

Rome's Dark Night of Tyranny

When the republic fell, Rome entered the dark decline of empire. Only after centuries of misery under predominantly tyrannical emperors did Rome finally meet its end.

by *Steve Bonta*

This is the ninth installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.

In the fourth century of our era, the Danube River marked the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. To the north and east of the Danube, fierce Germanic and Scythian tribes roamed to the

edges of the known world. Beyond them — according to the uncertain traditions of the ancients — lay a savage, frozen wilderness populated by the likes of the Gelloni, who dressed in the skins of their slain enemies, and the Melanchlaenae, who fed on human flesh.

Immediately to the north of the eastern Danube were vast settlements of Goths, who by the mid-370s found themselves threatened by invading Huns and Alans from the east. To escape the ravaging barbarians from the hinterlands, the Goths fled en masse to the banks of the Danube and sent envoys to the Roman emperor Valens, begging for permission to cross into Roman territory to escape the marauding hordes, and to settle in the province of Thrace. Valens, persuaded of the need for a mercenary and labor force to fortify and protect the northern boundaries of the empire, and anxious to expand his tax base, made one of the most fateful decisions in all of history: he opened the borders of the empire and invited the Goths to immigrate to Roman territory.

With the help of boats furnished by the Romans, the Goths poured across the Danube into Roman territory — “like lava from Etna,” in the words of Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus — and set up encampments in Thrace. The occupying population was estimated by Edward Gibbon to have numbered at least 200,000 fighting men and up to a million total immigrants. The Romans immediately took advantage of the situation by bartering food and other necessities (including, supposedly, spoiled dog meat) to the desperate Goths, in exchange for slaves. The Goths resented such treatment and soon rebelled against the Roman authorities. Before too many months, the Goths, led by their crafty general, Fritigern, were pillaging and laying waste to cities all across Thrace.



Rome prostrate: Alaric the Goth surveys Rome prior to entering and sacking the city. Alaric, a Christian, was benign compared to later conquerors, like Attila and Genseric, who dismembered the empire.

Disaster at Hadrianople

After several bloody and indecisive battles, the Roman emperor Valens himself

decided to intervene. He marched north at the head of an enormous army that represented much of the military might of Rome and encountered the Gothic army — which by now was strengthened by Alan and Hun auxiliaries — outside the city of Hadrianople. Hadrianople, the “city of Hadrian,” was named for the emperor best remembered for his efforts to fortify another Roman frontier, the boundary between Roman and Celtic Britain known as “Hadrian’s Wall.” But on August 9, 378 A.D., the plains outside the city of Hadrian witnessed the battle that brought the Roman Empire to her knees.

Valens and his forces advanced confidently against the howling barbarian host, only to be outflanked and outfought by the furious Goths, who had cleverly postponed the engagement until the heat of the day, when the Romans were weakened and dehydrated. Crushed together by the furious onslaught, the Romans, unable to maneuver or even use their swords and javelins, were slaughtered like cattle. By the end of that terrible day, the flower of the Roman military had been cut down, including 35 tribunes, many distinguished generals, and Valens himself, whose body was never recovered. With them fell somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000

Roman soldiers, or up to 80 percent of the entire existing Roman military force.

Not since Cannae in the Second Punic War had Rome suffered such a disaster. But unlike Cannae, which became a rallying point for republican Rome, Hadrianople shattered the empire beyond repair. Over the next few decades, the empire was swept away by successive invasions of barbarians eager to take advantage of Rome’s undefended borders.

