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Comments for APA Panel: New Approaches to Political and Military History in the Later Roman Empire. Papers by Professors W. Kaegi and M. Kulikowski.

Even in a panel entitled new approaches to political and military history, it is hard for any scholar of the late Roman period to ignore the shadow of Edward Gibbon's '*History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[1] And though neither paper explicitly invoked Gibbon, I am struck by how much our paradigms for studying Late Roman Political and Military History are still influenced by Gibbon's formulation of the period and its central issues. Gibbon's focus on the triumph of Christianity and barbarism to explain Rome's fall runs as a leitmotif through both papers.

The good news is that, as these papers show, we have been able to move beyond Gibbon's explanations. Not only new evidence, but new techniques and methods of analysis have enabled us to formulate new questions of Gibbon's old paradigm. In the time allotted to me, I would like to highlight what new approaches have emerged in reformulating these old, Gibbonian causal factors for Rome's demise. The good news, for prospective Ph.D. candidates and scholars like, is that there is much work yet to be done.

First I would like to discuss Prof. Kulikowski's paper and political history. The adoption of Christianity by the emperor Constantine has traditionally been viewed as one key to the triumph of Christianity. Prof. Kulikowski is right to emphasize the new light shed on this development offered by the work of Peter Weis. Weis has identified Constantine's vision with a solar halo and, most importantly, has dated this halo to an imperial campaign some two years before the standard dating, tied to Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in Rome. If accepted, we have important new information

to advance the debate on this emperor's religious policy. Constantine then used this phenomenon to reinforce his reputation as a victorious leader with divine support; the panegyrist of 410 described it as a vision of Apollo. This vision was not yet publicly linked to the Christian god.

Yet accepting the veracity of Constantine's solar vision does not fully answer what remains, for me, the still important political and social question, namely why and how Constantine "jumped ship" and came to accept the Christian explanation of this victory. Prof. Kulikovsky observed that pagans and Christians were in Constantine's entourage. But who, besides Ossius, and how did they get there? How widely was Christianity worshipped at the time? Can new quantitative analyses help here? Was Constantine's decision a matter of personal taste, or a politically motivated move to advantage himself? (Jacob Burkhardt's thesis, in a much mitigated form, lives on.) And beyond Constantine, how did imperial policies that helped spread Christianity influence on politics and society, for better or worse? These still are open questions.

By the mid fifth century, the empire had adopted Christianity. Hence, any explanation for Rome's demise must, as A.H.M. Jones argued long ago, take into account why the Western political system fell and the Eastern one did not. If Gibbon was too limited in focusing on Christianity as the culprit for decline, he was right to try to find as a "balance between internal and external factors in the fall of the Western empire," a topic that Prof. Kulikowski observed is perpetually debated. But, here, too, new evidence and new approaches can take us beyond Gibbon.

Prof. Kulikowsi highlights new work on the late Roman economy and its impact on politics and social change. In particular, Jairus Banaji's thesis about the role of gold

in the late Roman economy suggests one of the growing internal weakness of the western empire; the rise of new coined gold and its use in place of taxation in kind. This change, allegedly, fed a new bureaucratic elite in the east, funded by and dependent upon their control over gold tax collection. This contrasts with the west, where aristocrats' were better positioned to resist this new tax system, in part due to their control over landed wealth, accumulated over centuries. This new theory fits well with what I and others have said about the independence and political resources at the disposal of Rome's western elites. Indeed, economic and political independence was reinforced, I have argued, by social and cultural norms grounded in traditional Roman religion and literary culture.[2] Banaji's work on the economic differences between west and east help explain why western elites lost faith with the imperial state and turned away from it, retreating when desired to their urban and surburban villas. But economic weakness was, I would argue, only part of the internal problems facing the Western empire.

Prof. Kulikowski ends with Gibbon's second reason for Rome's fall, the triumph of barbarism. But as he notes, the revived version of Gibbon's thesis, that the barbarian invasions was the primary, or "sole cause of western collapse in the fifth century, as conveyed by colorful Oxonian scholarly prose" is far too simple. As he succinctly puts it: "An analysis that relies wholly upon invasion by a foreign foe is barely an analysis at all." Even Gibbon was more subtle, intermixing internal factors, i.e. Christianity, into the narrative. I agree, and consider it all the more important that the invasions be understood in terms of their effects on Roman society. Hence, I am particularly drawn to Prof. Kulikowski's suggestion that Romans were willing to "act like a barbarian" to gain political advantage. Indeed, scholarly awareness of the development of ethnic identities

as sources for political power has grown significantly since Gibbon's formulation of the "barbarians" as the cause for Rome's decline. Much recent work highlights how Rome's military leaders exploited their positions. But the key is, I would argue, the internal weakness that such exploitation led to.

That is not to say that the military and warfare are not central to understanding the decline and fall of Rome and this period as a whole. Prof. Kaegi's paper issues a strong and compelling argument for the need for military history. As was said: "warfare was the single biggest preoccupation of historians in antiquity." Again, we can go well beyond Gibbon's formulation of the triumph of "barbarism." And again, I find the understanding of internal forces offers new approaches. So, I found it particularly suggestive that Professor Kaegi suggested that more work be done on "decision-making". As Professor Kaegi notes, "we need much more investigation of aspects of this, calculations, and planning at the emperor's level, including budgetary constraints, internal security fears, and bureaucratic controls." These seem to me new sorts of questions to be asked of our texts and of the archaeological evidence. .

Another fruitful approach that goes beyond Gibbon is to adopt an explicitly comparative perspective. Professor Kaegi suggested that ancient historians analyze animal handling in the light of earlier periods, like 19th century North Africa or mid-seventeenths century Egypt. I see the advantages, but would urge caution; use these comparisons only if and when they shed new light on old evidence. And I would add that comparisons with other ancient cultures, i.e. Rome and China, may be more fruitful.

Gibbon's shadow, with his emphasis on the fall of Rome as the triumph of Christianity and Barbarism, leads me to welcome, especially, Professor Kaegi's

suggestion that more work be done on religion and military efficacy, including morale. The challenge here is to confront the perspectives of our textual sources. In narratives of the victory of Theodosius I over the usurpers Arbogastes and Eugenius, discrepancies emerge not only in the length of the battle, but even in the morale of the men fighting. Ecclesiastical historians highlight the tenacity of Theodosius' men; Chrysostom adds the detail in a *Sermon* delivered soon after the battle, that they were so inspired because the emperor jumped from his horse in the midst of battle and issued a prayer to his god. [3]But any assessment of the morale and military efficacy of this battle would have to deal with this biased text. The challenge of how to study these problems given such texts remains. Perhaps a comparative perspective would be especially helpful.

Finally, as we develop new approaches to political and military history, we should be wary, I think, of searching for turning points. That is a game that is useful in class, but less so in scholarship. Alaric, I would suggest to Professor Kulikowski, was not the first to willingly play on his barbarian identity in order to raise concerns; Arbogastes similarly used his barbarian identity in his bid for power. The search for turning points often leads to false simplicities; too often it indicates more about contemporary concerns than ancient ones. A panel devoted to new approaches should indeed beware of this temptation.

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[1] It is best to consult E. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in the new edition By D. Womersley, Harmondsworth, 1994.
[2] M. R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the later Roman Empire*, 2002.
[3] F. Paschoud, "Pour un mille six centième anniversaire: le Frigidus en ébullition," *Ant. Tard.*, 5, 1997, 275-280.