

When we think of the fall of Rome, we picture the mighty and glorious Empire at its peak falling to hordes of Barbarians. **But like any decline, it was a long and drawn-out process, with many stops and starts along the way.**

In fact, when we talk of Rome falling, we do not have an exact date to focus our attention on. A key date, at least from a symbolic viewpoint, is 476 AD. **In that year, Odoacer deposed the last Emperor of Western Rome, a so-called “barbarian” general.** This is a good place to end the story since there would never again be a Roman Emperor in Rome.

However, that was not really the end of the Empire. Well before the city of Rome was conquered, the Empire had split into two. **For years the Empire had been wracked by civil wars, rebellions, and all sorts of strife. The events of the 3rd Century in Roman History are often named the “crisis of the third century.”** Empires kept rising and facing violent death, and out-of-control inflation caused a severe fiscal crisis.

The ruling elites split it into two in 284, giving the Western Empire to Diocletian and the Eastern Empire to Constantine the Great. Constantinople and the Eastern Empire outlived the Western Roman Empire by almost 1000 years. **Therefore, you could make a reasonably convincing argument that the Roman Empire in the larger sense only fell in 1453 when Mehmed the Conqueror took Constantinople and made it the capital of the Ottoman Empire.** However, we will focus on the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the city of Rome. **Several problems eroded the structure of the Roman Empire in its later years. Perhaps the best known, and possibly the most significant, was the invasion of the territory of the Empire by tribes, which the Romans called “barbarians.”**

When we think of barbarians, we imagine savage fighters in loin clothes covered in paint; some tribes the Romans called by that name fit that description! **However, in this context, the word means someone who speaks a foreign language.** The Greeks used it to describe people who didn't speak their language, and therefore the words sounded like gibberish to them.

The main groups of barbarians which troubled the Western Roman Empire were Germanic tribes. The Romans had fought against tribes in that region for generations to expand their border North and Eastward. However, after a devastating loss in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, the great Emperor Augustus determined that it was time to stop trying to expand and create a border between Rome and the barbarians centering on the Rhine, the area's major river.

Over time, the groups began to pass through that frontier and settle on Roman territory. Sometimes, they did so against the wishes of the Imperial government – and other times, with its blessing. We may wonder why the Romans could not keep the barbarian tribes out, considering all of their might.

However, it was not that simple. We think of borders as a point where one country begins, and another ends, but that is not how the Roman Empire – or any other Imperial structure at that time – was built. **Instead, the tribes and political systems had been around the border area for generations.** Most of their leaders were client kings who paid tribute to Rome regularly and were considered friends of Rome. What changed is not so much that they entered the territory but rather that Emperor had lost control over them. So, the critical question is, why did Rome lose control over those tribes? There were powers at play beyond those of even the mightiest Emperor, such as the earth's climate. **Climate change had begun to push several groups away from the steppes of central Asia Eastward, most notably a nomadic group called the Huns.**

The barbarians began to move farther inland into the Empire at a time known as the Great Migration. The Huns movement towards Eastern Europe terrorized the locals, forcing many to migrate into the Roman Empire. **There were just too many people for the Romans to stop.** To make matters more complex, some of these tribes had been allies of Rome and were only asking for a safe place to call home. In some cases, the Emperors felt obliged to help.

Besides, the Empire was in no shape to deal with a new crisis as it had run into some severe economic trouble. Rome had overextended and was spending far too much money on military campaigns and the administration of rebellious provinces. That meant they could no longer expand as they once did.

The solution? Tax the population. **Roman taxes became so oppressive that farmers sank into poverty and Roman elites tried to flee and hide their property from the taxman.** Also, to keep their Empire in order, the Romans granted citizenship to many immigrants and those in areas they occupied. **While it was great for those people, the policy caused a severe problem by lowering the ready supply of slaves that had fed economic growth for generations.**

As we know from more recent history, nothing fuels economic growth more than free and abused labor. However, with this policy, Rome could not expand and could not subjugate the people it had conquered because they were citizens. Therefore, it began to experience a serious labor shortage.

This problem was compounded by the barbarian tribes running rampant in the former territories of the Empire. In 428, a tribe called the Vandals – originally from Southern Poland – took over the North African provinces. This was a significant blow to the economy and structure of the Empire. To make matters worse, they adopted piracy and began to prey on the Roman trade routes in the Mediterranean.

As more and more tribes made their homes within the Empire, the centralized authority of Rome had more difficulty collecting taxes and fighting them off. **Instead, some of these tribes ruled large areas, taxing them themselves. They often**

were aided by a local aristocracy that was glad to have an opportunity to shake off Roman oppression and the high taxes that came with it.

As the tribes gained power within the Empire's territory, they sacked and looted its wealthiest cities. One of the most dramatic symptoms of this problem was the legendary sack of Rome. The Gauls had already laid siege to the city in 387 BC, but that was before it had become a great power.

It must have been an absolute shock to Rome's people when Alaric and the Visigoths entered the hallowed city; they were accustomed to seeing themselves as the seat of world power. Still, if you are imagining massive destruction and slaughter, think again. Alaric and his followers had great respect for Rome and no desire to destroy a civilization they considered superior to their own. All they were after was a few quick bucks – or denarius, to be more precise.

Alaric also wanted to use the capture of the city as leverage over the Emperor. He hoped to receive a large and dangerous donation of land for his Visigoth tribe in exchange for leaving the city. The barbarians left Rome and allowed power to resume, but it was a wake-up call to the diminishing capabilities of the once-mighty Empire.

When the last Emperor died in 476 and Rome was annexed to the barbarian government Kingdom of Italy, it was almost anti-climactic. Rome had been a miserable rump state for quite some time by then. **The city of Rome had fallen, and the Empire it had sustained was gone. But the concept of the Roman Empire endured.** It did so in several forms. The Eastern Roman Empire, which we call Byzantium, continued to refer to its leaders as Roman Emperors. And indeed, as they built on a state established by Constantine the Great, they were heirs to its power. Besides, future leaders in other parts of the world, such as Charlemagne and Peter the Great, claimed authority derived from the Roman Emperors.

The Church in Rome grew in stature over the years and continued to claim much of the prestige and influence of the Empire that once governed the city. The Catholic Church wielded that influence globally, becoming a significant player throughout the world in areas as far afield as sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, stretching over territory a Roman Emperor could only dream of. **And when we think of the influence the Roman Republic had on future regimes such as the United States, which named its Senate after the institutions of the era, we can say that in a genuine sense: Rome never fell.**