

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BRYAN WARD-PERKINS ON THE FALL OF ROME

Conducted by Donald A. Yerxa

*“AT THE HOUR OF MIDNIGHT THE SALERIAN GATE WAS silently opened, and the inhabitants were awakened by the tremendous sound of the Gothic trumpet. Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the Imperial city, which had subdued and civilized so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia.” The emotion and drama that flowed so eloquently from Edward Gibbons’s pen has been largely drained from our contemporary historical imagination. Recent scholar-*

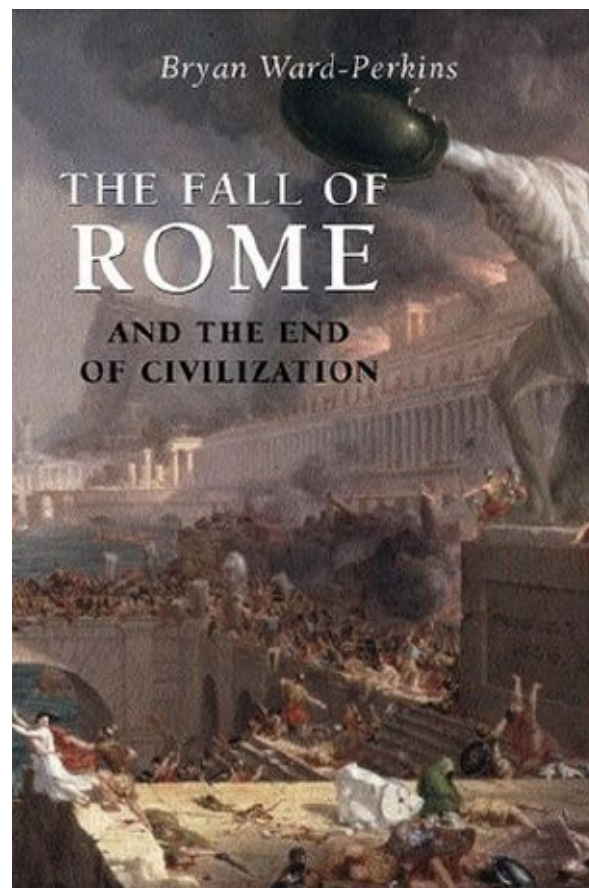
*ship has drastically transformed the subject that fascinated students of history for centuries, and Oxford historian Bryan Ward-Perkins fears that something important is being lost. Historically Speaking editor Donald Yerxa asked Ward-Perkins to speak to some of his concerns, developed more fully in Ward-Perkins’s *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2005), winner of the 2006 Hessell-Tiltman Prize for History.*

**Donald Yerxa:** In your book you mention that there has been a “sea change in the language used to describe post-Roman times.” How has the language changed?

**Bryan Ward-Perkins:** There has been a very strong tendency recently—particularly, but not exclusively, among scholars working in the U.S—to play down any unpleasantness at the end of the Roman Empire and any negative effects of the end of Roman power. Until quite recently scholars were happy that the settlement of the Germanic peoples in the 5th-century West was the result of violent invasion and viewed the next few centuries as a “Dark Age” marked by the collapse of Roman civilization. Currently the use of such negative language is seen as very old-fashioned: “decline,” “crisis,” and “Dark Age” have disappeared from the titles of academic books, conferences, and university courses. They have been replaced by neutral words like “transformation” and “transition.” For instance, a recent, massive European research project on the 4th to 9th centuries A.D. was entitled “The Transformation of the Roman World,” as if Rome never really came to an end, but just changed into something different but entirely equal.

**Yerxa:** What has happened to the Roman Empire’s dissolution by “hostile ‘waves’ of Germanic peoples,” dare I say “barbarians”?

**Ward-Perkins:** Nowadays, what was once seen as invasion is often interpreted as a process of “accommodation,” entered into willingly by Roman hosts. The argument runs that the Romans got tired of fighting the bar-



barians, and decided to let many of them into the empire, in order to use them to defend it against further invaders. The former poachers became the gamekeepers.

