

To Survive, Decentralize! The Barbarian Threat and State Decentralization

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***Abstract:** What happens when states or empires face multiple and geographically dispersed assaults along their frontiers from non-state, tribal actors? It is plausible to argue that the result may be state decentralization, both military and administrative. In some cases, this may be a conscious strategy pursued by the central authorities, but in others, it may be the result of centrifugal tendencies pursued by disaffected local leaders. This article illustrates this argument by describing the end of the Roman empire, caused by multiple assaults of barbarian groups. The lesson is that in such an environment a centralized state that arrogates to itself all the functions of security provision may undermine its own safety.*

Charles Tilly's pithy phrase that "war made the state, and the state made war," succinctly describes the rise of the modern nation-state.¹ The needs of modern, industrialized war drove the formation of the modern state. To survive, states had to embark on a gradual centralization of fiscal administration and of military force, resulting in the preeminence of the modern state. But what happens when a centralized political entity is challenged by fundamentally different external actors? To be more precise, what happens when states, or empires, face multiple and diffuse assaults along their frontiers from non-state, tribal actors? A reading of the end of the Roman

¹ Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 42.

Empire suggests that state decentralization—military and administrative—is one plausible result. Tilly’s phrase should therefore be amended: intrastate war makes modern states, but wars with non-state actors may lead to devolution of power.

This is not merely an academic debate. The possibility of localized, small, and unpredictable attacks that disrupt everyday life, but do not necessarily threaten the existence of the state cannot be ignored. The 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, a dramatic and violent and yet very localized and small episode, is an example of what the future may hold. A centralized state not only may be more vulnerable to a well-aimed attack, but also may be poorly suited to respond quickly and effectively to many “Mumbai-style” assaults, losing legitimacy, and forcing local communities to fend for themselves.

In what follows, I explore this question in two ways. First, I lay out the argument, starting from the premise that the external security environment shapes the organizational principle of states and ending with a list of conditions that may facilitate state decentralization. Second, I describe the well-studied historical period of the late Roman Empire, characterized by barbarian assaults along a long frontier, and by a splintering of the imperial territories.

The argument

The argument of this article begins from the assertion of the primacy of an external threat over the domestic politics of a state. War shapes the state because the primary goal of the state is to provide security to its members, and therefore the structure of the state adapts to the demands of war. Given that not every conflict is the same, not every state structure will be the same. The character of war, the way it is waged, the tools employed, the type of actors engaged in violence, changes across history. Consequently, the character of political entities, whose purpose is to provide security, is related to the type of war they face. As Gianfranco Poggi writes, “major changes in the modalities of warfare, and in the structure of military forces, have from time to time induced equally significant changes in political arrangements.”²

The most studied example of this logic is the rise of the modern nation-state. Modern war, characterized by the need to field large armies equipped with expensive armor and artillery, demanded the centralization of state functions and the development of state capacity in order to extract and manage resources of its territory. This required that both capital and coercion, which until the 10th century were held by different actors (commercial

² Gianfranco Poggi, *The State: Its Nature, Development and Prospects* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 111.

cities versus empires), had to fall under the control of one sovereign entity. The state could only field the force necessary to win wars by centralizing resources. And the more states increased their fiscal and bureaucratic capacity, the larger the armies they could field. The larger the armies, the greater and more destructive the wars, and this cycle resulted in further strengthening of the nation-state.³ The outcome was that an increasingly centralized polity capable of large-scale industrial warfare was essential to prevent military defeat. The threat of a peer-competitor, capable of fielding a large army with a long logistical tail along a well defined border and often along expected routes determined by geography, created the need to match him in organizational capabilities. In brief, to deter and to defeat a state you needed to be a state.

This argument revolves around three terms – state, centralization, and external threat – that may be self-evident but are often used in different context and with different nuances. First, by “state,” I mean a more or less territorially well delineated political entity with an administrative center that extracts resources and provides security. The modern nation-state is the most recent incarnation, but ancient empires represent one of the previous forms of state organizations. There are certainly important differences between ancient empires and post-Westphalian states in the size and scope of their government apparatus, as well as their territorial extent and control. However, both were hierarchically organized polities with a monopoly of violence over a more or less well defined territory. This monopoly was undoubtedly imperfect in ancient times, but even pre-modern empires severely restricted the freedom to be armed. The Roman Empire, for instance, made it illegal for civilians to carry arms and armories were imperial monopolies. Furthermore, as many have observed, a monopoly of violence never became absolute post-1648, even though modern states have been more successful in extending exclusive control over their territories. As Tilly writes:

Since the seventeenth century. . . rulers have managed to shift the balance decisively against both individual citizens and rival powerholders within their own states. They have made it criminal, unpopular, and impractical for most of their citizens to bear arms, have outlawed private armies, and have made it seem normal for armed agents of the state to confront unarmed civilians. By clinging to civilian possession of firearms, the United States now sets itself apart from all other Western countries. . .⁴

Despite this modern trend, both sub- and supra-state actors limit sovereignty of states, as well as their monopoly of violence. The difference between

³ Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1994).

⁴ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 69.

pre-modern and modern states is therefore one of degree, not of kind, and the term “state” refers appropriately not just to the modern state, but to any hierarchically organized and territorially defined polity.

Second, the term “centralization” encompasses three activities of the state: the extraction of resources (taxation), the administrative tasks (including legislative), and the military forces (provision of security). States, in their ancient or modern incarnations, tend to centralize all three activities because they are interrelated. In order to be able to field an army, the state needs to have the necessary resources that have to be extracted from its population and administered. Without controlling tax collection, a state cannot have monopoly of force, and without a central army, a state cannot enforce its laws and tax extraction. In the moment a state devolves some of its authority and power, for instance in the realm of security provision, the other tasks (tax collection and administration) tend to be decentralized too. Again, there are differences between modern states and ancient polities. For instance, ancient armies often were financed at least partially by the plunder that followed military victories, rather than exclusively through a state budget. Pre-modern polities lacked the bureaucratic apparatus needed to maintain a level of centralization comparable to that of the 20th century state, but the centralizing impulse was present.

