

The Fall of Rome

SECTION

5

**BEFORE
YOU
READ**

Reach Into Your Background

Have you ever thought about what you would do if you had all the money you could want?

Would you spend it wisely? Would you help others? Would you save some, or would you spend until the money began to run out?

Questions to Explore

1. Why did Rome begin to lose its power?
2. How did Constantine try to restore Rome's greatness?

Key Terms

mercenary
inflation

Key People and Places

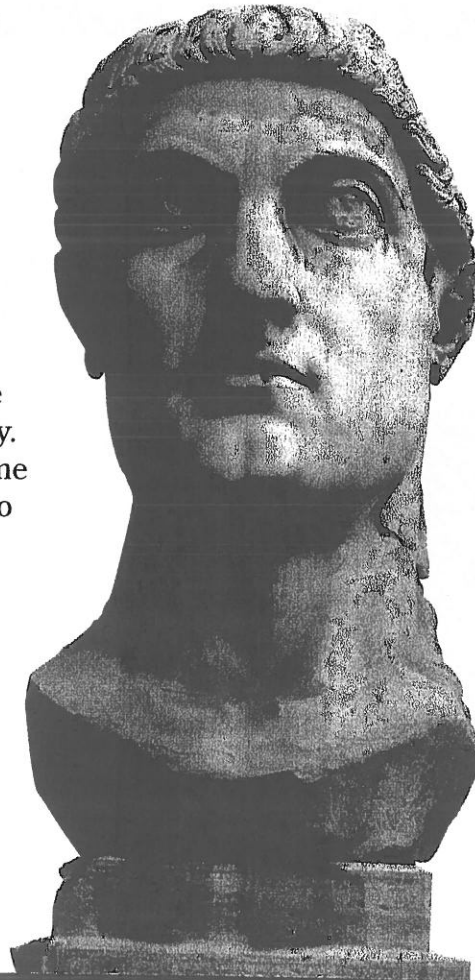
Constantine
Diocletian
Constantinople

One day in the year A.D. 312, the emperor Constantine (KAHN stuhn teen) stood with his troops under a cloudy sky near a bridge across the Tiber River. He was filled with doubts. A battle was about to begin. His enemies were waiting on the other side of the river.

While Constantine was hoping for victory, the sun broke through the clouds. According to Constantine, the sun had a cross on it. And above the cross was written in Latin: "Under this sign you will conquer!"

The next morning, Constantine had his artisans put the Christian symbol of the cross on his soldiers' shields. In the battle, they won an overwhelming victory. Constantine believed that the victory had come from the Christian God. Constantine vowed to become a Christian.

Historians today debate whether this event ever happened. But we know that as emperor from A.D. 312 to A.D. 337, Constantine strongly encouraged the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. As he lay dying, he may have converted to Christianity.



◀ This statue of Emperor Constantine originally towered over 30 feet (9 m). Today, only the head remains.

READ ACTIVELY

Ask Questions What questions do you have about the fall of Rome?

The Empire Crumbles

The Christian Church provided comfort and authority at a time when the mighty Roman Empire was on the edge of disaster. By the time Constantine took power, he could do little to stop the empire's fall.

