
What Were the Primary Reasons for the "Fall" of Rome?



The Destruction of Empire, painted by the American artist Thomas Cole in 1836.

Overview: From about 50 BCE until the year 200 CE, the Roman Empire was the superpower of the Mediterranean world. During that time, the empire's wealth, territory and international status grew and grew. But even as the empire prospered, it was slowly starting to fall apart. Some of its problems were internal – coming from within Rome itself – and others were external. This Mini-Q explores the factors that led to the eventual fall of one of history's most powerful and influential empires.

The Documents:

- Document A: Roman Emperors, 235-285 CE (chart)
- Document B: The Roman Army
- Document C: Foreign Invasions (map)
- Document D: The Huns
- Document E: Economic Corruption
- Document F: Disasters and Disease

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Document B

Source: An excerpt from the ancient book *Concerning Military Matters* by the Roman historian Vegetius, c. 450 CE.

[Before the year 400 CE] footsoldiers wore breastplates and helmets. But when, because of negligence and laziness, parade ground drills were abandoned, the customary armor began to seem heavy since the soldiers rarely ever wore it. Therefore, they first asked the emperor to set aside the breastplates ... and then the helmets. So our soldiers fought the Goths without any protection for chest and head and were often beaten by archers. Although there were many disasters, which led to the loss of great cities, no one tried to restore breastplates and helmets to the infantry. Thus it happens that troops in battle, exposed to wounds because they have no armor, think about running and not about fighting.

Source: Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A Reappraisal*, Crown Publishing, 1982.

There can be little doubt that the weaknesses of the late Roman army were largely due to the eventual failure ... to enforce regular conscription [draft of soldiers] The exempted categories were ... numerous. Hosts of senators, bureaucrats, and clergymen were entitled to avoid the draft; and among other groups who escaped were cooks, bakers, and slaves.

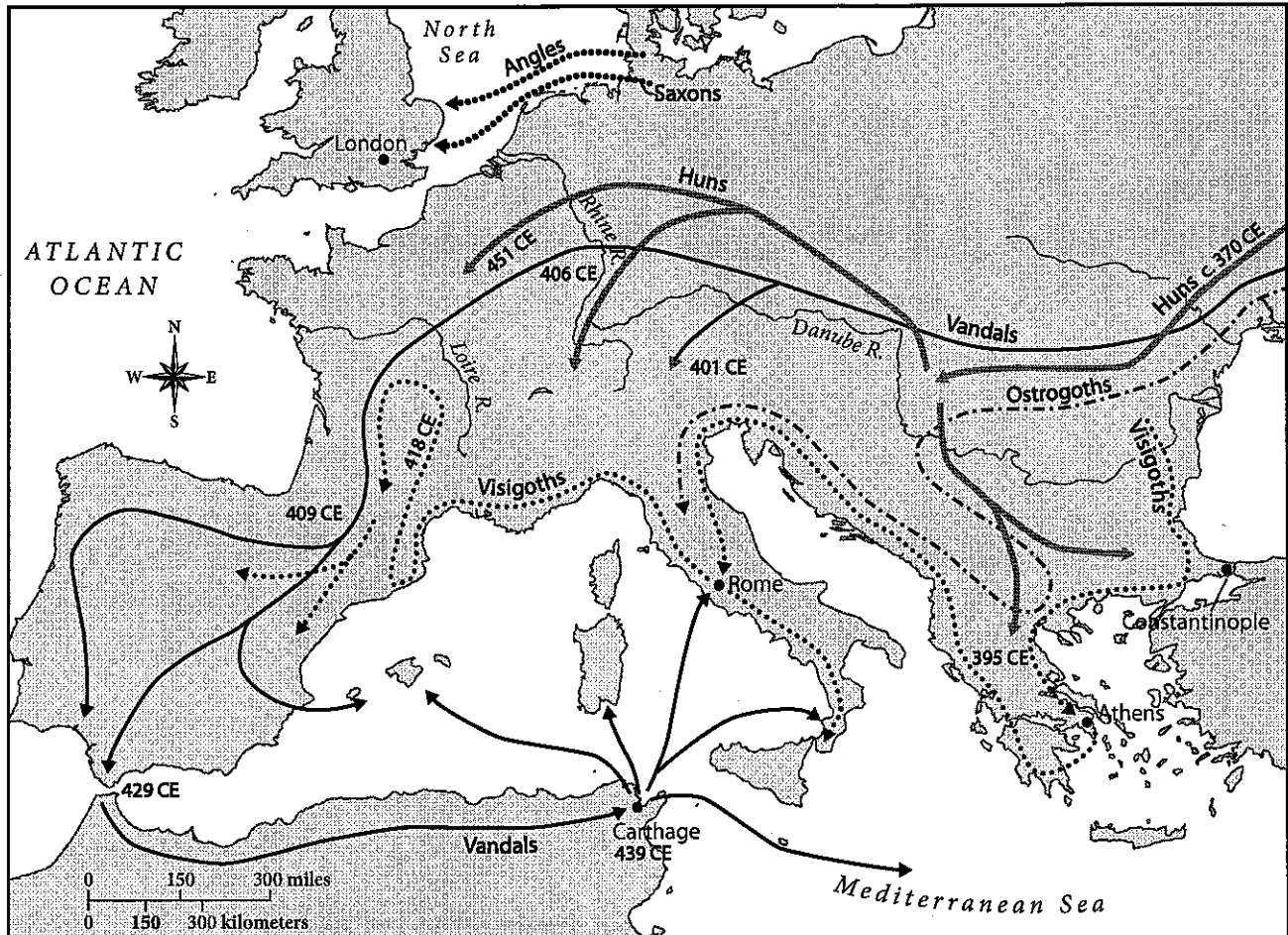
Document Analysis

1. According to Vegetius, what led to the changes in Roman military armor and training techniques?
2. How did the change in breastplates and helmets contribute to the decline of Rome?
3. What is conscription?
4. In what ways could the failure to enforce conscription weaken Rome?
5. Is there any connection between Document A and Document B? Explain your thinking.

Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

Foreign Invasions of the Roman Empire



Document Analysis

1. Which invaders of the Roman Empire came from the farthest eastern point?
2. Which invaders of the Roman Empire were the first to reach the city of Rome?
3. Do the dates on this map suggest an invasion of people or a migration of people? Explain your thinking.
4. How does this document help explain the reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire?
5. Is there a possible connection between Document C and Document B?

Document E

Source: An excerpt of a historical text written by Priscus, Roman ambassador to the Huns, 449 CE.

Note: Priscus is reporting a conversation he had with a former Roman citizen whose land had been conquered by the Huns.

[He] ... considered his new life ... better than his old life among the Romans, and the reasons he gave were as follows: ... The condition of [Roman] subjects in time of peace [is worse than war] ... taxes are very severe, and unprincipled men inflict injuries on others ... A [wealthy lawbreaker] ... is not punished for his injustice, while a poor man ... undergoes the legal penalty The climax of misery is to have to pay in order to obtain justice.... [He said] that the laws and constitution of the Romans were fair, but deplored that the governors, not possessing the spirit of former generations, were ruining the state.

Document Analysis

1. Who was Priscus? Do you think his description is reliable? Why?
2. Why were some Romans happy about being conquered by the Huns?
3. What does the person talking to Priscus mean when he says, "The climax of misery is to have to pay ... for justice"?
4. How can you use this document to help explain what caused the decline of the Roman Empire?