

During the 4th and 5th centuries, the Roman Empire declined fairly steadily. By the late 5th century, the Empire in the West—Italy, Spain, part of North Africa, and also western Europe—had virtually disappeared. This was a huge development that broke the unity of the Mediterranean world and ushered in a period of considerable chaos in western Europe. The Empire in the eastern Mediterranean was less affected, and, transitioning into what became known as the Byzantine Empire, continued to operate effectively for many centuries.

People at the time, and scholars since, have tried to understand what caused this collapse of the western Empire. Some scholars have assumed that empires inevitably fall after a period of prosperity. A few have blamed sunspots, or the rise of Christianity that (it was claimed) sapped the fighting spirit of the Roman people. Explanations today focus on some combination of internal deterioration, probably furthered by the impact of extensive epidemic disease, plus the pressure of outside invasion, particularly by Germanic tribes.

It was obvious at the time that something was going badly wrong. People wondered how an empire that had attained such glory could fall to low estate. Some ordinary people had never been convinced of the merits of Roman rule or had become discouraged by long periods of high taxes and ineffective administration, so they welcomed the change. But others were more troubled.

The first of the following two passages written by a retired soldier, Ammianus Marcellinus, between 386 and 389 C.E. He wrote roughly 10 years after the battle of Adrianople, in the Balkans. There the Visigoths, a Germanic tribe, had defeated the Roman army under Emperor Valens, two years after they began pouring across the Danube River.

Marcellinus offers a pretty clear picture of what went wrong: Fierce Huns (a nomadic group pressing in from Central Asia) pressed the Germans, who in turn successfully pressed the Romans. His account attempts to describe what qualities of the Huns made them so hard to deal with. Is it credible? He also makes a stab at explaining why the Romans could not hold fast, which really offers a second causal explanation besides the more obvious focus on invasion.

Scholars today would not accept this explanation entirely, arguing that Marcellinus exaggerated on a number of points concerning the invaders, and simply missed some of the more basic trends that sapped Roman economic as well as political and military strength. The document raises obvious issues of interpretation. However, it is also important as evidence of ways that people who were at the time friendly to the Empire, could try to make sense of what was happening around them.

Selection I from James Harvey Robinson, *Readings in European History*, Vol. I (New York: Ginn and Company, 1904), pp. 35–39. Selection II from William Stearns Davis, *Readings in Ancient History*, Vol. I: *Rome and the West* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1913), pp. 318–19.

The second passage was written by a Roman, Rutilus Numantius, who had been born in Gaul (France) but became the prefect (governor) of Rome in 413 C.E., as the empire was definitively falling apart. He was a pagan, probably hostile to Christianity. He was obviously highly enthusiastic about the qualities of Rome and its empire. Yet, writing in a time of obvious collapse, his passage invites interpretation: despite its obvious positive qualities does it unwittingly reflect Rome's decline? Certainly the passage invites analysis of what was being lost by Rome's fall in Western Europe, and of how loyal Romans might react when the Western empire disappeared entirely.

## MARCELLINUS AND RUTILIUS NUMANTIUS

### I. MARCELLINUS

The people called Huns, barely mentioned in ancient records, live beyond the sea of Azof, on the border of the Frozen Ocean, and are a race savage beyond all parallel. At the very moment of birth the cheeks of their infant children are deeply marked by an iron, in order that the hair, instead of growing in the proper season on their faces, may be hindered by the scars; accordingly the Huns grow up without beards, and without any beauty. They all have closely knit and strong limbs and plump necks; they are of great size, and low legged, so that you might fancy them two-legged beasts, or the stout figures which are hewn out in a rude manner with an ax on the posts at the end of bridges.

They are certainly in the shape of men, however uncouth, and are so hardy that they neither require fire nor well flavored food, but live on the roots of such herbs as they get in the fields, or on the half-raw flesh of any animal, which they merely warm rapidly by placing it between their own thighs and the backs of their horses.

