Of those who played the major roles amid the last agonising scenes of the mighty empire overturned by Alaric the Goth, Flavius Stilicho, chief minister and master-general of the Emperor Honorius, must be accorded priority of place.

All that we know of his parentage is that he was the son of a Vandal cavalry officer. He was a soldier almost from boyhood. He entered the army in the year 378 A.D., shortly after the battle of Adrianople, the most frightful disaster which had overtaken the Roman eagles up to that time. It was the first serious intimation that the great fabric of the Empire, already rent by its own weight from summit to base, was crumbling to irretrievable ruin.

Young Stilicho's extraordinary stature and strength, his skill with bow, broadsword, and javelin, soon brought him into notice, and secured his promotion. With a soldier's sure instinct, the Emperor Theodosius selected him to conduct a difficult and dangerous embassy to the court of Sapor III (383-388). At the time he may have been about twenty five. The poet Claudian expresses surprise that a mission of such importance should have been entrusted to a 'juvenis'.

On his return to Constantinople from this highly successful enterprise he received the hand of the beautiful and accomplished Serena, niece and adopted daughter of the Emperor. Thenceforth his rise was meteoric. About 385 he was appointed Master-General of the Cavalry and Infantry – Magister Utriusque Militiae. We may think perhaps of the military power of a modern commander-in-chief and the political influence of a Foreign Minister or Secretary of State lodged in the same individual.

Theodosius is deservedly called the Great. He was the last Roman Emperor to reunite East and West, and to govern the realms so unified. He refused, or he was constitutionally unable, to delegate authority; he brooked no rivalry, and overshadowed the personalities of his subordinates. At his death in 395 the eastern half of the Empire passed to his son Arcadius, a youth of eighteen whom he had left in Constantinople; the western half became the possession of his son Honorius, a boy of ten who had been earlier designated...
Augustus of the West. With his dying breath Theodosius had committed them to the care of Stilicho.⁴

The regent accepted the trust courageously and sought to carry into effect what in itself must be pronounced a magnificent scheme. But the task of holding in one orbit two young ‘shadow’ emperors, distant from each other, and exposed to the baneful influences of two largely antagonistic courts, was too much for mortal strength.

In the East the administration was really in the hands of the overbearing and unscrupulous Rufinus, the praetorian prefect of Illyricum. Part of this province had been assigned by Gratian to the eastern Emperor. The court of Constantinople was in favour of the retention of the status quo. Stilicho was anxious to have Illyricum restored to Honorius. The stoutest and most useful native troops in the Roman army were recruited in the highlands of Illyricum and Thrace. It was thus a key area in any scheme for the maintenance of military strength.

The event which brought Rufinus into open collision with his western rival was the rising of the Visigoths. Under the leadership of the able and energetic Alaric, they spread devastation through Thrace and Macedonia. Stilicho marched against them with what was in part an eastern army which had been in service against Eugenius in the West. He was preparing to attack the insurgents in the valley of the Peneus, the Vale of Tempe, with forces so substantially superior that victory seemed certain, when a mandate arrived from Constantinople, subscribed by the hand of Arcadius. Stilicho was curtly commanded to withdraw the legions of Honorius within the limits of the Western Empire, to dispatch the rest of the troops to Constantinople, and to depart whence he had come.

The directive was inspired by the jealousy of Rufinus. He was determined that his rival should not win the glory of crushing Alaric. The fact that Stilicho’s wife and children were at Constantinople and could be held as hostages for his satisfactory conduct provides the most likely explanation of what must otherwise seem a lame withdrawal and a spineless failure to exploit an unparalleled opportunity for dealing summarily with the Gothic menace.

Any hopes that the subsequent assassination of Rufinus by the soldiers of Gainas would open the way for Stilicho to assume the administration of both parts of the Empire proved nugatory. For the next five or six years the power over Arcadius was wielded by a junta of three — the Frankish Empress, Eudoxia, the eunuch
Eutropius to whom she owed her elevation, and Gainas the Goth, commander of the eastern army. Convinced that the jealous attitude of the Byzantines would never recommend his government, Stilicho abandoned Arcadius to his unworthy favourites and retired to Italy. Here he devoted his energies to maintaining the dignity of the miserable weakling Honorius in whose name every act of state was validated.

It may be that Stilicho preferred the reality to the semblance of power. For one of his mental fibre and military genius the tedious ceremonial of the court would have been intolerable. The line of expediency may have commended itself to him. Whatever his motives, it is plain that he was in a position to oust Honorius had he so willed. He remained strangely loyal. In effect he honoured the pledge given the dying Theodosius, and by his watchful devotion and firm administration postponed for a few years the dissolution of the Western Empire.

