

2015

Interrogating the "Collapse" of the Roman Empire: Historiography and Instruction

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Recommended Citation

Pesner, Jon, "Interrogating the "Collapse" of the Roman Empire: Historiography and Instruction" (2015).
History - Master of Arts in Teaching. 3.
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Interrogating the "Collapse" of the Roman Empire: Historiography and
Instruction

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Bard Masters of Arts in Teaching
Academic Research Project
2015

Table of Contents:

I.	Synthesis Essay.....	2
II.	Bibliography.....	24
III.	Primary Documents and Headnotes.....	26
IV.	Textbook Critique.....	39
V.	New Textbook Entry.....	44

The historiography of the period of time between 300-550 C.E. is the subject of one of the most extensive debates in modern academia. This is largely due to the fact that within the space of these two centuries one of the most powerful cultural and political forces on the planet, the Roman Empire, underwent a series of dramatic alterations. In the case of Western Europe, the empire vanished completely while in Western Asia and the Baltic region of Europe it persisted under a new identity. In both cases, what remained of the Roman Empire in 500 C.E. was entirely unlike its ancestor two centuries earlier. Histories of this time period written contemporaneously detail how and why such dramatic alterations occurred are tales of collapse and downfall. This pessimistic outlook of collapse was the accepted theory for generations. However within the last fifty years, challenges to this line of thinking began to emerge which called into question just how ruinous those centuries were. Instead, a theory of change and dissolution as opposed to outright collapse became increasingly prevalent. These theories, which held sway throughout the 1970's through today have just now started to receive their own challenges in the form of criticisms and new analysis. Therefore the academic environment of today is rife with debate over the concepts of "collapse" and those of "dissolution". At time of writing neither side has conclusively answered the other's assertions. Therefore the debate continues in the form of books and papers firing back and forth across the academic landscape.

The debate over the changes to the geopolitical scene throughout late antiquity is far too vast for so short a paper as this one to cover in the depth it so clearly deserves. As such this analysis will concern itself primarily with works which cover the alterations to the western half of the Roman Empire, which traditionally is defined as the regions between Hadrian's Wall in Britannia and the Borders of North Africa and extending from the Iberian Peninsula across to the Adriatic Sea. These regions were given to the rule of the western Emperor in the great divide by

Diocletian and are what are mainly referred to when the term “Western Roman Empire” is used. The remainder of the empire, including Greece and the Balkans, Anatolia and the rest of Western Asia, and Egyptian North Africa will not be addressed as fully, since the historiography of those regions in late antiquity is significantly more enmeshed with the evolution of Christianity and the emergent Byzantine Empire of the Medieval Period. While these are both fascinating subjects, they do not fall under the historiography which will be covered in this piece and regrettably must be set aside. The reasoning for such harsh definitions of territory and such specific time periods being studied exclusively is that the historiography of these places does not generally follow such strict guidelines and as a result there is a great degree of muddling of terms. While this seems important to the modern reader, to the earlier authors which will be reviewed in this piece, it was clear that specificity and thorough research was, at best, a secondary concern.

In the previous incarnations, history belonged to a specific subset of scholars known as antiquarians.¹ Their research was largely predicated on the search for fact through the exclusive use of primary sources in order to expose the "truth".² It is in this style that the fate of the western empire became crystallized as the inevitable collapse and fall of a declining military superpower. By and large the fall of the Roman Empire was largely left untouched by Enlightenment historians whose historical research was tied to philosophic theory.³ It is because of this that the majority of historical study during the enlightenment period was largely focused on the beginnings of society in order to examine the errors and pitfalls that many previous peoples had undergone in order to arrive at what society in a natural and enlightened setting would have looked like. Put another way, Hobbes envisioned mankind's emergence from the

¹"Bonfire of the Humanities", last modified January 20, 2015, <http://m.thenation.com/article/195553-bonfire-humanities>.

² "Bonfire of the Humanities."

³"Bonfire of the Humanities."

jungles in his *Leviathan*, just as Voltaire proposed a hypothetical race of pseudo peoples with his troglodytes.⁴ In either case their philosophic examinations, done with relative innocence of the classical histories, were hypothetical propositions in order to highlight mankind's inherent birthrights (either the enslavement to a larger power through the necessities of self-preservation or the relative freedom of pastoralism and limited democracy respectively). Enlightenment historians proposed theories where earlier antiquarians had pursued only facts.⁵ In the midst of this, the relative light touch with which Enlightenment scholars granted to the research of primary sources combined with the incompatible subject matter left the fall of the Roman Empire relatively under researched. These enlightenment traditions of historical research being linked to a Renaissance-era understanding of "truth" are the foundations of the diplomatic style of history.

Throughout most of history, the concept that the Western Empire collapsed under its own weight was taken as given. In the shattered physical remains of formerly great monuments coupled with the apocalyptic style with which the Roman historians detailed their changing world, it was easy to consider the Western Empire's sudden collapse as a fact.

Historiographically speaking, these beliefs were codified in the late eighteenth century by Edward Gibbon in his three-volume work *The Decline and a Fall of The Roman Empire*. Published between 1790 and 1804, this landmark work would serve as the foundation for late antique study for well over two centuries. Famously anti-Christian, Gibbon is credited with equating the declining political and military status of the empire and with a decline in civic virtue. "The five marks of the Roman decaying culture: Concern with displaying affluence instead of building wealth; Obsession with sex and perversions of sex; Art becomes freakish and

⁴ "The Philosophies of Enlightenment", last modified January, 20 2013, http://www.csudh.edu/phenom_studies/western/lect_8.html.

⁵ "Bonfire of the Humanities."

sensationalistic instead of creative and original; Widening disparity between very rich and very poor; Increased demand to live off the state.”⁶ As such it is important to place such an important work within the context of its creation in order to understand it fully. Supposedly inspired by a trip to Rome and the viewing of a series of examples of collapsed architecture, Gibbon penned the first volume of his great work in under a year. At the time, his methods were recognizably advanced. He drew on dozens of late antique sources in order to compile the reigns of the last Caesars into one work. Gibbon was the product of his contemporary historiography. A prototype of the diplomatic and political school of historical style of Von Ranke, his style shows a similar set of concerns.⁷ To Gibbon, there was little merit in the idea of the individuals within the empire. Instead "Rome" was his individual. The residents of the geographic regions of which he wrote were merely accidents of nature. Gibbon writes about Rome in a manner similar to a doctor diagnosing a patient who had passed away. It existed singularly and with a variety of specific symptoms which could be identified and treated with the benefit of hindsight.

The longevity of Gibbon's research lay at least in part with his marrying of the Enlightenment and Renaissance Antiquarian traditions.⁸ In many ways Gibbon could well be considered as a prototypical historian for the modern age. He sought out answers to specific questions and the conclusions he arrived at, though discounted, were all backed up by extensive use of primary source documents. The combination of theory with facts was a landmark achievement in the annals of historical analysis.⁹ While Gibbon was not the originator of this, historians of the modern era had been trending towards such a concept since the beginning of the

⁶Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Complete*, Waxkeep,2013, loc 55876.

⁷Leopold Von Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations (1494-1514)*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1915), 2-5.

