

## The Sack of Rome in 410 AD

### An Introduction

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, 410, Rome was captured and sacked for the first time in 800 years. According to our sources, barbarian troops led by the Visigothic king Alaric took the city and sacked it for three days, after having besieged it twice in previous years. Contemporary accounts describe how the Romans, broken by hunger and plague, and impoverished by successive ransoms, watched as treasures were looted, aristocratic palaces were destroyed, and Christian ascets were raped and murdered<sup>1</sup>. Very few events in the history of the eternal city have attracted as much attention from so many scholars, writers, and thinkers of different origins and backgrounds; fewer still have been interpreted in so many radically different ways.

Even contemporaries saw the events surrounding the Sack in contrasting terms. Writing soon after it took place, Jerome famously remarked that “the city which had taken the whole world was itself taken”<sup>2</sup>. Orosius and Augustine minimized its magnitude, observing that the Christian God had averted a much more terrible disaster, when Radagaisus – a non-Christian, and therefore a truly dangerous threat – was defeated whilst at the verge of conquering Rome<sup>3</sup>. Members of the pagan elite blamed the abandonment of traditional cults and the conversion to Christianity for the Sack; Christians, however, noted that the gods of old had not spared the city from many other catastrophes in the past. It is probably not a coincidence that the calendar of Polemius Silvius, compiled a few decades later, should mention the capture of Rome by the Gauls in 390 BC, but not the Visigothic success.

Physical traces of the sack are equally problematic. Dating and identifying destruction layers is a difficult task<sup>4</sup>, and the evidence available for restoration works and new buildings is usually richer and more informative than whatever signs of damage we might have. The inscriptions of late antique Rome are notorious for

mentioning various types of disaster, from the passing of time to ‘barbarian incursions’<sup>5</sup>. Even in this case, however, interpretation can give rise to disagreement, as commissioners of inscriptions were more interested in boasting of their love and care for the city than in documenting the actual state of what they saw<sup>6</sup>.

Scholars have traditionally dealt with these problems by adopting a circular argument, in which archaeological signs of destruction are treated as proof of what the texts tell us about the Sack, whilst the information given in texts is used as a key for dating and interpreting the archaeological record<sup>7</sup>. Different approaches were developed in recent decades, both in terms of the treatment of the sources (textual and material), and in terms of scholarly research agendas. Post-modern theories and especially the ‘linguistic turn’ have made scholars more aware of the politics of their texts, and as a result less likely to take the information they offer at face value. As different contributions to this volume argue, ecclesiastical writers had their own interests, and their narratives of the events were shaped by a wide range of literary models and theological concerns. Archaeologists have become more aware of the dangers of relating their evidence to specific historical events, while a greater interest in the late antique period has led them to evaluate their material in a more positive fashion. In general, scholars are more concerned with broader research topics, aiming for a more context-based understanding of late antique Rome – in other words, they have moved away from the traditional narrative of collapse with which the Sack was associated. In this process, even categories like ‘Romans’ and ‘barbarians’, not to mention ‘decline’ and ‘decadence’, are being vigorously questioned<sup>8</sup>.

It was in this context of new approaches to the late antique city that the conference that gave origin to this

1 There is a vast literature on the subject. On the literary evidence, Courcelle 1948 is a good starting point. Ralph Mathisen, below, presents the evidence in great detail.  
2 Oros. epist. 127, 12.  
3 Aug. civ. 5, 23; Oros. hist. 7, 37, 6–8. Specifically on Orosius, see Neil McLynn and Mischa Meier, below.  
4 A point discussed by Philipp von Rummel, below.  
5 Well demonstrated by Alföldy 2001; see now Silvia Orlandi, in this volume.

6 See Bauer 2001.

7 A good example is the dating of the destruction of the Domus of the Valerii, on the Caelian hill: Guglielmo Gatti (Gatti 1902, 160) attributed it to the sack of Roberto Guiscardo in 1084, whereas Antonio Maria Colini (Colini 1944, 255–258) suggested 410. See discussion in Machado 2012, 118–119.

