

THE DECAY OF THE EMPIRE AND FALL OF ROME
IN SAINT JEROME'S
LETTERS AND LIVES OF THE HERMITS*

By E. COLEIRO

Although before A.D. 410 nothing may have been further from Jerome's mind than the imminence, indeed the possibility, of the capture and fall of Rome, the Letters put before us facts and details which are a faithful echo of the growing despondency and of the current pessimism concerning the fate of the Empire as a whole. The moral corruption which Jerome sees around him seems to be only one aspect of the troubled state of affairs which was weakening the fabric of the imperial edifice. There is nothing to dispel the atmosphere of imminent danger, and the thought of recent and continued failure at home and abroad hangs upon everybody's mind.

As far back as A.D. 396 in LX.15-16[†], Jerome is convinced that an era of disasters has set in for the Empire. Intrigue and bloodshed disgrace the imperial court: able ministers and generals like Abundantius, Rufinus and Timasius are put to death or finish their days in exile. Imperial prestige has fallen low and treachery and mutiny have crept into the army. Jerome recalls how Valentinian was strangled by one of his officers (in 392) and how the army betrayed Gratian (in 383). Subject peoples are allowed to make bold to devastate the lands of their neighbours, as when the Isaurians make, in force, a depredatory inroad into Syria and Palestine (CXIV.1). Not only are Roman armies defeated but Emperors themselves fall in battle, as is the case of Julian and Valens. Usurpers like Procopius, Maximus and Eugenius distract the Roman world and humble the imperial majesty assumed by them for a short while by a shameful captivity before they are actually put to death. The frontiers of the Empire are constantly broken through. The whole of the North seems to have scented the difficulties of the Empire and to be on a scramble for conquest and plunder.

* This is Chapter IV of Part II of a thesis entitled *St Jerome's Letters and Lives of the Hermits with reference to (i) Art and Style; (ii) Social and Historical Significance*, submitted for a Ph.D. in London University.

[†] References to *The Letters* are made in Roman characters according to the number of the Letter and the paragraph in the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (Vienna). When the paragraph is not quoted the Letter is prefixed by 'Ep'. References to the *Lives of the Hermits* are prefixed by 'H' for *Vita Hilario-nis* and 'M' for *Vita Malachi*, in Migne, P. L. XXIII.

Jerome distinguishes four distinct phases in the barbarian invasions. The first one, covering the years 370-396, is summarised in LX.16, and includes the repeated invasions of the Danube basin, especially that of Greece by Alaric in 395-396. The second, covering the years 397-406, is hinted at in CVII.2 and Ep. CXVIII. The third, dealing with the great invasion of Gaul in 406-409, is recorded in CXXIII.16. The fourth, the invasion of Italy in 408-410 and the capture of Rome in 410, is dwelt upon in CXXIII.16 and CXXVII.12-13.

In LX.16, written in A.D. 396, Jerome reviews collectively the movements of the barbarians in the three wars in the Eastern part of Europe during the previous twenty years: the invasion of Pannonia by the Sarmati, Quadi and Marcomanni in 374; that of Macedonia and Thrace in 377 by the Goths of Fritigern and their allies, which ended in the carnage of Hadrianople in 379 and the great invasion and temporary occupation of Greece by Alaric in 395-396.

It is the first big sweep to destroy the Empire, and the thrust is made into the Balkan peninsula. From the Julian Alps, says Jerome, down to Constantinople along the banks of the Danube, Dalmatia, Pannonia, Epimus, Thessaly, Achaia, Macedonia, Thrace, Dacia, Scythia, the Troad are overrun, pillaged and plundered by Goths, Sarmathians, Quadi, Alans, Huns, Vandals and Marchmen. Although Constantinople itself does not fall, they penetrate as far as Athens, Corinth and Sparta. In 395 the Huns, coming from distant Maeotis (Sea of Azof), midway between the Tanais and the lands of the Massagetae, cross the Caucasus and overrun Armenia and Asia Minor as far as the Halys, to the West, and into Syria as far as Antioch, spreading panic and bloodshed wherever they went (LXXVII.8). Although they did not proceed further south, Palestine, Arabia and Egypt were panic-stricken presumably because there was no army to meet them (LX.16, LXXVII.8). In the south-east, the Saracens have already penetrated north as far as Syria and occasionally make an inroad into Palestine (LX.16).

