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## Why Did Rome End?

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## Abstract

It is often assumed that the Roman Empire had been rotting for centuries before its collapse in the West in the fifth century A.D. According to that paradigm, the fall of Rome resulted from a lengthy process of social, political, economic, structural, military, religious, and moral decline. This essay challenges those assumptions by arguing that none of the so-called 'internal diseases' which historians have often ascribed to the late Roman Empire can be sufficiently documented. The real reason for Rome's eventual demise lies not within, but beyond, her borders.

### 1. Preliminaries

Writing in the first quarter of the fifth century A.D. in the turbulent decades when the Roman Empire in the West was experiencing its dying lashes, the great Christian writer St Augustine of Hippo, in his magnum opus entitled *The City of God*, reflected upon the sack of Rome at the hands of Alaric the Goth in 410, an event which occurred during his own lifetime:

> Where were [the gods], when the consul Valerius was slain defending the Capitol, which had been set on fire by exiles and slaves? ... Where were they when Spurius Maelius, because he distributed free corn to the hungry people as the famine increased in severity, was accused of aiming at kingship and was slain? ... Where were they when a fearful plague had broken out? ... Where were they when the Roman army had fought for ten years without success and without

> intermission at Veii? ... Where were they when the Gauls captured Rome, sacked it, burnt it, and filled it with the bodies of the slain?[1]

Like many authors of his generation, Augustine struggled to come to terms with a seismic event which had shaken the civilised world which he knew, the fall of an imperial city which for centuries had stood at the helm of a vast Mediterranean empire which, at its furthest extent, stretched from Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain to the deserts of northern Africa, from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the fertile regions of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) in the East. A casual reading of these lines might dismiss them as a mere disgruntled cry against the injustices and vicissitudes of history, but on closer interpretation they convey a more profound conviction that the kingdom of heaven is to be found not in the tangible realms of this world, but in the spiritual dimensions of the human soul. Augustine polemicized against non- and anti-Christian opponents who blamed the misfortunes which Rome had undergone upon the abandonment of its traditional religion: A century beforehand, in 311, the Emperor Constantine, mainly to win support of the army, had converted to Christianity, a Middle Eastern cult which centred upon a Galilean Jew who had lived during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius three centuries before that. Because Rome had neglected her gods, so the argument went, the same gods which had given protection to the city for twelve centuries now turned their backs on Rome itself and left her to the merciless brigandage of barbarians who poured in across the Rhine and Danube.[2]

Augustine, equipped as he was with unparalleled understanding of Jewish and Christian scripture, saw through the shallowness of that line of thinking. His objection was not merely to the polytheistic beliefs with which Christianity had come into conflict but, more fundamentally, to the theologically naïve assumption that dutiful observance of religious protocol guarantees prosperity and flourishing in this life. The Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament) were sharply divided over the difficult question of human suffering. Some prophets, like Jeremiah or the post-Exilic portions of Isaiah, ascribed calamity to divine judgment, whereby Israel's captivity in Babylon was a punishment from God for infidelity, while others, like Job, regarded suffering as a test sent by God of faithfulness. The Christian Scriptures (or New Testament) spoke clearly against the simplistic hope that the just are rewarded in this life, and the apostles even embraced their suffering and martyrdom as a gift from God who would reward them in the life to come. The theological purport of Augustine's multi-layered treatise was to divorce human prosperity in this life from questions of merit or just desert. What applied at the level of the individual applied at the level of civilisation: When civilisations rise and fall, this is part of the working out of God's plan for humanity and has little to do with divine reward or punishment. The true City of God is therefore to be found not in any physical or political structure, like a resurrected Rome or Jerusalem, but in the interior recesses of the human heart, which is the only realm or edifice where God can truly reside. Augustine laid out the precepts of a Christian civilisation which was henceforth to be understood to be a Community of the Faithful in Christ, as distinct

[1] Augustin. *Civ. Dei* 3.17. Augustine in this passage refers not to the Gothic sack of 410 A.D. but the Gaulish sack of 386 B.C., some seven centuries earlier. For this earlier event, see Liv. 5.41.8-9.
[2] For contemporary Roman responses to the sack of 410, see Courcelle 1964, 67-77.

from an earthly realm, such as Rome, citizenship in which could, at best, be expressed in legal terms and which, as recent events had indelibly proved, was finite historically and temporally.

Augustine's dualistic conception of the earthly and heavenly realms is similarly borne out in contemporary Christian literature. In a poem entitled *Carmen de Providentia Dei* (*Poem on the Providence of God*), a Gallic Christian poet of the same period as Augustine urged his compatriots to bewail not the disasters which had beset Gaul but the ravages which had taken place in the desolate recesses of their hearts.[1] This was of a piece with the idea which Augustine expressed in the *City of God*: The duty of a Christian was to focus not on the earthly bounties which this life might afford, but on the riches promised in the kingdom of heaven which was yet to come. For Augustine and his contemporaries, there was no place for the theory that the reason Rome had undergone calamities in recent times was because the old gods of the Roman state had been neglected and were now wreaking their revenge. Equally, it was difficult for a Christian believer to hold on to the hope that dutiful service of the true God would be rewarded in this life. Christ had said that his kingdom was not of this world, and so it was vain to expect that Rome would eventually rise from the ashes in any temporal or physical sense. The idea that the godly, or spiritual, realm existed separately from the temporal and physical gradually became entrenched in Western Christianity, for which Augustine is the most important of its theological preceptors. Because of this, until the Protestant Reformation a thousand years later, Church and State held very distinct jurisdictions in the Latin-speaking West, whereas in the Greek-speaking East, which survived the disintegration of the western half of the Empire in the fifth century by another thousand years until the Ottoman sack of Constantinople in 1453, the Ecumenical Patriarch occupied the positions of both earthly and spiritual ruler.

The tendency to blame disasters on underlying moral degeneracy or neglect of the gods is well attested. For centuries, Roman historians had been preoccupied with the notion that Rome had risen to greatness because of her moral steeliness and vigour but, on acquiring the riches of empire, had slipped away from her prelapsarian grandeur to a state of laziness and turpitude. Such beliefs can easily be documented as far back as the second century B.C. with Cato the Elder and were toyed with by Roman historians at the height of Roman domination in the Mediterranean, most memorably Sallust writing in the time of Julius Caesar (c. 100-44 B.C.) and, a century later, Appian. The last two aforesaid grappled with the idea that the Roman Republic had given way to monarchy because of the political corruption of the Roman Senate, the most influential political body in Rome until the establishment of the Principate under Augustus (formerly Octavian) in 27 B.C. Sallust, who politically speaking occupied a position which we might identify as leftist, blamed the infighting which led ultimately to the demise of the Roman Republic (509-44 B.C.) on the historical circumstances which followed on from Rome's sack of Carthage in 146 B.C. In the prologues to his two extant historical treatises, the *Bellum Catilinum* and *Bellum Iugurthinum*, Sallust comments that when Rome's arch-rival in the Western Mediterranean, Carthage, was finally defeated and destroyed, moral corruption set in because there was no longer a sense of threat from the outside, and the rich and wealthy began to exploit their position shamelessly. Appian, in turn, ascribed the beginnings of decline

[1] For a translation and analysis of the *Carmen de Providentia Dei*, see Roberts 1992.

to the tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. and spoke of large scale polarisation of wealth which followed, where the richest citizens poured money into large land holdings at the expense of the smaller farmers, which led to economic division between haves and have-nots.

Sweeping moral judgments need to be read with some circumspection. Archaeological surveys over the past three decades of the Italian countryside in the second and first centuries B.C. have not yielded evidence of the *latifundia*, or large estates, whose origin Appian dates to the period following the Second Punic War (218-201 B.C.), and Sallust's historical tracts are themselves heavily politicised, casting Caesar as the hero of the dispossessed against the old Senatorial guard which identified with the dying Republic.[1] More to the point, Rome's power did not come to an end in their generations but was to endure for another four centuries. There was nothing new in the fifth century, therefore, about the claim that society was in a state of moral torpor, and that this was the root cause of the misfortunes which Rome had encountered. The tendency to look to an idyllic past when virtues were pristine and when society had not fallen victim to the vices and corruptions which wealth and empire brought in their train were well entrenched in Rome's literary heritage, and if the generality of the populace in Augustine's day held to such view about the causes behind the sack of Rome, that should not in any sense surprise us. More importantly, though, it should not be prioritised as an historical explanation. Republican authors from the time of Cato the Elder thought that their own age was corrupt, yet later authors regarded the age of Cato to have been a golden age of virtue and self-restraint. Cicero and Sallust endlessly bemoaned the moral laxity of their own generation which they put down to circumstances of the previous century, yet writers under the Augustan Principate and later saw the old Republic, excepting the last generation, as an era of moral vitality and growth. Equally, biographers and sensationalists living in the Flavian period might lambast the Julio-Claudians who preceded them as morally degenerate to heap praise on their own contemporary rulers. Moralising judgments for better or for worse often had underlying political motives.

