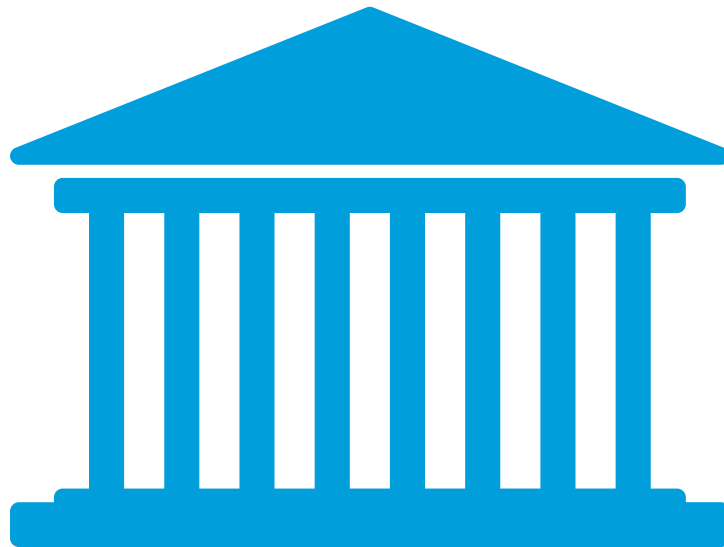




# GALMUN 2026

*SAINT JOSEPH SEMINARY AND HIGH SCHOOL*  
*in partnership with*  
*RETORIKA FOR MULTICULTURALISM*



## **Crisis** *RESEARCH REPORT*

The Western Roman Empire: the Quiet before the Fall.

## Definitions:

**Emperor:** sovereign ruler of an empire, a title historically associated with supreme authority over a state or multiple nations.

**Barbarian:** is a person perceived as savage, uncivilized, or primitive, a term historically used by groups like the ancient Greeks and Romans for anyone outside their own culture.

**Catholic:** The largest denomination of the Christian religion, and the only officially sanctioned religion in 435 AD. In the Eastern Empire, the religion is sometimes referred to as Orthodox. Please note that the Catholic-Orthodox split did not take place by the time of our crisis simulation.

**Paganism:** a broad term for non-Abrahamic religions, originally referring to ancient polytheistic faiths, particularly those outside of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

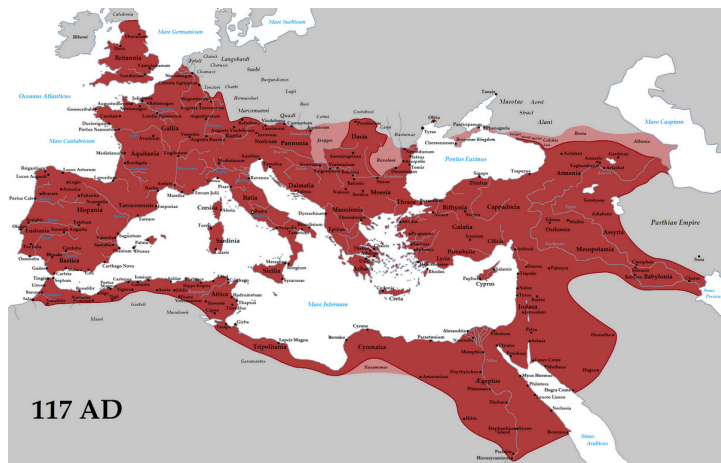
**Germanic:** refer to tribes living in “Germania,” a region north and east of Gaul.

**Peninsula:** a piece of land almost entirely surrounded by water but connected to a mainland on one side, “almost an island.”<sup>1</sup>

## Background:

### Birth of an Empire, Christianity and the administrative split

The Roman Empire was a vast ancient civilization that evolved from a kingdom, into a republic, into an empire. The Roman Empire grew into one of the largest empires in human history. Rome’s imperial era started with the rise of Rome’s first emperor Octavian (later known as Augustus), in 31 BC. During this period, Rome saw several decades of peace, prosperity and expansion.<sup>2</sup>



The Roman empire’s expansion reached its peak in 117 AD, crossing three continents stretching from Italy through Europe to the British Isles, across North Africa, down through Egypt, and up into Mesopotamia and across Asia Minor.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, emperors found this vast empire difficult to rule from the city of Rome. These difficulties varied from administrative challenges, like slow communication, a massive bureaucracy, and the need for powerful governors, as well as military overstretch due to the immense costs of a widely dispersed army and constant border pressures from outside groups known as the barbarians. In order to try and stabilize the empire, Emperor Diocletian made some changes. He declared an officer named Maximian his co-emperor, thus dividing the empire into two halves, the western half and the eastern half in 286 AD. Both halves were administered separately, but both of them called themselves and each other “The Roman

<sup>1</sup> <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/peninsula/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wolfsonhistoryprize.org.uk/past-winners/2021-winners/ravenna/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.worldhistory.org/Western\\_Roman\\_Empire/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Western_Roman_Empire/)

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Empire.”

