

Ricimer

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Flavius Ricimer^[1] (c. 405 – August 18, 472) Latin pronunciation: [ˈrɪkɪmɛr]) was a Romanized Germanic general who effectively ruled the remaining territory of the Western Roman Empire from 456 until his death in 472. Deriving his power from his position as *magister militum* of the Western Empire, Ricimer exercised political control through a series of puppet emperors.

Ricimer's military office and his dominance over the Empire led to historians such as J.B. Bury to conclude that he was a link between previous *magistri militum*, such as the Vandal Stilicho, and the Germanic king of Italy, Odoacer.^[2] Odoacer deposed Western Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476, in an act often considered to mark the fall of the Roman Empire.

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Lineage

Ricimer was the son of Rechila, the Suevic King of Galicia. His mother was the daughter of Wallia, king of the Visigoths. It has been surmised that such an alliance between the Suevi and the Visigoths would have been made before Wallia's death in 418, after which Wallia's successors may have become hostile toward the family members of the deceased king. As entry into the Western Empire's military was a frequently-used option for "losers of struggles for leadership among the barbarians",^[3] Ricimer's family would have thus entered the service of Rome.^[4]

Ricimer himself later married the sister of Gondioc, the king of the Burgundians.

Rise to Power

According to Sidonius Apollinaris, Ricimer served under the *magister militum* Flavius Aetius alongside the *comes domesticorum* Majorian, whom he befriended.^[5]

A power vacuum was created in the Western Empire after the events of 454 and 455, which saw the consecutive murders of Aetius and of the Western Emperor Valentinian III, who had been responsible for the *magister*

militum's assassination. After the assassinations, the Roman senator Petronius Maximus proclaimed himself emperor. Petronius, however, was killed by a Roman mob immediately prior to the Vandal sacking of the city in 455. After the sack, the Visigothic king Theodoric II proclaimed as emperor Avitus, the Roman military commander in Gaul. In return for Theodoric's support, Avitus agreed to allow the Visigoths to enter Suevi-controlled Hispania. Theodoric consented to Avitus's offers and the new emperor, with the Visigoths under his command, marched on Rome to secure the throne. Avitus named the Visigothic Remistus as *magister militum*, a position which had been vacant since Aetius's death.

Following the arrival of Avitus in Rome, Majorian gave his support, albeit reluctantly, to the new emperor. Avitus subsequently appointed Ricimer as a *comes*, or count of the Empire, a prominent military position. By this point, however, the Western Empire encompassed the Italian peninsula and portions of southern Gaul, which were mere fractions of the territory held by Rome in previous centuries.

Ricimer raised an army and navy from the Germanic mercenaries available to him, and commenced campaigns directed against "barbarian" tribes in conflict with the Empire. Ricimer achieved his first important victory in 456, when he defeated the Vandals in a naval battle. Although Priscus wrote that Avitus had sent him to Sicily to engage the Vandals, Hydatius states he defeated the Vandals near Corsica.^[6] After his Mediterranean victory, Ricimer was appointed by Avitus as *magister militum praesentalis*, the commander of the Western Empire's field army in Italy and effectively the second-highest rank available to a general of the West.

Ricimer used his new position to assist his colleague Majorian in plotting against Avitus, who had not yet been recognized as emperor of the West by Marcian, the Eastern emperor. Ricimer and Majorian convinced the Roman Senate to authorize a military expedition against Avitus, who had established himself at the Imperial capital of Ravenna. The two led an army against an Imperial force commanded by the *magister militum* Remistus and defeated it at Piacenza on October 16, 456. They then besieged Avitus in Ravenna, which fell. Avitus was captured, forced to assume the bishopric of Piacenza, and finally executed.^[7] With the Western throne vacant, the new Eastern Emperor, Leo I, granted Ricimer the title of patrician and the rank of *magister militum* on February 28, 457. Leo appointed Majorian to replace Ricimer in his Italian command. Without a Western Emperor, Leo hoped to use Ricimer as his effective vicegerent in the West.

Magister militum

Majorian (457-461)

As a Germanic tribesman, Ricimer could not assume the Imperial throne himself, but as *magister militum* he gained influence over the Germanic peoples occupying Gaul, Hispania, and Northern Africa. He was left with the options of dissolving the Western Empire and ruling as an official viceroy of Leo in Constantinople or exerting his power over the West through a puppet emperor. Though he had hoped to take the first option, the Roman aristocracy refused to consent to this step and Ricimer was forced to take the latter.

