

The Fall of the Western Roman Empire

Paul Waring

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Introduction

In 395 AD¹ the Roman Empire split in two for the final time – never again would one man rule the whole empire. Whilst the eastern part continued in one form or another for a thousand years,² the western part entered a period of rapid decline. Whilst the exact date for the fall of the west is subject to debate, it is generally considered to have ceased to wield any influence by the end of the fifth century.

This discussion will focus primarily on the fall of the western empire, putting the east to one side until towards the end. First, we will examine the background and events preceding the fall, such as the formation of the tetrarchy and the formal division of empire. Second, we will discuss some of the reasons commonly put forward for the fall of the west, and whether they truly explain why half the empire collapsed. Third, we will discuss some of the dates suggested for the official end of the western empire. Finally, we will take a brief look at the continuation of the east beyond the fifth century, including possible reasons for its staying power compared to the west.

It would be possible to devote an entire discussion to each of the individuals and events described here, but we will take a general approach, favouring breadth over depth. Those who wish to examine particular aspects in more detail are invited to consult the list of primary and secondary sources, which provides a starting point for further research into this time period.

Background

Although the west did not fall until the fifth century, several events occurred before that time which led to the division of empire and ultimately the fall of the west. One of the most significant changes was the establishment of the tetrarchy, which set a precedent for multiple rulers and official division of the empire.

The period under discussion is flanked by two emperors: Theodosius I (379-395), last emperor of both east and west, and Romulus Augustus (475-476), last emperor of the west.

The Tetrarchy

In 285 the emperor Diocletian appointed Maximian as co-emperor and divided the empire into two regions: east and west. Diocletian and Maximian looked after their own areas, but took major decisions jointly. Eight years later, the two emperors appointed a deputy each, to assist with ruling

¹All dates are AD unless otherwise indicated.

²The Byzantine Empire lasted until the capture of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottoman Empire.

and to establish a line of succession.³ This created a system known as the *tetrarchy* ('rule of four'), whereby the empire would have two emperors with the title Augustus, and two deputies with the title of Caesar.⁴

Although the tetrarchy does not appear to have directly caused the fall of the west, it did set into motion a system of government which led to the empire being treated as two autonomous parts, with each emperor having their own armies and administrative staff. This system continued with occasional interruptions (such as Constantine, who began as co-emperor but became sole ruler later, and not all emperors appointed deputies) until the fall of the west.

Theodosius I

Theodosius I was born in Spain in 347 to an army commander named Theodosius the elder.⁵ His military service included campaigns on mainland Europe and in Britain. Theodosius retired to his Spanish estates after his father's conviction (and later execution) for high treason in 375. However, the emperor Gratian summoned him back to active service, possibly as *magister militum* ('master of soldiers', a high-level military rank).

Theodosius was raised to Augustus in 379, after military successes on the Danube front. For thirteen years he reigned as joint emperor, until the death of Valentinian II in 392. Theodosius then became sole emperor of the east and west, although his authority was contested on several occasions. Theodosius is a key figure in the fall of the west because, although unknown at the time, he would be the last man to rule the whole empire.

One of Theodosius' significant policy decisions, which is sometimes seen as contributing to the fall of the west, was his treaty with the Visigoths in 382, after failed attempts to expel them by force. This led to an influx of barbarian civilians and soldiers into the empire, which raised social and economic issues and eventually resulted in armed conflict.

On the death of Theodosius in 395, the empire was again divided into two, with his sons Arcadius and Honorius becoming emperors of the east and west respectively. From this point on the west declined, with the final emperor being ejected in 476.

Romulus Augustus

Known by his nickname *Augustulus* ('little Augustus'),⁶ Romulus' year of birth is unknown, though 461 has been suggested. His father was a Roman named Orestes, who had been secretary to Attila, King of the Huns, and his mother was the daughter of a senior Roman officer. Rapid promotion led to him holding the rank of *magister militum* in 474 under Julius Nepos, the emperor of the west at the time. In 475, troops in the west considered rebellion and wished to follow Orestes instead of Nepos, but for some reason – sadly undocumented, so we can only speculate – Orestes decided to put his son forward as emperor. Romulus turned out to be the last official emperor of the west, and his reign lasted less than a year before the Gothic king Flavius Odoacer forced him to abdicate. We do not know what happened to Romulus afterwards, though some sources suggest that he was exiled and may have still been alive in 507.