For more than one hundred years Rome experienced even more divisions, until 395 AD when the empire was finally divided and became the Western Empire and the Eastern Empire with the Eastern Empire’s capital being located in Byzantium (later Constantinople, and the modern-day city of Istanbul in Turkey), and the Western Empire governed from Milan at first, before finally settling on Ravenna in 402 to better defend against invading tribes. Rome, the eternal city, served as a “ceremonial” or symbolic capital.<sup>4</sup>

(map of early 402 AD)



Another event that transformed the face of the Roman Empire was the spread of Christianity and the establishment of churches throughout the major towns and cities. Though persecuted at first, it was Emperor Constantine who passed the Edict of Milan in 313, which tolerated Christianity, allowing it to organize in public.<sup>5</sup> By then, there were five major Christian centers in the empire, four in the East (Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria), and one in the West where the Pope resided (Rome). There were debates and disputes about certain doctrinal questions about the Christian faith, culminating in the council of Nicene where followers of Arius were declared as heretics. However, by the time of our crisis, the five centers of Christianity, each led by a Patriarch or a Pope, considered themselves as part of the same Catholic and Orthodox church. It was Emperor Theodosius I who enforced anti-Paganism laws, leading to the destruction of many temples or their conversion into churches.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that both halves of the empire identified as Roman, radical, social, religious, and economic differences between East and West led to tensions and disputes between the two emperors.<sup>7</sup> The Western Roman empire mainly spoke Latin, which was reflected in the liturgical language in its churches. The Pope also had the unique position as the only leading Christian figure in the West on religious matters. The Eastern Empire, however, mainly spoke Greek and adopted a mixture of cultures including Roman, Hellenic, and other local Eastern cultures. This diversity was also reflected by the religious administrative units, with each center of Christianity being in charge of a specific area of the Eastern Empire. The economy

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wolfsonhistoryprize.org.uk/past-winners/2021-winners/ravenna/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edict-of-Milan>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodosius-I>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.studentsofhistory.com/division-of-the-empire>

of the Western Empire always found itself at a disadvantage compared to the East, which is rich in trade and natural resources.

After the split, the Eastern Empire thrived, while the Western one weakened. This has come about due to a variety of reasons. First, the capital of the Western Empire was not as defensible as the capital of the Eastern Empire, which was strategically placed at the very edge of the peninsula that could be easily defended. Second, the East had richer provinces and supported profitable trade with India and other states further east. In addition, the Eastern Empire was better organized, had a consistent set of laws, a good bureaucracy, and large amounts of gold with which it could pay for armies.<sup>8</sup> The Western Empire, on the other hand, struggled from pillaged provinces and a very long border to defend. Moreover, its poor economic situation forced the reduction in the number and professionalism of their armies in order to reduce upkeep. It was this dire situation in the West, which opened the door to the shockwave that brought the Western Empire to its knees.

## The External Threats and the Internal Weakness of the Roman Empire:

As the Roman Empire entered the 5th century, it faced several factors both internal and external that gradually undermined its stability. These factors made it increasingly difficult for the Empire, especially the West, to respond effectively. Internal factors included a particularly weak political system and lack of social cohesion. The crisis was further deepened because of the widespread corruption within government institutions, especially among regional officials, who exploited their positions for personal gain at the expense of the public. In addition, the heavy reliance on slave labor marginalized the lower classes of the labor market, which forced them to become increasingly dependent on public assistance. Moreover, the reduction of the value of the currency, originally initiated under Emperor Septimius Severus, became a recurring fiscal policy under subsequent emperors, contributing to rising inflation and weakening the overall economy.<sup>9</sup>

The more serious threat was external. For many years, the Roman Empire and many “barbarian” tribes actually lived in a state of relative cooperation. These tribes resided on their Rhine and Danube frontiers and traded with Rome, exchanged goods, and even shared cultural practices. The Romans allowed some barbarian families and tribes to settle within Roman territory and functioned as serfs, farming large landed estates. Some of these Romanized “barbarians” even served in the Roman army, with some rising to high ranks as generals. Because of this, the Romans did not initially see these tribes as a major threat. But in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, a number of dramatic events changed everything, turning those friendly neighbors into desperate migrants, and then into powerful invaders.<sup>10</sup>

