

Why were the Dark Ages so Dark? And what exactly were the Dark Ages? This period, some assert, was “dark” because of the lack of information about the period itself. Others point to the “intellectual darkness” or “general barbarity” of the era. Today, historians rarely use the term, as it is felt to be pejorative. Hence, the current phraseology is the “Migration Period.” This refers to the movement or migration of so-called barbarian peoples—including the Huns, Goths, Vandals, Bulgars, Alani, Suebi, and Franks—into what had been the Western Roman Empire. I will continue to use the prerogative of the pejorative to percolate this paper.

Scholars cannot agree on what time-period constitutes the Dark Ages. Many feel that the era began with the Hun invasion of Eastern Europe in 375, which forced the Germanic peoples in those lands to “migrate.” Other scholars feel that the beginning of the Dark Ages coincides with the sack of Rome in 410 or when the Western Roman Empire was without an emperor, which would date to 476. Still others would assert that the Dark Ages began with the disappearance of urban life.

I would maintain that the Dark Ages were “dark” because the story of the era is so convoluted, fraught with conflicting scholarship, drowning in facts, peoples, figures, and saw lands of shifting borders, that it is shrouded in darkness. I will attempt to lift this veil and shine the light of a good editor on the multitudinous facts and suppositions that make this story difficult to follow. Follow along with me this story of numerous characters, intrigues, battles, and yes, migrations, to some reasonable conclusion.

The Romans had been a band of warriors aligned by conquest and exploitation of subjugated peoples. As the empire encompassed greater and larger lands, it developed a sophisticated political structure to rule, and essentially life became more routine and peaceable. In the year 222, all freeborn people of the empire were made citizens. About this time, the empire was at its geographic height and encompassed all North Africa that bordered the Mediterranean, the Levant (today’s Syria, Israel, Lebanon, and parts of Iraq), Turkey, most of Southern and Eastern Europe, Italy (which included at the time a good portion of Austria), Greece, France – then known as Gaul, Spain, and Portugal – which form the Iberian Peninsula, and most of Great Britain.

Roman emperors were equivalent to gods and idolized by their public. However, life for most, was harsh. Some twenty-five percent of the empire population were enslaved peoples who had been captured through conquest. Unimaginable cruelty took place in the Roman circus for the

pleasure of the elite. At least one in ten urban women were prostitutes, as there was no other means to earn their daily bread.

As early as the first century, legions were staffed by mercenaries. Those of the populated cities, enjoying their urbane lifestyle, had no desire to fight wars. When Roman rule was at its greatest, war of conquest had ceased, which meant a further dwindling in the number of Romans in the army, and a marked increase in the number of mercenaries, who were predominantly from Germanic lands. Eventually, an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the legions were staffed by mercenaries, including officers and generals, whose loyalty was more directed to the army than the republic. In effect, the empire had outsourced their war and peacekeeping machine.

Since the elite classes were the only citizens afforded an education, and law being the most important of those subjects, after the empire's geographical zenith, there was little technological progress. For the most part, starting in the third century, sciences and engineering were not advanced, for they were of no use to a ruling class that functioned under an elaborate legal system. Up to this point, the empire had been a steady assimilation machine – of cultures, slaves, indentured servants, and other people's advancements. Due to its dependance upon slaves for virtually everything, save governance, there was no need for further technological advancement. Slavery had left an indelible mark upon the elites, who became accustomed to a life of ease, and would not suffer to lose dignity by engaging in commerce or production. Their economic base secure, those with the greatest learned intelligence applied themselves least to furthering advancements in their own civilization. Additionally, as Christianity took hold, many of the greatest potential leaders from elite families opted to become bishops or other clergy positions, rather than apply themselves to governing.

Like today – if you'll join me in the parody – a Senator or Counselman used his office to improve his and his family's fortunes and was most focused on governing in a fashion that would add to this personal wealth. Like today, this was considered natural and proper among the ruling class. And while Counselmen, Senators, and Emperors came and went, the Roman state was imagined as continuing forever.