In modern times, the idea that Roman society underwent protracted moral disintegration in the centuries leading up to the sack of Rome in A.D. 410 has nowhere more clearly been expressed than in the magisterial multi-volume treatise of Edward Gibbon entitled *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Writing in the second half of the eighteenth century, when Britain was struggling with political corruption of its own on a large scale among the aristocracy, Gibbon drew implied parallels between the British ruling classes in his own day and the Roman elite, which, he argued, over a period of centuries slowly sunk into a quagmire of indecency and fecklessness which ate away at the moral fibre of Roman society, and finally left Rome prey to the depredations of barbarian invaders which the army and Senate no longer had the resolve to be able to repel. More memorably, Gibbon is associated with the claim that the rise of Christianity had a direct effect on Rome's eventual downfall, and while that claim has been taken seriously by some anti-Christian polemicists since, most historians now rightly hold it up to suspicion, not least because there is little good evidence to support it, and because it resides in a mistaken identification between Christianity and monasticism, the latter of which did not begin as a viable movement within Christianity until the fourth century A.D., and which

[1] For a survey of the archaeological evidence for large land holdings in Italy, see Greene 1983, 98-141

never at any period of the Church's history incorporated more than a fraction of the population. St Paul in the *Epistle to the Romans* spoke clearly about Christian submission to earthly rulers, a precept which the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century took very literally, and the four Gospels could not be clearer in their account of Christ's passion that the founder of the world religion which came later to be known as Christianity was tried for civil disobedience and was publicly acquitted of the charge. Gibbon was a child of the Enlightenment, which held Christian religion in grave suspicion and, besides, adhered to grand theories about the rise and fall of civilisations to be explained in human terms, without reference to divine agency.

Just as the eighteenth century influenced historiography with its moralising theories, the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries allowed nationalism to colour discussion of Rome's downfall. This was especially the case in Germany following unification under Prussian suzerainty in 1871, when it became very popular to speak of a pan-national struggle against the military might of imperial Rome. According to that view, Rome for centuries had struggled in vain to reduce the German-speaking tribes, which after a long valiant battle for independence organised themselves into an indomitable military force and eventually in the fifth century, after centuries of aggression, humbled the arrogant imperialistic ambitions of her southern foe. The most famous specimen of this historicising nonsense is the famous novel by Felix Dahn entitled *Ein Kampf um Rom* (*War Against Rome*) which, consciously or otherwise, attempted to establish an historical precedent for the unification of Germany under the Kaiser.[1] Inconveniently for the theory, there is not a shred of evidence that pre-Carolingian Germany had ever been unified under a single leader, ruler, or tribe, and though we have independent evidence of large tribal federations coalescing between the first and fourth centuries A.D., even in the time of Alaric the Goth there is little good evidence that the Germanic tribes were united in anything that could be likened to a pan-national struggle. There are other problems with the theory which will be examined more thoroughly below, most important of them being that Rome never in any serious way attempted to bring Germania under its yoke because it was not worth its while economically, and for most of Rome's history the external military threat came not from beyond the Rhine or Danube but from Persia in the East, where the majority of her legions were stationed. Unlike Britain, which was a bread-basket for Rome and rich in mineral deposits - it was even referred to as 'The Tin Islands' in Greek – the heavily forested territories beyond the River Weser offered little of economic interest to Rome and were in consequence neglected by Rome's armies. Germanic 'vengeance on Rome' makes little historical sense.[2]

It remains true that there were episodes when Rome clashed with Germanic tribes, the most memorable of them being the great military standoff between the leader of the Cherusci, the formidable Arminius (a Latinisation of the name 'Hermann'), and the legions of Quinctilius Varus which were massacred in A.D. 9 in the Teutoberg Forest, between the River Ems and River Weser. Writing at the tail end of the first century A.D., the Roman historian Tacitus provided a gripping account of what Caesar Germanicus encountered five years later when he was sent out by the Emperor Tiberius to mete out punishments on the barbarian warlords who

[1] Dahn 1877.
[2] On the dynamics of Roman imperial expansion into Germany, see Isaac 1992; Whittaker 1994.

had committed vile atrocities against a Roman commander and his soldiers, who encountered whitening bones lying in heaps, horses' limbs scattered in every direction, and severed heads fastened to tree-trunks.[1] There may be an element of rhetorical exaggeration here, and certainly after the first printed editions of Tacitus' *Annals* were published towards the end of the fifteenth century the haunting figure of 'Hermann the German' captured the imagination of Humanist readers, and became a major tool of propaganda for the Prussian chancellor Bismarck in the nineteenth century who erected a monument, the so-called Hermann Monument, in his honour - as luck would have it, in the wrong place.[2] There are other reasons rooted in historical events of the last five hundred years why 'Hermann the German' has been so vitally important ideologically, and they can best be understood in the backdrop of the religious convulsions which rocked Europe in the decades following the Lutheran Reformation in the sixteenth century. A famous Renaissance painting depicts the Emperor's delegate Germanicus parleying with his great military rival Arminius, or Hermann. There are all sorts of hints in the painting which liken Caesar's deputy to a Papal nuncio, and Arminius, the historical prototype of Martin Luther himself, to the great defender of German national and spiritual freedom from the Roman enslaver.[3] As we shall see, the historical reality is that until the end of the fourth century, when a major incursion of Goths across the Danube presented an existential threat, there is little sign that Rome was engaged in a protracted struggle with the Germanic tribes, and though periods of fighting and rebellion among its client kingdoms broke out periodically, these were generally on a small scale and quite easily contained. The myth of an enduring struggle between Roman and her northern neighbours is one which has been fuelled over the last five centuries by a combination of religious hyperbole, nationalistic fervour, and Romantic distortion.

In what follows I provide a different account of the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West which disengages itself from some of the grandiloquent theories which have been put about in the past, often from a variety of suspect and historically unsound motives. I wish to argue that Roman power disintegrated in the West in the fifth century for reasons which had little or nothing to do with an imaginary process of steady political, economic, social, or moral decline, for which there is little good historical evidence or documentation. Rome indeed did undergo political and military crises in the centuries which preceded her eventual collapse, the most important of which was the renewed threat from the East presented by the rise of the new and aggressive Sassanid dynasty in Persia in the second half of the third century, the strain this placed on economic resources, the currency debasement and hyperinflation which followed, and the political instability which resulted in the fifty years between the death of Emperor Alexander Severus in 235 and accession of Emperor Diocletian in 284. Yet this was by no means the first time that Rome had experienced crisis, and indeed it may not have compared in magnitude to the formidable challenges which Rome had to counter in centuries previous in which her very existence came under threat, the most notable being one already mentioned, the Second Punic (or Hannibalic) War of 218-201 B.C. during which Rome was almost wiped off

[1] Tac. *Ann.* 1.68.
[2] For the history of textual transmission of Tacitus' writings and their cultural milieu, see Ash 2006.
[3] On the development of the Batavian myth and its political significance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Schöffer 1975.

the geopolitical map by her great Mediterranean rival, Carthage. When Diocletian came to the imperial throne, he put an end to a period of internal instability by creating the Tetrarchy (the division of the empire between East and West with two co-rulers presiding over each half), by price-fixing, by stabilising the currency, and by creating a new form of imperial administration which was more capable of dealing with the realities of what the Roman Empire had become since the days of Augustus. I divide the argument into the following subsections: the *Pax Romana* (section 2), beyond Rome's frontiers (section 3), the final crisis (section 4).

## 2. The *Pax Romana*

It is tempting to think of the Roman Empire as a political and imperial enterprise which came into existence at a single moment in history. The reality is rather more complex.[1] Rome began as an insignificant town in central Italy, which from the fourth century B.C. started to spread its influence throughout the Italian peninsula and which by the middle of the third century B.C. had united all Italy south of the River Po under her leadership. The early history of Rome is preserved in the chronicled account of the Augustan historian Livy, much of which is affected by myth and bias, but which gives a broad overview of the historical processes by which Rome rose from insignificance to imperial greatness. Her first contact with an overseas power came in 280 B.C. when she became embroiled in the internal affairs of the southern Italian city of Tarrentum (in Greek, Taras), which then invited the Hellenistic dynast Pyrrhus of Epirus across the Adriatic to intervene. The result was a futile and desultory war between Rome and one of the successor kings of Alexander the Great, which left Rome in full control of the heal of Italy. Eleven years after Pyrrhus withdrawal, Rome involved herself in Sicily which at that time fell within the sphere of Carthage in North Africa. Rome's victory in the First Punic War in 241 B.C. gained influence not only in Sicily but in some of the outlying islands. By 218 Rome had established colonies in the Po basin, known in antiquity as Gallia Cisalpina (Cisalpine Gaul). In the same year Hannibal of Carthage launched a revanchist campaign against Rome which took him across the Alps and brought him a series of spectacular military victories. When the tide turned, he was beaten back and defeated at the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C. Carthage was forced to accept crippling peace terms and was ultimately destroyed two generations later in a war which Rome picked in 146 B.C., the same year as the destruction of Corinth.

