

WHAT CAUSED
THE DARK AGES

The Fall of Rome

Introduction: Rome before the Fall

- after a thousand years, **Rome** finally began a long, slow collapse in the 400's CE
 - the so-called **Fall of Rome**
 - but only the Western half of the Empire
 - the Eastern **Byzantine Empire** lasted another millennium



The Fall of Rome

Introduction: Rome before the Fall

- by the 600's CE, western Europe looked very different
 - trade/economy: almost non-existent
 - all but no major cities were left
 - education/literacy: virtually extinct
 - arts/sciences: all but forgotten
- a basic siege mentality gripped Europe
 - “as if Western Civilization went camping for five hundred years”

The Fall of Rome

Introduction: Rome before the Fall

- a medieval Arab(!) geographer characterized Europeans, as follows:
 - “They have large bodies, gross natures, harsh manners, and dull intellects . . . those who live farthest north are particularly stupid, gross and brutish.”
- outsiders were now describing Europeans, in much the same way Herodotus and Tacitus had described “barbarians”
- no question, big changes have taken place!
 - but what sorts of changes?
 - and how? and why?

The Fall of Rome

The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- increasing pressure from **barbarians** to enter the Roman Empire
- these barbarians were collectively called **Germans**
 - most spoke some form of Common Germanic
 - but from different tribes



The Fall of Rome

The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- the Romans allowed these barbarians to work on farms or serve in the army
 - the late Latin word for “soldier” was *barbarus*



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The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- Rome had become a nation of immigrants
 - but that had been true for centuries
 - cf. the emperors Trajan and Hadrian; also Septimius Severus
- few Romans in the East spoke **Latin**



The Fall of Rome

The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- where the Romans tried to stop them, the barbarians forced their way in



The Fall of Rome

The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- why did the barbarians want inside the Roman Empire so badly?
 - safer world, even if there were taxes
 - aqueducts, baths, amphitheatres, etc.
 - and a much better climate

