

The Battle of Adrianople: A Reappraisal

By Robert Eisenberg

The Battle of Adrianople (AD 378) is perhaps one of the most studied battles in history. It is seen as a major turning point in both the history of the Roman Empire and in the evolution of warfare. There have been numerous studies of the causes the battle and its outcome, yet each one tends to focus on one particular cause. This study will present a synthesized appraisal of the reasons behind the Roman defeat at Adrianople, including both proximate and ultimate causes. While there are many determining factors in the course of any battle, this paper will focus on the setting of the encounter, as well as on long-term general trends in the composition of the Roman Army and the evolution of 'barbarian' policy. Additionally, the short-term causes for the strengths and weaknesses of both armies, the role of the commanders, the function of intelligence gathering, as well as the 'God' factor will be examined.

The principal source for the Battle of Adrianople is the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Ammianus' account is generally considered to be the most trustworthy and accurate, as he wrote within a short period after the battle, and was himself a military man, thus knowledgeable of technical details. Ammianus' credibility is further supported by the fact that he openly confesses when he is unsure of details and presents opposing viewpoints instead of only including his own.¹ However, there are certain weaknesses in his account. He is occasionally inaccurate with regards to geographical position and chronology.² Moreover, as a pagan, Ammianus tends to moralize about the general decline of Roman society, for which he blames Christianity, an accusation which carries over into his descriptions of individuals. Finally, Ammianus often neglects to give a description of the course of major battles, instead focusing on creating dramatic rhetoric.³

The other source for the battle is the pagan Zosimus, who attempts to trace the decline of the Roman Empire from a pagan perspective. Zosimus tends to take a negative attitude towards Christianity, and he is openly hostile to several Christian emperors, blaming them for Rome's decline. The ecclesiastical historians, Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, and Theodoret all briefly mention the Battle of Adrianople, though not in detail. Moreover, they usually refer to the battle as an act of divine punishment for the sins of Valens and the empire as a whole. Thus, Zosimus, as well as the Christian historians, cannot be trusted to give unbiased accounts.⁴

1 Regarding the death of Valens, for example. See Amm. Marc. 31.13.12-16.

2 See Amm. Marc. 31.11.1-2 and 31.12.1-3.

3 Gary A. Crump, *Ammianus Marcellinus as a Military Historian* (Wiesbaden: Franz -Steiner Verlag, 1975), 95-96.

4 See Zos. 4.24; Soz. Hist. eccl. 6.40; Theod. 4.32. Only Socrates Scholasticus admits that there are differing accounts (Soc. Hist. eccl. 4.38). See also Crump 1975, 29-30.

Before any detailed analysis of the Battle of Adrianople can be made, the exact location of the battle must be established. None of the ancient sources indicate the precise location, but provide only a general description of the geography.⁵ While Ammianus is not particularly helpful in this regard, some hints can nonetheless be gleaned from his account. Ammianus specifies that Valens' army had to march over "broken ground" for eight Roman miles (7.4 miles), along what modern scholars believe was an east-northeast road leading to the edges of the Haemus Mountains.⁶ (See Figure 1) On the other hand, the eighteenth century historian Edward Gibbon, using the later account of Hydatius, argues that Valens actually marched twelve Roman miles (11 miles), as he supposes eight miles to be too small a distance for a great Gothic army.⁷ However, Gibbon relies on a source which is greatly distanced in time from the battle; further, his argument rests in reconciling distances in light of presumed army strengths. However, the strength of ancient armies tended to be grossly inflated in the sources. Instead of increasing the distance of the battlefield from the city of Adrianople to accommodate the army strengths, these strength estimates should be reduced to fit within the distance recorded by Ammianus, a more reliable and contemporary author. Modern scholars have furnished better researched hypotheses as to the location of the battle. The general consensus is that the battle was fought in the northwestern corner of modern Turkey, close to the Bulgarian border. The village of Muratçali lies approximately eight Roman miles from Adrianople (modern Edirne). Muratçali is situated among low hills (which in Roman times were likely cultivated with vineyards and olive groves), and a nearby spring, which would make the spot ideal for the Visigoth camp, as it was well supplied and easily defended by placing the wagon laager on the high ground.⁸

Changes in the Roman Armies

The Roman legions in the later Empire were not of the same size or superiority as they had been during the Republic and early Empire. Ammianus documents on several occasions the small size of late Roman legions. In 356, Ammianus mentions that Julian's rearguard of two legions was attacked and almost destroyed. He also writes that at Strasbourg in 357, Julian's entire forces numbered only 13,000, implying that these two legions would have been quite small as well.⁹ Moreover, when describing the siege of Amida of 359, he notes that there were perhaps 20,000-25,000 people trapped in the city, including

5 See Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History: The Germans*, trans. Walter J. Renfro, Jr. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 281.

