

ISSUE 6



Were Internal Factors Responsible for the Fall of the Roman Empire?

YES: Adrian Goldsworthy, from *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (Yale University Press, 2009)

NO: Peter Heather, from "The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire in Western Europe," *The English Historical Review* (February 1995)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Historian Adrian Goldsworthy states that internal military and political conditions were responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire.

NO: Professor of history Peter Heather claims that the invasion of the Huns forced other barbarians to use tribal unity as a survival technique and to seek safety within the confines of the Roman Empire, thus permitting the invasion of the Huns to bring about the fall of the Roman Empire.

Periodization illuminates the past by delineating significant changes in humanity's progress from one time period to another. The European Renaissance, which marks the transition from the medieval to the modern world, is one such example. The decline and fall of the Roman Empire is another, because it notes the end of the Greco-Roman classical era and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Greek and Roman cultures provided Western civilization with some of its greatest historical and cultural endowments. Thus, the demise of these cultures continues to interest Western historians.

Not until the Italian Renaissance, with its renewed interest in classical antiquity, did the fall of Rome, along with its antecedent causes, earn an official place in the world of scholarship. Humanist scholar Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) (1304–1374) blamed internal problems for the empire's demise. In the next century, however, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), perhaps the first modern political scientist, blamed the constant attacks of neighboring barbarians, which eventually wore down the empire and caused its collapse.

Modern historical scholarship on the fall of Rome began with Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), who injected another variable into the mix. In his

multivolume work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (first published between 1776 and 1782), Gibbon stated that the rise of Christianity may have played a significant role in Rome's collapse. Because he was a product of Europe's Enlightenment era and shared its skepticism regarding the effects of organized religion on a civilization's progress, many modern historians consider his focus on Christianity to be overemphasized. In general, he took a more fatalistic approach to the Empire's demise, stating that "the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness."

More recently, countless reasons have been given for Rome's fall: the disintegration of the imperial economy; agricultural problems caused by climatic changes; manpower shortages due to lead poisoning from the empire's water pipes; destruction of the leadership class through imperial executions and civil wars; racial mixing that diluted the old Roman stock; the drain of gold and silver; widespread slavery that made the rich richer and the poor poorer; and a class war waged by peasant soldiers against the ruling class. This list is not complete, but it does testify to the interest historians have taken in the fall of Rome.

While recognizing the probability of multiple causation in most historical events, twenty-first century historians continue to debate the reasons for Rome's demise by analyzing and evaluating the effects of internal and external forces. By applying the Roman experience to the rise and fall of other civilizations—past and present—contemporary historians continue to revitalize the debate.

Our two historians reflect this internal/external dialogue. Peter Heather stresses the role of the barbarians in the empire's downfall, but offers a different spin. The fourth century C.E. invasion of Europe by the Huns was key to the fall of the Roman Empire, in his view, because it forced Germanic tribes to seek safety within the empire's boundaries where they developed a sense of unity, which ultimately gave them the power to supplant it. Adrian Goldsworthy provides a new spin for the internal side of the argument. He states that internal disintegration within the Roman army, caused by a variety of factors, made it impossible for the legions to resist the barbarian pressures. If these weaknesses had not existed, the Empire might have been able to survive this crisis.



How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower

It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which will (human nature being what it is), at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.'—*Thucydides, writing at the very end of the fifth century B.C.*

The Western Roman Empire ceased to exist in the fifth century. Even those scholars who talk of transformation admit this simple fact. The Eastern Roman Empire lasted for another thousand years until it was overrun by the Turks. Even at its height it could never hope to dominate the world. It was a power, rather than a superpower. The sixth century demonstrated that it lacked the capacity to recapture the lost western provinces. In the seventh century the Arab conquests stripped it of even more territory. It continued to exist as just one amongst many powers in the known world, and some of these were geographically larger and both militarily and financially stronger. Even so, none could be said to have replaced the Roman Empire or matched its former size and power.

None of this happened quickly, but viewed in the long term it cannot be seen as anything other than decline and—in the case of the Western Empire—fall. It was a long process and no single event, lost war or decision can be said to have caused it. The basic question remains of why this occurred, and whether the most important cause was internal problems or external threats. Throughout their history the Romans had always fought a lot of wars against very varied opponents. They had suffered some serious defeats, but had always recovered. There was never any question that such defeats could cause the collapse of the empire. Yet this did happen in the west in the fifth century and therefore we must ask whether the threats faced by the Late Roman Empire were greater than those of earlier periods. This in turn raises two basic possibilities. Either one or more individual enemy was more formidable, or there were simply so many simultaneous threats that the empire could not cope.

It is usually asserted that the Sassanid Persians were far more formidable than the Parthians, or indeed any enemy the Romans had faced for centuries.

They certainly won more victories over the Romans than the Parthians. On the other hand, the levels of Persian aggression varied enormously and there were long periods of peace. Some Persian kings needed the wealth and glory offered by a successful war with Rome. Usually this was necessary to secure their own hold on power. The largest Roman armies of the period were those sent east to face the Persians and massive resources were expended on frontier fortifications. Having said that, only border territory was ever actually lost to Persia and even this was on a fairly modest scale. The idea that from its first appearance in the third century Persia was an especially deadly opponent—even a rival superpower—remains firmly entrenched in the minds of scholars. It is a belief that is very hard to reconcile with the evidence, but this does not mean that it will not continue to be asserted.