⁸ "Bonfire of the Humanities"

⁹Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History*, (Kingston, Ontario: Queens University, 2011), 347-348.

Enlightenment, his work is by far the most famous and the most far reaching in terms of influence. What Gibbon was a proponent of was a fore-runner of the diplomatic/political school of historical analysis.¹⁰ While the style itself would be better championed a century later, Gibbon with his emphasis on specific principals, such as the emphasis on the binary nature of the Roman state's existence, or the constant labeling of "peoples" as opposed to specific individuals clearly mark him out as an early proponent of this style.

Where individuals did appear in Gibbon's narrative, they were leadership figures. Emperors, bishops, captains of the Praetorian Guard, these individuals are hardly representative of the roman experience as a whole. They are figureheads of state and, while glimpses of Roman culture can be seen through them, act as particular stand-ins for the abstract concept of the roman state as a whole. For example the rise of the Septim family in the early chapters of the first volume corresponds to the rise of the roman military conquests before the final collapse. When good men are in power the state benefits, when bad leaders buy or usurp their way to the throne the empire suffers. This style comes from the wholesale use of Roman sources in order to construct the narrative. Gibbon's source material is exclusively the histories of late antiquity.¹¹ While these sources certainly provide a great degree of excitement and narrative panache, their wholesale utilization is problematic.

Ancient histories were not written for the same reasons as histories in Gibbon's time or those written today. Roman histories were written with the specific goal of extolling the virtues of specific patrons.¹² This is particularly true in the cases of which Gibbon is so fond: the biographies of the Imperial families. Instead of attempting to engage with a specific thesis like

¹⁰ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 89-112.

¹¹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, loc. 445236.

¹² Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 29.

the histories of today, or even the political/nation based style of Gibbon's time, a roman historian instead fell into one of two categories. The first of these, the historical writer attempted to relay specific occurrences in order to tell a coherent story. Generally speaking these individuals were working under a specific patron but were not in the business of extolling their specific virtues or were writing about something else entirely.¹³ Ammianus Marcellinus is a good example of this style. His histories of the Gothic wars and the reigns of several emperors does not carry a great deal of praise for the roman state. The second and more common style of historical writing is the panegyric.¹⁴ This style is written exclusively to praise a specific individual or event. This second style was far more prevalent in Roman literature at the time of the decline of the Western Empire and as a result was a large portion of Gibbon's source material.

The end result of this is a fundamentally skewed product. By exclusively relying on Roman historical sources, Gibbon's history is laden with inaccuracies and decided bias. The roman categorization of all outside peoples as "barbarian" lead to a silencing of an entire sub-genre of experience within Gibbon's work.¹⁵ This in turn is exacerbated by the lack of any social science, such as archaeology or anthropology, in his research. This is not shoddy scholarship; in the late eighteenth century such fields did not exist beyond the amateurish hobbies of the very wealthy. The exclusive reliance on primary sources from only the Roman perspective was an unfortunate error on the part of Gibbon, but one which is fairly typical of diplomatic/politically based historical analysis.¹⁶ The teleological nature of this style of writing made such an outcome inevitable. In other words, that Rome fell was never in question for Gibbon; instead, he

¹³Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 279.

¹⁴Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 114-116.

¹⁵ "'It Was Barbarians!' - Peter Heather and Rome's Decline", last modified November 18, 2012, <https://coffeeshopthinking.wordpress.com/2012/11/18/it-was-the-barbarians-the-fall-of-rome-according-to-peter-heather/>

¹⁶ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 100-101.

attempted to examine the reasons behind the fall in order to provide his readers with a series of criteria for self-evaluation. Gibbon had written a work outlining the civic responsibilities of both leaders and people and highlighted the dangers when one or both of those parties abandoned their responsibilities.

The legacy of Gibbon's work is the traditional view of the "Fall of the Roman Empire" that the western empire was crippled by a series of incompetent and immoral leaders whose continual mismanagement and greed sapped the west's ability to respond to increasing pressures from the outside. This was coupled by the social turmoil of the emergence of Christianity as a legitimate competitor to the traditional religion of the empire. Ultimately the Western Roman Empire succumbed to both external and internal pressure and collapsed with a relatively short span (about five decades) and left a power vacuum in Europe for the next four centuries.¹⁷ This line of thought is the hallmark of the "collapse" school of thought and for a two centuries following Gibbon's final publication was the unassailable foundation of western history. The Roman Empire fell and the states of Europe slowly rebuilt into their modern identities with their foundations in the wreckage of the late antique world. The longevity of the "collapse" theory has much to do with its nationalist appeal. In Europe, scholars could find their national heroes in the various chieftains and tribal leaders of "dark ages". This nationalist slant of the origins of modern Europe was a large factor in the appeal of the diplomatic interpretation throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁸ France's Clovis and Britain's Arthur both have their origins here although the historical basis for the former is noticeably more concrete.

¹⁷ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 367899.

¹⁸ Woolf, *Global History*, 352.

The success of the collapse school continued well into the twentieth century buoyed up by the nationalism of the nineteenth century. The dominance of political and diplomatic historical traditions in the era before the Second World War made Gibbon's work viable, although there are several glaring errors in his text which were addressed in the early twentieth century. The same general theory of the "collapse" school continued to be the dominant means of talking about the transition between the antique and medieval world. Even today, the basic means of talking about the transition between the two is largely predicated on destruction. The traditional, Mediterranean based, Roman world being forcibly overcome and added into the more Northern European centric vision of its medieval counterpart. However, the trend of historiography began to stray away from diplomatic history and in the mid twentieth century new, Marxist-inspired social histories began to appear.

The rise of Marxism as a social philosophy in the early twentieth century brought about dramatic changes to a number of academic disciplines. Historical analysis was one which underwent massive alterations in the aftermath of the rise of the Soviet Union. Marxism, originally a theory that had its roots in both economics and history, saw the human experience as one of pure class struggle.¹⁹ Throughout every era the relationship changed yet retained the fundamental discrepancy of power, from slavery to feudal, feudal to mercantile, from mercantile to early capitalist, etc.. Marxism, with its emphasis on class struggle saw no distinction between the working classes of different countries and stood as a counter to the nationalism of the late nineteenth century.²⁰ In the years following the conclusion of the First World War, Marxist thought spread with the rise of the Soviet Union and the expansion of Marxism as a response to

¹⁹ E.J. Hobsbawm and John Tosh ed., *Historians on History*, (New York: Pearson, 2000), 89.

²⁰ Hobsbawm and Tosh ed., *Historians*, 90-91.

both the liberal capitalism and fascism of the western world. The effect this had was the erosion of diplomatic and political historical analysis because of its ties to the nationalist philosophies which Marxists held as partially responsible for the carnage of the First World War. The results of this new Marxist inspired thought were crystallized by refutation in the *Annales* school of Marc Bloch and many others in the inter war period. The *Annales* school was something of an unusual animal, a Marxist inspired historiographical movement but one which did not embrace Marxist philosophy wholesale. This is best summed up by the statement from the medievalist Bloch "behind all social life there was a background of the primitive, of submission to uncontrollable forces,..."²¹ In other words social histories saw the relationships between social classes. This new style of Marxist inspired histories were referred to as social histories and their emphasis was significantly different from their predecessors.

