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0521824451 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Three: The First Decline and Fall

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Excerpt

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Introduction

This is the third volume of *Barbarism and Religion*, a series intended to exhibit Edward Gibbon and his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in historical contexts to which they belong and which illuminate their significance. The two volumes so far published have brought Gibbon to the verge of writing his master work. *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* concluded with his intention to write a history which was to have been primarily a history of the city of Rome as it was deserted by its own empire, and only by degrees came to be intended as a history of that empire's decline and transformation. *Narratives of Civil Government* concluded with the prospectus Gibbon prefixed to the first volume of the *Decline and Fall*, and isolated as problematic a series of decisions then explicitly or implicitly announced, which were to determine the future character of the work. One of these was the decision to bypass the history of the Latin middle ages, already recounted by Robertson and Voltaire, and pursue the history of the eastern Roman empire to the Turkish conquest of 1453; perhaps the strangest of all Gibbon's decisions and that which perplexed him most. Implicit in it was the further decision that the *Decline and Fall* would not be, like other great Enlightened histories, a history of the 'Christian millennium' leading to the 'Enlightened narrative' of the emergence from 'barbarism and religion' – these are terms used in constructing the second volume of this series – but a history of late antiquity leading into the 'Christian millennium'; a history, as Gibbon came to see, of the 'triumph of barbarism and religion'. More deeply implicit still – and perhaps in 1776 not fully apparent to Gibbon himself – was the decision that the history of the late empire must also be a history of the Christian church and its theology. Gibbon indicated the persistence of his original conception by announcing – a decision in due course executed – that he would conclude his planned work by a study of the city of Rome during the Latin middle ages which he had treated only marginally.

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The two volumes so far published are thus preliminary to the history of Gibbon's text. The third, now presented, will begin an engagement with that text, but not until the last of this volume's six sections. The preceding five conduct a survey of the idea of Decline and Fall itself, beginning long before the events held to constitute that catastrophe, at a time at which the decline of Rome's empire was being predicted by writers before it had reached its height; and the survey includes a view of late-antique and medieval Christian historical concepts, in particular the Augustinian concept of the 'two cities' and the Latin, papal and imperial concept of the *translatio imperii*. These are prominent in the volume for more than one reason. For many centuries they outweighed and submerged the notion of Decline and Fall itself, which in some ways may be said to have returned to the surface only with the humanist recovery of ancient texts and ancient virtues, including the political; this volume conducts a re-assessment of that recovery. In the ages when *translatio imperii* counted for more than Decline and Fall, it indicated the presence of that competition between ecclesiastical and imperial authority, Christian and classical values and culture, which for Gibbon marked the difference between ancient and modern history and was in his mind when he wrote that a history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire had become one of 'the triumph of barbarism and religion'. The historiography of church and empire supplied so many of the events and themes of the *Decline and Fall's* third through sixth volumes that it has been necessary to give it equal prominence with the historiography of *libertas et imperium*, republic and principate, that supplies the narrative of what the title of this volume terms 'the first Decline and Fall'.

That narrative is the theme of the first fourteen of the sixteen chapters composing the volume which Gibbon published at the beginning of 1776. The decision to devote the third volume of *Barbarism and Religion* to a historical introduction and close study of chapters 1 through 14, deferring the study of chapters 15 and 16 to another place, entails the assertion, to be defended in due course, that there is a sharp and profound breach in the continuity of Gibbon's narrative, separating these two chapters from their predecessors and plunging them in a larger caesura, involving the five years (1776–81) which separate the first volume of the *Decline and Fall* from the second. During the lapse of time bridged, in the reader's eye, by chapters 15 to 21, Gibbon had to address the challenge, scarcely confronted in the preface he wrote in 1776, of making his way from an ancient history, whose problems were those of empire and liberty, to a modern history whose problems were those of empire and church; in the terms of our earlier volumes, the 'Christian millennium' preceding

