

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-49310-9 — Volney: 'The Ruins' and 'Catechism of Natural Law'
Constantin Volney, Edited and translated by Colin Kidd,
Translated by Lucy Kidd
Excerpt
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*The Ruins:
Meditations
on the
Revolutions of
Empires
(Paris, 1791)*

VOLNEY

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Preface

The conception of this work goes back to an era which is already far removed from our times, since it dates from nearly ten years ago. Hints of it can be seen in the preface and conclusion of my *Travels in Syria*, published in 1787. Composition was well advanced when the events of 1788 came to interrupt it. Not subscribing to the view that authoring a theory of political truths absolves a citizen from what is owed to society, the author wished to join theory to practice. At a time when every limb counted in the defence of liberty, he strove to fulfil his obligations. Since then the same motives of public benefit which led him to suspend the writing of this book, have induced him to take it up once more. Although the work no longer has the same merit that it would have had in the circumstances for which it was first intended, the author reckons that at a time when a whole host of new enthusiasms are on the rise – which in their fervour animate people's religious opinions – it becomes important to publish moral truths as a means of regulating heightened passions and curbing excess. It is with this intention that the author has attempted to reclothe these truths, until now treated as mere abstractions, giving them a form most appropriate for their dissemination. Although it was impossible not to offend the confirmed prejudices of some readers, this work is not the fruit of a desire to cause trouble, but arises from a considered respect for order and love of humanity.

After reading this work the reader will wonder how it was possible to have an idea in 1784 of what only took place in 1790. The solution is straightforward: in the original plan of the work the Legislator was a fictitious entity, merely hypothetical; but in the published version you see before you, the author has put in its place a Legislator that actually exists. Reality has only made the subject more interesting.

Invocation

Solitary ruins, I salute you – sacred tombs, silent walls: it is you that I invoke, and to you that I address my prayer. Whilst your appearance frightens ordinary people, when I contemplate you my heart finds the charm of a thousand sentiments, a thousand thoughts. How many useful lessons, how many pertinent reflections you offer to the mind which knows how to consult you. When the whole enslaved world stayed silent in the face of tyrants, you proclaimed the truths which they despised; you, confounding the mortal

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Invocation

remains of kings with those of the last slave, bore witness to the sacred doctrine of equality. A solitary lover of liberty, I have walked within your precincts and seen the spirit of freedom emerge from the tombs. By a stroke of good fortune, liberty took wing and called me back to my reborn homeland.

Tombs, you are the repository of virtues; you frighten away tyrants; you haunt their immoral pleasures. They flee your incorruptible aspect; and cowards, with the pride of their palaces, run far away from you. You punish the powerful oppressor; you seize back the corrupt henchman's ill-gotten gold; and you avenge the weak, from whom they have stolen. You avenge the deprivations of the poor as an unwelcome spectre amidst the splendours of the rich. You offer a last asylum to the unfortunate. Finally, you give the soul that just balance of strength and sensibility which constitutes true wisdom. Knowing that they must make restitution to you, deathly tombs, thoughtful people don't load themselves up with vain grandeur or useless wealth: they exercise restraint within the limits of fairness, using the means they possess to pursue useful employments. You rein in the excesses of greed. You calm the feverish desire for pleasure which troubles the senses; you allow the soul to rest from the tiring conflict of the passions, lifting it up above the base interests of the madding crowd. From your commanding heights, encompassing a comprehensive view of people and history, the mind dedicates itself to noble sentiments, and conceives only solid ideas of virtue and glory. When the dream of life is over, what will have been the point of all its agitations, if they don't leave something useful behind?

Ruins, I shall return to you to take your lessons. I shall bring myself back to the peace of your solitude, and there, distanced from the painful spectacle of the passions, I shall love mankind in remembrance of you, ruins, and will devote myself to the wellbeing of others. My own happiness will come from the knowledge that I have promoted with all haste the common good of mankind.

CHAPTER I

The Journey

In 1784, in the eleventh year of the reign of Abdul-Hamid, son of Ahmed, emperor of the Turks, at the time when the Nogai Tartar people were chased out of the Crimea, and when a Muslim prince of the blood of Genghis Khan paid homage to a Christian queen,¹ I was travelling in the Ottoman Empire, through the provinces then known as the kingdoms of Egypt and Syria.

Giving my full attention to everything touching on the common good of societies, I went into the towns and studied the manners of their inhabitants; I entered the palaces and observed the conduct of those who governed; I travelled far and wide into the countryside and investigated the condition of the peasantry. And everywhere, seeing nothing but banditry and devastation, tyranny and misery, my heart was oppressed with sadness and indignation.

Every day of my travels, I found neglected fields, deserted villages, and towns in ruins. Often I encountered ancient monuments, fragments of temples, palaces and fortresses; columns, aqueducts, tombs. Prompted by this spectacle, I began to meditate deeply and seriously on times past.

