

Against the Grain

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Collecting to the Core — The Fall of the Roman Empire

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

In 1996 **Glen Bowersock** dismissed the fall of Rome as a paradigm, saying that it is "no longer needed, and like the writing on a faded papyrus, it no longer speaks to us."¹ Many books and articles on the end of the Roman Empire have appeared since, most recently **Bertrand Lançon's** *La chute de l'Empire romain: histoire sans fin* in late 2017; his subtitle, "story without end," says it all.² The idea of the decline and fall of the greatest empire in the history of the world retains its fascination, despite the views of many contemporary historians, who see transformation rather than decline. It remains a topic fraught with problems. When did the Roman Empire fall? Why? Some view the sack of Rome by **Alaric** in 410 as the pivotal event, others the removal of **Romulus Augustulus** as the last Roman emperor in the west in 476, still others the death in 565 of **Justinian I**, the last Eastern Roman emperor to hold a significant part of the west, including Rome itself. One can also make a case for the fall of Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453. Though Greek in speech and culture, the Byzantines called themselves *Ῥωμαῖοι* (Romans) until the end; it was German historian and humanist **Hieronymus Wolf** who first called them Byzantine in 1557. As for causes of decline and fall, **Edward Gibbon** put forth over two dozen; in 1984 **Alexander Demandt** identified more than 200 proposed by various scholars.³ This brief overview will look at a handful of key works exploring the end of the Roman Empire, with emphasis on recent work in English.

Though he drew heavily upon predecessors such as the French historian **Le Nain de Tillemont**, **Edward Gibbon's** *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* stands as the seminal and iconic work on the subject, as well as a monument of English prose.⁴ First published from 1776-88, it was received with great acclaim and soon translated into French, German, and Italian. Nearly all subsequent work builds on or argues with **Gibbon** in one way or another. **Gibbon** begins with a survey of the Antonine age (98-180), which he called the "most happy and prosperous" (Chapter I) in the history of humanity. The narrative of the decline proper begins with the reign of

Commodus (180-192) and wends its leisurely way through the division of empire into east and west, the end of the western empire in 476, the history of the eastern empire until its fall in 1453, and the history of the city of Rome from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries.

Gibbon identified multiple causes for the decline of Rome, most famously the rise of Christianity and the effect of barbarian invasions. Many of the causes he put forth reflect a decline in civic obligation and virtue among Roman citizens. As a philosophical historian of the Enlightenment, he thought that decline "was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness" (Chapter XXXVIII).

Gibbon was long the dominant narrative, despite criticism of his anti-Christian posture. His successors argued details, but few questioned the basic notion of decline and fall. Everything changed in 1971 when **Peter Brown** published *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Mohammed* and founded the new field of Late Antique studies.⁵ He declares in his preface that "it is only too easy to write about the Late Antique world as if it were a melancholy tale of 'Decline and Fall': of the end of the Roman empire as viewed from the West."⁶ **Brown** shifts the narrative to one of transformation and innovation in Late Antique society, mentioning the sack of Rome in 410 and the fall of the western empire in 476 almost in passing. His focus is on social and cultural change, shaped by the rise of Christianity. Continuing in this vein of revisionism, in 1980 **Walter Goffart** rejected the long-standing belief that massive barbarian migrations and invasions brought down the western empire. His influential *Romans and Barbarians, A.D. 418-584* contends instead that the empire absorbed and accommodated smallish groups of barbarians in a series of "undramatic adjustments."⁷ **Gibbon** would have been shocked to read **Goffart's** assertion that "what we call the Fall of the Western Roman Empire was an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand."⁸ Twenty-five years later, **Goffart** published a sequel, *Barbarian Tides*, in which he again argues against the many scholars who attribute the fall of Rome completely or in large measure to Germanic barbarians.⁹ He devotes much effort to disproving the existence of a "German" people in Roman antiquity, *contra* generations of German scholars who constructed a quasi-mythic account of German national origins.

