
UNIT 4 CRISIS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you shall be able to:

- understand the process of decline of the Roman Empire,
- list the main factors that led to this decline,
- analyze the systematic breakdown of the Empire, and
- know about the writings of scholars on the decline of the empire.

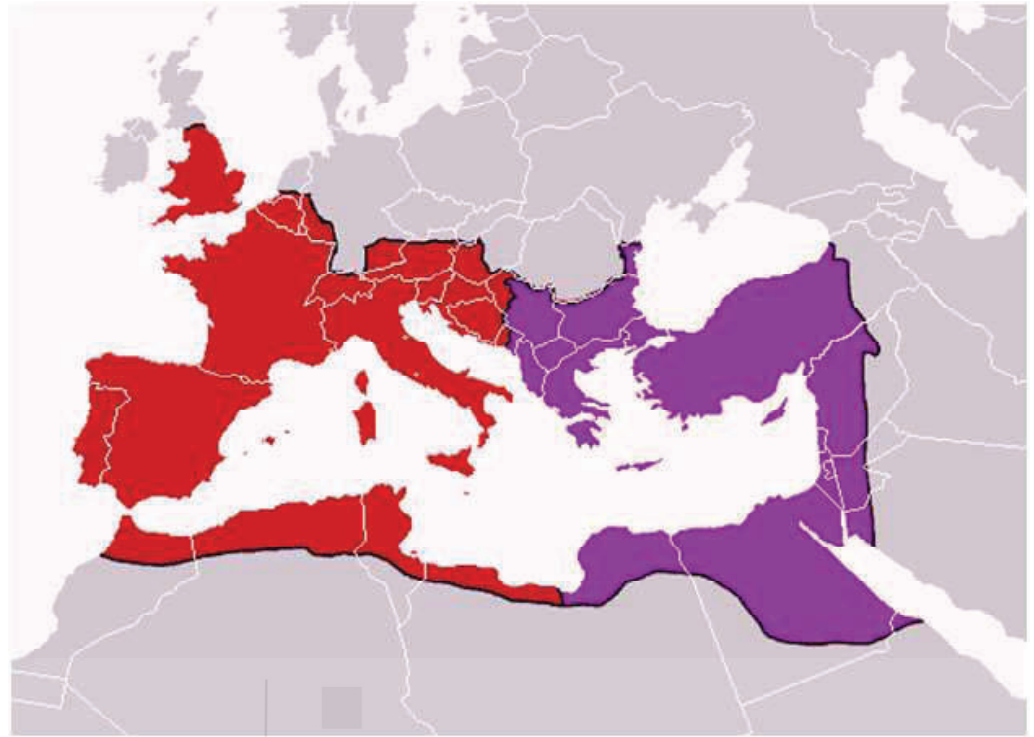
4.1 INTRODUCTION

The decline and fall of any socio-political formation is marked by intense historical speculation and analysis, more so the Roman Empire, undoubtedly the largest empire of the ancient world. The Roman Empire, at its peak, in the second century CE, was spread over most of western and eastern Europe, north Africa, and parts of west Asia, including the Arabian Peninsula, covering approximately 6,500,000 kilometres. A series of irreversible crises beset in Rome from the third century CE onwards, leading to political, economic, military, and social upheavals, and the empire staggered towards its demise. The conjunction of crises – internally, the disintegration and systemic breakdown and externally, the repeated Germanic invasions – dealt severe blows and resulted in the gradual collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

4.2 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The classic conundrum of pre-modern scholarship – What led to Roman decline? – has witnessed legions of scholars propounding various theories towards an explanation. Earlier, the theories for the crisis and decline of Imperium Romanum (Latin for Roman Empire) emphasized upon a primary reason. Historians conjecture that it was the combination of numerous factors that led to the gradual decline of the empire. Many theories of causality have been explored and most of these point out the disintegration of political, economic, military, and other social institutions, in tandem with Germanic incursions and usurpers from within the empire of Rome. Additionally, after the empire stopped expanding its territories from the third century CE onwards, it lost the immediate benefits of revenue from conquering new lands and resorted to increasing taxation from its own citizens.

The decline, viewed retrospectively, occurred over a period of three centuries. The efforts of Diocletian and Constantine at the political, economic, and administrative restructuring of the Roman state enabled it to withstand the crisis of the third century but the fifth century brought heavier blows. By the end of the fourth century, Germanic tribes had entered the empire all along the Rhine and Danube, and set up virtually independent kingdoms of their own. In 410 CE, Rome was sacked by Alaric, a Visigoth chief. And while some modern historians question the significance of the date, the final dissolution of the Western Roman Empire is widely recognized as occurring on September 4, 476 CE when Odoacer, deposed Emperor Romulus, bringing to an end the line of western emperors. The Western Roman Empire wielded negligible military, political, or financial power and had no effective control over the scattered western domains that could still be described as Roman.



Map 4.1: Map of the boundaries of the Western and Eastern Roman Empire after the death of Theodosius I, in 395 CE

Credit: Geuiwogbil at en.wikipedia

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Theodosius_I%27s_empire.png

Crisis of the Third Century

‘In some ways it is remarkable that the Roman Empire survived the third century CE at all. The civil wars, foreign invasions, plagues and other calamities it suffered for more than half a century after 235 CE would have been enough to cause the terminal disintegration of most empires. But centripetal patriotism, a loyalty to the idea as much as to the reality of Rome, proved in the end just strong enough to ensure the empire’s survival, for a while. It survived, however, in a different form and at a price that grew steadily more crushing, financially, socially and politically’ (Rodgers 2009: 218).

Two hundred years of *Pax Romana* (the Roman peace) ironically ended with the third century crisis. Politically, the half century from 235-284 was rife with civil wars, where for the first time Roman soldiers were killed fighting each other. There were at least fifty claimants to the imperial throne and twenty six emperors who ruled, of whom twenty five were murdered. The problem of succession became acute and was never unanimously resolved. Outbreaks of plague decimated the population and as the empire suffered internal convulsions, it became easy prey for invasions. Even towns like Athens and Tarragona, far removed from the borders were attacked in the 260s. The inevitable economic repercussions were the increase in taxation and debasement of currency.

4.3 THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

The crisis of the third century came to an end with the reign of Aurelian, also known as the ‘Restorer of the Order’, and more firmly with reign of Diocletian (284-305 CE), who streamlined the affairs of the empire with the system of governance known as *Tetrarchy* (rule of four). Diocletian divided the empire into two, by appointing Maximian as Augustus, the co-emperor in 286. In 293, he further appointed Galerius and Constantius as junior co-emperors (*Caesars*). Under this tetrarchy the empire was thus effectively split into four autonomous parts of which each one was ruled by an

emperor. Diocletian ruled the eastern region (Nicomedia); Maximian ruled Italy and Africa; Constantius ruled Spain, Gaul and Britain; and Galerius ruled Illyricum, Macedonia and Greece. However, dynastic ambitions led to the end of the Tetrarchy, and Constantine upon becoming emperor, presided again over a unified empire but shifted the seat of empire from Rome to Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey). He stopped the persecution of the Christians, and was baptized on his death-bed. With this the political role of Rome came to an end.



Map 4.2: Map of the Roman Empire during the first Tetrarchy

Credit: Coppermine Photo Gallery (CPG)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tetrarchy_map3.jpg

It was during the reign of Theodosius (379-395 CE) that Christianity became the state religion, and all heathen sects were prohibited. Theodosius partitioned the empire between his two sons – Arcadius who ruled the eastern part (Byzantine) with the support of the Visigoths, and the Western Roman Empire went to Honorius who ruled from Rome with the backing of the Vandals.

