Ancient Rome: The Fall of an Empire *video transcript-Day 1*

NARRATOR: ROME'S GLORY SHONE FOR A THOUSAND YEARS......BUT NOTHING LASTS FOREVER. IN THE 3RD CENTURY A.D., CIVIL WAR ENGULFED THE EMPIRE. CHAOS AND CORRUPTION UNDERMINED IT FROM WITHIN. AND FROM EVERY DIRECTION, ITS ENEMIES GATHERED FOR THE KILL.

PANIC SPREAD AS TERRIFIED ROMANS SENSED THE APOCALYPSE AT HAND. FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, THE BENEFITS OF ROMAN RULE SEEMED CLEAR. HER ARMY CREATED THE MOST STABLE EMPIRE THE WORLD HAD EVER KNOWN. FROM SCOTLAND TO THE SAHARA, FROM THE ATLANTIC TO THE EUPHRATES, EVERYONE ENJOYED THE BLESSINGS OF ROME'S PEACE. HER GOVERNMENT GAVE THE MEDITERRANEAN CENTURIES OF COMMUNITY, STABILITY, AND PROSPERITY. FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, IT WAS GOOD TO BE ROMAN. BUT THAT WOULDN'T LAST.

EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS PRESIDED OVER THE FIRST SIGNS OF DECLINE IN THE ROMAN WORLD. BORN IN 121 A.D., HE WAS GROOMED FROM AN EARLY AGE TO BE ROME'S NEXT EMPEROR. AURELIUS HAD 20 YEARS TO DREAM ABOUT THE KIND OF RULER HE WANTED TO BE AND THE KIND OF EMPIRE HE WANTED TO RULE. AS A ROMAN, HE BELIEVED THERE WAS A DIVINE ORDER TO THINGS. AS EMPEROR, HE HOPED TO RE-CREATE THAT ORDER IN THE ROMAN WORLD, WHICH IS WHAT ROMANS HAD DONE FOR CENTURIES, WITH ASTOUNDING SUCCESS, EVERYWHERE. THEY PACIFIED THE ENTIRE MEDITERRANEAN WITH ONE SET OF LAWS, REGULATED TRADE WITH ONE CURRENCY, AND REPLACED DIVERSITY WITH CONFORMITY.

ROME'S EMPIRE STRETCHED FOR TWO MILLION SQUARE MILES, BUT WHETHER YOU WERE IN EGYPT OR ENGLAND, YOU COULD ALWAYS TRAVEL A STRAIGHT ROMAN ROAD TO A FAMILIAR ROMAN CITY. ROMANS LIKED TO KNOW WHERE THEY STOOD. THEY PLANNED THEIR CITIES LIKE THEY PLANNED THEIR LIVES -- IN A METHODICAL, ORDERLY FASHION. IF NATURE WAS UNPREDICTABLE, THEY TAMED IT. ROMANS CHANNELED WATER TO THEIR CITIES IN AQUEDUCTS; THEIR GREATEST LOGISTICAL TRIUMPH.

ROME HAD BEEN A SYMBOL OF ORDER AND STABILITY FOR CENTURIES. AND MARCUS AURELIUS EXPECTED TO CONTINUE THAT TRADITION. IN 161 A.D., AURELIUS FINALLY BECAME EMPEROR. FOR 23 YEARS, HE'D BEEN PLANNING A PEACEFUL RULE. HE WAS IN FOR A BRUTAL AWAKENING.

LATER THAT YEAR, WAR BROKE OUT IN THE EAST. BARBARIANS CROSSED THE FRONTIER AND ATTACKED A ROMAN PROVINCE. A DEADLY PLAGUE RAVAGED THE EMPIRE, KILLING A QUARTER OF ROME'S POPULATION. GERMANIC INVADERS THEN EXPLOITED THE DISASTER AND ATTACKED FROM THE NORTH. ROME WAS SUDDENLY CONFRONTED WITH MILITARY THREATS ON TWO FRONTS.

MARCUS AURELIUS SPENT EIGHT YEARS ON THE FRONTIERS, FIGHTING FOR ROME'S SURVIVAL. LIKE MANY, HE FEARED IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE END; THAT THE GREAT ROMAN EMPIRE WAS ABOUT TO FALL TO AN INVADING ARMY. BUT HIS FEARS WERE MISPLACED. FOR ROME'S GREATEST PROBLEMS LAY WITHIN, AS DID THE EMPEROR'S. MARCUS AURELIUS HAD CANCER. HE TOOK DAILY DOSES OF A DRUG HE HOPED WOULD ALLEVIATE HIS SUFFERING. IT DIDN'T. AND IN 180 A.D., THE DISEASE FINALLY WON.

AURELIUS' PAINFUL DEATH FORESHADOWED THE FATE OF THE EMPIRE HE LEFT BEHIND. ROME, TOO, WAS SUFFERING FROM A FATAL DISEASE -- CULTURAL DECAY. IT WAS AN EROSION OF TRADITIONAL ROMAN VALUES THAT WOULD FORCE MANY TO TURN TO FOREIGN CULTS FOR THEIR SALVATION AND QUESTION THEIR ALLEGIANCE TO ROME.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE IS AS FAMOUS FOR ITS VICES AS IT IS FOR ITS VIRTUES. CORRUPTED BY WEALTH AND POWER, ROME'S LEGACY WAS TAINTED BY IMAGES OF INDULGENCE AND IMPERIAL EXCESS. THE EMPEROR COMMODUS EPITOMIZED THE DECAY. HIS ARROGANCE WOULD FORCE EVERYONE TO QUESTION THEIR ALLEGIANCE TO ROME.

