In many ways the fifth century CE was one of the most remarkable centuries in European and Mediterranean History.² An glance at a map of this region around 400 CE shows an empire stretching all the way from the Caucasus to the strait of Gibraltar and from the highlands in Scotland to the Red Sea. A Roman citizen living during the reign of Nero (54-68 CE) would still have recognised those borders as the same as those of his Empire. Yet looking further, around 500 CE, this empire has vanished in the West and been replaced by nearly a dozen barbarian kingdoms. The speed and magnitude of this geopolitical revolution is only comparable with twentieth century, when three empires that for centuries had dominated half of Europe were replaced with nearly twenty nation states. Despite its momentous impact on the shape of history, the fifth century has always been a bit of a black sheep in terms of scholarly attention. For most classicists it is too late, while for most medievalists too early. Furthermore, a lot of classicists feel hesitant to deal with this era. Only in the past few decades has there been a serious revaluation of this period. The old attitude is demonstrated by the original Cambridge Ancient History, the last volume of which stopped with the ascendancy of Constantine I in 324. In French, the period of the Later Roman Empire is usually called Le Bas-Empire—‘The Low Empire’. It was coined in the mid 18th century and always retained a negative connotation. Negative attitudes and lack of interest in this period persisted for a long time. Exemplary is the Roman part of The Oxford History of the Classical World from 1986.³ Out of 420 pages only the last 20 pages deal with the two centuries before the year 476. The chapter is called ‘On Taking Leave of Antiquity’. Seems like the editors could not leave fast enough!⁴

To explain this historiographical problem, it is useful to reflect on a couple of characteristics of both the Early and Later Roman Empire. At first glance, the two centuries of the Principate, roughly from Augustus (27 BCE-14 CE) to Septimius Severus (193-211), seem to suggest a uniform entity. The culture and religion are ‘pagan’, the emperors are hiding behind a republican façade, and Roman power is as good as uncontested through triumphant legions. More importantly, we are exceptionally well informed thanks to the histories of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio on one hand and probably the largest collection of inscriptions on the other. For many classicists everything that happened after the Severan dynasty never seems to have been as worthy of attention. When we get to the second quarter of the third century, we see a world in transition.⁵ In the East, Rome meets its deadliest rival since Punic Carthage. The Sassanid dynasty of Persia challenges Rome on its own turf and throws the

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1 Early versions of this article were presented at Ghent University (30/11/09), the University of Melbourne (23/8/11) and the Classical Association of Victoria (9/3/12). I am very grateful for the feedback I received from Prof. Koen Verboven and Prof. Arjan Zuiderhoek at Ghent, and Prof. Em. Ronald Ridley, Assoc. Prof. Em. Roger Scott, Dr. Frederik Vervaet, Mr. John Whitehouse and Ms. Alexandra Dellios at Melbourne. Any remaining errors are of course the sole responsibility of the author.

2 All dates are CE, unless stated otherwise.

3 Boardman, Griffin & Murray (1986).

4 I owe this observation to the very insightful essay by Ross (1996-2012).

imperial framework into turmoil. Meanwhile, barbarian tribes on the other side of the Danube and Rhine are uniting in confederations and plunging themselves deep into imperial territory. At the same time a series of usurpers and contenders detach Gaul, Britain and Spain on one hand and Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor on the other. In only half a century, more than twenty emperors and as many usurpers succeed and battle each other. Roman society seems to go through a crisis of identity and many people increasingly turn towards mystery cults such as those of Mithras and Christ. Order in the Roman World would not be restored completely until the supremacy of Diocletian (284-305).

Indeed, the empire of Diocletian was a very different one from that of Augustus. What was left of the republican façade of emperorship—not much—was finally replaced with an absolutist court culture along the Persian model, where emperors took on a divine status. Furthermore, from Diocletian onwards multiple emperors rule different parts of the empire at the same time. From 285 until 395, fewer than 25 years saw the government of a single emperor rule over the entire empire. Equally significant is the religious situation. From the reign of Constantine I (306-337) we see an evolution: Christianity turns from a persecuted cult into a tolerated cult and then from the favoured religion of his successors into the exclusive state religion under Theodosius I (379-395). Yet probably the most novel feature of this time is that the empire no longer revolves around Rome. The Roman Empire becomes an ‘inside-outside empire’, where authority shifts to the frontiers with imperial residences as far away as Trier near the Rhine or Antioch in Syria. Nobody had to march on Rome anymore to seize ultimate power, as Vespasian (69-79) or Septimius Severus had to do. Diocletian and Constantius II (337-361), who both ruled at least 20 years, only visited the city once, both towards the end of their respective reigns.

We enter a time when ‘being Roman’ had long ceased to mean ‘being a citizen of Rome’. The empire was no longer dependent on its original heartland, capital and native Italic people. I lay enormous stress on this fact for two reasons. Firstly, it is quite a unique phenomenon in Western history. Is it possible to imagine a British empire without London and the English? Or a Russian Empire without St Petersburg, Moscow and the Russians? Or even an Ottoman Empire without the Turks and Constantinople (after its capture in 1453)? No. Yet from Diocletian on, this is precisely what is happening to the Roman Empire. The Empire no longer gravitates around Rome and the indigenous Latin speaking people of Italy no longer hold sway in government. More and more, provincials from Gaul, the Danubian provinces and the Greek-speaking East will be the ones directing the fate of the Empire. *Roma* had become *Romania*.

For many older generations of scholars, this was not a Roman Empire anymore and hence they preferred to ‘take leave from Antiquity’. If the Roman Empire has to be identified as an empire ruled from Rome and governed by Italic people then there is indeed no point to go beyond the third century. But that is a matter of taste and does not diminish the achievements of the so-called Illyrian soldier-emperors from Aurelian (270-275) to Constantine. They laid

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6 Constantine I ruled solely from 324 until 337, Constantius II from 353 until 361, succeeded by Julian (361-363) and Jovian (363-364). Theodosius is traditionally considered to have been the last emperor to rule Rome’s Mediterranean Empire singlehandedly (394-395). It has to be strongly pointed out, however, that both Constantine and Constantius had junior family members assisting them in the role of Caesar, while Theodosius had already appointed his sons as co-emperors during his lifetime. Therefore, the last emperors truly to reign solely were Julian and Jovian. The very short tenure of both emperors makes it impossible to state whether this would have been permanent long-term or not.
the foundations of a new resilient imperial structure that would last in the West almost as long as the Principate. In the East it even lasted a millennium. This is the second point that needs to be emphasised. It is often forgotten but the Byzantine Empire had the most enduring political structure throughout all European history. More importantly, if I am allowed to make an even bolder statement, the term Byzantine is rubbish. Nobody who lived in the Eastern Empire, from the time of Constantine I until Constantine XI Palaeologos (1448-1453), called themselves ‘Byzantine’. These people referred to themselves as Romaioi. Romans. That is how they viewed themselves and that is how their Slavic, Arabic and Turkish neighbours identified them. In fact, when the Turks started conquering Asia Minor, from the late 11th century onwards, they referred to that region as Rum—the country of the Romans.

It is true that the inhabitants of this Eastern Roman Empire predominantly spoke Greek. But we should not make the mistake of calling them Greek. When an Italian ambassador visited Constantinople in the 10th century and addressed the Emperor as ‘Emperor of the Greeks’, he was immediately thrown in prison. For the Roman people of this age, to be called Graecus or Hellenikos meant to be called a Pagan! And we are dealing with very Christian Romans here. The labelling of the Eastern Roman people as Byzantines is in my mind nothing more than one of the most enduring cases of identity theft in European history. The term ‘Byzantine’ was developed by early modern scholars in the 17th century. It is essentially an anachronistic label steeped in negative connotations. Yet from the constitutional point of view, this so-called Byzantine Empire was still the Roman Empire. So it was to its inhabitants and so it was for its neighbours. Therefore, the concept of the ‘fall of the Roman empire’ would have been alien to the people of medieval Greece and Turkey. Yet for Western Europe—and later on the rest of the Anglophone world—this ‘Fall’ has always remained a bit of a trauma. Ever since the rediscovery of the Ancient World in the Renaissance, people have not ceased discussing ‘Rome’s demise’. There are modern theories galore regarding the ‘How, what, when and why’ issues. The German scholar Alexander Demandt compiled as many as 210 different explanations, going from Anti-Germanismus (anti-Germanic behaviour) to Zweifrontenkrieg (two-front war), and including Frauenemanzipation (women’s emancipation) and Hyperthermia (a phenomenon whereby men who visited the Roman baths too often acquired erectile dysfunction). Some of these theories are more sound than others.

