

Unorthodoxly Orthodox: Aspar and Imperial Politics in the Fifth Century CE

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Abstract

Roman Imperial politics experienced a drastic change under Constantine, in which Christianity became the state religion. Other changes came, including the emperor's direct involvement in church affairs. This set a precedent for the empire's future in which Christianity and imperial politics would be intertwined. By the fifth century CE, Christianity was experiencing internal strife resulting from the various groups and individuals within Christianity fighting as the orthodox faith was still being established. This resulted in a shifting of views as to who was seen as heretical and how much the emperor could tolerate them. Despite this, some of these 'heretical' individuals are seen holding quite elevated positions within the imperial court. This is suggestive of imperial politics finding benefit in using these religious outsiders in orthodox conflicts. Ultimately, this thesis will attempt to determine whether there was a scope for collaboration with outsiders in Roman imperial politics that allowed them to act as safe interveners in disputes.

This thesis focuses on Flavius Ardaburius Aspar, a Homoean general who gained exceptional influence in the fifth century and held power until his murder in 471 CE at the order of emperor Leo. He was *magister militum* from 431 to 471 and consul in 434. His prominence was aided by his father's military success and his familial connection to other powerful generals such as Plinta. His longevity in court can also be attributed to the various public and ecclesiastical services he provided to the state. While Aspar eventually fell out of favour with the imperial court, most notably with Leo, his prominence is exemplified by the supposed offer of the throne by the Senate made around the time of Marcian's death and the accession of Leo. Moreover, he is often referred to as a 'kingmaker' as he plays a large role in installing both Marcian and Leo to the throne. His role in their respective ascensions allowed the general to keep a close proximity to the emperor, which allowed him to influence imperial politics.

While Aspar was able to achieve great heights in his political career, his prominence is often downplayed in both primary and secondary sources because of his unorthodox religious affiliation. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that his Homoeanism had little effect on his political career, and what we see in the primary sources is often steeped in later biases of Homoeanism.

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Writing this thesis has changed me greatly. It has forced me to open my mind to new perspectives and has challenged me greatly in many ways. I feel I have become both a better academic and person through my studies of Aspar and the fifth century. Although, as we know, a project such as this is not taken on alone. It is only made possible by many who stand in the shadows, and they deserve my greatest thanks.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CIL- Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum.

CTh - *Codex Theodosianus*, ed. T. Mommsen, third edition. Berlin, 1962. trans. C. Pharr. Princeton, 1952.

CJ - *Codex Justinianus*, ed. P. Kreuger. *The Codex of Justinian. A New Annotated Translation, with Parallel Latin and Greek Text. Based on a Translation by Justice Fred H. Blume.* 3 vols. Cambridge, 2016.

CFHB- Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae

FCH - R. C. Blockley in *The Fragmentary Classicizing Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, vol. 2: 463-473. Liverpool, 1983

HE - *Historia Ecclesiastica*

JLA - *Journal of Late Antiquity*

MGH.AA- *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi*

PLRE - *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 1 & 2. ed. J. R. Martindale. Cambridge, 1971-1980.

SPCK - *Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge*

TTH – *Translated Texts for Historians*

V. Dan. Styl. - *Vita Daniel Stylites*, ed. H. Delehaye. 1913. *Analecta Bollandiana* 32: 121-229; trans. E. Dawes and N. H. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints*, Oxford, 1948: 7–84.

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Chronology

CE

325	Council of Nicaea
337-361	Reign of Constantius II
360	Council of Constantinople
364-378	Reign of Valens
376	Gothic migration over the Danube
378	Battle of Adrianople
379-395	Reign of Theodosius I
380	Homoeans residing in Constantinople expelled by Theodosius I
382	A treaty was brokered to settle the Goths in Roman territory
395-408	Reign of Arcadius
c. 400	Birth of Aspar
408- 450	Reign of Theodosius II
424-425	The campaign was launched against the usurper John
431	Aspar and the eastern forces dispatched against the Vandals in North Africa
434	Aspar awarded the western consulate
441-442	Aspar brokers a peace with the Huns
449	Second Council of Ephesus
451-457	Reign of Marcian
451	Council of Chalcedon
457- 474	Reign of Leo I
457	Conflict with Timothy Aelurus in Alexandria
459	Aspar builds in cistern in Constantinople
465	Zeno brings letters incriminating Ardaburius of treason to Leo
465	A great fire ravages Constantinople
467	Conflict breaks out between the Goths and Sciri over food shortages
470	Patricius declared caesar and was forced to convert
471	The assassination of Aspar and his sons
525-565	Reign of Justinian

Introduction

Few political figures of the fifth century match the longevity of Flavius Ardaburius Aspar. His career spanned fifty years, longer than any Roman emperor in the history of the Empire. He is credited with putting not just one but two men on the imperial throne and was supposedly offered the crown as well, but declined. He held the notable positions of *magister militum* from 431 to 471, consul in 434, and was patricius by 451.¹ These titles come as a greater accomplishment when we consider his less than impressive military record. Aspar is also credited with several public services, including the building of a great cistern in Constantinople and aiding in vanquishing the great fire of 464 that ravaged the city. Yet, when Aspar's life is assessed in scholarship, many academics focus on his murder by the emperor Leo (457- 474) in 471 and the reasons for his end, which often include his ethnicity as an Alan and his unorthodox religious affiliation as a Homoean. While these attributes certainly did affect the general's life and his ability to garner support, many scholars have overlooked Aspar's political successes and focused primarily on his religion, ethnicity and dramatic downfall. Upon assessing previous scholars' arguments, more blame for Aspar's downfall appears to be attributed to his faith, which scholars have often described as a major barrier to his political advancement, even an "insurmountable obstacle" by some.² When we examine these arguments in detail, it becomes clear that many scholars define political success as becoming emperor while not considering whether this was even Aspar's goal. Moreover, many tend to rely on primary literature that is often steeped in anti-Homoean propaganda, which often labels it as a corrupt heresy.

Specifically, many of the sources used by modern scholars to support this argument are often written much later than Aspar's time and reflect the religious attitudes of the sixth century and later, when Homoeanism was wiped out from the Empire after Justinian (525-565) defeated the Vandals and Ostrogoths. This context is important because these campaigns were carried out

¹ *PLRE II* Aspar. It is also speculated in the *PLRE* that his post as *magister militum* may have actually started in 424, not 431.

² See C. Zaccagnino, et al., 'The Missorium of Ardaburius Aspar: New Considerations on Its Archaeological and Historical Contents.' *Archeologia Classica* 63 (2012) 439; R. Snee, 'Gregory Nazianzen's Anastasia Church: Arianism, the Goths, and Hagiography.' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998) 185. B. Croke. 'Dynasty and Ethnicity: Emperor Leo I and the Eclipse of Aspar', in *Roman Emperors in Context* (London, 2021) 95, describes it as "a serious block to their advancement."

with religious propaganda against Homoeanism, which heavily vilified it. These sources include Procopius, the *Life of Marcellus*, and Zonaras. Therefore, it is essential to consider this historical context when analyzing these sources. While these sources will be discussed, as they are often cited in secondary literature, this thesis pulls many of its arguments from contemporary sources such as Priscus and the *Life of Daniel the Stylite*. John Malalas, although not a contemporary, is also an important source, as he often uses Priscus in his works. These sources, such as Priscus, were eyewitnesses to the political events in Constantinople during the fifth century and therefore provide a more accurate and less biased account.

The purpose of this thesis is to reexamine the political career of Aspar to assess if we can define it as successful and to examine if his Homoeanism played any role in his downfall. It will determine if much of the strife that Aspar faced in politics was the result of the normal, intense competition for power among individuals or the result of his religious beliefs. Furthermore, it will address other arguments that scholars have recently begun to refute, like the idea that Leo brought in the Isaurians solely to eliminate Aspar and the Goths from Constantinople.³ These black-and-white answers often misconstrue or completely misrepresent the actual political events that occurred during the fifth century. The imperial political machine was complex and should, therefore, be represented as such.

Chapter one will provide the necessary social and religious context of the fifth century, most notably within Constantinople and the eastern Empire. It will discuss the beliefs of Homoeanism and how it was maintained in the Empire despite being labelled a heresy under Theodosius I (379-395) and was often not seen as a major threat, especially by the time Aspar assumed power. It will open with a discussion of the establishment of Homoeanism in the Empire as well as the influx of Homoean Goths at the end of the fourth century. It will then focus on its presence in Constantinople and how fifth-century authors discussed it in their works. It will conclude with an overview of Goths in the Roman army of the fourth and fifth centuries, as well as the rise of powerful, and often Gothic, military leaders who were, for the most part, not of the Nicene faith and used the military as a means to gain political prominence.

³ H. Elton, 'Illus and the Imperial Aristocracy Under Zeno', *Byzantion* 70 (2000) 393-407.

The second chapter will examine Aspar's life in detail to provide a more comprehensive synthesis of his political career in order to determine if his Homoeanism truly was an obstacle to his success. It also seeks to argue that Aspar likely never strove for the throne himself by assessing his actions throughout his life. It will begin with the zenith of Aspar's career, where he played a significant role in the elevation of both Marcian (451-457) and Leo. It will then provide an overview of Aspar's military successes and failures to demonstrate the political success he obtained despite having a mediocre military record. It will conclude by discussing the ecclesiastical benefactions made by Aspar and his sons, as well as some of the major public services he provided. The breakdown of Aspar's political and military career will seek to determine if his position, as an outsider, allowed him to act in disputes as a trusted broker. Moreover, it assesses if Aspar had to work harder to gain support because of his religion and how this impacted his political success.

The final chapter will address Aspar's political downfall and subsequent murder. As a result of his dramatic death, later primary sources and scholars tend to use this event as their evidence for Aspar's religion being the reason for his 'lack' of political success. It will be shown that many of the sources cited in support of the idea that Aspar was murdered as a result of his religion were based on the writings of later writers, who were heavily influenced by the anti-Homoean policies of their time. Therefore, this thesis will examine the many sources, both contemporary and later, that report Aspar's. It will then look at the relationship between Aspar and Leo, as sources report several points of contention between the two. These disputes are often related to personal strife, such as Leo's desire to be free of the debt he owed to Aspar for putting him on the throne. It will also examine two major events relating to the sons of Aspar that had a significant impact on his political career and future dynasty. These include the treason of Ardaburius and the backlash against Patricius' elevation to caesar. While the latter event might suggest that religion was indeed a factor in Aspar's political decline, the late sixth century text, *Life of Marcellus*, the only source to report this episode, displays a strong anti-Homoean narrative when compared to the *Life of Daniel*, a source contemporary to Aspar. This chapter will conclude with the rise of Zeno and the Isaurians in the court of Leo, who became a strong political rival to Aspar.

While Aspar's military record demonstrates that he was not the greatest Roman general to have commanded the army, his life tells us many important things about fifth-century politics and religion when examined properly. It demonstrates that there was a scope for collaboration with those considered 'outsiders' and the Roman imperial court. These individuals could act as safe mediators in disputes in which they had little stake in. Furthermore, his life, like that of many others, demonstrates the pragmatism of Roman emperors in employing capable and powerful generals to lead the army regardless of their ethnicity or religion. Most importantly, it aids in breaking down previous assumptions that Late Antiquity was a time that saw severe religious persecution towards any outsiders. This is a misguided argument that has already begun to be refuted by many current scholars. This thesis seeks to add to that debate by demonstrating the tolerance that Aspar was granted and the prominence he achieved despite being considered a 'heretic'.

The World of Aspar

Introduction

Before we can begin to answer to what degree Aspar's religious affiliation affected his political career, it is necessary to look at the world in which he operated. Needless to say, while religion certainly had an important place within the fifth-century society of Constantinople, it was not the only factor to have an impact on the political life of Aspar. It was still, however, on the minds of the imperial officials and ecclesiastical writers who often vilified Homoeanism in their Church histories. One such example comes from Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria (328-73) and one of the strongest opponents of Homoeanism, who wrote,

But this one heresy, called the Arian, which is the last and which has now emerged as the forerunner of the Antichrist, being deceitful and cunning and seeing that the other heresies which are its eldest siblings have been openly denounced, hypocritically shrouds itself in the language of the Scriptures, as did its father the devil.⁴

The strong and hostile stance taken by Athanasius reflects the attitudes of many churchmen who adhered to the Nicene doctrine and gives the impression that once Homoeanism was outlawed as a heresy during the Council of Nicaea, in 325, its followers faced severe persecution as attempts were made to eliminate it from the Empire. Such impressions belie the complex and shifting religious landscape that existed in the world of Aspar, which saw the continued presence of Homoeanism, including in Constantinople. Moreover, as in the case of Aspar, many members of the aristocracy, especially those of high military rank, also subscribed to Homoeanism. This then raises the question as to what this presence looked like and how individuals of the Homoean faith were able to gain such an elevated status.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a synthesis of the socio-political environment in which Aspar operated, with a focus on Homoeanism and the army. It will open with an overview

⁴Athanasius *De Synodis*, 1.1, trans. K. Anatolios.

of the establishment of Homoeanism in the Empire, as well as the influx of Homoeanism seen at the end of the fourth century. It will then focus on its presence in Constantinople and how fifth-century authors discussed it in their works. Finally, it will show that the Roman army of the fourth and fifth centuries included a large number of Goths, which no doubt was a factor in the toleration of Homoeanism by the emperor. This period also saw the rise of powerful, and often Gothic, military leaders who were, for the most part, not of the Nicene faith and used the military as a means to gain political prominence. Overall, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that Homoeanism maintained a presence in the empire during the fifth century and that the army acted as a means for a Homoean to gain an elevated status at court.

Before covering the development of Homoeanism in the Empire, and particularly Constantinople, one must discuss the term itself. Terms from antiquity that denote Christian groups like Arians, Donatists, or Catholics need to be used with caution, as they reflect certain prejudices and only capture the claims of one side of an intra-Christian conflict.⁵ Many of these terms are misleading as they suggest a deep-seated relationship with the named founders of these groups. In reality, those labelled as Arian, especially in the fifth century, would have neither viewed their Christianity as deeply connected to Arius nor identified themselves by this name. On the individual level, they considered themselves orthodox Christians and viewed themselves as such. Furthermore, their beliefs, even today, are often boiled down to two main points: that Arius denied Christ's divinity and that Homoeanism was subordinationist, meaning that it made the Son, Christ, inferior to the Father, God.⁶ Again, this misconstrues and oversimplifies the complexities of these views and instead plays more into the prejudices that were associated with Homoeanism in Late Antiquity. Moreover, the term Arian was a slur coined by Greek disputants in the Christological conflicts of the 330s and 340s and is reflected as such in the works of fifth-century texts such as the Church histories of Socrates and Sozomen.⁷ Other terms were also given to Homoeans that appear in the writings of ancient authors, which included Exakionite and Eunomian.⁸ The term

⁵ R. Whelan, *Being Christian in Vandal Africa* (Oakland, 2017), 10-13.

⁶ M. Dunn, *Arianism* (Leeds, 2021), 2. For details on Arius and his views, see R. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 2002).

⁷ Whelan, *Being Christian*, 11-4.

⁸ Eunomian comes from the brand of Homoeanism set down by Eunomius, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381 AD* (Grand Rapids, 2005), 557-9; Exakionite refers to their supposed meeting place near the Exakionite gate just outside of Constantinople, see G. Greatrex, 'Justin I and the Arians', in M.F. Wiles, E.J. Yarnold (eds), *Studia Patristica XXXIV* (Leuven, 2001) 72-81. Also see D. Rankin,

Homoean, on the other hand, refers to the doctrine established at the council of Constantinople in 381, which declared that the Son is like the Father, a view better described by those who followed this line of interpretation.⁹ Therefore, in this study, the term Homoean will be applied for the most part, and Arian will be used when referring to specific ancient texts that use this terminology.

As mentioned, one of the major misconceptions of Homoeanism and something that is often used to vilify the belief is that it denies Christ's divinity. This is false as Homoeanism does recognize Christ as divine and a god in his own right. The most prominent difference between it and the Nicene Creed is that it holds that the Son and the Father are of a similar, rather than the same, substance. For Homoeanism, since the Son is begotten of the Father, there is a change in the godhead. If the Son comes from the Father, then he stands below him. He is subordinate to the Father but still divine in his own right. To say that the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit are of the same substance compromises God's unity. Homoeanism believes in the Trinity, but their understanding of the relationship differs from how the Nicene Creed defines it. The main reason for this difference was to preserve the uniqueness, timelessness and the unbegotten nature of god. Those identified as Anomoean, or Eunomians/ Neo-Arians, represented an extreme form of Homoeanism that held that God and Christ could not be alike. This is because they believe that *agennēsia* ("self-existence") is a part of the essence of God; Christ could not be like God because he lacked this necessary quality.

Development and Spread of Homoeanism

Homoeanism began to spread within the Empire just before Constantine (306-337) became sole emperor in 324, during which time theological debates around the relationship between Christ the Son and God the Father were taking place, most notably in Egypt. Around 315, a conflict broke out between Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, and his bishop, Alexander, who was supported by his successor Athanasius. The main focus of the debate was Arius' emphasis on the sole divinity of God and his inference that the Son was subordinate to the Father as opposed to Alexander, who

'Arianism', in P. Esler (ed.) *The Early Christian World*. 2nd ed., (London, 2017) 905–920, for the differences within Arianism such as those who identified as 'anomoians' who saw Christ as very different from God the Father.

