

What Happened to the City of Rome after the Empire Collapsed?

When I was a young and wayward graduate student at the University of Michigan, I fell into the habit of exploring abandoned buildings in Detroit. I especially liked the Lee Plaza, an Art Deco masterpiece that was once one of the city's finest apartment buildings. After scrambling in through the rubble-filled basement, I would wander the grand public rooms, steps stirring clouds of plaster dust. Then I would follow a long procession of stairs to the windy roof. One December morning, I paused in an apartment on the fifteenth floor, where a gaping hole in the wall framed a panorama. Falling snow shrouded the horizon, hiding the distant skyscrapers of downtown. Most of the houses in the neighborhood below had been demolished years before. The survivors straggled, swaybacked and gray, over an urban prairie. As I stood there, listening to the whisper of snowflakes on brick and broken glass, I remember thinking: *Rome must have felt like this after the fall.**



Rome was the biggest, dirtiest, and most dangerous city in the classical world. It was also the most magnificent. Even emperors were impressed. In 357 CE, when Constantius II visited Rome for the first time, he was awestruck. He marveled at the vast bath complexes, where pools smoked beneath walls of glass. He squinted appreciatively at the towering walls of the Colosseum. He was overwhelmed by the Pantheon. And these were only a few of Rome's wonders. At the time of Constantius's visit, the population was probably around seven hundred

* Please don't construe this anecdote as an endorsement to explore abandoned buildings. It's usually dangerous and/or illegal, and the pictures are almost always underwhelming.

thousand—fewer than the million or so of the early imperial era but still greater than that of any other city on the planet.* These teeming multitudes patronized Rome’s 424 temples and 861 baths, occupied its 1,790 aristocratic houses and 46,602 apartment buildings, and were laid to rest in cemeteries radiating miles beyond the city walls.¹

The next half millennium, however, was not kind to the capital of the world. Rome was sacked by barbarians, burned in a civil war, pillaged by both sides during Justinian’s Gothic Wars, ravaged repeatedly by plague, flooded ad nauseam, and sacked again for good measure by Saracen pirates. For much of this period, the city was reduced to the status of a frontier outpost ruled from distant Constantinople. Only pilgrimage and the prestige of the pope† prevented Rome from sinking into obscurity. By the ninth century, the population had fallen by more than 95 percent, leaving thirty to forty thousand residents scattered through the ruins of a city built for a million.

Some of Rome’s buildings were destroyed violently. During the first sack of Rome, aristocratic mansions and structures in the Forum burned.‡ Gilded roof tiles were stripped from the great Temple of Jupiter during the second sack. Overall, however, the raiding parties seem to have caused surprisingly little destruction, and at least some of the damage was later repaired: a fifth-century inscription commemorates the restoration of a statue “overturned by the barbarians.” The Gothic Wars caused more lasting devastation. Notable casualties included the colossal marble statues atop the Mausoleum of Hadrian, which the Roman defenders catapulted onto barbarians attempting to scale the walls.²

Most of the urban fabric was undone by less dramatic means. Thanks to extensive use of brick-faced concrete, large Roman buildings were, by premodern standards, remarkably solid. They were, however,

* On a whim, it was said, the eccentric emperor Elagabalus once ordered his slaves to collect cobwebs throughout Rome. When they returned to the palace carrying ten thousand sticky pounds, he remarked that one could judge from this how great the city was.

† “Pappas”—a colloquial term for “father” in Greek—was a term of affection for bishops in the Greek-speaking eastern provinces of the empire. In the west, however, only the bishop of Rome received this title, partly because the language of the Roman church was, until the third century, Greek rather than Latin. (For centuries, the Christian community in Rome was composed primarily of Greek speakers from the east. The first Latin-speaking bishop of Rome was Victor [r. 189–199], and it was only under Damasus [r. 366–384] that Latin replaced Greek as the city’s liturgical language.) “Pappas” gradually became the Vulgar Latin “papa,” from which our word “pope” derives.

‡ Visitors to the Forum still can see coins melted into the marble floor of the Basilica Aemilia by the heat of the fire.



