



## Investigation: System Change in Rome

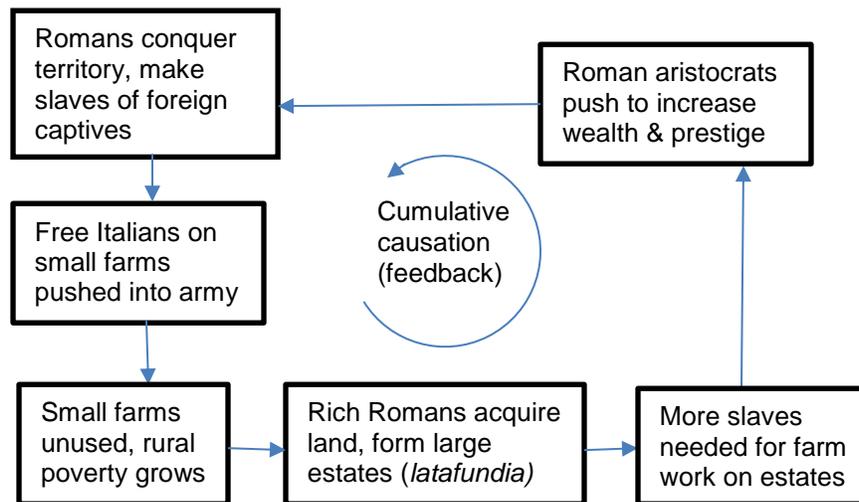
Early in Rome's history, most of the food consumed was grown on small parcels of land—typically a few acres—owned by plebeian farmers. The most common crop, and the main food for Romans, was emmer, a form of wheat. It was ground and baked into loaves of bread or cooked to form porridge. As Rome expanded in the third century BCE, land ownership and food production began to change.

The Greek/Roman historian [Appian of Alexandria](#) described changes:<sup>1</sup>

The Romans went to war and conquered more and more Italian people, and seized much land... Rich Roman aristocrats took control of a great deal of this land. Time went by, and since no one took this land away from them, they felt they had a right to it. They began taking over adjacent acreage owned by their poor neighbors. Some of this land they bought, after putting pressure on the owners to sell, some they took by force. In this way, they came to cultivate vast tracts instead of single estates, using slaves [*captured by the army in foreign wars*] as farm workers and herdsmen. Slaves were used because free laborers were often taken from agriculture into the army.

Owning many slaves increased the wealth of aristocrats, because of the children born to slaves, and because slaves were exempt from military service. Some powerful men became extremely rich, and the population of slaves multiplied throughout the country, while the Italian people dwindled in numbers and strength, held down by poverty, taxes, and military service.

These changes can be shown in a system change diagram:



<sup>1</sup> Appian, *Civil wars*, 1.7; (Tr. Loeb Classical Library, 1913, adapted) [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil\\_Wars/1\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil_Wars/1*.html)

This diagram is different from those you may have made earlier, because the changes show *cumulative causation* or *feedback*. The changes reinforce each other, and (over time) the amount of change tends to grow. The rich Roman aristocrats—primarily Patricians—controlled the government, which controlled the army. The aristocrats wanted more power and wealth, and the expansion of the territory under Roman control (by military force) brought wealth to them in several forms, including slaves. The expansion of *latifundia* created a demand for more slaves than were available because the birth rate of slave children didn't keep up with the number of workers needed.

**Many important historical changes involve cumulative causation.**

Below is a list (in random order) of additional conditions and changes that historians have linked to this situation depicted in Appian's account and the system diagram:

- Overseas conquests require a permanent army.
- Conquered fertile areas in North Africa and Sicily produce low-cost wheat.
- Rome sells off public land to pay war debts.
- Wealthy Romans loan money to government to finance military
- Italian *latifundia* estates mainly produce olives (oil), grapes (wine) and sheep (wool).\*
- Patricians receive war profits.
- Slaves revolt in Sicily and Italy. (70,000 slaves rebel in each revolt.)
- Tribes at the distant borders often attack Roman forces.

\*These were in demand and profitable, but required large parcels of land for production.