By 2005 a reaction to the ideas of transformation and accommodation had set in. **Bryan Ward-Perkins**, an archaeologist, renewed the case for the barbarian invasions as the major cause of Rome's fall in his *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization*.¹⁰ He argues that by the fifth century, Rome lacked the resource-

es (men and money) to resist the multiple threats of barbarian invasions. **Ward-Perkins** juxtaposes the "horrors of war" found in the sources and the painful accommodations made by occupied Romans to the "sunnier" picture found in **Goffart**; in an amusing send-up



he writes that "some of the recent literature on the Germanic settlements reads like an account of a tea party at the Roman vicarage."¹¹ He traces a significant decline in Roman material comfort and economic activity in the fifth century leading up to the fall of the western empire in 476. **Ward-Perkins** briefly addresses the survival of the Eastern Roman Empire until 1453, ascribing it in no small part to luck.

In the next year **Peter Heather's** *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* also argued that Rome's fall was due to pressure from barbarian invasions.¹² He sees the empire as relatively stable for much of the fourth century, before the catastrophic defeat of the Roman army by the Goths at Adrianople in 378. **Heather** posits that the Gothic invasion of 476-478 and an earlier cluster of invasions by Goths, Vandals, Alans and others in 405-408 were key events in the fall of the western empire, even if it limped along for another 65 years. He holds the Huns to be indirectly responsible by driving the Germanic peoples west into the empire. As the barbarians took over more and more Roman territory, tax revenues declined and the imperial government was less and less able to maintain adequate military forces and the central bureaucracy that governed the Roman state. The former Roman provincials gradually lost much of their "Romanness," as **Heather** calls it, under their new barbarian masters. While **Heather** is a bit more conciliatory toward the supporters of transformation than is **Ward-Perkins**, he firmly pushes the case for Roman decline and for barbarians as the major cause of the fall of the western empire in 476.

In 2009 **Adrian Goldsworthy** picked up the banner of decline and fall in his *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*, which in the original British edition was titled *The Fall of the West*.¹³ Like **Gibbon**, he takes the death of **Marcus Aurelius** in 180 as his point of departure, although he stops with the death of **Justinian** rather than continuing the story of the eastern empire. He views deposition of **Romulus Augustulus** in 476 as the actual end of the empire, with **Justinian** a brief renewal of former glory before the eastern empire became a rump state. **Goldsworthy** tells a story of internal conflicts as well as the external threats of barbarians and Persians. He sees the incessant civil wars and revolts that occurred from the end of the Antonine age until the fall of the western empire as a major cause

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of Rome's decline. Not only did the conflicts themselves sap the strength of Rome, fear of usurpation led the later emperors to make the army and bureaucracy less effective in their efforts to forestall successful revolts. He notes that scholars who favor a story of transformation over decline tend to focus on cultural, social, and religious themes. **Goldsworthy**, like **Heather** before him, suggests that neglect of both narrative and military history has biased these arguments.

Kyle Harper has taken a very different approach to explaining the fall of the empire in his 2017 work *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*.¹⁴ He interweaves Rome's historical narrative from the Antonines to **Justinian** with another of climate change, natural disaster, and disease. A favorable climate fostered Rome's growth and prosperity, but a transitional period of climate instability (ca. 150-450) followed by a little ice age contributed to its decline, as did multiple outbreaks of infectious disease. It is a fascinating and frightening story, one that reflects the concerns and fears of the early twenty-first century as we face the prospect of cataclysmic climate change.

Every age, every historian, has their own version of the fate of Rome. **Gibbon** reflects the concerns of the Enlightenment. The apostles of transformation and accommodation reflect an age of multiculturalism, in which western civilization has been dethroned to become one culture among many and empire is out of fashion altogether. As one reviewer of **Ward-Perkins** and **Heather** aptly observed, their works reflect the outlook of a post-9/11 world. **Harper** addresses the fall of Rome through the lens of climate change, perhaps the preeminent threat of our time. In *La chute de l'Empire romain: une histoire sans fin*, **Bertrand Lançon** approaches the various interpretations and explanations of the decline and fall of Rome as a series of mirrors which reflect the ideologies and predispositions that each historian brings. And in closing, we may observe with him "à chacun, sa 'chute'."¹⁵ 🌿

