CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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VOLNEY
The Ruins and
Catechism of Natural Law

Volney was once as influential as Tom Paine, and the author of one of the most popular works of the French Revolutionary era. *The Ruins* makes an argument for popular sovereignty, couched in the alluring and accessible form of an Oriental dream-tale. A favourite of both Thomas Jefferson, who translated it, and the young Abraham Lincoln, the *Ruins* advances a scheme of radical, utopian politics premised upon the deconstruction of all the world's religions. It was widely celebrated by radicals in Britain and America, and exercised an enormous influence on poets from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Walt Whitman for its indictments of tyranny and priestcraft. Volney instead advocates a return to natural precepts shorn of superstition, set out in his sequel, the *Catechism of Natural Law*. These days Volney enjoys a high profile in African-American Studies as a proponent of Black Egyptianism.

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VOLNEY

The Ruins
and
Catechism of
Natural Law

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Translated by Lucy Kidd
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Translators' Preface

This volume attempts to provide a fresh, modern, student-friendly translation of an iconic – or once-iconic – text from the French Revolution, Volney's *Les Ruines* (in the first 1791 edition) and its continuation *La Loi naturelle* (in its first edition of 1793). In most existing translations of Volney's provocative bestseller *Les Ruines* – many dating from the Revolutionary and romantic periods – expression tends to be high-flown, stilted and old-fashioned, and meaning sometimes veiled. But this is not to knock our predecessors, Thomas Jefferson among them: that would be presumptuous. Moreover, translation, as we soon discovered, is far from an exact science, and the competing pressures of literal accuracy, explanation and current English idiom force translators into a series of unsatisfactory trade-offs and imperfect compromises. We hope in this instance that we have not obscured or distorted Volney's thoughts with our own emphases or outright usurpations. On the other hand, Volney's arguments are often expressed in what are notionally sentences, but of paragraph length, layered with multiple main verbs, and studded with semi-colons. We have done our best to convey the gist of these in an approachable way, with as much twenty-first-century punctuation as sense would allow us to muster. We have departed on occasions from a literal version, taming Volney's prolixity when it verges on repetition or laborious redundancy, and, where possible, quietly adopting gender-neutral language and other formulations more attuned to modern sensibilities. At certain points we have inserted clarifying phrases into Volney's text that capture what we believe to be his meaning (in lieu of littering the text with too many obtrusive

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footnotes). Accessibility, fluency, and comprehension of Volney's ideas have been our overriding goals throughout.

We should like to acknowledge the work of our friend Nigel Leask, who first drew our attention to Volney and his extraordinary importance in English literary and political culture during the romantic era, and who also read the Introduction in draft. Much of the research for this volume was done in the superb collections of the Widener Library at Harvard, under the auspices of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, where Patrice Higonnet reminded us that in France, unlike the anglophone world, Volney is known primarily for his *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, not *Les Ruines*. Although we have never met in person, Alexander Cook at ANU in Canberra, today's foremost expert on Volney and his reception, has been extraordinarily generous in passing on information and advice. In addition, many friends and colleagues have helped with this project, whether by passing on references and suggestions or by reading drafts of parts of the work. We should like to thank Suzanne Marchand, Sophie Rees, Tim Blanning, Stuart Jones, Thomas Munck, Munro Price, John Robertson and Richard Whatmore, not least for saving us from several errors and inaccuracies; those that remain are, of course, our responsibility alone.

Quentin Skinner and Liz Friend-Smith commissioned this edition for Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, and we are grateful for their enthusiastic support. We should also like to thank Lisa Carter for her painstaking efforts at the production stage.

Introduction

Volney was once a household name, certainly for a time as well known as
Tom Paine. Radicals at the very end of the eighteenth century and in the
early decades of the nineteenth celebrated the name of the Frenchman,
no less widely or fervently than that of his English counterpart, as a
heroic demystifier of authority and priestcraft. Volney enjoyed an inter-
national reputation – to judge by his long afterlife in translation –
throughout the nineteenth century. Almost as soon as it was published,
Volney's *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791)
established itself in the canon of radical politics and irreligion, certainly
in Britain and the United States where it was known in various English
translations, including one which was largely the work of the American
president Thomas Jefferson. Volney would also become a favourite
author of another future president, Abraham Lincoln, who read the
Ruins as a young man in Illinois during the early 1830s. A few hundred
miles to the east in upper New York State, the town of Frederiksburgh
had changed its name to Volney in 1811. Invocations of Volney were a
staple feature of radical political culture across the Atlantic world. Within
ten years of its initial French publication, there were three different
competing English translations of the *Ruins*. Eleven English editions of
Volney's *Ruins* appeared between 1793 and 1822, and a portion of the
work was also translated into Welsh. The *Ruins* was, moreover, the
dominant influence on radical romanticism. In Mary Shelley's novel
Frankenstein (1818), the first book which the monster encounters is *Les
Ruines*, a reading of which he overhears, and that decisively shapes his
view of the world. For students of romantic literature this meeting of
monster and text is unsurprising, for the poetry of Mary Shelley's

