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REVIEW ARTICLE

Towards and beyond the 'Fall': rethinking Rome's end*

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I Introduction

Rome 'falls' differently in every scholarly generation. Perhaps no other historical event has been made to embody changing contemporary attitudes, fears and convictions like the protracted adaptation and dissolution of Roman governance structures in the West and their survival and eventual transformation in the East.[1] As in a musical variation, the notes are constantly re-arranged, with law, bureaucracy, war, disease, economy or religion sounding the dominant chord. The so-called barbarians fall in and out of focus, their precise status and movements given less or more attention. Various disciplines attain interpretative primacy, with history and archaeology dictating the trends and directions.

The scholarly perspective also changes. While sometimes the preferred approach is narrow, limited to small worlds and almost microscopic focus, at other times the view zooms out and lingers at a comfortable distance spanning whole continents. Even time seems malleable when it comes to Rome's fall (or survival), as the precise dates of its beginning and end remain objects of heated debate. While the year 476 C.E. — the year the last emperor in the west was deposed — has long been taken as *the* definitive moment of the 'Fall', the processes and events leading up to that moment are integral parts of the story. Meanwhile, many scholars champion the extraordinary vitality of this society (in material culture, as well as in literature, religion, politics and civic life) that lasted into the mid-sixth century and sometimes beyond. If we centre those aspects, the Roman empire does not necessarily seem to 'fall' at all.

A reader of an article on the 'Fall' of Rome might expect an answer on this issue; she might also hope to learn which factor in the 'Fall' played the decisive role. The following essay does *not* attempt to outline the reasons, date and significance of the 'Fall'.[2] A marked feature of recent works on this subject is that they decline to devise a master narrative or to rely on monocausal explanations. We have decided to step back and examine the 'Fall'

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[1] Theodore 2016; Rapley and Heather 2023.

[2] Comparable, but often narrower, synoptical accounts include Sessa 2019; Salzman 2021: 1–35; Kaldellis 2023: 191–221; Wood 2025: 190–6, 220–9.

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not as an event, or even as a process, but as an epistemological crux at the heart of much recent scholarship. Does the 'Fall' continue to hold its explanatory value? Throughout, we refer to the 'Fall' (with a capital initial and quotation marks) in order to distinguish this scholarly concept from any historical actualities or discrete events. Is the 'Fall' of Rome the most useful framing of the events at the centre of Late Antiquity?

This essay takes as its departure point the most extensive book on the subject published in recent years, Mischa Meier's *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung: Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.*,[3] a work of enormous proportions that has already left a decisive mark on continental scholarship. Across its 1,600 pages one finds a treasure trove of knowledge and detail that will not soon be surpassed and can perhaps only be compared with A. H. M. Jones's *The Later Roman Empire*[4] — its polar opposite in approach. Whereas Jones was explicitly not writing a history of the later Roman empire, Meier's work provides a wide-ranging historical narrative that is expansive both chronologically and geographically, extending into the eighth century and arguing that the broader Eurasian context in which the late Roman state fought for survival is a crucial part of the story. After all, the Avars and Persians did not simply appear outside the walls of Constantinople in 626, but were entangled in wars, alliances, people movements, disease burdens, economic networks and technological transfers stretching to east Asia. The book examines the early medieval Latin West, North Africa, the Eastern Roman Empire and the emerging Islamic world as interconnected post-Roman cultural spheres, while avoiding an all-encompassing thesis for the changes taking place in Late Antiquity — and certainly without 'blaming' barbarians for the 'Fall'. Meier instead organises his analysis around key motifs and regional studies of societies stretching from Britain to Mesopotamia. A significant contribution of this work is its comprehensive 500-page critical apparatus, which offers an in-depth review of historical, archaeological and religious studies scholarship, including the debates, controversies and challenges that define the field.

Meier's book highlights how the very concept of a migration of peoples, a '*Völkerwanderung*', as well as its relevance to historical studies, remains a contentious issue (see further in Section IV below). Despite its long-standing use in German-language historiography, scholars still disagree on whether this ambiguous term refers to actual historical migrations (usually of 'Germanic people groups'), to the chronological period between the last quarter of the fourth and the sixth centuries C.E. (typically defined by events such as the Battle of Adrianople in 378 and the arrival of the Lombards in Italy in 568), or to the entire transition from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages, when the Roman world was transformed in part through encounters with new groups from its periphery.[5] *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung*, its title notwithstanding, has no agenda on these matters. The book does not actively engage in the debates about the reasons, nature and consequences of the so-called Great Migrations; it rather interrogates the terms of these debates across 75 pages. While many sections deal with peoples, migrations and the founding of post-Roman polities (the Vandals, the Burgundians, the Franks, the Thuringians), the nexus remains the Roman Empire. Only the tenth of eleven substantial chapters deals with events that Meier depicts as more or less uncoupled from Rome: the fragmentation of the western Mediterranean (including Italy and North Africa) in the sixth century. In a sense, then, this book narrates the 'Fall' of Rome while upholding a focus on barbarian migrations, all without providing a single overarching thesis of the 'Fall'.

The following five thematic sections engage with different aspects of the problem of the 'Fall' in recent scholarship. We take the publication of Meier's book as a *caesura* — for it

[3] Meier 2019.
[4] Jones 1964.
[5] Geary 2012.

excels in taking stock. We begin with institutions and economy, both areas of study that have undergone radical reinterpretations in recent years and reshaped our understanding of the 'Fall' of Rome. Then we focus on ethnicity and community, where scholars still grapple with interpreting the role and identity of peoples and communities at a time of change. The last two sections consider relatively new offerings in the study of the 'Fall', albeit built on long-standing historiographic traditions; studies of ecology and religion cover a wide array of sources and processes that were hitherto neglected or unknown. We finish with a look at what might be missing, and which notes are still barely heard but might become decisively louder in the near future.

II Institutions

Late Antiquity is often presented as a time of flourishing but also as an essentially defensive epoch, perpetually staving off military, economic or demographic decline.[6] Recent scholarship, however, has rediscovered an area of particular resilience: institutions. Usually associated with law-oriented German and French scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, institutional history is now a much more diverse and robust field. The study of institutions may have less buzzword potential today than research on climate change or pandemics, but a look at our contemporary political landscape drives home how critical institutions are to a functioning society. While the dominant historical narrative of the late Roman world posits the failure of bodies such as the Roman senate or the army and even of larger processes such as tax legislation, recent approaches highlight that, while the names and officially delineated functions of institutions or their members may experience rapid change or collapse, their social functions and benefits do not easily disappear.[7]

It is worth emphasising that amidst a rhetoric of institutional decline — long framed as the prerequisite for the 'Fall' — there is much scope to see continuity in practice. What remains after an institution is declared dead (or changed beyond recognition) is often what the institution did. That is not to suggest that Roman institutions simply continued under new names; one can easily mistake resilient cultural practices for resilient institutions. But accepting cultural practice as a core tenet of institutional sustainability allows one to see what we might call 'relayed resilience'. Newly minted institutions like monasteries or the various local episcopates took over cultural practices that existed long before them. Just like the social elites standing behind city senates and councils, new ecclesiastical elites engaged in patronage and networking,[8] public benefactions and urban self-representation.[9] Friendship networks,[10] letter writing[11] and epigraphic display[12] were all strategies that carried over into church institutions. This shift largely obscured the 'Fall' of Rome for its contemporaries: many social practices continued — including things like urban social unrest.[13] At the same time, it is undoubtedly true that civic elites fell into crisis in some regions, such as Italy in the sixth century, which locally constituted a 'Fall' of Rome.[14]

[6] Ward-Perkins 2006; Brown 2013; Heather 2005; Harper 2017; Wood 2025.

