WHAT CAUSED THE DARK AGES
The Fall of Rome

Introduction: Rome before the Fall

• after a thousand years, Rome finally began a long, slow collapse in the 400’s CE
  – the so-called Fall of Rome
  – but only the Western half of the Empire
  – the Eastern Byzantine Empire lasted another millennium
The Fall of Rome

Introduction: Rome before the Fall

• by the 600’s CE, western Europe looked very different
  – trade/economy: almost non-existent
    • all but no major cities were left
  – education/literacy: virtually extinct
  – arts/sciences: all but forgotten

• a basic siege mentality gripped Europe
  – “as if Western Civilization went camping for five hundred years”
The Fall of Rome

Introduction: Rome before the Fall

• a medieval Arab(!) geographer characterized Europeans, as follows:
  “They have large bodies, gross natures, harsh manners, and dull intellects . . . those who live farthest north are particularly stupid, gross and brutish.”

• outsiders were now describing Europeans, in much the same way Herodotus and Tacitus had described “barbarians”

• no question, big changes have taken place!
  – but what sorts of changes?
  – and how? and why?
The Fall of Rome
The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

• increasing pressure from barbarians to enter the Roman Empire
• these barbarians were collectively called Germans
  – most spoke some form of Common Germanic
  – but from different tribes
The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- the Romans allowed these barbarians to work on farms or serve in the army
  - the late Latin word for “soldier” was *barbarus*
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The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

• Rome had become a nation of immigrants
  – but that had been true for centuries
  – cf. the emperors Trajan and Hadrian; also Septimius Severus

• few Romans in the East spoke Latin
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The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

- where the Romans tried to stop them, the barbarians forced their way in
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The Barbarians Arrive: The Fourth and Fifth Centuries CE

• why did the barbarians want inside the Roman Empire so badly?
  – safer world, even if there were taxes
  – aqueducts, baths, amphitheatres, etc.
  – and a much better climate
and there was another reason the barbarians wanted into Rome: Huns!
- from Mongolia
- first appeared in Europe ca. 350 CE
- crossed the steppes of Russia on ponies
- had a reputation for atrocity and ferociouslyness
- led to exaggerated reports of their numbers and speed
• and there was another reason the barbarians wanted into Rome: Huns!–from Mongolia–first appeared in Europe ca. 350 CE–crossed the steppes of Russia on ponies–had a reputation for atrocity and ferociousness–led to exaggerated reports of their numbers and speed
in fact, everything about the Huns is exaggerated!

– it’s hard to sift fact from frenzy and fiction
– no Hunnic account of their own history!
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The Huns, Part 1

• why didn’t the Huns write their own history?
  – “The winner get to write the history” — but not these winners!
  – all we hear are the screams of their victims
    • an unvarying picture of mindless carnage and wanton destruction
  – so what did the Huns want?
    • the truth according to Denis Synor
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The Goths

• the first barbarian group to feel the brunt of the Huns’ assault were the **Goths**
  – Germanic speakers living NE of the Balkans

• the Goths were split into the **Visigoths** (“West Goths”) and the **Ostrogoths** (“East Goths”)
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The Goths

• 376 CE: seeking protection, the Visigoths tried to break into the Roman Empire
  – the Roman emperor Valens had to let them in
  – but Roman officials cheated and abused them
  – so the Visigoths went on a rampage

• 378 CE: the Battle of Adrianople (NE Greece)
  – Valens was killed, along with the Romans’ reputation for invincibility
  – cf. Hannibal and the Punic Wars (216 BCE)
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The Goths

• Valens’ successor: Theodosius I
  – bribed the Visigoths and pacified them
• but in 395, Theodosius died prematurely
  – his teenage sons Arcadius and Honorius assumed the throne
• Alaric: new Visigothic leader
  – at Alaric’s approach, Honorius pulled the legions off the Rhine river, leaving the northern frontier of the Empire unprotected
The Fall of Rome

The Rhine Frontier
The Fall of Rome

The Goths

- the Vandals poured over the Rhine
- the Angles and Saxons invaded Britain
- Alaric attacked Italy
  - 410 CE: the Visigothic Sack of Rome
  - three days of plunder
  - the devastation was more psychological than physical
    - St. Jerome: “My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.”
The Fall of Rome

