

Information Sets

Rise of Military Power

As the empire expanded its territory, the result was felt in the Roman economy. This increase in the economy ultimately increased the wealth of Augustus who was in turn able to use this money to pay his security guards. Remember, ascent to the position of emperor often involved fighting and assassination.

A large empire requires a large army to protect it and a lot of money to pay for the army and protection. The Roman army quickly became over-stretched and needed more and more soldiers. In order to increase the numbers to protect the expanding empire, not only were citizens recruited but so were large numbers of barbarian volunteers. Many of these volunteers were from outside the empire and had very little loyalty or patriotism towards Rome. Additionally, they had little liking of or respect for the Roman citizens they were supposed to protect.

During the Pax Romana under Augustus, the army also experienced the period of peace. This long period of relative security may have led to the cessation of the drills that had made them a superior fighting force. This made them inefficient and vulnerable to attack.

Political Corruption

Politically, the Roman Empire was structured with an emperor, Senate and the military. The three bodies had to work together to govern the empire. The emperor legally ruled over Rome with the Senate acting as an advisory body. The emperors were powerful, wealthy and eventually became corrupt using their power and money for their own interests instead of the good of the empire. This led to bad feelings between the Senate and the emperor.

Officials often used threats or bribery to achieve their goals often ignoring the needs of the citizens. One example of this was the Praetorian Guard, the elite body of soldiers who made up the empire's bodyguards. Eventually, they became so powerful, that the Guard became the primary influence in choosing the emperor. The Guard was richly compensated for this and this simply continued the cycle.

As a result, the efficient government that had allowed Rome to grow was no longer efficient.

Economic Instability

The Roman economy began to falter in later years since much of the economy was based on expansion. Initially, as Rome's armies conquered new lands, they collected great riches from the conquered areas. As the empire grew, this wealth went to a few individuals who began to buy large amounts of land. These large estates were worked by slaves. Since small farmers could not produce the goods as cheaply, unemployment was widespread.

Eventually, Rome experienced high rates of inflation. Inflation is when the price of goods increase. This was a result of not enough gold and goods coming in and with the same amount of goods continuing to go out. When Rome's boundaries reached their furthest extent and the empire was no longer conquering land, the flow of gold and riches into the empire significantly decreased. Roman emperors, however, did not change their habits of indulging in luxury items. The lack of gold to make into coins led to Roman money losing value. Merchants then raised their prices to make up for the loss in value in the coins. The citizens, needing the products but unable to purchase them with devalued coins, turned to bartering for goods and paid their taxes in vegetables.

Political Instability

The path to the emperor's throne was not an easy one. There were no clear rules or consistent system set up for emperors to be chosen. The emperor was chosen with input from the old emperor, the Senate, the Praetorian Guard, (emperor's private army) and the army. The transference of power was not necessarily peaceful and orderly. Frequent civil wars to decide who would be the next successor to the throne were not uncommon. Since most legions were stationed on the borders of Rome to protect the empire, many soldiers were more loyal to their commander than to the city. Therefore, when the crown was "up for grabs", multiple generals would take their armies and fight each other for the throne. If war didn't work, often the crown would go to whoever bribed the right people.

From 186 A.D. on, the empire had 37 different emperors – 25 of whom were removed from office by assassination.

Shrinking Trade

Trade was a vital force in the Roman economy. The empire required a huge amount of money to run, and trade brought in a lot of that income. The trade was stimulated by many years of peace within the empire and more so by the number of foreign countries they conquered. Romans had access to almost any product they desired all within the empire.

As rich Roman citizens bought up large areas of land, they needed more and more people to work their large estates. The landowners agreed to give people land in exchange for rent. Then they passed laws that would not allow the people to leave the land. As a result of this, a sort of feudal system emerged where estates became little communities producing everything they needed. This in turn hurt trade in the cities.

A second factor that hurt the trade in the cities was the deterioration of the system of roads. As the roads declined, so did the paths that Romans used to move the trade goods. Without an effective way to transport products – either in or out – Roman trade dropped significantly. This loss in the economy was greatly felt in other parts of Roman life.

Attacks

As a result of the invasions from the Germanic tribes from the north, and the declining power of the Roman army, the empire and specifically the city of Rome was left vulnerable to attacks. In addition to leaving Rome open to attack, allowing the barbarian tribes inside the empire gave them access to the Roman military tactics. So when they did choose to attack, they had an intricate knowledge of how to use and how to defend Roman tactics.

In 398 AD, the Visigoths realized that the Roman army was so thinly spread that the city was for the taking. Advancing southward, the tribe took over the city in 410 AD. Further weakened by this attack, Rome was then continually attacked by various groups. Various groups united under the Huns because of a leader named Attila. Attila was power laid in his ability to provide his followers and troops with precious metals which he was getting from Roman territory. Attila gradually made his way through the eastern empire where he got huge sums of money and other valuables. Although Attila and the Huns never officially sacked the city of Rome, years of attacks weakened the empire so much that when the Vandals attacked the city in 455 AD, the city suffered serious damages. The Roman legions that had conquered and controlled so much of Europe could not stop the Vandals from destroying the city of Rome.

Invasions

Rome's massive size as an empire was also to be part of its ultimate demise. As Rome grew in size, its mighty military was spread thinner and thinner to continue to protect the ever expanding empire. Eventually barbarians (people who appear uncivilized) began invading from the north and the Roman legions could do nothing to stop them. Often the legions were pulled from the borders to fight in civil wars. Many of the barbarians were moving into Roman territory because they were simply looking for land and the good Roman life. Others were being pushed into Roman territory by the Huns from the west.

For whatever reason, this brought in a large number of people who were not loyal to the Romans. These tribes were never conquered, just assimilated, and therefore never "tamed." The Romans made deals with many of the tribes and allowed them to live within the empire if they promised to protect the border from the Huns. Eventually these tribes realized that the Roman army was not what it previously was and the barbarians ran rampant over the Roman territory.