

The End of the Roman Empire

During the centuries, the Roman Empire faced many challenges. Difficult situations came and went, Rome coped, and life went on within the Empire. However, with the weakening of Rome from A.D. 200 into the 400s, the Empire finally faced too many problems. The end for Imperial Rome came during the 5th century.

Economic, political, military, and social problems all worked against Rome in those centuries. But these internal challenges were made more difficult by forces outside the Empire. These challenges came in the form of foreign invasion.

Throughout the history of the Empire, neighboring powers had occasionally marauded and plundered its fringes. In the later stages of Imperial Rome, the Empire faced great pressure from the north. It was here that roaming tribes of ferocious Germans (considered barbarians by the Romans) began to move against the power of Rome.

The Germanic tribes lived in the region of Europe from the Rhine River on the western edge of Roman Gaul (modern-day France) to the east as far as modern-day Russia. They comprised many different tribes. Nearly all of these tribal groups were semi-nomadic. They practiced a limited agriculture and raised herds of cattle and sheep. In fact, their economy was so primitive that their standard of value was not money, but cattle.

These "barbarian" groups enjoyed close family ties and tribal allegiances. They told each other stories of great warriors and battles. They practiced a religion which included several gods. Some of these deities provided names of the days of our week, such as Wotan, the chief of the gods (Wednesday is named for him); Thor, the god of power (Thursday); Thiu, the god of war (Tuesday) and Freya, goddess of fertility (Friday).

While the Germanic tribes were always present to the north, they did not prove to be a significant threat to Rome until the later days of the Empire. Marius battled them successfully in 101 B.C. Julius Caesar conquered them in Gaul during his campaigns in the 1st century B.C. However, in A.D. 9, the

Roman ruler Augustus and his army met German warriors in the dark forest north of the Rhine river and faced dramatic defeat. After this military loss,

the Roman Empire established the Rhine and Danube Rivers as the northern frontier border of the Empire.

Throughout the century-and-a-half of the Pax Romana, the Germanic tribes did not prove to be a significant challenge to the power of Rome. But during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180), the Germanic tribes began to menace the Roman frontier. This lasted for nearly a century. The tribes of the Franks and the Goths proved to be the most bothersome.

After about A.D. 300, the Germans again slipped into a quieter mode and did not raid against the Romans to any significant degree for nearly 75 years. Through these decades, Rome was able to keep the Germanic tribes at bay by playing them off one another, maintaining a policy of "divide and conquer."

However, by the 4th century, the Germans were warring again, restless for land and the riches of the Empire. Meanwhile, a new group of invaders was on the horizon, the Huns. They were not Germanic, but Asiatic. The Huns were a nomadic Mongolian people who began raiding eastern Europe in the 300s.

One Roman writer described these terrifying new raiders:

Their mode of life is savage. They need no fire or prepared food but live on wild roots and the flesh of any kind of animal, eaten half raw; they warm it a little by putting it between their thighs and the back of their horses. Like unreasoning beasts, they are utterly ignorant of right and wrong. They burn with lust for gold.

When the Huns entered eastern Europe in A.D. 372, they began conquering a tribe of Germans called the Ostrogoths (meaning the *East Goths*). In no time at all, the Huns proved to be a problem for the Roman Empire and its future.

Review and Write

Describe the lifestyle of the Germanic tribes who were neighbors to the Roman Empire.

The Germanic Invasions

The Huns, an invading Asiatic tribe of horsemen, began menacing the Ostrogoths of eastern Europe in A.D. 372. The Romans observed these events with a watchful eye. While the Eastern Gothic people fell under the influence of the Huns, another Germanic tribe, the Visigoths (meaning the West Goths) began to fear their new Asiatic neighbors.

In 376, the Visigoths turned to the Roman Empire and requested permission from Rome to cross the Danube River into Roman lands. By doing this, the Visigoths were asking Rome for protection. When the Romans agreed, the Visigothic people streamed into the Empire. The Roman emperor, Valens, allowed the Visigoths to enter the Roman frontier lands with the intention of using them in the Roman army.

However, all did not go well. Roman officials along the frontier regions treated the Visigoths with little respect and did not distribute land to them as they were promised. Desperate for food and a home, the Visigoths turned on their hosts, the Romans, and began attacking Roman towns and villages. When Emperor Valens led an army against the Visigoths at Adrianople (modern-day Edirne, Turkey), the Visigoths defeated them and killed Valens.

