

## 5.4 Fall of the Roman Empire

### Fall of the West and Rise of the East

While Caesar Augustus was by far the most accomplished leader the Romans ever enthroned, very few of his successors imitated Augustus' tendency to conceal the extent of his power. Most historians argue that such a façade was no longer necessary over time as the Roman people grew accustomed to having such an absolute ruler. The worship of emperors as gods was part of the reason why the Christians faced such harsh persecution, but this kind of worship comes with a few side effects. Sure, the people loved and respected their emperors, but over time this love and respect also came with the expectation that the emperor could solve all of the empire's problems. While Augustus was more than capable of such a daunting task, any streak of incompetent emperors could have a devastating effect on the Roman Empire.



#### I. Third-Century Crisis (235 – 284 AD)

The prosperity of the Roman Empire was unlike any other in ancient history and its longevity makes it somewhat legendary in the pantheon of great imperial powers. In spite of this, the Romans were faced with the same kinds of problems that all other empires eventually face – invasion, political instability, and a fluctuating economy. All of these problems threatened the Roman Empire at once in what historians call the **Third-Century Crisis**.

##### From Stability to Volatility

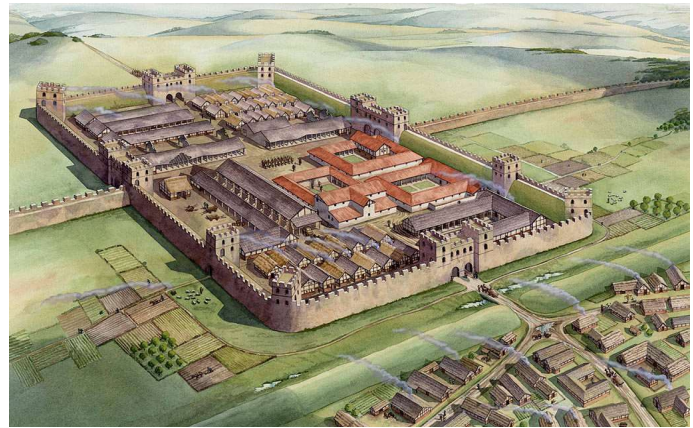
The political climate set by Caesar Augustus was one of stability. He made the public trust him thanks to his concealment of power. A key example of this is his adoption of the title princeps. Management of the empire also fell to Augustus' bureaucracy rather than on the Senate, which effectively removed politics from the day-to-day of the empire. These reforms are what made Pax Romana possible but required effective leadership from the emperor. The system worked very well under Augustus in large part due to his character, but not all leaders followed Augustus' example.

Each of Augustus' successors strayed further from his example of concealing his power. The near-unlimited power of the emperor was soon an accepted reality for Rome's subjects and citizens and so Roman emperors were increasingly **deified** or regarded as a god. If anything was going to get done in the empire it would be done by the emperor and so people of considerable wealth and influence sought the throne or looked to put their allies in power. As a result, the position of emperor was politicized to an extreme. Additionally, Augustus' decision to conceal the power of the emperor kept him from establishing formal laws for succession, which made it difficult to determine who had a legitimate claim to the throne.

The Third-Century Crisis is a unique period in Roman history because of this new reality in the Roman Empire. In a span of 75 years, the empire cycled through at least 25 emperors with most of them ruling for only a few months or years before being killed and replaced. The vicious cycle of emperors very closely reflects the same conditions that allowed Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus to come to power: the man with the bigger army wins. One military group, the **Praetorian Guard**, was particularly involved in the selection of emperors, brutally killing opposition or emperors that ceased to be useful to them. The volatility of the government limited the amount of detailed information available to modern historians about political affairs of this time period.

### **Defense of the Borders**

Invasion is often the most evident cause for the decline of empires and Rome is no exception. Ever since Julius Caesar conquered Gaul in 50 BC, the Roman Empire came into conflict with Germanic tribes that populated the regions of the north. For much of Pax Romana, clashes between the Romans and the various tribes were small and required relatively few legions to effectively manage. Most borders were defended by walls supported by a string of forts.



