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Excerpt

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THE HISTORY
OF THE
DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE
CHAPTER XXXVI

Sack of Rome by Genseric, King of the Vandals—His naval Depredations—Succession of the last Emperors of the West, Maximus, Avitus, Majorian, Severus, Anthemius, Olybrius, Glycerius, Nepos, Augustulus—Total Extinction of the Western Empire—Reign of Odoacer, the first Barbarian King of Italy

THE loss or desolation of the provinces, from the ocean to the Alps, impaired the glory and greatness of Rome; her internal prosperity was irretrievably destroyed by the separation of Africa. The rapacious Vandals confiscated the patrimonial estates of the senators, and intercepted the regular subsidies which relieved the poverty, and encouraged the idleness, of the plebeians. The distress of the Romans was soon aggravated by an unexpected attack; and the province, so long cultivated for their use by industrious and obedient subjects, was armed against them by an ambitious Barbarian. The Vandals and Alani, who followed the successful standard of Genseric, had acquired a rich and fertile territory, which stretched along the coast above ninety days' journey from Tangier to Tripoli; but their narrow limits were pressed and confined, on either side, by the sandy desert and the Mediterranean. The discovery and conquest of the Black nations, that might dwell beneath the torrid zone, could not tempt the rational ambition of Genseric; but he cast his eyes towards the sea; he resolved to create a naval power; and his bold resolution was executed with steady and active perseverance. The woods of Mount Atlas afforded an inexhaustible nursery of timber; his new subjects were skilled in the arts of navigation and shipbuilding; he animated his daring Vandals to embrace a mode of warfare which would render every mari-

Naval power of the Vandals. A.D. 439-45

[Genseric's title: King of Vandals and Alani]

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time country accessible to their arms; the Moors and Africans were allured by the hopes of plunder; and, after an interval of six centuries, the fleets that issued from the port of Carthage again claimed the empire of the Mediterranean. The success of the Vandals, the conquest of Sicily, the sack of Palermo, and the frequent descents on the coast of Lucania, awakened and alarmed the mother of Valentinian and the sister of Theodosius. Alliances were formed; and armaments, expensive and ineffectual, were prepared, for the destruction of the common enemy, who reserved his courage to encounter those dangers which his policy could not prevent or elude. The designs of the Roman government were repeatedly baffled by his artful delays, ambiguous promises, and apparent concessions; and the interposition of his formidable confederate, the king of the Huns, recalled the emperors from the conquest of Africa to the care of their domestic safety. The revolutions of the palace, which left the Western empire without a defender and without a lawful prince, dispelled the apprehensions, and stimulated the avarice, of Genseric. He immediately equipped a numerous fleet of Vandals and Moors, and cast anchor at the mouth of the Tiber, about three months after the death of Valentinian and the elevation of Maximus to the Imperial throne.

[A.D. 440, &c.]

The character
and reign of
the emperor
Maximus.
A.D. 455,
March 17

The private life of the senator Petronius Maximus¹ was often alleged as a rare example of human felicity. His birth was noble and illustrious, since he descended from the Anician family; his dignity was supported by an adequate patrimony in land and money; and these advantages of fortune were accompanied with liberal arts and decent manners, which adorn or imitate the inestimable gifts of genius and virtue. The luxury of his palace and table was hospitable and elegant. Whenever Maximus appeared in public, he was surrounded by a train of grateful and obsequious clients;² and it is possible that among these clients he might deserve and possess some real friends. His merit was rewarded by the favour of the prince and senate; he thrice exercised the office of Prætorian præfect of Italy;³ he

¹ Sidonius Apollinaris composed the thirteenth epistle of the second book to refute the paradox of his friend Serranus, who entertained a singular, though generous, enthusiasm for the deceased emperor. This epistle, with some indulgence, may claim the praise of an elegant composition; and it throws much light on the character of Maximus.

² *Clientum prævia, pedisequa, circumfusa populositas*, is the train which Sidonius himself (l. i. epist. 9 [§ 3]) assigns to another senator of consular rank.

³ [Rather, twice Prætor. Præf. of Italy, once Præf. of Rome. See Tillemont, v. 257.]

