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History Colloquium

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Literature Review

There have been many of theories on how Rome fell and why. There is a theory on its fall due to foreign barbarian invaders sacking Rome. Yet another is that Rome was too big and the legions of Rome could not protect the whole of it. The theory that this review is going to cover is the corruption in Rome that led to its fall and how many of authors just really don't mention this topic and do not go into any details on it. Most of the books that deal with the fall of Rome mention or talk about corruption in the Roman government; still a great deal has not been devoted to the examination of the corruption in till the latter half of the twentieth century.

During eighteenth century the only time corruption and Rome was mentioned or even looked at was with the reading of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In the six volumes of Gibbon's work, he mentions theories that because of the Christians being pacifists that the barbarians came in and sacked Rome; he then mentions about corruption in some of the Christian leaders.¹ Gibbon mentions that the magistrates had so much power that they were able to be on the same level as the higher officials in the Roman government.²

¹ Edward, Gibbon. 1875. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vol. Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger.

² Ibid. P. 310

In the early nineteenth century most of the books that covered the fall of Rome just mentioned corruption. These books mostly dealt with the basic theories like taxation where Rome's collapse was due to the economy being bad; Christians whom were pacifist and did not want to fight the barbarians which led to a lack of military force where the legions could not field as many troops as they had in the past. One book, *A General History of Rome*, which was written by Charles Merivale, goes through Rome's rise and fall and only mentions corruption a few times. Merival mentions in the early fourth century, that at the end Rome; it was controlled by a few wealthy senators.³ These senators whom had control, got their power through gaining money from gambling on fights, not paying taxes and blackmailing other people.⁴

In the late nineteenth century, historians didn't really start to look at corruption more than they had in the previous centuries. The way Historians looked at these works affected how they saw corruption. Even though they looked at Gibbon they also looked at corruption in Rome through the works of poets or other historians who wrote around the time like Virgil, Horace, and Livy.⁵ They saw the writers as very preachy when writing about corruption; this caused them merely to see these works as attacks on people who were just indulging themselves.⁶ Historians who looked at the works of Livy, Horace and Virgil to study corruption were very misled on the thought of corruption in Rome, this was due to them not understanding what the corruption these writers were talking about.⁷

³ Charles Merival, *A General History of Rome* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1886),150

⁴ Charles Merival, *A General History of Rome* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1886),60

⁵ Ferrero Guglielmo, *Characters and Events of Roman History* (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909.), 4-5

⁶ For further reading explanation of this read Ferrero Guglielmo, *Characters and Events of Roman History*(London: G.P. Putnam's Sons 1909)

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7

Those historians who were looking at the corruption in these works only saw it as the authors complaining about how the expansion of Rome was making it a corrupt city⁸. Historians around this time contemplated how Rome could be corrupt when it was at the height of its power and, at this time it had less vices than France or England⁹. The historians looked at what Horace said “Our fathers were worse than our grandsires; we have deteriorated from our fathers; our sons will cause us to be lamented”¹⁰ and saw him complaining about Rome expanding with each generation. The biggest passage that misled a lot of historians was one by Livy¹¹. They interpreted his work as asserting that each generation was more corrupt than the generation before.

The early twentieth century historians started to see that their contemporaries were misled by Livy and Horace. They were looking at Livy’s corruption as what we see corruption in a country as one person trying to gain more wealth through underhanded deeds; like blackmailing and bribery. Livy and the other writers of this time were talking about the change of values from one generation to the other.¹² So they were not talking about each person doing evil acts to other people to gain wealth; it was more along the lines of a son wanting to have more than his father and so on down the line.¹³

Historians in the early twentieth century looked at corruption in the individuals who were in power at the time of Rome’s fall, mostly likely the emperors or generals of the army.¹⁴

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 8-9

¹⁰ Quote of Horace stated in Ferrero Guglielmo, *Characters and Events of Roman History* (London: P.R. Putnum’s Sons, 1909), 4

¹¹ For this quote see Ferrero Guglielmo, *Characters and Events of Roman History* (London: P.R. Putnum’s Sons, 1909), 10

¹² Ferrero Guglielmo, *the Greatness and Decline of Rome*, (London: William Heinemann, 1908), 13-15.

¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 240

One of these historians, Ferrero Guglielmo, an Italian historian who wrote *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*. He was writing at a time in Italy, when it was trying to gain control in Africa ;and at this time Italy was very corrupt which would explain why his book focused on the Emperor's and corruption. He focused on corruption in the generals in how they took all this land, which they could not hold.¹⁵ Ferrero asserted that Rome fell because its emperors were greedy; they wanted more land for themselves even though they did not have the power to hold on to it.¹⁶

In the 1930s and the 1940s, there were not a lot of historians who were looking at corruption in Rome. These historians looked again at the more mainstream ways of how Rome's fell. These ways were invasion of barbarians, taxation and the economy, and that Rome was too large that it could not defend all of its territory. These were possibly due to the fact that during this time Germany was gaining power because of Hitler. Since most of the main historians were in the countries of France, England and United States they were trying to stop Hitler without going to war. It was coming knowledge that Hitler thought he was creating the next big empire.

During this time period, historians were just like they were back in Gibbon's day: they were looking at a bunch of theories dealing with the fall of Rome. One historian, R.F. Arragon, wrote during this time, how it is important to understand a little bit of every theory out there on the fall of Rome, from barbarians to the economy.¹⁷ He was an American who taught history in collage, his teaching style was to go over all different theories on why things happened during one major event in history; so one of his topics is the Fall of Rome. His book demonstrated a lot of theories on why Rome fell; and some of his theories mentions and discuss a bit of corruption.

¹⁵ Ibid.,277

¹⁶ Ibid.,47

¹⁷ R. F. Arragon *Transition from the Ancient to the Medieval World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1936), V

His book was really to teach people about theories of how Rome fell most of them dealt with the expansions of the territory Rome. Also he was writing around the time of people waiting for World War II to start because Hitler was taken land.

In the 1960s we start to see historians detract from Gibbon's idea and start to look at the fall of Rome mainly in the corruption of its leaders like the senate because they did not like the change in the Emperor's laws. Detractors thought that Gibbon focused too much on the fall due to Christians and Barbarians than corruption in the politicians of Rome.¹⁸ The historians also looked at events to see when the fall of Rome actually started because they knew when it collapsed from Gibbon. Historians also thought that Gibbon did not focus on the history of how Rome fell; he just really told what caused it.¹⁹

Lynn White Jr, a historian who was writing around the 1960s and wrote a book called *The Transformation of the Roman World* which he states the third century was the start of the fall of Rome.²⁰ White mentions that the senate was afraid when Emperor Diocletian started to make reforms that caused loss in power to the senate.²¹ White wrote that Rome started to fall in the third century because of the changing of the Emperors and the making of laws.²² These laws that Diocletian and the Emperors after, made were laws and reforms that limited the power of the senate.²³ He could have been influenced by all the protest that were going on during the time he was writing the book; which could make him see the U.S senate that passes all these bills and

¹⁸ Taken from White's opinion of Gibbon in Lynn Jr White, *The Transformation of the Roman World* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1966) , 35

¹⁹ Lynn Jr White, *The Transformation of the Roman World* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966) , 40

²⁰ Ibid, .30

²¹ Ibid, .42

²² Summary of passage in the books White, Lynn Jr; *The Transformation of the Roman World*(Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 51

²³ Ibid, .60

decides if we should go to war as corrupt. This in turn could be the reason he focused on corruption in the Roman senate.

White's book *The Transformation of the Roman World* is mostly focused on; not only the start of the fall of Rome but also about the cause, which was because the Emperor was taking away the senate's power.²⁴ White mentions that because Septimius during the second century took away control of the Legions from the senate and gave it to the equestrians,²⁵ this angered the senators because they had already lost power during Caesar's time. The senators were also angry when Septimius decided to give equestrians positions of governor of certain provinces, to them. These were originally only meant for the senators²⁶. The senators were very angry at this loss of power that they experienced at the hands of Emperors; which would have led to discourse between the senators and the Emperors which caused the fall of Rome.

In the 1970s, historians still looked at the corruption in the senate the same way they did in the sixties. Historians started to look at corruption in the senate and with how the senators reacted to the laws that the Emperors passed.²⁷ This was not only just American historians looking at corruption in Rome but also the French historians. One of them in particular focused mostly on the corruption in the lower class buying their way to power.²⁸ This was not liked by the current senators or office holders who got power because of their families' influence; instead these new citizens who do not come from high class families, were paying money to get power and positions.²⁹ Arnheim asserts that most of the senators and office holders got their position

²⁴ Ibid.,55

²⁵ Ibid.,43

²⁶ Ibid.,45

²⁷ M.T.W Arnheim, *The Senatorial Aristocracy in the Later Roman Empire*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 57

