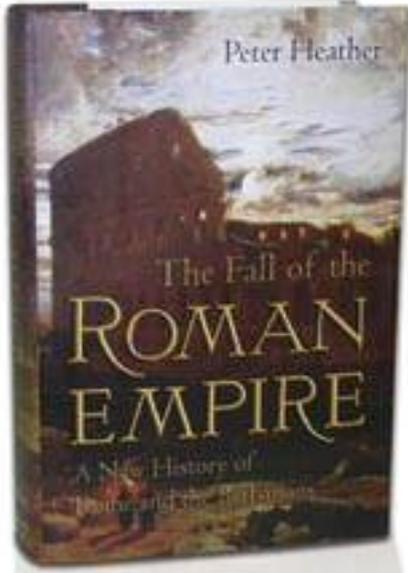


How Immigration Destroyed Rome

Oxford historian Peter Heather has reexamined the fall of Rome. His new book, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, holds many lessons for today.



by Dennis Behreandt

The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians, by Peter Heather (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 572 pages, hardcover.

By the time the Roman Empire in the West died in 476 A.D., the empire had lasted something on the order of 500 years. But the government of Rome was far older. Rome itself had been founded, mythically by Romulus and Remus, in 753 B.C., and archaeological information confirms that some occupancy of the area did in fact begin at about that time. The justly famous Roman Republic, the forerunner of the empire, was itself founded in 510 B.C. when the last king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, was overthrown by Junius Brutus. From that point until the empire replaced the republic, two Consuls, each elected to office for a one-year term, would rule Rome. Altogether, then, Rome was a dominant power on the world stage for more than 1,000 years. Its collapse in 476 was a historical change of colossal proportions.

Despite the fact that the empire had

ruled Europe and northern Africa for so long and had wielded, even almost to its dying breath, more military might than any other nation to that point, the end was anticlimactic. Because the state in 476 A.D. was suffering from lack of revenue, it could no longer pay the salaries of the soldiers serving in the still mighty Italian army. Odoacer, a barbarian soldier serving in the army, then convinced his fellow soldiers that, should they agree to follow him, he would arrange to have land redistributed amongst them in lieu of their expected salaries.

The soldiers agreed to follow Odoacer, and the barbarian leader submitted his proposal. The plan was fiercely opposed by the Roman leader Orestes, the power behind the throne and father of Emperor Romulus Augustulus. But with Odoacer controlling the army, Orestes had no real chance of thwarting the barbarian's plan, and the barbarian leader captured and executed Orestes near Placentia on August 28 of the fateful year. Paul, Orestes' brother, was captured and killed in Ravenna a few days later. The impotent emperor and the Roman Senate stood alone, naked against the barbarian power.

In such circumstances, there was no longer any hope, and the emperor resigned. The Senate, for its part, dissolved the empire in the West.

This event, the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, has been the ground for much historical speculation. How could this powerful, long-lasting empire finally be laid so low? How could it succumb, at long last, to a barbarian usurper at the head of an Italian army composed largely of other barbarians? The most prominent of all the historians of Rome, Edward Gibbon, in his magisterial treatise entitled *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, concluded that Christianity was principally responsible. This new religion, Gibbon argued, caused Roman leaders to drop out of the public eye in favor of contemplative religious pursuits,

caused the empire to concern itself too much with the distractions of doctrinal disputes, and, most telling, undermined the martial spirit of the Romans with a turn-the-other-cheek mentality.

After Gibbon, others, for a time, pointed to barbarians as a contributing factor. More recently, historians have pointed to economic factors, arguing that aggressive taxation destroyed the empire's economy and finally the empire itself. But what really happened? The answer, according to Oxford historian Peter Heather, is that unchecked immigration and invasion led to the gradual dismantling of the empire. Heather tells the story of this massive and crippling wave of hostile immigration in his new book, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. For modern Americans grappling with issues of empire abroad and facing the beginning elements of unchecked immigration themselves, the book is fascinating, if somewhat disquieting, reading.

The Power of the Empire

In the late fourth century, the power of the Roman Empire, whether in the East or West, was unchallenged. As a result of the external peace, internally the citizens of the state were able to carry on their daily lives in comparative peace and quiet. Some historians have argued, though, that this was actually a time when agriculture in important areas of the empire, especially in Italy, was failing. To make this claim they point to the fact that tremendous amounts of agricultural produce were brought to Rome from the empire's North African provinces, rather than grown locally. Moreover, it is historical orthodoxy to hold that the later empire overtaxed its land-owning class, causing a flight from the land that resulted in the infamous *Agri Deserti*, the phenomenon of the "deserted lands."