Third, for the sake of the argument, I posit two types of external threat, on the opposite ends of the spectrum of political centralization. The first is another state that has a similar capability to extract resources over a delimited territory and to organize and train an army controlled by the administrative center. It is a peer competitor, perhaps of unequal strength, but of analogous organization. The security challenge it presents almost always is along a clearly delimited border that separates the two states and is carried out by an army that is controlled, trained, and supplied by the central government. It is a threat that is characterized by temporal permanence and by geographic consistency, leaving time to prepare defensive measures along a demarcated border. Finally, a “peer-competitor” can present an existential threat because, thanks to its organizational capabilities and size, it can vanquish the target state and extend its authority over the conquered state.

The second threat is on the opposite side of the spectrum and is characterized by a large degree of political decentralization. In its most extreme form, the hostile actor (or actors) is a non-territorial and decentralized group composed of tribes or clans coalescing temporarily around a leader. The threat it presents tends to be unexpected because of its high mobility, and geographically diffused along a long frontier. While such groups can penetrate deep inside a state’s territory, they also present a very localized danger due to their relatively small size. They can bring devastation to a region or a city, but rarely can they topple the whole state.

These three concepts – state, centralization, and nature of the external threat – are linked. The widely accepted argument about the rise of the modern state shows that states centralized their functions when threatened by similarly organized actors; a modern state was needed to defeat another modern state. I think it is plausible to argue then that a decentralized and diffused external threat may lead to a decentralized state. If the modern state was a result of a specific type of warfare, the advent of a different way of waging war may lead to a different type of state. More specifically, *a decentralized and geographically diffused threat forces the state to devolve some of its functions*. A centrally organized state is, in fact, poorly equipped to respond to small-scale incursions along a lengthy frontier.

On a military level, it is difficult to meet such a threat with a large army, concentrated in large bases and dependent on long logistical lines, because such a military force tends to move slowly, is vulnerable to disrupted supply lines, and can protect only a few possible targets of attack. Such an army can respond to a threat of a similarly organized force, slow in its movements and large in its manpower. But a small, quick attack to a distant city or outpost along the frontier is likely to remain unanswered if the defending army is not placed precisely along the vector of the assault. Concentration of forces is an ineffectual posture in front of widely dispersed, localized attacks. Rather, smaller military formations placed along the frontier or in defense of the many potential targets are likely to be more effective in defending against, and mitigating the effects of, dispersed attacks perpetuated by mobile tribal forces. The ubiquity of small security detachments also demonstrates the commitment of the central authorities to the protection of disparate local communities, thereby maintaining the legitimacy of the state, from the threat of geographically diffused attacks.

Naturally, how a state provides security to its territory – through a centralized large army or through local forces – affects in some measure the wider administrative structure. The rise of local forces, geared to respond to localized threats, is in fact connected to the strengthening of local administration. Local defense is difficult to manage from a central and distant court. In other words, a military decentralization is not simply a matter of tactics, but has political implications on how the state is structured.

Absent such a military decentralization, states need to prioritize what to defend with its larger, centralized army. The sheer act of defense prioritization, however, undermines the appeal and legitimacy of the state in those locations which are deemed less at risk, or unworthy of military defense. As a result, the cities and regions that are not defended by the state tend to seek their own security arrangements, either by surrendering to the enemy, or by developing local forces. Local elites will gradually wrestle control over tax extraction and military power from the central state administration, shoring up

their own legitimacy based on their ability to provide security to the local populations.⁵ In many cases, this fragmentation of power is simply an outcome of state weakness. It is a sign of decay, rather than of a well thought out defensive posture. Such fragmentation, a result of pre-existing structural weakness, and leads to profound changes in the political and military structure of the state—indeed, it results in a new entity, which in modern parlance is often associated with “failed states.”

The decision whether to decentralize security provision, therefore, is not automatic. Not every state that faces geographically diffuse and unpredictable threat will devolve some of its functions to local communities. Specifically, there are four factors that influence such decision.

First, the more internally secure the central government or ruler, the more likely it will pursue decentralization. Any decentralization involves a degree of devolution of power, and as a result it is seen with suspicion and preoccupation by the central authorities. The feeling of security of these authorities will influence their willingness to decentralize. A ruler who has

⁵ State decentralization is a subject of a vast literature, which however does not link external threats to the internal structure of the state. In fact, decentralization is studied especially in the context of internal strife, as a solution or as a cause of civil wars and armed clientelism, rather than as a response to external threats.⁵ Decentralization is tied to domestic processes, and is often pursued in order to mitigate ethnic tensions. The empowerment of regions and local leaders through elections and fiscal devolution is seen, in fact, as a strategy to maintain the unity of a state torn by existing centrifugal forces. The challenge is that it often leads to the breakdown of the state and to a higher degree of violence. As Kent Eaton writes, decentralization “has played into the hands of illicit armed groups who have used their control of decentralized resources to reinforce and expand their domination of vast stretches of the national territory. Decentralization has fed the problematic rise of armed clientelism, the private appropriation of public goods through violence or the threat of violence.” Decentralization becomes then a prelude to a failed state. A decentralized state often ends up as a mosaic of warlords and armed gangs, rather than a more efficient and peaceful polity. See Kent Eaton, “The Downside of Decentralization: Armed Clientelism in Colombia,” *Security Studies*, October-December 2006, p. 535. See also Barbara Walter, “Designing Transitions from Civil War: Demobilization, Democratization and Commitments to Peace,” *International Security* Vol. 24, no. 1 (1999), pp. 127-155; David Lake and Donald Rothchild, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, no. 2 (1996), pp. 41-75; Dawn Brancati, “Decentralization: Fueling the Fire or Dampening the Flames of Ethnic Conflict and Secessionism,” *International Organization*, July 2006, pp. 651-685. My argument does not deny that decentralization can have negative connotations, and in some cases result in a collapse of a centralized authority. But it is not necessarily always a top-down process, initiated by the central government in response to a particular challenge (internal, in the above mentioned literature; external, in my argument). Rather, it can be simply an outcome of the failure of central authorities to provide security and other public goods. Decentralization, that is, is a strategy pursued by local leaders and authorities who fill the void left by the state, and should be seen as an attempt to restore the order already missing rather than a source of violence and turmoil. Moreover, and this is the biggest difference between my argument and the above mentioned literature, decentralization of state functions can be a factor of external threats, and not only of domestic processes. I argue that the nature of the external threat plays a crucial role in shaping the internal arrangement of a state.

limited legitimacy and a fragile domestic base is less likely to support a strategy of decentralization because of the fear of losing power. The rise of powerful local military commanders with local armies and local legitimacy is a threat to any central government, especially one with a shaky hold over its own population.

