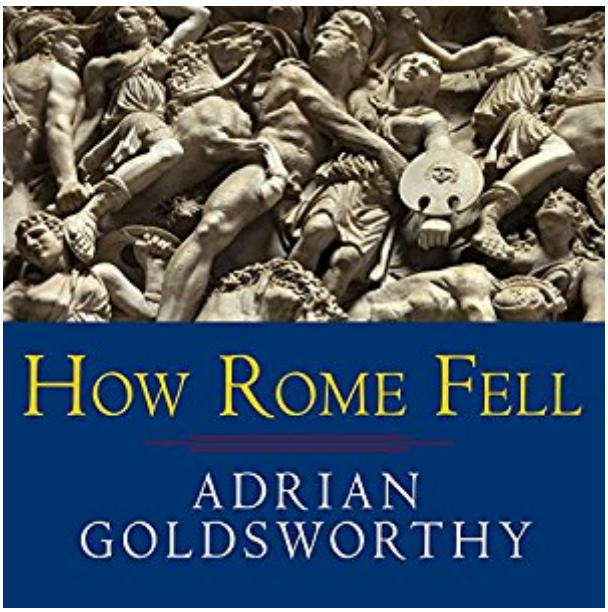
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How Rome Fell: Death Of A Superpower



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Synopsis

In AD 200, the Roman Empire seemed unassailable, its vast territory accounting for most of the known world. By the end of the fifth century, Roman rule had vanished in Western Europe and much of northern Africa, and only a shrunken Eastern Empire remained. This was a period of remarkable personalities, from the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius to emperors like Diocletian, who portrayed themselves as tough, even brutal, soldiers. It was a time of revolutionary ideas, especially in religion, as Christianity went from persecuted sect to the religion of state and emperors. Ultimately, this is the story of how an empire without a serious rival rotted from within, its rulers and institutions putting short-term ambition and personal survival over the greater good of the state.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This was an excellent book, describing the history of the Roman Empire from the latter part of the reign of Marcus Aurelius (from say 170 CE) to the reign of Heraclius (610-641), although events after the reign of Justinian are covered very briefly. (Heraclius isn't even mentioned by name in the main text, though he is in an appendix giving the chronology of the period.) Goldsworthy in general echoes Gibbon's comment that perhaps the real question isn't why Rome fell, but how it lasted so long. The real problem is glaringly obvious when you read a relatively condensed history like this one: from roughly 100 BCE through the reign of Justinian Rome, whether republic or empire, rarely went through a period of as much as 50 years without a civil war where Romans were fighting Romans, from the ones between Marius (and his successors) and Sulla in 88-82 BCE through Caesar and Pompey in 49-4 and Octavian and Mark Antony in 31-30; then an unusual 71-year

period of stability under Octavian/Augustus and Tiberius until the overthrow of Caligula in 41 CE (one of the exceptions), the "year of four emperors" in 69, and then the second and longest (124 years) period of stability from the accession of Vespasian in 69 through the Flavian and Antonine dynasties (Domitian was assassinated, but there was no civil war) until the overthrow of Commodus and the "year of five emperors" in 193. After that not a decade went by without Romans fighting Romans until the latter part of the reign of Diocletian, and even then there was only one decade without fighting. And as it became more and more common for emperors to be forcibly overthrown, they more and more became concentrated on survival rather than ruling the empire. Finally, by the fifth century in the West, nobody really wanted to be emperor, so the nominal emperors were basically puppets of one strong man or another. The east, with better communications and a serious enough external threat in Sassanid Persia to concentrate the attention of the generals, managed to muddle through, but the west was essentially done by the mid-5th century. Goldsworthy is an excellent writer and knows his material very well.

Most ancient histories focus on the leaders that defined their times. What Goldsworthy does here is a little disorienting because a major thesis of his argument is that leadership in Rome changed so often that it became a major reason driving the fall of the empire. So, you don’t have the narrative of a leader coming to power and ruling, so much as a constantly shifting cast of characters making up a larger narrative about the society as a whole. It can be a little dizzying for those of us who are used to these books being framed by great leaders. Instead of having those personalities, Goldsworthy puts forward certain recurring themes to frame his text (civil wars, barbarian attacks, political assassinations, etc.). Overall, this is the best single explanation I’ve read about the fall of Rome. So much so that, within a hundred pages, you are wondering why it took so long for (western) Rome to fall.

One of the unresolved questions still keeping historians at work concerns the fall of the Roman Empire.So far hundreds of books and articles discussed and scrutinized every detail of the Empire’s demise and each one has come up with different answers.Indeed,such a topic is barely possible to handle for one single historian.One must be in an extremely good command of primary and secondary sources and if he or she wants to have a wide audience, he or she must also be able to write in a very lively style, since such a topic could become boring in a matter of seconds if the style of writing is dry and contains only an endless number of facts.However, in the case of Mr. Goldsworthy’s case, this is not the case.Not only does he have a brilliant command of his sources

,but he has also the ability to keep the reader’s interest alive along 448 pages,the length of the text.What is original about this book concerns his conclusions and they are very simple: the real reason for the fall and demise of the Roman Empire had to do with the endless number of civil wars which started maily in 217 AD and proved to be fatal for the Empire which expired in the fifth century. Each conflict has sapped the empire’s energy.Corruption was rampant and just to illustrate, one emperor, Elagabalus,had nominated his governors on the merit of the size of their respective penises.One cannot escape the famous -and cited-sentence written by Gibbon in the 18th century who proclaimed that "the story of the Empire’s ruin is simple and obvious;and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed,we should rather be surprised that it lasted so long".In addition, the author has managed to examine almost every aspect of the Roman life under the tens-perhaps-hundreds- of emperors.The period between the second and fifth century was one of extreme economic crises, religious strife, plagues and endless wars.There was a succession of earthquakes in the fifth century which spread devastation throughout the Eastern Empire.Consider this:in sixty years there were more than sixty emperors! Sometimes one brother would kill the other in order to ascend to the throne.This book also examines at length the relations between the Empire and the Sassanid Persians.Towards the end,Mr.Goldsworthy warns us about making analogies with the Romans when talking about the demise of other Empires or superpowers, such as the USA.For example, he writes(on p.419) that "theses days,countries and governments do not face enemies likely to overthrow them by military force."And then(p.421):"Like the Romans,the bodies involved are usually just too big to come to immediate and final collapse". When speaking about the collapse of superpowers,such as the USA,one should be extremely careful in pronouncing their downfall, because such a process in not only uncertain, but also extremely slow and takes a very long time.However, no superpower is guaranteed its supremacy and this is true of modern America as well as it was of Rome.In short, this opus will be a delight to read for those who want an informative , entertaining and interesting read about a fascinating and controversial topic-all this in less than 500 pages.

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