The second-century B.C. Greek historian Polybius was probably right to claim that the fifty-three years which intervened between the end of the Social War in Greece in 220 B.C. and the defeat of Macedon in 167 B.C. was the defining epoch which took Rome from being a provincial power to the mistress of the Mediterranean world.[2] In those years, Rome came into conflict with two major foreign powers, Carthage just mentioned, and Macedon under Philip V, the latter of which was one of the successor kingdoms of Alexander the Great who had conquered the Persian Empire over a century earlier. Polybius had been an Achaean statesman and had fallen prisoner to the Roman patrician senator, Scipio Aemilianus, who eventually

[1] For general accounts of the Roman Empire, its expansion as a world power, and internal administration, see Lintott 1993 and Goldsworthy 2016.
[2] Pol. 1.1.5; 3.10; 4.1-5; 63.9; 64.2; 6.2; 8.2.3-4.

sacked Carthage in 146 B.C. Polybius evidently looked at events through Greek eyes and saw the rise of Rome as the mirror of Greece's eclipse. By the middle of the second century B.C., Rome had acquired dominance in Italy, Spain, mainland Greece, Sicily, Sardinia, and those reaches of the north African coast which had previously belonged to Carthage. Over the next century she pushed her power further afield into Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Syria, Judea, and, in the time of Julius Caesar, completed the conquest of Gaul (modern France). Britain was incorporated within the Roman sphere under the Emperor Claudius in 43 A.D., and under Trajan in the next century ventured into Dacia (modern Romania). By the time of Trajan's successor on the imperial throne, Hadrian (r. 117-138), the Roman Empire covered a vast swathe of territory the size of which would have taken literally months to cross on horseback. The vast conquests which this one city achieved did not happen overnight but were the result of a long process of military conquest which took place over a period of centuries.[1]

We tend to think of empires as areas on a map painted in one colour, a little like the old slogan of the British Empire that 'a quarter of the globe is red', but the habit of thinking is often more ideological than actual. In her rise to imperial supremacy, Rome did not reduce the entire world to a condition of servitude or obeisance. Once again reality is far more complex than the imperial ideologies might suggest. Coinage issued in the reign of Emperor Augustus depicted the Caesar with his foot fixed upon a round sphere, and on the face of it we might conclude that Rome thought herself the mistress of the known world.[2] Yet Rome's imperial enterprise was in reality much more akin to a network of alliances and treaties of different legal statuses, which came into existence at different moments in time and under varying circumstances. In the earliest phases of growth, she joined herself to her Latin allies by means of political treaties, or *foedera*, which like the Greek *symmachiai* guaranteed reciprocal obligations in the event one member of the league was attacked by an outside force.[3] Other types of relationship were less equal, like the conditions imposed by Rome upon Aetolia in north-west Greece in 189 B.C. which obligated a defeated state or alliance to 'preserve the rule and majesty of the Roman people without deceit'.[4] Such relationships were established through *deditio in fidem* (literally, 'surrender into faith'), where in return for Rome sparing a defeated people, that people pledged unconditional allegiance to Rome. An inscription from Spain at the end of the second century B.C. gives clear evidence of how such a surrender normally worked: The Seanoc people first surrendered unconditionally to Rome, which in turn allowed them to continue to exist with their lands, buildings and laws intact, without being killed or reduced to slavery.[5] A *deditio* was a total surrender which placed the subject people at the total discretion (*in dicione*) of Rome. This type of uneven relationship was unknown in the Greek world, and in the last two

[1] For the growth of Roman power abroad, see De Sanctis 1960-7; Toynbee 1965; Huergon 1973. For later developments, see Nicolet 1978; Gruen 1984; Sherwin-White 1984.
[2] Crawford 1974, 397 and 403.
[3] Dion. Hal. 4.49; 6.95.2-3; Festus 166L; Cic. *Balb.* 63. On the early league, see Sherwin-White 1973, 3-37, 190-9.
[4] Pol. 21.32; Liv. 38.11; Proc.*Dig*. 49.15.7.1
[5] Lopez Melero, Sanchez Abal and Garcia-Jimenez 1984, 265-323. On the legal nature of *deditio*, see Dahlheim 1968, 5-82.

centuries of the Roman Republic we hear of states left in *arbitratu dicione potestate*, which meant they were placed under the sovereignty, dominion and power of the Roman people.[1]

In various ways, the arrangements which Rome kept with her allied states were different in kind from those of the Hellenistic powers which they displaced. In the Greek world, alliances were forged on a grand scale, like the Delian and Peloponnesian Confederacies of the fifth century B.C., or the League of Corinth established in 338 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon after his victory over the resistant city states of southern Greece at Charoneia, which forged a pan-Hellenic alliance with Macedon at the helm. Rome, by contrast, did not form leagues or grand alliances on the same size or scale, but instead maintained separate relationships with peoples, cities, and tribal associations with which it came into contact. The flexibility of Rome's dealing with foreign cities and peoples was one the keys to her success as an imperial power. However, there was one feature which Rome kept in common with Greece, and that was the concept of the free city within an alliance. These cities were allowed to exist free from foreign intervention of taxation provided they remained friendly to Rome, though intervention was allowed in the event that a political revolution within the city occurred. This type of arrangement modelled itself on Philip II's League of Corinth[2] and bore similarities with Greek-speaking Sicily after Timoleon of Corinth had liberated Greek cities which previously had lain under the suzerainty of Dionysius II of Syracuse.[3] In other places Rome forged alliances with non-urban political communities (in Greek *ethnê*, in Latin *nationes*), such as in Celtic Spain and Gaul where the majority of people were bound to aristocrats within their own communities who maintained a special relationship with Rome.[4] Through the exercise of patronage Roman generals were able to maintain strong links with these communities and exert influence within them. In the Hellenistic world which Rome piece by piece absorbed into its own orbit cities, even Athens which was nominally democratic, tended to be socially oligarchic, and this permitted Rome to form diplomatic relations with key players within those cities and communities. [5] Ex-soldiers settled by kings and dynasts in subject cities in the Hellenistic period gave the ruler leverage, and the practice was continued by Rome as the Hellenistic monarchies were displaced.[6]

Very important to Rome's maintenance of the *status quo* was the institution of allied kings. The term 'client-king' is an invention of post-Renaissance scholarship, and in modern times scholars have debated whether the terminology is really appropriate as far as Rome's relationship with these allied kings is concerned, especially since the patron-client relationship was a feature of Roman society, legally defined, and may not have been strictly applicable to the networks of relations which Rome built up with kings and foreign rulers further afield.[7] Under the Republic this was paradoxical because the Republic was borne in 509 B.C. after the expulsion of a local monarchy at Rome. These kings maintained an *entente* with Rome without a *foedus*. A good example was Massinissa of Numidia, who received the title of *amicus et*

[1] Gai. *Inst.* 1.25-6; 3.74; *P.Giss.* I no. 40, col. 1; see Riccobono 1968, no. 88, line 9.
[2] *SEG* 22.339b-c.
[3] Diod. 22.10; Plut. *Pyrrh.* 22-3; Dion. Hal. 20.8.
[4] Caes. *Bell. Gal.*6.12-13; Poseid. *FGrHist* 87 F17 and 18; Diod. Sic. 5.29.2
[5] Cic. *Fam.* 10.33-35; 15.1-2; *P.Zeno*. II.59069 and 59261
[6] Welles 1974, no. 51; *Syll*$^3$ *410.16; OGIS* 229.13ff; 338.12
[7] See Brunt 1988, 382ff; Braund 1984, 5ff; Rich 1989, 117-35.

*socius* ('friend and ally') without being bound to Rome legally.[1] We hear of lists of friends and allies of the Roman people, the so-called *formula sociorum* and *formula amicorum*.[2] These relationships were based upon cordiale and often were cemented through dedications of gifts, trophies and votive offerings, such as the dedications on the Capitol to Juppiter Capitolinus and the *populus Romanus* from client kings from Pontus, Cappadocia and Nabataea.[3] Many of these allied kings maintained close links with individual Roman senators, such as Q. Oppius who in a letter to the people of Aphrodisias in Caria promised to be their patron.[4] Over time it was often felt that an allied king was little more than a bailiff (*procurator*) operating on behalf of Rome in the sense that Roman power was felt in those regions like a penumbra. A famous example of the position of political inferiority in which these kings stood to Rome is the case of Prusias of Bithynia at the time of Rome's victory in the Third Macedonian War approaching the Roman Senate in a freedman's cap,[5] and this uneven type of relationship developed further as the Roman Republic gave way to the Principate under Augustus.[6]

