

# Historiographical Survey of the Decline of the Roman Empire

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The question of why the Roman Empire declined and disappeared from history is perhaps one of the most extensively studied fields in the discipline, being exhausted by multiple angles of inquiry since at least the fifth century of the Common Era. As it is a tall order to challenge such extensive scholarship, the purpose of this essay will not be to argue why the Empire fell but instead to suggest that an element that has often been neglected by scholarship may have been a significant factor in the healthy operation of the state, namely under the Five Good Emperors and especially under Marcus Aurelius, and that its abandonment or absence under the later military despots during the Crisis of the Third Century contributed to a fatal spirit of civic disengagement, strife and manorialism. This element is the philosophy of Stoicism, which had a profound impact on the leadership caste of Mediterranean aristocracy from at least the time of the Diadochi, reached an apex during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and is absent from the behaviors and writings of future emperors.<sup>1</sup> In sum, this essay will argue that the abandonment of Stoic behaviors in leadership was a significant factor that contributed to the decline by contrasting the reign of the late Stoic emperors with the despotic rule of the military emperors of the third century. In order to bring this argument to bear, we must first examine the historiography of the decline of the Empire.

As a note for purposes of this assignment I must add that the primary works which have developed this field lie in books, not in articles. The scope of the concepts involve rarely are appropriate within the confines of an article, and in many ways the topic at hand is not precise enough to warrant individual coverage. Instead we observe in the historiographical record a series of great books which challenge the status quo in a lengthy and comprehensive fashion.

In the fifth century of the C.E. Vegetius proposed in *De Re Militari* ("Concerning Military Matters") that the Empire declined as a result of increased Germanization of the military, that the Latins and Greeks who once comprised the army and who were more-or-less faithful to the Emperor and the Roman civic system, were eventually replaced by foreigners who held their loyalty to particular generals who could win them loot on campaign.<sup>2</sup> In this manner, it was only inevitable that with increased Germanic influence, the Roman culture was diluted, leading to a fatal measure of decadence and apathy toward civic matters during a time of barbarian aggression in which service was most needed. While this rationale for the decline and fall is perhaps the first serious one proposed, historically it has been given some credence by modern historians, particularly Arthur Ferrill, who with contemporary scholarship and archaeological data affirmed the argument of Vegetius in *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*.<sup>3</sup>

The Vegetius theory was essentially unchallenged until the late eighteenth century C.E. Between 1776–1789, Edward Gibbon published the now famous *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which has stirred great controversy for its daring claims.<sup>4</sup> Gibbon proposed that it was the loss of civic virtue in late antiquity brought about by an increasingly popular Christian religion which inspired the Roman citizens to remain apathetic to imperial matters in such a fashion that they were unwilling to defend the Empire from external threats. The author argued that the people increasingly devoted themselves to delusions of an afterlife and the prospect of a better tomorrow, rather than devoting the service needed to repel the barbarian incursions of the late fourth and early fifth century. This argument fails because it oversimplifies the complex "decline" yet holds merit in that it illuminates the importance of psychology and religion as motivating

factors in the behavior of ancient peoples. Essentially my argument will be an elucidatory modification of Gibbon in that I will argue that the rejection of Stoic virtue (synonymous with Roman civic duty) in the late Empire was a significant factor contributing to, but not the fundamental cause of, the decline of the Empire.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a certain cadre of French historians proposed that the Empire did not in fact fall outright but instead was gradually transformed to come under the influence of Germanic peoples, who in turn contributed to administrating matters of state. Between 1875–1889, Fustel de Coulanges published *Histoire des institutions politiques de l'ancienne France* to solidify this argument, proposing that the Germanic peoples did not conquer the Empire but instead entered into civic life, transforming the nature of the Roman politic.<sup>5</sup> Henri Pirenne would expand upon this notion in his "Pirenne Thesis," which argued that the Empire did not cease to exist with the captures of Rome in the fifth century, but existed in a different form until the Muslim incursions of the seventh century, at which time Mediterranean trade was disrupted to such a degree as to paralyze the Empire. This economic torpor, argues Pirenne, was fundamental in the decline of the Empire and lead to the consequent rise and flourishing of the Frankish kingdom, a polity which the author claims was a rightful heir to the Imperial title. Recent historians such as François Masai, Karl-Ferdinand Werner and Peter Brown have agreed with Pirenne's argument and expanded the chronology of the Empire's existence, arguing that the Roman system never truly disappeared after some climatic event but instead changed appearances and was operated by foreigners, that its institutions and culture remained as a profound impact on all European states and empires to come.

As Pirenne was forwarding his claims in the 1920's, another historian, John Bagnell Bury, was also hard at work constructing a complex thesis of his own, publishing *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian* in 1923. Bury begins his investigation by first taking on Gibbon and judging the classical dichotomy of Pagan and Christian virtue, arguing that it was not the latter which must have contributed to the decline of the Empire, as the eastern portion of it, more devout than the west, had outlived Rome's sackings of 410 and 455, and flourished for another thousand years. While Bury praised Gibbon's meticulous research and detailed documentation as being rigorously sound and excellent, he would judge the data with a different interpretation. Bury proposed that it was not a grand and fatal failing which culminated in the decline of the empire but rather a combination of factors, all working in concert, which brewed a perfect storm over the Empire, ultimately leading to atrophy and collapse. The historian cites such elements as a reliance on Goth auxiliaries, the treachery of Stilicho, the assassination of Aetius and the subsequent power vacuum, economic weakness and inflation, German encroachment and decline of discipline and standards in the military, as factors contributing to decline. Most importantly, Bury maintained that the events contributing to the Empire's waning were not predestined or fatal but contingent, capable of being remedied through serious labor.

Radovan Richta argued in *Man and Technology in the Revolution of Our Day* (1963) that technology and innovation are the movers behind historical events, rather than other factors which he interpreted as simply a consequence of technological innovation. In this manner, Richta argued that as the barbarians became better equipped to battle the Roman armies on the field, and as they discovered the tools to make heavier

armors and the horseshoe, they eventually overcame their imperial foes and were capable of seizing the Empire. This perspective holds that the Romans were capable of defeating the barbarians in the field prior to the fifth century due to a distinct advantage in arms, training and logistical technologies, and as the external foes eventually adapted these advantages, the playing field was evened. Richta's research seems to have been mostly a colorful aside from the mainstay of historiographical research as it has been mostly ignored by academia. This may be because Richta proposes that scientific advances are linked to Marxist/socialist revolutions, sensationalizing his argument.

In 1965 Lucien Musset published *Les Invasions : les vagues germaniques* and continued to expand upon the popular Pirenne Thesis, arguing that a "clash of civilizations" between the Greco-Roman and Germanic world culminated in a synthesis responsible for the creation of the Medieval era. Rather than interpret the fifth century as a decline and collapse of the Empire, Musset interpreted it as a creative process in which German peoples transformed the pre-existing institutions to adapt to their culture while emulating the culture of Imperial Rome, similar to how the Assyrians adopted cultural trends from the peoples they encountered.

In great contrast to all prior theories is the research of Arnold Toynbee and James Burke, who interpreted the scholarship of a late decline of the Empire as being incongruous with the evidence. They argued that the Roman polity was based on a broken foundation from the start: a "plunder economy" without a proper budgetary system or means of creating revenue due to lack of exportable goods, that only maintained the façade of flourishing by virtue of its constant expansion. Once imperial expansion ceased with the conquest of Dacia by Trajan, it was only a matter of time,

argues Toynbee and Burke, before hyperinflation would result in a final failure, as revenue was only attained by conquering, demanding tribute from and looting foreign lands. With the end of these ventures, the full brunt of the Empire's expenses was levied upon the citizenry, who paid the dues with increasingly devalued currency. Toynbee and Burke argue that the Empire finally ended when the title of Emperor became an irrelevant honor and yielded no effective power save pomp and formality. In this manner Odoacer, who conquered the western portion of the Empire in the late sixth century of the C.E., deposing Emperor Romulus Augustulus, who did not adopt the imperial title himself or create an entitled puppet, and who claimed the lands previously designated imperial, brought the end to bear. The title of "Emperor of Rome" ceased to mean anything, prescribed to it neither land titles nor grandeur, and the imperial system soon became anachronistic.

Michael Rostovtzeff and Ludwig von Mises in *The Rise and Decline of Civilization* would expand upon Burke and Toynbee's focus on economic matters, arguing that it was indeed foolish economic policies which ultimately lead to the fall of the Empire. In opposition to the previously popular theories of foreign encroachment and corruption, Rostovtzeff and von Mises claimed that the economy of the second century was a developed and unregulated market economy, low on tariffs, with restrained price controlling – that an environment of free trade and cosmopolitanism contributed to a flourishing state. After the third century, debasement led to inflation and the Imperial office began to levy price controls on the economy which resulted in forcing merchants to sell goods below their market value so as to keep the Empire operational. These artificially low prices lead to a deficient supply of food and ultimately disrupted the urban

economy that relied on trade, forcing residents to relocate to rural areas to focus on subsistence agriculture. Combined with excessive taxation, this led to a faltering economy, which ultimately was unable to support the immense demand of the Empire's operation.

William H. McNeil explored the topic of depopulation further in 1976, arguing in *Plagues and Peoples* that the devastating plagues of the late second century, which ultimately destroyed half of the Empire's population, were responsible for creating an imbalance between state services and taxation. In this manner, the population was too small to bear the brunt of taxation to afford the large governmental and military structure which still existed in the Empire. As a result of this circumstance consequent economic and civic dysfunction contributed to the degradation of the imperial system. The western half of the Empire was devastated by the plague while the east, with its larger population, was able to endure and reconstitute itself, flourishing until the sack of Constantinople by Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Peter Heather returned to the thesis of Vegetius three years ago with his work, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which he argued that foreign encroachment did in fact play a significant role in the decline of the Empire, not by virtue of its own effect, but by the economic duress initiated by it. Heather argued that it was not the adventurism of the classical enemy of Rome, the Germanians, which ultimately signaled the death knell for the Empire's fortunes but rather a reemerged enemy in the east which had devoured the Parthian Empire in the third century C.E.: the Sassanid Persians. In confirmation with Bury and Gibbon, Heather claims that in the half century it took for the Romans to repel the initial Persian offensives and establish a weary and capricious status quo, the Emperor

had reallocated tax funds from the western portion of the empire to the east. While this reallocation of resources was successful in staying the aggression of the Sassanid Empire, a realm which mounted organized and focused offensives against the Levant, it established two long term trends in the Empire which ultimately proved to be fatal in undermining it. First, as the regional taxes were expended on the eastern empire, there was no incentive for local officials to develop provincial infrastructure, instead focusing on more reserved projects, leading to a general decay in the western portion of the Empire. Secondly, the land owning elites shifted their allegiance away from local politics to the imperial office. These two factors, combined with an increasingly wealthy Germanic people enriched by their contact as auxiliaries serving the Emperor, allowed them to assume local autonomy over portions of the western empire.

Next, Heather posited a new theory: that the migration and expansion of the distant Huns had forced the Germanic people, now empowered by their wealth, but not strong enough to resist the Huns in open battle, to flood across the borders of the Empire, initially seeking refuge and ultimately resulting in the conquest of the western portion, still drained of its resources. Ultimately, the eastern portion of the Empire cannibalized the west in order to resist the Sassanid Persians, and in doing so left the west unable to resist barbarian incursion. Heather rejects Goldsworthy's argument (reviewed later) that political infighting and civil war weakened the Empire as to cause its collapse, citing that the Empire and the republic had previous instances of such strife and was capable of enduring it. Heather further contends that Gibbon's "moral decay" theory provided an insufficient explanation, incongruous to the evidence, yet he tends to agree with Bury's

contention that the fall was not inevitable, but rather the result of a contingent chain of events.

In his 1988 work, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Joseph Tainter would approach the topic from an altogether different angle, returning to the “plunder economy” theory of Toynbee and Burke and modifying it to argue a new perspective. Tainter interprets the history of civilization as a history of complexity in that societies become more complex as they encounter problems, and establish new layers of government to address the issues involved. Tainter extrapolates this thesis to the history of late antiquity, a time in which Roman agricultural production was decreasing as the population was increasing, resulting in a shortage of resources. The Roman solution for this deficiency was to conquer nearby neighbors and claim their resources, which did apparently succeed in stabilizing the situation for the short term. Yet just as in Toynbee and Burke, the plundering of the Roman Empire did not answer the fundamental problem underlying it, and the increased cost of logistics and an enlarged military needed to maintain the expanded frontier soon exceeded the initial gains of the conquests, further plunging the Empire into increasingly dire economic woes. Tainter comes to the conclusion that the situation became so unbearable to the lives of the Roman citizen in the west that the “fall” was a preferable outcome in which the quality of life of everyday people was perhaps improved by those who replaced the dysfunctional Roman bureaucracy. Now no longer being taxed excessively to maintain a bloated and out of control Empire, average citizens may have preferred the services of governments loyal to local necessity.