The most life-altering change in the Late Roman Empire was the continuous incursions and skirmishes of the Germanic tribes, themselves escaping Central Asian groups like the Huns, which caused the collapse of the borders. A number of Germanic tribes (branches of the Goths, Vandals, Surbi, Alani, and Burgundians) kept pushing into and occupying the Roman territory. The capital shifted from Rome to the more defensible Ravenna in 404 CE and in 410 CE, Visigoths attacked and plundered Rome. In 455 CE, Rome was invaded by the Vandals, and in 476 CE, with the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, the Western Roman Empire ceased to exist. Even the Eastern Roman Empire was much weakened with loss of a number of territories. This weakened eastern empire came to be referred as the Byzantine Empire. One last attempt was made by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (527-63 CE) to revive and unify the empire by conquering Italy. But to no avail. New socio-economic structures emerged in the West but the existing Roman institutions were not abolished or dissolved. However, the army was completely under the control of the new rulers.

4.4 POLITICAL ANARCHY

Politically, the Roman state rested on a system of power sharing and balance between its three main components – the emperor, the senatorial oligarchy, and the army. It was the weakening of all these formative elements, coupled with the vexing issue of imperial succession that became the political undoing of the Western Empire. From the end of the second century CE, the army began playing a decisive role in the selection of the emperor and the relationship between the Senate and the army gradually broke down. Centrifugal tendencies asserted themselves and political anarchy became the order of the day.

‘Till the middle of the third century CE the Roman state remained theoretically a republic. The people were supposed to have delegated their authority to the emperor who ruled on their behalf. In actual practice, the emperor was selected from among the oligarchy. The hereditary principle remained very weak and there were very few dynastic successions. The monarchy was essentially elective in nature. According to Edward Gibbon, ‘the emperor was elected by the authority of the Senate, and the consent of the soldiers’ (Farooqui, 2001: 260).

4.4.1 Military Government

In the third century, Septimius Severus (r.193-211 CE), the first emperor of the Severan dynasty made the army an integral part of governance and consequently, the imperial mantle became the pawn of ambitious generals. This transformation of the civil government to a military despotism increased the financial needs of the state. The assassination of the last Severan ruler, Alexander Severus (r.222-235 CE), by his own troops and the lack of clear rights of succession led to long periods of civil unrest that witnessed an array of puppet rulers, with short-lived reigns, who were controlled by the military dictatorships.

After the third century, the empire faced military challenges in the shape of barbarian incursions that were more immediate, and the might of the Sassanid Empire in Asia. Military reforms carried out by Diocletian in the late third and early fourth centuries CE reintroduced **conscription** and Rome continued to increase the size of its army, which numbered 650,000 men by the fourth century CE. The state’s demand of taxes, to maintain this expanded army, was three times higher than that prevailing at the end of the Republic. According to A.H.M. Jones, over-taxation accelerated the decline of the Roman Empire (1964). Moreover, the division of the army into civil militia posted at the borders, and the more experienced military officers being stationed closer to the emperor also boomeranged for the empire.

4.4.2 Crisis of Governance

The fact that the administrative machinery of a small city-state was being used to govern a far-flung empire made the fall of the empire a foregone conclusion. This crisis of governance was compounded by the corruption rampant in all ranks of the ruling class. Political instability was the outcome that stemmed from this hunger for power, greed, and sense of entitlement. Amongst many other reasons, the historian Bryan Ward-Perkins (2005) argues that the downfall of the empire was caused, in no small measure, by a vicious circle of corrupt governments and political instability.

Being the Roman emperor was always a particularly dangerous job, but during the tumultuous second and third centuries, it nearly became a death sentence. Civil wars thrust the empire into chaos and the **Praetorian Guards** – the select troops stationed in Rome – assassinated and installed new sovereigns at will, and once even auctioned the spot off to the highest bidder. The political rot extended to the Roman Senate too,

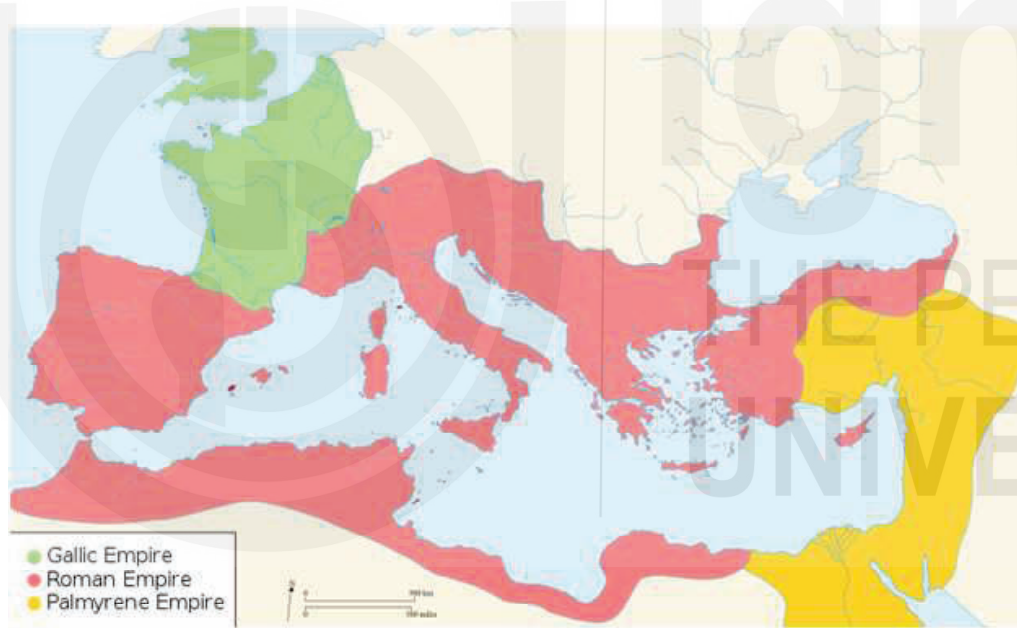
which failed to temper the excesses of the emperors due to its own widespread corruption and incompetence.

4.4.3 Civil Wars

Civil wars became endemic to the Late Roman Empire. Besides the exceptions of Diocletian and Constantine, emperors had short-lived reigns and the norm was constant fighting amongst powerful generals. The most detrimental effect of this civil strife was the disruption of the far-reaching trade network that had developed with the construction of roads and highways. As conditions became unfavourable for travel, long distance commercial transactions were given up for more localized economies. Civil wars fundamentally contributed to political mayhem and made effective governance untenable.

4.4.4 Political Fragmentation

The gradual dismemberment and administrative divisioning of the empire also led to its weakening. By about 258 CE, two large regions broke away from the main Roman Empire and transformed into the independent Gallic state and the Palmyrene state. Comprising the provinces of Gaul, Britain, and Hispania, the Gallic empire lay to the north and west of Rome. The Palmyrene Empire in the east consisted of the provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.



Map 4.3: Map of the Ancient Rome 271 CE

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Ancient_Rome_271_AD.svg

Administratively, the empire was divided into two units – the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire – by Emperor Diocletian in 284 CE, and control shifted between the emperors of the two regions. The functioning of the Tetrarchy or Rule of Four (for details, see **Section 4.3**) demanded an increase in the number of troops in each region, thus adding to the tax burden of the citizens. Seeking to increase imperial control, Diocletian's administrative reforms further divided the twenty provinces of the empire into hundred. The once-unified Roman Empire was thus further parcellized by this increase in the size of the bureaucracy.