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husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, is profoundly indebted to the inspiration of Volney's *Ruins*. In the literary avant-garde Volney was the epitome of radical chic. Indeed, the doyenne of English literary historians of the romantic period, the late Marilyn Butler, described Volney – perhaps with a sly, pejorative twist – as 'the Foucault of his day'.[1] According to Alexander Cook, the current leading authority on the topic, Volney was 'unquestionably the most popular revolutionary author in the anglo-phone world',[2] and 'for two generations the most widely read philoso-pher of the French Revolution'.[3]

This pervasive influence gave rise in turn to widespread notoriety and hostile criticism. The Volney cult was more than matched in England by a widespread Volney panic. This was loudest among Anglican conserva-tives, but also extended to anti-deistic dissenters troubled by Volney's wholesale deconstruction of all religion. The social reach and popularity of Volney's *Ruins* were matters of profound concern. There was a huge anti-Volney literature. In time the panic subsided, but in radical circles Volney's legacy endured. There were at least eighteen editions in England by 1878, sometimes published together with translations of its companion piece, Volney's *La Loi naturelle*.

Almost a century after the publication of the *Ruins*, Volney was still an influential presence in radical freethought in both Britain and America, as much a cynosure for the atheistic republican Charles Bradlaugh MP in Britain as for the pantheistic poet Walt Whitman in the United States. Today, however, things have changed. Whereas Tom Paine remains a firm fixture in our common memory, Volney is largely unknown, even in France, and the *Ruins* has long since slipped out of the canon of political thought. But precisely because canons are not static, there is a place within a properly contextualist history of ideas for the reappraisal of forgotten bestsellers and lost classics, especially in the case of the *Ruins* with its massive century-long legacy for poets, presidents, and popular politics.

[1] Marilyn Butler, 'Byron and the Empire in the East', in Andrew Rutherford (ed.), *Byron: Augustan and Romantic* (London, 1990), pp. 63–81, at p. 71.

[2] Alexander Cook, 'Reading Revolution: Towards a History of the Volney Vogue in Britain', in Christophe Charle et al. (eds.), *Anglo-French Attitudes: Comparisons and Transfers between English and French Intellectuals since the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 125–46, at p. 125.

[3] Alexander Cook, 'Volney and the Science of Morality in Revolutionary France', *Humanities Research* 16 (2010), 7–28, at p. 7.

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Volney also has another claim on our attention. The historian who tries to make sense of Volney and his legacy gradually becomes aware of two seemingly incompatible Volneys. While the anglophone world knows Volney by repute as a radical icon, in France he is firmly associated with a moderate republican grouping which suffered under the Terror, flourished under the post-Thermidorean Directory, and compromised – often tetchily – with the Napoleonic regime. Volney was part of the group of late Enlightenment intellectuals known as the Idéologues, who were associated, at different times, with the Auteuil salon of Madame Helvétius, the Second Class of the Institut National and the periodical *La Décade philosophique*. Ideology is, of course, a ubiquitous term of art in the history of political thought, with multiple overlapping meanings, some pejorative. However, its origins can be precisely dated. The word 'idéologie' was coined in 1796 by a member of that loose grouping, Antoine Destutt de Tracy, and initially possessed a different meaning from its familiar set of current usages. In its first incarnation the word referred quite specifically to a science of ideas, and was deliberately chosen to distance it from the obsolete notion of the soul (*psychē*, in Greek). The Idéologues – among whom the most celebrated was Pierre Cabanis – aimed to foster a science of humanity which fused together psychology with physiology, the individual with his or her environment, in order to show humankind the true sources of happiness or wellbeing ('bonheur'), a truth so often concealed by the self-interested wiles of kingcraft or priestcraft or by an accompanying miasma of metaphysical delusion. Very quickly, however, the term 'idéologue' acquired pejorative overtones; several decades, indeed, before Marx reminted 'ideology' in the 1840s to mean that set of ruling ideas in a society which obscured its underlying class interests. For, it was in the first decade of the nineteenth century, as early as January 1800,[4] that Napoleon and the Bonapartist press deployed it as a term of abuse for the republican intellectuals who grumbled about his reactionary direction of travel, most particularly in matters ecclesiastical. Once he assumed the trappings of dictatorship and began to compromise with the institutions of the ancien régime, Bonaparte felt as a stinging reproach the abiding commitment of the Idéologues, whom he otherwise admired, to the principles of republicanism and enlightenment. In consequence, the dictator began to fume

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[4] Martin S. Staum, *Cabanis, Enlightenment and Medical Philosophy in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 1980), p. 292.

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about the high-mindedness of these impractical intellectuals; and Idéologue became a prickly Napoleonic insult, though one which concealed Bonaparte's exasperated affection for a group of intellectuals upon whom he lavished titles and honours.

Volney had studied medicine in his youth, and maintained a keen interest in physiological wellbeing. His *Ruins* exemplified the core principles of idéologie, although it had appeared five years *avant la lettre*. Of course, Volney's *Ruins* enjoyed an international influence on political thought far exceeding that of his colleagues, but his thought and his lifestory are inseparable from those of his fellow Idéologues. The Idéologues made up the principal cohort of the second, or arguably third, generation of the French Enlightenment, and several of them – like Volney – were born in the 1750s. They constitute the main bridge between the world of the philosophes and the French liberal republican tradition of the following century. To be sure, that bridge was decidedly rickety and precarious during the Terror of 1793–4, when several members of the late Enlightenment either perished or found themselves imprisoned, and the legacy of the philosophes – Rousseau excepted, of course – was tainted with elitism, materialism and an absence of tender-hearted virtue. The vicissitudes of Volney and his kind serve as a sharp reminder that the Revolution was in no straightforward or unironic way the culmination of the Enlightenment. Later, the Napoleonic Empire, and then the restored monarchy, presented different sets of difficulties for members of this enlightened intelligentsia to dodge as best they could. Indeed, Volney and his allies constitute the main rope of continuity between the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the world of the French Positivists, Comte and Saint-Simon, and forward to the technocratic ideals of today's *énarques*.

