

# CLAUDIAN VERSUS THE OPPOSITION

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The sudden fall of the Vandal Stilicho in 408 A.D. is one of the most spectacular events in the disintegration of the Western Empire. After years of ruling the West he was suddenly removed from power and then murdered. A great career came to an almost absurdly unprotesting end. It will be the purpose of this paper to show that the revolt was not surprising and also to show that Claudian's poem on the battle of Pollentia may have helped to silence a noticeable opposition five years earlier.

Stilicho was forced to placate the senate from the beginning of his regency in 395. Even though he had married the niece of the great Theodosius, the old Roman aristocracy did not favor the rule of a son of a barbarian. He used three methods of influencing the attitude of this body: the bestowal of high office upon members of the senate,<sup>1</sup> the apparent granting of power to the senate, and the propaganda of Claudian, who tried to create a favorable image of Stilicho.<sup>2</sup>

Demougeot, Mazzarino, and Sirago have tried to show that active opposition to Stilicho must have existed at an early stage of his protectorate. Neither his harassment of the ruling group in the East nor his softness toward the barbarian Alaric could have been well received by the Roman aristocracy. Although the arguments of these three scholars seem reasonable, no concrete evidence has been found which antedates Stilicho's fatal treaty with Alaric.

Mazzarino finds the first clash between Stilicho and the aristocracy in 398, when the nobles struggled to avoid the draft of their tenants for the war against the traitor Gildo.<sup>3</sup> Although the senate did want

<sup>1</sup> E. Demougeot, *De l'unité à la division de l'empire romain* (Paris 1951) 211-14.

<sup>2</sup> H. L. Levy, "Themes of Encomium and Invective in Claudian," *TAPA* 89 (1958) 338-47.

<sup>3</sup> S. Mazzarino, *Stilicone* (Rome 1942) 238-39.

to crush Gildo, the private interests of the senators superseded the interests of the state and even the class. This disagreement did not form the basis of a real opposition because the senators were objecting to a policy which any leader, even a most respected aristocrat, would have been compelled to adopt. This criticism of the general vanished with the disappearance of Gildo.

Mazzarino also discovers an opposition, led by Theodorus and Lampadius, to Stilicho's religious tolerance.<sup>4</sup> However no one knows at what time this feeling arose. It has not been proved that the religious leaders of the West favored the removal of Stilicho before the later part of his career.

Sirago adds to Mazzarino's arguments that a Catholic resentment against Stilicho existed as early as 404 because of the transfer of the court from Milan to Ravenna.<sup>5</sup> He also claims that the civil administration was dissatisfied with the great power of the military.<sup>6</sup> Although these sources of discontent undoubtedly existed, no one knows how early they produced an active opposition.

Demougeot shows greater caution in pointing out opposition to Stilicho. She states that the general still had the support of the senate in 404, although his power rested on his military success.<sup>7</sup> He may already have been accused of pro-Gothicism in 407.<sup>8</sup> She leans to the view that Theodorus and Lampadius were not early leaders of the party opposing Stilicho, but went over to the opposition only in 408.<sup>9</sup>

Even though the arguments of these scholars are most plausible, they do not prove that serious opposition existed before 408. Unless proof is found there is a definite possibility that modern scholarship has created an opposition which never existed in fact. The earlier the date the less certain the evidence. As late as Stilicho's victory over Radagaisus in 405 his position seemed unshakable. Fortunately evidence does exist that Stilicho had to defend himself against his critics as early as Claudian's presentation of the poem on the Gothic

<sup>4</sup> Mazzarino (above, note 3) 245-46.

<sup>5</sup> V. A. Sirago, *Galla Placidia* (Louvain 1961) 47.

<sup>6</sup> Sirago (above, note 5) 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Demougeot (above, note 1) 293-94.

<sup>8</sup> Demougeot (above, note 1) 371.

<sup>9</sup> Demougeot (above, note 1) 406, note 273.

War in 403. This evidence, admittedly indirect, gives support to the position of Mazzarino, Demougeot, and Sirago.

The battle of Pollentia, the ostensible subject of Claudian's *De bello Gothico*, is now placed in 402.<sup>10</sup> Although the ancient sources do not agree on the outcome of this battle,<sup>11</sup> modern scholars have almost unanimously agreed that a Roman victory here was not exploited by Stilicho.<sup>12</sup> Most writers have found evidence in one section of the poem that Claudian is defending Stilicho for allowing Alaric to escape. It is the position of this paper that Claudian has constructed the entire poem not merely as a defense of Stilicho for his failure at Pollentia, but as a general defense of the Vandal's regency.