By 285, the empire had grown so vast that it was split into an eastern portion, based in Byzantium and a western portion, administered from Milan. The eastern portion remained intact until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. However, it was the fall of the western Roman empire,

that thrust all of Europe into the Dark Ages. From 285 until the sacking of Rome in 410, due to bubonic plague and other misfortunes of a steady decline in civilized life, the Western Empire lost twenty percent of its population; this in contrast to other cultures of the world, whose populations flourished with the advancement of knowledge and industrialization. It is estimated that the volume of trade in the Western Empire declined by some fifty percent. Even in the far reaches of the empire such as Britain, society was already experiencing severe stress with sharp contrasts between classes, a similar decline in trade, depopulation of cities and towns, a plummeting birth rate, a slow collapse of the money economy, accompanied by high inflation. Does any of this sound familiar?

So, it is the year 285, that I use as the beginning of the Dark Ages, which encompassed a long and varied series of events that would disembowel Western Roman Empire.

The first important person in this post-285 era was Constantine. He came of age at a time of great civil war in the early 300s. Through a series of battles, he deposed the Western Empire Emperor and became ruler in 312. When he then deposed the Eastern Empire Emperor in 324, Constantine became the sole ruler of the Roman World. He claimed his victories were due to his belief in the Christian God. He substantially fortified the Eastern Capitol of Byzantium, accessible by both the Aegean and Black Sea, and well impenetrable, and renamed it Constantinople. In part, he was forced to create his own capitol as he could not impose Catholicism on the pagan practicing Roman elite of the west. He ruled for another thirteen years until his death in 337. While the city was an undeniably formidable fortress, its creation encouraged the splitting of the Empire into east and west, with two emperors, upon his death.

Next to enter our story are the Goths, a barbarian people. The word “barbarian” was used by the Greeks to denote an alien, or someone of an inferior culture. A semi-nomadic Germanic people, of perhaps one to two hundred thousand, the Goths were described by Roman historian Tacitus as a race who had not intermarried with other people, and who had “eyes stern and blue; ruddy hair; large bodies, [and were] powerful in sudden exertions.” In commenting on the Goths in battle Tacitus explained, “In the field of battle, it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor; it is disgraceful for his companions not to equal their chief; but it is reproach and infamy during a whole succeeding life to retreat from the field surviving him.” Today, when we think of these people, we imagine them sweeping into Roman territory, *en masse*, almost out of the blue.

However, contrary to such thoughts, there were many Goths who were not only living in Roman provinces but serving in the Roman army.

The Goths' fortunes were to turn, and hence those of the Western Empire, when Atilla the Hun came to power with a war machine unlike any previously assembled. The Huns laid waste to all peoples they encountered. In the middle fourth century, the mighty Huns chased the Goths from their lands north of the Danube. In the year 376, those Goths living closest to the Danube, sought, and were granted refuge, by Emperor Flavius Valens who was based in Constantinople. (As a side note, a century later, these united Goth people were ruled by two kings, and split into two kingdoms, one in the west known as "Visigoths," and one in the east known as "Ostrogoths," Those who settled south of the Danube would become known as the Visigoths, which is how we shall now call them).

Settling into these fertile lands, (today's Balkans, parts of Austria and parts of Hungary), they were immediately beset by unusually harsh and unfair treatment by the local empire governors, which caused them to revolt and to engage the combined empire army in the Battle of Adrianople in 378. Adrianople is today's Edirne located in the far western portion of Turkey, just south of the Danube river and Bulgaria. At this battle, the empire army made a series of blunders and the Visigoths not only routed them but killed Emperor Valens. It then became evident to the Visigoths that the empire armies were weaker than imagined.

After the death of Emperor Valens, both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires were ruled by Theodosius the Great, who was also based in Constantinople. The Most significant date during his reign was February 27, 380, when he signed a decree making Christianity the officially recognized religion of the entire empire. This decree proscribed punishments for the practice of pagan rituals. His declaration stated that there was one deity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Such Catholic believers may also be known as Trinitarians. He also detailed the persecution of non-believers that was to come, stating that: "We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics...They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority which in accordance with the will of Heaven we shall decide to inflict."

