

HUI216

Italian Civilization

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Marble Portrait of Agrippina (ca. 50 CE, Museo Nazionale, Naples)



Aureus of Agrippina and Nero, minted in Lyon (France) (ca. 54 CE)_{HUI216}

7.1 The life of Nero: chronology of the main events

- 49 Agrippina marries Emperor Claudius, who adopts Nero (Agrippina's son from a previous marriage)
- 53 Nero marries his stepsister Octavia
- 54 Claudius dies (poison?)
- Nero becomes Emperor, before his 17th birthday
 - Seneca and Burrus are his tutors: the first a great philosopher, originally from Spain, the second a former military officer
- 55 Britannicus (Claudius's son) dies (poison?)

7.1 The murder of Agrippina and the life of Nero: chronology of the main events

- 59-62 Agrippina is killed, Burrus dies, Seneca retires
 - Nero is on his own, free to do whatever he likes
- 64 The Great Fire destroys more than half of Rome
 - Nero builds his new palace on prime land that was expropriated after the fire
- 68 Nero kills himself before he is captured by the soldiers of an opposing faction
- 68-69: the year of the 4 Emperors
 - in a short period, these 4 Emperors succeed one another by defeating the previous Emperor in battle, or by gaining more support in the army
 - the events of this year shows the weakness resulting from the lack of a clear mechanism of succession in the Roman Empire

7.2 Tacitus: how Roman Emperors are chosen

- At noon on the 13th of October, the gates of the palace were suddenly thrown open, and Nero, accompanied by Burrus, went forth to the cohort which was on guard
- There, at the suggestion of the commanding officer, he was hailed with joyful shouts, and set on a litter
- Some, it is said, hesitated, and looked around and asked where Britannicus was; then, when there was no one to lead a resistance, they yielded to what was offered them.

7.2 How Nero becomes Emperor at the age of 17

- Nero is hailed Emperor by a small military unit, that was guarding the palace
- A gift is promised to the soldiers in Rome, to encourage them to welcome and support the new Emperor
- The Senate follows "the voice of the soldiers"
- "...no hesitation in the provinces"
- "Divine honors" are decreed to Claudius
- Claudius's will is not "publicly read," for fear that it might mention his son Britannicus, legitimate heir to the throne (even though younger than Nero himself)

7.2 The mechanism of accession to the throne

- The mechanism of accession to the throne was not clearly regulated
- The practice of Kings in other regions dictated that the firstborn son would succeed his father, but in Rome that did not always happen, not even during the monarchy (753-509 BCE)
- This lack of fixed rules allowed Nero and his mother to act quickly and win the throne
 - Nero, after all, was Claudius' stepson, and although he was barely 16 (it all happened before his 17th birthday), he was a few years older than Britannicus
 - This course of events makes Claudius' death suspicious

7.3 The murder of Agrippina

- A "long meditated crime" motivated by
 - Power and ambition
 - Nero rightly suspects that his mother wants a share of the power that she has procured for her son
 - It is not by chance that on the face of Roman coins produced during the first years of his empire, one can see not just the face of the Emperor Nero, as customary, but also the profile of his mother
 - The passion for Poppaea
 - Nero wants to be free to divorce Octavia and marry his lover
- Tacitus's narration is framed like a tragedy, rather than like an accurate and objective historical narration

7.3 The murder of Agrippina

- Tacitus, a conservative Republican historian, was biased, and his narration betrays his political agenda, in favor of a more powerful Senate, to keep Emperors from abusing their position, and to revert to even a limited form of democracy
- Tacitus and other historians, like Suetonius, are largely responsible for the creation of the stereotypical image of the decadent Roman empire that is still so popular
 - The real issue is not even whether Nero or Caligula or Claudius were not as immoral or violent as the senatorial historians described them, but how much their personality quirks really affected Empire, which did not come to an end for another 400 years...