³Although the first two deputies, Galerius and Constantius Chlorus, did succeed their superiors, this was not always the case.

⁴These demonstrate how influential Julius Caesar and Augustus were, with their names still being used as titles nearly three centuries after their deaths.

⁵Roman practice was to usually name the eldest son after his father.

⁶Augustus was sometimes used as a name as well as a title – as a result coins from Romulus' reign were styled: 'Dominus Noster Romulus Augustus Pius Felix Augustus'.

Although Romulus receives some automatic blame for the fall of west - as last emperor some consider the fall must be his fault in part - the truth is that we know little of his reign, or indeed his life, due to a scarcity of details in the historical record. It is entirely possible that the west had already been lost by this point, and Romulus was simply unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Reasons for the fall

There have been many reasons suggested for the fall of the west,⁷ both from contemporary sources and modern scholarship, and covering a range of causes stretching across religion, social, economic, military and political factors. Each reason could be a substantial discussion in itself, but we shall restrict ourselves to a broad overview of some of the more well-known suggestions.

Increased barbarian activity

Barbarian activity increased on both sides of the Empire, from the Hun invasion of Persia in the east to Vandals across the west. Whilst raids were not a new thing – the map on page 10 shows some of the Gothic Raids in the third century – the activity in the fourth century was different for two reasons.

First and foremost, some of the raids were more akin to permanent invasions, as opposed to a brief incursion where barbarians would attempt to grab as much as they could and then head back across the border before Roman troops arrived. These presented an ongoing problem which penetrated further than just the frontiers.

Secondly, invasion of areas adjacent to the frontiers, whilst not a direct threat to the empire itself, caused the native populations to flee, and there was only one way for them to go. In particular, the invasion by the Huns of areas on the frontiers of the Empire resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Goths, a Germanic tribe, and these refugees fled over the borders. Six years of rebellion ensued,⁸ including the Battle of Adrianople in 378 where an army led by the emperor Valens suffered a heavy defeat. Peace was finally achieved by Theodosius I, and the barbarians – who would become known as Visigoths – settled within the Empire, but this eventually led to further problems, and ultimately an attack on Rome itself.

Sacking of Rome

Although the Visigoths had been settled within the empire and operated under a certain degree of autonomy,⁹ the importing of hundreds of thousands of people was not without problems. As is the case in modern times, large scale immigration brought issues of identity, integration and xenophobia from the existing population, and eventually these issues erupted into violence.

In 408, a ministerial official named Olympius became *magister officiorum* ('master of offices', one of the most senior administrative positions) and pursued an anti-Germanic policy which led to the slaughter of many barbarian soldiers and their families in Roman cities. Thousands of barbarians fled and sought refuge with Alaric I, King of the Visigoths.

⁷Alexander Demandt, a German historian, has enumerated 210 possible reasons for the decline and fall of the empire as a whole, some of which apply to the west.

⁸The so-called Gothic War lasted from 376-382.

⁹The land remained under Roman control and sovereignty, and the Visigoths were expected and required to provide soldiers for the army.

Alaric initially attempted to come to an agreement with the current emperor in the west, Honorius, requesting gold, hostages and permission to settle, but these were rejected. Possibly aware of the weakened state of defences in Italy, Alaric marched into the country with his army, sacking various cities as they went. The poor state of the defences was confirmed when Alaric's march was largely unopposed and his army reached Rome intact.

In late 408, Alaric laid siege to Rome, and demanded all the precious metals and slaves in the city in order to lift the siege. Ultimately a ransom was paid, though in order to do so many statues were melted down and shrines destroyed to obtain the necessary gold and silver. Thousands of barbarian slaves also joined Alaric and swelled the ranks of his army. Alaric lifted his siege towards the end of the year, and withdrew to Etruria, a region of eastern Italy.

After Alaric and his men had departed, the Senate urged Honorius to come to terms with the Visigoths, but the emperor refused and instead dispatched five legions (several thousand men) to garrison Rome and protect it against further attacks. Unfortunately their commander decided to engage the Goths en-route, and suffered a catastrophic defeat. Honorius sent another force to intercept Alaric's brother-in-law, Attalus, who was attempting to bring in reinforcements, but again they were defeated, although this time losses were minimal. Alaric marched on Rome once more and obtained senior military appointments for himself and Attalus in exchange for lifting his second siege.

