

The Necessary Connection between Ethical Corruption and the Decline of the Roman Empire

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Abstract—The decline and fall of Rome was a significant event to the western world, and scholars' analysis of the reasons for the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire is wide-ranging. It was most widely accepted that the decline and fall of the Roman Empire includes two factors, one is the decline of politics, economy, and society, and the other is the decline of ideology, culture and spirit. This paper examines how the degradation of moral values closer ties to the direct factor for the Empire's fall- economically and militarily.

Index Terms—Ethical corruption, roman empire, degradation of moral values.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Roman Empire is an important part of the history of Western civilization, and the history of its rise and fall has always been the focus of academic circles. The decline and fall of Rome was a significant event to the western world, and scholars' analysis of the reasons for the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire is wide-ranging. Among them, there are discussions from the perspective of internal and external factors, as well as analysis from the perspective of subject classification; both analyses from the perspective of inevitability and coming from the perspective of contingency. Even if the discussion is from the same perspective, the final conclusions are often quite different. The reasons for the demise of the Western Empire are very complicated, multifaceted, and comprehensive. However, in actual research, many scholars still looked for the main cause of the decline by examining political, economic, geographical, cultural, and moral factors.

Many believed that the demise of Rome was caused by accidental factors. These accidental factors include the influx of the Huns into Europe and the migration of the Goths, the emperor's personal decision-making errors that led to failure, the Goths settled in the territory as allies, and the weakness of the emperors in western Rome. The fall itself had little to do with the strength and wealth of the empire [1]. Some others put forward the theory that geographical differences led to the demise of the West. He believes that the main reason for the survival of the East in locations of the East and the West. The difference between east and west is that when the Danube provinces were continuously invaded, the tragedy of the Empire was precisely that it had no money to maintain an army and navy mercenaries. It is this poverty that makes it unable to maintain the operation of the internal affairs and military system [2].

It was most widely accepted that the decline and fall of the Roman Empire includes two factors, one is the decline of politics, economy, and society, and the other is the decline of ideology, culture and spirit. The ideological and spiritual realm is manifested in the decline of urban civilization in the ancient Greco-Roman world. The most prominent phenomenon in the process of decline was the gradual absorption of the educated class by the masses, and the simplification of all political, social, economic and ideological life functions caused by what we call the barbarization of the ancient world [3]. The western empire went to extinction in the internal struggle. Toynbee proposed in his "A Study of History" that the decline of civilization is essentially suicide. Once civilization loses self-determination, it eventually "kills" itself [4]. The corruption of morality leads to the disappearance of creativity, which in turn endangers civilization. This is the characteristic of Greek civilization. The Roman civilization, which succeeded itself from the foundation of the Greek civilization, was doomed to death before its empire appeared. However, other scholars believe that if this is the case, it is not so much suicide as "force majeure" [5].

Most theories derive from observing the internal changes within Rome, that the empire, or the developing force of the empire, the people, were no longer wanted or able to live by the values which once brought their civilization to its strength and prosperity. Many modern works on the history of Roman civilization have such a view: that the early Romans were "healthy, simple, and noble," full of patriotism and sense of honor, and possessed a strong national spirit and martial spirit. The virtues and honors belonged to Rome. The purpose of the republic, inspire citizens to do their best to be worthy of the solemn honor brought about by a victory. As is described in Montesquieu's "Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence," [6] Rome's prosperity stemmed from enlightened politics, strict laws, and liberal customs, as well as the simplicity, courage, and dedication of the people formed in constant wars. This kind of traditional virtue and moral spirit makes everyone scramble to serve the country at first, and the fundamental reason why Rome has survived in dangerous circumstances. The Romans, known for their frugal life, were hardworking farmers and strong fighters. For this reason, territorial expansion and the development of a slave economy in Rome through the period of the Roman Kingdom, the period of the Republic, and the beginning of the Roman Empire reached unprecedented wealth and prosperity [7].

Building on the prior theories which took the moral decline in the Roman Empire as the factor for the fall of Rome, this paper examines how the degradation of moral values closer ties to the direct factor for the Empire's fall- economically and militarily. After the reaching peak of its power in the 1st century under the rule of Augustus, the ethics and morality of

