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# The decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire

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**The decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

Program of Study Committee:

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Roman Army	4
The Roman Economy	33
Conclusion	59
Bibliography	64

## Introduction

For hundreds of years the city of Rome and its inhabitants fought with their neighbors and expanded their territory until they established a vast empire which encompassed much of modern day Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. As Roman territory grew, conquest continued to fuel further conquest, but this was not a pattern that could continue indefinitely. Eventually new conquests simply became unprofitable, as can be seen from the Emperor Trajan's conquest of Dacia which failed even to pay the expenses of the expedition.<sup>1</sup> This led to the Roman Empire becoming largely stagnant by the mid-third century and both exterior and interior pressures combined to pull the empire apart, culminating in 476 C.E. with the final collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

Numerous scholars have sought to explain the collapse of this once great empire. Edward Gibbon, who published six volumes on *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* during the final quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the earliest scholars to advocate for a primary catalyst behind the Western Roman collapse. While Gibbon covered at least two dozen factors which contributed to the ultimate collapse, his chapters on Christianity portrayed his true feelings. Gibbon's arguments in these sections can be accurately summarized as "the insensible penetration of Christianity in the empire fatally undermined the genius of a great people."<sup>2</sup> The problem with this conclusion is two-fold. First of all, this explanation is too narrow as it is difficult to believe one single factor brought down the empire. More importantly, it is clear that

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<sup>1</sup> Tainter, Joseph A., *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Jordan, David P. *Gibbon and his Roman Empire*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 213.

the Eastern Roman Empire was by far more Christian than the West, therefore if Christianity was behind the fall, the East should have fallen first.

The argument for lead poisoning fatally weakening the empire provides another example of scholars searching to explain the fall of the Western Empire with one factor above all others. Jerome Nriagu argues that “the one incontestable historical fact about the Roman aristocracy is that its ranks declined quite rapidly during the last century of the Republic and during the early centuries of the Empire.”<sup>3</sup> In Nriagu’s mind, lead poisoning led to “aristothanasia” and furthermore “one would expect the progeny of great men to be mainly imbeciles and underachievers.”<sup>4</sup> This conclusion is the product of both false conclusions and a lack of understanding of lead poisoning symptoms. Sufficient evidence is not available to support a significant decline in the aristocracy and even if this decline took place, numerous other factors such as war or plague could just as easily be held up as explanations. More importantly, the author tends to count any description of bellyache or other abdominal symptoms as lead poisoning. Many modern scholars believe true cases of ancient lead poisoning are not difficult to identify and the descriptions used by Nriagu from the Hippocratic corpus and from the Sanskrit *Susruta* almost certainly are not true cases of lead poisoning.<sup>5</sup> While evidence indicates that lead poisoning did occur in antiquity, it did so on an infrequent basis and certainly did not bring down the Roman Empire.

Numerous recent scholars hold more conventional explanations for the fall of the empire. Louis West argued that “in a word, the poor and the army had eaten up the capital of the thrifty

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<sup>3</sup> Nriagu, Jerome O. *Lead and Lead Poisoning in Antiquity*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1983), 407.

<sup>4</sup> Nriagu, 411.

<sup>5</sup> Waldron, H. A. Review of *Lead and Lead Poisoning in Antiquity* by Jerome O. Nriagu. *Isis* 76, no. 1 (Mar 1985), 119.

and the western half of Europe sank into the dark ages.”<sup>6</sup> A.H.M. Jones was on a similar path when he argued “the evidence does suggest that over taxation played a significant role in the decline of the empire.” Jones further argues that this over taxation led to the progressive abandonment of lands and in turn the impoverishment of the empire.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Arther Ferrill’s work stressed that “strictly military considerations must play a large part in any explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire.”<sup>8</sup> Each of these explanations contains the flaw of resorting to a single catalyst to examine above all others. While this serves to stress one key area and is good for a work with a narrow focus, this approach often leads to key information being omitted and ignored. Only by examining a wide range of economic and military factors can one find a more complete picture of the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

The purpose of this study is to examine a wide range of economic and military factors from the Third-Century Crisis to the fall of the Western Empire. My investigation of the Roman Economy focuses on taxation, inflation, coinage, mining, slavery and *coloni*. In the section on the Roman Army, I address policy decisions of emperors, logistics, pay and supply of the armies, military losses and recruitment, strategies and tactics, and the overall decline in population across the empire. By taking this broad approach and examining numerous factors, I will present a more complete explanation for the decline and eventual collapse of the Western Roman Empire. This explanation will show how the slow erosion of both the Roman economy and military from the third-century onward fatally weakened the Western Roman Empire causing it to fall apart.

### **The Roman Army**

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<sup>6</sup> West, Louis C. “The Economic Collapse of the Roman Empire.” *The Classical Journal* 28, no. 2 (Nov 1932), 106.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, A. H. M. *The Roman Economy*. Edited by P. A. Brunt. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Ferrill, Arther. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 7.

The Roman military was the very life force which held the empire together. Without a strong army, the Romans could never have created their vast empire. From the mid-third century onward, this vital component to the success and stability of the empire slowly withered away. Poor imperial strategy combined with the declining quality of the soldiery opened the empire to increasing barbarian attacks. Over time, these attacks simply overwhelmed the remaining Roman military forces.

### **Third-Century Crisis**

Following the murder of Emperor Severus Alexander in 235, the Roman Empire plunged into a near fifty year period of chaos know as the Third-Century Crisis.<sup>9</sup> This bleak time in Roman history found the empire engaged in a never-ending series of foreign and civil wars which led to widespread destruction within many of the provinces. During this period, there were 27 recognized emperors and numerous other claimants to the throne.<sup>10</sup> Several key external factors made the threat of outside invasion greater than ever. The first of these was the gradual development of many smaller Germanic tribes into larger and more closely-knit groups. From this reorganization groups such as the Franks, Saxons, Goths and Alemanni developed. This is not to imply these groups functioned internally like anything that would resemble a state or nation, but what it did mean was that these groups could mobilize men for war on a previously unheard of scale. The second key development occurred in the east with the rise of the Sassanid Persian Empire. This new ruling class galvanized the Persian Empire into a military power which could rival Rome for control of the east. The Persians relied on heavily armored shock cavalry

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<sup>9</sup> Penrose, Jane, ed. *Rome and Her Enemies: An Empire Created and Destroyed by War*. (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2005), 173.

<sup>10</sup> Tainter, 137.

and had increased siege capabilities. This allowed the Persian Emperor Shapur I, who came to power in 241, to attack deep into Roman territory going so far as to temporarily capture Antioch.<sup>11</sup>

The practice of emperors personally leading their troops into battle during much of this period was disastrous for the stability of the empire. An early example of this comes from the short-lived Emperor Maximinus who ruled from 235 through 238. Maximinus attempted to play up his personal bravery to both the people and senate in Rome by fighting against Germanic tribes in 235. His attempt at incurring their favor failed and he was murdered in 238 during a revolt within his army.<sup>12</sup> At least Maximinus managed not to die in battle. In 251, Emperor Decius and much of his army died fighting against the Goths.<sup>13</sup> In 259, Emperor Valerian suffered an even worse fate when Persian forces surrounded and captured both him and his army at Edessa.<sup>14</sup>

These crushing defeats and continued instability throughout the empire led to the development of new tactics for fending off barbarian invaders. After 260, senators ceased to command legions. Equestrian prefects replaced them and this was a key move away from amateur leadership towards a more professional military elite. The infantry continued to fight much as it always had, with throwing spears and short stabbing swords, but the new change for the army was a much greater reliance upon cavalry.<sup>15</sup> Large numbers of cavalry units were of the

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, Stephen. *Diocletian: And the Roman Recovery*. (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1985), 15-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Herodian*, 7.2. Quoted in *The Roman Army, 31 BC- AD 337: A Sourcebook*, Edited by Brian Campbell, 234. (London: Routledge Publishing, 1994), 234.

<sup>13</sup> Kulikowski, Michael. *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, Brian. "The Army," in *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193-337*, Edited by Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey, and Averil Cameron, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 12, 110-130. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111-117.



utmost importance especially under the system of “elastic defense” developed in the late 250s and utilized by Emperors Gallienus, Claudius, and Aurelian. Under this system, fixed frontier lines disappeared in favor of meeting invaders within Roman territory. The mobility of the cavalry, as they were able to travel up to 50 miles a day on good roads, was essential in meeting and dealing with these threats. The drawback of this tactic was that invaders could cause significant amounts of damage to the provinces before they were finally defeated, as the Alemanni did during one such incursion in 258 before they were finally defeated at Milan.<sup>16</sup> Emperor Gallienus may well have been the first to establish independent cavalry regiments making this defensive system more manageable.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout this period, a trend developed where large numbers of auxiliary troops served to help the regular army deal with threats. By 235, at least 400 of these units served the empire and they played a significant role in defending against these near constant invasions.<sup>18</sup> These auxiliary units would have strongly supplemented the 33 legions known to have existed in 235.<sup>19</sup> In spite of these additional military units, it does not appear that adequate troops were always available to deal with barbarian incursions even in the heart of provinces. This was especially true if large incursions occurred on multiple fronts at the same time. The collapse of the frontier between the Rhine and the Danube by the year 260 took place during a time of massive pressure in the east, as Persian Emperor Shapur captured Antioch in 256.<sup>20</sup> An additional series of raids by Germanic peoples into Gaul in the 270s led to the sacking of nearly 60 towns, including Paris. As the military was unable to provide adequate protection, many of these towns took the

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<sup>16</sup> Williams, 92-3.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Tainter, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Luttwak, Edward N., *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 152.

initiative to erect strong walls to prevent future disasters.<sup>21</sup> An inscription from Dacia dated to 248 indicates widespread fortification projects began early during this period. The inscription states that “in order to protect the community of their own colony of Romula, they built the circuit of the walls from the base up by means of a body of soldiers.”<sup>22</sup> Around 271, Emperor Aurelian constructed a wall around the city of Rome.<sup>23</sup> This indicates that the army was no longer capable of adequately protecting the general population against foreign threats.

While the Roman military was badly battered during this period of crisis, it still retained its ability to win substantial victories and this allowed the army, and the empire, to survive through the Third-Century Crisis.<sup>24</sup> In 268, Emperor Claudius II appears to have won a smashing victory over the Goths. While the claim by the likely fictitious Trebellius Pollio that the emperor killed 320,000 Goths and destroyed 2,000 of their ships is clearly exaggerated, it seems reasonable to assume this is a defeat which the Goths would have felt for some time to come.<sup>25</sup> In 271, Emperor Aurelian appears to have further punished the Goths by invading and defeating them on their own territory, even though he decided to abandon the province of Dacia as being indefensible.<sup>26</sup> Victories such as these would have made barbarians think twice before they invaded the Roman Empire. Through his numerous successes, Emperor Aurelian was able to push back many of the barbarians and retake a number of provinces which had been previously lost, which restored at least some stability throughout the empire.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, 93.

<sup>22</sup> *ILS 510*. Quoted in *The Roman Army, 31 BC- AD 337: A Sourcebook*, Edited by Brian Campbell, (London: Routledge Publishing, 1994), 124-5.

<sup>23</sup> Boak, Arthur E. R. *Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, 111.

<sup>25</sup> S.H.A. *The Deified Claudius*, VIII.

<sup>26</sup> Kulikowski, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Tainter, 140.

Recruitment during this period is difficult to quantify, but some sources indicate the use of barbarians in the army, especially in the case of barbarians previously settled within the borders of the empire. Emperor Marcus Aurelius provides an example of this when he settled the defeated Germanic Marcomanni tribe on Roman lands in exchange for them providing recruits for the army.<sup>28</sup> Evidence of Gothic troops serving among Roman units during this period comes from a battle inscription created by Persian Emperor Shapur.<sup>29</sup> After defeating invading Germanic tribes, Emperor Probus took 16,000 of the captives as recruits and spread them throughout the provinces in detachments of 50 or 60. He is quoted as stating that the aid of barbarian auxiliaries “must be felt but not seen.”<sup>30</sup> The total number of barbarian auxiliaries that served with Roman units during this period is unknown, but it is clear that the Roman Empire was experiencing a shortage in new recruits.

The effect of the instability and destruction of the Third-Century Crisis on the general population could have been nothing short of devastating. This is especially true considering the fact that the general population may not have recovered from the severe plague which struck the empire from 165-180, and likely again in 189.<sup>31</sup> J.F. Gilliam convincingly argues that this plague did not kill half of the population as many early historians believed, but he may have gone too far in the other direction by estimating that it killed only 1 to 2 percent of the population. A 7 to 10 percent mortality rate for the empire seems more reasonable.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the exact percentage was, it seems clear that this plague disrupted patterns in many archaeological data sets. These data sets show a considerable drop in meat consumption and a decline in the length of the

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<sup>28</sup> Tainter, 135.

