

The Original Godfather: *Ricimer and the Fall of Rome*

As the Western Roman Empire lurched towards collapse during the last quarter of the fifth century, no fewer than four men claimed the title of emperor between 456 and 472 C.E.¹ Despite their lofty position, the authority of these rulers was largely nominal. In fact, posterity has given them the collective designation of ‘shadow emperors’ in recognition of the true ruler of the late Roman West, Flavius Ricimer. In his position as patrician and *magister militum*, Ricimer established himself as the “emperor-maker” of the Western Empire during its last decades.² That Ricimer’s ‘reign’ so robbed the position of emperor of any real authority has made him a central figure in any examination of the Empire’s final collapse in the few years which followed his death. The intention of this paper is to engage two over-arching questions concerning Ricimer’s career: what were the motives behind his policies, and how did these policies influence the fall of the Western Empire?

The main obstacle to any such inquiry is the difficulty of the sources concerning Ricimer, which are underwhelming in both number and quality. The letters of Sidonius Apollinaris and his panegyrics to the emperors Majorian and Anthemius offer unique insight into the perspectives of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, but remain fraught with the prejudices of their author. The histories of Hydatius, Priscus and John of Antioch, of which the latter two survive only in fragments, are important though incomplete sources, while John Malalas’ *Chronicon* is valuable in reconstructing Ricimer’s relationship with Anthemius and Leo I. Procopius’ *History of the Wars* discusses the reigns of both Majorian and Anthemius in relation to their expeditions against the Vandals, but certain events in his account are pure fiction. Finally, there is the *Life of Epiphanius*, a biography of the bishop of Ticinum (Pavia) written c. 500 by Epiphanius’ successor, Ennodius.

From these limited sources it is possible to reconstruct the basic narrative of Ricimer’s career. Modern scholars have not shied from providing their own assessments, which have included a multiplicity of views. In his study of Libius Severus, one of Ricimer’s puppet emperors, S. I. Oost has described the patrician as “a cold, calculating, sinister man who hesitated at no crime, no murder, no treason or perfidy to maintain himself securely in power.”³ Himself critical of Ricimer’s methods, J. B. Bury has noted that while Ricimer is “not an attractive figure” it is perhaps too easy to do him injustice.⁴ In offering a revisionist view of Ricimer, L. R. Scott has pointed to “an annoying readiness of the part of modern scholars to credit any treachery of unspecified authorship to Ricimer.”⁵ Ultimately, negative views of Ricimer are likely explained by the tendency of some historians to view the fall of the Roman Empire as disaster from which western civilization took centuries to recover.

¹ All dates are in Common Era.

² Penny MacGeorge, *Late Roman Warlords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 215.

³ S. I. Oost, “D. N. Libivs Severvs P. F. Avg.,” *Classical Philology* 65 (1970): 228-240.

⁴ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire: From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 340.

⁵ L. R. Scott, “Antibarbarian Sentiment and the ‘Barbarian’ General in Roman Imperial Service: The Case of Ricimer,” in *Proceedings of the 7th Congress of the International Federation of the Societies of Classical Studies II*, ed. J. Harmatta (Budapest, 1984), 23-33.

⁶ John Michael O’Flynn, *Generalissimo’s of the Western Roman Empire* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1983), 127.

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If we distance ourselves from this assumption, it becomes possible to attempt a more balanced evaluation. Two recent studies, John Michael O’Flynn’s *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire* and Penny MacGeorge’s *Late Roman Warlords* have both offered in-depth accounts of Ricimer’s career. Under Ricimer’s control the Western Empire underwent three interregna (456-57, 461, 465-67), and from this O’Flynn has posited that his ultimate goal was to “dispense with a western emperor and rule the West himself as patrician of the emperor of Constantinople.”⁶ O’Flynn has also linked Ricimer’s objectives to his barbarian background (Ricimer was of mixed Visigothic-Suevi ancestry), a view which is echoed by P. S. Barnwell, who explains Ricimer’s purpose as “not to become emperor himself, but to have an emperor who would not oppose his own kin-group interests.”⁷ MacGeorge has dismissed several of O’Flynn’s broader claims and has instead argued that Ricimer’s policies were fundamentally reactive and cautious. Ricimer’s main focus was the defence of Italy, and while he was often ruthless, in the context of Roman political intrigue this hardly makes him unique.⁸

Much has been made of whether Ricimer ultimately intended to become emperor himself. It appears sufficient to know that, for whatever reasons, Ricimer did not declare himself emperor and was content to rule as the power behind the throne in the manner of Stilicho and Aetius. However, the question remains as to what ends Ricimer used his considerable authority. This paper will argue that Ricimer’s primary goal was the pursuit of a defensive policy centered on the protection of Italy from the threat posed by the Vandals. Further, it will be suggested that Ricimer’s tendency to ‘make’ and ‘unmake’ emperors was not the product of personal vindictiveness but a reflection of his desire to pursue this Italo-centric policy. Finally, the case will also be presented that Ricimer’s policies, while often effective, produced certain precedents which paved the way for the final dissolution of the Western Empire.