4.4.5 Breakdown of the Political Machinery

The collective reigns of Diocletian and Constantine could only stall the irreversible decline of the empire, which was progressively deteriorating. Constantine's death in 337 CE

was followed by an army mutiny, and assassinations of his family members. In 340 CE, Constantine II, Constans I and Constantinus II, his three surviving sons, divided the empire between themselves but mutual suspicion and feuding led to their ends and ended the reign of Julian (361-363 CE), the last pagan emperor, who died fighting the Persians. Emperors, Valentinian (364-375 CE; Western Roman Empire) and Valens (364-378 CE; Eastern Roman Empire), tried unsuccessfully to address the crises engulfing Rome, and Valens was killed fighting the Visigoths in the Battle of Adrianople in August 378 CE. This defeat, according to Edward Gibbon, was the crucial turning point in Rome's history, with its doom now writ large.

The reign of Theodosius I (379-395 CE) saw a rebel general in Britain, Magnus Maximus, proclaimed emperor by his troops in 383 CE, and he ruled the westernmost three provinces from Trier in Gaul. By 395 CE, after another round of civil wars resulted in the division of the empire, it was divided between Arcadius in the east and Honorius in the west. The death of Stilicho, the Romanized Vandal and regent of Honorius in 408 CE, led to repeated invasions of Italy by the Visigoths and the sack of Rome in 410 CE.

4.4.6 The Rise of the Eastern Empire

The fate of the western empire was partially sealed in the late third century CE, when Emperor Diocletian divided the empire into two halves – the Western Empire seated in the city of Milan, and the Eastern Empire with its capital at Nova Roma. In 330 CE, Constantine transferred the imperial capital to Nova Roma and gave the city his name, which henceforth became Constantinople. In 395 CE, Emperor Theodosius tacitly recognized that the empire was too vast to be governed by a single individual and divided it between his two sons. This division into the eastern and western empire proved to be permanent.

In the short term, this division perhaps made the empire governable, but over time the two halves drifted apart. East and West failed to work in a concerted manner to combat external threats, and the two often squabbled over resources, and military finances and postings. As the gulf widened, the largely Greek-speaking Eastern Empire grew in wealth, while the Latin-speaking West descended into multifold crises. Most importantly, the strength of the Eastern Empire served to divert the ongoing invasions to the West. While emperors like Constantine ensured that the city of Constantinople was fortified and well-guarded, Italy and the city of Rome, which now only had symbolic value, were left vulnerable.

4.5 MILITARY DECLINE

The might of Rome rested on, and was perpetuated by, its large army. Providing fodder to later military lore, the Roman state, from its incipient stage itself, incorporated the functioning and victories of its armies as a driving force. Rome's journey from a small city-state, to dominating the Latin League, and then becoming the unrivalled master of the Mediterranean and western world was achieved through military strength and prowess. However, the Roman *hoplite* army, its *legions* and functioning in *phalanxes* also carried schismatic seeds, and this became evident in the rise of generals like Sulla, Marius, Pompey, and Gaius Julius Caesar.

The period of *Pax Romana* brought with it peace but also the beginning of the end for Roman military supremacy. Territorial over-expansion and the compulsive military overspending could not amend, and in fact, began to cripple the system. And the weakening of the legions and growing number of mercenaries diluted the once-unified spirit of the army, and led to it losing of its cutting edge.

4.5.1 Over-expansion and Military Overspending

Roman army was the key factor in the expansion and protection of the Roman Empire and it was headed by the emperor. After the downfall of the Republic, the soldiers were being used for political advancement by the army generals. In the late Roman Empire, Diocletian reorganized the army and introduced conscription. In the late empire a large number of barbarian volunteers were incorporated into the army and these barbarian volunteers provided many elite regiments. After the conversion of Constantine and the defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge the character of the aristocracy across the empire as a whole was radically transformed by the great institutional change of Constantine's reign, the Christianization of the state. A number of newly converted Christians were appointed to the important positions in the administration and this had a transformative impact on the nature of the later Roman state. Most of the newly converted Christians were recruited from the East and a number of them became members of the second senate developed in Constantinople. The establishment of the Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, threatened the secular fabric of the state. The clerical bureaucracy was a new addition and over time it became more powerful than the secular bureaucracy of the Roman state.

The command of the military was in the hands of *magister equitum* and below them were the *duces* of the *limitanci* and the *Comites* of the *comitatens*, all possessing commands which were exclusively military. In the reign of Valentinian I (r. 364-375 CE) forts and camps were constructed with a rational layout.

Writing in the fifth century, the Roman historian, Vegetius urged for reform of what must have been a greatly weakened army. At its height, the Roman Empire stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to River Euphrates in west Asia. Historians reckon that its grandeur may also have been responsible for its downfall. With such a vast territory to govern, the empire faced an administrative and logistical nightmare. Even with their excellent road systems, the Romans were unable to communicate rapidly enough to manage their holdings. Rome struggled to marshal enough troops and resources to defend its frontiers from local rebellions and outside attacks. By the second century, the Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138 CE) was compelled to build the defensive wall in Britain named after him.

By the end of the second century CE there was no further territorial expansion. In fact, as it tottered towards its end, the Roman state resorted to a defensive policy with regard to the Germanic tribes and sought to increase the strength of the army. From 250,000 regular troops at the time of the death of Augustus, the Roman army stood at 650,000 men in the fourth century. The need to maintain a huge army, made the state enact heavy economic laws, which although to the big nobles and slave owners interests, alienated large sections of the people.

4.5.2 Weakening of the Roman *Legions*

Adrian Goldsworthy (2009), a British military historian, is of the opinion that the collapse of the Western Roman Empire occurred not due to any general decadence but due to the weak Roman *legions*. Once the envy of the ancient world, Rome's military by the period of its decline was a motley group of opportunistic adventurers. Unable to recruit enough soldiers from their citizen body, emperors like Diocletian and Constantine began hiring foreign mercenaries to meet the state's military needs. The change in the composition and nature of the *legions* was also impacted by the overall decline in the economy. The best troops were stationed in core areas, close to the imperial centres of control, and not at the frontiers, which were in any case porous. And by the fourth century CE, as the government tried to tide over an economic crisis by paying salaries in kind, in the form of rations of food and clothing, the *legions* could not be saved.

4.5.3 Influx of Mercenary Soldiers

The policy of inducting foreign mercenaries to prop up the armies led to the ranks of Roman *legions* swelling up with Germanic Goths, and other tribes. While these soldiers of fortune proved to be fierce warriors, they also had little or no loyalty to the empire, and their power-hungry commanders often turned their men against the Roman state.

In 378 CE, as the nomadic Huns from Central Asia invaded West Asia and East Europe, the Visigothic tribe got into a skirmish with the Romans in modern-day Turkey. They forced Rome to allow the settlement of their people within the empire's borders. The Roman practice of hiring mercenary soldiers eventually led to the Germanic soldiers outnumbering the Romans in the imperial army. Tragically, many of the barbarians who sacked the city of Rome had earned their military stripes while serving in the Roman *legions*. For example, the Visigoth soldiers worked against the empire and turned on Roman citizens and plundered the city of Rome in 410 CE.

4.5.4 Army No Longer a Reliable Instrument of Coercion

Another problem faced by the Roman state in the fifth century CE was that the army was no longer reliable as an instrument of coercion, as many of the armies sent to crush rebellions and invasions signed contracts to share the booty. In the first half of the fifth century CE, rebellions were continuous – the most successful being the Bucandae revolt in central and western France, which even spread to Spain in the sixth century CE. Bucandae had independent military command, system of taxation, and advocated severing of links with Rome. The very fact that Bucandae was being sustained by runaway peasants, and the army's inability to control them or allow their existence, points to deep seated structural flaws. First, it indicates the continuous class struggle between the *latifundists* and the *proletarii*, and secondly, the deepening chasm between the state and its army, the primary fighting-cum-coercion force.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Describe the developments that took place during the reign of Diocletian, with special emphasis on Tetrarchy.