As the Roman Empire continued to expand, these growing borders became increasingly difficult to defend. Shortly after his death, a message from Augustus warned the empire to slow down its expansion. The message fell on deaf ears: a combination of ambitious generals seeking glory and power and a need to conquer new lands to give to retired legions meant that the Roman Empire was heavily incentivized to continue its expansion. Roman legions were spread thin across the empire and the costs of maintaining an already massive military were draining the empire's resources quickly.

Rather than halting expansion, Roman emperors slowly began to reduce citizenship requirements to serve in the military until eventually hiring foreign mercenaries. These mercenaries were often recruited from conquered peoples – such as the Gauls – and even from rival barbarian tribes. The Gauls and Germanic mercenaries were ferocious warriors who were also considerably cheaper to maintain than their Roman counterparts. For this reason, they were very popular recruits for Roman generals. Though cost-effective, these mercenaries had almost no loyalty to the empire itself and they were difficult to manage. Discipline within the Roman legions dropped considerably.

Invasions by barbarian tribes only increased in response to Rome's instability and its constant civil wars. The costs of defending most of these contested territories exceeded their actual value, but this reality did nothing to curb the Roman's resolve to keep them.

## Failing Economy

As one might expect, civil war does an empire's economy no favors. Political instability and infighting made internal trade unsafe and the Roman economy was already extremely delicate, especially in the Italian Peninsula. Most Roman estates focused on the production of cash crops and imported its food from other parts of the empire. If trade within the empire was unsafe, this meant that the heart of the empire was at risk of widespread food shortages. Prices for grain began to rise as fewer merchants were confident enough to continue long distant trade.

While civil wars affected trade security, political instability affects economic policies. With so many emperors rising and falling, it's easy to see why many emperors grew short-sighted with their policies. Constant invasion and civil war meant that emperors could not afford to reduce the Roman military. Many emperors even increased the pay of legions in order to keep their support. This put a massive strain on the already disappearing Roman treasury and little by little Rome's emperors began to sabotage their own economy. To pay off their many debts, Roman emperors increased taxes and ordered the production of more coin.

Producing more money might help the economy for a very brief amount of time, but the Roman emperors went even further. Each emperor began to reduce the amount of precious metal (usually silver) that was put into Roman coins, significantly dropping their value. Eventually Roman coins were abandoned by merchants and traders who resorted to primitive barter systems. Barter systems made long distance trade even more difficult and impractical.



The sharp decrease in trade and the widespread decline of wealth across the empire meant that even the wealthy struggled to pay their taxes. The Western regions of the empire were hit particularly hard due to their overdependence on trade while also being far away from the empire's major trade centers. To escape the consequences of failing to pay their taxes, the wealthiest Romans began to move out of cities and travelled to the countryside to create new localized communities. These communities were normally small towns that were self-sufficient and maintained few long-distance connections. They often erected their own defenses, such as walls and forts, and hired private armies as they no longer trusted Rome to protect them.



### Diocletian's Reforms (r. 284–305 AD)

The Third-Century Crisis came to an end when **Emperor Diocletian** came to power. Born to peasant parents, Diocletian joined the army and rose through the ranks. He eventually joined the ongoing struggle for power and took control of the empire in 284. As emperor, Diocletian saved the empire with radical reforms and strict leadership. To restore the reputation of the emperor, Diocletian created a variety of ceremonies and festivals that honored him as a Roman god.

In an attempt to slow the decline of the empire's economy, Diocletian issued an edict that controlled prices for various goods, products, and services. Additionally, he forced professionals to stay in their industries while the economy recovered.



To restore order to the fractured empire, Diocletian nearly doubled the size of the Roman military and he ruled with an iron-fist. Rebellions were put down harshly and he severely limited the freedom of individuals within the empire. Even though he was cruel, most historians agree that Diocletian saved the empire from the brink of destruction.

One of Diocletian's core beliefs was that the Roman Empire was far too large and complex to be managed by one man. To this effect, he divided the empire into two parts – West and East – and appointed a co-ruler. The Western half included Italy, Gaul, Iberia, North Africa and Britain while the Eastern half included Greece, Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt. Although Diocletian now had a co-ruler, he made sure that he maintained a majority of the power. To do this, he gave his co-ruler control of the West which was the weaker of the two halves by far. With easy access to foreign markets, an abundance of major trade centers, and much more compact settlements, the East was not just wealthier but significantly easier to manage.



