



# THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN WEST



**Ian Wood**

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# **The Transformation of the Roman West**

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*For Peter Brown*

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

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This short book is a greatly expanded version of the plenary lecture entitled “Religion and the End of the Roman West,” which was delivered at the 51st International Congress on Medieval Studies on May 14, 2016. I am very grateful to the organizers for the invitation to deliver a plenary, and in particular to Simon Forde, who asked me to turn the lecture into the present publication. I am also very grateful to an old friend, Professor Thomas F. X. Noble, who acted as chair at the lecture.

The Medieval Institute at Western Michigan provided me with the opportunity to examine a subject that has long troubled me: how is one to keep in balance at least a sample of the numerous rewarding approaches to the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries, when many of them, it seems to me, have followed differing, sometimes seemingly mutually exclusive, trajectories? The most obvious rift is between socio-religious history on the one hand and socio-economic history on the other. The solution that I offer here is to present the Church, which is usually treated from a religious or social viewpoint, in terms of numbers, following a largely empirical line of argument: for me the idea probably derives from a sadly unpublished paper by Anthony Bryer, in which he provided a spell-binding analysis of the Byzantine Church as an economic institution.

I am indebted to numerous friends, and an even larger number of students, who have discussed aspects of the topic with me over the years: I think in particular of friends in the “Bucknell/Woolstone” group, of peers involved in the “Transformation of the Roman World” project, colleagues and students associated with “Texts and Identities” and “Networks and Neighbours,” as well as Robert Wiśniewski’s team working on “Presbyters in the Late Antique West,” with whom I debated often during a fellowship at the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies. Many of them appear in the footnotes, and to name them all would take up a very considerable number of lines. I would, however, like to thank specifically those friends who have commented on the book in one of its drafts: Stanisław Adamiak, Ann Christys, John Haldon, Paweł Nowakowski, Helmut Reimitz, Mark Stansbury, Jerzy Szafranowski, Chris Wickham, and Robert Wiśniewski; as well as Adrien Bayard, who very kindly tracked down a citation that had eluded me. Above all I would like to thank Peter Brown, not only for reading a draft of what follows, but also for over forty years of teaching and encouragement: this short book is dedicated to him.

## Introduction

# **The End of the West Roman Empire: From Decline and Fall to Transformation of the Roman World**

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In the final paragraph of the last volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Edward Gibbon sketched the issues that had most concerned him. In the section of the list which covers the causes of the end of the Roman West one finds “the disorders of military despotism; the rise, establishment, and sects of Christianity; the foundation of Constantinople; the division of the monarchy; the invasion and settlements of the barbarians of Germany and Scythia.”<sup>1</sup> All these issues had certainly attracted Gibbon’s attention in previous volumes, although in an even more succinct précis he had placed particular emphasis on two factors: “I have described the triumph of Barbarism and Religion.”<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I wish to examine the relationship between the “triumph of Religion” and the “Decline and Fall” of the west Roman Empire—taking “Decline and Fall” as the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries, and not in a strictly Gibbonian sense. Although one can certainly say that the Empire came to an end in the West at some point in the fifth or sixth century,<sup>3</sup> my prime concern is not with the significance of the deposition of the last western emperor (nor even with the fall of the Empire), but rather with the difference between western Europe, and the western Mediterranean more broadly, in 300 and

in 600. While this is not intended as a critique of Gibbon, his interpretation provides a useful scaffolding for examining the changes that took place between those two dates. The distinction between the late- and post-Roman western Mediterranean can be seen as illustrating a “Decline,” but, as will become clear, I doubt whether the qualitative judgement that the word implies is helpful when one considers the major changes that took place.

Even though Gibbon’s concerns, most especially that of religion, will provide the main focus for the line of argument that I will put forward, it should be stated immediately that his summary can no longer be regarded as providing an adequate list of the causes of the fall of the west Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, worth beginning by sketching a small number of the factors that Gibbon ignored or downplayed: as we will see, they are relevant to a discussion of the significance of the religious changes that took place during and after the period of “Decline and Fall.” It is also instructive to set this discussion within an outline of some of the major historiographical developments relating to the material.

