

The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: rewriting the sack of Rome

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On 24 August 410 the Goths under their king Alaric entered the city of Rome and spent three days pillaging it. They then moved south towards Sicily, possibly in the hope of escaping to Africa, but Alaric died and the Goths retreated back through Italy to Gaul, from where they were driven into Spain by Roman forces in 414.¹ The sack of Rome was by all accounts of little material significance in the long and complex history of Roman engagement with barbarians; it was in fact the Goths' third visit to the city in three years, and on the previous occasion the senate had allowed them into Rome and collaborated with them in setting up the prefect of the city as emperor in opposition to Honorius, whose administration was based in Ravenna.² Contemporary historians emphasized that the forces of the western empire had recovered their dominance within just three or four years at most, and recent historians have seen the attack on Rome as representing a failure on the part of the Goths, who had hoped to use the threat to Rome as a bargaining tool with the emperor in their pursuit of land and supplies.³ Honorius and his government seem to have been relatively untroubled. On the day after Alaric's seizure of Rome Honorius had time, from his palace in Ravenna, to issue an edict ordering that religious dissension among Christians in North Africa should cease and summoning a conference of all the Catholic and Donatist bishops to examine their differences.⁴ The *Liber pontificalis* manages to

¹ The main primary sources are the *Nova historia* of the Byzantine historian Zosimus, writing around 500, on which see R. T. Ridley, *Zosimus: New History: a Translation with Commentary* (Canberra, 1982), bks V–VI; and the account by the Spanish historian Orosius, writing around 417, in *Pauli Orosii historiarum adversus paganos libri VII*, ed. C. Zangemeister, CSEL 5 (Vienna, 1882), trans. R. J. Deferrari, *Paulus Orosius, The Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, The Fathers of the Church 50 (Washington, DC, 1964), VII.xxxix–xliiii. See also the fragments of an account by Olympiodorus in R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1981–3) II, 152–220. Among recent accounts, the most useful seem to be P. Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332–489* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 193–224; and R. Collins, *Early Medieval Europe, 300–1000*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 59.

² Ridley, *Zosimus*, V.xli and VI.vii; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 58–9.

³ See below, n. 8, as well as P. Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996), p. 148; Heather, *Goths and Romans*, p. 216; J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Courts, A.D. 364–425* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 300–1; and Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 59.

⁴ G. Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 2nd ed. (Norwich, 1986), pp. 267–8.

give a quite detailed account of the time of Pope Innocent I (402–17) and his good works without once mentioning the Goths or the attack on Rome (Orosius explains that he happened to be away in Ravenna at the time).⁵ But the event acquired remarkable prominence, and a distinctive significance, in the Anglo-Saxon perception of their past, especially in the Alfredian period: it is mentioned prominently in two of Bede's historical works, in four of the Old English prose works associated with King Alfred, and in Æthelweard's *Chronicle*; it is the context and end-point of the Old English version of Orosius's *History of the World*; and it is the starting-point of King Alfred's account of Boethius. I want here to explore its developing significance for the Anglo-Saxons, and particularly for the Alfredian world.

The sack of Rome by the Goths acquired a symbolic importance initially through the work of Augustine and Orosius, who represented the event as a crisis for Christianity in its conflict with classical paganism. In his *Retractions*, written in 426, Augustine explained that 'At this time Rome was overwhelmed in disaster after its capture by the Goths under their king Alaric. Those who worship the multitude of false gods, whom we usually call pagans, tried to lay the blame for this disaster on the Christian religion . . . This fired me with zeal for the house of God and I began to write the City of God to confute their blasphemies and falsehood.'⁶ The opening chapters of the *City of God*, begun in 413, make explicit reference to the sack of Rome, describing the Goths as savage and bloodthirsty but nevertheless emphasizing their clemency to those who took sanctuary in churches.⁷ Orosius, writing his *Historiae adversum paganos* at Augustine's request, around 417, describes the sack of Rome in his final chapters but also makes repeated reference to it throughout the work. He represents it as a brief, three-day experience remarkable for its restraint, an event which had no lasting repercussions and whose material signs are already hard to identify, in a Roman world now flourishing again under a good and confident emperor just a few years later: 'Anno itaque ab Urbe condita .mclxiiii. inruptio Urbis per Alaricum facta est: cuius rei quamuis recens memoria sit, tamen si quis ipsius populi Romani et multitudinem uideat et uocem audiat, nihil factum, sicut etiam ipsi fatentur, arbitrabitur.'⁸ And

⁵ *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, 2 vols. (Paris, 1844–92) I, 220–2; Orosius, ed. Zangemeister, VII.xxxix and Deferrari, *Seven Books*, p. 353.

⁶ *Retractationum libri II*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, CCSL 57 (Turnhout, 1984), II.xliii.1. The translation is that of Henry Bettenson in *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. xv–xvi.

⁷ *De civitate Dei*, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, 2 vols., CCSL 47–8 (Turnhout, 1955).

⁸ Orosius, ed. Zangemeister, VII.xl.1; Deferrari, *Seven Books*, p. 353: 'thus, in the one thousand one hundred and sixty-fourth year after the founding of the City, an attack was made upon the City by Alaric; although the memory of this event is fresh, nevertheless, if anyone sees the multitude of the Roman people themselves and hears their talk, he will think that nothing took place, as even they themselves confess'.

yet, he says, Romans continue to express outrage at the experience and to blame Christianity, even though the Christian king Alaric went to great lengths to protect Christian buildings and treasures. His narrative ends with the Goths disappearing to Gaul and then being pushed into Spain by Roman forces, with some moving on disastrously to Africa. The succession of empires is an important theme in his account of history, and he offers some ingenious calculations showing how Rome's rise began just at the moment when the Assyrian empire fell, and some comparisons showing the similarity between the manner in which the Assyrian empire fell and the events surrounding the sack of Rome; but the crucial difference, he insists, is that Rome's ruler is Christian and the providential rule of God ensures that the Roman empire will continue.⁹

For Augustine and Orosius, writing in the 410s, it was possible to claim, perhaps even to believe, that Alaric's sack of Rome was of minor import and Rome and its empire would survive. For the Anglo-Saxons, writing after the western empire at least had fallen and conscious that they themselves were a successor-state benefiting from the destructive work of the Goths, it had to have a different significance. Bede's first reference to the sack of Rome, in the chronicle which he included in his *De temporum ratione* around 725, seems to reflect the Orosian view of it as an event of limited material import: 'Halaricus rex Gothorum Romam inuasit partemque eius cremavit incendio .viii. kal. Sept., anno conditionis eius millesimo centesimo sexagesimo quarto, ac sexto die quam ingressus fuerat depredata urbe egressus est.'¹⁰

He makes no connection with events in Britain, and presents another forty-five years passing before the end of the empire itself, after the death of the patrician Aetius: 'cum quo Hesperium cecidit regnum neque hactenus ualuit releuari'.¹¹ But by the time he wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica* just a few years later, the event had acquired a critical importance in the history of Britain. Bk I ch. 11 begins with an account of the election of two usurpers in succession by the Roman army in Britain in 407, and Bede remarks in passing that this was during the reign of Honorius, in the year when the Alans and Suevi crossed the Rhine and two years before the sack of Rome.¹² Then at the end of the chapter he reports the event itself and links it with the end of Roman rule in Britain:

⁹ Orosius, ed. Zangemeister, II.i–iii; Deferrari, *Seven Books*, pp. 44–7.