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was twice invested with the consulship, and he obtained the rank of patrician. These civil honours were not incompatible with the enjoyment of leisure and tranquillity; his hours, according to the demands of pleasure or reason, were accurately distributed by a water-clock; and this avarice of time may be allowed to prove the sense which Maximus entertained of his own happiness. The injury which he received from the emperor Valentinian appears to excuse the most bloody revenge. Yet a philosopher might have reflected that, if the resistance of his wife had been sincere, her chastity was still inviolate, and that it could never be restored if she had consented to the will of the adulterer. A patriot would have hesitated before he plunged himself and his country into those inevitable calamities which must follow the extinction of the royal house of Theodosius. The imprudent Maximus disregarded these salutary considerations: he gratified his resentment and ambition; he saw the bleeding corpse of Valentinian at his feet; and he heard himself saluted emperor by the unanimous voice of the senate and people. But the day of his inauguration was the last day of his happiness. He was imprisoned (such is the lively expression of Sidonius) in the palace; and, after passing a sleepless night, he sighed that he had attained the summit of his wishes, and aspired only to descend from the dangerous elevation. Oppressed by the weight of the diadem, he communicated his anxious thoughts to his friend and quaestor Fulgentius; and, when he looked back with unavailing regret on the secure pleasures of his former life, the emperor exclaimed, "O fortunate Damocles,⁴ thy reign began and ended with the same dinner": a well-known allusion, which Fulgentius afterwards repeated as an instructive lesson for princes and subjects.

The reign of Maximus continued about three months.⁵ His hours, of which he had lost the command, were disturbed by remorse, or guilt, or terror; and his throne was shaken by the seditions of the soldiers, the people, and the confederate Barbarians. The marriage of his son Palladius with the eldest

His death.
A.D. 455,
June 12,
[May 31]

⁴ Districtus ensis cui super impiã
Cervice pendet, non Siculae dapes
Dulcem elaborabunt saporem:
Non avium citharæque cantus
Somnum reducent.

Horat. Carm. iii. 1.

Sidonius concludes his letter with the story of Damocles, which Cicero (Tusculan. v. 20, 21) had so inimitably told.

⁵ [Paulo amplius quam bimestris principatus, Sidonius, *ib.* The date of the death of Maximus is May 31 (Prosper); June 12 is given by Anon. Cuspiniani.]

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daughter of the late emperor might tend to establish the hereditary succession of his family; but the violence which he offered to the empress Eudoxia could proceed only from the blind impulse of lust or revenge. His own wife, the cause of these tragic events, had been seasonably removed by death; and the widow of Valentinian was compelled to violate her decent mourning, perhaps her real grief, and to submit to the embraces of a presumptuous usurper, whom she suspected as the assassin of her deceased husband. These suspicions were soon justified by the indiscreet confession of Maximus himself; and he wantonly provoked the hatred of his reluctant bride, who was still conscious that she descended from a line of emperors. From the East, however, Eudoxia could not hope to obtain any effectual assistance; her father and her aunt Pulcheria were dead; her mother languished at Jerusalem in disgrace and exile; and the sceptre of Constantinople was in the hands of a stranger. She directed her eyes towards Carthage; secretly implored the aid of the king of the Vandals; and persuaded Genseric to improve the fair opportunity of disguising his rapacious designs by the specious names of honour, justice, and compassion.⁶ Whatever abilities Maximus might have shown in a subordinate station, he was found incapable of administering an empire; and, though he might easily have been informed of the naval preparations which were made on the opposite shores of Africa, he expected with supine indifference the approach of the enemy, without adopting any measures of defence, of negotiation, or of a timely retreat. When the Vandals disembarked at the mouth of the Tiber, the emperor was suddenly roused from his lethargy by the clamours of a trembling and exasperated multitude. The only hope which presented itself to his astonished mind was that of a precipitate flight, and he exhorted the senators to imitate the example of their prince. But no sooner did Maximus appear in the streets than he was assaulted by a shower of stones; a Roman, or a Burgundian, soldier claimed the honour of the first wound; his mangled body was ignominiously cast into the Tiber; the Roman people rejoiced in the punishment which they had inflicted on the author of the public calamities;

⁶ Notwithstanding the evidence of Procopius, Evagrius, Idatius, Marcellinus, &c., the learned Muratori (*Annali d'Italia*, tom. iv. p. 249) doubts the reality of this invitation, and observes, with great truth, "Non si può dir quanto sia facile il popolo a sognare e spacciar voci false". But his argument, from the interval of time and place, is extremely feeble. The figs which grew near Carthage were produced to the senate of Rome on the third day. [John Malalas places the invitation in the reign of Theodosius.]

