

Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair: the fall of Rome in collapse theory.

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ABSTRACT: Several recent works have attempted to deal with the collapse of all past state societies, including the Western Roman Empire, as specific instances of a universal systemic phenomenon. These works all subscribe to a common list of characteristics of collapse, emphasizing poverty and discontinuity. This article examines the historical genesis of the concept of the fall of the Roman Empire, and modern scholarship on the Late Antique-Early Medieval transition. The 'trait list' of collapse is shown not to apply to the 'fall' of Rome.

For centuries, even millennia, travellers have looked in awe on the ruins of past civilizations. Struck by fallen grandeur, they have wondered what could have brought the creators of these mighty edifices to such a pitiful condition. With time, uninformed speculation has been replaced with a large body of scholarly work. Numerous more or less coherent theories have been put forward to explain the individual collapses of the Indus Valley civilization (c.1800 B.C.) the Mycenaean Empire (c.1200 B.C.), Minoan Crete (c.1450 B.C.), the Hittites (c.1200 B.C.), Sixth Dynasty Egypt (c. 2150 B.C.), Chou China (c.771 B.C.), the Classical Maya (c.A.D.1200), and the Roman Empire (c.A.D.500). The more reputable among these theories (those not involving, say, aliens or sinking continents) have ranged from geological and climatic changes (i.e. Raikes 1964; Griffin 1960), through barbarian invasions (i.e. Ferrill 1988; Bronson 1988), moral turpitude (i.e. Zosimus c. A.D. 500), political instability (Gibbon 1776), core-periphery interactions (Bowerstock 1988), over taxation (Jones 1964), agricultural failure (Cooke 1931; Sanders 1962), and religious fanaticism (Millon 1988).

The study of the collapse of civilizations has recently been given a new twist. Inspired by the generalizing tendency of the New Archaeology, a series of influential books and articles (Renfrew 1978, 1979; Cowgill 1988; Yoffee 1988; Kaufman 1988; Tainter 1988) have attempted to use systems theory to explain the end of all civilizations as a universal phenomenon brought about by systemic imbalances. Renfrew's (1978, 1979) initial work relied heavily on a simplistic model drawn with minimal justification from mathematical catastrophe theory (cf. Thom 1975; Poston and Stewart 1976). Tainter (1988) wisely abandons the use of catastrophe theory, but expands two of the ideas proposed by Renfrew. The first is that the collapse of all complex societies can be treated as specific instances of a

universal process (1988:1-21). The second is that this process can best be described and understood through the application of systems theory (1988:39-90). Tainter's views of the multivariate nature of collapse, and the importance of the imbalance between income and expenditure, also reflect very closely Yoffee's (1988), Cowgill's (1988) and Kaufman's (1988) ideas, although Tainter presents a much more developed examination of the systemic nature of society than any of the other authors.

Summed up, and rather oversimplified, Tainter's argument for the abrupt decrease in sociopolitical complexity centres on the analysis of energy requirements and efficiency in societies as energy processing systems. He feels the key problem for a society lies in the decreasing real return for investment that comes with increased complexity, known popularly as the law of diminishing returns. As a society becomes more complex, the energy required to further increase the level of complexity multiplies. Thus, when a society is at a low level of complexity, a small energy investment allows a great increase in sociopolitical complexity. However, when the society is already very complex¹, the former small investment has no apparent effect, and a much greater investment is required to produce the same result. As all societies have limited energy resources, investing a much greater amount in sociopolitical complexity requires shortchanging other parts of the system. Eventually, the increased investment in this subsystem² leads to a critical failure in another subsystem. As the system is the sum of its parts (or subsystems), the system itself fails, and the level of complexity falls drastically and quickly.

While I have serious reservations about many other specific aspects of these various works, in this paper I wish to address one issue pertinent to all of them. These authors understand the end of civilizations to have certain characteristics. 'Collapse' takes a specific form in *all* societies. I shall examine the characteristics they list for collapsing civilizations, and explore the genesis of this view, before showing that it is not applicable to the best known 'collapsing civilization' they list: the Western Roman Empire. I will concentrate on the characteristics described by Renfrew and Tainter. Cowgill, Yoffee, and Kaufman take it as given that readers know what constitutes a collapse, but in general they appear to subscribe to Renfrew's view.

1 Tainter emphasizes the relativity of terms. For a hunter-gatherer band a move to tribal organization represents arrival at a state of great complexity, compared to its former state, while the same tribal organization would represent a low level of complexity to a previously chieftain level society.

2 It is unclear whether Tainter sees complexity as a subsystem, or as a general feature of the system. It is immaterial for his general argument, although important in mechanics of systems theory.

