as Gauls. "Meanwhile the Gauls, refusing to wait any longer, emerged from a postern gate armed with axes and swords."³⁷ While

³⁷ Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 171.

it is possible that Ammianus only called these men “Gauls” because their legions were from Gaul, it seems strange that he would explicitly refer to them as such if they were not actually Gallic themselves. In addition to this Ammianus wrote that they were armed with axes as well as swords. It seems unlikely that Romans would have carried axes into battle; Gauls, on the other hand, very well may have been equipped with less traditional weaponry. Since this specific chapter of his *History* is discussing a siege, it could be possible that only some of the soldiers were sent out to attack the enemy, in which case the Romans may have sent out actual Gallic soldiers, axes and all. Ammianus also mentions a Sarmatian named Victor who was Emperor Valens’ *magister equitum*, and who may have been one of the first non-Romans to achieve this rank.³⁸

The increased presence of foreign troops began in the third century and impacted not only the composition of the military but Roman society as whole. One of the incentives of service in the Roman military, both for those already within the Empire and those without, had always been the guarantee of Roman citizenship after the completion of the required length of service. After Caracalla (r. 198-217) issued the *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 212, which gave citizenship to virtually every free man inside the Roman Empire, this incentive was no longer present. This likely had some impact on Roman recruitment efforts in the third century, at least until large groups of barbarians once again began to come into the Empire and caused the Romans to recruit larger numbers of non-Romans into the military.

One positive aspect of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* for the Roman military was that it formally allowed the majority of the Empire’s free population to serve in the legions rather than

³⁸ Marcellinus, *Later Roman Empire*, 433.

the *auxilia*.³⁹ This meant that the presence of foreigners in the Roman legions was more pronounced after 212 than it had been at any point before Caracalla's edict was issued. Combined with the fact that the Empire had to recruit larger numbers of *auxilia* to make up for the lower number of recruits from among the citizenry also increased this foreign presence. More foreign troops in the military also meant that there were more foreigners who settled in the empire as citizens once they completed their military service. This supposedly caused the "barbarization" of the Empire, which has been presented by some as one of the reasons, if not the main reason, for the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west.

This idea, however, fails to consider the sheer complexity of the Empire's "collapse." Firstly, the idea that the Roman Empire fell in 476 is misleading, as the Empire transitioned into something else entirely. Second, the evolution of Roman politics, religion, and the military all played a vital role in this transition and influenced one another in various ways. The idea of the Roman Empire undergoing some kind of "barbarization" also implies that the barbarians who moved into the Empire subverted Roman institutions. In truth, these peoples adopted various Roman institutions and laws when they established their own kingdoms throughout western Europe, and in many ways kept various aspects of the Roman Empire alive into the middle ages. In addition, many of the military developments discussed in this chapter continued to develop in the eastern Empire as well.

³⁹ It was technically illegal for anyone who was not a Roman citizen to serve in the Roman legions; instead, they had to serve in the *auxilia*. This law was not always strictly enforced, however, and some men still found themselves serving in a legion despite their status as a non-citizen.

Chapter 3: Religion and Politics in the Late Roman World

Constantine and Secular Intervention in Religious Disputes

The mixture of the political and religious realms is not something that was unique to the Roman world. Throughout antiquity many states and kingdoms mixed religion and politics together because they had not conceptualized the idea of the separation of church and state. The pharaohs of Egypt, for example, were viewed as gods. Even in the Roman Republic politics and religion were not separate, though this relationship was looser than it was during the later centuries of the Empire, as the office of Pontifex Maximus became highly politicized before the end of the Republic. During the Principate many Roman emperors were deified by the senate and their successors would oftentimes incorporate this into their own titlature.¹ That being said, Roman emperors did not have much influence over the actual practices and traditions of the traditional Roman religion. This all changed with Constantine's conversion in 312, when he abandoned the traditional religion and became the Roman Empire's first Christian emperor. After Constantine converted, he embarked on a path that ensured Christianity maintained influence over political matters in Europe, and vice versa, for the next several centuries.

Before Constantine's conversion there were very few high-ranking Christians in the Roman Empire. Most of the Christians in the Empire lived in the cities of the eastern provinces, though there were some Christians in the west, and North Africa had a strong Christian presence as well. There was, however, a sizeable Christian element in the military, though it is difficult to say just how many Christians served at any one time before 312. Christians must have made up a

¹ For example, Augustus' full title was "*Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*", with *Caesar divi filius* denoting him as the "son of the deified Caesar."

noticeable portion of the military by the end of the third century, because Diocletian and Galerius attempted to purge the legions of their Christian elements in 299 and again in 302 or 303.

After 312 Roman emperors took a much greater interest in religious matters and often got personally involved with religious disputes, though this was less evident in the west than it was in the east, where the emperor was the head of the church. Many ecumenical councils, such as the Council of Nicaea in 325, were convened by the reigning emperor to settle religious disputes. Unlike the pagan emperors who came before Constantine, Roman emperors now had the final say in theological debates and often used their secular political power to dictate the outcomes of these ecumenical councils². While this was a drastic and sudden change from the previous three hundred years of Roman history, Caesaropapism³ was just one facet of the transformation that the Roman Empire underwent in the third and fourth centuries.

Religion was also used to justify an emperor's right to rule, as military victories were often cited as evidence that the gods, or God in the case of Christian emperors, were on their side. This practice continued even after Emperors no longer personally led their armies into battles, because reigning emperors would often claim the success of their generals as their own.⁴ Beginning with Constantine, many Roman emperors were also heavily involved in the various functions of the Church as they had the authority to appoint and remove bishops throughout the Empire. Justinian I is a prime example of this as throughout his reign he made several attempts to

² In addition the First Council of Nicaea the other principal ecumenical councils were as follows: the First Council of Constantinople (381), the First Council of Ephesus (431), the Council of Chalcedon (451), and the Second Council of Constantinople (533).

³ Caesaropapism is the practice of a nation's head of state also being the head of the church, this was practiced in the Eastern Roman Empire from the fourth century until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Caesaropapism was not practiced in the western half of the Empire as western emperors took less interest in religious matters than their eastern peers.

⁴ Justinian is one of the more prominent examples of this. He used Belisarius' victory over the Vandals, which is discussed further in chapter four, to portray himself as a kind of savior of the Romans living in North Africa at the time.

reconcile the growing rift between the Christians who accepted the Confessions of Chalcedon⁵ and those who rejected them. Justinian may also have had a secondary political motive for this, as his reputation was in dire need of repair following the bloody Nika Riots in 532. Several Roman emperors also handpicked the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople.⁶

The politics of imperial Rome were complicated even at the best of times, and the ever-present religious tensions between Christians and pagans only served to make imperial politics messier by the late third century. In the centuries before Constantine there were several persecutions carried out against Christians in the Roman Empire, and by the fourth century the infighting among Christians exacerbated the political issues faced by the Christian emperors as the religion continued to gain popularity throughout the Empire and grow ever more divided over theological disputes. As stated above, emperors often convened ecumenical councils to solve these disputes, but inevitably the decisions made by these councils left at least one party unhappy. These councils often resulted in popular sects of Christianity being labeled as heresies, a prime example of this being Arianism, which was declared a heresy following the first Council of Nicaea in 325. Others, such as the Council of Chalcedon in 451, led to rifts between those agreeing with the council's decision and those opposing it. These councils often made things more complicated, and emperors found themselves trying to appease the aggrieved parties in an effort to keep the church united. By inserting themselves into various religious debates eastern Roman emperors, beginning with Constantine, ensured that the state and the Church were closely intertwined even if this was not necessarily done on purpose. Nevertheless, Constantine's

⁵ The Council of Chalcedon was convened in 451.

⁶ These were the five most important bishoprics in the Roman Empire, and while they were technically all of equal power the Bishopric of Rome often exerted the most influence.

frequent use of his secular political authority to settle theological arguments established a tradition that subsequent eastern emperors continued to follow.

Christians in the Military and the Diocletianic Persecutions

This intermingling of religion and imperial duties was not exclusive to politics as it bled over into various other aspects of Empire as well. There is evidence that there was a noticeable Christian presence in the military as early as the reign of Marcus Aurelius. While on campaign in Germany this legion, composed mostly of Christians, allegedly had their prayers answered by God and the campaign turned in favor of the Romans.⁷ There is further evidence that numerous Christians were serving in the legions at the end of the third century, even after the various persecutions carried out earlier in the same century. A potential soldier named Maximilian was drafted into military service in 295 but refused because he believed that the military seal was a form of idolatry because it depicted the tetrarchs who claimed to be the representatives of Hercules and Jupiter. When Maximilian was brought to trial it was pointed out to him that there were a number of Christians that served in the mobile unit commanded directly by Diocletian; nonetheless, Maximilian still refused to serve and was executed. There are other records of Christians in the legions, including centurions, who had no moral qualms serving in the military.⁸ The case of Maximilian makes it clear that not only were there Christians in the Roman military at this time, but that Diocletian, and presumably the other tetrarchs, took little issue with them serving in the military as long as they respected the military traditions. Problems only arose when Christians disrespected, or refused to partake in, these traditions.⁹

⁷ John Helgeland "Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173-337" *Church History* 43, no. 2 (1974): 155, accessed February 19, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/3163949.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹ There are also prominent examples in the New Testament of Roman centurions who expressed some level of interest in Christianity. For example, Matthew 8:5-13 tells the story of a centurion who begged Jesus, who he humbly addressed as Lord, to heal his dying servant.

Even without this evidence it is clear that there was a significant number of Christians in the military by the end of the third century because in 299 Diocletian (r. 284-306) and Galerius (r. 305-311) tried to purge the military of its Christian elements. Lactantius and Eusebius both painted a similar picture of the purge. According to Lactantius, who had firsthand knowledge of this event, Diocletian offered a sacrifice to the gods and some of his household ministers, who were Christians, made the sign of the cross to ward off demons. After multiple sacrifices failed to produce any results for the haruspices to read the head augur accused the Christians of sabotaging the sacrifices.¹⁰ It was at this point that Diocletian became enraged and ordered all the Christians present to offer a sacrifice or suffer the consequences:

In a rage, Diocletian ordered...all who were in the palace to make the sacrifice. He gave orders that any who might refuse were to be punished with clubbings. By means of these orders which were delivered through officers, he charged even the soldiers to be forced to the nefarious sacrifices. Those who would not obey were withdrawn from service.¹¹

The fact that Lactantius, who had no qualms with expressing his hatred of the pagans, did not record any actual bloodshed or death in his account implies that most of the Christians either went through with the sacrifices or were simply excused from service without being beaten or punished in some way. In addition, the soldiers subject to this persecution were not Diocletian's own men, as his army was still in Egypt; rather, these orders applied specifically to Galerius' army.¹²

Even though Lactantius portrayed Diocletian as the impetus behind this persecution the next chapter of *The Death of the Persecutors* places most of the blame squarely on the shoulders of the junior emperor, Galerius. Diocletian is not completely absolved by Lactantius, as he did

¹⁰ Lactantius, "Minor Works: The Death of the Persecutors," *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 54, trans. Mary Francis McDonald, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 148-149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

¹² P.S. Davies, "the Origin and Purpose of the Persecution of AD 303." *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 40, no. 1 (1989), 81. Accessed April 16, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23963763.

write that Diocletian's major flaw was that he only ever sought advice from his council on matters that he knew would bring him criticism to distance himself from blame. According to Lactantius, this council consisted of men who loathed Christianity, and they are the ones who urged Diocletian to go support Galerius' planned persecution of the Christians. It is at this point that Lactantius shifts the blame to Galerius as he claimed that Diocletian, attempting to remain as moderate as possible, wanted the persecution to be carried out without any bloodshed, but that Galerius wanted to burn at the stake every single Christian who refused to make a sacrifice to the gods.¹³

In his *Church History* Eusebius refuses to say whether it was Diocletian or Galerius who was responsible for the persecution. Timothy Barnes argued that Galerius was able to pressure Diocletian into persecuting the Christians throughout the Empire. Barnes argument is that this was possible because Galerius had recently won a monumental victory over the Persians in 298. This victory brought with it new levels of prestige that frightened Diocletian and convinced him to agree with the demands of the junior emperor.¹⁴ In addition, Diocletian was largely tolerant of Christians, while Galerius had little love for them.¹⁵ Eusebius, unlike Lactantius, did not have firsthand knowledge of the persecution, which is evident throughout his retelling of the events. His account paints a more vivid picture of violence towards Christians, whereas Lactantius' version is void of bloodshed. Eusebius even claims that the Christian soldiers were ordered either to perform the sacrifices or "give up the service and life itself."¹⁶ Eusebius would have been relying on secondhand information and rumors when writing his account, so it comes as no

¹³ Lactantius, "Minor Works," 150-151.

¹⁴ The victory against the Persians is credited to Galerius because Diocletian merely lent the junior emperor aid, while Galerius' legions conducted most of the campaign.

¹⁵ Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Harvard University Press, 1981) 19.

¹⁶ Eusebius and Rufinus, "History of the Church," *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 133, trans. Philip R. Amidon, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016.) 324-325.

surprise that years after the fact these rumors may have embellished upon the truth. Given the rather striking differences between this account and that presented by Lactantius it is also possible that Eusebius is describing a later persecution carried out closer to the end of Diocletian's reign rather than the one in 299.

These events are important partly because of how close they occurred to Constantine's conversion. There were only nine years between the second Diocletianic Persecution and Constantine's decision to become a follower of Christ, many of those who suffered at the hands of Diocletian and Galerius still remained in the Empire. They are also important because it shows that there were at least enough Christians in the military by the end of the third century to warrant two separate purges. This shows that the military was largely tolerant of Christians as long as they did not allow their religion to interfere with their military duties. While these particular purges were limited to North Africa and the Empire's eastern provinces, where the majority of Christians in the Empire lived, it does not mean that the legions in the west were any less tolerant. The fact that Constantine converted to Christianity well before he became emperor in the east and had his men put the symbol of Christ on their shields, indicates that, at the very least, his own legions had a Christian presence.¹⁷

Conversion of Constantine and His Complex Relationship with Christianity

After his alleged vision before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine had his men emblazon their shields with the *Chi Rho* symbol representing Christ. According to the account of Eusebius, who claimed to have heard the story directly from the emperor himself,

¹⁷ It should also be noted that Galerius issued an edict of toleration in 311, and put an end to the Christian persecutions he had started, which likely made Constantine's conversion less controversial than it otherwise may have been.

Constantine received a vision from God of a blazing cross in the sky that was inscribed with the words *in hoc signo vinces*¹⁸:

This God he began to invoke in prayer, beseeching and imploring him...to assist him in his plans. As he made these prayers...there appeared to the Emperor a most remarkable divine sign...about the midday sun...he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting above the sun, a cross shaped trophy, and a text attached to it which said “By this, conquer.”¹⁹

Constantine, while awestruck by this apparent miracle, was initially confused by his vision and unsure of its meaning. Later that night, Christ appeared to him in his sleep and explained that the symbol would protect him from his enemies. While it seems unlikely that Constantine experienced a legitimate religious vision or miracle, he could have seen something that he interpreted as a vision or a sign from God, which in turn may have influenced his dreams.²⁰ The fact that Eusebius claims to have heard the story from Constantine, rather than witnessing any of it himself, casts doubt on its veracity and integrity. In addition, Eusebius recorded this version of the story in his *Vita Constantini*, which is a panegyric written upon the death of Constantine. The fact that this version of the miracle appears in what is essentially a glorification of the deceased emperor, who was succeeded by his three sons,²¹ further calls into question the entire story’s veracity. Eusebius even began the *Vita Constantini* with a discussion on the nature of Constantine’s immortality, which makes it clear that the purpose of this work was to celebrate and glorify Constantine.

¹⁸ This phrase is not the one used by Eusebius, who wrote in Greek. *In hoc signo vinces* is the standard Latin translation of the Greek phrase used by Eusebius.

¹⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Life of Constantine*, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.28.2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

²¹ This is important to note because it means that Eusebius wrote the *Vita Constantini* during the reign of Constantine’s sons, and perhaps even at their behest. Even though it is unlikely that Eusebius would have painted an unflattering picture of the deceased emperor, he surely would have been under more pressure to depict him in a positive light.

Lactantius recorded a similar story of Constantine's conversion on the eve of the battle, but his version of events leaves out the dream, and Constantine's alleged vision is described in far less detail. Lactantius presents the vision almost as if it were an afterthought rather than the momentous life-altering miracle described by Eusebius. Nonetheless, Constantine's vision is still employed in this account to depict him as one of God's favored servants, just as it is used by Eusebius. Another difference between Lactantius' and Eusebius' accounts are their portrayals of the actual battle. Eusebius claims that Maxentius led his army across the Milvian Bridge which he had already sabotaged as a trap for Constantine, and the bridge collapsed killing him along with most of his men.²² According to Lactantius, however, the bridge was not sabotaged until after Maxentius crossed it and met Constantine in battle, at which point his men were routed and fled back across the bridge which promptly collapsed.²³

This is not to say that one source should be trusted over the other, as it may not ever be possible to determine which version of events is the more accurate account. Instead these sources should be compared to one another in order to provide a better overall examination of the events surrounding Constantine's conversion. For example, even though Lactantius and Eusebius both wrote a different account of how and when the Milvian Bridge collapsed, the fact that they both mention it makes it likely that the bridge did indeed collapse at some in the battle. It is also possible that since Eusebius admits his account of the conversion was told to him directly by Constantine, his version of the story simply adds details that play into the idea of the whole ordeal being a miracle.

Eusebius and Lactantius were both instrumental in Christianity becoming an officially recognized religion in the Roman Empire, as both men, at one point or another, served as

²² Eusebius and Rufinus, *Church History*, 362.

²³ Lactantius, "Deaths of the Persecutors," 190-191.

Constantine's religious advisors.²⁴ Eusebius was especially important in this regard as he helped shape many of Constantine's religious policies and laws that granted Christians greater freedom throughout the Empire. Eusebius was also heavily involved with one of the most influential events in early Christian history, when he called for an episcopal council that overturned Arius' excommunication by Alexander of Alexandria.²⁵ Eusebius once again came to the defense of Arius at the Council of Nicaea in 325, but despite his efforts the Nicene Creed, favored by Constantine, who wanted to solve the Christological debates and unite the Church, won out and Arius was branded a heretic. Despite being in opposition to the Nicene Creed and the outcome of Nicaea, Eusebius retained Constantine's favor and was exonerated by the emperor on multiple occasions. Constantine even relented, somewhat, on the stance that he had taken at Nicaea and allowed Arius and his followers to return from exile. Constantine's newfound leniency towards the Arians greatly influenced his son, Constantius II, who followed in his father's footsteps and was tolerant of Arianism throughout his own reign.²⁶

As Roger Collins notes, many scholars have held the belief that Constantine only converted to Christianity out of self-interest, but he argues that Constantine's conversion was genuine. This is important to note because if Constantine converted because he truly believed in God then it means he was willing to convert at a time when it was not advantageous for him to do so and in a region where he would not have widespread support. Galerius' edict of toleration had only been issued in the previous year, and it is unlikely that all of the pagans who, up until that point, had carried out persecutions would have immediately become tolerant of Christians.

²⁴ Lactantius even served as a tutor for Constantine's eldest son Crispus in either 309 or 310, two to three years before Constantine even converted to Christianity himself.

²⁵ Alexander was the Patriarch of the See of Alexandria, also known as the See of St. Mark, at the time of the Arian controversy.

²⁶ Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe 300-1000*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 64.

Most of the evidence used to support this claim is that Constantine continued to have coins minted with the Roman gods for eight years after his conversion, and his monuments, such as the Arch of Constantine, contained no Christian references whatsoever. This, however, ignores the fact that while there were some sizeable Christian communities in the west, most of the Empire's Christian population resided in the east, where Constantine would not become emperor until 324. Many high-ranking officials, including military officers, in the west were still pagans, and this likely left Constantine with little choice but to adopt a lenient view towards pagans, especially in the early years of his reign. While he could have carried out a persecution against the pagans after his victory over Maxentius the fact that he never attempted to do so at any point in his reign indicates that he had little interest in purging the pagans. Even in the east where Christianity already had a strong foothold, Constantine had little reason to expect any significant support from the Christians.²⁷

It is also possible that Constantine only adopted a somewhat informal view of Christianity after his conversion in 312. This would not only explain why the Arch of Constantine, built in 315, has no Christian references and why he continued to issue coins with pagan imagery, but also why he did not become overly involved with religious debates until after he conquered the east in 324.²⁸ In fact, the Council of Nicaea itself might be the most compelling piece of evidence to support this idea. The Arian controversy began as early 321 in North Africa, which was in the half of the Empire ruled by Constantine, yet he did not call together an ecumenical council to deal with the issue until 325 after he had defeated Licinius. It is possible that Constantine's original view of Christianity was a simple one that meshed with the traditional Roman idea that different religions were not mutually exclusive and could coexist. Certainly,

²⁷Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

after he became emperor of the entire Empire and moved his capital to the east, his relationship with Christianity became much more complex and involved, which can be explained by the simple fact that the Christianity was more common in the east and more developed as a result.

If this is the case it shows that Constantine may not have been interested in using his secular authority to influence the outcome of theological disputes until he came into contact with the more developed Christian traditions of the east. This would mean that the entanglement of politics and Christianity did not explicitly begin with Constantine's conversion in 312, though that event certainly set the Empire on this path, but rather with his exposure to more developed and nuanced Christian teachings. If Constantine was unaware of, or largely uninterested in, the larger debate surrounding early Christianity during the first decade of his reign it explains why he did not become heavily involved in these matters until he gained control of the east and was further exposed to Christianity.

Despite the smaller number of Christians in the west the fact that Constantine's soldiers seemed to have no issue with being ordered to adorn their shields with the symbol of Christ implies that there was already a Christian presence among his men. While it might be impossible to determine just how many of his men were Christians before 312, Christianity did have a presence in Britain during the reign of Constantius (r. 305-306). There is slight evidence that there were Christian soldiers in Britain before 312, but more compelling is the fact that many of the bishops in Britain were seated in towns near military camps. The smaller Christian presence in the west, compared to the east, indicates that the army itself may have spread Christianity to Britain.²⁹

²⁹ John Helgeland "Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173-337," 161.

The idea that the military spread Christianity to and throughout Britain is further supported by the fact that Britain was part of the domain of the tetrarch Constantius, father of Constantine. Even though Constantius was only a Caesar until 305, it is clear that the junior emperors exercised a great amount of influence over their own regions. If Lactantius is to be believed, this was especially true towards the end of the reigns of Diocletian and Maximian, likely because Diocletian was quite ill during the last years of his reign. The fact that Constantius was based in Britain also would have allowed him greater freedom as he was further away from the other three tetrarchs. Even though Constantius was a pagan, Lactantius mostly left him out of *The Death of the Persecutors* because “he was different from the rest, and he was worthy to hold command of the world alone.”³⁰ While Constantius always attempted to remain in favor with his fellow tetrarchs, evidenced by the fact that he left his first wife³¹ to marry the daughter of Maximian, he also treated the Christians with kindness.³² Constantius’ sympathy for the Christians of Britain would have allowed Christianity to have a sure foothold in the isles.³³ This, plus the evidence that Christianity was spread throughout Britain by the military, lends credence to the theory that Constantine’s legions had at least some Christians in their ranks prior to the battle with Maxentius in 312. Even before his conversion in 312, Constantine was just as sympathetic towards the Christian communities in Britain as his father had been. When

³⁰ Lactantius, “Deaths of the Persecutors,” 146.

³¹ Constantius’ first wife was Helena, the mother of Constantine. Helena was of low birth and may have been a milkmaid early in her life.

³² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 13.

³³ Constantius also controlled Gaul, but because Gaul was closer to the center of imperial power, it was probably still difficult for Christianity to gain traction in the province, no matter how sympathetic Constantius may have been.