[7] See, for example, the evidence of lead seals: Shea 2020 (cf. Woolf 2012); Straumann 2025 on the evolution of institutions.

[8] Allen 2015; Dekker 2018; Cvetković *et al.* 2019.

[9] Neary 2016; McEvoy 2022.

[10] Rebenich 2009.

[11] Sogno *et al.* 2019; Mossong 2022; Egetenmeyr 2023.

[12] Noble 2020; Toth 2020.

[13] Egetenmeyr and Riemenschneider 2025.

[14] Goltz 2020.

One of the paradigmatic studies of the last decade on the subject is Michele Salzman's *The Falls of Rome*,[15] very much a study of the city and not the empire. This is a very different kind of 'Fall', one that is entirely local, and never definitive. Through a processual analysis of institutional change, Salzman effectively shows the sustained institutional resilience that succoured central Italy between 300 and 600. In the face of trying circumstances, groups and individuals continued to reinvest in the foundations of institutions.[16]

The key takeaway is that we are now looking behind the institutions; they themselves are no longer seen as self-maintaining and self-enforcing.[17] We can see this quite clearly in military institutions.[18] These were kept afloat by the cultural practices behind them.[19] There was a way of being a Roman soldier, a Roman military family and a Roman commander, expressed in actions independent from institutionalised Roman command. Institutions are not simply manifestations of culture but also a way to enforce and maintain offices and political and religious systems. The practices carried out by institutions provided resilience — hence provoking, in older studies, a slightly skewed view of Late Antiquity as an age of decadence and excess in titles, pageantry and liturgies.[20] Practice, however, can also decouple from the institution — creating a situation where this ceremonial investment is nothing but a facade. These practices can then be repurposed for other means — a development that is particularly obvious in the later late antique world, for example in Ravenna after the withdrawal of Justinian's governing institutions and the rise of Lombard control. Titles, rituals and honours persisted but lost their original meaning, being instead imbued with new social and political functions adapted for the considerable change in circumstances.[21] Connecting the change in institutions to the 'Fall' of Rome is both correct and misleading. Their radical change was a 'Fall' in itself, but this 'Fall' should not be seen as the end of what lay behind these institutions.

If cultural practices are at the core of institutional resilience, then it is necessary to ask about their narrative longevity as well.[22] Some recent retellings of late antique history emphasise an almost seamless transition of institutional memory between the late Roman and post-Roman worlds, as well as a more or less continuous existence for such memory in Byzantium. Anthony Kaldellis' provocative recent study, *The New Roman Empire: A History of Byzantium*, is perhaps the strongest iteration of this approach, postulating a common history of late Rome and (what scholars call) Byzantium through the preservation of a narrative coherence between the two.[23] For him (and for many of the eastern Romans he is writing about), the 'Fall' of Rome never happened; rhetorical continuity works as a bridge for any institutional break that may or may not have occurred during Late Antiquity. Kaldellis' point is that medieval Romans ('Byzantines') did not perceive any break or separate periods in their own history.

Everywhere in the Mediterranean basin (and, to an extent, even beyond), new and old polities were formulating laws and prescribing social norms that offered an opportunity for the narrative longevity of Roman institutions. In Visigothic Spain, law codes from the fifth

[15] Salzman 2021.

[16] Salzman 2021.

[17] As with the institutions, so too with the physical structures that housed them: Jacobs 2013 has shown in painstaking detail the effort that went into maintaining public buildings in cities of the eastern Mediterranean, up until the mid-sixth century.

[18] Wijnendaele 2024.

[19] Falcasantos 2020: 29.

[20] See for example A.H. M. Jones' reading of John Lydus: 1964: 601–2.

[21] Schoolman 2021.

[22] Narrative longevity here means the continuous discourse about certain institutions, often implying institutional stability while facilitating gradual change.

[23] Kaldellis 2023.

to seventh centuries actively maintained institutional traditions and at least a facade of a continuous framework of authority.[24] Establishing authority through legal tradition was almost universal. Sometimes, as in Cassiodorus' *Variae*, there is an almost direct handoff from the Roman past to its medieval afterlife.[25] The debate about post-Roman law codes in Spain, Italy, Gaul and Britain hinges on whether this formal and narrative longevity translates to institutional longevity.

A good example of both a radical change in the content of institutions and their longevity as cultural practice is the consulate. The last western consul, Anicius Faustus Albinus Basilius Iunior, was appointed in 541. But institutions like monasteries in Gaul continued to use the post-consular date of his term both in anticipation of a continuation of consular appointments and through attachment to a Roman practice.[26] Equally, the imperial apparatus in Constantinople rhetorically built upon the office of the consul long after it ceased to appoint any consuls.[27] The post of the consul was discontinued, its meaning left as symbolic, but a cultural attachment remained. The 'Fall' both occurred in practice and was delayed in consequence for as long as possible.

We see, then, that at the core of the debate lies the problem of dissonance. On the one hand, recent literature has renewed criticism of 'continuity' in the late antique worlds — and, subsequently, on the degree to which the 'barbarian newcomers' were willing to write themselves into Roman institutional practices. On the other hand, sources confirm the resilience of institutions and the pervasive presence of narrative strategies of remembering. This tension between research paradigms and source critique shapes the literature. One could frame the 'Fall' of Rome as the fall of its institutions. But then, given how many of them continued to be transformed and adapted for centuries to come — and how many were abandoned and changed under Roman rule already — it is hard to determine when the threshold of a fall is reached.

III Economic processes

Identifying economic decline and collapse as important factors in the downfall of the Roman empire is a tried and tested point of view.[28] Changing urban landscapes, reduced long-distance trade and the empire's struggle to extract taxes from its provinces are all common economy-based explanations for the 'Fall' of Rome. While these explanations are based on tangible evidence, recent advances in methodology and a wider range of sources suggest that more is at play: we simply need to account for more factors when assessing the economic processes underpinning the empire.

