

Decline & Fall of Ancient Rome

The Decline (years: 200s)

Marcus Aurelius, the last of the five good emperors, died in A.D. 180. A period of conflict and confusion followed.

Political Upheavals

Following a series of civil wars in Rome, a military government under the Severan (family name) rulers restored order. Septimius Severus, one of the Severan emperors, told his sons “to pay the soldiers, and ignore everyone else,” setting the tone for the new family’s reign. After the Severan family rulers there was a period of disorder. For almost fifty years, from 235 to 284, the Roman throne was occupied by whoever had military strength to seize it. During this period there were 22 emperors.

At the same time, the empire was troubled by a series of invasions. In the east, the Persians made inroads into Roman territory. Germanic tribes poured into the Balkans, Gaul, and Spain. The political boundaries of Roman territory were disrupted and it was not until the end of the 200s that most of the boundaries were restored.

Economic and Military Problems

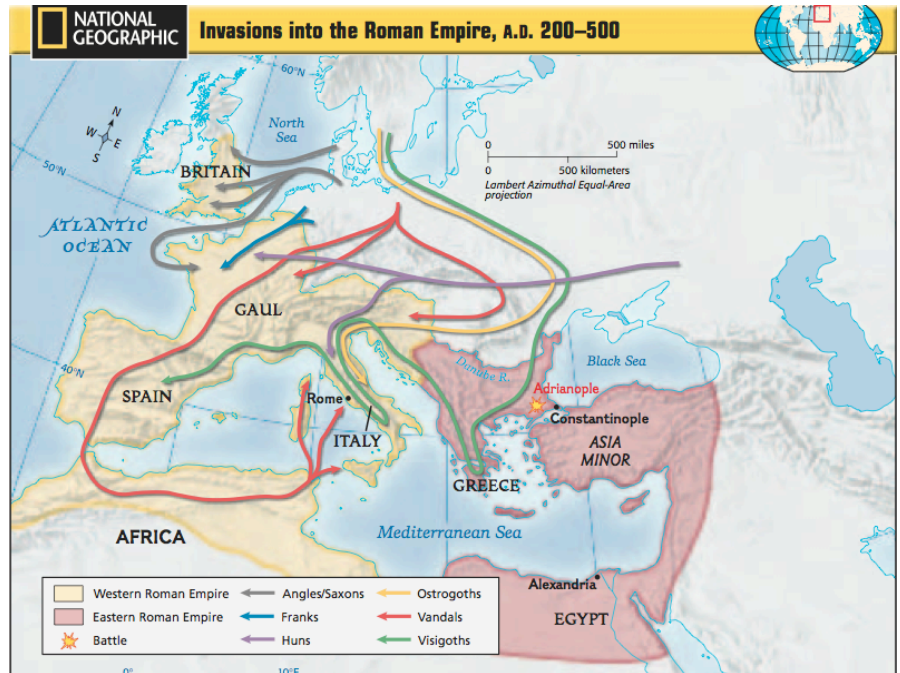
Invasions, civil wars, and plague came close to causing an economic collapse of the Roman Empire in the 200s. There was a noticeable decline in trade. A labor (worker) shortage was created by plague (play-guh). This deadly disease spread throughout Rome and affected both military recruiting and job production. Farm production declined as fields were destroyed by invaders or, even more often, by the defending Roman armies.

Armies were needed more than ever, but financial strains made it difficult to pay and recruit more soldiers. By the mid-200s, the state had to rely on hiring Germans to fight under Roman commanders. These soldiers did not understand or follow Roman traditions and had little to no loyalty to either the empire or the emperors.

The Reforms of Diocletian and Constantine (years: late 200s-300s)

At the end of 200s and beginning of the 300s, the Roman Empire gained a new breath of life through the efforts of two emperors, Diocletian and Constantine.

Believing that the empire had grown too large for a single ruler, Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305, divided the empire’s territory. The Roman Empire was divided into a western half and an eastern half. A different emperor ruled each half. Diocletian’s military power still enabled him to claim a higher status and to hold ultimate authority. Constantine, who ruled from 306 to 337, continued and even expanded the policies of Diocletian.