Of these invasions it was probably that of Greece by Alaric which brought home to thinking Romans the seriousness of the situation: in the letters written before 395 there is no reference to the misfortunes that the Empire had already been experiencing for some time.

In CVII.2, written in 403, Jerome hints at the restlessness of the Goths and says that they are proving themselves a match for the Roman armies. In CXVIII.2, written in 406, he hints at the devastation of Dalmatia presumably by Alaric in 400-401 on his way to attack Italy from the Julian Alps. In CXXIII.15, written in 409, he recalls the invasion of Gaul by a host of barbarians that had escaped the fate of their king Radagaisus at

*Florence. Although Spain is yet untouched, Gaul appears to Jerome practically lost to the Empire. Quadi, Vandals, Sarmatians, Alans, Gepidi, Herules, Burgundians, Pannonians have united in devastating it as far south as the Pyrenees. Jerome adds also the Saxons and the Alamanni although they are not known from other sources to have joined in the conquest. Jerome gives a graphic picture of what the people of Gaul had to go through. The once noble city of Moguntiacum (Maintz), he says, has been captured and destroyed. In its churches many thousands have been massacred. The people of Vangium (Worms), after standing a long siege, have been extirpated. The powerful city of Rheims, the Ambiani (Amiens), the Atrebatæ (Arras), the Belgians, Tournay, the Nemeti (near modern Speyer) and Strasbourg have fallen to the Germans; the provinces of Aquitania and the nine nations, Lyons and Narbonne are, with the exception of a few cities, one universal scene of devastation, and those whom the sword spares famine destroys (CXXIII.15).

In the Danube regions, the provinces of Noricum and Pannonia, already devastated some years previously, are still in the hands of the barbarians, and Jerome considers them as permanently lost to the Empire (CXXIII.16). Jerome is probably referring to the occupation of Pannonia, Vindelicia and Noricum by the Alans and the Vandals in 401, to which Honorius, on the advice of Stilicho, had to acquiesce contenting himself with a nominal sovereignty over them.

The culmination comes for Jerome when Italy itself is invaded, Rome twice besieged and on the second occasion captured and sacked by Alaric (CXXIII.16, CXXVII.12-13). Jerome gives a few but vivid details of its capture. In CXXVII.12 he says that a dreadful rumour came from the West. Rome had been besieged and its citizens had been forced to buy their freedom with gold (A.D. 408). Then thus despoiled they had been besieged again, so as to lose not only their possessions but their lives as well. The city which had taken the whole world was itself taken, says Jerome with evident emotion. The siege had been long, and famine had tortured the inhabitants to the point of frenzy. But that was not enough to reduce the city: treachery was needed. When the barbarians penetrated into the city by night, pillage and arson engulfed many parts of it (CXXVIII.5), and the smoke could be seen far out to sea (CXXX.7). Churches are desecrated, homes invaded (CXXVII.13), lofty buildings burnt down to a heap of dust and ashes. (CXXVIII.5), monasteries broken into and their virgins torn away from them (CXXX.7). The incident on which Jerome dwells more in detail is that of Marcella. Her palace on the Aventine was invaded by soldiers asking for booty. She was badly beaten and taken to the basilica of St Paul along with the young Principia when

she had convinced her captors that there was no money in the house. As we know from other sources¹, a number of churches had been granted the right of asylum. From *In Ezech.*, Prol., one may gather that Marcella died soon after, possibly through her rough handling by the barbarians.

