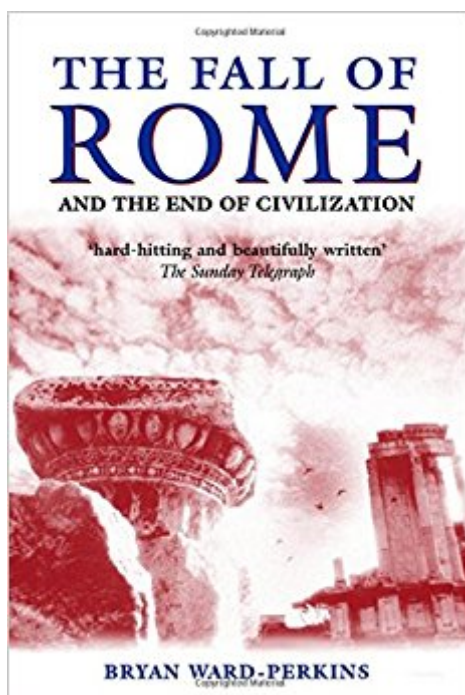


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The Fall Of Rome: And The End Of Civilization



Synopsis

Was the fall of Rome a great catastrophe that cast the West into darkness for centuries to come? Or, as scholars argue today, was there no crisis at all, but simply a peaceful blending of barbarians into Roman culture, an essentially positive transformation? In *The Fall of Rome*, eminent historian Bryan Ward-Perkins argues that the "peaceful" theory of Rome's "transformation" is badly in error. Indeed, he sees the fall of Rome as a time of horror and dislocation that destroyed a great civilization, throwing the inhabitants of the West back to a standard of living typical of prehistoric times. Attacking contemporary theories with relish and making use of modern archaeological evidence, he looks at both the wider explanations for the disintegration of the Roman world and also the consequences for the lives of everyday Romans, who were caught in a world of marauding barbarians, and economic collapse. The book recaptures the drama and violence of the last days of the Roman world, and reminds us of the very real terrors of barbarian occupation. Equally important, Ward-Perkins contends that a key problem with the new way of looking at the end of the ancient world is that all difficulty and awkwardness is smoothed out into a steady and positive transformation of society. Nothing ever goes badly wrong in this vision of the past. The evidence shows otherwise. Up-to-date and brilliantly written, combining a lively narrative with the latest research and thirty illustrations, this superb volume reclaims the drama, the violence, and the tragedy of the fall of Rome.

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Customer Reviews

"Imaginative and intensely interesting"--Christopher Kelly, University of Cambridge"An important

addition to the study of this period of Western history."--Library Journal"The author makes a compelling case for his point of view and thus helps readers restudy and rethink a major period in world history.... Explains the complex realities of the Roman empire and its neighbors in fascinating detail."--BookPage

Bryan Ward-Perkins is a lecturer in Modern History at the University of Oxford, and Fellow and Tutor in History at Trinity College. He has published widely on the subject and is a co-editor of *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Volume XIV

The overrunning of Roman provinces by Germanic tribes caused a collapse in societal complexity, a collapse in specialization of labor, a reduction in agricultural output, a large reduction in literacy, a loss in ability for most communities to trade over long distances, loss of standard currency for trading, a reduction in population sizes (thru hunger and other ways), and lots of other things I would not want to live through. This didn't happen all at once. The decline didn't start at the same time in all parts of the Roman Empire and the rate of decline differed by region. Britain went down early, hard, and fast. The eastern Empire lasted much longer. The book is a useful corrective to a recent school of thought that portrays the end of Empire as more peaceful transformation than catastrophe. I think it unwise to take civilization for granted. This book helps remind us what benefits we get from living in a complex civilization.

Impressive look at why the Western Roman Empire fell. And a great antidote to modern, multiculturally influenced rewritings of history that take the line that Rome fell because some people with different cultural practices moved into the neighbourhood. Great use of current archaeological findings. The final thesis is that, yes, Virginia, there was a barbarian invasion, and yes, it did lead to the destruction of the Roman civilization in the West. My only issue with the book is its brevity. I wanted more. Ward-Perkins tried to keep the book short, and as a result he excludes a lot of additional archaeological evidence. I would love to see an expanded second take on this subject that truly delves into detail.

I bought and read this book for a class, and I probably wouldn't have read it if it weren't required reading (it's not something I'd just pick up randomly.) I have to agree with a past reviewer that the best way to describe this would be "scholarly and compelling". I think the blurb, when seen in conjunction with the title, sensationalizes and dramatizes the contents of the book itself, so I

understand if others expected something less academic and more action-packed. Having said that, the chapters in this book flowed extremely well and made for smooth and comfortable reading, which I really appreciated as both a student and a reader. Ward-Perkins presents evidence and defends his arguments very well, and his writing is eloquent and persuasive without being overwhelming and pedantic. The themes and material covered in this book also complement the topics covered in the course that I'm currently taking, which invariably contributes to how pleased I am with the book. I would recommend this book to history enthusiasts with a passion for Roman history as well as the history of Late Antiquity, as well as professors and academics who might be looking for a well-written, compelling, scholarly reading for their students.

Scholarly publication based on top notch archaeology. It depicts the demise of Greco-Roman civilisation with state of the art scientific tools, showing many European peoples reduced to living in stone age conditions. Mr. Ward-Perkins refers to the "fashionable" scholarship saying that there was no collapse of civilisation; he is polite but firm in his step-by-step deconstruction of this politically motivated fallacy.

Superbly readable and a pleasure. Ward-Perkins offers a corrective to the new revisionists who insist that the Roman Empire went gently into that good night. It was neither gentle nor good. The end of that civilization was social and economic catastrophe. Using archeological and textual evidence, the author reveals the depth of the collapse and a plunge into a chaos that did not end for centuries in the West. The book is surprisingly short but gives clear, concise evidence for the author's thesis.

Every once in a while, you come across a book on an obscure, or not terribly popular, topic but it's so good it deserves a wider reading audience. (The classic for me was R. W. Bulliet's *The Camel and the Wheel*, 1975.) This gem is one of them. It traces the chain of events, much of the evidence for which is obscure or missing, that culminated in the fifth century A.D. in the collapse of the western Roman empire and the rise of Germanic kingdoms that replaced it. All historians work from incomplete evidence. Conclusions are always up for revision. If you think the past yields nothing but facts, like schoolchildren typically do, you're in for a rude awakening. If there is one word to characterize the past, it's "elusive." The past is elusive, the more so the further back in time one goes. People of those times thought their own thoughts and pursued their own preoccupations and they weren't necessarily the same as the ones we have and follow. The radical incompleteness of

the historical record -and the concomitant elusiveness of past values and meaning -- shapes the historian's trade. There are two touchstones in their business. The first is the evidence, what remains, written or otherwise, left behind by the past. The second is the interpretations of that evidence by prior scholars, not just historians but people working in ancillary fields like literature, anthropology, archaeology, etc. Historians write off other historian's views, accepting or rejecting them, modifying and expanding them in accord with their own reading of the evidence available when they are writing. Nowhere is this truism about the craft of history truer than in the study of ancient history. After a thousand and a half years, and there are holes in the evidence from which to draw conclusions. And since historians are human, they, like the rest of us, are influenced, sometimes without knowing it, by fashion and time. And that is precisely the merit of this sharpened dagger of a book: it takes to task current interpretations of the fall of the western Roman empire and tears them to shreds as reflecting today's fashions more than the hard evidence. It's a book more about potsherds, farmhouses and churches, and signs of literacy than it is about the Grand Meaning of Rome's fall. In reaction to earlier views of Rome losing out to the barbarians (who, as our ancestors, we wish to see as at least somewhat civilized rather than out and out barbaric), most recent history has argued that rather than there having been a 'fall,' the transition from Roman to Germanic rule was more or less peaceful. Besides, the Roman empire exploited its subjects mercilessly so post-Roman rule wasn't so bad by comparison. This landmine of a book shreds these views, showing that they respond more to current notions of who the Good Guys and the Bad were to any actual historical evidence. From the fifth century on, literacy declined dramatically though unevenly across regions, the sophisticated trade and manufacturing network of old Rome collapsed utterly with an attendant effect on the production of goods (which henceforth were less sophisticated, and there was significantly less extra-local trade). Rome may have been an ugly empire, callous to the fate of underlings, but all classes and regions benefited from the security it provided, from a common currency, protection of trade, and literacy within the bureaucracy, the army and the merchant sector. Goodbye Rome, and in most parts of Europe it was back to thatched roofs, dirt floors and wooden walls. Churches dwindled in size and old buildings were cannibalized to embellish new ones. Ward-Perkin's concluding paragraphs seems Spot on to me: "Present-day historians seem to feel comfortable discussing the 'rise' of this or that, because there is absolutely no risk in this vocabulary of anyone being criticized or a negative value judgement being made; rather the reverse -everybody is being awarded a reassuring pat on the back. . . . Nothing ever goes wrong -in this vision of the past, there are no serious downward turns or abrupt changes, let alone complete ruptures; rather, everything moves forward along a level plain, or even on a slightly rising

trajectory."I confess I find this limiting; but, more importantly, I think it does not fit the evidence and fails to reflect accurately what happened in the western half of the empire. In my opinion, the fifth century witnessed a profound military and political crisis, caused by the violent seizure of power and much wealth by the barbarian invaders. The native population was able to some extent, to adapt to these new conditions, but what is interesting about the adjustment is that it was achieved in very difficult circumstances. I also believe that the post-Roman centuries saw a dramatic decline in economic sophistication and prosperity, with an impact on the whole of society, from agricultural production to high culture, and from peasants to kings. It is very likely that the population fell dramatically, and certain that the widespread diffusion of well-made goods ceased. Sophisticated cultural tools, like the use of writing, disappeared altogether in some regions, and became very restricted in others...."I ... think that there is real danger for the present day in a vision of the past that explicitly sets out to eliminate all crisis and decline."

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