The obvious affinities between Volney and his fellow Idéologues should not, however, obscure the singularity of Volney's achievement, both in his remarkable life as an adventurous traveller in far-flung parts, active Revolutionary politician, and prolific polymath in a wide range of disciplines, and in his influential afterlives. Furthermore, there is much about Volney that remains enigmatic. If his legacy was a chequered one, strikingly different in the anglophone and francophone worlds, so too in his career there were abrupt shifts of tone and register – between outspoken radicalism and cautious moderation – which, in spite of his Idéologue connections, make his politics tricky to parse. Many of the crucial turning points in his life, moreover, persist as matters of

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puzzlement and speculation, including, it transpires, the very signifi-
cance of his strange adopted name.

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The figure to whom we shall refer throughout as Volney was not born
with that name. He was born Constantin-François Chassebœuf on
3 February 1757. As we shall see, his name changed later, for mysterious
reasons, around 1782, when he left France to tour the Middle East.
Volney was born in the town of Craon in the province of Maine, the son
of a substantial lawyer Jacques-René Chassebœuf de Boisgirais and his
melancholic wife Jeanne Gigault de la Giraudais. His ailing and unhappy
mother died in 1759, and this sad event blighted Volney's childhood.
The brutality he experienced at his local school provided scant relief
from a joyless home. However, he was fortunate enough to be taken
under the wing of a maternal uncle, Joseph Gigault, who arranged for
Volney to be transferred in 1769 to the College d'Angers run by the
Oratorians. In 1773 Volney enrolled in the faculty of law at Angers. But
he remained restless. Reaching the age of majority in 1775, he left Anjou
for Paris and took accommodation in the Latin quarter.

The lack of paternal affection after his mother's death appears to have
stunted the formation of Volney's character. Determinedly and reclu-
sively studious by nature, from his youth onwards Volney was, in the
reckoning of several observers, including his close friend François-Yves
Besnard, stiff-necked, aloof, sour and morose, though not to the extent
that his chilly introversion thwarted networking, friendship and sociabil-
ity. He was capable of focused charm and attentiveness, though also
prone to petulant outbursts when contradicted.[5] In the late 1790s he
dined frequently with his fellow Angevin and leading light in the
Directory, La Révellière-Lépeaux, who confesses in his *Mémoires* that
while he welcomed Volney to his table, he was underwhelmed by the
latter's 'pedantry, sententiousness and whims'.[6] Volney had several close
friendships with men of learning, including Jefferson. However, roman-
tic fulfilment came only late in life with a companionate marriage to a
widowed kinswoman, once the lost sweetheart of his youth.

[5] Francois-Yves Besnard, *Un prêtre en révolution: Souvenirs d'un nonagénaire*, ed. Martine
Taroni (Rennes, 2011), pp. 120–1, 161, 184, 270.
[6] Louis-Marie La Révellière-Lépeaux, *Mémoires*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1895), vol. II, p. 437.

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In Paris Volney studied first medicine, in the course of which he made the close acquaintance of Cabanis, and then turned to the study of classical Arabic. Cabanis introduced Volney to the salon of the atheistic philosopher Baron d'Holbach, and to the gatherings at Auteuil of Madame Helvétius, the widow of the philosopher Adrien Helvétius, who had died in 1771. Although this latter grouping was in some measure eclectic, it also included several future Idéologues, including, besides Volney and Cabanis, Sieyès, Ginguené and Garat, and would in the following years up to the death of Madame Helvétius in 1800 also encompass Laromiguière, Dégérando, Daunou and Roederer. Madame Helvétius grew fond of the diffident young man with the aquiline nose and short curly hair, and he became a regular at her salons, where he made the acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin.

At the end of 1782 Volney set out from Marseille on a three-year journey to the Middle East, returning only in 1785. The reason for Volney's journey and its financing remain mysterious, possibly involving some kind of state-sponsored espionage; perhaps under the auspices of Louis XVI's Foreign Minister the comte de Vergennes, in the wake of Baron de Tott's memorandum calling for French intervention in the provinces of a declining Ottoman power. Alexander Cook has discovered archival evidence that Volney travelled with consular recommendation, and notes that portions of the book which emerged from these travels 'read suspiciously like reconnaissance', but is less convinced by the Vergennes connection.[7] At the time of his Middle Eastern tour, Chassebœuf also changed his name to Volney, most plausibly adopted in honour of Voltaire, the name combining the first syllable of his hero's pen-name with the final syllable of Voltaire's estate, Ferney. Volney's expedition to the Middle East gave rise to a phenomenally successful book, which firmly established his intellectual reputation, the *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* (initially published in 1787 in two volumes as *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*). Volney's *Voyage* provided both a physical and social geography, including accounts of climate and terrain, as well as the economies, religion, institutions and recent histories of those parts of the Middle East. Although his contribution was overshadowed by that of his Prussian contemporary Alexander von Humboldt, Volney's

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[7] Alexander Cook, '"The Great Society of the Human Species": Volney and the Global Politics of Revolutionary France', *Intellectual History Review* 23 (2013), 309–28, at pp. 314–15.