As the city was taken during the night, in the darkness and confusion many succeeded in escaping to Ostia and from there took ship to other parts of the Mediterranean (CXXX.7), but many were killed or made captive (CXXVII.12), among them several friends of Jerome (CXXVIII.5), e.g. Pammachius².

The news of the sack of Rome was a great shock to a world which was already despondent through continued disasters. Fifteen years before, in writing Ep. LX, Jerome had given utterance to that despondency: 'Oh, he had said, if we could get up into a watch-tower so high that from it we might behold the whole world, nation warring against nation and kingdom in collision with kingdom: some men tortured, others put to the sword, some swallowed by the waves, others dragged away into slavery.' (LX.18) But Rome's capture has now struck the world dumb. Jerome confesses that he was perfectly confounded and that for a long time he had remained silent knowing that it was time to weep (CXXVI.2); and whenever he recalls the disaster his sobs choke the utterance. The repeated mention that Jerome makes of the event and the emphasis he puts on it clearly indicate that. Indeed, three or four years later, in A.D. 412 and 413, he still feels so troubled at the disaster that he cannot concentrate on his work (CXXVI.2, CXXVIII.5)³. It is clear that Jerome did not consider Rome's disaster as a transient episode but as a closing page of an era of history. When in CXXVIII.5 he looks to the future he sees no ray of hope: 'Such are the times when our little Pacatula is born... she is destined to know of tears before laughter and to feel sorrow rather than joy. Hardly does she come upon the stage when she is called upon to make her exit. Let her then suppose that the world has always been what it is now. Let her know nothing of the past'. That in this attitude Jerome was genuinely echoing the general feeling throughout the Empire is confirmed by Augustine who found it necessary a few years later to write his *City of God* to cheer up Christians and defend them from the allegation that Christianity had been responsible for the disaster.

Dill⁴ and Hughes⁵ thought that Jerome unduly exaggerated the disaster.

¹ Cfr. Augustine, *De Civ. Dei.*, 1. 1

² Cfr. also *In Ezech.* Prol. 1-2.

³ Cfr. *In Ezech.* 1, Prol. and *In Ezech.* 1-2.

⁴ Dill, S., *Roman Society in the last Century of the Western Empire*, 2nd ed. London, 1899, p. 307.

⁵ Hughes, L., *The Christian Church in the Epistles of St Jerome*, London, 1923.

The description of the capture of Rome in CXXVII.12-13, may be rhetorically embellished especially in its details of cannibalism, but it must be true in its basic implications of a siege fraught with terrible hardships, of a desperate resistance which the Romans put up until they were betrayed, and of the extensive sack with the inevitable arson and destruction. It was of course difficult to destroy or even to plunder completely such a vast place as Rome was at that time. We have seen in our own time that vast cities like Berlin and Cologne, although systematically laid in ruins by the thorough weapons of modern warfare, can go on, battered and shattered, even if they have little prospect of quickly healing their wounds. Whatever the confidence of Rutilius Namatianus⁶ there must have been a systematic sack, and pillage must have been very extensive especially in the houses of the rich. No doubt when the hordes of Alaric left the city the *profanum vulgus* helped itself to what the Goths had not carried away from the deserted palaces of the wealthy; otherwise it is difficult to explain why the noble refugees did not return especially when in the same year Alaric died, and the welcome that these refugees were getting in other parts of the Empire was not very inviting (CXXX.7). It is evident that the reality of the disaster was such as to shake all sense of security, at any rate, for a long time.

When one considers that Alaric's host had waited for months for the capture of the city, that it owed its ultimate success to treachery, and that this was the first time that the Northern peoples saw their former mistress at their feet with all the recollection of past pride and merciless domination by its haughty overlords, one could hardly expect any restraint to their fury. Add to that the fact that Rome was to Alaric's Goths the embodiment of orthodox Christianity which had lately withstood and successfully curtailed Arianism in the Mediterranean and that the Goths of Alaric were Arians with their prejudice against female monasticism, and one understands Jerome writing of the virgins torn away from their monastic refuge (CXXX.5) and churches burnt to the ground (CXXVIII.5 and CXXX.7).

