ROME FALLS

As historical turning points go, at least from a western European perspective, the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is a pretty big one.

It's an idea that hasn't gone unnoticed in speculative fiction. *Lest Darkness Fall* by L. Sprague de Camp is a foundational novel in alternate history, in which his hero, Martin Padway, travels from 1938 to 535 AD and does his darnedest to avert the "Dark Ages" by bolstering up the influence of the post-Roman Ostrogoth civilization he finds in Italy at that time. Many other authors have explored a longer-lasting classical Roman Empire: Robert Silverberg's *Roma Eterna* (2003); the *Romanitas* trilogy (2005-11) by Sophia McDougall, the graphic novel *Rome West* (2018) scripted by Justin Giampolini and Brian Wood, and the *Clash of Eagles* trilogy (2015-17) by (cough) Alan Smale, in which the Roman Empire has survived in its classical form until the thirteenth century and is now attempting to invade North America, with naval assistance from the Norse, only to get much more than they bargained for when they come up against the Iroquois and Mississippian cultures.

Obviously, our world of 2023 would be unrecognizable if the Roman Empire had never fallen. But, seriously: how likely is *that*?

Well. Let's talk.

Many people are strong believers in historical inevitability, or even Destiny. They assume that, since the Roman Empire declined and fell in our timeline, it *had* to fall. That the Imperium's collapse was preordained, a consequence of marauding "tribes" from without, superimposed upon moral decay and degenerate leadership from within.

I've argued for some time that this greatly overstates the case. Many civilizations have endured far longer. Ancient Egypt survived for three millennia. See also: China. There's no built-in sell-by date on empires in particular, or political systems in general.

First, let's look at what really happened in ancient Rome in our timeline, and the possible causes for it. Then I'll offer up a straightforward way in which it might have turned out very differently.

In the third century A.D., everything went to hell for Rome. It's known as the Crisis of the Third Century for good reason. The Crisis was foreshadowed by the atrocities and persecutions of Emperor Caracalla (198-217 A.D.), and the utter bizarreness of his successor, the flamboyant and decadent zealot Elagabalus (218-222). And the emperor who followed *him*, Alexander Severus (222-235), tried to bribe the Empire's enemies to go away rather than face them in battle, alienating his legions, who eventually assassinated him. These were clearly dodgy days for Roman authority.

This breakdown of Imperial power was followed by a half century in which an astonishing total of 26 men ruled as emperor, many of them army generals claiming the position by force. In the process of almost constant civil wars the frontiers were stripped of troops, allowing a broad range of incursions by foreign "barbarian" tribes plus a resurgence of attacks from the Sassanids to the East. Just to mess with the Empire even more, the Plague of Cyprian (probably smallpox) hammered it from 250-270 A.D., reducing military forces while helping to promote the spread of Christianity.

Although it took until 476 A.D. for the western Roman Empire to founder, leaving Constantinople as the power center of a transformed eastern Roman(ish) Empire, the rot was clearly irreversible after the Crisis of the Third Century. Organizationally, the most ominous step was the precedent of dividing the Empire into parts. Once division of the Empire became acceptable (during and after Diocletian's reign, 284-305 A.D.), the demise of Rome seems inevitable. No coming back from that.

But was all this predestined? Somehow programmed in? Could the Crisis of the Third Century have been averted?

Sure. Rome had introduced significant constitutional changes before, notably under Augustus (27 B.C.-14 A.D.). With sufficient will and strong leadership, such reforms were clearly possible.

So let's take a closer look at the Third Century. Emperor Septimius Severus died in 211 A.D., leaving his empire to be ruled jointly by his sons, Caracalla and Geta. Caracalla was thoroughly unpleasant, and his murders, massacres, and persecutions make him a close runner-up to Caligula for paranoid brutality. So it's no surprise that Caracalla had no intention of sharing the Empire and murdered Geta within the year, to stride off as sole ruler into his reign of terror.

By all accounts, Geta was a much calmer, more thoughtful and reasonable man than his brother (a low bar, I know). And perhaps on one critical day in December 211 A.D., Geta could have been a tiny bit luckier, and survived Caracalla's attempt on his life.

In the world of *Clash of Eagles*, this is exactly what happens. Geta escapes his grisly fate and flees Rome for Britain, where he is greatly respected by the legions. Factions align. Senators and armies choose sides. The Empire descends into a bloody ten-year civil war, and almost collapses in the process. But ultimately, Geta wins.

Geta and the Roman Senate have experienced a cataclysm they never want Rome to experience again. They have looked into the abyss of chaos and societal collapse, and backed away. When Geta proposes civil reforms to limit his own Imperial power and that of his successors, and plants the seeds for military reform to curtail Roman legions' bad habit of supporting their own candidates for the throne and acting as kingmakers, the Senate is right behind him. The Severan Dynasty solidifies the Empire. Classical Roman culture perseveres. And there is much rejoicing, Roman-style; feasts and gladiatorial games and such.

Nothing about this scenario is at odds with Roman psychology. From Julius Caesar onward, the Senate would have dearly loved to curb the powers of both their dictators and their generals (who were obviously sometimes the same person). Emperors used the power of the legions not only to put themselves into the Imperial purple but also to maintain themselves there, and to win arguments with the Senate.

There are obviously many other scenarios in which Rome fares better during these turbulent years, but if the mighty legions are not distracted – and often destroyed – by the Imperial struggles throughout the third-century Crisis, Rome's long-term future looks much brighter. A strong army can defend Rome's borders. Strong emperors can beat back the Parthian resurgence.

What about the "barbarians", you ask?

Well, massive migrations of hostile tribes into the Empire had been halted in earlier centuries by the likes of Julius Caesar and Trajan (98-117 A.D.). Similar incursions could have been held at bay again by a succession of determined emperors and competent armies in later centuries. The surge of Goths into the Balkans in 376 A.D. could have been terminated and future troubles deterred by ruthless massacres. (NB: I am not a fan of ruthless massacres. This is a thought experiment.) For examples, see how Rome razed Carthage to end the Third Punic War in 146 B.C., and how Trajan smashed the hell out of Dacia in 101-106 A.D. If the Romans were anything, they were efficient in their slaughter of their enemies. It wouldn't have been pretty, or admirable. But it might well have been effective.

If the Empire continues to be ruled through strong central control, then the military stays solid. The Rhine is never crossed by hostile tribes, and Rome is never sacked by the Visigoths. The Empire is not split by power-sharing emperors and Byzantium – Constantinople – never rises to become dominant. The western Roman Empire lives on.

I think that does the trick. If you agree, feel free to stop here.

But, seriously, there's much more to say. Let's dig deeper into the Official Causes of Rome's Decline and Fall. Why not?

And here we hit an interesting wall, and for me the most telling point: if even professional historians and other well-read experts can't fully agree why Rome fell, the conclusion that its fall was inevitable is pretty hard to sustain.

For Edward Gibbon, "the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness." Meaning that the Empire was unsound to begin with, due to lack of civic virtue, and its use of non-Roman mercenaries and the advent of Christianity ultimately caused its death knell. Vegetius, too, blamed military decline due to immoderate use of mercenaries. Many have proposed a slow decay of Roman institutions all through the centuries of the Principate.

Prominent economists, however, blame unsound economic policies. Joseph Tainter, an anthropologist, blames social complexity and diminishing returns on investments. Military historian Adrian Goldsworthy points to the weakening effect of endless civil wars and the decline of central authority. Historian William McNeill blames disease; geochemist Jerome Nriagu, lead poisoning.

You might be surprised to learn that there are *over 200* different theories for why Rome fell. This preponderance can perhaps be blamed on the lack of strong evidence – the death rates from the Cyprian plague are guesses, for example, and precious few economic documents have survived from the Rome of the third to fifth centuries A.D.

But to simplify: a number of these causes look suspiciously like effects – the effects of a weak central authority, combined with an out-of-control military, promoting its own favorites for emperor and weakening the borders in the process. Which means … they were avoidable.

In my scenario, the much more moderate Geta defeats his notoriously brutal brother Caracalla in a sustained civil war at the beginning of the third century A.D. and ushers in an alternate timeline where the Empire is not weakened by almost a century of turmoil. Given Geta's military reforms, mercenaries are

less necessary and can be kept under firmer control, and their leaders are less likely to rise up against Rome. The borders stay firm. The so-called "barbarian" tribes are forced back.

The economy remains strong, bolstered by plunder. Christianity might thrive, but church and state remain separated. People still die from plagues and contaminated water, but with strong central authority paying attention and without the devastation of constant civil war, many dire effects can be mitigated. And so the Roman Empire expands in fits and starts through the rest of Europe, and ultimately into Asia.

But could it live on unchanged? For example, could Rome still have recognizable legions in the centuries to come? Would we still perceive a western empire as "ancient Rome" a millennium later?

Maybe so.

The Romans adapted when they needed to. They adopted new ideas when they found them. But only if they saw an overwhelmingly good reason.

And if not, they stayed with the tried and true. In fact, the Roman army was extremely conservative. Weapons and tactics remained largely unchanged between the Marian reforms of 107 B.C. and the late third century A.D. The military formations of Julius Caesar were still commonly used well into the third and even fourth centuries. As it turns out, most Roman military disasters were caused by the army's strategic and tactical inflexibility.

More examples: the rituals of the military triumph remained unchanged throughout Roman history. Contemporary books discussing Roman army marching camps written 300 years apart describe exactly the same layout, and this is backed up by archeological evidence. Often even the individual signa – the symbols of various centuries and legions – persisted for centuries.

Weapons and armor barely changed either. The Roman pilum endured unaltered for 600 years, swords and daggers for almost as long. By the third century A.D., helmets were evolving to provide more protection, based on innovations copied from the barbarians. But it took a long time for these changes to manifest. The same was true back in Urbs Roma. Cowell's Life in *Ancient Rome* reports that the main elements in Roman clothing "remained practically unaltered throughout almost the entire thousand years of Rome's history." Rome was already well into its decline by the time major sartorial changes kicked in. Housing styles, likewise.

And why? Underlying it all, Roman society was based on a system of patronage, a vertical patron-client relationship that defined Rome from top to bottom and was strongly resistant to change: "the web of interlocking obligations was tightly woven and made change difficult" (Everitt, *The Rise of Rome*). Keeping their society stable was Job One, and by and large the Romans rocked that job for centuries.

Unlike our own society, change was not a given in ancient Rome. It came slowly, and at a cost.

In our timeline, the centroid of Roman power moved east to Constantinople, there to thrive for centuries longer. The people in the eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium felt a strong and unbroken connection with the "previous" Empire based in Rome, but from our modern perspective it looks like a very different animal. And so, the "fall" of the western Roman Empire was a substantial turning point, with far-reaching consequences throughout Europe, and ultimately far beyond.