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the ‘Enlightened narrative’. How he met that challenge will come to preoccupy us, but does not appear in Chapters 1 through 14. The First Decline and Fall is that of ancient, imperial and polytheist Rome: the history of how the *libertas* and *virtus* which had extended *imperium* failed to sustain the weight of the empire they had built up. It will be argued here that this Decline and Fall is a phenomenon of ‘ancient’ history, in which the Christian religion plays no significant part; its role is yet to come; but to situate Gibbon in the *moyenne durée* of the history of historiography, we must set classical and Christian histories side by side and consider Enlightened historiography as the partial escape from both. The present volume will enter the world of the Enlightenments only towards its close. If there is a single historian at the centre of the First Decline and Fall, he is Tacitus, followed in modernity by Montesquieu; for what is meant by ‘followed’ in this context the reader is referred to the book. Writing shortly after the murder of Domitian in AD 98, Tacitus examined events at the death of Nero in AD 70, and then turned back to the foundation of the principate by Augustus and the calamitous reigns of his successors. Commencing the narrative of the Decline and Fall at the murder of Commodus in AD 180, Gibbon employed an explanatory structure so exactly Tacitean as to compel an even longer retrospect; he once wrote that he should have begun where Tacitus began instead of long after he ended, and it was possible to base Tacitus’ analysis of the ills of the principate on a remoter narrative of the fall of the republic, beginning as early as Tiberius Gracchus. The first decision by Gibbon which *The First Decline and Fall* seeks to explore is the decision to begin with this Tacitean retrospect; the second, already inspected, is the imposition of a caesura at the accession of Constantine. These two have had the paradoxical effect of making his first volume better known to readers than the five to which it is essentially a preliminary. Chapters 1 to 14 recount the end of classical civilisation, with which readers including Gibbon were, and long remained, more familiar than with the late-antique figures and culture that succeeded them. Chapters 15 and 16, dealing with the Christian church before Constantine, provoked – as Gibbon may or may not have intended – such a furore that they have ever since been read as the principal index to Gibbon’s attitude towards Christianity; though it can be argued that they too are no more than preliminary, and that the history of the church in the empire, and of the philosophy underlying its theology, does not begin until chapter 21, five years as well as five chapters later.

Chapters 1–14 belong in a historiography that treated the Decline and Fall of Roman empire as continuing the history of the republic, the theme

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of the present book. Chapters 15 and 16 belong in, and at the same time rebel against, the very different historiography of the Christian church. How they do so, and how they were read in this context by a public whose culture was clerical as well as humanist, must be the subject of a separate volume, perhaps to be entitled *The Unbelieving Historian*; it may then be possible to consider whether the reading of these two chapters in any way alters that, already complete, of their fourteen predecessors. There is, however, one more omission and postponement that must now be acknowledged. Chapters 7 and 8, dealing with the Persians and Germans respectively, do not form part of the explanatory narrative presented here of the First Decline and Fall; the peoples whom they present are rather the beneficiaries of Roman military decay than its principal cause. For this reason, the two chapters which depict their manners and customs rather than their actions have been reserved for future treatment, entitled perhaps ‘the history and theory of barbarism’, or more ambitiously still, *Barbarians, Savages and Empires*. When these two omissions have been made good we shall be embarked upon the journey from ‘the decline and fall of the Roman Empire’ to ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’. Among many generous observations for which I am grateful, reviewers of my Volumes 1 and 11 have wondered how *Barbarism and Religion* is to be further developed and whether it is planned to reach a definite end; some of them have asked for a prospectus of the volumes yet to appear. Like Gibbon himself, presenting the *Decline and Fall* when he did not quite know how it would turn out, I am prepared to enter into an ‘engagement with the public’¹ to produce this and the next volumes;² what may follow must be determined by the interest of the public and the longevity of the historian.

¹ For Gibbon’s use of this phrase, see Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 2–3; *NCG* p. 373.

