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THE RESTORATION  
OF ROME

*Barbarian Popes & Imperial Pretenders*

PAN BOOKS

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## PROLOGUE

ON OR ABOUT 4 SEPTEMBER 476, a senior officer of the Roman army of Italy called Odovacar arrested and executed the uncle of the reigning Western emperor Romulus, known as 'Augustulus': the little Augustus. Seven days before, Odovacar had done the same with Romulus' father. The emperor himself was only a child and his father and uncle had been running the empire. Now in charge, Odovacar proved reasonably merciful. Romulus was despatched to live out his days on an estate in Campania. More significantly for the course of European history, Odovacar also induced the Senate of Rome to send an embassy to the East Roman emperor Zeno in Constantinople. This declared that:

there was no need of a divided rule and that one, shared emperor was sufficient for both [Eastern and Western imperial] territories.

It was soon followed by a further embassy which took to Constantinople the imperial vestments of the West, including the imperial cloak and diadem which it was treason for anyone but the emperor to wear. Although he maintained the fiction of Zeno's imperial sovereignty, Odovacar had not the slightest intention in practice of allowing Constantinople to interfere in the affairs of the Italian-based state that he now ran. Odovacar's two embassies brought to an end an imperial tradition based on Rome which stretched back nearly 750 years.<sup>1</sup>

But Odovacar's deposition of Romulus Augustulus was no more than a *coup de grâce*. The western half of the Roman Empire had been killed off progressively over the three previous political generations, as a remarkable revolution in the balance of strategic power worked itself out across the broader European land mass. Apart from some very early successes, such as the capture of Sicily in the third century BC, the bulk of the Roman Empire had been acquired in the two centuries either side of the birth of Christ. This was an era when non-Mediterranean Europe was subdivided into three broad geographical regions – west and south, north-central, and north and east – each

home to human societies which were operating at strikingly different levels of development. Levels of food production, population density, economic complexity, settlement size and scales of political organization: all of these were much higher in La Tene Europe to the west and south, and fell off substantially as you moved east and north through the other two zones. During this crucial 200 years of empire-building, Rome's Mediterranean heartlands provided sufficient economic and demographic resources, combined with a formidable military organization, to conquer all of the European land mass which was worth conquering. In practice, only the west and south offered post-conquest receipts and sufficient spoils of war to justify large-scale campaigning, and it was on its far borders that the legions' hobnails came to a halt.

Human ambition being what it is, though, efforts were also made to subdue parts of the central zone, largely dominated by Germanic-speaking populations, and it is often thought that Arminius' great victory over a Roman army in the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 put a stop to the process. Reality is more prosaic. Further Roman campaigns destroyed Arminius subsequently, and it was really the logic of an imperial cost-benefit equation which meant that Rome eventually allowed its frontier to coagulate on the river Rhine and not push it on further to the east. At the start of the first millennium, the north-central zone was not worth the costs of conquest, while outer Europe, the third zone to the north and east, never even figured on the imperial radar.

Over the next 400 years, however – above all because of the kick-start provided by interaction with the Roman Empire to everything from economics to political and cultural patterns – an accelerating process of development transformed patterns of life in this central zone. By the mid-fourth century AD, agricultural production had intensified, population densities increased massively, and economic patterns acquired previously unknown complexity. The military capacity of the region as a whole had also grown markedly – not least through the adoption of Roman weaponry – and its political structures had become much more robust. It remained impossible to build large, enduring states within the region because economic and administrative substructures could still not support complex political superstructures, so that Rome, broadly speaking, retained overall strategic control. Nonetheless, by the fourth century AD, the empire was having to run

its frontier security by a careful mix of stick and carrot to manage a series of reasonably durable medium-sized client states who now occupied every inch of space beyond the frontier. The old order in the central zone – one of small, sparsely distributed tribal societies – had long gone. These clients may not have threatened the empire's overall existence, but they certainly possessed sufficient political and military capacity to formulate their own medium- to long-term political agendas. And when conditions were in their favour – usually when Rome was at war with Persia – they could even fend off the most intrusive aspects of Roman imperial domination, which took the form of incessant demands for military manpower, foodstuffs, raw materials and, occasionally, even the demand that Christian missionaries be allowed to operate freely. Even if the transformed north-central zone remained too divided politically to pose an overall threat, much of the original demographic and economic advantage – the edge which had allowed Rome's European empire to come into existence half a millennium before – had been undermined by these revolutionary processes of development which had unfolded in between.<sup>2</sup>

My father was an explosives expert, who spent much of his life among dangerous substances. A fundamental safety principle he picked up early on in his training was that wherever human activity created a flammable atmosphere, 'God – i.e. some accident or another – would provide the spark'. In other words, safety had to focus on preventing the build-up of flammable conditions, since trying to guard against sparks was utterly hopeless. In the case of European history, the fundamental transformation of the old north-central zone created a potentially highly flammable political situation – at least as regards the long-term future of Roman imperialism – and the spark eventually came along in the form of the Huns. Exploding on to the fringes of Europe in two stages in the final quarter of the fourth century, the Huns pushed two large mixed blocks of old Roman clients from the transformed north-central region (together with some other groups from much further away) on to imperial territory in two distinct clusters: the first in AD 375–80, and the second a quarter of a century later in 405–10. The first of these moments coincided with the Huns' occupation of lands immediately north of the Black Sea, and the second, in all probability, with their further penetration westwards on to the great Hungarian Plain. In the face of (natural) Roman hostility which saw large numbers of those caught up in the movements either killed

or reduced to slavery, the survivors of both immigrant blocks (and many of the original participants had fallen en route) had, by the end of the 410s, reorganized themselves into two new composite groupings on West Roman soil, which were larger and more coherent than anything that had existed on the other side of the frontier in the fourth century: the Visigothic and Vandal–Alan coalitions. Each was composed of at least three major, previously independent, sources of military manpower, and both had evolved more centralized leadership structures to match. They had become larger to survive in the face of Roman counter-attack, and the greater wealth of the Roman world, compared to that beyond the frontier, made it possible for new dynasties to mobilize sufficient resources to maintain themselves in power.

