

The End of The Roman Empire: Did it Collapse or Was it Transformed?

Bryan Ward-Perkins finds that archaeology offers unarguable evidence for an abrupt ending.

It used to be unquestioned that the Roman empire in the West fell to violent and bloody invasion that resulted in the death of a civilization, and the start of a 'dark age', from which it would take Europe centuries to recover. Recent scholarship, however, has tended to downplay the violence, and to challenge a concept of post-Roman cultural decline. New orthodoxies are emerging: that the barbarians were peacefully 'accommodated' into the empire to serve as its defenders; and that Roman culture was quietly 'transformed' into a new guise.

In the late 1970s I worked with a team of archaeologists on the site of Luna, a Roman city in northern Italy, on the coast about halfway between Pisa and Genoa. Ancient Luna, like hundreds of other towns across the empire, enjoyed the full range of Roman urban amenities: bath-buildings with piped water; paved roads with a drainage and sewerage system beneath them; a theatre and amphitheatre; a number of imposing temples; a full complement of civic buildings including a marble-paved forum square and a basilica for commercial and political transactions; and some splendid private houses, decorated in fresco, mosaic and marble. In the searing heat of July, one of the Roman houses was particularly attractive – its main reception rooms had floors of cool marble, and opened out onto a shaded courtyard, with raised flower beds and a fountain playing at its centre. The prosperity of the city was also attested by a remarkable range of high-quality and eminently functional domestic articles. For instance, third- and fourth-century citizens were eating off glossy plates and bowls from North Africa, and even cooking in casseroles from the same region. These vessels are found in large quantities, and were clearly very widely available. Like other Roman towns, Luna's prosperity depended partly on a flourishing local agriculture, and partly on more specialized production and trade, in its case the extraction and export of the white marble now known as Carrara marble – much of imperial Rome was built in this stone.

My own interest, however, was in the history of the city in the period when the empire in the West disintegrated and disappeared. During the fifth century, Italy, after centuries of peace, faced invasion and devastation, first by armies of Goths (who sacked Rome itself in 410), and then by Vandals, raiding by sea from their north African base at the port of Carthage. The Mediterranean, which had been a peaceful commercial lake for five centuries, was contested between rival Germanic kingdoms, and became a place where raiders, as well as traders, operated. In the sixth century, Italy's troubles continued, with a long war for mastery between the Goths and the forces of the surviving east-Roman (or 'Byzantine') empire, with its capital in Constantinople. This war ended in Byzantine victory, but was followed, almost immediately, by the invasion of another Germanic people, the Lombards. The Lombards, however, failed to capture the whole of Italy, which became a divided and contested peninsula. Luna suffered directly from some of these upheavals – a large Gothic army passed through its territory in 412, and during the long Lombard-Byzantine wars it became an isolated outpost of Byzantine power, surrounded by Lombard territory. As a coastal city, it must have suffered badly from the slow decline of Mediterranean trade that has been charted by recent archaeology.

What we found had happened to the city in the fifth to seventh centuries was both striking and depressing. Sometime in the fourth or fifth centuries, the marble quarries, which were the source of much of Luna's wealth, were abandoned – and they remained closed for some 700 years thereafter. At roughly the same date, the monumental buildings of the city were progressively allowed to fall down, or were demolished, their decorative marble elements broken into pieces and used as building materials. The great basalt slabs of the Roman roadways were gradually covered over and lost under patchy gravel surfaces. The aqueduct was interrupted, piped water no longer reached the city, and its fountains fell silent, compelling the inhabitants to dig wells through the ancient monuments to the water-table beneath. The houses of the aristocracy decayed, and were buried under rubble – one of them became the site of a graveyard.

Eventually, the town of Luna disappeared altogether.

The specific remains that we were excavating consisted of the scant traces of two simple wooden houses built in the sixth century AD – with post-holes, dry-stone footings for timber walls, and beaten earth floors. Each house was made up of two small rooms, one probably for humans, and the other for animals. These unprepossessing dwellings were built over the square of the Roman forum, the monumental heart of the ancient city. By the time they were built, all the Roman monumental buildings and shops of the forum had been abandoned and despoiled of their marble fittings, and the square itself was already covered in a deep layer of silt. These simple post-Roman houses, and the startling contrast that they presented with the imposing underlying Roman structures, seemed to point to a remarkable drop in economic and technological complexity, and in levels of material comfort. A city of mortared stone and marble, was replaced by a settlement of wood, thatch and beaten earth. Furthermore, good-quality domestic goods and other indicators of sophistication and prosperity also totally disappeared: the sixth-century inhabitants of Luna, unlike their ancestors, hardly used coins at all, and almost the only pottery available to them were simple cooking-pots.

