



THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
**EDWARD GIBBON**

Edited by **Karen O'Brien**  
and **Brian Young**

## THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO EDWARD GIBBON

Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in three instalments from 1776 to 1788, is widely regarded as the greatest work of history in the English language. Starting with the accession of the Roman emperor Commodus in the late second century AD, Gibbon's work traverses thirteen centuries, encompassing the rise of Christianity and of Islam, the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, and the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. This Companion provides a comprehensive overview of the intellectual roots, contemporary European contexts, literary style and thematic scale of Gibbon's achievement. Alongside the *History*, it gives an introduction to Gibbon's other works, including the *Memoirs* he left unfinished at his death and previously unpublished material. Leading international scholars in the fields of classics, geography, history and literature provide a comprehensive account of Gibbon's monumental account of decline, fall and global historical transformation.

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[\*A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.\*](#)

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**Karen O'Brien**

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*This volume is dedicated to J. W. Burrow (1935–2009), Robert Mankin (1952–2017)  
and Mark Whittow (1957–2017)*



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## *Note on the Text*

All references to Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* are from David Womersley's three-volume edition (Penguin, 1994). Citations are by volume number and page.



# *Chronology*

## **1737**

Born in Putney, the son of Edward Gibbon, MP (1707–70) and his wife Judith (née Porten).

---

## **1747**

Gibbon's mother dies. He is cared for by his aunt Catherine Porten. All six of his siblings died in infancy.

---

## **1748**

Enters Westminster school.

---

## **1750–1**

A period of nervous illness interrupts his schooling.

---

## **1752**

Is sent to Magdalen College, Oxford, which he finds intellectually vacant. Pursues his own course of reading, including Conyers Middleton's account of miracles from the time of the early Christian church.

---

## **1753 June**

Converts to Roman Catholicism. His concerned father puts him under the care of a Reformed minister, M. Pavillard, in Lausanne.

---

## **1753–8**

Residence in Lausanne. Pavillard directs a serious programme of reading, noted in Gibbon's 'Commonplace-book', including Pascal, Giannone and a range of European scholars. Becomes fluent in French, attends theatricals and parties at Voltaire's mansion, acquires a lifelong friend in Georges Deyverdun. Forms an attachment (ultimately forbidden by his father) with Suzanne Curchod. Starts to write the *Essai*

*sur l'étude de la littérature*, seeking a middle way between philosophic and scholarly approaches to ancient writings.

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### **1754**

Christmas day Gibbon returns to Protestantism.

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### **1755**

Tours Switzerland.

---

### **1755 May**

Father marries Dorothea Patton (d. 1796) to whom Gibbon becomes devoted.

---

### **1758**

Returns to family estate in Hampshire. Permits his father to cancel the entail on the estate in exchange for a £300 annuity, giving him a slender financial independence. His father's finances remain precarious.

---

### **1758–63**

Spends part of his time in New Bond Street in London, studies English classics and acquires the *Memoirs of the Academy of Inscriptions* which later provided some of the scholarly foundations for his history.

---

### **1759 June–1762 December**

Serves as Captain in the South Hampshire Militia during the Seven Years' War. He resumes his commission in 1765, only resigning it in 1770.

---

### **1761**

Publishes his first book, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*.

---

### **1763–5**

Grand tour of France, Switzerland and Italy, unsteadily financed by his father.

---

### **1763 January**



Paris, where he is received by leading society hostesses and philosophes such as d'Helvétius and D'Holbach as a man of letters.

---

### **1763 spring to 1764 spring**

Lausanne. Final break with Suzanne Curchod who soon after marries the financier Jacques Necker. Preparatory study of Italian antiquities. Meets John Baker Holroyd (subsequently Lord Sheffield and Gibbon's closest friend and executor).

---

### **1764 April**

Arrives in Italy, learns Italian and sets out for Rome.

---

### **1764 October**

'It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind' (*Autobiographies*, p. 302).

---

### **1764 to winter 1765**

Tours Naples and Venice, returning via Paris to England.

---

### **1765–70**

Resumes his social and scholarly life in London and Hampshire, now enlivened by visits from Deyverdun. Joint writings include a literary periodical in French. Engages in a number of his own projects, including an unpublished essay on eastern history.

---

### **1770 November**

Death (little regretted) of his father brings a measure of financial independence, with advice from Holroyd. Pursues a sociable life in London from his fashionable address near Cavendish Square.

---

### **1774**

Becomes a member of Samuel Johnson's Club and is elected MP for Liskeard. He presents as a mainly silent figure in the Commons, aligned to the (broadly Tory)

ministry of Lord North. He remains loyal to North during the American conflict from 1775 to 1783, though never a great enthusiast for the war.

---

### **1776 February**

Volume I (chapters 1–16, culminating in his account of the rise of Christianity) of *The Decline and Fall* printed by Strahan and Cadell, priced 1 guinea. The first print run of 1,000 sells out instantly and three further issues (with some revisions) follow.

Extensive praise, including from David Hume.

---

### **1776**

A wave of published attacks on Gibbon's treatment of early Christianity, from high churchmen to dissenters. Gibbon responds with *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters*, vindicating his scholarly probity.

---

### **1777 May to December**

Paris, where he basks in his new-found fame.

---

### **1779**

Publishes *Mémoire justificatif*, a work of propaganda for the North government, criticising the French for their involvement in the American war. Appointed to the Board of Trade and Plantations for a much-needed salary of £750 per annum.

---

### **1780**

Loses his seat in Parliament.

---

### **1781**

Volume II (up to Theodosius, the last emperor to reign over the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire) and Volume III (ending in AD 476 and 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West') of *The Decline and Fall* come out to a more muted reception than the first volume.

---

### **1782**

Again elected MP, this time for Lymington, but no government sinecures follow.

---

## **1783 September**

Partly for financial reasons, and partly in fulfilment of a long-held plan, he goes to live with Deyverdun in Lausanne.

---

## **1783–7**

Completion of the remaining three volumes of *The Decline and Fall*, taking the narrative up to the fifteenth century in the east and in Rome itself, for which he receives £4,000. The ‘joy on the recovery of my freedom’ is tempered with ‘melancholy’ at the conclusion of so great an enterprise (*Autobiographies*, pp. 333–4).

---

## **1788**

Celebrates the publication of the final three volumes in London.

---

## **1789 July**

Death of Deyverdun, a shock to Gibbon.

---

## **1789–93**

French Revolution: Gibbon is initially sanguine, but increasingly appalled by events in France. Despite its attack on unbelieving philosophes, Gibbon finds much to agree with in Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). At work on his memoirs and various medieval antiquarian projects.

---

## **1793**

Returns to England after the death of Lady Sheffield. Suffering from a prodigiously enlarged hiatus hernia, he seeks surgical assistance and thereby contracts peritonitis.

---

## **1794 January**

Gibbon dies, and is buried in the Sheffield family church in Sussex. Sheffield becomes the executor of his papers.

---

## **1814**

Sheffield publishes Gibbon’s memoirs as part of an edition of *Miscellaneous Works*. Sheffield compiles and carefully edits the six MS drafts left by Gibbon into a seamless,

marmoreal narrative, *Memoirs of My Life*.

---

**1895**

Sheffield's grandson sells Gibbon's manuscripts to the British Museum.

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**1896**

Publication of *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* by John Murray, based on the manuscripts.

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**1896–1900**

Landmark scholarly edition of *The History of the Decline and Fall* by the Irish classical and medieval scholar J. B. Bury.

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# Introduction



**Karen O'Brien**

Gibbon was not born a historian, it was a 'character' he gradually and painstakingly acquired over many years of immense reading and exploratory writing. Towards the end of his life, in his *Memoirs*, the man known to us as the author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) trusted that he had sufficiently acquired 'a name, a rank, a Character in the World' to render his posthumous reputation secure.<sup>1</sup> His background as an English gentleman of good family and dwindling means certainly prepared him for a life of diverse literary pursuits, but less obviously for the extraordinary feats of scholarship and sustained writing demanded by his *History*. His early education, interrupted by poor health, provided him with a philologically grounded knowledge of Roman antiquity and literature, but not with the erudite and encompassing grasp of world history that would underpin his magisterial achievement. Gibbon was, or rather self-consciously became, not an English gentleman of letters, but a writer of the European Enlightenment. He greatly extended the scholarly ambitions and compass of that Enlightenment through his mastery of the great European corpus of classical and medieval erudition that had gone before.

Gibbon was born in 1737, the son of an MP and gentleman farmer, whose wealth had its origins in commerce and whose tendencies were toward dissipation and paternal neglect. His mother died when he was eight, and none of Gibbon's six siblings survived their infancy. He was educated at Westminster School and then at Magdalen College, Oxford, which he found, notoriously, populated with fellows who had 'absolved themselves from the labour of reading, or thinking, or writing'.<sup>2</sup> Unsupervised, Gibbon's own reading led to a decision to convert to Catholicism, in full knowledge of the severe legal disadvantages this would place him under when of age. Shocked, his father sent Gibbon to Lausanne in the Swiss republic of Bern, where, under the tactful tutelage of Daniel Pavillard, a Protestant Reformed minister, he re-embraced his original faith and suspended his 'Religious enquiries'.<sup>3</sup> Neither he nor his father greatly insisted upon the sincerity of that faith. Gibbon thereafter spent his remaining four and a half years in

Lausanne pursuing an extensive course of reading in ancient and modern literature from the settled standpoint of (as yet undemonstrative, but rigorous) scepticism. His Catholic conversion and recuperation were undoubtedly an important part of Gibbon's intellectual formation, and profoundly shaped his eventual interpretation of Christianity as a historical factor in the decline of the Roman Empire. As Brian Young points out in [Chapter 8](#), 'the journey from Protestantism to Catholicism and thence to scepticism' was 'a familiar itinerary in the intellectual history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe'. It laid the foundations for Gibbon's academic interest in all kinds of theology, and his conviction that dogmatic belief either invites or instigates the coercion of others.

Gibbon's Swiss interlude was formative in other ways. He met his life-long friends, Georges Deyverdun and John Baker Holroyd (later Lord Sheffield), and he fell in love with Suzanne Curchod, a woman who, some years after Gibbon's father had persuaded his son to relinquish the match ('I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son'), became a prominent *salonnière* and the wife of the French finance minister Jacques Necker.<sup>4</sup> He became steeped in the French language, writing and even thinking in French, and this provided a gateway, among many other things, to the Huguenot tradition of 'free and critical enquiry into civil and Church history', as Richard Whatmore and Béla Kapossy point out in their chapter on 'Gibbon and Republicanism' ([Chapter 7](#)). Moreover, exposure to the spirit of liberty, martial independence and republicanism of the Swiss cantons undoubtedly honed Gibbon's early political thinking, and alerted him, as Whatmore and Kapossy point out, to the unusual phenomenon of republican empire in Bern. In the mid-1760s, he started to write but then later burned a history of the Swiss republics, and in his unpublished *Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne* (1763–4) he explored the material conditions created by modern forms of liberty. Whereas his ruminations on Swiss liberty were in implicit dialogue with the Swiss republics' greatest son, Rousseau, his physical presence in Lausanne brought him into direct contact with Geneva's most celebrated writer in exile, Voltaire. Gibbon attended some theatricals and dinners at Voltaire's Geneva residence, Les Délices, encountering the great man at the height of his powers as a historian. Voltaire had published a history of the age of Louis XIV (*Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, 1751) and was in the process of revising and extending the work now known as the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, a history of the politics, culture and international relations of the world from the time of Charlemagne to

that of Louis XIV, first published in 1756. Gibbon was often dismissive of Voltaire's historical work, but there can be little doubt that he was spurred to surpass Voltaire's ambitious conception of history as global narrative, encompassing economic, cultural and technological developments, juxtaposing western and non-western histories of empire, and excoriating religious fanaticism as the barrier to civilisation. Gibbon's first published work, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, largely written during this period, grapples with the problem of critical and philosophical perspective in historical and literary writing, engaging with Voltaire, and with the sociology of culture in the works of Montesquieu.<sup>5</sup> In the *Essai*, Gibbon critically explored the ways in which Voltaire, Montesquieu and their contemporaries applied an 'esprit philosophique' to history, and considered how their methods of critical distillation both clarify and traduce the great traditions of European, polymathic erudition. Gibbon was fascinated by the theoretical insights of modern philosophers of history and society, and by Montesquieu in particular, but did not concede that this method superseded the empirical model of history as a cumulative, inherited body of documents, chronicles, data and inscriptions.

Lausanne remained close to Gibbon's heart. He visited again in 1763–4, and ultimately returned to live there permanently in 1783 with his friend Deyverdun. As David Womersley explains in the Afterword to this Companion, some of the papers left behind in Deyverdun's house have only recently been made available through the Lausanne city archives, and are beginning to shed more light on Gibbon's Swiss years. For now, Gibbon returned to England where his father granted him a modest annuity that enabled him to spend some time in London lodgings, and the rest reading deeply in the family library at Buriton in Hampshire, or carrying out military service in the local militia during the Seven Years' War. The Buriton library was the first of several personal libraries and collections out of which Gibbon eventually built the compendious scholarly edifice of footnotes to his history. His London library would finally contain up to six thousand volumes. Robert Mankin's chapter traces Gibbon's handling of the polyglot bibliographic resources of his libraries, and explores what this reveals about his scholarly method ([Chapter 10](#)). One major classification within his library, as Robert Mayhew points out in his chapter, was historical geography, reflecting his early and prodigious engagement with geographical erudition from maps to surveys, human geography and travel writing ([Chapter 2](#)). Gibbon was, from the outset, extraordinarily reliant on his



own memory; he rarely made notes in his own books, added footnotes only after writing his text, and ultimately abandoned a long-held plan to produce a supplementary bibliographical volume to his history, stating that *The Decline and Fall*, in itself, provided a sufficient critical overview of the authors he had used.

The end of the war furnished Gibbon with a precious opportunity to return to the continent, to carry out a tour of Italy, including Rome, Naples and Venice, and to learn Italian. Gibbon kept a journal of the 1764 portion of this trip from Geneva to Rome, but it was only much later in his autobiography (the six incomplete manuscript drafts that he composed between 1788 and 1793 towards the very end of his life) that he set down the now famous account of the first inspiration for his life's work, recapitulating his description of Christianity, in chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall*, as a movement that 'finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the Capitol' (I, 446).<sup>6</sup>

It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind.<sup>7</sup>

Catharine Edwards, in her chapter on Gibbon and the City of Rome, points out that, at the time, the Capitol was far from ruined, and the temple had long since been supplanted by Michelangelo's piazza ([Chapter 3](#)). Yet Gibbon's juxtaposition of the ascetic, historically oblivious Catholic ritual with the ruined majesty of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus succinctly evokes a long-range historical transformation in which the city of Rome figures as both epicentre and metonym for empire. Although Gibbon's history ranges across all those parts of the world remotely connected with the Roman and Byzantine empires, it is to the city and to the Capitoline hill that Gibbon finally returns in the closing chapters of his history as he roves imaginatively through its material ruins, before alluding to the shallow homage paid by the grand tourists who now come to Rome 'from the remote, and once savage, countries of the North' (III, 1084).

## The Beginnings of *The Decline and Fall*

The germ of the idea of *The Decline and Fall* had been sown. Gibbon returned home to spend the next seven years ‘seriously employed in preparing the materials of my Roman history’, as well as engaging other experimental projects.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the work on Swiss republics, he and his friend Deyverdun attempted a literary periodical, and he wrote a commentary on the sixth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The death of his father, little lamented by Gibbon, at last liberated him to set up his own house and to pursue a fashionable literary existence in London featuring membership of Samuel Johnson’s Club. In 1774, he obtained the safe and independent parliamentary seat of Liskeard in Cornwall, and found himself in the House of Commons, tongue-tied, as he admitted, but witness to the British government’s handling of its first major imperial crisis in the North American colonies. Gibbon described these parliamentary sessions as ‘a school of civil prudence’, invaluable to the historian whose voting record demonstrated a degree of independence, but who supported the government more decisively and in print once the French entered the war and hopes for conciliation with the colonies were at an end.<sup>9</sup> He profited, financially and in terms of lessons in civil prudence and imperial economics, from a stint on the Board of Trade and Plantations (1779–82), yet remained a European cosmopolitan in political outlook and a self-described ‘Citizen of the World’.<sup>10</sup>

Work on the history progressed apace. Gibbon’s conception of the project had a degree of fluidity at the early stages. In his *Memoirs* he noted that his original plan was ‘circumscribed to the decay of the City rather than of the Empire’, but it is nevertheless clear that he had a very long-standing interest in the chronological period covered by the final work, as well as in ancient chronology more generally.<sup>11</sup> There are some surviving marginal notes to a copy of the *History* in Gibbon’s hand, probably dating from the 1790s, where he appears to reproach himself for not having ‘deduced the decline of the Empire from the civil Wars that ensued after the fall of Nero’, or even earlier, but he was surely aware of the dangers of endless regress (III, 1093). In the Preface to the first volume he enters into an ‘engagement’ with his readers to cover the ‘complete history of the Decline and Fall of Rome, from the age of the Antonines, to the subversion of the Western Empire’ and encompassing the Crusades, the rise of Islam, and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 (I, 2–3). The first volume, published in 1776, begins

with an overview of the Roman Empire at the height of its extent and prosperity during the reigns of the emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, and the narrative proper gets going in AD 180 with the accession of Commodus and long ensuing slide into military despotism. The volume ends during the reign of Constantine, the first emperor formally to adopt the Christian faith, and with the famous overview, in chapters 15 and 16, of the rise and survival of Christianity during the preceding era of persecution. When he published the next two volumes, in 1781, Gibbon renewed his pledge, in the preface, to stay the course until 1453, and this time covered the period from the relocation of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople through Alaric's sack of Rome in AD 410, to the removal of the western Roman emperor, around AD 476, by a barbarian ruler. The volumes conclude with Gibbon's 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', one of the few places in the history where he draws comparisons between Roman and modern times. He offers his readers a heavily qualified assurance that the barbarian obliteration of western Roman civilisation is unlikely to be repeated in more populous, developed modern Europe, and he even makes the highly topical prediction that even if a barbarian invasion should occur, 'Europe would revive and flourish in the American world' whatever 'may be the changes of their political situation' (II, 513–14 and note 8).

For John Pocock, the author of *Barbarism and Religion*, the definitive, six-volume study of Gibbon and his intellectual context, this marks the end of the first of the 'two trilogies' of *The Decline and Fall*. The second trilogy, comprising the final three volumes published together in 1788, no longer centred upon the western provinces of the Roman Empire, but on the east. The second trilogy covers a thousand years, from the mid-fifth century onwards, and an immense geographical terrain, encompassing the institutional and theological developments within the Christian churches, and covering all the empires and peoples – Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Franks, Alamanni, Lombards, Slavs, Vandals, Mongols, Normans, Persians, Arabs, Ottomans, to name only a few – who themselves intersected with the history of the later Roman Empire. Although the narrative proper ends with the supine 'grief and terror' of the Latins at the news of the fall of Constantinople, Gibbon at several points ventures beyond his chronological remit and looks forward to the progress in Europe precipitated by the revival of classical heritage and the Reformation (III, 974).<sup>12</sup>



## Christianity, Irony and Style

*The Decline and Fall* was published by the London firm of Strahan and Cadell. The first volume appeared as an expensive quarto volume priced at 1 guinea, sold out its first print run of 1,000 within days, and was reprinted twice more in the next two years.

Gibbon was gratified by this immense success, and, as he wrote, ‘overpaid’ by the admiration of his acquaintance David Hume. Hume, who had endured the travails occasioned by his ‘Natural History of Religion’ (1757), also warned in his letter of congratulation of the ‘clamour’ that Gibbon might expect from the pious.<sup>13</sup> The first volume’s closing account of the ‘secondary’ (as opposed to divine) causes of ‘the progress of the Christian Religion’ is, as Gibbon’s believing contemporaries soon spotted, an exercise in subversive, polemical irony. Gibbon insinuates a causal connection between the ascent of Christianity – from underground plebeian cult to state religion – and the loss of the elite, civic culture that had previously sustained Rome’s balanced constitution, political stability and military strength. Whereas paganism had been woven into the fabric of Roman civic life – tolerated with a secret ‘smile of pity and indulgence’ by Rome’s philosophically minded ruling caste, yet practised with sufficient ‘external reverence’ so as not to insult the ‘folly of the multitude’ – Christianity discouraged active service for the state and army, and directed the early Christians’ irrepressible ‘love of action’ towards a separate, and separatist, ecclesiastical realm of their own (I, 482). This ultimately depleted Roman public life and, in the very long run, reinforced passive acquiescence to superstition and tyranny (I, 58–9). Christians, meanwhile, were preoccupied with the prospect of happiness in the afterlife (‘it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers’, I, 466), obsessed with self-denial and chastity (‘the loss of sensual pleasure was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride’, I, 481), and determined to reach out to as wide a social group as possible (far short, Gibbon writes with palpable sarcasm, of the ‘odious imputation ... that the new sect of Christians was almost entirely composed of the dregs of the populace’, I, 508).

Many early readers would have recognised in Gibbon’s pagan elites an illicit portrait of the British Anglican establishment, and might have savoured the irony of his debt to canonical ecclesiastical historians such as the Protestant writers Le Clerc and Mosheim,

or the magisterial Jansenist historian of the early church, Tillemont.<sup>14</sup> The impact of the two chapters may have been somewhat greater than Gibbon expected. He may, as John Pocock speculates, have made a last-minute decision to add the two chapters on the Christian church before Constantine to the end of his first volume, rather than placing them at the beginning of his second, and this may have given them more interpretive weight than he intended.<sup>15</sup> There ensued over the next few years a number of published attacks, from across the religious spectrum, on Gibbon's infidelity as well as his scholarly accuracy. Claiming or perhaps feigning surprise, he held back until a particularly personal assault by the Oxford academic Henry Davis gave him a suitable opportunity to act 'in defence of my own honour' (III, 1111). In his *Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1779) he exonerated his scholarship and despatched his critics with coruscating vigour. Gibbon also anticipated or responded to these attacks in a series of revisions to the first volume. David Womersley documents these in his edition, and discusses them in his study *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'* in terms of the way in which the controversy may have sharpened his interpretation, in subsequent volumes, of the interplay of Christianity and empire.<sup>16</sup>

Like Gibbon himself, recent scholars have been at pains to demonstrate that the savage or sneering ironies of chapters 15 and 16 were of a different temper to the mockery of overtly anti-clerical reformers such as Voltaire or Joseph Priestley. Among the papers left behind in Deyverdun's house, there has recently emerged a short essay, composed in French around 1757, in which we can see the genesis of Gibbon's use of irony for the purposes of scholarly polemic. Presented by David Womersley in the Afterword to this Companion, Gibbon's animadversion against an obscure Swiss writer on the errors of contemporary freethinkers suggests that, from the outset, the spirit of his own freethinking was one of scholarly and intellectual, rather than political, subversion. As Brian Young comments, Gibbon wrote with arduous scholarly attention to ecclesiastical and theological matters with the principled detachment of one who felt it was not possible 'to be a disinterested scholar *and* a Christian' ([Chapter 8](#)). In his chapter Fred Parker gives an overview of the 'pervasively ironic' style of the *History* ([Chapter 9](#)), from the delicately placed adjective, antithesis or italic to flagrantly sarcastic rhetoric: 'But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophical

world, to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses?’ (I, 512). A starting point for the consideration of Gibbon’s style has long been F. R. Leavis’s account of his irony as a subliminal agent of Enlightenment:

The decorously insistent pattern of Gibbonian prose insinuates a solidarity with the reader ... establishes an understanding and habituates to certain assumptions. The reader, it is implied, is an 18th century gentleman (‘rational,’ ‘candid,’ ‘polite,’ ‘elegant,’ ‘humane’); eighteen hundred years ago he would have been a pagan gentleman, living by these same standards (those of absolute civilization); by these standards (present everywhere in the stylized prose and adroitly emphasized at key-points in such phrases as ‘the polite Augustus,’ ‘the elegant mythology of the Greeks’) the Jews and early Christians are seen to have been ignorant fanatics, uncouth and probably dirty.<sup>17</sup>

However, as Parker shows, even Leavis’s refined ear has misheard Gibbon’s prose as always ‘decorously insistent’. Gibbon’s cadences are frequently deliberately imperfect, his sentences are balanced and symmetrical despite their syntactical proliferation, giving the impression of contained, restless energy. Gibbon’s ironies, moreover, are often those, not of discourse, but of history itself which the narrator cannot fully synthesise. Parker’s chapter also offers an important supplement to intellectual-historical approaches to *The Decline and Fall*, reminding us that ‘Gibbon’s thinking is realised only through and in the way he writes’ ([Chapter 9](#)). Gibbon’s extraordinary gifts as a stylist and the overtly constructed quality of his prose are bound up with his organisational mastery of his material. He frequently conceived of this in terms of monumental architecture, connected to his deep familiarity with the ancient and modern geographies of the two cities, Rome and Constantinople, at the heart of his narrative. Robert Mayhew draws attention to the spatially situated, commanding range of Gibbon’s narrative perspective ([Chapter 2](#)), including his set-piece survey of Constantinople at the beginning of the second volume, and the opening ‘circuit’ of the whole empire at the end of the second century AD: clockwise from the Pillars of Hercules all the way back round to the Straits of Gibraltar (I, 54). Mayhew gives a sense of Gibbon’s cinematic, brooding overview of his vast geographical canvas, the central metropolises brightly lit, the outer edges in a dark

chiaroscuro of barbarian forests and steppes. Coleridge disliked Gibbon's scene painting: 'When I read a chapter in Gibbon I seem to be looking through a luminous haze or fog, figures come and go, I know not how or why, all larger than life, or distorted or discoloured; nothing is real, vivid, true; all is scenical and by candle light as it were.'<sup>18</sup> Others have been more inclined to admire his spatial control and rendering of complex historical material, relishing connections between Gibbon's long lens and the sharp focus of his animated portraits of expansive, indeed expansionist, conquerors such as Timur, Chingiz Khan, Charlemagne and Belisarius.<sup>19</sup>

The larger organisational pattern of *The Decline and Fall* is built up from lengthy individual chapters, navigable by way of subheadings and enlivened by footnotes replete with erudite humour. Gibbon is master of the chapter form, a mode of narrative organisation that was at the time undergoing reinvention by contemporary novelists as a unit combining information, narrative dispensation and suspense. An exemplary case is the third chapter of the *History* in which Gibbon narrates the slow, invisible disappearance of Rome's free and balanced constitution, moves swiftly through the reigns of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines, 'the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was happy and prosperous' but when the 'fatal moment was perhaps approaching when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power, which they had exerted for the benefit of their people' (I, 103). Resonant with ominous drama, the chapter ends with a magnificent circumspection of an empire that 'filled the world', like a giant prison, from the 'barren rock of Seriphus' to the 'frozen banks of the Danube' from which there is no longer any escape. Gibbon closes with a quotation: "'Wherever you are," wrote Cicero to the exiled Marcellus, "remember that you are equally within the power of the conqueror"' (I, 107). With that lingering note of exile, foreboding and the implicit reminder of Cicero's assassination, the [next chapter](#) then initiates the narrative proper with Commodus, a licentious youth and jealous tyrant. So begins the course of overt political decline, little hindered by the attempt to reverse that decline by Commodus's more worthy successor Pertinax, whose assassination Gibbon places carefully at the end of another chapter.



## Classical, Enlightenment and Civil Narratives

The suspense, drama and slow trajectory of decline could not be narratively maintained through subsequent chapters. Commentators have long debated whether Gibbon fully envisaged that an account of the Roman Empire that covers over thirteen hundred years of history would really take the shape of ‘decline and fall’, as opposed to that of repeated calamities, protracted survival, adaption and transformation.<sup>20</sup> It is an issue of historiographical method and structure that Gibbon himself raised in the ‘General Observations’: ‘instead of enquiring *why* the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long’ (II, 509). The celebrated flourish of Gibbon’s title coexists with his commitment to primary-source-based exegesis, and with an increasing wariness of linear narrative. Gibbon’s method, as Arnaldo Momigliano recognised in a landmark essay, was firmly rooted in the erudite and antiquarian traditions of philology, source criticism, legal history and material cultural analysis of the seventeenth century, and in this scholarly project to recover and respect distinctive pasts.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Gibbon retained his philosophic commitment, derived from contemporary historians such as Montesquieu, Giannone, Voltaire, Hume and William Robertson and first set out in his *Essai*, to critical distance, interpretive grand narrative and the mutual illumination of the study of the human mind and the study of causality. John Pocock’s *Barbarism and Religion*, on which he reflects in his illuminating essay for this Companion ([Chapter 1](#)), traces the interplay in *The Decline and Fall* between these historiographical modalities, finding ‘a mosaic of narratives’, civil and ecclesiastical.<sup>22</sup> The initial modality of Gibbon’s history is the classical narrative of ‘imperial overstretch’ originated by Tacitus and other Roman historians themselves, and influentially restated in the eighteenth century by Montesquieu in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734); according to this, Rome’s military success in establishing an empire of vast territorial extent ultimately led to the decay of patriotic spirit as citizens relinquished their political rights to despots and their military role to professional armies, with the consequent overrunning of the empire by barbarians.<sup>23</sup> Gibbon explores and extends this master narrative throughout much of the first volume, later revealing only in chapters 15 and 16 the shaping presence of another narrative, the history of religion. This is partly a subset of the classical narrative

(Christianity diverted the Romans from patriotism and military spirit), but it also emerges here and throughout the rest of *The Decline and Fall* as major explanatory nexus, eventually encompassing Islam as well as Arianism and other forms of Christianity.

The presence of a self-consciously critical and civilised eighteenth-century perspective on the history of Roman imperial overstretch necessarily implies the possibility of the overarching Enlightenment narrative which Gibbon had encountered among contemporary historians. Tim Stuart-Buttle's chapter provides further insight into British, and more particularly Scottish, versions of the Enlightenment narrative and their influence upon Gibbon ([Chapter 6](#)), particularly David Hume's *History of England* (1754–61) and William Robertson's histories of Scotland, Europe and America in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. In different and nuanced ways, these promulgated an account of post-Roman European history according to which the oppression of medieval feudalism had been eroded by the development of cities and commerce; these developments in turn facilitated the growth of strong, centralised states and the attendant subordination of religious to civil authorities and law. Transformative intellectual energies and an appetite for liberty were then released by the violent upheavals of the Reformation. The major achievements of what Robertson named, and Gibbon recognised as, 'the progress of society in Europe' were greater religious toleration and the end of religious wars within the context of a balanced system of European states, and the economic improvements and social mobility afforded by commerce, manufacturing and overseas trade.<sup>24</sup> The modernity inhabited by the more educated beneficiaries of that progress expressed itself as a sense of a cosmopolitan European identity, and a willingness to consider religious beliefs, as Hume had done, social and psychological phenomena.

The Enlightenment idea of the progress of society had retrospective and predictive aspects. Retrospectively, Robertson, Adam Smith and others conjectured that the social evolution undergone by their barbarian ancestors in Europe – from hunter-gatherer, to a nomadic pastoral way of life, to settled, arable farming and thence to modern commerce – could be generalised as the four 'stages of society', and thereby provide an ethnographic way of understanding the Germanic peoples documented by Tacitus, for example, or the native Americans described by Robertson in his *History of America* (1777). Gibbon drew deeply, flexibly and sometimes critically upon the analytical

vocabularies provided by Scottish Enlightenment writers, particularly when seeking to characterise the mores and social forms he found among nomadic pastoral peoples such as the Huns, Mongols and Arabs.<sup>25</sup> His engagement with the social theory of the Enlightenment was more far-reaching than any attempted by his predecessors, more attuned, by virtue of his historical material, to demographic fluctuations and migration as factors in social transformation. He owed a great deal to his reading of Joseph de Guignes's *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Moguls et des autres Tartares occidentaux* (1756–8).<sup>26</sup> De Guignes enabled Gibbon to connect the histories of the nomadic steppe peoples with Chinese dynastic history, and to understand how destabilisation in the east led to the repeated incursions, from the fourth century, of Gothic peoples into the Roman Empire, starting with the Gothic War and Battle of Adrianople in AD 378. Gibbon's account, in chapter 26, of the events leading up to this momentous defeat of the eastern empire is one of the great set pieces of *The Decline and Fall*. In this, he narrates the desperate migration and evacuation of the Visigoths, pushed across the Danube by Hunnic incursions, thrown onto the mercy of the Romans and ultimately driven to attack their hosts. Gibbon gives a compelling account of the dynamics of migration, population pressure and encounter between peoples at radically different stages of social development, providing ethnographic insights into their lives. His narrative of the extremity and pathos of this refugee crisis, and the violence that follows, is more vivid and emotive than that of his principal Latin source, Ammianus Marcellinus, whom he found reliable but stiff. Mark Whittow notes in his chapter ([Chapter 4](#)) that, in our own age, leading historians of the exogenous causes of the fall of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, such as Peter Heather, concur with Gibbon's overall analysis of this episode: the Huns drove the Visigothic people to seek asylum within the empire, and the events of 378, if not immediately decisive, were in the long run terminal in their precipitating the Germanic people across the Rhine and thence to Italy.

The broad-minded admiration and sometimes compassion with which Gibbon writes about the barbarians is the subject of George Woudhuysen's chapter ([Chapter 5](#)), as well as Pocock's sixth volume. Gibbon's idea of the 'barbarian' belongs, in part, to the Enlightenment narrative of the progress of society from barbarism to civilisation. He implicitly links, in the second chapter of *The Decline and Fall*, the 'manly spirit of freedom' possessed by Rome's northern conquerors with the 'taste and science' of those

descendants now reading his history (I, 84). In chapter 9, Gibbon brings a comparative, quasi-anthropological dimension to Tacitus's *Germania* when describing the forest-dwelling Germanic tribes (for example, I, 237). However, as Woudhuysen argues, Gibbon complicates the notion of a 'ladder of civilisation', and simultaneously retains a 'basically classical' definition of barbarian as a non-Roman person in ways that cut across the idea of the stages of society ([Chapter 5](#)). He resists the idealisation of noble savages then fashionable among his contemporaries, as well as the older civic humanist idea of hunter-gatherer or pastoral tribesmen as embodying a political ideal of self-governing, martial independence: he dismisses the condition of the Germans as 'a state of ignorance and poverty, which it has pleased some declaimers to dignify with the appellation of virtuous simplicity' (I, 235). Gibbon was, moreover, as Woudhuysen shows, bemused by the kinds of Gothic ethnocentrism that were beginning to take hold in his day, particularly where Britain's Anglo-Saxon ancestors were concerned, and was alert to demographic and ecological factors in migration and intermarriage among the hunter-gatherer and pastoral peoples he surveyed ('famine ... was sometimes alleviated by the emigration of a third, perhaps a fourth part of their youth', I, 239). Over twenty years in advance of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, for example, he conjectures that the population of northern Europe is likely to have been small, and frequently checked by famine (I, 239 n40).

One of the surprises of the later volumes of Gibbon's history is the extent to which he is willing to acknowledge that the Christianising of the barbarians paradoxically broke the fall of the Roman Empire by providing an enduring point of connection with the language, legal system and political thought of the classical past. The Catholic Church paradoxically institutionalises that continuity, and fosters a degree of political cohesion and social quiescence by permitting the worship of saints and relics; its sanctioning of superstition, as Pocock explains, was in Gibbon's eyes somewhat preferable to the iconoclastic tendencies of the east ([Chapter 1](#)). The *History*'s closing chapters on the city of Rome, showing the desecration, partial preservation and superstitious adornment of classical buildings, capture in synecdoche the complexity of this relationship of the Catholic Church to this decline or continuity of the Roman Empire. The cityscape is as yet unmarked by the Counter-Reformation, though the Reformation itself has already been the subject of a lengthy, forward-looking excursus in an early chapter (54) on the

Paulician heretics of the seventh to ninth centuries. Like Robertson, Gibbon regards the Reformation as an important stage in the development of European civil society, essential for the freedom of thought and speech needed to resist cruelty and tyranny: ‘the chain of authority was broken, which restrains the bigot from thinking as he pleases, and the slave from speaking as he thinks’ (III, 437). He emphasises, controversially, that the Protestant assertion of ‘religious and civil freedom’ is a modern phenomenon, unrelated to the ideals of the early Christians who advocated only the principle of ‘passive obedience’ to worldly powers (I, 732). He nevertheless assumes, as Hume does when reviewing the Glorious Revolution at the end of his *History of England*, a tone of melancholy irony when reflecting on the often unintended, even disreputable, causes of progress: ‘This freedom however was the consequence, rather than the design, of the reformation. The patriot reformers were ambitious of succeeding the tyrants whom they had dethroned’ (III, 438).

## The History of Religion

If the rise and reformation of the Church belonged partly to Gibbon's history of European civilisation, it belonged more fully to what Pocock calls, in his chapter, 'the grand narrative of the history of religion', another modality which exerts 'paradigmatic guidance over Gibbon's history' ([Chapter 1](#)). Within this paradigm, a key moment is Constantine's establishment of a large ecclesiastical ministry marking the birth of a church separate from, and often in competition with, the state. Theological ideas occupy Gibbon in equal measure. He considers theologies as active historical forces; the controversies of the early fourth to the eighth centuries over Christology, the nature of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the meaning of icons are both intellectual debates and violent political events. The doctrine of the Trinity, elaborated in the fourth century by Gibbon's admired protagonist Athanasius, though a sensible compromise, soon becomes the basis for persecution and war. Religious practice is also integral to Gibbon's narrative, encompassing iconoclasm, monasticism and what he calls the 'revival of polytheism' in the form of the cult of saints and relics. These he considers, in a Humean manner, as aspects of the history of mind: 'the imagination, which had been raised by a painful effort to the contemplation and worship of the Universal Cause, eagerly embraced such inferior objects of adoration, as were more proportioned to its gross conceptions and imperfect faculties' (II, 95).

Gibbon's history of Christianity is inseparable from the fortunes of civil history, but he nevertheless has to separate ecclesiastical and civil history to a degree in order to encompass the story of the eastern empire with a global narrative of rival empires and religions. If the history of the west, notwithstanding the reconquest of Italy by Justinian in AD 535–54, was comprehensible within a version of the Enlightenment narrative of exogenous destruction, barbarian adaptation of classical culture and the eventual subordination of ecclesiastical to civil power, the history of the east presented an entirely different set of challenges and required a different paradigm. Gibbon observes at the beginning of the fifth volume that the main interest of the Byzantine Empire is that it is '*passively* connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world' (III, 25). Therefore, as Pocock explains, he devotes much of his second trilogy to the geographies and trajectories of external empires –

Sasanid, Vandal, Arab, Mongol, Timurid, Ottoman, Latin – who weaken and ultimately destroy the eastern Roman empire. His account of the devastating Crusader attack on the city of Constantinople in 1204, for example, is written with this emphasis on the east's 'passive connection' with barbarian outsiders, whereas other historians, notably Robertson in his 'View of the Progress of Society in Europe', wrote of this event from a western perspective, a phase of European development through reconnection with the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>27</sup>

As evidence for Gibbon's capacity for scholarly range and synthesis, these portions of the second trilogy cannot fail to astonish. His stated focus on what is 'passively connected' to Byzantium does not do full justice to this interconnected, polycentric, richly rendered portrait of the Eurasian world.<sup>28</sup> He knew no Arabic, for example, but deploys a vast array of French and other sources to piece together a global history of the rise of the Islamic empires – Umayyad, Abbasid, Seljuk, Mongol and Ottoman – from the life of Muhammad to the notable triumph of 1453. His interest in Islam goes far beyond the anti-clerical ambition of decentring of universal history favoured by other Enlightenment historians such as Voltaire (who begins his *Essai* in the east), and far beyond the stereotypical Enlightenment view of Muhammad as an impostor. In many ways, as Whittow observes in his chapter, this part of the history has much in common with the global histories of our own times ([Chapter 4](#)). It is true, as he acknowledges, that modern historians have found Gibbon's eastern Roman history far less satisfactory than the late Roman and early medieval portions of *The Decline and Fall*. Whereas Gibbon's depiction of the various Islamic empires – capable of transformation from nomadic, pastoral beginnings to durable political structures – appears dynamic, his Byzantine Empire seems curiously bereft of content; artistically merely imitative and 'lifeless', politically despotic and inert, militarily feeble, it lacks the capacity to innovate or regenerate, and yet lingers on until its last walls are breached. Moreover, because Gibbon does not give a history of ongoing interior decay, rather one of unremarkable durability, he offers no closing 'General Observations' to his eastern narrative. Instead, he notes with sardonic humour the horror, procrastination and swiftly ensuing indifference of the European powers at the fall of Constantinople. Although modern historians, using source material unavailable to Gibbon, now have a greater appreciation of the religious culture, complex governance and periodic economic flourishing of the

Byzantine Empire, Whittow nevertheless argues that there are fundamental similarities between their globally situated understanding of Rome's successor state and Gibbon's, and that a recent return to large-scale narrative, in Byzantine studies, is part of his continuing legacy.



## *After The Decline and Fall*

After the fall of Constantinople and the survey of the medieval city of Rome, Gibbon permitted himself his final, personal valediction: ‘It was among the ruins of the Capitol, that I first conceived of the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life, and which, however inadequate to my own wishes, I finally deliver to the curiosity and candour of the Public’ (III, 1085). Almost immediately, he began work on his memoirs, seeking to give substance, as Charlotte Roberts explains in [Chapter 11](#), to that serene authorial persona, to capture more fully that moment of the laying down of his pen, and to explain how he came into being.<sup>29</sup> By then, Gibbon had been living happily in Deyverdun’s house in Lausanne for five years, and had enjoyed a London interlude during which he had been rewarded (including financially, with £4,000 for the final volumes) and lionised. Gibbon’s own happiness was much diminished by Deyverdun’s death in 1789, after which he continued to produce successive drafts of the memoirs: six in total amounting to an unfinished masterpiece of literary autobiography. More fragmentary and inconclusive, as Roberts argues, than is generally supposed, the drafts transform the story of Gibbon’s life into an equable narrative of formative adversity, false starts, luminous moments, public service and acquired sociability. His vocation as a historian came about, Gibbon writes, through a combination of inner propensity, dedicated work and chance, including the fortunate chance of having been born in ‘a free and civilized country, in an age of science and Philosophy’.<sup>30</sup>

His autobiographical persona, in Roberts’s words, ‘assured, moderate and humane, as well as playful, witty and subversive’, vouches for the intellectual and moral qualities of his history. Gibbon’s historical persona does, indeed, rarely waiver from humane, tolerant worldliness, from dislike of prudishness (especially Christian prudishness), of fanaticism, hypocrisy, slavery (he told the pro-slavery Sheffield that he would have voted for Wilberforce’s bill to abolish the slave trade) and double standards applied to women (witness his disparagement of ‘those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity’, II, 567).<sup>31</sup> Throughout the *History*, as George Woudhuysen points out, he criticised those whose national loyalties override compassion, reserving particular hostility for callous writers who glory in the sufferings of the defeated (‘the bloody actor is less detestable than the cool, unfeeling historian’, II, 147, n82). The

breadth of Gibbon's sympathies enabled him to pitch his voice in between the 'unfeeling' and the overly or inauthentically 'feeling', carefully avoiding the sentimental register so much in evidence in his day, including some points in Hume's and Robertson's histories. In an era of radical sympathy for the American cause and prominent agitation for constitutional and parliamentary reform, Gibbon was distrustful of popular politics and hostile to change from below. Yet the sceptical, independent bent of his temperament made him instinctively averse to the oppression and harm of others. Describing the paranoid, inquisitional state under Constantine, for example, Gibbon records the spread of the use of torture, noting nevertheless that it was not to the credit of the Roman republic that it previously practised torture only on slaves: 'They applied this sanguinary mode of examination only to servile bodies, whose sufferings were seldom weighed by those haughty republicans in the scale of justice or humanity' (I, 631). The 'impartial and discerning view' made possible by critical distance and rigorous evaluation of source material demands, throughout *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a self-distancing antipathy to cruelty in all its forms (I, 515). The word 'cruelty' is one of the most prominent in Gibbon's lexicon, as a term of unqualified censure, and as a shorthand way of enlisting, as Claude Rawson has described it, the 'moral sanity' of civilised readers in a shared appraisal of historical experiences far outside their own.<sup>32</sup>

Gibbon was convinced that the civilised and Enlightened *ancien régimes* of eighteenth-century Europe offered the best chance for the diminution and control of the propensity to cruelty and force inherent in all political systems. Although he avoided explicit, facile comparisons between the Roman and the British empires, his *History*, with its extensive account of imperial domination from the perspectives of the provinces, certainly invited reflections on British failure in the American colonies and on the activities of the East India Company in India. The 'luminous page of Gibbon' was famously invoked in his presence by Richard Brinsley Sheridan during the first day of the parliamentary impeachment of the Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings; flattered, Gibbon nevertheless wrote that he would not 'absolve or condemn the Governor of India'.<sup>33</sup> The later drafts of the memoirs were written in the knowledge that the European order was under serious threat from the Revolution in France. Gibbon was fulsome in his praise of Burke's attack on the Revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ('a most admirable medicine against the French disease').<sup>34</sup> He did

not merely wish to dissociate himself from those unbelieving Enlightenment intellectuals whom Burke partly blamed for the overturning of the old order; he had real reasons to worry about his own safety. As Kapossy and Whatmore recount ([Chapter 7](#)), Gibbon was living close to the front line, in what he called ‘hurricane latitudes’, and in 1792 watched as French troops came to the gates of Geneva. He left Lausanne in 1793, only to die a year later, of peritonitis, while staying with Lord Sheffield. Sheffield became his loyal literary executor, and editor of his posthumous miscellaneous works, including a redacted and stitched together version of the *Memoirs*. His reputation as a great, perhaps the greatest, historian of the post-classical world, though it suffered at the hands of some pious nineteenth-century commentators, has not abated since that gratifying London season when Adam Smith told him that the completed *Decline and Fall* ‘sets you at the very head of the whole literary tribe at present existing in Europe’.<sup>35</sup> This Companion bears witness to the considerable revival and deepening of Gibbon scholarship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In order for this Companion to give adequate insight into the scale and multifaceted nature of Gibbon’s achievement, the editors have therefore assembled a group of contributors from many disciplines: classicists, historians of late antiquity and Byzantium, geographers, intellectual historians and literary scholars.

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## Notes

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[1](#) *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* (London: Murray, 1896), p. 346.

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[2](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 126.

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[3](#) *Ibid.*, p. 137.

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[4](#) *Ibid.*, p. 239.

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[5](#) *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature: A critical edition*, eds. Robert Mankin and Patricia Craddock (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010).

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[6](#) *Gibbon's Journey from Geneva to Rome: His Journal from 20th April to 2nd October 1764*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1961).

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[7](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 302.

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[8](#) *Ibid.*, p. 303.

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[9](#) 'Gibbon, Edward', in *historyofparliamentonline.org. Autobiographies*, p. 310. In 1779, at the request of the North government, Gibbon wrote a *Mémoire justificatif*, remonstrating with the French for recognising American independence.

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[10](#) Gibbon to J. B. Holroyd, Lord Sheffield (20 January 1787), *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), III, no. 642.

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[11](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 270. Kapossy recently discovered a chronological table of the centuries covered by *The Decline and Fall* dating from when Gibbon was between fourteen and sixteen. See Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 2.

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[12](#) See Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 196–9.

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[13](#) *Autobiographies*, pp. 311–13. James Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 358–60.

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[14](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume v: Religion: The First Triumph* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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[15](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 304–5.

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[16](#) David Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’: The Historian and his Reputation, 1776–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). A comprehensive Clarendon Press edition of *The Writings and Correspondence of Edward Gibbon* is currently under preparation under Womersley’s general editorship.

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[17](#) *The Common Pursuit* (New York: New York University Press, 1952), p. 75.

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[18](#) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 1, p. 418.

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[19](#) W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon’s Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 37–9.

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[20](#) Notably, David Womersley, *The Transformation of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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[21](#) Arnaldo Momigliano, ‘Gibbon’s Contributions to Historical Method’, *Studies in Historiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 40–55.

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[22](#) *Barbarism and Religion, Volume vi: Barbarism: Triumph in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.

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[23](#) *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History*, eds. James Moore, Ian Morris and Andrew Bayliss (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 2009).

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[24](#) William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V. With a view of the progress of society in Europe*, 3 vols. (London, 1769).

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[25](#) O’Brien, *Narratives*, pp. 132–6, 200–1.

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[26](#) Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume IV: Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 8.

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[27](#) Robertson, *History of the Emperor Charles V*, I, 25–7.

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[28](#) See the illuminating article by Garth Fowden, ‘Gibbon on Islam’, *English Historical Review*, **131**, no. 549 (2016), 261–92. See also Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’*, ch. 4.

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[29](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 333.

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[30](#) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

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[31](#) *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, III, p. 258.

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[32](#) Claude Rawson, ‘Gibbon, Swift and Irony’, in *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. David Womersley, J. W. Burrow and J. G. A. Pocock (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1997), p. 201.

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[33](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 336.

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[34](#) *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, III, p. 216.

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[35](#) Smith to Gibbon (10 December 1788), *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, eds. Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 317.

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An Overview of *The Decline and Fall of the  
Roman Empire*



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## ***After Barbarism and Religion: A Retrospect and a Prospect***

The first three volumes (1776–81) or trilogy (as it may be called) of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* arrives at the 'extinction' (as he calls it) of the Roman Empire in its western provinces; a second trilogy (volumes IV through VI) covers a history centred on Constantinople to the capture of that city by the Ottoman Turks a thousand years later. The two trilogies differ radically in character, and the purpose of this chapter is to explore what *Barbarism and Religion* may have achieved in situating the first of them in the history of historiography as it stood in Gibbon's time and as we know it, and then to enquire what occurred in the same field as he turned from a western, or 'Roman' history of empire and religion to an eastern, or 'Byzantine'.<sup>1</sup> It can be asked what became of Gibbon's enterprise as he did so, and what the historians of historiography may learn from his experience in constructing his later volumes; but since these are not to be explored in depth, only a tentative and introductory account can be given of this moment in the history of historiography.

The history of historiography is a discipline which has only recently assumed its contemporary character, and the phase of Gibbon scholarship to which *Barbarism and Religion* belongs is to be dated from the middle years of the twentieth century. Giuseppe Giarrizzo's *Edward Gibbon e la cultura Europea del XVIII secolo*<sup>2</sup> introduced the setting of a culture both historical and historiographical, and Arnaldo Momigliano's 'Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method'<sup>3</sup> introduced what has become a three-tier model of the overlapping modes of early modern historiography. These were, first, the rhetorical and exemplary narrative of actions chiefly political, inherited from Greco-Roman antiquity and revived by the humanists. It is a constant in *The Decline and Fall*, where among its many and sophisticated legacies we find the continuing assumption that 'the historian' is primarily the contemporary or near-contemporary author of a received account of the career of a people or state, and only in a secondary sense the 'modern' who reiterates and critically reviews the former's authoritative narrative. Momigliano saw Gibbon as marking the conjunction of two further modes of historiography that succeeded without replacing the rhetorical: first in order of time the philological, consisting of the detailed study of past (usually antique) states of language, law, religion

and society, extending on occasion to material culture. This major development of the later Renaissance permitted, first, the description of a series of contexts in which narratives of action might be situated and interpreted as belonging to distinctive pasts; second, the possibility of a new species of narrative, relating how distinctive states of culture had come into being and changed into their successors. The historical actor became an agent or patient in historical change. The final mode of historiography in which Momigliano's Gibbon took part was the 'philosophical' history supposedly characteristic of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This has proved a protean subject, whose mapping depends upon the making of many assumptions, often contestable; but it may be suggested that Gibbon was deeply aware of writers – Montesquieu and his successors in France, the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment – who pursued what he sometimes called 'the history of European society' and sometimes 'the history of the human mind'. The latter made them philosophers as well as historians, but he often reserved the term 'philosophical' for the authors of narratives in the first and second senses we have distinguished. It has proved possible to read *The Decline and Fall* as moving between these three modes of historiography, practising them all but not bringing them together to form a single practice, method or 'philosophy' of history. This is part of the case for continuing to regard Gibbon as an early modern historian; perhaps the last of his kind.

Recent scholarship has also revealed the presence, not only in Gibbon but in the historical discourse of his contemporaries in general, of a number of master narratives exercising paradigmatic authority. The chief of these for our purposes has been the narrative of *The Decline and Fall* in the strict sense, originated by historians themselves Roman – Tacitus above all – and descending through the centuries to its revival in early modern political thought by authors predominately Florentine, among whom Leonardo Bruni<sup>4</sup> developed it into a narrative of the history we term medieval. In this Roman liberty and the energies it generated were dependent upon a class of warrior citizens possessing both military and civic capacity. Those conquered a series of provinces, first in Italy, then in Spain and Mediterranean Africa, finally in Greece and the Hellenistic east as far as the Euphrates, constituting an empire too great for the citizens to control without losing that capacity to a class of professional soldiers who took over its management, and with it that of the republic. The history of *The Decline and Fall*, set

out in Gibbon's first three volumes, was the story of Rome's progressive loss of civic and military capacity, until the western empire was taken over by the barbarian mercenaries recruited to fill the vacuum left by the failure of Rome to defend itself. Though complicated by innumerable variants, this narrative survived until the end of Gibbon's first trilogy, by which point it had become essential to the self-criticism of a 'modern' understanding of empire and society which had none too securely replaced the image of 'ancient' liberty and empire.

Bruni and many others carried the narrative of *The Decline and Fall* through a history we term 'medieval' – Gibbon called it 'modern' – to understand which we must supply two further grand narratives, termed by him 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' (III, 1068). The first of these was in essence the history of the Germanic peoples who had penetrated Rome's western provinces and converted them into proto-feudal kingdoms. Originally, and enduringly, based on Tacitus's account of these peoples as they were known to Romans of the first post-republican period, the history of 'barbarism', never written by the barbarians themselves, had grown by Gibbon's time into a grand thesis of the progress of society, in which pastoral nomads as far east as China had set processes in motion which thrust the forest-dwelling peoples of Europe upon the frontiers of empire on a greater scale than Rome could resist or absorb. This set going in Europe the progress of society through the four stages of philosophical history, and made *The Decline and Fall*, somewhat marginally, a work of the 'Scottish school', and perhaps more centrally of French erudition.<sup>5</sup>

The grand narrative of the history of religion<sup>6</sup> may outweigh all others in bulk and complexity, and differs from them all generically. While possessing a rhetoric, philology and philosophy of its own, it was differentiated into ancient and modern in quite other ways; and above all, its written sources were Greek and Hebrew in excess of Latin and its cultural setting was Hellenistic Greek, Egyptian and Syrian rather than European. Through the Hebrew Bible and the Christian testament, it looked back to the creation of the world and the actions of God and recorded them in a sacred history as well as a human. From the Deluge and Dispersal of the Peoples, it related a history of Israel, to whom divine truth was known, and another of the Gentiles, who had lost it and must somehow recover it. In addition to the history of idolatry and subsequently polytheism, there was another of religions which must be false and philosophies which might be true,

and therefore of the difficulties which Gentile converts to Christianity had encountered in freeing themselves from them, as well as from the stubbornness of the Jews. Historians whom Gibbon read and recommended, orthodox as well as Enlightened, dealt at length with these problems, emphasising especially the persistence of philosophies in which the universe was uncreated and coeval with God,<sup>7</sup> so that monist or dualist pantheisms had stood beside the mechanistic atheisms of Democritus and Lucretius. As narrated as far back as Eusebius himself, this had given rise to the gnosticism with which even the first apostles had had to struggle, as well as to the later Manichaeism; and there was a history of how western monotheism had been faced with religions without a creator to be found in Persia and further east. There was a world history of religion alongside the sacred and ecclesiastical history of the first and second Israels.

A crucial position was occupied by Platonism, in which the failure to enlarge the Demiurge into a Creator had perpetuated the errors of the ancient philosophers, but the perception that the godhead might be differentiated into three capacities or persons had preceded the revelation of the Christian Trinity. From this ambivalence had arisen the great debates of the fourth and fifth Christian centuries, and it is of the first importance to acknowledge that Gibbon traced their history in some detail, so that his personal scepticism of all theologies did not prevent his seeing that their assumptions and categories were active historical forces. The case to be made against them did not diminish their meaning in history, or that of the actors in it.

Christian history in all its fullness thus became both one of the grand narratives and one of the modes of historiography exerting paradigmatic guidance over Gibbon's history of *The Decline and Fall* and its consequences. There was a further set of narratives, not related by Gibbon because he did not arrive at them, but constantly implicit in the modern history in which he perceived the setting for his work. These narrated the rise of the great kingdoms of Atlantic Europe, exclusive of German history with which he scarcely dealt: first, the medieval kingdoms and the debates over their legal foundations; second, the growth after 1494 of a system of states capable of a balance of power; third, the wars of religion which nearly destroyed them between 1550 and 1660; and finally, the emergence of a 'republic of states', in his own phrase (II, 511–13), proof against civil and religious war or threat of universal monarchy, in which Gibbon believed himself to be living. Enlightenment, as we use the term, was one of its instruments; in order to

bring the sacred under the control of the sociable, it was necessary to modify both Christian doctrine and the nature of Christian belief, and Gibbon's second and third volumes contain a history of how the turn in late antiquity from a poetic polytheism to a philosophic monotheism inescapably raised the problems of truth and error, disputability and toleration.<sup>8</sup> The last concept became the ideological foundation of the Enlightened *ancien régime*, which Gibbon thought secure against both barbarism and religion, but of which he was in fact living in the very last moments. He completed *The Decline and Fall* in May 1788, one year before the revolution which was to transform his Europe and its use and writing of history. If other historians – Raynal, Ferguson, Mably – knew that something of the kind was happening, he did not.

## Eurasian Narratives

Seven years previously, Gibbon had completed the publication of what is here called his ‘first trilogy’, ending with (but looking forward from) the extinction of the Roman Empire in its original capital and western provinces. He now faced (as he had always intended) the challenge of writing a history of the eastern or ‘Byzantine’<sup>9</sup> empire for the thousand years of its continued existence; the challenge of deciding how this history was to be written and even whether it was worth writing at all. To understand this problematic, we must recognise that the governing paradigms – the method of historiography and the master narratives – which had determined his project so far were, with the single gigantic exception of Christian history in its first five centuries, Latin, Roman and post-Roman in character, and therefore inapplicable to the Hellenistic, or Graeco-Oriental, history he was now committed to writing. The primary meaning of ‘Decline and Fall’ had been the disintegration of the Roman capacity to combine military with civic ‘virtue’; that of ‘barbarism’ the culture of the Germanic tribes who had taken over the western provinces, becoming themselves part-Romanised in the process; that of ‘religion’, while so far a history of dispute and intolerance springing from the conversion of civic polytheism into the encounter of monotheism with Greek philosophy, had begun to emphasize the limited extent to which the Latin churches were involved in this. The eastern decline and fall – if the term was to be used – was not a matter of the progressive barbarism of provinces, but of the loss of the Greek east to the organised empires of Persians, Arabs and Turks and the religious revolution of Islam; a history less of barbarism than of enthusiasm, itself organised into empires. West of the Bosphorus and north of the Danube, the former *barbaricum* had been recreated as ‘Europe’ by Latin and Frankish colonisation spreading from the west, and there had taken shape the competition between Roman papacy and post-Roman empire, the growth of the western kingdoms and the movement towards a republic of Enlightened states in which Gibbon and his contemporaries situated their early modern and modern history. *The Decline and Fall* is written as a prelude to this history; but Gibbon knew no way of arriving at it from Byzantine or Ottoman beginnings.

He knew that the paradigms shaping western history were not applicable in the east, and doubted both whether others could be found to replace them and whether Byzantine

culture had shaped a history of its own that could or should be narrated and studied. In the course of his third volume he said it consisted of a thousand years of ‘premature and perpetual decay’ (II, 237), meaning apparently that Roman history was reducible to the decline of an original ‘virtue’, and that Byzantine history began when that process was so far advanced that nothing could be done, or usefully written, about it. This was to deny that there was anything but a Roman history; he offered no account of how the heroic hoplites of Athens and Sparta had degenerated under Macedonian and Roman empires, and may have possessed no authoritative or written history relating to the process. Gibbon’s Greek history is less Hellenic than Hellenistic; his Greeks are already semi-orientalised. The capacity to write history depended, as Tacitus had remarked, on the freedom and capacity to enact it, and at the outset of his fifth volume (III, 23–5), with the reign of Justinian behind him, he pronounced that the history of the Byzantine dynasties was no longer worth studying, since they had neither made nor written one of their own. Byzantine history could only be written as that of its ‘passive connections’ (III, 25) with the recorded actions of a series of more active peoples, whom he proceeded to enumerate from the Franks and Latins in the west to the Mongols and Turks in the ‘Scythian’ north and east. He was proposing radical changes in the history to be related and studied, and the historiography to be studied and practised, by readers and students of *The Decline and Fall*’s concluding volumes.

My own study of Gibbon, *Barbarism and Religion*, was constructed by following two strategies. The first may be termed contextual: it pursued the sequence of Gibbon’s successive chapters, marking how they moved from one master narrative to another, and from one mode of historiography to another as the former choice required. The theme of imperial decay emphasised a narrative of reigns, that of barbarism a part-conjectural history of Eurasian society, that of religion an ecclesiastical history increasingly Enlightened, and Gibbon moved from one to the other as sources and premises indicated. The several modes of historiography were interrelated but never integrated, and this is a reason for continuing to regard him as an early modern historian, closer to humanism than to historicism. The second strategy was contextual in another sense: it consisted in a series of close studies of historians ancient, recent and contemporary with him, aimed at treating them as historians in their own right and presenting their texts at a length and in a depth comparable to that in which *The Decline and Fall* was presented. Gibbon

appeared, as he did to himself, a participant in the contentious historiographical culture of the eighteenth century. His opponents – especially Tillemont – presented contexts in which he might be better understood; and so, for reasons certainly paradoxical, did those – like Raynal and his colleagues,<sup>10</sup> or Robertson in his later writings<sup>11</sup> – who entered on fields and explored historical and philosophical concepts he never engaged in. The fact that they did this and he did not was relevant to the understanding of his work.

There appears to be no reason why these strategies should not be employed in the study of Gibbon's second trilogy. As he pursued the several histories of the 'active' peoples with whom the eastern empire interacted, he sets each out as they were known to the scholarship of his time, and we encounter the narrative histories, if any there are, generated by each before and during its encounter with Byzantium. If any of them was still in a pre-literate or 'barbaric' condition – perhaps of pastoral nomadism – Gibbon must turn to what 'conjectural' or 'philosophic' historiography permits us to suppose of them, and here we begin to rely on what European moderns have proposed concerning the history of others, continuing to use the narratives and forms of historiography known to them. Gibbon will be found dealing with west European, Christian and modern – perhaps Enlightened – communities of scholars. His chapters may be expected to change, not only in subject matter but in patterns of discourse, as he moves from one to another. This is no more or less than had happened as he wrote his first three volumes; but these possessed a central narrative to which he constantly returned, and we have been told that the history of the eastern Roman Empire no longer supplies one. The question remains whether the later volumes consist of more than a collection of separate national and religious histories, loosely connected by the passive responses of an empire no longer capable of a history of its own making. This is the question to be pursued by historians interested in Gibbon's second trilogy.

We enquire whether the relations between a Christian empire and church supply the connective tissue we are looking for, but the answer seems to be negative. Gibbon's very early readings in eastern Roman history were indeed focused – William Howel,<sup>12</sup> Simon Ockley<sup>13</sup> – on post-Laudian and High Church authors; but he shows no apparent interest in anticipating Hugh Trevor-Roper's suggestion that their caesaropapist tendencies pointed in a proto-Enlightened direction.<sup>14</sup> Had James II succeeded in establishing a Catholic Church, 'Anglican' in the sense in which the French was Gallican, things might



have been different; but this is to imagine the counter-factual, and Gibbon's involvement in Hanoverian ecclesiology seems to have begun from a point closer to Hoadly or Middleton. When he wrote of the Iconoclast controversy and its role in the division of a constructed empire between Charlemagne and Irene, his argument was Humean and therefore ambivalent. Image-worship, he had fiercely insisted, was superstitious and had turned the Church towards priestcraft; but perhaps this was preferable – except on extreme occasions – to the enthusiasm of worshipping ideas and formalised images that he found in the iconoclasm of the eastern monks. The Roman papacy's espousal of the western worship of tangible relics had led it halfway to the primacy of a western republic anchored in the reality of the world; only then had the counter-corruption of superstition set in. Gibbon insisted on this point to the very last chapter of *The Decline and Fall*; but as these chapters show us, it drew him constantly back to a history of religion and sociability which was western and Latin, rather than Greek or oriental.

Similarly, when at the end of his fourth volume he returned to the Council of Chalcedon (II, 976–80), which he had passed over when narrating the sequence of reigns, the emphasis lay not on the emperor's role as mediator (as it did for Howel) or even on the contrast between Latin sobriety and Greek disputatiousness, but on that between Greeks and Latins together and the 'oriental' churches, Nestorian and Monophysite, which rejected the council's decisions and embarked on the separation of Syria and Egypt from the authority and history of the Roman Empire. Here Christianity is an agent in the disintegration of empire; or is Gibbon rather telling us that its history exceeds the limits of the Graeco-Roman? Chapter 47, which concludes the volume, is his last word on the history of Christological debate, starting with Cerinthus, the gnostics and the Apostle John, and ending with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. It is not a dismissal, but a recognition that Christian history extends beyond that of an empire now lacking a directive centre. This is where the history of the eastern empire is leading us.

Chapter 50 opens: 'After pursuing above six hundred years the fleeting Caesars of Constantinople and Germany, I now descend, in the reign of Heraclius, on the eastern borders of the Greek monarchy' (III, 151). It is a splendidly rococo image: the rotund pink form descends, scattering shafts of light over a darkened desert landscape; but it marks a crucial moment. Gibbon has just completed two of the long-range surveys which

his choice of strategies is pluralizing into narrative: a history of the Byzantine dynasties from Heraclius to 1204, and a history of the increasingly shadowy western (and German) empire from Charlemagne to 1356. Neither presents a master narrative, but he is about to begin one: the struggle of what no longer deserves (though it may receive) the name of Roman Empire against a new force in world history, originating outside that of western empire and society though not outside that of west Eurasian monotheism. The history of Islam will dominate the rest of *The Decline and Fall*, together with the disastrous interference of the Crusades; and it will further dominate the species of historiography Gibbon is trying to write. His juvenile reading had been drawn towards the east by Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*<sup>15</sup> and he paired that work in the architecture of the second trilogy with Joseph de Guignes's *Histoire des Huns, des Turcs, et des Mogols*. The latter has figured in *Barbarism and Religion* as a key to the history of barbarism;<sup>16</sup> with the Islamisation of the western steppe it becomes a major episode in the history of religion; and first with the Arabs and then with the Turks, Islam will achieve greater changes in the map of global culture than any achieved by post-Roman Europe before the conquest of the oceans – the last a narrative that Gibbon does not touch but that Robertson, Raynal and Diderot take up.

