

Document Packet: “Decline of the Roman Empire”

Questions :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why is Ammianus criticizing many of his countrymen? ▪ How are some people in American society today like the Romans he describes?
Document #1	
<p>Rome is still looked on as the queen of the earth, and the name of the Roman people is respected. But the magnificence of Rome is defaced by the thoughtless conduct of a few, who fall away into error and vice. Some men think they can become immortal by having statues made of them—as if they could be rewarded after death by being cast as bronze figures that have no sense or feeling rather than by striving to perform upright and honorable actions. And they are even eager to have their statues plated with gold.</p> <p>Others place greater importance on having a couch higher than usual, or splendid clothing. They toil and sweat under a vast burden of cloaks which are fastened to their necks by many clasps.</p> <p>The whirlpool of banquets and other luxuries I shall pass over lest I go too far. Many people drive their horses recklessly over the flint-paved city streets. They drag behind them huge numbers of slaves, like bands of robbers. As for the lower and poorer classes, some spend the whole night in the wine shops. Some lie concealed in the shady arcades of the theaters. They play at dice so eagerly as to quarrel over them. Such pursuits as these prevent anything worth mentioning from being done in Rome.</p>	
<p>SOURCE: The Loeb Classical Library from J. C. Rolfe, translator, <i>Ammianus MarcelLinus</i>, Vol.1, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963.37-51 <i>passim</i>.</p>	

Questions :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why does Ammianus feel that the tax system is to blame for the problems facing Roman society? ▪ In your opinion, why were taxes being increased during the 4c C.E.?
Document #2	
<p>Hence resulted the grievous troubles of his subjects, and the ruinous items of [tariff/taxes] imposts that had been instituted, long continued practice in oppression . . . enfeebled (weakened) and cut the fortunes of rich and poor alike. Finally the burden of tributes (payments) and the repeated increase in taxes compelled some of the most distinguished families, hounded by the fear of the worst, to leave the country; others, crushed by the severity of the tax-collectors, having nothing to give, became permanent inmates of the prisons; and some of these, now weary of life and light; died by the noose (by hanging) as a welcome release.</p>	
<p>SOURCE: <i>Amnianus Marcellinus</i>, III, 337-39.</p>	

Questions :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why did the Emperor Diocletian pass laws setting price limits? ▪ How would these measures affect the Roman economy?
Document #3	
The Edict of Maximum Prices	
<p>In 301C.E., the emperor Diocletian tries to stabilize the Roman economy, by controlling prices and wages. We, who by the gracious favor of the gods have held back the former tide of ravages of barbarian nations by destroying them, must protect, through justice, a peace that was established for eternity. If self-restraint could have prevented the excesses of greed - greed which with no thought for mankind rushes for profits ...-or if the general welfare could have been protected without our action, we would have remained silent. Since those who are unscrupulous (greedy merchants) are not concerned with the common need, . . . we-the protectors of the human race-viewing the situation, have agreed that justice must step in for the betterment of all...</p> <p>In the commerce carried on in the markets or involved in the daily life of cities, high prices are so widespread that they are not lowered even by abundant supplies or by good years . . . There are men who try to gain control and to profit in good as well as poor years, even though they have enough wealth to satisfy whole nations . . . prices have been driven so high by these men that sometimes in a single purchase a soldier is deprived of his bonus and his salary .</p> <p>We have decreed that there be established, not the prices of articles on sale-for such an act would raise prices when they are low-but maximum prices . . . It is our pleasure, therefore, that the prices listed in the attached summary be observed in the whole of our empire . . . and the penalty for violating this law shall be death. The same penalty shall apply to the purchaser who conspires with the greedy seller to break the law. Nor is the merchant exempt from this penalty who withdraws his goods from the market rather than sell it at the listed price, since he who holds back the necessities of life and business should be treated even more harshly than he who takes advantage of the poor. We, therefore, urge obedience of this law, since it provides, not for single provinces and states, but for the whole world, to protect it against those whose greed could not be satisfied.</p>	
SOURCE: Tenny Frank, ed., <i>An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome</i> . The John Hopkins Press. 1940. 310.	

Question:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why does the historian Edward Gibbon feel that Christianity was to blame for the decline of the Roman Empire?
Document #4	
<p>The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring <i>why</i> the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long The victorious legions, who, in distant wars, acquired the vices of strangers and mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic... The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them formidable to the enemy; . . . the vigor of the military government was relaxed and finally dissolved by the partial institutions of Constantine [who divided the empire into an eastern and a western section]; and the Roman world was overwhelmed by a deluge of barbarians</p> <p>As the happiness of a <i>future</i> life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity [faint-heartedness]; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity [monks and nuns] ... the Church, and even the State, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody and always implacable [unforgiving]; . . . the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country . . . The sacred indolence [laziness] of the monks was devoutly embraced by a servile and effeminate age . . . the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine to Christianity.</p>	
<p>SECONDARY SOURCE: Edward Gibbon, <i>The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i>. B. Bury, ed.) London. Methuen, 1898, IV, 161-63; VII, 308.</p>	