Social history represented a change from the diplomatic/political school of thought in that the emphasis of the research was placed not on the interactions of "peoples as nations".²² What this new trend was concerned with was the interplay of different social classes within a given time period and region.²³ In the social interpretation the relationships between nations are less important as the actions of a nation are largely determined by the relationship of social classes within a common culture. This is unsurprising for a Marxist inspired movement; however the omission of cultural analysis is one which would haunt the entire school of thought until its new incarnation began to emerge in the late twentieth century. Social history became increasingly popular in Europe in the era in between the world wars. Marxism's appeal as an anti-fascist alternative to liberal capitalism saw social historians whether purely Marxist or in the *Annales*

²¹ Marc Bloch and I.A. Manyon trans., *Feudal Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 72.

²² Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 151-153.

²³ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 70-73.

style of Marc Bloch take a figurative sledgehammer to nationalist inspired diplomatic histories.²⁴ In the period following World War Two, it was the rise of social histories which began to expose the weaknesses in Gibbon's work. They raised the first serious criticisms which would eventually change the place of Gibbon from one of prominence to one of relative disuse.

It is important to note the development of the social sciences and their role in the evolution of social histories. The remains of the material world brought to light through archaeology are the largest proponent of this concept. Through the meticulous analysis of the possessions and locations of said possessions clues can be gleaned about the past and voices can be given to the mute masses of illiterates who populated the ancient world. Nowhere is this statement more accurate than in the raising of the question of the identities of the so called "barbarians" of Gibbon's work. In Gibbon's work they are largely silent antagonists, foils for the Roman world. Gibbon is guilty of the silencing of the "Barbarians" largely due to the bias of his sources. However it is important to note because this loss of identity is one of the larger sins of which Gibbon is accused and it is largely a result of the emergence of social histories rise in the mid twentieth century.

Inspired by social histories, historians began to re-examine the transitional period between the antique and medieval worlds. The "collapse" theory of sudden and violent destruction began to draw criticism for not being able to be translated into social historical interpretation without extensive modification.²⁵ This is what inspired Oxford trained researcher Peter Brown to write his landmark socio-cultural study *The World of Late Antiquity* in 1970. This book would be the death knell for the "collapse" theory as it had existed since Gibbon's time. The

²⁴Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 246-251.

²⁵ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), ix-1.

central thesis for *Late Antiquity* was that the Western Roman Empire had not fallen at all but had merely undergone a series of dramatic alterations.²⁶ The book is almost entirely predicated on material analysis. Of equal importance, Brown incorporated the eastern Empire into his analysis. As such "The World of Late Antiquity" has a central thesis which maintains that Roman political institutions simply shifted east and the Roman state in the west integrated into the Catholic Church and other regional powers.²⁷ The territorial losses of the Roman state in the west were the result of the political disenfranchisement of the traditional landed class of the Roman state and their replacement by a flux of newcomers to the Roman state.

What emerged from the scholarship of Peter Brown was a theory of gradual "dissolution" which held that step by step over centuries, the Roman state yielded a little more political control over Western Europe to regional powers until eventually the only real remnant of Roman greatness were cultural shadows like the Catholic Church. This theme of gradual change as opposed to sudden, violent collapse flew in the face of Gibbon, and in order to be considered valid had to be backed by a tremendous amount of scholarship and, more importantly, was the result of the shift from diplomatic to social histories.²⁸ The dissolution school of thought was appealing to the new breed of historical thinkers and throughout the late twentieth century it gained academic ground and became the predominant method for discourse about the Late Antique period. The reasoning for this was the ability of the dissolution school to satisfy nearly all the criteria for the social and cultural analyses which have become so popular in the modern analytical scene.

²⁶ Brown, *Late Antiquity*, 1-3.

²⁷ Brown, *Late Antiquity*, 19-21.

²⁸ Thomas F. Matthews, "Reply to Peter Brown", *The Art Bulletin* 78 (March, 1996): 178.

While Peter Brown is by far the most notable and prolific author of the "dissolution" school, he is not by any means the only one. While other scholars have taken to approaching the question of the "big picture", many historical writers of the dissolution school have attempted to examine specific phenomena. Authors like Ramsay MacMullen with his notable "Christianity and Paganism in Late Antiquity" for example have looked at the interplay of Christian and pagan religious traditions in order to better hypothesize how a fringe cult from the eastern Mediterranean was able to become the dominant cultural force for the entirety of the western world.²⁹ Similarly, the concept of who exactly the "barbarians" were is another hot topic within the dissolution school for several reasons. Peter Heather, another prolific writer in the scholarship of late antiquity, in his tremendous study *Empires and Barbarians* hypothesizes that the fluid nature of identity and the relative anonymity of the majority of the masses of non-Roman peoples outside the borders of imperial control led to a great deal of mislabeling and confusion when referring to the "Barbarian hordes" of Gibbon and his Roman sources.³⁰

Heather asserts that the best possible method of identifying the various peoples and nailing down some sense of their true selves is through archaeological evidence. He specifically uses archaeological evidence to attack the migration model of population demographics in Late Antiquity. "For these archaeologists, migration is associated with a previous, less advanced era in the intellectual development of their discipline, when in their view archaeology was subordinated to history."³¹ In this, it is possible to see an important transition from social to cultural historical analysis. Where in the social traditions there is a greater emphasis on the

²⁹Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity & Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, (Durham,NC: Yale University Press, 1997), ix- 1.

³⁰ Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-2.

³¹ Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 19.

various social constructs, there is little emphasis on the individual and the day to day goings on of said individual within the larger society. Social histories and the anthropologists who spawn them tend to view the individual as an abstract concept, something that exists but is somewhat less than useful without the larger context of society under examination.³² The change from social to cultural historical analyses was a subtle one. Beginning in the 1980's with the eminent demise of the Soviet Union and the accompanying discrediting of Marxist thought, socio-cultural influence into Late Antique Western Europe began to fundamentally alter the composition and subject matter under discussion.

The socio-cultural nature of historical analyses from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the present day has raised a number of new issues which the dissolution school has latched onto admirably. Nowhere is this better seen than in A.D. Lee's 2007 monograph, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History*.³³ While the book itself focuses on the "bigger picture" in the manner of social histories, its particular focus on the emotions and political stake of the empire in the maintenance and implementation of a massive military dictatorship in Late Antiquity. The book carries with it much more of the cultural continuity of Brown than the sudden collapse of Gibbon. Lee asserts that the Roman military apparatus indeed changed but maintained a good degree of its original function and practices.³⁴ The only true change came in the larger utilization of local authority as opposed to the system of regional governors which was the modus operandi of the Pax Romana.³⁵ Ultimately the methods of warfare changed but the larger rationalization of the roman military did not. This is a clear socio-cultural argument for the cultural continuity which Brown holds so dear. Ironically the title of the book is misleading. The cultural themes

³² Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 36-39.

³³ A. D. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity: A Cultural History*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 21-37.

³⁴ Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 147-164.

³⁵ Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 51-75.

which are incorporated throughout the piece land the book in the no-man's-land between the social and cultural trenches.

