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0521856256 - Barbarism and Religion, Volume Four: Barbarians, Savages and Empires

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Introduction

This volume occupies a special place in its series. In the first fourteen chapters of the *Decline and Fall* – the subject of *Barbarism and Religion III: The First Decline and Fall* – Gibbon related the disintegration of the imperial regime of pagan Rome, but did not arrive at the disintegration of the system of polytheism on which it was based. He reached the moment at which the Christian church was about to become the established religion of the empire, but, instead of going on to narrate how this happened or what had been its consequences, interrupted his narrative to insert the two chapters on the church before Constantine, which are the subject of a future volume of *Barbarism and Religion*. He had thus introduced the theme of religion, one of the two forces whose triumph he came to see the *Decline and Fall* as narrating; but the break in sequence caused by the insertion of chapters 15 and 16 was such that he did not resume this theme, or return to the point reached at the end of chapter 14, until he published his second volume in 1781, five years after its predecessor. Not only the causes of this hiatus, but its effects on both the writing and the reception of the *Decline and Fall*, present problems with which this series must be concerned. We are at midpoint in a study of how the theme of religion entered Gibbon's history and came to dominate it; and what happened when he took up the narrative again in his second volume of 1781 will also be the subject of a further volume of this series.

The theme of barbarism, however, has already appeared. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 of the 1776 volume were mentioned in *The First Decline and Fall* for their role in unfolding the narrative of imperial decay, but it was remarked at the same time¹ that they initiated a theme of another kind: that of who the barbarian peoples were, what were their cultures, and what was to be made of 'barbarians' as a category and phenomenon which (in a relationship with religion yet to be understood) came to replace the Roman world and lay the

¹ FDF, pp. 464–6.

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foundations of the European. How chapters 8 to 10 initiate this theme is the subject of the first part of the present volume, 'The History and Theory of Barbarism'. It is necessary to consider 'barbarism' as a concept both ancient and modern – meaning by 'modern' the patterns of thought emerging in periods preceding and including Gibbon's own – with a view to seeing how he employed the term and what part it played in the discourse to which he contributed. Here an important role is played by stadial theory: that is, by the sequence of stages through which human society was held to have progressed by eighteenth-century philosophic jurists, moralists and historians. Gibbon was on friendly terms with David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, Scottish leaders in the construction of this branch of 'philosophy', in whose works the 'barbarian' was commonly identified with the shepherd or pastoralist and European history presented as the outcome of periodic 'barbarian' invasions by 'shepherd' peoples and their subsequent civilisation.² He took much from them in his accounts of the German, Gothic and Scythian invaders of the Roman frontiers, but it can be shown that he relied also on earlier works, in which the biblical chronologies and Noachic genealogies – derided by Gibbon – were compatible with schemes of stadial development, and on systems like that of Antoine-Yves Goguet,³ which did not draw the sharp Scottish distinction between hunting and herding peoples or between the 'savage' and the 'barbarian'. Gibbon not uncommonly used these terms interchangeably, and it has been argued that European history, as he learned it from the Scots, contained no 'savage' stage – no stage, that is, at which the western peninsulas of Eurasia had been populated by hunter-gatherer peoples. The crucial step for Gibbon, as for others, became the equation of the shepherd stage with the nomad pastoralists of central Asia, whose intermittent mobility and expansiveness had thrust the plains-dwelling Goths and the forest-dwelling Germans over the Roman frontiers, creating a crisis with which the impoverished imperial system was unable to cope.

Gibbon did not reach this moment in his first volume, or until chapter 26, which terminates his second and marks the point of division between the two volumes published in 1781. This chapter, on 'the manners of the pastoral nations', closes a volume on Constantine and his heirs which has related the establishment of Christianity, the rise of theological dispute occasioned by the marriage of religion and philosophy, and the attempt of Julian to turn the clock back to a paganism now irretrievably (as cultic

² NCG, pp. 328–9, 332–45; FDF, pp. 387–92, 402–3.

³ Goguet, 1758; *Library*, p. 136.

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paganism had not been) taken over by a philosophy more or less neo-Platonic. At this point the history of the Roman empire is enlarged into a history of Eurasia; the nomad Huns and Hsiung-nu are seen to have impinged on the Chinese as well as the Roman empires, and the contexts of learning needed to understand the *Decline and Fall* are enlarged by the addition of histories – notably that of Joseph de Guignes⁴ – that examine both the Chinese dynasties and the nomads of the steppe. The second part of this volume is headed ‘The Discovery of Eurasia’; the word ‘discovery’ being employed in its correct sense: the discovery that something existed by people who had not known that it did.