I arrived in the town of Homs, on the banks of the Orontes, and there, finding myself near Palmyra, which is situated in the desert, I resolved to reconnoitre its vaunted monuments. After three days' walk in this arid emptiness, having crossed a valley full of caves and sepulchres, suddenly I saw on the plain the most astonishing vista of ruins. Here was an innumerable multitude of superb columns, which, as in the avenues of

¹ For the background to Russia's seizure of the autonomous khanate of Crimea under Catherine the Great, see M.S. Anderson, 'The Great Powers and the Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1783–4', *Slavonic and East European Review* 37 (1958), 17–41.

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The Ruins

our parks, extended in symmetrical lines as far as one could see. Amongst these columns were large buildings, some surviving intact, others half collapsed. Everywhere the ground was littered with the same debris: cornices, capitals, trunks of columns, entablatures, pilasters, all in exquisitely worked white marble. After three quarters of an hour's walk the length of these ruins, we entered within the walls of a vast edifice which had been a temple dedicated to the sun; and I accepted the hospitality of some poor Arab peasants who had their dwellings on the grounds of the temple. I resolved to stay for a few days to take in all this beauty in more detail.

Every day I went out to visit one or another of the monuments which covered the plain. One evening, caught up in my thoughts, I walked towards the valley of the sepulchres, and climbed the heights alongside it, from which the eye took in a panorama of ruins and the immensity of the desert. The sun had just set, a reddish band still tracing the distant horizon of the Syrian hills; in the east the full moon rose against a bluish foil, above the low riverbanks of the Euphrates. The sky was clear, the air calm and serene; the dying brightness of the day tempered the grim darkness; the fresh coolness of the night calmed the furnace-like temperatures of the daytime; the herdsmen had led their camels home; there was no movement on the greyish and monotone plain. A vast silence reigned across the desert, broken only at intervals by the mournful cries of a few night birds and jackals. The darkness grew; and already in the gloaming my eyes could see nothing more than whitish phantoms of columns and walls. These solitary places, this peaceful evening, this majestic scene, inspired me to religious meditation. The view of a vast deserted citadel, the memory of times past, the comparison with the present, all raised my thoughts to lofty contemplation. I sat on the trunk of a column, and there, leaning my elbows on my knees, my head resting upon my hands, sometimes looking out over the desert and sometimes towards the ruins, I abandoned myself to a deep reverie.

CHAPTER 2

The Meditation

Here, I told myself, here once upon a time had flourished an opulent city; here was the seat of a powerful empire. These scenes, now so deserted, were once host to a lively multitude; a busy crowd flowed through thoroughfares which were now utterly empty. Within these walls, where now a dismal silence reigned, the noise of artisans, and shouts of happiness and celebration once resounded. These piles of marble had formed ordered palaces; these felled columns had adorned majestic temples. These collapsed galleries traced the outlines of public squares. There, a substantial population had rushed about, carrying out the respectable duties of their religion and domestic life. There, goods were summoned from around the world to sustain the crafts of luxury. There the purple of Tyre was traded for the precious silk of China, the soft tissues of Kashmir for the luxury carpet of Lydia, Baltic amber for Arabian pearls and perfumes, the gold of Ophir for the tin of Thule.

Now nothing remained of that powerful city but its sad skeleton. Nothing was left of this vast empire but a shadowy memory. Deathly silence had succeeded the clamour of business which once buzzed around its portals. The hum of public places had yielded to a sepulchral silence. The wealth of a commercial citadel had been transformed into grim poverty. The palaces of kings had become the haunt of feral beasts; flocks bedded down on the thresholds of the temples and foul reptiles lived in the sanctuary of the gods. How had such glory passed away? How had these great edifices crumbled? Thus have perished all the works of humankind. Thus have all empires and all nations faded away.

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The Ruins

And the passage of history came alive for me; I reflected upon ancient times when twenty great civilisations existed in these lands. In my mind I saw depicted the Assyrian on the banks of the Tigris, the Chaldean on the banks of the Euphrates, the Persian Empire which commanded the lands between the Indus and the Mediterranean. I numbered the kingdoms of Damascus and Idumea, of Jerusalem and Samaria, the warlike states of the Philistines and the commercial republics of Phoenicia. This Syria, I said to myself, which today is almost depopulated, used to contain a hundred powerful towns. Its countryside was covered with villages, settlements and hamlets. All around, there had been cultivated fields, busy thoroughfares and occupied houses. What became of those lively, prosperous times? What became of so many brilliant creations of human industry? Where are they now, the battlements of Nineveh, the walls of Babylon, the palaces of Persepolis, the temples of Baalbek and Jerusalem? Where are the fleets of Tyre, the workshops and shipyards of Arad and Sidon, and their multitude of sailors, pilots, merchants and soldiers? And the ploughmen, and their harvests, and their flocks, and all the creation of living things in which the face of the earth rejoiced?

