

CAUSES OF THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE WEST

The number of those being paid by the state was so much larger than the number of taxpayers. that because of the enormous size of the assessments the resources of the tenant farmers were exhausted, fields were abandoned, and cultivated land turned into wilderness. Lactantius, On the Deaths of the Persecutors, chapter 7 (early 300s).



Barbarians?

Yes, Germanic tribes moved into the western half of the Roman empire in the 400s, but their population was, as a rule of thumb, only 5% of that of the Romans in the areas that they settled in. If in fact they did cause the fall, something else must have weakened Rome to the point where these small groups could have provided the final push.



Declining population and abandoned land

There was an outbreak of a plague in the Roman world in 165, when soldiers who had been stationed in Mesopotamia carried it back home. Throughout the 200s, waves of it killed many people, up through 270, when the emperor Claudius Gothicus died of it. Civil wars in the mid-200s also would have killed off many people (both through famine and the plague).

Destructive tax policies also were cited by contemporary sources as the cause of abandoned farmland; but another cause of land being abandoned must be a declining population. Roman armies grew smaller and smaller as time went on. For example, the emperor Julian in 357 met and defeated a Germanic invading force at Strasbourg (modern-day France) with only 13 thousand soldiers.



Army, bureaucracy, and taxes all get much greater

Coming to power in 284 AD, ending a period of civil war (in which 22 emperors reigned in the previous 50 years), Diocletian wanted to make sure that such anarchy was over. His solution was to increase the Roman army by 50%. The bureaucracy increased as well. Instead of governors reporting directly to the emperor, he doubled the number of provinces to just over 100; these provinces were grouped into 12 dioceses, the dioceses grouped into four prefectures.