

The Systemic Collapse of the Roman Empire:
Exploring Rome's Fall Through a Multicausal Lens

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The Roman Empire was a world-leading power that conquered millions of people and was not just one of the biggest empires in history but also had one of the most flourishing civilizations the world has ever seen. But like every other big empire in history, even the great Roman Empire found its end. Most historians name the year 476 C.E. as its collapse.¹ The collapse had a huge impact on the development of all of Europe in terms of culture, politics, and the social environment and even marked the transition to the medieval world. This paper examines the extensive research conducted over centuries regarding the causes and myths surrounding the collapse of the Roman Empire. Historians have come up with dozens of theses about causes such as barbarian invasions, internal political crises, and economic inflation. With new evidence discovered, research is still going on, and historians continue to develop new theories about causes that affected the empires' stability externally but also destabilizing factors within the empire. This means the collapse of the Roman Empire was a systematic collapse over a long period of time with multiple causes and cannot be narrowed down to a single main cause or even an accident.² Each factor involved in the collapse, such as social, cultural, economic, political, and military factors, reinforced one another and destabilized the Roman Empire more and more.

At first, internal instability was caused by the inefficient elite that governed the Roman Empire. This led to a very unstable empire that could not handle the upcoming crisis and was not able to react in proper ways. The political fragility found its peak in the assassinations of key

¹ David J. Breeze, et al., *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: The African Frontiers* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2021).

² Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (1776–1789; rep. ed., London: Penguin Classics, 2003), Book 38.

figures like Valentinian III and Aetius which also showed that the elite of the Roman Empire had a growing willingness to use violence.³ The failure of political work and instead the use of violence under different-minded parties gives evidence for multiple things: not just the empire itself, but especially the elite that led the empire had a loss of discipline and started to use violence. Tacitus, who was a historian and senator in the Roman Empire a long time before the collapse, already provided evidence such as the loss of discipline within the political structure even this far ahead of the crisis. His writings and experiences show that the political disintegration was a long and ongoing process, starting out with conflicts between people of the government, leading to inner instability and the loss of the ability to react appropriately to any challenges.⁴ About two centuries after the collapse, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus mentions: “The ruin of the state was hastened by the iniquitous measures of the rulers, who, amid their constant fears of conspiracies, became a terror to the innocent.”⁵ He expressed his concerns about the political fragmentation and especially concerns about the incompetency of the political elite. The people in the political elite were more interested in keeping or even strengthening their own power rather than doing government work, which would also mean to make compromises. Since Ammianus Marcellinus was not part of the political elite and also lived a long time after Tacitus, he had another perspective and insights into the empire, especially because he was a

³ Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 367.

⁴ Herbert W. Benario, “Tacitus and the Fall of the Roman Empire,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Jan. 1968): 39.

⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, 3 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939–1950), 3:29.

soldier.⁶ The weakened empire had a lack of political decision-making, which made it nearly impossible to react well to upcoming challenges and problems.

In addition to this change in the political elite, the loss of effective governing, and the fragmentation into different parties, there was also another factor that led to even more internal instability. The collapse of the Roman Empire was accompanied by various civil wars. Those civil wars concluded out of the internal conflict and the lack of compromises in the political elite but also were caused by the society, which shows how big the gaps between the people were. Roman society was also heavily involved in those internal conflicts, even as society changed extensively in the later years of the empire. Whereas the people once believed in the values of the empire, they now stopped accepting social restraints and openly criticized the empire's leadership.⁷ On top of that, a rise of unchecked ambition characterized the elite. All these things culminated in the fragmentation of the society. Besides the obvious division between poor people and the elite, other fragmentations happened. One example is the religious division, proof for which can be found in *The Theodosian Code and Novels*, which enshrines laws against Christian heresy and pagan practices. One example statement in this legal code is: "By suppressing pagan sacrifices and rituals, we seek to eradicate the remaining traces of an obsolete religion."⁸ Alone, the fact that this statement is in a legal code shows the massive impact this persecution had on adherents to religious doctrines other than orthodox Christianity. In short, the internal conflicts

⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, 3:29.

⁷ Paul Belonick, *Restraint, Conflict, and the Fall of the Roman Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 237.

⁸ Clyde Pharr, trans., *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 349.

were deep and split the society, leaving unsolvable gaps that ended up in civil wars and encouraged the political collapse of the entire empire.