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Voyage – together with his sample questionnaire, *Questions de statistique à l'usage des voyageurs* (1795) and his survey *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis* (1803) – helped lay the foundations of scientific geography.

In his journeys through Syria (a region which he took to include Lebanon and Palestine), Volney did not visit the ruins of Palmyra which would provide the setting for *Les Ruines*. Nevertheless, he knew about Palmyra from the work of the British traveller and antiquary Robert Wood, whose work he cited in the *Voyage*, and from his acquaintance with the artist Louis-François Cassas, with whom he had sailed from the coast of Palestine to Alexandria in the early spring of 1785 and for whose published collection of drawings of Palmyra Volney would later provide an introduction. Indeed, the motif of ruins and the sad decline of once flourishing ancient civilisations – the debris of which was now overrun by simple pastoralists and their flocks or the scene of shrivelled trade and vastly reduced artisanal capacities – recurred throughout Volney's *Voyage*, in discussions of Alexandria, Giza, Baalbek, Tyre and other locations. Notwithstanding such moments of wistfulness, he eschewed any other hints of the aestheticised or exoticised East prevalent in contemporary orientalism. Rather Volney's utterly unfanciful account of a demystified East, though suffused with orientalist condescension, remained grounded throughout in level-headed fact and observation.

Nevertheless, Volney's findings in the various fields of geography, sociology and history were spiced at crucial points with wider theoretical reflections. As an attender of his widow's salon, Volney was an admirer of Helvétius, whose *De l'Esprit* (1758) rebutted a central claim of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois*. Physical factors such as climate, Helvétius contended, had little influence on the manners of a people, certainly by comparison with the form of government. Why, he asked, were the Greeks of today so different from their forebears in antiquity? Their weather was the same, it was their institutional life which had changed.[8] Accordingly, Volney distanced himself from a crude version of environmental determinism, suggesting that Montesquieu's celebrated thesis about the influence of climate on government owed its success largely to novelty, and could not withstand close scrutiny. Volney argued that 'la mollesse asiatique' (oriental lassitude) did not arise from debilitating heat and its effects on physiology or from the character of the

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[8] Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De l'Esprit* (Paris, 1758), pp. 463–74.

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peoples of the Middle East. If sluggishness now seemed characteristic of balmy Mediterranean climes, then this perception bequeathed a further riddle about how one might then account for the rise of the civilisations of Carthage and Rome. There was no reason to believe that weather patterns had changed in any substantial way between antiquity and the present. Rather, Volney announced, government and religion were the key factors which explained the slumbering decline of Egypt and the Levant from their ancient greatness. Notwithstanding the jabs at *De l'Esprit des lois*, the critique of Montesquieu was far from wholesale. Climate was a contributing, though not a determining, factor, in Volney's analysis, and remains a theme in his discussions of the physical geography of Egypt and the Levant. Plains were the abode of despotism, mountainous regions the refuge of liberty. Moreover, the absence of a rung of property-holding intermediary powers had, Volney noted, exacerbated the despotism of the Ottomans. Volney also invokes conquest theory, arguing that whereas the ethnic differences between conquerors and conquered no longer served to divide the nations of modern Europe into competing blocs, opposition of this sort persisted in Egypt and inhibited any sense of a common interest. Yet modern Europe could not rest complacent about its achievements. Declension was the potential fate of any civilised power that fell prey to despotism and the smothering effects of theocracy.[9]

It was most probably on his return to France in 1785 that Volney got to know Jefferson, the United States ambassador to France, with whom he would later maintain a long correspondence. Volney reinforced the anti-Ottoman message of his *Voyage* in his *Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs* (1788), which contrasted the vigour of a westernising Russian state with the enfeebled state of the Turks. Volney questioned the received assumption that France's interests were best served by alliance with the Ottomans and the preservation of their Empire. On the other hand, while he perceived that the Ottomans' Egyptian province was a tempting plum which France – as a Mediterranean power – could easily wrest for itself, he cautioned against such a move. In lieu of acquiring overseas colonies – a process which led only to a vicious spiral of luxurious consumption, warfare and debilitating fiscal-military

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[9] Volney, *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* (1787), ed. Jean Gaulmier (Paris, 1959), pp. 114–15, 400–2, 413.

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encumbrances, Volney preferred a physiocratic strategy: improved and more extensive cultivation of France's own rich soils.

Volney's political position in the pre-Revolutionary events of 1788–9 is inscrutable, verging, possibly, on duplicitous. In Brittany, Volney won local renown for his editorship of a polemical anti-aristocratic Breton news-sheet, *La Sentinelle du Peuple*, five issues of which appeared in November and December 1788. Who sent him to Brittany, reformers or perhaps the royal government, which had its own reformist tendencies? In recompense for these services rendered, the allegation ran, Necker made Volney Director of Agriculture on the island of Corsica. More straightforwardly, perhaps, Volney was also involved with his friend La Révellière-Lépeaux in the rough and tumble of Anjou politics in the months preceding the Estates-General. Against the stiff-necked arguments of the crusty local standard-bearer of clerical conservatism, Canon Pierre Mongodin, Volney made the quasi-Erastian and Richerist case that only the lowermost clergy in the parishes served a useful social purpose.

