



Summary :

The Gothic raids of the 3rd century AD were a hard trial for the cities of Asia Minor. The inadequacy of the Roman defence resulted in the pillaging of many cities, with devastating consequences for the Greek population of Asia Minor.

Date

Second half of the 3rd century AD

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Historical frame and written testimonies

The Goths were tribes of Germanic origin. During the second half of the 2nd century AD they abandoned their homeland in Scandinavia and settled initially around the Baltic and then around the Black Sea.¹ There they established strong states spanning an area from Don to lower Danube, which they used as bases for their raids. These immigrations resulted in the movement of other German tribes during the reign of [Marcus Aurelius](#) (161-180 AD) in the Roman frontiers, where they put a lot of pressure on the frontier garrisons.

It is not a coincidence that the invasions of the Goths take place during the great crisis of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century AD. It is not surprising that within fifty years, starting in 235 AD, twenty different emperors rose to power. They were mainly military leaders, given that the army had already become a basic adjuster of the *status quo* in the provinces and at the centre. Meanwhile Rome was dominated by an intense political side scene with endless plots, while the central authority was gradually losing control over the Roman frontiers. Order was re-established briefly at the end of the century with the defeat of the Goths in 296 AD and the administrative [reforms of Diocletian](#).

The issue of the Gothic campaigns is hard to investigate for two reasons. First of all, the written sources describing these events are later, mainly Byzantine, thus covering the dating of the events in obscurity.² On the other hand, the destructive consequences of the Gothic campaigns led these later historians, mainly Zosimus and Syngelus who analyze these events, to exaggerated descriptions and estimations, mostly concerning the size of the military and naval forces of the barbarians. Most of them describe the Goths as tribes with strong internal structures, capable of successfully facing the Roman legions. Indicative of the atmosphere of fear concerning the Goths is a comparison of the Late Antique sources with their earlier counterparts which reflect a totally different atmosphere. [Caesar](#) (1st century BC) and the historian Tacitus (c.100 AD), for example, mention only by name the barbarian tribes, obviously considering them harmless neighbours of the Roman frontiers.

2. Gothic campaigns in Asia Minor

From the middle of the 3rd century AD a period of Gothic activity started in Asia Minor and the Balkans, which mostly affected the areas where Greeks lived. Initially the raids were limited to the northern coasts of the Black Sea and of lower Danube. The situation changed dramatically after the humiliating defeat of the Romans and the death of emperor Decius in 251 AD, during the raid in Thrace and [Mysia](#). This success made the Goths extremely daring, resulting in terrible raids in Asia Minor. Powerful cities were plundered, whereas not even the ancient sanctuaries managed to avoid the frenzy of the invaders. The consequences were catastrophic for the Greeks of Asia Minor with a great expense on the psychological as well as the economical level.

The first extensive raids in the land of Asia Minor took place during the reign of [Valerian](#) (235-260 AD) and marked a period of chaos. In 253 AD the Goths and their allies attacked Asia Minor from the sea and reached [Ephesus](#) and [Pessinus](#). Meanwhile, other Gothic hordes spread terror in Greece.³ The Boranians –allies and neighbours of the Goths originating from the Sea of Azov- forced



the Roman commander of Bosphorus to give them his fleet. Next they besieged [Pityous](#) in [Colchis](#). The city –under the leadership of the Roman military commander Succesianus-defenced itself bravely and was saved. One year later the barbarians besieged the city again. Succesianus was sent by the emperor to Syria, thus the city became an easy prey to the destructive mania of the Goths. After this successful outcome, the raiders sailed towards the rich city of [Trebizond](#), on the coasts of [Pontus](#). The city was protected by powerful walls and had a garrison. However, the Boranians took advantage of a carelessness of the defenders, climbed the city walls and slaughtered the inhabitants. After looting the city and capturing the survivors, they returned to their homeland.

