

The Fall of the Roman Empire



1. Use in the classroom or as homework

This module contains a sequence of maps showing the Fall of the Roman Empire in the west from its height in around AD 182, to around AD 500, by which time it had vanished. It seeks to contribute towards the teaching and learning of history at Key Stage 3 of the English National Curriculum, and a series of suggested activities are included below to help in this.

Key Concepts and Activities:

| Key Concept | Activity |
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| 1.1.: Chronological Understanding | Activity 1: Sequencing events Activity 2: Timeline exercise |
| 1.2.: Cultural, ethnic and religious diversity | Activity 8: Romans and Barbarians |
| 1.3.: Change and continuity | Activity 3: Analysis |
| 1.4.: Cause and consequence | Activity 3: Analysis Activity 6: Why the West? Activity 7: Why did it Fall? |
| 1.5.: Significance | Activity 2: Timeline exercise Activity 4: When was the Fall? Activity 5: Impact and significance |

The controls are very simple.

- The date label shows the date of the map on the screen, and the “forward” and “back” buttons on either side allow you to navigate through the map sequence.
- The “info” button, below the date, switches on the information hotspots, and the “info off” button switches them off.

These controls allow the module to be used in several ways. If what is required is a simple background summary to the history of the Roman Empire, a quick run through the map sequence, using the “forward” and “back” buttons, will give the class an attractive, visual overview, giving them a grasp of the key events and processes involved in the topic. To help you in this, **Appendix A** gives a commentary on the maps.

If on the other hand a more in-depth look at the Fall of Rome is required, these maps will provide an effective tool, either as a background resource or as the main focus for the topic. The resource can be used on an interactive whiteboard, or on desktops with small groups of pupils, or as homework on pupils' own machines at home. The notes below will help achieve this (see **section 3**).

2. Aims

The aims of the unit are to give pupils an overall understanding of the Fall of the Roman Empire:

- When did this process start?
- Over what time frame did it occur?
- What were the key events in this process?
- Why were these events important?

To fulfil these objectives in a way that fits in with a teacher's own approaches, the modules have been designed to work at two levels, (1) to provide an overview of the topic, and (2) to allow in-depth enquiry work by the pupils.

Overview

A quick run through of this module will offer a clear visual overview of later Roman history, and therefore provide the required historical background for the study.

Depth

There is a massive amount of information about later Roman history stored in the maps and text boxes of this module. These will enable pupils to conduct their own enquiries, and allow fruitful consideration of a range of questions or issues.

3. Student activities

This section offers a selection of exercises, one or more of which you may decide to undertake with your pupils depending on their age or level of ability, and your time commitment to this topic.

The activities are all relevant to the English National Curriculum KS 3 Programme of Study (see above for a table showing which activities match which key concepts). In undertaking them, pupils will be involved in enquiry work, either as individuals or as a group. They will be asked to identify and investigate specific historical questions or issues, and reflect critically on historical questions or issues.

To access the huge amount of information linked to the maps, pupils will need to use the “info” button, below the date box, which switches the information hotspots on. The “info off” button next to it switches them off again.

Activity 1: Sequencing exercise

Put following events in chronological order:

The division of the Roman Empire into East and West
Last Roman emperor in the west
Vandals take Africa
Founding of Constantinople
Sack of Rome by the Goths

Activity 2: Timeline exercise

Draw a timeline of the Fall of the Roman Empire

Place on it the key events in the process.

There is no “correct” list of key events, but pupils give reasons for including or excluding events.

[Possible list might include: The Third Century crisis; the founding of Constantinople; the division of the empire into east and west; the battle of Adrianople; the 1st Sack of Rome; the Romans leave Britain; the Huns invade; the 2nd Sack of Rome; the last Roman Emperor is dethroned.]

Activity 3: Analysis

[The purpose of this exercise is to encourage students to think about the nature of historical processes – and how that nature changes over time: different factors at play, different kinds of events, different results, and so on.]

EITHER:

Divide the events covered by this module into periods.