One obvious issue is that the field has too long concentrated on 'core' regions of the empire that may be less representative of the empire as a whole than previously thought. Another is the study of too limited a chronological scale, which obscures larger trends and developments. A focus on the Gallic provinces and the exchange of pottery, for example, will reasonably lead to the idea that the whole empire was running out of steam in the fourth and fifth centuries.[29] This does not square with the fact that many communities elsewhere were doing well, that Italian elites had money to spare and that the eastern part of the Empire was experiencing a phase of economic prosperity well into the sixth century.

[24] Kelly 2020.

[25] Bjornlie 2019; Cristini 2022. The highly refined edition of the *Variae* by Giardina *et al.* 2014–19, featuring an Italian translation and extensive commentary, has been largely overlooked.

[26] See the epitaph of abbot Florentius (d. 553): *CIL* XII 944.

[27] Bono 2024.

[28] McCormick 2002; Wickham 2005.

[29] Ward-Perkins 2006.

We need to face the fact that the economy changed its perceivable form and could vary regionally to an astonishing extent.

Several factors further complicate the picture and make a comprehensive account of the late Roman economy considerably more difficult. In a *longue durée* perspective, the economy reveals itself through changes in the physical environment. This is perhaps most apparent in late antique city-scapes, where shifts in practical economic activity are visible in basic spatial units like the street or the *forum*, with commercial activity gradually moving more into city centres and formerly monumental spaces.[30] The famous Sebasteion of Aphrodisias was desacralised and given over to shops and workshops some time around 350–450.[31] This was not, however, 'shambolic encroachment': Luke Lavan's hefty two-volume *Public Space in the Late Antique City* shows, on the basis of extensive archaeological data, that public spaces were not left unregulated. Encroachment was mainly 'top down' (favouring elite patrons or institutions) rather than signifying the popular takeover of urban space, except in regions experiencing serious deurbanisation.[32] Many cities of the east maintained their classical urban features into the sixth century, and even engaged in urban planning on a grand scale, as the recent rescue excavations in Thessaloniki have shown: new monumental *fora* with shops were built, probably under Justinian.[33] The archaeological record, however, is often at odds with the texts, which, in grandiose rhetoric, veer between abundance and abandonment, delighting in vivid descriptions of urban destruction and demise.[34] These passages served various rhetorical functions and do not necessarily reveal the actual state of the urban fabric in Late Antiquity. This is apparent in descriptions such as those of the sack of Rome in 410,[35] or of various cities taken and destroyed in Rome's sixth-century eastern wars. If we desire written indications of actual changes inside the cities we must look elsewhere, for example to documentary/epigraphic sources on trade, pilgrimage, or public works and their renovation.[36]

If we see the Principate as a time of abundance and productive economic activity, Late Antiquity appears as a time of degrowth (at least in the West) that almost 'naturally' led to the 'Fall' of Rome.[37] This might be a misleading perspective, as we can see now how modes of economic activity diversify and how those that were peripheral before the fourth century become dominant. One strong candidate for such a quintessential late antique mode is re-use.[38] Turning away from the extraction of new material, late antique communities shifted more towards a circular economic model.[39] From tiles to glass to stone, from sculptures to mosaics and to writing material, almost the entire material world of Late Antiquity went through a process of recycling.[40] Spoliation (the reuse of building material) — long conceptualised as a major symptom of decline and degrowth — was often an active choice, the reasons for which extended beyond the economic.[41] A culture that relied heavily on

[30] Witschel and Krause 2006.

[31] Ogus 2018: 174–7.

[32] Lavan 2020: 12–148, 374–417.

[33] Vasileiadou and Tzevreni 2021.

[34] Prominent examples include Jerome's description of the cities on the Rhine after 406; or Orosius' famous account of 410.

[35] Mathisen 2013. The extent to which the city of Rome was physically impacted by Alaric's sack is debatable (Meier and Patzold 2010), but archaeological evidence does attest to a devastating fire in the Basilica Aemilia in the Forum in precisely 410. A hoard found in and under the burnt layer in that building contained coins minted up to precisely 409/10: Frey-Kupper *et al.* 2022.

[36] Jacobs 2021.

[37] McConnell *et al.* 2018.

[38] Munro 2024: 4–14.

[39] Bavuso *et al.* 2023.

[40] Ng and Swetnam-Burland 2018; Barker 2019; Underwood 2019: 151–79; Duckworth and Wilson 2020.

[41] Sitz 2023; 2025.

authority and tradition in all things literary would also appreciate the appeal of traditionality in terms of material and iconography — but in both arenas, late antique individuals were quite willing to *play* with tradition. Just as late antique poetry is not a 'bad' version of classical poetry but instead intentionally subverts reader/listener expectations,[42] so too does architecture using spolia play with viewer expectations: an architrave reused in the 'wrong' place (at the base rather than crown of a wall) shows not incompetence but an aesthetic of the unexpected — of variety.[43] This shift in our interpretation of reuse is surely also a consequence of modern views regarding sustainability and circular economies. Spolia can no longer be regarded as an unambiguous symptom of the 'Fall', but instead a cultural practice inherent in (late) Roman building activity.

In the ancient economy, local production and consumption played a significant role. This is also true for Late Antiquity, but is sometimes skewed in relation to the 'Fall' of Rome: breaks in supra-regional exchange are, then, seen as a symptom of crisis, instead of a recurring feature of economic adaptation. We are questioning whether localisation (as it were) resulted in isolation, which has serious consequences for the impact of the economy on social and political life.[44] Increasingly, it seems that although trade and exchange did undergo a fairly radical re-orientation in the West, this process was accompanied by adaptations that, simply put, made the best out of limited resources acquired from long-distance exchange.[45] But how well do the tangible archaeological remains inform us on markets, levies, or even levels of monetisation?[46] Additionally, the decrease in long-distance exchange may paradoxically have increased local supply and in effect local consumption, leading to regional prosperity.[47] Localisation does not always equal scarcity.

While A. H. M. Jones's finger-pointing at the 'idle mouths' of monks in the decline of the late antique economy has long since fallen out of fashion, a new generation of materialist scholars has emerged for whom religion *does* play a role, and a significant one at that.[48] The inclusion of religion as a key economic factor has long been postulated by scholars like Ian Wood, who proposes a new explanation of the transition from a military tributary economy to an ecclesiastical one in *The Christian Economy of the Early Medieval West: Towards a Temple Society*.[49] Perhaps the most fascinating contribution of this model is that it acknowledges the decline of the late Roman economy while still accounting for its continuous vitality. The church became the main economic 'sink', depriving the secular economy of the gathered resources, but also a powerful new organiser and broker of productive space.[50] Significant new forms of economic activity emerged, such as large-scale pilgrimage. Tokens and flasks are indicators of lay spirituality, but they are also magnets for monetary investment.[51] The absolute and relative quantity of this sort of economic activity is difficult to gauge, as is elite sponsoring and patronage of churches and monasteries.[52] But overall we should keep in mind the sizeable amount of economic activity that lay hidden in plain view and is slowly coming into focus.

