

**PART 3**

*A Necessary Epilogue*





# Generalissimos and Warlords in the Late Roman West\*

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## 461 and the Disintegration of the Imperial West

Few events capture the breakdown between the western Roman government and its armed forces as vividly as the aftermath of the emperor Majorian's execution (AD 461). Flavius Julius Valerius Maiorianus stands as a lone exception to an overall pattern of imperial rule throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. In an era when the emperor spent most of his life at the palace in splendid isolation, ceremonially embodying the state, Majorian had led armies from Italy to Gaul and Spain.<sup>1</sup> For all intents and purposes, Majorian was a soldier-emperor whose style of rule would have been more akin to that of a Valentinian I (364–375) than that of an Honorius (393–423).<sup>2</sup> He had embarked on an ambitious campaign to reinforce the fragile cohesion of the western Roman empire, not only over its various neighbouring tributary peoples (often, but not always correctly, described as 'barbarian' *foederati*) but also its own civilian and military elites. His forces defeated the Alamanni in northern Italy in the spring of 457, and Vandal raiders in Campania during the summer of 458. He campaigned in western Illyricum where he incorporated Huns into his army. In late 458, Majorian arrived in Gaul, which had not accepted his rule.<sup>3</sup> Majorian ousted a Burgundian garrison from Lyon and defeated the Visigoths, who afterwards renewed their allegiance. In 460, Majorian entered Spain with a large army to attempt the reconquest of Vandal Africa. However, the Vandals

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1 For specific references to the sources, see *PLRE* 2: 'Fl. Iulius Valerius Maiorianus': 702–3.

2 On Majorian's reign, see: Meyer 1969; Harries 1994: 82–102; MacGeorge 2002: 196–214. Regrettably, I did not have access to Oppedisano 2013 during the time of publication.

3 Mathisen 1979; Max 1979.

managed to sabotage his fleet near Alicante, which forced Majorian to abort the campaign. On his arrival in Italy, Majorian was deposed and executed by his *magister utriusque militia* Ricimer near Tortona on 7 August 461.

As consequent events were to demonstrate, Majorian was the last western Roman emperor who had maintained the allegiance of imperial troops in Italy, Gaul, Dalmatia, and Spain. Unintentionally, when Ricimer executed the emperor and later elevated his puppet Libius Severus (461–465), he not only chopped off Majorian's head but also the remaining imperial territory outside Italy.<sup>4</sup> 461 could rightfully be regarded as the pivotal year when the Western Roman Empire finally disintegrated into various warlord fiefdoms. Imperial armies in Gaul and Dalmatia refused to recognize Severus, and went into open rebellion (Priscus *Fragments* 39.1). The armies were commanded respectively by two of Majorian's former generals, Aegidius and Marcellinus. Ricimer pursued diplomatic ties with Constantinople to defuse the Dalmatian crisis. In order to ward off a potential counter-offensive from Gaul, however, he made serious concessions to the neighbouring Visigoths and Burgundians. The city of Narbonne, a former bulwark that had withstood a lengthy Visigothic siege in 437, was officially ceded by Severus to the Visigothic king Theoderic II as a reward for aid against Aegidius, while Aegidius's rank as *magister militum* of the imperial forces in Gaul was allocated to the Burgundian king Gundioc. One thus witnessed the paradoxical scenario of the imperial government in Italy officially ceding Roman territory in order to fight its own army in Gaul. Furthermore, by abandoning Narbonne, the western court gave up its land-bridge with Spain, where Majorian's general Nepotian was soon replaced by a representative of the Visigothic king: Hyd. 208 (213). For the remainder of the fifth century, the Iberian peninsula would become a twilight zone, in which neither the Visigoths nor the Sueves managed to fill the vacuum the empire had left behind.<sup>5</sup> For the rest of the 460s and 470s, the western imperial administration's writ ran no further than Italy and a few toeholds in southern Gaul.

It must have been as challenging for anyone living throughout Libius Severus' reign (461–465), as it is for scholars today, to gauge how political factions in the imperial west aligned to one another, and which one of them could claim legitimacy. The Spanish bishop Hydatius regarded Aegidius as a champion of Roman order, yet the Gallo-Roman aristocrat Sidonius Apollinarius refused to make mention of him or his son and successor Syagrius throughout his voluminous work despite his awareness of northern Gallic affairs.<sup>6</sup> While the Vandal

4 On Severus, see: Oost 1970; Woods 2002.

5 Kulikowski 2004: 197–209.

6 Hyd. 214 (218); Harries 1994: 247–8.

king Geiseric may have been marauding the western Mediterranean and thus damaging the empire's economy, he was simultaneously the only ruler who could claim to be representing the interests of the Theodosian dynasty.<sup>7</sup> His son and heir Huneric was married to Eudocia, the elder daughter of the late emperor Valentinian III, while he publically backed the claims to the western throne of the prominent senator Olybrius, married to Valentinian's younger daughter Placidia (Priscus *Fr.* 38). The case of Geiseric shows how schizophrenic the nature of legitimate rule and loyalty to the empire had become in the early 460s. The Vandals presented the greatest threat to domestic security in the western Mediterranean, and even threatened eastern coasts, but the various factions representing imperial power were thoroughly divided on how to deal with him. The western court lacked the naval capacity to counter the Vandals, while the eastern court remained uncommitted to handling Geiseric militarily, and opted for diplomatic resolution. Similarly, Constantinople dissuaded Marcellinus in Dalmatia from taking up arms against Italy (Priscus *Fr.* 39). Yet not long afterwards Marcellinus took his forces to Sicily where he fought the Vandals independently, at the same time as his former colleague Aegidius was trying to set up an alliance with Geiseric: Hydacius 220 (224), 223 (227). Exactly who was who on whose side was a very thorny question indeed.

