

ROME'S POWER SLIPS AWAY

THE BARBARIANS

“TACITUS,
SÜETONIUS,
LACTANTIUS, AND
THE LIFE OF LEO
THE GREAT

On September 9 in the year 9 CE, the Roman governor and general Quinctilius Varus led three legions right into the hands—and swords—of their enemies. Narrow ravines forced the Romans to walk in ones and twos, and the army became a string of undefended men. The last soldier was half a day's march from the first. Then a force of Germans, led by a man named Arminius, attacked with surprise and brutal force. Only a few Romans survived.

Six years passed before another Roman army reached the site of the massacre and actually saw the remains. According to Tacitus: “There in the field were . . . the bones of men . . . strewn about or piled in heaps. . . . And so the Roman army, . . . in grief and anger, buried the bones of the three legions. No soldier . . . knew whether he was burying the remains of his kinsman—or those of a stranger.”

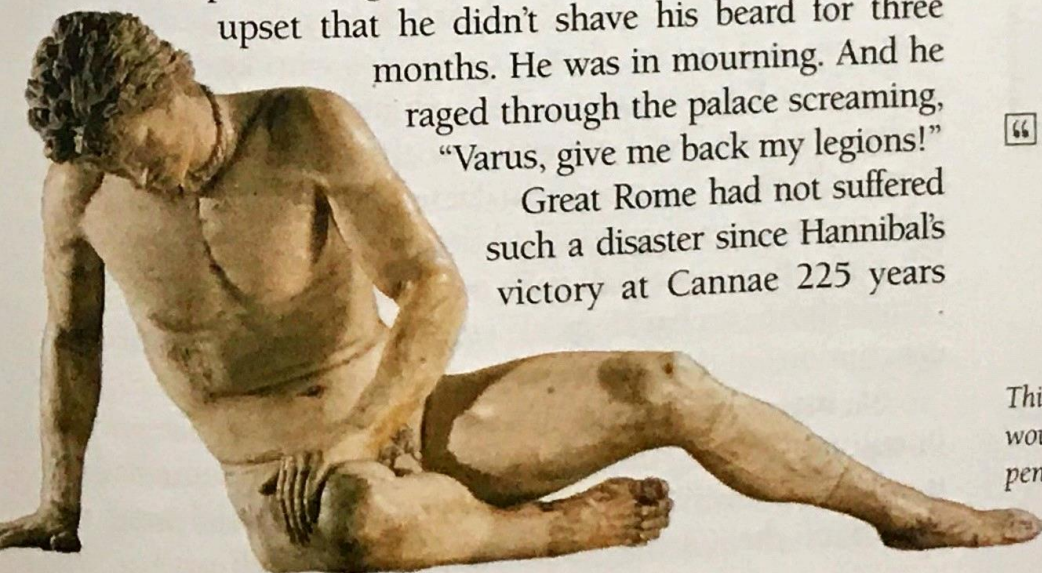
How could three Roman legions have been so completely defeated and dishonored? That question tortured the emperor, Augustus Caesar. The emperor was so upset that he didn't shave his beard for three months. He was in mourning. And he raged through the palace screaming, “Varus, give me back my legions!”

Great Rome had not suffered such a disaster since Hannibal's victory at Cannae 225 years

“Tacitus, *The Annals*, 117 CE

“Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, 130 CE

This strong young soldier has been wounded and defeated in battle. The pendant on the dying man's necklace tells us that he is from Gaul.



THE DIVIDING LINE

In his grief and shock after the defeat of Varus's legion, Augustus pulled his troops back to the Rhine River. To this day, the Rhine marks the border between German-speaking people and those who speak French, a Latin-based language.

"Barbarian" comes from the Greek word *barbaros*, which means foreigners. When native peoples spoke their languages, the Greeks thought all the words sounded like "bar-bar." The Latin word *barbaria*, meaning "foreign country," comes from the Greek term.

before. The empire had not only been defeated, it had been shamed. How could this happen? The answer lies in the personalities of the two leaders: Varus and Arminius.

