THE FALL OF ROME IN THE WEST & THE GERMANIC TRIBES

Introduction to the Fall of Rome in the West

Historians have come to delineate the last years of the Roman Empire, circa the fourth and fifth centuries as the decline and fall of Rome, using Edward Gibbon’s classic work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as the prototype.¹ Now many terms are used by historians such as the decline and transformation of the Roman Empire in the West, as there was a Roman Empire in the East until 1453 when the city of Constantinople was captured. This city was the last stronghold of the Byzantine Empire (what Historians call the eastern empire based on the original name for Constantinople). Rome’s decline and transformation has always fascinated historians and lay people. While scholars are still researching and debating the exact causes of this decline, it is possible to discuss several reasons. After the death of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 C.E., the empire was plagued by barbarian attacks and invasions on all sides of its vast domain, including the Rhine/Danube borders. The Roman Empire was not able to defend itself adequately, but there were also political, economic, and social reasons for this transformation.

Political, Economic, and Social Reasons Accounting for the Decline of the Roman Empire in the West

¹ It was published in the late 18th century
As stated in the section on the Roman Empire, there was no law of succession, there were many incapable and corrupt rulers, and the loyalty of the army declined due to its foreign elements. These political causes were also more serious as there was a definite decline of the citizens’ sense of civic responsibility due to rampant immorality, lack of citizen interest in government matters, and really not much desire to preserve the empire. Economically the Western Roman Empire was always poorer and less urbanized than the eastern Empire. The west never made the transition from a labor-intensive system largely based on slavery, to the more efficient mercantile system in the East. In tandem with this was the West’s consumption of more food than it could produce, leading to an unfavorable balance of trade with the East and North Africa. Due to the low productivity, higher taxes were levied that increased inflation. Added to this was the increased military expenditures to defend the frontiers. With insufficient revenues emperors were forced to debase the currency. By the fifth century the once vigorous cities were ghosts of their former selves. The decline of the cities was fatal to the urban-based administrative structure of the Roman Empire. Drained of their wealth because of the economy, they then began to lose much of their population. Patricians or aristocrats fled the cities to their country estates. Since the second century C.E. there had been a serious decline in the Roman population caused by heavy losses from wars, from effective birth control methods, outbreaks of the plague, and the
non-debunked lead poison theory leading to sterilization of the men. With the population drop the Empire was forced to recruit from the barbarian tribes. Civilizations based on cities like Athens, Alexandria and Rome could not survive in the countryside.

**Edward Gibbons’ thesis: Christianity was to blame for the Fall of Rome**

Christianity was also blamed for destroying the ancient Roman religious rituals with its moral and civic spirit. In fact, the thesis of Edward Gibbons’ book was that Christianity was the culprit for the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Memories of Rome remained, however as an incentive for future conquerors and rulers to want to emulate the power and greatness of the Roman Empire.

In its own category for the reason behind the decline and fall of the Roman Empire were the invasions, assimilations and conquests by the various barbarian tribes. Historians are thwarted by the lack of sources, and most of the information on this period of history comes from the time after the barbarians had been assimilated into the Roman Empire or else converted to Christianity. American history has the same problem when studying the native American culture before the white man’s influence – lack of sources. During the course of the fourth through the eighth centuries, Roman, Germanic, Celtic, and Christian ideas, values, and cultures came
together. It was not a peaceful meeting, but it was definitely dynamic. This new multi-culture time that evolved is called the Middle Ages by historians.

