

Research Proposal

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The reign of Marcus Aurelius stands out in history as one of the few times in which one of Plato's philosopher kings may have truthfully donned the Tyrian purple. My thesis will dissect the reign of Marcus in order to make the argument that the philosophy of Stoicism was an essential element in establishing realm stability and socio-political flourishing. It will be illustrated that as the military emperors to follow Marcus during the Crisis of the Third Century lacked Stoic virtue, they were unable or unwilling to maintain the same devotion to state that previously Stoic-minded statesmen had offered. Essentially this thesis will both expand upon and criticize Gibbon, arguing that a different type of moral decay contributed to the decline of the Empire.

While this latter argument has fallen upon such a measure of criticism in recent years as to nearly become debunked, being replaced by more favorable economic theories, this thesis will attempt to restore some credence to it by illustrating the impact that Stoicism had on Roman leadership, arguing that it became the *esprit de core* of the senator-class by the dawn of the common era, while also holding a profound influence for two centuries before. The implications of the abandonment of the Stoic ethic in leadership will be overviewed in order to argue for the philosophy's significance in establishing benevolent, prudent and just government.

Ultimately the thesis will contrast the exemplary reign of Marcus Aurelius, who identified himself as a Stoic, with the reigns of men who were not identified as being Stoics who followed him, military men who attempted to seize the power of the throne through ambition and greed rather than in the spirit of Stoic justice, and thus contributed to the manorialism, strife and duress which by the fifth century had become fatal for the Empire.

The question of why the Roman Empire declined and disappeared from history is perhaps one of the most extensively studied fields in the discipline, being exhausted by multiple angles of inquiry since at least the fifth century of the Common Era. As it is a tall order to challenge such extensive scholarship, the purpose of my thesis will not be to argue why the Empire fell fundamentally but instead to suggest that an element that has often been neglected by scholarship may have been a significant factor in the healthy operation of the state, namely under the Five Good Emperors and in especial Marcus Aurelius, and that its abandonment or absence under the later military despots during the Crisis of the Third Century contributed to a fatal spirit of civic disengagement, strife and manorialism. This element is the philosophy of Stoicism, which had a profound impact on the leadership caste of Mediterranean aristocracy from at least the time of the Diadochi, reached an apex during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and is absent from the behaviors and writings of future emperors.

In sum, my essay will argue that the abandonment of Stoic behaviors in leadership was a significant factor contributing to the decline by contrasting the reign of the late stoic emperors with the despotic rule of the military emperors of the third century. In order to bring this argument to bear I will first examine the historiography of the decline of the Empire and then confront perceived failings. I do not dare to define the fundamental causes of the decline, but I must admit that I do perceive a significant flaw in the scholarship of others.

The decline of the Roman Empire is one of the most exhausted and diverse studies of history, explained by a range of concepts, from elegant general theories to

complex and systematic frameworks.<sup>1</sup> While all of the historians to be surveyed propose reasons for why the Empire declined, or why we perceive it as having declined, none of them save Vegetius and Gibbon dare to argue for the cause of such change, the deeper and more fundamental reason why men chose to engage in civil war and kill one another for gold. Through modern Rankean cynicism most historians have rejected psychology, philosophy and religion as being meaningful movers of change, instead focusing on economic and political motives.

My argument is that the economic and political decline of the Empire was necessarily motivated by a psychological decline: the Stoic Emperors were better adept at dealing with crisis and seem to have ruled with relative selflessness and magnanimity, especially when contrasted with the period of anarchy and murder following them during the third century. Fundamentally, my argument is that the abandonment of Stoicism left the Roman leadership without knowledge of how to rule well.

Goldsworthy for instance argues that infighting and civil war contributed to degrading military standards and a lack of respect for central authority, which in turn weakened the defensive capabilities of the Empire, finally ushering in the fatal barbarian invasions of the fourth through sixth centuries. This chain of events is an accurate report of the state of affairs of the third century and such a tumultuous cocktail may have proved deadly for the empire. Goldsworthy's argument fails in that it does answer the question of why men chose to betray each other, to reject the rule of law and to disobey superiors, to quest for gold as the lowest common denominator, why they abandoned civic duty in the pursuit of personal power, i.e. why the behaviors and values of the leadership caste

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<sup>1</sup> A literature review is provided in the attached: Chris Krause. *Historiographical Survey of the Decline of the Roman Empire*. 2011.

shifted to foster dysfunction. Goldsworthy does not answer the question of what determines the actions of people and what would cause men to wage civil war, the latter weaknesses all originating from the first.

