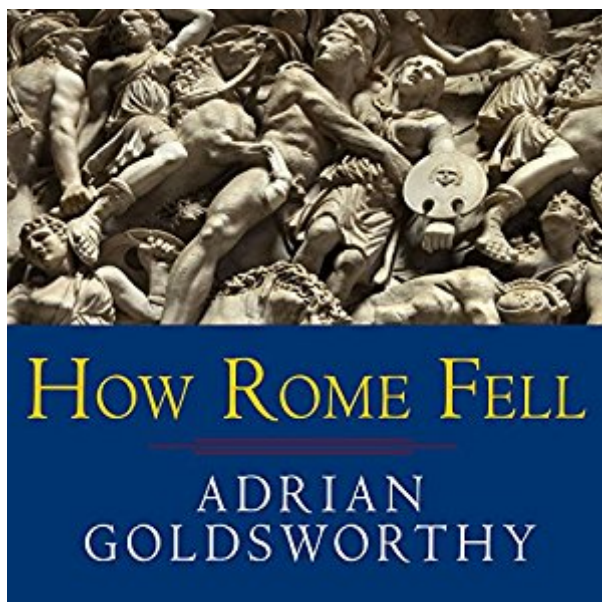


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How Rome Fell: Death Of A Superpower



Synopsis

In AD 200, the Roman Empire seemed unassailable, its vast territory accounting for most of the known world. By the end of the fifth century, Roman rule had vanished in Western Europe and much of northern Africa, and only a shrunken Eastern Empire remained. This was a period of remarkable personalities, from the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius to emperors like Diocletian, who portrayed themselves as tough, even brutal, soldiers. It was a time of revolutionary ideas, especially in religion, as Christianity went from persecuted sect to the religion of state and emperors. Ultimately, this is the story of how an empire without a serious rival rotted from within, its rulers and institutions putting short-term ambition and personal survival over the greater good of the state.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I want to start off by noting that any book dealing with the fall of the Roman Empire will be unsatisfactory to some because an author has only two choices: 1) cram as much info into a set amount of space to make the book marketable or 2) publish an academic treatise. In this regard, any commercial work on the subject will not be fully complete. Operating within these confines, this is a good book. To answer another commentator, this book is intended for the serious amateur or armchair historian and provides a great narrative of the last centuries of the glory that was Rome and a convincing explanation for the primary cause of its collapse. This book is also clearly meant to refute Peter Heather's work, which claims that Rome fell not because of internal weakness, but because of the superiority of newly formed barbarian supergroups. What I find fascinating is that both authors use the same evidence to reach drastically different conclusions. For instance, a cache of weapons found in a lake in Northern Europe is used by Heather to demonstrate that the

Germanic tribes had achieved a new level of sophistication and material wealth, as well as weapons equal to that of Rome. Goldsworthy uses the same find to conclude that only the top echelon of Germanic tribes had access to such weapons. Although I believe the truth lies somewhere in the middle, I believe Goldsworthy has the better argument. Although I do not find Goldsworthy's assessment that the Germanic tribes were no different than those facing Caesar to be persuasive (on this point Heather wins), at the same time I cannot accept Heather's conclusion that Rome post-3rd century crises was as vibrant and stable as before. Here is where Goldsworthy really shines.

Adrian Goldsworthy has crafted a lucid and compelling narrative history of the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire (the author consciously follows in the footsteps of Edward Gibbon). In recent decades it had become quite fashionable to describe what happened in Western Europe in the fifth century CE as a "transformation" from the Roman imperial state to a cluster of Germanic kingdoms, emphasizing continuity rather than disruption. However, the current generation of Roman scholars once again find that political, social, and economic changes were substantial enough to warrant a description of a "fall". Of course, there is -- and very probably never can be -- a consensus as to what caused that "fall". Literally hundreds of possible factors have been proposed since Gibbon wrote his classic work. A few years ago, Peter Heather in "The Fall of the Roman Empire" argued strongly that the Western Empire fell at the hands of irresistible military force at the hands of Germanic "barbarians" (Goths, Franks, Vandals, etc.), groups that had become more cohesive and formidable thanks to centuries of exposure to the Roman Empire. The suggestion was that external forces, not internal weakness, caused the catastrophe of the fifth century. Adrian Goldsworthy, on the other hand, contends that the Germans of the fifth century were not substantially more powerful than their ancestors of previous centuries (Goldsworthy takes great pains to point out that the "barbarian armies" of the fifth century most often numbered only a few thousand men), and that the real problem was that the Roman Empire had fatally weakened itself through many decades of civil wars and internal struggles for power. The acquisition of personal power, not service to Rome, had become all.

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