What distinguished Rome from Greece most of all was its concept of nationality and citizenship. In this one respect the ideology of the Romans could not have been more different from that of the Greeks, and it was arguably this that made the Roman power enduring. In the Greek cities, citizenship had always been understood in terms of kinship and blood-line, and the earliest known Greek historian, the sixth-century B.C. Hecataeus of Miletus (*FGrHist* 1), composed two major treatises, one on the geography of the known world, the other genealogies. The fact that Greek historiography in the sixth century B.C. began as genealogy is significant, because it shows that in the Greek conception nationhood was understood in terms of descent from a common ancestor. In Rome, by contrast, citizenship (*civitas*) was never racially defined or delimited in the same way. Unlike the Athenian concept of citizenship (*politeia*), where all citizens had to show Athenian parentage on both sides, Roman citizenship was not necessarily connected with kinship. Manumitted slaves automatically became citizens.[7] From an early stage, Rome granted citizenship to whole Italian communities which came under the sway of Rome, and by 90 B.C. the whole of the Italian peninsula south of the River Po attained Roman citizenship by the passage of the *Lex Iulia* of the same year.[8] Communities were also granted a semi-citizen status known as the *ius Latinum,* or 'Latin right', which granted holders the same rights as private citizens to hold property, marry, and freedom from whimsical abuse under the old laws of *provocatio*, but which did not give them the full political franchise.[9] Under the Republic attainment of Roman citizenship was not normally seen as compatible with retention of indigenous citizenship, but from the time of Augustus in the first century A.D. this began to change. The most memorable example in literature is St Paul, who besides being a Jew could

[1] Liv. 30.15.11; 31.11.11-12.
[2] Liv. 43.6.10; 44.16.7; *RDGE* 22 lines 7 (Latin) and 25 (Greek)
[3] *ILLRP* 174-181a, b; Jos. *AJ* 14.389; *BJ* 1.285.
[4] Reynolds 1982, no. 3, lines 48 ff.
[5] Pol. 29.27; 30.18-19; Liv. 45.44.19-21.
[6] Aug. *RG* 27.2; Suet. *Aug*. 48; Dio Cass. 38.38.4.
[7] Liv. 41.8.9-11; Cic. *Att.* 4.18.4; Cic. *Balb.* 52; *Off.* 3.47; *Arch.* 10; *Schol. Bob*. 175St; Dio Cass. 37.9.5.
[8] Liv. 38.36.7-8; Appl. *BC* 1.20.86-7; 23.99; Vell. Pat. 2.20; Gell. 4.4.3; Cic. *Balb*. 21
[9] Liv. 8.14.10; Cic. *Caec*. 102; Dion. Hal. 6.95; Fest. 426, 474-5L.

also claim Roman citizenship at the time of his trial and arrest. This arrangement had already begun to develop in the late Republic, as Cicero attests that no one found it objectionable that Roman citizens were members of the Athenian Areopagus.[1] In Augustus' third Cyrene edict of 7-6 B.C., the emperor stipulated that the grant of Roman citizenship should not exempt a man from paying taxes and performing duties in his own city.[2] The result was an ever growing concept of being 'Roman' which was not limited in any geographical or ethnic sense to Rome or Italy, and after the famous Edict of Caracalla issued in A.D. 212 by the emperor, citizenship was granted to every free person living within the boundaries of the Roman Empire.

The historical implications of the expansion of citizenship cannot be overestimated. In the most important sense, it meant that Rome from an early stage ceased to be a geopolitical idea and rapidly became a purely politico-legal one. In other words, to be 'Roman' by the time of the late Empire meant not necessarily that one lived in Rome or even spoke Latin (the official language of the East was always Greek), but that one possessed the *civitas Romana* and was therefore a member of a fortress civilisation bounded in the North by the Rhine and Danube, in the West by the ocean, and by impenetrable deserts in the South and East. By the third century A.D., the polarity was not between Rome and her subjects, as it had been in the early centuries of Roman expansion, but between fortress civilisation and that which lay beyond. This transformation had a profound effect on the nature of Roman imperial administration in the late Empire. Under the old Republic, the focal centre of authority had been Rome itself, made up of the *senatus populusque Romanus* (the Senate and People of Rome) which dictated its will to its allies and subjects. The end of the Republic in the first century B.C. brought about a *de facto* monarchy at Rome which officially retained the vestiges of Republican government – the Senate, the magistrates, the popular assemblies – but where real power devolved on one head. As time moved on, the centre of imperial administration was not necessarily Rome, but wherever the emperor (or Caesar) happened to be at any one point in time.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in a famous anecdote dating from the second half of the fourth century A.D., where a senatorial legate from Rome by the name Symmachus travelled to Trier on the Mosel River close to the Roman frontier with Germany: Trier by this period was fully Romanised, is famous for the Porta Nigra gate, and today contains remains of Roman baths and amphitheatres. Symmachus had been send in the early winter of A.D. 368/9 from Rome to find the reigning emperor Valentinian I to convey to him the imperial crown gold (*aurum coronarium*).[3] The significance of this episode is that because the emperor was stationed where he was, to all practical purposes that, not Rome, was where the centre of the Empire lay. From the time of the Emperor Diocletian at the end of the third century, all vestiges of Republican government had effectively been removed, and the old jurisconsults who from early times had interpreted law were now eclipsed by the emperor.[4] The emperor at this stage directly taxed the Empire, whereas in earlier centuries that duty fell to private and more local

[1] Cic. *Phil*. 5.14; 8.27.
[2] *RGE* 102, III.
[3] Symmach. *Epist*. 4.58-62; 5.56 and 62; 6.33 and 42.
[4] For these developments, see Robinson 1997; Honoré 1994; Millar 1992, chapters 4, 7 and 8.

sources of authority.[1] More significantly still, from the time of Diocletian there was not one Emperor but two, one in the West and one in the East, and he was joined by a junior co-ruler.

This partitioning of the Empire is partly to be explained by the changes in the character of Empire itself. While Rome was an imperial city dominating subject territories, it made good sense for the centre to be Rome. But once Rome and the Empire became co-extensive in the third century A.D. and beyond, there was no reason why the centre of power should continue to reside at Rome. Importantly, the inhabitants of Trier in Symmachus' day were no less Roman than the inhabitants of Rome, and Rome, though it continued to enjoy some special privileges in the fourth century, exercised no stronger claim on the emperor's attention than did any other portion of the Empire. The gradual process of Romanisation is exemplified by a law inscribed on ten bronze tablets near Seville, the *Lex Irnitana*, which laid out the constitution of the Roman town of Irni in Spain which modelled itself on Roman governmental practice.[2] At a socio-economic level, the spread of the villa throughout the Empire illustrates the extent to which Rome ceased to be a city and, in both a social and a cultural sense, became synonymous with the Empire.[3] Given its vast size, the Empire could no longer be governed by one ruler issuing his edicts from Italy, but needed to develop a more widespread and elaborate bureaucratic machine which, bit by bit, superseded the Roman Senate itself which by Symmachus's day was little more than a glorified town council. In the time of Emperor Constantine I (A.D. 305-337), the emperor created personnel known as *comites* (whence derives our English word 'count'), to govern and administer the Empire, and over time this bureaucratic machine proliferated in size and number, to the point that the *comites* displaced the Roman Senate as the effective governing body of the Empire.[4] Before the fourth century Roman senators known as *clarissimi* (most distinguished') occupied an important status, but in A.D. 367 Emperor Valentinian combined the military and administrative elements into a single system, so that the 6,000 most illustrious men in the Empire may not have resided at Rome but were scattered throughout.[5]

Thus, the Roman Empire transformed from a patchwork of alliances and treaties under Roman hegemony to a culturally and politically more homogeneous state where the sense of a geographical capital was more symbolic than actual. The sense of transformation, *Entwicklung*, is beyond doubt, but what needs to be examined more carefully is whether these political and cultural changes were accompanied by what Gibbon understood by decline and fall. Historians since Gibbon have debated the extent to which the late Empire can be characterised by political, social, economic and moral degeneracy. In the twentieth century, the classic text in the English language was the magisterial three-volume work by A.H.M. Jones entitled *The Later Roman Empire: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, which has influenced most scholarly discussion of the late Roman Empire since. Jones was less committed than Gibbon to the notion of moral decay but was nevertheless convinced that by the end of the fourth century A.D. the economic resources of the empire had all but dissipated and therefore that its ability to defend

[1] Jones 1964, chapter 13.
[2] Gonzalez 1986.
[3] Woolf 1998; Keay and Terrenato 2001; Mattingly 2002.
[4] On the growth of the imperial bureaucracy in the late Empire, see Matthews 1975, chs 2-4; Heather 1994.
[5] Jones 1964, ch. 18; Dagron 1974; Heather 1994.

itself from outside threat became effectively impossible. However, in a more recent and very compelling study, Peter Heather has re-evaluated some of these inherited ideas, arguing instead from archaeological evidence dating from the fourth century that there is no good reason to think that, economically, the late Empire functioned any less efficiently than in earlier times.[1]

It has traditionally been thought that because the annual volume of inscriptions from the mid-third century suddenly starts to fall off dramatically, this would indicate a sharp population decline brought about by the inability of the landed aristocracy to sustain itself or dependent populations because of the increased tax hikes.[2] This has been dubbed 'the flight of the curials', the curials (or decurials) being the landowners who manned the local *curiae* (town councils). But in the 1950s, a French archaeologist named Georges Tchalenko unearthed in the hinterland of Antioch remains of a dense spread of villages which were not abandoned until the eighth and ninth centuries in the wake of the Arab conquests. Tchalenko concluded from the stratification that there had been no significant tapering of prosperity in the region in the fourth century, and that indeed the region continued to flourish economically well into the fifth, sixth and seventh.[3] Other similar field surveys in Roman North Africa have confirmed Tchalenko's observations in Asia Minor, and a comparable picture emerges also in Greece, Spain and Gaul of about the same period. Equally, in Roman Britain it is now thought that the population of the fourth century was at a peak level which would not be matched again until the fourteenth century. The only areas which seem to have suffered were Italy and the Rhine.[4]