6 Amm. Marc. 31.12.11; Crump 1975, 93.

7 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. II (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1845), 516.

8 Soz. Hist. eccl. 6.40; Alessandro Barbero, *The Day of the Barbarians: The Battle that Led to the Fall of the Roman Empire*, trans. John Cullen (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), 100.

9 Amm. Marc. 16.2.10, 16.12.2.

seven legions.¹⁰ His description of the city as *civitatis ambitum non nimium amplae*¹¹ would imply a small percentage of civilians. M.J. Nicasie suggests that there were 5,000 citizens and another 2,500 refugees, which would leave room for approximately 15,000 soldiers to make up these seven legions plus the existing city garrison. At most then, Nicasie calculates that each legion could have included 1,500 men and as few as 1,000 men.¹² Similarly, Ammianus mentions that in 373, the Armenian king Para routed a Roman legion with a force of only 300 men.¹³ Likewise, Zosimus writes that Julian's army in Gaul in 355 consisted solely of 360 men who were badly armed.¹⁴ In another example from Britain in 456, four 'companies' of British soldiers were killed, totalling 4,000 men, again implying groupings of 1,000 men.¹⁵

This shrinking of legion strength underlines the Romans' increasing difficulties with recruitment. Valens had always found it difficult to maintain his army's strength through recruitment, and after 369 (following the battle against Athanaric at Isaccea), he was no longer able to use the auxiliary forces supplied by the Goths.¹⁶ Likewise, Julian's barbarian recruits had only enlisted on the condition that they not be forced to serve beyond the Alps.¹⁷ The fact that the Romans would acquiesce to such a demand clearly shows their overwhelming need for these soldiers.

The decline in fighting power forced the Romans to rely increasingly on barbarian troops. There was a common practice of swelling imperial armies before major campaigns by hiring Germanic and Hunnic soldiers.¹⁸ Interestingly, the 'barbarisation' of the Roman army was perceived as weakening the discipline and training of the legions, which was their traditional advantage over the barbarians.¹⁹ However, by the time of Adrianople, the barbarian soldiers were considered among the best units.²⁰ Another effect of the 'barbarisation' of the army was a change in the structure of the army, evident in the increasing shift towards cavalry. Whereas in the early Imperial period, the ratio of cavalry to infantry was approximately one to ten or twelve, by Adrianople, it was one to three.²¹

Valens' armies were spread thinly around the Eastern Empire in garrisons. In order to deal

10 Amm. Marc. 19.2.14.

11 Amm. Marc. 19.2.14: meaning that there was a small civilian population in this city.

12 M.J. Nicasie, *Twilight of Empire: The Roman Army from the Reign of Diocletian until the Battle of Adrianople* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1998), 70.

13 Amm. Marc. 30.1.5-7.

14 Zos. 3.3.

15 Nicasie 1998, 71.

16 Noel Lenski, *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A.D.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 324.

17 Amm. Marc. 20.4.4.

18 Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 38.

19 Nicasie 1998, 100.

20 Barbero 2005, 102.

21 Richard A. Gabriel and Donald W. Boose, Jr., *The Great Battles of Antiquity: A Strategic and Tactical Guide to Great Battles that Shaped the Development of War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), 442.

with the Gothic threat, he was forced to withdraw forces from Isauria and to settle a truce with the Persians and Arabs in order to be able to withdraw his forces from the east. He further requested reinforcements from the west from Gratian. These actions illustrate the weakness of Roman military strength.²² Nevertheless, Roman generals still commanded the army and the soldiers were well trained and supplied, thus demonstrating that while the Roman armies were not as strong as they once were, they were by no means on the verge of collapse, and were still an effective fighting force.²³