In 2005, Bryan Ward-Perkins published *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* and in agreement with Bury and Heather’s claim that the decline of the

Empire was not inevitable but a contingent chain of events returned to the former's thesis that the Empire broke apart by means of a complex number of factors. Unlike Bury however, Ward-Perkins posited a new web of factors, in consideration of contemporary archaeological evidence, including political strife, external threats and increasingly devalued taxation. Ward-Perkins contends that the external invasions caused irrevocable damage to the provincial economies and taxation systems, paralyzing the ability of the Emperor to equip and pay the legions, leading to both decreased national security as well as dissension among the ranks, inspiring revolts by the foederati and pretender emperors. Constant invasions were the result of the diminished military, in which small amounts of territory of the western portion of the Empire were either captured or declared autonomous under the domain of the Germanic tribes. In opposition to the notion posited by some contemporary historians such as Tainter that the fall was not a negative force on the lives of everyday citizens, Ward-Perkins argues that the fall had a devastating impact on the citizenry, citing modern archeological evidence.

Adrian Goldsworthy, the esteemed British military historian, would approach the study of the decline of the Roman Empire from the pragmatic perspective of war, arguing in *The Complete Roman Army* (2003) that the Empire fell apart as a result of an endless process of civil war between military factions vying for power over the Empire. The army and government structure, argues Goldsworthy, was weakened as a result and was increasingly unable to defend itself against the growing number of enemies perched at the Empire's borders. As civil war diminished central authority and seeded serious economic and social problems, the Empire was eventually unable to confront the foreign foes, who would overcome and conquer them. While Goldsworthy rejected the decadence theories

of decline as proposed by Gibbon and to a lesser degree Vegetius, he posits no reasons for the cause of such endless civil war. My paper will attempt to bridge Gibbon and Goldsworthy by arguing that while it may not have been a general decadence which inspired such contempt for civic virtue, the rule of law and service, it was the degeneration of Stoic-minded thinking in the aristocracy, as a properly instructed Stoic would not engage in civil war to further his own ambitions, is loyal to the rule of law and is devoted to serving the wellbeing of the civic body.

Other various theories that have been considered as arguments for the decline of the Roman Empire include environmental degradation and limited reserves of precious metal leading to escalatory debasement of currency. The former is succinctly argued by Jared M. Diamond in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005), in which the author argues that artificial deforestation and grazing contributed to desertification while excessive irrigation lead to salinization. These activities perpetuated by the Roman citizenry eventually resulted in the land becoming nonproductive, forcing farmers to relocate in overpopulating cities, escalating disease and resource shortage. The latter theory contends that as the output of the silver mine at Rio Tinto peaked in seventy nine C.E., and as no new significant reserves of precious metal were secured, as with a general trend of peak production of the other mines across the Mediterranean under Roman control, the Empire was forced to debase the currency as demand increased but supply decreased or remained the same, leading to runaway inflation and the atrophy of technological and economic innovation.<sup>6</sup> Both of these arguments are of secondary consideration and credence in academia (especially as comprehensive theses) but provide

themselves as useful perspectives for initiating chains of inquiry, expanding the possible frame of reference for purposes of research and study.

As we have seen, the topic of the decline of the Roman Empire is one of the most exhausted and diverse studies of history, explained by a range of concepts, from elegant general theories to complex and systematic frameworks. While all of the historians surveyed propose reasons for why the Empire declined, or why we perceive it as having declined, none of them, save Vegetius and Gibbon, dare to argue for the cause of such change, the deeper and more fundamental reason why men chose to engage in civil war and kill one another for gold. Through modern Rankean cynicism many historians have rejected psychology, philosophy, and religion as meaningful movers of change, instead focusing on economic and political motives. Goldsworthy, for instance, documents the endless civil war of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, but fails to sufficiently explain the motivation of such behavior.

