

## **Controversy over Citizens, Aliens, and Race in the Roman Empire**

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### **Abstract**

It has been frequently assumed that hordes of foreign “barbarians” invaded and overwhelmed the Roman Empire in the fifth century; Roman society by then had suffered “barbarization”, considerably diminishing its ability to resist the invasions. This article aims to revise the simple narrative of invasive foreigners that has long been perpetuated in Roman scholarship. The article shows that a) the Romans had always incorporated foreigners to strengthen their power; b) although the imperial government tended to elevate the civil and political status of foreigners, especially those rising from the military establishment, the officeholding nobility in the Senate strongly opposed any sort of inclusion that could threaten the status of entrenched officeholders; and c) as the rift between the nobility and the imperial government widened, foreigners progressively gained an increasing range of rights and privileges, until nobles resorted to force to reassert superior status. This controversy between the imperial government and the nobility over the inclusion of foreigners proceeded through several stages, beginning with legal repression of aliens, to universal citizenship, to foreigners in high office, and culminating with war and secession. Many aristocrats feared being declassed by ennobled foreign-born citizens, so they ended Emperor Theodosius’ peace with the Goths and instigated the wars that would fragment the Roman Empire and ruin many noble families. The Roman aristocracy’s antagonism towards upwardly mobile foreigners merits study, since it may provide insight into similar historical issues.

## Introduction

According to legend, descendants of refugees founded Rome.<sup>1</sup> Over centuries, the Romans, never a homogenous exclusive group, managed to incorporate peoples throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the senatorial nobility was often wary of accepting new sheep to the fold. When Gallic-Roman citizens sought to obtain senatorial office in Rome, many senators argued that native-born citizens, not descendants of hostile tribes, should fill the Senate.<sup>3</sup> They scorned the Gallic petitioners as “a mob of foreigners, a troop of captives, so to say,” and asked: “What distinctions will be left for the remnants of our noble houses...?”<sup>4</sup> Emperor Claudius responded that those senators descended from Italian tribes once foreign to Rome. He cited the example of Rome’s founder Romulus, who “was so wise that he fought as enemies and then hailed as fellow citizens several nations on the very same day.”<sup>5</sup> This story outlines two competing interests within the state. The imperial government sought to integrate foreigners into Roman society to unite entire nations and tribes under the Roman name; however, the nobility, consisting of those senators who could trace descent from illustrious office-holding families, objected to any sort of inclusion that would recognize foreigners subjugated by Rome as social equals and reduce the distinctions of noble houses. Since the imperial government held executive powers, this controversy within the state gradually enfranchised the alien, until senators used force to reassert social supremacy over whom they considered inferior outsiders. This ancient controversy over race, nationhood, and citizenship deserves attention, as it may improve our understanding of similar issues throughout history.

## Citizens and Aliens in Roman Law

Roman law, a foundation for later legal codes, divided free people into two groups: citizens and *peregrini* (“foreigners”). Unlike *peregrini*, citizens could marry, inherit, dispose of property through wills, and

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<sup>1</sup> C. Dio, *Roman History*, LanusCurtius, 2011, book 1, ch. 1, <https://bit.ly/CDioWPT>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>2</sup> N. Morley, “They Make a Desert and Call It Peace’: The Nature of Roman Rule’, in *The Roman Empire: Roots of Imperialism*, London, UK, Pluto Press, 2010, pp. 48–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183pb5x.7>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>3</sup> P.C. Tacitus, ‘The Annals’, in *Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. A.J. Church, W.J. Brodribb, New York, Random House Inc., 1942, book 11, ch. 23, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, ‘The Annals’, book 11, ch. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

enjoy the protection of Roman law.<sup>6</sup> Citizens were protected from torture, imprisonment, or execution without trial, but not *peregrini*. Citizens often received higher-pay jobs. Auxiliaries, non-citizen soldiers, were paid much less than legionaries, citizen soldiers.<sup>7</sup> Thus, citizenship in Roman times conferred social and legal advantages.