Colin Renfrew produces the following list of characteristics of collapse:

1. Collapse
 - i. Collapse of central administrative organization of the early state:
 - ii. Disappearance or reduction in number of levels of central place hierarchy.
 - iii. Complete fragmentation or disappearance of military organization into (at most) small, independent units.
 - iv. Abandonment of palaces and central storage facilities.
 - v. Eclipse of temples as major religious centres (often with their survival, modified, as local shrines).
 - vi. Effective loss of literacy for secular and religious purposes.
 - vii. Abandonment of public building works.
 - a. Disappearance of the traditional elite class:
 - i. Cessation of rich, traditional burials (although different forms of rich burial frequently emerge after a couple of centuries).
 - ii. Abandonment of rich residences, or their reuse in impoverished style by 'squatters'.
 - iii. Cessation in the use of costly assemblages of luxury goods, although individual items may survive.
 - b. Collapse of centralized economy:
 - i. Cessation of large-scale redistribution of market exchange.
 - ii. Coinage (where applicable) no longer issued or exchanged commercially, although individual pieces survive as valuables.
 - iii. External trade very markedly reduced, and traditional trade routes disappear.
 - iv. Volume of internal change markedly reduced.
 - v. Cessation of craft-specialized manufacture.
 - vi. Cessation of specialized or organized agricultural production, with agriculture instead on a local 'homestead' basis with diversified crop spectrum and mixed farming.
 - c. Settlement shift and population decline:
 - i. abandonment of many settlements.
 - ii. Shift to dispersed pattern of smaller settlements.
 - iii. Frequent subsequent choice of defensible locations-- the 'flight to the hills'.
 - iv. Marked decrease in population density.
2. Aftermath
 - a. Transition to lower (cf. 'earlier') level of sociopolitical integration:
 - i. Emergence of segmentary societies showing analogies with those seen centuries of millennia earlier in the 'formative' level in the same area (only later do these reach a chiefdom or florescent level of development).
 - ii. Fission of realm to smaller territories, whose boundaries may relate to those of earlier polities.
 - iii. Possible peripheral survival of some highly organized communities still retaining several organizational features of the collapsed state.
 - iv. Survival of religious elements as 'folk' cults and beliefs.
 - v. Craft production at local level with 'peasant' imitations of former specialist products (e.g. in pottery).
 - vi. Local movements of small population groups resulting from the breakdown in order at the collapse of the central administration (either with or without some language change), leading to destruction of many settlements.
 - vii. Rapid subsequent regeneration of chiefdom or even state society, partly influenced by the remains of its predecessor.

- b. Development of romantic Dark Age myth:
 - i. Attempt by new power groups to establish legitimacy in historical terms with the creation of genealogies either (a) seeking to find a link with the 'autochthonous' former state or (b) relating the deeds by which the 'invaders' achieved power by force of arms.
 - ii. Tendency among early chroniclers to personalize historical explanation, so that change is assigned to individual deeds, battles, and invasions, and often to attribute the decline to hostile powers outside the state territories (cf C.6)
 - iii. Some confusion in legend and story between the Golden Age of the early vanished civilization and the Heroic Age of its immediate aftermath.
 - iv. Paucity of archaeological evidence after collapse compared with that for preceding period (arising from loss of literacy and abandonment or diminution of urban centres).
 - v. Tendency among historians to accept as evidence traditional narratives first set down in writing some centuries after the collapse.
 - vi. Slow development of Dark Age archaeology, hampered both by the preceding item and by focus on the larger and more obvious central place sites of the vanished state.
3. Diachronic Aspects
 - a. The collapse may take around 100 years for completion (although in the provinces of an empire, the withdrawal of central imperial authority can have more rapid effects).
 - b. Dislocations are evident in the earlier part of that period, the underlying factors finding expression in human conflicts-- wars, destructions, and so on.
 - c. Boundary maintenance may show signs of weakness during this time, so that outside pressures leave traces in the historical record.
 - d. The growth curve for many variables in the system (including population, exchange, agricultural activity) may take the truncated sigmoid form ...
 - e. Absence of single, obvious, 'cause' for the collapse." Renfrew (1979:482-85)

Joseph Tainter explicitly accepts Renfrew's list (1988:19), and adds the following characteristics:

"a lower degree of stratification and social differentiation;
 less economic and occupational specialization, of individuals, groups, and territories;
 less centralized control; that is, less regulation and integration of diverse economic and social groups by elites;
 less behavioral control and regimentation;
 less investment in the epiphenomena of complexity, those elements that define the concept of 'civilization': monumental architecture, artistic and literary achievements, and the like;
 less flow of information between individuals, between political and economic groups, and between a centre and its periphery;
 less sharing, trading, and redistribution of resources;
 less overall coordination and organization of individuals and groups;
 a smaller territory integrated within a single political unit." (Tainter 1988:4)
 Collapse is abrupt "taking no more than a few decades" (Tainter 1988:4)

Both of these lists emphasize two things: abrupt discontinuity, and poverty, both material and cultural. Discontinuity is emphasized in "disappearance" of settlements (Renfrew I.A.1, II.A.6) and the appearance of new settlement patterns (Renfrew I.D), major population drops (Renfrew I.D.6), religious change (I.A.4, II.A.4), replacement of social structures with more 'primitive' forms (Renfrew II.A.1; Tainter 1) incapable of large scale organized activity (Renfrew I.A.2, I.A.6.), and by violent social disintegration (Renfrew I.B, II.A.6). Material poverty is stressed in abandonment of use and construction of monumental architecture (Renfrew I.A.3,