The Arrival of the Barbarians as one of the Reasons for the Fall of Rome

Who were the barbarians? They were Germanic tribes originally from Scandinavia and Northeast Europe that began to move southward. There were numerous tribes. Much information can be gleaned from Tacitus in his *Germania*, circa 98 C.E. He is referred to as the most important source for knowledge of the ancient Germans. “. . . All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames, fit only for a sudden exertion . . . heat and thirst they cannot in the least endure. . .” Why did they begin the movement away from their homelands? What causes tribes and people to move is one of the fascinating mysteries of history and anthropology. Historians have settled on six major reasons, but as yet there is no clear consensus. The First reason was the fascination the Germanic tribes had with Roman civilization, and wanting to have a share in its splendor and wealth. Most tribes regarded the Empire as something to enjoy not destroy. Second, was the need or desire for more land, booty, and food. Thirdly, The Roman frontier offered jobs in the legions and ancillary services. Fourthly, the natural curiosity of man to explore new places, and the fifth reason was that the Roman Empire invited some Germanic Tribes in to assist with keeping other tribes out. Some tribes came in more slowly than others, and were
assimilated into Roman society. Others who have been called less civilized were only interested in plunder and mayhem. From the first to the ninth centuries the European area was periodically invaded by marauding tribes and people.

The Arrival of the Huns and Attila

Lastly, the sixth reason was the movement of the Huns from their homeland in Mongolia. Starting in the 370’s, many Germanic tribes began moving in earnest beyond the Roman Empire borders of the Rhine and Danube rivers. This was caused by the westward thrust of the Huns into the Region around the Black Sea, and who fought strictly for plunder and not for settlement. The Huns reached the apex of their invasions under the impregnable Attila the Hun in the mid 5th century C.E. To the Roman civilized world the Huns were not far removed from wild animals in both appearance and lifestyle. The customs of the Huns are extremely interesting. Riding only mares that they could milk for their nutriment needs, firing their arrows deftly from their bows while riding, it was said that the “Huns committed so many murders and bloodletting that the dead could not be numbered.” Attila, who was called the Scourge of God, plundered the Eastern Empire first with Huns and other non-Hunic tribes. The emperor at Constantinople paid Attila a massive tribute of six thousand pounds of gold and agreed to an annual tribute of two thousand, one hundred pounds of gold to leave them alone. Returning four years later, the Huns created
havoc, but were stopped by the fear of the plague and decision to attack the more vulnerable West. They overran much of the Italian Peninsula, but were kept from attacking Rome itself. Many legends and tales abound about what happened, including that the saints Peter and Paul appeared to Attila and he was terrified. The other more creditable story is that Pope Leo I interceded with Attila by promising him a lovely bride to not attack Rome. Attila then on his wedding night while exerting himself in the bridal chamber ruptured a blood vessel and died. With Attila’s death in 453 C.E., the Huns broke up and eventually formed the area now known as Hungary.

**Specific German Tribes and their Part in the Decline of Rome,**

**Including Their Contributions**

Which Germanic tribes played an important role during the demise and transformation of the Roman Empire that led to the Early Middle Ages? The Visigoths or West Goths were the first to be allowed officially into the Roman Empire in 376 C.E. Attempts by the Romans to buy off their king, Alaric (ruled 395-410), was to no avail, for in 410 C.E. the Visigoths sacked Rome. This was a terrible event for the Romans, and as a result many more Germanic tribes moved into and through the Roman Empire. The Visigoths eventually settled in Spain. Forty-five years later the Germanic tribe of the Vandals sacked Rome in 455 C.E. for fourteen days with unprecedented savagery; hence the name Vandal is now in the English language. After they sacked Rome, they headed for Spain and North Africa, cutting off the grain
and olive oil supplies to the rest of the Empire with their raids. Finally they settled in Spain by the early part of the 5th century. One of the most important tribes gaining power in the Italian Peninsula was the Ostrogoths or East Goths, who came from Eastern Europe. They became the first heirs of the Roman emperors in the West. When they realized that they were only propping up the emperors, they set up their own state without Rome, and Theodoric, became the first Ostrogothic King. Problems ensued for the Roman Catholic Church as this Germanic tribe converted to Arianism, considered a heretical sect by the Catholics. Arians did not believe that Christ was coequal with God. Theodoric ruled the Italian area from 493 to 526.