The second Gothic campaign against Asia Minor took place in 256 or 257 BC.⁴ The Goths, having a high moral due to the successes of the Boranians, sailed with a large fleet towards the coasts of Asia Minor. Their infantry troops followed a parallel course, along the western coasts of the Black Sea. [Bithynia](#) was one of their first targets. When seeing the barbaric hordes the garrison of [Chalcedon](#) fled in terror, abandoning the city to her fate. The Goths conquered it easily gaining immense loot. Next they burned down [Nikomedeia](#) which was abandoned by its inhabitants and pillaged [Nicaea](#), Kios, [Apameia Myrleia](#) and [Proussa](#). The rich city of [Cyzicus](#) was saved by accident, thanks to the flooding of the river Ryndakus, which did not allow the invaders to cross it. The barbarians devastated the rest of the region under the guidance of a certain Chrysogonos, citizen of Nikomedeia. The emperor Valerian could not intercept the Gothic hordes and the raids stopped only when the Goths voluntarily returned to their lairs, having first obtained rich booty.⁵

In the years after 260 AD, the Gothic menace reappeared. New German tribes settled in Southern Russia and the Danube, reinforcing the barbaric troops. In 267/268 the Goths settled on the south of the river Dniester with an army whose size was never before witnessed by the inhabitants of the empire. The same was true for the fleet too. Moderate estimations mention 500 ships, while other raise their number to 2,000. This huge force was accompanied by 320,000 soldiers. There is no doubt that the written testimony does not correspond to reality. However, this military force was indeed the largest that had ever invaded Roman territory during the 3rd century AD. The Gothic ships were mainly manned by Erulians,⁶ a tribe acquainted with the sea, whereas the infantry was mainly comprised of Gothic tribes. Other allies of the Goths participated in campaigns against Thrace. The barbaric hordes sacked the whole of the Aimos peninsula.⁷ As there was no powerful opponent able to stand in their way, they reached [Ionia](#), Troas, [Lydia](#) and [Phrygia](#). Amongst others they conquered [Ilion](#), burned the [Artemision of Ephesus](#), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and destroyed the famous [statue of Artemis of Ephesus](#). Meanwhile, they invaded [Galatia](#) and [Cappadocia](#).

It is not difficult to imagine the psychological impact the Gothic raids had on the inhabitants of the cities of Asia Minor. The threat was visible even for cities located in the hinterland, which theoretically were not a target for the barbarians. The inhabitants of [Stratoniceia](#) for example, under a state of terror for the destructions reaching them, asked [Zeus Panamarios](#) if the sinful barbarians would attack their city and its domain. The god assured them that he would not allow their city to fall in their hands, as it actually happened.

The worry of the cities' inhabitants was augmented by the fact that Roman authorities were usually unable to prevent the advance of the barbarian hordes. Many times the garrisons abandoned the cities and the civilians fled their homes to save their lives. Exceptions to this were [Miletus](#), where improvised fortifications were erected, as well as Nice, whose defensive walls were strengthened during the years 261-269 AD.⁸ The command for the defence of Miletus was undertaken by the [asiarchus](#) Makarios, who managed to save [Didymaion](#) from the Gothic threat. An organized attack against the Goths was initially organized by Odenathus, the Arab king of Palmyra. He moved with his troops to [Herakleia of Pontus](#), where the Gothic troops were gathered to board their ships and return to their homelands. The operation was partly successful but eventually the Goths managed to escape, taking hundreds of prisoners with them.⁹ Odenathus was murdered along with one of his sons in 266/7 AD in Emessa of Syria.

The decisive conflict between the Goths and the Roman legions took place in Naissus of Upper Mysia. The leader of the Erulians, Navlovatus, joined the Roman army and was richly recompensed. After the death of Galienus, Claudius II was in charge of the war against the Goths. The barbaric troops, which were for many months away from their homes, were now decimated by the lack of provisions as well as the epidemics. Although they received reinforcements from Danube, they were finally defeated in 269 AD. The Romans included the prisoners in their armies and in cultivations. Claudius took the name "Gothicus" after this military achievement of decisive importance.



Although in a smaller scale, the barbaric raids in the domain of the empire were continued after Naissus. In the years of the emperors [Aurelian](#) (270-275 AD) and Tacitus (275-276 AD), new hordes of Goths, Alani and [Scythes](#) invaded Asia Minor and reached [Cilicia](#). The invasion was successfully confronted by Tacitus and his successors Florianus (276 AD) and Probus (276-282 AD).

