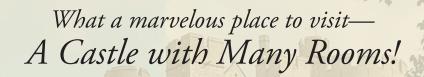




# A Castle with Many Rooms

The Story of the Middle Ages

by Lorene Lambert



- Walk through a thousand years of living history.
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#### Chapter One

## The Long Fall

Glorious no longer, the Roman Empire exits the stage of history

In 376 A.D. a host of people gathered on the northern bank of the Danube River, their faces turned to the south.

Today we know them as Goths, although that is not a name they used for themselves. In their own language, they were *Tervingi*, a word which meant "the forest people." Since ancient times, they had farmed the land in what is now Germany and eastern Europe, building small villages surrounded by fields of barley, wheat, and oats. But the Goths were not content with peacefully tilling the ground; they considered themselves to be warriors above all, and each man's worthiness among his fellow Goths was determined by the fearlessness with which he attacked his enemies in battle.

For all their warlike ways, however, the Goths were facing a foe far more ferocious. In the last half of the fourth century, the Huns, a tribe of fierce men astride swift and sturdy horses, had swept out of Asia like a mighty wind and plundered every Gothic village they could find. So dangerous were they that the Goths gave way before them, abandoned their homes, and fled, wandering west and south, until they had gathered on the Danube riverbank.

The Danube rises in the Black Forest of Germany and flows east for more than 1,700 miles until it empties into the Black Sea. It is broad and deep, the second-longest river in Europe, and in 376 A.D. it was the utmost frontier of the Roman Empire. Its smooth, rolling waters marked the truest sort of border: on the southern bank stood the mighty Roman Empire; to the north were the lands of the people whom the Romans called *Germani*, or Barbarians—the Goths among them.

The Romans considered the people of Germany to be "barbarian" because they thought that anyone who did not speak Latin was uncivilized. The people of ancient Greece had used the word *barbaros*, which meant "babbler," to refer to anyone who was not Greek, and the Romans had taken up both the word and the idea behind it. So to Roman minds, the Goths, in particular, were barbarian because they did not build cities or construct monuments or write their own history. To the Romans, it appeared that the Goths wished for nothing more than to die gloriously in battle; and from behind the safe walls of their strong empire, the Romans eyed the Goths with suspicion and fear.

The Danube River had always protected the northern edge of the empire. No bridges spanned its dark depths, making it difficult for an enemy to invade. If any were so bold as to try, the Roman soldiers guarding the frontier would fall upon them as they attempted to cross the river. The Danube was like a moat protecting a castle, keeping unwanted visitors out.

And for hundreds of years it had worked. The only barbarians who had been able to pass over the river successfully had been small, scattered family clans, who had quickly vanished into the vastness of the Roman Empire and become almost Roman themselves. No Gothic army had ever successfully invaded across the Danube.

Still, the Romans were wary of the menacing Goths, who so loved battle. They stationed soldiers at the frontier and trusted

the river for protection; then they turned most of their attention to other problems.

And Rome, in 376, did indeed have other problems.

For over a thousand years, Rome had been master of the world. It had grown from a simple town, founded 600 years before the birth of Christ, to an enormous empire that ruled immense portions of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Its strong and disciplined army had conquered many lands, and its effective government had transformed them. When Rome conquered a people, it absorbed them into the empire, allowing them to live their lives under Roman protection and, eventually, become Roman citizens themselves. The empire built great cities, marvelous roads, towering aqueducts to carry water for many miles, and graceful bridges with strong, arched pillars. Within the empire, these conquered people lived for the most part in peace and safety, and in return they paid taxes, farmed crops that helped feed many of the empire's hungry mouths, and shepherded their flocks.

But there were problems, nevertheless. As time had gone by, Rome's love for order and civilization had darkened into a lust for wealth and idleness. The emperors, who in the empire's earlier days had ruled only as the "First Among Equals," now began to demand that the people worship them as Dominus et Deus: King and God. Of course, Rome had suffered the occasional bad emperor-men like Nero or Commodus-but the foolish wickedness of such men had been balanced by wiser leaders following after them. Now, though, a steady stream of weaker kings had occupied the throne. Instead of tending to the business of ruling, they had become lazy and more absorbed in pursuing luxury and pleasure. So more and more of the empire's daily life was conducted by town and city officials. Many of these leaders gave way to the temptations of greed and cruelty, taxing the people unfairly or punishing them harshly for the most minor of crimes.