Changes in Roman Policy towards the Barbarians

Since the withdrawal from Dacia in 271-72 under Aurelian, the Romans had been able to control the Danube frontier largely by using the river as a first line of defence. However, after campaigning on the far side of the Danube, Valens was forced to conclude a truce with the leader of the Tervingi, Athanaric, in 369, as he was unable to defeat him in a decisive battle. The lasting animosity between Valens and Athanaric caused Valens to support Athanaric's rival, Fritigern, who later usurped Athanaric's role as leader of the Tervingi.²⁴ Then, in 376, Valens agreed to Fritigern's request to settle his people within the Roman Empire, and even aided them in their crossing of the Danube. Ammianus sees this concession of land to the Goths as one of the ultimate causes of both the disaster at Adrianople, as well as the 'decline' of the empire,²⁵ since by ceding the Danube willingly, the Romans had abandoned their best defence against the barbarians.

Once the Goths and Romans were at war in 376-77, the primary Roman army in the Balkans under Lupicinus was annihilated at a battle nine miles from Marcianople, effectively leaving the Goths unchallenged for another two years, and forcing Valens to raise a new field army.²⁶ Valens nonetheless waited over a full year before reluctantly moving his forces westward to counter the threat, a delay Ammianus criticizes heavily.²⁷ However, as has already been shown, Valens could not be faulted for his late arrival as he needed time to levy his troops from their garrisons and to conclude treaties on his eastern border.

The Opposing Armies: Romans

While it is necessary to understand the ultimate cause of the Roman defeat at Adrianople, the proximate causes must also be addressed. One of the most important of these was the composition of the two armies. The size of Valens' army at Adrianople is

²² Lenski 2002, 356.

²³ Gabriel and Boose 1991, 444; Nicasio 1998, 100.

²⁴ Soc. 4.33.

²⁵ Amm. Marc. 31.4.5. See also Soc. *Hist. eccl.* 4.34.

²⁶ Amm. Marc. 31.5.9.

²⁷ Amm. Marc. 31.11.1; Soc. *Hist. eccl.* 4.38. This delay could have been due to Valens' fear of 'Asia' which resulted from a foreboding prophecy he received. Amm. Marc. 31.14.8.

extremely difficult to calculate, as Ammianus only mentions a few units by name,²⁸ leaving modern historians to debate over its size. The high-end estimate places the number of Roman soldiers at 35,000-40,000 men and horse, however the general consensus is that the army numbered significantly less.²⁹ Nicasie argues that since Valens was confident enough to face Fritigern without reinforcements from Gratian,³⁰ then his force must have been equal or slightly superior to that of the Goths, thus totalling approximately 20,000 men.³¹ The lower number is preferred for two main reasons. As already discussed, Valens had great difficulty in filling his ranks, and cannot be expected to have had such a great number of available soldiers without denuding all of his garrisons. Moreover, by the time he arrived in Constantinople from Antioch, his forces and their quality had diminished. He had lost control of any remaining forces in Thrace, while his *comitatenses* (field army) had been thinned by the Battle of Ad Salices (377).³²

In terms of armaments, the Roman soldier at Adrianople was arrayed with weaponry that would have been unrecognisable to earlier Roman armies. The *gladius* sword had been replaced by the barbarian *spatha*, while the *pilum* had given way to a stabbing spear which was more useful against cavalry. Moreover, the straight-sided *scutum* shield was replaced with a light oval shield, while most legionnaires had little (if any) body armour. Even the traditional Roman helmet was replaced by the lighter barbarian *intercisa*³³ (see figures 2 and 3). Unfortunately for the Roman soldiers at Adrianople, after a prolonged fight, most of their spears would have been broken, leaving them with only their *spatha* swords, weapons which were ineffective against cavalry.³⁴

Morale was also an important factor, and before the battle it was in fact quite low. When Valens reached Constantinople on May 30, 378, he was met by a rioting populace which undoubtedly demoralised his troops.³⁵ Furthermore, Valens was forced to appease his soldiers by paying them and by “frequently addressing them in courteous speeches,”³⁶ while also pressing a number of veterans back into service.³⁷ Thus, in terms of manpower, it appears as if the Romans had a slight advantage, yet the soldiers’ armaments and morale put them at a disadvantage.

28 Amm. Marc. 31.12.16, 31.13.8-9, 31.14.18.

29 Gabriel and Boose 1991, 452.

30 The difficulty associated with Valens’ intelligence reports on Gothic troop levels will be discussed later.

31 Nicasie 1998, 246. Barbero agrees with this figure, but arrives at it by constructing the total size from the casualty figures (Barbero 2005, 102).