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- 2) What were the major factors that led to political anarchy in the late Roman Empire? State any four factors.

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- 3) How did overspending and influx of mercenary soldiers affect the institution of army in the late Roman Empire? Explain.

4.6 ECONOMIC CRISIS

Reorganization of Roman state in the 4th Century CE produced a temporary growth in the urban development and restored monetary stability with the issue of gold coins. But both recoveries were limited. The urban growth was largely concentrated in new military and administrative centres. This growth was patronized by the emperors and Milan, Sardica and above all Constantinople became important urban centres in the late Roman Empire. According to Perry Anderson (1974) urban trade and industry progressively declined in all provinces of late Roman Empire. In the later empire the policy of increased taxation was pursued by the Roman state. This policy was successful in the east but it produced crisis in Western part of the empire.

The enlargement and maintenance of the military required the imposition of higher taxes. To raise more money and to cover escalating costs, baser metals were added to the previously all-silver coins, which led to inflation. Successive devaluation of the coinage produced an economic crisis and hyperinflation. The increasing military expenditure proved most back-breaking for the agriculture sector. The steep rise and harsher enforcement of tax collection compelled many farmers to abandon their farms – land remained fallow, and the movement to the cities, to join the ranks of the urban poor, put a heavy strain on urban centres, which often could not support this increasing population.

4.6.1 Falling Economy, High Inflation and Absentee Landlordism

Even as Rome was under attack from external forces, it was crumbling from within owing to a severe economic crisis. Constant wars and oppressive taxation and inflation had widened the gap between the rich and poor. The Romans had no budgetary system and thus wasted whatever resources were available to them. 'To make matters worse, the wars of the third and fourth century, yielded next to nothing in the way of new areas to exploit or of booty. While tremendous amounts of wealth had poured into Italy during the latter years of the Republic, and which subsequently were used to finance purchases and projects throughout the empire. In short, an increasingly unstable and irresponsible government, which could not resort to the modern expedient of balancing receipts and expenditures by creating an imperial debt, had to exact larger and larger revenues by taxes and forced requisitions upon an economy, which was at least static, and which actually may have been undergoing an overall decline.' ([www.cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011 & context = contemporary-sec1](http://www.cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=contemporary-sec1)).

The economy of the empire was a raubwirtschaft or plunder economy based on exploiting existing resources rather than producing anything new. Historians such as Arnold J. Toynbee (1965) categorize the Roman Empire as a thoroughly exploitative rotten system that lacked rational taxation policies. He argues that the empire could never have lasted longer than it did without radical financial reforms, which no emperor could have implemented.

The economic crisis being faced by the Late Empire was accentuated by an exploitative revenue collection system, and the practice of absentee landlordism. The policy of greater centralization and excessive taxation, adopted by Diocletian and Constantine, to overhaul the functioning of the Roman state, succeeded in the east but aggravated the crisis in the west. The oligarchy passed on the burden of increasing taxation to the peasants, *coloni*, artisans, and petty traders, adversely affecting all sectors of the economy.

At the local level, tax collection was in the hands of *decuriones* or *curiales*, who were part of the local elite and with time, became a hereditary group. They colluded with the privileged sections and underassessed their land, to help them evade taxation. The smaller landlords' land, on the other hand, was often overassessed. The absentee landlords passed on their own tax liabilities by exacting illegal cesses from the less privileged sections. A.H.M. Jones (1964) is of the opinion that in the Western Roman Empire, a corrupt and inefficient aristocracy presided over the administrative and revenue affairs of the state. And when they could not determine the choice of emperor, they became uncooperative, and withdrew to their power bases in the countryside.

4.6.2 Crisis of Subsistence

There was a gradual ruralization of the Empire. But in rural areas far-reaching changes were taking place and new mode of production began to come into existence. In the Antiquity the slave mode of production was connected to a system of political and military expansion. Now the imperial frontier had ceased to advance in the late Roman Empire. The slaves therefore were converted by landowners into dependent tenants to the soil. The villages of small holders and free tenants lost their independent character to the landlords in search for protection against fiscal extortions and conscription by the state and their economic position had become like ex-slaves. In this way from the second century CE onwards the free peasants started to lose their independent status and they were tied to that of landlords' estate. The emperors of the later Roman Empire from Diocletian to Valens and Arcadius had proclaimed that tenants were to be regarded as bound to their villages for the purposes of tax collection. Thereafter the judicial powers of landlords had been increased over the dependent tenants (*coloni*) in the 4th and 5th centuries. But the slavery did not disappear with these changes and the state structure was still based on slavery in the later Roman Empire and it also continued till the end of the empire in the West. The role of slaves in urban artisanal production began to decline, but they were still the backbone of household services for the patricians.

The whole economic system of late Roman Empire was based on the relationships between the dependent rural producer, the landlord and the state. In the later Roman Empire the rise of army and bureaucratic machine had become very vast and the late Roman state imposed various kinds of taxes to fulfil the needs of vast state machinery. The citizens were taxed in the form of unpaid military service for the state and they had to procure their own fighting equipment. According to Marx, 'It was through wars that the Roman Patricians destroyed the plebeians, by compelling them to serve as soldiers...and made paupers of them.' Another kind of compulsory services was to be performed by the common people for the state. These services were known as *angaria*. For these type of services the labouring people could be hired for official purposes like carrying loads, construction of buildings and making roads without paying the wages.

There is a general unanimity among historians that from the third century onwards, with progressive abandonment of land, civil wars, famines, and recurrent plagues in epidemic proportion, large sections of the population faced a crisis of subsistence. Underpopulation and depopulation led to further shortage of agricultural labour.

While senators and the like were privileged enough to get tax exemption, big landlords managed to get their land under assessed. The smaller landlords' land was often over assessed and they had to face the burden of heavy taxation. Even of the bigger landlords' large estates, much of the land was marginal land, which with the rising ratio of taxation became a liability rather than an asset. Thus arose the pressure from landlords to shift the pressure of taxation to the peasantry by increasing the rent take-over. Taxation, coupled with the decline of gang-slavery resulted in the disruption of the whole process of production, and consequently, subsistence itself became a struggle.

4.6.3 Decline in Artisanal Production and Long Distance Trade

The process of empire building and Romanization was carried out in three stages. These included, improved communication systems, cultivation of many Italian crops, and the export of agricultural surplus (corn, wine, and oil) to other parts of Europe. Coinciding with these developments was a decline in the demand for Roman commodities, especially in France. Imported commodities in Rome were cheaper than those manufactured within Italy. According to Rostovtzeff (1926), the burden of heavy taxation and high cost of slaves led to the decline of artisanal production, and with prices of commodities falling due to competition, organization of indigenous production was no longer profitable.

Almost simultaneously, the economy experienced a decline in trade, especially long distance trade. The Roman social formation was very exploitative and the wealth of the senatorial oligarchy in the third century CE was nearly five times greater than their predecessors in the first century CE. Their conspicuous consumption and ostentatious lifestyle sustained trade in luxury goods, especially from the east. Romans achieved the unification of the Mediterranean world and brisk seaborne trade plied along its shores – Ostia, and then Portus were the serving harbours of Rome, and their status and fortune were linked to the city. However, as political chaos and financial crisis hit Rome, long distance trade became a casualty. And while Rome declined, Alexandria and Antioch continued to prosper, and Constantinople rose to prominence in the fourth century CE.