Heather plausibly infers that though the tax burdens on the agricultural peasant in the later Empire would have been greater than previously, we do not have sufficient evidence to be able to assert with any confidence that the economy of the fourth century was suffering. The fall in the rate of public inscriptions is to be understood better not as a function of population decline - inscriptions in any case represent only a fraction of total written communication[5] - but in the fall of new public buildings being commissioned. The only places at this period where new public building was happening on a large scale was in the main imperial centres and regional capitals.[6] Because funds were being sucked out of local government to the centre, that meant that there was less money to spend on luxuries, but that should not mean that the peasant economy was faring less well that previously. It has also been thought that the increase of imperial bureaucracy in the fourth century created a parasitical brood of governmental vipers sucking the life blood out of the Roman economy, but that stereotype relies primarily upon a very tendentious work by the rhetorician Libanius, who pilloried the activities of the Praetorian Prefects sent from Constantinople to exact funds.[7] But we know that Libanius had private motives in writing as he did, since one of his proteges, Thalassius, had been refused entry to

[1] Heather 2005, esp. ch. 3.
[2] Thus, Jones 1964, 812-23, 715-812.
[3] Tchalenko 1953-8.
[4] For more discussions and assessments of the archaeological evidence, see Lewitt 1991; Whittaker and Garnsey 1998; Ward Perkins 2000; Duncan Jones 2003
[5] This point is well made in the case of classical Athens by Sickinger (1999), who argues against the widespread assumption that until the fourth century B.C. Athens was primarily an oral culture.
[6] See Roueché 1989.
[7] Lib. *Or.* 42. 24-5.

the Constantinopolitan Senate. Like the Athenian comic playwright Aristophanes some seven centuries earlier, who lambasted the Athenian juries as comprising parasites who lived off the funds of the state, this evidence needs to be read with real circumspection. As time progressed, the Senate of Rome became less important as an administrative body, and therefore the imperial bureaucracy became increasingly attractive to anyone with political ambition. This was the result not of political or moral decline in the late Empire, but simply of the fact that the locus of power had shifted. Imperial ambition which Libanius no doubt detested was no different in kind in the fourth century than it had ever been at any period of history which we can document.

What, then, brought about the fall of Rome? To answer that question, we need to look not at long term trends, which speak less of internal weakness than internal change, and more to a series of unforeseen contingencies which took place towards the end of the fourth century and into the fifth. But before that, we need to examine what lay beyond Rome's boundaries.

### 3. Beyond Rome's Frontiers

As already hinted, the old-fashioned stereotype of barbarians knocking at the gates of Rome is mistaken. As far as the Rhine and Danube frontiers are concerned, with the odd exception of occasional skirmishing there is little evidence until the end of the fourth century A.D. of serious pressure being placed upon the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. The word 'barbarian' is in origin Greek and refers to someone who makes incomprehensible bleating noises ('bar-bar'). The Greeks themselves used the term to refer to anyone who was not Greek-speaking, and though in Greek eyes such humans were inferior politically and culturally to Greeks, they were not necessarily to be likened to hordes of savages. Hellenocentric perspectives varied throughout history, but when Herodotus in the middle of the fifth century B.C. opened his great work with the proclamation that he would set to record the marvellous deeds of Greeks and barbarians alike he was not being ironic.[1] By 'barbarians', he simply meant those peoples living beyond the borders of Greece and Asia Minor who spoke languages other than his own. In later times, it is likely that the term 'barbarian' acquired a more pejorative sense. The biographer, literary critic, and moralist Plutarch, living at the start of the second century A.D. on the eve of the great Attic Revival under Emperor Hadrian, disapproved of Herodotus as a *philobarbaros* ('barbarian-lover'), and it is undoubtedly true that such jingoistic views towards the outside world had been entrenched in popular consciousness long before that. Nevertheless, Rome for most of her history had come into contact with culturally alien peoples, and the idea that non-Romans were anathematised as sub-human seems unlikely in view of the fact that eventually the same peoples were subsumed within the all-encompassing bracket of *Romanitas*. By the late Empire, when the boundaries between civilisation and the outside world hardened, there is a better case to imagine that the term 'barbarian' came to mean someone who was not civilised, *i.e.* who lived beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and the attitudes of late Romans towards non-Romans beyond their borders show unmistakably that they were thought of as politically, culturally, linguistically, and ethically inferior. That should not, however, be taken

[1] Hdt. 1.1.1

to imply that Romans felt under permanent threat from these peoples. All the evidence shows, on the contrary, that they met, traded, negotiated, and bargained with them.

The great war between Arminius and the Roman legions at the start of the first century A.D. has gone down in history as an example of an ongoing feud which would continue unabated until the sack of Rome in 410, but as already argued this belongs to nineteenth-century nationalist ideologies which have little grounding in historical reality. The truth is that Rome saw no need to push further into Germany because there was nothing there that was worth conquering. Our main literary authority, Tacitus, informs us that the Germanic tribes were as likely to fight one another as they were the Romans, one example being the standoff between the Hermaduri and the Chatti in which 60,000 were massacred in front of a Roman audience which sat to enjoy the awful spectacle.[1] The nineteenth-century romanticising vision of a pre-historic German nation coalescing in a great struggle to cast off the Roman yoke could not be further from the truth. Once Arminius was defeated in A.D. 15, a trouble-maker from across the Rhine had been satisfactorily dealt with, and Rome saw no need to push further into the interior.[2] Part of this had to do with logistics, as rivers formed a natural boundary. But the deeper reason was the material, economic and cultural poverty of the regions east of the Rhine. Some of the more sophisticated zones, like the so-called La Tène culture which used coins and was organised into *oppida*, or primitive townships, eventually came into the Roman orbit, but the less sophisticated Jastorf Europe further to the East was so remote and poor that Rome did not bother with it. Historians have likened the halt of Roman advance into these further regions with the tendency in China to limit advance to semi-arable, semi-pastoral zones which were just about able to sustain the needs of occupying armies on the back of agriculture and pasture land. The Rhine and Danube both had access to the North and Black seas respectively, and so shipping large supplies of grain to feed the armies stationed along them was easy. But this was less possible in the interior of Germany which was cut off from any communication with the outside. If the armies could not sustain themselves, there was no point in advancing further.[3]

The real threat to Rome in the centuries leading up to her eventual demise came not from the North but from the East. In the middle of the third century A.D., a dynastic revolt took place in Persia which resulted in renewed military pressure on the eastern frontier, which in turn took a serious economic toll on Rome in the second half of that century and led ultimately to the reorganisation of Roman imperial administration under Emperor Diocletian. In 1936, a famous monument was discovered near the capital of Achaemenid Persia, Persepolis, inscribed in three languages, commemorating the achievements of Shapur, King of Kings. Known in Latin as the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* (*The Acts of the Divine Shapur*), it records the victories of the Persian King over Emperor Gordian (r. 238-244) who was driven back from his position in Mesopotamia.[4] In the decades leading up to this event, Persia itself had undergone a political transformation, with the overthrow of the Arsacid monarchy which had ruled Parthia for over

[1] Tac. *Germ.* 33; *Ann.* 13.56.
[2] Tac. *Ann.* 1.68.
[3] On China see Lattimore 1940. On the La Tène culture see Culiffe and Rowley 1976. On the Jastorf culture, see Schutz 1983.
[4] Dodgeon and Lieu 1991, 43-6, 50, 57.

three centuries, and the instalment of the new Sassanid dynasty.[1] The new overlords were far more aggressive militarily and better organised than their predecessors, and exerted a new kind of military pressure on Rome's eastern frontier which had not been known for some centuries. Shapur's father Ardashir between 237 and 240 attacked Rome's eastern flank in Mesopotamia and overran Carrhae, Nisibis and Hatra. Rome led a series of unsuccessful counterattacks in the reign of Shapur I (r. 240-72) which resulted in the capture, public humiliation, and death of Emperor Valerian.[2] Shapur capitalised on his military gains by uniting the Mesopotamian regions through a complex irrigation network built by captured Roman slaves. Beyond that, he had designs on Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, and Asia Minor, the old empire of the Achaemenids.