The Goths

• but Alaric died on the Visigoths’ retreat from Italy
  – eventually, the Visigoths settled in Spain
  – this kingdom would last two centuries, until Spain was conquered by Moslems (711 CE)
• the Visigoths even adopted Christianity
  – but in a non-orthodox form called **Arianism** (or **Arian Christianity**)
  • more on Arianism in Section 13 (Early Christianity)
The Fall of Rome

The Goths

• the Vandals crossed the Mediterranean Sea at Gibraltar and moved into North Africa  
  – stripped the Romans of the rich fields there
• like the Visigoths, they converted to Arian Christianity  
  – their conquest of North Africa was the source of many gruesome hagiographies (“saints’ biographies”)  
  – ultimately, they moved to sea and became pirates disrupting trade in the western Mediterranean Sea
The Fall of Rome

The Goths

• yet another inept Roman emperor, Valentinian III killed his own best general Aetius who was a Vandal by birth

• 455 CE: Vandalic Sack of Rome
  – this time real devastation!
  – vandalism: “the malicious destruction of property”
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The Huns, Part 2

• meanwhile, the Huns were busy terrorizing the Ostrogoths and Eastern Europe
• new Hunnic leader: Attila
  – “the Scourge of God”
• defeated by the Romans at Châlons (central France)
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The Huns, Part 2

• after Châlons, Attila and the Huns turned south and attacked Italy
  – Valentinian III fled Rome
  – but Pope Leo I confronted Attila who withdrew from Italy — but why?
  – new evidence suggests a virulent form of malaria decimated the Hunnic army

• within a few months, Attila died
  – the Hunnic army dissolved and disappeared
  – “they were not lamented”
The Fall of Rome
476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

- 476 CE: the German general Odovacar deposed the reigning boy-emperor Romulus Augustulus
  - not much of a change really!
  - though not a Roman citizen, Odovacar was actually in charge of the Roman state
  - ended the pretense of non-German control of the West
  - stopped paying taxes to the Eastern Empire
The Fall of Rome

476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

• 493 CE: the Eastern Emperor hired the Ostrogoths to “liberate” Italy
  – Ostrogoths now free of Hunnic control
  – new Ostrogothic leader: Theodoric
  – once in Italy, Theodoric killed Odovacar
  – but kept Italy for himself
  – ruled 493-527 CE
The Fall of Rome
476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

• Theodoric: a paradox of a man!
  – oversaw a small-scale renaissance in Italy
  – rebuilt Roman roads, buildings and aqueducts
  – sadly, however, this was to be the last breath of culture Italy would have for three centuries
  • until the Carolingian Renaissance in the eighth century!
The Fall of Rome

476 CE: The “Fall of Rome”

• Theodoric: a paradox of a man!
  – was an Arian Christian
  – was illiterate and needed “secretaries” but most educated people were orthodox
  • first, Boethius whom Theodoric executed
    – the last Classical author: *The Consolation of Philosophy*
  • later, Cassiodorus who was more practical and survived
    – Cassiodorus oversaw the copying of classical manuscripts
    – these were the last copies of many classical authors made before Europe’s long “camping trip” (the first stage of the Dark Ages)
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

• **classic problem**: “*Why did Rome fall?*”
  – over 210 answers have been cited
  – but none has achieved universal consensus
  – many are invented histories:
    • it was not because of changes in climate
    • it was not because of sexual excesses
The Fall of Rome
The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

• **Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire***
  – published ca. 1775
  – puts the blame on Christianity
  – but what about the Eastern Empire?
  – all in all, Gibbon’s answer has more to do with Britain in his day than ancient Rome
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

• there are many answers to the question of why Rome fell
  – slow decrease in population
    • the late Romans’ luxurious lifestyle led to a general disinterest in having and supporting children
    • also, plagues and warfare were persistent problems that eroded population numbers
    • there is evidence of lead poisoning in the bones of Roman dead, especially at Pompeii
      – but is this an empire-wide problem?
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

• there are many answers to the question of why Rome fell
  – failure to expand militarily
    • this led to economic stagnation: “Empires must expand.”
    • no real industry in Rome because the aristocrats who owned the capital disdained practical matters
      – matters of economics were seen as “middle-class”
    • Romans knew about the water-wheel, for instance, but never applied it on a wide scale
The Fall of Rome
The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

• there are many answers to the question of why Rome fell
  – incompetent leadership
    • too many emperors were children or fools or more interested in themselves than Rome
    • this led to a corrupt political structure
    • from that, a lethal mix of angst and apathy
    • and flight from cities killed the classical *polis*
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: The Oldest Question in History