In 461, the Roman Empire finally became a failed state in the western Mediterranean and its hinterland. Dalmatia and Northern Gaul effectively turned into warlord fiefdoms maintained by 'orphaned generals'. Even when Aegidius and Marcellinus were killed, these territories did not return to the imperial fold but were taken over by relatives of the warlord-commanders. Similarly, while a series of western emperors continued to reside in Italy, henceforth they would either reign as puppets or be rivals to the warlord-commanders of the regional field army. None of these emperors ever regained full control of the army in Italy, let alone those forces outside the peninsula previously still taking orders from Majorian. Eastern Roman historiography regarded Ricimer already as a *rex* in these years (Marcellinus Comes *s.a.* 464). Giving him the title was technically incorrect but understandable, since his control over Italy was so complete that after Severus' death he could comfortably govern the peninsula without a western emperor from 15 August 465 to 12 April 467 (*Fasti vindobonenses priores et posteriores s.a.* 465, 467).

Such a scenario, with regional strongmen exercising *de facto* control over various tracts of the imperial west without showing allegiance to an official head of state, would have been unfathomable a century earlier. In this chapter, I wish to highlight some of the root causes of warlordism in the Late Roman

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7 Clover 1966: 163–206.

West and their contribution to the crumbling of state authority in the fifth century. I will survey the personalization of military power inside the western high command, whilst considering cases of insubordination, mutiny and desertion. Special attention will be given to the accumulation of private wealth, the growing economy of violence, the rise of factionalism inside the ranks of the western Roman officer class, and their combined catalyzing contribution to the crumbling of state authority.

### The Personalization of Military Power

One of the key features of the state's loss of its monopoly on violence can be seen in its mounting inability to relieve generals of their commands. Throughout the fourth century, we encounter various examples of officers who were cashiered, deservedly or not. Ursicinus, a *magister peditum* who had served in Gaul and the East during the 350s, was relieved from his command by the emperor Constantius II after the Persian capture of Amida in 359 (Ammianus Marcellinus 20.2). The future emperors Valentinian I and Theodosius were both dishonourably discharged during their early military careers.<sup>8</sup> The *comes Africae* Romanus seems to have been dismissed for corruption contributing towards the revolt of Firmus in the early 370s (Amm. Marc. 29.5.5–7).

It is debatable whether any of these discharges was justified or not. To name but one example, Ammianus Marcellinus, who had served under Ursicinus, certainly took a partisan stance towards his superior's dismissal.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the very fact that these discharges occurred should serve as a reminder that the emperor, and by extension the imperial government, remained the ultimate arbiter of military authority.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of any feelings of indignity, officers were conditioned to accept their dismissal. However, already during the last quarter of the fourth century, a noticeable shift occurred in the way emperors had to deal with their commanders.

When the western emperor Gratian confronted the usurper Magnus Maximus near Paris in 383, his *magister peditum praesentalis* Merobaudes deserted to Maximus with a significant part of the dynastic army (Prosper *s.a.*

8 Valentinian's dismissal: Amm. Marc. 16.11.6–7. Theodosius' dismissal: Pacatus 2.9.1–3; Ambrose *Obituary for Theodosius* 53; Theodoret *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.5.1–2. On these, see Woods 1995; Woods 1999.

9 Matthews 1989: 46–7.

10 Independently from one another, Lee 2015 has made similar observations for the fourth century.

388). Maximus later found it necessary, however, to force Merobaudes to commit suicide (Pacat. 2.28). The same Maximus later criticized the conduct of Bauto, *magister militum* in Italy, as controlling the throne of the infant emperor Valentinian II (Ambr. *Epistulae* 24.4). Several years after the death of Maximus and Bauto, Valentinian was unable to cashier his *magister equitum praesentalis* Arbogastes (Zosimus 4.33.1–2; John of Antioch *Fragments* 187). The latter owed his command to Theodosius and thus found himself *incontournable* in the face of an emperor who had come to the throne during his infancy, and had never managed to assert his right to rule. Merobaudes, Bauto, and Arbogastes were the first western *magistri militum* whose sway over the military was so strong they could dictate government policy. This phenomenon cannot be dissociated from the increasing marginalisation of the western emperor.

The Roman emperor had always acted as a supreme commander of the army, and throughout the late third and fourth centuries had played an important role leading in the field.<sup>11</sup> Yet the young age of accession of emperors such as Gratian (367–383), Valentinian II (375–392), Honorius (393–423), and Valentinian III (425–455), paved the way for a series of military power brokers who gradually assumed the responsibility to conduct governmental policies.<sup>12</sup> As the fifth century progressed, powerful generals of the western Roman army eventually found that they were no longer subservient to the state; the state was rather subservient to them. Simply dismissing these generals was no longer a viable option. W. Goffart astutely observed that the prominence of murders in the fifth century is a clear sign of the personalization of late Roman politics.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the domination of these generals usually only ended with their deaths.

The *magister utriusque militiae* Stilicho thoroughly dominated the western Roman court for thirteen years (395–408). Yet when his position became politically untenable during a series of crises in 407–8, such as the usurpation of Constantine III (407–11) and the succession of the eastern emperor Arcadius, his opponents were not satisfied with simply engineering his fall from grace. The general was publicly condemned and executed, after mutineers at Ticinum had already lynched all of his key officers and officials gathered there. Afterwards, Stilicho's son and barbarian retainers were hunted down and assassinated. Between 408 and 411, several officials and generals struggled for power at Honorius' court. It is revealing that nearly all those who were deemed unsatisfactory paid with their lives. Even non-entities such as the *magistri militum*

11 Lee 2007: 22–30; Hebblewhite 2016.

12 On this development, see O'Flynn 1983; McEvoy 2013.

13 Goffart 2006: 194.

Vigilantius and Turpilio, who had accepted their sacking by Honorius, were not given the chance to go into exile but were soon murdered (Zos. 5.47.2–3).