**The Importance of Theodoric, Boethius, and Cassiodorus**

His importance is due primarily to two of his officials, Boethius and Cassiodorus. Boethius (circa 480-524) set as his main goal to translate all of Plato and Aristotle’s works into Latin. His translations served as the fundamental texts in Western schools for the next five hundred years. While he was in prison at Theodoric’s orders, he wrote *Consolation of Philosophy*, which became one of the most popular and influential books in Western Europe from the time it was written in 524 up to the end of the Renaissance. His subject was human happiness and the possibility of achieving it in the midst of suffering and disappointment, which played such a large part in every person’s experiences. Boethius ended up being
executed by Theodoric because of the intolerance between Christians and
Arians. The other official was Cassiodorus (circa 485-585) who was
Theodoric’s secretary. In his later years Cassiodorus was an abbot at a
monastery where he had his monks copy and preserve the great literary
works of antiquity both Christian and pagan. His influence set a major
precedence for monks to be scribes producing manuscripts. One of the
Eastern Germanic tribes were the Burgundians, some of whom were
immortalized by Richard Wagner’s operas like Brunhilda. While the
Burgundians were never as strong as other Germanic tribes in the Early
Middle Ages, they managed to gain a foothold around the Rhone River, and
in the Middle Ages they played an important role as the Dukes of Burgundy.
Gregory of Tours (539-594) wrote a famous book *History of the Franks* in
which he discussed the history of the various Germanic tribes, and he
included the tales and tribulations of them.

**The Germanic Tribes Invade Britain and King Arthur**

When Rome came under attack by the Barbarians in Gaul, the Romans
eventually pulled their legions out of Britain to defend the continent, but not
before setting up a ring of forts called the Saxon Shore Forts. Once Rome
left Britain, though, it too was invaded by Germanic tribes, including the
Angles, Saxons, and the Jutes. The Celtic Britons fled to the mountain
regions on the fringes of the British Isles, where the population of Wales,
Scotland and Ireland are still largely Celtic today. Perhaps the most famous
legend of the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons into England was the tale of King Arthur. He was supposedly one of the last Celtic war leaders to resist the Anglo-Saxons. Whether Arthur was real or not is still an on-going debate, but the memory of one of the last men to withstand the enemy lingered on in Celtic, Welsh, English, and even French memory. Places such as Tintagel on the western coast of England show by archaeological excavation to be an important place in Arthur’s times. By the twelfth century tales about Arthur emerged again by Geoffrey of Monmouth that added elements not part of the original Arthur: round table, Lancelot, Guinevere, and Merlin. While we will let the English literature folks discuss the stories, there is an addendum that gives important insights into medieval culture. The monks of Glastonbury Abbey in England dug up a skeleton they identified as Arthur’s in 1191. Monks had good reason to think this discovery would make their out-of-the way monastery a pilgrimage site that would bring in much-needed revenue. Arthur’s bones were on display until the sixteen century when the English Reformation scattered the relics.

The Contributions of the Merovingians

Another important Germanic tribe was the Merovingians, who were the forerunners to the Franks and Carolingians. The most famous Merovingian king was Clovis (481-511) who expanded his kingdom to become the most

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2 Somerset where Glastonbury Abbey is located is one of the warmer parts of England, and Glastonbury was a solid piece of ground rising out of the marshy countryside, all attributes of Geoffreay of Monmouth’s Avalon.
powerful in Western Europe. By 486 Clovis had defeated the last of the
Roman forces in Gaul, and then he set about defeating the Alemanni,
Burgundians, and Visigoths. How was he able to do this? One of his
principal ways was to be converted to the Roman Catholicism instead of
Christian Arianism, which the rest of the Germanic tribes ascribed to. Clovis
married the Christian Clotild of Burgundy, who convinced Clovis to be
baptized. His baptism was a decisive event for the Merovingians gained the
support and cooperation of the Papacy, as Clovis became the only Orthodox
Christian ruler in the West. Probably his other way was by murdering every
possible political rival. According to Gregory of Tours, Clovis persuaded
Cholderic to kill his father who was King of the Ripurarian Franks. While this
king had had good relations with Clovis, by the early sixth century Clovis felt
strong enough to move against him and the other Frankish Kings. While
Chloderic was selecting his reward from his deceased father’s treasure chest,
one of Clovis’ warriors split his skull with an axe. Clovis then announced
that since Chloderic had killed his father he had to be killed. Commenting
on this event, Gregory of Tours said that Clovis walked before God with an
upright heart and did what was pleasing in God’s sight. Clovis also took
advantage of another legendary tradition that St. Denis, the disciple of St.
Paul had been the first Bishop of Paris, where St. Denis was martyred.
Founding the Abbey of St. Denis and making his capital at Paris, over the
years, the royal name of Clovis was softened to Louis, and the Merovingians
became Franks or the French. St. Denis is where the French kings are buried.

