

Chapter 12: The Fall of Rome

The fall of Rome, conventionally dated to 476 CE, is one of the most iconic events in the history of the western world. For centuries, people have tried to draw lessons from Rome's decline and fall about their own societies, a practice inspired by the question of how so mighty and, at one time, stable a civilization could so utterly disintegrate. The answers have varied considerably: Rome grew corrupt and weak over time, Rome was infiltrated by "barbarian" cultures, Rome was simply overcome by overwhelming odds, or perhaps Rome was simply transformed into a different, more diverse set of societies rather than destroyed in so many words. However the events of the period are interpreted, the simple fact remains: the political unity of the Roman Empire was shattered by the end of the fifth century CE.

While the debate as to the causes of Rome's fall will probably never be definitively answered, an important caveat should be noted: Rome did not "really" fall for another thousand years, even though the city of Rome itself, along with the western half of the Empire, did indeed lose its sovereignty in the face of invasion by Germanic "barbarians." The Roman capital had already been moved to Constantinople in the early fourth century, and the eastern half of the empire remained intact, albeit under constant military pressure, until 1453. Arguably, one of the major causes for the collapse of the western empire was the fact that the Empire as a whole had focused its resources in the east for a century by the time waves of invaders appeared on the horizon starting in the fourth century CE.

At the time, most Christians blamed polytheism and heresy for Rome's fall: it was God's wrath exacted on a sinful society. In turn, the remaining polytheists blamed Christians for undermining the worship of the gods who had presided over the Empire while Rome was great. From the contemporary perspective, Rome's fall seems to have less to do with divine intervention than routine defeats and a growing barbarian threat.

Roman Relations with Barbarians

Romans had always held "barbarians" in contempt, and they believed that the lands held by barbarians (such as Scotland and Germany) were largely unsuitable for civilization, being too cold and wet for the kind of Mediterranean agriculture Romans were accustomed to. Romans believed that barbarian peoples like the Germans were inferior to subject peoples like the Celts, who could at least be made useful subjects (and, later, citizens) of the Empire. For the entire

history of the Empire, the Romans never seem to have figured out exactly which groups they were interacting with; they would simply lump them together as “Goths” or even “Scythians,” a blanket term referring to steppe peoples. Occasionally, hundreds of years after they “should have known better,” Roman writers would actually refer to Germans as Celts.

It is easy to overstate this attitude; there were many members of German tribes who did rise to prominence in Rome (one, Stilicho, was one of the greatest Roman generals in the late Empire, and he was half Vandal by birth!). Likewise, it is clear from archaeology that many Germans made a career of fighting in the Roman armies and then returning to their native areas, and that many Germans looked up to Rome as a model of civilization to be emulated, not some kind of permanent enemy. Some Romans clearly did admire things about certain barbarian groups, as well - the great Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Germania*, even praised the Germans for their vigor and honor, although he did so in order to contrast the Germans with what he regarded as his own corrupt and immoral Roman society.

That said, it is clear that the overall pattern of contact between Rome and Germania was a combination of peaceful coexistence punctuated by many occasions of extreme violence. Various tribes would raid Roman lands, usually resulting in brutal Roman reprisals. As the centuries went on, Rome came increasingly to rely on both barbarian troops and on playing allied tribes off against hostile ones. In fact, by the late fourth century CE, many (sometimes even most) soldiers in “Roman” armies in the western half of the Empire were recruited from barbarian groups.

The only place worthy of Roman recognition as another “true” civilization was Persia. When Rome was forced to cede territory to Persia in 363 CE after a series of military defeats, Roman writers were aghast because the loss of territory represented “abandoning” it to the other civilization and state. When barbarians seized territory, however, it rarely warranted any mention among Roman writers, since it was assumed that the territory could and would be reclaimed whenever it was convenient for Rome.

Meanwhile, there had been *hundreds of years* of on-again, off-again ongoing wars along the Roman borders before the “fall” of Rome actually occurred. Especially since the third century, major conflicts were an ongoing reality of the enormous borders along the Rhine and Danube; those conflicts had prompted emperors to build the system of *limes* that held the barbarians in check. From that point on, the majority of Roman legions were usually deployed along the *limes*, the semi-fortified northern borders of the Empire. There is evidence that many of those soldiers spent their careers as not-so-glorified border guards and administrators and

never experienced battle itself; there is no question that the performance of the Roman military was far poorer in the late imperial period than it had been, for instance, under the Republic.

In turn, many of the barbarians who settled along those borders were known as *federatii*, tribal groups who entered into treaties with Rome that required them to pay taxes in kind (i.e. in crops, animals, and other forms of wealth rather than currency) and send troops to aid Roman conquests, and who received peace and recognition (and usually annual gifts) in return. The problem for Rome was that most Germanic peoples regarded treaties as being something that only lasted as long as the emperor who had authorized the treaty lived; on his death, there would often be an incursion since the old peace terms no longer held. The first task new emperors had to attend to was often suppressing the latest invasion from the north. One example was the Goths, settled at the time somewhere around present-day Romania, whom Constantine severely punished after they turned on his forces during his war of conquest leading up to 312 CE.

