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Machines in Islamic Civilization

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The Collapse of Rome

The phrase “the collapse of Rome” paints a picture of a singular cataclysmic event that brought down one of the world’s most extensive empires. However, just as Rome was not built in a day, neither did it collapse in one. In actuality, a complex combination of various social, economic, and political pressures over the course of hundreds of years contributed to its eventual collapse. As these factors are constantly analyzed and revised, we will simply attribute Rome’s fall to three overarching factors: political instability, economic decline, and social inequalities.

One must first understand the extent of Rome’s power to understand its demise. Having lasted over 1000 years and being commonly depicted as one of the most sophisticated and adaptive civilizations to exist, the Roman Empire reached its peak during the *Pax Romana* period ranging from roughly 27 BC to 180 AD. This period of Roman prosperity was characterized by stability, economic growth, and territorial expansion. In fact, it became a dominant power in Europe, North Africa and the Mediterranean, cementing itself in an incredibly strategic position. The massive influx of Roman territory alongside the geographic and cultural diversity it contained proved incredibly difficult to govern, and led to a series of political changes in an effort to maintain Roman control: namely, a division of the empire into smaller provinces run by



governors to ensure loyalty. However, rather than unifying the Roman people, these changes exacerbated existing tensions and set the stage for internal conflict.

Given Roman overexpansion caused disunity and threatened to tear down the empire from within, ineffective leadership and political instability only served to magnify this issue. With growing tensions, Rome desperately needed a strong-willed emperor to unify the people and address the empire's concerns. What Rome received instead was a line of increasingly unstable, bloodthirsty and careless emperors beginning with Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius, in 180 AD. Under his leadership, Rome further established itself as a military state. As the imperial coffers dried, higher taxes were placed on the common Roman to fund Roman imperialist visions, and the internal needs of citizens went neglected. With the Roman people dissatisfied with his political rule, Commodus was assassinated in 193 AD, henceforth marking a period of numerous political coups and assassinations; 4 more emperors were named and later assassinated that same year, each leader believing themselves to be more competent than the last. This political instability greatly weakened Rome's political authority in the public eye, and ultimately, the Roman empire was split into the Western and Eastern Roman empires in 286 AD.

Mismanagement and issues surrounding taxation contributed greatly to Rome's economic decline and to its eventual fall. As Rome lost land, not only were their agricultural capabilities reduced, leading to higher food prices, but tax revenue decreased significantly. The further fall of tax farming led to less efficient tax collections. The trade deficit in the east, which western Rome struggled to support with its own resources, pushed the government to make more coins with lower silver content,

causing high inflation. Emperors such as the likes of Commodus depleted resources and poorly stocked public markets while ensuring a well-stocked market for the rich. By the 3rd century, Rome went bankrupt due to a culmination of corruption, loss of territory, and high maintenance costs.

Although Rome started as an asylum for exiles and runaways, as the empire flourished, those conquered by Rome or refugees became enslaved and exploited. The social inequalities within Rome became undeniable. Refugees and foreigners were enslaved, exploited, and forced into lowly positions—these largely consisted of Germanic tribes. The mistreated and poor Romans grew tired of the social injustice in Rome, increasing the overall internal sentiment of disdain for the empire. Several riots and battles took place, usually initiated by barbarians, but commoners and slaves assisted in destroying Western Rome on multiple occasions. Battles included those such as the Battle of Adrianople in 378 CE, which led to a massacre, and Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 CE after demands for better treatment within the empire were not met. With people at odds with one another and unhappy with their government, Rome began to crumble.

Finally, the dissent between the Christians and the Roman state played a role in the fall of Rome. While Ancient Roman religion was influenced by the ancient Greeks and Christians were initially persecuted because their practices were sometimes against the rules, the Christian gained traction within the empire. Constantine embraced Christianity, moving the center of Rome from Rome to Byzantium, demonstrating a rejection of Roman traditions.

In the end removing one piece of the tower was not what led to the fall of Rome—it cannot be traced back to a single moment nor a single cause. The political instability, economic decline, social inequality, and clash of religion, along with smaller imbalances caused Rome to fall. The Roman Empire collapsed due to a build up of events and the crumbling of each aspect of their society, one imbalance exacerbating another until Rome could no longer stand.

