

CONTENTS

Preface: Hindsight vs. Foresight	v
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Introduction

Overview	1
The <i>Decision Making in World History</i> Series	1
How to Use This Book	2
Lesson Components	2
What Is Decision Making? (<i>Student Handout 1</i>)	4
P-A-G-E (<i>Student Handouts 2 and 3</i>)	6
Strategies	8
Evaluation Tips for Student Handout 5 (<i>Pages 24–25</i>)	8
Evaluating Students	11
Sources	12
Student Handout 1: Guide to Thoughtful Decision Making	15
Student Handout 2: P-A-G-E Analysis for Decision Making	17
Student Handout 3: P-A-G-E Explanations and Examples	18
Student Handout 4: Decision-Making Log	23
Student Handout 5: Evaluating Decision Making	24

Lesson 1: The Fall of Rome

Teacher's Guide	27
Sources	35
Vocabulary	36
Student Handout 1 (Short): What Policies Will You Choose as Diocletian?	37
Student Handout 2 (Short): Outcomes of Diocletian's Decision	40
Student Handout 3 (Complex): What Policies Will You Choose as Diocletian?	42
Student Handout 4 (Complex): Outcomes of Diocletian's Decision	47
Student Handout 5: Emperor Diocletian Price Edict, 301 CE	52

Lesson 2: Feudalism

Teacher's Guide	53
Sources	60
Vocabulary	61
Student Handout 1: What Will You Do as a Lord in 900 CE?	62
Student Handout 2: What Will You Do as a Peasant in 900 CE?	66
Student Handout 3: Outcomes of the Lord of France's Decision	69
Student Handout 4: Outcomes of the Peasant's Decision	72
Student Handout 5: Excerpts from a Feudal Contract	75

CONTENTS

Lesson 3: The Crusades

Teacher's Guide.....	77
Sources	86
Vocabulary.....	87
Student Handout 1 (Short): Reforming the Catholic Church—Pope Urban II in 1095	88
Student Handout 2 (Short): Responding to the Pope's Call—a French Knight in 1095	92
Student Handout 3 (Short): Outcomes of Pope Urban's Decision.....	94
Student Handout 4 (Short): Outcomes of the French Knight's Decision	97
Student Handout 5 (Complex): Reforming the Catholic Church—Pope Urban II in 1095....	99
Student Handout 6 (Complex): Responding to the Pope's Call—a French Knight in 1095...	104
Student Handout 7 (Complex): Outcomes of Pope Urban's Decision	107
Student Handout 8 (Complex): Outcomes of the French Knight's Decision	111
Student Handout 9: Excerpts from <i>The Slaughter of the Rhineland Jews</i> , 1096	114

Lesson 4: The Magna Carta

Teacher's Guide.....	117
Sources	125
Vocabulary.....	126
Student Handout 1 (Short): Rebellion by the Nobles.....	127
Student Handout 2 (Short): Outcomes of King John's Decision	130
Student Handout 3 (Complex): What Will You Do about the Loss of Normandy?	132
Student Handout 4 (Complex): Rebellion by the Nobles	135
Student Handout 5 (Complex): Outcomes of King John's Decision.....	139
Student Handout 6: Excerpts from the Magna Carta.....	142

Lesson 5: The Mongols

Teacher's Guide.....	145
Sources	152
Vocabulary.....	153
Student Handout 1: Shah Mohammad in 1218	154
Student Handout 2: Possible Questions and Answers	156
Student Handout 3: Outcomes of Shah Mohammad's Decision in 1218.....	158
Student Handout 4: Genghis Khan in 1206	160
Student Handout 5: Outcomes of Genghis Khan's Decisions in 1206.....	162
Student Handout 6: Excerpts from Mongol Laws (the Yasa)	165

Lesson 6: Mansa Musa

Teacher's Guide	167
Sources	174
Vocabulary	176
Student Handout 1 (Short): Economic and Political Decisions	177
Student Handout 2 (Short): Religious Decisions	180
Student Handout 3 (Short): Outcomes of Mansa Musa's Decision	184
Student Handout 4 (Complex): Economic and Political Decisions	189
Student Handout 5 (Complex): Religious Decisions	192
Student Handout 6 (Complex): Outcomes of Mansa Musa's Decision	196
Student Handout 7: Excerpts from a Report on Mansa Musa in Cairo	202

Lesson 7: Medieval China Decisions

Teacher's Guide	205
Sources	212
Vocabulary	213
Student Handout 1 (Short): Medieval China Decisions	214
Student Handout 2 (Short): Outcomes of Medieval China Decisions	217
Student Handout 3 (Complex): Medieval China Decisions	220
Student Handout 4 (Complex): Outcomes of Medieval China Decisions	224
Student Handout 5: Excerpts from an Inscription on Chinese Voyages	229

LESSON 1: THE FALL OF ROME

Teacher's Guide

INTRODUCTION

■ Overview

Many people are interested in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, and historians theorize about various primary causes of the decline. (See the “Teacher Notes to Expand Discussion” section for an overview of the theories.) This lesson focuses on the decisions made by Emperor Diocletian and how they are related to some of the primary causes of Rome’s fall. Because the decline of the Roman Empire happened over the course of hundreds of years, there is no one decision (or one emperor) that captures all of the causes; some of Diocletian’s decisions, however, will help students better understand them.