[42] E.g. Agosti 2020.

[43] Niewöhner 2018.

[44] Lavan 2015; see especially Sarris 2015.

[45] Whittow 2015. The situation in the east is somewhat different. Leidwanger 2020, for example, has shown that shipwrecks (and therefore presumably shipping) in the eastern Mediterranean peak in both the Roman imperial period and (after a steep drop in the third century) again in late antiquity; Constantinople became a new node in shipping networks.

[46] Swift 2020.

[47] Wickham 2021: 20–1.

[48] Eisenberg and Tedesco 2021.

[49] Wood 2022.

[50] Cirelli 2021.

[51] Blanke and Cromwell 2023.

[52] Fafinski and Riemenschneider 2023.

No matter how rich the datasets that we put together are, Late Antiquity, like every historical period, remains an epoch of imperfect data, especially when it comes to the economy. Quantification is thus another area where considerable ink is spilled, and where opinions, epistemologies, methodologies and disciplinary contexts have led to controversy — often productively. First, there are efforts to quantify areas where there is hardly any quantifiable data in the first place: large data collections on societal changes spanning the entire frame of documented human existence, or more pointed analyses of exclusively hypothetical numbers, have certainly shown interesting results, but failed to produce more than conjecture.[53] New data specific to Late Antiquity, however, allow for substantiated quantitative analysis and drive the more fundamental push for quantitative historical analysis: be it human remains that show traces of the plague,[54] palaeo-botanical data,[55] or new sets of conventional archaeological finds such as amphorae or seals,[56] there is no shortage of hard numbers and comparable data. These approaches are far from universally indisputable, especially when it comes to their relation to large-scale developments and broad historical questions.[57] Although their interdisciplinary character has limited their reception in some areas, discussions over quantitative approaches will continue even as the necessity of qualitative framing is clear.

A final complicating observation is the recent intensifying of the debate about late antique modes of production and the overall theoretical model of the (end of the) Roman economy. The dominant view of recent decades has been one or other variant of New Institutional Economics, postulating mercantile individual and market behaviour that is relatively similar to contemporary economic models, emphasising institutions and social norms as regulators of economic activity.[58] Some authors, however, question whether the late Roman state was fundamentally a market economy and look for alternative characterisations. One such alternative model is that of a tributary state exercising economic control through targeted extraction of resources.[59] There are no barbarians here as a category — because the tributary state model does not care who is doing the extracting. Success depends on how well such a state manages its resources and makes them available for its own administration.

In the tributary state model, the economic transformation process is not a linear event with a series of breaks, but rather a more complex evolution of means and not methods.[60] Scholars working with this model focus less on taxation and more on land and labour. Changes in law and taxes are not considered as pivotal in the grand scheme of things.[61] The agency of agricultural workers and the energy and resources necessary for their management on the side of the elite gain a prominent role.[62]

Marxist analysis too is resurgent, stressing class differences, the emergence of economy-driven social stratification and exploitation.[63] This resurgence has, predictably, provoked reactions by historians seeking to re-impose modernist paradigms in their grand

[53] Bowes 2021.
[54] Mordechai *et al.* 2019; Preiser-Kapeller *et al.* 2025.
[55] Izdebski 2024.
[56] Komar 2024.
[57] See Meier 2020 and Mordechai *et al.* 2020.
[58] See the short analysis in Ward 2024: 1–14.
[59] Posited as a working model in Haldon 1993; for the most recent application of this model, see Tedesco 2024.
[60] For the detailed explanation, cf. Haldon 1993.
[61] Bang 2008; Brughmans 2016.
[62] Sirks 2024.
[63] Banaji 2016; Tedesco 2018.

analysis,[64] provoking yet another strong response from anti-determinists.[65] The relevance of this debate for the 'Fall' of Rome is simple: the pictures that emerge from each of these different macro-economic models are radically different. They each bring their own value judgements (was it, for example, ultimately good for most people that the empire dissolved in the West, as Scheidel proposes in his *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity*? [66]), and factor in completely different indicators. In a word: for each of them, the economic 'Fall' of Rome looks very different.

A definitive link between the Mediterranean economy and the 'Fall' is therefore difficult to conceptualise even on a theoretical level. We also lack much opportunity to take a comparative perspective; Rome's neighbouring polities, regions and peoples are simply much harder for us to observe. As discussed, the range of issues will inevitably muddy any synoptic view. Changes in urban landscapes cannot generally be attributed to economic decline; re-use and spoliation need to be reconsidered as complex social behaviours, not indicators of neglect; localisation was a reason and a consequence for declining long-distance trade, but it is by no means an expression of stagnation and decline; the Christian religious economy is not an alternative world, and its flourishing not a sign of the death of the empire; large data sets bring a range of possibilities to the discussion, but need to be interpreted carefully; and the underlying economic model will most definitely shape the analysis of every kind of evidence. Studies of the economy continue to feed on the idea of a 'Fall', even as Rome's economy looks less and less to have fallen in a definitive way.

IV Ethnicity

In the traditional narrative, 'ethnicity' played a major role in the 'Fall' of Rome: peoples migrated into Roman territory (drawn like moths to the flame of Rome's success, or pushed like dominoes by the movements of yet more distant 'ethnic' groups).[67] The 'Fall' of Rome was taken as a formative moment in the development of new ethnically defined kingdoms (Franks, Lombards, etc.) that in time developed into modern nation states, often defined by 'people groups' (the Germans, the French, the Hungarians, etc.). The devastating power of this idea became clear in the Second World War, and its contemporary re-emergence in various strands of nationalistic politics has, for many historians, heightened the urgency of deconstructing the notion of discrete, homogeneous and stable ethnic groups in Late Antiquity.[68] Some scholars go further, seeing the literary sources which describe such groups (the so-called *origines gentium* texts) as a pastiche of *topoi* going back to Herodotus without resonance in the real world. In *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung*, Meier takes a more moderate approach, avoiding total scepticism towards the various groups described in our late antique sources (Vandals, Slavs, Goths etc.; after all, late antique authors and readers accepted these categories), while also declining to essentialise them.[69] The *Völker* recede from the *Völkerwanderung*. In this approach Meier is surely supported by most researchers today.

Archaeology is no silver bullet for drawing clear lines between different 'cultures' or 'people groups' or for identifying 'migration' en masse, and it has not been for some time.[70] This line of thinking has been taken further by James Harland in his *Ethnic Identity and the*

[64] Scheidel 2019.
[65] Hodges 2021.
[66] Scheidel 2019.
[67] For the latest evolutions of this line of thinking, see Heather 2005; Rapley and Heather 2023.
[68] A significant amount of research on this topic has emerged from the 'Vienna School', now spearheaded by Walter Pohl: Pohl 2018; Kramer and Pohl 2021; Pohl 2023; 2024.
[69] Meier 2019.
[70] Brather 2004; von Rummel 2007.