**Yerxa:** How has the new periodization scheme of “Late Antiquity” changed historians’ thinking about the fall of Rome?

**Ward-Perkins:** A groundbreaking book published in 1971, Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity*, identified a cultural period (characterized primarily by the rise of two new monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, and the codification of a third, Judaism), stretching from the 3rd century right

through to the 8th century and even beyond. This periodization, which is now widely followed, deliberately ignores the 5th-century collapse of Roman power in the West and the 7th-century loss of most of the Eastern (or Byzantine) Empire to the Arabs, events that conventionally were seen as heralding “dark ages” in both areas. Rather than viewing the 5th to 7th centuries as a time of crisis and rupture, historians of “Late Antiquity” see it as a period of continuous cultural growth.

**Yerxa:** In what ways do you believe that the current view is flawed?

**Ward-Perkins:** The 5th century is portrayed as a time of peaceful accommodation. It is true that the Germanic invaders wanted reasonable relations with their Roman subjects (who were always in a massive numerical majority) and with the remnants of independent Roman power. Consequently, they were very happy to enter treaty arrangements with the empire, and generally treated their own Roman subjects reasonably well. But the evidence is unequivocal that most of the empire’s territory was taken over by Germanic rulers, either by force, or, at best, through the threat of force. This was not one of those fortunate periods in which to be alive.

**Yerxa:** You contend that treatments of the cultural accommodation between invader and invaded often read like accounts of “a tea party at a Roman vicarage.”

**Ward-Perkins:** While Germanic invaders and native Roman could sit down together and coexist, much recent scholarship makes the whole process far too genteel, as if the new

settlers knocked politely at the door and were shown to an empty chair. The reality is that the invaders seized most of the power and much of the land of the empire. Roman landed families remained, and many Romans rose high in the service of the new masters. But the unavoidable truth is that by the end of the 5th century an entirely new Germanic aristocracy had been established, whose *raison d'être* was its military might. This establishment was achieved by the dispossession on a massive scale of Roman landowners.

**Yerxa: Is there evidence that a civilization collapsed when Rome fell?**

**Ward-Perkins:** This is an area where historians seem to be decidedly myopic. In looking closely at their texts, they have failed to notice that in every single area of the empire (except perhaps the Levantine provinces conquered by the Arabs) there was an extraordinary fall in what archaeologists term “material culture.” The scale and quality of buildings, even of churches, shrank dramatically—so that, for instance, tiled roofs, which were common in Roman times even in a peasant context, became a great rarity and luxury. In the 6th- and 7th-century West the vast majority of people lived in tiny houses with beaten earth floors, drafty wooden walls, and insect-infested thatch roofs; whereas, in Roman times, people from the same level of society might well have enjoyed the comfort of solid brick or stone floors, mortared walls, and tiled roofs. This was a change that affected not only the aristocracy, but also huge numbers of people in the middling and lower levels of society who in Roman times had had ready access to high-quality goods.

**Yerxa: You discuss evidence from graffiti, coins, roof tiles, and especially pottery, whereas scholars from the Late Antiquity school point to religious texts. Why is it important to pay attention to material culture and economic history?**

**Ward-Perkins:** However elevated our thoughts, we all live in a sophisticated material world, supported by a complex economy, and we all enjoy the convenience and comfort of high-quality goods (whether clothes, washing machines, or the latest laptop and Internet connection). So it seems very obvious to me that material change (and there was dramatic material change at the end of the Roman Empire) is well worthy of our attention. Even the saints were affected by material changes in this period: the new churches constructed in

the later 6th- and 7th-century West, in places like Rome and Visigothic Spain, are tiny in comparison to those of the 4th century or of the later Middle Ages.

I also believe—and this seems obvious from modern experience—that sophistication in intellectual life generally requires solid economic underpinning. In my book I attempt to show this by focusing on the evidence of graf-



View of Rome's skyline near the Tiber River, ca. 1900. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-123704].

fiti (which were very common in Roman times, but virtually disappeared thereafter) in order to demonstrate that basic intellectual skills—reading and writing—suffered as dramatic a downturn with the fall of Rome as did the availability of high-quality material goods.