Because citizenship helped to distinguish their status, Roman statesmen maintained the distinction between citizen and alien. When Gaius Gracchus proposed granting citizenship to the Latins in 122 BCE, the senator Gaius Fannius reportedly asked:

If you were to give Roman citizenship to the Latins, do you think that there would still be room for you at public meetings...? Do you not think that they would take up all the spaces?<sup>8</sup>

Through these rhetorical questions, the senator warns that extending citizenship to aliens empowers them to hold important public offices and supersede the nobility. Theoretically, any citizen could attain noble rank by holding a curule office (e.g., consulships, praetorships). In reality, families that already possessed noble rank sought to guard their exclusive access to prestigious offices.<sup>9</sup> Since aliens could not hold senatorial office, legislation that separated aliens from citizens was one way that the nobility guarded those offices. In Fannius' mind, citizenship enabled officeholding, and curule office bestowed nobility, a venerable status that entrenched officeholders were unwilling to share with newcomers. Therefore, the Senate often pursued legislation to repress and disenfranchise aliens. In 65 BCE, the Senate passed the law of Papius, which reaffirmed the prohibition on aliens assuming the rights of a citizen and deported all aliens from the city of Rome.<sup>10</sup> Senator Cicero, who disapproved of the latter part of the legislation as inhumane,<sup>11</sup> nonetheless agreed to the former and accepted the basic premise that the

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<sup>6</sup> R.W. Mathisen, 'Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani: Concepts of Citizenship and the Legal Identity of Barbarians in the Later Roman Empire', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2006, p. 1013, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.4.1011>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>7</sup> M.A. Speidel, 'Roman Army Pay Scales'. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 82, 1992, p. 106, <https://doi.org/10.2307/301286>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>8</sup> H.I. Flower, *Roman Republics*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> F.B. Marsh, 'The Roman Aristocracy and the Death of Caesar', *The Classical Journal*, vol. 20, no. 8, 1925, p. 459, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3288647>, (accessed 24 April 2022).

<sup>10</sup> R.W. Husband, 'On the Expulsion of Foreigners from Rome', *Classical Philology*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1916, p. 328, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261855>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>11</sup> M.T. Cicero, *De Officiis*, LanusCurtius, 2022, book 3, ch. 11, <https://bit.ly/DeOfficiis3B>, (accessed 18 February 2022).

Roman was far superior to any alien, even the most illustrious Gauls.<sup>12</sup> As one jurist asserted, the law understood aliens to be free albeit inferior peoples serving the power of the Roman people.<sup>13</sup> To keep aliens disenfranchised and to preserve the status of the nobility, the Senate pursued coercive policies that resemble segregation.

### **The First Caesars and the Nobility**

Although senators had meticulously crafted legislation to subordinate the alien to the citizen, Julius Caesar threatened to undo all their legal precision by empowering aliens with citizenship and senatorial office. Despite his noble lineage, Caesar had spent his youth far from Rome as a dispossessed refugee serving among alien auxiliaries in Asia, an experience that likely shaped his unorthodox policies.<sup>14</sup> Not only did he extend citizenship to all free people in Cisalpine Gaul, but Caesar appointed Gallic aliens as senators. The premise of treating an alien as an equal so deeply offended established senatorial families that according to the Roman biographer Suetonius, the election of *peregrini* was a major factor that motivated some senators to assassinate Caesar. Interestingly, Suetonius lists this factor last, suggesting that it may have been the most important reason for Caesar's assassination. The nobles might have also resented Caesar doubling the number of praetorships and quaestorships, which would inevitably promote large numbers of new men, including Gallic foreigners, into the ranks of the aristocracy.<sup>15</sup> Just like Fannius, the old Republican families could not tolerate the prospect that they might lose their exclusive control over prestigious offices to foreigners.

The highly class-conscious nobility feared that foreigners in the Senate would not only replace existing nobles but also declass them. Suetonius records the words of Caesar's opponents: "Caesar led the Gauls in triumph, led them to the senate-house; / Then the Gauls put off their breeches, and put on the laticlave [the purple stripe of a senator]."<sup>16</sup> These verses appear to be a mere mockery of culturally alien Gauls, but closer analysis reveals a subtle fear that the inferior people are becoming the superior. The first verse subordinates the Gauls: they are

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<sup>12</sup> E.S. Ramage, 'Cicero on Extra-Roman Speech', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 92, 1961, p. 489, <https://doi.org/10.2307/283832>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>13</sup> C. Ando, 'Aliens, Ambassadors, and the Integrity of the Empire.' *Law and History Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2008, p. 504, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27641605>, (accessed 24 April 2022).