• thus, the incursion of barbarians was hardly the only problem facing late Rome
  – civilizations have faced far worse and survived
    – e.g. Mexico

• and so there are many answers to this question
  – but none of them are simple or compelling on their own
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• if it’s so hard to find a simple, easy answer, perhaps it’s a flawed question
  – a good example of why to avoid constructing simplistic Questions or Thesis Topics for your own Papers

• let’s review the question itself then by examining its three components: Why, Rome, Fall
The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

- What’s “Rome”?
  - the City?
    - the City of Rome fell several times
      - in 410 CE (Visigoths), 455 CE (Vandals)
      - also 48-45 BCE (Julius Caesar)
      - and nearly to Hannibal in 216 BCE!
  - the Empire?
    - only half of the Empire fell!
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• What’s “Rome”?  
  – the Government?  
    • the Government of Rome changed several times over the course of Roman history:  
      Kingdom (753-510 BCE)  
      Republic (510-31 BCE)  
      Empire (31 BCE - 476 CE)  
  – the People?  
    • they’re still around: Italians, French, Spanish, etc.

• all in all, they are too many “Romes” to begin answering the question there!
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• What’s “falling”?
  – an accelerating descent leading to a cataclysmic crash followed by a big kaboom and dust and fallout everywhere?
    • like a tree coming down?
    • or an atom bomb going up?
  – but if Rome fell, it fell slowly
    • more of a flumph than a kaboom!
    • so is “crumbled” a better metaphor?
    • how about “leak”? “slip”? “putrefy”?
    • but The Rot and Slide of Rome is not a particularly attractive title for a scholarly book, is it?
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• What’s “falling”?
  – and why be negative at all?
    • after all, this “fall” led to us and are we all that bad?
    • moreover, the transition from late Rome to the early Middle Ages was seamless, or at least it seemed so in the day
  – all in all, “fall” isn’t the right word
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• then what about “why”?  
  – with no clear “Romes” and all of them framed inside the dysfunctional metaphor of “falling,” what’s the point in asking “why”?  
  – it’s a loaded question which begs the answer that “Rome fell”  
  – the unavoidable truth is that something unpleasant happened in Rome in the 400’s CE  
    • e.g., Roman citizenship started to matter less and less  
  – but does this constitute “falling”?
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• and just because Germans have taken over the Empire doesn’t mean that the Roman world has somehow ended
  – it’s not like the Germans are aliens from another planet!
  – to say that Rome ended when a German general assumed the throne is unwarranted bigotry

• German generals had, in fact, been running the Empire for years!
The Fall of Rome
The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• the German takeover was part of a long, slow process of internationalization that had been going on in Rome for centuries
  – e.g. Hadrian was from Spain

• and the deposing of Romulus Augustulus involved no significant violence
  – it was hardly a change of government at all

• most modern historians are parroting ancient, anti-German, racist propaganda
  – invented history! a rationalization created to mask the late Romans’ own incompetence
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• greater truth: central Roman imperial government collapsed
  – and the provincial administrations inherited the power it once held
  – as did the Church, too
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• so why don’t we talk about the “Evolution of Rome”?
  – boring! there’s no moral core to the story
  – No sex? No laughs? = No lesson!
  – Don’t believe me? Ask Herodotus!
The Fall of Rome

The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• the “Fall of Rome” is based on an insidious fallacy: the personification of Rome
  – Rome was “born” with Romulus and Remus
  – Rome “died” with Romulus Augustulus and the German takeover

• because if Rome was “born,” it had to “die”
The Fall of Rome
The “Fall of Rome”: A New and Better Question

• so what was “Rome”? 
  – the most successful advertising campaign in all of human history: “Die for Rome!” 
  – along with that, some of the most well-recognized marketing images ever designed 
    • the fasces, the triumphal arch, the laurel wreath, the eagle 
  – all this says: “Rome is what matters!”
The Fall of Rome

**Conclusion:** “Die For Rome!”

- all in all, Rome is an idea
  - and ideas don’t live and die like people do
- and the idea of Rome lived on after 476 CE
  - in the Church
  - in the Mafia
  - in the Third Reich of Nazi Germany
  - in the Senate of the US government
  - in the mouth of any speaker of Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese or Rumanian
  - and in the heart of any Christian in the West!