

4 The Decline of the Roman Empire

TERMS & NAMES

- inflation
- mercenary
- Diocletian
- Constantinople
- Alaric
- Attila

MAIN IDEA

Internal problems and nomadic invasions spurred the division and decline of the Roman empire.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The decline and fall of great civilizations is a repeating pattern in world history.

SETTING THE STAGE In the third century A.D., Rome faced many problems. They came both from within the empire and from outside. Drastic economic, military, and political reforms would be needed to hold off collapse.

A Century of Crisis

Historians generally agree that the Roman Empire began its decline at the end of the reign of the last of the Five Good Emperors, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180). The rulers that followed in the next century had little or no idea of how to deal with the problems facing the empire. Most, like Aurelius' son Commodus, were brutal and incompetent. They left the empire greatly weakened.

Rome's Economy Declines During the *Pax Romana*, bustling trade flowed over routes patrolled by Roman legions and ships. Rome's treasuries were enriched by gold and silver taken from conquered territories. Most important of all, the empire's farms grew enough grain to feed the population of the cities. During the third century A.D., all three sources of prosperity evaporated.

Hostile tribes outside the boundaries of the empire and pirates on the Mediterranean Sea disrupted trade. Frequent wars were costly. The wealthy spent money on luxury goods from China, India, and Arabia. This spending drained the empire of gold and silver. Since the empire's expansion had come to an end, there were no new sources of precious metals.

Desperate to pay its mounting expenses, including the rising cost of defense, 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. Farmland was destroyed by warfare. The higher taxes imposed by the government caused many poor farmers to abandon their lands. The use of cheap slave labor had discouraged improvements in technology. Serious food shortages resulted for all these reasons. Eventually, disease spread and the population declined.

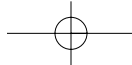
Rome Faces Military Upheaval The empire's economic crisis was worsened by its growing military troubles. Throughout the third century, Germanic tribes repeatedly overwhelmed the Roman legions guarding the northern frontiers. At the same time, Persia threatened Roman territory in Syria and Anatolia. (Romans

This Roman road, still in use in Manchester, England, was part of a 53,000-mile network of paved roads that connected the far-flung empire.



THINK THROUGH HISTORY

A. Analyzing Causes What caused the weakening of the Roman economy?



called all invaders “barbarians,” a term that they used to refer to non-Romans.) Rome’s most humiliating defeat occurred in A.D. 260, when the Persians captured the emperor Valerian.

In the army, discipline and loyalty had collapsed. Soldiers gave their loyalty 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.

Roman Politics Decay Loyalty was in fact a key problem, perhaps the most serious of all. 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.

Romans had once considered holding political office to be an honor. It was also an opportunity to gain wealth. By the 200s, however, local officials usually lost money because they were required to pay for the costly public circuses and baths out of their own pockets. Few people chose to serve the government under those conditions.

Only the armies remained actively interested in politics. In a 50-year period (A.D. 235–284), armies in the provinces and in Rome proclaimed 50 generals to be emperors of Rome. Of these “barracks emperors,” 26 briefly won the approval of the Roman senate; 25 died violently.

Emperors Attempt Reform

Remarkably, the empire survived intact for another 200 years. Its life was prolonged by reforming emperors and by its division into two parts: eastern and western.

Diocletian Reforms the Empire In A.D. 284, **Diocletian**, a strong-willed army leader, became the new emperor. With amazing boldness, he restored order in the empire and increased its strength. To accomplish this, he governed as an absolute ruler and severely limited personal freedoms.

Diocletian doubled the size of the Roman armies, drafting prisoners of war and hiring German mercenaries. He attempted to control inflation by setting fixed prices for goods. He also ordered farmers to remain on their lands and other workers to stay in their jobs for life. To restore the prestige of the office of emperor, Diocletian claimed descent from the ancient Roman gods. He viewed Christianity as a threat and passed decrees to persecute the Christians.

Diocletian believed that the empire had grown too large and too complex for one ruler. In 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, Britannia, and Spain). He took the eastern half for himself and appointed a co-ruler for the West, General Maximian. Each emperor also selected an assistant, who was to be his successor. 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.

Diocletian’s reforms slowed the decline of the empire. The borders became safe again, and the emperor’s prestige was restored. Because of ill health, Diocletian took the extraordinary step of retiring in A.D. 305.

However, his plans for orderly succession failed. Civil war broke out immediately. By 311, four rivals were competing for power.

