

The Battle of Adrianople 378AD

A Kings of War Historical supplement.

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Introduction

By the time this battle occurred, the Roman Empire had essentially ceased to exist. It was no longer 'Roman' nor was it an 'empire', but a collection of under strength garrisons, largely abandoned to their fate. So dire were the circumstances that one garrison on the Dacian border, (modern Romania) had lost contact with Rome for at least a decade, yet, out of 'habit', continued to man the garrison, in the name of Rome. I suppose it proves any form of social order is better than chaos.

The battle came about primarily through the necessity for Rome to reduce its borders. Under Aurelian (assassinated in 275AD), Rome began to withdraw from its territories in Asia Minor and Eastern Europe. This was forced on Rome because fewer citizens were prepared to serve in the military and began to be replaced by 'barbarians' from conquered territories. After Constantine formerly adopted 'Christianity' as a permitted religion within the Empire, following the Council of Nicaea in 325AD, the leadership of the Empire became dangerously factionalized between 'Christians' and 'Pagans'. So much so, the Roman defeat at Adrianople was characterized as 'an act of divine punishment for the sins of Valens and the Empire as a whole'.

The Roman Army of 378AD

While some commentators of that time bemoaned the loss of the fighting prowess and skill displayed by the legions from the old empire, the latter day legionaries of Rome were not so unskilled as some would have us believe. Legionary weapons and equipment had certainly changed, with the development of lighter, oval shields, chain mail

replacing lorica segmentata and the longer spatha replacing the short gladius. The pilum had also made way for the thrusting spear, javelin and darts. Archery, including crossbows, had also become an important component of the legion. The Roman Army had evolved to fight in the East, where they encountered mainly mounted opponents in semi arid conditions. Faced with increasing numbers of eastern, horsed opponents, the Romans increased the ratio of their horse to foot, from 10:1 to 3:1.

A continuing problem was a lack of new recruits. While there were numerous attempts to enlist barbarians, usually those seeking refuge within imperial territories, many Roman citizens actively avoided conscription or service at almost any price. The days when it was considered an honor to serve in the legions had long since passed and, as the middle classes consolidated their wealth, they preferred someone else to do the dieing, in the almost endless civil wars. A further blow was dealt the army after universal Roman citizenship was granted to all within her borders, by Caracalla in 212AD. This universal declaration of citizenship removed the greatest motivation for 'barbarian' recruits, who had received citizenship after 25 years service in the army. This lack of recruits led to the gradual shrinking of units, especially after heavy casualties. Some legion strengths were at 1,000 men, others a low as 350. In this respect at least, they were only a shadow of their former selves.

According to Peter Donnlley

“The Nature of Combat

Roman tactics in the late empire were very different from those of the classical age. In particular, the cavalry (including bowmen as well as heavily armored lancers) played a much more prominent role. However, the disaster at Adrianople did not signal the triumph of barbarian cavalry, as some earlier historians thought. [\[7\]](#) By this time, the Romans had already developed the armored cavalry known so well from Byzantine times, and could certainly match anything the Goths put into the field. [\[8\]](#)

Missiles of all kinds were more greatly relied on than in classical times. The heavy infantry marched behind a shield wall bristling with spears — not like the old hoplite or legionary shield wall, but a wall perhaps 6 feet high, the higher part being made up of shields held over the shoulders of the men in front by the men in the second rank. Meanwhile the ranks behind them showered the enemy with javelins, arrows, and lead-weighted darts. It must have

been very frightening to see, and something cavalry would not readily charge into.