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and the domestics of Eudoxia signaled their zeal in the service of their mistress.⁷

On the third day after the tumult, Genseric boldly advanced from the port of Ostia to the gates of the defenceless city. Instead of a sally of the Roman youth, there issued from the gates an unarmed and venerable procession of the bishop at the head of his clergy.⁸ The fearless spirit of Leo, his authority and eloquence, *again* mitigated the fierceness of a Barbarian conqueror: the king of the Vandals promised to spare the unresisting multitude, to protect the buildings from fire, and to exempt the captives from torture; and, although such orders were neither seriously given nor strictly obeyed, the mediation of Leo was glorious to himself and in some degree beneficial to his country. But Rome and its inhabitants were delivered to the licentiousness of the Vandals and Moors, whose blind passions revenged the injuries of Carthage. The pillage lasted fourteen days and nights;⁹ and all that yet remained of public or private wealth, of sacred or profane treasure, was diligently transported to the vessels of Genseric. Among the spoils, the splendid relics of two temples, or rather of two religions, exhibited a memorable example of the vicissitude of human and divine things. Since the abolition of Paganism, the Capitol had been violated and abandoned; yet the statues of the gods and heroes were still respected, and the curious roof of gilt bronze was reserved for the rapacious hands of Genseric.¹⁰ The holy instruments of the

Sack of Rome
by the Van-
dals. A. D. 455,
June 15-23

⁷ . . . Infidoque tibi Burgundio ductu
Extorquet trepidas mactandi principis iras.

Sidon. in Panegyrr. Avit. 442.

A remarkable line, which insinuates that Rome and Maximus were betrayed by their Burgundian mercenaries. [Binding, Gesch. des burgundisch-romanischen Königr. p. 49, conjectures that there had been a recent Burgundian incursion into Italy.]

⁸ The apparent success of pope Leo may be justified by Prosper and the *Historia Miscella*; but the improbable notion of Baronius (A. D. 455, No. 13) that Genseric spared the three apostolical churches is not countenanced even by the doubtful testimony of the *Liber Pontificalis*.

⁹ [The phrase of Prosper is noteworthy: per xiv. dies secura et libera scrutatione omnibus opibus suis Roma vacuata est. There was not an indiscriminate pillage, but the treasures were ransacked in a methodical and leisurely way. There is no reason to assume that there was any wanton destruction.]

¹⁰ The profusion of Catulus, the first who gilt the roof of the Capitol, was not universally approved (Plin. Hist. Natur. xxxiii. 18); but it was far exceeded by the emperor's, and the external gilding of the temple cost Domitian 12,000 talents (2,400,000l.). The expressions of Claudian and Rutilius (*luce metalli aemula . . . fastigia astris*, and *confunduntque vagos delubra micantia visus*) manifestly prove that this splendid covering was not removed either by the Christians or the Goths (see Donatus, Roma Antiqua, l. ii. c. p. 125). It should seem that the roof of the Capitol was decorated with gilt statues and chariots drawn by four horses.

