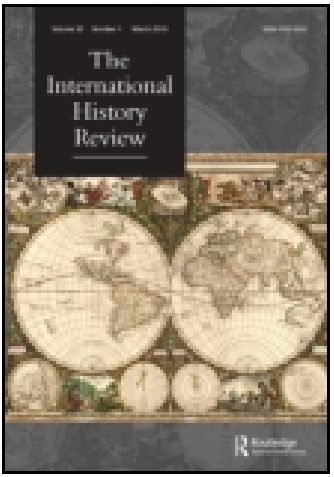
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Review Article: The Return of the Fall of Rome

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JEANNE RUTENBURG & ARTHUR M. ECKSTEIN

Review Article: The Return of the Fall of Rome

PETER HEATHER. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xvi, 572. $40.00 (US); BRYAN WARD-PERKINS. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. vi, 239. $28.00 (US).

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OVER THE PAST forty years, Edward Gibbon's apocalyptic view of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire has gradually become overshadowed by a revisionist view of what occurred in western Europe between AD 375 and 500. The new view stresses the virtues of multiculturalism, and an accommodation between the incoming non-literate tribal peoples (formerly known as barbarians) and the traditional Classical Roman society. This scholarly development was partly inspired by the realization that, in contrast to Gibbon's tragic vision, St Augustine had been correct about the crisis: the fall of Rome – of the secular Roman state – was not completely devastating as far as its effect on the cultural development and triumph of Christianity in the West. That is, the new view reflects the increasing domination of Late Antique studies by scholars of religion and culture, such as Peter Brown, a founder of this field, over scholars of Roman politics and institutional structure.[1] This trend was aided by the general rise in academia of a less judgemental and more consciously relativistic view of peoples who did not possess traditional 'higher civilization'. Thus, the traditional apocalyptic vision of the fall of Rome has for two generations or so been overtaken by a view that replaces the

1 The distinction between the views of scholars of religion versus scholars of Roman politics, law, and military history is rightly stressed by A. Murray, 'Peter Brown and the Shadow of Constantine', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxxiii (1983), 191-203. One of the best examples of the 'new Late Antiquity' is *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar (Cambridge, MA, 1999). Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*, p. 172, observes that the vast majority of entries in the *Guide* concern the eastern rather than the western Roman Empire, that the *Guide* is far more concerned with religious culture than with politics and institutions, and that while Visigoths, Franks, Britons, and Anglo-Saxons are missing from the book, demons, angels, and 'a host of different heretics and ascetics get individual entries'. Nevertheless, Brown's work in particular is notable for balance, and does not neglect the importance of politics and institutions. Recent scholars have not always followed the example of Brown's balanced view of Late Antiquity and the fall of Rome.

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concept of Rome's *fall* with the non-judgemental term *transformation*, and that emphasizes, instead of cataclysmic wars, the barbarian attacks and destruction of Roman civilization as a relatively peaceful 'transformation' in which the Romans made accommodations with 'new immigrants' who wished merely to enjoy the prosperity to be found south of the Rhine and the Danube. Bryan Ward-Perkins calls this the 'tea party at the Roman vicarage' theory of Rome's fall.

One of the primary exponents of this relatively sunny view of the fifth-century 'transformation' has been Walter Goffart: 'What we call the fall of the Roman Empire was an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand.'[1] The advertising for Goffart's most recent book proclaims that '*Barbarian Tides* radically subverts the grand narrative of a "Germanic" migration and reinvents the role of the barbarians in the Later Roman Empire. Goffart sets out how the fragmented foreign peoples once living on the edges of the Empire participated with the Romans in the larger stirrings of late antiquity.'[2] Rome did not fall, it experienced 'stirrings'; barbarians did not invade and conquer, foreign peoples 'participated' with the Romans in the 'stirrings'. This is the essence of the revisionist 'transformation and accommodation' view of the fall of Rome.

This revisionist approach got a great boost from the European Science Foundation's ongoing project on *The Transformation of the Roman World* which, since 1995, has sponsored conferences and workshops, and published papers in a monograph series (*The Transformation of the Roman World*) that has now reached fourteen volumes. This project has turned the transformation-of-Rome theory into a scholarly industry.[3] It tends to reflect the political climate of the contemporary European Union, with values such as multiculturalism, relativism, and a distaste for judgements that privilege literacy, rational thought and institutions, science and technological progress, and capitalist prosperity. It also reflects the dominance of these values in academia today. Two sorts of imbalance, therefore, seem to trouble current views of the fall of Rome and its aftermath: on the one hand, there is a tendency to concentrate on religious culture at the expense of political, institutional, and military history; on the other, there is a tendency to substitute 'transformation and accommodation' for the collapse in the west of Roman government and civilization and the onset of a period of war, anarchy, illiteracy, and cultural decline (formerly known as the 'Dark Ages').