I.A.4, I.B.3; Tainter 5), decrease in availability of luxury goods (Renfrew I.B.1, I.B.3), loss of both long distance and local trade (Renfrew I.C.1, I.C.3, I.C.4; Tainter 6, 7), and loss of an organized economic base (Renfrew I.C.1, I.C.2, I.C.5, I.C.6, II.A.5; Tainter 3, 8). Cultural poverty is seen in loss of technical and historical knowledge (Renfrew I.A.5, I.B.5, II.A.4, II.A.5, II.B.3) and loss of organizational ability (Renfrew I.A.4, I.A.6, I.C.6; Tainter 3, 4, 8, 9).

The abruptness and violence of the change is further emphasized by the time scale. Renfrew expects that, at the most, "The collapse may take around 100 years for completion" (1979:485), with Tainter agreeing that it will take "no more than a few decades" (1988:4). This is critical. For either of these theories to work, collapse must be abrupt. Their internal logic demands it. Renfrew's catastrophe theory is based on a mathematical prototype which deals with *instantaneous* large changes, while Tainter is using an energy state analogy reminiscent of the jumping of electrons between orbits in Bohr's atom.

The archetypal collapsing state is the Roman Empire. As far as I have been able to determine, all of the assorted monocausal theories for the collapse of other individual states were first proposed as explanations for the fall of Rome, decades or even centuries before they were applied to other civilizations. The universalizing systems approach, while not specifically applied to Rome first, certainly uses Rome as "the prime example" (Tainter 1988:11). This is hardly surprising. The motif of the fall of Rome is deeply woven into the popular and intellectual heritage of the Western world. It is worth briefly examining the genesis of this image.

The first outsider³ to attempt an interpretation of the fall of the western Roman Empire is Zosimus, writing in Byzantium circa A.D. 500. As one of the last great pagan writers, he blamed the loss of the western part of the Empire, and particularly the symbolically charged city of Rome, on the moral turpitude brought about by Christianity. His work was written in support of an expansionist party in the Eastern Empire. When this party finally regained power briefly under the emperor Justinian (A.D. 527-65), they reconquered much of the lost territory of the Western Empire, fulfilling Zosimus's foreign policy aims (Goffart 1971).

The next main writer to talk about the 'fall' of Rome was the Lombard historian Paul the Deacon (d. A.D. 799), in his *Historia Romanum* and *Historia Langobardorum*. Paul had several reasons for emphasizing the violence, disruption, and discontinuity surrounding the events of the early to mid sixth century. He was trying, in part, to justify the Lombard presence in Italy. In support of this he describes a destitute and depopulated country. The Lombard invasion (A.D. 568-72) is an almost bloodless event, as "the Romans had then no courage to resist because [of] the pestilence that occurred in the time of Narses" (*H.L.* II:26). He describes devastation, amounting almost to abandonment, caused by divine wrath at the

³ Internal writings about the fall of Rome go back to the early fifth century, and are usually tied in with battles between Christians and pagans. The best known of these works is Augustine of Hippo's *Civitas Dei*.

mismanagement of the country by the existing occupants, the Byzantines (Goffart 1988:355-6). Paul's work, addressed to the mother of the Lombard Duke of Benevento, Grimoald, was introduced into a situation in which Grimoald had to choose allegiance with the Byzantines, or with their chief rivals in Italian politics, the Franks. Paul, at one stage a member of Charlemagne's Frankish court, constantly vilifies the Byzantines, and describes in great detail their ruination of Italy.

After Paul the Deacon, until the Renaissance, the writing of conscious history in the west fell entirely into the hands of the ecclesiastical chroniclers, such as Bede of Jarrow (A.D. 673-735) in Northumbria (Tabacco 1989:7-8; Goffart 1988). Although these writers owed much to their classical heritage in matters of language and format, they adapted that heritage to the needs of their times. The format they chose as a basis for their chronicles was the annal. Its compilation of events by discrete dates was well suited to a variety of ecclesiastical needs. These included the calculation of the date of Easter, and the recording of legal events such as land transactions, ecclesiastical appointments and doctrinal statements, all of which happened at definite moments in time, and required no overall thematic interpretation.

This emphasis on discrete dates led the annals, and the chronicles after them, to focus attention on the events of history, battles and treaties, coronations and councils, births and deaths, foundations and destructions, and other events which made a major impression on the individual chroniclers. They mask the patterns of history. Underlying themes in these chronicles, often compiled by many hands over many decades, are restricted to universalist theological themes and localised or regional perspectives (Green 1972:1-6; Tabacco 1989:7-9).

A particular aspect of the monastic chronicles that has been influential in promoting the idea of a desolate and abandoned Dark Age Europe is their origin legends. These origin legends tend to fit a pattern, which may also be observed in hagiography, and in later monastic foundation charters (cf. Wickham 1989). The institution was almost inevitably 'founded in the wilderness'. This imagery of isolated communities has had a strong effect on the way later historians viewed the early middle ages. George Duby's description of "unending emptiness stretching so far west, north and east that it covers everything" (1981:3) could come from the origin legend of any major early monastery. However, this imagery of the community of pure souls away from the temptations of civilization, appearing in writing long after the actual foundation, has been shown to be more than a simple, objective description of the state of affairs.

In early Christian writing, and particularly in monastic and mystic writing, wilderness and desert have been shown to represent the use of a literary ideal type. Monasticism came into Europe from the East, and the particular eastern ideal which exercised the greatest influence on the early western monastics was that of the desert. Desert, or its effective synonym wilderness, had a far less literal meaning in the minds of the western ascetics than that conceived by their eastern

contemporaries. The westerners, living in a very different physical environment, interpreted it to mean a spiritual rather than physical desert (Brown 1988; Marcus 1990). In a land where Christianity was still primarily a religion of the cities (Meeks 1983, Meredith 1976), most of the countryside must have seemed a spiritual wilderness.

The monastic chroniclers had a motive other than theological 'street cred' for emphasising the emptiness of the land their institution had been founded on. Rival claims could be made over land ownership, and monastic fortunes certainly varied on this issue. San Vincenzo al Volturno, to cite an extreme although late example, was forced in the 12th C. to demolish its existing buildings and move to a site on the other side of the Volturno River as a result of legal and possibly physical harassment by a local aristocratic family (Hodges *et al.* forthcoming). A written chronicle, citing real or fictitious foundation charters, could be an effective weapon in legitimizing and perpetuating claims to land ownership and social control.

With the arrival of the Renaissance a fresh emphasis was laid on the cultural and material poverty of the Dark Ages. This owes much to the work of the Italian Renaissance writers such as Goro Dati, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Baronio, Rinaldi, Biondo Flavio, and Carlo Sigonio,⁴ on the origins, governance, and rights of the independent Italian cities. The Renaissance civic and literary elites, particularly in Italy, saw themselves as the heirs of Roman art, culture, learning, glory, and, above all, government. From their viewpoint,

the overall pattern of the Italian Middle Ages could not be in doubt: an irruption of barbarians leading to crisis, the recovery of institutions with the prodigious growth of autonomous cities, leading to a more stable organization formed of regional states (Tabacco 1989:8).

The preoccupation with political and civic history, combined with a focus on great events and great men, emphasised the 'fall' of Rome as an event happening at a discrete point in time. As the Early Middle Ages was the nadir of civilization, from which the Italian cities were forced to slowly and painfully recover, the Renaissance historians were content to focus on the few futile bright sparks of the time, such as the brief Carolingian Renaissance, and to condemn the rest to a gloomy dismissal. Their view of a discrete fall of the Western Empire and an ensuing 'Dark Age' of Europe was destined to strongly influence later writers, from the Enlightenment to the present, and to provide an enduring picture in the popular imagination.

The culmination of this trend came with Edward Gibbon's invention of the

4 Goro Dati c.1410. *Istoria di Firenze*; Biondo Flavio c.1470. *Rome Instaurate*; Lodovico Guicciardini c.1550. *Descrittione di Tutti I Paesi Bassi*; Caesar Baronius c.1575. *Annales Ecclesiastici*; Guglielmo Rinaldi c.1572. *Giornale delle Historie del Mondo*; Carlo Sigonio c.1550. Numerous historical and antiquarian works, including editions of and commentaries on Livy, Cicero and Aristotle; Niccolo Machiavelli c.1550. Numerous works, including *The Prince* and *The History of Florence and the Affairs of Italy*. These works are available in numerous editions and translations.

phrase, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776. With the publication of Gibbon's great work, the popular concept of the fate of the Western Empire was sealed. Rome fell. Hordes of barbarians swept across the countryside, destroying the very fabric of a proud and ancient civilization. Cities were abandoned, economies collapsed, and a depopulated and demoralized Europe staggered into the long night known as the Dark Ages ... or did it?

Gibbon's work is usually seriously misunderstood by those who have not read the original seven volumes. Most get no further than the title. Both the popular imagination and generations of scholars have been inspired by it to see the Late Antique-Early Medieval transition as two separate things: the collapse of the Roman Empire, and the rise of the Middle Ages. Discontinuity was emphasized, continuity ignored. This is a disservice to the ideas of the original work. Gibbon himself declares that the empire of the West finishes when the Ostrogothic king (and Roman general) Odoacer deposes Romulus Augustulus in A.D. 476 (Gibbon 1909: {4}54-8), but then devotes another three and three-quarter volumes to what happened thereafter. The last western emperor is near the midpoint of the great study, and just another deposed weakling at that. Gibbon is writing about a continuous process that lasts for 1,600 years, from the rise of Augustus to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. He can declare a particular event as a major contributor to the fall, but the rise of the Merovingian kings is treated as part of the same political processes as the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (Gibbon 1909: {4}109ff.).

For well over a century after Gibbon's publication first appeared, the *Decline and Fall* view of the Late Antique-Early Medieval transition prevailed. Historians and archaeologists studied either the Classical (i.e. Ashby 1927; Lanciani 1909), or the Medieval (i.e. Tomassetti 1882; Pirenne 1939) period. There was seldom any overlap of interest, or any synthesis. There were occasional debates over just when things stopped being 'Roman' and became 'medieval', but these tended to be viewed by most practitioners as mere academic border squabbles. Influential non-specialists accepted this view with no reservations. Karl Marx, for example, relied on the prevailing belief in an abrupt transition when formulating his theories of revolutionary change.

Modern advocates of a discontinuous and abrupt transition tend to base their view on a limited number of arguments. These can be described as the argument from authority, the argument from military failure, and the argument from poverty. The argument from authority generally takes the view that, because one or more authoritative figure in the past has declared that the transition emphasized discontinuity, we must accept this view. The authoritative figures cited range from contemporary or near contemporary authors, such as Procopius (fl. A.D. 535-60) and Cassiodorus (fl. A.D. 490-560), through people like Edward Gibbon (1776), to relatively modern scholars such as Henri Pirenne (d. 1939) and Karl Marx.

The argument from authority now holds relatively little credit amongst most historians. The most frequently cited early authorities are Procopius, Cassiodorus,

Zosimus, and Paul the Deacon. All have been shown to represent examples of source bias, or 'axe-grinding' (Goffart 1988; Barnish 1987; Dewing 1916). Renaissance and Enlightenment authors such as Biondo Flavio and Gibbon have been supplanted by later understandings. The works of Pirenne continue to have some vogue amongst archaeologists (Hodges and Whitehouse 1983; Randsborg 1989), but are now mostly ignored by historians. The views of Karl Marx remain the most influential amongst the authority figures. Those Marxists who focus on the base-superstructure relationship still tend to study Antiquity and the Middle Ages as discrete periods separated by a brief period of struggle (i.e. Hindness and Hirst 1975; G.E.M. de Ste. Croix 1983; cf. Rigby 1987), although those focusing on class consciousness and class struggle tend to blur the distinctions (ie Wickham 1981; Moreland 1991; Samson 1989; cf. Kaye 1984).

The military failure model, which can also be called the barbarian hordes model, emphasises the military collapse of the Western Empire in the face of 'barbarian' incursions (Bronson 1988; Ferrill 1988; Piganiol 1972). Various explanations are offered for Roman military ineffectiveness. Bronson's (1988) simplistic view focuses on fatal corruption amongst the imperial bureaucracy. Piganiol, in arguing for the inherent vitality of ancient Rome, uses the invasions as an irresistible *deus ex machina* (1972:466). Ferrill's more sophisticated model is in essence a rewrite of Jones's (1964) model of the fall of the western empire, based on a crisis of taxation. Unlike Jones, however, he sees both the consequence and cause of the tax crisis as a problem of funding of the military. Excessive military commitments led to overtaxation. This led to widespread tax evasion, causing underfunding of the military. This in turn led to improper and inadequate training, and an increasing and eventually fatal reliance on *foederati* (1988:153). Each of these situations is seen as allowing an opening for the vast hordes of ferocious barbarians, poised in squalor and poverty on the empire's doorstep, to leap through and ravish the wealth of the Mediterranean.

The military paradigm goes hand in hand with the 'great man' view of history. If military success and failure are the cause of historical changes, it is a logical extension to look at the generals and leaders of both sides, and lay blame or apportion praise based upon their actions. Ferrill, for example, turns specifically to one individual, Stilicho, and makes him the scapegoat (1988:167-8). In this, he seems to feel he is mirroring Gibbon's emphasis on important individuals, but he misses Gibbon's point. Gibbon insisted that the fatal flaw lay in the structures which led to reliance on single individuals, rather than in the actual actions of any one individual.

The argument from poverty is less easily dismissed. In the traditional view, the wealth of the Roman period is replaced, and replaced quickly, by the abject cultural and material poverty of the Dark Ages. The Roman world is one of peace, prosperity, art, and learning; the early Middle Ages a time of violence, poverty, and illiteracy. The emphasis is placed on the contrast between the two periods. Look indeed how the mighty have fallen!

As seen above, however, the concept of a culturally impoverished Dark Age was the creation of the Renaissance historians, writing during a conscious reinvention of the golden age of Antiquity. These writers ignored the achievements of the early Middle Ages. Although the Dark Ages were indeed a time of massive illiteracy, so were Antiquity and the Renaissance. Learning in the early Middle Ages followed a trajectory set for it long before Romulus Augustulus came to grief. The universalizing of the Christian religion in A.D. 312 gradually changed the focus of scholarship. The writers of classical antiquity wrote in a series of genres such as poetry, rhetoric, biography, letters, and philosophy. The ecclesiastical writers had instead glosses, sermons, hagiography, letters and theology. The Renaissance writers, and indeed many later writers, dismissed the ecclesiastical writings as products of inferior scholarship, in part because the quality of the Latin was worse than that of Cicero and Livy. This was an unfair criticism. The Latin of daily use had, by the third century, diverged a long way from the language of learned pretension. The ecclesiastical writers, addressing a wider audience than the poets, adopted a new and more vernacular style. Despite this they produced works of power and subtlety, such as Isodore of Seville's *Encyclopedia*. They proved a capacity for subtle argumentation, rivalling and perhaps surpassing Cicero, in the assorted theological debates that accompanied the working out of the implications of their new religion.

