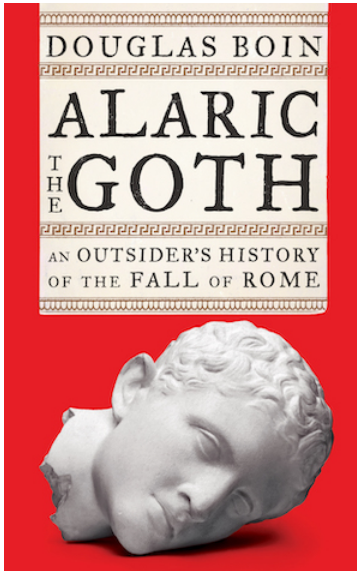


Reading Group Guide for *Alaric the Goth* (W.W. Norton, 2020)



Denied citizenship by the Roman Empire, a soldier named Alaric changed history by unleashing a surprise attack on the capital city of an unjust empire.

Stigmatized and relegated to the margins of Roman society, the Goths were violent “barbarians” who destroyed “civilization,” at least in the conventional story of Rome’s collapse. But a slight shift of perspective brings their history, and ours, shockingly alive.

Alaric grew up near the river border that separated Gothic territory from Roman. He survived a border policy that separated migrant children from their parents, and he was denied benefits he likely expected from military service. Romans were deeply conflicted over who should enjoy the privileges of citizenship. They wanted to buttress their global power, but were insecure about Roman identity; they depended on foreign goods, but scoffed at and denied foreigners their own voices and humanity.

In stark contrast to the rising bigotry, intolerance, and zealotry among Romans during Alaric’s lifetime, the Goths, as practicing Christians, valued religious pluralism and tolerance. The marginalized Goths, marked by history as frightening harbingers of destruction and of the Dark Ages, preserved virtues of the ancient world that we take for granted. The three nights of riots Alaric and the Goths brought to the capital struck fear into the hearts of the powerful, but the riots were not without cause.

Combining vivid storytelling and historical analysis, Douglas Boin reveals the Goths’ complex and fascinating legacy in shaping our world.

The following questions are designed to enhance your discussion of Alaric’s life and times.

Questions for Discussion

1. In his preface Douglas Boin talks about “stereotypes and gross generalizations” and how “derogatory words and insensitive imagery” can have a negative effect on the way we encounter minority lives in our history books (p. x). What came to your mind when you read that section?

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2. What did you know about Alaric and the Goths before coming to this book? What did you know about the Roman Empire?

3. In chapter one, while narrating the events of Alaric's attack on August 24, 410, the author describes many different aspects of Roman culture—from exotic food like “Indian parrot” to the Romans' understanding of geography (p. 8). What surprised you most about the Roman people?

4. How has the popular presentation of Roman emperors from movies like *Gladiator* affected your view of the Romans? Did eighteen-year-old Honorius, in charge of Rome during Alaric's attack, change what you thought about them, or confirm it?

5. In the opening chapter, the author leaves Alaric's name out of the events until the very end of the narration. Can you recall other books, movies, or plays where the title character is unexpectedly left off stage to heighten the drama?

6. As a historian, Douglas Boin was limited in his reconstruction of Alaric's childhood by the few sources that were available. What impression did you have of Alaric's youth? What missing pieces of information about Alaric's childhood do you wish historians still had?

7. In chapter two, Douglas Boin writes of the Emperor Maximinus that he was “the first man, who having been born a foreigner, then made a citizen by Caracalla's law, was promoted to emperor” (p. 25). What parts of the emperor's upbringing and experience spoke to you the most?

8. Do you agree with the Roman Empire's justification, in the 370s A.D., for separating Gothic children from their parents (p. 41–43)?

9. Why do you think the Roman army attracted so many Goths of Alaric's generation, when the Roman Empire had treated his people so savagely?

10. Do you or does anyone in your reading group speak or read another language? Was it easy or difficult for you to acquire, and how does your experience with your teachers compare to the story of the two Goths who wrote to St. Jerome for Latin grammar advice (p. 58–59)?

11. What are the circumstances that might lead an otherwise harmonious society, like Rome's, to fall into a devastating civil war?

12. Goths, like Romans, were largely unfamiliar with Persian culture until they traveled to the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers for war. Are there aspects of Persian culture that are an important part of your life or upbringing? How do you think ordinary Romans viewed their Persian neighbors?

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13. Ancient history is sometimes presented in popular media as a hyper-masculine world. But one of the ways Douglas Boin illustrates the impact of war in Alaric's day is by looking through the lives of wives and other family members who lost loved ones. Do you have a favorite book—nonfiction or fiction—which widened your understanding of another period through its unexpected perspective?
14. In his chapter on Athens, Douglas Boin explains how theatrical shows, in a time of widespread illiteracy, challenged ancient audiences “to imagine an outsider’s perspective on well-known events” (p. 118). What are some of the obstacles today’s actors, playwrights, and directors face in trying to bring similar “outsider” stories before the public?
15. Did it surprise you to hear a Roman man characterize Alaric’s wife as a “shrill” woman (p. 125)? What do you think she was really like? How might her personality, for example, have compared or contrasted to Serena, General Stilicho’s wife (p. 149–52)?
16. Discuss the short profile of the farmer of Verona by the poet Claudian, which begins “Happy is the one at home” (p. 130). What does the poem reveal about Rome in Alaric’s day?
17. The Romans were often willing to extend citizenship to non-residents and foreigners as a way to recognize the contributions foreigners made to Roman society. They famously did so three times throughout Rome’s long history, the last of which happened in 212 A.D. under Emperor Caracalla. Yet by 410 A.D., the government adamantly refused to grant any privileges to Alaric or his people, nor did it even recognize them for their service. How do you explain the Romans’ reluctance to do so? What do you think were the factors that prevented Rome’s government from following its own precedents and remaining a “sanctuary for refugees” (p. 5)?
18. Was Alaric’s last attack on Rome, in August of 410 A.D., justified?
19. In the final chapter, we learn that Rodolfo Lanciani, the Italian excavator who did much to create the first archaeological picture of Alaric’s attack, said that he “felt more than ever the vast difference between reading Roman history in books, and studying it from its monuments” (p. 192). Where have you felt the most in touch with history? Why does this place hold so much power for you?



About the Author

Douglas Boin, raised just outside Chicago, in Park Ridge, Illinois, grew up attending Jesuit Catholic schools, where his teachers cultivated his interest in storytelling, history, and religion. After college at Georgetown, he moved to Austin to pursue graduate work at The University of Texas. He is an associate professor of history at Saint Louis University and is available to speak about his love of Italian culture, classical history, his ongoing fieldwork in Italy, and how growing up gay in a Catholic family has shaped his writing.