

# The Transformation of the Roman World

## *The Situation of the Roman Empire around 200 AD*

Around 200 AD the Roman Empire was more and more under attack from nomadic tribes in North Africa, from the Persian Sassanides in the East and Germanic tribes along the Rhine and Danube frontier. In particular the Franks and Alemanni pushed into Gallia devastating among others Augusta Treverorum (Trier) and the Moselle area. Numerous villae were destroyed and never rebuilt; treasures of Roman coins hidden away were dug up in  
5 our days.

The internal situation was perhaps even worse: Between 211 and 284 AD there were 23 Roman emperors, 20 of them were murdered. In some provinces there were serious famines. The population suffered also from high taxes for the support of the army and the defense of the frontiers.

## *Diocletian and Constantine – A turn for the better?*

With two outstanding personalities Diocletian (284–305 AD) and, later on, Constantine (306–337) becoming emperors, a change for the better seemed to be in sight.  
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Diocletian, who had been the commander of the imperial bodyguard, was proclaimed emperor by his soldiers, when his predecessor was killed.

In 286 AD Diocletian decided to split up the Empire, first into two administrative parts, an eastern half, ruled by Diocletian, and a western half ruled by Maximian, and then in 293 AD into four. So, there were two  
15 Emperors and two Caesars, each of the Caesars attached to an Emperor. Diocletian also introduced military and social reforms, which were reinforced by Constantine. To increase the agricultural production, the coloni (tenant farmers) were forbidden to leave their farms and their children were obliged to succeed them. The system of taxation was reorganized which made planning for the government easier, but also put a heavy strain on the taxpayers. To avoid inflation a wage and price limit was fixed.

After Diocletian's death quarrels about the succession broke out again. In a series of civil wars Constantine (the son of the Caesar Constantine Chlorus), who had been acclaimed emperor by his army, finally kept the upper hand. Before one of the decisive battles in 312 AD Constantine allegedly had a vision of the Christian cross with the words: "In this sign you will win." According to the legend Constantine had his soldiers paint the cross symbol on their shields. The battle was won by Constantine and he attributed his victory to the power of the  
25 Christian God. In 313 AD Constantine together with his co-emperor Licinius ordered that all religions, including Christianity, should have complete freedom of worship.

Constantine later decided to transfer his residence to Byzantium on the shores of the Bosphorus which was then named after him – Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). Its geographic location was important because it connected trade routes to Asia and Northern Europe, and the city itself was on a peninsula, so it was protected by  
30 water from three sides. The new capital was splendidly equipped with new buildings. Besides Constantinople churches in Trier, Jerusalem, Alexandria and elsewhere owed their development to Constantine's support of the new religion.

## *Germanic Kingdoms and the Fall of the Roman Empire*

Even though the Roman Empire had established the Rhine and Danube rivers as the northern borders of their empire, the Romans had contact with Germanic tribes to the north in various ways. These contacts were sometimes friendly, but often characterized by misunderstandings, hostilities and wars.  
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In the second half of the fourth century the relationship between these tribes and the Romans became very strained. The Visigoths\*, a great Germanic tribe, had come under attack from the Huns\*, wandering herdsmen from Central Asia. They asked the Romans for help in exchange for military service and were allowed to live

within the empire. However, outraged by Roman mistreatment, the Visigoths revolted and crushed a Roman army. But four years later the new Roman Emperor Theodosius incorporated the Visigoths into the Roman army. Some of them even became army leaders. This started the Roman policy of allowing army units to be composed entirely of allies, or federates\*.

5        However, this policy revealed how weak the late Empire had become, as other Germanic tribes soon followed lead and also settled in the Roman Empire: the Vandals crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and seized Carthage, for instance. The Saxons expanded their control in Britain after the Roman withdrawal in 410.

10        In 476, another Germanic leader, Odoacer\*, unseated the Roman emperor who by then only had Italy and small parts of Gaul under his command. AD 476 is considered to be a symbolic date for the fall of the Roman Empire, but in reality a series of events in the three preceding centuries (200–500) were responsible for its decline. Eventually a number of Germanic kingdoms established themselves on the territory of the Empire.

15        Odoacer still officially accepted the dominance of the Roman emperor Zeno in Constantinople, but when Odoacer supported Zeno's enemies Zeno planned to unseat him. Zeno – in a two-sided plot – used a group of Ostrogoths\* with their leader Theodoric (493–526)\* to defeat Odoacer and thus keep the Ostrogoths from attacking Constantinople. Theodoric did indeed kill Odoacer, but decided to stay in the West and establish himself as the ruler of Italy.