⁹ Athanasius *De Synodis*, 30. 2-10.

argued for a co-eternal state shared by the Father and the Son.¹⁰ This conflict, also known as the ‘Arian Controversy’, resulted in Arius and some of his followers within the Alexandrian clergy being deposed, excommunicated, and exiled from the city.¹¹ It should be noted that Arius did have support in Alexandria before this conflict, but his actions were seen by many as a sign of his disobedience to the church. Many eastern bishops criticized the harsh actions of Alexander, which resulted in Arius finding support among several prominent bishops of the East, including Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Paulinus of Tyre, and others who considered Arius’ beliefs to be defensible even if they would not subscribe to them.¹² Nevertheless, this conflict began to affect the whole eastern church right around the time when Constantine became the sole emperor. Constantine likely heard about this conflict dividing the church in the East not long after gaining power, and sought to resolve it. His theological advisor, Hosius of Corduba, a representative of the western church, delivered an imperial letter to Alexandria, which made clear how intensively the emperor had read up on the controversy.¹³ With the emperor now taking an interest in this conflict, it was only a matter of time before this theological debate saw the intervention of the imperial administration.

In 325, both Arius and his teachings were condemned at the Council of Nicaea, and the Nicene doctrine was established and labelled as orthodox.¹⁴ This does not mean that everyone in the Empire was required to automatically follow this doctrine, and there is evidence that Homoeans maintained a presence in the Empire, including in Constantinople, where Aspar later resided. In fact, in the decades after the Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantius II (337-361), who was reported to be a Homoean himself, replaced the Nicene creed with a Homoean doctrine in 360, at the already mentioned Council of Constantinople.¹⁵ Moreover, Emperor Valens (364-378) was said to subscribe to or at least be sympathetic to the Homoean faith, which demonstrates its influence

¹⁰ For a better overview of the theological debate between Arius and Alexander see H. C. Brennecke, ‘Introduction’, in G. M. Berndt, R. Steinacher (eds), *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (London, 2016), 9-13.

¹¹ Theodoret *HE* 1.5.

¹² Brennecke ‘Introduction’ 10.

¹³ Brennecke ‘Introduction’ 11.

¹⁴ For more information on the events and outcome of the Council of Nicaea see J.N. Abogado, ‘The Anti-Arian Theology of the Council of Nicaea of 325’, *Angelicum* 94 (2017) 255-286; Y. R. Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge, 2021).

¹⁵ Socrates *HE* 4.26; Malalas 13. 325, trans. M. Jefferys, ‘After the reign of Constantine the Great, his younger son, Constantius, ruled for 30 years. He was magnanimous, an Exakionite, which means Arian’; See N. Baker-Brian, S. Tougher., *The Sons of Constantine, AD 337-361: In the Shadows of Constantine and Julian* (New York, 2020).

and persistence even after it had been condemned.¹⁶ Valens appeared to have also built churches for the Homoeans, as described by John Malalas, who says:

Crowned, he was king for 13 years. He was an Exakionite [Arian] by faith, a warrior, both magnanimous and fond of building. As soon as he was king, he gave to the Arians the Great Church in Constantinople, and in the other cities he did the same, and very much harmed the Christians during his reign.¹⁷

This passage shows that ‘orthodoxy’ or the brand of Christianity that was considered acceptable in the Empire shifted based on the emperor of the time. As just noted, both Constantius and Valens supported Homoeanism and made efforts to uphold the Homoean doctrine implemented by Constantius II. It was not until 380 that Homoeanism was officially outlawed as a heresy under the *Cunctos Populos* edict, which was further reinforced in 381 by Theodosius I.¹⁸ However, as will be demonstrated below, other factors such as the Gothic migration of 376, the Battle of Adrianople and the resulting death of Valens in 378 likely spurred this shift in the acceptance of Homoeanism.

Prior to the Battle of Adrianople, in 376, persecutions of Gothic Homoeans occurred within the Gothic territory first, in 347/8 against Wulfila and his followers, then again in the early 370s by the Tervingi.¹⁹ These persecutions by various tribal leaders, coupled with the Hunnic incursion from the steppes, resulted in a group of mostly Christian Goths under Fritigern crossing the Danube and seeking aid from Valens. These people were considered Homoean Christians owing to their connection to Wulfila, a reader and perhaps the interpreter for a Gothic embassy, who, presumably during the reign of Constantius II, was ordained as ‘Bishop of the Christians in the Gothic Lands’ by Eusebius of Nicomedia.²⁰ Wulfila, being fluent in three languages and using the framework of the imperial Church, organized a large autonomous group of Gothic Christians, which had its own

¹⁶ Valens’ Arianism was likely exaggerated; For scepticism on his doctrinal allegiance, see R.M. Errington, ‘Christian Accounts of the Religious Legislation of Theodosius I’, *Klio* 79 (1997) 399-400; S. Mitchell and G. Greatrex, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, 3rd ed., (Oxford, 2023) 296.

¹⁷ Malalas 13. 342, trans. M. Jeffreys.

¹⁸ *C.Th.* 16.1.2; *C.Th.* 16.1. 6.

¹⁹ P. Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1994) 97. See P. Heather and J. Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (Liverpool, 1991) 102-110, where Persecutions are mentioned in the *Passion of St. Saba*.

²⁰ H. C. Brennecke, ‘Deconstruction of the So-called Germanic Arianism’, in G. M. Berndt, R. Steinacher (eds), *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (London, 2016), 117-30.

Gothic liturgy and followed the customs of the eastern Church, in which he used a partially translated Bible in the Gothic language.²¹ Many of the Goths who crossed over the Danube had adopted the Homoean theology from Wulfila and his followers, which was also prevalent in the eastern empire of Valens. This is also reported by the church writer Socrates, who states:

So many of the Goths are even to the present time infected with the errors of Arianism, they having on the occasion preferred to become adherents of that heresy on the emperor's account. Ulfilas [Wulfila], their bishop at that time, after inventing the Gothic letters, translated the Sacred Scriptures into their own language, and undertook to instruct these barbarians in the Divine oracles.²²

Thus, Socrates confirms that in 382 when Theodosius brokered peace terms with the Goths after the Roman defeat at Adrianople by settling them in the Balkans, many of them were already adherents of the Homoean doctrine, since it was considered orthodox during the reigns of Constantius and Valens and was transmitted to other non-Roman groups.²³ Once these Goths were settled, they were expected to serve in the Roman army when called upon, and as a result, many of the Goths serving in the Roman military or as *foederati* were Homoean.

Homoeanism in Fifth-Century Constantinople

Even after the decisive action of Theodosius in 380 and 381, the Homoean presence continued in Constantinople both during the time of Aspar and after. Its presence is noted in Constantinople when Theodosius I expelled the Homoeans residing in the city on 26 November 380, when their leader, Bishop Demophilus, refused to follow the Nicene creed. They then established themselves outside one of the gates of the Constantinian walls, often speculated to be the Exakionion gate.²⁴ The *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* reports that Theodosius allowed them to take over the church

²¹ Brennecke, 'Deconstruction', 122-30.

²² Socrates *HE* 4.33, trans. A.C. Zenos.

²³ Brennecke, 'Deconstruction', 124-5.

²⁴ G. Greatrex, 'Justin I' 72-81.

of St. Mocius, which they subsequently proceeded to rebuild.²⁵ Their presence is noted again in 400 when John Chrysostom was able to bar Gainas' attempt to persuade the emperor Arcadius (395-408) to build a Homoean church in the city.²⁶ The Homoeans of Constantinople later faced other adversaries in the city, including Nestorius. In the days after his election as patriarch in 428, he tried to take over a Homoean chapel, resulting in the Homoeans setting fire to it themselves in protest, which caused the fire to spread, and Nestorius was blamed for the incident.²⁷ It is important to note that many of the aristocracy, especially those affiliated with the military, opposed Nestorius' measures. With the military aristocracy against Nestorius and many Gothic soldiers within the city being Homoean, it became clear that any type of unprovoked or violent persecution would be dangerous.

These episodes demonstrate that Homoeanism was not immediately wiped from the Empire nor Constantinople after its outlawing in 380. Its followers were also actively persecuted by the emperor, and in cases like Theodosius, tolerance and compromises were occasionally offered to the Homoeans. This extended into the reigns of Arcadius and Theodosius II (408-50), who continued to deny the Homoeans a place of worship in the city but showed tolerance in allowing them to practice their religion between the Constantinian and Theodosian walls.²⁸ This tolerance suggests that the emperors during this period often took a more pragmatic stance in dealing with ecclesiastical conflicts, prioritizing public order above all else. However, a series of laws issued in 415 suggests the presence of house chapels and processions within the city during part of the reign of Theodosius II.²⁹ One point of interest from these laws is that it appears there was an attempt to bar Eumonians, those who practiced a more extreme form of Homoeanism, from the military, which is found in the *Theodosian Code*:

²⁵ *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, 167-8 in A. Cameron and J. Herrin. It should be noted that this is a complex source which is discussed more in P. Odorico, 'From the collection to the invention of text: the case of *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 107 (2014) 755-783.

²⁶ Sozomen *HE* 8.4.

²⁷ G. Greatrex, 'Theodore Lector and the Arians of Constantinople', in R. Kosiński and A. Szopa (eds.), *Studies in Theodore Anagnostes* (Turnhout, 2021), 207-31. Also reported in Socrates *HE*, 7.29; 'From that time, however, they branded Nestorius as an "incendiary", and it was not only the heretics who did this but those also of his own faith'.

²⁸ For information on the wall of Constantinople and the topography of the city, see S. Turnbull and P. Dennis, *The Walls of Constantinople AD 324-1453*. (Oxford, 2004).

²⁹ *C Th.* 16.5.58 places a series of restrictions on Eumonians, including prohibiting baptism and property inheritance.

Etiam illo addendo, ut nemo eunomianus vel militet vel provinciam sub administratione cuiuslibet officii suscipiat gubernandam.

Also to add to that, that no Eunomian should either serve in the army or undertake to govern a province under the administration of any office³⁰

The fact that Aspar, a known Homoean at this time, was able to rise to a high military rank in the years that followed these laws suggests that there was recognition of the extremism of the Eunomian doctrine. This separation between Eunomianism and Homoeanism suggests that this law did not apply to the many Gothic soldiers during this time who were Homoeans, as will be discussed below, suggesting that again, we are seeing the pragmatism of the emperor, who placed greater value in the skills of his soldiers and commanders over whatever religious affiliation they may have held. This more pragmatic approach of the emperor was likely aided further by a new Christological debate that overshadowed the previous concerns over Homoeanism.

Chalcedon

During the mid-fifth century, from the 430s, there were conflicts concerning the nature of Christ himself, which eventually resulted in the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Called by Emperor Marcian (450-457), the council reversed the decisions made at the Second Council of Ephesus in 449, referred to by its opponents as the ‘Robber Council’, and established a new orthodox doctrine of the dual nature of Christ, holding that he was both fully divine and fully human.³¹ These debates on the nature of Christ became more important than concerns about Homoeanism, which may have resulted in it being more tolerated during the time of Aspar. An example that may indicate that Homoeanism was not too much of a concern to the Empire at this time is found in the *Theodosian Code*, which contains many laws on heretical groups and the measures against them. In an edict of 435, there were fewer restrictions placed on the Homoeans than on other groups deemed

³⁰ *C Th.* 16.5.58.7 ed. T. Mommsen; trans. C. Pharr.

³¹ For a more detailed account of the debates of the council see R. Price, M. Gaddis, *The Acts of the Council of Chalcedon* (Liverpool, 2005) 1-75, W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge, 1972) 41-4, H. Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2001) 578-591.

heretical. Greatrex has argued that this possibly reflects the emergence of this new and more fierce doctrinal debate, which now concerned itself with the nature of Christ himself as opposed to the nature of Christ within the Trinity.³² Indeed, this new debate gripped the Empire for most of the second half of the fifth century into the beginning of the sixth and beyond. In other words, Homoeanism was not seen as a serious threat to the orthodox faith at this time and therefore did not need to be actively restricted. Homoeanism did eventually meet its end, but that would come around 150 years after it was declared a heresy, in the reign of Justinian (527-65).

Anti-Homoean Propaganda from the Fifth Century Authors

While some of the examples above may suggest that Homoeanism was viewed with less hostility, its followers still faced anti-Homoean propaganda from fifth-century ecclesiastical writers. These writers often appealed to the negative views held by some members of the public who were also adherents to the Nicene doctrine. One example comes from the church writers Sozomen and Theodoret, who relate the story of the monk Isaac. In their respective accounts, both authors report that Isaac appealed to Valens before he left to fight at the Battle of Adrianople, asking him to allow the return of exiled Nicene bishops and gave him a prophecy that he was fated to die if he continued to support Homoeanism.³³ Theodoret specifically writes that Isaac told Valens:

He [God] has raised up the barbarians against you, because you have excited many to blasphemy against Him, and driven away from the churches those who celebrated His praises. Cease, then, from fighting against Him, and He will terminate the war. Restore the pastors to their flocks, and then you will obtain a bloodless victory. But if you despise my advice...you will never return but will perish with your troops.³⁴

The story of Isaac's prophecy is a post-factum story meant to attribute the failure of Valens and the Roman military to divine intervention provoked by the emperor's Homoean faith. Debate still surrounds the validity of the claims made by Jerome and Rufinus that Valens had recalled some of

³² Greatrex, 'Theodore', 210.

³³ Sozomen *HE* 6.40.1.

³⁴ Theodoret *HE* 4.34 trans E. Walford.

the exiled Nicene bishops.³⁵ However, the focus of this chapter will remain on the anti-Homoean rhetoric expressed by fifth-century writers. If we accept the more contemporary accounts of Jerome and Rufinus, then it may well be that fifth-century writers omitted Valens' recall of the bishops from their writings, which demonstrates the continued use of anti-Homoean propaganda. Nevertheless, these accounts do show that church historians like Socrates, writing in the 440s, remained hostile to Homoeanism even if emperors like Theodosius II appeared to be less concerned by its presence.

Indeed, we see fifth-century writers making several attempts to portray Homoeanism as more antagonistic towards the followers of the Nicene doctrine in Constantinople. After years of imperial support from Constantius II and Valens for Homoeanism, Valens' defeat at Adrianople provided ecclesiastical writers of the Nicene creed with an easy way to discredit the heresy. The ecclesiastical writers not only weaponized the Roman defeat and death of the supposedly Homoean emperor at Adrianople but also used the Gothic raids that followed to attack Homoeanism further.³⁶ They also took the opportunity to blame the Homoeans for conflicts within Constantinople. Socrates displays this type of rhetoric as he accounts for a conflict that occurred in Constantinople over the Homoeans performing nightly hymns, in which John Chrysostom organized members of the Nicene doctrine to perform their hymns in opposition. He writes:

the Arians who were very numerous, and fired with envy, resolved to revenge themselves by a desperate and riotous attack upon their rivals. For from the remembrance of their own recent domination, they were full of confidence in their ability to overcome, and of contempt for their adversaries. Without delay therefore, on one of these nights, they engaged in a conflict; and Briso, one of the eunuchs of the empress, who was at that time leading the chanters of these hymns, was wounded by a stone in the forehead, and also some of the people on both sides were killed.³⁷

The episode above contains several interesting points. First of all, Socrates acknowledges the presence of numerous Homoeans in the city. He also mentions the former domination of Homoeanism in the East and its recent decline in support. While this did likely cause some feelings

³⁵ R. Snee., 'Valens' Recall of the Nicene Exiles and Anti-Arian Propaganda', *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 26 (1985) 395-419, discusses Jerome *Chron.* A.D. 378 and Rufinus *HE*, 11.13 in more detail and argues that Valens may have already been recalling the exiled Nicene bishop before his death at Adrianople.

³⁶ Snee, 'Valens', 406-7.

³⁷ Socrates *HE* 6.8 trans A.C. Zenos.

of envy among the Homoeans, it also supports the argument that fifth-century writers took their decline as an opportunity to spread anti-Homoean propaganda. Furthermore, while the Homoeans in this episode are portrayed as the aggressors, we see the use of the anti-Homoean hymn singing incited by John Chrysostom as the spark for the violence in the streets.³⁸ Following this episode, Socrates gives an apologetic explanation of the origins of antiphonal singing, which demonstrates further attempts by church historians to attack Homoeanism and label it as a threat to society.

Of course, Socrates' account provides just one side of this episode to further portray anti-Homoean propaganda. The propaganda of the fifth-century church writers reflected the general attitudes of the public, especially of those residing in Constantinople.³⁹ Public opinion is particularly important because the people of Constantinople could put pressure on the emperor to alter or rescind certain imperial decisions. An example of this occurred when Patricius, the son of Aspar, was compelled by the public to convert to the orthodox faith, discussed further in Chapter Three. However, this may be, the examples presented above demonstrate that Homoeanism still existed in Constantinople well into the mid-fifth century, as we can see from the continued attacks by the ecclesiastical historians of the time. As we have seen in the previous section, their presence was in part a result of the influx of the Homoean Goths into the empire in 376, which affected the Roman army since these Goths were expected to fight when called upon by the emperor and were sometimes even in positions of high command.

The Goths in the Roman Army

The Goths had a significant place in the Roman army during the time of Aspar. The relationship between the Goths and the Roman military is too vast a topic to cover in this section, and so instead of narrating a complete history of this relationship, my focus will be on their specific role in the military during the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴⁰ The use of foreign troops in the Roman military

³⁸J. Hehn, 'Congregational Song as Theological Debate in Late Antiquity: A Case Study of Arius's Thalia and the Development of Trinitarian Orthodoxy', *The Hymn* 65 (2014) 15-20.

³⁹ Note the conversion of Patricius from Arian to the orthodox faith after a public outcry from him being named Caesar documented in *Vita Marcelli* 34 to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3; see M. McEvoy, 'Becoming Roman?: The Not-So-Curious Case of Aspar and the Ardaburii' *JLA* 9 (2016) 490-1.

