

BARBARIAN INVASIONS



The Rhine and Danube Rivers marked the border of the empire. Large numbers of German tribes lived on this border to the Roman Empire. The Romans allowed peaceful tribes to settle along the border. Due to civil wars in Italy, Roman soldiers were called back to the interior, leaving the borders open to attack. To compound the problems, the Huns were sweeping across Europe, attacking tribes of Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and other Germanic peoples. These tribes fled into Roman lands and Roman soldiers were unable to stop the incoming tribes. The Huns, under Attila, continued to terrorize Rome's borders. After Attila's death much of Rome's authority along their borders had collapsed. In 476 CE, Clovis, King of the Franks defeated the last Roman Army at Gaul. In the same year the Germanic general, Odoacer, overthrew the last Roman emperor to become ruler of all Italy. From then on, the western part of the Empire was ruled by Germanic tribal chiefs. Roads and bridges were left in disrepair and many fields were left untilled. Pirates and bandits made travel unsafe. Cities declined and trade and business began to disappear.



DECLINE IN MORALS AND VALUES

The final years of the Empire were marked by a decline in morals and values, and some historians believe that this contributed to the decline of the Empire. Crimes of violence made the streets of the Empire's larger cities very unsafe. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became famous for wasting money on lavish parties, where guests ate and drank until they became ill. Most important, however, was the growth of the Roman passion for cruelty. The most popular amusement was watching the gladiatorial combats that took place in the Colosseum. 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 day. Should the ground of the arena become too soaked with blood, it was covered over with a fresh layer of sand, and the performances went on.

EXCESSIVE MILITARY SPENDING TO DEFEND THE EMPIRE



Maintaining an army to defend the borders of the Empire from barbarian attacks was a constant drain on the government. Military spending left few resources for other vital activities; such as providing public housing and maintaining the quality of the public roads. In the latter years of the Empire, frustrated Romans lost their desire to defend the Empire. Thus, the government found it necessary to rely increasingly on hired soldiers recruited from the unemployed city mobs or foreign countries. Such an army was not only unreliable, but very expensive. Thus, the emperors were forced to raise taxes frequently—the majority of which were paid by businessman and farmers, which hurt the economy. Some historians believe that this helped lead to the fall of the Empire.

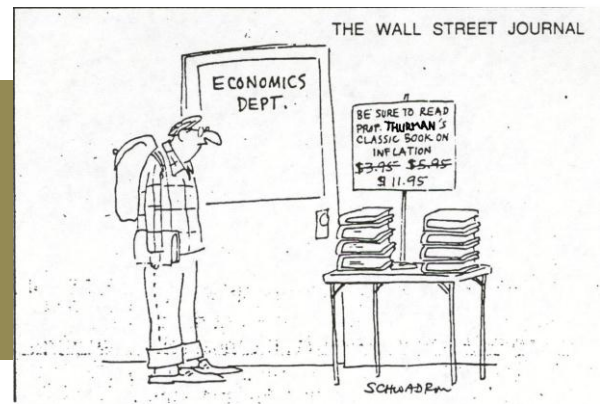


INFERIOR TECHNOLOGY

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 medicine for the benefit of the poor.

But since the Romans relied so much on human and animal labor, they failed to invent new machines or find new technology to produce goods more efficiently. As a result of inferior production techniques, the Romans were unable to provide important goods for their growing population. Some historians theorize that this contributed to the downfall of the Empire.

INFLATION



The Roman economy 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 (trading goods for goods, rather than using money) to get what they needed. Eventually, salaries had to be paid in food and clothing, and taxes were collected in fruits and vegetables. Some historians argue that this helped lead to the collapse of the Empire.



POLITICAL CORRUPTION

One of Rome's most serious problems was the difficulty of choosing new emperors. The Romans never created an effective system to determine how new emperors would be selected. For this reason, the choice of a new emperor was always open to debate between the old emperor, the Senate, the Praetorian Guard (the emperor's private army), and the army. Gradually the Praetorian Guard gained complete authority to choose the new emperor. In return, the new emperor handsomely rewarded the Guard for its support. This system worked fairly well for a time. Beginning in 186 C.E., however, when the army strangled the new emperor, the practice began of selling the throne to the highest bidder. During the next 100 years, Rome had 37 different emperors—25 of whom were removed from office by assassination. This political corruption, some historians argue, contributed to the decline of the Empire.