Diocletian chose to retire in 305 due to health concerns, but he failed to appoint his successor. Having split the empire in half now it was not just one open position but two and so the empire was embroiled in yet another civil war. In 311, the empire was ruled by not two co-rulers but four. One of these rulers was a young general named Constantine.

### Side Stories: The Praetorian Guard

How is it possible that the emperors' bodyguard could become the primary player behind the assassination of so many emperors? What did they have to gain from these actions? How did they even gain political power? The following video has answers.

[Watch 'Roman Armies and Tactics: Praetorians' by Kings and Generals to discover how the Praetorians found their political power!](#)

## II. Emperor Constantine (r. 306–337 AD)

Arguably the most well-known of the latter Roman emperors is Constantine. While he was not responsible for the division of Rome, his policies solidified it.

Constantine was one of Rome's four emperors immediately following the retirement of Diocletian. The four Roman emperors shared power in relative peace until Constantine overthrew his rival, Maxentius, and became ruler of the West in 312. Shortly afterwards he allied himself with Licinius and helped him become the ruler of the East. Their alliance was not stable despite Constantine giving Licinius his sister to marry. The two would eventually compete for power and Constantine would come out on top. By 325, **Emperor Constantine** was the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

### Growth of Christianity in the Empire

Constantine made two major moves that greatly affected the course of history. The first of these moves came in 312, a few days before he defeated Maxentius in his struggle for control of the West. A day before the critical Battle at Milvian Bridge, Constantine prayed for divine help and was given a vision. In his vision, Constantine believed that he saw the image of a cross – a common Christian symbol – and was convinced that this was a sign. He ordered that his soldiers paint the Christian symbol on their shields for divine protection and, after achieving victory over Maxentius, gave the Christian God credit for their triumph.



In 313, one year after taking control of the West, Constantine issued the **Edict of Milan** which stated that Christianity was now an acceptable religion. This marked the end of persecution for the Christians and sparked massive growth for the church and faith. While Constantine himself converted to Christianity he maintained religious tolerance for all religions within the empire. Historians are still not entirely sure what Constantine's motives were for siding with the Christians. Some scholars believe that Constantine was a genuine convert and wished to grant his community freedom from persecution. Others believe that Constantine simply wanted to unify the Roman Empire under a single god and religion.

Christianity was already a relatively successful religion despite the amount of persecution believers endured. Christian communities, known as **churches** across the empire grew to reflect Roman hierarchies. **Priests** were appointed to lead each local church and **bishops** were appointed from among the priests to supervise groups of local churches. Every major city would have a bishop and soon they wondered who would lead them all. For the sake of clarity, the term church refers to small communities whereas Church refers to Christianity as a whole.

The Apostle Peter was originally viewed as the leader of the earliest Christians due to the belief that Jesus conferred this responsibility to him. According to the Gospels, Peter was originally named Simon and Jesus renamed him Peter (meaning "the rock") after stating that he would be "the rock the church is built on." Combined with the belief that Peter established the church in Rome, later Christian leaders decided that the bishop of Rome would also be the leader of all the churches of the empire. As Christianity grew, the Bishop of Rome was eventually given the title of **Pope**, meaning 'father' in its original Latin.

As a result of Constantine's conversion to the faith and his legalization of its practice, Christianity's popularity boomed. An already enticing religion was finally acceptable in the empire and the emperor himself was a member. While some converted for purely spiritual purposes, many converted simply to emulate the emperor – a common practice throughout empires. Over time it became obvious that being a Christian was politically advantageous as the emperor had a tendency to prefer Christian officials over those who were not. Soon enough, the whole empire was overrun by a wave of new Christians. This sudden popularity of Christianity created problems for the Church. The Church found political power and many recent converts tried to take advantage of Christian institutions. In addition, the traditions and teachings of Christianity were now suddenly mixed with pagan (non-Christian) beliefs.