Of course Gibbon was aware of social and economic issues—indeed his interpretation of both the army and the Church raises the matter of the distribution of resources—but he chose not to underline them. This is scarcely surprising, given the relative development by the mid-eighteenth century of the sciences of sociology and economics in comparison with those of theology and politics. But it is not just the development of sociology and of economics since Gibbon’s day that has rendered his comments on social and economic issues inadequate. Modern interpretations of the late Roman economy and society depend on archaeology, and they do so to an extent that the interpretation of religion and politics does not.<sup>5</sup> To be fair, almost all our archaeological data was unavailable to Gibbon, hav-

ing been unearthed in the course of the twentieth century. Particularly valuable have been the discoveries of papyri in Egypt, which have meant that the region of the Lower Nile is understood with far greater precision than any other part of the Roman Empire. So too, ceramics have shed very considerable light on one major industry, and also on the distribution patterns associated with it.<sup>6</sup>

Not that the interpretation of the social and economic history of the last years of the Empire and its aftermath had to wait until the publication of the Egyptian papyri, or for the unearthing of late- and post-Roman ceramics. As early as the fifth century Salvian had placed the social and economic failings of the aristocracy at the heart of his reading of the crisis faced by the Empire—although he presented the case in primarily religious and moral terms.<sup>7</sup> If we move forward to Gibbon's own day, the question of the treatment of the general population of the Empire was a key point in the common eighteenth-century reading of Rome as being a despotism. This was an interpretation that was championed by a number of political theorists, not least Montesquieu in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, published in 1734, and in the last two books (30 and 31) of the *De l'Esprit des Loix*.<sup>8</sup> Building on the arguments of Henri comte de Boulainvilliers, and offering a critique of the work of the abbé Du Bos, Montesquieu presented the Roman Empire as a despotic institution, which he saw as providing a strong parallel for the despotism of the Bourbon monarchy of the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Gibbon did not share Montesquieu's concern to use the Roman Empire in order to critique the French government of his day, and his discussion of the second century, which he saw as the Golden Age, is to a large extent a response to the French philosopher.

Ancient history, including the fifth and sixth centuries, continued to provide material for discussing social

oppression in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but whereas for Montesquieu it was the Roman emperors who had oppressed their subjects, there was a growing tendency from the time of the French Revolution onwards to present the barbarian incomers of the Migration Period, rather than the Roman government, as the major oppressors. They could be seen as lording it over the indigenous population.<sup>10</sup> A picture of Frankish oppression of the Gallo-Romans, especially as formulated by Augustin Thierry,<sup>11</sup> was borrowed by Alessandro Manzoni and applied to Italy. There Manzoni saw the Lombards not only as oppressors of the native Italians but also as the model for all subsequent invaders of the peninsula.<sup>12</sup> Thus during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages provided the subject matter for consideration of the notion of social oppression.

While allowing that the barbarians overthrew the Empire, Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi was less inclined to see them as agents of oppression. Indeed, he took a position that in some ways had more in common with that of Montesquieu and those who had seen Rome as despotic. Sismondi, however, argued his case from the vantage point of economics: one of the great economists of the nineteenth century, he had already offered a devastating critique of Adam Smith, having personally witnessed the effect of wealth disparity in the new industrial world of the North of England. Not surprisingly, his explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire put a good deal of emphasis on class and economic inequality. The wealthiest squeezed the small proprietors, and although some emperors, including Diocletian (284–305), recognized the problem, in trying to redress it they stamped on liberty.<sup>13</sup>

Sismondi's analysis is sharp but, at least by comparison with his massive studies of the Italian Republics and the French people,<sup>14</sup> relatively slight. A much more substantial

examination of the social structure of the late and post-Roman world was undertaken after 1870 by the ancient historian Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges. Like many of the trailblazing scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Fustel was concerned first and foremost with the territory of France—and with the transformation of Roman Gaul into Merovingian Francia. His great *Histoire des institutions de l'ancienne France* (the first volume of which was published in 1874, while the sixth appeared posthumously in 1892, edited by his pupil Camille Julien)<sup>15</sup> also argued against a thesis of collapse caused by the barbarians; it insisted rather on a steady transformation of Roman institutions, and above all the evolution of the ancient patronage system into early medieval feudalism.