This phenomenon no doubt did occur in some areas. Ancient texts make reference to it, and historians were quick, too quick it seems, to assume this applied to the empire as a whole. Heather cites archaeo-

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logical evidence to the contrary. Some areas, he points out, experienced rapid and intense agricultural and rural growth. In Roman North Africa, Greece, the Near East and elsewhere, agriculture flourished. In these areas, Heather writes, “the fourth and fifth centuries have emerged as a period of *maximum* rural development — not minimum, as the orthodoxy would have led us to expect.”

The economy of the Roman Empire was grounded in agriculture; the power of the state, militarily, reflected this economy. If the agricultural sector was strong, the state’s coffers would be full, and the military, largely the only full-scale service provided by the Roman State, would be correspondingly strong. In fact, the military of the Roman Empire in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, just when it was supposedly on the decline according to orthodox historical interpretation, was in reality near its zenith. Heather points out that at the beginning of the fourth century, at the end of the reign of the Emperor Diocletian, the Romans could field an army of at least 300,000 men. Moreover, this was a well-trained army that could fight a two-front war, and it did so not long after, against the Goths in the West and the Persians in the East.

Invasion

Clearly, Gibbon’s thesis that Christianity caused the empire to become soft militarily is not true. Moreover, the empire had the economic wherewithal to support its massive military establishment, a fact that destroys the hypothesis that the late empire faced an agricultural shortage. So what brought down this colossus?

The beginning of the end came with an amnesty for a horde of Gothic immigrants. Faced with pressure from marauding Huns

in the East, powerful tribes of Germanic Goths fell back to the Carpathian Mountains to mount a defense. The effort failed and, in 375-376 A.D., under pressure from Hun attacks, two large tribes of Goths moved further west, to the banks of the Danube River where they sought asylum and safety inside the Roman Empire. In a sense, their timing was perfect. The Romans were deeply embroiled in the East with a resurgent Persian empire. The Balkans were, therefore, a bit short on manpower. Under the circumstances, the Emperor Valens was forced to admit the Gothic horde. All went well until food supplies ran short and tempers flared. There was an attack on the emperor at a banquet and soon there was war, which raged for six years.

From the time of this conflict, known as the Gothic War, until the fall of the Roman Empire, continuous pressure from the Huns would force other barbarians to move en masse across the Western Empire. Throughout the book, Heather examines the empire’s continuing attempts to repel or at least contain the onslaught. More often than not, they were successful in battle, but each success (and sometimes spectacular failure) sapped the strength of the giant. Soon Gaul was overrun, and Spain, too.

The real blow came when Goths and Vandals crossed into North Africa and took over the Roman provinces there. Loss of these provinces would mean loss of the West, and the combined forces of all the empire were sent to recover the area. Just before making landfall near Carthage, the Roman fleet was trapped and destroyed by a Vandal fleet.

Lessons of the Fall

There are two major lessons to be learned from the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, and these are made apparent in Heather’s book. First and foremost is the danger of uncontrolled hostile immigration. That the empire could absorb large groups of immigrants is beyond doubt. It could and did do so over several centuries. But even the Roman Empire, with its vast territory and unprecedented wealth, had a limit to the number of people it could absorb and Romanize.

Eventually, the immigrants grew more powerful than the existing Roman authority and, maintaining to some degree their independence of spirit and character, were unwilling to relinquish their own culture and adopt the Roman. Vast blocs of once-Roman territory eventually became foreign and even the preexisting Roman population, eventually outnumbered, had to make peace with the newcomers.

This is a stark lesson for America. The United States faces its own immigration dilemma with very large numbers of immigrants moving in but resisting Americanization. Our modern situation at the Rio Grande is not so different from the Roman situation at the Danube circa 376 A.D.

Also important is Heather’s reevaluation of the role of Christianity. Since Gibbon wrote his great masterpiece, it has been the norm to see in the fall of the empire the supposedly pernicious role of the new Christian religion. Heather’s book, taken as a whole, is a marvelous corrective for this mistaken position. There can be no doubt, after reading Heather, that the West, at the height of its power, succumbed to successive waves of hostile immigrants.

Heather also makes the point that if Christianity were to blame, then the empire in the East, based at Constantinople, should not have continued for almost a millennium after the fall of the West. After all, the Eastern Empire was just as Christian as the West, and was even closer to the scene of the many early doctrinal controversies. And yet the sun did not set on the Eastern Empire of the Romans until 1453. ■