8 See, for the debate concerning the identification of ‘Romans’ and ‘barbarians’: Heather 2005; Wolfram 2005; Halsall 2007; Kulikowski 2007. For the debate

book was initially planned<sup>9</sup>. The starting point for our discussions was the rediscovery of the majority of the coins originally found in the destruction layer of the Basilica Aemilia, a building that has played a central role in these debates since its excavation<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, besides marking the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the capture of the former imperial capital, our aim was to gather speakers from different disciplines and different scholarly traditions to reconsider the evidence available for the Sack of Rome, and more broadly speaking the 5<sup>th</sup> century history of the city<sup>11</sup>. A first aim of the conference was to pose the question of how to combine texts and archaeological remains, an issue that is particularly relevant for our understanding of the Sack and its consequences. Various types of sources might be employed to answer the same historical questions, or to reconstruct the same physical contexts, but they require different methodologies and approaches<sup>12</sup>. The identification of a historical event in the archaeological record is far from being straightforward, and in this sense the Sack of Rome is significant for archaeologists as well as for historians. To a large extent, these issues are considered in all contributions collected here, but they are discussed in a more direct and coherent way in the introductory chapters (Philipp von Rummel, Riccardo Santangeli Valenzani).

Another aim of this conference was to discuss the context in which the Sack took place. As a number of contributions to this volume argue, Alaric's Sack of Rome in 410 should not be seen as a self-contained event, be it an explanation to the physical and political decline of the old imperial capital, or as a symbol of the end of Roman order. Over the past few decades, historians have vehemently questioned the centrality of political events in our narratives about the past, or

*l'histoire événementielle* as French scholars put it<sup>13</sup>. It is impossible to deny the importance of the Sack, however, whether one sees it in political, military, or symbolic terms. This is discussed in the second group of chapters, dedicated to the historical context of 410. The significance of the capture of the city for contemporaries is directly linked to the symbolic position of Rome as *caput mundi* (Arnaldo Marcone). The composition of the Roman and imperial elites and their interactions were crucial elements in the process leading to the Sack and its aftermath (Carlos Machado). Alaric's march on Rome plays an important role in ancient and modern narratives of the military history of the period, and this is another element that needs to be taken into account (Michael Kulikowski).

Section three is dedicated to the Sack of Rome itself, and more specifically to the assessment of the available evidence. Recent decades have been marked by crucial developments in the amount and quality of information at our disposal. Excavations at the Crypta Balbi, the Imperial Fora, and the residential quarter on the summit of the Caelian hill fuelled the renewal of interest in late antique archaeology in the *Urbs*<sup>14</sup>. New excavations in the city centre and in the suburbs have unearthed a wealth of material that dazzles the specialist, calling into question old assumptions and refining our picture of the city in this period<sup>15</sup>. Our knowledge of Rome's late antique epigraphy has progressed greatly since the publication of fascicles 8, 2 and 8, 3 of volume VI of the *Corpus Inscriptiones Latinarum*, and the volumes of *Supplementa Italica – Imagines* that are dedicated to the *Urbs*<sup>16</sup>.

The necessary starting point for any review of the evidence is a discussion of the written tradition (Ralph Mathisen). This is followed by a group of chapters that

on 'decline' and 'decadence', see Liebeschuetz 2001; Ward-Perkins 2005; Krause – Witschel 2006. On Rome, more specifically, see Behrwald – Witschel 2012, as well as Fuhrer 2012 (comparing it with Milan) and Grig – Kelly 2012 (comparing it with Constantinople).

9 The book contained the papers of all participants, apart the ones by Guy Halsall, Simon Malmberg and Claire Sotinel.

10 See discussion in Johannes Lipps below, with bibliography. A recent project of the German Archaeological Institute at Rome, the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich and the University of Warwick, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), aims to study all the coins of the destruction layer.

