





















A telling weakness of the entire Roman administration can be traced to the increasing numbers of non-Roman mercenaries in the army. Often recruited in Balkan regions and commanded by their own leaders, who were paid for each campaign in which they participated, some pursued their ambition to occupy imperial territory as federate allies of the emperor, others merely threatened to invade and destroy. As the influence of these auxiliary troops grew throughout the fourth century, they began to dominate the Roman army and spread their adherence to Arian Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Their Germanic and Gothic generals gained senior military posts, deepened a serious division within the army, and promoted the rival form of Christian belief that was often shared by hostile groups beyond the empire's frontiers. The reduction of imperial fighting power became clear at the disastrous battle of Adrianople in 378, when Gothic forces killed Emperor Valens together with many of his generals in an unprecedented and total rout.

## The Achievements of Theodosius I (379–95)

As a result of this devastating defeat, the young western emperor, Gratian, had to call on Theodosius, a disgraced Roman general who had retired to Spain after his father's execution, to save Constantinople from the Goths. Theodosius duly set out on the long journey from Spain to the East. His progress was interrupted by confrontations and then negotiations with the Goths over their determination to settle within the empire on the richer land south of the Danube. After battles with Sarmatians near Sirmium in the Balkans, Theodosius was acclaimed emperor by his victorious troops, and Gratian made his appointment official on 19 January 379 (Plate 1). Theodosius then settled a large number of Gothic families on imperial territory as federate forces, obliged to fight for the empire. His long reign constituted another major turning point in imperial history, marked by his successful campaigns against hostile forces, his promotion of Christianity as the official religion, and his decision to install his two sons as emperors, which marked the division of the East from the West.

In the history of Ravenna Theodosius is especially important as the father of Empress Galla Placidia, who ruled as regent in Ravenna from

425 for thirteen years. The emperor had married his wife Flaccilla in Spain and they had a son, Arcadius, born before 379, a daughter Pulcheria, who died young, and in 384 another son, Honorius. Theodosius also adopted his niece Serena, when her father died; he made her legally his daughter and married her to his leading general, Stilicho. After Empress Flaccilla died in 386, Theodosius negotiated a second marriage to Galla, a princess of the dynasty of Valens, which was celebrated in Thessalonike in 387. From this second marriage the only child that survived to adulthood was Galla Placidia, half-sister of the young princes Arcadius and Honorius.

Theodosius was not only a most pious Christian, strongly anti-heretic, but he also firmly opposed the polytheist cults and issued laws against their celebrations and sacrifices. Following the example of Constantine I he summoned another Universal Council of bishops to Constantinople in 381, where they repeated the condemnation of Arianism and agreed a slightly revised version of the Nicene Creed of 325. The council also issued several canons – ecclesiastical laws – including one that elevated Constantinople to a status equal to Rome.<sup>11</sup> Bishops of Rome considered this deeply insulting to St Peter (*Petrus*) the rock, *petra*, on which Christ had founded his church and which they claimed gave them superior authority. While the canon became a source of much rivalry between Old and New Rome, Theodosius had given legal standing to the emergent new civilization of early Christendom. Like Constantine, Theodosius campaigned throughout the entire Mediterranean world; he paid only one ceremonial visit to the ancient capital, in June 389 to celebrate a major victory. In Constantinople/New Rome he erected an Egyptian obelisk on the Hippodrome, mounted on a base that describes his achievements and portrays both the erection of the monument and the emperor receiving homage and bestowing victory wreaths to competitors in the races.

In 394 after victory over his western rival at the Frigidus, Theodosius went to Milan and summoned Serena, who was looking after his youngest children following the death of Empress Galla. Leaving Arcadius, then aged seventeen, in Constantinople, Serena duly travelled from the eastern capital with Honorius, aged ten, and Galla Placidia, about three, and all their staff, and arrived in Milan just in time to witness the emperor's death on 17 January 395. As decreed, his two sons assumed imperial power under the dominant influence of their military

guardians, Rufinus in the East and Stilicho in the West. Theodosius had probably arranged for their baby half-sister to be brought up in the imperial household of Serena and Stilicho, where Galla Placidia lived for the next seven years. In planning the division of the empire, Theodosius may have hoped to prevent his sons from quarrelling over their inheritance, but rivalry between the two courts in Constantinople and Milan hampered any intended co-operation, especially when the nominal rulers were so young and inexperienced.<sup>12</sup>

