Sueves remained in Spain, though the Visigoths conquered most of their kingdom in the course of the sixth century. When, after the death in 453 of the powerful Hunnic leader Attila, the empire that he had created along the Danubian frontier collapsed, still other groups—Ostrogoths, Rugi, Gepids—moved into the Roman Empire. Each arrived with a “deal” from the Roman government; they hoped to work for Rome and reap its rewards. In 476 the last Roman emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus (r.475–476), was deposed by Odoacer (433–493), a barbarian (from one of the lesser tribes, the Sciri) leading Roman troops. Odoacer promptly had himself declared king of Italy and, in a bid to “unite” the Empire, sent Augustulus’ imperial insignia to emperor Zeno (r.474–491). But Zeno in his turn authorized Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, to attack Odoacer in 489. Four years later, Theodoric’s conquest of Italy was complete. Not much later the Franks, long used to fighting for the Romans, conquered Gaul under Clovis (r.481/482–511), a Roman official and king of the Franks, by defeating a provincial governor of Gaul and several barbarian rivals. Meanwhile other barbarian groups set up their own kingdoms.

Around the year 500 the former Roman Empire was no longer like a scarf flung around the Mediterranean; it was a mosaic. (See Map 1.3.) Northwest Africa was now the Vandal kingdom, Spain the Visigothic kingdom, Gaul the kingdom of the Franks, and Italy the kingdom of the Ostrogoths. The Anglo-Saxons occupied southeastern Britain; the Burgundians formed a kingdom centered in what is today Switzerland. Only the eastern half of the Empire—the long end of the scarf—remained intact.