***Copy the system change diagram on the previous page on a large sheet of paper, and expand it by adding at least four additional items (from the box above) to the diagram, with arrows to show relationships. Some boxes may have two or more arrows coming in or going out, and you may identify additional circular "cumulative causation" paths.***

Note: it may be helpful to copy the changes you select onto Post-it® sticky notes, so you can move them around to find the best locations for them on your diagram. Draw arrows lightly with pencil at first, so they can be easily changed.

***Changes don't increase indefinitely. Identify possible limits on the changes depicted in the system change diagram.***

## Investigation: System Changes in the Empire

Many civilizations have formed in our planet's past. Most are gone, decayed away or conquered by outside forces. The decline of the Roman Empire has fascinated historians for hundreds of years. You'll investigate some of the conditions related to this decline.

*Analyze the data that follow to identify the changes that are occurring, using the categories of the model (environment, demography, patterns of action, shared ideas). Summarize each change in a short statement to use as a component in a system change diagram. Data in a single box may suggest more than one change.*

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Rome became a powerful empire, expanding to the limits shown on the map (Page 1). Starting with Augustus, who ruled for 40 years (27 BCE to 14 CE), emperors were in control—some cruel dictators, others benevolent and wise.

Much of the second century CE was peaceful and prosperous. Six successive emperors—Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus, and Commodus—had long reigns. All but Commodus died of natural causes. Commodus, after serving as emperor for 15 years, was assassinated in 192, and a time of troubles began.

The Praetorian Guard—the elite, pampered troops who acted as the emperor's bodyguards—proclaimed Pertinax as the new emperor at the beginning of 193. But Pertinax tried to discipline the guardsmen and restrict their power, and after he'd been emperor only three months, the Guard assassinated him. Here's what happened next:<sup>1</sup>

When news of the murder of Emperor Pertinax spread among the people in the city, they were upset and filled with grief, and men ran about greatly disturbed. The people made a disorganized attempt to find out who had committed this crime, but they couldn't find and punish the wrongdoers. The Senators were the most disturbed, for they were certain this was a public disaster, and that they had lost a kind father and an honorable ruler. They feared a violent reign, because the soldiers would favor it. After a few days passed, the people dispersed, each man fearing for himself. Senators and others that held high positions fled to their estates outside the city, to avoid danger that might come from a change in emperor.

Eventually the soldiers knew that the people were quiet, and that no one would try to avenge the death of the Emperor. However, they still remained inside their barracks and barred the gates. They sent some of their comrades with the loudest voices to the top of the walls around the barracks, and had them declare that the Empire was for sale at auction. They promised to him who bid highest that they would give him the power, and use their force of arms to set him in the imperial palace.

(Continued)

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<sup>1</sup> Herodian of Syria (3rd Cent. CE): History of the Emperors II.6ff: (adapted)  
<http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/herodianus-didius.asp>

When word of this proclamation spread in the city, none of the more honorable and wise Senators, or others of noble origin and property, would approach the barracks to offer money in so vile a manner to become a degraded ruler. However, a certain Julianus—who had held the consulship, and was known to be rich—was holding a drinking bout late that evening, when the news came of what the soldiers proposed. He was a man notorious for his evil living. Now his wife, daughter, and fellow feasters urged him to rise from his banqueting couch and hurry to the barracks, to find out what was going on. They convinced him that he might get the position of emperor for himself, and that he should spend whatever money was necessary to outbid any competitors, giving large gifts to the soldiers.

When he came to the wall of the camp, he called out to the troops and promised to give them just as much as they desired, for he had ready money and a treasure room full of gold and silver. About the same time, Sulpicianus, who had also been consul and was prefect of Rome and father-in-law of Pertinax, also came to try to buy the power. But the soldiers did not receive him, because they feared lest his connection with Pertinax might lead him to avenge him by some treachery. So they lowered a ladder and brought Julianus into the fortified camp; for they would not open the gates until they had made sure that the amount of the bounty being offered met their expectations.

...Because of his promises—immediate payment to the soldiers and granting them the power to tax...the soldiers hailed Julianus as Emperor...and prepared to go with him in procession.