COMMODUS SUCCEEDED HIS FATHER MARCUS AURELIUS IN 180 A.D. TRAUMATIZED BY AN EARLY ATTEMPT ON HIS LIFE, COMMODUS SHUNNED ALL PUBLIC APPEARANCES AND LEFT ROME IN THE HANDS OF HIS CLOSEST ADVISORS. AS THEY TERRORIZED ROME...COMMODUS AMUSED HIMSELF IN THE PALACE. IT WAS A LIFESTYLE FUNDED BY CORRUPTION AND EXTORTION.

RESENTMENT FESTERED THROUGHOUT THE EMPIRE. IN 190 A.D., THE POOR RIOTED. THEY THOUGHT COMMODUS HAD DELIBERATELY HOARDED GRAIN TO INFLATE ITS PRICE AND INCREASE HIS PROFITS.

AFTER NINE YEARS AS A RECLUSE, THE EMPEROR WAS FORCED TO PLAY A MORE PUBLIC ROLE. THE RESULTS WERE DISASTROUS. HE DEMANDED HE BE MADE A LIVING GOD. HE TOOK THE TITLE "HERCULES" AND APPEARED IN A LION SKIN, WIELDING A CLUB, ON ALL PUBLIC OCCASIONS. WHEN A HUGE FIRE CONSUMED ROME IN 191 A.D., COMMODUS OUTDID HIMSELF. HE PROPOSED THE REST OF THE CITY BE DESTROYED AND AN ENTIRELY NEW ONE REBUILT IN HIS HONOR. BUT, FIRST, COMMODUS CHOSE ROME'S MOST FAMOUS LANDMARK FOR HIS ULTIMATE ACT OF INDULGENCE.

ON NOVEMBER 17, 192 A.D., PEOPLE FLOCKED TO THE COLISEUM. SOMETHING TRULY SHOCKING WAS ON THE PROGRAM. THAT AFTERNOON, THE SLAVES AND CRIMINALS WHO NORMALLY FOUGHT IN THE ARENA WERE JOINED BY SOMEONE VERY SPECIAL. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ROMAN HISTORY, AN EMPEROR WAS APPEARING IN PUBLIC AS A GLADIATOR.

COMMODUS MAY HAVE WON THAT DAY, BUT HIS VICTORY WAS SHORT-LIVED. COMMODUS WAS ASSASSINATED ON DECEMBER 31ST, ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, BECAUSE NEXT DAY, HE PLANNED TO BE INAUGURATED AS CONSUL DRESSED UP AS A GLADIATOR. AND THAT WAS SUCH AN AFFRONT. IT'S AS THOUGH THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT ATTENDED AN INAUGURATION DRESSED IN AN AMERICAN-FOOTBALL KIT. IT WAS A COMPLETE INSULT TO THE TOTAL POLITICAL WAY OF LIFE.

THE ASSASSINATION OF COMMODUS WASN'T THE ANSWER, FOR ROME'S PROBLEMS LAY DEEPER STILL, IN THE VERY FOUNDATION OF ROMAN SOCIETY. THE RICH LIVED LIVES OF GAUDY LUXURY. THEIR HOUSES WERE SPACIOUS AND ORNATE, THEIR GARDENS LUSH, THEIR LIFESTYLES LAVISH.

FOR MOST ROMANS, A LIFESTYLE OF LUXURY AND DECADENCE WAS A VERY DISTANT DREAM. THE GAP BETWEEN WEALTHY AND POOR WAS 10 TIMES WORSE THAN TODAY. 95% OF THE POPULATION STRUGGLED BENEATH THE POVERTY LINE. THEY LIVED IN DARK, FIRETRAP TENEMENTS, ENTIRE FAMILIES PACKED INTO A SINGLE ROOM. THE CHILD MORTALITY RATE WAS 50%. TYPHOID AND DIPHTHERIA WERE CONSTANT THREATS.

EQUALLY CLAUSTROPHOBIC WAS A WOMAN'S PLACE IN ROMAN SOCIETY. WOMEN WERE CONSIDERED BIOLOGICALLY AND MORALLY INFERIOR TO MEN. THEY COULDN'T VOTE, BUY PROPERTY, OR CHOOSE WHO THEY MARRIED. THEIR FATHERS AND HUSBANDS HAD LEGAL AND FINANCIAL CONTROL OVER THEM MOST OF THEIR LIVES.

ROME WAS BUILT ON A RIGID SOCIAL HIERARCHY. AT THE HEIGHT OF HER POWER, ONE IN EVERY THREE PEOPLE IN ITALY WAS A SLAVE. AND IT WAS THEIR SWEAT AND THEIR LABOR THAT GAVE ROMAN CITIES THEIR FABLED WEALTH AND SPLENDOR.

AT THE HEART OF ROMAN CULTURE LAY A TRAGIC FLAW -- A SOCIAL ORDER THAT TOLERATED EXCESS FOR THE FEW AND OPPRESSION FOR THE MANY.

THERE WAS ONE IDEAL THAT MADE EVERYONE PROUD TO BE ROMAN...AN IDEAL AS OLD AS ROME ITSELF -- A COMMITMENT TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY. ROMAN SOCIETY WAS ALWAYS ENORMOUSLY OPEN. THERE'S A WONDERFUL STORY ABOUT ROMULUS, WHO, WHEN HE GOES TO FOUND ROME, CALLS UPON PEOPLE TO COME AND LIVE IN THE CITY. AND THE PASSAGE SOUNDS JUST LIKE THE STATUE OF LIBERTY -- "EVERYONE, COME. LET ME TAKE YOUR OUTSIDERS AND YOUR POOR.” BY THE 3RD CENTURY A.D., ROME'S IMMIGRANT SPIRIT APPLIED TO EVERYONE, EVEN EMPERORS.