The third and final siege of Rome came about as a result of an attack on Alaric by a small Roman force lead by Sarus, a rival Goth. Unsurprisingly, Alaric treated this as treachery on the part of the Romans – although there is no suggestion that it was done on the orders of Honorius – and once again marched on Rome. This time there was no negotiation, and on 24th August 410, the Visigoths entered Rome and sacked the city, destroying buildings and taking away goods and people.

As with the incursions into the empire, it is tempting to blame the fall of the west – and particularly Rome – on 'barbarians at the gates', a particularly convenient scapegoat for contemporary writers. Rome had been sacked before though – most notably in 390 BC – and had always bounced back strongly from any defeats. Indeed, the persistence of Rome, particularly during the Republic, was a source of frustration to many of its enemies. The Carthaginians for example may well have expected Rome to at least sue for peace after their heavy defeat at Cannae, but instead the Romans continued to fight, and eventually defeated Carthage. Furthermore, by the time Rome was sacked the capital of the western empire had already been moved to Ravenna by Honorius, although this may not have reduced the spiritual association of Rome as the original capital of the empire.

However, this time there would be no immediate restoration of Rome, and the city would never again regain its former glory. Rome would be sacked again in 455 – this time by the appropriately named Vandals¹⁰ – whilst there was still a western emperor, and again in 546 by the Ostrogoths.

Movement of the capital

In 324, the emperor Constantine ordered construction to begin on the site of an existing city (Byzantium, hence the later Byzantine Empire). In a show of complete egotism, he named the city after himself, and Constantinople¹¹ became the new official capital of the empire, with its own Senate.¹² Rome remained an important city and conurbation, but the gravity of power began to move slowly towards the east.

¹⁰Our word vandalism possibly comes from the Enlightenment view that the Vandals destroyed Rome, the city of civilisation.

¹¹The city was renamed Istanbul in 1930 following the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

¹²By this time the Senate at Rome was a shadow of its former self, but creating another body served as a symbolic reminder of Constantinople's position as capital

The reasons given for moving the capital vary, but the fact that the empire had expanded gradually eastwards meant that Rome was now a considerable distance from the frontiers, and therefore a poor base of operations.¹³ Constantinople, on the other hand, was closer to the frontiers and had the additional advantage of straddling several major trade routes.¹⁴ Starting a city from scratch would also have held attractions, as it was easier to create strong defences without worrying about demolishing existing buildings. The defences which were eventually created, and gradually improved over time, were sufficiently strong, and the location so ideal, that the city was not successfully besieged until 1204 (regained in 1261) and then again in 1453.

However, one difficulty with viewing Constantinople as part of the fall of the west is that the official capital had less importance than in the early years of the empire, with emperors often establishing an unofficial capital in their current base of operations, which could be some distance from Rome or Constantinople. This process started with Diocletian, who only visited Rome twice in the twenty one years of his reign and made Nicomedia (northwest modern Turkey) his primary base of operations. It could also be argued that the movement of the capital was an effect of the transition of power from west to east, as opposed to the cause of the change.

Rise of Christianity

Although Christianity had existed for hundreds of years before the fall of the west, its promotion by Constantine through the Edict of Milan¹⁵ helped to spread it throughout the empire. The emperor Julian attempted to reverse this process, earning him the moniker 'the Apostate', but this lasted only for the short period of his reign (361-363). Theodosius made Christianity the state religion through the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, permanently changing the balance of power between Christianity and paganism.

As a monotheistic (one god) faith, Christianity marked a substantial change from the polytheistic (many gods) faith of paganism, as well as a departure from the old Roman tradition of absorbing the gods of conquered nations. The change also affected the structure of the state, with bishops holding an increasingly important role.

However, it should be noted that many emperors, regardless of their religion, took a fairly pragmatic and tolerant view towards different faiths. Discrimination certainly took place – members of the faith which was currently out of favour were often barred from holding certain positions, and some practices such as sacrifices were outlawed – but active persecution was only practised by a handful of emperors.

Dating the decline and fall

Having examined some of the reasons for the fall of the west, we can now examine some potential dates for the end of this part of the empire.

The earliest realistic date for the decline and fall of the west is 395, when Theodosius died and the empire was split in two for the final time. As the two separate and largely autonomous parts continued to move in different directions, there was a risk that one region would become weaker than the other, suffer unique socio-economic issues or be ruled by a less competent emperor.

¹³There is, of course, a strong argument for locating a capital city well away from danger.

