

Paris attacks, the fall of Rome should be a warning to the West

By Niall Ferguson, The Australian, 16 November 2015

I am not going to repeat what you have already read or heard. I am not going to say that what happened in Paris on Friday night was unprecedented horror, for it was not. I am not going to say that the world stands with France, for it is a hollow phrase. Nor am I going to applaud [Francois Hollande's pledge of "pitiless" vengeance](#), for I do not believe it. I am, instead, going to tell you that this is exactly how civilisations fall.

Here is how Edward Gibbon described the Goths' sack of Rome in August 410AD: "... In the hour of savage licence, when every passion was inflamed, and every restraint was removed ... a cruel slaughter was made of the Romans; and ... the streets of the city were filled with dead bodies ... Whenever the Barbarians were provoked by opposition, they extended the promiscuous massacre to the feeble, the innocent, and the helpless ..."

Decline shaded into fall

Now, does that not describe the scenes we witnessed in Paris on Friday night? True, Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788, represented Rome's demise as a slow burn. Gibbon covered more than 1400 years of history. The causes he identified ranged from the personality disorders of individual emperors to the power of the Praetorian Guard and the rise of Sassanid Persia. Decline shaded into fall, with monotheism acting as a kind of imperial dry rot.

For many years, more modern historians of "late antiquity" tended to agree with Gibbon about the gradual nature of the process. Indeed, some went further, arguing "decline" was an anachronistic term, like the word "barbarian".

Far from declining and falling, they insisted, the Roman Empire had imperceptibly merged with the Germanic tribes, producing a multicultural post-imperial idyll that deserved a more flattering label than "Dark Ages".

Recently, however, a new generation of historians has raised the possibility the process of Roman decline was in fact sudden — and bloody — rather than smooth.

"Violent seizure ... by barbarian invaders"

For Bryan Ward-Perkins, what happened was "violent seizure ... by barbarian invaders". The end of the Roman west, he writes in *The Fall of Rome* (2005), "witnessed horrors and dislocation of a kind I sincerely hope never to have to live through; and it destroyed a complex civilisation, throwing the inhabitants of the West back to a standard of living typical of prehistoric times".

In five decades the population of Rome itself fell by three-quarters. Archaeological evidence from the late 5th century — inferior housing, more primitive pottery, fewer coins, smaller cattle — shows the benign influence of Rome diminished rapidly in the rest of western Europe.

"The end of civilisation", in Ward-Perkins's phrase, came within a single generation.

Peter Heather's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* emphasises the disastrous effects not just of mass migration, but also organised violence: first the westward shift of the Huns of central Asia and then the Germanic irruption into Roman territory.

The disastrous effects...

In his reading, the Visigoths who settled in Aquitaine and the Vandals who conquered Carthage were attracted to the Roman Empire by its wealth, but were enabled to seize that wealth by the arms acquired and skills learnt from the Romans themselves.

“For the adventurous,” writes Heather, “the Roman Empire, while being a threat to their existence, also presented an unprecedented opportunity to prosper ... Once the Huns had pushed large numbers of (alien groups) across the frontier, the Roman state became its own worst enemy. Its military power and financial sophistication both hastened the process whereby streams of incomers became coherent forces capable of carving out kingdoms from its own body politic.”

Similar processes destroying the European Union

Uncannily similar processes are destroying the European Union today, though few of us want to recognise them for what they are. Like the Roman Empire in the early 5th century, Europe has allowed its defences to crumble. As its wealth has grown, so its military prowess has shrunk, along with its self-belief. It has grown decadent in its malls and stadiums. At the same time, it has opened its gates to outsiders who have coveted its wealth without renouncing their ancestral faith.

The distant shock to this weakened edifice has been the Syrian civil war, though it has been a catalyst as much as a direct cause for the great *Volkerwanderung* of 2015.

As before, they have come from all over the imperial periphery — North Africa, the Levant, South Asia — but this time they have come in their millions, not in mere tens of thousands. To be sure, most have come hoping only for a better life. Things in their own countries have become just good enough economically for them to afford to leave and just bad enough politically for them to risk leaving.

But they cannot stream northwards and westwards without some of that political malaise coming with them. As Gibbon saw, convinced monotheists pose a grave threat to a secular empire.

The majority hold views not reconcilable with liberal democracies

It is doubtless true to say that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Europe are not violent. But it is also true the majority hold views not easily reconciled with the principles of our liberal democracies, including our novel notions about sexual equality and tolerance not merely of religious diversity but of nearly all sexual proclivities. And it is thus remarkably easy for a violent minority to acquire their weapons and prepare their assaults on civilisation within these avowedly peace-loving communities.

I do not know enough about the 5th century to be able to quote Romans who described each new act of barbarism as unprecedented, even when it had happened multiple times before; or

who issued pious calls for solidarity after the fall of Rome, even when standing together meant falling together; or who issued empty threats of pitiless revenge, even when all they intended to do was to strike a melodramatic posture.

21st-century Europe has itself to blame

I do know that 21st-century Europe has itself to blame for the mess it is now in. Surely, nowhere in the world has devoted more resources to the study of history than modern Europe did.

When I went up to Oxford more than 30 years ago, it was taken for granted that in the first term I would study Gibbon. It did no good. We learnt a lot of nonsense to the effect that nationalism was a bad thing, nation states worse and empires the worst things of all.

“Romans before the fall,” wrote Ward-Perkins, “were as certain as we are today that their world would continue for ever substantially unchanged. They were wrong. We would be wise not to repeat their complacency.”

Killed by complacency

Poor, poor Paris. Killed by complacency.

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