I propose that inclinations, desires, judgments and aversions, defined by a knowledge or perception of the good of life, predicate the behaviors of actors, and must have necessarily predicated the actions of the military emperors of the third century. This knowledge of the good was during the reign of the five good Emperors defined by the philosophy of Stoicism, and the defacto civic religion fell out of prominence or was rejected by the despots to follow during the third century, who seemingly lacked a codified system of ethics and held power and gold as the greatest good. As these mediocre men lacked or refused a knowledge of the good transcendent of animal impulse and indulgence, holding the traditions, values and laws of both the cosmopolis and of Rome herself to be irrelevant in the pursuit of their own advancement, the statesmen to follow exercised tyrannical dispositions which were averse to the wellbeing of the commonwealth and so perpetuated the decline of the Empire.

The Stoics believed in a universal reason (known as the Logos) which bound together all of humanity, and interpreted all people as being equal and sharing in bonds of fellowship. Living in accordance with reason and virtue they held that in order to live properly one must recognize this common reason and the essential value of all people, treating others with fairness and magnanimity. The four cardinal virtues are wisdom (sophia), courage (andreia), justice (dikaiosyne) and temperance (sophrosyne). The Stoics held that action and choice were extensions of virtue, and sought to behave constantly in

a fashion consistent with those goods; they sought to build a self-sacrificing and tempered character, and so wielded the knowledge necessary to rule others.

In the centuries leading up to the "decline of the third century" the people of Rome venerated the semi-mythical figure of Cincinnatus who unflinchingly abandoned his farm and family to repel the Gauls as the ideal role model and found the incorruptible and austere Cato the Younger who dared to resist the tyranny of Gaius Julius for sake of upholding his duty to the republic as a living example of the embodiment of their national pride, so inspiring his compatriots to virtue and integrity. Both men embodied the Stoic virtues of temperance, prudence, justice and courage and were interpreted by Livy and Plutarch respectively as being ideal Romans: men who heroically served the community of the republic with no compromise and held loyalty not to individuals or to gods but the idea of what Rome could become, who laid down their lives in dutiful service, with no complaints. My thesis is that this mode of thought was common in the behaviors of the aristocracy during the reign of the Five Good Emperors of the first and second centuries, most notably under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, who professed himself to be a Stoic and also comprised a book of Stoic meditations in his own right, all the while holding the reins of power to the most powerful state on earth.

The knowledge of the good as perceived by a Stoic exemplar such as Cato the Younger, who served the state with voluntary self-sacrifice in order to bring about a just and harmonious society and who died rather than disobey the rule of law, lies in great contrast to the mercenaries of the third century, who exploited their power and positions, leading treacherous legions into battle against fellow citizens, in order to secure material prizes. The sublime republic, founded as a vessel of the virtues, grown into an empire of

laws, having been left destitute by the murderous sabotage of the military emperors, was finally unable to resist the Gothic expansion.

I will illustrate my argument by dissecting the historical record: the reign of Marcus was plagued by threats and dangers: barbarian adventurism and plague, for instance, yet the Stoic emperor endured and sought to bring about a just and fair society. This is in stark contrast to the petty men who followed him: professing no conviction in Stoicism and who seem to have fought each other like mad dogs for mere power and gold, all the while inflicting widespread and irrevocable damage to infrastructure, the social order and the rule of law. In this manner I will not argue that the rejection of stoicism was the essential cause of decline, but rather that its abandonment began a psychological decline in the minds of the leadership and officers, precipitating the fatal causes.

This topic is significant academically as well as generally. In terms of historiography, I believe that Stoicism has been crudely ignored as a significant factor in determining the decline of the Empire, so much so that a great measure of the broader academic community lacks knowledge of what Stoicism is, and how it influenced history, at all. Few in academia, and even less in the greater community, realize that Stoicism was the most influential philosophy of antiquity, profoundly influencing not only the Mediterranean aristocracy but also early modern European contemporaries up until at least the eighteenth century, at which point the emphasis was artificially shifted to Plato and Aristotle, as the study of the history of philosophy became a technical and intellectual pursuit rather than a civic and historical topic. The superficial (and often erroneous) coverage that Stoicism receives in most western civilization and ancient

history survey courses is an affront to the historical record and betrays the complex reality of the situation; Stoicism cannot be covered in two sentences, no matter how pithy. Ultimately, my hope is that my thesis will be compelling enough to convince the reader that the abandonment of this influential system of ethics and perception represents a critical degradation in the civic behaviors of the late Roman statesmen, playing a significant factor in their decisions to wage civil war.