Britain, where they know a few things about the rise and fall of empires, has now produced two Oxford University scholars who challenge the current views of the fall of Rome. Bryan Ward-Perkins is both a historian and an archaeologist, and Peter Heather is an expert on barbarians (especially Goths and Huns) and the late

1 W. Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans, AD 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, 1980), p. 35, cited by Ward-Perkins, p. 9, and Heather, p. 436.
2 W. Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 2006).
3 The first volume was *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, ed. W. Pohl (Leiden, 1997). Heather and Ward-Perkins both contributed essays to this series.

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Roman Empire. Their two new books correct both sorts of imbalances in current scholarship on the fall of Rome – the neglect of political and military history, and the predominant 'transformation and accommodation' theory. The books complement each other well. Heather emphasizes the violence of the Germanic and Hunnic assaults on the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, as well as the determined nature of Roman military resistance, which is often underestimated or ignored because it ultimately failed. Heather also stresses that, in these grim decades, one of the greatest losses suffered was the traditional Classical conviction that the highest good and best form of human living was the educated human being engaged in civic life and culture, with rational and eloquent statesmanship and public debate on all issues connected with the *civitas*. By 500, it was the battle-axe and the *comitatus* (war-band), not the *civitas* and the rule of law, that dominated society in the Latin West. Ward-Perkins, like Heather, emphasizes the brutality of the fifth century, but he is concerned not so much with the loss of traditional political and cultural ideals as with the material consequences of the barbarian onslaught, what he calls 'the disappearance of comfort': the decline in high-quality mass-produced goods being widely available well down the social scale; the disappearance of the impressive but fragile long-range trade networks characteristic of the empire; the greatly reduced scale and more primitive style of what little public building (for example, churches) was attempted; the general replacement of strong and elegant brick or stone housing and terra cotta roof tile by cruder thatch and wood houses; even the pitifully withered robustness of the average cow (see the striking illustration on p. 145). These losses are vivid concrete evidence of the *fall* of Rome.

While Ward-Perkins's main concern is with the material results of devastation and the decline of Roman civilization, with the results of the fall of Rome, Heather addresses the questions of *how* and *why* Rome fell. He sees this as an extended process of military difficulties in the west beginning in the late fourth century with losses of territory to barbarian invaders, and culminating in the collapse of centralized western Roman imperial rule in 476, when the last Roman emperor in the west, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the barbarian Sciri prince and commander Odovacar. But the Romans did not simply 'give in' to the invaders, Heather argues, nor did they suffer from an apathetic 'failure of nerve' or from devastating internal weaknesses; rather, they were overwhelmed by a series of invasions and military threats on many different frontiers that eventually exhausted their military resources and defence.

Heather's position is that while there was a fall, there definitely was not a long internal decline. Despite Gibbon's assertion that Christianity, with its 'piety and pusillanimity', was a cause of decline, for instance, once Christianity became the state religion it strengthened the hold of the imperial government upon the population, and certainly did not weaken the ability of the culture to defend itself from attack (Heather, pp. 441-3). Again, modern Classicists trained on the spare

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elegance of Caesar and Sallust may disdain the ornate Latin of the late fourth-century and fifth-century Gallo-Roman poets (Ausonius, Rutilius Namatianus, Flavius Merobaudes, Sidonius Apollonaris), but that is a matter of aesthetic taste, not evidence of cultural decline (p. 376). Heather's explanation for the fall of the western half of the empire is in fact extraordinarily simple: not internal decline at all, but rather an increasingly worsening international threat-environment that was not the fault of Rome, nor caused by Rome, and that no state could have survived.

The fact is that the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries AD, the 'golden age' of the *Pax Romana* (Roman world peace), had the huge advantage of a congenial international environment in which there existed no strong enemies. To the north were scattered, fragmented, and impoverished German bands, not worth conquering in their gloomy forests, but not too much of a threat, either. To the east, Mesopotamia and Iran possessed obvious military potential but they were overseen by the senescent regime of the Arsacids, a Parthian (Iranian) dynasty. The first radical change for the worse in this congenial situation was the replacement of the Arsacid dynasty in the 220s by the Sassanids, a new dynasty of vigorous, aggressive, and militarily efficient Iranian rulers. The most notable of these conquerors was the formidable Shapur I, who captured the Emperor Valerian in 260 and used him as a footstool to mount his horse. The Sassanid kings were motivated both by expansive geopolitical ambitions and by radical religious (Zoroastrian) belief. Containing this powerful new threat in the east required a half-century of nearly continuous war, with many Roman defeats, and eventually it required a great expansion in the size (and expense) of the Roman imperial army, at least by one-third and perhaps even one-half (pp. 62-4). The expansion of the army no doubt caused economic strain, but it is not the case that increased taxes on agriculture led to the abandonment of the Roman countryside (as has often been thought); on the contrary, new archaeological discoveries show that in many places in the empire, the fourth and early fifth century were times of agricultural prosperity (pp. 112-13).

By means of economic and military adjustments, the Roman Empire was able to survive the emergence of this vigorous new rival to the east. But, by the fourth century, the Iranian threat was becoming joined by a new threat: the transformation of the Germanic peoples to the north. Germanic agriculture had developed more sophisticated and intensive cultivation techniques, and Germanic settlements had become larger and more stable. The result was increased prosperity, especially accumulations of wealth at the higher reaches of society (evident in the first appearance of silver in fourth-century Germanic aristocratic burials), and this wealth enabled chieftains to expand their coteries of fighters, to create larger and larger conglomerations of tribal groups, until in fact they became kings. These larger and more cohesive Germanic groups were, in turn, much more dangerous and resilient foes to the Roman army than their fragmented predecessors had been. Thus the Cherusci, who had themselves destroyed three Roman legions in the Teuto-

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bergerwald in AD 9, were by the late fourth century merely one constituent element of an increasingly formidable Frankish tribal confederation (or 'super-group', as Heather calls them). Further up the Rhine, the new super-group called the Alamanni (the aptly named 'all men') emerged with their own over-king by 350, and we find that in most of the period covered by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, the Alamanni are engaged in serious raiding across the Rhine. Meanwhile, north of the Danube, we see the formation of formidable Gothic confederations (the Tervingi and Greuthungi), who will soon combine into one super-group.

The emergence of larger, richer, more powerful, and more cohesive Germanic political units constituted the second element in the significantly worsening threat-environment menacing the Roman Empire in the fourth century. But it was the third dangerous element that Heather believes was most crucial: the appearance *c.*370 of the Huns from out of the central Asian steppes. We do not know exactly who these people were.[1] They certainly were ferocious cavalry, armed with an extraordinarily powerful type of bow and arrow capable of piercing any kind of iron armour. Their violent seizure of the rich prairies on either side of the Dnieper soon pushed the Goths across the Danube as they fled from the Huns, in numbers that the Roman army could not handle. Some, seeking refuge, were admitted into the empire and settled in the Balkans. But when Roman officials exploited and mistreated them, they went to war, defeated the Roman army, and killed the Emperor Valens in the battle of Adrianople in 378, when the best field army of the eastern empire was wiped out by the united Tervingi and Greuthungi Goths. In the end, after the Goths savaged the Balkans (villa after villa has been found with a late fourth-century destruction layer), the imperial government had no choice but to allow them to settle as an autonomous and armed immigrant group south of the Danube.

That was the first blow ultimately attributable to the Huns; scholars are agreed on it. But the eastern empire survived it. The Huns' next move, according to Heather, caused much more damage, but in the west. By 410 or so, the Huns or their outriders had moved west, far from the Dnieper, crossing the Carpathians and entering the Great Plain of Hungary. It was this Hun advance, Heather says, that in turn forced the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi to flee across the Rhine in the winter of 406/7, in numbers which the field army of the west could not handle (p. 204). Almost simultaneously, similar pressures from the north led the now-unified Visigoths under their over-king Alaric to invade Italy proper. In 410, the Visigoths sacked Rome itself. But the sacking of one city, even Rome, was a blow from which the Roman Empire in the west could recover; what was far more dangerous was the settlement by 415 of several more large groups of autonomous armed immigrants within the imperial frontiers: the Visigoths in Aquitaine, the Vandals

1 They were probably not, according to Heather, the Hsiung-Nu horse-nomads whom the Chinese imperial government forced westwards around AD 50, though this is a popular scholarly belief (pp. 146-9).

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and their allies in Spain. To put the blame for all this on the westward movement of the Huns into Hungary is speculative: our first solid evidence of their presence on the Hungarian Plain is *c.*427. But this reconstruction makes sense and there does not seem to be a better one.

