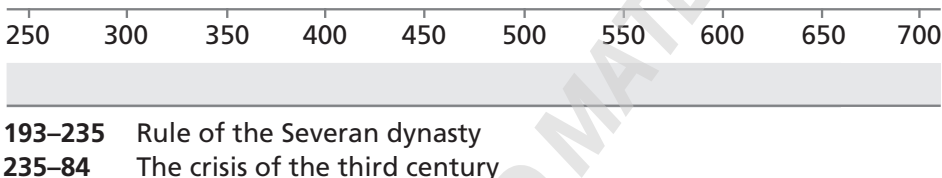




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An Introduction to Late Roman History



This book is concerned with the final four centuries of classical antiquity. This lengthy period in the history of the ancient world was characterized by profound transformations in its character, and led to the emergence, in the west, of medieval European civilization and, in the east, of a world dominated by a new religion, Islam.

The ancient classical world was formed from the interlocked civilizations of the Greeks and the Romans. Greek culture was based on a closely integrated community of city-states, which first took shape in the Aegean region around 1000 BC. These city-states, called *poleis*, evolved a style of self-government that was designed to preserve and promote their collective and community interests, which we still designate by the word politics. Over a period of some 1,500 years, these small- and medium-scale communities explored and developed amid myriad variations a pattern of social organization and collective action that has inspired all western democracies today. Although Greek city-states were a highly localized form of political organization, each making its own political decisions, they were bound together by strong cultural and social ties. Except to a very limited degree, the homogeneity and unity of the Greeks was not based on ethnicity, however that be defined, but on a shared language and a common religious outlook. While individual

city-states aspired to run their own business and restricted membership to their own citizens, there were virtually no limits to the spread of Greek culture, which proved overwhelmingly attractive to the other peoples of the Mediterranean and the Near East. The outcome was a process that we call Hellenism. Innumerable communities beyond the core region of the Aegean adopted the language, religious notions, and political ideas of the Greeks. They thus created the foundations of a common culture whose features could be identified among peoples extending from Spain to Afghanistan.

As this culture spread more widely, especially in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, it adapted to other forms of political organization, in particular the creation of large territorial kingdoms and empires. The emergence of such large-scale territorial political units had been an eastern development, exemplified by the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and, especially during the seventh to fourth centuries BC, which were a critical period for the history of the Greek city-states, of Persia. This model of the large hegemonic empire was fused with the Greek city-state system after the fall of the Persian Empire to Alexander the Great between 334 and 323 BC. During the following three hundred years most of the east Mediterranean and the Near East was controlled by the Greco-Macedonian kingdoms that succeeded Alexander. Increasing numbers of the inhabitants of these regions began to use the Greek language, modified their religious beliefs and institutions in conformity with Greek models, and adopted the city-state as the basis for local community politics. The whole era is consequently known as the Hellenistic period.

From the third century BC the Romans exercised a fundamental and dramatic influence on the Hellenistic world. Rome itself was in origin a city-state, which broadly resembled the Greek political pattern. However, like the other city-states of central Italy, it belonged to a different cultural tradition, with its own language and religious system. During the fourth and third centuries BC Rome succeeded in conquering much of Italy. The growth of Roman power led in the third century BC to a hegemonic clash with Carthage, the other major power of the western Mediterranean, which resulted in Roman dominion extending beyond the Italian peninsula to Spain, north Africa, and Sicily. After the defeat of Hannibal, the Carthaginian leader, Rome became embroiled in the affairs of the east Mediterranean. Two further centuries of expansion and conquest extended the limits of the Roman Empire to the river Euphrates during the first century AD.

Along this eastern frontier the Romans confronted Persian power in a new guise: the successive empires of the Parthians and Sasanians, based in Lower Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau, which had regained control over the eastern parts of the Hellenistic world. Throughout the remaining centuries of antiquity, the Roman and Persian Empires faced each other across a line that extended from the east end of the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf. Territory on either side of this frontier was disputed between the opposed great powers, and regularly became a theater for war and campaigning.

The Romans thus incorporated within their empire almost the entire Hellenized world. They made no efforts to suppress or replace the system of city-states, or Greek culture as a whole, but rather incorporated both of these into their empire. The Romans were successful from the outset as conquerors, but more important than this was their ability to develop a style of imperial rule that was sustained for almost

a thousand years. One of the crucial strengths of the Roman Empire was its capacity to incorporate newcomers and outsiders. Thus, so far from being defined by ethnic or even broader cultural boundaries, the Roman state was continually replenished and revitalized by new blood drawn from its subject provinces. As early as 200 BC the granting of Roman citizenship to outsiders was a recognized source of political resilience, and the strategy of inclusivity was particularly critical when a succession of imperial dynasties, which began with Augustus, took over from the earlier republican system of government. Although the privileges of citizenship became less significant in the late empire, the habit of absorbing new human resources from marginal areas was ingrained, and was exemplified throughout late antiquity in the relationships between the Roman Empire and its barbarian neighbors. Moreover, regional differentiation within and between provinces was overridden by the emergence of hierarchies throughout the empire that conformed to one another and to a Roman archetype. Provincial societies, both in the eastern and in the western empire, were highly stratified, with a massive and growing gulf between the rich and the poor. The richest property owners, who controlled most of the empire's resources, were those most closely aligned with the ideals and objectives of the Roman state.

