Barbarians Invade the Roman Empire

The Roman Empire Rises and Falls

In 509 B.C., the Romans established a republic in central Italy. Surrounded by enemies, the city was engaged in almost continual warfare for 200 years. By 260 B.C., the Romans had conquered almost all of Italy, and within 130 years Rome was master of the entire Mediterranean Sea. The Roman Empire reached its height around A.D. 180, stretching from Britain in the north to Arabia in the east to North Africa and Egypt in the south.

By A.D. 200, however, the once powerful Roman Empire began to weaken. Civil wars, a labor shortage caused by plague, and attacks on the outer borders occurred. People were taxed heavily to pay for more soldiers. The empire had become too large to protect. It was divided into the Western Roman Empire, with its capital still in Rome, and the Eastern Roman Empire, with a new capital at Constantinople.

The Barbarians

To the Romans, anyone who was not from their culture was known as a barbarian, a term we now use to mean “someone who is brutal and destructive.” Early in the A.D. 400s, waves of barbarians, or migrant tribes, began to cross the northern Roman borders—the rivers of Germany and Gaul (France). The Roman army was stretched thin. The first barbarians to take advantage of Rome’s weakness were two German tribes—the Visigoths (west Goths) and the Ostrogoths (east Goths).

As nomads, the Goths depleted the land around them and then moved on. This meant they were constantly searching for new land. Scientists believe the climate changed in northern Europe, becoming colder and damper. Food crops had a shorter growing season, and the northern tribes had to move south for food. At first, they also wanted to ally themselves with the Roman Empire and its vast military might because the Goths’ lands were being overrun by the fiercest of enemies—the Huns from Asia. Once secure in Rome, however, the Goths turned on the Romans and fought for control of the empire. In A.D. 410, the Visigoths sacked and looted Rome.

The Vandals

The next wave of barbarians to invade Roman territory—the Vandals—had been forced out of northern Germany by the Huns as well. The Vandals conquered much of the Roman lands in Spain and northern Africa. Then they crossed into Italy and in A.D. 455, they too sacked Rome. Today the word vandal means “someone who willfully destroys someone else’s property.”

Europe’s Conquered Lands

Eventually, the Germanic invaders settled in various parts of the now-collapsed Western Roman Empire. Some tribes gave their names to the lands they conquered. The Vandals settled in Spain, which they called [V]Andalusia. The Germanic peoples known as Franks settled in France. The Burgundians took over the Burgundy region of France, and the Angles crossed the North Sea to conquer England.
Geography and History Activity
continued

The Barbarian Invasions

KEY

Imperial capital
Eastern Roman Empire
Western Roman Empire

Applying Geography to History

Directions: Read the information about the barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire and study the map above. Then answer the questions below.

1. Naming Who was a “barbarian” to the Romans?

2. Locating Where did the first wave of invading barbarians come from?

3. Specifying For what reasons did the Goths move into Roman territory?

4. Naming What was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire?

5. Identifying Which city was attacked by the Visigoths, the Vandals, and the Ostrogoths?

6. Identifying Which group of invaders pushed the others into Roman territory? Who was their leader?