⁴⁰ P. Heather, *Goths and Romans* (Oxford, 1994) 332-489, and 'Foedera and Foederati of the Fourth Century', in F.X. Thomas(ed.), *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms* (London, 2006) 292-308, for a good overview of

was not a new development since there are many references to their service in the third century, including Shapur's inscriptions at Naqsh-e Rostam.⁴¹ Their role did change as a part of the peace treaty of 382, in which they were required to serve in the military when called upon by the emperor. Themistius, the fourth-century statesman and orator, comments on the treaty with optimism, comparing the Goths to the Galatians, who were early Gauls settled in Anatolia, and alluding to some of the terms of the treaty including their military service, "for now their clashes with us are still recent, but in fact we shall soon receive them to share our offerings, our tables, our military ventures, and public duties."⁴² Themistius does not provide much information about the exact military requirements for the Goths, but we can supplement his speech with that of Pacatus, a fourth-century panegyrist speaking about Theodosius I, who describes in more detail the terms of the mobilization of Gothic troops:

You granted the privileged status of fellow soldiers to the barbarian peoples who promised to give you voluntary service, both to remove from the frontier a force of dubious loyalty and to add reinforcements to your army and they followed standards which they once opposed. They marched under Roman leaders and banners the onetime enemies of Rome, and they led with soldiers the cities of Pannonia which they had not long ago emptied by hostile plundering. The Goth, the Hun and the Alan responded to their names.⁴³

The reference to Pannonia and the Goths suggests that Pacatus is referring to the Gothic groups that crossed over in 376. The notable difference between the third and fourth centuries is that it appears that larger contingents were amassed after the settlement in 382, and that these larger groups were required to serve in the military when called upon. As discussed above, many of these settled Goths, if they were mostly from the 376 crossing, were already subscribed to Homoeanism. As *foederati* or allied contingents, they were not bound to the religious legislation of the emperor. For that reason, they continued to adhere to the faith to which they had already subscribed.⁴⁴ Even after the outlawing of Homoeanism in 381, Gothic contingents in Roman service could remain

the history of the relationship between the Goths and the Roman military. M. Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁴¹ For full English translation of the inscription see R.N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Colchester, 1984), 376, relevant section reads, "Gordian Caesar raised in all of the Roman Empire a force from the Goth and German realms" ŠKZ (Shapur I's Ka'ba-ye Zartosht) trans. R.N. Frye. See also M. Dodgeon & S. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226-363)*, London 1991, 2.1.5, p.35.

⁴² Themistius *Or* 16 211d.

⁴³ Pacatus 12.32.3-4, trans. C. Nixon.

⁴⁴ Brennecke, 'Deconstruction', 122.

Homoean. Moreover, we know that this is the background to the conflicts involving the basilicas in Milan between Bishop Ambrose and Valentinian II's mother, Justina.⁴⁵ Again, the tolerance of Homoeanism in the army suggests that the emperors of this time acted in a more pragmatic sense because they recognized the benefit of adding Gothic soldiers and wanted to maintain their loyalty.

Pacatus also brings up the point that these larger contingents were only being drafted for specific campaigns, which could explain why we see a contradiction between the picture of the Eastern army in the *Notitia Dignitatum* and descriptions of it on campaigns in ancient sources.⁴⁶ In the surviving literature on Theodosius' campaign against Eugenius in 394, there is mention that the eastern army was divided into two kinds of units, Romans and 'barbarians'.⁴⁷ In truth, the eastern army was not just divided into units that were only composed of Roman citizens and those units solely composed of barbarians. It is important to note that Roman units included a good proportion of soldiers of non-Roman origin.⁴⁸ The distinction appears to refer to units that were not part of the regular army. Since this distinction is made so consistently in the literary sources, it suggests that there was a formal division within the Roman military. Therefore, based on the descriptions of literary sources like Pacatus, the late Roman campaigning armies seem to have been made up of regular units with auxiliaries that consisted entirely or almost entirely of non-Roman soldiers, which did not count as regular units. The *Notitia* also reflects this division, as the section devoted to the Eastern part seems to date from ca. 394 and lists only Roman regiments.⁴⁹ Regardless of the exact division between regular army and auxiliary units, the Goths still played an important role in the military, as demonstrated below by their use in Theodosius' campaign against Eugenius, among other campaigns undertaken by the emperors of the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁴⁵ For more details on the conflict between Ambrose and Justina see T.D. Barnes, 'Ambrose and the Basilicas of Milan in 385 and 386: The Primary Documents and their Implications', *JAC* 4 (2000), 282-299. The central point of contention began in 385 when Justina, acting through her son Valentinian II, demanded that Ambrose hand over a basilica in Milan for the use of Homoean worshippers, who included many Gothic soldiers.

⁴⁶ Heather, *Goths*, 161-2.

⁴⁷ Zosimus 4. 57; John of Antioch *Fr.* 187.

⁴⁸ J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom*. (Oxford, 1990), 46.

⁴⁹ Heather, *Goths*, 161. There is the question of whether the Eastern portion of the *Notitia* is dated correctly to c.394 or if is later around 440 as argued in A. Kaldellis, and M. Kruse, *The Field Armies of the East Roman Empire, 361–630* (Cambridge, 2023). For a response to this argument, see H. Elton's review of this work in *The Classical Review* 74 (2024), 212-214.

We also hear of the Goths performing more regular services for the military. For example, ‘Tervingi’ and ‘Visi’ are listed in the *Notitia* among the palatine auxiliaries of the two eastern *magistri militum praesentalis*.⁵⁰ Moreover, generals in the late fourth and fifth centuries had bodyguards who were sometimes Goths known as *bucellarii*.⁵¹ Gothic *bucellarii* were said to have been employed by Aspar himself, including during the events of 467 when the Romans came into conflict with both the Goths and Huns over food shortages caused by Roman blockades.⁵² As a result, the Huns petitioned the Roman generals present at their talks for a quick settlement because they were extremely short of food. The generals decided to refer their request to Emperor Leo (457-74). While they waited for the envoys to reach Constantinople, they promised to keep the Huns fed on the condition that they break into smaller groups that were each guarded by a Roman general. One of the groups was now under the guard of what Priscus calls ‘Aspar’s men’.⁵³ The exact identity of the men in Aspar’s retinue is not known for certain, but according to Malalas, a large portion of them consisted of Goths.⁵⁴ Not only does this show the continued use of Goths in the Roman military, but it also demonstrates that Aspar's personal retinue consisted of Goths who were probably Homoeans as well, serving the Roman military in times of conflict without being barred from doing so.

Goths were not just serving as soldiers or bodyguards in the army, but also held military high command. One such commander was Gainas who led Theodosius’ Gothic allies in the Battle of Frigidus in 394 in the conflict between Theodosius I and Eugenius. The success of Gainas’ efforts led to his promotion to *magister militum*, and in 399, he exiled many Roman citizens after a revolt in Anatolia. Gainas soon became a target himself in 400 after his revolt in Constantinople led to unrest in which Arcadius made use of another Gothic *magister militum*, Fravitta, who was

⁵⁰ *Notitia Dignitatum*, Or. 5. 61, 6. 61.

⁵¹ H. Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge, 2018) 151-194, Olympiodorus, *Fr.* 7.4, trans. R.C. Blockley, “in the days of Honorius, the name *bucellarius* was carried not only by Roman soldiers, but also by some Goths”.

⁵² Priscus, *Fr.* 48, ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, vol. 2. (Liverpool, 1983) 121-22; J.P. Given, *The Fragmentary History of Priscus: Attila, the Huns and the Roman Empire, AD 430–476* (Merchantville, 2015), 152–153.

⁵³ Priscus, *Fr.* 49, trans. R.C Blockley.

⁵⁴ Malalas 14. 40, trans. M. Jefferys, ‘for the victims [Aspar and his sons] had a large band of Goths and *comites* and other followers.’ For an overview on the Malalas text and the validity of his claim, see A. Laniado, Aspar and His Phoideratoi: John Malalas on a Special Relationship. in U. Roberto and L. Mecella (eds) *Governare e Riformare L'impero al Momento Della Sua Divisione: Oriente, Occidente, Illirico* (Rome, 2015), 1-18.

also not of the Nicene faith, to defeat and replace Gainas. This episode demonstrates that the Roman army and service to the state provided the Goths with great opportunities to elevate themselves, especially if they were politically ambitious. Liebeschuetz surveys the careers of Germans who influenced imperial politics and found that of sixteen *magistri militum* who are known to have held a position of command under Theodosius I, nine were non-Roman by birth.⁵⁵ The high proportion of generals with foreign backgrounds suggests that a similarly high proportion of officers was of non-Roman origin too. These numbers suggest that the later fourth century saw an influx of non-Roman, and in some cases Gothic, commanders within the Roman military which ultimately allowed Aspar to gain command after following in the footsteps of his father, who was *magister militum* from 424 to 425 and consul in 427, and who likewise exploited the opportunities the military provided to the Goths.

The Generalissimo: Aspar's Way to Power

Aspar's prominence in the military during the fifth century has resulted in modern scholars labelling him as a *generalissimo*. This term is used in modern secondary literature to describe the highest-ranked leader of an army. As regards its application in Late Antiquity, it is used for generals in the army who held a significant amount of power at court and would, in place of the emperor, have command over the army while taking part in various military campaigns and intervening in conflicts on behalf of the emperor.⁵⁶ One factor that played a large role in the prominence of these military men was the elevation of child emperors in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.⁵⁷ In the East and during the time of Aspar, Theodosius I made his six-year-old son Arcadius augustus in 383 and then in 393 elevated his younger son Honorius (393-423) to augustus at the age of eight. He later became emperor of the western Empire when he was ten years old in 395. Arcadius made his son Theodosius II augustus at the very young age of nine months in 402. He became the sole emperor of the East in 408 at the age of seven after the death of his father. The

⁵⁵ Liebeschuetz, *Barbarians*, 10; see H. Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425* (Oxford, 1996) 272-277, where he downplays the high number of barbarian command; H. Elton, 'Fravitta and Barbarian Career Opportunities in Constantinople,' *Medieval Prosopography*, 17(1996) 98-9, he does acknowledge the parallels between the careers of non-Roman general and Roman general.

⁵⁶ J.M. O'Flynn, *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire* (Alberta, 1983), xi.

⁵⁷ M. McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367-455* (Oxford, 2013).

elevation of such young emperors meant that they had to rely more on their *comitatus*, which included their generals.⁵⁸ Even though power was still centralized around the emperor himself, most business of the government was conducted at meetings in which generals were in attendance. In Constantinople, these meetings occurred in the *consistorium* within the palace complex, in which officials and the emperors would discuss matters of the state. While the emperor theoretically had the final say in all major decisions after discussions with his advisors, the nature of imperial authority meant that these decisions could be influenced by those who were close to the emperor, including his generals.⁵⁹ Thus, we see powerful figures such as Stilicho, Aetius, Ricimer in the West and Plinta and Aspar in the East, all emerging as powerful individuals within imperial politics of the late fourth and fifth centuries. Deriving their power from their command over the troops, the successes they saw in their respective campaigns, and their proximity to the emperor, these men rose to extremely powerful positions.

Another factor that comes into play at this time is that emperors during the time of Aspar were more sedentary, especially in the East, where they often resided in Constantinople for the majority of their rule. An example from the East comes from the reign of Theodosius II (402-450), several campaigns against the Vandals, Persians, and Huns were launched, none of which the emperor took part in. Theodosius II's lack of participation in military campaigns is noted in Priscus, who labels the emperor as 'unwarlike'.⁶⁰ This sedentary nature, coupled with the elevation of child emperors, resulted in senior generals during the fourth and fifth centuries wielding a considerable amount of influence and being recognized in the sources as very powerful men. A good illustration of this may be found in Sozomen's description of Plinta as one of the most powerful men in court during the 420s.⁶¹ Their power was derived from their control over military units, their personal wealth, and proximity to the emperor. The army held a large place in Roman society, overshadowing the church in both the number of staff and resources. This power can be illustrated in a law of March 441 addressed to Areobindus, a *magister militum praesentalis*, in which the emperor granted legal privileges traditionally enjoyed by soldiers to some members of

⁵⁸ M. McEvoy, 'Rome and the Transformation of the Imperial Office in the Late Fourth–Mid-Fifth Centuries AD' *Papers of the British School at Rome* 78 (2010), 151-92.

⁵⁹ H. Elton, 'Imperial Politics at the Court of Theodosius II' in A. Cain, N. Lenski (eds), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (London, 2020), 133-5.

⁶⁰ Priscus *Fr.* 3.2, refers to Theodosius II as ἀπόλεμος.

⁶¹ A.D. Lee, 'Theodosius II and His Generals', in C. Kelly (ed), *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2013) 90, who cites Sozomen 7.17.14.

the administrative staff attached to *magistri militum*.⁶² Lee has argued that the physical proximity of the *magistri militum praesentales* to the imperial court when not on campaign allowed for such a law to be created, as did their membership of the imperial *consistorium*, which remained a valuable forum in which generals could exert their influence over the emperor during the fifth century.⁶³ Indeed, we can see just how great the influence of generals was at the time by looking at the number of generals made consul during the reign of Theodosius II, which was eight. While this might not seem like much, it should be noted that the emperor himself held the position sixteen times, meaning that these eight generals made up approximately 40% of the remaining available consul opportunities.⁶⁴ Compare this to the father of Theodosius II, Arcadius, who only had one general named consul during his reign, which demonstrates that the generals of the fifth century possessed great influence and power.

While these two external factors played a large role in the increased influence of generals at this time, it should be noted that a general often employed other means once in power to strengthen his position. These means included the accumulation of personal wealth, public services and benefactions, and the establishment of familial connections with other powerful individuals at court either by birth or through marriage. The use of these means by Aspar himself will be analyzed further in Chapter Two, but these factors led to generals extending their great power within imperial politics. The personal patronage of these generals, coupled with the wealth provided by the army, land grants, and supply contracts, is the factor that Schor argues made generals true power-brokers of the time.⁶⁵ Indeed, Aspar fits into this category of a true power broker since he dominated much of the political scene in the mid-fifth century, especially in the 450s. He played a prominent role in the elevation of Marcian and Leo to the throne in part because both men were former soldiers under Aspar.⁶⁶ Therefore, we will see that Aspar was able to gain prominence at a time when the emperor had a more ceremonial role and was able to elevate himself to great heights without his faith impeding the process.

⁶² *CTh* 7.4.

⁶³ Lee, 'Theodosius II', 95.

⁶⁴ Lee, 'Theodosius II', 105.

⁶⁵ A. M. Schor, *Theodoret's People: Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria* (Berkeley, 2011) 147.

⁶⁶ Croke, 'Dynasty', 53-5.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the world of Aspar was complex, and many factors need to be accounted for before we can analyze his political career. These factors played a role not only in the maintained presence and toleration of Homoeanism in the empire but also in Aspar's political life. We have seen that Homoeanism, despite being condemned as a heresy in the fourth century, maintained a presence in the Empire until the reign of Justinian. This presence was mostly tolerated by the emperor but was still met with some resistance, especially from ecclesiastical writers who further spread anti-Homoean rhetoric. While the tolerance given to Homoeanism suggests that Aspar may not have faced much opposition because of his religious affiliation, the large Gothic presence in the military is also an important factor in the tolerance accorded to its followers. Many of the Gothic soldiers were also adherents of Homoeanism, and yet their role in the military was necessary for the Empire; thus, any attempts to persecute them would have been counterproductive. Instead, we see the emperors of this time acting in a more pragmatic way to maintain the loyalty of their troops, but also not give too much support to the Homoeans so as not to upset the followers of the Nicene doctrine. Thus, we see that the army acted as a means for acquiring political influence for powerful military commanders.

To further understand the political career of Aspar and whether his faith was an insurmountable obstacle, we must now turn to the life of Aspar himself. By looking at the services he provided to the state and the church, we can see a life that does not appear to have been severely inhibited by his Homoeanism. Moreover, it will be demonstrated that Aspar was in frequent contact with churchmen like Theodoret and the language used in their letters to Aspar suggests that, despite his unorthodox allegiance, they recognized that he was a powerful figure who could and did intervene pragmatically on their behalf. His power came not only from the army, as discussed in this chapter, but also from the connections he made with other powerful and sometimes Gothic families to secure a lasting dynasty for him and his family. It was these connections, coupled with the pressures from the public and political competition, that ultimately led to his downfall and death. Therefore, the next two chapters will consist of a look at the life of Aspar himself followed by an analysis of the downfall of Aspar to show that his affiliation with Homoeanism did not act

as an obstacle to his political career and that there were more important factors that ultimately led to his political demise.

The Life of Aspar

Introduction

In the last chapter, we discussed some of the socio-political factors that shaped the world in which Aspar operated. These factors include the maintained presence of Homoeanism in the Empire, Goths in the army and the rise of powerful, often non-Roman, generalissimos. As we now examine Aspar's life in detail, we shall see that these factors aided in his elevation and prominence in imperial politics, but he had to employ additional means to gain further popularity. We might say that instead of being a detriment to his political advancement, Aspar's Homoeanism resulted in the general having to try harder to amass public support. To put it simply, Aspar needed to find additional avenues to show that he prioritized the state's interest in the face of criticism towards his Homoeanism, but this is by no means to say it was an obstacle to his career. As a testament to Aspar's influence, the sixth-century historian Procopius wrote of the general as follows,

For Aspar himself, being an adherent of the Arian faith, and having no intention of changing it for another, was unable to enter upon the imperial office, but he was easily strong enough to establish another in it.⁶⁷

Some modern scholars have been led by this statement that Aspar was eligible for the imperial office to argue that this is clear evidence that Aspar's Homoeanism was an obstacle to his political career.⁶⁸ In doing so, they often minimize or completely ignore the second part of Procopius' statement that Aspar was nevertheless powerful enough to advance someone to the throne. They also fail to mention that Procopius was likely influenced by the sixth-century wars, including Justinian's campaigns against the Homoean Vandals and Ostrogoths.⁶⁹ Moreover, it

⁶⁷ Procopius *Wars* 3.6.3. trans. Dewing.