To counter this new threat, Rome needed to raise legions fast. Immediately before the rise of the Sassanids under the Severan emperors, it is estimated that around thirty legions were stationed in the eastern provinces of the Empire, amounting to about 300,000 troops. Historians debate the precise figures as they are based on later literary accounts, but what most agree is that in the wake of Shapur's military advance the Roman army in the East increased by as much as up to a third, possibly more.[3] In order to meet the inflated costs, funds needed to be raised at once. In the mid-third century, city-revenues accumulated through endowments and local taxation were confiscated by the emperors, which in the fourth century were in part returned.[4] But more troubling for the Roman economy was the debasement of coinage which followed. Customarily, legionaries had been paid in denarii (silver coins) but numismatic evidence shows that by the reign of Emperor Gallienus (253-68) these coins contained no more than about five per cent silver. To counter this trend, in his famous Prices Edict in A.D. 301 Emperor Diocletian fixed the price of grain to a hundred of the new debased denarii as an attempt to stabilise the inflation which had run riot for about forty years.[5] The efforts were successful, and a regular tax on grain supply, the *annona militaris*, was put into effect. In addition to getting the economy under control again, Diocletian's co-ruler in the East, Emperor Galerius, in A.D. 298 won a spectacular victory over Sassanid Persia, but there would continue to be major warring between Romans and Sassanids until the seventh century, when the Byzantine Empire (the Roman Empire of the East) fought a disastrous war against Persia which resulted in the decimation of both empires and opened the way to Arab conquest.[6]

Politically speaking, the menace of Persia in the second half of the third century had another effect on Rome, which was to move the administrative centre of authority away from its traditional locus in Italy and further to the East, as it was far easier to administer in closer proximity. Rome, in short, was in the wrong place. Diocletian's successor, Constantine I (the 'Great') re-united the eastern and western halves of the Empire created by Diocletian through

[1] Christiansen 1944; McAdams 1965; Howard Johnson 1995.
[2] *Chronicon Paschale* 510.
[3] The figures are given by Agathias *History* 5.13 and John Lydus *De Mensibus* 1.27, both writing over a hundred and fifty years later. For modern discussions, see Jones 1964, 679-86; Hoffmann 1969; Elton 1996; Whitby 2002.
[4] Crawford 1975
[5] Jones 1964, 623-30.
[6] The one exception is the futile *anabasis* of Emperor Julian in A.D. 363 who had the deluded idea of restoring the fortunes of Alexander the Great over Persia some six centuries previously; see Dodgeon and Lieu 1991; Matthews 1989.

the new system of the Tetrarchy and moved the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, which he re-named Constantinople (modern Istanbul). The shift of administrative focus away from Italy was part of a natural process dictated by historical necessity. It had nothing to do with Roman 'depravity' on the scale envisaged by Gibbon. In the fifty years which followed the end of the Severan dynasty Rome enthroned no fewer than twenty emperors, and this period of the so-called 'barrack' emperors is often seen as the beginning of Rome's political decline. But that can also be overstated. The fact that in Gaul of that period local rulers were appointed to govern that portion of the Empire has nothing to do with the Empire coming apart at the seams, as the Gallic region was non-separatist and remained politically within Rome's orbit. Rather, it had to do with the fact that the emperors were at that time stationed out in the East to deal with a military crisis and could not effectively administer the western reaches of the Empire directly. The evidence shows that Gaul was run effectively and took pressure off the emperors who were trying to contain a much more urgent menace in Persia. The panacea in the end was Diocletian's splitting of the Empire into two administrative halves, an ingenious political and administrative measure which allowed the Empire to be governed more centrally by the imperial bureaucracy and less reliant on local deputising governors who could potentially usurp.[1]

Rumblings along the Danube were beginning to be felt in A.D. 369 when Emperor Valens met Arthanaric, the tribal leader of the Tervingi, a subbranch of the Germanic Goths. Our main witness account comes from Themistius who describes the meeting to the Senate at Constantinople.[2] The account is spiked by flattery and praise for the emperor, who is described as having concluded a hugely favourable treaty with the Goth. But it was not the emperor who had begun war upon the Goths, but the other way around. Themistius also omitted to mention that in the middle of Valens' Gothic campaign a sudden incursion came in from the East which diverted attention. Notwithstanding the encomiastic praise heaped upon it, the peace treaty of 369 was more in the nature of a compromise than an unconditional surrender on the part of the Goths.[3] Though the Romans ceased to bestow benefactions of grain on the Goths, in turn the Goths gave up their military assistance to Rome in her resistance to Persia in the East. In these years Arthanaric began to side with the usurper Procopius against the emperor, and in this sense Gothic power was used to by one Roman against another. But what is more telling is that the meeting between Arthanaric and Valens happened in an unprecedented way, on an imperial barge sent out into the middle of the Danube. Traditionally, when Romans made peace treaties with their neighbours they did so in barbarian territory. By meeting Arthanaric in neutral territory, Emperor Valens was conceding to his barbarian foe control of the regions which lay on the other side of the Danube. In this respect, the colossal humiliation inflicted on the Goths thirty years beforehand under Constantine I was reversed, and the Goths perhaps no longer stood in awe of Roman power as they had done. This paved the way for the show-down at Adrianople in A.D. 378 in which Valens died and large numbers of legionaries perished.[4]

[1] Drinkwater 1987.
[2] Themist. *Orat*. 6. 73c-75a.
[3] Heather 1991, ch. 3.
[4] On the events leading up to Adrianople, see Heather 2005, 72-6.

The events of 369 left Rome in a more vulnerable position along the Danube, but it is important to emphasise the contingent nature of these developments. It is often stated that the pressures along the Rhine began to mount in the latter years of the fourth century, but a closer look at the evidence is needed. Between the first and fourth centuries A.D., the configuration of Germanic Europe shifted. This is partly to be seen in the fact that the tribal names mentioned by Tacitus in the first century almost completely vanish from the record and were replaced by four new tribal confederations: Franks, Alamanni, Saxons, and Burgundians. Further to the East, a large migration of Goths whose precise origins are disputed came down upon the banks of the Danube close to the Black Sea. The group which Arthanaric commanded may have comprised a confederation of Frankish subgroups also.[1] The reasons for these demographic shifts are not entirely clear, but archaeological excavations in the 1960s may give some of the answer. At Wijster in the Netherlands and Feddersen Wierde in Germany, two discoveries of farming settlements dating from the first century A.D. have suggested that an agricultural revolution was taking place in Germany at this time, which slowly moved from a nomadic to a more settled existence. With the development of intensive farming comes the growth of population and a more civilised type of existence. Similar surveys of Poland and Scandinavia have shown that developments of this kind were underway in those regions also.[2] The consequence may have been a substantial upsurge in the population of Germania beyond the frontiers of Rome, which would have resulted in new tribal configurations taking shape. There is also evidence of mining of precious metals, especially iron ore, in Poland and in what is now Romania at about the same period.[3] The economic expansion of barbarian Europe in the first four centuries A.D. will undoubtedly have led to greater trade and commerce with Rome, but more importantly, it would have led to a social revolution on an unprecedented scale.

Social change can be independently documented in the discoveries of grave sites with large collections of weapons buried in funeral mounds. Until the first century B.C. Germanic Europe practised cremation as opposed to inhumation, but this seems to have changed in the first few centuries A.D.[4] Burial practices on this sort of scale often indicate the widening of wealth divisions, and though there is no good reason to assert the emergence of a feudal system in Germany until the time of Charlemagne in the ninth century, it does appear that economic and social divisions were beginning to widen. What this signifies is the emergence of a warrior class which was able to organise military groupings on a much larger and more systematic scale than previously.[5] With this came the emergence of hereditary power. Chnodomarius, the Alamannic leader defeated by Julian at Strasbourg, commanded 200 warriors as part of a personal retinue.[6] The bog deposits tend also to suggest votive offerings for victory, a practice which the Roman historian Tacitus already attested in the first century.[7] With the increase in local population and emergence of a more militarised society came a greater potential threat to

[1] Gregory of Tours *Histories* 2.9; Ammianus 16.12; Ambrose *De Spir. Sanct.* prol.17.
[2] See Van Es 1967; Haarnagel 1979; Heather 1996, ch.3.
[3] Urbancyzk 1997, 40; Rau 1972; Hedaeger 1987.
[4] Heather 1996, 65-75.
[5] Ørsnes 1968; Hedeager 1987.
[6] Ammian. 16.12.60
[7] Tac. *Ann.* 13.57.

Rome than had ever existed in previous centuries. It is important here to emphasise that the threat was only potential insofar as these tribes until the fifth century A.D. felt no need to cross over the boundaries of the Roman Empire. But with a greater and more dangerous *potential* developing across Rome's borders, we might get a clue as to one of the primary causes for the collapse of Roman power in the West in the fifth century. In short, the causes were not internal, that is, rooted in some protracted process of political and economic decay within the Empire, but external, rooted in new changes which were happening beyond Rome's boundaries. If so, we need to look beyond the generalisations of Gibbon, who understood the collapse of imperial Rome to be a function of internal rot and breakdown of order. As argued here, the evidence for such a process of decay is extremely difficult to trace or document. However, there is mounting evidence of radical transformation of Europe beyond Rome's frontiers, and it is here, rather than at the core of the Empire itself, that the story of the demise of Roman power must be located. The pressures placed on the Germanic tribes in the late fourth and early fifth centuries can indeed be traced to events concomitant with the migration of the Huns across the Eurasian steppe, and with this pressure, we can begin to understand why Rome's days were numbered.

