

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



The Byzantine Empire and Emerging Europe, A.D. 50–800

Lesson 2 Decline and Fall of Rome

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How can religion impact a culture? What factors lead to the rise and fall of empires?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

military relating to the armed forces or to soldiers, arms, or war

collapse to break down completely; to suddenly lose force or effectiveness

Content Vocabulary

plague an epidemic disease

inflation a rapid increase in prices

TAKING NOTES: *Determining Cause and Effect*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a table like the one below to describe the events that led to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

Decline	Fall

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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The Visigoths sacked, or destroyed, Rome in A.D. 410. The Roman Empire in the west declined and then fell after it had ruled the Mediterranean world for hundreds of years. The Germanic peoples like the Visigoths were only one factor in Rome's collapse.

The Decline of Rome

Guiding Questions *What political factors led to the decline of the Roman Empire? How did economic and social reforms by Diocletian and Constantine affect the Roman Empire?*

Marcus Aurelius was the last of the five "good emperors." Many catastrophes happened in Rome during his reign. To many Romans, these natural disasters seemed like a warning about the future for Rome. New problems arose soon after the death of Marcus Aurelius in A.D. 180. A period of conflict, confusion, and civil wars followed.

Problems and Upheavals

The Roman Empire almost collapsed during the third century. The Severan rulers restored order after a series of civil wars. They ruled from A.D. 193 to A.D. 235. Theirs was a **military** government. Septimius Severus told his sons to pay the soldiers and ignore everyone else. This was how the new dynasty ruled. Then there was more disorder after the Severan rulers. The Roman throne was occupied by whoever had military strength to seize it. This period lasted for almost 50 years from 235 to 284. During this period there were 22 emperors, and most of them died violently.

The empire was also troubled by a series of invasions, which were probably encouraged by the internal disorder in the empire. The Sassanid (suh•SAH•nuhd) Persians came into Roman territory in the east. Germanic tribes poured into the Balkans, Gaul, and Spain.

Invasions, civil wars, and plague almost caused an economic **collapse** in the third century. The **plague** is an epidemic disease, or illness, that spreads quickly and that often results in many deaths. The plague helped cause a labor shortage. The shortage affected both military recruiting and the economy. There was a decline in trade and small industry. Farm production also declined as invaders or the defending Roman army destroyed crops. Armies were needed more than ever, but financial problems made it difficult for the state to enlist and pay more soldiers. The state had to hire Germans to fight by the middle of the third century. These soldiers did not understand Roman traditions, and they did not have much loyalty to either the empire or the emperors.

Reforms by Diocletian and Constantine

Diocletian and Constantine were Roman emperors during the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries. The efforts of these two emperors helped the Roman Empire return to strength. The empire changed into a new state, the Late Roman Empire. During this period of the Late Roman Empire, the new state had a new government structure, a strict economic and social system, and a new state religion. The new religion was Christianity.

Diocletian ruled from 284 to 305. He believed that the empire had grown too large for a single ruler. He divided it into four units known as prefectures. The entire Roman Empire was divided into two parts, east and west. Each part contained two prefectures, ruled by two leaders. This new system was called the tetrarchy, or rule by four. The empire appeared to be ruled by four men, but Diocletian's military power helped him hold complete authority, or power.

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Constantine ruled from 306 to 337. He continued and even expanded Diocletian's policies. Constantine's biggest project was the construction of a new capital city in the east. It was on the site of the Greek city of Byzantium on the shores of the Bosphorus. (The Bosphorus is a narrow body of water that connects the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, and this to the Mediterranean Sea.) The city was eventually renamed Constantinople, and it is now Istanbul, Turkey. Constantinople was developed for defensive reasons. Its location protected the eastern border of the empire. Constantinople, the "New Rome," became the center of the Eastern Roman Empire and one of the great cities of the world. Constantine improved the city by building a forum, large palaces, and a large amphitheater.

Diocletian's and Constantine's political and military reforms helped the civil service and the army grow. A hierarchy of officials controlled different levels of government. The army was enlarged to 500,000 men. It included German units and mobile units, which could quickly move to support frontier troops when the borders were threatened.

