

Who We Are #17 — The Goths Who Sacked Rome



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*Migrating Germans, Invading Huns, Expanding Slavs Destroyed Roman Order;
Hun Horde Routed Goths, Burst into Central Europe
Attila Yields to Gothic Valor; Germans Drive Asiatics from Europe*

THE GOTHIC NATION, as was mentioned in the previous installment, had established itself on the southern shore of the Baltic, around the mouth of the Vistula, before 300 B.C. Prior to that the Goths had lived in southern Sweden.

Like the other Germans of their time, the Goths were tall, sturdily built, and Nordic in coloration, with blue or grey eyes and hair colors ranging from red to almost white. Roman reports describe them as the tallest of the Germans, with especially large hands and feet — perhaps a trait resulting from the local mixture of Indo-European and Cro-Magnon races in Sweden.

Soon they were also the richest of the Germans. In direct contact with the amber-gathering Baltic tribes to the east, the Goths monopolized the amber trade. For

centuries Gothic caravans loaded with furs and amber pushed southward to sell their goods in the trading centers of the Roman Empire.

Gothic Migration

Then, in the third quarter of the second century of the present era, during the reign of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the Goths began a general movement to the southeast. Hundreds of thousands of them, taking their families, their cattle, and all their household goods, marched back toward the ancient Indo-European homeland their ancestors had left thousands of years earlier.

Historians can only speculate on the cause of this great migration: overpopulation in the Gothic north, local depletion of the soil, the lure of potential conquests, or the disruption and pressure caused by the movement of nearby tribes. Whether the last was a cause of the Gothic trek or not, it was certainly a concomitant; whenever one tribe moved to a new territory, it almost necessarily set into motion an ever-spreading, domino-like sequence of moves among other tribes. The Gothic movement to the southeast was accompanied by a greatly increased German pressure on the Roman Empire's northern border, as Marcomanni, Chatti, Quadi, and other tribes attacked repeatedly along the broad Danubian front.

The Early Slavs

The migration of the Goths also affected another people: the Slavs, through whose lands the Goths passed. The Slavs — or, better, those whose descendants were later known to the world as Slavs — were, like the Celts, Germans, and Balts (and also the earliest Romans and Greeks), an Indo-European people, and, therefore, of Nordic race.

The origin of the word “Slav” (and its immediate relatives, such as “Slovene”) has been disputed by the etymologists. Some see the Slavic word *slava*, meaning “glory,” as the source; this is the meaning of the ending “-slav” in such Slavic personal names as Boguslav and Miroslav. Others trace the word to the Slavic *slovo*, meaning “word” (i.e., the Slavs are all those sharing the same tongue); *slowien*, meaning “flax” (a symbol of purity among the early Slavs); or *slova*, meaning “marsh” (an allusion to the marshy condition of portions of the Slavic homeland).

Closest to Home

Of all the Indo-European peoples who carved out new homelands for themselves in Europe during the Neolithic and the early Bronze Age, the ancestors of the Slavs stayed closest to the ancient homeland in the steppes of southern Russia. Some 100 to 200 miles north of the Black Sea the Pontic steppe of ancient times merged into a region of mixed forest and grassland, more suitable for farming and less for grazing than the steppe itself. It was into this region, centered on the middle Dnieper basin and stretching some 600 miles from the Carpathians in the west to the upper

Donets basin in the east, roughly from modern Lvov to Kharkov, that the Indo-European ancestors of the Slavs moved prior to 2,000 B.C.

Despite their proximity to the old homeland, however, these proto-Slavs apparently made a more complete transformation in lifestyle, from wide-ranging mounted warriors and pastoralists to settled farmers, than any other Indo-European group. Although their nobility in later times — actually the descendants of their Scythian conquerors — rode horses, the Slavs entered history on foot rather than on horseback like the other Indo-Europeans.

“Scythian Farmers”

By about 1,000 B.C. the proto-Slavic area of Europe had shifted somewhat westward, encompassing the upper Vistula valley. And around 700 B.C. the entire area was conquered by Scythians, an Indo-European warrior-people from the south. When the Greek historian Herodotus wrote of the Slavs in the fifth century B.C., he referred to them as “Scythian farmers,” although he distinguished them from the Scythians proper, or Royal Scythians, the warrior aristocracy which ruled a dozen conquered peoples.

By 200 B.C. the Sarmatians had replaced the Scythians as the rulers of the Pontic steppe, and they, in turn, conquered much of the Slavic territory to the north of them. The Sarmatians, a confederation of Iranian-speaking tribes, were the last of the great Indo-European peoples to leave the ancient homeland. During the fourth century B.C. they had come from the steppe between the Don and the Volga. And 400 years after the Sarmatians, the Goths conquered the Slavs. In each case, of course — Scyths, Sarmatians, Goths — there was also a blending of peoples, all of whom had originally come from the same Indo-European stock. Because of these repeated conquests and blendings during the prehistoric period, it is not entirely accurate to speak of “Slavs,” as a known ethnic entity, prior to about the sixth century A.D.

Tall, Strong, Ruddy

By then their literate neighbors had gained quite a bit of experience of the Slavs, and we have written descriptions dating from that century, most notably in the writings of Jordanes the Goth and Procopius the Greek. Procopius says of the Slavs: “All of them are tall and very strong; their skin and hair are neither very light nor dark, but all are ruddy of face.” Procopius also describes them as “just as dirty” as the Thracians, but this was a judgment which the Greeks and Romans routinely passed on all the northern barbarians.

Despite their more complete acculturation to the settled, farming lifestyle than the other peoples of the north, the Slavs retained the typically Indo-European spiritual and cultural traits of their ancestors. They were sun-worshippers, and their god Perun, a vigorous, red-bearded deity who wielded a mighty hammer and rode in a

chariot drawn by a goat, is clearly just a Slavic version of the Balts' Perkunas and the Germans' Donar (Thor). Although the bulk of the Slavs were subjected to Christianity in the ninth and tenth centuries, the old religion persisted in some areas into the 12th century.

Lack of Unity

Early Slavic society followed the patriarchal and patrilinear pattern of other Indo-European societies, but it also seems to have adopted certain aspects of the decentralized, quasi-democratic social forms typical of early Mediterranean farming societies. The lack of a strong aristocracy undoubtedly made the Slavs an easier prey for their various conquerors. It was not until the eighth century A.D., much later than other Indo-European groups, that the Slavs began developing a highly centralized society, culminating in the ninth century in the first Slavic national state, Great Moravia.

As early as the beginning of the fifth century, however, events which brought about a collapse of order in the German-Roman world presented the Slavs with both the opportunity and the necessity of breaking out of their more-or-less passive pattern of the past. Throughout the fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries, Slavic militance and expansion played a major role in the drastic changes which were taking place in Europe.

These changes carried the Slavs from their Ukrainian homeland into the Balkan peninsula and into central Europe as far as the Elbe basin. By the middle of the seventh century Slavic tribesmen had seized the Adriatic coastlands from the Romans and had settled along the western Baltic coast, in the region later known as Pomerania.

Conquest of the Steppe

But we are getting nearly 500 years ahead of our story, and we must return to the Goths, who in the last years of the second century and the first years of the third were migrating through the Slavic homeland on their way to the coastlands of the Black Sea.

When the Goths reached the seacoast, some of them turned to the east and some to the west and southwest, the two streams of migration diverging near the mouth of the Dniester. Those who turned east conquered all before them, reaching the Don about the year 250. They became known as the East Goths, or Ostrogoths, and they set up an Ostrogothic kingdom which encompassed the heart of the ancient home of the Indo-Europeans, ruling the steppe and the forest-steppe from the Dniester to the Volga.

To the south of them, between the lower Don and the Caucasus Mountains, lived several Sarmatian tribes, the most prominent of these being the Alans. They had

been the last rulers of the steppe before the arrival of the Goths. To the east of the Ostrogoths lay the vast plains and deserts which stretched away into central Asia.

West Goths

The Goths west of the Dniester — the Visigoths — moved down into the Danubian lands west of the Black Sea, where they inevitably came into conflict with the Romans. They conquered the Roman province of Dacia for themselves, after defeating a Roman army and killing a Roman emperor (Decius) in the year 251.

For the next century and a quarter both the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths prospered, while the fortunes of the Roman Empire continued to decline. The Goths, who were excellent seamen, raided the Black Sea coastal cities of Asia Minor at will, and Rome was also hard pressed to defend other portions of her long border with the Germans.

Peaceful Coexistence

Toward the end of the third century, during the reign of Diocletian, the Empire was divided into eastern and western halves, for administrative and military purposes. The progressive breakdown of communications led eventually to separate de facto Powers, one centered in Rome and the other in Byzantium (later renamed Constantinople).

During the first three-quarters of the fourth century, despite occasional raids, a state of relatively peaceful coexistence between Goths and Romans pervaded. Especially in the eastern half of the Empire, diplomacy and bribery were used to hold the Goths at bay. During the reign of Constantine (306-337) 40,000 Goths were recruited into the Roman army, and they thenceforth were the bulwark of the Eastern Empire.

It was in the reign of Emperor Valens, in the year 372, that the greatest menace to the White race, both Germans and Romans, since the beginning of recorded history suddenly appeared on the eastern horizon. From the depths of Central Asia a vast horde of brown-skinned, flat-nosed, slant-eyed little horsemen — fast, fierce, hardy, bloodthirsty, and apparently inexhaustible in numbers — came swarming across the steppe around the north end of the Caspian Sea. They were the Huns.

The first to feel their impact were the Alans, living south of the Don between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The Hunnic horde utterly crushed the Alans, some of whose remnants retreated southward into the Caucasus Mountains, while others fled westward in confusion, seeking refuge among the Goths. In the Caucasus today traces of the Nordic Alans are found in the Ossetes, whose language is Indo-European and who are taller and lighter than the Caucasian-speaking peoples around them.

End of the Ostrogoths

Next the Huns fell upon the Ostrogoths and routed them. The aged Ostrogothic king, Hermanric, slew himself in despair, and his successor, Vitimer, was killed in a vain effort to hold back the Brown flood. The Ostrogothic kingdom disintegrated, and its people streamed westward in terror, with the Huns at their heels.

Athalaric, king of the Visigoths, posted himself at the Dniester with a large army, but the Huns crossed the river and defeated him, inflicting great slaughter on his army.

Thus, the Visigoths too were forced to retreat westward. Athalaric petitioned Valens for permission for his people to cross the Danube and settle in Roman lands to the south. Valens consented, but he attached very hard conditions, which the Goths, in their desperation, were forced to accept: they were required to surrender all their weapons and to give up their women and children as hostages to the Romans.

Oppression and Rebellion

The Goths crossed the Danube in 376 and settled in the Roman province of Lower Moesia, which corresponds roughly to modern Bulgaria. There the Romans took shameful advantage of them. Roman-Jewish merchants, in return for grain and other staples, took the hostage children of the Goths as slaves.

The Goths secretly rearmed themselves and rose up. For two years they waged a war of revenge, ravaging Thrace, Macedonia, and Thessaly. Finally, on August 9, 378, in the great battle of Hadrianople, the Gothic cavalry, commanded now by Fritigern, annihilated Valens' infantry (most of whom were also Goths), and the emperor himself was killed. This was the worst defeat Rome had suffered since the Goths defeated and killed Decius 127 years earlier, and the battle decisively changed the conduct of future wars. Heretofore, Roman infantry tactics had been considered unbeatable, but Fritigern's Goths had shown what heavy cavalry could do to infantry unprotected by its own cavalry.

The emperor of the eastern half of the Empire who succeeded Valens took a much more conciliatory stance toward the Goths, and they were confirmed in their possession of much of the territory south of the Danube which they had seized between 376 and 378. The Huns, meanwhile, had occupied Gothic Dacia (present-day Romania), as well as all the lands to the east.

Loss of a Homeland

The ancient homeland of the Nordic race was now in the hands of non-Whites. For more than four millennia wave after wave of White warriors had come out of the eastern steppe to conquer and colonize Europe: Achaeans, Dorians, Latins, Celts, Germans, Balts, Slavs, Cimmerians, Scythians, Sarmatians, and uncounted and unnamed peoples before all these. But the Sarmatians were the last; after the Huns

drove them and the Goths out, no other White barbarians were to come riding out of the east.