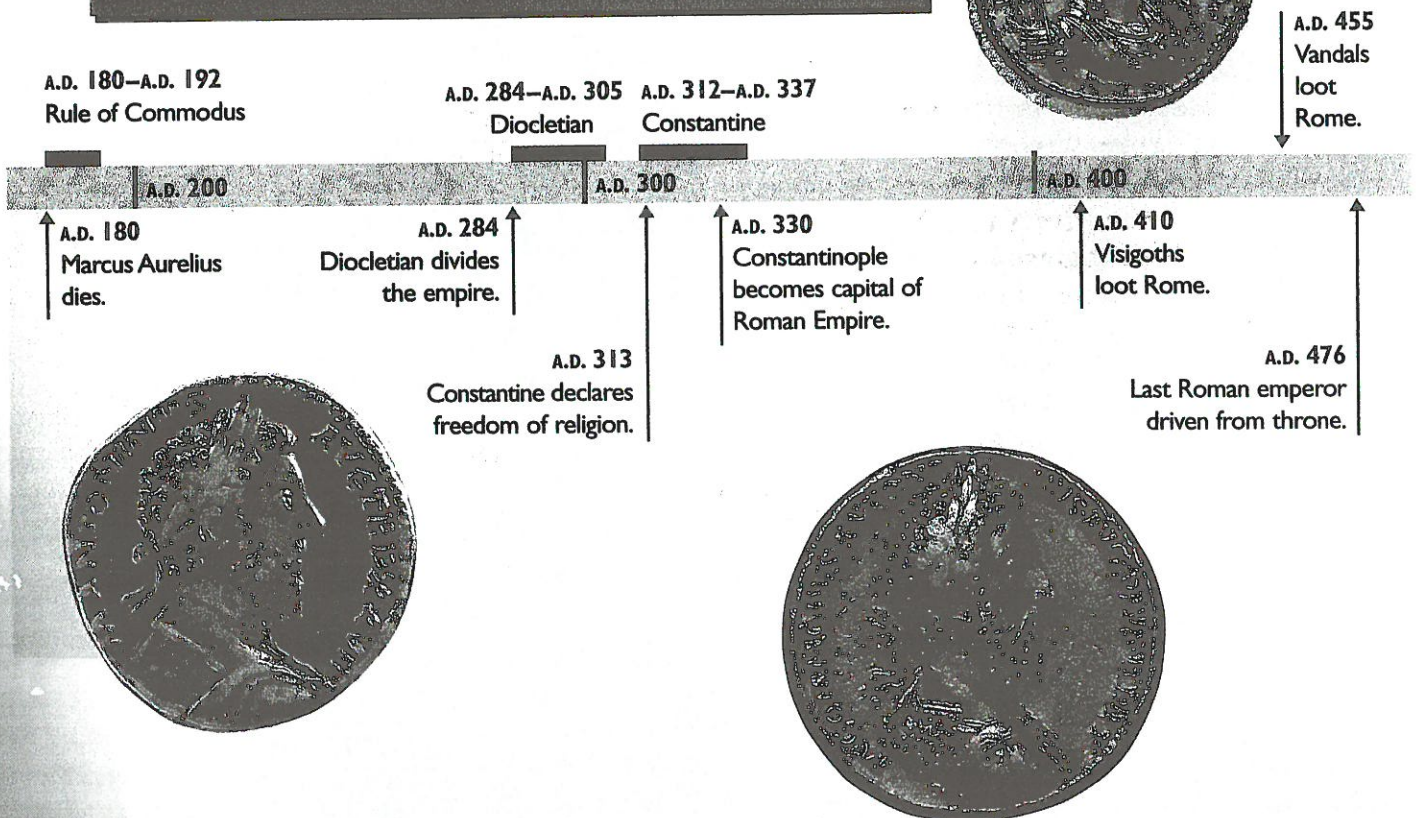
The trouble started 125 years before. That's when the last of the "good emperors"—Marcus Aurelius—died. The emperor, known for his wisdom, left his son Commodus in power in A.D. 180. Commodus was not a wise choice. He was a savage ruler who loved the bloodshed of the gladiators. He ruled by bribing the army to support him.

The rule of Commodus began the decline of the Roman Empire. Historians do not agree on any one cause for this decline. Generally, they believe that the following problems together led to Rome's end.