HISTORY MAKERS



Diocletian
A.D. 245?–313

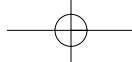
Diocletian, who may have been born the son of a slave in the province of Dalmatia, raised the office of emperor to a form of divine monarch. He declared himself to be a son of Jupiter, the father of the gods. He devised elaborate ceremonies to present himself in a godlike aura.

When he appeared in public, trumpets heralded his entrance. Anyone who approached the imperial presence had to kneel and kiss the hem of his robe. He had his clothing and shoes decorated with precious gems. By his actions, Diocletian sought to restore the dignity of the emperor. He also hoped to give himself greater security by making assassination appear to be a crime against the gods.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

B. Supporting Opinions

Do you think Diocletian was a good emperor?



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 (bih-ZAN-shee-ulm), 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 was protected by massive walls and filled with imperial buildings modeled after those in Rome. The city was given a new name—**Constantinople** (KAHN-stan-tuhn-OH-puhl), city of Constantine. After Constantine's death, the empire would again be divided. The East would survive; the West would fall.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

C. Analyzing

Motives Why did Constantine choose the location of Byzantium for his new capital?

Invaders Overrun the Western Empire

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.

Since the days of Julius Caesar, Germanic peoples had gathered on the northern borders of the Empire. Some groups settled into a peaceful farming life. Eventually they adopted Roman ways, such as speaking Latin and becoming Christians. Other groups remained nomads. From A.D. 376 to 476, huge numbers of Germans poured

Multiple Causes: Fall of the Western Roman Empire

Contributing Factors

Political

- Political office seen as burden, not reward
- Military interference in politics
- Civil war and unrest
- Division of empire
- Moving of capital to Byzantium

Social

- Decline in interest in public affairs
- Low confidence in empire
- Disloyalty, lack of patriotism, corruption
- Contrast between rich and poor

Economic

- Poor harvests
- Disruption of trade
- No more war plunder
- Gold and silver drain
- Inflation
- Crushing tax burden
- Widening gap between rich and poor and increasingly impoverished Western empire

Military

- Threat from northern European tribes
- Low funds for defense
- Problems recruiting Roman citizens; recruiting of non-Romans
- Decline of patriotism and loyalty among soldiers

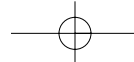
Immediate Causes

- Pressure from Huns
- Invasion by Germanic tribes and by Huns
- Sack of Rome
- Conquest by invaders

FALL OF ROMAN EMPIRE

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

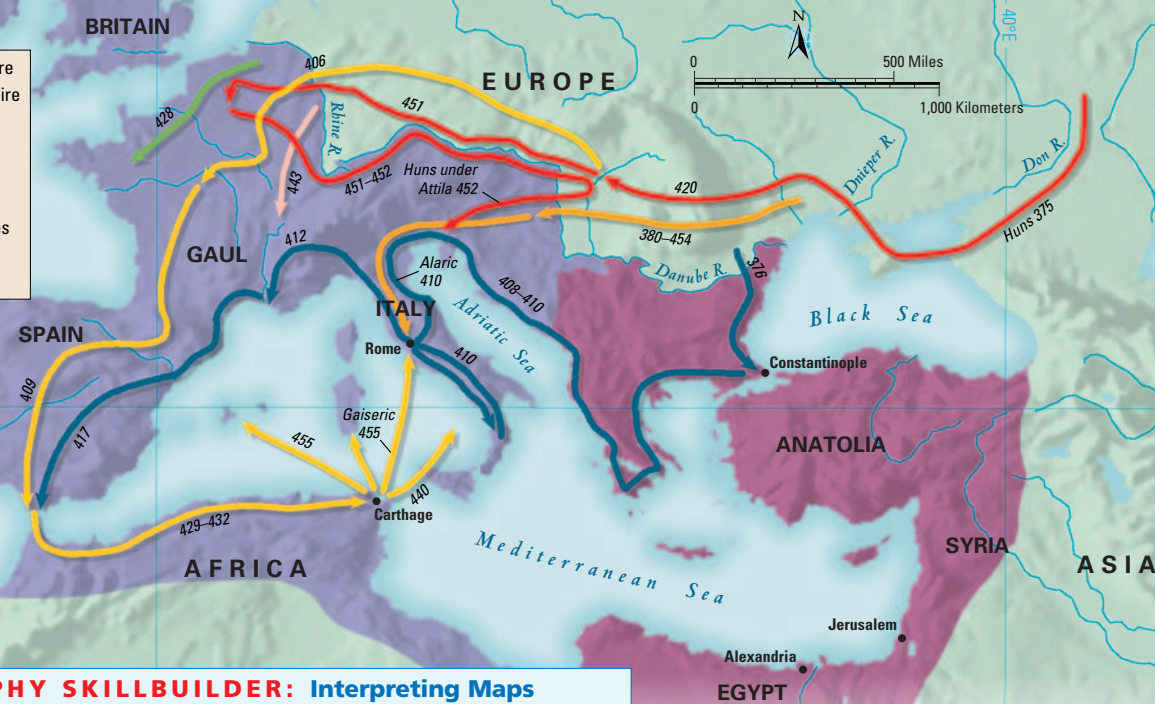
1. Could changes in any contributing factors have reversed the decline of the empire?
2. Which contributing factors—political, economic, or military—were the most significant in the fall of the Western Roman Empire?