Much work has been done in recent decades on the mechanics or actual experience of battle, and some old ideas have been overturned. For an up-to-date treatment of how men fought in the later empire, see Philip Rance's fascinating chapter in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*.[\[9\]](#)"

Surrounded by dissension

Probably the single greatest problem Valens faced was disloyalty and division, not helped by his own egotistic and autocratic personality! When Valens arrived in Constantinople, immediately prior to the battle, he found the city in the grip of a riot, which inevitably diverted his attention from the coming battle. His advisors were also deeply divided as to which course of action to follow. Should they immediately attack the Gothic invasion or await the arrival of the reinforcements with Gratian? Many of the opposing Goths had served in Roman units and were well-trained and familiar with Roman tactics, thus Goths, currently serving in Roman units, were under suspicion as potential traitors. Roman deserters had informed Fritigern, the Goth commander, of Valens' weaknesses and the fact that Gratian was advancing on Adrianople with reinforcements.

The Gothic army

The size of the army at Adrianople is unknown, but most historians agree it was at least as numerous as the Roman, if not larger. It certainly enjoyed a larger cavalry presence. However, it was an alliance of a number of barbarian tribal groups, Greuthingi, Alans, Huns, Tervingi and others, all of who were described as 'Goths' by the Roman historian, Ammianus. Each of these groups was under the direct control of their leaders and only accepted Fritigern's leadership out of necessity. Yet, had the battle turned against the Goths, Fritigern's authority would have vanished, ending in defeat in detail.

The Battle

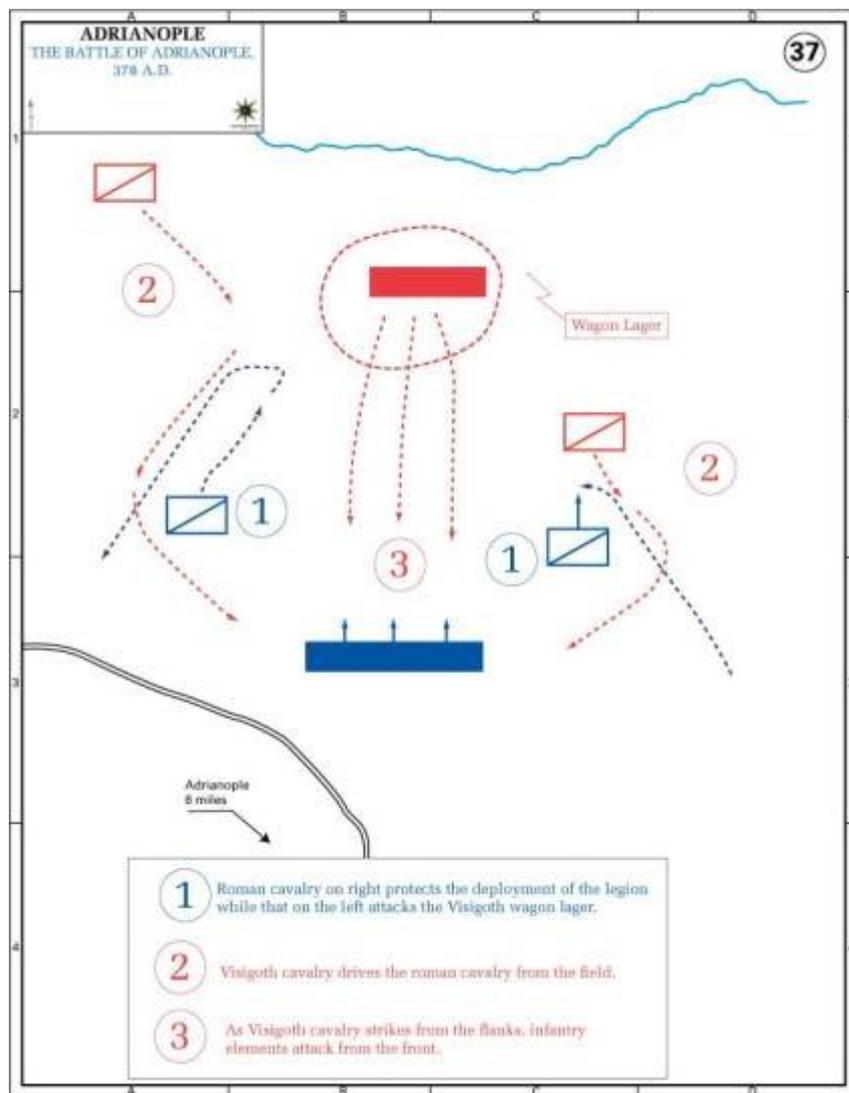
The actual site of the battle is unknown, although the general location is fairly certain. It began in the late afternoon and finished about 7pm, as darkness fell. Valens had delayed his deployment while negotiations with Fritigern took place, in the hope Gratian's reinforcements would arrive before the Goths attacked. Fritigern did likewise, awaiting the return of his foraging cavalry, which outnumbered the Roman horse. By late in the morning, it was becoming