Volney was elected to the Third Estate of the Estates-General as a deputy for Anjou, and during the early stages of the Revolution stood out as an implacable, noisy radical. In November 1789 Volney was elected Secretary of the Constituent Assembly. At this point there was some debate about Volney's pluralism, and he was obliged to choose between his deputyship of the Constituent and his royal post. Volney remained in the Constituent, but not as a frenetic participant so much as an increasingly detached observer. He was, after all, hard at work on *Les Ruines*. But he also had stomach problems, and had difficulty in projecting his voice to a body of 1,200 fellow deputies. *Les Ruines* appeared in the late summer of 1791. Its air of melancholy and scarcely suppressed anxiety sit oddly with Volney's otherwise optimistic celebration of the Revolution and the rise of popular sovereignty. But already the promise of the Revolution was beginning to curdle, and Volney felt increasingly marginalised by events. By a self-denying ordinance, members of the Constituent Assembly could not sit in the new Legislative Assembly established by the Constituent. Volney left Paris with the intention of taking up farming on Corsica.

In Corsica in the early part of 1792 Volney met a young military officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, with whom he was to have a long friendship that would end, publicly at least, in a politely demure estrangement. However, in the early days their friendship was carefree, and they

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travelled around the island together. Volney acquired a property there, La Confina, but his dream of a physiocratic life of agrarian improvement ran up against local dislike of outsiders, and in 1793 he returned to Paris.

In the spring of 1793 his friend Dominique Garat, Minister of the Interior in the Girondin government, sent Volney as 'commissaire obser-vateur' to four western departments, effectively as a government spy. In September 1793 Volney published what appears to be the missing second part of *Les Ruines*, *La Loi naturelle*. This was a subversive restatement of the Church's catechism, but based rather on the lowest common denominator of incontrovertible human needs. Volney also proposed himself to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a fact-finding mission to the United States, but this came to nothing. For Volney's politics were now out of step with those of the ascendant Jacobins, who had him arrested and imprisoned. Volney was held in captivity for ten months from November 1793, and was lucky to survive his spell in jail during the Terror. For atheistic tendencies were amongst the many attitudes which attracted the suspicious reproaches of the hyper-vigilant Robespierre, who had come to identify freethinking as an aristocratic pursuit inherently opposed to the interest of the people. But Volney's unbelief was not the immediate reason for his arrest. Volney was, notion-ally at least, imprisoned for civil debts relating to his property in Corsica. At first Volney was held in the Prison de la Force in the Marais, but was transferred on grounds of his serious bouts of cystitis, first in late January to a *maison de santé* in the Faubourg St Antoine, and then a month later to a further place of recuperation. Volney was eventually released some weeks after the fall of Robespierre. He moved to Nice where he ran into Bonaparte again. However, Volney was soon recalled to the capital.

His fellow Idéologue Garat, on the executive committee for public instruction, saw that Volney was appointed to the École Normale, which was responsible for the training of schoolteachers. The educational initiatives of the post-Thermidorean era signalled an attempt to re-route the destabilising course of the Revolution; a republican form of government would be reaffirmed, underpinned by rational, savant-led didacticism. Volney was given the task of delivering a course of lectures which would form the basis of a manual for the teaching of history in elementary schools, eventually published in 1800 as *Leçons d'histoire*. Here in a preliminary discourse and five succeeding lectures delivered between January and March 1795, Volney's subject matter – primarily a

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historiographical exploration of the various abuses of history – seemed for much of the time at a highly elevated remove from classroom practicalities. The study of the exact sciences – including mathematics and geography – was, he counselled, an essential prerequisite for children before they ventured onto the quicksands of history, whose findings were at best probable, at worst dangerously delusive. Nor was the old Christian template of universal history any way to teach the subject; rather one ought to begin in one's own historical neighbourhood of nearby periods and places before gradually proceeding to more remote topics. However, the demise of sacred history had been followed by the emergence of a sinister new superstition, a cult of the Ancients (which – without his having to name the guilty parties – was indelibly associated with the Rousseauist Jacobins, Robespierre and Saint-Just, and the recent unlamented Terror). This fanatical 'sect' was irrational, its adherents swearing by Sparta, Athens and the virtues of Livian republicanism, yet the liberty of the Ancients had been nothing but a façade for classical slavery, other massive inequalities and forms of oligarchical rule indistinguishable from that of the Mamelukes in early modern Egypt.[10] Not only were Greco-Roman polities riddled with gross enormities, as models they were irrelevant to the vastly different economic and demographic realities of the present. Indeed, an unashamed Modern, Volney anticipates the central themes of Benjamin Constant's celebrated essay 'De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes' (1819).

In 1795 Volney also published his *Simplification des langues orientales*, an attempt to devise a new approach to the thorny problem of transliteration between Arabic and European alphabetic characters. As Sophia Rosenfeld has shown, more was at stake here than a scholar's recondite linguistic preoccupation; for a universal alphabet provided an opening for transparency between different civilisations and in turn fostered conditions propitious for the triumph of reason over religious superstition.[11] However, the closure of the École Normale – in a further overhaul of France's educational institutions – gave Volney the chance to undertake his projected American journey.