Fustel's argument was formulated at a sensitive time, and the context in which he was writing certainly had an impact on his scholarship: the French had just been defeated in the course of the Franco-Prussian War, a victory that led directly to the formation of a united Germany. There was undoubtedly strong anti-German feeling underlying Fustel's denial of significance to the barbarian invaders of the Roman Empire, which is not to say that his argument lacked evidential support: far from it.<sup>16</sup> Yet despite his claim to rely only on the sources, he was responding to earlier interpretations that emphasized the role of the Germanic peoples. In addition, his use of the evidence was not above criticism: there were problems with his treatment of the charter material—he had little time for the growing science of diplomatics.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, his detailed analysis of social change, and above all of what he saw as the emergence of feudalism out of Roman systems of patronage, shifted the debate about the fall of Rome away from a grand narrative of invasion towards a more complex presentation of the social developments of the period from the fourth to the eighth centuries.

In certain respects his arguments were taken up in the early twentieth century by the great Austrian historian Alfons Dopsch in his *Wirtschaftliche und soziale Grundlagen der europäischen Kulturentwicklung von Cäsar bis auf Karl den Großen* of 1918/20, which appeared as an abridged English version under the title *The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization* in 1937.<sup>18</sup> For Dopsch the end of the Empire saw the integration of two cultures, the provincial Roman and the barbarian, which were not markedly dissimilar (their supposed differences he regarded as being largely the creation of legal historians), and which therefore did not involve any major disruption. His interpretation was initially well regarded. However, there was inevitably a “Germanic” backlash—one not confined to German scholars but more generally from all those with an interest in the post-Roman lawcodes.<sup>19</sup>

The approach of Fustel de Coulanges and Dopsch, with its emphasis on continuity despite the arrival of the barbarians, was echoed in Pirenne’s *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, published posthumously in 1937, although the author had already sketched out its arguments in a number of articles following the end of the First World War.<sup>20</sup> At first sight Pirenne’s focus seems to be very different from that of both Fustel and Dopsch. He was, however, every bit as much a socio-economic historian as they were, and the question that he posed to himself (which was to explain the economic development of the Low Countries in the post-Carolingian Age) was at heart a socio-economic one, as was the answer—that the end of Antiquity came with the breaking of Mediterranean unity. Yet that answer was largely given in narrative terms, and according to Pirenne’s narrative the Germanic barbarians did not disrupt the Ancient World, whereas the Muslims did.

Meanwhile the classicists were offering their own views of the end of Rome. Some were inclined to see the bar-



barbarians as playing a role. For J. B. Bury, who provided an enduring narrative of the period from Theodosius to Justinian and, indeed, in an earlier work from Arcadius to the eighth-century Byzantine empress Irene, contingency was the key: the Empire was overwhelmed by the sheer weight of events, which included the arrival of the barbarians.<sup>21</sup> Others were closer to Fustel, Dopsch, and Pirenne in downplaying the significance of the incomers. Among the great German scholars, Otto Seeck, who also provided a strong narrative of the period, took a gloomy view of the later Empire, presenting it as decadent and tyrannical despite the energetic attempts of the best of the emperors to salvage it: the barbarians were not responsible for its failure.<sup>22</sup>

The barbarians were even less significant for the Russian emigré Michael Rostovtzeff, not least because his focus was on the period before the fourth century—it was explicitly concerned with Ancient, not early Medieval, history. He set out his interpretation of the fall of Rome in 1926 in *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*.<sup>23</sup> His emphasis on the socio-economic weaknesses of the Empire reflected his experience of the Russian Revolution.<sup>24</sup> Rostovtzeff's own summary of his argument is as follows:

The foundation of the Empire, the urban middle class, was not strong enough to support the fabric of the world-state. Resting as it did on the toil of the lower classes—the peasants of the country and the proletariat of the cities—the municipal *bourgeoisie*, like the imperial aristocracy and bureaucracy, was unwilling to open its ranks to the lower orders ... and the society of the Empire became more and more divided into two classes or castes—the *bourgeoisie* and the masses, the *honestiores* and the *humiliores*. A sharp antagonism arose and gradually took the form of an antagonism between the country and the cities. ... It was this antagonism which was the ultimate cause of the crisis of the third century, when the aspirations of the lower classes were expressed by the army and countenanced

by the emperors. ... The bourgeoisie were destroyed, and there arose a new form of government which was more or less suited to the conditions—the Oriental despotism of the fourth and fifth centuries, based on the army, on a strong bureaucracy, and on the mass of the peasants.<sup>25</sup>

