

Resource Depletion, Despotism and the End of Empires

Part III: Review of Bryan Ward-Perkins' *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*

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As a third installment in this series on resource depletion and the end of empires, I shall examine the contemporary relevance of the arguments and evidence in Bryan Ward-Perkins' *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2005). The book is a critique of the trend in scholarship to present the era broadly called Late Antiquity (ca. 200-800) as one of continuity and gradual change, rather than one of immense social, political and economic upheaval. The evidence is divided into three categories, each of which illustrates the observable consequences of civilizational collapse: the distribution of pottery (both in terms of quality and quantity), the distribution of low-denomination copper coins, and the presence of relatively widespread literacy among lower classes.

The crucial point which links Ward-Perkins' material to our contemporary situation in the 21st century is his statement that the fate of the empire rested ultimately on the economic well-being of its taxpayers. From the perspective of the those taxpayers themselves, the 'fate of the empire' was experienced as a decline in standard of living in the Western Roman Empire during the 5th century.

The fourth-century reforms of Diocletian and Constantine had created a situation where functions of state (civilian and military bureaucracy) became the main motors of the economy, especially in terms of enabling the production of material goods. Various forces (mostly external invasions in the years 401-413) eliminated the conditions under which the Roman state was able to draw reliable income from its tax base. As a result, the imperial war machine no longer had the funds to equip or pay its far-flung outposts, undermining both the territorial defense of the Empire and the principal market for high-quality manufactured goods. This situation, in turn, caused the large-scale manufactories of high-quality tableware, armaments, clothing to shut their operations, causing an economic downward spiral which, by some measures, lasted for a millennium. The death-knell came with the loss of Africa to the Vandals in 439, who proceeded to seize the Roman fleet and raid the Western Mediterranean, including the sack of Rome in 455. More crucially, imperial access to the taxation of the richest remaining province was eliminated, along with the regular grain shipments which kept the capital fed.

Ward-Perkins makes the relevant observation that, from the perspective of the common person, this process would have been experienced as a radical decline in standards of living and material comfort. Evidence of this survives in the archaeological record in the relative quantity and quality of pottery and tableware which was available to Roman provincial lower and middle classes. Even in remote provinces such as Britain, high-

quality tableware – which would compare favourably with much of what is available even today – was common even in remote villas. If high-quality durable goods such as pottery could be produced on a truly industrial scale (witness the 53 million amphorae estimated to constitute the Monte Testaccio in Rome), one can make the reasonable assumption that other, more perishable goods made of leather and wood were also commonly available. Hardly two generations later, evidence for the availability of such goods practically vanishes from Britain, leaving in its place crude, locally-made items of obviously lesser workmanship and durability. Ward-Perkins is careful to point out that circumstances in Britain were exceptionally harsh, but every area of the Roman Empire, both East and West, suffered through a similar albeit less steep decline in standards of living.

The widespread availability of low-denomination copper coinage is taken as evidence for a monetized economy, with even lower classes using coins for small transaction. This by no means implies that barter was not used. But it does imply that impersonal exchange of goods was possible for most layers of Roman society even in remote provinces, thanks to the distribution system enabled by the necessity to support frontier troops. Ward-Perkins provides a number of graphs proving that even in the supposedly prosperous Eastern Mediterranean, the period from the late 7th century onward saw an economic decline of catastrophic proportions. Only the capital itself, Constantinople, seems to have been spared the worst of this depression.

Ward-Perkins also emphasizes the importance of literacy in assessing the level of ‘civilization’. The chance survival of both whimsical graffiti from Pompeii and ephemeral receipts for the smallest transaction in Roman Egypt show that literacy was relatively widespread in Roman times. The relative crudeness of the few surviving samples of writing by early Medieval pilgrims serve to show that literacy was another facet of civilization which suffered a steep decline in post-Roman times, becoming restricted to isolated elements among the elite.

The troubling message of Ward-Perkins’ book is that, despite the impression of cultural continuity which studying religious practices might imply, the daily life of the average inhabitant of Gaul in 525 would probably have looked very different from what that person’s grandparents had seen. The impotence of the hubristic Roman elites (both political and financial, who were often one and the same, a situation similar to today’s...) in the face of the progressive collapse of their infrastructure is one of the striking features of this time period. Nothing effective was done to slow or halt the collapse once it had started. Multiple, mutually compounding problems overwhelmed a system too complex, fragile and interdependent for any single individual or small group to control and put into effect a viable set of solutions.

The final installment in this series will explore the aspect of despotism.