



## **The Decline of the Roman Power in Western Europe. Some Modern Explanations**

Norman H. Baynes

*The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 33, Parts 1 and 2. (1943), pp. 29-35.

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*The Journal of Roman Studies* is currently published by Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.

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## THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN POWER IN WESTERN EUROPE. SOME MODERN EXPLANATIONS <sup>1</sup>

By NORMAN H. BAYNES

It is the purpose of this paper to consider a few of the more outstanding contributions towards the solution of this familiar problem propounded since the publication in 1898 of Sir Samuel Dill's book on *Roman Society in the last century of the Western Empire* (2nd edn., 1899). It may well appear somewhat surprising that I should venture to speak on such a topic, since my own work, such as it is, has been concerned rather with the history of the Byzantine Empire. And yet for a student of Byzantine history the problem has a special interest: he is forced to consider that problem not merely as a West European issue, but rather to compare and contrast the historical development in the western and eastern provinces of the Empire. He is compelled to raise the question: why was it that the Roman Empire failed to survive in Western Europe while it endured for a further millennium in the East? The very fact that he is primarily interested in the history of the Byzantine Empire enables him to approach the Western problem from a different angle and to treat that problem in a wider setting and not in isolation. That is my apology for what might otherwise appear to be an inexcusable impertinence. In a word I desire to ask what general considerations can be adduced to explain the fact that in Western Europe there is a cultural break—a caesura—while in the East Roman world the cultural development is continuous, the Hellenistic and Roman traditions being gradually fused to form the civilisation of the Byzantine Empire.

Of the recent explanations of the decline of the Roman power in Western Europe we may first take that of Vladimir G. Simkhovitch who in the *Political Science Quarterly* for 1916 published an article under the title 'Rome's Fall Reconsidered' <sup>2</sup> in which he attributed the collapse of the Roman power to the exhaustion of the soil of Italy and of the provinces. That article has been reprinted—somewhat incongruously—in the author's book *Towards the Understanding of Jesus*.<sup>3</sup> The evil began under the Republic: in Cato's time agriculture had already declined in the greater part of Italy. When asked what is the most profitable thing in the management of one's estate he replied 'Good pasturage'. What is the next best? 'Fairly good pasturage.' What is the third best? 'Bad pasturage.' And the fourth best? 'Arare'—agriculture. Simkhovitch admits that the Romans possessed great agricultural knowledge. 'All that is implied by the agricultural revolution,' he writes, 'the seeding of grasses and legumes, the rotation of crops, yes even green manuring, all that was perfectly known to the Romans. Why was it not practised for two thousand years or more? I do not know.' Columella was already drawing upon a literary tradition in his counsel to farmers: his mistakes prove that he had never witnessed the operations which he describes. To seed alfalfa one cyathus for 50 square feet, which amounts to several bushels per acre, is an impossible proposition. Province after province was turned by Rome into a desert: draining was neglected, and deserted fields became mosquito- and malaria-infested swamps. The 'inner decay' of the Roman Empire in all its manifold manifestations was in the last analysis entirely based upon the endless stretches of barren, sterile, and abandoned fields in Italy and the provinces. The evidence adduced by Simkhovitch is drawn for the most part from writers of the Republic or of the period of the early Principate, but from the Christian Empire he quotes Constantine's legislation in favour of the children of the poor who have not the means to provide for their offspring, and also the constitution of Valentinian, Arcadius and Theodosius giving permission to the squatter to cultivate deserted fields. Against those who would maintain that the flight from the land was caused by oppressive taxation he contends that it was precisely the exhaustion of the soil which rendered the burden of taxation oppressive: it was because

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Joint Meeting of the Hellenic and Roman Societies on Friday, 4th September, 1942. This paper originally formed part of the Sir Samuel Dill Memorial Lecture delivered in Belfast on 27th January, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> *Political Science Quarterly* xxxi (1916), 201-243.

<sup>3</sup> *Towards the Understanding of Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), pp. 84-139.

so much land was uncultivated that taxation pressed so heavily upon those who still continued the farming of their fields. The limits which confine the productivity of man's labour become for society physical conditions of existence from which it cannot escape. It was these limits set by the exhaustion of the soil which rendered the doom of Rome inevitable.