But while the immigrants' initial motivations focused primarily on escaping Hunnic predation, they always had it in mind to benefit from Roman wealth too, and their arrival on imperial soil materially damaged the empire's capacity to survive. Fundamentally, the empire functioned by taxing agricultural production to fund its professional army and other governmental structures. When these new immigrant coalitions forced the Western Empire to recognize their occupation of parts of its territories, this reduced the empire's revenues significantly, and, by direct extension, the size of the armies it could support. And other outsiders not directly threatened by the Huns, such as Anglo-Saxon intruders into southern Britain, were quick to take advantage of the military and political retrenchment that these losses of revenue enforced. Particularly once the Vandal–Alan coalition had captured the Western Empire's richest North African provinces in 439, the Western Empire found itself caught in a vicious circle. Lower troop numbers meant more losses of territory both to the original groups of outsiders (Visigoths and Vandal–Alans), and to new ones (like the Franks), whom the empire's declining military capacity encouraged to come to the party.

Odoacar's coup administered the last rites in this saga of imperial unravelling. He was part of a final set of refugees from the old north-central zone who found their way on to Roman soil as a result of the infighting which followed the collapse of Attila's Hunnic Empire in central Europe in the later 450s and 460s. A prince of the Sciri and son of one of Attila's chief henchmen, he was forced to relocate to Italy when his group's independent position was destroyed. And the military discontent he exploited to mount his *coup d'état* was caused by a

shortage of funds within Italy to pay the soldiers he led in revolt. This shortage was a direct result of the loss of tax revenues from the provinces as they progressively fell under the control of outside intruders: the process which forms the central narrative spine of West Roman history in the fifth century. The flow of funds to support the Roman army of Italy progressively dwindled and Odovacar was there to benefit from the resulting unrest. The spark supplied by the Huns set off a strategic explosion which pushed enough of the military manpower of transformed north-central Europe on to Roman soil to undermine the Western Empire's control of its territorial base.<sup>3</sup>

New rulers at the head of politically reasonably coherent bodies of military manpower, which had within living memory originated from beyond the imperial frontier, were now masters of the bulk of the old Roman west. Alongside Odovacar, Anglo-Saxon kings controlled most of central and southern Britain, their Frankish counterparts ran northern and eastern Gaul, Visigothic monarchs controlled south-western Gaul and Spain, Burgundian dynasts the Rhone valley, and the richest lands of Roman North Africa were in the hands of the Vandalic Hasding dynasty (Figure 4). Groups from the old north-central zone of Europe as it had stood at the birth of Christ thus generated a huge revolution on Roman soil, replacing the old monolithic empire with a series of successor states.

An equally profound – if much less documented – revolution then followed in the central zone itself in the century or so after 476, bringing Slavic-speaking groups from the old third zone to the north and east into prominence across much of central and Eastern Europe. This related story cannot be reconstructed in detail, although enough indications survive to make it clear that the creation of Slavic Europe was the aggregate result of a range of complex, diverse and long-drawn-out processes, rather than a sudden revolution. What it does make crystal clear, however, is that the dismantling of the Western Roman Empire has to be seen as part of a total recalibration of prevailing Europe-wide balances of strategic power, equivalent to the kinds of processes working themselves out in our own time, as the regional and global political consequences of the massive expansion of Near Eastern, Asian and some southern economies slowly make themselves clear.<sup>4</sup>

But, in the midst of all this restructuring, the Roman concept of empire not only lived on, but proved remarkably durable. After an astonishing half a millennium of existence (and the British Empire at



its maximum extent lasted, by comparison, less than a century), this is perhaps not so surprising. The West Roman imperial superstate may have gone, but in many (though not all) parts of its old territories, Roman provincial populations had survived the eclipse of empire with their social, economic, legal and cultural structures intact. Within these groups, Roman ideas and even some administrative institutions were alive and kicking. Nor, in fact, were the outsiders who had destroyed the empire implacably hostile to all things Roman. Many were its old frontier clients, and they had not mounted their individual takeovers of parcels of Roman territory under the banner of an ideological crusade against imperialism. They had long been used to operating within an overarching Roman framework, and the new leaderships of the successor states in particular could see much that was useful to them in the structures of Roman government, society and culture, as they set about creating a new order from the chaos of collapse.

Picking up the story from Odovacar's fateful embassy which handed over the Western imperial vestments to Constantinople, this sequel to the *Fall of the Roman Empire* tells the story of three great imperial pretenders who attempted to revive the Roman inheritance in Western Europe: Theoderic, Justinian and Charlemagne. Each was astonishingly successful. Coming from entirely dissimilar backgrounds and operating with different power bases constructed in completely diverse contexts, they each managed to put back together enough of the old Roman West to stake a plausible claim to the Western imperial title.

But even as they played out their extraordinary careers, the broader patterns of human life across the European land mass continued to move away from the three-speed pattern which had characterized it at the birth of Christ. As successful as each of these pretenders was in their own right, therefore, circumstances in the second half of the first millennium AD increasingly militated against the possibility of sustaining a durable imperial structure on the kind of scale that the old Western Empire had managed for most of the previous 500 years. In the end, a restoration of stable imperial power on a truly Roman scale proved possible only when fresh blood, from a part of Europe that the old Romans deemed utterly barbaric, used some of the Roman imperial toolkit to generate an entirely new kind of empire. By reinventing the papacy in the eleventh century, Europe's barbarians found the means to establish a new Roman Empire which has so far lasted a thousand years.

PART ONE

‘A COPY OF THE ONLY EMPIRE’

*GENS PURPURA*

IN 507 OR THEREABOUTS, the ruler of Italy, Theoderic the Goth, wrote to the Eastern Roman emperor Anastasius in Constantinople:

You are the fairest ornament of all realms; you are the healthful defence of the whole world, to which all other rulers rightfully look up with reverence, because they know that there is in you something which is unlike all others: we above all, who by Divine help learned in your Republic [Constantinople: Theoderic had spent ten years in the city as a child] the art of governing Romans with equity. Our royalty is an imitation of yours, modelled on your good purpose, a copy of the only Empire; and in so far as we follow you do we excel all other nations.

