Levels 7 and 8: Cause and Effect – Student Handout 1

Causes of the fall of the Western Roman Empire

For centuries, ancient Rome was a great power in the Mediterranean region and across Europe, northern Africa and western Asia. It reached its height as an empire around 117 AD. In 285 AD, Emperor Diocletian decided that the empire had become too big to rule from Rome, so he split the empire into four regions. This eventually became two: the eastern and western empires. However, by the end of the fifth century the ancient Roman empire in the west was no more. The eastern empire, which had been ruled from Constantinople (now known as Istanbul), lasted until 1453 AD when it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire.

Historians have long debated the causes of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Some of the causes are outlined below:

* **Civil wars and political turmoil –** while throughout its early history there had been civil unrest, from about 88 BC Rome experienced six major civil wars that would weaken firstly the Roman republic and then the Roman empire. These civil wars caused political instability and corruption within the Praetorian Guard, who were the emperor’s personal bodyguards, and the Roman Senate, which in turn led to economic and societal instability:
* the Marian-Sullan civil wars began in 88 BC
* Caesar’s civil war in 48 BC
* war between Mark Antony and Octavian (later the first Roman emperor, Augustus) in 31 BC
* the time of the four emperors – in the space of 18 months after the death of Emperor Nero in 68 AD, there were four emperors, each one murdered and replaced by his successor
* the crisis of the third century – over 45 years following the murder of Emperor Alexander Severus by his own troops in 235 AD, there were 26 emperors (some ruled for only 21 days), most of whom were killed in battle with their rivals or were murdered by their own legions and/or the Praetorian Guards
* the civil wars of the Tetrarchy (the four regions that Emperor Diocletian had created) in the early fourth century AD.
* **The rise of the Sassanid empire –** In 226 AD the Persian empire was reborn as the Sassanid empire under the rule of Ardashir, the first Shah of Shahs or emperor. In the next 30 years or so the Sassanids would defeat the Romans in three major battles, even capturing and killing Emperor Valerian in 260 AD. These defeats weakened the power of Rome in the Middle East.
* **Barbarian invasions –** throughout its history Rome had encountered barbarian Germanic tribes and had largely defeated them, but by the early fifth century AD, the Goths and Visigoths had started encroaching upon Roman territory. In 410 AD King Alaric of the Visigoths sacked (that is, looted and wreaked destruction upon) the city of Rome. In 455 AD the city was raided by the Vandals.
* **The impact of foreign populations within the Roman empire –** ‘Barbarians’ did not only attack from without. As Rome grew larger and larger its armies began recruiting not only from Roman citizens but from the conquered peoples who were not necessarily as loyal to the empire. In 476 AD, Flavius Odoacer, a military leader from within the Roman empire of Germanic background, deposed what was to be the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, Romulus Augustulus.
* **The spread of plagues and diseases from the east** – during the third century AD various plagues and diseases spread into the Roman world from the east. Then in 542 AD the Justinian plague broke out and was prevalent for the next 200 years. These plagues devastated the population of the Roman empire. This meant fewer soldiers to defend the empire and fewer people to work and support the society as a whole.
* **Economic issues and problems with slave labour –** constant wars both external and internal had cost the imperial government a lot of money, so taxes on the common people were continually being increased, meaning the empire suffered from economic inflation (this means that there is an increase in prices while the value of money falls). This meant that the gap between the wealthy and the poor widened, with many rich citizens fleeing to the countryside and abandoning the city of Rome. Traditionally, the Roman economy had relied upon slaves to do the hard work as farm labourers and craftsmen, but as Rome began to lose its hold upon its empire and was no longer expanding into new territories where it could gain new slaves, this led to agricultural and commercial decline.
* **The rise of Christianity –** the power of the Church in the years following Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity c. 312 AD undermined imperial authority. Some historians even hypothesise that some Roman people became less interested in supporting Roman society or achieving success or prosperity and more concerned with what would happen to them in the afterlife.
* **Overexpansion –** as the emperors kept pouring money into their military forces to allow for expansion and then maintenance of the empire, there was no money for the upkeep of Rome’s buildings and infrastructure.