The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is the most famous historical narrative ever told. An all-encompassing empire that controlled the known world from Scotland to Syria collapsed and in its place, sprung up small kingdoms ruled by brutal barbarians – Franks, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Burgundians, and Vandals. For some of those who lived through it, it was the end of the world. The impact of Rome’s end still divides two great epochs of human history: the ancient world and the Middle Ages.

At the same time as the political order of Rome collapsed, people experimented in various ways to transform their world into something better. Architects built the first domed churches, artists created dazzling life like mosaics, and writers created new literary genres. Meanwhile, the religious plurality of the ancient world with multiple gods was replaced by monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Boisterous bishops across the Roman world, from Iberia to Israel, argued with each other to understand the fundamental question of life: who is God?

We will also investigate how average people lived during the end of Rome. People fell victim to warfare and destruction as armies fought over Roman territories. As the violence subsided though, farmers, artisans, and merchants slowly gained greater control over their lives. They no longer had to pay heavy taxes to support massive Roman armies that no longer existed or bring their crops and goods to sell only where the government ordered. Instead, they could choose how to organize their economic relations. We will delve into how people thought about God and the afterlife as well. With Roman imperial religion swept away, various versions of Christianity adapted to give local worshippers a greater say over how to pray and practice.

Our readings will probe some of the most pivotal questions of this age of transformation. What caused the Fall of Rome? What fell anyway? How did various regions begin to form the nations – France, Italy, Spain, and Germany – we know today? How did Christianity become the majority religion of western Europe and the inhabitants of the Middle East became Muslim?
During this seminar, you will write a 25-30 page junior paper, based on original research. Together, we will learn to analyze sources from the deep past to orient ourselves in their world. Our seminar discussions will help locate specific cases of interest for you to investigate related to the seminar’s themes.

**Sample Readings:**

Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians.*


Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000.*

Guisto Traina, *428 AD. An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire*