

The fall of Rome was Europe's lucky break

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Why the Roman Empire fell is often discussed in history classes and textbooks. But new research by Stanford historian Walter Scheidel considers an angle that has received little scholarly attention: Why did it—or something similar to it—never emerge again?

Scheidel discusses in a new book why the Roman Empire was never rebuilt and how pivotal its absence was for modern economic growth, the Industrial Revolution and worldwide Western expansion. Freed from the clutches of an imperial monopoly, Europeans experimented and competed, innovated and collaborated—all preconditions for the world we now inhabit, he said.

Scheidel, the Dickason Professor in the Humanities and a Catherine R. Kennedy and Daniel L. Grossman Fellow in Human Biology, is author of [*Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity*](#) (2019). He also edited *The Science of Roman History: Biology, Climate and the Future of the Past* (2018).

The collapse of the Roman Empire is considered by many to be one of the greatest disasters in history. But you argue that Rome's dramatic collapse was actually the best thing that ever happened. How so?

The disintegration of the Roman empire freed Europe from rule by a single power. Imperial monopolies provided peace and stability, but by seeking to preserve the status quo also tended to stifle experimentation and dissent. When the end of empire removed centralized control, rival political, military, economic and religious constituencies began to fight, bargain and compromise and—in the process—rebuilt society along different lines.

Those 1,500 years (all the way up to World War II) were full of conflicts as Europe splintered into a violently competitive state system. But for all the suffering it caused, this fragmentation and competition fostered innovation that eventually gave rise to unprecedented change in knowledge production, economic performance, human welfare and political affairs. This path to modernity was long and tortuous, but also unique in the world.

In contrast to other large-scale empires—such as the successive dynasties in China—the Roman empire never returned to Europe. Why was that?

An overly simple answer would be that all later attempts to restore universal empire on European soil failed. But was that just an accident? I argue that it wasn't: there were powerful environmental reasons for Europe's lasting fragmentation. Europe lacks large river basins that supported centralized power elsewhere and it is shaped by mountain barriers and exceptionally long coastlines that carve it up into smaller units. Perhaps most importantly, Western Europe is far removed from the great Eurasian steppe, grasslands that used to house warlike nomads who played a critical role in the creation of large empires in Russia, the Middle East, and South and East Asia. Although these features did not determine historical outcomes, they nudged European state formation onto a different trajectory of greater diversity.

What made the Roman Empire so successful?

If Europe wasn't fertile ground for empire-building, we may wonder why the Roman Empire existed at all. The Romans succeeded by exploiting a set of conditions that were hard or even impossible to replicate later on. Through shrewd manipulation of civic obligations, material rewards and alliances, their leadership managed to mobilize vast numbers of ordinary farmers for military operations at low cost.

Rome also benefited from modest levels of state formation in the western Mediterranean and the fact that larger kingdoms farther east were busy fighting each other. This allowed them to overpower and swallow other societies one by one. In later periods, by contrast, Europe was full of competing states that prevented any one of them from subduing all the others.

What were the efforts to rebuild the Roman Empire, and why did they fail?

Such efforts began almost immediately when the eastern Roman Empire tried to recover the western provinces that had fallen to Germanic conquerors. Two-hundred-and-fifty years later, the Frankish ruler Charlemagne styled himself as a Roman emperor, and later in the Middle Ages an unwieldy entity known as the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation appeared on the scene. However, none of these projects succeeded in re-creating an empire of Rome's size, power or durability.

Later efforts by the Habsburgs and by Napoleon to establish some degree of hegemony over Europe failed as well. Several factors were responsible for this. In the Middle Ages, the erosion of royal power and taxation brought about by the rise of landed aristocracies interfered with state building. By the early modern period, the European state system had already become too deeply entrenched to be dislodged by any one power and would-be conquerors were reliably stymied by alliances that checked their ambitions.

You devote your epilogue to Monty Python's tongue-in-cheek question, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" So what does the modern world owe to the ancient past?

We usually focus on the legacies of Roman civilization that are still visible today, from the Romance languages, the Roman writing system and many proper names to the Julian calendar, Roman law, architectural styles, and, last but by no means least, the various Christian churches. All of these continue to shape our lives.

But when it comes to explaining why the world has changed so much over the last couple of centuries, the single most important contribution of the Roman Empire turns out to have been that it went away for good and nothing like it ever returned. This rupture was critical in allowing the right conditions for transformative change to emerge over time. Sometimes the most important legacy is the one we cannot see!

Provided by Stanford University

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