Gibbon's portrait of Muhammad partakes of both sacred and philosophic history. He is aware of the Platonic, gnostic and unitarian overtones of the Koran's insistence that Jesus, though not a divine being, was the apostle of God, the bearer of his word and the vehicle of his spirit (III, 179–80); it is easy to catch sight of the *Naked Gospel's* insistence that Muslim unitarianism was a reaction to Christian disputatiousness.<sup>17</sup> But if reason led to such a reaction, it was a reason that led to enthusiasm; and 'rational enthusiasm' is indeed Gibbon's preferred epithet for Islam. It was only one step – though a long step – away from Platonism to the philosophic account of the legislator who claimed divine authority for his laws and must either deceive others or deceive himself;<sup>18</sup> Hume's history of religion infuses this narrative. The fall of the eastern empire began with its encounter, not with barbarism – whatever might be said of the Bedouin (III, 154–66) – but with religion: with enthusiasm as the organising principle of its own empire. Adam Ferguson had asked, however, and Gibbon would have found Ibn Khaldun asking had he known of him, whether enthusiasm could sustain empire without changing itself,<sup>19</sup> and that had been the fate of the Romans, who had worshipped not

God but themselves. Gibbon's chapters on primitive Islam record the conquests of enthusiasm from Turkestan to Spain, but end with the Abbasid caliphate as an oriental despotism of the familiar type. So much for philosophical history; as history of erudition and historiography, they open up 'new and important scenes', as Gibbon would have said,<sup>20</sup> in the history of European culture. He knew no Arabic, though he had once wished to learn it, but he read the Arab sacred and secular histories in French translation (III, 237–9).

As the life of the Prophet ends, the history of the Arab Muslim conquests begins. For Gibbon, these are inspired by fanaticism, yet the belief that moves them is no more than the insistence that God is one and Muhammad his prophet; Gibbon admires this creed for its 'rationality', meaning that it rejects dispute over the nature of God, in which Christians have not ceased to engage. Though the age of the conquests coincides with the beginnings of the unending schism of Sunni and Shia, this does not arise from a dispute between theologies, but from one between rival claimants to the prophetic succession. It becomes involved, says Gibbon, in 'the immortal hatred of the Persians and Turks' (III, 220), and therefore in the expansion of an empire of conquest beyond its Arab beginnings. The several Muslim peoples and their cultures are ranked among those with whom the history of Byzantium is 'passively connected'; but together with the Arabs, they actively create another history, that of Islam, which must be separately related and cannot be confined to its interactions with the history of eastern Rome. Gibbon is from this point committed to writing a history of two empires and religions in conflict, but is at the same time committed to writing a series of histories defined as peripheral to, but more momentous than, the passive history of Byzantium. To further the complexity of his enterprise, there will be times when 'the Greeks' (III, 26–7), under the Macedonians, the Comneni and even the dying Palaeologi, assert themselves against their enemies and reshape the empire with their own hands. Small wonder, then, if writing the fifth and sixth volumes of *The Decline and Fall* turned out somewhat otherwise than announced in Gibbon's initial plan.

It could never, as that plan had made clear, have been the unified narrative of a single process. In the sixth volume, Gibbon seeks to reduce it to a two-sided history of how the empire was ground down by Crusaders from the west, culminating in 1204, and Turks from the east, with its climax in 1453; but even the latter, twice interrupted by

Genghiz and Timur, was a history originating in the Eurasian steppelands rather than on the frontiers of Rome or Christendom, or of Arabia. The second trilogy, then, is a history without a central nervous system, and this is why the fifth volume is a series of essays in which a series of histories, pursuing various themes and the fortunes of various peoples, are severally pursued and indicate various master narratives. It is not clear that Gibbon yet has in mind, though he does mention, the double narrative of Crusaders and Turks. The fifth volume will transcend, and yet will not abandon, the negative portrait of Byzantine history with which it opened.

Each of these essay-length chapters is based in eighteenth-century erudition, if only because Gibbon needed modern translation to give him access to Arabic sources. Behind each lies a world of scholarly debate, and it may well be worthwhile to situate each chapter in the context it entails and discover what was being said and thought by scholars, and in what ways Gibbon was part of it. But scholars today will also want to know how, and perhaps whether, he arranged these chapters to build up a unified history and of what kind that was; and it may be that he had set himself a new task and was in the process of discovering how he would have to perform it. Chapter 51 relates the progress of the Arab conquests, initially in Syria and Mesopotamia; and it was in the nature of Gibbon's enterprise that he should see these as achieved at the expense of the Roman eastern empire, and beginning the centuries of warfare between Islam and Christianity. So perhaps did the Arabs see it, and the chapter takes them all the way to Spain, with world-altering consequences. But before he does so, the second theme of the chapter is the conquest of Persia, the enemy of Hellas and Rome for the last thousand years, and Gibbon gives no indication that he is changing his historiographical starting point by placing this massive event where he does. Yet Persia was to change the conquering culture of the Arabs, just as Greek culture had changed Roman; and its effect was to bring them into immediate contact with the western steppe and its largely Turkish inhabitants, as Gibbon the reader of de Guignes very well knew and said. He does not, however, say that he is turning away from one history and returning to another, as he resumes the conquests of Egypt, Africa and Spain.

The destruction – *pace* Braudel – of Mediterranean cultural unity succeeds that of Hellenised Syria and Egypt to complete the Muslim revolution in Eurasian history. Gibbon does not fail to narrate it – in the romantic and heroic style considered

characteristic of Arab historiography – but he remains a historian of empire, analysing the strengths and weaknesses it displays in its various forms. As a follower of Montesquieu and a historian in the grand western tradition, it is not surprising that he turns from the empire of the caliphs at its height to its first failures and the beginnings of its decay. Arising from the usual causes – excessive size, the employment of mercenaries, the decay of military spirit – this process coincides over the next three centuries – Gibbon is employing a long-range perspective – with reorganisations of Christian power, temporary in the east, transformative in the west, which *The Decline and Fall* sets out in an order, perhaps planned by Gibbon and perhaps not, which will determine the shape of the fifth volume and prefigure the climax of the sixth. (The complexity of this sentence is an index to that of Gibbon's overall narrative.) From the failure of the Arabs to assault Constantinople by sea, chapters 52 and 53 proceed to the wealth, cultural energy and military reorganisation of the Byzantine Empire under the Macedonian dynasty; 'the Greeks' have been, somewhat paradoxically, listed among the peoples with whom Byzantine history is to interact. In the far west, the Ummayyads fail to extend their control of Spain into Aquitaine; the dynasties disintegrate, and with Charles Martel the Carolingians appear, who will re-erect the western empire and set about expanding it into Germany. After a chapter on Byzantium at its post-Roman height (chapter 54), however – one not free from the warnings of ultimate decline – Gibbon executes one more, arguably the last, of his sudden shifts into the history of religion, examining the heresy of the Paulicians, heirs of the Zoroastrians, gnostics and Manichaeans, and reopening, with Beausobre and Mosheim to support him, the long familiar question whether it is possible to find in this medieval dualism the seeds of the evangelism which preceded the Reformation. This is no part of the history of empire, and it is the only moment in the second trilogy when Gibbon looks forward from the medieval to the modern and contemporary. He returns to the Humean dilemma that arises when reason becomes enthusiasm, and conducts in a concluding footnote a quarrel he is having with the democratic unitarianism of Joseph Priestley (III, 439 n42). It is Gibbon's farewell to the history of Christianity.

In the last three chapters (55–7) of the fifth volume, he sets the geopolitical scene which he will reduce to narrative in the sixth. We are on the frontiers of former empire, specifically on the Danube, about to collapse finally as a military frontier but still marking

the point where peoples moving out of ‘Scythia’ collide and interact with post-Roman empires east and west. A reshaping of ‘Europe’ begins when this frontier collapses for the last time under pressure from peoples called ‘Slavonians’ or ‘Slavs’, who colonise the peninsula we call ‘Balkan’ and the provinces formerly Illyrian, Macedonian and Hellenic. This is a major cultural change, but the frontiers of empire do not necessarily recede, and the Slav peoples – Serbs, Croats, Wallachians – arrive sometimes by invasion, sometimes as allies. It seems to be the familiar story of *receptio*, and we expect a scenario in which the Slavs and Bulgars – this name begins to appear – play the role of Goths and Franks, creating new cultures half Roman and half barbaric. It is not recounted, however, perhaps because east Romans are not west Romans, or because Slavs lack a Tacitus to endow them with the primitive virtues of the Germans. Gibbon seems at times unsure what to say of them or their historical formation. There is an earlier passage in which they appear as a squalid people from the Pripet marshes (II, 690–2), but in chapter 55 he insists that the Bulgars are Slavs, and it is hard to name them without invoking the pastoral peoples of the nearer Asia, who have become paradigmatic in explaining all barbarian invaders of Rome and Europe. We have already heard of Avars, who besiege Constantinople and are destroyed by Charlemagne; the shepherd barbarians threaten both Latin and Greek empire and civility by way of Pannonia and the headwaters of the Danube. In chapter 55, Bulgarians are paired with Hungarians and threaten both empires; but the latter are Turkish-speaking (except where their language is Finno-Ugrian) (III, 447–8) and we have rejoined the grand narrative of Joseph de Guignes, with its Hunnish and Turkish confederacies spreading and subdividing through western Eurasia. From this history the Seljuks and Ottomans will in due course emerge; but for the present we are in the history of Europe and there is another cultural division to observe. The Hungarians, and some Slavic peoples, will be converted to Christianity and civility by Franks and Germans moving east from Latin Europe; others by missionaries and bearers of culture from the eastern empire and its Orthodox church. We have arrived at the divided roots of European history, but a large part of its Orthodox component is to spend centuries under Ottoman and Muslim empire. Gibbon does not narrate this history, but he inhabits and is aware of it.

Gibbon’s rather shaky grasp of Slav history has not lost its power to direct his overall narrative. The chapter concludes (III, 455–70) with the primitive and early

medieval history of ‘the Russians’, one of the peoples with which Byzantium interacts. Their power is originally northern and Baltic, the work of Scandinavian ‘Varangians’, the east wing of the Viking assault on Europe in the ninth century. Alternating as barbarians do between raiding and trade, they make their way along the great rivers, incorporating a miscellany of ‘Fennic’ and ‘Sclavonian’ tribes until their language and names have become Slavic. Arrived at the Black Sea river mouths, they form a principality powerful enough to threaten Constantinople itself, but are beaten off at the fourth attempt by John Zimisces (III, 464–6), hero of the Byzantine military revival. The Russians become allies and converts to Christianity; and Gibbon marks this as completing the civilization of ‘the North’ by ‘the monks, both of Greece and Germany’ (III, 468), who introduce civility along with letters and bring light where monks usually bring darkness. Gibbon mentions a Greek prophecy that a Russian will ‘in the last days’ become master of Constantinople, and remarks that this may yet be achieved, not by the light craft of the Russian rivers, but by the modern navy of the empress Catherine, capable of circumnavigating Europe (III, 463). It is one of his few excursions into the history of his own time, but is not further developed. The history of Kievan Rus ends with the Mongol invasions, and he does not return to Muscovite or Romanov history or pursue the civilisation of Europe into the colonisation of Siberia and the nomad steppe.<sup>21</sup> He has given only this one glimpse of eastern Christianity as the precursor of Enlightenment.

## The 'Double-Fall'

At the end of his fifth volume, Gibbon seems to move from a survey of histories impinging on the eastern empire to a master narrative of what he calls its 'double fall', brought about by Latin Crusaders in 1204 and Ottoman Turks in 1453. It is a double narrative, emerging from a western Latin history that he and his readers know well and an eastern history, part Muslim and part nomadic, which he has been labouring to reimagine all his life. The challenge before us is less to pursue these narratives through his concluding volume than to situate him in the history of historiography as he wrote them, enquiring on what sources and modes of writing he drew and in what problems and debates among the scholars of his time he took part.

Chapter 56 is a history of the Normans in Italy, a prelude to the Crusades but very much more; almost the last, nevertheless, of the peripheral histories he has undertaken to write. They appear in Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, first as mercenaries and then as pursuing independent power among what Gibbon terms 'the three great nations of the world, the Greeks, the Saracens and the Franks' (III, 471); the scene is enlarged beyond even the history of the Roman Empire and has become European if not global. It is nevertheless situated in Italy where all three hold power, and he lists the great modern historians who are his sources and to whom he owes so much more than his immediate theme: Carlo Sigonio, Pietro Giannone and Lodovico Antonio Muratori (III, 471 n1). These inform Gibbon regarding the expulsion of the Arabs from Sicily, the Greeks from Italy and the Norman ambitions in the empire; but the first Crusade will be Frankish rather than Norman, and the narrative will be that of competition between the papacy, the Hohenstaufen and the Angevins, in which the Norman kingdom becomes absorbed and Gibbon's theme becomes Latin rather than Byzantine. Is Gibbon able to escape western history for long? And to what extent is the history of the Crusades part of Byzantium's losing fight against eastern enemies? Chapter 57, which concludes the fifth volume, transcends the history of the peripheral yet dominant peoples by tracing that of the Seljuk Turks from their central Asian origins to the defeat of Romanus Diogenes in 1071 and the transformation of the Greek Anatolia into the Muslim sultanate of Rūm.

Here Gibbon's historiographical context undergoes a change, while remaining one with which we have long been familiar. He acknowledges two principal authorities:



Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*, which he had sent after him from Oxford to Lausanne,<sup>22</sup> and Joseph de Guignes's *Histoire des Huns, des Turcs, et des Mogols* (III, 523), his source for understanding the barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire. The *Huns* display the attributes of nomad pastoralists recoiling from the Chinese frontiers and setting in motion a series of snowball effects felt as far west as the Danube valley. The last of these had been the Magyar invasion of the ninth century, but Gibbon now becomes concerned with the very different story of the *Turcs*. The western steppe is converted to Islam and therefore to literate monotheism, and this in turn is a consequence of the Arab conquest of Persia and the transformation of Arab culture that follows. We enter the world of Ibn Khaldun, whom Gibbon did not know, and of Adam Ferguson, whom he may have reviewed:<sup>23</sup> one in which cities, capable of commerce, literacy and empire, draw constantly on the shepherd horsemen from whom they recruit their armies and by whose dynasties they are repeatedly ruled. Unlike the western barbarians, among whom the plough sets the progress of society in motion, the Turks are the only one of de Guignes's nomad peoples who become capable of durable empire. They are still governed by oriental despots, but their empire extends across western Asia and deep into Europe as Gibbon is writing. Whether it will last he does not seem to enquire.

Unlike the sultanate of Rūm, Seljuk power over Jerusalem is not acquired by conquest over the Roman Empire, but over the Fatimid caliphate that remains powerful in Egypt. It is not a matter of war between empires, but of control over the lucrative travels of pilgrims to the holy places of all three great religions (III, 548–54), and Gibbon has to enquire into the meaning, in the history he is writing, of the wars of the Crusades that are to follow. He is in no doubt that these were a Latin and Frankish enterprise, external to the history of the eastern empire, yet profoundly damaging to it.

He relates the history of the Crusades, down to the fall of the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, in the opening chapters (58–9) of his sixth and last volume. He does so in the simplest of the modes of historiography available to him: the paraphrase, with occasional commentary, of the first-hand and near-contemporary narratives of witnesses and participants. It is true that he enjoys massive philological support, in the form of the glossaries of medieval Greek and Latin supplied by Charles du Fresne Ducange, 'the Tillemont of the middle ages' (III, 1212), but there is no 'philosophical' history of the

Crusades, and what we read in these chapters is *res gestae*: the heroic and saintly exploits of knightly and clerical actors. This, however, may be misleading; we have only these narratives because the Crusades consisted only of actions of these orders, and once we realise this we have grasped their ‘philosophical’ history. They constitute an episode in the history, not of empire but of religion; specifically of enthusiasm, an epidemic of which swept through the peoples – particularly the warrior classes – of post-Roman Latin Europe in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, and did something towards lifting them from barbarism towards civility by converting their savagery (sometimes) into chivalry. This is why their historiography is an incident to the history of society.

There is one exception. When in chapter 59 Gibbon arrives at the fourth Crusade of 1204, he passes it over with the remark that it needs a chapter to itself (III, 645), which it receives in chapter 60. It is a climactic event in the history of empire: the Latin conquest of Constantinople and institution of a Latin empire, the joint work of French adventurers and aggressive Venetian merchants, from which Byzantine civilisation will not recover. We have embarked on the history of the ‘double fall’, to which the enthusiastic attempt to seize the holy places of Jerusalem was only directly a prelude. It calls for a different historiography, one of mixed character. If the narrative of the Latin conquest is still supplied by the knightly and chivalrous history by Geoffrey de Villehardouin (III, 1272) (whom Gibbon likes and admires), its prelude and sequel – the establishment and disintegration of the Latin empire, followed by the Greek restoration under the Palaeologi – cannot be understood without the wars between Venice and Genoa for control of commerce in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea; a narrative of a very different kind, ending when Constantinople, no longer an empire, is little more than a maritime trading city, for the moment under Genoese control.

This history, and that of the partial Greek recovery, is narrated by Gibbon in three chapters (61–3), in which he must follow, with little gratification, the none too reliable historians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – notably John Cantacuzenus, whom he seems to find so despicable as to be rather interesting (III, 1203, 1292). These are historians in the primary sense, recounting their own deeds or failures to perform them; but there is a deeper background, of Eurasian and intercontinental dimensions, which needs to be related. This consists of the origins and rise of the Ottoman Turks, who are to bring Hellenistic and Roman history to an end, and needs to be situated in the history

of the steppe as Gibbon has inherited it from de Guignes as one of his master narratives. There are two chapters (64 and 65) in which Gibbon presents the last great figures of nomad and post-nomad history – Zingis (the spelling he prefers to Genghiz) and Timur – as the background from which the Ottoman Empire emerges. He reminds his readers of the earlier chapters in which the history of barbarism appeared as a pastoral thrust of nomads from China towards Europe (III, 791 and n1); but he and we know that much has changed since the time of Attila. The nomads have developed an occasionally genocidal capacity to interact with cities and empires; they have accepted Islam and other religions, and have penetrated both Iran in the west and China in the east. Gibbon possesses a life of Zingis in Persian perspective and another in Chinese, and the son of the former's editor has translated a life of Timur.<sup>24</sup> He knows also that the last of the Mongol empires is falling under British control in India, and that William Jones and his colleagues are about to produce a revolution in oriental scholarship.<sup>25</sup> There is a new age in world history and historiography, in which the Ottoman role is not limited to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

This catastrophe (in the literary sense) is reduced from effective to symbolic importance – like the sack of Rome by Alaric in 376 – by the events of the preceding century, in which the Ottomans cross the Straits and permanently subjugate the Slav and Orthodox provinces of Byzantine civilisation (chapters 64 and 67). There is now a Turkish and Muslim empire, and what is more a lasting cultural presence, in Europe itself, using that word in both its ancient and its modern senses; and Gibbon leaves us in no doubt that he knows this presence to have persisted into his own time. Its history, however, is subordinated to narrative: that is, to the narratives of the successive reigns from the Latin to the Turkish conquests, and these to the quite distinct narrative of the Eurasian conquests of Timur from the Chinese to the European borders. At the battle of Ankara (Gibbon's 'Angora') he overthrows his fellow conqueror Bajazet and comes within reach of destroying the Ottoman Empire (as it now is) altogether; but he dies on the way to the invasion of China. While Gibbon is dealing with this sequence of narratives (including that of the iron cage in which the captive Bajazet is exhibited), he is also enquiring into the fact that, whereas the heirs of Timur scarcely try to hold his empire together (the death of Attila comes to mind), the heirs of Bajazet do not fall apart. What Gibbon calls 'hereditary succession' – we want him to add 'primogeniture' – has

preserved the Ottoman Empire for nearly four centuries until its present decadence (III, 859–60). Gibbon is able to venture past 1453 into the history of modern east Europe.

## Ottomans and Slavs

He does not, however, do so systematically. The concluding volume of *The Decline and Fall* lacks any equivalent to the third volume's 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', and it is worth enquiring – if need be counterfactually – what resources, if any, Gibbon possessed for writing such an equivalent, what it might have been and why he did not write one. The obvious response has already been given: the history of the eastern empire was not a decline and fall in the western sense, and Gibbon did not feel called on to reflect upon it. It was not a history of interior decay and progressive barbarian and ecclesiastical takeover, but of the rise of an alien if related religion and the organisation of non-Roman peoples into empires capable of conquest. Byzantium was more capable of self-recreation than Gibbon had suggested, and at times he must acknowledge this; but the history of its destruction by Latins and Turks was more one of their strengths than of its weaknesses, and he need only relate the latter at the level of narrative.

East Roman historiography therefore lacked a deep past and a master narrative, but this is only one set of reasons why it did not call for 'general observations'. It did not possess – alternatively, Gibbon did not see reasons for supplying – a medieval and early modern continuation leading to the modern Europe of his own time. This had been constructed by the republican and Enlightened historians surveyed in *Barbarism and Religion* and by many other writers, but it was essentially a history of post-Roman western Europe and its expansion, and lacked an eastern narrative written on the same scale. Gibbon did not write one, and there is no sign at present that he felt any need to do so; but his text stands at certain points from which one might – counterfactually we may say 'may' – have occurred to his mind.

As the successor state to the west Roman empire was the Frankish kingdom expanding eastward through Germany, the successor to Byzantium was the Turkish empire over the Orthodox Slavs and Greeks of southeast Europe. There could have been – are we sure that there was not? – a historiography of Ottoman power in the Danube valley and the Mediterranean seas. Gibbon once mentioned that the frontier of the Austrian empire separated Christian from Muslim Europe along the line which had separated the Roman empire *in occidente* from that *in oriente* (II, 98); and on a global

scale, Raynal's team of historians had made the Turkish conquest of Egypt a starting point of their history of world commerce.<sup>26</sup> Though it is dangerous to overestimate, one should not underestimate the capacity of Enlightened historians to envisage history on such a scale. In Gibbon's time, however, the critical encounter of Turkish-Christian history was that with an expanding Russia. He knew, though he did not much admire, the history in which the Moldavian (and exile in Russian protection) Demetrius Cantemir had offered to recount the rise and anticipated decline of the Ottoman Empire (III, 1203), and we have noticed his mention of the Russian navy's voyage from the Baltic to the Black Sea. There was a history of Europe here greater than its encounter with Arab-Turkish Islam and other than the epic encounter with the shepherd peoples that had provided the 'General Observations' of 1783 with their closure.

'A Julian or Semiramis may reign in the North' (II, 513). Julian is Frederick of Prussia, Semiramis Catherine of Russia, and we are at the head of the Baltic (a birthplace of German historiography)<sup>27</sup> where Europe is bringing Protestant and French Enlightenment to a still Orthodox Russia, now a Muscovite and Romanov state engaged in the colonisation of Siberia and the steppe, which will expel de Guignes's nomads finally from world history. All these are episodes of vast importance, which the need to write a Byzantine history as he understands it obliges Gibbon to mention, but never to bring together in a pattern.

## Conclusions

Having arrived at the fall of Constantinople – the culminating moment in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire – Gibbon does what he has done before, and adds three chapters on topics only indirectly related to his immediate narrative. In Volume I, after reaching the accession of Constantine, he had added two chapters on Christianity in the pagan empire; in Volume III, after reaching the end of the empire in the west, he had added a chapter on the structure of the Frankish monarchy. In each case there was some relationship between the addition and a narrative of continuing history; but that could not be the case with the conclusion of the work as a whole, where the additional chapters are retrospective and he offers no general considerations on history after 1453. It is more perplexing, therefore, not only that he offers these chapters, but that he has declared his intention of doing so since publishing his preface to *The Decline and Fall* as a whole in 1776.<sup>28</sup> We ask what his intentions were in 1776 and whether he was carrying them out unchanged in 1787–8; and it should be confessed that, in the present state of research and interpretation, we do not know.

Chapters 69 and 70 relate the political and ecclesiastical history of the city of Rome in the Middle Ages, a triangular history of popes, emperors and bandit nobilities competing to control the ghost of the vanished Roman republic. Chapter 71 – Gibbon's last – studies the material history of the city, the partial destruction and partial survival of the ancient buildings of the republic and empire. All three are intensively researched and written, and it may be said that they carry on themes that dominate his historical imagination: the former two relating the conflict of ecclesiastical power with secular, the last recalling that moment in 1764 when 'the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city' – not yet the empire – 'started to his mind'.<sup>29</sup> Gibbon, it is easy to say, was in the last analysis a historian of western Europe, and western historiography took control of his mind at the end. But this does not quite explain the lack of any connection between Volume VI and its last three chapters, and it may not sufficiently recognise the absorbing interest in oriental and Eurasian history which long preceded the visit to Rome and can be dated from what would have been his schoolboy years if he had ever been a schoolboy.<sup>30</sup>

It is easier to discern the paradigmatic history to which chapters 69–71 belong than it is to find that paradigm controlling *The Decline and Fall* as a whole. This present chapter, and the volumes of *Barbarism and Religion*, have offered a multi-paradigmatic and multi-contextualist reading, in which Gibbon's historiography alters as he moves from one narrative to another. There is not always a necessary connection explaining each move, and that seems in the present state of our insight to be the problem with his last three chapters. Perhaps the grandeur and unity of *The Decline and Fall* is literary after it is historiographical: the majesty of Gibbon's style as he moves from one narrative to another is what gives his work unity.



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## Notes

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[1](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015).

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[2](#) Giuseppe Giarrizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea del Settecento* (Naples: Istituto Ital. per gli Studi Storici, 1954).

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[3](#) Arnaldo Momigliano ‘Gibbon’s Contribution to Historical Method’, in *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1955).

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[4](#) See *Barbarism and Religion*, [III](#), ch. 8.

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[5](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [IV](#), parts [I](#) and [II](#).

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[6](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [V](#).

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[7](#) Gibbon’s chief source here seems to have been Isaac de Beausobre’s history of Manichaeism; see *Barbarism and Religion*, [V](#), ch. 5.

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[8](#) Jean Leclerc, perhaps even more than the greater David Hume, is the philosopher of this history; William Warburton of the origins of tolerance and intolerance.

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[9](#) This term is challenged by scholars who rightly remind us that the peoples of this empire continued to describe themselves as ‘Romans’. I continue to use it, however, because Gibbon employed it to distinguish between the inhabitants of a Greek-speaking Orthodox east and a Latin-speaking Catholic west.

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[10](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [IV](#), chs. 13–17. These chapters may be read as presenting a great sequel and aftermath to *The Decline and Fall* itself; a claim made not without trepidation.

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[11](#) *Ibid.*, chs. 10–12.

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[12](#) I present histories used by Gibbon in these volumes as they appear in the bibliographical index to Womersley’s edition; here Womersley, ‘Index’, *The Decline and Fall*, [III](#), p. 1227. See further *Barbarism and Religion*, [I](#), pp. 33–40.

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[13](#) Womersley, ‘Index’, *The Decline and Fall*, [III](#), p. 1246.

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[14](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [I](#), pp. 8, 322.

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[15](#) See *Barbarism and Religion*, [I](#), p. 29.

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[16](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [IV](#), chs. 6–8.

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[17](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [V](#), pp. 105–9.

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[18](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [IV](#), pp. 35–6.

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[19](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [II](#), ch. 22.

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[20](#) These words are used of de Guignes, *The Decline and Fall*, [I](#), p. 1029 n10.

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[21](#) Emphasised in the ‘General Observations’, *The Decline and Fall*, [II](#), p. 512.

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[22](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [I](#), p. 30.

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[23](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [II](#), pp. 352–4.

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[24](#) *The Decline and Fall*, [III](#), p. 794 nn7–9.

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[25](#) Gibbon considers Zingis a tolerant monotheist and compares him to Locke ([III](#), 793 n6).

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[26](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [IV](#), pp. 240–2.

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[27](#) Kant was a resident of Königsberg, Herder of Riga.

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[28](#) See *The Decline and Fall*, ‘Preface’, [I](#), p. 3; see also [III](#), pp. 27 and 978–9.

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[29](#) *Barbarism and Religion*, [I](#), pp. 283–5.

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[30](#) *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1896), pp. 114–22 (esp. 121); *Barbarism and Religion*, [I](#), p. 29.

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2

# Gibbon's Geographies



**Robert Mayhew**

## Introduction: Gibbon and the Ruins of Rome Revisited

Perhaps Edward Gibbon's most famous autobiographical reflection is his account of the moment when, musing amidst the ruins of Rome, his life's vocation as a historian came to him:

the historian of the decline and fall must not regret his time or expence [in travelling], since it was the view of Italy and Rome which determined the choice of the subject. In my Journal the place and moment of conception are recorded; the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of the evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol.<sup>1</sup>

In Gibbon's self-portrayal, then, this is a 'moment of conception', the birth of 'the historian of the decline and fall', and yet it is also in fact a moment of conversion, the moment when the historian's ambition emerges and supplants his previous scholarly self-fashioning as an antiquarian chorographer (to which we will return).<sup>2</sup> And yet it would be a mistake to depict this as Gibbon simply moving away from a culture of erudite geographical scholarship to the realms of narrative history which would immortalise him. Even in Gibbon's own account, he emphasises that the experience of travel – 'the view of Italy and Rome' – determined his historical ambitions. He also notes in detail the exact place where his very civilised conversion (no Damascene falling from beasts of burden for Gibbon) occurred. And yet the weaving between Gibbon's musings amidst the ruins of Rome and the culture of geographical inquiry which would permeate his life's work is more complex and multifaceted than his celebrated depiction suggests for two sets of reasons.

First, whilst Gibbon travelled to Rome along many of the same routeways as the standard denizen of the Grand Tour, his arrival 'on classic ground' was not that of the thoughtless milord who haunted contemporary satirical and moral treatises, but was meticulously prepared for by an exhaustive programme of reading in what Gibbon himself termed the 'topography of old Rome, the ancient Geography of Italy'.<sup>3</sup> Gibbon, as we shall see, had spent the last months of 1763 in Lausanne reading Strabo's

*Geography* whilst also wading through the massive late Renaissance antiquarian-cum-topographical writings of Nardini and Cluverius. As such, before Gibbon crossed the Alps he had immersed himself in the culture of geographical scholarship by way of preparation. Roads, buildings, landscapes and place names all had immediate resonances for him in the ancient world, priming him to see the counterpoint between ancient Rome's glory and its modern state not merely as a commonplace trope, but as something far more profound.

Second, the reason this passage in Gibbon's *Memoirs* is so celebrated may partly relate to its interlinkage with the moving closing chapter of *The Decline and Fall*,<sup>4</sup> but it is also attributable to the skill with which Gibbon creates a sense of place, to the descriptive power of his pen to fire the geographical imagination of the reader. For Gibbon's reading of chorographical tomes in Lausanne did not dull his sensibilities as the stereotype of the dusty antiquarian so often implied; imagination and intellect were mutually reinforcing and Gibbon arrived in Rome, as he himself depicted it, in a state of heightened emotion: 'at the distance of twenty five years I can neither forget nor express the strong emotions which agitated my mind as I first approached and entered the *eternal City*'.<sup>5</sup> And yet the recollection of these strong emotions did not transparently lead to the fine evocation of his conversion amidst the ruins of Rome, for Gibbon in fact wrote two versions of this celebrated passage, neither of which is quite geographically accurate, leading some to doubt the veracity of the origin story Gibbon spun for *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>6</sup> Gibbon's depiction of the ruins of Rome is not, then, a simple memory of a 'place and moment', of personal geography and autobiographical history, but is instead a thing of delicate narrative artifice, worked and reworked to achieve its effect. Gibbon proves himself to be a skilled craftsman, using a keen geographical imagination to build narrative coherence, here for the purposes of autobiographical rendering, but he would repeatedly use the same techniques in *The Decline and Fall*.

In this chapter, the lines hinted at by unpacking the geographies of Gibbon's celebrated autobiographical conversion experience will be pursued. First, Gibbon's concern with and erudition in the cultures of geographical scholarship will be analysed. Gibbon's reading of Nardini, Cluverius and Strabo prior to crossing the Alps will prove to be small fragments of a far longer and far more wide-ranging engagement with geography, an engagement which was lifelong and which would notably have an impact

on how he built his scholarly credentials in *The Decline and Fall*. Second, this chapter will then look to the more intangible question of Gibbon's geographical sensibility or imagination as evidenced by *The Decline and Fall*, and this at two levels. First, it will be suggested that Gibbon demonstrates a fine ability to craft 'static' geographical descriptions at both small and large spatial scales, thereby building accounts of the stages on which his narrative unfolded. Second, it will be shown that Gibbon moved beyond this to see geography – taking this to mean both the interrelation between places and the ways physical geography affects human settlement and society – as an active participant in the narrative he wove. Finally, it will be shown that Gibbon's engagement with geography did not end when he signed off at the close of *The Decline and Fall*; on the contrary, as Gibbon sought a new subject for his pen, geography remained a key part of his thoughts and his modes of inquiry. Before all of this, however, we need to understand why Gibbon's revelation amidst the ruins of Rome could never be a conversion *from* geographical work *to* historical inquiry. Why did the historian in the age of Enlightenment always and necessarily retain an interest in geographical learning?



## Geography as the Eye of History

Early in his reading of Strabo's *Geography* in Lausanne, Gibbon could have encountered Strabo's intertwining of geography and history,<sup>7</sup> and yet for his own era a rather different rendering of the interrelationship between these enquiries had become an accepted commonplace: that geography is the 'eye' of history. The origins of this commonplace are unclear, but it gained in currency when the celebrated Renaissance Flemish cartographer, Abraham Ortelius, emblazoned the phrase 'Historiae Oculus Geographia' on the title page to his collection of maps of the ancient world, *Parergon* (1595). Gibbon's library catalogue does not include Ortelius (although he did mention him in a letter of 1757),<sup>8</sup> but he possessed many books which rehearsed the same commonplace. To take two examples, the historian of English navigations, Richard Hakluyt, prefaced his *Principal Navigations* by saying he wanted to refer 'each particular relation to the due time and place ... by the helpe of Geographie and Chronologie (which I may call the Sunne and the Moone, the right eye and the left of all history)'.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, during the English Civil War the influential geographical description by Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie* (1652), played on the same theme, using various metaphors to suggest the close kinship between geography and history – they were like Castor and Pollux, or 'like two Sisters dearly loving, not without pitie (I had almost said impiety) to be kept asunder'.<sup>10</sup>

Why was geography seen as the eye of history, as inseparable from the craft of the historian? On the positive side of the commonplace, geography allowed the reader to envisage the setting of the historical events they read about, thereby enlivening the whole and imprinting the narrative in their memory. Heylyn offered a clear account of this:

What delight or satisfaction can any man receive from the reading of Story [*sic*], without he know somewhat of the places and the conditions of the people which are therein mentioned. In which regard Ammianus Marcellinus the Historian, hath deserved very well of all his Readers, premising to the Actions of every Country, some brief description of the place, and chief Towns therein. For though the greatness of the Action doth ennoble and adorn the place; yet it is the knowledge of the place which addes delight and satisfaction unto the reading of the story which conveys it to us.<sup>11</sup>

John Locke meditated on what might be called the ‘negative’ side of the commonplace in his influential *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Without the eye of geography to order events spatially (and the eye of chronology to order them temporally), history would become confused and perplexed:

without Geography and *Chronology*, I say, History will be very ill retained, and very little useful; but be only a jumble of Matters of Fact, confusedly heaped together without Order or Instruction. 'Tis by these two, that the Actions of Mankind are ranked into their proper Places of Times and Countries.<sup>[12](#)</sup>

As we shall see, Gibbon's accounts of his own geographical instruction, his working methods as revealed in his private papers and his use of geography in *The Decline and Fall* resonate strongly with the positive and negative sides of the commonplace that geography is the eye of history.

## Gibbon's Geographical Scholarship

In his *Memoirs*, Gibbon dated his first engagement with geography to somewhere between 1751 and 1753, suggesting on the model Locke had proposed that geography came to his rescue, perplexed as he was by his insatiable reading habits:

The only principle that darted a ray of light into the indigested Chaos was an early and rational application to the order of time and place. The maps of Cellarius and Wells imprinted in my mind the picture of ancient Geography.<sup>13</sup>

Note that Gibbon suggests here not *reading* geography books, but instead *looking* at geographical maps as his first engagement with ordering historical data. This was perfectly conventional as a first mode of geographical instruction in the era, with Locke again setting the terms by arguing that, as it could be learnt by attention to globes and maps alone, ‘*Geography*[...] ... being only an exercise of the Eyes and Memory’, was suitable to be learnt by children from a very young age.<sup>14</sup> Edward Wells’s popular *Treatise of Antient and Present Geography* (1701), which contained the maps of the ancient world to which Gibbon refers, makes the same point, suggesting that maps ‘represented’ geographical information ‘in the most natural manner to the Eye it selfe’ and are therefore ideal pedagogic tools for the schoolchild.<sup>15</sup> As well as being the eye of history, then, geography could be learnt by the eye alone. Locke in fact suggested geography could be learnt from the age of six, so Gibbon was a relative latecomer in turning to this method of organisation, and this may partially explain his judgement at the end of the same paragraph of the *Memoirs* that he went up to Oxford with a ‘degree of ignorance of which a school boy would have been ashamed’.<sup>16</sup>

Although we cannot reconstruct how Gibbon looked at maps to order his knowledge, we can trace his interest in prose geographical learning around the time suggested in the *Memoirs* from his extant Commonplace-book for 1755, which shows him excerpting information about the Iroquois tribe of North America from de Lahontan’s *Nouveaux voyages dans l’Amerique septentrionale* (1703) and about the Low Countries province of Frizeland from William Temple’s *Observations upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands* (1687).<sup>17</sup> The Frizeland note mentions Tacitus, but it is only in 1761 that one first sees Gibbon embarking on the sort of geographical reading

which would fire his imagination and feed into *The Decline and Fall*. It was at this time that Gibbon, whilst undertaking militia service, began to read the volumes of antiquarian scholarship published by the Académie des Inscriptions.<sup>18</sup> He showed a particular interest in geographical subjects, noting the work of Bougainville on Hanno's alleged circumnavigation of Africa (a topic to which Gibbon would return the better part of thirty years later), Bonamy's 'reflexions upon the Geographical errors occasioned by Alexander's historians',<sup>19</sup> and, above all, the work of the celebrated French geographer Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville. Gibbon read d'Anville's essay on the source of the Nile, but was more impressed with one concerning the Getae people, which he praised as 'judicious', a judgement which would mature – as we shall see – into a fulsome encomium to d'Anville by the time of *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>20</sup> For good measure, Gibbon also started rereading Homer, paying particular attention to 'the Geography of the Iliad', using 'Strabo in Casaubon's Latin translation' as his guide.<sup>21</sup>

Commonplacing in Lausanne in 1755 and reading ancient geography as a Hampshire militiaman were the start of a lifetime's immersion in the culture of geographical scholarship for Gibbon. The sheer continuity and depth of this immersion is best gauged by looking at Gibbon's library. In 1785, Gibbon compiled a catalogue of his books, arranged under six headings. One of those headings, appropriate both to the quantity of items it encompassed in his collection and to the commonplace connection between the two inquiries at the time, was 'Histoire, et Géographie'.<sup>22</sup> Looking in more detail at Gibbon's library, what sorts of geographical scholarship does it show him to have read? We can discern four categories. First, Gibbon possessed a wide array of works which in eighteenth-century parlance would have been deemed 'geography books'. Many geography books described the whole world in some form of sequence: we have already mentioned Peter Heylyn's *Cosmographie* from Gibbon's library as an example of this genre, but he also possessed the more recent synthesis by Anton Büsching in its six-volume English translation, *A New System of Geography* (1762), as well as a French abridgement of the same. Gibbon also possessed many more specialised geographical treatises, with a particular emphasis on the critical geographical work of French scholars led by d'Anville. The aim of such work was to compare and reconcile multiple accounts – written and cartographic – of the locations of places, looking to investigate inconsistencies and thereby to offer a corrected account of the true geography of a place.

D'Anville paid particular attention to applying this method to the ancient world and, having first encountered his work in 1761, Gibbon continued to buy and read his work, as is evidenced by the eighteen items by d'Anville in his library. Such Francophone geographical scholarship would bulk large in Gibbon's creation of geographical authority in *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>23</sup> But other stripes of geography are also found in Gibbon's library, with an unsurprisingly impressive collection of ancient geographical writings by the likes of Strabo, Pliny and Pomponius Mela, as well as allied works by Pausanias and others. Gibbon also had Abu al Fida's work as a representative of the Islamic geographical tradition (and would use it in the description of Arabia in *The Decline and Fall*, as we shall see later) and medieval works by Mandeville, Marco Polo and others. Second, as well as possessing prose geography books, Gibbon's library suggests that he continued to learn geography with his eyes via maps as Locke recommended. The catalogue of Gibbon's library is frustratingly opaque as to detail, but we have six entries under 'Atlas' and eleven under 'Maps', suggesting by their titles a diverse array of cartographic material at various scales. The catalogue also itemises other maps specifically, suggesting Gibbon had a number of English maps by the prolific Emanuel Bowen, two copies of his correspondent James Rennell's important map (and geographical memoir in the mould of d'Anville) of India, as well as five items from the French cartographic dynasty of the de Vaugondys.<sup>24</sup> The maps in Gibbon's library, then, support the picture offered by the geography books of someone with a very wide interest in geography, and a particular interest in the French critical tradition. Third, and normally at a smaller spatial scale, Gibbon had a wide array of local or chorographical descriptions of specific places and nations, works such as the Jesuit Jean Baptiste du Halde's celebrated description of China, in both the original French and in the English translation by Samuel Johnson. Likewise, Gibbon owned a copy of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Examples could be multiplied, but would be poorly differentiated from a fourth category, the extensive representation of travel literature in Gibbon's library. Gibbon owned the classic collections of travel accounts, the sprawling quartos and folios by the Renaissance originators of the genre such as Ramusio, Hakluyt and Purchas, as well as the eighteenth-century collections assembled by Anstey and Hawkesworth. He also owned many specific travel accounts: attending, for example, to the 'classic' Enlightenment travel accounts, Gibbon had copies of the Pacific travels of

Bougainville, of James Cook and of both the Forsters, for Africa he possessed the writings of James Bruce, for South America he could consult La Condamine, whilst for the northern part of the Americas he could supplement his 1755 commonplace of Lahontan with the writings of Petr Kalm and Pierre de Charlevoix amongst others, and finally the northern polar areas were covered by Constantine Phipps. Simply put, Burke's famous evocation of the 'great map of mankind' which the Enlightenment had rolled out for rational scrutiny could have been replicated by Gibbon in his libraries in Lausanne or Bentinck Street.<sup>25</sup>

The wealth of geographical scholarship which Gibbon's library discloses guided his early attempts to find a subject on which to write prior to his epiphany amidst the ruins of Rome. For in the years up to 1764, Gibbon sought to build on the model of d'Anville, French critical geography and the Académie des Inscriptions, as we can see from three sources. First, geography was not the quarry of Gibbon's first publication, the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (1761), but a couple of sections do address geographical questions, notably section 43 on the ancient evidence that the ocean inundated Britain and made the island a marshland.<sup>26</sup> Second, a longer piece which emanated from Gibbon's time in Lausanne in 1763 as he prepared to venture to Italy was 'A Minute Examination of Horace's Journey to Brundisium', which tries to address the actual distances between the places mentioned in Horace's satire of that name. Here, Gibbon works in the mould of a French critical geographer, looking at the varied ancient and modern estimates of how far people could travel in a day in Horace's time, and at the debates over the lengths of ancient units for measuring distances in the hope that 'a critical examination of the ordinary journies of travellers would afford important information concerning the private life of the Romans, and even throw light on geography and chronology'.<sup>27</sup> Finally, this 'Minute Examination' was almost undoubtedly an offshoot from the 'most important literary project of his Lausanne stay',<sup>28</sup> the so-called *Recueil géographique*, a project which was never completed, being dropped after Gibbon's discovery of his metier amidst the ruins of Rome, and which was only published posthumously by Lord Sheffield as *Nomina gentesque Italiae antiquae*.<sup>29</sup> It was in the service of this project that Gibbon, as Sheffield wrote, 'endeavoured to make himself a complete master of its [Italy's] geographical and classical antiquities' by reading Nardini and Cluverius.<sup>30</sup> In its original, Gibbon's *Recueil* was a set of commonplace

notes, arranged under headings by place name. Sheffield altered its arrangement for publication, giving ‘the false impression that the *Recueil* was from the beginning a geographic essay, whereas at first it was only the framework and notes for such a study’,<sup>31</sup> but there can be no doubt that Gibbon intended a geographically structured study from the organisation of his commonplacing. And what can be discerned from Sheffield’s publication of the *Nomina* is a fairly conventional piece of geographical antiquarianism, in which Gibbon opens with a general description of the size, regional divisions and physical geography of ancient Italy, before moving on to a region-by-region account.<sup>32</sup> What Gibbon was projecting was a publication to succeed the *Essai*, and he was commonplacing with intent. As he wrote in 1763, he envisaged that, having studied ancient geography, his visit to Italy would leave him ‘nothing to do but to insert in their proper places my own observations as they tend either to confirm, to confute, or to illustrate what I have met with in books’.<sup>33</sup> This was exactly the sort of adjudication d’Anville’s critical geographic method encouraged: to read ancient and modern geographers about a place, and then to compare them with the first-hand experience of the traveller to attain true geographic knowledge. Gibbon hoped in the same letter that the fruits of his labours ‘might produce something not entirely unworthy to the eye of the publick on a subject, upon which we have no regular or complete treatise’, an ambition confirmed by his Lausanne journal, which frequently suggested that geography for the eighteenth century needed to be ‘facile et lumineuse’ where the hulking Renaissance antiquarianism of Cluverius, ‘deux in folio’, was ‘un objet très redoutable’.<sup>34</sup>

All of the modest hopes of 1763, of course, were dropped once Gibbon arrived in Rome. Indeed, where the Lausanne journals show a daily diet of geographical and antiquarian reading from October to December of 1763, on crossing into Italy, Gibbon’s next journal never makes a single reference to geographical scholarship.<sup>35</sup> This gives some substance to Gibbon’s ‘conversion narrative’ amidst the ruins of Rome, however much artifice there was in its construction, but it does not mean that Gibbon abandoned geographical scholarship. Rather, its role was transmuted from lead player to that of supporting actor. In the *Memoirs*, Gibbon treats the years between the *Essai* (1761) and the first volumes of *The Decline and Fall* (1776) briefly, but does note that geography played an ordering role, was one eye of the historian, as it had been in his youth and as Wells and Locke recommended. Noting that he ‘insensibly plunged into the Ocean of the



Augustan history’ Gibbon added that ‘the subsidiary rays ... of Geography and Chronology were thrown on their proper objects ... to fix and arrange within my reach the loose and scattered atoms of historical information’.<sup>36</sup> That this was not mere retrospection can be shown by fragments from Gibbon’s scholarly jottings, most notable being a set of comments on Sallust in his ‘Index Expurgatorius’ (1768–9). Castigating Sallust as ‘no very correct historian’, Gibbon notes ‘nothing can be more confused than his Geography without either division of provinces or fixing of towns’.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, Gibbon was trying to order places accurately to build an authoritative historical narrative, and this involved assessing the geographical reliability of his sources. As we shall now see, comments showing that Sallust was by no means the only scholar – ancient or modern – to be assessed by Gibbon for geographical reliability pepper *The Decline and Fall*.

We get tantalising fragments of Gibbon’s continued engagement with the culture of geographical scholarship from the *Memoirs* and his comments on Sallust, but the main evidence comes from *The Decline and Fall* itself. For Gibbon’s ability to marshall geographical evidence was one key token of his authority as a historian. Gibbon was in no doubt that ancient and medieval geographers worked in a state of benighted ignorance compared to a denizen of the eighteenth century. Thus the ancients, for example, ‘had a very faint and imperfect knowledge of the great peninsula of Africa’ and ‘sometimes amused their fancy by filling the vacant space with headless men, or rather monsters’ (I, 1007) (a topic to which he would return after completing *The Decline and Fall*), whilst more damning still was the judgement on the medieval response to the opening of the Silk Road: ‘a larger view of the globe might at least have promoted the improvement of speculative science, but the Christian geography was forcibly extracted from texts of scripture, and the study of nature was the surest symptom of an unbelieving mind’ (II, 585). Ancient and medieval geographical misconceptions were an easy target; the real job of the Enlightened historian was to make sure that their own geographical framework had been built by the most rigorous adjudication of the source materials. Gibbon on several occasions demonstrated his geographical erudition in notes prefaced to the ‘static’ descriptions of places to which we will turn in the next section. In this, Gibbon was following in the footsteps of d’Anville, to whom he felt moved to pay tribute in *The Decline and Fall*, saying that William Delisle had been ‘the prince of geographers, till the appearance of the greater d’Anville’ (III, 379 n3). He also pointedly juxtaposed the



brand of ancient geographical antiquarianism of the Renaissance polymaths through which he had ploughed whilst in Lausanne with that of the Enlightened French school in another comment implicitly favouring the latter: ‘the curious reader may compare the classic learning of Cellarius, and the geographical science of d’Anville’ (III, 592 n87).

To look at this brand of geographical erudition in *The Decline and Fall*, we can pause on just two notes as examples, those which prefaced Gibbon’s descriptions of the Hellespont (I, 589 nn14 and 15) and of Arabia (III, 151 n2). In the former description, Gibbon’s aim is to point out the variance between an authentic and modest measure of the channel’s width as determined in his own age by ‘the geographers who, with the most skilful accuracy, have surveyed the form and extent of the Hellespont’, and the sense of its stupendous magnitude which emanated from ancient accounts of ‘the adventurous Leander’, of Xerxes’s ‘stupendous bridge’ and ‘the singular epithet of *broad*, which Homer, as well as Orpheus, has frequently bestowed’ (I, 589–90). For Gibbon, accurate measures trump Homer who ‘insensibly lost the remembrance of the sea’ and thus exaggerated the scale of the Hellespont. Gibbon also notes the varying assessments of the width of the strait in the best European travel accounts, notably those by Thevenot and Sandys, in the latter of which he detects a measure so erroneous that ‘we can only suppose some mistake of the press in the text of that judicious traveller’ (III, 589 n14). Here, as elsewhere, Gibbon relies on ‘the admirable dissertation of M. d’Anville’ but adds that ‘even that ingenious geographer is too fond of supposing new, and perhaps imaginary *measures*, for the purpose of rendering ancient writers as accurate as himself’ (III, 589 n15). An ancient impressionistic geography, then, is supplanted by the precision of modern surveying, with the range of modern and ancient texts adjudicated against that standard. Here, perhaps, Gibbon out-d’Anvilles d’Anville himself. The extensive note prefacing Gibbon’s description of Arabia is of a slightly different character of which further examples can be found in *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>38</sup> Here, Gibbon offers a bibliography of the sources on which he has drawn in constructing his geographical description, together with adjudications of the relative worth of those sources. For Arabia, Gibbon divides geographical accounts into three categories: the ancient writings of Greek and Roman geographers such as Strabo and Ptolemy; the Arabic geographers, where he pays particular tribute to the qualities of Abu al- Fida as offering ‘the most copious and correct account of the peninsula’; and the modern

European travellers, amongst whom he picks out Thomas Shaw and Carsten Niebuhr. Finally, and unsurprisingly given the commonplace of learning geography with the eyes, Gibbon recommends ‘d’Anville’s Maps ... should lie before the reader’ (III, 151–2 n2).

And yet Gibbon’s aim, of course, was not merely to repeat the achievements of d’Anville’s ancient geographies. Where that was the aim in 1763 of the projected *Recueil géographique*, after the epiphany in Rome, Gibbon’s aim was the broader one of offering a narrative of the decay of the Roman Empire. Geographical scholarship was not an end in itself, but a component in the creation of this historical edifice. Furthermore, however much Gibbon paraded his geographical erudition to create a sense of his scholarly authority, it in fact played a far more integral part in the creation of his narrative when used in a more imaginative vein. It is to Gibbon’s geographical imagination as manifested in *The Decline and Fall* that we now turn.

## The Geographical Imagination and *The Decline and Fall*

As an entrée to Gibbon's geographical descriptions, his imaginative reconstructions of the geographical stages on which historical events occur, we can return to both the Hellespont and the Arabian sections, the former offering a close-up, the latter a long view. For the Hellespont, Gibbon offers the accuracy of the moderns who 'assign about sixty miles for the winding course, and about three miles for the ordinary breadth of those celebrated streights', but he is also keen to visualise just why the ancients were seduced into exaggerating their size for his readers:

the traveller, and especially the poet, who sailed along the Hellespont, who pursued the windings of the stream, and contemplated the rural scenery, which appeared on every side to terminate the prospect, insensibly lost the remembrance of the sea; and his fancy painted those celebrated streights, with all the attributes of a mighty river flowing with a swift current in the midst of a woody and inland country.

(I, 590)

Gibbon, of course, has allowed his readers to get lost amidst the beauties of the Hellespont as assuredly as Homer did, and the bare, Enlightened facts of its actual mensuration are left behind in the evocation of why it was classic ground to the ancient geographical imagination.

If the Hellespont is limned as a geographical miniature, Gibbon's task in his account of Arabia is to offer a longer view, and here he turns to a very different register, the more objective geographical account. This is most apparent at the outset where he offers an overall description of 'the vacant space between Persia, Syria, Egypt, and Æthiopia ... as a triangle of spacious but irregular dimensions' (III, 151) before going on to subdivide it into three regions – sandy, stony and happy, a tripartite division upon which ancient and modern geographers and travellers alike have agreed. And yet even here, imaginative painting of the scene is soon injected by Gibbon to enliven the account, notably in his depiction of the landscapes of Arabia:

in the dreary waste of Arabia, a boundless level of sand is intersected by sharp and naked mountains; and the face of the desert, without shade or shelter, is scorched by the direct and intense rays of a tropical sun. Instead of refreshing breezes, the winds, particularly from the south-west, diffuse a noxious and even deadly vapour; the hillocks of sand which they alternately raise and scatter, are compared to the billows of the ocean, and whole caravans, whole armies, have been lost and buried in the whirlwind.

(III, 152)

Having portrayed the physical geography of Arabia, Gibbon moves on to look at its human geography, starting with the population, which is small, ‘being regulated by the means of subsistence’ a niggardly nature offers in the desert (III, 154), before looking at transport and cities and at Arabian society, in particular their spirit of independence and their literature, before finally turning to their religion (III, 154–66).

Gibbon, then, in both close-up and the long view displayed a skilled and sensitive ability to paint in words the locations his readers would be inhabiting. As well as attending to the quality of his geographical prose, however, it is also important to note where these descriptions were placed in Gibbon’s accounts. The Hellespont description comes in the opening chapter of the second volume of *The Decline and Fall*, where Gibbon’s attention turns from Rome to Constantinople as the imperial capital. It is itself embedded in a broader geographical description of Constantinople, which begins with the city before attending to the geography of its surroundings – the Bosphorus, the port and the Propontis. After rounding this description out with the Hellespont, Gibbon circles back from geography to history and antiquarianism, attending to the foundation, extent and important buildings of Constantinople, closing with the dedication of the city in AD 330 or 334 (I, 585–602). It is only at this point, having given an extensive but fairly static description of the scene, that Gibbon reverts to his historical narrative in the [following chapter](#), investigating how the easterly shift of the imperial capital drove events forward. In short, the description of the Hellespont is part of a bigger piece of word painting whose aim is to depict the geographical stage on which events will unfold. Gibbon, then, is following the post-Renaissance commonplaces about geography’s role in setting the scene for the historian and its ability to imprint narrative on the memory of its

readers. The same holds good for the longer Arabian description. This comes at the opening of chapter 50, where Gibbon's aim is to narrate the impact of Mohammad and Islam on the Roman Empire. As he puts this: 'the genius of the Arabian prophet, the manners of his nation, and the spirit of his religion, involve the causes of the decline and fall of the Eastern empire' (III, 151). From this exordium, Gibbon launches into his geographical account of Arabia, setting the scene onto which will blaze 'Mahomet, with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other' (III, 151). And it is notable in this respect that, having traced a course through the physical and human geography of Arabia, he concludes with an account of ancient Arabian religious beliefs (III, 166ff.), thereby setting the context in which Islam will emerge. The static geographic description of Arabia, then, sets the scene for the events which will move Gibbon's narrative forward, but skilfully does so by coming to a close exactly where the exordium led us to expect: with religion. Gibbon, then, builds his geographical descriptions as stages on which events will unfold, but always in ways skilfully tailored to his larger narrative purpose at any particular point in the story. Gibbon himself reflected on this practice in a 'verbal remark' which prefaced the fourth volume of *The Decline and Fall*, where he noted that 'as often as I use the definitions of *beyond* the Alps, the Rhine, the Danube &c. I generally suppose myself at Rome, and afterwards at Constantinople; without observing whether this relative geography may agree with the local, but variable, situation of the reader or the historian' (II, 523). As Gibbon noted, geographical tableaux were built with broader narrative purposes in mind, and were also located geographically with regard to the shifting locative hub of his account.

The placing of geographical descriptions as stage sets at the beginning of narrative sequences is repeated elsewhere in *The Decline and Fall*. It is perhaps most notable in the opening chapter of the work, which the table of contents calls a 'View of the Provinces of the Roman Empire' (I, 7), where Gibbon says 'we shall now endeavour, with clearness and precision, to describe the provinces once united under their [the Antonines'] sway, but, at present, divided into so many independent and hostile states' (I, 47). On the model of Strabo, Gibbon's 'View' is structured as a clockwise geographical description, starting at the northern Pillar of Hercules in Spain and circuiting around the Roman Empire at the moment of its maximal extent (when his narrative will commence) to reach the other side of the Straits of Gibraltar in North Africa in a pithy

short description (I, 47–55). And yet this strategy became both more insistent and more structurally important to Gibbon in narrating the later stages of the collapse of the mighty empire of the Antonines, for as the empire fragmented, so it was infringed upon from ever greater numbers of geographical arenas by ever more varied peoples. Gibbon's response to this, as he noted in his *Memoirs*, was to use the order of space as the guiding structural principle of *The Decline and Fall* rather than the historian's conventional narrative ordering of time:

In the fifth and sixth Volumes, the revolutions of the Empire and the World are most rapid various and instructive: and the Greek or Roman historians are checked by the hostile narratives of the Barbarians of the East and West. It was not till after many designs and many tryals, that I preferred, as I still prefer, the method of grouping my picture by nations; and the seeming neglect of Chronological order is surely compensated by the superior merits of interest and perspicuity.<sup>39</sup>

Gibbon had already revealed this method to his readers in *The Decline and Fall* itself, prefacing his account of the incursions of the Moguls into the Roman Empire by saying 'without confining myself to the order of time ... I shall present a general picture of the progress of their arms; I. In the East; II. In the South; III. In the West; and IV. In the North' (III, 798). In short, geography came to trump history in the search for narrative coherence. As well as using this technique self-confessedly to address the Moguls, Gibbon followed the same strategy in his accounts of Russia (III, 455ff.), of the conquests of Tamerlane (III, 830ff.) and in his depiction of Charlemagne's empire (III, 127).

We have seen, then, that in *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon could use geography in various registers to achieve various effects: he was skilled in the arts of geographical description, blending precision with vivid pen portraits; he regularly used geographical accounts to build static stages on which events would unfold; and, where a temporal narrative became too perplexed, he used spatial organisation to offer a more sure Ariadnean thread through the maze for his readers. One element of Gibbon's geographical imagination remains to be addressed: he did not just see geography as a narrative device for staging and ordering an historical account, but also acknowledged

that geography could be a causal mechanism in the decline of the Roman Empire. Gibbon was sceptical of perhaps the most influential Enlightenment proponent of the idea that climate and physical geography can determine human character and history, noting of Montesquieu that he ‘has used, and abused, the relations of travellers’ to deduce ‘the revolutions of Asia from this important circumstance, that heat and cold, weakness and strength, touch each other without any temperate zone’ (I, 1029 n11). And yet, when ventured in a more modest and grounded fashion, Gibbon accepted that physical geography could mould societal structures and, thereby, historical events. To see this, we can return to his Arabian description. As already noted, Gibbon argued that the sparse population of Arabia was a consequence of the scanty means of subsistence (III, 154), but he also traced more detailed elements of the culture of the peninsula back to its geography. Gibbon’s account of the incursions of Muhammad into the eastern empire would be driven by the martial valour and independence of his Arabian foot soldiers. Gibbon saw these qualities as originating in their pastoral mode of social organisation:

The perpetual independence of the Arabs has been the theme of praise among strangers and natives ... The obvious causes of their freedom are inscribed on the character and country of the Arabs. Many ages before Mahomet, their intrepid valour had been severely felt by their neighbours in offensive and defensive war. The patient and active virtues of a soldier are insensibly nursed in the habits and discipline of a pastoral life.

(III, 158–9)

And in turn, this pastoralism was a necessary adjustment to the physical environment whence they sprang: ‘as the naked wilderness could not maintain a people of hunters, they rose at once to the more secure and plentiful condition of the pastoral life’ (III, 154).

If the Arabs, emerging from a pastoral setting in the niggardly deserts of the peninsula, would, on Gibbon’s account, erupt to ride roughshod over the etiolated remnants of Rome’s eastern empire, this highlights another important point in Gibbon’s account: history was driven by the relationships between geographically determined cultures. Geography helped to mould human societies, but then the ability of those

societies to traverse space and encounter one another was a key motor explaining Gibbon's theme, the decay of the Roman Empire. This theme has been addressed most comprehensively by John Pocock, who finds in what he calls Gibbon's 'discovery of Eurasia' through the work of Joseph de Guignes the key to *The Decline and Fall's* broader structural argument:

The Roman Empire is on the receiving end of a domino effect originating in north-west China ... The Decline and Fall – meaning the loss of military control over the Latin-speaking provinces – has now ceased to be a mysterious effect of barbarian movement out of unknown space, and acquired a narrative history whose causes run back to adjustments of Chinese rule.<sup>40</sup>

Gibbon unpacks this question most clearly in the 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' with which he closed his third volume (II, 508–16). He argued 'the Romans were ignorant of the extent of their danger' (II, 512), where 'extent' is meant in a directly spatial sense, as 'the peace of Gaul or Italy was shaken by the distant revolutions of China'. Pointing out the difference between antiquity and the eighteenth-century world of his readers, he noted:

The endless column of Barbarians pressed on the Roman empire with accumulated weight; and, if the foremost were destroyed, the vacant space was instantly replenished by new assailants. Such formidable emigrations no longer issue from the North ... The reign of independent Barbarism is now contracted to a narrow span.

(II, 512)

As the Arabian passage makes clear, however, for Gibbon there was more than just one domino effect, that discerned by de Guignes and rehearsed in the 'General Observations', because in addressing the decay of the eastern empire the impact of Moghuls, Arabs and others on Constantinople also had to be faced, even if it operated after the same fashion as the Chinese domino effect on Rome. Gibbon framed this with geographical clarity in apologising for the subject matter of his final two volumes:



I should have abandoned without regret the Greek slaves and their servile historians, had I not reflected that the fate of the Byzantine monarchy is passively connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world. The space of the lost provinces was immediately replenished with new colonies and rising kingdoms ... As, in his daily prayers, the Musulman of Fez or Delhi still turns his face towards the temple of Mecca, the historian's eye shall be always fixed on the city of Constantinople. The excursive line may embrace the wilds of Arabia and Tartary, but the circle will be ultimately reduced to the decreasing limits of the Roman monarchy.

(III, 25)

Gibbon's geographical imagination, then, did not just see in geography the setting in which events occurred, a commonplace in the historical culture of his era, but also in more enlightened historiographical vein saw geography as a determinant of cultural patterns and as the motor which, through migration and cultural contact, drove the story he had determined to narrate sitting amidst the ruins of Rome.

## Gibbon and Geography after *The Decline and Fall*

The closing section of *The Decline and Fall* offered another version of Gibbon's authorial self-fashioning amidst the ruins of Rome (III, 1084–5). That section concluded a final chapter which had in fact seen Gibbon revert to antiquarian chorography of the sort which had preoccupied him in Lausanne as he recapitulated Poggio Bracciolini's enumeration of the surviving ancient buildings in the eternal city (III, 1063–4). The dated conclusion of the chapter, 27 June 1787, offered a certain finality to Gibbon's life's work. And yet, of course, it is a spurious finality in that Gibbon would live for another seven years and would continue his inquiries in search of a new subject. These inquiries and researches enmeshed Gibbon's final years with geography once more.

Firstly, *The Decline and Fall* itself was not something which could be signed off as easily as all that. It famously spawned a storm of controversy for its handling of Christianity.<sup>41</sup> Gibbon replied to these criticisms in his *Vindication* of 1779, a tract wherein Gibbon addressed, *inter alia*, attacks on the geographical erudition embodied in his *magnum opus*. Thus he addressed the geographical coverage of his use of the term 'Jew' (III, 1117–18) and offered a careful defence of his account of the spatial extent of early Christianity (III, 1142–4). Perhaps Gibbon's most characteristic rebuttal is of the critics who 'seem to consider it in the light of a reproach' that he depicted Palestine as 'a territory scarcely superior to Wales in extent and fertility'. Gibbon here brought strict geographical accuracy to bear on his side, citing 'Templeman's Survey of the Globe: he allows Wales 7011 square English miles ... and to Judæa or Palestine 7600'.<sup>42</sup> But then he also could not resist a deliciously anticlerical hit at those who 'strangely convert a geographical observation into a theological error' in his quintessentially Enlightened barb that, 'when I recollect that the imputation of a similar error was employed by the implacable Calvin, to precipitate and to justify the execution of Servetus, I must applaud the felicity of this country, and of this age, which has disarmed, if it could not mollify, the fierceness of ecclesiastical criticism' (III, 1122). As well as responding to criticism, Gibbon found it hard to say farewell to *The Decline and Fall*, mooting in a letter to his publisher of 1790 the possibility of 'a seventh, or supplemental volume to my History', this to include 'several tables of geography ... nor should I despair of obtaining from a gentleman in Paris some accurate and well-adapted maps'.<sup>43</sup> Gibbon had already got a

list of ‘Authors’ and ‘Places’ constructed before this letter,<sup>44</sup> but he did not carry the project far, his papers containing sketch materials for a seventh volume, some of which engaged with geography by using Thevenot’s travels, Kaempfer on Japan and so on,<sup>45</sup> but which give no sense of what such tables would have contained. That they, together with the proposed maps, would have allowed the reader to match Gibbon’s prose geographic descriptions with tabulated and visual instruction is clear. Alas, the project floundered.

