

Paula P. Age 17
School 6 b)

A thick bronze coin lies glinting in the middle of a dry packed road swirling with dust. There is a rumble, too low to be a summer storm, almost too low to be heard at all, and a pack of horses arrive. Their muscled flanks foam with sweat; some are ridden at a slow trot or gallop, others are so worn they must be lead by their owners, far behind the herd so that they are not suffocated by the choking dust. All of these horses are exhausted; they are not the thin skinned Bedouin mares so favored by the Arabians, but short stocky gothic animals from the mountainous east, and the oppressive August heat is slowly driving them insane. Had the day been temperate, or if the horsemen had passed through in the cool summer morning, the coin might never have been seen. Had these riders been preoccupied with thoughts of battle, and searching the yellowed fields around them for Roman troops, history might have been irrevocably changed. But that day the Gothic tribes thought they were safe, Valens army was much too small to dare attack them, and besides, it was *hora sexta*, high noon, and the sun blazing above was so overpowering that the men forced their eyes to the ground and therefore the coin was found.

"Hey! Look father, a coin." young Alaric cried out, then immediately cringed as the surrounding men sent him looks so scathing they could quell vipers in their dens. Alaric's father, a stocky, broad shouldered man rather similar in appearance to the grizzled war pony beside him, sheathed his half drawn sword and gently scolded the boy.

"My son, we are at war with the Romans now. Their army has abused our solders; their consuls have exploited our people! Even their Emperor invited us in and then spurned our aid against the Huns! So now we will bring war on them and build a haven for our people! But we cannot do that if the Romans learn where our cavalry is, and they'll certainly find out if a certain little colt cannot keep his mouth shut!"

Looking down to hide his blush, Alaric pretended to study the coin, a plain old *aes*. It was a Valens, the same emperor Alaric's father had spoken of so disparagingly before, and like all Goths he felt a curl of disgust at the hated face. Flipping the coin, he saw it was a *Gloria Romanum*, the glory of Rome, with a giant Roman warrior dragging a captive by the hair. What a joke, thought Alaric. Rome hasn't been glorious in ages, if they were, Valens would never have let the tribe cross the Danube! If any valiant warriors might soon be dragging a captive, it would be the Visigoths, not the fat, greedy centurions. Preoccupied by the coin, Alaric tripped over a rock, sending it skittering into the parched fields and a flock of bird screaming into the sky. This time his father wasn't the only one who drew his sword. Alaric's father, Athanaric, eyed his scowling comrades, and kneeling to face his son, spoke gently:

"My son, vigilance is the most important trait for a boy of our tribe. You must learn to pay attention to your surroundings. I cannot allow you to endanger our tribe. Take Ox-head and return to the camp. Perhaps one day you will be ready to ride with the men, but that day is not today."

Biting back hot tears of shame, Alaric roughly hauled on Ox-head's reins to turn back home, and attempted the running mount that his father and the other men could do so well. Ox-head, annoyed by his young master's attitude, reared up, tore his reins lose, and began a slow trot down the path as Alaric's poorly timed leap landed him on the dusty road. Cursing vividly and choking on the dirt of the road, Alaric took off after his

wayward pony, now a cloud of dust, down the track, the laughter of the men ringing in his years.

Several miles and unfamiliar roads later, a rather dusty and worn Alaric found a terribly cool and calm Ox-head waiting for him at a well paved trailhead by a decrepit Roman fountain, now dried and cracked. There might have been moisture in it once, as evidenced by Ox-head's glistening muzzle, but nothing remained for Alaric but spots of algae. Stopping at the spot where his road met the small plaza, Alaric doubled over, panting.

"Come on you dumb cow..." Alaric gasped, snatching his hanging reins (albeit more gently than before) and dragging him towards the shady woods at the back of the fountain. If there was one thing Romans were good at, it was carrying water, and maybe there was some still left in the pipes at the back of the fountain. Even if there wasn't, the thick shade looked lush and inviting to Alaric's aching limbs, and he dreaded his reception back at camp with the women after such an ignoble dismissal.

