

# The Fall of Rome

*By Dr. Peter Heather - February 17, 2011*



**Was the collapse of the Roman empire in the west a series of gradual adjustments or a catastrophic event that brought violent change?**

## Dark ages

In September 476 AD, the last Roman emperor of the west, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by a Germanic prince called Odovacar, who had won control of the remnants of the Roman army of Italy. He then sent the western imperial regalia to Constantinople.

The Roman empire in western Europe - a centralized superstate which had been in existence for 500 years - had ceased to exist, its single emperor replaced by upwards of a dozen kings and princes.

The vast majority of these rulers, like Odovacar himself, were non-Roman in origin. Their power was based on the control of military forces which were the direct descendants of recent immigrants into the Roman world, whether Anglo-Saxons in Britain, Goths in southern Gaul and Spain, or Vandals in North Africa.

**The end of empire was a major event in human history.**

What difference did this political revolution make to real life in the former western Empire?

For many 19th and earlier 20th century commentators, the fall of Rome marked the death knell of education and literacy, sophisticated architecture, advanced economic interaction, and, not least, the rule of written law.

The 'dark ages' which followed were dark not only because written sources were few and far between, but because life became nasty, brutish and short.

Other commentators, who were more focused on the slavery and entrenched social hierarchies that were also part of the Roman world, didn't really disagree with these observations.

But they saw the 'dark ages' as a more necessary evil - Rome had to fall to destroy large-scale slavery and make possible, eventually, a world which valued all human beings more equally.

On either view, the end of empire was a major event in human history.

## Massive inequality



Justinian I and his retinue, mosaic detail of the emperor, c. 547 AD

This was certainly a time in ancient history when all established certainties were challenged.

However, the eastern half of the Roman empire not only survived the collapse of its western partner in the third quarter of the fifth century, but went on to thrive in the sixth.

Under Justinian I (527 - 565 AD), it was still constructing hugely impressive public monuments, such as the *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople, and had reconquered Italy, North Africa, and parts of Spain.

**As late as 383 AD, captive barbarians were being fed  
to wild animals in the Colosseum.**

At the same time, there still lived in the west many individuals, who continued to describe themselves as Romans, and many of the successor states, it was correctly pointed out, were still operating using recognizably Roman institutions and justifying themselves ideologically with reference to canonical Roman values.

Consequently, by the late 1990s the word 'transformation' had come into vogue. No one denied that many things changed between 350 and 600 AD, but it became fashionable to see these changes as much more the result of long-term evolution than of a violent imperial collapse.

These revisionist arguments have some real substance. There really was little change at one deep level - the life of the peasant producers who made up perhaps 90% of the population.

I am still staggered by feats of Roman engineering, blown away by the beauty of some the buildings Romans lived in, and delighted by the sophistication of the empire's literary and political culture.

But these cultural glories were limited to a tiny privileged elite - those who owned enough land to count as gentry landowners. They represented maybe 3% of the whole population. Its structures were probably unspeakable vile to pretty much everyone else.

As late as 383 AD, captive barbarians were being fed to wild animals in the Colosseum, and its criminal law dealt ruthlessly with anyone seeking to remedy the highly unequal distribution of property.

In 650 AD, as in 350 AD, peasants were still laboring away in the much the same way to feed themselves and to produce the surplus which funded everything else.

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## **Fall of Rome**

On every other level, however, 'transformation' understates, in my view, the nature and importance of Rome's passing.

A two-stage process occurred between the battle of Hadrianople in 378 AD, when the emperor Valens and two-thirds of his army (upwards of 10,000 men) fell in a single afternoon at the hands of an army of Gothic migrants, to the deposition of Romulus Augustulus nearly a century later.

This process created the successor kingdoms. Stage one consisted of immigration onto Roman soil, followed by a second stage of aggressive expansion of the territory under the migrants' control. All of it was carried forward at the point of the sword.

**The central Roman state collapsed because the migrants forcibly stripped it of its tax base.**

The central Roman state collapsed because the migrants forcibly stripped it of the tax base which it had used to fund its armies, not because of long-term 'organic' transformations.

In this violent process of collapse, some local Roman societies immediately went under. In Britain and north eastern Gaul particularly, Roman landowners lost their estates and Roman culture disappeared with them.

In southern Gaul, Spain, and Italy, Roman landowners survived by coming to terms with the migrants. But to suppose that this was a voluntary process - as some of the revisionary work done since the 1960s has supposed - is to miss the point that these landowners faced the starkest of choices.

