

# Reasons for the Fall of the Roman Empire

By around 300 CE, the once mighty Roman Empire was falling apart. After the Pax Romana ended in 180 CE, the Roman Empire went through a series of weak emperors and civil wars. Then in the third century CE the Roman soldiers were pulled back from Northern Europe and Britain to fight in the civil war in Italy. This left the Roman border open to attack.

Gradually barbarians from the north began to overtake Roman lands in Greece and Gaul (France). Then in 476 CE, the Barbarian general Odovacar overthrew the last of the Roman Emperors, Augustulus Romulus. From then on the western part of the Empire was ruled by a Barbarian chieftain. Roads and bridges were left in disrepair and fields left unplowed. Pirates and bandits made travel unsafe. Cities could not be maintained. Without crops and goods from the farms, trade and business began to disappear. At that point, the Roman Empire completely fell apart, with different tribes controlling different parts of the Roman Empire and battling for control.

There were many reasons (or factors) for the fall of the Roman Empire. Each one connected to the next. Here is a summary of some of the major ones:

## Decline in Morals and Values

For hundreds of years, the Roman Empire was able to survive because its army was held together by shared values. The Roman army, and the Roman people, worshipped the emperor. But, more than that, they worshiped the idea of Rome. The Romans really believed that Rome was the best civilization on earth, and they would die to defend it. However, it became very hard to worship Rome towards the end of the empire. As the empire grew poorer and poorer, violent crime made the streets of the larger cities unsafe. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became infamous for wasting money on lavish parties where guests ate and drank until they became ill. The most popular amusement was watching the gladiatorial combats in the Coliseum. These were attended by the poor, the rich, and frequently the emperor himself. As gladiators fought, vicious cries and curses were heard from the audience. One contest after another was staged in the course of a single day. Should the ground become too soaked with blood, it was covered over with a fresh layer of sand and the performance went on. All of this bloodshed and waste made it difficult for many Romans to worship their empire any longer.

## Poor Public Health

There were many public health and environmental problems. In the later years of the Roman Empire, the wealthy stopped using aqueducts. Instead, many of the wealthy had water brought to their homes through lead pipes. The death rate among wealthy people was very high, because lead is poisonous, and they were drinking poisoned water. The major cities were incredibly crowded, and people were constantly spreading disease. In the cities, diseases spread quickly, killing large numbers of the Roman population. Alcohol use increased as well, which added to the poor health of the people.

## Government Corruption

One of the most difficult problems was choosing a new emperor. In Rome, there were no strict rules about who would be the next emperor. The only criteria was that he had to be a real or adopted relative of the old emperor. But, after that, the choice was always open to debate between the old emperor, the Senate, the Praetorian Guard, and the army. Gradually, the Praetorian Guard gained complete authority to choose the new emperor. Then in 186 CE the army strangled the new emperor. After that, the Praetorian Guard began selling the throne to whoever paid them the most. During the next 100 years, Rome had 37 different emperors - 25 of them were assassinated. This contributed to the overall weaknesses of the empire.

## Failing Economy

During the latter years of the empire farming was done on large estates called latifundia that were owned by wealthy men who used slave labor. A farmer who had to pay workmen could not do farming as cheaply. Many farmers could not compete with these low prices and lost or sold their farms. This filled the cities with unemployed people who could not find work on farms. The emperor had to spend money to feed all of the unemployed people. At one time, the emperor was importing grain to feed more than 100,000 people in Rome alone. This unemployment cost the Roman government too much money.

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

get what they needed. Eventually, salaries had to be paid in food and clothing, and taxes were collected in fruits and vegetables.

Maintaining an army to defend the border of the Empire from barbarian attacks was a constant drain on the government. Military spending left few resources for other important activities, such as providing public housing and maintaining quality roads and aqueducts. Frustrated Romans lost their desire to defend the Empire. The empire had to begin hiring soldiers recruited from the unemployed city mobs or worse from foreign counties. Such an army was unreliable because the soldiers were not loyal to Rome. In addition, such an army was also very expensive. The emperors were forced to raise taxes frequently which in turn led again to increased inflation.

### **Inferior Technology**

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

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## Pre-Reading – Questions

1. From 100 BCE to 180 AD, Rome was one of the most powerful empires in the world. Why? What made them so strong?

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**Pre-Reading – Vocabulary:** Find all of these words in the reading and write the definitions next to each word.

*civil war* – a war between 2 sides from the same country

*Barbarians* – non-Roman tribes that attacked Rome

*overthrew* – forced out of power

*disrepair* – falling apart, needing repair

*values* – beliefs about what is right and wrong

*infamous* – famous for bad reasons

*aqueducts* – tunnels that brought water to the city

*criteria* – qualification for a job

*Praetorian Guard* – the emperor's own army

*latifundia* – large pieces of land owned by wealthy people

*inflation* – prices going up a lot

*unreliable* – not reliable, can't be counted on

## During Reading

We are trying to find the answer to the question – Why did Rome fall apart? You need to underline every piece of information that is a factor which led to Rome falling apart.

## Post Reading: Questions

1. Who entered Rome and began taking over Roman land? When? Why were they able to enter Rome?

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2. Many wealthy people stopped using *aqueducts*. Why was this a problem?

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3. What is the *Praetorian Guard*? What was their role in choosing the emperor?

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4. Why did the emperors have to raise taxes?

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