4.6.4 Increased Monetary Pressure, Fiscal Crisis and Return to a Natural Economy

The post second century phase saw military anarchy, with numerous uprisings from the third century onwards. This period of political anarchy witnessed various pretenders imposing additional and arbitrary levies to carry on their incessant warfare. Seven distinct emperors issued coinage in the year 238 CE and eventually, monetary anarchy resulted in the economically powerful provinces resisting Rome, and its centralized taxation. The combined effect of all this was an increased fiscal pressure on direct producers, affecting the agricultural cycle, and consequently leading to the disorganization of the entire production process.

Increased state pressure generated a monetary crisis, which led to unprecedented fluctuations in currency. Over-expenditure by the state to wage wars from the second century onwards, and the various military failures of the third century, produced a galloping inflation. The Roman state collected its revenue in gold and silver, not copper or bronze. The amount of baser elements i.e. copper and bronze increased as inflation continued. During the reign of Constantine, gold currency was stabilized but copper currency still remained unstable. Due to this monetary dualism, good money was driven out of circulation by bad money, and gold and silver coins were hoarded domestically rather than being used for trade and commerce. Trade transactions got affected and the restoration of coinage invariably led to more hoarding.

The ratio of inflation towards the end of the empire was tremendous. There was financial and demographic crisis during this period. Despite the reforms attempted by Diocletian, there was considerable inflation as reflected in the price freeze known as the Edict of Prices. In Egypt, one solidus (gold currency) in 301 CE was valued at 4000 drachmas or copper coins, and in 400 CE it equaled 130 million drachmas. Such devaluation led to a crisis reflected in a high rise in prices, which in turn forced a return from monetary to barter economy. The gradual market acceptance of one measure of wheat equaling six drachmas and other such conversions threw the whole circulation system out of gear.

With the finances disorganized and state expenses rising, the state itself faced unaccustomed pressure. Taxes in kind – wheat and olive oil – were introduced and soldiers too began receiving pay in kind. In a certain sense, there was a return to a ‘natural economy’. Although the higher officials and generals were still being paid in cash, inflation hit their lifestyle. Uncontrolled inflation led to a virtual collapse of industrial and artisanal production. Money was required to pay the invading hordes and the flow of bullion from Rome to China and India due to the eastern trade, along the Silk Route and Spice Route, further compounded the monetary problem. All quarters of the economy suffered grievous setbacks, and Italy soon ceased to be the hub of commerce.

4.7 SOCIAL UPHEAVALS

The fractures and dividing lines between the haves and have-nots that form part of any social formation got congealed over time, and other issues added to the growing social tensions and ruptures within Roman society. To the initial issues of social justice, inclusion, and grant of citizenship, the expansion of the empire brought home other irresolvable conflicts. The conspicuous consumption of the elite isolated them from the masses on whose exploitation their lifestyle rested. From the third century CE, decline in population and the growing ranks of army and officialdom, made it harder for the lower classes to sustain the superstructure of the state, and rioting and brigandage became common. All of this happened alongside, and it was the result of widespread corruption, misuse of power, and the fading of the Roman civic spirit. Christianity went from a persecuted faith to becoming the dominant religion, and its clerical organization was often co-opted, and became analogous to the state.

The sharp class divisions that defined Roman society from the beginning got reformulated with each successive phase. By the time of the Late Roman Empire, the propertied class was the Equestrian class that enjoyed social prestige and economic wealth in all parts of the empire. It became customary to grant Roman citizenship and equestrian status to men in the provinces too; and in return, they were loyal to the state, and appointed to prominent positions in the civil and military administration. Other social groups that had a high social status were landowners, shopkeepers, traders, businessmen, and high-ranking employees. In the east, the higher bureaucracy emerged as a new hereditary aristocracy during this period.

The lower classes consisted of people who provided services to the higher classes, such as peasants, potters, teachers, entertainers, free labour, and even prostitutes. Skilled workers such as metalsmiths, bakers, and wool workers were organized in trade associations or *collegia*, which played an economic, social, and sometimes quasi-political role. And then there was slavery, facing its own internal contradictions and getting transformed into the colonate. The turbulent period leading to the decline of the Western Roman Empire made class differences acute, and as the government became more autocratic, to contain the economic doom, professions and posts were made hereditary.

Thus, related to the economic crisis was the unequal distribution of wealth. As the ranks of the lower peasantry got depleted, they joined the burgeoning group of *coloni* or dependent cultivators. Landownership and the subordination of peasants to landlords appeared, and there was hardly any difference between a legally free peasant and a slave. Peasants and slaves merged into a uniform class of the poor and from the second century onwards, there were a number of peasant rebellions, revolting not as peasants but as the dispossessed, allied with slaves. One should note that the glory of the Roman Empire was based on taxation of the peasantry. Meternus, who deserted from the army in 186 CE led a large-scale rebellion in Spain and France, described in the sources as one by ‘a numerous collection of rascals, runaway slaves and desperate men, which like other rebellions, met the same fate – a heavy armed suppression’.

4.7.1 Population Decline

The Germanic invasions chipped away at the already dwindling size of the Roman population. Population decline caused additionally by plagues and an overall population decrease from declining birth rates, added to the burden of increasing the size of the military. Two different plagues killed millions of Romans during the second and third centuries. The first, called the Antonine Plague, struck from 165 CE to about 180 CE, killing about 5 million Romans. The emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is thought to have died as a result of the plague, which is why it is named Antonine, after his family’s name, Antoninus. Then, from 251 to about 266 CE, an outbreak of smallpox, called the Plague of Cyprian, killed thousands. The disease greatly reduced the number of soldiers as well as farmers (Bundy 2011: 2).

The more inherent cause of the depopulation of the empire was the very existence, and extension of slavery, which denied slaves the natural reproductive rights. As the empire veered towards its end, there was a shift of population to the provinces, and also internal migration from rural to urban areas, to escape both, taxation pressure and losing money to moneylenders. Linked up with this socio-economic reason of deserting fields were the debilitating issues of development of marshy areas in undrained fields near the sea, and the spread of malaria.

The expansion of the empire territorially, and the associated rise in the number of soldiers and bureaucrats, put large numbers out of the production process. The increase in the number of unproductive people like the senators, bureaucrats, soldiers, and even the clergy as the state was integrated with the Church, put a continuous strain on the exchequer and demands made of the peasantry. A.H.M. Jones believes that the decline of trade and commerce should not be overemphasized and it was the disorganization of production with all its allied facets, including the maintenance of an unproductive section that gradually led to Rome’s terminal stage. The free grain distribution to the urban poor – 200,000 in Rome, and 80,000 in Constantinople – also presented an unavoidable dilemma to the state, more so at a time when production was stagnating and declining. The capital of the western empire – Rome, with its parasitic nature – embodied this problem of unproductive people siphoning off the resources of the state, and offering little in return.

4.7.2 Decline in Public Spirit

By the fourth century CE, the Roman state was being increasingly identified with the rich population. As the whole apparatus of the slave mode of production relied on effective bureaucratic control, development of excessive bureaucratization led to corruption, misuse of power, and misappropriation of revenues. This decline in the public spirit of the Empire became very evident from the third century onwards.

Another related cause was the rapid expansion of the Church – its apathy to the state and its teaching of salvation. It was Edward Gibbon, who first proposed that the decline of Rome dovetailed with the spread of Christianity, and some have argued that the rise of the new faith helped contribute to the Empire's fall. The Edict of Milan legalized Christianity in 313 CE, and from 380 CE it became the authorized religion of the state. These decrees ended centuries of persecution, but they may have also eroded the traditional Roman value system. Christianity displaced the polytheistic Roman religion, which conferred a divine status to the emperor, and expected due deference and loyalty to him. It also shifted focus away from the glory of the state on to a sole deity, and the pursuit of otherworldly salvation.