Generally, the thesis elucidates a more fundamental topic: how should a ruler behave or what is the good of life? My thesis will not answer this, as it is not within the domain of the discipline, but this topic is nonetheless why I consider such an essay to be of importance. I believe that the Stoic philosophy is extremely effective for purposes of just and compassionate government, as well as creating citizens of proper character. Many of the great statesmen through history have either been influenced by Stoicism or by the deep themes it touches upon (Sima Qian for instance, of the ancient Han court, with influence of Confucius, instructed a similar moral philosophy) from Scipio to Frederick II of Prussia, to George Washington, the latter two of which were said to have always had a copy of the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius at hand while on campaign.

The story of why the Roman Empire declined is the story of why all empires decline: when civic goods and the practice of virtues are replaced by the pursuit of gold and personal power, when lies become truth, and the people are unwilling or unable to participate in government, fear death more than they fear slavery, abandon decorum for ill-tempered indulgence, vote themselves largesse from the treasury, are disconnected from the good life, the state collapses. This judgment, in my mind, has a great deal of immediacy for the contemporary political culture of the United States, as the quality of



the leadership has degenerated from selfless Stoic knights to demagogue sophists seemingly dedicated to exploiting their power at the expense of the rape of republic. In this fashion my thesis serves as a letter of warning to those who have not yet abandoned their reason to the seductions of despot emperors.

### Proposed Outline

Part 1: Positioning of thesis and introduction

Part 2: Historiographical survey of the decline of the Roman Empire

Part 3: Critique of historiography and repositioning of thesis

Part 4: Academic analysis of the history of Stoicism in the Roman world; demonstration that Stoicism was prevalent in the Roman aristocracy

Part 5: Examination of the role of ancient philosophy in the lives of the ancients; Pierre Hadot's theory of the "spiritual exercise"; demonstration that Stoicism where present was followed with action rather than academic contemplation

Part 6: Case studies in the Five Good Emperors to demonstrate links between historical action and Stoicism

Part 7: A brief survey of the post-Stoic Roman world and the Crisis of the Third Century

Part 8: Discussion, repositioning of thesis

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

Betty Radice, trans. *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1963).

Pliny includes a conversation with Hadrian (10.97) which is very revealing as a portrait of the Emperor's psychology and rationales for action. In this letter Hadrian argues for universal law, justice and liberality, Stoic notions of the day.

David Magie, trans. *Historia Augusta* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1921).

The Augustan History is a late Roman collection of biographies, in Latin, of the Roman Emperors, their junior colleagues and usurpers of the period 117 to 284. It presents itself as a compilation of works by six different authors (collectively known as the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*), written in the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine I, but the true authorship of the work, its actual date, and its purpose, have long been matters for controversy. The Augustan History is problematic but nonetheless invaluable and its often fantastic claims can be checked against more rigorous accounts such as Dio and Herodian. The volume pays special attention to the character and personal behavior of the Roman emperors and is thus an aid to understanding the period, even if the precision of fact is often lacking.

Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, trans., *Dio Cassius: Roman History* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1924).

Dio's history is the best and most complete source and portrait of the life and time of the Stoic emperors, and places the period into the context of the greater history of the Roman polity. Dio's thoughtful and often philosophical tone is an aid to a thematic understanding of the period. *Roman History* ultimately provides the bulwark of essential fact and historical coverage which underlies the thesis.

Edward C. Echols, trans. *Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961)

While Dio offers complete historical coverage of the rise and apex of the Empire, Herodian pays special coverage to the decline and corruption following the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a dysfunction which is central to the argument laid to bear. Eight books cover the period of 180-238, from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the reign of Gordian III. Specifically Herodian covers the beginnings of the "Crisis of the Third Century" and the endemic failings of a Roman polity without proper respect of tradition or principled rule. A moral account, Herodian's work is nonetheless extremely important for understanding the turbulent death throes of the Empire.

Elizabeth Carter, trans. *Moral discourses ; Enchiridion and fragments* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010).

The works of Epictetus were the essential teachings for Stoics during the reign of the Five Good Emperors, either through direct dissemination or by adaption of allied schools. An understanding of Epictetus is essential to understanding the psychology of Roman Stoics, as will be demonstrated by Pierre Hadot.