¹⁰ *Chronica maiora = De temporum ratione liber*, cc. LXVI–LXXI, in *Beda Opera Didascalica*, ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout, 1977), 461–544, lines 1541–4; translation from *Bede: the Reckoning of Time*, trans. with introduction, notes and commentary by F. Wallis (Liverpool, 1999), p. 218: 'Alaric king of the Goths captured Rome and burnt part of it on the 9th kalends of September in the 1164th year after its foundation. On the sixth day after entering it he left the pillaged city.'

¹¹ *Chronica maiora*, ed. Jones, lines 1644–5; Wallis, *Reckoning*, p. 222: 'with him fell the Western realm and to this day it has not had the strength to be revived'.

¹² *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 38.

Fracta est autem Roma a Gothis anno millesimo .clxiii. suae conditionis, ex quo tempore Romani in Britannia regnare cesserunt, post annos ferme quadringentos .lxx. ex quo Gaius Iulius Caesar eandem insulam adiit. Habebant autem intra uallum, quod Seuerum trans insulam fecisse commemorauimus, ad plagam meridianam, quod ciuitates farus partes et stratae ibidem factae usque hodie testantur; ceterum ultiores Britanniae partes, uel eas etiam quae ultra Britanniam sunt insulas, iure dominandi possidebant.¹³

Bede's account of British history had begun with the arrival of Julius Caesar in 60 BC, and he uses the sack of Rome to mark the end of the period of Roman rule, leaving the island open to the next phase of occupation, that of the Anglo-Saxons.

Why did Bede link the sack of Rome with the end of Roman rule in Britain, and what did he mean by it? Probably every historian concerned with Roman Britain or early Anglo-Saxon England, and every archaeologist working in that period, has tried to deal with Bede's reasons for dating the end of Roman rule when he did and the literature on the subject is enormous, though strikingly little seems to have been said about the link he makes with the sack of Rome.¹⁴ Bede's narrative up to this point in the chapter follows almost verbatim Orosius's account in bk VII chs. 40–2, which records how the usurper Constantine III was proclaimed emperor by the army in Britain in 407, took his army to the Continent and established control of much of Gaul and Spain, and made an alliance with the legitimate emperor Honorius, but was eventually defeated and killed in 411 (though Bede omits the detailed account of events in Spain). His words describing the sack of Rome itself echo the summarizing words used by Orosius just prior to that narrative, in VII.40, at the end of his own description of the attack, 'anno itaque ab urbe condita .mclxiii. inruptio urbis per Alaricum facta est',¹⁵ though Bede's 'fracta est autem Roma' suggests something stronger and more final than Orosius's 'inruptio . . . facta'. After the reference to the sack of Rome and end of Roman rule quoted above Bede gives a lengthy description,

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 40–1: 'Rome was taken by the Goths in the eleven hundred and sixty-fourth year after its foundation; after this the Romans ceased to rule in Britain, almost 470 years after Gaius Julius Caesar had come to the island. They had occupied the whole land south of the rampart already mentioned, set up across the island by Severus, an occupation to which the cities, light-houses, bridges and roads which they built there testify to this day. Moreover they possessed the suzerainty over the further parts of Britain as well as over the islands which are beyond it.'

¹⁴ E.g. D. J. V. Fisher, *The Anglo-Saxon Age, c. 400–1042* (London, 1973), pp. 5–7; M. E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), esp. pp. 108–43 and 244–57 (who suggests on p. 110 that it may have been a lucky inference, and on p. 250 that it was guesswork); P. Salway, *A History of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 307–31; I. Wood, 'The End of Roman Britain: Continental Evidence and Parallels', *Gildas: New Approaches*, ed. M. Lapidge and D. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 1–25; A. S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 136–9. ¹⁵ See above, p. 48.

derived from Gildas, of how Britain had been denuded of troops by the usurpers and fell victim to raids by Picts and Scots, sought help from Rome and was twice rescued by Roman legions but thereafter told to fend for itself. But the intervening passage, on the ending of the 470 years of Roman rule in Britain and its link to the sack of Rome, is not derived from either Orosius or Gildas.

Gildas places the account of Britain being denuded of troops, attacked by Picts and Scots, twice rescued by the Romans and eventually abandoned to its fate, immediately after his account of an earlier usurper Maximus,¹⁶ who was elected emperor by the Roman army in Britain around 377 and established himself as ruler in the West after killing the emperor Gratian, but was eventually defeated and killed by Theodosius in 388. In his *De temporum ratione* Bede divides this story into three episodes. Like Gildas he places the first part of this account – Britain being denuded of Roman troops by Maximus and attacked by Picts and Scots who knew that the Romans would never return – in the 380s and 390s, immediately after the defeat of Maximus, but places the British appeals to Rome and the two visits by legions later, in the reign of Honorius (395–423), and after his account of the sack of Rome in 410 (though not immediately after it), and the final appeal to Aetius and the Roman abandonment of Britain to its fate in the period 425–51.¹⁷ But in the *Historia ecclesiastica* he reshaped the chronology, moving the first part, on Britain being denuded of troops and attacked by the Scots and Picts, to a later position, after his account of the rebellion and reign of Constantine III in 407–11, presumably because this new material that he had introduced from Orosius, which records that the Roman army in Britain chose a pair of usurping emperors in 407, was incompatible with the account from Gildas which implies that Britain lost its Roman troops for good as early as 380. By a nice sleight of hand Gildas's reference to usurpers denuding the island of troops, in context implying Maximus, now refers in the *Historia ecclesiastica* to Gratian and Constantine, the usurpers of 407.

This chronological shift brings the loss of Roman troops from Britain close in time to the sack of Rome in 410. In designating that date as the point at which Roman rule in Britain ended, Bede does seem to be, perhaps serendipitously, in accord with other evidence. Although Gildas gives no dates, the sixth-century Byzantine chronicler Procopius reports that Rome never recovered control of Britain after the defeat of Constantine III and his sons in 411, and that Britain from that time on continued to be ruled by tyrants (or usurpers).¹⁸ Another sixth-century Greek historian, Zosimus, reports that around 410 the Britons

¹⁶ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. M. Winterbottom (London, 1978), pp. 20–4.

¹⁷ *Chronica maiora*, ed. Jones, lines 1517–1600; Wallis, *Reckoning*, pp. 217, 219 and 220.

