

CHAPTER 26

THE EMPIRE, DIVIDED AND DEFEATED

THE FALL OF ROME

“ SYMMACHUS AND CASSIODORUS

In Plutarch’s story about the founding of Rome, the Trojans named their new city for Roma, a rebellious wife who burned the Trojan ships. Centuries later, another writer, Symmachus, gives us another picture of Roma. Now she is an old woman. Speaking to the emperor, Roma says that she is used to being admired and honored. But things have changed, and she is sad. People are following new ways, worshiping new gods.

Roma says she is too old to change. She doesn’t want to change—and besides, she shouldn’t have to at her age. “Best of emperors, fathers of the fatherland, respect my age. . . . Let me enjoy the ancient ceremonies, for I do not regret them. Let me live in my own way, for I am free. This is the religion which made the whole world obedient to my laws. . . . Change in old age is humiliating.”

Symmachus, a fourth-century CE orator and consul, had always loved Rome as it was before Christianity replaced the traditional gods. But during his lifetime, he had seen Rome change. He was horrified when the Christian emperor Gratian took the Altar of Victory out of the Senate house. Augustus himself had placed it there in 30 BCE as a symbol of Rome’s good relationship with its ancient gods. Symmachus believed that these same gods had protected Rome and made it glorious. But those gods were doomed. In 392 the emperor Theodosius the Great outlawed pagan worship. Christianity had won against the old gods of Rome.

Rome’s glory faded during the fourth and fifth centuries. Historians usually give 476 CE as the date for its fall. But Rome did not fall like an apple from a tree. It was more gradual than that. About 235 CE, after two and a half centuries of stable government, the Roman Empire fell into

“ Symmachus, *Dispatches to the Emperor*, 383 CE

“Horrify” comes from the word *horrificare*, which means to bristle, shake, or be afraid.

chaos. Numerous armies declared their generals “emperor,” and the Roman legions fought each other instead of defending the frontiers. They named almost 50 emperors during the next 50 years. But fewer than 20 made it to Rome, and not one of them died of natural causes. An extraordinary man named Diocletian finally broke the pattern of violence and restored order to the empire.

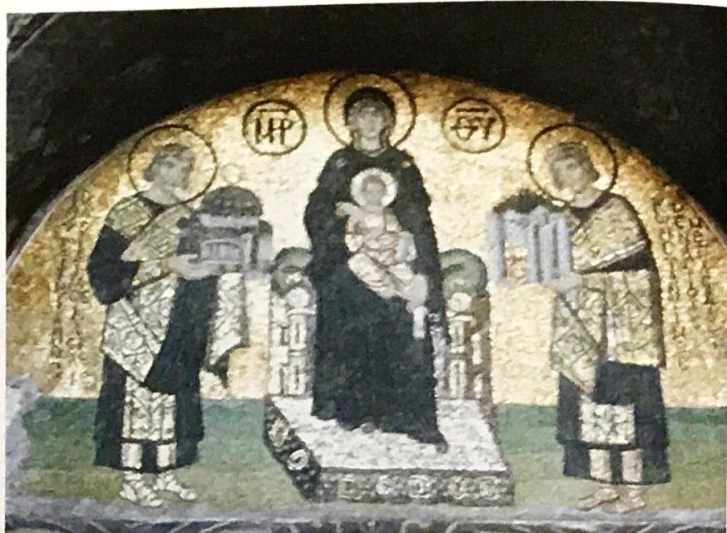
Diocletian came from humble beginnings. His father may even have been a freed slave. Although he started at the bottom, Diocletian rose through the ranks and became a general. He served under the emperor Numerian until 284 CE, when Numerian was murdered. When Diocletian murdered the emperor’s killer, the army proclaimed him emperor of Rome.

Diocletian was a practical man. He saw how hard it would be to rule such a huge territory. He realized that he needed to reorganize the army and improve tax collecting. Otherwise, how could he pay the army? He decided to divide the empire into two parts with four rulers: two senior emperors (*Augusti*) and two junior emperors (*Caesares*). This tetrarchy (“rule of four”) worked pretty well until Diocletian became ill and gave up his power.



The Emperor Hadrian built the Pantheon to honor the gods of ancient Rome. This temple represents the old religion that Roma loved so much. Today, it symbolizes the old and new worlds of Rome—the ancient temple surrounded by modern buildings and the constant buzz of traffic. It’s surrounded, yet beautiful; besieged, but still serene.

Jesus' mother, Mary, sits on a throne, holding him as two emperors bring gifts. On the right is Constantine holding a model of the city he founded, Constantinople. On the left, the emperor Justinian brings Jesus a model of the Hagia Sophia.



