

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE A.D. 337–476

After the reign of Constantine, the Roman Empire declined rapidly. After the reign of Theodosius in 395, the empire was permanently split into two parts, the western half and the eastern half, each with a different emperor who acted independently from the other. (See map on page 91.) When historians talk of the fall of the Roman Empire, they only mean the western half of the empire. The Western Roman Empire held on for less than a century until its collapse in the fifth century. The Eastern Roman Empire survived for a thousand years longer and was known thereafter as the Byzantine Empire.

The immediate cause for the fall of the Western Roman Empire was the Germanic invasions across the Roman frontiers. The Romans had continuously battled Germanic tribes for some time. However, during the fourth and fifth centuries, the Germans started to cross the borders and invade the empire on a massive scale. (See map on page 92.)

The Germans were a loosely-knit group of people, organized into a number of different tribes that the Romans had to fight individually. Along the Rhine River, the Franks, the Vandals, and the Burgundians threatened the empire's borders. Along the Danube River, the Goths posed a dangerous threat to the empire. The Goths were divided into two states, the Ostrogoths (eastern Goths) and the Visigoths (western Goths).

The massive Germanic invasions were triggered by the movement of another tribe of barbarians, called the Huns, who probably lived in northern China. By 370 the Huns had moved west into the Balkan area and entered the Danube River basin, conquering the Ostrogoths along the way. As a result, the Visigoths were terrified and were driven across the Danube River into the Roman Empire where they settled in 376.

Because of their unjust treatment at the hands of the Romans, the Visigoths revolted and ravaged northern Greece. In 378 the Roman emperor, Valens, dealt with the crisis and met them in a battle at Adrianople, in Thrace. For the first time, the Roman army was defeated by a Germanic tribe, and Valens was killed. This battle is regarded as one of the worst defeats the Roman army ever experienced. The Battle of Adrianople was a decisive battle because it marks the beginning of Germanic invasions into the Roman Empire on a massive scale. It also showed the Germans that the Roman army was not invincible.

After the battle, the Visigoths were pacified and were allowed to settle within the borders of the Roman Empire living under their own leaders. Under their leader, Alaric, the Visigoths moved west and invaded Italy several times and finally sacked Rome in 410. The Visigoths eventually moved to Spain where they set up their own kingdom in 418.

While dealing with the Visigoths in 406, the Roman army had to abandon both the Rhine River and British frontiers. This left the borders open, and the Vandals, the



Attila the Hun's invasion of Gaul and Italy failed; however, the movement of the Huns triggered invasions of Germanic tribes that eventually toppled the Roman Empire.

Burgundians, and the Franks invaded the empire, plundering many Roman towns along the way. At first, the Romans made a treaty with the different Germanic tribes and granted them "federal" status within the empire. This meant that they were allowed to live under their own rulers, but had to supply the Romans with soldiers and farmers. They became allied to the Romans. Eventually, the different tribes openly ruled their own states and tore themselves away from Roman control. The Vandals moved into Spain and then Africa, where they set up their own kingdom in 439. The Burgundians settled along the Rhone River in southern Gaul in the 430s. The Franks inhabited northern Gaul and unified into the Frankish kingdom in 481.

In the meantime, the Romans also had to deal with the Huns, who had become another threat to the empire. By the early fifth century, the Huns had built up an empire from the Baltic Sea to the Danube River. In 434 Attila became their leader. He ruled for 19 years and was known as the "Scourge of God" because he played a large part in the downfall of the Western Roman Empire. In 451 Attila marched into Gaul where he met a combined army of Romans and federate Germans in a battle at Chalons on the Marne River. Attila was defeated, and he had to evacuate Gaul. However, in the following year Attila decided to cross the Alps into Italy and attack Rome. His plan failed, and Attila withdrew from Italy. In 453 he died, and his empire fell apart.

By the middle of the fifth century, the Western Roman Empire was coming to an end. For the last twenty years, the empire was ruled by many emperors who had become mere puppets on the throne. Their election depended solely on powerful German generals in the army. Finally, in 476 the last emperor of the Roman West, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown by a German general called Odovacar. Odovacar was proclaimed King of Italy by his soldiers. Italy became the last Germanic kingdom. Several Germanic kingdoms in the west and the Byzantine Empire in the east replaced what once was the mighty Roman Empire.

The Roman army, superior in numbers and equipment, had dealt with the Germans for a long time, defeating them in many battles over the years. Why then were the barbarian invasions in the fifth century successful in destroying the Western Roman Empire? The underlying causes had their roots in the late Roman Empire. Politically, there was internal disunity. One of the prime causes of disunity was the failure of emperors to control the army and its generals, which led to numerous civil wars. The emperors were not able to secure peaceful succession to the throne. As a result, the emperors could not successfully defend the imperial borders. In addition, because of the man shortage in the army, more and more Germans were recruited as soldiers and generals. These German recruits proved to be less dependable and loyal to the Roman state than Roman soldiers. Economically, the Roman Empire was drained. During the last three centuries of rule, the prime concern of the emperors was the defense of the Roman frontiers rather than expansion. This meant that more and more was spent on the army while less and less money was coming into the empire. Taxes continued to increase, which resulted in the rise of inflation. The stagnation of technology and decrease in trade were also major factors in the decline of Roman power. All these factors affected the empire socially. The people became poorer and dissatisfied, which destroyed individual loyalty toward the Roman state. The Germanic invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries merely sped up the process of collapse in the Western Roman Empire.

Name _____ Date _____

CHALLENGES

1. In which battle did Valens fight the Visigoths?

2. Which barbarian movement started the massive Germanic invasions across the Roman frontiers?

3. In which battle did the Romans defeat the Huns in 451?

4. Who was Attila?

5. Why was the Battle of Adrianople a decisive battle?

6. Name the Germanic tribes that lived beyond the northern borders of the Roman Empire and eventually invaded the empire.

7. Who was the last emperor of the Roman West?

8. Who deposed the last emperor of the Roman West?

9. What was the new name for the Eastern Roman Empire?

10. What battle in 378 was regarded as one of Rome's worst defeats?