20        Theodoric managed to keep the Roman administrative system intact, but frictions nevertheless arose between the Italian population and their Germanic overlords, often because of their difference in Christian belief: The Germanic tribes were Arians in contrast to the catholic Italian population and East Rome. Theodoric's successor eventually had to accept defeat against Justinian who became emperor of the Byzantine Empire in 527.

Just like the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Visigothic kings in Spain favored co-existence between the Roman and Germanic populations, maintained the government structure and excluded the native Roman population from power. Because the Visigoths constantly fought over the kingship, the Muslim invaders in 711 were successful and destroyed the Visigothic kingdom.

25        Only the kingdom of the Franks in modern-day France and Western Germany proved more successful and longer lasting under the rule of Clovis (c. 482–511)\*. Clovis had converted to Christianity and secured himself the support of the Roman Catholic Church. After his death, his sons divided his kingdom into three major parts: Neustria in northern Gaul, Austrasia on both sides of the Rhine and the kingdom of Burgundy.

### ***The Rise of Christianity***

30        During the rule of Emperor Constantine the Great, Christianity rose in importance after the emperor had attributed an important victory to his vision of the Christian cross. The Christian Church developed a system of government based on a territorial structure. A bishop, whose dominion was known as a bishopric or diocese, ruled each Christian community. The dioceses were grouped together and headed by an archbishop. The bishops of the four great cities of Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria claimed that the original apostles sent out by Jesus had founded their communities and hence they also claimed to possess greater power. [see the text “Kings, Popes and Princes”]

35        A formal organization of the Church was needed because of the many different Christian teachings which had arisen. There were the universal (= “catholic”) teachings of the Church and so-called “heresies,” those teachings differing from the official ones. Two major heresies in the fourth centuries were “Donatism” (the teachings of Donatus, a North African priest, who opposed state interference in church affairs and taught that sacraments administered by priests who had renounced their belief during the time of persecution were not valid) and “Arianism” (the teachings of Arius, a priest from Alexandria in Egypt who taught that Jesus in contrast to God Father had been human and not really a God.) Official Church councils decided on what was considered heresy and, as a result, the Roman emperor who often presided over the councils and who on the one hand had protected

the church from enemies and, on the other hand, demanded obedience and support, came to play a more significant role in Church matters.

The doctrine of Petrine supremacy – the belief that the bishops of Rome occupied a (more) prominent position based on the Holy Scripture – led to the emergence of the Roman bishop as God’s representative on Earth and hence as leader of the Church called papa (father). With the appearance of Gregory I or Gregory the Great (590–604), a powerful and influential pope, the importance of the Catholic Church increased. Gregory was the one to establish the Papal States (=Kirchenstaat) in Rome and its vicinity as a means of defending the city against the advancing Lombards\*, a Germanic tribe, and of providing a city government. He was also active in converting the people in Britain and Germany through the use of monks as missionaries. [As to monks see the text Spheres of Medieval Life – Monks, Nuns and Priests].

Monks were also responsible for bringing formal education to the people they converted. One important example of the achievements of formal education is the Venerable Bede (672–735), a scholar who had grown up in a monastery in Britain and who produced the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, which is still a chief source of information about Anglo-Saxon England.

### ***The Byzantine Empire***

The West Roman Empire had definitely ceased to exist; its eastern counterpart continued to flourish. In the sixth century, a new emperor came to power in the Eastern Empire: Justinian (527–565)\*. He was knowledgeable in administrative matters and ambitious to regain the lost of the Roman Empire. He defeated the Ostrogoths in battle in 552 and succeeded in regaining some of these parts in the West: Italy, parts of Spain, North Africa, Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria. However, the battles also strained his resources and shortly after Justinian’s death, his empire started to disintegrate.

In order to ensure the unity of his huge empire he had Roman laws codified and arranged in a transparent system. From 529 to 565 the so-called Code of Justinian or Corpus Juris Civilis (Body of Civil Law) was compiled. The main parts of the Justinian Code were the Codex Constitutionum (a collection of imperial ordinances), the Digesta or Pandectae (a compendium of writings of Roman jurists) and the Institutiones (a kind of study book for law students).

The codification was the foundation of imperial law of the Byzantine Empire and also became the foundation of the legal system of continental Europe.

Early in his reign, riots troubled the Emperor and destroyed much of Constantinople, but Justinian rebuilt the city. He improved the infrastructure and also built many public buildings such as public baths, reservoirs for water supplies, hospitals and schools. His best-known achievement still visible today is the Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom, which was completed in 537.

Up to the very end, the Eastern Empire still considered itself as the legal successor of the Roman Empire, even though the common and official language was Greek.

