BEFORE THE GATES OF ROME

PROLOGUE

Late in August 410, a large troop of soldiers bore down on the city of Rome. At their head rode the general Alaric, in the full insignia of a *magister militum*. It was the highest command in the Roman army, won after years of politicking and military success. But Alaric was more than a Roman general. He was also a Gothic chieftain, some might have said a king. As far as contemporaries were concerned, the soldiers who followed him were Goths. Sometimes, to be sure, Alaric had put his followers at the service of the Roman emperor. When he did so, they became a unit in the Roman army. But their loyalty was to Alaric, not to the emperor or the empire, and everyone knew it. Alaric might be a Roman general, but no one ever mistook his followers for Roman soldiers. They were the Goths, and Alaric had led them against regular imperial armies more than once. In the early fifth century, the line between Roman regiment and barbarian horde was a fine one, and Alaric straddled it as best he could. But no one was quite taken in by appearances, and Alaric never succeeded in turning himself into the legitimate Roman commander he so desperately wanted to be.

But he had come very close, to within a hair's breadth of achieving everything a barbarian commander could hope for: a place in the

empire's military hierarchy for himself, permanent employment for his followers, food and land and security for their wives and children. Yet each time he had been on the verge of grasping everything he wanted, something had gone terribly wrong, negotiations had broken down, someone he had relied on had betrayed him. For fifteen years he had led his men, and for fifteen years most had remained loyal, through the ups and downs of constant negotiation and occasional battle, through the endless marching from the Balkans to Italy, from Italy to the Balkans, and back again. All that was over now. Alaric could contemplate no further delay, no further negotiation. He was in a fury, his patience finally at an end. It was true that he had never been a patient man. As he himself had recognized at least once, his failures were not always someone else's fault: at times his rage had got the better of him, and he had stormed away from the negotiating table too soon, when a little forebearance might have carried the day. This time, though, it had not been his fault. He had bargained in good faith with the emperor and he had gone all the way to Ravenna to do so, instead of insisting on meeting at Rimini, in between Rome and Ravenna, as he had done in the past. He had, in fact, done everything that was asked of him. And it had made no difference. He and his men had been attacked, a surprise assault, with no warning and no quarter.

With that, Alaric decided, the emperor had proven once and for all that he could not be trusted. The emperor's name was Honorius, but he had honoured few of the agreements he made with Alaric. Besides, he was a weakling and an incompetent, rumoured to be a half-wit even by those who wished him well. Holed up in the coastal town of Ravenna, safe behind marshes and causeways and readily supplied by sea, he was unreachable and the workings of his court inscrutable. Indeed, for the past two years, it had been impossible for anyone, least of all Alaric, to be certain which of Honorius' many courtiers really controlled him, which could really deliver on the promises made in his name. It had not always been thus, for while Honorius' father-in-law, the patrician Stilicho, was alive and in charge, Alaric had a negotiating partner he could trust, more or less. But Stilicho had been dead for two years,

MAP 1. *The Italian peninsula.*

murdered, and the cabal of treacherous bureaucrats that replaced him had never spoken with a single voice.

Even so, Alaric had kept trying to make his peace with the court at Ravenna. Simple-minded he may have been, but Honorius was the legitimate emperor, the son of the great Theodosius. Alaric, like anyone born

and raised inside the imperial frontiers, shared the Roman reverence for dynasticism, the seal of legitimacy that inherited power conferred. Even when he challenged Honorius, even when he threatened his very hold on the throne, Alaric could still not suppress the residual loyalty he felt to the imperial purple into which Honorius had been born. That was the only reason it had taken so long for his patience to run out. He had it in his power to deliver the killing blow, to seize the city of Rome itself: the eternal city, no longer an imperial residence, no longer the capital of the world, but still the symbolic heart of empire. Enemies had long believed him capable of such an enormity. The greatest Latin poet of the century, an Egyptian named Claudian, accused Alaric of having a malign destiny to pierce the walls of the immortal *Urbs*, 'the city', as Rome was called. Three times he had threatened, three times he had held back. To make good on his threat, after all, would be the end of all his ambitions, all his hopes: an irrevocable move that would make any future negotiation impossible and place Alaric beyond the bounds of civilized politics forever. He did not want that, had never wanted that, and for two long years he had hesitated.

