

## IHSP

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## Internet Medieval Sourcebook:

## St. Jerome (c.340-420): The Fate of Rome, from Letter to Agenuchia (409), lamenting the Visigoths

I shall now say a few words of our present miseries. A few of us have hitherto survived them, but this is due not to anything we have done ourselves but to the mercy of the Lord. Savage tribes in countless numbers have overrun all parts of Gaul. The whole country between the Alps and the Pyrenees, between the Rhine and the Ocean, has been laid waste by hordes of Quadi, Vandals, Sarmatians, Alans, Gepids, Herules, Saxons, Burgundians, Allemanni and--alas! for the commonweal!--even Pannonians. For "Assur also is joined with them." The once noble city of Moguntiacum has been captured and destroyed. In its church many thousands have been massacred. The people of Vangium after standing a long siege have been extirpated. The powerful city of Rheims, the Ambiani, the Altrebatae, the Belgians on the skirts of the world, Tournay, Spire, and Strasburg have fallen to Germany: while the provinces of Aquitaine and of the Nine Nations, of Lyons and of Narbonne are with the exception of a few cities one universal scene of desolation. And those which the sword spares without, famine ravages within. I cannot speak without tears of Toulouse which has been kept from falling hitherto by the merits of its reverend bishop Exuperius. Even the Spains are on the brink of ruin and tremble daily as they recall the invasion of the Cymry; and, while others suffer misfortunes once in actual fact, they suffer them continually in anticipation.

I say nothing of other places that I may not seem to despair of God's mercy. All that is ours now from the Pontic Sea to the Julian Alps in days gone by once ceased to be ours. For thirty years the barbarians burst the barrier of the Danube and fought in the heart of the Roman Empire. Long use dried our tears. For all but a few old people had been born either in captivity or during a blockade, and consequently they did not miss a liberty which they had never known. Yet who will hereafter credit the fact or what histories will seriously discuss it, that Rome has to fight within her own borders not for glory but for bare life; and that she does not even fight but buys the right to exist by giving gold and sacrificing all her substance? This humiliation has been brought upon her not by the fault of her Emperors who are both most religious men, but by the crime of a half-barbarian traitor who with our money has armed our foes against us. Of old the Roman Empire was branded with eternal shame because after ravaging the country and routing the Romans at the Allia, Brennus with his Gauls entered, Rome itself. Nor could this ancient stain be wiped out until Gaul, the birth-place of the Gauls, and Gaulish Greece, wherein they had settled after triumphing over East and West, were subjugated to her sway. Even Hannibal who swept like a devastating storm from Spain into Italy, although he came within sight of the city, did not dare to lay siege to it. Even Pyrrhus was so completely bound by the spell of the Roman name that destroying everything that came in his way, he yet withdrew from its vicinity and, victor though he was, did not presume to gaze upon what he had learned to be a city of kings. Yet in return for such insults--not to say such haughty pride--as theirs which ended thus happily for Rome, one banished from all the world found death at last by poison in Bithynia;

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while the other returning to his native land was slain in his own dominions. The countries of both became tributary to the Roman people. But now, even if complete success attends our arms, we can wrest nothing from our vanquished foes but what we have already lost to them. The poet Lucan describing the power of the city in a glowing passage says:

*If Rome be weak, where shall we look for strength?*

We may vary his words and say:

*If Rome be lost, where shall we look for help?*

or quote the language of Virgil:

*Had I a hundred tongues and throat of bronze  
The woes of captives I could not relate  
Or ev'n recount the names of all the slain.*

Even what I have said is fraught with danger both to me who say it and to all who hear it; for we are no longer free even to lament our fate. and are unwilling, nay, I may even say, afraid to weep for our sufferings.

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**Source:** St Jerome, Letter 23 to Ageruchia.

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001123.htm>

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