

The Fall of the Roman Empire

Question: Why did the Roman Empire fall?

Document 1

"The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight . . ."

Source: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1788)

Document 2

" . . . the decay of trade and industry was not a cause of Rome's fall. There was a decline in agriculture and land was withdrawn from cultivation, in some cases on a very large scale, sometimes as a direct result of barbarian invasions. However, the chief cause of the agricultural decline was high taxation on the marginal land, driving it out of cultivation. Jones is surely right in saying that taxation was spurred by the huge military budget and was thus 'indirectly' the result of the barbarian invasion."

Source: *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation* by Arther Ferrill (1986)

Document 3

Roman Emperors, 235-285 CE

Emperor	Reign	Cause of Death
Maximus	235-238	Assassination
Gordian I & II (co-rulers)	238	Suicide, Killed in Battle
Balbinus & Pupineus	238	Assassination
Gordian III	238-244	Possible Assassination
Philip the Arab	244-249	Killed in Battle
Decius	249-251	Killed in Battle
Hostilian	251	Possible Plague
Gallus	251-253	Assassination
Aemilianus	253	Assassination
Valerian & Gallienus	253-260	Died as Slave of Persians, Assassination
Quintillus	268-270	Assassination or Suicide
Aurelian	270-275	Assassination
Tacitus	275-276	Possible Assassination
Florianus	276	Assassination
Probus	276-282	Assassination
Carus	282-283	Assassination
Numerian	283-284	Possible Assassination
Carinus	283-285	Killed in Battle

Document 4

“[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 fighting.”

Source: *Concerning Military Matters* by Vegetius (c. 450 CE)

Document 5

“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 grouped who escaped were cooks, bakers, and slaves.”

Source: *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A Reappraisal* by Michael Grant (1982)

Document 6

