

## Lecture notes for "Why Don't Empires Last?"

based on the article of the same name written by Johnson and Johnson

- ◊ Many factors contributed to the strength and endurance of the Roman and Han empires. (But after several centuries.... both decline)
- What caused the central governments to lose control, trade diminish, and creativity in the arts and literature to fade?
- most subjects within an empire are unaware of what is going on in the capital.
- the daily lives of most people (especially those in distant provinces) are hardly effected.
- However.... when people no longer feel secure and are not "left in peace, they begin to care a great deal about "who rules the land."

### Chinese

- ◊ constructed the concept of a dynastic cycle (country-wide exams / moral leadership.
- ◊ Lost the Mandate (virtue/ serve the people /set a good example)
- ◊ more recent world historians tend to emphasize economic and political reasons for the collapse of the Han (and late dynasties)
- peasant uprisings
- troops used to put down these internal uprisings instead of defending the country
- to pay the army.... government increased taxes (led to more unrest and revolts)
- additional soldiers needed
- government forced poor farmers and others to fight OR hired nomads as soldiers.
- using more soldiers against the people left the boarders unprotected, inviting nomad invasions.
- China's population increased in certain areas ... led to smaller family plots-- some peasants who could not pay taxes ran--- south to Yangtze valley.
- Sometimes natural disasters (flood, earth-quakes, droughts) helped to bring down a dynasty.
- major breakthrough in their efficient administrative systems and tried to control corrupt officials.
- many of the large estates scholars - officials owned were tax free

- when peasants were being forced to pay taxes - some fled to local landlords for protection from tax collector, estates became self-sufficient... free or at least cheap labor.

## Roman Empire

- Don't emphasize moral leadership or country wide-exams
- increasing expenses
- shrinking tax base
- both governments had to choose between raising taxes or reducing their armed forces and social services
- population declines
- social unrest
- trade decreased / lowering profits
- major breakdown in efficient administrative systems and tried to control corrupt officials and court intrigues.
- threat from nomadic groups on their boards.
- much of the church land was not taxed
- many peasants were being forced to pay taxes -- some fled to local landlords for protection from the tax collectors, estates became self-sufficient - cheap or free labor.
- series of plagues (perhaps smallpox or measles) killed 100's of thousands of people.
- when legions spent less time repairing roads, bridges and guarding travelers, bandits and pirates attacked travelers and ships.
- Roman government minted money not backed by silver causing prices to soar and this inflation also hurt trade.
- Christianity.... as it spread some Roman rulers tried unsuccessfully to eliminate it.
- Emperor Diocletian declared himself the supreme god, symbol of the state
- Constantine converted to Christianity / Edict of Milan/ Christianity was made legal and no one was to be persecuted for practicing Christianity.
- Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire.

In 710 two acts further consolidated centralized rule. First, a new capital, modeled on Chang'an, was built at Nara. Second, the Japanese ruler now claimed to rule through divine mandate, although, unlike the Chinese "Mandate of Heaven", it could never be revoked. (To this day, the same family occupies the imperial throne, although after World War II, its divinity was officially repudiated; see Chapter 19.) At about the same time, again following Chinese models, the Japanese began to record their history for the first time in the *Nihongi*, in Chinese, and their legends in the *Kojiki*, which was written in a mixture of Chinese and Japanese forms.

The emperor served as the chief priest of Japan's Shinto faith, but as Shinto is a religion that worships the gods of nature—streams, trees, rocks—it can be practiced anywhere. Buddhism, by contrast, provides a more centralized form of organization, through monasteries and temples. Many new Buddhist temples were, therefore, constructed in Chinese form at Nara to centralize worship in Japan. From this time onward Buddhism and Shinto have coexisted in Japan, with millions of Japanese declaring themselves devotees of both faiths.

As centuries passed and Japan became more secure in its own political organization and cultural identity, the reliance on Chinese models declined. But in the centuries when its basic cultural and political identity was formed, Japan had followed carefully and devotedly the hegemonic examples of China, without compulsion or force of any sort.

## LEGACIES FOR THE FUTURE WHAT DIFFERENCE DO THEY MAKE?

The Roman and Chinese Empires are among the greatest empires in history in terms of longevity, population, geographical extent, and lasting influence. A comparison between them will help to clarify the characteristics and significance of each and help establish guidelines for thinking about other empires of other times, and our own.

### Differences

Not surprisingly, there are important differences between these two huge empires, separated by such great distances.

**Geopolitical.** China's heartland was far larger and more cohesive, geographically and culturally, than Rome's. Rome had as its heartland only central Italy, and even after conquering Italy, it held just that single peninsula bounded by the Alps Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. In the time of Augustus in Rome and the Han dynasty in China, the Roman and Chinese empires each held about 60 million people, but in Rome only a few of these millions lived in Italy. In China virtually all inhabited "inner China." Ninety percent of them were in the north China plain.

**Ideological.** Although Confucian China spoke of a mythological golden age of equality among people living in harmony with each other and with nature, realistically the Confucianists believed that the best possible government was a well-ordered empire. Many philosophers and writers in imperial Rome, on the other hand, believed in an actual, historical republican past (albeit an idealized past) and always looked back to it as a golden age. Roman imperial expansion and stratification were often regarded as violations of the earlier republican ideals.

**Longevity and Persistence.** Rome's empire rose, fell, and disappeared, although it lived on as a concept. China's empire has lasted for the past 2000 years. Dynasties have come and gone, sometimes the empire has broken into fragments, and sometimes it has been ruled by conquering "barbarians," but finally the empire endured as a single political entity. Today, although there is no emperor, China's geopolitical unity continues.

**Policy and Powers of Assimilation.** As China moved both north and south, it assimilated a great number of the peoples it invaded and conquered. Non-ethnic Chinese were absorbed culturally and biologically. Many of the 95 percent of today's Chinese population who are called "Han" are descended from ancestors who were not. Confucian and Buddhist ideology held the empire together, supported by the power of the emperor and his armies. Rome's empire was held together by law and backed by military power. Selected non-Romans could gain citizenship under law, but ethnically and culturally the conquered peoples remained "other." Inter-marriage with non-citizens was usually forbidden. Romans maintained the cultural distinctions between themselves and those they conquered far more than did the Chinese.

**Language Policy.** The Chinese language unified the Chinese Empire across space and through time—even today—far more than Latin did the Roman Empire. Chinese was never subordinated to another language and culture, as Latin was to Greek for many years and in many regions. Nor did Chinese compete with regional languages as Latin ultimately did. Indeed, Chinese helped to bring even neighboring countries—Vietnam, Korea, and Japan—together into a single general cultural unit.

**Ideology and Cultural Cohesion.** China's Confucian bureaucracy provided a core cultural identity throughout the empire and beyond. Even the alternative political-cultural philosophies of China, such as Daoism, Legalism, and later Buddhism, usually (but not always) served to broaden and augment the attraction of Confucianism. Rome's emperor worship did reinforce its cohesion, but its principal philosophies of polytheism, Stoicism, and, later, Christianity did not significantly buttress and augment its imperial rule. The latter two may even have diminished popular loyalty to the empire, except in its later continuation in the east as the Byzantine Empire.

**Influence on Neighbors.** The Roman Empire influenced the lands it conquered, but had less influence on those outside its boundaries. China exercised lasting hegemonic influence even on neighbors it did not conquer, such as Japan, or conquered only briefly, such as Korea. A considerable part of this legacy was religious and cultural as well as political, economic, and administrative.

## Similarities

The many points of similarity between China and Rome reveal some basic truths about the nature of empires.

**Relations with Barbarians.** Both empires faced nomadic groups from central Asia who threatened and penetrated their boundaries. Indeed, the Huns, who invaded Europe, and the Xiongnu, who invaded China, may have belonged to the same ethnic group. Both empires settled the "barbarians" near their borders and enlisted them in their imperial armies. In both cases, the barbarians came to hold great power. Ultimately, however, they dismembered the Roman Empire, while the Chinese absorbed them.