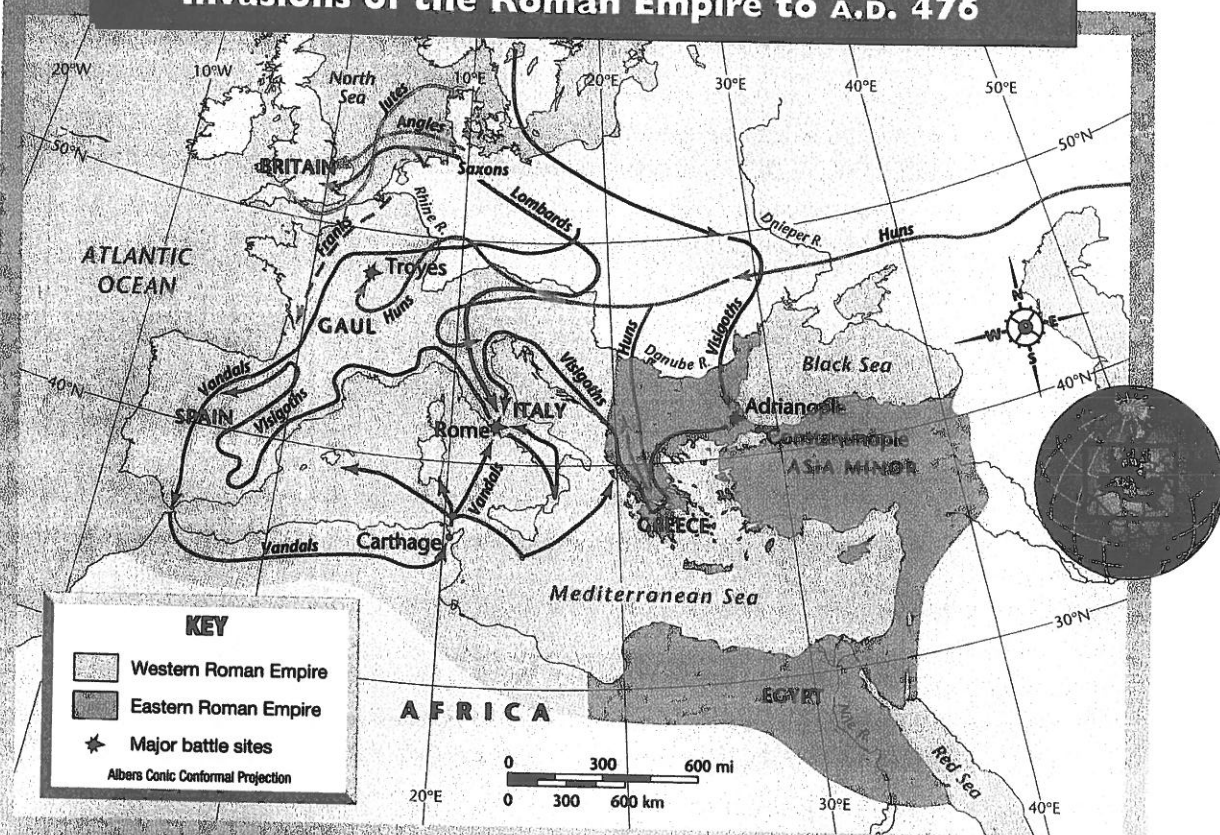
Weak, Corrupt Rulers After Commodus, emperors were almost always successful generals and not politicians. They often stole money from the treasury. They used the money to enrich themselves and pay off the soldiers. Under these emperors, the government and the economy fell to pieces. The senate lost its power. During this time, even emperors were not safe. Between A.D. 180 and A.D. 284, Rome had 29 emperors. Most were murdered.

▼ These time line entries show the decline and collapse of the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire, A.D. 180 to A.D. 476



Invasions of the Roman Empire to A.D. 476



Map Study When the Roman Empire grew too large to be ruled from one place, the emperor Diocletian divided it into western and eastern parts. The eastern empire would survive the fall of the western empire by 1,000 years. **Movement** Trace the routes of foreign invasions of the Roman Empire. In which part did most occur?

A Mercenary Army Once, the Roman army had been made up of citizen soldiers ready to defend their land. Now the army was filled with mercenaries, foreign soldiers who serve only for pay. The problem with mercenaries is that they do not fight for any cause. They often switch sides if it is to their personal advantage. Rome's strength depended on a strong army loyal to the nation. Such an army was now just a memory.