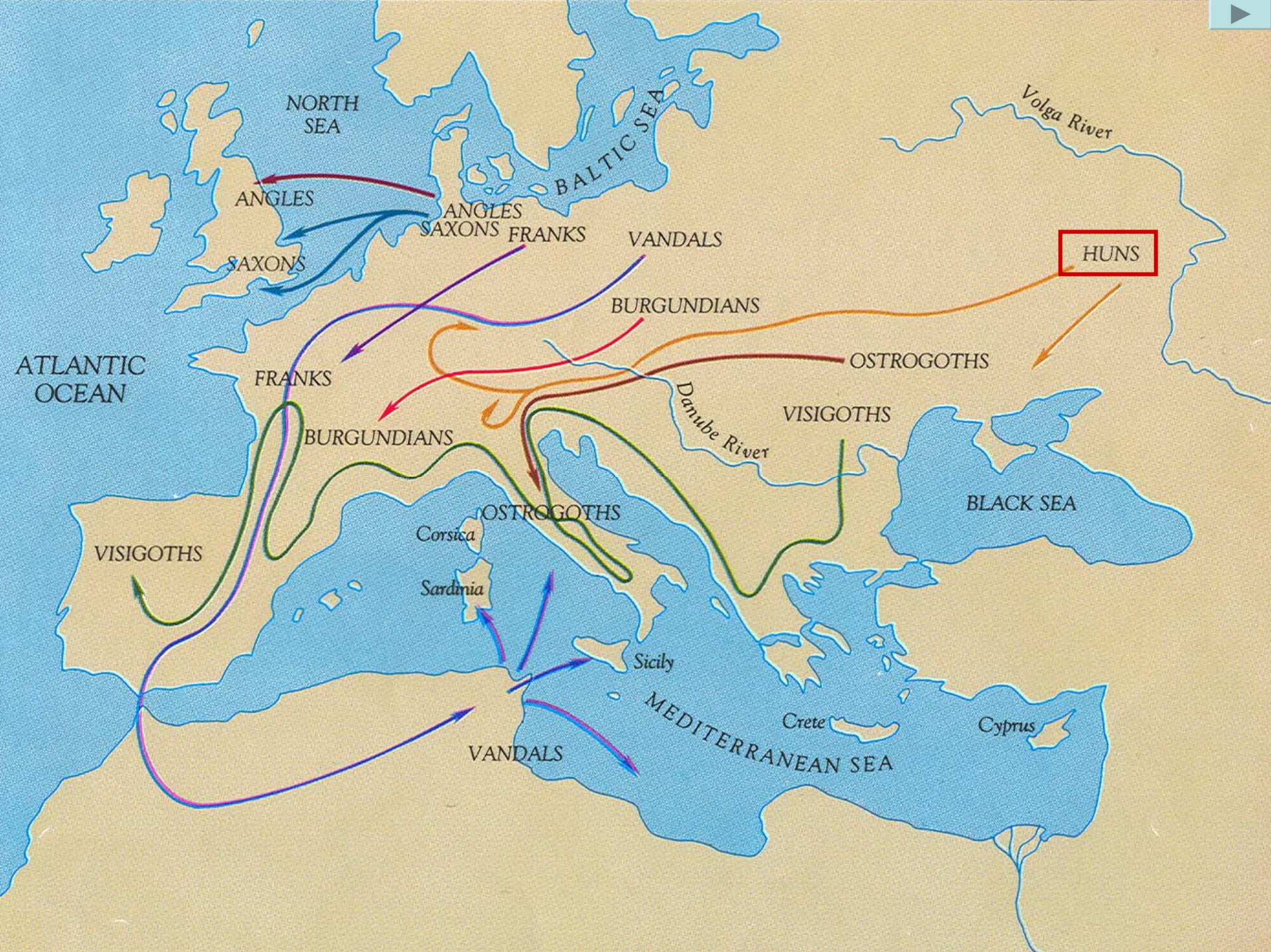


The Fall of Rome

The Huns, Part 1

- and there was another reason the barbarians wanted into Rome: **Huns!**
 - from **Mongolia**
 - first appeared in Europe ca. 350 CE
 - crossed the steppes of Russia on ponies
 - had a reputation for atrocity and ferociousness
 - led to exaggerated reports of their numbers and speed





The Fall of Rome

The Huns, Part 1

- in fact, everything about the Huns is exaggerated!
 - it's hard to sift fact from frenzy and fiction
 - no Hunnic account of their own history!