¹⁴The map of the empire on page 9 shows the position of Byzantium (as it was during the time of the tetrarchy).

¹⁵Whether this document was a formal edict is open to question, as there are two versions which have survived and they have substantial differences.

Another alternative date is 410, when the Goths sacked Rome. Although the city was no longer the capital of the west, let alone the whole empire, the ability of barbarians to enter and sack a key city with minimal opposition indicates an empire on the brink of falling.

Perhaps the most obvious date for marking the fall though is 476, when Romulus, the last emperor of the west, was forced to abdicate. This provides a supposedly clean change from Roman emperors to a succession of Kings of Italy, beginning with Flavius Odoacer.

All of the dates suggested naturally suffer from the innate difficulty of pinpointing a specific change from western empire to a collapse into barbarism. Whilst it feels clean and tidy to point to a specific date and state confidently 'that is when Rome fell', the reality is that even a rapid decline does not happen overnight. Incidents in history where a population wakes up one morning to find a completely different political structure and ruler with no warning are rare, if indeed any exist. Ultimately, we must accept a period (perhaps 410-476?) as opposed to a specific date, to mark the rapid decline and fall of the western empire.

Continuation of the East

Perhaps the most puzzling question of the period under discussion is why the eastern empire continued for another thousand years, despite being affected by many of the same changes as the west, such as the rise of Christianity and regular barbarian incursions. Although it underwent many changes, and ultimately morphed into what became known as the Byzantine Empire, the influence of the Eastern Roman Empire was still visible until the capture of Constantinople in 1453.¹⁶ Some remnants can even be seen today, for example the Eastern Orthodox Church.

One possible reason for the success of the east is that it was largely sheltered from barbarians, whereas the west was exposed on many fronts. However, whilst it may have been more difficult for barbarians to penetrate some parts of the eastern frontier, the bulk of the barbarian incursions came from the east (particularly the Huns, and the refugees they caused), even if some of them made it into the west.

The movement of the capital and centre of government to Constantinople may also partly account for why the east continued whilst the west declined. Whilst moving the capital is initially an administrative change, over time the army, along with any ambitious members of the population, would gradually gravitate to the new location, and this may have contributed to the east's continuation at the expense of the west.

Finally, the fall of the west appears to have had little impact on the east, and later emperors – most notably Justinian I (c. 482-565)¹⁷ – managed to retake parts of the western region. However, the empire was never again officially split into two distinct units, nor did it reach the same size.

Conclusions

Many reasons have been given for the fall of the western empire, ranging from religious to socio-economic, political and military. No one event stands out as being sufficiently disruptive to bring down an empire on its own, and even the most substantial events, such as the rise of Christianity and barbarian incursions, occurred over many decades.

¹⁶The Ottoman Empire itself lasted for nearly five hundred years, until shortly after World War I when it became modern Turkey.

¹⁷Justinian explicitly set out to restore the empire (*renovatio imperii*), though he was only partly successful in doing so.

Chronology

- 293 Formal establishment of the tetrarchy (two emperors, each with a deputy).
- 330 Capital of empire moved to Constantinople.
- 378 Battle of Adrianople.
- 379 Beginning of reign of Theodosius I, last emperor to rule the east and west.
- 395 End of reign of Theodosius I.
- 410 Goths enter and sack Rome.
- 455 Vandals enter and sack Rome.
- 475 Beginning of reign of Romulus Augustus, last emperor of the west.
- 476 End of reign of Romulus Augustus.

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented, and many of the primary sources are still available to us.

Primary sources

Our primary sources are split between Latin and Greek. Unfortunately this period of history is not as well served by English translations as that of the late republic and early empire, and only a few works are easily obtainable.

Zosimus Byzantine historian who wrote a 'New History' in Greek, primarily covering the period from 395 to 410 (the death of Theodosius to the sack of Rome). Translation not readily available.

Ammianus Marcellinus Fourth-century Roman soldier who produced a Latin history, of which only the sections covering 353-378 survive. Although a pagan, he was tolerant of Christians and provides a moderate and 'from the front line' view. Translation available in Penguin.

Eusebius of Caesarea Bishop and historian who produced a chronological account of the development of Christianity from the first to the fourth century. Translation available in Penguin.

Further reading

For those who wish to delve into this time period in more detail, some specific works are listed below.