Equally important for the longevity of the Roman Empire was an evolving mastery of the arts of hegemonic rule. In the initial phases of conquest there was a greater emphasis on outright military power. This was achieved not simply by the courage and commitment of citizen soldiers and by ambitious and talented military leaders, but by a much higher degree of military organization than was achieved by other ancient states. After the creation of the monarchic system by Augustus, this experience and talent for organization was transferred to the mechanisms that were devised for ruling provinces, assessing and collecting taxation, and developing a universal legal system. The empire combined Greek political ideas, including theories about just rulership, with a practical attention, based on experience, to the crafts of administration.

The emperors also adapted techniques, which had been honed in the eastern monarchies, for projecting an ideal image of the rulers that embodied their imperial might. These conveyed a fundamental message that the earthly empire was sustained as part of an overall structure of cosmic order and that harmony and stability were guaranteed by a religious compact between the rulers of men and the divine world. As the Roman polity developed into a worldwide empire, increasing emphasis was placed on the state religion. It was an article of faith that Rome's success was due to the support of the gods. Roman emperors were seen as controlling all religious activity in their territories and were regarded as custodians of a pact with the gods, the *pax deorum*. This central feature of the ideology of Roman rule was projected in all the available media of imperial propaganda: panegyric speeches, the designs of buildings and sculptures, commemorative inscriptions, the legends, and designs used on Roman coinage.

These structural features are clearly identifiable in the history of late antiquity. Rome's empire and the opposing eastern empire of the Sasanians in Persia continued to be the dominant powers, and they set the framework within which large-scale interstate activity took place. Rome continued to control her subjects by deploying organized military power, by employing the sophisticated machinery of government and administration, and above all by maintaining an ideology of empire that was rarely called into question. During late antiquity, when the Roman world, and especially the

Roman state, became Christian, the substance and form of this ideology inevitably changed, but the significance of religion in maintaining the Roman Empire increased. The city-states of the earlier classical periods were still the most important settlements and communities of most of the ancient world, especially in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire, but they also underwent radical changes. They lost most of their political independence and the right to self-determination. However, they remained for most people the most important fora of social, economic, and religious activity and retained their overall importance within the wider scheme of ancient civilization, at any rate up to the seventh century.

Historical circumstances brought about a major geo-political split between the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Between the fourth and the seventh centuries, German-speaking tribes such as the Alemanni, Franks, Vandals, and Goths, as well as the Huns, Alans, and Avars, who had moved west from central Asia, and the Slavs and Turks, broke through the old frontiers of the Rhine and Danube rivers.¹ As the northern boundary of the empire collapsed, much of the Balkan region slipped from Roman control, and regular overland communications between east and west were seriously threatened. While the former eastern provinces of Asia Minor, the Near East, and Egypt remained relatively unscathed, the western empire proved unable to defend itself militarily from the barbarian newcomers. Accordingly, Rome devised new strategies of accommodation, by which the barbarian peoples were integrated into the western classical world. The major Germanic tribes divided up large parts of Roman territory into kingdoms, although they continued in most cases to acknowledge the sovereignty of the emperors. Roman military and political weakness in the west thus led to the abandonment of the former Roman provinces in Britain, Gaul, Spain, and the Danubian region. Even Italy itself was relinquished after the fall of the last western emperor in 476, but the idea of a unified empire, including these territories, was never abandoned, and during the sixth century the emperor Justinian made a partially successful attempt to reunite eastern and western territories under a revived system of direct imperial rule.

The Roman state during this period was anything but weak and degenerate. The empire was resilient and highly effective. Emperors, whatever their individual qualities, generally had long reigns. Internal conflict and civil war between rival contenders for power extended through the third and fourth centuries, but the imperial system as such was not called into question. Remarkably, the same situation can be observed both in Sasanian Persia, Rome's eastern counterpart, and in the major Germanic kingdoms, which were established in north Africa and western Europe. Their rulers also evolved ideological and administrative systems that provided long periods of stability.

The Later Roman Empire, Late Antiquity, and the Contemporary World

Historical approaches to the final centuries of classical antiquity have been very varied. The differences between them are implicit in the various names that have been applied to the period in modern scholarship: the later Roman Empire; "le bas-empire" in French, meaning "the low empire," even if this was not coined with a negative sense; the early Byzantine Age, and Late Antiquity. These variations reveal divergent perspectives. Historians who have identified their subject as the

later Roman Empire have generally focused their attention on the history of the Roman state and its institutions, usually from an empire-wide perspective. Studies of Byzantium or the Byzantine Age, whatever chronological limits are adopted, necessarily deal with the eastern part of the empire, which was ruled from Constantinople. Histories of the west naturally have a very different emphasis, on the rise of the Germanic kingdoms and the origins of medieval western Europe.²

Late Antiquity is at first sight a less slanted term, embracing the entire geographical range of the Roman and post-Roman world. However, in practice, the study of Late Antiquity has acquired much more specific connotations. It has mostly been concerned with the eastern Mediterranean region and the Near East, concentrating on social, cultural, and religious themes, at the expense of political or institutional history. Histories of Late Antiquity have looked beyond the Roman state or the Roman Empire and drawn attention to other underlying conditions that gave unity to the period. Inevitably they place most stress on religious history, above all on the change from the polymorphous paganism of the ancient classical world to the predominantly monotheistic systems of early medieval Europe and the Near East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.³

This change of focus also tends to involve displacing the chronological boundaries of the period. While most studies of the later Roman Empire cover the period from c.300 to 600, limits that are explicable principally in terms of political developments, writing on Late Antiquity usually favors a longer span from around 200 to 800, sometimes referred to as the “long Late Antiquity.” This period covered two great religious transformations and their social consequences: the conversion of the Roman world to Christianity and the emergence and rapid spread of Islam in the Near East in the seventh and eighth centuries. The educated classes of the Greek-speaking East and their less numerous western counterparts also preserved large elements of the classical culture of the Greco-Roman world. Students of Late Antiquity are as much concerned with the survival of this culture as they are with the impact of Christian and Islamic monotheism.