From working at Luna, and from visiting many other Roman cities with a similar history, I formed an unshakeable impression that the disappearance of the Roman world was a shattering, and negative, event in human history. But, in the very years that I was documenting this post-Roman collapse, scholars elsewhere were engineering the downfall of such conventional views. The seeds of this change had been planted in 1971, when Peter Brown published his *World of Late Antiquity*, a book which was to have a remarkable effect on how the end of the ancient world was viewed by historians. Brown defined and described a period, which he termed 'Late Antiquity', stretching from the third century to the eighth century AD; but he saw it as characterized not by the disappearance of Roman sophistication and civilization, but by lively and positive developments. Brown invited his readers to reject the old language of 'decline and fall' and to embrace instead a vision of this as a period when Roman culture was transformed and revitalized.

The spread and impact of Brown's new interpretation was slow but inexorable. He is a brilliant historian who writes beautiful prose, and he is a bewitching performer in a lecture or seminar. In the early 1970s, as an undergraduate in Oxford, I attended a course of his lectures in All Souls on early Egyptian monasticism, not because I understood much of what he was saying (I was studying later periods and his detailed arguments went way over my head), but because the way he talked, and his empathy with those tough old men of the Egyptian desert, were truly enthralling. Under his influence, the way that historians, and some archaeologists, describe the last centuries of the Western Empire and their immediate aftermath changed markedly. For instance, a massive recent research project into the fourth to eighth centuries, sponsored by the European Union, was entitled the 'Transformation of the Roman World'. The very title of this project rejects the notion of any abrupt break at the end of the Roman empire; the underlying vision is instead of a Roman World seamlessly 'transformed' into the Europe of Charlemagne. The many Germanic peoples who entered the empire in the fifth and sixth centuries (Goths, Vandals, Franks, Burgundians, Sueves, Thuringians, Alamans, Lombards and others) are no longer seen as invaders who, wittingly or unwittingly, severely damaged the well-being of the Roman world, but as peaceful settlers in a world that continued much as before.

As a reinterpretation of the political and military history of the disintegration of the western empire, this is radical enough. But can the new upbeat thinking about the end of the Roman world be reconciled with the gloomy evidence of material collapse from Luna, and from hundreds of other similar sites across the ancient world? I think not, though efforts have been made by others to square this circle. For instance, some archaeologists have argued that one of the most striking changes at the end of the Roman period – the almost universal switch from solid stone and brick buildings, to much less permanent structures in perishable materials – was caused by cultural choice rather than economic necessity. They argue that it is possible to construct complex, sophisticated and highly decorated structures over the simple post-holes which are the only evidence we have for the buildings of post-Roman times; and that building in stone was merely a fashion – a way of expressing political and ideological allegiance to Rome – which was dropped when the empire disappeared. According to this way of thinking, the descendants and successors of the Roman aristocracy abandoned their villas, with their solid walls and floors, tiled roofs, bath-buildings, and under-floor heating, not because they were forced to, by a collapse in economic and technological sophistication, but because they actually preferred to live in wooden halls.

I find this deeply implausible: tiled roofs are, quite simply, much more durable, brick and stone floors far easier to keep clean, and stone walls more weatherproof, than their equivalents in perishable materials; and heating systems and hot baths are both effective and very pleasant indeed – much more so than a smoking open fire in the middle of a hall, and a bowl of lukewarm water. The evidence of buildings will, however, always remain controversial, because it is impossible in most cases to reconstruct with confidence, from the scant remains we find in the soil, what a post-

Roman building was really like to live in. But if we look at domestic pottery, an inescapable picture emerges of technological and economic collapse at the end of the Roman period, leading to a dramatic regression in living standards. And there is little prospect of arguing it away in terms of ideological and cultural choice.

The Romans produced pottery vessels to high standards, in enormous quantities, and shipped them widely. As we have already seen, in third- and fourth-century Italy even a cooking-pot might often be imported from North Africa. Furthermore – and this is very important – good-quality pottery, whether made in the region, or imported, was available at all levels of society. Fine tablewares, and imported amphorae for the storage and transport of liquids are discovered not just on the coast and in towns and rich villas, but also on inland sites and humble farmsteads.