This Christian, and nothing but Christian edict, was an effort to subjugate people's thoughts on spirituality, forcing a not too willing, widespread population, to change their form of religion. Add this to harsh taxes and little military protection, and people were wondering what they were getting in return for loyalty to the empire. Most people were not committed to Rome, at any event, and were ambivalent at the prospects of the empire, only wishing for a government that might ease, rather than increase, their daily burdens.

Theodosius's reign lasted sixteen years until his death in 395. Although he was a great thinker and builder, he exacted a severe toll of taxes on his subjects to pay for extensive monuments, and his court was besieged by open bribery for favors. Unsuccessful in pushing the Visigoths out of the Roman territory south of the Danube, he settled for peace, granted them lands, and allowed them to remain under their own leaders, rather than being assimilated, which had been the usual Roman practice.

Upon his death, the empire was again split between into two, ruled by his entirely inept sons. Arcadius became Emperor of the Eastern Empire from Constantinople and Honorius of the Western Empire. The Eastern Empire was to be largely spared the difficulties faced by the west, due in part, to a more firmly established urban culture and greater financial resources, and a virtually impenetrable capital.

That same year, 395, the Visigoths chose as their king the powerful, aggressive, and wise Alaric the Bold, who had been a military leader in the Roman army. Alaric's main goal was to seek legitimacy and assurance of lands that his people could permanently settle upon. However, after he had successfully pursued battles on behalf of the Eastern Empire, and several invading threats were removed, the inept Emperor Arcadius believed he no longer needed Alaric's services and in 399, Alaric's provinces were transferred to the Western Empire for administration by his equally inept brother. This political move stripped Alaric of his Roman rank and the entitlement for the provisioning of his army and put into question his people's right to continue to possess the lands they had previously been granted for settlement, some twenty years earlier.

Alaric felt he had no choice but to attack and pursued several battles against Flavius Stilicho, the commander of the Western Empire army, who was married to Theodosius's niece, and who had his own secret designs on conquering the Eastern Empire. The strange, if unfortunate part of this attack, was that Alaric had been a significant commander under Stilicho.

Between 401 to 403 Alaric pursued unsuccessful battles. However, Stilicho determined that Alaric and his Visigoths would be better allies than enemies and he thereby granted Alaric status as “Master of Soldiers.” Frightened by the battles, Emperor Honorius moved his court to the well-fortified city of Ravenna.

Soon, other Germanic barbarians such as the Vandals, began to wage battles south of the Danube, in North Africa and in Gaul. In response to these threats, Stilicho withdrew his armies from the Rhine and British frontiers to fortify his Italian defenses, in 406. The Britons responded by electing their own leaders and after 350 years of Roman rule, they were suddenly free, but left to their own to defend against marauding tribes who soon entered their lands.

Taking advantage of the upheaval, Alaric launched a Northern Italy attack in 407. The wise Alaric then threatened devastation of the land unless he was paid a handsome ransom in gold, to which Stilicho agreed, despite protestation from Emperor Honorius and the Roman senate. This treaty of sorts brought Alaric back into the fold as a loyal Roman leader.

In the east, Emperor Arcadius died in 408 and was replaced by his 7-year-old son Theodosius II. While General Stilicho was still intent on reuniting the Eastern and Western Empires under his own command, before he could act, he needed to address foreign incursions near Milan.

Sensing the impending actions of the opportunistic General, a powerful minister in Emperor Honorius’s court, named Olympius, had many of Stilicho's court supporters put to death. Meanwhile, Olympius convinced Honorius to act against local troops who were loyal to Stilicho, and had them murdered in their sleep. Without an army, Stilicho fled. However, he was promised sanctuary by Olympius, and therefore returned to Ravenna. But instead of safety, Olympius convinced Emperor Honorius that Stilicho was a threat to the empire, and thereby the general and his entire family were killed.

