

## 10.5 A Weakening Empire

### Why did Rome decline and fall?

#### Explore

## After the Fall of Rome

### What happened after the fall of the Western Roman Empire?

#### The Western Roman Empire

The [empire](#) in the west was gone, but the idea of [Rome](#) still remained. “Barbarian” kings ruled former Roman [provinces](#). [Gaul](#) was now part of the kingdom of the Franks, who would eventually give their name to the nation of France. Most of [Spain](#) had been conquered by the Visigoths. Italy and the territories to the north now made up the kingdom of the Ostrogoths. Rome’s African provinces were taken by the Vandals, and smaller pieces of the empire were carved out by other tribes.

In all these places, Latin remained the language of government and the educated classes. Gradually, however, Roman culture was forgotten. Cities and towns were abandoned because the economy could no longer support an urban population and the infrastructure fell into decay. Roman law and customs were replaced by the folk traditions of the [Germanic peoples](#). Further invasions and civil wars led to periodic famine, or severe food shortages. Europe had entered its early Middle Ages, sometimes known as the “Dark Ages.”

#### The Eastern Empire

In a wide arc around the Mediterranean Sea from Greece to Egypt, the Eastern [Roman Empire](#), which historians call the [Byzantine Empire](#), survived. Its emperors, the heirs of [Constantine](#), still called themselves emperors of Rome, and its people still thought of themselves as Romans. For a time, [Constantinople](#) was the most populous city in the world. The Eastern Roman Empire would not fall until 1453, when Constantinople was captured by the Turks.

Before the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and long before the fall of the Eastern, the culture of the Roman Empire had been transformed by a new religion. Early in the 300s, [Christianity](#) was only one of many “mystery religions” that had won followers in the empire. As Rome had declined, the old gods, goddesses, and ceremonies no longer were meaningful to many people. Still, priests maintained the temples and continued to make the sacrifices. Then in 324, the emperor Constantine himself became a Christian, and Christianity became a religion that was approved and supported by the state.

By the end of the 300s, Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. Later, as the “barbarians”

swept into the empire, Romans discovered that these people also followed the new religion. For centuries, Christianity was the only unifying force in Europe. The little that was remembered of Roman culture was preserved in Christian monasteries. The Roman Empire, which had unified much of Europe, was gone. The different geographical, cultural, economic, and political issues that impacted Rome had been too great for the Empire to survive.