

# The Fall of the Roman Empire

2

The fall of the Roman Empire is usually considered the starting point for the Middle Ages. In ancient times, Rome—a term that stood not only for the city of Rome, but for the entire world dominated by the Romans—was one of the world’s great civilizations. The city itself was founded, according to tradition, in 753 B.C., and over the years that followed, it gradually began to dominate other cities in Italy. In 507 B.C. the Roman Republic, comprising Rome itself and surrounding areas, was established. In 390 B.C. a nomadic group from the north called the Gauls, or Celts, invaded Rome, and this led the Romans to begin building up their military. The next five centuries saw near-constant warfare, during which Rome expanded its territory to include much of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. There was also nearly constant warfare among the Roman leaders themselves in the century leading up to 31 B.C., when the Roman Empire was established. During the next two centuries, the Roman world enjoyed a period of prosperity and contentment known as the *Pax Romana*, or “Roman peace.”



## Words to Know: The Fall of the Roman Empire

**Assassination:** Killing, usually of an important leader, for political reasons.

**Bishop:** A figure in the Christian Church assigned to oversee priests and believers in a given city or region.

**Cavalry:** Soldiers on horseback.

**Convert:** A new believer in a religion.

**Ecumenical:** Across all faiths, or across all branches of the Christian Church.

**Heresy:** A belief that goes against established church teachings.

**Infantry:** Foot soldiers.

**Legion:** A unit in the Roman military, consisting of between 3,000 and 6,000 soldiers; used collectively to refer to the entire Roman army.

**Martyr:** Someone who willingly dies for his or her faith.

**Nomadic:** Wandering.

**Persecutions:** In church history, Roman punishment of Christians for their faith.

**Pope:** The bishop of Rome, and therefore the head of the Catholic Church.

**Sack:** To destroy, usually a city.

**Theologian:** Someone who analyzes religious faith.

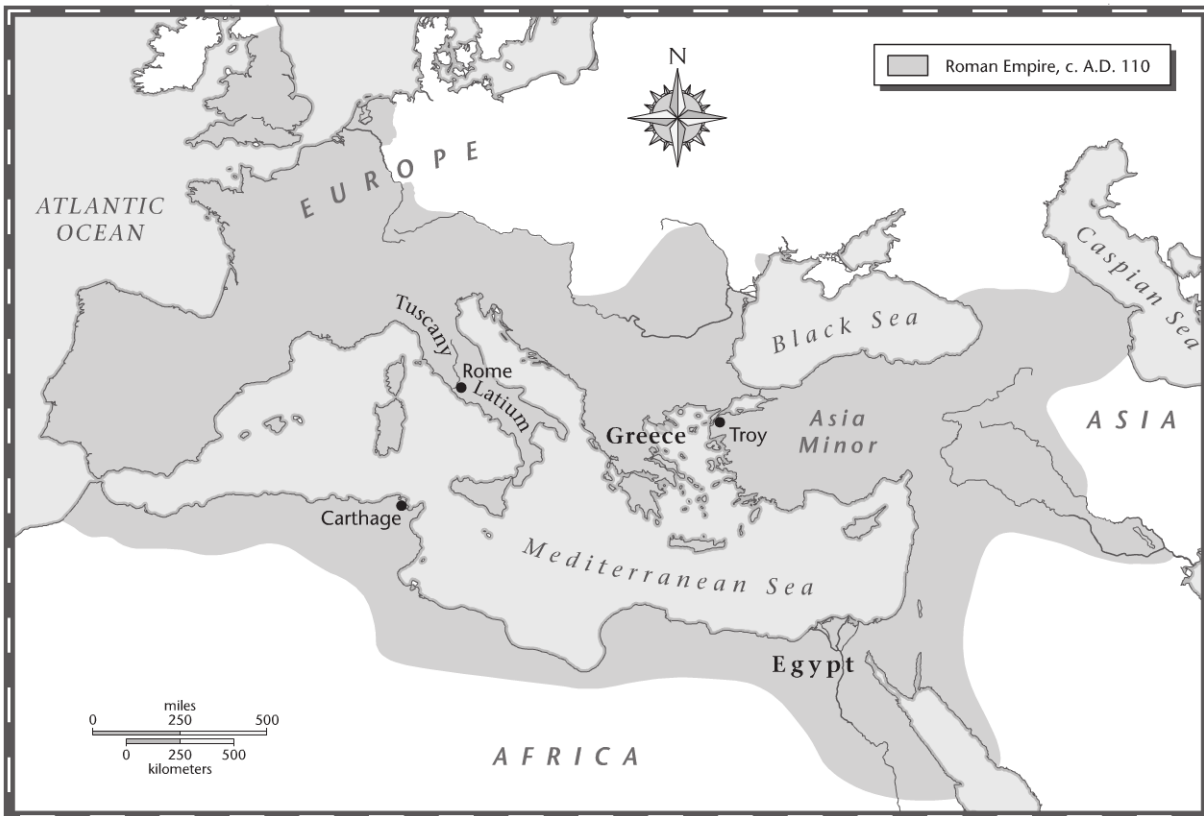
**Tribal:** Describes a society, sometimes nomadic, in which members are organized by families and clans, not by region, and in which leadership comes from warrior-chieftains.

