

# The later Empire

After the rule of Marcus Aurelius (see page 25), political problems increased, caused by dishonest, brutal or incompetent emperors and rebellious soldiers. The Praetorian Guard† became very powerful, often choosing or deposing emperors without consulting the Senate†. This led to frequent changes of ruler, so the empire lacked the continuity and strong leadership it needed.

## Commodus AD180-192; Pertinax AD192

Aurelius abandoned Nerva's method of choosing a successor (see page 25). Instead he appointed his son Commodus, who made peace with the barbarians†, but then ruled irresponsibly, ignoring the needs of the empire. He was murdered in



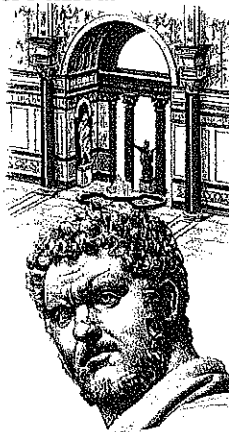
AD192. His successor, Pertinax, was killed after only three months by the Praetorian Guard, who auctioned the throne. The winner was Didius Julianus.

## Didius Julianus AD192; Septimius Severus AD193-211

Three army groups on the frontiers became jealous of the Praetorian Guard's power. They chose their own emperor, Septimius Severus, who returned to Rome and deposed Julianus. Severus kept the barbarians out of the empire for 14 years, but he had to raise taxes to pay the army. For the first time even Romans in Italy were taxed.

## Caracalla AD211-217

Caracalla, Severus's son, raised the army's wages again, and paid barbarians to stay away from the borders. He is remembered for the baths that he built in Rome. To increase the number of people he could tax, in AD212 he granted citizenship† to all free males in the empire. He was murdered by his Praetorian† Prefect, who seized power until he too was assassinated.



Bust of Caracalla

## Elagabalus AD218-222

Elagabalus became emperor when he was 15. He was fanatically dedicated to worship of a Syrian sun-god. The Praetorian Guard killed him and chose his cousin Alexander as the new emperor.

## Severus Alexander AD222-235

Alexander was only 13, so his mother Julia Mamaea ruled for him. She brought the army under control and gave management of the empire to a small group of senators. She also improved social conditions. Teachers and scholars were subsidised, as were landlords who repaired their property. Julia achieved relative peace, but after 12 years the eastern frontiers of the empire were invaded. The army rebelled against the government and murdered Alexander and Julia.

## The Anarchy AD235-284

Chaos followed. The throne went to an army leader, Maximinus Thrax, a barbarian who could hardly speak Latin and had never been to Rome. After this the empire was torn apart by civil wars. Various army factions nominated more than 50 different rulers. Huge areas of the empire were ruined by famine, plague or invasion. Taxation was heavy and prices rose; many people left their homes to join bands of outlaws. Finally the wars ground to a halt, but the country was devastated.

## Diocletian AD284-305

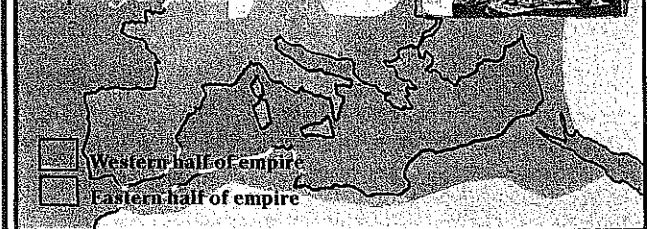
In AD284 Diocletian, a general in the Danube, was declared emperor by his troops. To establish order, he enlarged the army and made it responsible for the administration of the empire. Aware of the threat posed by ambitious soldiers, he increased the number of generals but gave each one fewer troops. He split the provinces† into smaller areas – 70 at first, later 116 – to make them easier to manage. More civil servants were appointed to handle the new administrative work.

Diocletian's most radical change was to divide the empire into two. Each half was governed by its own Augustus† and Caesar†. Diocletian was Augustus of the East, and set up his court at Nicomedia (see map). In AD286 another soldier, Maximian, was appointed Augustus of the West.

This statue represents the new system of leadership.



This map shows how the empire was divided.



