Barbarism and Religion: Volume 6, Barbarism: Triumph in the West

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Triumph in the West is the triumphant conclusion of J. G. A. Pocock's series on Edward Gibbon and the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89). Earlier installments sought to situate Gibbon and his text in a series of contexts: European Enlightenment(s), narratives of civil society, the conceptual history of 'Decline and Fall', theories concerning 'barbarians' and 'savages', ecclesiastical historiography. The work under review pursues the narrative of the *Decline and Fall* from the start of volume two to the climactic end of volume three. This is not merely a synoptic exercise, though the scope and relative obscurity of the history related in these volumes necessitate much synopsis. The main business is still the meticulous reconstruction of Gibbon's sources and motivations. Readers of the series will know that this is a more catholic enterprise than it sounds. For even when Pocock descends into the narrow gullies of specialist or antiquarian interest, it is always in search of wide vistas lying beyond. He arrives at several here: the emergences of 'modern' history and historiography; western conceptions of the east; relations between the histories of church, state, and empire. Pocock's interpretations will continue to be debated, but in venturing them, he has set the agenda for generations of scholars to come.

The book's organization is straightforward, treating in sequence the chapters in volumes two and three of the *Decline and Fall*, which lead from the age of Constantine to the end of the western succession of emperors (and beyond). This means, however, that the argumentation weaves throughout, following the often sharp and curious turns in Gibbon's text. Barbarism and religion are seen to be moving east to west. But Gibbon chooses largely to partition the history of the Roman empire from that of the Christian church; the history of the east from that of the west. For Pocock, these decisions among others conspire to make volumes two and three 'a mosaic of narratives, written on diverse premises and never fully synthesised' (p. 5). It is in the interplay of these narratives most of all that Pocock finds his subject.

Part one sees Gibbon wrestling with the challenge of dividing imperial history between eastern and western narratives, as well as that of describing Constantinople, a city not visited by him or his expected readers. Pocock has Gibbon conceiving the culture of this new Rome in 'orientalist' terms; and he raises the question as to whether eastern degeneracy will contribute to the western collapse (p. 27). More significant, however,

is the Emperor Constantine's revolutionary separation of civil from military office, a decisive moment in the decline of republican virtue. Part two finds Gibbon returning to the history of the church, begun in chapters 15 and 16 of volume one. The creation of ecclesiastical ministers marks Constantine's second revolution and, for Gibbon, the birth of 'modern' history, defined 'by the presence of a church competitive with the state' (p. 3). Yet even as civil and ecclesiastical history become inseparable, according to Pocock, early modern historiographical convention forbids Gibbon from narrating them together. Chapters on 'Theology and the problems of authority' and 'Nicaea and its aftermath' contain brilliant reflections on the intellectual paradoxes faced by the church Fathers and on the readings of these by early modern historians. Pocock shows Gibbon following the Jansenist Tillemont in seeing disputes over the Trinity as a consequence of the inability of partial language to comprehend an absolute God. But in narrating these disputes and the policies of Constantine's successors, Gibbon, too, is beset with difficulties: 'by separating the narrative of imperial action from that of theology changing according to its own logic', he deprives 'himself of any capacity to relate either as taking place in a context supplied by the other' (p. 126). Pocock finds Gibbon's account further fragmented by a series of shifts between sources and historiographical conventions. Part three of *Triumph in the West* discusses the 'interlude' of Julian the Apostate, an anomalous episode of 'sentimental' history narrated through the eyes and experience of a single individual. Part four witnesses two turning points of greater consequence, as Gibbon takes up the history of barbarian peoples and exhausts his favorite source, Ammianus Marcellinus. The former directs Gibbon towards philosophical, the latter critical, historiography. Discussing Britain, 'Gibbon steps into history not only maritime, but archipelagic and even Atlantic', as well as into a contemporary controversy over the Ossian poems, which Gibbon seeks to authenticate using stadial theory (p. 237). The reign of Theodosius, treated in part five, momentarily forces Gibbon to bring ecclesiastical into closer correspondence with imperial history: it is Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who compels the emperor to make penance after the massacre at Thessalonica in 390. Pocock notes, however, that Gibbon treats separately Theodosius's twin legacies: the establishment of a Trinitarian orthodoxy and, upon his death, the division of rule between east and west. Part six follows the *Decline and Fall* to its climax. Alaric's sack of Rome in 410 is for Gibbon a 'huge event in significance', but not 'in practice' (p. 357). More important, if less explored, developments are Vandal control of the Roman corn supply and the emergence of Vandal sea power. If barbarian inroads are felt across the empire, however, Pocock finds Gibbon struggling to give a narrative to events in the east and even expressing doubts whether it 'possessed a history at all' (p. 376). Finally, the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, dismantling the imperial succession, announces the end of the western empire and the 'replacement of Roman civility ... by ruling cultures termed "barbarian"' (p. 415). Part seven examines the miscellaneous essays concluding volume three and looks forward to Gibbon's second trilogy on the eastern ('Byzantine') empire. Excursive as these chapters are, Pocock finds in them the outline of a medieval history bridging the fall of Rome and the threshold of the 'Enlightened narrative' pursued by Gibbon's coevals.⁽¹⁾ In Gibbon's entry in the French debate between a *thèse royale* and a *thèse nobiliaire*, moreover, Pocock locates 'a massive historical thesis': that the history of the major Atlantic monarchies – leading to that of the nation state itself – must 'be written as a history of debate over their legal and constitutional structures, conceived as a debate between their Roman and their barbarian components' (pp. 479–80). Of course, this is not the history Gibbon will go on to write. Having repeatedly disclaimed any intention of extending *Barbarism and Religion* to the second trilogy, Pocock concludes with suggestions for those who do take up the subject.