Any analysis of Ricimer’s career must begin with his initial rise to power during the brief civil war of 456. In this conflict Ricimer, and the Germanic *foederati* which he commanded, were the key military supporters of Majorian, who deposed Avitus after the latter’s defeat in battle outside Placentia and eventually replaced him as emperor in 457. Ricimer and Majorian were connected by their service together under Aetius, the general who had dominated Roman military policy until his assassination on the orders of Valentinian III in 454. Indeed, Majorian might have succeeded to the purple following Valentinian’s own murder in 455 had he not been forced to retire from public life for a brief period. Sidonius Apollinaris’ panegyric to Majorian suggests this retirement was instigated by Aetius’ Gothic wife, who was jealous of Majorian’s growing fame.⁹

The fall of Avitus has been linked to his alliances with the Gallo-Roman aristocracy (Sidonius was his son-in-law) and Theoderic II’s Visigoths. Sidonius and his fellow aristocrats were indebted to Avitus for addressing their grievances, particularly their resentment at not having been granted higher offices despite their front-line efforts in preserving “the shadow of an empire.”¹⁰ Unfortunately for Avi-

⁶ P. S. Barnwell, *Emperor, Prefects, and Kings: The Roman West, 395-565* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 43.

⁷ MacGeorge, 268.

⁸ Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 198-200.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 540-41.

¹⁰ Hydatius 169, quoted in MacGeorge, 184.

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tus, Gallic support came at the expense of alienating the Italian Senate, a situation which stemmed from the emperor's inability to deal with the raiding of Geiseric's Vandal fleet. These failures allowed Ricimer to seize the initiative after he proved more capable of defending Italy: "In these days, it was reported to King Theoderic that a large number of Vandals, moving towards Gaul or Italy with 60 ships, had been destroyed... through an encirclement by the *comes* Ricimer."¹¹ Following these victories Ricimer used his increased prestige to promote Majorian's claim to the throne, as the latter's aristocratic ancestry made him highly attractive to the Italian Senate.¹² Unable to conciliate the competing interests of the Gallic and Italian ruling classes, Avitus found himself in an untenable position, of which his enemies soon took advantage:

When Avitus was emperor of Rome and there was famine at that time, the people blamed Avitus and forced him to send away from the city of Rome those whom he had brought with him from Gaul. He also dismissed the Goths whom he had brought as his own guard, and gave them a money payment raised from the public works... This roused the Romans to revolt... Majorian and Ricimer also broke into open revolt now that they were freed from fear of the Goths. As a result Avitus, afraid both of these internal disturbances and of the attacks of the Vandals, withdrew from Rome and began to make his way to Gaul.¹³

In conformity with his view that Ricimer acted in the interests of his "kin-group," Barnwell has posited that Ricimer's revolt was a reaction to Avitus' alliance with Theoderic, who had recently massacred the Sueves,¹⁴ a people in which Ricimer's father had been a member of the royal family.¹⁵ However, MacGeorge has argued that Ricimer's attachment to his Suevi brethren was tenuous at best and that his motives for turning on Avitus are to be found within the context of Italian politics since Ricimer, though a full-blooded barbarian, was highly Romanized.¹⁶ Scott's examination of anti-barbarian sentiment suggests that barbarians who held high office, such as Ricimer, closely identified their own interests with those of the society of which they were a recognized member. Thus, it is unlikely Ricimer would "alter the directions of state policy to conform more to ones supposedly in some kind of 'self-interest.'"¹⁷ It is more probable that Ricimer's support of Majorian, who represented the Italian aristocracy, was the result of Ricimer's own interests conforming to those of most senators. This view is supported by subsequent events; after having consolidated his power under Majorian, Ricimer's later policies reflect a preoccupation with Italy above other considerations.

Having seized power, it appears as though Majorian and Ricimer intended to rule jointly, with one acting as emperor and the other as patrician and *magister militum*. This division of duties is clearly

¹² Jill Harries, *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 79.

¹³ John of Antioch, *Fragment* 202.

¹⁴ Barnwell, 43.