**Religious Policies.** Both empires incubated foreign religions, especially in times of imperial disorder. In China, Buddhism was absorbed into Confucianism and Daoism and helped to sustain the national culture in times of political trouble. In Rome, however, Christianity did not save the empire. In fact, by challenging the significance of earthly power it may even have contributed to the empire's weakness.

**The Role of the Emperor.** Both empires ascribed divine attributes to the emperor, and both frequently had difficulty in establishing rules for imperial succession. The Romans often attempted to choose their best general, while the Chinese selected a man who could control the imperial family and court. Neither empire believed that a single imperial family should rule forever. The Chinese believed that eventually the Mandate of Heaven would pass from one dynasty to another.

**Gender Relationships and the Family.** The family was extremely important for both empires, and both empires subordinated women to men at all stages of life. Both drew analogies between hierarchies and loyalties in a well-run family and those in a well-run empire. Both empires used marriages as a means of confirming political alliances with foreign powers. Both periodically felt that excessive concern with sexual relationships distracted energy from the demands of sustaining the empire, and both proclaimed strict codes of sexual morality.

**The Significance of Imperial Armies.** In both empires the army was crucial in creating and sustaining the political structure in the face of domestic and foreign enemies. The Roman Empire was established and ruled by generals, as were the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties in China. Both empires were periodically threatened and usurped by rebel generals asserting their own authority. The cost of the armies, especially on distant, unprofitable expeditions, often drained the finances of the government and encouraged its subjects to evade taxes and military service and even to rise in revolt. Both empires established colonies of soldier-colonizers to garrison and develop remote areas while simultaneously providing compensation and retirement benefits for the troops.

**Overextension.** Both empires suffered their greatest challenges in confronting simultaneously the strains of overexpansion and the subsequent internal revolts that were triggered by the costs. In Rome these dual problems, along with the barbarian invasions, finally precipitated the end of the empire in the west. In China they led to the loss of the Mandate of Heaven and the downfall of dynasties. The external battles against Qin-Jurchen border tribes, for example, combined with the revolt of the Yellow Turbans, brought down the later Han; the loss of the distant Battle of the Talas River, combined with the internal revolt of An Lushan, sapped Tang power.

**Public Works Projects.** Throughout their empire the Romans built roads, aqueducts, public monumental structures, administrative/military towns, and the great capital cities of Rome and Constantinople. The Chinese built the Great Wall, the Grand Canal, systems of transportation by road and water, public monumental structures, administrative/military towns throughout the empire, and several successive capitals, especially Chang'an and Luoyang.

**The Concentration of Wealth.** In both empires, the benefits of imperial wealth tended to flow toward the center and to the elites in the capital cities. The capitals grew to unprecedented size. Both Chang'an and Rome housed more than one million people.

**Policies for and against Individual Mobility.** To maintain power and stability in the face of demands for change, both empires periodically bound their peasantry to the soil and demanded that the sons of soldiers follow their fathers' occupations. Both found these policies difficult to enforce. Both offered some individual mobility through service in their armies. In addition, the Chinese examination system provided for advancement within the imperial bureaucracy.

**Revolts.** Both empires experienced frequent revolts against the emperor and his policies. In Rome, which housed a much larger slave population, slaves led some of the revolts. In China they were more typically initiated by peasants. Rome attempted to forestall mass revolts in the capital and other large cities through the provision of "bread and circuses." Both empires faced constant challenges from those living on their peripheries.

**Peasant Flight.** In both empires during times of upheaval, peasants sought to evade taxes and conscription by finding refuge as tenants on large, landed estates. Whenever imperial government was weak, the largest of these estates challenged the power of the central government.

The influence of the early Chinese Empire continues today, not only in China itself, but in east Asia, southeast Asia, and central Asia. Consistent patterns in language, culture, geopolitical organization, and international relations are there to be discovered through the ages. The same is true of Rome throughout the areas it ruled directly in western and southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. To a lesser degree, its influence extends to eastern Europe and to the European settler colonies in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. The imperial ideals of China and Rome have entranced many who have studied them, and repelled many as well. As we turn to study the empires of ancient India, these models help to guide our thinking.

## Review Questions

- Many kinds of standardization accompanied the creation and consolidation of empire in China. What were these forms of standardization, and which do you think were the most important?
- What were the three most prominent philosophies of rule in the Chinese Empire? They seem to have been applied under different circumstances. Under what circumstances do you think each was most appropriate? Why?
- What were the attitudes of Confucianism toward the role of women in society? How did these attitudes compare with those of other Chinese philosophies, and with philosophies from ancient Rome?
- Compare the policies of the Tang dynasty with those of the Han. You might consider the geographical extent of the empire under these dynasties, their administrative mechanisms, philosophies of government, and international relations.
- Why are Vietnam, Korea, and Japan often considered to be daughter civilizations of China?
- How did China regard the barbarians on its borders, in terms of international relations and in terms of assimilation? How did China's policies compare with those of Rome?

## BACKGROUND TO THE FALL OF ROME

Before we examine the fall of Roman Civilization, it is useful to become clear on exactly what Roman Civilization entailed:

### I. Economic

Superimposed over an agricultural base was a great amount of commercial activity. That is, the specialized production of goods (e.g. clothing, metals, books, military hardware, furniture, etc.) in urban areas, which were exchanged with other urban areas as well as neighboring rural areas for agricultural commodities.

In order to insure and enhance this economic production and exchange, certain factors were provided by the Roman government:

1. stable currency
2. sophisticated system of roads, bridges, harbors, aqueducts
3. military, naval, and police protection as well as postal services, all to insure safe travel and efficient communication
4. commercial legal codes and courts

### II. Political

In order to provide for the above mentioned economic activities, Roman Civilization created a central governmental organization (i.e. imperial bureaucracies of tax collectors, lawyers, provincial administrators, military personnel, etc.) which could supervise tax collection, road maintenance, and military protection. **Remember:** In order to have a good system of roads, police protection, law courts requires government revenue which is gained through tax collection. This implies that the population is producing sufficient amounts of wealth beyond subsistence levels which can be taxed in return for these governmental services.

### III. Cultural

"Civilization" comes from the Latin word "civies" which means city. Cities are always the heartbeats of any advanced culture, for here one finds the schools, hospitals, libraries, postal networks, cultural institutions, political agencies, and factories where people are trained, and in return, carry out the complex assignments of civilized life. The city of Rome at its peak had over 1,000,000 people, and other great cities of the Roman Mediterranean World — Alexandria, Antioch, Marseilles, Carthage, Athens — each had close to 100,000 inhabitants. But note that a city's survival depends upon a complex set of fragile factors which promote its continued existence — e.g. permanent exchange of agricultural goods for city produced goods and services, which in turn imply good roads, taxes, military protection. Cities, like government services, will only exist if there are surpluses, agricultural or otherwise, which are exchanged for goods produced in those cities.

### IV. Social

Complex civilizations usually consist of a hierarchy of social classes and a variety of ethnic groups. If the civilization is to survive, lower classes and minority ethnic groups must, to a certain extent, accept their inferior position yet still remain productive. In other words, someone has to do the less desirable labor and simultaneously accept his inferior social status, if the culture is to remain stable, regardless of the morality of this circumstance.

# DECLINE and FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

## Introduction

The disintegration of Roman Civilization (200 C.E. - 500 C.E.) was a complex process that involved internal and external factors. The barbarian invasions were the most obvious and dramatic example of Rome's decline, but there were more subtle forces at work within Roman Civilization which significantly weakened her capacity to resist these barbaric outsiders. It should also be kept in mind that Rome did not collapse overnight, for the process of disintegration took three centuries, which translated in human terms, encompassed at least ten generations of human life. Hence, for people living during these centuries, the process of disintegration was a gradual, almost unnoticeable occurrence.

