

The Fall of the Roman Empire

A Century of Crisis

Historians generally agree that the end of the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180) marked the end of two centuries of peace and prosperity known as the Pax Romana. The rulers that followed in the next century had little or no idea of how to deal with the giant empire and its growing problems. As a result, Rome began to decline.

Rome's Economy Weakens

During the third century A.D., several factors prompted the weakening of Rome's economy. Hostile tribes outside the boundaries of the empire and pirates on the Mediterranean Sea disrupted trade. Having reached their limit of expansion, the Romans lacked new sources of gold and silver. Desperate for revenue, the government raised taxes. It also started minting coins that contained less and less silver. It hoped to create more money with the same amount of precious metal. However, the economy soon suffered from inflation, a drastic drop in the value of money coupled with a rise in prices.

Agriculture faced equally serious problems. Harvests in Italy and western Europe became increasingly meager because overworked soil had lost its fertility. What's more, years of war had destroyed much

farmland. Eventually, serious food shortages and disease spread, and the population declined.

Military and Political Turmoil

By the third century A.D., the Roman military was also in disarray. Over time, Roman soldiers in general had become less disciplined and loyal. They gave their allegiance not to Rome but to their commanders, who fought among themselves for the throne. To defend against the increasing threats to the empire, the government began to recruit mercenaries, foreign soldiers who fought for money. While mercenaries would accept lower pay than Romans, they felt little sense of loyalty to the empire.

Feelings of loyalty eventually weakened among average citizens as well. In the past, Romans cared so deeply about their republic that they willingly sacrificed their lives for it. Conditions in the later centuries of the empire caused citizens to lose their sense of patriotism. They became indifferent to the empire's fate.

Emperors Attempt Reform

Remarkably, Rome survived intact for another 200 years. This was due largely to reform-minded emperors and the empire's division into two parts.

Diocletian Reforms the Empire

In A.D. 284, Diocletian, a strong-willed army leader, became the new emperor. He ruled with an iron fist and severely limited personal freedoms. Nonetheless, he restored order to the empire and increased its strength. Diocletian doubled the size of the Roman army and sought to control inflation by setting fixed prices for goods. To restore the prestige of the office of emperor, he claimed descent from the ancient Roman gods and created elaborate ceremonies to present himself in a godlike aura.

Diocletian believed that the empire had grown too large and too complex for one ruler. In perhaps his most significant reform, he divided the empire into the Greek-speaking East (Greece, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt) and the Latin-speaking West (Italy, Gaul, Britain, and Spain). He took the eastern half for himself and appointed a co-ruler for the West. While Diocletian shared authority, he kept overall control. His half of the empire, the East, included most of the empire's great cities and trade centers and was far wealthier than the West.

Because of ill health, Diocletian retired in A.D. 305. However, his plans for orderly succession failed. Civil war broke out immediately. By 311, four rivals were competing for

power. Among them was an ambitious young commander named Constantine, the same Constantine who would later end the persecution of Christians.

Constantine Moves the Capital

Constantine gained control of the western part of the empire in A.D. 312 and continued many of the social and economic policies of Diocletian. In 324 Constantine also secured control of the East, thus restoring the concept of a single ruler.

In A.D. 330, Constantine took a step that would have great consequence for the empire. He moved the capital from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium in what is now Turkey. The new capital stood on the Bosphorus Strait, strategically located for trade and defense purposes on a crossroads between West and East.

With Byzantium as its capital, the center of power in the empire shifted from Rome to the east. Soon the new capital stood protected by massive walls and filled with imperial buildings modeled after those in Rome. The city eventually took a new name—Constantinople or the city of Constantine. After Constantine's death, the empire would again be divided. The East would survive; the West would fall.

The Western Empire Crumbles

The decline of the Western Roman Empire took place over

many years. Its final collapse was the result of worsening internal problems, the separation of the Western Empire from the wealthier Eastern part, and outside invasions.

Germanic Invasions Since the days of Julius Caesar, Germanic peoples had gathered on the northern borders of the empire and coexisted in relative peace with Rome. Around A.D. 370, all that changed when a fierce group of Mongol nomads from central Asia, the Huns, moved into the region and began destroying all in their path.

In an effort to flee from the Huns, the various Germanic people pushed into Roman lands. (Romans called all invaders "barbarians," a term that they used to refer to non-Romans.) They kept moving through the Roman provinces of Gaul,

Spain, and North Africa. The Western Empire was unable to field an army to stop them. In 410, hordes of Germans overran Rome itself and plundered it for three days.

Attila the Hun

Meanwhile, the Huns, who were indirectly responsible for the Germanic assault on the empire, became a direct threat. In 444, they united for the first time under a powerful chieftain named Attila. With his 100,000 soldiers, Attila terrorized both halves of the empire. In the East, his armies attacked and

plundered 70 cities. (They failed, however, to scale the high walls of Constantinople.)

The Huns then swept into the West. In A.D. 452, Attila's forces advanced against Rome, but bouts of famine and disease kept them from conquering the city. Although the Huns were no longer a threat to the empire after Attila's death in 453, the Germanic invasions continued.

An Empire No More

The last Roman emperor, a 14-year-old boy named Romulus Augustulus, was ousted by German forces in 476. After that, no emperor even pretended to rule Rome and its western provinces.

Roman power in the western half of the empire had disappeared. The eastern half of the empire, which came to be called the Byzantine Empire, not only survived but flourished. It preserved the great heritage of Greek and Roman culture for another 1,000 years. Byzantine emperors ruled from Constantinople and saw themselves as heirs to the power of Augustus Caesar. The empire endured until 1453, when it fell to the Ottoman Turks. Even though Rome's political power in the West ended, its cultural influence did not. Its ideas, customs, and institutions influenced the development of Western civilization—and still do so today.