## 4. The Final Crisis

Thus far it has been argued that the threats to peace and prosperity which Rome encountered in the two centuries leading up to her final demise, while significant in some cases, were not threatening to the very existence of the Empire and, in almost all cases, were satisfactorily resolved. Sassanid Persia was undoubtedly more of a problem for Rome than her predecessor, Parthia under the Arsacids, had been, and though the might of Persia had been repelled under Diocletian, Rome could not take its eye off what was happening in the East. In the penultimate quarters of the fourth century A.D., immediately before Rome had to face a very sudden and unprecedented crisis in the Balkans, Persian aggression had reared its ugly head again, and the inability of Emperor Valens to cope with the Gothic migrations which emerged almost out of nowhere was almost certainly down to the fact that the Sassanids were at that time waging war on Rome's eastern front. Rome did not collapse because of Persia, and indeed, the eastern half of the Empire long outlived the fall of Rome in A.D. 410. But the pressures which Persia was exerting on Rome at the time meant that when a much more serious threat emerged on the other side of the Danube the reigning emperor of the East was unable to deal with it effectively. Yet the real reason for the crisis which Rome faced in the last quarter of the fourth century had little to do with her own military or administrative competence, but with unforeseen developments on the Eurasian steppe. Our main literary source for the period is the late Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, on whose account our knowledge of the Goths and Huns depends.

The identity and origin of the Huns remains a mystery. Many historians have identified them with the Hsiung-Nu tribe which harassed the frontiers of Han China in the first century A.D.[1] According to that theory, they were split into different branches under the Han dynasty, the southern being absorbed into China, the northern being driven across the steppe three thousand miles in the direction of Europe. However, the identification is problematic because

[1] For a general discussion, see Maenchen-Helfen 1945; Twitchett and Lowe 1986, 383-405.

the splitting of the Hsiung-Nu tribe dates to A.D. 93, some three centuries before the Huns appear on the historical map, and if a mass migration took place it is unlikely to be explained as a function of nomadism.[1] Ammianus stated that they originated from the 'ice-bound ocean' (meaning the Arctic Sea?), but the testimony is difficult to evaluate.[2] Even their linguistic and cultural affiliation remains unclear, though some have thought that they were the first of the Turkic nomads to appear on the European scene.[3] Earlier in the fourth century we know that the Guptas from northern India were pushing on to the Silk Route, and this will no doubt have contributed to ethnic reconfigurations along the Steppe. Also, the western Steppe had better grazing regions, and the attraction of the Huns to the areas around the Black Sea can plausibly be explained by the wealth which they will have seen. But what is clear from the Roman sources is that in the penultimate quarter of the fourth century the Huns were pushing into the lands north of the Danube which traditionally had been inhabited by the Goths, and this in turn put vast pressure on the Goths to move southward and, potentially, to seek asylum within the Roman Empire itself.[4] The crisis which Rome faced in A.D. 376 had therefore been created by historical forces which lay completely beyond the control of Rome herself.

As with other misconceptions about the late Empire, one commonplace notion is that for the first time ever Rome had to deal with the problem of foreign peoples coming within her borders. This is simply untrue. For centuries, Rome had been repatriating peoples from outside on terms and conditions which those peoples would accept. The legal name for this type of arrangement was *receptio*, and in the case of the tribes living north of the Danube we know from inscriptional evidence that efforts to settle them within the borders of the Empire were centuries old. A famous example is the policy of one of Emperor Nero's governors in the first century A.D. to transport 100,000 people from across the River Danube into Thrace (modern Bulgaria). Similar policies were pursued by the tetrarchs in A.D. 300 and again by Emperor Constantius II in A.D. 359.[5] The reception of foreign tribes and people into the Roman Empire was not itself the problem. The issue was much more the terms under which this was done. Ammianus informs us that when the Goths appeared on the boundaries in A.D. 376 this was met with joy and gladness by Emperor Valens who saw in them an opportunity to strengthen the boundaries of the Empire against a more serious threat from further afield. According to the sources, events turned rapidly sour when one of the commanders in Thrace, Lupicinus, turned on the new migrants who went from acceptance of Roman rule to open revolt.[6] Most historians of modern times have followed the standard account, but there are problems with it.

In a recent re-evaluation of the episode, Peter Heather has argued persuasively that the Roman sources which relate the episode in question are not telling the whole truth.[7] Though the act of *receptio* had plenty of historical precedents, there was one feature of this one which was quite out of the ordinary, and that was the absence on this occasion of military advantage

[1] Thus, Heather 2005, 150.
[2] Ammian. 31.2.
[3] Maenchen-Helfen 1973, chs. 8-9.
[4] Ammian. 31.3.2.
[5] Ammian. 19.11.7.
[6] Ammian. 31.4.4; Eunap. fr. 42; Socrates *HE* 4.34; Sozomen *HE* 6.37
[7] Most of what I say in this final section is based directly on Heather 2005, ch. 3.

which Rome had always taken for granted when migrants were received within her boundaries. One example is the case of Constantius II seventeen years previously, when Iranian speaking Sarmatians were brought in on condition they acknowledge the authority of Rome, whereupon they raised the battle-cry and then were massacred to a man.[1] What that episode reveals is that Constantius was able to rely upon his military advantage to crush the migration if it proved to be hazardous to the safety and security of the Roman Empire. In the latter case, by contrast, Valens could not rely on such an advantage because his legions were engaged in the East after the King of Kings had begun to menace the Caucasus. Logistically, it was near-impossible for Valens to manoeuvre a decisive army to confront the Goths in time. The result was that when the Goths sued for peace, they did so on terms that were entirely favourable to themselves, whereby they were able to determine where they settled, in the case of the Tervingi, in Thrace.[2] The events of 376 were unusual not because of the fact that a barbarian people were entering the domain of Rome, for which there was plenty of historical precedent, but because they were entering and demanding terms and conditions under which they could be settled.

Valens responded by calling upon his western colleague, Emperor Gratian, to come to the scene post haste.[3] It is unlikely that Gratian would have arrived before the campaigning season of 377, by which time food shortages and hunger would have moved the Tervingi to revolt. The attack of Lupicinus on the Tervingi during the winter of 376/7 was most likely due to a strategic attempt to remove their leaders and bring them to terms, which was a standard Roman practice as Ammianus himself attests. Though the ancient sources do not say as much, there is reason to think that Lupicinus was acting under instructions from the Emperor, who would have been aware of the enormous threat posed by the entry of a militarised group of foreigners on Roman soil.[4] The Tervingi were forced by Lupercinus to move in the direction of Marcianople, by which point they would have been aware that Valens was fast approaching from the eastern front and would soon be joined by Gratian. Another development assisted their decision to break out into open revolt, the crossing by another related Gothic tribe, the Greuthungi, of the Danube. Because neither the Goths nor the Romans particularly desired the relationship into which they had been forced by the movement of the Huns, the fragile peace which had been forged between them after the initial Gothic crossing would have been easily shattered through mutual mistrust. As events turned out, this is exactly what took place.

What followed was a war between the newly arrived Goths and the Romans which would rage on until October 382. Ammianus is our principal source for these events down until the Battle of Hadrianople (378). The Balkans had been part of the Roman Empire for hundreds of years and were united economically by the mighty *via Egnatia* which connected the Danube provinces with mainland Greece. Thus, the presence of a large and hungry militarised force of barbarians within the frontiers presented a danger to the city states of Greece.[5] However, Ammianus informs us that the Gothic leader Fritigern 'kept peace with walls', which would

[1] Ammian. 31.5.9.
[2] For discussion of the peace terms, see Heather 1991, 122-8.
[3] Themist. *Or.* 13.163c
[4] Thus, Heather 2005, 164-6.
[5] For the development of the Balkans under Roman rule, see Mocsy 1974; Lengyel and Radan 1980; Poulter 1995.

imply that the frontier forts along the Danube were not destroyed, and the archaeological evidence tends to confirm the statement.[1] After defeating Lupercinus, the Goths had to deal with an immediate problem of their own, hunger, and to satisfy their need, they turned on the rich spoils of the Romanised Balkans. The next place they advanced to was Hadrianople to the south of Marcianople near the Haemus mountains. According to Ammianus' lurid account, the pillage that followed was unimaginable, with babies torn from their mother's breasts and every place ablaze with fire.[2] In response, Valens sent the general Victor to sue for peace with Persia and took troops out of Armenia to deal with the mounting crisis in the Balkans. In summer 377 he arrived. What followed was a period of heavy fighting with heavy losses on both sides. The bulk of Valens' forces did not arrive until 378, but new developments on the Rhine in that year meant that the western emperor, Gratian, was unable to discharge his promise to help Valens in the Balkans.[3] This was disastrous for Valens, who had to deal with the Gothic threat single-handed. On 12 June 378 Valens joined his army outside Constantinople waiting for Gratian to arrive, but without word from his western colleague. The Battle of Hadrianople proper started on the night of 8/9 August. The details of the battle are well preserved by our principal Roman authority, but what followed was a disastrous massacre by the Goths of the Roman forces under Valens, and the death of Valens himself. The exact numbers of dead are disputed, but they range anywhere from between 10,000 and 30,000 highly disciplined legionaries.[4]