The Emperor Theodosius managed to fend off most invasions during his reign, but after 395, a Visigothic leader named Alaric, led raids onto the Italian peninsula and attacked the city of Rome in A.D. 410, sacking the Imperial capital. To bring peace, the Imperial government was forced to give Roman territory in southern Gaul to the Visigoths, where they established an extensive kingdom.

Soon after this defeat, other barbarian tribes began to menace the Empire, invading at will across the frontier borders. After being pushed out of Gaul by the Visigoths, a tribe called the Vandals migrated to Roman Spain and then to northern Africa, where they established a kingdom. In 455, the Vandals reached their height of power and campaigned across the Mediterranean, landed in Italy and succeeded in sacking Rome. During the same period, the Burgundians moved into central Europe and the Franks settled in northern Gaul.

Ultimately, a weakened Rome had no alternative but to retreat in the face of these repeated German



invasions into its territories. Roman army units were withdrawn from frontier posts, and legions of border troops were pulled deeper into the Empire. After the withdrawal of such troops from England in A.D. 407, the British Isles were left without Imperial protection. Over the next 50 years, German tribes—including the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons—raided the countryside. The Celtic people there, left by the Romans, were nearly destroyed by these Danish invaders.

Few of these new Germanic kingdoms lasted longer than a couple of centuries. Only two—the Angles and Saxons in Britain, and the Franks in Gaul (the name would later be used in renaming the region *France*)—managed to remain powerful over the long run.

All these invasions, even the sacking of Rome twice, did not bring the Empire to an immediate end, however. But Roman rule was slipping fast. Germans were serving as officers and soldiers in the Roman army by this time. In 475, a German commander of Roman forces named Orestes led a coup and had his son, Romulus Augustus, placed on the Roman throne. The next year, another German commander, Odovacar, killed Orestes and deposed his son. This coup in A.D. 476 is considered by some historians as the year of the fall of the Roman Empire.

Review and Write

Why did the Roman government have so much trouble coping with German tribes on their borders?

The Eastern Empire Survives



In A.D. 330, on May 11, the history of the Roman Empire changed forever. On that date, the Emperor Constantine dedicated a new capital in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. He ordered the city christened as New Rome. It was an urban trading center first established by the Greeks centuries earlier and called Byzantium.

The Roman Empire had been divided in two during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (285-305). While Diocletian ruled in the eastern half of the Empire at a city named Nicomedia, Constantine made New Rome a capital because he wanted a city as splendid as Rome itself.

But Constantine had another reason for establishing the capital at New Rome, which was to be commonly called Constantinople, after the Emperor. Christianity had made great strides within the Empire over 300 years time. Constantine supported Christianity (although he was not baptized until just before his death in 337). Rome had long been considered by the Christians as a pagan city. Constantine believed that the Empire needed a new city, a Christian capital.

A century and a half later, when the western half of the Roman Empire was being overrun by the Germanic tribes, the eastern half was somewhat untouched by such invasions. In addition, many of the problems the western Empire was facing, such as political assassinations, corrupt emperors, inflation and little trade, were not happening in the East.

One reason was its geographic location. Constantinople (today the modern city of Istanbul, Turkey) was located on the southern end of the Bosphorus, a neck of land that connects the northeastern Mediterranean and the route to the Black Sea. Positioned at the crossroads between Europe

and Asia, Constantinople was destined to be a prosperous city, one which served as the great trading city of its day.

The trade of Constantinople was to be based on gold coins, one in particular. Known as the *bezant*, it contained 65 grains of pure gold. For over 700 years, the bezant kept its value and was used in trade by many nations and peoples from the British Isles to the Far East, even China.

As the Roman Empire in the West collapsed in the late 400s, in the East, the Empire flourished. Although the people of the Eastern Empire continued to refer to themselves as Roman, historians refer to this remaining half of the old Empire by a different name: the Byzantine Empire.

Life in Byzantium (Constantinople) was, in many ways, similar to life in ancient Rome. Ironically, both cities were built across seven hills. Many of the buildings were similar to other Roman architecture. There was an immense chariot racing track just like the Hippodrome in Rome and an arena similar to the Coliseum. The city featured many public baths, just as Rome did. Free bread was distributed to the masses and games and races were common entertainment.