This is an extraordinary letter. To Romans of any era Theoderic could only have been viewed as a barbarian. Yet here we have a Gothic king claiming to be copying Roman ideals. Naturally enough, it's as famous as it is extraordinary, and has often been cited as evidence of Rome's continuing psychological dominance, a generation after there had last been a Western emperor enthroned in the purple.

But on closer inspection, it demonstrates a great deal more than that. Like many diplomatic letters produced in almost any era of human history, it is written in a kind of code, carefully transmitting its full meaning via a set of conventions equally well understood by both the original parties to the correspondence. In this case, the key is provided by the long-standing ideological claims that sustained the self-understanding of the Roman imperial state. Roman ideologies claimed that the empire's existence was so closely interwoven into the beneficent deity's plans for bringing humankind to its fullest possible potential that it was actually providential divine power which had first brought it into existence, and supported it subsequently. An extension of an idea set that had first been rigorously articulated for the self-aggrandizing and thoroughly non-Christian successors of Alexander the

Great (and is hence often labelled Hellenistic kingship), it had required remarkably little alteration when the emperor Constantine declared his allegiance to Christianity. The claim to divine support for a divinely ordained mission remained constant: the divinity providing said support was just re-identified as the Christian God, and the purpose of the mission was recalibrated to one of spreading the Christian Gospel.

Read against this ideology, Theoderic's remarks become significantly less deferential. The critical phrase is 'Divine help' (*auxilio divino*). By employing it, the Goth made it clear to Anastasius that, in his own view of course (no one knows what the Eastern emperor thought when this was read out to him, although I could hazard a pretty good guess), Theoderic's capacity to govern Italy as a fully fledged Roman ruler was the product not of chance or even of his own personal capacities honed by ten years' observation of Romanness in action in Constantinople (although these played a part), but most fundamentally of God's direct intervention. The central plank of Roman state ideology was the claim that the empire existed because it was key to the divine plan for humankind. Theoderic's parallel claim that the divinity underpinned his own capacity to govern in a properly Roman manner amounted to a statement that he himself, together with the realm he governed, were just as legitimately 'Roman' – i.e. divinely ordained – as the Eastern Empire itself. As set up in this letter, Theoderic's Romanness was not indirectly acquired from the Eastern Empire, but directly from God. Who was this Gothic upstart making these extraordinary claims, and how much substance was there in this assertion of his own Romanness?<sup>1</sup>

## GETICA

The first image to survive of the young Theoderic is that of a seven- or eight-year-old boy being sent as a hostage to the great capital city of the Eastern Roman Empire: Constantinople. The year was 461 or thereabouts, and, young as he was, Theoderic had an important role to play. His uncle had just forged a new diplomatic agreement with the then Eastern emperor Leo, as a result of which he was awarded

foreign aid – or a subsidy, call it what you will – to the tune of 300 pounds weight of gold a year. The young Theoderic was sent to Constantinople in return as the physical embodiment of one of the agreement's security clauses. All this was routine. Since time immemorial, Rome had demanded high-status hostages to ensure that treaties would be complied with.<sup>2</sup>

The image comes from the Gothic History or *Getica* of a certain Jordanes, composed in Constantinople around the year 550, and this text has played a central role in modern understandings of who the child actually was. Later in life, when securely enthroned in Italy, Theoderic liked to state (particularly to foreign potentates) that he belonged to a uniquely purple (i.e. imperial) dynasty: a *gens purpura*. His own legitimacy flowed from the fact that members of his family had ruled unchallenged over the Goths for seventeen generations by the time power reached his grandson and successor Athalaric in the 520s. Jordanes *Getica* has long been taken to provide crucial narrative support for this statement, its text including not only a full genealogy of Theoderic's Amal family (Figure 1), but also a panoply of stories about some of its more distinguished individual members.<sup>3</sup>

Before swallowing this vision whole, however, it is important to look more closely at its sources. One of its main ones, as Jordanes states in his preface and a broader comparison with the author's other surviving writings confirms, was a now lost Gothic history written by the Roman senator Cassiodorus, whom we will meet again in the next chapter. Jordanes tells us that he only had access to Cassiodorus' History for three days, but the really important point here is that Cassiodorus was an insider at Theoderic's court and composed his history while serving the king. What this does, of course, is effectively undermine any claim that Jordanes provides independent confirmation of the unique royal status of the Amal family, since both Theoderic's claims and the *Getica*'s historical support ultimately derive from the same context: Theoderic's own court.<sup>4</sup> Once this is recognized and you go digging around a little further in the sources, it becomes possible quite quickly to shed rather more light on the real family history of the young Theoderic the Amal, whose horse plodded into Constantinople in the early 460s. He was certainly from a fairly grand family, otherwise he would not have been sent to Constantinople as a hostage in the first place. But that grandeur was both more recent and of a more limited degree than Theoderic would later pretend.

His father was the middle in age of three brothers – Valamer, Thiudimer and Vidimer in order of birth – who emerge in reasonably reliable sources as the leaders by the later 450s of a sizeable group of Goths which had been subordinate previously, and for a number of decades, to the Hunnic Empire of Attila, whose career of terror in the 440s had stretched from the walls of Constantinople to the outskirts of Paris. The traditional view of the Amal family – stemming directly from the kind of information that Theoderic was prone to give out in Italy – is that it had ruled one half of the overall Gothic ‘people’ – the Ostrogoths or ‘Eastern’ Goths – since at least the middle of the third century AD. The other half are conventionally called Visigoths (‘Western’ Goths) and have been seen as having a largely separate history from their Amal-dominated cousins, again from the third century. But all this is a fantasy directly generated by Theoderic’s own propaganda. The grandeur of the Amal dynasty, prior to the phenomenal successes of Theoderic’s own lifetime, was much more limited than the visions modern commentators have conjured into existence on the back of the king’s later pretensions.