## I. Barbarian Migrations/Invasions

Barbaric tribes had for thousands of years lived beyond the northern borders of the Roman Empire — i.e. in northern Europe beyond the Rhine and Danube rivers. During the 1st and 2nd centuries C.E., Rome had significantly expanded to these borders, bringing many barbaric cultures within the "umbrella" of Roman Civilization. But by the end of the 2nd century C.E., Roman expansion into northern Europe ceased, for Rome did not have the resources or military-political will to expand farther. She was comfortable in maintaining a defensive posture behind Hadrian's wall in England, and the Rhine and Danube in continental Europe.

But for reasons still largely unclear, the barbaric cultures increasingly took the offensive in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., desiring to migrate across these frontiers and occupy areas within the Empire. The migration of Asiatic groups such as the Huns pushed Germanic cultures westward and southward. Possibly the riches of Roman Civilization provided a further motivation, as well as the barbarian's recognition of Rome's increasing military weakness.

We have a description of one such barbaric tribe, the Huns, by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, a retired Roman officer writing around the year 400 C.E.

The people called Huns, barely mentioned in ancient records, live beyond the Sea of Azov, on the border of the Black Sea (in present day southern Russia), and are a race savage beyond all description. As children, the cheeks of their infants are deeply scarred by hot irons, in order that the hair will not grow when they reach maturity... These Huns are of great size, and low legged, so that you might believe them to be two-legged beasts, or stout figures which have been sculpted with an ax on posts at the end of bridges...

These people are so rough and hardy, they neither require fire nor well flavored food, but live primarily on roots and the half-raw flesh of animals, which they merely warm rapidly by placing it between their own legs and the back of their horses.

They never shelter themselves in homes, but avoid settled life as contrary to their customs. Hence, they wander about, roaming over the mountains and forests, and condition themselves to resist hunger, cold, and thirst from infancy... there is not a person in their tribes who cannot remain on his horse day and night, they can even eat and sleep without dismounting for days...



None of them plow, or even know how to plow, for they have no settled agricultural ways, but are homeless and lawless, perpetually wandering with their wagons which are their true homes; in fact, they seem to be a people always on the move. This active, hearty race desire only to plunder the possessions of others, went on ravaging and slaughtering throughout the northern Roman provinces...

These Barbarian cultures had a significantly disruptive impact upon Roman Civilization:

1. These marauders frequently burned crops, villages, and cities. They fought Roman armies as well as each other. Such violent restlessness disrupted transportation, trade, and other forms of commerce. The Roman armies inability to protect the provinces spread disillusionment and despair among the Roman masses. (One of the barbaric Germanic tribes called themselves the Vandals, this should give us insight into their behavior.)
2. Even when these groups eventually settled down to agriculture, they lacked any deeply felt allegiance to Rome, for these primitive cultures lacked any ideas of abstract laws, taxes, or dedication to a distant imperial government. This fact was particularly dangerous when Rome, suffering from manpower shortages, increasingly recruited these people to populate their diminishing armies. (The analogy would be similar to hiring wolves to guard the flock. . .)
3. Living a nomadic, or primitive agricultural level, they were not interested in producing surpluses, so necessary for maintaining taxes, trade, and urbanized life. They did not have the interests/skills for preserving roads, bridges, aqueducts, temples, museums, or any other urban buildings. They avoided city life as not suitable to their ancient Nordic traditions, hence they had no commitment to preserving the benefits/experiences of urban, civilized culture.
4. Being illiterate, they would have no interest/knowledge in preserving Greco-Roman cultural achievements which literacy and formal education had previously enabled. Hence, the Greco-Roman cultural traditions of philosophy, law, drama, humanistic art, historical writing, science and math, libraries, museums, written government records, etc...increasingly fell into disuse and disrepair.

Hence, even as these Germanic cultures finally gave up their marauding ways, and settled down to a more settled life in the provinces, their foreign cultural traditions and their disinterest/ignorance of civilization profoundly **undermined** Roman Civilization.

As modern historian, M. I. Rostovtzeff, stated,

The main phenomenon which underlies the process of Rome's decline is the gradual absorption of the educated classes by the masses and the resulting simplification of all aspects of political, social, economic, and intellectual life, which we call the **barbarization** of the ancient Greco-Roman world...

## II. Disease

The noted historian, William McNeill, in his work, *Plagues and Peoples*, argues that plagues have played a decisive role throughout human history. . The Black Plague which hit Europe in the mid-fourteenth century killed off 1/3 of Europe's population and significantly undermined Medieval Civilization. The Spanish conquistadores brought diseases from Europe which ultimately might have killed off 90% of the Indian populations in the Aztec and Inca civilizations during the sixteenth century.



Similarly with Rome. As a result of Roman contacts with Indian and Chinese civilizations, new diseases were introduced from these cultures into the Roman dominated Mediterranean world. There were two major outbreaks of the plague. The first one occurred during the years 165-180 C.E., probably being smallpox. A second epidemic hit the Roman Empire in the decades 251-266 C.E., probably being measles. No accurate statistics of population losses are possible, and any Roman records of these catastrophes have not survived. But one contemporary eyewitness to the second plague period observed that 5000 people were dying daily at the plague's height in the city of Rome alone! McNeill offers no estimate of total losses, but other examples previously cited suggest that the decline of the Empire's population could have been enormous. It should also be noted that although disease peaked in the mid second and third centuries C.E., lesser outbreaks continued throughout each century of Rome's decline into the eighth century C.E.; another plague hit the Byzantine Civilization during the reign of Justinian in the years 542-543 C.E.

As we shall see, other disruptive forces intensified Rome's decline, but these epidemics significantly contributed to a rapid depopulation of the Mediterranean world, a process that continued downward until the tenth century. Some historians have estimated that the Mediterranean population during the height of the Roman Empire in the early second century C.E. reached 100 million people. By the fifth century C.E., the population might have been less than 50 million! Specifically plagues would disrupt Roman Civilization in many ways:

1. The unexplainable loss of countless millions would breed a mood of despair among the survivors. The inability of Roman officials to counter such outbreaks, through no fault of their own, would nevertheless undermine popular acceptance of prestigious government institutions and officials.
2. Manpower shortages would place strains upon the military forces, precisely at the moment when Rome needed to strengthen the armies against the increased threat from barbarian tribes.
3. Survivors of the plagues would have to take on increased taxes to support government-military expenditures to effectively defend the Empire against the threat of Barbarian invasion.
4. Disease/plagues spread more quickly in densely populated urban areas than in rural areas. Cities, and the activities which take place there, would be more affected than rural areas. But cities were the centers of Roman Civilization. Hence with the onset of epidemics, shrinking tax bases, urban flight, and decreasing commerce would all contribute to the undermining of governmental activities and cultural-educational events which urbanization had previously nourished. Migrating barbaric tribes who plundered these defenseless cities further intensified the de-urbanization of Roman society.
5. Fear of epidemic outbreaks would discourage travel, hence diminish trade and tax collection, as well as disrupt communication networks — all of these factors so important to maintaining urban, civilized life.

In conclusion, the rapid, unpredictable spread of disease significantly depopulated urban centers, discouraged commerce, intensified tax burdens, and psychologically disoriented the surviving populations. Roman civilization was undergoing a process of population decline, ruralization, and political decentralization — precisely at a time when the opposite was needed to face the barbarian threat!



