

# WHY DID ROME FALL?

## INTRODUCTION

The renowned 20<sup>th</sup> Century historian and philosopher William Durant in his great 11 volume epoch *The Story of Civilization* famously wrote,

*A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself within.*

Every civilization has its beginning, its Golden Age, and its decline. The Roman Empire was no exception. From its humble mythic beginnings rooted in kingship it stumbled its way through being the world's first republic to one of the most influential, brutal, and powerful empires in human history. It forever shaped the social, economic, political, and philosophical foundations of Western Civilization and world history. Yet even in this, great was its fall.

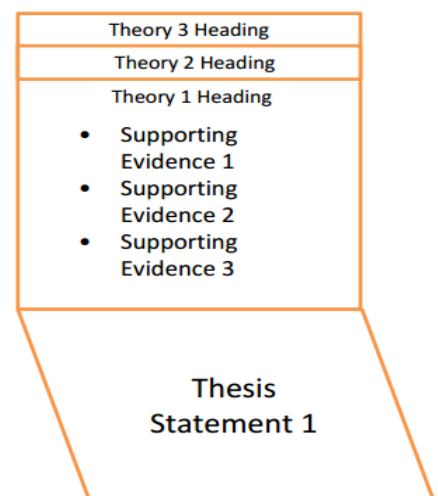
The Roman Empire's fall was, like any civilization, complex and therefore debatable. Historians for hundreds of years have argued over the exact reasons for why it fell apart and even when it did.

## DIRECTIONS

Your assignment will be to read information about the various reasons given by historians for why the Roman Empire fell and then take that information and create a three-tab foldable that informs about **the top three reasons** why you believe the Roman Empire fell.

Each section of your foldable will include:

- A heading tab identifying a theory for Rome's fall
- A thesis statement explaining why this theory is most accurate
- Three evidence statements that support your thesis



\*THIS IS WHAT YOUR FOLDABLE WILL LOOK LIKE

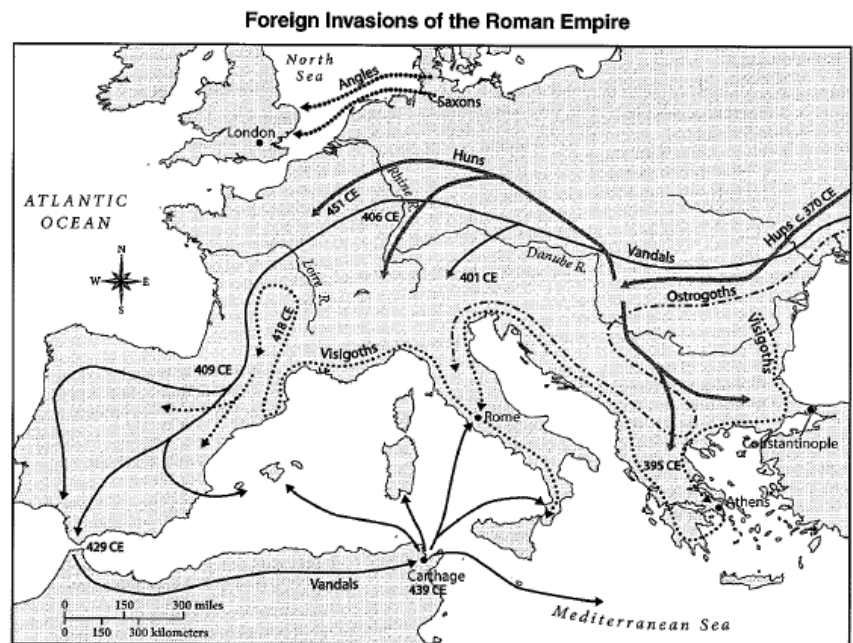
# TEN MAJOR THEORIES ON WHY ROME FELL

## BARBARIAN INVASION

For years, the well-disciplined Roman army held the barbarians of Germany in check. However, when the Roman soldiers were withdrawn from the Rhine-Danube frontier in the third century A.D. to fight in civil wars in Italy, the Roman border was left open to attack. Gradually Germanic hunters and herders from northern and central Europe began to raid and take over Roman lands in Greece and Gaul. In A.D. 476 the Germanic general Odovacar overthrew the last of the Roman emperors and made himself ruler of all Italy. From then on, the western part of the Empire was ruled by Germanic tribal chiefs. Roads and bridges were left in disrepair and many fields were left untilled. Pirates and bandits made travel unsafe. Cities declined and trade and business began to disappear