The first indication of Claudian's purpose is given in the poem's preface where he devotes two lines (6 and 18) to Pollentia and the other sixteen to himself and the audience's reception of the poem. Particularly significant are *respice iudicium quam grave, Musa, subis* (10), *et magis intento studium censore laborat* (13), and *timorem* (15). Claudian anxiously asks for favor through references to previous recognition from the senate and emperor (7-9 and 11-12). It may be suggested that Claudian fears an audience critical of his poetical talent. Such an explanation ignores the statue and other favors shown to Claudian by the senate. Earlier he displays amazement before the senate, but not fear (*Cons. Man. Theod.* pref.). As early as the time of *De tertio consulatu Honorii* he refers to himself as a tested eagle (pref. 1-18). Therefore it is far more likely that the concern expressed in the preface of *De bello Gothico* is for the subject rather than the poet. Claudian is asking his audience for a sympathetic hearing.

One passage of the work itself openly defends Stilicho's failure to destroy Alaric (90-137). Other passages defend the general's leadership.

<sup>10</sup> Demougeot (above, note 1) 275-77; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* 1 (Norman 1964) 184; Mazzarino (above, note 3) 272; Sirago (above, note 5) 54; A. Solari, *Il Rinnovamento dell'impero Romano* 1 (Rome 1938) 233; E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* 1, trans. J. R. Palanque (Brussels and Paris 1959) 248. The fullest discussion is given by Mazzarino, 279, note 2.

<sup>11</sup> Cassiodorus (*Chron.* a. 402) and Jordanes (154-55) consider it a Gothic victory, Claudian and Prudentius (*C. Symm.* 2.696-744) a Roman victory, and Tiro Prosper (*Chron.* a. 402), Orosius (7.37.2), and Hieronymus (*Ep.* 107.2.3) a drawn battle.

<sup>12</sup> Demougeot (above, note 1) 276; Jones (above, note 10) 184; Mazzarino (above, note 3) 272; Sirago (above, note 5) 118; Solari (above, note 10) 235; Stein (above, note 10) 248.

His loyalty to Rome forms a striking contrast to the cowardice and treason of others (296-313, 319-63, 511-17). The importance of this argument is indicated by the fact that, except for one indirect reference (*Cons. Stil.* I.116-37), this description of Stilicho's fidelity is unparalleled in Claudian. Several passages describe Stilicho's ability to control Rome's barbaric allies (*B. Goth.* 363-403, 414-29, 580-93) and several others stress the value of barbarians to the Roman army (362-63, 430-49, 463-68). Together these furnish an obvious hint that the Vandal is irreplaceable. Only he possesses the power to persuade others to do Rome's fighting for her.

The battle of Pollentia, the supposed subject of the poem, is discussed in 105 lines (194-204, 469-511, 550-57, 598-615, 623-47). But 184 lines are given to the weakness of the Romans (36-49, 154-65, 194-288, 314-29, 404-13, 430-49, 571-80, 616-22) and 255 lines to the power of the Goths (27-49, 61-89, 124-37, 154-204, 213-66, 289-95, 430-49, 518-49, 558-70, 623-34). This incredible emphasis on the contrast between Romans and barbarians reveals the real theme of the poem. Only Stilicho can overcome the terrible and seemingly invincible barbarians.

Claudian's choice of vocabulary strikingly contrasts the people and empire with the barbarians. The Romans are consistently called sick, weak, or dying. The barbarians appear powerful and terrifying.

Several types of words, such as images from nature, make the Goths frightening. *Hiems* (152, 409),<sup>13</sup> *grando* (174, 240), *procella* (309), and *tempestas* (112) bring the fear of storms to Claudian's picture of the Goths. *Flamen* (273) and *ventosus* (113) add the strength of winds. *Ignis* (45, 231, 248, 610) adds the horror of fire, and *unda* (272) that of water. *Tenebrae* (36, 316) indicates gloom.

Animals also create fear. A description of a portent compares the Goths to *lupi* (249, 250, 264) and a *belua* (255). References to *fauces* (30, 449) and *rabies* (98, 432) complement the picture of the Goths as wolves. A little of the supernatural, shown by *monstrum* (229), also makes them formidable.

A large number of words less colorful than the above stress the ferocity and power of the barbarians. *Furor* (72, 113, 292) and *furo*

<sup>13</sup> For simplicity only the simplest dictionary form is given for each word.