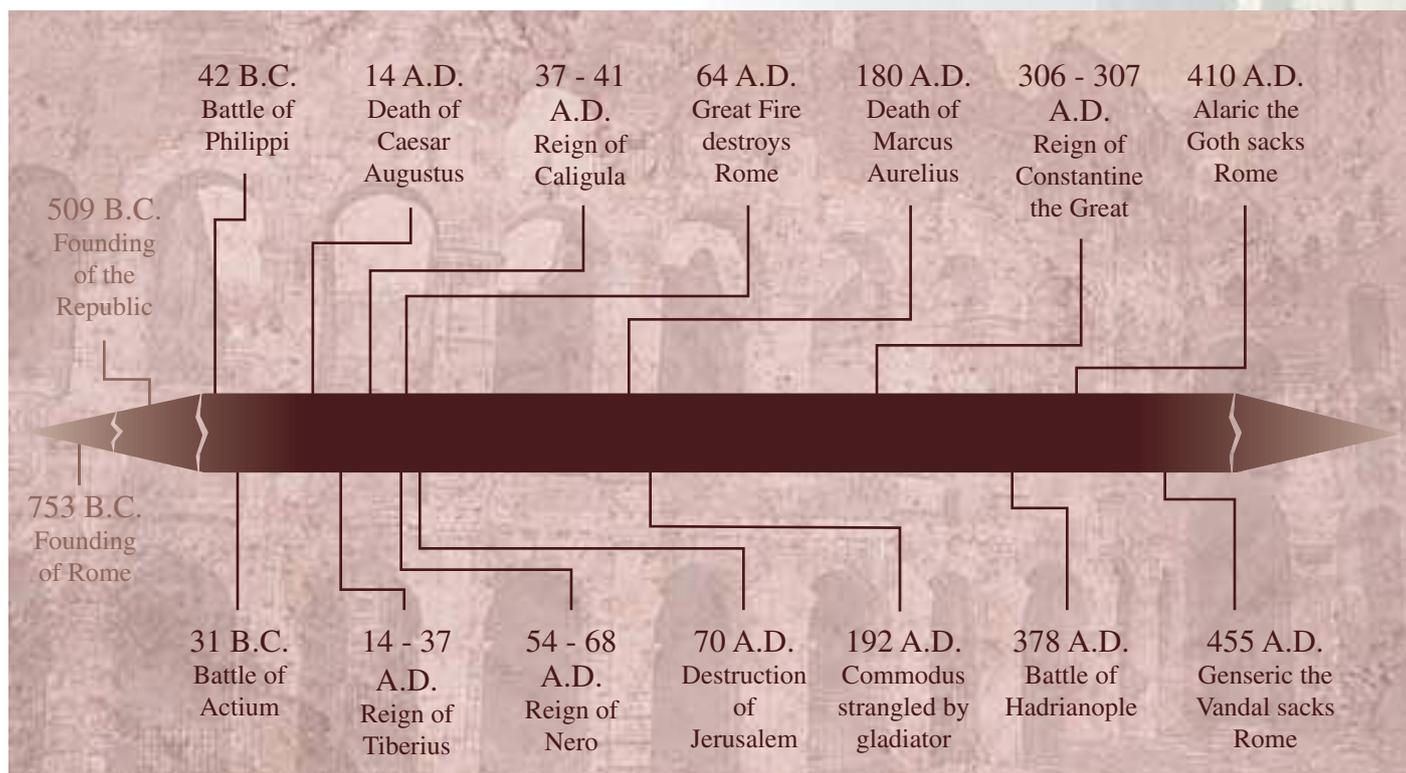
Within 30 years of the disaster in Thrace, Alaric and his Gothic horde were besieging the Eternal City. By 429 A.D., the Vandals were pouring into Roman North Africa, and in 455 they sacked Rome itself. Attila and his Huns, most formidable of all, overran much of Greece, Italy, and Gaul in the early decades of the fifth century, leaving desolation in their wake. Well could Romans, by the mid-fifth century, lament the fateful decision of a weak and foolish emperor, and what Ammianus mournfully called the “tumultuous eagerness of those who urged on the proceedings [that] led to the destruction of the Roman world.”

The disaster at Hadrianople was, how-

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ever, a symptom, not a cause, of Roman imperial decline. In historical hindsight, the longevity of the Roman Empire was extraordinary, given the centuries of almost unrelenting tyranny, warfare, economic decay, and even natural disasters that ravaged the once-proud Roman dominions. That the weary denizens of the empire could have endured so many generations of grinding tyranny is a testimony to human endurance. But more than a few may have felt a sense of relief at the collapse of their imperial oppressors.

The Roman Empire proper began with Octavian, better known as Caesar Augustus who initially, after the assassination of Julius Caesar, allied himself with Mark Antony and Lepidus to defeat the last republican



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army at Philippi, led by Cassius and Brutus. After 10 years of rivalry, he forced Lepidus into retirement and defeated Mark Antony and his Egyptian allies led by Cleopatra at the naval battle of Actium.