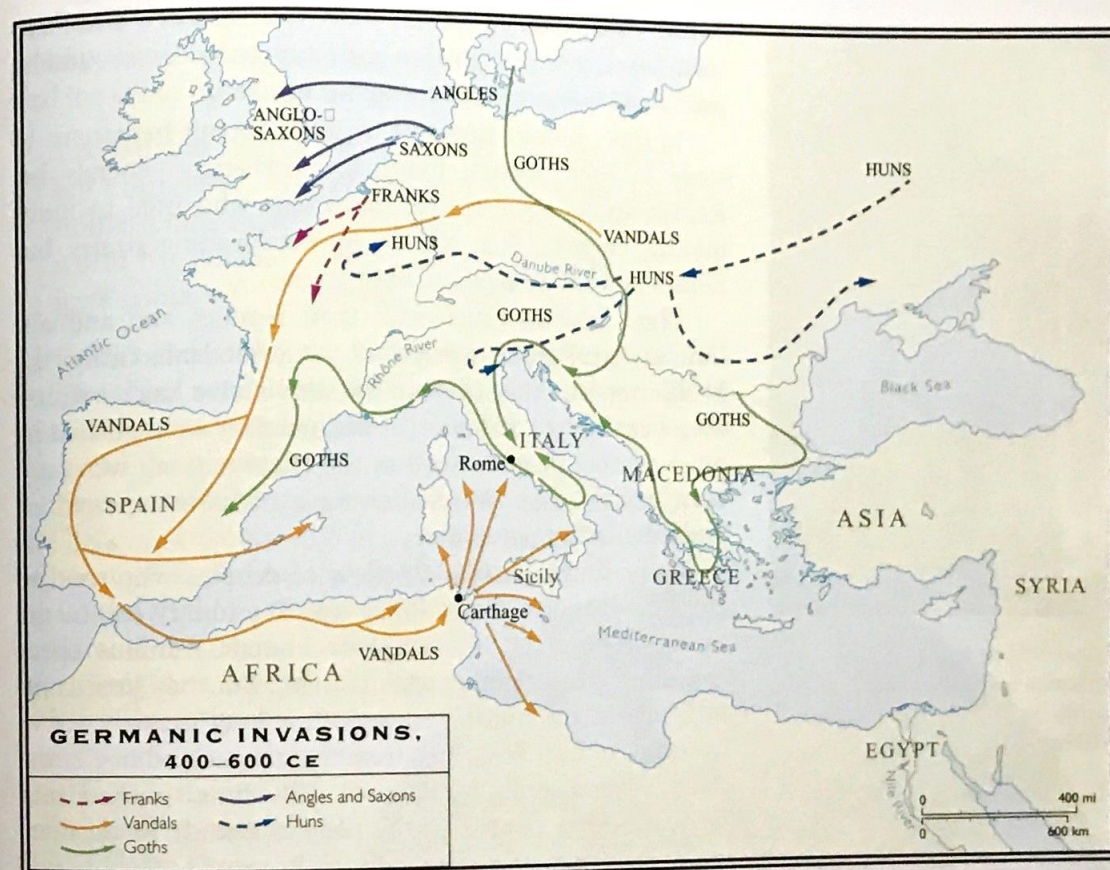
Varus was a successful politician in Rome. His career got a big boost when he married the emperor's great-niece. But imperial connections weren't enough, and Varus was a terrible judge of human nature. When he became the provincial governor over the Germanic tribes, he treated the Germans as though they were slaves of Rome. His attitude infuriated the Germanic tribes and their leader, Arminius.

Unlike Varus, Arminius was smart—and sneaky. With generous doses of flattery, he convinced the governor that the people were happy with his leadership and would obey him, whatever he asked. Varus never questioned the truth of Arminius's smoothly buttered words. So all Arminius had to do was wait—bide his time—until Varus grew careless. And then he set his trap.

Arminius sent Varus a message about a fake uprising and persuaded the governor to lead his troops through a dense forest in order to put down the rebels. Arminius and his men were ready and waiting. They ambushed the Romans, slaughtering not only the soldiers but also their wives, children, and servants. Then they left the bodies to rot and their bones to whiten in the sun. Varus had badly underestimated his enemy. The reasons were partly grounded in the history of relations between Rome and the people it called **barbarians**.

As the Romans expanded their borders into Gaul, Spain, Germany, and Britain, they met peoples who knew nothing of Greek or Roman culture. Though most of these so-called barbarians were Celts or Germans, they didn't share a common culture or language. In fact, they fought with each other more than they fought with the Romans. Since they left no written records of their own, what we know of them comes from archaeological evidence and from Roman descriptions of them.

At first, the Romans were terrified of these rough, uncultured tribes. After all, the Gauls had temporarily captured Rome in 390 BCE. But after Rome had defeated the armies of the Carthaginian general Hannibal and a few



Greek and Asian kings, the Romans felt they had little to fear from the disorganized peoples on their northern borders. For centuries, Roman soldiers were better trained than their enemies. They had sharper spears, stronger swords and armor. And they had powerful machines of war to catapult stones at their enemies and lay siege to their cities.

Roman views of the barbarians changed over time. At first, the Romans considered them all to be savages. The Romans assumed that these unfamiliar peoples were cruel and had no self-control. All barbarians were thought to follow strange practices such as cannibalism. Gradually, the Romans discovered that they were wrong: the provincial peoples were *not* all the same. Some were crude and untrained, but their differing customs and languages did not mean they were all dull



Roman soldiers hold a captured barbarian in this decoration from the marble arch that Constantine built to celebrate his victory in 312 CE.

witted. Some, like Arminius, proved to be shrewd military men. Varus, it seems, failed to learn this crucial lesson, and he paid a high price for the error of his thinking.

