

The Fall of the Roman Empire

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Full Text:

Peter J. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2006), \$40.

IN 375, THE ROMAN EMPIRE appeared as strong and secure as it had been in its four-hundred-year history. The empire extended from the ramparts of Hadrian's Wall to the deserts of northern Mesopotamia, and from the deltas of the Rhine and Danube to the valleys of the Atlas Mountains. Its military probably numbered well over four hundred thousand soldiers. None of its neighbors came close to matching its population of seventy million or its significant economic development.

Yet by 415, a heterogeneous force of wandering Germanic tribesmen had taken Rome itself and pillaged it. Military defenses along the Rhine collapsed, allowing other Germanic peoples to ransack Gaul before occupying large portions of Spain. The imperial army abandoned Britain to concentrate its shrinking resources against mortal threats on the continent.

By 476, with the Western Empire reduced to little more than Italy, a German general pensioned off the hapless youth who was the last Western emperor and dispatched his imperial regalia to his eastern colleague in Constantinople. (The empire's eastern half, which evolved into the Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christian realm we know as Byzantium, survived until it was snuffed out by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.)

What went wrong? The analytical powers and polemical skills of thinkers from Saint Augustine to Edward Gibbon have debated that for nearly sixteen hundred years. The latest to take up this challenge is Peter J. Heather, a professor of history at Oxford University who has previously written or edited volumes on the Huns, the Visigoths, and the interactions between Goths and Romans. Heather's book is a thoughtful and well-researched study that effectively synthesizes the archaeological discoveries of the past half-century and analyzes the often-patchy ancient sources with fresh insight. It is also zestfully written and a pleasure to read.

Many historians have attributed the Western Empire's collapse to internal factors, such as a loss of fighting spirit produced by soft living or Christianity's pacifist ideology, or to economic dislocations and depopulation caused by excessive taxation of the rural peasantry. These scholars dismiss the barbarians (in Heather's words) as "simple agriculturalists with a penchant for decorative safety pins" who do not deserve primary credit for putting an end to as great a power as Rome.

Heather disagrees. He argues that the Germanic peoples who swarmed across the Danube in 376-78 and the Rhine in 406 had come a long way from the primitive tribesmen Rome encountered when it first reached those river barriers four centuries earlier. Thanks to their commercial, military, and diplomatic interactions with the Roman Empire, the fractured mosaic of small tribal groupings that characterized Germania in the first century had evolved into a more limited number of larger confederations by the fourth. An agricultural revolution, based in part on new developments in iron production, fostered the growth of larger populations and a more settled life among the German tribes, while the Roman army's willingness to recruit soldiers and auxiliaries from beyond the frontier familiarized many Germans with Roman military tactics and methods.

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By the fourth century the German tribes had reached levels of economic, technological, and political development that transformed them into significantly greater potential threats to the Roman state. At the same time, the renaissance of the Persian Empire under the Sassanian monarchs confronted Rome with a newly aggressive adversary that tied down a large part of Rome's military.

Into this newly challenging strategic environment rode the Huns. Their impact on the Roman world was at first indirect. Their advance across southern Russia caused multitudes of defeated and desperate Gothic tribesmen to seek refuge behind Rome's Danube frontier. Once the Goths crossed into Roman territory, however, the cruelties and extortions of local Roman military governors and merchants prompted them to rebel and establish their own semi-independent state.

Heather posits that a further westward push by the Huns to the Danube generated the second wave of eruptions into the Western Empire by Vandals, Alans, Sueves, and Burgundians between 405 and 410 that shattered its territorial integrity for good. His treatment of the gradual consolidation of the Hunnish peoples into a barbarian superpower, the dozen years (441-453) in which their military force under Attila terrorized both the Eastern and Western empires, and the abrupt collapse of the Hunnish imperium east and north of the Danube after 454 is one of the freshest and most original parts of the book.

During its final seventy years between 406 and 476, the Western Empire resembled a battered boxer who reels around the ring as multiple antagonists take turns pummeling him. At critical junctures--in 406 and 441, for example--when the Romans seemed on the verge of finally crushing one of the German groupings, a sucker punch from another barbarian adversary caused the moment to be lost.

But at other times--in the 390s, in 408, the 420s and 430s, and in 454-55, for example--the Romans were their own worst enemies. Political rivalries and civil wars wasted the lives of troops or resulted in the execution or murder of effective military leaders, costing the western Romans strategic opportunities or creating openings that the barbarians adroitly exploited.

Readers will be variously charmed or irritated by Heather's breezily informal writing style, and his use of British slang may occasionally mystify. However, such surface ornaments or blemishes aside, this book is a serious, forcefully written, and highly enjoyable reconsideration.

Gray, Jefferson M.

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