



1

Who and What Is Late Antiquity?

Rutilius Namatianus did not want to leave Rome; but as news of the attack trickled in, he managed his goodbyes and rushed down the Tiber to board the next ship. It cannot have been an easy decision, to give up his comfortable life in the imperial city to sail, at moment's notice, back to Gaul. But crisis had struck. The luxury of living away from home had come to a sudden halt. Friends and colleagues in Italy would have to understand. Many of them would probably have seen Rutilius' look of anxious confusion, for "eyes cannot, tearless, say goodbye." That, at least, is the way he describes his own departure in a Latin poem (Rutilius Namatianus, *On His Return to Gaul* 1.165, LCL translation by J. Duff and A. Duff [1935]).

The poetry of the line, like Rutilius' work as a whole, is arresting for many reasons, not the least of which are related to Rutilius' upbringing and career. A member of Rome's wealthy senatorial class, Rutilius had been raised by a hard-working father, a dedicated government official who had held the position of governor in central Italy and, perhaps more importantly, had fulfilled his duties without scandal. It was a solid reputation that would loom large over Rutilius' life for many decades. Stopping in Tuscany on his journey home, in 417 CE, Rutilius tells us how touched he was to learn that the citizens there fondly remembered his father's time in office. The residents of Pisa had paid to erect a statue of him in their Forum. "The honor done to my lost parent," Rutilius wrote, "made me weep" (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.575–580).

Rutilius' upbringing helped determine his career. An educated male, from a family who had already served the emperor, he can be counted among an elite group of people who, in the early fifth century CE, stood in the top 1 percent of Roman society. People like Rutilius moved easily through the halls of power. Three years earlier, in 414 CE, Rutilius himself had been Prefect of the City of Rome, *praefectus urbi*. Prior to that, he had already served at the pleasure of the emperor,

acting as *magister officiorum*, “Master of the Imperial Offices.” Like a modern politician’s indispensable chief-of-staff, he oversaw the couriers, communications, interpreters, and audiences that kept the emperor’s day in some semblance of order. Prefect of the City of Rome – a twelve-hundred-year-old city by Rutilius’ day – was an extraordinary accomplishment. No surprise he was morose as he watched it disappear.

That’s precisely why this chapter begins with him. Of all the writers who could have delivered the first lines of our story, of all the objects and monuments that could have been used to set the stage for what comes next in history, Rutilius Namatianus is indisputably not the most famous voice of his age. Yet I believe his minor, though heartfelt, reflections do merit top billing for an altogether different reason. I think the unhappiness that pervades his poem – the result of a highly educated, successful Latin speaker being forced to walk away from the ancient city he so deeply loved – is something that should resonate with many readers who pick up this book.

Planned as the last in a new series of volumes which explore the social and cultural world of the ancient Mediterranean, starting in Archaic Greece and finishing in Late Antiquity, this work is designed to take readers across the bridge that passes from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages. Now that the story has arrived in the fifth century CE, the time has come for us to bid goodbye to Rome, too. For students and scholars trained in classical history, who wouldn’t be – like Rutilius Namatianus – just a tad nostalgic when they set foot nervously towards Late Antiquity? Many readers are leaving the world they love.

1.1 An Overview of the Book

History from the ground-up, all the way to the top

This book is built around people like Rutilius, second- or third-tier historical figures who are usually passed over in many traditional narratives of the time. That is not to say students won’t learn about marquee names and dates, too: Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, is here, as is the sixth-century Christian emperor of Constantinople, Justinian. Muhammad, the prophet who formed an important movement on the Arabian peninsula during the early seventh century, occupies these pages as well. But the emphasis throughout is not on the day-to-day record of wars, battles, and palace intrigue that largely predominates in our source material and gives us a narrative of what was happening at the top of society. This book focuses on reconstructing the period from the ground-up.

In many ways, it is a people’s history of the time: a story of ambition and failure, of the daily grind around which people organized their hours and of their hopes and aspirations for change that sometimes materialized, sometimes did not. It is a picture not just of life in the Roman Empire’s capital, Romulus’ historic city, which Rutilius was fortunate to manage, or life in the empire’s second capital, Constantinople – although it certainly will paint an impressionistic picture of both.

It takes readers, instead, on a tour: to the borderlands of the classical world to see what the people on the inside of the Mediterranean looked like to others who were looking in and then back again. In doing so, we have the opportunity to lay our eyes on a historical panorama that includes more than the isolated figures of emperors and kings.

In the fourteen chapters of this book, we will pause to inspect where the people of Late Antiquity lived and how they worshipped. We will explore the family bonds that sustained them and the economic structures that underpinned their daily life. We will encounter the fascinating literature they produced in a positively astounding number of languages, visit major monuments they built, and pick up the objects they left behind. This book is not a plodding survey of literature or archaeology, however. It is a social and cultural history – a story at its core about people, about the things and ideas that occupied their imaginations and shaped their world.

A reader could be forgiven for feeling enveloped, overwhelmed even, by such a broad, patchwork quilt of different cities, people, classes, and times. But there are recognizable faces here that are meant to comfort (and surprise, for those fortunate to meet them again for the first time). Augustine, the late fourth-century Christian author of the now world-famous spiritual autobiography called the *Confessions*, is but one of the familiar figures who hides in this landscape. Sometimes presumed to have dominated the period, Augustine will prove to be a much tougher person to hear than his later, saintly stature might imply, though. For the world we're about to put under our microscope hardly belonged to him. Even the map that we'll use to chart our journey will reveal itself to be more expansive and diverse than it sometimes appears in stories of Rome – with chapters featuring the history of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Arabian peninsula.

