

The End of the Roman Empire

During the centuries, the Roman Empire faced many challenges. Difficult situations came and went, Rome coped, and life went on within the Empire. However, with the weakening of Rome from A.D. 200 into the 400s, the Empire finally faced too many problems. The end for Imperial Rome came during the 5th century.

Economic, political, military, and social problems all worked against Rome in those centuries. But these internal challenges were made more difficult by forces outside the Empire. These challenges came in the form of foreign invasion.

Throughout the history of the Empire, neighboring powers had occasionally marauded and plundered its fringes. In the later stages of Imperial Rome, the Empire faced great pressure from the north. It was here that roaming tribes of ferocious Germans (considered barbarians by the Romans) began to move against the power of Rome.

The Germanic tribes lived in the region of Europe from the Rhine River on the western edge of Roman Gaul (modern-day France) to the east as far as modern-day Russia. They comprised many different tribes. Nearly all of these tribal groups were semi-nomadic. They practiced a limited agriculture and raised herds of cattle and sheep. In fact, their economy was so primitive that their standard of value was not money, but cattle.

These "barbarian" groups enjoyed close family ties and tribal allegiances. They told each other stories of great warriors and battles. They practiced a religion which included several gods. Some of these deities provided names of the days of our week, such as Wotan, the chief of the gods (Wednesday is named for him); Thor, the god of power (Thursday); Thiu, the god of war (Tuesday) and Freya, goddess of fertility (Friday).

While the Germanic tribes were always present to the north, they did not prove to be a significant threat to Rome until the later days of the Empire. Marius battled them successfully in 101 B.C. Julius Caesar conquered them in Gaul during his campaigns in the 1st century B.C. However, in A.D. 9, the Roman ruler Augustus and his army met German warriors in the dark forest north of the Rhine river and faced dramatic defeat. After this military loss,

the Roman Empire established the Rhine and Danube Rivers as the northern frontier border of the Empire.

Throughout the century-and-a-half of the Pax Romana, the Germanic tribes did not prove to be a significant challenge to the power of Rome. But during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180), the Germanic tribes began to menace the Roman frontier. This lasted for nearly a century. The tribes of the Franks and the Goths proved to be the most bothersome.

After about A.D. 300, the Germans again slipped into a quieter mode and did not raid against the Romans to any significant degree for nearly 75 years. Through these decades, Rome was able to keep the Germanic tribes at bay by playing them off one another, maintaining a policy of "divide and conquer."

However, by the 4th century, the Germans were warring again, restless for land and the riches of the Empire. Meanwhile, a new group of invaders was on the horizon, the Huns. They were not Germanic, but Asiatic. The Huns were a nomadic Mongolian people who began raiding eastern Europe in the 300s.

One Roman writer described these terrifying new raiders:

Their mode of life is savage. They need no fire or prepared food but live on wild roots and the flesh of any kind of animal, eaten half raw; they warm it a little by putting it between their thighs and the back of their horses. Like unreasoning beasts, they are utterly ignorant of right and wrong. They burn with lust for gold.

When the Huns entered eastern Europe in A.D. 372, they began conquering a tribe of Germans called the Ostrogoths (meaning the *East Goths*). In no time at all, the Huns proved to be a problem for the Roman Empire and its future.

Review and Write

Describe the lifestyle of the Germanic tribes who were neighbors to the Roman Empire.