### The decline of the Roman Empire (A.D. 180–c. 350)

From A.D. 96 to 180, a series of able emperors ruled Rome, but the quality of emperors in the next half-century would be uneven, and several were assassinated. Over the coming years, that method of replacing Roman emperors would become common. Between 235 and 285, Rome had twenty emperors, many of them promoted to their positions by the army. Few died a natural death.

During the third century, an increasing tax burden, a slave-based

economy, and other deep-seated economic problems created an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, until there was no one in between. The few Romans who were fabulously wealthy gave themselves up to lives of pleasure, while the many living in poverty faced a future of unrelieved misery. Neither group was having children, the rich because they could not be bothered, the poor because they could not afford them. Both groups practiced widespread abortion and infanticide, or the murder of children. Soon the Roman population began to decrease, and



**A map of the Roman Empire at its height, c. A.D. 110.** Illustration by XNR Productions. Reproduced by permission of the Gale Group.

the Italian countryside was filled with empty houses.

The empire stopped growing along with the population. For centuries, Rome had survived on constant warfare, which brought in slaves and captured treasures. No one thought about expanding the economy by learning better ways to cultivate crops or by creating more goods to sell; therefore once there were no more nations to attack, there would be no more wealth. Up to the A.D. 100s, the system of growth by conquest had worked fair-

ly well; then Rome came to the limits of its power.

All around it, the empire faced natural or manmade boundaries: deserts in North Africa and the Middle East, the military force of the Persians and others on its southeastern borders, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the North Sea to the northwest. Worst of all, along its northern and northeastern frontiers, formed by the Rhine (RYN) and Danube (DAN-yoob) Rivers respectively, were dozens and dozens of tribal "barbarians." The mission of Rome's armies turned from

conquest to mere survival, as they tried to hold on to lands they had won centuries before. But Romans themselves had lost their will to fight; therefore as time went on, the ranks of their legions were increasingly filled with foreigners—primarily barbarians.

### **Barbarians and Christians**

The barbarians would later bring down the empire, but the decline of Roman society itself made possible the barbarian takeover. The Romans had grown weak, but the tribes around their borders were strong; and whereas the Romans were cowardly, the barbarians were brave. In many ways, the barbarians—who, despite their brutality, were often honest and noble in their behavior—most resembled the ancient Romans who had built the great society that was now crumbling.

Only one group within Rome could match the barbarians' vigor and energy: a small group of religious believers called Christians, so named because they followed the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Christian religion had originated in the Middle East during the first century A.D. and spread to Rome through the efforts of numerous apostles, or teachers, including Paul, Peter, and others. Most likely Peter and Paul died in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero (ruled A.D. 54–68), who conducted the first wave of persecutions against Christians.