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Jewish worship,¹¹ the gold table, and the gold candlestick with seven branches, originally framed according to the particular instructions of God himself, and which were placed in the sanctuary of his temple, had been ostentatiously displayed to the Roman people in the triumph of Titus. They were afterwards deposited in the temple of Peace; and at the end of four hundred years the spoils of Jerusalem were transferred from Rome to Carthage, by a Barbarian who derived his origin from the shores of the Baltic. These ancient monuments might attract the notice of curiosity, as well as of avarice. But the Christian churches, enriched and adorned by the prevailing superstition of the times, afforded more plentiful materials for sacrilege; and the pious liberality of pope Leo, who melted six silver vases, the gift of Constantine, each of an hundred pounds weight, is an evidence of the damage which he attempted to repair. In the forty-five years that had elapsed since the Gothic invasion the pomp and luxury of Rome were in some measure restored; and it was difficult either to escape or to satisfy the avarice of a conqueror who possessed leisure to collect, and ships to transport, the wealth of the capital. The Imperial ornaments of the palace, the magnificent furniture and wardrobe, the sideboards of massy plate, were accumulated with disorderly rapine; the gold and silver amounted to several thousand talents; yet even the brass and copper were laboriously removed. Eudoxia herself, who advanced to meet her friend and deliverer, soon bewailed the imprudence of her own conduct. She was rudely stripped of her jewels: and the unfortunate empress, with her two daughters, the only surviving remains of the great Theodosius, was compelled, as a captive, to follow the haughty Vandal; who immediately hoisted sail, and returned with a prosperous navigation to the port of Carthage.¹² Many thousand Romans of both sexes, chosen for some useful or agreeable qualifications, reluctantly embarked on board the fleet of Genseric; and their distress was aggravated by the unfeeling Barbarians, who, in the division of the booty, separated the wives from their husbands, and the children from their parents.

¹¹ The curious reader may consult the learned and accurate treatise of Hadrian Reland, *de Spoliis Templi Hierosolymitani in Arcu Titiano Romæ conspicuis*, in 12mo. Trajecti ad Rhenum, 1716.

¹² The vessel which transported the relics of the Capitol was the only one of the whole fleet that suffered shipwreck. If a bigoted sophist, a Pagan bigot, had mentioned the accident, he might have rejoiced that this cargo of sacrilege was lost in the sea.

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The charity of Deogratias, bishop of Carthage,¹³ was their only consolation and support. He generously sold the gold and silver plate of the church to purchase the freedom of some, to alleviate the slavery of others, and to assist the wants and infirmities of a captive multitude, whose health was impaired by the hardships which they had suffered in their passage from Italy to Africa. By his order, two spacious churches were converted into hospitals; the sick were distributed in convenient beds, and liberally supplied with food and medicines; and the aged prelate repeated his visits both in the day and night, with an assiduity that surpassed his strength, and a tender sympathy which enhanced the value of his services. Compare this scene with the field of Cannæ; and judge between Hannibal and the successor of St. Cyprian.¹⁴

The deaths of Aetius and Valentinian had relaxed the ties which held the Barbarians of Gaul in peace and subordination. The sea-coast was infested by the Saxons; the Alemanni and the Franks advanced from the Rhine to the Seine; and the ambition of the Goths seemed to meditate more extensive and permanent conquests. The emperor Maximus relieved himself, by a judicious choice, from the weight of these distant cares; he silenced the solicitations of his friends, listened to the voice of fame, and promoted a stranger to the general command of the forces in Gaul. Avitus,¹⁵ the stranger whose merit was so nobly rewarded, descended from a wealthy and honourable family in the diocese of Auvergne. The convulsions of the times urged him to embrace, with the same ardour, the civil and military professions; and the indefatigable youth blended the studies of literature and jurisprudence with the exercise of arms and hunting. Thirty years of his life were laudably spent in the public service; he alternately displayed his talents in war and negotiation; and the soldier of Aetius, after executing the most important embassies, was raised to the station of Prætorian præfect of Gaul. Either

The emperor
Avitus,
A.D. 455,
July 10th

[c. 459 A.D.]

¹³ See Victor Vitensis, *de Persecut. Vandal.* l. i. c. 8, p. 11, 12, edit. Ruinar. Deogratias governed the church of Carthage only three years. If he had not been privately buried, his corpse would have been torn piecemeal by the mad devotion of the people.

¹⁴ The general evidence for the death of Maximus and the sack of Rome by the Vandals is comprised in Sidonius (*Panegy. Avit.* 441-450), Procopius (*de Bell. Vandal.* l. i. c. 4, 5, p. 188, 189, and l. ii. c. 9, p. 255), Evagrius (l. ii. c. 7), Jordanes (*de Reb. Geticis*, c. 45, p. 677), and the *Chronicles* of Idatius, Prosper, Marcellinus, and Theophanes under the proper year.

