

The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians.
By PETER HEATHER. Oxford and New York: Oxford University
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The question of what happened to the Roman Empire fascinates both a broad public and the scholarly world. From a European and text-based perspective, the fall of the empire represents the end of the Classical world, and with it a decline in literacy, urbanism and other signs of "civilization." In the minds of many people, Roman civilization was a golden age of art, literature and law. Since the Renaissance, European and North American societies have widely adopted Roman architectural and sculptural traditions, as well as laws and both legal and medical terms.

Historians, Classicists and anthropologists find the question of Rome's decline of enduring professional interest. Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, written at the height of the Enlightenment, became a standard version, though it was only one of many attempts to synthesize and interpret what happened between the 3rd and the 6th centuries. The diversity of explanations that have been proposed is represented in Alexander Demandt's *Der Fall Roms* (1984), in which the author groups them into six main categories. Anthropological archaeologists have embraced the topic of the decline of empires as a worldwide phenomenon. The fall of Rome is examined as one of many collapses of civilizations, along with others such as the Indus Valley civilization of south Asia, the Shang of east Asia, and the Maya of central America. The Roman case is different from the others in that it offers such a vast array of evidence, both textual and archaeological. Of interest to historians and anthropologists alike has been the question, can we identify a "prime mover" to explain the fall of Rome, or must we understand the process in systemic terms, such that the interaction between a variety of different "causes" created the problems that led to collapse?

The title of this new book by Peter Heather indicates the author's approach and argument. Heather observes that the peoples north and east of the Roman Empire in Europe—the "barbarians"—are little understood by the public. His stated aim is to present a synthetic narrative, aimed at a general readership, to explain the fall of Rome and the role of the barbarians. Heather is a historian, and his presentation is based almost exclusively on the textual evidence, although he mentions archaeological data a number of times. He provides a great deal of interesting detail about some key players—emperors, generals, officials and leaders among Rome's enemies—in

the events affecting the Roman world from the 3rd through the 5th centuries.

The book consists of three main parts. The first begins with Caesar in Gaul and covers issues such as military training, Rome's rise to power, the spread of Roman practices and materials among conquered peoples, and relations between Roman provinces and communities beyond the frontiers. The second focuses on interactions between the Roman world and the peoples to the north and east, especially those known as Goths and Huns. The third documents the collapse of the political and military power of the Huns, then that of Rome itself. Heather argues that the main factor in the fall of the Roman Empire was the military power of its enemies, especially the Goths and the Huns, directed against Roman interests. He cites the continued success of the eastern empire in the 5th and 6th centuries as evidence that internal causes were not the main factors that weakened the western empire, and believes that Christianity was not a major cause of the empire's decline.

The book presents a great deal of information. Heather's style is casual and accessible, making the book well suited to the interested general reader. Footnotes lead to more specialized literature. Within the narrative, certain topics are highlighted with extra discussion. For example, Heather shows how slow travel within the empire was and how difficult it was to get news into hinterland areas, and explains the resulting problems for administering places removed from the principal centers. The book includes a number of maps which help the reader locate places mentioned. A *dramatis personae* section, a timeline and a glossary provide quick access to specific information. In several places, Heather makes thought-provoking comparisons with later contexts, including the Norman Conquest of Britain and the battles of the Spanish Armada.

It would have been helpful to include a brief methodological discussion of the use of textual sources from the late Roman Period. One might come away from this book with the idea that what we read in the texts is straightforward statement of fact, without appreciating the complex process of critical analysis that historians apply to their documents. While the author clearly has full command of the textual sources, which form the basis of his book, he is not as strong on the archaeology. The main problem is that, in common with the Roman writers, Heather consistently understates the economic, social and political development of the peoples north and east of the Roman frontiers. Feddersen Wierde and Wijster do not represent the first "more or less permanent, clustered ... settlements" in their regions. Permanent settlements are common from the Neolithic Period (4500 BC) on, and important predecessors of the Roman

Period villages he mentions are Iron Age sites such as Boomborg-Hatzum in Germany and Grøntoft and Hodde in Denmark. Heather rightly emphasizes the great wealth placed in many graves beyond the frontier during the 3rd through 5th centuries, but does not consider the implications of the many earlier examples, such as at Langå in Denmark or Harsefeld, Putensen or Marwedel in Germany, to name only a few. Such burials are especially important for what they tell us about contacts between elites across Europe during the 1st and 2nd centuries. The great wooden trackways and earlier Iron Age weapon deposits are also important sources of information about political organization in northern Europe that are highly relevant for understanding the peoples Rome encountered.

Heather's book is an important contribution to the discussion, and is especially welcome in being aimed at a wider readership. He controls a vast amount of information and presents it clearly. In the future, authors and publishers might consider inviting an archaeologist to write a chapter for a book such as this one by a historian, and asking a historian to write a chapter for a comparable book by an archaeologist. The data and the interpretive literature in both fields have become so immense that no single individual can control them all.

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