ROMAN PERSPECTIVES

John Matthews

Roman Perspectives

Studies in the social, political and cultural history of the First to Fifth Centuries

John Matthews

The Classical Press of Wales

First published in 2010 by
The Classical Press of Wales
15 Rosehill Terrace, Swansea SA1 6JN
Tel: +44 (0)1792 458397
Fax: +44 (0)1792 464067
www.classicalpressofwales.co.uk

Distributor in the United States of America
ISD, LLC
70 Enterprise Dr., Suite 2, Bristol, CT 06010
Tel: +1 (860) 584–6546
www.isdistribution.com

ISBN 978-1-910589-27-4

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset, printed and bound in the UK by Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion, Wales

---

The Classical Press of Wales, an independent venture, was founded in 1993, initially to support the work of classicists and ancient historians in Wales and their collaborators from further afield. More recently it has published work initiated by scholars internationally. While retaining a special loyalty to Wales and the Celtic countries, the Press welcomes scholarly contributions from all parts of the world.

The symbol of the Press is the Red Kite. This bird, once widespread in Britain, was reduced by 1905 to some five individuals confined to a small area known as 'The Desert of Wales' – the upper Tywi valley. Geneticists report that the stock was saved from terminal inbreeding by the arrival of one stray female bird from Germany. After much careful protection, the Red Kite now thrives – in Wales and beyond.

CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	vii
Abbreviations	xv
1. Gibbon and the Later Roman Empire: causes and circumstances	1
2. Power in the Classical world – a three-cornered dialogue: Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, Tacitus	21
3. Ronald Syme, Constantine the Great and the Second Roman Revolution	41
4. Tacitus, *Acta Senatus*, and the inauguration of Tiberius	57
5. Six tales of the Equestrian Order	85
6. A Last Will and Testament	111
7. Travel, diplomacy and the diffusion of ideas in the Roman Mediterranean and Near East	157
8. The cultural landscape of the Bordeaux Itinerary	181
9. Ammianus and the eternity of Rome	201
10. The Letters of Symmachus	215
11. Four funerals and a wedding: this world and the next in Fourth-Century Rome	255
12. Children's games in Augustine's *Confessions*	275
13. Roman law and Roman history	291
14. Ammianus on Roman law and lawyers	311

15. Roman law and barbarian identity in the Late Roman West 327

16. Interpreting the *Interpretationes* of the Breviarium of Alaric 343

17. Macsen, Maximus, Constantine 361

Bibliography 379

Index 395

PREFACE

To engage in the re-publication of essays written over a period of many years is to court disappointment as well as satisfaction; so many arguments not stated with clarity, so many annotations not as crisp as they should be, so many important things hidden away, so many irritating quirks of style in pieces written so long ago. There are compensations, in recollections of the enjoyment with which one researched and wrote them, of how much one learned in doing so, of the opening up of new and unknown historical landscapes, and in one's sense, the stronger in retrospect, of the connections between them. There is even the engaging possibility that one's work may have improved in the meantime (which, after all, is what it is supposed to do). It is, however, not the memories of bygone pleasures that justify revisiting the past in this way, but a realistic sense of the value of what one has written, and a feeling that the sum of it may be more than the parts. Over the course of an academic career one's writing tends increasingly to appear in conference proceedings which, however productive and enjoyable the conferences, produce a rather scattered publication record, and in collections of papers that may not be widely known. There might be something to be said for bringing some of it together, in such a way as to reveal the connections and continuities. The opportunity to add new and unpublished work is a final encouragement.

The unifying theme of the essays collected in this volume is the formation of the cultural perspectives within which contemporaries (who are also our sources) viewed the world in which they lived. If this strikes one as an unsurprising theme (what else do historians ever do?), it should be understood as describing the underlying sense of discipline that controls our study rather than any particular project that might arise from it, and which now seems to have been present in my work from the beginning. It is an axiom requiring no repetition or proof, that we must understand our sources if we wish to understand the world which they described. I would put it a bit differently, in saying that to understand the sources is *in itself* to understand the world which they described, this being the world in which they also lived. This is so, even when the actual events which they described were in the past – for as is well known, large parts of the mental world of literate Greeks and Romans were located in the past. This is no profession of credulity. It does not mean that one believes everything the

Return to Table of Contents

ancient sources say, any more than, living in a modern democracy, one accepts the doctrines professed by every single political party. This does not mean that one does not study them, for understanding an opponent is not a handicap in political discussion; it is more like a secret weapon. So too we can understand Tacitus' attitude to the early Principate while taking issue with it, and using what he writes in order to do so. It is a normal exercise of the historian's craft, to borrow the English title of Marc Bloch's remarkable book on that subject.

