

DID ROME ACTUALLY FALL? DOES MEDIEVAL EUROPE DESERVE THE NAME THE "DARK AGE"?

-ANNOTATE FOR THE ARGUMENT OF THE FALL OF ROME (PUT DOWN ARGUMENT A BOTTOM OF EACH DOCUMENT).

-ANNOTATE FOR EVIDENCE OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE REPRESENTING A DARK AGE

-ANNOTATE FOR EVIDENCE THAT CHALLENGES MEDIEVAL EUROPE REPRESENTING A DARK AGE



THEMATIC AREA: History and Philosophy of Science

There was nothing dark about the Dark Ages: The Medieval Origins of Science

Benjamin M Vallejo Jr PhD

Science and Society Program, College of Science, University of the Philippines

"There was time between the waning age of enchantment and the dawning age of logic when dragons flew the skies, free and unencumbered. Look down there Gorbash, my friend. On the top of the earth below us, confusion and chaos reign. All mankind is facing an epic choice: a world of magic or a world of science. Which will it be?" – The green wizard Carolinus in Peter Dickinson's "The Flight of Dragons (1982)

1. INTRODUCTION

Was the Medieval Europe really "Dark"?

The above epigraph comes from the 1982 film adaptation of fantasy writer Peter Dickinson books "*The Flight of Dragons*" and the "*Dragon and the George*". Both novels have a European medieval context but as a fantasy, included wizards, magicians, dragons and evil spells, things that our postmodern world consigns to fantasy. Much later in the first decade of the 21st century, JRR Tolkien's magnum opus "*The Lord of the Rings*" trilogy was adapted for film. Tolkien's novels written in the inter world war period of the 20th century are in the realm of fantasy and as such has attracted a huge fan base. However whether one reads Tolkien or Dickinson or even CS Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* these books have a common allegorical theme and that is a change of worldview from a secure medieval and fantastical world to a world dominated by science and reason. But was the change of worldview abrupt as what the fantasists would like to to believe or was it more of a continuum of changes?

* It is a popularly accepted that the classical Western civilizations, Greece and Rome contributed to much of what is now the modern world. Our writing system, legal system, system of governance, democracy, science, medicine civil works and engineering, architectural forms among others has their roots in the classical civilizations. However when the Vandals finally conquered the Western Roman Empire and Rome fell in 476 when Romulus Augustus, the last Roman Emperor was deposed by Odoacer, a Germanic chieftain. This signalled the end of the classical period in Western history. And with it all learning and scholarship, did it really?

* The consensus of many historians was the Middle or Medieval Age began after 395, when the Roman Empire was last a unified entity. After 395, the Roman Empire was split into two halves, with the Western Empire centered at Rome and the Eastern Empire of Byzantium centered in

* Constantinople. The decline of the Empire happened soon after but this was not a sudden "fall" as popularly imagined but a 300 year long decline. Roman institutions of state declined followed by political authority and massive de-urbanization. This meant that the social, political organization of the city, which characterized Roman living unravelled and Europeans began to live once more in villages. Rome started as a village and eventually reverted to being as one. Thus it will not surprise anyone that the famous Roman engineering works were ruined, the magnificent structures, temples, fora and aqueducts were just used as a source of stone. However we have to remember that this was only true for the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Empire or Byzantium continued to prosper and this survived until 1454 when Constantinople the capital of Byzantium was defeated by the Muslim Turks.

* In the West, the period between 395 and 1000 is known as the Early Middle Ages or the "Dark Ages" since it is popularly believed that very few literary, artistic and scientific output have survived from this period. It is also in this period that the Roman Catholic Church became the sole political and social authority, filling that which was once occupied by Rome. In doing so the Church practically guaranteed social cohesion, provided health services since the monks preserved classical medical knowledge, and kept classical learning alive in its monasteries and abbeys. The Church preserved literacy among its clergy. This is important since Christianity most specifically Catholicism is considered following St Augustine's dictum as a "religion of the Book". Christians according to St Augustine "must be literate". While other bishops thought otherwise and that Catholics must just be content to listen to their priests and not read, St Augustine won the argument. Catholics if they want to go to heaven must read.

