



# Empires Fall

*By Dennis RM Campbell*

Maybe in the movies empires can strike back, but in the real world they fall. Every time. Here's a look at the various weak spots that converge when a major empire is ready to roll its closing credits.

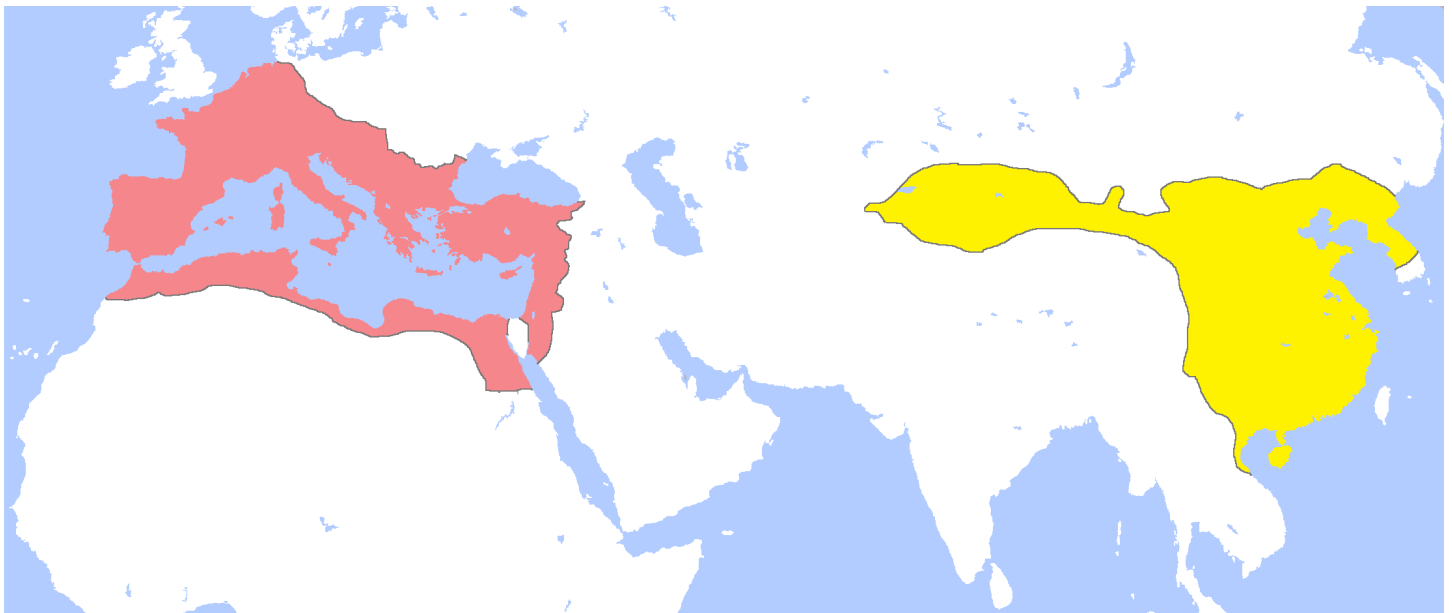
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## Empires as systems

Remember those empires we described in Era 3? They were political communities where a central group had governing control over outside groups on the periphery. The outside groups often had fewer rights than the central group.

There was also a third group that could affect an empire's power. These were the people who lived just beyond an empire's border. Often they were tribal people who were seen as barbarians by the empires. Sometimes an empire bordered another powerful state.



*The Roman Empire and Han Dynasty China c.1 CE, approaching their largest size. By Gabagool, CC BY 3.0.*

Empires were also economic networks through which goods and resources could be exchanged. The people who lived on the other side of the border were also a part of this network. Merchants often crossed borders to trade with neighboring peoples and there were also exchanges of ideas. Barbarian groups usually adopted some characteristics of the empire.