It would be impossible to discuss all of Demandt’s explanations within the scope of this article. Instead, it can be more insightful to investigate developments in the scholarly debate throughout the past two centuries. Though the topic had already been dealt with in the 18th century by eminent French philosophers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu, it seems prudent

7 Runciman (1933), 79, already pointed out that the political framework remained virtually the same and was essentially unchallenged. ‘Byzantium’ did not produce a single political theorist for centuries, which is an extraordinary feat compared to the numerous disputes between emperors, kings and popes in Western Europe during the same era.

8 The term can only be correctly used for citizens of the ancient Greek city-state Byzantium, before its transformation into Constantinople by Constantine in 330. Eastern Roman authors, such as Procopius and Marcellinus comes, used the term sometimes as an archaic name for the inhabitants of Constantinople, but never as a catchall term for all people of the Eastern Roman Empire.

9 Standard dictionaries in English, French and German provide meanings as ‘devious’, ‘needlessly complicated’ or ‘sycophantic behaviour’ for the word ‘Byzantine’.

10 For the Early Modern theories, Mazzarino (1959) remains useful.


12 For further investigation, see Baynes (1943); Bowersock (1996); James (2008); Wood (2008).
to start our story with Edward Gibbon.\textsuperscript{13} When the first volume of Gibbon’s \textit{The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire} appeared in 1776, it became an instant success. Praised lavishly by contemporaries, it rapidly turned into one of the most widely read works in the British Isles. To my knowledge, \textit{The Decline and Fall} must be the only scholarly work of history that has remained a best seller until this day after more than two centuries. The work has had a tremendous influence over entire generations of intellectuals, from David Hume to Iggy Pop.\textsuperscript{14} It was so popular, that the first French translation was done by no one less than king Louis XVI—when he was still able to put his head to these things. What made Gibbon’s work such a success?

First of all its magnificent prose. Gibbon is one of those brilliant historians whose narrative can be read solely for its stylistic merits. More importantly, Gibbon was also one of the first truly modern historians of the Roman Empire. To compile this work he engaged with nearly all surviving primary sources. Equally important, he left the reader a great critical apparatus of footnotes which allows the reader to see how Gibbon came to his ideas and explanations. Most of his research still provides us with the majority of basic facts about the Later Roman Empire. In six volumes, going from the Antonines all the way to the Renaissance, Edward Gibbon was digging for the roots of Rome’s decline. His quest was inspired by a visit to that Italian city where he became astounded by the material remains of its ancient heritage. In Gibbon’s mind there was no doubt that this was once the epitome of human civilisation (i.78):

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors, whose characters and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws. Such princes deserved the honour of restoring the republic had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom.

The following statement is probably unfair to Gibbon’s complex analysis. But if one wants to summarise the research of his six tomes into one sentence, then the Fall of the Roman Empire was essentially ‘the Triumph of Barbarism and Superstition’. Two factors above all caused the decline of Rome: Christianity and the barbarian tribes. Gibbon, very much a product of the Enlightenment, judged Christianity as a pacifist religion that robbed the Romans of their martial attitude and turned them away from secular affairs. It was this moral decay which allowed the barbarian tribes finally to break through and take over. For Gibbon, a superior culture disappeared and nothing worth that label could be found throughout the Middle Ages. It says something about the scope of Gibbon’s work, that the last attempt to replace it entirely was done in the early 1900s by Otto Seeck.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Gibbon (1776-1788).