Meanwhile, Popes and other Church officials began playing an increased role in political affairs, further complicating governance. Despite Gibbon and his followers' advocating, the aforementioned theory has been widely discredited. While the spread of Christianity may have played a small role in curbing Roman civic virtue, most scholars now agree that its influence paled in comparison to the irremediable conjunction of administrative, economic, and military factors.

4.7.3 Brigandage

The social rebellions reached their zenith in the 390s. Apart from the peasant rebellions, brigandage was common on a large-scale in Later Roman society. It was a forceful expression of social disparity and protest. Bulla's brigandage (205-207 CE) was atypical example of a distorted form of social protest whereby runaway slaves and imperial freedmen united in large numbers in semi-formal regiments and sought social justice. They flourished with the support of local communities, and eluded capture for years together. Another form of protest was by escaping to the invaders en masse, and in fact, from the fourth century CE onwards, peasants welcomed the invaders as mitigators or emancipators of their suffering. They made attempts to imitating them. In 285-286 CE, the rural population rebelled against the imperial rule. The memory of the Bagaudae (fugitive peasant brigands) insurrection was kept alive by the peasants for years to come. In 407 CE, another powerful movement was named the 'Bagaudae'.

4.7.4 Shift of Aristocracy to the Countryside

As the empire shook under the impact of various tensions and disasters that it faced, imperial towns and cities also fell on hard times. The Roman elite – known variously as the Patricians, Optimates, Equites and Equestrians over time – derived their wealth from the countryside and agriculture, and lived in, and enjoyed the luxuries and amusements of the city. The cities were also administrative centres and hubs of economic activity, especially trade and specialized artisanal production. The lifestyle of conspicuous consumption that the rich enjoyed, as an expression of wealth, prestige, and power was supported by the goods and services provided by merchants, and master craftsmen. By the closing decades of the Roman Empire, long distance trade and craft production had collapsed. Repeated invasions, or threat of invasion, bred insecurity, and when unable to exercise control on choice of emperor, the aristocracy retreated to its enclaves in the countryside, where they were unequivocal lord, master, and patron. This move, however, left the cities vulnerable to outside attack, and ushered in a ruralization of the society and economy.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Discuss the state of economy in the late Roman Empire. What led to the crisis of subsistence?

- 2) To what extent the position of lower classes and slaves in the Roman society contributed to the decline of the Roman empire?

- 3) What led to ruralization of the society and economy in the late Roman Empire? Give reasons.

4.8 CRISIS OF THE SLAVE MODE OF PRODUCTION

Historical Materialism¹, with its thesis of change in the mode of production triggering overall societal and civilizational change, espouses that it was the crisis of the slave mode of production that led to the decline of the Roman Empire. These scholars are unanimous in their view that ancient Rome was a slave society and not a society with slaves, and that slavery underpinned all its various facets. The power of the empire derived from brutal force and made possible thousands of war captives who were turned into bonded and servile labour, a mere tool of production (*instrumentum vocale*). The juridical and legal systems condoned, in fact validated, the ideological existence and practice of slavery. The post *Pax Romana* period, and the crises of the third century, laid bare the internal contradictions of slavery, and eventually when Rome was vulnerable and declining, the system of slavery too withered away, attributing to the final demise.

¹ It is the materialistic conception of history put forth by Karl Marx. It argues that history is not the result of ideas but result of changing materialistic conditions – from primitives, to slave mode of production to feudal, Asiatic and Capitalistic mode of productions.

The Roman Empire was racked by a labour deficit at the same time as its socio-economic troubles were mounting. Rome's economy depended on slaves to till its fields and work as craftsmen or in the petty bureaucracy; and its military had traditionally provided a fresh influx of conquered people for the purpose. But when expansion came to a halt in the second century, Rome's supply of slaves and other war treasure began to dry up. A further blow came in the fifth century, when the Vandals claimed North Africa, and began disrupting the empire's trade by prowling the Mediterranean as pirates.

With its economy faltering, and its commercial and agricultural production in decline, the Empire began to lose its grip on Europe. The number of slaves had increased dramatically during the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. The Romans' dependency on slave labour led not only to decline in morals, values, and ethics but also to economic backwardness and technological stagnation as there was no incentive to produce goods more efficiently. Joseph Tainter (1988) is of the view that the static technology resulted in a slow decline of the empire.

***Pax Romana* as a cause of crisis of slavery**

The unification of the Roman Empire and the establishment of *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace was a two centuries long period of Roman glory and cultural accomplishments, and extended from the reigns of Augustus (r. 27 BCE-14 CE) to Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180 CE). While it gave the Early Empire a common Latin language, uniform coinage system and legal code, it had serious political and economic implications. With the establishment of Roman Peace, the supply of war captives, the most important source of slave supply, was estranged. Slave labour throughout history was unable to reproduce itself, and the Roman slave economy thus contained the seeds of collapse, which were inherent. In the 1st century CE, 40% of the Italian population comprised of slaves, hence a 40% that could not reproduce itself.

After the death of Emperor Trajan (98-117 CE), no new territories were added to the empire, and consequently, fewer opportunities to acquire war captives en masse and turn them into slaves. Piracy and other extra-legal methods continued but they could not provide the numbers, which the primary source of military victories could. The fall in supply of slaves created an unprecedented shortage, which led to the rising prices of slaves. The internal supply was further hit by the outbreak of plague in the third century that produced an overall shortage of manpower.

By the fifth century, with the external supply of labour restricted, and the free population of the conquered areas being given Roman citizen status, there was a demographic problem. So, the slaves were granted the right to develop loose family bonds, and some production in *latifundia* was entrusted to slave families attached to the land. The increasing grant of *peculium* (right to raise families, and property owned by slaves) led to their being hutted, and the decline of gang slavery. Apart from this, there developed a process known as *ablonate* by which the slaves were granted land (*servi casati*) and converted to tenancy. And even though there was a tax levied on it, more so in urban areas, a large number of slaves were manumitted (freed), to utilize their labour efficiently.

With large sections of the population being granted land – the whole empire was an internal market – the landlord was unable to collect rent. He divided his estate into two parts – the first being slave-cultivated, and the other cultivated by tenants. But due to shortage of labour, tenants were forced to work on the first part with, and as slaves. This can be seen as an instance of dormant serfdom. In the words of Ste Croix (1981) 'The inevitable consequence was that the propertied class could not maintain the same rate of profit from slave labour, and to prevent its standard of living from falling, was

driven to increase the rate of exploitation of the humbler free population, as I believe the Roman ruling class now actually did, by degrees’.

Colonate and Patrocinium

The stagnation in agriculture, labour crisis, and increased pressure of taxation by the state proved to be most devastating for the smaller peasants. Earlier the peasant had some ‘reserves’ with him but now with most of the surplus being alienated from him to resume cultivation, he had to borrow or take loans. The peasants thus got indebted and were reduced to the position of *coloni* or dependent tenants. The smaller peasants unable to bear the burden of tax themselves got under the service of bigger landlords, and were again, reduced to servile conditions. The category of sharecroppers was also turned into *coloni* and gradually, all three classes were tied to the landowners and bound to their plots, enabling the extortion of a larger share from them. Moreover, the taxation measures of Diocletian and the legal provisions of Constantine permanently attached the *coloni* to the soil, and they were to be transferred with the land if there was a change of ownership.