Constantine was proclaimed emperor by his father's soldiers in 306, shortly after Constantius' death, he quickly set about returning the property of the Christians in Britain.³⁴

Eusebius and the Spread of Arianism

Eusebius' support of Arius and his teachings had a larger impact than just potentially influencing Constantine to allow the Arians to return from exile. Before Constantine had even called the council of Nicaea, Arianism had spread throughout the Empire and had become a popular sect of Christianity, and it would remain as such for several centuries. Arianism also grew in popularity among the Roman ruling class of this period as Constantine's later leniency towards the avowed heresy allowed it to once again spread throughout the Empire. Constantine's own son Constantius II (r. 337-361) was a Semi-Arian and wanted to bridge the gap in the Church between Arianism and the Nicene Creed. Emperor Valens (r. 364-378), was fully committed to Arianism and was even responsible for its spread to the tribes across the Danube as the Goths agreed to convert to Arianism in exchange for being allowed into the Empire. Julian the Apostate (r. 361-364), who ruled in the intervening years between Constantius II and Valens, wanted to reestablish paganism as the Empire's dominant religion, and in pursuit of this recalled many of the exiled Arians to cause further division in the Church.

If Eusebius had refused to support Arius or had even gone as far as to support Alexander's condemnation of Arius' teachings, then Arian beliefs most likely would have been contained in North Africa and been easier to snuff out. It was the support of Eusebius that gave Arianism the impetus to spread all throughout Europe and become one of the largest theological controversies of late antiquity. This also means that the Nicene creed adopted by the Council of

³⁴ Lactantius, "Deaths of the Persecutors," 168. Lactantius also claimed that Constantine restored the property of all Christians in Gaul as well, but at this time he was still based in Britain and it is unlikely that he would have been able to exert as much influence in Gaul.

Nicaea would not have come into existence until a later date when some other controversial Christian sect prompted the calling of a large ecumenical council. The spread of Arianism also allowed Constantine to establish the tradition of an emperor using his secular political power to intervene in serious religious matters and call together hundreds of bishops from throughout the Empire for ecumenical councils.

Following Arianism's spread across the Danube many barbarian tribes who later settled in western Europe brought this version of Christianity with them. Visigothic Spain was dominated by Arianism until the late sixth century. The first king of Italy Odoacer was an Arian, as was Theodoric the Great who conquered his kingdom in 480. The Vandals, who crossed the Rhine in 405, spread Arianism to North Africa after they conquered it from the Romans and even forcibly converted much of the region's Catholic population.

Christian Response to the Gothic Sack of Rome in 410

The Gothic sack of Rome in 410 was one of the most disastrous events in Roman history and inspired the creation of several prominent Christian texts. In 402 Alaric led the Goths across the Alps in what proved to be the first of three Gothic invasions of Italy, the last of which culminated with the sacking of Rome. This was not the only time that a non-Roman force made its way into Italy, but it is the most important as the Goths were the first barbarians to sack the city of Rome in almost eight hundred years.³⁵ Alaric's first two invasions were repulsed by the Roman general Stilicho, who was of Vandal ancestry himself. Fortune quickly turned in favor of the Goths, however, as Stilicho was executed in 408, sometime after the second invasion.

Stilicho was the only true barrier standing between Rome and the Goths, and with his death

³⁵ Other non-Roman people's who invaded Italy include the Vandals who also sacked Rome in 455, but the Empire was much weaker by this point. In 452 Attila the Hun invaded Italy but his invasion was largely unsuccessful as Italy was suffering from a plague and famine and he was forced to turn back.

Alaric was able to march on the city and besiege it in 410. Alaric initially reached a favorable agreement with Honorius, which was likely similar to the agreement he had previously with the eastern emperor.³⁶ Before Alaric could reach Ravenna to meet the emperor and confirm this deal he was ambushed by Sarus, who was a fellow Goth already employed by the Empire. While Sarus may have been acting on his own without orders from Honorius his ambush enraged Alaric who decided to return to Rome and sack the city. The Gothic sack was the first time that the city of Rome had fallen in eight hundred years.³⁷ While the Goths did plunder the city, they left it relatively intact, compared to other sacks from antiquity, and left the city after three days.³⁸

After the Gothic sack of Rome, Christianity was left in a rather precarious position. Many of the Roman Empire's pagan inhabitants, most of whom resided in the western half of the Empire, viewed the sack as punishment for Rome's abandonment of the old gods, while some Christians believed that God was punishing the Empire for its decadence. Several important theological works were written in the aftermath of the Gothic sack, of which Paulus Orosius' *Historiae Adversus Paganos* and St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos* are two of the most well-known. Both authors presented their writings as responses to the upswell of pagan fervor following the sack, but in truth the strongest reactions to the sack of Rome came from the Empire's Christian communities rather than from the pagans. As such, it is more likely that Orosius and Augustus both wrote under the guise of repudiating paganism but were responding to their fellow Christians.³⁹ Even though both men were writing in response to the same

³⁶ Alaric had originally been in the service of Honorius' brother Arcadius, but at some point before his first invasion Alaric's position was revoked. This is what led him to cross the Alps with his men as he wished to enter into a similar arrangement with Honorius.

³⁷ The last time Rome had been captured by a foreign enemy was in 390 BC when it was sacked by a Gallic tribe.

³⁸ Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans: 382-489*, (Oxford University Press, 1991), 213-218.

³⁹ Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 62-63.

traumatic event, they took drastically different approaches in their attempts to assuage the fears of their fellow Christians and counter the complaints of pagans.

Orosius' *History* was written to show that the history of the Roman Empire before the adoption of Christianity was more violent and miserable than the years after Constantine's conversion. Orosius' theory of Roman history is hopelessly biased, however, because Roman history after Constantine's conversion was full of violence and bloodshed and was not the glorious period of peace and prosperity that Orosius wanted to portray. He often left out important details from events of the third century to make history conform to his assumptions. Orosius used the sack of Rome as a prime example of this alleged more peaceful period. He argued that Alaric's Goths had left Rome and its inhabitants largely unharmed because they had given up their pagan traditions for Christianity, even if they followed a sect of Christianity that had been disavowed as a heresy. Orosius wanted to demonstrate to the pagans and his fellow Christians that Christianity had improved the Roman Empire and was superior to the Empire's pagan roots.

Orosius employed several examples from Roman history to achieve this purpose, one of the more poignant events he uses is the invasion of Italy in late 405 by the Gothic king Radagaisus, who was "the most savage by far of all former and present enemies" and "in a sudden attack spread over all Italy."⁴⁰ Just like many Christian authors before and after him, Orosius presented the events around Radagaisus' defeat as a kind of divine miracle to portray God's omnipotence, and in this particular case His benevolence towards a city (Rome) that was ungrateful for His gifts:

He forced Radagaisus, struck with divine terror, into the mountains of Fiesole, and...encircled his two hundred thousand men without leadership and food on a rough

⁴⁰ Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, (The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 349.

and dry mountain ridge, with fear pressing upon them from all sides...no army was drawn up for battle...no blood was shed...the enemy, so numerous and so cruel, were weakened by hunger...so many Gothic captives is said to have been made...they were sold in droves at random for an aureus a piece. But God did not all anything of this people to survive, for immediately...all who were bought died.⁴¹

While it is true that most of the Goths sold into slavery did die shortly after the fact, it was not the divine and bloodless miracle that Orosius described. In truth, most of Radagaisus' men were forced to join the Roman military, and it was their families who were sold into slavery, so many in fact that Italy's slave market was overwhelmed and briefly collapsed. In 408, Emperor Honorius had the general Stilicho arrested and executed, and then had the families of Stilicho's *foederati* massacred. These *foederati*, which included the men who invaded Italy with Radagaisus, went on to join Alaric when he invaded Italy later in 408.⁴²

While Zosimus' history has its own biases, especially towards Christians as Zosimus was a pagan, he depicts a more believable version of these events. It is rather certain that many of Radagaisus' men were sold into slavery following his defeat. It is also certain that those of his soldiers who were pressed into Roman service fled to Alaric for protection shortly after Stilicho was executed. This lends credence to the idea that the emperor had their families executed rather than it being a moment of divine intervention. For Orosius to portray the Roman Empire after the conversion of Constantine as less bloody and violent than it had been before the fourth century, he had no choice but to change the details of events as significant as this. Zosimus, who wrote his history in the late fifth century, also relied on primary sources from this period that no longer survive. While this does not guarantee his account is anymore accurate than Orosius, who admittedly lived through this period, it does indicate that Zosimus did not fabricate all of the details of his version of events.

⁴¹ Ibid., 351-352.

⁴² Zosimus, *New History*, (London: Green and Chaplin, 1814), 5.35.6,

Augustine's approach in *The City of God*, on the other hand, did not focus on the bloody nature of the pre-Christian history of the Roman Empire; rather, he sought to demonstrate that the Roman gods were useless idols and that all of Rome's past glory could be attributed to the one true God. Throughout book one Augustine provides numerous examples to show that Rome's old gods were incapable of protecting the Empire. In chapter three he quotes book two of Virgil's *Aeneid* as an example of the uselessness of the pagan gods.⁴³ For Augustine the fall of Troy, as depicted by a celebrated author like Virgil, is a prime example of God's superiority over the Roman gods: "Does he not admit that the very gods, whom he declares conquered are entrusted to his protection rather than he to theirs...if then Virgil describes such gods as vanquished, and...needing a man's help even to escape, surely it is folly...to entrust Rome to the safekeeping of such divinities."⁴⁴ Most of book one follows this pattern as Augustine repeatedly decries pagan worship as useless and ineffectual, and claims that the city's pagan inhabitants should thank God because those hiding in His temples were spared from the bloodshed.

In book four Augustine argued that the Roman Empire's past achievements and glory should be attributed solely to God rather than to any of the numerous Roman gods. In chapter seventeen Augustine wrote that it is not Jupiter who sends forth victory, but rather God who sends forth and grants victory to those who have His favor. Roman emperors often used this same logic to show that military victories proved their rule was favored by God, even when they no longer personally led armies into battle. Augustine also laments how large the Empire had become because it only achieved such a great size through warfare. For Augustine warfare is at

⁴³ *Aeneid* 2.293, "Troy entrusts to you her sacred relics and her household gods" and *Aeneid* 2.319, "Panthus, son of Othrys, Apollo's priest on the citadel, dragging along with his own hands the sacred relics, the conquered gods, his little grandchild, running frantically to my door"

⁴⁴ Augustine of Hippo, "City of God," *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 8, trans. Demetrius B. Zema and Gerald G. Walsh, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1950), 22.

best a necessary evil that is only celebrated by wicked and unprincipled men, but war can sometimes be a good thing if it means that good men will not be ruled over by the wicked.

Augustine's ideas on warfare, namely that it is at best a necessary evil that should only be employed when just, can also be viewed as the origin of the Christian concept of a "just war." While Augustine does not lay out any specific circumstances for when a war is just or unjust, he does make it clear that wars can be just in some situations. He even goes so far as to say that Christians should not be ashamed of protecting peace via warfare when forced to by the nation in which they live. This philosophy on warfare does not absolve wicked rulers of the sins that come with unjust warfare, but it very clearly does absolve the common man who has little to no say in matters of warfare. Augustine does, however, specify that this applies to a just war, which he once again does not specify in any meaningful way, which may have been his way of saying that true Christians have a duty to refuse to partake in any war that is not just.⁴⁵ This idea of a "just war," while vague, also contradicts the idea that Rome's military might waned in the fourth and fifth centuries because Christians would not, or could not, serve in the military.⁴⁶

Book four is also where Augustine disassociates the City of God from the City of man, which in this specific case would be the Roman Empire, whereas Orosius wanted to strengthen this connection. He believed that secular institutions, such as the Roman Empire, did not matter in the course of individual salvation:

Rule by good men is a blessing bestowed not so much on themselves but upon mankind. But the rule of wicked men brings greater harm to themselves since they ruin their own souls...as for their subjects only their own villainy can harm them. For whatever injury wicked masters inflict upon good men is to be regarded not as a penalty for wrongdoing, but as a test for their virtues.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Augustine, "City of God," 211-212.