Because pottery survives so well in the soil and because individual pot-sherds can be both dated and provenanced (reliably attributed to particular production sites), we know a remarkable amount about the trade in ancient pottery. We also know, from the objects themselves, that the vast majority of Roman pottery is of a quality not exceeded, in Europe, in terms of consistency and quality, before factory-made products became widely available in the eighteenth century. This judgement is based not on aesthetic considerations but on practical values. Roman pots are tough and hold liquids well; they are light and pleasant to handle; and they have smooth surfaces that are easy to clean. Furthermore, from the excavation of production sites we know a lot about the scale and levels of complexity involved in making some of the best-quality Roman wares. Excavators at a south Gaulish pottery, la Graufesenque near modern Millau, have found graffiti that record the stacking of great communal kilns, firing up to 30,000 vessels at a time. At the same site, a pit was discovered full of near-perfect vessels, discarded because they were not quite of a high enough quality; some of these pots had a hole punched through their base, in order to prevent them slipping into circulation – a remarkable testimony to Roman quality control.

Almost none of this sophistication survived into post-Roman times. In some provinces – particularly Britain – the regression was startling: even the potter's wheel, widespread in Roman times, wholly disappeared for over two hundred years. Pottery of the early Anglo-Saxon period, and also pottery of the same date from unconquered western Britain, is rare and poor in quality – of badly selected clay, hand-shaped, and fired on an open fire. The resulting vessels are porous and very friable – many would score low marks as first efforts in pottery at an infants' school. Elsewhere, the changes were slightly less dramatic and less sudden, but they were still very remarkable. On Mediterranean sites like Luna, the extraordinary and abundant range of tablewares available in Roman times became very rare in the fifth and sixth centuries, and eventually disappeared altogether; and kitchenwares, which were pretty much all that remained, became more or less restricted to a single bulbous design of pot. To explain these developments in terms of cultural change rather than of economic and technological regression, one has to work very hard indeed, perhaps imagining a culture with access to large numbers of metal vessels which replaced pottery but were all eventually recycled so they left no trace in the archaeological record!

If the archaeological evidence that points to a severe post-Roman regression cannot be squared with the historians' cheerful view of 'Late Antiquity', how has the latter come about? Partly, it is through the optimism of some archaeologists themselves, who explain all change in terms of altered cultural values. But largely it is because historians like Peter Brown examine entirely different aspects of the human condition, and therefore come to radically divergent impressions about the same periods of the past. The 'World of Late Antiquity' tends to be defined in spiritual and religious terms, as the period when Christianity became established and defined, and, slightly later, Islam emerged as the dominant religion of the southern Mediterranean. If we take these as the key things that happened in our period, then there is no problem in depicting the third to eighth centuries as a 'Golden Age' of continuous and positive development. It is certainly true that with the conversion of the Germanic kingdoms, and the eventual spread of Christianity into areas like Ireland and Scotland, far more souls were saved in these centuries than under the Roman empire.

I may be wrong to believe that the disintegration of a complex economy, and a consequent collapse of living standards mattered even more than momentous religious developments, and that they mark a decisive break in Western history – but I don't think I am. The changes that archaeologists have documented affected kings and peasants alike: palaces, as much as rural farmsteads, were far less impressive and comfortable in post-Roman times than they had been under the empire. These changes even affected God and his saints, currently the focus of much of the writing by historians on Late Antiquity. The cult of saints grew steadily through late Roman and post-Roman times, and was not slowed by the disintegration of the Roman world. But if we look at the size of the churches built for these saints, there is a dramatic shrinkage between late Roman and post-Roman times. In the fourth century, huge churches were built over the graves of the martyrs – Old St Peter's, for instance, erected by Constantine to honour Rome's premier bishop,

was a massive five-aisled basilica about 100 metres long, with an atrium almost the same size again. However, by the seventh century, new churches in the West seldom exceeded 20 metres in length. Fortunately for the saints, many great churches of earlier times were still maintained – if they had had to rely on post-Roman builders, their living-conditions would have become very cramped indeed.

All the evidence suggests that most of the sophisticated features and creature-comforts that characterized Roman life, disappeared in the West in the fifth to seventh centuries, to such an extent that the change can accurately be seen as the 'end of a civilization'. Furthermore, the close coincidence of date between this collapse and the Germanic invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries suggests, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the change was caused by the disruption of war and the disintegration of the peaceful trading-world that was the Roman empire. Western Europe did eventually emerge out of the resulting slump, but it took perhaps a thousand years to regain the levels of economic activity and the high standards of living that had so impressed me in Roman Luna.

For Further Reading:

Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (Thames and Hudson, 1971); Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire, AD 284-430* (Fontana, 1993) and *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395-600* (Routledge, 1993), Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton University Press, 1980); J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Macmillan, 2005)

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