

The Decline and Fall of the Western Roman Empire *The Historical Evidence*

Primary Source 1

Source: Diodorus Siculus, *Library Books 34/35. 2. 1-48*

- 1 Because of the superabundant prosperity of those who exploited the products of this mighty island [Sicily], nearly all who had risen in wealth affected first a luxurious mode of living, then arrogance and insolence. As a result of all this, since both the maltreatment of the slaves and their estrangement from their masters increased at an equal rate, there was at last, when occasion offered, a violent outburst of hatred. So without a word of summons tens of thousands of slaves joined forces to destroy their masters...

Primary Source 2

Source: Sallust, Roman politician, in his work *Conspiracy of Catiline* Chapters 11-16: "Life in Rome in the Late Republic, c. 63 B.C." In William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*, pp. 135-138.

After Sulla had recovered the government by force of arms, everybody became robbers and plunderers. Some set their hearts on houses, some on lands...The whole period was one of debauched tastes and lawlessness. When wealth was once counted an honor, and glory, authority, and power attended it, virtue lost her influence, poverty was thought a disgrace, and a life of innocence was regarded as a life of mere ill nature.

From the influence of riches, accordingly, luxury, [greed], pride came to prevail among the youth. They grew at once rapacious and [extravagant]. They undervalued what was their own; they set at naught modesty and continence; they lost all distinction between sacred and profane, and threw off all consideration and self-restraint.

Primary Source 3

Source: Galgacus, an ancient barbarian leader. Speech to his soldiers, recorded by Roman historian Tacitus. In *Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola*, 29-33 c. 98 A.D.

"Do you suppose that the Romans will be as brave in war as they are [immoral] in peace? ...their own army, an army which, composed as it is of every variety of nations, is held together by success and will be broken up by disaster. These Gauls and Germans, and, I blush to say, these Britons, who, though they lend their lives to support a stranger's rule, have been its enemies longer than its subjects, you cannot imagine to be bound by [loyalty] and affection...All the incentives to victory are on our side. The Romans have no wives to kindle their courage; no parents to taunt them with flight, man have either no country or one far away.

Be not frightened by the idle display, by the glitter of gold and of silver, which can neither protect nor wound. In the very ranks of the enemy we shall find our own forces. Britons will acknowledge their own cause; Gauls will remember past freedom; the other Germans will abandon them, as but lately did the Usipii. Behind them there is nothing to dread. The forts are ungarrisoned; the colonies in the hands of aged men; what with disloyal subjects and oppressive rulers...."

Primary Source 4

Source: Pliny, *Letters*, "Letters of Pliny to Emperor Trajan." Translated by Wilham Melmoth, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Vol.11, pp. 401-05, 407. Reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Loeb Classical Library".

Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your [the Emperor's] image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who

are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged...They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the [Roman] temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Primary Source 5

Source: Herodian of Syria, *History of the Emperors* II.6ff: "How Didius Julianus Bought the Empire at Auction, 193 A.D. In William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*.

The following account describes how Didius Julianus bought the office of Emperor after the murder of Emperor Pertinax in 193 A.D.

When [Julianus] came to the wall of the [military] camp, he called out to the troops and promised to give them just as much as they desired, for he had ready money and a treasure room full of gold and silver. About the same time too came Sulpicianus, who had also been consul and was prefect of Rome and father-in-law of Pertinax, to try to buy the power also. But the soldiers did not receive him, because they feared lest his connection with Pertinax might lead him to avenge him by some treachery. So [the soldiers] lowered a ladder and brought Julianus into the fortified camp; for they would not open the gates, until they had made sure of the amount of the bounty they expected...he promised the troops as large a sum of money as they could ever expect to require or receive. The payment should be immediate, and he would at once have the cash brought over from his residence. Captivated by such speeches, and with such vast hopes awakened, the soldiers hailed Julianus as Emperor...

Primary Source 6

Source: Emperor Diocletian, *Price Edict* 301 A.D. In *Roman Civilization*, vol. 2, *The Empire*, edited by Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), pp. 463-73.

Who does not know that wherever the common safety requires our armies to be sent, the profiteers insolently and covertly attack the public welfare, not only in villages and towns, but on every road? They charge extortionate prices for merchandise, not just fourfold or eightfold, but on such a scale that human speech cannot find words to characterize their profit and their practices. Indeed, sometimes in a single retail sale a soldier is stripped of his donative and pay. Moreover, the contributions of the whole world for the support of the armies fall as profits into the hands of these plunderers, and our soldiers appear to bestow with their own hands the rewards of their military service and their veterans' bonuses upon the profiteers. The result is that the pillagers of the state itself seize day by day more than they know how to hold.

Aroused justly and rightfully by all the facts set forth above, and in response to the needs of mankind itself, which appears to be praying for release, we have decided that maximum prices of articles for sale must be established.

Primary Source 7

Source: Diocletian, Emperor of East Rome/Byzantium, *Edicts Against the Christians*. In Eusebius: *Hist. Ecc.*, Book VIII, ch. 2, ch. 6 at end, and *De Mart. Palest.* ch. 3, ch. 4, and ch. 9 (ed. Dindorf, Vol. IV, p. 351, 357, 386, 390, 402). translated in University of Pennsylvania. Dept. of History: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1897?-1907?]), Vol 4., 1, pp. 26-28.

This was the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian...when the feast of the [Christ's] passion was near at hand, and royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches should be razed to the ground, the Scriptures destroyed by fire, those who held positions of honor degraded, and the household servants, if they persisted in the Christian profession, be deprived of their liberty.