Second, the concurrent presence of a peer-competitor threat along a different frontier will dampen the drive to decentralize. A decentralized security posture makes the state vulnerable to a large scale attack by a well organized army that could easily break the small frontier outposts and penetrate deep inside the territory, unless opposed by an equally potent army. In other words, an extremely decentralized state with no central army is difficult to defend against a state fielding a large, trained, and well armed army. The greater the threat of a hostile state, the weaker the incentive to decentralize becomes.

Third, the strategic and economic value of the frontier locations that are most likely to be attacked affects the government's decision whether and how to decentralize. In some cases, such locations, deemed unimportant, may simply be abandoned to their own fate, resulting in devolution of power likely to be permanent. In other cases, the regions under threat may be of great strategic value and the government may decide to devolve power to local actors in order to offer better protection. Such strategic decentralization is less likely to be permanent.

Fourth, the prior existence of local elites and local ability to extract and administer resources, and to organize local defenses affects the ability of a state to decentralize. If local elites exist, decentralization is more feasible, but it is also more centrifugal. Local leaders have the interest to protect their cities or regions, and can draw on fiscal and military support of the local populations. Yet, the risk is that devolution of power to the local authorities may generate greater aspirations for independence from the central government or court, fueling a separatist movement. The question then becomes one of identity, namely, the extent to which the local elites identify themselves with being part of a larger entity (say, the Roman Empire or the United States) and act in defense of local populations, but in the name of this larger community. A strong, "central" identity mitigates the centrifugal drift of empowered local authorities.

The absence of local elites upon which the central government can rely makes decentralization more difficult to implement, but easier to control and reverse. In such cases, decentralization needs to be manned by leaders and forces sent from the center, who depend fully on the central authorities for supplies, money, manpower, and legitimacy. While there is the risk that the leaders and forces detached to a region go "native" and aspire to greater independence from the center, their dependence on the state for financial and political benefits dampens their ability to turn against the capital. In some ways, this is a tactical decentralization, affecting mostly the placement of state military units, rather than devolution of power to the lowest possible political

level. Such decentralization is shallow and more transient as military forces can be easily withdrawn from frontier areas, and it also may be less effective because the facility with which troops can be moved away diminishes the credibility of the commitment of the central authorities to that region.

The end of the Roman Empire

Is this argument plausible? Because processes of domestic change have multiple causes, it is difficult to prove that diffused, localized attacks along a lengthy frontier lead to the decentralization of state functions (taxation and military force in particular). The presence of an external threat does not automatically make it a cause of decentralization because some internal factors, ranging from economic and social problems to ethnic tensions, always exist. The best one can do is to show that this argument – namely that geographically diffused attacks can lead to a decentralized state – is plausible, and that in fact a strategy of decentralization may be the most appropriate response to such a security environment. To do so, I illustrate this argument through the case study of the late Roman Empire that collapsed in the 5th century AD.

The Western Roman Empire ended in a spectacular and catastrophic form of decentralization, with the splintering of regions, the creation of new kingdoms, and the overall localization and privatization of political authority, military force, and economic life. There is certainly no disagreement regarding the outcome of this decentralization, which resulted in the end of the Western Roman Empire and sowed the seeds of the medieval period. The Roman Empire did collapse.

But there is no consensus among historians as to what caused the withering away of a central imperial authority over the Western Mediterranean and Western Europe. The key question for the purposes of this paper is whether the political and security decentralization of the Roman Empire was caused by the assaults of foreign groups crossing the Rhine and Danube, or whether internal factors, ranging from social cleavages to cultural changes, were decisive in splintering the empire.

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought, the “internalist” and the “externalist,” regarding the end of the Roman Empire. This split has characterized studies of Roman decline since ancient times and it has been summarized by Polybius, who argued that the decline of Rome, as of any other polity, can be attributed either to external enemies or internal (cultural and social) factors. St. Ambrose of Milan similarly indicated the existence of two enemies, internal (the moral degradation of society) and external (the barbarian hordes), that caused the weakening of the Roman Empire.⁶ And these two

⁶ See Santo Mazzarino, *The End of the Ancient World* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 44-57.

sets of arguments continue to characterize much of the debate among modern historians.

On the one side, some argue that the Roman Empire collapsed because of internal disarray (social, economic, cultural, and/or political), and the 5th century barbarian assaults were migrations of people who gradually, and mostly peacefully, were accommodated on imperial territories. By then, the Roman Empire was already weakened because of structural problems, and the new arrivals from the east simply filled a vacuum left by imperial degradation.

On the other side, a more recent group of historians reiterates the violent nature of the change in “late antiquity.” The barbarian groups that from the late 4th century on kept tramping through Roman territories brought with them enormous devastation, undermining the economic wellbeing of the empire, decreasing tax revenues, disrupting trade, and stretching Roman military forces to their limit (and in fact, in some cases defeating them in a spectacular fashion). What brought Rome down was the relentless and devastating pressure of external actors, rather than inherent domestic problems.⁷

My own argument is based on this latter, “external” school of thought, namely on the explanation of Roman decline as a result of foreign invasion. As French historian André Piganiol famously put it at the end of his book on 3rd century Roman Empire, “La civilisation romaine n’est pas morte de sa belle mort. Elle a été assassinée.”⁸ Without the continued assaults by groups from across the Rhine and Danube, the Roman Empire would not have fallen apart by the second half of the 5th century.