Confusion soon followed and church leaders decided that they had to standardize Christian beliefs in order to end the chaos. To do this, they compiled the letters of Paul and other apostles, the Gospels, and a few other documents into the New Testament. They later combined this with the Hebrew Bible which Christians referred to as the Old Testament. Together they make up the Christian Bible and became the primary authority on Christian beliefs. Emperor Constantine also involved himself in the standardization of the Christian faith. In 325 he called church leaders to meet in the city of Nicaea in Anatolia. In this meeting, Constantine oversaw the writing of the **Nicene Creed** which clearly defined the basic beliefs of the Church.

### **From Rome to Byzantium**

In 330, Constantine decided to transfer the imperial capital out of Rome and establish it in the Greek city of Byzantium in modern-day Turkey. Constantine had many reasons to make this move:

- 1- **Strategic Location:** Located just off the Bosphorus Strait on a narrow strip of land between Anatolia and Greece made Byzantium an easily defended city. Additionally, its proximity to the eastern borders made it easier for the emperor to coordinate military efforts against the growing threat of a new Persian Empire.
- 2- **Economic Stability:** By the time Constantine took power, the Eastern half of the empire had a significantly stronger economy than the West. The economic issues caused by the Third-Century Crisis certainly impacted the East, but it did not require a full-scale economic restructuring as in the West. The East was also where the empire's major trade centers were located, and it was closer to foreign markets. As a result, the East was not only stable it was also much wealthier than the West.
- 3- **Compact Centers:** The Eastern half of the Roman empire was far more urbanized than the West. Many of the Eastern urban centers were simply descendent from the Greek city-states that dotted the entire eastern Mediterranean for centuries. These urban centers were also much closer to each other and more densely populated on average. This made management (and taxation) much easier in the East than in the increasingly localized communities that were popping up across the West.

With the capital now located in Byzantium, political power shifted from West to East. Many of the political institutions in Rome were forced to migrate, others – like the Praetorian Guard – were destroyed by Constantine years earlier. Most scholars agree that the move was the final nail in the coffin for the West. The East became the heart of the empire, commanding its wealth, government, and military while the West grew increasingly localized. In spite of the move, the Bishop of Rome was still considered the head of the Church. Byzantium was eventually renamed **Constantinople**, after Constantine.





### III. Collapse of the West (c. 370–476 AD)

The death of Constantine in 337 marked the end of a unified Rome. Two rulers split the empire once again, and while the two sides had friendly relations, the disparity between the two only grew. As the Eastern half of the empire prospered the West continued to struggle. Due to the end of a truly unified Roman Empire, historians typically refer to the Eastern half the **Byzantine Empire** following the death of Constantine. It is important to note, however, that the people of the Byzantine Empire still considered themselves fully Roman in spite of the fact that few Byzantine emperors spoke Latin or had even seen Rome. The West began its gradual decline after Constantine's death, but it accelerated rapidly starting around 370.

#### The Huns and Goths

A group of Mongol nomads from Central Asia known as the **Huns** began a string of invasions into Europe around 370. While the Huns were not invading the Roman empires, they did force Germanic tribes to migrate south in massive numbers. Conflict between the Germanic tribes and Rome existed for centuries since Julius Caesar conquered Gaul and this migration of Germanic peoples was concerning for the Romans. Due to the circumstances of this migration, Roman leaders reluctantly granted the barbarians permission to cross the border.

Rather than remain in one place, the barbarian tribes travelled across the Western half. They crossed Gaul, Iberia, and some even reached as far as North Africa. Cruel treatment by the Romans fostered resentment among the tribes and by 410 hordes of Germanic tribes retaliated. The most organized of these groups, the Visigoths were able to ravage the Italian peninsula and attacked Rome itself. **The Sack of Rome** lasted three days and was the first time a foreign power had ever dared to attack Rome in centuries.



The greatest threat to both halves of the Roman Empire was led by **Attila the Hun**. The Huns were a ferocious band of nomads that had already done damage around the borders of the empire but never tried to invade the empire itself. With the rise of Attila, the Huns were finally organized under a single leader. With an army of around 100,000 men, Attila launched aggressive campaigns against both halves of the empire. In 444, the united forces attacked the Eastern half destroying dozens of cities but ultimately failed to conquer Constantinople. By 452, Attila the Hun turned his attention to the Western half and advanced on Rome – nearly conquering the city. Waves of disease and famine struck the Italian peninsula around this time which forced Attila to abandon his mission.