The phenomenon of *Patrocinium*² became widespread from the fourth century onwards. Sections of poor peasants, at times entire villages, voluntarily submitted to the big landowners or strong local commanders, to escape ravaging hordes or corrupt officials trying to fleece heavy taxation from them. The peasants received protection and were granted *Patrocinium* or tenancy rights but lost their freedom and ownership of land, and their status became virtually the same as *coloni*. In the long run, the practice of granting *patrocinium* created local centres of authority and thus weakened the administrative authority of the state, and deprived it of revenue.

‘We thus see that by various processes a uniform class of dependent peasant tenants tied to the soil came in existence in the western half of the Roman Empire by the third century CE. All such peasants were referred to as *coloni* (whatever might have been their earlier status) and included those slaves whose status had improved when they were settled on individual plots with their families. There was little to differentiate slaves of this type from the other *coloni*. The original *coloni* who had lost their freedom, the slaves whose status had been marginally improved when they became tenant cultivators, and depressed peasants (including those who had accepted *patrocinium*), became part of the broad status of *coloni* by the later Roman Empire. The *colonate*, or the new type of production based on the *coloni*, replaced *latifundia* driven surplus extraction, and represents a transitional phase between classical Greco-Roman slavery and classical medieval European feudalism’ (Farooqui, 2001: 295-96).

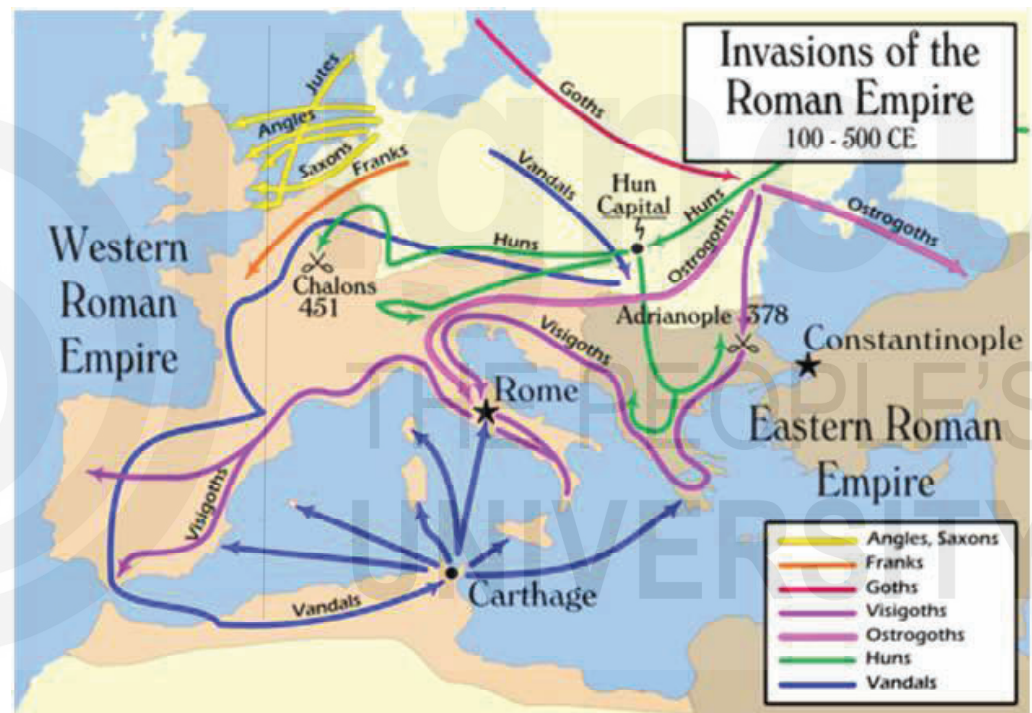
4.9 INCURSIONS OF THE GERMANIC TRIBES

The most straightforward theory for the collapse of the Western Roman Empire pins its fall on a series of military losses sustained against the Germanic tribes. That the internal crisis coincided with the escalating external pressure compounded the situation, and tribes like the Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths captured control, carved out their own kingdoms and completed the process of Rome’s downfall. The Roman conquest of Gaul and parts of central Europe brought the empire face to face with nomadic groups of pastoralists, referred to collectively as Germanic tribes for they all spoke a language based on common Germanic, an Indo-European language. Originally inhabiting southern Scandinavia and regions along the Baltic coast, Germanic people, like the Cimbri and Teutones began moving southwards and westwards from c. 1000 BCE. It

² A Roman law/legal contract under which peasants agreed to serve the bigger landlords in lieu of food and shelter.

is believed that contact with the Roman empire precipitated socio-economic changes and transformed relatively egalitarian agro-pastoralist social formations into warrior chieftaincies based on surplus appropriation and class differentiation.

Rome had tangled with Germanic tribes since the time of Augustus, and skirmishes and battles were common along the Rhine-Danube frontier. Initially, the tribes were too weak and scattered to challenge the might of the empire but from the period of Marcus Aurelius, pressure from other tribes led to open confrontations and Germanic populations started pushing into Roman areas. The state adopted a defensive policy, allowed Germanic settlements but simultaneously increased the strength of the Danubian army, to check the menace of increasing infiltration. In the first half of the third century CE, two northern Germanic tribes – the Alamanni and the Franks were the most formidable adversaries along the Rhine border, and the Danubian frontier was threatened by the Goths. The long European frontier was proving to be indefensible, and a compromise was reached allowing for selective settlement, recruitment into the army, and loyal Germanic chiefs were made collaborators, with their states acting as buffer states. However, the military option was never completely given up.



Map 4.4: Invasions of the Roman Empire

Credit: User:MapMaster

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Invasions_of_the_Roman_Empire_1.png

With a fresh wave of tribal movements in Eastern Europe in the mid-fourth century CE, things began to take a turn for the worse. The Goths had split into two groups, equally aggressive, the Visigoths (western Goths) and Ostrogoths (eastern Goths), who ceaselessly encroached the Empire's borders. Themselves on the run, escaping the sweeping Hun invasions, the Visigoths led by their chief Fritigern clashed with the Roman army in the Battle of Hadrianopolis/Adrianople in 378 CE. The Romans were defeated and Emperor Valens killed, marking a grave turning point in Rome's political destiny. The invincibility of Rome was now history and from the early fifth century CE, Germanic tribes such as the Vandals, Suebi, and the Alani began crossing the Rhine, and occupied the western provinces of Rome. In 410 CE, the Visigothic chief Alaric, successfully sacked the city of Rome and this assault reverberated in a demoralizing wave all over the empire. The empire spent the next several decades under constant threat before the 'Eternal City' was raided again in 455 CE, this time by the Vandals. Finally in 476 CE,

the Germanic leader Odoacer staged a revolt and deposed Emperor Romulus Augustulus (who was the last emperor of Western Roman Empire) and thus succeeded in delivering a fatal blow to the crumbling empire. Though the history of the interaction of the Romans and the Germanic people had begun with the latter being Romanized. The dethronement of the Western Roman emperor did not immediately lead to a break between antiquity and the medieval feudal society in Europe. It took centuries for this change to take shape. In various parts of the Roman Empire some tribal kingdoms arose that established new features in the society.

4.10 HISTORIOGRAPHY: CRISIS, DECLINE AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Citing the disasters of the fifth century CE as an adequate reason, western historians from the eighteenth century onwards, have treated the year 476 as the terminal point of the Roman Empire. It marked the end of Greco-Roman antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. However, many others have argued that no satisfactory date for the 'fall' of Rome can be ascertained for the decline occurred over a long period of time. And perhaps the crises and end of the empire were embedded in its structural flaws, and over-expansive imperial nature. While earlier scholarship treated the deposition of Emperor Romulus Augustulus as the critical moment of transition, more recent works on European history have pushed back the date of the onset of the Medieval period to c. 300 CE. Thus, the Late Empire and its successor states form a period of change, a metamorphosis from classical antiquity to feudal Europe.