There are, therefore, radically different ways of approaching the last centuries of antiquity. The greatest historian of the period, Gibbon, pre-empted the choice for most of his successors by writing his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The famous title not only placed the Roman state in the foreground of his study, but also set a historical agenda that has dominated the thinking of most historians since his time. The challenge is to analyze and explain Rome’s decline. The Roman Empire remains the central point of focus for most major studies of the period written since Gibbon. This is explicitly acknowledged in the titles of J. B. Bury, *The Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (395–565)* (1923), E. Stein, *Geschichte des spätrömischen Reiches I (284–476)* (1928) and *Histoire du Bas-Empire II. De la disparition de l’empire de l’occident à la mort de Justinien (476–565)* (1949), and A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* (1964). These major studies, together with A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike. Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian 284–565 n. Chr.* (third edition, 2018), still today offer the most ambitious and comprehensive surveys of later Roman history. Hugh Elton’s more recent handbook, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. A Political and Military History*, follows in this same tradition, and Jones’s great survey, now sixty years old, still serves as the starting point for most studies of the institutions and government of the late Roman state.⁴

The inspiration for the alternative approach can be attributed to the influence of a single scholar, Peter Brown. His short book, *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), which was loosely defined chronologically as covering the period from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad, effectively tore up the late Roman agenda and redefined the period as an object of study. Brown's own large output, and that of a generation of scholars inspired by him, has explored areas and aspects of the history of late antiquity that were hardly noticed in the mainstream tradition of later Roman history. From the prodigious abundance of early Christian literature, Brown and his followers have teased out and expounded an extraordinarily variegated picture of society and culture in all its regional diversity. Underlying this project is a pervading concern to explore the effects of religious change on individual and collective mentalities.⁵

The impact of this new approach to Late Antiquity has been enormous but uneven. Without question it has brought new impetus and vitality to the study of the period, especially in the English-speaking world. It has shifted attention away from the traditional objects of historical attention – emperors, generals, empires, states, and armies – to religious figures, above all Christian writers, to communities united by faith, and to the role of common men and women living in uncommon or remarkable times. It is, of course, far harder to elicit generalized patterns of meaning from studies of this sort. Individual episodes and individual lives stand out from the crowded texture of events, sometimes with dazzling immediacy and vividness, but it is not easy to locate them within a larger context, and harder still to transform these contexts into an accurate representation of a social and cultural *zeitgeist*. Classical and medieval historians alike have been captivated by these studies, but not always convinced by them.⁶

No one studying Late Antiquity today can fail to be influenced by the work of Peter Brown and his school, and much contemporary scholarship on the period, at least by English-speaking historians, tends to be eclectic. Thus, the *Cambridge Ancient History* volumes XIII and XIV, which between them cover the period from 337 to c.600, combine a core of narrative history, emphasizing political, military, and broad institutional themes, with discussions of family and social life, religious phenomena, and approaches to the *mentalité* of the period. Brown himself has contributed important sections to both volumes. The titles of Averil Cameron's two books written in the early 1990s illustrate the same dichotomy of approach. *The Later Roman Empire AD 284–430* (1993) is a largely traditional history of the late Roman state, while *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity* (1993; extensively revised second edition, 2012), written for another series, abandons the chronological framework and detailed discussion of the institutions of the empire, in favor of a looser thematic survey, with a greater emphasis on social, economic, and religious issues. David Potter's detailed and challenging survey of Roman history from 180 to 395, *The Roman Empire at Bay* (second edition, 2014), is an ambitious attempt to represent many facets of social, intellectual, and religious history within the grand sweep of political events.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw significant new developments and approaches with regard to the later Roman period, especially relating to the transition to the early middle ages. The most important contributions came not from classical historians but from medievalists. Chris Wickham's magnum opus, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (2005), is the

most important landmark in the study of this period since A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*. This is an exhaustive “bottom-up” survey and analysis of changing social and economic conditions across the entire area occupied by the Roman Empire, with the exception of the Balkan regions, but including Britain and southern Scandinavia. Wickham’s emphasis, in the Marxist tradition, is on the control, ownership, and exploitation of the land, on relations between peasants and aristocrats, and on modes of production, rents, and taxation. He argues that one of the key distinctions between the post-Roman polities and states, and the unified empire that preceded them, was the inability of any of the powers after Rome to levy universal forms of taxation from their subjects, and the need for landowners, and political power-holders, to rely on land rents to sustain their political and military institutions. A process of evolution, including long periods when the peasantry enjoyed relative autonomy from aristocratic control, led in due course to various forms of feudalism, in which power depended not on the imposition of centralized taxation but on services and rents delivered to powerful landowners. Wickham also wrote another large-scale history of the period, *The Inheritance of Rome. A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (2009). This also ranges beyond the boundaries of modern Europe and includes a major section on the empires of the East from 550 to 1000, integrating the socio-economic analysis that underpins *The Framing of the Early Middle Ages* into a cultural and political history that culminates in the contrast between Carolingian Europe and the Islamic world of the Abbasids. Both books emphasize the economic relationships relating to land tenure that transcended the division of the Roman Empire between East and West, and suggest that similar transformational patterns in social and economic conditions can be observed across the entire region, albeit at different periods. This approach, relying heavily on archaeology and the evidence of early medieval charters, tends to play down, although it certainly does not overlook, the impact of warfare on post-Roman society, in marked contrast to other recent approaches to the late Roman West, which have emphasized the devastation, dislocation, and economic collapse caused by the barbarian invasions of former Roman territory.⁷ Another important synthesis by Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith. The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (2011), has the same geographical scope but an earlier chronological terminus than Wickham, and places more emphasis on political and religious factors than Wickham’s materialist analysis.