**Germanic Society**

Germanic society was divided into four classes: nobles, freemen, serfs, and slaves. Birth and property determined nobility while war and hunting were only for the nobles. Farming was left to those unable to fight: women, old men, serfs, and slaves. At the head was a King or tribal chieftain, who was elected from the most powerful family in the tribe. Connected with the King in many tribes was a war band or comitatus. These warriors were bound by strict ties of personal loyalty to a chief, who maintained them in return for their fighting services. Booty, food, arms, and land were provided, and it was important to defend the leader to their death. From this institution, medieval feudalism developed. War was considered a glorious occupation, and even their names reflect this: Hrotgar meaning glorious spear (later Roger), Garhard meaning strong spear (later Gerald), and Charibercht meaning bright army (later Herbert). Over time land as well as military prowess determined one’s status in society. As infighting was a constant among the Germanic tribes as well as against the Roman Empire, certain rules developed to avoid blood feuds. Each family was held responsible for offenses committed by one of its members unless some satisfaction was made in retribution. All members of an offending family were in danger of death if retribution was not paid. Most tribes developed a
way to alleviate this form of fighting by ascribing to the Wergeld system. Each individual had his own worth, and it was calculated on the basis of social standing, military or craft skills, gender, and age. Men of fighting age had the highest Wergeld and then women of child-bearing age came next. If the accused refused to pay the Wergeld or if the victim’s family refused to accept it, a blood feud ensued. Extant are the Burgundian, Salic Franks and Lombard laws that describe the crimes and retribution amount. Many violent examples of the blood feuds can be found in Gregory of Tour’s History of the Franks. Blood feuds were often provoked by concern for the honor of a family’s women. In the City of Tournai in the late sixth century a man was rebuked by his brother-in-law for neglecting his wife in favor of loose women. When his brother-in-law did not mend his ways, he killed him and some of his relations. The killer was then slain in turn by relatives of the husband. “In the end not a single member of either family remained alive, except one survivor for whom there were no opponents left. At this point more distant relatives entered the quarrel. The Frankish Queen Fredegunde ordered them to stop before the feud became a public nuisance. When her command was not heeded, she decided to deal with it herself. She invited the three principal survivors for each of the feuding families to a dinner party. She plied them and their servants with wine until the men were drunk and the servants drowsy. Fredegunde then signaled three of her
own men who were armed with axes, “who swung their weapons and decapitated them.”

**Determination of Guilt and Innocence through Judicial Ordeals**

Developing later in tandem with the various Germanic law codes was the idea of judicial ordeal, a method to determine guilt or innocence if it was not apparent. Whether it was part of the Germanic system before contact with the Romans and Christians is still being debated. If a murder was committed, the accused purged himself of guilt by swearing his innocence, who was accompanied by oath helpers or compurgators who swore that his oath was truthful. If the testimony of oath helpers failed to indicate a clear cut verdict, the defendant could prove his innocence by submitting to physical trials for the determination. There were several methods used to determine guilt or innocence. The hot water method involved the accused placing his oiled hand in boiling water to retrieve an object that had been placed there. If after so many days, the hand healed without infection then the person was innocent. Ordeal of the hot iron was where the accused had to carry a hot iron for a certain length of time. If after so many days the hand was not infected then he was innocent. Variations of these two ways were also used.
Over time these various Germanic tribes formed kingdoms and nations that transform the period of late antiquity into the Middle Ages, when Germanic, Celtic, Christian, and Roman culture interacted dynamically.