The western half of the Roman Empire, as a political unit, formally came to an end in 476CE with the deposing of the last Roman emperor in the west. The deposing of the last western emperor was the result of a chain of events set in motion by the Gothic migration of 376 CE.

In 376, the Goths appeared along the Danube River frontier and petitioned the emperor of the eastern half of the empire, whose name was Valens, for permission to cross the Danube River and enter the empire. Often, we speak of the Goths as a barbarian tribe, but technically that’s not correct. The Goths and other tribes—the Vandals, the Franks, for example—were really collections of different tribes.

A tribe is a group of people who claim common descent from a single ancestor, whether real or mythical, and all of the Goths did not claim descent from one individual. Rather, they were a confederation, a frequently shifting, always changing confederation of different tribes who really thought of themselves as Goths only after coming into contact with the Romans affixed this label to them.

The Goths originally came from northern Poland. Although the Romans believed they hailed from Scandinavia, recent archaeological excavations suggest that they did not come from Scandinavia. They resided in northern Poland until about A.D. 100, at which point they began to migrate southward toward the Black Sea, where the weather was much more pleasant and the farmland more fertile.

**Commerce and Coexistence on the Danube**

They reached the Black Sea in c.250, and at that point were very close to the boundaries of the Roman Empire, which helps to explain their raids of the Roman Empire in the 250s, 260s, and 270s. However, following the accession of Diocletian and his restoration of the Roman frontiers, relations between the Goths and the Romans had been relatively peaceful. There was always the occasional punch-up, but for the most part, the two groups were relatively happy to coexist with one another as long as the Danube River separated them.

For more than a century before 376, the Goths had been exposed to Roman culture in various ways and had come to appreciate that culture. We know that the Romans traded with the Goths who lived across the Danube River because we found plenty of empty Roman win jugs in Gothic territory; either the Romans were hurling their empties across the width of the Danube, or the Goths were learning to like drinking wine. We found a fair number of Roman coins on the Gothic side of the Danube River as well, and we know that on occasion the Romans would recruit soldiers from among the Goths, hiring mercenaries who would serve as far away as Syria and Palestine.
Christians among the Barbarians
Another sign of Roman influence on the Goths, even before the Goths entered the empire in 376, was the fact that there were some Christians among the Goths. There were not many Christians yet; the Goths were still predominately a pagan group in 376, but you could find a handful of Christians. For example, there is one Goth named Ulfila, who was, in fact, a descendant of Romans captured in the raids of the 3rd century who had, nonetheless, become Gothic by ethnicity. Ulfila was then, as a Christian Goth, dispatched by the barbarians as an ambassador to Constantinople, and there around 340 he was consecrated as a Christian bishop and charged with ministering to those Christians who were living among the Goths. Ulfila even translated the Bible into the Gothic language, although he only won a few new converts among the Goths upon his return to them.
When the Goths asked for permission—politely asked for permission—to enter the Roman Empire in 376, therefore, they were not an entirely alien group. There was more than a century of coexistence between Romans and Goths behind this request, and they were not coming as invaders; they were coming as migrants.

Refugees, Migrants, or Invaders?
The Goths’ intention was not to take over the Roman Empire. What drove them to ask for permission to cross the Danube River and enter the Roman Empire was fear of the Huns. Huns were central Asian nomads who had been moving westward for some time and had been placing a great deal of military pressure on the Goths, and the Goths wanted to put the Danube River between themselves and the Huns. In a sense, the Goths were refugees in 376, seeking the protection of the Roman Empire.
Why would the Romans have allowed the Goths to enter, though? In some respects the Romans had every reason not to allow the Goths to enter in 376, because for all of the wine jugs and coins that we can find in the Gothic territories across the Danube, the Goths were still different.

Trousers, Butter, and Beer
They were still Germanic barbarians, and, in many respects, unlike the Romans. To a Roman, the Goths and all Germanic barbarians looked funny, smelled funny, sounded funny. They looked funny, in part, because their clothing was odd. It was heavy and bulky; they had not lost their Polish roots, and they tended to wear heavy furs. They also wore clothing that was sewn and fitted, such as trousers. The barbarian legacy to Europe is mostly trousers. To Romans, who preferred loose clothing that you draped around yourself, tunics—not toga; those were purely ceremonial by this point in time—the trousers just looked strange. Wouldn’t it have been better to have had something that you didn’t have to buy a new pair of every two years because you had expanded in size?
In addition to wearing these strange leggings, the hair of the Goths seemed odd. It was long, straggly, and some of it was on their faces. Aside from the radical Julian the Apostate, Romans preferred to be clean-shaven, and they preferred short hair. Even worse, barbarians styled their hair by using rancid butter that you didn’t want to use for cooking sometimes, which kept your hair in place but gave off a very distinctive odor, and one snide Roman poet of the 5th century penned the immortal line:” happy the nose that cannot smell a barbarian.”

In addition to putting strange substances in their hair that the Roman nose found offensive, the German barbarians drank, not wine, but a beverage that was brown and noxious- Beer, made from grain. However, perhaps the worst of all, was they did not speak the beautiful, mellifluous Latin that Romans so prized. Instead they spoke the undeniably harsh and grating Germanic dialects, of which English is one horrible-sounding example. Indeed, the Roman term “barbarian” derived from the Roman conception of foreigners’ speaking habits. To Roman ears, a Germanic conversation sounded like this: “Bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-bar-
It was unintelligible gibberish but also very guttural and so the term “barbarians,” the people who said “bar-bar” all the time, came to be the label affixed by Romans to the Goths.

DO THE FOLLOWING ON NOTEBOOK PAPER


IDENTIFY THE FOLLOWING – 1. The Franks 2. Ulfila

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING USING COMPLETE SENTENCES
1. What has recent archaeological excavation suggested was the “place of origin of the Goths?
2. What stopped the Goths from raiding the Roman Empire in the late 3rd Century?
3. What major European River formed the boundary between the Goths and the Roman Empire in the 4th Century?
4. What was the Goths intention when they entered the Roman Empire in 376 CE?
5. Why did a Roman say “Happy is the nose that can not smell a barbarian”?
6. Why do songs in Spanish or Italian sound better that those in English?