11 2010 was marked by a number of works and discussions about the Sack of Rome: Pollmann –

Harich-Schwarzbauer 2012 and Di Berardino – Pilara – Spera 2012 are also proceedings of conferences. See also the works of Meier – Patzold 2010 and Moorhead – Stuttard 2010, with the review article by Salzmann 2012.

12 As observed by Manacorda 2007.

13 See the influential article by Le Goff 1971.

14 Imperial Fora: Meneghini – Santangeli Valenzani 2007. Crypta Balbi: Manacorda 1993 and Manacorda 2001. Caelian hill: Pavolini 2006 and Pavolini et al. 1993.

15 For a good overview of these works, see Arena et al. 2001 and Paroli – Vendittelli 2004. See recently also: Jolivet – Sotinel 2012.

16 Particularly noticeable in the case of the inscriptions of the Colosseum, re-edited by Orlandi 2004. For the impact of the *Imagines* volumes, see Panciera et al. 2006.

present the archaeological evidence, with the aim of reconstructing the physical context in which the events of August 410 took place. Each chapter is dedicated to a different part of the city, from the Roman Forum (Johannes Lipps) and the Forum of Caesar (Antonella Corsaro – Alessandro Delfino – Ilaria de Luca – Roberto Meneghini) to Trastevere and the Campus Martius (Fedora Filippi; Stefania Fogagnolo). Ancient accounts place particular emphasis on the destruction wreaked by the invaders on the aristocratic residences of the Caelian and the Aventine hills, areas that also deserve special attention here (Carlo Pavolini; Paola Quaranta – Roberta Pardi – Barbara Ciarrochi – Alessandra Capodiferro). Recent work on Ostia raises a number of issues that help us to complement our picture of the events that shook early 5<sup>th</sup> century Rome (Axel Gering). Other contributions deal with specific categories of objects and monuments, such as silverware and jewels (François Baratte) and coins (Alessia Rovelli), as well as ecclesiastic buildings and ornaments (Franz Alto Bauer; Paolo Liverani). Rather than producing an inventory of the material available, the aim is to assess the extent to which different categories of objects might help us to understand the Sack and its impact.

A final group of chapters is concerned with the wider impact of the Sack. The Sack of Rome became the subject of an intense process of production of different memories (Michele R. Salzman), adding different layers of interpretation between the event and its modern observers. The information conveyed by authors like Jerome, Orosius, and Augustine, as well as a pagan like Zosimus cannot be treated in isolation from their in-

tellectual context. It requires the careful consideration of these works (Mischa Meier; Neil McLynn), taking into account the wider problems with which they were dealing. Beyond texts, the impact of the Sack can be traced in different groups of sources such as epigraphy (Silvia Orlandi), statues (Brian Ward-Perkins – Carlos Machado), ceramics (Clementina Panella) and cemeteries (Roberto Meneghini). The effects can also be understood when we consider long-term changes, such as the demographic evolution of the late antique *Urbs* (Elio Lo Cascio) and the strategy of the Visigoths after the Sack of 410 (Christine Delaplace).

Possible conclusions and narratives of the event are manifold. As the chapters collected here show, it would be impossible, at this stage, to offer a definitive assessment of the Sack of Rome and its impact. As such, we thought it would be more interesting to explore the many possible interpretations concerning this subject, rather than trying to fixate a one-dimensional and artificial narrative. The events leading up to 410, as well as the capture of the city itself, can be seen as a sign of the end of the ancient world or as a step in its transformation, whether one emphasizes the ruptures (Peter Heather) or continuities (Walter Pohl) that can be observed in this period. By presenting two powerful and divergent pictures of the period, we aim to do justice to the wealth of material and insights presented at our conference. We hope that our book will contribute to enhancing our understanding of the history and archaeology of late antique Rome, and more generally to advancing the ongoing debate concerning the nature of the late antique period.