Everything started with the rise of the Huns, a nomadic people who moved and conquered their way into Eastern Europe from their home regions located within the Eurasian Steppes. Their arrival created massive pressure on the tribes living between them and the Roman frontiers. Many of these tribes knew they could not survive Hunnic attacks, so they began to flee toward Roman borders, begging to enter the Empire. This created a sudden, uncontrolled movement of entire peoples, warriors, families, and elders who saw Rome as their only chance for safety.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.diplomacy.edu/histories/byzantine-diplomacy-the-elixir-of-longevity/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire/Height-and-decline-of-imperial-Rome>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian-invasions>

*Crisis*

One of the first tribes driven by the Huns were the Visigoths. They asked the Eastern Romans for permission to cross the Danube and settle within the area of Thrace. The emperor in Constantinople allowed them to cross, which led to thousands crossing the Danube river and settling within refugee camps and farming estates. However, as the months passed, the Visigoths soon found that they were treated badly by their Roman overlords who overcharged them for food, abused their people, and failed to keep promises of wellbeing. These tensions exploded into a full rebellion within Roman lands that managed to defeat a Roman army at Adrianople (378 AD) and, eventually, sacked the city of Rome in 410 AD. Eventually, the Visigoths were allowed to settle and rule within the area of southern Gaul. They agreed to become a Foederati, a tribe that has pledged allegiance to Rome. This has turned the Visigoths from refugees into a permanent force within the Empire that did not always exhibit loyalty to the central Roman Authority.<sup>11</sup>

The fall of Rome shocked the entire world. It showed that the Empire was no longer strong enough to control the peoples it let inside its borders. Chaos spread, and other tribes now saw Rome as vulnerable. Once Rome's weakness was exposed, other tribes also began attempting to penetrate the border and settle in the lands within the Western Empire to find shelter from the Huns and to secure a better future for their people.

One of these tribes were the Vandals who crossed the Rhine River into Roman Gaul in 406 AD, part of a larger migration wave. They moved into Spain, but constant fighting and instability pushed them to cross into North Africa in 429 AD. This was a turning point because North Africa was one of Rome's richest and most important provinces. By 435 AD, the Vandals had established control over key cities, thus threatening Rome's food supply and economy. The Burgundians, another tribe, also managed to take advantage of the chaos caused by the Visigoths to cross the Rhine frontier. They settled along the Rhine river and had a more positive relationship with the Romans, despite a few clashes between the two sides. Although they were not as destructive as the Visigoths or Vandals, their presence inside imperial borders showed how Rome was losing control of its own territory. The Franks crossed into Roman Gaul as well. Unlike the Visigoths or Vandals, the Franks often acted as Roman allies and helped defend parts of the frontier. But over time, they settled permanently in northern Gaul, slowly building the foundations of their own kingdom. All of these tribes, after struggle, swore allegiance to the Roman state as Foederati in return for concessions and land, pushing the Western Roman Empire down the road of fragmentation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Visigoth>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian-invasions>



## Current Situation

By 435 AD, the Western Roman Empire had faced decades of barbarian migrations. It also dealt with internal corruption and economic weakness. The permanent split between East and West added to these problems. The empire still stands, yet it feels much more fragile than in earlier times. The background events, as detailed above, have shaped this crisis: Visigoth migrations played a role; Hunnic pressure built up; The Vandals moved into North Africa; the empire's fragmentation leading to the crippling of the Roman state, and many other factors. These factors now define the situation in 435 AD.

### 1. Political Power Structure

Emperor Valentinian III rules the Western Empire. However, he remains young and politically weak. Flavius Aetius holds the real power in the West, as *magister militum*, or master of soldiers. He relies on his long experience and his contacts with many barbarian tribes to bolster his political power, turning him into the most influential figure at the Western court in Ravenna. Court politics involve competing nobles and generals with Imperial advisors also having their own agenda and interest. They often treat the emperor like a figurehead. True decisions rarely come from him alone as other figures, both within the Imperial families and the leading wealthy families, all fight to have the last say at court.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. Territorial Stability

Italy serves as the symbolic and administrative heart of the Western Empire, Ravenna acts as the capital, and Rome keeps its great religious and cultural prestige. Provinces beyond Italy face instability; Gaul, Hispania, and North Africa all show this, Roman governors struggle to maintain effective control in many areas. Imperial authority in frontier and provincial zones often depends on federate tribes, these *foederati* help with basic security. They also hold the borders in place. The reliance on the *Foederati* comes with benefits; however, it reduces the power of the Roman state.