Similar arguments can be made for sculpture and painting. The most common charge against medieval painting is that the artists had lost the ability to render perspective properly, a skill only rediscovered in the Renaissance. In antiquity there was a concern with perspective and realism in painting, as much art was concerned with simulating landscape (Bergmann 1992), or representing real or idealized individuals. Gradually the main stream of art came to focus on religious themes. This led to concerns with hierarchical relationships between individuals, so that the Christ figure will be larger than the saints who will be larger than the aristocrats who will be larger than their servants (Camille 1989; Henderson 1972; Krautheimer 1965). Backgrounds became schematic, incorporating the elements necessary to identify the biblical or hagiographic incident being portrayed. During the Renaissance the accurate portrait and realistic landscape again became priorities for artists, in part because of a conscious desire to imitate Roman art. The art of the Middle Ages is not inferior in technique or vision to that of Antiquity and the Renaissance, but represents a different focus and style.

The material poverty of the Dark Ages is usually approached through the disappearance of monumental architecture, and through the apparent sudden disappearance of archaeological evidence. I will not deal in detail with monumental architecture, but it should be noted that the late eighth century church at San Vincenzo al Volturno was 66 metres long by 23 metres wide, and approximately 22 metres high, and decorated with masses of marble, mosaics, and even coloured glass windows (Hodges *et al.* forthcoming), while Rome saw the founding of 45 monasteries in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries (Ferrari 1957). In the

supposed depths of the most poverty stricken of eras, Gregory the Great was able to reorganize the administration of the church and city, including reorganizing the dole, and at the same time rebuild in a grand manner the bridges of Ponte Salaro and Ponte Nomentano (Krautheimer 1980).

The argument for material poverty is most commonly employed by archaeologists. The following argument by Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse is a typical example. From 1955 to 1975 the British School at Rome sponsored and organized a large series of field surveys near the city of Rome, in south Etruria, the Roman Campagna, and Molise, (see Potter 1979 for a summary). Pottery chronologies (ie, Hayes 1980, 1972; Goudineau 1968) allowed the dating of many sites to within narrow bands of 25-100 years. The number of sites with early Medieval pottery (A.D. 550 to A.D 800) is *very* small, compared to those with Roman or High Medieval pottery. Further, very few early Medieval artifacts of any type are produced by the survey. This lack of material culture in the archaeological record is argued to equate with very low population levels in the Italian countryside during the Dark Ages, and further argued to show that those few who were there were very poor (Hodges and Whitehouse 1983:33-48). This depopulation of the countryside is said to mirror an apparent absence of early Medieval layers in many urban excavations (Hodges and Whitehouse 1983:26-33, 52-53). Hodges and Whitehouse then proceed to claim that this sample indicates a "generalized demographic collapse" (1983:53) for the whole western empire.

While there is little argument that civic populations declined to a fraction of their maximum sizes, there is considerable debate on just when these maximums and minimums occur, and what the decline actually represents. What is now certain is that the virtual complete abandonment of cities except as ecclesiastical administrative centres (Pirenne 1925:56; cf. Hodges and Whitehouse 1983:52-53) is generally an overstatement (Ward-Perkins 1987:70-71). Recent work in urban archaeology has shown that many excavations, by concentrating on stone built structures and high status artifacts such as finewares, have missed early Medieval levels. For example, in Milan a recent urban excavation has produced extensive remains of a large early Medieval wooden structure which continued through the section into an adjacent lot. The adjacent lot had been the site of an excavation several years previously which had found only 'sterile fill' between the Roman and high Medieval (11th century) levels (Perring 1990).

The timing of civic decline is also problematic. When we do have archaeological evidence it provides conflicting dates. It appears each city followed its own trajectory. For example, Luni (in Liguria) started to decline in the third century, perhaps because its main export, Carrara marble, went out of fashion (Ward-Perkins et al 1978). In contrast, Marseille could still be described as "the great port of Gaul" (Pirenne 1925:17-18) in the eighth century. In many cases civic decline appears to have begun by the third or fourth century, long before the supposed fall of Rome.

