

FROM ROME TO AACHEN:
THE SHIFT FROM ROMAN TO MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

MANUEL L. IRAVEDRA

Recent controversies have made the beginning of the medieval era rather difficult to pinpoint. At the root of the problem is the fact that the “Middle Ages” are so ambiguously defined: the term simply refers to whatever is sandwiched between the end of classical antiquity and the beginning of the Renaissance. The end of the classical era is traditionally synonymous with the fall of Rome, and so we must ask when Rome fell, if it fell at all, and if it did not, how we can concretely differentiate the late classical from the early medieval.

Merriam-Webster identifies two components to every society: first, a governmental or political system (“institutions”) and, second, a shared culture (“traditions”). In the case of Ancient Rome, these elements translate to central and local *Romanitas*, or “Roman-ness.” Both aspects – political and cultural, central and local – must be examined individually to arrive at an informed conclusion regarding the “fall” of Rome; furthermore, they must also be reviewed in light of the existence of two independent yet interconnected halves of the empire.

The Deposition of Romulus Augustus in the West

The political transition to medieval times in the West came with the deposition of Emperor Romulus Augustus by Odovacar in 476 CE. Odovacar, a Germanic-born Roman general, was subsequently recognized as *rex Italiae* (“King of Italy”) by the Eastern Emperor Zeno but was never officially declared Western Emperor, a title he had dismissed as meaningless. In his 1776 book, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon argued that this shift in leadership marked the “total extinction” of the Western system of governance. Rome (or, in this case, Ravenna) would never again house an emperor after Odovacar’s successes – the Western Empire had officially ceased to be. In the East, Constantinople became the “New Rome.”

By the end of the 5th century, what had been the Western Empire was now entirely in the hands of barbarians, split up between Franks, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals and the like. By 493, Theodoric, an Ostrogothic king, had supplanted Odovacar in Ravenna at the suggestion of Emperor Zeno.¹ Theodoric developed a peculiar Romano-Ostrogothic reign, trying to rule as a Roman would and even being respectful to the Senate.² He had been raised in Constantinople and wanted to see a continuation of the Roman way of life.³ While Theodoric himself was illiterate and thus authored no records, his secretary Cassiodorus often commented on his love of things Roman.⁴ Despite his efforts, Theodoric watched what was left of the empire fragment. For example, in southern Gaul and Iberia, the Visigoths established a proper state and issued a collection of laws, titled the *Breviary of Alaric*, that exempted them from Roman laws.⁵ Also during this time, the Sallian Franks broke away from Roman imperial allegiance and began to settle in northern Gaul.⁶

¹ Jordanes, “Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths,” *Medieval Sourcebook*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/jordanes-theodoric1.html> (accessed May 6, 2008).

² Edward Peters, *Europe and the Middle Ages* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2004), 81.

³ Cassiodorus, “Letters of Theodoric,” *Medieval Sourcebook*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/theodoric1.html> (accessed May 6, 2008).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Peters, *Europe*, 78.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Things had changed. According to Bryan Ward-Perkins' *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, the standard of living experienced a "startling decline" in the following two centuries,⁷ characterizing the onset of the Middle Ages. As an archaeologist, he based his conclusions on the quality and quantity of pottery, the size of cattle bones, and other physical evidence. In his own words,

This was a change that affected everyone, from peasants to kings, even the bodies of saints resting in their churches. It was no mere transformation – it was decline on a scale that can reasonably be described as 'the end of a civilization.'⁸

Ward-Perkins' "end of a civilization" also resulted from the removal of Romulus Augustus. We may reasonably conclude that the Western political transition took place in the late 5th century, when independent nations began to surge up in reaction to the disintegration of central authority.

The Fall of Constantinople in the East

In the East, the fall of the Roman government came much later, in the 15th century. In 1453, Ottoman forces under Mehmed the Conqueror breached Constantinople's walls and claimed the city in the name of Islam. Mehmed began to use the title *Kaysar-i Rum* ("Caesar of Rome") and continued to refer to the city as Constantinople, even though it had technically been renamed Istanbul.⁹ Nearly a millennium after the fall of Rome, the Roman Empire had finally lost all forms of centralized power.

In the case of the Byzantine Romans, there was no marked transition to medieval society and no equivalent to the Manchesterian "Dark Ages." Instead, there was a period of great wealth under Justinian shortly after Odovacar's conquest of the Western Empire. With the fall of Rome, Constantinople had become the largest and wealthiest city in the world. By the 15th century, the Renaissance had already started, and the "world lit only by fire"¹⁰ had essentially come to an end. The Eastern Empire had done much more than hold off barbarians for over a thousand years, it had spared its people the reduced standards of living experienced in the West, as elaborated on by Ward-Perkins, and served as the last bastion of genuine *Romanitas*.

