**Edward J. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome. The History of a Dangerous Idea*.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv + 301, ills, maps. £21.99, US$27.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-007671-9 (hardback).

The current period of division and decline in the United States of America has undoubtedly contributed to the publication of several recent books by prominent academics revisiting persistent questions concerning ancient Rome's decline and fall.[1] Adding to this discussion is Edward Watts' new book, which examines the rhetoric of Roman decline and renewal from a myriad of voices, cultures, and time-periods spanning the Roman Republic to the modern era. Having written several well-received books on Rome covering the fall of the Republic, Christianisation, and the life of the philosopher Hypatia, Watts (from now on W) is qualified to tackle vexed questions surrounding Roman decline and rebirth. The undergirding theme of this book that each generation interprets Rome's Fall(s) through its own lens is especially instructive in our troubled times. However, coming in at a slim 242 pages of text covering 2,200 years of Roman/Byzantine and post-Roman history in 17 chapters, W, as he admits, can offer only a small sample of the rhetoric of Roman decline. Here I must limit my analysis to the provocative first ten chapters.

W unapologetically looks to the past to offer lessons for the present. Trump's inaugural speech from January 2017, with his infamous promise to 'Make America Great Again', launches the study. As W points out, for Trump to revitalize America, he needed to establish that the presidency of Barack Obama represented a period of decline. W maintains that a similarly dangerous trajectory has driven Roman and post-Roman commentors discussing Roman decline/revival.

As W underlines, the need for renewal was not necessarily based on realities but sometimes it was just a feeling in one's bones. These sentiments were particularly prominent in the era of the Republic, which on paper was a time of unprecedented territorial expansion, social progress and increasing wealth. The victories and riches gathered by Rome's triumphant armies nevertheless brought with them a new set of problems for elite Roman men, since they had learned of the dangers of succumbing to the allure of luxurious and "soft" living, which, according to contemporary rhetoric had undone the Greeks before them. W encapsulates these debates in the figure of Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BCE)— a conservative Roman Senator who vociferously defended what he saw as traditional Roman values. Contrasting an idealised golden past with what he saw as a gloomier present, Cato chided his fellow Romans for their undisciplined lives. However, determining just who these peers were had become more difficult, since the rapid expansion of Rome and the subsequent integration of non-Roman peoples had in the xenophobe Cato's opinion led to a dangerous watering down of elite Roman identity and in particular a "worrying" fascination with soft and effeminate Greek

[1] E.g., M. Salzman, *The Falls of Rome: Crises, Resilience, and Resurgence in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2022; P. Stephenson *New Rome: The Roman Empire in the East*, 395–700, Cambridge MA, 2022.

culture.[2] As W points out, none of this moral crusading meant that opportunistic conservatives like Cato did not themselves become wealthier or bask in the increased power and privileges that followed in the wake of Rome's expansion.

Though Cato and his admirers failed to stem the tide of social and political change transforming their world, the divisive rhetoric they spewed, spread and festered in the decades after the statesman's death. Roman politics became even more divisive, leading to a rise in political violence and finally a series of bloody civil wars. Imagined decline became actual decline. Unable to agree on a shared vision of the best future path for the Republic, Rome became increasingly factionalised, spiralling from one crisis to another, leading eventually to the dissolution of the Republic and the rise of a state ruled by the autocrat Augustus. Once again, the parallels with modern America linger just beneath the narrative's surface.

As W demonstrates Augustus's success was based in part on his ability to interweave the rhetoric of previous decline with flowery depictions of his rule as a revival and rebirth of traditional Roman values. Augustus had succeeded at making Rome great again. But at what cost? With the loss of more democratic rule, W clearly sees the establishment of imperial Rome as a bad thing, conceding grudgingly nevertheless that Augustus's reign brought needed stability to his people and closed a particularly violent period of Roman politics. In this instance, Augustan rhetoric touting revival was based more on reality than the fiction of renewal that would mark the propaganda of many future Roman/Byzantine emperors.

Moving into the period of the early Empire, W suggests that the rhetoric of decline shifted. One could not risk offending the ruling emperor by painting the present as a period of decay; instead it was necessary to turn to the reigns of previous emperors for such examples. This was particularly true in the reign of Trajan (r. 98–117), whose glowing reputation W contends was based largely on his success in condemning his predecessors while simultaneously exaggerating his own successes. One of the victims of Trajan's propaganda was the emperor Domitian (r. 81–96), who. contrary to ancient and modern consensus, W argues was a "good" emperor.

Specialists will find much to ponder and indeed dispute in W's revisionist and provocative takes on what is usually seen as a "Golden Age" in Roman imperial history or the merits and faults of individual emperors Roman and Byzantine. While W is clear that the Big Man approach to history is flawed, throughout the study he prefers less expansionist emperors—Roman and Byzantine— who embraced, as he sees it, religious, social, and political diversity. For example, W praises Domitian for three main reasons. 1. His avoidance of expensive expansionary military campaigns 2. His sound economic policies, which permitted an increased focus on building infrastructure. 3. His standing up to conservative Roman Senators and extending senatorial rights to provincials. W's tone is much bleaker when it comes to more

[2] Cf. M. McDonnell,"Roman Men and Greek Virtue," in R. M. Rosen and I. Sluiter, *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden, 2003, 235–261.

powerful expansionist and powerful Roman/Byzantine emperors like Constantine, Justinian I, or Basil II.

