

## L E S S O N 1

# The Fall of the Roman Empire

## THINKING FOCUS

*What led to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire?*

### Key Terms

- province
- barbarian

➤ *Roman emperors were often depicted in military dress. The carved figures on the breastplate of Augustus's armor represent a Roman victory over a Persian army.*

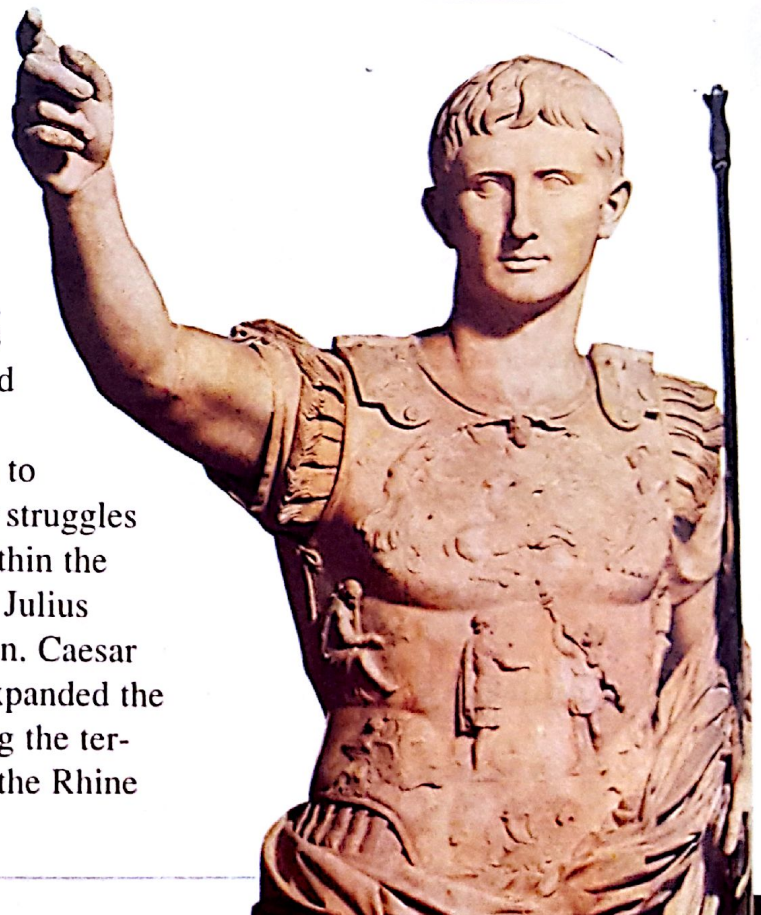
**T**he world has grown old and lost its former vigor. . . . Winter no longer gives rain enough to swell the seed, nor summer enough to toast the harvest . . . the mountains are gutted and give less marble, the mines are exhausted and give less silver and gold . . . the fields lack farmers, the seas-sailors, the encampments soldiers . . . there is no justice in judgments, competence in trades, discipline in daily life.

This description, written in about A.D. 250 by one of the Roman Empire's church leaders, foretells the fate of that mighty empire. Within 200 years of the

writing of this description, the Roman Empire would suffer great military and economic crises, weaken, and eventually collapse.