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon. Substantial work covering the first stages of decline through to the end of the Byzantine Empire. An abridged version is available from Penguin, but a full edition with notes is available from Everyman in six volumes. Chapters 26-36 are most relevant for the time period under discussion. Gibbon's depiction of Christianity as a contributor to the fall of the empire has earned him criticism, but his work is still worth reading.

Constantine the Great: Warlord of Rome, Elizabeth James. Detailed biography of one of the most influential emperors, whose movement of the capital to Constantinople is one of the factors contributing to the fall of the west.

The Later Roman Empire, Averil Cameron. Broad introduction to the period 284-430. A good overview of the period and easily accessible.

The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History, Peter Heather. A more substantial and in-depth alternative to Cameron.

The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome 31 BC - AD 476, Michael Grant. Useful quick reference to the various emperors, including family trees for the various dynasties.

Roman Britain: A New History 55 BC - AD 450, Patricia Southern. Mostly outside the scope of our discussion, but the final chapter contains details of the effect of the fall of the west on Britain.

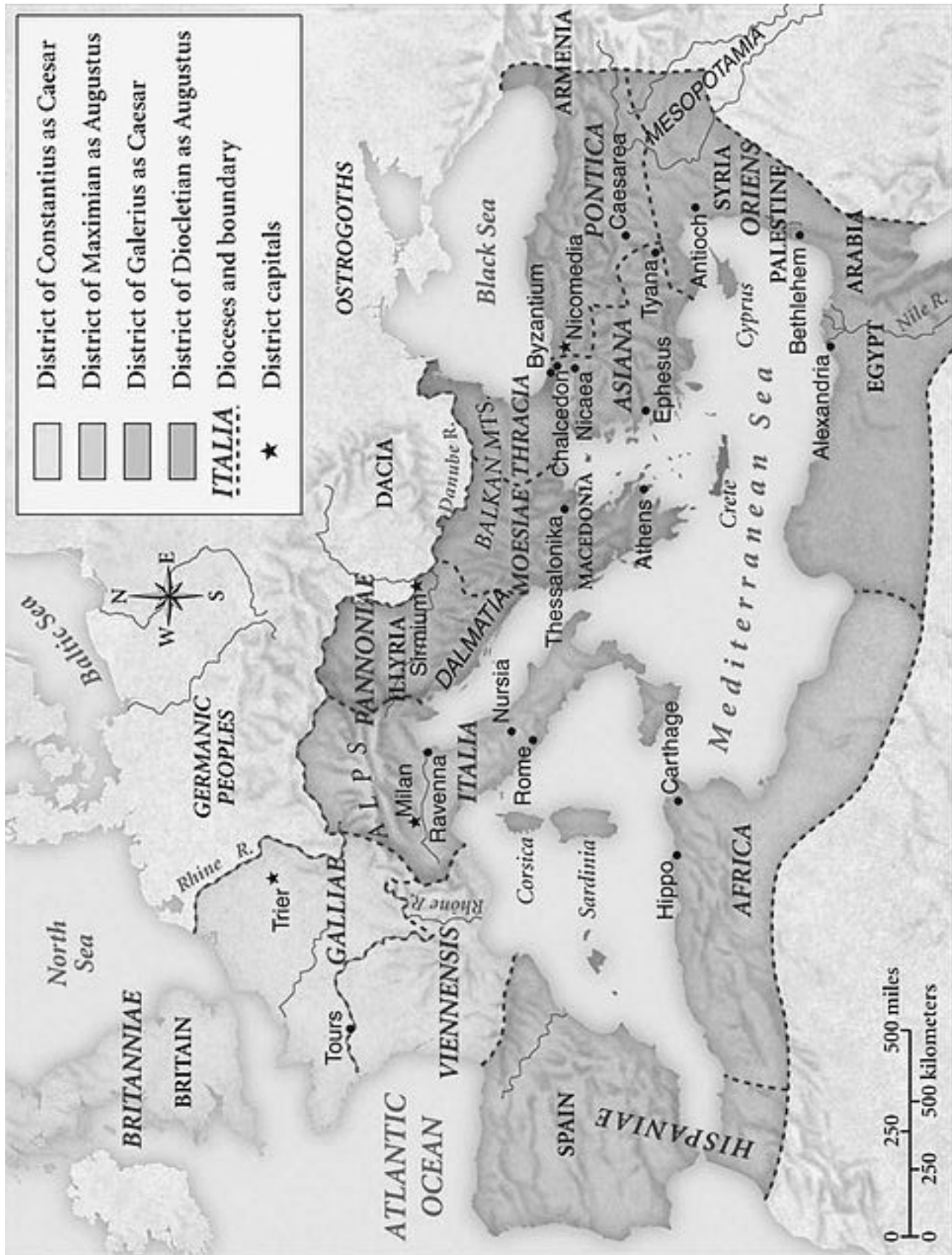


Figure 1: Division of Roman Empire under the Tetrarchy (Source: Wikipedia)