If a distinction can be made between the practices of history and historiography, the first can be defined as the study of a society and the events that took place in it in some other time than our own, the second as a critical reflection, in its own right and as a contribution to cultural history, on the question 'how people write history' – that is to say, how they achieve the first of these aims. It is obvious that the distinction is not an exclusive one. All ancient history is the study of its sources (which includes the material as well as the written sources) and what modern interpreters have to say about them. Tacitus and Ammianus Marcellinus are sources for us at the same time as they interpret their own world, and we have to understand not only what they say, but why they say it in the way that they do. We are all inescapably practitioners of historiography, for history is writing, we write what we are capable of, and in doing so we express our intellectual and cultural formation as well as our own temperaments. We do not read all our sources with the same attitude of mind, realising that they too are the products of their times. We know that Thucydides and Tacitus are inherently sceptical, that their writings express, suggest and create doubt, all as part of their intention. We know too that late Roman saints' lives are inherently credulous, in that the texts express no doubt at all about the impossible things they report; and we sharpen our own doubts accordingly. (One would think that the scepticism and credulity of ancient sources and their modern readers would be in inverse proportion to each other, but that does not always seem to be the case. It is a sad fact, that all too often the most credulous sources produce the most credulous readings.)

Similar principles of discrimination apply to modern writing on the ancient world. We understand (see Chapter 13) that we should read Mommsen's writings on Roman public law in the context of 19th-century discussions of the developing idea of a centralised state, just as (in Chapter 3) we read Syme's *Roman Revolution* in the context of the fascist dictators of the 1930s. In juxtaposing the two, we encounter very different views of the nature of the Roman *res publica*, which in turn deepens our own understanding of that most important political and cultural institution.

Return to Table of Contents

To take a different example, discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, readers have often thought of the 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' with which Edward Gibbon concluded Chapter XXXVIII (and Volume III) of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as insubstantial in relation to what has preceded. This is not surprising, since although this essay was published in 1781, it was drafted much earlier. It is when we turn to the notes, added later, that we get a sense of Gibbon's engagement with the contemporary world. Here we find references to the Declaration of Independence, the foundation in London of the Royal Academy of the Arts, the discovery of Australia through the 'voyages of discovery' of James Cook. So too, Gibbon's verdict, expressed in these 'General Observations', that the fall of the Roman empire could not be repeated in his own day because the nations of Europe, not differing much from each other in power and with similar technical capacities, would prevent each other from attaining imperial power, must be read in terms of late eighteenth-century political theories of the 'balance of power'. All of them – Mommsen, Syme, Gibbon, no less than Tacitus – wrote in their time and reflect its preoccupations.

Late Roman historians have rarely begun their studies in that field. They have moved into it, either forward from the Classical world or backward from the Middle Ages. In either case, there are disadvantages corresponding to the advantages (if it is at all clear which is which); medieval historians already know the future, Classical historians only know the past. Knowledge of the future seems to me a very dangerous commodity for a historian of any period (it is to be distinguished from that other 'secret weapon', the gift of hindsight), and it will be obvious from everything I have written, that I fall into the category of those who only know the past. Despite my own focus on late antiquity I have, both at Oxford and at Yale, continued to teach the early Principate (for many years, also, Greek history and even, at times, the history of the Roman Republic), and one of the constant elements of my approach to my area of special interest is the assumption that Classical techniques and modes of analysis can continue to be applied to it; indeed the weakening power of these methods is one of the clearest signs that the ancient world is coming to an end – much as the *Breviarium* of Roman law made for the Visigothic king Alaric II, discussed in Chapters 15 and especially 16, reveals the almost complete disappearance of that world from the consciousness of early sixth-century Gaul.

Three of the most substantial chapters in this book, all previously unpublished, are on the political, social and legal history of the early Roman empire. A fourth paper, also unpublished though once given as a lecture, is a comparative excursion into Greek history – with the support of Tacitus

Return to Table of Contents

and Thomas Hobbes as well as Thucydides. This allows me to acknowledge my own student acquaintance with philosophy (ancient and modern) as well as Classical literature and history, in which Hobbes, like Aristotle, was always a favourite: not so much for any particular doctrines he might have espoused (far from it) but because of the probing intelligence that marks every page that he wrote, and the wonderful variety of his interests; this man was a true genius. I was happy to give Hobbes his say, through his translation of Thucydides and the recently published *Discourse* on the first fifteen chapters of Tacitus' *Annals* which is discussed in Chapter 2. This leads naturally to the analysis of Tiberius' accession that follows in Chapter 4, expressing my belief that not everything has yet been said about that much-discussed occasion, especially in relation to Tacitus' own use of his sources. I would especially thank my Yale colleague Christina Kraus for her comments on this chapter. The influence of Sir Ronald Syme, formally recognized in the commemorative lecture printed as Chapter 3, is pursued in Chapter 5, which evokes the manner of Syme, and in the process takes up one of the few specific questions of Roman historical interpretation on which I think he was mistaken. Chapter 6, in the footsteps of Mommsen, is an unpublished study of an important inscription of the early second century known, though misleadingly, as the 'Testament of Dasumius', after which the selection reverts to materials that have appeared previously, with the exception of Chapter 8 on the Bordeaux Itinerary, a revised version of a lecture delivered in Oxford in November 2008, and Chapter 12, a *jeu d'esprit* on the *Confessions* of Augustine.