All at once decrees of Emperor Maximinus again got abroad against Christians everywhere throughout the province. The governors, and in addition the military prefects, incited by edicts, letters and public ordinances of the magistrates, together with generals and the city clerks in all the cities, to fulfill the imperial edicts which commanded that the altars of the idols should be rebuilt with all zeal and that all the men, together with the women and children, even infants at the breast, should offer sacrifice and pour out libations [to the Roman gods]; and these urged them anxiously, carefully to make the people taste of the sacrifices...

Primary Source 8

Source: Anonymous, *On Military Matters* 368 A.D. In *A Roman Reformer and Inventor*, translated by E.A. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 106-14, 122-23.

The Corruption of the Provincial Governors

Now in addition to these injuries, wherewith the arts of [greediness] afflict the provinces, comes the appalling greed of the provincial Governors, which is ruinous to the taxpayers' interests. For these men, despising the respectable character of their office, think that they have been sent into the provinces as merchants...As for the Governors, the buying of recruits, the purchase of horses and grain, the monies intended for city walls – all these are regular sources of profit for them and are the pillage for which they long.

Methods of Economy in Military Expenditure

I have now described, as I intended, the distresses of the State, which should rightly be removed by Imperial measures. Let us turn now to the vast expenditure on the army which must be checked similarly, for this is what has thrown the entire system of tax payment into difficulties...

Military Machines

Above all it must be recognized that wild nations are pressing upon the Roman Empire and howling round about it everywhere, and treacherous barbarians, covered by natural positions, are assailing every frontier.

Primary Source 9

Source: Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Battle of Handrianopolis* 378 A.D. In *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus During the Reigns of The Emperors Constantius, Julian, Jovianus, Valentinian, and Valens*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1911), pp. 609-618.

But when the barbarians, rushing on with their enormous host, beat down our horses and men, and left no spot to which our ranks could fall back to deploy, while they were so closely packed that it was impossible to escape by forcing a way through them...Then you might see the barbarian towering in his fierceness, hissing or shouting, fall with his legs pierced through, or his right hand cut off, sword and all, or his side transfixed, and still, in the last gasp of life, casting round him defiant glances.

Amidst all this great tumult and confusion our infantry were exhausted by toil and danger, until at last they had neither strength left to fight, nor spirits to plan anything... so that they were forced to content themselves with their drawn swords, which they thrust into the dense battalions of the enemy...seeing that every possibility of escape was cut off from them. The ground, covered with streams of blood, made their feet slip...At last one black pool of blood disfigured everything, and wherever the eye turned, it could see nothing but piled up heaps of dead, and lifeless corpses trampled on without mercy.

Just when it first became dark, the emperor being among a crowd of common soldiers, as it was believed--- for no one said either that he had seen him, or been near him---was mortally wounded with an arrow, and, very shortly after, died, though his body was never found.

Primary Source 10

Source: Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, XIV.16: "The Luxury of the Rich in Rome," c. 400 A.D. In William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*, pp. 224-225, 239-244, 247-258, 260-265, 305-309.

Rome is still looked upon as the queen of the earth, and the name of the Roman people is respected and venerated. But the magnificence of Rome is defaced by the inconsiderate [foolishness] of a few, who never recollect where they are born, but fall away into error and [immorality] as if a perfect immunity were granted to vice. Of these men, some, thinking that they can be handed down to immortality by means of statues, are eager after them, as if they would obtain a higher reward from brazen figures unendowed with sense than from a consciousness of upright and honorable actions; and they are even anxious to have them plated over with gold!

Primary Source 11

Source: Salvian, *Romans and Barbarians*, c. 440 A.D. In James Harvey Robinson, ed., *Readings in European History: Vol. I*: (Boston: Ginn and co., 1904), 28-30

[The Romans oppress each other with fees and exactions]...for the many are oppressed by the few, who regard public exactions as their own peculiar right, who carry on private [money making] under the guise of collecting the taxes.

[Nay, the state has fallen upon such evil days that a man cannot be safe unless he is wicked]. Even those in a position to protest against the [unfairness] which they see about them dare not speak lest they make matters worse than before. So the poor are despoiled, the widows sigh, the orphans are oppressed, until many of them, born of families not obscure, and liberally educated, flee to our enemies that they may no longer suffer the oppression of public persecution...And although they differ from the people to whom they flee in manner and in language; although they are unlike as regards the fetid odor of the barbarians' bodies and garments, yet they would rather endure a foreign civilization among the barbarians than cruel injustice among the Romans.

So they migrate to the Goths, or to the Bagaudes, or to some other tribe of the barbarians who are ruling everywhere, and do not regret their exile. For they would rather live *free* under an appearance of slavery than live as captives under an appearance of liberty. The name of Roman citizen, once so highly esteemed and so dearly bought, is now a thing that men repudiate and flee from...

Primary Source 12

Source. Jordanes, *An Account of the Person of Attila*. In William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-1913), p. 322

When Attila's brother Bleda, who ruled over a great part of the Huns, had been slain by Attila's treachery, the latter united all the people under his own rule. Gathering also a host of the other tribes which he then held under his sway he sought to subdue the foremost nations of the world---the Romans and Visigoths. His army is said to have numbered 500,000 men. He was a man born into the world to shake the nations, the scourge of all lands, who in some way terrified all mankind by the dreadful rumors noised abroad concerning him.