Heather rightly emphasizes that the Romans did not give up in the west without a valiant fight. There is no sign of decadence here. Instead, we see heroic Roman leaders, men to rival the military heroes of the Roman past: Stilicho, Flavius Constantius, Flavius Aetius. Stilicho was part-Vandal, and, it is crucial to note, a totally Romanized man. But as proof of the enduring vigour of Classical culture and its ideals, the two most striking figures are the field marshal Constantius and Merobaudes, a general of Aetius. In 418, Constantius, who, with minimum forces and maximum skill, had restored imperial control in much of Gaul, set up a council of the great Roman landowners to meet periodically at Arles to decide issues of mutual concern. Thus would the rational debate and common consensus of educated men continue to be a centrepiece of Gallo-Roman community life in the fifth century; the council was still meeting periodically in the 460s. Merobaudes was Frankish in ethnic origin, and yet a general of Aetius who helped restore imperial control against the Vandals in Spain, and he was one of the last of the great Latin poets. His poetry relates the struggle to retain Roman control against the barbarian onslaught. We know this crucial literary aspect of Merobaudes only by the chance survival of a single Latin manuscript discovered in the 1820s. Ward-Perkins would not hesitate to call this assimilated Frankish general a defender of civilization.

In terms of the vigour of the Roman defence, it is also important to realize that the eastern half of the empire did not leave the western half to die. On the contrary, six major expeditions were sent to the west during the fifth century, as the emperors in Constantinople spent their own diminished resources to save their brethren. According to Heather, it was in this context that the Huns struck their final crucial blow in 441 (these blows appear to have come in approximately thirty-year, generational intervals). Eastern forces had been sent in 440 to assist Aetius in uprooting the Vandals from the provinces in Africa that they had recently seized. This was a great expedition, of perhaps one thousand ships. But Attila ended it, for this new king of the Huns threatened a massive invasion across the Danube, requiring the eastern forces to withdraw to meet the attack. Once more, we see the crisis of there simply being too many major threats for the Romans to deal with simultaneously. Aetius did not have enough military strength to take on the Vandals alone, and so Africa, the richest of the remaining prizes of the empire, previously untouched by war for five hundred years, fell out of imperial control (pp. 300-4). The result was devastating for the imperial exchequer, because large parts of the other western provinces were either in the hands of armed and autonomous immigrants, or had been too devastated by their raids to provide the tax revenue that funded the Roman armies. Soon after Aetius's greatest triumph – his defeat of Attila's massive invading army at Châlons in 451 – the field marshal was himself

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assassinated as he was discussing the ghastly condition of tax revenues and army financial support with the emperor Valentinian III.

This is not to say that there were not any structural weaknesses within the empire. Men whose wealth and status were almost totally tied up in land were in no position to flee from the Germanic invaders if the imperial government was losing its capacity to protect them; therefore, in order to protect themselves and their families, they tended to make accommodations with the newcomers. This was not what they wished, but it was a necessity; the more helpless the imperial government became, the more widespread was the striving to make private accommodations; and the more widespread the accommodating phenomenon, the weaker the imperial government became. Heather shows this beginning to occur around 410 in Gaul, before the magnificent efforts of Flavius Constantius restored imperial order. After the last gasp of imperial military effort in the 460s, and yet another failure to retake North Africa (and thus restore the imperial finances), the phenomenon of accommodation occurred all over Gaul. Men who had held high public office, including a Deputy Prefect of All the Gauls, negotiated an agreement with the aggressive Visigothic warrior-king Euric II. Sidonius Apollonaris helped defend Clermont without imperial help for five long years against the Visigoths (470-5), but in the end he, too, made his deal with Euric, and his son would end up a general in the Visigothic army (Heather, p. 420).

But this negotiating for safety (of which those who see the coming of the barbarians as a peaceful multicultural process make much) would not have occurred except for the military failure of the imperial centre. Here one must say that, despite the staunch efforts of the field marshals listed above, the incapacity of the emperors of the west is stunning. Honorius seems to have cared about nothing but his pet rooster named Roma; Valentinian III was even worse: grossly overestimating his own abilities, he asserted his control by murdering Aetius, the last great defender of the empire, only to discover that he himself was an incompetent (assassinated within two years). If the imperial throne had been in the hands of men like Aurelian, Diocletian, and Constantine, men who had saved the empire 150 years earlier, or even of the capacity of Theodosius I, who had restored order and imperial prestige after the disaster at Adrianople in 378, the final outcome in the west might well have been different.