The Fall of Rome

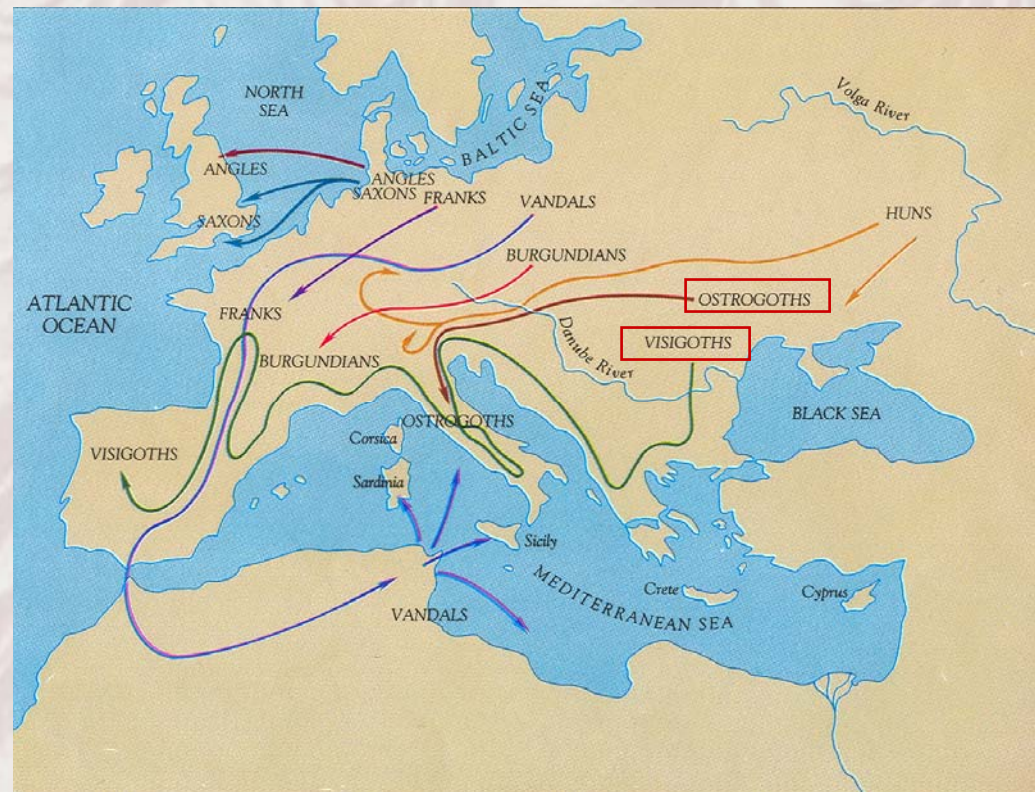
The Huns, Part 1

- why didn't the Huns write their own history?
 - “The winner get to write the history” — but not *these* winners!
 - all we hear are the screams of their victims
 - an unvarying picture of mindless carnage and wanton destruction
 - so what did the Huns want?
 - the truth according to Denis Synor

The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- the first barbarian group to feel the brunt of the Huns' assault were the **Goths**
 - Germanic speakers living NE of the Balkans
- the Goths were split into the **Visigoths** (“West Goths”) and the **Ostrogoths** (“East Goths”)



The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- 376 CE: seeking protection, the Visigoths tried to break into the Roman Empire
 - the Roman emperor **Valens** had to let them in
 - but Roman officials cheated and abused them
 - so the Visigoths went on a rampage
- 378 CE: the **Battle of Adrianople** (NE Greece)
 - Valens was killed, along with the Romans' reputation for invincibility
 - cf. Hannibal and the Punic Wars (216 BCE)

The Fall of Rome



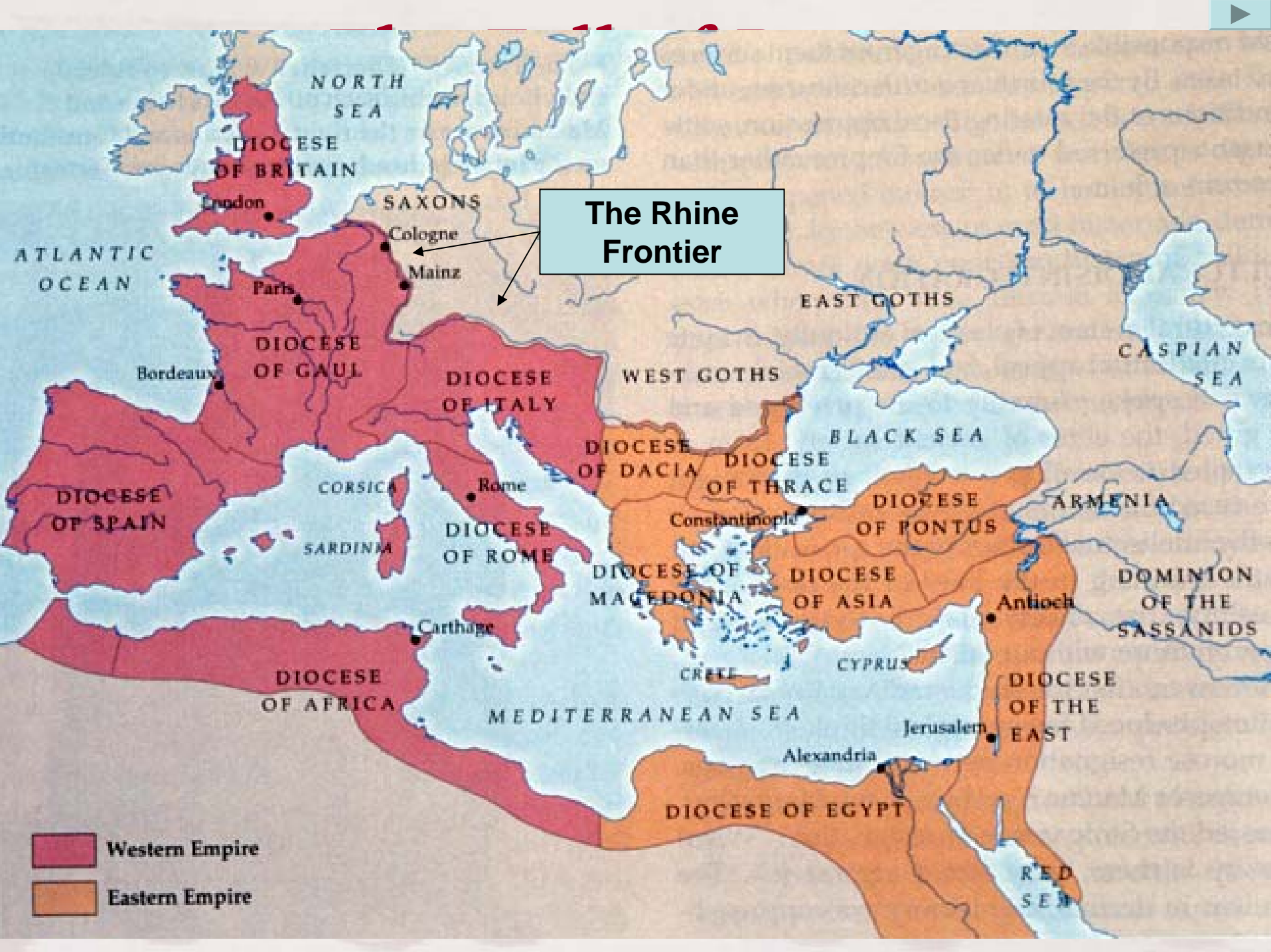
The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- Valens' successor: **Theodosius I**
 - bribed the Visigoths and pacified them
- but in 395, Theodosius died prematurely
 - his teenage sons **Arcadius** and **Honorius** assumed the throne
- **Alaric**: new Visigothic leader
 - at Alaric's approach, Honorius pulled the legions off the Rhine river, leaving the northern frontier of the Empire unprotected