32 Soc. Hist. eccl. 4.38; Soz. Hist. eccl. 6.39; Amm. Marc. 31.7.1-2. While ‘*comitatenses*’ literally translates into ‘company,’ it more accurately means ‘field army,’ the connotation being that it was used as a mobile force and was not used to hold the frontier line (this was the task of the *limitanei*).

33 Gabriel and Boose 1991, 439.

34 Barbero 2005, 110.

35 Amm. Marc. 31.11.1; Soc. Hist. eccl. 4.38; Soz. Hist. eccl. 6.39.

36 Amm. Marc. 31.11.1.

37 Amm. Marc. 31.12.1; Zos. 4.23.

The Opposing Armies: Goths

While the Roman scouts placed Gothic strength at 10,000 men,³⁸ the actual number was likely substantially higher. The historian Hans Delbrück places the number of Gothic soldiers at 12,000-15,000, a number extrapolated from logistical constraints. He notes that the Goths' march from Cabyle to Adrianople could only have occurred on one specific road along the left bank of the Tundscha River via the Bujuk Derbent Pass. Delbrück infers that Fritigern's army must have been small enough to march along this single road, and that the column was not more than one day's march long, so as not to risk a premature confrontation with the Romans.³⁹ Thus, to the 12,000-15,000 soldiers must be added another 55,000 non-combatants and slaves, totalling approximately 70,000 people, plus another 20,000-30,000 deserting Germanic allies.⁴⁰

However, while the size of the Gothic army can be established at 12,000-15,000 soldiers, its composition must still be explored. While Ammianus' account credits the Gothic victory to their overwhelming cavalry,⁴¹ modern scholars believe that it was unlikely that Gothic cavalry was very large, due to the increased pressure on supplies needed to maintain horses, as well as the legitimate point that the Romans would not have allowed the Goths to keep many horses upon their admittance into the empire. Also, it seems likely that the Goths would have sold whatever horses they had been allowed to keep for food during the famine in 376. Thus, the Gothic cavalry can be realistically estimated to have numbered no more than 3,000-4,000.⁴²

It is important to note that the modern term 'Goths' is misleading, as the Gothic peoples were actually divided into many, often rival, groups. However, by 378, Roman hostility and maltreatment had forced the various peoples who had by then crossed the Danube to unite into a single army under Fritigern.⁴³ Between 376 and 378, Fritigern's Tervingi was joined by the Greuthungi under Alatheus and Saphrax, escaped Roman slaves, and by numerous other Gothic tribes, Alans and even Huns.⁴⁴ Perhaps most interesting, is that Ammianus ceases to refer to Fritigern's forces as Tervingi and begins to call them either *Gothi* or *barbari*.⁴⁵

As with the Romans, the Goths' weaponry is well documented. Valens' admittance of the Goths into Roman territory in 376 was conditional upon their surrender of their weapons to the Romans, a process which was relatively successful, as Ammianus writes that in the early battles between Goths and Romans, many Goths armed themselves

38 Amm. Marc. 31.12.3. The intelligence factor will be dealt with later.

39 Delbrück 1980, 276-78.

40 Gabriel and Boose 1991, 448-51.

41 Amm. Marc. 31.12.17.

42 Nicasie 1998, 245.

43 Ward-Perkins 2005, 50.

44 Amm. Marc. 31.5.4, 31.6.1, 31.7.7, 31.8.4, 31.9.3.

45 Amm. Marc. 31.5.8-9; See also Lenski 2002, 331.

with the weapons of fallen Romans, and some even fought with clubs at the Battle of Ad Salices.⁴⁶ However, Zosimus concludes that this policy was largely irrelevant, since in the confusion that followed the initial river crossing, many barbarians were able to smuggle their weapons.⁴⁷

Regarding the weaponry of the Gothic infantry, the Roman military tactician Vegetius implies that a large part of the force was archers, as he writes that Gothic arrows were the cause of many Roman defeats.⁴⁸ The rest of the infantry was armed with the *scramasax* (short sword) or the *spatha* (long sword), while others carried the *fransica* (battle-axe) which could easily split Roman shields and helmets. Some of them also carried wooden shields which protected them from the opening sally of Roman arrows, while the use of the wagon laager for defence paralleled the functions of the Roman field camps.⁴⁹ Another interesting advantage enjoyed by Fritigern's army over previous Gothic forces was that a large number of its soldiers had served previously in the Roman army, and were thus well-acquainted with the terrain and with Roman military doctrine.⁵⁰

The Role of the Commanders: Romans

Commanders often play important roles in determining the outcome of a battle, and Adrianople is a prime example of this. At Adrianople, the outcome of the battle was decisively influenced by the actions of the Gothic commander, Fritigern, and by the inability of the Roman commanders to react effectively. The blame for the Roman disaster can thus be placed jointly on Valens himself and on his generals.