As suggested earlier, in selecting material for re-publication I have focused on what has appeared in conference proceedings and other collections rather than in academic journals. Most of the latter are available online through JSTOR, and the articles are often of a specialized and technical nature, devoted to the discussion of specific issues and points of dispute. Of those which might have something to add to the themes of the present collection, 'Olympiodorus of Thebes and the history of the West (AD 407–425)', published in the *Journal of Roman Studies* of 1970, would have required too much revision, and in any case was reprinted in my Variorum collection of 1985 (see the Bibliography for all these references). 'The tax law of Palmyra: Evidence for economic history in a city of the Roman East', in the *Journal of Roman Studies* of 1984, would have been fitting company for Chapter 7, on the cultural ramifications of travel; while 'The origin of Ammianus', in the *Classical Quarterly* of 1994, reasserts with additional arguments a position set out in my *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, of 1989. Anyone who is interested can easily find these papers and locate them where they belong.

The essays have been revised to give uniformity to their presentation, to accommodate editorial changes and to strengthen connections between the papers; only the later part of Chapter 10 has been revised to incorporate the results of a later paper that modified the conclusions of the original version. The bibliography has not been updated systematically, though I have added certain directly relevant work that is known to me. Some chapters retain the less formal style that is appropriate to essays that were given as lectures and seminar presentations. The chapters are grouped by topic, in the framework of a general movement through time.

I am grateful to my friend Anton Powell and to The Classical Press of Wales for undertaking the publication of these essays, and to the editors and publishers of the previously published papers for permitting their inclusion in this volume; detailed acknowledgments are made below. I recognise also all those historians, some of them close colleagues and others far distant, whose publications have provoked my own ideas and fed my research. Quite apart from our conversations on endless subjects, ranging from the dilemmas of Wotan to the flowering habits of the clematis, my wife Veronika Grimm has encouraged me and kept me moving when my energies have flagged and when competing duties have claimed too many of them; for all of this and much more, my deepest thanks. This book does not carry a formal dedication, but I am sure that both Veronika and Anton will join me if I inscribe it in honour of the dedicated school and university teachers we have had in many places and at all stages of our education, and of the teaching profession in general and all that it stands for. It is an underrated profession, but one that is essential to the well-being of our society.

* * *

Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 12 are previously unpublished, though Chapter 2 was given as a Tracy Lecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago in April 2003, and Chapter 8 as a lecture at Oxford University in November 2008. Chapter 1 first appeared in Rosamond McKitterick and Ronald Quinault (edd.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (1997), and is reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press. Chapter 3 was the inaugural Syme Memorial Lecture given at the Victoria University of Wellington in September 1992 and was published, together with an appreciation of Syme that appeared in the *Oxford Magazine* in September 1989 but is not included here, in *Prudentia* 26 (1993), pp. 24–41. It is reprinted here by permission

Return to Table of Contents

of Victoria University and the editorial board of *Prudentia*. Chapter 7 appeared in F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys (edd.), *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), the proceedings of seminars held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April 1984 and at the University of Chicago in October 1984; it is reprinted by courtesy of The University of Wisconsin Press. Chapter 9, from C. T. Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (edd.), *The Inheritance of Historiography*, 350–900 (Exeter University Press, 1986), is reprinted by permission of The University of Exeter Press. Chapter 10, which appeared in J. W. Binns (ed.), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1974) and was reprinted as Chap. IV of *Political Life and Culture in Late Roman Society* (Variorum Reprints, 1985), is revised to incorporate in its final pages some conclusions of 'Symmachus and his enemies', in F. Paschoud and others (edd.), *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque, à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire* (1986), pp. 164–75. It is reprinted in its revised version by permission of Taylor & Francis Books (UK). Chapter 11 appeared in Philip Rousseau and Manolis Papoutsakis (edd.), *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown* (Ashgate: Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT, 2009). The sequence of four chapters on aspects of Roman law begins in Chapter 13 with the introduction to the subject published in David S. Potter (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Blackwell; Malden, MA, Oxford, UK, and Carlton, Victoria, Australia), and continues with 'Ammianus on Roman law and lawyers', from J. den Boeft, D. den Hengst and H. C. Teitler (edd.), *Cognitio Gestorum: The historiographic art of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences; Amsterdam, Oxford, New York, Tokyo, 1992), the proceedings of a conference held at Amsterdam in August 1991. These chapters are reprinted by permission respectively of Wiley-Blackwell (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Malden, Massachusetts) and The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Chapter 15, presented at a conference held in Swansea in 1998, appeared in Stephen Mitchell and Geoffrey Greatrex (edd.), *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (2000), and is reprinted by permission of Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, and The Classical Press of Wales. Chapter 16 was presented at the second conference under the series title 'Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity', held at Columbia, South Carolina in March 1997, in Ralph Mathisen (ed.), *Law, Society and Authority in Late Antiquity* (2001), and is reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press. Chapter 17 stands by itself in every way; it is the only essay reprinted from a standard academic journal, first appearing in *The Welsh History Review* of 1983, and then as Chapter XII of *Political Life and Culture in Late Roman Society*; it is reprinted here for a second time with

Return to Table of Contents

slight revisions by permission of *The Welsh History Review*. The photographs of the testamentary inscription in Chapter 6 were freely made available from their original publication (by R. Neudecker and Maria Grazia Cecere, Wiesbaden, 1997) by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut at Rome. To all these, I express my thanks.

October 2009

John Matthews
New Haven, Connecticut

Return to Table of Contents

ABBREVIATIONS

Standard abbreviations for texts, editions and reference works are used throughout. The following is a list of the more frequently used or cumbersome titles; those that occur only on one or two occasions are given in full in the notes and Bibliography.

AEp	*L'Année Epigraphique*
AJP	*American Journal of Philology*
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
Blockley, *Fragmentary Classicising Historians*	R. C. Blockley, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus* (2 vols., Liverpool, 1983)
Bruns, *Fontes*[7]	K. G. Bruns, *Fontes Iuris Romani Antiqui*, 7th ed. by O. Gradenwitz, 1909
CCL	*Corpus Christianorum, series latina*
Chastagnol, *Fastes*	A. Chastagnol, *Les Fastes de la Préfecture de Rome au Bas-Empire*
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
CJ	*Codex Justinianus,* ed. P. Krüger, *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, vol 2 (Berlin 1877, repr. Aalen, 1969)
CPL	*Corpus Papyrorum Latinarum* (ed. R. Cavenaile, Wiesbaden, 1958)
CQ	*Classical Quarterly*
CRAI	*Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*
CTh	*Theodosiani libri XVI, cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis*, ed. Th. Mommsen, with P. Meyer and P. Krüger (Berlin, 1905, repr. 1962)
GCS	*Die Griechischen Christlichen Schrifsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*
HSCP	*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*
ICUR	G. Rossi (ed.), *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae*
ILCV	E. Diehl (ed.), *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, 3 vols, Berlin, 1925-1931, repr. 1970
IGR	*Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes*, ed. R. Cagnat and others, vols. I, III, IV, Paris, 1906–1927, repr. Chicago 1975)

Return to Table of Contents

ILS	H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (3 vols., Berlin 1892–1916)
Jones, *Later Roman Empire*	A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A social, economic and administrative survey* (3 vols. and maps, Oxford, 1964; repr. in two volumes, 1973)
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JHS	*Journal of Hellenic Studies*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
MAMA	*Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua*
MEFR	*Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome*
MGH, auct. ant.	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, auctores antiquissimi
——— , leges	——— , leges
Müller, *FHG*	C. Müller, *Fragmenta Historicum Graecorum*
OGIS	H. Dittenberger (ed.), *Orientis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae*
PG	J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*
Pharr	Clyde Pharr (ed.), *The Theodosian Code and novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions; A translation, with commentary, glossary and bibliography* (Princeton, NJ, 1952; repr. New York, 1969)
PIR (PIR^2)	*Prosopographia Imperii Romani* (1st ed. by E. Klebs and others, Berlin 1897–8; 2nd ed. by E. Groag and others, Berlin, 1933–)
PL	J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*
PLRE I and II	Jones, A. H. M, Martindale, J. R., and Morris, J., *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* I, AD 260–395 (Cambridge, 1971) and II, (ed. J. R. Martindale, Cambridge, 1980), AD 395–527
REA	*Revue des Etudes Anciennes*
Riccobono, *FIRA*^{2}	S. Riccobono, J. Baviera, J. Furlani, *Fontes Iuris Romani AnteJustiniani* (2nd ed., Florence 1968–72)
SChr	*Sources Chrétiennes*
SEG	*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*
ZPE	*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*
ZSS, Rom Abt.	*Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung, Romanistische Abteilung*

Return to Table of Contents

1

GIBBON AND THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE: Causes and circumstances

Having reached the surrender of Carthage to the Vandals in the year 439, Gibbon ended Chapter XXXIII of *Decline and Fall* by telling the 'memorable fable of the SEVEN SLEEPERS, whose imaginary date corresponds with the reign of the younger Theodosius and the conquest of Africa by the Vandals' (II, pp. 291–3).[1] Gibbon was not the last philosophic mind to feel the fascination of the story,[2] and that he was not the first is attested by his own erudite tracing of the legend and its variants, from Syriac and Latin versions to the Koran and among Moslem nations from Bengal to Africa, even in the 'remote extremities of Scandinavia', not to mention the inscription of the saints' names in the Roman, Abyssinian and Russian calendars. It told of the martyrdom of seven young men of Ephesus under the Emperor Decius by their entombment in a cave which was blocked by stones. The young men fell asleep, and were wakened, it seemed after a few hours, when someone opened the cave and let in the sunlight. They sent one of their number to town to buy bread, but he could no longer recognise the country; the main gate of Ephesus was, to his amazement, surmounted by a large cross. His odd dress and old-fashioned speech equally surprised an Ephesian baker, to whom the young man, in an episode that should interest numismatists, offered a coin of Decius as current exchange. The mystery was solved, if that is the word, when it was discovered that it was not just a few hours but almost two hundred years, since the young man and his companions had 'escaped from the rage of a pagan tyrant' to find themselves living, however briefly, under a Christian emperor – 'however briefly', because as soon as the seven young men had bestowed their benediction and told their story to their amazed hearers, they 'at the same instant peaceably expired'.