Although these conflicts seemed unsolvable, there were still attempts to reunify the society. One example was the fragmentation of the different religions. An important part of that were theological disputes and iconoclasm.⁹ In order to avoid the social unrest and the divisions, two councils, the Council of Nicaea around 325 C.E. and the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), tried to unify the Christian doctrine. The historian Peter Heather states in his book about those two Councils: “The *Council of Nicaea* sought to unify the Christian Church under a common creed, but its decrees sparked further divisions, particularly among Arian Christians, leading to political and social unrest that the Empire struggled to contain.”¹⁰ Meaning, those Councils made the situation worse and often divided the fractions even more, like the Nicene Christians and Arians, which split up even more. Since all of those groups were part of the Empire and all wanted to claim as much power as possible, new laws like in *The Theodosian Code* that suppressed different practices, such as the pagan practices, were invented by the elite in order to make a unified empire without differences in society. As Clyde Pharr notes, “The suppression of pagan rituals, as codified in *The Theodosian Code*, marked the decline of a shared cultural identity within the Empire. By targeting traditional religious practices, these laws alienated significant segments of the population, contributing to the broader cultural decay.”¹¹ The legal code tried to forbid varying religions and practices and wanted to achieve a society that believed in the same values and norms, but the end result was even more unhappy people within the

⁹ Timothy Peters, “A History of Images: Christianity and Historiography in the Later Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” *Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900, vol. 30, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 508.

¹⁰ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 152.

¹¹ Pharr, trans., *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, 345.

empire who lost their loyalty towards the government. This increasing religious division and unsatisfied society played a major role in the decline of the whole cultural variety of the empire.¹²

Moving away from just the internal conflicts and instability, the decline of the Roman economy in the late years of the empire also affected the foreign policy and trade relations with other empires. Through the years, the military and infrastructural expenses of the Roman Empire rose immeasurably and severely burdened the Roman Empire. As a result, the financial resources were strained, decreasing the power of the whole empire.¹³ The *Codex Theodosianus* states: “The public treasury, weakened by the excessive demands of military expenditure, could no longer maintain the essential provisions of the state.”¹⁴ These high and recurring expenses with which the empire had to deal brought continuous pressure on the elite and also made their room for maneuver against upcoming dangers very small. Additionally, the money needed for the military was acquired through the heavy taxation of citizens, which was noticeable in their daily lives and certainly did not diminish their decreasing loyalty towards the empire. This displeasure in society spread by the increased taxation furthered the internal instability and conflicts even more.

Another example is given in *History of the Wars* by sixth-century historian Procopius, who attributed the economic decline to critical shortages of grain.¹⁵ Not only was the economy strained, but even key resources like food and needed equipment were not consistently available

¹² Futong Zheng, “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and A Mirror of History: A Comparative Study,” *The Classical World*, vol. 80, no. 6 (July-August 1987): 428.

¹³ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 423.

¹⁴ Pharr, trans., *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, 203.

¹⁵ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing, 7 vols. (1914; rep. ed., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953–1954), 1:183.

anymore, which brought fear to the society. Besides the existing displeasure and lack of loyalty from its citizens, the empire could not even guarantee a steady supply of goods to all their regions and thus could not treat all conquered states efficiently. Policies which previously prevented rebellion and created new followers for the empire now had the opposite effect.

On top of those enormous expenses, the empire had to deal with another declining factor in the economy—*inflation*. The debasement of the currency in the later days of the empire destabilized the already damaged economy even more.¹⁶ In a published interview, Bryan Ward-Perkins discusses the collapse of the Roman Empire and also the economic situation following the transition or political collapse. He cites the breakdown of pottery production and a decline in the quality of roofing tiles as evidence of the gradual decline of the empire over a span of two centuries.¹⁷ Both the inflation and decline of the Roman economy damaged the once great working empire as a whole and weakened it from the inside.

Besides this economic stress, which made many citizens lose their trust in the Roman Empire, two different plagues within the empire exacerbated the loss of trust. The Antonine Plague around 170 C.E. killed millions of people and caused the death of about 10% of the empire's population. Historian Adrian Goldsworthy has observed, "The devastation wrought by the Antonine Plague, described by the physician Galen, led to widespread labor shortages and a significant decline in tax revenue, destabilizing the Roman economy during a critical period of expansion."¹⁸ This shows that other consequences, such as a huge loss of labor that led to a

¹⁶ A. H. M. Jones, "Inflation under the Roman Empire," *The Economic History Review*, new series 5, vol. 3 (1953): 295.

¹⁷ Bryan Ward-Perkins, interview by Donald A. Yerxa, "An Interview with Bryan Ward-Perkins on the Fall of Rome," *Historically Speaking*, vol. 7, no. 4 (March/April 2006): 31–33.

¹⁸ Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 210–11.

shortage of workers and soldiers and the reduction of industrial and agricultural output, were caused by the plague. With fewer people available, army recruitment was weakened, and the reduced output of industry and agriculture resulted in smaller tax revenues for the empire. Furthermore, the second plague, called the Plague of Cyprian, caused lots of damage by leading to mortality and disrupting military operations. This happened later, around 250 C.E., and about 5000 people died every day in Rome. During this period the empire could not respond to external threats, which shows the combined impact of the pandemic and political instability in the later phases of the empire.¹⁹ The plagues also led to an overburdened public health system, social unrest, and as mentioned before, weakened the military by cutting off their resources. In short, the plagues resulted in a loss of public confidence in imperial leadership and an increased reliance on religious explanations. The high mortality rate weakened the empire from the inside, causing the economy and military to decline further and creating social division.