As the central Roman state ceased to exert power in their localities, they either had to do such deals, or lose the lands that were the basis of their entire wealth. And even where Roman landowners survived, the effects of Rome's fall were nonetheless revolutionary.

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## **Roman culture**

In judging these effects, it is important to recognize two separate dimensions of 'Roman-ness' - 'Roman' in the sense of the central state, and 'Roman' in the sense of characteristic patterns of life prevailing within its borders.

At the state level, the empire was not just replaced by mini versions of itself, even where Roman landowners survived. Within two generations of 476 AD, a new and weaker type of state structure had emerged right across the former Roman west.

The old empire had employed two key levers of central power - large-scale taxation, two-thirds of which was then spent on maintaining the second lever, a large professional army.

**Learning Latin was now a waste of time -  
advanced literacy was confined to churchmen for 500 years.**

This high-tax, high-spend structure meant that the Roman state both intruded itself bureaucratically into localities to raise taxation, and was also able, if necessary, to compel obedience to its demands by employing the army, which the taxation supported.

The new states of post-Roman Europe were much weaker affairs. Even where other less important Roman institutions survived, the new kings had only much-diminished revenue rights and their armies were composed of semi-professional contingents of local landowners.

On the level of local 'Roman-ness' too, the revolution could not have been more profound. The characteristic patterns of local Roman life were in fact intimately linked to the existence of the central Roman state, and, as the nature of state structures changed in the post-Roman world, so too did local life.

The Roman city, for instance, was the basic unit of local administration through which taxation was raised. As central tax raising powers disappeared, so too did the need to keep the city, and by 700 AD it was history.

Many of the more advanced elements of the Roman economy, such as specialized production and long-distance trade, quickly disappeared too.

The Roman state had subsidized large-scale transport structures for its own purposes, but these had also been used by traders. As this command economy collapsed, so did much of the trade dependent upon it.

Cultural patterns were also transformed beyond recognition. Roman elites learned to read and write classical Latin to highly-advanced levels through a lengthy and expensive private education, because it qualified them for careers in the extensive Roman bureaucracy.

The end of taxation meant that these careers disappeared in the post-Roman west, and elite parents quickly realized that spending so much money on learning Latin was now a waste of time. As a result, advanced literacy was confined to churchmen for the next 500 years.

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## **Militarization**

Everywhere you look, the fall of the Rome let loose profound change. At the heart of it all, where change at state and local level intertwined, lay the militarization of elite landowners.

The end of the Roman empire generated many states where previously there had been one, and another casualty of 476 AD was thus the *Pax Romana*. Warfare became endemic to the former Roman west.

In this situation, successor state kings needed military service above all, and quickly mobilized Roman landowners with contingents of their retainers to fight alongside the descendents of their migrant warbands.

**Dark age Europe was born out of the violent destruction of the Roman empire.**

But taxation had always been justified in the Roman period by the fact that it paid for defense. When successor state kings made local Roman landowners turn out for battle, not only was it a nasty shock, but it was also the ultimate double whammy.

Having to pay taxation *and* fight was massively unpopular - witness the stringing up of the Roman grandee Parthenius, employed by the Frankish king Chilperic as his chief tax collector in 574 AD. Kings quickly realized that they could gain much popularity by canceling tax obligations.

In the short term, they could do so since they no longer needed the money for a professional army. But in the longer term, it was precisely this process which created the new Europe of powerful local landowners and relatively powerless states, which lacked both tax revenues and professional armies, and generated the cultural change, since literacy was now so marginal to secular elite life.

It also brings us back to the peasantry. One striking feature of post-Roman archaeology is the substantial decline it demonstrates in overall population. Even if peasants don't fight, they are not immune to the effects of warfare, and declining economic opportunity also hit their capacities to make a living. Though probably not really aware of it, they too had benefited from the *Pax Romana*.

Dark age Europe was born out of the violent destruction of the Roman empire, as the battlefield replaced the bureau at the heart of elite life, but its ramifications were felt at every social level.

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## Find out more

### Books

- *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation* by Bryan Ward-Perkins (Oxford University Press, 2005)
- *The Fall of the Roman Empire* by Peter Heather (Macmillan, 2005)
- *The Fall of the Roman Empire* by Michael Grant (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990)
- *Sidonius Apollinaris and the Fall of Rome AD 407-485* by Jill Harries (Clarendon Press, 1994)

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