Gibbon assigned the interest of the fable to its 'genuine merit'; the contrast between two ages so far apart would display what was surprising in the new world, to one with a still clear image of the old; 'his surprise and his reflections', wrote Gibbon, 'would furnish the pleasing subject of a philosophical romance'. Such a perception would in Gibbon's view,

however, not constitute history, for that would be concerned, not with the dramatic contrast between two ages so presented, but with the process by which one became the other; the 'perpetual series of causes and effects' by which 'the imagination is accustomed to unite the most distant revolutions'. The historian's task is not just to draw dramatic and pleasing contrasts, but to make connections.

The two hundred years between the reigns of Decius and Theodosius II were ideally placed to provide the materials for such reflection, for during this period, in Gibbon's words,

> the seat of government had been transported from Rome to a new city on the banks of the Thracian Bosphorus; and the abuse of military spirit had been suppressed by an artificial system of tame and ceremonious servitude. The throne of the persecuting Decius was filled by a succession of Christian and orthodox princes, who had extirpated the fabulous gods of antiquity; and the public devotion of the age was impatient to exalt the saints and martyrs of the Catholic church on the altars of Diana and Hercules. The union of the Roman empire was dissolved; its genius was humbled in the dust; and armies of unknown Barbarians, issuing from the frozen regions of the North, had established their victorious reign over the fairest provinces of Europe and Africa (II, p. 293).

Whether as history or romance, however, these two centuries did not form a consistent framework for Gibbon's conception of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. He had, famously, set its origins under the Antonine Emperors of the second century, when the 'long peace and uniform government' of the Romans had 'introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire' – notably, in this passage, by the extinction of the fire of genius, and the evaporation of the military spirit among the populations of the empire (I, p. 83). Gibbon's narrative begins with the sole reign of Commodus (180–92), which marked the end of this era of seductive, poisoned peace; but even this choice of starting point, as he wrote later in a possibly excessive fit of self-criticism (one has to begin somewhere), was a mistake now beyond retrieval. He should, he now claimed, have begun with the civil wars after the death of Nero, or even with the 'tyranny which succeeded the reign of Augustus'.[3] In the *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West* with which he concluded Chapter XXXVIII, he extended the framework still further, for he began this section by describing how Polybius had explained the strengths of the Roman constitution of the Republic to his Greek contemporaries of the second century BCE. In Gibbon's powerful phrase, Polybius had 'opened to their view the deep foundations of the greatness of Rome', for those Greeks who erroneously believed that this greatness

was the product, not of merit, but of Fortune.[4] The longer perspective is evoked in an episode narrated in Chapter XXX of *Decline and Fall*. When the senate was invited by the government of Ravenna to discuss the terms of peace offered by Alaric the Visigoth in 408, it was as if they – rather like the Seven Sleepers, except for the reversal of values of past over present – 'had been suddenly awakened from the dream of four hundred years':

> They loudly declared, in regular speeches, or in tumultuary acclamations, that it was unworthy of the majesty of Rome to purchase a precarious and disgraceful truce from a Barbarian king; and that, in the judgment of a magnanimous people, the chance of ruin was always preferable to the certainty of dishonour (II, p. 156).

That 'tumult of virtue and freedom' subsided, however, and the senate voted a ransom of 4,000 pounds of gold. The decline of Rome was not to be impeded by such occasional reminders of her once-great liberties.

Historical processes, the constructions of historians, are unstable phenomena; as their 'true causes' move back in time, so too their moments of fulfilment move forward. There is however a point beyond which a historical process may become so attenuated that it cannot be examined with proper discrimination, and it has often been remarked that Gibbon's concept of 'Decline and Fall' is not particularly well-defined. He said as much himself, in a revealing passage of his *Memoirs*:

> So flexible is the title of my history that the final era might be fixed at my own choice: and I long hesitated whether I should be content with the three Volumes, the fall of the Western Empire, which fulfilled my first engagement with the public (*Memoirs*, ed. Bonnard, p. 164)

– words which echo the postscript to the preface published with the appearance of Volume III in 1781:

> The entire History, which is now published, of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in the West abundantly discharges my engagements with the Public. Perhaps their favourable opinion may encourage me to prosecute a work, which, however laborious it may seem, is the most agreeable occupation of my leisure hours.[5]

The point, if it is accepted, that Gibbon did not have an exactly formulated definition of 'Decline and Fall', is relevant to the famous *General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West* (II, pp. 508–16), and more broadly to the way in which the critic should approach Gibbon as an analytic historian of the later empire. The *General Observations*, taken as a whole, are not so much a positive statement of what Gibbon thought to be the causes of the decline of the Roman Empire, as a summary of what he thought he

could take for granted, together with a wish to correct misunderstanding. Above all, they point to the future. As I just mentioned, they begin with a reference to Polybius as the writer who had made clear to Greek contemporaries the true character of the greatness of Rome. It may be no coincidence that the last clause of the narrative part of Chapter XXXVIII, in the sentence immediately preceding the *General Observations*, contains a reference to 'the history of the *Greek* emperors [who] may still afford a long series of instructive lessons, and interesting revolutions' (II, p. 507); but that is to look forward to the second part of Gibbon's project, and does not fully connect the *Observations* with the preceding text of a history from which they seem, to me and to others, to stand apart. One reason for this, obviously, is that the *Observations* were actually drafted at an early stage, whether in summer/autumn of 1772 or, perhaps more likely, in summer 1773.[6]

