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HIST 205

Research Paper

The Fall of Rome

The Roman Empire is considered by many to be the most important and influential civilization that the world has ever seen. As perfect as many people believe Rome to have been due to Shakespeare's romantic depiction, the Empire was not free of flaws as we can clearly tell from the slow decline to its eventual fall. As the exact time of the fall of Rome can vary depending on which version of Rome is being referred to, I will refer to "the fall of Rome" as the fall of the Western Roman Empire. For the purpose of this paper, I will be analyzing the period of time between the rule of Diocletian and his decision to split Rome into east and west halves in 285 to 476 A.D. when Romulus Augustulus is overthrown, ending the Western Roman Empire. I believe that the fall of Rome can be attributed to three individual factors: the gradual loss of the Roman identity, the shift from Roman polytheism to Christianity, and the pressure from outside forces that led to the physical fall of the Western Empire. Using these points, we will see how Rome's social, ideological, and physical decline led to the destruction of the great civilization.

The term "Roman" was questioned many times throughout the Roman Republic causing unrest among the people, which led to change and reform in the Republic. With all that had changed, the Roman Empire was eventually put into a similar situation. In the third century, after dealing with internal struggle and conflict with the civil war, Rome

found her army depleted and lacking. From 364 to 375 A.D., Valentinian I was emperor of the west. Valentinian failed to control his generals, and because of that, many individuals attempted to overthrow him and take over (Grant 437). While none succeeded, many valuable men and resources were used up trying to put down the traitors. These attempted coups left Rome in a state of chaos and segregation. The Roman people were no longer unified under a common name. Instead they shifted their loyalty to the generals that they served instead of the Emperor who ruled all of the people. With the Empire weakened and vulnerable and the increasing power and pressure from foreign lands, West Rome had to build up its army quickly. In addition to domestic skirmishes, Rome's need for troops was also affected by the expansion of the Empire over the years. More land required a greater number of troops to protect the Empire's recently acquired distant lands. Since Rome had already conquered most of the land nearby, there were less added benefits to joining the army. Before, soldiers would eagerly join the army with hopes of becoming rich from the plunder of the places that they defeated. Now that the purpose of the army had switched from a conquering offensive side to a defensive army aimed to protect Rome from the neighboring enemies, the people were no longer willing to volunteer. By around 395 A.D., the two Roman Empires were estimated to have possessed less than 500,000 men combined with western forces of around 15,000 to 20,000 being sent into battle at a time (Grant 438). The number of forces may seem like a lot, but many of the men were unskilled, and the number of troops that were available had to be spread over the entire Empire. The military life became so unappealing to most of the Romans that they would try to avoid serving at all cost, sometimes cutting off their thumbs (Grant 439). Instead of punishing those who attempted to avoid being drafted into

the army, the government allowed individuals to pay a fee that would relieve them of their military obligations. In addition to this, taxes were also increased to help fund the recruitment process. With the increase in funds and decrease in volunteers, Rome decided to start recruiting its armies by using the money that they acquired from the citizens. While the western half of Rome was able to recruit a substantial amount of men from Rome itself, the Empire filled the rest of the void with German mercenaries. While Diocletian and Constantine had already engaged in this practice, Theodosius took the recruitment to another level in 382 A.D. Instead of recruiting the Germans as individual soldiers to fill in the Roman army, Theodosius hired whole Germanic tribes commanded by their own leaders instead of Roman officials. While these new soldiers were not granted Roman citizenship, they were being assimilated into the “Roman army”, thus changing the meaning altogether. The need for foreign mercenaries emphasized how broken the loyalty and unification of Rome was. The Roman pride was shattered, and the obligations of the Roman people were no longer honored. While the recruitment of the Germanic tribes exposed the fall of Rome socially, we will see later how they also brought about the physical destruction of the Western Roman Empire (Grant 440).

Shifting from the social structure of the Western Roman Empire, we will now take a look at how the change in religious structure contributed to the decline of Rome. Christianity existed in Rome during the early days of the Empire, and as it went against the tradition of Rome and polytheistic religion, it was deemed illegal. Persecution of the Christians began in 64 A.D. with Emperor Nero. He allowed for the killing of anyone caught participating Christianity. This behavior towards Christian continued into the rule of Diocletian, who started the Great Persecution (303-311 A.D.) with an overall goal of