Eventually, after the western half of the Roman Empire fell under German domination and Roman Imperial rule collapsed, the Byzantine Empire continued for another 1000 years. Ruled by many emperors, including eleven named Constantine, Byzantium did not fall to an enemy until May 29, in the year 1453, when the city was overrun following a siege laid down by Moslem Turks.

Review and Write

1. Why did Constantine establish a new Roman capital at Byzantium?
2. In what ways were the cities of Rome and Byzantium similar?
3. What was the *bezant*, and why was it important to the economy of Byzantium?

The Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire was the direct continuation of the eastern half of the old Roman Empire. Long after Rome fell under the domination of the Germanic invaders of the fourth and fifth centuries, Byzantium continued on with an emperor on the throne in Constantinople. These emperors ruled as if the Roman Empire was still in existence.

This empire, despite being only half of the old Roman Empire was an extensive kingdom nevertheless. Its territories spread along the southern shores of the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. By the mid-500s, expansive-minded Byzantine emperors had moved into territory of the former western half of the Roman Empire including the Italian peninsula and northern Africa.

Over the 1000 years of the Byzantine Empire, two periods of greatness stand out. The first took place in the 6th century (the 500s) and was followed by two centuries of relative decline of imperial power. The second great period was from the 8th to the 11th century (the 700s to 1000s). Four hundred years of decline followed, ultimately leading to the Empire's fall to the Turks in 1453.

During Byzantium's first great period, one emperor was outstanding. His name was Justinian and he ruled from 527–565. His reign saw great Byzantine expansion across North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and even southern Spain. He fought other wars less successfully, including exhausting campaigns against the Persians.

This great Byzantine emperor rose to power from a simple background. He was born a peasant, yet was fired by ambition and great energy. During his reign, he pursued high goals and ideals. He wanted to restore the empire to its former Roman glory.

In one sense, Justinian was the last of the great Roman emperors. His reign was one of the last that still used Latin as the official royal language. After his death, the Latin tradition began to die out and

Greek became the official language of the eastern empire. This caused the Byzantines to think of themselves ultimately as different from the Romans and loosened the historical ties between Rome and Constantinople.

Great strides were taken by Justinian during his reign. He oversaw the construction of a great church

in the city that would prove to be the shining example of Byzantine architecture. Known as the Church of the Hagia Sophia (HI yuh SO FI yuh), it was a monumental work. (Hagia Sophia translates from the Greek as *Holy Wisdom*.)

The building measures 250 feet by 235 feet and features a great dome measuring 107 feet across and peaking at a height of 185 feet. The building took five years to complete with 10,000 men working on it. Inside, the great church was adorned with marble, elaborate columns, intricate mosaics, and gold.

Another contribution of Justinian was the reforming and codifying of Roman law. He ordered the creation of a commission to study Roman law and to bring it together in a unified form. The result was the Code, which included all Roman law up to A.D. 534. Also, the commission arranged the Digest, which included all the cases that served as interpretations of the law. This new work commissioned by Justinian gave new prestige to old Roman law.



Review and Write

1. What are some of the successes of the reign of Emperor Justinian?
2. Why do you think a "Roman" emperor such as Justinian would order the construction of a great church such as the Hagia Sophia?

The Barbarian West

While the eastern half of the Roman Empire continued and prospered as the Byzantine Empire, in the western half, life grew difficult. When the centralized Roman government collapsed around A.D. 500, Western Europeans experienced 500 years of disorder, chaos, and darkness. Traditionally, this period in Western Europe is known as the Early Middle Ages.

With the fall of Rome, the Germanic tribes became the dominant force in the West. However, they were relatively primitive people with little culture and civilization. They destroyed more than they brought or even borrowed from the Romans. Over the centuries following A.D. 500, civilization in the West nearly reached the point of extinction.

With the demise of the Roman political system, destruction became commonplace. The barbarian Germans were brutal conquerors, murdering, raping, and turning their victims into slaves. The population in the West declined as a result. Former Roman towns and cities either lost large numbers of their populations or ceased to exist at all.

The population of Rome, for example, had peaked at 10 million during its heyday. However, by A.D. 800, Rome was home to only 50,000 inhabitants. Throughout these years, many of the municipal (or city) systems ceased to operate. There were simply not enough people to keep the roads repaired. Great aqueducts which had delivered water to the city fell into disrepair. Buildings and bridges were not maintained and fell apart. The city's streets became littered with waste and trash. Grass grew in along Rome's streets and roads. Cattle grazed in the Roman Forum, formerly the city's busy commercial and political center.