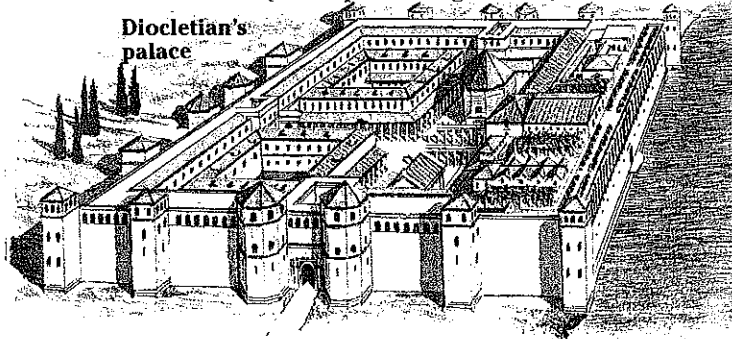
To stop prices and wages rising, Diocletian issued lists of the maximum sums that people could charge for goods and labour. But this did not work. In addition, the cost of defending the empire made it necessary to increase taxes. To make taxation more efficient, a census† was taken every five years. At first people had to stay on their land while the census was counted; later they were forced to remain permanently where the census takers had first found them.



The empire ran much more efficiently, but people had less freedom. The law was enforced by the army, which as a result became very influential.

Soldiers were now less able to depose the emperor, but they had more power over ordinary people. The Senate lost most of its authority, and in effect simply became the city council of Rome.

Diocletian convinced the people it was the will of the gods that he was emperor, and declared himself a god. It was impossible for others to challenge him. In AD305 he resigned, persuading Maximian to do so at the same time. He retired to a huge palace which was built for him at Spalatum in Dalmatia (now Split in Yugoslavia).



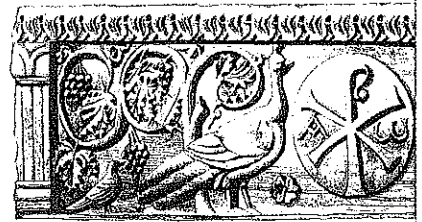
Diocletian's palace

Diocletian expected the two Caesars to take over, but this arrangement did not last long before the army interfered. Once more soldiers tried to choose emperors to suit themselves. By AD311 there were four contenders for the throne.

## Constantine AD312-337

One contender, Constantine, was leading the army in Britain. In AD312 he returned to Rome with his troops and defeated Maxentius, his main rival, at the Milvian Bridge. It is said that before the battle Constantine saw a cross in the sky and the words '*In hoc signo vinces*' ('You will conquer with this sign'). After his victory he granted tolerance to all religious groups, including Christians† (who under Diocletian had been badly persecuted).

Constantine adopted the Christian symbol shown on this tomb. It is made up of the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek: *chi* (Χ) and *ro* (Ρ).



Constantine began reuniting the empire. He defeated various rivals, and became sole emperor in AD323. He granted freedom of worship to Christians and gave people special privileges if they adopted the religion; in AD337 he formally became a Christian on his deathbed. Constantine demanded to be treated as the earthly representative of the Christian God, and began taking part in religious disputes and discussions. In this way he cleverly transferred the ideas of the state religion – that the emperor had divine status and religious authority – to Christianity.

Constantine wanted a new capital city to rival the splendour of Rome. In AD330 he moved his court to Byzantium, a former Greek colony at the entrance to the Black Sea, where he founded a new city called Constantinople (now Istanbul; see page 80). It remained an imperial capital for 1000 years.

Constantine was tolerant in religious matters, but he ruled in an authoritarian manner. The security of the empire depended on huge armies, and taxes had to be collected by thousands of civil servants. Workers were increasingly tied to their land and professions. But these measures still failed to halt the decline of the economy, and could not prevent the threat of the barbarians (see overleaf).



This head of Constantine, once part of a statue 10m (30ft) high, was probably an object of worship.