The neutralisation of the imperial army in Thessaly precipitated an incursion by Alaric into Greece. He carried his ravages into almost every district. In the hour of need Stilicho buried his resentment for past injuries at the hands of the ministers of Arcadius and in the spring of 397 landed with a large army near Corinth. Driving the forces of Alaric before him, he invested the position of the invaders on Mount Phloe in Elis. For the first time, the two greatest commanders of the age stood face to face; for the first time Stilicho received proof that there existed another not inferior to himself in military talent. By a brilliant manoeuvre Alaric extricated himself from the lines of circumvallation in which the Roman general had involved him and made good his escape to Epirus.

There he at once entered into negotiations with the ministers of Arcadius. The barbarian war-lord, who had left Corinth, Sparta, Argos and Megara smoking ruins, emerged with the (extorted?) title of Master-General of Illyricum.

He who, unpunished, laid Achaia waste
And smote Epirus, foremost now is placed
In all the Illyrian land... 

Stilicho returned to Italy. He interfered no more on an armed basis in the affairs of the eastern Empire.

He had enemies elsewhere than in Constantinople. In the court of Honorius at Milan he was the object of bitter hatred. That his position was maintained supreme during his absences on military
campaigns was due in large part to his talented and resourceful wife, Serena. When all allowance has been made for the fulsome flatteries of Claudian, it must be admitted that, like her less attractive counterpart in Constantinople, she was a truly remarkable woman.

Hard fighting was now going on in Africa. Gildo the Moor, governor of the African provinces, had raised the standard of revolt and transferred his allegiance to Arcadius. His rebellion was secretly fomented by the court at Constantinople.

Stilicho smashed the revolt of Gildo by availing himself of the deadly hatred which existed between that usurper and his younger brother Mascazel. The latter’s fate on his visiting Italy in triumph is surrounded in mystery. He came of a distrusted family and this may have excited apprehensions in the minds of the imperial ministers. The government may have held proofs of which we now know nothing that, like other successful generals, he was the head of a dangerous conspiracy. In any case Stilicho did not stand in the way of his destruction. He may even have abetted it. It is a ghastly picture -- the commander whose orders he had so effectively carried out watching Mascazel drown after falling from, or after being deliberately at a given signal by the guards pushed over, the parapet of a bridge when riding in the train of Stilicho. Bury says 'the evidence is not good enough to justify us in bringing in a verdict of murder against Stilicho'. But even as a crime perpetrated for reasons of state in the circumstances, if it took place, it is none the less odious. Such a horrid act of treachery cannot be palliated, even by the moral code of a violent age.

The glory and power of Stilicho were now at their zenith. Shortly before the expedition against Gildo he had strengthened the ties between the real and the nominal rulers of the Empire by securing the marriage of Honorius to his daughter, Maria. It was in reality a sorry match. The bridegroom was a sickly lad of thirteen. But politically the union was of consummate importance and inspired the poet Claudian to some of his best poetical flights. The Fescennines are the most musical verses he ever wrote.

For some years the Attacott Picts, ‘bellicosa hominum natio’ as Jerome calls them, had been occasioning grave concern in Britain. They had a perpetual feud with the semi-Christianised Britons of the Strathclyde. It seems that Stilicho decided that the best way to civilise the pagan Picts was to make Christians of them. His diplomacy was brilliantly justified by the successful mission of Ninian, the first bishop of Galloway.
There ensued in the north of Britain a period of comparative tranquillity. But war clouds began to roll nearer and darker along the Alps. The day was approaching when the Roman garrisons were to be permanently withdrawn. The cry was for Men! Men! But tens of thousands were immobilised on the estates of indolent and selfish patricians, while the monastic impulse was depriving the state of an incredible number of able-bodied citizens. It must always be a question of interest to what extent Christianity (or a false conception of it) contributed to the downfall of the Western Empire.

For four years Alaric had been reasonably quiet in Illyricum. He took advantage of the official position that sublime cowardice had bestowed on him to equip his followers with modern arms from the Roman arsenals in his Dacian diocese. Now he was beginning to show signs of renewed activity. In A.D. 401 he passed the Julian Alps and descended on Aquileia. Panic greeted his further advance. The advisors of Honorius frantically urged him to make his escape to Gaul. The power of Stilicho's personality alone held the Emperor to the spot.

There were troubles in Rhaetia, the modern Tyrol. Agitators were at work in the service of Alaric. Once in control of the area the Goth had the plains of Lombardy at his mercy.