## DECLINE IN MORAL VALUES

The final years of the Empire were marked by a decline in morals and values, and some historians believe that this contributed to the decline of the Empire. Crimes of violence made the streets of the Empire's larger cities very unsafe. Promiscuous sexual practices plagued the upper and middle classes as they indulged in orgies, prostitution and violent games. According to Roman historians there were roughly 32,000 prostitutes in Rome during the reign of Trajan. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became infamous for wasting money on lavish parties, where guests ate and drank until they became ill. Most important, however, was the growth of the Roman passion for cruelty. The most popular amusement was watching the



Source: Excerpts about an Asian tribe called the Huns from *Roman History* by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, c. 380 CE.

The Huns exceed any definition of savagery. They have compact, sturdy limbs and thick necks.... Although they have the shape ... of human beings, they are so wild in their way of life that they have no need of fire or pleasant tasting foods, but eat the roots of uncultivated plants and the half-raw flesh of all sorts of animals. This they place between their thighs and the backs of their horses and so warm it a little .... Huns are never sheltered by buildings, but ... roam freely in the mountains and woods, learning from their earliest childhood to endure freezing cold, hunger and thirst.... Huns are not well adapted to battle on foot, but are almost glued to their horses, which are certainly hardy, but also ugly.... Like refugees – all without permanent settlements, homes, law, or a fixed way of life – they are always on the move with their wagons, in which they leave.... Like unthinking animals, they are completely ignorant of the difference between right and wrong. Fired with an overwhelming desire for seizing the property of others, these swift-moving and ungovernable people make their destructive way amid the pillage and slaughter of those who live around them.

The basic trouble was that very few inhabitants of the empire believed that the old civilization was worth saving . . . [T]he overwhelming majority of the population had been systematically excluded from political responsibilities. They could not organize to protect themselves; they could not serve in the army. . . . Their economic plight was hopeless. Most of them were serfs bound to the soil, and the small urban groups saw their cities slipping into uninterrupted decline

Source: Strayer, Gatzke, and Harbison, *The Course of Civilization*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961 (adapted)

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. One contest after another was staged in the course of a single day. Should the ground of the arena become too soaked with blood, it was covered over with a fresh layer of sand, and the revolting performances went on.

## ENVIRONMENTAL & HEALTH PROBLEMS

Some historians believe that the fall of the Roman Empire was due in part to environmental and public health problems. They claim the leaders of Rome were killed off by consuming excessive amounts of lead. They argue that since only the wealthy could afford to have lead pipes bring water into their homes and to cook with lead utensils, their death rate was increased considerably. This theory however, is challenged by those who point out the fact that the eastern part of the Empire survived long after the decline of the Western portion.

Source: Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Strahan & Cadell, 1776-1788.

Note: It took the author 12 years to write this six-volume set of books.

In the second year of the reign of Valens (366 CE) ... the Roman world was shaken by a violent and destructive earthquake .... The shores of the Mediterranean were left dry by the sudden retreat of the sea ... but the tide soon returned with the weight of an immense [flood] which was severely felt on the coasts of Sicily, ... Greece, and of Egypt .... Fifty thousand persons had lost their lives in the flood [in the city of Alexandria alone] .... [T]his calamity ... astonished and terrified the subjects of Rome ... and their fearful vanity was disposed to [see a connection between] the symptoms of a declining empire and a sinking world....

Source: Peter Stearns, Michael Adas, Stuart Schwartz, Marc Jason Gilbert, *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, Pearson Education, 2000.

More important in initiating the process of decline was a series of plagues that swept over the empire... which brought diseases [from] southern Asia to new areas like the Mediterranean, where no resistance had been established even to contagions such as the measles. The resulting diseases decimated the population. The population of Rome decreased from a million people to 250,000. Economic life worsened in consequence. Recruitment of troops became more difficult, so the empire was increasingly reduced to hiring Germanic soldiers to guard its frontiers. The need to pay troops added to the demands on the state's budget, just as declining production cut into tax revenues.

## POPULATION LOSS & REPLACEMENT

A serious decline of population appears in the Roman Empire by the 100s A.D. As time went on fewer Romans got married and on the whole Roman families began having fewer children. It is also known that infanticide became a common practice as poverty increased. Population also decreased due to war, famine and disease. At the same time the population of "pure blood" Romans decreased the foreign/barbarian populations increased. There were mass importations of barbarians into the Empire by the emperors Aurelius, Valentinian, Aurelian, Probus, and Constantine. They began using masses of foreigners in their armies and workforces across the empire. As the foreign/barbarian groups settled in the empire they increased in population while the original Roman populace decreased or became extinct. The vast quantity of foreign groups did not understand nor adopt Romans classical values and as a result supplanted it.