¹⁵ Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 360-63.

¹⁶ MacGeorge, 191.

¹⁷ Scott, 28.

¹⁸ *Novella Maiorianus I*, quoted in MacGeorge, 200.

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laid out in Majorian's novella, which he delivered before the Senate in 458:

Military matters will be the watchful concern of both ourself [sic] and our parent and patrician Ricimer. We shall, by the grace of God, protect the position of the Roman world, which we liberated, by our joint vigilance, from foreign enemy and from internal disaster.¹⁸

Despite the announcement of shared power, in August 461 Majorian returned to Italy where he was arrested, stripped of his title and soon afterwards executed on Ricimer's orders. The traditional interpretation of this event has been that Ricimer had installed Majorian as his puppet only to realize that Majorian took his role as emperor quite seriously, and thus Ricimer disposed of him in favour of a more obsequious replacement.¹⁹ This explanation of Ricimer's decision to eliminate Majorian is on the whole unsatisfactory.

Firstly, Majorian had won distinction as Aetius' subordinate; Ricimer, who likely fought alongside Majorian, would not have been surprised by Majorian's decision to lead campaigns once he became emperor given his military background. Secondly, as we have seen, Majorian's novella makes clear that both he and Ricimer would assume responsibility for the defence of the empire. Thus, if Ricimer did not move against Majorian because he felt he had become dangerously independent, a more plausible explanation must be presented - unless we are to assume that Ricimer was simply bloodthirsty.

Having pushed back the Burgundians and the Visigoths, in 460 Majorian prepared to undertake a major expedition against the Vandal kingdom.²⁰ MacGeorge has put forward several suggestions as to the reasons behind the campaign. Majorian may have made a strategic calculation and decided turning to the offensive was the best method of defending against Geiseric's raids, perhaps with the ultimate intention of recovering the lost African provinces. Alternately, Majorian may have been planning a purely punitive raid in retaliation for the sack of Rome in 455, in order to increase his own prestige.²¹ Whatever the case, it is striking that the sources make no mention of Ricimer's involvement in organizing this expedition given that he was *magister militum* and had crushed a Vandal force in 456. From Ricimer's absence in the planning of this venture, Scott has inferred that the patrician believed the expedition was too risky.²² In the event, Majorian's fleet, over 300 ships, was captured while harboured in Spain when Geiseric attacked pre-emptively.²³

Despite this enormous defeat, Majorian returned to Gaul and at Arles held a "banquet on the occasion of the sports of the circus."²⁴ Sidonius, who was Majorian's guest at the feast, makes no mention of the defeat in his letter; it might therefore be possible to conclude that the campaign had not been a total disaster. However, John of Antioch describes a "disgraceful" truce concluded by Majorian with

¹⁹ O'Flynn, 109; Harries, 96.

²⁰ Procop. *Goth.* 3.7.1.

²¹ MacGeorge, 204-205.

²² Scott, 30.

²³ Bury, 332.

²⁴ Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.11.10.

²⁵ John of Antioch *Fragment* 203.

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the Vandals.²⁵ Indeed, the extent of the fiasco was such that Procopius' version of events has Majorian die of dysentery before the expedition is ever launched, thus sparing Procopius' heroic Majorian, "excelling in virtue all the Roman Emperors that ever were [...] a man moderate to his subjects, and to his enemies terrible," any share of the blame.²⁶

From this it appears that Ricimer eliminated Majorian not merely because he was strong-willed but for actual reasons of state: he had wasted resources the already weakened Western Empire could ill afford to lose.²⁷ If this is the case, then it would fit with the image of Ricimer as pursuing a defensive, Italo-centric foreign policy to which Majorian's aggressive imperialism posed a serious threat.

With Majorian gone, Ricimer continued to pursue a cautious policy in his own dealings with the Vandals. After a three and a half month interregnum, Ricimer appointed a new emperor, Libius Severus, an Italian senator of whom little is known. With Severus completely dependent upon him, Ricimer enjoyed increased decision making powers. As the Vandals were the main threat to Italy, and hence to Ricimer, in 461 Priscus records that envoys were sent by the patrician to Geiseric, but by 467 hostilities had not ceased.²⁸