## The Child Emperor Honorius

In January 395 the ten-year-old Honorius thus became emperor of the western Roman Empire at the court based in Milan (Plate 2), where his guardian and very successful general (*magister militum*) Stilicho assumed effective control. With his wife Serena, an imperial princess in her own right, Stilicho had three children, Maria, Eucherius and Thermantia, who were all employed in advantageous marriage alliances. In 398 Maria, then about twelve years old, was married to the young Emperor Honorius, aged thirteen, and Eucherius was betrothed to Galla Placidia, integrating the orphaned imperial princess into Stilicho's family plans. It was a typical Roman betrothal of young children, though it did not lead on to marriage and the anticipated birth of a new generation. Nor did Honorius and Maria have any children before she died in about 407/8. Stilicho then persuaded the emperor to marry his second daughter, Thermantia, trying to ensure his own family's place within the ruling dynasty.

But at the turn of the fourth century Stilicho and the imperial court in Milan received news that Alaric, chieftain of the Visigoths, had ravaged Greece and was threatening to invade Italy. By 401 he had crossed the Julian Alps (at the far east of the range) and laid siege to Aquileia. He moved on to besiege Milan in the winter of 401–2 as well as capturing many cities. Stilicho defeated the Goths in the summer of 402 (although Alaric escaped with most of his cavalry), and then advised Honorius that it might be wise to move the court away from Milan to a safer centre. This was the moment when Ravenna was selected as a suitable residence for the rulers of the western half of the Roman Empire.

## Ravenna, Imperial Capital

They chose the city of Ravenna partly because it was considered impregnable and partly because of its large port at Classis. The city was well served by river connections to the wide valley of the Po, rich in agricultural produce that could be stored inside the city if it was ever besieged, yet protected by treacherous marshes and lakes.<sup>13</sup> Built in the second century BC on sandbanks that protruded from the surrounding waters, Ravenna followed a typical square garrison pattern, the *quadrata romana*. It was considered a secure city where distinguished hostages or refugees could be accommodated. Bato of Pannonia, who had been forced to march in Emperor Tiberius' triumph, was confined in what was in effect a glorified prison; similarly, the wife of Arminius of the Cherusci brought up her son there. In AD 43 Emperor Claudius constructed a ceremonial entrance to the city, the Golden Gate, dated by his inscription.<sup>14</sup> The monument was demolished in the sixteenth century but drawings preserve an idea of its grandeur and a few fragments of the elegant sculptural decoration remain in the National Museum. The area around Classis also housed a school for training gladiators, who were said to benefit from the sea air. As naval challenges declined, the harbour at Classis was gradually adapted for the transport of goods across the Adriatic and throughout the Mediterranean. Shipbuilding, sailmaking and related maritime skills continued to be commemorated on funerary monuments, such as the second-century stele to Publius Longidienus, 'FABR.NAVALIS' (shipbuilder).<sup>15</sup>

Water-management was clearly necessary in the region where so many tributaries of the Po river descended towards the sea. Two major channels, the Padenna and the Lamisa, flowed around and into the city, creating a wide moat outside the city walls and a series of canals within them. In the sixth century Procopius described this:

This city of Ravenna . . . is so situated as not to be easily approached either by ships or by a land army . . . A land army cannot approach it at all; for the river Po . . . and other navigable rivers together with some marshes, encircle it on all sides and so cause the city to be surrounded by water.<sup>16</sup>

The Po's heavy silt also meant that the canals and river outlets were regularly blocked, and boatmen on barges stirred up the sediment with their poles as they punted around in the marshes. Visitors commented on the ubiquity of water but the lack of drinkable supplies, which was relieved by Emperor Trajan in the early second century when he ordered the construction of a major aqueduct, 35km long, to bring water from the Apennines.<sup>17</sup> Even so, floods and earthquakes in 393, 429, 443 and 467 caused buildings to sink with serious damage.