Question:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How would you compare Rostovtzeff's arguments to those of Gibbon in explaining the reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire?
Document #5	
<p>Every reader of a volume devoted to the Roman Empire will expect the author to express his opinion on what is generally, since Gibbon, called the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. . . In the sphere of politics we witness a gradual barbarization of the Empire from within, especially in the West. The foreign, German, elements play the leading part both in the government and in the army, and settling in masses, displace the Roman population . . . the ruling classes were replaced.. by Germans.</p> <p>The cities ... gradually decayed, and the majority of them practically disappeared from the face of the earth. Only small islands of civilized life are left, . . . but . . . are gradually swallowed up by the advancing tide of barbarism.</p> <p>Another aspect . . . is the development of a new mentality among the masses of the population. It was the mentality of the lower classes, based exclusively on religion (Christianity) and not only indifferent but hostile to the intellectual achievements of the higher classes.</p>	
<p>SECONDARY SOURCE: Michael Rostovtzeff, <i>The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire</i>. Of the Clarendon Press, Oxford.1957, 1, 532-34, 541.</p>	

Question:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why does the author disagree with the policies adopted by the Emperor Diocletian?
Document #6	
<p>The expenses of running the Empire continued to increase. As taxes failed to produce the needed revenue, the government resorted to devaluation of the currency, . . . Prices shot up as they did in twentieth-century inflations in Europe. A pall settled over the population. People felt they were being swept downward by forces beyond their power to control. In the face of overwhelming evils they were helpless. . . (Emperor)Diocletian, with army backing, became dictator, reorganized the administration, and stabilized the currency . . . Unfortunately, like some modern rulers facing a similar problem, he overvalued his new monetary unit. Prices promptly responded with another violent rise. Diocletian recognized the suffering that resulted, but naturally did not understand the cause. The trouble, he thought, lay in greedy profiteering. In 301 A.D. he issued his famous edict setting maximum prices and wages... But this early attempt at price-fixing failed. It is recorded that business men closed their shops, that many articles of commerce disappeared, and that food riots resulted...The heart was taken out of enterprising men.. Private enterprise was crushed and the state was forced to take over many kinds of business to keep the[state] machine running.</p> <p>People were schooled to expect some thing for nothing. This failure of the of Roman virtues of self-reliance and initiative was conspicuously shown in that pall of the population that was on relief The central government undertook such far-reaching responsibility in affairs that the fiber of the citizens weakened...The most disastrous policy . . . was extravagant spending by the government. Part of the money went into. . . the maintenance of the army and of the vast bureaucracy required by a centralized government . . . the expense led to strangling taxation.</p>	
SECONDARY SOURCE: Henry J. Haskell, <i>The New Deal in Old Rome</i> . New York. Knopf, 1947, 214-231.	

Questions :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why did Zinsser disagree with some of the preceding interpretations about why the Roman Empire declined and eventually collapsed? ▪ How does Zinsser support his own theory?
Document #7	
<p>The problem has been dealt with from every conceivable angle, for there is no greater historic puzzle than that of the disappearance of the ancient civilization --a disappearance so complete that not a spark from its embers shone through the barbaric darkness of several hundred years. Historians have analyzed the causes according to the prejudices of their own varieties of erudition [learning] . . . [But most of them have] failed to include any consideration of the calamitous epidemics(diseases) which - sweeping the Roman world again and again during its most turbulent political periods - must have exerted a material, if not a decisive influence upon the final outcome. .We believe that a simple survey of the frequency, extent, and violence of the pestilences to which Roman Europe and Asia were subjected, from the year one to the final barbarian triumph, will convince the unprejudiced that these calamities must be interpolated in any appraisal other causes that wore down the power of the greatest state the world has known. A concentration of large populations in cities, free communication with all other parts of the world . . . , constant and extensive military activity involving the mobilization of armies in camps, and the movement of large forces back and forth from all corners of the world these alone are conditions which inevitably determine the outbreak of epidemic disease. And against such outbreaks there was absolutely no defense available at the time. Pestilences encountered no obstacles. They were free to sweep across the entire world .As soon as a state ceases to be mainly agricultural,</p>	

sanitary knowledge becomes indispensable for its maintenance.

SECONDARY SOURCE: *Rats, Lice and History* by Hans Zinsser. Atlantic-Little, Brown and Co.1963 100-03.

Question:

- Why do you think that Ferrill felt it was the destruction of Roman military power in the 5c that was the reason for the end of the Roman Empire?

Document #8

In fact the Roman Empire of the West did fall. Not every aspect of the life of Roman subjects was changed by that, but the fall of Rome as a political entity was one of the major events of the history of Western man. It will simply not do to call that fall a myth or to ignore its historical significance merely by focusing on those aspects of Roman life that survived the fall in one form or another. At the opening of the fifth century a massive army, perhaps more than 200,000 strong, stood at the service of the Western emperor and his generals. The destruction of Roman military power in the fifth century was the obvious cause of the collapse of Roman government in the West.

SECONDARY SOURCE: Arther Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1986.

Question:

- What argument is made by the historian Finley Hooper in this document? Is he correct?

Document #9

The year was 476. For those who demand to know the date Rome fell, that is it. Others will realize that the fall of Rome was not an event but a process. Or, to put it another way, there was no fall at all—ancient Roman civilization simply became something else, which is called medieval. [It evolved into another civilization, that of the Middle Ages in Western Europe.]

SECONDARY SOURCE: Finley Hooper, *Roman Realities*, 1967.