**Yerxa: Why is Roman pottery such a revealing source?**

**Ward-Perkins:** The study of pottery isn't to everybody's taste, but (as a couple of reviewers have independently said of my book) it reveals “surprisingly interesting” results. Pottery was a basic item that played a central role in the storage, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food. And broken potsherds, which can often be both dated and provenanced, survive remarkably well in the soil. (They are discovered in the hundreds of thousands on archaeological sites in the Mediterranean.) This means that we can

reconstruct with considerable accuracy changing patterns of production, distribution, and consumption of pottery vessels. The picture that emerges shows that in the Roman period potting was highly sophisticated, and that good-quality pots reached deep into society. It was, for instance, quite usual for a 3rd-century peasant in upland central Italy to eat off a fine pottery bowl manufactured in North Africa. Virtually all this remarkable sophistication disappeared in the post-Roman period.

Other products do not survive as well in the soil as potsherds or cannot be attributed with such confidence to particular places or centuries of manufacture. But it is, I believe, obvious that the picture provided by pottery—of Roman sophistication, followed by almost total collapse—can be extended to other goods, where the evidence survives much less well, such as textiles, metal tools, and specialized food products. Pottery offers a detailed snapshot of the wider economy.

**Yerxa: What is fueling the revisionist views of the Late Antiquity school?**

**Ward-Perkins:** There are probably a number of different forces at work. Scholarship does tend to progress by a process of revision and counter-revision. It was probably time that gloomy views of the end of Rome were tested; and now, perhaps, it is time to return to them. This game of scholarly Ping-Pong might seem a little pointless, but I don't think so, because each time the ball is lobbed back over the net it lands in a slightly different place and has always acquired some of its flight from the preceding debate. For instance, although I could be termed a counter-revisionist (or a “neo-con” as one reviewer put it), I have no problem in recognizing that Late Antiquity has opened up an extraordinarily fertile field of debate, and that, without it, my own thinking would never have gone in the directions it has.

A central underlying reason for the current revisionist view must be the fact that both “empires” and “civilizations” have gone out of fashion, undermining earlier assumptions that the Roman Empire was a high point of “civilization.” In the modern postcolonial world the very concept of “civilizations” has virtually disappeared and been replaced by that of “cultures,” which are seen as being all on a level. In this perspective, post-Roman “culture” is necessarily the equal of Roman “culture.”

Furthermore, some Europeans seem to have found the idea of the Germanic peoples being “accommodated” into the Roman world attractive—it provides a happier vision of

Europe's troubled past. It replaces a story of strife between Germanic and Latin peoples with one of peaceful coexistence and common enterprise, which is much more in keeping with the current ideals of the European Union.

Finally, I suspect that my own very materialistic and economic focus went out of fashion toward the end of the 20th century, in part because of the demise of communism, and with it Marxist theory. In the 1960s economic history enjoyed a central position in historical study because it was so central to Marxist thinking. But, unfortunately, this meant it went down with the ship of communism. In my opinion, for the reasons I have given above, I think it is high time for economic history once again to be a central topic of historical debate and of university curricula.

**Yerxa: Is there a case to be made that the currently popular view of a Late Antiquity “transition” presents something of a corrective to earlier views?**

**Ward-Perkins:** There is no doubt at all that Late Antiquity has opened up new and very interesting areas of research, both geographically and thematically. Downplaying the centrality of the Roman Empire and of Greco-Roman culture, has allowed local cultures (expressed in languages like Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Irish) to take center stage and has brought to the fore some very “unclassical,” but fascinating, heroes of the past, like the Stylite saints of 5th- and 6th-century Syria.