As well as still engaging with geography through *The Decline and Fall* after its completion, Gibbon’s last years show him continuing to read geographical scholarship and to imagine projects wherein geography and history would intersect. With regards to scholarship, in 1789 Gibbon made extensive notes in a copy of Herodotus, a number of which pertained to his geographical knowledge. At times, Herodotus was praised, as for ‘the merit of discovering ... that the Caspian sea is a lake’, something ‘disregarded by the false science of succeeding Geographers’.<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere, however, it was ‘the Geographical error of Herodotus himself’ which attracted Gibbon’s attention, as in his computation of the length of the Black Sea, an error which d’Anville’s attempted ascription to variable measures of the stadia could not unpick.<sup>47</sup> Here we see Gibbon reading and annotating, still sensitive to the need to establish order in time and place, the skill he first ascribed to his encounter with Wells and Cellarius, and which we have also witnessed him deploying with regard to Sallust some twenty years earlier. If Gibbon was buried deep in his Herodotus as the French Revolution began, he emerged to offer critical comment on those momentous events in a letter to Sheffield from Lausanne in December of that year. Castigating the Assembly as ‘a set of wild Visionaries’, Gibbon closed his letter in more scholarly vein with a worry about his library, as a copy of ‘Rennel’s maps’ had not arrived safely from London.<sup>48</sup> James Rennell was the most important anglophone geographer of Gibbon’s generation to work in the mode of d’Anville’s critical geography, and Gibbon’s library showed that he possessed both the 1783 edition of his *Memoir of a Map of Hindostan* and, what is probably referred to in the letter here, the 1788 edition. Gibbon had made reference to the *Memoir* in *The Decline and Fall*, paying Rennell the handsome compliment that ‘if he extends the sphere of his enquiries [from India] with the same critical knowledge and sagacity, he will succeed, and may surpass the first of modern geographers [i.e. d’Anville]’ (II, 582 n71).

Rennell would take up the hint, moving on to study the geography of Persia and Africa, as well as completing a treatise on Herodotus of the sort Gibbon's notes gestured towards. And Rennell was aware in these projects that history was the eye of the geographer as well as vice versa, writing to Gibbon on the publication of the last three volumes of *The Decline and Fall* of 'the consciousness that it affords such rich materials for the geography of the eastern countries'.<sup>49</sup>

Clearly, amidst the turmoil of the French Revolution, Gibbon continued to think about geography as he read, annotated and maintained his library, but his attempts to build a new project were ultimately to prove fruitless. These years produced only 'a series of fragments', 'abortive attempts'.<sup>50</sup> One of these fragments is of interest in the present context, however. Gibbon, in his marginalia to Herodotus, had offered a longish comment on the idea that the ancients might have circumnavigated Africa prior to the Portuguese in the fifteenth century,<sup>51</sup> and he expanded on this in a set of eleven short essays on 'The Circumnavigation of Africa' dated to 1789–90.<sup>52</sup> These essays addressed the Portuguese exploration of the western coast of Africa before moving on to the main claimants to an ancient circumnavigation, Sataspes, Hanno, Eudoxus and Nechus. In each case, Gibbon was sceptical that any firm evidence existed to suggest more than that individuals had coasted down stretches of either the eastern or western African littoral in antiquity. Bringing together the Portuguese and ancient material, Gibbon closed with characteristic elegance and scepticism: 'in the sublime fiction of Camoens, the spirit of the Cape, arising from his stormy waves at once accuses and applauds the Portuguese, the first men who had explored their way round the southern promontory of Africa ... I WILL TAKE THE GHOST'S WORD FOR A THOUSAND POUNDS!'<sup>53</sup>

We will never know whether in his notes on Herodotus or his essays on the circumnavigation of Africa Gibbon was beginning to project a new, more expansive topic, extending the sphere of his enquiries as he had encouraged in Rennell, or working on the model of William Robertson's *History of Charles V*. What is apparent, however, is that the projects Gibbon may have envisaged would have continued his lifelong intertwining of geography and history. We can close, not where Gibbon's autobiographical comments and the final lines of *The Decline and Fall* tend to place us, amidst the ruins of Rome in 1787, but with his essays on the circumnavigation of Africa, penned amidst the onset of the revolution that would upend Gibbon's world. Pointing out that Ptolemy denied the

possibility of a circumnavigation of Africa by virtue of depicting it as attached to Asia by a long continental tongue, Gibbon simultaneously noted Ptolemy's ignorance, the clear implication that the ancients did not know the continent could be circumnavigated and the longevity of this geographical delusion in the Christian dark ages in his comment that 'Ptolemy reigned near fourteen centuries on Earth, as well as in Heaven; nor was the Greek Oracle ever confuted by the experience of the Arabians.'<sup>54</sup> In this comment on Ptolemy, we see Gibbon sifting geographical evidence, detecting and exposing errors in ancient geography from the vantage point of erudite eighteenth-century critical geography, and using the whole to fashion a distinctively Enlightened narrative, here with a deliciously characteristic touch of irreligious scepticism in the verbal echo between his depiction of Ptolemy and the Lord's Prayer's depiction of Christ. Here, then, we have a microcosm of the use of geography in *The Decline and Fall*. Gibbon built his authority as a historian in good part through his scholarly acumen in critical geography, using this to create geographical descriptions which set the stage on which his historical narrative unfolded, and that narrative itself was a product in part of geographical interrelationships between cultures spread across space, secular causation (about religion amongst other things) being the key to Gibbon's story. The moment in the ruins of Rome, then, was not a conversion from geographical scholarship, but its transmutation in the service of the great edifice of Enlightened historiography that was *The Decline and Fall*. The chorographic base metal Gibbon had worked on in Lausanne was not jettisoned in 1764, but converted into historical gold.

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## Notes

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[1](#) Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 136.

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[2](#) See J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Volume 1: *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 261–91.

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[3](#) *Memoirs*, p. 132.

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[4](#) Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), III, pp. 1062–85. Further references will be cited by volume and page number, in parentheses in the text.

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[5](#) *Memoirs*, p. 134.

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[6](#) *Memoirs*, p. 136 n7. See Patricia Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon: Gentleman of Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 222–3.

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[7](#) Horace Jones (trans. and ed.), *The Geography of Strabo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), I, pp. 46–9.

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[8](#) Edward Gibbon, *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), I, p. 59.

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[9](#) Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations Voyages Traffiques & Discoveries of the English Nation* (London: Dent, 1927), I, p. 19.

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[10](#) Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie in Four Bookes* (London: Henry Seile, 1652), p. 20.

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[11](#) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

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[12](#) John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, eds. John and Jean Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 237 (section 182).

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[13](#) *Memoirs*, p. 43.

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[14](#) Locke, *Some Thoughts*, p. 235 (section 178).

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[15](#) Edward Wells, *A Treatise of Antient and Present Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1701), Preface.

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[16](#) *Memoirs*, p. 43.

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[17](#) In *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia Craddock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 21–2.

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[18](#) See Pocock, *Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, pp. 107–8 and 121–34.

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[19](#) In D. M. Low (ed.), *Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763: My Journal I, II, and III and Ephemerides* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), pp. 31 and 32.

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[20](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 36 and 34.

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[21](#) *Ibid.*, p. 42.

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[22](#) Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *The Library of Edward Gibbon*, 2nd edition (London: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1980), pp. 8–10.

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[23](#) On this topic see Guido Abbattista, 'Establishing the "Order of Time and Place": "Rational Geography", French Erudition and the Emplacement of History in Gibbon's Mind', in *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. David Womersley (Oxford: SVEC, 1997), pp. 45–72.

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[24](#) For Rennell, see Robert Mayhew, *Enlightenment Geography: The Political Languages of British Geography, 1650–1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 193–206.

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[25](#) Whilst Gibbon never travelled further than Rome, he was a member of the African Association and expressed an interest in travellers, notably on meeting the Far Eastern traveller Benoiwski in 1777: see *Letters*, III, p. 146, and II, pp. 153–4.

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[26](#) Edward Gibbon, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature: A Critical Edition*, eds. Robert Mankin and Patricia Craddock (Oxford: SVEC, 2010), pp. 119–20.

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[27](#) Edward Gibbon, ‘A Minute Examination of Horace’s Journey to Brundisium’, in *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Lord Sheffield, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1814), iv, pp. 335–54, on p. 335.

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[28](#) Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon*, p. 182.

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[29](#) See *Miscellaneous Works*, iv, pp. 157–326.

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[30](#) *Ibid.*, iv, p. 155.

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[31](#) Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon*, p. 182.

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[32](#) *Miscellaneous Works*, iv; see pp. 164–71 for the general account and pp. 171ff. for the region-by-region analysis.

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[33](#) *Letters*, i, p. 154.

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[34](#) In Georges Bonnard (ed.), *Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne* (Lausanne: Librairie de l’Université, 1945), pp. 169 and 168.

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[35](#) Compare Bonnard (ed.), *Lausanne Journal*, pp. 89–163 and Georges Bonnard (ed.), *Gibbon’s Journey from Geneva to Rome* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1961), where the latter contains not a single reference to any geographical reading.

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[36](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 147.

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[37](#) Gibbon, ‘Index Expurgatorius’, in *English Essays*, p. 110.

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[38](#) Compare the bibliographical notes on Russia (iii, 457 n49) and on Charlemagne’s empire (iii, 122 n105).

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[39](#) *Memoirs*, p. 179.

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[40](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Volume iv: *Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 147–8.

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[41](#) On which see David Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’: The Historian and his Reputation, 1776–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), part



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[42](#) Thomas Templeman, *A New Survey of the Globe* (London: J. Cole, 1729).

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[43](#) *Letters*, III, p. 209.

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[44](#) Patricia Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian 1772–1794* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 304.

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[45](#) *English Essays*, pp. 350–1.

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[46](#) *Ibid.*, p. 368.

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[47](#) *Ibid.*, p. 373.

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[48](#) *Letters*, III, pp. 183–5.

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[49](#) *Miscellaneous Works*, II, p. 426.

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[50](#) Craddock, *Luminous Historian*, p. 293.

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[51](#) *English Essays*, pp. 371–2.

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[52](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 374–97.

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[53](#) *Ibid.*, p. 395.

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[54](#) *Ibid.*, p. 395.

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## Gibbon and the City of Rome



**Catharine Edwards**

Edward Gibbon's monumental work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published in three instalments, 1776–88), offers a complex, sophisticated and deeply learned interpretation of the processes by which the Roman Empire was transformed over the course of more than a millennium, from the second to the fifteenth centuries. Gibbon offers not a chronologically continuous narrative but rather an ironic analysis, which frequently returns to earlier periods or looks forward to later ones. In space, too, his history's range is wide and various. While the fate of the empire as a whole is its principal concern, the city has a very particular role to play in Gibbon's project. *The Decline and Fall* draws to a close back in the city of Rome, specifically on the Capitoline hill. Gibbon's final sentence declares: 'It was among the ruins of the Capitol, that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life, and which, however inadequate to my own wishes, I finally deliver to the curiosity and candour of the public.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus in the final instalment of his work (published in 1788) Gibbon casts as his monumental history's moment of conception his own visit to Rome years previously, in 1764, when he was twenty-seven years old. In his autobiography, also composed more than twenty years after his visit, he offers a fuller characterisation of this scene of inspiration: 'It was at Rome, on the fifteenth of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.'<sup>2</sup> Gibbon reworked this sentence substantially – an indication of the significance he attached to its particular phrasing. The season of the year, autumn, the time of day, evening, are, of course, especially appropriate to a narrative of decline. The ruins of the Capitol themselves are, we might note, metaphorical – by Gibbon's day Michelangelo's monumental piazza dominated the hill.<sup>3</sup> Gibbon writes of the temple of Jupiter, one of

the most venerated structures in Roman state religion, as if it were still visible but appropriated for Christian worship, the gold and marble for which it was once celebrated now eclipsed by the self-conscious asceticism of the friars.

The Capitoline hill plays a crucial role in Gibbon's thought and in his writing. This hill often functions in antiquity and later as a metonym for the city of Rome but it also has a host of particular associations, deriving from its topography, its built history, its religious role and its representation in classical and later literature.<sup>4</sup> The temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was located on one of the Capitol's two summits (though not the one supposed by Gibbon and his contemporaries). Here, in antiquity, the ritual procession of the triumph (an honour granted to a general who had won a great victory over a foreign enemy) reached its culmination. It was the epicentre of the Roman Empire. It was also a place where Rome's distant, mythical past might seem almost tangible. Virgil's great epic has his Trojan hero, Aeneas, ancestor of the Romans, visit the site where Rome will one day flourish. His guide: 'hinc ad Tarpeiam sedem et Capitolia ducit / aurea nunc, olim silvestribus horrida dumis' ('from here leads him to the Tarpeian spot and the Capitol, / now golden but then bristling with rough brambles', *Aeneid* 8.347–8). The rough vegetation of Aeneas's time is juxtaposed with the golden-roofed temples of Virgil's own. Here, above all, for Virgil's ancient (and later) readers, to use Bahktin's words: 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible.'<sup>5</sup> One might see the Capitoline as Rome's most intensely chronotopic location, a quality Gibbon exploits masterfully. Bahktin is, of course, writing about the novel; his chapter on the chronotope is subtitled 'Notes towards a historical poetics'. Gibbon's work has been characterised as an archetype of rational, ironic history.<sup>6</sup> But while we should appreciate Gibbon's rationalism, we should not overlook the important poetic dimension to his writing. This poetic dimension is perhaps especially evident in his treatment of the city of Rome.

Gibbon had been planning to visit Rome since at least 1759 but the Seven Years' War and his father's reluctance were both significant obstacles. It was four years before Gibbon at last had Rome in prospect. The final full entry in the journal written in the course of his travels (in both French and English) is for 2 October 1764, the day of his arrival in the city. He observes of his approach to the city: 'Depuis le Pons Milvius j'ai été dans un songe d'antiquité' ('From the Milvian bridge I was in a dream of antiquity').<sup>7</sup> Along with his companion, William Guise, and another English visitor, Gibbon, like many

other Grand Tourists, engaged the services of a learned antiquary, James Byres, with whom they began to explore Rome on 6 October.<sup>8</sup> Gibbon's letter to his father, of 9 October 1764, begins:

I am now, Dear Sir, at Rome. If it was difficult before to give you and Mrs Gibbon any account of what I saw it is impossible here. I have already found such a fund of entertainment for a mind somewhat prepared for it by an acquaintance with the Romans, that I am really almost in a dream.<sup>9</sup>

Gibbon, like so many visitors, seems overwhelmed by his first experience of Rome. In this letter, as in his journal, he characterises this encounter as dream-like. The analogy conveys his difficulty in pinning down the specifics of what he is seeing, as well as the flood of sensations and emotions the place provokes.

Gibbon's later *Memoirs* reflect on this struggle to articulate the surfeit of emotion which surged through him when finally in 1764 he encountered Rome as a place:

My temper is not very susceptible of enthusiasm, and the enthusiasm which I do not feel I have ever scorned to affect. But at the distance of twenty five years I can neither forget nor express the strong emotions which agitated my mind as I first approached the *eternal City*. After a sleepless night, I trod with a lofty step the ruins of the Forum; each memorable spot where Romulus *stood*, or Tully spoke, or Caesar fell was at once present to my eye; and several days of intoxication were lost or enjoyed before I could descend to a cool and minute investigation.<sup>10</sup>

Gibbon's extensive reading of ancient authors is brought to life. A little earlier in the *Memoirs*, Gibbon writes of his own Italian tour: 'ROME is the great object of our pilgrimage.'<sup>11</sup> The religious language in his recollection (the term 'enthusiasm' is also significant) anticipates (or rather, perhaps, echoes) the metaphor of pilgrimage, which characterises the activities of scholars of his own day in the concluding sections of *The Decline and Fall*.

Rome was almost invariably the culmination of the Grand Tour through France and Italy, that traditional complement to a classical education, which was viewed as an essential requirement for many English gentlemen (though the variety of British visitors,

including artists, as well as scholars, should not be underestimated).<sup>12</sup> Gibbon's contemporary, James Boswell (in his account of 11 April 1776), records Dr Johnson's remark that 'a man who has not been to Italy is always conscious of an inferiority from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see'.<sup>13</sup> The experience of Rome as a place was thought by many to activate the ideal of civic virtue articulated by classical authors such as Cicero, an ideal deemed (particularly after 1688) especially characteristic of and appropriate to British political life. In Rome, aristocratic British visitors, generally aged between sixteen and twenty-three, were escorted around a predictable itinerary of sites, monuments and galleries by their tutors or by resident experts such as Byres. Unsurprisingly some were disengaged, more interested in the opportunities Italy offered to pursue less highbrow pleasures away from parental supervision. Boswell himself reminisces at length about his erotic adventures during his travels in France and Italy in 1765. Yet he is also concerned to communicate (to his correspondent Temple) that: 'I have already surveyed most of the monuments of ancient grandeur and have felt the true, venerable enthusiasm.'<sup>14</sup> (Boswell, like Gibbon, we might note, self-consciously lays claim to 'enthusiasm' in relation to classical antiquity.) On the Palatine hill, Boswell is overcome, he reports, by the desire to speak Latin and persuades his companion, the antiquary Mr Morison, to converse in Latin for the rest of his tour.<sup>15</sup> To travel in Italy was for many besides Gibbon to feel a new connection to the texts so familiar from their youth. Another traveller, Lord North, writes in a letter to his old tutor of 1753, referring to the landscape south of Rome:

There is scarce a town, a rivulet, a hill or a valley, that is not mentioned & even distinctly pointed out in some of the ancient writers. Those travellers who are well read in them, & who have already made the same journey several times in their imaginations, are highly pleased to find themselves in a well known country: Almost every spot they see, & every step they take, recalls or refreshes, confirms or clears up some old idea.<sup>16</sup>

The philosopher David Hume, on arriving in Italy, 'kist the earth that produc'd Virgil'. In language curiously reminiscent of Gibbon's own, the physician Lucas Pepys observed in 1767 that to tread the same ground as Cicero was 'a kind of delightful dream ... which

cannot be expressed'.<sup>17</sup> Gibbon, then, was not alone in feeling himself, at least in the first flush of discovery, transported back to antiquity. Yet Gibbon, aged twenty-seven when he first came to Italy, thus a few years older than most visitors, approached Rome prepared not only by years of close engagement with classical authors but through a systematic and meticulous programme of study over the previous months – and with something more in mind than a desire for adventure or classical polish or even the thrill of connection with antiquity.

Long before he visited Rome, Gibbon had immersed himself in scholarship on the city's topography and history. His reading while in Lausanne in 1763 featured the *Thesaurus antiquitatum Romanorum* (1694–9), a compilation by Grevius, which included Nardini's *Roma antica* (1666). Having read Nardini and Cluvier's *Italia antiqua*, he comments, 'wherever I may end up in Rome or Italy, I shall no longer be a stranger'.<sup>18</sup> Looking back, years later when he composed the *Memoirs*, Gibbon observed of his studies: 'And thus was I armed for my Italian journey. Perhaps I might boast that few travellers more compleatly armed and instructed have ever followed the footsteps of Hannibal.'<sup>19</sup> A few lines later, again comparing himself with Hannibal, he comments: 'I climbed Mount Cenis and descended into the plain of Piedmont, not on the back of an elephant; but on a light osier seat.'<sup>20</sup> In retrospect Gibbon figures his own relationship to Rome and Italy in multiple ways; he implies he will be at home there ('no longer a stranger'). Yet he is also an invader, penetrating the Alps like Hannibal, Rome's archetypal enemy. The complex role played by the figure of Hannibal in Gibbon's work will be explored further below.

In 1763, again in preparation for his journey, Gibbon composed a *Recueil géographique*.<sup>21</sup> This is, on one level, merely a collection of materials on places in Italy derived from classical authors, yet its geographical approach inevitably leads to a focus on a long stretch of history. The section begins with 'Ambitus, Moenia, et Portae' (the circuit, walls and gates) and continues with other buildings or monuments worthy of admiration. From this physical basis Gibbon derived *aetates*, 'ages', so that ages of the city were mapped out in the history of its buildings – their construction or their destruction. Already Gibbon's journal reflects his interest in the process of medieval ruin and decay. However, he is not yet obviously concerned to connect building to the wider history of moral and social life.

Gibbon's first publication, which appeared in 1761, was the somewhat miscellaneous (though philosophically sophisticated) *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*.<sup>22</sup> A cancelled section of this (written in 1758) already shows how topographical specificity might be made to add bite to an understanding of Rome's transformation: 'On érige la croix sur les débris du Capitole' ('The cross is erected on the ruins of the Capitol').<sup>23</sup> This passage, though excised from the *Essai*, eventually finds its place, somewhat reworked, in the opening paragraph of the highly controversial chapter 15 of *The Decline and Fall*, which treats 'The progress of the Christian religion, and the sentiments, manners, numbers and condition, of the primitive Christians'. Gibbon writes here:

A candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity, may be considered as a very essential part of the history of the Roman empire. While that great body was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the Capitol. (I, 446)<sup>24</sup>

'La croix' has become, less starkly, 'the banner of the cross', but we see here the juxtaposition of Christian celebration and pagan destruction at this peculiarly significant site, which will also characterise the *History*'s conclusion – and, allegedly, its moment of conception. While Christianity is described as 'pure and humble' it is also presented as comparable in its destructive powers to barbarian violence and the decay of neglect, while the verb 'insinuated' imputes a potentially sinister significance to this triumph.

The initial scheme for *The Decline and Fall* itself was a more limited one. In his *Memoirs* Gibbon writes: 'my original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the City, rather than of the Empire'.<sup>25</sup> Further reading and reflection, however, drew him to the larger project. Peter Ghosh comments: 'The "History of the City" was not so much abandoned as incorporated into the new work: like a Roman ruin itself, it supplied the substructure to Gibbon's intellectual triumph.'<sup>26</sup> In *The Decline and Fall*, the city as such is discussed at length only on the occasion of its sack in 410 (in chapter 31) and in the final three chapters. It does, however, feature at a few critical moments earlier in Gibbon's narrative.



The emperors Diocletian and Maximian celebrated a triumph in 303. The ritual of the triumph, culminating on the Capitol, has a paradigmatic significance in Gibbon's work. During his own stay in the city (November and December 1764) he had composed an essay on the triumph, describing it (following Montesquieu) as 'the principal cause of the greatness of Rome'.<sup>27</sup> This particular triumph, however, was the last one to be celebrated in Rome. Soon after (in chapter 13), Rome ceased to be capital of the empire:

The spot on which Rome was founded, had been consecrated by ancient ceremonies and imaginary miracles. The presence of some god, or the memory of some hero, seemed to animate every part of the city, and the empire of the world had been promised to the Capitol ... The form and the seat of government were intimately blended together, nor was it esteemed possible to transport the one without destroying the other.

(I, 384)

The comments echo those attributed by the ancient historian Livy to the Roman leader Camillus as he argues successfully against a proposal to move the city of Rome to Veii (the site of a neighbouring settlement previously destroyed by the Romans) in the wake of the city's sack by the Gauls in 396 BC (5.52). For Camillus, Rome's religious identity is inextricably linked to specific sites within it. Gibbon concedes the imperial capital's move to Milan was justified by policy. Yet it becomes clear that abandoning the city as a physical place is part and parcel of the abandonment of the institutions preserving what remained of traditional Roman freedom: 'The senate of Rome, losing all connection with the Imperial court and the actual constitution, was left a venerable but useless monument of antiquity on the Capitoline hill' (I, 387). That Rome has become no more than a collection of monuments to a glorious past becomes apparent when Gibbon relates (in chapter 19) the rare visit to the city undertaken by the emperor Constantius. Reworking Ammianus Marcellinus's late fourth-century account, which describes Constantius's tour of the monuments in AD 357 (16.10.13–17), Gibbon lays ironic stress on the contrast between the heroes associated with different sites in the city and this belated and unimpressive visitor. Ultimately, Constantius is figured as a proto-tourist – though he at least has the chance to see the monuments before they succumb to ruin: 'The traveller

who has contemplated the ruins of ancient Rome, may conceive some imperfect idea of the sentiments which they must have inspired when they reared their heads in the splendour of unsullied beauty' (I, 699). Constantius, Gibbon hints, is susceptible to Rome's aesthetic impact (he contributes a new obelisk to the erstwhile capital) but less alert to the moral and political significance of these monuments. The motif of the triumph features ironically in Gibbon's characterisation of Constantius's visit: 'the march of a prince who had never vanquished a foreign enemy, assumed the appearance of a triumphal procession' (I, 698).

Only in his account of the early fifth century does Gibbon's history return its focus to the city of Rome. Chapter 31 explores a critical episode in the collapse of the western empire. By this point, the emperor had long been ensconced in Ravenna, whose marshy situation offered better protection from barbarian attack. Rome itself was sustained by its accumulated wealth – and by the long-burnished illusion of its former greatness. Though Gibbon is critical of Ammianus Marcellinus here (noting his 'latent prejudices and personal resentments' (II, 175)), he inserts into his own account a long passage significantly reworked and adapted from several passages in Ammianus (principally 14.6.9–10 and 28.4.8–10), offering a severely critical portrait of the luxury, indolence, cruelty and self-deception of the Roman aristocracy. Indeed, even while he distances himself from Ammianus, Gibbon's adaptation heightens the caricature of Roman aristocratic decadence. A complementary portrait of the debased character of the mongrel Roman populace is anchored in the concrete detail of Rome's palatial bathhouses and other physical structures associated with leisure and entertainment (II, 181–6). Rome has become a city devoted to pleasure.

The Visigoths, and in particular their leader Alaric, have a complex and important role to play in Gibbon's analysis of the transformation of the empire.<sup>28</sup> Alaric is in some respects a latterday Hannibal; he, like the Punic leader, is imagined by Gibbon to have 'felt a secret and praeternatural impulse, which directed, even compelled his march to the gates of Rome. He felt that his genius and his fortune were equal to the most arduous enterprises; and the enthusiasm which he communicated to the Goths insensibly removed the popular and almost superstitious reverence of the nations for the majesty of the Roman name' (II, 167). As this barbarian leader approaches the walls of Rome, Gibbon articulates a telling contrast between the response of these latterday Romans and that of

the inhabitants of the city in the late third century BC when it was under threat from Hannibal: ‘The unsuccessful expedition of Hannibal served only to display the character of the senate and people.’ Then ‘every citizen was trained from his earliest youth in the discipline and exercises of a soldier’ (II, 168–9). Now, however, the degenerate Romans encounter a force led by Alaric: ‘a victorious leader, who united the daring spirit of a Barbarian with the art and discipline of a Roman general’ (II, 192). It is these barbarians, ultimately, who preserve the best elements of Roman civilisation and transmit them to the modern world.

Gibbon, as was observed earlier, used the term ‘barbarian’ (if ironically) to characterise himself and other scholars whose ‘enthusiasm’ impelled them toward Rome. Indeed, at significant moments, he compares himself specifically to Hannibal. More often, however, he adopts rather the position of spectator. Yet this role also might be characterised in terms evoking the Punic wars of the Roman republic, particularly as recounted by Livy. Gibbon admired Livy’s prose style and, though he is critical of him as a historian, took the Latin epigraph to *The Decline and Fall* from the preface to Book 31 of Livy’s history. Having concluded in Book 30 his account of Rome’s second war with Carthage, culminating with Scipio’s defeat of Hannibal, Livy contemplates writing the subsequent history of the city:

iam prouideo animo, uelut qui proximis litori uadis inducti mare pedibus  
ingrediuntur, quidquid progredior, in uastiores me altitudinem ac uelut profundum  
inuehi et crescere paene opus, quod prima quaeque perficiendo minui uidebatur.

*Now in my mind I look forth, like those who, after wading in the shallows near the  
shore, are led further out. And however much I advance, I am transported to  
greater and more profound depths and my task, which my earlier endeavours had  
appeared to reduce as I went along, seems now almost to increase as I proceed.*

(31.1.5)

The history of Rome in the years down to Augustus, its empire increasing in leaps and bounds, is far greater in scope than the early years of the city or even the story of Scipio’s defeat of Hannibal. In Livy’s history, this reflection occurs well on in the narrative. What might the passage mean in relation to the decline and fall of this same

empire? Gibbon, taking it as his epigraph, makes clear the evolving nature of his own project: the history of Rome is almost overwhelming; its complexity increases the longer he works on it. Yet he perhaps also hints at the complex yet instructive parallels between that third-century **BC** encounter between Romans and barbarians, a key moment in – and a potent symbol of – the trajectory of Rome’s rise and the Roman–barbarian encounter of the early fifth century **AD**, which had such a dramatically different outcome, the fall of the city of Rome itself.

Gibbon’s account of the sack of Rome by Alaric’s troops offers a masterfully measured assessment of its impact, disputing the apocalyptic visions of Jerome and Augustine (**II**, 207–8). The Gothic sack, lasting a mere six days, is contrasted with the nine-month occupation of Rome by the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in the early sixteenth century. The latter, claims Gibbon, caused far more extensive damage to persons and property (**II**, 208). Certainly Gibbon concedes there were many casualties in 410. The concern of the Goths, however, particularly under the moderating guidance of Alaric (**II**, 201), was not primarily murder and rape (as some contemporaries asserted), nor the destruction of buildings, but rather spoils. Yet Gibbon does not underestimate the symbolic impact of the fifth-century sack. The triumph, a motif so intimately associated with the fabric of the city of Rome and particularly the Capitoline hill, is inverted. Alaric’s troops on their march toward Rome feasted on the milk-white oxen traditionally reserved as draught animals for the Roman triumphal procession (**II**, 168). In the wake of the sack of the city, Gibbon terms them ‘those warriors who had borne away in triumph the spoils of the Capitol’ (**II**, 230).

Gibbon now has little to say about Rome until chapter 49, which covers in a few pages the history of the city from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries (**III**, 136–50). The focus here is the relationship between papacy and empire and, while Gibbon offers reports (almost in the way of light relief) on the exuberant vices to which some popes gave rein in the Vatican and the Lateran, he has little to say about their physical setting. Much later, having dealt with the fall of Constantinople, Gibbon returns in chapter 69 to Rome, of which, in its imperial aspect, the Capitol is again the metonym: ‘when ... attention is diverted from the Capitol to the provinces, they are considered as so many branches which have been severed from the Imperial trunk’ (**III**, 978). Writing of eighth-century Rome, in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, he comments: ‘the

venerable aspect of her ruins, and the memory of past greatness, rekindled a spark of the national character' (III, 979). The ruins of the ancient monuments are no mere backdrop here; they have an active part to play, Gibbon stresses, in the subsequent history of Rome.

Gibbon gives an account of the foundation of papal rule, the internal conflicts of the Roman feudal nobility and attempts to restore the republic. He is highly selective in his evocation of Roman topography. Few places in the city are named and these are invariably chosen for their rich symbolic significance. Though Vatican and Capitol are sometimes paired (both are 'nourished by the swarms of pilgrims', for instance (III, 981)), more often Gibbon uses the city's topography to articulate Rome's internal conflicts. Chapter 69 exploits the opposition between the Capitol on the one hand (associated with civic authority), and the Vatican and Lateran (associated with the papacy) on the other. Charlemagne and the Othos all receive the imperial crown in St Peter's on the Vatican; each journeyed only once across the Alps to Rome, with their visits to the city marked by conflict between their barbarian followers and Rome's own inhabitants, resentful of foreign invasion. Pope Paschal, as the Easter procession moves from the Vatican via the Bridge of St Angelo to the Capitol, is subject to violent attacks (III, 984).

Half-baked twelfth-century attempts to restore the republic are particularly focused on the Capitoline hill (III, 992–1002). The brief history of the Capitol offered in this context reprises that offered by Tacitus in his *Histories* (3.71–2, referred to in note 37), a passage of tremendous importance for Gibbon.<sup>29</sup> The Capitoline hill in Tacitus's account of the civil war of AD 69 becomes the place where the Roman capacity for self-destruction reaches its own culmination. In evoking that particular literary precedent, Gibbon sets the scene for his own account of later Roman self-destruction in the final three chapters of his history. Gibbon describes the successive phases of the Capitoline temple's destruction and reconstruction in antiquity, before evoking the appearance of the hill in the mid-twelfth century:

The temples of Jupiter and his kindred deities had crumbled into dust; their place was supplied by monasteries and houses; and the solid walls, the long and shelving porticoes, were decayed or ruined by the lapse of time. It was the first act of the

Romans, an act of freedom to restore the strength, though not the beauty, of the Capitol; to fortify the seat of their arms and counsels; and as often as they ascended the hill, the coldest minds must have glowed with the remembrance of their ancestors.

(III, 993)

The rare access to emotion evoked here suggestively resembles Gibbon's description of his own first encounter with the remains of ancient Rome, quoted above. Gibbon describes the twelfth-century Roman notables' poignantly imperfect grasp of the ancient Roman institutions, which they attempted to restore, despite the poverty, ignorance and lawlessness of their city.

Chapter 70 is again closely focused on the Capitoline hill. Gibbon opens with an account of the ceremony held there in which the crown of laurel was conferred on Petrarch in recognition of his poetic achievements. The main concern of this chapter, however, is the story of Cola di Rienzi (which is mediated through Petrarch's account of his rise and fall). In 1347 Rienzi announced his plan to restore the ancient political institutions of Rome, at a meeting on the Aventine (III, 1025) – the traditional location in antiquity for those rebelling against aristocratic domination. Once he has assumed control of Rome, most of the action is associated with the Capitoline, where his tribunal is located. Despite Rienzi's enthusiasm, his lack of prudence and reason, his susceptibility to luxury and pomp render his regime short-lived. In Gibbon's account, a key moment in its decline is marked by Rienzi's procession from the Capitol to Lateran (III, 1032). The lavish banquet he shares with the Bishop of Orvieto in the Lateran is emblematic of his all too Roman failings. Another more serious weakness is also articulated in topographical terms. After a period of violent conflict, Rienzi has killed three leading members of the aristocratic Colonna family, who were alleged to have been involved in a plot to assassinate him (III, 1036). The issue, in Gibbon's analysis, is not that Rienzi disposed of aristocratic troublemakers. Rather his revival of ancient Roman ways is patchy and partial; he 'forgot the maxims of the ancient Romans, who abhorred the triumphs of civil war. The conqueror ascended the Capitol' (III, 1036). This celebration on the Capitoline, evoking the Roman ritual traditionally reserved for marking a great victory over a foreign enemy, is a fatal blow to Rienzi's popularity.

Following an opening vignette again focused on the Capitol (to which we shall return), chapter 71, the last in *The Decline and Fall*, offers a broad analysis of the causes of the ruin of Rome, with particular emphasis on the role played by ‘the domestic quarrels of the Romans’. There is some slippage here between the city and the empire; yet the city itself is to the fore throughout this chapter. In a central section of this chapter, the ironies of Rome’s fate are tellingly explored through the history of one particular ruined structure, the Coliseum (III, 1076–80). This is ‘an edifice, had it been left to time and nature, which might perhaps have claimed an eternal duration’ (III, 1076). Even in the time of Augustus, Rome had been termed the eternal city. A later tradition linked the Coliseum, Rome’s most conspicuous ruin, with the city’s capacity to endure. Indeed Gibbon quotes the saying, attributed to the eighth-century English monk Bede: ‘As long as the Coliseum stands, Rome shall stand’ (III, 1077). These words, he surmises, were prompted by the awe and admiration felt by ‘the pilgrims of the North’ when they beheld this extraordinary structure (III, 1077).

Gibbon underlines the responsibilities of the Romans themselves for the physical, as for the moral, destruction of their city. But, as ever, the story is complex; the entertainments staged in the Coliseum in the fourteenth century are, it transpires, far more civilised than those put on in antiquity. Here the juxtaposition of ancient place names and later inhabitants (elsewhere a spur to melancholic reflection on the effects of the passage of time) takes on an almost comic tinge. ‘The Colonna regretted the absence of the youngest of their house who had sprained her ankle in the garden of Nero’s tower’ (III, 1078). The bullfights are dangerous and there are casualties, to be sure. Yet ‘the noble volunteers, who display their magnificence, and risk their lives, under the balconies of the fair, excite a more generous sympathy than the thousands of captives and malefactors who were reluctantly dragged to the scene of slaughter’ (III, 1079). This is, however, a diverting prelude to a narrative of almost relentless destruction, as Gibbon records how the Coliseum was for centuries treated as a convenient quarry for building materials. Even in the sixteenth century, termed ‘an era of taste and learning’ (III, 1080), the Coliseum was subject to further depredations to feed the construction of the palaces of the Farnese and the Barberini. Only the intervention of Benedict XIV put an end to this, by consecrating ‘a spot which persecution and fable had stained with the blood of so many Christian martyrs’ (III, 1080), a characteristically ironic zeugma

pairing persecution and fable. The ambiguities of history's trajectory are especially apparent in Gibbon's treatment of the Renaissance rebuilding of St Peter's, which he praises, despite its implication in the further destruction of antiquities, in particular the emperor Septimius Severus's Septizonium. 'In the gradual destruction of the monuments of Rome, Sixtus the fifth may alone be excused for employing the stones of the Septizonium in the glorious edifice of St Peter's' (III, 1072). Gibbon goes on to term St Peter's 'the most glorious structure that has ever been applied to the use of religion' (III, 1083).

Chapter 71, the conclusion of *The Decline and Fall*, opens in the mid-fifteenth century (around the time of the fall of Constantinople) with the learned Poggio Bracciolini and a friend on the Capitoline hill, surveying the ruins of ancient Rome. These were still visible at that time prior to the construction of Michelangelo's piazza. Poggio's own treatise (*De varietate fortunae*) is quoted and paraphrased at length. Poggio himself cites the eighth book of Virgil's *Aeneid* (a passage I quote above), in which the epic hero visits the site of Rome. In Gibbon's version he comments:

This Tarpeian rock was then a savage and solitary thicket: in the time of the poet, it was crowned with the golden roofs of a temple: the temple is overthrown, the gold has been pillaged, the wheel of fortune has accomplished her revolution and the sacred ground is again disfigured with thorns and brambles.

(III, 1062)

In ceding the opening of his last chapter to Poggio, Gibbon includes in his own narrative the traditional ruin-inspired musings on fortune's vicissitudes, while at the same time distancing himself from them.

Gibbon's assessment of the humanists at first sight appears entirely positive. Gibbon writes of Poggio as 'one of the first to raise his eyes from the monuments of legendary, to those of classic, superstition'. Petrarch is also included among these pioneers (III, 1063). Later scholars often credit Petrarch with revolutionising the conception of history, initiating a Renaissance view of the ancient past as distinct from the present; this characterisation of Renaissance attitudes to the past is at least in part due to Gibbon. He refers to Petrarch as a sympathetic and knowledgeable witness, citing his letters to



Giovanni Colonna, which describe the city of Rome in his own day (III, 897–9, 1019).<sup>30</sup> Alluding to his *Epistolae familiares* 6.2, Gibbon observes: ‘When Petrarch first gratified his eyes with a view of those monuments ... he was astonished at the supine indifference of the Romans themselves’ (III, 1080).

Petrarch’s ceremony of coronation on the Capitoline hill in Rome in 1341 (described by Gibbon in the opening of chapter 70) was in recognition of his Latin epic *Africa*, along with another Latin work, *De viris illustribus*.<sup>31</sup> His ambitious epic poem took as its subject (adapting the narrative in Livy’s history) Scipio Africanus and the defeat of Hannibal and his Carthaginian forces. Though never completed, the poem emulated in scope Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Gibbon is dismissive of Petrarch’s Latin works (III, 1020 n6). This is not his main reason, though, for objecting to Petrarch’s coronation as poet laureate. ‘The learning of a theological school and the ignorance of a lawless city were alike unqualified to bestow the ideal though immortal wreath which genius may obtain from the free applause of the public and of posterity’ (III, 1021). Certainly the Capitol itself had long been associated with literary immortality, as Gibbon was well aware. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil apostrophises to two young heroes, killed in battle: ‘O fortunate pair! If my poetry has any power, never will you fade from the memory of the age, so long as the house of Aeneas occupies the Capitol’s unyielding rock’ (9.446–9). The *Aeneid*’s power to confer fame will endure as long as rituals take place on the Capitol, Virgil asserts. Petrarch was, however, mistaken in supposing that Virgil was ever crowned with laurel on the Capitol, as Gibbon underlines in note 10 (III, 1020–1). Yet Gibbon concedes that, in offering a crown to Petrarch, the Romans ‘did him justice’ (III, 1022). For Petrarch, inspired both by the texts and also by the ruins of Roman antiquity, offered the present inhabitants of the city an inspiring vision, albeit rosy-tinted, of the present – and hope for the future.

The subject matter of Petrarch’s epic poem, largely drawn from Livy’s history, is perhaps of additional significance for Gibbon, despite his dismissive comments. Petrarch’s hero Scipio wins a great victory over Hannibal. This defeat of Carthage proves a key moment in the establishment of the Roman Empire; Petrarch’s *Africa* thus presents itself as a kind of counterpart to the *Aeneid*. But its story cannot simply be the teleology of Rome’s rise; in Petrarch’s time Rome’s subsequent decline is inescapable. The individual fate of the hero Scipio Africanus, who ends his days in exile (as his father

is made to predict in a dream), is a prelude to the fate of the city, which will also face decline and ruin – even if *Africa* culminates with the triumph of Scipio on the Capitoline hill. In another poem (a text which Gibbon also invokes in *The Decline and Fall*), addressed to a member of the Annibaldi family, Petrarch blames the Romans themselves for destroying their city; they have, he asserts, accomplished what Rome's great enemy Hannibal aspired to (III, 1076). For Gibbon, too, Hannibal is a potent point of reference. The strength of Hannibal's desire to attain Rome, as we saw, models compellingly for that of Gibbon himself, as he plans his journey to the city. This desire is, in Hannibal, a destructive force. There is an element in Gibbon, too, which takes pleasure in the destruction of this great, but in some ways also terrible, civilisation. As we have already seen, one may detect, at key moments in Gibbon's work, a revealing sympathy with those who attack the city.

When Gibbon was on the point of completing *The Decline and Fall*, he wrote to his friend Lord Sheffield comparing the final stages of the process of writing the *History* with a laborious journey over the Alps. As Womersley has argued, there is here not only an echo of Alexander Pope, who famously expressed literary frustration in similar terms, but also, obliquely, an allusion to the Alpine journey of Hannibal, as described by the Roman epic poet Silius Italicus (*Punica* 3.528–35).<sup>32</sup> Later in Silius's work, Hannibal is made to express his ardent wish to see on display in Carthage the image of Rome destroyed (6.712–13), a passage with which Gibbon was surely also familiar. Hannibal's desire was, of course, not fulfilled. He never conquered Rome; it was rather Carthage which was reduced to ruins. Yet Gibbon, many centuries later, was perhaps conscious of producing for other barbarians a verbal image anatomising Rome's destruction.

In his *Memoirs*, Gibbon had compared himself to Hannibal, in his journey towards Rome. Yet he also expressed the desire not to be a stranger, a foreigner, there – despite his barbarian origins. The final chapters of *The Decline and Fall* align Gibbon with a peculiarly Roman poetic tradition. His preoccupation with the coronation of Petrarch is significant here. For Petrarch the coronation was the emblem of the enduring power of his literary works. Gibbon, for his own part, is not indifferent to the lasting glory which *The Decline and Fall* may earn him. He opens his discussion of the first of the four principal causes of the ruin of Rome thus: 'The art of man is able to construct monuments far more permanent than the narrow span of his own existence: yet these

monuments, like himself, are perishable and frail.’ Simple monuments, he goes on to say, such as the pyramids of Egypt, may last many centuries, while complex ones are more liable to ruin, subject to the depredations of weather, fire and flood (III, 1066–7). This surely echoes a motif, which recurs frequently in Latin literature, most famously in Horace’s *Ode* 3.30. The comparison Horace articulates is between the limited capacity of built monuments to endure and the greater power of literary works: ‘exegi monumentum aere perennius / regalique situ pyramidum altius’ (‘I have built a monument more lasting than bronze, / and higher than the regal place of the pyramids’). In this final chapter of *The Decline and Fall*, I would like to suggest, Gibbon invites us to think of the destruction of the city of Rome, which had endured so long, but also of the comparable – or greater – capacity for endurance, which his own literary monument may possess. While Gibbon’s final sentence (quoted above) may appear self-deprecating, it also makes quite clear his concern with the judgement of posterity.

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## Notes

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[1](#) Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), III, p. 1085. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the volume number followed by the page number.

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[2](#) Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London: Nelson and Sons, 1966), version E, p. 134, which differs notably from the earlier version C, p. 6.

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[3](#) ‘The Modern Capitol is still grand’, he records in the notes he made in December 1764 (Edward Gibbon, *Gibbon’s Journey from Geneva to Rome: His Journal from 20 April to 2 October 1764*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1961), p. 239).

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[4](#) For a fuller account of these associations, see Catharine Edwards, *Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 3, ‘The City of Empire’.

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[5](#) Mikhail M. Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

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[6](#) Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 53–5.

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[7](#) Gibbon, *Gibbon’s Journey*, p. 235.

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[8](#) Gibbon, *Gibbon’s Journey*, p. xi.

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[9](#) Edward Gibbon, *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), I, p. 184.

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[10](#) *Memoirs*, p. 134.

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[11](#) *Ibid.*, p. 133.

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[12](#) Rosemary Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour: The British in Italy c. 1690–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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[13](#) James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), eds. Pat Rogers and R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 29.

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[14](#) James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica and France, 1765–1766*, eds. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (New York and London: McGraw-Hill and Heinemann, 1955), p. 71.

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[15](#) Boswell, *Grand Tour*, p. 65.

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[16](#) Quoted in Vicky Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique: Neo-Classicism in Britain, 1760–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 30.

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[17](#) John Ingamells (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 277, 756–7, 534.

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[18](#) Edward Gibbon, journal entry of 13 October 1763, quoted in Peter Ghosh, ‘The Conception of Gibbon’s *History*’, in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, eds. Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 271–316, on pp. 281–2.

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[19](#) *Memoirs*, p. 132.

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[20](#) *Ibid.*, p. 133.

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[21](#) Edward Gibbon, ‘*Recueil géographique*’, *Miscellaneous Works*, ed. Lord Sheffield, 2nd edition, 5 vols. (London, 1814), iv, pp. 158–63.

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[22](#) See Robert Mankin, ‘Introduction’, ‘*Essai sur l’étude de la littérature*’: *A Critical Edition* by Edward Gibbon, eds. Patricia Craddock and Robert Mankin (Oxford: SVEC 7, 2010), and Ghosh, ‘Gibbon’s First Thoughts’.

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[23](#) Quoted in and discussed by Claude Rawson, ‘Musing on the Capitol’, *Times Literary Supplement* **4185** (14 July 1995), p. 3.

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[24](#) For the earlier history of the sentence, see Gibbon, ‘*Essai sur l’étude de la littérature*’, pp. 155, 347.

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[25](#) *Memoirs*, p. 136.

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[26](#) Peter Ghosh, ‘The Conception of Gibbon’s History’ in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, eds. Rosamund McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 292.

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[27](#) Edward Gibbon, ‘On the Triumphs of the Romans’, *Miscellaneous Works*, **IV**, pp. 359–98, on p. 359.

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[28](#) See David Womersley, ‘Introduction’, *The Decline and Fall*, **I**, pp. li–lvii.

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[29](#) See Edwards, *Writing Rome*, pp. 69–95. On Gibbon’s engagement with Tacitus, see Womersley, *Transformation*, pp. 80–8.

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[30](#) See Petrarch, *Epistolae familiares* 2.14; 6.2.

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[31](#) *Ibid.*, 4.4.

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[32](#) Womersley, *Transformation*, p. 296.

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## Do Byzantine Historians Still Read Gibbon?



**Mark Whittow**

An occupational hazard of being a Byzantine historian in the English-speaking world is the question, ‘Do Byzantinists still read Gibbon?’ A straightforward answer is no. Judging from my informal enquiries, and from the number of instances where Gibbon has been cited in a way that reveals no more extensive knowledge of *The Decline and Fall* than the title, I think it is certain that very few of those who currently study Gibbon’s subject matter have read his work. On the other hand a more subtle answer would be that even if they no longer read Gibbon, they still hold to what was in essence Gibbon’s narrative. Byzantinists may no longer read Gibbon, but they continue to read Gibbon’s ideas in other people’s words – and still repeat them.

At first sight this may seem surprising. Peter Brown, who is widely credited with the invention of the current concept of late antiquity, talks of Oxford in the 1960s and waging ‘a dogged *guerilla* war against the dominant and melodramatic notion of the decline and fall of the Roman empire’.<sup>1</sup> Was this war in vain? Clearly not. Brown’s positive evaluation of the Christian culture of the age of Tertullian, Augustine, John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria has had a profound effect. Gibbon had treated them as at best misguided enthusiasts who had regrettably used their undoubted literary and intellectual talents in the cause of unreason; Brown taught his audience to read them as profound thinkers, wrestling with angels in an attempt to transcend the limitations of the human. He taught his readers to approach them with a frisson of excitement that Gibbon’s masters, Polybios, Livy and Tacitus, no longer seemed to inspire. Even bolder, Brown saw the monks and ascetics, who Gibbon considered could ‘excite only the contempt and pity of a philosopher’, not as a freak show of misplaced fanatics, but in their own terms, as spiritual athletes, patrons, power-brokers and peace-makers, who



endured squalor and suffering on earth for the real rewards to come.<sup>2</sup> He read saints' lives, not as 'extravagant tales, which display the fiction, without the genius, of poetry', but as privileged windows into the realities and the conflict zones of Roman life.<sup>3</sup> Brown, and those influenced by him, have transformed how we approach the centuries between Septimius Severus and Charlemagne, but as regards Gibbon's narrative, all this is largely irrelevant. Gibbon identified Christianity, 'its doctrines of patience and pusillanimity [whereby] the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloyster', as a factor in the decline and fall of the empire, but he also acknowledged that any harm that it did was offset by other advantages: 'party-spirit, however pernicious or absurd, is a principle of union as well as of dissention' (I, 510–11); and in any case it was a secondary factor. '[I]f superstition had not afforded a decent retreat, the same vices would have tempted the unworthy Romans to desert, from baser motives, the standard of the republic' (I, 511). Brown, whether for or against, is not arguing anything so functionally reductive, and in this respect the rise of late antiquity and Gibbon simply pass each other by.

The same point can be made for the work of the other tutelary god of modern anglophone late antique studies, A. H. M. Jones, whose *Later Roman Empire* of 1964 was justly described by Brown as 'like the arrival of a steel-plant in a region that has, of late, been given over to light industries'.<sup>4</sup> Jones had read all the literary sources known to Gibbon, but, in his words, he had 'read and re-read the Codes and Novels, the Notitia Dignitatum and similar official documents', and what he had written was 'not a history of the later Roman empire', but rather 'a social, economic and administrative survey of the empire'.<sup>5</sup> Politics and war were essentially secondary factors which Jones left not just to others in general, but in many ways to Gibbon in particular. His son Roger remembered his father as a great admirer of Gibbon who used to say that it would be extremely difficult to update *The Decline and Fall* given that it contained very few mistakes.<sup>6</sup> Where Gibbon and Jones cover the same issues, the latter is notably Gibbonian. Jones's analysis of the impact of Christianity in terms of economically unproductive 'idle mouths', whose pernicious effect was to increase an already crushing burden of taxation on everybody else, is in effect a recasting of Gibbon's case in socio-economic terms.<sup>7</sup> It also provides an answer to Jones's own question for Gibbon, that if Christianity was an issue, why did the east survive? Christianity did more damage in the west because the

west was poorer, whereas the wealthier east could afford more wastage. More Gibbonian still is the penultimate section of the book, which has the running title, 'Decline of Morale', and opens with the sentence, 'The most depressing feature of the later empire is the apparent absence of public spirit.'<sup>8</sup> Gibbon says much the same. But like Gibbon and Brown, the overall effect is of ships sailing past each other. Jones revolutionised our understanding of the late empire in institutional and administrative terms, but this was never Gibbon's concern. It is telling that when he came to cover Roman law in chapter 44 of *The Decline and Fall* it came as a separate postscript to his discussion of Justinian, and he has barely a few lines on Jones's great source, the Theodosian Code (II, 797). Impressively coherent and learned though Gibbon is on the development of Roman law, it plays no obvious part in his unfolding narrative.

Equally telling is the impact, or rather lack of it, which archaeology has had on Gibbon's reception. Quite as much as by Brown's work on late antique culture, or by Jones's on the systems of the late Roman state, the field has been transformed since the 1970s by new archaeology which increasingly prioritised the period from the fourth century onwards. What has emerged is the evidence for a society which had certainly changed since the Antonine age of the later second century, but in no way amounted to a world in crisis. Urban excavations have shown a world where temples were being demolished, abandoned or at least mothballed, but where patrons were investing in new and often lavishly decorated churches; where theatres and amphitheatres were ancient monuments, but where the fashion was for new city walls or colonnaded streets; where the houses of the elite could be as splendid as ever.<sup>9</sup> Rural surveys have similarly allowed us to map the continued existence of villas with lavish mosaics, but more striking perhaps is the widespread phenomenon of wealthy villages inhabited one must presume by prosperous farmers. In some parts of the Mediterranean, these late antique centuries saw population and settlement densities reach their premodern heights. In parts of northern Europe, such as the provinces of Britannia, urban decay is offset by rural prosperity that goes hand in hand with what seems to be a regionalisation of the Roman economy.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, research on late Roman pottery (research growing almost exponentially in volume and sophistication) has allowed us to track the commercial and fiscal ties that bound the empire together. Best known is the evidence of fine ware pottery from Africa, called African Red Slip Ware, and of African transport amphorae that once carried oil,

wine and fish sauce. Both turn up from one end of the empire to the other, but more specifically show up the main trunk routes of the late antique economy, and the empire's fiscal demands that tied Africa to Rome and the north coasts of the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> Where African pottery studies led, others have followed, and in the second decade of the twenty-first century the picture is getting progressively richer and thicker, with more and more local and regional products being identified and tracked. The picture is complex and certainly not unvarying from Britain to Arabia, but any notion of a late empire receding into primitive autarky is gone for good.

The careless reader of Gibbon, or at least of Gibbon's title, might think such new evidence overthrew a central tenet of *The Decline and Fall*, but (leaving aside the still contested issue of whether and when the late antique economy shrank from its earlier apparent peak) that would be utterly to miss one of his central points. Although *The Decline and Fall* certainly describes a sequence of ravaging raids that left a trail of smoking ruins, Gibbon never suggests that the empire was becoming substantially poorer. Raid after raid, this wealthy world always recovered to provide more for its plunderers. Rome itself, sacked by the Goths in 410, was rebuilt, restored and restocked to provide new booty for the Vandals to plunder in 455, and for Romans and Goths to loot in the sixth century (II, 201, 216, 360, 543, 744). Everything Gibbon thought about the eastern empire after 395 would have led him to expect to find there a rich and prosperous world (II, 69, 577). Prosperity did not contradict decline in Gibbon's mind, it was its natural concomitant. Byzantinists need to be reminded that Gibbon's decline was not one from riches to poverty, or still less from a complex to a primitive economy, but rather the moral decline in civic and martial virtue made familiar by John Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*; a decline more likely to be fostered by pampering prosperity than invigorating poverty.<sup>12</sup> To treat Gibbon as a straw man for late antique 'decline' in an economic sense would be a serious mistake.

## New Narratives for Old?

In *Barbarism and Religion*, J. G. A. Pocock wrote, ‘This book has come to take narrative as its centre, meaning by that term the macronarrative of systemic change rather than the classical narrative of exemplary or arcane actions.’<sup>13</sup>

Gibbon’s macronarrative of the fall of the Roman Empire starts with the Antonine age at the end of the second century AD. The empire is an absolute monarchy ‘disguised’, thanks to the subtlety of its founder, Augustus, ‘by the forms of a commonwealth’ (I, 93, 96). As national spirit and martial virtue declined, power slipped inevitably into the hands of the soldiers of the standing army, who in the absence of any secure principle of hereditary succession became the effective arbiters of who would rule (I, 147, 186–8, 212). Up to the third century the decline of Rome was largely hidden to outsiders, but from this point on the barbarians, Persians in the east, Germans and Goths in the north, increasingly exposed the empire’s weakness (I, 212–14, 229–30, 266). Not all the emperors thrown up by a succession of military coups were lacking in merit. Decius, Claudius and Aurelian, for example, in their different ways, realised the need to restore public virtue, and individually they strove to throw back the barbarian invaders of the empire, but their achievements could only be superficial (I, 262, 299–302, 323). The virtue of Rome was irrecoverable.

What these reigns, however, also showed was that stability required a new form of government, where the army would be kept under much tighter control, and the emperor would be shrouded in ceremony that distanced and distinguished ruler from subject. The practical achievement of the new order was that of Diocletian, who seized power in 284, and whose reforms mark the beginning of a new era. The division of the empire between a series of co-emperors (the Tetrarchy) and Diocletian’s effective absence from the city of Rome, both furthered these ends (I, 386–91). At this point neither development was final; the empire would be reunited under Constantine, and Rome had not seen its last Caesar, but the logic was unavoidable.

Diocletian’s reformed empire, converted to Christianity by Constantine, was in many ways an effective answer to Rome’s superficial problems (I, 602, 614, 619, 730–7). Constantine’s foundation of a new capital in the east served the same ends, as in Gibbon’s mind did Christianity, a religion that in its fourth-century form promoted the

passive obedience an autocrat would wish to see in dutiful subjects; but beyond the frontiers, martial barbarians still waited, and when they were encouraged to move, disaster could be expected to follow. That movement began in the 370s, and was caused by events in the steppes of central Asia that had their ultimate origin in China (I, 1024, 1035; II, 141). The Huns pushed the Goths into the empire, and at the battle of Adrianople in 378, the Goths inflicted a crushing defeat on Roman arms, in which 40,000 of the empire's best soldiers and the emperor Valens himself were lost.

The battle of Adrianople was not decisive in itself. 'The fabric of a mighty state, which has been reared by the labours of successive ages, could not be overturned by the misfortune of a single day', but in practice its consequences were never overcome (I, 1074–6). If one section of the Goths, that of Radagaisus, was destroyed in 406, another, that of Alaric, closed in on Rome, and having failed to achieve its ends by blackmail, resorted to sacking the city in 410 (II, 145–6, 201). In any case, by this date the 'barrier, which had so long separated the savage and the civilised nations of the earth [had been] levelled with the ground' (II, 149). At the end of 406, the Germans had crossed the Rhine. Just as the Goths in 376 had been moved by the Huns, the hidden causes of whose appearance lay in China, so, Gibbon tells us, the Germans had 'yielded to an irresistible impulse, that appears to have been gradually communicated from the eastern extremity of the continent of Asia' (II, 141). Taken with the consequences of the battle of Adrianople, this crossing of the Rhine 'may be considered the fall of the Roman empire in the countries beyond the Alps' (II, 149).

What followed may be considered as a long drawn-out end game for the empire in the west. Gibbon recognises the symbolic importance of the deposition of the last emperor of the west in 476, but his stronger emphases are on the failure of the emperor Honorius to provide leadership, the unfortunate death of the very effective general Constantius, the crucial importance of the Vandal conquest of Africa and the ironic significance of the Roman alliance with the Huns.<sup>14</sup> Casting ahead he also gives full weight to the achievements of Theodoric, the Gothic king of sixth-century Italy, 'who might have deserved a statue among the best and bravest of the Romans' (II, 525). It is an irony, typically relished by Gibbon, that Italy was not ruined by the barbarian king, but through the destruction unleashed by a Roman emperor's attempt at reconquest (II, 731). By the end of the sixth century, with the Franks in Gaul, the Goths in Spain, the

Lombards in much of Italy, all that remained of the empire in the west were a few imperial outposts, and the Pope in Rome.

Like Thebes, or Babylon or Carthage, the name of Rome might have been erased from the earth; if the city had not been animated by a vital principle, which again restored her to honour and dominion. A vague tradition was embraced, that two Jewish teachers, a tent-maker and a fisherman, had formerly been executed in the circus of Nero, and at the end of five hundred years their genuine or fictitious relics were adored as the Palladium of Christian Rome.

(11, 874)

So Gibbon; and so Peter Heather, whose three volumes, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History*; *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe*; and *The Restoration of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders* (published in 2005, 2009 and 2013 respectively) are a lively restatement of Gibbon's story of long-term decline, fourth-century stasis and a barbarian crisis brought on by events far to the east. Not being an eighteenth-century Machiavellian, Heather naturally does not describe decline in terms of a loss of civic and martial virtue; and being a product of the positive reassessment of the late empire that has taken place over the last forty years he does not use the term 'decline' at all, but the message is effectively the same.

The empire, he explains, had grown to such great size because of the vast economic and cultural gulf that separated Rome from its barbarian neighbours. Expansion stopped in the first century AD when the costs of conquest outweighed the benefits, thus leaving the empire's northern frontier on the Rhine and the Danube. At this date, barbarians beyond the frontier might covet the empire's goods, and might inflict an occasional defeat, but their small and underdeveloped communities were in no position to do any serious harm to the Romans. Over the following centuries this gradually changed as barbarian society developed, partly in response to Roman aggression, partly as a result of Roman fostering of convenient clients who would make for quieter frontiers, and partly as a result of economic growth brought about by relations with the empire. By the third century even barbarian groups on the coast of the Baltic were actively looking for ways

to gain access to the wealth of the Roman world – the Gothic raids that reached as far as the Aegean in the 250s and 260s were an example of this; and by the fourth century the empire faced a series of powerful groupings (to talk of ‘tribes’ is too weak a term and ‘states’ too strong) ranging from the Franks and Alamanni on the Rhine to the Goths on the Danube. In the east at the same time the situation had changed. Where Rome had once faced Persia under the rule of the comparatively unthreatening Parthians, a similar process of Roman aggression and Persian response had led to the rise of the formidable Sasanians. If Gibbon’s decline is to be understood as the loss of a once unquestionable military superiority, this was it.

Yet, as the empire’s response to the various crises of the third century had proved, decline was only relative. War with Sasanian Persia tended to be no worse than stalemate, and Roman armies in the fourth century were still more than a match for even the new and larger barbarian groups on the northern frontiers. The Alamanni or the Goths might present much bigger problems than their first-century predecessors, but taken individually they were no threat to the imperial system as such. The fourth-century empire had not recovered the total dominance of the age of Caesar and Augustus, but that was not within any emperor’s power.

What transformed a reasonably stable situation, as Gibbon and Heather agree, was the appearance of the Huns, and one of Heather’s lasting achievements will no doubt be to have set out more clearly than ever before how and why the Huns had this effect.<sup>15</sup> Like Gibbon, Heather makes the case not just that the Gothic appeal for asylum in 376 was a consequence of Hun aggression, but that the Rhine crossing of 406, the Gothic sack of Rome in 410 and indeed the whole fall of the western empire flowed from this original cause. Like Gibbon, Heather does not think that the empire was lost at Adrianople, but much more important was the fact that the Goths continued as an autonomous armed body within the empire for decades to come. He shares too Gibbon’s appreciation of the importance of the early death of Constantius in 421, which deprived the west of an effective leader; and of the significance of the loss of Africa to the Vandals, which took away a huge and essential source of revenue. Like Gibbon he brings out how much the Huns were important to the Romans both as mercenaries and in the form of Attila’s empire, as a potential threat to remind the Goths and others why they needed the empire of Rome. Far from being a relief, the collapse of Hunnic power after



the death of Attila in 453 had the effect of removing one of the western empire's few remaining props.

The first book of Heather's *de facto* trilogy ends with the deposition of the last western emperor in 476, and the eastern emperor Zeno's decision not to intervene, but the third volume, like Gibbon, picks up the story with a positive picture of Theodoric, perhaps emperor of the west in all but name, but perhaps not, because by this date the world had moved on, and neither the machinery of empire nor the instinctive loyalty of thousands of provincial landowners any longer existed anywhere outside Italy. And even in Italy its days were numbered. Like Gibbon, Heather has little that is good to say about Justinian, the eastern emperor who reconquered Italy from the Goths and in doing so destroyed it. Heather then turns to Charlemagne, and the short-lived Carolingian revival, before ending the book, as Gibbon did *The Decline and Fall*, with the Pope and Rome.

It seems often to be assumed that to break with Gibbon all that is required is to reject the supposedly Gibbonian notion that Christianity caused the fall of the empire; in fact, as we have seen, Gibbon at least partially rejects this himself, and in any case he never makes this more than a secondary factor. Really to break with Gibbon requires breaking with the idea that the fall of the western empire was brought about by barbarian invasions, themselves triggered by the appearance of the Huns; and this is what Heather's critics, notably Walter Goffart, Guy Halsall and Michael Kulikowski, have on the face of it attempted to do. Their arguments are not identical, but they add up to a case that Rome's fall in the west was not brought about by barbarian invasion so much as through internal factors.<sup>16</sup> The barbarians who appear in our sources were not part of an existential battle between civilisation and barbarism; still less, as Goffart is keen to emphasise, a battle between Rome and Germany. They were not driven into the empire by the Huns, rather they were recruited into Rome's civil wars, and what followed was not the collapse of civilisation, but part of a longer-term process which saw the emergence of a militarised elite culture in which Romans and barbarians both shared.<sup>17</sup> What caused the fall of the west was the failure of any imperial regime to establish itself securely after 423. When Honorius died in that year the empire appeared set for recovery. The disaster at Adrianople, forty-five years before, had not been fatal, nor ultimately had the Goths been victorious.<sup>18</sup> The Goths who had sacked Rome had not been ravaging barbarians but effectively a Roman force with a lot of barbarian recruits



trying to extort better terms from an unwilling regime.<sup>19</sup> They were now settled in Aquitaine, on the empire's terms, and acting as part of the Roman army in the west. Order was being restored in Spain, and the prospects were good for northern Gaul too.<sup>20</sup> By the 460s the empire was slipping to its end, not because of the actions of the Goths or the Vandals as such, but because the intervening years had seen almost constant civil war, where barbarian groups like these had been essential to all parties' claims to power.<sup>21</sup> In Goffart's words, 'When set in a fourth-century perspective, what we call the fall of the Western Roman Empire was an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand'; or as Halsall puts it, 'The Roman empire was not murdered and nor did it die a natural death; it accidentally committed suicide.'<sup>22</sup>

There is much here that makes good sense, or at least adds up to a sustainable argument. Heather, for example, believes that Alaric's Goths were the undefeated descendants of the victors of Adrianople, and that the 406 Rhine crossing was a consequence of Hun pressure, but no source actually says so, and his interpretation is just that. In practice, however, none of these revisions actually takes us very far from Heather or Gibbon, for the basic reason that Jones pointed out. Gibbon knew the source material very well, and all parties therefore share the same body of narrative information. Large numbers of so-called barbarians certainly entered the empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the new politics of the post-Roman west would form round such barbarian identities. That was as clear to Gibbon as it is to us.

