

HIS101--12 Roman Withering © Dec. 25,1999

Raymond J. Jirran

A. Introduction

The course goal for studying the Roman Withering is **to evaluate how progress can occur in an apparently disorderly way** according to criteria of the people, places, and times involved and the degrees of certitude warranted. Though barbarians represent disorder and chaos, barbarians did not set out to destroy Rome. They set out to enjoy Rome. That is why historians of Ancient Rome do not like to write about the fall of Rome. Rome did not end, either. In 1992 "Wither" was the latest in a series of terms Dr. Jirran had used for the title of this lecture. Because Wither seems to work, wither is retained for the 1999 edition. The seventh edition of Chambers on page 145 simply writes of "The Late Roman Empire."¹

B. Final Trouble

Toward the end of the Fourth Century, A.D., a series of Germanic invasions of the empire began. The professor observes that historians take an implicit position that Rome was polluted by Germanic genes and, hence, fell. This racism is too uncomfortable to face directly and openly, but is, nonetheless there present in the seventh edition of Chambers on pages 148-149.²

German restlessness seemed to have originated in overpopulation. Actually, no single date was accurate to mark an end to the Germanic restlessness. The fall of Rome was long and complicated. The early Sixth Century pagan Damascius made the first known reference to "Rome, having fallen".³

The first claim that the invasion of Rome sprang from ethnic hostility arose in Sixth Century Byzantium. Twelve Centuries later, in the Eighteenth Century, that claim was again put forth, this time by the French. There was about as much substance to the first as to the second such claim. The reason the claim was made was to justify things as they were when the write-up was made, not to explain what had actually happened.⁴

See the "Map 6.1 Invasions, Fourth through Sixth Centuries" on page 172 in the seventh edition of Chambers.⁵ Note: Carthage; Adrianople; Constantinople; Elbe River; routes of the Alemanni, Burgundians, Franks, Huns, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Visigoths, Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Britons, Lombards. The most noteworthy battle resulting from these Gothic invasions was at Adrianople in 378 A.D. The Romans lost.

C. Interpretation

The shock and dismay felt by contemporary citizens throughout the Roman world, when learning of the 456 sack of the Eternal City by Vandals from their African staging area, will continue to go down the centuries as a major calamity. A date twenty years later, 476, when Odoacer was crowned Emperor, became the symbolic date of the End of the Roman Empire in the West. The working date for the fall of Rome is 476 A.D. Many reasons are offered about why Rome withered and fell: religious, psychological, racial, mixed.

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1. Religious

One reason offered for the collapse is Christianity. The sack of Rome, as well as other disasters overtaking the empire, had been attributed by pagan writers themselves, such as Zosimus (ca. 500 A.D.) to the abandonment of the ancient gods. In his book The City of God, Augustine disputed the charges of the pagans, justified the new faith, and directed attention from conditions in the classical world to the new goal of Christianity. In doing this, Augustine advanced the theory that history unfolds according to the design of God. In this way, the fall of Rome was seen as an essential act in a Divine overall plan to prepare humanity for the triumph of the heavenly city wherein true destiny was to be attained.

2. Psychological

Some contemporary explanations for the fall of Rome have been rooted in psychological theories. For example, the basic cause has been attributed to the very success of Rome that weakened morale and led to a changed mental attitude of laziness and self-gratification among the ruling classes. Such subjective psychological theories, however, can scarcely be proven.

3. Mixed

Modern social scientists increasingly tend to account for the decline of Rome through a variety of interacting forces. By the Fifth Century, in the western half of the empire, vast tracts of formerly cultivated land were left barren. Meanwhile, the labor forces in the cities tended to break up the economy. Gradually, the handicraft industry was transferred from cities to large estates, as scores of once flourishing cities in the west shrank into ghost towns. While Roman civilization had been essentially urban, medieval civilization was to be essentially rural. With the decline of the towns, the general level of civilization became less sophisticated and Western Europe began to assume its medieval characteristics.

D. Conclusion

In this lecture, the students have seen Rome herself fail to accommodate the cultural demands of her greatness. Consequently, the Empire collapsed and, in one sense, Western Europe had to begin all over again. In another sense, however, Rome did not fall, but moved eastward. There is controversy of interpretation on this point.⁶

Supplement

E. Interpretation

1. Religious (continued)

Edward Gibbon, author of the famous book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, countered this Augustinian view by historians of the Eighteenth Century, in particular. Gibbon identified the fall of Rome with the triumph of barbarians and religion. Because Gibbon argued that Christianity had played an important role in undermining the imperial structure, including laissez-faire

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economics and republican politics, many have accused Gibbon of maintaining an anti-Christian bias. In 1753 Gibbon converted to Catholicism, but soon abandoned the religion.⁷

3. Mixed (continued)

In the Greco-Roman world food shortages were common, though famines were relatively rare. Interseasonal climatic variability caused a frequent maldistribution of food. This meant that the rich remained well fed and that the poor suffered.⁸ People living in the rural medieval environment were less subject to the vagaries of the market place than people living in the urbanized Roman Empire were.