(143) tend to suggest their beastly nature. *Foedus* (83) and *profanus* (102) make them criminal. They represent *tumultus* (212), *violentia* (382 and *violenter* 251), and *horror* (294), as they bring *periculum* (3, 211, 317) and *ferrum* (122, 616). Their movement is described by *bacchor* (156, 242). *Morbus* (120, 174), *incendium* (145, 242), *cremo* (241), *ictus* (240), *vulnus* (563), and *viscus* (577) show their effect on Rome. This effect is augmented by *fatalis* (61), *funestus* (171), *ruina* (6, 172), *letum* (41), and *mors* (366, 448). *Spolia* (94, 624) and *exuviae* (611) show that the Goths have defeated the Romans in the past. *Vectigal* (538) converts their power into an institution. *Monumentum* (615) and *famula* (628) recall their former victories. *Fortis* (645), an unusual term for an enemy, suggests their military power. *Superbus* (93, 602), *vesanus* (647), and *temno* (178, 511, 647) show that the Goths despise the Romans. *Ruo* (80, 175), *seco* (123), *frango* (532), and *rumpo* (187, 261, 279, 520, 546, 547) suggest strength and ruthlessness.

Hannibal (149, 154, 386; as *Poenus*, 138 and 148) and Pyrrhus (125, 128, 132, 145, 154), ancient enemies, are compared to the Goths. Claudian also uses *Teutonicus* (292), *Kimber* (293), and the *Senones* (291).

Fearful divinities such as Bellona (34), Erinyes (173), and Mars (*Mavortia aetas* 35) are found on the side of the Goths. The mythological monsters Typhoeus (63), Otus (74), and Ephialtes (75), also resemble the Goths.

Claudian clearly shows the weakness of Rome in contrast. Rome has received *ulcera* (121) which bring *dolor* (208, 615). The effect on the Western Empire becomes clear from *turbo* (272) and *nudo* (427). Roman weakness also appears in *temero* (102, 560). *Nuto* (595), *labo* (571), and *morior* (248) give the expected outcome of the attack on Italy.

Claudian presents to his audience the picture of weak Italy's rescue from a ferocious and strong enemy. He hopes that the resulting relief and the fear of another attack will persuade the senate to leave Stilicho in power without investigating his policies. Although it is justly said that words and images are not valid in themselves and that the full context must be given to understand any word, this statement is not relevant here. Over one hundred words, all projecting the same idea, produce an overpowering cumulative effect.

The formal similes and metaphors illustrate this point, especially since Claudian does not picture the non-Romans as frightening monsters

in his other works. This can be seen most easily if the imagery applied to non-Romans is divided into three groups according to chronology. The first concerns non-Romans in poems written before Pollentia, the second in *De bello Gothico*, and the third in the later *De sexto consulatu Honorii*.

Illustrations of hoped-for Roman conquests, glorifications of Roman power, and pictures of the might of the barbarians are the three major themes in the imagery of the barbarians. There was considerable optimism about future expansion in the first period. The goddess Roma expresses a wish that the Araxes, the Rhine, the towers of Semiramis, and the Ganges become part of the empire (*Cons. Olyb. et Prob.* 160–63). Theodosius presents a similar hope of universal success in speaking of Honorius' future victories on the Araxes, Euphrates, and Nile (*IV cons. Hon.* 387–88). Iustitia predicts that the Phasis and Araxes will submit to Honorius (*In Rufin.* 1.376). Claudian predicts that Bactria and the Ganges will become slaves of Honorius and Arcadius (*III cons. Hon.* 202–3) and later that Bactria will be ruled by Honorius and Arcadius (*IV cons. Hon.* 656). The conquest of Germany is foretold in Venus' statement that Maria, Honorius' wife, will rule the Rhine and Elbe and serve as queen for the Sygambri (*Epith.* 277–79).

Many more images in these earlier poems describe Roman might. The Rhine and Caucasus trembled at Honorius' birth (*III cons. Hon.* 18–21). The Libyan shore and Thule shuddered at Theodosius (52–53), who controlled the world as Apollo controlled the horses disturbed by Phaethon (*IV cons. Hon.* 62–65). The Spanish and German Tethys, Britain, the Arar, the Rhone, and the Ebro obeyed Manlius Theodorus while the Rhine grieved that the Roman's rule included only one of its banks (*Cons. Man. Theod.* 50–55). Roma mentions the softening of Tethys and the broken Pict (*In Eutr.* 1.392–93) and Hiverne laments the Scots killed by Honorius' grandfather Theodosius (*IV cons. Hon.* 33). Stilicho conquered the Rhine through fear alone (457). Gaul wonders at the peaceful Rhine (*Cons. Stil.* 1.20). Germany now serves Rome, and her tribes are as obedient as if they marched in a triumph (212–14). The Rhine, now softer with its broken horns (220–21), wears chains.