wiping out the Christians in Rome (Thomas). During this time, known Christians were stripped of their citizenship, captured and imprisoned, and even killed or enslaved if they refused to give up on their illegal faith and make a sacrifice to the Roman gods. These cruel acts were seen as attempts to preserve the social and religious integrity of Rome, but all that changed in 311 A.D. when Emperor Gallienus declared Christianity to be a legal religion in Rome. Christianity took firm hold in Rome under the rule of Constantine from 306 to 337 A.D. and his Christianization of the Empire. Throughout his reign, Constantine elevated Christianity in Rome through the construction of many churches, buildings, and religious monuments (Goldsworthy 185). For example, the construction of Old St. Peter's Basilica occurred during Constantine's reign. Another example of Constantine's efforts to convert Rome was the organization of the First Council of Nicaea, which met to establish uniformity within the Christian faith across all of Rome (Goldsworthy 188). By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had over taken the old "pagan" ways of Rome as the majority religion among the population. Acknowledging the shift in religious views by both the Roman people and the emperors before him, Theodosius declared Christianity to be the official religion of Rome and merged the powers of church and state (Goldsworthy 277). While Rome's conversion to Christianity is seen as a good thing due to the unification it brought as well as an end to religious prosecution within the Empire, it can be argued that the shift from Rome's old polytheistic ways marked yet another decline in traditional Roman values and ideals.

With Rome's social and religious structures compromised, the Roman Empire was a shell of what it once was. It is when the Western Roman Empire is destroyed that we see the physical fall of Rome. As addressed earlier when elaborating on the social

decline of Rome, due to civil conflict and general loss in appeal to the military lifestyle, Rome was forced to recruit soldiers for the army both domestically and abroad.

Throughout the Empire's existence, Rome experienced an enormous amount of foreign pressure from the various surrounding Germanic tribes to the north and west. With the increase in power and pressure from the tribes, the people of Rome began to distrust, fear, and even harm Germanic people within their ranks and the Empire. This distrust weakened the structure of the Roman army even further and also made the Germanic soldiers more likely to help the attacking foreign tribes either through desertion or conversion when Rome's Germanic detachments were defeated and captured. Because of Rome's weakness, Alaric, leader of the Germanic tribe known as the Visigoths, led his men into Roman territory to pillage. Alaric attempted to force money from the Senate in Rome in exchange for the withdrawal of his men, but Rome refused to give in to the demands. Angered by the dismissal of his threats, the Visigoth king gathered his men and a substantial amount of Germanic deserters and proceeded to march on Rome for the next three years. The first time, he was paid off, while the second year's march was his attempt to set up a puppet emperor within Rome. Finally in 410 A.D., Alaric marched straight into Rome with the gates wide open and occupied the city for three days. Before continuing on his way, Alaric and his men sacked the city (Grant 430). Later in 455 A.D., Rome was again overtaken and sacked by the Vandals, an East Germanic tribe. In order to restore the land taken from them, Rome drew up a peace treaty in an attempt to salvage the Empire and bring the Vandals into their fold (Grant 432). The consecutive sackings of Rome, whose walls had not been penetrated by outside forces for close to 800 years, exposed the true weakness of the once great and powerful Empire. For the next twenty

years, Rome struggled to maintain its empire and its very existence. Beaten and bruised in 476 A.D., the Western Roman Empire sees its last emperor, Romulus Augustulus deposed by German general, Odoacer (Grant 434-6). With the final emperor forcefully removed from power, the Western Roman Empire falls.

The rise and fall of Rome is something that has been studied and discussed by historians for many years. Arguments have been made from many different angles; some being very broad while others are longer and more elaborate, breaking down every event from year to year. While some might argue that the decline of Rome began long before the division of Rome into the eastern and western halves, I believe that it was Diocletian's decision that would inevitably catalyze Rome's final descent. The downfall of the western half of the Roman Empire cannot be attributed to one specific moment or event. Ultimately, the downfall of the Roman Empire comes as a result of their widespread expansion process. Rather than wiping out the native population of the territory they conquered, the Romans chose to integrate the populations within their own society and culture. With the addition of numerous distinct populations, Rome experienced social and religious diversity. The shift in ideas and tradition in Rome represented by the Roman identity crisis and the integration of Christianity marks the internal collapse of Rome, while the invasion of Rome by foreign threats and the shift in power marks the physical end of the Roman Empire.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire marked the end to the Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire shifted into the Byzantine Empire, moving away from the values and ideals of Rome, as seen in a shift towards Greek culture. The fallen Western Roman Empire rose into its reincarnated form of the Holy Roman Empire, where we see a new

age of Rome entirely with the church assuming complete power. The Rome that followed the fall of the Roman Empire, while prestigious and respected in its own way, was a deviation of the traditional Roman Republic and old Roman Empire. At its roots, Rome looked to be a sound, powerful, and well-organized civilization. Over its many years of existence, Rome saw countless changes in its geography, social structure, and system of power. From its early days, Rome was structured in a way that would see it run efficiently and ensure stability, but Rome was inevitably pushed to its limits; its destruction more the fault of its citizens and leaders than that of outside forces.

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