

## The 200s—A Century of Crisis

Historians generally agree that the Roman Empire began its decline at the end of the reign of the last of the Five Good Emperors, Marcus Aurelius (161-180 C.E.). The rulers that followed in the next century had little or no idea of how to deal with the problems facing the empire. Most, like Aurelius' son Commodus, were brutal and incompetent. They left the empire greatly weakened.

### Rome's Economy Declines:

During the *Pax Romana*, bustling trade flowed over routes patrolled by Roman legions and ships. Rome's treasuries were enriched by gold and silver taken from conquered territories. Most important of all, the empire's farms grew enough grain to feed the population of the cities. During the third century C.E., all three sources of prosperity evaporated.

Hostile tribes outside the boundaries of the empire and pirates on the Mediterranean Sea disrupted trade. Frequent wars were costly. The wealthy spent money on luxury goods from China, India, and Arabia. This spending drained the empire of gold and silver. Since the empire's expansion had come to an end, there were no new sources of precious metals.

Desperate to pay its mounting expenses, including the rising cost of defense, the government raised taxes. It also started minting coins that contained less and less silver. It hoped to create more money with the same amount of precious metal. However, the economy soon suffered from inflation, a drastic drop in the value of money coupled with a rise in prices.

Agriculture faced equally serious problems. Harvests in Italy and Western Europe became increasingly meager because overworked soil had lost its fertility. Farmland was destroyed by warfare. The higher taxes imposed by the government caused many poor farmers to abandon their lands. The use of cheap slave labor had discouraged improvements in technology. Serious food shortages resulted for all these reasons. Eventually, disease spread and the population declined.

### Rome Faces Military Upheaval:

The empire's economic crisis was worsened by its growing military troubles. Throughout the third century, Germanic tribes repeatedly overwhelmed the Roman legions guarding the northern frontiers. At the same time, Persia threatened Roman territory in Syria and Anatolia. (Romans called all invaders "barbarians," a term that they used to refer to non-Romans.)

Rome's most humiliating defeat occurred in A.D. 260, when the Persians captured the emperor Valerian.

In the army, discipline and loyalty had collapsed. Soldiers gave their loyalty not to Rome but to their commanders, who fought among themselves for the throne. To defend against the increasing threats to the empire, the government began to recruit **mercenaries**, foreign soldiers who fought for money. While mercenaries would accept lower pay than Romans, they felt little sense of loyalty to the empire.

## Roman Politics Decay:

Loyalty was in fact a key problem, perhaps the most serious of all. In the past, Romans cared so deeply about their republic that they willingly sacrificed their lives for it. Conditions in the later centuries of the empire caused citizens to lose their sense of patriotism. They became indifferent to the empire's fate.

Romans had once considered holding political office to be an honor. It was also an opportunity to gain wealth. By the 200s, however, local officials usually lost money because they were required to pay for the costly public circuses and baths out of their own pockets. Few people chose to serve the government under those conditions.

Only the armies remained actively interested in politics. In a 50-year period (235-284 C.E.), armies in the provinces and in Rome proclaimed 50 generals to be emperors of Rome. Of these "barracks emperors," 26 briefly won the approval of the Roman Senate; 25 died violently.

## Emperors Attempt Reforms

Remarkably, the empire survived intact for another 200 years. Its life was prolonged by reforming emperors and by its division into two parts: eastern and western.

### Diocletian Reforms the Empire:



In 284 C.E., Diocletian, a strong-willed army leader, became the new emperor. With amazing boldness, he restored order in the empire and increased its strength. To accomplish this, he governed as an absolute ruler and severely limited personal freedoms.

Diocletian doubled the size of the Roman armies, drafting prisoners of war and hiring German mercenaries. He attempted to control inflation by setting fixed prices for goods. He also ordered farmers to remain on their lands and other workers to stay in their jobs for life. To restore the prestige of the office of emperor, Diocletian claimed descent from the ancient Roman gods. He viewed Christianity as a threat and passed decrees to persecute the Christians.

Diocletian believed that the empire had grown too large and too complex for one ruler. In his most significant reform, he divided the empire into the Greek-speaking East (Greece, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt) and the Latin-speaking West (Italy, Gaul, Britannia, and Spain). He took the eastern half for himself and appointed a co-ruler for the West, General Maximian. Each emperor also selected an assistant, who was to be his successor. While Diocletian shared authority, he kept overall control. His half of the empire, the East, included most of the empire's great cities and trade centers and was far wealthier than the West.



Diocletian's reforms slowed the decline of the empire. The borders became safe again, and the emperor's prestige was restored. Because of ill health, Diocletian took the extraordinary step of retiring in 305 C.E..

However, his plans for orderly succession failed. Civil war broke out immediately. By 311 C.E., four rivals were competing for power. Among them was an ambitious young commander named Constantine, the same Constantine who would later end the persecution of Christians.

### Constantine Moves the Capital:



Constantine gained control of the western part of the empire in 312 C.E. and continued many of the social and economic policies of Diocletian, In 324 C.E., Constantine also secured control of the East, thus restoring the concept of a single ruler.

In 330 C.E., Constantine took a step that would have great consequence for the empire. He moved the capital from Rome to the Greek city of **Byzantium** (bih-ZAN-shee-uhm), in what is now Turkey. The new capital stood on the Bosphorus Strait, strategically located for trade and defense purposes on a crossroads between West and East.

With Byzantium as its capital, the center of power in the empire shifted from Rome to the East. Soon the new capital was protected by massive walls and filled with imperial buildings modeled after those in Rome. The city was given a new name—**Constantinople** (KAHN-stan-tuhn-OH-puhl), city of Constantine. After Constantine’s death, the empire would again be divided. The East would survive; the West would fall.