■ Vocabulary

- barbarians—people from “uncivilized” cultures (from the Roman perspective)
- bureaucracy—a large number of government officials who follow strict rules
- deficit—spending more in a year than is taken in from taxes
- Diocletian—Roman Emperor from 284 to 305 CE
- empire—a group of states or peoples ruled by a single, supreme authority
- national security—protection of a country and its citizens against all threats

■ Decision-Making Skills Emphasized

- Identify underlying problems
- Consider other points of view
- Ask questions about context
- Establish realistic goals
- Generate ethical options
- Predict unintended consequences
- Play out the options

LESSON PLAN A: IN-DEPTH LESSON (40–50 minutes)

There are two sets of handouts for this lesson. Handouts 1 and 2 are labeled “Short” and are targeted at middle school students, while Handouts 3 and 4 are labeled “Complex” and are geared more toward high school or more advanced students. The handouts are labeled “Short” and “Complex” rather than “Middle School” and “High School” in order to give teachers more flexibility in using the handouts without stigma (allowing the use of short handouts with high school students, for example). Compared to Handouts 3 and 4, Handouts 1 and 2 are shorter, are less intricate, and contain more cues to aid with reading comprehension. The teacher can choose the handouts that fit the students better or tailor learning by giving Handouts 1 and 2 to students who struggle with reading comprehension and Handouts 3 and 4 to more advanced students.

■ Procedure

Middle School Plan (Short Handouts 1–2)

Tell students that in this lesson, they will be making some important decisions as Emperor Diocletian of Rome in 286 CE. They will not know what actually happened until *after* they have made the decisions themselves.

Distribute Handout 1 and have students read Problem 1 on national security. If necessary, review the situation, the locations from Map A, and the two choices. Is there any vocabulary that students do not understand? Are there any other questions? Have students individually decide on what they will do. Remind them that they can choose both, one, or create an options of their own. If you use the **P-A-G-E** sheet for making decisions, encourage students to refer to that sheet to remind themselves of the decision-making criteria before deciding.

After students have chosen their option(s), have them pair up and discuss their choices. The students in each pair do not have to agree; they are exchanging views in order to help them think through the problem more deeply. Circulate through the room to answer questions and clear up misunderstandings. Bring the class back together, conduct a preliminary vote on each option (to improve the military and/or increase the number of government officials), and discuss reasons for and against each proposal. You might want to have students look once again at the **P-A-G-E** sheet as they make their arguments. Use the board to record student votes and arguments. Because some students may have changed their thinking, have the class revote.

Repeat this procedure for Handout 1, Problem 2 on government spending. Here there are five options, so you might want to review each of the options with students. Remind students that they can select as many options as they like or create an option of their own.

Option for Premortem: To help students think through their decision, ask them to consider that it is years later and their choice (for example, spending more money to improve the military in Problem 1 or increasing the tax rate in Problem 2) ended up being a disaster. They are to go back to discussion in pairs and determine what the disaster was, what went wrong, and how likely the problems are to have occurred. Should they change their decision in light of their analysis?

When both problems in Handout 1 have been discussed and voted on, distribute the outcomes in Handout 2. Tell students to read the results and answer the questions for analysis at the end of the sheet.

Questions for Analysis Possible Answers

1. Evaluate the decisions made by Diocletian. How well did he do on these decisions?

Most historians argue that Diocletian made good decisions in improving the army and avoiding disasters by not cutting taxes, not cutting spending, and by continuing to pay the soldiers. Beyond those points there is disagreement.

2. Evaluate your decisions on these problems. On what did you do well or poorly in terms of decision making?

Answers will vary.

3. About 150 years after the Diocletian's reign, the Roman Empire fell apart. Based on what you learned in this lesson in Handouts 1 and 2, what do you think were some of the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire?

Among the many possible causes of the fall of the Roman Empire, this lesson emphasizes the following: outside threats from Germanic tribes and the Persians, internal disunity and rebellion, taxes being too high or too low, and too much or not enough government spending.

High School Plan (Complex Handouts 3–4)

Follow the Middle School Plan (in this chapter), except substitute Handout 3 for Handout 1, and Handout 4 for Handout 2. Remind students that, in both problems, they can select as many options as they like or create an option of their own. For Problem 3, students can only select one of the two options.