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS SUCCEEDED COMMODUS AS EMPEROR IN 193 A.D. HE WAS AFRICAN, A NATIVE OF LEPCIS MAGNA IN MODERN-DAY LIBYA. DURING HIS 18-YEAR RULE, HE ADORNED HIS HOMETOWN WITH LAVISH BUILDINGS......AND BROUGHT SOME OF ITS MAGIC BACK TO ROME. SEVERUS AND HIS WIFE, JULIA DOMNA, WERE BOTH DEEPLY SUPERSTITIOUS. HE WAS DEVOTED TO AN EGYPTIAN MYSTERY CULT. SHE WORSHIPED A SYRIAN SUN GOD.

ROMANS HAD NO PROBLEM WITH THE COUPLE'S EXOTIC BELIEFS. THE VAST ROMAN EMPIRE HAD A LONG HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE. THEY LIVED IN A PAGAN WORLD THAT WELCOMED VIRTUALLY EVERYONE'S GODS. ALL THAT WAS ASKED OF FOREIGN RELIGIONS WAS THAT THEY RESPECT THE CULT OF ROME BY MAKING ANNUAL SACRIFICES TO THE EMPEROR. IT WAS A POLICY INTENDED TO SECURE SOME CONTROL IN A WORLD OF EXTREME RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY. THERE WERE AS MANY CULTS IN ROME AS THERE WERE PROVINCES IN THE EMPIRE. BUT BY THE 3RD CENTURY A.D., RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY WAS LEADING TO CHAOS. ROMANS TURNED TO ONE CULT IN PARTICULAR......A CULT WHOSE MESSAGE WAS DESTINED TO CHANGE THE EMPIRE AND THE WORLD FOREVER.

CHRISTIANITY'S DRAMATIC RISE TO POWER IN THE ROMAN WORLD WOULD CHANGE EVERYTHING. A CULT BASED ON THE SUFFERING OF ONE MAN WAS SET TO CHALLENGE THE INTEGRITY OF AN ENTIRE EMPIRE. CHRISTIANITY'S MOST REVOLUTIONARY IDEAL WAS SPIRITUAL EQUALITY. IT WAS A DIRECT THREAT TO ROME'S BELIEF IN HIERARCHY AND SOCIAL DIVISION. THEY COULDN'T ABSORB CHRISTIANITY BECAUSE IT WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO SACRIFICE TO OTHER GODS. IN PARTICULAR, CHRISTIANITY INVOLVES THE REJECTION OF THE CULT OF THE EMPEROR. AND BECAUSE THE CULT OF THE EMPEROR IS VIRTUALLY THE ONLY WAY IN WHICH THE WHOLE EMPIRE CAN EXPRESS ITS UNITY, THIS IS VERY DISRUPTIVE.

A PROTEST MOVEMENT WAS QUICKLY GAINING MOMENTUM. ITS VERY POPULARITY POSED A FUNDAMENTAL THREAT TO THE ROMAN WAY OF LIFE. BY THE MIDDLE OF THE 3RD CENTURY A.D., ROME WAS CONSUMED BY DOUBT. AS CHAOS AND CONFUSION WRACKED THE EMPIRE, EVERYONE BEGAN QUESTIONING THE BENEFITS OF ROMAN RULE.

BETWEEN 235 AND 270 A.D., MORE THAN 30 ROMAN GENERALS PROCLAIMED THEMSELVES EMPEROR. CIVIL WAR BROKE OUT AS LEGION FOUGHT LEGION, EACH TRYING TO INSTALL ITS GENERAL AS EMPEROR. ANARCHY GREW. ROMANS YEARNED FOR ONE OF THE GREAT EMPERORS OF THE PAST TO TAKE CONTROL -- A JULIUS CAESAR, AN AUGUSTUS, A HADRIAN. ROMANS WONDERED HOW THEIR GREAT EMPIRE COULD HAVE FALLEN TO SUCH A SHAMEFUL STATE OF AFFAIRS. SOME BELIEVED IT WAS THE LONG-AWAITED FULFILLMENT OF THE SIBYLLINE ORACLES, A SERIES OF APOCALYPTIC PROPHESIES THAT HAD HAUNTED ROME FOR CENTURIES. BUT THERE WAS NOTHING MYSTICAL ABOUT THE CHAOS OF THE 3RD CENTURY. QUITE SIMPLY, THE EMPIRE HAD BECOME UNMANAGEABLE.

EMPERORS COULD NO LONGER COPE WITH THE MONSTER ROME HAD BECOME. POLITICAL POWER WAS CONCENTRATED IN TOO FEW HANDS. THE WEALTHY WERE FORGETTING THE OLD DEMOCRATIC IDEALS, BALANCING THE POWER OF RULERS WITH THE NEEDS OF ORDINARY CITIZENS. ROME HAD TURNED ITS BACK ON THE COMMON MAN. DESTITUTE FAMILIES FLOODED INTO THE CITY, SWELLING THE RANKS OF SWEATSHOP WORKERS AND THE URBAN POOR.

