

H-Net Reviews

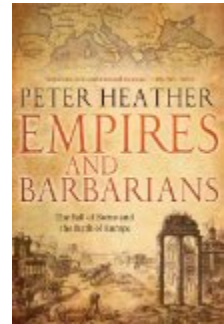
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Heather. *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2012. 752 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-989226-6.

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Commissioned by Seth Offebach



Peter Heather's compendium *Empires and Barbarians* is an impressive work in its scope, ambition, and sheer size. At 734 pages, this is a serious academic work, yet its tone and language remain admirably accessible and engaging for the interested, if uninitiated, general audience. *Empires and Barbarians'* subject is the events occurring in Europe after the third-century crisis in the Roman Empire. This is not an easy subject to cover. There are fewer primary sources than for the imperial period and there are a lot of different and not-well-understood characters and nations entering the narrative. The Huns, Vandals, and Visigoths are well known by reputation but Heather deals with the Suevi and the Taifali as well. Likewise, Attila the Hun is notorious for his exploits but fewer people will know the deeds of Radagaisus and Fritigern. Heather's ability to tell an engaging story of the famous and the forgotten is admirable. Heather also deserves credit for wading into a subject matter already covered by the likes of Edward Gibbon. In *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire's* six volumes (1776-88) Gibbon discusses Rome from Marcus Aurilius to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. Heather's work is less ambitious, nesting within that period, and adding modern additions, such as archeology, genetics, and linguistics, for the modern audience. This will make a good reference book for people interested in the after-Rome-not-quite-the-Middle-Ages period of European history.

Heather's work will also fit nicely next to Gibbon's masterwork. The academic audience will find it a well-written and thoroughly documented reference book. It modernizes Gibbon by having less flourish but more science and modern theory. Medieval historians will find it a useful addition as a general text of the period. It covers all the parts of Europe, all the major migrations, and

Heather has a special focus on the future Russian areas of Europe. It gives the literature a fresh perspective by concentrating on the Slavic world though, without, denying the successes of the future West. As a reference book it is hampered by a poor index which leaves out major figures and events that are mentioned in the text. There's no mention of Saints Cyril and Methodius, who brought Orthodoxy and an alphabet to the Slavic world; nor any mention of Princess Olga, who converted the Kievan Rus to Orthodoxy after witnessing mass in the Hagia Sophia. Yet all are mentioned in the text. A book this large and with such a sweeping scope requires an overly detailed index—and unfortunately this version does not contain one.

Heather's update to the mountainous literature concerning the fall of Rome is to turn the tables on the narrative. Most works, like Gibbon's, deal with the fall of Rome from the Roman perspective and try to explain the melancholy tale of greatness turned to rust and ash. It is the sad history of the losers and the defeated; one of the few places in historiography where the defeated perspective dominates the narrative. It makes sense since the Romans were the literate peoples and the barbarians were illiterate, unable to tell the tale of their success to future generations. The survival of the Christian church as a literate institution also assured that barbarian success was portrayed in apocalyptic terms by the likes of St. Ambrose and Hydatius.

Heather, on the other hand, takes the perspective of the winners—the illiterate, reputedly uncivilized, pagans who overwhelmed the Roman defenses, squatted on the Roman land, and absorbed Mediterranean culture while imparting their own Germanic, Slavic, and Scandinavian

customs to Europe—creating, Heather argues, the Middle Ages and modern Europe along the way.

Heather divides the book roughly into three parts. In the first part (approximately the first three chapters) he sets up the situation concerning the late Roman world by describing the various tribes, their situations, and their motivations before the migrations into the Roman Empire. He also describes the larger economic and political unit he calls “barbarian” Europe—stating that the word is meant to describe the Europe separate from Mediterranean Europe (the Greco-Roman world) and is not a statement of moral value and inferiority (p. xiv). He also uses “barbarian” Europe as a way of describing a world encompassing more than just the Germanic-speaking peoples of Europe who had connections to the Roman world (including the Goths and, most importantly for Heather, the Slavs). Heather’s argument is that this was a well-connected and civilized world simply outside of, but not apart from, Mediterranean culture. He also shows that far from being unsophisticated the tribes were able to raise professional retinues, collect taxes, and create laws. Heather uses the modern concept of globalization to describe the interconnectedness of the barbarian and Mediterranean worlds.

The second part discusses the migration of peoples into new zones—the Germans and Goths enter into western Europe, the Huns carve out a piece of central Europe for a time, and eastern Europe is taken over by the Slavic peoples who began to displace several older peoples from the lands between the Dneiper and the Oder Rivers. Heather charts how the act of migration created these larger units that protected their inhabitants from and enabled them to negotiate with Rome. Heather shows a period of Europe in flux; the passing of one age but not yet the formation of the next. He describes a Europe in the act of becoming, a story that is often overlooked, as Heather points out, in favor of the national origin myths which emphasize, mistakenly, ancient continuity and unity.

Heather also discusses the coalescence and expansion of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon civilizations—a brief respite before the smashing hammer of the Viking invasions and migrations. He seems to have an affinity for the rise of Slavic Europe, which is a topic not normally detailed in the usual West-centric historiography. His affinity for Slavic Europe, and his detail work on its rise and importance, is impressive but makes the lack of a Byzantine narrative puzzling. Saints Cyril and Methodius are passed over with barely a mention, Princess Olga’s con-

version is treated as a minor event, and I did not read any mention of the Battle of Klinedon or the conversion of the Bulgars. It is surprising that the Slavic achievements are treated as separate from the larger Christian-Roman-Greek world. In fairness, Heather does deal with the decline of East Rome after Justinian to explain why a Roman imperial recovery (political, cultural, and economic) turned out to be quixotic, yet never relates the Byzantine cultural importance during the Macedonian dynastic period (867-1056 CE). The Byzantine impact on the Slavic world is a surprising omission for such a detailed work.

The final section is the settling of European culture after the migrations. In this section Heather deals with the cultural and political connections of the new hybrid societies, which are both barbarian and Mediterranean. For Heather these connections are exemplified in the Viking trade networks which Heather describes as the “first European Union” for their depth, breadth, and importance (p. 515). Labor and goods flowed from northern Europe and manufactured and luxury goods came in from the Byzantine and Arab world. In this section, Heather discusses the beginnings of state formation, national kings, imperial pretensions, and the spread of a core European culture to periphery areas. This is the “Birth of Europe” section of the subtitle. This is the chapter where the reader begins to see references to the Carolingians, the Ottonians, Hungary, Poland, Cnut, and other states and persons with long, well-known futures ahead of them. This section had the feeling of an astronomy metaphor, the creation of planets from the coalescing of dust and rock and debris; out of the movement of many separate parts comes the union of something larger and more enduring. In fact, Heather’s last chapter is an allusion to Isaac Newton’s third law of motion. Heather argues that imperial action has an opposite reaction among periphery states—thus creating the forces of future imperial demise and giving warning to all present and future empires who believe they are designed to last forever.

Heather tells a complicated story well and in a way that a general audience will be able to understand and enjoy. He makes allusions to famous historical events in other centuries in order to help present his position to the audience—which people will find helpful. There is a large section of detailed maps in the back and chapters are broken down into subchapters so that the reader will not worry about advancing through the 700-page tome. Heather makes an important addition to the literature of the late Roman world/early Middle Ages. This work emphasizes depth and accessibility instead of cutting-edge theoretical arguments. I have come across some of the

positions before in other venues and works (for instance, that the Romans created their own enemies by forcing the Germanic tribes to organize) but not in so complete and detailed a manner. This work will be a welcome addition to any early medieval collection.

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