But his options had now run out. Negotiation was fruitless, and as the recent surprise attack had shown, it could even prove life-threatening. However ambivalent he might be, the time to make good on all his threats had probably arrived. It remained a bitter choice, but after two years of failure, it was becoming easier to make. Alaric got back to the outskirts of Rome some time around August 20th. Nothing he saw there can have made him very happy. For two years, since just after the death of Stilicho, his followers had been camped there, spread out along the banks of the Tiber river that fed the city of Rome. Alaric himself had been on the move quite a lot over the preceding two years, riding back and forth across the Appenines and up the coast road to Rimini and Ravenna. Most of his followers had not. Each time he rode out to negotiate with the imperial government, only picked troops had gone with him. Their dependents, and the larger part of the fighting men necessary to defend them, remained behind in the vicinity of Rome. It was more than just a matter of protecting the women and children. They were needed as a reserve, and as a threat, a visible reminder that at

any time he wanted, Alaric could seal Rome off from the outside world. His soldiers were, ultimately, the basis of his power, and their value as a threat increased with their proximity to Rome.

The government in Ravenna was afraid of the threat, but that had done Alaric and his followers little enough good. Years had passed since they had fought a proper battle: the massacre of a small imperial force sent from Dalmatia in 409 hardly counted, and Alaric had failed to deliver what all ancient armies, barbarian or Roman, demanded of their leaders: victory, wealth, security. That his men still followed him despite that was perhaps a testament to magnetic leadership. More likely it was because they had no choice, because he was the only link they had with an imperial government that might eventually give them enough to retire in peace and put an end to their endless, fruitless traveling. Now, though, inactivity and boredom were a menace. Alaric had commanded troops in the field for nearly two decades and he knew full well the limits of military discipline. Every time he had stayed stationary for long, bits of his following had melted away. He had always been able to find new followers in the aftermath of later triumphs, but now he'd seen little success for two years. As the hope of negotiation with Ravenna grew more and more distant, he could not afford to lose a single man capable of bearing arms. Worse still was the haunting prospect of mutiny. Better commanders than he had gone down beneath the blows of their own troops. Kept occupied, soldiers had no chance to wonder whether a change of leader might not improve their own prospects. Sitting idle, even loyal troops might get worrying ideas, and recently Alaric's men had been given far too much leisure to contemplate his failings.

The environment was not helping. Rome in August is a sultry and oppressive place, the air a blanket of heat and stench. To this day as many Romans as can manage it leave the city for the month. In antiquity, it was not just uncomfortable but positively unhealthy. The Tiber and its trade sustained the city's life, but its banks bred death in the shape of mosquitoes and the malaria they carried. Malaria is endemic to central Latium and even native Romans suffered. Foreigners suffered worse and the disease could cripple whole armies; until the nineteenth century, the city was a pestilential graveyard for the many northerners who tried to

conquer it. Alaric's followers were mostly children of the Balkans and the Danube. Their tolerance for Roman conditions cannot have been very high. Immobility weakened them further, as the waste of men and horses piled up and bred diseases and the spectre of food shortage loomed ever larger.

Alaric's Goths were neither a proper garrison, reliably housed and fed by the state, nor the proprietors of their own farmlands from which they might perhaps extract a living. Halfway between a besieging army and a band of refugees, they would have had a hard time anywhere in Italy, but the suburbs of Rome imposed difficulties uniquely their own. Rome was a huge city, its population numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Its own urban territory could not begin to feed it, and the mass of the city's people were totally dependent on the import of grain from Africa, which arrived at Portus, the city's main harbour, some fifteen kilometres down the Tiber on the Tyrrhenian coast. Some of this grain belonged to the Roman state and was distributed for free, but much of it belonged to the senatorial owners of vast African estates who sold it on the open market. If the grain ships failed to arrive, the city began to starve and the senators, their rich houses and their grain warehouses, suffered first from the anger of the urban mob. Alaric monitored Portus even more closely than he did Rome itself, and twice already he had brought Rome to its knees by cutting off the steady stream of shipping up the Tiber from the sea.

