

Fall of Rome

By Dennis RM Campbell

We know that the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE, but we're not so sure why. Despite knowledge of events leading up to the fall, historians still debate the cause.

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Headed for a fall

At its peak in 117 CE, the Roman Empire covered some 2.3 million square miles over three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. It is estimated that perhaps 60 million people lived within its borders. Although the Roman Empire was one of the largest and most powerful empires in the ancient world, it could not maintain its size. Within a few decades of Emperor Trajan's death, Mesopotamia[1] was lost to the Parthians of ancient Iran. The Romans would never again hold Mesopotamia. In Europe, the long border through heavily wooded Germania proved too expensive to defend, forcing the Empire to surrender land to German tribes and pull back to the Rhone and Danube Rivers.



Map of the Roman Empire in 117 CE showing it at its greatest extent. By Andrei nacu, public domain.

1 The Roman emperor Valerian did attempt to get Mesopotamia back in 260. Bad idea. He was captured by the Persian Sassanid ruler Shapur and spent the rest of his life as Shapur's footstool! After his death, his skin was flayed off his corpse and hung behind the throne of the Persian emperor.

When Diocletian became the Roman Emperor in 284 CE, he inherited an empire on the verge of collapse. He was preceded by several weak rulers who rose too quickly and were often assassinated. International trade networks were failing, and the vast, connected world of the Roman Empire almost disappeared. When Diocletian took charge, he brought about a series of changes to save his empire. Most of these changes would not last long past his death, but he did bring about some needed stability. In the west, the empire would limp forward for another century and a half, while in the east it would reign for over 1,000 years.

Diocletian created the tetrarchy, which divided the empire between four rulers, two senior emperors and two junior ones. Together they would rule the vast empire. Yet soon after Diocletian's death in 311 CE, the rulers were back to fighting each other for control. Constantine the Great (who ruled from 306 to 337 CE) would emerge as the victor. Under Constantine, Christianity became legal and eventually the dominant religion, and the new capital city Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) was created as if it were the New Rome. This was in the eastern part of the empire, which was much wealthier and more stable.



Relief carving of the four tetrarchs. Each Augustus is shown embracing the younger Caesar. These relief statues are from Constantinople. By Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0.



Map of the Roman Empire during the tetrarchy. Note how the empire has been divided into four parts for each of the rulers. By Coppermine Photo Gallery, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Things went downhill for the next 140 years, especially over in the west. Power was often in the hands of child emperors, who were guided by generals. The economy suffered as international trade dramatically declined. The Vandals under their king Gaiseric took over North Africa and cut off the Western Roman Empire from its main source of grain. Within the empire, markets became more localized. This made it a lot harder for the government to collect the taxes it needed for its vast armies. Throughout Europe, Germanic tribes began to push into the empire, often driven there by the hope for safety and security against forces such as Attila the Hun. In the west, these forces became too strong to resist. In 476 CE, the last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown at the age of 16.

Romanitas—being and becoming Roman

In 212 CE, the emperor Caracalla published the Antonine Constitution. It gave citizenship to all free men within the borders of the Roman Empire, no matter how far from Rome they lived. The idea of Roman identity, or *romanitas*, was pushed hard through education and government. The people who lived on the other side of the borders were non-Romans and looked down upon as barbarians. This sense of social superiority was most evident in how the Romans dealt with the Germanic tribes. In 350 CE, German groups were trying to migrate into the Roman Empire, but while the Romans would use them as troops, these Germans had little chance of being accepted as "Roman." However, Germans would soon prove you didn't have to be Roman to learn the *romanitas* way.

In 375 CE, the emperor Valentinian I met with German tribal leaders from the Quadi. The Quadi had previously attacked Roman forces that had crossed the Danube River. They explained to the emperor that this was because he had set up military camps along the river in their territory, creating a barrier against them. He was so insulted by the blame that they placed on him that he "burst into a mighty fit of wrath," suffered an aneurysm, and died. Three years later, in 378 CE, a group of German tribes defeated the Romans at the Battle of Adrianople and killed the emperor Valens. This battle was the result of a series of abuses suffered by Germans at the hands of Roman officials. The group of tribes then united as the Visigoths under their first king, Alaric. Alaric and his subjects were repeatedly denied safe refuge or recognition as citizens, simply because they were Germans. Alaric and the Visigoths fought back by sacking Rome in 410 CE.

When the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE, it was replaced by a series of kingdoms. They were ruled over by the very Germans that the Romans so despised. Yet, even as Rome fell, it spread its *romanitas* to the Germanic tribes. There is no small irony in how



Mosaic of Constantine the Great holding a model of Constantinople, the city he created and named after himself. This is found in the Haghia Sophia and likely dates to the early 11th century CE. By Myrabella, public domain.



Illustration from the 1920s showing Alaric and his Visigoths parading through the streets of Rome after sacking the city. The sack was said to have been particularly gentle—they didn't kill too many people or steal too many objects! Public domain.

the Germanic kingdoms that arose in western Europe after 476 CE were modeled after the Roman Empire. In that sense, Roman traditions continued long after Rome's fall.

Understanding the Fall of Rome

In 1984, Alexander Demandt published a list of 210 reasons historians have given for the fall of the Roman Empire. The list points to everything from taxes to hypothermia to public baths, but most likely there were many causes. Internally the empire was failing economically. It had lost its tax base and long-distance trade was cut off. The people of the Western Roman Empire became disconnected from the emperor, living in small, localized, self-sufficient communities. They could no longer rely upon their emperor to care for and protect them. Externally, outsiders like those Germanic tribes were crossing into the empire in ever larger numbers. Many probably just wanted to join Rome, not invade or destroy it, but the Romans continued to despise them.



The sight of the ruins of the forum in Rome has had a tremendous impact on how some historians have viewed the Fall of Rome. According to some, if these broken stones are what was left of the once mighty and proud empire it must have had a dramatic collapse. By Kimberlym21, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Beyond asking why it fell, it's important to ask *what* the Fall of Rome meant to historians. Some see it as catastrophic. Looking at the ruins of the empire, these historians see the Fall of Rome as the violent and bloody end of a civilization. They believe the fall pushed Europe into a Dark Age that was crude and barbaric compared to earlier life under the Roman Empire. Others look at the Fall of Rome as a period of transition. While the central authority of the Western Roman Emperor disappeared in 476 CE, Roman institutions, from the Catholic Church to Roman law, continued in the Germanic kingdoms that came afterward. The Eastern Roman Empire survived this difficult period and continued on as the Byzantine Empire until its fall in 1453 to the Ottomans. It survived where the West did not for a variety of reasons. Its society was more cohesive, its tax base was stronger and its location provided it with better protection against German attacks.

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Dennis RM Campbell

Dennis RM Campbell is an associate professor of History at San Francisco State University. He primarily conducts research on esoteric topics in ancient history and writes about ancient language, religions, and societies.

Image credits

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