With a vacant Western throne, the Alamanni invaded Italy. They moved from Raetia and managed to penetrate Italy, reaching Lake Maggiore. Majorian led his field army north to fight the Alamanni, defeating them. Majorian was proclaimed emperor by his troops in a place called *ad Columellas* on April 1, 457.^[8] Realizing Majorian's potential as a puppet, Ricimer induced Leo to give his consent to this arrangement.

Though Ricimer had expected to control his friend, Majorian proved to be a capable ruler and soon distanced himself from his *magister militum*. Majorian demonstrated his military skill through his re-conquest of Gaul and his campaigns in Hispania. Majorian's campaigns effectively subdued the Visigoths and returned them to their

pre-Avitus foederati status, greatly increasing his status among the Senate and army. Majorian then prepared for a campaign against the Vandals of Geiseric. With Majorian in Hispania, Ricimer was left in Italy.^[citation needed]

Majorian was defeated by Geiseric, possibly through treachery, near modern-day Valencia, Spain while organizing a mercenary army. During his absence, Ricimer convinced the Senate to turn against the emperor, who soon disbanded his army and returned to Italy. Learning that the emperor was in Tortona, Ricimer led a detachment there and arrested him. Deposing Majorian on August 3, 461, Ricimer had the emperor tortured and finally beheaded on August 7.^[9]

Libius Severus (461-465)

Ricimer's murder of Majorian did not sit well with some portions of the military establishment, notably the Commanding General in Gaul Aegidius and the Commanding General in Dalmatia Marcellinus who ruled their respective domains independent from Imperial authority. These two generals entered open hostilities with Ricimer and refused to recognize Ricimer's position. Ricimer ruled the West without an Emperor for three months. Facing pressure from the Senate and Italian aristocracy, Ricimer named the undistinguished Senator Libius Severus as his puppet Emperor. Though Severus was recognized by the Senate, the Eastern Emperor Leo I refused to recognize him as his Western counterpart. Though he faced open military opposition from Western generals, with the docile Severus as Emperor, Ricimer was master of Rome.

The chief problems facing Ricimer during Severus' *reign* was military opposition from the Vandals and political opposition from the Eastern Empire. The Vandals had continuously raided the Italian coast since the assassination of Valentinian III in 455, wreaking havoc upon the Italian economy. At the same time Eastern Emperor Leo refused to recognize Severus as the legitimate Western Emperor and refused to provide assistance to the Western government as a consequence. Constantinople had made peace with Geiseric in 462, but had refused to intervene in the Vandal raids. Due to diminished tax revenues and with the key armies of the West under opposition control, Ricimer needed assistance from the East in order to maintain order in the West. As such, Severus, despite his docile nature, represented an obstacle to Ricimer's power. Upon Severus' death in 465 — rumored, according to Cassiodorus, to have been poisoned by Ricimer^[10] — Ricimer proceeded to rule the West for eighteen months without an Emperor as he waited for Leo to name Severus' successor.

Anthemius (467-472)

The Vandals saw the vacant Western throne as an opportunity to increase their role in Imperial politics. Geiseric supported Olybrius' candidacy for appointment as Emperor. Geiseric had family ties with Olybrius as both Olybrius and Geiseric's son Huneric had married the two daughters of Valentinian III. With Olybrius on the throne, Geiseric would become the real power behind the throne in the West, replacing Ricimer. To put Leo under pressure, the Vandals extended their attacks on Sicily and Italy to the territories of the Eastern Empire, sacking and enslaving people living in Illyricum, the Peloponnese and other parts of Greece.

Faced with increased Vandal raiding, in 467 Leo named the Commanding General of the Illyrian Army Anthemius as Western Emperor. Leo sent Anthemius to Italy with an army led by the Commanding General of the Dalmatian Army Marcellinus, who had previously rebelled against Ricimer, to secure the Western throne and recapture North Africa from the Vandals. Ricimer must have initially viewed Anthemius' appointment as undermining his position. Unlike Libius Severus, Anthemius had a proven history of military success and had family ties to the Theodosian dynasty. However, needing the support of the Eastern Empire, Ricimer was forced to accept him. To solidify his connections with the new Emperor, Ricimer diplomatically married Anthemius' daughter Alypia,^[11] and for some time lived in peace with Anthemius. The marriage produced two sons,

Aunemundus in 470 and Ansemund in 505.