There is ample evidence to indicate that the barbarian invasions were a truly catastrophic event. The arrival of Gothic tribes in 376, and their victory over Roman legions and the death of the Roman emperor in the battle of Adrianople (378), signaled the intensification of barbarian movements across the Rhine and Danube frontiers in the succeeding decades. In some cases, such as that of the Vandals, foreign groups moved across thousands of miles of Roman territories, sailing to North Africa from where they launched raids on the Italian peninsula. Most of these groups came uninvited and were met with

⁷ A strong proponent of the internalist version is Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, introduction by Hugh Trevor-Roper (New York: Everyman’s Library 1993); Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Princeton 2006); Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*. The externalist view is represented by, among others, Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London 2005); Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Arther Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1986); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: PanBooks, 2006). For a summary of these views, see Peter Heather, “Why Did the Barbarians Cross the Rhine?”, *Journal of Late Antiquity*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2009), 3-29. See also Santo Mazzarino, *The End of the Ancient World* (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 1966), pp. 44-57, 184-9.

⁸ André Piganiol, *L’Empire Chrétien, 325-395* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), p. 422.

military force, often with great Roman success, but still at a great expense of resources and manpower. Imperial frontiers were more permeable and less defined than modern state borders, but there is no indication that Roman authorities did not seek to prevent movements of people across them. While fixed fortifications such as the Hadrian wall in Britain were exceptional, the Rhine and Danube served as an approximate line marking the limits of imperial territories. They were not demarcated land borders of the empire, but any crossing of them by external actors was considered threatening and demanded a defensive response.⁹

The barbarian incursions had a direct impact on the political structure of the empire. Most spectacularly, by the second decade of the 5th century, some of the barbarian groups managed to wrestle from Rome control over large swaths of territory, from Aquitania to Spain and North Africa. They tore, quite literally, the empire apart. But they also forced the central imperial authorities either to abandon certain regions (starting from Britain) because of the need to prioritize defense, or to relax their monopoly over military force in order to allow local communities to defend themselves. The nature of the external threat, in fact, was such that it encouraged a gradual decentralization of military and fiscal functions, resulting by the 6th century in a political landscape that is unlikely to have come into being otherwise. In the following two sections, I examine, first, the nature of this external threat and, second, the effects of this threat on the Roman Empire.

Nature of the threat

The various barbarian groups that crossed the Rhine and the Danube into Roman territories presented a very different threat from that offered by another territorially defined and centrally administered state. Six features distinguished this threat from a peer-competitor, such as Persia. First, Roman intelligence of the barbarian groups was very limited. The Romans had some knowledge of the political realities on the other side of their frontier in Europe, but it was often vague and incomplete, and above all, tinted by a strong belief in the cultural and material inferiority of the barbarians. Furthermore, the mobility of the barbarian groups of the 4th and 5th centuries deprived Rome of neighbors that had temporal and geographic permanence. Many of the groups that arrived on the frontier in the 5th century, pushed westward by the Huns, were new and unknown to Rome. Whatever the reason for this imperfect

⁹ Benjamin Isaac argues that the term *limes* has been used incorrectly to indicate a defended border with manmade fortifications. See Benjamin Isaac, "The Meaning of the Terms 'Limes' and 'Limitanei'," *Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 78 (1988), 125-147; Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: the Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, revised edition 1992). See also C.R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

intelligence of barbarian movements, it seems clear that Roman authorities had considerably fewer sources of intelligence, and thus, less information of imminent attacks by barbarian groups across the northern frontier.¹⁰ As a result, the scope of uncertainty was much larger on the Rhine and Danube than on the frontier with Persia in the east, making it more difficult to tailor defensive measures to specific areas.

Second, unlike an invasion by a peer-competitor, barbarian attacks were often raids, rapid and in-depth penetrations of small groups seeking booty, rather than full scale territorial conquests.¹¹ Raids devastated targeted regions, and with the later barbarian attacks of the 5th century, even walled cities, but none of these groups appeared to want, or to have the capability, to replace the empire and its authorities. For instance, the 410 AD sack of Rome by Alaric's Goths was a direct attack against the by-then former administrative capital, and it was considered a shocking sign of the catastrophic collapse of the Roman power, but it was perpetuated more out of a desire for gold and glory, than by a conscious decision to take over the Roman Empire.¹²

The threat presented by these rapidly moving groups was undoubtedly very serious and resulted in great loss of life and material wellbeing over the course of several decades. Writing in 396 AD, St. Jerome bemoans that "for twenty years and more the blood of Romans has every day been shed between Constantinople and the Julian Alps" and such devastation could not but lead to a feeling that the "Roman world is falling."¹³ And in the end, the relentless incursions of various barbarian groups irreparably weakened the economic base of the empire, especially after the Vandal takeover of North Africa. But from the late 4th century on, each individual barbarian threat was too small to topple the empire and was a localized menace, spreading gradually from the frontier regions to areas increasingly deeper inside the Roman Empire.

The third feature of the barbarian threat was related to the previous one, namely, the relatively small size of each group. Given the lack of definitive information, the numbers are highly speculative, but there seems to be a broad consensus that at most some of these groups fielded 20-30,000 fighting men.¹⁴ Often much smaller groups crossed the Rhine and the Danube, and while some of them were either defeated or assimilated by Rome, it

¹⁰ A.D. Lee, *Information & Frontiers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 128-139.

¹¹ Ward-Perkins, p. 52.

¹² As St. Jerome writes, "The city which had taken the whole world was itself taken." Jerome, *Select Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1933), Letter CXXVII, p. 463. See also Stefan Rebenich, "Christian Ascetism and Barbarian Incursion: The Making of a Christian Catastrophe," *Journal of Late Antiquity*, Spring 2009, pp. 49-59.

¹³ Jerome, Letter LX, p. 301 and p. 303.

¹⁴ Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 7; Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans* (Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 5 and pp. 231-4; Heather, *Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 446.

appears that barbarians gradually moved into imperial territories. As a historian puts it, it was a “seepage of barbarian peoples” that undermined the security of imperial territories; they were many, but small groups that kept entering at the same time into several territories from Gaul, to Noricum and Thrace.¹⁵

The military advantage of the Roman armies, which were still a formidable force by the late 4th century, was by and large useless when facing such a threat. The impressive logistical capabilities, combined with a well trained infantry and a growing number of cavalry, made Roman forces quite capable of winning large battles that, however, were becoming rare occurrences. The story of barbarian incursion is not a story of large battles, but of raids, skirmishes, rapid and deep penetrations along a lengthy frontier. The 378 AD battle of Adrianople, lost by the Romans, was an exceptional event, both because it occurred and because the Romans were defeated. As Ward-Perkins observes, the “West was lost mainly through failure to engage [militarily] the invading forces successfully and to drive them back.”¹⁶

Fourth, while each assaulting party was relatively small, there were many concurrent groups or tribes pressuring the frontier. There was certainly a tendency to unify into ever larger groups, especially after successful raids. Yet, even such groupings were often led by multiple leaders whose allegiance to, and alignment with, other tribes was constantly shifting.¹⁷ The strategic landscape on the European frontier of the Roman Empire was, therefore, an ever changing mosaic of highly mobile groups. In such circumstances, it was difficult to develop diplomatic interactions with these hostile actors and to enforce agreements that may have been reached with them. There was simply not enough knowledge and not enough time to establish a pattern of diplomacy.