<sup>29</sup> Kulikowski, 36.

<sup>30</sup> S.H.A. *Probus*, XIV.

<sup>31</sup> Littman R. J. and M. L. Littman. “Galen and the Antonine Plague.” *The American Journal of Philology* 94, no. 3 (Autumn 1973), 243-5.

<sup>32</sup> Littman R. J. and M. L. Littman, 252.

average Roman femur, indicating a shorter and less healthy population. The argument that the climate of Europe at this time was cooler and dryer, if true, would only have contributed to the severity of the plague.<sup>33</sup> Based on the evidence available, this plague contributed greatly to the overall population loss which took place during this period.

Less than a century later during the worst portion of the Third-Century Crisis from 250 to 270, another large-scale plague struck the Roman Empire, this one starting in the east and spreading quickly, likely due to the movement of soldiers. When this plague is coupled with the widespread barbarian raids of this era it is reasonable to assume that the peasant population dropped substantially. This is especially true when one factors in the scores of slaves and tenant farmers, many of Germanic origin, who would have taken the opportunity presented by the confusion and disruption of this period to flee from their lands and masters.<sup>34</sup> It was from this diminished population that the army had to find enough recruits to defend the empire.<sup>35</sup>

## **Diocletian**

Emperor Diocletian's relatively stable reign from 284 to 305 helped the Roman Empire emerge from the dark shadow of the Third-Century Crisis. Diocletian reorganized both the government and the frontiers in an attempt to permanently stabilize the empire. Following a serious revolt in Egypt in 297, Diocletian became convinced multiple rulers were needed to effectively run the empire. This led him to create the Tetrarchy, or rule of four, with two senior members known as *Augusti* and two junior members called *Caesars*. The purpose of this system

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<sup>33</sup> Jongman, Willem M. "Gibbon was Right: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Economy." *Roman Economic History as World History* (2006), 192-5.

<sup>34</sup> Boak, 24-6.

<sup>35</sup> Boak, 124-5.

was to allow multiple rulers to deal with multiple threats at the same time.<sup>36</sup> In 298, the junior Emperor Galerius won a key victory over the Persians and made peace with them under extremely advantageous terms. The new established frontier was both more advanced and more easily defensible than the previous frontier had been. Elsewhere, the abandonment of certain territories made the frontiers easier to defend. In the west, the province of Dacia was recognized as lost and all territory beyond the Rhine-Danube line was abandoned. In North Africa, the southern *limes* of Volubilis were evacuated, as was territory in southern Nubia. In all, the frontiers were simplified, with exposed salients being abandoned in favor of more easily defensible lines, and only in the east was new territory added, but even here this contributed to the overall defensibility of the frontier.<sup>37</sup>

This reorganization of the frontiers served as an integral part of Diocletian's new defense-in-depth strategy. This new strategy called for the engagement of invaders within Roman territory, but still very near to the borders. To ensure deep penetrations into Roman lands did not occur, this strategy called for hard points to be set up at the frontiers and then continuing back into the province. These hard points included walled towns and numerous military forts set up at strategic locations such as river crossings, strategic passes through rough terrain, and along roads.<sup>38</sup> The hard points would be combined with mobile field forces, including a large number of cavalry units, organized on a regional level to respond to barbarian threats. When invaders crossed the frontier, the hard points served the purpose of slowing down and channeling the enemy penetration, and thus making barbarian invaders much easier to intercept and defeat

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<sup>36</sup> Tainter, 141.

<sup>37</sup> Luttwak, 152-9.

<sup>38</sup> Luttwak, 155-161.

before they could cause significant amounts of damage to the provinces.<sup>39</sup> Several surviving ancient writers seem to indicate that this new strategy met with a high degree of success. Zosimus states that “by the forethought of Diocletian, the frontiers of the empire everywhere were covered, as I have stated, with cities, garrisons and fortifications which housed the whole army.”<sup>40</sup> Eumenius further indicates the extensiveness of the system by commenting “who can count the numbers of forts of cavalry and infantry that have been rebuilt along the whole length of the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates?”<sup>41</sup> This defense-in-depth system appears to have been largely successful at holding back the barbarians. At the very least, it would have been a powerful psychological tool which may very well have discouraged many potential invaders from risking an attack on Roman territory.

For this strategy to be successful, the Roman army needed a vast expansion. It is estimated that the army stood at 400,000 strong when Diocletian came to power and by the end of his reign had been increased to between 500,000 and 600,000 men.<sup>42</sup> At the very least, the 33 legions of the Severan Era had increased to 67 legions by the end of Diocletian’s reign in 305. However, this massive increase in the size of the army would have led to severe recruitment problems. Under Diocletian, it was the responsibility of city governments or individual landowners to produce recruits annually. Instead of providing recruits, many landowners simply gave money to help encourage enlistment from barbarians either within, or outside of Roman territory through enlistment bonuses.<sup>43</sup> The practice of settling barbarians within the Roman Empire in exchange for military service was now to become all the more common. Around 295,

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<sup>39</sup> Williams, 93-4.

<sup>40</sup> Zosimus. *New History*. Translated by Ronald Ridley. (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982), 39.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, 91.

<sup>42</sup> Tainter, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell, 123-6.

the defeated tribes the Chamavi and the Frisians received vacant lands in Gaul as part of a program designed to repopulate Gaul and provide a reserve of recruits for the upcoming war to reconquer Britain.<sup>44</sup> In 307, the junior Emperor Galerius settled the defeated Carpi on lands south of the Danube as defeated subjects under the condition that they provide him with recruits for his army.<sup>45</sup> An anonymous Gallic orator summed this practice up quite well in 297 when he wrote:

Now the barbarian farmer produces corn... and indeed even if he is summoned for the levy he presents himself speedily, reduced to complete compliance and totally under our control, and is pleased that he is a mere slave under the name of military service.<sup>46</sup>

This system appears to have worked well at this time, which explains why it was widely used. The drawback to the system was that nothing guaranteed that these barbarian *federates*, as they were called, would continue to maintain their loyalty to Rome.

Evidence from this period suggests that Diocletian was worried about being able to adequately provision his armies. In the preamble of his Edict of Maximum Prices, Diocletian states his concern for the soldiers and the ability to supply them when he proclaimed that “sometimes in a single purchase a soldier is deprived of his bonus and salary, and that the contribution of the whole world to support our armies falls to the abominable profit of thieves.”<sup>47</sup> This preamble and the tables of maximum prices taken together give a strong indication that Diocletian’s chief concern was not as much the high cost of the necessities of life, but instead the high cost of supplying the armies.<sup>48</sup> A key development initiated by Diocletian was the

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, 73.

<sup>45</sup> Kulikowski, 78.

<sup>46</sup> Campbell, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Frank, Tenney. *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*. vol. 5, *Rome and Italy of the Empire*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 314.

<sup>48</sup> West, Louis C. “Notes on Diocletian’s Edict.” *Classical Philology* 34, no. 3 (July 1939), 239.

innovation of state run arsenals managed by army personnel and manned by skilled artisans conscripted for military service. Approximately twelve of these arsenals were initially established, with more being added by his successors. This direct state control soon spread to all industries considered key to the survival of the Roman Empire such as textiles, brickworks, mining and pottery just to name a few. State supervision over the industrial capacity of the empire ensured the manufacture of enough provisions to supply the army with all of its needs. Future emperors maintained, and some even expanded, the level of state control over production.<sup>49</sup> Evidence of pay to the armies is confined to surviving Egyptian papyrus which requests the authorities of Panopolis to pay military units in Upper Egypt, and while this papyrus is difficult to interpret, it does seem to indicate that military pay was nominal compared to the rate of inflation. Regular donatives on the birthday and accession of ruling emperors, along with smaller donatives for the consulships of junior emperors would have significantly boosted the soldier's income. In addition, Roman legionaries received an allowance of meat and salt, while auxiliaries received corn.<sup>50</sup>

## **Constantine**

Following the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian in 305, the Tetrarchy fell apart, largely over the choice of two of Galerius' close supporters as *Caesars* instead of the sons' of Galerius and Constantius who had just become *Augusti*. On Constantius' death in 306, his son Constantine was acclaimed emperor and in 307, a series of civil wars began.<sup>51</sup> Shortly before confronting the usurper Maxentius, Constantine appears to have had a dream during which he

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<sup>49</sup> Williams, 136.

<sup>50</sup> Campbell, 126-7.

<sup>51</sup> Kulikowski, 80.



received the message from a god to use a standard in the form of a cross to protect him from his enemies.<sup>52</sup> Whether or not this actually happened is debatable, but it is a fact that after his victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine did convert to Christianity. It is difficult to say how much of an effect this conversion would have had on the army, but it does appear that soldiers in the army were overwhelmingly pagan at this time.<sup>53</sup>

Constantine established powerful field armies for empire-wide service and to field these armies, provincial forces had to be correspondingly reduced.<sup>54</sup> There is some indication that Diocletian had a field army, but it does not appear to have been critical to his overall strategy.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, under Constantine and his system of concentrated mobile forces the highest priority was not protecting the provinces themselves, but protecting the emperor. The mobile army and the frontiers now fell under a separate command structure. This was very similar to the system used during the worst portion of the Third-Century Crisis, and while the frontiers were certainly not abandoned, they no longer had the manpower to resist serious enemy incursions. The experience Constantine had in fighting civil wars clearly influenced his decision on the development of this large mobile army.<sup>56</sup> This mobile army placed a high priority on cavalry units which could be deployed quickly to affected regions.<sup>57</sup>

At least one ancient writer appears to have felt that Constantine's weakening of frontier defenses and creation of a mobile army was a major mistake. Speaking on the frontiers, Zosimus writes that:

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<sup>52</sup> Eusebius. *Life of Constantine the Great*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *Life of Constantine the Great*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 490.

<sup>53</sup> Penrose, 233.

<sup>54</sup> Luttwak, 178.

<sup>55</sup> Campbell, 121.

<sup>56</sup> Williams, 207.

<sup>57</sup> Tainter, 142.

Constantine destroyed this security by removing most of the troops from the frontiers and stationing them in cities which did not need assistance, thus both stripping of protection those being molested by the barbarians and subjecting the cities left alone by them to the outrages of the soldiers, so that henceforth most have become deserted. Moreover he enervated the troops by allowing them to devote themselves to shows and luxuries. In plain terms, Constantine was the origin and beginning of the present destruction of the empire.<sup>58</sup>

While this criticism is quite harsh and shows Zosimus' strong dislike for Constantine, he makes several very good points. There does appear to be a qualitative decline in soldiers during this period, but it is unclear if this came from a relaxed standard of recruitment or simply a general loss of discipline within the army.<sup>59</sup> Estimates for the size of Constantine's army range as high as 650,000 men. A law issued by Constantine in 313 requiring soldiers' sons to serve in the military indicates that recruitment had become a problem. Evasion of this law appears to have been widespread because from 319 to 398 there were twenty-two additional laws issued regarding attempts to evade military service.<sup>60</sup> Recruitment of large numbers of barbarians to fill out the ranks would certainly have been possible, and even likely, when the difficulty in finding recruits for the mobile army is factored in. As this army could be stationed anywhere, many individuals would have avoided joining it at all costs because they did not wish to be stationed far from their home provinces.<sup>61</sup> Whatever the qualitative drop may have been, it still appears that this mobile field army could defeat attacking enemies, but in many cases this was only done after they had caused much damage to the provinces. The cumulative effect of this damage may very well have led to the erosion of the logistical base for the empire.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Zosimus, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Luttwak, 179.

<sup>60</sup> Tainter, 141-4.

<sup>61</sup> Luttwak, 179.

<sup>62</sup> Luttwak, 190.

Constantine rewarded soldiers who fulfilled their term of service, likely twenty years, with significant retirement bonuses. Veterans received two options. They could receive unoccupied land to farm along with 25 *folles* in cash to buy the necessities of rural life. In addition to this, veterans choosing this option were to receive a pair of oxen and 100 *modii* of assorted seeds. Under the second option, veterans received the lump sum of 100 *folles* in cash so that they could go into business.<sup>63</sup> This law shows both the incentive given to soldiers to join the army and serve out their full term, and it also indicates enough vacant land was available for them to receive upon the completion of their term of service.