Over the next two-and-a-half centuries, Rome treated its Christian minority mercilessly: for instance, Christians were fed to lions while

cheering spectators watched. One reason for this treatment was Christians' rejection of Roman ways, in particular the pagan religion. Whereas the Romans worshiped many gods, represented with statues everywhere, the Christians had just one god, and it was against their religion to worship statues. The gods of Rome were such a part of life that to reject them was to reject Rome itself: therefore Christians were scorned as "atheists" and dangerous anti-Roman activists.

The Christians meanwhile had their own type of government, with leaders called bishops presiding over each major city. According to tradition, in his last days the apostle Peter became the bishop of Rome, and because Rome was the center of the world at the time, Peter's office came to have a great significance. Therefore the bishop of Rome took on a special title: father, or *papa*—that is, pope. During the Middle Ages, hundreds of men would hold the title of pope, or leader of the Roman Catholic Church, and the papacy (office of the pope) would come to hold great power.

The early popes, however, were far from powerful; and whereas many popes in the Middle Ages did things that Jesus Christ would have condemned—for instance, living on wealth that they had taken from the poor—the early popes typically led lives of poverty. As for the Christians as a whole, it seems that persecution made them more sincere in charity and love, concepts taught by Christ, and indeed it would be hard to find a class



This painting, *The Apparition of the Cross to Constantine*, by Giulio Romano, depicts the event that persuaded Constantine to convert to Christianity. Reproduced by permission of the Corbis Corporation.

of people more heroic than the early Christian martyrs (MAR-turz) who sacrificed their lives for their faith.

### The age of Constantine

Rome may have lost its will to rule the world, but it did not die easily. From the late 200s to the early 300s, the empire recovered under the leadership of Diocletian (die-oh-KLEE-shun; ruled A.D. 284–305) and later Constantine. Diocletian was the last emperor to persecute Christians. Constantine later claimed that before going into battle at the Milvian Bridge along the River Tiber (TY-bur) on Oc-

tober 28, A.D. 312, he saw a cross in the sky superimposed over Greek words meaning “In this sign [you shall] conquer.” He won the battle and accepted Christianity.

Constantine’s version of the Christian faith, however, was mixed with a heavy dose of the old-time Roman religion, and as emperor he remained high priest of the pagan gods. Nonetheless, under his rule, Christianity became not only legal, but socially acceptable. At the same time church leaders, seeing the advantages of working with the Roman system rather than against it, eased restric-

tions against Christians taking part in public life.

Meanwhile more and more people converted to the new religion, and this rising popularity—combined with imperial support and the church’s new openness to participation in political affairs—soon gave Christians considerable power. Many church leaders used their influence to foster the principles of brotherhood and tolerance taught by Jesus, but many others seemed eager to turn the tables on the pagans who had mistreated them for so long. Indeed, in many cases, the formerly persecuted Christians themselves became persecutors. One of their most notable victims was Hypatia (hy-PAY-shuh; A.D. 370–415), the only known female philosopher of ancient times, who in 415 was brutally attacked and killed by a group of “Christians” opposed to her pagan teachings.

Constantine made a number of valuable contributions to early Christianity, particularly by linking the power of the church with the power of the state—in this case, the Roman government. He also called an extremely important conference of Christian bishops, who met in the city of Nicaea (nie-SEE-uh) in Asia Minor in 325 to discuss a problem that threatened to destroy Christian unity at the very moment of triumph.

A Greek named Arius (AR-ee-uhs; c. A.D. 250–337) had been preaching that God was separate from all of his creation—and that Christ was one of those creations; this idea came to be called Arianism. Mainstream Chris-

tians, by contrast, believed that God the Father and God the Son (Jesus) were one and the same being. Arianism had by then gained a number of converts, particularly in Greece and Egypt. In response, the 220 bishops at the Council of Nicaea declared Arianism a heresy (HAIR-uh-see)—a belief that went against the Christian faith. The bishops also adopted the Nicene (ny-SEEN) Creed, a form of which is still recited in churches today: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible or invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten ... not made....”