⁴⁶ This idea has been refuted many times and has fallen out of favor with most historians of late antiquity, but it remains a widely accepted reason for Rome's fall among non-academics.

⁴⁷ Augustine, "City of God," 194.

It did not matter to Augustine if the Roman Empire was ruled by a just man or a wicked man because in the end a wicked man could only harm his own immortal soul. This, by extension, can also be interpreted as a condemnation of the emperors' incessant involvement in theological matters. Roger Collins argued that while Augustine did hold the belief that the Roman state and the Church do not need to be identified with one another, he was not criticizing the Empire; rather he was merely stressing that secular institutions do not matter when it comes to the subject of an individual's salvation.⁴⁸ Whether or not Augustine intended for his words to be taken in that manner, he clearly believed that identifying Christianity through its relationship with the Roman Empire was largely unnecessary, because neither the Empire nor the emperor was responsible for an individual's salvation. Even if this was not his intent, book four nevertheless calls into question the well-established practice of Caesaropapism, which had begun, somewhat unofficially, with Constantine.

Even if this was Augustine's intent, it made little difference in the long run as Roman emperors continued to use their secular power to maintain control of the Church for centuries. This relationship between the secular and the non-secular allowed the Roman Empire, particularly in the east, to undergo yet another significant transition in late antiquity, just as military reforms and the barbarian migrations did throughout this same period. By the end of the fourth century religion and politics were intertwined in a way they never had been before in the Roman Empire.

Even though Orosius and Augustine both took drastically different approaches in their responses to the sack of Rome in 410, both are prime examples of just how ingrained Christianity had become with Roman culture in the hundred years following the conversion of

⁴⁸ Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, 63.

Constantine. Both men wanted to assuage Christian fears and calm the rising clamor of those Romans who still worshipped the pagan gods. In addition, Orosius' *History* continued the tradition of ecclesiastical history that had been established by Eusebius nearly a century earlier. Ecclesiastical histories were an important development in Roman history as most of the surviving sources from late antiquity, while not necessarily ecclesiastical histories in the same vein as Eusebius or Orosius, were written by Christians, and therefore were more likely to be preserved than secular or pagan texts. A prime example of this Gregory of Tours' *History of Franks*.

Conclusion

While Constantine did not make Christianity the Roman Empire's official religion, he laid the legal groundwork that allowed it to spread throughout the Empire rapidly, and to be recognized as the official religion in 380 by Theodosius I. In fact, Constantine did everything except make Christianity Rome's official religion; he passed several laws that offered new protections to the Christians. After Constantine's conversion in 312 Christianity's status in the Roman Empire remained secure, with the sole exception of the reign of Julian the Apostate (r. 360-363). Constantine the Great's impact on the political and religious spheres of the Roman Empire lasted long after his own death in 337 and allowed Rome to undergo a substantial transition leading into the fourth century.

Even though western Roman emperors usually had little to no interest in religious disputes, and in spite of the fact that the pope came to be the head of Christianity in the west, the idea of heads of state also being the head of the church was not entirely absent from western Europe as time went on. Many European kings, especially in the later Medieval period and beyond, had little regard for the papacy and some monarchs outright disobeyed the pope when it came to religious matters. Even though the Nicene Creed, which forms the basic foundations of

Catholic beliefs, was first formulated in the Empire's eastern territories, it soon became the dominant form of Christianity in the west as well once Arianism was wiped out. Caesaropapism spread with it when Justinian reconquered much of Italy and North Africa in the sixth century and over the next three hundred years several emperors chose to directly influence the inner workings of the Church by choosing who would serve as the bishop of Rome. While this was the only true form of Caesaropapism practiced in western Europe, before Henry VIII established the Church of England, there were several European monarchs who made the pope subservient to their own political wishes, such as Philip the Fair of France.

The events of the next 150 years are largely untouched in this thesis for the sake of brevity, but the Council of Chalcedon is briefly discussed in the next chapter. This is not to say that there were no major developments in Christianity during this period. Several ecumenical councils were convened, including the aforementioned Council of Chalcedon, which had tremendous impact on Christianity in Late Antiquity. Chapter four focuses on the emperor Justinian and his wars to reconquer Italy and North Africa, and how these wars demonstrate the continued development of the Roman military and imperial politics in the sixth century. The wars against the Vandals and Ostrogoths provided numerous examples of just how important the cavalry had become to the Roman military, and therefore are important for this thesis. Justinian's reign is also discussed, to some extent, in the context of the religious dissent present in the east during the sixth century. In an effort to keep topics together based on their themes, in this case the reign of Justinian, this discussion is included in chapter four instead of chapter three.

Chapter 4: Reestablishing the West: Justinian's of Reconquest

The Problems of Reconquering the West and Justinian's Reasons for War

Justinian's wars to reconquer the western half of the Roman world were the most ambitious undertakings in the history of the Roman Empire. During his reign (527–565), the Romans took back large swathes of what used to be the western half of the Empire. Not since the days of Julius Caesar had the Romans conquered such a vast amount of land in such a short amount of time. Under the leadership of Justinian's most trusted general, Belisarius, the Romans regained control of North Africa, a portion of southern Spain, and Italy. While both the Vandalic and Gothic Wars were the most important wars that the Romans had fought perhaps since the days of Caesar and Augustus, they can be viewed as overall failures. Though the Romans won an easy and quick victory over the Vandals (533-534), they found it difficult to consolidate their control over North Africa. Their war against the Goths in Italy, on the other hand, was costly and drawn out. Justinian's Gothic War, which was the final war in a long series of Roman conflicts with the Goths,¹ lasted nineteen years (535-554), exacerbated the Empire's fiscal problems, and drained it of resources that could have been used to address pressing needs throughout the Empire.

Despite the difficulty and expense of reestablishing Roman control in Italy and North Africa, both wars were of significant symbolic importance to Justinian. After the disastrous 532 Nika riots, in which Justinian had thirty thousand rioters killed, he desperately needed to restore his reputation.² His first solution was the reconciliation of the Chalcedonian and anti-

¹ The Romans and Goths fought a series of eight wars that began in 249 during the reign of Trajan Decius (r. 249-251)

² In 532 the two main political factions in Constantinople rebelled against Justinian and crowned Anastasius I's nephew as emperor. Justinian initially considered fleeing the city, but allegedly his wife convinced him to stay. Justinian then ordered Belisarius to massacre all the rioters who were in the hippodrome.

Chalcedonian Christians that lived within the Empire. This quickly proved to be unsuccessful, and in 533 Justinian resorted to an invasion of Africa to regain his waning prestige. It is likely that the subsequent invasion of Italy was carried out with this same goal in mind. Justinian also reached a compromise with Pope John II, likely because of the presence of imperial armies in Sicily.³

The War in North Africa

Over the fifty years between the death of Huneric (r. 477-484) and Justinian's invasion of North Africa in 533, the Vandals ruled a relatively peaceful kingdom. They continued their persecution of s, but after the death Huneric it was far less violent in nature.⁴ There was nearly a war against King Theodoric of the Ostrogoths, when Gaiseric's (r. 428-477) grandson Hilderic imprisoned Theodoric's sister Amalafrika. Amalafrika was the widow of Hilderic's predecessor, and she had brought an extremely large dowry with her. In response, Theodoric prepared for an invasion of North Africa, but he died before he could complete his preparations.⁵ This incident exposes a glaringly obvious issue with the Vandal kings who ruled after 477; none of them was the ruler that Gaiseric was. Gaiseric was a competent ruler who was able to avoid a major war with the Romans for most of his reign. Hilderic almost brought about a war with the Ostrogoths, which could have been disastrous if not for the death of King Theodoric. Gelimer's usurpation of the throne brought the Vandals into conflict with the Romans, which led to the collapse of the Vandal kingdom in 534.

Justinian also used this friendship as justification for his war against the Vandals after Gelimer deposed Hilderic and claimed the throne. Before Gaiseric died, he and Emperor Zeno

³ Peter Heather, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian*, (Oxford University Press, 2018) 202-205.

⁴ Many of the peoples who migrated into the Roman Empire during this period (c. 375-568) followed the teachings of Arius who was declared a heretic in 325 by the Council of Nicaea.

⁵ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 83-85

agreed to a treaty that stated neither side would bring harm to the other, which Justinian needed to work around before he could declare war on the Vandals. Thus, Justinian sent Gelimer a letter that demanded he restore Hilderic to the throne, for he was already an old man and Gelimer would then come by the throne legally. Gelimer, unsurprisingly, refused this demand, which prompted a second letter from Justinian. This letter was more aggressive than the first, and Justinian demanded that Gelimer send Hilderic to Constantinople or face the consequences. Justinian further claimed that this war would not be in violation of the treaty that Gaiseric had made with Zeno because he was not declaring war against the kingdom of Gaiseric but rather to “avenge Gaiseric with all our power.”⁶ This made it appear that Justinian was reluctant to declare war on the Vandals, and only did so for the sake of his friend. Gelimer created the perfect opportunity for Justinian to restore his public image following the Nika riots. Justinian appeared reluctant to get dragged into costly war; it gave him the opportunity to reestablish Roman control over North Africa, and, perhaps most importantly, allowed him to reassert Catholic dominance in an area that was now controlled by heretics. This final reason may have been the most important one to Justinian because he had already failed to reconcile the Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians and needed a new method through which he could bring about religious stability in the empire.

Gelimer, in response to the second letter, claimed that he had gained the throne justly, and that it was Justinian who was unjust in his actions because of his repeated attempts to interfere with an independent kingdom.⁷ Even though Gelimer became king through usurpation, Justinian did not have the authority to dictate who should or should not be the ruler of an independent Vandal kingdom. It is more likely that Justinian had already planned an invasion of

⁶ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 85-89

⁷ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 85-89

North Africa for the reasons discussed above. Nonetheless, it did not matter who was in the right because Justinian had the power to do whatever he wished. As was common throughout history, especially during the ancient period, those with the greater power were often free to do whatever they wished when there was no one to stop them. As such Justinian ended his war with the Persians and recalled his general Belisarius to Constantinople to begin the reconquest of Roman North Africa.

Justinian then gathered an army that was composed of 10,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. This force also included 600 Huns and 400 Heruli, who were all mounted bowmen. In addition, Belisarius had his own personal bodyguard of 1,500 heavy cavalry.⁸ This would have brought the entire army up to 17,500 men, 7,500 of whom would have been cavalry of some type.⁹ The fact that almost half of this army was cavalry demonstrates how much military composition had changed since the earlier days of the empire, when infantry made up a higher proportion of the legions. The composition of this force more accurately reflects the armies of the third century and later, when field armies had evolved into more mobile strike forces. Procopius' accounts of battles from both this war and the Gothic War also show this change, as there were several key battles fought almost entirely with cavalry. None of this, however, means that cavalry had become more important than the infantry, which was still the backbone of the Roman military, even though most of the major battles throughout this war, as well as the Gothic War, were cavalry engagements. As far as the size of this army, 15,000 men is a believable number, albeit small compared even with the third and fourth centuries. This relatively smaller size can be attributed to the large cavalry presence, and the fact that Justinian would have needed to keep a

⁸ During this period prominent Roman generals had their own personal guards known as *bucellarii*. The *bucellarii* were typically paid from the general's personal wealth and their size depended on how many men the general could afford. They were typically heavy cavalry but were trained to be versatile in war.

⁹ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 103-105

sizeable portion of his military strength in the east in case there was another war with Persia. It is also unlikely that Procopius was mistaken about the size of this army because he accompanied Belisarius in all the wars that he wrote about.