For one thing, the Goths left in central and Eastern Europe by the 463 were far from united. Aside from those Goths led by Theoderic’s father and two uncles, settled somewhere in the old Roman province of Pannonia around what is now Lake Balaton in modern Hungary, there was another large group of allied Goths living by agreement on East Roman territory in Thrace, a moderately large third group still under Hunnic domination (where we find them as late as 467) and two more separate – if seemingly smaller – Gothic groups in the Crimea and on the eastern shores of the Sea of Azov. Numbers are not exact, of course, but, at most, the Amal family can have led no more than roughly a quarter of all the Goths of central and Eastern Europe that we know about as Hunnic power collapsed. And this makes no allowance for the perfectly real possibility that there might have been other Gothic groups of whom we know absolutely nothing.<sup>5</sup>

Equally important, the unchallenged rule of the Amal brothers over even the Pannonian Goths was a recent creation. A snippet of misunderstood narrative in the *Getica* catches pretended Amal grandeur with its hands in the historical till. What this passage describes is not, as it thinks, some of the successes of a Hunnic conqueror of the Goths (whom it labels Valamver), but actually the early career of Theoderic’s uncle, Valamer himself. And the picture is electric. Far from being the

latest in a long line of kings exercising unchallenged dominion over half of all Goths, it shows Valamer elbowing himself to the head of a pack of other Gothic warband leaders. He starts by personally killing a certain Vinitharius and marrying the victim's granddaughter, Vadamerca. At the same time, a rival line comprising a father (Hunimund), two brothers (Thorismund and Gensemund) and a grandson (Thorismund's son Beremund) was steadily eliminated. After various deaths in the older generation, Gensemund chose to accept the inevitable and resigned himself to Valamer's authority, while Beremund decided to take his personal following westwards and remove himself from the competition. The prominence of Valamer and his brothers by the late 450s, even over the Pannonian Goths, was the result of hard-fought struggles with multiple rivals among them, all probably fought out since Attila's death in 453, since the latter's management techniques did not generally tolerate overmighty rulers among his subject peoples.<sup>6</sup>

What this material does, in fact, is turn the Amal dynasty into a pretty familiar fifth-century story. To be the unchallenged leader of a large group of warriors required strong levers of power. There are many possible variations in detail, but this always meant an interlinked mixture of stick and carrot: enough brute force to keep potential rivals from chancing their arms against you, combined with a plentiful flow of ready cash to keep enough foot soldiers and middle-rank leaders happy, actually to generate that brute force. But both, and particularly the cash, tended to be in relatively short supply in the non-complex economies characteristic of the world beyond Rome's European frontiers before the arrival of the Huns. Pre-AD 400, for instance, all you tend to find in non-Roman archaeological contexts is a modest amount of silver and almost no gold at all. Not that there was no gold around; it was just too valuable to be buried with the dead or for anyone to lose with any regularity.

Non-Roman, largely agricultural economies also produced only small annual surpluses which could support only relatively limited numbers of specialist non-farmers. As a result, both professional full-time warriors and the cash with which to buy their services were far from abundant, and it was only in highly unusual circumstances (mostly involving access to Roman funds by fair means or foul) that kings beyond the frontier could assemble enough military might to dominate larger geographical spaces. Small-scale kingships, run essen-

tially by warband leaders, were the natural order of the day, not great imperial dynasties; and larger hegemonies tended to be highly temporary, limited to the lifetime of particularly effective leaders.

The rise and fall of Attila's Hunnic Empire altered this situation in two fundamental ways. First, there was an explosion of gold in the non-Roman world beyond the frontier, in particular in the Huns' Middle Danubian heartlands. Moveable Roman wealth was the central object of Hunnic campaigning, whether taken as booty, or in the form of annual subsidies which increased with every Hunnic victory to a maximum of 2,000 pounds in weight per annum. Not only is all this clear in the texts but it is also reflected in the archaeology, where the new wealth of the Hunnic era shows up in a large number of gold-rich burials. As Hunnic hegemony began to collapse in the mid-450s, therefore, there was now enough wealth knocking around both to generate intense competition between the rival warband leaders – like Theoderic's uncle and his rivals – who had formed the empire's second-tier leadership, and to sustain in the short term the larger political structures that their conflicts tended to create.

Second, even after the wheels came off in the mid-450s, the overall effect of the Hunnic period – the combined product of Attila's victories and the greater concentration of military manpower he had assembled to win them – was to shift the longer-term strategic balance of power on the Danube frontier away from the Roman Empire. The imperial authorities of East and West were now having to deal with larger numbers of bigger, more militarily effective neighbouring forces. This meant that the new powers which formed around figures such as Valamer in the 450s were able in their own right (or wrong!) to retain access to Roman wealth by a combination of moving on to parcels of former Roman territory which still had more developed economies than anything beyond the frontier, and setting up political relations with the Roman state which involved the payment of subsidies. As Hunnic power receded – and it did so astonishingly quickly in the decade after Attila's death – and the Hunnic brake on political centralization among subject groups such as the Goths was removed, new and militarily effective groupings quickly formed among the Huns' former subjects. Apart from squabbling with one another, they started casting covetous eyes over bits of former particularly West Roman territory, and on potential particularly East Roman subsidies.