Under Valens the military bureaucracy was expanded so that there were two *praesentales* (commanders' of the imperial escort army), one *magister equitum per Orientem* (master of the horse in the Prefecture of the East) and two more each of *magister peditum* (master of the foot troops) and *magister equitum* (master of the horse), thus totalling seven *magistri* in the eastern Empire.⁵¹ As if this excessive bureaucracy was not harmful enough (for reasons that will be seen later), Ammianus notes that two of his generals, Profuturus and Trajan were "both officers of rank and ambition, but of no great skill in war."⁵²

Furthermore, Valens' reception of Fritigern's emissary – "a presbyter of the Christian religion (as he called himself)"⁵³ – has often been interpreted as a 'weak spot' of Valens for Arian magistrates. This acceptance of Fritigern's delaying tactic can be seen as

46 Amm. Marc. 31.6.3, 31.5.9, 31.7.12.

47 Zos. 4.20.

48 Veg. Mil. 1.20.

49 J.F.C. Fuller, *A Military History of the Western World From the Earliest times to the Battle of Lepanto* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1954), 268; Gabriel and Boose 1991, 449; Barbero 2005, 107.

50 Fuller 1954, 268; Delbrück 1980, 269; Gabriel and Boose 1991, 449.

51 N.J.E. Austin and N.B. Rankov, *Exploratio: Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* (London: Routledge, 1995), 229.

52 Amm. Marc. 31.7.1.

53 Amm. Marc. 31.12.8.

an attempt by Valens to also delay the battle so that Gratian's reinforcements would have time to arrive, without Valens being aware that the Gothic cavalry was on its way back to the battlefield.⁵⁴ However, as will be examined, this defence is unlikely, as Valens did not want Gratian to arrive before the battle began.

While Ammianus describes Valens' vices, he neglects to mention his pride, which the ecclesiastical historians tend to focus on, perhaps because of its religious implications. In their histories, Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen both write that Valens was provoked to rush out of Constantinople to battle as a result of the taunts of cowardice he experienced in the city.⁵⁵ Similarly, Valens' pride prevented him from acknowledging the military knowledge of his generals; Theodoret writes that Valens "spurned [his] excellent counsellors."⁵⁶ Valens' religious beliefs may have played a role in his disregard for his advisors' warnings. His Arian beliefs likely precluded cooperation and actually sparked enmity with one of his chief commanders, Victor, who was a zealous Catholic.⁵⁷ Likewise, Ammianus blames Valens for his reluctance to share the glory of the assumed victory over the Goths, and portrays him as openly jealous of his young nephew.⁵⁸ While this may very likely be true, it is possible that Valens, remembering his inability to inflict a decisive blow on Athanaric, resolved to attack Fritigern as quickly as possible to prevent him from escaping into the countryside.⁵⁹

As previously mentioned, Valens' expansion of the military bureaucracy had profoundly detrimental effects. Valens' military staff was fractured in its advice to the emperor over what course of action to take regarding Fritigern's entreaties. Ammianus writes,

Some, following the advice of Sebastian, recommended with urgency that he should at once go forth to battle; while Victor, master-general of the cavalry, a Sarmatian by birth, but a man of slow and cautious temper, recommended him to wait for his imperial colleague, and this advice was supported by several other officers, who suggested that the reinforcement of the Gallic army would be likely to awe the fiery arrogance of the barbarians.⁶⁰

One historian explains this internal division in terms of petty jealousy between the commanders. Sebastian's recent successes against raiding Gothic bands had likely aroused envy

54 For the attack on Valens see Gibbon 1845, 516. For his defence, see Delbrück 1980, 274.

55 *Soc. Hist. eccl.* 4.38; *Soz. Hist. eccl.* 6.39.

56 *Theod. Hist. eccl.* 4.32.