<sup>14</sup> G.S. Tranquillus, 'The Life of Julius Caesar', in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, LanusCurtius, 2013, ch. 2-4, <https://bit.ly/SuetJul>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Marsh, 'The Roman Aristocracy and the Death of Caesar', p. 460.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

captives being led. However, the second verse empowers the Gauls: donning the purple stripe, they become the leaders instead of the led. Now the Romans are the captives, it is implied. Furthermore, after assassinating Caesar, the conspirators styled themselves “liberators” and paraded a freedman’s cap on a spear, again implying Romans were captives or specifically slaves.<sup>17</sup> The distinctions of office set the nobility apart from the rest of society; with their monopoly over high offices in danger, nobles might have felt that they would become subsumed with the common people. Fearing that officeholding foreigners would declass the Roman aristocracy from magistrates to slaves, leading aristocrats resorted to violence to reassert their superiority.

After Caesar’s assassination and the ensuing civil wars, Augustus sought to placate the aristocracy by reducing the number of magistracies and promoting largely from the old nobility. This settlement between the emperor and Senate restored the nobles’ exclusive access to high office and acknowledged their social prestige in return for loyalty.<sup>18</sup> To satisfy the senators, the first emperors adhered carefully to the distinction between citizen and alien to reflect the aristocracy’s perception of aliens as mere resources. Senator Tacitus tacitly expresses such a perception in his work *Germania*:

For my own part, I agree with those who think that the tribes of Germany are free from all taint of inter-marriages with foreign nations and that they appear as a distinct, unmixed race, like none but themselves...

...

Foremost among all these nations in valor, the Batavi occupy an island within the Rhine and but a small portion of the bank. Formerly a tribe of the Chatti, they were forced by internal dissension to migrate to their present settlements and there become a part of the Roman Empire... Free from the usual burdens and contributions, and set apart for fighting purposes, like a magazine of arms, we reserve them for our wars. The subjection of the Mattiaci is of the same character. For the greatness of the Roman people has spread reverence for our empire beyond the Rhine and the old boundaries.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> W.E. Caldwell, ‘The Sequence of Events after Caesar’s Death’, *The Classical Weekly*, vol. 8, no. 9, 1914, p. 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4386987>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Marsh, ‘The Roman Aristocracy and the Death of Caesar’, p. 463.

<sup>19</sup> P.C. Tacitus, ‘Germany and its Tribes’, in *Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. A.J. Church, W.J. Brodribb, New York, Random House Inc., 1942, ch. 4, 29, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0083>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

Tacitus appears to celebrate the inclusion of the Batavi and Mattiaci within the empire as an achievement that illustrates “the greatness of the Roman people.” Yet, he simultaneously exhibits contempt for marriage with foreigners as he considers interracial marriage a “taint.” Although Tacitus praises both the inclusion of foreigners into the country and the exclusion of foreigners from marriage, closer inspection reveals no contradiction. The senator compares the Batavi to a “magazine of arms”, which commodifies aliens as resources possessed by the Romans. Senators approved of enrolling aliens to serve Rome’s interests, but intended them to be subordinates, not equals as marriage implied. Hence, emperors, in accordance with the attitudes of the senatorial elite, regularly enforced the separation between aliens and citizens. According to Suetonius, Augustus was very unwilling to grant citizenship to any alien to keep the Roman stock “pure” and “unsullied by any taint of foreign or servile blood.”<sup>20</sup> The words “foreign” and “servile” are closely associated, again expressing the premise that aliens are social inferiors obligated to serve the superior people, the Romans. Emperor Claudius prohibited aliens from assuming Roman names and executed those who falsely claimed the rights of citizenship.<sup>21</sup> When the senatorial aristocracy and imperial government shared common ideals, aliens generally faced repression and very low social prospects.

### **The Controversy within the State**

As relations between the imperial government and aristocracy worsened, the status of aliens gradually improved. Resenting the growing influence of Emperor Commodus’ freedmen, prominent nobles organized multiple conspiracies to replace Commodus with someone more malleable.<sup>22</sup> Following these conspiracies, Commodus, emulating the example of Romulus, began to blur the distinction between citizen and alien. Like how Romulus founded Rome in his name, Commodus refounded Rome as “Commodiana” and styled all people in the empire as “Commodians.”<sup>23</sup> By replacing all the old ethnic terminology (e.g., Romans, Gauls, Egyptians, Syrians, Greeks, Spaniards, etc.) with the overarching term “Commodians”, he attempted to unite Romans and aliens into one people, just as Romulus had united a diverse group of

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<sup>20</sup> G.S. Tranquillus, ‘The Life of Augustus’, in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, LanusCurtius, 2013, ch. 40, <https://bit.ly/SuetAug>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> J.S. McHugh, *The Emperor Commodus: God and Gladiator*, Barnsley, UK, Pen & Sword Military, 2015, ch. 3.