A fine example of Visigothic craftsmanship, this richly jewelled eagle—worn as a cloak clasp or as a brooch—could be afforded only by the wealthiest and most powerful members of the nobility. (Source: Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore)





The Rhine Frontier

- Western Empire
- Eastern Empire

The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- the **Vandals** poured over the Rhine
- the **Angles** and **Saxons** invaded **Britain**
- Alaric attacked Italy
 - 410 CE: the **Visigothic Sack of Rome**
 - three days of plunder
 - the devastation was more psychological than physical
 - St. Jerome: “My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.”

The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- but Alaric died on the Visigoths' retreat from Italy
 - eventually, the Visigoths settled in Spain
 - this kingdom would last two centuries, until Spain was conquered by Moslems (711 CE)
- the Visigoths even adopted Christianity
 - but in a non-orthodox form called **Arianism** (or **Arian Christianity**)
 - more on Arianism in Section 13 (Early Christianity)

The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- the Vandals crossed the Mediterranean Sea at Gibraltar and moved into North Africa
 - stripped the Romans of the rich fields there
- like the Visigoths, they converted to Arian Christianity
 - their conquest of North Africa was the source of many gruesome **hagiographies** (“saints’ biographies”)
 - ultimately, they moved to sea and became pirates disrupting trade in the western Mediterranean Sea

The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- yet another inept Roman emperor, **Valentinian III** killed his own best general Aetius who was a Vandal by birth
- 455 CE: **Vandalic Sack of Rome**
 - this time real devastation!
 - **vandalism**: “the malicious destruction of property”



“‘Sack Rome!’ That’s your answer to everything!”

The Fall of Rome

The Huns, Part 2

- meanwhile, the Huns were busy terrorizing the Ostrogoths and Eastern Europe
- new Hunnic leader: **Attila**
 - “the Scourge of God”
- defeated by the Romans at **Châlons** (central France)



The Fall of Rome

The Huns, Part 2

- after Châlons, Attila and the Huns turned south and attacked Italy
 - Valentinian III fled Rome
 - but **Pope Leo I** confronted Attila who withdrew from Italy — but why?
 - new evidence suggests a virulent form of malaria decimated the Hunnic army
- within a few months, Attila died
 - the Hunnic army dissolved and disappeared
 - “they were not lamented”

The Fall of Rome

476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

- 476 CE: the German general **Odovacar** deposed the reigning boy-emperor **Romulus Augustulus**
 - not much of a change really!
 - though not a Roman citizen, Odovacar was actually in charge of the Roman state
 - ended the pretense of non-German control of the West
 - stopped paying taxes to the Eastern Empire