There is no doubt truth in this picture of the decline of agriculture: for the later Empire it may well be an accurate description of some parts of Italy: in A.D. 395 the abandoned fields of Campania alone amounted to something over 528,000 *jugera*; but in itself it is inadequate as an explanation of the fall of Rome. For in one country at least—Egypt—there can be no question of soil-exhaustion, and it is precisely from Egypt that we have our earliest reports of the flight from the land, of the disappearance of villages through depopulation. Modern studies of economic conditions in Egypt have demonstrated the fatal effects of the methods of administrative exploitation employed by the Roman government in that province. The burden of taxation here certainly came first, and the decay of agriculture was its result and not its cause. Further, the sweeping generalisations of Simkhovitch's paper cannot be sustained: even in the fifth century of our era where a resident proprietor supervised the cultivation of his own estate there can be no question of soil-exhaustion. Read again Ausonius' poem of his expedition in the valley of the Moselle, read the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris: still in the Gaul of the fifth century it is clear that there were smiling fields and well-cultivated farms. The real danger of the *latifundia* lay, I am convinced, in the fact that they were for the most part managed by bailiffs for owners who were absentee landlords, men who drew money from their estates in order to spend it in Rome, Ravenna, or some provincial capital. The primary cause of the agricultural decline is to be found in the abuses of the fiscal system, in the scourge of corporate responsibility for the collection of the taxes which ruined the municipal aristocracy of the city *curiae*, and perhaps above all in the absence of the personal supervision of the proprietor and the unprincipled use of authority by irresponsible bailiffs, controlling the cultivation of the large estates which now absorbed so great a part of the land of the empire. Soil-exhaustion is, in fact, an inadequate explanation of the collapse of the Roman power.

Another theory has been proposed by Professor Ellsworth Huntington—that of climatic change. The great sequoias of California—the big trees of a familiar advertisement—have been growing for some three or even four thousand years. Each year in the trunk of the tree there is clearly marked the circle of the year's growth: when the tree is felled these rings can be traced and according to their width a chronological chart of climatic variation can be established: the years of considerable width of ring recording the effect of favourable climatic conditions, the narrower rings marking the result of less favourable climate. In this way for the area of the sequoias the variations in climate can be traced for at least 3,000 years. On this basis Ellsworth Huntington constructed his theory. In an article published in 1917 in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* on 'Climatic Change and Agricultural Exhaustion as Elements in the Fall of Rome'<sup>4</sup> he suggested that the climate of the Mediterranean world and that of California have always undergone similar modifications: that from the chronological chart of Californian climate one is accordingly entitled to reconstruct the changes in the climate of the Mediterranean area during the course of the history of Rome, and from the record of such changes we may conclude that the fall of Rome was due to a decline in the rainfall from which the Mediterranean world suffered during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries of our era. It is easy to object that on Professor

<sup>4</sup> On climatic change and the evidence of tree-growth, cf. Ellsworth Huntington, 'The Secret of the Big Trees,' *Harper's Monthly Magazine* cxxv (American Edition), lxiiv (European Edition), 292-302 (July, 1912); *id.*, 'Climatic Change and Agricultural Exhaustion as Elements in the Fall of Rome,' *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (Harvard University Press) xxxi (February, 1917), 173-208; Carnegie Institute of Washington, *Publication No.* 192 (1914, pp. vi, 341); Ellsworth Huntington, with contributions by Charles Schuchert, Andrew E. Douglass, and Charles J. Kullmer, 'The

Climatic Factor as illustrated in arid America'; *Publication No.* 289 in three volumes: A. E. Douglas, 'Climatic Cycles and Tree Growth. A Study of the Annual Rings of Trees in relation to Climate and Solar Activity' (vol. i, 1919, pp. 127, Bibliography 124-7; vol. ii, 1928, pp. vii, 166, Bibliography 159-166); 'Climatic Cycles and Tree Growth' (vol. iii, 1936, pp. vii, 171, Bibliography 166-171); *Publication No.* 352 (1925) on 'Quaternary Climates', Ernest Antevs, 'The Big Tree as a Climatic Measure' 115-153, Bibliography 150-3.