\textsuperscript{14} Iggy Pop (1995)

\textsuperscript{15} Seeck (1897-1920).
Contrary to Gibbon’s *magnum opus*, Seeck’s work has not stood the test of time. His reconstruction of events is very diligent, but very few scholars would be willing to adhere to his analysis today. Seeck believed that a long process of demographic decline (the so-called *Ausrottung der besten*) resulted in the dominance of moral weakness and degeneration in late Roman society. This social-Darwinist interpretation of Rome’s demise was characteristic of scholarly thought during the ‘Belle Époque’. Seeck’s work would also hold tremendous influence over Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Fortunately, this sort of pseudoscientific theory has been thoroughly debunked during the past century. Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* would dominate most scholarly views in England until John Bury’s *Late Roman Empire* at the end of the 19th century. Bury adhered to Gibbon’s factual research, but turned down his analysis. He pointed out that Christianity could not have been a dominant factor in Rome’s downfall, since the Eastern Empire was much more christianised than the West yet it was the latter which crumbled. More importantly, Bury did not believe in the inevitability of Rome’s decline in favour of the barbarian tribes during the fifth century. He saw no great theory here, but rather a chain reaction of events and factors whose interplay would bring about the demise of the Western Empire. Individually, none of these could have granted dominion to the barbarian kingdoms. Yet combined they did. Besides economic and demographic decline, Bury singled out dangerous tendencies such as the barbarisation of the armies, weak leadership of the Western emperors and the precarious position of supreme commanders such as Stilicho (395-408) and Aetius (434-454), whose execution exacerbated the political balance to the detriment of the empire in face of the barbarian invasions.

A third fundamental name in the traditional British school for this subject is Arnold Jones. Jones was a scholar of immense stature. His vision and focus were extraordinary, resulting in series of monographs with topics as varied as Sparta, Augustus, the cities of the Roman East or Constantine. He was also one of the founding fathers of the prestigious journal *Past and Present*. His most important work for our discussion is his *The Later Roman Empire: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*. Two of his observations are fundamental for the debate on the Fall. Jones had demonstrated that both East and West shared the same institutional framework and were facing the same fundamental social and economic challenges. Therefore, each theory that claims to explain the fall of the Roman Empire, also has to explain why the West diminished yet the East endured. For Jones ‘the fall of the Roman Empire’ is still a legitimate expression as long as we carefully define it. For Jones this meant nothing more than the ‘loss of the Western provinces of the Empire in the fifth century AD’. More importantly, after having provided the most exhaustive analysis of all Later Roman institutions in more than a thousand pages Jones concluded that ‘internal factors cannot have been decisive in its demise’.

Consequently, many scholars have turned to external factors when trying to understand the

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16 For one of the earliest rebukes, see Baynes (1943). Baynes is noteworthy since he published this work during the peak of the Second World War, where social Darwinism had been one of the driving factors in Nazi ideology. Many British people in 1943 were still unwilling to believe reports about Jewish extermination in Eastern Europe.

17 Bury (1923). The first edition of this work was published in 1889. The 1923 edition is still the most complete narrative of the fifth century in English and can be accessed online: [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/home.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/home.html) (last consulted on 30/03/12).

18 Jones (1964).

19 Jones (1964), 1068.
loss of the Western provinces of the Empire. In other words, we have to face the issue of the barbarians. It is necessary to clarify what is understood by the term ‘barbarian’. Even though it is steeped in ideological baggage (both ancient and modern), ‘barbarian’ has the benefit of being a contemporary term used by Roman historiographers. ‘Germanic’ does not cover the wide range of people who settled inside the Western Roman Empire between 376 and 568. Some tribes, such as the Sarmatians and Alans, had Caucasian roots while the origin of the Huns most probably needs to be sought in Central Asia. More importantly, the wide variety of tribes which we call ‘Germanic’, such as Goths, Vandals or Sueves to name but a few, did not apply this umbrella label to themselves.

The nature of how these barbarian tribes took over the West has remained a never-ending source of academic dispute. Especially during the first half of the 20th century, it was a controversy often kindled by the nationality of the academics involved. In the German academic world, people tend to speak of Die grosse Völkerwanderung—The Great Migrations. Nationalist writers saw the Germanic tribes as powers of creation. The philosopher Herder spoke about an exhausted Rome, lying on its deathbed until Germanic people infused it with new life. Such ideas were ripe for abuse. Probably the most notorious example of ‘history driving down the wrong alley’ was Karl Lamprecht. He used theories about the settlement of the Franks in what is now modern Belgium during the fifth century to argue that it would be legitimate to annex Flanders to Germany. Lamprecht believed that one only had to take the train and get off at Lille to see for oneself that it is a German people living there. Indeed, ‘Flemish women are tall, blonde and love Beethoven’. When Lamprecht went to Brussels in 1915 to confer with Belgian colleagues, he returned very distressed to Germany and died three weeks later. Perhaps he never survived the shock that those Belgians did not want to be Germans.