Soon after assuming the Western throne, Anthemius granted Marcellinus the rank of Patrician in an effort to counterbalance the authority of Ricimer. In the East, it was established practice for there to be two Supreme Commanders where the West it had become common to only have one. With his experience with the Eastern military structure, this may have been an attempt by Anthemius to introduce the eastern structure and rule like an eastern emperor using the successful and trustworthy Marcellinus as co-Supreme Commander with Ricimer. Both Eastern Emperor Leo and Anthemius had seen the difficulty any Western Emperor had in maintaining control over the Western military with the existence of a singular unchallenged Supreme Commander.

In 468, Eastern Emperor Leo organized a grand campaign attack against the Vandals in North Africa, in which the East and West would commit substantial forces. The Commanding General of the Thracian Army Basiliscus, brother-in-law of the Leo, assumed supreme command over the joint West-East assault, with Marcellinus given direct command of the forces from the West. The overall plan called for a three-pronged attack between Basiliscus, Marcellinus, and the Military Count of Egypt Heraclius of Edessa.^[12] Basiliscus was to land at a distance from Carthage with the main army (transported by an armada of over 1,000 ships) and then link up with Heraclius, advancing from Tripolitania. Marcellinus was to secure Sicily and Sardinia and then advance to Carthage.^{[12][13]} Ricimer, under the overall command of Marcellinus, commanded a large portion of the Western forces in the expedition. Ricimer's behavior raised suspicions that he secretly wanted the expedition to fail, which it ultimately did following the disastrous battle of Cape Bon. Most of the joint armada was destroyed, with Marcellinus himself being assassinated by his own soldiers while in Sicily, perhaps at the instigation of Ricimer.

The failed joint expedition against the Vandals bankrupted the Western and Eastern Empires and greatly reduced their military might. Upon hearing of the disastrous defeat, the Visigoths resumed their wars of expansion against the West and the Vandals resumed raids on Italy. Additionally, with Marcellinus dead, Ricimer was left as the sole Supreme Commander of the West. Marcellinus had been Anthemius' favorite of the two generals, and his death served to widen the divide between the Emperor and Ricimer. The tipping point of their relationship was the trial of Romanus, the Imperial Chancellor (*magister officiorum*) and supporter of Ricimer, whom Anthemius accused of treachery and condemned to death in 470.^[14] Following the execution of Romanus by Anthemius, Ricimer moved north to Mediolanum with a force of several thousand soldiers. Relations between the two deteriorated to the point that Epiphanius of Pavia, bishop of Milan, was asked to negotiate peace between them.^[15]

Despite the bishop's efforts, open warfare broke out between Ricimer and Anthemius again in 472. Ricimer, along with his barbarian mercenary units (including the soldiers of Odoacer), marched on Rome. Besieged, Anthemius took refuge in St. Peter's Basilica. The Eastern Emperor Leo dispatched Olybrius to mediate a truce between Ricimer and Anthemius but, according to John Malalas, had sent a secret letter to Anthemius, urging him to kill Olybrius. Ricimer intercepted the letter, showed it to Olybrius, and had him proclaimed Emperor.^[16] The siege lasted for five months. Ricimer finally entered the city and succeeded in separating the port on the Tiber from the Palatine, starving the supporters of the Emperor.^[17] Both sides appealed to the Field Army in Gaul, but the Burgundian Commanding General of Gaul Gundobad supported his uncle Ricimer.

Anthemius held out until his supporters deserted him. Disguised as a beggar, the Emperor was caught attempting to flee the city at the church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, where he was beheaded on July 11, 472.^[18] Ricimer then proclaimed Olybrius as Emperor, who was the candidate for Emperor that he and Geiseric had once favored.

Death

Ricimer's "rule" lasted until his death from a hemorrhage on August 18, 472, six weeks after deposing Anthemius. His title of Patrician and position as Supreme Commander were assumed by his nephew Gundobad.

Without a powerful figure to guide it, the Western Roman Empire experienced an even more rapid succession of emperors, none of whom was able to effectively consolidate power. The line of Western Roman Emperors ended with Odoacer's deposition of Romulus Augustulus (arguably in either 476 or 480), reunifying the Imperial power in far off Constantinople.

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Political offices		
Preceded by Imp. Caesar Iulius Maiorianus Augustus, Imp. Caesar Flavius Valerius Leo Augustus	Consul of the Roman Empire 459 <i>with Julius Patricius</i>	Succeeded by Flavius Magnus, Flavius Apollonius
Military offices		
Preceded by Remistus In 456	Supreme Commander of the Western Roman Army 457-472	Succeeded by Gundobad

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