increasingly apparent Gratian had been delayed, by Goth incursions into territory north of Constantinople. Valens was also aware the Goths were attempting to cut his supply lines to Constantinople, while at the same time negotiating. Valens realised he was going to be forced to give battle, sooner rather than later. Roman scouts had located the vanguard of the Gothic force, which was smaller, and lacked cavalry, who were scattered foraging. Faced with being cut off in Constantinople, with a potentially rebellious army, he appears to have decided to defeat the smaller Goth vanguard, before their cavalry could return from foraging and thereby buy enough time to allow Gratian's forces to join him. A victory for the Romans would have improved morale among his troops, and quelled the dissent in Constantinople.

His legions were ordered to move towards the small town of Adrianople, some 8-miles from Constantinople. Thus, in the heat of midday, without adequate water or food, the legions advanced towards the enemy wagon lager, situated on the high ground near Adrianople. By the time they arrived, the legions were in no fit condition to fight, let alone assault a well prepared defense. Valens ordered the legions to attack the Goth wagon lager, which was equivalent to a Roman field camp. A formidable task, even for a well rested, well equipped, legion at full strength. Much has been made of this 8-mile march, as a cause for the Roman defeat. But it must be remembered in earlier Imperial times, legions were required to make forced marches of up to 12 miles a day, and build a camp before night fall. I believe it was this lack of 'stamina' training, which primarily contributed, to the Roman defeat.

Valens launched his infantry at the wagon lager, with his cavalry acting as flank guard. Both cavalry units on the flank were routed by the returning Goth cavalry, leaving the infantry stranded in the centre. The Goths immediately attacked the remaining infantry from front and flanks, pinning them in position. The legionaries, faced with certain death, formed themselves into defensive knots and sold their lives as dearly as they could. While some $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Roman infantry perished, casualties among the Goths were also severe. The main cause of casualties, on both sides appears to have been bow fire. The later claim that Goth – probably Hun – cavalry rode down the Roman infantry is almost certainly an 'urban legend'. Tests carried out a few years ago, demonstrated that horses would not charge a formed line of trained infantry. It was only once infantry units broke and scattered, then, they were more easily destroyed by the cavalry.

The terrain was open dry grassland, with a scattering of vineyards and olive groves. It was early August, and almost certainly dry and hot! The average daytime temperature in August is 31.6⁰ C with only 4.8 days of rain. If you check Edirne, Turkey, on Google earth, you will see how dry and flat the area is.



Scenario specific rules

The Hour of Wolves supplement – Rome’s Rise and Fall, is used. Each side has a maximum points value of 1,500 points.

Roman forces use the 'Late Imperial Roman Armies' list (p7).

Goth forces use a combination of three army lists:–

Early Visigothic Army (p17) –500 points– with the exception that Catafracts must be replaced by Medium Cavalry.

Early Ostrogoth Army (p18) – 500 points– with the exception that Catafracts must be replaced with Medium Cavalry.

Hunic Army (p21) – 500 points.

The Goth wagon lager:

Obtaining wagon models for this scenario can be an expensive challenge, even using 20mm plastic figures. I would recommend making heavy card wagons, fitted with hobby store wooden wheels.



This is an offering from JR Models which is cast resin and shows how crude the Goth wagons were. The cart would have been pulled by a team of at least four oxen. There was probably a fabric (possibly linen) tilt, supported by wooden hoops, covering the wagon. The important thing to remember is they were not highly decorated works of art, but war machines, expected to offer good defensive cover and security. I'm reminded of the axiom; measured with a micrometer, marked with chalk, cut with a chainsaw!