### **Death of Constantine through Theodosius**

Shortly after the death of Constantine in 337, the Roman Empire was once again plunged into civil war. In 354, Emperor Constantius II emerged victorious from this series of civil wars to control the Roman world. Beginning at this time the ancient historian Ammianus Marcellinus provides us with detailed accounts of the reigns, achievements, and abilities of Roman emperors through 378. Understanding how these emperors were perceived, as well as exactly what they accomplished, provides key insights into just how capable they were at maintaining stability throughout the empire. First, we hear from Ammianus of the cruelty of the Constantius II's co-emperor Gallus. During his reign, "a number of people were found guilty and condemned through mere misty suspicion."<sup>64</sup> Some of these people were killed, while others had their property confiscated, and still others were exiled penniless. Constantius executed Gallus after a reign of only four years. Following this Constantius promoted his only remaining relative, Julian as his new co-emperor.<sup>65</sup> With this we can see that Gallus was not running his portion of the

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<sup>63</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 7, 20.3.

<sup>64</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 14.1.

<sup>65</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 14.11.

empire up to the standard which was expected of him. It is also clear that instead of helping him or persuading him to change his ways, Constantius simply found it more expedient to have him removed. While Gallus may very well have been killed because of his excess cruelty, the same exact charge is leveled at Constantius by Ammianus who states “Constantius’ narrow and sensitive mind treated the slightest rumor as evidence of an actual or projected attempt on his life, and made his victory an occasion of mourning by the slaughter of the innocent.”<sup>66</sup> It would appear that neither Gallus nor Constantius would have enjoyed a high level of support among the population.

Following the death of Gallus, Julian proceeded to administer the western portion of the empire quite skillfully. He managed to reconquer Cologne and the area around it which Ammianus describes as being virtually deserted of fortifications, thus illustrating the lack of attention that had been paid to this portion of the frontier.<sup>67</sup> The situation changed early in 360, when Constantius demanded that Julian send a portion of his army east to fight against the Persians. While Julian was attempting to arrange this, his soldiers mutinied and proclaimed Julian to be emperor, thus once again illustrating the difficulty in forcing troops from one region of the empire to move to another. Also seen from this is a strong sense of loyalty displayed by the troops that Julian had personally led to victories in battle.<sup>68</sup> Before another full-scale civil war began, Constantius died of natural causes leaving Julian sole emperor. On his accession, Ammianus tells us that people beyond the Tigris and the Armenians sued for peace, and that Indian peoples competed to send him gifts. The Moors offered him their services and previously

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<sup>66</sup> Amm. Marc. 14.5.

<sup>67</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.3.

<sup>68</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.4.

unknown tribes from the Black Sea region offered to pay him tribute to be left in peace.<sup>69</sup> While this is likely an exaggeration, it still shows the level of respect that a proven emperor with a record of military victories could obtain. The downside to being an emperor who led troops in battle is that this is a hazardous way to rule as Julian found out in 363 while campaigning against the Persians. During a skirmish, Julian received a wound from a cavalry spear and died shortly thereafter.<sup>70</sup> The army then elected a man named Jovian as emperor who concluded a disastrous peace agreement with the Persians, surrendering huge amounts of territory even though Ammianus states, “the Romans had the upper hand in almost all the fighting.” Jovian then died before he could even make it back to the heart of the empire.<sup>71</sup> This clearly illustrates how the untimely death of an emperor, especially in combat, could have disastrous consequences for the empire.

The Roman military elite made Valentinian the next emperor and despite advice to the contrary, he appointed his brother Valens as co-emperor.<sup>72</sup> Valentinian was the last Roman Emperor who systematically patrolled and fortified the western frontiers and he ran his portion of the empire with both skill and vigor.<sup>73</sup> Ammianus described Valentinian’s belief that it was “a greater service to keep the barbarians in check by frontier barriers than to defeat them in battle.”<sup>74</sup> Following the formal division of the empire made by Valentinian and Valens in 364, the two portions increasingly governed and regulated their own affairs without consulting each

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<sup>69</sup> Amm. Marc. 22.7.

<sup>70</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.3.

<sup>71</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.7.

<sup>72</sup> Amm. Marc. 26.1-4.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1971), 119.

<sup>74</sup> Amm. Marc. 29.4.

other.<sup>75</sup> Even though Valens was ruling primarily on his own, throughout much of his reign he managed to keep his portion of the empire largely intact. This was of course until he made the fateful decision to give battle against the Goths at Adrianople, even though the western emperor Gratian was fast approaching with an army to support him in crushing these invaders. This decision cost him both his army and his life.<sup>76</sup>

With the accession of Emperor Theodosius in 379, the role of the emperor began to change. No longer did the emperor directly lead troops into battle or reside in frontier regions. Theodosius spent much of his reign in Constantinople, leaving for extended periods only to suppress the usurpations of Maximus and Eugenius.<sup>77</sup> Theodosius' lack of involvement in campaigns and on the battlefield would not have allowed him to develop the loyalty of his soldiers as Julian had done before him. On the other hand, it also ensured that he would not die in battle. With his death in 395, Theodosius left the empire to his two young and inexperienced sons Honorius and Arcadius. This lack of experienced leadership gave rise to a power vacuum of which powerful generals took full advantage, especially in the west.<sup>78</sup> With the death of Theodosius came the final division of the Roman Empire between east and west. After Theodosius, no single emperor was able to reunite the two portions of the empire ever again. As we shall see, this was extremely bad for the western portion of the empire which was

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<sup>75</sup> Errington, R. Malcolm. *Roman Imperial Policy from Julian to Theodosius*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 109.

<sup>76</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.12-3.

<sup>77</sup> Mitchell, Stephen. *A History of the Later Roman Empire (AD 284-641)*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 89.

<sup>78</sup> Lee, A.D. "The Army," in *The Cambridge Ancient History: The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425*, Edited by Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, Vol. 13, 211-237. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 229.

economically inferior and was strategically more vulnerable due to the vast length of the frontiers which had to be protected.<sup>79</sup>

We know more about the fighting abilities and styles of Rome's primary enemies during this period than in virtually any other era during the late Roman Empire. In a victory over the Alamanni by Constantius, Ammianus states the defeated barbarians threw away their armor to run faster, and thus gives a rare mention of Germanic peoples wearing armor.<sup>80</sup> In a separate engagement with these same barbarians won by Julian, Ammianus states the Alamanni held the advantage in both strength and height giving a key glimpse into the physical stature likely shared by many Germanic tribes.<sup>81</sup> In a description of Persian troops, Ammianus tells us that their military training and discipline, combined with their practice of maneuvers and arms drills made them formidable opponents. They relied heavily upon their cavalry, manned by the nobility, and their regular infantry were armed like Roman gladiators.<sup>82</sup> The Persians are also said to have been clad in mail armor which covered their entire bodies and "the only spots a weapon could lodge were the tiny holes left for the eyes and nostrils." Ammianus acknowledged the proficiency of their archers when he stated that they "practiced from the very cradle in a skill in which that people most excel."<sup>83</sup> The Persians were not lacking in siege warfare capabilities either. At the siege of Singara in 360, the Persians employed an exceptionally powerful ram as well as many other engines and were able to breach a round tower and take the fortress.<sup>84</sup> The primary enemies of Rome at this time were quite formidable, with the Germanic tribes holding

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<sup>79</sup> Tainter, 151-2.

<sup>80</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.4.

<sup>81</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.12.

<sup>82</sup> Amm. Marc. 23.6.

<sup>83</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.1.

<sup>84</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.6.

the advantage in physical stature, while the Persians may have reached parity with Rome in armor, training, and military technology.

The Roman army possessed at least the same level of technology as the Persians, but their system of organization did not provide any artillery at all to the ordinary legions. Instead, they appear to have raised separate legions of *ballistarii*. The reason behind this was that the Roman Empire suffered from a shortage of qualified personnel to build and operate their artillery.<sup>85</sup> During the siege of Amida, Ammianus mentions two Magnentian legions which had recently been transferred to the east from Gaul that were supposed to assist with the defensive machinery, but that these legions were useless in siege warfare.<sup>86</sup> There is no reason to believe that these Magnentian legions were exceptions to the rule in the fourth century. Full utilization of artillery was further complicated by the lack of commanders who were able to appreciate what engines of war could do for them, and as such, artillery was not as large of a factor for the late Roman army as it otherwise could have been.<sup>87</sup>

There is some evidence that as the fourth century progressed, the Roman army went away from its previous practice of wearing body armor as more and more barbarians joined the army. While a fourth century set of mail armor has been discovered at Caerleon in South Wales, the lack of additional surviving evidence of infantry armor indicates that perhaps only the cavalry remained heavily armored so that it could deal with enemy cavalry which was likewise armored.<sup>88</sup> Vegetius states that while the cavalry remained armored in the example of the Goths, Alans, and Huns, the infantry ceased to wear armor or helmets beginning with Emperor Gratian.

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<sup>85</sup> Marsden, E. W. *Greek and Roman Artillery: Historical Development*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 196-7.

<sup>86</sup> Amm. Marc. 19.5.

<sup>87</sup> Marsden, 196-8.

<sup>88</sup> Simkins, Michael. *The Roman Army from Hadrian to Constantine*. (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1979), 39.



He further claimed that the reason for this was neglect of leadership in enforcing the soldiery to wear their armor and even after many defeats; no one had bothered to restore armor or helmets to the infantry.<sup>89</sup>

If large numbers of barbarian units served in the army during this period, it would make sense that the discipline and abilities of the Roman army would have declined significantly. This would have especially been true in the west where the barbarian recruits would almost certainly have been Germanic in origin, and the conflicts in the west frequently involved Germanic tribes. At the Battle of Strasbourg in 357, Ammianus specifically states that the Romans enjoyed the advantage in training and discipline and this would have been difficult to achieve if the army did not consist largely of regular Roman units. Furthermore, Ammianus never gives the impression that an overall barbarization of the army took place.<sup>90</sup> On the issue of armor, Ammianus specifically stated at the Battle of Adrianople in 378, the weight of their armor weakened the Roman soldiers. During the battle itself he indicated that “on both sides helmets and breast plates were split into pieces,” thus seemingly confirming that at least a majority of the Roman army that fought here was armored.<sup>91</sup>

It seems likely that only after Adrianople were large numbers of barbarians recruited into the army and the widespread armoring of the infantry may well have been abandoned. The losses suffered by the army at Adrianople and in battles leading up to Adrianople had been enormous, especially in the east. After Amida fell to the Persians almost all of the seven legions stationed there were lost.<sup>92</sup> At least two further legions were lost when Singara fell shortly thereafter.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Veg. Mil. 1.20.

<sup>90</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.12.

<sup>91</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.13.

<sup>92</sup> Amm. Marc. 19.8.

<sup>93</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.6.

The subsequent loss of the powerful fortress at Bezabde cost the Romans at least another three legions.<sup>94</sup> Even worse, during a failed counter-attack on Bezabde by Constantius, the Romans “suffered severe and grievous losses of which the effect would long be felt.”<sup>95</sup> By far the worst losses were still to come when at Adrianople an entire field army perished. Ammianus puts this loss into perspective when he states “it is certain that hardly a third of our army escaped. No battle in our history except Cannae was such a massacre.”<sup>96</sup> The losses suffered during the late fourth century had a lasting effect on the future composition of the army, and after Adrianople the myth of invincibility held by the professional Roman army may have been forever shattered.<sup>97</sup>

The Romans required at least 20,000 new recruits just to replace the losses to the field army after Adrianople, and these men would not have been easy to find.<sup>98</sup> This is especially true due to the difficulties in recruitment that existed in the late fourth century. Speaking on the character of the Gauls in 355 Ammianus writes, “no one here ever cuts off his thumb to escape military service, as happens in Italy, where they have a special name for such malingerers (*murci*).”<sup>99</sup> Additional law codes indicate the problems with recruitment in Italy likely permeated much of the empire. In 364, Valentinian and Valens issued a law reconfirming the previous law established by Constantine that the sons of soldiers must serve in the military.<sup>100</sup> The next year an additional law was issued stating that if a person of low status helped a deserter then he would

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<sup>94</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.7.

<sup>95</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.11.

<sup>96</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.13.

<sup>97</sup> Liebeschuetz, Wolfgang. “The end of the Roman army in the Western Empire,” in *War and Society in the Roman World*, edited by John Rich and Graham Shipley, 265-276. (London: Routledge Publishing, 1993), 265.

<sup>98</sup> Ferrill, Arther. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 65.

<sup>99</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.12.