Justinian gave Belisarius the authority to make the final decision on all matters regarding the war, and these decisions would carry with them the weight of the emperor, as if Justinian himself had made them. This allowed Belisarius to quickly make military decisions without the need to constantly convene his fellow generals to discuss every major decision or wait for an order from Justinian. It also gave Belisarius the authority to overrule any potential objections raised by his fellow generals. This decision shows the amount of trust that Justinian had in Belisarius, because this is not the kind of authority that a sensible ruler would normally hand over to anyone, even a general as accomplished as Belisarius.¹⁰

Before Belisarius left for Libya there were two revolts against Vandal rule. One occurred at Tripolis and was led by a Libyan named Pudentius, the other was in Sardinia when the local governor declared himself the king of Sardinia. Justinian had already sent a small force to support the rebels in Tripolis. Because of this, in addition to the fact that the city was a good distance from Carthage, Gelimer decided to focus only on the revolt in Sardinia. As such he sent his brother Tzazon with 5,000 men, a sizable portion of the Vandal army, to retake Sardinia.¹¹ If Gelimer was aware that Justinian had already sent men to support the rebels in Tripoli, then his decision to send such a large force to Sardinia is questionable. Gelimer was certainly aware of the fact that his relationship with Justinian was on the verge of open warfare, and his decision to send so many men to Sardinia only gave the Romans more reasons to invade. Thus, Gelimer's

¹⁰ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 107.

¹¹ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 99-100, 107.

rash decision to focus on Sardinia rather than the defense of Africa in face of a potential, and somewhat likely, Roman invasion, allowed Belisarius to march upon Carthage virtually unopposed.

Some of Belisarius' success in Africa has been unfairly attributed to luck more than skill, but all successful military leaders have been on the right side of luck at some point in their careers. It is not accurate to accuse Belisarius of being unskilled because luck was on his side and allowed him to take advantage of the favorable situation that the Vandals handed him. While most of his march to Carthage was unopposed, because all the towns that his army came upon quickly surrendered to him, he still used his skill as a general to gain support from the native Libyans.¹² Belisarius hoped the native Libyans would prove to be unfaithful to their Vandal rulers, and therefore support the Roman war effort. This hope was not farfetched on his part, as the Vandals had taken a large amount of land from the Libyans without cause and persecuted them, often violently, simply because they practiced Catholicism rather than Arianism. Belisarius quickly demonstrated that he wished to treat the Libyans fairly when he punished two of his own soldiers who had stolen food from locals.¹³

When the Romans were roughly forty miles from Carthage, Gelimer, who was still in the city of Hermione, ordered his brother to execute Hilderic. He also commanded his brother to prepare all the Vandal warriors that remained in Carthage, so that both of their forces could ambush Belisarius at Ad Decimum. When the Romans arrived, Gelimer sent his nephew Gibamund with 2,000 soldiers, most likely cavalry, ahead of the main Vandal army. This was done so that Gelimer, his nephew, and his brother would be able to surround the Romans on three sides as they entered. Gelimer's plans quickly fell apart, however, as the Vandal offensive

¹² James J O'Donnell, *The Ruin of the Roman Empire* (New York: Ecco, 2008) 253.

¹³ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 143.

was disjointed. His nephew was killed by Belisarius' Huns, and his brother was likewise killed at Ad Decimum by the Roman advance guard led by John the Armenian. Belisarius, unaware that these events had taken place, set up camp a short distance away and led some of his cavalry to Ad Decimum. Gelimer captured a strategic hill, which gave him a decisive advantage over the advancing Romans. At this stage of the battle Belisarius did benefit from luck: when Gelimer learned of his brother's death, he immediately buried him, and the Vandals fled towards Numidia.¹⁴

While this account of Gelimer's actions could be accurate to some extent, it does seem likely that the Vandals would have engaged Belisarius' inferior force. Gelimer likely would not have discovered his brother's death while still atop the hill, because the hilly terrain restricted his vision of the surrounding area. It is probable that the Vandals did engage the Romans, before Gelimer learned of his brother's death. Additionally, based on Procopius' own admission that the Vandals would have defeated the Romans they most likely held the upper hand until Gelimer fell into despair over his brother's fate. This would also explain why the Vandals then fled to Numidia, as there would have been little reason to flee that far from Carthage when they still held a strategically advantageous position.

Some historians have also used this incident as further evidence of Belisarius' luck in North Africa. James O'Donnell even goes so far as to say that it was timid leadership on the part of Gelimer that allowed the Romans to emerge victorious at Ad Decimum.¹⁵ Guy Halsall also mentions Gelimer's poor leadership in his brief description of the Battle of Ad Decimum.¹⁶ This is an overly harsh assessment. That is to say that it is possible that Gelimer was a poor military

¹⁴ Procopius, *History of the wars Book III*, 153-169

¹⁵ O'Donnell, *Ruin of the Roman Empire*, 254.

¹⁶ Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) ,500.

commander and, given Procopius' description of the battle, it is not an unreasonable conclusion. That being said, Gelimer's plan to ambush the Romans on three sides at Ad Decimum was certainly a good strategy. Belisarius just happened to have arranged his army in a formation that allowed the Huns to encounter Gibamund's force and allowed John's advance guard to defeat Ammatas. As such, it might be more accurate to say that Gelimer was, at worst, a decent military leader, but that Belisarius was simply a superior tactician and had luck on his side in this particular engagement.

The Fall of Carthage and the Final Stages of the War

The Vandal defeat at Ad Decimum left Carthage virtually undefended in the face of the Roman advance. Despite the warm welcome the Romans received, Belisarius was wary of an ambush and had the army spend the night camped outside the city. The next day the Romans entered the city peacefully, as Belisarius had reminded his soldiers to be on their best behavior. Meanwhile, Gelimer's brother, Tzazon, had finally captured Sardinia, but he was unaware that Carthage had already fallen.¹⁷ This further reinforces the idea that the decision to retake Sardinia, rather than focusing solely on the defense of North Africa, was a mistake on the part of Gelimer. Had the 5,000 men under Tzazon been available to Gelimer at Ad Decimum, then they would have been evenly matched with the Romans. That being said, Gelimer did have these men with him when he next faced the Romans at Tricamarum, a battle that still ended in defeat for the Vandals.

The Battle of Tricamarum is another example of excellent planning on the part of the Vandals, as they managed to catch the Roman cavalry unaware and unprepared. Unfortunately for Gelimer, his plans failed once again, and he lost yet another brother. The day before the battle

¹⁷ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book III*, 170-171, 197.

Belisarius had sent John the Armenian to Tricamarum with the cavalry where they set up camp, and Belisarius followed them the next day with the infantry. The Vandals marched out for battle while the Romans made lunch. Belisarius had also not yet arrived with the infantry, so the Romans were both unprepared for battle and under-strength. At first neither side advanced towards the other, but eventually John the Armenian took a small force and engaged the center of the Vandal line. This attack was repulsed by the Vandals, but John attacked them again. This attack was also repulsed, but this did not deter him as he once again charged the Vandal center. This time he was successful, and the rest of the Roman army charged against the Vandals. Sometime after this Tzazon fell in battle. Gelimer, losing yet another brother, again became overwhelmed, and the Vandals retreated.¹⁸ Once again Gelimer was swayed by his emotions in the heat of battle. This victory meant that Belisarius could take the rest of Vandal North Africa unopposed. In fact, immediately after Tricamarum, Belisarius was welcomed into Hippo Rhegius with open arms just as he had been at Carthage. The Battle of Tricamarum demonstrates just how important cavalry had become in the Roman military, and how far cavalry tactics had evolved. Before the fourth century it would have been nearly impossible for the Romans to fight a battle, let alone win, with only cavalry.¹⁹ This is largely because Roman armies before the fourth century simply did not have enough cavalry at any one time to actually fight a pitched battle without the infantry, but also because the Romans did not have much experience with cavalry

¹⁸ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book IV*, 227-231.

¹⁹ The reign of Gallienus (253-268) was one major exception. Gallienus increased the prominence of Roman cavalry because he needed a more mobile army to deal with threats all around the Empire. His model of a more mobile strike force did not become standardized until the reign of Constantine.

battles. In fact, the Romans were quite often on the losing end of battles that had a large cavalry presence.²⁰

John the Armenian pursued Gelimer into Numidia and on the sixth day of this chase John was accidentally killed by one of Belisarius' personal bodyguards, a soldier named Ularius. After John's death Belisarius then sent the Herulians to besiege Gelimer on Mt Papua, which was in Moorish territory. Meanwhile, he also sent out several of his commanders to conquer the rest of the Vandal kingdom. He sent Cyril to capture Corsica and Sardinia, John²¹ to Caesarea, and Apollinarius to capture Majorca and Minorca. The Herulians eventually convinced Gelimer to surrender, and the latter was sent back to Carthage in chains. Belisarius also wished to capture Lilybaeum on the island of Sicily, which was part of Amalafrika's dowry and had been in Vandal possession since her marriage to Thrasamund. The Ostrogoths claimed that the fort technically still belonged to them, and they occupied it and held off the Romans sent to take it. After this Belisarius withdrew his soldiers from Sicily and allowed Justinian to negotiate with the Goths.²² These operations brought about the end of the war against the Vandals, which lasted less than a year. This successful war against the Vandals only served to further embolden Justinian's hopes of reconquering the entirety of what had been the western Roman Empire. Within one year of the Vandal's defeat, Justinian launched an invasion of the Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy.

After his commanders captured the rest of the Vandal kingdom, Belisarius returned to Constantinople, where he was celebrated with a triumph. Belisarius was the first Roman general

²⁰ Crassus' defeat at the hands of the Parthians at Carrhae in 53 BC is a good example of this. The Parthians were outnumbered at least 4:1 but their army was composed entirely of cavalry and easily defeated the larger Roman force, even though the Romans themselves had at least 4,000 cavalry present.

²¹ This was not John the Armenian but another general named John.

²² Procopius, *History of the Wars Book IV*, 247-251, 255, 269.

to celebrate a triumph in nearly six hundred years, as Emperor Augustus had declared that triumphs could only be celebrated by members of the imperial family.²³ The fact that Justinian allowed Belisarius to celebrate a triumph, even if it was modified from the ancient traditions, shows just how momentous the emperor believed Belisarius' victory was. It is safe to say that Justinian was correct in this belief, as his invasion of Italy would likely have been impossible without the victory in North Africa. If the Romans had been defeated in North Africa, not only would they have lost thousands of veteran troops, but it also would have left a hostile kingdom to their rear if they invaded Italy.

Despite what Justinian thought about the conquest of North Africa, the restoration of Roman rule to the region was more disastrous than any period since 146 BC, when the Romans destroyed Carthage to end the Third Punic War. The Moors raided the province extensively, and they proved impossible to put down. The Carthaginians, and by extension most of North Africa, refused Justinian's demand that they convert back to Catholicism.²⁴ These, of course, are the same peoples who had been forcibly converted to Arianism over the past several generations by the Vandals. Even though there were Libyans who still remembered the Vandal persecution of Catholics, Arianism had clearly become a part of their culture. As such they did not wish to be forced to convert yet again, even if it was back to their original faith. Certainly, their children and grandchildren, who would have been raised as Arians, would have opposed any attempted forced conversions. This situation did not make the restoration of Roman rule any easier, and Justinian would have been better off if he let the Carthaginians make their own religious decisions. Even though these attempts to reestablish Catholic supremacy in North Africa only

²³ Procopius, *History of the Wars Book IV*, 279.

²⁴ James O'Donnell, *Ruin of the Roman Empire*, 256-257.

made things more difficult, Justinian did have a reason to insist upon it. Just as he embarked upon his conquest of the former Roman west to solidify his rule over the empire, he also wished to reestablish the dominance of Catholicism in the west to serve this same goal.

Why Justinian Felt the Need to Conquer Italy

If Justinian's goal truly was to be viewed as the savior of the Roman people, or at the very least those he believed were oppressed by the barbarians, then the Italian Peninsula was far more important than North Africa. Italy, and more importantly the city of Rome, was both the physical and cultural homeland of the Roman Empire and had been lost to the barbarians nearly sixty years earlier. The bishopric of Rome was also the most important of the five patriarchies, and thus was of even greater religious significance than North Africa.²⁵ In addition, most of Italy's non-Gothic population still believed themselves to be Roman citizens and resented the fact that they were ruled over by Visigothic kings. Even though the culture of the empire by this point was largely Greek, in fact, Justinian may have been the last Roman emperor to speak Latin as a first language; they still referred to themselves and their empire as Roman.²⁶ For all intents and purposes, the empire of Justinian was the same empire that was founded by Augustus. As such, reestablishing imperial control in Italy was a much grander accomplishment than achieving the same feat in North Africa. Unfortunately for Justinian, retaking Italy proved far more difficult, and vastly more expensive, than Belisarius' campaign in North Africa.