INTENT ON DISTRACTING THEMSELVES, MOST ROMANS DIDN'T NOTICE THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF THEIR EMPIRE SHREDDING ALL AROUND THEM. ROME'S SENSE OF COMMUNITY HAD DISAPPEARED. THE ELITE WERE INCREASINGLY ISOLATED FROM THE POOR. EDUCATED ROMANS WERE TURNING THEIR BACKS ON EVERYTHING TO DO WITH OLD ROME, NOT JUST THE POOR.

THE EAST -- ANCIENT, MYSTERIOUS, AND EXOTIC -- SEEMED MUCH MORE ENTICING. WEALTHY ROMANS HEADED OFF TO SEE THE SIGHTS OF EGYPT. THE WORLD'S FIRST TOURIST BOOM HAD BEGUN. ROMANS MARVELED AT THE WONDERS OF EGYPT, AND LIKE TOURISTS IN CENTURIES TO COME, SCRATCHED GRAFFITI TO RECORD THEIR VISITS.

EGYPT WAS A LAND OF MAGIC AND MYSTERY. IT HAD THE PYRAMIDS. IT HAD HIEROGLYPHS. IT HAD THE NILE. AND ROMANS -- THEY WENT TO EGYPT MUCH MORE OFTEN IN FANTASY, IN PICTURES, BY BRINGING THE WILD ANIMALS OF EGYPT FROM EGYPT INTO ROME -- HIPPOPOTAMUSES, CROCODILES. BUT SOME OF THEM WENT AS FAR AS THEY COULD, RIGHT TO THE BOUNDARIES OF ETHIOPIA.

AS TRAVELERS ABROAD MARVELED AT THE MYSTERIES OF EGYPT, ROMANS BACK HOME WERE HUNGRY FOR THEIR OWN TASTE OF THE MYSTERIOUS EAST. A LUXURY TRADE IN EXPENSIVE FOREIGN GOODS FLOURISHED. THERE IS THIS EXOTICA THAT THE RICH AND WEALTHY CAME TO EXPECT. PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST STARTLING EXAMPLES WOULD BE SPICES.

THEY CAME FROM THE FAR EAST, FROM THE ISLANDS OF INDONESIA. EVEN MORE THAN THAT, WE'VE GOT A GUIDE WRITTEN FOR SHIPPERS UP THE RED SEA ON HOW TO CROSS OVER, USING THE MONSOON, TO INDIA TO PICK UP GOODS. AND IT TELLS YOU WHAT YOU CAN GET IN THE YEMEN, IN BOMBAY, ON THE SOUTHERN TIP OF INDIA, WHERE THERE MAY VERY WELL HAVE BEEN A COLONY OF ROMAN CITIZENS. THE ROMAN DELIGHT IN FAR-FLUNG PLACES WAS NOT RECIPROCATED. AS ROME THRILLED TO THE EXOTIC EAST, THE EXOTIC EAST WAS STARTING TO HATE ROME'S GUTS. IN THE PROVINCES AND PERIPHERY OF EMPIRE, RESENTMENT FESTERED.

FROM THE BEGINNING, ROME HAD BUILT ITS EMPIRE BY CONQUEST AND FORCE OF ARMS. IN THE EARLY DAYS OF EMPIRE, THERE HAD BEEN REAL BENEFITS TO BEING DEFEATED BY ROME......CITIZENSHIP, CIVIL RIGHTS, TRADE, AND PROSPERITY. BUT BY THE 3RD CENTURY A.D., THOSE BENEFITS WERE EVAPORATING. CITIZENSHIP WAS GIVING WAY TO SLAVERY, PEACE AND PROSPERITY REPLACED BY SHAMELESS EXPLOITATION. ROME WAS SITTING ON A POWDER KEG OF POVERTY AND RESENTMENT.

Ancient Rome: The Fall of an Empire *video transcript-Day 2*

IN APRIL 248 A.D., THE EMPEROR PHILIP STAGED THE MILLENNIUM GAMES. ROME WAS 1,000 YEARS OLD AND CELEBRATING ITS BIRTHDAY IN THE ONLY WAY IT KNEW HOW...WITH A GRANDIOSE SPECTACLE OF RITUAL, RACES, AND BLOODLETTING. AS ROMANS CELEBRATED, BARBARIAN ARMIES HAMMERED THE EMPIRE'S FRONTIERS. REBELLIONS WERE BREAKING OUT IN THE PROVINCES. WITH THEIR WORLD COLLAPSING INTO CHAOS, THE ROMAN THIRST FOR MACABRE DISTRACTION GREW. THE DEATH TOLL FROM THE MILLENNIUM FESTIVAL WAS SPECTACULAR EVEN BY ROMAN STANDARDS.

NOISY CROWDS PARADED STATUES OF THE GODS THROUGH THE STREETS. PRIESTS HEAPED OFFERINGS IN FRONT OF THE TEMPLES, PRAYING FOR A RETURN OF ROME'S GOOD FORTUNE. NATURE ITSELF SEEMED TO BE CONSPIRING AGAINST THE ROMAN EMPIRE. CLIMATIC CHANGES IN CENTRAL ASIA WERE FREEZING THE HIGH PLATEAUS AND FORCING ITS NOMADIC PEOPLES TO MIGRATE. SHUT OUT OF THE CHINESE LOWLANDS, THEY HAD NO OPTION BUT TO MOVE WEST. AS THEY HEADED FOR EUROPE, THEY PUSHED ALL THE TRIBES IN THEIR PATH FURTHER WEST, AS WELL.