For the next thousand years the eastern steppe which had been the breeding ground of the Nordic race became the invasion route into Europe for periodic waves of non-White hordes from Asia: Huns, Avars, Turks, Magyars, Mongols.

German vs. German

The Huns contented themselves, for the time being, with that portion of Europe between the Carpathians and the Danube, leaving the Romans and the Germans elsewhere to their own devices. Rome, a hollow shell peopled largely by Levantines and ruled in effect by a gaggle of filthy-rich Middle Eastern moneylenders, speculators, and merchants, depended for her continued existence upon cleverness and money rather than real strength. Germans menaced her and Germans defended her, and the Romans concentrated their energies on playing German off against German.

The game succeeded in the Eastern Empire, more or less, but not in the Western Empire. A Frank, Arbogast, was the chief adviser — and effective master — of Western Emperor Eugenius in the year 394, having assassinated Eugenius' predecessor. The emperor of the East, Theodosius, sent his Gothic army against Arbogast, and Arbogast called on his fellow Franks for support. The two German armies fought at Aquileia, near modern Venice, and the Goths defeated the Franks.

Alaric the Bold

Two of the leaders of Theodosius' army were Alaric the Bold, a Gothic prince, and Stilicho, a Vandal. After the battle of Aquileia Stilicho, nominally subordinate to Theodosius, became the effective master of the Western Empire. Alaric was chosen king of the Visigoths by his tribe and decided to challenge Stilicho, but as long as Stilicho lived he was able to hold Alaric at bay.

The emasculated and Levantinized Romans, unable to face the Germans man to man, bitterly resented their German allies as much as they did their German enemies. This resentment, born of weakness and cowardice, finally got the better of the Romans in 408, and they conspired to have their protector, Stilicho, murdered. Then the Romans in all the Italian cities butchered the wives and children of their German allies — 60,000 of them.

This foolish and brutal move sent Stilicho's German soldiers into Alaric's arms, and Italy was then at the Goth's mercy. Alaric's army ravaged large areas of the peninsula for two years in revenge for the massacre of the German families. Alaric demanded a large ransom from the Romans and forced them to release some 40,000 German slaves.

Fall of Rome

Then, on the night of August 24, 410, Alaric's Goths took Rome and sacked the city. This date marked, for all practical purposes, the end of the capital of the world. Rome had endured for 1,163 years and had ruled for a large portion of that time, but it would never again be a seat of power. For a few more decades the moribund Empire of the West issued its commands from the fortress city of Ravenna, 200 miles north of Rome, until the whole charade was finally ended in 476. The Empire of the East, on the other hand, would last another thousand years.

The Huns, meanwhile, had not long contented themselves with Dacia, but had begun expanding westward again, wreaking such havoc that whole nations uprooted themselves and fled as the Huns advanced. The Vandals, a German people closely related to the Goths; the Alans who had been driven westward from the Transcaucasian steppe; and the Suebians poured across the Rhine into Gaul in 406, setting still other German nations, such as the Franks, Burgundians, and Alamanni, into motion.

Conquest of Spain

In 409 the Vandals, Alans, and Suebians crossed the Pyrenees into the Iberian peninsula, which they carved up into realms for themselves. They were followed a half-dozen years later by the Visigoths, and a great deal of fratricide took place before it was decided which parts of the peninsula belonged to whom.

Most of the Goths eventually re-crossed the Pyrenees and settled, for the moment, in the Gallic province of Aquitania Secunda, while the Vandals sailed across the Strait of Gibraltar and conquered the Roman province of Africa. Under their very able ruler, Gaiseric, the Vandals consolidated their hold on northern Africa, established themselves as a major naval power, and became prosperous.

In June 455 Gaiseric's Vandal navy carried an invasion force to Italy which occupied the city of Rome and systematically looted it of everything of value which could be carried away. Gaiseric repulsed repeated efforts against Africa by the Eastern Empire and died undefeated in 477 at a very old age.

Ultimately, however, Africa became the graveyard of the Vandal nation. In 534, having allowed their prosperity to soften them, the Vandals were defeated by an army from Constantinople. A century later their descendants in Africa were swept away by an Arab tide driven by Islamic zeal. Today occasional blue eyes and light hair among some of the more remote tribes of the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and Algeria are the only traces remaining in Africa of the Vandals.