"They're gonna laugh at me again" Alaric moaned, "I wish there was something I could do to prove I'm not a baby anymore." The last word had barely escaped his mouth when Alaric's foot caught on a branch and sent him sliding down the increasingly steep path. When he finally stopped, the boy found himself dangling over the edge of a cliff, saved from certain death by the reins still tangled in his hand. Ox-head, who was the typical steppe horse, a solid, dun colored animal, with a thick ugly head and a bad temper, could easily have panicked, or slipped out of his simple bridle and ran off, but like all Gothic ponies he was well trained and loyal. Sure enough, over his head, Alaric heard Ox-head snort in annoyance, but slowly the wise beast began to back up, scraping and banging Alaric against the mountain side in the process.

When he was finally safe on the edge, Alaric gave Ox-head a tight hug, dodged the cantankerous pony's bite, and turned to look at the drop that nearly killed him. To his amazement, he could see the *laager*, the Visigoth camp, barricaded in a ring by their horse carts.... and it was under attack!!! From his vantage point on the cliff Alaric couldn't make out the standards on the troops, but he knew Roman marching formation when he saw. Gasping in shock, Alaric turned and began to blindly rush up the slippery hill, scraping his already bruised knees and hands in the process. With his usual aplomb, Ox-head waited until the panicking boy has ceased his climb for a moment, sunk his strong teeth into the boy's shirt (and some of his skin), lifted his short strong neck, and made his way up the slope the same way he had followed his master down, slowly and precisely. This unusual and very uncomfortable position shocked Alaric lucid, and he realized with despair what he had to do.

"Oh Ox-head..." the boy moaned, "I never really paid attention to the path to the grazing land! I always just followed the men!" The horse, having his mouth full, and lacking certain musculature, wisely said nothing. At the top of the incline, Alaric found himself facing five unfamiliar roads, and sighed, "Even if I could trace our footprints back, the road we took was paved over a mile back, so I don't even know where to start!"

Just as all hope seemed lost for alerting the men, a cloud shifted, and there, glinting in the torturous sun, was a small bronze coin. Alaric's coin. It must have slipped from his pocket when he bent over! The right road must be just beyond it. Urging Ox-head into a jog, Alaric closed his eyes, vaulted, and landed squarely on Ox-head! He was so shocked at his success that he nearly forgot to bend down, scoop up his coin, and tuck

it securely into a pocket. As he galloped down the road, Alaric knew he would reach his father in time, and together they would rout the murderous Romans and secure a homeland for all Gothic tribes! Perhaps they could capture and defeat that self centered fool, Valens! *Gloria Romanum* indeed! As if any glorious nation would attack a camp full of women and children! And they call us barbarians! Shaking his head in wonder, Alaric made a mental note that after this upcoming battle (his heart soared at the thought of battle!) he should borrow an arrow point and fix the coin's legend to something more suitable, *Gloria Barbarus*, perhaps. And with that happy thought, Alaric, with his newfound alertness, galloped off towards the grazing land. Saving the tribe would certainly grant Alaric manhood; so long as he kept his lucky coin, Alaric knew that he (and Ox-head) would have a happy future.

Works Cited

- "Battle of Adrianople." Roman Empire. 15 Feb. 2006
<<http://www.roman-empire.net/army/adrianople.html>>.
- Gill, N S. "Valens and the Battle of Adrianople." About.com. 16 Feb. 2006
<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/valens/a/Adrianople_2.htm>.
- "Roman Imperial Coins of Valens." Wild Winds. 16 Feb. 2006
<<http://wildwinds.com/coins/ric/valens/i.html>>.
- Ross, Kelley L. "Germania 395-774." Friesian School. 2003. 14 Feb. 2006
<<http://www.friesian.com/germania.htm>>.
- "Valens." Wikipedia. 15 Feb. 2006. 16 Feb. 2006 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valens>>.