Both the East and West had accepted the Christian faith, but a religious controversy arose that would divide the two Roman Empires for good.

The Byzantine Empire, as the Empire in the East was to be called until its end in 1453, placed enormous importance on religious art. Artists produced religious images or icons (pictures of sacred beings or objects) which were extremely significant to simple people. Eventually, these people were accused of idolatry (= the worship of pictures) which was outlawed in the Christian Church, but the proponents of icons argued that these images helped to understand the religion. The opponents – called “iconoclasts” – were supported by Byzantine Emperor Leo III (717–741)\* who outlawed the use of icons and used the controversy to increase the power of the Byzantine Patriarch. The Patriarch was the highest Church official. The only one higher than the Patriarch was the Pope in Rome. The Iconoclastic Controversy\* added to the growing schism\* of the Christian Church into Roman

Catholicism and Byzantine Greek Orthodoxy, a development which was already apparent in 750 but did not occur officially until 1054.

## ***The Rise of Islam***

The biggest threat to the states which had developed within the boundaries of the Roman Empire was the Arab invasions from the East, hence the Byzantine Empire served as a buffer to the empires in the West.

5 The Arab people, who lived on the Arabian Peninsula, believed in many gods, before Muhammad (570–632) introduced the belief in one god, called Allah. A black meteorite stone in a shrine called Ka'aba in the holy city of Mecca symbolized this God. The meteorite stone was, according to the tradition, given to Adam after his expulsion from paradise in order to obtain forgiveness for his sins. The Ka'aba is still considered by the Muslims to be the most sacred spot on earth.

10 As a young man, the orphan Muhammad (570 – 632) had visions that he said came from a god he called Allah who had previously given revelations to Moses (Judaism) and Jesus (Christianity). These revelations were written down by his followers and formed the Qu'ran (or Koran) which contained guidelines governing the lives of its followers. This religion came to be known as Islam, meaning "submission to the will of Allah". The followers were called Muslims which means "practitioners of Islam."

15 Muhammad wanted to convert the people of Mecca, but had little success, so he and some of his closest followers went to the city of Yathrib, later Medina (Madinat Rasul Allah – "city of the Prophet") in 622. This date marks the beginning of the Islam calendar. In Medina, Muhammad had many followers and his ideas spread quickly. Like the Christians the Muslims did not have a separation of church and state. Following Allah's principles meant being obedient to his prophet. The belief in Allah and having a sacred book, the Qu'ran, put the Arabs on the same level as the Christians in the late Roman Empire and so helped to unify the estranged and divided Arabic tribes.

In Islam, five "pillars" of faith are important: faith, prayer, alms, fasting and pilgrimage. Muslims believe in Allah and Muhammad as his prophet and have set prayer times during the day and a public prayer at noon on Fridays. They should give to the poor and observe the holy fasting month of Ramadan. Once in their lives, they should undertake a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. In addition to these five pillars, Muslims also have to live according to a strict set of guidelines as written down in the Shari'a ('way'), the Islamic system of law without both in religious and secular matters. Under the Shari'a, Muslims must not eat pork, gamble, or drink alcohol, for instance.

30 After Muhammad's death, his followers selected a new leader, Abu Bakr, the first caliph ('the successor', the temporal and spiritual leader). Under Abu Bakr, the Muslim Empire grew quickly – they defeated the Byzantine army at Yarmuk in 636 and took possession of the province of Syria in 640. In the eighth century, the Muslims also took over most of Spain after the Visigothic Empire had collapsed, but they were defeated near Poitiers in France in 732. The Muslims could not seize Constantinople, thus ending Muslim expansion in and into Europe was stopped.

35 However, conflicts arose again about succession to the leadership in the Muslim world until eventually General Muawiya became caliph in 661. He secured the allegiance of the Arabic tribes for the caliphate of his son and thus established the practice of hereditary rule in Islam. He was the founder of the so-called Umayyad dynasty.

40 Because of internal dissension within the caliphate, Islam experienced a split into Shi'ites and Sunnites. The Shi'ites only accepted Ali's (Muhammad's son-in-law's) descendants as the true rulers, whereas the Sunnites were supporters of the Umayyad dynasty. This seventh-century schism still affects relations within Islam today. There have been violent struggles between Sunnites and Shi'ites in Lebanon and Iraq where the main conflict is not only about proper worship, but also about group identity. The groups differ on worship of imams and reli-

gious holidays. In general, one can say that the Shi'ites have long been oppressed. They are minority; only about 15% of Muslims are Shi'ites, they mainly live in Iran.

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