After the death of Attila the Hun in 453, the Huns were no longer a threat to the Romans. Even though the threat of another Hun invasion had passed, Germanic tribes continued to invade.



### Fall and Legacy of Rome

Invasions of Rome by Germanic tribes continued after Attila's death. The West, which never truly recovered from the Third-Century Crisis, never received consistent support from the East. The Eastern half was already fighting its own wars against invaders and growing threats from the Middle East. In 476, **Odoacer** – an Ostrogothic statesman – led a successful invasion and coup-d'état against the sitting Roman emperor. At the time, the emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was only a child at around 15 years of age. This boy emperor was effectively a puppet of his father and thus had little ability to change his fate.

Odoacer exiled the boy and gave himself the title King of Italy. Historians consider Romulus Augustulus the final emperor of Western Rome, fully appreciating the painful irony of his name. Equally ironic was that as Odoacer became King of Italy, the Roman Senate – still intact but powerless – watched hopelessly from the sidelines.

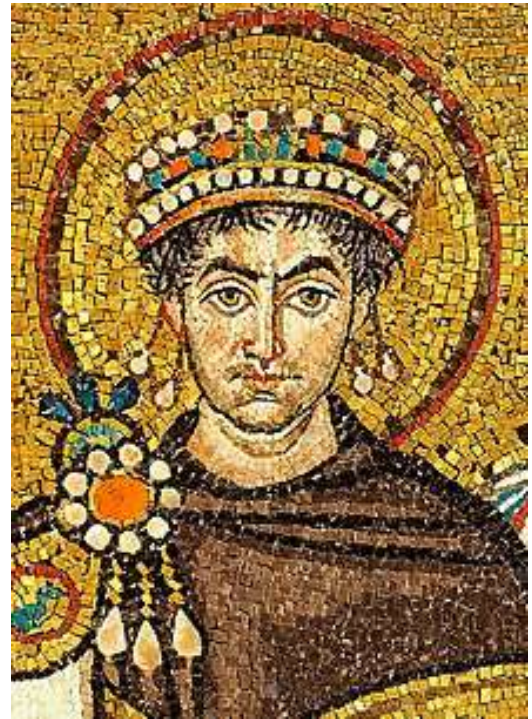


#### IV. Emperor Justinian (r. 527–565 AD)

The reign of **Emperor Justinian** (right) marked the peak of the Byzantine empire. Justinian was a passionate leader whose legal and religious reforms laid the foundation for the evolution of Christianity and European law. He was a controversial emperor in his first few years in power but with the encouragement of his wife, Theodora, he was able to solidify his claim to the throne following a bloody string of riots.

##### The Nika Riots (532 AD)

Justinian's ascension to power was unique by many standards. As a peasant, he was adopted by his uncle, Justin, who used his influence as a member of the imperial guard to guarantee that Justinian received an education. To repay his adopted father, he helped secure Justin's ascension to power. As emperor, Justin was supported by Justinian who would eventually become the de facto ruler when Justin grew old. When Emperor Justin died in 527 Justinian was named emperor.



Perhaps due to the circumstances of his rise to power or simply because of his policies or choice of advisors, Justinian was not a popular ruler. In 532 riots began to break out around Constantinople. Riots were not uncommon in Constantinople; mobs would often form after the city's popular chariot races took place and these mobs would start riots if their preferred teams lost a race. These riots would take place inside of the **Hippodrome**, where the races were held, and the districts that surrounded it.