Here ancient and Hellenistic history may be bridged with history of philosophy, as glimpsing into the latter we realize that ‘the love of wisdom’ was once as grossly influential in the lives of ancient peoples as was economy and politics. The contemporary reader might scoff at this idea as philosophy has become an academic and technical art in modern times, but it was not always so; philosophy once informed the actions of those who studied it just as much as any other historical factor. Accordingly to understand the arguments which underpin my thesis we must also survey historical treatment of philosophy. Most appropriate to our purposes are the revolutionary works of Pierre Hadot.

Hadot introduced the importance of the “spiritual exercise” in ancient philosophy, defining such as "practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and mediation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practice them. The philosophy teacher's discourse could be presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within."<sup>7</sup> Hadot, encountering contemporary analytical criticisms of seemingly incoherent and contradictory ancient philosophical works, revolutionized the study of the discipline by arguing that such works were not systematic treatises as the moderns had erroneously assumed, but rather served as dialectical exercises intended to mold the character of the student.<sup>8</sup>

In this fashion the ancient philosophical teachings were not intended to transmit information (as modern philosophical texts are) but rather “to produce a certain psychic effect in the reader or listener” so that disciples could more wisely “orient themselves in thought, in the life of the city, or in the world.”<sup>9</sup> These dialectical exercises “aimed at realizing a transformation of one’s vision of the world and a metamorphosis of one’s personality.”<sup>10</sup> Philosophy in the ancient tradition was not simply an abstract knowledge that one could detach him or herself from, but rather required the perpetual attention of the will “[kept] ready at hand at each instant [of] life,” practiced on a constant basis to achieve serenity and the healthy operation and direction of the soul; philosophy was a sublime knowledge at the core of the student’s existence, informing one’s behavior and thoughts at all levels. The ancient philosophical schools did not attempt to “procure a total and exhaustive explanation of reality, but to link, in an unshakable way, a small

group of principles, vigorously articulated together,” the discourse serving as didactic meditation on the nature of the world in order to provide “the means [for students] to maintain their psychic equilibrium.”<sup>11</sup>

While ancient philosophical thought was often divided into separate domains of study (i.e. logic/dialectic, physics and ethics) for pedagogic purposes, it was not interpreted as lacking unity in practice; philosophy was practiced as “a single act, renewed at every instant, that one can describe, without breaking its unity, as being the exercise of logic as well as of physics or of ethics, according to the directions in which it is exercised.”<sup>12</sup> In this fashion philosophy constituted a single, unified act, a way of being and of identity, constantly in mind and of gross influence in the disposition of the character; there existed no division between theoretical and practical, philosophy was a way of life. In the case of the Stoics, the practice of premeditation of possible future misfortune served to inform the character of students on the basis of prescribed principles, and so tempered mental habits with virtue by means of the rational process.<sup>13</sup> Finally it must be stressed that ancient philosophy was not only tasked with transforming the mental inclinations, desires and judgments of its students but also their actions so that “the animated words of the philosopher are at the service of the philosopher’s way of life.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Murray, *The Stoic Philosophy* (1915), p.47

<sup>2</sup> Stewart Perowne. *Death of the Roman Republic: From 146 B.C. to the Birth of the Roman Empire*. 1968. p. 55

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: the military explanation*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1986, p.22

<sup>4</sup> Shelby Thomas McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1933)

<sup>5</sup> William James Ashley. *Survey of Historic and Economic*. 1900. p. 137-143

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm W Browne. *Ice Cap Shows Ancient Mines Polluted the Globe*, The New York Times, December 9, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Hadot. *What is ancient philosophy?*. 2002. Harvard University Press, p6.

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<sup>8</sup> Hadot. *La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?*. p. 8 also: *Presentation au College International De Philosophie*, pp. 1-2

<sup>9</sup> Hadot. *Jeux de langage et philosophie*. p. 341. Also: Hadot. *La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?* p.11.

<sup>10</sup> Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Hadot. *Philosophie, discours philosophique , et divisions de la philosophie chez les Stoiciens*. p. 216. Also: Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> As in *Premeditation of Seneca*; ep. 63.14;91.3-4, 7-8. also: Marcus Aurelius provides a sound example of such a practice in *Meditations* 2.1

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. p. 23.