¹⁸ Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, III.ii.31–8; see Procopius, *Works*, with an English translation by H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols. (London, 1914–40) II, 19–21.

rebelled against Roman rule, threw out their governors and took control of their own defence against the barbarians.¹⁹ And Zosimus goes on to report, also around 410, that Honorius sent letters advising the cities of Britain to take responsibility for their own defence.²⁰ Archaeological evidence, especially the evidence of coins, also suggests the disappearance of Roman troops, and probably therefore administration, from Britain around the first decade of the fifth century.²¹ Bede did not of course have the benefit of archaeological reports and had probably not read the Byzantine historians, but there may have been a western tradition of similar import.²² But it is important to note that the documentary evidence for the ending of Roman rule gives no parallel for Bede's association of it with the sack of Rome. Gildas and Procopius attribute the loss of Britain to the activities of the British-based usurpers Maximus and Constantine respectively, while Zosimus gives two different and apparently contradictory accounts. The first, a British (and Gallic) rebellion against Roman authority prompted by the threat of attack from barbarians who had crossed the Rhine, is placed vaguely during the period of Constantine III's 'tyranny', that is, 407–11:

They [the barbarians from over the Rhine] reduced the inhabitants of Britain to such straits that they revolted from the Roman empire, no longer submitted to Roman law, and reverted to their native customs. The Britons, therefore, armed themselves and ran many risks to ensure their own safety and free their cities from the attacking barbarians. The whole of Armorica and other Gallic provinces, in imitation of the Britons, freed themselves in the same way, by expelling the Roman magistrates and establishing the government they wanted.²³

There have been attempts to make it fit with the other evidence, from Gildas, Orosius and Bede, and deduce that the Britons were rejecting not the authority of Rome but the officers appointed by Constantine before he left for Gaul (though it is difficult to see how this could have helped them deal with barbarian threats)²⁴ but it looks like an extremely garbled version of the rebellion by Roman forces in Britain under the usurpers Gratian and Constantine.²⁵ The second, Honorius's letter, is dated before the sack of Rome and in a context which emphasizes the emperor's strength rather than weakness: 'Honorius sent letters to the cities of Britain, urging them to fend for themselves, and rewarded

¹⁹ Ridley, *Zosimus*, VI.v.3. ²⁰ *Ibid.* VI.x.2. ²¹ Cleary, *The Ending*, p. 139.

²² See below, p. 53. ²³ Ridley, *Zosimus*, VI.v.3.

²⁴ Cf. Salway, *History*, pp. 322–31; Fisher, *Anglo-Saxon Age*, p. 6; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 60.

²⁵ Heather (*Goths and Romans*, p. 77) notes other cases where Zosimus seems to have unintentionally produced two different versions of the same event, through using two different sources. And Procopius similarly treats the usurpation of Constantine as a rebellion of the Britons against the Romans.

his troops with the money sent by Heraclianus. He was now completely at ease, having won the loyalty of the armies everywhere.²⁶ The documentary evidence points, if anywhere, to the rebellion of Constantine III rather than the sack of Rome as the key factor in interrupting Roman rule in Britain.

The one text prior to Bede which does associate the two events is the brief anonymous text entitled *Narratio de imperatoribus* printed by Mommsen, which was supposedly written in the West soon after Honorius's death in 423.²⁷ In describing Honorius's reign the chronicler says that many grievous blows struck the empire during that period, of which the bitterest was the sack of Rome by Alaric; and he goes on to specify the capture of the emperor's sister, Galla Placidia, and her marriage to the next Gothic leader, the destruction of Gaul and Spain by the Alans, Suevi and Vandals, and the permanent loss of Britain to the empire: 'Britanniae Romano nomini in perpetuum sublatae'. But in contrast to the emperor's failures against external enemies, he says, Honorius was successful against internal ones, specifying his victories over Constantine and other usurpers. The formulation perhaps suggests that the chronicler attributed the loss of Britain to external enemies rather than usurpers, but the chronicler does not specify which ones, as he does with the other disasters, and perhaps did not know. Even the *Narratio* does no more than record the sack of Rome and the loss of Britain as parallel disasters, accompanied by others, and implies that the emperor retained power nevertheless.

The association of the end of Roman Britain with the Gothic sack of Rome seems to be Bede's own link, and it is not clear what exactly he meant to suggest. It is of course possible that he linked the two events in this fashion because he had reasons for dating both to around 410 and was not necessarily implying a causal link. Much indeed depends on how his words are punctuated and translated. Mynors, following Plummer, punctuates them as a single sentence, which should presumably be translated: 'Rome was broken by the Goths in the eleven hundred and sixty-fourth year after its foundation, from which time the Romans ceased to rule in Britain . . .'.²⁸ But in the facing translation Colgrave gives: 'Now Rome was taken by the Goths in the eleven hundred and sixty-fourth year after its foundation; after this the Romans ceased to rule in Britain.' And Michael Jones renders it still more loosely: 'Rome fell to the Goths in the 1164th year after its foundation. At the same time Roman rule came to an end in Britain.'²⁹ If Bede did see a causal connection, it was presumably that the sack of Rome prevented

²⁶ Ridley, *Zosimus*, VI.x.2.

²⁷ 'Narratio de imperatoribus domus Valentinianae et Theodosianae', *Chronica Minora Saec. IV.V.VI.VII*, ed. T. Mommsen, MGH Auct. antiq. 9 (1892) I, 629–30. For the date, see S. Muhlberger, 'The Gallic Chronicle of 452 and its Authority for British Events', *Britannia* 14 (1983), 23–33. ²⁸ *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 40; see above, p. 50.

²⁹ Jones, *Roman Britain*, p. 250, n. 25.

the empire from replacing the troops withdrawn by Constantine or restoring the administration subverted by his rebellion. But whatever the precise causal link he may have seen, rhetorically there does seem to be an underlying suggestion here that the sack of Rome was, despite Orosius, a climactic event in the decline of the empire which was mirrored by events in Britain.³⁰ It seems to be his own version of the *translatio imperii* theme used by Orosius, and gives the end of Roman Britain implications for the Roman empire itself. But if his wording, and the structure of his narrative, do indeed suggest strongly the sense of an ending, the completion of the Roman phase of British history in line with the decline of the empire, his subsequent narrative complicates the picture. Following Gildas, he goes on to record that the Britons appealed to Rome, as if the city was still a centre of power, and that Roman legions arrived in all their old power and success, twice over, as if Alaric had after all had no effect. And it is only in 455 that he records the end of the western empire. In his *De temporum ratione* under Anno Mundi 4410 Bede reports the death of Aetius and says ‘with him fell the western realm and to this day it has not had the strength to be revived’.³¹ In the *Historia ecclesiastica* he gives a somewhat different version: ‘Nec multo post Valentinianus ab Aetii patricii, quem occiderat, satellitibus interimitur, anno imperii Marciani sexto, cum quo simul Hesperium concidit regnum.’³² In dropping the reference to a future revival, and identifying the fall with the death of the last western emperor, he perhaps adds a further note of finality to Roman rule, before introducing the new Roman arrivals, the mission of Augustine of Canterbury.

Bede clearly knew Orosius and Augustine, and must have been well aware of their reading of the sack of Rome as a challenge to Christianity which had been successfully countered. But for him it has begun to acquire a quite different sense, as a stage in the collapse of the western empire and the marker, if not the cause, of the end of Roman Britain. The Goths become implicitly responsible for clearing Britain of Roman power and thus making space for the Anglo-Saxons.

Such a reading seems to be implied by Alcuin’s poem on York, dated perhaps in the early 790s. Alcuin briefly describes the early history of York under Roman

³⁰ Bede’s view of the sack of Rome as an event more serious than Orosius and Augustine suggest, was conceivably influenced by Jerome’s emotional response on hearing the news, describing it as the moment ‘when the brightest light of all the lands was extinguished, the head of the Roman empire cut off, and the whole world perished in one city’ (*Commentarii in Ezechielem*, ed. F. Glorie, CCSL 75 (Turnhout, 1964), Prol. 5–14). I owe the suggestion to Professor George Brown of Stanford University. ³¹ See above, p. 49.

³² *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 66–7; ‘Not long after, in the sixth year of the reign of Marcian [i.e. 455], Valentinian was murdered by the followers of the patrician Aetius whom he had put to death, and with Valentinian the western empire fell.’