When Constantius finally emerged as uncontested *magister utriusque militiae* in 413, it was atop the corpses of several palatine officials who had been prominent in Honorius' administration after Stilicho's downfall, such as the *magister officiorum* Olympius, the *magister equitum* Allobichus and the *comes Africae* Heraclian. One of the most significant consequences of the emergence of military dictatorship in the imperial west was that loyal service to the emperor was no longer sufficient to guarantee one's position or indeed one's life. As the fifth century progressed, any western Roman general who was keen on preserving either had to ensure that he belonged to the faction of the dominant *magister utriusque militiae*, or try to remove the incumbent one altogether and take his place. It was this deadly competition for unofficial supreme power that fueled warlord-politics within the western Roman army during the fifth century.

### Insubordination, Mutiny and Desertion

Modern scholarship has usually focused on those *generalissimos* who managed to obtain a dominant position at court.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one could be deceived into thinking that the model of a 'military manager' controlling the government of a western ceremonial emperor became accepted without controversy during the fifth century.<sup>15</sup> Yet there was no legal basis for the position of a *generalissimo*, and this created a critical fault-line in military authority. The position of a *generalissimo* always relied on the implicit threat of force. The result was, therefore, that anyone who aspired to a similar position would also have to countenance the use of violence. What would prevent one officer from professing outward loyalty to the state, i.e. the emperor and his dynasty, while simultaneously trying to engineer the downfall of its leading *magister militum*?

The history of the Theodosian dynasty in the west (395–455) is hallmarked by the mounting unwillingness of the western military aristocracy to adhere to the traditional chain of command. Gildo, the senior commander of the African field army (*magister utriusque militiae per Africam*) was the first to

14 See the various individual biographies covered by Zecchini 1983; Lütkenhaus 1998; Stickler 2002; Janssen 2004; Anders 2010.

15 O'Flynn 1983; Lee 2013: 81–109; McEvoy 2013.



grasp the new reality of power and its ill-defined legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> He made the momentous decision to shift his allegiance from the western court to the eastern court in 397/398. He halted vital grain shipments to Rome in the process, just when Stilicho was leading a campaign against Alaric's Gothic army in the Peloponnese.<sup>17</sup> The polemic historiographer Orosius specifically argued that Gildo was motivated to seize power because of the very young age and feeble rule of the imperial brothers Arcadius and Honorius (Oros. 7.36.3). While one does not need to accept Orosius' hostile account of Gildo's revolt *prima facie*, the entrenchment of child-emperor rule in 395 did encourage generals to aim for higher power within the chain of command. Gildo eventually failed, but others followed his lead.

The Gothic magnate Sarus played this game more carefully. When his patron Stilicho fell in the summer of 408, he operated as a free agent with a troop of several hundred retainers for almost two years in Italy, while Alaric and Honorius struggled against one another. Sarus ultimately thwarted Alaric's integration into the western Roman government during his final negotiations with Honorius in 410, and thus prevented the Gothic *rex* from turning into Stilicho's 'successor' within the western Roman high command. He was accepted again at Honorius' court until the unsolved murder of one of his lieutenants drove him to seek employment with the usurper Jovinus (411–413). However, he was ambushed and killed by Alaric's successor Athaulf on his journey to Gaul (Olympiodorus *Fragments* 18).

In the same vein as Gildo, the *comes Africae* Heraclian had tried to react against the growing influence of Constantius.<sup>18</sup> Not only did he withhold the African grain shipments during a critical campaign by Constantius against the Visigoths, he even set sail to Italy with an army in 413; Oros. 7.42.12–14; Hyd. 48 (56). The most puzzling thing about this intervention is that it happened in the very same year as Heraclian's consulship.<sup>19</sup> To be a consul was one of the most prestigious honours in the Late Roman Empire; it did not confer any power as such but whoever held it would be remembered for generations to come because his name was used to define the year. That Heraclian was willing to take up arms at the pinnacle of his prestige can only mean that he felt personally threatened by Constantius' rise to power.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, he was swiftly

16 On Gildo, see: Wijnendaele (forthcoming).

17 For the connection between Gildo's revolt and Stilicho's suspension of this second campaign against Alaric, see: Burrell 2004.

18 *PLRE* 2: 'Heraclianus 3' 539–40.

19 *CLRE* 360.

20 Oost 1966; Gaggero 1991.

defeated in the Italian peninsula and eventually murdered after his flight to Carthage.

Gildo, Sarus, and Heraclian have often been viewed as rebels. But they are mainly regarded as minor rebels and they do not feature prominently in the history of Honorius' calamitous reign. More attention is usually devoted to the *generalissimos* Stilicho and Constantius. Yet all three men were alike in that they could show a track record of proven loyalty to the reigning dynasty prior to their ultimate disaffection. In 397, Gildo was the last western Roman general who could trace his career in the western army all the way back to the reign of Valentinian I. More importantly, he had kept Africa loyal to Theodosius' cause during the latter's civil war with Eugenius and Arbogastes (394), for which he had been duly rewarded.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Sarus played a decisive role in stopping Radagaisus' horde in Italy (406), and scored some success in temporarily halting the usurper Constantine III's advance in Gaul (407–8).<sup>22</sup> Finally, Heraclian had played the decisive role in ensuring Honorius' hold on the western throne by redirecting Rome's grain fleet to Ravenna, during Attalus' usurpation in Italy (409–10).<sup>23</sup> While all three men committed some form of insubordination and thus defied state authority, it makes more sense to interpret their actions as a rallying against the growing influence of individual *generalissimos* or other contenders for positions of influence, than to dismiss them as rebels in the traditional sense. They ultimately failed, but it is impossible to understand the behaviour of the next generation of commanders, who could clearly be categorised as warlords, without considering these earlier precursors.