In his *Fall of the Roman Empire*, Peter Heather claims that past 700 CE the Eastern emperors were "ruling an entity best understood as another successor state rather than a proper continuation of the Roman Empire."¹¹ Heather made a value judgment, alleging that the Eastern Empire was not a surviving part of the Roman Empire but rather an heir to it. This is demonstrably false. The Greek city of Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople, fell to Emperor Septimius Severus' forces and was assimilated into the Roman Empire as early as 196 CE, nearly three centuries before the deposition of Romulus Augustus. The city was distinctly Roman from that point onward. While the fall of Rome substantially reduced the amount of land under official Roman control, it is overly simplistic to assert that the Roman Empire came to an end while Constantinople was experiencing its golden age.

The medieval era only truly refers to Western Europe's post-Roman reinvention. While the Byzantine Romans certainly dealt with the medieval Europeans, and were even helped by the Western Roman Catholics at the behest of Pope Urban II,¹² they were never "medieval" themselves. In their case, the first major political transition came with Mehmed's troops and acclimation to the Ottoman system. While in the West, we may speak of classical, medieval, and Renaissance, in the East we may only identify classical followed by Ottoman.

Diocletian's Tetrarchy

When faced with the idea of governmental downfall, some historians argue that the Roman Empire really collapsed when Diocletian split it in 286 CE, or that this split severely weakened it. For instance, Edward Gibbon wrote in his *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*:

⁷ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178.

¹⁰ William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993).

¹¹ Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 431.

¹² Urban II, "Speech at Clermont," *Medieval Sourcebook*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/urban2-5vers.html> (accessed May 6, 2008).

This dangerous novelty impaired the strength, and fomented the vices, of a double reign; the instruments of an oppressive and arbitrary system were multiplied . . .¹³

The institution of Tetrarchy differs from the aforementioned processes of Germanic takeover in the West and Ottoman takeover in the East in fundamental ways. While all involve governmental reform, the Tetrarchy was Emperor Diocletian's bidding, not a foreign conqueror's. The splitting of the empire was meant to prolong its life, not shorten it. Furthermore, Diocletian's Tetrarchy did not keep future emperors from reuniting the halves and ruling over a consolidated empire, like Constantine did shortly after the initial split in 324 CE. In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius tells of Constantine's victory over the Eastern Emperor Licinius and the reunification of the empire:

And now, the impious being thus removed, the sun once more shone brightly after the gloomy cloud of tyrannic power. Each separate portion of the Roman dominion became blended with the rest; the Eastern nations united with those of the West, and the whole body of the Roman empire was graced as it were by its head in the person of a single and supreme ruler, whose sole authority pervaded the whole.¹⁴

Because the Eastern Empire flourished under Justinian as the former Western Empire lay in a heap, we must wonder if Diocletian's initial division forged an 'Eastern identity' of sorts that allowed the Byzantine Roman government to survive for so long after the fall of Rome. In this light, Diocletian did not hurt the empire so much as take the steps necessary for its survival, albeit in reduced form, after realizing it had grown too large to be managed entirely from a single city; thus, it is not fair to say Diocletian's reforms had effects *en par* to those adopted under Odovacar or Mehmed.

A Cultural Legacy

It can be argued that, culturally, Rome has yet to fall. In this case, we may speak of transformation rather than reinvention. After the deposition of Romulus Augustus, the Romans did not immediately stop thinking of themselves as Roman. Once he took over Odovacar's post, Theodoric tried to fill the shoes of the Western Emperor and minimize trauma: he deferred to the Senate, he continued minting coins depicting the old emperor's likeness, and even attempted to reconsolidate the territories by marrying off his daughters. While this ultimately did not work, it is important to recognize that the barbarians did not seek to destroy the Roman way of life but instead to incorporate themselves in it. Because Henri Pirenne explained it beautifully in *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, it becomes counterproductive to paraphrase:

The appearance of the Germanic tribes on the shore of the Mediterranean was by no means a critical point marking the advent of a new era in the history of Europe. Great as were the consequences which it entailed, *it did not sweep the boards clean nor even break the tradition*. The aim of the invaders was not to destroy the Roman Empire but to occupy and enjoy it. By and large, what they preserved far exceeded what they destroyed or what they brought that was new. *It is true that the kingdoms they established on the soil of the Empire made an end of the latter in so far as being a State in Western Europe*. . . . The Empire, however, was far from becoming a stranger to the lost provinces. *Its civilization there outlived its authority*. . . . They barbarized [Rome], but they did not consciously germanize it.¹⁵

