

Introduction

This volume, which concludes the series, differs from its predecessors in laying rather less emphasis on the establishment of contexts in which the *Decline and Fall* may be read, and rather more on the pursuit of Gibbon's text, and therefore of his narrative, through the historical sequence which it relates. It consists of a critical enquiry into the succession of chapters making up the second and third volumes of his work, which Gibbon published in 1781, five years after the first, to which *Barbarism and Religion* has been paying attention so far. Volume I of the *Decline and Fall* related the crisis and transformation of the Antonine monarchy, which claimed continuity with the Augustan principate, and its remodeling as a military and taxative system, first by Diocletian and then by Constantine. The dominant narrative so far, forming a 'context' in which Gibbon is to be read, was that of the separation of military from civic capacity, so that soldiers were no longer citizens and emperors were no longer magistrates; a narrative which had taken shape in republican antiquity and had been reformulated by humanists in Renaissance Europe, by whom it was considered a sufficient explanation of the Decline and Fall itself. A tragical nostalgia for Roman virtue persisted into the Enlightened Europe in which Gibbon wrote, side by side though sometimes at tension with the 'Enlightened narrative' indicating the replacement of ancient military virtue by the modern system of commerce and manners, by which Europe had freed itself from the wars of religion. This second grand narrative forms a deep background and further context to Gibbon's writing, but he continued to explain the ruin of the ancient world by the self-destruction of ancient values, and therefore to write a late humanist or early modern history.

At the end of chapter 14 of his first volume, however, Gibbon declared that Constantine, in addition to perpetuating the changes wrought by Diocletian, had taken two revolutionary steps: the foundation of the new capital city that bore his name on the Bosphorus, and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the empire. Neither statement was in any way new in European historiography, but their impact on the

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structure of the *Decline and Fall* was so drastic that there is room for the view that Gibbon was insufficiently prepared to make them. In Volume v of *Barbarism and Religion* it is related how he took a last-minute decision to add the second of them to his volume of 1776 as chapters 15 and 16, and how the exposed position of these chapters led to the belief that the Enlightened religious scepticism they contain expressed Gibbon's true purpose in writing the *Decline and Fall* as an anti-Christian polemic. In Volume v and the present volume of *Barbarism and Religion*, it is contended that this reading cannot be justified; that Gibbon's primary purpose was to relate and explain the decline and fall of the Roman empire, in which the role of the Christian Church was so complex and multivalent that it can form only part of the narrative he was pursuing; but that there is a sense in which it transcends that narrative. Gibbon was interested in Christianity as a historical, not an extra-historical phenomenon, and as less a cause of the empire's fall than the replacement of ancient civilisation by a new one, in what he termed 'modern' history. At this point the *Decline and Fall* becomes 'the triumph of barbarism and religion', and Gibbon's narrative becomes a prelude to the 'Enlightened narrative'.

As history of historiography, the importance of chapter 15 lies in Gibbon's acceptance, as central to the narrative of *Decline and Fall*, of a species of historiography new to his text but not to him nor, certainly, to his Christian readers, to whom it was nearly coeval with their faith itself: the language of Christian historiography both sacred and ecclesiastical. It possessed its own vocabulary and literature, a class and profession of skilled exegetes, and a long history of controversy and debate. From this moment Gibbon would have to learn to write in it – he had probably been studying it for many years – and both to engage in it and write its history; a formidable challenge to which he seems to have been equal. He found it, of course, deeply uncongenial – many of its premises seemed to him unreasonable and even absurd – but he had to admit it to his history as one of the contexts in which that history and his text from now on would have to proceed, and merely to dismiss and deride it would not be sufficient. He had to treat it as history, taking it seriously until it called for an act of faith he was never going to perform. As this volume of *Barbarism and Religion* explores the text of the *Decline and Fall*'s second volume, Gibbon will be found presenting the Arian controversy in detail and with thoroughness, as a series of dilemmas both intellectual and practical, which were real to those involved in it for reasons that can be understood. Simultaneously, however – and perhaps this is the point at which his relationship to Enlightenment can best be understood – he can be seen explaining why any act of faith in an absolute God, especially when

supported by philosophy, is necessarily intolerant. There is a case for regarding the *Decline and Fall* as a sustained history of intolerance, a phenomenon new in the history of religion and society, though Gibbon here will be found to have had predecessors.