Nicaea was the first ecumenical (ek-yoo-MIN-i-kul) council, a meeting of all believers at which church leaders established the official Christian position on a variety of issues. In the view of Constantine and later church leaders, in order for Christianity to survive and grow, there could be no diversity of opinion. Gradually the church began to call itself “catholic,” which means universal. Indeed, for many centuries the church would maintain a semblance of unity, though in fact there were many varieties of Christianity.

Constantine in his later years placed his stamp all over Christianity and the medieval world. Adapting a type of Roman building called the basilica (buh-SIL-i-kuh), he made its open floor plan a model for church design that is still used today. He also established the city of Constantinople (kahn-stan-ti-NOH-pul), which became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Realizing that the empire had become too big to control from one city,

in 330 he established a second capital at a Greek city formerly called Byzantium (bi-ZAN-tee-um). Thus he restored the empire for a time, but he could not arrest its steady decline. By the mid-300s, the threat to Rome's borders had become too severe to ignore.

## The fall of Rome (c. 350–476)

The ultimate source of Rome's downfall lay many centuries and many thousands of miles away. When the Chinese began building their Great Wall in 221 B.C. to keep out barbarian invaders, they displaced a number of nomadic peoples who had long threatened them from the north. Among these were the Hsiung-Nu (shung-NOO), a group of extremely able horsemen and warriors. The Hsiung-Nu began moving westward, leaving a trail of death and destruction as they went. The first Europeans unfortunate enough to cross their paths in the A.D. 300s gave them a new name: Huns. For more than a century, the very word "Hun" was a synonym for terror.

Meanwhile, a number of other tribal groups emerged in Europe. There were the Gauls, or Celts (KELTZ), who lived in what is now France and the British Isles. Farther east and north were other groups, so many that the Romans had long before given up trying to distinguish between them. They all seemed to have blond hair and blue eyes; therefore the Romans called them by a word that, in the Latin language, meant "related": *Germanus*.



## Roman Numerals

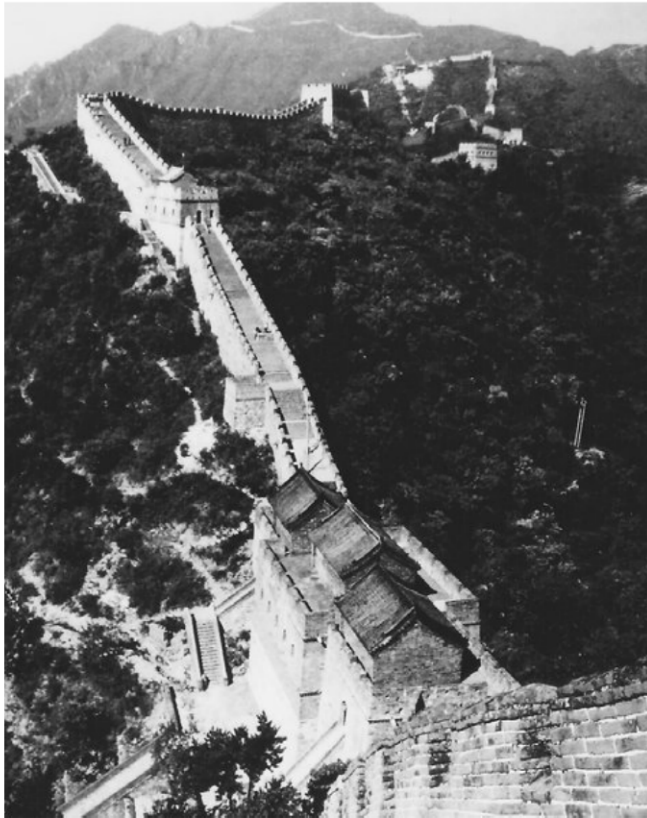
The Romans had their own number system, quite unlike the Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) used throughout the world today. The symbols included:

I = 1  
V = 5  
X = 10  
L = 50  
C = 100  
D = 500  
M = 1,000

All other numbers were created by combinations of these seven numbers; for example, the numbers from 1 to 10 are: I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X. From 11 to 20, the pattern repeated, but with an X at the front, standing for 10: XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX.