When the problems in Handout 3 have been discussed and voted on, distribute the outcomes in Handout 4. Tell students to read the results and answer the questions for analysis at the end of the sheet.

Questions for Analysis Possible Answers

1. Evaluate the decisions made by Diocletian. How well did he do on these decisions?

Most historians argue that Diocletian made good decisions by improving the army, not cutting taxes, cutting spending, and continuing to pay the soldiers. Beyond those points there is disagreement.

2. Evaluate your decisions on these problems. What did you do well or poorly in terms of decision making?

Answers will vary.

3. About 150 years after the Diocletian's reign, the Roman Empire fell apart. Based on what you learned in this lesson in Handouts 3 and 4, what do you think were some of the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire?

Among the many possible causes of the fall of the Roman Empire, this lesson emphasizes the following: outside threats from Germanic tribes and the Persians, internal disunity and rebellion, taxes being too high or too low, too much or not enough government spending, inflation, and persecution of Christians.

Option for Primary Source: When the class finishes discussing the decisions in Handout 4, have students read the primary source (Price Edict) in Handout 5 and answer the questions at the end of the sheet.

Questions for Analysis Possible Answers

1. What arguments does Emperor Diocletian make to get Romans to support maximum prices (price controls)?

One argument he stressed is that the people charging high prices are damaging the public welfare.

2. If you were a Roman citizen at the time, would you have been convinced by these arguments?

Answers will vary.

3. How reliable is this document as a source?

It is a primary source, as it is Diocletian's speech supporting price controls. There are many other sources detailing that Diocletian imposed wage and price controls. Diocletian, however, has a reason to lie to get support for wage and price controls.

■ Reflecting on Decision Making

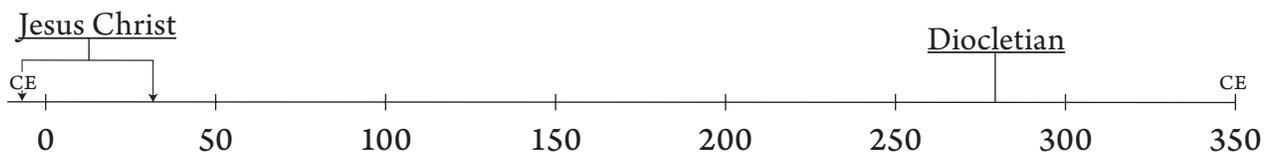
Ask students how well they did in decision making on this problem. Which decision-making skills were especially important in making these decisions as Emperor Diocletian? Which of the letters of **P-A-G-E** applied especially to these decisions? (See the "Decision-Making Analysis" section to follow for ideas.) Ask students about what they did well or poorly in terms of the **P-A-G-E** analysis of decision making. Discuss their answers.

■ Putting the Actual Decisions into Historical Context

Ask students whether the decisions made by Diocletian were more the result of historical forces or the decisions made by individual leaders. Those arguing for the role of individual leaders will point out that decisions made by Diocletian were due to his forceful personality and beliefs. Those supporting historical forces would argue that the threats from outside forces in addition to the internal threat of rebellion shaped his decisions.

WHAT POLICIES WILL YOU CHOOSE AS DIOCLETIAN?

Complex



The year is 286 CE and you are the Roman Emperor Diocletian. You took over two years ago during a period of great instability for Rome.

For the past seventy years, there have been twenty-three emperors, each only ruling for an average of fewer than three years. To make things worse, twenty of the twenty-three emperors were killed by Roman rivals. There have been almost constant attempts to overthrow the emperor and the government. In fact, your army had to defeat a Roman rival's soldiers in order for you to become the emperor. In the past century, more Roman soldiers have probably been killed by other Romans than by enemy soldiers.

As a result of these internal threats and rebellions, the emperors and their closest advisers have been more concerned with their survival than with governing. The rebellions most often occur in the outlying areas of the empire, because, according to your advisers, the people in these faraway regions do not think the government in Rome pays much attention to their concerns. For example, barbarians—Germanic tribes in the west and Persians in the east (see Map A)—occasionally attack Roman citizens. The Roman Empire has a formidable army, so no single barbarian group could defeat it. These barbarians, however, can nevertheless attack outlying towns and farms and slaughter Roman citizens. Romans want a stronger defense of the frontier areas, seeing barbarians as a threat to their safety.