Groups from the tribal peoples of Europe eventually took control of the Western Empire. However, it is extremely difficult to see major change in the military efficiency of the tribal peoples of Europe from Julius Caesar's day to that of Stilicho's or Aetius'. To some degree larger tribal confederations appeared, but we should never exaggerate the degree of unity. It is convenient to talk of the Franks or the Goths, in spite of the fact that these remained divided into many separate and sometimes mutually hostile tribes. At no stage before the creation of the barbarian kingdoms inside the provinces was there a single king of all the Franks or any other people. Attila united both his own people and allied and subject races to a remarkable degree. Yet, once again, he was unable to take much territory from the Romans and was essentially a raider and extortionist on a grand scale. Other powerful barbarian leaders had emerged in the past and, like Attila, they had proved unable to pass on their power to a successor. The Huns were a frightening enemy, but it is worth remembering that their power had been broken before the final collapse of the Western Empire and that they had anyway devoted most of their attentions to the Eastern Empire.

There is no good case for claiming that the enemies of the Late Roman Empire were simply more formidable than those of earlier periods. This also makes it harder to argue that the Roman Empire had to adapt in the third century to face new and more dangerous threats, most of all the Sassanid 'superpower'. Does this mean that it was the sheer quantity rather than the scale of individual threats that was the problem? There certainly do seem to have been more major wars in the third and subsequent centuries than in the early Principate. In particular, raiding by barbarian groups in Europe is much more prominent in our sources. Such predatory attacks, often on a small scale, were not new. In the past they had always increased in scale and frequency whenever the frontier defences were perceived to be weak. An impression of vulnerability encouraged attacks and this makes it hard to judge whether an increase in raids and invasions was the consequence of a rise in barbarian numbers and strength or a result of Roman weakness. It is clear that all of Rome's enemies, including the Persians, exploited the empire's frequent internal disputes and civil wars.

There may be other reasons for Roman weakness and we need to consider these. Unfortunately, for so many of the theories about long-term problems

we lack the basic information either to confirm or deny them. There are no good figures for the population of the empire at any period and, therefore, we cannot say with any certainty that this was in long-term decline. Similarly, we must study the economy without any adequate statistics. It seems more than probable that levels of trade and prosperity fell from the end of the second century onwards and never again achieved the levels of the early Principate. However, sources at best hint at such trends, and some scholars will interpret these glimpses of the past in radically different ways. The same is true of the traditional picture of a Late Roman world where the burden of tax was oppressive and fell disproportionately heavily on the poor, who were already oppressed by their rich landlords. Land fell out of cultivation and the rural population was reduced to the level of serfs. None of this is implausible, but that is also true of other models and it is impossible to prove any of them. Far more data—the bulk of which must come from archaeology if it can ever be found—is needed before we can speak with some confidence on these topics. The same is true of claims about climate change and other wider problems.

The type of evidence we have, as well as the interests of scholars, has meant that a good deal of the work on Late Antiquity has focused on economy and society, law and government, intellectual life, culture and religion. Studies tend to concentrate on broad themes and inevitably this emphasises continuity rather than change. By comparison, narrative history has all too often been neglected and certainly has made only a minor contribution to most scholars' mental picture of the period. There are exceptions and study of the frontier relations and foreign wars has often been more traditional in style, since a narrative or chronological element is obviously essential. At the same time civil wars and internal conflict have not received such detailed and coherent treatment. This is odd, for these are the one aspect of the empire's internal problems for which we have considerable evidence.

It is worth once again emphasising that from 217 down to the collapse of the Western Empire there were only a handful of periods as long as ten years when a civil war did not break out. Some of these conflicts were very brief and some were confined to a small region—the usurpers who were proclaimed and then suppressed, or rejected and murdered by their own men after a reign lasting just a few weeks. Challenges for imperial power were sometimes resolved without serious fighting. On the other hand, some conflicts were fought on a very large scale and lasted for years. It is easy to remember Constantine as the great emperor who united the entire empire under his control, but we should not forget that he was a usurper who fought or prepared for civil wars for the first half of his reign.

Civil war and challenges to the imperial throne were common occurrences. Every adult emperor from Septimius Severus onwards experienced at least one such conflict during their lifetime. Usurpers never wanted to destroy or change the empire. These were not conflicts about ideology, but purely for political power. A small minority of the losers in these wars were allowed to keep their lives, although only a tiny handful were permitted to continue in a public career. In the vast majority of cases such conflicts only ended with the death of one of the rivals. Usurpers were the most direct and personal threat faced by any

emperor and tended to be treated accordingly. It was normal for an emperor to abandon a war against a foreign enemy to deal with a Roman rival.

Usurpers did not act alone. They needed supporters and the most important of these expected rewards including promotion and riches if the rebellion was successful. If a usurper was suppressed, then many of his backers were likely to suffer with him. Punishment was often extended to their families, especially those holding any office or whose wealth made them appealing targets for informers. In this way even a localised rebellion could mean life, death, imprisonment or ruin to people in distant provinces who had not been involved in it in any direct way. This was a world of patronage, where the powerful exerted themselves to secure benefits for relatives and friends. Such webs of favour and gratitude could become very dangerous for all concerned at times of internal conflict.

All usurpers needed military backing to succeed. Emperors from Augustus onwards tried to keep their soldiers loyal through solemn oaths and regular donatives. On the whole, the army tended to stay loyal to an established dynasty unless the emperor seriously alienated them. Few usurpers could count on similar loyalty. Losses were considerable in some civil wars, as the army wasted its strength fighting against itself. Soldiers fighting an internal struggle could not simultaneously operate on one of the frontiers. Time and again substantial parts of the army were drawn away and Roman military dominance across its borders reduced or utterly shattered. Successive civil wars dislocated the army's administrative and logistical structures, its training patterns, recruitment and also its discipline, which suffered whenever licence was given in an effort to win loyalty. Ordinary soldiers could usually expect to change sides to join the victors after a failed rebellion. This was not so easy for more senior officers.