Pieces of Roman marble built into a medieval house. *The façade of the tenth-century House of the Crescentii in Rome. Author's photo*

far from immune to weathering. Once their roofs collapsed, water worked into masonry joints and cracks in the concrete fill, pulverizing the mortar. By the beginning of the seventh century, Pope Gregory the Great could lament “every day, we watch buildings decayed with age fall down.”³ During windstorms and hard frosts, Rome must have echoed with the thunder of collapsing walls.

The pace of decay was quickened by natural disasters. Serious earthquakes rattled the city in 801 and 847, cracking walls, toppling columns, and laying low many a lofty vault and dome. Floods were more frequent and almost as destructive, particularly to the blocks of tottering ancient apartments near the river. A flood in the early eighth century is reported to have sent many of these buildings crashing into the muddy water.⁴

The greatest enemies of Rome’s monuments, however, were the Romans themselves. Despite the reduced size of the medieval city, constant small-scale construction, papal patronage of church building, and a thriving export trade in marble created a persistent hunger for

scrap metal and building materials. The ruins provided a seemingly inexhaustible supply of both.

The forests of bronze sculptures in Rome's public places were especially vulnerable to plunder. The process had already started by the beginning of the sixth century, when an official complained of drowsy night watchmen ignoring the sounds of thieves wrenching statues from their bases. Later, Byzantine emperors and their officials periodically harvested statues for scrap. The worst pillager was Emperor Constans II, who visited the city in 663. Over the course of his two-week stay, men from his entourage gathered all the bronze statues they could find, hacked them into manageable pieces, and hauled the metal to boats waiting on the Tiber.* Marble statues were treated no better. Sometimes they were hauled to building sites, smashed with sledgehammers, and used as rubble fill in foundations and walls. More commonly, however, they were burned in kilns to produce lime for mortar. When the House of the Vestals in the Roman Forum was excavated, a pile of marble statues fourteen feet long, nine feet wide, and seven feet high was discovered near one of these kilns, stacked and ready for burning.⁵

Ancient buildings were torn apart in the same spirit. Although the scavengers had little use for the concrete and rubble cores of foundations and thick walls, they stripped almost everything else. The fine marble veneers were often the first to go, both because they were straightforward to remove and because they made excellent lime. Iron and bronze fittings were other easy pickings. There also was constant demand for dressed stone. One eighth-century pope personally supervised the demolition of a decrepit Roman temple for its usable blocks. This was unusual only in being recorded: for the next millennium, virtually every stone used in Rome's churches and palaces would be plucked from the nearest convenient ruin.⁶

A few prominent Roman buildings were preserved by being converted into churches. Even consecration, however, was only partial

* Some of this loot may have surfaced in 1992, when divers near Brindisi discovered the remains of a huge trove of bronze statues, ranging in date from the second century BCE to the third century CE. Every statue had been cut up for scrap. It has been suggested that the metal was dumped when one of Constans's ships either sank or jettisoned part of its cargo.

† One of the last buildings dismembered this way, a temple of Minerva near the Roman Forum, provides a sense of how creatively stone could be recycled. One huge block of marble became part of the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica. The columns and architrave were cut into thin slabs and used to decorate a new fountain. The remaining stone was built into the walls of the Borghese Chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore.

protection. The Pantheon, for example, became a church in 609. But when that scrap-happy emperor Constans II showed up a half century later, the pope was powerless to prevent him from stripping the building's gilded roof. Nearly a millennium later, another pope melted down the massive bronze trusses of the Pantheon's porch and had the metal (which weighed more than 450,000 pounds) cast into 110 cannons.*



You are a ninth-century pilgrim. The journey was long, the road was hard, and the inns were grim even by ninth-century standards. But you reached Rome safely, and having visited the most famous relics, you've decided to take a stroll through the ruins.

Staff in hand, you walk along a street of decaying apartment blocks, each one as tall as the church in your native village. To your surprise, the lower stories of some buildings are still occupied.† Most, however, are gutted shells, and a few have collapsed onto the street. At the street's end looms the Colosseum. A fellow pilgrim at your hostel told you that the building was originally a temple of the sun, where Christians were sacrificed to the old gods. Whatever it used to be, the Colosseum is falling apart now. Huge heaps of stone blocks, shaken down by earthquakes, cover the pavement on one side of the building. Lime kilns smolder among the rubble.‡ On the other side of the building, slightly better preserved, houses and shops have been squeezed into the lowest row of arches.⁷

From the Colosseum, you follow a path through the columns of a collapsed temple. Passing beneath a marble arch, you find yourself

* There were many other instances of papal pillaging. In 630, Pope Honorius I stripped the gilded bronze roof tiles from the Temple of Venus and Rome and used them to repair the roof of St. Peter's Basilica. Some of these tiles survived until 1613, when Pope Paul V melted them down to make the colossal statue of the Madonna that still stands in front of Santa Maria Maggiore. Another Renaissance pope destroyed two sets of bronze Roman doors to make the statues of Saints Peter and Paul now atop the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius.