Archaeology of the adventus Saxonum.[71] Harland problematises archaeological attempts at reading a change in material culture as an indication of the influx of new people, the 'Anglo-Saxons', to the British Isles after the cessation of Roman governance there (traditionally dated to 410). Changes in burial practice and grave goods in fifth-century Britain need not be read as indicators of 'Germanic' newcomers (as narrated by much later sources, such as the Venerable Bede in the seventh/eighth century), but rather the renegotiation of gendered expectations in response to Roman military ideals. That is not to deny that migration from northern Germany/Scandinavia took place, even on a large scale (see below); rather it argues that northerners (who may well have identified themselves as 'Romans') arriving on British shores offered new political allegiances and forms of identity in relation to more traditional Roman civic ideals. Harland therefore encourages the asking of a new set of questions of the material evidence, beyond attempts to read the migration of 'ethnic' groups from it. Yet again, an influx of 'barbarians' is not an explanatory model for the 'Fall'.

None of this is to deny that the concept of 'ethnicity' can still be important. The Romans saw their world as populated by various 'ethnic' groups. Vandals, Franks, Goths, or Burgundians used ethnic terms in royal titles and to shore up the support of the military elite.[72] Ultimately, however, they instrumentalised these terms within a Christian framework that gradually overlaid and replaced ancient ethnographic habits; 'people groups' were now associated with named communities in the Bible, rather than in Herodotus.[73] The *gentes* were assigned a providential role, and the plurality of peoples was understood as part of the divine plan of salvation.[74] Romanness, too, can be understood as an 'ethnic' category in the West, one (at times) worth fighting for. Attributed either through self-identification or through external adscription, being Roman could be one of many strategies of identification or a rallying point in times of stress. That such identity did not have an inherent value is visible in how varied the attitudes to it were in the aftermath of the fifth- and sixth-century changes in the West. Romans could be seen as one *gens* among many or as a group embodying the vestiges of imperial aspirations; in other words, they could be defined through an ethnic lens or a political one. As Roman identities ultimately faded across many former provinces, they gave way to regional identities such as Italian, Spanish, Aquitanian, Welsh, or Provençal.[75] However, these identities were also products of the empire — even if by now long gone — and labelling them simply as 'ethnic' obscures that fact.

At the same time in the East, Romans capitalised on their identity by using ethnicity as a productive category to prop up their state.[76] Kaldellis has argued forcefully that it was Romanness — not Greekness — that defined and unified the eastern empire until its last gasp in 1453. Its territory was called, colloquially, *Romanía* (Romanland). Roman identity, alongside Christian Orthodoxy and a strong state, combined to form something akin to a nation state (a concept usually associated with modern rather than pre-modern polities).[77] 'Ethnicity' — traditionally investigated in relation to Rome's 'Fall' — would thus seem to be more relevant to its survival in the East.

While historical research since the mid-twentieth century has gradually abandoned essentialist definitions of ethnicity, the rapid development of 'genetic history' since the 1990s has led to their resurgence. From early on, scholars attempted to apply ancient DNA (aDNA) analysis to old familiar questions: whether peoples actually migrated into the

[71] Harland 2021, esp. 41–86. See also Halsall 2020.
[72] Pohl 2024.
[73] Maas 2025.
[74] Pohl 2023.
[75] Pohl *et al.* 2018.
[76] Kaldellis 2019; 2023.
[77] This transfer of paradigms from the *barbaricum* (with groups long defined by 'ethnicity') to Roman territory has led to spirited debate: see *inter alia* Stouraitis 2025; Matheou 2026.

Roman Empire, how ethnically cohesive they were, and whence they came. Although this was rarely made explicit, many earlier studies assumed that 'ethnic groups' were characterised by genetic similarity, bolstered by popular perceptions of 'ethnicity'. Historians have criticised these approaches: we now understand that aDNA, especially when there are few comparative datasets, is not well suited for these questions.[78] Whether aDNA can offer any contribution to the problem of the 'Fall' remains unclear. Genetic information can inform us about patterns of intermarriage (to what degree more recent immigrants mixed with the local population, and whether there was a gender bias in this admixture, e.g. mostly immigrant males and local females) as well as offer estimates of the genetic heterogeneity or homogeneity of a community.[79] What it cannot show is the 'ethnic' identity of a person or community. Genetic groups may or may not overlap to different degrees with 'ethnic' groups, archaeological *habitus* or linguistic communities. Where aDNA may be helpful — when used with due caution — is with the question of mobility.[80] In this respect genetic homogeneity/heterogeneity can be revealing: groups within the Hun empire were vastly more genetically diverse than later Avar groups, who show more homogeneous inner Asian descent (at least among the Avar elite), and a more closed societal structure once they had settled in Pannonia.[81]

Like all historical sources, aDNA data must be treated critically. They should not be used in isolation to attempt to trace precise patterns of migration of 'ethnic' groups. For the period of the 'Fall' of Rome, aDNA has an almost irresistible allure, offering to conclude certain debates or deliver definitive proofs of whether a literary source was 'correct' or not. It appears, however, ever more unlikely that aDNA can confirm that the Venerable Bede or Jordanes were right in saying that entire 'peoples' migrated. Alternative methodologies, such as oxygen and strontium isotope analysis (which can assess, based on local background levels of specific isotopes, whether a buried individual was raised in that locality, or moved there from a distant region), offer another possibility of evaluating late antique narratives of mobility. Recent isotopic analysis of tooth enamel in Britain suggests increased immigration from the late sixth to late eighth century — later than the text-based date for the *adventus saxonum* (*c.* 450).[82] Other archaeological finds suggest that Roman habits in Britain held on longer than expected: excavations in 2017 and 2023 at the Chedworth villa suggest that a renovation (including the laying of a mosaic) took place *after* 410: the dating is based on both radiocarbon results and optically stimulated luminescence (OSL).[83] Traditional narratives of the 'Fall', in which 'barbarians' swooped into former Roman territories, are undercut by this data.

If we seek out a different approach — away from ethnic or genetic connections and towards bonds of choice and social circumstance — the term 'community' is in many ways a critical foil for ethnicity, allowing for a much broader view that emphasises deliberate connections between people, and between people and places.[84] Communities (of faith, education, class, gender, language, lifeway and location) allow us to leave behind the straitjacket of determinism in questions of identity and belonging. Where earlier generations of scholars saw ethnically and linguistically sorted populations playing clearly defined roles in the 'Fall', we now see a multitude of communal interactions — vivid, complex, and often resilient.

[78] Meier and Patzold 2021; Geary *et al.* 2021.

[79] Alterauge 2021; Tian *et al.* 2024; Wang *et al.* 2025.

[80] Anthony 2023.