Each civil war cost the empire. Anything gained by the winning side inevitably had to be taken from other Romans and a prolonged campaign was likely to involve widespread destruction within the provinces where fighting occurred. Almost as important as the physical price of civil war was its impact on attitudes and behaviour from the emperor down. Personal survival became the first objective of every emperor and shaped all of their decisions and the very structure of the empire. In the quest to protect themselves successive emperors gradually reshaped the empire itself and, ironically enough, often made themselves more rather than less vulnerable.

The biggest change was the marginalisation of the senatorial class in the third century and, along with them, the city of Rome as a real rather than merely spiritual capital of the empire. Senators—and most of all a handful of distinguished men and those trusted with senior provincial commands—were for a long time the only possible rivals for imperial power. At first the major military provinces were divided up so that no one man commanded too large an army. By the end of the third century senators had virtually ceased to hold military rank of any kind. They had also all but ceased to become emperor.

Emperors could now come from a far wider section of the empire's population. Any connection with the imperial family—even spurious claims to be

the illegitimate son of an emperor—was sufficient to make a claim. In the past Rome's emperors had had to be wary of only a small number of senators, men who were known to them personally and whose careers meant that they spent many years in and around Rome. Now a rival could be almost anyone. They did not need political connections or family reputation, simply the ability to persuade some troops to back them. Many emperors were equestrians, and almost all were army officers or imperial officials.

The trend towards smaller provinces continued. In addition, military and civil power were made separate. This helped to protect an emperor against challengers, but made it far harder to get things done. In particular, it was very difficult to raise and supply a large enough army to deal with a serious problem on the frontiers. From the emperor's point of view this was comforting, since the same army could easily have been turned against him by a rival. At times extraordinary commands were created so that one commander could deal with a problem, but emperors had to be wary of offering such power to a potential usurper. More often emperors chose to go themselves and take personal command of a campaign. From the middle of the third century onwards Roman emperors spent much of their time performing tasks that would once have been dealt with by an imperial legate. Again, it is worth emphasising that it was not the scale of the problems that had increased, but the ability of the empire to employ its resources to deal with them.

An emperor could not be everywhere at once. If he was unwilling to trust anyone else with sufficient power to deal with a distant problem, then it would simply not be dealt with at all. Time and again this sense of neglect by central government prompted a region to rebel and proclaim its own emperor. One solution was to have more than one emperor. The tetrarchic system is often praised, but its success was always limited and no one was able to repeat the dominance of Diocletian for any great length of time. In a way, the acceptance that more than one emperor would exist offered usurpers the prospect of advancing to supreme power in stages. It also tended to encourage regionalism as separate military and civil hierarchies developed in different parts of the empire. Each group was naturally inclined to give priority to its own aims and problems, and often proved reluctant to assist other parts of the empire.

Emperors had always travelled in some state, surrounded by members of their household, bureaucrats and guards. This increased massively in scale during the third century. All wanted to have sizeable military forces under their direct control. If the field armies were intended to perform a strategic role, then this was first and foremost to guard against Roman rivals. Emperors surrounded themselves with more and more attendants and personal bodyguards, and made court ceremonial increasingly elaborate. In part this was to dignity and secure the rule of men who had often seized power in brutal fashion comparatively recently. It was also intended to protect the emperor's person. Assassination was less common in the fourth century than the third. At the same time all of this tended to isolate the emperor. It made it harder for him to know personally even his more senior officials and commanders, let alone the vastly inflated number of bureaucrats who now worked in the

imperial administration. Control over the activities of the men who represented imperial authority throughout the provinces was extremely limited.

All emperors lived with the fear of usurpation. It shaped their behaviour and also that of all of the officials and officers who served under them. A career in the imperial service offered the prospect of legal privileges and wealth, gathered both through pay and, even more, from bribes and payments for services. The most successful achieved very high rank with all the patronage and influence this brought. A small minority were even able to reach imperial rank. However, alongside the advantages came serious risks. Any suspicion that an individual was plotting against the emperor was likely to be punished severely. The same was true of anybody associated with a failed usurper or their supporters. In a system where careers were routinely advanced by personal recommendation, such networks of patronage inevitably put many individuals in danger. Personal survival and personal success and profit were the foremost aims of most officials.

The imperial bureaucracy in the Late Roman Empire was certainly far larger than in the first and second centuries. The army mayor may not have been bigger, but certainly consisted of far more small, independent units. Size on its own does not mean that either of these institutions was more efficient. There were far more administrators than could readily be supervised, especially since they formed part of a bureaucracy that was both divided and confused in its structure. The imperial administration raised funds and resources to support both itself and the army. Such short-term expedients as debasing the coinage suggest that at times this supply proved inadequate. However, on the whole the system seems to have functioned in the third and fourth centuries, at the very least to a minimal necessary level. It still left plenty of room for inefficiency and corruption, and such wastage may well have been on a massive scale. Most individual members of the bureaucracy did their job well enough to keep the system functioning and prevent their speculation becoming too blatant. Some may genuinely have been both honest and competent.