Huntington's own showing the latter part of the second century and the first half of the third century marked a climatic improvement : it might be hard to trace any corresponding increase in prosperity in the history of the Empire during this period. But a more serious objection would point to the hazardous character of the fundamental assumption. Records of rainfall in the neighbourhood of the great trees have only been kept for about half a century ; Professor Huntington prints a table of four year-groups in order to establish the climatic parallelism between California and the Mediterranean area (*Quarterly Journal of Economics* xxxi, 1916-17, 193) :

- I. Seven years of heaviest rainfall in California.
- II. Eighteen years with heavy rainfall in California.
- III. Seventeen years with light rainfall in California.
- IV. Thirteen years with least rainfall in California.

The table presents the following figures :

	<i>San Francisco</i>	<i>Rome</i>	<i>Naples</i>
I.	8.3 in.	10.7 in.	11.5 in.
II.	4.5 in.	10.6 in.	11.0 in.
III.	3.4 in.	9.8 in.	9.2 in.
IV.	1.9 in.	9.6 in.	8.6 in.

'The columns vary,' writes Professor Huntington, 'in harmony with the California rainfall.' That is true, but the disparity in the amount of the decline in rainfall between California and Rome—in California a fall from 8.3 in. to 1.9 in., in Rome a fall only from 10.7 in. to 9.6 in.—is very striking, and it is not easy to see what conclusions can justifiably be drawn from such figures.

But that is not all : the matter does not remain as it stood in 1917. In 1925 the Carnegie Institute of Washington published further discussion of the Big Tree as a climatic measure, and it now appears uncertain what part is played respectively by temperature and what by rainfall in the yearly growth. Thus a further element of ambiguity is introduced into the problem. Before this Ossa of doubt piled upon a Pelion of uncertainty the confidence of a mere student of history may well quail, and for the present I should hesitate to call in aid Nature's yardstick as a solution of our historical perplexities. The great trees still keep their climatic secret.

From Nature we may turn to the human factor in our search for the causes of the collapse of the Roman power. Otto Seeck has, I think, found no followers in his attempt to charge the third-century Roman emperors with the responsibility for that collapse. Through their continued *Ausrottung der Besten*—the persistent extermination of capacity and individual merit—the Caesars bred a terror of distinction and encouraged the spread of that slave mentality which issued logically and naturally in the triumph of Christianity—the Beggars' Religion—*die Religion des Betteltums*. An inverted Darwinism stamped out originality from the Empire : no man remained with the courage to be the master of his fate—the captain of his own soul. The way was open for 'Byzantinismus', for crawling servility and fawning adulation of authority. Here the prejudice of one who was inspired by a passionate and life-long hatred of the Christian faith has, I cannot but feel, attempted to wrest history to its own purpose. Is there indeed any single century in the annals of the Empire which can show so many men of outstanding personality as can the fourth century of our era? Surely Professor Lot is not far from the truth when he exclaims : 'If ever there were supermen in human history they are to be found in the Roman emperors of the third and fourth centuries'—men who shouldered the burden of a tottering world and resolutely refused to despair of the Republic. And beside the Roman emperors stand in the Christian camp such figures as Athanasius and S. Basil in the East, as Ambrose and Augustine in the West. There is little of crawling servility in such men as these. The wonder of the fourth century to my mind is rather the heroic courage and the desperate resolution with which men strove to preserve that imperial organisation which alone safeguarded the legacy of the ancient world. Further, you will not have failed to notice with

what rigour Seeck presses the theory of the hereditary transmissibility of ἀρετή. So thorough-going a conviction might well rejoice the heart of a champion of an unreformed House of Lords. No, *Die Ausrottung der Besten* will not suffice to explain the decline of the Roman power.

Professor Tenney Frank, of the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, has approached the problem from another angle. From an elaborate statistical study of the Corpus of Latin inscriptions<sup>5</sup> he concludes that Rome and the Latin West were flooded by an invasion of Greek and Oriental slaves: as these were emancipated and thus secured Roman citizenship the whole character of the citizen body was changed: on the basis of a consideration of some 13,900 sepulchral inscriptions he argues that nearly 90 per cent of the Roman-born inhabitants of the Western capital were of foreign extraction. What lay behind and constantly reacted on those economic factors which have generally been adduced to explain the decline of the Roman power was the fact that those who had built Rome had given way to a different race. 'The whole of Italy as well as the Romanized portions of Gaul and Spain were during the Empire dominated in blood by the East.' In this fact Tenney Frank would find an explanation of the development from the Principate to the Dominate—the triumph of absolutism, of the spread of Oriental religions, the decline in Latin literature and the growing failure in that gift for the government of men which had built up the Empire.

