

The causes of the economic recession of later roman empire

[History](#), [Empires](#)



The decline and fall of Roman Empire was an attractive topic. This paper will focus on the economic field. There will be three parts in this paper to analyze the reason of the economic recession happened in later Roman Empire. After the back background introduction, the first part will focus on how the Empire's military affected the economy. The legions of Empire used to be the reason for the prosperity of the Empire but in the later period they couldn't protect the Empire any more. The second part will focus on how the political chaos affected the economy.

The turbulence in administration system brought the disorder to the Empire and interrupt increase of economy. In the third part, to analysis what kinds of changes happened in the economic field is the purpose. The people lived in Roman Empire, including the Emperor, officers and citizens, didn't know the importance of industry and commerce. To sum up, the economic recession was resulted by the cause from these three fields. Few topics are more attractive than the decline and fall of Roman Empire, one of the world's earliest superpowers.

Roman grew from a small settlement of farmers into an Empire which nearly ruled whole west part of the then known world. The Roman Empire stretched from Scotland to Egypt and lasted a considerable long time. Some influence left by Roman still affects the world. Italian, Spanish and French are romance languages and much of the world's law is derived from imperial Rome. However, as the splendid of Rome's Rise, the fall of Rome is also very mysterious and rouses endless debate. It took several centuries rather than a few years.

The empire experienced a series of disasters during the third century. The civil wars, foreign invasions, plagues and other calamities it suffered for more than half a century after 235AD would have been enough to cause the terminal disintegration of most empires(Rodgers, 2008, p. 222). It's great fortune that the empire had several powerful soldier-emperors, such as Aurelian, Constantine I and Valentinian I. The empire survived, however, in a different form and at a price that grew steadily more crushing, politically, financially and militarily (Rodgers, 2008, p. 222).

The economic developments of the later Roman period provide a clue to the decline and fall of Roman Empire (Brown, 1967). Rather than analysis all the answers for what lead the fall of Roman Empire, this paper will focus on the recession in economic filed. The economic recession was caused by several relative issues including changes happened in military, politic and economical field. The influence of military decay on economy In the first part of my paper, I want to discuss what kind of role the military power of the Empire play in the Economic recession in later Empire period.

In the words of Rodgers, " Rome didn't acquire or keep its empire by noble ideals or fine words" because " it was, first and last, a nation of soldiers. " (2008, p. 10)The biggest cost of Roman Empire is the soldier's pay and provisions. Roman legions used to be invincible and be regarded as the most powerful military power. However, it didn't take no price. As Roman troops were the best army, they also were the most expensive military force in ancient world. Before I analysis the negative influence of the military force, I

must list the positive effects of legions, because the Roman Empire was gained by swords not others.

The war of conquest brought slave, silver and gold to the center of the Empire, Rome. The slave provided the cheap labor which was needed by thousands farms and plantations in Italy. The large amount of precious metal stimulates the desire of the nobles and rich men to purchase amusement and entertainment. The triumphs of the legions made Rome became the trade center of the Mediterranean. As it grew, Rome city sucked in ever more products from across the globe, establishing new patterns of supply and demand. (Rodgers, 2008, p. 460)

Rodgers said that " the biggest trade was the wheat from Egypt and Africa; Olive oil, silver and gold came from Spain, Wine, honey and marble were also very important to Rome. " (2008, p. 460) All the wealth was earned by the soldier's sword. As the prosperity was brought by the army, the gradual decline was caused by army of the Empire being defeated. After a series of chaos in the third century, it's seemed the terminal disintegration had already come. However, it was momentary recovery of consciousness just before death. The army of Rome was defeated by barbarians again and again. The prosperity of the Empire was can be reached by different kinds of barbarians.

Gray states that " Military defenses along the Rhine collapsed, allowing other Germanic peoples to ransack Gaul before occupying large portions of Spain" (2007). The invasion and pillage from the barbarians created perpetual harm to the Empire's economy. The Goths, Huns and Franks took incredible wealth from Roman Empire. In the first siege of Rome on 408 A. D. , Alaric, the King

of Visigoths, got a huge bribe of 5, 000lb of gold, 30, 000lb of silver and 3, 000lb of pepper. (Rodgers, 2008, p. 247) Because of loss such immense wealth, the Empire never recovered till her death. The influence of Political turbulence on economy

In second part of this paper, how the political turbulence affected the economy is what will be analysis. The political life is a very significant part of Rome. The From the Republic to the Empire, the senate was always very important to the country. The senate and the emperors' struggle and compromise last nearly five hundred years. However, the most powerful political force was from outside of political system, the legions. Throughout the history of the Roman Empire, the army played a crucial role (Potter, 2006). In Rome, the person controls the army who can make the final decision.

The Political turbulence including the rebellion, murder, scrambling and civil wars was another very important factor led the economic recession. The first bad influence was the Political turbulence is the endless civil wars and its direct damage to the Economy. Realizing that a single emperor would struggle to defend the empire against so many external threats (Matyszak, 2008, p. 255), Diocletian, who halted the rapid turnover of emperors, established the Tetrarchy. This political system, only giving the empire a period of stability for 20 years, ultimately became the root of internal disorder in Roman Empire.