Civil wars were most common in the third century, but remained frequent afterwards. The state developed in ways intended to protect emperors from internal rivals, but singularly failed to do so. Personal survival had always been an important concern for all emperors since the creation of the Principate. Augustus had fought his way to power through a series of civil wars. Assassination plots and open rebellion were threats faced by each of Rome's rulers from the very beginning. Augustus was a monarch, but created a system in which his power was carefully veiled. Since he was not formally a king, there was no clear institution to arrange the succession. Some have seen this as a fatal flaw in the system of the Principate—effectively, an accident waiting to happen. Others would go further and see the Augustan system as a 'millstone', revered by tradition that prevented proper reform of the empire in the third and fourth centuries.

This cannot explain the quite staggering difference between the Principate and the Late Roman Empire. There was civil war for a year after the death of Nero in 68 and another longer conflict after Pertinax was murdered in 193. Claudius, Domitian and Marcus Aurelius each faced a challenge from

a rebellious governor, although all of these revolts swiftly collapsed. Assassination plots and attempted coups at Rome were a little more common, although some of these may have been imagined by nervous emperors or invented by their ruthless subordinates. The early Principate was not wholly free from the reality or threat of internal conflict, but for more than two hundred years it still suffered only rarely from these. This is also in marked contrast to the last half-century of the Republic. If the system created by Augustus was so seriously flawed, then only remarkable luck could explain this. With Gibbon, we might stop 'inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed', and instead 'be surprised that it lasted so long'.

It stretches credibility to see two centuries of largely unbroken internal peace as a mere fluke, especially when they were followed by a longer period when civil war was so very frequent. It is true that each fresh bout of internal conflict weakened imperial authority and the institutions of the state and therefore made future usurpations and rebellions more likely. Yet, once again, it cannot have been solely chance that such a cycle did not develop earlier. In the third century the empire largely lost the Republican façade so carefully constructed by Augustus. He and his successors ruled through the Senate. As a body this had no real political independence, but sensible emperors took care to respect its dignity. More importantly, they employed senators in virtually all important posts, effectively ruling the empire through them.

It may seem odd in this day and age to praise a system based on an aristocratic elite, consisting of men who were amateurs in the modern sense. Yet the system had many advantages in the Roman context. It provided a manageable group of senior soldiers and administrators—an emperor could know all of these men and their families. Only a minority were potential rivals and these could be closely observed. Public life remained focused on the fixed location of Rome itself, making it easier to sense the mood of the aristocracy. Emperors in the first and second centuries were able to trust selected senators to control substantial armies and large provinces. Only rarely—usually during times of major conflict with Parthia—was it necessary to appoint a commander to control more than one province and this did not automatically lead to an attempt at usurpation. In the first and second centuries emperors were able to delegate and did not feel obliged to direct campaigns in person. Rome was the centre of the empire in more than just a spiritual sense. We do not need to idealise the senatorial legates of the early period. Some were incompetent, a few untrustworthy and probably quite a lot were more or less corrupt. In all these respects they seem at the very least no worse than the senior officials of the Late Roman Empire. Politically, the small senatorial class was simply easier for an emperor to control. Reliance on the Senate was a Republican tradition, but actually made sound sense.

The governments of ancient states had limited ambitions and did not concern themselves with major programmes of health, education or the detailed day to day regulation of markets, industry and agriculture. For all its size and sophistication, the Roman Empire was not fundamentally different in this respect. It raised revenue and other resources and made use of these in a range of ways. The army was the biggest single cost, but there was also the maintenance of many

buildings, some ports and a vast road network, as well as the subsidised or free doles of food to the population of Rome and later Constantinople. None of these duties of the empire ground to a halt in the third or fourth century. However, this does not mean that they were functioning well.

The Roman Empire did not fall quickly, but to use this as proof that its institutions were essentially sound is deeply misguided. The empire was huge and faced no serious competitors. Persia was the strongest neighbour, but there was never a Persian army reaching the Tiber. Rome was massive, heavily populated and rich. This remained true even if the population and economy were in decline. It had a transport system of all-weather roads and busy commercial routes by river, canal and sea on a scale unmatched again in Europe until recent centuries. Although we may note the difficulties emperors had in making their will felt in distant provinces, their capacity to do this at all was still far greater than the leaders of any other people. The Roman army was a large, sophisticated, permanent and professional force backed by an extensive logistical system. Like the empire itself, it was different from anything else in existence in the known world. The Romans possessed many great advantages over all of their competitors. None of these rivals had the power to push the empire over in the third or fourth centuries. The empire was huge and did not need to operate at the highest levels of efficiency to succeed. It possessed massively greater resources, technological and other advantages. There was also the probability that somewhere along the line some officers and officials would do their job at least moderately well. This meant that the Romans were likely to prevail in the long run. None of its enemies were capable of inflicting more than a limited defeat on the Romans.

None of this meant that the cost of repeated civil war was not felt. It is not difficult to make the case that the majority of emperors in the first and second centuries had the wider good of the empire as their main ambition. All were concerned with personal survival, but this had not become the overwhelming priority it would be for their successors in later eras. That is not to say that the later emperors were more selfish, but simply that they could never be as secure. Many may have had the best of intentions to rule well, but the government of the empire became first and foremost about keeping the emperor in power—and at lower levels, about the individual advantage of bureaucrats and officers.

The Late Roman Empire was not designed to be an efficient government, but to keep the emperor in power and to benefit the members of the administration. Many of these could enjoy highly successful careers by the standards of the day without ever being effective in the role that they were theoretically supposed to perform. Sheer size prevented rapid collapse or catastrophe. Its weakness was not obvious, but this only meant that collapse could come in sudden, dramatic stages, such as the loss of the African provinces to the Vandals. Gradually, the empire's institutions rotted and became less and less capable of dealing with any crisis, but still did not face serious competition. Lost wars were damaging, but the damage was not fatal to the empire itself. As an example, from 376–382 the Romans could not lose the war against the Goths, but they still struggled to win it. Even defeats at the hands of the Persians did not deprive the empire of major or essential resources.