But the foundations on which this far-reaching theory rests are not above suspicion. The nationality of Roman slaves is but rarely expressly stated in the sepulchral inscriptions, and thus it is upon the appearance of a Greek name for slave or freedman that Tenney Frank has inferred an Oriental origin. The legitimacy of this inference has been questioned by Miss Mary Gordon in her able study of the 'Nationality of Slaves under the early Roman Empire', *JRS* xiv, 1924. A slave was a personal chattel, and slave-dealer or slave-owner could give to the slave any name which in his unfettered choice he might select: the slave dealers with whom Romans first came in contact were Greeks and thus, as Miss Gordon says, 'Greek was the original language of the slave trade and this is reflected in servile nomenclature much as the use of French on modern menus and in the names affected by dressmakers suggests the history and associations of particular trades.' In fact the nomenclature of the slave in the ancient world was scarcely less arbitrary than are the modern names given to our houses, our puddings, our horses or our dogs. An attempt to determine the domicile of origin of our cats or dogs solely by the names which their owners have given them would hardly be likely to produce results of high scientific value. The outlandish names of barbarian captives reduced to slavery would naturally be changed to more familiar forms, and Latin nomenclature was singularly poor and unimaginative: the Greek names were well-known and resort to these was easy. It may be said that this reasoning is largely *a priori* and of little cogency. But Ettore Cicotti in a recent paper on 'Motivi demografici e biologici nella rovina della civiltà antica' in *Nuova Rivista storica*, Anno xiv, fasc. i-ii, has adduced an interesting historical parallel. L. Livi (*La schiavitù domestica nei tempi di mezzo e nei moderni, Ricerche storiche di un antropologo*, Roma, 1928) in 1928 published documents which his father copied from the State Archives of Florence. These documents record 357 sales of slaves: the transactions date from the years 1366 to 1390—for the most part from the years 1366 to 1370. The majority of the slaves were of Tartar origin, though some were Greeks, Roumanians, etc. In these records the slave's original name is generally given and then follows the Italian name by which the slave is known. Thus the name of Lucia occurs forty-two times and represents such original names as Marchecta, Gingona, Erina, Minglacha, Saragosa, Casabai, Alterona and many others. Similarly the name of Caterina is given to slaves of Greek, Tartar, Turkish, Circassian, and Russian origin and has taken the place of such barbarous names as Coraghessan, Chrittias, Colcatalo, Tagaton, and Melich. The parallel is very instructive.

But this is not all: the sepulchral inscriptions studied by Tenney Frank extend over a period of three centuries: suppose that Rome had during the early Empire a population

<sup>5</sup> 'Race Mixture in the Roman Empire,' *American Historical Review* xxi, 1916, 689 ff.; see also by him

of some 800,000 with an annual mortality of 20 per cent : in those three centuries the deaths would number 4,800,000. Tenney Frank has examined 13,900 inscriptions and those are derived from imperial and aristocratic *columbaria* : here the slaves would be better off and the percentage of accomplished foreign slaves would be higher : what of the nameless dead whom no record preserved, whose bodies lay in the vast common burial pits of the slave proletariat ? These 13,900 dead who left permanent memorials behind them cannot be regarded as really representative of the general servile population of the city : we are not justified in using the percentage obtained from these records and applying it as though it were applicable to the whole class of slaves and of freedmen.

In the light of this criticism Tenney Frank's statistics are vitiated, and it must be admitted that the nationality of the slaves of Rome under the early Empire remains a matter of conjecture. There must have been a far greater number derived from Western Europe than are allowed for on Tenney Frank's calculations.

A somewhat different form of biological explanation is given by Professor Nilsson in his well known book *Imperial Rome*. The most important problem for the Empire was that of race : that was decisive, for upon it depended the quality of Roman civilisation. Culture rests on racial character. If the alien races and barbarian peoples were to be assimilated, they must be interpenetrated by their conquerors. Since the Roman world was of vast extent and those of alien race were very numerous, an increase in the birth-rate of the Romans was required : instead of this the Roman birth-rate declined : the blood of the Romans became more and more diluted, and in place of the Romanisation of the Empire a civilisation of intercommunication and intercourse resulted in a mingling of races—an unchecked 'mongrelisation'. Under the Empire cross-breeding, hybridisation, spread throughout the provinces and in this widespread realm of mongrels all stable spiritual and moral standards were lost.

I confess that as soon as the word 'race' is introduced into any discussion I realise that my only safe course lies in a resolute silence, for I have never been able to understand the precise significance of that ambiguous term. But when folk begin to ascribe all kinds of moral and spiritual failings to race-mixture it will hardly be expected that an Englishman will accept the insinuation without a protest. It is beyond calculation to estimate how many races and peoples have gone to his ethnological make-up, and he will not readily admit that the results of 'mongrelisation' have in his case been wholly deplorable. As an Englishman I am unlikely to discuss dispassionately the theory of Professor Nilsson. And unfortunately I am also a student of Byzantine history and as such I am convinced that the essential condition of the prosperity of the later Roman Empire was its possession of Asia Minor—that reservoir alike of money and of men. And Asia Minor of the Byzantines was surely man's most stupendous effort in race-mixture to which history can point : it was an ethnological museum. Professor Nilsson, to be quite frank, will have his work cut out to persuade an English Byzantinist that race-mixture is of necessity so poisonous and deadly a process. I had better leave it at that : you had best form your own judgment on the theory without further comment from me.

There still remains, however, the explanation of Professor Rostovtzeff as set forth in his *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, a masterpiece for which any student of imperial Rome must have a sincere admiration. Professor Rostovtzeff's explanation of the collapse of the Roman power can be briefly summarised. It was through the medium of the *municipia*—of the towns—that Rome had unified Italy, and when she extended her conquests into the West of Europe she naturally favoured the growths of towns as centres of Romanisation. But the towns drew their wealth from the countryside, and the peasants bitterly resented this exploitation of their own class by the *bourgeoisie*. Under the peace of the Empire the civilian population became unfitted for the life of the military camps, and it was from the rude vigour of the peasantry that in the crisis of the third century the Roman armies were recruited. The peasant of the army made common cause with the peasant of the countryside and both waged a war of extermination against their oppressors of the city. The explanation of the downfall of the aristocracy and with them of the ancient civilisation is thus to be found in a class-conscious alliance between the soldier and the

worker on the land. Professor Rostovtzeff, it must be remembered, has seen in his native country an aristocratic régime overthrown by a similar alliance. And the only answer to this theory that I can give is quite simply that I can find no support for it in our extant sources. I have consulted every reference to the authorities cited by Professor Rostovtzeff and in my judgment none of them supports his reading of the facts. So far as I can see the constant terror of the peasants is the soldier : the last menace to a defaulting debtor is (according to the papyri) the creditor's threat : ' I will send a soldier after you.' The soldier is to the peasant what Napoleon or the policeman has been to successive generations of children in English nurseries. To the Roman peasant and soldier of the third century of our era there had not been granted a revelation of the gospel according to Karl Marx.

And thus I come back as a student of Byzantine history to the difficulty to which I referred at the beginning of this lecture. I believe that there was in Western Europe a break in the cultural development and that there was no corresponding break in the development of civilisation in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. To a Byzantinist, therefore, the problem which we are considering necessarily assumes a dual aspect : what he must discover, if he is to gain any intellectual satisfaction from the inquiry, is precisely the *differentia* which distinguishes the history of the Western provinces from that of the *partes orientales*. And so many of the modern explanations do not provide him with any such *differentia*. ' Die Ausrottung der Besten,' civil wars, and imperial jealousy of outstanding merit did not affect the West alone : the whole Roman world suffered from these scourges : the brutality of an undisciplined soldiery was likewise an evil common to both halves of the Empire. Soil-exhaustion, climatic change, these must have affected the entire Mediterranean area. The oppression of civil servants, the decay of the municipal senates, the flight from the land—all these ills the Eastern provinces were not spared. Greeks and Orientals invaded the West and we are told caused the collapse of the Roman power there ; but in the East these same Greeks and Orientals sustained the Empire against unceasing assaults for another millennium : it seems mysterious. And therefore in closing it only remains for me to state the *differentia* as I see it and to suggest an explanation of this diversity in the history of East and West—an explanation which is so humiliatingly simple that I am constrained to believe that it must be right.

