

The Roman Army Riot of 408 and the Execution of Flavius Stilicho

In 408 AD the bulk of the Western Roman Army was encamped at Ticinum in Northern Italy, preparing to combat both a rebel Roman army and a barbarian incursion. While the Emperor Honorius was present in camp, the troops rioted and murdered a number of high-level government officials, all closely aligned with the Roman general Flavius Stilicho. The demonstration by the army could not have sent a clearer message as their attitude toward Stilicho, who as *Magister Militum* had been the most powerful general and statesman in the West for 16 years. In order to quell the riot and restore order among the troops, Honorius ordered the execution of his most able and experienced general. Why was Flavius Stilicho executed at a time when the Western Empire was beset by enemies both internal and external?

Zosimus asserts that Stilicho's eventual goal was to "acquire an opportunity of removing the young Theodosius [the Emperor of the Eastern Empire], and of placing the Empire in the hands of his own son, Eucherius" (Zosimus, *New History*, 5.158). Similarly, Orosius claimed that "...when the character of these crimes was openly revealed to the emperor Honorius and to the Roman army, the soldiers very properly mutinied and killed Stilicho..." (*Historiae Adversus Paganos*, 7.38) The ancient historians Zosimus and Orosius make the case that the revolt against Stilicho was ultimately a conservative reaction which sought to protect the legality of imperial succession from Stilicho, who was plotting to install his own child on the throne in the East.

Ample evidence instead suggests that the riot perpetrated by Roman soldiers was due to the anti-barbarian xenophobia that was prevalent in Roman society, which had irrevocably tainted Stilicho thanks to his political and military policies. The realist political policies that the generalissimo pursued necessitated constant contact, both diplomatic and military, with barbarian forces within the borders of the Roman Empire (Burns, 1994). Resistance to these policies

began to escalate greatly in 405. After fighting the marauding Visigothic King Alaric to a standstill, Stilicho recruited Alaric to attack the Eastern Empire. Stilicho was forced to go before the Roman Senate and justify paying for the services of a barbarian who only a few years before had been ravaging the Italian countryside (Hughes, 2010).

The panegyrics of Claudian, Stilicho's personal poet, are acutely aware of the taint that "barbarism" carried in the Roman world, especially for officials required to interact with Rome's barbarian neighbors. Claudian's poetry over-emphasizes Stilicho's operations against the barbarians in an attempt to quell any such accusations. In *De Bello Gothico*, Claudian describes the outcome of Stilicho's campaign against the Alans: "...now subject to Roman rule, followed our trumpets' call, taught by their chief to lay down their lives in the cause of Italy" (Claudian, *De Bello Gothico*, Ln. 586-88.) Not only does Claudian extol the success of Stilicho over the barbarians, but the poet also levels the charge of barbarism at Stilicho's Roman enemies. His rival Rufinus, the Praetorian Prefect of the East "adopts the manner and dress of the barbarians, Roman law, obliged to change her noble garment, mourns her slavery to a skin clad judge" (Claudian, *In Rufinum*, Ln. 79).

Moreover, almost immediately after the execution of Stilicho, the army instituted a purge of Visigothic *foederati*, killing thousands of "barbarian" troops and their families who had integrated into Roman society. This act confirms the virulent anti-barbarian xenophobia that was rife throughout many segments of Roman world, and very clearly contradicts the ancient historians portrayal of the riot in 408 and subsequent execution of Flavius Stilicho as being related to imperial succession.

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