<sup>100</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 7, 1.5.

be sent to the mines and if a high status individual helped a deserter then he would be fined half of his total property.<sup>101</sup> A third law issued in 368 stated that “if a person cuts off his fingers to avoid military service he will be sentenced to death and if his master fails to prevent him from this he will be severely punished.”<sup>102</sup> Writing five years after Adrianople Themistius stated, “Thrace was overrun, Illyricum was overrun, armies vanished altogether, like shadows.”<sup>103</sup> In 382 unable to defeat the Goths, Emperor Theodosius made peace with them by granting them lands in Thrace.<sup>104</sup> In these desperate times where recruitment was extremely difficult, any and all means of rebuilding an army would have been used, including the large scale recruitment of barbarians. The first mention of this on a significant scale comes from Emperor Theodosius’ employment of 20,000 barbarians at the Battle of Frigidus in 394. These barbarians fought under native commanders and were less disciplined than Roman soldiers, but the Romans needed manpower and this was something the barbarians could provide, for a price.<sup>105</sup>

The danger in this arrangement was that the barbarians were not likely to be as loyal as regular soldiers were. During a campaign against the Alamanni in 354, the discovery of a fordable river crossing potentially could have led to the destruction of the Alamanni:

had not a few men of the same race, who had attained high rank in our army, sent a secret warning to their compatriots. That at any rate was what some believed, and suspicion fell on Latinus, count of the household troops, Agilo, the superintendant of the stables, and Scudilo, the general of the Scutarii, all men who were held in high respect as pillars of the state.<sup>106</sup>

It is likely that although all three of these men were raised in the Roman Empire, they still considered themselves to be ethnically Alemanni and it is very possible they gave away the

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<sup>101</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 17, 18.1.

<sup>102</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 7, 13.5.

<sup>103</sup> Kulikowski, 143.

<sup>104</sup> Kulikowski, 152-3.

<sup>105</sup> Ferrill, 83-5.

<sup>106</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 14.10.

invasion plans to prevent their countrymen from being slaughtered.<sup>107</sup> The Alemanni and Constantius were still able to come to a peace agreement, but this type of betrayal could not be taken lightly.<sup>108</sup> The Romans were so worried after Adrianople that they called forward all recent Gothic recruits, who had entered into the army in the eastern provinces, under the auspice of paying them money that they were due and executed them.<sup>109</sup> The danger of relying on large numbers of barbarians in the army was certainly apparent to the Romans who knew these groups could not always be trusted.

The pay of the Roman army did increase during the late fourth century and by 364 soldiers received pay in gold coin. At this time, the infantry received five *solidi* annually while the cavalry received nine *solidi*.<sup>110</sup> Julian provides an example that proves soldiers still received donatives. When his troops proclaimed him emperor, he promised them each five pieces of gold and a pound of silver.<sup>111</sup> Julian also made sure that the troops posted along the Danube “should not lack either arms and clothing or pay and food.”<sup>112</sup> At least during times of stability soldiers were receiving the supplies they needed. Several examples from Julian’s expedition against the Persians suggest that on campaign supplies were much harder to come by. While marching through Assyria for example the soldiers “were delighted to have ample subsistence without having to draw on the supplies carried by the ships.”<sup>113</sup> Later on in the campaign the army marched through a region with many fields that contained vines and fruit trees and “the army

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<sup>107</sup> Drinkwater, John F. *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496 (Caracalla to Clovis)*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 176.

<sup>108</sup> Amm. Marc. 14.10.

<sup>109</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.16.

<sup>110</sup> Harl, Kenneth W. *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B. C. to A. D. 700*. (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 217.

<sup>111</sup> Amm. Marc. 17.13.

<sup>112</sup> Amm. Marc. 22.7.

<sup>113</sup> Amm. Marc. 24.1.

satisfied its appetite with ample food from this source, and where as men previously dreaded a dearth there was now a serious fear that they would overeat.”<sup>114</sup> These examples illustrate that while the army did travel with supplies these were often inadequate to support the full needs of the army on a lengthy campaign. When Jovian accepted the horrendous peace offer of the Persians to end this campaign, it seems the Roman army was on the verge of starvation.<sup>115</sup> A greater abundance of supplies for this campaign could very well have saved the Roman army from this desperate situation.

### **Death of Theodosius to fall of Western Empire**

For the early fifth century, the most abundant information available on recruitment, training and the supply of the Roman army comes from Vegetius. While his writing is difficult to date it still provides useful insights that are not otherwise available. He states that skill and training, not numbers and untaught bravery produce victories. This indicates the preference for a professional army. Curiously, he follows this by suggesting that recruits for the army should be chosen from colder climates. Vegetius justifies this by stating people from warmer climates are more intelligent, but have less blood and are therefore more afraid of wounds, while recruits from cooler climates are less intelligent, but possess more blood and as such have a strong contempt for wounds and death. This is interesting as Italy and much of the Roman Empire had what could be termed a ‘warm’ climate and Germanic peoples would almost exclusively reside in ‘cooler’ climates. Exactly what this comment means is difficult to decipher as regions of the Roman Empire such as Gaul also have cooler climates, but this could signify an increased recruitment of Germanic peoples into the army. Vegetius also states recruits should come from

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<sup>114</sup> Amm. Marc. 24.3.

<sup>115</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.7.

the country and not the city as the toil of the country better prepares men to be soldiers than does the ease of city life.<sup>116</sup> This point makes sense, and as the vast majority of the population still lived in the country, did not significantly narrow the potential recruitment pool.

On the subject of supply, large armies were difficult to support and Vegetius cites examples such as Xerxes, Darius, and Mithridates, whose extremely large armies fared poorly in combat due to their size. Vegetius recommends that armies remain smaller so that they can move more quickly and are easier to supply.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, stating that “armies are more often destroyed by starvation than battle,” Vegetius writes that the only remedy to the problem of supply is to store large quantities of provisions in advance within fortified locations. If taxes in kind proved inadequate, then advance payments of gold should be used to secure everything that is needed.<sup>118</sup> Much of this advice is quite sound and suggests the base elements of recruitment, training, and supply were not lost in the early fifth century. It is more likely circumstances simply dictated that the only way to rebuild the army after the disasters of the fourth century was through the recruitment of large numbers of barbarian *federates*.

Dating to around 400, the *Notitia Dignitatum* provides a list of all military units in both the East and the West. These units have a total estimated strength of 645,000 men, but this does not take into account the fact that many of these units were likely under strength. A current argument by Wolfgang Liebeschuetz states that at least 25% of the units given in the list were comprised of men with Germanic or non-citizen origins. These non-Roman units were known as

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<sup>116</sup> Veg. Mil. 1.1-1.3.

<sup>117</sup> Veg. Mil. 3.1.

<sup>118</sup> Veg. Mil. 3.3.

*federates* and throughout the first half of the fifth century, they grew in importance to the point that they vastly outnumbered regular Roman units in the field armies.<sup>119</sup>

This was the army inherited by the Roman general Stilicho, who effectively ruled the West for the young Emperor Honorius following the death of Theodosius in 395.<sup>120</sup> From the beginning, Stilicho faced numerous barbarian invasions. The Roman policy of settling Visigoths within the empire had worked well from 382 to 395, but after this time Gothic forces roamed virtually unchecked through the empire.<sup>121</sup> Their leader, Alaric, had led auxiliary units for Emperor Theodosius helping to win several key victories, but when he did not receive a proper military command for his efforts, Alaric led a Gothic rebellion in 395. In 402, Alaric invaded Italy, but Stilicho was able to force him to retreat, though the engagements appear to have been indecisive.<sup>122</sup> Alaric became the least of Stilicho's problems when in 405 a massive invasion crossed into Roman territory under the Gothic leader Radagaisus. To counter this threat, Stilicho mobilized 30 regiments from the field army of Italy and supplemented this with a contingent from the Rhine frontier, as well as Alan and Hunnic auxiliaries. With this force, Stilicho was able to trap Radagaisus in 406 and he even convinced a large portion of this barbarian army to join the Roman army. Radagaisus attempted to flee and was captured and executed.<sup>123</sup>

Stilicho was much less effective at dealing with the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi who burst across the Rhine on December 31, 406.<sup>124</sup> Stilicho is often accused of stripping the frontier of soldiers leading up to this invasion to provide soldiers for his field army. While there is little

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<sup>119</sup> Liebeschuetz, 265-7.

<sup>120</sup> Penrose, 235.

<sup>121</sup> Ferrill, 119-120.

<sup>122</sup> Kulikowski, 164-170.

<sup>123</sup> Heather, Peter. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 205-6.

<sup>124</sup> Heather, 206.

doubt that he removed troops, whether or not he recklessly ran down western defenses is debatable.<sup>125</sup> What is not debatable is Stilicho's failure to stop these incursions. The poet Orientus summed up the immediate effect of this invasion with the phrase, "all Gaul was filled with the smoke of a single funeral pyre."<sup>126</sup> The situation was so desperate that even slaves were permitted to enlist in the army, and would receive their freedom if they served faithfully.<sup>127</sup> In 407, at the height of this confusion Alaric once again invaded Italy. This time Stilicho managed to convince the senate to buy him off with a payment of 4,000 pounds of gold.<sup>128</sup> The senator Lampadius famously observed that "such a gesture bought not peace but servitude." This payoff to Alaric severely weakened Stilicho's position at court.<sup>129</sup> On August 13, 408 a number of Stilicho's chief supporters died during a revolt started by the followers of Radagaisus, the same ones Stilicho had convinced to join him a mere few years earlier. Shortly thereafter Stilicho was himself murdered in Ravenna likely at the behest of Emperor Honorius.<sup>130</sup>

Following the death of Stilicho, soldiers loyal to Honorius slaughtered thousands of barbarians quartered in Italy, including women and children.<sup>131</sup> Zosimus states that 30,000 *federates* who survived this massacre deserted to Alaric when he again invaded Italy in 408, and with this loss, rendered the Roman army in Italy ineffective.<sup>132</sup> This explains the lack of a military response to Alaric who three times put the city of Rome under siege, and finally as the Romans continued to ignore his demands, which actually shrank over time, sacked the city in

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<sup>125</sup> Drinkwater, 322-3.

<sup>126</sup> Heather, 207.

<sup>127</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 7, 13.16.

<sup>128</sup> Kulikowski, 172.

<sup>129</sup> Mitchell, 93.

<sup>130</sup> Heather, 222-3.

<sup>131</sup> Mitchell, 93.

<sup>132</sup> Liebeschuetz, 267.



August of 410.<sup>133</sup> From his position in Jerusalem, Saint Jerome captured the shock of this disaster by writing, “the city which had taken the whole world was itself taken; nay, it fell by famine before it fell by the sword.”<sup>134</sup> Jerome’s shock could have been lessened had he known just how weak the Roman army actually was due to its heavy reliance on barbarian *federates*. While this was happening in Italy, in 409 the Vandals Alans and Suevi entered Spain and by 411 had made themselves masters of the entire peninsula.<sup>135</sup> This led the Romans to reemploy the same group of Goths which had only recently sacked Rome, though their leader Alaric was now dead, to fight once more for the empire in an attempt to rid Spain of barbarians. Following successful campaigning, these Gothic *federates* were settled on lands in Gaul.<sup>136</sup> By 418, these Goths fully established themselves in the region of Aquitania as rulers of the land. This helps to illustrate how the barbarian *federates* were taking over not only the army, but much of the territory within the Roman Empire as well.<sup>137</sup>

Flavius Aetius was the other prominent figure to come to power for the Romans in the fifth century, becoming the leading general following the accession of Emperor Valentinian III in 433 and virtual ruler of the Western Empire.<sup>138</sup> Aetius’ rise to power was made possible only because he had at his disposal a strong force of Hunnic *federates*.<sup>139</sup> Despite his relatively successful military career, Aetius was unable to prevent the fall of North Africa to the Vandals in 439. This cost Rome its richest remaining province along with the primary source of food for the city of Rome. Being unable to launch an expedition to recover North Africa, Aetius was forced

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<sup>133</sup> Kulikowski, 177.

<sup>134</sup> Jerome. *Select Letters of St Jerome*. Translated by F. A. Wright. (London: Heinemann, 1954), 463.

<sup>135</sup> Heather, 208.

<sup>136</sup> Kulikowski, 183.

<sup>137</sup> *Ausonius*. vol. 2, Translated by H. G. Evelyn White. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), 347-9.

<sup>138</sup> Heather, 282.