In time, Rome's emperors began to recruit barbarians to serve in their armies. Eventually, barbarian generals led Roman armies against other barbarians who tried to move into the empire. Often, these were not invading armies, but hordes of what we now call immigrants.

These peoples came, with their families and animals, from eastern Europe in search of the fertile lands nearer the Mediterranean. Most of them left their native lands because they were hungry and poor, or because they were pushed by other warlike peoples, such as the Huns moving westward from central Asia. Wave after wave of barbarian nations pushed into Roman territory.

Rome fought to stop the flow of peoples who tried to cross the frontiers of the Rhine and Danube rivers. In the second century CE, the emperor Marcus Aurelius spent almost ten years fighting against them. But they kept coming. Late in the fourth century CE, a long drought drove tribes of nomadic horsemen from their homeland in Central Asia. These peoples, whom we call Huns, pushed into Germany. They conquered the peoples already living there and forced them to migrate into the Roman Empire. As one group moved in, another was forced to move out.

One group of Germans, the Goths, marched into Italy in 410 CE. As the Goths came near Rome, the Roman troops panicked and shamefully abandoned the field of battle. The Vestal Virgins managed to save—and bury—the sacred vessels from Vesta's temple. They carried the eternal fires of Vesta to a place of safety beyond the gates of the city. A large part of the population fled across the Tiber River. The Goths ransacked the city, destroying or stealing at will, an event called the "Sack of Rome."

The Sack was a huge shock to the capital city. A barbarian army had not captured mighty Rome in 800 years. (No great city has ever been undefeated for this long.) The idea of *Roma Aeterna*—Eternal Rome—had long been proclaimed by its rulers and celebrated by its writers. The words were stamped

on Roman coins. For Rome to be defeated was almost unthinkable. A century earlier, a Christian writer had imagined the fall of Rome and compared it to the end of the world:

The fall and ruin of the world will soon take place, but nothing . . . is to be feared as long as the city of Rome stands intact. But when the capital of the world has fallen, . . . who can doubt that the end will have come for . . . the whole world?

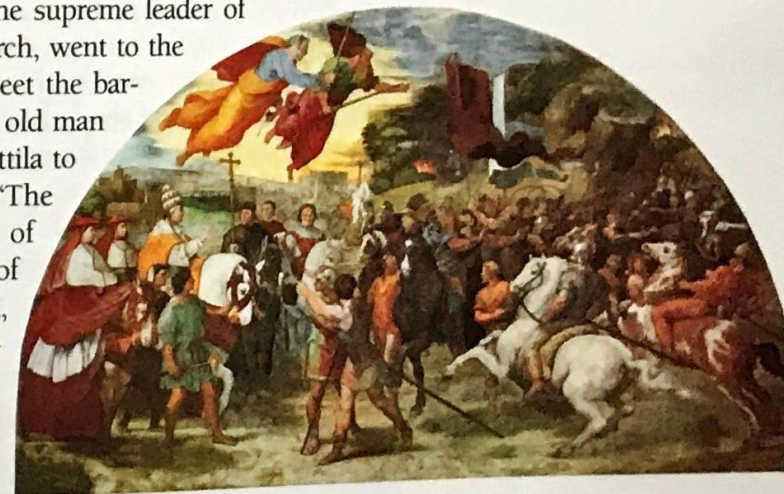
“Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 313 CE

Rome's defeat by the Goths was traumatic, but the Goths did not actually destroy the city. Rome survived, and its emperors recovered from the shock. But Rome never again had the power it once had held.

Forty years later, the Huns and their leader Attila “came into Italy, . . . inflamed with fury . . . utterly cruel in inflicting torture.” Pope Leo, the supreme leader of the Roman Catholic Church, went to the outskirts of the city to meet the barbarian king. Leo, a gentle old man with gray hair, “begged Attila to spare Rome, saying, ‘The Senate and the people of Rome, once conquerors of the world, now conquered, come before you as beggars. . . . The people have felt your punishments. Now as beggars, we ask for your mercy.’”

According to the same anonymous source, Attila was moved by Rome's sad plight. He “promised a lasting peace and withdrew beyond the Danube.” The Hun warlord had spared Rome, yet the capital was now at the mercy of barbarian lords. It was no longer unbeatable, unbreakable. It was no longer Eternal Rome.

“Anonymous, *The Life of Leo the Great*, after 550 CE



Two angels help Pope Leo convince Attila to show mercy to Rome in this 16th-century painting by the Italian artist Raphael. Scholars now think the pope offered him a huge amount of money to spare the city.