**Yerxa: What do you think of the project of relocating the center of the 4th-8th-century Mediterranean world eastward to Egypt, the Levant, and Persia?**

**Ward-Perkins:** I am a historian of the West, and I don't have the linguistic knowledge to get seriously involved in the East. But I do teach Eastern history at an undergraduate level and find it absorbing. The entire Byzantine world was a flourishing region into at least the 6th century; and the 7th century, of course, spawned Islam and the civilization of the Umayyads. For Egypt, the Levant, and Persia, a long Late Antiquity probably works well—for instance, the Great Mosque at Damascus, with its considerable size, basilical plan, and marble decoration and mosaics, can quite reasonably be seen as a “late antique” building. It is very important—for modern-day reasons—that we seriously consider the possibility that it was the Islamic Levant, and not the West or Byzantium, that was the true heir to the sophisticated economy and culture of antiquity.

My complaint is that a very long Late Antiquity, which can fit the Levant, is also being exported westward, where it really doesn't fit. The 5th-century West and the 7th-century Byzantine worlds were characterized by political, military, and economic crises on a scale that cannot, and should not, be ignored.

**Yerxa: Have the newer interpretations corrected the naive view that the fall of Rome was an affair between two great forces—Rome and the barbarians?**

**Ward-Perkins:** As I have said, I have little patience with the view that the barbarians were peacefully “accommodated” into the West, and this same point has recently also been argued, with considerably more expertise, by Peter Heather in his *Fall of the Roman Empire* (also published by Oxford University Press). But it is true that the view prevalent immediately after the Second World War—that all Germanic invaders were solely destructive and brutal—needed some adjustment. Romans were as often at war among themselves as they were with the Germanic invaders. And the latter were often happy to ally with Roman forces against other Germanic tribes. This was not a titanic battle between rival and monolithic ideologies, but a very messy and confused affair, which left considerable scope for alliances between Romans and “barbarians.” Indeed, much of the personnel of the Roman army, including its high command, consisted of Germanic tribesmen.

**Yerxa: What brought you to this subject?**

**Ward-Perkins:** I was born in Rome, and my father was a classical archaeologist with a particular interest in the technological skill that the Romans deployed in their buildings. For some fifteen years, I worked every summer as a field archaeologist in Italy, with a special interest in the post-Roman period (which I was also researching from written sources). It was blindingly obvious to me, working on an archaeological site like ancient Luna—where all the great Roman buildings were abandoned and torn down in the 4th and 5th centuries, to be replaced by very simple wooden houses—that something very dramatic happened at the end of the Roman world, something which can reasonably be called the “end of a civilization.”

**Yerxa: We cannot have a conversation about the fall of Rome without my posing the classic questions to you: Why did Rome**

**fall? Could its decline have been reversed? And might we draw any lessons from the collapse of the Roman Empire?**

**Ward-Perkins:** I believe the Western Empire was brought down by a specific military crisis—Germanic invasion, made more serious by the arrival in the West of an Asiatic people, the Huns, and exacerbated by civil wars within the empire—rather than by any irreversible internal decline. The Eastern Empire was then very nearly destroyed some two centuries later by the rise of Arab Islamic power. Probably with a bit of good luck and perhaps some better leadership both crises could have been reversed (as had happened in the 3rd century, when the whole empire was saved from a seemingly fatal spiral of invasion and civil war). But all great powers (so far) have at some point or another declined, or been brought low, so it is reasonable to assume that Roman power would not have gone on forever!

What is so striking about the fall of Rome is the collapse of material sophistication that ensued. This happened, I believe, precisely because the Roman world was not entirely dissimilar to our own: complex economies are very fragile because they rely on hugely sophisticated networks of production and distribution. If these are seriously disrupted, widely and over a long period of time, the entire house of cards can collapse. Although I have a great deal of respect for the new Late Antiquity, it does seriously worry me that it smoothes over the very real crisis that happened at the end of the Roman world. The Romans, like us, enjoyed the fruits of a complex economy, both material and intellectual. And like us, they assumed their world would go on forever. They were wrong, and we would be wise to remember this. The main lesson I think we should learn from the collapse of the Roman Empire and of ancient civilization is not some specific panacea that can preserve our civilization forever (since modern circumstances and the threats to our well being are ever-changing), but a realization of how insecure, and probably transient, our own achievements are—and, from this, a degree of humility.