⁶⁸ Croke, 'Dynasty', 95, "The doctrinal attachment of Aspar and his family was a serious block to their advancement"; also see Zaccagnino et al., 'The Missorium', 439; Snee, 'Gregory', 185.

⁶⁹ McEvoy, 'Becoming Roman', 499.

seems that when scholars evaluate the life of Aspar, they set the bar for political success in becoming emperor without considering whether that was even a goal of Aspar.⁷⁰ This is an important question to consider because, excluding the fact that he was never emperor, Aspar still had a highly successful and enduring political career. Despite not having limited military success, Aspar wielded enough power to install two men of his choice to the throne while gaining prominent titles such as consul and *patricius*.

This chapter aims to provide a more comprehensive synthesis of Aspar's life and political career to see if his Homoeanism truly was an obstacle to his success. It also seeks to assess if Aspar strove for the throne himself based on his actions and the building of his dynasty. Chronologically, it will start in the mid-fifth century when Aspar was at his most prominent, at the coronation of Leo in 457. It will also look at his role in the elevation of both Marcian and Leo. It will then go back in time to provide an overview of Aspar's military successes and failures to demonstrate the political success he obtained despite a lacklustre military record. From there, it will focus on the ecclesiastical benefactions made by Aspar and his sons, along with some major public services he provided, such as the building of a great cistern in Constantinople and aiding in the combating of the fire of 464. Through the exploration of Aspar's life, this chapter seeks to determine if Aspar's religious affiliation had any impact on his political career.

Indeed, Aspar was not the only powerful Roman general to come within arm's reach of the throne and never seize it for himself. The West offers many comparative examples, but this thesis will focus on one who was a contemporary of Aspar. Ricimer, was one of the most powerful men at court during his time. He held the notable positions of *magister utriusque militiae* from 456 to 472, consul in 459 and *patricius* from 457 to 472.⁷¹ He was likely a Homoean, as inferred from his Suevic and Visigothic lineage and an inscription at the Homoean church of St. Agatha in Rome.⁷² Ricimer's career began to prosper under the reign of Avitus

⁷⁰ Croke, 'Dynasty', 95; Zaccagnino et al., 'The Missorium', 439; Snee, 'Gregory', 185.

⁷¹ For a complete synopsis of Ricimer's life and political career see P. MacGeorge, 'Ricimer's Early Career and the Reigns of Avitus and Majorian', in *Late Roman Warlords* (Oxford, 2002) 178-214.

⁷² A detailed overview of the church and inscription is found in R. Mathisen, "Ricimer's Church in Rome: How an Arian Barbarian Prospered in a Nicene World" in A. Cain, N. Lenski (eds) *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (2020), 307-25. The inscription reads *Flavius Ricimer, vir inlustris, magister utriusque militiae, patricius et ex consule ordinario, pro voto suo adornavit*.

(456-7). Avitus was later disposed by Ricimer and his close comrade Majorian, who would become emperor from 457 until 461. Some modern historians have even gone as far as to label Majorian a puppet emperor of Ricimer, demonstrating the influence he held in court.⁷³ After the death of Majorian, Ricimer exerted his influence, often acting as a de facto emperor in his various actions. For example, during the reign of Libius Severus (461–65), Ricimer sent out embassies and undertook military campaigns supposedly on his own authority.⁷⁴ In April of 467, Anthemius (467-472) was installed as the new western emperor as the nominee of the eastern emperor Leo. To build a familial dynasty much like Aspar, Ricimer married Anthemius' daughter Alypia, bringing him into the imperial family and giving any of his children with Alypia a strong claim to the throne.

Like Aspar, Ricimer was a powerful general who was only steps away from the throne but made no attempt to take it. When analyzing these two generals' lives, modern historians often ask why they did not seize the throne for themselves. Perhaps the answer is that by his time, the position of the Western emperor was no great prize.⁷⁵ Ricimer had seen the short life span of previous emperors, and as a *patricius*, he had all the benefits of being emperor, like issuing laws, minting coins, and launching military campaigns without any of the negative aspects like being subject to court ceremonies and attempted assassinations. These may also be the reasons that Aspar never vied for the throne, being content in his position as a top aristocrat, making imperial decisions from the shadows and, in theory, less of a target for usurpation and assassination, though the latter was always still a risk. Like Ricimer, we see Aspar having personal connections with the emperors whom he installed, allowing both men to hold a significant amount of influence still. Furthermore, as noted, both men sought to build an imperial dynasty through marriage since Aspar attempted to marry his son Patricius to Leo's daughter Ariadne and have him named caesar.⁷⁶ Thus, similarities between him and Ricimer are quite apparent. This further

⁷³ J. M. O'Flynn, 'Ricimer the Emperor Maker' in *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire* (Edmonton, 2000) 107.

⁷⁴ Priscus *Fr.* 29; R. Mathisen, 'Ricimer's Church', 308.

⁷⁵ Olympiodorus *Fr.* 33; Constantius III takes a similar path as Aspar and Ricimer but does ascend to the throne in 421 only to die from an illness less than seven months later; see McEvoy, *Child Emperors*, 215, who notes that "Constantius fell ill and died, supposedly regretting the constraints his accession had placed upon him" providing more reason for Aspar not to seek the imperial officer personally.

⁷⁶ Croke, 'Dynasty', 2021, 37.

supports the idea that Aspar did not want to be emperor and instead only sought to create an imperial dynasty through his sons and their future children.

Prominence and Popularity

On 9 February 457, the coronation of the eastern emperor Leo took place, and its ceremony demonstrated Aspar's power at its apogee. The details of Leo's accession, including the prominent role that Aspar played, are preserved in the *De Ceremoniis*.⁷⁷ The account states that after his acclamation by the army at the Hebdomon, Leo proceeded down the processional route to the imperial palace. Here, Leo underwent an imperial costume change at the Helenianae palace and then proceeded to board the imperial carriage. In the carriage next to him stood Aspar, who kissed the emperor's hand upon boarding. As the *πρῶτος πατρίκιος*, it was Aspar's role to accompany Leo as he travelled through the city, where he would be seen by many at the side of the emperor by many.⁷⁸ After the carriage reached the Forum of Constantine, Leo greeted the senate and the Prefect of the City before being offered the gold crown by the head of the senate (*πρῶτος τῶν συνλητικῶν*), who at that time was also Aspar.⁷⁹ The rest of the ceremony involved acclamations in several places, including the forum, the imperial palace, and the hippodrome, where Aspar was never far from the emperor he installed. John the Lydian reports that in 470, the praetorian prefect created a mosaic depicting Leo's ascension, which unfortunately does not survive.⁸⁰ Still, to observe how Aspar was depicted in the piece would have been interesting since he no doubt would have been included, given how close he was to the emperor during his ascension. Nevertheless, the account in the *De Ceremoniis* makes clear that at this time, Aspar was one of the most powerful men in Constantinople, next to the emperor himself.

To provide further evidence of Aspar's prominence, one source claims that he could have seized the throne for himself at this time. It was reported at a church council in Rome held by the Gothic king Theodoric in the early sixth century that Aspar was offered the throne by the senate

⁷⁷ *De Cerimoniis* 1.100, eds. G. Dagron and B. Flusin. The document is a book of ceremonial protocols at the court of the Eastern emperor. It was written in the tenth century and includes chapters taken from a sixth century manual by Peter the Patrician

⁷⁸ Aspar is also called 'primus patriciorum' by Marcellinus Comes *Chron.* 471.

⁷⁹ Aspar is also referred to as the most senior senator (*princeps senatus*) in Malalas, 14. 40.

⁸⁰ John Lydus, *On the Magistrates* 2.20. The Praetorian Prefect Constantine commissioned the mosaic.

either at the death of Theodosius or Marcian, but refused it.⁸¹ Although the nature of this source may be biased, and since it originated with the Homoean Theoderic, who was also related to Aspar through marriage, we must consider that he might have had ulterior motives in presenting a Homoean emperor as a possible choice.⁸² Despite the unreliability of this story, scholars have still speculated as to whether Aspar meant that his religious affiliation or his ethnicity precluded him from the throne. Perhaps the best guess as to what could have been meant was that Aspar knew he would have a difficult time gaining support owing to his Homoeanism if he had become emperor.⁸³ Regardless, he ultimately chose Leo, a *comes* and *tribunus Mattiariorum*.⁸⁴ Since Leo had no prior imperial connections, Aspar's choice appears to be unusual. He was either a Dacian or a Bessan and about fifty years old at the time of his accession.⁸⁵ This suggests that Aspar must have had some close connection with Leo to be inclined to support him. In fact, Leo had once been curator of one of Aspar's estates and had served under him in the army.⁸⁶ It may have been their time in the army together that inclined Aspar to aid Leo in his accession. Nevertheless, Leo's accession to the throne exemplifies Aspar's power at its height with his role as the top imperial official in Leo's coronation and his ability to install him on the throne just as he had done with Leo's predecessor, Marcian in 450.

Marcian became the eastern Roman emperor on August 25th, 450, about a month after the death of Theodosius II. Marcian had been a former tribune and *domesticus* of Aspar, and as Procopius describes, served as an advisor to him.⁸⁷ The circumstances of Marcian's accession and the individuals who made that happen have been much debated by modern historians, given the many versions that exist.⁸⁸ Some have argued that others, such as Zeno and Pulcheria, who

⁸¹ *Acta synhodorum habitarum Romae* 5.23-26 (ed. T. Mommsen, *MGH AA XI*, 424), "Aliquando Aspari a senatu dicebatur ut ipse fieret imperator, qui tale refertur dedisse responsum: timeo ne per me consuetudo in regno nascatur." The speculative nature of the date of this is discussed in Croke, *Dynasty*, 54, note 18, who suggests the death of Marcian in 457. B.S. Bachrach, *A History of the Alans in the West* (Minneapolis, 1973) 44, suggests it was offered on the death of Theodosius II in 450.

⁸² Croke, 'Dynasty', 54, note 18 argues that since Theoderic was a hostage at the court of Leo when Aspar was at his most influential, he might have heard the story from Aspar himself.

⁸³ Aspar's response is generally seen to refer to his Homoianism; see Lee, 'Theodosius II', 90-108; and Croke, 'Dynasty', 54 note 18. Although McEvoy, 'Becoming Roman', 500 note 96, suggests that he meant that if he were to become emperor, he would not allow himself to be ruled by any power behind the throne. I am inclined to think he was referring to his Homoianism.

⁸⁴ Photius *Bibl.* 79 cites Candidus who states that it was from Aspar's aid that Leo ascended the throne.

⁸⁵ Referred to a Bessan by Jordanes *Rom.* 335 and Malalas 369; Photius *Bibl.* 79, says he is from Dacia

⁸⁶ Theophanes AM 5961; also Zonaras 13.25.

⁸⁷ Procopius *Wars* 3.4.7, Theophanes AM 5931.

⁸⁸ Theodore lector *Epitome* 354, Procopius *Wars* 4.2.10, Evagrius *HE* 2.1, Theophanes AM 5942, Zonaras 8.24.1-3.

endorsed him through marriage, may have had a greater involvement in Marcian's nomination. However, Burgess has rightly argued that it is impossible to conceive that Aspar was not intimately involved in his accession, given their past relations.⁸⁹ In fact, the nomination of Marcian is what directly implicates Aspar as the primary force behind his ascension. Moreover, some ancient sources, such as Malalas and the *Chronicon Paschale*, indicate Aspar's involvement in the succession. For example, Malalas singles him out from those present at Theodosius' deathbed when the emperor supposedly chose Marcian as his successor.⁹⁰ The appearance of Aspar in Malalas gives credence to the idea that he must have been one of those who vouched for the authenticity of Theodosius' nomination and therefore had played a role in Marcian's proclamation. Procopius further implies that Marcian was destined for the throne not only due to the prophetic signs, but also his connection to Aspar and the latter's political influence in Constantinople.⁹¹ Furthermore, given that Aspar had been made *patricius* and was already at court by 451, even though his military career up to that point had been less than stellar, suggests that Aspar experienced an elevation in status most likely brought about by his nominee sitting occupying the throne.

To conclude, it is during the elevations of both Marcian and Leo that we see Aspar at his most prominent. Based on his previous connections with Marcian and his immediate promotions, it is more than likely that he was one of the stronger forces behind Marcian's accession. Aspar maintained his political domination into the reign of Leo, where he was at the forefront of the latter's coronation. It is also during this time that Aspar was supposedly offered the throne but refused, which suggests that he never aspired to gain the throne for himself. This lack of aim for the throne is supported further when we compare Aspar's life with that of the actions of Ricimer, who also became one of the most powerful men in court but never sought to be emperor. As we have discussed, his Homoeanism did not bar him from any of these advancements. Instead, we see Aspar elevating himself to great heights politically at this time through his imperial

⁸⁹ R.W. Burgess, 'The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic' *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 86–87(1993-1994) 47–68. See also A.D. Lee, 'Theodosius' 95–96. On the involvement of Zeno, see C. Zuckerman, 'L'empire d'Orient et les Huns: Notes sur Priscus', *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994) 174.

⁹⁰ Malalas 14.27; *Chron. Pasch.* s.a. 450, pg. 80.

⁹¹ Procopius *Wars* 3.4.1-11.

connections. This is especially noteworthy, as Aspar does not have the most decorated military record, which we shall discuss next.

Military Service

In the last section, we examined Aspar at his most prominent position as an emperor maker and noted that this was remarkable given his lack of military victories. Little is known of Aspar's early military career, except that, according to Candidus, he enlisted as a youth.⁹² However, it can be assumed that he likely served under his father, Ardaburius, who was commander of the forces during the eastern Empire's conflict with Persia in 421-422. This conclusion is drawn from two strong points; first, scholars have postulated that Aspar was likely born c. 400, making him the appropriate age to serve and second, since Aspar is seen in a command position in a major campaign only a couple of years later, it is likely that he had already distinguished himself as a capable soldier and leader.⁹³ The first record of Aspar's military activities appears in 424-425 when an expedition was launched against the usurper John, who was proclaimed emperor after the death of the childless Honorius.⁹⁴ When Theodosius II did not accept John as the new western leader, he dispatched Ardaburius, possibly as *magister militum praesentalis* and Aspar and Flavius Candidianus, as *magister militum vacans*.⁹⁵ According to the sources, the expedition reached the city of Salona in Dalmatia, where the forces were split into two detachments. Ardaburius took a portion of the troops by sea, while Candidianus and Aspar proceeded on land through Dalmatia, with Aspar leading the cavalry.⁹⁶ Ardaburius' fleet was scattered after a storm, and he was taken prisoner by John's forces and held at Ravenna. Ardaburius was treated well and was given the freedom to roam the city and to talk to officials, including John's military commanders. Ardaburius took advantage of these freedoms to win over these men and organize

⁹² Candidus *Fr. 1*.

⁹³R. Bleeker, *Aspar and the Struggle for the Eastern Roman Empire* (London, 2022) 25, comes to this probable birthdate based on his father's MVM position by 421, placing his probable birthdate at 375-80; *PLRE 2*, Fl. Ardabur 3.

⁹⁴ For more on the details of the struggle for succession after the death of Honorius see; M. McEvoy, *Child Emperor*, 225-232; P. Heather, *The Fall of Rome: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford, 2005) 258-262.

⁹⁵ L. Pigonski, *The Shields of the Empire: Eastern Roman Military Elites during the Reigns of the Emperors Theodosius II, Marcian and Leo I* (Łódź, 2023) 50; *PLRE 2*, Candidianus 3.

⁹⁶ Philostorgius *HE* 12.13.

them in a conspiracy to overthrow John.⁹⁷ More importantly, Ardaburius was able to smuggle out a letter to Aspar telling him of the plot and directing him to advance rapidly on Ravenna.

In the meantime, Aspar and Candidianus had some military success in winning over several cities in northern Italy, including Aquileia. Their efforts seem to have helped weaken the usurper's position, because soon afterwards, John was betrayed and murdered in Ravenna, which allowed the eastern Roman forces to enter the city. Just before his downfall, John sent word to Aetius, another prominent general of the West, to gather an army from his Hunnic allies to assist him. Aetius arrived in Italy too late to help John, but according to Philostorgius, he was met on the field of battle by Aspar and his forces.⁹⁸ Neither side was able to gain the upper hand, and thus Aetius made a deal with Placidia, the mother of Valentinian III, to secure his standing after the change of regime. The Huns were paid off to return to their lands. Interestingly, our other source of this event, Olympiodorus, does not report a battle at all, but it should be noted that his writings only survive as fragments. Furthermore, Philostorgius mentions Aspar's efforts as fundamental to the campaign's success, while the fragments of Olympiodorus claim it was Candidianus' capturing of cities which contributed to the outcome, as Aspar succumbed to despair after his father had been captured.⁹⁹ Despite these conflicting stories, it is important to note how quickly Aspar gained prominence after this campaign, which would have likely been impeded had he truly not been of use in this campaign. Furthermore, Aspar was given command of another expedition in 430, which lends more credibility to the Philostorgius account in recording that Aspar was instrumental in the campaign against John.