Give reasons for your divisions – where were the distinctive features of the different periods?

OR:

The Fall of the Roman Empire in the West can be divided into phases. One such scheme might be:

The Third Century Crisis
The Later Roman Empire
The Fall of the Western Roman Empire

Give dates for these periods.

[No right answer, but possibly:

The Third Century Crisis – AD 225 to 285 (accession of Diocletian)

The Later Roman Empire – AD 285 to 378 to the battle of Adrianople;

The Fall of the Western Empire – AD 378 to 493]

Activity 4: When was the Fall?

EITHER

When, in your opinion, did the Fall of the Roman Empire actually start?

Give reasons.

Possible dates (all of which have been given by one modern scholar or another):

182 – The death of Marcus Aurelius

For: Marcus was the last of a continuous line of five “good” emperors going back almost a hundred years, who gave the Roman world peace and good government.

Against: the fact that the empire lasted more than two centuries after this, even in the west, shows that this is no more than an arbitrary date.

220 – The onset of the Third Century Crisis

For: it marked the end of more than two centuries of peace, and the Roman Empire was never the same again – it was always on a downward spiral from that date on

Against: the Roman Empire recovered from the crisis and lasted another two centuries.

378 – The Battle of Adrianople

For: this was a decisive event that triggered the downfall of the Roman Empire

Against: it was only one event amongst many, and not of especial significance

410 – The 1st Sack of Rome

For: this was a catastrophic event that shook the empire to its foundation, and that was accompanied by mass invasions across the frontiers – and also by the complete loss of Britain to the empire. The western provinces were doomed from this moment.

Against: dramatic, yes, but just one amongst many dramatic events

476 – The Dethronement of the Last Roman Emperor

For: if any event marks the end of the Roman Empire in the west, this was it

Against: this was just a symbolic event, with no real meaning

OR

The year AD 476 – was it significant, or not?

Activity 5: Impact and significance

Go through the changes listed in connection with the map dated AD 337.

Which of these had the most impact at the time, do you think?

What two had the most impact on future generations beyond the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West.

[There's a clue there – "...in the West" – for one of the changes your students might choose.]

Give reasons for your choice.

OR

Why the year 182 to start with?

Activity 6: Why the West?

What can the sequence of maps tell us about why the Western Roman Empire fell, whilst the Eastern Roman Empire endured?

This unit is entitled, The Fall of the Roman Empire. Is this title accurate?

Activity 7: Why did it Fall?

List the causes of the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West, in your opinion.

Or,

What, in your opinion, were the causes of the Third Century Crisis, and what were the consequences?

Or,

To what extent can this sequence of maps help you understand the causes of the Fall of the Western Roman Empire?

Activity 8: Romans and barbarians

Studying the Fall of the Roman Empire, can you see examples of cultural, religious and ethnic tensions between Barbarians and Romans? If so, how did this affect the history of the period?

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Commentary of Maps

The following notes give background details to each map in the sequence. If you do not want to go into depth, and just give a brief overview of the fall of the Roman Empire, the first paragraph for each date will give you all the information you need.

Some questions for discussion are included.

AD 182: The Roman Empire at its height

This map shows the Roman Empire at the height of its power. By this date it has been ruled by an unbroken succession of very able emperors for over a century, and for over two centuries the inhabitants of the empire have experienced more or less unbroken internal peace (the one major exception being the Year of the Four Emperors in AD 69).

The efficiency and probity of government throughout this period has been very high by the standards of the pre-modern world. Peace has encouraged trade and economic development, and the empire is full of large and prosperous cities, each one governing its own affairs (the map shows only a handful of the largest or most famous cities, but in fact there were around two thousand of such self-governing communities). Roman law and Roman citizenship has spread far and wide, and the ruling class of the empire, as epitomised by membership of the senate in Rome, is drawn from many provinces. Even the emperors are no longer from Rome, or even Italy. The current ruling family has its origins in Gaul and Spain, and there will soon be an African on the throne.