[81] Meier 2025: 43–5; Gnecchi-Ruscone *et al.* 2025; Wang *et al.* 2025.

[82] Legget *et al.* 2025.

[83] Papworth 2024. Note that the full results have not been published; the OSL date only indicates a date of after *c.* 400; and the nature of the structure (villa or sanctuary?) is debated.

[84] Tannous 2018; Kramer and Pohl 2021.

In Italy, fragmented after the wars of Justinian, or Iberia, with a mix of elite and local identities, ethnic terms continued to provide some political capital for Ostrogothic or Lombard rulers and are even at work within the exarchate of Ravenna.[85] However, they remain within the framework of a shared Christian world — with the mosaicists of Ravenna working for both East Roman and local rulers. In Iberia, the Gothic identity of the elite did not interfere with using Romanness, in a distinctively local flavour, to unify the peninsula politically and ecclesiastically, with a complex administrative system and a flourishing Latin literature. Ethnicity on this scale seems to have been operationalised by (local) communities.

V Ecologies

A review in this journal of Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*[86] argued that ancient historians will no longer be able to ignore climate and disease in their analyses of this period.[87] Yet the integration of new evidence proves to be challenging. Was there an ecological 'Fall' and, if so, what was its chronology?[88] The findings of close examination of ecological data derived from pollen samples do not always synchronise with political, economic, or religious narratives.[89] Nor can a Roman 'climate optimum' or the late antique Little Ice Age explain the whole arc of history, given that these generalised climate trends impacted regions differently.[90] Integration of ecological data requires a different kind of interdisciplinary discourse than the one researchers of Late Antiquity are used to and has, frankly speaking, not yet been attempted at scale. Questions emerge when we try to develop such syntheses: if the migration of people played a role, what about the migration of other species, both animals and plants? We know that their extinction or displacement influenced ancient societies, but we still struggle to conceptualise these changes and integrate them in our narratives.[91] Eco-criticism may well form an important methodological contribution.[92] Many of these points have been raised by Kristina Sessa in her seminal essay *The New Environmental Fall of Rome: A Methodological Consideration*, which laid much of the groundwork for thinking about the 'Fall' in the context of natural processes.[93]

The point in time where we place the 'Fall', and even the question of *if* we can place it, shifts if we take an environmental perspective. Sources that foreground ecological events deliver chronologies that diverge from the dominant political and economic periodisations.[94] Cases when these chronologies coincide are rare, but prove to be extremely valuable in order to test our periodisation assumptions.[95] The advent of ecological microhistories in the analysis of Late Antiquity allows us to broaden the social perspective.[96] Phenomena caused by the correlation of ecological and political factors, previously seen as signs of decline leading to the 'Fall' — like extensive gardening within urban spaces — are now seen as signs of resilience and economic acumen.[97] At least some of these conversions of urban or manufacturing spaces into cultivated ones could have happened not as a reaction against

[85] Oppedisano 2022.
[86] Harper 2017.
[87] Bresson 2020.
[88] Izdebski 2024.
[89] Cremonini *et al.* 2013.
[90] Erdkamp 2019.
[91] Pollaro and Robertson 2022.
[92] Arena 2022; Formisano 2024; Cordovana 2024.
[93] Sessa 2019.
[94] Squatriti 2010.
[95] Zanini 2019.
[96] Maranzana 2021; Schoolman 2023; Schulz *et al.* 2024.
[97] Goodson 2021.

the waning of Roman legal and state frameworks, but within them.[98] The challenge, then, is not to disassociate ourselves from political, social or economic chronologies, but to reflect on the emergence of new chronologies that follow ecological data.

Partly because of this challenge, the degree to which ecological events can explain major political and even religious changes is hotly debated.[99] The Plague of Justinian is perhaps the most controversial of these events, provoking a slew of publications arguing over its overall impact.[100] Discussions of long-term impact also extend to questions of climate. Tracing volcanic eruptions or fluctuations in temperature starts to impact our understanding of the sixth century in particular.[101] While some of these attempts can contribute to the search for the 'Fall', there are recent contributions that clearly misunderstand the interplay between sciences and historical hermeneutics.[102] Discussion of the impact of climate and nature has entered a problematic phase where historians are often deliberately left out of the discourse.[103] Fortunately, there is already a theoretical discussion under way on how the dissonance between methods and discourses can be bridged and made productive.[104] The 'Fall' then appears as a protracted event. For example, archaeological findings from Asia Minor in the seventh century support this need to combine natural and man-made causes: recent excavations in the Place of Palms at Aphrodisias indicate that an attack (presumably by the Persians) in 617, followed by an earthquake *c.* 620, devastated the city; another attack sometime between the 640s and 660s (this time presumably by the Arabs) finally brought to an end the monumental appearance of this urban park.[105]

Focus on climate and environment foregrounds either a *longue durée* perspective across epochs,[106] or a much narrower chronological and geographical scope.[107] In larger overviews of the Roman state, plague has become a key talking point — the assessment of its impact on economy and demography being an act of showing your colours, even if only in passing.[108] Simultaneously, microhistorical approaches continue to inform larger narrative building. This happens not only for western, post-Roman material,[109] but also for regions outside of the direct Roman sphere of influence.[110] The result is, to revisit Sessa's point, an ongoing discussion of the environmental 'Fall' of Rome.

VI Religion

Gibbon's hypothesis of Christianity as the bringer of doom still looms over the field, but the more nuanced recent picture points towards a different conclusion: Rome underwent a religious transformation without thereby falling, and without losing its Romanness. To an extent this can be seen as a result of a process of 'religification' of many areas of late antique society, which throws into question the existence of the 'secular' in this epoch

[98] Fafinski 2021: 147–51.

[99] Izdebski and Mulryan 2019.

[100] Harper 2017; Green 2019; Mordechai *et al.* 2019; Sarris 2022; Preiser-Kapeller *et al.* 2025. For a review of the archaeological evidence for mass graves (which increase in frequency from *c.* 500–700, and at least some of which have revealed molecular evidence for *Yersinia pestis*), see McCormick 2015; 2016).

[101] Ellegård Larsen *et al.* 2024.

[102] McConnell *et al.* 2025 or Norman *et al.* 2025; see the response to the last paper by Foxhall Forbes *et al.* 2026.

[103] Büntgen *et al.* 2016; Peregrine 2020, citing a consensus between historians, archaeologists and climate scientists, without actually citing any historians.

[104] Meier 2021.

[105] Wilson and Russell 2024.

[106] Preiser-Kapeller 2021.

[107] Schoolman *et al.* 2019, and programmatically Haldon *et al.* 2020.

[108] Preiser-Kapeller 2021; Kaldellis 2023.

[109] Schoolman *et al.* 2019.

