

What Were the Primary Reasons for the "Fall" of Rome?



The Destruction of Empire, painted by the American artist Thomas Cole in 1836.

Overview: From about 50 BCE until the year 200 CE, the Roman Empire was the superpower of the Mediterranean world. During that time, the empire's wealth, territory and international status grew and grew. But even as the empire prospered, it was slowly starting to fall apart. Some of its problems were internal – coming from within Rome itself – and others were external. This Mini-Q explores the factors that led to the eventual fall of one of history's most powerful and influential empires.

The Documents:

- Document A: Roman Emperors, 235-285 CE (chart)
- Document B: The Roman Army
- Document C: Foreign Invasions (map)
- Document D: The Huns
- Document E: Economic Corruption
- Document F: Disasters and Disease

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Ranking Reasons in Order of Importance

Directions: There is general agreement among historians that the 1900s was America's century. During this 100-year period, the United States emerged as the world leader in a number of critical areas – politics, economics, military power, and human and civil rights. Now, in the opening decades of the 21st century, observers are wondering if America is losing its edge.

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Your Task: Below is a short list of eight troubles facing the United States in the 21st century. With a partner, identify the three troubles that you believe are most capable of causing America's decline. Be prepared to share your thinking with the class.

- America is becoming an unhealthy, overweight couch-potato culture. Too much sit and click.
- Political squabbling among Democrats and Republicans is sinking the nation.
- Terrorism is a real threat.
- Growing economic inequality between rich and poor has created the greatest gap in decades.
- Yearly budget deficits and growing national debt imply a "buy now, let our children pay later" mindset.
- Environmental threats – pollution, habitat destruction and global warming. Climate-related disasters like Hurricane Katrina are on the rise.
- Dependence on foreign oil and unwillingness to pay the price for alternative energy
- Moral and cultural decline – music, pop culture, materialism and declining work ethic

List your three primary troubles below. Put them in order of importance, with the first one being the most significant problem.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What Were the Primary Reasons for the "Fall" of Rome?

Rome – the city that would become the center of one of the world's greatest empires – began around 750 BCE as an unremarkable settlement. During Rome's early years, the most wealthy and powerful people of the Mediterranean world were the Greeks. However, by 200 BCE, the Greek empire was weakening and Rome was turning into a giant, spilling over its borders as it acquired foreign lands. No longer a sleepy little town, Rome had become a powerhouse.

As with so many empires, Rome's rise to power came with the thrust of a spear and the slash of a sword. The enormous Roman army conquered territory from modern-day Scotland to Spain, gained control of the whole Mediterranean Sea, and established colonies in North Africa, Egypt, the Middle East and Asia Minor. By the year 44 BCE, when Julius Caesar became Rome's virtual emperor, there were no major rivals left to defeat.

Caesar used his hero status – along with bribery, beatings and even assassination – to gain political power. Over the next two decades, Rome shifted from being a **republic**, with elements of democratic control, to an empire with power in the hands of an emperor and the military.

Rome's first two centuries as an empire were years of relative stability, increasing power, and great imperial wealth. It was a time known as the **Pax Romana**, the time of Roman peace. Rome was clearly top dog in the western world. But as Rome was to discover, size has its problems. The empire acquired new subjects who were not Roman and who often did not want to be Roman – in Gaul (France), in England, beyond the Danube River, in the Middle East.

Controlling this expanded empire meant a larger army, which in turn meant a need for more food, clothing, weapons and supplies. Political strains developed at home. Leaders in Rome focused less on debate and compromise and more on force to get their way. Having existed for centuries as a republic, Rome eventually became more like a **dictatorship**.

As Rome drifted through the 3rd century, survived the 4th, and staggered into the 5th, one general problem was apparent – life at the top was getting soft. Upper-class Romans were losing their edge. When a country is on the make,

when energy and hope are high, leaders and their people are more willing to work hard and to sacrifice. When the goal appears to have been reached, it is easy to get lazy. The evidence for this was a love of luxury, a decline in the quality of literature, even a decision by upper-

class Romans to have fewer children because child-raising was a bother.

But there was more to Rome's decline than developing a soft belly. By the 5th century CE, when the city was **sacked** by outside invaders, Rome had been badly weakened by a number of problems. Parts of the empire would survive, particularly in Constantinople and the East, but the old heart of the empire – Italy and the West – was shattered.