Archaeologists are finding artifacts that indicate that there was plenty of food throughout the Greco-Roman world in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C. Only after that were these artifacts abandoned, for a thousand years. New research is establishing the existence of agro-demographic cycles, taking as long as five hundred years each.⁹ There may be a political dimension involved in that modern contemporary famines occur mainly in countries without effective governments.¹⁰

F. Conclusion (continued)

Events have a continuous flow and it is not in singular events that so broad a question as the end of the empire can possibly be found. The fall happens when thoughtful people believe that it has. According to some, Rome did fall and did not move, the weaker opinion, according to the professor. Whether Rome fell or whether Rome was moved, out of the disorderly ruins of Rome came the progress that made contemporary success possible. Students are reminded to read and to consult the map and, most of all, to think.

G. Slavery¹¹

Slavery is "an extremely important aspect of European history willfully neglected by British and American Historians and teachers." The professor thinks the reason for the neglect is embarrassment. European slavery did not end with the end of Rome. Balanced treatment of large-scale slavery in ancient Rome demands consideration not only of the demand for labor, but also of the supply of labor and of the effects of warfare.

From the fall of Rome until 1650, for about 1200 years, slavery existed in a diminished state. Slavery existed not only in Central and Southern Europe, to which scholars pay careful attention, but also in Scandinavia and England, which scholars neglect. Slavery in Eastern Europe was Islamic.

Islamic slavery helped to diffuse the cultivation of sugar in the Mediterranean islands and to develop a trans-Saharan slave trade. Italian merchants participated in the development of the enterprise. Slave-grown sugar spread from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic islands and from there to New World.

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Modern definitions of slavery emphasize power and sociocultural alienation rather than the traditional legalistic conception of slavery as property in persons. The legalistic Western conception of slavery does not fit well with non-Western concepts, such as those found in sub-Saharan Africa. This means that drawing continuities from Rome to St. Augustine, Florida is fraught with difficulties. A choice must be made. Either the new capitalist context of early modern Europe made slavery something "vastly different" from what was present in the Old World, or it did not. Here the professor reserved judgment in 1992 but by 1999 was leaning in the direction of something vastly different..

The reason for the change in attitude was partly attributed to just having finished reading Terry Alford's *Prince Among Slaves*.¹²

Slave society must not be judged too materialistically. In many Islamic states slaves largely led, administered and defended society. Slaves there were also crucial in preventing political chaos. In Eastern Europe, there existed genuine slave societies, although few slaves were involved in production.

H. Periodization

All history is traditionally divided into three parts: ancient, medieval, and modern. Following this tradition, HIS 101, Western Civilization I, as taught by the professor, treats ancient and medieval history. Periodization, however, is a convention readily challenged by other approaches. To broaden the span from Western civilization to global development six periods might be used: pre-pre classical, before cities; pre-classical, with cities, but before Greco-Roman civilization; classical Greco-Roman civilization; post-classical from the end of the classical to the beginning of the transregional nomadic empires, extending from about 1000 to 1500; modern. Some of these global considerations merit mention.¹³

During the Eleventh Century, the Seljuk Turks extended from Anatolia to Southwest Asia. Two centuries later, during the Thirteenth Century the Mongols overran most of Eurasia from Russia and the Danube River in the West to the Pacific Ocean in the East. This was the largest empire in human history. The professor suspects that the reason for the lack of greater cultural penetration was lack of a truth over politics basis to that empire. The professor agrees that cross-cultural interactions merit more consideration than scholars have paid so far to transregional empires.¹⁴

I. Conclusion

The reason for studying this lesson is to understand that progress can occur in an apparently disorderly way. Upsetting the status quo is essential for change. All change is not progress. Progress must be measured against an agreed upon standard. Despite the common sense expectation that such a standard exists, the professor fails to find consensus.

Under Final Trouble students noted that as others got into the act, what Rome built collapsed. The various interpretations of what happened are chaotic. None of these interpretations measures truth

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against politics or politics against truth. That measurement is the key to understanding Western civilization.

Slavery was about freedom of some humans to abuse others. Wherein lie the criteria to judge such institutionalization? How can enslavement of some include progress for others? The professor takes the stand that before that question can be fairly answered, the truth-politics conundrum must be fairly addressed. Ending slavery causes disorder but releases the possibility of a new order.

Periodization is a reflection of who has enough power to do the periodizing. The status quo is well established. Changes would upset that status quo, but not necessarily bring progress. A more inclusive understanding of the human experience, however, does seem positive progress. The professor puts forth the willingness of politics to yield to truth as both the main reason for studying Western civilization and the main benefit of Western civilization for global interests.

Comments on the Seventh Edition of Chambers, pages 0145-0150

In the opinion of the professor, Chambers is the most scholarly textbook on the market. Chambers well represents mainstream thinking in the history profession. The professor, however, disagrees in many significant ways with mainstream thinking. These disagreements are set forth in the following comments.