<sup>139</sup> Liebeschuetz, 270.

to make peace with the Vandals who were supposed to become a client kingdom of *federates*, and for a time they did provide a small quantity of grain to help feed the city of Rome.<sup>140</sup>

The most difficult challenge Aetius had to face arrived in 451, as the Huns invaded the West under their powerful ruler Attila. As Attila advanced he burned Metz to the ground along with all of its inhabitation and would likely have done the same to Orleans had Aetius not arrived with his Gothic and Frankish allies. These forces engaged Attila in battle and forced him to retreat.<sup>141</sup> During this large-scale engagement, there is not a single specific reference to a unit of Roman soldiers fighting in the battle under Aetius. It is therefore possible the entire force which defeated Attila consisted of *federates*, and that professional Roman units had ceased to exist in the field army.<sup>142</sup> Attila returned the following year to invade Italy, and Pope Leo took credit for stopping this invasion. He claimed to have convinced Attila to desist from his war and return to his homeland in peace.<sup>143</sup> A more likely reason for Attila's retreat was the famine and plague which was sweeping through his army. Furthermore, Aetius, along with the Eastern Emperor Marcian were harassing Attila's troops in Italy, while additional forces from the East had launched an invasion northward into Attila's heartland. Attila had no choice but to retreat. While preparing for a third invasion of the West, Attila died suddenly early in 453, removing this dire threat to the survival of the West.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Heather, 289-92.

<sup>141</sup> Gregory of Tours. *The History of the Franks*. Translated by Lewis Thorpe. (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 115-6.

<sup>142</sup> Liebeschuetz, 272.

<sup>143</sup> Stevenson, J. ed. *Creeds, Councils, and Controversies: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church AD 337-461*. (London: SPCK, 1966), 359.

<sup>144</sup> Heather, 340-2.

With the Hunnic threat removed, in September 454 Emperor Valentinian had Aetius assassinated.<sup>145</sup> After the death of Aetius and the loss of much of his *federate* army, the West desperately needed a regular field army, but this required regular supplies and it does not appear these could be squeezed from the western economy. Too much of the territory in the West was under the direct control of *federates*, and those units which did serve in the army in Italy were made up primarily of units from the tribal groups now dominant in Gaul and Spain.<sup>146</sup> Emperor Valentinian was then himself assassinated by supporters of Aetius in March 455.<sup>147</sup> The lack of a significant military presence in Italy is apparent from the complete absence of any attempt to prevent the Vandals from sacking Rome in June 455.<sup>148</sup> One final attempt was made to save the West when in 468 what remained of western forces, combined with a massive expedition sent by Eastern Emperor Leo, attempted to reconquer North Africa from the Vandals. Vandal fire ships badly defeated this force at ruinous cost to the East.<sup>149</sup> With no more help available and no regular army to guard Italy, there was nothing the Romans could do to prevent the last Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, from being deposed in 476.<sup>150</sup>

The population loss of the second and third centuries caused a severe manpower shortage for the Roman military and this situation only got worse over time. The decision by Constantine to withdraw part of the military from the borders to create field armies was a serious mistake. More easily penetrable borders combined with increasingly formidable barbarian opponents led

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<sup>145</sup> Penrose, 241.

<sup>146</sup> Whitby, Michael. "The Army: 420-602," in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425-600*, Edited by Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby, Vol. 14, 288-314. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 296-8.

<sup>147</sup> Penrose, 241.

<sup>148</sup> Mitchell, 311.

<sup>149</sup> *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*. Translated by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 180.

<sup>150</sup> Heather, 430.

to numerous wars which stretched the Roman military to the breaking point. When recruits could not be found for the army, barbarian *federates* became increasingly important for filling out the ranks. By the early fifth century, this situation reached a critical level and the examples provided by Stilicho and Aetius show us that the Roman army could no longer function without its *federate* units. However, these are only the military reasons for the western collapse. By examining the Roman economy, we can gain the full picture behind the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

### **The Roman Economy**

The basis for the late Roman economy was agriculture, and the taxation of agricultural production provided the majority of imperial income. Over time, ever-increasing taxation placed a massive burden on the Roman people with the majority of these taxes falling on the poorest members of society. The plight of the masses slowly ate away at the foundation of the Roman economy, especially following the final division of the empire in 395. The Roman economy in the West simply lost the ability to function in the face of overwhelming exterior and interior pressures.

### **Third-Century Crisis**

By the onset of the Third-Century Crisis, the expenses of the Roman Empire were enormous. These included civilian administrative employees, the cost of the emperor's household and court, handouts and entertainment for civilians and soldiers, building programs, gifts to important individuals, foreign subsidies, and the salary, discharge and maintenance costs

of the vastly expanded army.<sup>151</sup> Military costs were by far the most expensive. In 235, there were an estimated 33 legions needing financial support with each soldier receiving 750 *denarii* per year. By comparing this figure with the 25 legions established under Emperor Augustus with each soldier receiving 225 *denarii* per year, the escalating costs of the Roman military become apparent.<sup>152</sup>

Not all imperial expenses functioned with the strict purpose of running the empire, and many had the sole purpose of incurring favor with the people. Several examples from the *Historia Augustae* can help illustrate just how expensive this process could be. When mutinous soldiers murdered Emperor Gallienus in the hope of booty, the military elite placated them “by the usual means of winning their favor” by giving each soldier 20 *aurei*.<sup>153</sup> In the early 270s, Emperor Aurelian gave a daily ration of bread, pork, and oil to all men within the city of Rome and planned to give them wine also, but restrained himself from this.<sup>154</sup> A final example coming from the early 280s shows the waste of imperial resources quite clearly. The most noteworthy event from the reigns of Carus, Carinus, and Numerian was the series of games that they gave the Roman people.<sup>155</sup> It is worth noting that the reigns of all three of these emperors were quite short, Carus likely died from a battle wound and both Carinus and Numerian fell to assassins, which might suggest they were not successful in their efforts to achieve popularity. The primary problem with these attempts was that they established precedents that future emperors were expected to follow. Giving donatives to the soldiers, feeding the people of Rome, and providing extravagant games could not be avoided if an emperor wished to retain his throne for an

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<sup>151</sup> Duncan-Jones, Richard. *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*. Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 35-44.

<sup>152</sup> Tainter, 133-6.

<sup>153</sup> S.H.A. *The Two Gallieni*, XV.

<sup>154</sup> S.H.A. *The Deified Aurelian*, XLVIII.

<sup>155</sup> S.H.A. *Carus, Carinus, Numerian*, XIX.

extended period of time. In the late imperial period, these obligations became increasingly burdensome for the imperial administration.

To meet the growing expenses of the Roman Empire, increased taxation was required to bring in necessary revenue. Taxation on agriculture seems to have produced over 90 percent of imperial revenues.<sup>156</sup> However, taxation had always been extremely unpopular and tax evasion was not uncommon.<sup>157</sup> When this is combined with the severe instability during the Third-Century Crisis, collecting taxes would have proven phenomenally difficult on an empire-wide basis. Where taxes could still be collected it appears that the level of taxation was beyond oppressive as can be seen in a petition to Emperor Philip the Arab in 245:

We are suffering extortion and illegal exactions beyond all reason at the hands of those who ought to be preserving the public welfare...Soldiers, powerful men from the cities, and your own officials leave the highways, descend on us, take us from our work, seize our plough and oxen and illegally extort what is not due to them.<sup>158</sup>

The evidence above allows two conclusions to be drawn. First, those who could be taxed were taxed at extremely high levels, and secondly, in spite of this heavy taxation the Roman government still did not have enough money to meet its financial obligations.

This shortage of revenue is evident from the policy of many emperors during this period to heavily debase the coinage. This was not a new phenomenon as debasement of the coinage had occurred as far back as Emperor Nero, but the rate of the debasement took place on a scale never before seen in the Roman Empire.<sup>159</sup> After 235, emperors debased silver coinage, and raised taxes repeatedly to meet financial shortages hoping that windfall profits from military victories would make these measures temporary. The problem with this theory was that there

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<sup>156</sup> Jones, A. H. M. *The Roman Economy*. Edited by P. A. Brunt. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 83.

<sup>157</sup> Tainter, 129.

<sup>158</sup> Williams, Stephen. *Diocletian: And the Roman Recovery*. (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1985), 20.

<sup>159</sup> Tainter, 133-4.

were no windfall profits to be had as wars were simply no longer profitable. Every emperor from Decius to Claudius II debased the silver *antoninianus* condemning his predecessors' money to the melting pot. By 260, rapid recoinages of currency only a few years old destroyed public confidence in imperial money.<sup>160</sup> This loss of confidence in imperial coinage is further confirmed by an Egyptian document from 260 which states:

Whereas the bankers stand publically accused of closing the money exchanges because they will not accept the divine coin of the emperors, it has become necessary to issue this order to them to open again, and exchange all coin except the truly spurious and counterfeit.<sup>161</sup>

Not only had confidence in imperial coinage dissipated, but this text also reveals a further problem involving counterfeit coinage. This problem had likely existed as long as money has exchanged hands as a medium of exchange, but it seems probable that counterfeiting at this time was much easier due to the plethora of debased coinage in circulation. In 275, the emperor Tacitus attempted to address this counterfeiting problem when he ordained that “if anyone, either officially or privately, alloyed silver with copper, or gold with silver, or copper with lead, it should be a capital offence, involving confiscation of property.”<sup>162</sup>

With the imperial currency in shambles, the requisition of supplies became largely the same as taxation in kind.<sup>163</sup> While collecting revenue in the form of taxes in kind did help to cover many of the states' needs, the state still required money for such important tasks as maintaining and paying the army.<sup>164</sup> However, by the rule of Emperor Gallienus in the 260s the

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<sup>160</sup> Harl, Kenneth W. *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B. C. to A. D. 700*. (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 128-132.

<sup>161</sup> Williams, 115.

<sup>162</sup> S.H.A. *Tacitus*, IX.

<sup>163</sup> Williams, 19.

<sup>164</sup> Duncan-Jones, 3.

*antoninianus* contained less than five percent silver.<sup>165</sup> This meant that when imperial coinage actually was accepted, it was only done so well below its rated value. For example, from the time of the early empire to that of Emperor Gallienus, the price of wheat had risen over a hundred times, while during the same period a soldiers' wage had barely doubled.<sup>166</sup> The empire required extreme currency reforms and there is evidence that Emperor Aurelian made some progress in this area in 274. During his reign, Aurelian reconquered many of the previously lost Roman provinces and appears to have reestablished regular tax collection throughout the Roman world. He also made attempts at restoring the reputation of imperial coinage and he fixed rates of exchange to help roll back prices.<sup>167</sup> The level of success of these measures taken by Aurelian is difficult to determine due to a severe lack of documentation that plagues the entire period of the Third-Century Crisis, but at the very least, the empire continued to hold itself together.

One key explanation for the severe debasement of the coinage during the Third-Century Crisis, and under many emperors thereafter is a sharp decline in mining during the late empire. An initial look at mining in the Iberian Peninsula might on the surface support this conclusion as large-scale mines show a marked drop in production of gold, silver, and tin after the first and second centuries C.E. However, the mines known about today which existed during this period are primarily only the large-scale mining operations, and little is known about smaller-scale mining. This is because the mines that have been identified are largely those that have been reopened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and only larger mines were worth the time and effort to reopen, and as such many small-scale mines have yet to be identified. Over time, easily obtainable ore from larger mines became exhausted and this very well could have led to

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<sup>165</sup> Tainter, 139.

<sup>166</sup> Williams, 116.

<sup>167</sup> Harl, 145-6.



the development of numerous smaller mines. The current evidence seems to indicate that it is possible and even likely that a large number of smaller mines could have supplied much of the metal needs for the late empire, meaning that debasement was not just a side effect from a lack of raw metal.<sup>168</sup> Severe shortages in raw metals, while they did occur, were more due to periods of instability than they were a cause of mining operations not having the potential to meet the requirements of the empire. This helps to explain how Emperor Aurelian may have been able to restore the reputation of imperial currency. There is evidence that even with the loss of Dacian mines, following the evacuation of Dacia in the early 270s, he was able to reopen enough mines to offset these mineral losses, and as such a higher level of purity could have been obtained for his imperial coinage.<sup>169</sup>

As the Roman Empire emerged from the Third-Century Crisis, the devastation wrought by this terrible period fell disproportionately on the lower classes. The origins of this can be traced back to 212. When in this year Emperor Caracalla gave Roman citizenship to virtually all free Romans, the entitlements and privileges of Roman citizenship were lost. New class distinctions began to develop between the wealthy upper class, known as the *honestiores*, and the rest of the population called the *humiliores*. As time went by the wealthy devised methods to more directly exploit the poorer masses from their positions of power and the gap between the *honestiores* and the *humiliores* continued to widen. This impoverishment and exploitation of the masses was the primary cause of peasants becoming increasingly tied to the land throughout the late empire.<sup>170</sup> With the economic condition of peasants in a steady decline, there was no incentive for peasants to have large families, as these could not be supported. While specific

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<sup>168</sup> Edmondson, J. C. "Mining in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond: Continuity or Disruption?" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989), 85-93.

<sup>169</sup> Harl, 145-6.