## The Fall of the Eastern Empire

‘The Byzantine Empire remains almost the unique example of a highly civilized state, lasting for more than a millennium, which produced hardly any educated writing which can be read for its literary pleasure alone.’<sup>23</sup> Where Heather parts company with Gibbon, and where the revisionist case has no contribution to make either, is with what happens next. I have described Gibbon on Theodoric, Justinian and the Popes, and Heather ending on a similar note, but this of course is to ignore the fact that *The Decline and Fall* still has more than two books to go at this stage. Gibbon explicitly regarded his theme not as the fall of the empire in the west, but as the fall in the east too, and in 476 the empire had nearly another thousand years of history to come. Gibbon’s account of what it is convenient to call the Byzantine Empire can be criticised for its superficial coverage of events in chapter 48 (tellingly the only chapter without footnotes), which he introduces as ‘a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery’ (III, 23). The empire’s subjects ‘who assume and dishonour the name of Greeks and Romans, present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity, nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes’ (III, 24). In the event Gibbon’s judgement is not quite so bleak. Various emperors, notably Leo III, Constantine V, Basil I, Isaac I and above all John II Comnenus, are praised for their virtues, and in later chapters when he goes into more detail about specific episodes, such as the first Muslim siege of Constantinople in 668–75 (Gibbon’s dates are taken from Theophanes),<sup>24</sup> it is acknowledged that the ‘spirit of the Romans’ (III, 324) had not been entirely extinguished. Later, after the loss of Constantinople to the Latins in 1204, Gibbon can equally note how the calamity had for the time being restored vigour to the Greeks, but overall the reader is left wondering why Byzantium lasted as long as it did (III, 737–8).

Gibbon’s answer is effectively the same as his explanation for the fall of the west, a millennium earlier. The history of Byzantium is the equivalent of the western empire’s stasis between the accession of Diocletian in 284 and the battle of Adrianople in 378. Roman virtue had not been restored, but the empire was strong enough and rich enough to survive, until an outside force, in that case the Huns, propelled the Germanic barbarians across the Danube and the Rhine. Logically a proper history of the fall of the western empire should explore in detail the history of the Huns, and Gibbon did his best.

He made good use of Ammianus Marcellinus, he includes an important comparative discussion of steppe nomads, and he used what Chinese materials he had available in translation or through secondary discussion to place the Huns in the full context of Eurasian history (I, 1024–46; II, 294–315, 351–2). We know more about the Huns now, but not actually very much more.

Gibbon saw the fall of the eastern empire in much the same terms. The Romans under Heraclius had managed to survive the great war with Persia at the beginning of the seventh century. What had led to the permanent loss of Egypt, Syria and Palestine in the decades that followed was not this war with an old enemy, but the utterly unexpected eruption of the Muslims from the deserts of Arabia (II, 931; III, 151–236). In the late seventh and early eighth centuries, the Romans managed to survive two sieges of the imperial city and a series of Muslim invasions, before entering a period of military security and expansion that lasted into the early eleventh century. But then a new revolution in the depths of Eurasia propelled the Turks, central Asian nomads like the Huns, to the empire's borders (III, 523–30). The appearance of the Turks led to the loss of Anatolia and Alexios Comnenus's appeal to the west for help, which in turn led to the Crusades, the Fourth Crusade and the first fall of Constantinople in 1204. The Latin empire was no triumph – 'peace was banished, industry was crushed, in the disorders of the feudal system' – and the Greeks recovered the city in 1261 (III, 707). After a short period of renewal the empire slipped once again into a cycle of murderous domestic politics, and the Turks, now in the form of the Ottoman *gazis*, fanatic warriors for the faith, began inexorably to extend their control first of western Asia Minor, then the Balkans and finally to close in on Constantinople itself.

The rise of the Ottomans was itself the outcome of another steppe revolution, that of the Mongols and the world conquests of Ghengis Khan in the early thirteenth century which had swept away much of the old order across Eurasia. Turks who did not want to serve the Mongol khans migrated to Anatolia, where the Mongols had created a vacuum by destroying the Seljuk sultanate of Konya. Among those refugee Turks at the end of the thirteenth century were the ancestors of the Ottomans, who managed to carve out for themselves a *gazi* principality on the Asian frontiers of Byzantium (III, 809–12). Through the fourteenth century the Ottomans went from strength to strength, exploiting with some adroitness the empire's conflicts to establish a foothold in Europe by 1353,

and making themselves a power in two continents by the 1380s. The Byzantines had survived the initial ‘shipwreck of nations’ caused by the Mongol conquests, but by 1400 the Ottomans were ready to put a final end to the empire (III, 816–25). At this point Constantinople was saved for another fifty years, again by events that had their roots in the heart of Eurasia. Timur, who claimed to be a descendant of Ghengis Khan, launched his armies on a career of conquest stretching from India to Anatolia. The Ottomans were one of Timur’s victims, and the sultan Bayezit I was defeated and captured, ending his life as a prisoner kept, so the story goes, in an iron cage (III, 826, 831, 840–3). Timur died in 1405, on the verge of an invasion of China. The Byzantine Empire had won a reprieve, but only a comparatively short one. The Ottomans recovered, and in 1422 launched their first attempt to take the Second Rome on the Bosphorus. They failed on this occasion, but with no real prospect of relief from the west, the end was only a matter of time, and the Roman Empire finally fell in 1453.

If Gibbon’s analysis of the medieval empire that survived a thousand years begs the question of how such an unwarlike people as he describes, led for the most part by such corrupt and inadequate rulers, could have survived so long, he may be excused on the grounds that he was simply repeating the message of his sources. With the exception of Leo the Deacon’s account of the reigns of Nicephorus Phokas and John Tzimiskes, which Gibbon agreed were years of martial success, and Anna Comnena’s life of her father, Alexius I Comnenus, which Gibbon recognised as special pleading, all the other Greek sources he had available told exactly this story of martial failure (III, 59–60, 69, 464). George Cedrenus and John Zonaras do this for the eleventh century; Nicetas Choniates, writing in Nicaean exile after 1204, does this even more vividly in his account of the twelfth century; and George Pachymeres, Nicephorus Gregoras and John Cantacuzenus tell this story for the thirteenth and fourteenth. Gibbon received the same message from Odo of Deuil and Geoffrey de Villehardouin, contemporary French historians of the Crusades, who had been to Constantinople and had direct experience of the Byzantines. To say anything very different would have required access to materials he did not have, and a perverse determination to read them all against the grain. Modern Byzantine studies have been built in part on doing just that, but only up to a point.

As with the study of late antiquity, equivalent work to that done by Brown, Jones and the archaeologists has transformed our understanding of Byzantium from the seventh

to the fifteenth century. This has had an effect on how we tell the story. The iconoclast emperors, for example, are better understood than they were, but this is not so new; Gibbon had recognised they were being traduced by their enemies (III, 36–47). As with late antiquity, the real advances have been towards a better understanding of Byzantine religious culture, with which Gibbon had little sympathy, and Byzantine government and governance, where modern historians have the benefit of important sources that Gibbon did not know, and the sociological models to interpret them provided by Max Weber. Like the narratives of the fall of the western empire, the standard modern accounts, ranging from that of George Ostrogorsky first published in 1940, via Donald Nicol's 1993 account of the last centuries of Byzantium, to that of Warren Treadgold published in 1997, do little more than follow the message of the sources, in a not significantly different manner to Gibbon.<sup>25</sup> Even Cyril Mango's seminal portrait of Byzantine society and culture published in 1980 rests on a narrative that Gibbon would have recognised.<sup>26</sup> Only genuinely different is the picture of Byzantium as a bastion of republican virtue recently drawn by Anthony Kaldellis. It remains to be seen how convincing this proves to be.<sup>27</sup> For the time being the subject has not moved as far beyond Gibbon as we sometimes like to think.

In any case Gibbon could point out that the 'fate of the Byzantine monarchy is *passively* connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world'. In other words, only passively. It is in these revolutions, which took place in 'the wilds of Arabia and Tartary', and not by implication in what happened in Byzantium itself, 'that we must explore the causes and effects of the decline and fall of the Eastern empire' (III, 25). Much more than the majority of his successors attempting to explain decline and fall, Gibbon had a genuinely global conception of history, both in the sense of comparing one empire, kingdom or people with another across the globe, and in terms of a connected history, where events and actions in one part of the world had consequences in another. At the end of a chapter which had covered the sixth-century Lombards, Persians and Avars, as well as introducing the Turks for the first time and making a comparative point about Shah Abbas, the ruler of Safavid Persia during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Gibbon turns to Ethiopia (II, 686–730). 'This narrative of obscure and remote events is not foreign to the decline and fall of the Roman empire. If a Christian power had been maintained in

Arabia, Mahomet must have been crushed in his cradle, and Abyssinia would have prevented a revolution which has changed the civil and religious state of the world' (II, 730). Similarly Gibbon could see that Byzantine iconoclasm mattered because it led directly to the revolt of Italy, as well as the rise of the papacy, and Charlemagne's restoration of a Roman empire in the west – two institutions that were still in existence when Gibbon was writing (III, 86). Or that the spread of the Turks in the eleventh century mattered because it provoked the Crusades which in turn fostered western notions of chivalry, with all that represented for the future of the west, and a lasting hatred of Greeks for Latins, again with far-reaching consequences (III, 580). Less persuasively perhaps, Gibbon also drew a line between the 'simple and spiritual creed' of the radical Paulicians in the eighth and ninth centuries, the Albigensians, the creation of the Inquisition and the Reformation of the sixteenth century (III, 424–7, 436). Or with more success he made a connection between Timur and the fifty-year delay to the fall of Constantinople on the one hand, and the rise of western culture on the other to a level where refugees from the east could be appreciated as the bearers of lost ancient wisdom (III, 856, 896, 904). Throughout, *The Decline and Fall* is a cat's cradle of connections with implications for the future.

Twenty-five years ago, in the heyday of microhistory, Gibbon's large scale of vision would have seemed simply an aspect of his being a philosophic historian in the eighteenth-century mode; halfway through the first third of the twenty-first century, with historians taken by the global turn, a vision of Rome's fall that spans more than a millennium and reaches from China to the Atlantic, Scandinavia to Africa, seems to speak more closely to current concerns than ever. This does not mean that more than a very few historians of the fall of the Roman empire will actually ever read *The Decline and Fall*, but it does mean that Gibbon's ideas expressed in other people's words will be more current than ever.

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## Notes

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[1](#) Peter Brown, ‘The World of Late Antiquity Revisited’, *Symbolae Osloenses* **72** (1997), 5–90, on p. 9.

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[2](#) Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), **II**, p. 428. Further references will be cited by volume and page number, in parentheses in the text.

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[3](#) Peter Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity’, *Journal of Roman Studies* **61** (1971), 80–101.

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[4](#) Peter Brown, ‘The Later Roman Empire’, *Economic History Review*, New Series **20** (1967), 327–43, on p. 329.

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[5](#) A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), **I**, pp. v, vii.

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[6](#) Alexander Sarantis, ‘Arnold Hugh Martin Jones (1904–1970)’, in *A. H. M. Jones and the Later Roman Empire*, ed. D. Gwynn (Brill: Leiden, 2008), pp. 3–24, on p. 17.

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[7](#) Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, pp. 1026–7, 1046–7.

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[8](#) *Ibid.*, p. 1058.

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[9](#) Bryan Ward-Perkins, ‘The Cities’, in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XIII: THE LATE EMPIRE AD 337–425*, eds. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 371–410, especially pp. 403–9; Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 596–602.

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[10](#) Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Michael Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume XIV: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors ad 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 350–69; Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 442–81.

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[11](#) Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 708–80.

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[12](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 211.

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[13](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015), II, p. 397.

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[14](#) See *The Decline and Fall*, II, pp. 218, 220, 223, 273–4, 277–8, 280, 284, 337.

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[15](#) Most clearly in Peter Heather, ‘The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire in Western Europe’, *English Historical Review* **110** (1995), 4–41.

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[16](#) Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); *Barbarians and Romans ad 418–584: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Guy Halsall, ‘Two Worlds Become One: A “Counter-Intuitive” View of the Roman Empire and “Germanic” Migration’, *German History* **32** (2014), 515–32; *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael Kulikowski, *Rome’s Gothic Wars from the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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[17](#) Halsall, ‘Two Worlds Become One’, pp. 529–30; Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, pp. 75–9.

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[18](#) Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 180–5.

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[19](#) Kulikowski, ‘The Failure of Roman Arms’, in *The Sack of Rome in 410 ad*, pp. 77–83; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 202–6.

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[20](#) Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 224–37.

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[21](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 237–83.

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[22](#) Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans*, p. 35; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, p. 283.

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[23](#) Romilly Jenkins, *Dionysius Solomós* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 5.

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[24](#) See *The Decline and Fall*, III, pp. 36–8, 49, 64, 71, 73, 84.

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[25](#) George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. Joan Hussey, 2nd English edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968); Donald M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261–1453*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

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[26](#) Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980).

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[27](#) Anthony Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).



## Gibbon among the Barbarians



**George Woudhuysen**

In 1781, at the end of Volumes II and III of *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon delivered to the public his ‘General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West’. The previous 1,000 pages, advertised as ‘elegantly printed in quarto ... Price two guineas in boards’, swept the reader from the age of Constantine to that of King Arthur.<sup>1</sup> Here, Gibbon turned aside from the ‘simple and obvious’ story of the empire’s ruin to ask ‘with anxious curiosity’ whether Europe, ‘one great republic’, was threatened by the savage nations which had overthrown the Romans (II, 509, 511). He bustled through how civilisation had contracted barbarism to a narrow span, how (perhaps paradoxically) European division, and the vigorous competition it encouraged, was a source of strength, and arrived finally at the vast improvements in the military arts, which formed an impregnable barrier against any would-be Attilas. He concluded, with that warm optimism frequently surprising in an historian of so much bloodshed and despotism, that ‘Europe is secure from any future irruption of barbarians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous’ (II, 514). The advance of European civilisation had constricted the number of awful things that could happen: there had been progress.<sup>2</sup>

Kings were not exempt from this general felicity and happy contraction of the range of historical outcomes, and Gibbon confidently asserted that the ‘smooth and solid temper of the modern world’ made it very unlikely that another Alexander would triumph, or another Darius fall (III, 84). One must imagine that the king of France, ‘the absolute monarch of an industrious, wealthy, and affectionate people’, was included amongst the number of these contented and secure sovereigns (I, 637–8). Quite a prediction to publish in 1788. The rumbles that began to emerge from Paris in 1789 did not at first repel Gibbon: on 22 July, just over a week after the storming of the Bastille, he posed the question to his friend Lord Sheffield, of whether the French had the

moderation 'to establish a good constitution'.<sup>3</sup> After that, however, his view of events rapidly soured, and by the end of the year Gibbon lamented the misuse by the French of their 'glorious opportunity', and noted that no Richelieu or Cromwell had emerged to restore or subvert the monarchy.<sup>4</sup> Gibbon's letters to Lord Sheffield of the following years are thick with despair for France – 'the state is dissolved, the nation is mad' – and concern for England – 'If this tremendous warning has no effect on the men of property in England ... you will deserve your fate.'<sup>5</sup> By 1792, historical possibility had begun to expand again: 'You will allow me to be a tolerable historian, yet on a fair review of ancient and modern times I can find none that bear any affinity with the present.'<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, as events began to move outside the happy bounds of the *ancien régime*, the barbarians reappeared. Writing in 1793 to Lord Loughborough, who had recently been made Lord Chancellor, Gibbon rejoiced that the lawyer was 'now armed in the common cause against the most dangerous fanatics that have ever invaded the peace of Europe – against the new Barbarians who labour to confound the order and happiness of society'.<sup>7</sup> The Tartars (as Gibbon called them) of central Asia might be firmly pinned back by cannon and fortresses, but the barbarians were already within the gates of the great European republic; the irruption of savagery had come from the inside, from a city marked by 'that inestimable art which softens and refines and embellishes the intercourse of social life' (I, 724).

Barbarians, it is clear, occupied a central place in Gibbon's mind; they were crucial to his great historical project – 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' – but also to the way he understood his own world, as a divining rod to identify its key features. The many-sidedness of barbarism, its endless manifestations and permutations, fascinated him, and retained the capacity to surprise him, to upend conclusions he had settled on long ago, to the end of his life.<sup>8</sup> They are announced on the very first page of Gibbon's great work as 'the barbarians of Germany and Scythia, the rude ancestors of the most polished nations of modern Europe', and we meet the same tribes right at its close (III, 1084). In between, a dazzling array of peoples passes before our eyes; their proclivities, their conquests, their own declines and falls, are assiduously examined. The first barbarians to intrude seriously on our attention arrive in chapter 8. Here, Gibbon has paused his narrative of the third century at the Secular Games held to celebrate the millennium of Rome's foundation, and we are about to enter the 'twenty years of shame

and misfortune' which lasted from 248 to 268: the heart of what is often called Rome's 'third century crisis' (I, 253). The barbarians are the cause of many of the catastrophes of that era, and Gibbon gives us a long digression in chapters 8 and 9 – his other two-chapter digression in Volume I, is, significantly, on the history of Christianity – on the Persians and the Germans to help frame what follows. [Chapter 8](#) has not attracted nearly as much attention as the one that follows, but Gibbon's nuanced sketch of an oriental despotism is remarkable for the positive role he allowed to religion in Iranian society. Moreover, the very fact that the Persians are introduced as the 'barbarians ... of the east' deserves comment, for they were literate, urbanised, luxurious; indeed the inhabitants of Asia had been so for many ages (I, 213). They were barbarians only in the sense that they lived outside the boundaries of the Roman world. Gibbon's definition of a barbarian is, then, basically classical. He was remarkably consistent in this, and described the Franks in the age of Charlemagne, or the Arabs in the tenth century, as 'barbarians', when they had advanced far in refinement from the condition of their rude ancestors (III, 26, 410–11). What made a barbarian a barbarian was only their position relative to the perspective Gibbon had chosen for himself; their way of life or degree of civilisation were not necessarily relevant to his calculations. This is all the more remarkable, for the late eighteenth century was intensely interested in stadial theories of the progress of society, in which peoples advanced from savagery to barbarism (the shepherd stage), and from there to agriculture, and ultimately to commerce. Gibbon was clearly influenced by these theories, and often used their language, but he was, as ever, the servant of no system, and his classicising conservatism is a quiet act of rebellion against many contemporary speculations, something visible also in the easy equivalence of 'savage' and 'barbarian' in his pages, as so many of his peers tried to prise the terms apart.<sup>9</sup>

Gibbon was not the sort of historian, though, always to play by the rules he had set himself, and he was well aware of how the language of barbarism might be used to surprising effect. He was quite happy to describe the work of 'the army of fanatics' who in the age of the emperor Theodosius destroyed many temples as 'the ravages of *those* barbarians', the italics ramming home who the true savages were (II, 81). In a similar manner, Gibbon described Justinian as 'born ... of an obscure race of Barbarians', right at the head of his account of that emperor whom he despised; it comes in a sentence peppered with brackets and footnotes, almost as though Gibbon might smuggle it past the

reader (II, 557). Nor does the perspective Gibbon had chosen for himself imply any automatic moral division between the civilised and the savage, something worth emphasising today, when many historians feel uncomfortable talking of ‘barbarians’, let alone ‘savages’, out of modern sensitivity to the word’s overtones. Gibbon’s sympathies were invariably determined by what the actors in his history did, rather than by who they were. If anything, he was more repulsed by the way that the Romans unfeelingly related their own savagery than by their accounts of barbarian atrocities, which he often thought overheated. When he came to the execution of Radagaisus, the Gothic king who had invaded Italy in 405–6, he convicted Stilicho, *generalissimo* of the western empire at the time, of ‘cold and deliberate cruelty’, and was so repulsed by the contemporary historian Orosius’s account of the events that he declared that ‘the bloody actor is less detestable than the cool, unfeeling historian’ (II, 147 and n82). On one memorable occasion, Gibbon used the fate of some Saxons taken prisoner in the reign of Valentinian I (r. AD 364–75) to highlight the contradiction between the polished disgust the Romans felt towards barbarians and the unfeeling brutality with which they treated them:

Some of the prisoners were saved from the edge of the sword, to shed their blood in the amphitheatre: and the orator Symmachus complains, that twenty-nine of those desperate savages, by strangling themselves with their own hands, had disappointed the amusement of the public. Yet the polite and philosophic citizens of Rome were impressed with the deepest horror, when they were informed, that the Saxons consecrated to the gods the tythe of their *human* spoil; and, that they ascertained by lot the objects of the barbarous sacrifices.

(I, 996)

Nor was his sympathy reserved for barbarians who were being brutalised: one of the most favourably sketched rulers in the whole work is Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths (e.g. II, 547). Both Alaric, whose army sacked Rome in 410, and Attila the Hun, ‘that formidable barbarian’ (II, 294), received much more subtle coverage than the reader might expect. They are both described as ‘artful’, a capacious term in Gibbon, fit to describe Augustus, Diocletian, Constantine, Cyprian of Carthage and Eusebius of Caesarea, and meaning a transcendent capacity for taking pains, first of all.

Barbarian was not a term of condemnation in Gibbon, unless he wished it to be, nor was civilisation (it should not need stating) always one of praise; relating Septimius Severus's campaigns in Scotland, and provoked by the supposed poetry of Ossian, Gibbon contrasted the 'freeborn warriors' who resisted the emperor with 'the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery' (I, 152). Quotations like these should not mislead, however, for Gibbon was no believer in the noble savage; in fact, throughout his work, Gibbon seems to have been exercised by the fear that he might be thought to have smoothed away a few too many of barbarism's rough edges, and those who are said to have attributed to barbarians 'the fairest attributes of peace and innocence' were frequently the target of his irony, almost as though this was a prophylactic against criticism (I, 1025). There were certainly those who thought Gibbon had been too sanguine in his account of the actions of some barbarians, and Horace Walpole mocked that in writing a history of the decline and fall of the British Empire, Gibbon 'will not pen the character of Hyder Ali [sultan of Mysore] with so much complacency as that of Attila'.<sup>10</sup>

In truth, Gibbon's attitude to the barbarians was ambiguous, and nowhere is the fineness with which he could balance a problem on better display than in chapter 9, where he sketches 'Ancient Germany' from the Rhine to Estonia, and from the Danube to Norway (I, 230). Here, there is a singular literary pleasure: Tacitus rewritten by Gibbon, who sometimes engaged in a paraphrase of the Roman author, albeit not always a faithful one.<sup>11</sup> Not all contemporaries liked the effect that Tacitus had had on Gibbon's style, and the Scottish historian William Robertson commented with relief on Volumes II and III of *The Decline and Fall* that there was in them 'less of that quaintness' into which Gibbon's love of the Roman author had occasionally seduced him.<sup>12</sup> Still, the overall result is remarkable, and more complex than derivation from Tacitus might imply. The Germans were illiterate, and therefore did not have a history in the true sense of the word, and were incapable of progress in the arts or sciences (I, 234). They were short of iron, mostly unfamiliar with the use of money, and without these (the 'universal incitement' and the 'most powerful instrument' of human progress) it was hard to imagine how they might ever cease to be barbarous (I, 236–7). Like all savage peoples, they were indolent, and careless of the future (I, 237). Because of this, they gloried in bloodshed, for it was the only thing which could cure the self-doubt which their

indolence brought on (as Pocock has remarked, Gibbon appears to have discovered Angst in its homeland) (I, 237).<sup>13</sup> In the intervals of peace, they were drunk, for drunkenness dulled their sense, and often prompted them to happy violence, whether by the slaughter of their own kin, or by encouraging them to invade the Roman Empire in pursuit of the wine they craved (I, 238).

Gibbon paused in this sketch of savagery to discuss the question of how numerous the ancient Germans were, and to refute the idea, a lively issue at the time, that somehow the fecund northern nations had been more populous in antiquity than they were subsequently.<sup>14</sup> The influence of Robertson, and of Hume – ‘that fattest of Epicurus’ hogs’ as Gibbon called him (the unkind might regard this a case of pot calling the kettle black, but comparisons to animals are generally positive in Gibbon’s writing) – is clear and self-confessed. The paragraphs on population serve as a hinge in the chapter, moving us from the vices and unpleasantness of Germanic life to its surprising advantage. The Germans were poor and illiterate, yet precisely because of this they were free. Now this was not the kind of freedom that a polished man (and Gibbon was well aware of the limited social roles women could occupy in his own age) in a free state might enjoy, but Gibbon brought out beautifully how property and intellectual sophistication could make a society more civilised, but also function as tools of oppression.<sup>15</sup> The Roman (or, we might surmise, the eighteenth-century European) had possessions which could be taken from him to compel his obedience, he had desires which could convince him that despotism was for his own good (I, 239). In contrast, the drunken, violent German had none of these, and could freely assert that manly virtue indispensable to liberty. He could do this in the assemblies: the ‘rude but liberal outline of political society’ with which the Germans made do (I, 240). This was a precarious liberty, for it was bound up with the very forces which might tear it apart, and it was constantly to be feared at one of these gatherings that a drunken faction might use weapons to enforce their will (I, 241). Gibbon concluded by noting that the magistrates, such as they were, of German society had the power to redistribute landed property every year, but not to imprison someone: ‘A people thus jealous of their persons, and careless of their possessions, must have been totally destitute of industry and the arts, but animated with a high sense of honour and independence’ (I, 242). This portrait had crucial implications for how one wrote history, whose proper subjects were war and public administration (a view which Gibbon, whose



fascination was almost boundless, often honoured in the breach). In a prosperous, commercial monarchy, where millions might pursue ‘their useful occupations in peace and obscurity’ (obscurity is generally a positive quality in Gibbon), the historian could fix his eye on the court, the capital and the camps. But in the free anarchy of a barbarous republic, almost every man was a political actor, and history might become, insensibly, a total account of a society, for every part of it was relevant (I, 252).

The terms in which Gibbon analyses Germanic society are clearly indebted to stadial theory and to the ideas of the civic humanists. To simplify greatly, the humanists thought that virtue was to be found in a republic of free, active and independent citizens, who bore arms for their country, and were thus admitted to the government of their simple and agrarian polity. Virtue would characterise not only their individual behaviour but the whole state; yet virtue had its price, for the armed and virtuous republic could not but conquer, and conquest led to luxury, luxury to dissipation, and dissipation to despotism, all things which commerce and cities might bring in their wake. Paradoxically then, history might swing in great cycles, in which there were no promised lands, only times when decay had not yet thoroughly set in. Here, however, Gibbon implied that the virtue of the Germans was not that virtuous – if anything, it was rather terrifying – and he also suggested, at least in passing, that it was hard to see how the Germans might ever ascend from their original state, how they might ever climb the rungs of the stadial ladder. The only thing more terrifying than a history where decline is inevitable is perhaps one where there can never be any advance from savagery. Yet at the same time, Gibbon hinted that the Germans had advanced; after all, he opened the chapter by stating that ‘the most civilized nations of modern Europe issued from the woods of Germany, and in the rude institutions of those barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws and manners’, so progress must have been made (I, 230). His reading of what made Germanic society what it was is resolutely institutional and almost everything in his description of their lives is something over which the Germans have control; yet this does not offer much hope. He gave a leading role to the Germans’ habit of dividing the arable lands amongst themselves afresh each year. This prevented that great eighteenth-century notion of improvement from taking place, and thus they remained poor: indolent because they were poor, violent and drunken because they were indolent, and free because they were all of these.

The Germans thus occupied a precarious space in Gibbon's world; they fitted awkwardly into the systems contemporaries had constructed and suggested disconcerting things about the shape of history. Not only was it unclear whether the Germans could advance through the stages of society, it was not entirely certain to which stage they belonged. Gibbon's Germans have sometimes been simply assimilated to the shepherd stage of human development; John Pocock has brilliantly elucidated how depicting them as savage shepherds allowed Gibbon to associate more closely the agricultural and commercial stages of civilisation, and thus do away entirely with any idea of a Germanic agrarian golden age, a vision that was popular on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>16</sup> Such an assimilation has the effect of creating one vast barbarous continuum from the Rhine to the verges of China, ceaselessly interacting with and impinging on the civilised world. Yet it is not quite as simple as that. Gibbon never calls the Germans shepherds in chapter 9, he never says that they have flocks (unlike the Scythians and Sarmatians) and he is clear that they live in forests, not on the open steppe. Whilst Gibbon does downplay the role of agriculture in Germanic society, it is always present in his thought, running quietly through it, not least in the emphasis on the effect on the Germans of repeated land divisions. As a result of this, we are firmly warned not to expect improvements in agriculture from the Germans, but it is implicit in the warning that they already till the earth. They only extracted a small quantity of corn, yet that had enormous importance, for it was from this that they made the beer that was so significant both for their society and their aggression.

When Gibbon turned to the nomadic nations, we see further subtleties amongst the shepherds. In chapter 9 he had declared that having summarised the 'manners of Germany ... As the ancient, or as new tribes successively present themselves in the series of this history, we shall concisely mention their origin, their situation, and their particular character' (I, 251); the manners of the barbarians had been covered, and he would not repeat them. Yet in chapter 26, almost the first thing Gibbon did was to provide a detailed and incisive account of the life and history of the pastoral nations down to the Hunnic victories over the Goths north of the Danube in the 370s (I, 1025–44).<sup>17</sup> There is a tacit admission here that the manners of the Germans and of the Tartars are so different as to require separate treatment. Consideration of what made pastoral nations something separate prompted Gibbon to one of his most interesting

remarks about human societies: ‘The different characters that mark the civilised nations of the globe may be ascribed to the use, and the abuse, of reason, which so variously shapes and so artificially composes, the manners and opinions of an European, or a Chinese.’ Yet, as we consider the more savage parts of mankind, we find that they have ‘a stronger resemblance to themselves and to each other’, because the ‘influence of food and climate, which, in a more improved state of society, is suspended, or subdued, by so many moral causes, most powerfully contributes to form, and to maintain, the national character of barbarians’ (I, 1025). Thus a social history of the nomads must be very different from one of a polite and commercial people; it must think hard about the effect of diet, about the nature of the climate and about the consequences of this pastoral life for social organisation and behaviour.

These were exactly the problems which Gibbon proceeded to examine, but we are a long way here from his account of the Germans, whose manner of life was not so shaped by climate and whose food he did not choose to consider in detail. This new social history also produced some curious facts for contemporary theorists. In a passage drawing heavily on civic humanist ideas, Gibbon sketches the paradox of Graeco-Roman civilisation: in its age of rustic simplicity the warlike people were scattered over the country and it took time to gather them for war. The progress of commerce slowly gathered the citizens into the walls of towns, and this made it easy but useless to assemble them for war, for ‘the arts which adorn and improve the state of civil society corrupt the habits of the military life’. The manners of the nomads seemed to solve this paradox, for they were constantly assembled, but in a camp which primed them for war; somehow they had escaped the civic humanist treadmill (I, 1028). Nothing quite like this had been written before in English, and William Robertson wrote to Gibbon: ‘Your chapter concerning the pastoral nations is admirable; and, though I hold myself to be a tolerably good historian, a great part of it was new to me.’<sup>18</sup> This was no mean praise from an historian whose *History of America* (1777) had dealt extensively with the problems of savagery and progress.

The point to draw from these contrasts is not that Gibbon thought the Germans were definitively not shepherds, for at times he clearly refers to them as such (e.g. II, 298–9). Rather, it is that he had a more flexible and more interesting conception of what that might mean: a barbarian was not simply a barbarian, the term could cover a

multitude of things. Similarly, the pastoral nomads, uniform as their manners might be, did not fit easily into attempts to reduce human societies to a simple pattern and easy progression. Gibbon's point was that if there was a ladder of civilisation, then its rungs were decidedly uneven; it was in the strange juxtapositions this produced that some of the most interesting historical facts lay.

If we turn from Gibbon's barbarians in their eighteenth-century context to how they appear in the light of modern research, one fact stands out: Gibbon anticipates many of the most important conclusions historians have reached in the last fifty years about barbarian identity. Recent scholars have often emphasised the fluidity, the overlapping and contingent nature of barbarian ethnicity, and have played with the concept of ethnogenesis, the way that an agglomeration of barbarians might be melded and grow into a people. This historiography is consciously in opposition to occasionally pernicious views held in the early and mid-twentieth century, about the fixity of barbarian ethnic identity. These ideas led, for instance, to archaeologists in the early twentieth century, such as Gustav Kossinna, intervening in debates about where Germany's frontiers should lie, trying to work out whether certain potsherds or placenames were inherently Germanic or obviously Slavic (he hoped to influence the Versailles Conference, and its decisions on where national boundaries should fall). Another scholar, Franz Petri, was appointed officer for cultural politics in Belgium and had helpfully argued before 1939 that much of Belgium should be in Germany. Hitler was apparently convinced that the German-speaking inhabitants of the South Tyrol, who in 1940 voted to join Germany, should be moved to the Crimea, for they were obviously Goths, and in late antiquity that was where the Goths had lived.<sup>19</sup>

Gibbon would have found all this bizarre and repellent. He *was* convinced that modern societies produced rather firm identities: they were 'fixed and permanent societies', their inhabitants were connected by laws and government, and bound to their soil by arts and agriculture. But the barbarians were not like that at all. They were 'voluntary and fluctuating associations of soldiers', merely aggregated individuals. The inhabitants of a territory might be changed by emigration or invasion; a new tribal name might emerge from the confederation of two groups, and its dissolution might at length restore some long-forgotten titles. A conquered people might be named by their conquerors. Most perceptively of all, Gibbon writes of how volunteers might flock to the

standard of a leader: his camp would become their country, and some common name would be applied to them (I, 251). He was well aware that this process might also take place on Roman territory, with deserters and slaves supplying the raw material (I, 280–1). This gave Gibbon a welcome flexibility when it came to thinking about barbarian invaders in late antiquity. He was quite content to see Alboin lead the ‘Lombard’ invasion of Italy, at the head of a motley host of former Romans, Gepids, Bulgarians, Sarmatians, Bavarians and Saxons (II, 851). Similar processes might equally form new peoples on the steppe (I, 1031). When it came to the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England, he was careful to note that Frisians, Rugians, Prussians ‘and some adventurous Huns’ had been ‘insensibly blended’ with the more famous Angles, Saxons and Jutes (II, 495–6). He had earlier described the formation of the Saxons, and his sentiments, if not his words, are strikingly modern:

The various troops of pirates and adventurers, who fought under the same standard, were insensibly united in a permanent society, at first of rapine, and afterwards, of government. A military confederation was gradually moulded into a national body, by the gentle operation of marriage and consanguinity; and the adjacent tribes, who solicited the alliance, accepted the name and laws of the Saxons.

(I, 995)

Given all this, it was hardly surprising, Gibbon concluded, that the Romans struggled to keep track of the groups, got names wrong, or used antiquated terms; their ethnography tried to describe as a static picture something that changed all the time (I, 251). It is interesting to note in this regard that Gibbon was urged by Lord Hardwicke to include a map of the ‘progress and native seat of the northern hives’ in the second edition of Volumes II and III, but demurred as ‘The Map which your lordship recommends would be useful, but it must be adapted to a single moment, and that moment would not be easily fixed, any more than the precise limits of the wandering Barbarians.’<sup>20</sup> Barbarian society was too fluid to pin names on maps and hope for the best.

Chapter 26 is far from the last sustained attention that Gibbon gives to the barbarians. They thread their way, naturally enough, through his account of the end of the Roman Empire in the west, and through the vicissitudes of the Byzantine world,

which had all of the virtues Gibbon disliked and none of the vices he admired. Occasionally, Gibbon broke from his narrative to give more sustained attention to the barbaric world. In chapter 42 he circled the borders of the eastern empire, picking out the barbarians perched over it, and in chapter 55 he turned to the Bulgarians, Hungarians and Russians: ‘Their names are uncouth, their origins doubtful, their actions obscure, their superstition was blind, their valour brutal, and the uniformity of their public and private lives was neither softened by innocence nor refined by policy’ (III, 440). In chapter 57 he would discuss the Turks, and in 64 the Mongols. Some of his most sustained attention was devoted to the Arabs and the empire, reaching from India to Spain, they created. When reading the last three volumes of *The Decline and Fall*, Horace Walpole lauded Gibbon’s efforts, remarking, with an unusual collocation, that ‘Mahomet and the popes were gentlemen and good company’.<sup>21</sup>

We might turn, however, to some rather less admired portions of Gibbon’s work: the consideration he gave to the barbarians as their kingdoms took shape on the ruins of the western empire. He arrived at this barbaric world in the latter half of chapter 37, and in chapters 38 and 39, which covered, respectively: the conversion of the barbarians; the kingdoms of the Franks, Visigoths and Anglo-Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries; and the kingdom of the Ostrogoths in Italy. At the time of their publication, this part of his history was greeted with little enthusiasm. William Robertson rather awkwardly remarked in a letter to Gibbon which was otherwise fulsome in its praise, that ‘The last chapter in your work [38] is the only one with which I am not entirely satisfied.’<sup>22</sup> Horace Walpole expressed himself with characteristically greater vigour, bemoaning ‘a deluge of Alans, Huns, Goths, Ostrogoths, and Visigoths, who with the same features and characters are to be described in different terms, without any essential variety, and he is to bring you acquainted with them when you wish them all at the bottom of the Red Sea’.<sup>23</sup> We must hope that no word of this judgement ever got back to Gibbon, for Walpole had (as Gibbon saw it) insulted his work on a previous occasion. Then, Gibbon ‘coloured; all his round features squeezed themselves into sharp angles; he screwed up his button-mouth, and rapping his snuff box, said, “It had never been put together before”’. Walpole had taken this in his stride, and gone on in his letter to the Reverend William Mason to complain of Gibbon’s vanity, ‘even about his ridiculous face’, and his ‘flattery to the Scots that would choke anything but Scots’. They were soon reconciled.<sup>24</sup>

If anything, the judgement of those who specialise in the history of the barbarian kingdoms has been harsher than the negative opinion of contemporaries. Gibbon has been accused of a ‘deep-seated antagonism to barbarians’ and he has been arraigned for his view that the Lombard invaders of Italy in 568 were a clearly identifiable people.<sup>25</sup> His ‘assessment of the emergent barbarian successor states in the context of decline had an unfortunate effect on English scholarship on the European early Middle Ages’; he had ‘a lack of sympathy with the early Middle Ages and random selectivity among the wealth of scholarship on the early medieval period available to him, both in principle and actually in his library’.<sup>26</sup> Ian Wood, a scholar with deep sympathy for and vast knowledge of past practitioners of early medieval history, has felt moved to say that Gibbon expected his sources to be reliable quarries for facts, and has accused him of following the sixth-century historian Gregory of Tours ‘blindly’.<sup>27</sup> One excellent recent history of the Roman west from 376 to 568 mentions Gibbon only once, and that is to blame him for a mistake which he did not in fact make.<sup>28</sup> Hostility to Gibbon’s work on the barbarian kingdoms is not totally uniform – Peter Brown, one of the most influential post-war historians of the period, has called his portrait of the era one ‘of unexpected warmth’ in a brilliant essay on the cultural life of the fifth and sixth centuries – but it is widespread.<sup>29</sup>

These criticisms, fixing as they do on specific things Gibbon got wrong, areas he neglected or topics he misconstrued, are one thing, betraying as they do acquaintance with some of what he wrote. Gibbon was certainly capable of error, and he was vulnerable to forged documents in otherwise reliable collections.<sup>30</sup> Other historians, however, seem to be put off from investigating him at all. Some are perhaps disturbed by the style, often so jarring in what can now appear a po-faced subject: when Gibbon tells us that the Visigothic clergy ‘always recommended, and sometimes practised, the duty of allegiance’, it is easy to gravely dismiss his judgement as unserious (for all that the statement is true) (II, 492). Others seem to be put off by the mere title of his great work, as though to say that we now study late antiquity and have no time for decline and fall (scathing references to ‘the decline and fall paradigm’ often seem to be motivated by this); perhaps they fear that Gibbon’s work is nothing more than a simple story, spun out over thousands of pages, in which barbarous barbarians attack and abuse decadent Romans. Fortunately, it is not. Other scholars of the early Middle Ages do pay attention



to Gibbon, but they start by choosing a topic, looking at how he deals with it, finding mistakes, turns of phrase that now make readers uncomfortable, or subjects which have become central to the study of a period, but in which Gibbon was uninterested. Faced with such evidence they invariably arrive at an unfavourable estimate of his work. Yet their conclusions are almost guaranteed by their method. Gibbon did not pretend to cover all the things that now preoccupy historians; he had his own aims and targets, and he had, moreover, to be ruthlessly disciplined in what he did and did not cover, lest the six weighty volumes of his work swell even more. To judge him by a standard he never meant to meet seems unduly harsh.<sup>31</sup>

It is more profitable to try and meet Gibbon on his own terms, to work with what he was interested in and see where it took him. If we do this, his chapters on the barbarian kingdoms emerge as brilliant and subtle examinations of post-imperial politics and society. They are certainly essayistic, darting from topic to topic, but it must be kept in mind that Gibbon's project was a history of the Roman Empire, and he wrote about anything else only insofar as it impinged on that. His curiosity sometimes got the better of him, but he always dragged himself back to the declining circuit of the Roman world. Chapter 37 is an excellent place to see this, and a good one to start for those who are interested in late antiquity, but deterred by the idea of decline and fall. They might be surprised to find here an account of the rise of western Christendom (to use the title of one of Peter Brown's books). In two perspicuous pages, Gibbon sketched how Christianity gave the barbarians letters to read the Scriptures which 'insensibly enlarged' their minds. The reading of translations made clergy curious about the original texts, and they were dragged beyond these to the Fathers of the Church, and from them, often by the thinnest of threads, to works of classical literature. In a remarkable concession, Gibbon even admitted that the barbarians might have learnt 'justice from the law, and mercy from the gospel'. The barbarians were bound to each other and to the Romans by the bonds of Holy Communion, and the bishops were gradually admitted to the councils of kings and assemblies of free men. The gentle upward spiral which Gibbon traces here then begins to quicken, and in the Latin Church, 'the most corrupt state of Christianity', we might be surprised to learn that there were the seeds of that great republic of Europe of which Gibbon was so fond: 'The perpetual correspondence of the Latin clergy, the frequent pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, and the growing authority of the popes,



cemented the union of the Christian republic, and gradually produced the similar manners and common jurisprudence which have distinguished from the rest of mankind the independent, and even hostile, nations of modern Europe' (III, 432–3).

If we turn to chapter 38, there are more good things in store. This chapter was mostly devoted to the Franks; it was underpinned by a century of remarkable French scholarship. By 1767, eleven volumes of the *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, a collection of source material to 1060, had been published. More than that, in France an entire way of arguing about the present by close attention to the Frankish past had evolved, a mode of analysis memorably discussed by Michel Foucault in his lectures, 'Society Must be Defended', at the Collège de France in 1975–6.<sup>32</sup> Gibbon had first dealt with this argument – 'the bold paradoxes of the Comte de Boulainvilliers', 'the adroit sophisms of the Abbé Du Bos', 'The President Montesquieu, always brilliant, always profound' and the Abbé Mably who (somewhat deflatingly) 'has given us on this topic a useful and well written work' – in his essay *Du gouvernement féodal*, written in 1768.<sup>33</sup> To simplify greatly, and without wishing to suggest a one-for-one relationship between views of history, political predilections and background, people who believed that the Franks had conquered Gaul and enslaved the inhabitants tended also to believe in the rights and privileges of the nobility, a limited monarchy, the power of the *parlements* (provincial appellate courts), and to be angry about things like the *intendants* (civil servants, acting for the king), and suspicious about the Third Estate (or commoners). Such people likely had a general belief, not always actuated in practice, that war was good and glorious, and were probably nobles, not always very prominent ones. If they believed, on the other hand, that the Frankish kings had acquired dominion over most of Gaul by treaty, with its inhabitants or with the Roman government, then they were likely to believe that the nobles did not have privileges, to be sceptical of the power of the *parlements*, to be monarchist, though perhaps not always hugely enthusiastic ones, or to believe in the importance of the Third Estate, and to be from a *bourgeois* background.<sup>34</sup> None of this meant that scholars who more or less agreed politically did not attack each other, nor is it meant to suggest that scholarly matters were of secondary importance, *merely* a way of fighting about the state of France.

There is an occasional tendency to see Gibbon as in some sense derivative of these scholars; the implication is that there is little in him that is not in them. This is not an

unreasonable accusation provided one is prepared to take these disputants as one school of thought. Many of their positions were contradictory and, on a question like whether the Roman inhabitants of Gaul had all been enslaved by the conquering Franks or were protected by treaties struck with their new kings, to take a middle line was more argumentative than it might seem, for it was to advance a new proposition, as Gibbon was aware (II, 487). Moreover, the charge ignores what Gibbon himself said about what he was doing in Frankish history: he did not claim to have a radically new approach, but described himself as ‘An impartial stranger, instructed by their discoveries, their disputes, and even their faults’ (II, 472 n64). What Gibbon did was attempt to digest the work of these disputatious antiquaries, adding his own distinctive judgements; he approached the topic not as someone who was already implicated in political arguments in France, but simply because he was interested. In some sense, the historiography just sketched is a Gibbonian construct; it is his use of it that lends it an elegant coherence.

What he did with their work was to give a remarkable account, part narrative, part ethnography, of the Frankish kingdom. To recapitulate all its subtleties would be a long work indeed, but two rather different facets might be brought out. On basic matters of interpretation, Gibbon showed razor-sharp judgement. The French antiquarians were inclined to believe that someone’s name allowed one to tell if they were Frankish or Roman, but Gibbon had already noticed a Roman Gundulf and a barbarian Claudius in the pages of Gregory of Tours, and was rightly sceptical (II, 488 n113). Gibbon also has what remains the most economical account of the gradual process by which many of the people inhabiting what is roughly modern France came to be called Franks. At the start of the period, the overwhelming majority were Romans. The Franks, the *barbari*, were a small group, speaking a Germanic language, who did, it is true, often run the place. Into the eighth century, we find people, especially in southern France, describing themselves as Romans. Yet at some stage this identifier went missing entirely; so complete was its disappearance that one early medieval reader of a work of Frankish history inserted a marginal comment to the story of Clovis, explaining that he had killed all the Romans who lived in Gaul, and that in those times the Franks had learnt the Latin language from the Romans (how they managed to do both is not made clear).<sup>35</sup> There are analogies here with ideas, still occasionally resuscitated, that there are no Britons in England because the Anglo-Saxons killed them all, or drove them out; ideas of which Gibbon was

very sceptical (II, 502). Confronted by this problem, in a few remarkable lines Gibbon sketches how a regime of legal pluralism, where different groups, identified by national markers, had different law codes and rights, might gradually resolve the tangle of identities, and the way that the rapid adoption of Christianity and Latin by the conquerors might ‘by the intercourse of social and sacred communion’ eradicate the distinctions of the conquest (II, 473–4, 489).

Chapters 37 to 39 come at the hinge of Gibbon’s massive work, bridging the perilous gap between its two halves. By their position, and by their content, with its mixture of the Christian, the barbarians and the Christian barbarians, they remind us of the final, and greatest, part the barbarians played in Gibbon’s historical imagination. Throughout they have been seen in a multitude of roles, allowing Gibbon to devise new ways of writing social history, to probe the future of his own society and to pose difficult questions for contemporaries inclined to parse the world by social theories. They had subverted the Roman state, and Gibbon saw no contradiction between a vision of the fall in which the empire collapsed under the weight of its own massive fabric and one in which ravenous barbarians smashed through its boundaries and rent it apart; he was, to use the terms of recent debate, both a ‘mover’ and a ‘shaker’.<sup>36</sup> After all that, these chapters at the end of Volume III and the start of Volume IV remind us that to Gibbon the barbarians were the connectors of the ancient and the modern worlds, and that it was they, in conjunction with Christianity, who had created the Europe that he lived in: Constantine’s ‘victorious religion broke the violence of the fall, and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors’ (II, 510). It had taken ten centuries, of anarchy and ignorance, of blindness and servitude, as Gibbon had called them, to polish the ‘fierce giants of the north’; but he did not doubt that ‘[t]he most civilised nations of modern Europe issued from the woods of Germany’ (I, 230). The barbarians had transformed Europe, and in a sense they had transformed Edward Gibbon. When he had mused on the steps of the Capitol, it had been the decline and fall of the *city* which had preoccupied him.<sup>37</sup> Yet from those famous steps, Gibbon was led, somewhat haltingly at first, but with greater and greater confidence, into the world of the barbarians, as he found that they impinged more and more on the history of the city. As he circled away from Rome, they drew him to distant places, first to the forests of Germany, and ultimately to the verges of China; they transformed what was meant to be an account of

the decline and fall of the city into a magnificent exploration of the late Roman millennium. Gibbon, it seems, has much to teach us about the barbarians, and the barbarians not a little to say about Gibbon.

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## Notes

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[1](#) The advertisement is quoted in J. E. Norton, *A Bibliography of the Works of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 49.

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[2](#) David Womersley, *The Transformation of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 188–91.

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[3](#) *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), III, no. 730.

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[4](#) *Ibid.*, III, no. 752.

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[5](#) *Ibid.*, III, nos. 762, 803.

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[6](#) *Ibid.*, III, no. 804.

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[7](#) *Ibid.*, III, no. 831.

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[8](#) See Peter R. Ghosh, ‘Gibbon Observed’, *Journal of Roman Studies* **81** (1991), 132–56, for a defence of dating the ‘General Observations’ to 1772.

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[9](#) See J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Gibbon and the Shepherds: The Stages of Society in the *Decline and Fall*’, *History of European Ideas* 2 (1981), 193–202, and Francois Furet, ‘Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon’s History’, in Glen W. Bowersock, John Clive, Stephen R. Graubard (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 159–66.

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[10](#) Letter to William Mason, 25 April 1781: *xxix/II*, p. 136. All references to Walpole’s correspondence are from *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, ed. Wilmarth S. Lewis, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937–83).

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[11](#) Womersley, *The Transformation*, pp. 84–7.

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[12](#) *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, ed. Lord Sheffield, 5 vols. (London: John Murraby, 1814), II, *CXLIX*, p. 249.

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[13](#) J. G. A. Pocock, 'Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist', *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 103–20, on p. 111.

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[14](#) *Letters* I, no. 227.

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[15](#) See *The Decline and Fall*, I, p. 170. Karen O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 110–51 and pp. 130–6.

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[16](#) Pocock, 'Gibbon and the Shepherds', especially 199.

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[17](#) See J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199–2015), IV, part 2.

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[18](#) *Miscellaneous Works*, II, CXLIX, p. 250.

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[19](#) See Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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[20](#) *Miscellaneous Works*, II, CLII, p. 255; *Letters*, II, p. 518.

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[21](#) To Thomas Barrett, 5 June 1788: XLII, *Horace Walpole's Miscellaneous Correspondence*, III, p. 221.

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[22](#) *Miscellaneous Works*, II, CXLIX, p. 250.

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[23](#) To the Rev. William Mason, 3 March 1781: XXIX, *Mason*, II, p. 115.

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[24](#) To the Rev. William Mason, 27 January 1781, and 9 February 1781: XXIX, *Mason*, II, pp. 98, 106.

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[25](#) Tom S. Brown, 'Gibbon, Hodgkin and the Invaders of Italy', in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, eds. Rosamund McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 143, 156.

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[26](#) Rosamund McKitterick, 'Edward Gibbon and the early Middle Ages in Eighteenth-Century Europe', in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, pp. 162, 166.

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[27](#) Ian Wood, ‘Gibbon and the Merovingians’, in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, p. 122.

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[28](#) Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 211 n121. Gibbon never claimed the frozen Rhine in 406 was anything other than a hypothesis (II, 149).

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[29](#) Peter Brown, ‘Gibbon’s Views on Culture and Society in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries’, in *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 37–52.

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[30](#) See Wood, ‘Gibbon and the Merovingians’, pp. 120–1 for some examples.

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[31](#) See Brown, ‘Gibbon’s Views’, pp. 37–8.

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[32](#) Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–6*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin, 2003).

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[33](#) *Miscellaneous Works*, III, p. 183. Peter R. Ghosh, ‘Gibbon’s Dark Ages’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983), p. 10 for the date. Gibbon was very interested in Montesquieu’s chapters in *De l’esprit des lois* on the Franks, particularly books XXVIII, XXX, and XXXI, though Mably’s influence was also very important, see Wood, ‘Gibbon and the Merovingians’, pp. 128–32.

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[34](#) Indispensable for these debates is Wood, *Modern Origins*, chs. 2 and 3, pp. 19–51.

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[35](#) The comment can be found in translation in Edward James, *EUROPE’S BARBARIANS, AD 200–600* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009), p. 121.

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[36](#) Guy Halsall, ‘Movers and Shakers: The Barbarians and the Fall of Rome’, *Early Medieval Europe* 8.1 (1999), 131–45.

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[37](#) *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1897), Memoir E, p. 302.

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## Gibbon and Enlightenment History in Eighteenth-Century Britain



**Tim Stuart-Buttle**

*The Decline and Fall* is astonishing in its erudition, ambition and scope. It poses formidable challenges to the intellectual historian, who endeavours to identify those ‘intellectual contexts and frameworks of discourse’ which might shed light on what Gibbon was ‘*doing* in writing’ the work.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, scholars have greatly advanced our understanding of the manner in which Gibbon both engaged with and departed from those ‘frameworks of discourse’ which were prevalent in his native country. The necessarily selective overview of the British intellectual context offered in this chapter serves to illuminate aspects of Gibbon’s thinking; but it also reminds us that in a number of respects *The Decline and Fall* was an Enlightened history unlike any other.

## British Enlightened History

‘I believe’, David Hume famously declared in 1770 to his publisher William Strahan, ‘this is the historical Age and this the historical Nation.’ Hume could name ‘no less than eight Histories upon the Stocks in this Country’.<sup>2</sup> Here Hume referred to Scotland; but the initiatives of ambitious Scottish authors and publishers were motivated by the prospect of success in the larger and more profitable English, and indeed wider European and North American, markets.<sup>3</sup> They worked together successfully to broaden and diversify their audience. The marketability of history – and the success of Scottish authors in cultivating (and profiting from) this public demand – was amply attested by the publication of William Robertson’s *History of Charles V* (1769), for which the author was paid the unprecedented sum of £4,000 for the copyright by his, and later Gibbon’s, Scottish publishers.

Hume’s ‘historical Age’, however, was not merely one in which Europeans read and wrote history. Readers of Enlightened histories were invited to regard themselves as members of societies which collectively had *made* history. The European continent, Hume intimated, had entered upon a new epoch, significantly different from – and yet the product of – what had gone before. In this regard, the guiding theme or metanarrative of all the great Enlightened histories bespoke a seminal departure from classical historiography. That theme was the progress of European civilisation. In *Charles V*, Robertson emphasised this point. The ‘true end’ of history, Robertson declared, was to explain Europe’s remarkable advancement from ‘barbarism to refinement’, its Phoenix-like rise from the ashes and rubble of a Roman Empire destroyed by barbarians to ‘the full splendour’ of the modern day. This, in turn, allowed the Enlightened historian to identify ‘the proper objects of history’ (the causes of, and key stages in that advancement), and genuinely to ‘instruct’ as well as to entertain his reader. As Robertson noted, this required that erudition and philosophical insight, which together allowed the historian to lead his reader expeditiously but authoritatively through past ages, be combined with a narrative style modelled on the great classical histories of Livy, Tacitus and Thucydides. In such a ‘refined’ age, the ‘cold’ and ‘tiresome’ labours of the antiquarian had to be put at the service of the philosophical historian.<sup>4</sup> A central theme of this history, meanwhile, was the progress of the human mind. The Enlightened historian,

Hume argued, was liberated from the partial and myopic ways of thinking which had ‘so much perplexed’ the historical actors themselves.<sup>5</sup> This rendered past ages and societies amenable to historical investigation by those who were able to evaluate their significance from a detached, comparative and professedly impartial perspective. As Karen O’Brien observes, Gibbon’s writings similarly betray a ‘deep imaginative interest in his own consciousness as a modern historian endeavouring to assimilate the great sweep of a previous civilisation’. Readers were invited to join an ‘interpretative community engaged in a rhetorical arbitration of their own history’, and to reflect self-consciously on the implications – the losses, as well as gains – of living in a new epoch in European civilisation.<sup>6</sup>

There is a temptation to discern in Enlightened history a smug complacency in reason and progress which, dispelling the clouds of ignorance and superstition, might ensure that the modern age need never revisit the violence and internecine strife which had bedevilled past societies. What Gibbon said of M. Pavillard, however, was true of all those contemporaries whom he most admired: ‘he was rational because he was moderate’.<sup>7</sup> Not the least valuable of the lessons offered by the European past, notably that of a recent vintage, was that the intellect acted within history: it could not emancipate itself from its captivity. Europe’s progress from ‘barbarism to refinement’ had been neither smooth nor linear, and betrayed a notable dearth of prophets whose reason had allowed them to play the role of a secular Moses leading his people to the promised land. Human nature remained the same at all times; and the historically contingent but irresistible forces of custom, fashion and opinion shaped history in ways reason alone could not. Those who had professed to stand outside history and to redirect its course – whether the English republicans of the 1640s, or the Roman emperors Julian and Justinian – failed to grasp that they could not easily do so. If in their different ways the British Enlightened historians marginalised or denied God’s direct action in the world, human wisdom was emphatically not offered as a substitute.

Two preoccupations above all informed the sense of Enlightened contemporaries that they lived in an ‘historical Age’, and complicated any simple identification of the modern with the ancient world. The emergence of a (seemingly) robust system of European states, independent in foreign policy but rendered interdependent by commercial and cultural exchange and a shared history, encouraged optimism that the

threat of universal monarchy or barbarian invasion was no longer real. ‘Great empires’, which ‘degraded and debased the human species’ by asphyxiating the mind and preventing its capacity for expansion, might be consigned to the past.<sup>8</sup> Gibbon, no less than Robertson, Hume, Montesquieu or Voltaire, did not lament the passing of empire on the Roman model. Second, following the ruinous seventeenth-century Wars of Religion there was a widespread (though not universal) conviction that spiritual authority had to be reconciled with – or subordinated to – the interests of civil society. A concern for salvation in a world to come must never again be permitted to turn this world into a living hell. Both of these convictions informed *The Decline and Fall*, even as its narrative ended in 1453. Moderation and politeness, ‘the perfection of that inestimable art, which softens and refines and embellishes the intercourse of social life’, were presented by Gibbon as the defining characteristics of the modern age (I, 724).

Any sense of complacency at these developments was undercut by the recognition that they were recent, yet to be fully understood, and precarious on account of both of these facts. The theory of religious toleration had only been developed, as Gibbon noted, in the late seventeenth century. Yet it was ‘the propensity of mankind to exalt the past, and to depreciate the present’, a tendency which might potentially prevent Europeans from recognising the advantages of their own age.<sup>9</sup> Precisely because these developments were so recent, Enlightened historians acknowledged the need to develop both a new language to discuss them and a new conceptual toolkit with which to evaluate their implications. On the former, Hume noted in 1741 that ‘the first polite prose we have, was writ by a man who is still alive’ (Swift). On the latter, even Machiavelli (d. 1527) ‘had lived in too early an age of the world’ to be of much assistance. Machiavelli had known nothing of the modern phenomenon of the civilised monarchy which, unlike the ‘tyrannical governments of ancient times’, was ruled (like republics) by laws rather than men. Machiavelli and his Italian contemporaries had been similarly silent on the subject of commerce and trade, which ‘was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century’.<sup>10</sup> Insofar as commerce had been discussed by these ‘ancient’ authors, a label applied by Hume to sixteenth-century Italians as well as to their classical ancestors, it had been in terms of the enervating consequences of ‘luxury’, which supposedly enfeebled a body politic reliant upon the active participation and martial prowess (*virtus*) of its citizenry. This was still the language employed by the political opposition in the 1740s to

criticise the supposedly endemic corruption and effeminacy caused by the creation of a ‘fiscal-military’ state in the decades following the Revolution of 1688–9.<sup>11</sup> In the attempt to expose this discourse as anachronistic, Enlightenment history, political economy and moral philosophy joined forces. Hume, uniquely, mastered all three genres. His compatriot Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) similarly grew out of an earlier endeavour to redefine the concept of ‘virtue’ for a modern, commercial age in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).

As regards religion, meanwhile, both Gibbon and Hume found to their cost that the age in which they lived was not quite as willing to accept the subordination of Christian theology to political authority and civil morality as they (perhaps) anticipated. Here again the ancient authors were of limited assistance. Heathen polytheism, unlike Christian theism, had lacked any determinate theology and as a consequence had not posed a challenge to the harmony of civil society. The ancient historians had not witnessed the unique capacity of religion to disturb the civil order and to lead societies away from the pursuit of what their citizens collectively found conducive to peace and happiness in this life. The history of Christianity, without which (as Gibbon well understood) the emergence of the ‘historical Age’ could not hope to be comprehended, required an analytical framework not to be found in Tacitus (or even in Machiavelli). This is a complex but important point to which we shall return.

## Scotland and the Science of Society

The dynamics of intellectual production and debate differed significantly between Scotland and England. So too did the manner in which they addressed the twin concerns of Enlightenment historiography: the emergence of a European republic of states connected by commercial exchange, and the commitment to subordinating spiritual authority to the interests of civil society. Both the Scottish and English Enlightenments provided insights – not necessarily easily reconcilable – that were of importance to the historian of the Roman Empire.

With the significant exception of Hume, Scotland's leading men of letters occupied prominent positions within her universities, law courts, and the established (Presbyterian) Kirk. They took an active role in shaping post-Union Scottish cultural as well as intellectual life. This endeavour was further pursued by the Moderate party in the Kirk – led by Robertson, Moderator of the General Assembly from 1763 – which sought to undermine the associations between Presbyterianism and political sedition which had crystallised with the Civil Wars. Uniformly committed to the Revolution (1688–9), Union (1707) and Hanoverian Settlement (1714), and deeply troubled by their nation's passivity in the face of the Jacobite Rebellion (1745–6), Enlightened Scots sought to comprehend the preconditions and implications of commercial modernity. Hume's reference to Scotland as 'the historical nation' succinctly captures this shared intellectual vision. Their pioneering works of moral philosophy, civil history, sociology, anthropology and political economy were all intended to explain how the 'historical Age' had come into being. In this regard, collectively they constructed 'a teleology of civility', explaining the relationship between a society's material, political and cultural development in its overall progress towards the commercial modern age.<sup>12</sup>

As Colin Kidd has shown, Hume and his compatriots recognised their 'historical nation' as indelibly a part of the modern British polity.<sup>13</sup> Hume's *History of England* (1754–62) and Robertson's *History of Scotland* (1759) both suggested that Scotland had remained impervious to those broader historical currents which, elsewhere in Europe, had from the fifteenth century subordinated a powerful feudal nobility and a frequently recalcitrant ecclesiastical order to law and central government. If, as Robertson suggested, the 'true end' of history was to explain the emergence of commercial

modernity, Scotland's past – lacking the internal dynamics which propelled the progress of other European nations – was rather barren terrain. England had partaken in this process, and had the internal institutions to show for it: a mixed constitution balancing the claims of authority and liberty, a national church which acknowledged the civil magistrate as its supreme governor, thriving semi-autonomous cities, a burgeoning public sphere and a commercially-minded middling class. The Union had rendered these institutions, with the important exception of the English church, the joint preserve of Britons. However, Hume suggested that the English lacked the historical self-awareness to understand the conditions of their own modernity, let alone to write its history. Hume pointed to the attacks levelled at his *History* by 'Whig and Tory, churchman and sectary, freethinker and religionist' to illustrate the factional and insular nature of the English intellectual world.<sup>14</sup> Gibbon abandoned an early work on Sir Walter Raleigh (c. 1554–1618) and 'the modern history of England' for this very reason, and noted that it had taken two Scots – Hume and Robertson – finally to raise British altars to the muse of history.<sup>15</sup> Hume, in turn, expressed his astonishment that an Englishman could have produced such a dispassionate and philosophical work of history as *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>16</sup>

A primary objective of Hume's *History* was to show that the English constitution, like all others, had been in a state of continual flux. This challenged the tendency of English historians and common law theorists to interpret their nation's past as defined by the continual challenges to and reaffirmation of the principles of an ancient constitution (in Machiavelli's terminology, a cycle of *corsi* and *ricorsi*) with its origins in an ancient Anglo-Saxon witenagemot (parliament). Civil liberty and a mixed constitution, Hume argued, were of a rather more recent vintage, and considerably more precarious as a consequence. Here Hume drew upon a sociological schema influentially developed by James Harrington (1611–77), which suggested that the balance of power necessarily shifted according to the balance of property. The erosion of feudal tenures from the reign of Henry VII, and the granting of privileges (charters of incorporation) to cities, were of great consequence. This freed the mass of mankind from their servitude as unwaged labourers, strengthened central government by undermining the military power and sway of the aristocracy, and (as Robertson later echoed) allowed cities 'to turn their attention towards commerce'.<sup>17</sup> Commerce, in turn, encouraged men to entertain hopes and wishes (to improve their lot, to acquire status) which had previously been unthinkable,



and stimulated their industry. Commerce also served insensibly to soften men's manners by illustrating their mutual dependence for the satisfaction of these desires, which relied upon the exchange of goods (including those 'good offices' described by Cicero in his enduringly popular handbook of ethics, *De officiis*). Commerce and consumption ('luxury') were the handmaidens of the arts and sciences, modern politeness and civil liberty, not their enemies.<sup>18</sup> This theme had already been explored by the English authors of urban histories: a genre which gained in popularity from the late seventeenth century, as thriving commercial towns (and later industrial cities) sought to defray the Horatian charge that urban living and commerce corrupted a disinterested concern for the public good (traditionally considered the exclusive preserve of the great rural landowner).<sup>19</sup> The benefits of modern commerce were similarly extolled by Daniel Defoe, by Voltaire in the tenth of his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), and given powerful theoretical articulation in Jean-François Melon's *Essai politique sur la commerce* (1734).

Hume and Robertson further enriched Harringtonian historical thought by emphasising the importance of a balance of opinion as well as property. Changes in the latter were accompanied (or even preceded) by alterations in the former, as men's minds began to expand and conceive of new ideas of liberty, community and lawful government. A central theme of Hume's *History* – written 'backwards' in instalments, initially beginning in 1603 but eventually returning to the age of Julius Caesar – was the inability of language to adapt to ways of feeling and of seeing the world which at certain points altered profoundly. As he explored this theme, Hume's *History* became more insistently cosmopolitan, drawing attention to those general historical forces which operated at particular junctures throughout Europe and further indicating that England's past was not quite as exceptional as the English themselves liked to believe. In his *History* Hume faced, but did not entirely overcome the challenge of integrating these broader sociological generalisations within a neo-classical narrative of particular political events.