Aspar's next recorded military expedition resulted from an event in 428 when a group of Vandals led by Geiseric crossed the straits of Gibraltar from the Iberian Peninsula and entered the Roman province of Africa.¹⁰⁰ This soon became a crisis for the West as Roman forces in Africa under the command of Boniface were insufficient to deal with the threat. In 430, the

⁹⁷ Olympiodorus *Fr.* 46.

⁹⁸ Philostorgius *HE* 12.14. "Aetius, John the usurper's lieutenant, arrived three days after his death, leading as many as sixty thousand barbarian mercenaries. Battle was joined between him and Aspar's men, and great slaughter ensued of those on either side. Afterwards Aetius made peace with Placidia and Valentinian and received the title of count. The barbarians were persuaded to lay aside their anger and their arms with the assistance of gold, and having given hostages and accepted pledges, they retired to their own lands" (trans. P. Amidon); for more Aetius' role in the campaign see J. Wijnendaele, 'The Early Career of Aetius and the Murder of Felix (c.425–30 CE),' *Historia* 66 (2017) 470-2.

⁹⁹ Olympiodorus, *Fr.* 43.

¹⁰⁰ For a recent discussion of these events see M. Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (Munich, 2019), 656.

Vandals moved across North Africa towards Hippo Regius, where they besieged it after a failed attempt at taking Carthage. A battle ensued outside the city walls during the siege in which the Roman forces were defeated. After a fourteen-month siege, the city could not hold out any longer, and the Vandals captured it.¹⁰¹ Now, the situation was critical, especially for the West, because Africa provided a steady supply of grain to Italian cities and other areas of the Empire. In response, Aspar was dispatched to Carthage in 431 as the commander of the expeditionary forces sent to assist Boniface. The combined strength of the western provincial forces and the eastern Roman forces met the Vandals on the field of battle. This battle resulted in another Roman defeat, and many Roman soldiers were captured, among them Marcian, Aspar's *domesticus* and the future eastern emperor.¹⁰² Despite two Vandal victories, the situation in Africa resulted in a stalemate. The Romans were in no position to challenge the Vandals in combat again, nor to attempt to force them out or subjugate them. The Vandals, owing to their lack of competence in siege warfare, could not assault Carthage, which was firmly held by Aspar and the remainder of his troops.¹⁰³ After a two-year stalemate, it appears that both sides have tried to reach some agreement. Aspar likely negotiated a temporary truce and the return of the captives, which allowed for the groundwork to be laid for future peace talks. Eventually, a treaty was reached in 435 by the envoy Trygetius that allowed the Vandals to settle around Hippo Regius in exchange for a tribute.¹⁰⁴ Sometime before or after returning to Constantinople, Aspar was rewarded with the western consulate for his role in the campaign in 434, which he commemorated on a silver plate.¹⁰⁵

From a military perspective, the campaign in Africa was not successful, but its outcome probably seemed satisfactory to the western Empire, especially since Aspar was rewarded with the western consulate position as a result. Interestingly, we also get some insight into what Aspar might have felt was the best way to deal with the Vandals, a topic that would become a point of contention in Aspar's late career. It appears that Aspar felt the Vandals should be dealt with more

¹⁰¹ For more on the Vandal crossing and capture of Africa, see A.H. Merrills. and R. Miles, *The Vandals* (2010) 28-55; P. Heather, *The Fall*, 268–272.

¹⁰² Procopius *Wars*, 1.4; Marcellinus Comes, *Chron.* 432.

¹⁰³ Some have suggested that Aspar left Africa after his initial defeat in 431, other evidence suggests that he remained there. For example, he was still in Carthage when he received his consulate for 434. *PLRE* 2, Fl. Ardabur Aspar; J. Wijnendaele, *The Last of the Romans: Bonifatius–Warlord and Comes Africae* (London, 2015) 96; Pigonski, *Shields*, 53.

¹⁰⁴ Prosper *Chron.* 1321, pg. 474.

¹⁰⁵ The silver plate will be discussed further in the last chapter. See Zaccagnino and al. 'The Missorium', 419-54.

by diplomatic means rather than by war, likely meaning that the Romans would have to make some concessions to allow for peace. Aspar continued to push for diplomacy with the Vandals when additional conflicts arose in 440 and 455, in the latter of which Marcian's policy towards them took a more passive approach.¹⁰⁶ This has led Pigonski to theorize that Aspar have influenced Marcian's response to the Vandals. Aspar's conviction towards diplomacy with the Vandals is important to note because, as mentioned, Aspar would later find himself at odds with Leo on how to handle the Vandals, which played into his political downfall.

There is little information on Aspar between his return to Constantinople in 435 and the accession of the emperor Marcian in 450. Nevertheless, the following years were a critical transition period, since Aspar went from being a general in 431-432 to a top political player who had a major role in deciding the imperial succession after the death of Theodosius II in 450. This is an even greater achievement, given the fact that it was a difficult decade for his military career since the Empire now faced three major military threats. First, the treaty with the Vandals was broken in 439, as Geiseric was able to capture Carthage, and a Vandal armada was sent to Sicily.¹⁰⁷ To make matters worse for the Empire, in 440, the Persians made incursions into Armenia and Mesopotamia after a new king, Yazdegerd II, came to power.¹⁰⁸ To call this a war with Persia would be a stretch, but it nonetheless added additional pressure to the Roman army. The third threat to the Empire had to face was from the Huns, who organized themselves into two groups along the Danube under Attila and Bleda.¹⁰⁹ The Huns took the town of Constantia, which was situated along the Danube, after making a surprise attack on the crowded market.¹¹⁰ Theodosius now had to decide where to deploy Roman forces and, thinking that Attila did not want to start an all-out war, decided that priority should be given to the campaign against the Vandals. In opposition to Theodosius' decision, some believe that Aspar argued that the greatest threat was from the Huns and that the Vandal problem should be addressed by diplomacy.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ See Pigonski, *Shields*, 113-6; After the accession of Petronius Maximus, the Vandals captured and sacked Rome in 455. Geiseric captured the empress Eudoxia and her daughters and Petronius Maximus was killed while fleeing the city. Marcian appeared seemingly unconcerned by this fact. As a response, Marcian only resorted to sending embassies to Geiseric, asking for the return of the imperial women and the withholding of any further Vandal raids.

¹⁰⁷ Kelly, *The End of Empire: Attila the Hun and the Fall of Rome* (New York, 2010) 119-122.

¹⁰⁸ Pigonski, *Shields*, 64-5; G. Greatrex and S.N.C Lieu, *The Roman eastern frontier and the Persian Wars. Part II, AD 363-630: a narrative sourcebook* (London, 2002) 44-5; Marcellinus Comes *Chron.* 441; Procopius *Wars* I, 2.

¹⁰⁹ See Kelly, *The End*, 93-105.

¹¹⁰ On the events of the market attack, see Heather, *The Fall*, 300-6.

¹¹¹ Bleeker, *Aspar*, 70-1; also see Kelly, *The End*, 121, suggests that Aspar had seen in the past how quickly the Huns could amass a great number of men and since they had crossed the Danube in 421 and 434 while Roman

Theodosius was unconvinced and chose to do the opposite; thus, Aspar was sent to Attila as the Roman negotiator.

Many scholars have commented on the fact that Aspar was not made the commander of the Vandal expedition in 440. They claim it is surprising because Aspar was one of the eastern empire's most experienced generals in warfare with the Vandals and was also well-regarded by Galla Placidia, whose cooperation would be essential. The most likely explanation is that it was felt that his presence was more urgently required in the Balkans since Aspar himself supposedly argued that dealing with the Huns was a more urgent conflict. Others have alleged a more dubious reason and claim that Aspar and Geiseric had a secret alliance between them, where Aspar would not attack the Vandals, apparently extending into Basiliscus' campaign in 468.¹¹² However, it is unlikely that both the East and West would have approved the choice of Aspar as consul in 434 if they felt such an accusation held any credibility. This suggests that the allegation of collusion between Aspar and Geiseric in our sources may have been written later with knowledge of the total failure of the Vandal campaign in 468, making Aspar a suitable scapegoat for the blame. The main reason for these allegations stems from the shared religious affiliations of Aspar and Geiseric. While it is true that Geiseric, along with many of the Vandals, were Homoean, there is no evidence to support any sort of secret alliance with Geiseric. These accusations, therefore, lend more credibility to the idea that ancient authors sought to discredit Aspar as a 'faithless barbarian', which was a common trope of slander in the ancient world.¹¹³ As we will see in a later section, Aspar is often labelled as a conspirator against the empire or orthodox church, but again these come from later sources who solely provide his Homoeanism as 'evidence' of any treachery. Furthermore, given that Aspar achieved his greatest prominence during the 450s, suggests that he was not under suspicion of collusion until after his downfall and death.

forces were preoccupied in Mesopotamia and North Africa respectfully that history would likely repeat itself in this instance.

¹¹² Theophanes, AM 5961; Hydatius, 241. Theophanes wrote his chronicle ca. 815, while Hydatius wrote his around 468/9 which lines up with the theory that this accusation came after the Vandal expedition failure in 468.

¹¹³ C. Kelly, *Ruling the Later Empire* (Cambridge, 2004) 169, notes that a part of the 'trope' used to slander heretics, including Homoians, was that they were prone to bribery and corruption.

Aspar was likely *magister militum praesentalis* at that time of the Hunnic conflict, but his exact position is the subject of speculation.¹¹⁴ It is unknown what forces he had at his disposal, but considering the many conflicts the Empire was engaged in 441, they were likely insufficient to engage with the Huns in direct combat. It is therefore highly likely that he was forced to end this conflict diplomacy. During the negotiations, the Huns claimed that they had not broken the previous treaty because the attack on Constantia was a retaliatory strike for the disgraces of the bishop of Margus, who allegedly robbed some of their royal tombs.¹¹⁵ Regardless of how much credibility can be given to these claims, the Huns demanded that the bishop be handed over to them, along with any fugitives whom the Romans were prohibited from accepting as refugees under the existing treaty. After the negotiations collapsed, the Huns invaded Roman territory, taking Viminacium, Margus, Singidunum, Sirmium, and Naissus after a siege.¹¹⁶ At some point, Aspar was able to secure a one-year truce with the Huns, which gave the forces in Sicily time to return home. Prosper confirms that this was the aim of the treaty, stating, “because the Huns ravaged Thrace and Illyricum with wild devastation, the fleet, which had been stationed in Sicily, returned to defend the eastern provinces”.¹¹⁷ Unlike the previous campaign, where the results were satisfactory, this conflict with the Huns in 441-442 was considered a failure for Aspar. Despite this military failure, Aspar was about to become one of the most powerful men in Constantinople with the accession of Marcian.

Aspar was involved in one more campaign in 467, when the Romans came into conflict with both the Goths and Sciri over food shortages caused by Roman blockades.¹¹⁸ The Huns petitioned the Roman generals present at their talks for a quick settlement because they were extremely short of food. The generals decided to refer to emperor Leo to make the final choice. While they waited for word from Constantinople, they promised to keep the Huns fed on the

¹¹⁴ Bleeker, *Aspar*, 71-73 and Kelly, *The End*, 121-3 suggest that he was *magister militum per Illyricum* at the time, making it his direct responsibility to intervene. Pignonski, *Shields*, 66, argues that he was *magister militum praesentalis*.

¹¹⁵ Kelly, *The End*, 103-5.

¹¹⁶ Marcellinus Come *Chron.* 441.

¹¹⁷ Prosper *Chron.* 1346, pg. 479, trans. O. Maenchen-Helfen in *The World of the Huns; Studies in their History and Culture* (Berkeley, 1973) 111.

¹¹⁸ Priscus, *Fr. 48*, ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, vol. 2. (Liverpool, 1983) 121-22; J.P. Given, *The Fragmentary History of Priscus: Attila, the Huns and the Roman Empire, AD 430–476* (Merchantville, 2015), 152–153.

condition that they break into smaller groups that were each guarded by a Roman general.¹¹⁹ Leo ultimately decided to support the Sciri over the Goths. Thus, upon assessing Aspar's military career, we see that his record was less than stellar, especially when compared with other notable generals of the time. Yet, as we have discussed, Aspar would become one of the top political figures in the East, playing a key role in two imperial successions. Had his Homoeanism truly been an obstacle to his political career, we would have likely seen him not gain such prominence. Instead, we see Aspar sustain notable political longevity, which spanned over three emperors. The reasons for his downfall will be covered at length in the final chapter, but in terms of his military capabilities, his Homoeanism never appeared to inhibit him in any way. To understand how Aspar gained such political prominence, we must look at the other means by which he acquired popularity and support.

These means involve Aspar's work in both ecclesiastical affairs and public service. Like many other generals of his time, Aspar was in contact with many priests and bishops, including Theodoret of Cyrus, and intervened when called upon. He and his family would also donate benefactions to the Church, as well as providing safe transport of the corpse of Symeon the Stylite. The exploration of these benefactions and contacts will demonstrate that while Aspar and his family may have remained Homoeans, they still supported the orthodox church when it was in the best interest of the state. Furthermore, outside of ecclesiastical work, Aspar continued to demonstrate an interest in the state through notable public service acts. The acts to be discussed in the next chapter include his building of a cistern in Constantinople in 459 and his efforts in extinguishing a major fire in the city in 465. The examination of his ecclesiastical and public services also aims to disprove the accusations of treason or corruption from later sources, as most of these acts were done for the benefit of the state.

Ecclesiastical Contacts and Public Services

¹¹⁹ This campaign is also considered a Roman success, see L. Pigonski, *Shields*, 149-154.

Since Aspar did not have an impressive military record to bolster his position, he needed to find other avenues to gain influence and public support. One of these ways was through his services to the orthodox church.¹²⁰ Despite maintaining his Homoeanism for the entirety of his life, Aspar did not demonstrate any open hostility towards Nicene beliefs. In fact, it appears that Aspar recognized the importance of the orthodox church to the state and showed his support when it was in the best interest of the Empire. An example of this can be seen in his nomination of Marcian.

It comes as no surprise that Aspar, like many other generals of the fifth century, was contacted by several church officials, including Theodoret, the bishop of Cyrus and Leo, the bishop of Rome. It was not unusual for powerful generals in the fifth century to receive letters regarding ecclesiastical affairs, regardless of their personal beliefs, and as Elton argues, it could perhaps even be seen as helpful by the imperial administration for a powerful religious outsider to intervene in these quarrels.¹²¹ One such instance is recorded in a letter from Theodoret to Aspar, thanking him for his intervention on his behalf to end his house arrest imposed after the Second Council of Ephesus in 449.¹²² In his letter, the bishop praises Aspar for his many good deeds and his closeness to the emperor. Of course, we must recognize that Theodoret is purposely flattering the general since he provided aid. Nevertheless, the bishop still recognizes the reality of his prominence and his influence over the imperial family. Schor has commented that it was unusual for Aspar to aid Theodoret since they were previously not closely connected.¹²³ Although considering that Aspar was one of the top aristocrats at court and had just installed Marcian as emperor, Theodoret's appeal for aid exemplifies the power Aspar wielded at court. The bishop needed someone whose support could influence the emperor, and the best person for that job was the man who had just put him on the throne and was already playing a large role in his Vandal policies. Furthermore, Aspar's support can be seen as another pragmatic

¹²⁰ This term is problematic as orthodoxy shifted from Nicene to Chalcedon but is used to simply demonstrate that Aspar's religious beliefs fell outside of what was considered 'orthodox' for the time.

¹²¹ H. Elton, 'Fravitta', 102.

¹²² Theodoret *Ep.* 139. It should be noted that Theodoret was charged, convicted and deposed without a trial and no way of defending himself, see I. Pasztori-Kupan, *Theodoret of Cyrus* (New York, 2006) 19-22.

¹²³ Schor, *Theodoret's People*, 178.

decision made for the benefit of the state when accounting for Theodoret's popularity and his loyalty to the imperial state.¹²⁴

The next instance of Aspar's intervention in ecclesiastical affairs is in 457. During a surge of religious violence in Alexandria, which concerned the anti-Chalcedian bishop Timothy Aelurus.¹²⁵ During the conflict, Leo, the bishop of Rome, wrote to Aspar and the emperor and urged them to oppose Timothy and support the Chalcedonian cause.¹²⁶ In response to the violence, Emperor Leo dispatched a circular letter in the summer of 457 to all bishops and other important churchmen, asking whether the Council of Chalcedon should be upheld and what should be done about Timothy. Amphilochius of Side agreed that Timothy should be expelled, but admitted that he opposed Chalcedon. Leo's circular letter is important to highlight as it demonstrates that even the emperor was unsure of how to deal with the problem at the time. The imperial government decided to expel Timothy and discipline Amphilochius. Aspar intervened on behalf of both of the men, likely hoping to quell any violence in the city. Concerning Amphilochius, he may have felt that he had been wrongly punished for simply speaking truthfully, which is reported by the contemporary Zachariah, bishop of Mytilene.¹²⁷ For his decision to support Timothy, although this initially appears to suggest that Aspar did not support the orthodox church, Scott has convincingly argued that this was likely another pragmatic decision made for the benefit of the state, given Aelurus' popularity in Alexandria.¹²⁸ Following Scott's arguments, it appears Aspar prioritized ending violence in Alexandria, perhaps to protect the empire's grain supply, which was already at risk from the Vandal occupation in Africa.

One source alludes to the idea that Aspar's Homoeanism could have influenced his policy on Timothy and go against the orthodox. According to the seventh-century epitomizer of Theodore Lector's *Church History*, when the bishop Gennadius moved to punish Timothy, "Aspar, however, as a heretic, was eager for the contrary".¹²⁹ Theophanes repeats this in his

¹²⁴ L. Scott, 'Aspar and the Burden of Barbarian Heritage' *Byzantium Studies* 3 (1976) 67.