Many French academics understandably held very different ideas about the nature of these ‘barbarian’ settlements. Where the Germans spoke about Völkerwanderung, they spoke about ‘invasions’. For them the barbarian tribes were a source of destructon, perhaps most sharply summarised by André Piganiol. Clearly traumatised by the German occupation of France during World War II, he wrote: ‘La civilisation romaine n’est pas morte de sa belle mort. Elle a été assassinée.’ Pierre Courcelle on the other hand could only write about the barbarians as ‘pillagers’, ‘hordes’, ‘enemies’ whose settlement in the empire was accompanied by ‘massacres’ and ‘destruction’.

A radically different sound came from Belgium where Henri Pirenne’s Mahomad et

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20 One of the last thorough cases for internal decline in the Anglophone literature was made by MacMullen (1988). He makes a compelling case to identify corruption as the crucial factor in Rome’s fall. Yet this argument is weakened by the basic observation that corruption was just as much an endemic problem during the Principate as in the Later Empire.
21 Most narratives date the so-called barbarian migrations or invasions between 376, when the Gothic tribe of the Tervingi requested asylum in Moesia, and 568, when the Longobards invaded Italy.
23 Lamprecht (1915).
24 Lamprecht was not too bothered with historical geography since Lille (Rijsel) has been part of northern France since its capture by Louis XIV in 1667.
26 Piganiol (1947), 422 (‘Roman civilization did not pass away from a gentle death. It was assassinated’).
27 Courcelle (1964).
Charlemagne was published posthumously.\(^{28}\) In this work, Pirenne argued that barbarian invasions did not shatter the unity created by the Roman Empire. For him, the invasions were a non-event and their perceived long-term destructive impact was exaggerated by shocked contemporaries. More importantly, the barbarians did not substantially alter the world they entered. Their laws, their social structure and their ideological outlook did not contribute or change the Roman provinces that became theirs. Pirenne demystified the barbarians of the aura bestowed upon them by previous generations of nationalist German scholars. Pirenne did not believe that the barbarians had dismantled the Roman world, because that was founded on much more than just a political framework. It was rooted in its cities and the trade that supplied these cities. It was founded on the Mediterranean Sea. The wealth of Egypt and Syria, firmly in Roman hands, still remained accessible to Merovingian Gaul and the rest of Western Europe. It was therefore possible to sustain some sort of Roman way of life, centuries after the Empire in the West had given way to the barbarians.

According to Pirenne, it was the Arab conquests in the seventh century that shattered Roman unity in the Mediterranean world. Western Europe did not cease to be Roman in 476 but in 698, when the Arabs conquered Carthage thereby permanently occupying the South and East coasts of the Mediterranean. He famously remarked that ‘sans l’Islam, l’Empire franc n’aurait sans doute jamais existé, et Charlemagne sans Mahomet serait inconcevable’.\(^{29}\) Pirenne’s famous thesis has received a lot of criticism and his economic arguments are no longer supported by archaeology. Yet his thesis has one undeniable merit: by postponing the end of the Roman world for more than two centuries, Pirenne has allowed historians to examine long term developments of Late Roman culture, economy and the spread of Mediterranean Christianity. Because of that he would become a fundamental source of inspiration for Peter Brown, the godfather of ‘Late Antiquity’.

In 1971, Brown published \textit{The World of Late Antiquity}.\(^{30}\) It has now become a manifesto for the study of Late Antiquity as an independent historical period, even though that was not its intention back then. Instead, Brown aimed to illustrate—and we can use that word literally since he used about 130 photographs—that the period from the 3rd century to the 7th century was not all doom and gloom. It was a period of cultural and intellectual prosperity. It was the period that witnessed the triumph of the two monotheistic religions that still dominate our world: Christianity and Islam. Brown would inspire an entire movement called ‘The Reformists’.