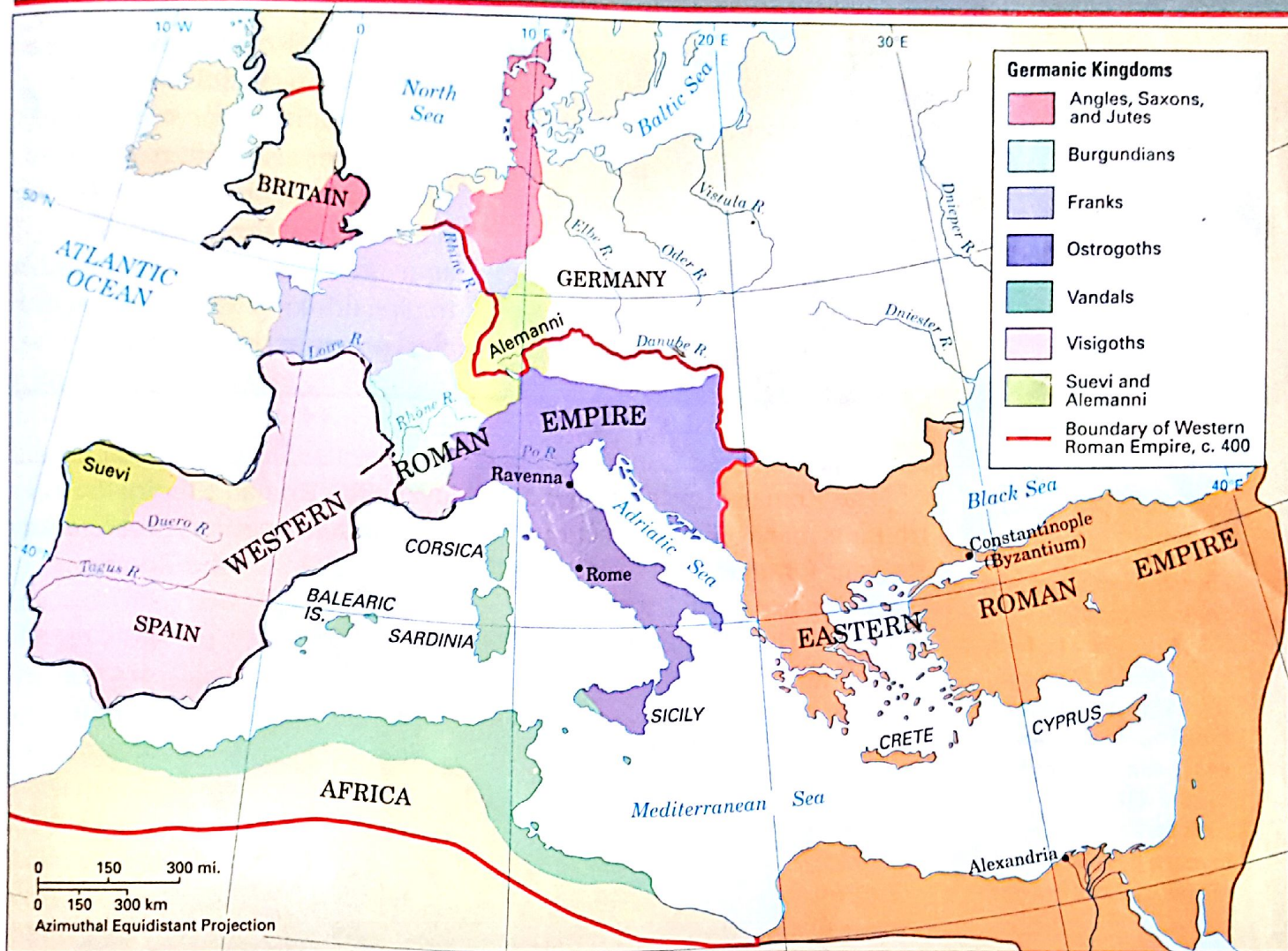
## The Empire in Prosperity

From 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, Julius Caesar's adopted son Octavian ruled as Rome's first emperor. Octavian was given the name Augustus, which means the revered or exalted one. As emperor, Augustus put an end to the chaos and power struggles that had occurred within the Roman Empire after Julius Caesar's assassination. Caesar and Augustus also expanded the empire by conquering the territory that ran along the Rhine and Danube rivers.





## Breakup of the Western Roman Empire



### Expanding the Empire

Roman conquests of new territory continued under the emperors after Augustus. By A.D. 117, the Roman Empire had reached its greatest size. It extended from Britain in the north to Africa in the south and from Spain in the west to Syria in the east.

The lands and peoples captured by the empire were organized into **provinces**, or territories, of Rome. Rome maintained peace in its provinces by allowing individuals to continue living and working as usual. However, Roman officials did institute Roman laws in these territories. In addition, they appointed governors to rule the provinces and make sure that Roman law was enforced there.

### Profiting from the Provinces

Rome benefited from its empire in many ways. Since enemies could reach Rome only by crossing the provinces, these territories pro-

As powerful as it was, the Roman Empire did not last. How did its boundaries change as it weakened?



tected Rome by acting as a buffer zone. They also produced food and other goods for the city of Rome. For example, Egypt and North Africa supplied Rome with most of

Here Egyptian grain is loaded on a barge for shipment to Rome.