The riots of 532 were different from typical chariot race riots. The mobs normally targeted fans from opposing teams, but the groups joined together to protest Emperor Justinian himself. Their primary demand was for Justinian to dismiss some of his closest advisors. Justinian relented but the mobs eventually began to demand that

Justinian himself step down. The mobs began a massive riot, burning and destroying entire districts of Constantinople. The palace itself was targeted for almost four days and Justinian and his advisors made plans to abandon the city. They were stopped by his wife, Theodora:

*My lords, the present occasion is too serious to allow me to follow the convention that a woman should not speak in a man's council. Those whose interests are threatened by extreme danger should think only of the wisest course of action, not of conventions.*

*In my opinion, flight is not the right course, even if it should bring us to safety. It is impossible for a person, having been born into this world, not to die; but for one who has reigned it is intolerable to be a fugitive. May I never be deprived of this purple robe, and may I never see the day when those who meet me do not call me empress.*

*If you wish to save yourself, my lord, there is no difficulty. We are rich; over there is the sea, and yonder are the ships. Yet reflect for a moment whether, when you have once escaped to a place of security, you would not gladly exchange such safety for death. As for me, I agree with the adage that the royal purple is the noblest shroud.*

Theodora's pleas were effective. Rather than run away or give into the rioters demands, Justinian chose to deal his opposition a devastating blow. While the rioters participated in the burning of thousands of buildings most of them were not armed nor did they specifically aim to physically harm other people. Justinian ordered that they be put down anyways. In the two days that followed he ordered a brutal suppression of the riots that ended with the death of around 30,000 people.

The riots came to be known as the **Nika Riots** as they began when the mobs began to chant 'Nika!' which roughly translates to 'Win!' or 'Conquer!' The effects of the Nika Riots were twofold. First, Justinian was able to demonstrate an almost cruel determination to hold power. Although Justinian still had many enemies in the empire, he went on to rule with almost no opposition following the Nika Riots. Second, the destruction of large areas of the capital gave Justinian opportunities to restore or rebuild the cities to his liking. The most significant project was the restoration of the Hagia Sophia which still stands in Istanbul today. Justinian was able to improve his reputation by upgrading and beautifying Constantinople.

### Military Campaigns

Emperor Justinian is widely regarded as the last truly Roman emperor of the Roman Empires because he was the last Roman emperor to have controlled the city of Rome. It was always one of his goals to restore the Roman Empire to its former glory, but it was through the skill of his generals that his dream was almost realized, the greatest of which was **Belisarius**, who took part in the suppression of the Nika Riots. Before Justinian could turn his attention to Rome, he was forced to address the Persian threat in the East.



The Neo-Persian Empire, the **Sassanid Empire**, was growing in influence and power in the East and began a string of invasions into Byzantine regions in Anatolia and the Levant. Likely drawn by the vast wealth of Byzantium, the Sassanids and Romans of Byzantium were in constant conflict even during the reign of Emperor Justin. It was only after the death of Shah (king) Kavad in 531 that Justinian was able to negotiate peace with the Persians and secure the Eastern frontier. One year later, the Nika Riots broke out in Constantinople.

With the Eastern frontier and capital secured, Justinian was finally able to launch his ambitious campaign to retake the Western Empire. By 534 North Africa was under Byzantine control and in 554 Italy was firmly in Justinian's control.

### Legal Reforms

Under the oversight of Justinian's legal advisor, **Tribonian**, Roman law was reformed, refined, and modernized. Centuries of legislation, legal decisions, and civil war made the Roman legal code almost impossible to fully decipher, let alone learn. Court ruling were often personal decisions made by judges rather than actual legal decisions. To solve this issue, Justinian ordered a massive overhaul of Roman law in 528.

Just a year later, Tribonian had completed the project and published a new comprehensive Roman legal code called **Codex Justinianus** (or **Code of Justinian**). It not only condensed a thousand years of legal tradition it also modernized the legal language into more modern Latin. The legal code was a masterpiece of law and it still serves as a foundational work for many modern legal systems around the world, though today it more commonly referred to as *Corpus Juris Civilis*. With the release of such a comprehensive code of law, judges and lawyers could finally operate using the same laws and the reputation of the courts in the Byzantine empire soared as a result.

### **Side Stories: Justinian and Theodora**

Strange side story? Not really. The history of Emperor Justinian and his wife is extremely well documented, and the topic of his reign is a favorite for many modern historians. Go beyond the basics and get a better feel for what made Justinian such a successful emperor.

[Watch 'Byzantine Empire: Justinian and Theodora' by Extra Credits to learn more!](#)