What Gibbon now says about the decline of Rome as 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness' is less a positive attempt to offer an analysis of the phenomenon, than a prefiguring of the contrast with the states of modern Europe which forms the second part of the *Observations*. Indeed, in so far as anything needed explaining, Gibbon thought it was not the fall, but the rise, of Rome that 'may deserve, as a singular prodigy, the reflection of a philosophic mind' (II, p. 509). He meant, of course, that it had already deserved the reflection of just such a mind – that of Montesquieu.[7] The story of the ruin of Rome, Gibbon wrote in 1772 or 1773, was 'simple and obvious'. Whether this is so or not, Gibbon did not go into that question here; except that in his opinion that 'as *time or accident* [my italics] had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight', we have re-entered the dimensions of the memorable fable of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. There, as we saw, Gibbon noted the distinction between seeing two worlds juxtaposed without transition, and the tracing of the series of causes and effects – 'time or accident' – by which the two were connected.

Next in the *Observations* come two points of correction (II, pp. 510–11). It might be thought that the foundation of Constantinople was a material factor in the decline of the west, but Gibbon thought that not to be so; 'The foundation of Constantinople more essentially contributed to the preservation of the East than to the ruin of the West' – again looking forward to the still notional second half of *Decline and Fall*. So too one might think that the 'introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire'. Gibbon conceded the force of the argument but offered in return the contribution of 'eighteen hundred pulpits' to the lawful obedience of the people of the

Roman world, and the mollifying effects of Christianity on the ferocious temper of its barbarian conquerors. These two factors are often seen as contributory factors in the decline of the Roman empire, but, in this passage at least, Gibbon denied this, to him commonplace, interpretation.

All of this – drafted before Gibbon published even Volume I of *Decline and Fall* – is more observation than systematic analysis, and his reader may be misled if he mistakes one for the other. Gibbon now moved on to modern Europe, in order to explain how its sovereign states, individually modest in size and improved by a level of scientific invention that made them collectively immune from barbarian conquest, might hope to avoid the fate of the Roman empire. It is at this point worth emphasis that the editions of Gibbon that most present-day readers have at their disposal fail in their arrangement of volumes to bring out the role of the *Observations* in the economy of *Decline and Fall*. They stand, not indeterminately between Chapters XXXVIII and XXXIX in the middle of Volume IV of Bury's seven-volume edition (to take one example), but emphatically at the end of the first three volumes of the original publication, bringing to an end what Gibbon thought would satisfy his 'first engagement with his public'.[8] The narrative text preceding the *Observations* ends with the reference to the 'Greek emperors' who would form the second part of his work, and the beginning of Chapter XXXIX is composed as a new start to a new Volume and instalment. The *Observations* themselves end, in a gracious footnote added to the final version, with praise of the five voyages of exploration (the voyages of James Cook) 'undertaken by the command of his present Majesty', who had also, 'adapting his benefactions to the different stages of society', founded a school of painting in his capital, and `introduced to the islands of the South Sea the vegetables and animals most useful to human life' (II, p. 516 n. 15).[9] One is reminded of that earlier footnote, to a description of the dietary habits of the barbarian folk of Roman Britain, expressing the 'pleasing hope that New Zealand may produce, in some future age, the Hume of the Southern Hemisphere' (I, p. 1001) – in the form possibly, as he himself hinted with characteristic sly subtlety, of that distinctly Gibbonian New Zealander, Sir Ronald Syme.[10]

In his famous essay on Tolstoy's view of history, Sir Isaiah Berlin used a fragment of the Greek poet Archilochus to suggest 'one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general'; '*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing*'. Some people, like the hedgehog, know one big thing – 'a single, universal organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance'.[11] Others, like the fox, know many things; 'their thought is scattered or diffuse, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a

vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing...unitary inner vision'. Among Berlin's examples, Dante is a hedgehog, Shakespeare a fox; Plato a hedgehog, Aristotle a fox. Herodotus is an obvious fox, Thucydides, whom Berlin happens not to mention, a prime candidate for hedgehog;[12] and so on. Tolstoy, Berlin proposes, believed himself to be a hedgehog, but was in fact a fox, and it may be that a similar misidentification sometimes affects readers of Gibbon. I am not sure that Glen Bowersock was correct in asserting that Gibbon's problem 'consisted in the continuing search for a single secret cause', and that 'It is unclear why Gibbon's concept of the philosophic spirit kept driving him to find a secret poison, a single hidden cause to explain the whole story of Rome's decline'.[13] The question can certainly be posed differently. Gibbon, as Momigliano wrote with a delightful humour which I remember much appealing to me as a graduate student of late Roman history, 'must not be made responsible for the D.Phil. candidate's dream of sleeping beauty: somewhere in the wood the true cause of the decline and fall of the Roman empire lies hidden and only awaits to be awakened by him, the lucky D.Phil. candidate'. To Gibbon, 'the decline and fall of Rome suggested a picture of new societies, laws, customs, superstitions, something to be described in its various stages rather that to be deduced from certain premises'.[14] To adapt this to the literary zoology of Sir Isaiah Berlin, Gibbon was a fox – erudite, imaginative, universal, someone who, in his own words, 'by reading and reflection, multiplies his own experience, and lives in distant ages and remote countries' (I, p. 235).

