

Invasions of the Roman Empire

Teaching Idea

If there are any football fans in your class, ask them to explain what “sack the quarterback” means (tackle the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage). Explain that “to sack a city” means to loot, or rob, a city after an army has captured it.

The Middle Ages progressed directly out of the Roman Empire. Rome went from a republic to a vibrant expansive empire that spanned much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. But eventually the empire declined. Corruption and pressure from Germanic and other invaders eventually brought the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE.

The decline of Rome took place over centuries. Around 200 CE, Germanic peoples began moving into the Roman Empire from the east. Their ancestors had settled around the Baltic and Black Seas and over time had gradually moved west up to and then beyond the Danube and Rhine Rivers.

The first Germanic peoples to move into the Roman Empire accepted Roman authority, and some even joined the Roman army and served on the frontier of the empire. However, by the 400s CE, greater numbers of Germanic peoples were pushing into Roman territory and challenging Rome for authority. Unable to fight the Germans due to a lack of men, resources, and will, Rome lost more and more territory to them.

The Germanic groups were moving west and south because of population pressures and because of their own troubles with invaders. The Germanic peoples were experiencing a great increase in numbers, and they needed more land and more resources to feed their growing population.

In 410 CE, the Visigoths, led by Alaric, broke through Roman lines and invaded Rome itself. The ensuing sacking (looting) of the city signaled the death knell of the empire.

The next threat came from the Huns, led by the legendary Attila. The Huns, also known as the Hsing-Nu, were nomadic warriors from Central Asia. The Huns threatened Germanic peoples, like the Visigoths and Vandals, as well as Rome itself. In 451 CE, Attila's conquest brought him to Gaul and he turned to threaten Rome. However, Attila died in his sleep the night after his marriage in 453 CE. Only Attila's death spared Rome from the murderous rampage of the Huns, whose ferocity was remembered for centuries. 29



Representative Peoples in the Roman Empire

Among the peoples who settled in what had been the Roman Empire were the Vandals in Gaul and Spain, the Franks in Gaul, and the Angles and Saxons in England.

The English words *vandal* and *vandalism* are derived from the Vandals, a Germanic group that invaded western Europe in the 400s CE. They had originated in the area south of the Baltic Sea and moved west beginning in the 300s CE as the Huns moved into their territory. The Vandals reached as far west as Gaul and Spain, but were driven out by the advancing Visigoths. The Vandals crossed the Mediterranean to North Africa and established a kingdom that spanned North Africa and the island of Sardinia. In 455 CE, the Vandals, too, sacked Rome. The Vandals' aggressiveness in sacking Rome resulted in their name entering the language as a synonym for "wanton destructiveness." 30

The Franks originated east of the Rhine River and moved west between the 200s and 400s CE. Under Clovis I, they invaded Gaul and overcame first the Romans; then the Burgundians, another Germanic group; and lastly the Visigoths. Clovis I established the first Frankish kingdom. The name *France* comes from the name of this conquering tribe.

The Angles, Saxons, and a third group, the Jutes, came to England in the 5th century to help a British chief defend his land. They established independent kingdoms and subordinated the original Celtic inhabitants after the Romans ended their occupation in 420 CE. The Jutes disappeared over time, but the Angles and Saxons combined to form Angle-land, or England. Their language, Anglo-Saxon, is also known as Old English. The Angles and Saxons were in turn subjugated by William the Conqueror and the Normans in 1066 CE.