* The popular notion is that there was no science during this period and the period that followed or the High Middle Ages, while there was a resurgence of learning, this was theology and philosophy and not science as we know it today. This is a notion propagated by misinformed historians working from secondary sources. The truth is far different. The medieval period for all purposes **laid down the foundations of modern science. Much of these foundation lay on the idea of preserving knowledge through the written record via books.** And the spirit of invention never died even in the so called "Dark Ages". Metallurgy reached a high point in the early middle ages. Eyeglasses were invented soon after. The first mechanical clocks were invented in England. The Medievals also understood the principles of engineering statics magnificently demonstrated in the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe which still stand 800 years after they were constructed.

In the papacies of John Paul II (1979-2005) and Benedict XVI (2005-2013), there has been a renewed interest in studying the role of Islam in translating and transmitting mathematical and scientific knowledge from the Greek and Roman eras to the Medieval period. This was brought upon by the Catholic Church's renewed program of dialogue with non Christian religions. The contribution of Islam to science is bigger than what was previously believed.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Team: _____

Week 26 [Friday]

Education is Freedom

**What is Vallejo's argument around the Fall of Rome?

Does Vallejo believe the Medieval Europe should be the Dark Ages? Explain with evidence.

Document 2

Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. (B. Bury, ed.) London. Methuen, 1898, IV, 161-63; VII, 308.

The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long . . . The victorious legions, who, in distant wars, acquired the vices of strangers and mercenaries, first oppressed the freedom of the republic . . . The emperors, anxious for their personal safety and the public peace, were reduced to the base expedient of corrupting the discipline which rendered them formidable to the enemy; . . . the vigor of the military government was relaxed and finally dissolved by the partial institutions of Constantine [who divided the empire into an eastern and a western section]; and the Roman world was overwhelmed by a deluge of barbarians

As the happiness of a *future* life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal that the introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity [faint-heartedness]; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the demands of charity and devotion; and the soldiers' pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity [monks and nuns] . . . the Church, and even the State, were distracted by religious factions, whose conflicts were sometimes bloody and always implacable [unforgiving]; . . . the Roman world was oppressed by a new species of tyranny; and the persecuted sects became the secret enemies of their country. . . . The sacred indolence [laziness] of the monks was devoutly embraced by a servile and effeminate age . . . the decline of the Roman empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine to Christianity.

Gibbon's Argument:

Document 3

Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*. Of the Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1957, 1, 532-34, 541.

Every reader of a volume devoted to the Roman Empire will expect the author to express his opinion on what is generally, since Gibbon, called the decline and fall of the Roman Empire . . . In the sphere of politics we witness a gradual barbarization of the Empire from within, especially in the West. The foreign, German, elements play the leading part both in the government and in the army, and settling in masses, displace the Roman population . . . the ruling classes were replaced . . . by Germans.

The cities . . . gradually decayed, and the majority of them practically disappeared from the face of the earth. Only small islands of civilized life are left, . . . but . . . are gradually swallowed up by the advancing tide of barbarism. Another aspect . . . is the development of a new mentality among the masses of the population. It was the mentality of the lower classes, based exclusively on religion (Christianity) and not only indifferent but hostile to the intellectual achievements of the higher classes.

Rostovtzeff's Argument:

Hans Zinsser, Rats, Lice and History. Atlantic-Little, Brown and Co. 1963 100-03. Document 4

The problem has been dealt with from every conceivable angle, for there is no greater historic puzzle than that of the disappearance of the ancient civilization — a disappearance so complete that not a spark from its embers shone through the barbaric darkness of several hundred years. Historians have analyzed the causes according to the prejudices of their own varieties of erudition [learning] . . . [But most of them have] failed to include any consideration of the calamitous epidemics (diseases) which — sweeping the Roman world again and again during its most turbulent political periods — must have exerted a material, if not a decisive influence upon the final outcome. We believe that a simple survey of the frequency, extent, and violence of the pestilences to which Roman Europe and Asia were subjected, from the year one to the final barbarian triumph, will convince the unprejudiced that these calamities must be interpolated in any appraisal other causes that wore down the power of the greatest state the world has known. A concentration of large populations in cities, free communication with all other parts of the world. . . , constant and extensive military activity involving the mobilization of armies in camps, and the movement of large forces back and forth from all corners of the world these alone are conditions which inevitably determine the outbreak of epidemic disease. And against such outbreaks there was absolutely no defense available at the time. Pestilences encountered no obstacles. They were free to sweep across the entire world. As soon as a state ceases to be mainly agricultural, sanitary knowledge becomes indispensable for its maintenance.