From this point, then, the *Decline and Fall* becomes a history ‘as well ecclesiastical as civil’; one ‘modern’ in the sense in which Gibbon used the term, opposing it directly to ‘ancient’, as marked by the presence of a church competitive with the state. The church possessed its own narrative, which he must relate concurrently with the narrative of empire; and it is at this point that we must recognise that Gibbon was still an early modern historian, among the last and perhaps the greatest of those obliged to regard ‘history’ as having already been related by the historians of antiquity, whose authority compelled the modern historian to criticise and re-narrate what they placed before him, but never to replace it altogether by a narrative re-synthesised by his own capacity to work from independent sources of evidence. He now had before him two kinds of histories, for which he was indebted to two sets of historians; and his vigorous scepticism as to one set’s claim to be narrating sacred actions performed by God in the world did not free him from the need to follow their narratives without replacing them. The historian of historiography is obliged to scrutinise and report how Gibbon went about doing this in his second volume and those following it.

The history of the *Decline and Fall* therefore becomes a plural history, concerned with how Gibbon related to histories without uniting them. There are narratives ‘as well ecclesiastical as civil’, the latter usually related before the former, and Gibbon’s powers are displayed, in his second volume especially, in his ability to present thoughts and actions he considered based on unreal and nonsensical assumptions, while making it clear why they were desperately real to those making these assumptions. This is especially the case with his treatment of the great controversies following the Council of Nicaea; his statement that these were based on ‘the abuse of philosophy’ is balanced by his admiration for Athanasius. He was not again accused, at the level reached in the controversy over chapters 15 and 16, of exiling religion from history by means of the ‘sneer’ alone.

The duality of civil and ecclesiastical history is not the only force making these volumes of the *Decline and Fall* a plurality of narratives, through which Gibbon, his text and his readers must all make their way. The second volume turns from the histories of the reign of Constantius to what is here termed the ‘interlude’ of Julian the Apostate, an exercise in ‘sentimental’ history, meaning that it is recorded largely in terms of the sensibility and subjectivity of a single dominant individual. The ‘history’

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proper of this reign is supplied by the ‘ancient’ Ammianus Marcellinus, the last Roman historian for whom Gibbon felt respect; the *vie de Julien* – not quite the same as a history – by the French ‘modern’ La Blérierie. Gibbon is now interacting regularly with modern historians, usually French, whose outlook may be very different from his: for church history at large the Jansenist Tillemont, who proves to have been more of a historian and less of a laborious antiquarian than Gibbon allows him to have been; for Julian La Blérierie; and in the concluding section of volume II the Sinologue Joseph de Guignes, a notable presence in *Barbarism and Religion*’s fourth volume. In these chapters Gibbon begins to narrate the fall of the western empire at barbarian hands, set in motion by the Huns displacing the Goths north of the lower Danube, and Gibbon makes use of de Guignes’s scenario of steppe nomads recoiling from the Chinese frontiers and initiating a snowball effect that will send the Huns into the *barbaricum* later to be called Europe. The great work of the Jesuits on Chinese history joins forces – at least in Gibbon’s mind – with the stadial schemes of Scottish conjectural history of society. The history of the *Decline and Fall* is part of the historiography, still early modern, of Enlightened Europe.

Gibbon therefore presents, and is at the same time involved in, a series of historiographies as well as histories, based on their several sources and requiring to be written according to several sets of historiographic conventions: histories as well ecclesiastical as civil, eastern as well as western, philosophical as well as erudite, concerned with the actions of barbarians as well as of civilised Romans and Greeks; though strictly speaking, barbarians being pre-literate should have no history because they write no histories. It is Gibbon’s problem to conduct his readers from one to another of these modes of historical narrative, and there are times when this strains or exceeds the capacity of his historical culture. It was for modern rather than early modern historians to claim to have brought all histories together, and for post-moderns to criticise this assertion.

To the thesis that new subjects entailed new historical narratives, and that Gibbon set about relating them in conjunction, there is one major exception, of great significance to the future volumes of the *Decline and Fall*. At the end of chapter 14, preceding even the establishment of Christianity, Gibbon situated the foundation of Constantinople as the first revolutionary act of the emperor Constantine; and in chapter 17, the first of the volumes of 1781, he set about presenting the city on the Bosphorus, and the governing culture shaped at and by it, as not only a new imperial capital, but the seat of a new kind of empire, of which the city and culture of Rome now became a part. There rapidly took shape in Gibbon’s writings a division of the empire into two cultures, the one

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Greek or rather Hellenistic, the other Latin and increasingly barbarian; and it becomes a question for his readers whether the concept and the history of *Decline and Fall* are not western-centred, so that it becomes necessary to write a western history along lines already laid down, and – as suggested by Flavio Biondo in the fifteenth century – necessary to write of an eastern Decline and Fall, culminating a thousand years after that of the western, as caused by historical processes altogether different. This question must have confronted Gibbon from the first schematisation of his history in 1776, when he proposed a tripartite chronology, in which the periods from Justinian to Charlemagne, and from Charlemagne to the fall of Constantinople, should succeed that which he carried to completion in 1781. But was it not only the period before these which was to be a history of the decline of ancient virtue and the end of classical Rome? The history of the fall of Rome to the barbarians, ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’ and the Europe taking shape after it, led into what has been termed ‘the Enlightened narrative’ and did not apply to the history of Orthodox or Muslim civilisation.