<sup>23</sup> ‘The Life of Commodus’, in *Historia Augusta*, LanusCurtius, 2019, ch. 15, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Commodus\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Commodus*.html), (accessed 8 February 2022); Dio, *Roman History*, book 73, ch. 15.

followers into one people by the term “Romans.” To emphasize this idea of a common people, he titled Rome “Colony of the Whole Earth”, signifying that the people of Rome comprised all nationalities.<sup>24</sup> Many alien cities renamed themselves “Commodian”, and alien auxiliaries adopted the label “Commodian.”<sup>25</sup> Commodus likely appealed to the support of the common people and the military, as the aristocracy proved increasingly untrustworthy. Commodus’ reign established a rift between the nobility and the imperial government, aligning the imperial government more closely with the interests of aliens, especially those in the military.

The imperial government began to enfranchise aliens by treating them as Romans and providing the rights of citizenship. Commodus’ refounding of Rome signaled that the people of his empire comprised one tribe, a policy his successors would continue. In 212 CE, Emperor Antoninus Caracalla enacted the Antonine Constitution, which extended citizenship to all free people within the empire.<sup>26</sup> This policy redefined citizenship as a right, not a privilege, for any free individual under imperial rule. Following the Antonine Constitution, citizenship depended on one’s allegiance to the imperial government, not one’s geographical origins or tribal lineage.<sup>27</sup> With Gallic, African, and Syrian ancestry,<sup>28</sup> Caracalla likely sympathized with alien peoples, since he not only admitted all free aliens to citizenship but also promoted many aliens in his employ.<sup>29</sup> This infuriated the aristocracy. Senator Cassius Dio describes Caracalla as a madman who regularly murdered Roman nobles while advancing the most unqualified aliens into the highest offices of the state. One anecdote should sufficiently illustrate Dio’s disgust:

On Alexander’s account, then, [Caracalla] was very fond of the Macedonians. Once, after commending a Macedonian tribune for the agility with which he had leaped upon his horse, he asked him first: “From what country are you?” Then, learning that he was a Macedonian, he asked again: “What is your name?” And hearing that it was Antigonus, he further inquired: “And what was your father’s name?” When the father’s name was found to be Philip, he declared: “I have all my desire,” and promptly advanced him through all the other grades of the military career, and

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<sup>24</sup> Dio, *Roman History*, book 73, ch. 15.

<sup>25</sup> McHugh, *The Emperor Commodus: God and Gladiator*, ch. 8, para. 15-35.

<sup>26</sup> Mathisen, ‘Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani’, p. 1014.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1011-12.

<sup>28</sup> Dio, *Roman History*, book 78, ch. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 8, 9, 13, 17. 19.

before long appointed him a senator with the rank of an ex-praetor.<sup>30</sup>

This story shows Dio's scorn of lowborn aliens gaining status equal to highborn Romans. Antigonus' promotion to senatorial rank was completely undeserved from the perspective of nobles like Dio, who perhaps felt their education, experience, or breeding was far superior. Moreover, the adlection of a lowborn foreigner to the prestigious rank of ex-praetor insulted the honor and dignity of other ex-praetors and senators in junior offices. Social mobility for aliens accelerated after the Antonine Constitution. During the reigns of Caracalla and his successors, Gaius Julius Verus Maximinus rose from an obscure alien to a prominent Roman general.<sup>31</sup> More soldiers of humble *peregrini* origins, now citizens, obtained command positions as well. After the death of Emperor Severus Alexander, these officers of alien origin, leading a very racially-diverse army, elected Maximinus emperor without a decree from the Senate.<sup>32</sup> Enfranchised by the Antonine Constitution, an Illyrian-Roman general, whom nobles considered not a fellow citizen but a mongrel, became emperor in 235.<sup>33</sup> In Rome's case, universal citizenship elevated the social status of former aliens, with some reaching the highest levels of government to the disgust of traditional officeholding families.