Page Column
Paragraph
Line

0148 box column 2, line 5 "Ravenna"

Ravenna is on the east coast of Italy, between the two rivers north of Rome. On page 383, "Map 11.6 The Italian States in 1454," Ravenna would be just south of the "n" in Bologna; on page 854, "Map 224.2 The Unification of Italy," on the east coast, north of Rimini and south of Bologna.

Ravenna is a special place, indexed in the seventh edition of Chambers on page I-53 for pages 180, 181, and 1057. Ravenna is also mentioned, but not indexed for

Page	Column	Paragraph	Line
0161	caption		
0182	2	1	3 rd last
0184	2	3	2 nd last
0207	caption		

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0149 2 2 8-12

“The only way to preserve civilian control over the military machine would have been to entrust more responsibility to the Senate and to maintain strong civil servants.”

Merits consideration with

0132 2 3 3rd last to last line

“The army, which had kept the emperors secure, sometimes became a force beyond control.”

The professor thinks that expecting one political power to control another without the introduction of everyone agreeing to the principal that truth should determine politics, rather than politics truth, is unrealistic.

Endnotes

¹The fifth edition of Chambers on page 198 simply writes of "The Late Roman Empire"; sixth edition, page 129, seventh edition, page 145.

²This racism is too uncomfortable to face directly and openly, but is, nonetheless there present, despite the use of "unscientific" in the fifth edition of Chambers on page 202, the last line. Since that passage is omitted from both the sixth and seventh edition, a full quotation of the missing passage, along with the lead and trailer follows:

. . . Why were *these peoples* [emphasis added] able to defeat an Empire that had ruled the civilized world for centuries? And why did not the Eastern part of the Empire decline along with the Western?

Some historians have said that the mixing of peoples within the Empire, a process that certainly did take place during the centuries, produced an inferior population that lacked the virility to withstand the invasions of the third and fourth centuries. This racial theory is, however, highly unscientific and would appeal to few historians today. After all, the Greeks, Germans, and Slavs who mixed with the Romans were not physically inferior to them and could have fought effectively enough in the armies. A more plausible supplement to this theory is the view that the emperors unintentionally paved the way for the fall of Rome by exterminating possible political rivals in the upper class . . .

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The comparable passage is found on page 132 columns 1-2 in the sixth edition; page 149, column 1, paragraph 1 in the seventh edition.

On page 149, column 2, 2nd last paragraph, 4th-3rd last line, Chambers implies, if not a racist, then an ethnic bias with, "...non-Italians supplied the troops, and appeals for traditional Roman firmness in danger found little response.

There is an article in the American Historical Review, Vol. after 1979 that lends credence to this position. ??

³Walter Emil Kaegi, Jr., review of Jaroslav Pelikan, The Excellent Empire. The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church in Catholic Historical Review, Vol. 75, No. 1, page 127.

⁴Karl F. Morrison, review of Walter Goffart, Rome's Fall and After in The Catholic Historical Review, Vol. 76, No. 4 (September 1990), pages 820-822.

⁵See the "Map 6.1 Invasions 4th-6th Centuries" on page 213 in the fifth edition of Chambers; on page 153 in the sixth edition of Chambers; on page 172 in the seventh edition, in which the Rhine and Danube Rivers are no longer identified.

⁶See Walter Goffart, "Zosimus, the First Historian of Rome's Fall," The American Historical Review, Vol. 94, Vol. 76, No. 2 (April 1971), pp. 412-441.

⁷ Richard L. DeMolen, review of Bruce Mansfield, *Man on His Own: Interpretations of Erasmus, c. 1750-1920* in The Catholic Historical Review, Vol. 79, No. 3 (July 1993), page 503.

⁸John Bintliff, review of Peter Garnsey, Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis in The American Historical Review, Vol. 96, No. 1 (February 1991), page 145.

⁹John Bintliff, review of Peter Garnsey, Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis in The American Historical Review, Vol. 96, No. 1 (February 1991), page 145.

¹⁰ John H. Coatsworth, "Presidential Address: Welfare," The American Historical Review, Vol. 101, No. 1 (February 1996), page 9.

¹¹This section relies heavily upon Orlando Patterson, review of William D. Phillips, Jr., Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade in The American Historical Review, Vol. 94, No. 2 (April 1989), page 409, from which the quotation is also taken. A study that the professor has not

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seen is Ramsay Macmullen, "Late Roman Slavery," *Historia*, 36 (no. 3, 1987): 359-82 as cited in Recently Published Articles, Vol. 13, No. 2, page 13.

¹² Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), extensive footnotes, no bibliography or index, xx, 284 pages.

¹³ Jerry H. Bentley, "AHR Forum: Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 3 (June 1996), page 756.

¹⁴ Jerry H. Bentley, "AHR Forum: Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 101, No. 3 (June 1996), page 756.

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