

## Sample Essay

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Greek civilization and Roman civilization both experienced a period of “greatness” and then a period of decline. The decline of Greek civilization in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and Roman civilization from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. through the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 A.D. were the result of many factors.

### TASK

1. Identify and analyze the causes of decline for Greek civilization.
2. Identify and analyze the causes of decline for Roman civilization.
3. Compare and contrast the decline of Greek civilization with the decline of Roman civilization.

### INTRODUCTION

During the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Greek civilization reached its zenith during the “golden age” of Athens. This brief period of towering cultural achievements was tragically cut short by the devastation of the Peloponnesian War. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Alexander the Great created an empire that reinvigorated and spread Greek civilization throughout the Near East. The continual internecine warfare between his successors eventually paved the way for Roman conquest of the region in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. The spread of Roman civilization throughout the Mediterranean world reached its apex under the Pax Romana. This period of peace, stability, and prosperity was eventually eroded and undermined by continual civil wars and barbarian invasions that began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. and culminated in the collapse of the Western Empire in 476 A.D. The decline of both civilizations followed a similar pattern. Each experienced a period of internecine conflict that undermined their cohesion and vitality. Once weakened internally, both were then conquered by external threats that overwhelmed their diminished resources and divided peoples. Greek civilization co-existed with and co-opted its conquerors whereas Roman civilization in the West crumbled after the Empire ceased to exist.

### BODY PARAGRAPHS

- I. The “Golden Age” of Classical Greece ended with the Peloponnesian War because it resulted in the decline of Athens and another half century of warfare among the major Greek city-states.
  - A. Athens was defeated in the Peloponnesian War and lost its empire.
    1. Many of the best and brightest among the Athenian citizenry were killed during the war. Consequently, the city also lost their talents and the benefits of any potential contribution (political, economic, intellectual, and cultural) that they could have made to the city if they were alive.
    2. Athens’ defeat also resulted in the reduction of Athens’ navy. This prevented Athens from recovering its pre-eminent position in trade and military strength.

3. The loss of Athens's empire (the Delian League) also meant the loss of revenue from its former "allies." These funds had been used by Pericles to help Athens rebuild itself from the devastation of the Persian Wars. The beautification of the city with new monuments (i.e. the Acropolis) came to symbolize and embody the "golden age" of Athens. Without these funds, Athens was unable to replicate its former glory.
- B. The end of the Peloponnesian War did not bring about lasting peace. Instead, the Greek city-states continued to fight among themselves for hegemony over each other until Philip II of Macedon finally conquered them.
1. Spartan hegemony after the Peloponnesian War did not preserve peace because of their arrogance and repression of other Greeks. Thebes eventually defeated Sparta to dominate Greece until it, too, was defeated by a coalition of Greek city-states.
  2. Constant fighting divided the Greeks and exhausted their resources and manpower.
  3. The Persians encouraged and funded dissension as a means of keeping the Greeks distracted and preventing them from uniting into a united, potent threat against the Persian Empire.
  4. Philip II of Macedon manipulated the Greek city-states into a false sense of security all the while conquering them one by one. By the time the remaining Greek city-states realized the danger he posed, they were too few in number and too late in forming alliances to effectively oppose his conquest of Greece.
- II. The decline of Hellenistic civilization resulted from the inability of the empire created by Alexander the Great to remain politically united.
- A. The struggles between the successor kingdoms kept them divided.
1. Upon the death of Alexander the Great, his generals fought among themselves for control over his entire empire because each harbored ambitions to become the next great conqueror.
  2. Because none of Alexander's generals were able enough to defeat the rest, each of them used their armies to carve dynastic kingdoms out of the remains of his empire.
  3. The goal of each of these successor kingdoms was to preserve the power of their ruling dynasty and expand their territorial boundaries at the expense of the other successor kingdoms.
- B. The political disunity in the Hellenistic world allowed Rome to conquer the successor kingdoms one by one.
1. Rome conquered Greece and Macedonia with relative ease in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. because neither the Seleucid kingdom nor Ptolemaic Egypt came to their aid.
  2. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., only Ptolemaic Egypt remained semi-independent of Rome. However, Cleopatra's struggles with her brother for control of the throne gave Rome the opportunity to garrison Egypt with Roman legions. Cleopatra's fatal decision to side with Mark Anthony in his civil war against Octavian resulted in

the destruction of the Ptolemaic dynasty and direct Roman rule over Egypt as a conquered province.