IN THE 3RD CENTURY, WAVE AFTER WAVE OF UPROOTED PEOPLES WERE PUSHED UP AGAINST ROME'S NORTHEASTERN FRONTIER -- GOTHS, SLAVS, VANDALS, AND MORE. IN 259 A.D., PERSIANS ATTACKED. RALLYING TO THE EMPIRE'S DEFENSE, THE EMPEROR VALERIAN MARCHED HIS LEGIONS HUNDREDS OF MILES TO CONFRONT THEM. WEAKENED BY ILLNESS AND EXHAUSTION, THEY WERE MASSACRED AND THE EMPEROR CAPTURED. EAGER TO HUMILIATE THE EMPEROR TO THE MAXIMUM, THE PERSIAN KING USED VALERIAN AS A STEPPING STOOL TO MOUNT HIS HORSE. ROME'S HUMILIATION WAS COMPLETE.

"DEAREST MOTHER, MY GREETINGS. I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I FINALLY ARRIVED SAFE AND SOUND IN ALEXANDRIA AFTER FOUR DAYS' TRAVEL. I MISS YOU ALL ALREADY. TELL IO THAT IF HE WANTS TO JOIN THE ARMY, HE SHOULD COME HERE. EVERYBODY SEEMS TO BE JOINING THE ARMY."

AS ISIS WROTE TO HER MOTHER FROM EGYPT, THE DISASTER OF VALERIAN'S DEFEAT HAD SPARKED PANIC THROUGHOUT THE EMPIRE. THERE WAS A FURIOUS RECRUITMENT DRIVE. BY THE YEAR 300, THERE WERE ALMOST HALF A MILLION ROMAN SOLDIERS, AND THE LEGIONS WERE STILL GROWING. THE ONLY WAY TO MAINTAIN THIS GIGANTIC MILITARY MACHINE WAS TAXATION.

TAXES ROSE, AND INFLATION SPIRALED. ROMAN CURRENCY, THE DENARIUS, WAS PROGRESSIVELY DEVALUED. ONCE AGAIN, ORDINARY ROMANS BORE THE BRUNT.

BESET BY ENEMIES WITHOUT AND TURMOIL WITHIN, THE EMPIRE TRIED DESPERATELY TO TIGHTEN ITS GRIP. ALONG WITH THE ARMY, THE WHOLE APPARATUS OF IMPERIAL POWER BEGAN TO SWELL. BUREAUCRACIES MULTIPLIED. THE PEOPLE WHO OVERSAW THE POSTAL SYSTEM, THE SPECULATORES, HAD BECOME THE WORLD'S FIRST FULL-FLEDGED INTELLIGENCE OPERATION. SPIES WERE EVERYWHERE, REPORTING ANY SIGNS OF REBELLION IN THE PROVINCES. EMPERORS WERE OBSESSED WITH MAINTAINING CONTROL. ROME WAS MOVING SLOWLY BUT SURELY TOWARDS THE TOTALITARIAN REGIMES THAT WOULD PRESIDE OVER ITS FINAL COLLAPSE.

IN 285 A.D., REALIZING THE EMPIRE WAS BECOMING BLOATED AND TOP-HEAVY, THE EMPEROR DIOCLETIAN EMBARKED ON REFORMS TO STREAMLINE IT. HE SPLIT THE IMPERIAL BUREAUCRACIES INTO TWO -- TWO LINKED EMPIRES, TWO EMPERORS, AND TWO ARMIES. HE FROZE PRICES, PUTTING THE BRAKES ON RUNAWAY INFLATION, AND BANNED THE SUBVERSIVE CULT CALLED CHRISTIANITY.

IN THE SHORT TERM, DIOCLETIAN'S REFORMS WERE ASTONISHINGLY SUCCESSFUL. ROMANS BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF AS PEACE AND ORDER ONCE AGAIN REIGNED IN THE EMPIRE. CERTAIN THE ROMAN WORLD WAS BACK ON TRACK, DIOCLETIAN DID SOMETHING NO ROMAN EMPEROR HAD EVER DONE. HE RETIRED AND LIVED QUIETLY TO BE AN OLD MAN.

BUT THE PEACE DIDN'T LAST LONG. BY THE 4TH CENTURY, NO AMOUNT OF BUREAUCRATIC RESTRUCTURING COULD COPE WITH THE CLASS CONFLICTS AND THE POLITICAL INFIGHTING TEARING THE EMPIRE APART. IF ROME WAS TO SURVIVE, IT NEEDED MORE THAN A SANE ADMINISTRATOR LIKE DIOCLETIAN. IT NEEDED A FEROCIOUS AND ALL-POWERFUL RULER. IT WAS ABOUT TO GET ONE.

ON OCTOBER 26, 312 A.D., RIVAL ROMAN ARMIES MASSED OUTSIDE THE CITY, WAITING TO DO BATTLE. AT THE HEAD OF ONE WAS A YOUNG COMMANDER CALLED CONSTANTINE. HE KNEW THE NEXT DAY, A RIVER OF ROMAN BLOOD WOULD FLOW. HE ALSO KNEW THAT IF HE LOST, IT WAS ALL OVER -- HIS CLAIM TO THE EMPIRE, CERTAINLY, AND PROBABLY HIS LIFE. CONSTANTINE LOOKED UP INTO THE SKY. HE SAW A CROSS OF LIGHT THAT SEEMED TO BURN ITSELF INTO THE HEAVENS, AND ABOVE IT, THE WORDS "IN HOC SIGNO VINCES" -- "BY THIS SIGN, YOU WILL CONQUER." HE HAD CROSSES PAINTED ON THE SHIELDS OF HIS TROOPS. THE NEXT DAY, AT THE BATTLE OF THE MILVIAN BRIDGE, HE SMASHED THE ARMIES OF HIS RIVAL, MAXENTIUS.