² I may be permitted to record that since Volumes 1 and 11 appeared in 1999, I have published five essays relative to the future of my enterprise: ‘Gibbon and the Primitive Church’, in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 48–68; ‘Commerce, Settlement and History: a reading of the *Histoire des Deux Indes*’, in Rebecca Starr (ed.), *Anticipating America: Fashioning a National Political Culture in Early America. Essays in Honour of J. R. Pole* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 15–44; ‘*The Outlines of the History of the World*: a Problematic Essay by Edward Gibbon’, in Anthony J. Grafton and J. H. M. Salmon (eds.) *Historians and Ideologues: Essays in Honour of Donald R. Kelley* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), pp. 211–30; ‘Tangata whenua and Enlightenment Anthropology’, in Judith Binney (ed.), *The Shaping of History: Essays from the New Zealand Journal of History* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2001), pp. 38–61; ‘Gibbon and the History of Heresy’, in John Christian Laursen (ed.), *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe: For, Against and Beyond Persecution and Toleration* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 205–20.

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Prologue

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CHAPTER I

Gibbon's first volume: the problem of the Antonine moment

(1)

Gibbon published the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* on 17 February 1776.¹ He was in his thirty-ninth year and, once his father's death in 1770 had left him in a condition of independence, had moved to London and taken a house in Bentinck Street in search of what he termed 'study and society'.² The paired terms indicate that the *Decline and Fall* was to be a work of Enlightenment, in the primary sense that the life of the mind was to be, freely but inescapably, a life in society. Though Gibbon liked to be considered a virtuoso – 'a gentleman who wrote for his amusement'³ – he knew very well that he was pursuing a vocation; from infancy, he believed, he had been formed to be a historian. This vocation, however, was not to be a profession, in either the clerical-academic or the nineteenth-century sense of that word; Gibbon pursued it in the company of urban and urbane gentry, gentlemen of letters in a sense differing from the French *gens de lettres*. He was a member of the Literary Club,⁴ formed by Joshua Reynolds with the intent of elevating painting – as David Garrick sought to elevate acting – from a trade to a high art conducted in high society. It was here that Gibbon met, but did not much like, Samuel Johnson, who remembered the literary life before some of its practitioners had been rescued from Grub Street desperation by the expansion of genteel publishing (the London and Edinburgh 'business of Enlightenment') which enabled Hume, Robertson and Gibbon to live in affluence off the sale of their copyrights, independent of either patrons or booksellers.⁵ It was also through the Literary Club that Gibbon became a friend of Adam Smith, representing with David Hume that group of Scottish

¹ *EGLH*, p. 67. ² *Letters*, 1, pp. 362, 364; 11, p. 63. ³ *Memoirs*, p. 126.

⁴ Rogers, 1997, is a detailed study of the Club and of Gibbon's membership.

⁵ Brewer, 1997, chs. 3 and 4; Darnton, 1979.

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‘philosophers’ – this word too has other resonances than those of the French word *philosophes* – with whom Gibbon associated, but did not identify, the writing of history. Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* in March 1776, and Hume died in the following August, after reading and approving the *Decline and Fall*’s first volume. Gibbon valued Smith’s conversation and Hume’s correspondence; at the latter’s death he was consulted about Hume’s surviving manuscripts, and seems to have approved of the *Dialogues of Natural Religion*, though there is nothing to connect him with Smith’s refusal to be associated with their publication.⁶

As Gibbon prepared his first volume – it was a difficult process of composition – he was drawn into London public life as well as social. One morning in September 1774, ‘as I was destroying an army of Barbarians’, he was invited to accept a seat in Parliament controlled by a family friend.⁷ He held this until 1780, when his patron went into opposition and Gibbon did not wish to follow him; he was a steady if silent supporter of the North ministry, though his letters reveal disquiet and even dismay at the disasters of 1778–81 and he later wrote that in the dispute with the American colonies he had upheld ‘the rights, though not, perhaps, the interest of the mother country’.⁸ There is a letter of 1779 in which he remarks ‘la décadence de Deux Empires, le Romain et le Britannique, s’avancent à pas égaux’,⁹ but facile connections are to be avoided; Gibbon understood the differences between an ancient land empire of appropriation and a modern maritime empire of commerce, and he would know that whereas the institutions of Roman freedom had been subverted and replaced by the institutions of empire, the British were engaged in losing an empire rather than extend their institutions of self-government to include it. He would agree with Adam Smith that they would survive this loss with no more than emotional damage.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is to be remembered, and may be examined, that the first three volumes of the *Decline and Fall* were written and published during that major crisis of the Hanoverian monarchy and the Europe it upheld which Venturi termed *la prima crisi dell’ Antico Regime*. On the