The expansion of the bureaucracy and the army created a demand for more revenues. However, the population was not growing, so the tax base could not pay for them. Roman money, or currency, began to lose value.

Both Diocletian and Constantine created new economic and social policies to deal with these financial problems, but the new economic and social policies were all based on force and loss of individual freedom. Diocletian issued a price edict in 301 to fight **inflation**. It set wage and price controls for the empire. However, it did not work even though there were severe penalties for not following the controls.

The emperors issued edicts that forced workers to remain in their vocations. They did this to ensure the tax base and keep the empire going. Jobs such as bakers and shippers became hereditary, or passed down from family member to family member. The wealth of free farmers also decline. Soon farmers found themselves tied to the land by landowners who took advantage of the poor conditions to make their estates larger.

The economic and social policies of Diocletian and Constantine were based on control and force. The policies were temporarily successful, but they did not help the Late Empire solve its growing financial problems.



Reading Progress Check

Determining Cause and Effect What were the effects of the political and military reforms of Diocletian and Constantine?

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Lesson 2 Decline and Fall of Rome, *continued*

The End of the Western Roman Empire

Guiding Question *How did the migration of Germanic tribes contribute to the fall of the Roman Empire?*

Constantine had reunited the Roman Empire and restored some order, but the empire continued to be divided into western and eastern parts after his death. Fighting occurred on a regular basis between parts of the Roman army. They were fighting for different rival emperors. The western and eastern parts of the empire were basically two independent states by 395. The empire in the east remained together under the Roman emperor in Constantinople through the fifth century. At the same time, the administrative structure of the empire in the west collapsed. A number of Germanic kingdoms replaced it. The process was a slow one, and it began when Germans moved into the empire.

The Romans had established a series of political frontiers along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. However, the Romans and Germans often came into contact across these boundaries. Until the fourth century, the empire had proved capable of absorbing these people without harm to its political structure. In the late fourth century the Germanic tribes came under new pressure. This pressure was caused by the Huns, a fierce tribe of nomads from the steppes of Asia. The Huns moved into the Black Sea region, possibly attracted by the riches of the empire. One of the groups moved out by the Huns was the Visigoths. They moved south and west, crossed the Danube into Roman territory, and became Roman allies. But the Visigoths soon revolted. The Roman attempt to stop them at Adrianople in 378 led to a crushing defeat for Rome.

More Germans now crossed the frontiers. In 410 the Visigoths sacked Rome and then moved into Spain and Gaul. The Vandals poured into southern Spain and Africa and ravaged Rome in 455. By the middle of the fifth century, the western provinces of the Roman Empire had been taken over by Germanic peoples who were in the process of creating independent kingdoms. At the same time, only the appearance of imperial authority remained in Rome. The real power behind the throne was in the hands of important military officials known as Masters of the Soldiers. These military commanders controlled the government and the imperial court.

In 476 Odoacer, a new Master of the Soldiers, himself of German origin, deposed the Roman emperor, the boy Romulus Augustulus. To many historians, the deposition of Romulus signaled the end of the Roman Empire in the west. This is only a symbolic date because much of direct imperial rule had already been lost in the course of the fifth century.

Many theories have been created by historians to explain the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. They include the following:

- Christianity's emphasis on a spiritual kingdom made the Roman military weak since the military lost importance.
- Traditional Roman values declined as people who were not Italian gained importance in the empire.
- Lead poisoning through water pipes and cups made of lead caused a mental decline in the population.
- Plague killed off one-tenth of the population.
- Rome failed to advance in technology because of slavery.
- Rome could not create a political system that worked.

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There may be some truth in each of these theories, but no single explanation can completely explain the fall of a great empire. The Roman army in the west was not able to stop the large groups of people moving into Italy and Gaul, and the Western Roman Empire collapsed. A series of German kingdoms replaced the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire was able to stop invaders, and it survived for another thousand years.



Reading Progress Check

Understanding Historical Interpretation Why do many historians date the fall of the Roman Empire at 476?