Zinzer's Argument:

***Document 5**

Arther Ferrill, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 1986.

In fact the Roman Empire of the West did fall. Not every aspect of the life of Roman subjects was changed by that, but the fall of Rome as a political entity was one of the major events of the history of Western man. It will simply not do to call that fall a myth or to ignore its historical significance merely by focusing on those aspects of Roman life that survived the fall in one form or another. At the opening of the fifth century a massive army, perhaps more than 200,000 strong, stood at the service of the Western emperor and his generals. The destruction of Roman military power in the fifth century was the obvious cause of the collapse of Roman government in the West.

Ferrill's Argument:

Name: _____ Date: _____ Team: _____

Week 26 [Friday]

Education is Freedom

***Document 6**

Finley Hooper, Roman Realities, 1967.

The year was 476. For those who demand to know the date Rome fell, that is it. Others will realize that the fall of Rome was not an event but a process. Or, to put it another way, there was no fall at all — ancient Roman civilization simply became something else, which is called medieval. (It evolved into another civilization, that of the Middle Ages in Western Europe.)

Hooper's Argument:

****Document 7- Perkins Argument**

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRYAN WARD-PERKINS ON THE FALL OF ROME

Conducted by Donald A. Yerxa

"AT THE HOUR OF MIDNIGHT THE SALERIAN GATE WAS silently opened, and the inhabitants were awakened by the tremendous sound of the Gothic trumpet. Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the Imperial city, which had subdued and civilized so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia." The emotion and drama that flowed so eloquently from Edward Gibbons's pen has been largely drained from our contemporary historical imagination. Recent scholar-

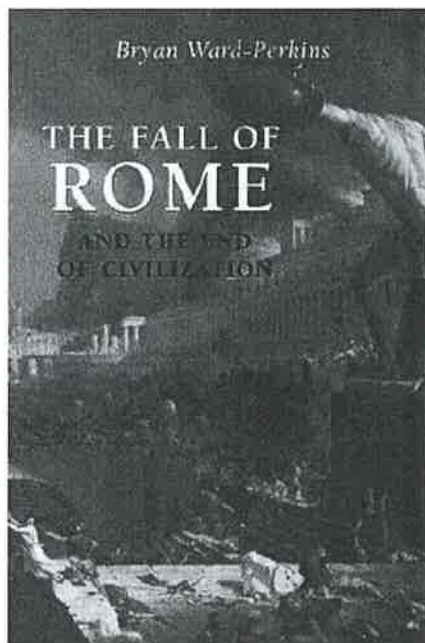
*ship has drastically transformed the subject that fascinated students of history for centuries, and Oxford historian Bryan Ward-Perkins fears that something important is being lost. Historically Speaking editor Donald Yerxa asked Ward-Perkins to speak to some of his concerns, developed more fully in Ward-Perkins's *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2005), winner of the 2006 Hessel-Tiltman Prize for History:*

Donald Yerxa: In your book you mention that there has been a "sea change in the language used to describe post-Roman times." How has the language changed?

Bryan Ward-Perkins: There has been a very strong tendency recently—particularly, but not exclusively, among scholars working in the U.S.—to play down any unpleasantness at the end of the Roman Empire and any negative effects of the end of Roman power. Until quite recently scholars were happy that the settlement of the Germanic peoples in the 5th-century West was the result of violent invasion and viewed the next few centuries as a "Dark Age" marked by the collapse of Roman civilization. Currently the use of such negative language is seen as very old-fashioned: "decline," "crisis," and "Dark Age" have disappeared from the titles of academic books, conferences, and university courses. They have been replaced by neutral words like "transformation" and "transition." For instance, a recent, massive European research project on the 4th to 9th centuries A.D. was entitled "The Transformation of the Roman World," as if Rome never really came to an end, but just changed into something different but entirely equal.