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the empire, from the aristocrats to plebeians, experienced degradation so destructive to the spiritual world of Rome that its superficial wealth and prosperity were no longer able to obscure its internal crisis, laying the foundation for Rome's undoing. "In these latter years, wealth brought avarice in its train, and the unlimited command of pleasure has created in men a passion for ruining themselves and everything else through self-indulgence and licentiousness." [8] In Rome, when prosperity eroded the traditional morality of the Romans, it also stifled freedom, unity, love, and the enterprising spirit of the Romans. This loss of moral ethics led to an observable decline in the core of the well-being of a civilization- its economy and military. The combination of these factors, privileges the Romans have enjoyed from prosperity, have simultaneously become Rome's undoing.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the 8th century BC, according to legend, the Romulus brothers, who were nurtured by she-wolves, founded the city of Rome. Rome, which started from a small city-state, experienced seven kings in the next 200 years, which is known as the Roman Kingdom. At the same time, Rome also set up a senate with considerable power composed of 100 heads of a large family, responsible for legislation, administration, appointment and removal of officials, which imposed great restrictions on the king's power. In 510 BC, as the last tyrannical king known as Tarquin [9] was deposed by the Romans and driven out of Rome. The Roman Senate, a republic led by the alliance of nobles, formally established. This new Republic of Rome lasted for 500 years.

In the Republican era, Rome, with its tactical and military, and unique system superiority, focused on expanding their territory. It was equivalent to continuously introducing external resources into the country. In ancient times when civilization was underdeveloped, the method of expansion was violence. However, it has caused many problems to the agricultural society within Rome. When soldiers who had been fighting outside for many years returned to their hometowns, they found that their land had been annexed because they had not been cultivated for many years. Not only that, the war also brought a large number of slaves to Rome, because the heavy work could be done by slaves, the system completely destroyed the small farmer economy in the past. This has caused a sharp increase in the disparity between the rich and the poor, and various social conflicts have become increasingly serious.

At this point, the republican tradition that has worked well for 500 years and brought great success to Rome seemed to be increasingly unfeasible. The representative body was mostly from aristocratic families. Through various marriages for hundreds of years, they formed a huge interest group, and ruled with stupidity, greed, corruption, and ignorance.[10] The Senate was corrupted, and Roman society was full of contradictions; so, in Rome, at the end of the Republic, military leaders came to power -Mallor, Sula, Pompey, Crassus, Caesar, Anthony, and Octavian. The winner of this political melee naturally gained the right to rule and achieved the concentration of power.[11] In 27 BC, Octavian received the title of Augustus, which means sacred and noble, and can also be understood as the head of state. He served as a

guarantor, a senior battalion, and the chief high priest, bringing all the powers together and realizing a true dictatorship. He directly controlled the governors of the provinces, set tax standards, and tightly controls the army. Through constructing a centralized power system, Octavian established an effective administrative management system to ensure stability for more than 200 years, thereby ushering in the start of the Roman Empire.[12] Despite Octavian's effort to reestablish his code of law and order in this vast empire, the seed of corruption, exploitation and integrity throughout the era of the republic continued to grow among the Roman upper class. Rome was not built in one day, nor was it destroyed in one day. After centuries of disillusionment and moral degradation within the Roman society, Rome fluctuated with economic recessions and military shortages and was vulnerable to the growing attacks of the barbarian tribes. In September 476, the Germanic mercenaries in Rome deposed the last emperor of Rome, Romulus Augustulus.[13] Rome fell shortly after; Eastern Rome survived for another thousand years but it was never able to restore its former glory until its demise in 1453.

The rise and fall of the Rome took place within a thousand years. During this period, the Romans ruled from the Tiber River over a vast empire far greater than their predecessors. The overthrow of the empire was mostly due to the exhaustion of Roman society, far more than foreign troubles. Desires for power and greed replaced the tradition, leading to economic and political decline. Driven by an increasing loss of morality, the last emperors of Rome and their citizens had no other choice but to watch their empire fall towards destruction.

III. ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE MORAL DECLINE

The Roman Empire had gradually been losing its wealth and power since the 1st century. One main cause was its economic recession at the time, and like many civilizations of its time, the large factor which contributed to the economy was its agricultural production and tax income. With the calamity in both, the economy had continued to decline until the Empire's extinction. The 1st century AD was where Rome began to lose its power and wealth. The decline of agriculture during the 1st century forced Emperor Trajan to take measures to revitalize agriculture. He issued a decree stating that the elders of the Senate must ensure that their property was invested in agriculture; the imperial government granted low-interest loans with a 5% interest rate to agriculture to encourage farming. Although the government had adopted these measures, it could not overturn the decline. The root cause of its decline was no other than the growing expenditure of the upper class and the growing tax pressure and exploitation on citizens which destroyed enthusiasm of production seeing no purpose of their labor but to the exploitation of the country, and the upper class, and eventually leading them to abandon the means of production and turn to complete usage of slave labor.[14]