In explaining the general willingness of Scottish historians and social theorists to expand their perspective and to place the civil histories of particular nations within a broader European (and even extra-European) context, two factors are of particular importance. The first relates to the aforementioned Scottish interest in the civilising power of commerce. The incorporating Union of 1707 stripped Scotland of many of its

political institutions, in exchange (it was hoped) for full economic equality and access to English markets. A republican definition of virtue – identified with Aristotle as much as Machiavelli – which emphasised political participation was manifestly problematic.<sup>20</sup> So too was the nexus between *virtus* and martial prowess. The Jacobite Rebellion of 1745–6 was a formative experience for Hume and Robertson’s generation. It suggested an opposition between an archaic conception of virtue as enshrined in the undivided personality (including arms-bearing) and a more modern notion which was suitable to an age of commerce, refinement, and a division of labour (not least between the citizen and the state). There was an intimate relationship between commerce and political loyalty to the Hanoverian state. This encouraged the development of a language of manners, and a concept of virtue, which emphasise exchange (both commercial and social) and the intersubjectivity of those sentiments which guide moral judgement. Second, the Rebellion dramatized the internal boundaries and differences between the Lowlands and Highlands, suggesting two societies at different stages of development. Following Culloden, the Highlands became a laboratory for implanting ‘commercial’ society, defined in large part in opposition to a clan-based society considered to be ‘feudal’.<sup>21</sup> The profound Scottish interest in the mechanics of progress, and in the ‘barbarian’ and ‘savage’ states, owes something to the consternation which this engendered. Scottish ‘stadial’ or ‘theoretical’ history, most fully developed by Smith, Henry Home (Lord Kames), Adam Ferguson and John Millar, offered a four-stage classification of social development beginning with the hunter-gatherer and terminating in the commercial. This typology was indebted to a continental tradition of natural jurisprudence, which was most influentially transmitted through the writings of Samuel Pufendorf and (in rather different form) by Montesquieu. Modern natural law theorists endeavoured to explain the emergence of complex, law-based political communities from a lawless and hostile state of nature primarily on the basis of the historical development of ideas and practices regarding property ownership.<sup>22</sup>

Scottish commentators were nonetheless markedly ambivalent about the implications of the historical progress they described. In Scotland as in England, the ancient world was admired for the unrivalled examples of heroic *virtus* it offered (Cato, Brutus, Cicero) as much as for the great works of philosophy it bequeathed to the moderns. Even the most sanguine apologists for commercial modernity, Hume and Smith, preferred to speak of cultural, political and moral *difference* – and the

unbridgeable nature of the historical chasm separating the ancient from the modern world – rather than superiority. As Hume noted, ancient statesmen and warriors ‘have a grandeur and force of sentiment, which astonishes our narrow souls’.<sup>23</sup> Smith observed that, in this regard, modern ‘savages’ (the native Americans) were much closer to the ancients than were citizens of commercial societies. They possessed a ‘magnanimity and self-command ... almost beyond the conception of Europeans’, a ‘heroic and unconquerable firmness’ which allowed them to withstand ‘the most dreadful torments’ visited upon them by their rapacious Spanish conquerors.<sup>24</sup> In his immensely popular epistolary novel, *Lettres persanes* (1721; English translation 1722), Montesquieu offered a similarly ambivalent evaluation of the consequences of social development for the moral personality in his parable of the Troglodytes, a people who were forced to make the choice between their primitive virtue and the pursuit of wealth.<sup>25</sup>

This theme was most fully developed in Scotland by Adam Ferguson, not coincidentally the only leading Enlightenment figure who was intimately acquainted with Highland culture and a Gaelic speaker. Ferguson emphasised the public spirit and vigour which animated ancient and savage societies, but which had been suppressed by ‘the application of men to particular callings’ in commercial society.<sup>26</sup> The modern citizen was discouraged from engaging in the business and protection of the state. Ferguson did not subscribe to a vision of the savage as a model of uncorrupted purity. Both the ancient Romans and ‘savages’ were passionate, violent and jealous; but unlike those whose sentiments had been ‘softened’ by commerce and politeness, these passions were stimulated by a zealous care for the *patria*, not by a petty concern for financial profit and self-glorification. For Ferguson (and to an extent Smith), commercial society cramped the ‘character’ of the modern citizen in ways which endangered his happiness and compromised the vitality and strength of the body politic. A means, such as a citizen militia, had to be found to reawaken public zeal in a modern age seemingly defined, as Bernard Mandeville had indicated in his *Fable of the Bees* (1714), by rampant economic self-interest rather than by a shared concern for the common good. For Hume, however, this trade-off between primitive virtue and commerce was eminently worth making. The Romans would have been astounded at ‘the degree of clemency, order, tranquillity, and other social virtues, to which ... we have attained in modern times’, and by the unprecedented peace and prosperity enjoyed by modern Europe as a consequence.<sup>27</sup>

This ambivalence towards both ancient Roman and ‘savage’ culture – invoking sentiments of nostalgia by combining admiration with a profound sense of historical detachment – can be found throughout *The Decline and Fall*. Indeed Scottish stadial history, both in terms of its method and its insights, was of considerable importance to Gibbon’s understanding of ‘barbarism’ and of European development (see Woudhuysen’s chapter in this volume). There was nonetheless the potential for tension as well as fertile exchange between civil and stadial history. The civil histories written by Hume and Robertson, most especially the latter’s *History of America* (1777), exhibit an interest in the sociological patterns of explanation developed by Smith and others. Yet they betray a notable resistance to the adoption of an overly deterministic approach to historical change: the capacity for accident and, indeed, the desire to retain a place for human agency in history give their narratives much of their vitality and complexity. They remained sympathetic to the classical vision of the rhetorical purpose of history as philosophy teaching by example, as expressed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in ancient times and restated recently by Viscount Bolingbroke.<sup>28</sup> A more specific concern, however, informed Hume’s resistance to historical sociology. This was a concern not, for the most part, shared by Robertson; but it was one to which Gibbon was particularly attentive. It regarded religion, and its unique capacity to disturb the operation of those general causal laws which Montesquieu and his Scottish followers identified as operating throughout human history.

## England and the History of Religion

An older historiography held that there was no English intellectual context which could meaningfully illuminate our understanding of Gibbon. There was a Scottish context: Scotland produced Enlightened history, both civil and sociological; and Scotland was open to European intellectual currents in a way England was not. In recent decades this assumption has been decisively challenged by scholars such as Nigel Aston, John Pocock, David Womersley and Brian Young. The English intellectual context helps to resolve the paradox identified by John Henry Newman: why a philosophical sceptic and ‘infidel’ – Gibbon – had been drawn to write the greatest ecclesiastical history produced in England since the Reformation.<sup>29</sup>

Robertson, no less than Hume, traced historical effects to this-worldly causes, even as he suggested that, from the perspective of the historian, a beneficent hand (‘Providence’) *might* be discerned behind the progress achieved by mankind. Beyond this, however, neither Robertson nor the Scottish sociological historians had much to say about religion in their works. On one level this is perhaps unsurprising: Robertson and his compatriots were engaged in the practical (and largely successful) attempt to reduce the influence of a more rigidly orthodox and illiberal Presbyterianism in both the Kirk and the universities. In their writings a studied silence on theology and religion, even as it did not prevent a suspicion of their orthodoxy, at least guarded against re-inflaming those religious tensions which the Moderates were anxious to portray as the residue of a bygone era. The attempt in Scotland to reconcile religious belief and spiritual authority with the interests of civil society was for the most part a practical rather than intellectual enterprise. This uneasy consensus was repeatedly disturbed by Hume, something he regretted but found intellectually unavoidable.<sup>30</sup>

No such consensus existed in England. As Hume noted contemptuously, the English intellectual scene was dominated by an insatiable appetite for theological controversy. Yet Hume’s disdain was not tantamount to dismissal. Hume was profoundly interested in questions which were largely avoided in Scotland but returned to repeatedly in England. These included the origins and development of religious belief as the product of the human mind; the relationship between this natural religion and the Christian revelation; and, most importantly, the capacity of organised religion to destabilise civil society. As

the Scottish moral philosopher Dugald Stewart later noted, it was Hume who first pioneered the science of ‘*Theoretical or Conjectural History*’ in Scotland. Hume did so, however, in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), which explored religious belief as a social and psychological phenomenon able to interfere with men’s moral sentiments and ideas of justice.<sup>31</sup> These were ‘delicate’ questions which, as was noted by a reviewer (possibly Gibbon) in the *Mémoires littéraires de la Grande Bretagne* (1767–8), Ferguson had been at great pains to avoid in his recently published *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). For Gibbon as for Hume, European history – and its progress from rudeness to refinement – demanded that religion be taken seriously. If the stability of civil societies relied in the final analysis on opinion, then religion had shaped opinion in profound and irreversible ways in the long period which separated the classical from the modern world. In the *Natural History*, Hume built upon his earlier attempts to develop a conceptual framework within which to analyse what otherwise seemed unfathomable: ‘the potent magic of religion’.<sup>32</sup> In so doing Hume engaged with the currents of an English Enlightenment which was clerical, conservative and as acrimonious as it was erudite.

In briefly charting the contours of the English Enlightenment, Conyers Middleton (1683–1750) serves as an instructive, if far from representative guide. An ordained Anglican clergyman of distinctly heterodox persuasions, Middleton illustrates how in England the most critical treatments of Christianity could emerge from within piety.<sup>33</sup> In the brief autobiographical sketch that was prefixed to all posthumous editions of his *Essays and Treatises*, Hume noted that Middleton’s *Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers* (1749) had caused such a furore in England that his own treatment of the subject (the essay ‘Of Miracles’) had been entirely neglected. Here Hume again cast a negative judgement on the English intellectual world. In contrast to Hume’s more philosophical approach, Middleton dived deeply into the arcane fields of ecclesiastical history and patristic scholarship: an approach evidently more to English tastes.<sup>34</sup> Gibbon would, of course, later make these fields his own. Hume nonetheless invited Montesquieu to consult Middleton’s work, which he offered in support both of his own profound distrust of the clerical order and his insight that religion was a more significant determinant than climate in shaping the character and history of particular nations.<sup>35</sup> Middleton is also a significant presence in Gibbon’s *Memoirs*. Gibbon claimed that it was his reading of the

*Free Inquiry* as an undergraduate which led to his apostasy.<sup>36</sup> In the *Vindication*, meanwhile, Gibbon suggested that the controversy which greeted the publication of the first volume of *The Decline and Fall* – concerned overwhelmingly with the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters – was a tedious restaging of the mid-century furore over Middleton's work (III, 1159–61).

In all of his writings, Middleton professed to perform what Gibbon later referred to as 'the melancholy duty of the historian': 'he must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which [Gospel Christianity] contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings' (I, 446). Hume similarly claimed that this was not to attack but to redeem 'true religion': the historian 'may retain the highest regard for true piety, even while he exposes all the abuses of the false'.<sup>37</sup> As all three authors well knew, in a Protestant context this was a perfectly respectable position to hold. Corruptions had deformed Christianity, as papal Rome had become the church of the Antichrist rather than the true Church of Christ; and the primary objective of the Reformation had been to detoxify Christian theology, church government (ecclesiology) and public worship. Yet Middleton played upon a tension regarding the nature of the Church of England to which contemporaries were profoundly sensitive. At what point, Middleton asked, had Christianity become corrupted? This question had momentous implications for the status of the Church and its relationship to the state. It also dictated where sacred history ended and profane history began: that is, when the infallible word of God (attested by miracles) was replaced by that of fallible men. As his clerical critics recognised, Gibbon's treatment of primitive Christianity and his focus on the 'secondary causes' behind its growth owed much to Middleton.

On this question, Middleton argued, there was no consensus in England, because the *Ecclesia Anglicana* was the product of an incomplete Reformation.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, the Act of Supremacy (1534) declared the English church to be established by law. Its bishops and clergy were the officers of the Crown, and its articles of faith were intended merely to ensure order and decorum. The latter could be altered by the magistrate as and when it was deemed necessary. Henry VIII, however, broke from Rome for reasons of political expediency, not personal conviction; his objective was 'to banish rather the power, than the religion of the Pope, out of his realm'. This allowed English bishops to continue to present themselves as the successors of the Apostles, and



to argue that the articles of the Church were essential to communicate grace. Without them, no man could be saved; and to alter them as the interests of civil society (or the magistrate) dictated might secure temporal harmony at the cost of the Christian's immortal soul. English Protestantism was Janus-faced. It forced the individual to 'hang, as it were, between the two religions': Catholicism, established upon unbroken tradition and the claim to be the one true Church of Christ; and Protestantism, founded upon the moral excellence of the Gospels.<sup>39</sup> The claim to Apostolic succession and the Church's independent (and potentially superior) function within the realm depended upon the defence of Trinitarian orthodoxy. Christ was divine in substance, and he communicated his grace through the sacramental acts of his Church on earth. The Trinity, in turn, was to be defended with recourse to the writings of the Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries and the miracles they reported as vouchsafing its divine origins.<sup>40</sup> This was necessary because, as Erasmus and his fellow philologists had shown, the doctrine was not clearly expounded in the Gospels.

This reliance on the Fathers, Middleton argued, deeply compromised the defence of Christianity. The history of Christianity in its 'long residence upon earth' provided an arsenal for its freethinking opponents rather than its defenders. Christianity could only be defended on moral, not historical or philosophical, grounds. The Gospels revealed truths which supported civil society. To live a moral life on earth was the sole route to salvation. That moral code, meanwhile, necessarily evolved according to the needs and interests of societies in particular historical contexts. Prior to Christ, philosophers had been unable to acquire certain knowledge of the existence of a future state or even the unity of God.<sup>41</sup> In Cicero's Rome, what was found 'useful and agreeable' – that is, conducive to the collective happiness of the community – had shaped both political and moral judgements. Ancient polytheism may have been philosophically absurd, but it had reinforced the bonds that held men together in civil society by rendering sacred those qualities which most contributed to the pursuit of the common good. Christ had enjoined obedience to legitimate political authority, and merely offered an even stronger incentive (salvation) to live morally. It was the 'crack-brain'd' monks and Fathers who first suggested that the duties of Christianity were antithetical to a this-worldly morality, not Christ.<sup>42</sup> True Christians, they now taught, would either abandon civil society and its moral regulations as depraved and idolatrous, or – a later development – seek to overturn



it in the name of true piety. The pagan heroes were shining exemplars of civic virtue; Christian sainthood was reserved for those who had either withdrawn from or actively disturbed civil society. The miracles reported by ecclesiastical historians, unlike Christ's, were merely concerned to vouchsafe speculative and contested theological doctrines, and thereby to reinforce the temporal power of the Church. There was nothing to choose between the earliest post-Apostolic miracles described by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, and those reported by the French Jansenists in the 1720s.<sup>43</sup> One either accepted or rejected them all. This was the challenge confronted by the youthful Gibbon: refusing to abandon his 'implicit belief' in the miracles reported by the early Fathers, the only option left was to convert to a church which continued to lay claim to infallibility.<sup>44</sup>

Gibbon suggested that Middleton had risen 'to the highest pitch of scepticism, in any wise consistent with Religion' (III, 1151). In effect, Middleton dissolved Christian theology into civil morality: the former could not be allowed to undermine the latter. To fail to take this step, Middleton urged, would once again allow for the emphatically this-worldly self-interest of clerics to disturb civil society, something they had collectively succeeded in doing throughout Christian history. This concern led Middleton to Rome, both pagan and Christian; it also led him eastwards, to consider the patristic writings and history of Christian orthodoxy. Middleton explicitly isolated the Apostolic era – as Gibbon notably did not – from his more general claim that the history of Christianity fell squarely into the province of civil rather than sacred history. Middleton's were works of Christian apologetic, not Enlightened history. His concern was to show how Christianity had been corrupted from its inception, and to detail how destructive this had proved for the happiness and stability of civil societies. In considering this struggle between ecclesiastical authority and civil society, it is interesting to note, Middleton found much to value in the Neapolitan historian, Pietro Giannone's *Istoria civile del regno di Napoli* (1723): a work to which Gibbon similarly acknowledged his debt.<sup>45</sup> Middleton's writings illustrate how, in England, the reconciliation of religion and spiritual authority with civil society was an intensely historical and critical enterprise, and considered to be of particularly pressing contemporary importance.

## Conclusion: Gibbon and British Enlightened History

In his *Memoirs*, Gibbon indicates the extent to which, from an early age, he was well-versed in English theological controversy and the historical researches to which it gave rise. Middleton illustrates how, in England, the history of orthodoxy and the early Church possessed profound contemporary resonance given its implications for the politics of ecclesiology and the status of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*. In England, in contrast to Scotland, the boundaries between sacred and profane history were probed explicitly, in the name of reconciling (or reducing) spiritual to civil authority. Hume was well aware of this: his own *History*, after all, included the history of the Church of England. Indeed, the insight that the historical consequences of Christianity were by no means uniformly negative was one Gibbon shared in part with the infidel Hume, but not with the ordained Christian minister Middleton. Middleton, not unlike Giannone, was concerned exclusively with only one (important) part of this story: institutional religion's capacity to destroy what mankind's natural concern for happiness had led them to build (civil societies). Hume recognised the unique capacity of Christian theism to exert an influence on human nature which polytheism had not: it 'warped from their natural course' the 'unbiased sentiments of the mind'.<sup>46</sup> As a consequence Christianity was implicated in Europe's development out of the rubble of the Roman Empire in complex ways. Hume suggested that Christianity had contributed positively – the Renaissance papacy had fostered the rebirth of the arts and sciences; apocalyptic Protestantism had inadvertently advanced the cause of civil liberty – as well as negatively to European culture. Either way, the effects of Christianity were as profound as they were irreversible: an insight developed with great richness and nuance by Gibbon. Yet Gibbon's treatment of religion was more detached, agnostic and genuinely historical than anything to be found in Hume or Middleton. Gibbon's fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, which owed a great deal to these authors, have dominated discussion (in his day and ours) in ways which unhelpfully draw attention away from the complexity and subtlety of Gibbon's handling of Christianity and religious belief in his subsequent volumes. Gibbon's remarkable achievement was to show how modern European civilisation owed as much – if not more – to its Christian as to its classical past.

Gibbon openly acknowledged his intellectual debts to the Scottish historians, particularly Hume and Robertson. These authors' historical practice was supremely self-conscious, and their narratives possess an unusually literary quality and complexity. Gibbon's own literary style, and his clear sense of vocation as first and foremost an historian, owes much to their conviction that the study of the *bonae litterae* was a source of continuing pleasure and edification in a 'modern' age and need not impede a critical detachment ('impartiality') from the sources from which one worked. There is no reason to doubt Gibbon's later claim that the recent 'performances' of Hume and Robertson served to kindle his early ambitions, and 'inflamed me to the ambitious hope, that I might one day tread in [their] footsteps'.<sup>47</sup> Yet it is important to state the obvious: Gibbon's narrative ended in 1453, the point at which, for Scottish historians and social theorists, things began to get interesting. In this regard Gibbon's work assumes what it does not attempt to explain. Whilst it repeatedly gestures towards the Scottish narrative of the birth of the commercial modern age, in the final analysis this was not Gibbon's subject. Gibbon's interests led him onto different historical terrain, and in many respects complicated this narrative of European development. Gibbon wrote what was in large part an ecclesiastical history, concerned primarily not with Catholic authority and papal Rome but with orthodox theology and the controversies which shaped its formation. This, in turn, required an intimate engagement – detached and critical, but frequently affectionate – with ecclesiastical historians such as the pious Jansenist priest Le Nain de Tillemont (1637–98). As *The Decline and Fall* developed, it was increasingly the scholarship as well as 'good sense' of the likes of Mosheim and Tillemont which drew Gibbon's approbation. This was accompanied by a critical re-evaluation of the merits of those whom previously Gibbon had so admired (including Montesquieu, Giannone, Middleton and even Hume). This was not mere affectation on Gibbon's part, an attempt to carve out his place at the summit of the pantheon of Enlightened historians by depreciating others. Rather it illustrates how Gibbon's intellectual relationship to his contemporaries inevitably changed as his own historical interests and practice developed: this is ultimately a story of contribution, exception and departure.

Gibbon's increasing distrust of the application of general sociological laws to explain historical change itself bespoke his self-identification as above all an historian (rather than a moral philosopher or political scientist), attentive to the seeming irregularities which

remind us of the indissoluble complexities of history. As John Pocock has shown, there are many intellectual contexts, British and European, which can illuminate aspects of *The Decline and Fall*; and to privilege one over all others would fail to do justice to the richness of the work as a whole. In Gibbon's hands the history of religion was subsumed within the broader history of European civilisation. This was indebted both positively and negatively to Christianity as it had taken shape in the world. Gibbon showed that Christianity had transformed ideas of morality and justice. It had mediated – even as it had preserved – the inheritance of ancient Rome, resulting in a modern European culture which was the product of both. This was a, or perhaps *the*, central theme of *The Decline and Fall* as a whole. The capacity for creative syncretism defined western European culture and gave it a vital energy lacking in the east. In turn, the complexity and nuance of *The Decline and Fall* – its capacity to unsettle, as well as to entertain and inform its reader – testifies to the vitality and intellectual creativity of the mind that produced it. Gibbon's intellectual context was as capacious as his subject.

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## Notes

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[1](#) Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1, p. vii.

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[2](#) Hume to Strahan, August 1770, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 11, p. 230.

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[3](#) Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 265–326.

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[4](#) William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, 7th edition, 3 vols. (London, 1792), 1, pp. 15, 26.

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[5](#) David Hume, ‘Of the Study of History’ (1741), in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), pp. 563–8, on p. 566.

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[6](#) Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3, 5.

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[7](#) Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 72.

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[8](#) Robertson, *Charles V*, 1, p. 3.

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[9](#) *Ibid.*, 111, p. 438 n39; 1, p. 82.

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[10](#) Hume, ‘Of Civil Liberty’ (1741), in *Essays*, pp. 91 (Swift), 88 (Machiavelli).

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[11](#) For the language of republican civic humanism and its genealogy, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 423–505. On the contested notion of the fiscal-military state, see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State* (London: Unwin, 1989).

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[12](#) Murray G. H. Pittock, ‘Historiography’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University

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Press, 2003), pp. 258–79.

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[13](#) Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 185–216.

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[14](#) Hume, 'My Own Life' (1776), in *Essays*, pp. xxxi–xli, on p. xxxvii.

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[15](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, pp. 98–9, 121–2. For Gibbon's aborted plan for a history of the life of Raleigh, see Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 1, pp. 122–5.

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[16](#) Hume to Gibbon, 18 March 1776, in *Letters*, 11, pp. 309–11. In the *Memoirs*, Gibbon claimed that this 'letter from Mr. Hume over paid the labours of ten years' (p. 158).

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[17](#) Robertson, *Charles V*, 1, p. 37.

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[18](#) Hume, 'Of Commerce' (1752), in *Essays*, pp. 253–67.

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[19](#) Rosemary Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 142–86.

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[20](#) Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, eds. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 19–40.

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[21](#) Bob Harris, *Politics and the Nation: Britain in the Mid-Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 148–91.

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[22](#) Istvan Hont, 'The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the "Four-Stages" Theory', in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 253–76.

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[23](#) David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 63.

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[24](#) Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), eds. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), pp. 205–7.

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[25](#) Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), Letters 11–14, pp. 53–61.

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[26](#) Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 32 and *passim*.

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[27](#) Hume, *Principles of Morals*, p. 63.

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[28](#) Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752), in *Lord Bolingbroke: Historical Writings*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), ‘Letter 2’, p. 9.

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[29](#) *Characteristics from the Writings of John Henry Newman*, ed. W. S. Lilly (London, 1875), p. 223.

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[30](#) See, for example, Hume to Adam Smith, 28 July 1759, in *Letters*, 1, pp. 311–14.

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[31](#) Dugald Stewart, *Biographical Memoirs, of Adam Smith, LL.D of William Robertson, D.D. and of Thomas Reid, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1811), p. 49.

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[32](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 80.

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[33](#) Brian Young, ‘Conyers Middleton: The Historical Consequences of Heterodoxy’, in *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy, 1600–1750*, eds. Sarah Mortimer and John Robertson (Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 235–65.

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[34](#) Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *Essays*, p. xxxv.

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[35](#) See Montesquieu’s letters to Hume of 19 May and 3 September 1749, in John Hill Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1846), 1, Appendix B, pp. 456–7.

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[36](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 59. David Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’: The Historian and His Reputation, 1776–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 309–13.

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[37](#) David Hume, *The History of Great Britain, Volume 11* (London, 1757), p. 449 n.

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[38](#) Conyers Middleton, *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers ...* (1749), in *The Miscellaneous Works of the Late Reverend and Learned Conyers Middleton, D.D.*, 4 vols. (London, 1752), 1, pp. lxix–lxxiii.

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[39](#) *Ibid.*, p. lxxvi.

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[40](#) On the return to the Fathers and tradition from the Restoration onwards, see Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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[41](#) Conyers Middleton, *The History of the Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, 2 vols. (London, 1741), esp. 11, ‘Section x11’.

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[42](#) Middleton, *Free Inquiry*, pp. 143–4.

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[43](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 180–4.

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[44](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 59.

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[45](#) John Robertson, ‘Gibbon and Giannone’, in *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. David Womersley (Oxford: SVEC, 1997), pp. 3–19; Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 11, pp. 65–71.

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[46](#) Hume, *Principles of Morals*, pp. 108–9.

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[47](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, pp. 98–9.

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# Gibbon and Republicanism



**Béla Kapossy and Richard Whatmore**

## Gibbon and the French Revolution

Edward Gibbon spent the month of March in 1792 in Geneva at the house of Jacques Necker, father of Anne Louise Germaine de Staël and husband of Suzanne Curchod, whom the young Gibbon would have wed himself had his father allowed the match. Necker, the renowned Genevan banker and former French *directeur général des finances*, was in exile from events at Paris, where he had been, as Gibbon wrote in the spring of 1789, ‘the Minister and perhaps the Legislator of the French Monarchy’.<sup>1</sup> Gibbon described Necker as an archetypal victim of the French Revolution. Necker had been ‘overwhelmed by the hurricane, mistook his way in the fog’, and was now ‘abused by all parties.’ No French person dared set foot in Necker’s house. Seeing Necker at close quarters, Gibbon declared that, ‘I have really a much higher idea than I ever had before’ of Necker and of his opinions. Necker had recently published *Du pouvoir exécutif dans les grands états*, which justified his conduct as a minister in the early stages of the French Revolution with the claim that he had always been seeking a British-style constitutional settlement. Gibbon praised the book to Lord Loughborough as an antidote to domestic radicalism.<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, first appearing in November 1790, had made predictions about the evil consequences of the French Revolution, all of which appeared to be coming true. Gibbon called Burke ‘the most eloquent and rational madman that I ever knew’, but described himself as ‘as high an Aristocrat as Burke himself’ with regard to the subject of ‘that cursed Revolution’.<sup>3</sup> Like Burke, Gibbon was convinced that the French extremists would soon be defeated, so irrational and flawed were their ideas and so bloody were their actions. As he put it, ‘the last revolution of Paris appears to have convinced almost every body of the fatal consequences of Democratical principles, which lead by a path of flowers into the Abyss of Hell’.<sup>4</sup> This was one of the reasons why, despite Necker’s gloom, Gibbon characteristically enjoyed his time at Geneva. His life with the Neckers comprised, as he put it, ‘the freedom of the morning, the society of the table and drawing room, from half an hour past two till six or seven, an evening assembly and card-party, in a round of the best company, and, excepting one day in the week, a private supper of free and friendly conversation’. Like Burke too, Gibbon was to alter his view of the prospects for France towards the end of 1792. The Revolution had created a state that

was better at making war than any other. This fact troubled Gibbon's final years, and coloured particularly his view of the Swiss states, his home for more than a third of his adult life, just as he left them for the last time.

Necker's pessimism about the future of Europe began to afflict Gibbon on his return to Lausanne at the end of March 1792. He articulated this view through commentary on Switzerland, his 'home by adoption'. Gibbon said of his beloved Lausanne in 1792, 'I never knew any place so much changed.'<sup>5</sup> He began to plan an escape to Bern or to Britain, because the 'Gallic wolves' were roaming, advocates of detested democratical principles and 'wild ideas of the rights and natural equality of man'.<sup>6</sup> Gibbon distinguished between the French revolutionary project and the kinds of republican liberty that fascinated him in Switzerland, which had made him want to write about the collapse of the Florentine republic, and which had characterised above all the history of Rome.

After March 1792 Gibbon began to wonder if he was living through the final days of an era, experiencing the decline and fall of old Europe at first hand. He increasingly saw the French as being on the brink of tearing up the existing map of independent states in perpetuity and establishing in its place an imperial democracy. John Baker Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, Gibbon's closest English friend, shared this view, writing that, 'I consider the French affairs so far out of the line of common Politicks, that I wish the whole world to declare against them.'<sup>7</sup> For a time Gibbon expressed the hope that the Duke of Brunswick, commander of the combined armies of Austria and Prussia that invaded France at the end of July 1792, would prevail ('On every rational principle of calculation he must succeed').<sup>8</sup> The defeat of Brunswick at the Battle of Valmy on 20 September was followed by the French invasion of Savoy. Gibbon wrote to Holroyd that with French troops in the immediate vicinity, 'it is possible that you may have some trifling apprehensions of my being killed and eaten by those [French] Cannibals'.

Gibbon watched as French troops came to the gates of Geneva in October. He was certain that the little republic could not withstand a siege. Although the fortifications 'were not contemptible', the number of supporters of the French Revolution in the city meant that the spirit of the defenders was not sufficient to hold fast against the invaders.<sup>9</sup> After all, 'the character of the Genevois is rather commercial than military'. Feeling that he was in 'hurricane latitudes', Gibbon's mood became increasingly black. At Geneva he

anticipated ‘a Democratical revolution, which would probably renew the horrid scenes [September massacres] of Paris and Avignon’.<sup>10</sup> He wrote to John Holroyd that he was increasingly concerned about ‘the Leviathan France’. Gibbon was convinced that none of the existing republics could stand against France. Swiss troops were pouring into the region of Copet and Nyon, north of Geneva and on the east bank of the lake. The Swiss were in arms from Schaffhausen to the Pays de Vaud, Gibbon’s own ‘little paradise’. For Gibbon, however, the Swiss cantons, despite their great military reputation, were ‘not equal to a long and expensive war, and as most of our Militia have families and trades, the country already sighs for their return’. His conclusion was that ‘the smaller powers may acquiesce without dishonour’. The French were ‘new Romans’ and could not be stopped.

Gibbon was even fearful that French notions of democracy and equality would spread to Britain. He asked Holroyd for ‘a full and confidential account of your views concerning England, Ireland, and France’.<sup>11</sup> He saw the revolutionary disease spreading across Europe with the progress of French arms. They had, by the beginning of 1793, defeated Prussia, conquered Savoy, pillaged Germany, invaded the Dutch Republic and were threatening Spain and all of the states of Italy. Gibbon concluded that ‘the whole horizon is so black, that I begin to feel some anxiety for England, the last refuge of liberty and law’. As ‘the Gallic dogs’ were enjoying the ‘most insolent prosperity’, it was conceivable that the British would succumb to the general revolutionary ardour and ‘eat the Apple of false freedom’.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Gibbon feared war with France. The British could easily justify war because the French invasion of the Austrian Netherlands and Savoy violated existing treaties. Yet France, the ‘new Sparta’, was so deadly that to fight would entail ‘plunging headlong into an abyss, whose bottom no man can discover’.<sup>13</sup>

If Britain was under threat, Gibbon’s fears for Switzerland were infinitely greater. This was one of the reasons, in addition to the desire to comfort his recently widowed friend, Lord Sheffield, why he left Lausanne the day after his fifty-seventh birthday, 9 May 1793, travelling to Basel, Frankfort, Cologne, Brussels, Ostend and London.<sup>14</sup> Gibbon no longer felt safe on mainland Europe. For him it was evident that established ideas about politics were dead, and that with the French Revolution the republics of the old world, and especially the Swiss cantons, had become an endangered species. Such a

view was a product of many decades reflecting on the nature of republican liberty, particularly in Switzerland.

## Gibbon at Lausanne

At his death in 1794 Gibbon was the most celebrated and most European of British historians. More than any other British contemporaries, Gibbon was influenced by the scholarly debates of the early Huguenot and the French enlightenments.<sup>15</sup> He spoke, wrote and for a number of years even thought in French, so much so that at certain moments in his youth he seemed to have considered himself as Swiss or French, rather than English. Much of his engagement with Swiss, Dutch, French and Italian discussions of classical literature, erudition, antiquarianism, Protestant apologetic, history and philosophy can be traced back to his lengthy stay in Lausanne, the most important town of the Pays du Vaud, then occupied by the republic of Bern.<sup>16</sup> As he famously wrote in his *Memoirs*, ‘such as I am in Genius or learning or in manners, I owe my creation to Lausanne; it was in that school, that the statue was discovered in the block of marble’.<sup>17</sup> Gibbon spent more than sixteen years of his life in Switzerland, first from June 1753 to April 1758 on his father’s order after Gibbon’s conversion to Catholicism; then from May 1763 to April 1764 as part of his Grand Tour that would eventually take him to Italy; and, finally, from September 1783 to May 1793 when, for economic reasons, he settled in Lausanne after having lost his seat at the Board of Trade in London. It was at Lausanne that Gibbon, on Christmas day 1754, was accepted back into the Protestant church, where he fell in love with Suzanne Curchod, and where he met his two life-long friends, Jacques Georges Deyverdun, whose house Gibbon shared during his third stay, and John Holroyd, Gibbon’s literary executor. It was also in Lausanne that he socialised with Voltaire, wrote much of his first published work, the *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* (1761), and finished the two final volumes of *The Decline and Fall*.

In his *Memoirs* Gibbon fondly remembered the extraordinarily studious and virtually penniless existence of his first stay, claiming ‘I should gladly have accepted a small independent estate on the easy terms of passing my life in Switzerland with the two persons who possessed the different affections of my heart.’<sup>18</sup> If Gibbon spent his first years largely at the margins of Lausanne society, his return in 1783 as the famous historian of Rome placed him at its very heart, a position he held undisputed until his departure the year before his death.<sup>19</sup> After 1794 Gibbon’s house, called *La Grotte*, and in particular the garden cabin he had used for writing, became a shrine for cultivated

travellers, who, like Shelley or Byron, hoped to relive the moment described in the *Memoirs* when Gibbon put down his pen after completing the last page of his manuscript.<sup>20</sup>

Among the many influences Gibbon was exposed to during his years in Switzerland, two were of particular relevance for understanding his journey to becoming the historian of Rome. The first was his engagement with the Protestant commitment to free and critical enquiry into civil and church history that was characteristic of Huguenot culture in the early Swiss and European Protestant enlightenments. The second was his encounter with the complexity of Swiss republican politics and the history of Swiss independence, including the history of Bern's rise to the status of republican empire.

Although culturally closely tied to France, the French-speaking part of Switzerland was also open to English, Italian and German influences. Eighteenth-century Geneva was a destination for many British travellers, some of whom ended up living there, sometimes for reasons of health. Ties between Scotland and Geneva had been close since the days of John Knox. Several leading Protestant ministers from the Vaud were members of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and cultivated close ties with English latitudinarians. They were often at the forefront of translating and disseminating the works of English authors.<sup>21</sup> Lausanne magistrates, including Gabriel Seigneux de Correvo, whom Gibbon met during his first two visits, set up Charity Schools following the English model, while members of the academy at Lausanne often privately taught the increasing number of young English noblemen who, like Philip Stanhope, the son of Lord Chesterfield, or Lord John Sackville, were either sent there for their education or arrived in the Vaud on their Grand Tour through Europe. Gibbon's tutor, Daniel Pavillard, one of Lausanne's four ministers and a member of the Consistory, and whose house he stayed in during his first visit, was closely involved in a number of educational activities offered to foreign visitors around the middle of the eighteenth century. During the 1740s Pavillard was the secretary of a learned society, the Société du comte de la Lippe, which had been set up with the explicit aim of educating the young future sovereign of a tiny German Calvinist principality. Deyverdun, Gibbon's closest friend of the 1760s, was educated at the Lausanne Academy and became a tutor to one of the sons of Prince Louis of Württemberg, before joining Gibbon in England between 1765 and 1769.

The place Gibbon was sent to by his father in 1753 was not only known as a



bastion of Protestantism; the Swiss cantons were also renowned for their republican politics. Republican liberty survived only because of the cantons' ongoing struggle for independence against the military and economic threats emanating from the monarchies that surrounded them. During the fourteenth century the old Swiss cantons had won significant battles against the emperor's larger armies at Sempach and at Morgarten and, in 1474 and 1476, against Charles the Bold, the Duke of Burgundy, at Grandson and Murten. The latter victories, together with their exploits in the Italian Wars, supplied the Swiss with a reputation for invincibility. Their example served subsequent republican thinkers in Europe with the most important example of the superiority of militias over standing armies. By the eighteenth century Swiss militias were widely held to be in decline. As the English envoy Abraham Stanyan reported in 1714, 'a disuse of war, during so long a tract of time, has given rise to an opinion, that the Switzers are much fallen from their ancient valour'.<sup>22</sup> At the same time the Swiss were still regularly described as the most heavily armed people in Europe. The standard account of Swiss valour and virtuousness was summarised by the British author John Campbell, who in 1750 stated that the Swiss were 'naturally of a martial disposition' and 'never at a loss for as large and well-disciplined an army as any government in Europe can rise'.<sup>23</sup>

When arriving in Lausanne for the first time Gibbon, like other visitors before and after him, would have been familiar with Switzerland's republican tradition and the symbolic position it occupied within European political argument. While most foreign commentators shirked from trying to understand the complex history of the Swiss Confederation and the treaties that tied its different members to one another, Gibbon was clearly drawn to Switzerland's past and the challenges it posed to the historian. The knowledge he acquired during the 1750s and 1760s clearly surpassed that of any other non-Swiss historian of his generation.

Gibbon's first occasion to observe the constitutional, economic and cultural specificities of the different cantons presented itself in 1755 when his tutor Pavillard, together with his wife, took Gibbon on a month-long tour through northern Switzerland. From Gibbon's travel journal that he sent to his father we can glean the exact itinerary of the tour, the places and personalities he visited, and above all his fascination with the historical remnants of Switzerland's military past. At Grandson, for example, he noted that the castle walls still held some of the cannon balls fired during the battle against

Charles the Bold, the Duke of Burgundy. This victory, Gibbon reported, was for the Swiss what Marathon, Salamis, Plataea and Mycale were to the Greeks.<sup>24</sup> As he continued on his route, Gibbon encountered further traces of the defeat that Charles the Bold had suffered at the hands of the Swiss. In Solothurn's arsenal he was shown the duke's armoury and his boots and in Zurich some of his weapons. In Bern's library Gibbon saw the magnificent embroidered crimson velvet Flemish tapestries that had adorned the Duke of Burgundy's tent. In the city's arsenal he discovered, next to the famous wooden statue of William Tell, further Burgundian spoils. All of this confirmed Gibbon in the opinion that there was no nation in the world as well armed and virtuous as the Swiss. Other features that caught his attention included remnants from the Roman period, such as at the baths at Baden, or in Avenches, formerly the great city of Aventicum, where he visited what was probably the first archaeological excavation on Swiss soil.

The route from Zurich to Basel and to Bern allowed Gibbon to muse on the differences in manners that could be observed in these three cities. If the citizens of Zurich exhibited the rusticity and directness typically associated with the old Swiss, the Bernese, he claimed, cultivated an exaggerated politeness, while those of Basel seemed to occupy a middle ground between the two. In Schwyz Gibbon commented on a government that in appearance was 'altogether democratic [*tout à fait démocratique*]', but which, despite its General Assemblies guaranteeing each citizen an equal share in political life, in reality was as open to abuse by rhetoricians who generally succeeded in controlling the majority of their supposed equals. Many of his remarks echo those he would have found in earlier eighteenth-century accounts of Switzerland, such as *L'état et les délices de la Suisse* of 1730, Stanyan's *State of Switzerland* of 1714, or Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* of 1705; Gibbon carried a copy of Addison with him as he travelled.

Other comments by Gibbon are more distinctive, revealing both the recent convert and the precocious scholar. Gibbon was particularly fascinated by the Abbey of Einsiedeln, a centre of Catholic worship since the Middle Ages. Gibbon noted that the priests, behaving like their pagan predecessors as 'able politicians [*bons Politiques*]', captured the imagination of visiting believers and thereby laid the foundations for the accumulation of an extraordinary amount of wealth over the centuries. The small change

alone that the numerous pilgrims donated annually, a Zurich banker assured Gibbon, amounted to 100,000 imperial florins. The treasure of the abbey was accordingly one of the greatest in the Catholic world, containing, for example, a large collection of dresses for the Virgin covered in pearls, diamonds and rubies. All this made Einsiedeln, as Gibbon memorably wrote, ‘the height of superstition, the masterpiece of ecclesiastical politics and shame of humanity [*le comble de la superstition, le chef d’oeuvre de la politique ecclesiastique et la honte de l’humanité*]’. Anti-Catholic sentiments can also be found in Gibbon’s account of the Toggenburg War of 1712, which he presented as the product of illicit religious interference in politics; in this case the attempt by the Catholic abbot of St Gallen to root out the Reformation amongst his Protestant subjects and to deny them any freedom of conscience.<sup>25</sup>

More positive were Gibbon’s comments on the collections and libraries he visited and his encounters with other scholars. In Baden he bought some dice that were reputedly of Roman origin, but which Gibbon suspected were contemporary counterfeits produced for gullible tourists. In Einsiedeln he was shown a Bible on vellum from the eighth century, while in Zurich the librarian and philologist Johann Jakob Breitinger allowed him to inspect a sacred text from the time of Charlemagne, in addition to a Greek Psalter that was reputed to be amongst the oldest in existence. In Basel Gibbon admired the paintings of Holbein, a portrait of Erasmus and original manuscripts relating to the Council of Basel (1431). Arriving at Bern, whose constitution Gibbon described in great detail over several pages, he met the physician and natural scientist Albrecht von Haller, ‘known for his vast learning [*connu par son savoir immense*]’, and observed the coin collection of the antiquarian Samuel Schmidt. Gibbon praised Schmidt’s son, Frederic Samuel, already a celebrated antiquarian, who, at the age of fourteen, had composed a Latin dissertation on the Roman treasures discovered at Avenches. Gibbon might have been seeking to convince his own father of the honourableness of his intended scholarly pursuits.<sup>26</sup>

## Gibbon and Swiss Liberty

Gibbon returned to the study of the history of Swiss liberty in 1765, a year after his return to England. He hesitated for a time between writing about the crisis and decline of the Florentine republic, or the early Swiss cantons' struggle for independence. The arrival of Deyverdun in England was decisive in persuading Gibbon to study the history of the Swiss during a period of two hundred years, from the beginning of the Confederation to the 'plenitude and prosperity of the Helvetic body' following the defeat of Charles the Bold. Deyverdun aided Gibbon greatly by guiding him through and by translating German sources, and especially the work of the Swiss-German historians Aegidius Tschudi, Johann Jakob Laufer and Johann Jakob Leu.<sup>27</sup> As Gibbon wrote in his journal on 26 July 1762, the history of the liberty of the Swiss was the subject 'I should prefer to all others'. After writing the first two chapters, however, and despite David Hume's encouragement, Gibbon abandoned the work due to critical remarks made by members of a society in London to whom he had submitted the text anonymously. In his memoirs he commented on his Swiss project only in passing, claiming,

I delivered my imperfect sheets to the flames; and for ever renounced a design in which some expense, much labour, and more time had been so vainly consumed. I cannot regret the loss of a slight and superficial Essay: for such the work must have been in the hands of a stranger, unformed by the scholars and statesmen, remote from the libraries and archives, of the Swiss Republics.<sup>28</sup>

The surviving copy of the first chapters of Gibbon's essay, entitled 'Introduction à l'histoire générale de la République des Suisses', was published in Holroyd's *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon* in 1814. Gibbon's letters, as well as the copious translations Deyverdun made, confirm both the ambition and originality of Gibbon's project.<sup>29</sup> Although the focus was firmly on the Swiss cantons and their resistance to foreign intervention during the fourteenth and fifteenth century, Gibbon clearly saw the history of the Swiss as a prism through which he hoped to shed light on early modern Europe more generally. The battles at Sempach, Morgarten, Laupen or Murten were as much about the sudden and dramatic reconfiguration of European politics during the fourteenth century as they were about the Swiss themselves. Gibbon believed general

principles could be derived from the cantons' fight against the Holy Roman Empire's feudal oppression. These principles included the superiority of militias over mercenary armies, the transformative power of industriousness and the powerful effect of the love of liberty upon communities. Echoing Montesquieu's account of the history of democracy, Gibbon described the natural liberty of the alpine cantons as a product of the equality enjoyed by their hardened rustic inhabitants: 'Liberty was dear to him, and the independence that arose from the equality of fortunes and from the sense of the strength it supplied, was the foundation of his being [*La liberté lui étoit chère, et cette indépendance qui naît de l'égalité des fortunes et du sentiment de ses forces, étoit le premier resort de son âme*].'<sup>30</sup> It was this love of equality and liberty that animated the Swiss militia, 'who fight for all that is dear to men [*qui combattoit pour tout ce qu'il y a de plus cher aux hommes*]'. This secured them victory in 1315 at Morgarten over the far greater forces of Leopold III, Duke of Austria.<sup>31</sup>

The pact that the three cantons, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, established shortly after was of enormous symbolic importance. It provided in Gibbon's view an historical example of the kind of social contract that natural jurists merely speculated about. In Gibbon's view it supplied in a small state 'the first draft of civil society [*la première ébauche de la société civile*]', thereby combating the tendency among scholars to search for evidence only in the histories of large states.<sup>32</sup> Switzerland's past, Gibbon concluded in his first chapter, was important to any philosophically minded historian who wished to see liberty as more than the prerogative of a privileged few.<sup>33</sup> In a period marked by feudal anarchy, the convulsions of which provided little consolation to a 'friend of mankind', the Swiss offered a 'rare sight, and one more worthy of human nature [*spectacle plus rare et plus digne de la nature humaine*]'.<sup>34</sup> The strengthening of the Confederation with the joining of Lucerne, Zurich, Glarus, Zug and Bern, which was covered in Gibbon's second chapter, supplied further lessons. Bern's fight against a coalition of Hapsburg-led forces enabled Gibbon to reflect on the dictatorial powers Bern's military leader, Rudolf von Erlach, had been invested with. A description of Zurich's commercial republicanism provided an occasion to stress once more the close ties between commerce and the spread of liberty under the rule of law: 'The merchant senses that free men by nature are united by their mutual needs. The spirit of commerce can only flourish in the shade of the laws [*Le négociant sent que des hommes libres par*

*leur nature sont unis par leurs besoins réciproques. L'esprit du commerce ne peut fleurir qu'à l'ombre des loix].'*<sup>[35](#)</sup>

## The Significance of Bern

It remains unclear whether Gibbon intended his project for the history of Swiss liberty to include the period of the Reformation and Bern's conquest of the Vaud in 1536. Probably not, is the best response. Extending the history would have forced Gibbon to deal with a very different aspect of Swiss, and especially Bernese, politics, namely the formation of republican empires and the consolidation of aristocratic government. By the end of the sixteenth century Bernese rule extended from the eastern tip of the Aargau down to the western end of Lac Léman, covering more than a third of the Confederation's entire territory. The closing of the citizenry to foreigners over the course of the seventeenth century, and the putting in place of a highly elaborate and secret ballot system for the election of magistrates along Venetian lines, underlined Bern's image as a *de facto* oligarchy. A dwindling number of patrician families controlled access to the sovereign Council of Two Hundred and the many lucrative governmental and administrative posts. Bern was not only frequently compared to Venice; during the eighteenth century parallels were also drawn with the history of the Roman republic.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the commercial cities of Zurich and Basel, Bern had failed to develop extensive domestic industry and depended largely upon agriculture. Bern's leading families, unlike those of Zurich or Basel, generally shunned commercial activities, pursuing instead military careers in one of the foreign regiments in France or in the Netherlands, or overseeing the exploitation of their private domains. The comparatively strict separation of politics from the economic sphere, together with the absence of any direct taxation, and an accentuated military culture, earned Bern the reputation of being the last remaining agrarian military republic in Europe. For these reasons Bern was also generally believed to be in a much better position to escape the problems that arose from the constantly growing need of modern states for new sources of fiscal revenue.<sup>37</sup> While most European nations had amassed considerable public debts, Bern was debt-free. Due to its investments in the national debts of other states, most notably Britain, it had even acquired a fiscal surplus, which, during the eighteenth century, amounted to a third of total public revenue. This provided the republic with means of financing a number of lavish and much debated public projects, including a new granary, hospital, orphanage and a network of modern roads connecting the canton's main economic centres. It was



this blend of private frugality and public luxury, together with Bern's victory in 1712 over the Catholic cantons, that led Montesquieu to describe the republic in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains* (1734) as a potential new Rome.<sup>38</sup>

Montesquieu's verdict was eagerly picked up by Bernese and by other commentators. The Lausanne publisher Marc-Michel Bousquet even used the Bern–Rome analogy in order to promote his 1750 edition of Montesquieu's *Considérations* as a textbook for Bern's future politicians.<sup>39</sup> Here, as in other places, the analogy with Rome served less as a warning of what might befall the republic of Bern than as a way of thinking about the ties that linked the capital to its subject territories like the Vaud. This rather standard view was neatly summarised by the historian Johannes Müller in his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Berne*, an essay published in 1781, where he claimed that Bern had surpassed Rome, not only on account of the speed with which it had expanded its territory during the first two centuries after its foundation, but also with regard to its ability to avoid the kind of institutional and cultural change that had led Rome into a downward spiral of corruption and decline. 'The Bernese retained this state of things because they were sufficiently wise to be content. They set aside their victorious arms, but without forgetting how to use them [*Les Bernois conserverent cet état, parce qu'ils eurent la sagesse d'en être contents. Ils posèrent leurs armes victorieuses, mais sans en oublier l'usage*].'<sup>40</sup> Instead of forcing the barons they had defeated into slavery, the Bernese had offered them citizenship, turning them into supporters rather than enemies of the republic. If many of the families from the Vaud rejected this offer, it was only because they believed that sovereignty would soon return to the ousted Duke of Savoy. Even in this case, Müller argued, Bern's military aristocracy had managed to capture their subjects' hearts: 'The peasant was protected. The towns retained their established liberties. Antagonism was replaced by order. The population doubled and the numbers of the poor fell by half [*Le paysan fut protégé. Les villes conserverent leurs anciennes franchises. Les divisions firent place au bon ordre. La population doubla, & le nombre des pauvres diminua de la moitié*].'<sup>41</sup> Bern had succeeded in bringing prosperity and happiness to its subject peoples, not in spite of but rather because of its hostility to extensive commerce and manufactures.

Bern's decision to turn away the industrious Huguenot refugees who flooded the canton following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was hailed in



consequence as a feat of political prudence: ‘The Huguenots, chased from France, were welcomed into the republics who were zealous in defence of their religion, or greedy for wealth. A spirit of innovation and new manners accompanied the refugees. The Bernese rejected their pleas and have remained in the same state as they were before [*Les Huguenots, chassés de France, furent accueillis dans des républiques zélées pour la foi, ou avides de richesses; l’esprit d’innovation & des nouvelles mœurs vinrent avec eux; les Bernois rejetterent leurs offres, & ils sont encore ce qu’ils étoient*].’<sup>42</sup> Müller was adamant in his defence of the government of Bern against accusations of tyranny. The institutional safeguards in place that prevented any family from dominating politics, the patricians’ disinterestedness towards commercial matters, as well as the strict control of the administrative officials or bailiffs, all helped to maintain the rule of law. A general martial spirit meant that the idea of liberty was associated more with national independence and the absence of foreign threats, rather than with the protection of individual rights by means of political representation. As Jean Müller put it, the Bernese Senate saw the people not as subjects but as comrades in arms.<sup>43</sup>

Alexander Ludwig von Wattenwyl, the Bernese historian, put forward similar arguments in his *Histoire de la Confédération helvétique* (1754), which Gibbon repeatedly referred to. In his *Speech of a Confederate concerning the Happiness of a Subject under a Free Government*, published in 1765 but probably written during the 1750s, Wattenwyl argued that the clear concentration of political power within the sovereign Council of Two Hundred provided the kind of legal security that Rome was never able to offer its citizens and subjects. This was why Rome suffered continuous domestic unrest while Bern remained stable.<sup>44</sup> Bern not only offered its subjects the rule of law, but provided them with the conditions for happiness. This was in contrast to the monarchies where happiness was measured by military glory and where the terms ‘fatherland or liberty’ were unknown.<sup>45</sup> Bern’s paternal rulers supported the needy and the sick often at their own expense. As Wattenwyl put it, ‘Were these not fathers who opened their treasures, providing their children with bread and with physicians. How many owe them their return to good health? Are these [magistrates] not fathers who carefully watch over the public peace ...? Where else do you find rulers who never accumulate wealth at the expense of their subjects?’<sup>46</sup>

Gibbon too associated Bern with Rome. He took a more critical stance, however,

than either Wattenwyl or Müller. When first visiting the city in 1755 Gibbon listed many of the features that other commentators had found noteworthy, such as Bern's investments in foreign debts, the fact that families from the Vaud had been offered citizenship, or the existence of the new hospital, where poor citizens were being cared for at the expense of the state. Gibbon was fascinated by the republic's political institutions and by the gravitas displayed by Bern's magistrates, whom he likened to Roman consuls.<sup>47</sup> He was less convinced that Bern had actually found an answer to the problem of republican empires. Personal politics shone through wherever he looked. The hospital, where *Christo in Pauperibus* was written over the portal, seemed disproportionately lavish in comparison to the simple housing of those in power. This hinted at underlying tensions among the citizenry. The famous pride of the patricians, meanwhile, reflected less their patriotism and rather their being accustomed to seeing their subjects on their knees and having all their wishes catered to.<sup>48</sup> Given the striking similarities between the civil histories of Bern and of Rome, Gibbon was baffled by the lack of concern the Bernese displayed with regard to their own fate: 'If the Bernese have read history, why have they not recognized that the same causes produce the same effects? The reply is straightforward but delicate: it is that individual greed extinguishes the light of reason [*Les Bernois ont lû l'histoire, pourquoi n'ont ils point remarqué que les mêmes causes produisent les memes effets? La réponse est facile mais delicate, c'est que la cupidité particulière éteint les lumières de la raison*].'<sup>49</sup>

If Bern's failures to contain the dynamics of its republican empire were visible within the capital itself, Gibbon believed that they were even more noticeable when seen from the provinces. This was the theme of one of Gibbon's most remarkable essays written during his years in Lausanne, the *Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne*, which was published only after his death by Holroyd. Distinctive reference to Rousseau's notion of the general will (*volonté générale*), made famous in the *Contrat social* of 1762, suggests that it was most likely composed during Gibbon's second stay in 1763 or 1764.<sup>50</sup> This is of some importance because it places Gibbon's essay in the midst of a debate in which reformers in Bern and the Vaud confronted one another over the ways and means of countering the threat of rural depopulation and of improving the canton's overall economic performance. The main instigator of this debate was the Bernese Economic Society, founded in 1759, which soon attracted the attention of the reform-

minded across Europe.<sup>51</sup> Although it respected Bern's separation between politics and the economy, declaring its main focus to be the increase of agricultural productivity through technological advancement, the wider aim of the Economic Society was to instigate a new patriotic work ethic. This was intended to facilitate the association of Bern's subjects with republican ideas about the household economy. The hope was that in time Bern would acquire a virtue-driven competitive economy even in the absence of the clear social or political incentives characteristic of commercial self-interest. For these reasons the Economic Society established a number of local branches in various municipal towns, including Lausanne. Gibbon attended at least one of their meetings in 1763. He did so at a time when Vaudois thinkers were voicing their doubts about the validity of the Bernese reform project.<sup>52</sup> The main issue here was whether economic activity could be increased by means of technological development and moral education alone, or whether the modernisation of Bern's household economy necessitated political reform at the same time. Some of the people Gibbon met at that time, including the brothers Gabriel and François de Seigneux, Jean Bertrand, who had translated Bernard Mandeville into French, or the physician Auguste Samuel Tissot, tended to be clear advocates of the modernisation of the household economy.

## Gibbon and the Future of Switzerland

Gibbon's *Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne* can be read as a radical contribution to the debate about the future of the Swiss republics. It reiterates many of the complaints Vaudois authors were expressing in private about republican imperialism during the first half of the eighteenth century. These included attacks on Bern because of the dominion of a few families within the Great Council and the exclusion of most subjects from politics, the dissolution of the Vaud's Ancient Constitution after the conquest in 1536, as well as Bern's support for the Helvetic Consensus against Moses Amyraut of Saumur's heterodox Calvinism. Gibbon made it quite clear that branding the republic an oligarchy was not a sufficient response to Bernese imperialism. The Vaudois, after all, enjoyed a standard of living that only few other places in Europe could match. They inhabited a beautiful region with a fertile soil and possessed the right infrastructure for a domestic economy to flourish. London was known for its philosophers and Paris offered more luxuries, but the Pays de Vaud was superior in being the only place 'where at the same time one dares to think and one knows how to live [*où à la fois l'on ose penser et l'on sache vivre*]'.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the people of Vaud could rely on a reasonably fair judicial system, they paid few taxes and, unlike many other countries in Europe, could freely enjoy the fruits of their private property.

Gibbon's worry was less about the actual quality of life in the Vaud. His concern was about the future and, more specifically, the ability of the Vaudois to exploit the region's obvious economic potential. The relative backwardness of the Vaud became clear once one recalled the achievements of other regions, like France, Germany, England and Holland that had flourished in much less favourable circumstances with regard to natural resources and fertility. 'From being barbarians they have become civilized, from being ignorant they have become enlightened, and from being poor they have become rich. I see towns where there were deserts and where forests have been cleared and transformed into fertile fields [*Des Barbares ils sont devenus civilises, d'ignorans éclairés, et de pauvres, riches. Je vois des villes ou il y avoit des deserts et les forets defrichées se sont converties en champs fertils*]'.<sup>54</sup> Although the Vaudois enjoyed peace and relative wealth, they risked being overtaken by their neighbours before too long. The reason for this, Gibbon insisted, was that Bern, by becoming an

empire and by concentrating power within the Great Council, had effectively renounced Europe's Gothic heritage that went back to the barbarian invasions of the fifth century. The Gothic constitution brought to northern Europe by Charlemagne did not prevent social and military conflict, but its basic principle was sound in that it granted small communities and cities a share in the political and legislative process: 'the foundation of this Constitution has remained throughout all the revolutions, and nothing is more free than this foundation. These states, their members and their rights were maintained always and by everyone, and everywhere were the same [*le fonds de cette Constitution est demeuré dans toutes les revolutions, et rien de plus libre que ce fonds. Ces états, leurs membres et leurs droits se conserverent toujours et par-tout, et par-tout ils étoient les mêmes*].'<sup>55</sup>

This was the framework within which modern liberty had been able to develop. It was the framework within which the modernisation of Europe's feudal monarchies and their economies was taking place. The question facing the Vaud, for Gibbon, was neither the current degree of happiness of its people, nor the intervention by the sovereign in their daily lives. The happiness of a slave, Gibbon argued, could often be the same as that of a citizen. The real question was whether the population of the Vaud was free in the traditional sense, meaning whether it possessed the legal and institutional means to defend its rights against its prince, the sovereign city of Bern, and whether it could embrace a path of economic development that enabled it to maintain its wealth in the midst of that of its monarchical neighbours.

Echoing Rousseau, Gibbon argued that when men entered into civil society they agreed for their individual wills to become merged into a single general will. This became the source of all the laws that regulated social life in particular communities. From the perspective of the general will, in principle it could be said that the enlightened interest of the government of the community would always be congruent with the interest of the people, so that 'in working for them he works for himself [*en travaillant pour eux il travaille pour lui-même*]'.

This was however mere speculative thought, or, as Gibbon put it, 'the language of philosophy [*le langage de la Philosophie*]'.'<sup>56</sup> A number of Bernese thinkers claimed that Bern was exactly this kind of Rousseauian state. Rousseau himself, in a footnote to Book III, chapter 5 of the *Contrat social*, was willing to concede that of all aristocracies Bern came closest to fulfilling the requirements of the

general will, claiming that it ‘maintains itself through the extreme wisdom of its Senate; it is a most honourable and a most dangerous exception’.<sup>57</sup>

Gibbon was not convinced. Even if Bern’s generosity towards its subjects could be interpreted as proof of the sovereign’s good will, the mere fact that all powers were held by a single body meant that the sovereign’s current disposition could never be anything more than a temporary phenomenon. For a condition of liberty to be permanent, ‘each order of citizens, and each part of the state has to have representatives dedicated to opposing any law destructive of their rights, or destructive of their happiness, since they themselves would be the first to recognize the negative consequences of the law [*chaque ordre de Citoyens, chaque partie de l’état y ait ses représentants intéressés à s’opposer à toute loi qui fut nuisible à ses droits, ou contrainte à son Bonheur, puisqu’eux-mêmes en sentiroient les premiers ses mauvais effets*]’.<sup>58</sup> It was because of this separation of powers and representation of the different parts of the state that many European nations had managed to shed the last vestiges of barbarism and become rich and civilised. From this perspective, any attempt to modernise Bern’s republican household, without rectifying the underlying political structure, was bound to fail.

Gibbon’s harsh critique of Bern mellowed over time. Partly this had to do with his elevated social status during the third stay in Lausanne, which brought him into close contact not only with the largely pro-Bernese local aristocracy, but also with the Bernese magistrate Gabriel Albert von Erlach, with whom he maintained close ties of friendship. More importantly, however, after 1789 Gibbon was faced with the rise of a very different kind of republic, a republic that he saw as being far more menacing to its neighbours and far more brutal towards a substantial proportion of its own citizens. Compared to revolutionary France, Bern now seemed a haven of tranquillity and a monument to political prudence. Gibbon’s reappraisal never quite went as far as that of Edmund Burke, who described Bern as ‘one of the happiest, the most prosperous, and the best governed countries upon earth’.<sup>59</sup>

In his *Memoirs* Gibbon, writing in July 1789, accepted that ‘while the Aristocracy of Bern protects the happiness, it is superfluous to enquire whether it be founded in the rights, of man: the oeconomy of the state is liberally supplied without the aid of taxes; and the magistrates *must* reign with prudence and equity, since they are unarmed in the midst of an armed nation’.<sup>60</sup> Gibbon wrote these words after the death of his great

friend; he was concerned that he would increasingly be 'alone in paradise [Lausanne]'. What Gibbon called 'the revolution or rather the dissolution of the Kingdom' had led to a 'swarm of emigrants' escaping from 'the public ruin'. His central worry, however, was that the 'triumphant *Democrates*' of Paris had such extensive local support. As he put it, 'the fanatic missionaries of sedition have scattered the seeds of discontent in our cities and villages, which had flourished above two hundred and fifty years without fearing the approach of war, or feeling the weight of government'. A 'French disease' might well infect the Swiss republics. It amounted to a new and more deadly enemy than any hitherto contemplated. The ideas of the revolutionaries were altogether foolish and were historically without foundation, being 'wild theories of equal and boundless freedom'. In 1789 Gibbon was still sure that the Swiss would be 'faithful to their sovereign and themselves'. He was also sure that domestic rebellion would 'terminate in the ruin of the country', declaring that 'the first stroke of a rebel drum would be the signal of my immediate departure'.<sup>61</sup> Three years later he was much less certain. By the time of his final return to England and his death Gibbon had become convinced that the Swiss republics he had known belonged to a different epoch. A new task had been set for historians, that of understanding how the new French form of republican empire could be made compatible with the existence of a Europe of small independent sovereignties, proud of their history and of their distinctiveness.



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## Notes

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[1](#) Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 86.

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[2](#) Gibbon to Lord Chancellor Loughborough, 23 February 1793, in *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), III, pp. 321–2.

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[3](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 30 May 1791, *Letters*, III, pp. 257–64.

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[4](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 23 August 1792, *Letters*, III, p. 268.

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[5](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 4 April 1792, *Letters*, III, p. 254.

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[6](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 4 April 1792, *Letters*, III, pp. 252–3.

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[7](#) John Holroyd to Gibbon, 17 October 1792, *The Private Letters of Edward Gibbon*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1896), II, p. 321.

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[8](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 12 September 1792, *Letters*, III, pp. 267–70.

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[9](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 5 October 1792, *Letters*, III, pp. 276–7: ‘the malcontents are numerous within the walls, and I question whether the spirit of the citizens would hold out against a bombardment’.

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[10](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 13 October 1792, *Private Letters*, II, pp. 317–18.

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[11](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 27 October 1792, *Letters*, III, pp. 282–6.

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[12](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 10 November 1792, *Letters*, III, pp. 290–2.

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[13](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 25 November 1792, *Letters*, III, p. 303.

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[14](#) Gibbon to Lady Elizabeth Foster, 4 May 1793, *Letters*, III, p. 329.

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[15](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume 1: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 50–71, 167–274.



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[16](#) Henri Vuilleumier, *Histoire de l'église réformée du Pays de Vaud sous le régime bernois*, 4 vols. (Lausanne: La Concorde, 1927–33), Volume iv.

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[17](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 86.

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[18](#) *Ibid.*, p. 210.

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[19](#) Brian Norman, *The Influence of Switzerland on the Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford: SVEC, 2002), pp. 5–20, 62–120, 142–57.

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[20](#) Ernest Gidey, *L'Angleterre dans la vie intellectuelle de la Suisse romande au XVIIIe siècle* (Lausanne: Bibliothèque historique vaudoise, 1974).

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[21](#) Maria-Cristina Pitassi, *De l'Orthodoxie aux lumières: Genève 1670–1737* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1992); Martin I. Klauber, 'The Drive toward Protestant Union in Early Eighteenth-Century Geneva', *Church History* 61 (1992), 334–49; Jennifer Powell McNutt, *Calvin Meets Voltaire: The Clergy of Geneva in the Age of Enlightenment, 1685–1798* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

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[22](#) Abraham Stanyan, *An Account of Switzerland: Written in the Year 1714* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1714), p. 191.

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[23](#) John Campbell, *The Present State of Europe*, 3rd edition (London: Thomas Longman et al., 1752), p. 466.

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[24](#) Edward Gibbon, *Miscellanea Gibboniana: Journal de mon voyage dans quelques endroits de la Suisse, 1755*, eds. Georges A. Bonnard, Gavin De Beer and Louis Junod (Lausanne: Librairie de l'Université, 1952), pp. 12, 18, 33, 38, 41, 61, 64.

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[25](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 27, 33.

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[26](#) *Ibid.*, p. 60.