The three intimately linked settlements – Ravenna, Caesarea and Classis – already commanded the attention of fourth-century emperors as an important location for watching naval and commercial activity in the Adriatic. Indeed, Honorius had visited the city in 399, and in that year, he united the province of Flaminia with neighbouring Picenum, a coastal region to the south. Thus enhanced as the seat of a governor, Ravenna acquired a full array of Roman administrative and cultural buildings, as well as some impressive villas such as the *Domus dei Tappeti di Pietra* (house of stone carpets). In the circuit of its old city walls the Golden Gate made a particularly monumental, triumphal entrance that led to the heart of the city past an area associated with Hercules (perhaps a temple), the theatre and other urban facilities. The combined settlements were capable of housing and supporting a large additional force, such as the detachment of 4,000 soldiers, sent from Constantinople in the early fifth century, that remained in Ravenna. Like all Roman cities, Ravenna was governed by a local council (*curia*) of officials elected annually to collect taxation, provide basic services and maintain the city's walls and public buildings, though the council was under the ultimate authority of the commander of the fleet.

In addition to the governor and the naval commander, the city also had a bishop, whose status was rather lowly in comparison with the established sees of Milan and Aquileia. Severus is the first officially recorded bishop who attended a church council held at Serdica in 343 (Plate 52). The earliest references to a Christian presence in the area appear at Classis, which also claimed to house the relics of several early Christian martyrs, notably St Apollinaris who was later identified as the founding bishop of the city. It's quite likely that the earliest bishops resided there, but the episcopal centre was moved to Ravenna as soon as the imperial court was established, and the first cathedral building was probably begun in the early fifth century. Over the winter of 402–3,

as this tripartite settlement on the Adriatic coast welcomed the emperor and his court, it took on its new role as the imperial capital of the West.

No contemporary writer provides a description of this process and how Honorius was received by the city. But we can imagine that he rode in through the Golden Gate, accompanied by his personal guards, to be acknowledged by the naval commander, the provincial governor and the bishop, cheered by the local inhabitants. The bulk of the court's equipment, furniture, records and supporting staff probably arrived by river transport along the Po from Milan. In December 402 the emperor's presence at Ravenna is confirmed by laws issued there and coins struck in his name at the new mint he established.<sup>18</sup> Like other capital cities created in the third and fourth centuries, Ravenna now experienced a major expansion as new and more substantial accommodation was rapidly constructed to house the court, part of the army, the imperial government's larger bureaucracy, officials and their families, Christian clergy, merchants and craftsmen, who followed the court to its new base. Transforming a fairly small Roman city with a large port into the leading centre of the western half of the empire was only achieved by substantial large-scale investment, which probably remained in the hands of the emperor and his immediate circle of officials; the city council may have found its power somewhat reduced from the full autonomous control normally exercised by such bodies. By the mid-fifth century, when fragmentary records of its activity are preserved, its role appears to be focused on the maintenance of civic archives, rather than raising taxes.

Not all the ruling elite of the western empire approved of the choice of Ravenna: some members of the Senate hoped that the emperor would return to live in Rome; other military advisers suggested that Arles should be made the new centre of government. Honorius was clearly sensitive to the disappointment of the Roman faction and made a point of visiting the ancient capital frequently, in marked contrast with his father's neglect. Late in 403 he celebrated an imperial entry (*adventus*) at Rome to mark Stilicho's military victory over Alaric at Pollentia (modern Pollenza), which had protected the city and the emperor from the Gothic leader's invasion of Italy (401–3).<sup>19</sup> Following the formal ceremonial of his arrival, Honorius retired to the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill, and at New Year the Senate nominated him as one of the consuls for 404. Assuming the office of consul involved more

choreographed processions in the palace and the Forum, culminating in the emperor presiding over military parades, games and chariot racing in the Circus Maximus, funded by him in his capacity as the new consul. These ceremonies, on which senators often spent vast sums in order to ensure the promotion of their sons, symbolized the status associated with honorific titles, as well as Roman traditions of lavish popular entertainment.<sup>20</sup>

While Ravenna could not compete with these ingrained traditions, Honorius returned to the task of creating facilities for the imperial court and administration in his new capital, the provision of grand churches for the Catholic population and the beautification of the city. Leaving Stilicho to manage military defence and to appoint civilian administrators, Honorius appears to have given up any ambition to rule in the manner of previous emperors. His move to Ravenna, however, ensured the survival of the Theodosian dynasty and provided his half-sister Galla Placidia with a stable court environment in which she grew up. Under his patronage, which she later continued, the city was endowed with the first of a series of extraordinary buildings that signalled its position as the new capital of the western Roman Empire.



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