

Lesson 38 - The Legacy of Rome in the Modern World

Section 2 - The End of the Empire in the West

« Previous Section Next Section »

▶ Play ★ Main Ideas + Add Note Spanish

At the height of Rome's power in the 100s C.E., Romans believed that the empire would last forever. Yet by the year 500, the western half had collapsed. What happened to cause the fall of one of the mightiest empires the world has ever known?

Problems in the Late Empire Most modern historians believe that a number of problems combined to bring about Rome's fall. Here are three of the main reasons.

Political Instability Rome never solved the problem of how to peacefully [transfer](#) political power to a new leader. When the emperor died, rivals might fight each other to replace him. Real power fell into the hands of the armies, who could help leaders seize power—or destroy them. Sometimes, rivals did not wait for an emperor to die. Emperors were regularly murdered.

Economic and Social Issues Political instability led to other problems. To finance Rome's huge armies, citizens had to pay heavy taxes. These taxes hurt the economy and drove many people into poverty. Trade also suffered.

Weakening Frontiers The huge size of the empire made it hard to defend. By the 300s, Germanic tribes were pressing hard on the western borders. Many of these people settled inside the empire and were recruited into the army. But these soldiers often had little loyalty to Rome.



Click to read caption



Click to read caption

The Fall of Rome In 330 C.E., the emperor Constantine took a step that changed the future of Rome. He moved his capital 850 miles to the east, to the ancient city of Byzantium (bih-ZAN-tee-uhm), in what is now Turkey. He renamed the city New Rome. Later it was called Constantinople. Today, it is known as Istanbul. Before Constantine, emperors had tried sharing power over the vast empire between co-rulers. After Constantine's reign, power was usually divided between two emperors, one based in Rome and one in Constantinople. Rome became the capital of just the western part of the empire.

Soon, Rome itself was threatened by Germanic tribes. In 410 C.E., the Visigoths attacked and looted the city. Finally, in 476, the last emperor in the west, Romulus Augustus, lost his throne to a Germanic leader, Odoacer (OH-duh-way-sir). Then, the western half of the empire began to [dissolve](#) into separate kingdoms ruled by different tribes.

In the east, the empire continued for another 1,000 years. Today, we call this eastern empire the [Byzantine Empire](#), after Byzantium, the original name of its capital city. The Byzantines wove the Roman heritage into their own rich civilization. But they were never able to put the old empire back together. For historians, the fall of Rome marks the end of the ancient world.

Yet the influence of Rome lived on. Let's look now at how Rome's legacy continues to affect our lives today.

« Previous Section Next Section »