Rivalry for high office was a time-honoured tradition in Roman history, but it had rarely materialised in such public eruptions of violent unrest as from the death of Honorius' co-*Augustus* Constantius III (421) onwards. The tribune Bonifatius deserted his position in Italy after dismissed from a high-profile campaign against the Vandals organised by the *magister militum* Castinus in 422, only to usurp the office of *comes Africae* in the process and establish an autonomous power base in Africa.<sup>24</sup> Through the rest of the 420s, he managed to thwart the ambitions of his superiors Castinus and Felix. The latter eventually lost his life in a mutiny instigated by Aëtius, a rival senior officer.<sup>25</sup> Soon

21 Gaggero 1998.

22 Oros. 7.37.12; Marcell. Com. s.a. 406 (2); Zos. 6.2 3–6.

23 Halsall 2007: 216.

24 *PLRE* 2: 'Bonifatius 3': 237–40, Wijnendaele 2015: 43–56.

25 On Aëtius, see: Zecchini 1983; Stickler 2002; McEvoy 2013: 251–72.

afterwards, Aëtius waged a private war with Bonifatius, his main competitor for the supreme command of the western field army.<sup>26</sup> After Bonifatius' death due to wounds incurred during this showdown, Aëtius himself only narrowly escaped an attempt on his life in the aftermath. Fleeing to Pannonia, he managed to acquire a large force of Huns that enabled him to return to Italy and demand at sword's length that the supreme command of the western army be returned to him.

The careers of both Bonifatius and Aëtius, misleadingly styled as the 'last of the Romans,' (Procopius *Bellum Vandalicum* 3.3.15) represent the pinnacle of successful warlord politics. One is tempted to perceive similar ambitions in other generals who failed to achieve such success. Sanoeces was a general sent by Felix to eliminate the dissident Bonifatius in 427, but decided to have his colleagues who held joint command of the campaign murdered, thereby facilitating Bonifatius' victory and his own death (Prosper *s.a.* 427). The very fact that an imperial commander sent on behalf of the legitimate government was willing to eliminate his fellow generals, jeopardising a critical operation in the process, can best be understood as the outcome of an attempt at greater power that went awry. This is more apparent in the case of Litorius, Aëtius' subordinate commander, who scored notable victories in Gaul during the second half of the 430s.<sup>27</sup> However, during a war with the Visigoths, he took the unprecedented step of leading his army all the way to their royal seat at Toulouse where it was eventually annihilated. Litorius paid for his daring with his life, and it was later rumoured that he had undertaken this fiasco out of eagerness to outshine Aëtius' exploits.<sup>28</sup>

When Aegidius, Marcellinus, and Ricimer cast off their allegiance to specific emperors in the early 460s and 470s without assuming the imperial purple themselves, they merely took the next logical step in a decades-long process of disintegrating military authority that had gradually grown out of military unrest via violent insubordination to outright rule through arms. The success or failure of aspiring warlord-commanders, such as Sarus, Aëtius or Marcellinus, ultimately hinged on a combination of three factors: economic resources, personal troops, and factional alliances.

26 *Chronica Gallica* 452, 111; Hyd. 89 (99); Marcell. Com. *s.a.* 432.3.

27 *PLRE* 2: 'Litorius', 684–5.

28 Prosper *s.a.* 439. Kulikowski 2012: 45 makes similar observations.

### Private Wealth and Public Violence

Accumulation of wealth and property can be attested in various cases of the western Roman military aristocracy. During his twelve-year tenure as senior commander of the African field army, Gildo managed to accumulate tremendous riches. When he finally fell in 398, Honorius' government had to create a new bureau led by the *comes Gildioniaci patrimonii* specifically for administering his extensive domains as part of the state fisc (Codex Theodosianus 9.42.16; Notitia Dignitatum, Occidens 12.5). Heraclian's property was more modest in comparison, but still allowed Constantius, the beneficiary of his death, to organise lavish consular games (Olympiod. *Fr.* 23). As for Aëtius, one of the advantages of his marriage to Pelagia, Bonifatius' widow, was that she was incredibly wealthy: Marcell. *Com. s.a.* 432 (3). It is explicitly recorded that, after Majorian's death, Ricimer was able to bribe Marcellinus' barbarian troops in Sicily 'because of his greater wealth' (Priscus *Fr.* 38.1). Yet by 468, Marcellinus had strengthened his position to such an extent that he was able to bring an army and financial support to the west during the great allied campaign against Geiseric (Marcell. *Com. s.a.* 468).

Exactly how much greater the private wealth of these generals was to that of their fourth century counterparts is hard to discern.<sup>29</sup> It has been argued that the *comes* Sebastian's modest wealth made it easier for his rivals to remove him after the death of Valentinian I.<sup>30</sup> Yet Arbogastes was similarly praised for possessing no more than a common soldier despite the fact that he was able to seize control of all western military forces in the early 390s (Eunapius *Fragments* 58.1). The key area where private wealth mattered the most for ambitious commanders in the fifth century was in their ability to attract personal forces and maintain their allegiance. Nearly all western Roman generals covered in this survey possessed armed retainers variously identified in the sources as *satellites*, *doruphoroi*, *buccellarii*, *armigeri* and so forth. Gildo, Stilicho, and Heraclian possessed considerable bodies of clients tied to their person whom the state deemed dangerous enough to hunt down after these generals' downfall.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it is safe to assume that one of the main reasons for the

29 Whittaker 1993: 287–91 emphasises the growing concern of imperial authorities about the accumulation of private property at the end of the fourth century. Liebeschuetz 2007: 488–91 rightly rejects Whittaker's argument, however, that landed property enabled men to become warlords. I concur with Liebeschuetz that military service formed the crucial basis.