I, alas, had crossed it, this ravaged land. I had visited the places which were the theatre of so much splendour, and seen only abandonment and emptiness. I had sought out these ancient peoples and their works, but I found only traces, resembling the marks which our footsteps leave in dust. The temples had fallen down, the palaces were ruined, the gates had filled with rubble, the towns were destroyed, and the land, bare of inhabitants, was nothing more than a desolate scene of tombs. Great God! What caused these fatal revolutions? By what means had the fortune of these lands changed so drastically? Why were so many towns destroyed? Why was this ancient civilisation unable to sustain itself?

As I gave myself over to my thoughts, new reflections presented themselves in a relentless flow. I was disorientated, and everything caused me uncertainty and anxiety. When great civilisations flourished in these lands, they were inhabited by pagan peoples. The Phoenicians, who gathered within their walls the riches of many lands, performed human sacrifices to their god Moloch. The Chaldeans, who conquered opulent cities and plundered palaces and temples, prostrated themselves before their serpent-god Bel. The Persians, whose

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2 *The Meditation*

emperor received tribute from a hundred peoples, were fire-worshippers. The inhabitants of this very city, who raised so many monuments signalling prosperity and luxury, worshipped the sun and the stars.

Numerous flocks, fertile fields, abundant harvests, all of the rewards of piety, were in the hands of these idolaters. Now that religious believers occupy this land, nothing is left but emptiness and sterility. The earth, in these blessed hands, now bears only thorns and brambles. An anguished people sows seeds but reaps only tears and worry. War, famine and pestilence assail them in turn. Yet aren't these the children of the prophets? Are not the Muslims, the Christians and the Jews the chosen peoples of God, endowed with providences and miracles? So why do these privileged races not enjoy more blessings? Why do these lands, sanctified with the blood of martyrs, lack the amenities they had in former times? Why in the course of centuries has prosperity been banished to other countries?

At these words, my mind followed the course of the vicissitudes which had passed the sceptre of the world amongst peoples of such varying religions and customs, from those of the ancient East to the more recent triumphs of Europe. This, the name of my native continent, awoke in me sentiments of patriotism; and, as I turned my gaze towards my own country, my thoughts fixed on the circumstances which I had left behind.

I recollected its rich farmland, its well-appointed roads, its populous towns, its fleets spread across the seven seas, its ports receiving the goods of the East and West Indies. Comparing its commercial activity, the extent of its navigation, the wealth of its monuments, the crafts and industries of its inhabitants, to all that Egypt and Syria could once have possessed of a similar nature, I was pleased to find the former glories of Eastern civilisation now settled in modern Europe. But soon the charm of my reverie withered under the force of a final comparison. Reflecting on the former busyness of the places I was contemplating – who knows, I asked myself, whether our own regions might meet a similar fate? Who knows whether one day, on the banks of the Seine, the Thames or the Zuiderzee, where now the whirl of sensation and pleasure is more than anyone can take in, a future traveller like me might sit down amidst silent ruins and weep, alone amidst the ashes of our civilisation and the memory of Europe's grandeur?

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My eyes filled with tears; covering my head with the tail of my coat, I gave myself over to sombre reflections on human affairs. What misfortune awaits humankind? I wondered sadly. A blind fate makes sport with our destiny, and the lot of humanity is to be ruled by a dismal necessity.

But, no: this is what celestial justice decrees. A mysterious deity exercises his inscrutable judgments. Doubtless he has borne a secret anathema against this land; he has avenged the sins of past races with a curse on its current inhabitants. Who dares to fathom the depths of divinity?

I stayed motionless, wrapped in a deep melancholy.

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CHAPTER 3

The Phantom

However, a noise struck my ears. It resembled the movement of a flowing robe, and slow footsteps on dry and rustling grass. Worried, I picked up my coat and cast a furtive glance around. Suddenly to my left, in the moonlit shadows, across the columns and ruins of a neighbouring temple, I seemed to see a whitish phantom, wrapped in immense draperies, the very image of a ghost emerging from a tomb. I shivered; although shaken, I hesitated between fleeing and making sure of what I was seeing. The solemn accents of a deep voice compelled me to listen to his speech:

‘How long will humanity beseech the heavens with unwarranted grievances? How long will fate be blamed in vain for the misfortunes of humankind? Will people therefore always close their eyes to the light, and their hearts to the implications of reason and truth? Enlightenment presents itself everywhere; but humanity fails to perceive it. The call of reason strikes the ears, but people don’t hear it. Humanity is being unfair. If you could only let go, for a moment, of the enchantment which plays upon your senses. If your heart is able to understand the language of reason, question these ruins: read the lessons they offer you. And you, sacred temples, venerable tombs, walls that were once glorious – you who are witnesses to twenty different centuries – appear in the cause of Nature itself. Come before the tribunal of sound reason to bear witness against an unjust accusation. Come forward and refute the speeches of empty wisdom and hypocritical piety, and avenge heavens and earth from the calumnies of humankind.

‘What is this blind fate which, without reference to rules or laws, plays with human destiny? What is this cruel chance which mixes up the outcomes of prudent and unwise behaviour? What is the real cause of the divine punishments which have fallen on these lands? What is the