For historians of this movement, the creation of Late Antiquity has a couple of significant advantages: by categorising the period from roughly 250 until 750 as Antiquity, it allows them to experiment with a blank slate, since Antiquity does not evoke the same type of negative connotations as the early medieval era with its infamous ‘Dark Ages’ tends to do. It enables experimentation with critical theory, anthropology, gender and looking at long-term developments in a completely new timeframe, much in line with the practice of the French \textit{Annales} school. More importantly, it allows the study of the Mediterranean World and its hinterland as one unit. Bona fide medievalists usually tend to focus on one country or region specifically. Late Antiquity, starting from the Roman world, allows a broader and more cosmopolitan canvas. The Reformists refuse to talk about this period in terms of ‘decline’ or

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\(^{28}\) Pirenne (1937).

\(^{29}\) Pirenne (1937), 86 (‘Without Islam, the Frankish empire would have doubtlessly never existed, and Charlemagne without Mohamed would be inconceivable’).

\(^{30}\) Brown (1971).
‘demise’. For scholars such as Glen Bowersock, the fall of Rome is irrelevant.\textsuperscript{31} Where Brown’s pupils largely ignored the settlement of the barbarian tribes, a different school of thought started to look back on an idea already formulated by the French historian Musset: the Roman world did not collapse, it was transformed.\textsuperscript{32}

In the 1990s, the European Science Foundation bankrolled a massive project called ‘The Transformation of the Roman World’. The premise of the project was that Rome endured and gradually evolved into a different, yet definitely not inferior form. The barbarian tribes became exonerated and integrated in a Romano-Germanic world that saw a smooth transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. The first volume of the published proceedings was not coincidentally called: ‘Kingdoms of the Empire’.\textsuperscript{33} Integration, assimilation, multi-culturality and the forging of new identities are key concepts that run through the entire series. It should not be surprising that all of this fits perfectly in the discourse of the European Union whose original duty was to unite formerly hostile nation states.\textsuperscript{34} The work of both the Reformers and the Transformation school,\textsuperscript{35} have resulted in a massive scholarly output. Yet their ideas have definitely not gone unchallenged.

Peter Brown himself admits that he is predominantly focused on the Eastern part of the Mediterranean world. Britain, northern Gaul and the Danubian provinces are peripheral in his vision and hence outside the domain of his research. From this point of view it is easy to regard the barbarian settlements as a non-event. The best illustration of this is his encyclopaedia \textit{Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World}.\textsuperscript{36} Out of 183 items, only 62 deal with the West. We find no entries for tribes such as the Visigoths, Franks or Saxons, but ‘Angels’ or ‘Purgatory’ are readily available. Anyone who wants to know more about the ‘Praetorian Prefect’, the most important civilian office of the late Roman empire, will find no reference between the entries for ‘Pornography’ and ‘Prayer’.\textsuperscript{37} Such scope has been severely criticised by a group of academics who have been styled ‘The Counter-Reformers’. Where the reformers are mostly concerned with culture, society and religion in the Eastern Mediterranean, the counter-reformers tend to deal more with political, economic and military issues in the West. Where the first group would rather talk about spiritual ‘Rise’, the other tends to focus on secular ‘Fall’. Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins, two scholars of the counter-reformers, have both recently published books that propagate this view. In many ways, Peter Heather’s \textit{Fall of the Roman Empire} is the successor to Bury’s \textit{Later Roman Empire}.\textsuperscript{38} It is a traditional narrative, with a narrower focus both in time and themes. Heather sees two crucial factors in the decline of the Roman West. First the rise of Sassanid Persia during the third century, which would become a proper superpower in its own right and Rome’s worst nemesis. The major reforms of Diocletian in the Roman economy, army and political administration would have had as primary aim keeping the Persian threat at bay in

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\item \textsuperscript{31} Bowersock (1996).
\item \textsuperscript{32} Musset (1965).
\item \textsuperscript{33} Pohl (1997).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ward-Perkins (2005), 174-76.
\item \textsuperscript{35} James (2008), 24 n.16, aptly remarks that it would not be helpful to call scholars of Late Antiquity ‘late antiquarians’. On a similar note it might be best not to speak of the Transformation school as ‘Transformers’.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Bowersock, Brown & Grabar (1999).
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ward-Perkins (2005), 172.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Heather (2005).
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the East. Consequently, fewer resources and reserves would have been available for the West. Nevertheless, the West managed to endure most of its challenges in the fourth century, until the arrival of the Huns in Europe around 375.