Invasions into the Roman Empire, A.D. 350–500

- Eastern Roman Empire
- Western Roman Empire
- Burgundians
- Franks, Alamanni
- Huns
- Ostrogoths
- Saxons, Angles, Jutes
- Vandals
- Visigoths

ATLANTIC OCEAN



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

1. **Movement** What group of invaders came the greatest distance?
2. **Location** What areas of the empire were not threatened by invasion?

into Roman territory—Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, Angles, Saxons, Burgundians, Alemanni, and Vandals. Gradually, they overwhelmed the structures of Roman society. Finally, they drove the last Roman emperor from the throne.

The Huns Move West The main reason for the Germanic invasions of the Empire was the movement into Europe of the Huns. The Huns were fierce Mongol nomads from central Asia. They began invading the frontier regions of the Rhine and Danube rivers around A.D. 370, destroying all in their path. The pressure from the Huns forced other groups to move as well—into the Roman Empire.

The following description from a fourth-century Roman historian shows how intensely the Huns were feared and scorned:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The nation of the Huns . . . surpasses all other barbarians in wildness of life. . . . And though [the Huns] do just bear the likeness of men (of a very ugly pattern), they are so little advanced in civilization that they . . . feed upon the . . . half-raw flesh of any sort of animal. . . . When attacked, . . . they fill the air with varied and discordant cries . . . they fight in no regular order of battle, but by being extremely swift and sudden in their movements, they disperse . . . spread havoc over vast plains, and . . . pillage the camp of their enemy almost before he has become aware of their approach.

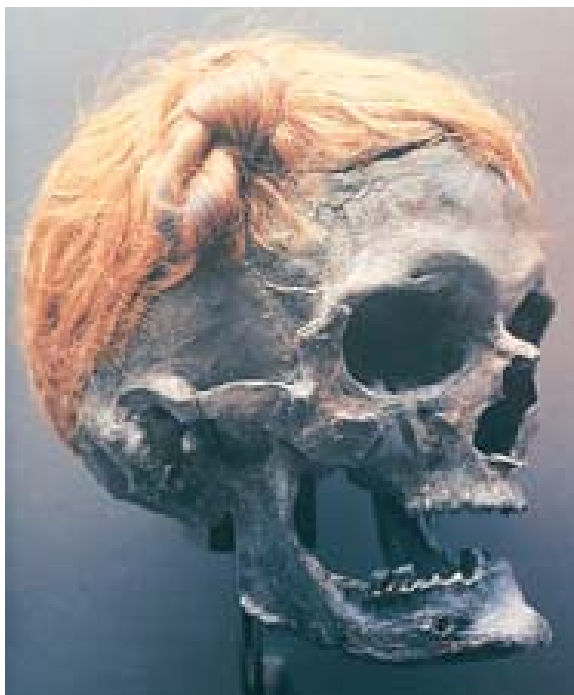
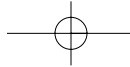
AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS, *The Chronicle of Events (Rerum gestarum libri)*

Background

Most of the Germanic invaders were Christians.

Germanic Invasions Germanic people near the Rhine River—Franks, Burgundians, and Vandals—fled the invading Huns and entered Roman lands. When the Rhine River froze in the winter of 406, Vandal warriors and their families swarmed across the ice. 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. From Carthage, the Vandals raided some Mediterranean islands and Italy.

By the early fifth century, the city of Rome itself was vulnerable to attack. More than 600 years had passed since a foreign army, that of Hannibal, had threatened



This skull from the period, still retaining its hair, shows a kind of topknot in the hair that some Germanic peoples fashioned to identify themselves.