One important thing that this map does not show is the disposition of the Roman army. This consisted of 30 or so legions (6000 men each, so 180,000 legionaries in all) stationed in by-now permanent camps distributed in a cordon along the frontiers of the empire. The legions were recruited from Roman citizens, and they were supplemented by an equal number of auxiliary troops, usually (but not always) recruited from non-Roman citizens. These were formed into smaller units of 500 to 1000 troops each, and the vast bulk of these were also stationed in permanent camps along the frontiers.

The only significant body of troops stationed in the interior of the empire were those at or near Rome itself. These were the Praetorians, the imperial guard, numbering 12,000 men. They were supplemented by other troops serving in Rome, bringing the total number of troops here to around 30,000. All these were recruited from Italy.

The map shows the Roman Empire ringed by “barbarian” peoples. These had been causing more and more trouble over the past half century or so, and the most recent Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, had spent most of his reign commanding armies on the frontiers fighting against the Germans and Sarmatians. The one people who the Romans regarded as roughly equal to them in terms of civilization were the Parthians, the rulers of the ancient Middle East and heirs to the great civilizations of Mesopotamia and Persia.

AD 182 was the year that later Roman historians regarded as the year in which decline set in. In that year the emperor Marcus Aurelius died, and was replaced by his son, the worthless Commodus. Ten years of misrule were followed by Commodus’ assassination, and then by one of the most remarkable events in Rome’s history. The Praetorian Guard auctioned the imperial office to the highest bidder. This sparked off a round of civil war, which ended in 196 with the emperor Septimius Severus coming to the “purple” (so-called because only emperors were allowed to wear a purple-rimmed toga). He restored order, and his family reigned for more than thirty years. But the empire was never to know the same level of political stability as it had known in the second century.

AD 220-270: The Crisis of the Third century

Between AD 196 and 220, the empire entered a period of comparative stability under the Severan emperors. After 217, however, the emperor was a young boy, and it was during his reign that major barbarian invasions triggered 50 years or so (AD 220 to 270) of intense crisis. This map illustrates what modern historians call “The Crisis of the Third Century”.

Barbarians broke through the frontier cordon of legions and auxiliaries and penetrated deep into the heartlands of the empire. Even Rome was threatened, and the emperor Aurelian (270-75) built a new set of huge walls around the city.

Note the loss of territory experienced by the empire: one complete province (Dacia) and on the Rhine frontier.

Note too that in the east, the Parthians are replaced by the Persians. This happens just at the wrong moment for the Romans. The new dynasty rules its empire much more tightly than its predecessors did, and they are much more aggressive.

What this map does not show is the chronic political instability that accompanied these invasions. The serene succession of emperors of the second century AD was now a thing of the past. An unseemly scramble for power sees emperor follow emperor in quick succession, and at times several emperors rule different parts of the empire at the same time. Indeed, the empire looked as if it was breaking apart by the 260s.

Viewing the synchronization of invasion and instability, historians have debated which was cause, and which was effect: put simply, did the fact that Roman armies were fighting one another encourage barbarians to invade, and enable them to penetrate so far? Or alternatively did the invasions spark off instability by undermining faith in the reigning emperor and intensify the loyalty of the Roman armies to their own generals, causing them to back their bid for the throne?

(Another significant thing that the map cannot show is that, in 212, the emperor Caracalla declared all free inhabitants of the Roman Empire to be Roman citizens.)

Possible questions:

1. Compare carefully the boundaries of the Roman Empire in AD 225 and AD 270 – which areas have been lost?
2. Imagine that you had suddenly become emperor during this time – you have just won a battle against some barbarians and your troops have expressed their loyalty to you by proclaiming you emperor. What are your overriding priorities? And what measures might you take to deal with them?

AD 270-337: Recovery and Change

In the event, the empire survived, just. It did so by the Herculean efforts of a string of soldier-emperors of humble birth and hailing from the frontier regions – very different from the previous rulers, who had belonged to refined and aristocratic families from the prosperous cities of the heartlands regions of Italy, Gaul, Spain and North Africa. Along with this change came a host of others, which turned the empire into a much more militarized state than it had been before.