Fifth, the time and place of conflict was often not of Roman choosing. The length of the frontier allowed the barbarian groups to cross at multiple locations, making their assaults unpredictable and difficult to prevent. Unlike the armies of a peer-competitor, barbarian forces were sufficiently small and mobile not to require lengthy and large logistical preparations. As a result, it was difficult to foresee where and when they were preparing a penetration of imperial territories. As a historian puts it, in the 5th century “it must often have been difficult to know exactly not only who was defending and who was attacking, but also what was being threatened.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395-600* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 56.

¹⁶ Ward-Perkins, p. 40.

¹⁷ Mark Humphries, “International Relations,” in P. Sabin, H. Van Wees, M. Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 7, p. 240.

¹⁸ Cameron, *The Mediterranean World*, p. 54.

Sixth, the early invaders were technically inferior to Roman forces. They often armed themselves from defeated Roman troops, and above all could not put walled cities under siege. This gradually changed, and the Huns, who arrived after the Goths, had some ability to assault cities and possessed a tactical advantage in cavalry. But the early technical inferiority meant that the barbarians left cities, the core of Roman civilization, alone and focused on devastating the countryside. The result was a growing solitude of cities, increasingly fortified with walls and severed from the rest of the Roman community because of unsafe roads. Trade decreased and cities became increasingly more detached from the imperial economic and political system. Life in all of its aspects became more and more localized.

In brief, from the 4th century on, the Roman Empire faced a security environment that was characterized by multiple, often concurrent, attacks of varying strength and across a long frontier. The groups that were threatening Rome were neither peer-competitors, nor similarly organized polities, and their rapid and unexpected movements across the frontier combined with their small sizes made Roman military superiority in large battles irrelevant. Most of the time these groups were not a match for the Roman security apparatus, but precisely because of this, and their avoidance of set battles, they presented a novel and resilient threat that demanded, and in the end caused, a very different political entity on former Roman lands.¹⁹ In a nutshell, Rome and empires in general had a tactical advantage against barbarian threats (that is, they could defeat the hostile groups in a direct military clash), but had strategic disadvantages because their centralized nature made it arduous to defend against multiple, diffuse, localized assaults.

This was a relatively new security situation for the Roman Empire. Roman authorities had to deal with the “needs of constant defence against a multiplicity of enemies from an ever diminishing pool of fiscal and military resources.”²⁰ And the Roman response, from central and local authorities alike, to this threat resulted in a gradual and often contested devolution of power that was very difficult to reverse.

¹⁹ Concerning Roman superiority, Bryan Ward-Perkins sums it up: Rome had “well-built and imposing fortifications; factory-made weapons that were both standardized and of a high quality; an impressive infrastructure of roads and harbours; the logistical organization necessary to supply their army, whether at base or on campaign; and a tradition of training that ensured disciplined and coordinated action in battle, even in the face of adversity. Furthermore, Roman mastery of the sea, at least in the Mediterranean, was unchallenged and a vital aspect of supply. It was these sophistications, rather than the weight of numbers, that created and defended the empire, and the Romans were well aware of this fact.” Ward-Perkins, p. 34.

²⁰ Mark Humphries, “International Relations,” in P. Sabin, H. Van Wess, M. Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 7, p. 238.

Roman responses

Due to the paucity of information, it is difficult to draw unequivocal conclusions on the policies pursued by Roman authorities. We know, for instance, that emperors communicated with foreign leaders and that provincial governors and commanders exchanged information and instructions with Rome, but we have very few surviving documents.²¹ As a result, we can only speculate whether Roman authorities had a clear idea of the nature of the threat they were facing, whether they were aware of their own resource constraints, and whether they tried to formulate and implement a coherent plan to deal with it. Some historians even doubt that Roman authorities thought in grand strategic terms, namely, that they related their objectives to the available resources in a systematic way.²² Many arguments about what happened, and why it happened must be therefore made “from silence.”²³

We have, however, some inkling of the political and economic processes that occurred in the late Roman Empire from the 4th century on. Perhaps the most striking change was a gradual de-urbanization of Western imperial territories. The city was the center of Roman life where the powerful lived, conducted their business, made their political careers, and where the highest expression of human activity occurred.²⁴ Western Europe under

²¹ See Fergus Millar, “Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations, 31 BC to AD 378,” *Britannia*, Vol. 13 (1982), pp. 1-23; Fergus Millar, “Government and Diplomacy in the Roman Empire during the First Three Centuries,” *International History Review*, August 1988, pp. 345-377.

²² The debate on whether there was a Roman “grand strategy” revolves in large measure around Edward Luttwak’s book, *Grand Strategy in the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). His argument that Rome pursued a clear grand strategy that could be also broken down into three distinct periods spurred a large critical literature. See Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); C.R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Everett Wheeler, “Methodological Limits and the Mirage of Roman Strategy,” Part I and Part II, *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (January 1993) and No. 2 (April 1993), pp. 7-41 and pp. 215-240; Susan Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). For a summary of the arguments and a defense of the study of grand strategy, see Kimberly Kagan, “Redefining Roman Grand Strategy,” *Journal of Military History*, April 2006, pp. 333-362; Adrian Goldsworthy, “War,” in P. Sabin, H. Van Wess, M. Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 3, pp. 76-121, in particular, pp. 108-111.

²³ Millar, “Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations,” p. 3.

²⁴ “The city was conceived of as a community of citizens united by laws and the worship of the gods, they natural environment of men, in other words that in which they could best realize their moral potential. Beyond the civilized world of cities, the classical writers described men living in villages, scattered through the countryside, or else as nomads, wanderers with no fixed abode eating raw flesh like animals, drinking only milk.” Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 106.