The Roman Empire continued for a very long time. Successive blows knocked away sections of it, as attackers uncovered its weaknesses. Yet at times the empire could still be formidable and did not simply collapse. Perhaps we should imagine the Late Roman Empire as a retired athlete, whose body has declined from neglect and an unhealthy lifestyle. At times the muscles will still function well and with the memory of former skill and training. Yet, as the neglect continues, the body becomes less and less capable of resisting disease or recovering from injury. Over the years the person would grow weaker and weaker, and in the end could easily succumb to disease. Long decline was the fate of the Roman Empire. In the end, it may well have been 'murdered' by barbarian invaders, but these struck at a body made vulnerable by prolonged decay.

Peter Heather

The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire in Western Europe

Based on the Mediterranean, the Roman Empire forged Europe as far as the rivers Rhine and Danube—and, for lengthy periods, extensive lands beyond those boundaries—together with North Africa and much of the Near East into a unitary state which lasted for the best part of 400 years. The protracted negotiations required to bring just some of this area together in the European Community put the success of this Empire into perspective. Yet since the publication of Gibbon's masterpiece (and long before), its very success has served only to stimulate interest in why it ended, 'blame' being firmly placed on everything from an excess of Christian piety to the effect of lead water pipes. The aim of this paper is to reconsider some of the processes and events which underlay the disappearance of the western half of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD. This was an area encompassing essentially modern Britain, France, Benelux, Italy, Austria, Hungary, the Iberian Peninsula, and North Africa as far east as Libya, whose fragmentation culminated in the deposition of Romulus Augustulus on or around 4 September 476. That groups of outsiders—so-called 'barbarians'—played an important role in all this has never been doubted. A full understanding of the barbarians' involvement in a whole sequence of events, taking the best part of a hundred years, lends, however, an unrecognized coherence to the story of western imperial collapse.

There are two main reasons why this coherence has not been highlighted before. First, most of the main barbarian groups which were later to establish successor states to the Roman Empire in western Europe, had crossed the frontier by about AD 410, yet the last western Roman emperor was not deposed until 476, some sixty-five years later. I will argue, however, that the initial invasions must not be separated from the full working-out of their social and political consequences. Not just the invasions themselves need to be examined, but also the longer-term reactions to them of the Roman population of western Europe, and especially its landowning elites. While the western Empire did not die quickly or easily, a direct line of historical cause and effect nonetheless runs from the barbarian invasions of the late fourth and early fifth centuries to the deposition of Romulus Augustulus. The second reason lies in modern understandings of what caused the different groups of outsiders to cross into the Empire in the first place. These population movements



did not happen all at once, but were stretched out over about thirty-five years, c. 376–410. Here again, however, a close re-examination of the evidence reveals that the years of invasion represent no more than different phases of a single crisis. In particular, the two main phases of population movement—c. 376–86 and 405–8—were directly caused by the intrusion of Hunnic power into the fringes of Europe.

The Huns were very much a new factor in the European strategic balance of power in the late fourth century. A group of Eurasian nomads, they moved west, sometime after AD 350, along the northern coast of the Black Sea, the western edge of the great Eurasian Steppe Illiterate, and not even leaving a second-hand account of their origins and history in any Graeco-Roman source, they remain deeply mysterious. Opinions differ even over their linguistic affiliation, but the best guess would seem to be that the Huns were the first group of Turkic, as opposed to Iranian, nomads to have intruded into Europe. Whatever the answer to that question, the first half of this study will reconsider their impact upon the largely Germanic groups of central and eastern Europe which had previously been the main focus of Roman foreign policy on Rhine and Danube.

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This fundamental change in the nature of political activity from regimes independent of the immigrant groups to regimes which included them—a direct result of the disappearance of the Huns as an outside 'force'—had important consequences. No group of supporters was ready (nor previously had any of the more traditional power-blocks ever been ready) to back a regime without some kind of pay-off. One effect of including immigrants in governing coalitions, therefore, was to increase the numbers of those expecting rewards, most obviously involvement in the running of the Empire. Burgundian kings took Roman titles, for instance, while the Visigoth Theoderic II attempted to order affairs in Spain. The Vandals' intervention in Italy in 455 should likewise be read as an attempt to stake their claim in the new political order. That they sacked the city of Rome has naturally received most attention: but Geiseric, the Vandal leader, also took back to North Africa with him Eudoxia and Eudocia—respectively wife and daughter of Valentinian III—and married the daughter to his son and heir Huneric. The two had been betrothed but not married under the treaty of 442, yet in 455 Petronius Maximus married her to his son, the Caesar Palladius. Thus Geiseric intervened in Italy at least partly out of fear that a match which should have cemented the Vandals' status within the western Empire was not going to take place. Subsequent years, similarly, saw Geiseric forward the imperial claims of Olybrius who married Placidia, the younger daughter of Valentinian, and was thus his relative by marriage.

Involvement in imperial affairs carried great prestige, and had been sought, as we have seen, since the time of Alaric and Athaulf. The western Empire only had this prestige, however, because it was, and was perceived to be, the most powerful institution of the contemporary world. Prestige certainly incorporates abstract qualities, but the attraction of the living Empire for

immigrant leaders was firmly based upon its military might and overall wealth. They wished to avoid distributed dangerous military confrontations with it, while its wealth, when distributed as patronage, could greatly strengthen a leader's position. By the 450s, however, the real power behind the western imperial facade was already ebbing away. As we have seen, Britain, parts of Gaul and Spain (at different times), and above all North Africa had removed themselves or been removed from central imperial control. The rewards—money or land, such wealth being the basis of power—which were given after 454 to new allies from among the barbarian immigrants therefore only depleted further an already shrunken base.