¹⁵ The private life and elevation of Avitus must be deduced, with becoming suspicion, from the panegyric pronounced by Sidonius Apollinaris, his subject and his son-in-law.

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the merit of Avitus excited envy, or his moderation was desirous of repose, since he calmly retired to an estate which he possessed in the neighbourhood of Clermont. A copious stream, issuing from the mountain, and falling headlong in many a loud and foaming cascade, discharged its waters into a lake about two miles in length, and the villa was pleasantly seated on the margin of the lake. The baths, the porticoes, the summer and winter apartments, were adapted to the purposes of luxury and use; and the adjacent country afforded the various prospects of woods, pastures, and meadows.¹⁶ In this retreat, where Avitus amused his leisure with books, rural sports, the practice of husbandry, and the society of his friends,¹⁷ he received the Imperial diploma, which constituted him master-general of the cavalry and infantry of Gaul. He assumed the military command; the Barbarians suspended their fury; and, whatever means he might employ, whatever concessions he might be forced to make, the people enjoyed the benefits of actual tranquillity. But the fate of Gaul depended on the Visigoths; and the Roman general, less attentive to his dignity than to the public interest, did not disdain to visit Toulouse in the character of an ambassador. He was received with courteous hospitality by Theodoric, the king of the Goths; but, while Avitus laid the foundation of a solid alliance with that powerful nation, he was astonished by the intelligence that the emperor Maximus was slain and that Rome had been pillaged by the Vandals. A vacant throne, which he might ascend without guilt or danger, tempted his ambition;¹⁸ and the Visigoths were easily persuaded to support his claim by their irresistible suffrage. They loved the person of Avitus; they respected his virtues; and they were not insensible of the advantage, as well as honour, of giving an emperor to the West. The season was

[c. 445 A.D.]

[A.D. 455]

A.D. 455,
August 15

¹⁶ After the example of the younger Pliny, Sidonius (l. ii. c. 2) has laboured the florid, prolix, and obscure description of his villa, which bore the name (*Avitacum*), and had been the property, of Avitus. The precise situation is not ascertained. Consult, however, the notes of Savaron and Sirmond.

¹⁷ Sidonius (l. ii. epist. 9) has described the country life of the Gallic nobles, in a visit which he made to his friends, whose estates were in the neighbourhood of Nismes. The morning hours were spent in the *sphaeristerium*, or tennis-court; or in the library, which was furnished with *Latin* authors, profane and religious; the former for the men, the latter for the ladies. The table was twice served, at dinner and supper, with hot meat (boiled and roast) and wine. During the intermediate time, the company slept, took the air on horseback, and used the warm bath.

¹⁸ Seventy lines of Panegyric (505-578) which describe the importunity of Theodoric and of Gaul, struggling to overcome the modest reluctance of Avitus, are blown away by three words of an honest historian: *Romanum ambisset imperium* (Greg. Turon. l. ii. c. 11, in tom. ii. p. 168).

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now approaching in which the annual assembly of the seven provinces was held at Arles; their deliberations might perhaps be influenced by the presence of Theodoric and his martial brothers; but their choice would naturally incline to the most illustrious of their countrymen. Avitus, after a decent resistance, accepted the Imperial diadem from the representatives of Gaul; and his election was ratified by the acclamations of the Barbarians and provincials.¹⁹ The formal consent of Marcian, emperor of the East, was solicited and obtained; but the senate, Rome, and Italy, though humbled by their recent calamities, submitted with a secret murmur to the presumption of the Gallic usurper.²⁰