Gibbon himself says as much on the first page of *Decline and Fall* and, given this clue, in many other passages. Even the full title of his work, '*The History of* the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' – not, as he might have taken over from Montesquieu, '*Considerations on* the Decline and Fall...' – is revealing, and at the end of the very first paragraph of his work Gibbon spells out the implications of this:

> It is the design of this and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of [the Antonines'] empire; and afterwards, from the death of Marcus Antoninus, to *deduce the most important circumstances* of its decline and fall' (I, p. 31; my italics)

– that is, not to explain or analyse, but to describe and bring out the most important circumstances of a known phenomenon. The notions of 'decline and fall', of a 'declining empire' and so on, as well as the physical metaphors aptly noted by Bowersock, like the 'secret poison', the 'wounds of civil

discord' affecting the Roman empire like a human body,[15] recur throughout the text without doing more than provide reminders of what the book is about; they do not, and are not meant to, *explain* it. The historian's task, to return to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, is to 'unite the most distant revolutions' by a 'perpetual series of causes and effects', not to expatiate upon the 'pleasing romance' provided by the juxtaposition of two ages; this is what Gibbon means by 'deducing the most important circumstances' of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, and this too is what is meant in the *General Observations*, in Gibbon's reference to the way in which 'time or accident' had removed the artificial supports of the Roman empire. All this is at one with the emphasis placed by Momigliano and others (from Byron onwards) on Gibbon's overpowering erudition, and with the first words of the 'Advertisement to the Notes' (which in the first printing of Volume I appeared at the end of the volume and not at the bottom of the page); 'Diligence and accuracy', wrote Gibbon, 'are the only merits which an historical writer may ascribe to himself; if any merit indeed can be assumed from the performance of an indispensable duty'.[16] Contrast the *philosophe* Voltaire, for whom details in history were 'the vermin that kills great works' – or, to put it differently:

> Details which lead to nothing are in history what baggage is to an army, impedimenta; for we must look at things in large, for the reason that the human mind is small and sinks under the weight of trivial encumbrances.[17]

It speaks for itself that no good historian will spend time on details that lead to nothing (although this may not always be clear at the outset); but no more than an army, as Europe was about to see with a vengeance, can history function without impedimenta.

For Gibbon, therefore, the fall of the Roman empire, itself no mystery, was to be described in the sequence of circumstances, sometimes accidental, by which it came about. Not surprisingly, there were many moments at which something relevant to the process came to pass and, therefore, many moments to which Gibbon seems to assign the decisive influence. These passages come with a certain similarity of expression which can give the reader the impression, when he puts them side by side (ignoring the hundreds of pages that may lie between them), that Gibbon is contradicting himself, or allowing himself the constant luxury of hedging his bets by invoking ever new and shifting 'immediate causes'. Having located the infusion of 'secret poison' into the Roman empire as early as the time of the Antonines, it would be surprising if Gibbon had found no 'important circumstance' of the decline of Rome before the fourth century, the first significant moment occurring under the emperor Septimius

Severus, with his unleashing of the power and privileges of the army. So Chapter V ends emphatically, that 'Posterity, who experienced the fatal effect of [Severus'] maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal author of the decline of the Roman empire' (I, p. 148). Bowersock considered that Gibbon had forced himself into this 'remarkable opinion' by his obsession with a 'secret cause for the whole decline of Rome'. Having expressed my doubts already about this obsession, I should add in support of Bowersock that, whatever its origin in Gibbon's mind, his view about the contribution of Severus would not be widely accepted today. It might still be agreed that Severus and his dynasty saw significant changes in the military organisation of the Roman empire, but if so, this would not be in the terms laid down by Gibbon, but with reference to the pressures on the frontiers of the Roman empire going back at least to the time of Marcus Aurelius.[18]

Gibbon's narrative of the third century is from a technical point of view the weakest part of his treatment of the Roman empire, largely because of his reliance on the set of imperial biographies known as the 'Augustan History', a text of which he perceived the difficulties without drawing their consequences. (It was, indeed, in his understanding of the principles of source criticism that lay Gibbon's most obvious methodological weakness, as was pointed out by an early German reviewer.)[19] The reign of Constantine might next seem to offer great opportunities for one tracing the circumstances of the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Various aspects of the reign – the founding of a new Rome, the recruitment of barbarians, the adoption and encouragement of Christianity – were all features in Gibbon's conception of the process of decline; while the manner in which the 'abuse of military spirit had been suppressed by an artificial system of tame and ceremonious servitude', as he wrote in commentary on the Seven Sleepers, formed the subject of the imposing chapter XVII, in which Gibbon described the political system of Constantine and his successors, using sources from the time of Constantine himself down to the publication of the Theodosian Code in 437. Gibbon did not adopt an especially critical approach to Constantine, even though one was already formulated by hostile pagan writers of the fourth and fifth centuries. Though he wrote of his description as 'amusing the fancy by the singular picture of a great empire, and illustrating the secret and internal causes of its rapid decay' (I, p. 602), he regarded the actual decline of the empire (i.e. the *circumstances* of its decline) as beginning only after the strong emperors of the fourth century. The reforms of Constantine strengthened it and, at the price of a further suppression of liberty and independence, maintained its institutions for several generations.