Take, for example, Avitus. Under him, the Goths were sent to Spain to bring the Suevoi to heel. Unlike the 410s, however, Theoderic II's troops seem to have operated by themselves, and according to Hydatius' account basically ransacked northern Spain, including loyal Hispano-Romans, for all the wealth they could muster. This benefited the Goths, but not the Roman state: there is no indication that Roman administration and taxation were restored. Likewise the Burgundians: after participating in Spain, they received new and better lands in Savoy, which, an enigmatic chronicle entry tells us, they divided with local senators. Another prosperous agricultural area no longer formed part of central imperial resources.

After 454, there thus built up a vicious circle within the western Empire, with too many groups squabbling over a shrinking financial base. In political terms, this meant that there were always enough groups left out in the cold, after any division of the spoils, which wanted to undermine the prevailing political configuration. Moreover, with every change of regime, there had to be further gifts to conciliate supporters anew. Having been granted a free hand in Spain under Avitus, the Goths then received the city of Narbonne and its territory (especially, one supposes, its tax revenues) as the price of their support for Libius Severus, Majorian's successor, in the early 460s. Even worse, this concentration on the internal relations of the established power-blocks allowed the rise of other more peripheral forces, which would previously have been suppressed, and whose activities took still more territory out of central control. Particularly ominous in this respect was the expansion of the Armoricans, and, above all, the Franks in northern Gaul from the 460s, as increasingly independent leaders gathered around themselves ever larger power-bases.

There were only two possible ways to break the circle. Either the number of political players had to be reduced, or the centre's financial base had to expand. This clarifies the logic behind the policies pursued by the only effective western regimes put together after the death of Aetius: those of Majorian (457–61) and Anthemius (467–72). Majorian's regime combined the suffering of all the western army groups with the support of Italian aristocrats and a careful courting of the Gauls who had previously backed Avitus. He also won at least the temporary acquiescence of the Goths and Burgundians, and Constantinople seems eventually to have recognized him. Anthemius was son-in-law of the former eastern Emperor Marcian, and came to Italy with an army and a blessing from the reigning eastern Emperor, Leo. His leading general was Marcellinus, commander in Dalmatia; Ricimer accepted him in Italy (they forged a marriage

alliance); Gallic landowners were again carefully courted; and, at the start of his reign at least, the major immigrant groups deferred to him. The central policy of both these regimes was to reconquer Vandal Africa. Majorian making his bid in 460, Anthemius in 468. Victory in either of these wars would have renewed imperial prestige, but, more important, would have removed from the political game one of its major players, and, perhaps above all, restored to the rump western Empire the richest of its original territories.

Both Vandal expeditions failed, and as a result both regimes fell apart. But what if either had succeeded? Particularly in 468, a really major expedition was put together and the later success of Belisarius shows that reconquering North Africa was not inherently impossible. There was, so to speak, a window of opportunity. Buoyed up by victory and the promise of African revenues, a victorious western emperor could certainly have re-established his political hold on the landowners of southern Gaul and Spain, many of whom would have instinctively supported an imperial revival. Sidonius, and the other Gallic aristocrats who organized resistance to Euric, for instance, would have been only too happy to reassert ties to the centre. Burgundians, Goths, and Suevi would have had to be faced in due course, but victory would have considerably extended the active life of the western Empire. The failure of the expeditions foreclosed the possibility of escaping the cycle of decline. With the number of players increasing rather than diminishing, as the Franks in particular grew in importance, and with the Empire's financial base in decline, the idea of empire quickly became meaningless, since the centre no longer controlled anything anyone wanted. In consequence, the late 460s and 470s saw one group after another coming to the realization that the western Empire was no longer a prize worth fighting for. It must have been an extraordinary moment, in fact, when it dawned on the leaders of individual interest groups, and upon members of local Roman landowning elites, that, after hundreds of years of existence, the Roman state in western Europe was now an anachronism.

The first to grasp the point seems to have been Euric the Visigoth. After the Vandals defeated Anthemius, he quickly launched a series of wars which, by 475, had brought under his control much of Gaul and Spain. There is a striking description of his decision to launch these campaigns in the *Getica* of Jordanes:

Becoming aware of the frequent changes of [western] Roman Emperor, Euric, King of the Visigoths, pressed forward to seize Gaul on his own authority.

This extract captures rather well what it must have been like suddenly to realize that the time had come to pursue one's own aims with total independence. The correspondence of Sidonius Apollinaris likewise shows members of the Roman landowning elite of southern Gaul transferring their allegiance piecemeal to Euric's colours at much the same time: some had taken stock of the terminal decline of the Empire as early as the 460s; others, like Sidonius himself, did not accept the situation until the mid-470s. Euric's lead was followed at different times by the other interested parties.

The eastern Empire, for instance, abandoned any hope in the west when it made peace with the Vandals, probably in 474. As we have seen, Constantinople had previously viewed North Africa as the means of reinvigorating the western Empire. Making peace with the Vandals was thus a move of huge significance, signalling the end of attempts to sustain the west; diplomatic recognition as western emperor was subsequently granted to Julius Nepos, but he never received any practical assistance. That the western Empire had ceased to mean anything dawned on the Burgundians at more or less the same time. Gundobad, one of the heirs to the throne, played a major role in central politics in the early 470s; a close ally of Ricimer, he helped him defeat Anthemius, supported the subsequent regime of Olybrius, and, after Ricimer's death, even persuaded Glycerius to accept the throne in 473. Sometime in 473 or 474, however, he 'suddenly' (as one chronicler put it) left Rome. Possibly this was due to his father's death, or perhaps he just gave up the struggle; either way, he never bothered to return. Events at home were now much more important than those at the centre, which now, of course, was the centre no longer.

