

A Reply to Michael Whitby's “Army and Society in the Late Roman World: A Context for Decline”

By Oliver Bartle



Image 1: Flavius Stilicho.
Source: Wikipedia (Accessed
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Basic overview

- Key argument: the Roman army's decline was not evidence of a decline in ability, or the involvement of Barbarian forces, rather the collapse of the economy, Imperial competence, trust in the system and the overall organisational system of the Empire.
- The East: centralised and had the economically valuable provinces so was able to hold things together so Imperial authority survived
- The West: lack of centralisation and financial collapse led to a downward spiral of decline and eventually the entire Imperial system collapsed
- The focus of this presentation is on the subchapters on Loyalty and Christianity

Reply to the General Argument

Agree with Author

- There is evidence that if competently led the Roman army could hold its own against its foreign rivals (Wood, 2000)
- The fact that, at least in the early days, generals like Stilicho and Aetius fought loyally for Rome, in spite of their Germanic decent, (Norwich, 1990) undermines the Barbarians being responsible for the fall
- Correct that the grain and gold producing provinces of Egypt, Syria and Anatolia helped the East survive (Hopkins, 1980)

Things that are missing/ disagree

- It fails to take account of the effects of near continuous civil wars after the Third Century Crisis (Lee, 1998)
- Ignores the impact of the loss of the province of Africa to the Vandals on the decline of the Western Empire (Heather, 2005)

Where source sits in scholarly debate

- Different schools of debate as to the collapse of the Roman army
- Barbarians in the army bear chief responsibility (Berg, 2010, Liebeschuetz, 1990)
- Economic collapse (Hopkins, 1980; Liebeschuetz, 1990)
- Population decline theory (McGeachy Jr., 1957)
- Christianity caused a decline in the army (Liebeschuetz, 1990)
- Collapse of trust in the Roman state by people and army (Grant, 1976)
- Armies attempts to usurp power, undermine system (Lee, 1998; Grant, 1976)
- Whitby argues that in actual fighting terms there was not a decline in the army, (Isaac, 1990) however due to external circumstances, especially economic and lack of trust in the Roman state by army and people, caused the downfall and collapse of army organisation system

Summary of the Loyalty Subchapter

- Recruitment problems and reliance on non-Romans sign of collapse of Roman loyalty to the state
- Main reasons: Citizenship no longer being a privilege, excessive taxation and distant Emperors
- Collapse of the special relations between provincial elites and army with the emperor set up by Diocletian and Constantine
- East: centralised all sources of power in Constantinople - kept system working
- West: divided sources of power between Rome, Ravenna and myriad others, led to breakdown of system
- Breakdown of special connection between Emperor and army
- East: peace with Persia, centralization and control of the economically powerful provinces ensured survival
- West: military commanders (of German or partial German ethnicity) seized power from the emperor - financial collapse meant army could not operate effectively

Reply to Loyalty section

Agreement with Author

- The universal citizenship decree meant citizenship no longer a privilege (Wesch-Klein, 2007)
- Evidence of the collapse of relationship between army and emperor shown in the increase of secessionist provinces and rebellions after Adrianople (Whitby, 2000; Lee, 1998)

What is missing/ disagree

- Ignores the open animosity between the Eastern and Western Theodosian lines (Grant, 1976)
- Underplays why the Barbarian troops eventually turned on Rome, only mentions the financial issues. This meant Roman Empire could not pay them. (Whitby, 2007) Other issues include religion (Liebeschuetz, 1990) and betrayals by earlier Roman Emperors (Goldsworthy, 2010)

Summary of the Christianity Subchapter

- Traditional argument: conversion to Christianity a cause of Rome's military decline due to pacifist moral system and competition with military for resources
- Old Testament has some sections that defend military service
- Did not change Roman military other than replacing traditional oath of allegiance
- Wealth of church often used to fund military campaigns
- Created a sense of unity amongst Roman citizens
- East: managed to make Emperor a crucial figure in the church hierarchy
- West: never able to gain the same control over church

Reply to Christianity section

Agree with author

- The bible is full of war and conflict, (Manning, 2016) so unlikely to dampen Rome's warlike spirit, indeed many early pagan emperors did not go to war (Goldsworthy, 2016)
- Christianity on the whole was a unifying factor nor a dividing factor (Norwich, 1990)
- He is also correct that the Western Empire failed to gain control over the church, as is evidenced by the Eastern Romans failure to control Western Church after reconquest (Norwich, 1990; Norwich, 2012)

What is missing/ disagree

- Fails to account for laws against Pagans and Heretics (especially Arianism) that prevented them by law from holding positions of power (Liebeschuetz, 1990; Grant, 1976)
- Ignores completely the Barbarian troops Arian Christian beliefs (Heather, 1994) and how this could affect relations with Rome, especially as they dominated the army (Wickham, 2010)

Conclusion

- Argument is logical and well argued on the whole, could go into more detail in some areas
- Covers the Roman people's decline in loyalty, but not collapse of trust between two halves of Empire and Germans
- Fails completely to discuss religious differences between Rome and the Barbarians

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