

# Fall, but no decline

## The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History

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*Peter Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History, (London: Macmillan, 2005)*

One of history's greatest mysteries, Peter Heather tells us in his new book, is "the strange death of the Roman Empire." An up-to-date general study of the fall of the Roman Empire has long been needed. Heather is attempting to fill the gap. He draws on material previously only available in specialist publications to produce a synthesis that takes into account the last 40 years of research into late antiquity.

Heather is well placed to produce such a work. He has published widely on subjects relating to the late Roman Empire and its successor states in the west. His previous book, *The Goths*, has become essential reading for all students of the period. His latest book is slightly different in style. It aims to be accessible—this is a book that can be read for pleasure—yet it is no less scholarly than his other work. Both the style and the questions addressed take the book beyond the narrow audience of those who have to write essays on the late Roman Empire.

The attempt at accessibility has had one unfortunate consequence. Heather seems to feel it necessary to take a stab at writing in a post-modern vein. We find "grand narratives" condemned and there is much talk about "the other." Happily, we are spared, although whether for reasons of good taste or common sense I could not say, the now ubiquitous verb "othering." Heather's postmodernism seems to be more stylistic than philosophical and does not detract too much from what is otherwise a solid empirical survey.

Despite this drawback it is a book which will be of value to any one who is interested in history, or wants to understand the nature of Europe before it acquired the nation-state system with which we are familiar. Rome established a common culture from the Euphrates to the Tyne which survived for over 400 years. Studying the history of the Roman Empire offers us a different perspective on Europe, Africa and the Middle East. What is now divided into so many rival nation states was once ruled as a single political entity. Quite apart from its intrinsic interest, the history of the Roman Empire allows us to see just how historically specific the nation-state is.

Heather's book focuses on the late Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. That is the period of the Gothic wars and the rise of the Huns to 476 when the last Emperor of the west, Romulus, was deposed. By this time, the western Empire was divided into the numerous successor states established by the Germanic invasions and Roman culture was disintegrating.

One of the great strengths of the book is that Heather is able to draw on some of the less well-known late Roman writers. The letters of the fourth century senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus are not widely known outside of a small circle of specialists, but offer a contemporary picture of private and public life among the elite of the

Roman Empire. The same is true of the poet Sidonius Apollinaris, who found himself having to adapt to Gothic rule in the south of France in the fifth century.

Heather combines this literary material with recent archaeological evidence to give a much fuller impression of the late Roman Empire than has previously been available to the general reader. He describes the prosperous late Roman villas of the Trier area in Germany, the density of rural settlement in Roman Syria and North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries. On the barbarian side of the frontier, he explains the importance of the discovery of substantial Germanic villages where excavation has revealed that more intensive agricultural techniques supported a growing population which was becoming more socially differentiated. Rich "princely graves" give us evidence of an aristocratic layer emerging among the Germanic tribes. Such a coherent combination of the literary and the archaeological, the Roman and the non-Roman evidence is unusual. Heather integrates it well without ever becoming bogged down in superfluous detail.

There are two parts to his thesis about the fall of the Roman Empire: firstly, that the Roman Empire did indeed collapse and, secondly, that the Empire was brought down by attack from the outside without any appreciable internal decline. The first part of this thesis might seem like a statement of the obvious. Western Europeans, the inhabitants of North African and the Middle East are clearly not living in the Roman Empire today. But the theory that that there was an essential continuity between the Roman Empire and its successor states has gained a wide currency in academic circles.

Heather accepts that in some parts of the western Empire the wealthy held on to their land and social position. Some aspects of Roman culture survived, but, he thinks that it would be a mistake to minimize the importance of the disappearance of the western Roman state. Roman political domination involved the rapid spread of urbanization as local elites adopted Roman public and domestic styles of building. This was the concrete manifestation of a cultural change that was also expressed in the spread of education that would equip the next generation with the polished Latin that would qualify them to participate in the ruling circles of the Empire. Once that state ceased to exist there was no reason to have one's children expensively educated. Even where Roman landowners survived, they had to learn new ways to impress the semi-literate local king on whom their status now depended.

Literary culture survived to some degree in the Church, but even the Church had to adapt and evolve institutionally. The local organization of the Church began to reflect the new boundaries of kingdoms that cut across the old administrative structures. Centrally, the Popes assumed an importance that would have been inconceivable if the western emperors had survived. In the eastern Empire the Patriarchs

of Constantinople never achieved the degree of political authority that the Popes of Rome secured for themselves.

