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### **When the Roman Empire Fell**

During the reign of the “Five Good Emperors” in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the Roman Empire was the greatest empire the western world had ever known. It encompassed four time zones stretching from Portugal in the west through Mesopotamia in the east. It ranged from Great Britain lying within 10 degrees of the Arctic Circle to as far south as the Tropic of Cancer in Egypt. Every inch of the Mediterranean, Adriatic and Aegean coastlines were included under the umbrella of Pax Romana, Roman peace. It was a golden age in which all citizens received free grain, wine and oil. Commerce flourished not only because of safe passage on the seas but because of an inter-state system of paved roads wherein all roads led to Rome. It was very good to be a Roman citizen until it wasn't. Newtonian physics dictates that all things at the top have nowhere to go but down. The inevitable fall of the Roman Empire wasn't a sudden crash, but rather a stumbling event making it difficult for even the most astute of scholars to pinpoint when the dead body finally did come to rest.

While it is difficult to pinpoint one precipitating event in the downfall, the appointment of Commodus as emperor certainly set the stage. More than the fact that Commodus' apparent mental illness shocked the genteel and drained the treasury, his relentless paranoia assured that after his well-deserved murder, there would be no successor, leading to a chaotic string of 26 “Barracks Emperors” appointed over the next 50 years. They were so known because they came from the military and were appointed by the military. A telling sign of the chaos was that only one of the 26 died naturally. During the reign of these emperors, their excesses began to

noticeably impact the treasury. They surreptitiously minted coins containing less and less silver, and more and more alloys, devaluing the currency. As this became obvious, inflation and unrest ran rampant. Crisis came from other unexpected areas. Rome started running out of slaves. Since the empire wasn't expanding and conquering new peoples, there was no one to add to the existing cadre of laborers. Another strain upon the slave population was the popular trend of freeing slaves upon the death of the master. And, of course the most obvious cause of the depletion slaves was disease. For decade upon decade the Roman Empire relied upon the labor of a massive slave force, and now they were becoming as rare as silver in the treasury. The unintended consequences of having an embarrassment of slaves are that there is no need to develop labor-saving technology and that the technologies that previously existed had been forgotten. Why save labor when you're trying to think of things for all these people to do? But suddenly, slave labor was at a premium, free men wouldn't accept pay for performing slave labor, and Rome had forgotten how to innovate. Meanwhile, the Germans and barbarians were all too happy to take advantage of the disarray as Rome began to trip.

Luckily, the Roman Empire caught its balance when the military appointed Diocletian as emperor, although ironically it was Diocletian who provided another feeder-root to hasten the downfall of the Roman Empire. For the next 20 years, Diocletian lifted the Roman Empire up. He reformed taxes and recalled the bad coinage. He reformed the military. He reformed government spending. He split the empire. Diocletian believed that the empire had become too unwieldy for one man to rule and that it would be easier to defend a sprawling realm if its resources were equally divided and distributed. So, he devised a tetrarchichal form of government in which the empire was divided into two separate-but-equal sections between Italy and Greece—east and west. Diocletian ruled as an augustus from the more-equal eastern

portion, and another augustus was appointed to rule from the less-equal Rome. A caesar, which was a sort of vice-president, was appointed for each half to assist the augustus. When an augustus would retire or die, the caesar would replace the augustus and another caesar would be appointed. This process worked while Diocletian remained in power, but when he and his co-augustus retired in 305 CE, the divided empire was thrown into civil war. The Roman Empire stumbled along the roots of disarray.

It was pulled from the brink by the installation of a brilliant emperor named Constantine, who by 324 CE was able to reunite the Roman Empire. But Constantine, too, would be a contributor to the downfall of his own domain. His first contribution was to legalize Christianity. The basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul were built in Rome, as well as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Little did Roman society realize, but their traditional panoply of gods and goddesses, festivals, rituals, and vestal virgins were about to be eliminated. Constantine's second contribution was to make a strategic decision relocating the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium, which he renamed New Rome, although the name Constantinople (from the Greek meaning "City of Constantine") was the name that stuck for centuries. Constantinople was easy to defend. With respect to both its Persian and Germanic frontiers, it was the most central location to launch troops in either direction. For its own defense, it was surrounded by water on three sides, such that it only had to offer land defenses along the narrow peninsula. It had a perfect natural port with calm waters. The port was also narrow enough to chain off against an attacking fleet. Best of all, it was at the crossroads of all the trade routes. Constantinople prospered greatly and the Roman Empire stood. But, Constantinople wasn't Rome and when Constantine died, his sons fought over succession and fractured the empire. Rome was separated from the power base in the east and

the Roman Empire stumbled again, fingers brushing the ground as German tribes and Visigoths invaded the western frontier.