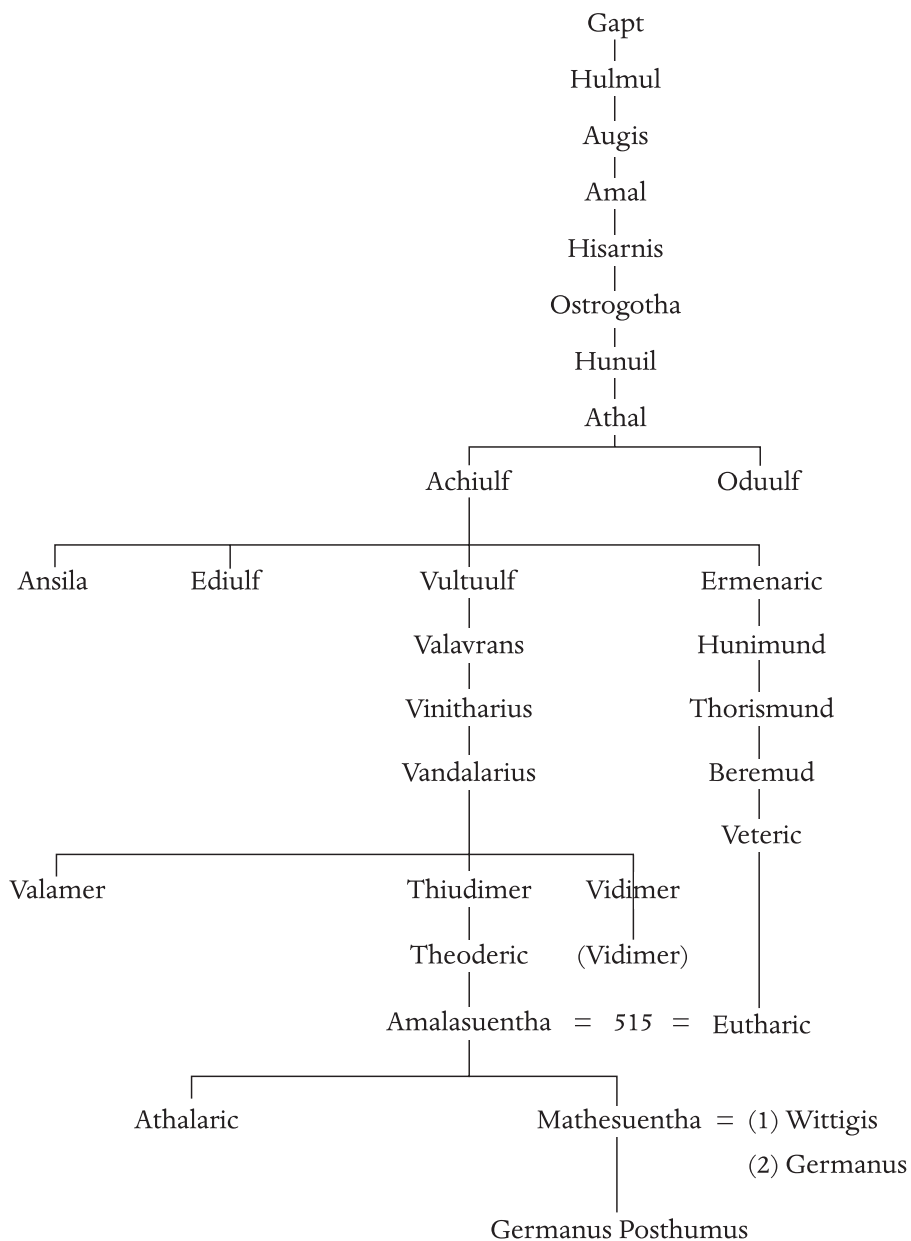
Valamer followed both elements of this recipe for success to the



letter. Soon after the elimination of his immediate Gothic rivals, we find him both in possession of part of the old West Roman province of Pannonia, and pushing hard for foreign aid from Constantinople. The young Theoderic trotted towards Constantinople precisely as one of the sureties for the deal which sent 300 pounds of gold per annum in Valamer's direction in return – a quantity of regular cash which came in extremely handy when you had to convince warriors that you deserved their loyalty. The archaeological evidence makes it entirely clear, in fact, how Valamer and his peers used this wealth to win political support. The remains of post-Hunnic central Europe throw up a mixture of Roman imports, not least wine amphorae, and some extremely rich personal ornamentation for both males and females. Parties and bling provided an excellent recipe for stamping your power on a potential following. The correlation between non-Roman dynasts moving actually on to (or at least closer into) Roman territory, and their being able to use Roman wealth to build up their power by attracting a much larger body of military support than had previously been possible, had been and remained an extremely strong one as the Western Empire collapsed in the fifth century.<sup>7</sup>

We find it operating, for instance, among the Vandals and Visigoths who founded successor states to Rome respectively in North Africa and southern Gaul and Spain in the first half of the fifth century. Both started out as loose alliances of separate groups with their own independent leaderships, and became centralized under a single leader only on Roman soil. In the case of these groups, it was not only that the positive possibilities opened up by the greater wealth of the Roman world facilitated a centralization of power, but also the fact that their unity grew at a time when the West Roman state was still powerful enough actually to threaten to destroy them. The historical detail preserved by our sources makes it clear that the negative impulse provided by a still very vital Roman threat played a major role in making the originally independent groups, of which both were composed, willing to overturn their long-standing traditions of separation and create the political relationships on which the new groupings were based.

In many ways the closest parallel to the Amals' story, however, is provided by the Frankish Merovingian dynasty, whose power, like that of Theoderic's family, was substantially a post-Roman phenomenon, not brokered by any effective imperial threat. In this case, the history



## Amal Genealogy

penned by Bishop Gregory of Tours in the 590s provides chapter and verse. In the era of West Roman political collapse, the Merovingian Childeric rose to considerable prominence in what is now Belgium, allowing his son Clovis to inherit a reasonably powerful kingdom based on Tournai in *c.*480. Clovis' subsequent career extended Merovingian domination over pretty much the entirety of France, and large chunks of non-Roman territory east of the Rhine. It also famously encompassed a conversion to Catholicism, both of which points have given him a prominent place as 'founder of the nation' in the political myths of modern France. At least as important as his conquests of new territory, however, and to my mind perhaps even key to them, was the fact that Clovis extinguished a whole series of rival warband leaders, adding their surviving followers to his own. As Gregory tells it, Clovis eliminated no less than seven rivals. At least some of these were collateral relatives (as may also have been true of some of those despatched by Valamer) and Gregory closes the chapters with a speech Clovis is supposed to have made at a Frankish assembly:

How sad a thing it is that I live among strangers like some solitary pilgrim, and that I have none of my own relations left to help me when disaster threatens!

Gregory's comment on this is typical of his own dark sense of humour:

He said this not because he grieved for their deaths, but because in his cunning way he hoped to find some relative still in the land of the living whom he could kill.