NO SOONER WAS CONSTANTINE INSTALLED AS EMPEROR THAN HE REPEALED MANY OF DIOCLETIAN'S REFORMS, INCLUDING HIS BAN ON CHRISTIANITY. BUT HE WENT EVEN FURTHER, DECLARING HIMSELF A CHRISTIAN. ROMANS WERE STUNNED. MOST THOUGHT CHRISTIANITY WAS JUST ANOTHER WEIRD EASTERN SECT. SUDDENLY, THEIR NEW EMPEROR HAD DECLARED HIMSELF A CULT MEMBER. THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD ANOTHER LUNATIC ON THEIR HANDS.

THEY DIDN'T. CONSTANTINE CLEVERLY SAW HOW CHRISTIANITY COULD UNIFY AN EMPIRE COMING APART AT THE SEAMS. UNLIKE ROME'S PAGAN RELIGION, IT PREACHED DISCIPLINE, OBEDIENCE, AND ONLY ONE GOD. UNDER CONSTANTINE, ROMAN UNITY WAS REBORN, BUT THERE WASN'T MUCH THAT WAS ROMAN ABOUT IT.

CONSTANTINE GREW UP IN THE BALKANS IN EASTERN EUROPE IN THE IMPERIAL CITY OF TRIER, GERMANY. HE HAD NO LIKING FOR ROME AND RECOGNIZED IT HAD BECOME STRATEGICALLY IRRELEVANT. ALL THE IMPORTANT CONFLICTS IN THE EMPIRE WERE NOW ALONG THE FRONTIERS TO THE EAST AND NORTH. SO HE MOVED THE EMPIRE'S CAPITAL TO THE ANCIENT CITY OF BYZANTIUM AND RENAMED IT AFTER HIMSELF, CONSTANTINOPLE.

THE FOUNDATION OF CONSTANTINOPLE IS, I THINK, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. IT'S THE FOUNDATION OF NEW ROME. TO USE CONSTANTINE'S NAME FOR THE CITY. IT MARKS A POLITICAL, A CULTURAL, AND AN ECONOMIC SHIFT FROM ITALY TO THE BALKANS. THE ROMAN EMPIRE NOW WILL BE CENTERED NOT IN THE WEST, BUT IN THE EAST.

IN THIS NEW CHRISTIAN ROME, SUFFERING WAS THE MARK OF HOLINESS. EDUCATED ROMANS GAVE UP COMFORTABLE LIVES TO GO AND LIVE IN THE DESERT. DESPITE THE RIGORS OF CHRISTIANITY, AS THE 4TH CENTURY PROGRESSED, ROMANS FLOCKED TO IT. WOMEN, LONG OPPRESSED BY PATRIARCHAL ROME, FOUND RESPECT AND RECOGNITION. TO EVERYBODY -- MEN AND WOMEN, RICH AND POOR, ROMAN AND NON-ROMAN -- CHRISTIANITY OFFERED A REFUGE FROM THE CHRONIC UNCERTAINTIES OF THE ERA.

THERE'S NO DOUBT IN MY MIND THAT CHRISTIANITY SAVED THE ROMAN EMPIRE. AT THE END OF THE 3RD CENTURY IT GAVE IT A NEW FOCUS FOR UNITY, BOTH RELIGIOUSLY AND IDEOLOGICALLY. BUT CHRISTIANITY IS THE GLUE THAT STICKS THE VARIOUS PARTS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE TOGETHER IN THE CENTURIES AFTER CONSTANTINE.

CHRISTIANITY COULD HOLD THE EMPIRE TOGETHER FOR A WHILE...BUT NOT FOREVER. IN THE YEAR 378 A.D., AT ADRIANOPLE IN MODERN TURKEY, THE EMPEROR VALENS LED HIS ARMY INTO BATTLE AGAINST GOTHS FROM ROMANIA. IT WAS TIME TO TEACH THE BARBARIANS A LESSON AND MAKE THEM SUBMIT TO THE MIGHT OF ROME. LIKE VALERIAN BEFORE HIM, VALENS MARCHED INTO DISASTER. HIS LEGIONS WERE SURROUNDED. THE FAMOUS ROMAN DISCIPLINE GAVE WAY. HE AND HIS ARMY WERE MASSACRED. IT WAS ROME THAT HAD LEARNED ITS LESSON, AND IT WAS A BITTER ONE. ROME COULD NO LONGER RULE BY MILITARY MIGHT ALONE. SHE WOULD HAVE TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE BARBARIANS.

THE TRUTH WAS, THERE WERE ALREADY AS MANY GERMANIC TRIBESPEOPLE WITHIN THE RANKS OF THE ROMAN LEGIONS AS OPPOSING THEM, BUT NOW THEY WANTED MORE. IF THEY WERE GOOD ENOUGH TO FIGHT ROME'S WARS, THEY DESERVED TO SHARE ITS POWER. BUT ROMANS DIDN'T SHARE POWER.

FORCED TO ACCOMMODATE THE BARBARIANS, ROMANS BEGAN TO FEEL THREATENED. INTOLERANCE AND RESENTMENT GREW.

