

What Were the Primary Reasons for the "Fall" of Rome?

Rome – the city that would become the center of one of the world's greatest empires – began around 750 BCE as an unremarkable settlement. During Rome's early years, the most wealthy and powerful people of the Mediterranean world were the Greeks. However, by 200 BCE, the Greek empire was weakening and Rome was turning into a giant, spilling over its borders as it acquired foreign lands. No longer a sleepy little town, Rome had become a powerhouse.

As with so many empires, Rome's rise to power came with the thrust of a spear and the slash of a sword. The enormous Roman army conquered territory from modern-day Scotland to Spain, gained control of the whole Mediterranean Sea, and established colonies in North Africa, Egypt, the Middle East and Asia Minor. By the year 44 BCE, when Julius Caesar became Rome's virtual emperor, there were no major rivals left to defeat.

Caesar used his hero status – along with bribery, beatings and even assassination – to gain political power. Over the next two decades, Rome shifted from being a **republic**, with elements of democratic control, to an empire with power in the hands of an emperor and the military.

Rome's first two centuries as an empire were years of relative stability, increasing power, and great imperial wealth. It was a time known as the **Pax Romana**, the time of Roman peace. Rome was clearly top dog in the Western world. But as Rome was to discover, size has its problems. The empire acquired new subjects who were not Roman and who often did not want to be Roman – in Gaul (France), in England,

beyond the Danube River, in the Middle East. Controlling this expanded empire meant a larger army, which in turn meant a need for more food, clothing, weapons and supplies. Political strains developed at home. Leaders in Rome focused less on debate and compromise and more on force to get their way. Having existed for centuries as a republic, Rome eventually became more like a **dictatorship**.

As Rome drifted through the 3rd century, survived the 4th, and staggered into the 5th, one general problem was apparent – life at the top was getting soft. Upper-class Romans were losing their edge. When a country is on the make, when energy and hope are high, leaders and their people are more willing to work hard and to sacrifice. When the goal appears to have been reached, it is easy to get lazy. The evidence for this was a love of luxury, a decline in the quality of literature, even a decision by upper-class Romans to have fewer children because child-raising was a bother.

But there was more to Rome's decline than developing a soft belly. By the 5th century CE, when the city was **sacked** by outside invaders, Rome had been badly weakened by a number of problems. Parts of the empire would survive, particularly in Constantinople and the East, but the old heart of the empire – Italy and the West – was shattered.

Your task is to examine the documents in this Mini-Q and decide which three problems were most responsible for bringing Rome to its knees. Then, of these three problems, decide which was most important.



The Roman Empire at its height