Warring generals fought for control of the empire until Constantine's victory in 312 CE. Now power shifted to the east. Constantine founded the new capital city of Constantinople in 330 CE. From there, his successors ruled a unified empire until the death of the emperor Theodosius in 395 CE. Then the empire actually split into two parts, with two emperors in two separate capitals: Rome in the west and Constantinople in the east. This made a huge difference and was a major step towards "the fall."

Foreign invasions also contributed to Rome's fall. For a century, barbarians had battered Italy so fiercely that the western emperors had to call their troops back from the provinces. The soldiers were needed at home. Rome pulled the last of its troops from Britain in 407 CE. With the Roman forces gone, the Irish and Scots as well as the barbarian tribes from Germany soon overran the British population. Rome's 400-year rule over Britain had ended. At the same time another German tribe called the **Vandals** devastated Gaul, passed through Spain, and by 429 had established a kingdom in North Africa. Now the barbarians controlled nearly all the western provinces of Rome's once-great empire.

Then, in 476 CE, German invaders forced the Roman emperor from his throne. This emperor, Romulus Augustulus,

"Vandalism" comes from the name of a Germanic tribe that, like the Goths, invaded Italy. The Vandals were a powerful and destructive tribe; the term "vandalism" means malicious destruction.

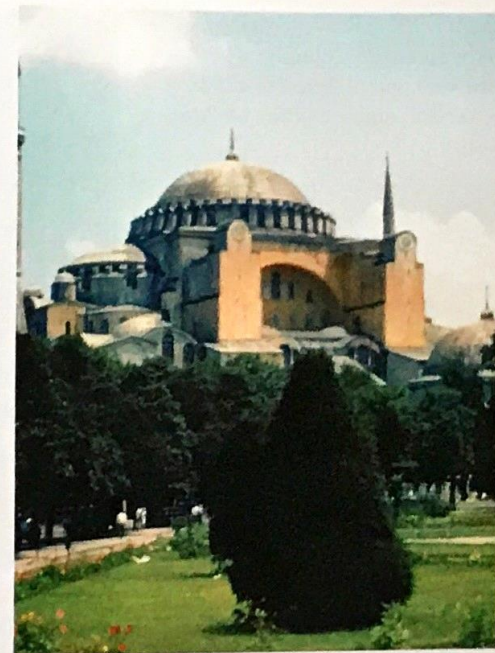
was only 12 years old. And even though he had the names of Rome's first king and its first emperor, he wasn't very impressive. He was a child, and not a strong one. A German named Odoacer became king in his place, and Romulus retired to a house in the country.

Few people living in Rome in 476 CE would have called this event "the Fall of Rome." But later writers and historians saw how important it really was. Looking back, it became clear that Rome was never quite the same after 476 CE.

Most historians agree on the date of Rome's fall, but they have been arguing for centuries about why. Some, agreeing with Symmachus, blamed Christianity. Yet the emperors who ruled in Constantinople were Christian, too, and Constantinople prospered long after 476 CE. The other Roman emperor still ruled there, and although the citizens of Constantinople spoke Greek, they still called themselves Romans. In fact, the eastern capital called itself "Roman" for another 1,000 years.

The cause of Rome's fall has to be something that was true for the Western Empire, but not for the Eastern Empire. One difference between the two empires was geography. The Western Empire had to defend much longer borders. Its troops were spread out, which made them more vulnerable—more easily attacked and defeated. The Eastern Empire had many more people and could support a much larger army. It included the rich lands of Egypt and controlled a lively, moneymaking trade with Arabia, China, and India. Its wealthy cities produced manufactured goods that brought in taxes. Yet Rome frowned on manufacturing and still relied upon agriculture for its income. The landowning aristocrats of Rome made money, but often in corrupt ways. Even more harmful was their use of private armies and political connections to avoid paying taxes.

When the empire actually split, Rome could no longer collect taxes from the wealthy east. Suddenly, there was almost no money coming in. The government in Rome



This domed building in Istanbul was once the Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, built by Justinian and dedicated in 563 CE. It later became a Muslim mosque and is now a museum.

After the fall of Rome, grass grew up in the Forum and it became a park—cows even grazed there. For a time, it was called campo vaccino, the “cow pasture.”



grew desperate. It raised taxes and seized crops to feed its army. Hungry farmers joined the foreign invaders. As more and more taxable land fell into the hands of the German invaders, the state budget grew smaller and smaller.

“Magnificent” comes from the words, *magnus* (great) and *facere* (to do, to make).

When the foreign king Odoacer took the throne in Rome, the **magnificent** days of imperial Rome were over. But even the conquering barbarians admired Roman civilization. The German kings not only adopted Christianity but tried to hold on to Rome’s glory as well. They paid poets to write hymns in Latin. They borrowed Rome’s system of laws and adapted it to fit their own needs. Other Europeans tried to meet the standard set by Rome. As the Gothic king Theodoric liked to say, “an able Goth wants to be like a Roman; only a poor Roman would want to be like a Goth.”

66 Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 537 CE