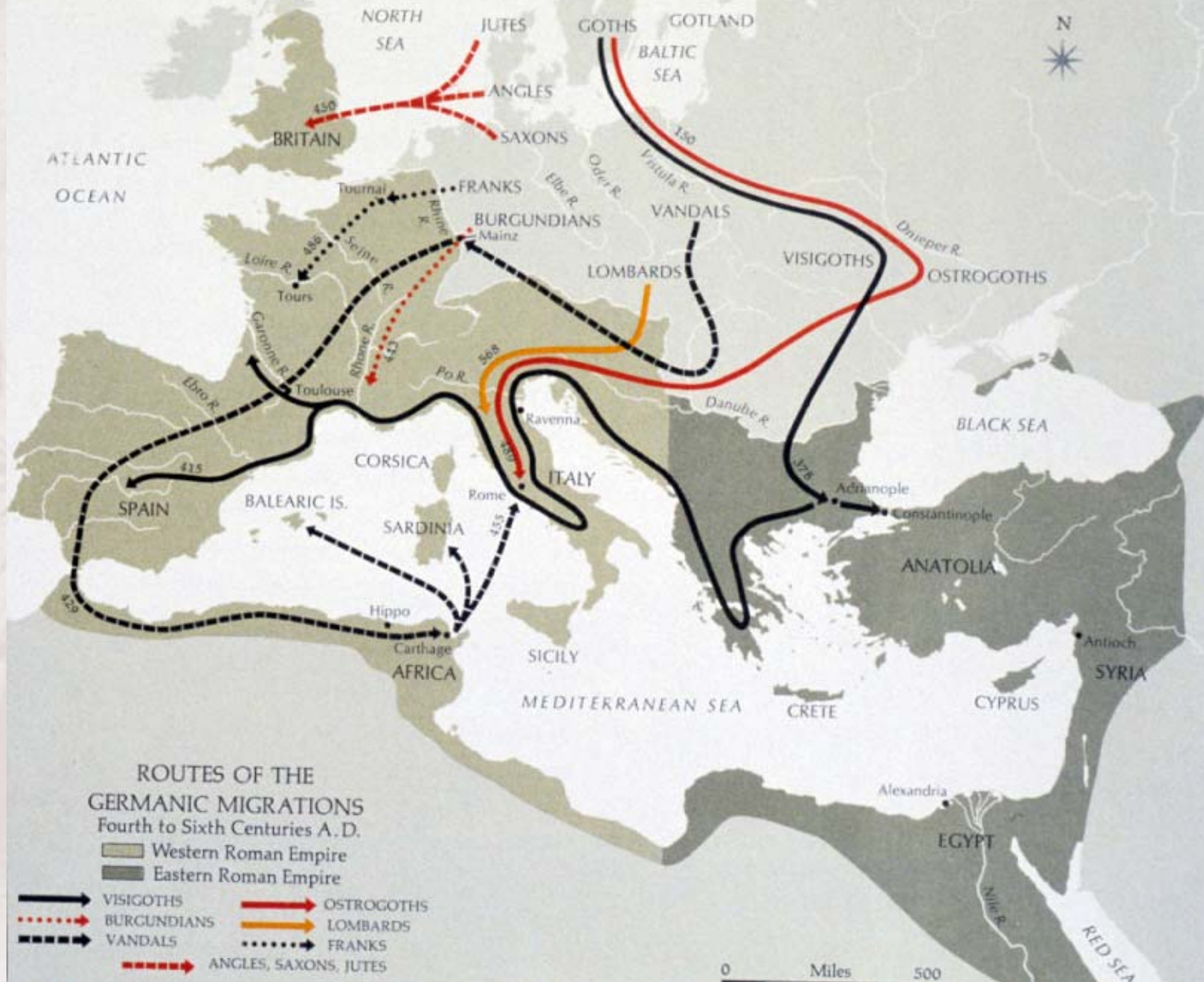


The Fall of Rome

476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

- 493 CE: the Eastern Emperor hired the Ostrogoths to “liberate” Italy
 - Ostrogoths now free of Hunnic control
 - new Ostrogothic leader: **Theodoric**
 - once in Italy, Theodoric killed Odovacar
 - but kept Italy for himself
 - ruled 493-527 CE





ROUTES OF THE GERMANIC MIGRATIONS
Fourth to Sixth Centuries A. D.