Julianus offered the customary imperial sacrifices [*to the gods*] in the camp; and then went out with a large escort of the guards. Purchasing the empire was against the will and intention of the people of Rome—a shameful and unworthy stain upon the public honor. He had reason to fear that the people might overthrow him. The guards therefore...formed in a phalanx around him, ready to fight; with "their" Emperor in the center. They swung their shields and lances over his head, so that nothing thrown could hurt him during the march. Thus they brought him to the palace, and no man of the watching crowd dared to resist. There was no cheer of welcome, as was usual at the induction of a new Emperor. On the contrary, the people stood at a distance and hooted and disrespected him for buying the throne with money at an auction.

Didius Julianus held power only from March 28th, 193 A.D., to June 1st of the same year. He was taken from power and killed when [General] Septimius Severus and the army he commanded marched from the Danube region to Rome, to avenge the death of Pertinax. With support of Severus, the Senate commanded that the ringleaders of the Praetorians be executed. The rest of the guardsmen were dishonorably discharged and banished from Italy.

**Next pages: Table of emperors—193 to 285 CE.** Note that there were other "pretenders" not on the list who also claimed the throne, Most of them were killed because of their imperial ambition.

<b>Roman Emperors, 193 to 285 CE<sup>1</sup></b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Time as emperor</b>	<b>Date and cause of end of rule</b>
Pertinax	3 months	193, assassinated by Praetorian Guard
Didius Julianus	2 months	193, executed on Senate orders
Septimius Severus	17 years 10 months	211, natural causes
Caracalla (co-emperor)	19 years	217, murdered by soldier in conspiracy
Geta (co-emperor)	3 years	211, murdered on orders of Caracalla
Macrinus, Diadumenian	1 year 2 months	218, both executed
Elagabalus (co-emperor)	3 years 9 months	218, assassinated by Praetorian Guard
Severus Alexander	13 years	235, murdered by the army
Maximinus I	3 years 3 months	238, assassinated by Praetorian Guard
Gordian I	21 days	238, suicide
Gordian II	21 days	238, killed in battle
Pupienus	3 months	238, assassinated by Praetorian Guard
Balbinus	3 months	238, assassinated by Praetorian Guard
Gordian III	6 years	244, unknown, perhaps murdered
Philip I	5 years	249, killed in battle
Decius, Herennius Etruscus	2 years (co-emperors)	251, both killed in battle
Hostilian	4-5 months	251, died of plague
Trebonianus Gallus, Volusianus	2 years (co-emperors)	253, assassinated by their own troops
Aemilian	2 months	253, assassinated by his own troops
Valerian	7 years	After 260, captured in battle, died in captivity
Gallienus	15 years (co-emperor with Valerian)	268, murdered by his own soldiers
Claudius Gothicus	1 year 4 months	270, died of plague
Quintillus	Less than 1 year	270, possibly suicide or murder
Aurelian	5 years	275, assassinated by Praetorian Guard

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Roman\\_emperors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Roman_emperors) (adapted)

Tacitus	9 months	276, unknown, possibly assassinated
Florian	3 months	276, assassinated by his own troops
Carus	10-11 months	283, unknown, possibly killed by lightning
Numerian	1 year	284, unknown, possibly assassinated
Carinus	2 years	285, Died in battle

About the “pretenders to the throne:”

“The soldiers of different frontier armies began nominating their own generals for the throne. It didn’t matter whether the general actually wanted the throne or not. Once nominated, you had no choice but to try and take it. Otherwise your own troops would kill you. And if they didn’t, the reigning emperor would.”<sup>1</sup>

Petition of the Aragenians (in what is now eastern Turkey) to the Emperor Philip, 246 CE:<sup>2</sup>

Most reverend and serene of all emperors, under your good rule everyone else in the empire enjoys an untroubled and calm existence, since all wickedness and oppression have ceased. However, we alone are suffering, so we present this plea for help to you.

We are unjustly oppressed and we face extortion by those whose duty it is to maintain the public welfare. For although we live in a distant area and have no military protection, we suffer unfair treatment in your time of peace. Generals and soldiers and officials from important government agencies in the city, along with Caesarians [*aides of financial officials*], come in our region. While moving across the Appian district, they leave the highway, force us away from our work, take away our plowing oxen, and make us give up possessions that they have no right to take. In this way we are wronged by these extortions. Our possessions are spent on them, and our fields are stripped and laid waste....