The Gothic adherence to Arianism likely played a role in Justinian's decision to invade Italy as well. As previously mentioned, Justinian was a staunch Catholic, and most of the Italian

²⁵ Technically the bishoprics that made up the five patriarchies had equal authority, but because Rome was the most historic city out of the five the Roman bishops often exerted more influence than the other four. The other four episcopal sees were Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.

²⁶ Even after the Roman Emperors stopped speaking Latin, they referred to the Empire as *Basileia Rhōmaiōn*, which is Greek for Kingdom of the Romans.

population were Nicene Christians.²⁷ Throughout his reign Justinian had already tried, and failed, to mend the rift between Monophysites and Nicene Christians. Reconquering Italy would not only allow Justinian to present himself as the savior of those Romans living under the rule of Arian Goths, but it would also give him greater say in religious matters as he would be able to have direct influence on who was chosen as the bishop of Rome.²⁸ Justinian had already attempted to use his war against the Vandals to salvage what was left of his reputation after 532. Conquering Italy would have served both Justinian and the empire as a whole for several practical reasons. The Goths controlled large tracts of farmland that would have allowed the Empire to generate more taxes and regaining Italy also would have allowed the Romans to reestablish their control over the majority of the Mediterranean Sea. It should be noted, however, that largescale ancient wars were usually destructive and devastated any regions that saw heavy fighting. So, while Italy did have land that could have generated income for the empire, Justinian must have known that a serious war against the Goths would be costly both for his treasury and for Italy. Practicality aside, Justinian needed more than just these reasons to justify the invasion of a kingdom with which he had an alliance. This justification practically fell into his lap when King Theodoric died in 526.²⁹

²⁷ Catholicism, usually referred to as Chalcedonian Christianity during this time, is a subset of Nicene Christianity, and shares many of the same beliefs. In the late fifth century there had been tensions between the western and eastern churches, but Justinian's uncle Justin I was able to resolve most of these issues. Arianism was viewed as a heretical belief by both Nicene and Chalcedonian Christians. The Goths had been Arians since at least the fourth century, which had occasionally caused problems with the Nicene Romans.

²⁸ This is exactly what Justinian did after the Romans captured Rome from the Goths. He immediately got involved in papal affairs and had Pope Silverius deposed in favor of a bishop named Vigilius.

²⁹ Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, 148-149.

Justinian Declares War on the Goths after the Death of Theodoric

Theodoric's chosen heir was originally his son-in-law Eutharic, who was married to Theodoric's daughter Amalasantha. Eutharic was allegedly a member of the Amali dynasty.³⁰ Unfortunately for Theodoric, his son-in-law preceded him in death in 522. Eutharic's death once again exposed the Ostrogothic kingdom to a succession crisis, as Theodoric's new heir was his then six-year-old grandson Athalaric.³¹³² Even after Athalaric's ascension to the throne, his status as king was bitterly contested among the other prominent Goths of Theodoric's court. The Gothic nobles also detested the fact that Amalasantha was the one in charge of the kingdom because her son was still a young boy and did not have a father, or any male figure, to rule in his stead until he came of age. One of these nobles was Theodoric's nephew, and Amalasantha's only living relative, Theodahad. After only a few years on the throne Athalaric grew sick, and it became obvious that he would not recover. With her son's death imminent, Amalasantha felt threatened because she had made several prominent enemies among the Gothic nobles, including Theodahad.³³

In order to protect herself from political enemies, Amalasantha agreed to share her power with Theodahad, but she secretly corresponded with Justinian as well. She offered Justinian all of Italy in exchange for her own safety. Justinian sent envoys to Ravenna to work out the specifics of her proposition, but Amalasantha was murdered before they reached the capital. Theodahad was adamant that her murder had not been his idea, and he secretly agreed to the same deal that

³⁰ The Amals were the leading dynasty of the Ostrogoths, and Theodoric himself belonged to this dynasty. Eutharic is said to have belonged to the Visigothic branch of the Amals, and his marriage to Amalasantha would have reunited the two branches.

³¹ Procopius, *Wars* 5.2, 15

³² It seems that the Ostrogoths practiced some form of agnatic succession, meaning only male relatives could inherit property. This is why the kingdom went to Athalaric instead of Amalasantha even though she was Theodoric's daughter.

³³ Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, 149-150.

Amalasantha had. Her murder, however, gave Justinian the very pretext he needed to invade Italy. While he continued his negotiations with Theodahad, Justinian sent an army commanded by the general Mundus to capture the city of Salona in Dalmatia. Belisarius also sailed from North Africa to Sicily with orders to take the island through peaceful means if possible; otherwise he was to continue to Libya and claim that North Africa had been his intended destination all along.³⁴

The initial stages of the Gothic War indicate that Justinian was not yet committed to a full-scale war in Italy and was content with using diplomacy to bring Italy under his control. The force that Belisarius took with him to Sicily was rather small, around seven thousand men, and did not contain a significant amount of cavalry.³⁵ Justinian's original goal may have been to destabilize the Gothic kingdom mostly through internal dissent and with minimal military pressure. This either would have forced Theodahad to abdicate the throne or deal with a revolt by the other Gothic nobles. Just when it appeared that this plan would be successful the Goths managed to retake Dalmatia, and Theodahad, no longer afraid of Roman military strength, decided to remain in power instead.³⁶

Even though Justinian had initially resorted to diplomatic means to gain control of Italy, with only slight military pressure, he proved himself more than ready to engage in a full-scale war when Theodahad backed out of their deal. In June 536, Belisarius was ordered to invade Italy immediately, and Justinian sent another army to retake Salona.³⁷ When Belisarius crossed

³⁴ Procopius, *Wars* 5.4-5.5, 37-45.

³⁵ It's possible that the majority of Belisarius' cavalry was still in North Africa to garrison the larger cities and to respond to Moorish raids.

³⁶ Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, 152-153.

³⁷ Mundus had lost control of the city after he tried to engage the Goths in battle following the death of his son. Mundus was killed himself, and his army then retreated from Dalmatia.

into Rhegium, a sizable portion of the Italian population in the region joined him, as well as some Gothic deserters.

Belisarius Captures Naples and Theodahad is Deposed

The first city to oppose Belisarius was Naples, which had a Gothic garrison of eight hundred men. Naples was also the first city that Belisarius encountered whose Roman population balked at the idea of betraying the Goths. When he offered the native Romans in the city the opportunity to do just that, two of their fellow Romans convinced them to remain true to the Goths. Belisarius initially attempted to take the city by force, but the Romans suffered heavy casualties in the fierce fight that followed. He was left with no choice but to settle into a prolonged siege of the city, which became the first true roadblock on his path to Rome.³⁸ The Romans could have reached Rome in only a few days if the city, as well as the rest of the cities on their way to Rome had surrendered immediately; but instead they were stuck outside of Naples until November. The siege of Naples took nearly a month by itself whereas the war against the Vandals only lasted ten months in total and required no prolonged sieges. The war against the Ostrogoths had already proved that it could not be won as easily as the Vandalic War.

The reactions of the Roman population in Calabria compared to that of Naples shows that even though most Italians still believed themselves to be Roman, not all of them were excited by the prospect of coming under Roman rule. While Justinian and Belisarius may have thought that the Roman population of Italy was dissatisfied with Gothic rule, the political landscape of Italy proved to be much more complex than North Africa. The hero's welcome that Belisarius received in Calabria likely only served to reinforce his and Justinian's belief that they would receive ample support from the Italian population. The Neapolitans, however, proved that both

³⁸ Procopius, *Wars* 5.8, 81.

men were in for a rude awakening; the kingdom of the Visigoths was not as feeble as that of the Vandals.

Once the Romans were able to infiltrate Naples, they proceeded to slaughter the population killing Goths and Romans alike.³⁹ Once Belisarius regained control over his men, he immediately put an end to the violence. It should be noted that much of Belisarius' army were not Romans, but rather they were the Empire's barbarian allies; just like the war in North Africa, the Romans relied largely on barbarians to fill out the army sent to Italy. The Empire had been reliant upon barbarian allies, as well as barbarian conscripts, to fill up the military since at least the middle of the fourth century. While an army of Roman citizens might have been more hesitant to ransack a city whose inhabitants were themselves Romans, it could be that the barbarians in Belisarius' army had no such qualms. This is not to say, however, that barbarian troops were more unruly or savage than Roman soldiers, as violence and bloodshed was the result of most sieges from antiquity. Rather it is to point out just how much the Empire had come to rely on barbarians as soldiers and some of the inevitable effects this had.

Procopius specifically mentions the Massagetae as having been extremely brutal: "the Massagetae outdid all the rest, for they did not even withhold their hand from the sanctuaries, but slew many of those who had taken refuge in them, until Belisarius...put a stop to this."⁴⁰ When Procopius uses the term Massagetae, he most likely means the Huns who were often called Massagetae in classical sources.⁴¹ Thus, it is possible that Procopius singled out the Huns

³⁹ One of Belisarius' Isaurian soldiers found a small tunnel in Naples' aqueduct and Belisarius used this tunnel to send 400 men into the city.

⁴⁰ Procopius, *Wars* 5.10, 101.

⁴¹ This was usually done by ancient writers because it followed the tradition established by Herodotus. In Herodotus' writings there were no Huns, but there were Scythians, Massagetae, Cimmerians, etc. As such, the Huns are often referred to by the names of these older nomadic groups.

because they were already well-known throughout the Roman world for their brutality.⁴² Nevertheless, the slaughter of the Neapolitans certainly did Belisarius no favors in gaining the trust of the Roman population of Italy. The siege of Naples not only cost the Romans time; it may have cost them the favor of native Italians as well. Several other cities immediately surrendered to Belisarius later in the war to avoid suffering the same fate as Naples, so while the slaughter of Naples likely eroded much of the goodwill he had tried to establish with the Italians, it did make his march towards Rome easier. It is hard to determine whether these factors offset one another, because if Naples' had not resisted the Romans then another city might have instead. So, while the siege of Naples was a set back for the Romans there is no guarantee that all the other cities on the march to Rome would have surrendered without Naples to serve as an example of why immediate surrender was the better option than resistance.

Shortly after the siege of Naples, Justinian's original goal would be accomplished, as Theodahad was overthrown. This did not end up working in his favor, however, because he was overthrown by a much more capable ruler and military commander. This new king was Vitiges, who already had a reputation as a successful general. Theodahad, who had not even sent reinforcements to Naples when it was besieged by Belisarius, was an ineffectual leader who was reluctant to engage the Romans with his own army. His refusal to send men to relieve Naples or prepare for war greatly angered the Goths. Vitiges, on the other hand, quickly rectified the mistakes of his predecessor, after he had Theodahad murdered. Vitiges implored the pope, the Senate, and the people of Rome to remain loyal to him. Before he left for Ravenna, he selected four thousand men to protect the city from Belisarius' army. This is significant because Ravenna still had a large Roman population, and Vitiges left behind a substantial portion of his own army

⁴² Procopius, Wars 5.10, 95-101.

to protect the city and its Roman population. Within the first few weeks of his reign, Vitiges had already proven himself to be a far more formidable opponent than his predecessor. The Romans would have been better off if Theodahad had remained in power, because the Gothic kingdom would have remained unprepared for a full-scale war. This proved quite unfortunate for the Romans and for the Empire's treasury, as Vitiges' skill as a military commander allowed the Goths to hold off the Romans for several years.⁴³

Vitiges also sought out alliance with the Franks, a process that was begun by Theodahad. He promised to give the Franks all the Gallic territory that was part of the Ostrogothic Kingdom, as well as a considerable sum of money. The Franks were willing to accept these terms but could only do so in secret as they had already formed an alliance with Justinian. After the death of Theodoric, the Franks had the most powerful kingdom in Western Europe. As such, they did not have much reason to fear the military strength of the Romans and were quite eager to regain the territory that they had previously lost to Theodoric. Since the agreement between the Franks and the Goths was done in secret, the Franks could not actually send any of their own soldiers into Italy to support Vitiges. They could, however, send the soldiers of the nations that they had subjugated, namely the Burgundians.⁴⁴

Rome is Captured by the Romans

Around this same time Belisarius began to make his way towards the city of Rome, whose Italian population decided that they would be better off if they did not resist him as Naples had done. Despite Vitiges' pleas for them to remain loyal to the Goths, they were more than ready to hand the city over to Belisarius when he approached Rome. The Gothic garrison that Vitiges had left in the city quickly realized that there was no hope to successfully defend the

⁴³ Procopius, *Wars* 5.11, 107-117.