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[27](#) Norman, *The Influence of Switzerland*, pp. 88–94.

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[28](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 142.

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[29](#) Edward Gibbon, *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Lord Sheffield, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1814), III, pp. 239–330.

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[30](#) *Ibid.*, III, p. 252.

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[31](#) *Ibid.*, III, p. 278.

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[32](#) *Ibid.*, III, p. 280.

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[33](#) *Ibid.*, III, p. 282.

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[34](#) *Ibid.*, III, p. 283.

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[35](#) *Ibid.*, III, p. 299.

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[36](#) Béla Kapossy, ‘Neo-Roman Republicanism and Commercial Society: The Example of Eighteenth-Century Berne’, in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols., eds. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), II, pp. 227–47.

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[37](#) Stefan Altorfer-Ong, *Staatsbildung ohne Steuern: Politische Ökonomie und Staatsfinanzen im Bern des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Baden: Hier und Jetzt, 2010).

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[38](#) Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949–51), II, p. 120.

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[39](#) Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains, et de leur décadence. Nouvelle édition, revue, corrigée et augmentée par l’auteur* (Lausanne: Marc-Michel Bousquet, 1750), p. ix.

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[40](#) Jean Müller, *Essais historiques* (Berlin: G. J. Decker, 1781), p. 73.

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[41](#) *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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[42](#) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

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[43](#) *Ibid.*, p. 82.

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[44](#) Alexander Ludwig von Wattenwyl, *Rede eines Eidgenossen von der Glückseligkeit eines Unterthanen unter einer freien Regierung* (Berne: Wagner, 1765), p. 21.

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[45](#) *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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[46](#) *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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[47](#) Gibbon, *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, p. 56.

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[48](#) *Ibid.*, p. 58.

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[49](#) *Ibid.*, p. 53.

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[50](#) Gibbon, ‘La Lettre de Gibbon sur le gouvernement de Berne’, in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, on p. 125; cf. Norman, *The Influence of Switzerland*, pp. 21–32.

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[51](#) Regula Wyss and Martin Stuber, ‘Paternalism and Agricultural Reform: The Economic Society of Bern in the Eighteenth Century’, in *The Rise of Economic Societies in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Koen Stapelbrok and Jan Marjanen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 157–181; Béla Kapossy, *Iselin contra Rousseau: Sociable Patriotism and the History of Mankind* (Basel: Schwabe, 2006), pp. 103–72.

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[52](#) Pierre Morren, *La Vie lausannoise au XVIIIe siècle, d’après Jean Henri Polier de Vernand, Lieutenant Baillival* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1970), p. 110.

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[53](#) Gibbon, *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, p. 124.

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[54](#) *Ibid.*, p. 131.

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[55](#) *Ibid.*, p. 130.

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[56](#) *Ibid.*, p. 125.

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[57](#) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 93.

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[58](#) Gibbon, *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, p. 126.

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[59](#) Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 9th edition (London: J. Dodsley, 1791), p. 288.

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[60](#) Gibbon, *Memoirs*, p. 185.

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[61](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5.



## Gibbon and Catholicism



**Brian Young<sup>1</sup>**

‘Gibbon’s conversion to Catholicism was characteristically bookish; he knew no Catholic; he read himself into the Catholic Church.’<sup>2</sup> The late J. W. Burrow’s formulation of the sixteen-year-old Gibbon’s experience elegantly characterises the difficulty all commentators have in detailing that short-lived, if traumatic, religious experiment. And in this they are obliged to follow Gibbon’s own economic, rather questionable presentation of the event and its aftermath in the various accounts offered in his fragmentary memoirs. The materials, alas, do not exist to make full sense of Gibbon’s conversion to Catholicism, unless, in common with W. B. Carnochan who interpreted this decision psychoanalytically in terms of Gibbon’s evident sense of isolation and separateness, one is happy to entertain psychological conjecture in their stead.<sup>3</sup> But something of the intellectual environment and consequences of that experience can be reconstructed by an attentive reading of *The Decline and Fall* and allied works.

Lost though the details of Gibbon’s conversion now irrecoverably are, its consequences for Gibbon the historian of Christianity cannot be overestimated. In his classic study of the origins of historicism, Friedrich Meinecke noted that the irreligious Gibbon, along with Montesquieu (and unlike Voltaire and Hume), nonetheless demonstrated an impressive appreciation of the vital role that religion played in the life of any culture. In making this interpretative claim, Meinecke cited an arresting observation made by the great German Jewish philologist Jacob Bernays, an attentive student of Gibbon’s writings. Writing in 1874, Bernays insisted that the emotional power of young man Gibbon’s experience of conversion, reconversion and de-conversion was ultimately to make him an authoritative student of Christian theology, especially in its dogmatic form, and hence his patience in detailing Trinitarian teaching; it was a concern, Bernays insisted, that ‘can only be ascribed to an interest that had cooled down after a period of heat; it could not possibly be the mark of a radical indifference’.<sup>4</sup>

The rhythm of conversion, reconversion and eventual de-conversion identified by Bernays informs much of Gibbon's personal as well as his scholarly history. It would make Gibbon a uniquely authoritative historian of religion, and one intellectually far from the 'indifference' and worse of so many of his contemporaries regarding the subject. Gibbon's experience constitutes an Anglo-French story with significant resonances for eighteenth-century religious and intellectual history.

## The Oxford Convert

To begin, then, with the English dimension. Gibbon utilised the registers and rhetoric of moderate Anglicanism in constructing his literary and scholarly persona, and this allowed him to be pronouncedly critical of Catholicism whilst seeming not to be an enemy of Christianity in its reformed guise; yet, just as he used this persona subtly to undermine the authority of the Church to which he nominally belonged, he even more effectively entertained a sustained assault on Catholicism which quietly undermined the claims and the efficacy of Christianity as a religion altogether.<sup>5</sup> Gibbon's conservative radicalism is all-pervasive in his analysis of Catholicism, as was appreciated by Francis Eyre, the only lay critic to write against chapters 15 and 16 shortly after the appearance of the first volume of *The Decline and Fall*. Eyre, not coincidentally, a member of the recusant gentry, was the first of many Roman Catholic thinkers who challenged Gibbon's history of the early Church, a line which includes such later commentators as the converts John Henry Newman, Ronald Knox and Evelyn Waugh.<sup>6</sup> Roman Catholics, rather more than Protestants, early detected in Gibbon an enterprising and sardonic enemy of all that they held dear. That he had once briefly been one of their own was yet more troubling.

Why might the young Gibbon have converted to the religion which many modern historians insist was the ritually despised 'Other' in resolutely Protestant England?<sup>7</sup> After all, had Gibbon continued to profess his adopted religion he would have been debarred from holding public office; in effect, he would have been obliged to live his life in a form of internal exile. Clearly, a crisis of some sort had precipitated the conversion, just as the conversion itself constituted a crisis. Here one may see the dynamics of doubt that propelled many a Protestant before (and after) Gibbon into the arms of Mother Church. In his life of the poet and physician Samuel Garth, the pious Dr Johnson adverted to the opinion of a contemporary Anglican divine in accounting for rumours that the previously unbelieving Garth had been secretly reconciled to Roman Catholicism: 'It is observed by Lowth, that there is less distance than is thought between scepticism and popery, and that a mind wearied with perpetual doubt, willingly seeks repose in the bosom of an infallible church.'<sup>8</sup> Such a claim could well have been made of a series of seventeenth-century Protestants who, weary of confessional wrangling in an age of religious wars, had converted to Rome: it is quite a litany encompassing writers, artists and thinkers from



across the continent of Europe – Christoph von Grimmelhausen, author of *Simplicissimus*, a classic in the literary reaction to the horrors of the Thirty Years' War; the poets Richard Crashaw, Sir William Davenant and John Dryden; the natural philosopher and courtier Sir Kenelm Digby; the civil war royalist soldier and playwright Sir Samuel Tuke; the artist Jan Vermeer; the scholars Justus Lipsius and Hugo Grotius; the theologians William Chillingworth, Hugh Cressy (whose *Exomologesis* perverted many Anglicans) and David-Augustin de Brueys; the controversialists Pierre Bayle and Matthew Tindal; and, of course, several monarchs and potentates: the Count Palatine Wolfgang Wilhelm of Pfalz-Neuburg, the Landgrave Friedrich of Hesse-Darmstadt, Queen Christina of Sweden, Augustus II, 'the Strong', of Saxony, and Charles II and James II of England, among many.<sup>9</sup>

Roman Catholic apologists ritually intoned these and allied names when lauding the supposedly unchanging truths of their Church, but what is of greater moment is how many of these prominent converts reverted to Protestantism, and of them quite a few became increasingly sceptical of all claims to religious truth being monopolised by Christian churches, of whatever denomination. Confessional recidivism was surprisingly commonplace. Out of just such an experience came a classic of Anglican apologetics, William Chillingworth's *The Religion of Protestants* (1638), but Chillingworth was rumoured to have become increasingly radical, ending his life as a silent critic of Trinitarian orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> At its most intriguingly disreputable, the process of Anglican conversion to Rome and thence to freethinking would have had a spectral local presence for Gibbon the young Oxonian in the figure of Matthew Tindal, a fellow of All Souls, a secular 'Vicar of Bray', who had converted to Catholicism during the reign of James II, when that seemed the politic thing to do, and who gradually abandoned all confessional attachments in favour of the sort of anti-clerical deism that was, at the height of its fashion, to affect the legislative activity and generally freethinking atmosphere of the House of Commons in the 1730s. Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, a spirited, and occasionally scabrous, assault on Scriptural authority, appeared in 1731, two years before his death, and was immediately subject to much notoriety, although, by the 1790s, Burke could rhetorically ask, whoever read Tindal (and his allies) through?<sup>11</sup> The answer was the generation of Gibbon's father; hence, for Edward Gibbon senior especially, the shock of his son's conversion to Catholicism.

It is important, however, to remember just how young Gibbon was when he was received into the Roman Catholic Church, and that what Johnson disparagingly said of Dryden's conversion to Rome could be applied even more strongly to Gibbon:

If men of argument and study can find such difficulties, or such motives, as may either unite them to the church of Rome, or detain them in uncertainty, there can be no wonder that a man, who perhaps never enquired why he was a protestant, should by an artful and experienced disputant be made a papist, overborn by the sudden violence of new and unexpected arguments, or deceived by a representation which shews only the doubts on one part, and only the evidence on the other.<sup>12</sup>

Gibbon was born into a family of religious contrasts. On the one hand, High Church Anglican spirituality had fused with continental mysticism – his aunt Hester lived out her maidenly life in the chaste companionship of the Nonjuring theologian and mystic William Law. On the other, his father had conspicuously led a life of religious indifference – despite, or because of, his early tutelage by Law.<sup>13</sup> The young Magdalen undergraduate, unusually for an eighteenth-century Englishman, was likely to have been uncertain of what exactly constituted a Protestant.<sup>14</sup>

As Gibbon tells the story of his conversion in the various drafts of the *Memoirs*, there was no spiritual pabulum to nourish him at Oxford, and it was a book, Bishop Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes* (1688), which converted him to Rome; his Anglican preceptors were allegedly incapable of saving him from such a persuasive account, one which exactly fitted Dr Johnson's description of doubts and evidence. As David Womersley's contribution to this volume makes clear, however, Gibbon's later claim that the impieties of Conyers Middleton's *A Letter from Rome* (1729) had paradoxically led him to Bossuet's authoritative critique of Protestantism as an endlessly fragmenting heresy is most likely a fictitious recreation of a more complex truth. But, as this chapter will demonstrate, his encounter with Bossuet the castigator of theological multiplicity proved invaluable, as Gibbon matured into the most brilliant chronicler of the internal divisions and fratricidal sectarianism that bedevilled the early church, thereby subverting Bossuet's historical endeavours even as he pursued his own. By turns fascinated and appalled by the fluidities of orthodoxy and the creative

intransigence of ever more resilient heresies, Gibbon the once uncertain Protestant became the most fluent and effective critic of the jealous claims to ultimate truth made by the churches, both Catholic and Reformed. Protestants, who prided themselves on returning to the principles of the primitive church, before it had become recognisably Roman Catholic in form and character, would have been no less horrified than such Catholic apologists as Bossuet by Gibbon's insistence in *The Decline and Fall* that:

It has been remarked with more ingenuity than truth, that the virgin purity of the church was never violated by schism or heresy before the reign of Trajan or Hadrian, about one hundred years after the death of Christ. We may observe with much more propriety, that, during that period, the disciples of the Messiah were indulged in a freer latitude both of faith and practice, than has ever been allowed in succeeding ages.<sup>15</sup>

And note the implied critique of Protestantism in that claim; 'latitude' has clear echoes of the Latitudinarianism that marked the more liberal wing of the Anglican Church, but even that had not been as free as it had pretended. There is a sceptical rather than a Protestant understanding of the primitive church at play here, and whilst its accents look indulgent, or at least permissive, they are at least as much critical as they are approving. Even more provocatively, he would go on to observe that 'the appellation of heretics has always been applied to the less numerous party' (I, 501). The historian can only describe religious phenomena; it is for the theologian to apologise.

At this point the story becomes increasingly French in character, for Gibbon continued to be influenced by a prominent predecessor in the process of conversion and de-conversion: Pierre Bayle.<sup>16</sup> A prominent Huguenot, Bayle had converted to Protestantism, but he rapidly acquired an equivocal reputation for scepticism bordering on unbelief among his contemporaries. In his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Bayle carefully wrote in such a manner as led to his appearing simultaneously a believer to those who wanted him to be one and a sceptic to those who piqued themselves on being able to read between the lines. In opening up Gibbon's references to Bayle, it is worth reflecting on a particularly telling moment in the sixteenth chapter, where Huguenot refugees have been compared disparagingly with primitive Christians, and in which

Gibbon delivered himself of an unusually admonitory comment: ‘See the artful Bossuet ... and the malicious Bayle’ (I, 732 n20). The condemnation of Bossuet, based on the now suspect *Histoire des variations*, might have been expected, but Bayle’s is due to Gibbon having probably correctly attributed to him a text which had been hurtful, if not downright cruel, about the plight of his fellow Protestant refugees. It is a striking moment, and one gravid with the interpretative consequences of Gibbon’s own personal history. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was a critical lodestar in Gibbon’s history of persecution. Bayle’s equivocal behaviour on this matter was, therefore, a huge moral, as well as a scholarly, failure in Gibbon’s eyes.

Generally speaking, however, Bayle is on the side of the angels, and sometimes Gibbon made an implied parallel with himself. He admired, for instance, in Bayle’s article on ‘Marcion’, ‘a curious detail’ that proved a staple of his own historical argument (as it had in that made by Middleton), namely that the heterodox, as well as the orthodox, had had their martyrs (I, 458 n34); similarly, in his detailing of Bayle’s treatment of female martyrs whose chastity had been breached by despoiling persecutors. There is surely a good deal of reflexivity in the historian’s observation that, ‘Bayle has amused himself and his readers on that very delicate subject’ (I, 481 n97). Some of Gibbon’s detractors might also have claimed a parallel where Gibbon would have seen none, when he observes that, ‘The sceptic of Rotterdam exhibits, according to his custom, a strange medley of loose knowledge, and lively wit.’ Gibbon would have recovered himself from such an accusation, as well as Bayle, in the footnote which immediately follows, in which he praises the Huguenot’s ‘acute logic’ (I, 974 n45, n46). It is most frequently as an ancestral citizen of the republic of letters that Gibbon salutes Bayle, especially when such recognition allows him to make an anti-clerical comment; as when he adverts to a Church Father’s slight against the false learning of heathen philosophers, as contrasted with the true knowledge vouchsafed to a Christian mechanic: ‘[Bayle’s] remarks on the presumption of Tertullian are profound and interesting’ (I, 776 n34). It is unsurprising that Gibbon made hay when considering Hilary’s reflections on the decline into unbelief of the oriental clergy: ‘In the celebrated parallel between atheism and superstition, the bishop of Poitiers would have been surprised in the philosophic society of Bayle and Plutarch’ (I, 785 n65). As with Bayle, so with Gibbon, the elision between past and

present often served to undermine the pretensions of the clergy, especially when faced by the criticism of the learned.

Accordingly in condemning Ambrose's having opposed the rights of heathen philosophers to teach publicly, Gibbon commended both Bayle and Barbeyrac, who 'have justly condemned the archbishop' (II, 58 n92). In the same vein, Gibbon approved the 'laudable' sentiments voiced by 'the sceptic Bayle' against the persecutions of non-Christians made by prominent clergy in the early church (II, 111 n33). Most striking, however, is how Gibbon distanced himself from Augustine: 'the celebrated Bayle ... has noted, with superfluous diligence and ingenuity, the arguments, by which the bishop of Hippo justified, in his old age the persecution of the Donatists' (II, 282 n20). Elsewhere, Bayle is called on as a sound mediator between Protestant and sceptical criticism of Catholicism, as in his observations on a text desiring that Gregory the Great reign in an eternal kingdom as he had on earth: 'This base flattery, the topic of protestant invective, is justly censured by the philosopher Bayle'; the mediation is succinctly and exactly expressed (II, 903 n48). Sceptical ex-converts to Roman Catholicism were united in their indictment of the papacy, and it would be superfluous – almost an act of supererogation – to cite Gibbon's frequent exercise of wit and invective against that particular institution.

The sort of conjectural histories of saint worship that Bayle encouraged, and which were to be developed by Middleton in his *Letter from Rome*, were, however, and surprisingly perhaps, quietly censured by Gibbon, as in his remark that: 'In his article on NESTORIUS, Bayle has scattered some loose philosophy on the worship of the Virgin Mary' (II, 948 n36). When Gibbon recalled the gestation of his history as he watched the barefoot friars walk across the temple of Jupiter, he was noting declension and difference, and not merely the trace elements of heathenism: the style of conjecture of earlier sceptical critics of Roman Catholicism, such as Bayle and Middleton, was not one he shared. An indication of this sense of distance occurs in the next reference to Bayle, when, once again, the historian censures the philosopher, the *érudit*, the *proto-philosophe*: 'In the article Mahomet, Bayle has shewn how indifferently wit and philosophy supply the absence of genuine information' (III, 190 n110). Similarly, when treating of Arabic invasions of Merovingian France, an appreciative castigation is deployed: 'The Dictionary of Bayle ... has more merit for lively reflection than original

research' (III, 333 n25). It is striking, however, that it is as a critic of Islam that Bayle is chastised; as an opponent of Rome he is consistently praised, along with his fellow Protestant Le Clerc, as in their remarks on Gregory VII, on whom the reader will 'as usual find some instruction in Le Clerc ... and much amusement in Bayle' (III, 504 n83).

When associated with others, Bayle's confessional identity becomes a matter of note, as when the factitious history of Pope Joan is mentioned: 'She has been annihilated by two learned Protestants, Blondel and Bayle' (III, 138 n132). Bayle's identity as a sceptic and a Protestant was variously appealed to by Gibbon as apologetic occasion demanded. The flexibility of two ex-converts to Catholicism who were subsequently to be accused of scepticism was, therefore, mutually reinforcing in the logic of *The Decline and Fall*. Consider here one of the last references to Bayle, where Gibbon regrets that 'the spirit of bigotry might often discern a serious impiety in the sportive play of fancy and learning' (III, 909 n117). Reflexivity is the order of the day. Nonetheless, in the final appearance of Bayle, the contrast between the proto-*philosophe* and the ecclesiastical historian is drawn, here by invoking Gibbon's greatest Lutheran contemporary: 'The wicked wit of Bayle was amused in composing, with much levity and learning, the articles of ABÉLARD, FOULQUES, HELOISE, in his Dictionnaire Critique. The dispute of Abelard and St. Bernard, of scholastic and positive divinity, is well understood by Mosheim' (III, 987 n21). Sceptical wit and Christian scholarship were discriminated in *The Decline and Fall*, even if both are integral, indeed fundamental, to its argument and style.

## Scepticism and Jansenism

The journey from Protestantism to Catholicism and thence to scepticism was, then, a familiar itinerary in the intellectual history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Here one might consider another Protestant convert to Catholicism who reverted to his native Protestantism before shading off into an altogether idiosyncratic form of natural religion: Rousseau. Although Gibbon had little time for Rousseau – the civil religion advocated in *Du contrat social* smacked of enthusiasm, and worse, to anti-clericals of Gibbon's post-religious sensibility – there is another point of contact between the two men: their affinities with Jansenism.<sup>17</sup> Jansenism was essentially a revival of the teaching of St Augustine on predestination and grace. Much of its impetus was owed to unease on the part of theologians regarding the position on free will adopted by the Jesuits, especially as promoted by Luis de Molina (1525–1600); Jansenists were also critical of aspects of the papacy, leading to suspicions on the part of the Church hierarchy that would be resolved in a papal bull, *Unigenitus*, promulgated in 1713, condemning many tenets of Jansenist teaching as heretical in tendency. If its intellectual golden age was in the seventeenth century, its political influence was stronger in the eighteenth century; many historians attribute much of the impetus of the origin of the French Revolution to its teachings.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Jansenism, as Gabriel Glickman has recently shown, was a current in much of the lay (and clerical) piety of English Catholicism; if Gibbon had remained an English convert, he would likely have become steeped in such theology.<sup>19</sup>

Gibbon's early admiration of Pascal's *Les Provinciales* – the frequent re-reading of which gave him recurrent lessons in 'grave and temperate irony, even on subjects of Ecclesiastical solemnity' – put him in regular contact with Jansenist thought at its most satirically intense. *Les Provinciales* (1657), translated as the *Provincial Letters*, were designed to illustrate the supposed moral laxity of the Jesuits who were alleged by Pascal and his fellow Jansenists to use compromising ethics as a means of securing control over powerful members of the laity who resented the moral rigour of Jansenist confessors; and he did so by quoting liberally from Jesuit confession manuals in *Les Provinciales*. Although Gibbon first makes reference to *Les Provinciales* as late as 1762, he notes in his autobiography that he had read them when studying under Pavillard in Lausanne;

they were a natural text for one supposed to be making the move away from a Jansenist-inflected form of Catholicism towards a Calvinist-inflected form of Protestantism. But he read them, he tells his readers, alongside a more ostensibly serious but notably credulous account by the abbé de la Bléterie of a miracle alleged to have accompanied the apostate emperor Julian's sacrilegious attempt at rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem and Giannone's sceptical civil history of Naples.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the company Pascal's letters kept in his journal entry for 1 October 1762 is revealing; he compared Pascal's work with Erasmus's *Ciceronians*, a playful but seriously scholarly attack on medieval Latinists, noting how the latter work was composed with 'that exquisite humor, of which the *Lettres provinciales* offers so fine a specimen'; Erasmus, in common with Pascal, 'ridicules' a theological party 'by a bare exposition of those maxims which' said party 'venerated and practised'.<sup>21</sup> And what Pascal said against the Jesuits in the *Lettres provinciales* applies again and again to Gibbon's comments on religious extremism throughout *The Decline and Fall*: 'En vérité, mes Pères, il y a bien de la difference entre rire de la religion, et rire de ceux qui la profanent par leurs opinions extravagantes' ('Indeed, Fathers, there is a lot of difference between laughing at religion and laughing at those who profane it by their extravagant opinions').<sup>22</sup>

The young Gibbon, even when recuperating from his conversion, remained an admirer of the Jansenist community of pious laymen and women associated with the convent of Port Royal, praising it as 'that learned society which contributed so much to establish in France a taste for just reasoning, simplicity of style, and Philosophical method'.<sup>23</sup> There was a natural connection between Calvinist Lausanne and the Jansenism of Port-Royal: the Augustinian girding both of Calvinism and Jansenism remained significant during the Enlightenment; and John Robertson, a leading student of the Enlightenment, has been especially attentive to the Augustinian moment as this informed debate about the nature of human sociability at the close of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> Gibbon knew how to observe its patterns, whether recovered from Pascal or from his fellow Jansenist, the ecclesiastical historian Tillemont, on whose sure-footed, if mulish, authority he based so much of his strictly factual argument when discussing the history of the Church in *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>25</sup>

Pascal was more than an incidental influence on Gibbon; he marks a confluence between serious Roman Catholic and serious Protestant reflection on the Augustinian



routes of orthodoxy. *Les Provinciales* was translated into English in 1657, immediately after its original appearance in French.<sup>26</sup> And nor was this the only route taken by Anglo-French religious concord in the decades immediately before Gibbon's birth; recognising that the Gallican Church settlement was akin to the quasi-erastian alliance between the Church of England and the English state, the French statesman Cardinal Fleury had looked to William Wake, archbishop of Canterbury, for a *rapprochement* between the two churches in the 1710s; Anglicans were keen to demonstrate the catholicity of their church just as the French were openly marking their distance from the papacy as a temporal power. Anglo-French religious exchanges were, then, much more frequent than more modern preconceptions regarding confessional rivalry might otherwise suggest, and it is most interesting to discover that, very shortly before Wake was to look favourably on Gallicanism, a High Churchman, Joseph Bingham, published a polemical text, written to counter Dissenting identification with the French Protestant Church, which Bingham was careful to point out, was more properly the sister communion of the Church of England.<sup>27</sup> Gibbon's indebtedness to Bingham's *Origines ecclesiasticae*, manifest at various points in *The Decline and Fall*, is nowhere more so polemically present with confessional force than when he contrasts his work on the Eucharist with that of a Catholic historian: 'but as, on this subject, the Papist may reasonably be suspected, a Protestant reader will depend with more confidence on the learned Bingham' (I, 745 n63). But note how it is only 'more confidence' that is felt; by the time he wrote that note, Gibbon was a sceptic, if a Protestant one, and unlike such commentators as Bingham, he was temperamentally wary of 'the suspicious evidence of ecclesiastical history' (I, 578). The subject that had once converted him to Roman Catholicism was now the strongest element in his increasingly sceptical historical sensibility.

In making sense of the young Gibbon's original conversion, then, one must be much more attentive to such confessional complications than many historians have hitherto been. The soundly Anglican Bingham, for one, would not have found the elder Edward Gibbon's strategy of sending his son to Lausanne for Protestant reclamation quite as odd as some later historians have done. After all, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had corresponded with the Swiss Protestant churches in the early 1700s precisely because of their fears of the possible ambitions of the Gallican Church.<sup>28</sup> What was unusual, if not unique, about

Gibbon was that his experience left him open to a plethora of Anglo-French religious influences.

Thus it was natural that the reaction to such exposure to so many of Europe's Christian traditions should lead to scepticism. Despite what he may have owed to Pascal as a thinker and a literary technician, for instance, Gibbon reacted strongly against the piety of that 'superior genius' who had attested to the veracity of a miracle; and one should note how effective the temporal distancing is in Gibbon's evocation of that alleged occurrence, a distancing which, by prolepsis, includes his younger self and his then religious avocations:

About the middle of the last age, an inveterate ulcer was touched and cured by an holy prickle of the holy crown: the prodigy is attested by the most pious and enlightened Christians of France; nor will the fact be easily disproved, except by those who are armed with a general antidote against religious credulity.

(III, 721 and n53)

In this instance, the repetition of 'holy' only undermines the claims; it is far from being celebratory. By the time he came to compose *The Decline and Fall* scepticism had prevailed against religious belief. Nevertheless, it is important to realise that, whilst Gibbon might very frequently excoriate religion, he did not ritually castigate theology as such, but he looked on it as an intellectual, not as a believer. Late in the fifth volume of *The Decline and Fall* he made a decidedly ecumenical observation regarding a style of theology, both Catholic and Protestant, but it is important to notice that its strength disappears in the generation immediately before his own: 'Erasmus may be considered as the father of rational theology. After a slumber of an hundred years, it was revived by the Arminians of Holland, Grotius, Limborch, and Le Clerc: in England by Chillingworth, the latitudinarians of Cambridge ... Tillotson, Clarke, Hoadley, &c.' (III, 438 n38). As J. G. A. Pocock has so trenchantly observed, much of Gibbon's learning was already old-fashioned by the time he came to compose *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>29</sup> But much of his philosophical acumen was rather more up-to-date, and more typical of his turn away from his adolescent Catholicism to his mature scepticism was his observation on the nature of polytheism made early in the first volume: 'The best commentary may be

found in Mr. Hume's Natural History of Religion; and the best contrast in Bossuet's Universal History' (I, 57 n53).

And for all the approving reference to Erasmian theology, theological latitude was never part of Gibbon's own felt religious convictions, but was only ever critically admired by him externally; he was, as a young man, suspended between Anglo-French Jansenism and the Calvinism of Lausanne, and his subsequent sceptical distance from both is visible in his simultaneously withering and appreciative evaluation of Augustine's theological achievement:

But he possessed a strong, capacious, argumentative mind; he boldly sounded the dark abyss of grace, predestination, free-will, and original sin, and the rigid system of Christianity which he framed or restored, has been entertained, with public applause, and secret reluctance, by the Latin church.

(II, 286)

It is worth citing the appended footnote in full, as in it lies all that is at the core of the present chapter's argument, revealing, as it does, a series of ambiguities and paradoxes that at once appalled and amused Gibbon, the disabused chronicler of religious folly:

The church of Rome has canonised Augustin, and reprobated Calvin. Yet as the *real* difference between them is invisible to a theological microscope; the Molinists are oppressed by the authority of the saint, and the Jansenists are disgraced by their resemblance to the heretic. In the mean while the Protestant Arminians stand aloof, and deride the mutual flexibility of the disputants ... Perhaps a reasoner still more independent, may smile in *his* turn, when he peruses an Arminian Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans.

(II, 286 n31)

It is irony worthy of Pascal, who, as a natural philosopher, would probably have baulked at the image of a 'theological microscope', but in common with his Jansenist mentor, Gibbon laughs more at theologians than at theology, more at priests than at religion. By historicising dogma, both in more remote and more modern eras, Gibbon released himself from its supposed authority. The same process can be discerned in allied

comments on church government, to various forms of which the young Gibbon had conformed with equally varying degrees of ingenuousness: ‘The government of the church has often been the subject as well as the prize of religious contention. The hostile disputants of Rome, of Paris, of Oxford, and of Geneva, have alike struggled to reduce the primitive and apostolic model, to the respective standards of their own policy’ (I, 483). And how charged is that word ‘policy’!

Indebtedness to Jansenism was, then, more than compensated by Gibbon occasionally and effectively marking a critical distance from it: few things could have so disgusted the mature historian as the teaching of the Church (both Catholic and Protestant) that even ‘the wisest and most virtuous’ of heathens would be eternally condemned, a matter which Jansenists, ‘who have so diligently studied the works of the fathers’, particularly maintained with ‘distinguished zeal’. And here Gibbon notes how ‘the learned M. de Tillemont never dismisses a virtuous emperor without pronouncing his damnation’ (I, 470 and n70). And just as one can measure Gibbon’s progress from ‘superstition’ to scepticism (as he himself put it in regard to Chillingworth and Bayle) in his relations with Bayle, so one can equally measure Gibbon’s reversion from Jansenism in his amused reflections on Tillemont.<sup>30</sup> To cite but two further moments: in mocking Tillemont’s misinterpretation of a dream of the superstitious Severus, Gibbon deploys his favoured mode of sexual innuendo against the blameless celibate: ‘Did M. de Tillemont imagine that marriages were *consummated* in the temple of Venus at Rome?’ In a locution which Gibbon favoured when relegating sexual depravity to his own notes, he quietly observed (in a footnote) of Tillemont’s treatment of St Cyril, that the Jansenist treats the theologically inconsistent saint’s ‘memory with tenderness and respect’ (I, 149 n3), with the result that he ‘has thrown his virtues into the text, and his faults into the notes, in decent obscurity at the end of the volume’ (I, 888 n69). It took a sceptic to recover them from such ‘decent obscurity’.

Informing all of Gibbon’s treatment of orthodoxy and heterodoxy is his conviction that such distinctions lead only to persecution, and the central theme of much of his history is that which concludes the sixteenth chapter, in which he laments that Christians have persecuted one another much more effectively and much more cruelly than did any of the heathen emperors (I, 580–1). In this exercise in comparative atrocity, the Christians win hands down; what is more, as his citation of Tillemont proved, they

continued the persecution into eternity, as heathens and pagans, righteous or otherwise, were condemned precisely and only because they had had the supposed misfortune to have thrived before the politic Constantine Christianised the Roman Empire. And hence much of the interpretative power of his subsequent observation concerning events immediately prior to Constantine's conversion to Christianity: 'The Protestant and philosophic readers of the present age will incline to believe that, in the account of his own conversion, Constantine attested a wilful falsehood by a solemn and deliberate perjury' (I, 742). Gibbon had more than earned his status as a consummate analyst of conversion.

## History and Christianity

The worldly Gibbon noted how, just as Constantine's politic conversion Christianised the western world, so politics and religion were to grow inseparable, with enormously destructive consequences. His most telling observation regarding the papacy can look both Protestant and sceptical, yet it was also entirely compatible with a Jansenist indictment of that institution as having succumbed to the lures of temporal power and riches. Coming as it does at the close of the second volume of *The Decline and Fall*, it similarly marks the meridian of Gibbon's own critique:

This lively picture of the wealth and luxury of the popes in the fourth century, becomes the more curious, as it represents the intermediate degree, between the humble poverty of the apostolic fisherman, and the royal state of a temporal prince, whose dominions extend from the confines of Naples to the banks of the Po.

(I, 988)

And it was not only popes who were so corrupted; so also were scholars, as witness his damning appeal to a French cleric akin to the Bossuet who had originally converted the young historian to Rome:

A life of Theodosius the Great was composed in the last century ... to inflame the mind of the young Dauphin with Catholic zeal. The author, Flechier, afterwards Bishop of Nismes, was a celebrated preacher; and his history is adorned, or tainted, with pulpit eloquence; but he takes his learning from Baronius, and his principles from St. Ambrose and St. Augustin.

(I, 1071 n104)

Yet again, Gibbon's sceptical account of the relationship between Christianity and history resolves itself into a covert autobiography by someone uniquely exposed to all the forces of Anglo-French religious experience, from conversion to unbelief.

It is fitting, then, that Gibbon's first lay critic should have shared a similar background, although his was that of a cradle rather than a convert Roman Catholic. Francis Eyre, some five years Gibbon's junior, and from a similar landed background

(and with yet stronger Jacobite elements than Gibbon's family), had studied at St Omer in France and the Jesuit academy at Liège, returning to England as Gibbon himself was returning to the Protestant fold in Lausanne.<sup>31</sup> Francophone culture had both briefly converted the older man and confirmed the younger in his faith; subsequently, it also helped to de-convert the elder of the two English Catholics. It is all the more interesting, therefore, that Eyre was first inspired into print when provoked by the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of *The Decline and Fall*. There is little in his reply, *A Few Remarks on the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, that is not to be found in the more prolix and consciously scholarly responses made by the squadron of Anglican clerics to whom Gibbon was also to reply in turn in his *Vindication*.<sup>32</sup> What is immediately striking, however, is a passing slight on Gibbon's abilities as a French speaker in a studied refutation, as Eyre observes that 'the allusion to St. Peter's name is not exact in the French; Le Pierre and La Pierre differ just as much in the Latin, Petrus and Petra'.<sup>33</sup> A common culture was used, casually but damningly, against the presumed authority of the historian. Slight though this might seem, it was indicative of a testy disavowal of Gibbon's abilities as a scholar, as were the much stronger claims made alongside it.

Eyre defended the Christian bishop Theophilus's refusal to procure a miraculously resurrected man in order to satisfy the heathen philosopher Autolychus of the truths of his faith (it has to be said that Eyre does this on not entirely convincing grounds, but that would have been a tall order for anyone). As a Catholic, Eyre naturally defended the continuance of miracles into the modern age, and he also attempted to skewer Gibbon's celebrated comment on St Augustine's conversion to his mother's Christian faith, by observing that 'a progress from reason to faith is absurd. Faith and reason are concomitant, inseparable.'<sup>34</sup> He also challenged Gibbon's use of classical sources, suggesting that he had distorted Tacitus to suit his purposes, just as he questioned the supposed moral authority of Seneca, 'an enthusiastic advocate of suicide'.<sup>35</sup> But where Eyre was most provoked by Gibbon, and where he in turn most provoked Gibbon, was in terms of confessional power politics. He defended both Charles V and Louis XIV from Gibbon's accusations of religious despotism, and turned the charge instead against one of the historian's heathen idols. Accusing Marcus Aurelius of prejudice in ignoring the patent virtues of the Christians whom he persecuted, Eyre concluded that: 'As a

philosopher then he could not *despise* the Christians, and since he punished them, it proves that he was a superstitious bigot, which was his real character, though in some other respects he was a great man.’<sup>36</sup> Eyre, the learned Catholic gentleman, had thereby frontally assaulted the totem of much that Enlightened historians of the ancient world held dear.

By this stage of his career, Gibbon had little time for the likes of Eyre, whose decision to remain anonymous in *A Few Remarks* led to some sharp comments regarding his conduct in the closing pages of Gibbon’s lacerating *Vindication*. Gibbon emphatically distanced himself from a modern practising Catholic in strong, if ambivalently, Protestant terms:

There lies between us a broad and unfathomable gulf; and the heavy mist of prejudice and superstition, which has in a great measure been dispelled by the free inquiries of the present age, still continue to involve the mind of my adversary ... and the resentment which he points against me, might frequently be extended to the most enlightened of the PROTESTANT, or, in his opinion, of the HERETICAL critics.

Gibbon plainly enjoyed the ambiguity of that identification. He also chose to shelter behind the authority of two great Protestant ecclesiastical historians, Mosheim and Le Clerc, in defending his version of the third century, and he adverted to an era of religious war and the origins of the Huguenot refuge when he observes that, ‘The man who refuses to judge of the conduct of Lewis XIV and Charles V towards their Protestant subjects, declares himself incapable of distinguishing the limits of persecution and toleration.’<sup>37</sup> The distance between the believer and the ex-convert could not have been more firmly instantiated, but Eyre could not resist his own reply, during which he observed polemically that whether Gibbon’s inquiries had ‘terminated in a system of *religion* or *irreligion*, I leave to the readers of his history to determine’: Gibbon’s journey from conversion to scepticism had been openly identified by his Catholic opponent.<sup>38</sup>

Eyre had questioned the parallel Gibbon had drawn between Charles V and Diocletian; so unimpressed was Gibbon by this rebuke, that, in a subsequent volume of



*The Decline and Fall*, he returned to a further, decidedly less flattering parallel, this time between Charles V and Alaric the Goth in their sackings of Rome (II, 208). More damningly, the two modern sovereigns had originally been invoked by Gibbon in order retrospectively to palliate the Christian persecutions undertaken by the Roman magistrates, as he noticed that: ‘From their reflections, or even from their own feelings, a Charles V or a Louis XIV might have acquired a just knowledge of the rights of conscience, of the obligations of faith, and of the innocence of error’ (I, 524). Toleration was at the core of Gibbon’s argument in *The Decline and Fall*, and it had decidedly Protestant origins. Chief of its proponents, in his litany, had been a fellow Protestant renegade: ‘I am sorry to observe, that the three writers of the last age, by whom the rights of toleration have been so nobly defended, Bayle, Leibnitz, and Locke, are all laymen and philosophers’ (III, 438 n39). This was the true product not only of Bayle’s experience of conversion, and reconversion, but of Gibbon’s also. Gibbon’s double experience as a convert and an apostate lies at the heart of the sceptical apologetic that underpins much of the historical and philosophical logic of *The Decline and Fall*. In this sense, his history is a fusion of both pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment thought. It was philosophers who promoted toleration, and priests who fomented persecution.

## The Consolations of Scholarship

In a footnote to the sixty-sixth chapter of *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon observed of a recently published *Vie de Petrarque* a celebrated and learned account of Petrarch composed by a louche clergyman, the uncle of the even more notorious Marquis de Sade, that, ‘The abbé de Sade treats him with the most indulgence; but *he* is a gentleman as well as a priest’ (III, 867 n4). That lapidary conjunction (neither part of which applies to a later eighteenth-century bearer of the abbé’s noble name), economically reflects Gibbon’s relations with the Christians of his own and all preceding ages. It is a cliché of Gibbon scholarship that his was a condescending attitude to religion as constituting a moral, social and political necessity for those lacking either gentlemanly breeding or polite intelligence (if, indeed, the two could be neatly separated in his mind), and that, consequently, as a gentleman and an unbeliever, he never understood, let alone appreciated, the true vitality of religion, especially of Christianity. In this regard, he is held to be a prisoner of both his age and his social status. What has been argued here, on the contrary, is that it was precisely the complex dynamic at play between the values of a man of culture and refinement and those of a clerical caste which determined much of Gibbon’s consideration of Christianity, and on religion more generally. The abbé de Sade – long involved in a *ménage à trois* and widely known as ‘the priest of Epicurus’ – was presented by Gibbon not so much as a living paradox, but rather as a fascinating demonstration of the genuine openness of the republic of letters: it was, for Gibbon, possible – if only just possible – to be both a gentleman *and* a priest, but the history of the Church demonstrated that this was not as likely as he might otherwise have liked it to have been.<sup>39</sup>

What Gibbon raises in this pregnant footnote is a much more radical question than the one imputed to him by promoters of the usual clichés about his interpretative and experiential failings, and it is one that haunted his scholarly successors rather more than it had concerned his predecessors, or even many of his contemporaries: is it possible to be a disinterested scholar *and* a Christian? Bayle, seemingly, had thought not, and this divided scholars in the republic of letters more than is often appreciated. Burke, on the other hand, whose conservative and clerical reaction against the French Revolution attracted Gibbon’s approbation, despite their pronounced religious differences, firmly

answered that question in the affirmative.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, for Burke, not to be a Christian was not to be a gentleman, and true scholarship was emphatically Christian.

Gibbon's rejection of Christianity, in common with Bayle's, was far from being unconsidered. For Gibbon, a puritanical, life-denying existence of the sort promoted by primitive Christianity and its immediate successor church was simply unacceptable, not least because it led, inevitably, to hypocrisy; he understood, therefore, why Pascal hated the Jesuits, but he could not live according to the dictates of such austere moral rigour as that in turn promoted by the lay Jansenist. The Jesuits, in Pascal's estimation, were so dedicated to the gentry and the nobility that they undermined their own calling as priests; Gibbon, self-consciously a gentleman, doubted that his values could or would be defended by priests, whose own morality was to him as frequently and mordantly doubtful as it had been, more sorrowfully, for Pascal. Where Pascal maintained faith with Augustine, Gibbon moved a long way from him; his concern was decidedly with the earthly rather than the heavenly kingdom.<sup>41</sup> Gibbon's was a nostalgic evocation of the values of ancient rather than of papal Rome, and here he was notably distant from the contemporary he increasingly admired, Burke – reared as an Anglican by his Protestant-convert father in an Ireland in which Catholicism was largely shaped by Jansenism – and also from those religiously motivated counter-revolutionaries who wrote after him, including Francis Eyre, who wrote a defence of Christianity against French revolutionary impiety in 1795.<sup>42</sup> Gibbon memorably stated his position in a letter to Lord Sheffield of February 1791: 'Burke's book is a most admirable medicine against the French disease ... I admire his eloquence, I approve his politics, I adore his chivalry, and I can even forgive his superstition. The primitive Church, which I have treated with some freedom, was itself at that time, an innovation, and *I* was attached to the old Pagan establishment.'<sup>43</sup>

In the early 1790s, Gibbon's conservatism was so reactionary as almost to be revolutionary, but not quite. Gibbon's gentlemanly values were quickly outmoded by reactions against the French Revolution; where the English had once espied only supercilious and superstitious French Catholics, they increasingly recognised persecuted European Christians, many of whom were popularly considered to have been martyred by the atheist enthusiasm of the Terror, of whose horrific extremes Burke was quickly adduced as a prophet. Within four years of Gibbon's death, Eyre would write a piece

concerning the common cause that united Anglicans and Roman Catholics, celebrating the fact that, despite the occasional attack from ultra-Protestant writers, they were closer than they had ever been before.<sup>44</sup> Times were rapidly changing: in 1794, the year in which Gibbon died, a community of émigré French Benedictines was allowed to do something hitherto unthinkable in post-Reformation England: they founded, on a promontory in Dorset, a monastery, the very cynosure of all that Gibbon had abhorred about Roman Catholicism.<sup>45</sup>

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## Notes

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[1](#) I am grateful to Mishtooni Bose, Ksenia Levina, Laura Lambert, Deborah Madden and Noël Sugimura for their characteristically careful readings of the chapter.

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[2](#) J. W. Burrow, *Gibbon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 7.

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[3](#) W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 6, 12–14, 146–8, 152–3. See also David Womersley, 'Gibbon's Apostasy', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* **11** (1988), 51–70.

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[4](#) 'Gibbon's aufweist, muthet sich nur die nach Erhitzung abgekühlte, nicht die von Hausa us kalte Indifferenz zu', in Jacob Bernays, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen*, ed. H. Usener, 2 vols. (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1885), II, p. 215.

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[5](#) See B. W. Young, "'Scepticism in Excess": Gibbon and Eighteenth-Century Christianity', *Historical Journal* **41** (1998), 179–99.

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[6](#) See Brian Young, 'Gibbon, Newman, and the Religious Accuracy of the Historian', in *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Studies*, ed. David Womersley (Oxford: SVEC, 1997), pp. 309–30, and 'Preludes and Postludes to Gibbon: Variations on an Impromptu by J. G. A. Pocock', *History of European Ideas* **35** (2009), 418–32.

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[7](#) For a classic statement of this case, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 11–54, and for criticism, see Brian Young, 'A History of Variations: The Identity of the Eighteenth-Century Church of England', in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland c. 1650 – c. 1850*, eds. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 105–28. Gibbon's experience was by no means unique: see Eamon Duffy, "'Poor Protestant Flies": Conversions to Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England', *Studies in Church History* **15** (1978), 289–304.

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[8](#) Samuel Johnson, 'Garth', in *Lives of the Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), II, p. 197.

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<sup>9</sup> See Andreas Raß, *Die Convertiten seit der Reformation nach ihrem Leben und ihren Schriften dangeselt*, 13 vols. (Freiburg, 1866–80). For a sensitive analysis of the consequences of such conversions in the arts, see Daniel Arasse, *Vermeer: Faith in Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

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<sup>10</sup> Robert R. Orr, *Reason and Authority: The Thought of William Chillingworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 81, 97–9, 196–200; Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 75–6. Gibbon believed such claims: *Autobiographies*, pp. 89–91, 129.

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<sup>11</sup> See B. W. Young, ‘Matthew Tindal’, in *ODNB*.

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson, ‘Dryden’, in *Lives of the Poets*, 11, pp. 102–3.

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<sup>13</sup> B. W. Young, ‘William Law and the Christian Economy of Salvation’, *English Historical Review* 109 (1994), 308–22.

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<sup>14</sup> Such was the view of John Evans, a Baptist minister and controversialist, who reached this conclusion from a reading of Lord Sheffield’s edition of the *Memoirs: An Attempt to Account for the Infidelity of the Late Edward Gibbon* (London, 1797), pp. 10–17.

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), 1, p. 457. Further references will be cited by volume, page and occasionally note number, in parentheses in the text.

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1896), pp. 91–3, 129, 229, 297, 395.

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<sup>17</sup> See the important essay by Christopher Brooke, ‘Rousseau’s Political Philosophy: Stoic and Augustinian Origins’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 94–123.

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<sup>18</sup> For authoritative analysis, see John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 11, pp. 345–508, 661–78, and Dale van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French*

*Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

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[19](#) Gabriel Glickman, *The English Catholic Community, 1688–1745* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 15–16, 175–88, 224–9, 238–9, 249–51.

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[20](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 143.

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[21](#) *Gibbon’s Journal to January 28th, 1763*, ed. D. M. Low (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), p. 151.

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[22](#) Pascal, 11th Letter, in *The Provincial Letters*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 163–4.

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[23](#) *Gibbon’s Journal*, p. 135.

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[24](#) John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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[25](#) See Carnochan, *Gibbon’s Solitude*, pp. 85–8; Jordan, *Gibbon and his Roman Empire*, pp. 123–58, and ‘LeNain de Tillemont: Gibbon’s “sure-footed mule”’, *Church History* **39** (1970), 483–502.

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[26](#) Ruth Clarke, *Strangers and Sojourners at Port-Royal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. 101–15; Richard Parish, ‘Les Traductions en langue anglaise: des *Lettres provinciales* de Pascal’, *La Campagne des Provinciales, Chroniques de Port-Royal* 58 (Paris, 2008), pp. 199–210.

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[27](#) Young, ‘A History of Variations’; Joseph Bingham, *The French Churches Apology for the Church of England* (London, 1706).

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[28](#) Eamon Duffy, “‘Correspondence fraterne’: The SPCK, the SPG, and the Churches of Switzerland in the War of the Spanish Succession’, *Studies in Church History Subsidia* **2** (1979), 251–80.

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[29](#) A subject which suffuses the six volumes to date of J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2015).

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[30](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 89.

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[31](#) Eyre married a daughter of the Earl of Derwentwater, who had been executed for Jacobitism; the Eyres of Hassop Hall, Derbyshire, were involved in support for the '15; see Glickman, *The English Catholic Community*, pp. 83, 131.

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[32](#) On whom see David Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The Historian and his Reputation 1776–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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[33](#) [Francis Eyre], *A Few Remarks on the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1778), p. 30, *contra* *The Decline and Fall*, I, 489 n123.

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[34](#) Eyre, *A Few Remarks*, pp. 20–21; 14–15 *contra* *The Decline and Fall*, I, 459 n37.

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[35](#) Eyre, *A Few Remarks*, pp. 4, 9–10, 35, 37, 40–6, 52, 58, 60–1.

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[36](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 109–11.

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[37](#) Gibbon, *A Vindication*, in *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia Craddock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 310–11.

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[38](#) [Francis Eyre], *A Short Appeal to the Public* (London, 1779), p. 10.

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[39](#) On the learned abbé, see Maurice Lever, *Marquis de Sade: A Biography*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 15–16, 55–8.

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[40](#) See Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, pp. 207–40.

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[41](#) On Pascal's treatment of this classic Augustinian theme, see his 14th Letter, in *The Provincial Letters*, pp. 218–19.

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[42](#) Francis Eyre, *A Letter to a Friend on the Late Revolution in France* (London, 1791); *Letters to a Friend on the Late Revolution in France* (London, 1792); *A Short Essay on the Christian Religion* (London, 1795).

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[43](#) J. E. Norton (ed.), *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), III, p. 216.

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[44](#) Francis Eyre, *A Reply to the Rev. Ralph Churton* (London, 1798), pp. 469–94.

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[45](#) Dominic Aidan Bellinger, ““A standing miracle”: La Trappe at Lulworth 1794–1817”, *Studies in Church History* **22** (1985), 345–50.



## Gibbon's Style in *The Decline and Fall*



**Fred Parker**

It might be thought unfortunate to devote a separate chapter to Gibbon's style, as if the manner of his writing could be bracketed off from his inquiries and achievements as thinker and historian. The justification for such a focus lies, in part, in its value as a corrective. If Gibbon used once to be read only 'for his style', that deadly emphasis has been swept away by the stream of recent work bringing out the complexity of his intellectual vision and his relation to eighteenth-century thought. Such is the interest of this work, that it is possible to forget that Gibbon's thinking is realised only through and in the way he writes, and that his style may itself be a mode of intelligence or understanding. As Roy Porter noted, being bilingual, Gibbon was well placed to understand how 'thought is a function of language'.<sup>1</sup> A full consideration of Gibbon's thought or his place in intellectual history must acknowledge that paraphrase or summary can only go so far, and will attend to the effect on the mind of the words Gibbon uses.

This implies seeking for aspects of Gibbon's historical vision and method that have a resonance in the way he writes. Here we may begin with the notion of *balance*. In a footnote on Mosheim's ecclesiastical history, he writes of 'the balance, which he has held with so clear an eye, and so steady a hand' (even if this now 'begins to incline in favour of his Lutheran brethren').<sup>2</sup> This desirable quality can be found in history as well as in historians. Looking back to the ideal moment of republican Rome, Gibbon salutes its balanced power structure:

The temperate struggles of the patricians and plebeians had finally established the firm and equal balance of the constitution; which united the freedom of popular assemblies, with the authority and wisdom of a senate, and the executive powers of a regal magistrate.

(II, 508)

The idea of disparate forces held in balance offers us a cue for thinking about the elements of Gibbon's style. These most obviously include the elaborative extension of his syntax, regularly seeking by the extra phrase or clause to accommodate a further consideration or subtler nuance within the overall arc of the sentence, and his fondness for imperfect or ironic parallels and unexpected conjunctions. Of these last, 'temperate struggles' provides an example, clear enough in its referential meaning (conflicting interests did not produce meltdown into civil war), but still holding together, with a palpable resistance to the easy phrase or simple formula, two words that pull in different directions.

'Firm and equal balance' would be misleading, however, if taken to imply a resolved equilibrium, the enduring stability of an arch where the pressure of one element against another locks the whole into place. If Gibbon admires balance and stability, he also regularly prefers restless energy to the 'indolence' and stagnation of a settled state. It is crucial for him that the constitutional balance of republican Rome was compatible with the principle of 'active emulation' among its 'ambitious citizens' (II, 508); the sentence preceding the quotation has emphasised just this, so that the sentence quoted is, in context, itself one element within a larger and less stable balancing, itself temperately struggling with the sentence before. This is typical; the single sentence (sometimes), the single paragraph (often), the single chapter (always) does not pull all one way, but offers a series of different perspectives and divergent emphases, preserved from incoherence by the holding or composing power of Gibbon's style and by the sense of a mobile critical intelligence, alert to this plurality, which that style conveys. Another way of putting this might be that in Gibbon's history the writing itself affords a temporal experience, in movement from page to page, rather than being written from a position of abstraction from and reflection on the flow of history going on elsewhere. Where Gibbon hypothetically invokes the viewpoint of the 'philosophic' or 'impartial' observer who stands outside history, it is generally with the implication that such a viewpoint is itself partial, either humanly unsustainable or in need of correction.

One stylistic corollary of this is the way that the strong gestures towards the permanent and definitive in Gibbon's writing – its epigrammatic and lapidary moments, its impression of a constructed monumentality – turn out to be a kind of feint, more provisional than they appear, as open to change and reworking as the other monuments

of Rome. If Gibbon's style balances disparate emphases and considerations, this is a dynamic balancing, a temporal activity rather than an achieved state, almost as 'impatient of repose' (II, 509) as the expanding Roman republic.<sup>3</sup>

This can be illustrated through comparison with Johnson's prose style in the 1750s and 1760s, which provided the most important starting point in English for the development of Gibbon's own style. They have much in common. Johnson decisively broke with the Addisonian model of an 'easy' style, the unstudied and conversational utterance of a gentleman at home with his subject, his culture and his audience. Instead, Johnson writes in a way that dramatises the deliberateness of the writer and the resistance of his material to simple formulation. He uses syntactically complex sentences in which one element is regularly placed in parallel with another, and where each phrase must be weighed in its relation to the whole, so that a good deal of comparison and discrimination is required of the reader simply to make sense of what is there. Meanwhile an always deliberated and sometimes heightened diction continually draws attention to the agency of the writer, as well as often opening the question of how important, how serious the matter in question really is. All this is true of Gibbon's prose also. But Gibbon's rhythms are different. Here are two sentences, from early in the *History*, where Gibbon could *almost* be mistaken for Johnson:

The ideal restraints of the senate and the laws might serve to display the virtues, but could never correct the vices, of the emperor. The military force was a blind and irresistible instrument of oppression; and the corruption of Roman manners would always supply flatterers eager to applaud, and ministers prepared to serve, the fear or the avarice, the lust or the cruelty, of their masters.

(I, 103–4)

Johnson, however, would have finished each sentence with a stronger emphasis, a fuller discharge of the momentum that has been at first built up by the expansive opening clause, and then held back by the complications of the syntax. Here he is, in a roughly comparable passage:

Power is always gradually stealing away from the many to the few, because the few are more vigilant and consistent; it still contracts to a smaller number, till in time it

centers in a single person.

Thus all the forms of government instituted among mankind, perpetually tend toward monarchy; and power, however diffused through the whole community, is by negligence or corruption, commotion or distress, reposed at last in the chief magistrate.<sup>4</sup>

Gibbon's lighter sentence endings – 'of the emperor', 'of their masters' – die away by comparison, declining to support or transmit the weight of the whole sentence. Those seemingly Johnsonian parallel phrases – 'the fear or the avarice, the lust or the cruelty' – do not, as in Johnson, hold up the movement in order to increase its teleological pressure, which is then discharged in a full concluding phrase; rather, abetted by the heavy punctuation, they break the onward movement, not so much dissipating the energy of the sentence as sending it back to be distributed through all its parts, so that the overall dynamic shape of the sentence remains elusive or in flux. Each of Johnson's sentences, describing an inevitable movement, allies itself syntactically with that movement, coming to a point of resolution or repose; each of Gibbon's, envisaging an equally inevitable historical tendency, begs leave to dissent from it a little. One might say, crudely, that for Johnson in this mode everything comes down to how things end, whereas Gibbon distributes our attention across the trajectory or history of the sentence in more complicated ways. His handling of parenthetical phrases, like his fondness for the extra qualifying adjective, works against repose in a single accumulated emphasis, multiplies rather than resolves points of view.

These are large generalisations to build on small quotations. Let me flesh them out a little by looking at a longer passage which is tolerably representative and fairly self-contained. It describes the actions of the bishop Synesius in the early part of the fifth century, as an illustration of how far the Church was able to criticise and control the actions of those in power in the State. The bishop's main weapon in this situation was excommunication.

Under the reign of the younger Theodosius, the polite and eloquent Synesius, one of the descendants of Hercules, filled the episcopal seat of Ptolemais, near the ruins of ancient Cyrene, and the philosophic bishop supported, with dignity, the character which he had assumed with reluctance.\* He vanquished the monster of Libya, the

president Andronicus, who abused the authority of a venal office, invented new modes of rapine and torture, and aggravated the guilt of oppression by that of sacrilege. After a fruitless attempt to reclaim the haughty magistrate by mild and religious admonition, Synesius proceeds to inflict the last sentence of ecclesiastical justice, which devotes Andronicus, with his associates and their *families*, to the abhorrence of earth and heaven. The impenitent sinners, more cruel than Phalaris or Sennacherib, more destructive than war, pestilence, or a cloud of locusts, are deprived of the name and privileges of Christians, of the participation of the sacraments, and of the hope of Paradise. The bishop exhorts the clergy, the magistrates, and the people, to renounce all society with the enemies of Christ; to exclude them from their houses and tables; and to refuse them the common offices of life, and the decent rites of burial. The church of Ptolemais, obscure and contemptible as she may appear, addresses this declaration to all her sister churches of the world; and the profane who reject her decrees, will be involved in the guilt and punishment of Andronicus and his impious followers. These spiritual terrors were enforced by a dexterous application to the Byzantine court; the trembling president implored the mercy of the church; and the descendant of Hercules enjoyed the satisfaction of raising a prostrate tyrant from the ground. Such principles and such examples insensibly prepared the triumph of the Roman pontiffs, who have trampled on the necks of kings.

\* Synesius had previously represented his own disqualifications (Epist. c. v. p. 246–250.). He loved profane studies and profane sports; he was incapable of supporting a life of celibacy; he disbelieved the resurrection: and he refused to preach fables to the people, unless he might be permitted to *philosophize* at home. Theophilus, primate of Egypt, who knew his merit, accepted this extraordinary compromise.

[I, 761–2, other footnotes omitted]

Gibbon recounts a fundamentally admirable action: Synesius compels the submission of the wicked tyrant Andronicus, an act by which he supports with ‘dignity’ his office as bishop. Our sense of dignity is, however, jeopardised and qualified by the passage’s continual teasing movement between different perspectives on this action. ‘The polite and elegant Synesius ... the philosophic bishop’: these notably eighteenth-century

attributes have the ring of anachronism, they announce themselves as epithets applied by the historian before being qualities possessed by Synesius. (This is a favourite locution.) The effect is sharpened by referring to Synesius as, simply, ‘one of the descendants of Hercules’. The viewpoint which calls Synesius ‘polite’ cannot be identical with that which accepts his mythic ancestry as fact: the shift between an idiom of modern detachment and an idiom uncritically embedded in the past’s self-image destabilises both. There is comparable temporal slippage in the detail that Ptolomais was located ‘near the ruins of ancient Cyrene’: ‘ruins’ suggest an eighteenth-century perspective, but Cyrene already lay in ruins, so that for a second we see double: fifth-century Ptolomais is both ancient and modern. Different phases of history are again momentarily co-present when Synesius-as-Hercules ‘vanquished the monster of Libya’, before the delayed clarification, ‘the president Andronicus’, reveals the monster as metaphorical. What is in play here is how seriously we can take the act of Synesius as belonging to, or still in communication with, the age of heroes: the merit of his action, which the passage nowhere denies, when amplified as Herculean, evokes a mischievous possibility of mock heroic. When the Hercules allusion comes back again for the third time – ‘the descendant of Hercules enjoyed the satisfaction of raising a prostrate tyrant from the ground’ – this seems a little much: someone, we feel, is milking it. That someone may be Synesius, about whom the verb ‘enjoyed’ alerts us that his pleasure in the triumph of goodness may be partly egotistical (he enjoys seeing his action as a dignifying historian might narrate it), but it may also be the narrator, repeating the heroic note until it wears a little thin. The clunky repetition of ‘the descendant of Hercules’ draws attention to itself: Synesius has *descended* from Hercules not only lineally, but also, we may reflect, on the scale of greatness – a more nearly kinetic meaning supported by the unheroically neat symmetry with which Synesius, descended, raises Andronicus from the ground.

Here in miniature is something fundamental to the whole *Decline and Fall*. The ideal moment of republican Rome, the time and place of true dignity and freedom, exists before the start of Gibbon’s *History*, is represented as unreachably pre-historical. All that the historian of empire, thus placed, can record are attempts to repeat, mimic or recall that dignity: but insofar as greatness repeated is diminution or descent, or involves a consciousness of rhetorical construction that weakens its claim, history is the history of decline. These large themes are conveyed through Gibbon’s handling of repetition, of



historical parallel and allusion, and through the foregrounding of rhetorical construction in almost all his evocations of greatness.

There is more to notice. One reason that we feel Synesius to be something less than a hero is Gibbon's footnote, which expansively transmits Synesius's reasons for doubting his suitability to become a bishop. Footnotes always offer potential for the expression of an unofficial viewpoint, a view from below; Gibbon has many that are used in this way. The immediate effect is to make us reappraise the incongruity lurking in 'the philosophic bishop': we had read this phrase as shaded with anachronism, but it seems that Synesius, unapologetically pleasure-seeking and sceptical, did indeed have more in common with David Hume than we might have expected. The sense of incongruity reverts entirely to the fifth century, the 'extraordinary compromise' whereby such a man was appointed to such an office – 'extraordinary' hovering equivocally between neutral information (such arrangements were unusual) and normative judgement (the narrator raising an eyebrow). The reader, alerted to the possibility of a sceptical or enlightened perspective, may then hear a certain bathos in the rhythm of 'by that of sacrilege': this is the last item in the triad of Andronicus's crimes, and formally the culmination or climax of them, but lacks the strengthening term ('by the madness of sacrilege', 'by the outrageous insult of sacrilege') needed to give the cadence the weight it requires. The missed beat intimates the question, by what scale of values does sacrilege 'aggravate' the atrocious guilt of rapine, torture and oppression?

With a profane perspective thus activated, Gibbon then overtly puts it aside, and for the next four sentences recounts the terms of excommunication with a vigour that inhabits the official ecclesiastical viewpoint, almost without remainder. Only the italicisation of *families* marks an interrogative detachment from the proclamation's extremity; in other respects, the switch to the present tense embeds us wholly in the sentiment, and Gibbon's full cadences, with the sets of rolling triads in the two central sentences, enact and reinforce the emphasis of the original. But all this turns to stage thunder in the opening to the next sentence: 'These spiritual terrors were enforced by a dexterous application to the Byzantine court.' The return to the past tense pulls the viewpoint back, and the single word 'dexterous' – decorously Latinate, but in English calling attention to itself as pointed – is, dexterously, enough to change the perspective: the Church's sublime and awesome malediction can do little unless backed up by political

savvy. ‘These spiritual terrors’, condensed in the summarising phrase, suffer a certain diminution in our lengthening view, rather as ‘the trembling president’ returns us to the mode of ‘the philosophic bishop’, offering to reduce Synesius and Andronicus to the simplified figures of some stage comedy.<sup>5</sup>

The zoom out continues in the final sentence: ‘Such principles and such examples insensibly prepared the triumph of the Roman pontiffs, who have trampled on the necks of kings.’ Taking the long view, the diligent historian makes a causal connection (albeit an ‘insensible’ one) between the action of a Synesius and the ceremonial powers of the medieval papacy – drawing out the ‘plot’ of history, identifying a connecting thread. Such procedures can be questionable, as Hayden White has suggested:

Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a *plot* all along, they give to reality the odor of the *ideal*. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment.<sup>6</sup>

The self-consciousness with which Gibbon makes his connections anticipates and precludes such embarrassment. In this instance, our sense that history is intelligible is disturbed by the blurring of categories. The ‘triumph of the Roman pontiffs’ figures the popes as pagan priest-emperors<sup>7</sup> who hold a Roman triumph over the defeated enemy, an image which merges spiritual and worldly powers even as it opposes them, while the idea of a Roman triumph jars against the image of trampling on the necks of kings, this being an Old Testament phrase whose historical connotations are exotic and barbarian. Like Synesius and the labours of Hercules, these Roman pontiffs both recall past greatness and, in repeating it, convey also their distance from it. Repetition in *The Decline and Fall*, whether practised by emperor or historian, frequently suggests entropy: ‘The fortifications of Europe and Asia were multiplied by Justinian; but the repetition of those timid and fruitless precautions exposes to a philosophic eye the debility of the empire’ (II, 599f.); ‘A repetition of such capricious brutality without connection or design, would be tedious and disgusting’ (III, 984). At the end of this chapter I return to this analogy with the historian.

If, impatiently, we ask what all this adds up to, we can say that Gibbon approves the action of Synesius in resisting tyranny, within a more quizzical view of the powers of

the Church and its relation to secular power. This is part of a general tendency of *The Decline and Fall* to emphasise the historical importance of religion while belittling its claims to respect. But as striking as any resolved position is the dynamic activity of the passage, how it shifts between the different lights in which Synesius may be regarded. As David Womersley writes of a different passage, ‘the experience of reading is one of feeling the writing shift and slide: in its delicacies of phrase, movement, allusion and structure, the prose repeatedly provokes fleeting responses which the reader cannot fully articulate’.<sup>8</sup> Such mobility is of itself enough to touch all uniformity – the homogeneity of empire, the single-mindedness of religious zeal – with irony. The church of Ptolemais achieves something historically significant, ‘obscure and contemptible as she may appear’, and Gibbon’s parenthetical reminder of the possibility of contempt, even while he deals in the momentous, is one of the marks and functions of his style.

I have at last allowed myself to use the word ‘irony’. In its movement between discrepant perspectives, or its ability to evoke more than one frame of reference simultaneously, Gibbon’s style can be described as pervasively ironic. My reason for holding the term back until now is that ‘irony’ often carries a more restricted meaning, and that an emphasis on Gibbon’s irony in the restricted sense would misrepresent *The Decline and Fall* as a whole. In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–18), Byron described Gibbon as one who

... shaped his weapon with an edge severe,  
Sapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer;  
The lord of irony.<sup>9</sup>

‘Irony’ here means saying one thing while implying another, with polemical intent. As Byron uses it, it implies a strong design in the writer, master of his material, who insinuates a division of his readership between those who immediately understand his true design and those who can be imagined not to, or who are led into a trap by taking his statements at face value. Byron is most obviously thinking of the destructive ironies of chapters 15 and 16, on the early growth and flourishing of Christianity. In these chapters Gibbon introduces considerations which he knows must undermine the Christian belief of most of his readers, while affecting an attitude of disinterested inquiry or even

defensive piety. As chapter 15 comes to its climax, the ‘solemn sneer’ becomes finally unmistakable, the mask altogether transparent:

But how shall we excuse the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world, to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by innumerable prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, daemons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle, and pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral or physical government of the world. Under the reign of Tiberius, the whole earth, or at least a celebrated province of the Roman empire, was involved in a praeternatural darkness of three hours. Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history.

(I, 512)

Although there is a substantive argument here against the historical probability of the miracles recounted in the New Testament, climaxing in the darkness at noon of the Passion, the real force of the passage comes from its rhetorical control, from Gibbon’s demonstrated superiority over both his material and the anxieties of his readership. The fame and infamy of these chapters can, however, lead to an exaggerated sense of their centrality. David Womersley’s groundbreaking study has helped us to see that even if these chapters, which conclude the 1771 volume, are the point and climax of that volume, they are by no means the key to the five volumes that follow. The controlling – lordly – irony of the passage just quoted is very different from the more open and mobile ironies to which the shifting perspectives of the Synesius passage give free admission, and the difference between the two broadly corresponds to Womersley’s account of how the strength of design manifest in Volume I is effaced in later volumes by a much greater openness to contingency.

Womersley calls the prevailing stance of Volume I ‘disingenuous’,<sup>10</sup> a term applicable not only to Gibbon’s handling of Christianity but also to other moments of overt disinterestedness, where parallel constructions seem to announce an even-handed balancing of different considerations. Here is Gibbon on the toleration of religious plurality under the Antonines:

The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.

(I, 56)

Formally, the sequence true-false-useful allows equal weight to each term, mimicking the equality which each party grants to all forms of religion; but the formal egalitarianism of the phrasing is ironic, for we hear it as an ascending series, where the next term caps what precedes it until the magistrate takes the trick. Across the two sentences, the three parts of society are arranged in an extended chiasmus (abccba): the policy of the magistrate frames the whole, just as such symmetrical constructions, containing and organising discrepant perspectives, express the overarching perspective of the narrator. Or, comparably, here is Gibbon on Augustus, composing what might otherwise appear as contradiction – his ‘tender respect for a free constitution which he had destroyed’ – into a single view:

With the same hand, and probably with the same temper, he signed the proscription of Cicero, and the pardon of Cinna. His virtues, and even his vices, were artificial; and according to the various dictates of his interest, he was at first the enemy, and at last the father, of the Roman world.

(I, 96)

Augustus behaves in opposite ways at different times. Gibbon is able to explain this in terms of the character of ‘that subtle tyrant’ – ‘a cool head, an unfeeling heart, and a cowardly disposition’ (I, 96) – and his shaping of contradiction into symmetry is the

formal expression of that power of explanation. It demonstrates the historian's comprehension, his mastery, of his material; the slipperiness of Augustus, as both enemy and father, yields to the narrator who can appraise his doubleness with such a pointed juxtaposition.

In later volumes comparable contradictions – in the behaviour of Constantine, for example – are much less frequently gathered up into symmetries of this kind. As the *History* evolves, there is a shift away from the confident and directive ironies of the first volume towards a more fluid and plural mode. Even so, it is important not to see this as a clean dichotomy, but as a matter of shifting emphasis, where either extreme owes its vitality to the felt possibility of the other, which is rarely wholly absent. Gibbon's directive, knowing irony generally acknowledges some residual resistance in the material that it shapes and judges. 'At first the enemy, and at last the father' resolves *almost* entirely into the implication that the fatherliness of the self-serving Augustus was a sham, a charade, so that 'father' can certainly be heard as a sarcasm, a 'solemn sneer'. But the word also gives some space to the reflection that Augustus's settled policies did foster the stability and prosperity of the empire, despite the base motives from which they sprang. Or consider Gibbon's lethal account of the ascetic self-denial of the early Christians:

Ambitious to exalt the purification of the Gospel above the wisdom of philosophy, the zealous fathers have carried the duties of self-mortification, of purity, and of patience, to a height which it is scarcely possible to attain, and much less to preserve, in our present state of weakness and corruption ... The insensible and inactive disposition, which should be supposed alike destitute of both [the love of pleasure and the love of action], would be rejected, by the common consent of mankind, as utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to the world. But it was not in *this* world that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful.

(I, 477f.)

This is *almost* pure satire, in ways that hardly need pointing out: the leading emphasis on 'ambitious'; the momentary suggestion that the fathers were seeking to purify the gospel (rather than practise the purity recommended in the gospel); the ambiguity as to whether

‘our present state’ denotes the insecure faith of the eighteenth century, or the human condition since the Fall (in which case the Fathers could, indeed, ‘scarcely’ have succeeded). The final sentence achieves its effect by the placing of ‘not’: that the primitive Christians were not desirous of being agreeable or useful in this world could pass as orthodox, but Gibbon’s word order wickedly suggests salvation to be a matter of being ‘agreeable’ and ‘useful’ (the Humean virtues) in the afterlife. Yet even in such a strongly satirical passage there are dissonant notes: ‘patience’ may seem an unexpected choice for the climax of the triad, not inviting enlightened superiority as straightforwardly as ‘self-mortification’ and ‘purity’ do, and the very emphasis on *this* world which conveys such knowingness also allows the reflection that it was in this world, nonetheless, that the primitive Christians so enormously affected human history. As with Augustus, the knowing judgement foregrounded by Gibbon’s directive irony doesn’t sit easily with the historical impact and significance of these figures.

Conversely, the more open pluralities of later volumes are set off by the residual or remembered possibility of Gibbon’s knowingness.<sup>11</sup> At the end of chapter 54, Gibbon draws his account of the heretical Paulician sect into a consideration of protestant challenges to ‘superstition’ and the ‘secret reformation’ that has been ‘silently working in the bosom of the reformed churches’. This has brought with it a great deal of good: ‘a spirit of freedom and moderation’, the right to ‘liberty of conscience’, an enlargement of restrictive laws by ‘the prudence and humanity of the times’ and a welcome epistemological humility as to the limits of the mind’s powers. He then concludes:

The volumes of controversy are overspread with cobwebs: the doctrine of a Protestant church is far removed from the knowledge or belief of its private members; and the forms of orthodoxy, the articles of faith, are subscribed with a sigh or a smile by the modern clergy. Yet the friends of Christianity are alarmed at the boundless impulse of enquiry and scepticism. The predictions of the Catholics are accomplished: the web of mystery is unravelled by the Armenians, Arians, and Socinians, whose numbers must not be computed from their separate congregations. And the pillars of revelation are shaken by those men who preserve the name without the substance of religion, who indulge the licence without the temper of philosophy. (III, 439)<sup>12</sup>

A first-time reader who supposes Gibbon entirely in sympathy with the spirit of Enlightenment critique is given pause by the final sentence. Yet even at the start of that sentence, the grandiloquence of ‘the pillars of revelation are shaken’ suggests a mock-indignation or mock-alarm, akin to the mimicking of pious apology in chapter 15. Surely, we reflect, Gibbon is himself one who has shaken these pillars. But then we have to change focus, as the final clause gives us a voice raised in earnest against the rationalists and secularisers. Moreover, a final footnote directs the reader to passages by Joseph Priestley which exemplify such dangerous thinking, at which both priest and magistrate may ‘tremble’ – a footnote not, like others, mischievously subversive, but mischievously authoritarian. We are bound to be struck by that startling parallel between ‘the temper of philosophy’ and ‘the substance of religion’ – not enemies here, but allies. More refocusing is called for: if men who preserve the name without the substance of religion are dangerous, should we rethink the implied approval of the enlightened modern clergy who sign the Thirty-nine Articles with ‘a sigh or a smile’? Or is ‘the substance of religion’ something quite different from belief in doctrine? And the alarmed ‘friends of Christianity’, who a moment ago seemed the objects of Gibbon’s criticism or contempt, might now, after all, include Gibbon himself, thanks to what we retrospectively note as a precision in the phrasing: a friend of Christianity, rather than a Christian. But would a true friend of Christianity imply an equivalence between ‘the pillars of revelation’ and the now unravelled ‘web of mystery’? The question to which all these questions tend is whether there is an optimal point – a point of balance – at which the ‘impulse of enquiry and scepticism’ can and should rest, demonstrating ‘the temper of philosophy’, or whether that impulse is indeed intrinsically ‘boundless’?

Gibbon could have gathered this up into a summary: free-thinking is highly beneficial, provided it does not go too far, but it has a dangerous tendency to observe no limits. What we have instead is a mobile, restless piece of writing which enacts the difficulty of resting in a tempered position, and where the relation between the various broadly parallel terms is continually being reappraised and readjusted within the reading experience. The ironies here – that freedom of inquiry is both good and bad, that religion and philosophy are sometimes allies – are ironies of history, not of discourse, which the narrator cannot synthesise, the stylist can expose but cannot master; such a phrase as



‘the friends of Christianity’ sounds pointed (as in chapter 15),<sup>13</sup> makes us seek for the historian’s point of comprehensive vantage, but in vain.

Irony, in its original meaning, is a figure of speech, an aspect of discourse, belonging to a speaker or a writer. According to the *OED*, it is not until the nineteenth century that irony is found in events themselves, rather than the way they are spoken about – what Wilkie Collins referred to in 1860 as ‘the irony of circumstances’, which ‘holds no mortal catastrophe in respect’. Of course, the perception of a contrast between human aspiration and man’s inflexible fate did not wait for the nineteenth century. But the use of the term ‘irony’ for this perception depends upon a subliminal sense of situations and events as *utterance* (rather as ‘fate’ itself is, etymologically, that which is spoken), as the imaginable narrative of a god or an historian: though, as this meaning becomes established, and irony is felt to inhere in situations and events themselves, that sense of a shaping speaker which delivered the term dies away, and the location of irony passes from the historian to the history.

We can think of *The Decline and Fall* as emblematic of this transition, and as exploiting its ambiguities. The author is felt as a strong local presence (tone is often key to interpretation), yet without being established as a coherent personality or persona after the manner of a Johnson or a Fielding. The overtly constructed quality of Gibbon’s prose – so unlike the facility and flow of Hume’s *History* – speaks of the historian’s shaping hand, his decisive arrangement of the matter of his history: but its admission of multiple perspectives, declining to establish any definitive interpretation, would seem to submit to history’s contingencies, to register rather than install the irony of events. Gibbon’s style favours sometimes one tendency, sometimes another, but most characteristically allows both to coexist, and registers that coexistence as something remarkable and unresolved.<sup>14</sup>

This complex sense of the writer’s agency and the pressures on that agency, which the reader breathes in when reading this prose, transmits itself also to the agency of the actors in the history. Gibbon’s narrative is of course much concerned with figures of power and influence, whose appearance in his volumes testifies to the fact that they have made history. Yet his style often insinuates a passivity at the heart of action:

The caprice of Hadrian influenced his choice of a successor. (I, 100)

New fortifications were added by the indefatigable prudence of Justinian.

(II, 602)

Even when the agent is allowed an active verb, it is still often a faculty of the person that is active rather than the person himself, who stands to one side of the active principle, or is himself acted on by it:

The vain and ambitious mind of Julian might aspire to restore the ancient glory of the temple of Jerusalem. (I, 888)

The military judgment and astrological knowledge of Mahomet advised him to expect the morning.

(III, 960)

Sometimes it is a figure of speech that does the deed:

The stroke of domestic conspiracy punished the crimes of Maximin.

(I, 203)

There are exceptions: the extraordinary dynamism of Athanasius, for example, is not treated in this way. But they are felt as exceptions, moments of sharp contrast in a narrative of decline and fall which, Gibbon can suggest, is best understood not as the consequence of actions (such as would provide a strong, consequential narrative structure) but as happening *of itself*:

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.

(II, 509)

That last quotation conveniently returns us to the question of *greatness* in *The Decline and Fall*. This is another area where the overlap between style and subject is peculiarly charged. ‘Stupendous’ (defined in Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755) as ‘wonderful; amazing; astonishing’) is itself a term of ‘immoderate greatness’; obtrusively Latinate, it marks the problematics of transmission from classical to contemporary, and draws attention to itself

as striving to accommodate the grandeur that was Rome. As such, it also makes that grandeur vulnerable: the heightened phrase ‘the stupendous fabric’ works in the plot of the sentence as the tiny push which is all it takes to bring the tottering empire down. Rome yields to the pressure of the metaphor: the empire is so great, so immense a thing, that once imaged as a building it cannot stand.

In his choice of phrase, Gibbon was following a common association of ‘stupendous’ with buildings. Of the five quotations given by Johnson, three have to do with architecture – including the ‘stupendous’ bridge in *Paradise Lost* built to join Earth and Hell, which as a ‘wondrous pontifice’ also has Roman connotations.<sup>15</sup> Gibbon is fond of thinking about classical greatness in architectural terms; his decision to organise his concluding chapter around the disappearance and decay of Rome’s buildings and monuments is only the most striking example of this. Buildings as expressions of greatness appealed to Gibbon’s imagination not only because of their afterlife as ruins, but because they foregrounded the thought that greatness is a matter of *construction*, and – since the grandeur of a building depends very much on viewpoint – brought with them ideas of perspective and perspectivism. It is characteristic that when describing the glories of the temple of Diana at Ephesus, one of the greatest and most famous buildings of antiquity, he should pause to note that its dimensions were pretty small – ‘still more inferior’ – by comparison with St Peter’s (I, 281). Destroyed by the Goths, who lacked ‘a taste for the elegant arts’ (I, 282), the temple is vulnerable equally to damaging comparisons by the historian. A comparable shift of scale and viewpoint comes at the end of his description of Ayia Sophia in Constantinople. After an immense paragraph warmly detailing the brilliance of its construction and decoration, he concludes:

A magnificent temple is a laudable monument of national taste and religion, and the enthusiast who entered the dome of St. Sophia, might be tempted to suppose that it was the residence, or even the workmanship of the Deity. Yet how dull is the artifice, how insignificant is the labour, if it be compared with the formation of the vilest insect that crawls upon the surface of the temple!

(II, 597f.)

There is a double shift of viewpoint here. One is obvious and familiar and appropriate to a place of worship: the greatest works of man are as nothing by comparison with the glory of the works of God. If Gibbon had written ‘the smallest insect’, there would be no more to say. But ‘vilest’ is a surprise, the wrong word for the pious sentiment: instead of a greater glory capping a lesser, there is suddenly insignificance and vileness everywhere. ‘Vilest’ speaks of a value judgement, or at least a visceral response, that cannot be cancelled by the intricate formation of the insect, however fine, and is particular enough to make ‘crawls upon the surface’ a physical perception rather than a concept. We are brought in very close to the beautiful object, and no longer like what we see. The Divine Craftsman should not, surely, be creating vile bodies (although we may note that ‘formation’ only weakly implies a creator). Magnificent engineering may, it seems, coexist with vileness, and this is true whether the engineering is biological or architectural – for, as Gibbon told us at the beginning of this section, ‘the *edifices* of Justinian were cemented with the blood and treasure of his people’ (II, 592).

That quotation, however, continues: ‘but those stately structures appeared to announce the prosperity of the empire, and actually displayed the skill of their architects’ (II, 592). Despite all the cutting ironies and critical astringencies of *The Decline and Fall*, it is still a stately structure, a work of epic scale and stupendous imagination. Where Gibbon employs a ‘stately’ style – heightened, measured, expansive, weighty – he continually plays on the indeterminacy of whether such a style is called out by the greatness of his subject; whether it is ironically applied to what, from another perspective, is ‘little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind’ (I, 102); or whether it figures, substitutively in the rhetorical skill of its architect, the impossible greatness of its lost original. Gibbon’s spacious and splendid paragraphs celebrating Ayia Sophia should remind us that a constructed grandeur is still real, even if neither absolute nor often, in the perspective of history, long enduring.

As with Constantinople’s buildings, so also with its ceremonial. Here we may draw one final analogy with aspects of Gibbon’s style. The newly founded Constantinople employed a ceremonial pomp of language and ornament, a ‘stately affectation ... trifling and solemn’, which departs from the practice of old Rome in the act of recreating it:

By a philosophic observer, the system of the Roman government might have been mistaken for a splendid theatre, filled with players of every character and degree, who repeated the language, and imitated the passions of their original model.

(I, 603f.)

In Gibbon's passages of elevated style or 'stately affectation' the historian takes his place, but with infinitely more self-awareness, among the officials of Constantinople, the second Rome, as in both the course of history and the process of representation greatness passes from the realm of substantial power to the more equivocal potency of language.

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## Notes

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[1](#) Roy Porter, *Edward Gibbon: Making History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), p. 87.

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[2](#) Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), III, p. 436. Further references will be cited by volume and page number, in parentheses in the text.

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[3](#) ‘Antitheses and parallels commonly turn out to be not quite antithetical, or not quite parallel ... history resists the stabilizing efforts of the historian.’ W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon’s Solitude: The Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 94f.

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[4](#) *The Adventurer. In Two Volumes*, ed. D. D. Eddy (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1978), I, pp. 267f. (no. 45).

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[5](#) Gibbon’s figures ‘are constantly blushing with shame, dropping tears, bending the knee; theirs is the histrionic repertoire of the classical French theatre’. Porter, *Edward Gibbon*, p. 90.

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[6](#) Hayden White, ‘The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality’, *Critical Enquiry* 7 (1980), 5–27, on p. 24.

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[7](#) Augustus appropriated the title of *pontifex maximus*.

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[8](#) David Womersley, *The Transformation of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 55.

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[9](#) *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 116 (c. III, st. 107).

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[10](#) Womersley, *Transformation*, p. 56.

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[11](#) Here and elsewhere, I have learnt much from Charlotte Roberts; see her *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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[12](#) For the pairing of ‘enquiry and scepticism’ compare ‘the nerves of the mind, curiosity and scepticism, were benumbed by the habits of obedience and belief’ (III, 95; chapter 49).

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[13](#) ‘The friends of Christianity may acknowledge without a blush, that many of the most eminent saints had been before their baptism the most abandoned sinners’ (I, 476).

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[14](#) My account may be contrasted with that of Lionel Gossman, who sees the creation of ‘order and perspicuity’ through the instrument of style as ‘the aim of all [Gibbon’s] labor as an historian ... the search for order and perspicuity in history is indistinguishable for him from the search for an orderly and perspicuous narrative’. *The Empire Unpossessed: An Essay on Gibbon’s Decline and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 94 and see pp. 93–108.

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[15](#) See *Paradise Lost*, x.348–51.





## Gibbon's Mind and Libraries



**Robert Mankin**

This chapter is about the idea of high literary achievement in the field of history and about the material nature of books. To start with mind, Gibbon's was one of the most extraordinary in the eighteenth century. He displayed in-depth mastery of vast regions of the world, complex chronologies and multiple disciplines; he devised effective techniques for palliating the lack of information and sometimes of foreign languages. What is more, he transformed all of those variables into a supreme demonstration of the historian's craft. In Britain it was an established craft but an inchoate science, and no one more than Gibbon brought learning into the scope of historical writing and thinking. In addition (but it is not really an addition) he did so with remarkable efficiency. In the preface to the first volume of *The Decline and Fall* (1776) he announced the blueprint for a total of six volumes that would span a period of over 1,200 years. Not only did he stick to the bargain but to a large extent he even maintained the timetable for delivering copy to the printer. Yet the American War of Independence created a sizeable distraction for an author who was also an MP with a keen interest in the fate of contemporary empires. A year before publishing the first volume, he wrote in a letter to a friend that 'We are now arrived at the decisive moment of preserving or of losing for ever both our Trade and Empire.'<sup>1</sup> That pressure affected but did not distract Gibbon's routine of half-days of writing, though it seems to have impaired his ability to speak in Parliament. In other words *The Decline and Fall*, but also the production of *The Decline and Fall*, are two of the colossal achievements in the history of history: a marshalling over some eighteen years – *only* eighteen years – of reading, study and interpretation of sources, and their transformation into an eloquent narrative of 3,000 pages. As well as a great mind and a great writer, in other words, Gibbon displayed his talents as a logistical engineer. It should be added that unlike many of his contemporaries, he took on the task singlehandedly, even without an amanuensis, much less a helper gathering information for him. It is true

that Gibbon commended his head servant Caplen for his ‘knowledge of books and the upholstery business’.<sup>2</sup> But in relation to books, Caplen’s tasks were probably the expert locating, fetching and re-shelving of volumes, overseeing their cataloguing and perhaps managing relations with booksellers and binders. The plural element that did exist in Gibbon’s authorial life involved the society of the books in his library.

Three aspects of his practice are not only unusual but enigmatic. The first is associated with 1776, when Gibbon lived in Bentinck Street, London. Perhaps in view of his publication of Volume I of *The Decline and Fall*, and to confirm his sense that ‘a very memorable Era in [his] life’ had commenced, he bought a stylish pocket almanac.<sup>3</sup> It is the only such item in the Gibbon archives. As he kept meticulous accounts of his money, mostly in ledgers and small notebooks, the almanac served more as a literary diary and social register. On 17 February he noted the release of the first small print run of *The Decline and Fall* and on 3 June the larger second edition. With this encouragement, he began writing the first chapter of Volume II the very next day, a fact he duly noted. That chapter (17) describes the foundation of Constantinople; in the Womersley edition it runs to about sixty pages. Although Volume II would subsequently slow down as Gibbon waded through the doctrinal controversies and sorted out some political chronology, the opening chapter went smoothly and would have been produced by his ordinary method of composition. ‘It has always been my practise to cast a long paragraph in a single mould, to try it by my ear, to deposit it in my memory, but to suspend the action of the pen till I had given the last polish to my work.’<sup>4</sup> Although no manuscripts of *The Decline and Fall* have survived, we have numerous reasons to take his description seriously. So two months after starting chapter 17, he would have finished not a draft but something *very* close to final copy. He recorded the fact on 4 August: ‘Finished the first Chapter without the notes.’ This too was standard practice and can already be seen in the manuscript of his *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* (1761), published when he was twenty-four and mostly written several years before. Nor can it be a surprise if we consider his method of composition. Gibbon could not have been hunting for passages or keeping his fingers in the pages of books as he perorated (and perhaps paced) in search of just the right formulations. Writing was more likely a hands-off than a hands-on operation: the evidence was all in his mind. And yet, for readers of *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon without the notes would not be Gibbon, and even when

they are not long, they are diverse, alternatively compact, learned, quipping, discursive and sometimes excursive. The almanac indicates that the notes for chapter 17 were begun over two weeks later and finished – we don't know when; Gibbon doesn't say. So here is the first enigma. How many scholars today would defer the drafting of 193 footnotes to a long chapter until a later date, leaving only empty parentheses to recall their location? This was no fit of procrastination. It was Gibbon's habitual practice, which we might call 'historical composition in tranquillity': on the one hand, the privileging of oral eloquence over more densely allusive, written argument; on the other, a buffering of the historical imagination from the pressures of outside, perhaps including such things as war in the colonies.

The second enigma follows on the first. In the 1930s, the literary scholar, bibliophile and surgeon Geoffrey Keynes set out on the same path as this chapter, to try to take the measure of Gibbon's mind. He did so with a volume published in 1940 and revised in 1980 on which students of *The Decline and Fall* and intellectual historians often rely. *The Library of Edward Gibbon* allows us to deduce Gibbon's vast culture from the cumulative weight and breadth of a list of about 3,000 titles. Crucially, it provides historians with materials by which to chart the path Gibbon took through a polyglot universe formed by anglophone, francophone, Italian, Latin and Spanish writings of all kinds, including antiquarian and philosophical cultures, as well as works from Graeco-Latin antiquity. That path is an important element in our understanding of Gibbon's and Europe's Enlightenment(s), and the two go together all the more readily since Gibbon was eighteenth-century England's most European author. It is remarkable that Keynes's list of titles matters more than the books themselves. In his introduction Keynes noted that when Gibbon's books could be located, they were of little use to scholars, because they virtually never contain annotations.<sup>5</sup> (This even affected their market value.) In the volumes I have inspected, not only are there no markings; from a material standpoint, there are barely signs of use, though we know that Gibbon read them attentively. Note-taking in books is an important early modern heuristic practice, even an art, and if the art was on the wane in Gibbon's time, the practice remained important. In his youth he based his Commonplace-book on Lockean precepts for ordering knowledge. But as an adult he was more of Samuel Johnson's mind, when Johnson inveighed against commonplace-books, recommending 'that what is twice read is commonly better

remembered than what is transcribed'.<sup>6</sup> Gibbon remembered that line in his memoirs and apparently extended it to annotations and even marks in his books. Reading too was a hands-off operation. Gibbon's achievement must seem more mysterious than ever: we have now found reasons to think that he composed without piles of books open before him, and even more clearly there were no marginalia in his books to guide his critical reading and thinking along. With this distance from the sources in mind, we can proceed briefly to the third enigma, which concerns a curious regret.

Gibbon published the final three volumes of *The Decline and Fall* in 1788 and acknowledged that there was something he had not managed to do:

I now discharge my promise, and complete my design, of writing the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, both in the West and the East ...

It was my first intention to have collected, under one view, the numerous authors, of every age and language, from whom I have derived the materials of this history; and I am still convinced that the apparent ostentation would be more than compensated by real use. If I have renounced this idea, if I have declined an undertaking which had obtained the approbation of a master-artist,\* my excuse may be found in the extreme difficulty of assigning a proper measure to such a catalogue. A naked list of names and editions would not be satisfactory either to myself or my readers: the characters of the principal Authors of the Roman and Byzantine History have been occasionally connected with the events which they describe; a more copious and critical inquiry might indeed deserve, but it would demand, an elaborate volume, which might swell by degrees into a general library of historical writers.<sup>7</sup>

\* See Dr. Robertson's Preface to his History of America.

Why was Gibbon thinking he should have extracted a catalogue of his library from within *The Decline and Fall* itself? What 'real use' could he possibly have foreseen? We may be tempted to postpone such obscure questions in favour of a practical issue: how could the job have been done? There was no good model, and it was hard to imagine 'a proper measure to such a catalogue'. In 1777 William Robertson had tried, under Gibbon's aegis, but this simply showed that a 'naked list of names and editions' – what we call a bibliography and what Keynes would later produce – was not enough. Whether as a preliminary to this catalogue, or in place of it, in 1788 Gibbon engaged a scribe to

draft indexes of the authors cited and the places named in all six volumes of *The Decline and Fall*.<sup>8</sup> But he didn't publish them at the time, as if to imply that more information was needed. But how much? Where would it end and how could such writing be characterised? Although he may not have been able to answer these questions, or because he couldn't, Gibbon remained dissatisfied. When he next announced 'The review of my library must be reserved for the period of its maturity', he was no longer talking about *The Decline and Fall* as such but, rather, about who the historian was, in 1789, in two different drafts of his autobiography.<sup>9</sup> But the story does not end there either. Gibbon revived his project in 1790, suggesting to his printer, Thomas Cadell, that the historiographical review might form the bulk of a new seventh volume of *The Decline and Fall*. He even argued that beyond use, it would please and sell: 'I am convinced such a supplement might be rendered entertaining, as well as useful; and that few purchasers would refuse to *complete* their Decline and Fall.'<sup>10</sup>

Gibbon had finished his book but closure had not occurred. But where was the logic of this connection? In the author personally or in his book, in the present or the past? From the standpoint of history, the argument might go: modern history writing had now been brought into being, but the dialogue on which it depended needed to be foregrounded, via 'a general library of historical writers'. *The Decline and Fall* represented a kind of public library, and by means of a Volume VII Gibbon wanted his library of sources and authors to become public too, so that historiography would itself become a subject of social discussion. This was a great deal to expect of the public. After Gibbon's death in 1794, his literary executor Lord Sheffield was clearly of that opinion, and he had political and personal reasons to be peremptory and even bitter on the subject. He annotated the letter to Cadell with a dismissive 'Mr Gibbon soon became tired of this plan' – soon means after at least two years – 'and expressed a wish it had not been mentioned. He said his History was a critical review of the authors he had used.'<sup>11</sup> Pace Geoffrey Keynes, *The Decline and Fall* had never needed a *Library*.

I have rehearsed these three enigmatic moments that reveal both Gibbon's extraordinary independence with respect to his sources and the odd, persistent need he felt to reassert them in time and space. Three remarks arise here, one bibliographical, one biographical and one political. First, the circularity of secular books being represented as libraries as well as the product of libraries is a commonplace in western history. Ancient

examples in Gibbon's library include Photius's *Myriobiblion* and Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*; the Marquis de Paulmy's *Mélanges tirés d'une très grande bibliothèque* (61 vols.) upheld the tradition in Gibbon's day. For Gibbon this was also one of the virtues of modern journalism,<sup>12</sup> such as Jean Le Clerc's *Bibliothèques choisie* and *universelle*. Gibbon's library thus housed many libraries, because learning progressed via synthesis and accumulation as well as analysis. However, this did not incline Gibbon to pay special attention to the 'lexicon' tradition of early modern writing: a library was not a philosophical arsenal.<sup>13</sup> It was more disorderly, personal and polyphonic. Indeed, from a biographical standpoint, the years after *The Decline and Fall* are also the period when Gibbon demonstrated in what ways he was *not* a great logistical engineer. Between *circa* 1788 and 1792, he wrote six different versions of his life but was unable to write just one. And yet his *Autobiographies* were beautifully and flawlessly composed in tranquillity.<sup>14</sup>

Both of these remarks relate to a political question, and one of the decisive moments in Gibbon's life, when the French *philosophe* and mathematician d'Alembert delivered a stark new critique of history. For d'Alembert, knowledge was clearly expanding in the modern west, but not all forms of knowledge were equally welcome. As a result, philosophers urgently needed to take charge of the 'science' of history. If not, spurred on by the growing world of print, future generations and even contemporaries were going to drown in accumulated, largely useless information. D'Alembert therefore proposed that 'every hundred years an extract should be made of all the truly useful historical facts, and that the rest be burned'.<sup>15</sup> In this centennial retrieval, 'useful' would have to be defined as relevant to existing systems of knowledge. It is unclear when the first bonfire was to occur, unless it just had, in that transformation of the library which is the *Encyclopédie*. (The first seven volumes had appeared by 1757.) Gibbon's outrage, upon reading d'Alembert in Lausanne in 1758, prompted his first publication, the *Essai*. No, he retorted, the faculty of memory must not be subordinated to the faculty of reason, accumulation cannot be condemned and libraries must not be plundered or purified by reduction to a philosophical system. Translated into English, the key part of his refusal might read:

Let us conserve everything preciously. From the meanest facts a Montesquieu will unravel relations unknown to the vulgar. Let us imitate the botanists. Though every plant is not useful in medicine, they are constantly discovering new ones. Their hope is that genius and felicitous efforts will detect properties hitherto concealed.<sup>16</sup>

With this call for generalised conservation, if not conservatism, it is perhaps no surprise that Gibbon did not own or even read much of the *Encyclopédie*. But his own advice was ambivalent too. To begin with, the *Essai* too recognises that belles-lettres were in decline and that the nature of literary activity (in the broad sense) had changed by becoming more sociable. Secondly, Gibbon's appeal to some future Montesquieu against d'Alembert was not easy for the twenty-year-old to make good on personally. However brilliant, Montesquieu was not exactly an historian. In addition, botany may have represented a science of continual discovery, but Gibbon's perspective was not only about open-endedness in nature. His concern was how erudition could illuminate a field without discernible laws: history. And so his scepticism ran deeper than d'Alembert's. If there was too much to know, and so many different ways of knowing, there was also too much that time could do to invalidate respected, or reinstate discredited, forms of knowledge. Knowledge and disciplines had histories or, as he put it in one passage, they could not help but obey 'fashion'.<sup>17</sup> Fashions are neither paradigms nor direct expressions of the search for truth. But as expressions of social order, Gibbon implies, they cannot safely be ignored. He summed up his youthful ambivalence flippantly at the start of the *Essai*. 'Let the clever man beware of looking for a system, but let him beware even more of avoiding one.'

This statement is less profound than arch, but it captures how Gibbon was an intellectual. Instead of making him prisoner of a double bind, or motivating revolt against some reigning order, his scepticism about forms and about the absence of forms defined the way he lived socially, religiously and intellectually. It was in these terms that he was creative – artfully and sometimes ironically rather than scientifically – in managing knowledge. He too could succumb to its excess, as we shall see, and he felt hardly less rancour than d'Alembert at times. But his talents, combined with these tensions, led him to elaborate means by which to establish historical practice in English. At the heart of that enterprise, and of the tension between art and science, was the library. Gibbon's vocation



had not waited to be born one day amid the ruins of the Forum, nor was he the kind of writer whose life was changed by reading a particular book. His career was shaped by his lifelong experience of libraries as a physical, intellectual and polyphonic space. Born into gentry stock whose finances and spiritual bases were in disarray, he grew up with family libraries falling to waste on both parents' sides. At the Gibbons' country house, for instance, 'the library ... was stuffed with much trash of the last age, with much High Church divinity and politics, which have long since gone to their proper place'.<sup>18</sup> The last words, a euphemism, could easily have made him a disciple of d'Alembert's. He also frequented other libraries, in schools, aristocratic houses and at Magdalen College, Oxford. His bookishness made him introverted in the country and extroverted in town. The young gentleman during and after his teens used circulating libraries in Lausanne, London and Bath. He imagined using them elsewhere too, and he profited from London book sales.<sup>19</sup> Thus, his library was no simple extension of his patrimonial history or even of the world of early modern erudition.<sup>20</sup> It reflected his personal taste and experience – of the world of ideas, of the contemporary book trade and of the consecration of print learning that was taking shape in public institutions. As a young man Gibbon expressed support for public collections, although in the last years of his life he came to favour access to knowledge via the book market.<sup>21</sup> In short, it was the market and public intellect rather than antiquarian fetishism for vellums, folios and family editions that produced Gibbon's private library. In that spirit he had steadily constituted his library just as he would constitute, or write, *The Decline and Fall*. More than Parliament, London clubs or drawing rooms, the library incarnated his intellectual, social and spiritual aspirations in adulthood to an almost utopian degree. In 1773 the MP wrote to his aunt, 'All the notions I ever formed of a London life in my own house and surrounded by my books, with a due mixture of study and society, are fully realized.'<sup>22</sup> As part of that synthesis, society was even allowed to penetrate the library, where Gibbon would often write his letters, drink coffee with guests after a meal, set up card tables to entertain or hold meetings as an MP.<sup>23</sup> The synthesis was meant to be moral as well. His memoirs twice invoke a humanist tag, 'the tolerating maxim of the elder Pliny: nullum esse librum tam malum ut non ex aliqua parte prodesse' ('no book is so bad but that some good might be got out of it').<sup>24</sup> Pace d'Alembert, there was to be no such thing as a bad book – though that does not yet tell us what a good book was.



Along with this idyll, in which library and liberty, self and sociability could be so nicely balanced, Gibbon had to take up the challenge of managing excess. We can start to grasp the problems he faced by considering Pliny, since Gibbon commended his toleration without following his example. For the Roman officer, prolific scholar and naturalist, note-taking seemed to accompany every act of reading and (one might gather) every breath. The mature Gibbon sided with the nephew, Pliny the Younger, who dispensed with such extracting when he pronounced that ‘a man should be deeply rather than widely read’. Gibbon probably felt closest of all to Samuel Johnson’s reductive assertion that ‘The true art of memory is the art of attention.’ But what becomes of hands-off attention in a rapidly expanding universe of knowledge?

By 1783, Gibbon wrote to a Swiss friend that his collection at Bentinck Street comprised five to six thousand volumes. The approximation is telling:

Formed little by little with much care and expense, [my library] might today be called a handsome private cabinet. Not satisfied to fill the shelves twice over in the best room to which it was assigned, it has overflowed into the room facing the street, into your former bedroom, mine, and every nook in the house at Bentinck Street, and even into a cottage which I’ve taken at Hampton Court.<sup>25</sup>

The books had multiplied as if with a logic of their own, filling the library shelves once and then once over again, before overstepping their conventional space. Managed probably by Caplen, they were settled in another room, then in the guest and master bedrooms, and finally at Gibbon’s weekend retreat outside London. When Gibbon later moved to a grand house in Lausanne, in theory he had a capacious library plus another book area at his disposal, along with two distinct drawing rooms for receiving different qualities of visitors. But his book-buying and reading continued. To remedy this intellectual housing crisis and reassert social decorum in his living quarters, he turned one drawing room into a ‘front library’ before the main library, while also outfitting a back room for book storage. He also had doors (‘presses’) made for the library shelves, so that not a single volume need be visible to guests. Again, he was not drawn to ‘apparent ostentation’.

This part of the story is more familiar than enigmatic. In the life of the individual, it corresponds not to d'Alembert's bad dream about the proliferation of useless knowledge, but to the triumph of mind that Keynes's volume wished to celebrate.<sup>26</sup> The library embodies the steady if sometimes problematic progress of knowledge, information and intellectual power that had no reason ever to stop, not even (as we have seen) at the end of six successful volumes. But there were difficulties, and to understand them better, we need to consider the ways Gibbon tried intellectually to master his books, that is, the expansion and the increasing variety of knowledge that they embodied. In 1776 he treated himself to more than just a pocket almanac. Between the first and second editions of *The Decline and Fall*, the proud author decided to consecrate his library by investing in a formal catalogue.<sup>27</sup> The historian of the Roman Empire was a humanist and so his taxonomy was in Latin, a choice in keeping with a polyglot collection of some 1,900 titles. The key categories were well known to the book world as those of the 'Parisian booksellers', with History given pride of place. (See [Appendix I](#) at the end of this chapter.) As this expensive, elegantly bound catalogue was partly meant for show, the MP also accorded a prominent place to Law. The titles themselves were neatly arranged on the recto side of 158 sheets, leaving plenty of room for later acquisitions on the facing versos. At least this was the plan. For a variety of reasons, including mistakes in the fabrication of the catalogue and the fact that his library shelves had overflowed, Gibbon stopped updating within two years of having commissioned it. So the document that forms the core of Keynes's list makes for a handsome but abortive record of probable shelf order, especially in one room of Gibbon's house, *circa* 1776.

The most striking symptom of Gibbon's dilemma was the way he classed individual volumes. One must be struck by the density of important writings that the historian relegated not to the conspicuous History section, nor even to Philosophy, but rather to an orphan of the library genre. The Miscellaneous section at the end contains (as the Latin says) those 'polygraphs *et al.* who cannot be reduced to any other class'. In 1776 they included what we think of as the canon of great early moderns, such as Castiglione, Machiavelli and Erasmus; Bacon, Milton, Harrington, Locke, Toland, Swift, Bolingbroke and Hume the essayist; Montaigne, Fontenelle, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, d'Alembert and Rousseau. This was an extraordinary amount of high literary achievement to be leaving unassigned except to a general term like 'all of the above'. To

the extent that it was thought out, Gibbon's arrangement foregrounded the authority of the author rather than his implication in a disciplinary science or method.<sup>28</sup> It is remarkable that the catalogue distinguishes historians from authors. Montesquieu's *Considérations sur la grandeur des Romains* and Hume's *History of England* appear under the appropriate sections of 'Historia', whereas other of their works appear under 'Miscellanea'. It is even more remarkable that Volume I of *The Decline and Fall* does not appear in the catalogue that was created to celebrate it. (The *Essai* was listed in 'Literae Humaniores', c. 3.) Did the breadth of *The Decline* render it ill-suited to any one place, and therefore a marker for the library as a whole?

After Gibbon the historian had published Volumes II and III of *The Decline and Fall* in 1781, and the MP had seen the war in America through to its end in 1783, a revolution occurred in his life: he decided to remove to Lausanne. By far the most vexing problem with expatriation was how to get back to work quickly, and that meant how to move a library of five to six thousand volumes. He took several measures. First, he sold a number of folios and quartos, replacing them by more portable, if less prestigious, editions. Second, as he was in the midst of writing Volume IV and embarking on the history of Byzantium, he selected key titles for immediate shipment. Third, fearing that Byzantium's 'tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery'<sup>29</sup> would prove off-putting for readers, he invested in a great many classics from antiquity: in good, portable, modern editions, to provide himself intellectual relief from a narrative in which stasis overcame even decline and fall.<sup>30</sup> In Volume I of *The Decline and Fall*, he had sought relief from the darkness of late Roman antiquity by other means, but now that need was assigned to the classics. These different categories of books, plus a part of the rest, were dispatched in August 1783. At the same time, he reported that the 'bulk' of his library would have to be stored in London,<sup>31</sup> presumably to be shipped once he was settled. This is where the plot thickens.

The urgent dispatch was slow to arrive in Lausanne and so Gibbon did not set up at his new home, 'La Grotte', and resume work until the spring of 1784. He soon found himself pleased with his new environment and *The Decline and Fall* was again underway. That was the good news. But when worrisome news about his personal finances arrived from England, he imagined selling the books left in storage. In February 1784 he ordered a list to be drawn up quickly so he could choose a few more titles,<sup>32</sup> but

he resigned himself, perhaps for more than one reason, to extracting the truly useful historical works, and selling all the rest. Apart from the word ‘selling’ in place of ‘burning’, my wording echoes d’Alembert’s. If one believes in markets, selling is not the same as burning, but in some ways that is what Gibbon’s doubts amounted to. Most commentators, including Keynes, have considered that the books left in London were put in temporary storage and then reintegrated into the ever-growing collection in Lausanne. But again the story is more complicated. Settling into his new life, Gibbon once again commissioned an elegant bound catalogue of his library in September 1785.<sup>33</sup> In 1940 Keynes had no knowledge of this volume, and his learning of it was one reason he issued a revised edition of *The Library* in 1980. But being intent on accumulating titles, Keynes did not revise his general idea of Gibbon’s library. Patently, however, if Gibbon had intended to retrieve the ‘bulk’ of his London collection, it would have been ludicrous to invest in a new catalogue in 1785. At best we must conclude that he was indecisive,<sup>34</sup> and that the practical issue of moving his books turned into an occasion for culling authors that he could either live without or find (or replace) if needed. It was several years later, in 1788 or 1789, that he vaunted his collection as a ‘numerous and Select library’.<sup>35</sup>

Gibbon scholars seem not to have clearly identified or studied this other list of books that was for anything but show: a set of small sheets listing by format the 1,978 volumes left in London.<sup>36</sup> This list or catalogue has escaped notice because it does not make good sense to us: so many of the books that we associate with the Enlightenment and with Gibbon in particular are among those listed. Here are a few of the titles that he unsentimentally left behind: the memoirs of the Parisian Académie des Inscriptions, the first twenty volumes of which he purchased and revelled in for the ‘rational amusement’ they provided in his youth, which he celebrated in his memoirs, and which embodied his lasting commitment to academic erudition; the writings of William Law that determined the religious environment of his family, where Law was a tutor; along with Bossuet’s *Variations*, the reading of which was so important in his own attempt to define himself differently, via a brief, formal conversion to Catholicism; likewise, Le Clerc’s ‘excellent *Ars critica*’,<sup>37</sup> Formey’s *Bibliothèque germanique* (76 vols.), the works of Bayle, Caylus, Fréret, La Blérierie’s Tacitus, Diderot (the first *collected works*, 6 vols.), d’Alembert; Chaucer, editions of Bacon’s works and of Boyle’s, Wilkins, Cudworth,

Newton's chronology, Defoe's historical fictions, Hutcheson, Blair's *Sermons*, Kames's *Elements of Criticism* and even his own *Essai*. This long catalogue is and is not a cull list, or rather it signified something of a virtual cull, because eventually Gibbon's finances improved so that he was able, in the same year that the last three volumes of *The Decline and Fall* went to press (1788), to ship many of these books to Lausanne.<sup>38</sup>

But how was he now to order his collection? The 1785 Lausanne catalogue adopted a more reasoned, personal system than the one employed in London (see [Appendix](#)). Living in Francophone Switzerland, Gibbon replaced Latin with French in the new table of contents, and asserted the roots of the entire collection in philology, 'Connaissance des Langues et des Livres', and the transformation of ancient into modern. After this broad category comes a modest section on Theology ancient and modern, except that the short list of moderns proves to be predominantly English, exclusively Protestant and tolerant. Theology in that sense falls short of history. It is followed by humanist philology, with 'Auteurs Classiques' subordinated to genres (poets, historians and philosophers or orators). The model of linguistic invention changes after Greek and Latin Antiquity. Modern writing divides into the disciplines of History and Literature, while Philosophy and public eloquence disappear. Space rather than time is the key to both categories: modern History entails mostly area histories and geography<sup>39</sup> whereas Literature subdivides into linguistic cultures (Renaissance Latin or Italian, and the modern world via French and English). Together History and Literature lead on to three modern sciences, which are less fields of study than commanding heights of Enlightenment, places where the mind discovers its relations to its objects and presumably balances among them. In law and politics (e.g. Milton's prose, Blackstone, Montesquieu's works, Smith's *Wealth of Nations*), the mind recognises the operative principles of social life; in metaphysics, morals and the arts (e.g. Locke, Bacon's and Hume's *Essays*, Smith's *Moral Sentiments*, Dubos and Winckelmann), it understands and proportions itself; in natural history (e.g. Burnet, Buffon, Réaumur), it penetrates the laws of nature. It should be noted also that the category of 'Mélanges' inside literature is no longer the densely charged mass it was in London, at least for the English-language titles. Polygraphs have been subordinated to literary forms. As with the historians in London, they are now more often assigned multiple places as poets, playwrights, political writers and so on, rather than united as authors. Others are transferred to the Sciences altogether. Still others are

reduced emphatically and unjustly to one role only. Voltaire appears in Poetry, as does Swift; Rousseau appears in Novels. This was a deeply ambivalent way of ascribing them authority. However, the French section of 'Mélanges' remains a surprising, unstable mix of theological and philosophical (Pascal, Fléchier, Bossuet alongside Rabelais, Montaigne, La Bruyère and Fontenelle). The treatment of such major Francophone writers might be taken as a gloss on academician Jean-Pierre de Bougainville's 1763 warning to Gibbon, that French men of letters were 'hardly estimable and very dangerous'.<sup>40</sup>

What I am calling Gibbon's cull catalogue remained such. Although he enriched the Lausanne catalogue regularly and extensively with new purchases, he seems rarely to have incorporated the books shipped from London in 1788. The handsome catalogue that he put in the hands of a visitor in late 1788 remained that of 1785.<sup>41</sup> This implies that the 'cull' titles were probably not even shelved along with the official and new Library of Edward Gibbon, a library that bears relatively little resemblance to the one in Bentinck Street or to Keynes. The only thing that Gibbon clearly did with the full collection is hard to interpret. Playing cards were an important part of social and literary life in the pays de Vaud. From his arrival there in 1783, Gibbon apparently began to use decks with blank backs the way members of the local nobility did, to send short text messages back and forth about visits, dinners and social engagements, including times to meet and play cards. Gibbon likewise found them handy as bills of exchange for merchants and even as counters for himself about the transfer of funds.<sup>42</sup> Along with this social fantasia, their standardised format may have inspired him, around the time of the French Revolution, to extend the range from social and domestic to intellectual economy by preparing a card catalogue for his library, with information written on the back of each card.<sup>43</sup> Keynes knew about these from the start, but no one really understands what Gibbon had in mind. The various suits and ranks of the cards appear to have been indifferent, but titles and other information were recorded, probably with the intention of forming two different alphabetical catalogues, by title and by author. Gibbon did not live long enough to make his intentions clear. But as they stand, this would be no ordering of knowledge; rather a renunciation that from d'Alembert's standpoint could look either pathetic ('I told you so') or heroic. According to one posthumous report, the cards were collected pell-mell in a basket.

Before concluding, we must return briefly to Gibbon's 1785 catalogue and its idea



of the modern. The triumph of science asserted there was the triumph of modernity's transformation of the ancient and of ancient classics, which led in Gibbon's case to a need to redefine what a good book, or a modern classic, was. Culling too intersects with that question about the meaning of the word 'classic'. The word was evolving in the eighteenth century towards its present meaning of belonging to a dominant canon, and Gibbon's wish to add an historiographical supplement to his history is one further sign that the objects were changing. But was this scientific or literary, universal or European? In England in 1793, while awaiting the surgery that was to prove fatal, Gibbon drafted what turned out to be his final work, a series of bibliographical remarks on a period bestseller, Edward Harwood's *View of the Various Editions of the Greek and Roman Classics* (1775, with frequent reprints). The remarks did not directly concern his library or *The Decline and Fall*, but they are an extension of his bibliographical project – down to the fact that, according to Sheffield, Gibbon interleaved his thoughts into a volume of Harwood that has since disappeared. Perhaps it never existed: the book shows up on Gibbon's cull list and is not even in Keynes. However, there survives a copy of Gibbon's remarks, perhaps the original clean copy that he drafted, on sheets once interleaved into a copy of his own 1761 *Essai*, a work (as mentioned) that he appears not to have kept on display in Lausanne.<sup>44</sup> If this is not just an accident, or a chance irony, it suggests that Gibbon had not only culled works that defined previous communities of antiquarians and pedagogues, but that he was ready to see his own first efforts in thought as now transcended, though not to be burned; literally inserted into the genealogy, or history, of a new idea of what was classic.

That idea had to do with what I've called high literary achievement, that could be associated with an author *or* with a member of society and a practitioner of a discipline, in more than one sense of the term. Perhaps Gibbon was unable to choose between author and practitioner but he may have wished he could. That may be why we see him trying to bind the public and future historians in a 'useful' seventh volume to *The Decline and Fall* rather than imagine that an historian's intellect or authority could be the source of scientific achievement. This ambivalence also explains why at the end of his life we find Gibbon willing to disperse his library on the market rather than create or recreate a patrimonial 'Gibbonian collection' at Sheffield Park – at the cost of the most heated exchange of his life with his close friend Lord Sheffield. Gibbon ordained in his

will that his books could be considered as ‘some portion of the fruits of my own labour’, leaving him free to dispose of them as he wished.<sup>45</sup> True, but they had also been the seed.



### *Appendix: The Two Principal Catalogues of Gibbon's Libraries*

The following outlines, in two foreign languages, give some idea of the way that Gibbon's understanding of his collections and of his undertakings evolved between 1776 and 1785. The order of the categories and the range each is allowed suggest that Gibbon's vision of the library evolved from a universal to a more selective, classicising perspective, both for ancients and moderns. In relation to his Lausanne library at an early stage, he even boasted of having assembled 'the choice of a chosen library'.<sup>[46](#)</sup>

# **I. ‘Catalogue of the Library of Edward Gibbon, as preserved in his house in Bentinck Street’ [1776–7], British Museum (Add MS 46141)**

## *Index*

### **Historia**

1. De Historia Legenda; Chronologia et Historia Universalis
2. Historia Græci et Romani Antiqui et eorum Versiones et Commentarii item Historici Byzantini
3. Scriptores Recentiores de Historia, Antiquitatibus Inscriptionibus et Numis Veterum Monarchiarum; Vitæque Illustrium Virorum Antiquorum
4. Historia et Antiquitates singularum, Ordine suo, Europæ Regionum Hodiernarum; Vitæque Hominum in Singulis Gentibus Illustrium
5. Rerum Asiaticarum Africanarum, Americanarum; Variarum Per[e]grinationum Scriptores; item Geographi, et Tabularum Geographicaum Maritimarumque Collectiones

### **Theologia**

1. Historia Sacra et Ecclesiastica, Vitæ Sanctorum et Pontificum; item Historia Ordinum Monasticorum et Militarium
2. Biblia, Patres et Opera Theologorum Recentiorum in singulas Linguas distincta

### **Philosophia**

1. Ethici, Oeconomici, Politici, Logici et Metaphysici; item Scriptores de Historia Naturali, de Rebus Rusticici et de Medicina
2. Artes et Scientiæ; Physica, Mathematica, Tactica, Architectura, Pictura et Sculptura

### **Literæ Humaniores**

Poetæ, Oratores, Philosophi &c Græci cum Versionibus et Commentariis eorum

Poetæ, Oratores, Philosophi &c Latini Antiqui cum Versionibus et Commentariis eorum

Grammaticæ et Lexici Linguarum Variarum; Diarii Literaria, Philologia, Historia Literaria; Vitæ Epistolæ, Elogiæque Virorum Doctorum

Poetæ Recentiores in singulas Linguas distincta

### **Miscellanea**

Polygraphi &c qui ad certam aliquam Classem reduci nequeant

## **II. ‘Catalogue de Livres de la Bibliothèque de Monsieur Gibbon. Fait à Lausanne le 26 septembre 1785’, Morgan Library, New York (MA 270)**

### *Table des Matières*

#### **I Connaissance des Langues et des Livres**

I. Dictionnaires

II. Grammaire, Critique, Imprimerie

III. Bibliothèques, Journaux

IV. Histoire littéraire

#### **II Théologie, et Histoire Ecclésiastique**

I. Antiquité Sacrée

II. Histoire Ecclésiastique

III. Théologiens Modernes

#### **III Auteurs Classiques**

I Poètes

1. Grecs

2. Latins

II Historiens

1. Grecs

2. Latins

3. Byzantins

III Philosophes, et Orateurs

1. Grecs

## **2. Latins**

# **IV Histoire, et Géographie**

## **I Histoire**

- 1. Chronologie, poids, et mesures**
- 2. Traités d'Antiquités**
- 3. Histoire Ancienne**
- 4. Histoire, et littérature Orientale**
- 5. Histoire de l'Europe**
- 6. Histoire de la Grande Bretagne**

## **II Geographie, et Voyages**

- 1. Collections generales**
- 2. Descriptions de l'Europe**
- 3. – de l'Orient, et de l'Afrique**
- 4. – de l'Amérique, et Voyages autour du monde**

# **V Littérature**

## **I. Latine, et Italienne**

## **II. Française**

- 1. Poésie**
- 2. Théâtre**
- 3. Romans**
- 4. Mélanges**

## **III. Angloise**

- 1. Poésie**
- 2. Theatre**

**3. Romans**

**4. Mélanges**

**VI Sciences**

**I. Droit, et Politique**

**II. Métaphysique, Morale, Beaux Arts**

**III. Histoire Naturelle**

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## Notes

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[1](#) *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), II, pp. 57f., 31 January 1775.

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[2](#) *Letters*, III, p. 22, 21 March 1785.

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[3](#) *Letters*, II, p. 32, 10 September 1774; *sic*. ‘The Complete Pocket Book, or Gentleman and Tradesman’s Daily Journal’ for 1776 is in the Morgan Library, New York (PML 19089).

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[4](#) *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. John Murray (London: John Murray, 1896), pp. 316, 308.

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[5](#) Geoffrey Keynes, *The Library of Edward Gibbon* (1940; London: St Paul’s Bibliographies, 1980), pp. 16, 33. For the condition of the books, pp. 32–3; the price, p. 30. The Sotheby’s auction catalogue of 1934 likewise remarks that the books are ‘generally in excellent condition’: *Catalogue of the Library of Edward Gibbon, Historian* (London: Sotheby’s, November 1934), ‘Foreword’.

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[6](#) Gibbon’s Commonplace-book from Lausanne is in the British Library (Add MS 48860), with his 1761 reflections on reading and note-taking, ‘Extraits raisonnés de mes lectures’, ff. 160–3. Johnson’s *Idler*, no. 74, dated 15 September of the same year (and shortly after Gibbon’s return to England), is quoted in *Autobiographies*, pp. 143–4.

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[7](#) Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), II, p. 519.

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[8](#) The British Library describes these ledgers (Add MS 34882) as ‘Lists of authorities cited and places mentioned in the History[.] [F]ive separate note-books, in three of which the names and references have been taken down in order as they occur in the volumes, while the other two contain the names alphabetically arranged but without references.’

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[9](#) *Autobiographies*, pp. 165, 248; drafts of 1789.

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[10](#) *Letters*, III, p. 209; to Thomas Cadell, 17 November 1790 (his emphasis).

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[11](#) *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Lord Sheffield, 2 vols. (London: Strahan, 1796), I, p. 686n.

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[12](#) Gibbon, ‘Extraits raisonnés’, f. 162 in 1761 and Appendix (below) in 1785.

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[13](#) Jonathan Israel has identified the genre of the ‘lexicon’ and the concept of the ‘universal library’ as key expressions of the vision espoused in *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 119–41.

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[14](#) ‘Six autobiographical sketches by Edward Gibbon, all holograph, being the materials from which Lord Sheffield arranged the “Memoirs” as published in the *Miscellaneous Works*’. British Library, Add MS 34874.

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[15](#) ‘Il seroit à souhaiter que tous les cent ans on fît un extrait des faits historiques réellement utiles, & qu’on brûlat le reste.’ Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, ‘Réflexions et anecdotes sur Christine, reine de Suède’, in *Mélanges de philosophie et de littérature*, 4 vols. (1753; Amsterdam: Chatelain, 1759), II, p. 1 (my translation).

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[16](#) Gibbon, *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature : A Critical Edition*, ed. Robert Mankin (1761; Oxford: SVEC, 2010), LIII. I quote from my translation: *Republic of Letters* 3.3, 2014; <http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/essay-study-literature-translation>.

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[17](#) *Essai*, VI for the ‘décadence’ of belles-lettres and II for ‘la mode’.

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[18](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 248; see also p. 164. He associated the Portens’s library with the bankruptcy of his merchant grandfather James (see pp. 48, 119).

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[19](#) *Autobiographies*, pp. 57, 120, 248.

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[20](#) For patrimonial libraries, see the portrait of the Roman nobility by Ammianus Marcellinus, translated in chapter 31 of *The Decline and Fall*, II, p. 180.

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[21](#) *Gibbon’s Journey from Geneva to Rome*, ed. Georges Bonnard (London: Nelson, 1961), p. 105.

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[22](#) *Letters*, I, p. 364; II, pp. 276, 355; III, pp. 130–1.

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[23](#) *Letters*, II, pp. 59, 70.

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[24](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 165; see also p. 248 (1788–9 and 1789 respectively).

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[25](#) *Letters*, II, p. 335 (my translation of the French): ‘Formée peu à peu mais avec beaucoup de soin et de dépense [my library] peut se nommer aujourd’hui un beau cabinet de particulier. Non contente de remplir à rangs redoublés la meilleure pièce qui lui étoit destinée, elle s’est débordée dans la chambre sur la rue, dans votre ancienne chambre à coucher, dans la mienne dans tous les recoins de la maison de Bentinck Street, et jusques dans une chaumière que je me suis donnée à Hampton Court.’

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[26](#) Keynes, *The Library of Edward Gibbon*, p. 3; for the 1,900 titles mentioned later in the paragraph, see p. 20.

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[27](#) The undated ‘Catalogue of the Library of Edward Gibbon’, or Bentinck Street catalogue, belongs to the British Library (Add MS 46141). A receipt for payment at the Morgan Library (MA 725) indicates the cost of its production: £12.2.6.

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[28](#) The only exceptions are ‘Works of Mrs Catherine Cockburn. Theological, Moral, Dramatic and Poetical’ and ‘Lettres de Mad[ame] de Sévigné’. Bentinck St Catalogue, pp. 151r, 155r, 157r.

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[29](#) *The Decline and Fall*, III, p. 23.

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[30](#) *Letters*, II, p. 360; to William Robertson, 1 September 1783.

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[31](#) *Letters*, II, pp. 353–4.

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[32](#) *Letters*, II, pp. 399–400; III, p. 3.

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[33](#) ‘Catalogue de Livres de la Bibliothèque de Monsieur Gibbon. Fait à Lausanne le 26 septembre 1785’. Morgan Library (MA 270).

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[34](#) *Letters*, III, p. 37: these hesitations date from October 1785.

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[35](#) *Autobiographies*, pp. 164, 331.

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[36](#) The list is registered as ‘Catalogue des livres de Gibbon’. British Library (Add MS 34715), pp. 19–46.

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[37](#) *Autobiographies*, p. 164; *Essai*, v (my translation). The catalogue also includes Bayle’s *Dictionnaire* and Beausobre’s history of Manicheanism. But they were dispatched in 1784.

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[38](#) *Letters*, III, p. 145.

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[39](#) *The Decline and Fall* is listed in 1785 in IV.I.3, ‘Histoire ancienne’. Note too the crossover regarding oriental literature (IV.I.4).

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[40](#) ‘Des hommes peu estimables et très dangereux.’ Lausanne Libraire no. v. ‘Le Séjour de Gibbon à Paris du 28 janvier au 9 mai 1763’, in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, eds. Gavin de Beer, Georges A. Bonnard and Louis Junod (Lausanne: Librairie de l’Université, 1952), p. 100; 26 February 1763.

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[41](#) [Ernst Langer], ‘Einige Nachrichten von Gibbon’, *Neues Göttingisches historisches Magazin* (1794), 636.

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[42](#) For example, there is a card inscribed, ‘Bon pour trois cent vingt livres à moi-meme £320 E. Gibbon ce 2 Janvier 1789’. British Library (Add MS 34887), p. 21.

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[43](#) ‘Catalogue of the library of Edward Gibbon, the Historian, written on the backs of playing cards.’ British Library (Add MS 34716A & B).

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[44](#) Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (MS Eng 1308).

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[45](#) Cf. p. 15r of Gibbon’s last will (1791; British Library Add MS 34715). An earlier will (1788) bequeathed his entire library to a public institution, the Académie de Lausanne. *Autobiographies*, p. 423; *Letters*, III, p. 263.

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[46](#) *Letters*, III, p. 22.

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## The *Memoirs* and Character of the Historian



**Charlotte Roberts**

Edward Gibbon's reputation as the erudite and masterful historian of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has influenced perceptions of his life and character since the publication of the first volume of his history in 1776. Gibbon's contemporaries, whether they celebrated him as a literary giant or berated him as an insidious champion of irreligion, formed opinions of his character based upon the expectations raised by this commanding work. In the almost two and a half centuries since the first appearance of *The Decline and Fall* the idea of Gibbon the historian of Rome has acquired and maintained an almost mythic status. This is owing, in part, to his history's reputation as a classic of enlightenment historiography, but it is also a consequence of Gibbon's own alertness to and cultivation of literary character.

The question of how to view these early years in the light of his subsequent achievement is one that preoccupied Gibbon when he came to write his *Memoirs* in the last years of his life. Gibbon first began working on his *Memoirs of the Life of Edward Gibbon* in 1788, the same year in which the final volumes of *The Decline and Fall* were published. Over the next five years Gibbon wrote six substantial versions of his autobiography (subsequently entitled Memoirs A–F, in probable chronological order) as well as notes and other extracts related to the project. Only one of the *Memoirs*, Memoir E, carries the story of Gibbon's life as far as the completion of his history, his final retirement to Lausanne and the present moment of autobiographical reflection. Gibbon cannot have been fully satisfied with this attempt, however, because he set it aside in order to begin a new version, Memoir F, which differs substantially from its forerunner in style, pace and outlook.

Gibbon left these autobiographical sketches, along with his other papers, to his friend John Holroyd, Lord Sheffield, at his death in 1794. Just two years later, Sheffield published the *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, which made available, for the first time, a public edition of Gibbon's *Memoirs*. This text and a slightly expanded second edition dated 1814 (the only available versions of Gibbon's *Memoirs* for a century) are as much Sheffield's compositions as they are Gibbon's. All six versions (except for Memoir D) are mined for material that will contribute to the controlled and amiable portrait that Sheffield wishes to create of his friend. In his preface Sheffield talks of his own and the public's desire 'to see in print every literary relick' of the famous historian: terminology which, for all his talk of publication, suggests an attitude of jealous control as well as veneration regarding Gibbon's literary remains.<sup>1</sup> The manuscripts of Gibbon's *Memoirs* were not published in their original, incomplete and iterative state until 1896. *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, 'printed verbatim' by John Murray, is the only edition that preserves the original form of Gibbon's manuscripts and, since 1897, it has not been republished.<sup>2</sup> Despite its claim to be an accurate reproduction of Gibbon's original papers, however, it does not do justice to the complex tissue of emendations, rephrasings and additions found in Gibbon's autograph manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> Twentieth-century editions of Gibbon's *Memoirs* have all been compilations and have presented Gibbon's *Memoirs* as a single complete and coherent work. In the case of Georges Bonnard, the most prominent modern editor of Gibbon's autobiographies, this coherence is further complicated by his appeal to what he perceives to be 'Gibbon's original and final decision'.<sup>4</sup> It is possible, Bonnard implies, for a modern editor to create a version of the *Memoirs* more truly representative of Gibbon's aims and intentions than anything Gibbon himself was able to produce.

The original form in which Gibbon composed his *Memoirs*, and the ways in which these works have subsequently been edited and published, pose significant problems to students and scholars encountering Gibbon's autobiographical writings for the first time. All the readily accessible, modern editions of the *Memoirs* present a text that is very different from anything that Gibbon himself produced, and while these compiled narratives may serve to introduce the main events of Gibbon's life alongside some of the works' stylistic features they cannot do justice to their author's changing attitudes, narrative revision or the fundamental incompleteness of his autobiographical project.

Murray's *Autobiographies*, on the other hand, has been out of print for over a century, and Gibbon's original manuscripts, held in the British Library, have not yet been digitised. I have used Murray's edition for quotations and references in this chapter, in the hope that most readers will have access to a copy of this text either in a library or online. Despite its limitations, this edition is the only published source that allows us to compare the different versions of Gibbon's *Memoirs*, and which thus illustrates the evolution of his autobiographical project.

