

# The End of the Empire in the West

At the height of Rome's power in 100 C.E., proud Romans believed the empire would last forever. yet by the year 500, the western half of the empire had collapsed. What happened to cause the fall of the mightiest empire the world would ever know?

## Problems in the Late Empire

Most modern historians believe that a number of problems combined to bring about Rome's fall. Here are three of the main reasons:

### 1. Political Instability

Rome never solved the problems of how to peacefully transfer political power to a new and capable leader. When an emperor died, ambitious rivals often fought each other for the emperor's crown. Real power fell into the hands of the armies, who could help leaders into power -- or destroy them. Sometimes rivals didn't wait for an emperor to die; emperors were regularly murdered. After 180 C.E., Rome had a series of weak -- and sometimes dishonest -- emperors.



### 2. Economic and Social Issues



Political instability contributed to other problems. To finance Rome's huge armies, its citizens had to pay heavy taxes. These taxes hurt the economy and drove many people into poverty. Trade also suffered. Across the empire, the spirit of citizenship declined.

### 3. Weakening Frontiers

The huge size of the empire made it hard to defend. By the 300s, Germanic tribes were pressing hard on the western borders of the empire. Many of these people settled inside the empire and were recruited into the army. But these soldiers had little loyalty to Rome.

## The Fall of Rome

In 330 C.E., the emperor **Constantine** took a step that changed the future of Rome. He moved his capital 850 miles to the east, to the ancient city of Byzantium. He renamed the city New Rome. Later it was called **Constantinople**. (Today it's known as Istanbul, Turkey.)

Before Constantine, emperors had tried sharing power over the vast empire between co-rulers. After Constantine's reign, power was usually divided between two emperors, one based in Rome and one in Constantinople. Rome became the capital of just the western part of the

empire.

The emperors in Rome soon found themselves threatened by invading Germanic tribes. In 410 C.E., one of these tribes attacked and looted Rome itself. Finally, in **476 C.E.**, the last emperor in the west was driven from his throne. The western half of the empire began to dissolve into separate kingdoms ruled by separate tribes.

In the east, the empire continued for another 1,000 years. Today we call this eastern empire the

**Byzantine Empire**, after Byzantium, the original name of its capital city. The Byzantines wove the Roman heritage into their own rich civilization. But they were never able to put the old empire back together. For historians, the fall of Rome marks the end of the ancient world.