After Actium, Augustus' subsequent reign of more than 40 years was a comparatively tranquil one, in spite of atrocities committed by certain of his imperial subordinates, like the Judean tetrarch Herod. But with the death of Augustus in 14 A.D., a new type of monarch assumed the scepter in Rome, embodied in Augustus' adopted son Tiberius.

Darkness Falls

Tiberius, like nearly all of his imperial successors, was a monster. "If we were to draw a picture of his life," wrote the Abbé Millot, a historian held in high esteem by the American Founding Fathers, "we might say that he knew what was good, and often commanded it, but the general tenor of his conduct was to do evil with cool deliberate malevolence." One of Tiberius' first acts in office was to order the assassination of Agrippa, the son of Augustus' most famous adviser of the same name. He was also accused of ordering the murder of Germanicus, a Roman military leader of great integrity who had successfully put down a sedition in the military aiming to set him up as emperor in Tiberius' stead. But instead of the emperor's gratitude, Germanicus' popularity with the Roman people earned him only Tiberius' bitter envy.

Tiberius set up a massive network of informers, and passed laws making writings or utterances critical of his regime high treason, and punishable by death. If Julius Caesar and Octavian had transformed the Roman Republic into a military dictatorship, Tiberius now changed it into a police state.

In addition to his political cruelty, Tiberius, if the frank testimony of Suetonius is to be believed, was a depraved monster in his private life. A recitation of the details of Tiberius' private life would appall and sicken the reader; it is enough to record that Tiberius was an enthusiastic and insatiable practitioner of every base sexual depravity known, and even kept vast

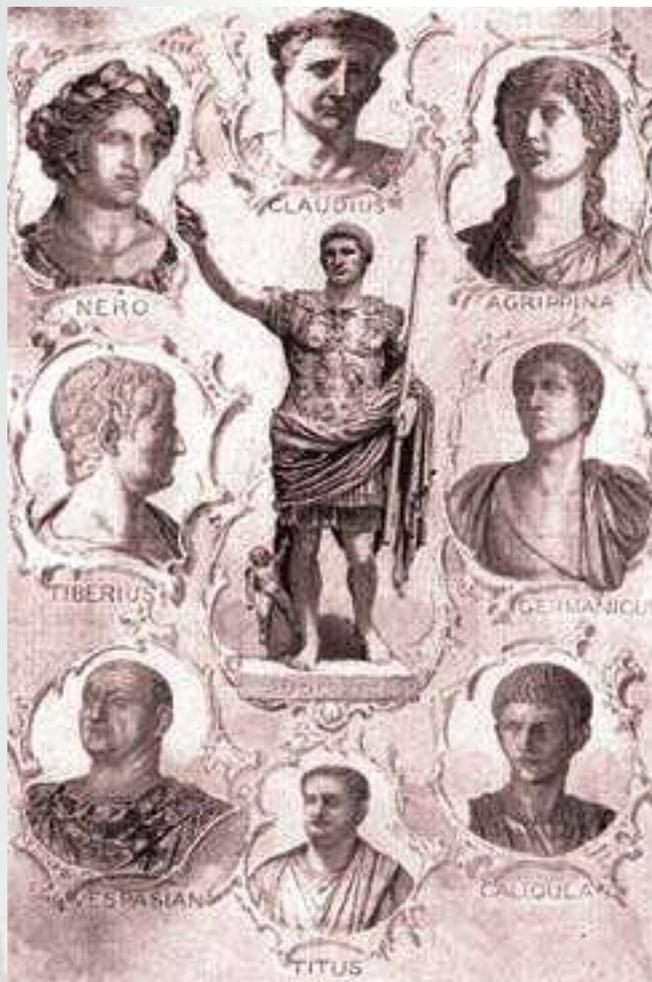
numbers of captive children to gratify his twisted whims.

Tiberius, like most of Rome's emperors, met a violent end. Having fallen severely ill, he was suffocated by certain of his attendants after partly recovering from a bout of illness that had been expected to claim his evil life. He was succeeded by Gaius Germanicus, also known as Caligula, a man whose perversions and despotic behavior have always taxed the credulity of modern historians. Caligula carried on incestuous relationships with his three sisters. He had numerous homosexual partners and forced adulterous liaisons with many of Rome's most illustrious women.