<sup>170</sup> Littman and Littman, 198.

methods of how peasants attempted to control the size of their families is unclear, throughout the fourth and fifth centuries conditions never presented themselves to allow for the repopulation of the Roman Empire.<sup>171</sup>

### **Diocletian**

Emperor Diocletian, who came to power in 284, helped restore order to the Roman Empire. He stabilized the frontiers and checked all serious barbarian incursions. Beginning largely in 293 with the creation of the Tetrarchy, imperial expenses increased greatly. This new system divided the empire amongst four separate rulers, which meant the support of four separate imperial courts and residences. Furthermore, Diocletian increased the number of provinces to just over a hundred, nearly double the previous number, and all of these new provinces needed numerous administrative officials. An equestrian vice-prefect headed each of the twelve administrative dioceses created to run the provinces under this new system. By 305, senatorial governors had all but disappeared, as the equestrian order now became the path to high office under this new system.<sup>172</sup> Diocletian also increased the pay and size of the army. Estimates for the size of Diocletian's army range around 400,000 men at the beginning of his reign to as high as 600,000 men by the time of his abdication in 305.<sup>173</sup> In 293, each soldier received 360 silver clad *nummi* as their annual wage.<sup>174</sup> This would have placed a significant financial burden on the imperial administration.

To fund these imperial expenditures, Diocletian initiated substantial reforms to the system of taxation around 297. These reforms focused around two components, the *iugum* and the *caput*. The *iugum* was theoretically the acreage that could be cultivated by one man to

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<sup>171</sup> Tainter, 144.

<sup>172</sup> Williams, 104-7.

<sup>173</sup> Tainter, 141.

<sup>174</sup> Harl, 217.

support his family, and this figure varied systematically according to the productivity of the land. The *caput* stood for one man, with additions made for his household including women, children, slaves and tenants often at less than one *caput*. For example, a woman or child might count as only  $\frac{1}{2}$  *caput*. A global survey of resources was carried out to properly determine the precise amount of production throughout the empire and this was initially to be carried out every five years, but was changed to every fifteen years at a later date. The goal of this system was to allow taxes to be collected more fairly based on production throughout the entire empire. This new system resulted in Italy losing its old privilege of tax exemption which it had enjoyed for centuries. On September 1<sup>st</sup> of each year the state's total requirements would be published and could then be passed on to the provincial governors who were responsible for collecting their share of the total tax obligation of the empire.<sup>175</sup> The ancient Christian writer Lactantius stated that the beneficiaries of public expenditure, officials and soldiers, had become more numerous than the taxpayers themselves.<sup>176</sup> Lactantius further believed that supporting the greatly increased bureaucracy and army caused farmers' resources to become exhausted, which led to the desertion of fields and cultivated lands became forests.<sup>177</sup> It must be remembered however that Lactantius was a Christian, and as Diocletian persecuted Christians throughout his reign, his account may be extremely biased. Whatever the direct effects of this new system of taxation were, it remained in place for the next century and subsequent emperors used it to revise the imperial budget steadily upward.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Williams, 119-122.

<sup>176</sup> Bernardi, Aurelio. "The Economic Problems of the Roman Empire at the Time of its Decline," in *The Economic Decline of Empires*, edited by Carlo M. Cipolla, 16-83. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., (1970), 52.

<sup>177</sup> Lactantius. *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. Edited and Translated by J. L. Creed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 11-13.

<sup>178</sup> Williams, 125.

To facilitate this new system of taxation Diocletian drastically reformed imperial coinage, taking three decisive steps in 293. First, he fixed the gold *aureus* at 60 to a pound. Next, he reminted silver *argentei* at 96 to the pound rated at 25 *denarii*.<sup>179</sup> The purpose of this pure silver coinage was largely to combat the high quality silver coinage issued by the rebel Carausius in Britain at this time, and was not intended for long-term use.<sup>180</sup> Finally, Diocletian issued a new silver-wash piece known as the *nummus* rated at 5 *denarii*. Diocletian intended the *aureus* and the *nummus* to replace all other coinage, and he had hundreds of millions of *nummi* struck. Unfortunately for Diocletian, lack of confidence in the *nummus*, combined with the *nummus* appearing in such great numbers, flooded the market and required new sets of values to be frequently set for coinage just to keep pace with inflation. Diocletian's Edict of Maximum Prices, issued in 301, stipulated a price of 72,000 *denarii* for a pound of gold which may have helped stabilize the value of gold coinage. This first edict was followed the same year by a second Monetary Edict which doubled the value of all denominations above one *denarii*. In a single stroke all taxes, prices, and salaries computed in *denarii* were sliced in half, while the rates of exchange among higher denominations were preserved.<sup>181</sup> In spite of all his efforts, continued rampant inflation throughout his entire reign shows that Diocletian was unable to stabilize the monetary system.

Diocletian's Edict of Maximum Prices is one of the most famous inflationary control documents to survive from antiquity, both for its scope, and for its colossal failure. Diocletian clearly blamed inflation on the merchants as can be seen in the preamble to this edict that states, "men who, individually abounding in great riches which could completely satisfy whole nations,

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<sup>179</sup> Harl, 149.

<sup>180</sup> Williams, 117.

<sup>181</sup> Harl, 148-154.

try to capture smaller fortunes and strive for ruinous percentages.” This was, of course, largely untrue as many merchants were not wealthy, but they were convenient scapegoats and disliked by elites in general. The preamble goes on to state that the edict is not trying to fix prices, it only wishes to set a maximum to combat the greed of merchants and make goods affordable, and the edict should be “observed in the whole of our empire”. The preamble ends by stating that anyone who breaks this edict, including those who withdraw items from the general market, are subject to capital punishment.<sup>182</sup>

This edict immediately ran into problems of its own making. First of all, no allowance was made for transportation costs. The price of Italian wine, for example, must have varied greatly between places such as Rome, London and Antioch and these prices could have easily exceeded the maximum set in the edict. The key failure of the edict proved to be that in many cases the maximum prices were set too low. Two published prices that can be compared with the edict from this time period come from Egyptian papyrus, listing the price of wheat at 300 *drachmae* per *artaba* and Macedonian petroselinum, which was a highly valued spice, at 800 *drachmae* per ounce. The maximum prices listed in the edict are 100 *drachmae* per *artaba* for wheat and 170 *denarii* per pound for petroselinum. In the second example, the difference between the market price and the maximum price set is enormous.<sup>183</sup> Lactantius certainly believed the edict was a failure as he stated that it caused nothing to appear for sale and after much blood was spent, the law was repealed.<sup>184</sup> Evidence indicates that Lactantius’ conclusion

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<sup>182</sup> Frank, Tenney. *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*. vol. 5, *Rome and Italy of the Empire*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 313-6.

<sup>183</sup> West, Louis C. “Notes on Diocletian’s Edict.” *Classical Philology* 34, no. 3 (July 1939), 245.

<sup>184</sup> Lactantius. *De Mortibus Persecutorum.*, 11-13.

was correct, because within several years, as prices continued to climb, the edict was quietly allowed to lapse.<sup>185</sup>

The Edict of Maximum Prices does give some very useful comparative data on the subject of slavery. The maximum price of a male slave between the ages of 16 and 40 was listed at 30,000 *denarii* and a female slave in the same age group has a maximum price of 25,000 *denarii*. By comparing this price with the wage of the top skilled labor worker listed in the edict, a picture painter who received a mere 150 *denarii* per day, the evidence strongly suggests slaves were becoming extremely expensive. This very well could have led to an increased use of peasant *coloni* by wealthy landowners, as it is quite possible that they were significantly cheaper and more abundant than slaves were.<sup>186</sup> *Coloni* did not have the high initial purchase cost as slaves did, and furthermore they were relatively easy to keep from moving off their land while many slaves might attempt to escape. Diocletian frequently settled barbarian tribes within the Roman Empire as *coloni*, as can be seen from the Chamavi and the Frisians who were defeated in 295 and settled on vacant lands in Gaul, so an overall increase in this segment of the population is likely.<sup>187</sup>

*Coloni* traditionally enjoyed freedom of movement from place to place, but in difficult times, it was easy for these tenants to fall behind on rent payments and other debts to their landlords, causing many to become tied to the land. Diocletian also began the process of turning the Roman economy into a command economy. Beginning with arsenals designed to ensure military production, and followed by strategic industries such as textiles, minting, and heavy industry, the state began to directly supervise the production of all major facets of the economy

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<sup>185</sup> Williams, 132.

<sup>186</sup> "Diocletian's Edict on Maximum Prices: ZPE 34" in *Greek and Roman Slavery*, Edited by Thomas Wiedemann, 105. (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1981), 105.

<sup>187</sup> Williams, 73.

until virtually every industry was under government control. With the need for skilled workers in many of these industries, mobility within any industry would have been severely restricted.<sup>188</sup>

### **Constantine**

Emperor Constantine came to power as emperor in 306 and gained control of the western empire by defeating his rival Maximian at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. After his victory, Constantine converted to Christianity, as he believed that the Christian God helped him win the battle.<sup>189</sup> The reason or motive behind Constantine's conversion has long been debated, but this is much less important than the changes within the Roman Empire this conversion caused. One of these changes was the need to support a new state religion. These expenses would have included the costs of building, enlarging, decorating and maintaining numerous churches, as well as supporting the poorer clergy of the church. Christian emperors often gave imperial subventions or properties to help support and provide for the growth of the church.<sup>190</sup> Constantine also decided to build the new imperial capital at Byzantium known as Constantinople. Constantinople was founded in 324 and dedicated in 330. To prepare this city to become his capital, Constantine rebuilt the wall, constructed a Hippodrome, built a massive imperial palace, as well as an exceedingly fine forum.<sup>191</sup> These were only the most noteworthy building projects as the construction of Constantinople required 80,000 workers and as such, this project likely placed a major strain on the imperial budget.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Williams, 136-7.

<sup>189</sup> Penrose, 233.

<sup>190</sup> Finn, Richard. *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice (313-450)*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 259.

<sup>191</sup> *Chronicon Paschale: 284-628 AD*. Translated by Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 15-6.

<sup>192</sup> Tainter, 142.

A more positive result of Constantine's conversion was the unusual windfall of gold that he was able to obtain through the confiscations of his rivals' accumulated reserves and property, and also through the confiscation of treasures from pagan temples.<sup>193</sup> Using this gold, and most especially through the reminting of the heavy gold *aurei* of his pagan rivals, Constantine was able to impose his gold *solidus* on the Roman world.<sup>194</sup> Constantine minted the gold *solidus* at 72 to the pound and the weight and purity of this coin was to remain unchanged for over seven centuries.<sup>195</sup> This allowed the *solidus* to enjoy vast purchasing power in a society that was still in the grip of massive inflation.<sup>196</sup> Dating from the last years of Constantine's reign, large amounts of new gold coinage appeared, likely as part of a plan to allow gold to be used in transactions and exchanges throughout the empire.<sup>197</sup>

While gold coinage was firmly in place, the silver coinage issued by Constantine and his successors through the end of the fourth century did not meet with the same level of success as the price of silver fluctuated greatly relative to the price of gold.<sup>198</sup> The stability of silver coinage suffered greatly from Constantine's repeated debasement of the *nummi*. In 307, Constantine's *nummi* lost 35 to 40 percent of its weight and silver content. By 325, the *nummus* was at 30 percent of the weight and less than 15 percent of the silver content of the *nummus* of 305.<sup>199</sup> Throughout the fourth century, inflation ruined Tetrarchic silver-clad coins in favor of token bronze coins.<sup>200</sup> As long as an individual could deal in gold, inflation was not a significant

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<sup>193</sup> Edmondson, 84-5.

<sup>194</sup> Harl, 159.

<sup>195</sup> Jones, 202-3.

<sup>196</sup> Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1971), 37.

<sup>197</sup> Banaji, Jairus. *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>198</sup> Jones, 204.

<sup>199</sup> Harl, 163-5.

<sup>200</sup> Harl 172.



problem, but the majority of the population was not wealthy, and for them dealing in gold was simply not an option.

Constantine's reign also led to new changes for the peasant population. The programs started under Diocletian to offer the government control over the production of the Roman economy came into full force. The result of this was that generations of workers became bound to their professions through hereditary obligations.<sup>201</sup> Not all social groups saw their status deteriorate under the reign of Constantine; Constantine seems to have encouraged slave owners to free their slaves by issuing the law that any master can proclaim his slave to be free in a church as long as a bishop is present.<sup>202</sup> A separate law stated that a slave owner could beat his slave with sticks and whips, but if the slave owner abuses his rights and performs an act with the intention of killing the slave, then he may be accused of homicide.<sup>203</sup> A third law, dated from 322, states that:

We have learned that provincials suffering from lack of sustenance and the necessities of life are selling or pledging their own children. There, if any such person should be found who is sustained by no substance of family fortune and who is supporting his children with suffering and difficulty, he shall be assisted through Our fisc before he becomes a prey to calamity.<sup>204</sup>

This law seems to indicate that the government did not wish to see poverty drive the population into slavery. However, it also suggests that an advanced state of poverty already existed for the masses, otherwise this law would not have been enacted. One additional decree issued by Constantine stated that the “governing bodies of communities be held liable for properties that had been abandoned.”<sup>205</sup> It stands to reason that if this law were being enacted, then large tracts

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<sup>201</sup> Williams, 208.