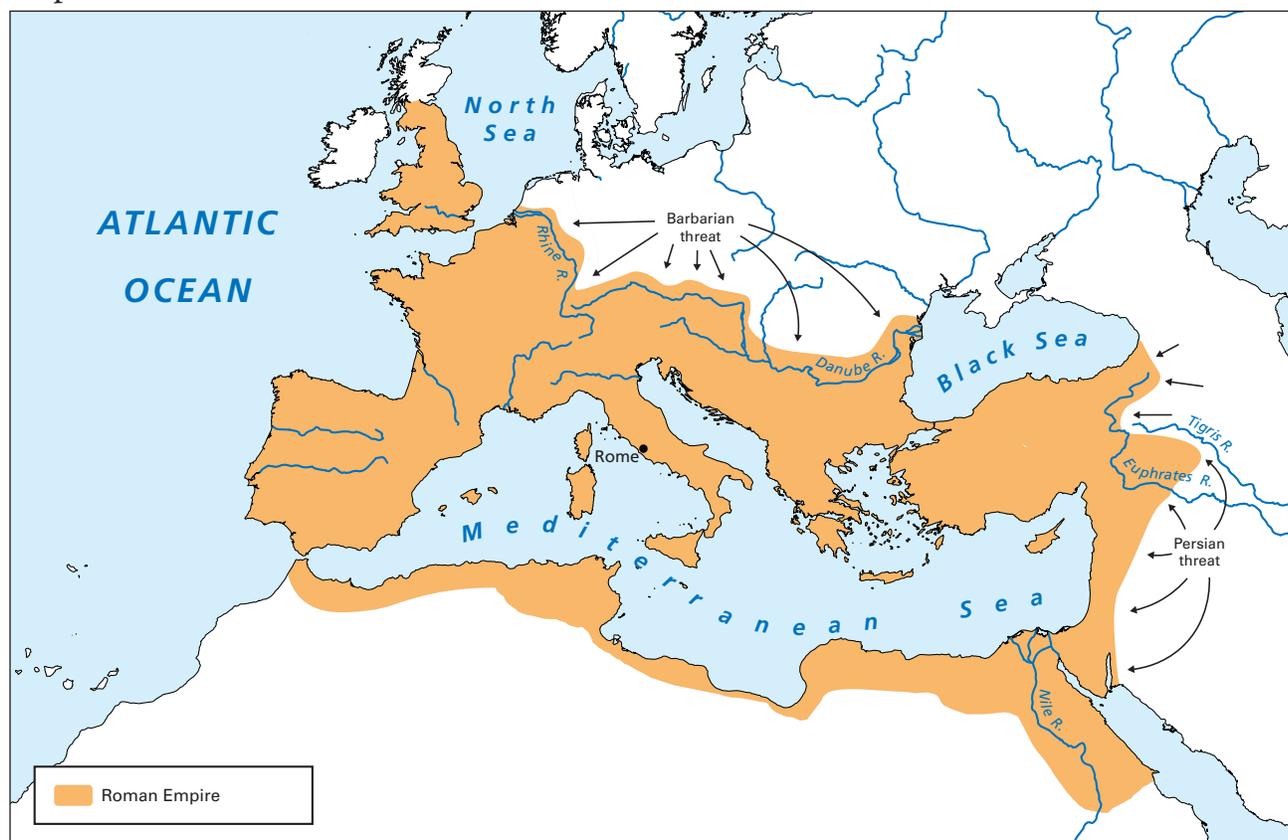
While Roman roads are very good, the distances involved in such a large empire—from Western Spain to the Euphrates River—make moving an army a lengthy process; it takes about six months to move from one end of the empire to the other. Communication is so bad that commanders in each area are forced to decide for themselves about strategy and tactics.

Because of the threat of rebellion from within the army, emperors have been keeping the toughest and strongest forces close by in order to keep tabs on their generals. The effect of this suspicion causes the best units in the army to stay with the emperor, often far from the edges of the empire where they are most needed. The army is incapable of meeting the existing challenges on the frontiers.



Head from statue of Diocletian

Map A:



Threats from foreign fighters to the Roman Empire at the time of Diocletian

Inflation is another problem. The price of wheat, for example, has risen one hundred times (wheat that used to cost \$1 a bushel now costs \$100 a bushel), while soldiers' pay has only doubled in the same time amount of time. Soldiers' pay is so low compared to current prices that they supplement their wages by taking food and other items, such as cloth, from farmers in proximity of their encampments. The farmers are understandably upset by these actions. Many Romans have since fled areas rife with barbarian skirmishes and army plundering, and now there are many empty farms throughout the empire.

■ Problem 1—National Security

There exist a number of proposals to strengthen the security of the Roman Empire. One suggestion (Option A) divides the empire into four regions, with an emperor for each region—a Tetrarchy. There would still be one empire, but it would be under the leadership of four emperors—two top emperors (augusti) and two secondary leaders (caesars). One disadvantage of this option is that you, personally, would be giving up complete power over the empire. In addition, you would be opening up the possibility of rebellion for one of the other three emperors, who would each have a power base and an army. It would require a great deal of trust and coordination to make this system work effectively. On the other hand, there would be several advantages to this type of system. First, there would be a much more effective defense of the empire, because each emperor would be focused on his own area; any weakness in the defenses would be much more likely to be fixed.