Your task is to examine the documents in this Mini-Q and decide which three problems were most responsible for bringing Rome to its knees. Then, of these three problems, decide which was most important.



The Roman Empire at its height

Background Essay Questions

1. How many years passed between Rome's early days as a sleepy little settlement and its invasion in the 5th century CE?
2. What was the Pax Romana?
3. In what way did the form of the Roman government change around the time of Julius Caesar?
4. Beginning in the 3rd century, Rome was developing a "soft belly." What does that mean?
5. Define these words:

republic

Pax Romana

dictatorship

sack

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c. 700 BCE – Rome founded

509-27 BCE – Years of the Roman Republic

55 BCE – Julius Caesar extends Roman conquest into central and western Europe.

27 BCE – Pax Romana begins.

200 CE – Peak of Roman territorial expansion and end of Pax Romana

220 CE – Invasions by foreigners begin.

235-285 CE – Crisis period in Roman political leadership

410 CE – Rome is sacked by invading Visigoths (a Germanic tribe).

455 CE – Rome is sacked by Vandals (another Germanic tribe).

476 CE – Rome falls to Goths (yet another Germanic tribe).

Document A

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

Roman Emperors, 235-285 CE

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

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Document Analysis

1. How many Roman emperors ruled during the 50-year period covered by this chart? How many died a natural death? What was the most frequent cause of death of these men?
2. What message might these frequent and violent changes in leadership have sent to people of the Roman Empire?
3. What message might these frequent and violent changes in leadership have sent to people living outside the Roman Empire?
4. How does this document help explain the decline of the Roman Empire?

Document B

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

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

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Source: Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A Reappraisal*, Crown Publishing, 1982.

There can be little doubt that the weaknesses of the late Roman army were largely due to the eventual failure ... to enforce regular conscription [draft of soldiers] The exempted categories were... numerous. Hosts of senators, bureaucrats, and clergymen were entitled to avoid the draft; and among other groups who escaped were cooks, bakers, and slaves.