In November 465 Severus died of natural causes and Ricimer, now the "emperor-maker" in his prime, acted as regent during a lengthy interregnum which lasted until April 467, when Anthemius was made emperor. This appointment was reached in consultation with Leo I, emperor in Constantinople. Thus, this was an attempt at reconciliation with the Eastern Court, which had never recognized Severus, in the hope that Leo's aid would give Ricimer leverage in the ongoing conflict with his arch-rival Geiseric. In accepting Leo's candidate, Ricimer once again demonstrated his preoccupation with Italy, since the potential advantages to be gained by having Anthemius as emperor carried definite risks. Anthemius was beholden to Leo and therefore might pose a realistic threat to Ricimer's position, as in fact transpired. Yet the Vandal threat to Italy was significant and this seems to have outweighed Ricimer's other considerations.²⁹

Leo likely cooperated with Ricimer in the belief that the Vandal fleet constituted a threat not only to the Western Empire but to his own holdings as well. A passage from the *Life of Daniel the Stylite* records that "a report was spread that Geneseric [Geiseric], King of the Vandals, intended to attack the city of Alexandria; this caused great searchings of heart to the Emperor [Leo] and to the Senate."³⁰ Procopius claims that "Leo also sent Anthemius [...] to be Emperor in the West, that he might be aiding to him in the Vandalic war."³¹ If this is correct it appears Anthemius was given a specific mandate by Leo, who now positioned himself to fill the role of senior emperor.

That Anthemius would be less docile than Severus was accentuated by his retinue of eastern bodyguards and the accompaniment of Marcellinus of Dalmatia, another warlord whose presence was likely intended to check Ricimer's power. The two were already bitter enemies; during the 450s Ricimer

²⁶ Procop. *Goth.* 3.7.13.

²⁷ Scott, 30.

²⁸ Priscus, *Fragments* 38, 40.

²⁹ MacGeorge, 234-35.

³⁰ *Vita Danielis Stylitae* 56.

³¹ Proc. *Goth.* 3.6.5.

³² Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.9.1.

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had bribed Marcellinus' Scythian troops and left him stranded in Sicily. In order to preclude possible tensions Ricimer married Alypia, Anthemius' daughter. Sidonius described the wedding as an event in which "the wealth of two empires has been scattered to the winds," which may reveal the extent to which a high-ranking Gallo-Roman felt alienated by Ricimer's focus on Italy.³² Most importantly for dynastic politics, the wedding linked Ricimer, however remotely, with the Theodosian dynasty since Anthemius was Marcian's son-in-law.

Despite the attempts at accommodation in 468 Marcellinus was murdered by his own officers while fighting the Vandals. Though his death was not conclusively linked to Ricimer, his guilt in the affair is more than likely, and from this point relations between Anthemius and his patrician continued to deteriorate.³³ Ricimer may have resented Marcellinus' appointment to command the campaign against the Vandals, which failed, while Geiseric continued to raid Sicily and the Italian coastline.

Further conflict between Ricimer and Anthemius arose over the worsening situation in Gaul. Anthemius refused to abandon the remaining Roman cities in Gaul, such as Sidonius' Auvergne, while Ricimer remained committed to concentrating his forces in the defence of Italy. This disagreement over military policy eventually degenerated into a civil war when Ricimer moved against the emperor in 470. At this time both Anthemius' military and political support was compromised as his Gallic army, commanded by his son Anthemiolus, had been destroyed by Euric, Theodoric's successor as King of the Visigoths, while Leo was engaged in a power struggle with Aspar.³⁴

It has been suggested the conflict between the two stemmed from the overriding animosity between two factions based on ethnic divisions; in this scenario Ricimer's Germanic followers were pitted against a conservative Roman party led by Anthemius. Bury posited that the conflict brought forward long-simmering tensions as the dispute over Germanic or Roman ascendancy became starkly defined.³⁵ In a similar vein O'Flynn has suggested that Ricimer felt threatened by Anthemius' diplomatic overtures towards various Germanic peoples. Ricimer could have perceived this part of the emperor's attempt to rescue the situation in Gaul as an encroachment on his territory.³⁶ The sources do reveal that a degree of ethnic tension underlay the conflict. Of Anthemius' reign John Malalas records that the emperor "aroused the enmity of his son-in-law, Ricimer the *magister militum*, and was afraid of him, as he was a Goth."³⁷ Anthemius apparently referred to Ricimer as *pellitus Geta* ('hide-wearing Goth') while the latter retorted by calling the emperor an "aroused Galatian" and "Greekling", a reference to Anthemius' eastern origins.³⁸

However, to characterize this struggle as one which assumed solely ethnic dimensions does not seem accurate. Sidonius, as a Gallo-Roman aristocrat fighting against Visigothic encroachment, might be expected to have been among Anthemius's staunchest supporters but in one letter he refers dis-

³³ O'Flynn, 117.

³⁴ MacGeorge, 244.

³⁵ Bury, 339.