## Key dates

- AD180-192 Commodus
- AD192 Pertinax, Didius Julianus
- AD193-211 Septimius Severus
- AD211-217 Caracalla
- AD218-222 Elagabalus
- AD222-235 Severus Alexander
- AD235-238 Maximinus Thrax
- AD238-284 Civil wars
- AD284 Diocletian takes power.
- AD286-305 Maximian rules western empire; Diocletian rules eastern empire.
- AD293 Galerius and Constantius appointed Caesars; new system of government is formalised.
- AD305-312 Struggles for power
- AD312-337 Constantine (East and West united again from 324).

# The Empire after Constantine

After Constantine's death the empire was divided among his three sons, but struggles for power soon arose. After the death of two of them the third son, Constantius II, reunited the empire, but himself died in AD361.

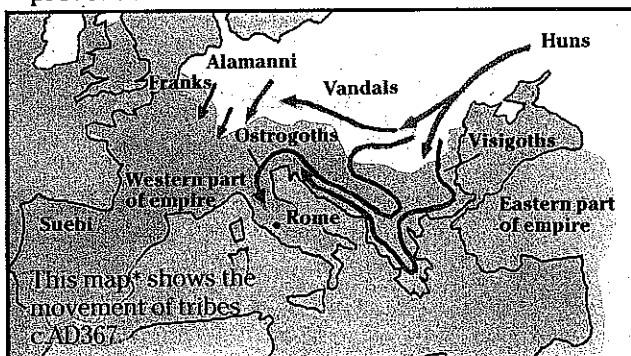
His successor, Julian (AD361-363), was known as the Apostate (someone who abandons one religion for another). Julian restored the old Roman gods and rebuilt their temples. Though Christianity † was not banned, people who worshipped the old state deities were favoured.



Julian

Julian was very hardworking and conscientious. He cut the number of palace workers and gave back independence to city councils throughout the empire. Julian's successor, Jovian (AD363-364), restored Christianity to its former supremacy.

Soon events outside the empire threatened its frontiers. The Huns, a tribe from eastern Asia, began moving west. They invaded the territory of other tribes, who in turn had to move further west to escape them. In AD367 the Visigoths †, Vandals † and Suebi began to set up their own kingdoms on Roman territory. This coincided with a series of short-lived emperors who were too weak to prevent the invasions.



This map shows the movement of tribes c. AD367.

## Theodosius AD379-395

During the frontier unrest, Theodosius took power (AD379). Unable to expel the barbarians from Germany, he made a treaty with them. This granted them safety if they provided soldiers and farm-workers for the Romans. Barbarian Germans, and later Huns themselves, became a regular part of the Roman army. Many Romans disliked this, but it was necessary as not enough Roman citizens were willing to become soldiers.



This silver relief shows Theodosius in his official robes.



Barbarian soldiers

Theodosius fought against the break-up of the empire, and was the last emperor to rule both East and West. In theory Theodosius's sons were joint rulers of the whole empire, but they split it down the middle again and each ruled half. This scheme continued for another century; usually each emperor was succeeded by his eldest son. But these rulers were often interested only in personal power and wealth. Meanwhile the barbarians continued to advance, further contributing to the downfall of the western half of the empire.

## Honorius AD395-423

During Honorius's rule the barbarians shattered the security of the empire. In AD402 Italy was invaded by a tribe of Goths led by a commander called Alaric. Scared by this, Honorius moved the imperial court to Ravenna on the east coast of Italy. Gradually Ravenna grew from a poor town into a prosperous city, and it remained an imperial centre for centuries.



Ivory plaque showing Honorius.



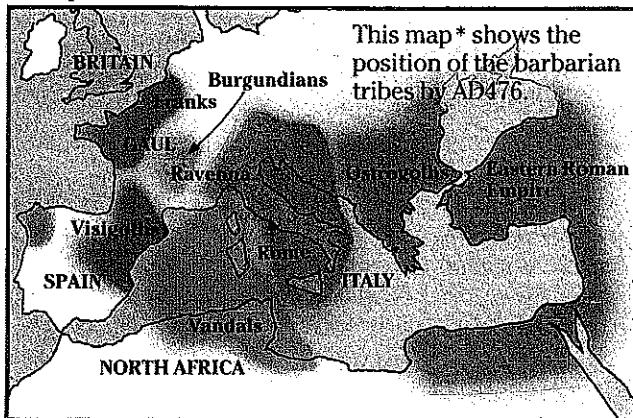
This is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Ravenna. It is known as the Baptistery of the Orthodox, and was built during the 5th century AD.