⁴⁴ Procopius, *Wars* 5.13, 137-141.

city so long as the population was hostile towards them. On December 9 the Goths surrendered the city to Belisarius without a fight, and Rome was once again under Roman control. Belisarius also allowed the entire Gothic garrison to leave Rome unharmed and go to Ravenna. Many of his men were reluctant to defend Rome because they felt that its walls were far too long to be adequately defended by such a small force. This would turn out to be a well-founded apprehension, as the first siege of Rome demonstrated that Belisarius was indeed unable to defend every section of the wall at once.⁴⁵

While the reestablishment of Roman control in the city of Rome would have been an important ideological and cultural victory for Justinian and the populace of the Roman Empire, this was not the case for many of the men that Belisarius commanded. Many of these men were non-Romans, and the city of Rome had little to no symbolic importance to them. Thus, it is not hard to believe that some of these men were reluctant to defend a city as large as Rome with only a few thousand men when the Goths could field far more than that. Even those soldiers who were Roman citizens might have been just as hesitant to defend the city. Rome had not been part of the empire for nearly sixty years and had not been a political capital for over two centuries. For the men in Belisarius' army Rome had always been a foreign city controlled by foreigners. While it may have retained much of its symbolic importance for those in the imperial court, this is unlikely to have been true for the majority of the military. Belisarius did not have an actual choice in this matter because he lacked cavalry and his force was far too small to meet a mobilized Gothic army in battle. The defense of Rome would have also taken a large garrison and Belisarius had a little over 6,000 men, some of whom he had already sent out to defend the cities along the Via Flaminia. Until Justinian sent reinforcements from the east, Belisarius' only

⁴⁵ Procopius, *Wars* 5.14, 141-149.

real option was to remain in Rome and prepare for a siege. The very siege that the city's population had surrendered to avoid was now unavoidable.⁴⁶

This demonstrates just how important cavalry had become to the Roman military. Without a large cavalry force, like the one he had in North Africa, Belisarius was reluctant to engage the Goths in battle. While infantry normally composed the bulk of most late Roman armies and was still the single most important aspect of the military, the cavalry had become a very strategic part of the military. Roman tactics began to depend more and more on the presence of cavalry, especially heavy cavalry. Large cavalry contingents also gave armies the advantage of speed, as they could be sent ahead of the infantry to overtake the enemy or capture key strategic locations. This was all possible because the Romans now normally had a large number of cavalry on most military campaigns, but without reinforcements Belisarius' cavalry was too small to be of much use outside of scouting missions, skirmishes, and capturing smaller towns in Latium. This effectively trapped him inside the walls of Rome, because his 6,000 man army would be outmatched by the larger Gothic force in a pitched battle.

In March 537, in order to buy the city some time, Belisarius went with his personal guard to the Milvian Bridge. His intentions were to keep the Goths on the other side of the bridge for as long as he could. To achieve this goal, he placed men in a tower that overlooked the bridge so they could harass the Goths with missile fire while the rest of the cavalry engaged them from the front. This plan quickly fell apart as the men placed in the watchtower fled in the middle of the night, and Vitiges' army was able to cross the bridge unopposed. Belisarius then had to fight the entire Gothic army with only his 1,500 *bucellarii*. The Romans, despite the obvious disadvantage of the situation, were able to inflict serious casualties on the Goths before overwhelming

⁴⁶ Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, 166-167.

numbers forced them to retreat. Belisarius' cavalry was twice overtaken by the Goths, the second of which occurred just outside the walls of Rome. Both times the Romans' discipline and training allowed them to inflict heavy casualties, and eventually escape back into the city.⁴⁷ This skirmish set the tone for the first few years of the Gothic War, as most of the major military actions, outside of sieges, were skirmishes between the Gothic army and Belisarius' cavalry. These skirmishes once again demonstrated how far the Empire's military tactics had come since the third century, as the cavalry was now an integral part of the army rather than an afterthought. Despite the fact they were hopelessly outnumbered, Belisarius and his 1,500 men were able to hold off the entire Gothic army for a short time. If Belisarius had sent out an equal number of infantrymen to hold the Goths, they likely would have been overwhelmed much quicker than the cavalry, and they would have stood no chance against the full brunt of the Gothic army.

After this initial skirmish against Belisarius' cavalry the Goths settled in for a lengthy siege, which lasted just over a year. On the eighteenth day of the siege the Goths launched an assault on the walls of Rome. The Romans were awestruck at the sight of the Gothic siege engines, but Belisarius was well-prepared. The ballistae and scorpions that he had placed along the walls were able to easily pick off the exposed oxen, leaving the Gothic siege machines unable to advance. Belisarius also sent out cavalry sorties to keep the Gothic infantry from climbing the walls. Despite only having around six thousand men, Belisarius was able to hold off a much larger Gothic force.⁴⁸ After this initial assault was repulsed the Goths prepared to starve Rome until Belisarius was forced to surrender the city.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Procopius, *Wars* 5.18, 171-179.

⁴⁸ Procopius claims that the Goths lost 30,000 men and had a total of 200,000, but Heather (2018) asserts that they probably only lost 3,000 out of a total of 20,000. It is impossible to know the exact numbers, but Procopius figures were undoubtedly inflated as per tradition.

⁴⁹ Procopius, *Wars* 5.22, 209-217

It should also be noted that barbarian tribes, like the Goths and Vandals, were not usually well versed in siege warfare, as they did not have to capture large cities very often. Even when they did, they often resorted to starving the city out rather than using siege engines. Therefore, the Goths must have learned siege warfare from one of several sources. They could have developed siege tactics during their war to overthrow Odoacer and conquer Italy, possibly even learning them from whatever remnants of the Roman military remained in Italy. There is also the possibility that they developed these tactics while fighting on behalf of the eastern Roman Empire in the years before Theodoric invaded Italy. The final, and perhaps most likely, source is the Huns. The Huns, who had conquered the Ostrogoths in the late fourth century, learned how to build siege weapons from Roman prisoners of war. Since the Huns also forced their subjects to provide men for the military, it seems likely that the Ostrogoths would have become familiar with these tactics during their time as Hunnic subjects.

Belisarius sent the women and children of Rome to Naples in order to conserve what little grain was left in the city. His reinforcements from Constantinople had still not arrived, and he had to employ all the able-bodied men of Rome that were willing to serve in the army. This allowed Belisarius to garrison larger sections of the walls and allowed the men to get more sleep per day. The Romans were clearly desperate for relief, but the reinforcements that had been sent by Justinian, which were only 1,600 men, were still in Greece. Despite this, the Goths, with their numerical superiority, were still unable to retake the city. In many ways they were just as bad off outside the city as the Romans were inside. Both sides began to run out of food, and disease ran rampant through Rome and the Gothic camp outside the city. The Goths did manage to capture

Rome's main port, which meant Belisarius could no longer bring any supplies into the city. Twenty days after the port was captured Belisarius' reinforcements finally arrived.⁵⁰

Belisarius' Reinforcements Arrive and the Second Phase of the War Begins

These reinforcements were elite cavalry and immediately allowed Belisarius to go on the offensive. Rather than engage the Goths in a pitched battle (he still had far too few men to fight a largescale battle), he sent out small sorties of several hundred men. Over the course of these many sorties the Romans were able to inflict heavy casualties on the Goths with minimal losses. This discrepancy in casualties reflects the fact that the Goths mostly used heavy cavalry, while Roman cavalry was also trained in the use of ranged weapons. In fact, Belisarius had given his cavalry explicit orders only to attack the Goths from a safe distance with bows, and then retreat to the city when the Goths advanced. No matter how many men Vitiges sent against these Roman sorties, his heavy cavalry was never able to catch up with the Roman skirmishers.⁵¹ This juxtaposition of the Roman and Gothic cavalry shows how drastically different things now played out from the way they did in the late third century. Before the empire began to place a greater focus on cavalry, usually through the use of barbarian allies and mercenaries, the Romans were often the ones who employed heavy cavalry against the light cavalry of their enemies. While heavy cavalry will usually win a fight against light cavalry, they are hard pressed to defeat an enemy who only attacks them from range. Heavily armored riders and horses were unable to keep up with the faster light cavalry who would pick them off from a safe distance before retreating. It should also be noted that just like most of the engagements in this war, and the

⁵⁰ Procopius, *Wars* 5.25-26.

⁵¹ Procopius, *Wars* 5.27, 253-261.

Vandalic War as well, the infantry was not involved in these skirmishes. While the Infantry was still important and tended to be the largest portion of any Roman army, in these wars it was the cavalry that proved to be more important. Roman military strategy had evolved alongside the increased use of cavalry since the early fourth century.

Belisarius was greatly pleased by the continued success of these sorties, and the civilians that had remained in the city were now hopeful that the Goths could be defeated. This success ultimately led the Romans into disaster, as Belisarius was pressured into meeting the Goths in battle. He tried to resist going into battle for as long as he could, as he still did not have enough men to win a full-scale engagement, but he was eventually left with no choice as mounting pressure from his men and the city's inhabitants forced his hand. In the battle that followed, the Roman cavalry, augmented with civilians from the city, initially routed the Goths, but soon fell into disarray which allowed the Goths to launch a successful counterattack. Belisarius had to retreat into the city, and the Goths continued their siege.⁵² Sometime around the spring equinox the rest of Belisarius' reinforcements finally arrived. This force was 4,800 strong and composed mostly of cavalry, and they evened the odds between the Romans and the Goths, who had lost a considerable number of men to disease and famine.⁵³

This allowed Belisarius to send out larger raiding parties to harass the Goths and bring the key Italian cities under Roman control. One of these forces, commanded by John, managed to capture the city of Arminum. Belisarius wanted to replace John's cavalry force with an infantry garrison so that the city's provisions would last longer if they were besieged by the Goths. This is where things began to fall apart for the Romans, as John refused to follow Belisarius' orders and remained in Arminum. The Goths then besieged the city, but Belisarius was reluctant to

⁵² Procopius, *Wars* 5.28-29.

