

What factors contributed to the fall of the Western Roman Empire?

In the third century A.D. Rome encountered many problems. In addition to facing internal (inside) problems, the invasion by Germanic tribes seemed to deliver a devastating blow to the Western Roman Empire. Historians have examined both internal and external (outside) conditions/factors that weakened the empire and have presented a variety of explanations for its fall.

Document 1

1. What were the basic problems facing the Western Roman Empire according to these authors?

Document 2

1. According to this excerpt from Gibbon, what were two causes for the fall of Rome? Explain both.

Document 3

1. What economic issues does Muller identify as causes for decline? Explain.

2. How was slavery a cause for the decline of the Roman Empire?

Document 4

1. Why did the Roman government have such large expenses?

2. What was the effect of high taxation on the people?

3. What effect did the establishment of a governmental welfare system have on the people?

Document 5

1. What does this author identify as the cause of the problems in the military?

Document 6

1. How does Rostovtzeff explain the fall of the Western Roman Empire as a process of decay?

Document 1

The basic trouble was that very few inhabitants of the empire believed that the old civilization was worth saving... the overwhelming majority of the population had been systematically excluded from political responsibilities. They could not organize to protect themselves; they could not serve in the army... Their economic plight was hopeless. Most of them were serfs bound to the soil, and the small urban groups saw their cities slipping into uninterrupted decline.

Source: *The Course of Civilization* by Strayer, Gatzke, Harbison (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961).

Document 2

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness [large size] ... The introduction ... of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrine of patience; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the ...demands of charity and devotion...

Source: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon.

Document 3

First the economic factor... While the empire was expanding, its prosperity was fed by plundered wealth and by new markets in the semi-barbaric provinces. When the empire ceased to expand, however, economic progress soon ceased... The abundance of slaves led to the growth of the *latifundia*, the great estates that...came to dominate agriculture and ruin the free *coloni* [farmers] who drifted to the cities, to add to the unemployment there. The abundance of slaves likewise kept wages low.

Source: *Uses of the Past* by Herbert J. Muller

Document 4 (blames the decline on the heavy taxation required to support government expenses)

...Part of the money went into...the maintenance of the army and of the vast bureaucracy required by a centralized government...the expense led to the strangling taxation ... The heart was taken out of enterprising men ... tenants fled from their farms and businessmen and workmen from their occupations. Private enterprise was crushed and the state was forced to take over many kinds of business to keep the machine running. People learned to expect something for nothing. The old Roman virtues of self-reliance and initiative were lost in that part of the population on relief [welfare] ... The central government undertook such a far-reaching responsibility in affairs that the fiber of the citizens weakened.

Source: *The New Deal in Old Rome* by Henry Haskell, he

Document 5 (blames the fall on "internal decay" specifically that of the military)

Rome, like all great empires, was not overthrown by external enemies but undermined by internal decay ... The military crisis was the result of ... proud old aristocracy's ... shortage of children. [Consequently] foreigners poured into this ...void [lack of soldiers]. The Roman army [was] composed entirely of Germans.

Source: *Romans Without Laurels* by Indro Montanelli

Document 6

In the sphere of politics we witness a gradual barbarization of the Empire from within, especially in the West. The foreign, German, elements play the leading part both in the government and in the army, and settling in masses, displace the Roman population . . . the ruling classes were replaced . . . by Germans.

The cities ... gradually decayed, and the majority of them practically disappeared from the face of the earth. Only small islands of civilized life are left, . . . but . . . are gradually swallowed up by the advancing tide of barbarism. Another aspect . . . is the development of a new mentality among the masses of the population. It was the mentality of the lower classes, based exclusively on religion (Christianity) and not only indifferent but hostile to the intellectual achievements of the higher classes.

Source: *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* by Michael Rostovtzeff