■ *Describe the relationship between Rome and its provinces.*

its wheat. Trade with the provinces brought wealth to Roman citizens. The people in the provinces also paid taxes, which supported the government and the army of about 300,000 men distributed along the empire's frontiers. For a long time, the empire was well fed, strong, and wealthy.

Because Rome was strong, the empire was peaceful and stable, which benefited everyone in it. The government built roads that connected the provinces to Rome. It also funded the construction of aqueducts. Aqueducts were used to pipe drinking water from wells and springs to the people. ■

### Across Time & Space

*The word barbarian was originally used in the Roman Empire to describe people from outside the empire who spoke a different language and had a different culture. Over time, the term barbarian has come to mean a person who is uncivilized and warlike.*

▼ *Roman impact on the provinces can be seen in the ruins of a city built by the Romans in Palmyra, Syria.*

## The Empire in Crisis

The Roman army along the frontiers managed to protect the Romans for many years. But, beginning in A.D. 161, some enemies broke across the frontiers to

invade the Roman Empire itself. This became a serious problem for the Romans.





## Border Problems Increase

Along the empire's central and eastern borders lived tribes of Germanic peoples who were not all content to live peacefully with Rome. The Romans called these peoples **barbarians**, meaning people who speak a different language. Tacitus, a Roman historian from the first century, described the barbarians as having "blue eyes, and reddish hair; great bodies, especially powerful for attack, but not equally patient of hard work."

By the 200s, some of these Germanic peoples had established villages along the Rhine and Danube rivers and were peacefully exchanging goods and ideas with Romans. Some became allies of the Romans. Many barbarian men entered the Roman army and helped to defend the frontiers against invasion by hostile barbarian tribes. In return, they and their families were granted land within the empire and a yearly salary. Some even adopted Latin as their language.

Then, in the late 300s, thousands of barbarians began seeking refuge within the empire to escape the Huns. The Huns, a fierce group of nomadic warriors, were sweeping west from the central plains of Asia, conquering everyone in their path. Roman border patrols were unable to limit the number of barbarians entering the empire during this massive migration. So, many hostile barbarians were actually able to enter the empire's borders and still keep their weapons.



Barbarian invaders reached deep into the empire.

## Internal Problems Mount

To complicate the situation further, a struggle for political control was occurring in the empire. From A.D. 193 on, many men tried to claim control of the empire. Many of them were generals who, backed by their armies, took the throne by force. Rivals for the throne began to promise higher salaries to the armies in return for their support, but this strained the empire's treasury.

The combination of barbarian invasions and fighting between Roman armies for control of the empire ruined the countryside. Such unrest made it very difficult for farmers to produce enough food. Food shortages resulted, making available food very costly.

In an attempt to cope with the economic problems of the empire, the government minted more coins. But, because government stores of gold and silver had been reduced, the new coins were filled

▲ In this early third-century relief, country people wearing typical hooded cloaks bring money to a tax collector who is surrounded by his staff.

◀ Ostrogoths wore helmets similar to the one at left in the 500s.



## How Do We Know?

**HISTORY** The coin pictured below gives us visual evidence that the barbarians had an impact on the Roman Empire. The coin, from A.D. 8, illustrates Roman Emperor Augustus receiving a child from a barbarian.





■ *Support this statement:*  
The barbarians were both allies and enemies of the Romans.

with other, less precious metals as well. The new coins weighed the same as the old ones, but they were actually worth less. If merchants had been willing to accept these new coins at their face value,

minting such coins might have solved the financial troubles of the empire. But they would not do so. Instead, merchants charged more coins to exact the same value for their goods. ■

## The Empire in Transition

When Diocletian became emperor in 284, he made some changes in an attempt to correct the empire's problems. He divided rule over the empire among four men. With two rulers to oversee the east and two to oversee the west, he hoped to make governing the empire an easier task. Each ruler had his own capital and administrative staff. He established four capitals because from Rome alone he could not adequately govern the vast territory belonging to the empire. Diocletian moved his capital from Rome to Nicomedia, a city a few miles south of Byzantium in Asia Minor.

Diocletian hoped that this division of the empire would help pre-

vent civil wars caused by rivals for the throne. He also hoped that it would make the empire easier to manage and defend.