### 3. Foederati Inside the Empire

The Visigoths entered the empire as desperate refugees long ago. They sacked Rome in 410 and settled in parts of Gaul as semi-independent allies of the Romans. They follow Rome's orders only when it suits their own interests. The Burgundians live within imperial lands too, settling along the Rhine and in eastern Gaul. Officially, they count as allies; however, tensions have been rising between them and Ravenna. In northern Gaul, the Franks divide into several smaller groups. Their military role grows steadily. In the near future, they might turn into valuable partners, or they could become dangerous enemies. The Suebi were another *Foederati* tribe that settled the North of Spain. The Vandals, after conflict, managed to sign a *Foederati* treaty with the Romans and settled in North Africa.<sup>14</sup>

### 4. The Vandal Threat in North Africa

The Vandals crossed from Hispania into Africa. Now they control key coastal areas in North Africa. This region once ranked as one of the richest in the Roman world. Their hold threatens Carthage and nearby provinces. African grain feeds Italy in vital ways. Losing full control here would hit the Western Empire hard as it would damage the economy and food supply severely. The Vandals currently signed a peace treaty with the Romans and swore allegiance to Ravenna as *Foederati*. However, tensions remain high. Within the Western court, issues

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Aetius>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/foederati>

around the Vandals stir debate. Negotiations create controversy. Treaties do the same. Military responses prove equally divisive.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. The Huns

The Huns first drove many Germanic tribes toward Roman borders, Now they base themselves in Central Europe. While their base of operations was in Hungary, they controlled the lands and dominated all the tribes across the Danube and Rhine frontiers. Relations between the Huns and the Western Empire stay unstable. With the Romans, paying tribute to prevent their hostility and to hire their soldiers as mercenaries in their wars against other tribes. Aetius has made extensive use of this due to his close familiarity with the Huns who welcomed him when he was exiled from court. Romans debate this approach sharply; some view it as necessary for peace, others call it humiliating and risky: a failed negotiation could spark trouble, a missed payment might do the same, even a shift in Hunnic leadership could lead to raids. These might target Gaul or even the heartland in Northern Italy.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Economy and Society

The Western Empire's economy weakens steadily from year to year. The tax base shrinks due to lost provinces. Unstable areas contribute to this as constant warfare drains resources and the long border costs a lot to defend. Political corruption persists. The old economic model hurts state finances due to its dependence on expansion and slave labor, which was now in short supply. Social tensions rise between groups with Roman citizens clashing with barbarian settlers. Church authorities add to the friction with the central Roman church confronting Barbarians who follow Arian Christianity and from pagans who still persist within the Roman state. Issues around land create division and taxes increase the strain on farmers and citizens.<sup>17</sup>

## 7. Relations Between East and West

The Eastern Roman Empire centers on Constantinople as its capital. It proved richer than the West as it was able to withstand its grand defeat in Adrianople and pay off the Visigoths and the Huns enough to leave them alone. While the East did at one point attempt to conduct joint military operations against the Vandals, they tended to stay distant from Western troubles if they could, focusing on their own frontiers and concerns. In 435 AD, one key strategic issue stood out: will the Eastern Empire provide real military support to the West and financial aid or will it just observe? The Western Empire might weaken further and collapse might follow.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hun-people>

<sup>17</sup> <https://historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/empire-and-development-the-fall-of-the-roman-west/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.studentsofhistory.com/division-of-the-empire>

## Questions to Consider:

- Is your faction an ally or an enemy of the Romans?
- What is the best way to secure the livelihood of your character's group?
- Should both halves of the empire work together or should each focus on their own issues?
- Should barbarians be allowed to settle within the Roman Empire?
- What are your character's assets and abilities?
- What is the best way for your character to achieve their aims?
- What is the best course of action to stabilize the Roman economy?
- Should the Huns reach positive relations with the Romans?

## Relevant Media:

- VisiGoths:  
[Visigoth | History, Culture & Legacy | Britannica](#)
- Huns:  
[Barbarian invasions | Facts, History, & Significance | Britannica](#)  
[Who were the Huns?](#)
- Vandals:  
[Who were the Vandals?](#)
- Barbarians and The Migration Period:  
[The Migration Period. Historical atlas of modern Europe.](#)
- Germanic tribes:  
[Origin of the Germanic Tribes - BARBARIANS DOCUMENTARY](#)

The map of the year 435 AD (Our current map):





## Helpful Resources :

- [A timeline of the Barbarians](#)
- [A timeline of The Roman Empire](#)
- [Roman Empire - World History Encyclopedia](#)
- [Who Were the Huns](#)

## Bibliography

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- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/foederati>
- <https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hun-people>
- <https://historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/empire-and-development-the-fall-of-the-roman-west/>
- <https://www.studentsofhistory.com/division-of-the-empire>