Note that the claim, “we alone are suffering” in this petition is wrong—the problem of official corruption and exploiting local populations was common throughout the empire.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.accla.org/actaaccla/kramer.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/246philip-pet1.asp> (adapted)

Starting about 250 CE the Goths brought warriors across the Danube River, and attacked and devastated towns and cities in Roman territory.<sup>1</sup>

While [Emperor] Gallienus was spending his time [*back in Rome*] in luxurious living of every sort, the Goths, with their leaders Respa, Veduc, and Thuruar, boarded ships and sailed across the strait of the Hellespont to Asia. There they laid waste many populous cities and set fire to the renowned temple of Diana at Ephesus, built by the Amazons. They were driven from the neighborhood of Bithynia, but they destroyed Chalcedon... After their success the Goths re-crossed the strait of the Hellespont, carrying booty, and returned along the same route by which they had entered the lands of Asia, sacking Troy and Ilium on the way... After the Goths devastated Asia, Thrace next felt their ferocity.

Besides the Goths, the empire was facing serious border attacks and raids during this period by other troops of “barbarians.” To their north: the Carpi (from what is now Romania), along with Vandals and Alemanni (from what is now Germany), mounted raids against Roman forces and settlements, attacking from across the Rhine and Danube Rivers. In the west, the Franks were a growing threat. In the east, the Persians recaptured much of the territory of their previous empire that had been taken over by Greeks and Romans, and formed the Sassanid Empire.

Below: Romans battling Goths, from a sarcophagus:



<http://www.crystalinks.com/CrisisoftheThirdCentury.html>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/246philip-pet1.asp> (adapted)

Estimated population of the city of Rome:

- Third century BCE: 300,000
- 27 BCE: 1,000,000
- Second century CE: 1,600,000 (peak, largest city on earth until modern times)

A decline began after the middle of the second century CE.

In 250 to 270, epidemic disease (probably smallpox) hit Rome and spread into the empire. At the height of the outbreak, 5,000 people a day were said to be dying.<sup>1</sup>

A dreadful plague broke out, and...invaded every house, one after another, of the trembling populace, carrying off day by day with abrupt attack numberless people. All were shuddering, fleeing, trying to avoid the contagion. They refused to help their own friends, as if by keeping out the person who was sure to die of the plague, one could exclude death itself. Everywhere in the whole city human carcasses were lying—no longer bodies, but decayed remains. Passers-by would see these, and feel nothing but pity for their own fate.

The Roman Army:<sup>2</sup>

Year (CE)	Size	Year (CE)	Cost (denarii)
24	255,000	14	123,000,000
130	381,000	150	194,000,000
211	447,000	215	223,000,000
270	290,000	--	--
290	390,000	--	--

Because of economic and cultural differences, comparing value of Roman money and that of the present day is nearly impossible. However, the average daily wage of a worker in the empire was one denarius or less, if they got paid at all. The total estimated population of the empire in 215 was about 50 million people (including unpaid slaves, women and children).

Note that during empire expansion (before 24 CE), booty and the value of captured slaves helped pay army expenses. When expansion stopped, taxes paid the cost of the army.

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<sup>1</sup> [Pontius of Carthage](#), *Life of Cyprian*. Translated by Ernest Wallis, c. 1885. [Online at Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#). (adapted)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial\\_Roman\\_army#Army\\_size\\_and\\_cost](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Roman_army#Army_size_and_cost)

After Augustus, the first emperor, the cost of running the empire exceeded the funds available, so the emperor and high Roman officials tried to stretch their money. The table below shows the changing weight and composition of Roman silver coins:<sup>1</sup>

Emperor	Coin	Coin Weight (g)	Silver content	Silver weight (g)
Augustus	denarius	3.75	99%	3.71
Nero (after 64 CE)	denarius	3.40	90%	3.06
Trajan (after 107 CE)	denarius	3.20	85%	2.72
Caracalla	denarius	3.00	50%	1.50
Gordian III	denarius	2.70	45%	1.22
Decius	antoninianus	3.75	40%	1.50
Gallus	antoninianus	3.75 and 3.00	40% and 50%	1.50
Valerian I	antoninianus	3.20	35%	1.12

**Important:** During the reign of Decius (about 250 CE), the denarius became a crudely struck copper coin with a thin coating of silver which quickly wore off.