²⁸ Ibid., 161

²⁹ Jordon P. David; *Gibbon and his Roman Empire*(Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 117 - 118

through work and family, while these new citizens are getting vacant offices through money and bribery.³⁰

The major theory found in Arnheim's book focuses on the corruption in the non-noble citizens who bought their way into power and the noble citizens who already had power and how they did not get along, this in turn led to discourse which caused Rome to fall.³¹ This is what Arnheim contends caused the fall of Rome: the corruption and stubbornness that was the reason that the senators were always at each other's throat.³² This really started to take hold in the third century and continued down to the fifth century which started to weaken the empire due to outside influences.³³ The two types of people in the senate needed to work together instead of trying to get rid of each other. Since Arnheim was from France he could have written this in response to the anti-American wave that was going through France at this time; showing that we need to work together or we will end up like Rome.

Historians in the 80s tended to look at who did what to whom kind of history. They looked at the corruption of certain high officials of Rome; to see how they helped try to stop the corruption from spreading or if they were a part of it.³⁴ They tended to look at how the Emperors dealt with corruption as early as Caligula and Nero all the way to Diocletian and beyond.³⁵ The historians also focused on local town leaders or small land owners and how their corruption affected Rome as a whole. For example, local town leaders would hire thugs to

³⁰ M.T.W Arnheim, *The Senatorial Aristocracy in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 159 - 160

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19

³² *Ibid.*, 15

³³ Jordon P. David, *Gibbon and his Roman Empire* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1971), 86

³⁴ Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 5

³⁵ Anthony Barrett, *Caligula the Corruption of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 63

muscle in on their workers to make sure they paid the tax collectors or to stop them from killing the tax collectors.³⁶

In the eighties a historian by the name of Ramsey MacMullen published *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* which was one of the only history books that dealt solely on corruption and the fall of Rome. MacMullen's book looks at corruption in all levels from the low magistrate's clerks to the high officials like generals and senators who were corrupt.³⁷ He also builds on Arragon's theory that corruption was everywhere within the senators who hired Barbarians for protection; then the Barbarians turned on Rome.³⁸ He mentions in his book that a magistrate would hire some people from unsavory places; these people would then work their way up to the higher offices with their lack of morals.³⁹ What MacMullen is trying to say is that corruption worked its way up through the classes, and spread from there to the other officials which intended to destroy the morals of these officials. MacMullen was probably influenced by the corruption in the senate for taken brides in the late severities and how we backed some Latin American dictators so they could gain power.

Historians also looked at corruption and how the emperors of Rome dealt with it; the stronger ones could keep it in check, and the weaker ones were taken in by the corruption.⁴⁰ We see a strong emperor like Diocletian make reforms to try to weaken the senate's power because it was becoming apparent that they were using it for their own personal gain.⁴¹ This forced the senate to use other means to try to get their power back even if it means resorting to bribery or

³⁶ Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 80

³⁷ Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.), xi

³⁸ R.F. Arragon, *Transition from the Ancient to the Medieval World* (New York: 1936.), 35

³⁹ Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.), 157

⁴⁰ Ibid., 75

⁴¹ Anthony Barrett, *Caligula the Corruption of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 133

paying foreign armies for protection.⁴² Because the emperors were passing laws to limit corruption in the senate, they actually made them more corrupt.⁴³

During this time, historians also looked to the corruption of the military officials and how their corruption had a hand in the fall of Rome. They looked at how the generals and high ranking officers got their ranks through money, family, or acts of valor⁴⁴. The ones who got it through money tended to be the ones who did not want to go out and fight the Barbarians but stay in the comfort of their new found statuses; the basically did not want to sleep in tents or others peoples homes.⁴⁵ This it led to the senate losing its trust in the Legions, so they turned to hiring the Barbarians to be their own private military.⁴⁶

There have been a few decades that focused strictly on corruption in Rome, and then there are decades that just mention corruption. We can see that the more focus on corruption in Rome was in the past fifty years; focusing heavily on the senate and the officials in Rome mainly in the 70s and 80s. This is mostly due to the fact that all these stories of corruption were coming up in America. I think that corruption was looked at less during the time before the 60s was due to the fact that everyone knew it was happing but just turned a blind eye. I can't really say if corruption really was the main force behind the fall of Rome, all I can really say is that corruption did not slow down the fall it spread up the process.

⁴² Ibid.,153,

⁴³ Further reading on this topic see Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁴⁴ Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 180

⁴⁵ Ramsay MacMullens, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 174

⁴⁶ Ibid.,152

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