He goes on to provide an important caveat: "I regret that I have been unable in this volume to deal with ... the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic life of the Empire. Without a thorough treatment of those sides of life the picture must clearly be one-sided and incomplete."<sup>26</sup>

Despite the contributions of Fustel, Dopsch, and Rostovtzeff, the second quarter of the twentieth century, reflecting the ideological interests of Nazism, saw a shift away from a socio-economic reading of the end of the Roman World to one dominated by barbarians—with German scholars, at least in the two decades prior to 1945, often taking a positive view of the role of migrating peoples in the destruction of the Empire,<sup>27</sup> while others (and especially the French after the end of the Second World War) saw them as killing off the civilized Classical World: this was most famously stated by André Piganiol, who claimed that Roman civilization did not die naturally but was assassinated.<sup>28</sup>

Even after 1945, however, there were those who did not place the barbarians at the forefront of their interpretation of the fall of Rome. In 1948 the English Marxist historian F. W. Walbank published *The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West*, which was reissued in 1969 as *The Awful Revolution*.<sup>29</sup> Like Rostovtzeff, Walbank chose to focus on the second and third centuries, rather than on the period that followed.<sup>30</sup> For him, the Roman Empire was intrinsically weak because it was founded on an inefficient slave economy, and although the State attempted to prevent its collapse, it did so by an overambitious attempt to control the economy and the military, which was bound to

fail. This emphasis on slavery was subsequently expanded by Geoffrey De Ste Croix.<sup>31</sup>

Despite their different approaches, both Rostovtzeff and Walbank saw the late Roman State as top heavy. This is an image that was further reinforced by the vast gathering of material made by A. H. M. Jones in *The Later Roman Empire* (1964), despite the fact that for him the Empire was in working order and the West only collapsed because of the barbarian invasions.<sup>32</sup> Jones provided a narrative,<sup>33</sup> together with a painstaking description of imperial, social, and ecclesiastical organization, and a clear analysis of the economy. The result is a work that remains a first port of call for many in search of evidence, but one in which the detail ultimately outweighs the interpretations it has to offer. That detail gives the impression of a world swamped by the demands of the government and the army, despite the rather Gibbonian line taken on both the barbarians and the Church.

The image of the later Roman Empire that was prevalent in the later 1960s was largely an oppressive one, dominated as it was by the reading of Jones, and to a lesser extent Rostovtzeff and Walbank, and even Seeck. This bleak picture was suddenly and dramatically challenged in 1971 with the publication of *The World of Late Antiquity* by Peter Brown.<sup>34</sup> Here the later Empire was presented as a dynamic place that experienced dramatic change, and, moreover, change that could be presented positively. We will need to return to Brown's work in the context of the religious history of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. However, for the moment we need to note that *The World of Late Antiquity* challenged the very notion of "Decline and Fall" to the extent that the late and post-Roman periods came to be defined in the 1990s as marking the "Transformation of the Roman World." This was indeed the title of a scientific programme set up by the European

Science Foundation between 1989 and 1992, which then ran for a further six years and involved well over two hundred scholars.<sup>35</sup> The word “Transformation” was deliberately chosen in order to avoid the negative connotations of “Decline,” which for the Greek scholars involved in the project (and particularly for Evangelos Chrysos, who was one of the coordinators) were clearly anathema: no Greek Byzantinist could accept the east Roman State of the fifth and sixth centuries as an institution in decline.<sup>36</sup> For the majority of the scholars involved in the “Transformation of the Roman World” project the emphasis was on continuity and development rather than on catastrophe, although the meaning of the word “transformation” can in fact encompass sudden change—and, indeed, as any lover of traditional English theatre knows, the cataclysmic scene in a pantomime, when the scenery collapses to reveal a different (usually devastated) world, is called the “transformation scene.” The emphasis on continuity prompted an adverse reaction from at least two of those who participated in the project: Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins. The latter, indeed, who explicitly called into question the notion of “transformation,”<sup>37</sup> went so far as to title his study of the period *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. The response of the former came largely in a series of grand narratives, which placed the barbarians, most especially the Huns, in the forefront of events.<sup>38</sup>