In response to barbarian pressures on the empire, Diocletian increased the size of the Roman army from 300,000 men to 500,000. The increases of both the civil administration and the military meant large increases in government spending. This further emptied the empire's treasury.

### The Rise of the East

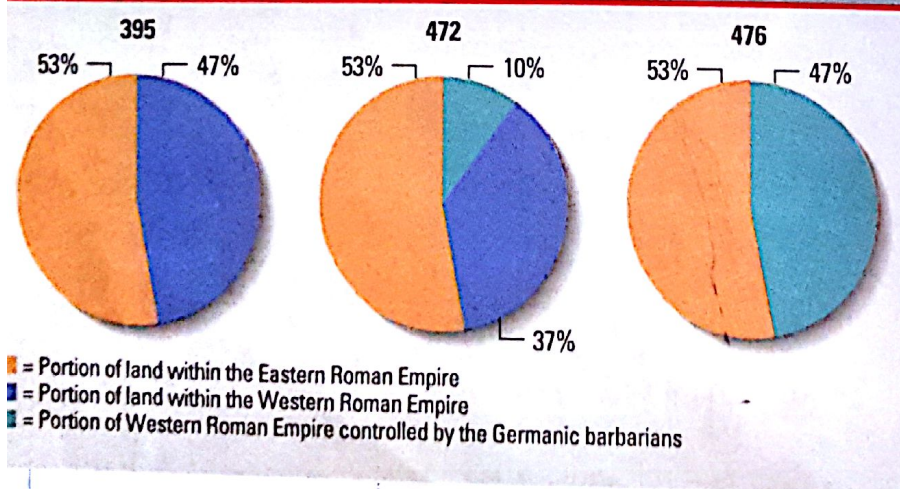
Diocletian's successor, Constantine, also worked to stabilize the empire. To this end, he decided to establish a stronger eastern capital city. Constantine chose the old Greek trading town of Byzantium as the site for his new capital in 324. Find this city on the map on page 27.

Byzantium possessed great military and economic advantages. With water on three sides and the Balkan mountains on the fourth, enemies would find the city difficult to attack. Its location also made it a perfect stopping place both for merchants traveling overland and for those traveling by sea between Europe and the East Indies.

From 324 to 330, Constantine had Byzantium completely rebuilt

▼ Look at the map on page 27 to see which tribes took over the Western Roman Empire.

**Barbarian Takeovers in the Roman Empire**





to resemble Rome. On May 11, 330, he renamed it "New Rome which is Constantine's City." The people called it Constantine's City. In Greek this is *Konstantinoupolis*. Thus, the city eventually became known as Constantinople.

Constantinople suffered from political quarrels and barbarian invasions, but it was the western half of the empire that suffered most. So, in an attempt to solve these problems, Emperor Theodosius I

wrote into his will that upon his death the eastern and western sections of the empire should be declared separate empires. Use the map on page 27 to find the border between the two empires. When Theodosius died in 395, his will officially split the Roman Empire in two. Today, scholars use the term *Roman Empire* for the Western Roman Empire and the term *Byzantine Empire* for the Eastern Roman Empire.



### The Fall of the West

The Byzantine Empire prospered for the next 1,000 years. However, the Roman Empire never recovered from its troubles. Spain, Gaul, and North Africa were overrun by barbarian invaders. As shown on the map on page 27, the barbarians set up their own kingdoms. In 410, the city of Rome was raided. By the late 400s, emperors of the Roman Empire were little more than puppets. In 476, a barbarian general overthrew the last of these Roman emperors, bringing the Roman Empire to an end. ■

◀ The oldest surviving view of Constantinople was created in 1420. How many years earlier had Constantine established the city as Constantinople?

■ What did Diocletian do to strengthen the empire?

## REVIEW

1. **FOCUS** What led to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire?
2. **CONNECT** In what ways might the roads, aqueducts, and buildings that the government funded have improved the living conditions in the provinces?
3. **HISTORY** Why did the government limit the number of barbarians entering the empire at any one time?
4. **ECONOMICS** Why didn't minting more coins solve the empire's economic problems?
5. **CRITICAL THINKING** Why was the Eastern Roman Empire able to survive and prosper while the Western Roman Empire crumbled?
6. **ACTIVITY** Make a list of the problems that led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. Rank the items in your list from most important to least important. Compare your list to those made by other members of your class and defend your ranking.