### III. Military Problems

By the beginning of the third century C.E., the Roman armies increasingly became restless, expressing their grievances by making greater demands upon the imperial government and frequently thrusting their generals into political power struggles. By 230 C.E., Roman generals contested for the imperial throne, and their legions politically maneuvered, even fought with each other to gain economic concessions and political control. Similar to the late Republic (first century B.C.E.), late imperial Roman society once again collapsed into frequent civil war. The reasons for this military discontent/rebelliousness are many:

1. Shrinking tax revenue made it difficult for the Roman imperial government to consistently and effectively pay the Roman soldiers, hence spreading discontent among military ranks and encouraging them to become involved in political power struggles to meet their financial needs.
2. Roman imperial expansion had stopped by the mid-second century C.E. Hence, legions stationed on the frontiers increasingly became demoralized, for they had to accept a strategy of defense, a policy to which they were unaccustomed. Long years of military service on the distant frontiers became regimented and tedious. But abundant leisure time also provided ample opportunity for discussing grievances and hatching political conspiracies.
3. During the peaceful centuries of the Pax Romana, military policy had moved soldiers throughout the Empire during their army careers. Such mobility fostered a more cosmopolitan attitude among soldiers, for they came to know soldiers and civilians from other provinces. Mobile military careers disallowed the development of a soldier's strong attachment to a local area, hence military allegiance remained focused on the Empire as a whole, and the imperial government which administrated it. But by the third century C.E., shrinking governmental revenue and a defensive strategy encouraged the placement of soldiers in one region for their entire military career. Furthermore, soldiers were locally recruited and allowed to spend much time living with their families. Hence these soldiers increasingly lacked any deeply felt allegiance to the distant emperor or to other Roman armies stationed in far away provinces.
4. Increasing military "provincialism" was further intensified by the recruitment of barbarian warriors to fill the Roman manpower shortages. The increasing hiring of "foreigners" also undermined morale. But more importantly, Roman leaders were hesitant to use such soldiers, for they feared that these barbarian troops had not developed strong attachment to the Empire.
5. The recruitment of Roman officers increasingly came from the lower classes. These people lacked formal education which would have exposed them to Greco-Roman cultural values, solidifying allegiance to Roman Civilization.

All of these factors worked together in pushing third century Roman civilization into military anarchy and civil war. Between 235-284 C.E. there were twenty-seven Roman emperors; only two died of natural causes! Historians refer to this period as the "Barracks Emperors", for these men came from military backgrounds, pushed into imperial office by their legions who were hungry for economic gain and political control. Recognizing where their political power came from, these general-emperors willingly imposed heavy taxes upon the civilian populations to meet the economic demands of their soldiers. As one soldier-general, Septimus Severus, cynically stated, "Pay the soldiers and despise the rest."



#### IV. Governmental Problems

With the fall of the Roman Republic, Roman emperors, beginning with Caesar Augustus, had reorganized the army and governmental administration. The reforms basically proved favorable, as the stability of the next two centuries, the **Pax Romana**, reveals. But the stability of the Roman Empire during that era **disguised** certain governmental problems:

1. A clear, distinct relationship was never clearly worked out between the office of the Emperor and the Senate. Even though the Senate lost significant power with the fall of the Republic, senators, representing the traditional Roman aristocracy, continued to resent, even at times politically conspired against Roman emperors who had usurped their power.
2. The office of the Emperor suffered a major weakness as well. No clear line of succession was ever formalized in law. It was simply up to the present emperor to determine his successor to the throne. Frequently emperors made good decisions, even recruiting and training the next man in line for the job. But in the late Empire, poorer decisions were frequently made. Just to cite one example, Marcus Aurelius appointed his inept son, Commodus, to the throne in 180 C.E. Lacking any administrative talent, he squandered the royal treasury on lavish parties for his friends. Instead of conscientiously administrating the Empire, he amused himself by posing as a gladiator in the Coliseum, where he slaughtered countless victims who were forbidden to resist. He was eventually murdered by his own private guard who in turn offered the emperorship to the highest bidder! The lack of a clear constitutional-legal provision for succession to the throne encouraged many such abuses, opening the way in the 3rd century C.E. for military intrigues and the rise of the "Barracks Emperors."
3. Even though the central government was located in Rome, lack of modern communication encouraged a great degree of local and provincial self-rule. This is what made Roman Civilization work — a willingness on the part of provincial governors and municipal officials to flexibly administrate/resolve local problems as they arose. The central government's task in Rome was to insure adequate military protection, provide legal services, and maintain sufficient transportation networks (i.e. roads, bridges, naval protection in the Mediterranean, etc.). Rome's success during the **Pax Romana** resulted from her ability to provide such services with minimal taxes, which paralleled an imperial policy of general toleration of her various cultural minorities (e.g. Arabs, Jews, Celts, Britons, etc.). In other words, Rome's success depended upon considerable government decentralization. But this policy implied the economic vitality of the various regions, cities, and villages throughout the Empire. Local administrators were willingly recruited based upon talent, education in Greco-Roman values, and personal wealth which allowed them the leisure time to hold public office. During the **Pax Romana**, it was a matter of honor and public prestige to serve Rome.

The rising barbarian threat and the military anarchy of the Barracks Emperors forced the Roman leadership to abandon this previous policy of political decentralization. Hence, with the ascension of Diocletian (284-305 C.E.) to the imperial throne, dramatic governmental reconstruction took place. He specifically instituted the following reforms:

1. The Empire was divided into East and West, following the dividing line of the two major international languages, Greek and Latin. The Empire was further split into 4 basic regions (i.e. **prefectures**) which were further divided into smaller dioceses, which in turn were further subdivided into approximately 120 local units.
2. To coincide with the four largest administrative units, Diocletian established four supreme rulers consisting of two emperors and vice-emperors (i.e. the **tetrarchy**). Each ruler had his own capital city, Roman armies, and bureaucracy.



3. Although the army's total size was expanded from 400,000 to 650,000 men, Diocletian divided the armies into smaller units supplemented by cavalry. These reforms provided greater mobility against the nomadic barbarians while simultaneously reducing the military power of any individual general, lessening his potential "political" ambitions.
4. He instituted an elaborate spy system throughout the Empire, not only to keep watchful eyes on governors and generals, but also assist in tax collection and supervise business activities in the local market places.
5. Local, municipal, and provincial officials were increasingly selected by the emperors, in hopes that such appointments coming from the central government would produce greater allegiance at the local level to the imperial throne.
6. To stimulate respect and awe for the office of the emperor, Diocletian, borrowed from the monarchical traditions of Egypt and the Near East. The emperor was perceived as being divine, and his activities were permeated with elaborate court rituals. Visitors and government officials crawled in his presence, kissing his feet, ring, and the hem of his gown, all carried out in reverent supplication.

All of these measures were designed to inhibit further military revolts, and they basically worked. But the price was heavy, for the centralization of government undermined the vitality/flexibility of local rule, and the enormous expansion of central governmental bureaucracies placed even heavier tax burdens upon an already overstrained population decimated by disease and a half-century of civil war. These enormous taxes, coupled with previous decades of debasing (i.e. devaluing) the Roman currency brought economic ruin to the Mediterranean world. In desperation, Diocletian instituted wage/price controls to combat inflation. Even though the death penalty threatened those business people who refused to comply, resistance was widespread, the economy continued to tumble, and the government finally abandoned the effort.

As a result, government taxes increasingly took the form of collecting commodities and foodstuff directly, instead of money, which was diminishing in value and availability. State granaries and stockyards were quickly built to house such "taxes", and farmers were compelled to remain on the land. Finally, all workers were prohibited from leaving their jobs, even in the cities. Millers, bakers, shipbuilders, soldiers, even government officials were forced to remain in their jobs, and eventually these vocations became hereditary as well. In effect, the entire economy became "nationalized" all for the purposes of meeting the military crisis!

In conclusion, Diocletian's reforms ended the military anarchy of the previous half-century, but his reforms created a rigid society — militarized, bureaucratic, over-centralized and over-taxed. In short, he saved the Empire by "freezing" it. Although the Empire would linger on for another century, the masses no longer saw Roman citizenship as a blessing, but a military necessity paid for with crushing taxes and imperial indifference to local rule.