Olympius and inept Emperor Honorius then officially declared Alaric an enemy. They exacted punishment on him and his Visigoths by massacring over 10,000 of their women and children, then living in the various cities in Italy, while the Visigoth men were away fighting on behalf of the Eastern Empire. What Olympius hadn’t counted on, was that the remaining army, many thousands of soldiers, seeing the treachery at hand, defected to the army of Alaric. Hence, the main Roman army, whose strength lay in the mass of battle-hardened mercenaries, had now

disintegrated. Alaric now had an army of some 30,000 Visigoths, seeking revenge for the havoc and death wrought by Olympius and Honorius.

Even now, however, Alaric sued for peace, offering to move his army and their families near to the land they had originally settled by the Danube. However, Honorius and Olympius spurned him.

Alaric responded to this rebuttal by moving his army into Northern Italy. Bypassing the imperial court in Ravenna, he headed to Rome and imposed a blockade to starve the people into submission. The Emperor Honorius and the Roman senators tried to thwart Alaric by telling him the citizens in Rome would defend themselves to the last. To this Alaric replied, with a now famous retort: “The thicker the hay, the easier mowed!”

After considerable negotiations, the starving citizens of Rome, which included most of the empire’s wealthy elite, paid a ransom of 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, 4,000 silken tunics, 3,000 scarlet-dyed hides, and 3,000 pounds of pepper. There was difficulty in raising the metal for ransom so numerous pagan statues were melted down to supplement the loot. Alaric also recruited some ten of thousand or more freed Gothic slaves into his army. Thus, the siege of Rome ended, and Alaric removed his now enriched troops into Tuscany and Umbria.

Honorius, as part of the terms of the ransom, had agreed to grant Alaric a significant post, such as head of the Roman Army. When Honorius recanted his promise, Alaric moved again on Rome in 409. This was now the second siege of the eternal city. In negotiating a new peace, Alaric insisted that the Roman senators appoint a new emperor to replace Honorius. They elected Attalus. Additionally, the senators appointed Alaric, yet again, as Master of Soldiers. He also had his brother-in-law, Ataulf, appointed Head of the Imperial Equestrian Soldiers.

Alaric’s next move was to march on Ravenna, with his new Emperor Attalus, to confront Honorius and his court. Honorius pleaded through a minster that he and Attalus should share power as co-emperors, which Attalus wholly rejected, instead threatening death by mutilation, or exile to some distant land. Facing this threat, Honorius planned to flee to Constantinople. However, divine providence intervened when thousands of troops, who had sailed from the eastern capital, around Greece and up into the Adriatic Sea, arrived in Ravenna. This strengthened Honorius’s resolve to stand his ground.

The pseudo-Emperor Attalus came into constant conflict with Alaric, by issuing edicts and orders that were contrary to Alaric's wishes. Alaric responded to this by summoning Attalus to join him south along the western Italian coast where he then stripped Attalus of his royal garments and removed him as emperor.

What precipitated Alaric and his army to move on Rome, for yet a third time, on August 24, 410, was dishonesty in negotiations between he and Honorius. Utterly frustrated in attaining both title and permanent homelands for his large body of people, Alaric was left with only one recourse – to take the eternal city and ransom it for his needs. It is often said that history is written by the victors. However, in this case, history was written by the literate, and Alaric and his Visigoths were illiterate. Hence, the account of the sack of Rome was written by those who could best put ink to vellum or paper, including Saint Jerome (c.345-420), Pelagius the monk (c.354-418), and Saint Augustine (354-430), all contemporaries of the era.

Rome had been besieged and starved twice within the previous two years and the populace was suffering greatly. It was said that women fed on their babies, rather than the other way around. As morning arose, after the first evening's attack, the destruction wrought by the Visigoths was painfully, frightfully apparent. The siege lasted three days. Young women were raped in the streets and elderly women were bludgeoned to death. Many important and massive buildings, whose foundations today are their only remains, were utterly destroyed. The wealthy Romans, who had prided themselves on recording the weight of food their guests had ingested at sumptuous banquets, were gruesomely killed or held for ransom. Further aiding in the carnage were thousands of Goths who were suddenly free from Roman bondage. The ranks of Goth slaves had been swelled by traders who for years made a habit of taking Goth children from their mothers and selling them into a greedy slavery market for the Roman elite.