They never shelter themselves under roofed houses, but avoid them, as people ordinarily avoid sepulchers as things not fit for common use. Nor is there even to be found among them a cabin thatched with reeds; but they wander about, roaming over the mountains and the woods, and accustom themselves to bear frost and hunger and thirst from their very cradles. . . .

There is not a person in the whole nation who cannot remain on his horse day and night. On horseback they buy and sell, they take their meat and drink, and there they recline on the narrow neck of their steed, and yield to sleep so deep as to indulge in every variety of dream.

And when any deliberation is to take place on any weighty matter, they all hold their common council on horseback. They are not under kingly authority, but are contented with the irregular government of their chiefs, and under their lead they force their way through all obstacles. . . .

None of them plow, or even touch a plow handle, for they have no settled abode, but are homeless and lawless, perpetually wandering with their wagons, which they make their homes; in fact, they seem to be people always in flight. . . .

This active and indomitable race, being excited by an unrestrained desire of plundering the possessions of others, went on ravaging and slaughtering all the nations in their neighborhood till they reached the Alani. . . .

[After having harassed the territory of the Alani and having slain many of them and acquired much plunder, the Huns made a treaty of friendship and alliance with those who survived. The allies then attacked the German peoples to

the west.] In the meantime a report spread far and wide through the nations of the Goths, that a race of men, hitherto unknown, had suddenly descended like a whirlwind from the lofty mountains, as if they had risen from some secret recess of the earth, and were ravaging and destroying everything which came their way.

And then the greater part of the population resolved to flee and to seek a home remote from all knowledge of the new barbarians; and after long deliberation as to where to fix their abode, they resolved that a retreat into Thrace was the most suitable for these two reasons: first of all, because it is a district most fertile in grass, and secondly, because, owing to the great breadth of the Danube, it is wholly separated from the districts exposed to the impending attacks of the invaders.

Accordingly, under the command of their leader Alavivus, they occupied the banks of the Danube, and sent ambassadors to the emperor Valens, humbly entreating to be received by him as his subjects. They promised to live quietly, and to furnish a body of auxiliary troops if necessary.

While these events were taking place abroad, the terrifying rumor reached us that the tribes of the north were planning new and unprecedented attacks upon us; and that over the whole region which extends from the country of the Marcomanni and Quadi to Pontus, hosts of barbarians composed of various nations, which had suddenly been driven by force from their own countries, were now, with all their families, wandering about in different directions on the banks of the river Danube.

At first this intelligence was lightly treated by our people, because they were not in the habit of hearing of any wars in those remote districts till they were terminated either by victory or by treaty.

But presently the belief in these occurrences grew stronger and was confirmed by the arrival of ambassadors, who, with prayers and earnest entreaties, begged that their people, thus driven from their homes and now encamped on the other side of the river, might be kindly received by us.

The affair now seemed a cause of joy rather than of fear, according to the skillful flatterers who were always extolling and exaggerating the good fortune of the emperor. They congratulated him that an embassy had come from the farthest corners of the earth, unexpectedly offering him a large body of recruits; and that, by combining the strength of his own people with these foreign forces, he would have an army absolutely invincible. They observed further that the payment for military reinforcements, which came in every year from the provinces, might now be saved and accumulated in his coffers and form a vast treasure of gold.

Full of this hope, he sent forth several officers to bring this ferocious people and their carts into our territory. And such great pains were taken to gratify this nation which was destined to overthrow the Empire of Rome, that not one was left behind, not even of those who were stricken with mortal disease. Moreover, so soon as they had obtained permission of the emperor to cross the Danube and to cultivate some districts in Thrace, they poured across the stream day and night, without ceasing, embarking in troops on board ships and rafts and on canoes made of the hollow trunks of trees. . . .