Sources report that a period of relative calmness followed in Asia Minor.¹⁰ Rome, in these late years, made diplomatic negotiations with the Goths, asking even for their help to strengthen the defence of the eastern frontier. The Goths from their part were concerned with attacks of barbaric tribes living on their borders.

Considering all these, the name "Gothicus", given to the emperor [Diocletianus](#) (284-305 AD) is rather problematic. Is it due to a certain victory against the barbarians in the years 292-294 AD or was it given to him for psychological reasons from the authorities of the regions bordering the domain of the Goths? Whatever the case is, if there was any tension during these years, it was an exception to the good climate that had been developed in the relations of the two sides. In 296/297 AD, the need for further military reinforcement of the eastern frontier, due to the activity of the Sassanids, led to a new diplomatic agreement, which defined the relationships between the Goths and Rome until the years of [Constantine](#) (306-337). This agreement did not certainly exclude occasional raids when a chance was presented, especially when the Romans turned their attention towards other military or political matters in the East. Nevertheless, it minimized the Gothic danger and insured an ally ready for war. The Goths on their behalf, enjoying a relative freedom, appear to have occupied themselves with their inner matters.¹¹

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1. According to a Gothic tradition documented by the Goth historiographer Jordanes in the middle of the 6th century AD, these tribes originated from southern Scandinavia. From there, they sailed with three ships and under the directions of king Bering to the south coasts of the Baltic, where they settled after defeating the Vandals and other German tribes. Later, Bering's successor, Filimer, led the Goths to the areas north of the Black Sea.
 2. On the references of the ancient tribes to this event see Magie, D., *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton 1950), p. 1566-1568, n. 28 and Alföldi, A., "The movements of the peoples on the Black Sea, Danube and Rhine", *CAH* 12 (1939), p. 720-723. The basic later sources concerning the Gothic raids are Zosimus, Syngelus, Eutropius, Hieronymus, Ammianus Marcellinus and Orosius. On the other hand, the *Historia Augusta*, used in parallel to these sources for the dating of the events, presents emperos Galienus as a tyrant, thus interpreting the Gothic raids as a "product" of his tyrannical authority. In the same text, information concerning the facts comes from various sources, resulting in variability in their quality, as well as in their quantity.
 3. In order to confront the Gothic danger, fortification walls were built on the Isthmus and at Thermopylae. Furthermore, the walls of Athens were rebuilt, which lay in ruins since the raid of Sulla in 86 BC, in an effort to face any possible raid.
 4. Zosimus, who documents these events, mentions the campaign as "second" (Zosimus 1.35.2), considering as first the campaign of 253 AD.
 5. Nonetheless, the emperor, for reasons of propaganda, minted coins in Antioch in 257 AD, with the inscription "Victoria Germanica". In these years the Romans still called the Goths "Germans". The expression "Victoria Guttica" (or Gothica) was only used during the reign of Claudius II.
 6. The Erulians were a Germanic tribe. Their homeland was the Scandinavian countries, but they finally settled in the area between the Baltic and the Black Sea. In the 3rd century AD they raided the eastern provinces of the Roman empire and pillaged Athens in 267 AD.
 7. The Erulians advanced until Peloponnesus destroying whatever they found on their way. They pillaged, amongst others, Athens, Sparta, Argus and Corinth. Their fleet raided Byzantium and Chrysopolis, but many barbaric ships sunk in the Propontis and others were intercepted by the Roman fleet. In these years an unsuccessful attempt to conquer Philippoupolis must be dated. Next the Goths



conquered Cassandra and Thessalonica.

8. In the same period various cities of Mysia and Thrace were reinforced with fortifications, such as Nikopolis, Traianopolis, Markianopolis, Vizye. On the coins they minted during these years, strong gates appear.

9. Amongst the prisoners were probably the ancestors of Ulfilas, the missionary of the Goths.

10. Ammianus Marcelinus 31.5.17.

11. According to the prevailing view, in these years the Goths were separated in two branches, the Besigoths, who lived between the rivers Danube and Dniester, and the Ostrogoths, who lived in modern Ukraine.

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