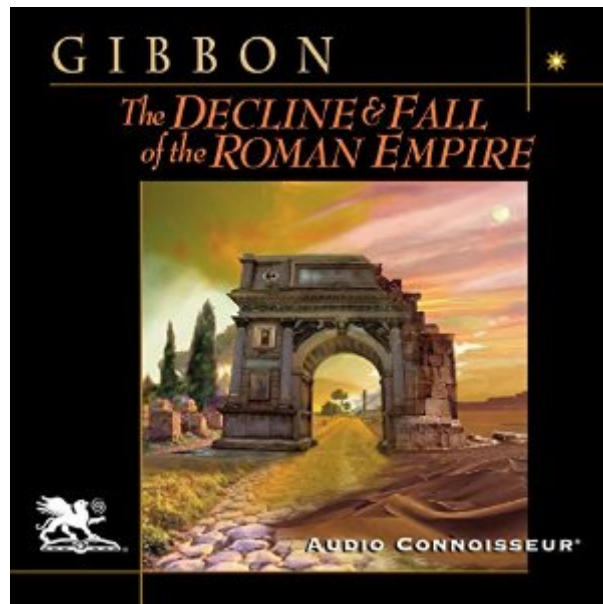


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# The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire



## Synopsis

Here in a single volume is the entire, unabridged recording of Gibbon's masterpiece. Beginning in the second century at the apex of the Pax Romana, Gibbon traces the arc of decline and complete destruction through the centuries across Europe and the Mediterranean. It is a thrilling and cautionary tale of splendor and ruin, of faith and hubris, and of civilization and barbarism. Follow along as Christianity overcomes paganism... before itself coming under intense pressure from Islam. It is a story that begins in Rome and ends in the capture of Constantinople by the Turks almost 1,500 years later. To aid in navigating this massive work, please refer to the accompanying PDF, which contains a table of contents and starting times for each chapter.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 126 hours and 31 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audio Connoisseur

Audible.com Release Date: April 21, 2015

Language: English

ASIN: B00WHCB85K

Best Sellers Rank: #5 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Ancient #14 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Rome

## Customer Reviews

There are books; there are great books; and then there are books that change everything - that test you and change you and impact you permanently and profoundly. Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens...those sorts of authors shake you and challenge you to grow. Gibbon, deservedly considered one the fathers of modern history and the historical method, ranks among those authors. The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire displays a fine example of literary genius, representing some of the very best humanity has to offer. If, faced with the extinction of the human race and the loss of all things we've learned throughout our history, the lone survivors were bequeathed a top ten list of written works aimed at condensing human thought and evolution into the most valuable lessons and wisdom of the ages in the interest of providing the surest and most beneficial foundation for starting anew, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire should be in it. Yes, it's that important and that good. Aptly titled, Gibbon explains not only the historical nuts and

bolts of what happened when but more importantly why. As incredibly ambitious as it is valuable, Gibbon traces the history of Rome's demise from its height (around the 1st century) to/through the dark/middle ages (to around 1500A.D.), giving a sweeping and astonishing view of a period of our history that still has no equal. Gibbon not only shows us Rome; for those willing to look he holds a mirror before humanity...shows us who we are, largely where we came from, emboldens our virtues and warns us of our vices, and shows that while the context and names may change, the essential core of issues human beings face remains the same. If no other evidence existed for why you should read this work, consider that despite being written over 200 years ago, Gibbon is still considered the gold standard when it comes to Rome, and while some additional historical facts have since come to light that invalidate minor details of Gibbon's narrative, the essence of the work remains untarnished. I won't mislead you, however, weighing in at six volumes and approximately 2000 pages, combined with Gibbon's amazing vocabulary (make sure you have a dictionary handy), gift of beautiful but initially intimidating denseness of narration and prose, and somewhat dry (but fiercely insightful, very witty, and at times even humorous) style, if you're not a history teacher or letters major the work is an ambitious read for most, but I would encourage you in the purest sense to conquer it. I promise you, "there's gold in them there hills." I once met a 95 year old history and philosophy professor with whom I developed a brief but memorable friendship. A very intelligent, lucid, gentle, wise, and amiable man, during one of our conversations, knowing him a voracious reader and very educated person, I asked him to give me a list of his favorite books - ones he would recommend without hesitation. The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was the first book(s) he mentioned. I never forgot, and in fact made an inward commitment that I would read it someday. Years later I did, and my only regret is that I didn't read it sooner, and that I'll never get to discuss it with him. I'll be forever grateful for the advice.

