

This short introduction to recent developments in the field of late Roman political history will address four problems that have altered the larger narrative of late imperial history in ways that should be reflected in syllabi on the period.

1) The third-century crisis. Research has in recent years suggested that the political breakdown of the third-century empire was in some ways an inevitable consequence of the social and constitutional structure of the Severan empire. This structure differed in dramatic ways from the Augustan, Flavian and Antonine political scenes, not least in the balance between court, senate, and regional elites, which was particularly conducive to centrifugal divisions.

2) Constantine and conversion. The reasons for, and nature of, Constantine's conversion continue to be debated. In particular, the impact of Constantine on the conversion of the imperial aristocracy needs to be registered.

3) The impact of gold on imperial politics. Jairus Banaji's *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2006) introduces a controversial but plausible thesis about the role of gold in the late Roman economy, particularly from the very end of the Constantinian era. If correct, it has serious implications for the growing separation between eastern and western empires and the rise of a bureaucratic aristocracy in the East.

4) Invasion and the fall of Rome. The balance between internal and external factors in the fall of the western empire is a perpetual topic of debate. Recent attempts to reinstate barbarian invasion as the primary, or even sole, cause of western collapse in the fifth century need to be canvassed and rejected.