

Roman Empire: Decline & Fall

“In the second century of the Christian era, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth (1), and the most civilized (2) portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valor “(3). Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1776-1789 (six volumes)

Roman Empire, All Glory to Rome, Roman Empire, Decline & Fall

The Roman Empire fell due to the gradual loss of “civic virtue” among its citizens. They had become weak, outsourcing the defense of their empire to barbarian (4) mercenaries, who then became so numerous that they were able to take over the Empire. Romans, some believed, had gotten soft (5), and were unwilling to live a tougher, military lifestyle.

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Some historians have focused on additional causes for the decline of the Roman Empire, especially economic weakness (6). There was a large gap between rich and poor, and a shortage of workers. The empire was also overextended geographically. It had expanded quickly due to military conquests, but it was hard to defend such a huge territory.

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Notes

- 1) **fairest part of the earth**: The Roman Empire (27 BC-approximately 500 AD) covered a massive expanse of territory on three continents (Europe, Africa, Asia). Centered in the Mediterranean Sea region, it reached as far north as present day England. From 100 BC to 400 AD, Rome was the largest city in the world.

- 2) **civilized**: The Roman Republic (approximately 500 BC-27 BC) is regarded as the first republic. In addition to representative government, it is known for achievements in art, architecture, law and technology.
- 3) **disciplined valor**: The Roman legions were one of the most successful armies in history. Their strengths were effective organization and innovative battle tactics.
- 4) **barbarian**: Northern European tribes on the border of the Empire such as the Goths and Visigoths, began as allies of the Romans, but later attacked the Empire when it began to weaken.
- 5) **soft**: According to Gibbon, the growth of Christianity weakened the Roman Empire, softening military might with a belief system based on love and a focus on the afterlife. Christians were persecuted but the religion spread rapidly among the people.
- 6) **economic weakness**: The chief economic weakness of the Empire was the unequal distribution of wealth, which created poverty surrounding the plenty enjoyed by a relative few. Also, the use of Roman slave labor was counterproductive.

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