The early people of Rome were mainly engaged in agriculture. In the early days of the Roman state, free self-cultivating farmers accounted for the majority. Since the state apparatus of Rome was not yet fully developed at that time,

the self-cultivating slaves did not feel heavy pressure from the government. As people of Rome once described their ancestors, Farmers who worked hard in the fields were highly regarded. "And when they would praise a worthy man their praise took this form-good husbandman, good farmer-one so praised was thought to have received the greatest commendation" [15] However, with the expansion of the Roman state, the state apparatus gradually strengthened, and the bureaucracy became more powerful and the numbers increased. In the late period of the Roman Empire, the bureaucratic aristocracy became corrupt and degenerate, indulging in pleasure and luxury. They built villas and converted large fertile fields into hunting grounds for recreation. In order to satisfy their arrogant and extravagant life, the bureaucratic aristocracy continuously increased the deprivation of the lower classes. No power seemed to curb the desire of the Roman nobles, bureaucrats, and landlords to lead a luxurious life. Therefore, there was no force that could stop them from embezzlement, bribery, and the tendency of gaining surpluses.

In order to provide for the huge expenditure of the bureaucracy, army, and court of the Roman Empire, tax revenues were constantly increased, which became more and more unbearable for the citizens. The government relied on new taxes to make up for the country's regular losses. The old tax has been more popularized, while the rate has also continued to grow exponentially. In the face of increasingly unbearable taxes, rich people frantically sought tax exemption rights and tried every means to pass on taxes. As the historian Perry Anderson noted in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, "Nowadays, many rich people force the poor to bear theirs. At the same time, the rich demand new extortions against the poor and force them to pay. The heavy burden of taxes continued to fall unbearably on the farmers. By the end of the empire, the land tax rate exceeded the late Republic tax rate by about three times. The tax collected by the state accounts for one-fourth to one-third of the total agricultural output." [16] It was evident that Roman citizens were significantly overtaxed. In addition, in order to appease and supply the staff who extorted the subjects, the taxes paid by the subjects are 30 percent higher than the official tax rate. [17] In this way, the Roman Empire and the upper classes of the ruling class made more exploitation of the middle and lower classes in order to satisfy their extravagant lives, so that small farmers, who had always been proud of the production, felt that the more they produced, the more they were exploited by the country and the upper class, so they lose all interest in their work.

Coupled with the influence of a luxurious lifestyle, Roman civilians as small and medium-sized producers also despised labor, resulting in more and more enjoyment and fewer producers. Instead, along with the expansion of the empire, this issue expanded, Romans slowly distanced themselves from farming and relied more on slaves for agricultural production. As a founding father of socialism Friedrich Engels once commented on the economy at his time, "slavery no longer worked; it was for that reason it died out. While dying, it left behind its poisoned sting-the stigma attaching to the productive labour of freemen. This was the blind alley from which the Roman world had no way out. Slavery was economically impossible, the labour of freemen was morally

ostracised. The one could be the basic form of social production no longer; the other, not yet. Nothing could help here except a complete revolution. ... oppression by Roman officials and great landlords had become so heavy that many 'Romans' fled into districts already occupied by the barbarians, and that the Roman citizens settled there feared nothing so much as a return to Roman rule." [18]

Regarding the lack of Roman enthusiasm for labor, Columella, a Roman agronomist in the first century AD, wrote: "For men who purchase lands at a distance, not to mention estates across the seas, are making over their inheritances to their slaves, as to their heirs and, worse yet, while they themselves are still alive; for it is certain that slaves are corrupted by reason of the great remoteness of their masters and, being once corrupted and in expectation of others to take their places after the shameful acts which they have committed, they are more intent on pillage than on farming." [19] There were large-scale slave uprisings as in the 1st century BC, endless incidents of slaves resisting forced labor, destroying tools, sabotaging work, fleeing, killing their masters, and holding small-scale uprisings. Successive emperors repeatedly issued orders to strengthen the suppression, but the hatred of slaves towards slave owners is still growing stronger. At that time, a proverb prevailed in Rome: "You've as many enemies as you've slaves," which explained the threat of slavery to slave owners. Through continuous rebellions, It can be seen that producers of the Roman economy resisted labor by destroying production, so it is not surprising that the Roman Empire eventually fell into an economic crisis and even collapsed. In addition, the large amount of food imported from other provinces and the reduction of slave sources also accelerated the decline. Agriculture is the foundation of handicraft and commerce. The decline of agriculture caused the shortage of urban food and handicraft raw materials, and industry and commerce also declined. This caused the economic crisis, internal strife, and foreign troubles, letting the Roman Empire fall into political crisis, and the unified empire began to split and gradually disintegrated.