[10] Volney, *Leçons d'histoire*, in Volney, *Œuvres*, ed. Anne and Henry Deneys, 3 vols. (Paris, 1989–98), vol. I, pp. 501–610, esp. pp. 556, 560, 566–9, 602–7.
[11] Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 2001), p. 190.

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In October 1795 Volney arrived in Philadelphia, where he spent the following winter. Philadelphia was one of the major centres of the American Enlightenment, but in the 1790s when it thronged with aristocratic and revolutionary exiles from Paris also a significant outpost of the French Enlightenment. Volney lived a few blocks away from the homes of various liberal notables, Talleyrand, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, the Vicomte de Noailles, and later the Duc d'Orléans (the future King Louis-Philippe), who arrived in the autumn of 1796.

In June 1796 Volney set out on an expedition into the vast American backcountry. His first destination though was Jefferson's home at Monticello, outside Charlottesville in Virginia, from which he took the Shenandoah mountain pass to the Ohio river valley. Here at Gallipolis he saw a desperate French community of settlers visibly degenerating in the heart of the American wilderness towards a rudimentary state of misery, low morale and bad health: a mode of existence far from the idyll of primitive life conjectured by Rousseau.

Volney returned to France in June 1798, where the atmosphere under the Directory was now more propitious. Indeed, La Révellière-Lépeaux, Volney's acquaintance from student days and the early stages of the Revolution, was one of the five Directors. In his absence in the United States Volney had been appointed to the new Institut National des Sciences et des Arts, set up in the autumn of 1795 by the outgoing Convention. The Institut, and especially its Second Class, dedicated to the Moral and Political Sciences, was dominated by Idéologues. Volney's post was in section 1 of the Second Class which dealt with the Analysis of Sensations and Ideas, a core concern of the Idéologues. Here he was joined by Ginguené and Cabanis, while Daunou was appointed to the third section and Roederer and Sieyès to the fourth. The Idéologues favoured a measure of stability which would conserve the core principles of the Revolution and allow these quasi-technocrats to advance the insights of a new social science securely rooted in physiology and the psychology of sensation.

Tellingly, Volney dined with Bonaparte at Napoleon's house on the rue de la Victoire a couple of days before the coup of 18 Brumaire, and several Idéologues were part of the conspiracy which brought Napoleon to power. The new consular system fronted by a seeming philosopher strong-man was welcomed initially as a means for safeguarding the gains of the Revolution from the buffeting extremes of Jacobinism and

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Royalism, previous adjustments to maintain the even keel of the Directory's republican moderation having issued, ironically, in a series of destabilising coups – Fructidor year V, Floréal year VI and Prairial year VII. In the aftermath of Brumaire, Volney was promptly made a Senator on 3 Nivôse, along with his fellow Idéologues Destutt de Tracy, Garat and Cabanis, though he declined invitations to high office as Third Consul and as Interior Minister. The early years of the Bonapartist regime were the 'apogee' of Idéologue influence.[12] Bonaparte and the Idéologues shared a common desire to stabilise the Revolution, but whereas the philosophers favoured technocrat-led education of the people in a sensible, functional republicanism, Bonaparte eventually decided to reach some form of accord with the old order. This compromise with the discredited irrationality of the ancien régime was to cause enormous disappointment for Volney and most of the Idéologues, except perhaps the rightward-leaning Roederer who split from the group. Volney and Napoleon fell out over the Concordat with the Church and then again over the sacred flummery of the imperial coronation. In public, however, there was no open rupture or outright persecution of an obvious dissenter. Nevertheless, in January 1803 Napoleon – exasperated with the Idéologues whom he regarded as a prating party of preposterously impractical metaphysicians – suppressed the Class of Moral and Political Sciences at the Institut National. But otherwise the year saw Volney showered with honours, a benign Napoleonic stratagem for dealing with those he otherwise found irksome: Volney was elected to fauteuil number 24 in the Académie française, and became vice-president of the Sénat.

In the same year, Volney published his *Tableau du climat et du sol des États-Unis*, drawing on his journeys of 1796 in the American backcountry. The sobriety of the *Tableau* mirrors that of his *Voyage*, though on this occasion – a moment of tense Franco–American diplomacy – he was even more constrained, limiting his remarks largely to physical geography and prudently eschewing discussion of American institutions. Gilbert Chinard suggests that the work was also a form of homage to Volney's friend Jefferson, author of the *Notes on the State of Virginia*.[13]

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[12] Martin S. Staum, *Minerva's Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution* (Montreal and Kingston, 1996), p. 179.

[13] Gilbert Chinard, *Volney et l'Amérique d'après des documents inédits et sa correspondance avec Jefferson* (Baltimore, MD and Paris, 1923), p. 140.

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Nevertheless, in his remarks on the way of life of the native American peoples he encountered, Volney reiterated – with perhaps greater clarity and force than elsewhere in his oeuvre – his rejection of Rousseau's thesis of an original lost state of virtuous happiness. Rather, Volney countered, he had seen with his own eyes in the great American wilderness the reality of primitive manners: an unstable combination of poverty, conflict, insecurity and enslavement to basic needs.[14] Rousseau's idle speculations on the state of nature withered in the face of empirical investigation of existing primitive societies.

