

The Causes for the Fall of (New) Rome.

While the Roman Empire did not finally fall until 1453, the seeds for its destruction were planted well before, and were indeed inherent in its structure for most of the Middle-Ages. Much as they hurt the old empire, the devastation wrought upon it by the barbarians of the west merely showed how tough the system was and how well it was able to rebuild and continue to survive against the odds.

The final fall may have taken a millennium after Rome itself 'fell', but it stemmed from several major roots. The first is linguistic / religious, the second is foreign war and the third is the decline in Constantinople's ability to control the Mediterranean Sea. These feed into each other in several ways.

The linguistic / religious issue is a complex one. What we today call Byzantium was called Rome or Romanie by its inhabitants and regarded as a continuum from the founding of the first Rome. This continues until today with the 'Third Rome' – Moscow regarding itself as the successor state. The term 'Byzantium' was a construct used by only a small group of scholars before the fall. As a part of the modern reconstruction of history to suit the mythology that was being constructed about the rise of civilization it was necessary (for Western pride) for the Roman Empire to have fallen and not to have continued its traditions and culture until finally destroyed by actions and inactions of the West itself. The Dark Ages, now a discredited term, were a necessary part of the myth of cultural Darwinism.

The inhabitants of the central part of Romanie spoke Latin, although Koine Greek (Ελληνιστική Κοινή) was gaining ascendancy. Some parts of the Empire (especially North Africa, Egypt and Palestine) spoke other tongues such as Coptic or Syriac or, where Greek was spoken it was the Alexandrian dialect, which was almost a different language to that spoken elsewhere.

Many in the outer provinces had local Church customs that varied from those of the official Orthodox Church. Seeing that Bishops were appointed by the Metropolitan in Constantinople, and he had a habit of appointing Greek-speaking Orthodox Bishops to oversee Coptic-speaking Monophysites, there was a build up of resentment against the central government. As well as the Christian minorities, many of the Berber tribes of North Africa, like some of the Bedouin in Palestine, were Jewish by conversion. Direct persecution of these religious and linguistic minorities was a common and much resented practice.

This explains why, when the Muslims came, they were usually greeted as liberators by the populace, who were initially allowed to keep their language and religion by the conquerors and who relaxed taxation.

In 603 Chosroes II invaded the Empire and was not driven out until 622. This Persian invasion conquered most of Palestine and Egypt, depriving Constantinople of the grain, timber for its fleet and much of its revenue. This was closely followed by an Avar invasion in 626, which reached the walls of the city. When the various invaders were driven off, using control of the sea to outmanoeuvre them, Romanie was left with greatly depleted resources and much weaker in manpower for its armies. A typical battle of the time might involve 100-200,000 troops. This led to a depletion of resources as people died and land was laid waste.

The Muslim campaign of 635 followed closely on these earlier attacks and gave the Empire no time to recover. By 645 Palestine, Syria and the most productive parts of

Africa were lost to the Muslims. This speed of collapse was partly due to the welcome extended by the different religious groups. It was also partly due to Constantinople appointing a series of disastrously bad military commanders who either surrendered or else had poor tactics. The way that they used the thematic troops, small professional armies which were transported by sea and backed by thematic levies, showed scant regard for the Manuals that had developed over the centuries and they had no answer for the overwhelming speed of the lightly equipped land-based armies of the Muslims. The thematic levies that they needed were often the first to welcome the invaders due to perceived or actual persecution.

Even despite these setbacks, the power of Romanie continued to control the Mediterranean basin (with a fair amount of fluctuation in fortune), as Imperial fleets raided Muslim settlements forcing the administrative centres to be placed far from the sea (Damascus and Cairo rather than Caesarea and Alexandria). This naval control was made possible with the introduction in 673 of Greek fire. It was only through the use of this weapon that the numerically inferior Empire was able to continue its maritime struggle against the Muslims, making raids and landing armies as far away as Spain for the next few centuries and keeping the Arabs from the vulnerable southern shores of Europe. It was during this time that Greek gradually gained ascendancy as the language of Court and Latin retreated.

It was only with the gradual loss of the provinces that supplied timber to the fleet that Roman naval power was reduced. Of course, once started, this was a downward slide and Romanie grew unable to protect Sicily, Cyprus, Sardinia and its provinces in Italy and its more vulnerable lands in Africa (Spain had been finally lost to the Visigoths during the Persian wars).

The final destruction of the Empire was guaranteed when Venice treacherously diverted a Crusade to enable Constantinople to be looted for the profit of the Adriatic city and finally came to pass a few centuries later when the west, ignoring many entreaties, turned its back for the last time on the remnants of Rome and, allowed it to be defended by the people of the city, volunteer sailors and Islamic troops, rather than send support and thus permitted the Turk, who could afford the Christian Serbian gunners, to finally breach the walls.

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