What this map does not show is that successive soldier-emperors, above all Diocletian (284-305), carried out wide ranging reforms which changed all aspects of the way the Roman Empire worked.

- Taxes were greatly increased to pay for the army, which more than doubled in size, and the bureaucracy, which now became a huge organization.
- The army was no longer based on the old legions. Frontier forces remained, and indeed increased in strength, but they became hereditary farmer-soldiers, allotted land to feed themselves and their families. The elite formations of the army were now powerful mobile field armies based well behind the frontiers, ready to move quickly to wherever they were needed.
- The army was now recruited in large part from barbarians from beyond the frontiers, and even many of the generals were barbarians.
- The senate was now remote from the scene of power, and senators, traditionally the leading generals and governors of the empire, no

longer held important posts, and in particular kept well away from military commands.

- The emperor no longer resided at Rome, but wherever they were needed. Certain strategically located cities became favoured imperial residences, for example Trier in Gaul and Milan in N Italy.
- Diocletian divided the empire between four emperors – two senior, two junior – in order to control the huge territory. While his system did not last much beyond the end of his reign, it set the precedent for two, three or four emperors ruling together as colleagues. In the Late Empire it was fairly rare for there to be only one emperor.
- The imperial courts were now based on the Persian model, with the emperor seated on a throne and those in his presence abasing themselves on the ground in front of him. Previously the emperor had acted more or less as other senators, although no one doubted where real power lay. Like the Persian “king of kings”, the Roman emperor now wore a diadem and was surrounded in his inner court by eunuchs (seen as more reliable than other officials because they could have no heirs, and therefore could not ascend the throne).
- The provinces were now organized in tiers, so that groups of provinces formed a vicariate, and groups of vicariates formed the three or four dioceses into which the empire was now partitioned.
- All men were tied to their professions on an hereditary basis, to ensure taxes were paid more efficiently and the army was supplied with soldiers. Thus peasants were tied to the land on which they worked, making them effectively serfs, and sons of soldiers had to follow their fathers into the army.

The two most notable changes occurred under the emperor and Constantine (306-337):

- He founded a brand new capital, which he called Constantinople, from which the eastern provinces of the empire were from now on governed
- He made Christianity a legal religion, and he and his successors became Christians themselves. From being an outlawed and persecuted faith, it effectively became the official religion of the empire.

Possible question:

Diocletian instigated the policy of having more than one emperor at a time ruling the vast territory.

What were the benefits of this approach?

What were the dangers?

AD 395: The Division of the Empire

The fourth century emperors were often engaged in fighting barbarians, on virtually all fronts, and eventually one group, the Visigoths, destroyed a Roman army and invaded deep into the empire.

The appearance of the Huns from central Asia caused a migration of peoples westward, fleeing from them, and pushing against the Roman frontiers. Some

of these peoples sought asylum from the Roman government and were settled inside the frontiers. Such a group were the Visigoths. However, their settlement got out of hand as more and more Goths pushed across the Danube. The harsh response of the Roman officials provoked them to rebel. The Roman emperor, Valens, had to come against them with an army. This army was destroyed – and the emperor killed – at the battle of Adrianople (378). The Visigoths then went on a rampage through the Balkans. The battle of Adrianople was immediately recognized by contemporaries as the worst Roman defeat for many centuries.

Valens' successor in the eastern Roman empire, Theodosius, made peace with the Goths and gave them territory to settle in the Balkans. On his death, in 395, he officially divided the empire into two parts, east and west, with one son the ruler of each.

Note also the invasions of Roman Britain by Irish and Pictish tribes. Britain had escaped comparatively unscathed in the third century, apart from Saxon raids which necessitated the construction of a line of coastal defences called the "Saxon Forts". In the late third century and first half of the fourth century the Romano-Britons had known a degree of stability and prosperity denied to many other parts of the empire. It was at this time that some of the largest and most luxurious of the Roman villas were built in Britain. Now, however, Britain came under severe and what looked like co-ordinated attack from the tribes beyond the border, and they were never to know real peace again.