The years after the publication of *The World of Late Antiquity* not only marked a complete re-evaluation of the period between Marcus Aurelius and Muhammad; they also reflected a revolution in the evidential base available to scholars. Archaeology came to provide new material that deeply altered subsequent discussion. To see the scale of material provided by the spade in recent years (and here one is talking even more about ceramics than about the remains of buildings, except in Egypt, where the evidence

of the papyri is dominant), and its impact on historical interpretation, one can jump forward to the first decade of the twenty-first century, and to the work of Ward-Perkins and of Chris Wickham. In *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* the former presented a cataclysmic picture, and laid the responsibility for the catastrophe firmly at the door of the barbarians. Ward-Perkins's case rests largely on the evidence of ceramics and of the ground-plans of buildings supplied by archaeology, which do indeed suggest a decline in material culture, at least for the uppermost levels of society. Archaeology, however, has complicated rather than simplified the picture: it reveals a good deal more than destruction and degeneration. The most sustained reading of the period—Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages*—has pointed firmly to a great deal of diversity, with the various regions of the Roman World developing in markedly different ways and at diverse speeds, both socially and economically. Despite the divergences, however, trade and communication continued.<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. 71. Because of the number of editions available I have chosen to cite *Decline and Fall* by chapter rather than page number.

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. 71 (under the second of the “four principal causes of the ruin of Rome”); Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, esp. vol. 1, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Wood, “When Did the West Roman Empire Fall?.”

<sup>4</sup> See the list of 210 suggested causes for the collapse of the Western Empire in Demandt, *Der Fall Roms*, p. 695.

<sup>5</sup> Esmonde Cleary, *The Roman West*; Christie, *The Fall of the Western Empire*.

<sup>6</sup> Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*; Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. For an archaeological survey that does not concentrate on ceramics, Christie, *The Fall of the Western Roman Empire*.

<sup>7</sup> Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, IV, 20–36.

<sup>8</sup> Montesquieu, *Considérations sur la grandeur des romains et de leur decadence*; Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Loix*.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 37–41, 61–64.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–51.

<sup>11</sup> Thierry, *The Historical Essays and Narratives of the Merovingian Era*; Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 97–102.

<sup>12</sup> Manzoni, *Discorso sopra alcuni punti della storia longobardica in Italia*; Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 114–19.

<sup>13</sup> Simonde de Sismondi, *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire*; Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 84–93.

<sup>14</sup> Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des Français*; de Sismondi, *Histoire des Républiques italiennes du Moyen Age*.

<sup>15</sup> Fustel de Coulanges, *Histoire des Institutions Politiques de l'ancienne France*.

<sup>16</sup> Hartog, *Le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et l'histoire*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> Dopsch, *Wirtschaftliche und soziale Grundlagen der europäischen Kulturentwicklung*; abridged English trans., *The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization*.

<sup>19</sup> Review by Joliffe, *English Historical Review* 53 (1938): 277–83.

<sup>20</sup> Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*; English trans., *Mohammed and Charlemagne*; Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 224–36.

<sup>21</sup> Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*; Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*; Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 210–17.

<sup>22</sup> Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*.

<sup>23</sup> Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*.

<sup>24</sup> Cameron, "A. H. M. Jones and the End of the Ancient World," p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.

<sup>27</sup> Wood, *Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 244–67.

<sup>28</sup> Piganiol, *L'empire chrétien*, p. 422.

<sup>29</sup> Walbank, *The Decline of the Roman Empire in the West*, reissued as *The Awful Revolution*; Cameron, "A. H. M. Jones and the End of the Ancient World," p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> For a summary of recent views of the importance of the crisis at the end of the second century see Haldon, "Framing Transformation, Transforming the Framework," p. 341.

<sup>31</sup> de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*; Cameron, "A. H. M. Jones and the End of the Ancient World," p. 238; for views of the importance of slavery in subsequent centuries, McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*. For a recent assessment of the work see A. H. M. Jones and the *Later Roman Empire*, ed. Gwynn.

<sup>33</sup> A much fuller narrative of the Later Empire was already available in Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*.

<sup>35</sup> Wood, "Report: The European Science Foundation's Programme on the Transformation of the Roman World and Emergence of Early Medieval Europe"; Noble, "The Transformation of the Roman World."

<sup>36</sup> See also Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>37</sup> Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, pp. 4, 174.

<sup>38</sup> Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*; Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*.

<sup>39</sup> Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*; see also McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*. Among several thought-provoking responses to Wickham, see Banaji, "Aristocracies, Peasantries

and the Framing of the Early Middle Ages”; Haldon, “Framing Transformation, Transforming the Framework”; and Shaw, “Rome’s Mediterranean World System and its Transformation.”