Summary:
The decline and fall of the Roman Empire, which extended throughout most of Western and Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and into Asia, occurred slowly over about three hundred years. The decline was punctuated by periods of political, economic, military, and social disintegration along with Germanic invasions. The Roman Empire is considered to have officially ended in 476 CE when the Germanic chieftain Odoacer deposed the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus. The Eastern Roman Empire, or the Byzantine Empire, would continue until its collapse in 1453 CE.

Background & History
Although numerous theories each explain a primary reason for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, historians have also theorized the likelihood that the gradual decline of the Roman Empire was the result of numerous events. A combination of factors coincided to chip away at the Imperium Romanum, which is Latin for Roman Empire. The factors include the empire’s eventual dependence on Germanic soldiers, a declining population in Western Europe, plagues, economic crises, and the lack of consistent leadership. During its peak in the second century CE, the empire covered approximately 6,500,000 square kilometers (2,509,664 square miles). After the empire stopped expanding its territories, it lost the immediate benefits of revenue from conquering new lands and turned to its own citizens for tax revenue.

Military government
During the second century CE, the first emperor of the Severan dynasty, Septimius Severus (145-211 CE), transformed the civil government into a government that ruled with the support of the army. Generals gained power under the military dictatorship, and after the last Severan ruler, Alexander Severus (208-235 CE), was murdered by his own troops, the lack of clear rights of succession created long periods of civil unrest. Roman generals and their own factions fought for the throne, causing Rome to be ruled by twenty-five emperors during the next fifty years, a period called the Crisis of the Third Century, which ended when Emperor Diocletian (244 CE-311 CE) assumed the throne in 284.

The Roman military underwent significant changes during and after the third century as the empire was increasingly pressured to defend its borders against Germanic and Sassanid armies. Under Diocletian in the late third and early fourth centuries, Rome continued to increase the size of the army—and therefore increase its taxes—as Diocletian divided the troops into civil and military offices. The civil militia protected the borders, and the more experienced military soldiers were moved deep into the empire, closer to the emperor and farther away from invasions.

Civil Wars
Between 235 and 284, the near-constant fighting among generals led to civil wars. The previously organized and far-reaching trade network within the empire suffered as conditions along the vast network of roads became unsafe for merchants. As a result, long-distance commerce was unsustainable and eventually led to more localized economies, such as those that developed in the Middle Ages. Up to this point, Rome’s population had come to depend upon the resources of food, clothing, metals, and other commodities that the trade network supported, as well as tribute from newly conquered lands. However, Rome was no longer expanding but merely defending its borders, and the army required food and supplies brought to the numerous fronts they defended.

Invasions
In the late second and early third centuries, increasing invasions along the north and east borders by Germanic Goth, Vandal, Alamanni, and Carpiani tribes, and threats from the Persian Sassanid Empire (226-651 CE) to the east, caused Rome to increase its army by 25 percent during the late third century, and pay its military double.
In order to deal with the increasing number and severity of invasions at numerous fronts along the border, Rome also had to contend with the decreasing number of Romans willing to fight. Eventually, Rome began hiring mercenary Germanic soldiers to fill their ranks. Emperor Diocletian continued this practice, which ultimately threatened the existence of Rome as the capital of the empire, leading to the Germanic takeover of Rome in the fifth century.

**Economic Crisis**

To cover escalating military expenses, large tax increases were enacted. More and more soldiers were needed to protect the borders from invasions. To raise more money to cover the costs of the military and other expenses, Rome added baser metals to the previously all-silver coins, which in turn created inflation. An economic crisis occurred from hyperinflation after the devaluation of Rome's coinage, leading to near-complete currency devaluation by the time Diocletian came to power in 284. The high costs of the military created additional strains on the empire as taxes on agricultural lands to pay for the enormous military budget led large amounts of land to remain fallow. As it was too expensive to cultivate land, many farmers were forced to abandon their farms and move to the cities, which often could not support their increasing populations.

**Population Decline**

As Germanic tribes attacked the outer provinces and caused Romans to retreat from bordering areas, they reduced the number and size of fortresses around cities within the empire. The invasions also chipped away at the already dwindling size of the Roman population. Population declines, caused additionally by plagues and an overall population decrease from declining birthrates, added to the burden of increasing the size of the military. Two different plagues killed millions of Romans during the second and third centuries. The first, called the Antonine Plague, struck from 165 CE to about 180 CE, killing about 5 million Romans. (Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius is thought to have died as a result of the plague, which is why it is named Antonine, after his family's name, Antoninus.) Then, from 251 to about 266 CE, an outbreak of smallpox, called the Plague of Cyprian, killed thousands. The disease greatly reduced the number of soldiers as well as farmers.

**Political Fragmentation**

Political fragmentation also contributed to the Crisis of the Third Century. By about 258 CE, two regions had fragmented from the main Roman Empire and became the Gallic Empire and the Palmyrene Empire. The Gallic Empire included the provinces of Gaul, Britain, and Hispania. The provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt made up the Palmyrene Empire in the east. After Roman Emperor Diocletian assumed power in 284 CE, he officially divided the empire into the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire. Control shifted between emperors of the two regions for nearly two hundred years.

Diocletian further fragmented the empire when he appointed one senior and two junior co-emperors to help rule the different regions of the empire. Each ruler in this tetrarchy, or rule of four, further increased the number of troops in their region, piling on the tax burden. To increase military control throughout the empire, Diocletian divided the empire's twenty provinces into 100, compounding the size of the bureaucracy, and in effect further dividing the once-unified empire.