“THE GOTHS ARE PERFIDIOUS. THE ALANI, RAPACIOUS LECHERS. THE SAXONS, FRANKS, AND THE URALIANS ARE WANTONLY CRUEL. AND THE GERMANS ARE ALCOHOLICS TO A MAN.” -- SALVIAN.

SPECIAL SCORN WAS RESERVED FOR THE HUNS, THE NOMADS FROM CENTRAL ASIA, WHO HAD PUSHED THE OTHER BARBARIANS WESTWARD IN THE FIRST PLACE. THEY, TOO, NOW APPEARED ON THE FRONTIERS OF EMPIRE. THESE ATTITUDES DIDN'T BODE WELL FOR THE FUTURE OF INTERRACIAL HARMONY IN THE EMPIRE.

FOR CENTURIES, BARBARIANS HAD BEEN HUMILIATED AND ENSLAVED. THEY WERE TIRED OF IT. WHEN ALARIC, LEADER OF THE GOTHS, SETTLED HIS PEOPLE INSIDE THE NORTHERN FRONTIER, HE WANTED A DIGNIFIED COEXISTENCE WITH ROME. ALARIC SPOKE LATIN FLUENTLY, WAS WELL-READ, AND NOT ABOUT TO BE DISMISSED BY POMPOUS ROMANS.

WE TEND TO THINK OF THE BARBARIANS AS A COLLECTION OF CONAN THE BARBARIAN AND HIS BUDDIES COMING ACROSS THE FRONTIER, WAVING THEIR DOUBLE-HANDED AXES. THIS IS QUITE FAR FROM THE TRUTH. BY THE TIME THAT THE BARBARIANS COME ACROSS THE FRONTIERS, THEY'RE BEGINNING TO BE ROMANIZED.

ALARIC, WHO SACKED ROME IN 410, DID SO BECAUSE HE WAS TURNED DOWN FOR A JOB AS A ROMAN GENERAL. WHAT THESE PEOPLE WANTED, FIRST AND FOREMOST, WAS A PLACE WITHIN THE EMPIRE FOR THEMSELVES. AND WHEN THEY DIDN'T GET IT, THEY TURNED ON THE GOVERNMENT OF THE EMPERORS.

BUT ROME HAD STILL NOT LEARNED ITS LESSON. INSTEAD OF BUILDING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE GOTHS, LOCAL GOVERNORS SYSTEMATICALLY INSULTED, STARVED, AND OVERTAXED THEM. ALARIC SENT LETTERS OF PROTEST TO THE EMPEROR. THEY WERE IGNORED.

WHEN ALARIC AND HIS PEOPLE FINALLY DESCENDED ON ROME IN 410 A.D., IT WAS NOT TO RAPE AND PILLAGE, BUT TO DRIVE HOME HIS PEOPLE'S PROTESTS AND DEMAND THE DECENT TREATMENT THEY'D BEEN PROMISED. TO HIS SURPRISE, AS HIS ARMIES SWEPT THROUGH THE HEART OF THE EMPIRE, THERE WAS HARDLY A ROMAN SOLDIER IN SIGHT. THE TRUTH WAS, MANY ROMANS WERE NO LONGER PREPARED TO FIGHT THE BARBARIANS. SOME EVEN WELCOMED THEM.

AND SO IN THE YEAR 410, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ALMOST 1,000 YEARS, ROMANS AWOKE TO FIND AN ENEMY ARMY CAMPED JUST OUTSIDE THE CITY. THEY COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. ALARIC'S DEMANDS WERE REASONABLE. ALL HE WANTED FOR HIS PEOPLE WAS PART OF THE DANUBE RIVER VALLEY IN WHAT IS NOW AUSTRIA. ROME REFUSED.

FURIOUS WITH ROME'S ARROGANCE, ALARIC LAID SIEGE TO THE CITY. IN ADDITION, HE NOW DEMANDED 5,000 POUNDS OF GOLD, 3,000 POUNDS OF SILVER, 4,000 SILK TUNICS, 3,000 SCARLET-DYED SKINS, AND 3,000 POUNDS OF PEPPER. "WILL YOU LEAVE US WITH NOTHING?" ASKED THE ROMAN ENVOYS. ALARIC REPLIED, "IF YOU GIVE US WHAT WE WANT, YOU CAN KEEP YOUR LIVES."

ROME HELD BACK, PROCRASTINATED, AND IN THE END, ALARIC LOST PATIENCE. BARBARIAN SLAVES, DELIGHTED BY THE PROSPECT OF ROME'S RUIN, THREW OPEN THE CITY GATES. THE GOTHS POURED IN AND SACKED THE CITY. PROUD ROME WAS FINALLY BROUGHT TO HER KNEES.

ALTHOUGH THE CITY OF ROME WAS NO LONGER THE CENTER OF THE EMPIRE, FOR ROMANS EVERYWHERE, SEEING IT SACKED WAS AN OMEN OF CATASTROPHE. ROMANS WERE NOW SURE THE APOCALYPSE WAS AT HAND. STORIES CIRCULATED THAT THE MOUTHS OF VOLCANOES WERE GETTING BIGGER, READY FOR THE SOULS OF ALL THE SINNERS THEY'D HAVE TO RECEIVE.

ROME WAS NOW DIVIDED IN HALF. THE EASTERN EMPIRE REMAINED STRONG, BUT AS BARBARIANS OVERRAN THE WEST, ROMANS EVERYWHERE WERE TERRIFIED THE END WAS AT HAND. BUT APOCALYPTIC VISIONS TURNED OUT TO BE UNTRUE.