7.3 Elements of a literary tragedy inside the narration of the murder of Agrippina

- The sins and the impious behavior of the main characters justify and prepare the story's developments
 - greed, murder, incest, perversion, simulation and hypocrisy
- Growing anxiety results from the various successful crimes, rather than elation and tranquility (cf. *Macbeth*)
- The theme of the fight of good vs. evil
 - Seneca and some of the senators fight on the side of democracy, justice and honesty against Agrippina, Nero and their conniving, criminal accomplices

7.3 Elements of a literary tragedy inside the narration of the murder of Agrippina

- Another typical literary device employed in this episode is the historian's insistence on the description of the frame of mind of the main characters
- Traditional historians usually would not speculate on the thoughts and feelings of historical figures at the time of dramatic events
- Unless they could rely on the report of an eyewitness, they would either be silent or they would convey those feelings and thoughts by embellishing and re-creating public speeches given by those historical figures, under the pretense that eyewitness existed who could confirm what they wrote

7.4 Causes of the fall of the Roman empire

- The fall of the Roman empire cannot be explained citing a few specific events or a single problem
- During the years some bizarre reasons have reached the media and have made their way into Internet pages of dubious value
 - E.g., that the Romans suffered from lead poisoning caused by plates and pots
 - That the growing number of Christians made it difficult to find good soldiers, willing to fight aggressively enough
 - That sexual "perversions" and homosexuality caused a significant drop in the number of births

7.4 Recent attempts to explain the fall of the Roman empire

- In 2001 *The New York Times* published an article ([http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/20/science/20ROME.html?ex=1057723200&en=bf70fdbba313d4be4&ei=5070; registration required](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/20/science/20ROME.html?ex=1057723200&en=bf70fdbba313d4be4&ei=5070;registration%20required)), in which the incontrovertible fact that malaria had become more common at the end of the Empire (because fewer resources were available to maintain aqueducts and to drain marshy lands) was linked to the fall of the Empire (as if barbarians who moved through those same regions were immune from this disease, or were not affected in equal measure)
- We don't really need fantastic theories to explain the end of the Roman empire, because we have a fair number of official documents and sufficient knowledge of the variety of problems that affected Roman society and its economy towards the end

7.4 The beginning of the end: Commodus

- The emperor Commodus (180-192) initiated some of the political trends and strategies that in the long term caused serious problems in Roman society
 - He offered lavish gifts to the Praetorian Guard (the elite soldiers and veterans who were responsible for the security of the imperial family and of the capital), to insure their loyalty and support
 - He had real or potential opponents murdered, a practice that became all too common during the 3rd century CE
 - Commodus himself was assassinated
- During the 3rd century, instead of succession by family lineage or adoption, you have the Praetorian Guard selling the imperial title to the highest bidder, or the provincial armies supporting the imperial plans of their generals

7.4 Septimus Severus (193-211 CE)

- He was the commander of a provincial army and succeeded Commodus
 - Raised the soldiers' pay to gain their loyalty
 - Enlisted more troops in the army to better defend the borders of the empire
 - there were frequent attacks by Germans in Central/Eastern Europe and by Persians in the Middle East
- From this point on, no further expansion of the empire was possible
 - The Roman economy had to do without the considerable income produced by conquests
- To reduce the existing deficit Severus debased the coinage (=decreased the amount of silver or gold contained in the coins)
 - As a result, obviously, prices were raised

7.4 Septimus Severus (193-211): trade deficit, the mines, hyperinflation

- Trade deficit was another problem of Roman economy at this juncture
 - Every year there were hundreds of millions of sesterces in imports from India and China (spices, gems, silk etc.), all paid in gold/silver; but few or no exports from the empire were directed to those regions
- The limits of the Romans' mining technology made the shortage of silver and gold worse
 - Since they were unable to extract minerals deep underground, some of their existing mines ceased producing enough precious metals
- Inflation soon became hyperinflation

7.4 Diocletian (284-305 CE): his temporary solutions

- 235-284 CE: out of 22 emperors, 20 were murdered
- Diocletian managed to come up with a temporary fix for some of the empire's problems
 - To stop inflation Diocletian introduced fixed wages/prices, and heavier taxes
- In so doing, Diocletian produced economic stagnation and a loss of social mobility
 - a black market economy and other forms of social disorganization followed
 - the social order insured by the government is reduced to the bare essentials
 - the State vs. the citizens: shared goals, antagonism