Interestingly enough, the first real reactionary challenges to Peter Brown's theory comes from this shift in analysis from purely social to socio-cultural. Published in the early 2000's the first real cultural challenge to Brown came in the form of Bryan Ward-Perkins' *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*.³⁶ Ward-Perkins, the son of an archaeologist, styled himself as a new Gibbon. By examining the material remains of the late antique Roman world and comparing them to their predecessors. In doing so he finds a great degree of decline both in production and living standards. This focus on the day-to-day lives of the individuals at the middle and lower class levels is not necessarily in line with the imperially focused Gibbon, but the end result is the same. In Ward-Perkins' work, there is a clear challenge to the dissolution school of thought. What is significant about the shift from social to cultural histories is that it allows an author in the style of Ward-Perkins to address faults in Brown's theory by removing the generalities one encounters when addressing broad social themes and allows him to examine the real day-to-day goings on with the benefit of archaeological research. Although Gibbon could never be considered a cultural historian, his ideas of collapse are at least alive enough to support the existence of a new, culturally based school of roman collapse in late antiquity.

It is in this vein that Peter Heather was sponsored to compose *The Fall of Rome* : a surprising turn from Heather's preferred topic of non-Roman peoples to a very socio-cultural examination of the collapse theory.³⁷ Heather's reference to "Roman imperialism" as a specific

³⁶ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, (New York:Oxford University Press, 2006), 2-5.

³⁷ Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*,(New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6-11.

cultural force which brought about its own destruction through the creation of a series of unsustainable practices, seems at first to be completely in contrast with his works on roman-northern European relations and yet at the same time that was not the purpose of the creation of the monograph. Heather was commissioned to write this piece under the auspices of the European Science Foundation's drive to create a synthesis between the collapse and dissolution schools of thought.³⁸ In order to do so, and nominally end the debate the organization sponsored nearly a decade's worth of research and publications which fostered some of the great definitive works on either side of the argument and, in the case of Heather's monograph, proposed a synthetic link between the two.³⁹ Yes the Roman Empire in Western Europe was changed but contained within that change was an inherent collapse of traditional roman values and their incorporation into the new European culture of the Middle Ages. While this was not a perfect explanation there was at least a degree of reconciliation present in the attempt.

This attempt to further redefine the dissolution theory is perhaps the genesis behind the attempt by Peter Brown to reconstitute the theory under purely cultural terms in his latest work 2012's *Through the Eye of A Needle: Wealth, The Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West*. which discusses the cultural practices of the roman wealthy under the newly dominant Christian religion.⁴⁰ By examining the practices of the elite both before and after, and most importantly, by looking at the cases of specific individuals, Brown rewrote the dissolution theory into term of the new method of analysis. This is clear when examining the method in which he highlights the basic continuity of specific cultural practices such as the donation of largess and establishment of civic institutions. Although the nature of the donations changed

³⁸ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, ix-xiv.

³⁹ Heather, *The Fall of Rome*, 8-9.

⁴⁰ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, The Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West 350-550*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1.

(largest and pagan temples became alms and churches) it is clear that the Roman elite tradition of public generosity remained intact and therefore the traditional Roman culture became synthesized with Christianity and survived.⁴¹ In writing this book, it is clear that Brown, as an author, is less interested in compromise with the collapse school but is willing to reconcile his theories with the cultural slant of modern historical analysis.

The breakdown between "collapse" and "dissolution" has a lot to do with the differences in historical traditions under which each one had its genesis. From the purely political/diplomatic standpoint of Gibbon, the Roman Empire's existence was entirely binary, either existing or not existing. The focus on individuals beyond the figureheads of state was unnecessary since, in the tradition of nations as individuals, the individuals in power were representative of their entire population.⁴² Little people were unimportant as they existed purely as members of a larger nation represented by their political figurehead. The political appeal of Gibbon's work was immense as the entire theory of "immoderate greatness" and the lack of virtue towards the end of the empire was meant to be instructive to the ascendant British Empire of Gibbon's time.⁴³ In a way, the political interpretation of Gibbon may well be compared to Aesop's fables. The new interpretation of the collapse theory, one proposed by Ward-Perkins and to a lesser extent by Peter Heather in his *The Fall of Rome*, focuses squarely on examining the validity of the claim that life styles changed dramatically over the course of a few decades. This change would simply make the concept of cultural continuity, that is to say that the Roman world underwent gradual change as opposed to a sudden break, problematic. In the latter case, the author attempted to redefine the works of Gibbon using social sciences to express the truth of the "collapse" theory.

⁴¹Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 14-33.

⁴² Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 191-194.

⁴³ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, loc 34-39.

By contrast the "dissolution" theory focuses on the continuity of Roman culture well into the medieval period and downplays the political emphasis on military and territorial losses of the empire in late antiquity. Where the "collapse" movement had its original foundation in the diplomatic and political schools of historical thought, the "dissolution" school is largely a product of the Marxist inspired social historical tradition.⁴⁴ As a result of this the examination of differing social strata and the practices therein have led many of the "dissolution" scholars, most notably Peter Brown, to argue that there was remarkably little change in the practices of the differing social classes and as a result very little change between the late antique roman and late antique early medieval years. Beginning with *The World of Late Antiquity* in the 1970's Peter Brown has led a revolution when talking about the period as a specific subset of the Roman history. While others, like Ramsay MacMullen, examine the specifics of cultural continuity within a set of parameters as is the case of religious practices in *Christianity and Paganism* Brown remains committed to his original concepts of cultural continuity as a better indicator of Roman hegemony than the political accidents of territorial or military setbacks of the late empire.⁴⁵ This is a theme that is even carried over into the early 2000's as seen by Lee's social deconstruction of warfare in Late Antiquity. Even with the publication of *Through the Eye of a Needle* which bears much more of the hallmarks of the cultural rather than the social historical traditions, the emphasis is always the same with Brown, who continues, even today as the standard bearer for his movement as late as 2012.

Peter Heather is an anomaly within the rather black and white world of collapse and dissolution scholarship. His early works could almost be described as European post-colonial

⁴⁴ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 73-76.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 219-235.

focus almost exclusively on the non-Roman peoples, known as Barbarians, and their relationship with the Roman state.⁴⁶ He is capable of publishing works that could be classified in either the collapse or dissolution camp. The sheer volume of scholarship poured into *Empires and Barbarians* is on par with the works of Peter Brown and on the surface seems to gel with Brown's assertion that culturally speaking the Roman Empire continued in the hands of the non-roman individuals who emerged as dominant powers into the Western Europe in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. Heather also makes a point of attacking the "invasion/migration" theory which was the primary source of Gibbon's external pressure on the ailing roman state.⁴⁷ By attacking such a predominant assertion as that it is easy to classify "Empires" as firmly in the camp of the dissolution school of thought. However, by proposing several different theories which could feasibly replace the migration theory and in doing so provide the external pressure which the collapse tradition requires.