NOT ONLY DID THE WORLD NOT END, THE BARBARIANS DIDN'T DO MUCH RAPING AND PLUNDERING, EITHER. GOTHS, VISIGOTHS, VANDALS, AND OTHER GERMAN TRIBES STREAMED OUT OF CENTRAL EUROPE AND SPREAD THEMSELVES THROUGHOUT THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN. TO EVERYBODY'S SURPRISE, THEY TRIED TO LIVE PEACEFULLY ALONGSIDE THE ROMANS.

ALARIC'S SACK OF ROME IN 410 A.D. WAS NOT THE END. THE EASTERN EMPIRE WAS STILL STRONG. FROM ITS WEALTHY CITIES IN TURKEY AND THE MIDDLE EAST, IT VIEWED THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE WEST WITH GROWING DETACHMENT. IT WOULD SLOWLY BECOME THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE BUT GO ON CALLING ITSELF ROMAN UNTIL THE MIDDLE AGES. THE WESTERN EMPIRE STAGGERED ON FOR ANOTHER 60 YEARS.

THERE WERE STILL EMPERORS IN ROME, BUT THEIR CONTROL WAS EVAPORATING AS THE POWER OF THE CENTRAL BUREAUCRACY CRUMBLED. THE WESTERN EMPIRE NOW DID NOTHING FOR THE PROVINCES EXCEPT TAX THEM. LOCAL ROMAN NOBLES SOON FELT THEY WERE BETTER OFF WITHOUT IT. THEY CAME TO SEE THEMSELVES AS FREE AGENTS, FORTIFYING THEIR ESTATES, MAKING THEIR OWN DEALS WITH THE BARBARIANS, EVEN INTERMARRYING WITH THEM.

THIS WAS THE BIRTH OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE, AN ANARCHIC WORLD WHERE LOCAL BARONS OWED ALLEGIANCE TO FEW AND BUILT THEIR OWN FIEFDOMS. WITH ROME'S PASSING, THE WEST'S LONG LOVE AFFAIR WITH ITS MEMORY BEGAN.

PARADOXICALLY, IT WAS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH THAT FAITHFULLY KEPT THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF ITS FORMER PERSECUTOR ALIVE.

SIMPLY WALK INTO ANY CHURCH. IN ITS ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN, YOU HAVE JUST WALKED INTO A ROMAN IMPERIAL PALACE. SIT DOWN IN THAT CHURCH, AND PERHAPS LISTEN TO THE CHURCH SERVICE, LISTEN TO THE LITURGY, LISTEN TO THE HYMNS. YOU ARE LISTENING TO A ROMAN IMPERIAL COURT CEREMONIAL. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BUILDINGS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, ITS LITURGY, ITS CHOIRS, ITS PRIESTS, ITS BISHOPS ARE TAKEN OR IMITATIVE OF ROMAN IMPERIAL COURT CEREMONIAL.

IN THE CENTURIES THAT FOLLOWED HER FALL, ROME WAS REBORN AGAIN AND AGAIN. THE GUIDING IDEA OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE WAS THE REBIRTH OF ROME AND ITS CLASSICAL IDEALS. WHEN THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF THE UNITED STATES SOUGHT A MODEL FOR THEIR NEW COUNTRY, IT WAS TO ROME THEY TURNED. RAISED ON THE CLASSICS, THEY POURED ROME'S REPUBLICAN IDEALS INTO THE CONSTITUTION.

THE EARLY ROMAN REPUBLIC INSPIRED DEMOCRACIES AND HIGH IDEALS DOWN TO THE PRESENT DAY. BUT THE EMPIRE IT BECAME LEFT A VERY DIFFERENT LEGACY. WHEN THE FRENCH EMPEROR NAPOLEON CLAIMED TO HAVE ROMAN BLOOD COURSING THROUGH HIS VEINS, IT WASN'T THE REPUBLIC, BUT THE EMPIRE AND ITS ALL-POWERFUL RULERS HE WAS THINKING OF. THE GREAT DANGER IS THAT WE BELIEVE THAT THE ROMAN EMPIRE WAS A GOOD THING. THAT IS A 19TH-CENTURY VIEW.

IT'S THE REASON WHY, IN BRITAIN, PEOPLE LEARNT THE CLASSICS. THEY LEARNT THE CLASSICS AND THEY READ THEIR LIVY IN ORDER TO KNOW HOW TO GOVERN INDIA. BECAUSE BRITAIN SAW HERSELF AS DOING EXACTLY WHAT THE ROMANS HAD DONE. WE HAVE NOT YET PROPERLY WRITTEN THE POST-IMPERIALIST HISTORY OF ROME THAT WILL COME AND REALIZE THAT THIS WHOLE THING, GREAT THOUGH IT WAS, HAS ITS NEGATIVE SIDE. IT HAS ITS VIOLENCE. IT HAS ITS DARK SIDE.

THAT DARK SIDE OF ROME WAS RUTHLESSLY EXPLOITED BY THE FASCIST DICTATOR MUSSOLINI, WHO OPENLY STYLED HIS REGIME AS A NEW ROMAN EMPIRE AND HIMSELF A NEW EMPEROR AUGUSTUS.

FOR BOTH GOOD AND BAD, THE WHOLE WESTERN WORLD HAS GROWN UP IN ROME'S TOWERING SHADOW......NURTURED ON ITS STORIES, IMITATING ITS HEROES, ALWAYS TRYING TO LEARN THE LESSONS OF ITS REPUBLIC, ITS EMPIRE, AND ITS FALL.