Yerxa: What has happened to the Roman Empire's dissolution by "hostile 'waves' of Germanic peoples," dare I say "barbarians"?

Ward-Perkins: Nowadays, what was once seen as invasion is often interpreted as a process of "accommodation," entered into willingly by Roman hosts. The argument runs that the Romans got tired of fighting the bar-



barians, and decided to let many of them into the empire, in order to use them to defend it against further invaders. The former poachers became the gamekeepers.

Yerxa: How has the new periodization scheme of "Late Antiquity" changed historians' thinking about the fall of Rome?

Ward-Perkins: A groundbreaking book published in 1971, Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*, identified a cultural period (characterized primarily by the rise of two new monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, and the codification of a third, Judaism), stretching from the 3rd century right

through to the 8th century and even beyond. This periodization, which is now widely followed, deliberately ignores the 5th-century collapse of Roman power in the West and the 7th-century loss of most of the Eastern (or Byzantine) Empire to the Arabs, events that conventionally were seen as heralding "dark ages" in both areas. Rather than viewing the 5th to 7th centuries as a time of crisis and rupture, historians of "Late Antiquity" see it as a period of continuous cultural growth.

Yerxa: In what ways do you believe that the current view is flawed?

Ward-Perkins: The 5th century is portrayed as a time of peaceful accommodation. It is true that the Germanic invaders wanted reasonable relations with their Roman subjects (who were always in a massive numerical majority) and with the remnants of independent Roman power. Consequently, they were very happy to enter treaty arrangements with the empire, and generally treated their own Roman subjects reasonably well. But the evidence is unequivocal that most of the empire's territory was taken over by Germanic rulers, either by force, or, at best, through the threat of force. This was not one of those fortunate periods in which to be alive.

Yerxa: You contend that treatments of the cultural accommodation between invader and invaded often read like accounts of "a tea party at a Roman vicarage."

Ward-Perkins: While Germanic invaders and native Roman could sit down together and coexist, much recent scholarship makes the whole process far too genteel, as if the new

settlers knocked politely at the door and were shown to an empty chair. The reality is that the invaders seized most of the power and much of the land of the empire. Roman landed families remained, and many Romans rose high in the service of the new masters. But the unavoidable truth is that by the end of the 5th century an entirely new Germanic aristocracy had been established, whose *raison d'être* was its military might. This establishment was achieved by the dispossession on a massive scale of Roman landowners.

Yerxa: Is there evidence that a civilization collapsed when Rome fell?

Ward-Perkins: This is an area where historians seem to be decidedly myopic. In looking closely at their texts, they have failed to notice that in every single area of the empire (except perhaps the Levantine provinces conquered by the Arabs) there was an extraordinary fall in what archaeologists term "material culture." The scale and quality of buildings, even of churches, shrank dramatically—so that, for instance, tiled roofs, which were common in Roman times even in a peasant context, became a great rarity and luxury. In the 6th- and 7th-century West the vast majority of people lived in tiny houses with beaten earth floors, drafty wooden walls, and insect-infested thatch roofs; whereas, in Roman times, people from the same level of society might well have enjoyed the comfort of solid brick or stone floors, mortared walls, and tiled roofs. This was a change that affected not only the aristocracy, but also huge numbers of people in the middling and lower levels of society who in Roman times had had ready access to high-quality goods.

Yerxa: You discuss evidence from graffiti, coins, roof tiles, and especially pottery, whereas scholars from the Late Antiquity school point to religious texts. Why is it important to pay attention to material culture and economic history?

Ward-Perkins: However elevated our thoughts, we all live in a sophisticated material world, supported by a complex economy, and we all enjoy the convenience and comfort of high-quality goods (whether clothes, washing machines, or the latest laptop and Internet connection). So it seems very obvious to me that material change (and there was dramatic material change at the end of the Roman Empire) is well worthy of our attention. Even the saints were affected by material changes in this period: the new churches constructed in

the later 6th- and 7th-century West, in places like Rome and Visigothic Spain, are tiny in comparison to those of the 4th century or of the later Middle Ages.

I also believe—and this seems obvious from modern experience—that sophistication in intellectual life generally requires solid economic underpinning. In my book I attempt to show this by focusing on the evidence of graf-



View of Rome's skyline near the Tiber River, ca. 1900. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-123704].

fiti (which were very common in Roman times, but virtually disappeared thereafter) in order to demonstrate that basic intellectual skills—reading and writing—suffered as dramatic a downturn with the fall of Rome as did the availability of high-quality material goods.

Yerxa: Why is Roman pottery such a revealing source?

Ward-Perkins: The study of pottery isn't everybody's taste, but (as a couple of reviewers have independently said of my book) it reveals "surprisingly interesting" results. Pottery was a basic item that played a central role in the storage, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food. And broken potsherds, which can often be both dated and provenanced, survive remarkably well in the soil. (They are discovered in the hundreds of thousands on archaeological sites in the Mediterranean.) This means that we can

reconstruct with considerable accuracy changing patterns of production, distribution, and consumption of pottery vessels. The picture that emerges shows that in the Roman period potting was highly sophisticated, and that good-quality pots reached deep into society. It was, for instance, quite usual for a 3rd-century peasant in upland central Italy to eat off a fine pottery bowl manufactured in North Africa. Virtually all this remarkable sophistication disappeared in the post-Roman period.

Other products do not survive as well in the soil as potsherds or cannot be attributed with such confidence to particular places or centuries of manufacture. But it is, I believe, obvious that the picture provided by pottery—of Roman sophistication, followed by almost total collapse—can be extended to other goods, where the evidence survives much less well, such as textiles, metal tools, and specialized food products. Pottery offers a detailed snapshot of the wider economy.

Yerxa: What is fueling the revisionist views of the Late Antiquity school?

Ward-Perkins: There are probably a number of different forces at work. Scholarship does tend to progress by a process of revision and counter-revision. It was probably time that gloomy views of the end of Rome were tested; and now, perhaps, it is time to return to them. This game of scholarly Ping-Pong might seem a little pointless, but I don't think so, because each time the ball is lobbed back over the net it lands in a slightly different place and has always acquired some of its flight from the preceding debate. For instance, although I could be termed a counter-revisionist (or a "neo-con" as one reviewer put it), I have no problem in recognizing that Late Antiquity has opened up an extraordinarily fertile field of debate, and that, without it, my own thinking would never have gone in the directions it has.

A central underlying reason for the current revisionist view must be the fact that both "empires" and "civilizations" have gone out of fashion, undermining earlier assumptions that the Roman Empire was a high point of "civilization." In the modern postcolonial world the very concept of "civilizations" has virtually disappeared and been replaced by that of "cultures," which are seen as being all on a level. In this perspective, post-Roman "culture" is necessarily the equal of Roman "culture."

Furthermore, some Europeans seem to have found the idea of the Germanic peoples being "accommodated" into the Roman world attractive—it provides a happier vision of

Europe's troubled past. It replaces a story of strife between Germanic and Latin peoples with one of peaceful coexistence and common enterprise, which is much more in keeping with the current ideals of the European Union.

Finally, I suspect that my own very materialistic and economic focus went out of fashion toward the end of the 20th century, in part because of the demise of communism, and with it Marxist theory. In the 1960s economic history enjoyed a central position in historical study because it was so central to Marxist thinking. But, unfortunately, this meant it went down with the ship of communism. In my opinion, for the reasons I have given above, I think it is high time for economic history once again to be a central topic of historical debate and of university curricula.

Yerxa: Is there a case to be made that the currently popular view of a Late Antiquity "transition" presents something of a corrective to earlier views?

Ward-Perkins: There is no doubt at all that Late Antiquity has opened up new and very interesting areas of research, both geographically and thematically. Downplaying the centrality of the Roman Empire and of Greco-Roman culture, has allowed local cultures (expressed in languages like Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Irish) to take center stage and has brought to the fore some very "unclassical," but fascinating, heroes of the past, like the Stylite saints of 5th- and 6th-century Syria.

Yerxa: What do you think of the project of relocating the center of the 4th-8th-century Mediterranean world eastward to Egypt, the Levant, and Persia?