New attention has also been given to the question of economic relationships between the Near East and the western Mediterranean environment, the subject of Henri Pirenne’s classic study, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937). Pirenne’s hypothesis, that up to c.700 East and West were tied together by economic links based on long-distance trade, until these were broken by the early Arab conquests, and that links were not resumed again until the eleventh century, has been questioned and revised in the light of archaeological evidence, as well as on the basis of a more rigorous appraisal of the structures of the ancient and medieval economy, in which local and regional production not the long-distance transport of goods was paramount.⁸ Indeed, the approach developed in P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea* (2000), seeks to establish that the Mediterranean should not be approached as a historical unity, but as an interlocking system of sub-regions, strongly emphasizing the significance of local environments and shorter links at the expense of all-encompassing interpretations of the region’s historical

geography and the social systems that it generated. Meanwhile, a new standard work by M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300–900* (2001), evaluates the evidence for maritime connections across the Mediterranean during later antiquity.

The second decade of the twenty-first century has been no less productive than the first. Chris Wickham's magnum opus on the early Middle Ages has its counterpart in Mischa Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (2019), which, in over a thousand pages, offers an in-depth account of the migration of the Germanic peoples as well as a detailed analysis of how the Roman Empire tried to respond. For Meier the change in mentalities, notably the increasing prominence of religion, is a central element, as we shall explore later towards the end of this book. On a less epic scale, numerous general histories of the period have appeared, such as Michael Kulikowski's vivid narrative surveys, *The Triumph of Empire* and *The Tragedy of Empire* (2016 and 2019), Hugh Elton's *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, A Political and Military History* (2018), which gives detailed attention to military matters and the dominant caste of military and civilian officials around the emperors, and the second edition of John Moorhead's *The Roman Empire Divided, 400–700* (2013). Paul Stephenson's *New Rome. The Empire in the East* (2022) belongs to the same series as Kulikowski's two volumes, but devotes much attention to social history and exploits recent archaeological and environmental research, in part following the example set by another ground-breaking study of recent years, Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease and the End of an Empire* (2017). Late antiquity is not only covered by an *Oxford Handbook*, edited by S. Fitzgerald Johnson (2014), which covers an area extending deep into Asia and a period ranging up to and beyond 800, but also by the two-volume *Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity*, ed. O. Nicholson (2018, also on-line), an invaluable research tool. There are German surveys by Rene Pfeilschifter, *Die Spätantike. Der eine Gott und die vielen Herrscher* (second edition, 2017) and Henning Börm, *Westrom. Von Honorius bis Justinian* (second edition, 2018), and Sylvain Destephen's French textbook, *L'empire romain tardif, 235–641 après J.-C.* (Paris, 2021). A further recent development in the field is an increasing interest in the practitioners of late antique studies themselves. It is now possible to obtain interesting biographical information on many of the scholars mentioned throughout this work, particularly pioneers of the field such as Peter Brown, Alan Cameron, A. H. M. Jones, and Ernst Stein.⁹

The important studies by Wickham in particular of the transition from the late Roman to the post-Roman period in Europe and the Near East made it desirable to add a new chapter to the second edition of this book surveying the overall pattern of historical evolution from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (formerly Chapter 13 and now Chapter 15). In this third edition coverage has been extended to the end of the seventh century, encompassing the origins and the early but extensive Islamic conquests. The modern historiography of the development and rise of Islam has underlined the degree to which this new and radical form of monotheism was rooted in the Late Antique context, as Aziz al-Azmeh has emphasized in *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (2014). An emphatic adherence to monotheism, the fusion of politics and religion at state level, and widespread millenarian expectations were phenomena of fundamental importance that united peoples and their rulers within and beyond the boundaries of the Eastern Roman Empire and the Near East, and are among the defining characteristics of the later part of Late Antiquity. Douglas

Boin's stimulating textbook, *A Social and Cultural History of Late Antiquity* (2018), which follows the direction set by Peter Brown's work, also extends to the early Arab conquests. We have not attempted to cover events in western Europe in the seventh century, except for those regions that fell within the eastern Roman orbit.

Despite pushing its chronological boundaries forward to 700, this book generally conforms to the older pattern of late Roman history, rather than to Peter Brown's approach to Late Antiquity. There are several reasons for this. One is quite simply that it is easier to organize the teeming abundance of historical evidence within the traditional contours than it is to reconfigure the framework into completely new thematic patterns. The point will be obvious to anyone who compares a volume such as *CAH XIV*, or the current standard German history, A. Demandt's *Die Spätantike*, with Bowersock et al.'s *Late Antiquity. A Guide to the Postclassical World* (1999), which was the first attempt to collect the harvest of the Brownian approach into a single handbook. Chronology, emperors, and armies are almost entirely jettisoned to make way for four thematic chapters on religion, two on attitudes to the past and the classical tradition, two on material culture, and one each on barbarians and ethnicity, and on war and violence. Only the last two overlap substantially with the more traditional agenda. The new approach is original, stimulating, and often carries historical conviction, but it also demands a huge sacrifice.