Caligula took full advantage of the police-state apparatus founded by his predecessor to unleash a reign of terror unsurpassed (though often matched) in imperial Roman history. A brief excerpt from Suetonius' lengthy and horrifying description of Caligula's reign will give the reader an idea of Rome under Caligula's administration:

Gaius made parents attend their sons' executions, and when one father excused himself on the ground of ill health, provided a litter for him.... A knight, on the point of being thrown to the wild beasts, shouted that he was innocent; Gaius brought him back, removed his tongue, and then ordered the sentence to be carried out.... The method of execution he preferred was to inflict numerous small wounds; and his familiar order: "Make him feel that he is dying!" soon became proverbial.

"Let them hate me, so long as they fear me," Caligula is alleged to have often said. On one well-known occasion, Caligula, angry at crowds cheering a team he opposed, publicly wished that all Romans had but one neck to sever. He terrorized Romans of every social class, delighting in mass executions of senators and



Rogues' gallery: Of these first-century Roman leaders, only Germanicus and Augustus were not total monsters. Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero in particular were among the most bestial princes history has ever produced.

in having prisoners tortured in his presence during mealtime. His erratic behavior suggests what Suetonius and others have concluded, that Caligula was clinically insane. Caligula was assassinated after terrorizing Rome for nearly four years.

He was succeeded by Claudius, another monster, somewhat less bloodthirsty, but fickle and depraved nonetheless. Claudius appears to have been of subnormal intelligence, which made him susceptible to manipulation by amoral power-mongers like his appalling wife Messalina.

Dean of Depravity

Claudius, who was finally poisoned by assassins, was followed by another bestial personage whose name, like that of Adolf Hitler, has become virtually synonymous with wanton dictatorial cruelty: Nero. Nero was a man of many gifts. He had an aptitude for the arts and was an accomplished musician. He was a man of considerable charisma and had a photographic memory for names and faces. His reign started promisingly; he pledged to restore

the practices of civilized rule that had characterized the Augustan period, and he lowered taxes dramatically. However, he soon began spending extravagant sums on lavish games and other public entertainment extravaganzas.

His penchant for monstrous personal vices gradually gained the upper hand. All of the perversions of his predecessors were Nero's stock in trade. Suetonius accuses him of committing frequent incest with his mother Agrippina, of raping a vestal virgin, and of attempting to convert one of his young male consorts into a woman by mutilating him and forcing him to undergo a wedding in bridal attire. And these, if Suetonius is given credibility, were among his milder vices.