Heather turns to a neo-romantic idea of the Huns’ movements having a domino effect on barbarian tribes living in Eastern and Central Europe. They started fleeing and eventually forced their way into the Empire. Heather’s novel contribution is the actual role the Huns themselves performed in this movement. Only for a very brief period were the Huns actually hostile to the Western Empire (c. 450-453) and most of the time they happily supplied mercenaries. Yet when the Huns no longer were available either as mercenaries or as a common threat to both Empire and the settled tribes, the Western Empire was doomed to collapse. Just like Bury, however, Heather does not believe in the inevitability of this fall and shows that during several episodes in the fifth century the Empire managed to strike back. Until some greater disaster happened.

Bryan Ward-Perkins, on the other hand, passionately argues against the Transformation school and painstakingly explains that the settlement of the barbarian tribes in the Roman provinces was anything but a peaceful process. He also staunchly refutes the Reformists who rarely speak negatively about the fifth century. Much more than Heather, Perkins focuses on economic factors and the geographic handicaps of the Western Empire. The prime advantage of his book is the wealth of archaeological material he utilises to demonstrate how living standards dramatically diminished in Western Europe during its post-Imperial phase. The most astonishing example is early Anglo-Saxon Britain which declined to nearly Iron Age standards. As demonstrated by the title, Bryan Ward-Perkins returns with his The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization to the core of Gibbon’s vision: the fall of the Roman Empire was a catastrophe and meant a fundamental decline in European culture and civilisation.

Needless to say, returning to a view that sees the barbarians as primary agents in bringing about the collapse of empire does not meet universal acceptance in the scholarly community. Guy Halsall and James O’Donnell cast two of the most important critiques. Controversially, Halsall claims that barbarian migrations were caused by the decline of the Roman Empire, not the other way around. Rome was responsible for creating several of the largest barbarian confederations in Europe, such as the Alamanni or the Goths, during the third century crisis. The aftermath of the third century crisis saw significant tracts of the Imperial West economically weakened, while central authority had to contribute greater resources to maintain its presence in distant provinces that had gained greater political significance, such as the Rhine frontier. When the Empire started to neglect its responsibilities towards both these regions and the management of neighbouring barbarian tribes, during the final quarter of the fourth century, a downward spiral emerged which resulted in the replacement of the Empire by barbarian kingdoms in Western Europe and North Africa.

With his The Ruin of the Roman Empire, O’Donnell sets himself up as staunch advocate of the barbarians against the invasion-narratives of Heather and Ward-Perkins. As a ‘Reformer’ he argues that the actual downfall of the Roman Empire was caused in the sixth century through the nefarious campaigns of the Eastern emperor Justinian I (527-565). The so-called ‘barbarian’ kingdoms were in many ways a continuation of the Western Empire. In particular, Ostrogothic Italy, during the reign of Theoderic the Amal (493-526), witnessed a

40 Halsall (2008).
vibrant renaissance and demonstrated the potential these kingdoms had. In the aftermath of a war that lasted two decades, Italy was reduced to a wasted landscape that truly saw the end of classical culture.

An enquiry into the ideas of western scholars over the past two centuries has shown a fascinating dialogue between shifting paradigms and how we view our own world. All of the theories discussed here were shaped by the times and society of the authors. No matter how well his *Decline and Fall* keeps selling, Gibbon’s ‘Enlightened’ disdain of Christianity is no more timeless than Lamprecht’s nationalist claims on ‘Germanic’ Flanders. Even the most recent authors are no exception to this. Heather and Ward-Perkins’ analysis of the ‘barbarian invasions’ could be interpreted as the product of a specifically British apprehension to the impact of global migration on the socio-economic landscape of early 21st century Western Europe. Both Ward-Perkins and O’Donnell admit at the start of their work that their personal lives and upbringings have left traces in their analysis. This renders their work and insights everything but superfluous, however.

It seems apt, therefore, to conclude this overview with a quote from James O’Donnell. He remarked on Ward-Perkins’ book that ‘if there is an implicit moral to his *Fall of Rome*, then it is that human prosperity and happiness are fragile things and need to be worked at assiduously.’

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