## Why do empires collapse?

Historians search for causes behind the collapse of specific empires. There are often many theories, which are sometimes contradictory. We'll try to understand some patterns that lead to an empire's collapse. Two general measures help us evaluate the health of empires.

The first is money. Empires were very expensive to maintain. Healthy empires with adequate resources could respond to an invasion or natural disasters. Eventually, these burdens would become too much and empires would not have the money to handle their usual problems. A small event could cause the collapse of the empire, like the straw that broke the camel's back.

The second measure is cohesion (unity). An empire could lose cohesion as it aged. Elites became more interested in their own wealth than with the empire. Peripheral people developed a stronger sense of group identity separate from the empire.

Another factor was the growth, decline, or movement of populations in an empire. If the population decreased, the empire would lose tax revenue. If it increased, the empire would struggle to provide for everyone. If an empire could not provide what its people needed, they usually rebelled.



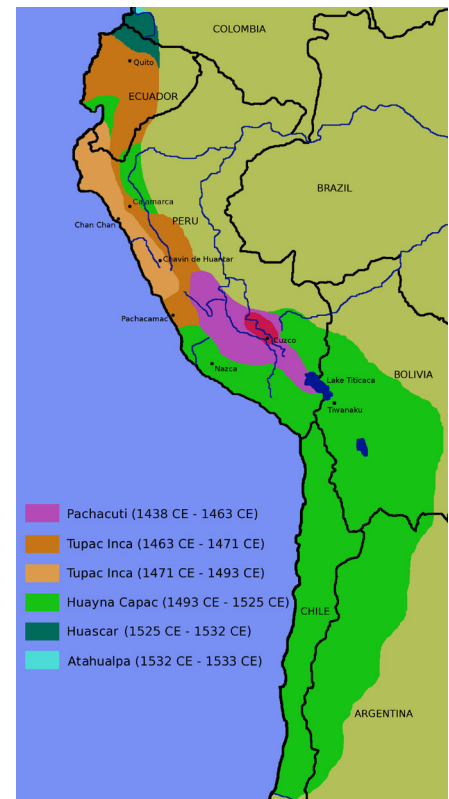
*The famous Alexander Mosaic (House of the Faun, Pompeii, Italy) showing Alexander the Great attacking the Persian Emperor Darius III at the Battle of Issus. The mosaic is now in the Naples National Archaeological Museum. By Carole Raddato, CC BY-SA 2.0.*

## From theory to reality: Han dynasty China and the Roman Empire

In this lesson, we will learn mainly about the collapse of two empires. The Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE. The Han dynasty in China fell in 220 CE. They were both powerful empires that experienced similar problems.

First, let's look at the money measure. Both empires lost revenue as elites began to take taxes for their own use. Then the empires saw a decrease in the number of people they were able to tax. In Rome, peasants moved out of reach of tax collectors. In China, people fled the barbarian raids along the border. This snowballed into a bigger problem. The empire was unable to collect tax money from the people who fled. But it needed that money to fight off the barbarian raids.

Both empires also had problems with cohesion. The Romans and Han saw themselves as superiors and treated outside groups poorly. The outside groups realized how strong they would be by coming together. They became a much more serious threat to the empire.



*Map showing the growth of the Inca Empire. Public domain.*

## Collapse elsewhere

There are many examples of empires in other parts of the world collapsing. One is the Persian Empire that you learned about in Era 3. The Persian Empire became weakened through civil wars and assassinations. It was not strong enough to resist Alexander the Great when he conquered it in 334 to 323 BCE.

We will discuss the Inca state, a South American empire, in Era 5. The Incan Empire fell to the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The story has usually been that the Spanish were more advanced than the Inca, but this is not accurate. The Incan Empire had been weakened by civil war and anti-Incan peripheral groups. The Spanish arrived at a bad time for the Incan Empire.



*Woodcut illustration by Guaman Poma de Ayala of the execution of Atahualpa by the Spanish, public domain.*

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