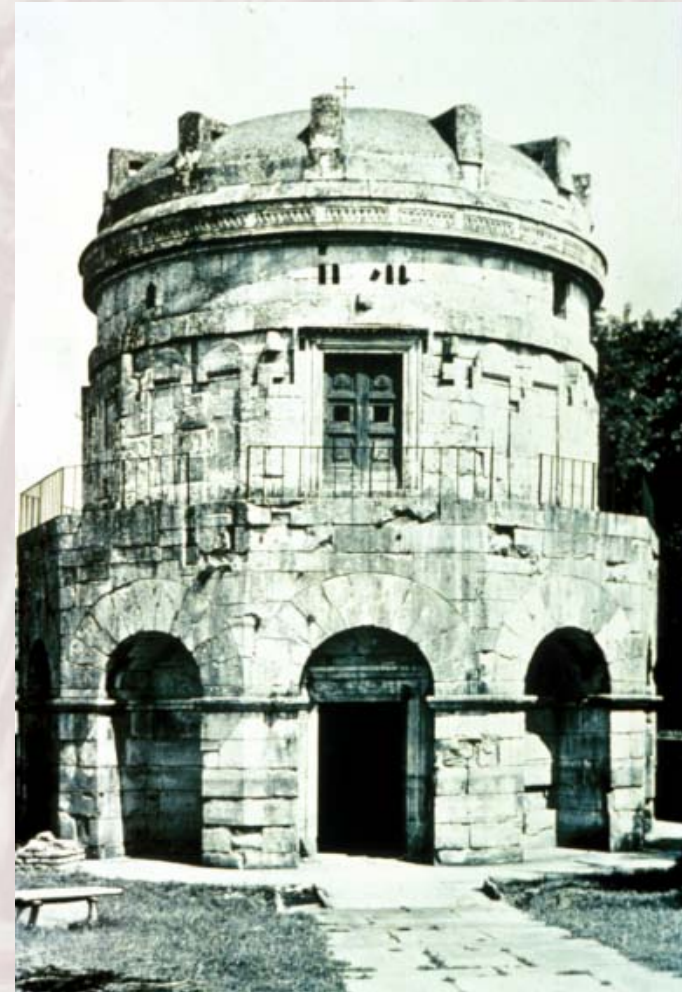
Western Roman Empire
Eastern Roman Empire

- VISIGOTHS
- OSTROGOTHS
- BURGUNDIANS
- LOMBARDS
- VANDALS
- FRANKS
- ANGLES, SAXONS, JUTES

The Fall of Rome

476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

- Theodoric: a paradox of a man!
 - oversaw a small-scale renaissance in Italy
 - rebuilt Roman roads, buildings and aqueducts
 - sadly, however, this was to be the last breath of culture Italy would have for three centuries
 - until the Carolingian Renaissance in the eighth century!



The Fall of Rome

476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

- Theodoric: a paradox of a man!
 - was an Arian Christian
 - was illiterate and needed “secretaries” but most educated people were orthodox
 - first, **Boethius** whom Theodoric executed
 - the last Classical author: *The Consolation of Philosophy*
 - later, **Cassiodorus** who was more practical and survived
 - Cassiodorus oversaw the copying of classical manuscripts
 - these were the last copies of many classical authors made before Europe’s long “camping trip” (the first stage of the Dark Ages)



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

- classic problem: “Why did Rome fall?”
 - over 210 answers have been cited
 - but none has achieved universal consensus
 - many are invented histories:
 - it was not because of changes in climate
 - it was not because of sexual excesses



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

- Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*
 - published ca. 1775
 - puts the blame on Christianity
 - but what about the Eastern Empire?
 - all in all, Gibbon’s answer has more to do with Britain in his day than ancient Rome

The background of the slide features a faded, light-colored image of several Roman statues or busts, likely representing figures from the Roman Empire. The statues are arranged in a row, and their forms are softened and less distinct due to the low opacity. In the top right corner, there is a small, light blue square icon containing a white right-pointing triangle, resembling a play button.