The scale of this disaster must not be underestimated. Against all the odds, the Goths had won for themselves a stunning victory. This was the first time in memorable history that a barbarian force had destroyed whole legions within Roman territory itself. It is true that Rome had lost sizable forces in battles with barbarians in previous centuries, such as the famous catastrophe in the Teutoberg forest in A.D. 9 mentioned earlier. But the difference there is that catastrophic losses were inflicted upon Rome's military force beyond the boundaries of the Empire, on barbarian soil. In this instance, we witness for the first time a seismic defeat of the Roman army *within* its boundaries. This cannot have been perceived as anything other than an unprecedented disaster by Rome, and it opened the rich lands of the Balkans for spoil at the hands of marauding Goths whose movements were now unrestrained. In the next year they moved westward into Illyricum (modern Albania) and then into Pannonia (modern Hungary) where the Greuthungi were defeated by Gratian, who by this stage had settled the problem along the Rhine and begun to move eastward. The Tervingi ravaged the provinces of Macedonia and Thessaly, whereupon they marched back into Thrace where in 382 peace was concluded on their terms. The contemporary Roman sources which describe this peace make it look as though it was a *deditio in fidem*, but the flattering orator Themistius is almost certainly not to be trusted on that score. Themistius in one of his show speeches mentions Rome's benevolence and forgiveness towards the Goths, but this is highly suspect, not least since the Roman qualities of *clementia* and *benevolentia* were usually shown in the wake of a Roman

[1] Ammian. 31.6.4.
[2] Ammian. 31.6.5-7
[3] Ammian. 31.11.
[4] For varying estimates, see Hoffman 1969, 444-58; Lenski 2002, 339.

victory, not a Roman defeat.[1] The precise nature of the peace terms is not known, but we do know that the Goths received grants of land in Thrace and Macedonia. Valens' successor as eastern emperor, Theodosius, is reported by Themistius to have brought the Goths to terms not by exercise of arms but by entrusting fate to the providence of God.[2] This is certainly rhetorical and facile. The truth, as Themistius himself admits, is that Rome had been unable to appease the Goths through exercise of military superiority, and Rome's only hope was to come to terms with Fritigern at the cost of Rome's humiliating loss of armies and Emperor Valens himself.

Recent archaeological surveys of Nicopolis on the Danube reveal an increasing number of rich villas being built at the end of the fourth and early part of the fifth centuries within the city walls rather than, as traditionally, beyond them.[3] What this would indicate is that the Gothic incursion of 376-82 brought new fear into the minds of Romanised peoples within the Balkans that the countryside was no longer safe, and that the best and most reliable places to dwell for the wealthy were within cities, not in the rural hinterland. More problematic still was the fact that, contrary to the predictions of the spin-doctor Themistius to the Constantinopolitan Senate, Rome simply failed to absorb the Goths culturally within her political orbit, as she had been able to do a hundred years before when Celtic tribes moved across the Dardanelles into mainland Greece. This meant that the solutions which Rome found to the problem in 382 was only ever going to be short term. As Bishop Ambrose of Milan put it, the process begun by the Huns, Alans and Goths was not about to end, and indeed he was right.[4] The following three decades brought about fresh waves of barbarian migrations which the Roman Empire did not have the military capacity to be able to control or contain. The Goths themselves, repatriated in the Balkans, remained restive and would inflict further raids on Italy to the west.

In 405/6, a pagan Gothic king called Radagaisus led a formidable force across the Alps in the direction of Florence. At about the same time, a mixed group crossed the Rhine into Gaul consisting of Vandals, Alans, and Suevi.[5] A third major invasion followed under the leadership of the Hunnic king Uldin on Castra Martis.[6] A fourth invasion along the Rhine was inflicted by the Burgundians.[7] The precise numbers involved are not known for certain, but what most historians agree is that they were unprecedented and gigantic, ranging anywhere between 20,000 and 100,000 men, women and children. What caused these migrations is also not known for certain, but archaeological evidence indicates a significant population displacement at the end of the fourth century in what is now Czech and Polish territory, caused almost certainly by the movement of the Huns further to the east.[8] How all of this is connected to the Gothic infiltration some thirty years earlier is equally not known, but the evidence for westward and southward movement of indigenous peoples who had traditionally lived east of the Rhine and north of the Danube would tie into the same picture: The pressure which the Huns were exerting

[1] Themist. *Or.* 16. 210bc.
[2] Themist. *Or.* 16
[3] Poulter 1995 and 1999.
[4] Ambr. *Comm. Evang. Luc. 10.10.*
[5] Claud. *Bell. Goth.* 323ff; Hier. *Ep.* 123.4.
[6] Soz. *HE* 9.25.1-7; see Thompson 1996, 63-4
[7] Sidon. *Poems* 12. On the Burgundians, see Matthews 1989, 306ff; Demougeot 1979, 432, 491-3.
[8] Heather 2005, 199-202.

in the East made it impossible for the Germanic peoples of the northern and central European regions to hold their lands, and, like the Goths, the great influx of Germanic tribe across the Rhine in the first decade of the fifth century was most likely motivated by the need to find safer lands within the Roman Empire. The sheer unprecedented numbers of these people were more than the legions of Rome were able to cope with. However, unlike the crisis of 376-82, it was this time the western half of the Empire that came under threat, and the crisis proved too great.

Roman Gaul and Spain were completely overrun. On the fringes of Italy, a group of Goths under the leadership of Alaric gathered at the River Frigidus.[1] These peoples were directly descended from the two Gothic tribes who had defeated Valens at Hadrianople, who under Alaric coalesced to form a confederation known as the Visigoths. Why this new period of unrest broke out is not entirely clear, but the volatile politics of Constantinople in the last decade of the fourth century may provide the answer. Constantinople during these years remained intransigent to any request by Alaric for further grants of land. As a result, Alaric turned westward to seek a deal with the Roman generalissimo Stilicho who had that point was the *de facto* ruler of the West. In autumn 408, Alaric crossed into Italy from Pannonia to force Emperor Honorius to conclude a deal which would grant them significant land donations. The western emperor stationed at Ravenna in northern Italy played cat and mouse. According to our best authority for the period, Zosimus, Alaric demanded a fixed amount of corn and gold every year and domiciles for his followers in the two Venetias, Noricum, and Dalmatia. Additionally, he demanded for himself a senior position in the imperial army.[2] Honorius would not agree to the last of these demands. After sending an insulting letter to Alaric, the latter contrary to expectation acceded to the emperor's more moderate offer. But then a *volte face* in the court of Honorius resulted in the offers of land being rescinded, at which point Alaric turned upon Rome.[3] It should not be forgotten that Alaric's Goths had converted to Christianity, and therefore a complete sack of the imperial city and her holy places was not in their interest. In fact, the sack of Rome in 410 has been described as one of the most civilised sackings of any city on record, certainly much more so than the far more devastating Gaulish sack some seven centuries previously upon which St Augustine harped. From what we can gather, the Senate house was damaged as was the Salarian Gate, but most of the old buildings remained intact, even though their valuables were pillaged, and the precious metals melted down.

As noted already, Rome for over two centuries previous had become synonymous with the Empire, and so the sack of Rome in 410 did not mean that the Empire itself came to an end at that time. Rome continue to function as an imperial capital until 476 when the last emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed. Though the sack of Rome sent reverberations through the Empire, it did not end the Empire as such, and the continuance of Rome as a city is testified to by the fact that it exists today. The question 'Why did Rome end?' is therefore perhaps rather misleading. A better question would be: Why did imperial unity in the West end in the fifth century A.D.? The best answer lies beyond the boundaries of the Empire, in the

[1] Oros. 7.35.19.
[2] Zos. 5.48.3; 5.50.3-51.1.
[3] For a more detailed account of the events leading up to the sack, see Matthews 1975, ch..11; Heather 1991, 213-18

lands north of the Danube and east of the Rhine. This was no divine punishment, as Augustine's contemporaries believed, nor was it the result of long-term moral decay, as Gibbon believed, nor was it due to an internal economic crisis, as A.H.M. Jones and others have thought. Long-term historical processes better explain political and social transformations than existential crises of the kind which the western Empire had to face in the fifth century. Once the Visigoths had established themselves in Gaul and Spain, the Vandals in southern Spain and North Africa, the Franks in northern Gaul, and the Saxons and Jutes in Britain, centralised authority was no longer needed, as the focal points of power became more local. Politically speaking, the real period of disintegration comes not before the sack of Rome but afterwards, when Italy lost her tax revenues from Carthage in the 450s and was unable to raise legions or exercise any effective imperial jurisdiction in the West. Once the successor kingdoms had been established, the western Empire just fizzled out of existence. This is perhaps best understood not as a sudden crash, like a rotten tree trunk blowing down in the wind, but a steady evaporation of what had once been a highly organised and centralised administrative system. Political breakdown in the West did not occasion the barbarian invasions, but was the direct consequence of them.

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