While Heather exists as an author whose individual writings can belong to either camp, his style is noticeably postmodern. Postmodern criticism and all of the offshoots thereof (such as Heather's post colonialism) are relative newcomers to the historical scene only beginning in the late 1990's and continuing to pick up steam as the millennium progresses.⁴⁸ Where the diplomatic and socio-cultural schools all have their specific emphases, postmodern criticism has a specific set of criteria which must be met in order for a work to be considered as such. Specifically such criteria involves the author's awareness of the impossibility of being completely arbitrary and as such observing that all actions carry bias as an innate passive

⁴⁶ Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, xiii-1.

⁴⁷ Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 271-326.

⁴⁸ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 205-206.

occurrence.⁴⁹ Carried within that definition is a degree of rejection of traditional means, i.e. to be post-colonial is to reject the identity markers of nationalism and substitute in a new set of criteria for the identity of the individual.⁵⁰ This is easiest to observe in Heather's substitution of traditional definitions of "Barbarian" and "Roman" in *Empires* and instead replacing them with the heavy burden of individual choice. This is one example of the postmodern style of criticism but it is far from the only example. As a new generation of scholars seek out publication, their education in a postmodern environment and their innate distrust of their own biases will come through much more than in the writings of the more classically trained historians like Heather.

What Heather represents is a hybridization between the various schools of the current historiographical environment. He very clearly is not pro-collapse but neither is he entirely convinced by Brown's work either. Instead he like many of the modern scholars who are just now beginning to publish today are representative of a synthesis of both schools. What is emerging is a new school which attempts to combine the clear decline of traditional Roman Culture in the style of Gibbon with the rise of a new medieval culture which, while a step down materially speaking, represented the influx of Northern European cultural practices into the Mediterranean world. In both cases the authors focus on the cultural aspects of life in Late Antiquity is one of the more prominent cases for their works to be considered as cultural rather than truly postmodern. What is most perplexing about the monograph with the latest publication date, Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle*, carries within it almost nothing that could be defined as postmodern. Indeed it seems that the venerable scholar, who still teaches and publishes out of Princeton University at time of writing, seems to have just discovered the concept of cultural

⁴⁹ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 268-270.

⁵⁰ Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 285-287.

analyses to say nothing of the postmodern critical approach. Yet Heather stands apart as the only author whose work can truly be defined as even nodding in that direction. That Heather's work is now utilized in coursework for college level courses on a scale that is beginning to eclipse that of Peter Brown's is, surely, purely coincidental.

One of the most difficult concepts to comprehend when discussing the historiography of Late Antiquity is the rather arbitrary nature of the subject itself. Dates can be a telling factor in determining where on the spectrum from collapse to dissolution any specific work or method of criticism falls. The fact that there are few hard and fast dates that define the end of Roman or the beginning of medieval times makes the decision of the parameters largely up to the particular author. Collapse scholars tend to place the date early in order to better outline the rapidity of Roman decline. Conversely, dissolution scholars seeing the Roman state as present in one form or another place the date for the end of late antiquity much later on. The contrast is an easy one to highlight. Gibbon places the fall of the Roman Empire as the end of late antiquity with the abdication of Romulus Augustulus in 470 C.E..⁵¹ In comparison Peter Brown's work places the end of Late Antiquity much later, charting the emergence of Islam in the seventh century as part of Late Antiquity and bringing the end date to 750 C.E..⁵² The activities of the interim three centuries fall into a grey area that many of the authors examined place their end dates for late antiquity. It should come as no surprise that Ward-Perkins, for example, places his end date in the mid fifth century.⁵³ Heather, ever the post-modernist conciliator, splits the difference between the two citing the poetic year of 549 C.E. as his end date.⁵⁴ The year is poetic due to the closing of the Platonic Academy's closing and the opening of the first Benedictine monastery

⁵¹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, loc 58814.

⁵² Brown, *Late Antiquity*, 117-122.

⁵³ Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*, 1.

⁵⁴ Heather, *Fall of the Roman Empire*, 277.

both occurring in the same year, marking the shift in thinking and education. MacMullen holds that late antiquity progressed as long as paganism maintained a tangible presence in religious practice. The arbitrary nature of this statement makes such a date impossible to nail down with any certainty but he offers a passable date at the year 600 C.E..⁵⁵ Similar results come from Lee, albeit with different logic behind the choice.⁵⁶ The changes in the dates and even areas of study (Brown remains the only author to maintain even a notion of including the Eastern Empire in his definition of Rome) continue to fluctuate with the most recent dates belonging to socio- cultural authors and the most temporally distant belonging to the diplomatic/political authors with the post modernists falling somewhere in between.

Currently, the debate between the two schools of thought is ongoing. Neo-collapse scholars are finding fertile ground in the reactions to post modernism which is just starting to become its own distinct movement within historiography. The attempt to assign a specific start and end date to Late Antiquity is a sign that scholars are attempting to restore at least some of the framework which postmodernism with its arbitrary nature has removed. Later works published after the emergence of the Post-Modern hydra have a far greater emphasis on start and end dates than those that came before it. By lining up with the collapse school of thought, the neo-collapse movement has adopted some of the theories if not the outright words and methods of Gibbon. In a similar fashion, Peter Brown and the majority of the original “dissolution” writers remain adamant in their advocacy of cultural continuity being a better determinant of the Roman Empire than the military or political markers so many writers in the past have attempted to use. Both cases have their merits in that they both focus on different aspects based largely on the

⁵⁵ MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, 127.

⁵⁶ Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 171.

historiographical movements they were created by or in reaction to. Historiographically speaking, the playing field, so long tilted in favor of the socio-cultural definitions of the dissolution school, has begun to exhibit something of a balance. The much maligned Gibbon remains a valuable primary source for many students and scholars even today, albeit with a great degree of accompanying research. The diplomatic and political style of historical analysis is long since removed from its place of prominence in the way which history is researched and written and yet the movements offspring remain so entrenched in contemporary histories that to say it is completely gone is problematic. Students today still learn of “The Fall of Rome”, regardless of the issues behind the term. In such a way, the historiographical controversy is kept out of the majority of classrooms and is instead restricted to the higher realms of academia.

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The Arch of Constantine⁵⁷

Erected in 315 C.E. In Rome.

Constantine, in remembrance of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge the year before, commissioned this piece. It is an example of "spoilage": the practice of taking from earlier monuments to adorn newly built ones. The Arch has been proposed as both an indicator of the continuity and the change in the Late Roman Empire. The arch celebrates the famous battle at the Milvian Bridge in [year] which led to Christianity's elevation to the state religion of the empire.



The Arch of Constantine, last modified November, 2007,
https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/smarthistory/arch_constantine.html

"The Good Shepherd"⁵⁸
Milan: Late Third Century

One of the earliest Christian images. The emergence of Christianity as the dominant cultural force of the Roman World is seen by many proponents of the "Collapse" theory as one of the largest contributing factors. Oddly enough, cultural historians like Peter Brown see the emergence of Christianity as a normal progression of Roman culture and not disruptive to society. The image in question is based on a traditional image of Orpheus and is an example of what Ramsay MacMullan referred to when he speaks about cultural transmission of Roman values into Christian Practice.



⁵⁸ "Koroiphorous," last modified June, 2014, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=804833&partId=1.

Ammianus Marcellinus Excerpts on the "Invasion of the Goths"⁵⁹

Written in 385-391 C.E.