Those wealthy enough to possess gold, were able to bargain their lives. Many were not so fortunate and were slaughtered for sport and revenge or captured to be sold, themselves, into slavery. Citizens who sought refuge in a church, however, were spared, but the wealth of gold chalices and other valuable adornments was fair booty for the plundering horde, except for the basilica of St. Peter, where Alaric demanded his troops return whatever they had taken.

Some historians maintain that because the slaughter was not "wholesale," the sacking of Rome was not quite so bad as it might seem. However, even one hundred and fifty years later,



chroniclers reported that damage to the city was still very evident. The Roman population was devastated, and wholly demoralized at the destruction and loss.

One historian, contemporary to the age, claimed that the Visigoths decimated Northern Italy during this period as well, killing all they encountered, and burning the villages and cities to the ground, with nothing remaining save some stone foundations. In this area, population dwindled by at least 40% and previously known cities disappeared into the dust. This population void opened the land to new settlement by strange barbarian tribes, such as the Lombards.

And yet, after all the carnage, Alaric's people had no homeland in which to settle. After only three days in Rome, he took his people south, ravaging every city in their path. He was now attempting to cross into North Africa for supplies and likely, hopefully, a permanent homeland. Unfortunately, his ships were damaged by a severe storm, and in late 410 or early 411, scholars cannot agree, he died not far from the coast in Consentia, Italy. True to pagan practices, his burial took place nearby a stream or small river. Scholars agree that the elaborate burial entailed diverting the water flow long enough to dig a grave, fill it with his body and special mementos, and then allowing the water to resume its original course, forever sealing his final resting place. This work was performed by recent captives, who were then slaughtered on the spot, to preclude them from ever revealing the important site.

His brother-in-law Ataulf was now elected leader of the Visigoths and took as his bride the captured sister of Emperor Honorius, Galla Placidia. As the Visigoths moved north to settle in Southwestern Gaul, Ataulf died in 415. Wallia, was now elected King of the Visigoths and he finally, successfully, settled his people, who through additional conquest, absorbed not only the Southwestern area of Gaul but the Iberian Peninsula.

Emperor Honorius officially granted them the lands known as Aquitaine, a region forming the Southwestern corner of France, bordering Spain and the Atlantic, with today's Bordeaux as its major city. With this settlement of place, and official designation by the emperor, these barbarians became the first people in Roman history to live autonomously within the Roman empire. They were beholden to no other peoples, no external authority, and no taxation and elected their own King.

Soon after this settlement, other barbarian peoples invaded lands in the Roman empire including the Burgundians along the upper Rhine and Southern Gaul and the Franks on the lower Rhine and in Northern and central Gaul.

The Vandals, after moving into North Africa in 435, and conquering the remainder of the areas, posed a particular problem for the empire as they were adept seamen, and their ships poached any of those plying the Mediterranean, which effectively cut communications, supplies, and military reinforcements from moving east to west. The Eastern Empire and Western Empire were thus cleaved by Vandal sea power. The Vandals were systematically cruel, wholly anti-Trinitarian and pro-Arian. Intolerant of those not of their own tribe, they earned no loyalty among the people they conquered, and their name lives on today as a definition of the people themselves. Webster's defines a vandal as: "a person who deliberately destroys or damages public or private property."

