

## Why did the Roman Empire fall?

The Roman Empire lasted for nearly 1000 years as the unmatched power center of the Mediterranean region. The Romans built impressive monuments to their many gods, towering aqueducts to deliver clean water over hundreds of miles, and elaborate theatres, stadiums and other public buildings to support their vibrant cosmopolitan culture. Despite all of these achievements, the empire would face the final waves of barbarians from the north as they sacked the capital around 500 CE. How did it come to this? Why did the Roman Empire fall? The slow political and cultural decline of the Roman Empire weakened the military, which left the empire vulnerable to increasingly successful barbarian invasions.

In the centuries leading up to its collapse, the Roman Empire was in a state of cultural and political decline. Edward Gibbon argues in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that the Roman Empire had so much success that laziness and a sense of entitlement pervaded Roman society, “Prosperity ripened the principle of decay.” (DOC 1) Gibbon doesn’t argue that cultural decline alone would bring down the empire, but that its existence limited Rome’s ability to resist the later barbarian invasions, “. . . the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of the conquest . . .” (DOC 1) The chart in Document 3 indicates that between 235 and 285 CE, Rome had 21 emperors, most of whom served only a few years and met untimely deaths. (DOC 3) This suggests that Rome’s political system was significantly flawed in the last centuries of the empire. Citizens must have felt a sense of unease and lack of confidence in their leaders, which would likely have ripple effects in other areas.

Aspects of the cultural and political decline made their way into the Roman military and weakened it from the inside. Vegetius, a Roman writing around 450 CE laments the sorry state of the Roman military when he discusses the decision by soldiers to abandon the use of breastplates and even helmets in battle. (DOC 4) He writes that this happened “because of negligence and laziness,” which suggests a pervasive lack of control and discipline in the ranks. (DOC 4) Perhaps if a strong emperor with military prowess were able to stay in power for an extended period, this would not have been a problem. Modern historian Michael Grant supports this conclusion in *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A Reappraisal* when he writes, “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] . . .” (DOC 5)

After centuries of gradual decline, the weakened Roman military was no longer able to hold back wave after wave of barbarian invasions and the empire collapsed. Between 100 and 500 CE, the Roman Empire was invaded by a host of barbarian groups that sacked several major cities, including Rome. (DOC 6) The impact of these invasions is very complex. Indeed the physical conquest is what ultimately did the Romans in, but as the borders continued to shrink, Romans cultivated less and less land, which made putting up a strong defense even more difficult. (DOC 2) A host of factors interacted to speed the decline of the Roman Empire, but they might all have been overcome if there had not been dozens of barbarian tribes eager to take advantage of Rome’s weakened state.

**Red:** Setting the stage with specifics as who, what, when, and where.

**Orange:** Raising the question.

**Purple:** Multi-part thesis with distinct answers that make sense.

**Green:** Claim Sentences

**Black:** Logic (Explanation)

**Blue:** Evidence (Specific Examples)