Because of the dropping value of the denarius, another coin—the *antoninianus*—with some silver content came into use beginning with Caracalla, but even this was eventually degraded in silver content (shaded boxes above).

For thought and discussion:

*What effect would these coinage changes have on prices of goods (such as a measure of wheat)? How might it affect wages?*

*Would trade between regions be likely to increase, decrease, or stay the same as a result of coinage changes?*

*What effect would this and other changes have on the autonomy of those who lived in cities and towns (e.g. concern about food supplies)?*

*Would the effects of these changes on those who live on farms and agricultural estates be greater, or less than those who live in towns and cities? How might this affect city and town population?*

You may wish to add answers to these questions to your change summary statements.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Augustus. (undated booklet) *The Financial Collapse of the Roman Coinage in the 3rd Century A.D.* 20 pp. 1 plate. Published by Augustus Brown, Kyrenia, Kingston, Canterbury, Kent. See <http://www.accla.org/actaaccla/kramer.html>



◀ Antoninianus of Caracalla, 217 CE

Both: <http://www.accla.org/actaaccla/kramer.html>



Antoninianus of Tetricus I, 270-273 CE ▶

Other changes noted in this period by historians:<sup>1</sup>

- End of expansion of the empire, no more captured slaves and booty
- Colonies become self-sufficient, no longer import metal goods and pottery from Rome
- Decreased overall trade and economic activity
- Increasingly, army made up of troops and leaders from remote, backward regions
- Estates become more self-sufficient in crafts (e.g. weaving, ironwork) and growing grain
- Decline of town and city populations
- Empire temporarily split into three independent nations
- Estates increasingly worked by free tenants (*coloni*) instead of slaves
- Government tries to fix economic problems, creates more bureaucracy, higher taxes
- Transfer of power from Senate to army
- Officials gain support of soldiers by giving them land owned by political opponents
- Landed aristocrats replaced by army leaders, often from distant provinces
- Leaders less educated, more violent, more materialistic

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<sup>1</sup> Primarily abstracted from Quigley, Carroll, *The Evolution of Civilizations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1979 Indianapolis, Indiana, Liberty Fund, pp. 325ff

## Putting it together: System Change in the Third Century Crisis

*Use your summary statements of change you've developed from your analysis of the data in the previous investigation, along with additional changes from the box on page 11, to build a system change diagram for the third century crisis in the Roman Empire. Build your diagram in the same way as your earlier one, looking for important relationships and for circular causation loops.*

This isn't easy. Team with others in preparing the diagram.

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Marcus Aurelius, emperor from 161 to 180, was one of the five "good emperors" who served before the period of crisis you've been investigating. In his famous *Meditations*, written in Greek, he expressed the ideals of noble Roman life.<sup>1</sup>

Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man to do each task with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice. Free yourself from distracting thoughts. You will find satisfaction if you do every act of your life as if it was your last; avoiding carelessness, excessive emotion, and illogical thinking. Don't be a hypocrite, avoid egotism, and be content with what you have been given. You see that a man needs to possess very few things to live a life which flows in quiet, and is like the existence of the gods. The gods will require nothing more from him who observes these things.

*In the data you've analyzed, how do shared ideas seem to be changing from those expressed by Marcus Aurelius?*

## Follow-Up: Present-Day Decline?

In 1776, British historian Edward Gibbon published the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In these books, he proposes that the empire's decline was due to the loss of "civic virtue." Citizens were putting their own desires above the needs of the community and state. At least since that time, people have been proposing that America (or Western Civilization) is on the same downward path.

