

Causes of Fall of Rome.

Kate Alexander.

Outline

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II. Discussion

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1. Political

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- b. Bad money system
- c. Official corruption
- d. Military despotism
- e. Division of Empire
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2. Religious

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3. Social

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- c. Slavery
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B. External

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A. Significance of

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- 2. Constantinople remaining intact until 1453
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Though 476 A.D. is the date recognized by historians, as the date of the downfall of Rome, it is not to be considered as arbitrary. The forces that undermined that great power, which had dominated the civilized world for centuries, had been constantly at work since the Antonines; and even before, for was not the mere fact of the change in the form of government, from a republic to a monarchy, significant of a decline? It is conceded by historians, that in many respects the accession of the Caesars was a decided benefit, though it undeniably was an unwarranted usurpation of power; and if the Romans of that time had possessed the virtues and intellectual qualities of their forefathers, would they not have clung tenaciously to their old liberties, and have yielded them up only after a desperate struggle?

Though the decline in character was evident before, the decline in power was first noticeable in the second century of the Empire, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. While he was one of the best of the Emperors, he had difficulty in maintaining the frontiers against the Germans, thus disclosing the weakness of that once invincible organization, the Roman army. Commodus, the much indulged son of Marcus Aurelius, brought disgrace upon the name of the Antonines.

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He was involved in the most hideous crimes, and indulged in the worst vices of the times. His wicked life was brought to an end by the hands of assassins in his own household, who had anticipated his designs against themselves.

Commodus was typical of those who followed him, in this the third century of the Empire. The middle of the third century is sometimes called the "Age of the Thirty Tyrants," from the rapidity with which one bad Emperor succeeded another.

From this time on, the decline of the Roman state was almost precipitate till the reign of Diocletian, who gave a decided check to the disintegrating influences by his wise administration. One of the most noticeable changes effected by Diocletian was in the customs of the court. The hollow mask of the Republic was laid aside for the form which was modeled after the Orientals; and the Roman state became a monarchy in form as well as in fact. He did much toward confining the various peoples under the Roman rule, into one people with a common purpose. He also sought to remedy another evil, by establishing a law of succession, according to which there were to be two Emperors, one residing in the East at Constantinople and the other in the West at Rome.

But Constantine, one of the next Emperors

according to the law of succession, avoided all the provisions and became the sole Emperor of Rome.

The two features that marked the reign of Constantine as a turning point in history are the establishment of the Christian religion and the removal of the capital to Constantinople.

By the light of the present, we see that the initial cause of disaster to the Roman state, was due to the steady internal deterioration of the political, religious and social life of the Romans, while the immediate and external cause was the impetuous and inevitable migration of the barbarians.

The retention of the old republican forms of government under the monarchy, had a deleterious effect, since it kept up the superficial tendencies of the times, and induced, even compelled the growth of the dependent, servile characteristics of the Roman of that period. Augustus had preserved carefully all of the old republican forms. His household was modest, and he would have "blushed" at employing the meanest of the Romans as his servants. Ever before his eyes, was the picture of Julius Caesar, and he fully realized the absolute power of the Roman army, in this critical period, the Senate having lost much of its boasted power. For, as Gibbon says, "it is

a most critical period for an elective monarchy when the throne is vacant; and that, practically was the condition in Rome at the time of Augustus.

When Augustus revised the Senate roll, under the title of Censor, and had given them ample time to know their complete dependence upon him, he very modestly tendered them his resignation in an oration in which he avowed that "he solemnly restored the Senate and people to all their ancient rights, and wished only to mingle with the crowd of his fellow citizens and share the blessings which he had obtained for his country. But the Senators did not accept his resignation. They begged him not to leave them to their fate, and after skillfully pretending to resist them, Augustus accepted with seeming reluctance, the two added titles of Pro-consul and Imperator. He was now the possessor of four titles: Censor, Prince of the Senate, Pro-consul and Imperator. As Censor, he was general inspector of Roman manners and morals; as Prince of Senate, he dominated that body, and as Gibbon says, "the principles of a free quotation are irrecoverably lost, when the legislative body is dominated by the executive." As Pro-consul, he governed the provinces, and as Imperator, the army; in fact, every department

of government was now virtually under his control. He accepted these titles for ten years only, at the expiration of which time, he firmly believed, so he announced to the Senate 'that the Republic would be restored to its pristine health and vigor.' The tenth year of an Emperor's reign, thus came to be celebrated in the centuries following.

