

Problems in the Empire

IN AD369 an anonymous writer sent a document to the Emperor Valens. Like many other people in the Empire, he was very worried about the problems facing it. In his 'treatise' he describes the problems and suggests some solutions, which are occasionally rather far-fetched.

SOURCE 1 From the introduction to the treatise

I shall describe:

- how taxes can be reduced by half
- how settlers can be persuaded to develop frontier lands without anxiety
- how the gold and silver you [the Emperor] own can be doubled
- how you can please the soldiers by giving them more rewards than usual.

I shall also show:

- how a particularly fast warship is able, through a brilliant invention, to defeat ten other ships and sink them, without need for a large crew
- how a new invention can allow a horse to charge the enemy lines without needing a rider on his back
- how a new type of military bridge has been invented which can be carried around by a small number of men and 50 packhorses.

1. What evidence is there in Source 1 that:

- the government was running out of money
- people felt they were paying too much tax
- the army could not afford to pay as many soldiers as it needed?

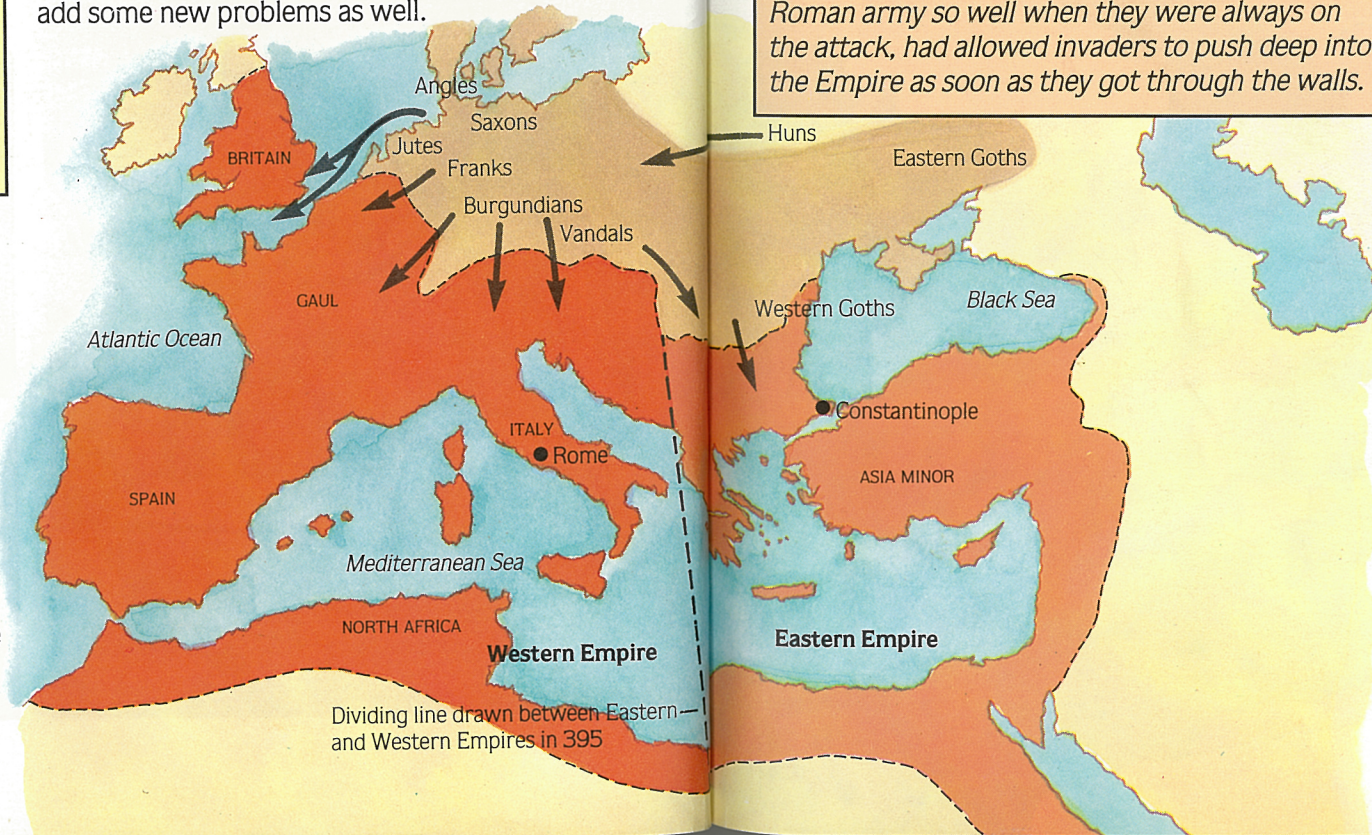
► **SOURCE 3** The Roman Empire and the barbarian tribes which threatened it. Since AD330 the Empire had been ruled from the Eastern capital, Constantinople

The writer then goes on to explain his ideas about why things have gone wrong and various things he believes the Emperor should do:

SOURCE 2 Extracts from the treatise

- Public grants have made the rich even more extravagant, while the poor are driven by their problems into crime.
- Now, in addition, comes the appalling greed of the provincial governors, which ruins the taxpayers.
- The vast spending on the army must be stopped.
- Above all, it must be recognised that wild nations are pressing upon the Roman Empire and howling round about it everywhere. Treacherous barbarians, protected by natural defences, are attacking every frontier. The state must take care of the frontier.
- When you've dealt with all these, one thing remains to you, Emperor – to get rid of dishonest laws.

The problems of the Roman Empire have been a favourite subject for historians to write about. Sources 4–6 come from three different histories of the Empire. They give us some extra information, about some of the problems already mentioned, and add some new problems as well.



SOURCE 4

The Empire's biggest single expenditure was the army. To pay for the army taxes had risen so much that an ordinary Roman was paying up to one third of his income in taxes and another one third in rent.

SOURCE 5

With no fixed method of choosing the next Emperor, there was nothing to stop cruel and selfish men from fighting for power. Time after time, successful generals marched their legions into Rome and killed the reigning Emperor, only to suffer the same fate themselves. In the space of 73 years there were 23 emperors, 20 of whom were murdered.

SOURCE 6

By the fourth century it was becoming very clear that the defensive system set up during the second century had a major flaw. It was too much like a lobster. Once attackers got through the armoured outer shell, there was nothing inside but undefended fleshy parts.

The Roman road system, which had served the Roman army so well when they were always on the attack, had allowed invaders to push deep into the Empire as soon as they got through the walls.



SOURCE 7 Border security was increased all over the Empire. Even in far-away Britain in the fourth century, the Romans built a series of coastal defences called the forts of the Saxon shore. This one is Pevensey Castle in Sussex

Activity

Work in pairs or groups.

1. Using all the sources on this page, make a list of problems facing the Empire.
2. Write each problem on a separate piece of paper.
3. Arrange the problems in order of importance. Put the biggest problem first. If you think two problems are equally important place them alongside each other.
4. Take the problems in order, starting from the top. In your group, try to think of solutions to that problem.
5. Sometimes your solutions to one problem might make another problem worse. Check each of your solutions against the other problems.
6. Now, on your own, write a 'Discussion paper' to be presented to the Emperor's advisers.
 - a) Set out the problems facing the Empire.
 - b) Suggest solutions that can be adopted.