Ward-Perkins: I am a historian of the West, and I don't have the linguistic knowledge to get seriously involved in the East. But I do teach Eastern history at an undergraduate level and find it absorbing. The entire Byzantine world was a flourishing region into at least the 6th century; and the 7th century, of course, spawned Islam and the civilization of the Umayyads. For Egypt, the Levant, and Persia, a long Late Antiquity probably works well—for instance, the Great Mosque at Damascus, with its considerable size, basilical plan, and marble decoration and mosaics, can quite reasonably be seen as a "late antique" building. It is very important—for modern-day reasons—that we seriously consider the possibility that it was the Islamic Levant, and not the West or Byzantium, that was the true heir to the sophisticated economy and culture of antiquity.

My complaint is that a very long Late Antiquity, which can fit the Levant, is also being exported westward, where it really doesn't fit. The 5th-century West and the 7th-century Byzantine worlds were characterized by political, military, and economic crises on a scale that cannot, and should not, be ignored.

Yerxa: Have the newer interpretations corrected the naive view that the fall of Rome was an affair between two great forces—Rome and the barbarians?

Ward-Perkins: As I have said, I have little patience with the view that the barbarians were peacefully "accommodated" into the West, and this same point has recently also been argued, with considerably more expertise, by Peter Heather in his *Fall of the Roman Empire* (also published by Oxford University Press). But it is true that the view prevalent immediately after the Second World War—that all Germanic invaders were solely destructive and brutal—needed some adjustment. Romans were as often at war among themselves as they were with the Germanic invaders. And the latter were often happy to ally with Roman forces against other Germanic tribes. This was not a titanic battle between rival and monolithic ideologies, but a very messy and confused affair, which left considerable scope for alliances between Romans and "barbarians." Indeed, much of the personnel of the Roman army, including its high command, consisted of Germanic tribesmen.

Yerxa: What brought you to this subject?

Ward-Perkins: I was born in Rome, and my father was a classical archaeologist with a particular interest in the technological skill that the Romans deployed in their buildings. For some fifteen years, I worked every summer as a field archaeologist in Italy, with a special interest in the post-Roman period (which I was also researching from written sources). It was blindingly obvious to me, working on an archaeological site like ancient Luna—where all the great Roman buildings were abandoned and torn down in the 4th and 5th centuries, to be replaced by very simple wooden houses—that something very dramatic happened at the end of the Roman world, something which can reasonably be called the "end of a civilization."

Yerxa: We cannot have a conversation about the fall of Rome without my posing the classic questions to you: Why did Rome

fall? Could its decline have been reversed? And might we draw any lessons from the collapse of the Roman Empire?

Ward-Perkins: I believe the Western Empire was brought down by a specific military crisis—Germanic invasion, made more serious by the arrival in the West of an Asiatic people, the Huns, and exacerbated by civil wars within the empire—rather than by any irreversible internal decline. The Eastern Empire was then very nearly destroyed some two centuries later by the rise of Arab Islamic power. Probably with a bit of good luck and perhaps some better leadership both crises could have been reversed (as had happened in the 3rd century, when the whole empire was saved from a seemingly fatal spiral of invasion and civil war). But all great powers (so far) have at some point or another declined, or been brought low, so it is reasonable to assume that Roman power would not have gone on forever!

What is so striking about the fall of Rome is the collapse of material sophistication that ensued. This happened, I believe, precisely because the Roman world was not entirely dissimilar to our own: complex economies are very fragile because they rely on hugely sophisticated networks of production and distribution. If these are seriously disrupted, widely and over a long period of time, the entire house of cards can collapse. Although I have a great deal of respect for the new Late Antiquity, it does seriously worry me that it smoothes over the very real crisis that happened at the end of the Roman world. The Romans, like us, enjoyed the fruits of a complex economy, both material and intellectual. And like us, they assumed their world would go on forever. They were wrong, and we would be wise to remember this. The main lesson I think we should learn from the collapse of the Roman Empire and of ancient civilization is not some specific panacea that can preserve our civilization forever (since modern circumstances and the threats to our well being are ever-changing), but a realization of how insecure, and probably transient, our own achievements are—and, from this, a degree of humility.

