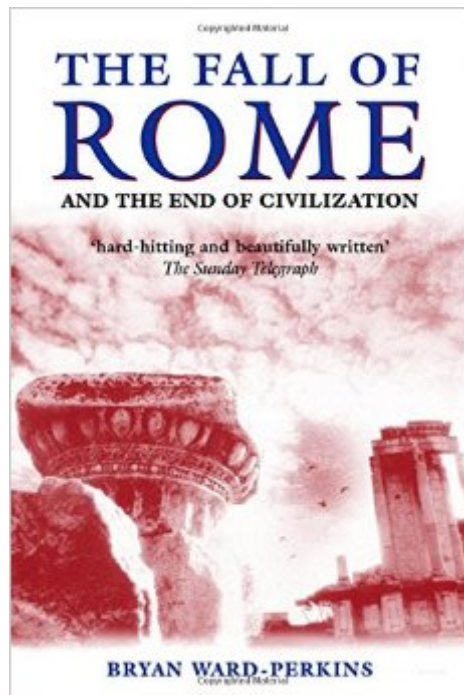


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The Fall Of Rome: And The End Of Civilization



Synopsis

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

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; New Ed edition (September 7, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0192807285

ISBN-13: 978-0192807281

Product Dimensions: 7.6 x 0.5 x 5 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (85 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #31,386 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #22 in [Books > Textbooks >](#)

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Customer Reviews

Bryan Ward-Perkins is concerned with impact of the collapse of the Western Roman Empire on the

standard of living, or what he calls "the loss of comfort." Seen from this standpoint, the end of Rome was the end of the world's first complex, specialised economy. He is careful to explain that the end of the Roman Empire was not a uniform process, and that the Eastern half of the empire continued to flourish until the time of the Arab attacks in the seventh century AD. He uses three instances: pottery, roof tiles, and coinage, to demonstrate the material changes which took place. The use of pottery was widespread throughout the Empire, it was not solely the preserve of the elite, its manufacture was industrial, and its quality was excellent. In provinces like Britain the availability of sophisticated, mass produced, quality pottery simply disappeared. The skills and technology were lost. (Well the German invaders never had them!) Tiled roofs do not catch fire, they do not attract insects, and they do not need replacing every thirty years. In Britain, " ... the quarrying of building stone, preparation of mortar, manufacture and use of bricks and tiles ... " all ceased. Coins are the hallmark of economic sophistication: in Roman times they were "a standard feature of everyday life ... " Their disappearance meant the disappearance of economic complexity, and in the West this was "almost total". These three instances highlight the loss of specialisation, and as the author points out, specialisation depends on "a sophisticated network of transport and commerce ... in order to distribute ... goods efficiently and widely.

I came to Bryan Ward-Perkins' work indirectly, through reading Rodney Stark's "The Victory of Reason." Stark argues the reason for the superiority of Western culture is the Christian religion, especially the Catholic Christian religion with its emphasis on the (alleged) rationality of God and on the goodness of creation. Stark's Christian triumphalism requires him to attack the classic account of the "Decline and Fall" of Western Roman Civilization by Edward Gibbon. Gibbon argued (in 1776) that the "useless" activities of the monasteries and churches in the 5th Century required so much labor and wealth that little was left over to fend off the barbarians. The fall of Rome, Gibbon concluded, "was a triumph of barbarism and religion." (I sell a nice little summary of Gibbon's views entitled "Christians and the Fall of Rome.") Stark dissents from Gibbon's view, arguing that there had been no "fall" of civilization in the 5th Century. There had simply been a cultural segue from one type of social organization (Roman) to another (feudal society featuring monasteries and local castles). I had never heard anyone seriously deny there had been a "fall" of Roman civilization in the 5th Century, and I did not know enough at that time to contest his ideas. Then while in a waiting room, I came across an article by Ward-Perkins in the magazine "History Today" (as I recall its title). Ward-Perkins briefly laid out the issue between the defenders of the "discontinuity thesis" (like Gibbon) and the defenders of the "continuity thesis" (which included historians like the Oxford

historian Peter Brown and of course Rodney Stark).

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