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## 5. Rome: The Decline of the Roman Empire

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## 5. Rome: The Decline of the Roman Empire

### Abstract

The decline of the Roman Empire is a theme which has captured the imagination of countless men . The Roman achievement, both in its material and cultural aspects, was of such magnitude that its passing invites consideration on that account alone. There are those who have sought to find in the decline of Rome some clue which might help lead to an understanding of why civilizations seem to develop, prosper, and then wither away. Our immediate interest in this complicated subject arises from the assumption that Western Civilization is one of the direct heirs and successors of Roman Civilization, and would not have come into existence when it did without the Roman collapse. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Rome, Greece, Golden Age, Roman Civilization, Roman Republic, Pax Romana

### Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Cultural History | History

### Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

### Authors

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## 5. The Decline of the Roman Empire

The decline of the Roman Empire is a theme which has captured the imagination of countless men. The Roman achievement, both in its material and cultural aspects, was of such magnitude that its passing invites consideration on that account alone. There are those who have sought to find in the decline of Rome some clue which might help lead to an understanding of why civilizations seem to develop, prosper, and then wither away. Our immediate interest in this complicated subject arises from the assumption that Western Civilization is one of the direct heirs and successors of Roman Civilization, and would not have come into existence when it did without the Roman collapse.

*Ribbons said that Christians caused the decline of the Empire.*

As we have already seen, the Pax Romana came to an end at the close of the second century after Christ. During the third century, the army once again was a disturbing factor in politics, making and breaking one emperor after another. The effectiveness of the civil government dropped precipitously, especially as many important posts were filled with unqualified military personnel. This situation developed at a time when it could scarcely be afforded, since barbarian pressures were increasing along the long Rhine-Danube frontier and a revived Persian Empire threatened to seize large eastern territories from Rome. Thus, the government needed a strong, steady hand and greatly increased revenues to bribe these potential invaders or to finance military campaigns, just when the imperial political system devised by Augustus was breaking down. Furthermore, the economy of the Roman Empire -- particularly that of the western half -- was not well enough organized to compensate, at least in part, for this political malfunctioning. A tendency for the various sections of the empire to become relatively self-sufficient was already evident in the second century. The resultant decline in trade was especially onerous upon the imperial

nerve center, Italy, where self-sufficiency meant a considerably lower level of living than that enjoyed during the Pax Romana. To make matters worse, the wars of the third and fourth century yielded next to nothing in the way of new areas to exploit or of booty, tremendous amounts of which had poured into Italy during the latter years of the republic, and which subsequently were used to finance purchases and projects throughout the empire. In short, an increasingly unstable and irresponsible government, which could not resort to the modern expedient of balancing receipts and expenditures by creating an imperial debt, had to exact larger and larger revenues by taxes and forced requisitions upon an economy which was at least static, and which actually may have been undergoing an overall decline.

The reforms of Diocletian (284-305) and Constantine (306-337), which in many respects only regularized practices begun by their predecessors, postponed the political and economic decay of the Roman Empire, and nothing more. This reprieve was bought at the price of turning the government into a military despotism, which tried desperately to force men to do what many of them would no longer do voluntarily: work, pay taxes, govern, and fight. As we have seen, it involved fixing men to their land or to accustomed jobs, price regulation (which failed to achieve its purpose), government enterprise, increasing taxes and forcing certain people to collect them, and making the army subservient once more to the emperor. Perhaps the best measures of the ultimate success of these reforms are the events of the fourth century. In 330 Constantine, the first Christian emperor, transferred the imperial capital to Nova Roma -- the city of Constantinople -- as if to be closer to the safer, more productive eastern part of the empire. In 378 the Roman legions suffered a decisive and significant defeat at the hands of barbarian cavalymen at the battle of Adrianople. In 395 Emperor Theodosius tacitly recognized that the empire was far too large for one man to govern effectively by dividing it between his two sons. This division into eastern and western parts proved to be permanent.

By the end of the fourth century the situation in the West had deteriorated almost completely. Barbarian tribes had entered the empire all along the Rhine-Danube line. In time they set up independent, or virtually independent, kingdoms of their own. In the absence of anything but the feeblest imperial authority, landowners, especially the large ones, undertook to protect themselves and appropriate some of the functions of government. During the course of the fifth century, barbarian invaders entered Rome (after 404 the more defensible Ravenna was the western capital) on a number of occasions, providing a tremendous humiliation for a proud city which had known no ravager for eight hundred years. Finally, in the year 476 a barbarian general deposed the reigning Western emperor. He sent the imperial insignia to the Eastern emperor in Constantinople and proclaimed himself king of Italy. Within little more than a decade after this, the barbarian Ostrogoths established their rule in Italy. Whatever imperial authority was exercised in the West

between 476 and 800 was that claimed by the Eastern emperor, and this was much more often nominal than real. Such are the facts of the decline of the Roman Empire.

It should be obvious that there is no completely satisfactory date for the "fall" of Rome. The decline occurred over a long period of time. The year 476, which has often been used as a convenient date, represents merely the end result of a process which, many believe, actually began before the empire was established. It should be equally obvious that there is no one completely satisfactory reason for so complex a phenomenon as this. Even today, historians dispute the relative importance that should be assigned to the reasons that are advanced, and they are not agreed on the reasons themselves. The best that can be accomplished here is the suggestion of some of the factors which appear to have been significant.

It may be that, two thousand years ago, the far-flung Roman Empire was too large to be governed effectively for an indefinite period of time. The Roman political system, as devised by Augustus, proved adequate for relatively peaceful times, but not for the decades of turbulence which followed them. As we have seen, that system relied in large measure for its successful operation upon a balance among the emperor, the Senate, and particularly, the cities of the empire. It presupposed the existence of (or the possibility of developing) a civic pride which could inspire these urban elements to undertake the responsibilities of municipal government, while at the same time maintaining loyalty to the emperor.

When, in the third century, the imperial mantle became the pawn of irresponsible armies and the financial needs of the state mounted, the burden of empire fell most heavily upon this class of landowners and businessmen. In attempting to stay the decline, the government made increasingly heavy demands upon it and accentuated greatly the trend, actually begun earlier, of encroaching upon its freedom and rights of self-government -- of undoing the Augustan balance. In the end, the indispensable civic pride and loyalty faded and eventually disappeared, and with them went the props which supported local government in the empire as well as most of the props of the old imperial government itself. Some cities shrank in population; others began to disappear.

When the support of this urban class was lost to the empire, there was no other comparable group to which to turn. The Roman economic system had never been sufficiently dynamic to provide sustained work and purchasing power for the large urban proletariat in Italy, nor had it ever succeeded in restoring the free peasant farmer who was typical of the earlier republic. The lower classes in the rest of the empire were similarly depressed. Many aspects of Roman culture had been denied to these groups, both of which -- the urban and the rural proletariat -- were large in numbers. Had the empire been able to command their loyalty in the way it had once commanded that

of the urban middle and upper classes, the outcome of its trials might have been quite different. As it was, they felt they owed little to the existing system. The fact that Christianity had such a wide appeal, at least among the urban representatives of this group, is an indication of their temper. A faith which focused their attention on another world offered more attraction than an empire which had offered them little in this world.

✓ We shall see that the greatest of the Church Fathers, Augustine, felt impelled to answer the charge, heard then and since, that Christianity itself was a major factor in bringing about the collapse of Rome, by introducing a set of standards which undercut those that had made and kept the empire great. Other factors have been suggested from time to time: the decline in the Roman birth rate and the results of widespread plague in the second and third centuries, to name just two. Then there is the problem of the barbarians. ✓