

# Faults left inheritors of Caesar to turn barbarian

The Fall of the Roman Empire  
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Peter Heather's *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* will have the positive effect of turning many of its readers back to the pages of an old history on the same subject: Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published in six volumes, 1776-88). Both works will profit from comparison. If Gibbon's romantic story of inspiration is to be trusted, he expanded his original idea of tracing the decline and fall of the city of Rome into a full-scale study (71 chapters, nearly 8,000 footnotes) of those "revolutions" that "gradually undermined, and at length destroyed, the solid fabric of human greatness" that stretched across the expanse of the Roman Empire in the West for more than 500 years and in the East for a thousand years more.

Gibbon's Rome was sacked (AD476), the western empire thereby extinguished, and Italy left in a miserable state by the end of his third volume, 17 years into his study of the topic. Gibbon then posed the key question about the Roman Empire that Heather - through nearly 25 years of work with the archaeological and documentary evidence for barbarians and Romans - is in a better position to answer: "The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it subsisted so long."

Direct references to Gibbon are rare in Heather. In a silent nod, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* begins with the same theme that opens *Decline and Fall*: an explanation of the Roman military system, its unique strengths and its role in preserving the security of the empire and its inhabitants. Here Heather is more dramatic, placing us, as vividly as the opening scene in Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator*, in AD54 at the massacre of Roman legionaries by the Eburones in what is now eastern Belgium. We learn from this vignette not only the dangers of serving in the Roman army at or across the limes, but we feel the skill, discipline, determination and true courage with which men recruited and trained within the Roman military system were willing to work, fight and, more and more as the imperial centuries went by, die in the interests of empire. The legionary system, Heather makes clear, was also a main source of cultural cohesion across the sprawling empire, the mechanism by which barbarians could become Romans and one of the ways that the eastern and western halves of the empire increasingly collaborated.

Heather cites Gibbon sparingly, mainly for his views on Christianity and corruption. Missing from *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is Gibbon's remarkable gift for storytelling. Heather, as the account of the annihilation of the legionaries under Sabinus and Cotta makes clear, is good at describing historical setting and cultural environment and how they determine choices made and actions taken at different moments.

But Gibbon presents the history of Romans and barbarians, Christians and pagans like a raconteur. Viewing history as "indeed little more than the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind", he tells delicious stories, in the manner of good American Southern writers. He is delightfully gossipy about human foibles and perceptive about human vice. Read his pages again, and you may hear the voice of actor Phillip Seymour Hoffman playing Truman Capote. Gibbon finds again and again just the right original turn of phrase to tell us something that we all know about the figures who strut and fret on life's stage. We need gifted observers such as Gibbon, Capote and Shakespeare to give voice to what we know, often to our regret, is in the minds and hearts of the rich and powerful, or those who would be.

But we also need what Heather has to offer here: the sure narrative voice of a good BBC documentary, a firm grasp of archaeological evidence and a deep appreciation of how barbarians and barbarian leaders such as Alaric the Goth and Attila the Hun negotiated with, and operated within and against, the Roman Empire. Heather's special insights into, and sympathy for, barbarian culture transcend Gibbon's use of barbarian leaders as the noble savages destined to triumph over dissolute Roman emperors, self-seeking courtiers and impoverished citizens perverted by Christianity.

Take for example, the dramatic and crucial embassy of Maximinus, the historian Priscus and their interpreter Vigilias, sent out from Constantinople to negotiate with Attila, ruler of the Huns, in AD448. The slenderest of threads preserved from antiquity our fullest contemporary look at Hunnic culture. Portions of Priscus's first-hand account of this mission fortunately made its way into *Excerpts Concerning Embassies*, the only surviving volume of a 53-volume digest of the great works of classical learning by the 10th-century Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

Heather calls the Emperor's labours a "maniacal project", one that demonstrates the "figurehead status" and "long stretches of political insignificance" of the nominal rulers of the eastern empire. But it also indicates an intense preoccupation, at the very pinnacle of imperial nobility and a near millennium into empire, with how to define, preserve and propagate what being an inheritor of the culture of Caesar Augustus means. Such an obsession with cultural identity, Heather knows, is one of the secrets of the empire's longevity.

Heather also explains that the archaeological record of some 200 burials that have been uncovered from the 5th century in the Hungarian plain and the Volga steppe has confirmed

the richness of the utensils and of the adornments of clothing and military equipment described in Priscus's account. But compare how Heather uses an excerpt from Priscus, via the 6th-century historian Jordanes, with what Gibbon does. Heather quotes from Jordanes: "(Attila's) gait was haughty, and he cast his eyes hither and thither, so that the power of his pride was reflected in the movements of his body." Gibbon heats this up: "The haughty step and demeanour of the king of the Huns expressed the consciousness of his superiority above the rest of mankind; and he had a custom of fiercely rolling his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy the terror he inspired." Perhaps Charles Laughton in his prime, or even Marlon Brando past his prime. And note the universalising "mankind". Gibbon knows how a true warrior king feels, and he uses translator's licence to get that feeling across.

So why did the Roman Empire last so long - even the western empire's half millennium is extraordinary in human history - and why is this the real question? Here a reader of Gibbon needs to become a reader of Heather.

Consider the impediments.

Scale. At various points, Heather helps us understand how difficult the size and heterogeneity of the empire made its efficient operation and its very existence. Besides Priscus's embassy, which took 13 days to travel the first 250 miles, missions by other notables, Olympiodorus (and his parrot), Symmachus and Theophanes bring home the point. Theophanes's journey from Upper Egypt to Antioch took three and a half weeks, averaging 40km a day on the Roman imperial autobahn, the *Cursus Publicus*, which was reserved for official travellers. Heather estimates it would have taken close to three months to travel the 4,000km from Hadrian's Wall to the Euphrates River.

With ancient techniques of correspondence and record-keeping, the complexity of managing an empire "between five and ten times the size of the European Union" was staggering.

Heather argues, rightly in my opinion, against the logistically impossible idea that the imperial centres were sticking their fingers constantly into many, many local pies. Their legal and ideological authority was absolute, and they would have demanded taxes; but day-to-day operations were in the hands of local elites, who made up a sprawling old-boy network. The interests and aspirations of these elites glued the empire together. A properly written letter of introduction meant everything. A good position in society required owning land sufficient to become a member of the town's council and wealth enough to provide a grammarian's education for your children. Sallust, Cicero, Vergil and Terence taught them proper Latin and the Roman way of life. Perhaps 5 per cent of the population reached this level, and this 5 per cent owned 80 per cent of the property.

Heather is sparing with modern analogies, but those few he uses are good. He likens the Roman system to the one-party communist bloc, pre-1989, with the key difference that, unlike the communist empire in the late stages of the Cold War, the Roman Empire was

threatened by no major competing system. Wealth disparity was extreme, and the state stood ready to maintain that disparity. The whole imperial system was designed to protect the rights of the landed wealthy.

But this also created what Heather calls a fault line that eventually made the lower orders who had little invested in the system and the landowning elites who lived in a "world of self-governing localities" independent of the central authority willing to cut deals with barbarian invaders and barbarian-sponsored regimes.

There are a few typos such as *cursus honorem* (sic) on page 30, and the many helpful maps could have been made more helpful. For example, the important fortress site of Ratiaria is missing, without explanation, from map 11.

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## **The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History**

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