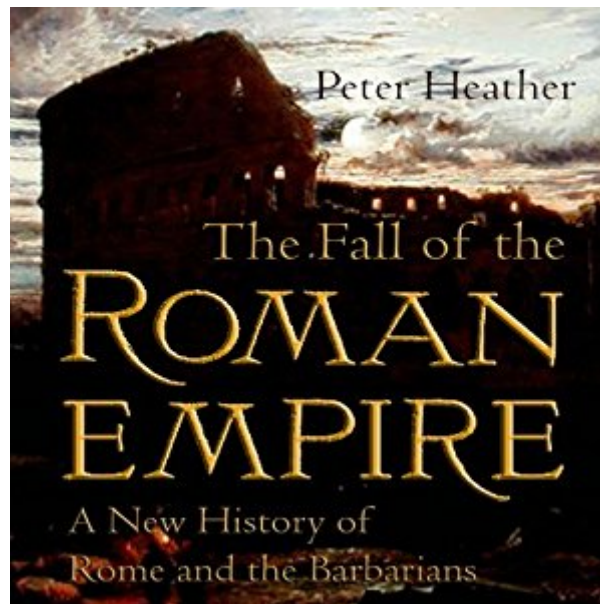


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The Fall Of The Roman Empire: A New History Of Rome And The Barbarians



Synopsis

The death of the Roman Empire is one of the perennial mysteries of world history. Now, in this groundbreaking book, Peter Heather proposes a stunning new solution: Centuries of imperialism turned the neighbors Rome called barbarians into an enemy capable of dismantling an Empire that had dominated their lives for so long. A leading authority on the late Roman Empire and on the barbarians, Heather relates the extraordinary story of how Europe's barbarians, transformed by centuries of contact with Rome on every possible level, eventually pulled the empire apart. He shows first how the Huns overturned the existing strategic balance of power on Rome's European frontiers, to force the Goths and others to seek refuge inside the Empire. This prompted two generations of struggle, during which new barbarian coalitions, formed in response to Roman hostility, brought the Roman west to its knees. The Goths first destroyed a Roman army at the battle of Hadrianople in 378, and went on to sack Rome in 410. The Vandals spread devastation in Gaul and Spain, before conquering North Africa, the breadbasket of the Western Empire, in 439. We then meet Attila the Hun, whose reign of terror swept from Constantinople to Paris, but whose death in 453 ironically precipitated a final desperate phase of Roman collapse, culminating in the Vandals' defeat of the massive Byzantine Armada: the west's last chance for survival. Peter Heather convincingly argues that the Roman Empire was not on the brink of social or moral collapse. What brought it to an end were the barbarians.

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Customer Reviews

In this volume Peter Heather attempts to explain that ultimately, the cause of the Fall of the Western

Roman Empire was not due to tax inequities, a failure of the economy, internal discord, etc., but rather because of the simply overwhelming level of barbarian invasions which began in the late 4th century. This he proceeds to do very well. This work is divided into three main parts; "Pax Romana" for chapters 1-3, "Crisis" for chapters 4-7 and "Fall of Empires" for chapters 8-10. I will discuss each of these briefly. In "Pax Romana" Heather discusses the Barbarians, the Romans, and the Roman Empire briefly. For each of these groups he gives an overview of their development to the latter part of the 4th century, in order to provide us with a starting point for the period of the barbarian invasions. He discusses what it meant to be "Roman" and how even cities far removed from Rome, such as Trier, were fully involved in Roman life and, rather than being rustic frontier outposts, were as fully a part of the Empire as cities of the Italian peninsula. He discusses the increased autonomy of the Emperor and how the Empire changed and adapted to the rise of Sassanid Persia as a threat to the East, including changes in the taxation system to support an increased military presence in that area. He also discusses the evolution of Germanic tribes and their coalescence from small, isolated people into larger, more unified kingdoms, capable of truly threatening Rome rather than just gaining an occasional, ultimately meaningless victory, as had previously been the case.

Notice the title of Peter Heather's fascinating study of the final centuries of the Roman Empire. It is a clear tribute to Gibbons, yet the "Decline" is intentionally missing. Because according to Dr. Heather the Roman Empire never declined; its fall was due to external, rather than internal, forces, and the perpetrators were two: the Huns and the Goths. Heather rejects the theories that see the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire in internal maladies. Contra popular opinion, he argues that the division of the Empire to Western and Eastern parts was rational given the increased size of the Roman population. As the Roman way of life spread, and more and more conquered people became Roman citizens, the patronage that had to be distributed became too enormous for any single Imperial Court - hence, the need for two Courts. Nor is the fault in the Christianization of the Empire; although he acknowledges that the rise of Christianity brought a Cultural Revolution (separation of the Living from the Dead; Equality of all before the Lord; diminished importance for the educated Romans in comparison with the simple true-believers, pp. 121-122), Heather doubts it effected the functioning of the empire much. The Roman Empire was still perceived as divinely blessed "only the nomenclature was different" (p. 123), Christian theology fitted neatly into Roman Chauvinism, and it was only as consequences of defeat that St. Augustine started to develop his anti-Nationalist theology (pp. 230-232). The best evidence against the "internal decline" thesis is that the Roman Empire did not actually collapse - only its western half did. In the East, the Roman

Empire soldiered on, until another powerful foreign threat - Islam.

Peter Heather, an Oxford history professor, offers a "new history" of one of the most controversial subjects in world history - discussing what caused the fall of the (west) Roman Empire. Although this book makes for interesting reading at points, the author's main hypothesis is neither particularly fresh nor well constructed. Heather's main focus is on external factors - Barbarian actions - rather than internal Roman factors such as political corruption or economic disintegration. The author's main thesis revolves around the contention that Germanic society changed rapidly between the 1st and 4th Centuries and allowed the heretofore-weak tribes to form confederations that could challenge Roman power. Once Hunnic aggression pushed these Germanic tribes into Roman territory he argues, the Romans could no longer assimilate or destroy these Germanic "super-groups" such as the Goths, and the resultant loss of territory gradually deprived the empire of revenues. A vicious cycle began with the arrival of the Goths on Roman territory in 378, and eventually resulted in a growing inability of the Empire to defeat the swarm of new foes, such as the Vandals, Franks and Huns. Heather tends to dismiss all other theories about the reasons for imperial collapse out of hand, claiming that internal factors were not essentially irrelevant. Hmm...not exactly sound historical methodology. Essentially, the author subscribes to the "mono-causal" explanation for this very complex process of imperial collapse - his explanation. It is a telling indictment about the intellectual foundations of this book that the author never questions whether a "mono-causal" theory can even be applied to such a lengthy, complex process.

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