<sup>202</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 4, 7.1

<sup>203</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 9, 12.1

<sup>204</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 11, 27.2

<sup>205</sup> *Codex of Justinian*. 11,59 (58), 1.

of land must have been abandoned throughout the empire. This would then indicate that taxation and oppression of the lower classes was leading to peasants either losing or abandoning their lands, and with no other option open to them, many of these peasants would have become *coloni*.

While the very bottom of Roman society seems to have been receiving aid, the *coloni* were rapidly losing their rights. The first direct evidence that *coloni* had become tied to the land comes from a law dated from 332 that states:

Any persons with whom a *colonus* belonging to some other person is found, shall not only restore him to his place of origin but be liable for his poll tax for the period. It will furthermore be proper that *coloni* themselves who plan flight should be put in irons like slaves, so that they may be compelled by a servile penalty to perform the duties appropriate to them as free men.<sup>206</sup>

By this period, it had become essential to keep the land and the workers on the land producing a taxable income so the empire could continue to function normally.<sup>207</sup> This would explain why tenants near Antioch, who did not have any land of their own, were registered for the purpose of taxation under the estates of their landlords.<sup>208</sup> The freedom of the *coloni* was no longer a concern for the emperor.

### **Death of Constantine through Theodosius**

From the death of Constantine in 337 to the end of the fourth century, the Roman Empire held together, in spite of the infighting that took place between Constantine's sons and other claimants to the throne, and the disastrous losses incurred at Adrianople in 378. While the empire remained largely intact, this period was characterized by continued inflation and ever-increasing taxation. Despite the increased oppression of taxation, emperors still were not frugal with their

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<sup>206</sup> Jones, 294.

<sup>207</sup> Whittaker, C. R. "Circe's Pigs: From Slavery to Serfdom in the Later Roman World," in *Classical Slavery*, edited by M. I. Finley, 111-154. London: Frank Cass Publishers, (2000), 128.

<sup>208</sup> Liebeschuetz, J. H. W. G. *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 66.

money as can be seen from the example of Constantius who in 354, celebrated the 13<sup>th</sup> year of his reign with extravagant shows in both the theatre and the circus.<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, the army was becoming more and more expensive to fund and by 364 each infantryman received 5 *solidi* annually and each cavalryman received 9 *solidi* per year. Added to this was the estimated annual cost of supporting each soldier at 36 *solidi*, with an additional 20-25 *solidi* per year necessary to support the horses of cavalrymen.<sup>210</sup> Emperors Constantius II and Theodosius, in the years 370 to 395, needed large numbers of pure *solidi* to pay tribes hired as *federates* and to pay barbarians enrolled in elite Roman units who would only accept payment in high quality gold coinage.<sup>211</sup> Donatives did not disappear either during this period, and it appears the troops were becoming more and more difficult to win over. When Emperor Julian was on campaign against the Persians in 363, he promised each man 100 pieces of silver following a successful siege, after which he had to give a speech to pacify his men because “the smallness of this sum was provoking something not far from mutiny.”<sup>212</sup>

As previously mentioned, coinage was crucial for paying many of the expenses during this period and efforts were made to save silver coinage so that it could serve the economy alongside gold coinage. In 354, following his victory in civil war, Emperor Constantius II tried to improve the monetary order by outlawing coins of the usurper Magnentius, removing low value, debased coins from circulation, and by initiating new, more stable pieces.<sup>213</sup> Inflation, the enemy of these reforms, made sure that they had no chance of saving silver coinage. In the forty year

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<sup>209</sup> Amm. Marc. 14.5.

<sup>210</sup> Harl, 217.

<sup>211</sup> Harl, 160.

<sup>212</sup> Amm. Marc. 24.3.

<sup>213</sup> Harl, 170.

period from 324 to the reign of Julian, the value of the *denarius* had sunk from 4,500 to the *solidus* to about 30,000,000 to the *solidus*.<sup>214</sup>

This same inflation did not affect gold coinage which continued to remain strong. In fact, by the end of the fourth century, *solidi* had become so abundant that all taxes and salaries were paid in gold and most transactions, except the smallest, were conducted in gold.<sup>215</sup> By the 380s, small Syrian villages were even paying protection money directly in gold coinage.<sup>216</sup> The spread of gold coinage did not prevent the rich from exploiting the poor as can be seen from Emperor Julian's time in Antioch beginning in July of 362. According to Julian's own account, the people complained of merchants and landowners possessing abundant goods, but selling them only at extremely high prices. Julian attempted to convince the local elite to remedy the situation, but when they failed to do so, Julian fixed prices to make goods more affordable. Just like Diocletian before him, Julian failed in his attempt at economic interference. Now it is likely that wherever the emperor went, inflation would follow him as he traveled with a large entourage at all times, but this does not mean the gouging of the general population did not take place on a regular basis. It is quite possible that the emperor being present was simply the only way for situations like this to be brought to his attention.<sup>217</sup>

There is strong evidence that taxation in the later portion of the fourth century was becoming exceedingly burdensome for much of the population. Under Constantius II, magistrates financed virtually all local services in cities, and this was imposed as a hereditary

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<sup>214</sup> Jones, 213.

<sup>215</sup> Jones, 203.

<sup>216</sup> Banaji, 77.

<sup>217</sup> Corcoran, Simon. *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government AD 284-324*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 216-9.

burden.<sup>218</sup> When future emperor Julian left Gaul in 355, he reduced the tax to 7 *solidi per caput* instead of the 25 *solidi per caput* tax that had been in place when he arrived there.<sup>219</sup> This strongly suggests that the rate of taxation that had been present in Gaul was too high. Ammianus provides further evidence of this when in 357, Julian refused to allow the praetorian prefect Florentius to make a special tax levy on Gaul. Ammianus believed that Julian “realized that after being plundered on all sides it was extremely difficult for them to produce normal taxes, and that even torture could not get a supplement out of them.”<sup>220</sup> Gaul had been recently attacked by barbarians and as such taxes would have been harder to pay than would have normally been expected, but there is no reason to believe that the extremely high rate of taxation found in Gaul during this period was an exception to the level of taxation throughout the empire.

Emperor Valens, who came to power in the east in 364, appears to have had some success in curbing the rising level of taxation, but his co-emperor in the West, Valentinian II, had no such luck and taxes continued to rise.<sup>221</sup> This fact helps to illustrate the discrepancy in tax revenues between the eastern and western portions of the empire. While rates of taxation in the East stabilized and were able to support this portion of the empire, in the West these rates continued to increase constantly. A decree issued by Valentinian and Valens in 366 indicates that many individuals may have been cheating on their taxes. The goal of this decree was to crack down on underweight or counterfeit *solidi* and it stated that all *solidi* collected into an account to be paid as taxes must be “reduced to a firm and solid mass of refined gold.” The danger in being caught dealing in underweight or fake coinage would have been great, so for this to be happening enough that a law had to be issued against it, indicates high rates of taxation must have been

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<sup>218</sup> Tainter, 146.

<sup>219</sup> Bernardi, 55.

<sup>220</sup> Amm. Marc. 17.3

<sup>221</sup> Tainter, 147.

forcing people to take desperate measures.<sup>222</sup> A key factor in rising taxation and tax evasion was the giving away of imperial lands to *federates* who were not required to pay taxes to the Roman government. Emperor Theodosius did this on a large-scale, especially in dealing with the Goths, and this practice, which continued into the fifth century, steadily eroded the resource base of the empire.<sup>223</sup>

The exact effect that high levels of taxation had on the population of the empire during this period is difficult to measure, but several key examples can help to illustrate the desperation and anger that many people may have felt. Libanius provides one good example when he described the affect that a drought had on the people of Antioch in 365. “Everywhere there is poverty, beggary, and tears; farmers think it better to be beggars than farmers, and the man to give alms today is tomorrow himself in need of alms.”<sup>224</sup> This suggests that farmers were unable to maintain any kind of a reserve so when disaster struck, they had no safety net to prevent them from losing everything. In 392, the church’s right of granting asylum was abolished with regard to debtors of the treasury indicating that many people were unable to pay their taxes.<sup>225</sup> Suffering from this extreme poverty, it would not be surprising that many people would have resented the Roman government. The example of Balkan miners fighting alongside the invading Visigoths in 378 is a good example of how heavy taxation could lower the allegiance of Roman citizens to their government.<sup>226</sup>

The tying of larger and larger portions of the population to the land would not have helped the popularity of the government, but this did take place during this period. By 367,

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<sup>222</sup> Harl, 159.

<sup>223</sup> Whittaker, C. R. “Trade and Frontiers of the Roman Empire,” in *Trade and Famine in Classical Antiquity*, edited by Peter Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker, 110-127. Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, (1983), 120-1.

<sup>224</sup> Libanius. *Selected Works*. Translated by A. F. Norman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 475-7.

<sup>225</sup> Bernardi, 55.

<sup>226</sup> Tainter, 147.

children of a free man and a *colona* woman were required to follow the status of the mother.<sup>227</sup> A law dated to 371 from Emperor Valentinian stated:

We declare that *coloni* and *inquilini* (tenant farmers) throughout Illyricum and the neighboring regions cannot have the liberty of leaving the land on which they are found to reside by virtue of their origin and descent. Let them be slaves of the land, not by the tie of the tax, but under the name and title of *coloni*.

A more explicit example of this can be found in a constitution issued by Emperor Theodosius between 392 and 395 which stated:

Throughout the entire diocese of Thrace the census of the poll tax is abolished forever and only the land tax will be paid. And in case it may seem that permission has been given to *coloni*, freed from the ties of their taxable condition, to wander and go off where they will, they are themselves to be bound by the right of origin, and though they appear to be free men by condition are nevertheless to be held to be slaves of the land itself to which they were born, and are not to have the right to go off where they will or change their domicile. The landowners are to control them with the care of patrons and the power of masters.<sup>228</sup>

While there is some evidence in this second law of some much needed tax relief, the key point to be taken from both of these laws is that *coloni* had fallen to the level of nothing more than slaves of the land which they resided upon.

A rare mention of the lower classes receiving imperial aid comes from a law dated to 391 which again dealt with the subject of selling children into slavery. This law stated that all freeborn children who had been sold as slaves must be set free and if this slave had worked for his master for a considerable amount of time, then the master could not even ask for the price of the slave to be repaid.<sup>229</sup> The government continued to pay close attention to the issue of poor citizens, especially children, ending up as slaves, but there is no evidence the government was doing anything to stop the institution of slavery itself. Ammianus mentions a slave receiving 300

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<sup>227</sup> Whittaker, 127.

<sup>228</sup> Jones, 297.

<sup>229</sup> *Theodosian Code*. 3, 3.1

lashes for being slow in bringing his master hot water.<sup>230</sup> While Ammianus may have felt that this punishment was extreme, the mention of a slave in this casual context indicates that slavery as a practice was still extremely common. The late fourth century bishop Basil of Caesarra even went so far as to speak out in favor of slavery, stating, “it is better for a man who lacks intelligence and self-control to become another’s possession. Governed by his master’s intelligence, he will become like a chariot driven by a skilled horseman.”<sup>231</sup> The church did not condemn slavery nor did it die out in the late Roman world. The Roman government offered protection against children being sold into slavery simply because controlling peasants as *coloni* had become the preferred labor control method, thus making state support for slavery unnecessary.

Whether due to high taxation or various other factors, there is strong evidence to support the progressive abandonment of land in the late fourth century. In a survey of the province of Asia, Emperor Valens found that of 6,736 ½ fertile *iuga*, 703 were “deserted and now in bad condition and sterile.”<sup>232</sup> This corresponds with an edict issued in 371 that forbade heirs to retain only cultivated lands of their inheritance under the penalty of the confiscation of the whole.<sup>233</sup> This abandonment of land decreased the output of the empire as a whole, likely by a significant amount, and the tax burden that would have fallen on the remaining population could only have increased by a large margin. This would have been especially true for the western portion of the empire after 395, as with the death of Emperor Theodosius in that year the empire was divided between east and west for the last time, never to be reunited again. This placed the economically

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<sup>230</sup> Amm. Marc. 28.4.