⁶ See William Strahan’s letter to Suard of December 1776; Baridon, 1971 (I am indebted to Patricia Craddock and David Raynor for help with this reference) and Ross, 1995, pp. 290–1, 299–301, 304; Mossner and Ross, 1987, pp. 205–7, 208, 210–13, 215, 216–17, 223–4. These letters do not mention Gibbon as playing any role in the affair. He bought the *Dialogues* when they were published in the following year; *Library*, p. 156.

⁷ *Letters*, II, p. 32. ⁸ *Memoirs*, p. 156.

⁹ *Letters*, II, p. 218. The singular noun and plural verb are Gibbon’s.

¹⁰ *Letters*, II, p. 326 (20 May 1783: ‘Notre chute cependant a été plus douce . . . Il nous reste de quoi vivre contents, et heureux’). An echo of Adam Smith’s ‘the real mediocrity of their condition’?

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authorial level, Gibbon converted his seat in Parliament into a place under government, and it was after losing the latter at the hands of the reformer Edmund Burke – his fellow member of the Literary Club – that he removed to Lausanne in 1783, to finish the *Decline and Fall* five years later.¹¹

(II)

So much, at this point, for the context of personal and historical circumstances in which Gibbon's first volume may be situated. He had been at work on this volume for perhaps four years, and both its contents and the preface he affixed to it can be read as indicating his understanding of his project at the end of the year 1775. This preface¹² – considered in a preceding chapter of this series¹³ – lays out a plan for future volumes not remote from that finally executed; it indicates an intention of carrying on to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and concluding with a study of the city of Rome in the middle ages. From this it has been inferred, first that Gibbon's original vision of a history of the city within that of the empire was still alive beneath the many layers of intention that had been superimposed upon it; second, that he had already decided to bypass the Latin middle ages (treated by Robertson in his *View of the Progress of Society in Europe*¹⁴) and treat them as marginal to a history of New Rome and the eastern empire, reserving the ruins of the ancient city as a coda to which he would return. This is a very remarkable decision, which will call for a great deal of examination. Concealed beneath it is a further decision, not announced in the 1776 preface and perhaps not yet visible in all its complexity to Gibbon himself: the decision that the history of the empire after Constantine would have to be 'a history as well ecclesiastical as civil',¹⁵ a history of the Christian Church and in particular of the rise of Christian theology, a principal motor of the challenge of ecclesiastical to civil authority. This decision, however momentous, is not made explicit in Chapters 1 through 14 and is only partly visible in Chapters 15 and 16. It can be examined, like its predecessor, only as it takes effect; and the preface of 1776 says nothing about it.

That preface, however, announces in the clearest terms a further decision, not yet considered, which must furnish the present volume with

¹¹ *Memoirs*, pp. 163–5. ¹² Womersley, 1994, I, pp. 1–3.

¹³ *NCG*, ch. 25. ¹⁴ *NCG*, pp. 275–88.

¹⁵ A term regularly used in English historiography on either side of the year 1700.