Gregory Hays, trans., *Meditations* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

The philosophical journal of Marcus Aurelius offers a unique insight into Hellenistic and Roman perceptions of Stoicism, cosmology, civic responsibility, philosophical thought and tenets of leadership. This is perhaps the most important record for the work, as it clearly reveals a Roman emperor who is also a philosopher whose actions are heavily influenced, almost religiously by Stoicism. The Gregory Hays translation of the Koine Greek is the best available. While the George Long translation is considered often considered authoritative, it's stubborn insistence on using Victorian and formal English is not compatible with the researcher's perception of hypomnema, or contemporaneous translations of similar writings.

H.W. Bird, trans. *Aurelius Victor: De Caesaribus* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994).

Aurelius Victor's work is another contemporaneous account of the same dubiousness as the *Historia Augusta*. Nevertheless, this colorful history covers the "Five Good Emperor" period and the subsequent decline in the morals and values

of the Roman polity. *De Caesaribus* pays special coverage to the reign of Nerva, which is essential to understanding the concept of adoptive rule.

John E. Hill, trans. *Through the Jade Gate to Rome: A Study of the Silk Routes during the Later Han Dynasty, First to Second Centuries CE* (Booksurge, 2009).

Hill's work includes a translation of *The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu* from Book 88 of *Hou Hanshu*, the history of the late Han. This Chinese account is critical for an understanding of the cosmopolitan auspices of both the Roman and Chinese polities, and respective philosophical interpretations of their place in nature.

John Jackson, trans. *Tacitus: The Annals* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1937).

The Histories of Tacitus, written c. 100–110, covers the Year of Four Emperors following the downfall of Nero, the rise of Vespasian, and the rule of the Flavian Dynasty (69–96) up to the death of Domitian. It is an essential record of the time before the Five Good Emperors, and naturally ends where his contemporaries initiate coverage.

John Dryden, trans. *Plutarch's Lives* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

Plutarch's Lives, written at the beginning of the second century A.D., is a brilliant social history of the ancient world by one of the greatest biographers and moralists of all time. In what is by far his most famous and influential work, Plutarch reveals the character and personality of his subjects and how they led

ultimately to tragedy or victory. Richly anecdotal and full of detail, Plutarch helps to depict the character which underlies historical action prior to the period of Five Good Emperors, and is thus invaluable for purposes of the thesis.

Joseph D. Frendo, trans. *Agathias: The Histories (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae)* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975).

Agathias is a principal source for late Roman history and covering the origins and operation of the Byzantine politic. His focus, like many historians of antiquity, is on the manners, behaviors and morals of great leaders, and is thus excellent for purposes of this thesis. While Agathias' histories are lacking in precision of fact, they are nonetheless important for understanding the terminal period of the Roman Empire, when powerful forces were shearing the west from east expanses, many of which were coming from within. Agathias is most notable as one of the only sources on the reign of Justinian and the foundation of the Byzantine domain. In this sense Agathias is useful for examining the broader theme of decline with an earlier age.

Kirsopp Lake, John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Hugh Jackson Lawlor, trans. *The ecclesiastical history* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

The church history of Eusebius is an excellent insight into the thought of the post-Stoic Roman society and the progression of the Logos from Stoic cosmology to Church doctrine.

P.G. Walsh, trans. *Livy: Ab urbe condita* (London: Duckworth Publishers, 2008).

Livy's monumental history of Rome since its founding up until 9 B.C. is an essential companion to the various other primary sources which cover the period of interest, as it was used extensively by contemporaneous writers as a basis of historical understanding.

Robert Graves and Michael Grant, trans. *The Twelve Caesars* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1957).

The Twelve Caesars, is a set of twelve biographies of Julius Caesar and the first 11 emperors of the Roman Empire written by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. The work, written in AD 121 during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, was the most popular work of Suetonius, at that time Hadrian's personal secretary, and is the largest among his surviving writings. The book offers similar coverage to Tacitus and can be considered a companion for cross reference and verification.

Robin Campbell, trans. *Letters from a Stoic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969).

*This volume includes the epistles of Seneca the Younger, a foundational work in Roman Stoic philosophy. Included as an aid to comprehension of the Roman Stoic.*

Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain, trans. *Simplicius: On Epictetus* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).

The essential Roman commentary on the most influential Stoic philosopher of the period. Through Simplicius we come to understand the Roman interpretation and adoption of Epictetus' doctrines.

Secondary Sources:<sup>1</sup>

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Ward-Perkins, Bryan. *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> Annotations and discussions of each one of these sources are included in the attached document.