Nevertheless, the incompetence of the descendants of Theodosius I would have been less crucial if not for the overwhelming multiple threat-environment facing the imperial government, for which the Huns – an unexpected catastrophe developing out of the eastern steppes – are primarily responsible. The empire might well have been able to handle the major threats posed by the revitalized Persian regime combined even with the growing wealth and size of the Germanic tribal conglomerations, but not when the latter were being pushed across the imperial frontiers by savage horsemen from Central Asia. It is a testimony to the structural strength of the imperial system that the eastern half of the empire did survive, but

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it was beyond the west's capacity to deal with the crisis. Even so, Heather argues, the final collapse was a near-run thing: if the government of the emperor Anthemius (an eastern general appointed to the western throne by Constantinople) had been able, with eastern help, to defeat the Vandals in Africa in 468, the recovery of the African provinces with their wealth might have given the central government and the armies a new lease on life. Yet it is striking that, amid all the fighting in the crisis that began with the Germans crossing the Rhine in large numbers in the winter of 406/7, the armies of Rome suffered severe defeats occasionally, and occasionally won some victories, but they hardly ever (except at Châlons against the Huns in 451, and with significant German help) won a decisive triumph.

The collapse of the Huns after the death of their king, Attila, in 453 itself caused further problems. Heather argues that after *c.*410 the Huns had in fact restrained 'immigration' into the western empire by other tribal groups. But once they were gone, after 453, the Romans had to handle this threat and accommodate the barbarians: 'This was the straw that broke the western empire's back. Bereft of Hunnic military assistance, it had no choice but to build regimes that would include at least some of the immigrant powers' (p. 435). Thus, in the end, these 'immigrants' brought down the western Roman Empire. The formation of barbarian supergroups gave these peoples the necessary force to overwhelm the Romans. Although separately they were much fewer in number, inferior in military training and technology, and poorer, together, in huge super-groups, they succeeded in overcoming the Romans.

In a general way, Heather has returned to the approach of earlier, 'pre-transformation-theory' historians such as A. H. M. Jones and J. B. Bury, where military contingencies and a steadily worsening threat-environment play key roles in the fall of Rome.[1] Heather and Ward-Perkins agree that it was not internal problems or structural weaknesses that caused Rome to fall, or the spread of Christianity, which, if anything, revitalized imperial power and strengthened urban administration in the late fourth and fifth centuries. Rather, there were simply too many military threats in too many places, and too many military and economic limitations, for the Romans to be able to afford a strong enough response to these threats, and not enough troops to save the west.

Like Heather, Ward-Perkins rejects the common picture of Rome in serious decline in the third and fourth centuries. To the contrary, he argues, archaeological excavations in the east and parts of the west show evidence of economic health and 'abundant and widespread rural and urban prosperity' (Ward-Perkins, p. 42.) But that was *before* the military crises of the fifth century. Roman security depended on a large, well-managed professional army supported mainly by tax

1 J. B. Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (London, 1928); A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey* (Oxford, 1964). See also, A. Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation* (London, 1986).

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revenue: 'military capability relied on immediate access to taxable wealth' (p. 41). The many invasions, wars, and territorial losses of the fifth century greatly reduced tax revenue and the tax base that supported the army, and this in turn resulted in military shortages, especially in the west. And when these shortages occurred, Ward-Perkins thinks, it was too late for the civilian population, which had for so long counted on the professional army, to learn military defence. It took time for the civilians to learn and develop military skills and the art of war in order to defend themselves against war-hardened 'immigrants'. In this time of crisis, previous reliance on Roman military professionalism made the civilian population helpless. In contrast, among the Germanic peoples, with their warlike culture and obsession with fighting, all free men were prepared to fight, if necessary, and considered this an honour.

But how does one measure the decline of civilization? This is one of Ward-Perkins's key questions in his attempt to show that the fall of Rome was the end of Classical civilization in the west. He focuses on the decline in standards of living and the complex and sophisticated Roman economy, both of which depended on the security and the ease of transport the empire offered. When these conditions collapsed, standards of living declined. Tableware, luxury goods, good pottery, good tools, sturdy tiled roofs, good buildings of all sorts: all disappeared. Large churches and basilicas, everyday coinage and commercial exchange, the wide distribution of goods and foodstuffs, ease of travel and communication: all disappeared. The fall of Rome brought a sharp decline in literacy, as well as in the unity of language (Latin, as opposed to numerous Germanic dialects), in widely accessible education, in the use of written records and documents, and in the production of literature and history-writing and the whole mentality this reflects. Gold portrait medals appeared with rulers sporting long hair and moustaches, unheard-of and unspeakable among Romans (there is no Latin word for moustache: Ward-Perkins, p. 73). There was a serious decline in varied and nutritious diet, a spread of malnutrition and epidemics, and a low birth rate with the resulting decline in population.