Further honours were to follow; an ironic index, perhaps, of estrangement between the Emperor and the Idéologues. Several of the Idéologues, including Volney, were awarded imperial titles under Napoleon. Volney was made a count by Napoleon in 1808, and the same title was conferred on Garat and Destutt de Tracy, while Dégérando became a baron of the Empire in 1812. In 1810 Volney married his cousin Charlotte Gigault de la Giraudais, the widow of Daniel Mortier of Nantes. Volney's scholarly energies and polemical vigour were far from spent. He launched a further historical assault on the supernatural claims of Christianity in *Recherches nouvelles sur l'histoire ancienne* (1813–14) and continued to publish on two of his long-standing hobby horses, the chronology of Herodotus (the subject of his literary debut, an essay in the *Journal des savants* of January 1782) and the ongoing problem of reconciling European and Middle Eastern alphabets.

At the Bourbon restoration in 1814, Volney retained his rank, now as a peer, a title reconfirmed in 1815 after Waterloo. Not that Volney was any more inwardly reconciled to Bourbon legitimism than he had been to Napoleonic absolutism. When in 1819 Louis XVIII announced his intention of being anointed with holy oil, according to a generously broad reading of Article 74 of the Charter of 1814 (by which the restored Bourbons pledged to preserve many elements of the Revolution), Volney struck back. Under the cloak of anonymity, he published a pamphlet, *Histoire de Samuel, inventeur du sacre des rois* (1819), in which he identified the practice of royal unction as an absurd survival from a primeval age of Hebrew savagery and superstition, which helped dissuade the monarch from this imprudent solemnity.

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[14] Volney, *Tableau du climat*, in *Œuvres*, vol. ii, esp. pp. 343, 348, 358–60, 367, 373–6, 382.

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Volney died on 25 April 1820, and was buried at the Père Lachaise cemetery where a small, quasi-masonic pyramid was erected 1.5 metres in height, with the inscription 'À F VOLNEY / PAIR DE FRANCE'. The eulogy delivered by Volney's friend Comte Daru in the Chamber of Peers on 14 June was translated into English and Spanish, and republished in the United States. Volney died a figure of international renown.

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Volney's most celebrated and notorious book, *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791), is a major assault on traditional forms of government in Church and state presented with considerable literary flair in the form of a dream-tale of the near-Orient. The tale is set in 1784 at a point when Volney had been travelling in the Middle East. To begin with Volney falls asleep in the ruins of Palmyra and is accorded a revelation by a genie. There follow meditations on government, the rise and fall of civilisations, the emergence of parasite classes, lay and ecclesiastical, and the competing claims of different religions to a monopoly on truth, as well as a vivid allegory of revolutionary transformation. Volney's semi-poetic framing of his philosophical arguments made them easily accessible to a wider populace. It was a deceptive materialist masterpiece, whose literary, dreamlike charms meant that it appealed both to French and to English romantics who might otherwise have been repelled by Volney's arid rationalism.

Despite being best known for an orientalist reverie, Volney had no reputation for whimsy – quite the reverse; and, apart from the occasional fanciful departure, such as his *Histoire de Samuel*, which he presents as a translation from an American Quaker traveller in Cairo, he rarely bothers to devise a literary proscenium for his arguments. *Les Ruines* is Volney's mythopoeic encapsulation of an emergent science of humanity, whose core principles are then restated as simply as possible in the didactic form of a catechism in *La loi naturelle* (which was commissioned as such by Garat, then in 1793 the Minister of the Interior under the Girondins).

Les Ruines advanced a scheme of radical, utopian politics premised upon the comparison, deconstruction and delegitimation of all the world's religions, and by extension all politico-theological arguments for the legitimacy of existing regimes. The numinous is exposed as a smokescreen for hierarchy and self-interest, power grabs of this sort being ubiquitous throughout history and across civilisations. The

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centrepiece of the reverie is a mass assembly of the world's religious leaders, each staking a claim to divine authority for a particular form of government in Church and state. Deception, it becomes clear, is universal, and the first crucial step towards authoritarian rule. Volney also provides an intricate conjectural history of the origins, development and elaboration of religious ideas. Christianity is exposed as plagiarism of other oriental religions, which themselves are revealed as mere worship of nature in its various forms, including the seasons and the constellations of the night sky. There are close parallels with the work of Volney's contemporary Charles Dupuis, whose *Mémoire sur l'origine des constellations, et sur l'explication de la fable, par le moyen de l'astronomie* (1781) and later magnum opus *Origine de tous les cultes* (1794) traced the influence of astronomical observation and the zodiac on the proliferation of religions and mythologies. Absurdly, according to Volney, all power rests on such fictions. Despotism, he argued, was founded in superstition. The only things on which humans are capable of agreeing, Volney contended, are matters capable of adjudication by the senses; all else is mere conjecture, and liable to generate empty debate. What is immediately accessible to the senses and the basic bodily needs of humankind provides the only secure platform for philosophy and government. This is the true law of nature, its observance contributing to the rise and flourishing of states, its neglect to their decline and fall.