30 MacMullen 1988: 194.

31 Stilicho: *CTh.* 9.42.21–22; Gildo: *CTh.* 9.40.19; Heraclian: *CTh.* 9.40.21.

violent removal of these generals was their personal bond with such retainers that persisted beyond their office.<sup>32</sup>

The title *buccellarii* is used in the *Notitia Dignitatum* to describe an elite unit of heavy cavalry (ND *Orientalis* 7.25). During the reign of Honorius they seem to have consisted of both Goths and Roman soldiers, and to have taken pride in their rations of *buccellatum* (a type of hearty dry biscuit akin to hardtack): Olympiod. *Fr.* 7.4; 12. The failure of Radagaisus' invasion of Italy in 406 resulted in a great influx of Gothic soldiers who needed to be integrated into western military structures and who played a vital role in the subsequent actions of Stilicho, Alaric and Sarus.<sup>33</sup> Though they were officially state troops, they depended for their pay and rewards on the generals they served.<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the lack of a proper command could strain the ability of officers to keep such troops in check when they went rogue.

The dangerous liaison between a disgraced commander and his retainers is explicitly recorded in the case of Bonifatius. Augustine castigated the latter when he acquiesced to his retainers' pillaging of the African countryside during a civil war with the imperial court (Aug. *Ep.* 220.6). Yet Bonifatius may simply have had no choice than to reward his troops, who depended on him for their livelihood, and whose loyalty he in turn needed to ensure his own survival by allowing them to ravage the countryside. After his death, his son-in-law Sebastian briefly took over his position as supreme commander of the western Roman army, but eventually had to surrender it to Aëtius in 434. When Sebastian subsequently fell out of grace at the eastern court, his *doruphoroi* took to piracy (Priscus *Fr.* 4). While such disturbances are never reported among Aëtius' followers, the very fact that he campaigned nearly every other year between 425–440 in Gaul against Visigoths, Franks, and Burgundians, perhaps had more to do with finding profitable targets for his Hunnic retainers than was strictly militarily necessary.<sup>35</sup> Similar motivations may have inspired Marcellinus to campaign against the Vandals in Sicily in the mid 460s, despite having his stronghold in Dalmatia and being sabotaged by Ricimer on this very island previously: Hyd. 223 (227); Priscus *Fr.* 38.1.

There may be some correlation between this economy of violence and the decline of monetisation in the western provinces as the fifth century dawned.<sup>36</sup>

32 Liebeschuetz 1990: 43.

33 On Radagaisus' invasion, see: Wijnendaele 2016a.

34 On the development of the *buccellarii*, see Schmitt 1994; Sarris 2006: 162–75; Lenski 2009.

35 For a critical analysis of Aëtius' commitment to Gaul at the expense of other provinces, see Moss 1973.

36 López Sánchez 2005; Esmonde-Cleary 2013: 348–50.

The western state apparatus certainly saw financial retraction in this period. Stilicho dissuaded Honorius from travelling to Constantinople in 408 when the emperor's brother Arcadius died on the grounds that such a journey would be a burden to the treasury.<sup>37</sup> Repeated tax amnesties were necessary throughout the 410s in order to help the Italian peninsula recover from the damage sustained during the war with Alaric.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the Vandal conquest of Africa delivered another crippling blow to the western empire's public finances.<sup>39</sup> It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that generals were encouraged to provide for their troops personally, regardless of the origin of these provisions.

Sarus departed from his campaign against Constantine III with a baggage train laden with booty, while he most probably supplied his retainers from the Italian countryside during the war between Alaric and Honorius (Zos. 6.2.3; 6.13.2). Gerontius, chief general of Constantine III, already allowed his troops to pillage a Spanish town they were supposed to win for the usurper's cause in 408 (Oros. 7.40.8). The palatine faction orchestrating the mutiny at Ticinum, which lynched Stilicho's key generals and ministers, probably looked the other way when its soldiers subsequently looted the city (Zos. 5.32.5). Similarly, the eastern army that was sent to restore Valentinian III on the western throne celebrated its victory over the usurper Ioannes by sacking Ravenna in 425 (Chron. Gall. 452, 99). When Ricimer finally toppled the western emperor Anthemius, and his troops entered Rome in 472, the city suffered widespread looting (Pauli Diaconi *Historia Romana* 15.4).

### Trickle-down Diplomacy

When introducing his seminal work on the fall of the Roman Republic, Sir Ronald Syme famously remarked that 'however talented and powerful in himself, the Roman statesman cannot stand alone, without allies, without a following'.<sup>40</sup> Personal armies and resources go some way towards explaining the individual power bases growing around ambitious generals in the fifth century. Yet modern scholarship has rarely examined the extent to which generals tried to tie these troops to themselves personally. One recurring element is

<sup>37</sup> Zos. 5.32.1; Matthews 1975: 280.

<sup>38</sup> Jones 1964: 204–205; Heather 2005: 245–246. *CTh* 11.18.1 issued at Ravenna in February 412 already speaks of 'an exhausted treasury'.

<sup>39</sup> Elton 1996: 118–127.

<sup>40</sup> Syme 1939: 7.

their attempted construction of marriage alliances between themselves and their officers.<sup>41</sup>

In a certain way this emulated the practice of the eastern emperor Theodosius I.<sup>42</sup> He had tied various generals to his dynasty through marriages to his relatives, such as Gildo's daughter Salvina to a nephew of the empress Flacilla, that of Bauto's daughter Eudoxia to his son Arcadius, and that of Stilicho to his own adoptive daughter Serena. He even raised his general Promotus' sons together with his own. It has been traditionally argued that Theodosius ruled solely over both imperial realms for a brief period in 394–395, but the sources make it clear that he only intended to rearrange western affairs before returning to the east where urgent problems needed to be tackled. His son-in-law Stilicho was then meant to supervise the western Roman government as guardian of his infant son Honorius.<sup>43</sup> Theodosius' unexpected demise and his succession by ceremonial child-emperors allowed other generals to aspire to a position similar to that intended for Stilicho.

One of the first attested cases of such a marriage alliance is the marriage of Bathanarius to Stilicho's sister, when Stilicho also granted him the command over the African field army.<sup>44</sup> Stilicho's decision to allow Bathanarius to marry a relative cannot have been a coincidence considering the grave difficulties that he had encountered with Gildo in Africa. Ensuring the loyalty of the African field army through his own brother-in-law seems to have been the primary aim behind the appointment and marriage.<sup>45</sup> This approach was adopted by two of Bathanarius' successors as *comes Africae*. The *comes Africae* Heraclian married his daughter to Sabinus, who is described as his *domesticus* (Oros. 7.42.11). The *domestici* in this period often served as 'lieutenants' to key generals who maintained *buccellarii*. When Heraclian crossed into Italy with an army, most probably to counter the growing dominance of Constantius, Sabinus stayed behind. Heraclian's adventure failed dismally, and his son-in-law preferred to flee to Constantinople while Heraclian's *satellites* (a term often used for generals' armed retainers) were hunted down in Africa. This seems an indication that Heraclian had wished to safeguard his regional powerbase by having an officer directly tied to his house supervising it.

41 Demandt 1980 provides the most thorough study of the various links between the highest generals, imperial families and royal barbarian houses. Yet the marriage links between the lower ranking generals in the survey presented in this chapter escaped his notice.

42 Liebeschuetz 1990: 24.

43 Cameron 1969: 274.

44 *PLRE* 2: 'Bathanarius': 221.

45 Warmington 1954: 12; Lütkenhaus 1998: 13, n. 40.

That pattern is further exemplified by Bonifatius who gave his eldest daughter in marriage to Sebastian, who had temporarily replaced him as *comes Africae* in 425–426 while Bonifatius was overseas (Augustine *Epistulae* 7\*). After Bonifatius' death, Sebastian briefly succeeded him as *magister utriusque militiae*: Hyd. 89 (99). We know too little about Sabinus to conjecture why Heraclian would have found him a suitable partner for his daughter. But Sebastian showed himself an excellent career-soldier who could maintain control over personal troops during years of adversity.<sup>46</sup> Both Heraclian and Bonifatius were able to call upon the allegiance of the African military for their autonomous endeavours. Their personal ties to their officers below can partially explain this. Similarly, the *magister equitum* Gaudentius enrolled his son Aëtius among the *protectores et domestici*, and was probably responsible for his marriage to the daughter of the *comes domesticorum* Carpillio (Gregorius Turonensis *Historiae* 2.8). Again during his ascendancy, Aëtius' panegyricist and subordinate commander Merobaudes married the daughter of the *magister militum* Astyrius. This relationship allowed both men to cooperate in Tarraconensis during the early 440s. When Astyrius was recalled, his son-in-law simply continued the campaign: Hyd. 120 (128). Thraustilla, one of Aëtius' *buccellarii* who later murdered the emperor Valentinian III, was reported to have been his son-in-law (Addit. Prosp. Haun. s.a. 455). The source preserving this information is admittedly a late one, but it seems credible given the overall pattern of such marriages. The final culmination of this process of military networking can be seen in the events of 461 that transformed Italy, northern Gaul and Dalmatia into warlord fiefdoms.

Marcellinus held sway as warlord over Dalmatia for most of the 460s. When he was assassinated in Sicily, during the 'Fourth Punic War' against Geiseric, the Italian government did not manage to re-establish control over Dalmatia. Instead, Julius Nepos simply took over his position that was eventually formalised by the east as *magister militum per Dalmatiae* (CJ. 6.61.5). One source suggests that Nepos was the son of Nepotian, a high-ranking general of Majorian who accompanied the emperor to Spain and campaigned against the Sueves (Jordanes *Romana* 338). Hence Marcellinus, seems to have married his sister to Nepotian in order to create a powerbase for the future. Again, the future Burgundian king Gundioc married Ricimer's sister, and the tie between both men has been interpreted as that of one barbarian royal house securing an alliance with each other by means of marriage. In contrast, both Ricimer and Gundioc will have been minor officers serving under Aëtius when the marriage

<sup>46</sup> Clover 1979; Scharf 1989; Wijnendaele 2015: 107–13.



was enacted, probably at some point in the early 450s.<sup>47</sup> Gundobad, Gundioc's son and Ricimer's nephew, later reigned as Burgundian king until his death in 516.<sup>48</sup> Yet he was already old enough to assist Ricimer with an army against the emperor Anthemius in 472 and this relationship allowed Gundobad to inherit Ricimer's position in Italy as lord of the Italian field army when the latter died in 472 (Joh. Ant. *Fr.* 209.2). Similarly, Aegidius continued to hold onto former imperial territory north of the Loire as king of the Franks, and inflicted a great victory over the Goths in 463.<sup>49</sup> Yet when he was assassinated in 465, no force allied to Ricimer was able to take over his domain. Instead, Aegidius' son Syagrius eventually inherited his position as a *Rex Romanorum* operating from Soissons.<sup>50</sup> Marriage alliances that originally were arranged by ambitious generals with an eye to safeguard key provinces ultimately evolved into dynasties where military power could be inherited.

### Warlordism and the Collapse of State Power

In the field of ancient history, the concept of 'Warlords' has received most attention by scholars studying the Later Roman Empire.<sup>51</sup> As this volume aims to demonstrate, theories of 'Warlordism' as developed in social sciences can be useful as much for the Late Imperial West as for the wider Mediterranean world in the second half of the first millennium BC. In the Late Imperial West, warlordism emerged on the fringes among middle-ranking officers, and could (unfairly) be called the poor-man's usurpation. In fact, it was an alternative form of political and military opposition, and more efficient to accomplish. The *generalissimo's* lack of any constitutionally defined position meant that it was easier to replace him than replacing a dynastic emperor and his government altogether. The steady withdrawal of troops during the early fifth century from Britain and the Rhine frontier, traditional hotbeds for usurpations in the fourth century,<sup>52</sup> also meant that there were simply no resources for 'traditional

47 The Burgundians only reasserted their autonomy during the short reign of Avitus (455–456), after Aëtius had thoroughly decimated them in the mid-430s. Note that unlike the Visigoths and Alans, the Burgundians did not fight with Aëtius under their own king at the so-called battle of the Catalaunian Plains against Attila in 451.