This chronicle details a declining military and political environment in the western Roman Empire. Because this chronicle was written by a man who deplored the state of affairs in the roman west, it contains a very negative view of his surroundings. Ammianus Marcellinus' history is one of the better preserved primary sources and has been used extensively by the modern scholars of late antiquity. This is a great example of how perspective in a primary source is an important factor. Because Ammianus' history is so pessimistic, scholars in the early days of modern historical writing, like Edward Gibbon, who used primary sources exclusively were forced to accept his writings at face value. As a result of this many of these histories were as pessimistic as their source materials. However, the biases of any particular author can come under scrutiny as the works of Peter Brown and others have challenged the dismal view of history that Marcellinus and similar Roman historians have recorded.

'...dogs leaped back when wolves howled, night birds rang out a kind of doleful lament, the sun rose in gloom and dimmed the clear morning light; at Antioch, in quarrels and riots of the common people, it became usual that whoever thought that he was suffering wrong shouted without restraint: "Let Valens be burned alive!"'

"This race of untamed men, without encumbrances, aflame with an inhuman desire for plundering others' property, made their violent way amid the rapine and slaughter of the neighbouring peoples as far as the Halani, once known as the Massagetae."

"The barbarians, who are always alert and nimble, threw at our men huge clubs, hardened in the fire, and ran their swords through the breasts of those who showed most resistance; thus

⁵⁹ "The a Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus," last modified April 22, 2009, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28587/28587-0.txt>

they broke through the left wing. When this gave way, a strong troop of reserves bravely hastened to their aid from near at hand, and rallied them when death already sat upon their necks.”

“The barbarians, however, like savage beasts that had broken their cages, poured raging over the wide extent of Thrace.”

Augustine *City of God* Excerpts⁶⁰
Written: 405-419 C.E.

Augustine of Hippo, Catholic Bishop of North Africa, (395-430 C.E.) wrote *The City of God* in response to the sack of Rome by the Goths in the late fifth century. *City of God* is a treatise on what it means to be Christian and Roman in an increasingly dangerous world. Huge advice of the author is to become distant from the physical world and instead commit to a better life in the eternal world of the afterlife.

According to scholars like Peter Brown and others like him, Christianity's adoption by the Romans as the state religion represented a new form of social relationships. Because the emperor was increasingly a military man backed by the army, members of the Roman nobility and the Senate were increasingly forced into high positions in the church in order to preserve their social status. As such the position of Bishop became one of immense importance as a position of local leadership. Eleven years after writing this, Augustine died in the Vandal siege of Hippo.

“If, then, Virgil says that the gods were such as these, and were conquered, and that when conquered they could not escape except under the protection of a man, what a madness is it to suppose that Rome had been wisely entrusted to these guardians?”

“They lost all they had. Their faith? Their godliness? The possessions of the hidden man of the heart, which in the sight of God are of great price? Did they lose these? For these are the wealth of Christians”

‘The whole family of God, most high and most true, has therefore a consolation of its own,—a consolation which cannot deceive, and which has in it a surer hope than the tottering and falling affairs of earth can afford. They will not refuse the discipline of this temporal life, in which they are schooled for life eternal; nor will they lament their experience of it, for the good things of

⁶⁰ "City of God," last modified July 13, 2005, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.html>.

earth they use as pilgrims who are not detained by them, and its ills either prove or improve them. As for those who insult over them in their trials, and when ills befall them say, "Where is thy God?" we may ask them where their gods are when they suffer the very calamities for the sake of avoiding which they worship their gods, or maintain they ought to be worshipped; for the family of Christ is furnished with its reply: our God is everywhere present, wholly everywhere; not confined to any place. He can be present unperceived, and be absent without moving; when He exposes us to adversities, it is either to prove our perfections or correct our imperfections; and in return for our patient endurance of the sufferings of time, He reserves for us an everlasting reward. But who are you, that we should deign to speak with you even about your own gods, much less about our God, who is "to be feared above all gods? For all the gods of the nations are idols; but the Lord made the heavens."

Boethius *The Consolation of Philosophy*⁶¹

Written in the late 490's

Boethius was a Roman nobleman who received a traditional Roman education. When the city of Rome was sacked by the Goths and its Italian territories divided up to the new lords of Europe, Boethius became a member of the court of Odeacer, the king of the Visigoths.

As a Roman minister in a Barbarian kingdom, Boethius was an example of the cultural continuity alluded to by Peter Brown. He is associated with the Neo-Platonic movement. Boethius' student Cassiodorus took his inspiration from Boethius in the creation of the required readings for the new Benedictine monastery at Monte Casino. In such a way traditional Roman culture was preserved in the practices of the Catholic Church, at least according to the scholarship of Peter Brown and others. Edward Gibbon or Bryan Ward-Perkins however would point out that Boethius was accused of treason by Odeacer and beheaded. Before his execution he wrote his "Consolation of Philosophy" which is a hallmark of traditional Roman values of stoicism and gravitas created in a time when the empire as it was in the time of Caesar no longer existed.

"The lays (songs/poems) which I, an exile, formerly with delight sung, I shall now mourning sing, and with very unfit words arrange. Though I formerly readily invented, yet I now, weeping and sobbing, wander from suitable words..."

"Dost thou believe that fortune governs this world, or that aught of good can be thus made without the Maker?"

"Look now at the sun and also at the other heavenly bodies; when the swarthy clouds come before them they cannot give their light: so also the south wind with a great storm troubles the sea, which before, in serene weather, was clear as glass to behold. When it is so mingled with the billows it is very quickly unpleasant, though it before was pleasant to look upon. So also is the brook, though it be strong in its right course, when a great stone rolling down from the high

⁶¹ "King Alfred's Anglo Saxon Translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*," last modified October 2003, http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/Boethius_Fox.pdf.

mountain falls into it, and divides it, and hinders it from its right course. In like manner does the darkness of thy mind now withstand my enlightened precept.”

“Though to the covetous man come as many riches as there are grains of sand by the sea-cliffs, or stars which in dark nights shine; he nevertheless will not cease from complaints, so as not to lament his poverty.”

The sarcophagus of Junius Bassus⁶²
Created 359 C.E.

This is a popular primary source for many of the scholars who argue for the continuity of Roman culture well into the medieval period. The principle argument of Peter Brown and others like him maintain that Christianity was changed when it was accepted as the state religion of the Roman Empire. By becoming more "Roman," Christianity became the vehicle for cultural diffusion between Roman and Northern European peoples in late Antiquity. This casket is a clear indication of that trend as it combines traditional Roman sculpting styles and themes with stories from the newly ascendant Christian religion. The fact that Junius Bassus was a member of the Roman upper classes shows that the adoption of Christianity was occurring across a wide spectrum of Roman society of late antiquity.



⁶² "Christianity becomes legal," last modified May 8, 2014, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/early-christian1/a/sarcophagus-of-junius-bassus>.