Most importantly, the Empire was too large to be watched over from the throne in only one city. In 285, the emperor Diocletian (die-uh-CLEE-shun) had tried to solve this problem by splitting the empire into two halves, west and east, with the western capital in Rome and the eastern capital in Constantinople (con-stan-tih-NO-pull), which lies in what is now Turkey. But two capitals also meant two emperors, and as you might imagine, men of such power do not share that power easily.

And so in 376, when the host of Goths gathered on the Danube's banks, terrified of the encroaching Huns, the Rome from whom they sought protection was not quite the powerful, almighty Rome that it had been in the past.

The Goths sent messages to Emperor Valens (VAL-enz), who ruled the Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople, requesting permission to cross the river and enter Roman lands peacefully. Although he may have paused at the idea of granting refuge to an enormous army of Goths, Valens nevertheless consented to give them entrance. They could come, he said, if they would agree to farm only vacant land, and if they would provide soldiers to serve in Rome's armies. The Goths quickly agreed and forded the river in safety. In allowing that crossing, however, Valens started in motion a toppling line of dominoes, a series of events that would eventually lead to the entire empire's downfall.

The Roman border, held unbroken for so long, had been breached. As this news made its way north, more and more Gothic clans, fleeing the Huns' terror, poured over the river. With Emperor Valens far away, the burden of dealing with all of these refugees fell upon the local Roman officials, and not all of them were equal to the task. Tax money was demanded, food supplies ran low, and insults were shouted from both sides. In just two years, the Goths decided that they had had enough and rebelled in open warfare against their Roman hosts.

Valens gathered up a portion of his army and marched west

to deal with the Gothic rebels, but in the meantime the Goths had been joined by many more of their kinsmen. On August 9, 378, the two forces met. Valens and his army were slaughtered on the battlefield.

Now the Goths knew something they hadn't known before: the mighty Roman army could be defeated in battle. The godlike emperor could be killed like any other man.

Freed from their awe of Roman power, the Goths began raiding deeper and deeper into the Empire, looting villages and towns. By 409, under the leadership of their war chief Alaric (AL-a-rik), they were laying siege to the city of Rome itself. The men of the city tried to appease him by offering a huge ransom of gold, but Alaric could not be deterred. In August of 410, the Goths entered Rome through one of its gates and pillaged the city for three days and nights.

It was the first time in more than 800 years that Rome had fallen to an enemy. The news spread like a rising tide, drowning all who heard it in shock and despair. Could it be true? Rome was known as "the Eternal City," blessed by God. How could it have been trampled under the boot of a heathen conqueror?

St. Jerome (juh-ROHM), a priest who had lived in Rome and devoted much of his life to translating the Bible into Latin, wrote of his terrible grief when he heard of the city's fall:

"Who could believe that Rome, built upon the conquest of the whole world, would fall to the ground? That the mother herself would become the tomb of her peoples?"

After humbling the Eternal City, the Goths departed, made their way north, and invaded Spain and Gaul, which today we know as France. There they established a kingdom of their own, the land of the Visigoths; we will meet them there again in a chapter to come.

But Rome was not to be spared further sorrow. The way had been shown; other barbarian tribes flooded into the empire from all directions. From Germany, another group of warriors, known as the Vandals, marched all the way through the Roman lands to seize the coast of North Africa. In 455 they launched their own attack against Rome and sacked the city again. Once more the news of Rome's humiliation spread through all the lands that had once bowed low before it.

Meanwhile, pressing ever closer were the Huns, the Asian nomads who struck such fear in the hearts of the Goths. By 400 A.D. they had built a giant empire that stretched from the Alps to the shores of the Caspian Sea. In 434 the Huns gained a new king, whose name you may already know: Attila (uh-TILL-uh). One historian, writing several hundred years later, described Attila the Hun as "a man born into the world to shake the nations, the scourge of all lands." With Attila leading them, the Huns stormed through both halves of the old Roman Empire, winning immense sums of gold from the king of the Eastern Empire in Constantinople, before turning to attack Rome in the west. As the Huns rode toward them, the Roman citizens cowered in fear, certain that the end of the world was at hand.

Rome was rescued from Attila's wrath, though not through any valiant effort on the part of her people. Before Attila could reach the city, he received word that Rome and all the countryside around it were suffering from terrible famine and sickness. Not wishing to risk the health of his soldiers, he turned aside to the north, burning and looting as he went.