Effects of the Invasions

Jerome gives a few vivid impressions of the general effects of the barbaric invasions on the Empire.

As all the invasions developed more or less concomitantly within the same space of about thirty years, down to the capture of Rome, the economic disaster must have been of immense proportions. The economic

⁶ Cfr. Dill, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-259.

structure of the Empire, especially in the cities, was centered around the wealthy families with their numerous slaves, clients and dependants. It was these families that were principally hit, as their wealth was in large measure derived from their extensive county estates (CXXX.6). In CXVIII.2, writing to Julian, Jerome assumes that in the complete overrunning of Dalmatia and in the general devastation his private property, which had been considerable, had been destroyed, his herds and flocks driven off, his slaves either taken captive or slain. The same tale is repeated in the letters to Rusticus (CXXII.4), to Geruchia (CXXIII.17), and to Proba (CXXX.7). Again and again Jerome emphasizes the loss of their possessions. In CXXVII.13 he says that the sack of Rome left Marcella penniless. For it was not only the cities that the barbarians plundered. The countryside with its flourishing farms scattered all round was systematically left in ruins. Even such a tiny place as Stridon, Jerome's birth-place, is blotted out beyond recognition and in LXVI.14 Jerome betrays wonder that some farms belonging to the family, although left in a ruinous state, had not been completely destroyed by the barbarians. When one considers that since the time of the Antonines in all the lands of the Empire industry had been gradually transferred from the cities to the villages, thus giving an essentially agrarian character to the general economy on which the Imperial fabric was sustained, and that agriculture remained throughout antiquity the most typical economic activity, and land the most important form of wealth⁷, one can safely conclude that by A.D. 410 when Dalmatia, Gaul, Spain and other lands had been overrun, laid waste and practically lost to the Empire, the economic disaster was complete. Such conclusions are amply confirmed by Jerome's repeated allusions to the financial ruin caused by the invasions⁸.

Besides, the devastations often left in their wake pestilence and famine (CXXIII.17), and spread confusion, panic and despair far and wide (CXXII.4). Families were divided as was the case of Rusticus who had been separated from his wife when both had to fly for their lives from the barbarians (CXXII.4).

The Church had its share in the calamity. Bishops, says Jerome, were made captive, many of the clergy were put to death, churches were destroyed, horses were stabled by the altars of Christ, relics of martyrs dug up, monasteries destroyed and their virgins made the sport of the barbarians (LX.16).

⁷ Walbank, F.W., *The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West*, London, 1946, pp. 19-21 and 34-37.

⁸ Cfr. Baynes, 'The Bankruptcy of the West', p. 34, *Journal of Roman Studies* (1943).

Those who succeeded in escaping with their lives wandered along the shores of the Mediterranean often to face new disasters. This was particularly the case of the Roman nobles who succeeded in getting out of Rome at its capture and in sailing to Africa and other places as far as Palestine (CXXVIII.5, CXXX.4)⁹. The hardships that awaited Proba and her company in Africa are one of the many instances. Heraclian, the governor of that province, had mustered a force of Syrian slave-dealers and as the refugees landed in his province expecting to find refuge and protection, he sold them into slavery if they had not the means of ransoming themselves at a high price. Proba, says Jerome, with difficulty succeeded to ransom herself and her company and that at a great price (CXXX.7).

Indeed, so great was the general despondency that the refugees caught at anything in order to have something to console themselves with. The rejoicing of Demetrias's family at her taking of the veil, although, no doubt, rhetorically coloured by Jerome, can best be explained in that way (CXXX.6).