57 Barbero 2005, 95.

58 *Amm. Marc.* 31.12.1, 31.12.7.

59 *Zos.* 4.24; Nicasie 1998, 244.

60 *Amm. Marc.* 31.12.7. According to Zosimus, Sebastian recommended not to attack at once, but to delay until Gratian arrived (*Zos.* 4.23).

in his fellow generals, and therefore, they advised the emperor to withhold from battle not because it was a prudent strategy, but because it would undermine Sebastian's credibility.⁶¹

Similarly, this internecine conflict between the generals may have contributed to the two major tactical errors of the battle. By the time the Roman forces had arrived at the Gothic camp, they had been on a forced march for eight miles without food, drink or rest, factors which Ammianus notes hindered their ability to fight effectively.⁶² Likewise, Sozomen explains that the Romans were attacked by the Gothic cavalry before they had deployed into battle formation, while Ammianus adds that the Roman forces were still stretched out along the road⁶³ (see figure 4). These tactical errors resulted solely from the generals' lack of preparation.

The Role of the Commanders: Goths

Very little is known about the Gothic leadership or preparations for the battle, except what was seen from the Roman perspective. Ammianus credits Fritigern's use of delaying tactics, including the Christian emissary, as well as the secret correspondence and attempts to negotiate a truce as strategically necessary, so that the cavalry under Alatheus and Saphrax could have time to return.⁶⁴ Moreover, Fritigern was able to exacerbate the Roman soldiers' thirst and fatigue by setting fire to the surrounding crops so that the smoke would irritate them, as well as have the added benefit of confusing the Roman troop deployment.⁶⁵

As a whole, the Gothic military leadership can be seen as extremely experienced and tough, as these elite Goths would have either served with, or fought against, the Imperial army in the past, creating a form of 'hybrid' commander who was able to anticipate the strengths and weaknesses of their enemy. However, implicit in Ammianus' account is that Fritigern's control over his army was tenuous, as each of the various tribal chiefs still maintained absolute control over their own forces, and only submitted to Fritigern's authority out of necessity.⁶⁶ For example, the Greuthungi were led by their king Vitheric and his generals Alatheus and Saphrax, yet some also followed the rex Farnobius, while Sueridas and Colias likely maintained control over their forces. Similarly, the Alans and Huns in his army were mercenaries and presumably obeyed their own commanders, while even Fritigern had to share control of the Tervingi with Alavivus.⁶⁷ While the relatively short and successful nature of the battle minimised any leadership conflicts for the Goths,

61 Fuller 1954, 270-71.

62 Amm. Marc. 31.12.13. This may also have prompted Vegetius to advise that soldiers should be given a "moderate refreshment of food before an engagement, so that their strength might be the better supported during a long conflict" (Veg. Mil. 3.11).

63 Soz. *Hist. eccl.* 6.40; Amm. Marc. 31.12.12.

64 Amm. Marc. 31.12.8-9, 12-15.

65 Amm. Marc. 31.12.13.

66 Lenski 2002, 332.

67 Amm. Marc. 31.5.4, 31.9.3, 31.6.1, 31.8.4.

had the Romans turned the tide of the battle, it is likely that Fritigern's authority would have crumbled and the Gothic alliance would have fractured.

Much has been made by both ancient and modern historians over the failure of Roman intelligence gathering at Adrianople, as "those who had been sent forward to reconnoitre (what led to such a mistake is unknown) affirmed that their [the Gothic] entire body did not exceed ten thousand men."⁶⁸ There have been several attempts to understand this figure, yet the most plausible explanation is that (based on the previous assessment of Gothic army strength at 12,000-15,000 infantry) the figure reported by the Roman reconnaissance units only counted the Gothic forces stationed within the wagon laager, as the cavalry would have been away foraging. However, fault for the disaster lies on the generals, who should have known that the Gothic cavalry would not be gone long, and thus that the attack would commence immediately.⁶⁹ Valens' decision to move out of the city to confront the Goths can be seen as an attack of opportunity, which failed only because Valens hesitated at the last moment.⁷⁰

Conversely, Gothic intelligence gathering was quite successful at Adrianople. Fritigern's scouts were able to detect the approaching Roman army early enough so that he had time to recall his foraging cavalry in time for battle.⁷¹ Likewise, in 378, an Alan soldier on leave from service in the Roman army told his countrymen that Gratian was soon to march east with a large force to aid Valens. Thus, the Lentienses took the opportunity to begin raiding Roman territory, forcing Gratian to delay his march eastwards, and leaving Valens to face the Goths alone.⁷² While this case cannot be taken as an example of some type of pan-Germanic unity or alliance, it is representative of the dangers of having Germanic peoples serving in the Roman army.