## V. Economic Problems

As we have seen, Diocletian's military preoccupations put great financial strain upon Rome's diminishing economy. But there were other factors at work which also intensified the economic decline of the Mediterranean world.

1. For the previous 1000 years, the Mediterranean basin had been densely populated. Traditional cultures frequently lack a clear understanding of the ecological consequences of overgrazing, deforestation, and intensive farming. As early as the Classical age, Plato had noted environ-

mental decay in 5th century B.C.E. Greece. The Roman statesman, Cicero, had also noted a similar decay in southern Italy in the 1st century B.C.E.

2. Roman Civilization had frequently covered its governmental expenditures through imperial expansion. That is, Rome had previously met its government/military expenses by imposing heavy taxes upon recently conquered peoples, hence Roman citizens living in the interior provinces (e.g. Italy, Egypt, Greece, etc.) did not see an increase in their taxes. But when Roman imperial expansion ceased during the 2nd century C.E., this important source of tax revenue disappeared.
3. Even during the **Pax Romana**, the western and northern provinces were less economically developed than the older provinces of the eastern Mediterranean (e.g. Egypt, Greece, Syria, Asia Minor, etc.). Hence goods purchased from these more developed areas by the West were paid for in gold and silver. But by the 3rd century C.E., these currency reserves had become depleted. The great Roman mines in Iberia (i.e. Spain) had dried up. Rome was becoming short of cash, and the Barracks Emperors constantly devalued the coins to pay for their military needs. As a result, rampant inflation hit the Roman world throughout the 3rd century C.E., undermining business confidence and undercutting international trade. Hence, the western/northern provinces (e.g. Gaul, Spain, Britain, Italy) experienced a rapid economic, urban, and population decline.
4. The Roman institution of slavery also created mass economic problems:
  - a. Cheap slave labor discouraged technological innovation because the aristocratic landowners always had cheap, abundant labor reserves, and they were indifferent to labor saving technology. It was always cheaper to purchase new slaves than take care of the old ones.
  - b. For obvious reasons of security, slaves were not educated, hence the goods produced by them remained rather primitive and of the same quality throughout the Mediterranean world. Hence, without the specialized production of goods, international trade was constantly inhibited, and the growth of cities as trade centers for such goods was hampered.
  - c. Because of the reliance upon slave labor, the aristocracy class had never taken an interest in economic activities. Aristocratic education, as a result, did not focus upon practical arts, but upon the classical Greek cultural arts (i.e. philosophy, rhetoric, drama, etc.). Hence, the great wealth of these landowners was never applied/invested into technological innovation or increased economic productivity.
  - d. Slaves remained indifferent to hard work or technological innovation, for they received no incentives to become better workers. As a matter of fact, suggested improvements might encourage aristocratic suspicions, and if a slave worked harder/faster, he would just die more quickly of exhaustion. Slaves may have been uneducated, but they were certainly smart enough to remain passive, minimally productive, and quiet.
  - e. Slavery bred unemployment among other classes. The free-farmers, who had been the traditional economic-military backbone of the Roman Republic, could not effectively compete with the large slave-tilled estates. Their costs were too high, for their farms were too small/inefficient and their families' economic needs were more expensive than what it cost the aristocracy to keep their slave-farmers alive. Hence, as early as the late Republic era, this free-farming class had been increasingly forced off their lands and migrated to the cities in search of employment. But the Empire's underdeveloped economy, suffering from insufficient industry and inadequate international trade, could not provide sufficient jobs for these people. Chronic unemployment had become a problem since the 1st century B.C.E. These restless urban masses consistently threatened Rome's political stability.

Hence, the Roman government pacified these people with welfare doles ("i.e. Free bread...") and public entertainment (i.e. Free circuses...) as a means to keep them quiet. But such handouts demoralized/corrupted the urban proletariat, and such government expenditures placed greater tax strains upon those who could find work.

- f. Rural slavery and urban unemployment economically separated the common masses from the wealthy aristocratic ruling class. Having no access to the wealth of the aristocracy, and formal education in Greco-Roman values which such wealth allowed, the common people did not psychologically identify with the Greco-Roman world view, nor did they maintain any deeply-felt attachment to the ruling aristocracy which held these values.

In conclusion, the political stability of the **Pax Romana** disguised a Roman economy that remained static, inefficient, and underdeveloped. Chronic urban unemployment coupled with widespread rural slavery both kept Rome's economy, even in good times, in a constant state of frailty. Furthermore, the psychological brutality of slavery and the moral inertia of urban unemployment fostered a feeling of passive indifference among the masses to their ruling overlords. With the political-military catastrophes of the late Empire, these common people did not feel strongly compelled to support the ruling aristocracy, let alone make further sacrifices. When the barbarians arrived in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., the Roman masses frequently met these newcomers with indifference, if not welcomed gratitude. As the historian W. C. Westermann stated,

It was the loss of economic freedom, even more than the loss of political freedom, which had such disastrous results upon private initiative and finally undermined Greco-Roman Civilization...

## VI. Intellectual Factors

### 1. Aristocratic Decadence

During the late Roman Empire, the wealthy aristocracy had little to do. Slavery had released them from economic responsibilities. Diocletian's governmental reforms undermined local self-rule. Hence, the local aristocracy's political responsibilities diminished as well.

Not surprisingly, this class pursued pleasure to fill the void of their unproductive lives. The Greek philosophy of Epicureanism provided many aristocrats with a world view well suited to these tastes. To quote from Epicurus, its founder,

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you shall die.

I was not...I was...I am not...I do not care.

Today we are alive, and this is all the certainty we have, so let us make the best of our present existence.

Although Epicureanism called for the ascetic rational pursuit of pleasure, even advocating intellectual pursuits as the most noble lifestyle, many rich Romans pursued pleasure without restraint. We have a description of one such Roman:

We quickly undressed, went into the hot baths, and after working up a sweat, passed on to the cold showers. There we found Trimalchio again, his skin shining all over with perfumed oil. He was being rubbed down, not with ordinary cloth, but towels of the purest and softest wool. During his rubdown, right before his eyes, the three masseurs were guzzling away at the finest of his rare Italian wines. He was then wrapped into a blazing

silk toga, placed upon his litter and carried off. Before him ran four slaves, all dressed in glittering harnesses and robes. A slave-musician with a miniature flute also paced along his side, playing constantly at his master's ear...Drunk with admiration, we followed this noble procession.

Arriving at Trimalchio's house, we finally took our places at his dinner table. Immediately slaves from Alexandria came in and poured ice water over our hands. These servants were followed by other slaves who knelt at our feet and with extraordinary skill pedicured our toenails. During all of their work, not one of them stopped singing...In fact, anything you asked for was consistently provided for with song, so that you would have thought you were eating in a concert-hall rather than a private dining room.

We were nibbling at these splendid appetizers when suddenly trumpets blazed a fanfare, and our host, Trimalchio, was carried into the room by his slaves, finally propped up on piles of miniature silk pillows...On the little finger of his left hand was an immense gold ring, on two fingers of his other hand were two rings of similar nature and size...he further showed off by revealing his arm which was covered by gold bracelets...He was picking his teeth with a silver toothpick...

Suddenly the orchestra sounded again and four slaves came dancing in, whisking off the top of a silver food tray. Underneath, in still another tray, lay juicily prepared capons, sowbellies, and a small roasted rabbit embellished with pastry wings to look like a little Pegasus. The food carver appeared immediately and went to work, thrusting with his knife like a gladiator practicing to the accompaniment of music...Suddenly there came a large uproar outside the room and then huge Spartan horses came bounding into our room...Following were dogs, then servants carrying another food tray of a wild pig of absolutely enormous size...clustered around the large sow were little suckling pigs made of hard pastry...a slave gave a savage slash with his knife, and the pig's roasted flesh parted. From inside the pork out flew dozens of live birds!!!