Reason for the Decline and Fall¹⁰

Like many of his contemporaries Jerome gives three main reasons for the decline of the Empire in the last decades of the fourth century and the fall of Rome in 410: moral degeneration and vice (LX.17); loss of morale (CXXIII.16); treachery of the barbarian chiefs in whose hands the Emperors frequently left their armies (CXXIV.16).

In all of them Jerome shows that he takes a narrow and incomplete view of the issues involved. The moral corruption of society may have helped in some way to bring about the disaster but it can hardly be classified as one of the determining factors. The society of Jerome's time was not more corrupt than that depicted in Cicero's Philippics, in Ovid's erotic works, in Juvenal or Martial, when Rome was practically at the height of its power and strength. And it is the extravagance of the rich that Jerome is continually bringing under his lash: he gives little evidence that their corruption was shared to any degree by the middle and lower classes

⁹ Cfr. also *In Ezech.* III. Prol. 79-80, 'ut tota Orientis, Aegypti, Africae litosa olim dominatricis urbis servorum et ancillarum numero complerentur'.

¹⁰ These few considerations suggested by Jerome's Letters are not given here as an attempt to solve the intricate problem of the decline and fall of the Empire. The complexity of that problem is indeed such that one can hardly expect to find a comprehensive solution in the works of any one author, even the most illuminated. We have limited ourselves to a discussion of Jerome's views about it and of any confirmation that the Letters may give, directly or indirectly, to some of the many concomitant reasons suggested by historians.

which formed the bulk of the peoples of the Empire. Nor was Jerome, after all, blind to the life of moral integrity led by many, Christians and non-Christians alike.

As regards the second reason, no doubt, there is much to support Jerome's contention that 'praeter paucos senes omnes in captivitate et obsidione generati non desiderabant quam non noverant libertatem' (CXXIII.16). No doubt peoples with a great history like the Corinthians, the Athenians, the Lacedaemonians, the Arcadians must have been greatly shaken in their morale at seeing their cities overrun by barbarians (LX.16). But good leadership could easily have remedied that. Jerome himself, perhaps unconsciously, provides the proof. He mentions the stout defence that some of the cities of Gaul, left to their own resources, made against the hosts of the invaders. The people of Vangium were overpowered only after standing a long siege (CXXIII.15); Toulouse inspired by its bishop Exuperius successfully withstood the barbarians (CXXIII.15). Jerome stresses that Rome itself had stood two sieges (CXXIII.16, CXXVII.12), and was captured in the second only because its gates were opened by treachery during the night (CXXVII.12). It is evident that the peoples of the Empire could make a stand and win their way through if properly led.

His third reason that the Roman armies were betrayed by their barbarian chiefs is perhaps more adequate. To the low-born adventurers, provincials and barbarians who officered the Roman armies in the fourth century (H.21, CXXXXVII.16) the memories of the glorious past could hardly be an inspiration at all. Personal motives must have often outweighed any other consideration in such generals. But had not the Roman armies been similarly officered for more than a hundred years, and had not a considerable number of the Emperors themselves, within the last hundred and fifty years, been anything but Roman or Italian? Alaric himself would have preferred to pass to history as the master of the horse of Rome's forces and the upholder of its Emperors than the one who, mostly to gratify a personal grudge, put it to the sack. Still it was no doubt a very dangerous policy to trust to barbarians or semi-barbarians Rome's military forces so completely as the Emperors did at the close of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, and when Jerome dubs Stilicho a traitor for inducing the Roman Senate to pay a subsidy to Alaric and thus increasing his capacities for making trouble in the future (CXXIII.16), he is just recording what almost everybody thought of Stilicho at the time. And there is hardly any doubt that Stilicho's secret negotiations with Alaric had all the appearance of treachery. Jerome is therefore wrong not so much in his condemnation of Stilicho as in the narrowing the principal

blame for Rome's disaster to that single issue.