You realise then that I speak as a student of Byzantine history : a Byzantinist looks at the world of Western Europe. As I conceive of it, culture is essentially a social thing : it is born of intercourse and it needs a conscious solidarity of interest in order to sustain it. Roman civilisation depended upon intercommunication, upon the influences radiating from the capital and returning to the capital for reinforcement. Such free communication, however, can be preserved only within an area which is safeguarded from violence : the Roman Empire was such an area safeguarded by the civil administration and by the frontier screen of the military forces. The civil service and the army together formed the steel framework which maintained the entire structure of civilisation. It is perhaps with the Emperor Hadrian that one first observes a conscious realisation of this function of the Roman power. The area of civilisation is delimited on permanent lines : not expansion of territory, but concentration of resources in order to protect the solidarity of culture—that is the emperor's task. The barbarian invasions broke into this area of intercourse, and the establishment of barbarian kingdoms on Roman soil destroyed the single administration which was its counterpart. And the fatal significance of the establishment of these barbarian kingdoms lay in the fact that they withdrew from the Empire not only Roman soil, but also the revenues derived therefrom. Africa lost to the Vandals, Spain occupied by Sueve and Alan and Visigoth : Southern France a Visigothic kingdom and the rest of Gaul a battleground on which Aëtius fought and fought again : Italy alone remained as a source of revenue, and Italy was an impoverished land. The Western state was bankrupt. And the defence of the Empire demanded money, for Rome had so effectually provided the area of peaceful intercourse in Western Europe that her subjects were no longer soldiers : if battles were to be won they must be fought by barbarian mercenaries and for mercenaries to fight they must be paid. Further, Rome's effort in the West was a struggle with a double front : against the barbarian on land and against the Vandal fleet upon the sea. Rome

possessed no technical superiority such as the invention of gunpowder might have given her, such as later the secret for the composition of the 'Greek fire' gave to the Byzantine navy. Thus the tragedy of the Empire in the West lay precisely in the fact that she had not the wherewithal to keep at one and at the same time a mercenary army in the field and a fleet in commission. And the *differentia* which distinguishes the situation in the East of the Empire is in my judgment that, while the Danubian provinces were continuously ravaged, Asia Minor was for the most part untroubled by invasions: Asia Minor remained as I have said a reservoir alike of men and money. It was this reservoir which the West lacked. The West could throw no counterpoise into the scale against the supremacy of the barbarian; but the East amongst its own subjects numbered the hardy mountaineers—the Isaurians—and the fellow-countrymen of the Isaurian Tarasicodissa, whom history knows as the Emperor Zeno, could meet the menace of the barbarian mercenary and when the supremacy of the Alan Aspar had been broken, the Empire could send the Isaurian back to his mountains and Anastasius, an aged civilian who had only just escaped consecration as a bishop, could rule unchallenged. And as a consequence of the triumph of the civil power, the civil administration—the steel framework which maintained Byzantine civilisation—was likewise preserved, and from the city of Constantine culture radiated and through intercourse with the capital was again reinforced. Here is preserved that conscious solidarity in the maintenance of civilisation which guaranteed a real continuity. In the West there are survivals from the ancient world—true—a branch lopped from a tree may still produce shoots; but for all that the continuity of life is broken: the doom of decay is sure. Gregory of Tours is a remarkable man, but he is a lonely figure and he feels himself isolated. And against that figure I would set a scene at a Byzantine court—when the Emperor's barbarian mistress appeared in her radiant beauty at a reception, one courtier uttered the words οὐ νέμεσις: the barbarian queen did not understand the allusion, but for Byzantines the two words were enough to summon up the picture of Helen as she stood before the greybeards on the walls of Troy. So well did the aristocracy of East Rome know their Homer: such is the solidarity of Byzantine culture. In a word it was the pitiful poverty of Western Rome which crippled her in her effort to maintain that civil and military system which was the presupposition for the continued life of the ancient civilisation.