But by 410, even when Alaric let the citizens of Rome eat, there might not be enough food to go around. He and his followers had to feed themselves from the same sources as did the rest of the city. The highest official in Africa was loyal to Ravenna and had held back the grain ships for much of the year, while after two years of Gothic residency near Rome, any stored surplus had been depleted. The suburbs could never produce enough food to feed the city, and now they could no longer feed the Goths either. Even worse, foraging further afield, out into the more distant corners of Latium and north into Etruria, could only make up so much of the difference. The whole region had been blighted by two years of periodic siege and the Gothic occupation. Roman soldiers were proverbially voracious, destructive of the very provincials they were

supposed to be defending. But provincial Romans were at least used to such rapacity and viewed the half-random, half-legal, expropriation of their crops in the same way they did the weather, as one of the many miseries that unkind fate showered upon them. The farmers of central Italy – unlike those of frontier provinces that frequently experienced the misery of soldiers and barbarian raiders on the doorstep – had little experience of soldiers and still less of barbarians. The Gothic occupation was a novel blow, and one they sustained with difficulty. For the first time in decades, there was an army at the doorstep likely to eat up the crop without payment, and robbing the farmer of any incentive to grow a surplus for market.

In a similar way, the landlords who might have lined their pockets selling food to the quartermasters of a regular imperial regiment were suspicious of Alaric's Goths. To be sure, Alaric could wave his imperial commission about and claim that he and his followers were entitled to the same supplies as any other unit of the Roman army; yet everyone knew that his relations with the emperor might change at any minute, and with them his status as a legitimately constituted member of the military hierarchy. Who would pay for the food his Goths ate, if the Roman state ceased to take responsibility for them? Far better to hide it or not to grow it at all than to give it away for free. And so those fields that had not been ruined by marching feet, those farms that had not had their seed grain eaten by hungry mouths, lay fallow, their intricate irrigation systems falling into decay. The rich loam of northern Europe might sustain that sort of neglect, but Italian soil was thin and poor, barren if not lovingly tended: even seven years later, a Gallic poet named Rutilius Namatianus, bent as he was on trumpeting the imperial recovery after the dark night of Gothic terror had passed, had to admit that central Italy lay desolate, a wasteland where crops should have sprouted. The modern scholar should have no more illusions than Alaric had at the time: hungry soldiers are angry soldiers, and Alaric's room for manoeuvre was shrinking to almost nothing at all.

His only comfort can have come from the fact that things were very nearly as bad for the Romans inside the city. Rome, as we have seen, was huge and that made it hard to defend. The city was walled, of

course, and had been for well over a hundred years, ever since the threat of an earlier barbarian assault during the reign of the emperor Aurelian. The Aurelianic walls snaked for almost nineteen kilometres, enclosing not just the original seven hills of the city, but even the hill of the Janiculum and much of the neighbourhood of Trastevere, on the west side of the Tiber river. Four metres thick, fifteen metres tall in many places, and studded with 381 towers every thirty metres or so, the wall was and remains an impressive construction. Archaeology has uncovered repairs to these walls in many places dating to the first years of the fifth century, presumably a reaction to Alaric's initial invasion of Italy. While such repairs may well have been psychologically important, the city would never have stood up to a genuine assault – it covered too much ground, more than a hundred square kilometres, and its population was overwhelmingly civilian. Even decades earlier, when a unit of elite troops had still been stationed inside the city, Rome had never been put to the test of a real assault. The threatened attack under Aurelian had never materialized, and during the civil wars of the early fourth century, Italian conflicts had been prosecuted in open battle well beyond the city walls, without threat of siege. Had Alaric ever wanted to take the city by storm, it could not have held for long. But thus far he had not wanted to seize Rome, only to strangle it, to force its great men to their knees and induce them to wring from the emperor the concessions he wanted.