Rome. Then in 408 Visigoths, led by their king, **Alaric** (AL-ur-ihk), marched across the Alps toward Rome. After putting the city under siege, hordes of Germans stormed Rome in 410 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** (AT-uhl-uh). 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 they were weakened by famine and disease. As a result, Pope Leo I was able to negotiate their withdrawal. Although the Huns were no longer a threat to the empire after Attila's death in 453, the Germanic invasions continued. In 455 Vandals, under Gaiseric, sacked Rome, leaving it in chaos. Famine struck, and its population eventually dropped from about one million to 20,000.

Rome's Last Emperor The Roman emperor in the West had become practically powerless. Germanic tribes now fought one another for possession of the Western provinces. Spain belonged to the Visigoths, North Africa to the Vandals. Gaul was overrun by competing tribes—Franks, Burgundians, and Visigoths. Britannia was invaded by Angles and Saxons. Italy was falling victim to raids by the Ostrogoths.

The last Roman emperor was a 14-year-old boy named Romulus Augustulus. In 476 he was deposed by a German general named Odoacer (oh-doh-AY-sur) and sent into exile. 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. (See Chapter 11.) The 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, through its ideas, customs, and institutions, continued to be deeply embedded in Western civilization.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY

D. Hypothesizing Do you think that Rome would have been taken by invaders if the Huns had not moved into the west?

Vocabulary

sacked: looted or plundered a captured city or town

Background

Vandals gave their name to the word for those who willfully destroy property.

Section 4 Assessment

1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- inflation
- mercenary
- Diocletian
- Constantinople
- Alaric
- Attila

2. TAKING NOTES

Identify the causes of each of the effects listed in the chart below.

Decline of the Roman Empire	
Effects	Causes
Inflation	
Untrustworthy army	
Decreased citizen interest in government	

How did these problems open the empire to invading peoples?

3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

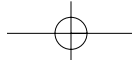
How do you think the splitting of the empire into two parts helped it survive for another 200 years?

THINK ABOUT

- the differences between the eastern and western halves of the empire
- the advantages of a smaller empire

4. THEME ACTIVITY

Empire Building Imagine you are a journalist in the Roman Empire. Write an editorial in which you comment—favorably or unfavorably—on Constantine's decision to move the capital of the empire. Present the facts of the move, but focus the editorial on the effects you think the move will have on Rome and its citizens.



different PERSPECTIVES

The Fall of the Roman Empire

Since the fifth century, historians and others have argued over the empire's fall. They have attributed it to a variety of causes, coming both from within and outside the empire. The following excerpts are examples of the differing opinions.

HISTORICAL COMMENTARY

Edward Gibbon



In the 1780s Gibbon published *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In this passage, Gibbon explains that a major cause of the collapse was that the empire was simply just too large.

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long.

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

St. Jerome



This early Church leader did not live to see the empire's end, but he vividly describes his feelings after a major event in Rome's decline—the attack and plunder of the city by Visigoths in 410. He said:

“It is the end of the world ...

Words fail me. My sobs break in ...

The city which took captive the

whole world has itself been

captured.”

HISTORICAL COMMENTARY

Arther Ferrill

In his book *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1986), Arther Ferrill argues that the fall of Rome was a military collapse.

In fact the Roman Empire of the West did fall. Not every aspect of the life of Roman subjects was changed by that, but the fall of Rome as a political entity was one of the major events of the history of Western man. It will simply not do to call that fall a myth or to ignore its historical significance merely by focusing on those aspects of Roman life that survived the fall in one form or another. At the opening of the fifth century a massive army, perhaps more than 200,000 strong, stood at the service of the Western emperor and his generals. The destruction of Roman military power in the fifth century was the obvious cause of the collapse of Roman government in the West.

HISTORICAL COMMENTARY

Finley Hooper

In this passage from his *Roman Realities* (1967), Hooper argues against the idea of a “fall.”

The year was 476. For those who demand to know the date Rome fell, that is it. Others will realize that the fall of Rome was not an event but a process. Or, to put it another way, there was no fall at all—ancient Roman civilization simply became something else, which is called medieval. [It evolved into another civilization, the civilization of the Middle Ages.]

Connect to History

Comparing Compare the reasons given in these excerpts for the fall of Rome. Which seem the most valid to you? Why?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R7

Connect to Today

Comparing In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed after nearly 70 years of existence. Research that fall and discuss one way in which the Soviet Union's decline can be compared to the fall of Rome.



For more information about the fall of the Roman Empire, see the World History Electronic Library of Primary Sources.