Roman rule was an overwhelmingly urban society, linked by an extensive network of maritime and land routes. From the 4th century on, however, these cities become increasingly smaller and are walled for defense. Even Rome and Constantinople develop impressive layers of fortifications. Rome's Aurelian walls, built toward the end of the 3rd century AD, were "a sign of changed times," characterized by increasing levels of insecurity deep inside imperial territories.²⁵

If the key cities of the empire needed walls, smaller ones in Western Europe and in the Balkans were certainly even more vulnerable to the roaming bands of barbarians and erected their own defensive ramparts, some in a hurry, perhaps indicating an unexpected degeneration of their security.²⁶ Probably as a result of local initiative, fortified positions on strategic hilltops, called *oppida*, began to appear, a sign of "the increasing remoteness of a centralized authority that could be relied upon to respond with sufficient speed or strength in times of crisis."²⁷ Furthermore, the wealthy began to move out of cities into their rural estates, which until then tended to be their sources of wealth and secondary residences. Many of those estates "also became more self-contained legally and more self-reliant for protection. Many landlords obtained an exemption from the jurisdiction of the local authorities and began themselves to exercise some jurisdictional functions on their estates. They fortified their residences and provided for their protection."²⁸ The provision of security gradually became a local responsibility because a centrally administered military apparatus could no longer counter multiple localized threats.

While a lot of cities disappeared, especially in Britain and the Balkans, those that survived in Italy, France, and Spain did so as quasi-independent entities.²⁹ Some cities, such as Cordoba and Seville in the 6th century rejected any central administration and acted as independent entities for twenty years. This devolution of power was a result of imperial withdrawal or inability to protect individual cities and regions, and there is no evidence that it was a conscious policy of the central authorities to cede power to the regions most likely to be affected by barbarian incursions. The central government was simply incapable of protecting every region under assaults. As historian

²⁵ Michael Whitby, "War" in P. Sabin, H. Van Wess, M. Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 9, p. 312.

²⁶ Whitby, p. 313.

²⁷ William Bowden, "The fourth century," in E. Bispham, ed., *Roman Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 290.

²⁸ Richard Gerberding, "The Later Roman Empire," in Paul Fouracre ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Vol. I, Chapter 1, p. 29.

²⁹ J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, "Administration and Politics in the Cities of the Fifth to the Mid Seventh Century: 425-640," in A. Cameron et al., eds, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Vol. XIV, p. 229. Whittaker, "Landlords and warlords," p. 292.

J. B. Bury writes, the “task of ubiquitous defence” was beyond the abilities of the imperial authorities.³⁰

For instance, the historical record points to a Roman withdrawal from Britain in the first decade of the 5th century, in part perhaps because of the need to move troops to defend the Rhine and in part because an imperial usurper (Constantine III) took the remaining Roman troops across the Channel to claim the throne for himself.³¹ Interestingly, the official letter announcing Roman withdrawal was addressed to cities, not local Roman leaders, probably because no legitimate and clearly recognizable Roman authorities existed there.³² Other regions most likely experienced similar military withdrawals. The vacuum left by the central imperial government was filled by local authorities, who throughout the 5th century became increasingly self-sufficient and separated from the imperial capital. Indeed, in some cases, the head of the city, the *defensor*, was elected by local people who sought him as a replacement of the governor appointed by the central government.

These cities also took over the provision of security, and the army became attached to them rather than to the imperial center. At least in part, from the end of the 4th century on, the decreased mobility of the army and its reliance on cities for supplies was due to the degeneration of the logistics system, made unreliable by the lack of security of the Roman road network.³³ The effect was unmistakable: the imperial monopoly of force gradually broke down and local private armies became more common. This was a dramatic change. As a historian writes, “That landowners should join the army at the head of their own armed tenantry is a fundamental departure both from the principle of the city state and from the practice of the empire.”³⁴

This bottom-up decentralization of power was aided by the existence of elites who had the authority and popular following necessary to demand money and manpower to protect their cities and regions. These elites were culturally Roman, with extensive contacts, as well as residences in Rome, and often came from the senatorial class. Many of them were or became bishops who were locally elected, and thanks to the authority derived from the Church, they rallied populations around them and became the new local leaders.³⁵ A case in point is Sidonius Apollinaris, bishop of Clermont in Gaul, who defended the city against the Goths in the late 5th century. While ultimately unsuccessful militarily, Sidonius maintained his position as a bishop, insisting

³⁰ J.B. Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), p. 161.

³¹ Peter S. Wells, *Barbarians to Angels* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), p. 109.

³² Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 249.

³³ Whittaker, “Landlords and warlords,” p. 294.

³⁴ Liebeschuetz, p. 236.

³⁵ Liebeschuetz, p. 230.

on the ability of the Church to be independent from the Goths' (who were Arian and therefore heretic) interference.³⁶

In a sense, the unity of the Roman Empire, rapidly vanishing under the pressure of barbarian incursions, was shored up by the Church that defended cities and maintained order in them, and that, through the monasteries, kept Roman civilization alive.³⁷ After the disappearance of a unified Roman army, the Church became the only institution that could transcend the constantly moving boundaries of barbarian kingdoms.³⁸ Furthermore, spurred by St. Benedict and his rule, from the late 5th century on, monasteries became self-sufficient entities, with their own economies, centers of authority and education, and in some cases even as places of refuge and safety, an "oasis of sanity in a barbarian kingdom."³⁹ As Christopher Dawson writes, "The monastery had, in fact, taken the place of the moribund city, and was to remain the centre of medieval culture until the rise of the new type of city commune in the eleventh and twelfth century."⁴⁰

The geographic contraction of imperial power and its focus on Italy from the mid-5th century on created the space necessary for local elites to assume the responsibilities until then fulfilled by the central authorities. Yet, this process of decentralization was not smooth because local armies could not fill quickly the security vacuum left by the imperial forces. In fact, the barbarian groups that entered the Roman Empire encountered overall very little local resistance.