¹²⁵ E. Watts, *Riot In Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics In Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities* (Berkeley, 2010) 221-9.

¹²⁶ Leo *Ep.* 153.

¹²⁷ Pseudo-Zachariah 4.7, "Aspar, who was a general at that time, although he was an Arian, pleaded and begged for him that a priest who spoke the truth should not be exposed to danger. And thus indeed Amphilochius was delivered from danger"

¹²⁸ Scott, *Aspar*, 62-63.

¹²⁹ Epitome 43 [378] trans. A. Zaborcka, pg. 276-7.

chronicle by stating, “the Arian Aspar sought to counteract him”.¹³⁰ Theophanes could not have had any knowledge of Aspar’s motives beyond what he learned in the epitome, and he often mentions Homoeanism in irrelevant events as a cardinal evil. Therefore, our sole source for Aspar’s Homoeanism being a motive in his church policy is an epitome written several centuries after Theodore composed his history. Considering Elton’s argument about the benefits of having a religious outsider intervene, these cases could support his arguments, especially if Aspar’s actions are seen as pragmatic and not influenced by his religious beliefs.

Aspar and the Ardaburii are also reported to have made benefactions and donated funds for refurbishments to the Nicene church of St Anastasia in Constantinople.¹³¹ According to the *Vita Marciani*, Ardaburius, the eldest son of Aspar, although Homoean, respected the Father so highly that he gifted some beautiful and expensive liturgical vessels to the Anastasian church, which was said to be near the family’s residence. The clergy of the church expressed their gratitude towards the family by reading the scripture in Gothic on certain feast days.¹³² According to another source, it was during the reign of Leo that the relics of St Anastasia were brought from Sirmium to Constantinople and deposited in the church in a grand procession that included the emperor, senate, and people.¹³³ A grand event such as this would have provided an opportune occasion for the Ardaburii to make their donation, which would have no doubt earned the family popularity among the city. Ardaburius appears in the record again as Evagrius informs us that when the stylite Symeon died in 459 during his tenure as *magister militum per Orientem*, the general and his men protected the corpse from relic hunters and transported it back to Antioch.¹³⁴ Given the popularity of Symeon, this act would have been another means for the family to exercise their power while earning them more support. In both cases discussed, we do not see an influence of Homoeanism affecting the decisions of Aspar or his son, and in some cases, their benefactions appear to stem from an attitude of mutual respect and support, as seen with the donations to the church of St. Anastasia. Moreover, in the same year, Aspar began

¹³⁰ Theophanes AM 5952, trans. C. Mango.

¹³¹ *Vita Marciani*, ed. and trans. J. Wortley, ‘Vita Sancti Marciani Oeconomi’ *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 103(2011) 796.

¹³² Snee ‘Gregory’, 157–8, 164–75 discusses the manuscript tradition and dating of the *Vita*. Despite the reading of scriptures in Gothic, it is most unlikely that the services were Arian; see Snee, ‘Gregory’, 180.

¹³³ Theophanes AM 5950.

¹³⁴ Evagrius *HE* 1.13. See also Malalas 14.37; *Chron. Pasch.* 464. Pg. 85-6, who reports that Ardaburius sent a Gothic force to defend the corpse, only Evagrius says that Ardaburius personally oversaw the transportation.

construction on a large cistern in Constantinople, demonstrating further efforts he took to garner popularity.

As mentioned, Aspar's Homoeanism may have resulted in the general needing to try harder to prove his loyalty to the state. He achieved this not only through his ecclesiastical contacts and benefactions but also through his public services within the city of Constantinople. The first notable service was his building of a very large cistern near the old Constantinian walls in 459.¹³⁵ The building of the cistern itself would have provided many jobs to the people of Constantinople, earning the general further prominence within the city. Furthermore, in 465, when a great fire spread through eight of the urban districts of Constantinople, Aspar is specifically named as having played a significant role in containing the blaze. Candidus, in his first book, describes the fire and specifically singles out Aspar and his measures for the public good during the crisis.¹³⁶ It is also important to note that at this time, Aspar would have been in his late 60s or early 70s, making his role in extinguishing the fire no easy feat. Aspar's actions stand in stark contrast with those of the emperor Leo, who fled the city for six months.¹³⁷ As Scott has suggested, it seems likely that Aspar was seen as a man of the people because of his civic services, which is further suggested by the nickname of 'the butcher' given to Leo after Aspar's assassination.¹³⁸ Candidus also picks up this idea when he states that Aspar's actions were motivated by his care for the well-being of the city he called home.

The events recounted in this section demonstrate the other means that Aspar and his sons employed to gain popularity, most notably within the city of Constantinople. As we have seen, their actions seem unrelated to their Homoeanism. There is no doubt that the family may have had ulterior motives, mainly amassing more power, in some of their benefactions and donations, but these were clearly unrelated to their religious affiliations. Moreover, the actions of Aspar indicate his pragmatic nature and his desire to act in the state's best interest. As we will see in the final chapter, Aspar needed to maintain public support, especially when faced with rivalries in

¹³⁵ *Chron Pasch.* 309. Pg 85. See R. Janin *Constantinople Byzantine: Développement Urbain et Répertoire Topographique*. 2nd edition (Paris, 1964) 204-5.

¹³⁶ Candidus *Fr. I* (ed. Blockley 1981–1983, 2: 464–466). The fire is reported in many sources, with the fullest account being that of Evagrius *HE* 2.13.

¹³⁷ Malalas 14.43.

¹³⁸ Candidus, *Fr. 2*; L. Scott, 'Aspar' 63.

court politics and accusations of treachery, all of which played a significant role in his downfall and eventual murder.

Conclusion

Upon recounting the major events in Aspar's life, we see a life that was not solely dictated by his religious affiliation. Moreover, we see the general reach great prominence in his political career by having crowned not one but two emperors. His political dominance is seen most distinctly at the coronation of Leo, where he played a significant role in the ceremonial procession and proclamation of the new emperor. At the same time, he was supposedly reported to have been offered the crown himself but ultimately refused. These feats are more impressive when his military record is analyzed. When compared with other notable generals of the time, his record is lacklustre. His actions in the military do appear to reflect the more pragmatic nature of Aspar and his desire to act in what he considers to be in the best interest of the state. This mindset is also reflected in his intervention in ecclesiastical affairs, where he chose to support individuals such as Theodoret and Timothy, whose popularity could have led to violence if they were further persecuted. Perhaps the strongest evidence to support the argument that Aspar's political career was not ruled by his religious affiliation comes from the benefactions he and his family made to the Nicene Church of St Anastasia in Constantinople. These actions speak more to a man who understood and cared for the people of Constantinople as opposed to a heretic plotting to overthrow the emperor. This is further supported by the public services of Aspar for the city of Constantinople, which included the building of a major cistern and his actions in combating a major fire that devastated the city.

In the final chapter, we shall look at the events and circumstances that led to the downfall of Aspar and his murder within the imperial palace. This will include an analysis of the sources that report on Aspar's assassination to see what they claim to be the cause of his downfall. As with the previous chapters, we shall examine whether his religious affiliation played a major role in this political downfall or if there were much greater forces at play. One such factor that will be analyzed includes his professional and personal relationship with the emperor Leo, which we see becomes severely strained the further into Leo's rule. Additionally, the actions of his own sons

would cause the general to face backlash, as one is accused of treason and the other caused turmoil in the city upon his promotion to Caesar. Finally, we see Aspar face intense political competition from notable Isaurian generals, which led to the diminishing of his power. It is these factors that ultimately led to Aspar losing support with imperial politics and caused Leo to decide to have him eliminated. While some sources continue to state that it was his Homoeanism that led to his demise, this final chapter will demonstrate that this does not appear to be the case.

The Downfall of Aspar

Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter, Aspar wielded significant power during the reigns of Marcian and Leo. His position in the imperial court recalls that of other *generalissimos* of the fifth century, such as Aetius, who has also been seen as a de facto emperor.¹³⁹ While these men were able to bolster their position through their military exploits and political connections, their prominence would eventually be challenged, resulting in an abrupt end. For Aetius, his end came about in 454 when Valentinian and his eunuch Heraclius assassinated him during a meeting at the imperial palace.¹⁴⁰ Priscus records that his death stemmed from Valentinian's fear of losing power in the West due to the general's prominence. Almost twenty years later, in 471, Aspar met a similar fate to Aetius when the general and his two sons, Ardabur and Patricius, were called to the palace for a meeting, only to be assassinated by Leo's eunuchs. Below, we shall discuss the sources that report Aspar's death and the circumstances behind it in detail. Still, for now, it is important to show the similarities between Aetius and Aspar. Despite his abrupt end, we can see some of Aspar's influence waning in the years before his death, as he faced conflicts with the emperor, accusations of treachery, and political competition from other rising generals. All these factors could be reason enough to oust Aspar, but we must ask ourselves if something greater was at play to push Leo to commit an act that would cement his role in history as 'the butcher'. Another essential question to ask, especially considering the comparison between Aspar and Aetius, is whether their downfall was more of a result of the intense competitive nature of imperial politics in the fifth century.

¹³⁹ Procopius *Wars*. 3.4.28 mentions someone who supposedly told Valentinian after the murder of Aetius that he had cut off his right hand with his left. See also recent scholarship M. McEvoy "Sharing the Imperial Limelight: The Age of the *Magister Militum*" in C. Davenport & M. McEvoy (eds.) *The Roman Imperial Court in the Principate and Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2023) 172-202; R. Mathisen, 'Ricimer's church in Rome: how an Arian barbarian prospered in a Nicene world', in A. Cain and N. Lenski (eds), *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (London, 2009) 322.

¹⁴⁰ Priscus, *Fr.* 30.1.13.

This final chapter will cover the events leading up to and immediately after the death of Aspar. Like much of Aspar's life, scholars have debated the possible reasons for his death. Some believe that his death was a result of Leo attempting to push out all Gothic power in Constantinople, resulting in a sort of ethnic struggle between the Goths and Isaurians.¹⁴¹ Our later sources have also portrayed Aspar's death as Leo's victory over Homoeanism, indicating another potential reason.¹⁴² Other scholars have sought a simpler answer that focuses on the character of Leo as opposed to the biases presented in the late sources. Croke has acknowledged that while religion may have been a motivator, "it was more about the primal dynastic impulse of retaining power and securing succession, a traditional concern of imperial families and their rivals in every era".¹⁴³ In simple terms, Leo was threatened by Aspar's power and sought to rid himself of the threat. Indeed, it seems Aspar was making moves to cement his power through imperial marriages and the promotion of his sons to office. Further evidence of Aspar's ambitions comes from his commission of a silver plate after his Western consulate. It has been observed that the missorium displays clear iconography of an imperial dynasty. It has also been noted that it was an unusual piece, since issuing a silver plate was normally the action of an emperor, not a consul.¹⁴⁴ The iconography alone indicates that Aspar envisioned an imperial connection for his family, demonstrating his desire to elevate his status.

As we evaluate the circumstances involved in Aspar's downfall, several factors will be discussed to see whether or not Aspar's Homoeanism played any significant role. First, we shall cover the several points of contention reported between Leo and Aspar, including decisions on foreign policy and imperial marriage. The conflicts that arise between Aspar and Leo point to the emperor's attempt to distance himself from the man who had put him on the throne. Next, we shall explore how public pressure and reports of treachery contributed to the diminishing of Aspar's influence and allowed Leo to distance himself from the general further. Finally, the introduction and the role of the Isaurians will be assessed to demonstrate the growing political

¹⁴¹ W. Burgess, 'Isaurian Factions in the Reign of Zeno the Isaurian', *Latomus* 51 (1992), 874–80; Scott (1976), 59–69.

¹⁴² Malalas 14.41 'The emperor Leo carried out a persecution of the Exakionite Arians because of Aspar and Ardaburius, sending decrees everywhere to prevent them possessing churches or gathering together'. Also, see Marcellinus Comes, *Chron.* 471.

¹⁴³ Croke, 'Dynasty', 106-7.

¹⁴⁴ Zaccagnino et al. 'The Missorium', 433. The plate displays the consul Aspar and his son, Ardaburius iunior, beside him. The roundels above depict the elder Ardaburius, Aspar's father, and Plinta, also a former consul and *magister militum*, likely to have been Aspar's father-in-law.

competition that Aspar faced. This section will also explore the debate surrounding the supposed ethnic struggle between the Goths and the Isaurians to see if this event supports this argument or not. Overall, this chapter seeks to prove that the biggest obstacle to Aspar's political career was not his religious affiliation but the normal intense competition for power.

Aspar's Final Day

Before we explore the factors that contributed to Aspar's downfall, it would be beneficial to examine the various accounts of his assassination. Several sources record the murder of Aspar and his sons in 471, but our fullest account comes from Malalas as follows,

During his reign he [Leo] suspected that Aspar the patrician was planning a rebellion, [Aspar] being the leader of the senate, and so he put him to death inside the palace, together with his sons Ardabourios and [the Caesar] Patricius who were also senators, at a *conventus* and mutilated their bodies. A riot began in Constantinople, for the victims had a band of Goths and *comites* and other followers, and a large number of supporters. Then a Goth who was one of Aspar's associates, a *comes* named Ostrys, entered the palace with some other Goths, shooting with their bows. A battle broke out between the *excubitores* and Ostrys, and there were many casualties. He was surrounded and saw that he was beaten, so he fled, taking Aspar's concubine, a beautiful Gothic girl, who escaped with him on horseback to Thrace, where he plundered estates. The Byzantines chanted an acclamation about him, 'the dead man has no friend – except Ostrys.'¹⁴⁵

The account states that Leo had lured Aspar and his two sons to the palace under the guise of a meeting, only to have them killed by his eunuchs. We know from this source, and others, that Aspar and Ardaburius died at that palace, but the fate of Patricius is murky. Most of our sources claim Patricius also died in the palace, and since there is no evidence of his activities after this date, it is likely to be true. It is worth mentioning, however, that Candidus, while stating that Patricius was 'destroyed' along with his brother and father, also mentions that he survived his injuries.¹⁴⁶ While it is enticing to imagine Patricius surviving such a slaughter, we do not hear

¹⁴⁵ Malalas, *Chron* 14.40(Thurn 294–5), trans. Jeffreys et al. (1986), 204–5.

¹⁴⁶ Candidus, *Fr. 1*.

anything about the former caesar after this date, and as Croke has argued, it is hard to imagine Patricius was spared since one of the motivations behind the murders was to remove Patricius from the line of succession.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, it seems highly likely that all three men died in the palace that day. Aspar did have a third son, Hermanaric, who was supposedly moved away before this plot on account of his friendly relationship with Zeno, but it is not clear in our sources who decided on this.¹⁴⁸ The moving of Hermanaric indicates that this plot was planned in detail, suggesting that Leo had felt pressure from Aspar for quite some time before the days leading up to his death.

Malalas' account attributes Aspar's death to his supposed planning of a rebellion and is not the only one to state that Aspar's death came about from his treachery.¹⁴⁹ This assumption is not uncalled when considering that his son, Ardaburius, had been dismissed from office in 466 after his collusion with the Persians was exposed. However, this does not necessarily mean that Aspar was also conspiring to rebel against Leo, as we are told that he agreed to the conditions of his son's dismissal.¹⁵⁰ Early scholars such as Bury have also seen the ousting of Aspar as a way for Leo to push out the 'German/Gothic faction' and replace it with the 'Isaurian faction'.¹⁵¹ Recent scholars have doubted the likelihood of this scenario, which will be discussed below, but it is important to note that the arrival of certain Isaurian generals did intensify the political competition that Aspar faced.

In contrast, some sources appear to lay the blame at the feet of Leo and condemn him for Aspar's murder. One such source includes Evagrius, who in his summary of Priscus' account of the assassination provides us with an alternative reason for Aspar's murder, which accuses Leo of treachery.¹⁵² Malchus further expressed an unfavourable view of Leo in his description of the emperor Zeno, where he contrasts Zeno's personality with that of Leo.¹⁵³ We cannot confirm that

¹⁴⁷ Croke, 'Dynasty', 197-8.

¹⁴⁸ We later find Hermanaric commanding Rugian troops in Zeno's army suggesting they did have a friendly relationship. *PLRE* 2, Herminericus; Candidus, *Fr. 1*.

¹⁴⁹ Procopius, *Wars* 3, 6.27, *V. Dan. Styl.* 66, *Vita Marcelli*, 65.

¹⁵⁰ *V. Dan. Styl.* 39.

¹⁵¹ J.B. Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (London, 1923), 320.

¹⁵² Evagrius, *HE*, 2.16; Priscus, *Fr. 61* '[Priscus the rhetor also tells] how Leo by the use of treachery rewarded Aspar, as it were, for his [Leo's] own promotion and destroyed the man who had made him Emperor together with his sons Ardaburius and Patricius, the latter of whom he had earlier made Caesar in order to win Aspar's favor.'

¹⁵³ Malchus, *fr. 16* in *FCH* 423-4. 'Zeno, the Roman Emperor, did not have in his character the same cruel streak as Leo, nor did he have the constant, inexorable anger that was in Leo... He was not so frantically eager as Leo for

Malchus is referring to Aspar when he accuses Leo of fabricating charges against wealthy men, but it is not out of the question to hypothesize this. Perhaps the most damning piece of evidence comes from Leo's own admission in a letter to the western emperor Anthemius that was intercepted, in which he states, "I put to death Aspar and Ardaburius so that nobody should oppose my orders. You too should execute your son-in-law Ricimer, to prevent him giving you orders."¹⁵⁴ This letter, only known through Malalas' account of it, portrays Leo's motives as deeply personal and casts the death of Aspar as his attempt to gain more control over the eastern Empire. His advice to also take out Ricimer speaks to the threat that the *generalissimos* of the fifth century posed to the emperor's rule. As McEvoy explains, the late fourth and fifth centuries were an age when a *magister militum* held significant dominance within the imperial court, and their power was acknowledged through imperial presentation and policy.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps Leo's actions mark a shift in this age where the power of *generalissimos* began to dwindle in the eastern Empire.