[110] Azad 2021.

and complicates the search for religious reasons for the 'Fall'.[111] New impulses for understanding the process come from the religious world — both in the sense of ancient religious life, and matters of faith and belief. Possibly the most important catalyst is the enormous corpus of religious texts that long remained underexplored by historians. This is particularly obvious for the languages of the broader eastern Mediterranean. The study of Syriac texts and their societal background — dubbed *le monde syriaque* in the important book of Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié[112] — is the most visible facet of this trend. Armenian, proto-Arabic and Ethiopian inscriptions and literature are gaining traction as well. That the vast majority of these texts has a strong religious bent may have caused their regrettable neglect. Now historians turn towards Syriac and Armenian chronography, Greek homilies and Latin ascetic literature in order to grasp the communities at the fringes of the empire.

The 'Fall' of Rome is counterintuitively both strongly present in this corpus of texts — through apocalyptic rhetoric, shifting jurisdictions and the increasing role of the Church in administration — and absent through the pervasive dependence of these phenomena on the very notion of the Roman empire. It would be a major misunderstanding of the late Roman state to ascribe its 'Fall' to the increased role of Christianity. On the contrary, Rome became what Robin Whelan calls 'the Christian State', in which the members of the administrative apparatus saw themselves as Christian authority figures.[113] The importance of decidedly Christian elites and ecclesiastical functionaries for governance seems unquestionable,[114] and their power appears as something that secular politics had to take into account one way or the other.[115] This process cannot be described as leading to a 'Fall' of Rome — Christianity did not attempt to disestablish the empire that fed it. Church properties contributed heavily to economic output almost everywhere in the late and post-Roman world.[116] If anything, from this perspective, Christianity seems to be a supporting factor. What about other religions? Manichaeism appears to have been both well established within the Roman empire and hardly a danger to its social fabric, even though it was (occasionally) opposed by the Roman state.[117] Judaism, even when resisting the empire's Christianising violence, was part of the Romanness which constituted its identity.[118] Emergent Islam, if we look at the 'Fall' of Rome in a long perspective, formed a formidable antagonist to the Roman Empire, and yet it took over and kept alive many of its institutions.[119]

However, religion was not without influence on the process of the 'Fall'. Fourth- and fifth-century Christian authors, like Orosius and Augustine, created a new theory of history which coopted Roman imperial history for the Christian social project. Historiography became open to Christian allusions, religious imagery and the merging of Christian and traditionally secular techniques.[120] Christianised literary instruments were used by authors as diverse as Jerome, Cassiodorus or John the Solitary in both secular and ecclesiastical fields.[121] Just as the built environment of late antique cities experienced a religious shift, so did the social imagination of the inhabitants of the majority of the empire.[122] Not a fall,

[111] Gassmann 2020; Goddard 2021; Nowakowski 2023; Sitz 2023.
[112] Chatonnet and Debié 2017.
[113] Whelan 2026.
[114] Rapp 2024.
[115] Panzram and Poveda Arias 2023.
[116] Wood 2013; 2022; Eisenberg and Tedesco 2021; Blanke and Cromwell 2023; Tedesco *et al.* 2023.
[117] Matsangou 2023.
[118] Dohrmann 2013.
[119] Meier 2019: 1035–88.
[120] Stickler 2021.
[121] Rigolio 2022; Stenger 2023; Fafinski 2025.
[122] Riemenschneider 2024.

but a certain parallelisation and sometimes even a replacement of imperial institutions occurred. Monasticism is perhaps the best example. Monasticism did not cause the 'Fall' of Rome nor did it cause the disappearance of its institutions.[123] However it created a viable social alternative, for example in its own interpretation of classical *paideia*.[124]

Religion, then, did not directly cause the 'Fall'. However, key movements within Christianity, like monasticism, precisely by adopting imperial institutions and by offering an alternative when they became weaker, made it possible to function aside from Rome. They make the search for the 'Fall' more difficult because by incorporating Roman imperial history and Roman social frameworks they kept Rome relevant beyond the state and the secular realm. Popes, bureaucrats and emperors engaged in remembering and reworking the stories of various 'Falls' of Rome. In 442 Pope Leo I gave a sermon to the people of Rome on the 'sack' of Rome by Alaric in 410.[125] He used a religious genre, a homily, to appropriate the memory of Roman history. He thus instrumentalised a story of the fall of the city in a religious context. But he also used it to direct public opinion on the eve of the treaty with Geiseric of 442. From an institutional perspective he was the wrong person at a wrong time exceeding his competences. And yet he was shielding Rome from a fall, by remembering another one in liturgy. He certainly did not see the events of 410 as final, and clearly did not consider them as a prelude of another fall. If anything, it was religious devotion that was to prevent one in the future.[126]

VII Conclusions

We have, in the last twenty years, gained a new appreciation of the profound changes at play in Late Antiquity. Both for those advocating for greater continuity and for those seeing this as an irreversible catastrophe, the 'Fall' seemed like a natural candidate for the key research question, the lynchpin of that change. However, as soon as we zoom out, both geographically and disciplinarily, it ceases to be the question we necessarily need to ask to explain change. What happened in the Roman world in Late Antiquity can hardly be boiled down to a simple notion of a 'Fall'. The concept explains, perhaps, certain political developments, but even there its impact is often barely visible. The picture that emerges is thus: yes, an autonomously acting Western Roman Empire ceased to exist towards the end of the fifth century. But this empire had so profoundly adapted (or was forced to adapt) its internal organisation, structure of governance and military in the preceding decades that it became, in a way, superfluous even for its own ruling class. To call it a 'Fall' is a stretch. This highly regionalised development would have been imperceptible to many. And decades, even centuries, after it took place, many of the institutions, functions, even bureaucratic procedures of this empire continued to exist. This is emphatically not to say that the world of this time was devoid of change, violence, even carnage. If we want to keep the 'Fall,' we need to find a new place for it.

If this is the state of the field, what, then, are the alternatives to the concept of the 'Fall' of Rome as our epistemological crux? In this article we have identified a number of options. Increased interest focuses on the cultural practices underpinning how Roman institutions evolved and sometimes detached from the offices themselves, creating new opportunities for local elites. More attention is given to how religious life, contrary to the traditional fall narratives, does not seem to overtake all other aspects of late antique society — instead it just starts to include a great many societal phenomena. We are now comfortable looking for

[123] Fafinski and Riemenschneider 2023.
[124] Larsen and Rubenson 2018.
[125] Freeland and Conway 1996: 360–1.
[126] Salzman 2021: 130–1.

governors in homilies and *municipia* in hagiography. How we think of the economy is also changing. When resources become scarce or simply too complicated to extract or to move, and the underlying social and religious practices change, the result often was widespread economisation — no longer simply measured against the idealised standard of the earlier Roman economy. Climate changes, and responses to these changes — sometimes truly ingenious adaptations not only of the state's apparatus but also of daily life — surpass a simplistic notion of the 'Fall' entirely. People moved both geographically and across the societal spectrum, looking for new identities or defending their previous ones, forcing us to rethink how we contextualise migration and social structures. The collapse and change of bureaucracies used to be seen as a fall of Rome — now we just recognise it as one of the many processes that happened in Late Antiquity.