At the time of the first edition, it appeared that late twentieth-century study of Late Antiquity had tended to neglect the historians of the period between 300 and 600 although historical writing flourished as a central part of ancient educated culture. Between the fourth and sixth centuries writers of extraordinary talent carried on the heritage and tradition of classical historical writing, which began with Herodotus and Thucydides. The histories of Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius are essential for understanding the Roman Empire in the fourth and sixth centuries respectively. Their fifth-century counterparts, including Olympiodorus, Priscus, and Malchus, survive only in fragments, but these are sufficient to demonstrate their quality. The period was also documented by numerous less ambitious chroniclers, who presented visions of world history from the creation up to the writers' own times, but with a localized, regional focus. The longest surviving example is the *Chronicle* of Malalas of Antioch. Late antiquity also witnessed the birth of an entirely new historical genre, Church history. This was created by Eusebius, whose history of the Church up to Constantine was continued and emulated by four works of the mid-fifth century, the histories of Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and the Arian Philostorgius, and by the sixth-century writers, Evagrius, John of Ephesus, and Pseudo-Zachariah of Mytilene. The work of these figures taken collectively underpins serious history of the later Roman Empire. Several ambitious new projects have made important progress in furthering our understanding of the historiography of the period, and are rapidly making good what had been a significant gap in the study of Late Antiquity.¹⁰

Modern historiographical interests have also inevitably shaped contemporary approaches to the late classical world. Historians of the late twentieth century have widened the definition of their subject dramatically by choosing new themes and approaches. There has been a tendency to study social attitudes rather than social structures, popular activity in preference to high culture, mentalities rather than educational patterns, and issues of personal or communal identity rather than questions of national or state politics. One general feature of these new approaches

has been to play down the significance of individuals or specific events and look instead for underlying patterns, unconscious influences on human behavior, and, in social and economic history, to the importance of long-term, slow-moving change, the *longue durée*. The classic modern exposition of *longue durée* history, F. Braudel's *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip*, has been a huge influence on historians of late antiquity.

This approach, however, suggests a distinct detachment from the world that we experience. Modern media and the dissemination of news and information make it easier for us to appreciate the impact of historical developments as they unfold, and we should not too readily underestimate the significance of these changes simply because they have occurred in a short space of time. The extraordinarily rapid breakdown of the Soviet Empire in 1989/90 not only revealed how fragile imperial structures may be, but has also led to major shifts in the balance of world power. Within the same few years one of the world's great religions, Islam, also underwent a drastic transformation. Radical movements have become prominent, religious belief has crystallized into violent political action, and secular statecraft has lost ground to the charisma of religious leadership. Similar developments can easily be identified within Christianity and Judaism. The significance of the Islamic terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York has been colossal. Events of this magnitude lead to huge shifts in the world's historical alignments. The nations of the world have been presented with stark choices about the nature of their relationship to the remaining imperial power, the USA. The nations of Europe after the collapse of the Russian Empire have been reconfigured into the European Union, the world's most powerful economic bloc. Its members confront the implications of this for their own nationhood and debate whether religious identity should be a prime criterion for membership. Population transfers and large-scale migration, especially within Europe, have had profound social and economic implications, and have contributed to the formation of new communal identities. In the second decade of the twenty-first century only the rise of China, based on the extraordinarily swift economic transformation of its society, has no obvious precedent in the ancient world. The viability of nation-states themselves, the foundation of the modern world order, faces serious challenges both from transnational economic corporations and from religious ideologies.

These contemporary parallels and the justifiable upsurge of interest in the nature and rapid rise of Islam and the origins of the conflicts between the Arabs and the established empires of Rome and the Sasanians have been an important consideration that has led us to add two new chapters to the third edition of this book. Their aim is to show just how dynamic this period was as the Roman Empire evolved to confront new threats to its very existence. As will be clear from the narrative and the notes, research on the seventh century is particularly active and fertile. The inclusion of this extra half-century for the new edition therefore not only gives an insight into the momentous events that unfolded but also serves to set the earlier centuries in a longer perspective.

Within our own immediate recollection, we can appreciate the impact of imperial power and the entanglement of religion and secular politics. We have not only observed but undergone changes in national character and communal identity, and our recent experience enables us to document the vulnerability of national sovereignty to economic, political, or religious pressures. In addition,

many of the shifts in our collective perceptions can be traced to specific events and political developments. The world is not immune to the impact of *histoire événementielle*. The events through which we have lived in the last thirty years have cast a strong light back on later Roman history. They help to enhance our understanding of the evolution of the Roman and Sasanian Empires, the role of Christianity as a defining force within society, the role of smaller civic units, the impact of the barbarian migrations, and the political and social transformations that followed from them. The history of the later Roman Empire holds up a mirror to the world we live in today. Through our contemporary experience we are better able to appreciate and learn from the past.¹¹