If Valamer had been blessed with a historian of similar stature to Gregory of Tours, he might well have found something similar to put in the mouth of the great founder of Amal power. Certainly the two careers ran closely in parallel. But all of this merely restates the question with which we began with much greater urgency. How did the nephew of a fairly obscure Gothic warband leader come to affect the perquisites of a God-chosen Roman emperor?<sup>8</sup>

## CONSTANTINOPLE

What the young Gothic hostage thought of his new surroundings and how much anxiety he felt are not recorded, but, by 463, what had been the small and relatively undistinguished – if certainly ancient – Greek city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus had been transformed into a mighty imperial capital. That process was less than 150 years old, initiated in the 320s – after some umming and erring – by the same Constantine who had turned the official religion of the empire towards Christianity. At one point, feeling in a classical turn of mind, and no doubt influenced by the old Roman claim that their city had been founded by the fleeing remnants of Troy's destruction, the emperor had considered rebuilding the topless towers of Ilium. The sources also record that at another point Constantine boldly declared that 'Serdica [Sofia, capital of modern Bulgaria] is my Rome'. But that proved another false start, and his choice finally fell on Byzantium, sited on a peninsula strategically placed to control the crossing of the Hellespont, from Europe to Asia, and equipped with abundant sheltered waters for large fleets to lie at anchor, both in the Bosphorus itself and particularly in the Golden Horn that snakes up its eastern shoreline.

In the first generation, Constantine's decision looked far from momentous. Many structures were half-built at the time of the emperor's death in 337, he had trouble persuading the richer landowners of the Eastern Empire to relocate to his new capital, and a fundamental problem with the water supply remained to be resolved. Like many peninsulas around the rim of the Mediterranean, it was a struggle to concentrate enough water to supply all the needs of even Byzantium's few thousand inhabitants in the 320s, let alone the larger masses of all social classes who flocked to an imperial capital, with all the job opportunities, free food distributions, and extravagant entertainments that could be anticipated. And, in fact, many Roman emperors over the years had turned their favourite cities into new capitals which lasted maybe a generation or two at best before whim or new circumstances led to a further political and administrative relocation.

Constantinople proved the exception. Two key political developments under Constantine's son Constantius II located political power much more permanently within its new walls. First, the new emperor created there an imperial senate for the eastern half of the Roman Empire, which was designed to match the grandeur of its Roman counterpart. This time, there were sufficient inducements on offer and a cross-section of the richer landowners of the eastern Mediterranean duly trotted off to new houses, duties and honours beside the Bosphorus. Henceforth, the Senate of Constantinople became the prime political audience for imperial policy: the men to whom imperial policies had to be sold and justified, and whose continued importance in the home provinces from which they came made their support for imperial initiatives a *sine qua non* for their successful implementation. Second, the fourth century in general saw a steady expansion in the size of the empire's central bureaucratic offices. This operated equally in east and west, but, in the eastern half of the empire, all the new offices were located securely in Constantinople, bringing a further reinforcement of important personnel and functions to the city. Between them, these two developments made it impossible for effective central power ever to be exercised from anywhere else in the eastern Mediterranean. And once central power was so firmly committed to the site, the will was automatically there too, both to resolve all its logistic difficulties and provide the new capital with an appropriate range of amenities. By the time Theoderic came to Constantinople, therefore, a bog standard small-to-medium Greek city had emerged from its chrysalis as an astonishing metropolitan butterfly.<sup>9</sup>

Coming from the north-west, along the main military road through the Balkans, the young Goth entered the city by the Charisius Gate. This was the most northerly of the main gates through the Theodosian landwalls which guarded the city. Rarely has any city been so well guarded. The first obstacle to be crossed was a moat twenty metres wide and another ten in depth; this was succeeded – beyond a further twenty metres of flat killing ground – by the outer wall which was two metres thick at its base and eight and a half metres high, studded by a grand total of ninety-six towers, placed at fifty-five-metre intervals. There then followed another twenty-metre terrace before you came finally to the full might of the main wall: five metres thick and twelve metres high, reinforced with another ninety-six towers placed in between those of the outer wall, and these a full twenty metres from

foot to battlement. Constructed in the years around AD 410, and still substantially visible in modern Istanbul, they were so strong that they protected the landward approaches to the city until cannon finally blew open the breach in which, according to some stories, the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine XI, fell fighting on 23 May 1453.<sup>10</sup>

Theoderic had no cannon, and neither did anyone else in the fifth century, so to his eight-year-old eyes, the city's fortifications can only have transmitted an impression of overwhelming power. He would have known that they had proved more than strong enough to ward off Attila the Hun less than twenty years before. The line of the walls – for excellent military reasons – was set on high ground, which reached maximum elevation towards the north, where Theoderic had entered. Once through the gate and archway, the whole imperial metropolis was laid out before him.