The problem with field survey seems at first glance more acute. As noted above,

in the South Etruria surveys the number of sites with early medieval artifacts is minimal. However, a close examination of the survey results and related documentation reveals a much less straightforward situation than Hodges and Whitehouse suggest. The surveys show a complex pattern of settlement change over time. Pre-Iron Age sites are very rare, due probably to massive Iron Age erosion and redeposition. In the Early Iron Age (800-600 B.C.) the Etruscans expanded into the area from the northwest (Tuscany), establishing a series of nucleated settlements in what was probably mostly deep forest (Hutchison 1970). During the middle Iron Age (600-300 B.C.) these nucleated settlements were gradually surrounded by numerous dispersed farmsteads. This pattern continued and intensified during the later Iron Age (300 B.C.-A.D. 100), after the Romans had taken control of the area. In the late second and third centuries A.D. there is a large reduction in the number of sites found, but the sites that are found tend to be larger and wealthier. In the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. there is a continued minor decrease in the number of sites found, and the sites generally decline in wealth. Then, from the sixth century until the ninth, sites become very rare. Suddenly, in the ninth and tenth centuries, there appear nucleated settlements (*castelli*), each housing dozens to hundreds of people. These are accompanied by some dispersed farmsteads. This remains the basic settlement pattern through the rest of the Middle Ages (Potter 1979, Kahane *et al.* 1968). Only since the formation of the Italian state, with its accompanying program of land reforms, has the pattern begun to again shift significantly towards dispersed farmsteads (Silverman 1975).

It is crucial to understand that, from the early Iron Age until the rise of the *castelli*, sites are dated by finds of fine pottery types. Sites from the second to seventh centuries A.D. are dated by the presence of specific types of African Red Slip (ARS), produced, as the name suggests, in Africa. Early Medieval sites are dated through the presence of Forum Ware, produced in Rome. The distribution pattern of ARS appears to have been seriously disrupted beginning in A.D. 533-35, when the Eastern Empire 'retook' North Africa from the Vandal kings. The Byzantines appear to have diverted much of the region's agricultural exports from Rome to Constantinople (Jones 1964). As ARS ware was shipped as an adjunct to grain and olive oil, it too was diverted. Forum ware may have been a response of the Roman potters to the proffered opportunity. It is a less technically sophisticated pottery than ARS, which may indicate potters used to producing coarse kitchen wares were adding tablewares to their repertoire. Its dating is somewhat controversial, but in any case it appears within 50 to 100 years of the cessation of ARS imports (Whitehouse 1978; Christie 1987). It was certainly never produced in the quantity of ARS, and it appears to have a quite limited distribution around Rome (Whitehouse 1978). Interestingly, all of the sites which I know of as having Forum Ware also have ecclesiastical connections, such as the Papal *domus cultae* of Capracorum (Whitehouse 1978), or the monastic *locus* of San Donato (Moreland and Pluciennik 1991). This may indicate that the pottery was produced for monastic and papal patrons.

There have been many explanations for the dearth of early Medieval sites and/or finewares in South Etruria. Hodges and Whitehouse, as noted above, state that there are no sites because there are no people (1983). Moreland (pers. comm.) argues that the late Antique sites carry on into the early Middle Ages, but the lack of finewares from this period disguises their true date range. Associated with that he suggests a period of ideological rejection of material possession, although his own site at San Donato shows that a sixth to eighth century rural site can have a rich material culture (Moreland and Pluciennik 1991, Moreland *et al.* forthcoming). Interestingly, the site of San Donato was recorded by the preceding field survey as a Renaissance church, as it did not produce any early medieval finewares. The site was identified only through the study of land ownership documents (Moreland 1986, 1987; Moreland and Pluciennik 1991; Moreland *et al.* forthcoming). Others (i.e. Potter 1987) have suggested that a ninth century date for *incastellamento* is far too late, while Greene (1987) has implied that pottery was replaced as a status symbol by other materials, such as metalwork. Wickham (1981) has argued that rural society became less stratified, and thus the need for status markers such as fine pottery declined. I would argue that, in addition to the above suggestions, a significant amount of display and conspicuous consumption was being directed to building and decorating churches and monasteries. This concentration of durable and dateable material culture has made these the most obvious and most easily dateable early medieval sites in the countryside. Whatever the case, an argument based almost entirely on the absence of finds of fine pottery remains in field surveys is unconvincing as an indicator of rural depopulation and poverty.

If the Late Antique-Early Medieval transition was not a discontinuous collapse, what did happen to the western Empire? It is impossible in the space of a short article, written to an audience unfamiliar with the material, to provide a complete picture. Indeed, the situation is so complex I despair of even being able to fit it into a large book. The following description is brutally brief and oversimplified, ignoring all but the most obvious political and social events and process. More detailed exposition of the themes noted below, accompanied by extensive bibliographies, can be found in Goffart (1971, 1972, 1981, 1982, 1988, 1989), Cameron (1993), Liebeschütz (1990), P. Brown (1967, 1978), and T. Brown (1984).

Edward Gibbon puts the beginning of the decline and fall of the empire at its very inception, and for convenience I will use that as a starting point, although I would argue that the processes leading to the problems go back much further (Ross *in preparation*). Gibbon declares that the underlying problem with the Empire was that empires are inherently structurally unstable. The Roman Empire relied on the skills, talents and whims of one person, the emperor, or the individual controlling the emperor. When that individual was incompetent or corrupt or evil the empire suffered. The other main factor to note is that once Rome had conquered the Levant, Mesopotamia, North Africa, and Egypt, its real centre of wealth and population lay around the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. Its chief external trade was with the wealthy empires of Persia, India, and China. The

western provinces, Spain, Gaul, and Britain, were always of less economic importance. Even Italy, mountainous and rugged, was a land of relatively low economic potential. Through its conquests Rome had effectively turned itself from a core to a periphery (Bowerstock 1988; cf. Duncan-Jones 1982, 1990).

In the context of these factors, the key events are Diocletian's structural reorganization (A.D. 284-90), which permanently divided the empire into two administrative units, and Constantine's removal of the primary capital of the empire to Constantinople (A.D. 330). Milan, located closer to the troublesome frontiers, and better situated for communication with the bulk of Europe, became capital of the west. Thereafter the city of Rome and its immediate hinterland entered into a steady economic and demographic decline as wealth and power migrated to the new centres. This does not represent a 'fall' of the western Empire. The concept of western and eastern empire as two separate polities is false. What happened was that the rulers of the Empire recognized and responded to the realities of the situation. The basis of their power lay in the east, as did their chief rival, Persia, and their most holy site, Jerusalem. There was nothing to keep them in Rome except tradition, and as none of the rulers had been from Rome itself since the late third century, the power of tradition could not hold them.

With the capital removed to the east, interest in the west declined. In the fifth century usurpers and local despots were simply ignored, or treated as any other provincial governor, as long as they did not aspire to the Empire. For example, in 476 the Roman general Odoacer took over Italy, and declared himself *king* of Italy, possibly to avoid being seen as a pretender to the Purple. He pledged formal allegiance to the Emperor Zeno, and was accepted as Patrician of Rome and Prefect of Italy. Odoacer and his successors then effectively turned their back on the eastern empire, and concentrated on local affairs. From a practical point of view, this meant that the tax revenues of the west were rendered as tribute rather than tax, and, from the eastern viewpoint, were considerably reduced (Goffart 1989, 1972). This state of affairs was abruptly terminated in A.D. 533-54 when the Eastern Empire decided to re-establish direct control of the west. The imbalance between east and west is shown in the ease with which the Eastern Empire regained control of North Africa and Italy with only a small force. Court intrigue and the threat of conflict with Persia finally stalled the campaigns before Spain, Gaul and Britain could be retaken (Goffart 1981).

Following the reconquest of Italy, the Byzantines imposed extremely high taxes, which aggravated the local economic downturn. Following this, the Byzantines lost interest in the west again, and continued to pursue an eastward looking policy, leaving the country only lightly garrisoned. This left the gate open for the Lombards to enter Italy over the Alps, and, with the apparent connivance of disgruntled Italians, take control of much of the northern interior of the peninsula, just as earlier disinterest and disaffection had allowed the Franks to gain control of large parts of Gaul.

It is critical in the above description to note that the Roman Empire does not

collapse. The centre of gravity shifts, for a variety of economic and political reasons. It then contracts, allowing provinces to move out of its direct control, again for various reasons. The empire suffers several major periods of contraction. The first is the loss of the northwest in the fifth and sixth centuries, through what can only be called indifference. The second period of major contraction is the Islamic conquests in Palestine, Syria, Egypt and North Africa in the seventh century. Despite all the descriptions of the unstoppable nature of the *jihads*, it must be noted that Persia and Constantinople had fought a long and exhausting war just prior to the Arab irruptions. Although it is chipped away at thereafter, the Roman Empire, as Gibbon clearly recognized and states, did not finally end until 1453, when it did not 'collapse', but was rather finally absorbed into the empire of Ottoman Turks. This picture of the 'fall of the Roman Empire' does not support collapse theory. Although some places suffer decline, and even occasionally abrupt decline, the empire as a whole is a complex and heterogenous entity which evolves over the course of nearly 1500 years into a variety of different entities.

Does the failure of this example invalidate collapse theory? No. It barely even weakens it. Renfrew claims his model applies to "early states" (1979:481). It can easily be argued that Rome belongs to a different classification, along with its 'axial age' contemporaries, Persia, India and China (Eisenstadt 1986). Tainter argues that states do not necessarily collapse, but can rather suffer slow decline (1988:4-5). There is, after all, nothing in systems theory that requires jumps in energy level, up or down. Rome, from the viewpoint of collapse, may simply have been a bad choice of example. The real question I am raising, however, goes deeper. All of these writers assume that rapid collapse is a widely found event, yet the archetypal collapse, the fall of Rome, appears to be a historical illusion. The image of the fall of Rome which pervades western thought is the product of a long tradition of historiographic biases reaching back at least to the Renaissance. 'Everyone knows' Rome fell, yet it didn't. To what extent has this false understanding been applied as an unconscious paradigm by the students of other states? We may never know, but we must still ask ourselves questions like "Does the fall of Rome lead to the Classic Maya collapse?"

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