Meanwhile, in 435, Attila the Hun, after settling upon a treaty with Rome and Ravenna, almost immediately ignored it and began prolonged raids into Roman territories. After much plundering and slaughter, they traded a tenuous peace for gold and other ransom, thereby significantly enriching the Hun treasury. While they also attacked the Eastern Empire, with some success, they were not able to take Constantinople, and so they turned back westward for more conquest. Ten years later, Atilla led his warriors in the conquest of the Balkans, parts of eastern Gaul, and Northern Italy. The Huns were primarily responsible for the incursion into Roman Empire territory by Germanic tribes as they were fleeing these seemingly invincible marauders. The Huns were highly adept horsemen and with their skilled archers and javelin throwing techniques, they were able to attack from afar, rather than being embroiled in close hand-to-hand combat. When they did move in for closer battle, their horse skills were superior to all they encountered.

Much of the history of Attila comes from sketches and fragments of later writers, who were enemies of the Huns, for they themselves had no written legacies, other than contemporary honorifics of Attila's life, but little of these survived the vicissitudes of time. It is surprising to learn that a name we all know so well as a fearless warrior has a life history that is supported with scant evidence.

Atilla moved his army close to Rome but was not able to take the city. They turned to eastern Gaul, but were met with strong resistance by the Visigoths, who, strangely enough, were fighting

against not only the Huns, but the Ostrogoths, who had become, through conquest, a part of the Hun army. The Hun harassment of the Roman empire ended with the death of Atilla in 453, whereby his German allies, the Gepids, an offshoot of Goths, turned against the Huns, and drove them back to central Asia. Meanwhile, this opened up the territory to attack, and the Vandals, moving from their conquered lands in North Africa, sacked Rome in 455 and carried off great quantities of gold and treasure.

With Northern Italy now free of the Huns, but substantially depopulated, the Eastern Empire, under Emperor Zeno, began to assert control. As two decades wore on, Zeno encouraged the German King Odoacer to attack the Western Empire in Rome with his Ostrogoth army. At the time, the young Romulus was the Western Emperor, placed there by his father, Master of Soldiers, Orestes. Odoacer and his troops took Rome and executed Orestes in 476. The young Romulus, whose life was spared, thus became the last emperor of the Western Empire. To obtain lands for his men and their families, Odoacer appropriated portions of those estates that remained under private ownership.

Those Ostrogoths who had not joined Odoacer in his conquest, moved eastward where they joined the Ostrogoth king Theodoric the Great. Now Odoacer, in a wholly independent manner, began appropriating other lands that Emperor Zeno believed to be part of the Eastern Empire. Zeno therefore saw Odoacer as a threat, and just as he had previously encouraged him to take the Western Empire and Rome, he similarly encouraged Theodoric the Great to attack, in hopes of reuniting the two empires under Byzantine authority. After Zeno died in 491, Theodoric successfully invaded Italy and deposed Odoacer and ruled the Romans and Ostrogoths in 493.

The land of Italy that Theodoric reigned over, at that time, had been devastated by depopulation and deforestation. Without vegetation, large swaths of cropland became arid as they were flooded by rains, which carried away the topsoil. Theodoric embarked on a campaign to plant trees, drill wells, drain swamps, dig irrigation flows, and reclaim land. An Arian Christian, he tolerated those who were Trinitarian Christians. Arianism had a slight distinction. They believed Jesus was the son of God, but not one and the same, as is practiced by the Trinitarians or Catholics.

He was also a wise judge in matters of the rights of men and preserved and instituted policies that found favor among a more independent people. In 497, the new Eastern emperor,

Anastasius, named Theodoric as the King of Goths and Romans. Unlike Roman Kings before him, he did not seek to form people into one common unit by erasing their tribal identities.

To secure his place on the throne as head of the Western Empire, Theodoric undertook political alignment with other Germanic people. One daughter was sent to the King of the Visigoths to be married in 494. In 496, another daughter was wed to the King of the Burgundians, who occupied Southeast Gaul. He himself made the politically adept move of marrying the sister of King Clovis of the Franks, who was wily and powerful. Clovis had converted to Christianity knowing that he would then be the only Germanic King to practice the religion, and thereby would gain significant support from the church, as well as its swollen coffers.

