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The Capitoline Geese of Rome

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The Capitoline geese were supposed to warn Rome of its downfall, yet the (Western) Roman Empire fell anyway. In 390 BC, as Celtic warriors attempted to scale the cliffs of the Capitoline Hill under the cover of darkness, the sacred geese of the goddess Juno raised the alarm.

Their loud honking awakened the defenders and helped prevent the city's capture. The geese became a symbol of vigilance, proof that danger can be detected before it is too late.

Yet Rome fell anyway.

Not that night, and not because its people lacked warning. Centuries later, the Western Roman Empire collapsed under the weight of problems that had been visible for generations. Political instability, economic stagnation, crushing taxation, demographic decline, epidemics, military overextension, and a growing disconnect between rulers and citizens gradually eroded the foundations of one of history's greatest powers.

The barbarians who crossed Rome's borders were not the root cause of the empire's decline. They were, in many ways, the final beneficiaries of a crisis that had been unfolding from within. By the time the last Western Roman emperor was deposed in AD 476, the empire had already been weakened by decades of internal decay.

This is perhaps the most important lesson Rome offers the modern world.

Civilizations rarely collapse because they receive no warnings. More often, they collapse because warnings are ignored, dismissed, or addressed too late. The danger is not always the enemy at the gate. Sometimes it is the slow deterioration of the institutions, economic systems, and social bonds that once made a society strong.

Many observers today see echoes of these challenges in Europe. Aging populations, rising public expenditures, bureaucratic expansion, political polarization, economic pressures, and declining trust in institutions are frequently cited as concerns. Europe is not Rome, and history never repeats itself in exactly the same way. The modern world is fundamentally different from the ancient one.

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Nevertheless, historical comparisons remain valuable, not because they predict the future, but because they remind us how great powers lose resilience.

The real question is not whether Europe is becoming a new Rome.

The real question is whether we can recognize our own Capitoline geese.

Because Rome's story teaches a simple but uncomfortable truth: warnings alone do not save civilizations. Even the loudest geese cannot save a society that refuses to confront the causes of its decline.

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