were supported by the state and the emperor was often used as grounds for persecution. The first persecution of the Christians actually predated Trajan. In 64 CE, the Emperor Nero (see p. 133), seeking to deflect criticism from himself, blamed the Christians for the great fire that had destroyed large parts of Rome.

The Emperor Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305 CE, brought the full resources of the empire to bear against Christianity. He was determined to make Christians give up their practices. Many Christians died for their faith; sometimes they were forced to fight as gladiators against one another or against wild animals. The phrase “throw the Christians to lions” comes from this time and was originally meant literally. However, the persecution of the Christians did not have the desired effect. Those who were executed were hailed as martyrs, and the religion continued to spread in spite of the persecution.

Constantine and the Rise of the Eastern Empire

In addition to persecuting the Christians, Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two parts, a Greek-speaking east and a Latin-speaking west. The eastern portion included Greece and the Middle East, and the western portion, Italy, France, Spain, Britain, and North Africa. Diocletian ruled the eastern portion and a co-emperor ruled the west.

Constantine became emperor of the west in 306 CE. He converted to Christianity in 312 CE on the battlefield, thus becoming the first Christian emperor. In 313 CE, he and the emperor in the east agreed to allow Christians to practice their religion openly. The document that granted religious toleration to Christians is known as the Edict of Milan. From this point on, Christianity moved rapidly from being a minority religion, subject to persecution, to being the official religion, and the religion of a growing number of Roman citizens.

Ultimately, Constantine defeated the emperor in the east and ruled both portions of the empire. In 324 CE, he built a new eastern capital, Constantinople, on the site of the former Greek city of Byzantium. Over time, this city astride the Bosphorus became the center of a vast trading network that connected Europe with the Middle East and the rest of Asia and brought the empire great riches. Today, this city is known as Istanbul.

The Decline and Fall of the Western Empire

While Roman emperors continued to rule in the east, Roman rule in the west began to collapse in the 300s and 400s CE. The collapse did not happen overnight, but over the course of many years, and as a result of many factors.

The best-known factor, and the most obvious symptom, was the invasion of western Europe by various so-called barbarian peoples, including the Huns, the Visigoths, and the Vandals. In 410 CE, the Visigoths, under the leadership of Alaric, sacked Rome. Many historians view this date as marking the end of the Roman Empire in the west. Although Roman emperors continued to be proclaimed, these men were really little more than puppets of powerful Germanic leaders. The last emperor in the west, Romulus Augustus, was deposed in 476 CE.

Ever since the sack of Rome in 410 CE, people have debated the reasons for Rome's decline. It is now generally accepted that no single factor caused the decline of the western Roman Empire. The factors that contributed to the decline of the western empire can be grouped into four categories.
II. Ancient Rome

- **Military**: invasions by Germanic peoples; replacement of citizen-soldiers by mercenaries, which weakened the Roman legions
- **Economic**: heavy taxation; widening gap between rich and poor; use of slave labor, which blunted technological innovation
- **Social**: decline in traditional values, such as hard work and patriotism; corruption and dissolute lifestyles of many emperors; lack of social conscience among the upper class; social welfare (“bread and circuses”) for the poor
- **Political**: widespread corruption among government officials; an increasingly authoritarian government; division of the empire into west and east

Although it is customary to speak of the “fall” of Rome, it may be more accurate to say that the western Roman Empire slowly changed over time and was replaced by new customs, new languages, and new rulers. One civilization gradually gave way to another.

It is also important to bear in mind that there were elements of continuity as well as change. One of the most important elements of continuity was the Christian religion. Although the western empire collapsed, the Roman Catholic Church continued to function as a unifying force in the west, even after the last emperor was deposed. More and more, the Church became the stable organization in people’s lives.

Italy, and North Africa. With his wife, Theodora, as co-ruler, Justinian governed the largest area that the Byzantine Empire would possess. Later emperors were unable to hold onto these gains.

One of the major accomplishments of Justinian was the codification of Roman law, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, literally “the body of civil law.” All Roman laws, as well as the decrees of emperors and the writings of judges, were collected. The work outlived Justinian and was updated periodically by later emperors. By the 1100s CE, the Justinian Code, as it became known, was in use in the Roman Catholic Church and in western European nations.