Theodoric had hoped to unite all the German peoples so that they might live peaceably in their respective lands. Among his ruling class he included those of all nationalities. He proclaimed fairness among all. Every free man in the kingdom possessed the same legal rights under the law. Even though he was illiterate, common among almost all Germanic tribesmen, he encouraged education and literacy among the people. The poor were treated kindly with portions of food from the royal granaries allotted to stave off any extreme hunger.

Theodoric repaired all types of public works including aqueducts, public baths, and city walls. In several cities, he created administrative offices in abandoned palaces that he had repaired. Promoting religious tolerance, which was highly uncommon at the time, gained him loyalty among his subjects.

Despite his political acumen, however, his reign was beset by several minor troubles. King Clovis of the Franks determined to take the remainder of Southwest Gaul and in 507 defeated the Visigoths, pushing them solely into the Iberian Peninsula. Next, the landlocked Burgundians began a push southward to the Mediterranean Sea, which by rights was Italian territory. In 513 Theodoric repulsed this invasion and in doing so, appropriated a portion of Burgundian land.

Not wholly independent of the Eastern Empire, Theodoric knew that to secure his legacy there would need to be a bloodline son to replace him after his death. Failing to produce a male heir, he named his grandson, produced as a union between his daughter and the Visigothic King, as next in line to the throne. This had the effect of reuniting the Visigothic Kingdom with his own.

Unfortunately, as his rule continued, he became more despotic. Part of the issue was the schism between Arianism and the Trinitarians, who by this time, formed the largest body of Christians, including the whole of the Eastern Empire. This was to portend considerable unrest. Ten years after the death of Eastern Emperor Anastasius, who as you recall, was the foundation of Theodoric's legitimacy, a new and great emperor arose in Constantinople, Justinian.

Arian Christians were regularly persecuted in Constantinople as heretics considered dangerous to the stability of the Trinitarian based church. Theodoric then began persecuting Trinitarians in Italy. Naturally, this was the cause of much strife between the two empires. Before Theodoric could effectively purge the Western Empire of Trinitarian Catholics, he died in the year 526 at the age of seventy-two, after reigning for over thirty years. Historians remember Theodoric as Great for his rebuilding of Italy from ruin to prosperity. As for the Ostrogoths, they fled north and west into Gaul and Iberia. In Gaul, they were thoroughly assimilated by the Franks, and as a distinct people, disappeared forever.

It is fascinating today, that in Ravenna, Italy, you may, for a mere four euros, visit the UNESCO World Heritage site, that is Theodoric's fully intact mausoleum, constructed six years before his death. It is replete with a thirty-foot diameter, single stone, 230-ton roof made of Istrian limestone, quarried from today's Croatia. It is perhaps the earliest Christian building with no subsequent alterations, so that a visit there, is a step back in time some 1,500 years to its construction.

There was a good deal of intrigue and treachery that would finally combine the Eastern and Western Empires after Theodoric's death. His grandson, who was only ten at the time, was the successor to the throne, but due to his age, his mother ruled in his stead. Entrusting him to local tutors, they plotted his downfall by addicting the young king to alcohol. As a result, he died at an early age in 534. During the short reign of his mother, she sought legitimacy from Emperor Justinian in Constantinople. Since the effort was met with no response from the emperor, she enlisted a close cousin to join her in ruling the Western Empire. Agreeing to this pact, he almost immediately had her arrested and exiled to a lake island located about halfway between Florence and Rome. Once there, and away from public scrutiny, he had her strangled to death in 535.

Around the same time, Justinian sent General Belisarius to North Africa to reconquer the lands that had been taken by the Vandals one hundred years earlier. Traveling with an army and navy

of some 50,000 men, they were successful in their conquest and thereby reunited North Africa with Constantinople. Justinian then directed the General to turn his attention to the Ostrogoths in Italy. Rome at that time was not fortified as the Ostrogoths strength lay in their capitol of Ravenna, Northern Italy, and the Balkans.