48 *PLRE* 2: 'Gundobadus' 1: 524–5.

49 *PLRE* 2: 'Aegidius': 11–3.

50 On Syagrius, see Halsall 2001; MacGeorge 2002: 111–24.

51 Whittaker 1993; Liebeschuetz 2007; Wijnendaele 2016b.

52 Wardman 1984.

usurpations' in the west after the last surge of such between 406 and 413.<sup>53</sup> For the rest of the fifth century, the western Roman army steadily devolved into a single imperial field army stationed in Italy.

None of Gildo, Sarus, Heraclian, Bonifatius, Aëtius or Sebastian ever aimed to replace the legitimate emperors Honorius or Valentinian III. This dynamic only changed with the death of Valentinian in 455, and the demise of the Theodosian dynasty in the west. At this point, the question of who possessed the credentials to reign from the western throne, while catering to the interests of the various elites, was thrown wide open. Only in this scenario could Ricimer become a kingmaker and kingslayer. Furthermore, it has to be stressed that none of these generals desired to place themselves outside of the imperial framework indefinitely.<sup>54</sup>

Stilicho's panegyrist Claudian famously vilified Gildo for his rupture with the government in Italy, but even he had to concede that the rebel-commander had received official recognition from the Constantinopolitan court to administer Africa as eastern territory (Claudian *De consulate Stilichonus* 1, 277–87, *Eutropius* 1, 410–1). Bonifatius seemingly fought imperial troops as a rebel without a cause between 427 and 428. Yet he combined an impressive guerrilla stance with diplomatic negotiations through aristocratic networks in Rome to have his position restored (Procop. *BV* 3.3.27–30; Theophanes *AM* 5931). Even Sebastian still desired to play a role in imperial politics after a decade-long odyssey that took him from Africa to Italy, Constantinople, Gaul, Spain and back to Africa.<sup>55</sup> This motivation is evident in his ambition to reconquer Carthage while Geiseric was absent in Sicily (Prosper *s.a.* 440). The same process can be seen with Aegidius and Marcellinus. Neither commander was initially content to become ruler of a Gallo-Roman or a Dalmatian secessionist state, and both aimed to march on Italy.<sup>56</sup> The crucial difference is that neither was ever able to project his power beyond his immediate domain into Italy. Marcellinus did

53 This is already apparent in the different power bases backing Constantine III in 407 and Jovinus in 411. Constantine crossed from Britain to Gaul with the last British field army and quickly gained support from remaining imperial forces in Gaul. In contrast, Jovinus was proclaimed by an alliance of Alans, Burgundians and remnants of Constantine's faction. See, Drinkwater 1998; Halsall 2007: 220–4.

54 Wood 2000: 508 uses the phrase 'opting out of the system' to describe Aegidius' actions in Gaul post 461. I concur that this is a useful way to describe the behaviour of men such as Sarus, Sebastian or Marcellinus during their respective stints as warlords, but I would stress that none of them desired to opt out indefinitely.

55 *PLRE* 2: 'Sebastianus 3': 983–4.

56 Priscus *Fr.* 39.1. *Contra* Henning 1999, who styles his sections on these realms as 'Sezessionen'.

succeed very briefly to regain a legitimate position as imperial commander through his alliance with the western emperor Anthemius in 467, yet Aegidius ultimately died as king of the Franks.

When Odoacer requested permission from the eastern emperor to assume control of Italy, he was still acting as chief of the field army in Italy—such as it was.<sup>57</sup> His request to be granted the title of Patrician by Zeno only underlined his desire to receive official recognition (Malchus *Fragments* 14). Too often Odoacer's policy towards the non-entity Romulus Augustulus in 476, which Arnaldo Momigliano famously coined the *caduta senza rumore di un impero*, has been identified as the formal end of the Roman Empire in the western Mediterranean world.<sup>58</sup> In fact, Odoacer merely followed the precedents already established by Gildo in 397–398, Bonifatius between 423–425, and Marcellinus in the 460s. All of these commanders operating from the periphery sought to align themselves with the legitimate powers in Constantinople when they were at odds with the government in Italy. The difference here is that by 476, Italy had already been transformed into a peripheral warlord fiefdom, and Odoacer simply formalised a *de facto* state of affairs. Alternative methods of violent opposition and the acquisition of force through private means had ensured the breakdown of the state's monopoly on violence and the disintegration of centralised armies. What had started as an accidental revolution in the late fourth century became a new form of military rule in the late fifth century.

### The End of Rome's Republic and Empire in the West

In the long history of the *Res Publica*, there were arguably three moments when Roman state authority collapsed and gave way to a new order of power: the civil wars heralding the end of the Republic, the crisis of the third century, and the disintegration of the western imperial apparatus in the fifth century. Ever since E. Gibbon, historians have been obsessed with trying to establish one particular moment in time that signaled the end of Rome's empire in the west. More often than not, this is usually associated with the death of key individuals who may or may not have been able to steer the western Roman government towards a better course should they have lived. Yet historians should be wary of stumbling into this pitfall of the 'great-men-theory'.<sup>59</sup>

57 *PLRE* 2: 'Odoacer': 791–3.