The bottom line is that, as of the late fourth century CE, it seemed like “business as usual” to most political and military elites in the Roman Empire. The borders were teeming with barbarians, but they had *always* been teeming with barbarians. Rome traded with them, enlisted them as soldiers, and fought them off or punished them as Roman leaders thought it necessary. No one in Rome seemed to think that this state of affairs would ever change. What contemporary historians have determined, however, is that things *had* changed: there were *more* barbarians than ever before, they were *better-organized*, and they were capable of defeating large Roman forces. What followed was a kind of “barbarian domino effect” that ultimately broke the western Empire into pieces and ended Roman power over it.

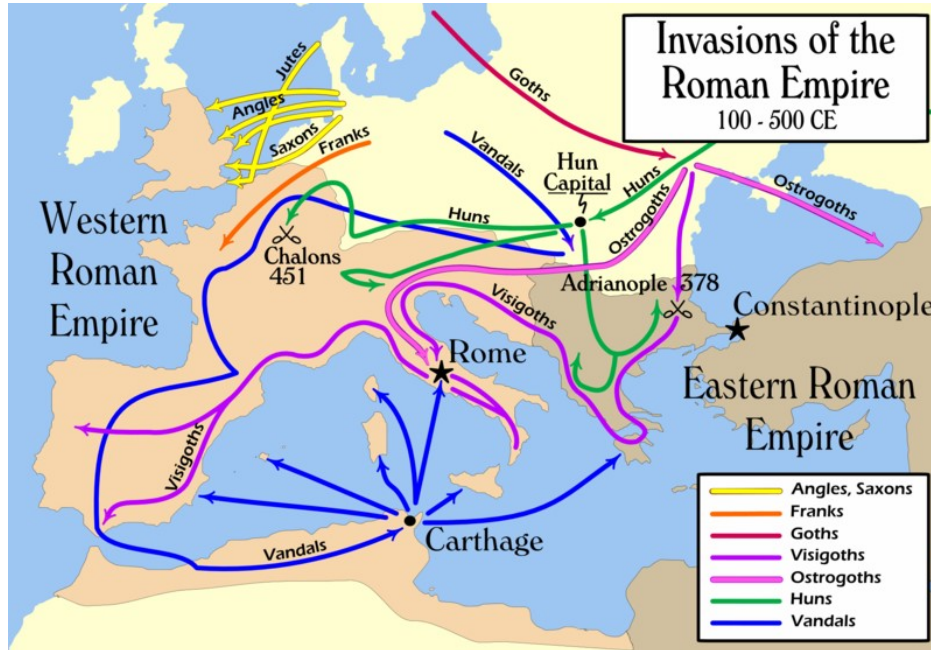
One other factor in the collapse of the western half of the Empire should be emphasized: once Rome began to lose large territories in the west, tax revenues shrunk to a fraction of what they had been. While the east remained intact, with taxes going to pay for a robust military which successfully defended Roman sovereignty, Roman armies in the west were under-funded, under-manned, and vulnerable. There was thus a vicious cycle of lost land, lost revenue, and poor military performance that saw Roman power simply disintegrate over the course of less than a century. Even the handful of effective emperors and generals in the west during that period could not staunch the tide of defeat.

Invasions

The beginning of the end for the western Empire was the Huns. The Huns were warriors of the central Asian steppes: expert horsemen, vicious warriors, unattached to any particular land. They had much in common with other groups of steppe peoples like the Scythians who had raided civilized lands going back to the very emergence of civilization in Mesopotamia. They were known to be so cruel and so unstoppable that the Germanic barbarians further west claimed that they were the product of unions between demons and witches, rather than normal humans.

In 376 the Huns drove a tribe of Goths from their lands in southern Russia. Those Goths were allowed to settle in the Balkans by the Romans, but were soon extorted by Roman officials, causing the Goths to rise up against Rome in retribution. In 378 the Goths killed the emperor, Valens, and destroyed a Roman army in an open battle. The new emperor made a deal with the Goths, allowing them to serve in the Roman army under their own commanders in return for payment. This proved disastrous for Rome in the long run as the Goths, under their king Alaric, started looting Roman territory in the Balkans, finally marching into Italy itself and sacking Rome in 410 CE; the Roman government officially moved to the city of Ravenna in the north (which was more defensible) following this sack.

The Gothic attack on Rome was the first time in roughly seven hundred years that the walls of Rome had been breached by non-Romans. The entire Roman world was shocked and horrified that mere barbarians could have overwhelmed Roman armies and struck at the heart of the ancient Empire itself. Rome's impregnability was itself one of the founding stories Romans told themselves; Romans had long vowed that the Celtic sack of 387 BCE would be the last, and yet the Goths had shattered that myth. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can see the arrival of the Huns as the beginning of a "domino effect" in which various barbarian groups were pushed into Roman territory, with the sack of Rome merely one disaster of many for the Empire.