Cary¹¹ considers as one of the fundamental reasons for the decline in the third and fourth centuries the enfeeblement of the frontiers through the general military insubordination and the recurrent civil wars. At least in one instance this is directly confirmed by Jerome. In LXXVII.8 he says that because of the civil war in Italy in 395 the Eastern defences had been left unmanned thus giving a good chance to the marauding Huns to force the Caucasus and plunder Syria and Asia Minor. In LX.17 he laments that 'plus paene bella civilia quam hostilis mucro (Romanum exercitum) consumpsit'; and when in CXXXIII.9 (written in A.D. 415) he calls Britain 'fertilis provincia tyrannorum' he is perhaps referring to the revolts of Maximus in 383 and of Constantine in 407¹².

Lack of effective control by a central imperial administration may have emboldened Heraclian, the governor of Africa, in his dealing with the Roman refugees (CXXX.7). Military insubordination is evident in LX.15 where Valentinian is quoted as being strangled by one of his officers and Gratian betrayed by his army. Such behaviour is of course no worse than the innumerable instances of similar insubordination, mutiny and anarchy of earlier centuries, but it did contribute in some measure to the formation of that complex situation which the barbarian invaders no doubt turned to their profit.

Another factor which Jerome's works under review suggest as concurring to bring about the disaster is the complacent attitude that had been allowed to develop that the Empire could not really come to grief. The Romans generally thought of their security too much in terms of past achievements and they fatally relied on the myth that no foreigner, indeed not even Hannibal or Pyrrhus, had dared to attack Rome. Jerome shares such an attitude as is apparent from CXXIII.16 where he looks back on that mythical past and asks who would hereafter credit the fact that Rome had to fight within her own borders not for glory but for life itself. Indeed, the Prol. to Book XI of the commentary on Isaiah makes it clear that Jerome's comments made in his Commentary on Daniel 2.40 in A.D. 407 on the weakness of the Roman Empire had been resented in high quarters, probably at the imperial court itself¹³. And, indeed, even Jerome himself, in spite of his despondency, is so engrossed in the idea of the perpetua-

tion of the Empire that even after the sack of Rome, writing in A.D. 414 he asserts that the Jews will for ever be under the domination of Rome (CXXIX.7).

One may perhaps connect with this complacency the state of military unpreparedness suggested by the works under review. Although scattered detachments are kept for policing purposes at the frontier outposts (M.3 and 10), they seem utterly inadequate to deal with the actual boundaries of the Empire. So the Saracens range unhindered in the desert of Chalcis (M.4); Jerome's monasteries are attacked and wellnigh destroyed seemingly without any hindrance from local authorities (Epp. CXXXV, CXXXVI, CXXXVII); the Isaurians overrun and plunder the whole of Syria, Phoenicia and Galilee in 405 (CXIV.1); the defences of cities are neglected: at the sudden irruption of the Huns Antioch hastily patched up its walls (LXXVII.8), and at that of the Isaurians an attempt is made to repair the walls of Jerusalem which had been allowed to fall into decay (CXIV.1).

The unpreparedness is aggravated by the occasional lack of initiative. So in A.D. 407 the cities of Gaul are left to fight one by one a lone battle (CXXIII.15). This lack of initiative could hardly have escaped the notice of contemporaries. The apology which Jerome makes quite undeservedly for both Emperors (CXXIII.17) for standing aloof while Rome was being besieged by Alaric is indication enough that at the time they must have been blamed for inactivity.

¹¹ Cary, M., *A History of Rome down to the Reign of Constantine* (Macmillan) 1935, p. 779.

¹² In Dan. 2.40 Jerome again mentions civil war as one of the factors contributing to the decline of the Empire.

¹³ Cfr. Freemantle, W.H., *The Principal works of St Jerome translated* (Selection of letters and other works) in a select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. VI, New York, 1893, p. 498; and Kelly, M.J., *Life*

and Times as revealed in the writings of St Jerome exclusive of his Letters, Catholic University of America, Patristic Studies, Washington, 1944, p. 100.