The *Ruins* is a complex, multi-purpose work, which eludes easy classification. With the joins disguised to some degree behind the compelling setting of his dream-tale, Volney spatchcocks together a conjectural history of humankind, including a chequered assessment of its genuine progress and wrong-turnings; an account of the rise and fall of ancient empires; a vision of the French Revolution; a debate between the common people and an entrenched, indolent elite; an argument for popular sovereignty; two deconstructions of all the world's religions, first by way of an imagined no-holds-barred debate among religious leaders of every stripe, and second by way of a history of the human mind and its confusions, especially between nature and metaphors of nature; and, finally, a plea for a secular natural law grounded in a basic consensus on empirical fact. Volney also includes a transcendent overview of the Russo-Turkish War of the late 1780s, possibly indebted to Voltaire's philosophical tale *Micromégas* (1752), which takes a similarly condescending view of the earlier Russo-Turkish war of 1733–9. The mood music in the *Ruins* veers between a heady optimism and a more

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plaintive strain, derived in part from Volney's growing anxieties about the turbulent course of the Revolution. But it also owed something to the prevailing taste for the poems of Ossian, which afforded licence for a lachrymose indulgence in the pangs of loss. Certainly, Volney's friends and colleagues – among them Garat and Ginguené – were infatuated by the Ossianic phenomenon, La Révellière-Lépeaux going as far as to name his son Ossian. According to Antoine Lilti, there are two tonally contrasting settings in *Les Ruines*, but we should not be deceived as to Volney's mood: the oriental tale suffused in melancholy with which the work opens belongs firmly in the past, unlike the uplifting prophecy from the 1780s hymning a future revolution. In addition, Lilti highlights the interplay in the *Ruins* of a triple time scheme which includes a cyclical understanding of the rise and fall of empires, the long – apparently linear – ripening of the civilising process in enlightened Europe, and an appreciation of moments when radical change is willed or imposed, as in Europe's colonies, or in the Revolution itself.[15]

Volney's *Ruins* seems to represent at first sight an eccentric outlier in his oeuvre: the fanciful orientalism of a dream-tale is far removed from the normal fare he served up, level-headed, factual surveys of the geography and institutions of the Middle East in his *Voyage*, or the terrain and climate of the United States in his *Tableau*. These eschew the aestheticised romance of travel for staid scientific analysis of terrain and climate, the physical characteristics of populations and their institutions. Indeed in the *Voyage* Volney presented himself, not as a dreamy, romantic traveller, but as a savant willing to explore the wider world at first hand. Yet the *Ruins* seemed to mark a vivid departure from these sober standards – to be almost an anti-Volneyiad. *Les Ruines* marked nonetheless a postscript of sorts to the arguments of the *Voyage*. After all, the two texts, though markedly different in genre and timbre, advance similar arguments about despotism and the economic desolation to which it gave rise.

A further problem arises in attempting to parse Volney's relationship to the philosophes. Volney was a second-wave proponent of the French Enlightenment, not least a champion of Voltaire, Helvétius, Condorcet, Condillac, d'Holbach and Boulanger, but also an irritant gadfly on the

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[15] Antoine Lilti, 'Et la civilisation deviendra générale: L'Europe de Volney ou l'orientalisme à l'épreuve de la Révolution', *La Révolution française* 4 (2011), http://journals .openedition.org/lrf/290, pp. 2, 6–8.

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French Enlightenment canon, never satisfied that the brilliant insights of its major figures accorded sufficiently with the awkward empirical realities – of history, political practice and real-time ethnographic encounters – observed, sometimes experienced, by the roving philosophe. Notwithstanding the insights of Montesquieu, a hostile environment – however unpropitious – did not impose an insuperable obstacle to human potentiality: the real barrier to progress was human ignorance of the natural laws that governed life, and flawed institutions which perpetuated that ignorance. By the same token, any Rousseau-like tints in the allegorical depiction of an emergent popular sovereignty in the *Ruins* are superficial. Volney was contemptuous of Rousseau's sentimentality and relegation of reason, which for Volney remained paramount. Throughout his oeuvre, moreover, he was a persistent critic of primitivism. Although Volney's account of the course of human history in the *Ruins* is pockmarked with depredations and oppressions, this did not make Volney an unsparing critic of civilisation or of progress. In this respect he diverged markedly from the arcadian sentimentality of Rousseau. An adherent of physiocratic economy, Volney believed that agriculture was a boon not a yoke; so too was the preservation of property within the social order. Less ambiguously, Volney's deconstruction of religious authority owes obvious debts to the anticlerical wing of the French Enlightenment, to Voltaire and Boulanger, and to d'Holbach, whose salon he attended. Moreover, there are also some very specific debts to Helvétius, and it seems likely that one of the central scenes in the *Ruins* – the mutually destructive arguments of the leaders of the world's incompatible religions – was an amplification and embellishment of a fleeting image in Helvétius's *De l'Esprit* where he imagines the priests of various different religions preaching against one another.[16] Nevertheless, given the fluidity, mysterious unexplained backstories and moments of moderation in Volney's career, his wholehearted alignment with an atheistic-democratic Radical Enlightenment, while plausible, is far from being the whole story. Such a categorisation conflates the values of 1789 with those of 1793, and substantially downplays the cool, quasi-technocratic science – founded on basic physiological needs and their social realisation – which substantially qualified Volney's radical

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[16] Helvétius, *De l'Esprit*, p. 69.