The transformation and continuation of the Empire are stressed emphatically, with reference to Byzantium. The Eastern Roman Empire that morphed into the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, continued for another thousand years after the 'fall' of Rome. 'Scholars have continued to come forward in defence of continuity in the western parts of the empire – no-one has ever seriously maintained that there was any marked break in the east between ancient and Byzantine civilization' (Vogt, 1967: 5).

The theme of the decline of the Roman Empire is a much contested arena. In terms of intellectual scholarship, it was introduced by one of the most influential modern historians, Edward Gibbon, in his multi-volume book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776). Gibbon, reflecting the anti-clerical rationalism of the Enlightenment of the 18th century blamed Christianity, charging that it destroyed the civic spirit of the Romans, and the Church usurped political power from the state. In the 19th century, as advances were made in the historical method, varied perspectives related to the Roman decline were suggested. Exponents of historical materialism, Marx and Engels contended that since slavery had engulfed all forms of labour, and was now becoming extinct, the Roman world reached an impasse.

In the early 20th century, the Russian scholar, Michael Rostovtzeff (1926) attributed the decline to social tensions and to the constant pressure exerted by the underprivileged masses to gain a share in the power and wealth of the rulers. The English historian, F.W. Walbank (1946), regarded slavery as the root cause of the technological paralysis and general loss of vitality in the Roman world. Scholars offering an anthropological interpretation of the change point to population decline, its racial dilution – the influx of Greeks and Orientals diluted the original Roman sense of unity and to the shrinking ruling class as the primary causes of this debacle. Thus, the German historian O. Seeck, believed that the political aspect of the Roman world was a systematic 'extermination of the best', leaving a vacuum to be filled by men of inferior worth, that eventually proved to be fatal for the Empire.

A host of scholars have added fresh insights to the subject of the Roman decline. J.B. Bury (1897), E. Stein, A. Piganiol were all scholars of repute of Late Antiquity and Byzantium attached to different European Universities, and furthered the debate on Roman decline through their teaching and research. A. Dopsch contended that the Germanic invasions did not represent a complete break with the Roman past, and that the Germanic states that emerged on its ruins continued with Roman practices, and institutions, especially in the realm of statecraft and governance. S. Mazzarino, the leading 20th century Italian historian of ancient Rome, held that the death of Rome came about as a result of decadence and economic mismanagement. A.H.M. Jones' (1964) authoritative work marked a watershed in the scholarship on the subject. He stressed on the geographic and socio-economic factors and opined that as the Western Roman Empire advanced through the Rhine and Danube areas, conflict with the Germanic tribes became inevitable. This led to an increase in the strength of the armed forces, and related pressure of taxation borne by the direct producers was the fundamental cause of this decline.

The two stalwarts of universal history, who made valuable contributions to the study of Roman decline, are Oswald Spengler (1926) and A.J. Toynbee (1965). Spengler posited that the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire formed an intermediate stage between the ancient world and its successor states. Toynbee held the belief that the collapse of *Imperium Romanum* was due to the combined attack of the internal proletariat and external proletariat. More recently, archaeologists working with chemical analysis of the skeletal remains recovered from the 1st century CE have concluded that ancient Romans were succumbing to chronic lead poisoning, for their food and wine were heavily contaminated with lead. Bryan Ward-Perkins (2006) engages more substantially with archaeology in his assessment of the Roman decline. He points out that there was an extraordinary fall in the material culture of later Roman centuries and believes that, 'the Western Roman Empire was brought down by a specific military crisis – Germanic invasion, made more serious by the arrival in the West of an Asiatic people, the Huns, and exacerbated by civil wars within the empire – rather than by an irreversible internal decline'.³

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) The crisis of the Third Century rang the death knell for the Roman Empire. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

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- 2) The crisis of the Slave Mode of Production was the primary cause of the decline of the Western Roman Empire. Discuss.

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³ Interview in the journal *Historically Speaking*, March/April 2006: 33.

- 3) Discuss the historiography of the Decline of Roman Empire. What are the different theories propounded by historians for the fall of Roman Empire?

- 4) Fill in the blanks:

- a) wrote the book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.
- b) The system of governance introduced by Diocletian was known as
- c) was the last pagan ruler of the Roman Empire and made Christianity the religion of the state.
- d) sacked Rome in 410 CE and deposed the last ruler of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE.
- e) The Eastern Roman Empire is better known as in history.

4.11 SUMMARY

In this Unit we discussed about the Crisis of the Roman Empire. Forming the last segment of Greco-Roman antiquity, this was a period of tremendous change – a carry-over of past problems, the eruption of new issues, adaptations and accommodations, and finally the fissures that coincided with external blows and saw the eclipse of the Roman Empire. Various factors contributed to the crisis. Politically, the far-flung territoriality of the empire made it ungovernable. Civil wars were a recurrent feature; corruption, political and administrative fragmentation, and with the creation of the Eastern Empire, an alternative power base, weakened the Empire, which had hitherto been a united entity. A military despotism introduced to reform the system was a brief reprieve but exacted a heavy price from the citizens. There was an ideological disconnect between the state and army as the citizen-soldiers were replaced by mercenaries and the army could no longer be relied on. At the economic level, falling economy and high levels of inflation created a crisis of subsistence. Farms were abandoned; craft production and long distance trade suffered, and the state's desperate measures of currency debasement and monetary dualism further aggravated the problem. The social fabric of the empire withstood constant change, and simmering tensions either erupted as protests and brigandage or got rearticulated as interim institutions, to cope with the change. As the Germanic tribes infiltrated unchecked and kept pushing into the empire, the crisis of slavery, and all these conjoined crises led to the end of the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire, henceforth known as Byzantium, continued for another millennium and met its end at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE.

4.12 KEYWORDS

<i>Comites</i>	: imperial Roman (court) titles and offices.
Conscription	: compulsory military service for the state.
<i>Curiala/Curiales/Decurions</i>	: Wealthy middle class citizens. <i>Decurions</i> were members of the local assemblies of the town and were drawn from the <i>curiales</i> .
Duce	: later Duke; leader/commander.
<i>Hoplite</i>	: heavily armed foot-soldiers.
<i>Legion</i>	: a unit of Roman army. Its number was not fixed. In the Republic period it consisted of 5000 soldiers divided into three lines of ten maniples (each maniple consisted of 60-120 soldiers). Later around 100 BCE it was divided into 10 <i>cohorts</i> . It also had a cavalry wing (<i>ala</i>). By the 3 rd century CE, it was reduced to a body of 1000-1500 men.
<i>Phalanxes</i>	: a rectangular military formation of the Greeks.
<i>Praetorian Guards</i>	: the Roman Imperial bodyguards.

4.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 4.3
- 2) See Section 4.4
- 3) See Section 4.5.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 4.6
- 2) See Section 4.7
- 3) See Sub-section 4.7.4

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Section 4.8
- 2) See Section 4.8
- 3) See Section 4.10
- 4) a) Edward Gibbon; b) Tetrarchy; c) Theodosius; d) Visigoths; e) Byzantine Empire

4.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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4.15 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Roman Empire – Episode 6: The Fall of the Roman Empire (History Documentary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDz-z92Qc4Q>

The Rise and Fall of Roman Empire – Documentary Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePq7IeGiIs>