Endnotes

1. **Bowersock, Glen W.** "The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49, no. 8 (1996): 29-43, 43.
2. **Lançon, Bertrand.** *La chute de l'Empire romain: une histoire sans fin*. Paris: Perrin, 2017.
3. **Demandt, Alexander.** *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt*. München: Beck, 1984.
4. **Gibbon, Edward.** *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. London: Printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776-88. Standard modern editions edited by **John Bagnall Bury** (London: Methuen, 1897-1900) and by **David Womersley** (London: Penguin, 1995).*
5. **Brown, Peter.** *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Mohammed*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1971.*
6. **Brown, Peter.** *The World of Late Antiquity*, 7.
7. **Goffart, Walter.** *Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.*
8. **Goffart, Walter.** *Barbarians and Romans*, 35.
9. **Goffart, Walter.** *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
10. **Ward-Perkins, Bryan.** *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.*
11. **Ward-Perkins, Bryan.** *The Fall of Rome*, 82.
12. **Heather, Peter.** *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.*
13. **Goldsworthy, Adrian.** *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.*
14. **Harper, Kyle.** *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.*
15. **Lançon, Bertrand.** *La chute de l'Empire romain*, 299. Translated: "to each his 'fall.'"

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Booklover — Black and White

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Have you ever witnessed a conversation where the participants are a family, a bunch of close long-term friends, a squad, a couple or confidants? There is usually a code spoken when referring to specifics in the conversation or aside references to situations or circumstances known only to the "group" or surface explanations where the "group" always understands the deeper realities. The back-story of the varying codes can be learned — if offered, but sometimes gets lost in translation. *A Sport of Nature* by **Nadine Gordimer** reads like such a conversation. "He was waiting to see if there was any need to explain what could not be said, whether the experience of this white girl with whom nothing had needed an explanation, so far, went so far as to 'follow him' as she would put it."

Gordimer begins the novel by offering the reader the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for "*Lusus naturae* — Sport of nature: A plant, animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type...a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way." This variation, spontaneity and departure from parental stock is introduced in the first line of

the story: "Somewhere along the journey the girl shed one name and emerged under the other..... she threw Kim up to the rack with her school pajama and took on Hillela." Hillela continues to develop her unique phenotypic behavior brought on by this spontaneous act and directed by the racially charged environment in which she exists.

An exploration of **Gordimer's** biography identifies elements of her life experiences that are reflected in this novel: **Gordimer's** parents are Jewish immigrants to South Africa (Hillela comes from a Jewish background), **Gordimer's** mother is an activist influenced by the racial problems in South Africa (Hillela's aunt is an activist influenced by the racial problems in South Africa), **Gordimer's** home was raided by the local police confiscating family letters and diaries (there is a raid on one of Hillela's lovers' apartment where his works are confiscated), and **Gordimer** herself was involved in the anti-apartheid movement to the point that several of her books were banned by the apartheid regime (the course of Hillela's life, her many love affairs, her worldly experiences, her marriages and thus this story are all entwined in the anti-apartheid movement).

"It was dangerous to believe anything open, while holed up in refugee status where everything is ulterior. They stared past, willing her to go. Then someone walked in whom she did know. She began from that moment to have credibility of her own: he came back, the man who had appeared so black, so defined, so substantial from out of water running mercurial with light. He had come between them, a girl and man in the sea, paling them in the assertion of his blackness, bearing news whose weight of reality was the obsidian of his form. A slight acquaintance seems more that it was when two people meet again in an unexpected place. Although he had not acknowledged her when he rose from the sea, and she had only put in a word here and there in the conversations he had led at Ma Sophie's, he took her by the shoulders in greeting, shook her a little, comradely, and she was close enough to see the lines made by dealing with the white man, down from either side of his mouth, and the faint nicked scars near the ears made by blacks in some anterior



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