That expedient had worked more than once, for no amount of aristocratic resistance could blunt the power of famine. Alaric held Portus, the key to whether Rome ate or went hungry, and he could cut off the food supply more or less whenever he chose to. The plebs might be the first to starve, but they would vent their rage on their senatorial neighbours before they collapsed. It was this threat, more than anything, that had served in the past to reconcile the Roman senate to Alaric. Some senators actually came to prefer Alaric to the emperor in Ravenna, and nearly all feared Alaric on their doorstep far more than they trusted Honorius. It was not just that Honorius was feeble, but that he was the son of Theodosius. The same dynastic legitimacy that

conferred on Honorius a certain resilience also earned him the dislike of many Roman aristocrats who had resented the strident Christianity of Theodosius himself. By the later 300s, the cities of the empire were very largely Christian, and the mass of the population in Rome itself was as well. But more so than elsewhere in the empire, the city of Rome was filled with reminders of the pagan past, generations' worth of enormous temples, some of them half a millenium old. An eclectic paganism remained a badge of honour among some of the oldest and most distinguished senatorial families. With them, devotion to the old gods was both a sincerely held belief and a reproof to all the petty aristocrats and jumped-up provincials who ruled the Christian empire and packed the imperial court. Little as they liked Alaric, many senators felt a certain satisfaction in his open defiance of Honorius. Indeed, a few went so far as to place their bets on Alaric rather than Honorius, and for a short while in 409 and 410, a member of the Roman senate had taken up the imperial purple and challenged Honorius' right to the throne with Alaric as his backer. That experiment had gone badly for all concerned, and by August 410, even those Romans who had been most willing to accommodate the Goths had little to hope of their mercy at this point.

Worse still, the threat from outside led to bloodletting within. Roman culture had always viewed a purge as a good way to stabilize the body politic in the face of external threat, and many a Roman vendetta was settled while the Gothic army camped before the walls and people looked for a neighbour whom they could blame. Serena, niece of Theodosius, widow of Stilicho, and thus cousin and mother-in-law of the reigning emperor, was strangled on suspicion of collusion with Alaric, with the open approval of the emperor's sister Galla Placidia. She was not the only victim, and famine and disease soon made matters worse: 'Corpses lay everywhere', we are told, 'and since the bodies could not be buried outside the city with the enemy guarding every exit, the city became their tomb. Even if there had been no shortage of food, the stench from the corpses would have been enough to destroy the bodies of the living'. We can gauge the scale of discontent by a totally unexpected reversion

to the old gods. Roman pagans not only blamed the Gothic menace on the Christian empire's neglect of Rome's traditional religion, but were emboldened to say as much in public. They claimed that Alaric had bypassed the town of Narnia in nearby Etruria when the old rites were restored, and argued that pagan sacrifices – banned for twenty years – should be offered on the Capitol, the greatest of Rome's hills on which sat the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the foremost god of the Romans. Some Roman Christians, impressed by such arguments, sought the views of the bishop of Rome, who forbade any public sacrifices but gave permission for the rites to be carried out in secret. Such secrecy would have robbed the rites of their efficacy, and the whole project was abandoned. This dramatic story may not be entirely authentic, yet the fact that contemporaries could imagine that the head of the Roman church might consent even to the secret performance of pagan rites – in a city so pious that disputed elections for the city's bishop could end with hundreds of partisans lying dead in church aisles – is the best possible testimony to the fear that Alaric had instilled. However, given that parts of the population had turned to cannibalism to feed themselves, we should perhaps expect any number of extreme measures.

And so, in the scalding heat of August 410, neither Alaric nor the Romans could take much more. On the night of the 23rd, Alaric decided to make the ultimate confession of failure, to countenance the overthrow of all his hopes and dreams. He would let his Goths sack Rome. On the morning of the next day, they did, and for three days the violence continued. The great houses of the city were looted and the treasures seized were on a scale that remains staggering: five years later, when Alaric's successor Athaulf married his new bride, he gave her 'fifty handsome young men dressed in silk, each bearing aloft two very large dishes, one full of gold, the other full of precious – nay, priceless – gems, which the Goths had seized in the sack of Rome'. Supposedly out of reverence for Saint Peter, Alaric left untouched the church on the Vatican that housed his tomb, and in general the Goths made an effort not to violate the churches. But however much some might take comfort in that slight forebearance, the verdict of the world was shock and horror: 'The mother of the world has been murdered'.[1]