Belisarius first took Sicily, and using it as a base, within three years retook Rome with little conflict. He then was reinforced and commanded a total army of some 20,000 to prepare for the attack and taking of Ravenna. He strategically proceeded to starve the capitol by blocking all grain shipments. Once the Ostrogoths realized their defeat was at hand, they offered Belisarius the throne of the Western Empire. Feigning acceptance, he marched into Ravenna and proclaimed the Western Empire was now unified with the Eastern Empire under Justinian. The year was 540. It was over a century since the two empires had been separated, and to this day, Justinian is rightly credited with the will, cunning, and foresight of reuniting it.

Meanwhile, the Visigoths continued to live a peaceable settled life on the Iberian Peninsula. In 589 they abandoned their Arianism and adopted Catholicism. Toledo was established as the center of the Visigothic kingdom and became a seat of great learning and civilization.

By 600, the population in the Western Roman Empire had declined significantly. It is said that not more than ten percent of the general population were free men. There was a rapid deurbanization and estimates of the number of people residing in towns, those with any urban life at all, was less than five percent. The remainder of lands were dominated by lords and serfs. The lords were solely concerned with amassing wealth and promulgating battles to do so or fighting in defense to maintain what they had. They cared little for learning, or general ideas such as justice or peace, and their form of government was their own, there was no such thing as a state with power from afar.

The serfs lived a life not removed from a simple beast of burden. In almost all respects the lord saw no difference between animals of the field and serfs. Life was brutal and brutish, and held in very little regard, save what it meant to production in the field.

To make matters worse, the entire church structure of men was, like the lords, concerned with building their wealth. The churchmen were also beholden to the lords, who viewed Christianity as some sort of magical sect with miracles that were unexplainable. Hence, those that once

fostered literacy, abandoned learning. The collapse of the Roman Empire was a “political, economic, and cultural disaster of the greatest magnitude.”

As for the Visigoths, through various ebbs and flows in their lands, civil wars, and wars with the Franks, their kingdom was maintained until the successful invasion by Muslims in 711, who captured and killed the Visigoth king and forced the people to flee into the far northern reaches of the peninsula, along the Atlantic Ocean and parts of the Pyrenees, an area roughly centered upon today’s Bilbao.

Since their imperial capital of Toledo had been conquered, and their king was chosen from that area, by Toledo-based nobles, the Muslims executed the Visigothic nobles, leaving no one to legitimately ascend to the throne. It is reported by some scholars, that the Muslims were awed by the sophistication of Visigothic metalwork and public works that supported their population. Recent scholarship shows that they were much more highly sophisticated than nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century scholars gave credit. Their comingling with those of the earlier Roman empire created a combined Hispano culture. Today, those native to Spain, are in fact likely descended from the Germanic Visigoths. The Iberian Peninsula was as far as the Muslim invaders advanced into today’s Europe proper.

As to the fate of the Eastern Empire, today’s Syria, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and parts of Asia Minor were lost to the Muslims in the 630s. The people in these lands were of both Christian and Jewish practice, and found the Muslims much more to their liking, as they tolerated religions among the conquered people. Those who didn’t recognize Mohammed needed only to pay a head tax. The largest, most learned, and wealthiest populations of Jews were in North Africa, among the great trading centers of the Mediterranean. The Muslims were in no hurry to convert people who were providing them a ready source of tax revenue.

In 674 the Arabs launched an unsuccessful attack on Constantinople, and again, unsuccessfully, in 717 to 718, when an uneasy standstill was reached, whereby the eastern Taurus Mountains in Turkey defined the Byzantine frontier.

It is generally accepted that the Dark Ages ended about the year 1000. However, the darkest period was the fall of the Roman Empire, and that is what I’ve focused on this evening. To quote

scholar Robert Lopez, “the meeting of German primitivism with Roman decrepitude” sealed the fate of the Empire.

So ends our tale. We have seen war, pestilence, starvation, disease, unmerciful rulers, intrigue, betrayal, conquest, loss and reconquest, and an empire that was built, then split, then reunited, and split again through the intervening centuries. A cavalcade of characters and peoples have crossed these pages. The one thing we know for certain is that in seventeen hundred years, little of human behavior and proclivities have changed. Thank you.