Chapter 5 tackles the third-century crisis, and the persecution of Christians, which W sees as an unintended consequence of imperial rhetoric, by a series of desperate emperors hoping to restore Rome's vigour. These persecuted Christians, in turn, argued that it was these policies of religious intolerance, which had truly led to decline. Chapter 6 turns to the rise of Constantine, and the triumph of Christianity, which W argues witnessed a shift away from Roman exceptionalism, since W declares (to my mind inaccurately) that for Christian intellectuals "The glorious Roman past was now irrelevant (p. 75)." Misguided too is W's further contention that Constantine sought to create one universal religion. Chapter 7 shifts to the reign of Constantine's son Constantius II who truly established a Christian Roman Empire and made the Empire's shift eastward permanent by establishing Constantinople as the "New Rome." In Chapters 8 and 9, W describes an Empire inevitably descending to dissolution despite the best efforts of its leadership; in fact, their unenlightened policies often made things worse. For his pessimistic vision, W relies heavily on the views of rigorist Christians like Augustine and Paulinus. He further contends that for most fifth-century Roman-Christians in the West the triumphs of non-Roman peoples like the Vandals in North Africa and the Goths in Italy mattered little, since these Romans were more interested in a Christian future, rather than caring much about Roman decline in the present. This contention and his further assessment (p. 113) that in the fifth century "the distinctions between Vandals and Romans had gradually blurred," lacks nuance and is indeed contradicted by our primary sources.[3]

In Chapter 10, W follows the recent trend of blaming Justinian (r. 527–-565) and his expansionist wars of reconquest against the Vandals and Goths for the true fall of the ancient Roman West. The idea that Ostrogothic Italy was thriving and harmonious before Justinian attacked to my mind is overly optimistic.[4] As archaeological and literary sources attest, in Rome, steady urban decline had set in by the late fourth century, and only accelerated in the fifth and early sixth centuries.[5] For his optimistic vision, W relies largely on the propaganda of two writers, Ennodius and Cassiodorus, who had their own reasons to interpret Theodoric's Italy through rose-coloured glasses. Why trust this rhetoric, while discounting that of Justinian? I would suggest that the views found in Marcellinus Comes's Latin chronicle and other near contemporaries concerning the justice of Justinian's cause in restoring the imperial West appealed to a wider and more appreciative audience in Vandalic North Africa and Ostrogothic Italy than W believes. Likely relying on an absurd statement made by Procopius (*SH* 18.4), W makes the unsubstantiated claim that Justinian murdered "hundreds of thousands

[3] Cf. A. Merrills, "Contested Identities in Byzantine North Africa," in M.E. Stewart, D. A. Parnell, C. Whately (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium,* London, 2022, 181–197,

[4] Cf. S. Lafferty, *Law and Society in the Age of Theoderic the Great: A Study of the* Edictum Theoderici, Cambridge, 2013.

[5] See, e.g., H. Harich-Schwarzbauer and K. Pollmann (eds), *Der Fall Roms und Seine Wiederauferstehungen in Antike und Mittelater,* Berlin, 2013.

(p. 124)." W also underplays the Goths' role in destroying Italian cities, and surprisingly underplays the impact of plague after 542 and the "cooling" of the climate after 536 in the decline of Italy in the second half of the sixth century. This is not to claim that Justinian's wars did not push a teetering Italy over the edge, but Italian decline had been exacerbated by factors outside of Justinian's control. Moreover, W's negative take on Justinian's rightly famous and praised codification of Roman law underplays the extent that such legal reform was needed. Even Justinian's staunch orthodoxy, which W condemns, discounts Justinian's sincere, if from our modern viewpoint misguided, desire to restore harmony to a divided church. Justinian also had a more conciliatory side than W discusses.[6]

Every generation judges a leader like Justinian through the oft-times skewed lens of their own values. Like other medieval intellectuals, the twelfth-century Otto, Bishop of Freising (*Chron*. 5.4), for instance, praised Justinian for his military campaigns, religious zeal and legal reforms, declaring that "This most zealous Christian monarch resurrected his domain, as it were, from the dead."

A fear of religious fundamentalism and contemporary autocrats like Vladimir Putin plays a part in modern scholars like W's vilification of Justinian/ Constantine II and other Byzantine emperors. Justinian's harsh views on intellectuals, homosexuals, and religious dissidents do not play well for those living in modern liberal democracies. Justinian, nevertheless, makes an easy target; the same could be said of any Roman or Byzantine emperor categorised by W as "good" emperors. Of course, neither W's nor Otto's views are completely "true" or "false" concerning Justinian, but W should make clearer for his reader the danger of arguing for such sharp dichotomies. It is tricky for us to judge which emperors were "good" or "bad," either in a moral or a practical sense. Moreover, when reading our sources, we must be careful when identifying them as either a propagandist or a recorder of truth, since the reality can be much more blurred.

As W declares in his closing paragraph, for him, history offers a series of forks in the road, where one path leads to prosperity and the other to destruction and decline. The first, exemplified by the policies of good emperors like the Antonines is inclusive and collaborative, leads to restoration and cohesion, the second, taken by Justinian and others assigns blame, destroys social structures, and "tears us apart (p. 244)." This book will spark needed debate and disagreement. W proves once again that he has the rare gift of producing work that appeals to both lay and scholarly audiences. However, those looking for deeper introspection should look elsewhere.

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[6] D.A. Parnell, "Justinian's Clemency and God's Clemency." *Byzantina Symmeikta* 30 (2020) 11–30.