## EXCESSIVE MILITARY SPENDING & PROBLEMS

Maintaining an army to defend the borders of the Empire from barbarian attacks was a constant drain on the government. Military spending left few resources for other vital activities, such as providing public housing and maintaining the quality of public roads. In the latter years of the Empire, frustrated Romans lost their desire to defend the Empire. Thus, the government found it necessary to rely increasingly on hired soldiers recruited from the unemployed city mobs or foreign countries. For example some emperors (like Aurelius) replenished the imperial army by enrolling slaves, gladiators, policemen, and criminals to serve. Such an army was not only unreliable, but very expensive. Thus, the emperors were forced to raise taxes frequently-the majority of which were paid by businessmen and farmers, which hurt the economy. Some historians believe that this helped lead to the fall of the Empire

Part of the money went into . . . the maintenance of the army and of the vast bureaucracy required by a centralized government. . . . [T]he expense led to strangling taxation. . . . The heart was taken out of enterprising men . . . tenants fled from their farms and businessmen and workmen from their occupations. Private enterprise was crushed and the state was forced to take over many kinds of business to keep the machine running. People learned to expect something for nothing. The old Roman virtues of self-reliance and initiative were lost in that part of the population on relief [welfare]. . . . The central government undertook such far-reaching responsibility in affairs that the fiber of the citizens weakened.

Source: Henry Haskell, *The New Deal in Old Rome*, A.A. Knopf, 1947 (adapted)

## 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. But since the Romans relied so much on human and animal labor, they failed to invent many new machines or find new technology to produce goods more efficiently. As a result of inferior production techniques, the Romans were unable to provide important goods for their growing population. Some historians theorize that this contributed to the downfall of the Empire

Source: An excerpt from the ancient book *Concerning Military Matters* by the Roman historian Vegetius, c. 450 CE.

[Before the year 400 CE] footsoldiers wore breastplates and helmets. But when, because of negligence and laziness, parade ground drills were abandoned, the customary armor began to seem heavy since the soldiers rarely ever wore it. Therefore, they first asked the emperor to set aside the breastplates . . . and then the helmets. So our soldiers fought the Goths without any protection for chest and head and were often beaten by archers. Although there were many disasters, which led to the loss of great cities, no one tried to restore breastplates and helmets to the infantry. Thus it happens that troops in battle, exposed to wounds because they have no armor, think about running and not about fighting.

## UNEMPLOYMENT & INFLATION

The Roman economy suffered from inflation (an increase in prices) beginning after the reign of 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 the 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 this loss in value, merchants raised the prices on the goods they sold. Many people stopped using coins and began to barter (trading goods for goods, rather than using money) to get what they needed. Eventually, salaries had to be paid in food and clothing, and taxes were collected in fruits and vegetables. Some historians argue that this helped lead to the collapse of the Empire.

First the economic factor . . . While the empire was expanding, its prosperity was fed by plundered wealth and by new markets in the semi-barbaric provinces. When the empire ceased to expand, however, economic progress soon ceased. . . .

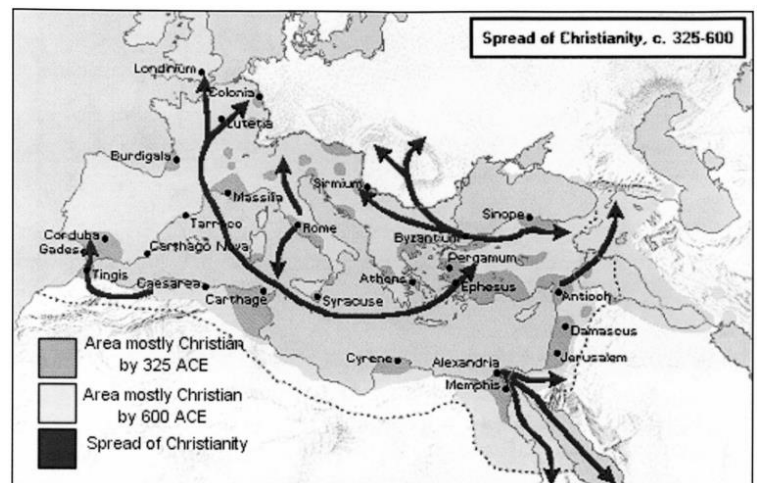
The abundance of slaves led to the growth of the latifundia, the great estates that . . . came to dominate agriculture and ruin the free coloni [farmers], who drifted to the cities, to add to the unemployment there. The abundance of slaves likewise kept wages low.