That is part of what makes Late Antiquity so exciting. It demands a deep, empathetic desire to inquire into the lives of ancient people who have outgrown the traditional labels, “Greek” and “Roman,” with which the study of ancient Mediterranean history has traditionally been concerned. Their dramas played out on three continents – Europe, Africa, and Asia – and the richness of their experiences cannot be appreciated with the use of a simple, parochial lens like a focus on Christian theology or church history. In fact, a large number of its actors were not Christian at all: They were Jews shut out of their holiest site by an aggressive Christian take-over of Jerusalem; Muslims who wrestled with the complicated legacy of what had been revealed to Muhammad; and followers of the Buddha who worshipped in monastic communities over the din of Chinese and Persian traders passing outside their caves (*Exploring Culture* 1.1: Late Antiquity Lost; Figure 1.1). And among them was also a nameless, faceless, but no less important host of traders, laborers, wives, husbands, daughters, and sons who never declared any religious preference.

Their choices are the very things that make Late Antiquity so difficult to study. The question of why people at any time might choose to reveal meaningful things about themselves – in the imagery of a poem they composed or in the designs on a plate they commissioned or purchased in the market – is fundamentally connected with the power structures of the place and time around them. In short, although it's admirable and indeed necessary for us to dig deeper into history to study the borders,

Exploring Culture 1.1 *Late Antiquity Lost at the Start of the Twenty-First Century*

It can be difficult to think about the ancient past, let alone study it. Buildings, statues, even pieces of old cookware can breathe a little bit of life into people long gone. They bridge the distance and lend the past a more tangible presence. For archaeologists and historians, they also inform us about aspects of life not preserved in documents.

Stones and sherds are more than scientific artifacts, however. They are people's cultural heritage, and the loss of objects and monuments – whether through natural disaster like the sudden rumbling of an earthquake or through more nefarious means, described below – can strike like a gut-wrenching blow to communities who value the stories these precious pieces contain.

The start of the twenty-first century has witnessed some dramatic upheavals around the globe that have directly impacted how Late Antique scholars do their jobs. Regional conflicts, civil wars, international terrorism, and domestic disturbances have led, tragically, to the loss of many important examples of the historical and archaeological record. Two damaged sites, in particular, Bamiyan in Afghanistan and Palmyra in Syria, illustrate how truly expansive this period was and how interconnected its people were. Late Antiquity crossed many modern time zones.

Bamiyan lies in the center of Afghanistan. Located about 150 miles west of the Afghan capital, it is nestled in the tail of a mountainous ridge, the Hindu Kush, which snakes across northeastern Afghanistan before it merges with the Himalayas in Pakistan. Starting in the sixth century CE, two monumental statues of the Buddha were carved from the rock face. These towering Bamiyan statues were examples of Gandhara material culture. An ancient kingdom of the Indus River valley and Hindu Kush, with roots dating back to 1500 BCE, the people and culture of Gandhara began to see many Mediterranean customs and ideas come through the mountains in the wake of Alexander the Great's military excursions. Gandhara culture would flourish through the sixth century CE. A seventh-century Chinese traveler, Xuanzang, reports how impressive the rock-hewn Buddhas were.

In March 2001, however, the authorities in Afghanistan, the Taliban, deemed the Bamiyan statues "idolatrous" to their version of Islam and had them detonated. Today, after a U.S.-led invasion following the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, the people of Afghanistan are now picking up the pieces of their culture in more ways than one. There is a campaign to restore the Buddhas.

The all-too-familiar story of modern people suffering a cultural loss through violent destruction can be told about Palmyra (also known as Tadmur), Syria. Located at the opposite end of the Eurasian landmass from China, Palmyra was an important trading oasis in classical antiquity. During Roman rule, the city's temples, colonnades, and tombs reflected the cosmopolitan interests and personalities of its people.

In August 2015, in the middle of a heart-breaking civil war, the so-called Islamic State lined two important ancient temples and several tombs with explosives and blew them up. The largest of these buildings, the Temple of Bel, was situated inside a sanctuary that measured almost two American football fields on each side. The destruction of Palmyra's monuments was a heinous act of cultural cleansing intended to remove the pre-Islamic past from memories of war-torn Syria.