The army of Dalmatia made one final attempt to sponsor a regime when Julius Nepos marched into Italy in 474, but one year later he left again—definitively—in the face of the hostility of Orestes and the army of Italy. Fittingly, it was the army of Italy which was the last to give up. In 475, its commander Orestes proclaimed his son Romulus Emperor, but within a year lost control of his soldiers. Not surprisingly, given all the resources which had by now been seized by others, it was shortage of money which caused the unrest. Odovacar was able, therefore, to organize a putsch, murder Orestes, and depose Romulus Augustulus. He then sent an embassy to Constantinople which did no more than state the obvious: there was no longer any need for an emperor in the west. With this act, the Roman Empire in western Europe ceased to exist.

That the Huns and other outside, 'barbarian', groups were a fundamental cause of western imperial collapse is not a novel conclusion. The real contribution of this paper to scholarly debate, outside matters of detail, lies in three main lines of argument. First, the invasions of 376 and 405–8 were not unconnected events, but two particular moments of crisis generated by a single strategic revolution: the emergence of Hunnic power on the fringes of Europe. This was not a sudden event, but a protracted process, and the movements of the Huns provide a real unity and coherence to thirty-five years of instability and periodic invasion along Rome's European frontiers in the later fourth and early fifth centuries.

Second, while some sixty-five years separate the deposition of Romulus Augustulus from these invasions, they are, nonetheless, intimately linked. The regular crises for the Empire in intervening years represent no more than the slow working-out of the full political consequences of the invasions, with the events of 476 marking the culmination of the process whereby the after-effects of invasion steadily eroded the power of the western Roman state. The loss of territory to the invaders—sometimes sanctioned by treaty, sometimes not—meant a loss of revenue, and a consequent loss of power. As the state lost power, and was perceived to have done so, local Roman landowning

elites came to the realization that their interests would best be served by making political accommodations with the outsiders, or, in a minority of cases, by taking independent responsibility for their own defence. Given that the Empire had existed for four hundred years, and that the east continued to prop up the west, it is not surprising that these processes of political erosion, and of psychological adjustment to the fact of erosion, took between two and three generations in the old Empire's heartlands of southern Gaul, Italy, and Spain (even if elites in other areas, such as Britain, were rather quicker off the mark). Despite the time-lag, the well-documented nature of these processes substantiates a very direct link between the period of the invasions and the collapse of the Empire. There was no separate additional crisis. Simply, the overwhelming consequences of the arrival, inside the body politic of the western Roman state, of new military forces, with independent political agendas, took time to exert their full effect.

A third line of argument has concerned the paradoxical role of the Huns in these revolutionary events. In the era of Attila, Hunnic armies surged across Europe from the Iron Gates of the Danube towards the walls of Constantinople, the outskirts of Paris, and Rome itself. But Attila's decade of glory was no more than a sideshow in the drama of western collapse. The Huns' indirect impact upon the Roman Empire in previous generations, when the insecurity they generated in central and eastern Europe forced Goths, Vandals, Alans, Suevi, Burgundians across the frontier, was of much greater historical importance than Attila's momentary ferocities. Indeed, the Huns had even sustained the western Empire down to c. 440, and in many ways their second greatest contribution to imperial collapse was, as we have seen, themselves to disappear suddenly as a political force after 453, leaving the west bereft of outside military assistance.

I would like to finish by trying to place these lines of argument in broader historical perspective. Taken together, they indicate firmly, of course, that it was a foreign policy crisis which brought down the western Empire, and thus cast further fuel on long-raging fires of debate over whether it was internal or external factors which caused the fall of Rome. Indeed, there exists a vast secondary literature—what Peter Brown once labelled the 'sacred rhetoric'—which would argue precisely the opposite, seeing internal social, economic, and psychological developments as fully explaining imperial collapse. According to this view, the balance of power on the frontier was broken by progressive Roman enfeeblement, rather than by developments in areas beyond Rome's control.

Transformations within the Roman world must obviously be taken into account when we look at the ability of outside groups to create increasing mayhem inside its borders. Despite possible appearances, the argument of this paper is itself very far from monocausal, since internal and external factors obviously interrelate. On a very basic level, the economic, demographic and other resources of a society fundamentally explain its success or failure in the face of outside threat. If the Empire had a sufficiently large and wealthy population, it would have been able to resist even the new forces unleashed by the Huns. More particularly, as we have seen, the appearance of barbarian powers

actually within the Empire's borders, in the fifth century, opened up a pre-existing fault line in the relationship between imperial centre and local Roman landowning elites. The centre relied on a mixture of constraint and reward to focus the loyalties of landowners, some of them many hundreds of miles distant, upon the Empire. The new barbarian powers of the fifth century undermined the ability of the Empire to prop up the position of its local supporters, to reward them, or even to constrain their loyalty. The Empire thus fell apart as local landowners found alternative methods to guarantee their elite status, making accommodations with the new powers in the land.