³⁶ O'Flynn, 119.

³⁷ John Malalas, *Chronicon* 373.

³⁸ Ennodius, *Vita Epiphanius* 53, 54, 67.

³⁹ Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 1.7.5.

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paragingly to Anthemius as “the Greek Emperor.”³⁹ Ennodius’ description of the conflict ascribes its causes only to “that envy which divides rulers” and reports that “the quarrel was encouraged by the counsel of their supporters,” but makes no reference to Germanic or Roman factions. Since Ricimer had always favoured a foreign policy centered on the defence of Italy he likely received the support of many Italian senators, and the composition of the opposing factions was doubtless highly complex.⁴⁰ In sum, a straight division between Ricimer’s *foederati* and Anthemius’ supporters appears to oversimplify the situation; rather, the nature of the conflict, though coloured by ethnic tensions, more likely resembled a typical power struggle between political rivals such as the Roman Empire witnessed countless times.

Having killed Anthemius in 472 when he attempted to escape from Rome disguised as a beggar, Ricimer once again emerged victorious and proceeded to install Olybrius, a member of the venerable Anicii family, as emperor. Through Olybrius’ marriage to Placidia, the daughter of Valentinian III, he was also a member of the House of Theodosius. This may have contributed to Ricimer’s interest in his promotion, as Ricimer had long sought to associate himself with the Theodosian dynasty. He was to be the last individual Ricimer would raise to the purple, since the patrician, who had dominated the Western Empire for nearly two decades, finally died in 472. It now remains to analyze the impact Ricimer’s policies had upon the Western Empire, which, it will be argued, contributed substantially to its fall.

Firstly, in the aftermath of his power struggle with Majorian, Ricimer set a dangerous precedent when he sacrificed Roman territory in order to consolidate his position. After his execution, the coalition of Italian senators, Gallic aristocrats and barbarian allies Majorian had constructed began to unravel. Ricimer was challenged by Marcellinus, with whom he dealt in Sicily, but was also challenged by Aegidius, the *magister militum per Gallia*, who prepared to invade Italy.⁴¹ Faced with these threats, Ricimer turned to Theoderic II and secured his support by handing over Narbonne in 462. Ricimer’s surrender of Narbonne marked a turning point in the Western Empire’s rapid dissolution as it marked the first time that due to an “internal power-struggle for control of the imperial throne, a Roman city was surrendered, probably by formal treaty, not to provide land for settlement but as the price for support.”⁴²

Ricimer’s decision reveals his concern with the protection of Italy but also his willingness to sacrifice Gallic territory in order to achieve this end. Thus Ricimer’s Italo-centric policy contributed to the transformation of the Western Empire into a rump state composed of little more than the Italian peninsula. From the structure of the geo-political situation Ricimer bequeathed to his successors, it is not difficult to see the ease with which Odoacer dispensed with the Western Empire altogether and ruled Italy as an individual kingdom. In essence, the transition from empire to kingdom was largely completed by Ricimer, who refrained only from the formality of such a declaration.

Secondly, on a less abstract note, Ricimer’s war with Anthemius involved the third sack of

⁴⁰ MacGeorge, 245.

⁴¹ Priscus, *Frag.* 30.

⁴² Harries, 97.

⁴³ John Malalas, *Chronicon* 374.

⁴⁴ MacGeorge, 255.

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Rome since Alaric had taken the city in 410 and therefore contributed to the overall decline of Italy during this period. Adding to the devastation, Malalas' account suggests that Ricimer blockaded the city rather than besieged it in his attempt to starve Anthemius out: "Ricimer had stationed a guard of Goths at every gate of Rome, and at the harbour."⁴³ From this episode MacGeorge has concluded that the brief civil war and the blockade of Rome, which lasted three months, "must have been a major factor both in the political changes that followed and in the increasing poverty and disruption of Italy."⁴⁴

From this examination of Ricimer's career several patterns emerge. The fact that he was pre-occupied with the defence of Italy against the Vandals was undoubtedly clear both to himself and to those who favoured a more aggressive policy of preserving what remained of Roman Gaul. Though the leaders of a pre-modern society may not have recognized them as such, Ricimer's conflicts with Majorian and Anthemius were, at their core, policy disputes between political rivals. As we have seen, the roots of these disputes were primarily *realpolitik* considerations over how and what to defend of the remnants of the Western Empire, rather than conflicts between competing ethnic factions. Although Ricimer was able to assert his preferred policy each time, his success was not without costs; though he had no way of knowing it, the concept of empire for which he fought disappeared only four years after his death.

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