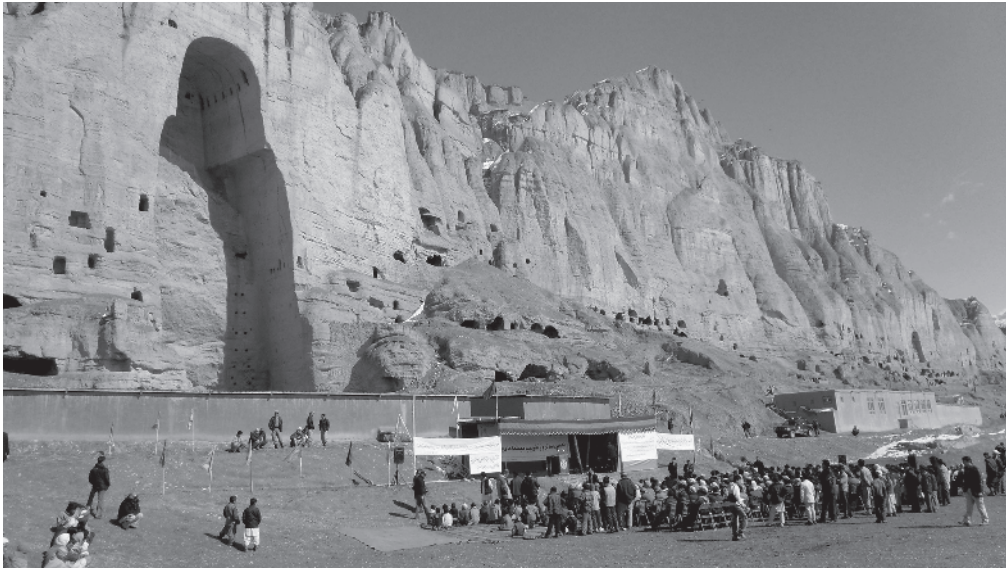


Figure 1.1 The Buddhist caves at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, where two colossal images of the Buddha once stood. Carved from the sandstone cliffs by a community of Buddhist monks – the smaller one in the middle of the sixth century CE, and the larger one (seen here) in the early seventh century CE – they were destroyed by the order of the Taliban government of Afghanistan in March 2001. The issue of how people of different faiths or no faith interacted with each other and with the diverse world around them is one of the key topics that we will explore in this book. It is a story that crosses three continents, five centuries, and involves Jews, Christians, Muslims, believers in the Olympian gods, Buddhists, Hindus, and people who had no religious preference at all. Originally 55 meters tall (c.180 feet). Copyright © DPA Picture Alliance Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

beliefs, cities, families, economics, communities, literary culture, and material culture of the people who laid the foundation of this book, we cannot and must not leave conversations about politics, law, and power so casually behind. This book introduces readers to both, and it suggests that even bottom-up history must take account of people and events at the top of the social ladder.

Precisely for that reason, the intersection of power, politics, and society is a topic that haunts many episodes in this book. In the fourth century, we will consider whether Rome would remain true to its pluralistic past with the legalization of Christianity. In the fifth century, we will look at the social status which religious minorities, like Jews, had as citizens in a Christian empire. And in the sixth century, we will see how a contemporary empire, like that of the Persians, conceived of their own political mandate as divinely given, too. Finally, in the seventh and eighth centuries, we will search for evidence to show us how the first Muslims interacted with their neighbors – diplomatically or militarily? – and try to determine what effect their choices had on the lives of the people they unexpectedly came to govern. These are some of the avenues and questions we will wander down together in this book (*Key Debates* 1.1: Late Antiquity Found). In doing so, our guiding principle will be to eavesdrop on as many voices as possible, not just the testimony of the people who shouted loudest.

Key Debates 1.1 *Late Antiquity Found at the Start of the Twenty-First Century*

Was Jesus married? Did the Qur'ān exist prior to Muhammad? In the past decade, these two questions, which might scandalize some devout Christians or Muslims, have dominated the headlines. In each case, the news has been fueled by the discovery of new material culture.

In September 2012, American researchers at an international conference in Rome announced that they had translated a scrap of papyrus with a sensational phrase on it: "Jesus said to them, 'My wife....'" Written in eight lines of Coptic, a language used in Late Antique Egypt, the papyrus fragment had been assigned a sensational name by the researchers who were working on it. They called it a fragment of *The Gospel of Jesus' Wife*. The tiny artifact, which at $c.1.5 \times 3.0$ inches is smaller than an iPhone, quickly lit a fuse in the academic community. A series of startling revelations followed.

Scientific tests used to determine the papyrus' date revealed that it had come from the seventh to ninth century CE. Consequently, the text offers no evidence at all about whether Jesus was *actually* married. It does, however, have a place in a long and important intellectual conversation, dating back to the late second century CE, in which Christian writers *speculated* about Jesus' marital status. The Late Antique Coptic fragment would fit within this vibrant tradition – if the text is authentic.

As soon as the fragment was unveiled, other researchers detected problems. The Coptic text was written in a dialect that had long died out in seventh- to ninth-century Egypt. In addition, the order of the words read less as fluent sentences and more as a series of patchwork phrases, cribbed from another source. One perceptive scholar

identified a missing letter in the text's first line. It replicated the same error that appeared in the same words in an online edition of the much more widely known Coptic document, the *Gospel of Thomas*. Details of the fragment's exact collecting history, beyond a vague 1999 receipt and a few references to a mid-twentieth-century collector, were also never made public at the time. That point was particularly galling to the cultural heritage community, concerned with stopping the illicit trade of antiquities, which thrives on obscurity.

An announcement coming out of the United Kingdom, reported widely by outlets such as BBC and the *New York Times*, was similarly exciting. Charles Cadbury, a famous chocolate maker, had funded the acquisition of several ancient manuscripts in the 1920s. Purchased by a priest from Iraq, these artifacts were then brought to Birmingham in England.

In 2015, a graduate student made a stunning discovery. On two previously unidentified parchment folios, or individual leaves, she recognized the text of the Qur'ān. Muslims consider the Qur'ān to be the word of Allah revealed to Muhammad, starting in the 610s. No text of the Qur'ān has ever been dated to Muhammad's lifetime, however. He died in 632. The text is said to have been standardized by the Muslim community's third leader, Uthman, who ruled between 644 and 656 CE.

Scientific testing has now confirmed that the Birmingham parchments date between 568 and 645 CE. Though imprecise, the range of dates for the Birmingham folios distinguishes them as two of the world's oldest copies of the Qur'ān.

That's why, throughout this book, top-down history is interwoven with history from the ground-up. Famous names, momentous laws, and an emphasis on chronology: all these provide an essential ground line for registering the power dynamics within Late Antique society. When we pay attention to them, they can even help us see our sources in a higher relief – even “minor” poets like Rutilius Namatianus.

A top-down view of Rome in the fifth century CE

Let's consider an example of how to integrate top-down history with a more individualistic, local approach. Just what *was* happening in the Roman Empire at the time Rutilius set out for Gaul? Political changes before, during, and after the fifth century CE were certainly dramatic and, in many cases, socially disruptive. In 476 CE, the empire would shed the form it had assumed for roughly five centuries. Roman provinces across the landscape of Europe and North Africa, including the crucial territory of Italy, would be cut loose from imperial control, and many people would gradually adapt to life under new management: Christian kings, not Christian emperors.

To make matters more painful, at least for culturally conservative Romans, many of these new administrators were foreigners, and they had arrived in violent waves of migration. One group that rocked Rome into the fifth century CE were Vandals. A tribe from northern Europe, Vandals had crossed the Rhine River in the early fifth century CE. Later, they marched through modern Spain across to North Africa and, in 439 CE, eventually seized its cosmopolitan cultural capital, Carthage. The Rhine River wasn't the only site of border problems for the Roman Empire, though.

The Danube frontier was another. Since the mid-third century CE, other foreign tribes had been testing the vigilance of Roman armies stationed along the empire's northeastern frontier. These sporadic attacks began as third-century headaches for the Roman cities of eastern Europe and the Balkans. By the fourth century, they had turned into a full-blown, urgent political crisis. Athens was invaded in 267 CE. Areas of the historic city were torched. A century later, in 378 CE, the Emperor Valens would resolve to put an end to the confrontations. Backed by his powerful army and devoted soldiers, Valens met a band of Goths at Adrianople, outside modern Istanbul. The emperor may have been hoping for a swift victory. Instead, in a confrontation that left an open wound on the Roman state, Valens was killed in battle, his body never found. The emperor's death stung, an indictment of Rome's failed border policies. It was also a harbinger of more problems.

At the turn of the fifth century CE, two Gothic tribes, the Tervingi and the Greuthungi, living on the western shores of the Black Sea, were driven from their home by an unexpected invasion of Huns from Central Asia. Rome was ill prepared to handle the effect of foreigners driven from their home by other foreigners. This tense situation reached a breaking point in the first decade of the fifth century when a savvy Gothic leader, Alaric, began demanding a land settlement with Roman authorities. The government balked at ceding anything to Alaric's Goths.

In 410 CE, to prove the seriousness of his demands and to get the Senate's attention, Alaric attacked Rome. He and his army besieged the city to convince the empire's stubborn bureaucrats that the Goths' concerns could no longer be ignored. By holding the empire hostage, Goths won major territorial concessions, too. Around 413 CE, land was given to them in the province of Gaul, in the region of Aquitaine, settling them far from the empire's capitals in Ravenna and Constantinople. Before the end of the decade, the capital of the Gothic settlement in Aquitaine would be based in the historical city of Roman *Tolosa*, modern Toulouse, France. From there, Gothic settlers would continue to grow in power in Aquitaine and Spain and expand militarily.

Rutilius Namatianus' family home was in Toulouse. In 417 CE, as word reached Rome that the Goths had seized the city as their capital, the panic-stricken, one-time Prefect of the City – fearing the worst for his hometown – rushed through his farewells and arranged for passage on the next ship to Gaul. As historians, we don't have to share Rutilius' sense of nostalgia to recognize how thankful we should be that we have his poem. It allows us to experience a crucial transition in the story of the Roman Empire through the eyes of a person who called two places home, Italy and Gaul; but it also affords us a unique way of seeing the same period through several of Rutilius' family and friends. Many of them were staking their hopes for the future by looking in the opposite direction: east.

Rutilius' poetry, in effect, offers an excellent case study at the outset of our book for observing how top-down narratives can inform our more minor sources, and vice versa. Before starting, then, we should not push Rutilius off stage so quickly. We can learn quite a bit more about how to do Late Antique history by listening to his poem. This first chapter invites readers to join three figures, Rutilius' friends, all of whom can help us put a human face on a pivotal age that is too often talked about in generic terms.

1.2 Three Lives and the "Fall of Rome"

Rutilius' journey was delayed fifteen days on account of weather (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.205). It must have been an agonizing two-week wait spent at the Roman harbor. Although only one complete book, or chapter, survives, along with fragments of a second, Rutilius' poem *On His Return to Gaul* is our primary source for his life, his family, and his career during the early fifth century CE. The precarious circumstances under which he wrote peek through the lines of his text.

Throughout his poem (where the meter permitted it), Rutilius introduces friends and relatives. The inclusion of their names and, in many cases, the details of their professional or personal lives, helps us compile a profile of Rutilius' social network. The following profiles will allow readers to personalize the dramatic decades of the early fifth century. They will also help us begin to sketch, albeit impressionistically at first, a more complex picture of how specific instances of change – like the migration of non-Roman citizens into the empire's borders and the violent conflict that could accompany it or result from it – affected daily life in fifth-century Rome, Gaul, and beyond.

Pictures of this period are sometimes painted in heavy black and white and for understandable reason. Greeks and Romans used these dark lines to stigmatize outsiders. They called foreign tribes “barbarians” (in the Greek, *barbaroi*; in Latin, *barbari*), “savages,” whose perceived inability or even unwillingness to talk, act, or behave as Romans fundamentally disqualified them from being included in civic society. Since at least the republican age of Cicero in the late first century BCE and of Tacitus in the late first century CE, recourse to this kind of stereotyping, even dehumanizing language drove public conversation about who was worthy enough to be counted a real Roman (for example, see Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.4.112, evoking the image of inhumane “barbarian”; and Tacitus, *Annals* 14.39, characterizing the people of Britain as such). This book asks students to adopt a more empathetic approach to history.

Victorinus, vicarius of Britain

And yet we cannot underestimate the effect that this steady trickle of nativist ideology had on molding the minds of elite Romans over the course of five centuries. Rutilius attests its effects. From his poem, we learn that at least one Roman in Gaul was not willing to welcome this new wave of change brought by Gothic settlers. This man was Rutilius’ friend Victorinus, a former *vicarius* of Britain and a native of Toulouse. “The capture of Tolosa,” Rutilius tells us, “had forced Victorinus, a wanderer in the lands of Etruria, to settle there and dwell in a foreign home” (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.495–496). Victorinus’ deliberate choice to relocate to Italy rather than continue to live in a city settled by Goths reveals much about his values and priorities.

The office of *vicarius*, “vicar,” which Victorinus held prior to 414 CE, was a bureaucratic invention that had not existed in the earlier empire. At the end of the tumultuous political years of the third century CE, Emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305 CE) had instituted several constitutional changes that were designed to make governing such a vast empire more efficient. One of these had been the creation of twelve “dioceses,” or super-provinces, which would become the second most senior structural unit of the Roman state (the prefectures, of which there were four, were super-dioceses). The long familiar units of empire, the provinces, meanwhile, were reduced in size – effectively allowing the provincial governor to manage a smaller, more self-contained area. In his role as *vicarius* of Britain, Victorinus would have coordinated reports from each of his provincial governors (there were five), and then channeled that information to the palace. Rutilius tells us that, for his service, Victorinus was awarded an honorary title, *comes*, “special advisor to the emperor.”

In the early fifth-century CE western empire, however, none of this success apparently held any allure for Victorinus anymore. After a career that had taken him to the northwest territories, after a lifetime of calling the landscape of Roman Gaul his home, Victorinus opted for a pleasurable retirement in Tuscany, where, as “special advisor,” he could be consulted if needed, rather than take a desk and an office with the emperor. By the time the Gothic settlers had won their concessions from the

government, Victorinus must have thought that the world he loved was simply changing too fast for him to play an active role in it anymore. In this way, he moved out of his house in Gaul just as new, different people were moving in.

Was Victorinus' outlook commonplace, or unique? That's the question for the social and cultural historian. Rutilius' other friends certainly didn't share Victorinus' perspective. Notwithstanding the ongoing negotiations taking place with Alaric and the Goths, many Romans throughout the empire were striving to ensure that the government continued to function and that life as they knew it adapted to the times. One attack in 410 CE, however psychologically jarring, was not going to be the end of their world (*Political Issues* 1.1: "Are We Rome?" Apocalyptic Thinking, Then and Now). We can observe this alternate perspective if we look at the lives of two more of Rutilius' friends.

Political Issues 1.1 *"Are We Rome?" Apocalyptic Thinking, Then and Now*

Do you know the popular parlor game, "Are We Rome?" It's an amusing pastime in which people use the past to talk, in code, about current concerns. In this diversion, the "Fall of Rome" is assumed to be a historical event, usually dressed up with real dates: 410 CE, 476 CE, or 1453 CE. Yet Rome didn't "fall" in one year. Nor did it "fall" because of a series of mistakes. The "End of the Great Empire" is a powerful theological idea that has been around since antiquity. Scholars have identified it as one characteristic of an *apocalyptic worldview*.

Although many writings called "apocalypses" are known from antiquity, elements of an apocalyptic worldview transcend this specific genre. One biblical scholar, John Collins, has identified eight characteristic motifs of this worldview: There is (1) a frantic expectation that the world will end and a belief (2) that it will come as an utter catastrophe. This hope is based upon the conviction that (3) the world unfolds in neat, discrete time periods. In addition, writers may also characterize their present time (4) as a "cosmic struggle" in which heavenly actors, such as angels and demons, battle for the soul of humanity. The outcome of this battle is (5) salvation, often evoked through ecstatic visions of paradise. In the end, (6) a divine kingdom will arrive with the aid of (7) a royal, savior figure, who will come bringing (8) glory.

The roots of this worldview sink deep into time, perhaps dating back millennia to the Near East and Persia. One of the most famous – and influential – manifestations of it comes from the Hellenistic Jewish world: the Book of Daniel.

Most biblical scholars believe this Jewish text was written around 165 BCE. In the age of Alexander's successors, Hellenistic customs, ideas, and trade began arriving on the doorstep of Jerusalem in greater frequency. Their presence, including the practice of ruler cult, was sparking a heated debate among the Jewish people about how to balance cultural traditions and innovations, faith and politics. The Book of Daniel preserves a slice of this crucial historical moment.

In the text, Daniel is living in Babylon during the time of King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and taken the Jewish people as captives to Babylon in 586 BCE. While in prison, Daniel has a series of visions of “four great beasts [come] up out of the sea” (Daniel 7.2–8 [NRSV]). Puzzled by what they signify, he approaches an interpreter who tells him: “[They signify that] four kings shall arise out of the earth” (Daniel 7.16–17 [NRSV]). The author was using symbols to provide a coded message of hope for his readers. He was telling them that history had been “predicted” to unfold as a series of hostile empires. This divine plan had begun with Nebuchadnezzar’s “Babylon.” Daniel’s readers would know that it had been followed by two of the most powerful empires of ancient history: the Median and Persian. The Hellenistic rulers were the last of these four maniacal “beasts.”

The Book of Daniel suggests that their time, too, would soon reach its end and that the Hellenistic empire would “fall.” This idea would have brought hope to people who saw the influx of Hellenistic ideals as incompatible with their Jewish faith. Both the Book of Daniel and the apocalyptic worldview which it encapsulates would be passed down to Late Antiquity. Many of these ideas still shape our own. They lie just beneath the surface of many “Are We Rome?” political laments.

Rufius Volusianus and Palladius were two other men whom Rutilius mentions in his poem. Their biographies suggest that not everyone in the early fifth century was necessarily demoralized or paralyzed by current events. These two men were not only staring head-on at the changing Roman world; they were eager to make the changing future their own.

Palladius, the law student from Gaul

Alaric’s three-day siege of Rome, in 410, had clouded the mood of Rome’s residents. Many wealthy Romans had fled, deciding to seek refuge from the aftermath of the precarious times by sailing to the comfort of their second homes in North Africa. Their stories, famously dramatized in a sermon on the Book of Daniel preached by Augustine that very year or the year following (Augustine, *Sermon* 397), create the impression of a city-wide exodus, a self-inflicted aftershock, that completed the decimation of the western capital. Yet during the first decades of the fifth century, not everyone was so eager to give up Rome.

Palladius – a young man from Gaul, perhaps in his twenties, maybe younger – had just arrived. And he had come with a purpose: to learn from the best teachers of the city. He “had been sent of late from the lands of the Gauls to learn the laws of the Roman courts” (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.208, 212–213). A close friend of Rutilius’, Palladius was also the poet’s relative, a boy who held “the fondest ties of my regard,” Rutilius wrote. Their connection was deep and went back to two generations to Palladius’ father, born in Poitiers in Gaul. An “eloquent youth,” as Rutilius styles him, Palladius had potential. His family, however, was in a precarious state.

Palladius' father, Exuperantius, had been assigned the task of quelling Gothic disturbances in Gaul. "Even now his father, Exuperantius, trains the Armorica sea-board to love the recovery of peace; he is re-establishing the laws, bringing freedom back and suffers not the inhabitants to be their servants' slaves" (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.214–216). The duty was a thankless one. Roman Armorica occupied the peninsula of modern France which is roughly the region of Brittany, a territory that had, for geographic reasons, not been well integrated into the empire's road system. Routes to and from the coast, originating in the interior of Gaul, near Roman Limonum (Poitiers), took a circuitous path. Midsummer, the fastest journey to the center of Armorica from Exuperantius' home has been calculated to take almost twenty-one days; Romans fleeing to Carthage in the wake of Alaric's attack, by contrast, arrived at their destination in less than a week. Over the next two decades, the dedication that Palladius' father showed in fighting for Roman values would make him an easy target for the disreputable pool of usurpers and revolvers hiding out the isolated Armorica.

In 424 CE, Palladius' father was murdered during an uprising in the south of France, as confirmed in a list of events, or "chronicle," compiled in Gaul in the mid-fifth century (*MGH, AA* volume 9, *The Gallic Chronicle of 452 CE*, entry at year 424–425 CE). Sadly, we do not know what effect his father's death had on Palladius. The student who had come to Italy to learn law, the boy who had bid goodbye to his father while he was policing Gaul, vanishes from the historical record after his appearance in Rutilius' poem. Whatever dreams the young Palladius had for making a name for himself in the wake of Alaric's attack may have been lost in Rome.

Rufius Volusianus, the prodigy who went to Constantinople

Anonymity was not a choice for our third and final individual: Rufius Antonius Agrypnius Volusianus. Rufius Volusianus was a child of an indisputable privilege; his father's family traced its lineage through Rome's historic *Decii* and *Caeonii* lines. His great-grandfather had been a senator. His status among the membership of the empire's elite was unimpeachable. His mother's name is unknown. He was also a loyal friend who thought nothing about accompanying Rufinus on his trip to the harbor.

"And now while others wend their way back to Rome, Rufius, living glory of his father Albinus, clings close to me on my way" (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.165–166). One imagines two young men running frantically to catch a ferry down the Tiber or a chariot down the Ostia Way. All the while, Rutilius must have appreciated the ridiculousness of the scene. His friend had forever bragged of having acquired his nickname – Volusianus – "from the ancient pedigree of [the name] Volusus," one of the local Italian tribes that had risen to power during the first years of the Roman Republic, back during the sixth century BCE. An impressive connection, if it were true. When people pressed him to substantiate it, Rutilius says, Volusianus would hem and haw, boldly brandishing stories about the authority of "Rutilian kings on the witness of Virgil" (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.170). Whether anyone ever mocked

such outrageous claims of lineage is never documented; Virgil's Rutilian kings, their stories dramatized in the *Aeneid*, were fictional characters.

Rufius Volusianus may have seen himself in Virgil's poetry, but poetry could not contain someone who presented himself as larger than life. It was Rufius' impressive "power of eloquence" that, Rutilius says, had skyrocketed his friend's career (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.171). One of his earliest jobs was in the imperial house, acting as *quaestor sacri palatini*, or "Chief Legal Officer in the Sacred Palace." The number of positions in the administration had grown since Diocletian's time, just as the number of provinces had, at the end of the third century and beginning of the fourth century CE. Diocletian's successors, among them chiefly Constantine, had continued to create new positions to assist in the day-to-day running of the empire. The "Communications Officer in the Sacred Palace" was one of these new roles.

Historians would be at a loss to decode the roles in this puzzling bureaucracy were it not for the fact we fortunately possess a document that helps us crack it. Written around 400 CE and preserved in several early medieval manuscripts, it is titled the *List of Offices* (in Latin, the *Notitia Dignitatum*). It charts many government positions in both the western and eastern branches of the empire and, in some cases, explicitly states the duties associated with these roles. Unquestionably dry to read, lacking any plot or character, the *List of Offices* is, nevertheless, a valuable reference for understanding Rufius Volusianus' political world. It tells us that Rufius Volusianus would have been responsible for "the formulation of laws [and] the formulation of petitions." It also mentions that he would have been fortunate to have a staff ("subordinate clerical assistants from the various bureaus" [*List of Offices*, translation by W. Fairley, 1901]).

With this government job came a high salary and the potential for advancement to an even higher salary, with more access and prestige. And less than two years after Alaric's attack, Volusianus seems to have been on a path towards acquiring just that. By then, his ambition – with hints of political ruthlessness – had clearly imprinted itself on Rutilius. "In youth he was the fitting spokesman of the emperor [*quaestor sacri palatini*]. Still earlier [probably before 412 CE], a mere stripling, he had governed as pro-consul the Carthaginian peoples and among the Tyrian folk [the Punic people of North Africa] inspired dread (in Latin, *terror*) and love (*amor*) alike" (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.171–174). It was these qualities, his ability to be a feared paper-pusher with a delicate touch, that led Rutilius to speculate freely about his friend's future: "His zealous energy gave promise of highest office. If it is permitted to trust desert, a consul he will be" (*On His Return to Gaul* 1.175–176).

Rufius Volusianus never became consul, one of the honorary chief executives of the state, a position often held ceremoniously by many emperors during their own reign. He did, however, earn another one of the elite titles of the empire: *vir illustris*, "Illustrious Man." Like the top-tier "Platinum Status" for today's frequent fliers, this Latin rank had been created in the fourth century CE to help distinguish levels of wealth and success among the already wealthy and successful. *Vir clarissimus*, "Distinguished Man," and *vir spectabilis*, "Admirable Man," functioned in similar, but less elevated, ways. Public texts inscribed in Greek and Latin throughout the Mediterranean usually include a proud reference, on the part of the dedicator, to one of these three levels of elite status.

Rufius Volusianus, the platinum-level office holder, would capitalize on it. By 418 CE, he would become the Prefect of the City of Rome. A decade later, in 428–429 CE, he would be given even more responsibility: the control of an entire praetorian prefecture. There were four of these state units: the prefectures of Gaul, Italy–North Africa, the Balkans, and the eastern Mediterranean, according to the *List of Offices*. Each had been drawn onto the map of the Roman state by Emperor Constantine (r. 313–337 CE) and functioned as the super-provinces of the fourth-century empire, just as Diocletian dioceses once had. The result of Constantine’s tweak to Diocletian’s design was a three-tiered level of Roman government – prefecture, diocese, province – that would survive into the seventh century CE.

The boy who had raced to the harbor with Rutilius would eventually command one of these four territories, “Italy–Africa,” and he would end his career as a confidant of the Roman emperor. When, in 437 CE, the ruler in the west, Valentinian III (r. 425–455 CE), announced his plan to marry the daughter of the emperor of the east, Volusianus’ connections must have opened doors. He was invited to the eastern capital to be a part of the ceremony. This imperial wedding must have been one of the grandest state functions in Constantinople’s young history. We know these things not from anything Rufius Volusianus wrote down but because his niece was living in the east, and she was eager to see her uncle.

It is one of history’s great ironies that the story of her life – not his – would soon be circulating as a book. Motivated by an ascetic urge, Melania (383–439 CE) had convinced her husband they should sell their homes, in North Africa and elsewhere, and move to Jerusalem. There, they would endow monastic communities for Christian men and women in the city where Jesus had been executed. By the late fifth century, a *Life of Melania*, written in ancient Greek, would be providing inspiration for pious Christian ascetics and pilgrims throughout the empire. A Latin edition would shortly follow. Uncle Volusianus, who traced his lineage to Rutilian kings, political striver and platinum-status aristocrat, would be reduced to a bit player in the *Life* of his ascetic Christian niece (*Working With Sources* 1.1: Writing History vs. Writing Church History).