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its principal theme and enquiry. Gibbon pronounces that the complete history of the Decline and Fall

may with some propriety, be divided into the three following periods. I. The first of these periods may be traced from the age of Trajan and the Antonines, when the Roman monarchy, having attained its full strength and maturity, began to verge towards its decline; and will extend to the subversion of the Western Empire, by the barbarians of Germany and Scythia, the rude ancestors of the most polished nations of modern Europe.¹⁶

Gibbon here announces the theme of barbarism and indicates its centrality in a history of Europe which it helps to define. The second period is to run from the reign of Justinian to that of Charlemagne, and the third from the re-foundation of the western empire to the extinction of the eastern. With that the history of the Roman empire is concluded, and we are left to infer that the history of ‘modern Europe’ is constructed on other foundations; perhaps, given the role of the papacy in founding, and then subverting, the empire of Charlemagne and his successors, a history of religion alongside that of barbarism and civility. But the Gibbon of 1776 is not yet ready to tell us, and perhaps has not yet fully decided, how to present a medieval history he is committed to viewing through Constantinopolitan lenses. We are more immediately concerned with his third decision, that to commence the narrative of Decline and Fall with the Antonine monarchy at the height of its power and wealth. ‘Decline and Fall’ conventionally refers to events of the fifth century, when the western empire was partitioned into a patchwork of barbarian kingdoms; why is Gibbon writing so proleptically as to begin his narrative three centuries earlier? This is his subject in Chapters 1 through 14, and it is the initial problem of the present volume.

His decision may be defended, which is not the same thing as explained, by pointing out that it was a convention of rhetorical and moral historiography that revolutions were rotations of Fortune’s wheel and that decline invariably began from the zenith of power and success. Gibbon accordingly began with a *peinture* – as Sainte-Palaye would have called it¹⁷ – of Antonine civilisation at its height, which occupies the first three chapters of his history; and he detected at its heart a ‘secret poison’¹⁸ which ultimately produced its decline. What this was we must in due course consider; but first we must note that Gibbon has switched from the key of cyclical rotation to that of systemic transformation. The

¹⁶ Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 1. ¹⁷ For the dictum of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, see *EEG*, p. 155.

¹⁸ *DF*, 1, ch. 2; Womersley, 1994, 1, p. 83.

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II

Antonine empire was a generalised condition of circumstances, which in time was replaced by some other, and what was to be replaced was classical civilisation itself, not yet challenged by Christianity and existing in a condition which was the product of its own history. The Decline and Fall is the breakup of a civilisation as well as an empire, both described in great richness of detail, and the 'secret poison' must be something generated within its systemic completeness. Here is the moment at which Gibbon is writing a prehistory to 'the Enlightened narrative'; where the latter began with 'the triumph of barbarism and religion' and traced its ultimate reversal, Gibbon is approaching that triumph from a starting-point in classical antiquity, the last moment of its existence in completeness.

If the description of Antonine civilisation is a *peinture*, the narrative of its decay must be a *récit*. That *récit* starts with the murder of the emperor Commodus by his domestics in AD 180, a palace revolution which touches off a series of interventions by the frontier armies. This phenomenon is not new; Gibbon has already isolated a period of benign rule by responsible emperors, beginning in 98, when the murder of Domitian in similar circumstances had led his successor Nerva to nominate the frontier general Trajan to succeed him, thus inaugurating that age in which Antonine civilisation had been at its height and the happiness of 'the human race' nearly complete. But 98 was also the moment at which the historian Tacitus had been moved by what was happening before him to write a history of events in AD 69–70, when the suicide of Nero had produced interventions by the frontier armies and wars in the streets of Rome, and to follow it with a history of events since the time of Augustus, when dissensions within the imperial household, and between that household and the senate, had produced conditions tending to the murders and suicides of emperors and the consequent interventions of the armies. This narrative was recyclable; the deaths of Caligula, Nero, Domitian (the exceptional case) and Commodus had led to the re-enactment of a scenario in which that of 180 was the last act only in the sense that it precipitated Antonine decay and led – in some sense yet to be explained – towards Decline and Fall. In deciding to start as far back as the Antonines, Gibbon committed himself to a Tacitean historiography of explanation, and it was to be a problem for him that this narrative was retrospective, equally valid for the fall of the Antonines, the Flavians, the Julio-Claudians, the Augustan principate and even (as we shall see) the Roman republic itself. He once wrote that he should have commenced the *Decline and Fall* from AD 70 where Tacitus had ended his history, or even AD 14 where