Galla Placidia (Figure 1) was an amazing woman. No woman in ancient society was more highly placed: she was the daughter of the Roman emperor Theodosius I, wife of the emperor Constantius III, mother of the emperor Valentinian III, and half-sister of the emperors Arcadius and Honorius. Yet no woman had a more eventful life, full of exciting adventures. Her story is rather complicated and one needs to have some knowledge of the history of the time to be able to follow it. When Constantine the Great became the Roman emperor he moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople in 330 AD, and in order to better control this vast realm the emperor Valentinian I (364-375 AD) divided the empire into...
two divisions. He appointed his younger brother Valens, as co-emperor in the east with Constantinople as the capital while he ruled the western division with Rome as the capital. Theodosius I (Figure 2), who reigned from 379 to 395, united the two divisions, and being a zealous Christian he prohibited pagan worship throughout the empire. When he died the empire was again divided between his sons, Arcadius (Figure 3) who ruled the eastern division, and Honorius (Figure 4) who ruled the western division.

Placidia was the daughter of Theodosius I by his second wife, Galla, and she was born in about 390. In 401 Italy was gripped by fear as the Goths led by Alaric invaded from the north. The Goths were barbarians who had ravaged the Balkans and Greece before turning their attention to Italy. Fortunately the Roman general Stilicho, who was the guardian of Honorius and whose daughter Honorius married, was able to defeat Alaric in 402 and 403 causing him to retreat from Italy. Stilicho moved Honorius to Ravenna which was surrounded by swamps and safe from invasion. Sadly in 408 a palace official convinced Honorius that Stilicho intended to make his son emperor in the east, and Honorius had Stilicho and his son executed. Stilicho was a Christian and one of the great Roman military commanders.

With Stilicho out of the way Alaric was able to invade Italy and in 408 he reached Rome, but the Roman Senate paid him to go away. In 409 he again surrounded Rome and only lifted the blockade after they agreed that the city prefect, Priscus Attalus (Figure 5) would become the western emperor and that he would then appoint Alaric as head of the army. Alaric tried to negotiate with Honorius but to no avail. He then deposed Priscus Attalus and in 410 besieged Rome for the third time, but this time some of his allies in the city opened the city gates and his soldiers stormed in. They plundered the city for...
three days. (Figure 6) The inhabitants must have been terrified but surprisingly they were treated humanely. The Goths were Christians who had been converted by Ulphilas in the 4th century. Ulphilas is little known today but his achievement of converting the wild Gothic tribes was remarkable. Professor Frend in his book, The Early Church, said that he was one of the greatest missionary bishops of all time.

It was about this time that Placidia was taken captive. As the Gothic horde moved north she was carried along with all the booty. She would have looked very out of place, dressed in her silken finery and with her aristocratic manners, and she must have been afraid of what would happen to her. She was only 20 years old and no doubt a beautiful woman. As they were all marching northward something unexpected happened: Alaric died. He was buried in a river bed and his brother-in-law, Ataulf, was elected king of the Visigoths, as this major division of the Gothic peoples was called. Ataulf was young and brave, and according to Edward Gibbon in Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, he “excelled in the more attractive qualities of grace and beauty.” Therefore what happened next should be no surprise: Placidia and Ataulf fell in love.

Honorius now consented to form an alliance with Ataulf who agreed to move his people into Gaul. But there was a problem: this part of the western empire had rebelled against Honorius and a Gaulish noble, Jovinus, had been proclaimed emperor in 411. (Figure 7) But Ataulf captured him and took him to Narbonne on the south coast of Gaul where he was executed in 415. Ataulf also defeated Sebastianus, the brother of Jovinus in 413. (Figure 8) The marriage of Ataulf and Placidia was consummated before the Goths withdrew from Italy, but the wedding ceremony took place at Narbonne in 414. Gibbon describes the scene: “The bride, attired and adorned like a Roman empress, was placed on a throne of state; and the king of the Goths, who assumed on this occasion the Roman habit, contented himself with a less honourable seat by her side.” Such is true love. They had a son, but sadly he died in infancy.

To compound Placidia’s grief Ataulf was murdered in his bath in 415. Singeric then became king and he treated her cruelly, but after only a week he too was assassinated, and Wallia became king. Wallia was kept busy fighting other barbarians in southern Gaul and northern Spain, and he began to run out of food for his men. At this time Honorius’ general, Constantius, had moved with his army into the region and threatened
Wallia. Constantius had a formidable reputation because he had captured Constantine III (Figure 9) who had been proclaimed emperor by the legions in Britain in 407 before moving into Gaul. For his hungry troops Wallia did a deal: he handed Placidia over, in exchange for 600,000 measures of grain.

Unfortunately when Placidia returned to Italy she was forced by Honorius to marry Constantius in 417. It was not a happy union but they had two children, Honoria born in 418 and Valentinian in 419. In 421 Honorius appointed Constantius co-emperor (Figure 10) and Placidia was given the title “Augusta”. Sadly Constantius died seven months later.