The ‘barbarian’ of antiquity, who spoke neither Greek nor Latin and did not live in free cities, had by now undergone several enlargements and mutations, merging first with the ‘Gothic’ and ‘Scythian’ invaders of the Roman provinces, secondly with the ‘shepherd stage’ of advanced stadial theory – which Gibbon admired if he did not always follow – and finally with the Central Asian nomads who intermittently devastated and transformed the European subcontinent. In this sequence, the barbarian inhabited both ancient and modern history, from the mythic times of the Cimmerians and the progeny of Japhet to the very recent moment when Chinese and Russians were thought to have joined hands to subjugate the steppe and end this phase of world history for ever. He – the figure was not often female – linked antiquity to modernity in more ways than one; if he had been an agent in replacing the ancient world by one of barbarism and religion, the processes of his civilising had been crucial to the replacement of the latter world by civil society and commerce. By contrast, the ‘savage’ – meaning the hunter or hunter-gatherer – though preceding the shepherd barbarian in the order of stadial theory, was paradoxically a figure of modern history; the more so if we speak of the ‘invention’ of the savage, following the conventions of a postmodernism in which nothing happens or exists other than the creation of fictions. As Europeans, who believed they had no prehistory but that of patriarchal shepherd clans, took to the sea and mastered every arm of the global ocean, they everywhere encountered peoples who might be thought hunter-gatherers, or who practised those blends of village horticulture and fishing or hunting we now have in mind when we use the term ‘indigenous’ (or describe them by one of the many names such people have found for themselves).⁵ There ensued a complicated and disastrous history in which the will to describe such peoples as ‘savage’ (and so sub-human)

⁴ HHTM; *Library*, p. 141.

⁵ For extensions of this point in oceanic directions, see Pocock, 1992 (2001) and 1999.

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was reinforced by stadial theory, for the reason that the two steps the latter thought essential to progress – the domestication of hoofed mammals and their harnessing to wheeled transport and deep-cutting ploughshares – did not seem to have occurred outside Eurasia, or in the Americas, Polynesia or Australia (the historisation of sub-Saharan Africa is a somewhat later process). In the two American continents particularly, neither pastoral nomads, productive agriculturalists nor trading cities could easily be found, or recognised when they were found, and it was overwhelmingly tempting to relegate all American peoples before settlement to the category of ‘savages’ defined as the first stage of human development.

The effect was to involve the savage, defined as ‘primitive’ or more significantly ‘natural’ man, in an immediate encounter with the most ‘modern’ of histories: that of the seaborne empires established by ocean-going Europeans after the year 1500. This was not a history Gibbon was concerned to write; the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* ends with the fall of Constantinople in 1453,⁶ and the major event preceding it is the transitory supremacy of Timur – held to be the last of the nomad conquerors in ways which left the relation of Ottoman to nomad history in need of explanation.⁷ But there already existed a perceived relation between the Ottoman conquests and the voyages of the Portuguese to India and the Spaniards to the New World. In the third and fourth parts of the present volume, the *Decline and Fall* will be confronted with two histories appearing between 1776 and 1781, with which Gibbon was acquainted and to which he makes reference: William Robertson’s *History of America*, published in 1777–8, and the *Histoire philosophique et politique du commerce et des établissements des Européens dans les deux Indes*, written by a team of authors under the direction of the Abbé Raynal, to which the edition of 1780 gave its decisive form, largely though not wholly shaped by the contributions of Denis Diderot.

Both works confront the savage with the seaborne empire; both are deeply concerned with the enormous problems of fitting the New World into a European vision of history. Since the *Decline and Fall* is a history of empire in antiquity, late antiquity and what we term the middle ages, and since it is situated in a Eurasian history ending just before the European voyages began, it is obvious that these concepts and problems play no part in its making or its content. The enterprise of presenting Robertson and

⁶ DF, v1, ch. 68. ⁷ DF, v1, ch. 65.

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Raynal in relation to Gibbon is to some degree a continuation of that pursued in *Barbarism and Religion* II: *Narratives of Civil Government*, when a series of major Enlightened writers on history – Giannone, Voltaire, Hume and Robertson, reinforced by Smith and Ferguson – were shown to have constructed histories of the millennium of barbarism and religion and the exit from it into enlightened Europe, which helped us to understand the *Decline and Fall* as a history of the entry into that millennium and its history to 1453. *Barbarism and Religion* V will show Gibbon beginning to lay foundations for that history by laying those of ‘the triumph of religion’, and the first half of the present volume shows him beginning to present the theme of barbarism. Part four, ‘The Crisis of the Seaborne Empires’, however, reverts to volume II’s enterprise of setting the *Decline and Fall* in the large context of Enlightened historiography. It does so in part because we have begun to be concerned with the hiatus in Gibbon’s production of his work between 1776 and 1781. Between the year of the Declaration of Independence and that of the surrender at Yorktown, Gibbon sat in the House of Commons as an increasingly disquieted supporter of the North administration, and wrote a state paper justifying the British government against the French;⁸ this may help explain the five-year delay between his volumes. It can certainly be said that the histories of Robertson and Raynal are deeply affected – in ways to be explained below – by the events of the American Revolution, and that, in sequence with those of Hume, Voltaire and Robertson himself as a historian of Europe, they show the culture of commerce and manners, civil government and civil society, which had emerged at the beginning of the century, as it plunged into what Franco Venturi termed *la prima crisi dell’ Antico Regime*.⁹

The relation between this crisis and contemporary historiography, however, is by no means simple. Ingenious readers constantly search for ways in which the text of the *Decline and Fall* may be applied to the events of the 1770s and 1780s, and even if (as the present writer suspects) this search should be in vain, it was a rhetorical commonplace – to which Gibbon at least once succumbed¹⁰ – that the decline of the Roman empire might find a parallel in the fall of the British. There are, however, massive objections in the way of this parallel. The first is that – as was widely recognised – an ancient empire held together by legionary camps along lines of communication by land was structurally and generically unlike a modern – now meaning a post-medieval – empire in which seaborne power held together

⁸ Gibbon, 1778; MW, v, pp. 1–34.⁹ Venturi, 1979; Litchfield, 1989.¹⁰ FDF, p. 8.

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a system of commerce. It could be, and was, added that, whereas the Romans had allowed the military government of provinces to destroy and absorb the political structure of the republic, the British were willing to see their American colonies rise in rebellion rather than extend to them the parliamentary liberties of the kingdom; the ancient parallel that suggested itself was not the Decline and Fall of the empire so much as the Social War that had hastened the downfall of the republic.¹¹ Lastly – though this is to look beyond 1781 – the outcome of the *prima crisi* was as much the enlargement of the British empire as its dissolution. The empire acquired in India was, disturbingly, a good deal more Roman than that lost in North America, and there was to be a later moment at which Gibbon, and after him Robertson, can be seen showing interest in Dow, Jones and Rennell, the historical scholars of British India.¹²

It is the contrast between ancient and modern empire – indeed, between ancient and modern history – which makes it important to confront the *Decline and Fall* with works of historiography appearing between 1776 and 1781; Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (as it is called for short) in particular. This work by many hands – just how it was written and edited is still the subject of enquiry¹³ – has many faults, sentimentality and self-dramatisation among them; but it is a major achievement in several ways, and ranks as a counter-piece to the *Decline and Fall* itself.¹⁴ Its authors provide a history of the rise (they would add the fall) of the European seaborne empires over three centuries, from the voyages of the 1490s and their encounter with the civilisations of Asia already known to them: Islam as a modern (i.e. a post-Christian) phenomenon, Hindu India with which they shared an antiquity, Confucian China as a possible alternative to the dreadful history of religion. The narrative then turns west, and becomes a history of encounter with the New World and therefore with peoples easily described as 'savage'; even the Mesoamerican and Andean city systems did not prevent this. There was added a third narrative: that of the transportation of Africans reduced to slavery, a condition as artificially distanced from civil society as that of savagery was naturally remote. The history of modern empire thus became that of encounter between European civil society and those excluded from its history.

¹¹ FDF, pp. 45, 48, 84–5, 162, 351–2, 396, 405.

¹² For references, see Womersley, 1994, 111, pp. 1211, 1229, 1257; *Library*, pp. 162–3, 236.

¹³ The Voltaire Foundation intends a critical edition. For preliminary study, see Lüsebrink and Strugnell, 1995.

¹⁴ For a prospectus of this volume's treatment of the *Histoire*, see Pocock, 2000.

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The secondary thesis of the *Histoire des deux Indes* was that European commerce with peoples outside Europe was expropriative and monopolistic, conducted through chartered companies whose debts threatened European society itself with corruption. Here was a modern equivalent of the ancient thesis that empire corrupted the liberty that had acquired it; but the concept of savagery operated to enlarge this trope in a metahistorical direction. The savage was the natural man;¹⁵ savage society, in so far as it existed, was as distant as possible from the hegemonies of kings, republics and priests which provided history with its subject matter; and Diderot was able to join Rousseau in asking whether it had been good to leave the state of nature for the processes of history, but whether that departure once taken was not irreversible. Here was a crucial step in late Enlightened philosophy of history, and it would not have been possible without the concept of the savage. The *Histoire* becomes a narrative of the encounter of history with nature, and necessarily (if none too satisfactorily) ends by telling Europeans they must recover their own nature, corrupted by a civil society itself corrupted by empire. The work becomes a pre-revolutionary treatise, but as with Machiavelli there is doubt whether humans are not too far committed to history to return to its beginnings.

The *Histoire des deux Indes* is therefore a work of Enlightened philosophical history which Gibbon neither could nor would have written. He had no contact with the concept (though he used the adjective) of the ‘savage’, and the ‘barbarian’ was not a figure of nature opposed to history; only in modern history, we might say, could that opposition appear – whatever ancient Cynics and Stoics might have dreamt of in their philosophy. Gibbon was writing a history of the Old World, of a Eurasia in which cities and empires interacted with the migrations of pastoralists; what is startling to our eyes is the virtual omission from Enlightened philosophy of the alluvial city empires of Mesopotamia and the Nile Valley. All these peoples could be included in histories of civil society, whether biblical, philosophical or stadial; and as Gibbon had shown in his early *Essai* against d’Alembert and the *Encyclopédie*,¹⁶ he had no desire to leave civil history for the philosophy of nature. This choice made him a figure of the conservative rather than the *philosophe* Enlightenment. If we read the *Histoire des deux Indes* as prefiguring revolution, we must read the *Decline and Fall* as prefiguring Gibbon’s instantly Burkean responses to the events of 1789–92;¹⁷ and this antithesis must be connected with that between the *Histoire* as a history of

¹⁵ Pagden, 1982.¹⁶ EEG, ch. 9.¹⁷ Womersley, 2002, pp. 195–202.

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modernity, savagery and nature, the *Decline and Fall* as a history of antiquity, barbarism and religion. The former entailed a critique of civil society and civil history; the latter did not. The *Histoire* supplies the *Decline and Fall* with a context by acting as its antithesis, and the function of savagery in the present volume is to clarify what Gibbon was doing with the concept of barbarism.

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PART I

The history and theory of barbarism

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CHAPTER I

Introducing the barbarian: problems of barbarism and religion

(I)

As Gibbon reached the end of chapter 7 of the *Decline and Fall*, he elegiacally reviewed Roman history since its heroic beginnings, and remarked that, as the discipline of the legions disintegrated in the wars of succession, ‘the barbarians ... soon discovered the decline of the Roman empire’.¹ *The First Decline and Fall* carried on the process, through the wars of succession – in which barbarians played an increasing part – as far as the victory of Constantine; but it was observed² that chapters 8 to 10, immediately following the words quoted, digress from the narrative and are written in a different key. In place of the *récit* of Roman actions and their systemic consequences, these chapters offer a *peinture*³ of the laws and manners of the invading cultures, and we shall find Gibbon observing that a history of barbarians and barbarism must be written on different principles from one in which civilised men are the actors. Chapters 8 to 10 introduce that history, but the meanings of the words ‘barbarian’ and ‘barbarism’ are not yet determined and need to be explained.

‘Barbarians’ – Gibbon or his printer almost always accords them a capital initial – are hostile peoples beyond and upon the frontiers of empire, and are to some extent defined by those frontiers, which, however, run through a diversity of lands and societies. Chapter 8 deals with the Persians, who will threaten Rome’s Asian frontiers through the defeats of Valerian and Julian, and a succession of wars down to Chosroes; chapter 9 deals with the Germans and chapter 10 with the Goths, resuming the narrative with the Gothic, Persian and civil wars of the third century. The latter peoples are ‘barbarian’ in the sense that they are not civilised, whereas the Persians, though ‘barbarians,’ are not merely civilised, but ‘civilised and corrupted’;⁴

¹ Womersley, 1994, 1, pp. 211–12; FDE, pp. 461–2. ² FDE, pp. 464–6.

³ For the use of these terms in a formula by La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, many times employed in the present series, see NCG, p. 17.

⁴ See below, p. 24.