(Excerpt from Petronius, *Satyricon*)

Another Roman, Ammianus, writes of the degeneration of the Roman people,

In place of the philosopher, the singer is carried in, and in place of the teacher, the gladiator is praised. While the libraries are shut up forever, musical instruments are increasingly manufactured. The common masses, although suffering the greatest poverty, spend the entire night in the wineshops, some lurk in the shadows of the theaters...or they quarrel with one another in their games of dice... From sunrise to sunset they stand open-mouthed, examining with great care the good points or the defects of charioteers and their horses...

## 2. Religious Revivalism and the Growth of Eastern Cults

The aristocratic pursuit of pleasure, in the name of Epicureanism, possibly discredited the integrity of rational Greek philosophy. It was of little value to the common masses anyway, for they did not have the leisure time or the financial resources necessary for a formal education which would have exposed them to such philosophies. But even among the aristocracy there



was a movement away from the intellectual traditions of Greco-Roman rationalism. Aristotle, Stoicism, and the intellectual currents of Greek mathematics and science increasingly fell into disfavor and disuse. Even Plato's philosophy was modified by the religious-mystical concerns of Plotinus. The reason for this retreat from rational thought is best summarized by the historian Solomon Katz who states,

Rational philosophy failed to answer the psychological needs of the masses. It offered few rays of hope regarding either the grim present or uncertain future, and it provided no colorful ceremony to compensate for the drabness of life.

The Pax Romana had unified the Mediterranean world, but it also brought religious trauma to the masses. For Rome's military conquests destroyed the credibility of the various defeated cultures' gods, while the growth of cities undermined, for the urban immigrants, the agricultural-religious traditions of their farming ancestors. Furthermore, Rome's own national religious heritage made little sense to the various cultures living within the Roman Empire, and the worship of the emperor was more of a public ceremony than a deeply-felt religious experience.

Not surprisingly, the late Empire witnessed the rapid infiltration of new mystical cults from the Near East. From Egypt came Isis, Serapis, and Osiris; from Persia came the cult of Mithras, so popular among the Roman legions and Christianity's greatest competitor; in Greece, the revival of Dionysus and Orpheus cults occurred; while Asia Minor offered her earth-goddess as well as the solar deity, Sol Invictus. All of these cults discarded their original local agricultural meanings, and spread throughout the Empire, especially converting the common masses who were hungry for a personal relationship with a deity who could promise spiritual security and heavenly reward.

These religious impulses undermined Roman Civilization in two distinct ways:

1. An increase in religious-mystical enthusiasm undermined a rational problem-solving approach to the very real crises facing Rome. But the concerns for this world were increasingly being replaced by an expectation for the next life. If Greco-Roman philosophy had been nurtured and taught on a wider scale, possibly its scientific assumptions might have encouraged a more pragmatic approach to the real problems of disease, agricultural underproduction, needed economic innovation, and effective governmental reform.
  2. The proliferation of numerous cults fractured the cultural-political unity of the Roman Mediterranean world. Furthermore, the individual pursuit of personal salvation turned people psychologically inward. A sense of civic consciousness, so necessary for meeting collective problems, increasingly gave way to a mood of spiritual, self-centered hedonism.
3. Christianity

The eighteenth century British historian, Edward Gibbon, in his monumental historical work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, argued that Christianity also significantly contributed to Rome's collapse. He offered reasons similar to what has been previously mentioned on the rise of Eastern cults. That is, Christianity shared similar views with these Near Eastern competitors in its emphasis upon a personal Deity, heavenly reward, miraculous rituals, and a preoccupation with the next life. More specifically, Gibbon argued that Christianity's dramatic rise during the third and fourth centuries C.E., robbed Rome of potential civic leaders. That is, young men who might have chosen Roman military-governmental careers alternatively decided to join monasteries or other similar religious vocations. In short, they retreated from the world instead of embracing it. Furthermore, the

Christian attack upon Greco-Roman philosophy diverted the faithful's attention away from rationalism and the pragmatic attention to the late Empire's earthly problems. As represented by Jesus' quote, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," Christianity's exclusiveness alienated the non-converted, discouraging pagan Romans from cooperating with their Christian neighbors in collectively solving the catastrophes of the late Empire. For example, early Christians were pacifists, refusing Roman military service. They refused to attend Roman courts, because they did not acknowledge/accept Roman legal oaths which were infused with pagan beliefs. They avoided public ceremonies (e.g. emperor worship, the games, theater, the Roman baths) because these occasions were likewise permeated with pagan rituals. Not surprisingly, pagan Romans viewed Christians with suspicion, deriding them as "atheists" and "haters of the human race"; Roman government took advantage of this public mood by periodically persecuting the early Church.

Persecution ended with Emperor Constantine's (310-335 C.E.) conversion to Christianity in the early fourth century. But his pro-Christian policies further weakened Rome's capacity to confront its problems. He exempted Christian wealth from government taxation, precisely when Rome needed additional revenue. His suspension of government financial subsidies to pagan religions undercut their support for Roman imperial rule. Constantine's efforts to mediate between different Christian factions at the Council of Nicea antagonized Christians who maintained doctrinal positions different from the "official" theology of Rome. For example, many Greek churches did not accept the Trinity, North Africans embraced a differing view of the clergy than was held by Rome, and the barbarians frequently converted to a form of Christianity, Arianism, which also differed from Rome's views on the theological nature of Christ.

The Emperor Theodosius (378-395 C.E.) brought the rise of Christianity to official culmination. During his reign, he issued a series of decrees outlawing all religions except Christianity. Pagan temples were closed, pagan priests lost their political and tax exempt privileges, Jews were removed from government and military offices and forbidden to marry Christians on penalty of death. Through the last decades of Rome's lingering existence, the Christian masses, emboldened by the imperial decrees, persecuted the "non-believers" with increasing tenacity. Synagogues and pagan temples were frequently burned, the classical library of Alexandria was destroyed, the Greek Olympic games were stopped. Not surprisingly, when Rome finally politically collapsed during the 5th century C.E., paganism largely died with her. Christianity had emerged triumphant, ready to convert the barbarian hordes and construct the religious foundations for the Middle Ages.

In conclusion, the great twentieth century British historian, Arnold Toynbee, argued that a symptom of a civilization's decline is a "failure of nerve." Possibly this observation best summarizes the intellectual forces of Rome's collapse. For in the final analysis, it was the acceptance of Greco-Roman values by the urban middle class and landed aristocracy which had fused the Mediterranean world into one people under Roman rule. Roman law, largely influenced by Stoic philosophy, had joined the Mediterranean masses together as Roman citizens. Sophisticated Roman engineering, refined by Greek science, had brought the Mediterranean world into greater commercial integration and economic prosperity. The Greco-Roman cultural practices of Greek education, theater, the Olympic games, libraries, the widespread use of Greek and Latin, etc., were found in every city and village of the Roman world, bringing nominal cultural unity and a sense of shared values among the Roman elites. However, during the late Empire, these attitudes and practices were increasingly discarded in favor of a broad religious revivalism which exchanged a rational approach to earthly problems for a mystical concern for the next.

## Final Thoughts on the Fall of Rome

As we have seen, the disintegration of Roman Civilization was a **complex** process involving three centuries of decay and turmoil. Some of these disruptive forces were **contingent**. That is, Rome did not cause, nor could she effectively counteract the external forces of barbarian migration or the spread of disease. Her internal problems (e.g. tax shortages, ecological decay, military restlessness, etc.) were **complex**, demanding a creative response that was possibly **beyond** Rome's capacity for solution. One could more deeply ask, "To what extent did people even realize this growing decay, given the fact that it took three centuries, involving more than ten generations of people widely distributed throughout the Mediterranean world?" Certainly some events dramatically captured people's attention — e.g. the barbarian sacking of one's local village, the outbreak of an epidemic, or a local famine. But so many of these historical forces were both **subtle** and **long term** — e.g. the moral corrosion of slavery, aristocratic decadence, the abandonment of Greco-Roman rationalism. This last point should give us pause, for if the majority of Romans were blind as to their own culture's decay, **to what extent are we well-informed as to the state of American Civilization?**

Historical hindsight does reveal that these forces did destroy Rome. European-Mediterranean culture was significantly transformed from the third to the fifth century. And this fact is best revealed by the American historian, Peter Brown, in his observation.