The major barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire. Note, among other things, their astonishing scope: the Goths may have originated in Scandinavia but some of their descendents ended up ruling over Spain, while the Vandals came from somewhere in present-day Germany and conquered Roman North Africa.

Leading up to that event, the Roman legions were already losing their former coherence and unity. In 406 CE a very cold winter froze the Rhine river, and armies of barbarians invaded (literally walking across the frozen river in some cases), bypassing the traditional Roman defenses. One group, the Vandals, sacked its way to the Roman provinces of Spain and seized a large swath of territory there. The entire army of Britain left in 407 CE, when yet another ambitious general tried to seize the imperial throne, and Roman power there swiftly collapsed.

Roman armies from the western Empire hastily marched back to Italy to fight the Goths, abandoning their traditional defensive posts. For the next fifty years, various groups of Germanic invaders wandered across Europe, both looting and, soon, settling down to occupy territory that had only recently been part of the Roman Empire. Most of these groups soon established kingdoms of their own. The Vandals pushed through Spain and ended up conquering most of Roman North Africa. After the Goths sacked Rome itself in 410, the emperor Honorius gave them southern Gaul to get them to leave; they ended up seizing most of Spain (from the Vandals who had arrived before them) as well. At that point, the Romans came to label this group the *Visigoths* - “western Goths” - to distinguish them from other Gothic tribes still at large in the Empire.

Back in Italy, the Huns, under the leadership of the legendary warlord Attila, arrived in the late 440s, pushing as far as the gates of Rome in 451. There, the Pope (Leo I) personally appealed to Attila not to sack the city and paid them a hefty bribe. Attila died in 453 and the Huns were soon defeated by a combined army of their former German subjects and a Roman army. By then, however, the damage was done: the domino effect set off by the Hunnic invasion of the previous century had already almost completely swallowed up the western Empire. Only two years after the Huns were defeated, the Vandals sailed over from Africa in 455 and sacked Rome again. This sacking, despite occurring with relatively little carnage, nevertheless led to the use of the word "vandal" to mean a malicious destroyer of property.

Italy itself held out until 476, when an Ostrogothic ("eastern Goth") warlord named Odoacer deposed the last emperor and declared himself king of Italy; the Roman emperor in Constantinople (having little choice) approved of Odoacer's authority in Italy in return for a nominal pledge of loyalty. Subsequently, Odoacer was deposed and killed by a different Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, in 493, but the link with Constantinople remained intact. The Roman emperor worked out a deal with Theodoric to stabilize Italy, and Theodoric went on to rule for decades (r. 493 - 526). Thus, by 500 CE Italy and the city of Rome were no longer part of the Empire still called "Roman" by the people of the eastern Empire. By the end of the fifth century, the western Empire was gone, replaced by a series of kingdoms ruled by Germanic peoples but populated by former citizens of the Roman Empire.

Theodoric presided over a few decades of prosperity, restoring peace to the Italian peninsula and joining together with other Gothic territories to the west. He maintained excellent relations with the Pope even though he was an Arian Christian, and he set up a system in which a government existed for his Goths that was distinct from the Roman government (with him at the head of both, of course). Some historians have speculated that Theodoric and the Goths might have been able to forge a new, stable Empire in the west and thereby obviate the coming of the "Dark Ages," but that possibility was cut short when the Byzantine Empire invaded to try to reconquer its lost territory (that invasion is considered in the next chapter).

In Gaul, a fierce tribe called the Franks, from whom France derives its name, came to power, driving out rivals like the Visigoths. Unlike the other Germanic tribes, the Franks did not abandon their homeland when they set out for new territory. From the lower Rhine Valley, they gradually expanded into northern Gaul late in the fifth century. Under the leadership of the warrior chieftain Clovis (r. 481/482 - 511), the various Frankish tribes were united, which gave them the military strength to depose the last Roman governor in Gaul, drive the Visigoths into Spain, absorb the territory of yet another barbarian group known as the Burgundians, and

eventually conquer most of Gaul. Thus, what began as invasion and occupation of Roman territory evolved in time to become the earliest version of the kingdom of France.

In almost every case, the new Germanic kings pledged formal allegiance to the Roman emperor in Constantinople in return for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their rule (Clovis of the Franks made a point of having the Frankish laws recorded in Latin, and over time the Frankish language vanished, replaced by the early form of French, a Latinate language). In fact, for well over a century, most Germanic “kings” were, officially, treaty-holding, recognized Roman officials from the legal and diplomatic perspective of Constantinople. That said, the “Roman” emperors of Constantinople had plenty of legal pretext to regard those kings as usurpers as well, since the treaties of acknowledgment were often full of loopholes. Thus, when the emperor Justinian invaded Italy in the sixth century, he was doing so to reassert not just the memory of the united Empire, but to restore the Empire to the legal state in which it already technically existed.

Conclusion

While interpretations of the collapse of the Empire will continue to differ as long as there are people interested in Roman history, there is no question about the basic facts: half of what had once been an enormous, coherent, and amazingly stable state was splintered into political fragments by the end of the fifth century.

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