As an imaginary concession to the Senate, he gave them formal control of the provinces, and it gradually dawned on the people that the strong hand of Augustus could be felt with the same resistless force in every part of the Empire. But he conscientiously kept up all the old forms, did not change any of the offices and kept up the General Assembly. Though those who filled the offices had little or nothing to do, the honor was eagerly sought after by the Romans.

The Emperors who immediately followed Augustus, kept up these forms, principally through fear. Those who did not feel this fear, and used their power too rashly, were assassinated at the close of a short, tyrannical reign.

A bad money system is an injury to any state, causing unfairness in the payment of debts. One of the greatest problems of modern times is a good money system, and if the problem is not yet solved, what a knotty problem it must

have been to the Roman of a "Millennium" and a half ago. That he had difficulty is shown in the frequent changes in the standard of value. At one time, oxen were used, again weapons of war, such as are used by the "red man"; then the baser metals, brass or iron.

After the advent of the Caesars, there was a great deal of political corruption. Unscrupulous men bought their way into the offices, misusing public wealth for private gain, thus growing immensely rich. As the functions of the officers were mainly usurped by the Caesars, they had practically all their time for luxurious idleness, which is always accompanied by its abominable twin, Vice.

The army was a most powerful force in the Roman state, after the degenerate influences had overthrown the Republic. Augustus was fully aware of the unbounded power of the army, and governed it with extreme care, that it might not come to know its strength. But the later days of the Empire, from Commodus to Constantine, witnessed some startling and menacing evidences of its strength. Pertinax was elected by the praetorian guard, but his sensible and economical methods incensed that avaricious body. They assassinated him and sold the Empire

To a rich Senator, Didius Julianus, a dull fool, who went his endless round of vices and made no attempt at government. He, too, was finally assassinated, and another was proclaimed Emperor in his stead. During this period election was followed by assassination by the army, the inevitable results of an age of military despotism. The Emperor was either too virtuous, and instituted too many reforms; or he was so full of iniquity, as to be unbearable, even by such a corrupt body as the Roman army.

Thus matters went on until Constantine totally disarmed the army of its power, by disbanding the guard at Rome, and changing the capital to the Bosphorus. In this frightful age, many lives were lost in the frequent contentions for the royal purple. Several vice-saturated men were elevated to the highest place in the land; and an equal number of capable and worthy men were put to death for their virtues. This age marks the most rapid decline in the whole history of the Roman Empire.

"In union there is strength." The division of the Empire under Diocletian, divided the strength of the state, whose waning power needed concentration, rather than dissipation; and it only furnished another bone over which there could be and was endless contention. Constantine's

change in the seat of government, though wise on account of existing conditions, did much toward hastening the downfall of Rome. It took from Rome her best citizens, and much of the wealth, thus striking the death blow to her former glory and power.

Even at this early date, man was influenced by his religious feelings. With the fall of the Republic, the old Roman faith died out. So closely had it been woven into the fabric of the Republic that it could not long outlive it. The influx, also, of a foreign population, did much toward uprooting the old belief; and association with the care-free Greek had left its impress. Disbelief in any God was prevalent, and their motto was: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." The many excesses into which the Roman of that period plunged, would doubtless have been avoided by a hope in the future. The Christian religion did not supply the needs of the Roman, because he did not understand its underlying principles and lofty teachings. Constantine had adopted it for the sake of policy, and under his direction, it served as a mask for unheard-of atrocities. The vices hidden under the robes of the monk, even rivaled those of the rich nobility.

The social conditions, out of which grew many of these other abuses, were the most degrading of all the influences, which united to bring about the ruin of the Roman government. Rome has been called the city of millionaires and beggars. The oppressions of the rich added steadily to the vast horde of beggars that depended upon the state for subsistence, through that iniquitous institution, the distribution of corn. The heavy taxes, which were levied to keep up the games, the pomp of the Senate, and in the age of military despotism, to pay the soldiers, were a heavy drain on the middle class, those least able to bear the heavy burden, while the rich escaped untaxed. This steadily pushed each year, a greater number of the middle class down among the paupers. The rabble, kept in idleness by the charity of the state, were the lowest and most degraded types of humanity imaginable. The general morals of the people were rapidly lowered by this mob, who had nothing to do but invent some new evil. They were ever willing to lend an ear to every agitator with a ready flow of words; and for this reason, they remained an ever turbulent menace to the very existence of Rome itself.