**Mercenary Soldiers**

In 378, after Romans fought the Visigoths in modern-day Turkey—when Visigoths were simultaneously fleeing the nomadic Hun peoples from Central Asia—Visigoths forced Rome to allow the settlement of their people within the empire's borders. Rome continued its practice of hiring mercenary soldiers among the Visigoths, eventually leading to a greater number of Germanic soldiers than Roman in the empire's army. However, the Visigoth's expensive fees led Rome to increase taxes within the empire to cover the military's costs. Eventually, the large number of Visigoth mercenary soldiers in the Roman army were loyal not to the Roman government but to Germanic commanders within the Roman army. This influx of Visigoth soldiers eventually worked against the empire as the soldiers eventually turned on Roman citizens and sacked Rome in 410.
In 476 CE, Germanic general Odoacer (435-493) deposed the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, Romulus Augustus, when his army invaded Rome, effectively ending the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman, or Byzantine Empire, lasted until 1453 when the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople.

**Cultural & Historical Impact**

During the Late Roman Empire, the civic culture of the Roman Republic began to disintegrate as the focus of the empire shifted to defending its territory and rampant internal civil strife. While many historians point to a moral decay and loss of civic virtue as either cause or effect of the empire’s decline, much in its culture reveals fragmentation. This fragmentation is evident in both the language and the family, even as ruling emperors sought to demand pure devotion to themselves as demigods.

**The Role of the Imperial Cult in the Late Roman Empire**

Begun under Julius Caesar Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE), Rome's first emperor, the Imperial cult developed under the guise that the emperor's rule was divinely approved. Emperors were considered connected to the Roman state, which was divinely ordained, and the Imperial cult was intertwined with the deities of Rome, such as Jupiter. Emperors themselves deified their predecessors into demigods.

Contractual examples of the cult were seen in sacrificium, or "sacred offerings," that involved the offering of loyalty in business dealings, in oaths of office, and in marriage. Diocletian was known for taking full advantage of sacrifice by persecuting Christians and demanding their sacrifice to the gods.

Imperial rule through the cult became an effort to manipulate the loyalty of Roman citizens through propaganda, as was evident in the gladiator games. At the games, sword-wielding gladiators would fight condemned criminals, wild animals from Africa, and other gladiators to the death. The games were outrageously expensive but entertained the populace and served as venues for emperors to impress citizens and gain recognition. In addition, emperors used their imperial rule to decrease the Roman Senate's power while increasing the power of the military, as well as their own.

**The Role of Language in the Late Roman Empire**

Latin was the official language of the empire. As Rome expanded, Latin split into Classical Latin, which was written and used in scholarship and literature, and Vulgar Latin, which was spoken. Vulgar Latin was spoken in Rome’s conquered western provinces and was eventually transformed into the Romance languages of French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian.

**The Role of the Family in the Late Roman Empire**

The Roman family was considered an economic unit, or in the aristocratic class, an estate. The father was the head. Called the paterfamilias, the "father of the family" made all of the important decisions, especially concerning property, finances, and the moral and social comportment of all in his family. In fact, the father was the legal authority of the wife, children, and slaves within the household. However, because of the need for women to bear children to increase the birthrate, women were given legal independence when they gave birth to three live babies.

The family was considered a smaller version of the Roman state, with the emperor having the legal authority to rule over the citizens and the father over the family. The father was also responsible for ensuring the family followed the laws of the Twelve Tables, which included property, debt, civil procedures, crimes, and marriage. In essence, it was up to the father to ensure the household learned and obeyed Roman law.

**Unanswered Questions**

Numerous theories continue to claim a specific, primary cause of the empire's collapse. For example, eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon described how Rome's citizens lost their revered civic virtue as Germanic mercenary soldiers infiltrated the army's ranks. Gibbons partly blamed the decline of the empire on Christianity's impact, which gave Romans a more pacifistic perspective than did their pagan beliefs. Still other historians thought the Roman Empire was systemically corrupt and slated for decay from the beginning.
In addition to the contributions described in this article, other historians believe the Roman Empire never officially collapsed but was transformed under Germanic rulers, maintaining many of its former practices. Other theories suggest that the empire did not officially end until the seventh-century Muslim conquests that cut off trade to Europe.

Overall, the majority of theories on the empire’s collapse involved a primary cause and usually a mix of the topics already described. However, recent theories also include the impacts from deforestation and salinization of the soil from irrigation, as well as the role that lead poisoning had on the aristocratic class. Because the upper class ate the largest quantity of food made in lead pots and drank the most liquids from amphorae, which contained lead glaze, they were highly susceptible to the debilitating effects of lead poisoning on the brain and nervous system.

**Interesting Facts**

- During the Crisis of the Third Century, a fifty-year period, the empire experienced chaotic leadership as military generals fought for the throne, and the empire was fraught with civil war, plague, near-economic collapse, and invasions.
- Emperor Diocletian, in the late third and early fourth centuries, moved the best fighters far into the empire to protect the rulers, leaving the weakest and least prepared fighters along the borders to fight invading Germanic armies.
- In the late second and early third centuries, invading Germanic Goth, Vandal, Alamanni, and Carpian tribes, as well as threats from the Persian Sassanid Empire, caused Rome to increase its army by 25 percent and to double the amount it paid its soldiers.
- Two plagues killed millions of Romans during the second and third centuries. The first, called the Antonine Plague, killed about 5 million Romans. The second was an outbreak of smallpox, called the Plague of Cyprian.
- Rome’s practice of hiring large numbers of Germanic Visigoth soldiers to fight for the empire led to a greater number of Visigoth soldiers in the Roman army than Roman.
- The Visigoths sacked Rome twice—once in 410 and again in 476—causing the official end of the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman, or Byzantine Empire, lasted until 1453 when the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople.