

BARBARISM AND RELIGION

Volume Three

The First Decline and Fall

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

(I)

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.

‘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*, 11, p. 32. ⁸ *Memoirs*, p. 156.

⁹ *Letters*, 11, p. 218. The singular noun and plural verb are Gibbon’s.

¹⁰ *Letters*, 11, 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’?

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

(11)

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.

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.

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

it began, rather than 180, the collapse of the system which Tacitus had examined.¹⁹

The problem here encountered by Gibbon merges into a problem for us rather than for him. Why the Antonine moment at all; why the premise that imperial decay began in the late second century? What connection can exist between the crisis following the death of Commodus and what we ordinarily term the Decline and Fall, namely the loss of control over the western provinces by an empire centred on Constantinople two and a half centuries later? If Gibbon saw the Roman world as a single civilisational system, could the 'secret poison' afflicting it in the second century have remained operative in the fifth? He once wrote that the imagination was able to connect the most distant revolutions by a regular series of causes and effects;²⁰ but what impelled him to begin his series at a point not only distant in itself, but driving the imagination to seek its origins in a past more distant still? These problems have led at least one distinguished historian to contend that Tacitus was Gibbon's 'great evil genius', fascination with whom set the *Decline and Fall* on a wrong path that Gibbon recognised but could not escape.²¹

It seems indeed to be the case that Gibbon thought of the ancient Roman world as a unified system whose decay might be the result of general causes; but we have to take some account of an earlier, deeper and never quite superseded pattern in his thinking about the Decline and Fall. He had initially conceived a history of the decay of the city of Rome as the centres of imperial power moved away from it;²² and the sense that there was a critical relationship between city and empire survived after his project had become that of writing a history of the decay of the latter. At the beginning as at the end of his completed volumes, his thought focussed on the city and the failure of its politics. The city, which is to say the republic, had conquered an empire, but failed to rule it; history thus became that of the empire divorced from the city, and consequently of the decline of both. We shall see that he found in Tacitus an explanation – entailing a retrospective of the history of the republic – of how power

¹⁹ *EE*, p. 338: 'Should I not have deduced the decline of the Empire from the civil wars, that ensued after the fall of Nero or even from the tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus? Alas! I should: but of what avail is this tardy knowledge?' Just what Gibbon means by 'tardy knowledge' may be debated; he cannot refer to his knowledge of Roman history in general.

²⁰ *DF*, 111, 33; Womersley, 1994, 11, p. 293.

²¹ Bowersock, 1977, p. 67. He interprets the words quoted in n. 19 as Gibbon's confession of this error. Cf. Shaw, in Bowersock, Brown and Grabar, 1999, p. 164, for a development of Bowersock's point.

²² *EEG*, pp. 272–4.

had moved away from the city, to points in Tacitus' phrase *alibi quam Romae*.²³ This enabled him to begin the narrative, sustained through Chapters 1–14, of the wars of frontier generals with one another, and with the increasingly dangerous barbarians, until Constantine emerges as sole victor like Augustus three centuries before him, and like him embarks on an altogether new system of rule.

There are several senses in which Constantine marks completion of the movement *alibi quam Romae* – though it is vital to remember that Gibbon in 1776 reached only a point at which they were about to become actual, and that five years were to pass before he published his treatment of them in his second volume. By founding New Rome the emperor had rendered final and visible the abandonment of the old city, which began its long journey into the picturesque; by his alliance with the Christian religion he created both the empire which was to endure for a millennium in the east, and the force which was to replace, rather than renew, empire in the west. The failure of the sons of Theodosius to control the barbarian irruptions after 400 led to the end of empire in the Latin provinces and old Rome itself; the limited success of Justinian's attempt to resume control of Italy left the bishops of Rome free, and necessitated, to form alliances with the barbarian kingdoms in Gaul and elsewhere. Here we enter on the second period of Gibbon's 1776 preface: that from Justinian to Charlemagne, at the end of which Rome has become the capital of Peter and his Church, and the ghost of the deceased empire has seated itself on the grave thereof. The abandonment of Rome by empire has come full circle. The 'Enlightened narrative' may now embark on the history of the 'Christian millennium' – a process, and its premises, rather western than eastern, Latin than Greek.

All these processes take place in the history of Christian empire. Five of Gibbon's six volumes deal with the decline and fall – and in the west the post-history – of the system founded by Constantine. We therefore return to the problems set us by Gibbon's first volume, which introduces that figure but does not engage with his work. Chapters 1 through 14 bring him only to the Milvian bridge; Chapters 15 and 16 deal only with the Church before him; it will be 1781 before Gibbon tells us how Constantine in his new capital is obliged to repair to Nicaea by a theological dispute originating in Alexandria. We return to the problem of the Antonine moment. In what ways do weaknesses in the imperial system, detected by Tacitus in the first century and continued by Gibbon

²³ Below, p. 25.

into the second, serve to explain the failures of the fourth and fifth? If there was a 'secret poison' in the Antonine system, was it operative in the Constantinian? Here we may take up the belief, well established by Gibbon's time, that Constantine's military reforms, separating the frontier *limitanei* from a mass of reserves quartered in the cities, were fatal to legionary culture and led to its corruption. We must also confront the question whether the Christian religion, of which nothing has been said in the first fourteen chapters, figures in this process as cause or effect; but this must be the matter of a future volume.

Whatever the answers that emerge to these questions, it is evident that a Tacitean historiography, presenting the problems of the principate as the consequence of republican decay, was of enormous importance to Gibbon, who placed it at the outset of his narrative of Decline and Fall. He did not do so simply because he had read the works of Tacitus and become obsessed with their philosophic possibilities. There existed a long tradition of Tacitism, which had made him part of a European consciousness of history and philosophy, as an authority on Decline and Fall and the place in it of the barbarians, Batavian and British as well as German, who are prominent in his writings. But Decline and Fall, at first sight a fifth-century narrative, had arisen as a concept both before and after Tacitus, writing at the end of the first century. If we are to understand what Gibbon in his text was doing with the linked but non-identical concepts of Tacitean historiography and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, we must trace their origins and transmissions through ancient, Christian and Enlightened historiography to the points at which they were inherited by Gibbon with such mixed consequences. Ancient predictions, which later became explanations, of Roman decline must be studied in the ancient setting where they took shape, and then pursued through the long silences of what Gibbon termed 'modern history' and we 'the Christian millennium', until they re-emerge in early modern Europe to constitute the Decline and Fall.