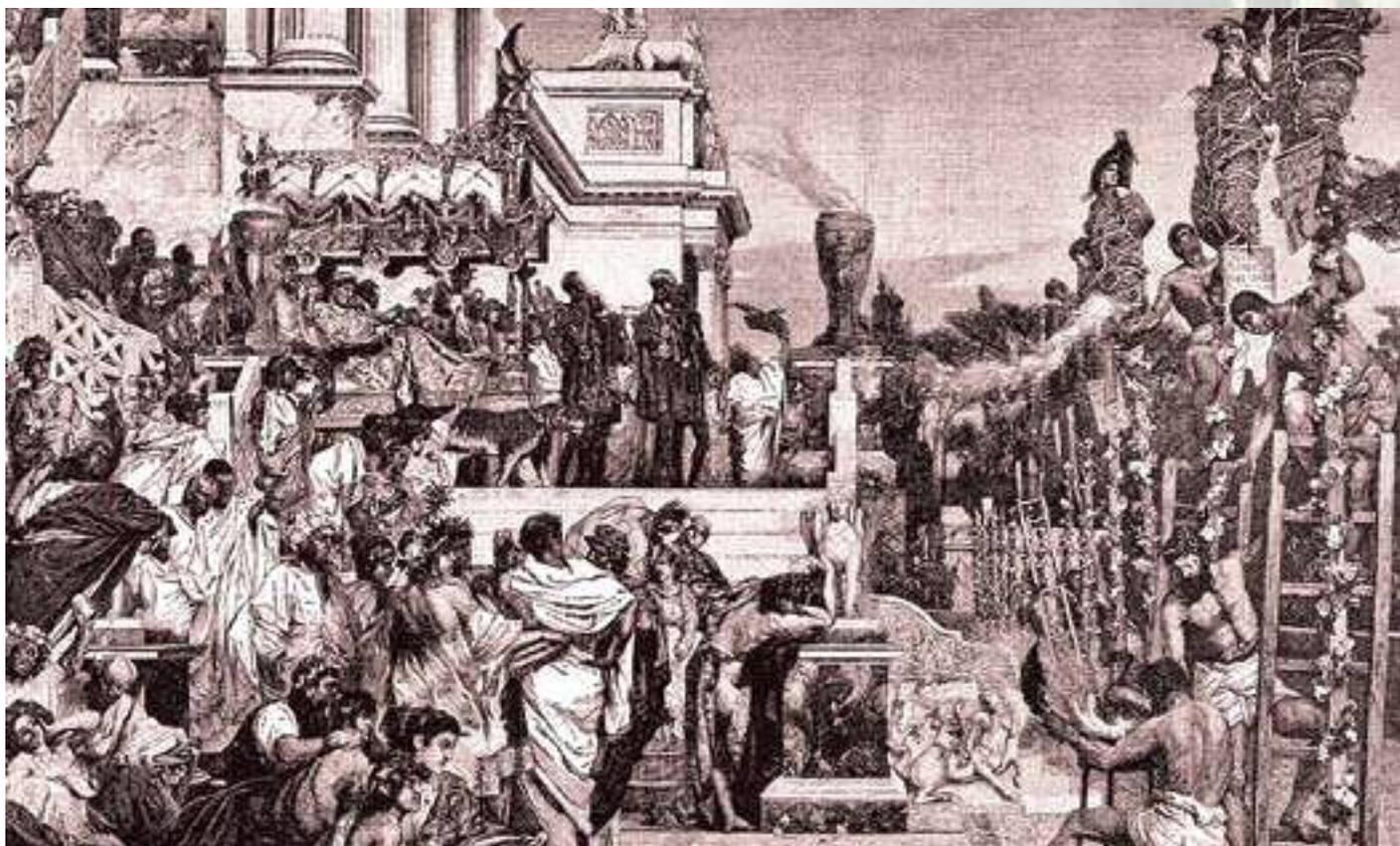
His bloodlust turned Rome into a horror show for 14 awful years. In addition to murdering many members of his own family, including his mother and aunt, Nero continued the reign of terror of his predecessors in emphatic style. The best-known episode in his misbegotten rule, the great conflagration that destroyed Rome,

was quite possibly his own doing, although the historical evidence for that is inconclusive. What seems beyond dispute was that he reveled in the destruction and played his lyre as the Eternal City went up in flames.

Persecutions and Power Factions

In the aftermath, Nero encouraged the belief that members of a new religion, Christians, were to blame, and launched the most horrific large-scale persecutions that Christianity had yet seen. In the words of Tacitus, "an immense multitude [of Christians] was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of wild beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to the crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired."

Nero's behavior finally brought about armed revolt, led by Galba, who marched on Rome in 68 A.D. Nero committed suicide as Galba's forces closed in. Rome for



Mass martyrdom: The emperor Nero publicly blamed Christians for the great fire that destroyed Rome in 64 A.D. — a fire he may have set himself. At his orders, thousands of Christians were burned alive all across the city.

Much has been made of the decline and fall of the empire, but the real story was the decline and fall of the republic. The fall of empires is a foregone conclusion, but the causes leading to the decline and fall of republics pose a vexing problem that man has not yet fully fathomed.

the next several years was the scene of unending slaughter and civil war, as three more bloodthirsty tyrants — Galba, Otho, and Vitellius — succeeded to the purple by violent overthrow. Tacitus gives vivid descriptions of Rome ravaged by fire and the sword again and again, and of thousands of terrified citizens cut down by successive power factions. Suetonius, never one to mince words, complements Tacitus' account with his usual revolting personal portraits of these men.