Source: Herbert J. Muller, *Uses of the Past*, Signet, 1967 (adapted)

During the latter years of the Empire farming was done on large estates that were owned by wealthy men who used slave labor. A farmer who had to pay workers could not produce goods as cheaply as a slaveowner could. Therefore, slaveowners could sell their crops for lower prices. As a result, many farmers could not compete with these low prices and lost or sold their farms. Thousands of these men filled the cities of the Empire, where there were not enough jobs to accommodate them. At one time, the emperor was importing grain to feed more than 100,000 unemployed people in Rome alone. Some historians believe that this contributed to the collapse of the Empire.

## RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

Some historians believe that Christianity produced dramatic changes in Roman society at the very time when pressure from the barbarians was increasing. They argue that Christianity made its followers into pacifists (those who oppose war), thus making it more difficult to defend Roman lands from barbarian attacks. They also suggest that the Church attracted many qualified leaders whose talents were needed to deal with the problems of the Empire. Finally, these historians theorize that money that would have been used to maintain the Empire, instead, was used to build churches and monasteries.



The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness [large size]. . . . The introduction . . . of Christianity had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrine of patience; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the . . . demands of charity and devotion. . . .

Source: Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776–88 (adapted)

## POLITICAL CORRUPTION

One of Rome's most serious problems was the difficulty of choosing new emperors. The Romans never created an effective system to determine how new emperors would be selected. For this reason, the choice of a new emperor was always open to debate between the old emperor, the Senate, the Praetorian Guard (the emperor's private army), and the army. Gradually the Praetorian Guard gained complete authority to choose the new emperor. In return, the new emperor handsomely rewarded the Guard for its support. This system worked fairly well for a time. Beginning in A.D. 186, however, when the army strangled the new emperor, the practice began of selling the throne to the highest bidder. During the next 100 years, Rome had 37 different emperors-21 of whom were removed from office by assassination. This political corruption, some historians argue, contributed to the decline of the Empire.

Roman Emperors, 235-285 CE

| Emperor                    | Reign     | Cause of Death                           |
|----------------------------|-----------|--|
| Maximinus                  | 235-38 CE | Assassination                            |
| Gordian I & II (co-rulers) | 238       | Suicide; killed in battle                |
| Balbinus & Pupineus        | 238       | Assassination                            |
| Gordian III                | 238-44    | Possible assassination                   |
| Philip the Arab            | 244-49    | Killed in battle                         |
| Decius                     | 249-51    | Killed in battle                         |
| Hostilian                  | 251       | Possible plague                          |
| Gallus                     | 251-53    | Assassination                            |
| Aemilianus                 | 253       | Assassination                            |
| Valerian & Gallienus       | 253-60    | Died as slave of Persians; assassination |
| Claudius Gothicus          | 268-70    | Plague                                   |
| Quintillus                 | 270       | Assassination or suicide                 |
| Aurelian                   | 270-75    | Assassination                            |
| Tacitus                    | 275-76    | Possible assassination                   |
| Florianus                  | 276       | Assassination                            |
| Probus                     | 276-82    | Assassination                            |
| Carus                      | 282-83    | Assassination                            |
| Numerian                   | 283-84    | Possible assassination                   |
| Carinus                    | 283-85    | Killed in battle                         |

## URBAN DECAY

Wealthy Romans lived in a domus, or house, with marble walls, floors with intricate colored tiles, and windows made of small panes of glass. Most Romans, however, were not rich. They lived in small, smelly rooms in apartment houses with six or more stories called islands. Each island covered an entire block. At one time there were 44,000 apartment houses within the city walls of Rome. First-floor apartments were not occupied by the poor since these living quarters rented for about \$400 a year. The more shaky wooden stairs a family had to climb, the cheaper the rent became. The upper apartments that the poor rented for \$40 a year were hot, dirty, crowded, and dangerous. Anyone who could not pay the rent was forced to move out and live on the crime-infested streets. Because of this, cities began to decay. Some historians believe that this helped lead to the downfall of the Empire.