To understand Leo's actions better, we must analyze the political relationship between Aspar and Leo. As we shall see, it appears that initially, the two worked well together with Aspar even influencing some of Leo's imperial policy. Unfortunately, over time things would begin to sour. The nature of their dwindling relationship has been attributed to a few factors, which include Leo's stalling to marry his daughter to Aspar's son, the birth of Leo's son, and Leo's fear of Aspar amassing too much support within court.

Aspar's Relationship with Leo

The start of Leo and Aspar's partnership seemed to have gone well. When the consuls were named for 459, the western consulship went to Ricimer while the eastern position went to Aspar's second son, Patricius. The consulate for Patricius has been speculated to have been a way for Leo to keep his alleged promise about the imperial succession by promoting Aspar's

wealth and profit, and he did not fabricate charges against wealthy men, although he was not wholly above such activity.'

¹⁵⁴ Malalas 14.45 (Thurn 298) trans. Jeffreys et al. (1986), 204–5

¹⁵⁵ McEvoy, 'Magister' 201.

son.¹⁵⁶ This promise, the marriage of Leo's daughter to Aspar's son, is said to be one of the conditions Aspar imposed on Leo to crown him as emperor.¹⁵⁷ Whether there was such a condition, we can infer from later events, such as Patricius being named caesar, that Aspar did aspire to build an imperial dynasty through his children. Leo continued to support Aspar over the next few years by awarding the eastern consulate to associates of Aspar. The eastern consul for 461 was Dagalaifus, who was married to Godisthea, a daughter of Ardaburius the Younger and Aspar's granddaughter.¹⁵⁸ The post of praetorian prefect of the East in 459 was awarded to a certain Vivianus, who was likely connected to Aspar.¹⁵⁹ Thus, at the start of Leo's reign, the general secured important offices for his supporters and family, which ultimately meant that the emperor was surrounded by people loyal to Aspar. Such a situation must have been hard to swallow for Leo, who already owed his throne to Aspar, yet he was likely aware that he could not do much about it at that point. As we shall see, Leo would begin to take steps to distance himself from the general and his supporters, indicating a desire for autonomy.

In addition to securing political office for those close to Aspar, some of Leo's early policies are also said to have been influenced by the general. A few of the first laws issued by Leo in 458 were concerned with the defensive capabilities of the eastern Roman state, which forbade soldiers from turning to private ventures and prohibited military officials from using soldiers for their private benefit.¹⁶⁰ These laws stipulate that the military should remain a professional force paid for by the state. They also ensured that the army was kept in fighting shape to maintain the state's security. Based on Aspar's past actions, it has been argued that the security of the state was a matter that was very dear to him.¹⁶¹ Indeed, Aspar's initial influence over Leo's rule was noticed by others at the time. For example, when Leo, the bishop of Rome,

¹⁵⁶ Croke, 'Dynasty', 60.

¹⁵⁷ McEvoy, 'Becoming Roman' 490 n. 39; Croke, 'Dynasty', 157. The only evidence of this promise in our sources comes from Zonaras 14.1 "Ἄρτι δὲ καταστάντος τοῦ Λέοντος αὐτοκράτορος ὁ Ἄσπαρ ἐπέκειτο βιάζων αὐτὸν Καίσαρα ποιῆσαι θάτερον τῶν υἱῶν αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὴν ὑπόσχεσιν". Zonaras is a late eleventh/ early twelfth century historian who draws from sources such as Josephus and Cassius Dio.

¹⁵⁸ *PLRE* II Fl. Dagalaiphus 2, 340-1. Dagalaifus was another member of the Eastern Empire's military aristocracy. He was also the son of Areobindus, who had been a *magister militum praesentalis* and served as Aspar's colleague as consul in 434 and a co-commander in the Hun wars.

¹⁵⁹ Croke, 'Dynasty', 161-2 speculates that since Vivianus had served as p.p. Orientis in 459-60, which was based in Antioch, it is possible he was connected with Ardaburius the Younger, who was serving as *magister militum Orientis* in Antioch at the time. Bleeker, *Aspar*, 119-120, also suspects their connection based on Aspar's later support of Vivianus in a quarrel with Leo in 466.

¹⁶⁰ *CJ*. IV. 65. 31; *CJ*. XII. 35. 15.

¹⁶¹ Pigonski, *Shields*, 133.

referenced the emperor and his general in his letters, he used terms that likened Aspar to Aetius, which could be read as Aspar's position was that of a *de facto* co-ruler.¹⁶² As we have seen elsewhere, Aspar and Aetius share many similarities

The turning point in Aspar and Leo's relationship, according to Croke, occurred in 463 when a son was born to the imperial couple. Before that, Leo had no male heir, and the birth of a son would have affected the political scene.¹⁶³ Modern scholars state that Aspar chose Leo because he believed his wife, Verina, was too old to bear children. This belief is what supposedly drove Aspar to make Leo promise an imperial marriage for Patricius. However, the assumption that the birth of Leo's son was an unexpected event does not correspond to what is reported in our sources. First, Verina was able to have children as Ariadne, Leo's first daughter, was born ca. 455, just two years before his imperial election. Furthermore, Leontia, Leo's second daughter, was born around 458, which falls just after Leo's accession. The birth of both Leo's daughters around the time of his election to the throne implies that Aspar would have had some awareness that Verina was still fit to bear children. Secondly, there is evidence that Leo was aspiring to have a male child and is said to have prayed for one to Daniel the Stylite.¹⁶⁴ While it seems evident that Aspar sought to have his family married into that of the emperor, it does not appear that he planned to put his sons on the throne, at least not initially.

Perhaps the real strife between Leo and Aspar was spurred by Leo's delaying of an imperial marriage to Aspar's son. As mentioned above, one of the supposed conditions of Leo's elevation to the throne was a promise to marry Aspar's son to Leo's daughter.¹⁶⁵ Initially, it appears that Patricius was promised to Leo's eldest daughter, Ariadne, but as time went on, no imperial marriage occurred. Even by the time Patricius had been proclaimed as caesar in 470, he had yet to marry Ariadne and would never have the chance to do so since she was married to Zeno in 466/67.¹⁶⁶ It does appear that Patricius was eventually betrothed to Leo's daughter at the same time as his appointment to caesar, but it was instead to the younger daughter, Leontia. An unkept promise of an imperial marriage seems more likely to be a point of contention as opposed to the birth of Leo's son, especially if the marriage had been delayed by almost twenty years.

¹⁶² Leo *Ep.* 149; 153.

¹⁶³ Pigonski, *Shields*, 139.

¹⁶⁴ *V. Dan. Styl.* 38.

¹⁶⁵ Croke, 'Dynasty', 61.

¹⁶⁶ *PLRE II Zenon* 7, 1201.

Moreover, several sources report an undated incident in which Aspar grabbed Leo's imperial cloak and allegedly said, "It is not fitting that the one who wears this cloak should lie." To which Leo responded in anger, "Nor is it fitting that he should be driven like a slave."¹⁶⁷ Scholars disagree on the nature and date of the "lie" referred to since there are several points of contention between the two, but Zonaras also records this event, attributing it to an argument over Patricius and his marriage.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, this event demonstrates the contentious relationship that formed between Aspar and Leo over the years which was now making itself public.

We also see attempts by Leo to remove Aspar's supporters from court later in his reign which have led scholars to speculate that Leo was attempting to isolate the general. One example is the appointment of Basiliscus, Leo's brother-in-law, to the office of *magister militum per Thracias* and the replacement of Vivianus as *praefectus praetorio Orientis* in 463. The appointment of Basiliscus has been seen by Pignonski as the first step in Leo challenging the domination of Aspar by promoting officers who are family and supporters of the emperor.¹⁶⁹ The replacement of Vivianus would further imply that Leo was now seeking to replace supporters of Aspar with those who were more loyal to the emperor. Other appointments that came about after the treachery of Ardaburius will be discussed further below, but it seems that Leo began to politically distance himself from Aspar during the 460s.

Aspar and Leo would also face contention over foreign policy, most notably over how to deal with the Huns and the Gothic/Sciri conflict in 467, which has already been discussed in the first and second chapters and requires no further expansion. All these events demonstrate that while Leo may have initially wanted to work with the man who put him on the throne, at some point, Leo felt convinced that he needed to remove Aspar from power. In the next sections, we will examine two events that affected the sons of Aspar and allowed Leo to isolate the general further. These events include the exposure of Ardaburius' letters to the Persians and the public outcry against Patricius' appointment to the position of caesar. As a result of these episodes, we shall see that Leo was able to continue to push Aspar out through the appointment of his supporters and by aligning himself with the Church, an avenue not available to Aspar.

¹⁶⁷ Cedrenus, 379.1 (593–4 Tartaglia) vol 2.

¹⁶⁸ Zonaras 14.1. Also see Croke, 'Dynasty', 66, who discusses the other arguments that could have led to this event, including disagreements over the appointment of a City Prefect of Constantinople.

¹⁶⁹ Pignonski, *Shields*, 141.

Reports of Treason

While Aspar faced his own conflicts with Leo, his sons also played a significant role in the general's downfall. The first major event occurred in 465 at Constantinople when a certain individual named Tarasis/ Tarasicodissa, or Zeno¹⁷⁰, produced for the emperor some incriminating letters from Ardaburius to the Persians which had come into his possession. This episode is summarized in the *Vita* of Daniel the Stylite as follows:

Around the same time, a certain Zeno, an Isaurian by birth, came to the emperor, bringing with him letters, which were written by Ardaburius, who was general of the East at that time, inciting Persians against the Roman state, which he himself agreed to assist. The emperor received the man and perceived the value of the letters. He ordered a meeting to take place and when the senators gathered, the emperor brought forth the letters and ordered them to be read aloud. Among all the senators listening was Patricius, who was Master of Office. After reading them aloud, the emperor said "What do you think?" As they all kept quiet the emperor said to the father of Ardaburius [Aspar] "these are fine things that your son has brought about against the emperor and the Roman state" and the [father] replied "you are ruler and have authority, I am no longer able to control my son after these things, for I many times have sent him advice and warnings not to ruin his life and now I see he has done the opposite. Thus do what comes to your pious mind, dismiss him, and make him come here and defend himself."¹⁷¹

As reported in the *Vita*, a meeting of the senate was called to deal with the treasonous letters. Aspar, as the leading senator, was present as well as Herminericus and Patricius, the brothers of Ardaburius, who were consul and a senator, respectively. Ardaburius himself was not present as he was stationed at Antioch. The letters revealed that he was guilty of inciting the Persian king to launch an attack on Roman territory. Aspar appeared shocked by the revelation but affirmed that

¹⁷⁰ *PLRE* II Zenon 7 1200-1. This is the Zeno who became emperor in 474. See H. Elton, 'Alahan and Zeno', *Anatolian Studies* 52 (2002) 155 for discussion on whether his original name was Tarasis or Tarasicodissa. See also S. Zsolt, 'Once Again on the Original Name of Emperor Zeno of Isauria.' *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 116 (2023) 279–84.

¹⁷¹ *V. Dan. Styl.* 55. Translation is my own.

he was not involved in his son's treacherous dealings, offering to accept whatever punishment Leo decided upon. The emperor immediately dismissed Ardaburius from the position of *magister militum* and stripped him of the title of patrician. Since the *Vita* does not indicate that Aspar even questioned the authenticity of the letters, and given his resigned reaction, this suggests that Aspar believed the letters were genuine.

Scholars have speculated on why Ardaburius would incite the Persians and why he did not receive a greater punishment for his crime of high treason.¹⁷² Given the fragmented and limited number of sources for this time, it is difficult to give an exact reason. In terms of the latter question, Bleeker has suggested that Leo presented Aspar with the letters privately before the senate meeting, which allowed them to arrange an outcome.¹⁷³ He comes to this conclusion based on Aspar's reaction in the *Vita*, where he appears to leave Ardaburius' fate to Leo, but then immediately tells the emperor what that fate should be, suggesting the meeting was following a pre-arranged script. As enticing as this theory might be, we simply have no evidence to confirm that such a private meeting occurred beforehand. What seems more likely is that Aspar was aware that he was losing control of his son but was powerless to stop him. Moreover, Aspar suggests that Ardaburius be recalled to Constantinople to make his defence, implying that he was to receive further punishment upon his return.

Another interesting theory is put forward by Pigonski, which addresses both questions concerning Ardaburius. He approaches the questions by looking at the events between Persia and Rome at the time to suggest that Ardaburius did not incite the Persians to attack Rome directly. He notes that at this time tensions between Rome and Persia were high as a result of the mistreatment of Zoroastrians in the Roman territories, the Romans accepting refugees from Persia, and Leo's refusal to bear some of the expenses of manning the fortresses of the Caspian Gates.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, Lazica, in ancient Colchis, experienced turmoil when a local conflict erupted between the Lazi and Iberians. Given these events, Pigonski speculates that Ardaburius may have indeed contacted the Persian king, but it was to come to some kind of agreement to avoid an outright war in Lazica. The *Vita* claims that Ardaburius urged Perozes to intervene militarily and

¹⁷² Croke, 'Dynasty', 64-5; R. Bleeker, *Aspar*, 133; Pigonski, *Shields*, 145.

¹⁷³ Bleeker, *Aspar*, 132-3.

¹⁷⁴ R.C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy. Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds, 1992) 73-75.

offered his support, but perhaps its author mistakenly (or intentionally) claimed the intervention was supposed to be within Roman territory, while in fact, it could have involved Lazica.¹⁷⁵ Ardaburius might have wanted to organize a joint operation to stabilize the region. If that was indeed the case, Ardaburius may have overstepped in his role as general, thus bringing about Leo's wrath.

It is worth mentioning that other scholars reject the authenticity of the letters outright. Some, such as Siebigs, theorize that Zeno's intrigue to gain the emperor's favour probably fueled the accusations against Ardaburius.¹⁷⁶ There is no doubt that the discovery of these letters did benefit Zeno in gaining support from Leo, but it needs to be stated that, based on the sources available, all that we can say with confidence is that Zeno was responsible for providing the evidence that got Ardaburius fired. Whether we reject or accept the theories posited above, all resulted in the same outcome of Ardaburius being sacked and Aspar's influence being diminished. Perhaps instead of questioning the authenticity of the letters themselves, we should consider the senate meeting called by Leo. The public nature of the meeting, coupled with having the letters read out to all the senators, including Ardaburius' own family, suggests that Leo may have purposely exaggerated the seriousness of the letters to diminish the Ardaburii family. I theorize that Ardaburius likely contacted the Persians, but not to incite them to attack the Romans. My reasoning for this is the fact that Ardaburius was not immediately executed for the high treason he supposedly committed. This either supports the idea that Ardaburius was not inciting anyone to attack Roman territory or that Aspar had enough power at the time to prevent his son from being executed. Realistically, it was probably a mix of Aspar's prominence and the lack of actual treasonous activity that led to Ardaburius being sacked rather than killed.

Regardless of Ardaburius' true motivations or the authenticity of the letters, this event provided Leo with another opportunity to elevate his supporters and further diminish Aspar's influence. Ardaburius was replaced as general by Jordanes, the son of John the Vandal. Jordanes was initially a Homoean like his family, but this changed after his encounter with Daniel the Stylite. Supposedly, Jordanes converted after he met the holy man, which may have paved the

¹⁷⁵ Pigonski, *Shields*, 145-7; Also see G. Greatrex & S. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars* (London, 2002) 56-8.

¹⁷⁶ G. Siebigs, *Kaiser Leo I: Das Oströmische Reich in Den Ersten Drei Jahren Seiner Regierung* (Berlin, 2010) 688.

way for his new appointment, according to scholars.¹⁷⁷ Some believe that Leo chose Jordanes to ally himself more closely with Daniel the Stylite. As McEvoy has argued, emperors of the later fifth century may have felt less secure than their Theodosian predecessors, and given the volatile political situation and the existence of many potential political rivals, they needed the validation that a holy individual like Daniel could offer.¹⁷⁸ Daniel, in particular, was known for having a long list of powerful patrons, including Leo, who built additional columns and platforms for Daniel to live on.¹⁷⁹ Leo is seen seeking further validation from the holy man when he seized the opportunity to take Jordanes to Daniel to be blessed before he departed for Antioch.¹⁸⁰ Following his revelation of the treachery of Ardaburius, Zeno was appointed *comes domesticorum*, which gave him responsibility for the protection of the imperial household and the emperor's own military staff. Thus, with the key armies of Thrace and the East now under the command of Leo's appointees, Basiliscus and Jordanes respectfully, the emperor appears to have gained the advantage over Aspar after this episode.

Public Pressure

As mentioned, Aspar suffered two major setbacks in regards to his sons that contributed to his downfall. The second episode was not related to treasonous letters but instead to a public outcry against Aspar's second-oldest son, Patricius, as caesar. In 470, Patricius married Leo's daughter Leontia and was proclaimed caesar. Being a Homoean like his father and now heir to the imperial throne, this elevation was met with protest by the patriarch, clergy, and monks in the hippodrome, calling for him to convert or step down. It is reported that he chose to convert in hopes of keeping his position as heir. This episode only appears in one early source, the sixth-century *Life of Marcellus*, which describes a heated public meeting first in Hagia Sophia, then

¹⁷⁷ *V. Dan. Styl.* 49. Also see P. Wood, "Multiple Voices in Chronicle Sources: The Reign of Leo I (457–474) in Book Fourteen of Malalas." *JLA* 4 (2011) 311.