The Third Century

All history is a continuous process and there is no definitive reason for choosing to start a study of the Later Roman Empire with the accession of the emperor Diocletian in 284. As will be seen, many events and phenomena covered in this book have their roots and origins in earlier times, and this brief overview of the third century is designed to provide some orientation. The regime of the Severan dynasty (the relationships of the rulers after Caracalla to the founding family were fictive) emerged from a civil war and covered the reigns of the emperors Septimius Severus (193–211), Marcus Aurelius Antoninus “Caracalla” (198–217), Macrinus (217–18), Marcus Aurelius Antoninus “Elagabalus” (218–22), and Severus Alexander (222–35). The Severan period marked a break from the consensus politics of the second century and the working partnership between the emperors and the senate, the highest level of the Roman aristocracy, which had always generated tensions, now became seriously compromised. The rulers relied increasingly on overt military support. Michael Rostovtzeff’s classic treatment of this period has the title “The Military Monarchy;” the senator Cassius Dio repeatedly emphasized that both Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla owed their position to the support of military officers and soldiers, who were always the highest priority for imperial largesse and the state budget. The regime, however, did not change the administrative structures that had been created by Augustus at the start of the principate and developed and refined over the subsequent two centuries. The last of the dynasty, Severus Alexander, was murdered by troops in Germany, who acclaimed one of their officers, “Maximinus the Thracian” as his successor. Maximinus Thrax (235–44) was even more dependent on overt military support than his predecessors, and his reign marked the start of a fifty-year period that Rostovtzeff dubbed “The Military Anarchy.” There was a rapid turnover of emperors. Four rulers briefly held power in 238, preceding Gordian III (238–44) and Philip “the Arab” (244–9); four emperors followed between 249 and 253, ushering in the rule of Valerian (253–60) and his son Gallienus (253–68), the longest tenure of the mid-third century. Claudius Gothicus (268–70), Aurelian (270–5), and Probus (276–82) offered some stability and continuity, but the sequence was interrupted by short-lived rivals: Quintillus (270), Tacitus (275–6), and Florianus (276). The final attempt to establish a lasting dynasty by Carus (282–3), Numerianus (283–4), and Carinus (283–5) was halted by Diocletian’s coup d’état.

The main reason for the instability was internal – the rivalry between contenders for power supported by the regional armies that backed them. This was an age of devastating civil wars, a pattern that was to be repeated through much of the fourth century. However, the empire was also under external pressures that it had not previously experienced. The northern provinces from the English Channel to the Black Sea, which was protected by a hard military frontier – the Roman Rhine-Danube *limes* – no longer held firm when legions and other large troop contingents became engaged in internal conflicts or had to be deployed to other parts of the empire, especially the eastern provinces. Germanic tribes and Goths from north of the Danube made incursions that had a devastating impact on the non-Mediterranean European provinces, plundering farmlands in Gaul and sacking cities in Thrace. Insecurity in the face of foes, real or imagined, became an empire-wide phenomenon and many hitherto undefended cities, including Rome itself, acquired fortifications in the third century.

In the longer term there was an even greater threat from a rival empire in Persia. In 224 the last Parthian Arsacid king was overthrown in 224 by the first ruler Sasanian ruler, Ardashir I. His successor, Shapur I (see Plate 1.1), defeated Gordian III in battle, forced humiliating surrender terms on Philip the Arab, and, after a devastating military incursion into Syria and Asia Minor, took captive his rival, the emperor Valerian, who subsequently died in custody, a triple triumph that was commemorated in a colossal relief in the Persian heartland at Bishapur, a city that he had newly founded. Sasanian Persia was a serious rival and occasional partner of the Roman Empire for four hundred years, dominating Rome's external and foreign policy.



Plate 1.1 Roman humiliation and Persia's triumph. Shapur I mounted, with the emperors Philip pleading for mercy, and Valerian led into captivity. Rock relief at Bishapur, c.260. (Source: Sahand Ace/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0)

The external pressures both on the northern and on the eastern frontier in the third century made huge demands on the emperors, exposing their vulnerability to mutiny and internal challenges, even resulting, for brief periods, in the creation of break-away regimes in Gaul and in Syria. These wars also placed a growing burden on the state's finances. In the first and second centuries much of the surplus wealth of the largely peaceful empire was retained in the provinces and underpinned civilian expenditure and material well-being, especially in the cities. Land owners and other local elite families had abundant wealth that could be spent on temples, bathing establishments, entertainment, and other public facilities. Higher taxation, military requisitioning, and punitive dispossession by the emperors, as well as a widespread perception of insecurity, largely put an end to aristocratic largesse. The economic climate became harsher and large-scale expenditure became a matter almost exclusively for the state, not for private individuals. Those who maintained, or even increased their wealth in these changed times, tended to spend their surplus on their private property, not on public works.¹²

Change and Development

Since the preponderance of recent studies of late antiquity have been thematically organized, there has been a relative neglect of chronology, but historical change occurred over time and has to be traced sequentially. It is important not to conflate evidence from widely disparate periods. There was an enormous difference between the Roman Empire of the fourth century, which was shaped by the actions of emperors and their officials who were constantly on the move and actively engaged in warfare, and that of the fifth and sixth centuries, when the rulers and their courts were confined to Constantinople, and that again of the seventh century, when emperors once more took to the field and scaled back the apparatus of government. The religious landscape also changed radically. In the fourth century Christianity was still challenged by the numerous forms of pagan polytheism. In the sixth and seventh centuries it faced no serious rivals within the empire as a universal religious system. The character of the cities of the ancient world was also transformed. In the fourth century cities were still nominally governed by local landowners, who represented local interests. During the fifth and sixth centuries this form of "constitutional" civic government was replaced by a more patriarchal system, in which power was largely monopolized by imperially nominated officials, estate-owning grandees, or bishops. It is crucial to keep this change in view in studying the evolution of urban life in the later empire.¹³

The time span from the accession of Diocletian in 284 to c.700 is a long one and the study of this period covers several concurrent and interlocking histories. It deals with the later Roman Empire, the early history of Christianity, the barbarian invasions and settlement of western Europe, and the loss of the most prosperous provinces of the Roman East, to say nothing of the newer agendas within the study of late antiquity. The geographical scope of these histories encompasses all of Europe south of the rivers Rhine and Danube, the Mediterranean basin, and the Near East, with consideration given also to the Iranian plateau, the Caucasus region, and the steppes of eastern Europe and western Asia. Each of these histories had its own chronological dynamic and developed with considerable regional variety. The chapters that follow this one provide a variety of approaches to these histories.