Army Commanders and their retinue

Valens' (Army General) and Fritigern's (Warlord in Chariot) commands should consist of three or four mounted figures, preferably with an individual figure to represent each commander. One figure will be equipped with an Army Standard. These bases are without points cost. Each barbarian warband will be commanded by a chieftain, and retinue with standard (four figures on a base) at no points cost.

Roman Legionary bases and unit size

I use late Imperial Legionary figures by Italeri (6137) fitted five figures to a 100mm wide by 40mm deep base.



I use each one of these as a Legionary vexillum (troop) with two bases making a cohort (regiment). It's important that, regardless of the original rules supplement base to figure ratio, (p3) the following ratios are used. One base is equivalent to a troop, as described on page 3 of the rules supplement, and two bases are equivalent to a Regiment. This is regardless of the number of figures shown in the rules. The 'Infantry Horde' classification is converted to represent a Legion which will consist of between eight to ten bases of infantry, regardless of the total number of figures.

The 'Tortoise' (testudo)



Preparing to receive a charge or missile fire

This was an extremely common legionary formation used to approach defensive positions or defend against bow fire. A testudo can be formed by two infantry bases being placed back to back, as a full move option. Unless attacking a defensive position, it cannot be moved. If it is used to attack defenses, all movement is halved. Units in testudo formation gain an extra +1 De (bringing legionaries to DE6). A testudo has no flanks or rear.

Cavalry

Cavalry MAY NOT charge an unshaken legionary unit, from its front arc. They may, however, take their chances and attack a 'wavering' unit.

Testing Nerve

This is a critical part of the scenario. All legionary troops will suffer a +1 penalty to their dice roll, when making their first 'nerve test'. Once they have passed the first test, they will revert to their original **Ne** value. If a Roman legionary unit suffers a 'wavering' result from a nerve test, it must immediately form a 'testudo' and remain stationary until it is no longer under attack. Once in testudo formation it cannot suffer a further 'wavering' result in a nerve test, it may only be destroyed by failing a 'routing' test.

Goth units suffering a 'wavering' result from a Nerve Test, must remain halted for the next game turn, to reflect the command confusion resulting from casualties among its leaders. If Fritigern is routed from the table every allied warband must immediately take a nerve test with a +2 penalty added to the dice roll.

Leadership qualities – or lack thereof!



Valens

History has not treated Valens kindly, due mainly to the antagonism between the religious factions within his

command. He is portrayed as autocratic and arrogant, yet strangely indecisive. There is little doubt he faced many political opponents, both from within the army and the Senate. The constant risk of assassination must have been upper most in his thoughts. He must have realised failure on the field of battle, would see him swiftly removed and the army and Senate install another contender. His family could have been slaughtered or sold as slaves, if lucky. In the end, it was probably fortunate he died in battle. Most historians rate Valens as 'indecisive', at best, 'cowardly' at worst. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and call him 'indecisive'. Valens does not inspire anyone, therefore loses the command bonus allowing units within 6 inches a re-roll for failed 'nerve tests'. If Valens' Army Command base suffers a 'wavering' result from a 'nerve test', his body guard, and Army Standard Bearer, immediate desert him, and his profile falls from **Army General** to **Junior Officer**.

Fritigern

Very little is known of Fritigern other than he was considered by Ammianus to be a great leader, exhibiting much cunning and guile. He was sufficiently capable of organizing a coalition of disparate German and Hun tribal groups – whom Ammianus terms 'Gothi', into a cohesive force, under his command. Because he is mounted in a chariot, any nerve test resulting in 'wavering' does not reduce his next game turn movement options. He may move as normal. Should Fritigern be driven from the field or killed, every command unit must take an immediate nerve test with a +1 added to the dice roll. If any command unit fails their 'nerve test', their entire contingent deserts the field and is immediately removed from the game.