IV. MILITARY CONSEQUENCE OF THE MORAL DECLINE

Throughout the history of world development, the reasons for the cycle of dynasties and the transfer of power are mainly related to taxes, management efficiency, and military power. For the reasons for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, a small part of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire originated from the invasion of barbarians. In fact, the Roman Empire successfully resisted numerous attacks by the barbarians. [20] The decline in the resistance of the Roman army was also intrinsically linked to corruption. The loss of ethics and morality led to the corruption of the army, fleeting loyalty to the country, growing usage of mercenaries and usurpation in military power.

The early Roman soldiers were described to be brave, patriotic, and loyal to the emperor. The country was a union against foreign enemies and guaranteed their lives, property, and land. In the first century AD, Rome developed into a huge empire encompassing the Mediterranean. The prosperity and strength of its military power are inseparable from the early

Romans' and sense of honor. At the same time, the civic soldiers as the main combat force are the backbone of the army, with strong combat effectiveness. The unity of the citizens and the enhancement of military power resulted in greater military victories. The successive conquests of the land, wealth and slaves obtained from the victory of the war helped most of the civilian's land and debt problems. Before wars, the nobility's willingness to compromise opened all kinds of official positions to civilians and reduced civilians' debt burden. In this way, in the heyday of the Roman Empire, the patriotism, sense of honor, national spirit, and martial spirit of the Romans, coupled with the drive of economic interests and the temptation of improved political status, created a powerful fighting force for the Roman army.

However, prosperity brews corruption. When there were no enemies left to conquer, the comfortable life and the admiration of luxury obliterated the enterprising spirit of the Romans. They eroded the patriotism and sense of honor of the Roman soldiers. At the end of the empire, the Roman army transformed from masters of the Mediterranean world into slaves of money and wealth. As the historian Edward Gibbon noted, "Fashion was the only law, pleasure the only pursuit, and the splendor of dress and furniture was the only distinction of the citizens of Antioch. The arts of luxury were honored; the serious and manly virtues were the subject of ridicule, and the contempt for female modesty and reverent age announced the universal corruption of the capital of the East." [20] This trend of corruption spread rapidly, flooding the entire Roman army, from generals to ordinary soldiers. Emperor Severus once said: "Be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, scorn everybody else." He increased the payment of the soldiers dramatically. The result of blindly indulging the army was to create a chaotic situation where the army was large and dominated the political power. When the rewards could not satisfy their greed, the guards often turned to mutiny and the abolition of the legislature; usurpation and killing frequently occurred. Because they enjoy these dangerous privileges, they grew arrogant and reluctant to make war. They were soon completely incapable of carrying out arduous military operations. The right to divide up the spoils made them loyal to their military commander instead of the entire Roman Republic. From this point, the foundation of Rome began to shake.

In the Roman Empire, armies dominated by Roman proletarians were replaced by mercenaries composed of foreigners and slaves. Roman citizens had to pay military expenses to raise mercenaries, and those foreigners who were caught by the Roman government were looking for opportunities to resist. Mercenaries could always switch their sides to attack Rome at any time. In fact, later Rome also confirmed this, mercenaries' loyalty rested with whoever satisfied their demands. And as their desire to acquire more power and wealth grew, civil conflicts within the Roman army were often the result, weakening the army and society, making it difficult to resist the growing enemies of Rome. [21] However, a country that has not even the most basic military defense line and has no ability to resist. In the end, it can only fall into the hands of others.

V. CONCLUSION

Corruption has been a common phenomenon since the civilization of human society, but few regimes are willing to stand up against power corruption. The demise of Rome was due not to the power of the barbarians, but the power of the empire that has long been eroded in invisible corruption. The formation of corrupt ethical values is more terrifying than corruption itself. In the early days of the Republic, Roman citizens were exemplary in terms of morality. They were courageous, pious, arduous, simple, and disciplined. Strict civic ethics made Roman citizens into hard-working people, fearless soldiers, and officials who regarded national interests above all else. They created a powerful collective of citizens and a vast Roman empire. However, with the continuous victory of Rome's foreign wars, the moral norms of Roman citizens were corroded, and the loss of civic morality had a great negative impact on Rome's social atmosphere, political life, social production, and army, and shaken the foundation of Rome's rule. At its zenith, the mighty Rome ushered in not calmly handling the relationship between wealth and power, but full-hearted devotion to pleasure. The luxurious and corrupted social atmosphere could not bring long-term comfort; on the contrary, it could only invite the degeneration and decline of nations and individuals. The fall of morality leads to economic decline and political chaos. These are enough to shake the foundation of the Roman Empire, letting it dissipate until it collapsed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Suyang liu conducted the research; analyzed the data; wrote the paper all by herself. Professor Linford Fisher made revisions and sug-gestion to the paper.

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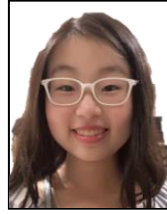
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