This was probably in large part due to the fact that for generations the population had been accustomed to being protected by a professional army. The civilian population was in fact, for reasons of internal security, forbidden to bear arms. More important than this legal prohibition was the attitude of mind which it reflected. Citizens were not expected to fight, and for the most part they never envisaged the idea of fighting.⁴¹

There are certainly cases of local defensive actions undertaken by cities, as in the case of Clermont mentioned earlier, but it took time for cities and regions to develop the will and capabilities to militarize themselves. Unlike a few

³⁶ Eric J. Goldberg, "The Fall of the Roman Empire Revisited: Sidonius Apollinaris and His Crisis of Identity." *Essays in History*, No. 35 (1995), pp. 1-15.

³⁷ See for instance the role of Cassiodorus, a retired public servant who established a monastery, Vivarium, in the south of Italy, where he collected the last large library of the Roman world. Franco Cardini, *Cassiodoro il Grande* (Milano, Italy: Jaca Books, 2009).

³⁸ Raymond Van Dam, "Merovingian Gaul and the Frankish Conquests," in Paul Fouracre ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Vol. I, Chapter 8, p. 215.

³⁹ Christopher Brooke, *The Age of the Cloister* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003), p. 50.

⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), p. 63. See also Christopher Dawson, *The Formation of Christendom* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2008), p. 181.

⁴¹ A.H.M Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), Vol. 2, p. 1062.

centuries later when local landowners in the Carolingian empire had already “their own ready-made armies. . . Roman landowners, by contrast, were civilian, and had to struggle to put together enough of a force in their locality to defend themselves from predation from the centre” and later from external groups.⁴² The danger of any empire and state that exercises a monopoly of force is that devolution of security roles, whether willing or not, takes time and presents a substantial adjustment to the structure and culture of the affected society.

By the mid-5th century, Roman emperors were willing to relax the imperial monopoly over arms production by, for instance, providing cities with armories. And in 440 when Italy was being targeted by Vandal seaborne raids, Valentinian III formally repealed the law banning civilians from carrying arms.⁴³ The centrality of Italian lands, where also the emperors felt less threatened by potential local usurpers, made decentralization of security provision a much more appealing option than in strategically less important regions that were also more at risk of generating local challengers to the imperial throne (as proven, for instance, by the self-declared emperor Constantine III in Britain). The tradeoff was that in regions where a strong local leadership existed, the devolution of imperial power resulted in centers more capable of defensive actions but also in the end less interested in staying within the Roman orbit. The least Romanized regions of the empire, such as Brittany, Western Britain, Northern Spain, and parts of Gaul, were those that resisted the longest to barbarian incursions.

In these areas, in fact, the Roman Empire never succeeded in replacing completely the existing tribal structures on which the populations, facing the various Gothic and Hunnic groups, relied to organize their defense. The militarization of local populations was easiest then in places where Roman imperial influence had been least successful.⁴⁴ Similarly, the revolts of the Bacaudae in the early 5th century, often interpreted as slave rebellions, were more likely local rebellions against central authorities that failed to provide security. The large number of slaves who participated in these uprisings was probably due to the fact that they were the most skilled warriors as many came from barbarian tribes.⁴⁵

The political success of the empire was therefore a mixed blessing when the barbarian – that is, small, local, mobile, and frequent – threats materialized in the late 4th century. The sophistication of Roman society, which

⁴² Heather, *Fall of the Roman Empire*, 449. See also Whitby, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIV, Chapter 17, p. 481, and Whitby, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIV, Chapter 11, p. 297.

⁴³ Bryan Ward-Perkins, p. 48; Whitby, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIV, Chapter 17, p. 481.

⁴⁴ Van Dam, *New Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. I, Chapter 8, p. 222.

⁴⁵ Ward-Perkins, pp. 47-8; Ian N. Wood, “The north-western provinces,” in A. Cameron et al., eds, *Cambridge Ancient History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Vol. XIV, pp. 497-524, and pp. 502-4 in particular.

encouraged labor specialization that led local populations to buy manufactured products from distant markets and security from a professional army, also made it vulnerable to a disruption of the system. As a historian observes, the ability to buy pots from skilled workers and superior security from imperial legions was beneficial because people

got a quality product – much better than if they had had to do their soldiering and potting themselves. However, when disaster struck and there were no more trained soldiers and no more expert potters around, the general populations lacked the skills and structures needed to create alternative military and economic systems. In these circumstances, it was in fact better to be a little “backward.”⁴⁶

Finally, a decentralized empire could defend itself as long as local elites felt they were Roman. Perhaps unavoidably, the population writ large had little desire to defend the “Empire,” the world under Roman control. As A.H.M. Jones notes, “Rome was . . . a mighty and beneficent power which excited their admiration and gratitude, but the empire was too immense to evoke the kind of loyalty which they felt to their own cities.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, most city leaders who assumed positions of administrative and military responsibility in the late 4th century were truly Roman and were interested in preserving the civilization that came with the empire. They saw themselves as defending Roman civilization and power by protecting their city or region. Gradually, however, from the late 5th century on, the connection to a Roman empire withered away and the political outlook of the leaders shrunk to their own province. This “provincialization” was

both a consequence and a cause of the breakdown of central government. Augustine thought in terms of the whole empire; Salvian took his moral images at least from the whole of the West. . . . But Sidonius was definitely a Gaul. Gaulish elites rarely travelled to Italy by now. . . . A common political culture may have survived, but in each former Roman region or province its points of reference were becoming more localized, and its lineaments would soon start to diverge.⁴⁸

With each new generation of local leaders, Rome was becoming an increasingly distant and abstract authority.

Western vs. Eastern Roman Empire

The historical record is clear: the Western Roman Empire collapsed, and by the 6th century various barbarian kingdoms took its place. Rome as a central authority simply could not cope with the multiple localized threats; as a result, it had to abandon some regions and relax its monopoly of violence over others. Arguably, this imperial fragmentation was influenced by diminishing

⁴⁶ Ward-Perkins, p. 49.

⁴⁷ A.H.M. Jones, p. 1062.

⁴⁸ Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome* (New York, NY: Viking, 2009), p. 91.

material capabilities as well as by the unstable internal political scene. But it is certainly plausible to argue that the external threat had an enormous impact on the internal structure of the attacked state.