This is all to say that not everything points towards empire as a necessary framework, and that many aspects of the period are better understood without it. One empire's crisis, limited in geographical scope, need not be read as an all-encompassing event. In some places Rome does not fall at all. In others, such as Italy, there are multiple, sometimes repeated farewell parties, where the guests do not want to leave and the host does not switch the music off. The connection to Rome was not contingent on the continued existence of the Western Roman Empire: the warriors buried in Sutton Hoo may have served in the Eastern Roman army.[127] At the same time, new ways of conceptualising what the 'Fall' of Rome actually entails (beyond institutional, economic or military change) emerge: for example, the study of gender (and gendered expectations among Roman and non-Roman agents) may be the next substantial shift in this area.[128] Gender to date seldom figures as a factor in the downfall or resilience of the Empire.[129] Since Kate Cooper's *The Fall of the Roman Household* at the latest, however, we know how significant a dedicated analysis of gendered relationships can be.[130] A comprehensive study of the influence of gendered processes on the fall of Rome awaits: the roles of women and eunuchs, as well as gendered expectations for men, could profitably be written into this history. The variety of gendered agency, in elite circles,[131] in lower elite strata[132] and in lower classes of society,[133] has already shifted our understanding of late antique adaptations. Networks of powerful imperial women are now firmly seen as part of the founding constellation of late antique political systems.[134] The visibility of these networks and their members is not a given in scholarship and required a methodological reorientation.[135] Increasingly, however, life and politics at the imperial court are recognised as a gendered space, and as a space where women had considerable influence on the functioning of empire.[136] Recent work by Susanna Elm has highlighted the gender norms and expectations that shaped the late Roman power apparatus.[137] From that analysis we can see a clear pathway to analysing the 'Fall' of Rome as a gendered process: and paradoxically it is in gender studies that we might hear the fall again.

[127] Gittos 2024.
[128] Kotrosits 2023a; 2023b.
[129] For an exception, see Elm 2025.
[130] Cooper 2007.
[131] Vihervalli and Leonard 2023; Viermann and Rollinger 2024.
[132] Hemelrijk 2015.
[133] Vuolanto 2019; Constantinou 2024; Tutty 2024.
[134] Hillner 2023.
[135] Sheinfeld *et al.* 2024. Literary analyses, too, have tended towards more politically gendered readings: Peltonen 2019; Smith 2019. Gendered violence has been identified as an inescapable ideological framework in the literary development of Christian piety: Barry 2023.
[136] Tougher 2020; McEvoy 2021.
[137] Elm 2025.

As we progress, the old elephants in the room start to look decisively smaller. Was there a *Völkerwanderung* that shook the Roman Empire at its core? If the peoples of the *Völkerwanderung* and their empires (for Rome was not the only one — the Tang, the Sasanian and the Hunnic empires were equally affected by movements of people) are seen as a part of a broader system, it is much more important to ask about the internal logic of migration in the ancient and medieval world in general, far beyond narrow chronological confines of the 'Fall' of Rome. New methodological approaches emerge, in which the logic of sedentary Romans and moving barbarians does not hold water. Neither 410 nor 476 appear to be milestones in a total sense. Nor can the conflicts of those years be seen as a struggle between those wanting to preserve the empire and those wanting to abolish it. They are a chain of events with sometimes very limited impact. The 'Fall' falls itself and disintegrates into a series of regionalised, compartmentalised events and processes with their own dynamics and impacts.

That the 'Fall' is limited in its epistemological utility can also be seen in one of the many areas not covered in this review: war. Military history has evolved in recent years, moving away from the interpretation of battle accounts and strategic theorising and towards a broader perspective on military events, including the social, emotional and economic sides of war.[138] There are notable exceptions[139] and attempts at changing the discussion, but even those are built on social arguments and have largely failed to make a palpable impact.[140] This is not to say that generals and armies have fallen wholly out of fashion, yet we interpret them in a more comprehensive way that includes many of the processes detailed above.[141] The recent volume *War and Community*, edited by Susanna Elm and Kristina Sessa, exemplifies this change, through its focus on war as a social and cultural condition.[142]

Our analysis foregrounding the limited usability of the 'Fall', however, comes up short in one important respect: the 'Fall' holds an ongoing allure for the public and for academics alike that is not going away. Among the general public, the appeal of viewing an empire's end is only rising — and with it an expectation of a coherent narrative. The immense success of exhibitions like 'Le Temps Mérovingien' in Cluny (2016/2017), 'The Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms' in the British Library (2018), 'Germanen. Eine archäologische Bestandsaufnahme' in Berlin (2021/22) or 'Der Untergang des Römischen Reiches' in Trier (2023) confirms continued fascination with the 'Fall' for both visitors and the scholars who curated them. These exhibitions tell their stories largely on the basis of local archaeological discoveries, which sometimes undercut the overarching notion of Rome's 'Fall' as a turning point.

This expectation of a 'Fall' narrative does not come from nothing. On the one hand, it is reinforced by still-popular narratives that focus on destruction and discontinuity — based strongly on highly positivistic readings of ancient sources. To no one's surprise, recent books have tried once more clumsily to tie the 'Triumph of Christianity' to the 'Fall'.[143] On the other hand, it persists because we see falling empires all around us. As the 'Fall' paradigm seems to be fading in its explanatory power for the past, it only gains it for the present. The sheer amount of scholarship on the end of Rome and the malleability of its narrative, from that on Orosius, through to that on Gibbon, all the way to that on Boris

[138] See, for example, the reorientation towards provisioning and the military economy in the special issue of *Journal of Late Antiquity* 12.2 (Lee *et al.* 2019); see also Lin 2021. This development mirrors to an extent the developments in ancient warfare studies writ large, where the social turn has shifted the debate: Lendon 2004. We are grateful to Bret Deveraux for sharing his analysis of the developments in ancient military studies.

[139] Sarantis and Christie 2013; Whately 2021.

[140] Bennett *et al.* 2023.

[141] Parnell 2016; Köhn 2018.

[142] Elm and Sessa 2026.

[143] See the frustratingly popular Roberts 2026; for a balanced review of this 'Triumph', see now Rébillard 2026.

Johnson, promises that it will explain what is happening to us today. The 'Fall' is in this sense the ultimate contemporary event. And so Rome falls one more time: here and now, as we observe yet another shift in imperial frameworks. This is a recurring theme, used to explain the end of the British Empire, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, or, one could argue, the loosening of the United States' hegemonic influence in our present moment. More exciting research questions for Late Antiquity emerge and await. But in one area, the 'Fall' is still on the rise: in trying to explain our present.

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