A German group known as the Goths began moving southeastward in the A.D. 200s, and as they did, they split into two groups. The eastern Goths or Ostrogoths settled in what is now Ukraine, and the western Goths or Visigoths put down roots in north-eastern Greece and modern-day Romania. No one knew it then, but these two tribes would become key players in the chain of events that brought about the fall of Rome.

Though the Romans called them barbarians and thought of them as uncivilized, in fact the Goths had a



**The Great Wall of China, which the Chinese began building in 221 B.C., was built to repel barbarian invaders.** *Reproduced by permission of AP/Wide World Photos.*

great respect for Roman civilization. They seemed to understand that the Roman Empire was on the decline, and they hoped to preserve what was best about Rome. Thus it was a particular tragedy when, in 372, the Huns crossed the Volga River and attacked the Ostrogoths. They then moved westward and dealt the Visigoths a harsh blow as well.

The Visigoths begged the Roman emperor Valens (VAY-luhnz; ruled 364–378) for permission to cross the Danube into the empire. Up to

that point, Rome had seldom willingly allowed barbarian tribes inside its borders; but Valens agreed to let them in if they would surrender their weapons and give up their children as hostages. The Romans took advantage of the Visigoths' desperation to charge them outrageous prices for food—a loaf of bread, for instance, went for ten pounds of silver—and sold most of the Visigoths' children into slavery.

Because the Visigoths were relatively peaceful and civilized—though that would change in time—the Romans' treatment of them was particularly cruel. This says a great deal about the moral character of the Romans; so too does the fact that the Visigoths were able to bribe Roman officials into letting them keep their weapons. In the end, the Visigoths revolted, and began overrunning the region, burning and looting as they went.

In 378, Valens lost his life in a battle with the Visigoths, a battle that according to one historian was the worst Roman defeat in nearly six hundred years. The victory of the Gothic cavalry also marked the beginning of medieval military tactics: whereas foot soldiers (or infantry) had dominated for more than a millennium, horsemen would now control the battlefield.

### **The Visigoths sack Rome**

It was the beginning of the end for Rome. Theodosius (ruled 379–395) was the last emperor to rule a united realm; thereafter the Eastern Roman Empire would chart a separate course. Among Theodosius's generals was a





## Augustine and the *City of God*

One of the greatest minds of the Middle Ages, and indeed in Western history, was the theologian and church leader Augustine (aw-GUS-tin; 354–430). Raised in North Africa, he experimented with loose lifestyles and the Manichaean faith, an obscure Persian religion that viewed all existence as a battle between good and evil, before embracing Christianity in 386. Later he became bishop at the Mediterranean port city of Hippo, now part of northeastern Algeria. Augustine wrote a number of important books, including the *Confessions* and *De civitate Dei*, or the *City of God*. The former, the world's first autobiography, was a deeply personal work, whereas the latter discussed the whole history of the world.

Augustine wrote the *City of God* after the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410. This event was far more devastating than the actual end of the Western Roman Empire sixty-six years later, and wise men throughout the Roman world looked for reasons why it had happened. They did not try to provide a military or political explanation, as modern analysts would; in a fashion more typical of premodern people, they saw the event purely in religious terms. The gods of Rome, many claimed, were angry at the Romans for turning away from them in favor of Christianity.

Not so, claimed Augustine in the *City of God*; in fact, quite the opposite was



**Augustine.** Reproduced by permission of the Corbis Corporation.

true. The Visigoths were a punishment from the Christian God for the Romans' continued sinfulness. He then went on to outline a number of ideas that would become essential to medieval European thought. The world was divided into two groups, he wrote: the city or society of people who were loyal to God on the one hand, and those loyal to earthly existence—which was the same thing as loyalty to Satan—on the other. The City of God, as he called the first group, was destined to triumph over the City of Man. This idea provided a basis for later claims by the popes that the church, as the City of God, should dominate the state, or the City of Man.



**Attila, leader of the Huns, spread fear throughout Western Europe, though Pope Leo I was able to convince him not to attack Rome. Reproduced by permission of the Corbis Corporation.**

brilliant Visigoth king named Alaric (AL-uh-rik; c. 370–410). After Theodosius died, Alaric turned against Rome.