Division of the Roman Empire 395 AD



Constantine began his reign in 306, and by 324 he had emerged as the sole ruler of the empire. Constantine's biggest project was the construction of a new capital city in the eastern part of the empire. The city, eventually renamed Constantinople, was developed for defensive reasons and had an excellent strategic location. Calling it his "New Rome," Constantine enriched the city with a forum, large palaces, and a vast amphitheater. Constantinople would become the center of the Eastern Roman Empire and one of the greatest cities of the world.

Growing Problems (*years: throughout late 200s – 300s*)

There were many reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire. Each one intertwined with the next.

Christianity

**pacifist = a person who doesn't participate in war or violence*

Many blame the introduction of Christianity. Christianity made many Romans into pacifists, making it more difficult to defend against the barbarian attackers. Also money used to build churches could have been used to maintain the empire. However, some argue Christianity may have provided some morals and values for a declining civilization.

Decline in Morals and Values

**lavish = elaborate or luxurious*

Crimes of violence made the streets unsafe. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became infamous for wasting money on lavish parties where guests ate and drank until they became ill. The most popular amusement was watching the gladiatorial combats in the Colosseum. These were attended by the poor, the rich, and frequently the emperor himself. As gladiators fought, vicious cries and curses were heard from the audience.

Public Health

There were many public and environmental health problems. Many of the wealthy had water brought to their homes through lead pipes. Previously the aqueducts had even purified the water but lead pipes were thought to be preferable. The wealthy death rate was very high due to the use of lead pipes. The continuous interaction of people at the Colosseum with the blood and death probably spread disease. Those who lived on the streets in continuous contact allowed for an uninterrupted strain of disease to spread.

Inflation

The Roman economy suffered from inflation – an increase in prices – beginning after the reign Marcus Aurelius. Once the Romans stopped conquering new lands, the flow of gold into the Roman economy decreased. Yet much gold was being spent by wealthy Romans to pay for luxury items. This meant that there was less gold to use in coins. As the amount of gold used in coins decreased, the coins became less valuable. To make up for the loss in value, merchants raised the prices on the goods they sold. Many people stopped using coins and began to barter to get what they needed. Eventually some salaries had to be paid in food and clothing.

Urban Decay

Wealthy Romans lived in a house with marble walls, floors with intricate tiles, and windows made of glass. Most Romans, however, were not rich. They lived in small smelly rooms in apartment houses with six or more stories. First-floor apartments were not occupied by the

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poor since these living quarters were rented at too high of a price. The more shaky wooden stairs a family had to climb, the cheaper the rent became. The upper apartments that the poor rented were hot, dirty, crowded, and dangerous. Anyone who could not pay rent was forced to move out and live on the crime-infested streets. These factors caused Roman cities to decay.

Inferior Technology

During the last 400 years of the empire, the scientific achievements of the Romans were limited almost entirely to engineering and the organization of public services. They built marvelous roads, bridges, and aqueducts. They established the first system of medicine for the benefit of the poor. Since Romans relied so much on human and animal labor, they failed to invent new machines or find new technology to produce goods more efficiently. They could not provide enough goods for their growing population. They were no longer conquering other civilizations and adapting their technology, they were actually losing territory.

The Final Blows to Rome (years: 378-476) *sacked = raided, destroyed

The restored empire of Diocletian and Constantine limped along for more than a century. After Constantine, the empire continued to be divided into western and eastern parts. The capital of the Western Roman Empire remained in Rome. Constantinople remained the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Western Roman Empire came under increasing pressure from the invading Germanic tribes. The major breakthrough of invaders into the west came in late 300s. The Huns, who came from Asia led by the infamous Attila the Hun, moved into Eastern Europe and put pressure on the Germanic Visigoths. The Visigoths, in turn moved south and west, into Roman territory. They initially settled as allies of Ancient Rome. However, the Visigoths soon revolted. The Romans' attempt to stop the revolt in 378, but this led to a crushing defeat for the Romans.

Increasing numbers of Germans now crossed Roman boundaries. In 410, the Visigoths sacked Rome. Another group, the Vandals, poured into southern Spain and Africa. They crossed into Italy from northern Africa and, in 455, they too sacked Rome.

In 476, the western emperor, Romulus Augustus, was overthrown by the Germanic army general. Roads and bridges were left in disrepair and fields left unfarmed. Pirates and bandits made travel unsafe. Cities could not be maintained without goods from farms and trade, so business began to disappear. The year 476 is usually recognized as the date of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire, however, continued to thrive with its center at Constantinople.