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rule, and then reports that the Romans left Britain to deal with barbarian enemies at home:

Hinc Romana manus turbatis undique sceptris
postquam secessit cupiens depellere saevos
hostes Hesperiae regnum sedemque tueri,
urbis tunc tenuit sceptrum gens pigra Britonum.³³

He then moves on to the attacks of the Picts which lead to the appeal for Saxon help. Godman cites Gildas ch. 18 as the source for this section, but this particular detail is decidedly not from Gildas; nor is it from Bede, whose *Historia ecclesiastica* provides the material for the subsequent narrative in Alcuin's poem. Both Bede and Gildas report that the Roman army originally left Britain in support of an attempted usurpation of the empire, whereas Alcuin's wording strongly suggests that they left to help protect Italy against barbarians who had already invaded. Presumably Alcuin is alluding to the Goths of 410, and perhaps reflecting the implications of Bede's link between the departure of the Romans and the sack of Rome.

Such implications were to be picked up by vernacular writings of the Alfredian period a century and a half later. The Old English version of Bede's *Historia*, probably produced towards the end of the ninth century, is often rather selective in what it reproduces from Bede and also given to mistranslation, and it is hard to tell whether the substantial differences in its reading of early history are deliberate or accidental, though they evidently produced for readers a rather different picture of Roman history and Roman Britain from Bede's. It reports, for instance, that under Nero the Romans lost control of Britain and did not regain it until the reign of Severus well over a century later, in AD 189. That, intriguingly, includes the time of the British king Lucius who obtained the conversion of the British to Christianity.

Its account of the sack of Rome and the end of Roman rule is more succinct than Bede's:

Ða wæs ymb feower hund wintra ond seofone æfter Drihtnes menniscnysse; feng to rice Honorius casere, se wæs feorða eac feowertigum fram Augusto þam casere – twam gearum ær Romaburh abrocen ond forhergad wære. Seo hergung wæs þurh Alaricum Gotena cuning geworden. Wæs Romaburh abrocen fram Gotum ymb þusend wintra ond hundteontig ond feower ond systig ðæs þe heo geworht wæs. Of þære tide Romane blunnun ricsian on Breotene. Hæfdon hi Breotona rice feower hund wintra ond þæs fiftan hundseofontig, ðæs ðe Gaius, oððre naman Iulius, se casere þæt ylce ealond

³³ *Alcuin: the Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, ed. P. Godman (Oxford, 1982), pp. 6–7, lines 38–41; 'after the Roman troops, their empire in turmoil, had withdrawn, intending to rout their savage foe and to defend Italy, their native realm, the slothful race of Britons then held sway over York'.

gesohte. Ond ceastre ond torras ond stræta ond brycge on heora rice geworhte wæron, þa we to dæg sceawian magon. Eardædon Bryttas binnan þam dice to suððæle, þe we gemynegodon þæt Seuerus se casere het þwyr's ofer þæt ealond gedician.³⁴

The translator, or rather adapter, has shifted the accession of Honorius from 395 to 407 and omitted the reference to the Alans and other barbarians crossing the Rhine and the whole account of Constantine III's rebellion, usurpation and death, thus reducing Bede's chapter to this single passage on the sack of Rome and the end of Roman rule in Britain. (He also rewrites this to say that the Britons lived to the south of the wall, where Bede had been talking about the Romans.) He then moves directly on to Bede's next chapter, omitting the opening reference to Britain being denuded of troops by the usurpers, and gives an account of the attacks of the Picts and Scots, the British appeal to the Romans for help and the two successive rescue visits from Roman legions before the final unsuccessful appeal to Aetius, whom he calls a king. All reference to the series of usurpers originating from Britain and denuding the island of troops is eliminated – the Old English adapter in fact omits Maximus as well as Gratian and Constantine III, and moves directly from the reign of Constantius I and Constantine the Great in 306–37 to the accession of Honorius in 407 and the sack of Rome. The departure of Roman troops from Britain is thus never mentioned and the Gothic success becomes the only possible explanation for the cessation of Roman rule in Britain. What happened to Rome itself thereafter, and to the western empire, is left unclear. It is reported, as in Bede and Gildas, that the Britons appealed to Rome for help and great armies were sent from there, but the subsequent fall of the western empire in 456 is omitted.

For the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* too the sack of Rome by the Goths functions as a key moment in the story of Roman Britain. In the Parker version at least the story of Britain begins, as in Bede, with the arrival of Julius Caesar.³⁵ It continues with a series of annals recording the Roman engagement with Britain – the conquest by Claudian, the conversion under Lucius, the building of the dyke under Severus, the reign of Maximianus who was born in Britain and then went

³⁴ *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. A. Miller, 2 vols., EETS os 95 and 96 (London, 1890–1), I, 42–4: '407 years after the Incarnation the emperor Honorius, who was the 44th from the emperor Augustus, succeeded to the throne, two years before the city of Rome was taken by force and sacked. The sacking was done by Alaric king of the Goths. The city of Rome was taken by the Goths 1164 years after it was built. From that time the Romans ceased to rule in Britain. They had power over Britain for 470 years, from the time that the emperor Gaius Julius visited that same island. And cities and towers and squares and bridges were made under their rule, which we can see today. The Britons lived to the south of the dyke which we mentioned, which the emperor Severus ordered to be made right across the island.' (The translation is my own.)

³⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MS A*, ed. J. Batley, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition 3* (Cambridge, 1986), 2.

to Gaul in 381 (apparently a conflation of the usurper Maximus and the earlier emperor Maximianus, whom the Old English *Bede* records as coming to Britain), and finally the sack of Rome and the end of Roman rule under 409: ‘Her Gotan abrecon Romeburg, and næfre siþan Romane ne ricsodon on Bretone.’³⁶ Presumably for contemporary readers the implication that the Goths had put an end to both the Roman empire and the Roman hegemony in Britain would have been unmistakable. Nothing further in the *Chronicle* ever suggests that the emperors regained control of Rome, and the next reference to the city identifies it as a place of pilgrimage and the seat of the pope, under the year 688. But the chronicler adds one new element to the story of the end of Roman Britain, in the next annal, for 418, with the Roman burial of their treasure before departing for Gaul: ‘Her Romane gesomnodon al þa goldhord þe on Bretene wæron and sume on eorþan ahyddon þæt hie nænig mon siþþan findan ne meahte and sume mid him on Gallia leddon.’³⁷ This strange annal has an odd approximation to historical fact, at least in the sense that a remarkable number of hoards of precious coins have been found in Britain from the last decade or so of Roman occupation, without parallel on the Continent or from earlier periods in Britain.³⁸ Presumably the discovery of such hoards by Anglo-Saxons may have played a part in the tradition recorded here.³⁹ This departure of the Romans in 418, after the supposed end of Roman rule in 409, perhaps suggests the vague influence of Bede’s story, derived from Gildas, of the two successive visits of Roman legions in the period between 411 and 451, though the reference to departure to Gaul (rather than Rome) is more reminiscent of the stories about emperors and usurpers who originated from Britain: Maximus and Constantine III are both said to depart for Gaul by Bede, and Constantine I is made emperor of Gaul on his father’s death at York. But the annal clearly functions as a rhetorical or mythic statement of the final departure of the Romans from Britain, abandoning their claims and clearing the way for the next wave of conquerors and the next empire, whose advent is the subject of the next annal but one. In its association of treasure-burial with the end of an era, rather than temporary threats, the annal resembles the story in *Beowulf* of the last survivor of a people in decline burying his people’s treasure because there is no-one left to use and

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 15; ‘in this year the Goths broke into the city of Rome and never afterwards did the Romans rule in Britain’. (The translations from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are my own; the OE *abrecon* presumably reflects Bede’s *fracta*.)