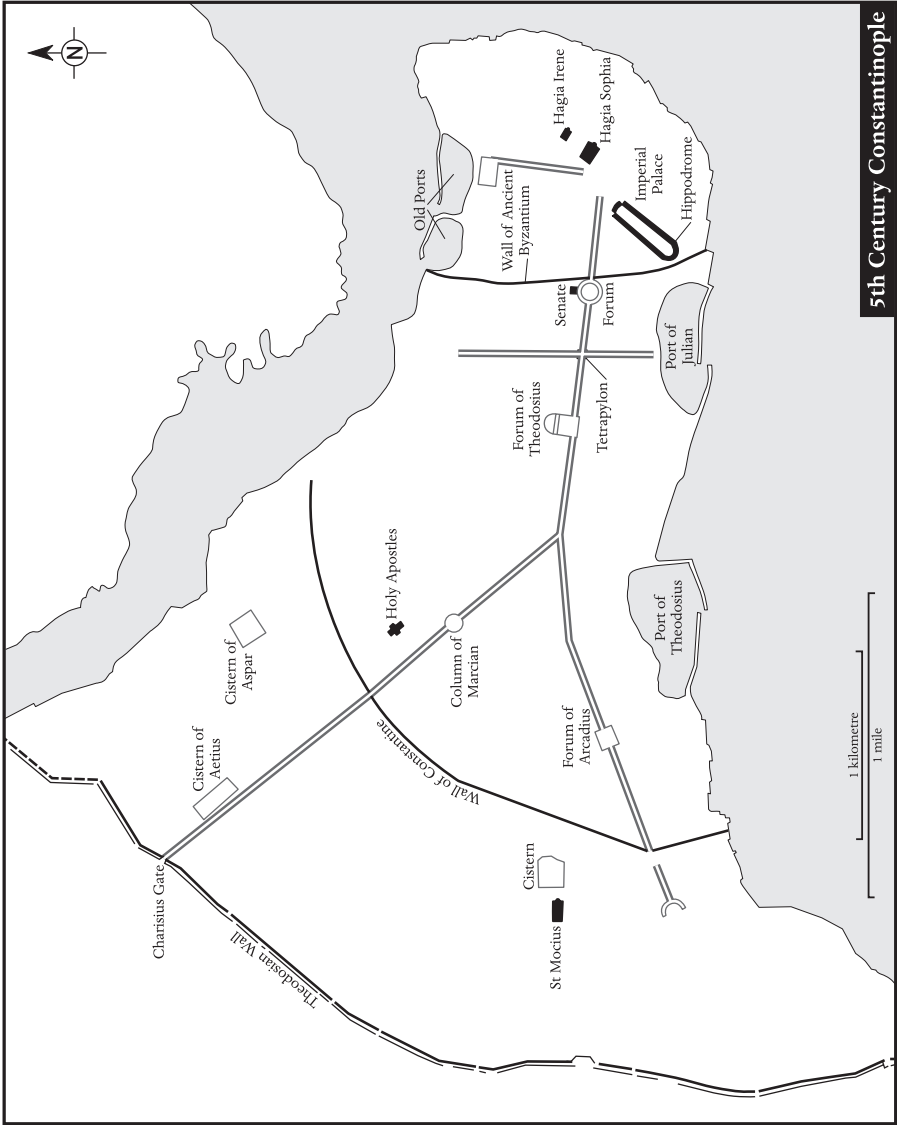
The immediate effect can only have been shock. Theoderic had just ridden in from the Middle Danubian plain, west of the Carpathians in modern Hungary, where he had spent his early years. In the high Roman period, this was a heavily defended frontier region which had seen much imperial investment and great prosperity in the first four centuries AD. Legionary bases studded the line of the river, and, around the soldiers' spending power, real Roman towns had grown up, while the agricultural potential of the hinterland was exploited by retired legionaries, new settlers from Italy, and native populations turning themselves into fully paid up Romans. As multiple excavations have emphasized, the region at its height boasted walled cities, temples, then cathedrals as Christianity took over, theatres and amphitheatres, aqueducts, road systems, statues, town councils, inscriptions and villas in glorious abundance. But that was before the crisis years of West Roman collapse, and aside from a handful of massively fortified – perhaps originally imperial – villas which the new rulers of this landscape adapted to their own purposes, by the mid-fifth century the rest had fallen into decay. There was still a substantial population, and some of it inhabited the old sites, but no one was preserving any of the old cultural forms, so stonework and statues were turning rapidly to rubble, togas had been put away for good, and most of the villas had long since been destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

The contrast between the debris of old Roman provincial prosperity and the full-on metropolitan imperial splendour of mid-fifth-century Constantinople could not have been greater. The first thing to assault

his senses was the sheer scale of the city. Chronologically, the Theodosian Walls were the city's third set. The old Greek city of Byzantium possessed the first set; these enclosed a roughly rectangular area at the end of the peninsula of about two kilometres by one and a half (Figure 2). The walls added by Constantine in the 320s more than trebled the enclosed area, and then those of the emperor Theodosius more than doubled it again. Not all of the enclosed area was built up – there were extensive market gardens and parks, especially between the Theodosian and Constantinian walls – but a standard late Roman town of maybe 10,000 inhabitants had probably already become, by 463, the largest city of the Mediterranean, with a population estimated at over half a million.

Huge logistical problems had been solved along the way. Part of the solution to one of the most pressing came into Theoderic's view immediately on his left as he rode away from the gate. The area between the Theodosian and Constantinian walls was home to the city's three enormous open-air reservoirs, one of which – that of Aetius – lay beside Theoderic's road. Their remains can still be seen (at least at the time of writing), each home to temporary-looking housing and a couple of football fields. These man-made lakes were supplemented by over a hundred smaller underground cisterns with a total storage capacity between them of over a million cubic metres. But that was only part of the water story. To keep these storage tanks filled, over 250 kilometres of aqueduct snaked away from the city, fanning out to the north and west to ensnare the rainfall of the Thracian hills. As with water, the mechanics of the solution to the problem of food were literally in front of Theoderic's eyes: front left lay the two small harbours of the old Greek city, but straight ahead he could see the two new massive ones built by the emperors Julian and Theodosius to receive the grain fleets whose periodic deliveries, especially from Egypt, fed the city. Each of the harbours was lined with massive granaries where the food was stored.

Whether the thoughts of an eight-year-old Goth from the ruins of provincial Pannonia would have turned to the logistic problems of feeding and watering 500,000 people must, I guess, be slightly doubtful. More probably, his eyes were captured by the city's astonishing range of pristine monuments which dwarfed any of the wrecks he'd seen back home or en route. First in view was Constantine's Church of the Holy Apostles, imperial burial place and home to the skulls of



5th Century Constantinople



St Andrew, St Luke and St Timothy. Theoderic was himself a Christian, so this collection of holy power held immediate significance, and the building itself was stunning too. The route then led past the triumphal column with a statue of the emperor Marcian, conqueror of Attila on the top (part of the column is still visible), then on to the Capitol. There a half-left led Theoderic into the ceremonial heart of the city where a full range of marble monuments succeeded one another at bewildering pace. The forum of Theodosius (now Beyazit Square), complete with another column and triumphal statue (Theodosius himself, of course), the massive triumphal arch complex of the Tetrapylon, the circular forum proper complete with Senate house, then finally to the great imperial centre of hippodrome, palace buildings and the imperial churches of Holy Wisdom and Holy Peace: Hagia Sophia and Hagia Irene. These were not, in 463, the famous domed churches of that name which can still be seen in modern Istanbul, but their predecessors: rectangular, classic basilica churches with gently pitched roofs and not a dome in sight. The story of how these came to be replaced will play a major role in Chapter 3, but for now it is enough to recognize how overwhelming this all must have been. When Theoderic rode through the Charisius Gate, the city was in its pomp, resplendent with marble facades, bronze roofs and gilded statues. The extent of the contrast with everything he had ever known can only have been violently disorienting.<sup>12</sup>

Especially if you have had children, it is only natural to think about Theoderic in the light of youngsters known to you. A quick consultation of my own boys' records tells me that the average eight-year-old male in the UK at the turn of the millennium stood about 128 centimetres (four foot three inches) high and weighed around twenty-eight kilos (fifty-seven pounds). Most eight-year-olds also come equipped with short attention spans, abundant energy and a built-in requirement for frequent inputs (in smallish quantities) of stimulation, food, and affection. But Theoderic was a prince of (reasonably) royal blood, and hence blessed (or otherwise) with an upbringing which would have prepared him better than most for the emotional deprivation and public display demanded by his new life in Constantinople.