Attila, King of the Huns

The Huns halted their westward push for more than 40 years while they consolidated their hold on all of central and eastern Europe, and on much of northern Europe as well. In 433 they gained a new king, whose name was Attila. In

445, when Attila established his new capital at Buda, in what is now Hungary, the empire of the Huns stretched from the Caspian Sea to the North Sea.

In 451 Attila began moving west again, with the intention of seizing Gaul and then the rest of the Western Empire. His army consisted not only of Huns but also of contingents from all the conquered peoples of Europe: Ostrogoths, Gepids, Rugians, Scirians, Heruls, Thuringians, and others, including Slavs.

One contingent was made up of Burgundians, half of whom the Huns had subjugated (and nearly annihilated) in 436. The struggle between the Burgundians and the Huns forms the background for the German heroic epic, the *Nibelungenlied*.

Scourge of God

Attila's mixed army threw western Europe into a state of terror as it advanced. So great was the devastation wrought on the countryside that Attila was given the nickname "the Scourge of God," and it was said that grass never again grew where his horse had trod.

Two armies, one commanded by Aetius, the last of the Western Empire's Roman generals, and the other by Theodoric, King of the Visigoths, rode against Attila. Aetius and Theodoric united their armies south of the Loire, in central Gaul, and compelled Attila to withdraw to the north-east.

Attila carefully chose the spot to halt his horde and make his stand. It was in a vast, open, and nearly level expanse of ground in northeastern France between the Marne and the Seine, where his cavalry would have ideal conditions for maneuvering. The region was known as the Catalaunian Plains, after the Catalauni, a Celtic people. The name of Chalons (ancient Catalaunum), is most often associated with the battle which took place on the Catalaunian Plains, although the actual site is much closer to the city of Troyes.

White Victory

In a furious, day-long battle frightful losses were inflicted on both sides, but the Visigoths, Franks, free Burgundians, and Alans of Aetius and Theodoric had gained a decisive advantage over the Huns and their allies by nightfall. Attila retreated behind his wagons and in despair ordered a huge funeral pyre built for himself. He intended neither to be taken alive by his foes nor to have his corpse fall into their hands.

King Theodoric had fallen during the day's fighting, and the command of the Visigothic army had passed to his son, Thorismund. The latter was eager to press his advantage and avenge his father's death by annihilating the Hunnic horde.

The wily Roman Aetius, however, putting the interests of his dying Empire first, persuaded Thorismund to allow Attila to withdraw his horde from Gaul. Aetius was afraid that if Thorismund completely destroyed the power of the Huns, then the Visigoths would again be a menace to the Empire; he preferred that the Huns and the Visigoths keep one another in check.

Battle of the Nedao

Attila and his army ravaged the countryside again, as they made their way back to Hungary. The following year they invaded northern Italy and razed the city of Aquileia to the ground; those of its inhabitants who were not killed fled into the nearby marshes, later to found the city of Venice.

But in 453 Attila died. The 60-year-old Hun burst a blood vessel during his wedding-night exertions, following his marriage to a blonde German maiden, Hildico (called Kriernhild in the *Nibelungenlied*). The Huns had already been stripped of their aura of invincibility by Theodoric, and the death of their leader diminished them still further in the eyes of their German vassals. The latter, under the leadership of Ardaric the Gepid, rose up in 454. At the battle of the Nedao River in that year it was strictly German against Hun, and the Germans won a total victory, completely destroying the power of the Huns in Europe.

Slavic Opportunity

The vanquished Huns fled eastward, settling finally around the shores of the Sea of Azov in a vastly diminished realm. They left behind them only their name, in Hungary. Unfortunately, they also left some of their genes in those parts of Europe they had overrun. But in 80 years they had turned Europe upside down. Entire regions were depopulated, and the old status quo had vanished.

This provided an opportunity for the Slavs to expand, and they took advantage of it, as mentioned earlier. Unfortunately for them — and for our entire race — the area into which the Slavs expanded corresponded largely to the area invaded repeatedly in later centuries by Asiatic hordes from the east, and the Slavic peoples suffered grievously. We will examine these Asiatic invasions in later installments.