It was during this period that the Roman military acquired a habit it was seldom to relinquish for the remainder of the empire: proclaiming emperors solely on the authority and whim of the soldiers. Unlike later European monarchies, imperial Rome (as well as its successor regime in the east, Byzantium) never developed a system of orderly succession, with the result that almost all emperors were enthroned by armed revolt culminating in the murder of their predecessor and of any potential rivals.

If the Christians had endured unspeakable persecution under Nero, it was the turn of the Jews to do the same under Vespasian and Titus, the latter of whom finally destroyed Jerusalem in a horrific campaign that resulted in the destruction of the temple and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Jews.

By the end of the first century A.D., Rome and her dominions had endured several generations of horror and bloodshed on a scale and duration never before seen in

human history. Even the architectural remnants of republican Rome had been swept away by the fires that had scoured the city, and every last vestige of republican virtue and manners had been eradicated. The Senate still existed in name, and would persist as a feeble institution for several centuries, but old Rome had been consumed in the holocaust of empire.

Beginning with the emperor Nerva and continuing with Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus, and Marcus Aurelius, imperial Rome from the late first century until the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 A.D. enjoyed a brief sunlit interlude that saw the flowering of Christianity and the production of many great works of litera-

ture, including the writings of Plutarch and Tacitus. It was this period that Gibbon chose as his point of departure in his famous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* — a misleading starting point to support his mistaken premise that the early empire represented the pinnacle of Roman achievement. Calling the empire “the most civilized portion of mankind,” Gibbon went on to extol Rome’s “disciplined valor,” “peaceful inhabitants,” “free constitution,” and “gentle, but powerful, influence of laws and manners.” However, Rome during this comparatively placid interval was still a decrepit civilization of unending foreign wars and conquests, of palace intrigue, and of the debased morals that had incubated the likes of Caligula and Nero. The virtues of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines appear magnified by the faults of their predecessors. But with the death of Marcus Aurelius, Rome’s lucky streak ended.

Empire’s End

Marcus Aurelius was succeeded by his son Commodus, another bestial ruler cast from the same mold as Nero, with the same vices and insatiable appetite for cruelty. He was eventually strangled by a gladiator in the employ of a palace conspiracy.

And so it went. For the next several hundred years, the Roman Empire was strained to the breaking point by civil wars, foreign adventures, heavy taxation, and constant political turmoil. Emperor succeeded emperor, usually by violence. For each tolerable ruler — a Diocletian, Pertinax, Constantine, or Julian — there were a dozen monsters, such as Caracalla, Elagabalus, Maximin, Valens, and others far too numerous to merit mention. Most of them slashed their way to the top, only to be deposed in bloody coups within weeks or months of accession to the purple. And even the best were deeply flawed or committed unpardonable atrocities.

Constantine the Great, despite establishing Christianity as the official religion of Rome, was ca-



Rome vandalized: Led by the fearsome Genseric, the Vandals, a Germanic tribe that had already wrested Iberia and North Africa from the Roman Empire, sacked and burned Rome itself in 455 A.D. After centuries of impregnability, Rome was now experiencing the same horrors her legions had so often inflicted on others.

pable of remarkable acts of cruelty, which included having his own wife and son put to death. Julian, nicknamed “the Apostate,” was a brilliant and able leader, but chose to persecute Christians and to wage unprovoked war on the Persian empire, where he died of battle wounds during the retreat from Ctesiphon, the Persian capital. Pertinax, who followed Commodus, seems to have been a genuinely virtuous man. He attempted to restore Senate authority, transferred all his personal property to his wife and son to avoid the reproach of personal enrichment, and overturned the unjust decrees of his predecessor. Unfortunately, this decent man was murdered by his own Praetorian guards after less than three months as emperor. Imperial Rome was beyond repair and no longer suited to virtuous leadership.

Diocletian, who reigned for 20 years, divided the empire for the first time, a division that became permanent in the mid-fourth century in the time of Valentinian I and Valens. At about this same time,

in July 365 A.D., the Roman world was literally shaken by an unprecedented catastrophe. An immense earthquake struck the greater part of the Mediterranean basin and was followed by gigantic tsunamis that wiped out much of coastal Sicily, Dalmatia, Greece, and Egypt. The great city of Alexandria was nearly wiped out, losing 50,000 inhabitants. This event filled the Roman world, pagans and Christians alike, with consternation, as the very powers of nature now seemed to be unleashed against the dying Roman world. Thirteen years later came the calamitous battle of Hadrianople, the event that traditionally marks the beginning of the Dark Ages.