Thus throughout the west – most strikingly in Britain (abandoned by the Roman army in 407), but even in Italy itself – fine houses of mortared brick and stone with tile roofs all but disappeared in the sixth century. Such houses had been widely present in the Roman period well down the social scale; what replaced them were wooden houses with thatched roofs, a far less healthy environment, poorly ventilated, damp, mouldy, more subject to infestation of insects and vermin, and providing less protection against the elements. The abandonment of building in brick and stone has recently been called merely a cultural preference, and not an indication of economic decline: the new elite preferred jewellery and fine clothes to good bricks.[1] But as Ward-Perkins devastatingly replies, the Roman

[1] Ward-Perkins cites C. Wickham, 'L'Italia e l'Alto Medioevo', *Archeologia Medievale*, xv (1988), 110;

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elite had jewellery and fine clothes in abundance, as well as solid, comfortable, healthy housing (pp. 150-1). Again, in the Roman Empire, literacy and the cultural world it implied were widespread enough so that buildings in Pompeii were sometimes studded with graffiti. And not only were there professionally made election posters for voters to read, but also graffiti satirizing such notices – 'the petty thieves are all voting for Marcus Cerrinius Vatia!' – whose clever writers obviously intended them to be read and their humour appreciated. Another example: in the second century, on the British frontier, we find the commander of an auxiliary cohort of German soldiers, who was evidently himself a German princeling, literate in Latin (as was his wife), and they have hired a tutor of Latin literature to teach their son Virgil (a difficult task, judging from the boy's homework, which is preserved.)[1] All this, too, vanished after the arrival of the 'immigrants'. That is shown, even in Italy, by the almost total disappearance of casual wall graffiti of the sort so often found in the Roman period, along with the disappearance of personal inscriptions or jokes written on people's possessions, another hallmark of literate Roman culture.

Above all, there was in the post-Roman Latin West a rise of localism: a society composed of small, fairly isolated rural settlements that were more or less self-sufficient economically and self-sufficient in local defence, relying mainly on local *potentes* (armed elites and warlords with small private armies or bodyguards). The decline of sophisticated, centralized government, and the rise of localism, meant that basic needs and the demands for survival left most people no free time for education, art, literature, and architecture. There was no time and no preparation for forms of government based on rational law, knowledge of history and rhetoric, public debate and consensus, guided by educated, experienced leaders. Every minute and ounce of strength had to be devoted to the most basic tasks of survival. The disappearance of what Ward-Perkins calls 'comforts' widely and easily distributed throughout the west required people to produce everything they needed themselves, locally, at the expense of other specialized activities and skills. And here, too, thinks Ward-Perkins, the Romans' long reliance on highly specialized craftsmanship and production of everyday goods, all made widely available by excellent distribution and commercial networks, caused the reasonably good early local production and commerce to disappear. How ironic: Roman economic sophistication and complexity destroyed local skills and lower-level economic complexity, which made the pervasive localism after the fall of Rome primitive and

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cf. M. Carver, *Arguments in Stone: Archaeological Research and the European Town in the First Millennium* (Oxford, 1993), p. 50, and T. Lewit, 'Vanishing Villas: What Happened to Elite Rural Habitations in the West in the 5th and 6th Centuries AD?', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, xvi (2003), 260-74.

1 See A. Birley, *Garrison Life at Vindolanda: A Band of Brothers* (Charleston, SC, 2002), pp. 135-45. The homework on Virgil's *Aeneid*: p. 144 and illustr. 105. Hundreds of Vindolanda documents written in ink on thin strips of wood have been preserved, despite the damp local conditions. They show that not only the officers but dozens of ordinary soldiers in the cohort were literate (see Ward-Perkins, p. 157).

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disastrous, especially for the middle and lower reaches of society who could not afford to import suddenly rare and expensive everyday goods.

This decline of civilization is apparent everywhere in the sixth-century Gaul of Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, with its primitive country-dwellers (*rustici*), uncouth warlords, and savage blood feuds. Sophisticated Roman understanding of state finance disappeared: a really bad king, Chilperic, at his wife's bidding and as penance for their sinful greed, had all the evil tax registers burned and proclaimed that no more tax assessments would ever be made.[1] It is also apparent in the Italy of St Benedict, whose first miracle was repairing a sieve his nurse had borrowed from a neighbour and accidentally broken. Not everyone had a sieve, and the scarcity of even ordinary kitchenware, which made this accident a cause of serious and tearful distress, made St Benedict's miraculous repair a source of great rejoicing and proof of Benedict's sanctity.[2]

