The Fall of the Roman Empire

1. In 27 B.C., Octavian became the unchallenged ruler of Rome. Although the Senate continued to meet, Rome was no longer a republic. Octavian took the title of Augustus, or “exalted one,” and became Rome’s first emperor. The Roman Empire, which covered more than 3 million square miles, was now ruled by one man. For about 200 years, the Roman Empire enjoyed a time of peace. However, it was difficult to manage such a large area.

Constantine gained control of the Roman Empire in 324 A.D. He moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium. Constantine renamed the city Constantinople. The eastern part of the Roman Empire grew stronger because Constantinople and other eastern cities were on trade routes. The economic gains from the trade of spices and other items from the far east guaranteed wealth and stability. The western part of the Roman Empire became weaker because of constant invasions. In 395, Rome split into two sections: the Eastern Empire and the Western Empire. The East would survive, but the West would fall.

2. The fall of the Western Roman Empire happened over many years. Although there were many complicated reasons, the main problem was constant invasions by Germanic tribes. Germanic people had been living on the northern borders of the Roman Empire for years. From 376 until 476, many Germans moved into Roman territory. Some of these Germanic groups were the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, and Vandals.

Germanic tribes fought each other for control of the Western provinces of the Roman Empire. The city of Rome was captured and looted by the Visigoths in 410. This attack seriously weakened the Western Empire. In 476, Odoacer, a German warrior, removed the Roman emperor from power and sent him into exile. This completed the fall of Rome. After Romulus Augustulus was dethroned, Roman power in the western half of the empire disappeared. The Western Empire broke into separate states that were ruled by many different German tribes.

3. The richer and stronger Eastern Empire became known as the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine emperors ruled from Constantinople. This empire lasted until 1453, when it was taken over by the Ottoman Turks. Even though the Western Empire’s political power ended, its ideas, customs, and institutions lived on. Its cultural influence continues in Western civilization today.