58 Momigliano 1973.

59 Even a traditional historian as Oost 1968: 133 already commented on the premature demise of Athaulf and Galla Placidia's son Theodosius that '[i]f one believes that if the

When critiquing O. Seeck's social Darwinist approach to the decline of the ancient world, Baynes already remarked that '[i]f ever there were supermen in human history they are to be found in the Roman emperors of the third and fourth centuries,—men who shouldered the burden of a tottering world and resolutely refused to despair of the Republic'.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the rapid succession of the emperors Gallienus (268), Claudius II (270), Aurelian (275), and Probus (282) at the zenith of the third-century crisis showed that despite their undeniable contributions to the recovery of state power, the Roman Empire was not dependent on these emperors' reigns for its own survival. The most astonishing feature is that these emperors could come and go, while making place for equally capable men. Historians should be wary, therefore, of identifying the survival of western Roman state power in the fifth century with the fortunes of any single individual. Yet this is often the line taken in regards to the fall of Aëtius.<sup>61</sup> However, if the western Roman Empire had reached a point in the fifth century where it was utterly dependent on the talents and survival of one individual, such as Aëtius, then its destruction was inevitable anyway.

It has not been the intention of this study to reduce the debate concerning the fragmentation of western imperial power to the type of scapegoating in which the ancient sources particularly like to indulge. Yet if one wishes to look for a single date that heralded the end of Rome's hegemony over the western provinces, it should be sought in neither Aëtius' murder in 454, nor in Romulus Augustulus' dismissal in 476 when a mere cypher was removed, but rather in 461 when Ricimer executed Majorian.<sup>62</sup> The critical point here is that Majorian was the last emperor to gain the allegiance of all imperial forces in the west, and that his death resulted in the irrevocable degeneration of these territories into warlord fiefdoms. In doing so, Roman history finally reverted to a point it had reached five centuries earlier.

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accession of this child had come to pass the West Roman Empire might have been saved, one must necessarily also subscribe to the theory that great events in history depend on accident rather than on deep-rooted causes, a type of aetiology likely to be repugnant to most students of history today'.

60 Baynes 1943: 31.

61 O'Flynn 1983: 103; Zecchini 1983: 284; Sticker 2002: 83.

62 One can also observe this in the contemporary work of the eastern Priscus, whose history ended with the reign of Leo I (457–473), and who did not witness the final dissolution of western emperors. Yet already in the 460s he refers to regional entities such as 'western Romans', 'Italians' and 'Gauls', thus tacitly acknowledging the discrepancy between the constitutional unity of empire and its *de facto* dismemberment in the western provinces. See also Blockley 1992: 46–7; McEvoy 2014: 246, n. 5.

A few scholars have already noted one striking similarity between the fall of the Roman Republic and the disintegration of the Late Imperial West.<sup>63</sup> In both cases the state lost control over its own military, which ultimately dissolved traditional political structures in favour of a new system entrenching its own rule. Warlordism was a vital element in both collapses, and resonated in the fates of several strongmen five centuries apart.<sup>64</sup>

The case of Aegidius could be compared with that of Sertorius. Both men refused to recognize new governments in Italy, and continued their resistance in provinces on the western side of Alps. They were supported by both former state troops and barbarian allies, and were even willing to make common cause with other enemies of the Roman state. Both were ultimately powerless, however, to project their power beyond their respective domains, and eventually succumbed to treachery. Similarly, Marcellinus and Sextus Pompeius both grabbed control over a key province close to Italy, and were slightly more successful in maneuvering their way back to the heart of western politics due to their naval resources and proximity to the heartland of state government. Yet each man died violently not long afterwards.

Ricimer had a reputation for violently bringing down emperors and raising new ones, but also one of reluctance to do away with traditional government. This echoed Sulla's bloody rise to power. Both men probably never considered themselves as revolutionaries and regarded their violent acts as necessary to preserve the state. Yet both men also had no qualms about taking up arms against the very city of Rome, or letting their soldiers grab hold of it. They also shared the relatively rare fate of not dying a violent death.

The banker Sittius operated as an entrepreneur of violence with his mercenary gang near Egypt, Mauretania and Africa, just as the desperado Sebastian offered his sword-services to Visigothic Aquitaine, the urban aristocracy of Tarraconensis and the Vandal king Geiseric. The refusal of Aëtius to disarm prior to the accession of Valentinian III and his ambition to obtain higher offices against the government's wishes should be compared to the early career of the *adulescentulus carnefex* Pompey. The latter's refusal to disband his troops in Africa during the ascendancy of Sulla was soon followed by equally insidious demands to be invested with higher authority during the wars against Sertorius and Spartacus. When Bonifatius and Aëtius took up arms against one another at Rimini in 432, their clash was not aimed at bringing about a revolution in the state, but settling the primacy of the victor, in much the same way as Julius Caesar and Pompey vied for control of the republic after 50 BC.

63 Oost 1964: 23; O'Flynn 1983: 23; Liebeschuetz 2007: 482–3.

64 For references to these Republican warlord-commanders, see the various chapters in this volume.

Tacitus already described how the Roman world was worn out by the two decades between Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon and the battle of Actium—basically one long period of civil war (Tacitus *Annales* 1.1). It is optimal to regard the period between 461 and 480 in the same light. In 461, the last western emperor died who had held the allegiance of all state troops in Italy, Gaul, Spain and the Balkans. In 480 the last legitimate western emperor died in exile, and the governments of Italy and Constantinople finally resolved their differences.<sup>65</sup> Citizens in Italy will have sighed with relief when both Octavian and Odoacer finally took the obvious step of formalizing their military rule under a thin veil of professed loyalty to the traditional but powerless state, whilst settling their troops over the peninsula and letting arms rest after decades of intermittent civil war.

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65 This is particularly symbolised in eastern recognition for the Italian aristocrat Caecina Decius Maximus Basilius as consul of 480 (*CLRE* 494–495). Basilius was the first consul designated by the west since 472; a clear symptom of the state of quasi anarchy that had plagued Italy during the rest of the decade. Furthermore, he received eastern recognition as sole consul for 480. This honour had never previously been bestowed on a western aristocrat, and reveals that Italy and Constantinople had finally reestablished a mutual rapport.

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