Ward-Perkins believes that the severe decline in standards of living and material culture that signal the fall of civilization in the west are more significant overall than the continuity one sees in religious developments of Late Antiquity. For this reason, current approaches to Late Antiquity as 'a spiritual and mental world' that neglect economic, military, and institutional history are misleading.[3] The astonishing recovery of learning and culture we see in western Europe beginning around 1000, once social and economic recovery got under way, making everyday necessities and 'comforts' available again, shows how crucial these are for the survival of a complex civilization. This supports Ward-Perkins's thesis. It is also clear that the decline (and rise) of cities and urban culture affects all aspects of society as a whole, both material comforts and intellectual and cultural life. The decline in material comforts made the sort of civic life Heather sees as the heart of Roman civilization impossible to sustain. And as Ward-Perkins shows, with the collapse of centralized and unified Roman political authority and of a complex economy and system of trade, the civilization of the west also collapsed.

Nevertheless, the ideals of civilization and the Classical learning and culture that supported them managed to survive the crisis-ridden period between the fall of Rome and the revival beginning in *c.*1000. They were preserved within the monasteries of the west, the Church, and Christian culture in general, which, as Heather

1 Chilperic and his wife Fredegund believed that the deaths of their sons in an epidemic of plague and dysentery were a divine warning about their sinful amassing of wealth: Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, Bk. V, ch. 34, tr. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 297-8.

2 *The Life of Benedict by Gregory the Great*, ch. 1, sect. 1, *Early Christian Lives*, trans. and ed. C. White (Harmondsworth, 1998), p. 166. In a similar vein, amidst the scarcity of iron tools, St Benedict also miraculously retrieved the iron head of a valuable pruning hook from a deep lake, ch. V, sect. 3, p. 174.

3 'A long and rosy Late Antiquity, reaching even to AD 800, may well be an interesting and constructive way of examining the history of the Levant, but it seriously distorts the history of the West after about 400 ... Modern Late Antiquity is primarily a spiritual and mental world, almost to the exclusion of the secular and material one' (Ward-Perkins, p. 171). In contrast to some recent scholars, Peter Brown never loses sight of the catastrophic results of the fall of Rome for secular society and daily life: see *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford, 1996), esp. pp. 55, 56, 75, 77.

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notes, had become increasingly 'Romanized' (pp. 119-27, 441). In addition, the ideals of peaceful order and the kinds of leadership and institutions they depended on were at least partly sustained in the Church's ecclesiastical government. Heather and Ward-Perkins have chosen to avoid detailed discussion of religion, spirituality, asceticism, and holiness, which they feel have been given too prominent a place in our current conceptions of Late Antiquity. They may have thus overlooked the importance of the Church as a guardian of social and political order, and consequently as a bearer of *Romanitas*. Heather and Ward-Perkins often rely on primary sources written by Christian monks and clerics, and these men were committed to recording the history of their times. That, too, is *Romanitas*.

Shortly after 481, for instance, when the Frankish chieftain Clovis (Chlodovech) defeated the Roman commander Syagrius in Gaul, became king of the Franks, and began his consolidation of a Frankish kingdom, Clovis received a letter from Remigius, the bishop of Rheims, warning him that he had better heed and obey the advice of the bishops if he hoped to succeed in keeping power. There was no longer a Roman emperor in the west to lay down the law for Clovis; it was the bishops who insisted that he make every effort to preserve some sort of order under their direction.[1] Here we see a good example of the Church's tendency to assume some of the sorts of responsibility that Roman emperors and administrators had exercised in the previous centuries. The history of the Church and ecclesiastical administration in this post-imperial society had much to do with politics and institutions: it is not strictly a history of 'religion' any longer. It is a history that shows us in concrete details that Rome did fall, but in some ways *Romanitas* struggled on, often through the efforts of the clergy and religious institutions that took over tasks and ideals that were no longer accomplished through imperial government.

Similarly, the convening of Church councils in sixth-century Gaul shows a concern to preserve the tradition of determining policies and actions by a gathering of leaders – in this case, bishops – engaged in debate. In spirit, these councils were not unlike Flavius Constantius' councils of local notables dealing with Gallo-Roman political issues one hundred years earlier. At the request of bishops, Clovis summoned the first of these, the Council of Orléans, in 511; the councils continued through the whole century and were used to govern and reform the Church in Gaul. Here, too, the public debate of educated men characteristic of *Romanitas* endured.

In the 590s, the city of Rome faced multiple crises: plague, famine, poverty, floods, chaos, and an invasion of Lombards. There was no Roman emperor to provide leadership, and no competent secular leadership. It was the pope,

[1] Letter of Bishop Remigius of Rheims to Clovis, 481/2, *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*, ed. and trans. A. Murray (Toronto, 2000), p. 260.