7.4 Diocletian (284-305 CE): political reforms

- Under Diocletian the Senate lost most of its remaining power
 - Senators became high-ranking administrators loyally offering their services/expertise to the State
- Other vestiges of republican democracy were also suppressed
- The emperor was called *Dominus* (Lord), and he was clearly identified as the sole ruler in legal and political documents
 - The emperor now wears a crown, sits on a throne

7.4 Diocletian: living conditions in the rural areas

- He enlarged the army with barbarian recruits, trying to assimilate the Germans
- Small farmers are forced to stay on their lands and never leave, first because of their debts (the money they owe to big landowners is usually repaid with labor), then thanks to specific laws, meant to protect the interests of the affluent landowners and to insure that strategic areas of the empire are not depopulated
 - To pay taxes and/or debts small farmers give their rich patrons a part of their produce and provide services to them (cf. the textbook, Chap. 1)

7.4 Diocletian: reduced mobility, the Empire divided

- Fewer investments and diminished mobility produce a localization of the economy
 - This is the beginning of medieval Feudalism
- Money gradually disappears from circulation and the barter system is expanded
- The empire is divided in 2 parts (East/West), with 2 emperors
 - Diocletian becomes the emperor of the Eastern empire, the wealthiest and the most important strategically
 - The 2 emperors have vice-emperors who are supposed to learn the trade and succeed their superiors

7.4 Constantine (305-337 CE)

- He eventually reunited the two sections of the empire under his command
- With the edict of Milan (313), he guaranteed freedom of cult for the Christians
- Constantine himself, according to tradition, converted to Christianity, either out of a sincere personal desire, or driven by political reasons
 - He might have seen the Christians as a relatively small group, compared to the population of the empire, but also a group with fairly strong convictions, willing to support him without ever wavering, once he chose their side
- Constantine ordered the execution of his own son Crispus and of Fausta, Constantine's wife
 - <http://www.roman-emperors.org/fausta.htm>

7.4 Constantine's donation

- Constantine moves the capital of the empire to Constantinople (later called Byzantium, now Istanbul), in the Spring of 330 CE
- Constantine's donation
 - Following the transfer of the imperial court to Constantinople, the authority of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) naturally increased
 - a new political position: the Church becomes one of the political agencies of the Empire
 - the custom of leaving part or all of one's inheritance (especially land) to the Church (*Patrimonium Sancti Petri*)
 - Finally during the early Middle Ages a legend was created, together with a forged document to support it, i.e. that Constantine had officially donated Rome and its suburbs to the Popes

7.4 Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom)



7.4 The end

- After 395 the empire is divided again, and it remained divided until the end
- Eastern empire
 - It has more economic resources, more homogeneous traditions
 - It includes Turkey, Greece, the Middle East, Egypt etc.
- Western empire
 - It includes Italy, France, West Germany, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia etc.
 - United only under the Romans, quickly falls apart without the support and constant supervision of the central administration
- New "barbarian" tribes move to Europe from Asia
 - Franks, Saxons, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals (to their practices we owe the word *vandalism*), the Huns

7.4 The end

- The Visigoths sack Rome in 410, an event that is interpreted as a clear sign of the impending doom
- Attila's Huns invade Italy in 453
- The Visigoths eventually settle in Spain, the Vandals in Africa, the Franks in France, the Saxons in Britain, the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Huns in Hungary
- Odoacer, leader of a Germanic tribe, deposes the last Roman emperor in the West, Romulus Augustus (476), and becomes King of Italy under the authority of the Eastern Roman Empire
 - Valerio Massimo Manfredi, *The Last Legion (L'ultima legione)*: book published in 2002, [motion picture to be released in 2007](#)

7.5 Quotes from Valerio Massimo Manfredi, *The Last Legion* (2002)

- The Empire defended itself for centuries against the barbarian attacks. Many emperors were elected to the dignity of their rank by their soldiers at the front, and died at the front, sword in hand, without ever having seen Rome or discussed any matter whatsoever with the Senate.
- The attack was often multilateral, coming in waves from various directions, and waged by many populations at once. This is why the great wall was built, at such expense, extending from the mountains of Britannia to the deserts of Syria. Over three thousand miles long! Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were recruited. As many as thirty-five legions were called up at once, with nearly half a million men!