<sup>231</sup> Garnsey, Peter. *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45.

<sup>232</sup> Jones, 84.

<sup>233</sup> Bernardi, 56.



weaker and strategically more vulnerable West at a severe disadvantage compared to its eastern counterpart. This is not to say that there was no longer cooperation between East and West, but each of these two portions of the empire would have looked after its own well-being before it attempted to help the other.<sup>234</sup>

### **Death of Theodosius to fall of Western Empire**

The key addition to the imperial budget that took place in the early fifth century was the extortionary payments that many emperors had to give barbarians to keep them from attacking the empire. The payment of 4,000 pounds of gold to Alaric to keep him from invading Italy is a prime example.<sup>235</sup> An additional example comes from Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II paying the Huns an annual tribute of 700 pounds of gold in the 420s with this amount increasing to 2,100 pounds by 447. It is possible that this represented 5% of imperial revenue.<sup>236</sup>

Gold *solidi* continued to hold their value, which helped to ensure that the barbarians were satisfied with their payoffs, but virtually all other Roman coinage disappeared. In 395, Western Emperor Honorius outlawed all *nummi* except two extremely low value pieces. Soon after 400, no silver or bronze coins stood between high level gold and the lowest level bronze coins. The wave of barbarian assaults that struck the Roman world, especially in the west, from 395-417 would have been extremely disruptive to mining and tax collection operations throughout Europe. This was especially true due to the almost complete loss of Gaul and Spain. Though some of these lands were later recovered, it would have been extremely difficult to restore these lands to a stable state of productivity.<sup>237</sup> This is not to say that these invasions led to a severe

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<sup>234</sup> Tainter, 151-2.

<sup>235</sup> Mitchell, Stephen. *A History of the Later Roman Empire (AD 284-641)*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 93.

<sup>236</sup> Penrose, 281.

<sup>237</sup> Harl, 176-8.

shortage in gold coinage; there is no evidence to support this conclusion at all. It appears likely that enough reserves in coinage were available for gold to continue to function as the currency of the empire. Furthermore, these invasions did not cause mining to stop completely, even in remote areas of the empire. A recent discovery provides evidence of a gold mining operation that took place during the fifth and sixth centuries at Bir Umm Fawakhir in the Eastern Desert.<sup>238</sup> Previously it had been thought no mining had taken place in this region during this time period. Additional gold mines of this era could be found in North-west Spain, when it was under imperial control, and Illyricum. The *Theodosian Code* also mentions *metallarii* or miners in both Italy and Gaul, and while these references are nonspecific, they could refer to gold miners.<sup>239</sup> All evidence points to mining continuing throughout the late empire at a much higher rate than had been previously thought.

The final collapse of the Western Roman economy can be traced through taxation, or more specifically, the lack of taxation which was actually being collected by the imperial government. In 397, taxes owed by senators were in arrears throughout many of the remaining provinces.<sup>240</sup> In 412, the Visigoths who ruled the Aquitaine region of Gaul not only did not have to pay imperial taxes, but they even minted their own *solidi*. While these were not accepted on par with Roman *solidi*, this does illustrate just how little control or sway the Western Roman Empire had on these regions that had been given to *federate* peoples.<sup>241</sup> The Christian writer Augustine gives an indication of the economic condition of North Africa in the early 420s when he recorded:

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<sup>238</sup> Bagnall, R. S. "Governmental Roles in the Economy of Late Antiquity." *Production and Public Powers in Classical Antiquity*, edited by E. Lo Cascio and D. Rathbone. Cambridge, Cambridge Philological Society (2000), 87.

<sup>239</sup> Edmondson, 91-2.

<sup>240</sup> Bernardi, 62.

<sup>241</sup> Harl, 183.

There are so many of those in Africa who are commonly called ‘slave dealers’ that they seem to be draining Africa of much of its human population and transferring their ‘merchandise’ to the provinces across the sea. Almost all of these are free persons. Only a few are found to have been sold by their parents, and these people buy them, not as Roman laws permit, as indentured servants for a period of twenty-five years, but in fact they buy them as slaves and sell them across the sea as slaves.<sup>242</sup>

This large slave population could only have been the result of worsening economic conditions that forced numerous individuals into indentured servitude. This placed large numbers of poor people at the mercy of these ‘slave dealers’ and clearly shows the desperation that must have been felt by many members of the lower classes.

The anger of the general population boiled over in the form of revolts, likely over excessive levels of taxation, in 417, 435-7, and 442. Each case required strong military forces to put down the revolt. A severe blow fell on what remained of the Western Roman Empire when in 439 the Vandals captured Carthage and with it conquered the Roman province of North Africa. Not only had this been by far the wealthiest remaining province, which meant it had paid the most in taxes, North Africa had also supplied the majority of the grain to feed the city of Rome.<sup>243</sup> The abolishment of all tax privileges in 441 by the Emperor Valentinian III at the request of the very landowners who directly benefited from them, indicates how serious problems had become for the imperial treasury.<sup>244</sup> In 444, Emperor Valentinian publically admitted that:

If we claim these expenses from the landowner in addition to what he already pays, such an exaction will crush his last feeble strength: if again we demand them from the merchants, they will inevitably sink under the weight of such a burden.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Garnsey, 60-1.

<sup>243</sup> Tainter, 147.

<sup>244</sup> Bernardi, 62.

<sup>245</sup> Jones, 82.

Even after this public declaration that further taxation would be disastrous, Valentinian still imposed a 1/24 sales tax.<sup>246</sup> The final straw came in 468 when the Western Emperor Anthemius and his eastern colleague Leo I launched a joint expedition, largely funded by the Eastern Empire, against the Vandals with the goal of reconquering North Africa. This expedition ended in total disaster and estimates for the cost of the expedition range between 7 ½ and 9 ½ million *solidi*.<sup>247</sup> With no further help available, the now ruined western Roman economy could no longer support even the most basic financial needs of its government.

As we have seen, from the third-century onward taxation increased throughout the Roman Empire to a level which heavily overburdened the lower classes of society. This excessive taxation, combined with the oppression of elites, forced many peasants to become *coloni*. Over time, the rights of *coloni* declined substantially until they were little more than peasants tied to the land on which they were born. This constant oppression of the peasant class did not allow the population of the Roman Empire to recover from the losses that it had suffered in centuries past, and thus the tax base of the empire could not expand. Following the final division of the empire in 395, the economically weaker West quickly lost the ability to financially support itself, which in turn led to economic crisis and eventual collapse.

### Conclusion

The Western Roman Empire fell from the slow erosion of both the economy and military from the third-century onward. This decline began with the population loss suffered during the

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<sup>246</sup> Tainter, 147.

<sup>247</sup> Harl, 176.

Third-Century Crisis. Instead of working to help the peasant class repopulate the empire, the privileged *honestiores* focused on subjugating the general population which was already overburdened by excessive taxation. This succeeded in turning the general population into *coloni*, who were essentially serfs. This in turn removed the ability of peasants to support large families, and thus indirectly acted as a type of population control. The high cost of slaves indicated as early as the Edict of Diocletian, shows why the *honestiores* fought to keep this system in place to maintain their status at the top of Roman society.

While this process was taking place, Constantine's decision to create large field armies and remove many troops from border defense could only have encouraged barbarian attacks. While most barbarian societies were primitive by Roman standards, they were certainly capable of understanding that an attack on Roman territory was more likely to penetrate the frontier and acquire substantial booty if fewer Roman soldiers directly opposed them on the borders. Whether or not a field army could defeat these barbarians at a later date would not likely have factored highly into the barbarians' decision to invade. Even if a field army did succeed in driving the barbarians out of Roman territory, the destruction wrought by the invasion could not easily be undone. The bottom line was that field armies increased security for emperors, but did so at the direct expense of adequately defending Roman borders. This caused peasants living near many borders to suffer greatly and likely led to abandonment of frontier lands at the first threat of invasion.

The final division of the empire following the death of Theodosius in 395 had a significantly negative impact on the West. The East benefited greatly from this, as this portion of the empire was economically stronger and strategically less vulnerable. The East brought in tax revenues estimated at three times greater than those produced in the West, while at the same time

the West had nearly double the length of frontier to defend.<sup>248</sup> This was a recipe for disaster. To field the necessary forces to attempt to defend all of its borders, the Western Roman Empire levied ever-greater taxes on its already overtaxed population. This massive financial burden may well have caused large segments of the Roman population to prefer barbarian rule to that of the Romans.<sup>249</sup>

While it is a controversial subject, criticism of the East for not doing more to help the West during the fifth century ignores the many dire concerns facing the East. First and foremost of these was Persia, which required large numbers of troops be kept in Armenia and Mesopotamia to deal with this potential threat.<sup>250</sup> A recent argument holds that the only sign that the East even recognized the sack of Rome in 410 was the three days of public mourning declared in Constantinople.<sup>251</sup> Stilicho likely did not receive support from the East because he claimed guardianship over Theodosius' other son, Eastern Emperor Arcadius, and hoped to one-day control both portions of the empire. The fall of Stilicho from power likely pleased the eastern aristocracy, but there is no evidence of an eastern desire for Rome itself to fall.<sup>252</sup> As previously stated, the East did help in dealing with Attila and they provided the bulk of the money and troops for the attempted retaking of North Africa in 468. Lack of support from the East was not a primary cause for the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

The increasing reliance upon barbarian *federates* during the fifth century significantly weakened the Western Roman military. Following the disaster at Adrianople, increasing numbers of less than reliable *federates* began to fill the military ranks. When Germanic

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<sup>248</sup> Tainter, 151.

<sup>249</sup> Tainter, 147.

<sup>250</sup> Heather, 386.

<sup>251</sup> Brown, 137.

<sup>252</sup> Heather, 217-8.

barbarians crossed into Roman territory in 406, Stilicho was unable to use his field army, which contained a large number of *federates*, to stop the invasion. Stilicho, following the previous precedent of pulling troops away from border defense to comprise his field army, is at least partially responsible for the ease with which the barbarians penetrated Roman frontier defenses. With the death of Stilicho in 408, and subsequent desertion of a number of his *federate* soldiers, the remaining Roman forces were incapable of preventing Alaric from sacking Rome.

To placate these invaders and maintain some semblance of control, Roman emperors continuously gave invaders large tracts of land to settle on within the Roman Empire in exchange for service as *federates*. The settlement of Gothic troops in Aquitania is a prime example of this. These *federates* did not pay imperial taxes, which only further strained imperial resources and led to a further dependence of *federates* for military support. The army commanded by Aetius consisted largely of *federates* and after his death this army disappeared, and the West never again fielded an effective army of its own. With the financial resources of the West exhausted and no army to call on for defense, what remained of the Western Roman Empire fell quietly into the night.

While others have sought to find more narrow explanations for the fall of the Western Roman Empire, this study has explained its fall as the result of a slow decline in both the Roman military and economy. This explanation is certainly less flashy than Nriagu's attempt to place lead poisoning as the primary cause behind the fall of the empire, but it is vastly more accurate. The fall cannot be attributed to the poor and the army as West would have us believe, nor was taxation the primary cause as Jones suggests, nor should we examine military factors by themselves as Ferrill argues. There simply was no catalyst which can be held up above all others

as the primary cause of the Western collapse. This becomes clear only after looking at a broad spectrum of issues within both the Roman army and economy.

The key problems of excessive taxation and the slow decline in quality and effectiveness of an overstretched military which contributed to the downfall of the Western Roman Empire, are far from unique to one specific case or time. The problem of overextended military resources intertwined with economic crisis can be applied to numerous empires throughout history. The current situation in the United States falls into this very same pattern. The deployment of large numbers of troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq has placed an enormous financial burden on an already strained American economy. These two conflicts alone require an estimated \$16-billion worth of funding every month. The cost of these wars for every household in the United States is approximately \$100 per month.<sup>253</sup> When this is combined with the over \$11-trillion worth of public debt currently owed by the United States government which over the last several years has increased by an average of \$3.77 billion per day, the dire state of the American economy becomes clear.<sup>254</sup> This massive budget deficit cannot continue forever. Unless a solution is found quickly, the pressures of an overextended military fighting costly wars, combined with the ever-increasing national debt, could destroy the United States, just as similar economic and military issues brought down the Western Roman Empire.

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<sup>253</sup> Adair, Bill. (2008, April). *The Iraq war, for \$100 month*. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2008/apr/01/iraq-war-100-month/>

<sup>254</sup> Hall, Ed. (2009, March). *U.S. National Debt Clock*. Retrieved March 20, 2009, from [http://www.brillig.com/debt\\_clock/](http://www.brillig.com/debt_clock/)



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