The first part of Heather's thesis is a welcome corrective to the view that the Middle Ages should be seen as a continuation of the Empire because the kings of the successor states liked to imagine that they were Roman Emperors. The second part of the thesis is a little more problematical. We are asked to believe that the western Roman Empire collapsed, but did not decline. It was destroyed, Heather argues, because of an exogenous shock—the barbarian invasions.

Heather's account of the invasions is excellent. This was a complex process lasting over several centuries and involving alliances as well as conflict between Romans and barbarians. Heather succeeds in providing a narrative of the invasions that is at once clear and yet sufficiently detailed to give an impression of the shifting forces involved. His account is particularly interesting for the emphasis it gives to the impact of the collapse of the Hunnic Empire following the death of Attila in 453. Rather than saving the Roman Empire from a terrible scourge, as the Romans themselves thought, Attila's death created a situation of violent instability as the subject peoples broke away from the Hunnic Empire. The collapse of the Hunnic Empire destroyed the international balance of power on which the Roman Empire had come to depend. Without the Huns, the Goths could not be held in check.

This is certainly a richer account of the barbarian invasions than anyone has previously offered, but it is not enough to explain the fall of the Roman Empire. Even assuming that the "exogenous shock" was sufficient to overwhelm the military defences of the Empire in the west, why were the invaders not absorbed culturally and politically? This process can be observed in the Chinese Empire and the Roman Empire had successfully absorbed invaders, refugees and immigrants before. It is hard to explain this without an internal decline. Otherwise, we cannot explain the political collapse of the central administration and the concomitant cultural collapse.

Heather is determined to deny that Rome was suffering any kind of economic or social crisis. He admits a third century fiscal crisis, but argues that this was ultimately overcome. Rome was as prosperous and as socially stable as it ever was by the time it faced the barbarian invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries.

This argument does not hold water. The crisis of the third century demanded a shift of power and tax revenue to the centre. By the year 400 a top bureaucracy of about 6,000 people were running the Empire. Beyond that was a layer of less wealthy landowners who might aspire to official or semi-official professional positions. Heather allows that, at most, five percent of the population controlled all the wealth and power in Roman society. He does not see that as a problem. But no society that is based on such a gross inequality can be described as stable.

Heather seems to think that this massively unequal distribution of wealth and power was, and remained, the normal of state of affairs. The Empire had always been run for the benefit of an elite, he argues, and the wealthy, leisured lives of the Roman landed elite were to provide the blueprint for the landed aristocracy in Europe for the next millennium and a half. The letters of Symmachus, Heather tells us, are like Jane Austen in togas.

Perhaps if he had pursued the analogy a little further it would have been more enlightening. Jane Austen's world sat on the edge of a volcano in the form of the French revolution. That cataclysmic event makes no appearance in her books, but certainly impacted on her own family and friends. The world revealed in Symmachus's letters may

have looked stable, but that does not mean it was so.

The late Roman Empire was a society with an extremely limited productive capacity because the level of technological development was low. Its agricultural productivity was barely above subsistence. Roman society exploited that limited technology with immense ingenuity and skill and could sustain large cities, fine public buildings and a road system that has never been surpassed until modern times. But the life that Symmachus and his friends lived depended on the extraction of huge amounts of surplus from an inelastic agricultural economy. Our interpretation of the evidence from literary and archaeological sources depends on how we understand social and economic relations. Wealthy villas can be seen as a sign of rural prosperity when in fact they are a sign of extreme exploitation that has reached unsustainable levels.

Roman society did not produce a resolution of this crisis from within. There was no class capable of taking society in a different direction. In this sense, it did indeed fall because of an exogenous shock, but internal social and economic processes had prepared the way over a long period for that shock to bring about the fall.

The position of the mass of the Roman population deteriorated over time. By the third century a poor Roman citizen could be flogged while a rich citizen was protected from this punishment. The evidence of a rich citizen had more weight in a court of law. Without the protection of the courts it became easier for poor citizens to be reduced to a position of virtual slavery. Wealth flowed to the top to men like Symmachus and Sidonius.

The late G.E.M. de Ste Croix provided an historical materialist analysis of this process. He argued "the Roman political system (especially when Greek democracy had been wiped out ...) facilitated a most intense and ultimately destructive economic exploitation of the great mass of the people, whether slave or free, and it made radical reform impossible. The result was that the propertied class, the men of real wealth, who had deliberately created this system for their own benefit, drained the life-blood from their world and thus destroyed Graeco-Roman civilisation over a large part of the empire.... That I believe," concludes de Ste Croix, "was the principal reason for the decline of Classical civilisation."\*

This is a more satisfactory explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire than a simple exogenous shock.

\* *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*, Duckworth, 1982, pp. 502-03



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