Even so, it remains very much to the point to ask a hypothetical question. What would have happened had barbarians not invaded the Empire en masse in the face of the Hunnic threat? Despite continued attempts of late to stress the importance of internal factors, there is still not the slightest sign that the Empire would have collapsed under its own weight. Indeed, a great body of recent (and not so recent) research in two separate areas would collectively support the contention of this paper, derived from a close examination of the sequence of events, that it was developments beyond, rather than within, the imperial frontier which upset the prevailing balance between Rome and its neighbours. There is no space here to deal with either fully, but brief summaries can at least set an agenda for further debate.

First, there have been substantial reappraisals of different aspects of the later Roman Empire, whose cumulative effect, to my mind, has been to overturn the 'sacred rhetoric'. The fourth-century Empire was not socially rigid, economically stagnant, culturally dead, or politically dislocated to an obviously greater degree than earlier Roman societies. Much, of course, was problematic about the late Roman world, but perfect societies exist only in historians' imaginations. Recent studies have revealed that there was no fundamental dislocation in the rural economy, the power-house of the Empire; that trade was flourishing in a far from demonetarized economy; and that local elites were participating in imperial structures in unprecedented numbers. Traditional classicists' prejudice has also given way—in some cases, at least—to a fuller appreciation of the cultural dynamism generated by the incorporation of Christianity within the existing political and social edifice.

On a second front, archaeological investigations have also revealed a total transformation in the nature of Germanic societies in the first three centuries or so AD. Causes are still a matter for debate, but agricultural output and economic sophistication both grew exponentially, generating in their wake expanded markedly, creating much more pronounced social hierarchies. All this is consonant with the literary evidence, which shows the existence of much larger political entities and of real dynasties among at least some Germanic groups of the fourth century. Demonstrably true of Goths on the Danube, it also seems to be the case with the Franks and Alamanni of the Rhine frontier. Fourth-century Alamanni society threw up a succession of leaders with pre-eminent power—Chnodomarius, Vadomarius, and Macrianus being described as such by Ammianus—and Roman policy was precisely directed towards containing the threat they posed: kidnapping them at banquets being a preferred

approach. These new, larger entities, as might be expected, acted more assertively towards the Roman state. In the aftermath of a Roman civil war, for instance, Chlodomarius actually attempted to annex Roman territory (and was matched in this by some Frankish groups), and the later 360s and early 370s saw both Alamannic and Gothic groups demand (and succeed in establishing) less subservient diplomatic relationships.

Taken together, these entirely separate areas of research suggest that any substantial change in the strategic balance of power was prompted by the growing strength and cohesion of Germanic groups, not the enfeeblement of the Roman Empire. Even so, the effects of those changes should not be overstated. Germanic groups were stronger in the fourth century; but when it came to direct confrontation, the Roman Empire was still overwhelmingly victorious in the vast majority of cases. And this, perhaps, finally allows us to bring the role of the Huns in the destruction of the western Empire into clear focus. Individually, the new Germanic powers were still no match for the Roman state in the fourth century. By themselves, they could generate some adjustment in relations along the frontiers, but were not about to pull the Empire apart. The most important effect of the Huns, therefore, was to make sufficient numbers of these new Germanic powers, which were not themselves politically united, act in a sufficiently similar way at broadly the same time. If ambition had prompted just one new dynasty to invade the Empire on his own, his fate would have been the same as that of Chlodomarius, crushed by Julian at Strasbourg (or, indeed, of Radagaisus). The Huns, however, induced too many of these more substantial groups to cross the frontier in too short a space of time for the Roman state to be able to deal with them effectively. The balance of power on the frontier was already swinging away from the Empire, but only within a limited arc. By creating an accidental unity of purpose among Rome's neighbours, the Huns shattered frontier security, and set in motion processes which generated—out of unprecedented combinations of outside military power and existing local Roman elites—a new political order in western Europe.



POSTSCRIPT

Were Internal Factors Responsible for the Fall of the Roman Empire?



Most historians studying the fall of Rome agree that neither internal nor external forces can be ignored, yet many continue to produce works that emphasize one side of the debate. E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, reprint) has been a standard source on the external forces side for decades. Arthur Ferrill's *The Fall of Rome: The Military Explanation* (Thames & Hudson, 1986) is a more recent account of the role played by the barbarians in Rome's collapse. Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, A.D. 350–425* (Oxford University Press, 1998) brings the subject up-to-date. In *Warfare in the Classical World* (Salamanca Press, 1998), John Warry surveys the role of wars and their effects on Greco-Roman civilization, titling a concluding chapter, "The Coming of the Barbarians." Derek Williams, in *Romans and Barbarians: Four Views from the Empire's Edge, First Century, A.D.* (St. Martin's Press, 1998), and Thomas S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) offer two more contemporary updates.

A. H. M. Jones's *The Decline of the Ancient World* (Oxford University Press, 1964) and Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity* (Thames & Hudson, 1971) are classics on the internal factors side of the debate. Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire: A.D. 284–430* (Harvard University Press, 1993) surveys the centuries before the empire's fall. Geza Alföldy's *The Social History of Rome* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) is a short but well-packed volume on Rome's social history that sets the stage for the fall of Rome. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (Harper & Row, 1987) gives a religious spin to the question.

Despite its age, one should not ignore Gibbon's classic, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, republished recently in many new editions. Its lasting value is more evident today when scholars and politicians are currently debating the pros and cons of the "New American Empire."

There has been renewed interest in the role of the barbarians in the process. Many historians are now willing to credit them with helping to establish the Middle Ages, viewing that era as emerging from Greco-Roman, Christian, and barbarian influences. Perhaps it's time to put the term "barbarians" to rest. For more information on the barbarians and their contributions, see Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1999), and, Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Henry Holt and Company, 1997).