Not an hour could be spared. Stilicho could rely on himself alone. Leaving the court at Milan plunged in gloom and but weakly guarded, he started on his difficult expedition up the olive-bordered lake of Como. He expected to return before Alaric could cross the frontier. But the winter played him false. The frosts were prolonged. No melting snow turned the river-beds of Northern Italy into raging torrents. When Stilicho reappeared from his successful operations among the Alps it was to find the country between the Addua and Milan overrun by Alaric's troops. Honorius, overtaken in full flight to Gaul, was isolated in the Ligurian town of Hasta.

They were exciting weeks, momentous in world history. Time was everything. All the bridges were in the enemy's hand. But Stilicho was equal to the hour. Putting himself at the head of his cavalry, he swam the Addua, swept over the fifty miles of intervening plains, and cut his way through the besieging army. But the little force within the walls of Hasta, if cheered by his arrival, was beset by the far-reaching lines of Alaric. Would the legions that had been recalled from Spain, from Gaul, from Britain, save the day? One by one they threaded the Alpine passes. Gradually there was drawn round the besieger's lines a second cordon. At length on Easter Day,
April 6, 403 A.D., was fought the battle of Pollentia.

Was Pollentia a Roman victory? Was it an indecisive conflict? Perhaps the best reply is that it was no crushing defeat for the Goths. We learn from Claudian that Alaric's wife and children fell into Roman hands. Stilicho remained definitely master of the situation. The religious pamphleteer Orosius has a strange allusion to 'lamentable engagements near Pollentia in which we conquered in fighting, in conquering were defeated'. Apparently this censures the Roman attack on Good Friday. It was not till Alaric had become the 'invincible hero' long after the sack of Rome in 410 that Pollentia is claimed as a Roman defeat. And both Cassiodorus and Jordanes wrote in a Gothic interest and a hundred years post eventum.

Stilicho seems to have made some sort of compact. Perhaps he restored Alaric's family. At any rate the latter commenced a leisurely retreat through Lombardy. Stilicho could not afford to drive the Goth to desperation. He had a weapon of uncertain temper to wield in his enervated legionaries, and he ran the risk of enlisting the latent sympathies of his barbarian auxiliaries on behalf of their northern brethren. To this may be attributable his apparent disinclination to adopt the 'quick way' with his formidable opponent.

Three years, and another invasion broke. Rhodogast or Radagaisus, 'by far the most savage of all the past and present enemies of Rome', at the head of a reported 200,000 fighting men, invested Florence. The strategy in Greece and at Hasta was repeated. The Romans, drawing plentiful supplies from the plains of Tuscany behind them, watched thousands die of starvation. Stilicho was again hailed as the saviour of his country!

So far as it could be saved. The national spirit was incurably diseased. The army that overthrew Rhodogast was the last army in the Western Empire. Stilicho knew that his military resources were at an end. He faced appalling realities. Alaric was still restless and threatening. If he could not be fought off, he must be bought off. And so, on the recommendation of the all-powerful minister to a reluctant Senate, the 4000 pounds of gold was paid to keep the peace.

The shadows were falling. Honorius was now twenty-five. Olympius, arch-enemy of Stilicho, and influential minister, had obtained an ascendancy over the young Emperor. He persuaded him that his father-in-law was plotting his death with a view to replacing him by his own son Eucherius. Reports were circulated. Alaric and Stilicho, it was said, were in collusion. The tribute was the work of a
traitor. Italy was to be bled white through the machinations of one who had consistently Germanised the army. He had unmanned the frontiers, had left Gaul open to invasion. The once popular hero became the blackest of knaves. On the eve of his departure for Gaul, Stilicho's most trusted generals and ministers were massacred at Pavia.

Stilicho was at Bologna when the news reached him, surrounded by a devoted band of officers and men. They placed themselves unreservedly at his service. But for the first time Stilicho hesitated. Mere indecision? A genuine horror of civil war? Eventually he fled to Ravenna.

There was enacted the crowning inhumanity. On the 23rd August, A.D. 408 Flavius Stilicho, staunch patriot, astute statesman, capable commander, was dragged from a Christian altar and without trial butchered by order of the jealous Honorius.¹⁵

Not content with the murder of Stilicho, the Senate decreed the liquidation of his family. Eucherius was led to the scaffold. The beautiful Serena was strangled on a trumped-up charge of idolatry at the very moment when Alaric was thundering at the gates of Rome. Finally, the Christian Emperor Honorius was made to divorce his wife on no other pretext than that she was the daughter of Stilicho. His statues were torn down and all laudatory inscriptions erased. He was declared a public enemy.

