



The Ruin of the Roman Empire: A New History

By James J. O'Donnell



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The Ruin of the Roman Empire by James J. O'Donnell is a “vigorous” (*Kirkus Reviews*) and “richly layered” (*Publishers Weekly*) history of Rome’s fall. Renowned historian and author of *Augustine*, O'Donnell revisits this ancient tale in a fresh way, bringing home its sometimes painful relevance to today’s political issues.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The Roman empire was not invaded by barbarians in the fifth century, says classical historian O'Donnell. Rather, these tribes—Visigoths, Vandals and others—were refugees who crossed into the empire in search of a place to settle. These migrants were turned into enemies by Rome. O'Donnell (*Augustine*), former provost of Georgetown, supports this controversial thesis by drawing on primary sources to analyze the geopolitical errors that led to Rome's fall. Emperor Theodoric, he says, had preserved social order and prosperity among the various peoples of the vast empire. But seven years later, Justinian squandered that good order. He failed to make peace with Persia in the east by not emphasizing a common interest of trade; he failed to establish good relations with the kings of the western Mediterranean and to develop his own homeland, the Balkans; finally, by banning certain Christian sects, he alienated some border regions and sowed the seeds of rebellion. These failures not only divided the empire, they made it vulnerable to attack from peoples that had once been friends. O'Donnell's richly layered book provides significant glimpses into the many factors that leveled a mighty empire. 20 illus. and maps. (*Sept.*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Traditional histories of the “decline and fall” of the Roman Empire in the west portray a centuries-long decline, ending in that final overthrow of the last western emperor in AD 476. The Eastern, or Byzantine, Empire, endured until the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks, in 1453. Historian O'Donnell presents a more nuanced and probably more accurate view in an engrossing and wonderfully descriptive portrait of late antiquity. O'Donnell's focus is the sixth century, when the reimposition of imperial control over lost territory in Italy and the west was still feasible. As O'Donnell illustrates, the city of Rome had long ceased to be the center of the empire; commercial hubs such as Alexandria and other prosperous eastern cities were more influential. It was the failure of the elites of this civilization, particularly the emperor Justinian, that made the loss of western territories irrevocable. As he explores his thesis, O'Donnell provides a sweeping panorama that includes diverse Christian sects, surprisingly civilized barbarians, and ordinary humans striving to survive in an unstable world. --Jay Freeman

Review

“O'Donnell's richly layered book provides significant glimpses into the many factors that leveled a mighty empire.” (Publishers Weekly)

“A vigorous history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“An exotic and instructive tale, told with life, learning and just the right measure of laughter on every page. O'Donnell combines a historian's mastery of substance with a born storyteller's sense of style to create a magnificent work of art. Perfect for history-lovers and admirers of great writing alike.” (Madeleine K. Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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