Honorius had divorced his second wife and had no children, and he became very affectionate towards his half-sister Placidia, kissing and cuddling her in public. It was suspected that they were in an incestuous relationship. In 423, however, after quarrelling with Honorius Placidia fled with her children to the court of her nephew, Theodosius II, in Constantinople. (Figure 11) In 423 only a few months after arriving in Constantinople Placidia heard that Honorius had died of natural causes, but she could not return to Ravenna.

Continued overleaf
because Honorius’ secretary, Johannes (Figure 12) had become the emperor. Theodosius then designated Placidia’s son, Valentinian, the emperor of the west. He had been betrothed to Theodosius’ infant daughter, Licinia Eudoxia, in 424. The wedding took place in Constantinople in 437 when Licinia was 15. (Figure 13) She grew to become a fine-looking woman. (Figure 14)

Theodosius sent an army to defeat Johannes, who was captured and executed in 425. Valentinian was only six years old, so Placidia was appointed his guardian and regent. In October 425 they returned in triumph to Ravenna where Valentinian III was crowned emperor. The occasion was commemorated by a gold solidus that shows Valentinian on the obverse and Theodosius and Valentinian standing on the reverse. (Figure 15) In 1851 a hoard of coins was found at Velp in the Netherlands and one was a gold coin equal to 1.5 solidi that has Placidia on the obverse and little Valentinian enthroned on the reverse. It is set in an elaborate mount. (Figures 16 and 17) Placidia ruled as regent for the next 12 years until Valentinian was 18 when he was considered old enough to rule. From this time on, however, he came very much under the control of powerful generals, and Placidia’s influence was greatly reduced.

Through all her adventures she had a strong Christian faith, which no doubt supported her during the hard times, and in her later years she built churches and led a life of Christian devotion. In Ravenna the so-called mausoleum of Placidia (Figure 18) might have been built by her. It is thought that the three sarcophagi in the building originally held her embalmed body as well as the bodies of Constantius III and Valentinian III. (Figure 19) She died in Rome in 450.

Even in the last years of her life exciting times were not over for Placidia because her daughter Honoria was to do something that actually changed the course of history. Having been forced into an unhappy marriage herself it is surprising that in 449 Placidia arranged for Honoria to marry a man whom she did not love, a respectable member of the Senate. What happened was that Honoria, who had been given the title “Augusta” when Valentinian became emperor (Figure 20), was found to be having a sexual relationship with Eugenius, the manager of her estates. Valentinian was shocked and stripped her of her title and had Eugenius executed. It must have been terrible for Honoria. In a distraught state she sent a message to Attila the Hun, the ruler of a vast horde of wild barbarians, requesting that he rescue her from an unwanted marriage. With the message she included her engagement ring. She probably did not mean it as a marriage proposal but Attila interpreted it as such. He thought all his Christmases had come at once, and he demanded that she be given to him together with half of the western empire. Valentinian was outraged and it was only the pleading of Placidia that saved Honoria from execution. When his request was denied Attila intended to claim his bride but his advance was checked at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plain in 451. The menace of Attila, who was known as Flagellum Dei (the Whip of God), was only removed by his death in 453.

The stress caused by Honoria might have hastened Placidia’s death, although a life span of 60 years was longer than the average. Her death at that time was probably a blessing for her because in March 455 her son Valentinian was...
murdered. The assassination was arranged by Petronius Maximus, an ambitious senator. (Figure 21) He forced Valentinian’s widow, Licinia, to marry him. In May, however, Petronius was killed by a mob in the street when he was fleeing from Rome because Gaiseric, the king of the Vandals, had sailed from Carthage with a large fleet to attack the city. In June of that year Gaiseric captured and plundered Rome, and Licinia was carried off to Carthage. Placidia lived at a tumultuous time in history and it is amazing that most of the characters involved in the events appear on coins.

Coins of Galla Placidia are rare and high-grade examples are sold for thousands of dollars, but many numismatists who are not financial investors are happy to have worn examples because it gives them “character”. The people who handled them were alive when Placidia was alive and might have seen Alaric the Goth, Ataulf and all the fascinating people from that exciting time. A worn example is shown in Figure 22. If only it could speak.

Figure 18 - The so-called Mausoleum of Galla Placidia at Ravenna. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 19 – Inside the mausoleum at Ravenna. One of the stone sarcophagi can be seen. A golden light filters into the building through alabaster window panes. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 20 – Gold solidus of Honoria, daughter of Galla Placidia, minted at Ravenna in 425. She has the title “Augusta”. Sear, Vol. 5, 21371. (Heritage Auctions, Auction 3032, Lot 23744)

Figure 21 – Gold solidus of Petronius Maximus (455) minted at Rome. He stands with his foot on a human-headed serpent. Sear, Vol. 5, 21571. (Triton XIX, Lot 1135)

Figure 22 – Bronze coin of Galla Placidia. It is only 9 mms in diameter and weighs 0.9 gram. Sear, Vol. 5, 21359. (Author’s Collection)

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