† Some of the great mansions of the late Roman elite also remained in use through the ninth century, at least in modified form. Pope Gregory I, for example, converted his ancestral mansion into a monastery (still extant as San Gregorio Magno al Celio).

‡ Selective pillaging of the Colosseum's stone seems to have begun even before 523, when the last games were staged on the arena. The marble seats were early victims, as were the iron clamps holding the travertine blocks together. The worst damage, however, occurred during the late Middle Ages, when a severe earthquake destroyed nearly half of the building. The huge heap of travertine left by the collapse—nicknamed “the Colosseum's thigh”—took more than four centuries to haul away. In 1452, a single busy contractor carried off 2,522 cartloads of stone.

between hills of tumbled brick. To your left are the half-buried buttresses and buckling roofs of the old imperial palace.* But you turn right, where a faint track leads into an enormous brick building.† Entering cautiously—this is the sort of place where demons lurk—you peer into the dim interior, which smells faintly of manure. As your eyes adjust to the gloom, you make out the fragments of a gargantuan statue in one corner. You also notice, however, that sunlight is slanting through huge cracks in the vaults overhead, and decide not to explore further.‡

Back outside, you continue toward the Forum. Ahead, you can see the red walls of the Church of Saint Hadrian, once—according to the guide you hired in the Vatican yesterday—the house of the Senate. (You aren't quite sure what the Senate was but gather that it was important.) Next to the church, a few shops and houses have been built into a tottering two-story colonnade. The huge hall behind them is in ruins. So are all the other temples in sight.§ Walking beneath another arch, you emerge onto the Forum square, a rectangular plaza bounded by tall columns. A few columns, you notice, still carry battered bronze statues.

There are more ruins beyond Saint Hadrian's—half-collapsed temples and broken porticoes jutting from orchards and fields of wheat. Beyond them, you glimpse the wonder your hostel keeper advised you see: the column of the good emperor Trajan. You head toward it, and after a few minutes among the wheat fields, you reach the door of the huge ruined building§ in front of the column.

You step through the door and emerge in what was once a vast hall. The roof, however, is long gone, and trees have forced their way through the marble floor. Weaving through the thickets, you make your way to the column's base. As your hostel keeper claimed, the column is carved from top to bottom with scenes of Trajan's wars against the

* Though stripped of its last bronze statues by a cash-strapped governor in 571, the palace continued to be used for at least another century by a few functionaries, who kept offices in corners of the vast and decaying complex. The severe earthquakes of the early ninth century probably destroyed the towering reception rooms, leaving a moonscape of heaped stone and tile. A twelfth-century traveler described the ruins as a marble quarry for Rome's churches.

† The Basilica of Maxentius.

‡ The notes of a pilgrim who visited Rome around the year 800 suggest that the buildings of the Forum were then still standing, though badly decayed. It was probably the earthquakes of the ninth century that destroyed most of the surviving buildings and buried the ancient pavement under debris.

§ The Basilica Ulpia

heathen. And just as he said, there is a door at the column's base. You enter, starting up the steps within. The stairway is narrow and lit only by occasional slits. Your breath comes ragged. Sweat stings your eyes. All discomfort, however, is forgotten the moment you reach the platform at the column's top.

Rome spreads like a figured mosaic beneath your feet. To one side is the great building you walked through, nearly as tall as the column itself. Starlings call from nests in the rafter holes. On the other side is a roofless temple* with columns thicker than any oak. The Forum crouches in the middle distance, overlooked by the gaunt Temple of Jupiter, arch-devil of the old gods. Beyond are windrows of ruinous apartments, stretching off toward the wilds of the Campagna. You would like to linger. But the sun is setting, and the streets are dangerous at night. Your footfalls echo as you descend the stairs.

* The Temple of the Deified Trajan.