The Roman Empire also faced various challenges in defending against external threats. The lack of soldiers and insufficient financial resources for the military brought many difficulties and additional challenges. The soldiers lost their discipline, much like the society and the political elites. This decrease in discipline of the Roman troops corresponded to a growing reliance on mercenaries.²⁰ The military could not accurately control its missions anymore, and the leader of the Roman Empire even had to hope that the mercenaries would fulfill their obligations, though it did not always happen as planned, weakening the military power of the empire further. The historian Zosimus mentioned in his sixth book of *New History*: “The

¹⁹ Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 113–14.

²⁰ Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 298.

empire's defense, once robust, now faltered due to the negligence of the rulers, who, distracted by internal strife, left the frontiers vulnerable.”²¹ The lack of decision making on the political side resulted in fewer defensive capabilities and made the army react and adjust very slowly to new pressures or challenges. Furthermore, it worsened the morale of the army. The high costs for mercenary troops heavily burdened the economy of the whole empire. The weaknesses of the military got worse over time and the causes reinforced one another, meaning that the Roman Empire had a weakened military with issues in finance, discipline, and reliance on mercenaries.

Besides the decline of the military strength and discipline, another major factor that must be analyzed when thinking of the decline or collapse of the Roman Empire is the pressure from outside. Because of the massive expansion and many conquests, the Roman Empire ruled over millions of people and came into conflict with many different parties. These included the Germanic peoples. The Germanic migrations and invasions weakened the influence of the Roman Empire in the West.²² These led to victories over the Roman military and diminished trust in the capabilities of the Roman Empire. In addition, there were also many other pressures on the Roman borders. Ammianus Marcellinus writes: “The barbarians, emboldened by the Empire’s internal divisions, laid waste to the provinces with fire and sword.”²³ Ammianus gives evidence that barbarian groups took advantage of the weakened military of the Roman Empire to attack poorly defended borders and damage the empire on the inside.²⁴ All of this external pressure found its peak in the sack of Rome by the Goths, which showed how weakened the Empire was at that point.

²¹ Zosimus, *New History*, trans. J. Davis (London: Green and Chaplin, 1814), Book 6.

²² Ian Wood, “The Fall of the Western Empire and the End of Roman Britain,” *Britannia*, vol. 18 (1987): 254.

²³ Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*, 117.

²⁴ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 501.

Not all historians have seen these barbarian groups as seeking to destroy the empire.

Pirenne argued that many of those barbarian groups sought to integrate into the Roman system, rather than trying to conquer parts of the empire. This point of view contrasts with the traditional way of seeing the barbarians solely as enemies of the empire. Instead, Pirenne argued that the fall of the Roman Empire was a gradual transformation, and that the barbarian groups were gradually integrated into Roman society.²⁵ The groups were seeking security, food, and accommodation. Because of the weakened empire, these groups could more easily settle down within the Roman borders, but the lack of resources and poor organizational capacities often resulted in conflicts. He also noted that these barbarians endeavored to become part of the fabric of Roman society and adopted Romano-Gallo cultural practices. Furthermore, the disruptions that were caused by barbarian migrations very often were the result of pressure from other migratory groups. One example was the conflict between the Huns and Goths within the borders of the Roman Empire. Pirenne argued that the incompetent Roman leadership allowed internal conflicts and unrest.²⁶ Whether one views those societies as enemies or groups that wanted to integrate, both illustrated the weaknesses of the Roman Empire from the inside.

In addition to this external pressure and the weakened military, another major issue was the division of the empire into western and eastern halves, which began under Emperor Diocletian in 284 C.E. with the creation of the Tetrarchy (rule by four co-emperors) and the cultural differences between Constantinople and Rome. While the division helped the eastern

²⁵ Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. Bernard Miall (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939), 11–15.

²⁶ Henri Pirenne, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, trans. I. E. Clegg (London: Routledge, 1937), 23–26.

part of the empire to endure, it left the West vulnerable.²⁷ Procopius provides the following evidence of this: “The Western Empire, left to fend for itself, could no longer withstand the pressures from its enemies, while the East prospered under centralized rule.”²⁸ This proves that the gap between those two parts of a once-unified empire grew because the eastern empire did not provide any help or support to the western part. This is especially important because most of the external pressure was directed toward the western part. However, finding the reason for the empire’s decline makes no difference if one only focuses on the western part. The reasons and causes remain the same, and the division of the Roman Empire into two parts played a large role in the collapse of the whole, or at least the western part, of the empire.²⁹

In conclusion, the collapse of the Roman Empire was a complex and multicausal process and started a long time before the actual fall of the empire. On all sides of the empire, the values and attitudes of the people changed and drove splinters into the Roman Empire. All these factors, such as political instability, economic challenges, military failures, social decay, external pressure, and the division into a western and eastern part, played a role in the collapse of the empire. This means the empire’s collapse was a systematic collapse and did not just happen by accident. For this collapse to happen, each factor reinforced another. The fall of the Roman Empire gives a very good example of how ignoring interdependent factors can destabilize even the mightiest states and empires, whose citizens could never have imagined would fall.

²⁷ Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 518.

²⁸ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 1:179.

²⁹ Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 322.

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