Gibbon possessed, and was possessed by, a master narrative of west European history; to know whether he possessed a narrative of the empire ruled from Constantinople we may begin by asking whether the complex account of the institutions taking shape at the foundation of that city indicated any historical process set in motion by their structure. Did he set about visualising a ‘Byzantine’ history – he uses that word – which the new imperial order created, and subsequently suffered, of its own making? Though he does say in chapter 17 that a study of Byzantine government will indicate the sources of its strengths and weaknesses, it is hard to find in 1781 any sustained historical narratives arising from them. He has much to say about the weakening of the armies and the powers of provincial governors resulting from decisions taken by Constantine; he does not point out that the barbarisation of the armies and the progressive barbarisation of the provinces, fundamental to his account of Decline and Fall, takes place along the upper Danube and the Rhine, but never along the frontier facing the Persian empire, or indeed in the dioceses of Asia, Syria and Egypt. Decline and Fall, we might very well argue, is a European process, indeed west European. How then did Gibbon go about writing the later stages of his original scheme?

This volume presents and explores the sequence of chapters making up volumes II and III of the *Decline and Fall*, and carrying Gibbon’s narrative to the end of empire in the west. It makes two general assertions: the first, as we have seen, that this is in reality a mosaic of narratives, written on diverse premises and never fully synthesised with one another; the second, that these chapters assert a progress of both barbarism and religion from

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east to west, leaving much history behind as they do so. The Goths forced by the Huns across the lower Danube destroy the field army of the eastern empire in Europe; they are accepted within it by Theodosius I; but at his death a complex of pressures cause Alaric to move his men west, where their looting of Rome in 410 is of more symbolic than practical importance. Meanwhile there has occurred a second barbarian invasion originating (Gibbon thinks) in distant Asia: that of Vandals and others across the Rhine into Gaul and Spain, which together with Britain pass out of imperial control; and at Alaric's death the Visigoths enter this region, establishing themselves in Aquitaine. The major outcome of these invasions will be the Vandal seizure of Roman Africa: the central event – Gibbon insists with some support from contemporary French historiography – in the barbarian destruction of western Roman authority, since it destroys the prosperity of Italy and the city of Rome, and renders impossible any intervention by the eastern empire. The devastating inroads of Attila's Huns are peripheral to all this, important mainly because they leave behind them a chaos of mercenaries from the *barbaricum* beyond the Alps and the Danube, with which no warlord in Italy is able to cope; hence the termination of western empire, and the first if not the last grand climax of Gibbon's history.

All this is preceded, however, in the sequence of chapters by the ecclesiastical history of the reign of Theodosius I. He succeeds in destroying the power of the Arian heresy, which has dominated the eastern church since the time of Constantine himself, and establishes an intolerant Trinitarian orthodoxy in both west and east. In the west, however, he encounters the spiritual power, and is outfaced by Ambrose of Milan in the first of the great confrontations of Latin medieval history. Gibbon now inserts a chapter in the philosophical history of religion, narrating the transformation of Christianity into a quasi-polytheism by the ascription of sacred powers to saints and martyrs, their relics and their miracles. The Christians cease to defy civil society in the role of enthusiasts, and set out instead to rule it by the power of superstition; an assertion as Protestant as it became Enlightened.

This is the last appearance of ecclesiastical history in the *Decline and Fall* of 1781; the triumph of barbarism follows and eclipses the initial victories of religion. There has been only a minimum of eastern history in volume III, and the great controversies of Ephesus and Chalcedon in the reign of Theodosius II are postponed unmentioned until a chapter not appearing until the end of volume IV seven years later. The triumph of barbarism dominates what remains of volume III, as already recounted; but once again Gibbon adds concluding chapters that break new ground after what has seemed to terminate his narrative. Chapter 38 narrates the rise of the

true victor among the western barbarians, the kingdom of the Franks, and proceeds to explore the controversy, beginning with Boulainvilliers and culminating with Mably, but also with Sieyès in the first years of Revolution, as to whether the French *noblesse* owed its feudal powers to Frankish conquests over the Gallo-Romans, or whether the *monarchie française* had from the beginning been Roman in character and founded in Roman law. The chapter opens up the prospect of a history of the medieval and post-Roman western kingdoms, as a history of legal conflict between unwritten barbarian custom and written Roman law; a history, Gibbon went on to indicate, from which the Britain that became England had been excluded for half a millennium by the destruction of everything that was Roman, so that the English knew nothing of an age in which ‘the ancient constitution and the feudal law’ had been interchangeable terms. It is a remarkable conclusion – not least to the present author – to a history of the fall of empire in the west; but Gibbon here gives us little hint of what he meant by it.