The Fall of Rome

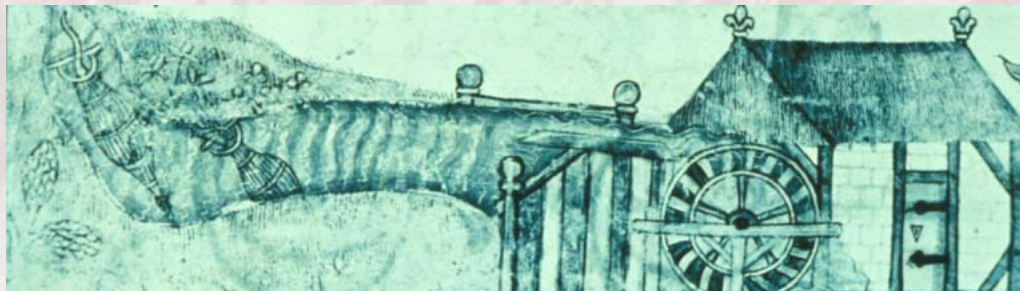
The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

- there are many answers to the question of why Rome fell
 - slow decrease in population
 - the late Romans’ luxurious lifestyle led to a general disinterest in having and supporting children
 - also, plagues and warfare were persistent problems that eroded population numbers
 - there is evidence of lead poisoning in the bones of Roman dead, especially at Pompeii
 - but is this an empire-wide problem?

The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

- there are many answers to the question of why Rome fell
 - failure to expand militarily
 - this led to economic stagnation: “Empires must expand.”
 - no real industry in Rome because the aristocrats who owned the capital disdained practical matters
 - matters of economics were seen as “middle-class”
 - Romans knew about the water-wheel, for instance, but never applied it on a wide scale



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

- there are many answers to the question of why Rome fell
 - incompetent leadership
 - too many emperors were children or fools or more interested in themselves than Rome
 - this led to a corrupt political structure
 - from that, a lethal mix of angst and apathy
 - and flight from cities killed the classical *polis*



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

- thus, the incursion of barbarians was hardly the only problem facing late Rome
 - civilizations have faced far worse and survived
 - e.g. Mexico
- and so there are many answers to this question
 - but none of them are simple or compelling on their own



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- if it’s so hard to find a simple, easy answer, perhaps it’s a flawed question
 - a good example of why to avoid constructing simplistic Questions or Thesis Topics for your own Papers
- let’s review the question itself then by examining its three components: Why, Rome, Fall



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- What’s “Rome”?
 - the City?
 - the City of Rome fell several times
 - in 410 CE (Visigoths), 455 CE (Vandals)
 - also 48-45 BCE (Julius Caesar)
 - and nearly to Hannibal in 216 BCE!
 - the Empire?
 - only half of the Empire fell!

A background image showing several Roman statues in classical attire, including togas and draped robes, standing in a row. The statues are rendered in a light, semi-transparent style, allowing the text to be clearly visible over them. In the top right corner, there is a small blue square icon with a white right-pointing triangle.

The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- What’s “Rome”?

- the Government?

- the Government of Rome changed several times over the course of Roman history:

- Kingdom (753-510 BCE)

- Republic (510-31 BCE)

- Empire (31 BCE - 476 CE)

- the People?

- they’re still around: Italians, French, Spanish, etc.

- all in all, they are too many “Romes” to begin answering the question there!

The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- What’s “falling”?
 - an accelerating descent leading to a cataclysmic crash followed by a big *kaboom* and dust and fallout everywhere?
 - like a tree coming down?
 - or an atom bomb going up?
 - but if Rome fell, it fell *slowly*
 - more of a *flumph* than a *kaboom*!
 - so is “crumbled” a better metaphor?
 - how about “leak”? “slip”? “putrefy”?
 - but *The Rot and Slide of Rome* is not a particularly attractive title for a scholarly book, is it?

The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- What’s “falling”?
 - and why be negative at all?
 - after all, this “fall” led to *us* and are we all that bad?
 - moreover, the transition from late Rome to the early Middle Ages was seamless, or at least it seemed so in the day
 - all in all, “fall” isn’t the right word



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- then what about “why”?
 - with no clear “Romes” and all of them framed inside the dysfunctional metaphor of “falling,” what’s the point in asking “why”?
 - it’s a loaded question which begs the answer that “Rome fell”
 - the unavoidable truth is that something unpleasant happened in Rome in the 400’s CE
 - e.g., Roman citizenship started to matter less and less
 - but does this constitute “falling”?