*You've identified many changes that were a part of the crisis in the Roman Empire. Collect evidence about your own nation, society, or region in each category (e.g. economic problems, political violence, etc.).*

*Based on your data, identify and record similarities and differences between your society and that of third century Rome. Form a conclusion: Do you think your own nation or society is in decline?*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.2.two.html>

### ***For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:***

The changes and relationships investigated in this unit are, perhaps, the most significant ones possible in any study of history—or any other subject. Understanding cumulative and multiple causation within systems is a vital element of intellectual growth, neglected in much conventional schooling. This understanding is the best possible source of insight into possible futures.

**The objective of the unit is to introduce learners to system changes that form cumulative causation loops, and develop their ability to identify and understand these circular relationships and their role in generating profound historical transformations.**

In climate, global warming thaws the arctic tundra, releasing methane—one of the most potent greenhouse gases—causing further global warming. A “vicious circle,” is another name for cumulative causation.

In neighborhoods, if the appearance of houses and buildings starts degrading, the shabbiness leads to loss of property value. The loss of value reduces the likelihood that needed clean-up and repairs will be made by owners, and the appearance of the neighborhood degrades more. Those seeing trash thrown on the street are inclined to throw their own trash there, and the neighborhood eventually takes on the appearance of a dilapidated slum.

In economics, cumulative causation is central to runaway inflation such as that in Germany after World War I, in Argentina in the 1980s, and—within the scope of this unit—the Roman Empire during the third century crisis. Because of rising prices, a person’s money buys less and less. This motivates buyers to spend the money they have as quickly as possible before its value degrades. This quick spending drives down the value of money even faster, and sellers, knowing that the money they hold is degrading, raise prices to try to counteract the loss in value, increasing inflation. Part of this inflationary sequence is the necessity for higher wages to offset the loss in value of money, creating the familiar “wage/price spiral.”

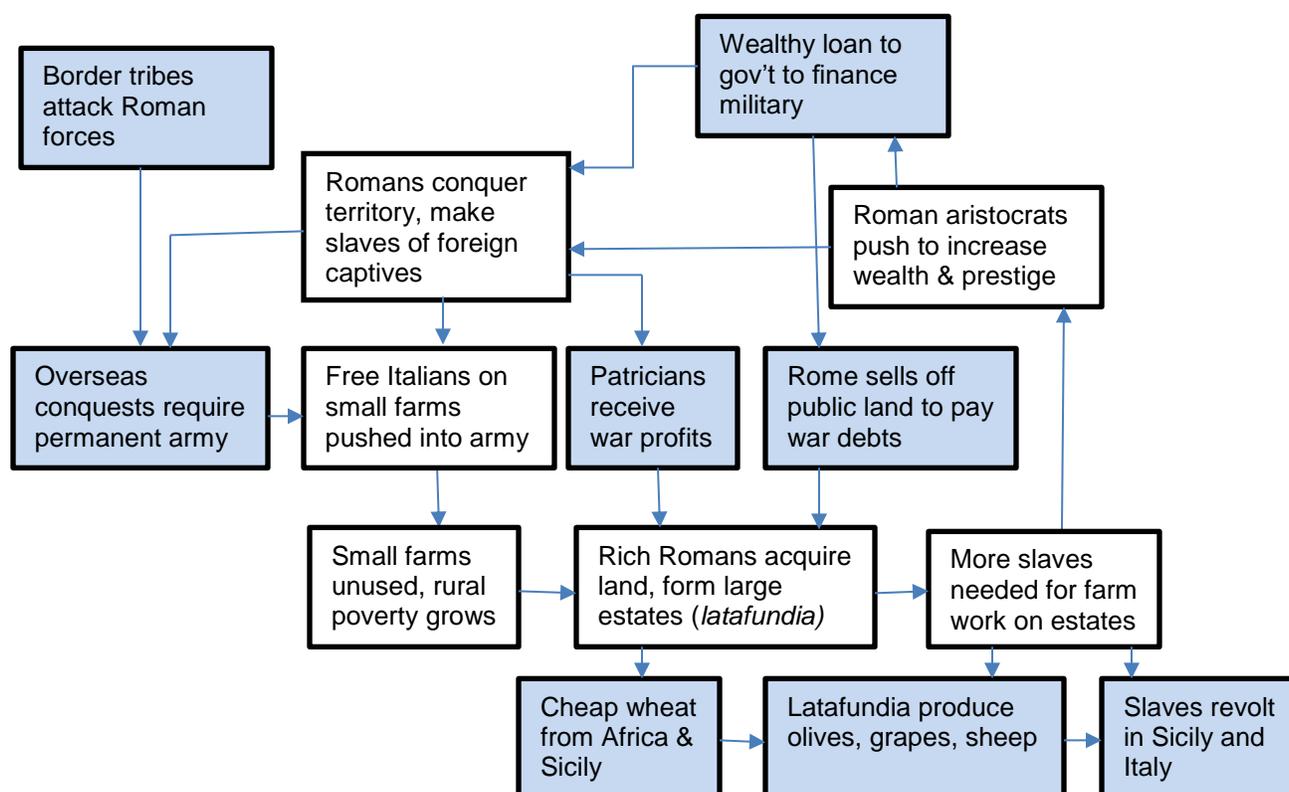
Not all feedback leads to the kind of “vicious circles” investigated in this unit. Some kinds of feedback increase stability. In economics, one classic example is that of market competition. The natural tendency of any retailer is to raise prices to maximize profits. However, if competition is present, another retailer will see an opportunity to make money by lowering prices for the same goods, attracting customers away from the first retailer. The first retailer is then may try to counteract by lowering prices. The process continues until both arrive at a stable price that can sustain a profit—or until one party with deep pockets drives prices so low that the second can’t compete. (The market isn’t magic—in reality, market forces are often much more complex than this simple example of the “invisible hand.”)