I will append a single proviso to my five-star rating: to enjoy this book, you will need a somewhat decent command of the English language and the capacity to unpack dense meaning. Gibbon's prose, to my mind, is almost without par; however, it is very much written in the Enlightenment style, which was more complex than what we accustomed to from today's workman-like scribblers. Therefore, if you dislike long, complicated sentences, it's probable that you won't enjoy this work. Also if you're a teenager, I might suggest you perhaps start with someone like Will Durant, who has a nice style of his own, but is much easier for the youngsters to comprehend. Unless you're a whizz kid, then by all means jump on this immediately. Perhaps a representative passage will get my point across: "Of the various forms of government which have prevailed in the world, an hereditary

monarchy presents the fairest scope for ridicule. Is it possible to relate without an indignant smile, that, on the father's decease, the property of a nation, like that of a drove of oxen, descends to his infant son, as yet unknown to mankind and to himself, and that the bravest warriors and the wisest statesmen, relinquishing their natural right to empire, approach the royal cradle with bended knees and protestations of inviolable fidelity? Satire and declamation may paint these obvious topics in the most dazzling colours, but our more serious thoughts will respect a useful prejudice, that establishes a rule of succession, independent of the passions of mankind; and we shall cheerfully acquiesce in any expedient which deprives the multitude of the dangerous, and indeed the ideal, power of giving themselves a master. In the cool shade of retirement, we may easily devise imaginary forms of government, in which the sceptre shall be constantly bestowed on the most worthy by the free and incorrupt suffrage of the whole community. Experience overturns these airy fabrics, and teaches us that in a large society the election of a monarch can never devolve to the wisest or to the most numerous part of the people. The army is the only order of men sufficiently united to concur in the same sentiments, and powerful enough to impose them on the rest of their fellow-citizens; but the temper of soldiers, habituated at once to violence and to slavery, renders them very unfit guardians of a legal or even a civil constitution. Justice, humanity, or political wisdom, are qualities they are too little acquainted with in themselves to appreciate them in others. Valour will acquire their esteem, and liberality will purchase their suffrage; but the first of these merits is often lodged in the most savage breasts; the latter can only exert itself at the expense of the public; and both may be turned against the possessor of the throne by the ambition of a rival. The superior prerogative of birth, when it has obtained the sanction of time and popular opinion, is the plainest and least invidious of all distinctions among mankind. The acknowledged right extinguishes the hopes of faction, and the conscious security disarms the cruelty of the monarch. "If you were able to read those three paragraphs without much trouble, and understood exactly what he was saying, then you should be to digest this work. Pay attention to the style, too. Do you like those long sentences, the vivid imagery of the wordplay? Some people do not. If you are one of those people, you will not make it through this work (it is almost 4,000 pages). Some people call it florid. I don't agree. I love Gibbon's style, and was disappointed after finishing the sixth volume that I had no more to read. Not to worry, though, as it holds up exceedingly well to repeat reading (usually I just return to read a chapter here, or there, on whatever topic I am interested in at the moment). Also pay attention to not just the style of the above three paragraphs, but the viewpoint Gibbon was expressing. Keep in mind, Gibbon wrote in the 1700s. His viewpoint is hardly postmodern, and he is a particularly stern judge in almost all respects: of history, of character, of

society. That said, his book remains remarkably (but not entirely) free of racial bigotry. You only need to look up some of Immanuel Kant's quotes to realise that how exceptional this is for the period when Gibbon wrote. Be assured, however, that you may not agree with many of Gibbon's opinions. If you can't suspend your judgement when you read, if you only like to read authors whose sociopolitical views you share, then you may not be able to stick this one out. My suggestion would be to try, however.