### **“Barbarian” Emperors**

Relations between the imperial government and the Senate worsened considerably, as the emperor himself became a foreigner. Antoninus Caracalla held alien blood, but he could nevertheless trace descent from the ennobled Septimius Severus. Emperor Maximinus however could claim no such noble lineage, as his origins were so obscure that Roman writers could only agree that he was born a “barbarian” of some kind. Herodian describes Maximinus as a lowly “barbarian” who erected a “savage tyranny.”<sup>34</sup> Reiterating Maximinus'

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<sup>30</sup> Dio, *Roman History*, book 78, ch. 8.

<sup>31</sup> I. Mennen, 'Changing Emperorship: Setting the Scene', in *Power and Status in the Roman Empire, A.D. 193-284*, Leiden, NL, Brill, 2011, pp. 23–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w76vsp.8>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>32</sup> 'The Life of Severus Alexander', in *Historia Augusta*, LanusCurtius, 2019, ch. 61, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Severus\\_Alexander/3\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Severus_Alexander/3*.html), (accessed 8 February 2022); 'The Two Maximini', in *Historia Augusta*, LanusCurtius, 2019, ch. 7-8, <https://bit.ly/MaxDuoSHA>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Mennen, 'Changing Emperorship', pp. 27-28.

<sup>34</sup> Herodian, *Historian of the Empire*, trans. C.R. Whittaker, Cambridge, Loeb Classical Library, 1969-70, cited in J. Moralee, 'Maximinus Thrax and the Politics of Race in



“low barbarian birth”, *Historia Augusta* calls Maximinus more beast than man and so racially inferior that even slaves mock him.<sup>35</sup> By using the word “barbarian”, these writers designated Maximinus as a non-Roman, challenging the idea of the Antonine Constitution that all free people throughout the empire were Romans. By condemning Maximinus as a racially-defective outsider, these writers argue that he is reaching above his station by attempting to rule “true” Romans, the aristocratic elite. Yet, Maximinus behaved in every aspect as a Roman, as evidenced by his Roman titles, his Roman name, his Roman citizenship, and his very Roman military campaigns against Germanic tribes.<sup>36</sup> Maximinus’ reign showed that a former alien could become head of state. However, the Senate’s racial derision of Maximinus proved that universal citizenship did not necessarily entail acceptance that he and other new citizens were Romans.

After Roman soldier-emperors from Illyria had stabilized their control of the imperial government by the fourth century, they remained both figuratively and distant from the nobility in Rome, as they elevated men from the provinces and frontiers into a new aristocracy. Fourth-century emperors rarely visited Rome and preferred to hold court in faraway cities like Nicomedia or Constantinople, the “New Rome.” Emperor Constantine created a second senate at Constantinople and greatly increased the number of administrative positions that bestowed senatorial rank. This policy introduced thousands of new men, including provincial elites, curials, and frontier army officers, into the senatorial order.<sup>37</sup> From capitals far removed from Rome, Illyrian-Roman emperors created a new aristocracy by granting power and rank to those with proven loyalty and ability, perhaps recognizing the old nobility’s animosity toward “barbarian” emperors. The statesman Aurelius Victor calls Emperor Diocletian “uncultured” and his co-ruler Maximian “rather uncivilized” due to their origins in Illyria.<sup>38</sup> Victor shares a similar opinion of Emperor Constantius Chlorus and Emperor Constantine: “They were so remarkable for their natural abilities that if those abilities emanated from cultivated minds..., without doubt, they would be considered exceptional.”<sup>39</sup> Although Victor acknowledged the

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Late Antiquity’, *Greece & Rome*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2008, pp. 58–59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20204200>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>35</sup> *Historia Augusta*, “The Two Maximini”, ch. 8.

<sup>36</sup> A. Victor, *De Caesaribus*, trans. H.W. Bird, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1994, ch. 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> R. Chenault, ‘Statues of Senators in the Forum of Trajan and the Roman Forum in Late Antiquity’, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 102, 2012, p. 107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41724968> (accessed 1 May 2022).

<sup>38</sup> Victor, *De Caesaribus*, ch. 39.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

achievements of Illyrian soldier-emperors, he nevertheless viewed Illyrians as culturally inferior aliens. He laments how the senatorial nobility's idleness allowed soldiers and "barbarians" to seize absolute power.<sup>40</sup> Victor's mixed sentiments towards Illyrian-Roman emperors indicate that a universal grant of citizenship did not erase cultural divisions and racial prejudice, which was now directed against Illyrian-Roman emperors and other foreigners in the new aristocracy.