Even in this general optimism some signs of a fear of the barbarians occur. In describing the services of Theodosius (*IV cons. Hon.* 56–58) Claudian certainly pictures the barbarians as frightening by comparing

them to torches and jaws of death. The description of barbaric tribes (*In Rufin.* 2.22-26) rushing over the East like the winds of Aeolus suggests uncontrollable power. The wish that the winds be still (*Fesc.* 2.41-42) at Honorius' marriage to Maria reveals a preoccupation with the barbarian threat at even a happy occasion.

Of the twenty-three images found in poems written before Pollentia, six express hope of expansion, thirteen magnify Rome and her leaders, and only four allude to the terrifying nature of the barbarians.

A greatly different pattern of imagery is found in *De bello Gothico*. None of the thirty-two images of the Goths pictures future Roman victories, only seven concern the Roman victory at Pollentia, while the other twenty-five visualize the power and the horror of the enemy. The emphasis clearly rests on the latter.

A long analogy compares Stilicho to Tiphys and Jason (1-35). One brief reference mentions the revenge obtained by the Alps and the Po (194-96). A final group of images pictures the cut throat of Scythia, the battered Don, and the broken horns of the Danube (601-3).

Even in defeat the Goths are powerful. Claudian compares them to the Symplegades, the Harpies, the dragon protecting the golden fleece, the fire-breathing bulls, and the warriors born from the earth (1-35). They are as audacious as the mythological giants who attacked the gods (62-76). These supermen cross Olympus as though it were a plain (180-82). They open up the Alps, causing Fama to frighten distant Thule with the rumor of Rome's capture, so that no one would expect even a shadow of Italy to remain (197-204). Alaric claims that all nature obeys him (525-26). The barbarians produce a fear which covers the people like a cloud (40-41). Their habitation of Italy is a winter of Roman affairs (151-52). They pour over Roman territory like hail or disease (174). They resemble the roughness of the sea (210). The wealthy would rather live in the greater safety of the Aeolian caverns (223-24). The Goths resemble terrifying animals with jaws ready to loot Italy (30). Alaric swallows cities in his mind (85-86). Claudian fears the Goths' raging madness (97-98). In one lengthy passage (249-66) Claudian explains that the two wolves killed in front of Honorius signify the Gothic attack on Italy and two human hands in their stomachs represent Rome living after the breaking of the Alps. Alaric, like Brennus, has a beast-like madness (431-32).

This is also implied in the picture of towns dragged away from the jaws of Tartarus (448-49). One of Alaric's men even warns him not to be killed within the fold like an excessively greedy wolf (502-4).

Claudian in *De bello Gothico* has definitely changed his manner of representing the barbarians. An examination of his later poem discloses that this change is temporary. In *De sexto consulatu Honorii* no images describe future triumphs for Rome, six of the eleven images of the barbarians are based on Roman victories, and only five revolve around the enemy. Alaric admits that he once considered himself above the entire world (277-80). A surprising image compares the camps of the Goths to stars (453-54). The Po accuses Alaric of giant-like madness (185-86). Alaric causes the cities of Liguria to tremble after he crosses the Alps (443). He resembles a pirate ship, although one badly damaged by a warship (132-42).

The imagery in *De Sexto consulatu Honorii* goes much further than that of *De bello Gothico* in describing a final defeat of the Goths. Alaric appears as pathetic as a beekeeper who tries to recall his lost bees by beating a gong (259-64). He considers suicide as he laments his fate and compares his situation to a shipwreck and himself to an exile without a refuge (316-17). The Po exults over the defeat of another Phaethon (186-92). The axes in a Roman triumph are covered with Gothic garlands as Honorius puts his foot on the neck of the Danube (647-48). In two poems of almost the same length *De bello Gothico* has twenty-five images magnifying the Goths and *De sexto consulatu Honorii* only five. The general tones of the two poems also differ. In the first the Romans have had a narrow escape but in the second the Goths have been crushed.

In *De bello Gothico* Claudian makes the Goths quite frightening. Claudian seems to be emphasizing the need to retain Stilicho because of the inability of other men to restrain the barbarians. This, however, is not the traditional view of Claudian's purpose in this poem. The ordinary explanation would state that Claudian glorifies the enemy in order to magnify the achievement of Stilicho in defeating a major foe: some excuse must be offered because the victory was not decisive.