Chapter 38, succeeded by *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*, brings to a close the volumes Gibbon published in 1781. It shows him so deeply interested in the history of the medieval west as to devote a chapter to opening up one of its major controversies, still going on as he wrote. Yet this is the point at which he is obliged to transfer his narrative from west to east, and embark on the ‘Byzantine’ history he has repeatedly said he is postponing to a further volume. That did not appear until 1788, as one of a trilogy of volumes carrying him to the fall of Constantinople and the conclusion of his history. The series *Barbarism and Religion* breaks off at this point, on the premise that the second trilogy differs from the first, in subject matter and method, in so many ways that it should be left to the exploration of other historians, with their own approaches.

The central assumption here is that the key thesis Gibbon has used so far – that the decline of Rome was due to the divorce between civil and military authority, producing a civilisation incapable of defending itself – has ceased to be of either narrative or explanatory value. It had from the start been a thesis Roman, Latin and western, rooted in a history to which Romans and west Europeans related themselves and were accustomed to narrate. When the scene shifted from Latin to Greek and from Europe to Asia, it ceased to be employable. There was no grand narrative relating how the valour and liberty of Athens and Sparta had decayed under the Macedonian kingdoms; even Polybius had at this point to resort to Roman history. As a further consequence, Hellenic history had become Hellenistic, that of Hellenised Asians, Syrians and Egyptians with no past record of armed liberty and discipline. It followed that there was no

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grand narrative, of this or any other nature, for the empire Gibbon had begun to call ‘Byzantine’, though it had survived the empire of Rome proper for a thousand years. He had already described that millennium as one of ‘premature and perpetual decay’, indicating that it was hard to find any justification for its existence. It did not even exhibit a Decline and Fall in the sense used so far; the barbarisation of the armies and successively of the provinces had some presence on the Danubian frontier but none at all on the Euphrates. Historians since Flavio Biondo and before him had realised that for an *inclinatio* of the eastern empire they must wait for the Arab Muslim conquests after the reign of Heraclius, which had indeed altered the map of world civilisations on a scale exceeding anything achieved by the barbarians in western Europe – until their descendants became ‘masters of the world’ in a process Raynal had begun to criticise and explore – but was not the direct product of the empire’s internal decay.

The central fact about the *Decline and Fall*’s second trilogy – I venture to suggest to those to whom I leave its study – is that Gibbon thought the east Romans (at least after Justinian) incapable of either enacting or writing a history of their own. He therefore described it, at the outset of his fifth volume, as ‘passively connected’ with ‘important revolutions’ taking place around it, and conceived his second trilogy as surveying these revolutions from a Byzantine starting point to be instantly left behind. Since they occurred in the histories of Latin west Europeans, Arab and Persian Muslims, Slavic and central Asian nomads from the world of Joseph de Guignes, a Russia taking shape to the north of them, and climactically the conquering Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, the second trilogy takes on the dimensions of a world history; but only in name is it a Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. I see myself as leaving this narrative to others; how they will see the later *Decline and Fall* is for them (if any there are) to tell their readers.

A reviewer of the earlier volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* asked, as I recall, the question ‘where is the historian?’ It is true that Gibbon the creator of his narrative is not the central figure of any of them. Rather, I have aimed to show him as acting in many contexts – some of them shared by historians who have been allowed to speak in their own voices which were not his – employing many discourses, and constantly encountering problems to which he proposed solutions that were themselves the occasion of further problems. Sometimes my purpose has been less to present Gibbon than to explore and describe the historiographic culture of the era in which he wrote. In consequence I am conscious of having depicted him as the solver of problems, himself problematic, which he was, than as the great master of historical narrative which he was also. I see no need to

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apologise for this; my Gibbon is offered as a historical reality. If we ask the question ‘what made Gibbon a great historian?’ the possibility arises that the adjective ‘great’ lies more in the province of the student of literature than in that of the historian of speech acts and discourse generally, a characterisation with which I should be content. There remain the historical questions whether Gibbon in any way innovated in the treatment of late antique history, and whether he can be shown to have changed it; the latter at least belongs to the history of how his work was received over time, and this is not attempted here. These volumes have been essentially an attempt to discover and present what he was saying, what he meant by it, why he said it in the ways that he did, and how he is to be understood in the setting of eighteenth-century Anglo-French historiography.

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Part I

The Constantinian Empire

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