In this way, through the turbulent zeal of violent people, the ruin of the Roman Empire was brought about. This, at all events, is neither obscure nor uncertain, that the unhappy officers who were intrusted with the charge of conducting the multitude of the barbarians across the river, though they repeatedly endeavored to calculate their numbers, at last abandoned the attempt as hopeless. The

man who would wish to ascertain the number might as well (as the most illustrious of poets says) attempt to count the waves in the African sea, or the grains of sand tossed about by the zephyrs. . . .

At that period, moreover, the defenses of our provinces were much exposed, and the armies of barbarians spread over them like the lava of Mount Etna. The imminence of our danger manifestly called for generals already illustrious for their past achievements in war; but nevertheless, as if some unpropitious deity had made the selection, the men who were sought out for the chief military appointments were of tainted character. The chief among them were Lupicinus and Maximus,—the one being count of Thrace, the other a leader notoriously wicked,—both men of great ignorance and rashness.

And their treacherous covetousness was the cause of all our disasters. . . . For when the barbarians who had been conducted across the river were in great distress from want of provisions, those detested generals conceived the idea of a most disgraceful traffic; and having collected dogs from all quarters with the most insatiable rapacity, they exchanged them for an equal number of slaves, among whom were several sons of men of noble birth. . . .

[After narrating the events which led up to the battle of Adrianople, and vividly describing the battle itself, Ammianus thus records the death of the emperor Valens:]

So now, with rage flashing in their eyes, the barbarians pursued our men, who were in a state of torpor [lethargy], the warmth of their veins having deserted them. Many were slain without knowing who smote them; some were overwhelmed by the mere weight of the crowd which pressed upon them; and some died of wounds inflicted by their own comrades. The barbarians spared neither those who yielded nor those who resisted. . . .

Just when it first became dark, the emperor, being among a crowd of common soldiers as it was believed,—for no one said either that he had seen him or been near him,—was mortally wounded with an arrow, and, very shortly after, died, though his body was never found. For as some of the enemy loitered for a long time about the field in order to plunder the dead, none of the defeated army or of the inhabitants ventured to go to them.

## II. RUTILIUS NUMANTIUS

Give ear to me, Queen of the world which thou rulest, O Rome, whose place is amongst the stars! Give ear to me, mother of men, and mother gods!

Through thy temples we draw near to the very heaven. Thee do we sing, yea and while the Fates give us life, thee we *will* sing. For who can live and forget thee? Before thy image my soul is abased—graceless and sacrilegious, it were better for me to forget the sun, for thy beneficent influence shinest—even as his light—to the limits of the habitable world. Yea the sun himself, in his vast course, seems only to turn in thy behalf. He riseth upon thy domains; and on thy domains, it is again that he setteth.

As far as from one pole to the other spreadeth the vital power of nature, so far thy virtue hath penetrated over the earth. For all the scattered nations thou createst one common country. Those that struggle against thee are constrained to bend



to thy yoke; for thou profferest to the conquered the partnership in thy just laws; thou hast made one city what was aforesaid the wide world!

O Queen, the remotest regions of the universe join in a hymn to thy glory! Our heads are raised freely under thy peaceful yoke. For thee to reign, is less than to have so deserved to reign; the grandeur of thy deeds surpasses even thy might destinies.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of Marcellinus's account seem most accurate? What points seem least accurate, and what explains why Marcellinus would be prone to exaggerate?
2. How does Marcellinus explain Roman failure in the face of the barbarians? Are his explanations plausible? Do they suggest deeper internal weakness in Rome's state and society?
3. Does Marcellinus's account suggest some characteristic difficulties in explaining major disasters in a society?
4. Does the passage by Rutilius Numantius provide other kinds of evidence about Rome's decline, or should it be interpreted as a sign that things were not as bad as later historians have suggested?
5. What does Rutilius suggest about Rome's legacy, after the empire disappeared? How would loyal Romans of this sort react to the Germanic kingdoms that replaced Rome in the West?
6. What other kinds of evidence are necessary to figure out what went wrong during the later Roman Empire?
7. What do you think the main causes are that explain the frequent decline of once-great societies? Are there common patterns? Were the factors involved in western Rome unusual?