



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. Although we know of events leading up to the fall, historians still debate the cause.

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The Roman Empire was one of the largest empires in the ancient world. It covered parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe. However, the empire could not maintain its size. After Emperor Trajan's death, the Parthians took over Mesopotamia¹. The Romans would never hold that area again. In Europe, the border through Germania was too expensive to defend. German tribes took over the area. The Roman Empire had to pull back.



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In 284 CE, Diocletian became the Roman emperor. He took over an empire that was falling apart. Trade networks were failing and the vast world of the Roman Empire almost disappeared. Diocletian made some changes to save the empire. Most of these changes did not last long past his death, though. In the West, the empire would only survive for another 150 years. In the East, it would continue for over 1,000 years.



[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.

Diocletian divided the empire between four rulers. Together they would rule the vast empire. Yet soon after Diocletian's death, the rulers were back to fighting each other. Constantine the Great won the struggle for power. Under Constantine, Christianity became the main religion. The capital was moved to Constantinople. It was in the eastern part of the empire. This part was much wealthier and more stable.



*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. They were especially bad in the western part of the empire. Power was often in the hands of child emperors, who were guided by generals. The economy suffered as international trade declined. Germanic tribes began to invade. They cut off the main source of grain and made it harder for the government to collect taxes. Soon these forces became too strong to resist. The last Roman emperor was defeated in 476 CE.

Romanitas—being and becoming Roman

In 212 CE, the emperor Caracalla published the Antonine Constitution. It gave citizenship to all free men in the Roman Empire. The government pushed the idea of Roman identity. This sense of being “Roman” was called *romanitas*. People who lived outside the empire were non-Romans. They were looked down upon as barbarians.



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

In 378 CE, a group of German tribes attacked the Roman Empire. They defeated the Romans at the Battle of Adrianople. Then they killed the emperor Valens. The tribes united as the Visigoths under their first king, Alaric. Alaric and his subjects were denied Roman citizenship, simply because they were Germans. In response, they destroyed the city of Rome in 410 CE.

The Western Roman Empire fell in 476 CE. It was replaced by a series of German kingdoms. They were modeled after the Roman Empire. In that sense, Roman traditions continued long after Rome's fall.

Understanding the Fall of Rome

Historians have given many reasons for the fall of Rome. For one, the empire's economy was failing. Long-distance trade was cut off. Meanwhile, outsiders were crossing into the empire in large numbers. Many probably just wanted to join Rome, not destroy it. Nevertheless, the Romans continued to hate them.

Historians have different views about the Fall of Rome. Some see it as a disaster. They believe the fall pushed Europe into a Dark Age. Others see the Fall of Rome as a period of change. The central power of the emperor disappeared in 476 CE. However, Roman institutions continued in the kingdoms that came afterward. For example, the Catholic Church continued to be powerful. The Eastern Roman Empire survived this difficult period. It continued on as the Byzantine Empire. This empire eventually fell in 1453.



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 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.
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Image credits

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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. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tetrarchy_map3.jpg#/media/File:Tetrarchy_map3.jpg

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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. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Forum,_Ancient_Rome.jpg#/media/File:Roman_Forum,_Ancient_Rome.jpg



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