¹⁷⁸ M. McEvoy, 'Emperors, Aristocrats, and Columns: Christian Imperial Politics in the Late Fifth Century CE as Reflected in the *Life of Daniel the Stylite*', *JLA* 15 (2022) 436.

¹⁷⁹ R.L. Fox, 'The Life of Daniel', 178-9. Daniel also earned the favour of Emperor Zeno, Anastasius and notable imperial women such as Verina and Eudoxia.

¹⁸⁰ *V. Dan. Styl.* 55 "The Emperor went in solemn procession and led him up to the holy man and related to him all about Ardaburius' plot and Zeno's loyalty; others told him, too, how Jordanes had been appointed General of the East in place of Ardaburius. The holy man rejoiced about Jordanes and gave him much advice in the presence of the Emperor and of all those who were with him then he dismissed them with his blessing." trans. E. Dawes

progressing to the hippodrome, led by the Patriarch Gennadius and Marcellus. The group supposedly stood before the *kathisma* (the royal box), chanting for hours “*Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy)” and making their demands against Patricius.¹⁸¹ Pressure from the public masses could influence imperial politics immensely, and one of the ways this was accomplished was in the hippodrome. The location itself was the focal point in relations between the public and the emperor, where the public could compel him to attend the games, or he could summon the people by appearing in the royal box¹⁸². The people then had the chance to voice their concerns and demands to the emperor, which he could accept, ignore, or instead send in troops to oppose the assembled people. While the public outcry against Patricius seems at first to support the notion that Aspar’s and Patricius’ faith did lead to political turbulence, Snee has rightly observed that the unusual instance of a patriarch and monks acting together might indicate the possibility that this was a carefully choreographed event, possibly by Leo, to prevent the elevation of Aspar’s son.¹⁸³ Even if Leo did not coordinate this event, he certainly was able to capitalize on it by elevating Zeno further.

It is also important to note that *The Life of Marcellus* was written in Constantinople with the hindsight of the sixth century and ties its opposition to the Homoeans to later developments, such as Justinian’s invasion of Vandal Africa. As Lane Fox has indicated, Daniel and Marcellus were contemporaries, but their *Lives* differ when it comes to Aspar and his family. The general’s death is mentioned in Daniel’s *Life* only briefly, while the *Life of Marcellus* expands on these events, even stating that Marcellus had prophesied Aspar’s downfall.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, the *Life of Daniel* omits the entire Patricius episode, while in Marcellus’ *Life*, the story is used to portray the orthodox victory over Homoeanism. Most impressively, nowhere in the *Life of Daniel* is it mentioned that Aspar was a Homoean.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, Daniel’s *Life* depicts the saint as one who opposed doctrinal differences. These factors have led to the argument that the author of Daniel’s *Life* supported religious unity.¹⁸⁶ I want to expand on this argument by suggesting that the date of

¹⁸¹ *Vita Marcelli* 34.

¹⁸² G. Greatrex, ‘The Nika Riot: A Reappraisal’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997) 63.

¹⁸³ Snee, ‘Gregory’, 183–84.

¹⁸⁴ *V. Dan. Styl.* 66 “When Aspar and his sons stirred up a rebellion against the most pious Emperor Leo, He 'that maketh wars to cease unto the ends of the earth fought on the side of the pious Emperor and destroyed them both,” trans. E. Dawes.

¹⁸⁵ R. Lane Fox, ‘The Life of Daniel’, 200.

¹⁸⁶ R. Lane Fox, ‘The Life of Daniel’, 208.

composition also affected the works. The *Life of Daniel* was written in 496, only a few years after Daniel's death, whereas the *Life of Marcellus* was written about a hundred years after his. As mentioned, we see in the sixth century a renewed effort on Justinian's part to completely wipe the Homoean Vandals out of Africa and Constantinople. Given the nature of Justinianic propaganda at the time, particularly the use of the Homoeanism of the Vandal kingdom as a pretext for legitimizing Roman attacks against them, it is likely that this propaganda influenced the author of the *Life of Marcellus*. Therefore, we see a greater bias against any groups or individuals deemed heretical.

As we have seen, Aspar faced many challenges to his political career. These challenges included two major setbacks in regards to his sons, but overall, we do not see Aspar's Homoeanism being a direct cause for his political downfall. In fact, the events highlighted above reflect the normal intense competition for power rather than an attempt to erase all Homoeans from imperial politics. In the final section of this chapter, we shall examine the rise of the Isaurians, most notably Zeno, who would be the last political rival Aspar faced before his death. Despite some scholars seeing the Isaurians as Leo's attempt to push out all German/Gothic power from court, it will be argued that this was simply a conflict between two powerful families and their political allies. While Leo likely did not plot to bring in the Isaurians to deal with the Goths, he probably did see an opportunity to align himself with a rising general who was not beholden to Aspar.

The Isaurians

Near the end of Aspar's political career, he faced intense political competition from Leo's newest favoured general, Zeno the Isaurian. Before covering the career of Zeno and the competition he brought to Aspar, it is important to mention that recent scholarship has rightly attempted to provide a historical account of the political situation during the reign of Leo that does not assume that the Isaurians were being used as political pawns against Aspar specifically. Past research has often characterized the Isaurians as the barbarian group that Leo brought in to push Aspar and the

Goths out of political prominence.¹⁸⁷ Attractive as this characterization may be, it misrepresents the Isaurians and their role within the Roman military and imperial politics. Recent research, most notably from Elton on the reign of the emperor Zeno has turned attention away from seeing this as a conflict between the Germanic Goths under Aspar and the Isaurians under Zeno. Instead, he argues that this simply can be seen as divisions between two families and their political allies.¹⁸⁸ This chapter adapts this view but also argues that Leo saw an opportunity in this division and, coupled with his already-waning relationship with Aspar, seized it by elevating Zeno. This middle ground allows for the misrepresentation of the view that this was a conflict between two ethnicities to be disregarded, but still supports the idea that political competition, mainly from Zeno, had a greater impact on Aspar's political downfall than his religious affiliation.

The first influential Isaurian to enter imperial service and provide competition for Aspar and his family was Zeno, not the future emperor, but his countryman.¹⁸⁹ He was *magister militum per Orientem* from 447-51, consul in 448 and *patricius* by 451. Zeno played an influential role in policy against Attila, something that would become a point of contention in the future for Aspar and Leo.¹⁹⁰ More impressively, Zeno accomplished these feats in the 440s, which was during the time of Aspar's domination in the imperial court. His career demonstrates that an Isaurian could achieve a high military rank even during the period when Aspar and his supporters supposedly dominated politics, attesting that Aspar was not the only important figure in the imperial court and had competition from individuals.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, the success of Zeno against the Huns could have presented an opportunity for the future emperor Leo regarding a disagreement he would have with Aspar; that there were other individuals he could elevate and rely on besides Aspar. This Zeno would die during the reign of Marcian, but soon there would be a new Zeno to challenge Aspar.

¹⁸⁷ E.W. Brooks, 'The Emperor Zenon and the Isaurians', *English Historical Review*, 8 (1893), 209-38; Burgess, 'Isaurian Factions', 874-880.

¹⁸⁸ Elton, 'Illus', 393-407.

¹⁸⁹ *PLRE* II Zenon 6.

¹⁹⁰ It is reported that Leo did not take Aspar's advice on how to deal with the Huns. See Croke, 'Dynasty', 79, Snee 'Gregory', 181-2.

¹⁹¹ Elton 'Illus' 396.

The next and final important individual to discuss, who also happened to be Isaurian, is Tarasis/ Tarasicodissa, who would later become emperor and change his name to Zeno in honour of the countryman. He had already served in the military by 466 CE when he arrived at Constantinople with the supposedly treasonous letters of Ardaburius. As a result of this evidence, Ardaburius was dismissed from office, but not Aspar. The fact that Aspar himself was not dismissed supports the notion that Leo did not bring in the Isaurians specifically to eliminate Aspar and the Germanic Goths. Tarasicodissa was then appointed to the post of *comes domesticorum* and married the daughter of Leo, Ariadne. At this point, he takes the name Zeno, in honour of the earlier Zeno. We also hear from Candidus that the elevation of Zeno was spurred by a disagreement between the emperor and Aspar over the promotion of Titianius to consul in 466 instead of Aspar's supporter, Vivianus. According to Photius' summary of Candidus:

He [Candidus] mentions Titianus and Vivianus and relates how Aspar and the emperor disagreed over them and what they said to one another. He tells how, as a result of this, the Emperor allied himself with the Isaurian people through Tarasicodissa, the son of Rusumbladeotus whose name he changed to Zeno and whom he made his son-in-law after Zeno's former wife had died.¹⁹²

This passage initially appears to support the argument that Leo used the Isaurians to push the Goths out of Constantinople, but we must note that the only evidence for this statement is that Zeno was promoted by the emperor. If we look at the timeline of these events, we first see that Zeno comes to the emperor with the Persian letters, then the consular appointment of Titianius occurs later that year (465). This sequence of events supports the idea that Zeno had already earned Leo's favour before this disagreement, and since the emperor already had multiple points of contention with Aspar, he might have opted to support another general who had already proven his value to Leo. Indeed, this appears to be the case as in the following years he was appointed *magister militum* in Thrace from 467/8 to 469 CE. During this time, Aspar attempted to have him assassinated while Zeno was campaigning in the Balkans, which demonstrates how Aspar himself was worried about Zeno's further elevation. Zeno was then appointed as *magister militum per Orientem* from 469 to 471 CE, the year of Aspar's murder, but he was not in Constantinople during that time.

¹⁹² Candidus, *Fr. I*, trans. Blockley.

As already mentioned, Leo and Aspar had a series of problems towards the end of Aspar's life, which included their disagreement on certain policies and actions taken against the Huns and Titianius. These problems never directly involved the Isaurians, and when Leo had Aspar murdered on his order, he did so using the palace eunuchs. Moreover, the subsequent counterattack of Ostrys, one of Aspar's supporters, was aimed at the palace and not the Isaurians. Had Leo truly brought in the Isaurians specifically to eliminate Aspar and the Goths, we would have likely seen more involvement of the Isaurians in the death of Aspar. Instead, what appears to be happening is that Leo saw an opportunity through the successes of the two Zenos to elevate an individual he felt fit his rule and policies better than the antagonistic Aspar, when he was already in conflict with him on imperial policy. Additionally, Burgess has concluded at the end of his list of names of Isaurians associated with Zeno and Illus that we do not see factions of Isaurians but instead two main prominent families and their supporters.¹⁹³ This conclusion further supports the argument that this was not a competition between ethnic factions but competition between powerful families, mainly those of Zeno and Aspar.

Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, many circumstances contributed to Aspar's political downfall. Many of these circumstances and events reflect the nature of imperial politics and the intense political competition between individuals and their families. This is most prominently seen in Aspar's fraying relationship with Leo, as the emperor sought to free himself of his debt to the general who put him on the throne. As a result, Leo aligned himself with other supporters with whom Aspar had no links, such as Jordanes and Zeno, who were also politically successful during the time of Aspar's prominence. This conclusion also becomes evident when we see attempts by Leo to create his own dynasty outside of the control of Aspar. This was achieved by stalling the marriage between Patricius and Ariadne and by the birth of his own male heir, who unfortunately died months later. We then see Leo marry Ariadne to Zeno, further supporting the argument that Leo was seeking allies outside of those loyal to the family of Aspar.

¹⁹³ Burgess 'Zeno', 878.

Additionally, the sons of Aspar suffered two major crises that would also leave a stain upon the general's political career. The treachery of Ardaburius, whether real or fabricated by Leo, allowed the emperor to replace Aspar's son with his own supporter, Jordanes. The final nail in the coffin came when there was a public outcry against Patricius being named caesar because of his Homoean affiliation. As mentioned, some scholars question whether Leo orchestrated the event, but whether he did or not, he was able to capitalize on the public outrage by further promoting Zeno. All this would come to an end when Leo had his eunuchs assassinate Aspar, Ardaburius, and Patricius in the imperial palace, and supposedly advised the western emperor, Anthemius, to do the same to Ricimer.

Finally, we should avoid the assumption that since Leo aligned himself with Zeno, he sought to use the Isaurians to push the Goths out of Constantinople. This narrative is not only misleading about the events that occurred and the history of the Isaurians within the Roman army, but also calls into question the success that certain Isaurians were able to achieve within imperial politics. The first Zeno, was able to gain prominence before Leo ever took the throne, demonstrating that the Isaurians were already in imperial service long before Leo's influence. Instead, we should see the promotion of the later Zeno as evidence of the normal intense political competition that occurred between individuals at the imperial court and their families.

General Conclusion

The argument that Aspar's religious affiliation was detrimental to his political career is misguided and does not accurately reflect his success and longevity. This thesis has demonstrated that Aspar was able to achieve great prominence in imperial politics by wielding enough power to put two different men on the throne. Not only that, but he remained a prominent figure in the court of the eastern empire for almost fifty years, an impressive tenure we must acknowledge. He was able to obtain notable positions such as patrician and western consul. Moreover, Aspar maintained his prominence through a series of public and ecclesiastical services in which he

often acted as a safe outsider who provided mediation in conflicts pertaining to the orthodox church.

In this study, we have seen that despite being named a heresy, Homoeanism, often referred to as Homoeanism, maintained a presence in the empire up until the reign of Justinian, its presence mostly tolerated by emperors, but it still met with some resistance by church writers. The large Gothic presence in the military is also an important factor in the tolerance granted by the emperor, as many of the Gothic soldiers in the Roman army were also followers of Homoeanism, and yet their role in the military was necessary for the empire. Thus, we see the emperors of this time acting more pragmatically to maintain the loyalty of their troops, but also being careful not to give too much support to the Homoeans so as not to upset the followers of the Nicene and Chalcedonian doctrine. Thus, we see that the army acted as a means for acquiring political influence, especially for those considered outsiders, which allowed Aspar to gain such elevation and power within the imperial court.

Upon evaluating Aspar's life and political career, we see that his life was not solely dictated by his religion. His political dominance is seen most distinctly in his role of putting both Marcian and Leo on the throne. Moreover, the positions he held and the power he was able to exert are more impressive when we see that Aspar had a lacklustre military record when compared with other notable generals of the time. When we assess his life in detail, many of his actions attest to the more pragmatic nature of Aspar and his desire to act in what he considers to be in the best interests of the state. This pragmatism is also seen in his intervention in ecclesiastical affairs, where he chose to support individuals such as Theodoret and Timothy, whose popularity could have led to violence if they were further persecuted. The strongest evidence to support the argument that Aspar's political career was not determined by his religious affiliation comes from the benefactions he and his family made to the Nicene Church of St Anastasia in Constantinople. These actions tend to indicate a man who understood and cared for the people of Constantinople rather than a heretic plotting to overthrow the Empire. His role as a man of the people is also evident in the various public services he performed, including building a large cistern in Constantinople and his role in vanquishing a great fire that threatened the city.

Furthermore, we need to be wary of assuming that every individual in imperial politics was seeking the throne as their end goal. This is where I believe most of the misconceptions around Aspar's 'lack' of political success originates. It was argued in this thesis that Aspar likely never wanted the throne himself and was content with being able to exert his power from the sidelines. This role is also taken by other generalissimos of the fourth and fifth centuries, most notably Aetius and Ricimer. We should ask ourselves why these men chose to remain behind the scenes instead of jumping to the conclusion that their respective religion or ethnicity acted as a barrier to their success. The answer to this question may give us valuable insight into the inner workings of the imperial political machine of Late Antiquity.

The same point can be made about the arguments surrounding his death that also blame his Homoeanism. As McEvoy accurately concludes, "Their [Aspar and his sons] deaths were the simple result of the dangers of high Roman politics, just as the deaths of the western generals Stilicho and Aetius before them had been."¹⁹⁴ As we have seen, many circumstances contributed to Aspar's political downfall. The majority of these reflect the nature of imperial politics, where individuals and their families compete for prominence. We see this most evidently in Aspar's deteriorating relationship with Leo, as the emperor aligned himself with other supporters with whom Aspar had no ties, such as Jordanes and Zeno. These men were also politically successful during Aspar's prominence, demonstrating the multiple players within imperial politics. This conclusion is also supported by attempts by Leo to create his own dynasty outside of the control of Aspar, which included postponing the marriage between Patricius and Ariadne and later marrying her to Zeno instead.

Future research should focus on these complex parts of the imperial political machine. While it is easier and more enticing to associate a person's dramatic downfall with their religion or ethnicity, Aspar's career has shown that a person's end often comes from intense political competition among individuals, which was normal in the Roman world and even in today's society. When we limit ourselves to these black and white conclusions, we often misrepresent the complexities of imperial politics. To reflect again on Procopius' statement, which is often used as evidence against the main argument of this thesis:

¹⁹⁴ McEvoy 'Becoming Roman', 506.

For Aspar himself, being an adherent of the Arian faith, and having no intention of changing it for another, was unable to enter upon the imperial office, but he was easily strong enough to establish another in it.¹⁹⁵

We must consider all that Procopius tells us. While he does affirm that Aspar's Homoeanism may have prevented him from the throne, it did not stop him from being able to easily put someone else on it. That in itself should stand as a testament to the success Aspar saw in his political career.

¹⁹⁵ Procopius *Wars* 3.6.3. trans. Dewing.

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