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 16; ‘in this year the Romans gathered all the treasure-hoards that were in Britain and hid some in the ground so that no-one would be able to find them afterwards and took some with them to Gaul’. ³⁸ Cleary, *The Ending*, p. 139.

³⁹ See M. Hunter, ‘Germanic and Roman Antiquity and the Sense of the Past in Anglo-Saxon England’, *ASE* 3 (1974), 29–50, at 38–9; as Hunter points out, earlier Roman coins are often found in Anglo-Saxon graves and are imitated in Anglo-Saxon coinage.

care for it. Presumably both writers are invoking a tradition of treasure-burial as a symbol of the end of a people.

This is not quite the end of the story of Roman decline in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* however. Under the year 690 we find a reference to the end of Roman rule of the church in Britain: ‘Her þeodorus ærcebiscep forþferde, and feng Beorhtwald to þam biscepdome. Ær wærun romanisce biscepas, siþþan wærun englisce.’⁴⁰ If for Bede the arrival of the faith from Rome in 597 might be read as a restoration of the Roman rule in Britain, for the chronicler the point is rather to underline the role of the Anglo-Saxons as successors to the Romans.

When Æthelweard came to write his *Chronicle* some seventy or eighty years later he drew on both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the account in the Old English *Bede* for this period of British history, plus at times his own imagination or fondness for rhetorical elaboration. Under 381 he records the rebellion of the usurper Maximus in Britain, but adds the conquest of Italy and Spain to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s* report of his conquering Gaul. He then gives the 409 annal on the sack of Rome and the end of Roman rule in Britain, apparently in the belief that Maximus was still reigning at that date: ‘Igitur post ambitum circuli regni eius uigesimi et anni octauī a Gothis destruitur Roma sublimis iam in milleno centesimo quadragesimo sexto post suam conditionem anno. Ab illo tempore cessauit imperium Romanorum a Britannia insula, et ab aliis quas sub iugo seruitutis tenebant multis terris.’⁴¹ Some of this additional material is in fact also added to manuscript A of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in a post-Conquest hand and appears in the E-version, but as Campbell shows,⁴² for this and much of the following material, on the attacks of the Picts and Scots, Æthelweard is drawing on the Old English *Bede*. But Bede is not responsible for the statement that the rule of Rome ceased in other lands as well as Britain. This statement makes explicit the implications of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and other texts of the period, that the sack of Rome by the Goths was a catastrophe for the empire which brought an end to Roman rule in Britain.

Æthelweard then has four pages on the attacks of the Picts and Scots and the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, largely from the Old English *Bede*. After that he returns to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* with an imaginative rendering of the 418 annal: ‘In nono etiam anno post euersionem Romae a Gothis, relictī qui erant in Brittannia Romana ex gente, multiplices non ferentes gentium minas, scrobibus

⁴⁰ *ASC MS A*, ed. Bately, p. 32; ‘in this year Archbishop Theodore died, and Beorhtwald succeeded to the bishopric. Previously bishops were Roman, but afterwards they were English’.

⁴¹ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. A. Campbell (London, 1962), p. 5: ‘after the lapse of the twenty-eighth year of the course of his reign, lofty Rome was destroyed by the Goths, and it was already the 1164th year after its foundation. From that time the imperial power of the Romans was ineffective in the island of Britain and in many other lands which they held under the yoke of servitude’.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. xvii and xxxvi–vii.

occultant thesaurum, aliquam sibi futuram existimantes fortunam, quod illis post non accidit. Partem sumunt, in unda gregantur, dant uentum carinis, exules Gallias tenent partes.⁴³ He differs from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in his surmise that the Romans hoped to return to recover their gold. More striking is his notion of the Romans living in Gaul as exiles, taking literally the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s statement that they departed for Gaul. Are they exiles from Britain or from Rome? Is Æthelweard implying or assuming that the Goths now occupied Italy and so the Romans could not return? The foreigners whose threats they would not endure are presumably not the Anglo-Saxons, since Æthelweard dates their arrival after 449 and here has turned back in time to 418, but either the Britons themselves or the Picts and Scots. If the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* had presented the Romans shaking the dust of Britain from their feet and returning home with their empire lost, Æthelweard has piled on the pathos, presenting them as a pitiful remnant driven into exile by more powerful peoples.

The sack of Rome and its significance for faith was of course a key event for Orosius when he wrote his *History*. Dorothy Whitelock, summarizing his argument, argues that it was no longer important for the Alfredian translator of Orosius: 'one gets a long way in this version before one even becomes aware of this theme. After all, it was not a burning question by Alfred's reign'.⁴⁴ Janet Bately makes much the same point in her notes, referring back to Whitelock.⁴⁵ This seems to me to misrepresent the importance of the event for the Old English version. Altogether the Old English writer mentions the sack of Rome at least six times, including twice without prompting from the Latin text. Orosius himself does not mention it at all in his preface and his first reference is at I.6, where he briefly contrasts the wholesale destruction of Sodom with the Goths' mild attack on Rome, which merely caused a slight interruption of their pleasures for the Romans; and the Old English version does indeed pass over this passage. But at I.16 the translator introduces a reference to the sack of Rome which is not in the original. Orosius says that the Goths abandoned their homes and invaded the Roman provinces but merely asked humbly for alliance and a place to settle; the Old English writer has more specific references here to the Goths destroying Rome and killing its inhabitants, and having the power to conquer.⁴⁶ He also makes the sack of Rome the final episode of his version,

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 10; 'in the ninth year after the overthrow of Rome by the Goths, those of the Roman nation who remained in Britain no longer endured the manifold threats of foreigners, but hid their treasure in trenches, thinking that some future luck would fall to their lot, but it did not thereafter turn out so for them. They took a part [of the treasure], gathered on the sea, set sail, and lived as exiles in the country of Gaul'.

⁴⁴ D. Whitelock, 'The Prose of Alfred's Reign', *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 67–103, at 90.

⁴⁵ *The Old English Orosius*, ed. J. Bately, EETS ss 6 (London, 1980), p. xciv. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 31.4–7.

whereas Orosius continues for a few more pages to describe the revival of the empire and the decline of Gothic power. More significantly, perhaps, the Old English writer presents a quite different outcome to the event. The Latin original ends by reporting the death of Alaric and the expulsion of the Goths from Narbonne into Spain, by a Roman army under Constantius, and the subsequent flight of some to Africa. The Old English version has a quite different story, in which the Goths appear to enter into an alliance with Honorius and settle in Italy after vacating Rome itself:

and sona þæs on þæm þriddan dæge hie aforan ut of þære byrig hiora agnum willan, swa þær ne wearð nan hus hiora willum forbærned. þær genom Hettulf, Alrican mæg, Onorius swostor þæs cyninges, and siþþan wið hine geþingade, and hi him to wife nam. Siþþan sæton þa Gotan þær on lande, sume be þæs caseres willan, sume his unwillan; sume hi foron on Ispanie, and þær gesæton, sume on Affrice.⁴⁷

What seems to be indicated here is that the sack of Rome led to the permanent settlement of the Goths in Italy, and that was certainly King Alfred's own understanding, as we shall see. No source is known for this, and it is perhaps just a deduction from the known presence of the (Ostro-)Goths in Italy in the sixth century, which is a central concern of two other works of the Alfredian circle, the Old English versions of Gregory's *Dialogues* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. And the statement that no houses were deliberately burnt by the Goths is quite contrary to the account of Orosius.