The case of the Eastern Roman Empire is instructive because Byzantium in the 4-6th centuries faced the barbarian threats in the north and a peer-competitor, Sasanian Persia, on its southern frontier. Unlike its Western counterpart, Byzantium had to face the powerful Persian state, capable of fielding a large army that relied on extended logistics, could hold conquered territories, and presented a fixed threat from across the southern frontier.⁴⁹ The barbarians in the north could raid a region or damage a city, but an invasion of a Sasanian army could result in a territorial loss that would have required enormous military efforts to reverse.⁵⁰ To deter and, if need be, to defeat such an army, Byzantium needed a comparable force, led by a central authority that could direct it to where it was most needed.

While regional forces, in some cases private armies or retinues of local individuals and commanders, developed in this period, all were ultimately under imperial control, and the emperor could decide how to use them. Byzantine strategy stressed the need to avoid set battles with the enemy in order to protect the dwindling imperial military resources.⁵¹ But to implement such a strategy, a centralized control over the military forces had to be maintained because otherwise local armies might have chosen to engage enemy forces approaching a city or region that they were expected to protect. As a historian observes, “Warfare against the Persians usually entailed the deployment of an imperial army which could repress separatist tendencies. . . and there was little hope that a city or region could sustain an independent existence in the face of Persian might. . . . The direct clash of the two great powers of an ancient world helped to ensure that their common frontier was an area of strong central control, not of disintegration.”⁵²

The power of the Eastern Roman empire remained firmly seated in Byzantium. Taxes continued to flow directly to the capital, and not to local commanders as it gradually became the norm in the West in the 5th and 6th centuries. Power was derived from the state apparatus, and not the possession of large estates from which one could draw taxes and manpower. The privatization and localization of security provision that characterized the late Roman period in the West did not occur in the East.⁵³ Similarly, the decen-

⁴⁹ Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵⁰ Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 50.

⁵¹ Luttwak, *passim*; John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204* (London: UCL Press, 1999), pp. 278-9.

⁵² Whitby, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIV, Chapter 17, p. 484.

⁵³ Mark Whitton, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 106.

tralization of political authority in the West was made possible by the local Church hierarchy, which assumed increasingly larger roles as protectors of cities, as the example of bishop Sidonius in Gaul indicates. In the East, bishops preferred to reside in Byzantium, where the seat of all power remained.⁵⁴

When and where Byzantium faced a more decentralized, mobile, and localized threat, a process of political and military devolution did occur. For instance, starting in the 7th century, the southern frontier came under the threat of Arab raids and the centralized system of security provision became inadequate for dealing with rapid and unpredictable assaults on border regions and cities. The challenge was that local populations were left exposed to raids, but were also woefully unprepared to defend themselves because Byzantium had maintained a prohibition to possess and produce arms by private individuals. There are some cases where local individuals attempted to lead the defense of their cities, but most of Syria and Palestine, recognizing that an armed resistance would have been futile in the long run, gradually surrendered to Arab invasions.⁵⁵

The case of Byzantium, therefore, appears to strengthen the broad argument that the nature of the external threat has a great impact on the internal structure of the state. It also confirms the more particular argument that a decentralized threat encourages and in some cases forces decentralization of state functions, including that of security provision. Byzantine history points to the fact that a threat by a peer-competitor, a similarly structured state or empire, increases the pressure to keep a centralized fiscal, political and military apparatus to be able to maintain deterrent and defensive capabilities.

Conclusion

This overview of the late Roman Empire does not prove that political fragmentation is unavoidable when a state is assaulted by multiple and small groups that present very localized threats. But it does indicate that state centralization is not always the most effective way of approaching security matters. In fact, there are some serious costs associated with a centralized state. Herein lies the relevance of this argument. A state, ancient and modern alike, that is characterized by a high level of fiscal and military centralization is an effective strategic actor in an environment dominated by analogous political entities. But when such a state faces a fundamentally different opponent, a manifestation of the barbarian threat described above, e.g. terrorist organizations, insurgencies, armed groups, and the like, centralization may become an impediment to security. Because of the unpredictable and localized nature of

⁵⁴ Wickham, p. 353.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Isaac, *The Eastern Frontier*, A. Cameron et al., eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIII, Chapter 14, pp. 437-460, pp. 456-8 in particular; Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 47-51.

this threat, a state may be better served by decentralizing some of its authority and allowing local forces and leaders to provide for their own security. Such devolution of power is likely to occur anyway, because a centralized state is poorly prepared to deal with militarily small and geographically diffuse assaults. It is more provident, therefore, to establish the circumstances, such as local leaders with a strong attachment to their country in the idea of the state and a population with skills and capabilities to defend itself, that would allow the state to pursue a strategy of decentralization. A centralized state that arrogates to itself all the functions of security provision may undermine its own safety.

Arguably, most states have a modicum of local security provided by their police forces, which are responsible for maintaining order and preventing or mitigating criminal activity. Yet, the threat described here is of much higher intensity than relatively small crimes. It falls somewhere in between the menace of a peer-competitor and the nuisance of traditional criminal activity; it has an external component that some organized crime has, but it is more lethal and disruptive than most episodes in recent criminal history.

Current situations that approach the level of the barbarian threat faced by Rome are the growing instability along the U.S.-Mexico border caused by increasingly well armed Mexican gangs, or the continued possibility of attacks by jihadist groups (think of several Mumbai-style assaults). A conventional—large but slow—army of a modern state is unsuited to counter such threats; interstate conflicts are its strength. But a relatively small local police force may also be incapable to respond with sufficient strength to such attacks, and it can be easily overwhelmed. Furthermore, these threats are highly localized, creating a large divergence of interests within the country. For example, Mexico's instability is an immediate threat to, say, Texas, but does not register as a concern to authorities in Maine. As a result, it becomes politically difficult to mobilize the resources of the whole country to address problems deemed to be specific to a city or a border region.

The policy of decentralizing security provision by, for instance, building greater capabilities for local police forces, may be the most effective way of responding to such a security environment. Signs already abound that this is exactly what is already happening in the United States, a country that because of a deep tradition of self-reliance and federalism may be well positioned to adapt to the possibility of non-state, small, localized, threats. Other countries, in particular in Europe, where the drive to build a centralized state that arrogates to itself most aspects of social life has been historically longer and more relentless, may face greater challenges.

