

“Again, a Christian bishop might welcome the disasters of the barbarian invasions, as if they had turned men irrevocably from earthly civilization to the Heavenly Jerusalem, yet he will do this in a Latin or a Greek unselfconsciously modeled on the ancient classics; and he will betray attitudes to the universe, prejudices and patterns of behavior that mark him out as a man still firmly rooted in eight hundred years of Mediterranean life” (The World of Late Antiquity, 8). While there exist two major paradigms regarding the timeframe around the “fall” of Rome, the Late Antiquity paradigm more accurately characterizes the transformation of the united Mediterranean world into three separate and unique cultures. The “fall” of Rome paradigm puts too much importance on the destruction of the entity of the Roman Empire, and not enough on the many aspects that survived in one form or another after the supposed fall of civilization.

The standard paradigm in history is that the “fall” of the Roman Empire in 476 AD was the final dramatic event of Classical History, and everything after is of a different period of time. Rome reached a zenith of power around 200 AD, and after that slowly declined until it, and therefore civilization, collapsed. One of the major cited reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire in the West is that of barbarian invasion and the futile attempts at assimilating the barbarians into Roman society, and the military in particular. The western movements of the Huns, the failure at the Battle of Adrianople, and the sacks and takeover of Rome all were prevalent reasons for the fall of civilization. These invasions left the Empire split into a smattering of (heretic) Christian barbarian kingdoms in the West, and the neo-Roman Empire of Byzantium in the East. Another highly-argued thesis of the fall of Rome deals with the rise of Christianity. It had started out as an ignored and persecuted Eastern Mystery religion and by the fall of Rome had replaced civic paganism as the state religion. The originator of this idea, Edward Gibbon, argued that Christianity weakened the Roman Empire to the point where it could not stand up to the aforementioned barbarian invasions. Other major factors in the fall include a decline in

population, economic stagnation, and incompetent leadership. Constant warfare, lack of desire to raise children, plagues, and other health issues caused the population of the Roman Empire to slowly decline over the last few centuries of its existence, further propagating the disaster of using barbarians to fight barbarians. The Roman economy was heavily slave driven, and with the loss of population as well as the lack of further conquests after the second century, the abundance of slaves ran out and agricultural standards were not up to supporting the economy without them. The incompetent leadership of the late Roman Empire, combined with the horrid policy of massive over-taxation required to support the barbarian “soldiers” used to fend off other barbarians, drained all confidence in the state and the city, causing many to abandon the city for the countryside. These are all major cited reasons for the classical paradigm of the “fall” of Rome; however they do not describe well enough what happened to the world after the “fall”.

While the “fall” of Rome paradigm was the standard for long periods of time, in 1971 Peter Brown introduced the new paradigm of Late Antiquity which describes a new period of time that spans from c. 200-800. The Late Antiquity paradigm focuses on the cultural and religious transformations within the areas that made up the Roman Empire and how they came to be the 3 distinct cultures of the Catholic West, the Byzantine East, and Islam. The “fall” of Rome itself is merely an important event on the timeline of Late Antiquity, not the overwhelming climax of the end of civilization for a thousand years. While the entity known as the Roman Empire was destroyed in the west in 476 AD, in reality it had barely even been Roman for a long time, Odoacer merely destroyed its pretense. Even then, the Roman Empire survived as Byzantium for another thousand years, and the governmental system had been through many changes before settling on an autocratic model by the time of Diocletian. As the barbarians merely took up the mantle of leadership in the west and did not destroy it, the economy went into a slow reversion to subsistence agriculture. The areas of the Byzantine Empire had always been the economic heartland of the Roman Empire anyways, so there was no long-lasting change there.

In the West, many of the functions of the Roman Empire were transferred to the Christian church. Powerful and wealthy Senators became powerful and wealthy bishops. The popes took to defending Rome when Emperors would flee. The rise of monasticism in 3rd century Egypt that spread throughout the old Empire helped preserve and spread ancient culture and became agricultural, economic, and production centers, inheriting the legacy of cities for those not in the heartland of “civilization”. The conversion of the barbarian kingdoms in the West to Christianity united them under the pretext of religion, becoming Christendom. The blending of Christianity, Germanic, and Roman cultures led to the peoples and kingdoms of the Middle Ages.

In the East, Byzantium was the heir of the Roman Empire. As it contained the more urban areas of the former Empire, and had a better economy and financial abilities, it was able to defend itself against the barbarians and survive well into the Middle Ages, even at some points holding many former Roman territories. Byzantium inherited the Roman self-sufficient government. Absolute power was held by an autocrat, but the underlying administration was that of an extremely complex bureaucracy that withstood civil war and outside turmoil. The basis of the economy was also fixed; trade was just as important as agriculture. The government also often stepped into economic affairs to regulate economic activities and food supply, just as the Roman Empire had done. Only with the rise of Islam in the 7th century did the power of Byzantium start to wane.

The period of Late Antiquity was characterized less by dramatic rises and falls and the collapsing of civilization, and more by a gradual transformation of the united Mediterranean world into three separate culture groups, of which the “fall” of the Roman Empire was merely a factor. I feel the Late Antiquity paradigm is a better representation of the time period than the “fall” paradigm, which does not describe well enough what happened to the Mediterranean after the West fragmented. Yes, the

Roman Empire did fragment and collapse but its customs, religions, laws, and language have continued to survive in some way to the modern day.