⁵³ Procopius, *Wars* 6.5-6.

relieve them. The Armenian Narses, who had recently arrived in Italy from Constantinople, argued that they should immediately march to relieve John. Narses eventually won the argument, as the situation at Arminum had could no longer be ignored, but the tension between the two generals would remain. The city was ultimately saved, but Mediolanum, which had also been captured, was lost when the Franks sent ten thousand Burgundians to support the Gothic siege of the city.⁵⁴

Narses began to undermine Belisarius' command in the hopes that Justinian would choose him as the new supreme commander in Italy. Several of the commanders in Italy were also convinced that Narses should replace Belisarius and refused to listen to any orders that did not come directly from Narses himself. Belisarius quickly grew tired of this dissension and reminded Narses that he had been personally appointed by Justinian to oversee the war in Italy. Narses responded with an accusation that Belisarius was no longer acting in the best interest of the empire, and therefore they no longer had to listen to his orders. This dissent also led to the aforementioned loss of Mediolanum, as the men that Belisarius ordered to relieve the city were followers of Narses. When Justinian was informed of this situation, he immediately recalled Narses so that Belisarius could focus on the war at hand rather than petty squabbles.⁵⁵

In 539, Vitiges, who was now worried that he had no hope of defeating the Romans, sent envoys to convince the Persians that they should attack the Empire. At the same time Justinian was already worried that the Persians would break the truce they had signed with the empire, and as such he began to negotiate with the Goths. This negotiation once again began to unravel quickly, this time for both sides. The Franks sent a second army into Liguria, but at this point the Franks were no longer pretending to be allied with either side. Instead, the Franks quickly routed

⁵⁴ Procopius, *Wars* 5.10-16

⁵⁵ Procopius, *Wars* 6.18-22

the Goths, who thought the Franks had come to reinforce them, and then defeated the Romans in battle as well. The Franks threatened to upset the entire balance of Italy and throw all of Belisarius' plans into disarray. Luckily for the Romans the, Franks were forced to withdraw because Liguria had been decimated by disease and famine. Towards the end of 539 Belisarius was finally able to approach the walls of Ravenna and lay siege to the city. The Gothic War now entered its fifth year, and the first Gothic surrender was still five months away.⁵⁶

In May of 540 Vitiges realized that the only option he had left was to surrender. He devised one final trick to make the war end on terms that were as favorable as possible for him. After Belisarius refused to ratify the terms agreed upon by Justinian and Vitiges,⁵⁷ the Goths offered to make him the Western Roman Emperor. Belisarius had no interest in being named emperor, but he did accept their terms in order to trick them into handing over the city. Once the Goths surrendered the city to him, Belisarius revealed his deception and took control of Rome in the name of Justinian. Belisarius had achieved the decisive victory he desired, and Justinian's regime had achieved another monumental victory in the west.⁵⁸

Belisarius was soon recalled to Constantinople so that he could focus on the increased Persian threat. Justinian also might have recalled Belisarius because he no longer trusted the general as much as he had in the past. If this is the case, it is most likely because of Belisarius' decision to feign acceptance of the Gothic offer to name him emperor. Even if Procopius' account of Belisarius' actions is accurate in that Belisarius never had any intention of accepting the Gothic offer, it would have given Justinian ample reason to become suspicious of his most powerful general. Roman history was filled with usurpers, especially the previous two centuries,

⁵⁶ Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, 175-177.

⁵⁷ This treaty would have allowed Vitiges to retain control of everything north of the Po, but Belisarius wanted a decisive victory and refused to accept these terms.

⁵⁸ Procopius, *Wars* 6.29.

and many were powerful military commanders just like Belisarius. Historical precedence shows that if anything, it was a smart decision for Justinian to be so suspicious of one of his top generals, especially since Belisarius had been extremely successful in North Africa and Italy. In addition, even if Justinian's image had recovered since 532, the Gothic surrender was only eight years removed from the Nika riots. His actions during the riots could have been easily exploited by the right person, even by Belisarius, the general who, under orders, carried out the slaughter of the rioters.

As such Justinian may have felt safer if his most powerful and most capable general was closer to Constantinople where he could keep watch over his ambitions. Justinian also thought that the Romans securely controlled Italy, but he was quickly proved wrong. The Goths still controlled much of northern Italy, and in 541 they renewed their hostilities with the empire. The Romans were sorely unprepared for this second phase of war for several reasons. A plague had devastated the empire in 541 and 542, and depopulated large parts of Justinian's realm.⁵⁹ Second, the Persian Shah, Khosrow II, attacked the Empire in the east, which forced Justinian to focus most of his troops along the Persian border. Finally, the generals who remained in Italy did not have a good working relationship with one another, which allowed the Goths to score several easy victories early on. This second phase of the war lasted until 554 and further drained the empire of its already overtaxed resources.

Conclusion

Justinian squandered a vast fortune by the end of his reign, most of it spent on these two wars and various building projects. The imperial treasury reportedly contained 28,000,000 solidi when Justinian came to power after the death of his uncle Emperor Justin. He spent 36,000,000

⁵⁹ The so-called "Plague of Justinian" killed 25-50 million people in the Roman Empire and put serious strains on the Empire's resources.

on his wars alone. 8,000,000 of this was spent on the war in Africa, and half of that was spent after Belisarius' victory. The Empire only brought in roughly 5,000,000 solidi per year. In addition to the above expenditures, most of the empire's income was spent to reestablish control in the newly reacquired provinces. This discrepancy also caused Justinian to debase the Empire's currency, which had lasting effects long after his death. None of the emperors after Justinian were able to afford building projects or wars like his. While 8,000,000 is less than one-third of the 28,000,000 solidi that Justinian reportedly had to begin his reign, the fact that it was spent on such a short campaign means that the empire lost money while fighting in North Africa, unless the treasures recovered from the Vandals were worth at least 4,000,000 solidi.⁶⁰ Justinian spent roughly 21,500,000 solidi on the war in Italy, which means that over the course of both wars he spent more money than his uncle Justin had saved.⁶¹ These expenditures do not even take into account the exorbitant sums that Justinian spent on various building projects such as Hagia Sophia.

The fact that he also spent most of the imperial income to restore the newly conquered provinces, after he already spent an exorbitant sum just to retake them, means that Justinian had little to no money left to spend on other projects. While it is probably safe to say that most ancient wars were quite costly, the fact that Justinian spent more money than he had, or could hope to generate through taxes, shows that his hopes of restoring the empire to its former glory were delusions of grandeur. Italy had been lost for nearly sixty years, and North Africa for one

⁶⁰ Even if the Romans recovered enough treasure to offset the war in North Africa, this does not mean that it would have had any affect on the economic cost of the war, because a large portion of the war loot likely would have been items that could not be used to stimulate the economy. In addition, there is no guarantee that Justinian did not keep the recovered wealth in reserve so he could use it to fund future building projects.

⁶¹ James O'Donnell, *Ruin of the Roman Empire*, 289.

hundred. Surely Justinian knew that neither region could provide a large influx of money, and that both wars would be exorbitantly expensive.

For Justinian it was about the restoration of the empire as a whole, and the glory that it would bring. Justinian's entire reign demonstrates that he was self-conscious about his own glory and public image, especially following the Nika Riots. He was not the first Roman emperor to make decisions based solely on the prestige a certain course of action could bring and restoring the western half of the empire was one of the most prestigious things a Roman emperor could ever accomplish.

The religious aspect of these wars also meant Justinian could portray himself as the savior of the Catholics that lived under Arian rule in these new barbarian kingdoms. After Belisarius' victory over the Vandals Justinian even wrote: "By what work or deeds can I thank God who has seen fit to avenge the wrongs of his church and pluck the people of mighty provinces from the yoke of servitude, the least of his servants."⁶² This quote alone displays just how important the reconquest of Africa was to Justinian's perception of himself as a religious savior of sorts. The veneer of humility that the emperor used to end this sentence does little to hide the role of savior that he has clearly ascribed to himself.

The Romans were ultimately victorious, but this was not the monumental victory that Justinian wanted to achieve. Italy had been devastated by nearly two decades of brutal warfare, famine, and disease, as well as the decimation brought about by a deadly plague during Justinian's reign. The emperor died in 565, and three years later most of Italy was lost to the Lombards, who remained in power until Charlemagne conquered their kingdom in 774. One of the lasting side-effects of Justinian's Gothic War was that Italy ceased to be a unified state and

⁶² *Codex Justinianus*, 1.27.1, quoted in John Moorhead, *Justinian*, (New York: Longman, 1994) 69.

was not reunified until the late nineteenth century. By the end of Justinian's reign, the Roman Empire had begun to run low on funds and was once again too large for its own good. Justinian had over-stretched the resources of the empire, which would have disastrous consequences when the Arabs emerged from the Arabian desert and invaded North Africa.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Roman Empire survived in western Europe into the middle ages because the traditions discussed in this thesis, and others, continued to exert some level of influence in medieval kingdoms. The various kingdoms that replaced the Empire throughout the west, such as the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy or the Franks in Gaul, continued to use Roman laws, Roman infrastructure, Roman military practices, and Roman Catholicism. Even Arianism, favored by the Goths, originated in the Eastern Roman Empire and therefore can be seen as a form of Roman Christianity, even if it was disavowed as a heresy.

The kingdoms that replaced the Roman Empire in Gaul, Italy, and Spain were originally established either by barbarians who had once been under Roman control or had been allied with Rome. These people, through their close connection to the Romans, had a base understanding of Roman politics, military, and religious concerns, and they were easily able to implement traditions and practices in their own governments. The most obvious example is the Ostrogothic Kingdom, which kept the Roman Senate intact even after they conquered Italy.¹ The Franks and the Ostrogoths even retained a close relationship with the eastern half of the Empire, at the very least until the reign of Justinian. Many of those who lived in these kingdoms still believed themselves to be Romans and referred to themselves as such. This was especially true for Italy where many of the native Romans resented Gothic rule. Even the languages still spoken in these regions are mostly descendants of Latin despite centuries of non-Roman rule. Romanian is one of the best examples of the longevity of Rome's cultural influence.² The Romans abandoned Dacia, modern day Romania, two hundred years before Odoacer overthrew Romulus Augustus,

¹ It should be noted, however, that the Senate by this point no longer functioned as a true political body; nonetheless, it is still an example of the Goths incorporating an aspect of Roman culture into their own.

² There are two exemptions in western Europe: Basque, which might be a pre-Indo-European language, and Breton which is a Celtic language.

and yet Romanian nevertheless developed into a Romance language. This is even more incredible considering the fact that Romania has had various non-Roman and non-Latin speaking inhabitants and is surrounded by Slavic languages.³

In addition to the Romance languages, the Roman Catholic Church is the most prominent example of Rome's continued cultural impact on western Europe, and the rest of the world to some extent. Catholicism's broader reach can be traced back to the Nicene Creed formulated and adopted by the Church at the Council of Nicaea and likely influenced by Constantine. Roman Catholicism became the dominant form of Christianity in western Europe and retained that status until the Reformation. Throughout the middle ages, the Catholic Church wielded enormous influence despite (supposedly) not being a secular political institution. Popes were often able to influence, or even manipulate, rulers into going along with their wishes. Pope Leo III even crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day in 800, though he did it for his own protection since it is unlikely that there was any legitimate interest in reforming the Roman Empire. That being said, the fact that the pope crowned Charlemagne legitimized the title of Emperor of the Romans to the extent that it effectively repudiated the legitimacy of the Eastern Roman Empire, which at the time was ruled by Empress Irene.

These post-Roman kingdoms also retained militaries that were similar to that of the Empire. By 476 cavalry had become an important aspect of the Roman military and would continue to grow in importance in the east. The Goths in Italy had employed heavy cavalry against the invading Romans during Justinian's war to reconquer the Italian peninsula. The Goths likely learned heavy cavalry tactics from the Romans themselves as the eastern Empire by the reign of Justinian typically used large cavalry contingents in battle, and very often relied on

³ The three most prominent non-Roman peoples who inhabited Bulgaria in Late Antiquity and the early middle ages were the Gepids, the Avars, and the Bulgars.

hired barbarians to make up a large portion of the cavalry. For many non-Roman tribes, light cavalry had always been an important facet of their military strength and this would have been combined with the heavy cavalry developed by the Romans and already present in the former Roman provinces. While it is historically wrong to claim that this was the origin of medieval knights, this trend of the cavalry's importance did reach its pinnacle in the middle ages, when the heavily armored knights became the backbone of most medieval armies.

These examples demonstrate the continued longevity of the Roman Empire. The empire never truly collapsed, but rather it transitioned into various new forms. Specifically, it transitioned into kingdoms such as those of medieval France or Spain, or eventually into the various city-states of Italy, and the Roman Catholic Church adopted much of its institutional forms and adapted its legal system. The Romans also passed their laws and customs onto the kingdoms that succeeded them in their former provinces. Rome's legal system still forms the basis for Western Europe and all international law. These aspects of Roman culture survived through the middle ages; and some survive still. Therefore, it is incorrect to claim that the Roman Empire simply collapsed after Odoacer's coup in 476. Other aspects of Roman culture also survived the fifth century, however, and more research can be done on how Rome continued to influence its successor kingdoms for centuries.

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