Near Rome, a sculptor's yard of the fourth century still turned out classical statues, impeccable dressed in the old Roman toga. But the aristocrats who commissioned such works would, in fact, wear a costume which betrayed prolonged exposure to the barbarians of the non-Mediterranean world — a wool shirt from the Danube, a cloak from northern Gaul, fastened by a decorative brooch from Germany; the wardrobe was made complete by trousers from German Saxony. **Deeper** still, at the very core of the Mediterranean, the tradition of Greek philosophy had succumbed to a different world-view...

# FREE MAN

USING  
THE INFO  
PROVIDED  
TRACK THE  
DOWNFALL  
OF THE  
CLASSICAL  
CIVILIZATIONS



ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO AN END.

# DOWNFALL ROME

In 376 CE, large numbers of Goths crossed the Danube. They sought admission to the territory of the Roman Empire, a political institution which, despite having both new and longstanding systematic weaknesses, wielded effective power across the lands surrounding the Mediterranean and beyond. The Empire had large numbers of trained, supplied, and disciplined soldiers, it had a comprehensive civil administration based in thriving cities with effective control over public finances, and it maintained extreme differences of wealth and status including slavery on a large scale. It had wide-ranging trade networks that allowed even modest households to use goods made by professionals a long way away. Among its literate elite it had ideological legitimacy as the only worthwhile form of civilization and a unity based on comprehensive familiarity with Greek and Roman literature and rhetoric.

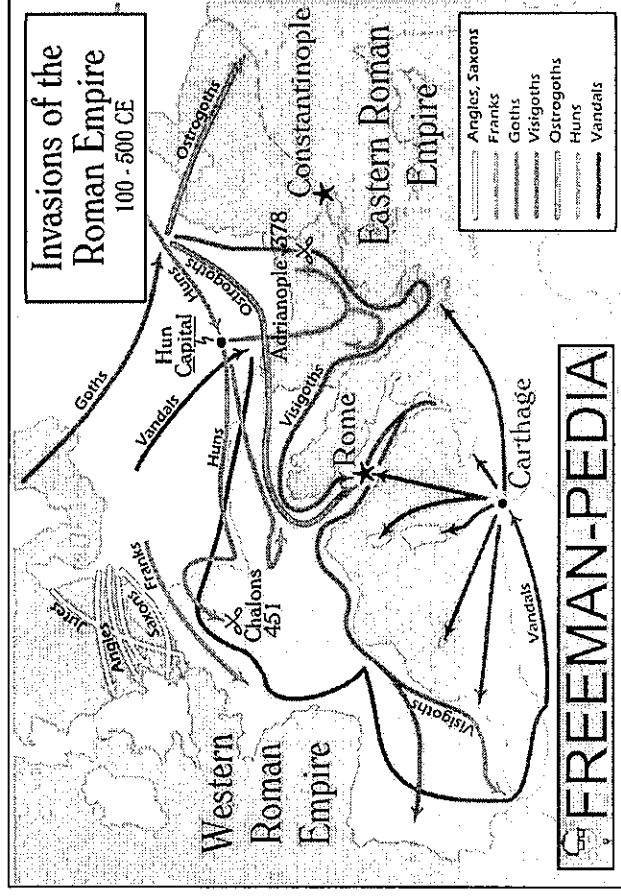
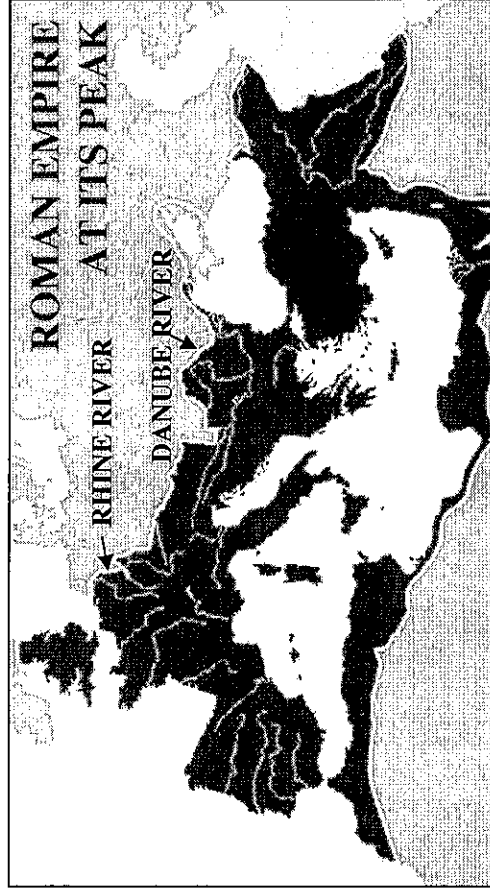
By 476, when Odoacer deposed the Emperor Romulus, the Western Roman Empire wielded negligible military, political, or financial power and had no effective control over the scattered Western domains that still described themselves as Roman. While its legitimacy lasted for centuries and its cultural influence remains today, the Western Empire never had the strength to rise again.

## DECLINE

The Romans had existed as an important power for over 1000 years. They had brought stability, prosperity, and order to the civilised West. Excellent roads connected the far reaches of the empire with the capital at Rome. These were built originally for military purposes but improved all communications and trade. Roman law kept the internal peace and 20 to 30 Roman legions defended the frontiers.

All was not perfect, however. Emperors held absolute authority. This worked well with good emperors, but incompetent ones could do great harm. The rules for succession to the throne were never clear, and debilitating civil wars often resulted. The bureaucracy that managed the empire on a daily basis grew more corrupt, increasing the dissatisfaction of the common citizen. The wealth of the empire gradually concentrated in the hands of a minority while a large slave population did most of the work. The borders of the empire were immense and put a strain on military resources (500,000 soldiers defended a frontier that required 3 million or more to be secured). Roman conquests had ceased in the second century A.D., bringing an end to massive inflows of plunder and slaves. Taxes increased and production fell as the work force declined. A plague may have killed 20 percent of the empire's population in the third and fourth centuries, further reducing trade and production.

In the late third century, the Roman Empire was split into eastern and western halves in an attempt to make for easier rule and better control. In 323 Constantine became emperor after a civil war and established his eastern capital at Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople. During the next century the eastern and western parts of the empire gradually established separate identities, although nominally the same empire. These identities were partially due to the different pressures brought to bear on them from the outside and the local culture. The Western Empire was predominantly Latin; the Eastern Empire was predominantly Greek (although they referred to themselves as Romans). The Eastern Empire survived the cataclysm of the third and fourth centuries because it had a larger population (70 percent of the empire's total), better emperors, more money, and a far better army and navy.



# DOWNFALL ROME

## THE GERMANIC PEOPLE TO THE NORTH/EAST

In the 4th century A.D. most Germanic peoples in Europe were living east of the Rhine and north of the Danube. These groups were seminomadic, herding their flocks and tilling the soil. Large and vigorous, the people prized strength and courage in battle.

