Germanic (Barbarian) Invasions of Rome

The Romans fought the barbarians at the borders of the Roman Empire for many years before the eventual fall of the Roman Empire. In some cases, barbarians became part of the Roman Empire. Many lived as citizens in Roman towns, became soldiers in the Roman Army, or simply tried to coexist in small villages within Rome’s borders. In other cases, they rebelled against Rome and fought battles, eventually, sacking the city of Rome bringing about the end of the Western Roman Empire.

Who were the Barbarians?

The Romans referred to people or groups outside the Roman Empire as barbarians. The barbarians had much different cultures than the Romans. They dressed differently, ate different foods, spoke different languages other than Greek and Latin, and had different religions. They did not have the same advanced level of government, education, or engineering skills as the Romans.

Barbarian Peoples and Invasions of Rome

The barbarians weren't just one people group. The term "barbarian" was a Greek term used to describe a wide variety of different peoples that had little to do with each other. Many of the groups that attacked and invaded the Roman Empire were Germanic tribes from Northern Europe.

- **Goths** - One of the most powerful and organized groups of barbarians were the Goths. The Goths were divided into two major branches: the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths. The Visigoths took over much of Western Europe and battled Rome constantly in the late 300's. Under their leader Alaric, the Visigoths sacked Rome in AD 410. After this event, the Ostrogoths arrived and conquered and settled in Italy.

- **Vandals** - The Vandals migrated from Northern Europe to the Iberian Peninsula (Spain) and eventually to North Africa where they established a powerful kingdom. They established a peace treaty with Rome in AD 442, but attacked Rome in 455 when the treaty was broken. Under the Vandal King Genseric, the Vandals sacked Rome in AD 455, and plundered the city for two weeks. Our word “vandalism” stems from this event.
• **Huns** - The Huns were a nomadic warrior people who came from the east, somewhere near northwestern China. Under the leadership of their leader Attila, the Huns defeated the Ostrogoths and invaded the Eastern Roman Empire. They then moved to conquer much of Roman Gaul (France). In 452, the Huns invaded Italy. They plundered much of Italy but did not take the city of Rome.

• **Franks** - The Franks were a number of Germanic tribes that settled in the region that is today the country of France (France gets its name from the Franks). They began invading the borders of the Roman Empire around 300 AD. The Franks truly became powerful after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and would eventually become one of the leading empires in Western Europe.

• **Saxons** - As Rome began to weaken, the Saxons moved from Northwestern Europe and began to invade Great Britain. They attacked and took over many Roman settlements in Great Britain as the Roman Emperor was too weak to send the Romans in Great Britain assistance. Essentially, the Romans living in Britain were defenseless from Saxon raiders.

• **Others** - There were many other Germanic groups of people that the Romans referred to as barbarians including the Angles, Alemanni, Jutes, Picts, Lombards, and the Burgundians.

**Interesting Facts About Ancient Roman Barbarians**

- The word "barbarian" comes from the Greek word "barbaros" which means foreign or strange.
- The Romans thought it was a strange custom for barbarians to wear pants.
- The Romans often allied with (or worked together with) various barbarian tribes. They would use one barbarian tribe to help them fight another.
- Many barbarians became part of the Roman Empire before it collapsed.
- Several barbarian groups would later convert to Christianity.
- The name England comes from one of these barbarian groups, the Angles.
- Barbarian men often served as soldiers and sometimes leaders in the Roman army.