The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- and just because Germans have taken over the Empire doesn't mean that the Roman world has somehow ended
 - it's not like the Germans are aliens from another planet!
 - to say that Rome ended when a German general assumed the throne is unwarranted bigotry
 - German generals had, in fact, been running the Empire for years!



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- the German takeover was part of a long, slow process of internationalization that had been going on in Rome for centuries
 - e.g. Hadrian was from Spain
- and the deposing of Romulus Augustulus involved no significant violence
 - it was hardly a change of government at all
- most modern historians are parroting ancient, anti-German, racist propaganda
 - invented history! a rationalization created to mask the late Romans’ own incompetence

The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- greater truth: central Roman imperial government collapsed
 - and the provincial administrations inherited the power it once held
 - as did the Church, too





The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- so why don't we talk about the “Evolution of Rome”?
 - boring! there's no moral core to the story
 - No sex? No laughs? = No lesson!
 - Don't believe me? Ask Herodotus!

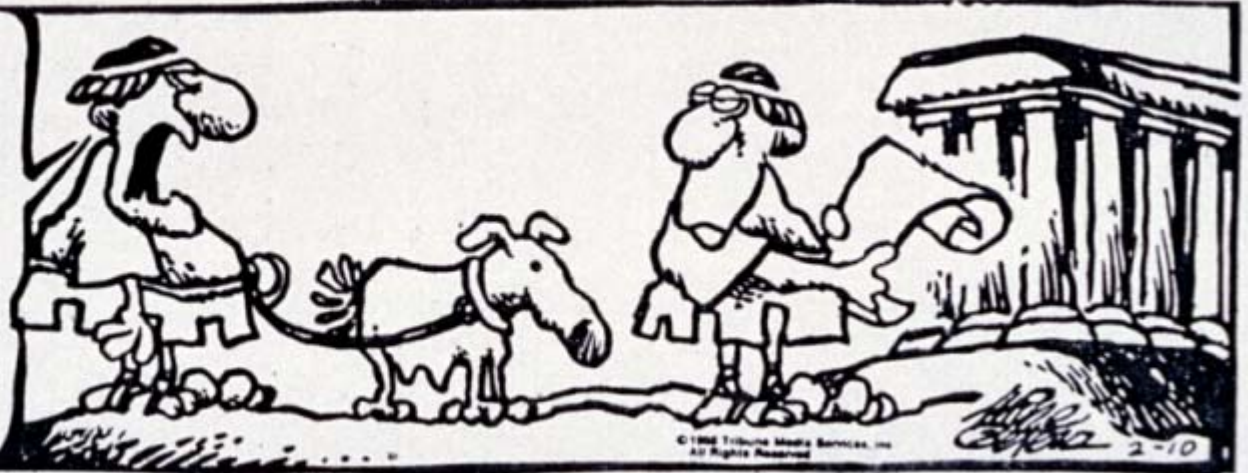
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- the “Fall of Rome” is based on an insidious fallacy: the personification of Rome
 - Rome was “born” with Romulus and Remus
 - Rome “died” with Romulus Augustulus and the German takeover
 - because if Rome was “born,” it had to “die”

Mother Goose & Grimm

COME ON,
ROMULUS,
I WALKED
MOTHER
LAST NIGHT...
NOW IT'S
YOUR TURN.



The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- so what was “Rome”?
 - the most successful advertising campaign in all of human history: “Die for Rome!”
 - along with that, some of the most well-recognized marketing images ever designed
 - the fasces, the triumphal arch, the laurel wreath, the eagle
 - all this says: “Rome is what matters!”



The Fall of Rome

Conclusion: “Die For Rome!”

- all in all, Rome is an idea
 - and ideas don’t live and die like people do
- and the idea of Rome lived on after 476 CE
 - in the Church
 - in the Mafia
 - in the Third Reich of Nazi Germany
 - in the Senate of the US government
 - in the mouth of any speaker of Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese or Rumanian
 - and in the heart of any Christian in the West!