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Gregory I (590-604), who organized the city, protected the grain stores, made sure the poor were fed, and mobilized military defence.[1] Gregory came from one of the wealthiest and most powerful Roman families, the *gens Anicia*. He used his family wealth to found monasteries in Italy, monasteries where literacy and education survived, and he became a monk himself, but was called upon to sacrifice his contemplative life and lead the Church. He became a Roman leader and administrator as bishop of Rome, and inherited many of the tasks that Roman secular leaders and officials once performed. He also maintained the idea of Rome – of a unified and universal western Latin order – as a Christian Rome, the Roman Catholic Church under papal headship. This contrasts sharply with the particularism and localism that dominated most of the west. For most of the early Middle Ages, after Gregory died in 604, the unity and universality of Roman Catholic order and Roman civilization were theoretical ideals more than realities, but the ideals did not disappear, and so again, it is clear that the Roman Empire fell but *Romanitas* survived. Goths, Burgundians, Saxons, Alamanni, Lombards, Franks gradually became Christians, Catholics, and Romans of some sort.

Romanitas survived because there was recognition of the moral and human value of these ideals, and there were individuals willing to assert this, willing even to insist on the superiority of these ideals over others, and willing to keep on reading the Classics, recopying them, and stowing them away for safekeeping in monastery cupboards so that they would not disappear. Whatever transformation and accommodation occurred throughout Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the traditions of Rome were not diluted or transformed into oblivion because there were always at least a few people who remained devoted to them and were not afraid to assert their value and protect them. It is precisely this belief in the value of civilization – Roman civilization, Western Civilization – that Heather and Ward-Perkins see as threatened by the current insistence of scholars on the 'transformation and accommodation' theory and its underlying cultural relativism. 'In the modern post-colonial world the very concept of "civilizations" has virtually disappeared,' says Ward-Perkins, 'and been replaced by that of "cultures", which are seen as being all on a level. In this perspective, post-Roman culture is necessarily the equal of Roman "culture".'[2] Heather, although somewhat more willing than Ward-Perkins to see the dark, violent side of Roman hegemony, agrees that it is wrong to deny that when Rome fell civilization declined, and to assert that the societies that subsequently dominated the west – illiterate, warlike and war-centred, and lacking in centralized government and complex economic support –

[1] See R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. chs. 4 and 7. Gregory of Tours describes Pope Gregory's leadership in *The History of the Franks*, Bk. X, ch. 1, pp. 543-7. He notes that, during a penitential procession the pope assembled to ward off the plague, eighty individuals fell dead.

[2] Ward-Perkins, 'Interview with Bryan Ward-Perkins on the Fall of Rome', conducted by D. Yerxa, *Historically Speaking*, vii (March/April 2006), 32.

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were 'equal' to Roman civilization. He draws a sharp contrast between the anarchic, warlike tribal peoples and the eloquent Roman citizens devoted to civic life, whose ideals (described in admiring detail) really did bring higher fulfilment (see, for example, pp. 49, 67-72).

These are important, well-done, and welcome books. Heather and Ward-Perkins have performed a salutary service in seeking to balance the sunny 'transformation' view with some superbly documented harsher realities. People interested in this subject should read both of them. But both Heather and Ward-Perkins were also writing about the fall of Rome in the shadow of 9/11/01. It shows. They view the Roman past through the lens of our own time and experience, as do the proponents of 'transformation and accommodation', who seek in their view of the past a glimpse of how they think things ought to be in a tolerant, liberal-minded, multicultural present. The authors of these two books are aware of the resonance of their subject for our contemporary world. Current readers, in turn, are now reading these books in the shadow not only of 9/11/01, but also of Madrid, and London, and autumn 2005 in the French suburbs, and this resonance, although unintended by the authors, is now even more intense. These books certainly bear a cautionary lesson and a warning, which Ward-Perkins voices (p. 183): 'there is a real danger for the present day in a vision of the past that explicitly sets out to eliminate all crisis and all decline. The end of the Roman West witnessed horrors and dislocation of a kind I sincerely hope never to have to live through ... Romans before the fall were as certain as we are today that their world would continue for ever substantially unchanged. They were wrong. We would be wise not to repeat their complacency.' Thus, we will be wise to balance the virtues of accommodation and transformation with a realistic acknowledgement of the destruction of civilization in Rome's fall, and a realistic awareness of the vulnerability of even the seemingly strongest states when faced with a multiple-threat environment.

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