Slavery was an abominable institution

that existed in its worst and most advanced stage. The effeminate and dissipated Roman had come to spend much of his time inventing new duties for a new slave. The domestic servant was much better treated than the field laborer, who often worked so hard, that in a few years he was virtually worn out, when he was replaced by another. This was thought to be the more economical, since a slave could be had for the expense and trouble of kidnapping him. Slavery here, as in every other state that has tried it, sapped the vitality and lowered the morality of the people.

The decrease in population, too, was a serious problem. So much had it decreased that the ordinary number of legions could not be maintained; so German soldiers came to be hired, thus paving the way for the train of evils attendant upon a hired soldiery. So entirely did the German soldier come to predominate in the fourth century that when a commander was elected, he was raised on a shield in true German fashion. Endless fighting thinned the ranks; riotous living brought ignominious death to hundreds; the games disposed of many victims, and the repulse in which marriage was held, served also to decrease the population.

Under these combined influences, the population of Rome steadily decreased, despite all efforts to check it.

Perhaps the great, predominating — at any rate, the underlying cause of the downfall of Rome, was the decay in the character of the citizen. A study of the early Roman, reveals perfect physical development and a code of splendid morals; strength and endurance for his country; freedom to strike telling blows for that country he loves, and for which he lives. The good of Rome comes first in every consideration, and above all, his home life is pure, thus giving him the atmosphere in which to develop, into the substantial, reliable and worthy citizen. As a reward for the strong citizenship resulting from these conditions, Rome becomes undisputed master of the world, unlimited wealth flows into her coffers, and lo, the change begins, for Corruption and Vice go hand in hand with Wealth. The Roman citizen no longer possesses the commendable traits of his forefather, that enabled him to put Rome on the pinnacle of her greatness. He is effeminate, dissipated, ignoble, servile, a physical and a moral wreck. His chief characteristic is avarice; he is dominated by his own selfish desires,

for his governing motive has ceased to be directed by that which is for the general good, but instead, by a longing to gratify his own low and degraded cravings. The home, in great contrast to that of the early Roman home in its purity, was a nest of vile iniquity. Thus was every vestige of the admirable character of the early Roman destroyed.

While these gradual changes were taking place within the Empire forces from without were gaining strength to complete the ruin of the Roman state. These forces came from two directions; the growing power of the German nations of the north, and the fact that they were being pushed from their borders by the fierce Huns; also the revival of the Persian Empire, which was again showing its old covetous disposition with regard to the Western continent. It had recovered some of its lost territory and was grasping greedily for more. This tendency, had it not received some check, would undoubtedly have given the Romans much trouble, had not the Scythians saved them the trouble. They, being driven southward by the Huns, advanced into the Roman provinces. In the struggle that followed, some of the Ostrogoths became subjects

to the Huns, while the Visigoths and other tribes asked and obtained permission to come within the protection of the Roman frontier. The avarice of the Romans brought about much warfare. After the death of Theodosius who had subdued them, they revolted again. This time they were quieted by Stilicho, who also drove off the Huns, who were continually threatening from the north.

Thus in 476, A.D. there was enacted on the stage of human existence, one of the greatest and perhaps the most awful scenes in the history of mankind, in which Romulus Augustus, the last Roman, was deposed and the barbarian, Odovacer, placed on the throne of the Caesars. This seemingly terrible disaster came as the inevitable result of the conditions that had produced such widespread corruption in the political world, immorality in the social life, degradation in the home, and consequent loss of manhood, which is always the foundation of the citizenship of any great state. And while the Roman Empire, with its seat of government at Constantinople remained as a barrier against the Orient for another thousand years, thus preserving some of the remnants of the Graeco-Roman culture, until

the barbarian Occident was capable of appreciating it, yet the glorious and once mighty capital was never again at the head of the civilized world after the memorable year, which marks the close of the reign of the last Emperor in the West, 476, A.D.