**The Roman Empire**

Many of the same pressures that brought down the Han plagued the Romans as well. Similar in size to the Han empire, but more linguistically and culturally diverse, Rome was even more difficult to hold together in the face of such pressures.

As with the Han, increased trade along the silk roads brought new contagious diseases from afar. These diseases repeatedly ravaged populations throughout the empire. Because conditions were worst in the cities during such outbreaks, those who could afford to do so fled to their country villas.

Neighboring pastoral societies were also a problem for both the Han and Roman empires. Rome had a long and turbulent border with Germanic peoples, called Goths, who lived to the north and east along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. Roman rulers wished to keep the Germanic Goths out of Roman territory, but raids were frequent and the financial and logistical burden of maintaining troops along the border was enormous. Eventually, the Romans ended up with an arrangement similar to the one established by the Han with the Xiongnu. The Romans paid Gothic chiefs an annual tribute in return for an end to raids on Roman territory. In addition, the Romans allowed Goths to cross the border to sell their goods in Roman markets. In fact, many Germanic warriors served in the Roman army. This arrangement worked well for a time. One result of this interaction was that many Germanic men and women converted to Christianity, which by the fourth century CE was the religion of Rome.

The Huns brought this fragile peace to an abrupt end around 375 CE. After crossing the Volga River from Central Asia and conquering the farming peoples there, the Huns swept into eastern Europe and attacked Germanic settlements. Trapped between the borders of Rome and the onrushing Huns, the terrified Goths requested and received Rome’s permission to migrate west of the Danube. The crossing was a disaster. According to the Roman historian Ammianus, the desperate refugees took to the dangerous, rain-swollen river, clinging to almost anything that would float. Some tried to swim. For those who survived the crossing, their problems were just beginning. The generals in charge of the refugees mishandled their resettlement, starving and mistreating them in the process. Within three years, these Germanic groups had regrouped and took their revenge, defeating a Roman army at Adrianople and killing the emperor Valens. This was the first time a Roman army had been beaten by Germanic peoples in Roman territory. It signaled an end to Roman military superiority. Other Goths, as well as the Huns, soon took notice.

The disappearance of Roman military invincibility was due in large part to serious economic and political problems within the empire. Epidemics and war led to a steep decline in population during the third and fourth centuries. The loss may have been as high as thirty percent. Labor shortages developed. Trade and business slowed. Tax revenues plummeted. At the same time, the gulf between rich and poor grew. The emperor Diocletian attempted to save the empire by dividing it into more manageable eastern and western sectors governed by its own set of co- rulers. Making such reforms was politically risky and required the cooperation of the wealthy senatorial class. To gain that cooperation, Diocletian exempted rich families from taxes, shifting the burden to the lower classes. Members of the senatorial class could expect to earn as much as 120,000 gold pieces a year. Peasant farmers typically earned about five. Farmers who could not pay their taxes were sold into slavery along with their children. Aristocratic landlords gained land and wealth, while ordinary Romans sank into poverty or slavery. The benefits of Roman citizenship became less apparent to many Romans and loyalties faded accordingly. With conditions deteriorating in Rome, the emperor Constantine established a new capital at the Greek city of Byzantium, known henceforth as Constantinople. This city was in more populous and richer eastern part of the empire. And its strategic and easily defensible location astride the major maritime trade route between the Mediterranean and Black seas ensured its survival and continued prosperity regardless of Rome’s fate. The elites of Rome flocked to the new city, continuing the economic abandonment of the old capital that had started during earlier outbreaks of disease.

So by the time the Germanic army defeated Rome in 378 CE, the stage was set for collapse. The western empire, all but abandoned by the east, was ill-equipped to deal with the flood of Germanic and Hunnic migrants who surged across the borders. Indeed, these movements had the character of migrations of entire populations, along with their livestock and belongings, intent on making parts of the western empire their home. The Goths were divided into a number of groups. One of them were the Visigoths. Their chieftain Alaric led an attack on Rome and sacked the city in 410. Another group, the Vandals, did so again in 455. In 476 a Germanic general deposed the last western emperor. Meanwhile, the eastern empire, which became known as the Byzantine empire, or Byzantium, had enough financial and military resources to deter would-be invaders, including the Huns. In fact, Byzantium survived for another thousand years.