- III. Roman civilization eventually declined beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. because of internal decay and external pressures that overwhelmed the deteriorating institutions of the Roman Empire.
- A. After the period of the “Five Good Emperors”, the Roman Empire experienced nearly a century of political turmoil.
1. The lack of an orderly system for succession resulted in conspiracies, intrigues, and often civil war upon the death of an emperor.
  2. Instability and uncertainty over the occupancy of the throne prevented the government from implementing meaningful and long-term reforms or policies addressing problems facing the Empire.
  3. The government became more dictatorial, was frequently inefficient, increasingly corrupt, and began to lose the loyalty of its subjects.
- B. The end of Pax Romana also resulted in economic decline throughout the Empire.
1. The loss of security forced many small farmers off their land as they fled for safety to large estates owned by powerful local lords. Once there, they became serfs and lost the incentive to improve farming methods or to increase agricultural production.
  2. The self-sufficiency of these large estates hampered trade and curtailed industry. The loss of security also diminished the flow of trade throughout the Empire. Both of these contributed to a general economic decline.
  3. As the Empire came under more pressure and needed more funds, heavy taxes became a major burden on the people and eroded their ambition to work harder.
  4. The pervasive use of slaves on agricultural estates and in industry caused widespread unemployment among the plebeians.
- C. During the twilight of the Empire, the erosion of traditional Roman values and way of life contributed to the disintegration of cohesion in Roman society.
1. The wealthy became more interested in living a life of luxury while the poor became more focused on survival. The early Roman ideals of patriotism, service, and morality had practically disappeared.
  2. Sharp class distinctions exacerbated divisions between Romans.
- D. The Roman army deteriorated in quality and quantity.
1. Some historians believe that the warlike nature of the early Romans was undermined by the spread of Christianity, which preached a message of peace and universal love.
  2. As fewer Romans volunteered to serve in the army, the Empire relied more heavily on barbarian mercenaries of questionable loyalty and training.
- E. Barbarian tribes overran the Empire’s frontiers and gained control over large parts of the Empire’s western provinces.
1. Germanic tribes of warlike, primitive peoples were attracted to the Empire’s wealth, fertile land, and advanced civilization.

2. Pressure from the Huns resulted in the large-scale migration of barbarians into the Empire. Wherever they settled, they often displaced or destroyed the power of local Roman governors and garrisons.
  3. Eventually, the barbarian tribes established new kingdoms within the borders of the Empire that nominally recognized the suzerainty of the Eastern Roman Emperor but were in reality autonomous units.
- IV. Although both civilizations declined as a result of divisions caused by internal strife and being conquered by external foes, Greek civilization continued to flourish under Roman rule whereas Roman civilization largely disappeared in the new barbarian kingdoms of Western Europe.
- A. The Romans adopted and preserved many aspects of Greek civilization.
    1. Romans copied Classical Greek literature. Many original Greek texts have been lost to time. The only reason why we know about them is because of Roman copies.
    2. Romans copied Classical Greek architecture. Many Roman buildings exemplify symmetry, simplicity, and the use of columns.
    3. Romans copied Classical Greek art and sculptures. Romans continued the use of mosaics, freestanding statues, and wall paintings first pioneered by the Greeks.
    4. Romans adopted Greek philosophies, such as Stoicism.
  - B. The barbarians that overran the Western Roman Empire tried but failed to preserve Roman civilization in their new kingdoms.
    1. Roman law was replaced by Germanic customs.
    2. Roman government institutions (the Senate, the offices of emperor, governor, etc.) were replaced by Germanic kings, chieftains, and councils.
    3. Pax Romana was replaced by continual wars and conflicts throughout the lands of the former Empire.
    4. Roman cities declined as the bulk of the population shifted away from urban centers into the countryside.
    5. The urban, commercial economy of the Roman Empire became an agricultural, subsistence economy of a fragmented Western Europe.

## CONCLUSION

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