One of the striking aspects of the Old English writer's references to the sack of Rome and its implications is the way in which he preserves, or in some cases accentuates, the context in which Orosius originally presented the work, giving the sense that it is still Orosius speaking to the Romans in the 420s when the empire still flourished, not himself speaking to the Anglo-Saxons in the 890s with the benefit of hindsight. It is evident especially in the reference to the sack of Rome which the Old English writer introduces at I.10, where he says that the Goths have 'plundered you a little, and taken your city, and slain a few of you';⁴⁸ the passage is prefaced by the phrase 'cwæð Orosius'. It is more strikingly evident at II.1, where, following Orosius, he defines the four great empires of the world, Babylonian, Greek, African and that of the Romans 'who are still reigning'.⁴⁹ He repeats, and attributes specifically to Orosius – 'Orosius cwæð' –

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 156; 'and immediately after, on the third day, they marched out of the city of their own accord, so that there was not a house deliberately burnt. There Hettulf, Alaric's kinsman, took the sister of Honorius the king, and made terms with him, and married her. Afterwards the Goths settled there in the land, some with the emperor's agreement, some without. Some went to Spain and settled there, and some to Africa'. (The translations from the Old English *Orosius* are my own.)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 31: 'þa Gotan eow hwon oferhergedon and iowre burg abraecon and iower feawe ofslogon'. ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 36: 'þe giet ricsiende sindon'.

the latter's argument that God's providence has determined the rise and fall of empires, and his claim that although Alaric had sought to deprive Rome of its power it has continued unharmed afterwards, in all its strength. 'Because of their Christianity God would not permit that, neither for their emperors nor for themselves, but they (that is, the Romans) are now still ruling with their Christianity and their power and their emperors.'⁵⁰ It is of course possible to argue that for the Alfredian world the Roman empire *was* still flourishing, by virtue either of the continuing presence of the eastern empire in Byzantium or the ninth-century revival of the western empire under the Carolingians (though the last decade of the ninth century is a singularly bad period for that claim, since the imperial throne had fallen into the hands of a Lombard duke). In the early eleventh century Ælfric could still take comfort from the statement of St Paul, as interpreted by Jerome, that Antichrist would not come 'while the emperor rules his empire. But after the rule of the emperor who reigns over the Romans is wholly overthrown, then Antichrist will come'.⁵¹ Since there was an obvious hiatus between the last western emperor and Charlemagne, Ælfric must be referring to the eastern empire, described by him as still ruling over the Romans. But other present tense passages in the Old English *Orosius* can hardly be explained in this way. Thus at VI.37 the Old English writer tells us, referring to the year 395, 'Arcadius succeeded to power in the eastern part and maintained it for 12 years, and Honorius succeeded to the western part, and still has it now, said Orosius.'⁵² Such passages are a forceful reminder, and presumably a deliberate one, that the polemical, optimistic perspective of the work, even in its Old English form, is that of the early-fifth-century Orosius speaking to Romans, both unaware that Rome was shortly to lose its power. There is both a strange fidelity to the Orosian perspective here, and a strange contrast, for Alfredian readers, between that perspective, with its continued insistence that the sack of Rome was of minimal importance, and the reports that they would have found in the Old English *Bede* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that it had marked the end of Roman power in Britain. The Old English adaptation of Orosius's *History* becomes from this view a monument to the fallen Roman world, a snapshot of a moment when the empire tottered on the brink of dissolution and yet contemporaries could insist that all was well.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 38: 'hit þeh God for heora cristendome ne geþafode, naþer ne for heora caseras ne for heora selfra, ac hie nugiet ricsiende sindon ægþer ge mid hiera cristendome ge mid hiora anwalde ge mid hiera caserum'.

⁵¹ *Homilies of Ælfric: a Supplementary Collection*, ed. J. C. Pope, 2 vols., EETS os 259 and 260 (London, 1967–8) II, 784: ' . . . þa hwile þe se casere his cynedomes gewylt. Ac syððan þæs caseres rice þe on Romana rixað byð mid ealle toworpen, þonne cymð Antecrist'.

⁵² *Orosius*, ed. Bately, p. 155: 'feng Archadius to anwalde to þæm eastdæle and hine hæfde xii ger, and Onorius to þæm wæstdæle and nugiet hæfð, cwæð Orosius'.

Some interesting dramatic ironies are clearly developing in the text. Orosius had described the rise and fall of great empires and ascribed their passage to the providential dispensations of the Christian God, but insisted that, despite the sack of Rome by the Goths, Rome and its empire were still unharmed and flourishing at the time of writing, its Christian emperor and people protected by their God. Orosius continues to make that argument in the Old English version, though with a degree of distancing indicated by the recurrent ‘cwæð Orosius’. But the realities of history – that the western empire did soon fall, to be parcelled out among Goths, Lombards, Vandals, Franks and of course Anglo-Saxons – were evident to any contemporary reader of the Old English version, and are already signalled in its closing words with their reference to Gothic occupation. That leaves open of course for the Anglo-Saxon readers the question whether Orosius’s belief in a God determining the rise and fall of empires was simply invalid, or whether it had to be enlarged, beyond the horizon of Orosius himself, to include the fall of Rome and the rise of the Goths and other Germanic peoples. Which is a question that Alfred himself promptly goes on to explore.

As the Old English *Orosius* ends with the sack of Rome in 410, so King Alfred’s *Boethius* begins with it: ‘On ðære tide ðe Gotan of Sciddiu mægðe wið Romana rice gewin up ahofon, and mid heora cyningum, Rædgota and Eallerica wæron hatne, Romane burig abræcon, and eall Italia rice þæt is betwux þam muntum and Sicilia þam ealonde in anwald gerehton, and þa æfter þam foresprecenan cyningum þeodric feng to þam ilcan rice.’⁵³ Historically, of course, Alaric’s men were Visigoths and Theoderic ruled over the Ostrogoths, and there was no linear connection between Alaric’s brief incursion into Italy ending in 411, or indeed Rædgota’s in 406, and Theoderic’s longer occupation from 489 to 526. Alfred’s wording seems to insist that the Goths under Rædgota and Alaric (whose powers and followers are clearly distinguished in *Orosius*) established control of the whole of Italy and that Theoderic was the inheritor of that dominion. His introductory account of Theoderic and Boethius clearly draws in part on one of the *vitae* of Boethius which often formed part of the text of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, but none of those

⁵³ *King Alfred’s Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899), p. 7; ‘in the time when the Goths, of the Scythian race, raised up war against the rule of the Romans, and with their kings, called Rædgota and Alaric, took the city of Rome and brought the whole kingdom of Italy, which is between the mountains and the island of Sicily, into their power, then, after those aforementioned kings, Theoderic succeeded to that same kingdom’. (The translation is my own.) The conventional (and contemporary) attribution of the adaptation of Boethius to Alfred himself seems to me increasingly doubtful, but I have assumed its validity for the purposes of this article.