A withdrawn, monastic world was certainly not the one Rufius Volusianus saw when he looked around. After a century and a half in which emperors had redrawn the administrative boundaries of the state, the two most important politicians of the Roman world now stood united, in marriage, over a political territory that stretched from western Europe to Asia Minor and from North Africa to the eastern Mediterranean. If a sad plume of smoke had been rising over Rome, in 410 CE, as Rutilius Namatianus sailed away, by the mid-fifth century its cloud had dissipated. And Rufius Volusianus was there to capitalize on what happened next, wherever it happened.

Thirty years later, in 476 CE – just as Melania’s life story was put down on parchment or papyrus – a new group of Christian foreigners would negotiate the fiercest settlement yet with the rulers of the empire. They called for the western emperor’s resignation and demanded sole political control over the western capital. By the time they had worked their magic, the city of Rome had been erased from the map of a now-diminished Roman Empire. How had that happened? What did it mean? And what were the effects of the “vanishing” of Rome on the people of antiquity? Did Rome really disappear from history in 476 CE, or might it be an illusion?

Working With Sources 1.1

Writing History vs. Writing Church History

When the author of the Book of Daniel, in c.165 BCE, “predicted” the rise of the Hellenistic empire, Rome was a distant star. The maturing Republic on the Tiber was also at that time a potential ally in the Jewish struggle against the Hellenistic kings. In 164, that hoped-for allegiance became a reality. Jewish communities asked the Roman Senate to intervene on their behalf in their struggles with the Hellenistic kings (2 Maccabees 11.34–38).

By year’s end, one Jewish family, the Maccabees, had seized the Jewish Temple and ousted the Seleucid dynasty from the Jewish homeland. That same year, in the Jewish month of Chislev, 164 BCE, they purified and rededicated the Temple, establishing a new line of high priests. The Maccabean victory is commemorated today during Hanukkah. In this way, the prophet Daniel’s “fourth beast” was finally, triumphantly, erased from time.

By Late Antiquity, however, that’s not what many Christians had been taught to believe. Rather than accept the fact that the visions of Daniel had now been “fulfilled,” many Christians resorted to highly creative interpretations to convince others that the “fourth beast” was still alive. Daniel, they claimed, had really been talking about “Rome.” This fanciful interpretation provided the starting point for many Christian writers who wanted to reassure their listeners that God had been guiding history to its present age. Some were writing at times of genuine crisis.

After Goths attacked Rome in 410 CE – something no foreign army had accomplished in almost eight hundred years – the writer Orosius tried to justify the attack. In a treatise he titled *Against the Non-Christians*, he explained the calamity as part of God’s plan. Adopting Daniel’s worldview, Orosius presents history as the story of four kingdoms: “In the beginning there was the Babylonian, then the Macedonian [Hellenistic] kingdom, later the African [Carthaginian], and finally,” he wrote, there was “the Roman Empire” (*Against the Non-Christians* 2.1). By reworking the scheme to allow room for “Rome,” Orosius was suggesting that the Christian empire had not only been predicted by Daniel; it would last until the end of time, a moment which – despite the Gothic attack – had not yet come. Hearing that the end times were postponed must have buoyed the spirits of many Christian communities in Orosius’ time. It also must have given them a sense that the story of the world was being written by providence.

At its core, Orosius’ history is rooted in an apocalyptic worldview. From a historian’s perspective, however, his way of reading Daniel is too theological to be an objective starting point for narrating the events of the past. Still, many Christians could not be convinced to read the text any other way.

Porphyry, who lived in the late third and early fourth centuries CE, was a particularly righteous fact-checker. Daniel did not foretell the future, Porphyry tried to explain to Christians. He was talking about the Hellenistic world. In fact, he was describing the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Prologue to Jerome’s *Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, translated by G. Archer, 1958). Given the later success of Orosius’ text – *Against the Non-Christians* was immensely popular during the Middle Ages – it is clear that many Christians did not care to be so rigorously fact-checked.

Summary

In many history books, the tumultuous events of the fifth century CE are presented as the “Fall of Rome.” In this chapter, we used the poetry of one fifth-century writer, Rutilius Namatianus, to give some human faces to a time period that is often written about in cataclysmic, world-ending terms. Rutilius’ poetry introduced us to the different fortunes of his friends and, above all, to their own ideals and aspirations during an age that is traditionally characterized as one of decline, decay, and ruin. A careful reading of this fifth-century poem also revealed many details about the changing administration and constitutional structures of the Roman state.

By introducing readers to a select group of people from the fifth-century Roman world, this exercise raises questions about which individuals or groups might be left out of our sources. (Readers who wish to learn more about the historical data we have for all these men, outside the lines of Rutilius’ poetry, should consult the “Study of the People of the Late Roman Empire” [PLRE], volume 1.)

Study Questions

1. Who is Rutilius Namatianus? When did he live? What did he do for a living?
2. What were some of the key political and military events that shaped the fifth-century CE Roman Empire?
3. How does Rutilius’ poetry help historians investigate this same time period?
4. How have others characterized life in the fifth century CE? Do you agree with the way this time is traditionally presented as the “Fall of Rome”?

Suggested Readings

Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Johannes Lipps, Carlos Machado, and Philipp von Rummel (eds.), *The Sack of Rome in 410 AD: The Event, Its Context and Its Impact* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2013).

Martha Malamud, *Rutilius Namatianus’ Going Home: De Reditu Suo* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Danuta Shanzer and Ralph W. Mathisen (eds.), *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011).