While Honorius lived in splendour and safety until his death in AD423, the empire was being overrun by the barbarians. In AD409 the Vandals invaded Spain. In AD410 Rome was sacked by Alaric, who rapidly invaded the rest of Italy. That same year the Romans abandoned Britain and recalled the British legions † to defend the shrinking empire. Disease and famine weakened the population. It is also likely that people stopped wanting to fight the barbarians, because they no longer had any faith in a Roman government that kept taxing them and restricting their freedom.

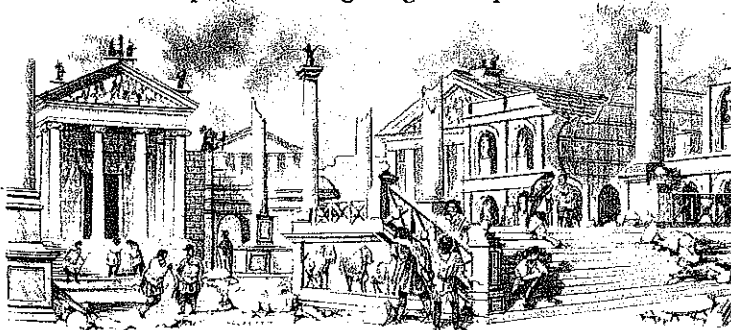
## The barbarians take over

The barbarians swept across Europe. Part of Gaul was occupied by the Burgundians †, and northern Europe by the Franks. In AD429 the Vandals moved from Spain to North Africa. In AD451 the Romans drove the army of Attila the Hun out of central France. But this was the last Roman victory.

The empire was continually under attack. In AD455 the Vandals sailed to Italy, invaded Rome and destroyed it. The city's administrative services collapsed. Chaos and famine followed. Rome's population fell from over 1 million to about 20,000. Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor of the West, was deposed in AD476 by Odoacer, a German captain who declared himself king of Italy and ruled from Ravenna. The western empire had ended.



Many barbarians, such as the Vandals in Africa, were violent fighters who wanted to remove all trace of the Romans. Others, like the Burgundians, did not destroy the areas they conquered, and tried to preserve Roman buildings. But often they failed to do so because they did not have the skills to keep the buildings in good repair.



Each barbarian tribe ruled the area it conquered in its own way. Romans were badly persecuted in some areas. In others the invaders were tolerant. They could not keep strict control over large areas, so local Roman governments were able to preserve the Roman way of life for years. But in the West the idea of the empire, once so important to the Roman people, gradually faded away.

## The rise of the Christian Church

In the 4th century AD the Christian Church became richer and more powerful. Educated men began to choose careers as religious officials rather than entering the army or politics. The Church began to influence the way the empire was governed. Bishops, not generals, organized resistance to the barbarians. They also converted many barbarians to Christianity. The developing Church produced many writers and philosophers. Even after the barbarian invasion the Church remained very influential.



This mosaic shows Ambrosius, a Roman bishop. He was highly respected for his teaching and writings.

As Christianity grew, Christians founded communities called monasteries all over the empire. In monasteries men called monks lived away from the rest of society and observed strict rules of behaviour. Some monasteries became famous places of learning, and monks saved and copied ancient books. In this way they preserved many works of Latin and Greek literature and history which otherwise might have been destroyed.



### Key dates

- AD337-361** Rules of Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius II.
- AD361-395** Many emperors of East and West, including Julian ('the Apostate') and Jovian.
- AD379-392** Theodosius rules as emperor of East.
- AD392-395** Empire re-united under Theodosius.
- AD395-423** Rule of Honorius.
- AD402** Italy invaded by Alaric the Goth. Honorius moves the imperial court to Ravenna.
- AD409** Vandals invade Spain.
- AD410** Sack of Rome by Alaric.
- AD455** Vandals invade Italy from Africa and destroy Rome.
- AD476** Romulus Augustulus, last emperor of the West, is deposed by Odoacer.

\*For a note about the projection of this map, see page 3.