On to the actual material Gibbon covers. If you're looking for any material on Rome under the Kings, Republican Rome, or the early Empire, then you've come to the wrong place. Gibbon does provide us with a brief, single-chapter account of the Empire and its Emperors from Augustus to Domitian, and two opening chapters on the age of the Antonines (which Gibbon and most scholars consider to have been the peak of the Empire in almost every respect). The real narrative, however, picks up with the death of Marcus Aurelius and the accession to sole rule of his son, Commodus, in 180AD. If you don't know much Roman history, and these names are still familiar to you, perhaps you've seen *Gladiator*? Marcus Aurelius is the old Emperor whom Russell Crowe serves at the beginning. Commodus is the Joaquin Phoenix character. That film wasn't really based on any true story, but these definitely were father and son in real life, and incidentally Commodus really did things like fight as a gladiator. Some of the stories Gibbon tells are quite amusing. We hear that Commodus had special arrows made, whose tips were shaped like crescent moons. He could, apparently, decapitate a sprinting ostrich by firing one of these from his bow. Commodus thought nothing of killing a lion in single combat. An elephant too. All in the arena, as his subjects watched. Some stories about other Emperors are clearly far-fetched: we are told the Emperor Maximin (known to us as Maximinus Thrax) was over 8 feet tall, could drink 7 gallons of wine and eat between 30-40 pounds of meat in a day, could break a horse's leg with a punch, and crumble stones in his fists. However, Gibbon is a sober historian. He never falls for a tall tale. If he tells one, it is for amusement or colour. He always provides his sources, and he is an astute judge of a source's quality. Gibbon always, if possible, practices what he calls "ascending to the font," by which he means never settling for a secondary source if a primary source is available. All these traits made him remarkable as a historian for his period.

Volume I takes the reader until the triumph of Constantine the Great over his rivals in the early 4th Century AD. It then concludes with the first of what were considered the most controversial chapters of the book. Volume II begins with the second. These "controversial" chapters (15 & 16) dealt with the origin of Christianity, and its character and evolution in the roughly three centuries until Constantine founded Constantinople as a new, Christian Rome (Constantine actually called it *Nova Roma*, but the people were having none of that). Now chapters 15 & 16 caused quite the stir in Gibbon's day. You can go and read on

Wikipedia about the accusations made against Gibbon because of what the chapters contained. Honestly, though, for the twenty-first century, they are extremely tame. It is to Gibbon's credit, however, that throughout the book when he does dedicate chapters entirely to religion, he at least in most cases avoids inflicting terminal boredom on the reader. Volume II takes the reader until the first part of Theodosius the Great's career. Volume III shoots just past the end of the Empire in the West, ending with a chapter on some of the barbarians who came to exercise sovereignty in the former Imperial lands. Volume IV covers Justinian and his immediate successors, still ruling as the Roman Empire in the East, and in the West continues covering the Barbarian successor kingdoms. The scheme of the work changes a little when the reader arrives at Volumes V and VI. Gibbon did not put much stock in the so-called Byzantine empire. In the final chapter of Volume IV he in fact covers 800 years of Byzantine empires, whereas he had just spent four volumes covering about half that amount of time. So if you were hoping for an extremely in-depth coverage of the Byzantine Empire, you'll be sorely disappointed, as I initially was (if this is the case, I suggest you look to the excellent works of John Julius Norwich). Instead, in Volumes V and VI, Gibbon covers the histories of the nations erected on the ruins of the West Roman Empire, along with those territories lost to enemies in the East. This takes the reader through a varied journey: the Caliphates; the Turkish Sultanates; the Crusades and Crusader Kingdoms; the exploits of the Normans in France, Italy, and elsewhere; the Bulgarians; the Hungarians; Russia; the Papacy; the Italian states; and more. All said and done, the complete work took me about 15 months to read. I took my time, reading about half an hour per day. Some days I'd read an hour, some days only ten minutes. I made sure to read it every day, however. Take your time. Get into a habit of reading this, one bite-sized chunk at a time. You'll be glad you did.

I echo the comments of the other reviewer. This is a very ambitious read, but it is rewarding both in terms of its timeless historical content, but also Gibbon's prose, which reads like poetry at times. The books themselves are quite beautiful. For various reasons I have read volumes 1-3 twice, and am only now making my way through volumes 4-6. The final three volumes cover around 1000 years, while the first three cover around 500 years, so the pace necessarily picks up in the final three volumes. Gibbon (for good reason) spends a lot of time on the reign of Justinian, so the Byzantine era is actually compressed even more in volumes five and six. There are many other good books about the time period covered by Gibbon, but I can't imagine having an interest in this era and not reading *The Decline and Fall*. It remains essential, centuries after it was written.

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