The editorial history of Gibbon's *Memoirs*, despite the difficulties with which it confronts a modern readership, is part of an ongoing process of textual revision and reappraisal, which was begun by Gibbon himself. The versions of the *Memoirs* offered by Sheffield, Murray and Bonnard all have strengths and limitations, but beyond questions of accuracy and comprehensiveness each of them can be seen to offer a subtly different interpretation of the original form of Gibbon's texts. Bonnard's appeal to Gibbon's unrealised intentions, for example, suggests an understanding of Gibbon's sketches as a series of attempts moving towards an ideal that would eventually have been realised, had Gibbon not died relatively young. The incomplete or provisional form of Gibbon's *Memoirs* is indicative only of an intermittent compositional process which can be mapped onto the local and accidental events of Gibbon's life in the late 1780s and early 1790s: Memoir B is interrupted by the death of his life-long friend, Georges Deyverdun; Memoir C is halted by a fit of the gout. Alternatively, the original form of Gibbon's *Memoirs* may be expressive of a deeper indecision. The variations in tone, focus and outlook that can be identified between, and occasionally within, the different versions might indicate that Gibbon was grappling with some fundamental, perhaps irresolvable, problem of self-expression as he composed his *Memoirs*.<sup>5</sup> Editors can either preserve this indecision or use it, as Sheffield does, as licence to make their own choices and selections from among the many autobiographical narratives that Gibbon constructs.

There are, however, other explanations we might propose for the original incompleteness and provisionality of Gibbon's *Memoirs*. Perhaps their form is not expressive of any particular stylistic, interpretive or ideological ambivalence but is rather indicative of an insistent concern with the dynamics of inconclusiveness and fragmentation. According to this interpretation, the iterative form of the *Memoirs* is not an unintended consequence of interruption or indecision but a valued aspect of their

presentation of Gibbon's life. It is certainly the case that incompleteness, interruption and incoherence exert their influence over the content as well as the form of these works. The events of Gibbon's early life, which dominate his *Memoirs*, do not lend themselves to a coherent and continuous narrative of maturation or intellectual progress. Gibbon was frequently sick as a child, which prevented him from attending school with any consistency or regularity. His mother was distracted from her eldest son by frequent pregnancies, and died when Gibbon was eight years old. Sent to Oxford University before he was yet fifteen, Gibbon's education and spiritual welfare were so neglected that he converted to Catholicism, prompting his father to banish him to a position of disgrace and dependence at the house of a Calvinist minister at Lausanne in Switzerland. Although he re-entered the Protestant communion eighteen months after his exile his father did not permit him to return to England for another three and a half years. When he did come back, it was to sign away the entail on the family estate, thus allowing his father to mortgage his property. Gibbon's income, occupation and even affections were tightly controlled by his father until the latter's death in 1770, and the many debts that Gibbon inherited continued to cause him anxiety until his own death in 1794.

It is possible that Gibbon found, in the incomplete, interrupted and iterative form of his *Memoirs*, a way of expressing the incoherence he so strongly associated with his early life and minority.<sup>6</sup> However, he also managed to compose one version of his autobiography that encompassed the writing and publication of his history and brought the story of his life as far as the present day. All of the *Memoirs*, with the exception, perhaps, of Memoir A (which, like the early volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, does not get as far as narrating the birth of its protagonist), address the question of how Gibbon emerged as the monumental historian of Rome. All the *Memoirs*, therefore, are required to effect a challenging reconciliation between the difficulties of Gibbon's early life – many of which, like his limited classical education and expulsion from Oxford, do not presage his future scholarly success – and their protagonist's emergence as the author of *The Decline and Fall*.

Gibbon's *Memoirs* have frequently been read as redemptive works, which use retrospective narration to impose order and coherence on events which, at the moment of experience, were painful and confusing. Patricia Meyer Spacks, discussing Gibbon's narration of his difficult childhood and youth, argues that '[t]he historian setting down the

story of his life shows himself a master of marmoreal style. The boy and young man he describes, struggling towards mastery, is finally defined by his suffering, which, as boy and young man, he cannot comprehend but which as mature writer he can accept, judge, and contain.’<sup>7</sup> Roy Porter also argues that Gibbon was able to use retrospective narration to control and manage the seeming incoherence of his experience before the publication of *The Decline and Fall*: ‘by a flick of historical interpretation, all these losses could be made into gains, emancipations even’.<sup>8</sup> It is significant that both these critics associate Gibbon’s ability to compose his losses and calamities into a narrative of triumph with his acquisition of a historical outlook. In the first volume of *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon describes the historian as someone ‘who attempts to preserve a clear and unbroken thread of narration’ amidst the ‘imperfect fragments’ of the past and its memorials.<sup>9</sup> The ability of the historian to create continuity and narrative from a historical record that is broken and confused is a skill that Gibbon may also apply to the incoherent particularity of his own life. By maintaining the persona of the historian in his *Memoirs* Gibbon is able to retrospectively compose a narrative of this persona’s triumphant emergence.

Gibbon uses elements of redemptive narrative in all the versions of his *Memoirs*. Certain aspects of his life – most particularly the years he spent at Lausanne, but also his depleted fortune, his time in the militia and his parliamentary career – are narrated as episodes that bring unexpected benefits to his life and character. In Memoir C Gibbon uses the advantages of his time at Lausanne in order retrospectively to recuperate his disastrous conversion and neglect at Oxford:

If my childish revolt against the Religion of my country had not stripped me in time of my Academic gown, the five important years, so liberally improved in the studies and conversation of Lausanne, would have been steeped in port and prejudice among the monks of Oxford.

(C, pp. 239–40)

He goes on to describe in detail how all the apparent disadvantages of his position at Lausanne – his boredom, his indigence and disgrace, his isolation – ensure that these years are his most valuable and formative. Very frequently, the hidden benefits that Gibbon identifies in the difficulties and challenges of his life are directly associated with



his later historical achievement. The depletion of fortune that results from his father's prodigality is an advantage to the scholar: 'I am persuaded that had I been more indigent or more wealthy, I should not have possessed the leisure or the perseverance to prepare and execute my voluminous history' (B, p. 155). Gibbon asserts that '[t]he eight sessions that I sat in Parliament were a school of civil prudence, the first and most essential virtue of an historian' and even the vagaries of his political life are advantageous. The Board of Trade, at which Gibbon had a lucrative post, was abolished following the fall of Lord North's government in 1782, but Gibbon's regret for the loss of a 'convenient salary' is compensated by an improvement in the composition of his final volumes: 'my diligence perhaps was quickened by the loss of office' (E, pp. 310, 325–6).

It is difficult to identify clear differences of attitude and outlook between the different versions of Gibbon's *Memoirs*. Some of the sketches are more detailed than others, and their contents vary significantly because they all leave the story of Gibbon's life in different stages of completion. It is possible, for example, to trace an increasing diffidence towards redemptive narration in the *Memoirs* Gibbon composed between 1789 and 1793. However, the reader's sense of this development may be heightened by the increasing brevity with which the troubling events of Gibbon's early life are narrated in Memoirs D and E, and even more by the breaking off of Memoir F before the account of Gibbon's teenage years at Lausanne. Of course variations in narrative pace and the different end points of the *Memoirs* are themselves potentially significant aspects of Gibbon's composition. Nevertheless it is difficult confidently to identify meaningful diminutions and absences when the general trend of Gibbon's writing is increasing brevity, and when many omissions are determined by chronological cut-off points in the story of Gibbon's life. It is only through an examination of the evolution of particular and localised sentiments, expressed through the repeated revision of individual phrases and sentences, that we can trace Gibbon's changing attitudes in the sequential versions of his *Memoirs*.

Gibbon's account of his time in the Hampshire militia is redemptive in all four of the *Memoirs* in which the episode is narrated. Memoirs B, C, D and E all acknowledge the unpleasant nature of his years of service, but all contain, in some variation, the opinion that 'the Captain of the Hampshire grenadiers (the reader may smile) has not been useless to the historian of the Roman Empire' (B, p. 190; see also C, p. 258; E, p. 299;

D, pp. 401–2). Within this consistent framework, however, there are variations. We can compare Gibbon's reflections on the benefits and drawbacks of his militia service in three sections from Memoirs B, C and D (Memoir E does not contain a comparable passage):

The loss of so many busy and idle hours was not compensated by any elegant pleasure; and my temper was insensibly soured by the society of our rustic officers who were alike deficient in the knowledge of scholars, and the manners of gentlemen. In every state there exists, however, a balance of good and evil. The habits of a sedentary life were usefully broken by the duties of an active profession: in the healthful exercise of the field I hunted with a battalion instead of a pack ... But my principal obligation to the militia was the making me an Englishman and a soldier. (B, pp. 189–90)

That, in the Militia, a sedentary life was broken by some salutary exercise of the mind and body, I shall not deny. My active duties forced me from the closet into the field: I hunted with a battalion instead of a pack ... and I became familiar with the government and manners, the interests and characters of the English world. But these casual benefits bore no proportion to the loss of time, of temper, and of health. (C, p. 259)

A larger introduction into the English World was a poor compensation for such company and such employment – for the loss of time and health in the daily and nocturnal exercises of the field and of the battle.

(D, p. 401)

The question of compensation, an important one for any redemptive narrative, is addressed in each of these extracts. In Memoir B militia life places demands on Gibbon's time that are not balanced by any immediate social pleasures, but the benefits of his service are permanent and substantial: activity, health and an English identity that Gibbon had to some extent lost during his years in Switzerland. In Memoir C the use of litotes qualifies the advantages of his militia experience, and the same benefits that compensated Gibbon for his distraction and discomfort in Memoir B are now merely 'casual', offering no recompense for the permanent losses 'of time, of temper, and of health'. In Memoir D the possible benefits of an introduction to the English world are immediately and

emphatically dismissed as a 'poor compensation' for the irredeemable losses of his time in the militia.

Although all of the *Memoirs* maintain some level of commitment to a redemptive autobiographical model, Gibbon's successive accounts of his militia experience exemplify a decreasing commitment to this kind of narration. They also demonstrate the way in which small manipulations of vocabulary, sentence structure and the order in which ideas are presented can fundamentally alter the mood and outlook of Gibbon's self-narration. The redemptive model – which locates, in Gibbon's *Memoirs*, a single, coherent narrative of his triumphant emergence as the historian of the Roman Empire – is difficult to reconcile with the impulse towards multiple narration indicated by Gibbon's revisionist and iterative approach to his autobiography.

In whatever vein Gibbon chooses to narrate the events of his life both he and his readers know how the story will end. Writing with the security of a quasi-historiographical perspective over his early experiences, it may not matter much whether Gibbon constructs a narrative of benefits enjoyed or hardships overcome. Nor does it matter that most versions of his *Memoirs* do not get as far as describing Gibbon's career as a historian, since their very existence is a testament to his achievement and success. Gibbon's professed motivation for attempting to write his *Memoirs* is the value and interest of his literary character: 'the public is always curious to *know* the men who have left behind them any image of their minds ... [t]he author of an important and successful work may hope without presumption that he is not totally indifferent to his numerous readers' (B, p. 104). Yet despite Gibbon's secure possession of a literary character, his understanding of this character changes over the course of his *Memoirs*. A comparison of two of Gibbon's autobiographical sketches – Memoirs B and F – reveals the extent to which Gibbon's sense of himself as a historian was dependent upon his recollection, interpretation and narration of the events of his early life.

One of the consequences of the redemptive narrative that Gibbon employs in Memoir B is that decisions made, by Gibbon and others, without understanding or foresight are frequently productive of desirable results. His father's 'blind resolution' to send him to Lausanne 'produced the effects of the most deliberate wisdom' (B, p. 152), while Gibbon's submission to the breaking of the entail on his estate, although 'blind and almost involuntary', is later 'justified by duty and interest' (B, p. 156). Both Gibbon and

his father, blind to the true motivations and consequences of their actions, find themselves participating in a narrative of inevitable triumph for the historian of Rome, whose destined success transcends the faulty and limited foresight of human individuals. In all Memoirs B to E Gibbon reflects, to some extent, on the ‘high prize’ that he has drawn in the ‘lottery of life’ (E, p. 343):

My lot might have been that of a slave, a savage, or a peasant; nor can I reflect without pleasure on the bounty of Nature, which cast my birth in a free and civilized country, in an age of science and Philosophy, in a family of honourable rank, and decently endowed with the gifts of fortune.

(B, p. 105)

Gibbon even beats the odds stacked against his survival, since ‘[a]ccording to the calculations of Monsieur de Buffon ... the chances that I should not live to compose this narrative were, at the time of my birth, in the proportion of above three to one’ (B, pp. 111–12). It is striking that Gibbon’s reflections on the accidents responsible for his success, happiness and even his continued existence do not disturb his tone of confidence and security. Instead of exhibiting anxiety when confronted with the precariousness of chance and contingency, Gibbon embraces the sense of being a special case, a lucky individual who triumphs over the general and the probable.

The sense of specialness that Gibbon garners from the circumstances and events of his life has a direct impact on his understanding of his historical vocation. In the earlier versions of his *Memoirs*, whether a ‘secret Genius’ whispers in his ear (C, p. 258), he obeys the promptings of some ‘secret instinct’ (D, p. 403) or follows the ‘natural propensity’ (B, p. 193) of his mind, Gibbon attributes his turn to mature historical composition as a response to an innate impulse. Despite being fully aware of contemporary philosophic distrust of the theory of innate ideas and inborn abilities Gibbon cannot quite bring himself to deny his own intrinsic historical ability in Memoir B: ‘Without engaging in a metaphysical or rather verbal dispute, I *know*, by experience, that from my early youth I aspired to the character of an historian’ (B, p. 193). Gibbon’s belief that his historical character is inherent rather than learnt and experiential accords him an almost unshakeable resilience to the vicissitudes of his life. The incoherent

maturation his *Memoirs* chronicle cannot alter his destined form. Instead Gibbon is like a 'statue ... discovered in the block of marble' (B, p. 152), a fully formed work of art, waiting to be revealed rather than created.

In Memoir F, in place of a celebration of his own exceptional qualities, Gibbon includes several new passages which emphasise the extent to which the conditions of his existence are shared by him with the rest of mankind. Gibbon's account of his first mastery of 'reading, writing, and vulgar Arithmetic' is illustrative of his altered outlook:

So remote is the date, so vague is the memory of their origin in myself, that were not the error corrected by Analogy I should be tempted to conceive them as innate. In the improved state of society in which I have the good fortune to exist, these attainments are so generally diffused that they no longer constitute the liberal distinctions of Scholars and Gentlemen. The operations of writing and reading must seem, on an abstract view, to require the labour of Genius ... Yet experience has proved that these operations of such apparent difficulty, when they are taught to all may be learned by all, and that the meanest capacity in the most tender age is not inadequate to the task.

(F, p. 38)

In Memoirs B to E the fortunate circumstances of Gibbon's birth revealed him as a special case: someone who had beaten the odds stacked against his survival and prosperity in order to achieve his success. In this passage from Memoir F the same good fortune stems from the fact that he is born into a society in which seemingly special abilities are universally acquired. In Memoir B the irresistible knowledge of his own innate talent for historical composition is enough to oppose the empiricist philosophies of his contemporaries. In Memoir F not only is the tempting belief in innate ability contradicted, it is contradicted by an analogous appeal to the general and probable development of a human individual: an empiricist triumph after all. The influence of 'Genius', which in Memoirs B and C is the source of Gibbon's historical propensity, is denied. Employed in ironic or discredited contexts throughout Memoir F, the word 'Genius' is perhaps most strikingly used to describe a collective or national character from which Gibbon is excluded. Despite his own negative and limited experience of

school, Gibbon remarks: 'I shall always be ready to joyn in the common opinion, that our public schools, which have produced so many eminent characters, are the best adapted to the Genius and constitution of the English people' (F, p. 51). The complete reversal that the word Genius has undergone, from a unique characteristic to a nation-defining quality, illustrates the change in outlook that has occurred between the first and last of Gibbon's personal *Memoirs*.

The proliferation of the *Memoirs*, both at a structural level – as Gibbon composes more and more versions – and at the level of content – as different autobiographical strands are placed in competition with one another – challenges Gibbon's belief in a unique, destined and innate historical ability. The specialness that Gibbon attributed to himself and his vocation in Memoir B, and to a lesser extent in Memoirs C to E, is reinterpreted in Memoir F as exclusion and detachment. The schoolboy pleasures of the playing field, the 'smiles of maternal tenderness' (F, p. 45), the intellectual debt that a scholar owes to his university are all benefits enjoyed by others from which Gibbon is excluded, and are all renounced by Gibbon with a seemingly studied indifference. Gibbon's *Memoirs* tell a story of the proliferation of character and the marginalisation of special achievement that might lead us to believe that Gibbon felt dissatisfaction or insecurity when he reflected on his literary character, especially later in life. However, it is also possible that the *Memoirs* illustrate a different understanding of the role of the historian, one not based upon singular, privileged vocation or invulnerable, destined triumph, but a very different model of success.

Gibbon chronicled the years he spent writing *The Decline and Fall* in his contemporary letters to friends and associates as well as in his retrospective Memoir E. In these texts, Gibbon describes a compositional process beset by interruptions, distractions and delays. In his earliest researches Gibbon recollects that he was 'diverted by the amusements of the World, and the avocations of old and new books' (E, p. 303), and the publication of his first volume was delayed by the 'novelty and tumult' (E, p. 310) of his first parliamentary session. In his letters, accounts describing the progress of his history and his authorial activity jostle for space among discussions of political, legal and familial concerns, as well as gossip, jokes and compliments. When his history does not progress as it should the distractions of contemporary life are often blamed.

In both his *Memoirs* and his letters, however, Gibbon's contemporary life of

parliamentary duty and fashionable London amusement is shown to complement the life he lived vicariously through his composition of Roman history – sometimes in surprising ways. Gibbon’s earliest experience of London life as an adult, immediately following his first return from Lausanne at the age of twenty-one, was not a favourable one. In his *Memoirs* Gibbon paints a picture of social isolation from which he often took refuge in reading: ‘While coaches were rattling through Bond Street, I have passed many a solitary evening in my lodging with my books’ (B, p. 161). His second period of London life, which followed his father’s death, was characterised by a newfound freedom. Beginning to work on his history, Gibbon’s studious and social lives no longer replace or oppose one another in his autobiographical account. Instead Gibbon was able to ‘divide the day between study and society. Each year the circle of my acquaintance, the number of my dead and living companions, was enlarged’ (E, p. 307). Gibbon relates his increasing sociability to his increasing familiarity with his historical sources. Nor is this the only instance in which Gibbon draws together the ancient world he experienced through the composition of *The Decline and Fall* and the modern life he experienced through Parliament and London society. ‘On Thursday an attempt to repeal the Quebec bill’, he writes to Lord Sheffield in 1775; ‘having supported the British I must destroy the Roman Empire’.<sup>10</sup> Statements like these do not necessarily indicate that Gibbon saw the Roman and British empires as equivalent to one another: he was certainly not interested in writing political commentary in the form of historical discourse. They do suggest, however, that Gibbon was teased by the differences as well as the similarities that were highlighted by the sudden conflation of ancient and modern: a conflation that he experienced daily as he wrote his history of Roman decline in the midst of the political, cultural and social life of London in the 1770s and 1780s. The tension between present and past is a source of interest for Gibbon, and is certainly a source of amusement. Tongue-in-cheek asides such as that contained in a 1774 letter to Sheffield – ‘as I was destroying an army of Barbarians, I heard a double rap at the door’ – show Gibbon playing with bathos and the dynamics of the mock-heroic.<sup>11</sup> The tension between the grandeur of his subject matter and the minutiae of his day-to-day existence, between the control he exercised as an observer and composer of the past and the vagaries of political favour (the knock at the door announces Lord Eliot, who offers Gibbon his first

parliamentary seat), is something that Gibbon savours. The tension between authorship and public life is, for Gibbon, a source of pleasure and irony as well as anxiety.

In 1774 Gibbon wrote a brief, chatty letter to his friend Lord Sheffield, framed as an apology for the decreasing regularity of his correspondence:

I begin to flag, and though you already reproach me as a bad Correspondent, I much fear that I shall every week become a more hardened Sinner. Besides the occasional obstruction of *Clarke and Deyverdun* I must intreat you to consider with your usual candour 1. The aversion to Epistolary Conversation, which it has pleased the Daemon to implant in my nature. 2. That I am a very fine Gentleman, a Subscriber to the Masquerade where you and My Lady ought to come, and am now writing at Boodle's in a very fine Velvet Coat with ruffles of My Lady's chusing &c. 3. That the aforesaid fine Gentleman is likewise a Historian: and in truth when I am writing a page, I not only think it a sufficient reason of delay, but even consider myself as writing to you, and that much more to the purpose than if I were sending you the tittle tattle of the town, of which indeed there is none stirring. With regard to America, the Minister seems moderate, and the House obedient.<sup>12</sup>

In this letter, despite the pressures of club life (Boodle's furnished Gibbon with what he described as 'mixed, though polite, company' (E, p. 307)), entertainments, friendships, political business and historical writing, Gibbon's tone is exhilarated. Instead of being anxious at the hours stolen from studious composition Gibbon seems confident that his historical work can sit alongside very different pursuits, and even interfuse with them. The playful suggestion that history writing might replace letter writing, fulfilling the requirements of intimate, friendly communication, is one of Gibbon's most remarkable characterisations of his compositional process. In Memoir E Gibbon reinforces this sense of productive diversion, writing that 'I never found my mind more vigorous or my composition more happy than in the winter hurry of society and Parliament' (E, p. 316). The sentiment expressed here is subtly different from that invoked by Gibbon elsewhere in his *Memoirs*, which we have already characterised as redemptive. Here the hurry of society and Parliament do not help to confirm Gibbon's character as a historian (as his time in the militia did, for example). Rather these institutions invigorate Gibbon in his authorial task precisely because they distract him from it. It is when Gibbon feels



competition for his time and attention, when he cannot fully surrender himself to historical composition, that he feels he can embody the role of historian most satisfyingly and completely.

Competition, not to be confused with conflict or polemic, was something of a Gibbonian ideal. Gibbon entered into a number of literary conflicts during his career: with Henry Davis, for example, who attempted to attack the irreligion he perceived in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of *The Decline and Fall* by casting aspersions on Gibbon's skill and probity as an author in his *Examination of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of Mr. Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1778), or with the Bishop of Gloucester William Warburton, against whose analysis of Virgil Gibbon composed his *Critical Observations on the Sixth Book of the Aeneid*. In all his battles Gibbon cast himself as the pacific victim of importunate literary hostility, even when (as was certainly the case with Warburton and arguably the case with Henry Davis, given the provocative nature of his chapters on Christianity) he was the main aggressor. This allowed him to claim a gentlemanly equanimity which he took a supercilious delight in contrasting with the indecorous aggression of his competitors. However, the studied modesty that Gibbon adopted as a rhetorical pose in his literary arguments is not incompatible with an interest in the productive and valuable qualities of balanced competition. Throughout his writings, and especially in *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon uses stylistic devices that exploit the taut equilibrium produced by the juxtaposition of competing alternatives. Through the use of antithesis, Gibbon alerts his readers to the ambiguity that underlies so many of his historical explanations, while his irony is often generated by the complex interplay of similarity and difference.<sup>13</sup> Within the pages of his history Gibbon enacts an intellectual battle between competing historiographical modes: between the detached, broad-ranging and systematic history associated with the French *philosophes*, for example, and a very different kind of intimate, detailed analysis that challenges the value or even possibility of generalisation. Although Gibbon was not himself a thoroughgoing sceptic in historical matters, he was fascinated, throughout his career, by the enquiries pursued by pyrrhonists such as Pierre Bayle, who 'balanced the Religions of the Earth in the scales of his sceptical philosophy, till the adverse quantities, if I may use the language of Algebra, had annihilated each other' (B, p. 129). Competition is even, for Gibbon, a political ideal. The balance of power that is

established between a collection of affiliated and mutually dependent, but jealous and competitive, states is applauded in *The Decline and Fall* as a source of energy and improvement:

In all the pursuits of active and speculative life, the emulation of states and individuals is the most powerful spring of the efforts and improvements of mankind. The cities of ancient Greece were cast in the happy mixture of union and independence, which is repeated on a larger scale, but in a looser form, by the nations of modern Europe: the union of language, religion, and manners, which renders them the spectators and judges of each others merit: the independence of government and interest, which asserts their separate freedom, and excites them to strive for pre-eminence in the career of glory.<sup>14</sup>

It is significant that the achievement of this ideal is located, by Gibbon, beyond the temporal confines of his own historical narrative, in the city states of ancient Greece and the trading nations of modern Europe. The history that Gibbon recounts in *The Decline and Fall* begins with the peaceful but enervated conglomerate of the Antonine empire and concludes with the factious and even more enervated Byzantines. Although *The Decline and Fall* offers no single explanation for the corruption of the Roman Empire, the loss of productive competition, both between states and nations and between individuals, is one of the causes of decline that emerges most strongly from Gibbon's narrative.<sup>15</sup>

The redemptive narrative that some critics have discovered in Gibbon's *Memoirs*, and to which Gibbon demonstrated intermittent and waning commitment, proposes that the events of an individual life can be interpreted with the same dedication to singular narrative and linear explanation as is demonstrated by Gibbon in the first volume of *The Decline and Fall*. The 'thread' that the historian must preserve amidst fragmentary and broken materials is reinterpreted, in an autobiographical context, as a narrative subordination of all of life's events to a single account of historical vocation and literary success. Yet it would be wrong to assume that the linear thread represents the sole mode of historical narration used by Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall*. During the course of his history Gibbon continued to explore what it meant to be a historian, and the earlier model

of a detached, superior observer rising above the particularity of the past in order to ‘collect ... compare’ and even ‘conjecture’ is not maintained throughout the six volumes of his historical composition. At the opening of his fifth volume Gibbon abandons the largely chronological narrative he had maintained up to this point:

Should I persevere in the same course, should I observe the same measure, a prolix and slender thread would be spun through many a volume, nor would the patient reader find an adequate reward of instruction or amusement. At every step, as we sink deeper in the decline and fall of the Eastern empire, the annals of each succeeding reign would impose a more ungrateful and melancholy task. These annals must continue to repeat a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery; the natural connection of causes and effects would be broken by frequent and hasty transitions, and a minute accumulation of circumstances must destroy the light and effect of those general pictures which compose the use and ornament of a remote history.<sup>16</sup>

Gibbon signals more, here, than his intention to organise the final two volumes of his history by nation rather than by era. The confidence he once had in his ability to transcend particularity, and to construct causal narratives even if he had to rely on historical conjecture in order to do so, has been lost. The thread of narration that allowed him to do both these things is no longer a reassuring clue but a restrictive and frustrating principle that will condemn him to repetition and tedium. Gibbon’s *Memoirs* are not simple reworkings of the narrative preoccupations of his earlier history. However, in both his autobiographies and *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon acknowledges the value of singular, progressive narrative, only to subsequently embrace particularity, multiplicity and competition as the antidotes to enervating uniformity.

In the first version of his *Memoirs* that he ever attempted Gibbon affirmed that ‘style is the image of character’, an aphorism that has had a flourishing afterlife in studies of Gibbon’s life and character. Its appeal as a touchstone of Gibbonian biography is clear. It hints that the persona that emerges so strongly from Gibbon’s historical prose – assured, moderate and humane, as well as playful, witty and subversive – is one that Gibbon himself was willing to claim as an image of his true mind.<sup>17</sup> This expressive phrase is often quoted out of context, however, and an examination of it in the immediate

environment of Memoir A challenges its status as an untroubling summary of Gibbon's idea of self-expression:

Truth, naked unblushing truth, the first virtue of more serious history, must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative: the style shall be simple and familiar; but style is the image of character, and the habits of correct writing may produce, without labour or design, the appearances of art and study.

(p. 353)

Gibbon briefly countenances, here, the ideal of history, both public and private, as an unmediated representation of a pure and uncompromised truth. The phrase 'style is the image of character', however, does not support this ideal by suggesting that prose can act as a transparent medium for the expression of innate personality; instead it qualifies and contradicts it. Character, Gibbon implies, is not something innately possessed that can be unproblematically conveyed through idioms of language or behaviour, but nor is it artificially constructed and affected. Instead it is something acquired over time and through habit: it is accumulative, iterative and firmly grounded in experience and action.

Although, when read in context, Gibbon's aphorism suggests a very different understanding of self-expression from the one it seemed to indicate in isolation, the contextualised sentiment tells us a great deal about Gibbon's life and character. It provides a context within which to understand Gibbon's preference for flowered waistcoats and fastidious manners, and his tendency both to speak and act with considered self-awareness, which some contemporaries interpreted as affectation. It helps us to understand the intense, personal value that Gibbon placed on the central achievements of his life – most especially the history that accorded him 'a name, a rank, a character, in the World' (E, p. 346) – and provides a sympathetic context in which to view the 'vanity of authors' (E, p. 349) to which Gibbon was perhaps particularly prone. It also offers an explanation for Gibbon's interest in reiteration both in his *Memoirs* and in *The Decline and Fall*. In both works phrases, ideas and images recur in new contexts, acquiring nuance and subtlety from repeated articulations, and illustrating a historian who is never complacent because he is constantly reconsidering his own assumptions and beliefs. We may be wrong to search, in Gibbon's writings, for an accurate and

unblemished representation of his life and character; but we can find, in both his history and his *Memoirs*, the image of a mind alert to the power of self-performance, the significance of event and action, and the value of rehearsal and reappraisal.

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## Notes

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[1](#) Edward Gibbon, *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esquire. With Memoirs of his Life and Writings, Composed by Himself: Illustrated from his Letters, with Occasional Notes and Narrative by John Lord Sheffield*, 2 vols. (London, 1796), 1, p. iii.

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[2](#) *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon: Printed Verbatim from hitherto Unpublished MSS., with an Introduction by the Earl of Sheffield*, ed. John Murray (London: Murray, 1896).

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[3](#) The original manuscripts of Gibbon's *Memoirs* are currently held by the British Library, Add MSS 34874.

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[4](#) Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London: Nelson and Sons, 1966), p. xxxii.

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[5](#) For an example of this kind of interpretation of Gibbon's *Memoirs*, see David Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The Historian and his Reputation 1776–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 207–363.

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[6](#) For a further exploration of this idea, see Charlotte Roberts, 'The Marmoreal Edward Gibbon: The *Autobiographies* and the Ruins of Rome', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34:3 (2011), 357–78.

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[7](#) Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 93.

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[8](#) Roy Porter, *Edward Gibbon: Making History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), p. 9.

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[9](#) Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Penguin, 1994), 1, p. 253.

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[10](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 15 May 1775, *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London: Cassell, 1956), 11, p. 69.

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[11](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 10 September 1774, *Letters*, II, p. 32.

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[12](#) Gibbon to John Holroyd, 21 April 1774, *Letters*, II, pp. 13–14. The editor (Norton) believes the underlinings (*Clarke and Deyverdun*) to be by Holroyd.

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[13](#) A more detailed discussion of similarity and difference in *The Decline and Fall* can be found in Charlotte Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the Shape of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially ch. 2.

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[14](#) *The Decline and Fall*, III, p. 421.

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[15](#) See Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 167–203.

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[16](#) *The Decline and Fall*, III, p. 23.

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[17](#) In Memoir E the same sentiment is expressed directly in relation to the composition of *The Decline and Fall*: ‘The style of an author should be the image of his mind, but the choice and command of language is the fruit of exercise; many experiments were made before I could hit the middle tone between a dull Chronicle and a Rhetorical declamation; three times did I compose the first chapter, and twice the second and third, before I was tolerably satisfied with their effect’ (p. 308).





## Afterword



### *A New Gibbon Manuscript*

**David Womersley<sup>1</sup>**

On 30 June 1753 the sixteen-year-old Edward Gibbon arrived for the first time in Lausanne. A few weeks before, on 8 June, he had absconded from Magdalen College, Oxford, gone to London, and imprudently converted to Roman Catholicism. His father had initially thought to recover Gibbon for the Church of England by means of a crash course in freethinking, and had sent the new convert to his friend and neighbour in Putney, David Mallet. The plan misfired. Gibbon was more scandalised than reclaimed by Mallet's 'philosophy'.<sup>2</sup> A relative, Edward Eliot, then suggested a period of study in Lausanne, as a place of moderate Protestantism where the apostate might be led gently to retrace his steps.

In Lausanne Gibbon lodged with Daniel Pavillard, one of the four 'pasteurs' of the city. Pavillard lived in the rue Cité-derrière, in the upper part of the town near the cathedral and the château. In his *Memoirs* Gibbon would shudder as he recalled the coarseness of these new surroundings: 'To an home-bred Englishman every object, every custom was offensive, but the native of any country might have been disgusted with the general aspect of his lodging and entertainment.' Mme Pavillard Gibbon would roundly denounce as 'ugly, dirty, proud, ill-tempered and covetous'.<sup>3</sup> Pavillard himself, however, who had devised a programme of reading and study for his gifted pupil, Gibbon would eventually salute as 'the first father of my mind'.<sup>4</sup>

By the time he returned to England in May 1758 Gibbon's initial aversion to Lausanne had been overcome, and he recorded his indebtedness in a famous sentence of Draft 'B' of his *Memoirs*: 'Such as I am, in Genius or learning or manners, I owe my creation to Lausanne: it was in this school, that the statue was discovered in the block of marble; and my own religious folly, my father's blind resolution, produced the effects of

the most deliberate wisdom.’<sup>5</sup> Gibbon would visit Lausanne again in 1763–4, pausing there before travelling onwards to Italy on the Grand Tour. And in 1783, when the abolition of the Board of Trade had removed the source of income that enabled him to live comfortably in London, he made Lausanne his permanent home. However, as a wealthy and famous author Gibbon now lived in a more fashionable district to the south of the old city. La Grotte, the house of Gibbon’s friend Georges Deyverdun, stood opposite the church of St François on the site of the present Hôtel des Postes. Here Gibbon occupied a spacious set of rooms on the first floor.<sup>6</sup> From his windows he could gaze without interruption across Lake Geneva towards Evian; for what is now the railway station and the smart hotels, private banks and apartment blocks of Ouchy was then an open landscape of fields and vineyards.

In January 1794 Gibbon died unexpectedly while visiting his friend Lord Sheffield in England. When Gibbon had left Lausanne on 9 May 1793 he had fully expected to return, and so his papers in La Grotte were exactly as he had left them. After Gibbon’s death the most obviously important of these papers were sent to Lord Sheffield in England, who was one of Gibbon’s executors (Maria Holroyd believed mistakenly that ‘all the papers left at Lausanne were sealed, and directed to Papa’).<sup>7</sup> These manuscripts arrived in England in July 1794. But other manuscripts remained behind.

It was General Meredith Read who in the late nineteenth century first hunted for Gibbon manuscripts in the Pays de Vaud, and he gives a romantic description of what it was like to enter the attics of La Grotte for the first time:

But when one enters a long range of gigantic garrets, whose misty expanses are dimly lighted at wide intervals, and gropes his way amidst an unending scene of dust-laden documents, only the most robust seeker of knowledge can withstand the depressing influence of its environment. In these great depositories of La Grotte I found letters, parchments, diplomas, titles of nobility, fragments of unprinted books, unpublished poems, written and printed music, portraits in oil, pencil drawings, silhouettes, engravings, broken harpsichords, disabled billiard-tables, the remains of Gibbon’s theatre; in fact, the odds and ends of a family life of three or four hundred years, whose threads lay before me broken and in confusion.<sup>8</sup>

Gibbon’s papers had in fact been separated into at least three groups. The cream had

been sent to Lord Sheffield. A large number of personal papers of apparently slight literary importance had gone to the de Sévery family. A remnant had remained in La Grotte. The Sheffield papers were sold in 1897 to the British Museum (as it then was), and are now held as the Gibbon manuscripts in the British Library. The de Sévery papers were eventually given to the Archives Cantonales in Lausanne, where they have been very carefully catalogued (although their potential to enrich our understanding of Gibbon's final years in Lausanne has been barely exploited). The third tranche of manuscripts passed to the Grenier family, who had inherited La Grotte. These papers in their turn have recently been presented to the Archives de la Ville in Lausanne, where some documents have been misrecognised, and in consequence misdescribed.

One such victim of misdescription is the manuscript discussed in this chapter, now identified as a short scholarly essay or note by the young Edward Gibbon, composed certainly between 1756 and 1758, and very probably either during or just before January 1757.<sup>9</sup> Aside from the natural interest that attaches to the discovery of any new manuscript from the hand of a major author, this manuscript possesses a broader importance for four reasons. It sheds light on the nature and extent of Gibbon's reading during his first period of residence in Lausanne. It represents certainly a very early, possibly even the earliest, Gibbonian experiment in the use of irony for purposes of scholarly polemic. It leads us to an unexpected source for some memorable turns of phrase in Gibbon's most notorious use of such irony, the fifteenth chapter of *The Decline and Fall*. And it thus opens the door to some fresh speculations on the scholarly matrix of Gibbon's ironic treatment of religion – speculations which may go some way towards explaining why Gibbon's first orthodox readers found the irony of the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of *The Decline and Fall* both so maddening and also so unanswerable.

The manuscript consists of a single sheet of paper measuring 24 by 36 cm, identical in size and quality to the paper on which Gibbon composed the journal of his tour through Switzerland in September and October 1755.<sup>10</sup> There is writing in French on only one side of the paper. The hand is certainly that of the adolescent Gibbon; it is identical to the hand of the holograph of the journal of the Swiss tour (which was also composed in French). The text reads as follows (original lineation and orthography preserved; square brackets enclosing insertions above the line):

- (1). Histoire Universelle. Trad: Franc. Tom. 1. p. 430. (2). Salchi Lettres sur le Deisme. p. 215,  
(3). Canon Chronicus Edit. Francq: p. 86. (4) p. 93 Idem. p 93. (5). Idem. pag. 355.

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Les savans Auteurs de l'histoire Universelle en parlant du systeme de Chronologie Egyptienne du Chevalier Marsham. s'expriment ainsi "Il suppose que l'Egypte immediatement après la mort de Menes fut partagé en quatre royaumes differens de Thebes de This de Memphis Et de la Basse Egypte. sans compter quelques autres royaumes moins Considerables qui se formerent dans la suite et dont il est plus difficile d'en determiner l'Origine. Cette division eut lieu pendant prés de sept siecles jusqu'à ce que les Rois Pasteurs se rendirent Maitres de tous Ces Royaumes excepté celui de Thebes et que ce ne fut que 500 ans apres l'expulsion de ces ~~prin~~ pasteurs que l'Egypte se vit gouverné par un seul prince Par cette supposition la durée de Tout l'Empire depuis Menes jusqu'à la fin de l'Empire regne d'Amasis est reduite ~~il y auroit~~ à 1816 ans. (1) M. le Professeur Sachli a fidelement copié tout ceci ^ [(2)], et il l'a fait avec une si grande exactitude qu'il a adopté tout ce qu'il s'y trouve de fautes. Car si je vou= lois suivre l'Exemple de Bayle je ne laisserois point passer la Phrase. Cette division dura près de sept siecles: jusqu'aux Rois Pasteurs. Car ~~premierement~~ [*above the line*: proprement]

Cette division (de quatre royaumes) ne dura point 7 siecles. Celui de This fut de Retranché du nombre à la fin du sixieme siecle (3). ~~H. me. This se passe point pres de 7 siecles jusqu'à l'invasion des Pasteurs suivant Marsham. puisque le tems qui recoule dans cet Intervalle fut de 720 ans (4).~~ Mais la grande faute et si grande que je suis presque tenté de la croire de l'Imprimeur ou du Traducteur plutot que des savans Auteurs Anglois. consiste à dire que leEgypte ne fut reunie sous une seul prince que 500 ans apres l'Expulsion des Pasteurs. Pour dire cela par inadvertence il n'etoit necessaire ^ [que] d'etre fatigué d'un long travail, mais pour le copier de bonne foi il falloit ~~n'avoir~~ n'avoir jamais vu la reliure du Canon Chronologieus. [icus.] Tous ceux qui l'ont vu savent aussi bien que moi que le Chevalier Marsham supposoit Cette reunion d'avoir d'etre arrivé en meme tems que cette Expulsion et que les Rois de Thebes se trouvoient par ce moyen Monarques de l'Egypte. ~~Si ils~~ Si ils en doutoient je les renverrai à ce passage de son livre. "Est enim plus quam "verisimile totam Egyptum hisce temporibus (de l'Expulsion des Pasteurs) "in Monarchiam coalluisse (.5). ~~Firons de ceci quelques reflexions pratiques:~~ Jugeons ~~de~~ ^ [par] ceci quelle doit etre l'Erudition du Sieur Salchi, et souvenons ^ [la] qu'on ne doit pas parler avec tant d'Arrogance des Antiquites Egyptiennes ni citer Petau, Perizonius, Marsham etc. pendant qu'on ne connoit qu'une Compilation

des plus Communs, dont on copie les paroles et jusqu'aux bevues. Que je vois  
des choses à dire sur la Chine dommage que je n'ai pas du tems à perdre.

[11](#)

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Three questions immediately arise. Who was Jean Salchli (to give his surname its correct spelling)? What are (or were) his 'Lettres sur le Deisme'? And when did Gibbon read them?

Jean Salchli (1724–1808) occupied from 1759 the chair of Hebrew at the Académie of Lausanne, where his father, Jean-Jacques Salchli (1695–1774), had held the chair of theology. In 1756 Salchli *fils* published at Lausanne his *Lettres sur le déisme*, no doubt calculating (as Vuilleumier surmises) that this would strengthen his claim over the chair to which he would in fact be elevated three years later.<sup>[12](#)</sup> In 1759 a second edition of the *Lettres* was published in Paris, apparently identical to the first. However, Salchli seems to have made no impact on this side of the Channel. There is apparently no copy of either edition of his *Lettres sur le déisme* in any major British library.

That lack of anglophone impact is surprising because the first five letters of the *Lettres sur le déisme* describe and deplore the English deists from Lord Herbert of Cherbury to Woolston. With 'Lettre VI' Salchli turns to a brief and speculative review of the causes of what he depicts as the alarming rise in religious scepticism during the first half of the eighteenth century. But by far the greater part of the *Lettres* is taken up by a detailed attack on the French freethinker d'Argens, whose *La philosophie du bon-sens* had been published in 1736.<sup>[13](#)</sup> Salchli devotes more than half of the *Lettres* to a refutation of the arguments whereby d'Argens had sought to 'répandre des doutes sur la Religion, & en particulier sur l'Histoire Sacrée' ('spread doubts on religion, and in particular on sacred history').<sup>[14](#)</sup> D'Argens, like other freethinkers, had been excited by the potential in the histories of ancient, non-Christian civilizations – principally China and Egypt – to challenge biblical chronology, and hence to cast doubt on 'l'Histoire Sacrée'. The discipline of historical chronology had begun as the handmaiden of theology. Its original purpose had been to confirm the accuracy of biblical history, and thus to shore up Christian doctrine by corroborating the factual reliability of the documents in which it was enshrined: 'Chronologies could link secular to sacred time, showing that the rise and

fall of the great kingdoms of the world fitted the patterns of biblical prophecy.’<sup>15</sup> Or not, as the more maverick readers of Scaliger’s *De emendatione temporum* (1598), such as Isaac la Peyrère, were quick to spot.<sup>16</sup> For the discrepancies between secular and biblical chronologies could be exploited to undermine the status of the Bible. In the second half of *Lettres sur le déisme* Salchli’s objective is to defend the historical flank of Christianity against such attacks.

When and why did Gibbon read Salchli’s *Lettres*? In the course of his tour of Switzerland in the autumn of 1755 Gibbon had been introduced to Johann Jacob Breitingen, professor of Hebrew and Greek at Zürich, a man he would later acknowledge as a critic of ‘eminence and erudition’.<sup>17</sup> On his return to Lausanne, Gibbon began a correspondence with Breitingen on some vexing points of Roman history.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the third of these letters, dated 24 January 1757, Gibbon asked a favour of Breitingen (who had also edited a journal, the *Museum Helveticum*):

Nunc habeo quod te rogem, Vir Eruditissime. Amicus quidam meus aliquas exaravit animadversiones in librum nuperrime editum, cujus titulus sic se habet, ‘*Lettres sur le Déisme par M. le Pr. Salchi de Lausanne*’ sine licentia, aliqua tamen cum libertate. Has cupit in tuo praestantissimo Musaeo Helvetico inserere. Te rogo maximum in modum ut voti compos fiat. Stat enim per hanc libertatem res literaria. Gallico scriptae sunt sermone, sed si Gallice respuas, Latine vertendas curabit.

*I now have something to ask of you, most learned sir. A certain friend of mine has unearthed some observations on a very recently published book, the title of which is ‘Lettres sur le Déisme par M. le Pr. Salchi de Lausanne’. They are not scandalous, although they are written with a certain freedom. He desires that they may be published in your most distinguished journal, the Musaeum Helveticum. I beg you to accede to his wish. The cause of literature depends on such freedom. The discourse is written in French, but if you reject submissions in French, he will have it translated into Latin.*<sup>19</sup>

The manuscript fragment transcribed above is surely one of these ‘animadversiones’ (‘observations’), written as it is in French, and also ‘sine licentia, aliqua tamen cum libertate’ (‘unscandalous, although they are written with a certain freedom’). Neither for

the first nor the last time, therefore, a tentative young correspondent has disguised their own composition as the work of an anonymous ‘amicus’ (‘friend’).

In the fragment’s chiding of the shortcomings of a scholar it is similar to other pre-*Decline and Fall* writings by Gibbon, such as the ‘Index Expurgatorius’.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, its focus on questions of chronology – particularly ancient oriental chronology – is also typical of Gibbon in the later 1750s.<sup>21</sup> Gibbon would record in his *Memoirs* how after his first encounter with serious historical writing in the summer of 1751 he had become intoxicated with ‘the principles of Chronology’, and as a result ‘the dynasties of Egypt and Assyria’ became his ‘top and cricket-ball.’<sup>22</sup> In the summer of 1752 this ‘blind and boyish taste for the pursuit of exotic history’ had led Gibbon to compose an essay (which has not survived) entitled ‘The Age of Sesostris’, in which he attempted to reconcile the Greek, Jewish and Egyptian chronologies.<sup>23</sup> In January 1758 Gibbon was working seriously on Newton’s *Chronology*, and his long essay ‘Sur la Monarchie des Mèdes’, composed at least five years later, still contains a strong element of chronology.<sup>24</sup> Gibbon’s final comment in his *Memoirs* on the whole subject of historical chronology – ‘at a riper age I no longer presume to connect the Greek, the Jewish, and the Egyptian antiquities which are lost in a distant cloud; nor is this the only instance in which the belief and knowledge of the child are superseded by the more rational ignorance of the man’ – is an expression of the sober conclusions of intellectual maturity, rather than of the intoxicating visions of youth.<sup>25</sup>

The reference to Salchli in Gibbon’s letter to Bretinger allows us provisionally to date this manuscript either to the latter part of 1756 or to the first few weeks of 1757. It may be that Gibbon’s own natural curiosity had led him to this recent local publication. Alternatively, it may be that Pavillard, anxious lest the arguments he had used to loosen Gibbon’s attachment to Roman Catholicism should prove to be solvents of all religious faith whatsoever, had encouraged Gibbon to read this latest attempt by the orthodox to rebut the arguments of the freethinkers, in the hope of thus making his protégé pause on the brink of ‘the boundless regions of Scepticism’.<sup>26</sup>

Irrespective of precisely when and why the young Gibbon read Salchli’s *Lettres*, we can certainly say that he read them with close attention, for this fragmentary ‘animadversio’ echoes salient terms in Salchli’s text, and deploys against Salchli



polemical manoeuvres which Salchli had himself used against d'Argens and his fellow deists.

The charge Gibbon lays against Salchli is that of pretending to be more learned than he really is. Although the *Lettres sur le déisme* parades in its footnotes the heavyweights of comparative chronology (Petau, Perizonius and Marsham),<sup>27</sup> Gibbon has noticed that in at least one place Salchli has drawn his information from 'une Compilation des plus Communs' ('one of the most common compilations'), the French translation of the *Universal History*.<sup>28</sup> In plagiarising the *Universal History*, Salchli has at the same time revealed the frailty of his scholarship by following his source exactly, even where it is unreliable.<sup>29</sup>

In so indicting Salchli, Gibbon turned back upon him an accusation which Salchli himself had repeatedly levelled against the deists. Salchli presents himself in the *Lettres* as an uncompromising scholar who disdains the shortcuts employed by the freethinkers. His book (so he claims) is written by a man 'Nourri dans le travail, accoutumé aux recherches les plus profondes, livré aux méditations les plus abstraites' ('weaned on work, habituated to the deepest research, given to the most abstract meditations') who therefore can speak with 'la voix du Monde savant' ('the voice of the world of learning').<sup>30</sup> The deists, however, are lightweights: 'Ces Messieurs n'aiment guères une Science qui entraînent des recherches pénibles' ('these gentlemen have little liking for a science which requires hard research').<sup>31</sup> They are the spawn of those 'Journaux ... très funestes à la Littérature' ('newspapers ... very fatal to scholarship'), which allow writers to appear 'savant à peu de frais' ('learned on the cheap').<sup>32</sup> It is in these terms that Salchli berates Collins and Coste for their scholarly superficiality.<sup>33</sup> Even d'Argens, whom Salchli acknowledges to be 'au-dessus du commun des Auteurs Déistes' ('superior to the average deist writer'), has feet of clay.<sup>34</sup> Twice Salchli detects d'Argens quoting *verbatim*, but without acknowledgement, from Lenglet du Fresnoy, whom he calls 'l'un des plus fermes piliers du Système du Marquis' ('one of the strongest pillars of the Marquis's system'), and 'l'Auteur favori de M. d'Argens & son guide perpétuel' ('M. d'Argens's favourite author, and his constant guide').<sup>35</sup>

Gibbon's echoing of Salchli's general polemical strategy towards the deists is given further adversarial point by his repetition of terms and phrases drawn from the *Lettres sur le déisme*. Gibbon begins his 'animadversio' with a reference to the 'savans Auteurs'



(‘learned authors’) of the *Universal History*. Salchli had invoked ‘tant de Savans illustres’ (‘so many famous scholars’) in his struggle with the deists.<sup>36</sup> Gibbon ironically marvels that Salchli has copied ‘les paroles et jusqu’aux bevues’ (‘the words and even the blunders’) of the *Universal History*. ‘Bévues’, or blunders, is Salchli’s favourite term for the scholarly errors made by the deists. ‘Qu’importe au Public de connoître les bévuës de ces petits Auteurs dont les productions meurent en naissant’ (‘why should the public take note of the blunders of these trivial authors, whose works die in the moment they are born’), he asks.<sup>37</sup> Of the error in the *Universal History* that Salchli has blindly but revealingly transcribed, Gibbon says:

Pour dire cela par inadvertence il n’etoit necessaire ^ [que] d’etre fatigué d’un long travail, mais pour le copier de bonne foi il falloit ~~n’avoir~~ n’avoir jamais vu la reliure du Canon Chronologicus. [icus.]

*To say this inadvertently, it was necessary only to be exhausted by long labour, but to copy it out in good faith you would have to have not so much as clapped eyes on the binding of the Canon Chronicus.*

This metaphor for shallowness of knowledge – to have never set eyes on even the binding (the ‘reliure’) of the *Canon Chronicus* – is also taken from Salchli’s *Lettres*, where he deplores the influence of the notions about the materiality of the soul imputed to Locke:

J’ai ouï dire à vingt personnes qui n’avoient jamais vu la reliûre de *l’Essai sur l’Entendement humain*, que Locke croioit l’Ame matérielle ...

*I have heard it said by twenty people who have not seen so much as the binding of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding that Locke believed the soul to be material ...*<sup>38</sup>

Gibbon shakes his head in mock astonishment at the blunder made by the authors of the *Universal History*:

Mais la grande faute et si grande que je suis presque tenté de la croire de l'Imprimeur ou du Traducteur plutot que des savans Auteurs Anglois. consiste à dire que leEgypte ne fut reunie sous une seul prince que 500 ans apres l'Expulsion des Pasteurs.

*But the great error – and so great that I am almost tempted to ascribe it to the Printer or to the Translator rather than to learned English Authors – consists in saying that Egypt was reunited under a single prince only 500 years after the Expulsion of the Shepherds.*

It is a feint copied from Salchli, who had paused in affected disbelief over Lenglet du Fresnoy's difficulties with a detail of the book of Genesis:

Affecteroit-il cette ignorance dans le dessein de donner une légère atteinte à la Révélation? ou plutôt, voudroit-il se mettre à la mode? Je n'ose le croire.

*Might he feign this ignorance with a view to making a weak attack on Revelation? or, rather, did he wish to seem fashionable? I dare not believe so.*<sup>39</sup>

Finally, Gibbon marks the moment when he begins to draw out the significance of Salchli's blunder with a first-person plural imperative which he polishes and revises:

~~Tirons de ceci quelques reflexions pratiques.~~ Jugeons de ^ [par] ceci quelle doit etre l'Erudition du Sieur Salchi ...

*On the strength of this, let us assess what the erudition of Mr. Salchli must be ...*

Again, this is a stylistic move for which a precedent exists in the *Lettres*. Salchli had launched his hostile analysis of d'Argens's critique of Genesis by putting his arm round his reader in a similar fashion: 'Entrons dans quelque détail' ('let us examine this in detail').<sup>40</sup>

Gibbon's attitude towards Salchli is one of contempt, as the brusqueness of his conclusion suggests:

Que je vois des choses à dire sur la Chine dommage que je n'ai pas du tems à perdre.

*How much might I say on the subject of China – a pity I don't have time to waste.*

Chinese chronology was another of the scholarly battlegrounds where Salchli had encountered the deists, and moreover one (so Gibbon thinks) where Salchli's scholarship was likely to be even more derivative than it was in respect of Egyptian chronology.<sup>41</sup> But Gibbon's scorn for Salchli as a scholar did not prevent him from studying the *Lettres sur le déisme* attentively. As we have seen, his 'animadversio' teems with echoes of the language and the polemical tactics of the *Lettres*. It is in part a work of cheeky mimicry, written (as Gibbon said) 'cum libertate' ('with freedom').

Yet Gibbon's engagement with Salchli's *Lettres* made an enduring, as well as a detailed, impression on him. Many years later, when he was composing the notorious fifteenth chapter of *The Decline and Fall*, it seems that Salchli's prose rose up again in Gibbon's thoughts.

In the opening paragraph of that chapter, Gibbon figured the worldly success of Christianity as a successful military conquest over the empire:

While that great body was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the Capitol.<sup>42</sup>

This was a metaphor he would have come across in Salchli, who had evoked the ambitions of the deists in very similar terms:

Le dessein que les Déistes ont formé de renverser la Révélation, & d'élever leurs sentimens sur les débris d'une Religion, qui a par devers elle seize Siecles d'examen, est peut-être le dessein le plus téméraire qu'ait enfanté l'esprit humain.<sup>43</sup>

*The plan of overthrowing revelation framed by the deists, of establishing their opinions on the ruins of a religion corroborated by sixteen centuries of scrutiny, is perhaps the most audacious scheme to which the human mind has given birth.*

In the final paragraph of chapter 15 Gibbon puzzled over the strange silence of the pagan authors Seneca and Pliny concerning the darkness of the Passion:

Each of these philosophers, in a laborious work, has recorded all the great phenomena of Nature, earthquakes, meteors, comets, and eclipses, which his indefatigable curiosity could collect. Both the one and the other have omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which the mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe.<sup>44</sup>

Again, in these sentences we can detect the surprising presence of Salchli at Gibbon's elbow. D'Argens had sought to impugn sacred history by demonstrating the physical impossibility of the entire world being flooded. Salchli undertook to dispel these 'doutes particuliers' ('particular doubts'), but paused before he did so:

Mais avant que d'en examiner la justesse, souffrez que je vous expose le sentiment le mieux fondé, sur le fait le plus considérable qui soit arrivé, depuis la formation de nôtre Globe.<sup>45</sup>

*But before examining the correctness of this, allow me to outline the most well-founded opinion on the most momentous event that has occurred since the formation of our earth.*

What should we make of these echoes of a minor work of Swiss clerical orthodoxy in the prose of *The Decline and Fall*? Two thoughts suggest themselves.

In the first place, the trace of Salchli in the irony of Gibbon's fifteenth chapter hints at the paradoxical contribution made by Gibbon's orthodox adversaries to the style of *The Decline and Fall*. The recent work of John Pocock has reminded us of the extent to which Gibbon drew his scholarly materials from the quarries of the pious – from Mosheim, above all from Tillemont.<sup>46</sup> It seems that this substantive indebtedness was accompanied by a stylistic debt. And it may be for this reason that the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'<sup>47</sup> found Gibbon such an awkward assailant. Aside from the evident mischievousness of Gibbon's intentions, he and they had so much in common.

Secondly, this engagement with Salchli illuminates the unexpected path that led Gibbon into conflict with the forces of Christian orthodoxy in the first place. Certainly in

his youth Gibbon did not display the plumage of a deist – the conversion to Roman Catholicism and the horrified response to David Mallet are sufficient evidence of this. This new manuscript – important as an early indication of antagonism on Gibbon's part towards the orthodox – suggests that it was indignation at the feeble scholarship and disingenuousness in argument of apologists for orthodoxy such as Salchli which initially impelled Gibbon to enlist under the banner of irreligion, and to write on 'l'Histoire Sacrée' ('sacred history') 'sine licentia, aliqua tamen cum libertate' ('without scandal, but with a certain freedom'). Hence, throughout his life, Gibbon's careful separation of himself from *esprits forts* such as Voltaire, and also from those such as Priestley who tried to use the early history of the Church as a lever of radical social change.<sup>48</sup> This manuscript fragment allows us to glimpse – perhaps, given its early date, to glimpse for the first time – the secret thread of consistency in Gibbon's own heterodox, but not inflammatory, meditations on the history of the Church.

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## Notes

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[1](#) The author acknowledges the Archives de la Ville de Lausanne whose collections contain Gibbon's short essay on Salchli discussed in this Afterword.

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[2](#) John Murray (ed.), *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* (London: John Murray, 1896), p. 130.

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[3](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 131–2.

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[4](#) *Ibid.*, p. 297.

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[5](#) *Ibid.*, p. 152.

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[6](#) Archives Cantonales Vaudoises, 'Fonds P Gibbon', 326–67, contains a floor plan of Gibbon's apartment at La Grotte.

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[7](#) Patricia Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian: 1772–1794* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 348.

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[8](#) John Meredith Read, *Historic Studies in Vaud, Berne, and Savoy*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1897), 1, pp. 8–9.

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[9](#) Archives de la Ville de Lausanne, 'Fonds Grenier', carton 18, cartable 5, envelope 12.

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[10](#) BL Add MSS 34875, ff. 2r–17v.

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[11](#) In translation: 'The learned Authors of the Universal History express themselves as follows in speaking of Sir John Marsham's system of Egyptian chronology "He supposes that, immediately after the death of Menes, Egypt was divided into four different kingdoms of Thebes, of This, of Memphis and of Lower Egypt without counting some other less considerable kingdoms which were formed afterwards and the origin of which it is more difficult to determine. This division occurred during nearly seven centuries until the Shepherd Kings made themselves masters of all these kingdoms except that of Thebes and it was only five hundred years after the expulsion of these ~~prin~~ shepherds that Egypt found itself governed by a single prince. By this

supposition the length of the whole Empire from Menes until the end of the ~~Empire~~ reign of Amasis is reduced ~~there would be~~ to 1816 years. (1) Professor Salchli has copied all this out faithfully ^ [(2)], and he has done so with such great exactness that he has adopted all the errors to be found there. For if I wished to follow the example of Bayle I would not allow the phrase This division lasted almost seven centuries until the Shepherd Kings to pass. For ~~in the first place~~ [*above the line*: strictly speaking] This division (into four kingdoms) did not last for 7 centuries. That of This was de Deducted from the number at the end of the sixth century (3). ~~H. mc. According to Marsham This did not lack almost 7 centuries until the invasion of the Shepherds, since that Interval lasted 720 years~~ (4). But the great error – and so great that I am almost tempted to ascribe it to the Printer or to the Translator rather than to learned English Authors – consists in saying that Egypt was reunited under a single prince only 500 years after the Expulsion of the Shepherds. To say this inadvertently, it was necessary only to be exhausted by long labour, but to copy it out in good faith you would have to have not so much as clapped eyes on the binding of the Canon Chronicus. All those who have done so know as well as I that Sir John Marsham assumed that This reunion happened at the same time as that Expulsion, and that by this means the Kings of Thebes became Monarchs of Egypt. ~~If they~~ If they were doubtful, I would refer them to this passage in his book. “For it is more than likely that the whole of Egypt was united into a monarchy at this time (of the Expulsion of the Shepherds). (5) ~~Let us draw some practical conclusions from this.~~ On the strength of this, let us assess what the erudition of Mr. Salchli must be, and let us remember that one must not speak of Egyptian antiquities with such arrogance, nor refer to Petau, Perizonius, Marsham etc. when one’s knowledge is confined to one of the most common of compilations, the words and even the blunders of which one has copied out. How much might I say on the subject of China – a pity I don’t have time to waste.

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[12](#) Henri Vuilleumier, *Histoire de l’Église Réformée du Pays de Vaud sous le régime Bernois*, Volume iv (Lausanne: Éditions la Concorde, 1933), p. 273.

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[13](#) Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d’Argens (1703–71); chamberlain to Frederick the Great. Author of *La Philosophie du bon-sens* (‘Paris’ [i.e. Amsterdam], 1736); *Lettres juives* (1738); *Lettres chinoises* (1739–40); *Lettres cabalistiques* (1741).

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[14](#) Jean Salchli, *Lettres sur le déisme* (Lausanne, 1756), p. 175.

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[15](#) Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, Volume 11: *Historical Chronology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 10.

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[16](#) Grafton, *Scaliger*, p. 406; on La Peyrère, see Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 204–13.

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[17](#) Johann Jacob Breitinger (1701–76). *Autobiographies*, p. 146.

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[18](#) On which see Patricia Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon: Gentleman of Letters* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 96–8. J. E. Norton (ed.), *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, 3 vols. (London: Cassell and Company, 1956), 1, items 7, 9, 11, 12 and 14.

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[19](#) *Letters*, 1, pp. 44 and 49. In the event, nothing appeared in the *Museum Helveticum*, for the very good reason that the last volume of the journal had been published four years previously in 1753.

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[20](#) BL Add. MSS 34882, ff. 27–48. Patricia Craddock (ed.), *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 107–29.

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[21](#) Brian Norman, *The Influence of Switzerland on the Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon*, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), p. 57.

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[22](#) *Autobiographies*, pp. 121 and 122.

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[23](#) *Ibid.*, p. 79.

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[24](#) ‘Les Principales Époques de l’Histoire de la Grèce et de l’Égypte’, dated 13 January 1758; ‘Remarques Critiques sur le Nouveau Systeme de Chronologie de Chevalier Newton’, dated 23 January 1758 (BL Add. MS 34880, ff. 116 and 117–23; *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, ed. Lord Sheffield, 111 [1815], pp. 61–2 and 63–73). Sheffield dated the essay ‘Sur la Monarchie des Mèdes’ to the period 1758–63 on the basis of the handwriting; but it must have been composed after the death of Jean-Pierre de Bougainville on 22 June 1763, since Gibbon refers to him



in the past tense: ‘ce maître étoit mon ami’ (*Miscellaneous Works*, III, pp. iii and 2–3; cf. BL Add. MS 34881, ff. 75v–120). Gibbon had met Bougainville (Freret’s successor as secretary of the Académie des Inscriptions) in Paris during the spring of 1763 (*Autobiographies*, pp. 201–2 and 261–2).

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[25](#) *Autobiographies*, pp. 80–1.

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[26](#) In his *Memoirs* Gibbon compared his own youthful apostasy with those of Chillingworth and Bayle, and noted how the ‘retrograde motion’ of reconversion from Roman Catholicism had, in the case of Bayle, propelled him into ‘the boundless regions of Scepticism’ (*Autobiographies*, p. 297, n10). Gibbon’s own recent experience would surely have led him to read with a particular interest the pages in which Salchli recounted Matthew Tindal’s conversion to Roman Catholicism and reconversion to Protestantism (Salchli, *Lettres*, pp. 36–7).

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[27](#) Denis Petau (or Petavius) (1583–1652); *érudit* and Jesuit; translator and editor of Julian the Apostate, Synesius, Cicero and St Nicephorus. Jakob Voorbroek (or Perizonius) (1651–1715); classical scholar and historian. Sir John Marsham (1602–85); antiquary, scholar and chronologist; author of the *Canon Chronicus* (1665; revised and expanded, 1672).

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[28](#) For a reference in the *Lettres* to the *Universal History*, see p. 261. For Salchli’s praise of the *Universal History*, see his *Apologie de l’histoire du peuple juif* (Geneva and Lausanne, 1770), p. 139.

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[29](#) Salchli, *Lettres*, pp. 214–15.

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[30](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 409 and 208.

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[31](#) *Ibid.*, p. 160.

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[32](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 346–7; cf. also pp. 150–1.

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[33](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 34 and 162 (Collins) and p. 133 (Coste).

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[34](#) *Ibid.*, p. 238.

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[35](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 197 and 283.

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[36](#) *Ibid.*, p. 136.

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[37](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 343–4; cf. also pp. 134 and 238.

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[38](#) *Ibid.*, p. 352.

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[39](#) *Ibid.*, p. 240.

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[40](#) *Ibid.*, p. 198.

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[41](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 192–3 and 321. On Chinese chronology (‘Les Annales Chinoises, si vantées par nos Esprits forts’), cf. also Salchli’s *Apologie de l’histoire du peuple juif*, p. 43.

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[42](#) Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1994), I, p. 446.

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[43](#) Salchli, *Lettres*, p. 6.

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[44](#) Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, I, p. 512.

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[45](#) Salchli, *Lettres*, p. 257.

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[46](#) J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume v: Religion: The First Triumph* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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[47](#) In the opening pages of his *Vindication* Gibbon explained that he ‘could not be ignorant that the result of my inquiries might offend the interest of some and the opinions of others’, and that the ‘obnoxious part would provoke the zeal of those who consider themselves as the Watchmen of the Holy City’ (*A Vindication* [1779], p. 3).

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[48](#) Gibbon met Voltaire during his first period of residence in Lausanne, when he rated him ‘above his real magnitude’ (*Autobiographies*, p. 148). In *The Decline and Fall* he occasionally notes the insecurity of Voltaire’s scholarship, and denounces him as ‘In his way ... a bigot, an intolerant bigot’ (*Decline and Fall*, III, p. 916, n13). For Gibbon’s alarm at the tendency of Priestley’s writings on early Christianity, see *Decline and Fall*, III, p. 439, n42.





## *Further Reading*

## Standard Editions

Note: Other than *The Decline and Fall* and the *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature*, Gibbon's own writings are poorly served by current editions. The autobiographical writings, in particular, have never been faithfully transcribed or reproduced. An Oxford University Press edition of Gibbon's complete writings and correspondence, under the general editorship of David Womersley, is currently under preparation, and will supersede most of the standard editions listed here.

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*The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon: Printed Verbatim from hitherto Unpublished MSS., with an Introduction by the Earl of Sheffield*, ed. John Murray (London: Murray, 1896)

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