To protect themselves against invasion, the Romans had moved their capital from Rome itself to Ravenna, a city in northeastern Italy surrounded by marshes. Yet Rome still remained the center of the Western world, and one of its greatest defenders was a “barbarian” named Stilicho (STIL-i-koh; c. 365–408). Stilicho’s people were the Vandals, a Germanic

tribe that, following their defeat by the Visigoths in Constantine’s time, had requested and received permission to settle within the empire. Stilicho himself had proven such an able commander and administrator that he essentially ruled the Western Roman Empire, and he was able to repel an earlier attack by Alaric. However, a rival managed to convince the reigning emperor that Stilicho was a traitor, and he was executed in 408—two years before Alaric’s troops returned.

The Romans tried to bribe Alaric, who had surrounded the city and cut off all food supplies. For a time, Alaric considered it, but in the end he invaded the city. For three days in August 410, Rome experienced a terror it had not known since the Gauls’ invasion exactly eight hundred years before. The Visigoths and their army, which included Huns and runaway Roman slaves, looted, burned, and killed, virtually destroying the city.

Later a rumor would spread that the Visigoths had destroyed Rome because they were pagans and resented Rome’s acceptance of Christianity. This rumor helped bring about one of the most important books of the Middle Ages (see box, “Augustine and the *City of God*”), but it was not true: the Visigoths were Christians, though they subscribed to the Arian heresy. They even spared the Church of St. Peter, center of the pope’s authority.

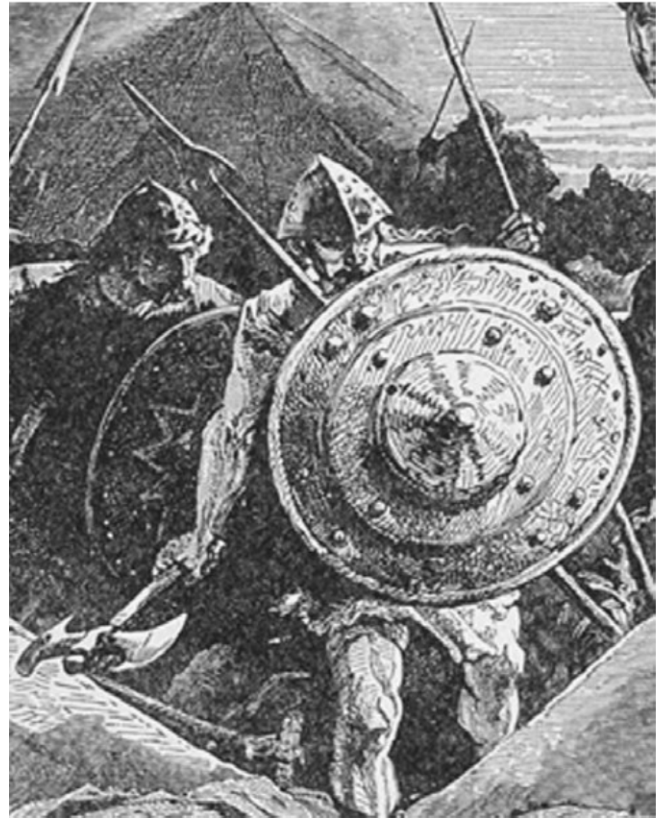
## **Huns and Vandals**

Certain barbarian leaders, despite their reputations for cruelty and

ruthlessness, had an odd respect for religion—including the religions of other peoples. Certainly that was true of the Huns, particularly their leader, Attila (c. 400–453). For a few years in the mid-400s, Attila held Western Europe in terror, and when he invaded Gaul in 448, it looked as though he were poised to deal the Roman Empire a fatal blow.

A combined force of Romans and barbarians actually scored a military victory over Attila—Rome’s last—in 451, but in the following year he appeared with his troops right outside Rome itself. However, he allowed Pope Leo I, or Leo the Great (ruled 440–461), to talk him out of attacking. This incident was an example of how much political authority the church could wield, establishing an important pattern for later popes. Attila withdrew and died a year later, and after that the Huns faded into the larger European population. Only the name of the country where they briefly settled in the early 400s, Hungary, serves as a reminder that they existed.