7.5 V.M. Manfredi, *The Last Legion* (2002)

- No expense, no sacrifice seemed too great to the Caesars in order to save the empire, and civilization with it, but in doing so they did not realize that costs had become intolerable, and that the taxes they levied to cover them impoverished the farmers, the breeders, the craftsmen, destroying trade and even reducing the number of births! Why put children into the world to have them live in misery and deprivation?
- Eventually, it became impossible to stave off the invasions, so our leaders imagined that they could settle the barbarians peaceably within our own borders and recruit them into our army so they could fight off other barbarians . . .

7.5 V.M. Manfredi, *The Last Legion* (2002)

- Everything has its price in this world, my son. If a people attain a high level of civilization, a certain level of corruption is bound to develop as well. I'm not saying that it's in a barbarian's nature to be corrupt, but before long they develop a taste for fine clothing, refined foods, perfumes, beautiful women, luxurious dwellings. All of this costs money, lots of money, the kind of money that only corruption can produce.
- Civilization means laws, political institutions, guaranteed rights. It means professions and trades, streets and communications, rites and solemnities; science, but art as well. Great art; literature and poetry like that of Virgil, whom we've read so many times together.

7.5 V.M. Manfredi, *The Last Legion* (2002)

- "Being part of a civilization gives you a particular pride, the pride of participating in a single collective endeavor, the greatest that man has ever attempted to achieve."
- "But ours -- I mean, our civilization -- is dying, isn't it?"
- "Yes," replied Ambrosinus, and he fell into a long silence.

7.6 Gold coins with the names of Romulus Augustus and of Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno



7.6 Europe and the Mediterranean after the fall of the Roman empire (c. 500 CE)



7.7 Final remarks on the fall of the Roman Empire

- The decline of a complex political and military organization such as the Roman Empire cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather to the simultaneous insurgence of several crises
- The Roman Empire, after all, had reached the peak of its expansion between the first and the second century of the common era, but was able to survive and keep most of its territories until the fifth century, and even then the Eastern Roman Empire remained strong enough to live on
- Compared to other famous examples of very large Empires created during antiquity, for example that of Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire had the advantage of a relatively slow development, and had also the benefits of highly organized administrative and military systems

7.7 Final remarks on the fall of the Roman Empire

- The multiplication and the compounding of problems is what brought the empire to its knees
 - Romans had to deal with the internal political problems and the instability caused by the lack of a clear mechanism for succession
 - At the same time they were facing increasing problems in the economy (which could not be adjusted with revenue procured by new conquests)
 - All the while they had to maintain a large army and long defense lines (on the Danube River alone Roman garrisons and watchtowers extended for 1000 miles), to keep barbarians from invading their territories
 - Lack of flexibility, quick adaptive process, resources

7.7 Aldo Schiavone, *The End of the Past: Ancient Rome and the Modern West*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000

- Schiavone suggests that European civilization practically began anew in the Middle Ages and that it bore little resemblance to the Roman culture of the ancient era
- The European modernity that evolved in the West was influenced more by a society and culture that arose subsequent to the collapse of the Roman Empire than by institutions, ideas, and technologies from the period of the classical Roman past
- Thus, for Schiavone, the crisis of the Roman Empire not only brought to an end a vast economic, political, and imperial hegemony it also was responsible for a cultural and epistemic break between ancient and modern societies in the West

7.8 More suggested readings

- Click on the following link if you want to and look at various interactive maps of the Roman Empire, which allow you to see the areas of the empire in different periods
 - <http://www.roman-emperors.org/Index.htm>
- If you're interested, you can click on the next link, and then with a little bit of patience you can find information and more links regarding the Emperors that were mentioned in this presentation:
 - <http://www.roman-emperors.org/impindex.htm>