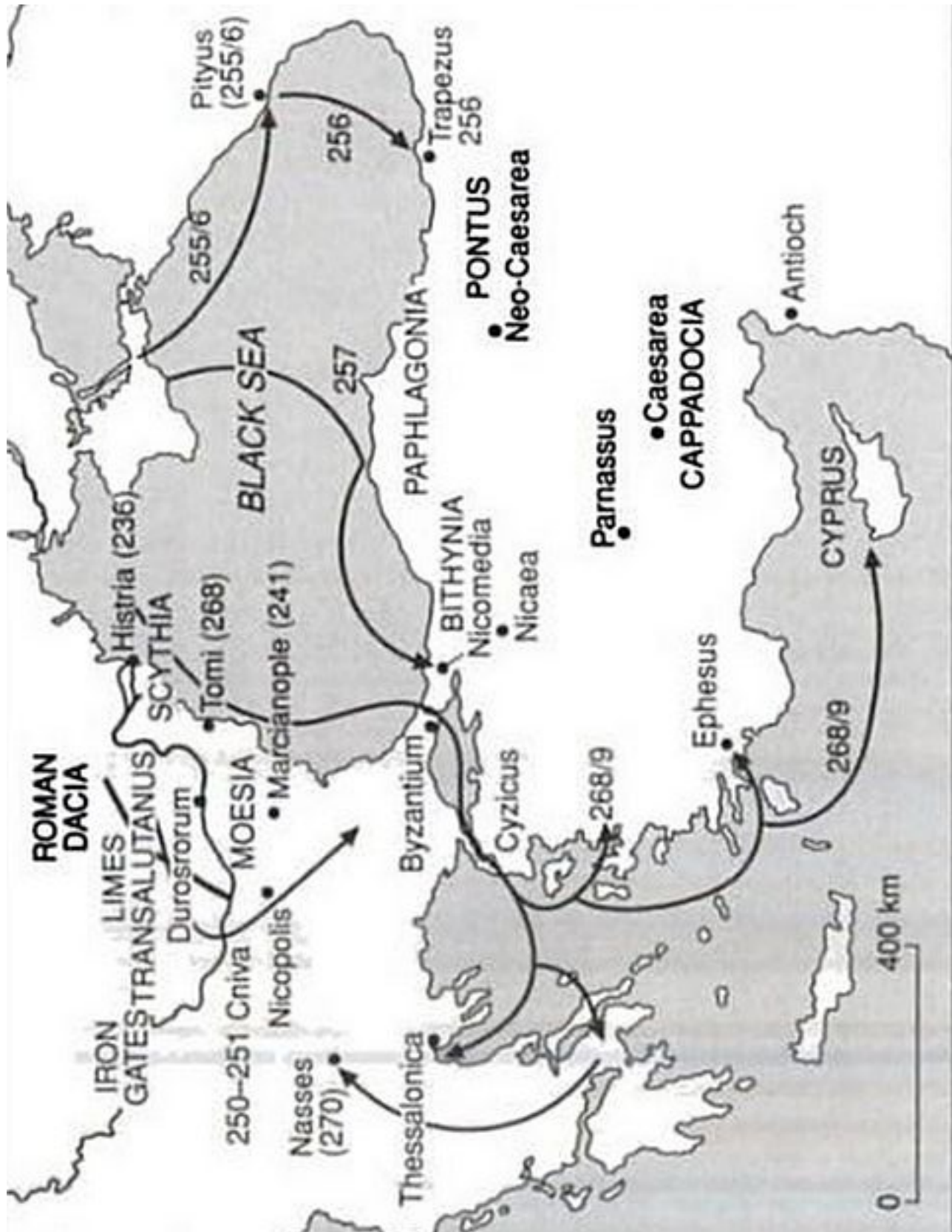


Figure 2: Gothic Raids in the third century (Source: Wikipedia)