

Ten Theories on the Fall of Rome

Read each item and carefully consider each potential argument.

Barbarian Invasions

For years the well-disciplined Roman army held the barbarians of Germany in check. In the third century A. D. the Roman soldiers were withdrawn from the Rhine- Danube frontier to fight civil wars in Italy, and the Roman border was left open to attack. Gradually Germanic hunters and herders from the north and central Europe began to raid and take over Roman lands in Greece and Gaul. In A. D. 476, the Germanic general Odovacar overthrew the laws of the Roman Emperors and made himself the ruler of all Italy. From then on, Germanic tribal chiefs ruled the western part of the Empire. Roads were left in disrepair and many fields were left untilled. Pirates and bandits made travel unsafe. Cities declined and businesses began to disappear.

Decline of Morals and Values

The final years of the Empire were marked by a decline in morals and values, and some historians believe that this contributed to the decline of the empire. Crimes of violence made the streets of the larger cities very unsafe. Emperors like Nero and Caligula became known for wasting money on lavish parties, where guests ate and drank until they became sick. Also important was the Roman passion for cruelty. The most popular amusement was watching the gladiatorial combats in the Colosseum. All levels of people attended them, and vicious cries could be heard from the bloodthirsty audience. One contest after another was staged right after the previous one, all in the course of a single day. If the arena became too soaked with blood, a layer of sand would be spread, so the revolting performances could go on.

Environmental and Public Health Problems

Some historians believe that the fall of the Roman Empire was due in part because of health and environmental problems. They claimed that consuming excessive amounts of lead killed some of the leaders of Rome off. Since only the wealthy could afford to have lead pipes bring water into their homes and utensils made of lead for cooking, their death rate was increasing. What didn't make sense were those people from the Eastern part of the empire survived longer than those of the Western.

Excessive Military Spending to Defend the Empire

Maintaining an army to defend the borders of the Empire from barbarian attacks was a constant strain on the government. Military spending left few resources for other important activities- such as providing public education and maintaining roads. In the last years of the Empire, the frustrated Romans lost their desire to defend the Empire. Because of this, the government had to rely on hired soldiers called mercenaries for defense. This group, which was gotten from the unemployed city mobs or foreign countries, was unreliable and expensive. This caused many increases in taxes, which hurt the economy and were usually paid by businessmen and farmers.

Inferior Technology

During the last 400 years of the Empire, the scientific achievements were limited to engineering and the organization of public services. The Empire built marvelous roads, bridges, and aqueducts. They also established the first system of medicine for the benefit of the poor. Unfortunately, they relied so much on human and animal labor they failed to invent any machines that would increase more goods; nor did they invent any new ones. As a result of the inferior production techniques, the Romans were unable to provide the needed goods for their growing population.

Inflation

After the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the Roman economy suffered from inflation, which is an increase in prices. Once the Romans stopped conquering new lands, the flow of gold into the economy decreased. On the other hand, Romans spent a lot of their gold on luxury items. This meant there was less gold to use for coins. The amount of gold was decreased in the making of the coins, and then the coins became less valuable. To make up for this loss in value, the merchants increased the prices on the goods they sold. Many people stopped using coins and began to barter (trading goods rather than using money) to get what they needed. Eventually salaries had to be paid in food and clothing and taxes were collected in fruits and vegetables.

Political Corruption

One of Rome's most serious problems was choosing new emperors. The Romans had never created an effective system to determine how the new emperors were to be selected. For this reason, the choice of a new emperor was always be open to debate between the old emperor, the regular army and the emperor's private army called the Praetorian Guard. The newly elected emperor would highly reward those who had chosen him. This system worked fine for a while, but later, after 186 A. D, the practice of selling the throne to the highest bidder made it difficult to have good rulers. In fact there were 37 different emperors during a 100-year period – with 25 of them being removed from office by assassination.

Rise in Christianity

Some historians believe that the Christians produced changes in the Roman society. This increase of Christian came at the same time the barbarians were attacking the country. It is believed that the Christians opposed war, thus making it difficult to defend from the barbarian attacks. They also thought that the qualified leaders sided with the Church decisions or became rulers within the Christian church. Also the historians theorized that the money that would have been used to maintain the Empire was used to build Churches and Monasteries.

Unemployment

During the latter years of the Empire, farming was done on large estates that were owned by wealthy men that used slave labor. These farmers who had to pay the workmen could not produce goods as cheaply as a slave owner could; nor could the crops sell as cheaply. Since these farmers could not compete with the lower prices, many lost or had to sell their farms. Thousands of the previous employees filled the cities looking for work, finding there were not enough jobs to accommodate them. At one time, the emperor was importing grain to feed the more than 100,000 unemployed people just in the city of Rome.

Urban Decay

Wealthy Romans lived in fancy houses called a domus. These houses had marble walls, floors with intricate colored marble tiles, and windows made from real glass. However, most of the people of Rome were not rich. The others lived in small, smelly rooms in apartment houses with 6 or more rooms called islands. Each island covered an entire block. At one time, there were more than 44,000 apartment houses within the city walls of Rome. The poor did not occupy first floor apartments, as the rent was too high. As the people climbed up the shaky wooden stairs to the higher-level dwellings, the rent was cheaper, and the apartments became warmer, darker, and more crowded. Anyone who could not afford to pay the rent was forced to move out and live on the crime infested streets. Because so many people lived on the streets, the cities began to decay.

Response Questions

Please answer the following questions in a typed document following MLA formatting. On time submission = printed document submitted in class on the due date AND submission to Turnitin.com by class time.

- Which of these theories do you think is most likely to have caused the fall of the Roman Empire? Why? Give supporting evidence.
- Do you believe the Romans could have prevented the fall of their empire? If so, how?
- Are any of these theories something that is happening today and if so, which one(s)? Give examples.