printed by Peiper makes any reference to Alaric and the earlier invasion; in so far as they explain the historical circumstances, one says that Theoderic invaded Italy and deprived the Romans of their liberty, and another reports that Italy was invaded by the barbarian king Odoacer and the emperor Zeno sent Theoderic king of the Goths against him.⁵⁴ (Alfred could also have found a more accurate account in Bede's *De temporum ratione*, which records the fresh advent of the Goths under Odoacer under AM 4444.)⁵⁵ It is surely probable, as has long been argued, that Alfred was here heavily influenced by the final chapters of the *Orosius* in its Old English version, which links Alaric and Rædgota as leaders of the Goths and reports (as Orosius himself does not) that the Goths then settled in Italy.⁵⁶ And in doing so he was of course reflecting an Anglo-Saxon tradition, evident in other works as well as the Old English *Orosius*, that Alaric's sack of Rome marked the collapse of Roman power, despite the claims of Orosius himself and other historians. But the differences are just as striking. The Old English *Orosius* indicates that the Gothic settlement in Italy was at least partly with the emperor's permission, whereas the Old English *Boethius* represents it as a conquest, taking the whole country into their power. The Old English *Orosius* tells us that Alaric was the most Christian of kings and the mildest, whose gentle sacking of Rome was an act of the most merciful divine punishment for the sins of the Romans, whereas Rædgota, it says, was a pagan who made daily human sacrifices, especially of Romans, to his idols, and was defeated and captured by the Romans. Alfred has them co-operating in the capture of Rome and Italy.⁵⁷ More particularly, he makes no reference to the Christianity of the Goths or to the sins of the Romans, but has the Gothic conquest of Italy leading on to the persecution of orthodox Christians by their tyrannical heir Theoderic. If the Old English *Orosius* was able to read Alaric's attack as an example of divine providence operating in the world, punishing the sinful but cherishing the Christian, Alfred's account of the Goths and Theoderic becomes implicitly the first piece of evidence for the questioning of providence which his *Boethius* promptly takes up. The Old English *Boethius*

⁵⁴ *Anicii Manlii Severini Boetii Philosophiae Consolationis Libri Quinque*, ed. R. Peiper (Leipzig, 1871), pp. xxx–xxxiv. ⁵⁵ Wallis, *Reckoning*, p. 223.

⁵⁶ First pointed out by Whitelock, 'Prose', p. 82. As Geoffrey Russom has suggested to me, Alfred may well have been influenced here too by a characteristic Anglo-Saxon (and Nordic) narrative tradition of setting the scene by giving a genealogy. It remains all the more striking that he should have offered this false one rather than the alternatives, for Theoderic and for Boethius himself, that were available in the *vitae* and other sources.

⁵⁷ Isidore, in his *History of the Goths, Vandals and Suevi*, gives a similar impression, and also could be taken to imply that the Goths settled in Italy: Isidore, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Wandalorum et Suevorum*, PL 83, cols. 1057–82, at 1062.

begins by questioning why the evil prosper in the world and presents the tyranny of Theoderic as an example of that experience. And although Wisdom ultimately argues that all is indeed under the control of a benevolent God, he tends to see that benevolence operating at the level of the individual and eternity rather than the kingdom and secularity. Again, the ironies are historical as well as philosophical. Alfred's account of the continuing oppression of Italy by the Goths into the succeeding century casts a shadow over the optimism voiced by Orosius, in both Latin and Old English texts, about the continued flourishing of the Roman empire after Alaric's departure. Instead of the line of western emperors we have only the *caseras* in Constantinople, 'the Greeks' chief city' as Alfred calls it. But the Boethius of Alfred's version is equally outdated, as he fruitlessly tries to invoke the eastern empire in order to restore a western empire that, four centuries after Alaric, was very evidently dead.

But if the introductory section in the Old English *Boethius* departs significantly from the Orosian view of the sack of Rome, the story is carried still further in the one remaining example, which is in fact the fullest Anglo-Saxon account of the sack of Rome. Someone who might have been Alfred himself rewrote the introduction to the *Boethius* in verse, along with much else in the prose translation, expanding twenty-four lines of prose into seventy-three lines of verse.⁵⁸ The metrical version has much more detail on the sack of Rome, and develops further the belief that Alaric conquered Italy and established a permanent occupation, and brought an end to the western empire. (I paraphrase somewhat the long and repetitive account.) The Goths are described as two victorious peoples, they had two *gecynde* (natural, legitimate) kings, Rædgota and Alaric:

Then the kingdom of the Romans was conquered, the best of cities was broken, Rome was opened up for the warriors. Rædgota and Alaric entered that stronghold. The emperor fled with the princes to the Greeks. The wretched remnant could not resist the Goths in battle. The defenders gave up the treasure of their ancestors and oaths . . . But the hearts of the warriors were with the Greeks, if they dared support their leader . . . The nation was overcome for many years, until Theoderic became king. Theoderic was (or became) Christian and all the Romans rejoiced and sought peace with him. But Theoderic broke his promises. . . . Then there was a powerful man, a *beretoga* called Boetius, who had been dear to his lord during the time when the Greeks ruled the capital. . . . He thought constantly about the harm and contempt that the foreign kings showed them, and was loyal to the Greeks, remembering the honours and old rights that his ancestors had had. He began to think how he could bring the Greeks back, so that the emperor might have power over them again, and sent a letter secretly to his old lords,

⁵⁸ *Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield, pp. 151–3. There is a translation in W. J. Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Philosophy done into Modern English* (Oxford, 1900), pp. 177–80.

urging them to return to the city and let the Greek counsellors guide the Roman people.⁵⁹

It is hard to see how anyone familiar with Orosius, or even the Old English version, could produce this account, with Rædgota and Alaric entering the city together and the emperor fleeing to the east. In reality Honorius remained safely in Ravenna throughout. Though neither Orosius himself nor the Old English version quite say this, neither suggests that Honorius was directly affected and both insist that he was alive, well and still ruling the western empire at the time of writing, several years after the sack. The metrical introduction seems to be imaginatively conflating events of 410 with the situation that held in Theoderic's time, from 489 onwards, when the only legitimate emperors were now in the east. It has repeatedly been said that whoever composed the metrical parts of the Old English *Boethius*, Alfred or whoever, did so without further recourse to its source, the Latin *Boethius*, and it seems to be equally true that whoever composed the metrical version of the introduction did so without further recourse to the *Orosius* in either its Latin or Old English form. The metrist has accepted the implications of the prose introduction, that Alaric and Rædgota together sacked Rome and established a Gothic kingdom of Italy that lasted into Theoderic's time and beyond, and made them more explicit. He has taken it for granted that Rome was the seat of the emperor and therefore imagined a scene in which the emperor takes flight from Rome to Greece, since that is where the prose introduction had placed the imperial dynasty in Theoderic's time. From the prose introduction's silence about the faith of Alaric and Rædgota, and its statement that Theoderic was a Christian, though an Arian, the metrist has extrapolated a scene in which Theoderic receives baptism and all the Romans rejoice and are reconciled to him, as if the Goths have now accepted Christianity for the first time. And from the prose introduction's silence about the passage of time between Alaric and Theoderic, the metrist has