He was the oldest male child yet produced by the three brothers, which is why presumably he was sent to guarantee the treaty. Valamer does not seem to have had any male children (the amateur psychologist might wonder if the fact that he had killed his wife's grandfather may

have had something to do with that), but, even if he had, this would not have prevented Theoderic being brought up from the outset as a potential leader. At this point, the leadership of the Pannonian Goths was still being shared, as between Valamer and his brothers. There was no primogeniture, and any male child was a potential leader of the future. Moreover, the job description was both so specific and so dangerous that you needed plenty of alternatives to hand in case of either early death or the possibility that the character of any particular individual failed to match the task. Not only did you have to sit on a horse in the front of the battle line at crunchtime, but you had also more generally to inspire a large number of alpha males with sufficient confidence to follow you enthusiastically into battle in the first place. This requires not only physical strength and personal bravery, but also that infectious charisma which comes from self-confidence, matched too with enough brainpower to know which battles to fight – and which not – and how exactly to wage them.

Succession in these kinds of contexts rarely runs simply from father to eldest son. Historians have often criticized the contemporary Merovingians for failing to develop primogeniture, since the dynasty's succession history is broadly one of repeated infighting. But this is to miss the point. You can only have primogeniture when the personal characteristics of the son don't matter so much; that is, when leadership is not so personal and charismatic. The troops will not be willing to be led into battle either by a poet, for instance, or – not more than once, at least – by an idiotic macho man who may be big and charismatic, but will also throw their lives away in hopeless fights against ridiculous odds. The best analogy to early medieval succession I know of is provided by *The Godfather*, where the chief aides and independent second-rank leaders like Tom Hagen, Luca Brasi and Peter Clemenza carefully evaluate the qualities of Vito Corleone's different sons. Worth thinking about particularly carefully, I think, are the better and worse sides of the oldest of the three:

Sonny Corleone had strength, he had courage. He was generous and his heart was as big as his organ. Yet he did not have his father's humility, but instead a quick, hot temper that led him into errors of judgment. Though he was a great help in his father's business, there were many who doubted that he would become the heir to it.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, the much quieter but smarter and equally brave third son proves infinitely superior to his charismatic but rash eldest brother, while the middle son lacks the qualities ever to rank as a contender. Leading a warband, large or small, was a heavy responsibility, and potential heirs were always being watched.

The qualities of Theoderic's home life are unlikely to have been much conducive to sentimentality, therefore, even in an eight-year-old. We know that he had brothers and sisters, although whether they had been born by 463 is unclear. More likely than not, however, they were the products of various unions. Even semi-royal warband leaders based their unions as much on political necessity as affection or desire, and often formed various simultaneous unions – by both marriage and concubinage – as circumstance dictated. Sometimes, things didn't go quite as planned. Reputedly the Gepid princess Rosamund murdered her husband, the Lombard king Alboin, for too much boasting that he'd turned her defeated father's skull into a drinking cup. Whether Vadamerca harboured inklings of revenge towards Valamer is unrecorded, but, even where royal family life was not so fraught, tensions between wives, mistresses, and their natural ambitions for their various children, made the experience of growing up in a fifth-century, even moderately royal family a million miles away from the norms and hopes of a modern nuclear family. And that's without taking into account tensions between the three brothers. Valamer, Thiudimer and Vidimer may have agreed to share power in their own lifetime, but that doesn't mean they remotely agreed on what was to happen next (anyone who has inherited something jointly from parents and then has to contemplate the next generation will, I think, recognize the experience). Jordanes records that Theoderic's father did not want Valamer to use him as the hostage, and that has the ring of truth about it. The older brother may well have wanted his nephew out of the way in Constantinople, so that he couldn't do anything to establish the ties of respect with the second-rank leadership which would make him the natural heir for the next generation, and maybe also in the hope that he could have sons of his own in the meantime.<sup>14</sup>

Some of these thoughts may be wide of the mark, but their general trajectory is certainly correct. It was no ordinary eight-year-old who rode through the Charisius Gate. He must have been anxious and alarmed, but his upbringing had ensured that he was uncommonly hardened. What exactly he did for the next ten years in Constantinople

is not recorded, but from many other examples of hostages at Roman imperial courts over the preceding centuries, we have a very good idea of the kind of programme on offer. For while Theoderic was certainly there to guarantee that Valamer's Goths would respect the new treaty, and the threat was real enough that he might be executed if they did not, the line of thought behind the Romans' hostage reflex was much more ambitious. To state it succinctly, the Romans aimed to get inside the heads of royal hostages to make them pliable and useful in the longer term. They hoped to engender a mixture of genuine respect for the wonders of Roman civilization and a well-informed awe of Roman imperial power that, having eventually returned home, the ex-hostage would influence the foreign policy of his group in directions that served Rome's interests.

Although certainly watched, but surrounded by some of his own retinue, he would have undergone at least part of the standard education programme for an upper-class Roman (as alluded to in the letter to Anastasius). The longer-term plan, after all, was to shape his opinions, and what better way to implant Roman values than by a Roman education. He would also have been free to move about at court and in the city, attending circuses, theatres, and Church too, since Constantinople still had a distinct non-Nicene Church community at this point. He may even have been attached to the Roman army for the odd operation or two as he grew older. All in all, although there was that faint shadow hanging over him – he really was a hostage after all – he was given every opportunity to learn about everything Roman, with the hope that this would make him a reliable partner if and when he succeeded to the throne back home.<sup>15</sup> But whatever the precise details of the educational programme unloaded in Theoderic's direction, it spectacularly failed to work. Within five years of his return to Pannonia, and still only in his early twenties, he came back to the walls of Constantinople: this time at the head of an army of 10,000 men. How did this happen, and what had gone wrong with his education?