The fall of Stilicho was a signal for the purely Roman legionaries to settle real and imagined scores with the Teuton auxiliaries in Italy. As a result, thousands deserted to the camp of Alaric to employ their training for the further undoing of the Roman state.

This paper is written (perhaps too obviously) from what might be termed a minority viewpoint. It seeks to enter a caveat against a too ready and unqualified acceptance of the attitude which sees in Stilicho the villain who sold the pass.¹⁶ Stilicho is not a popular figure among English scholars. And the hostility of Bury in his able work¹⁷ has left him under a cloud. The Continentals have been more kindly. He has received appreciative, but discriminating, treatment from the great Mommsen,¹⁸ to a rather greater degree from Stein¹⁹ and Lot,²⁰ and has been quite enthusiastically rehabilitated by Mazzarino²¹ and Nischer-Falkenhof.²²

History is a fitful record. Immortality is largely a matter of chance. Stilicho was in no sense sine vate. He was the idol of Claudian and has been a target for the venom of Orosius, Zosimus
and Jerome. They are as biassed on the one side as Claudian, presumed servile operator of the Stilicho propaganda machine, on the other. Many of their judgments are patently ex parte and as likely as not only the echo of state reminiscence or political rancours. It seems to be lost sight of that Stilicho meant the advent of Arianism with the consequent inducements to a 'smear' campaign.

Few important lives afford such scope for the assignment of 'motives' and the clarification of 'aims.' And characters delineated on such a basis with the materials at our disposal must ever be open to review.
1. Jerome’s use of the epitnet ‘semibarbarus’ in his description of Stilicho (Ep. 123) seems to indicate that his mother was a Roman.
2. Cf. Claudian, De Cons. Stil. I. 51-53: Vix primaeus eras, pacis cum mitteris auctor / Assyriae; tanta foedus cum gente ferire / commissum tuveni (‘Scarce hadst thou reached man’s estate when thou wast sent to negotiate peace with Assyria (i.e. Persia); to make a treaty with so great a people was the charge entrusted to thy youth’ – L.C.L.)
3. For her literary tastes, cf. Claudian, Laus Serenae 146-147: Pierius labor et veterum tibi carmina vatum / ludus erat: quos Smyrna dedit, quos Mantua libros / percurrers damnas Helenam nec parcis Elisae (‘The study of the Muses and the songs of poets of olden time was thy delight. Turning the pages of Homer, bard of Smyrna, or those of Virgil, poet of Mantua, thou findest fault with Helen nor canst approve of Dido.’).
4. Cf. Ambrose, De obitu Theod. 5 (funeral oration): liberos praesenti commendabat parenti; also Claudian, In Rufinum II, (v) 4-6: iamque tuis, Stilicho, Romana potentia curis / et rerum commissa apex, tibi credita fratrum / utraque maiestas geminæque exercitus aulae (‘Then was the power of Rome entrusted to thy care, Stilicho; in thy hands was placed the governance of the world. The brothers’ twin majesty and the armies of either royal court were given into thy charge.’).
7. The story is told by Zosimus alone, v, 11. It is strange that Orosius, the most bitter of Stilicho’s opponents, makes no mention of this splendid material for calumny.
9. Claudian, De Bello Gothico, 215-313, vividly describes the feelings of the entourage of Honorius at this time.
10. Vide The Cambridge Medieval History, vol. I, p. 265: ‘ . . . but though the Romans were left in possession of the field and took numerous prisoners, Stilicho can hardly be said to have gained a victory.’
12. pugnantes victimus, victores victi sumus.
13. Considerations of this kind may offset the observations of Bury (op. cit. pp. 162-163) regarding the ‘precise conditions on which Stilicho spared Alaric.’ – ‘We know enough, however, to see that if another than this German general had been at the head of affairs, if the defence of the province had been in the hands of a Roman commander possessing the ability and character of Theodosius or Valentinian I, the Visigoths and their king would have been utterly crushed and many calamities would have been averted, which ensued from the indulgent policy of the Vandal to whom Theodosius had unwisely entrusted the destinies of Rome.’
14. 'Radagaisus, omnium antiquorum praesentiumque hostium longe immanissimus'. Orosius vii, 7.

15. '. . . With a heart already broken by man's ingratitude, and weary of life, he offered his neck to the sword of the executioner and in a moment 'that good grey head, which all men knew' was rolling in the dust.' Thomas Hodgkin, Italy and her Invaders, vol. 1, part 2, p. 756.


18. Gesammelte Schriften. IV, Stilicho und Alaric.