⁵⁹ *Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield, pp. 151–3: 'Hæfdan him gecynde cyningas twegen, Rædgod and Aleric; rice geþungon . . . Ða wæs Romana rice gewonnen, abrocen burga cyst. Beadurincum wæs Rom gerymed. Rædgot and Aleric foron on ðæt fæsten. Fleah casere mid þam æþelingum ut on Crecas. Ne meahte þa seo wealaf wige forstandan Gotan mid guðe. Giomonna gestrion sealdon unwillum eþelweardas, halige aðas . . . Þeah wæs magorinca mod mid Crecum, gif hi leodfruman læstan dorsten . . . Þeod wæs gewonnen wintra mænigo, oðþæt wyrd gescriaf þæt þe þeodrice þegnas and eorlas heran sceoldan. Wæs se heretema Criste gecnoden; cýning selfa onfeng fulluhtþeawum. Fægnodon ealle Romwara bearn, and him recene to friðes wilnedon . . . He þæt eall aleag . . . Ða wæs ricra sum on Rome byrig ahefen heretoga, hlaforde leof, þenden cynestole Crecas wioldon . . . Wæs him on gemynde mæla gehwilce yfel and edwit þæt him elðeodge kyningas cyðdon. Wæs on Crecas hold; gemunde þara ara and ealdrihta þe his eldran mid him ahton longe . . . Angan þa listum ymbe ðeancean þearflíce, hu he ðider meahte Crecas oncerran, þæt se casere eft anwald ofer hi agan moste. Sende ærendgewrit ealdhlaforðum degelice, and hi for Drihtne bæd, ealdum treowum, ðæt hi æft to him comen on þa ceastre, lete Creca witan rædan Romwarum.'

guessed at ‘many years’ but also implied that it all happened within Boethius’s lifetime – ‘he had been dear to his lord during the time when the Greeks ruled the capital city’. But in elaborating the story in this way he has reflected the kinds of meaning that the sack of Rome had come to acquire in Anglo-Saxon tradition – not the mild assault by a Christian king whose forces soon left the country, as described by Orosius, but an invasion of Italy which brought an end to Roman power and established Germanic rule over western Europe.

It is hard to say whether the traditional view that King Alfred wrote both versions of the Old English *Boethius*, or even the view that the same person wrote both, is compatible with this rewriting. The prose introduction was clearly written by someone familiar with at least the end of the Old English *Orosius*, while the metrical introduction departs radically from the narrative recorded by the Old English *Orosius*, in presenting Alaric and Rædgota as partners in the sack of Rome, reporting a conquest rather than a partial settlement with the emperor’s permission, and narrating the flight of the emperor to Greece rather than his remaining in full power. Yet the narrative had already begun to move in that direction in the prose version, and we cannot know what licences Alfred might have allowed to verse or what he still remembered of Orosius by the time he came to write (if he did) the metrical version. Either way, it is surely significant that the Old English versions of *Boethius* should be grounded so firmly in the world from which Orosius’s *History* was perceived to have emerged, the fall of the western empire and the Gothic conquest of Italy. And it can scarcely be a coincidence that a third major Alfredian work, his version of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, was explicitly located in the same period. Augustine’s own work was probably written during the reign of Theodosius, but in the Old English version Augustine is made to refer, in his dialogue with Reason, to his lord Honorius, who is described as a good king and the son of a better one.⁶⁰ Presumably if the metrical *Boethius* reflects the views of the Alfredian circle about the fate of Honorius, they imagined the *Soliloquies* as being written in the years immediately preceding the sack of Rome, perhaps at the imperial court, and its favourable reference to Honorius is to be set beside the sympathetic reference to him fleeing from Rome to the Greeks in the metrical introduction to the *Boethius*. The Alfredian programme was an attempt to recuperate for the Anglo-Saxon world the writings that the Roman empire produced just as it finally gave way to new Germanic empires, and Alfred could hardly have been unaware of the multiple ironies, not least the fact that the Anglo-Saxon world owed its existence to the catastrophe that had apparently brought down the world to which Orosius, Boethius and Augustine belonged.

What we see in these texts is a gradually developing understanding of the sack

⁶⁰ *King Alfred’s Version of St Augustine’s Soliloquies*, ed. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 88–9.

of Rome and its significance in British and European history. Orosius, writing very soon after the event, had insisted that its effect was slight and temporary and that the Roman empire still flourished under the providential order of the Christian God. Bede however presented it as the event which marked the end of Roman rule in Britain, without any apparent justification or precedent, and that association was taken up and emphasized by Alcuin, the later Old English translation of Bede, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Æthelweard. At the same time, the Old English translation of *Orosius* and the two successive Old English versions of *Boethius*, drawing no doubt on the implications of that view, gradually developed an interpretation of the sack of Rome as the catastrophe which brought an end to the Roman empire in the west and established Gothic rule in Italy for at least the following century. There were, clearly, implications in this for the reading of history. The philosophical import of the sack of Rome was also to change. Orosius had read it as evidence for a providential interpretation of history, in which God continued to protect Christianity and the Roman empire. Bede appropriated that interpretation to explain, if not the loss of Britain to the empire, at least its acquisition by the Anglo-Saxons. The Old English version of *Orosius* preserves the original, now long outdated, providential reading, but attributes it to the voice of Orosius himself. And the author of the Old English *Boethius* recognizes the failure of such crude providential readings and sets the sack of Rome and the Gothic rule of Italy in the context of a divine dispensation which has no concern with the flourishing of empires.

The transformations and interpretations of the sack of Rome suggest an ambivalent view of the Goths and the Romans in the Alfredian world. The Old English *Orosius* presents a favourable view of the Goths, or at least of those under Alaric, whereas the Old English versions of *Boethius* consistently present Theoderic as a tyrant (in contrast to the much more neutral treatment of him in the Latin text). The association of Theoderic with the original conquest of Italy by Alaric and Rædgota seems to cast a negative light on the Goths in general, and the authorial voice identifies strongly with Boethius and his desire to terminate Gothic rule and reintroduce the imperial line. And we might add that the Goths are generally identified as tyrants and oppressors in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, which Werferth supposedly translated for King Alfred. If it is indeed the case, as a doubtful letter from Pope Leo to Alfred's father claims, that the pope invested the young Alfred as a consul on a visit to Rome around 853,⁶¹ and if Alfred correctly understood what was involved, it is perhaps not surprising that he should in later life identify with the earlier consul Boethius and more particu-

⁶¹ *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, ed. D. Whitelock, Eng. Hist. Documents 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1979), no. 219. On the authenticity, see J. L. Nelson, 'The Problem of King Alfred's Royal Anointing', *JEH* 18 (1967), 145–63, and Whitelock, *EHD*, pp. 879–80.

larly with his two sons, both made consuls under Theoderic, rather than with the Goths. Yet Asser records a story that Alfred's maternal grandfather, Oslac, was a Goth by race, and that Oslac traced his line back to Goths and Jutes and specifically to the chieftains Stuf and Wihtgar, who had collaborated with the West Saxons in the conquest of Britain⁶² (and who would thus have been contemporaries of Theoderic). Whatever the truth of the tradition,⁶³ the story suggests that in the Alfredian circle at least Goths could be an honourable ancestry and their contribution to the creation of Anglo-Saxon England was thought to go beyond the sack of Rome and the destruction of the Roman empire.⁶⁴

⁶² *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), ch. 2 (p. 4).

⁶³ Stevenson thought that Asser had confused Goths with Jutes, and has been followed by most modern commentators; *ibid.* pp. 166–70.

⁶⁴ A shorter version of this article was given at the tenth conference of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists in Helsinki in August 2001, and I am grateful for comments and suggestions made by the participants there. Since then an important article on related topics has been published by S. J. Harris, 'The Alfredian *World History* and Anglo-Saxon Identity', *JEGP* 100 (2001), 481–510.