Other Roman cities ceased to exist altogether. In England, the Roman city of London was completely abandoned and was not revived until hundreds of years later. A city in southern Gaul (France), Marseilles, fell from existence for 200 years.

Shortages existed everywhere in the West. With little trade and little production, food shortages were constant. By the 700s, gold coins almost disappeared with only a few silver coins left in circulation. The chief export of the West became human beings who were sold into slavery.



Each little village or rural group had to produce all its own food, clothing, and housing. Farming became less productive. There was a constant shortage of hay, so livestock could not be fed and consequently dwindled in numbers. Fewer farm animals meant less manure, which was in shortage to fertilize the hay fields, completing the tragic circle. There were reported incidents of cannibalism in the West. Children died at early ages; perhaps four out of five died in infancy.

Learning nearly disappeared in the barbarian West. Schools ceased to exist and most people grew up illiterate. Only the church existed to provide some element of security in people's lives. Within the church, literacy remained alive.

For hundreds of years, life in Western Europe became desperate and frightening. People forgot how to be civilized. They forgot how to live in cities. They forgot how to read. It is no wonder that some historians still refer to these centuries in Western Europe as the Dark Ages.

Review and Write

1. In what ways did life in the western half of the old Roman Empire become barbaric after A.D. 500?
2. Describe the Germanic peoples who invaded the Roman Empire.
3. What happened to life in the city of Rome after the collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire?

The Early Medieval Church



With the collapse of the Roman Empire by A.D. 500, Roman civilization began a serious decline. For hundreds of years, Rome was a unifying force in the Mediterranean region, bringing security and prosperity to many within the Empire and for those who traded from the outside.

Once the Empire ceased to wield power, however, the West experienced bleak times. Lawlessness was rampant. People lived in constant fear of invaders, robbers, and plunderers. No governmental power existed in the West that provided any sense of security and direction. There was no emperor and no great king to provide protection. Civilization itself seemed to many to be doomed.

Although no great secular or worldly leader emerged in the West following the collapse of Rome, the early Church soon took a position of leadership among Western Europeans. The Church and its leaders became important in maintaining many elements of classical heritage, including literacy. Christianity continued to provide some element of civilization in a world increasingly barbarous and insecure.

Even after Rome ceased to be the center of imperial power, the city continued to be an important Christian capital. Western Europeans looked to Rome for religious direction. The patriarch of Rome, in time, came to consider himself to be the leader of the Western Church.

In the East, the patriarch in Constantinople thought himself to be the head of the Byzantine Church. This resulted in Christianity following several paths during the Early Middle Ages.

Other splits among Christians also occurred. As different Church leaders emphasized various religious ideas, or theologies, splinter groups of Christians were formed. One example was the establishing of the Coptic Orthodox Church in

Egypt around A.D. 450. Its leader was the patriarch of Alexandria. It was the Copts who created monasticism, the practice of setting one's self apart from the secular world as a monk.

In the West, various Roman patriarchs began redefining the scope of their Church office. Innocent I (who served as patriarch from A.D. 402–417) established himself as the only universal leader of the Church. Leo I (440–461) announced the principle of papal supremacy. He also obtained a decree from the Roman emperor recognizing Leo's decisions as having the force of law. Other patriarchs—such as those in Constantinople, Alexandria, and Jerusalem—did not agree, of course.

One justification given by Roman patriarchs for elevating themselves as leaders among the patriarchs was the tradition that the Apostle Peter, one of Jesus' twelve followers, had lived the last years of his life in Rome. The Roman Church came to see Peter as the first Pope, and all other Roman patriarchs to follow him were supreme among Church leaders.

From A.D. 500 to 800, various doctrinal issues further separated Christianity, including a long-standing debate about whether Jesus had been all flesh, all spirit, or a combination of both. Other controversies centered around the use of images, such as paintings and statues, in Christian worship. Some, especially in the Eastern Church, did not believe such images should be used. Such believers were known as iconoclasts, meaning "image-breakers."

Such theological issues plus the dividing of the old Roman Empire into eastern and western halves, caused splits among Christians which remain in place today.

Review and Write

Why did Christianity split into several different Churches during the Early Middle Ages? Cite three reasons.