In the time between Alaric and Attila, Western Europe had been ravaged by a new threat, the formerly peaceable Vandals. Impressed by Alaric’s victories, the Vandals and other tribes plundered and pillaged their way through Gaul and into Spain. By 429, they had crossed the Mediterranean Sea and landed in North Africa, which had been under Roman control for centuries. Led by Gaiseric (GY-zu-rik; ruled 428–477), they quickly subdued the fertile coast, where most of Rome’s food was



**Gaiseric, leader of the Vandals, led a devastating attack on Rome in 455, contributing greatly to the fall of the Roman Empire.** *Reproduced by permission of Archive Photos, Inc.*

grown. For a time, the Romans were able to bribe Gaiseric, but in 455 his forces sailed across the Mediterranean for Rome itself. This time Pope Leo could not convince the invaders to turn away: they devastated Rome, and ever since, the term “vandal” has been used to describe a destructive person.

### **The final hours**

The Western Roman Empire was in its final hours, and after the

Vandals, it was just a matter of time before it caved in completely. Rome itself, once home to some 1.5 million people, had shrunk to one-fifth that size, and it would be more than a thousand years before another Western European city grew larger than ancient Rome. A parade of leaders, each more forgettable than the one before, gained control of the empire's remains; then in 475 a general named Orestes (ohr-ES-teez) placed his son on the throne with the imposing title of Romulus Augustulus.

Around the same time, a new wave of German invaders swarmed over the Italian Peninsula. When Orestes refused to give them one-third of Italy, they replaced his son with their own elected leader, Odoacer (oh-doh-AY-sur; c. 433–493). Thus the Western Roman Empire came to an end on August 23, 476. At the time, however, few perceived the event as particularly significant.

Odoacer sent a message to Zeno (ruled 474–491), ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire—thenceforth the Byzantine Empire—promising that Zeno would have the title of ruler over the West as well if he would allow Odoacer to govern in his place. Zeno had no reason to refuse, and no power in Italy to back him up, so he accepted. To many it seemed as though the empire had been reunited, not destroyed; but in fact Odoacer ruled Italy as a kingdom entirely separate from the Byzantine Empire.

## For More Information

### Books

- Bardi, Piero. *The Atlas of the Classical World: Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome*. Illustrations by Matteo Chesi, et al. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1997, pp. 34–59.
- Burrell, Roy. *Oxford First Ancient History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 206–315.
- Caselli, Giovanni. *The Roman Empire and the Dark Ages*. New York: P. Bedrick Press, 1985.
- Dijkstra, Henk, editor. *History of the Ancient and Medieval World, Volume 8: Christianity and Islam*. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1996, pp. 1015–32.
- Martell, Hazel Mary. *The Kingfisher Book of the Ancient World*. New York: Kingfisher, 1995, pp. 76–87.
- Severy, Merle, editor. *The Age of Chivalry*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1969, pp. 13–42.

### Web Sites

- "EAWC: Ancient Rome." *Exploring Ancient World Cultures*. [Online] Available <http://eawc.evansville.edu/ropage.htm> (last accessed July 28, 2000).
- Imperium Romanorum*. [Online] Available <http://wwwtc.nhmccd.cc.tx.us/people/crf01/rome/> (last accessed July 28, 2000).
- Roman Emperors: De Imperatoribus Romanis: An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors*. [Online] Available <http://www.salve.edu/~romanemp/startup.htm> (last accessed July 28, 2000).
- Roman Sites—Gateway to 1,849 Websites on Ancient Rome*. [Online] Available [http://www.ukans.edu/history/index/europe/ancient\\_rome/E/Roman/RomanSites\\*/home.html](http://www.ukans.edu/history/index/europe/ancient_rome/E/Roman/RomanSites*/home.html) (last accessed July 28, 2000).
- Rome Resources*. [Online] Available <http://www.dalton.org/groups/rome/> (last accessed July 28, 2000).