Triumph in the West has a polemical thrust, picking up two lines of contention introduced earlier in the series. The first is that Gibbon wrote the history of Christianity not, as has often been alleged, from the standpoint of a *philosophe* seeking to undermine the faith, but from that of an erudite historian, drawing on sources and debates largely within ecclesiastical historiography.⁽²⁾ This position finds both ammunition and impediments in volumes two and three of the *Decline and Fall*. As in chapters 15 and 16 of volume one, Gibbon can be observed drawing on a range of church historians as sources and authorities. He might share their premises, Pocock asserts, while opposing their conclusions; concur on matters of history, while diverging on metahistory. Gibbon wrote 'seriously, and even respectfully' about religious views with which he disagreed, out of a concern with the 'experience and actions' of their adherents (p. 92). And his sympathy could flow in surprising directions: against the Arians, for instance, but towards the Trinitarian and fideist

Athanasius. For Pocock, it is the decay of ancient virtue, not the growth of Christian belief, that animates Gibbon's explanatory framework. After all, the latter enters the narrative only belatedly with Constantine, whereas the destructive effects of the former 'had developed on an empire-wide basis by the time of Diocletian' (p. 493). Most importantly, Gibbon accords the church such a complex role, and narrates its history at such a distance from that of the empire, that it becomes difficult to read it as contributing directly to the western collapse. 'Gibbon's judgement of Christianity was always ambivalent, but ... he saw it less as destroying ancient Mediterranean civilisation than as replacing it by a new one' (p. 493). According to Pocock, then, the rise of the church was a 'rival narrative', secondary to, but also transcending the narrative of the Decline and Fall – and leading, perhaps, to the Enlightened narrative of post-Roman Europe that Gibbon did not take up (p. 437).

If all of this is true, however, what should we make of Gibbon's own claim that 'the indissoluble connection of civil and ecclesiastical affairs has compelled and encouraged me to relate the progress, the persecutions, the establishment, the divisions, the final triumph, and the gradual corruption of Christianity' (cited p. 439)? Pocock is at something of a loss here. After all, and as he has been at some pains to point out, Gibbon almost always narrates the rise of the church and the disintegration of the empire separately. For Pocock, this division presents a sturdy barrier to the longstanding belief that Gibbon thought the one a principal cause of the other. His nuanced position must contend, however, not only with Gibbon's language on this occasion, but with a number of passages entering into the critical or philosophical history of religion. Gibbon's antipathy to Augustine Pocock manages to construe as a 'Protestant-Enlightened' reaction and something of a missed intellectual engagement (p. 14). Elsewhere, however, as when he quotes 'as savagely anti-Christian a passage as any found in the *Decline and Fall*', Pocock falls back on the theme of narrative fragmentation. Instead of reading such a passage as indicating Gibbon's own sentiments, he prefers 'to read it as [one in?] a series of historical explanations and narratives' extraneous to that of the Decline and Fall (p. 328). This is an intriguing and subversive reading, but it does not entirely convince. How might Gibbon have written had historiographical convention – alongside perhaps other considerations – permitted him? Must we assume that he did not anticipate readers themselves filling in the gaps, synthesizing his skeptical insinuations with the account of imperial decline? Many, certainly, have done so. And the concluding essays, for which Pocock has difficulty accounting, might well be interpreted as providing hints in this direction. Pocock credits the embrace of Humean skepticism in chapter 37 as 'a moment of great importance in both Gibbon's utterance of his basic premises and our understanding of them'. On the other hand, 'it is a digression from any historical narrative taking shape'. So its implications need not be extended, and the chapter may be relegated as 'a clearing of the desk, a summary and dismissal of minor themes before moving on' (p. 453). For Pocock, it seems, narrative inclusion is the ultimate test of authorial intention – a theory unlikely to assuage critics of his approach to chapters 15 and 16.

The project of disentangling multiple, heterogeneous narratives returns Pocock to a second earlier assertion, of which the first is in some sense a part. This is 'that Gibbon was still an early modern historian'; as such, he was

obliged to regard 'history' as having already been related by the historians of antiquity, whose authority compelled ... [him] 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 (p. 3).

This characterization helps explain Gibbon's surprising deference to ecclesiastical historians like Tillemont, whom he alternately 'mocked, admired, and depended upon' (p. 121). It also helps make sense of the composite character of the *Decline and Fall*: 'It was for modern rather than early modern historians to claim to have brought all histories together' (p. 4). In Pocock's view, Gibbon has far less claim to being the first modern than he does the last early modern historian. Moreover, because early modern history relied to such a great extent on ancient authorities, 'Gibbon's vision, of both history and historiography, was still' – in large part – 'ancient in character' (p. 507). One startling payoff of this interpretation is its potential to recast

ostensible historical narratives as passive holdovers from classical rhetoric. Pocock cites Gibbon's juxtaposition of antique virtue with modern degeneracy at the end of chapter 27 as an example of this.

For all of its insights, however, Pocock's relentlessly retrospective portrait of Gibbon's historiographical methods and concerns risks disregarding contemporary contexts in which the *Decline and Fall* might profitably be understood. Between publishing volume one in 1776 and volumes two and three in 1781, Gibbon witnessed the disasters of the American Revolutionary War as a Member of Parliament. The only significance Pocock finds in Gibbon's political activities is an explanation for his delay in finishing volumes two and three. 'Gibbon was still living in the mental world of early modern historiography', insulated by choice or complacency from the transformations going on around him (p. 56). Did he not even perceive Roman analogies in Britain's imperial situation? Pocock has previously rejected 'facile connections' between the modern European and ancient Roman empires, suspecting that any 'search for ways in which the text of the *Decline and Fall* may be applied to the events of the 1770s and 1780s' would be 'in vain'.⁽³⁾ The relationship of Gibbon's history to coeval works like the *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770, 1st ed.) is thus for Pocock a fundamentally antithetical one: Gibbon and his contemporaries knew just how dissimilar the land-based Roman empire was from the maritime British or French. Such claims are sure to be increasingly challenged in the wake of recent studies emphasizing the range and pervasiveness of Roman parallels in European, notably British, imperial understandings.⁽⁴⁾ Yet, in the present volume, Pocock seeks to buttress rather than temper his earlier assertions. He finds a blithely (if not unusually) unaware Gibbon presenting modern 'Europe not as threatened by revolution and empire, but as secure against barbarism', thanks to the stability introduced by the Treaty of Utrecht (p. 496). The *Decline and Fall*, Pocock offers in conclusion, was produced 'at the last moment when a history of its kind' could have been: before the events in France of 1789, whence 'Europe would be faced with a new history culminating not in Enlightenment, but in revolution'. It was these events, and the 'profound changes' which came in their train, that propelled 'historiography from its early modern to its modern condition' (p. 509). Many historians would be inclined to dispute that the French Revolution ushered in 'modern' historiography, much less terminated Enlightenment. Indeed, those who undertake investigations of Gibbon's second trilogy, or of his 19th-century reception, may be particularly well placed to revise such characterizations. But Pocock, like his hero, had to wrap up somewhere. What he has now finished represents as monumental an achievement as could be hoped for from any historian in any age – perhaps not far surpassed even by Gibbon's great work.

Notes

1. The 'Enlightened narrative' is Pocock's term for the account given by Enlightenment historians of the long-term emergence of modern Europe from a patchwork of Latin successor states. J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, 1999–2015), vol. 2.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid., vol. 5.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ibid., 3:8, 4:5.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Classics and Colonialism*, ed. Barbara Goff (London, 2005); *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, ed. Mark Bradley (Oxford, 2010); Christopher Hagerman, *Britain's Imperial Muse: The Classics, Imperialism, and the Indian Empire, 1784–1914* (Basingstoke, 2013); Phiroze Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India* (Oxford, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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