Rome—wonder of the world, queen of cities, throne of the Roman Empire—was no longer any of those things. The nobles abandoned the city and fled to the town of Ravenna, which, being situated in the midst of a large marshy swamp, was easier to defend. Without any true or honorable way to determine who should be emperor, what power there was became more and more centered on the army. If a general felt that he had enough men to back him, he would march into Ravenna, kill whoever was currently on the throne, and declare himself King and God, though of course such behavior was neither godly

nor kinglike. Over the course of its last seventy-three years, the Western Roman Empire had twenty-four emperors, and twenty of them were murdered while on the throne.

In 476 then, that precarious throne was occupied by a young man called Romulus Augustulus (ROM-yoo-lus ah-GUST-uh-lus), the "little Caesar." He was only a boy, really, left wearing the emperor's crown when his father, one of those very generals who had briefly seized control, had been forced to flee for his life.

But there was another who wanted that crown, as it seems there always must be. His name was Odoacer (OH-doh-AY-ser), and though a member of the Roman army, he was no Roman. History does not tell us the nature of his ancestry, but he was most likely a Goth or, perhaps, even a Hun.

At the head of his own army, he approached Ravenna, and once he had secured the city, he demanded that Romulus Augustulus surrender the throne and, with it, the title of emperor. The boy, with no other choice before him, agreed. And with that, Odoacer became king.

But king of what? Rome was no longer ruled by Romans. In fact, it no longer ruled anything at all. Devastated by centuries of weak emperors and barbarian invasions, Rome had lost its empire. The city stood alone amidst the dusty memories of its past glory.

The Roman Empire had been the fortress that kept the world stable and secure; when the empire ended, the era we think of as ancient times ended. But a new world would emerge from the dust of the empire's collapse. On Rome's shattered foundation, a majestic castle would rise—a castle of many kingdoms, its rooms filled with splendor and pageantry, sorrow and joy. That is the story that lies before us in the chapters to come: the long and rich tale of the Middle Ages.

#### Chapter Two

### Justinian the Great

The legacy of Rome endures in Byzantium

ighty Rome was no more. But as you may remember, the empire had been divided in two many years before. Though the city of Rome had fallen, and the western half of the empire with it, in the east the empire continued, centered on its magnificent capital: Constantinople.

At its beginning, 600 years or so before the birth of Christ, Constantinople had been nothing more than a modest Greek town called Byzantium (buh-ZAN-tee-um). But while the town may have been humble, its location was not. It stood on a triangle of land that jutted out into the Bosphorus Strait, a gleaming ribbon of water that was the gateway between Europe and Asia.

If you spin your globe and find the Mediterranean Sea, follow it eastward, past Greece and the Aegean Sea and into the smaller Sea of Marmara. Do you see a little further east the deep waters of the Black Sea? Only a thin bridge of land separates the Black Sea from the Sea of Marmara, and that neck of land, in turn, is divided by a narrow channel: the Strait of Bosphorus. This tiny opening is the only meeting place between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean where a ship could sail

from the shores of western Asia to the far reaches of Europe. There, perched like a watchtower above the Bosphorus Strait, sat Byzantium. Whoever controlled the town also controlled the Strait, and therefore, all of the ships traveling back and forth between Europe and Asia.

Of course, such an important spot would not go unclaimed by the power that was Rome, and so in 324 A.D., the great emperor Constantine declared that Byzantium would be the site of a grand new capital, a wondrous city modeled after Rome itself. When he died in 337, the city was given his name, Constantinople.

After the empire was divided, Constantinople remained its eastern capital, the only Roman capital now that Rome itself had fallen. The city was immensely strong: the Bosphorus Strait protected its southern and eastern ramparts, and a deep inlet called the Golden Horn guarded it to the north. Any attacker would have no choice but to approach from the west, and there the emperors had caused a huge wall to be built, three layers deep. Within such a dauntless fortress, the kings of Constantinople felt safe from any enemy.

And yet on an afternoon in January of 532, heavy columns of black smoke rose over the city's center. Citizens cowered in their houses, their doors barred, listening fearfully as bands of armed men ran howling through the streets, striking down anyone they could find. In the palace, the emperor sat hunched on his throne, his face in his hands, his wife by his side, his last few loyal advisors huddled nearby. Constantinople was burning, but it had come under no attack from without. The proud city had been brought to its knees by its own people.

And it had all started with a game.

Of course, people have cheered and shouted at sporting events for thousands of years, and the Romans of Constantinople were no different. They had even built their own arena, just like the stadium where you might go to watch a baseball