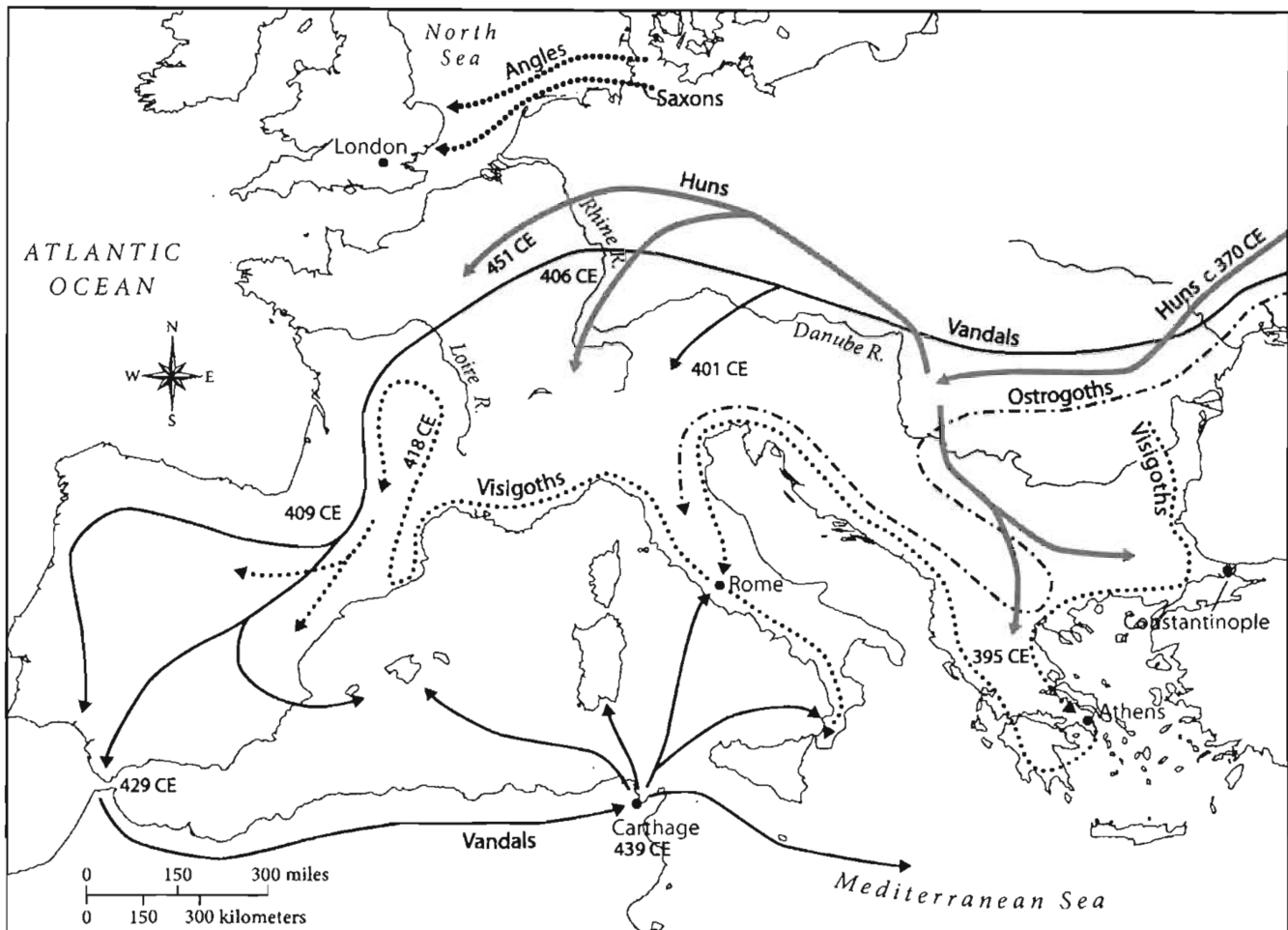
Document Analysis

1. According to Vegetius, what led to the changes in Roman military armor and training techniques?
2. How did the change in breastplates and helmets contribute to the decline of Rome?
3. What is conscription?
4. In what ways could the failure to enforce conscription weaken Rome?
5. Is there any connection between Document A and Document B? Explain your thinking.

Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

Foreign Invasions of the Roman Empire



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Document Analysis

1. Which invaders of the Roman Empire came from the farthest eastern point?
2. Which invaders of the Roman Empire were the first to reach the city of Rome?
3. Do the dates on this map suggest an invasion of people or a migration of people? Explain your thinking?
4. How does this document help explain the reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire?
5. Is there a possible connection between Document C and Document B?

Document D

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

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

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Document Analysis

1. Who was Ammianus Marcellinus?
2. What words and phrases does Ammianus use to describe the Huns?
3. What does Marcellinus mean when he describes the Huns as being “glued to their horses”?
4. Why might a Roman historian like Ammianus want to compare the Huns to “unthinking animals”?
5. How can you use this document to help explain the decline of the Roman Empire?

Document E

Source: An excerpt of a historical text written by Priscus, Roman ambassador to the Huns, 449 CE.

Note: Priscus is reporting a conversation he had with a former Roman citizen whose land had been conquered by the Huns.

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[He] ... considered his new life ... better than his old life among the Romans, and the reasons he gave were as follows: ... The condition of [Roman] subjects in time of peace [is worse than war] ... taxes are very severe, and unprincipled men inflict injuries on others ... A [wealthy lawbreaker] ... is not punished for his injustice, while a poor man ... undergoes the legal penalty The climax of misery is to have to pay in order to obtain justice.... [He said] that the laws and constitution of the Romans were fair, but deplored that the governors, not possessing the spirit of former generations, were ruining the state.

Document Analysis

1. Who was Priscus? Do you think his description is reliable? Why?
2. Why were some Romans happy about being conquered by the Huns?
3. What does the person talking to Priscus mean when he says, "The climax of misery is to have to pay ... for justice"?
4. How can you use this document to help explain what caused the decline of the Roman Empire?

Document F

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

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

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

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

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

Document Analysis

1. In the Gibbon passage, what natural disaster struck the Roman Empire in 366 CE?
2. In the Stearns passage, what deadly illness arrived from southern Asia?
3. Describe one specific way that the two disasters detailed above contributed to the decline of the Roman Empire.
4. Consider the various causes of decline presented by the six documents in this Mini-Q: political assassinations, military problems like armor and conscription, legal injustice, foreign invasions, and natural disasters. Which of these do you regard as the most important three causes? Explain.