The Size of the Empire The Roman Empire had grown too big to be ruled from one place. All over the empire, in Asia, Africa, and northern Europe, the enemies of Rome attacked. Tribes that the Romans had earlier conquered now poured over the empire's borders. This caused the empire to shrink.

Serious Economic Problems When Rome stopped conquering new lands, no new sources of wealth were available. This meant that taxes grew heavier. Further, the resources of the empire were being drained to pay an army that often would not fight. There was severe unemployment throughout the empire.

READ ACTIVELY

Predict How did Diocletian try to stop the decline of the Roman Empire?

Food was scarce. That made the price of food go up. To pay for this food, the government decided to produce more money in the form of coins. The value of those coins depended on the amount of silver in them. But since the government did not have much silver, it put less in each coin. So there was more money, but the money had less value. This situation is called **inflation**. If inflation is not controlled, money continues to buy less and less. Roman coins soon became worthless.

Trying to Stop the Decline Some emperors made strong efforts to stop the steady decline of the Roman Empire. While Diocletian persecuted Christians, he also worked to strengthen Rome. He enlarged the army and built new forts at the borders. He also improved the system of collecting taxes. This brought in more money to pay the army. Diocletian divided the empire into two parts to make it easier to rule. He ruled over the more wealthy east and appointed a co-emperor to rule over the west.

The Romans Accept Christianity

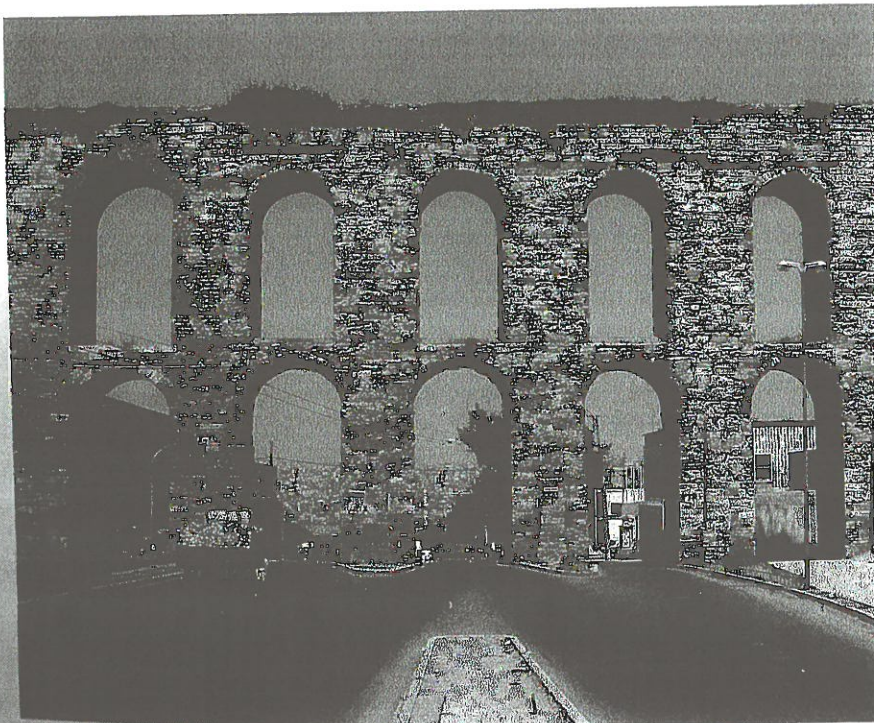
Diocletian and his co-emperor retired in A.D. 305. A struggle for power followed. For seven years, generals fought each other for power until one—Constantine—came out the winner. As you read earlier, Constantine reported that the Christian God had helped his army win the battle for the control of Rome. A year later, Constantine proclaimed freedom of worship for people in the empire. No longer would Rome persecute the Christians. Christianity soon became the official religion of the Roman Empire—the one accepted by the government.