For hundreds of years the Germans had exerted pressure on the frontiers of the empire. In 105 B.C. German warriors inflicted a terrible defeat on a Roman army, but four years later, a capable Roman leader, Marius, became a national hero when he outmaneuvered the Germans and defeated them. Again in Julius Caesar's time, German invaders tried to conquer part of Gaul but were defeated. During the reign of Augustus, the Romans launched a drive against the restless German tribes between the Rhine and the Elbe rivers, but in 9 A.D. the Roman legions suffered a crushing defeat in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. Three legions were completely wiped out. From then on the Romans were content to hold the frontier on the Rhine-Danube line, and quiet continued for a long period. Again, in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, from 161 to 180 A.D., and for 120 years afterward, the Romans had difficulty holding the Germans at the Frontier. But after 300 A.D. peace was maintained for some seventy-five years.

## THE ROLL OF THE HUNS IN ASIA

In Asia, during the 4th century, restless nomads called Huns were on the march from the east. Mounted on swift horses, they attacked with lightning ferocity all tribes in their path. Crossing the Volga River, they conquered the Ostrogoths in eastern Europe. Fearing that the Huns would attack them also, the Visigoths implored Roman authorities for sanctuary in the empire. The Roman officials agreed, promising them lands for settlement provided they came unarmed.



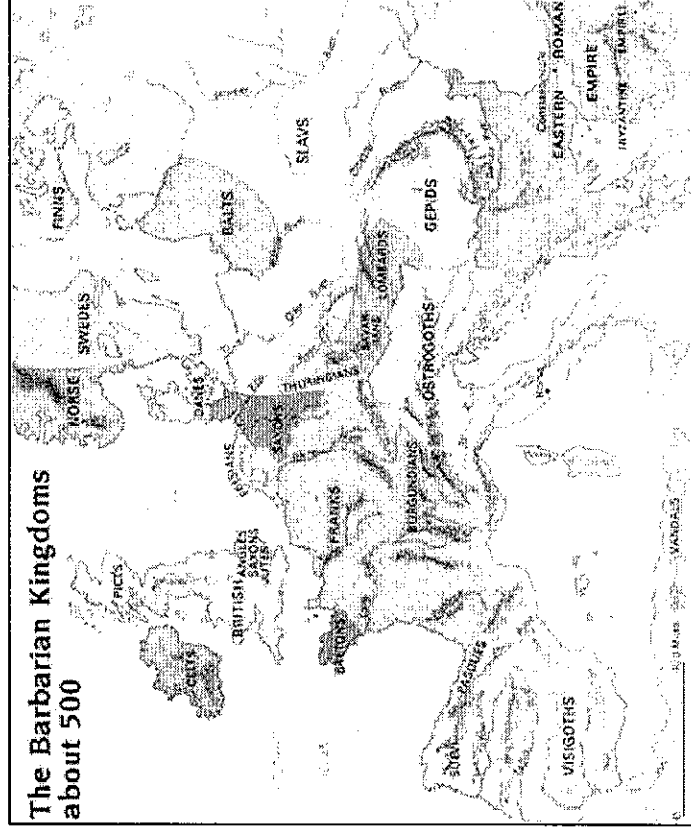
# FALL

Neither side lived up to the agreement, however, and the Visigoths, without land and facing starvation, began to sack Roman settlements. When the Roman emperor Valens led a great army against the Visigoths, to the astonishment of Romans and Germans alike, the imperial force was scattered and the emperor slain. This battle on the field of Adrianople in 378 A.D. is considered one of the decisive battles in world history because it rendered the Roman Empire defenseless. German tribes outside the frontiers began to round up their cattle, mobilize their fighting men, and move toward the Roman borders.

## THE END...

Meanwhile, the power of the emperors in Rome had fallen to a point where they had become merely puppets of the legionaries, many of whom were of German birth. In the 476 A.D., Odoacer, a commander of the Roman armies, deposed the last of the Roman emperors and became the first German ruler of Rome. This date—476 A.D.—is often cited as the date for the "fall" of Rome.

## The Barbarian Kingdoms about 500



# DOWNFALL OF CHINA

The **End of the Han Dynasty** refers to the period from 189 to 220, which roughly coincides with the reign of the Han Dynasty's last ruler, Emperor Xian. During this period, the Han Empire's institutions were destroyed by the warlord Dong Zhuo, and fractured into regional regimes ruled by various warlords, some of whom were nobles and officials of the Han imperial court. Eventually, one of those warlords, Cao Cao, was able to gradually reunify the empire, ostensibly under Emperor Xian's rule, but the empire was actually controlled by Cao Cao himself. Cao Cao's efforts to completely reunite the Han Empire were rebuffed at the Battle of Red Cliffs in 208 / 209, when his armies were defeated by the allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei. The Han Dynasty formally ended in 220 when Cao Cao's son and heir, Cao Pi, pressured Emperor Xian into abdicating in his favour. Cao Pi became the emperor of a new state, Cao Wei.

## DECLINE

By the 180s the Han court had grown weak, with debauched or disinterested emperors who lived only for amusement. Court eunuchs vied for power with the scholar-officials and army generals, at times even leading to massacres within the palace. In 189 CE, the warlord Dong Zhuo went so far as to assassinate the 13-year-old Emperor Shao, placing Shao's younger brother on the throne instead.

Economically, the Han government had trouble collecting enough tax revenue to fund the court and to support the armies that defended China from external threats. The scholar-officials generally exempted themselves from taxes, and the peasants had a sort of early-warning system by which they could alert one another when the tax collectors came to a particular village. The peasants would scatter to the surrounding countryside, and wait until the tax men had gone. As a result, the central government was chronically short on money.

One reason that the peasants fled at the rumor of tax collectors is that they were trying to survive on smaller and smaller plots of farmland. The population was growing quickly, and each son was supposed to inherit a piece of land when the father died. Thus, farms were quickly being carved into ever-tinier bits, and peasant families had trouble supporting themselves, even if they managed to avoid paying taxes.

Externally, the Han Dynasty faced the same threat that plagued every indigenous Chinese government throughout history: the danger of raids by the nomadic peoples of the steppes. To the north and west, China borders on desert and range-lands that have been controlled by various nomadic peoples over time, including the Uighurs, Kazakhs, Mongols, Jurchens (Manchu), and the Xiongnu.

During prosperous times, the settled agricultural people of China would simply pay tribute to troublesome nomads, or hire them to provide protection from the other tribes. Emperors even offered Chinese princesses as brides to the "barbarian" rulers in order to preserve the peace. The Han government, however, did not have the resources to buy off all of the nomads.

One of the most important factors in the collapse of the Han Dynasty, in fact, may have been the Sino-Xiongnu Wars of 133 BCE to 89 CE. Over more than two centuries, the Chinese and the Xiongnu fought throughout the western regions of China - a critical area that Silk Road trade goods had to cross to reach the Han Chinese cities. In 89 CE, the Han crushed the Xiongnu state, but this victory came at such a high price that it helped to fatally destabilize the Han government.

Interestingly, half of the Xiongnu moved west in the wake of their defeat, absorbing other nomadic groups, and forming a formidable new ethnic group known as the Huns. Thus, the descendants of the Xiongnu would be implicated in the collapse of two other great classical civilizations, as well - the Roman Empire, in 476 CE, and India's Gupta Empire in 550 CE. In each case, the Huns did not actually conquer these empires, but did weaken them militarily and economically, leading to their collapses.

## The Three Kingdoms

circa 220 A.D. (late Han)



## Threats Within and Without

### End of the Roman Empire

name \_\_\_\_\_

#### External Threats

#### Internal Threats

##### **Political**

Germanic armies invade

- civil wars
- power struggles
- legions supporting generals for power
- self-sufficient villas reduced power of central government

##### **Social**

Germanic marauders disrupt living

- barbarians disrupted patterns of trade and farming

- starvation
- epidemics
- population decline
- not enough tax payers
- cities forced to build walls for protection

##### **Economic**

Germanic marauders disrupt farms and trade

- trade disrupted
- food supplies
- prices increases
- money worth less
- population declines
- reduces number of taxpayers and soldiers