While the system inevitably changed in the long run, the Romans had set the benchmark as far as empires went: they had dominated Europe for centuries and had achieved levels of production (and standards of living) that would not be seen again until the 19th century, according to Ward-Perkins.¹⁶ Before the adoption of Christianity as the official state religion by Theodosius in 380 CE, most Romans had enjoyed unparalleled religious tolerance the likes of which would not be seen again until the rise of the Ottoman Empire.

¹³ Edward Gibbon, *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West* (UPENN Electronic Resources), <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/gibbon.fall> (accessed May 6, 2008).

¹⁴ Eusebius, "Life of Constantine," *Medieval Sourcebook*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/vita-constantine.html> (accessed May 6, 2008).

¹⁵ Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), 32. My emphasis

¹⁶ Ward-Perkins, *End of Civilization*, 100.

Rome's cultural legacy can be most obviously examined in religious terms. Christianity, as the official Roman religion, went on to be the one constant among all new Western nations. It was an alliance with the Pope that validated Charlemagne's Frankish empire and allowed it to expand so efficiently. The Roman Church was possibly the most powerful institution of the Middle Ages. In a sense, the Pope became the new Roman emperor after the collapse of the West. He ruled over millions of faithful from the safety of Rome, excommunicated instead of executed, and conquered new lands and defended territories by calling for crusade. *Romanitas* was replaced with religious fervor: in Medieval Europe, massive numbers of people were brought together through shared faith rather than the shared nationality of the Roman age.

Roman influence was not limited to the Church, though it was often associated with it. Well into the Middle Ages, Latin continued to be the language of learned men. Charlemagne, with the blessing of the Church, endeavored to recreate Roman times: he called himself Holy Roman Emperor and declared his capital city of Aachen the "New Rome." Even today we can see Rome's legacy – for instance, the ancient Roman symbol of the *fascēs*, a bundle of rods that represents strength through unity, is still employed by governments worldwide (particularly in France and the United States). More generally, the diligent spirit of Roman urbanization directly inspired the modern metropolis.

While post-Roman societies were not necessarily fixated on the past, it can be argued that Roman culture somehow influenced every civilization that arose after it. As mentioned previously, we speak of transformation in this case, not substitution or abandonment. For instance, while Latin continued to be studied and employed, it became necessary to learn new languages for everyday speech. For instance, in a letter to his friend Syagrius, Sidonius wrote about how strange it was to be learning German.¹⁷ Besides new languages, Romans had to contend with a new take on Christianity: the Ostrogoths, who were the only military force in Italy during the 490s, were typically Arians. Edward Peters claims that this religious difference was a source of great strife between the two groups during Theodoric's reign.¹⁸ Regardless, Roman tradition plowed on, and Catholicism would eventually displace Arianism and regain control of the Italian peninsula.

Conclusions

In light of these examinations, we may conclude that the barbarian Odovacar medievalized the Western Empire's administration in 476 CE with the takeover of Ravenna. There was no resurgence of Roman central power in the West, at least not on a secular level. The deposition of Romulus Augustus put a crack in the political system that could not be repaired even by Theodoric's Romanized rule. The former Roman provinces experienced marked economic decline during this transitional period. In sharp contrast, the Eastern Empire's administration was never medievalized. Roman power was centralized until the fall of Constantinople to Mehmed the Conqueror's Muslim troops in 1453 CE. The transition took place so much later than that of the West that it was one of classical directly to Ottoman or Renaissance, virtually skipping the medieval period. The Eastern Empire never experienced a marked decline in standard of living comparable to what the West endured in the 5th century.

Culturally, the medieval and late classical periods were very similar because medieval societies appreciated Roman accomplishments and wanted to make them their own. The main difference between the periods was the shift in leadership, or central *Romanitas*, rather than changes in culture, or local *Romanitas*. There was no marked cultural transition to the medieval era because the early Middle Ages borrowed their traditions from late antiquity to begin with. Again Pirenne rings true, "By and large, what [the barbarians] preserved far exceeded what they destroyed or what they brought that was new."¹⁹

¹⁷ Michael Maas, *Readings in Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 307.

¹⁸ Peters, *Europe*, 81.

¹⁹ Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, 40.

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