While it cannot be rationally entertained that the Roman disaster at Adrianople was divinely ordained as punishment for Valens' personal sins, it must be mentioned, as the ecclesiastical authors cite it as the prime reason for the outcome of the battle. Sozomen writes that the defeat at Adrianople was punishment for Valens' refusal to heed the monk Isaac's warnings to return the churches to Catholic control, while Theodoret claims that God abandoned the Romans because of Valens' heretical actions.⁷³

The Battle of Adrianople was a Roman military disaster. The outcome was determined by the culmination of the long-term changing trends in the structure of the Roman army as well as changes in Roman barbarian policy. The short-term factors of increasingly less effective Roman soldiers, more effective Goths, the importance of strong commanders and the necessity of adequate intelligence gathering all played a supporting role in the Roman

68 Amm. Marc. 31.12.3.

69 Austin and Rankov 1995, 52.

70 Austin and Rankov 1995, 241.

71 Gabriel and Boose 1991, 458.

72 Amm. Marc. 31.10.5; Nicasie 1998, 157.

73 Soz. Hist. eccl. 6.40; Theod. Hist. eccl. 4.30.

defeat. Although the Battle of Adrianople was a catastrophe, by 382 the Romans and Goths had made peace, and the Goths were allowed to settle in Thrace in exchange for military service. Thus, as Nicasie notes, “in the end, the Gothic war ended as the Emperor Valens had wished, and it does not seem that the defeat at Adrianople made much of a difference at all.”⁷⁴

74 Nicasie 1998, 254.

Appendix

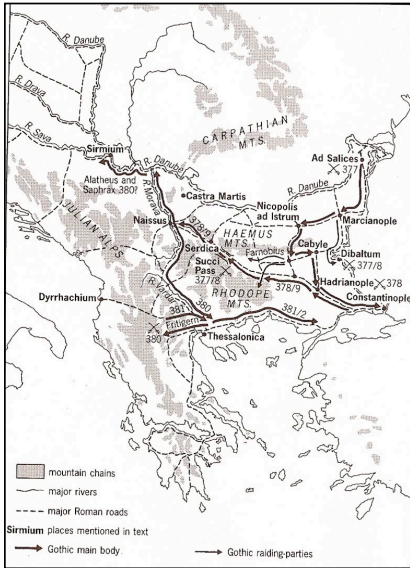


Fig 1: The Gothic War from Ad Salices to the conclusion of peace, 377-82. P.J. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332-489* (Oxford, 1991), 143.

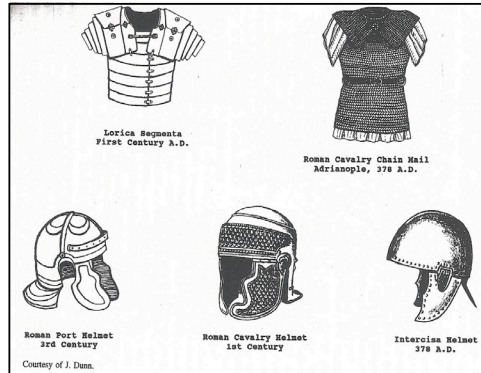


Fig. 2: Roman Military Equipment. Gabriel and Boose, 437.



Fig 3: Roman Legionnaire, First and Fourth Centuries. Gabreil and Boose, 440.

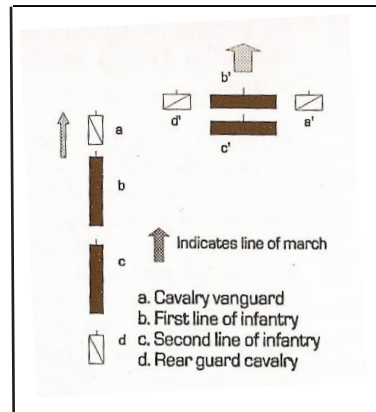


Fig 4: The Battle of Adrianople, deployment of the Roman army from marching column into battle. Nicasic, 247.

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