After every time the Empire was unified, there must be a long time lasted civil war followed. The civil wars' harm to the economy is obvious, because

there was no really winner in a war in one nation. Rodgers noted that " by 395AD, by another round of civil wars, the empire was divided between two sons of Theodosius"(Rodgers, 2008, p. 244) The Empire never be unified again. Since only half of Empire didn't have enough power to defend Rome from the invasion of barbarians, the last hope of economic recovery was disappeared.

Another bad influence from the Political turbulence was the indirect damage to the order and law, no matter where the rebellion from, the Praetorian Guard or the provincial governor. Actually the damage of the rebellion was not the people died in the war, this kind of lose would be recover very soon, the really damage was it was impossible to establish an organized government and really meaning order. Every emperor or usurper, the first thing they will do after they got the throne was to collect enough money, grain and equipment for their troops.

The reason is, in the civil war, the tetrarch who controls more powerful troops will win the war with other tetrarch. There is no one wanted to follow the legal way to get those things for slowness. Compulsive conscript and tax were unaffordable for the people live in later Empire were expected. According to the book " Roman Empire"(Rodgers), " Septimius Severus had increased Rome's military strength to 400, 000 men and raised the army's pay by 50 percent- perhaps an overdue raise, but Caracalla raised their pay again by another 50 percent. "(Rodgers, 2008, p. 23) Such high salary of army can't be collected by original tax rate. We can assume the economic activities went well was impossible. Changes of the economic environment In

the third part, the paper will focus on what happened in economic field led the Economic recession in later Empire period. The Roman's economic environment was keeping change from Republic to Empire period. At the beginning, the senate and the knight used to be two privileges in Roman Empire. They are landlords and businessman. The high social class controlled the main economy of the republic.

Their wealth was gained by their political power and their richness would also enhance their social status. But the capitalist class and the proletariat came up to alliance and fought the privileges. Caesar and Augustus lead those two classes to finish this enduring proceeding in which the senate and knight's privilege was broken. After the battle happened in Philippi, the privileges, the senate and knights, exhausted by decades of turmoil, wearily resigned themselves to the loss of their republic and the Senate lost the meaning becoming the subordinates of emperor.

But in third century, the Roman's economic environment changed into an unhealthy situation. That caused the third century crisis and the chaos aggravated the economic recession. The contradiction between the capitalist class and the proletariat was too sharp to resolve in peaceful way. (Rostovtzeff, 1957, p. 6) The first obvious change in economic field is the inflation and the incredible rise of the price of life necessary happened in same time. The currency devaluation was a long time proceeding. The percentage of gold or silver in a coin kept going down and down.

The denarius was the standard coin of Roman Empire. Most commercial transactions were conducted in the denarius. However, " in Marcus's reign

[406–407] the silver content of the denarius sank to 75 percent, in Severus's [420–465] to 50 percent (Jones, 1953). What happened in the same time was the dramatic rise of price. For example, the price of wheat in Egypt was very steady at seven to eight Drachmas per artaba (one kind of unit in Roman Empire period) in second century.

However, the price of one artaba wheat increased to one hundred twenty thousand Drachmas in third century. Rostovtzeff, 1957, p. 649) To feed the family then became very hard for the workers. The second obvious change was the recession happened in whole economy. The commercial and industry recession happened first. The reason of this phenomenon was the people preferred to invest the money earned by business into land. As agriculture was still the main income, most people believe the business just an assistant method to improve the income of land (Rostovtzeff, 1957, p. 651). The Roman economy was based on agriculture (Potter, 2006).

But natural disasters destroyed the basic pillar of agriculture. " Alternate periods of rain and drought, coupled with disease, had reduced the population of the western empire" (Fall of Roman Empire, 2005). In third century, the invasion of barbarians enhanced the tendency. Research shows that " the damage the provinces far beyond the traditional frontier zones proved hard to repair" (Rodgers, 2008, p. 460). In addition, the advanced and prosperous boundary provinces were trampled and there were too many risks for run business in those provinces. Conclusion

According to Edward Gibbon, author of The Decline and fall of the Roman Empire, he summarized the causes of Rome's fall as the " triumph of

barbarism and religion". That means while the barbarians invaded the empire from outside, Christianity undermined it from inside by encourage men to neglect their duties as soldiers to become monks or priests. But regarding some simple reasons as the causes of Rome's fall is obviously kind of haste. As the rise of Rome is hard to explain, the fall of Rome is not an isolated event, led by several relative factors when they happened at same time.

The decline of the Roman Empire's Economy was not only caused by economic reasons but only also affected by the decay of military and politic. The decrease of the military power resulted the Empire couldn't defend herself from the plunder of barbarians; the Political turbulence led the chaos on administration and disorder of society; the inflation and the indolent economic concept of Roman enhance the tendency of economic recession. To sum up, in the later Empire period, no matter what the tetrarchs and their heirs attempted, the recession was irreparable and irreversible. The fate of the Roman Empire was written.