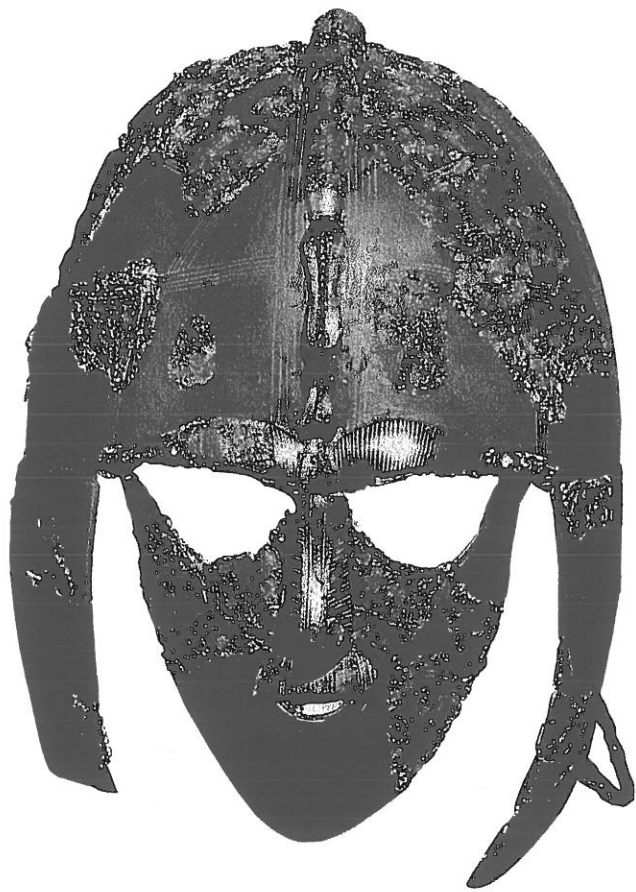
During Constantine's 25 years as emperor, he worked to strengthen the Christian church. In 330, Constantine moved his capital to the city of Byzantium (biz AN tee uhm). In his honor, the city was renamed Constantinople.

The Fall of Rome

Constantine had struggled to keep the empire together. But the forces pulling it apart were too great. After his death, invaders swept across Rome's borders and overwhelmed the empire. The invaders belonged to tribes from the north. Today, we call them Germanic tribes. The Romans called them barbarians. In the past, the Roman army had been able to defeat these

▼ This shows a Roman-style viaduct in Constantinople, the capital of the eastern Roman Empire. Today Constantinople is known as Istanbul, Turkey.





◀ The Anglo-Saxons who invaded Roman England buried their kings in ships. At a site discovered in England in 1939, the ancient ship had rotted. Yet many solid gold items, including this helmet, remained.



Vandals Today, we call someone who destroys property and valuable things a *vandal*. The Vandals were one of the Germanic tribes that invaded the Roman Empire. They looted Rome in A.D. 455. They were no worse than the other Germanic tribes. But their name came to be connected to this kind of damaging behavior.

tribes. Now, however, they could not stop the northerners. In the 400s, the Germanic tribes overran the empire. They captured and looted Rome in 410 and 455. The Roman emperor was almost powerless.

The last Roman emperor was 14-year-old Romulus Augustulus. His name recalled more than 1,000 years of Roman glory. But the boy emperor did not win glory for himself. In 476, a German general took power and sent him to work on a farm. After Romulus Augustulus, no emperor ruled over Rome and the western part of the empire.

However, even after Rome fell, the eastern part of the empire remained strong. Its capital, Constantinople, remained the center of another empire, the Byzantine empire, for another thousand years.

SECTION 5 REVIEW

1. **Define** (a) mercenary, (b) inflation.
2. **Identify** (a) Constantine, (b) Diocletian, (c) Constantinople.
3. **Why** did Roman money finally become worthless?

4. **What** did Diocletian do to make governing the Roman Empire easier?

Critical Thinking

5. **Expressing Problems** Clearly Summarize in two or three sentences the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire.

Activity

6. **Writing to Learn** Today, we think of the fall of the western Roman Empire in A.D. 476 as a great turning point in history. However, some historians think most people in those days hardly noticed any change. Why do you think that might be true?