AD 406: The Deluge

After 10 years or more of comparative peace between Romans and Goths, tensions resurfaced and erupted into further Gothic rebellion. Under Aleric, their king, the Goths marched west, sacked Rome, and then travelled onwards into western Gaul, where they settled.

The sack of Rome by the Visigoths sent a shock wave around the Roman world. Although it had not been the political capital of the empire for well over a century, it was still the Eternal City, representing the heart and soul of the Roman people.

This event was the trigger for other German tribes to cross the Rhine frontier en masse. In a confused process which is now hard to piece together, some merely took territory near the frontier, whilst others, notably the Seuvi and the Vandals, marched great distances, causing devastation on their way, and settled hundreds of miles from their homeland. Wherever these barbarian tribes settled, they set up kingdoms which may, or may not, have loosely acknowledged the suzerainty of Rome, but were in effect independent states.

There was one factor which prevented Germans and Romans from intermixing freely. This was that most of the Germans had been converted to a form of Christianity which the Romans viewed as heretical. This was Arianism, which did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. As a result,

Christians and Romans kept their own identity, and this prevented the Germans from being assimilated into Roman society in the way that, for example, the barbarians who invaded China at around the same time were soon absorbed into the Chinese population, and similarly the Huns who invaded India were absorbed into Hindu society. The Germans did in due course become Catholics, like the Roman population amongst whom they had settled, but by then Roman civilization had become severely degraded.

It was sometime during these years that the Roman army in Britain was ordered across the Channel to defend points closer to the Roman heartlands. It is probable that the army so ordered was only the mobile field army stationed on the island, leaving the frontier garrisons in place. However, these had long since ceased to be first rate troops, and in any case may by now have existed more on a paper in a Roman bureaucrat's filing cabinet than on Hadrian's Wall.

AD 439: The Huns

From the late 430s the Huns, having established themselves in Eastern Europe, became restive, seeking to take advantage of the confusion in the empire to expand their power. In 451, under their leader Attila, they marched west, intent, apparently, on conquering the western provinces. This was an event much feared by both Romans and Germans, but in the event Attila's forces were defeated by a joint Roman-Visigoth army, under the command of the Roman general Aetius, at the hard-fought battle of Catalaunum (451).

The Huns briefly invaded northern Italy the following year, but then Attila died and the Hun power subsided as rival leaders quarrelled among themselves.

AD 454

The victory of Catalaunum did not stop the barbarian invasions. The breaching of the Roman frontiers merely let in more and more of them. These years are known in German history as the period of the Great Migrations.

It is from the mid-fifth century that the Anglo-Saxon settlement began in earnest. At the opposite end of the old empire, the Vandals built a fleet and began raiding the Mediterranean coasts, subjecting Rome to a second sack. Other Germanic peoples extended their territories or entered the empire for the first time. It was now that the western Empire really ceased to function as a going concern.

AD 455 - 500

The barbarian encroachments and invasions continued, wiping out all Roman territory in western Europe. Even Italy itself now came under German rule. In fact, in 476, the last Roman emperor of the west, a boy named Romulus Augustulus (rich in irony, that name), was sent packing into retirement.

Questions:

By AD 500, had Roman Empire vanished?

[The answer is, of course, no, emphatically not. However, we think of the “Fall of the Roman Empire” as an event which took place in the Fifth century, and what we really mean is the fall of the Western empire. The territory of the Eastern Roman Empire was still intact; its army was still very much a force to be reckoned with; its administration was still functioning effectively; and its economy was still largely unaffected by the troubles in the west.]

If not, when did the Roman Empire finally expire?

[This may take a little research on the part of the students, but the answer is in fact 1453, almost a thousand years after the date on this map, when the city of Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks. The last thousand years of the Roman Empire is often called the Byzantine Empire (the city of Constantinople, the empire’s capital, had previously been called Byzantium). By this time, in English history the Middle Ages were entering their final phase with the Wars of the Roses, and the birth of the first Tudor king was only four years off.]