As the imperial government promoted foreigners into the ranks of the aristocracy, disgruntled traditional elites increasingly racialized these men as dangerous outsiders. After emperors began rewarding able military officers with senatorial rank, many Franks joined the Roman military, and some talented Frankish generals, like Bauto and Richomeres, achieved the highest rank of the senatorial order.<sup>41</sup> Bishop Synesius ridiculed such "barbarian" generals exchanging sheepskins for togas before Senate meetings, likening them to wolves in sheep's clothing.<sup>42</sup> Many Germanic-Roman generals, like Merobaudes, Stilicho, and Magnentius, married Roman wives as well, renewing fears over race mixing.<sup>43</sup> The poet Prudentius expressed anxiety over "barbarian" blood contaminating Romans:

One offspring is stitched together from two races as a  
result of the mixing of blood...

Yet what is Roman and what is barbarian are as different  
from each other as the four-footed creature is distinct  
from the two-footed or the dumb from the speaking.<sup>44</sup>

Senator Symmachus expressed more subtle contempt of Germanic-Roman senators by using flattery to point out failures in etiquette. Symmachus wrote to Bauto, a Frank awarded with the consulship:

No suspicion falls on you that you could be believed to  
have intentionally been negligent of our friendship. Your  
character is tenacious of its fidelity...For which reason, I  
did not previously think that I was removed from the

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<sup>40</sup> Victor, *De Caesaribus*, ch. 37.

<sup>41</sup> M.R. Salzman, 'Symmachus and the 'Barbarian' Generals', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2006, p. 366, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436821>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Mathisen, 'Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani', p. 1034.

<sup>43</sup> R.W. Mathisen, 'Provinciales, Gentiles, and Marriages between Romans and Barbarians in the Late Roman Empire', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 99, 2009, p. 145, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40599743>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum*, as cited in Moralee, 'Maximinus Thrax and the Politics of Race in Late Antiquity', pp. 68-69; Salzman, 'Symmachus and the 'Barbarian' Generals', p. 352

number of those to whom you gave a consular gift at the beginning of the year...<sup>45</sup>

Here, Symmachus refers to a delayed gift from Bauto, a serious breach of etiquette, but hides criticism as a compliment of Bauto's character, praising his "fidelity." Yet, by teaching Bauto the rules of etiquette, Symmachus asserts cultural superiority over Frank, even as he gives the impression of equality by addressing Bauto with the language of friendship. In essence, ennobled Germanic-Roman generals and their interracial marriages inspired backlash from hereditary aristocrats, such as ridicule, fear, and passive-aggressive criticism coded as praise.

The divide between old aristocrats and ennobled foreigners intensified, as Gothic tribes sought refuge in the Roman Empire. After six years of war, Emperor Theodosius concluded peace with the Goths in 382.<sup>46</sup> The Goths would provide soldiers for the Roman army and obey Roman law in exchange for land grants and peace. Theodosius considered the Goths worthy of citizenship and insisted that they become Roman.<sup>47</sup> Some historians viewed the Goths as foreign enemies of Rome because Gothic tribes once warred against the Romans. These historians wrongly refer to the Goths as "barbarians", defining them as aliens. Because they were once foreign, they remained foreign according to modern nationalist psychology. Nationalists today similarly consider refugees outsiders. However, the Romans followed a different mindset inherited from their founder Romulus, a leader who embraced enemies as comrades and united foreign tribes with the Roman people.<sup>48</sup> As Emperor Claudius stated, many nations were once enemies of Rome, before Rome admitted their leaders into the Senate and recruited their soldiers into one army.<sup>49</sup> From Theodosius' perspective, the Goths were not aliens, but simply more tribes becoming Roman. An orator claimed in 383 that the Goths were no longer deemed "barbarians" but Romans.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, Roman law classifies Gothic soldiers as Roman veterans by entitling Goths to the same privileges as army veterans.<sup>51</sup> A Gothic historian writes that after submitting to Roman rule, the Goths

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<sup>45</sup> Symmachus, *The Letters of Symmachus*, as cited in Salzman, 'Symmachus and the 'Barbarian' Generals', p. 357

<sup>46</sup> H. Sivan, 'On Foederati, Hospitalitas, and the Settlement of the Goths in A.D. 418', *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 108, no. 4, 1987, p. 762, <https://doi.org/10.2307/294799>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>47</sup> Mathisen, 'Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani', p. 1023.

<sup>48</sup> Tacitus, 'The Annals', book 11, ch. 24.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Mathisen, 'Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani', p. 1023.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 1026.

formed “one body with the imperial soldiery.”<sup>52</sup> This implies the Goths qualified as Roman soldiers. Finally, under the Antonine Constitution, all the Goths inside the empire were Roman citizens.<sup>53</sup> By embracing former enemies as comrades, Theodosius’ administration began to integrate the Goths into Roman society.

### The End of the Theodosian Peace

Theodosius entrusted the governance of the western half of the empire to Stilicho, an ennobled Germanic-Roman general who continued the policy of integration until his assassination by an anti-barbarian faction.<sup>54</sup> During Stilicho’s regency for Emperor Honorius, several Germanic-Roman generals, including successful Goths, held senatorial office and married into Roman families.<sup>55</sup> Many aristocrats from the old nobility, fearing loss of status to Germanic Romans, wanted the state to discontinue employing Goths, whom senators racialized as dangerous “barbarians.” When the Gothic general Alaric requested payment after his army completed an expedition under Emperor Honorius’ orders, the Senate favored war against Alaric.<sup>56</sup> One highborn senator said that giving Alaric gold signified slavery, not peace.<sup>57</sup> His comment reflected the general worry among the aristocracy of losing social standing to Germanic Romans, echoing the fear of being declassed by newly-made Gallic senators during the administration of Julius Caesar.

In his “historical” work written during Stilicho’s regency, the Aquitanian noble Sulpicius Severus reveals his perspective on the integration of Goths and the ennoblement of Germanic Romans:

Under [the] guidance [of Judah], matters were successfully conducted: there was the greatest tranquillity both at home and abroad... Then, as almost always happens in a time of prosperity, [the Hebrews] began to contract marriages from among the conquered, and by and by to adopt

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<sup>52</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, trans. C.C. Mierow, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1908, ch. 28, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/14809/pg14809.html>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>53</sup> Mathisen, ‘Peregrini, Barbari, and Cives Romani’, p. 1036.

<sup>54</sup> Moralee, ‘Maximinus Thrax and the Politics of Race in Late Antiquity’, pp. 68-69.

<sup>55</sup> H. Elton, ‘Fravitta and Barbarian Career Opportunities in Constantinople’, *Medieval Prosopography*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1996, pp. 99–102, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44946209>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>56</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, trans. R.T. Ridley, Sydney, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982, book 5, ch. 29.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

foreign customs, yea, even in a sacrilegious manner to offer sacrifices to idols: so pernicious is all alliance with foreigners. God, foreseeing these things long before, had, by a wholesome precept, enjoined upon the Hebrews to give over the conquered nations to utter destruction. But the people, through lust for power, preferred (to their own ruin) to rule over those who were conquered. Accordingly, when, forsaking God, they worshipped idols, they were deprived of divine assistance, and, being vanquished and subdued by the king of Mesopotamia, they paid the penalty of eight years' captivity.<sup>58</sup>

This text, a thinly veiled commentary on the writer's present, criticizes interracial marriage, the cultural inferiority of foreigners, and especially the integration of foreign nations. Severus' first two criticisms are consistent with Tacitus' idea of the subordinate alien, but the third differs starkly from Tacitus' approval of integrating Batavia. Not only do foreigners corrupt native culture, Severus warns, but they declass locals into captives. Thus, the adlection of foreigners and Theodosius' peace with the Goths deeply troubled the aristocratic elite, which feared losing status to people perceived to be harmful outsiders. For aristocrats still adhering to the ancient premise of the subordinate alien, the ennoblement of foreign-born Romans represented an unnatural inversion of social roles, an existential problem that demanded a correction. The optimistic attitude of Tacitus' era, which had commodified foreigners as useful resources, was long gone. Now, only the "utter destruction" of foreigners would satisfy nobles like Severus.

When Stilicho chose peace and compensated Alaric's soldiers, dissatisfied nobles and courtiers began conspiring against Stilicho, whom some considered a treacherous "half-barbarian."<sup>59</sup> They charged Stilicho with plotting to install his multiracial son Eucherius as an emperor, an accusation that reflected the general fear among traditional elites of being subordinated to racialized upstarts.<sup>60</sup> The accusation was probably fictitious since Stilicho loyally surrendered himself upon learning of the order for his death and none of Stilicho's associates confessed to his supposed treason when questioned under torture.<sup>61</sup> During the purge of Stilicho's administration, soldiers massacred tens of thousands of Gothic

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<sup>58</sup> S. Severus, *Chronica*, as cited in W. Goffart, 'Rome, Constantinople, and the Barbarians', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 86, no. 2, 1981, p. 276, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1857439>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>59</sup> Moralee, 'Maximinus Thrax and the Politics of Race in Late Antiquity', p. 69.

<sup>60</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, book 5, ch. 32.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 34-35.

women and children in the cities and seized their property.<sup>62</sup> Stilicho's opponents presumably ordered the massacre; one Roman historian suspects the soldiers were following a preconcerted signal. 30,000 Goths immediately defected to Alaric, who nevertheless sought peace.<sup>63</sup> Alaric offered to defend frontier provinces for Emperor Honorius and requested only provisions as compensation.<sup>64</sup> Alaric urged Honorius to restore peace, lest his aggrieved and hungry Goths plunder Rome.<sup>65</sup> Yet, the courtiers surrounding Honorius refused peace on any conditions, desiring the utter destruction of Alaric's Goths.<sup>66</sup> After years of failed negotiations with the court, Alaric's army, running out of food supplies, infamously sacked Rome.<sup>67</sup> Emperor Theodosius had enrolled the Goths as Romans, but anti-barbarian aristocrats rejected Theodosius' peace to protect their status and turned the Goths from comrades to enemies. By resisting Alaric's reconciliation efforts, the nobility made the "barbarian" menace real.

After the massacre of their women and children and Alaric's death, his Gothic soldiers, often called "Visigoths" by scholars, began plundering estates in Aquitania in 412.<sup>68</sup> Gothic raids forced landowners to flee their homes since the Visigoths would capture aristocrats for ransom.<sup>69</sup> For forty years, the Visigoths struggled to seize lucrative port cities, obstructed by siege warfare and the Roman army. The Visigoths finally captured Narbonne in 461 and Marseille and Arles in 476.<sup>70</sup> The Visigoths exiled Gallo-Roman nobles and confiscated their property, even executing some imperial loyalists.<sup>71</sup> Some Aquitanian aristocrats fled the wrath of the Visigothic king Euric, but others maintained their status by collaborating or joining the clergy.<sup>72</sup> By the 470s, the Visigoths had created an independent kingdom within Gaul.<sup>73</sup> Separatism was the result of the Roman failure to integrate the Visigoths.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., ch. 35.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., ch. 35-36.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., ch. 50.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., ch. 50.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., ch. 51.

<sup>67</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, ch. 30.

<sup>68</sup> R.W. Mathisen, 'Emigrants, Exiles, and Survivors: Aristocratic Options in Visigothic Aquitania', *Phoenix*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1984, pp. 160-63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1088899>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>69</sup> Mathisen, 'Emigrants, Exiles, and Survivors', p. 164.

<sup>70</sup> V. Burns, 'The Visigothic Settlement in Aquitania: Imperial Motives', *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1992, pp. 371-373, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436252>, (accessed 8 February 2022).

<sup>71</sup> Mathisen, 'Emigrants, Exiles, and Survivors', p. 167.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

## Conclusion

Emperor Claudius once asked: “What was the ruin of Sparta and Athens but this, that mighty as they were in the war, they spurned from them as aliens those whom they had conquered?”<sup>74</sup> One may apply the same question to Rome. Although the imperial government, following the precedents of Romulus and the Antonine Constitution, tended to integrate foreigners fully, the aristocracy had always perceived foreigners as social inferiors. Senators during the early empire commodified foreigners as useful instruments, but as foreigners steadily gained rights, influence, and titles, senators during the late empire increasingly perceived foreigners as threats to their status. By antagonizing fellow citizens as inferior “barbarians”, senatorial elites instigated unnecessary conflicts that brought disaster upon the empire and themselves.

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<sup>74</sup> Tacitus, ‘The Annals’, book 11, ch. 24.

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