RISE IN CHRISTIANITY



Some historians believe that Christianity produced dramatic changes in Roman society at the very time when pressure from the barbarians was increasing. They argue that Christianity made its followers into pacifists (those who oppose war), thus making it more difficult to defend Roman lands from barbarian attacks. They also suggest that the Church attracted many qualified leaders whose talents were needed to deal with the problems of the Empire. Finally, these historians theorize that money that would have been used to maintain the Empire, instead, was used to build churches and monasteries.



UNEMPLOYMENT

During the latter years of the Empire farming was done on large estates that were owned by wealthy men who used slave labor. A farmer who had to pay workmen could not produce goods as cheaply as a slaveowner could.

Therefore, slavesowners could sell their crops for lower prices. As a result, many farmers could not compete with these low prices and lost or sold their farms. Thousands of these men filled cities of the Empire, where there were not enough jobs to accommodate them. At one time, the emperor was importing grain to feed more than 100,000 unemployed people in Rome alone. Some historians believe that this contributed to the collapse of the Empire.

URBAN DECAY



Wealthy Romans lived in a domus, or house, with marble walls, floors with intricate colored tiles, and windows made of small panes of glass. Most Romans, however, were not rich. They lived in small smelly rooms in apartment houses with six or more stories called islands. Each island covered an entire block. At one time there were 44,000 apartment houses within the city walls of Rome. First-floor apartments were not occupied by the poor since these living quarters rented for about \$400 a year. The more shaky wooden stairs a family had to climb, the cheaper the rent became. The upper apartments that the poor rented for \$40 a year were hot, dirty, crowded and dangerous. Anyone who could not pay the rent was forced to move out and live in the crime-infested streets. Because of this, cities began to decay. Some historians believe that this helped lead to the downfall of the Empire.



WEAKER ARMY

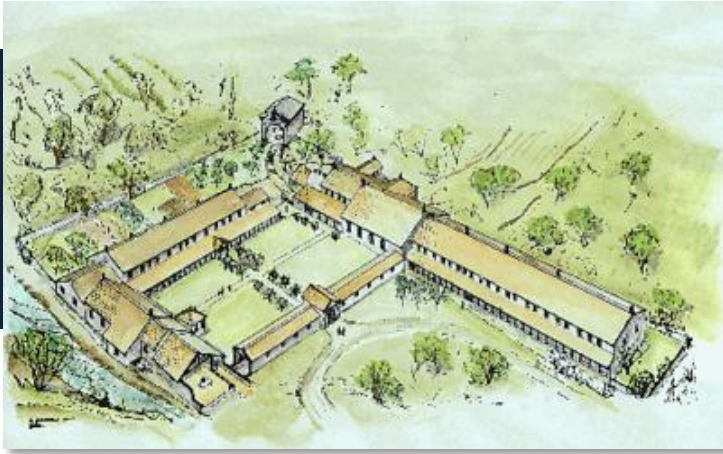
During the Pax Romana, loyal Roman citizens had helped build the empire. At its end, the army began to recruit foreign soldiers who did not have the same ties and loyalty to Rome as earlier troops had. Dissension occurred throughout army ranks, as many of these new soldiers did not follow orders. This weakened the army's ability to fight and control their borders. Many historians think that the weakened state of the Roman army eased the barbarian tribe's attempts to infiltrate Roman borders, and led to Rome's downfall.

PROBLEMS WITH THE POOR



As the empire expanded, the gap between rich and poor increased. The wars destroyed farms and hurt trade. The poor only got poorer. The amount of Romans who lived in poverty also increased. As political corruption worsened and the toll of fighting wars added up, high taxes hurt the poor more. Corrupt tax collectors charged the poor more taxes than they owed so they could enrich themselves. The poor grew more and more resentful.

Many historians believe that with so many Romans poverty stricken this hurt Rome economically. Without the support of this large portion of the population, both monetarily and in spirit, some historians believe that this contributed to Rome's demise.



DECLINE OF CITIES

The economic uncertainties of the empire led many wealthy Romans to leave cities as social unrest was on the rise. They settled on their country estates, called *latifundia*. As time progressed, many of these *latifundia* became self-sufficient, raising their own food and protecting themselves from attack. The poor had little choice in the matter. Some went to work on the *latifundia*, while others joined the army or became outlaws. City life, which had been the center of Roman living for so long, now shifted to the *latifundia*. Some historians see this as a turning point in Roman history and the decline of cities as a hastening in the decline of the empire.