The practice of praising enemies may be normal for apologists, but it is not the custom of Claudian, who does almost the opposite in his other poems. The cruel monster Rufinus acts like a coward when



threatened by Stilicho's overwhelming power (*In Rufin.* 2.130-40). All are amazed at the easy victory over Gildo (*B. Gild.* 1-16). Eutropius, who is not even a man, is easily vanquished (*In Eutr.* 2. pref. 1-20). The emphasis in the other political poems, except for a few short references to the dangerous situation, is on the universal peace obtained by great slaughters of the enemy. The passages describing the actions of Stilicho against the Goths offer the closest parallel to *De bello Gothico*. Sixty-seven lines tell of the victories of Stilicho over these barbarians (*III cons. Hon.* 147-48; *In Rufin.* 1.316-18, 2. pref. 9-12, and 124-29; *IV cons. Hon.* 459-73, 479-83; *Epith.* 309-11; *Cons. Stil.* 1.94-111, 131-37, 185-87, 3.13). Only seven lines can be construed as stressing the power of the Goths (*IV cons. Hon.* 474-78; *Cons. Stil.* 1.112-15). This is far from the result obtained by the analysis of *De bello Gothico*.

The excuse for the escape of the Goths is as rare in Claudian as the praise of the enemy. Greece in 395, Pollentia in 402, and Verona in 403 give Claudian three different occasions for explaining away a lost opportunity against Alaric. But it is only the praise of clemency in *De bello Gothico* (90-137) that admits the responsibility of the general for his failure. In the first case the treachery of Rufinus is blamed for the escape of the already beaten Goths (*In Rufin.* 1.318-22, 2.141-70, 186-96, and 201-97; *Cons. Stil.* 1.112-15). In *De sexto consulatu Honorii* only three lines (223-25) explain the escape of Alaric. The lengthy description of the defeated Goths (178-330) expresses an optimism not seen in *De bello Gothico*. It is also only in the latter poem that Claudian devotes an entire work to the explanation of a lost chance and a defense of the Vandal through the unusual means of frightening the senate.

This analysis does not *prove* that there was an opposition to Stilicho. It shows that Claudian, since he tries to defend Stilicho, thought that such an opposition existed. Not only the number, but also the effectiveness, of the images used of the Goths reveals Claudian's attitude toward the barbarians. The conclusion that Claudian is defending the position of Stilicho through his picture of the Goths seems to be the most satisfactory explanation of this unusual poem. Since the work defends Stilicho's power, it must be assumed that this was Claudian's purpose in writing the poem. That Claudian achieved some success here is suggested by the optimism of *De sexto consulatu Honorii*. The

opposition to which the poem on Pollentia is directed apparently disappeared. It did not return until a series of disasters and an unpopular policy had weakened Stilicho.

Further conclusions may be deduced from the unusual nature of *De bello Gothico*. This is Claudian's only poem devoted to the Goths. Only here does the poet reply to the charge that Stilicho favored the Goths. Nowhere else does Claudian directly oppose the Roman senate. Two passages in this poem (217-26 and 267-73) even attack the aristocracy. All of this shows that Stilicho's authority was seriously questioned only at this time in Claudian's entire career and that the criticism arose primarily because of Stilicho's attitude toward the Goths. Levy has pointed out the efforts of Claudian to discuss the barbarians with the senate, although he portrays Claudian's practice as one of attacking the barbarians.<sup>14</sup> Romano has also observed the importance of the Goths, although he concludes that Claudian favored the senate and deserted Stilicho because of the Vandal's philobarbarism.<sup>15</sup>

The view that Claudian broke with Stilicho because of the latter's pro-Gothicism is untenable. Fabri has tried to find evidence of Claudian's dislike of philobarbarism in two of the poet's works, "Deprecatio in Hadrianum" and *De bello Gothico*.<sup>16</sup> Demougeot has already refuted the analysis based on the former,<sup>17</sup> while Merone has disproved the reasoning based upon the latter.<sup>18</sup> Romano explains Claudian's silence on politics after 404 by a disgust at Stilicho's favoritism for the Goths.<sup>19</sup> But it is most unlikely that Claudian changed sides. If Stilicho is guilty of leniency toward the Goths, Claudian is defending that leniency in *De bello Gothico*.

<sup>14</sup> Levy (above, note 2) 343-45.

<sup>15</sup> D. Romano, *Claudio* (Palermo 1958) 139-40.

<sup>16</sup> P. Fabri, "Il vero Claudiano," *Athenaeum* (1939) 27-40.

<sup>17</sup> Demougeot (above, note 1) 290-93.

<sup>18</sup> E. Merone, "La Morte di Claudiano," *Giornale Italiano di Filologia* (1954) 312-18.

<sup>19</sup> Romano (above, note 15) 139-40.