Theodoric, to whom Avitus was indebted for the purple, had acquired the Gothic sceptre by the murder of his elder brother Torismond; and he justified this atrocious deed by the design which his predecessor had formed of violating his alliance with the empire.²¹ Such a crime might not be incompatible with the virtues of a Barbarian; but the manners of Theodoric were gentle and humane; and posterity may contemplate without terror the original picture of a Gothic king, whom Sidonius had intimately observed in the hours of peace and of social intercourse. In an epistle, dated from the court of Toulouse, the orator satisfies the curiosity of one of his friends, in the following description:²² "By the majesty of his appearance, Theodoric would command the respect of those who are ignorant of his merit; and, although he is born a prince, his merit would dignify a private station. He is of a middle stature, his body appears rather plump than fat, and in his well-proportioned limbs agility is united with muscular strength."²³ If you ex-

Character of
Theodoric,
king of the
Visigoths.
A.D. 453-466

¹⁹ [The assembly was held at Ugernum (Beaucaire) near Arles (Sidon. Carm. 7, 572. Cp. Longnon, Géogr. de la Gaule, p. 437). But it cannot have been the annual assembly of the seven provinces.]

²⁰ [There is no clear evidence that Marcian acknowledged Avitus. Tillemont conjectured that he refused to do so, and that for this reason the name of Avitus, consul for 456, does not appear in the Consular Fasti.]

²¹ Isidore, archbishop of Seville, who was himself of the blood-royal of the Goths, acknowledges and almost justifies (Hist. Goth. p. 718 [p. 279, ed. Mommsen, in Chron. Min. ii.]) the crime which their slave Jornandes had basely dissembled (c. 43, p. 673).

²² This elaborate description (l. i. ep. ii. p. 2-7) was dictated by some political motive. It was designed for the public eye, and had been shewn by the friends of Sidonius, before it was inserted in the collection of his epistles. The first book was published separately. See Tillemont, Mémoires Ecclésiastiques, tom. xvi. p. 264.

²³ I have suppressed in this portrait of Theodoric several minute circumstances and technical phrases, which could be tolerable, or indeed intelligible, to those only who, like the contemporaries of Sidonius, had frequented the markets where naked slaves were exposed to sale (Dubos, Hist. Critique, tom. i. p. 404).

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amine his countenance, you will distinguish a high forehead, large shaggy eyebrows, an aquiline nose, thin lips, a regular set of white teeth, and a fair complexion that blushes more frequently from modesty than from anger. The ordinary distribution of his time, as far as it is exposed to the public view, may be concisely represented. Before daybreak, he repairs, with a small train, to his domestic chapel, where the service is performed by the Arian clergy; but those who presume to interpret his secret sentiments consider this assiduous devotion as the effect of habit and policy. The rest of the morning is employed in the administration of his kingdom. His chair is surrounded by some military officers of decent aspect and behaviour; the noisy crowd of his Barbarian guards occupies the hall of audience; but they are not permitted to stand within the veils or curtains that conceal the council-chamber from vulgar eyes. The ambassadors of the nations are successively introduced: Theodoric listens with attention, answers them with discreet brevity, and either announces or delays, according to the nature of their business, his final resolution. About eight (the second hour) he rises from his throne, and visits either his treasury or his stables. If he chooses to hunt, or at least to exercise himself on horseback, his bow is carried by a favourite youth; but, when the game is marked, he bends it with his own hand, and seldom misses the object of his aim: as a king, he disdains to bear arms in such ignoble warfare; but, as a soldier, he would blush to accept any military service which he could perform himself. On common days his dinner is not different from the repast of a private citizen; but every Saturday many honourable guests are invited to the royal table, which, on these occasions, is served with the elegance of Greece, the plenty of Gaul, and the order and diligence of Italy.²⁴ The gold or silver plate is less remarkable for its weight than for the brightness and curious workmanship; the taste is gratified without the help of foreign and costly luxury; the size and number of the cups of wine are regulated with a strict regard to the laws of temperance; and the respectful silence that prevails is interrupted only by grave and instructive conversation. After dinner, Theodoric sometimes indulges himself in a short slumber; and, as soon as he wakes, he calls for the dice and tables, encourages his friends to forget the royal majesty, and is delighted when they freely express the passions which are excited by the incidents of play.

²⁴ Videas ibi elegantiam Græcam, abundantiam Gallicanam, celeritatem Italam; publicam pompam, privatam diligentiam, regiam disciplinam.