The life of St Martin by Sulptius Severus⁶³

Written in Italy mid 500's

The life of St Martin is a widely used primary source for researching the late Roman military. Martin was a Roman soldier in Gaul who became a Christian and later in life became the Bishop of Tours. The majority of the piece examines the changes in the way that Roman aristocratic men could advance in their society. Martin begins his life in the army but it is only after he converts to Christianity that he begins his spiritual "conquest" of Gaul as a missionary. The transition from military/political domination to one of religious control is the cornerstone of the dissolution movement and it is partially through the use of saints' lives as primary sources that the resulting analyses from these sources were significantly more positive than the earlier diplomatically based ones. The ultimate result of the inclusion of saints' lives as a large primary sources was a product of the rise of social histories.

"During nearly three years before his baptism, he was engaged in the profession of arms, but he kept completely free from those vices in which that class of men become too frequently involved. He showed exceeding kindness towards his fellow-soldiers, and held them in wonderful affection; while his patience and humility surpassed what seemed possible to human nature. There is no need to praise the self-denial which he displayed: it was so great that, even at that date, he was regarded not so much as being a soldier as a monk."

"ACCORDINGLY, at a certain period, when he had nothing except his arms and his simple military dress, in the middle of winter, a winter which had shown itself more severe than ordinary, so that the extreme cold was proving fatal to many, he happened to meet at the gate of the city of Amiens a poor man destitute of clothing. He was entreating those that passed by to have compassion upon him, but all passed the wretched man without notice, when Martin, that man full of God, recognized that a being to whom others showed no pity, was, in that respect, left to him. Yet, what should he do? He had nothing except the cloak in which he was clad, for he had already parted with the rest of his garments for similar purposes. Taking, therefore, his sword with which he was girt, he divided his cloak into two equal parts, and gave one part to the

⁶³ "The Life of St. Martin," last modified September 2006, <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/npnf2-11/sulpitui/lifemart.html>.

poor man, while he again clothed himself with the remainder. Upon this, some of the bystanders laughed, because he was now an unsightly object, and stood out as but partly dressed. Many, however, who were of sounder understanding, groaned deeply because they themselves had done nothing similar. They especially felt this, because, being possessed of more than Martin, they could have clothed the poor man without reducing themselves to nakedness. In the following night, when Martin had resigned himself to sleep, he had a vision of Christ arrayed in that part of his cloak with which he had clothed the poor man.”

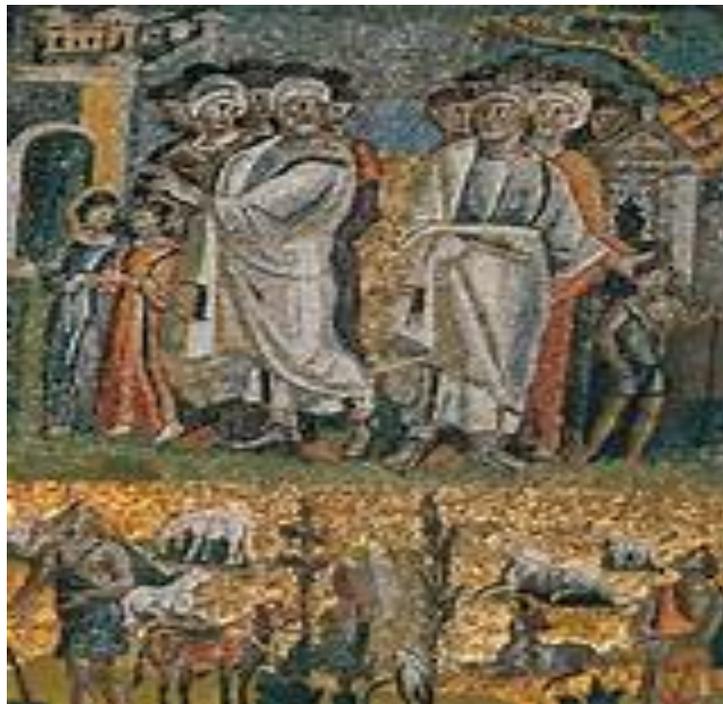
“Full alike of dignity and courtesy, he kept up the position of a bishop properly, yet in such a way as not to lay aside the objects and virtues of a monk.”

Santa Maria Maggiore⁶⁴
Built 432-440 C.E.

The largest cathedral built in Rome during the imperial period. It was built after the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in Asia Minor.

The artwork reflects the changes in Christian practice following its adoption as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity was a portion of the nineteenth century German traditional diagnosis of the weakening and eventual collapse of the empire in the west. Similarly

Edward Gibbon, considered to be actively anti-Christian in his historical writings, held this view. However, the analysis of both social and cultural historians in the mid and late twentieth century have re-evaluated the existence of Christianity and deemed it one of the most important factors for the survival of a large portion of Roman culture.



⁶⁴ "Christianity becomes legal" last modified May 8, 2014, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/early-christian1/v/basilica-of-santa-maria-maggiore-rome-5th-century-a-d>.



Textbook Critique

Given the current controversies surrounding the terminology used to discuss the transition from Late Antiquity to the early medieval period, one would expect to find the materials used to educate the youth in America to reflect this highly polarized scenario. This is however not the case. What is given instead is a great degree of agreement with the traditional interpretation of events. That is to say that the textbook in question, a modern one and assumedly representative of the larger history textbook community, holds that the Roman Empire suffered a relatively sudden and violent collapse. The fact that this is, at best, unaware of the range of theories available and, at worst, outright ignoring them speaks to a level of contempt when it comes to examining what is placed inside a history textbook. In the case of the lack of insight into the Roman Empire's decline and sundering into the nations of Europe the authors of this book, for whom discussion and further reading appear to be things to promote, have missed a massive opportunity to foster discussion on the very foundations of the modern Western World.

Rome is placed within the textbook in the chapter immediately following Han China which makes sense both thematically and in the linear consideration of time. These two regional superpowers were roughly contemporaneous and achieved similar heights of civilization before dissolving into regional factionalism. As such studying them in succession makes sense in theory. The problem with this is the need to see similarities where there might not be any. While the two different cultures sound similar on paper, a cursory glance over the scholarship produced over the last four decades highlights a distinct lack of confidence in the theory that the Roman Empire ever truly "fell" at all. What is clear at least from the textbooks insistence on territorial gains and losses as well as the insistence on the traditional date for the final "fall of Rome" in

479 C.E., is that the authors were writing from a very political/diplomatic form of history.⁶⁵ This is the form of history for which Edward Gibbon wrote from in the late 1790's when he published the initial volumes of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The hallmarks of this style are an overwhelming concern with the territorial gains and losses of a particular state and the lives and histories of the rulers and upper classes of a given society. Put another way, diplomatic history stands apart from socio-cultural or postmodern analysis because its focus is noticeably smaller and more teleological than its more modern counterparts. By concerning itself exclusively with the fates of different nations, diplomatic history lines up fairly well with the enlightenment need to find "truth". Event x happened on date y and involved party z. The diplomatic history is concerned exclusively with attempting to fit every event into a single, linear conception of time. Individuals who are not fortunate enough to be the heads of state for important nations are left silenced.

The relatively simple breakdown of history that diplomatic history leads to is naturally suited to the learning styles promoted by modern public schools and therefore it remains present in the textbook world. However this becomes a problem when discussing a time period as tumultuous and ambiguous as the last years of late antiquity. Perspective has become an important factor in defining where one falls on the spectrum of collapse and dissolution. However one would not know that were one to read into the interpretation provided by the textbook exclusively. In the author's need to bookend the era, the reader is forced to turn to the one section devoted to the later empire, section five to be precise. At the top of the page we find the infamous quote by Jerome relating the doom and gloom of the death of the "Mother of the

⁶⁵ Jackson Spielvogel, PhD. *Glencoe World History: New York Edition*, (Columbus, Ohio: McGraw Hill, 2008), 174-177.

World" immediately opposite a map of the later empire.⁶⁶ Like Gibbon, the authors begin with the Septim dynasty but instead of going into any great depth, they simply inform the reader that the Septim dynasty was the last great hereditary military dictatorship of the Roman West and that their legacy was the political maxim to pay the army over any other civic institution. While this has some faint ringing of Gibbon, the lack of detail is somewhat discouraging.

A mere two pages later the reader is at the end of the section. The reasoning behind the fall of Rome is explained to be nothing more than the work of a weakened imperial military and the ravages of an unstoppable tide of barbarian peoples. This is not so much a restatement of Gibbon as it is a poorly designed cliff notes version of the last volume of the great author's work. The Empire, in true diplomatic form, ended with the abdication of Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor in 476 C.E. to his untrustworthy barbarian mercenary general.⁶⁷ The eastern empire would continue on in Constantinople, the authors assure us, but following the usurpation of the throne by a non-roman, the empire had well and truly gone extinct in Western Europe. There is a somewhat optimistic "Theories" section immediately following the last portion of the decline section. However the theories are not so much indicative of trends in the historiographical traditions as one would have hoped and are instead are alternatives to the "ruthless" barbarians who overthrew the roman world. Such theories include the spirituality of Christianity softening up the traditionally violent Romans, mass lead poisoning, and the Roman inability to create a workable political system.⁶⁸ All of these alternative theories sound remarkably reminiscent of an old nineteenth century Prussian chart cataloguing the one hundred and one signs of the empire which caused the downfall of the western empire.

⁶⁶ Spielvogel, *World History*, 174.

⁶⁷ Spielvogel, *World History*, 177.

⁶⁸ Spielvogel, *World History*, 177.

The last paragraph of the section before turning to the assessments holds that Rome in the west, like the Han in China, collapsed as a result of overwhelming internal and external pressure. This is backed up by the ending lines of the chapter “both the Han dynasty in China and the Roman Empire lasted for centuries. Both of these empires were able to... Both, however, eventually fell to new peoples”.⁶⁹ In doing so their willingness to embrace the political and diplomatic historical traditions has led to a very one dimensional affair which only serves to limit the experience of students reading it.

As such the entire excerpt is in need of rewriting. However the inclusion of the entirety of the scholarship on late antiquity would require a textbook in its own right. Therefore the last section, the one dealing with the alternate theories on the collapse, is an unnecessary one, and its removal or rewriting is needed. This would be an ideal place for the inclusion of more aspects of the more modern trends into the otherwise predominantly diplomatic style of writing that the chapters surrounding the decline of the roman west are predominantly concerned with. The revision of this aspect of the chapter would allow for the diplomatic/political theme to still take precedence over the other theories, yet it would still introduce the student body to a degree of the debate surrounding a very ambiguous and perspective based point in western history.

By including at least a nominal nod towards socio cultural histories, the theories section could be dramatically altered with no loss to the larger theme of the preceding chapter. The flow of the book requires a collapsing Rome as the following sections refer, rather archaically in fact, to the “Dark Ages” of the early medieval period.⁷⁰ Therefore the inclusion of the alternate theories could only be placed as a form of ancillary section and in so short a section, the only real

⁶⁹ Spielvogel, *World History*, 177

⁷⁰ Spielvogel, *World History*, 177.

place for such an insertion is there. It would perhaps be interesting to consider placing supplemental socio-cultural analyses in the sections dealing with Christianity's rise, however these sections are sadly classified in with the high point of roman culture in the previous section. This seems strange as many scholarly works, including this one, rank the formal adoption of Christianity as one of the largest factors in the evaporation of Roman political authority.

If there is to be a revision of the theories section and that revision is to have a more sociocultural interpretation that the rather diplomatic tone of the rest of the chapter, the argument then becomes what to include in such a revision. The tone of the preceding and subsequent chapters steers one away from the completely incompatible works of Peter Brown, whose arguments are as antithetical to the diplomatic and political field of history as it is possible to be. However the arguments that Brown bases his larger claims on can certainly be utilized in order to present the student reader with at least a taste of the larger works still being created over this controversial subject.

The revised version could contain the core concept of cultural continuity. Or perhaps with less alliteration, the idea that Rome never truly fell but assumed a new identity which was less overtly political and instead adopted a much smaller scale of regional power and spiritual unity through the evolution of the Catholic Church. One could go on to extrapolate this theory into a brief examination of the church hierarchy and its close relationship with the nobility of Late antique Italy. Such figures as Augustine or Ambrose could be put forward as examples in order to further the idea. The revised section could look something like this:

Theories

Although many scholars agreed for centuries that the Roman Empire fell in the west with the abdication of Romulus Augustulus, during the twentieth century many scholars began to look into the idea that Rome never truly “fell” at all. Many modern scholars now believe that the Empire just changed. These individuals look at very specific criteria when they examine late antiquity. Specifically, these scholars tend to look at how much everyday life changed from before the abdication of the last emperor to afterwards. Their findings have shown that life changed very little for the common person. As such these scholars prefer to use the term “Early Medieval” as opposed to the “Dark Ages” because in many ways the Roman way of doing things did not change all that much once the outsiders from Northern Europe took power.

If you take a look at an individual like Augustine of Hippo or Ambrose of Milan, it is clear that the Roman nobility simply adapted into the church as opposed to collapsing with the rest of Roman society. Many individuals like Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose of Milan are examples of Roman noblemen who took up influential positions in the church in order to continue their hold of regional power. Because the overarching power of the Roman Empire was tenuous during late antiquity, power began to become consolidated into regional and local leaders. In many cases these leaders were Romans who emerged as local powerbrokers in the twilight of the Roman state. These individuals were people who were steeped in both Roman and non-Roman traditions who were the bedrock of the new culture of Europe in the medieval period.

Therefore, the idea that Rome “fell” at all is a difficult one to prove during this time period as the line between Roman and non-Roman was a very blurry one. Both sides were influencing each other very heavily through the process of cultural diffusion. This process

combined with the regional nature of power, eventually led to the new states of the medieval world.

This excerpt is a significant improvement on the existing section because it allows for a more nuanced approach to the intervening period between the roman and medieval world. The socio-cultural slant that this excerpt is based on is a counterpoint to the more traditional interpretation in that there is less concern with the military and territorial losses of the roman state and a greater focus on the cultural and social transitions that western Europe was undergoing in order to highlight the shortcomings of the diplomatic and political interpretation which the majority of the chapter is written in.

Bibliographies

Spielvogel, Jackson J, Phd. *Glencoe World History: New York Edition*. Columbus, Ohio: McGraw – Hill, 2008.