Chapter 2 surveys the main sources for the period, with particular emphasis on the historians. These need to be read not merely for the information they contain, but for the views they took of Roman and Christian history, and for their understanding of the world they lived in.

Chapter 3 is a chronological narrative of the history of the empire from the accession of Diocletian in 284 to the beginning of the fifth century, ending in the west with the sack of Rome by the Gothic leader Alaric and in the east with the accession of Theodosius II. The fourth century was an age of warrior emperors, engaged in unceasing struggles against external enemies and also in civil wars against would-be usurpers. Military history is inevitably the dominant theme.

Chapter 4 takes the narrative forward until the middle years of Justinian and the great plague that swept through virtually the entire inhabited world in 542 and at regular intervals thereafter. The destinies of the eastern and western provinces of the empire parted ways during the fifth century. During this period, the supremacy of the western emperors was challenged and eventually superseded by the Germanic kingdoms, which led to their eclipse in 476. However, the eastern rulers remained closely involved in the immensely complicated political events that encompassed the end of the western emperors in 476. Meanwhile, the eastern empire itself enjoyed a long period of relative stability and growing prosperity, which was largely due to peaceful relations with the Sasanian Empire along the eastern frontier. These were interrupted when war broke out with Persia at the beginning of the sixth century, but the early years of Justinian's reign witnessed a major reassertion of Roman dominance. The unforeseeable outbreak of the plague and the other enormous setbacks that Rome encountered during the 540s mark a major caesura.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the Roman state and the nature of Roman rulership. It focuses on the use of ritualized political procedures and visual propaganda, the ideology of the emperors and the ruling class, and the administrative framework of the empire.

Chapter 6 is a corresponding study of the major barbarian powers of the west, including the so-called empire of the Huns, and the kingdoms of the Visigoths, Burgundians, Franks, and Ostrogoths, which assumed political power in western Europe. Within each there were contrasting forms of military organization and mechanisms for asserting state power and projecting an ideology of rulership. The continuing influence of the Roman Empire remained strong in all cases.

Chapter 7 traces the religious development of the Roman world after the third century. It analyses the diversity of religious practice and experience with which the period began and the reasons behind the enormous change that led Christianity to become the dominant religion of the empire by the end of the fourth century. The chapter also examines the position of the state in matters of religious tolerance, both from the perspective of pagan rulers in the face of Christianity and of their Christian counterparts who confronted the survival of paganism.

Chapter 8 looks at the social context of religious conversion by examining the three best documented individual examples from the fourth century, the emperors Constantine and Julian, and the greatest figure in western Christianity, St Augustine. The chapter then turns to the study of Christianity as a political phenomenon in the late empire and the evolving doctrinal disputes around the central tenets of Christian belief. Discussions were carried on amid bitter controversy at the highest level by leading bishops and theologians, under the eye of

the emperors. The political objective was to establish a unified Roman state that was co-extensive with a unified Christian Church. Church politics, therefore, are central to the history of the late Roman Empire. Orthodox Catholic Christianity became the central feature of the political ideology of the empire and thus the main symbolic identifier of the Roman inhabitants of the empire. The chapter now also contains a brief discussion of the emergence of monasticism in the fourth century.

Chapter 9 is concerned with the economic basis of the empire and the political and social institutions by which this was maintained. It draws attention to the importance of distinguishing local economies, patterns of interregional trade, and the development of city life. The survival of the Roman Empire depended on the sustainability of long-distance links, enabling the circulation of people, goods, and ideas. Without these its political unity and common culture would have disintegrated. Particular emphasis is placed on the economic importance of the state *annona* system. The organization of the *annona* is also a major factor explaining the extraordinary growth of the capital cities, Rome and Constantinople, and of the major regional centers at Alexandria, Carthage, and Antioch.

Chapter 10 turns to the regions and provinces, considering the evidence for patterns of rural settlement, the evolution of civic life, and the importance of regional security to economic development, which played a decisive role in the split between the eastern and western parts of the empire.

Chapter 11 resumes the narrative pattern of Chapters 3 and 4. The focus is on the enormous challenges that the Roman Empire faced in the middle years of the sixth century. In the forefront were the blows dealt by the plague, which recurred throughout the century, other devastating environmental disasters, and earthquakes. These were compounded by military setbacks arising from the reconquest of Africa and Italy, and by the resurgent power of Sasanian Persia. Although these challenges led to major internal changes to Roman society, and in particular to a much more explicit reliance on religious means to maintain the morale and coherence of communities, they did not shake the underlying self-confidence of the empire, which proved resilient against the growing threats to its existence.

Chapter 12 examines these threats in the context of the dramatic conflict known as the “last great war of antiquity.” It traces the impact of new barbarian incursions from central Asia and northern Europe, the arrival of Avars and Turks, Slavs and Lombards, and the resurgent militarism of the Sasanian Empire, which culminated in the great struggles of the early seventh century between the Roman Empire of Heraclius and the Persian Empire of Khusro II. These enormous external forces, rather than internal decadence and decay, provide the main clues to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.

Chapter 13, newly added for this edition, focuses on the Arabian Peninsula and sets the appearance of Islam in its late antique context, charting the steadily increasing role of the Arabs in the Roman East. It insists on the rising importance of religion in the seventh century, a development that encouraged many contemporaries to infer that the end of the world was imminent. It was against this backdrop that the armies of Muhammad’s followers were able to undertake remarkably successful campaigns against both the Roman East and the Sasanian Empire. The chapter takes the narrative of these conquests up to the 650s, stressing their contingency. The Arab victories were often hard fought and many expected that they would prove fleeting.