The primary objective of the unit, stated above, will help learners avoid oversimplified explanations for historical change, e.g. “Rome fell because of loss of civic virtue,” or “Rome declined due to excessive levels of lead in the drinking water,” etc. These “single causes” may have contributed to historical change, but real systems usually change for multiple interlocking reasons.

### Investigation: System Change in Rome

This preliminary activity introduces the concept of cumulative causation. You may wish to supplement this with a simple introduction to this subject from [Introduction to Systems, Part 5](#) (pp. 6-7).

One possible way of arranging the remaining changes, and connecting them to the original diagram:



Added boxes are shaded. The point of the exercise is not to reproduce this diagram, even approximately, but to have learners generate diagrams in which every arrow shows a reasonable systemic relationship. Their ability to develop the diagrams in this and the next investigation will, of course, vary with their level of intellectual skill. With younger learners, these should definitely be small-group activities.

The forces in a cumulative causation loop reinforce each other, moving a society toward major change. Make sure learners grasp the transforming power of feedback in systems.

This investigation is based on causal sequence information in Carroll Quigley's *The Evolution of Civilizations*.<sup>1</sup> One summary he makes about the change to large estates (p. 318):

<sup>1</sup> Quigley, Carroll, op. cit., pp. 316ff.

“This new pattern of agrarian organization created a demand for slaves that could hardly be satisfied. No slave system has ever been able to continue to function on the slaves provided by its own biological reproduction because the rate of human reproduction is too slow and the expense from infant mortality and years of unproductive upkeep of the young make this prohibitively expensive. This relationship is one of the basic causes of the American Civil War, and was even more significant in destroying ancient Rome. The normal method for supplying the slave needs of Classical Antiquity was by sales of war captives. But even this was not sufficient to meet the demand. It was, however, sufficient to make war an endemic element in Roman life.”

**Optional Historical Expansion:** We’ve skipped over some events in Roman history that most courses would include as necessary knowledge. (As we’ve said elsewhere, “coverage” of historical facts is not our objective.) If time permits, these subjects could be used for individual extra credit investigation and reporting:

- Punic Wars: Three wars fought between Rome and Carthage between 264 and 146 BCE. Carthage was the North African center of a civilization that began with the Canaanites at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, a seafaring people called “Phoenicians” by the Greeks, who dominated ship-based commerce around the Mediterranean until their final defeat by Rome. (The Canaanite/Phoenician Civilization could also be the focus of additional investigation.)
- Defeat of Macedonia: Four wars fought between Rome and Macedonia, the ruler of the Hellenistic-dominated Mediterranean (See Unit 13: Hellenistic Period) during the same period as the Punic Wars, also ended with Roman victory in 146 BCE. This left Rome in undisputed control of most of the shores of the Mediterranean.
- Roman general Julius Caesar’s conquest of Gaul, 51 BCE. Caesar became the head of government of republican Rome, but was assassinated in 44 BCE.
- A series of civil wars lasting about a century, ending in 30 BCE, left Julius Caesar’s grand-nephew and adopted son Octavius as sole ruler. The Roman Republic became the Roman Empire, with Octavius proclaimed “Augustus” (“Majesty”), the first Roman emperor.

### *Investigation: System Changes in the Empire*

The root causes for decline in the Roman Empire were built into its structure even during republican times, and became evident during the “crisis of the third century.” Although the crisis passed and the empire was superficially reunited late in the third century, the structural problems and underlying decline-creating changes remained and festered.

Learners, in small groups, should work their way through the data in this investigation one block at a time to develop the “change summary statements.” This will necessarily require days of class time to assemble the statements and then build the system change diagram. What’s happening here is important—take as long as it takes.

**Probable learner difficulties:** expressing the change or changes expressed in each data block *succinctly*, and at a *sufficiently generalized* level. “Praetorian Guard selects emperor by auction” is succinct, but “Praetorian Guard assumes control of empire” is more adequately generalized.

The main guide questions for each data block are, “What change is being described?” “Why is it important?” and “What other changes are likely to follow?” The teacher/mentor may need to reiterate these questions to maintain learner focus. If a follow-up change to one in the block is identified as nearly inevitable, it should become one of the listed “change summary statements.”

Quigley: “The political disorders of the third century can be measured by one fact: In sixteen years forty-six emperors or would-be emperors met death by violence.”<sup>1</sup>

The economic forces in this period, and their effect on coins, are discussed in a lively article by Hugh Kramer we recommend: <http://www.accla.org/actaaccla/kramer.html>. Understanding the economic system changes occurring in this or any other period isn’t easy. Kramer’s summary is clear and succinct.

Patrick Wyman, in an on-line article on the ending of gladiatorial contests, says, “Most devastating of all was a decades-long financial crisis that came about as a result of debasement of the coinage. Soldiers still had to be paid, and the only way to make up the huge budget shortfalls that came about due to barbarian raiding and usurpations was to devalue the currency, which caused runaway inflation.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Putting it together: System Change in the Third Century Crisis*

Assembling the final system change diagram will require oversize paper (at least 11 x 17 inches or international size A3) or a sheet of poster board. The procedure suggested with the earlier diagram—Post-it notes® and lightly-penciled arrows to allow changes—are recommended here as well.

(Some innovative teams may come up with ways to generate the diagrams via digital means.)

### *Follow-Up: Present-Day Decline?*

Statements that “this country is just like the Roman Empire before it fell” make the rounds from time to time. (One appeared on a friend’s Facebook posting seen by the author a few days before this was written.)

**Our position:** Comparing our society with the Roman Empire and arriving at useful generalizations is ridiculous, as can be seen by looking at the data in this unit. The differences in culture and condition between then and now are extreme, making it nearly impossible to draw conclusions about modern civilization from looking at the Roman example.

We’d hope and expect that this exercise would help learners see and appreciate these contrasts.

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<sup>1</sup> Quigley, Carroll, op. cit., pp. 326-7

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.vocativ.com/370756/the-death-of-gladiators/?utm\\_source=Digg&utm\\_medium=Referral&utm\\_campaign=DeathDay](http://www.vocativ.com/370756/the-death-of-gladiators/?utm_source=Digg&utm_medium=Referral&utm_campaign=DeathDay)

However, this is not to say there are no elements of decline in our society. Polarization of wealth, divisive political views, growth of oligarchic power, and other conditions may be pointing downward. Professor Quigley said that civilizations decline when their problem-solving instruments become *institutions*, more concerned with their own survival than with solving the original problems they were created to deal with. There's plenty of evidence that this is occurring.

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