Again, the Roman Empire was saved from the fall by the emperor Theodosius the Great, who achieved peace with the Visigoths in 378 in return for giving them land in the eastern Balkans. For 16 years under the rule of Theodosius, the Roman Empire remained united. But Theodosius declared Christianity to be the new state religion and created a powerful institution known as The Church. All other religions were declared illegal. Temples were closed and statues destroyed. For the first time, the eternal flame of Rome guarded by the vestal virgins was extinguished. Even the Olympic Games that had been celebrated for a thousand years were banned. The cultures of the old world were dead, and a new Christian culture emerged. It was hierarchical and absolute, reflecting the structure of the Roman Empire. At the head of The Church were the Bishops, and the most powerful bishop of all was the Bishop of Rome, who also held the title of Pope. Once again, Rome had its own source of power. While an emperor only had power over the living, a Pope had power over the immortal souls of the dead. And as Theodosius prepared to meet his maker in 395 CE, avoiding a civil war was foremost in his mind. He divided the empire along the old lines of Diocletian. The eastern half he gave to his son Arcadius, and the western half he gave to his son Honorius. The Roman Empire was split forever, each side peeling from the other, falling in opposite directions in slow motion.

With the death of Theodosius, the first successful invasion of Rome was but a tiny march of years away. Two of Theodosius' best and most faithful generals were Alaric, a Visigoth, and Stilicho, a Vandal. Both men were faithful citizens and committed to stabilizing the northern borders against invading Germanic tribes. Upon Theodosius' death, Alaric presumed he would be granted a prominent position within the Western Roman Empire and also a homeland for his

people, but he was refused, stinging him and his fellow Visigoths. Stilicho was unjustly accused of treason by the Western Empire and was executed in 408 CE while hundreds of Germans residing along the northern border were massacred. As a result of this outrage, Alaric amassed an army of 30,000 Stilicho supporters and Visigoths and invaded Rome in 410 CE. For the first time since its founding by Romulus, Rome fell to foreign invaders. The Visigoths did not occupy, but moved on and Rome survived to fight another day. Next came Attila the Hun, but in 452 Pope Leo the Great convinced Attila that after Alaric's sacking, there was nothing of worth left in Rome except the treasures he brought with him to pay tribute. Attila did a cost/benefit analysis, took the tribute and left Rome alone, rather than risk his weakest soldier. It's important to note that neither the Emperor nor his agent attempted this transaction. It was the Pope. Attila was not a Christian, yet it was the Pope who saved Rome to limp along toward its ultimate demise. In 455, yet another sacking came, now at the hands of the Vandals. Finally, in 476, the Ostrogoth Odoacer deposed the boy-emperor Romulus Augustulus and now Rome, all of Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Croatia were ruled by Germans. It began and ended with Romulus. The Western Roman Empire was dead, due to a fall.

And yet, the Eastern Roman Empire remained, centered on Constantinople. But was the Eastern Roman Empire even Roman anymore? While the people of the time referred to themselves as the Eastern Roman Empire, historians refer to them as the Byzantine Empire. This is because through their analysis, they concluded that the empire was no longer Roman. The Byzantines could have called themselves whatever they liked; they could have called themselves the Inca Empire. That wouldn't have made them Inca any more than it made them Roman. Byzantium's most non-Roman feature was that they didn't speak Latin. They spoke Greek. They were living in Greece; they were born and died in Greece. They loved all things Greek.

They were Greek. Their Patriarchs had excommunicated each other in 484 CE; not even their religion remained united. They were two separate empires and had been for many years. They just didn't know it.

The so-called Eastern Roman Empire survived many centuries after the demise of the empire in the west. It survived the summerless years after the eruption of Krakatoa in 535; it survived the pneumonic, septicemic and bubonic plagues; it survived the numerous sieges by the Sassanians and Arabs throughout the 7<sup>th</sup> century through their use of "Greek Fire"; it survived the religious schism in 1054. But nothing lives forever, nothing. The Byzantine Empire was not able to survive the canon fire of Sultan Mehemed II. In 1453, Constantinople fell to Muslim forces. Its name was changed to Istanbul, and so it remains today. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, both eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire were dead. And yet looking back 600 years, the Roman Empire seems to have had a third branch that may have survived. On Christmas Day in the year 800 CE, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. But this event gives us a clue as to what really caused the fall of the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire did not fall with the invasion of Mehemed II, nor did it fall with the abdication of Romulus Augustulus. The true fall of the Roman Empire was much more insidious. It was similar to the fall of a skinny old lady. She doesn't fall and break her hip; she breaks her hip and falls. The fall of the Roman Empire occurred when Theodosius proclaimed Christianity as the state religion. It was then that the multicultural Roman Empire was forced to adopt a single culture. It was then that the Roman Empire subjugated itself to the will of the Christian god. It was then that the the Roman Emperor's rule over his mortal subjects was

diminished compared to the rule of a Church that had power over the immortal soul of not only the empire's subjects, but over the emperor himself.

The Roman Empire was dead before it hit the ground. It died before it fell. It died the day the eternal flame of Rome was extinguished. There were no barbarians at the gates that day, just a single zealot who proclaimed that his god would be the only god and that the culture that existed until that day was forevermore illegal. The final split Theodosius made between east and west was immaterial because the empire fell long before that split was made. The Roman Empire fell not at the point of a sword, but at the swipe of a quill.