After Hadrianople, predatory barbarian tribes were quick to pounce on the enfeebled Roman world, and by the late fifth century, the last remnant of the Western Roman Empire was conquered by the Goths and other tribes. Many of the Germanic tribes, most conspicuously the Goths, did possess a certain rustic virtue, enhanced by their Arian Christian beliefs.

Gothic rulers of former Roman dominions, like Theodoric and Totila, were fairly just and humane rulers compared to the morally bankrupt Romans, and many former imperial citizens were happy to submit to these gentler masters. Meanwhile, the eastern empire lived on, with its capital at Constantinople and its distinctly Greek and Asiatic character, for another thousand years.

Thus did Rome die, more than 1,300 years after the founding of the city by Romulus and his band of followers. Following Gibbon, much has been made of the decline and fall of the empire, but the real story, which had concluded by the time of Christ, was the decline and fall of the republic. For the fall of empires is a foregone conclusion; they are always built on foundations of sand — despotism, militarism, expansionism, and welfarism — and soon exhaust themselves, or are dismembered by other powers. But the causes leading to the decline and fall of republics pose a vexing problem that man has not yet fully fathomed. ■

For the Serious Student

Direct documentation of the Roman Empire and its decline is surprisingly sparse. The best sources for the first century A.D., Tacitus and Suetonius, both make grim if informative reading. Tacitus, lauded by many as the best Roman historian for his concision, attention to detail, and reliability, is a must-read for anyone wanting a dispassionate account of Roman culture and politics at the beginning of the Christian era. The surviving portions of Tacitus’ two magisterial works on Roman history, *The Annals* and *The Histories*, are available complete in a Modern Library Classics paperback edition.

Tacitus’ scandalous counterpart, Suetonius, is not for all tastes. Where Tacitus draws a curtain of discretion over the baser acts of his subjects, Suetonius unstintingly describes perversities that would make even some modern pornographers squirm with unease. The reader of Suetonius’ *The Twelve Caesars*, available complete in a Penguin Paperbacks edition, must be prepared for an utterly candid view of diabolical levels of personal corruption. If nothing else, Suetonius is the most devastating testimony ever written of the dangers inherent in unlimited government power.

The last true Roman historian was Ammianus Marcellinus, who chronicled the events of his lifetime, many of which he witnessed. A professional soldier, he participated in Julian’s disastrous Persian campaign. He lived to see the virtual destruction of the Roman Empire, and his history concludes with a vivid description of the Battle of Hadrianople. The Penguin Paperbacks edition of his history is nearly complete, but a few passages have been removed for editorial reasons.

Finally, no discussion of Roman sources would be complete without reference to the venerable Edward Gibbon, whose massive *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* remains, more than two centuries after its original publication, the most comprehensive such history, and perhaps the greatest historical treatise on any subject ever written. That said, the authority of Gibbon is often overdrawn. His obvious command of the facts and copious documentation are often overshadowed by his pompous tone, overuse of certain stock words and phrases, and blatant hostility to Christianity. All writers are entitled to their prejudices, of course, but Gibbon attributes the fall of the Roman Empire largely to the rise of Christianity. There is ample reason to suppose instead that Christianity artificially prolonged the life of an otherwise moribund state. It was certainly the case that Byzantium, the heir of the Eastern Empire, lacked any semblance of good government, and was preserved mostly by the vitality of her faith.

Nor was Gibbon any great champion of republican virtue and liberty. He, like many elites of his age, was awed by empire and cared little for the bucolic virtues of early Rome. As a consequence Gibbon, despite the canonical status he now enjoys, was very controversial both in America and in Europe when his work was first published. Many early Americans preferred the now-forgotten world history of the Frenchman Abbé Millot, a less monumental work but infinitely friendlier to republican values than Gibbon. In sum, Gibbon is without parallel as a source of raw information, but less reliable as an interpreter of the events he chronicled. ■

— STEVE BONTA