Chapter 14, the second new chapter added, takes the narrative up to 700, as the Arabs consolidated their huge gains. Within the Roman Empire it analyzes the factors that allowed the state to survive the battering it took throughout the period, highlighting the importance attached to doctrinal issues, perceived as essential in securing divine favor against the new enemy. Thus, Emperor Constant II was no less active in church affairs than he was in his military campaigns. The securing examines the means by which the Roman army adapted to its new role, defending Anatolia, firmly on the defensive. It also considers the fate of the Romans of the Near East and the transition to Muslim rule, stressing how smooth the transition often was and how little things changed, at least in the seventh century. By 700 the empire had shrunk enormously, as had its bureaucracy, yet it had taken important steps to adjust its structures to cope with this new reality. Its smaller scale strengthened its internal cohesion, moreover, so that it now had a renewed confidence in its ability to survive.

Chapter 15, added for the second edition, analyzes the perennial problem of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Four themes are discussed in detail: Rome's ability to maintain its tax revenues in the later sixth century; the evidence for military decline as Roman forces were reduced in size; the possible impact of climate on the ancient environment and its consequences for Rome's resilience and survival – or demise; and an assessment of the demographic impact of the bubonic plague, which recurred repeatedly throughout and beyond the empire for two centuries after its initial outbreak in 541/2.

NOTES

- 1 We concede that terms such as “German-speaking” and “Germanic” are problematic, but they remain convenient. See M. Friedrich and J. M. Harland (eds.), *Interrogating the “Germanic.” A Category and its Use in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Berlin, 2021), esp. the introduction.
- 2 J. Durliat, “Qu’est-ce que le bas empire?” *Francia* 16 (1989), 137–54 at 137, on French terms.
- 3 E. James, “The rise and function of the concept ‘Late Antiquity,’” *JLA* 1 (2008), 20–30 at 26.
- 4 See the fundamental review by Peter Brown, “The Later Roman Empire,” *Economic History Review* 20 (1967), 327–43, reprinted in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London, 1972). We use the pagination in the first edition of Demandt’s work (of 1989), having not been able to consult the newest edition.
- 5 See Averil Cameron, “The long late antiquity,” in T. P. Wiseman (ed.), *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 2002), 165–91; W. Liebeschuetz, “The birth of late antiquity,” *AnTard* 12 (2004), 253–61, reprinted in his *Decline and Change in Late Antiquity. Religion, Barbarians and Their Historiography* (London, 2006), chapter XV; H. Inglebert’s introduction to S. F. Johnson (ed.), *OHLA*.
- 6 See Alexander Murray, “Peter Brown and the shadow of Constantine,” *JRS* 73 (1983), 191–203; W. Treadgold, “Taking sources on their own terms and on ours: Peter Brown’s Late Antiquity,” *AnTard* 2 (1994), 153–9; R. Lizzi Testa (ed.), *Late Antiquity in Contemporary Debate* (Newcastle, 2017).
- 7 P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2005); B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005).

- 8 Peter Brown, “‘Mohammed and Charlemagne’, by Henri Pirenne,” *Daedalus* 103.1 (1974), 25–33; R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe* (London, 1983) for an early reappraisal of the archaeology; C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), 700–8 and 800–1, and *The Inheritance of Rome* (London, 2009), 223–4 for a structural critique.
- 9 D. Gwynn (ed.), *A. H. M. Jones and the Later Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2008); C. Ando and M. Formisano (eds.), *The New Late Antiquity. A Gallery of Intellectual Portraits* (Heidelberg, 2021). See also Averil Cameron, “An accidental scholar,” *Catholic Historical Review* 107 (2021), 1–27 (on her own career) and now Peter Brown, *Journeys of the Mind. A Life in History* (Princeton, 2023).
- 10 E.g., M. Stein and B. Bleckmann’s series, *Kleine und fragmentarische Historiker der Spätantike* (KfHist) (Paderborn, 2015), P. Van Nuffelen and L. Van Hoof, *Clavis Historicorum Antiquitatis Posterioris* (Turnhout, 2019), P. Van Nuffelen and L. Van Hoof, *The Fragmentary Latin Histories of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2020), P. Janiszewski’s project, “The missing link. The lost Latin historiography of the late Roman empire (3rd–5th century),” building on his *The missing link: Greek Pagan Historiography in the Second Half of the Third Century and in the Fourth Century AD* (Warsaw, 2006), and M. Meier’s on-line commentary on Malalas’ *Chronicle*, <https://malalas.hadw-bw.de/einfuehrung>.
- 11 For an important appraisal of the impact of contemporary multiculturalism on approaches to the study of late antiquity, see W. Liebeschuetz, “Late antiquity, the rejection of decline, and multiculturalism,” in *Decline and Change in Late Antiquity* (London, 2006), chapter XVII; see also B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005), 169–83 for similar points. On discussions relating to immigration and parallels with the period, see M. Kulikowski’s chapter in Friedrich and Harland’s book, cited in n.1, A. Gillett, “The fall of Rome and the retreat of European multiculturalism: A historical trope as a discourse of authority in public debate,” *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 4 (2017): 1390915.
- 12 J.-M. Carrié and A. Rousselle, *L’empire romain en mutation des Sévères à Constantin*, 293–337 (Paris, 1999), O. Hekster, *Rome and its Empire, AD 193–284* (Edinburgh, 2008), and D. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*² (New York, 2014) offer good coverage of the century.
- 13 W. Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford, 2001) and Chapter 5.