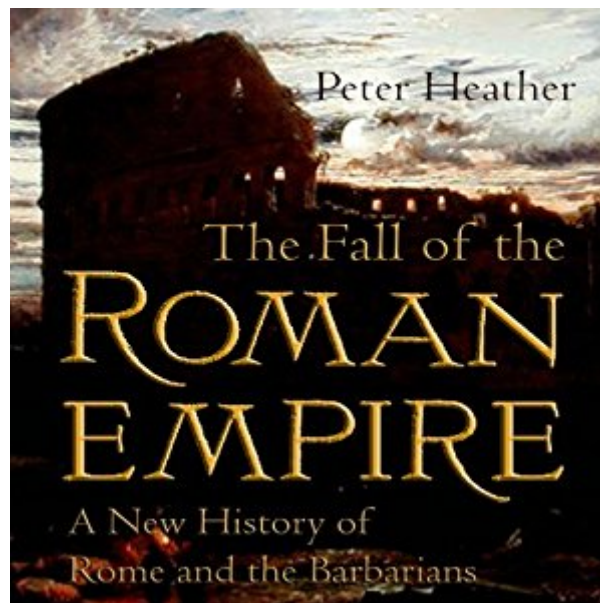




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The Fall Of The Roman Empire: A New History Of Rome And The Barbarians



Synopsis

The death of the Roman Empire is one of the perennial mysteries of world history. Now, in this groundbreaking book, Peter Heather proposes a stunning new solution: Centuries of imperialism turned the neighbors Rome called barbarians into an enemy capable of dismantling an Empire that had dominated their lives for so long. A leading authority on the late Roman Empire and on the barbarians, Heather relates the extraordinary story of how Europe's barbarians, transformed by centuries of contact with Rome on every possible level, eventually pulled the empire apart. He shows first how the Huns overturned the existing strategic balance of power on Rome's European frontiers, to force the Goths and others to seek refuge inside the Empire. This prompted two generations of struggle, during which new barbarian coalitions, formed in response to Roman hostility, brought the Roman west to its knees. The Goths first destroyed a Roman army at the battle of Hadrianople in 378, and went on to sack Rome in 410. The Vandals spread devastation in Gaul and Spain, before conquering North Africa, the breadbasket of the Western Empire, in 439. We then meet Attila the Hun, whose reign of terror swept from Constantinople to Paris, but whose death in 453 ironically precipitated a final desperate phase of Roman collapse, culminating in the Vandals' defeat of the massive Byzantine Armada: the west's last chance for survival. Peter Heather convincingly argues that the Roman Empire was not on the brink of social or moral collapse. What brought it to an end were the barbarians.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mr Heather's history is convincing: the barbarians killed the Western Roman Empire. But though he shows how the Roman response to the Persian threat changed things, he does not go into how this might have changed, and weakened, the Empire. The Roman economy was plantation-based. It was slave-driven only when the Romans had new slaves: after their conquests stopped, (mostly) free labor did the grunt work. But most importantly, before the Persians, taxation was half local: local magnates constructed public buildings to gain places on the civic curia. After the Persians, the Romans built a "nationalized" bureaucracy and the curia were no longer important. The local peasants (for that is what the working class was post-Diocletian) pointed out vulnerabilities and choice targets to the barbaric invaders. Once the Imperial military protection weakened, and were already controlled, taxed and suppressed, the Empire was a lose/lose proposition to the great majority of citizens. They didn't have to hate the Empire... they need only stop identifying with it. (I have not even mentioned the insanely wasting dynastic wars that were proof on the face that the Romans were, largely, politically incoherent after the Republic.) Heather does not examine this fatal problem of morale. Nevertheless, his history is concise, the campaigns lucid, and many wonderful, compelling new archaeological facts about the condition of the Empire, her ruling class, her citizens and economy are presented. Your opinion of the Empire will change after you read this book.

You'd better love Rome. Peter Heather certainly does, which means he goes into exhaustive detail when describing his current insights into the genuine causes of the fall of Rome. Rather than portraying a struggling, sissy-man, codger of an empire, as has been the tendency in the past, Heather attributes the fall to two external factors: a radical increase in German population, attributable to changes in agricultural technology, and the invasion of the Huns, which displaced the much-larger and better-fed German tribes toward Rome. The substantially increased pressure, compared to past pressure, was too much for the Empire's structure and finances. After the Empire began to admit select Germanic groups, they blundered in recruiting these guests as part of the Empire. From there the unraveling is chronicled in great detail, with Heather pointing out milestones along the way. The density of detail Heather includes sometimes left me wishing for a Cliff's notes, but he deserves tribute for putting out a well-founded, fascinating account of the period.

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the number of connections the author provides between different historical moments and events. For instance, closer to the end, you read about Orestes, Roman general, father of Romulus Augustus (the last emperor of Rome), and about Odoacer/Odovacar, first King of Italy after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. But a few chapters

earlier, there was an episode where Orestes and Odoacer's father, Edeco, were serving together under Attila, King of the Huns. So it was not black and white, Romans versus barbarians like I had always thought. The fathers of the last Roman emperor and of the first "barbarian" King of Italy had been on the same side - under Attila! There are many other instances where the author makes connections between the Eastern and Western Roman empires, between what was happening in Asia and Africa, and how exactly that affected Rome. The author does a very good job of presenting the large history of the epoch, which for the first time has become more clear to me - the sequence of events, their causes, their consequences, it is all there. He also includes interesting stories, often based on written accounts left by people who took part in the events reported. The solid quality of the book rests mainly on those two pillars: broadness and primary sources. But there are also interesting archaeological references, good background information and a profusion of maps (sixteen maps - so you will know exactly what region or road or province the author is talking about). It's a beautiful narrative of the decline of the Western Roman Empire and of how people were affected by it. I finished the book with almost no lingering doubt about anything related to the subject, so clear and complete is the text - without being excessive. As other reviewers have pointed out, it's obvious also to me that the barbarians were not the only cause of the fall of Rome. But the author can keep his (stated) beliefs, and I will keep mine - and I did not enjoy the book less because of that. I had read before about the internal circumstances leading to the Roman decline, so the barbarians angle was a welcome addition to my reading on this subject. Although the author clearly indicates he wrote the book "for a more general audience", there are signs that he tried not to be too far from an academic standard. A few times the text becomes a bit repetitive and adopts a dry academic tone. This is the reason why I gave the book four stars, and not five. I would have given it four and a half stars if that was possible. (I didn't like either the too many notes, and the fact that they are at the end of the book, which is the worst location for notes, in my opinion.) (- Now I would like to find a book as good as this one about the impact on the Eastern Empire of the rise of Islam. The author put me on this track, when he wrote that the rise of Islam robbed Constantinople of three-quarters of its revenue, and added that after the year 700 the Byzantine Empire was actually "another successor state rather than a proper continuation of the Roman Empire".)

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