In what must be admitted to be a rather inconsequential fashion, the Emperor Julian is said to be responsible, in some measure, for the triumph and the calamities of the empire, not, as we would expect and as Gibbon's admired Ammianus concedes, because of the disastrous losses on the Persian campaign which he had undertaken but because, fatally wounded in the course of the campaign, he neglected to nominate a successor (I, p. 946). More significantly, Julian's religious fanaticism and other-worldly intellectualism might seem to stand against him, but in Gibbon's words the emperor 'could break from the dream of superstition to arm himself for battle; and, after vanquishing in the field the enemies of Rome, he calmly retired to his tent, to dictate the wise and salutary laws of an empire, or to indulge his genius in the elegant pursuits of literature and philosophy' (I, p. 873). Despite the distant unreality of this picture, Gibbon's emphasis on the value of action marks him, as it seems to me to mark Ammianus Marcellinus, as an essentially Classical historian.[20]

Valens, who lost the battle of Hadrianople to the Goths, is a straightforward case. From his reign, wrote Gibbon, may justly be dated the 'disastrous period of the fall of the Roman empire' (III, p. 70), a point of view forcibly endorsed in a footnote, the last in Chapter XXVI, criticising Montesquieu for a most serious historical error in asserting that the Goths had left the Roman territory after the battle. The error was inexcusable, wrote Gibbon in one of his rare direct denunciations of a scholar, 'since it disguises the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western Empire of Rome' (I, p. 1083 n. 143). Yet again, at the end of the reign of Theodosius, Gibbon wrote, after the military writer Vegetius, that it was the pusillanimous indolence of the soldiery that might be considered as the 'immediate cause of the downfall of the empire' (II, p. 70).[21] After the reign of Theodosius, who like Constantine receives a surprisingly warm endorsement from Gibbon, a series of inactive emperors, both in east and west, failed to assert the initiatives of their predecessors and delegated military control to barbarian war-lords. Of one of these emperors, Honorius, Gibbon wrote with magnificent sarcasm that since, in the course of a busy and interesting narrative, he might possibly forget to mention the death of such a prince when it occurred, he would take the precaution of observing at this place (under the year 413) that he survived the last siege of Rome about thirteen years (II, p. 218).[22]

Taking this select list of immediate or proximate causes as a systematic account of the reasons for the decline and fall of the western empire, we might concede it as a somewhat assorted collection, with an unhelpfully broad conception, both in time and character, of what counts as an

'immediate cause'. This is however a serious objection, only if we regard Gibbon as one of Sir Isaiah Berlin's hedgehogs, such as would be forced into self-contradiction by an obsession with a single cause for the decline and fall of the Roman empire. But, as Momigliano said in a passage quoted earlier, for Gibbon the decline and fall of Rome suggested a much more complex and varied picture of 'new societies, laws, customs, superstitions, something to be described in its various stages rather than to be deduced from certain premises'.[23]

To convey this complex and varied picture, Gibbon established his account not only upon the narratives that would trace the most important circumstances of the decline of the Roman empire, but upon the digressions that are, in themselves, a monument to Gibbon's multifarious learning, and to his debt to the historians of the Classical world. In reading *Decline and Fall*, it is just as important to grasp the interrelations of these with each other, as with the narrative chapters that frame them. Chapters VIII and IX, on the Persians and the Germanic peoples respectively, should be taken with the vivid pages within Chapter XXVI on the manners of the pastoral nations, and with Chapter XXXIV on the history of the Huns – in the course of which Gibbon's conception, at least of the *indirect* causes of the fall of the Roman empire, extends to the frontiers of China.[24] Chapters XV and XVI, on the character of Roman religion, the early advances of Christianity and its persecutions by the Roman government, should be taken, not only with the delayed Chapter XXXVII on the monastic life and the conversion to Christianity of the barbarian peoples, but also with the long Chapter XXI on the persecution of heresy, the descriptions of the pagan policies of Julian in Chapter XXIII and the end of paganism in Chapter XXVIII. With the large section of Chapter XXXI on the society, population and physical extent of Rome, we should connect the earlier description of the foundation of Constantinople in the first part of Chapter XVII. The four chapters on Constantine (XVII–XVIII, XX–XXI) form a substantial monograph on that emperor, taking within themselves the form of narrative and digressions largely because Gibbon deliberately segregated civil and ecclesiastical affairs in his narrative. This was a tactical, not a strategic segregation, one of the most notable features of Gibbon's writing being its extraordinary assimilation of all types of source and all subjects.

No arrangement of a large literary structure is ever perfect and there are, to be sure, some inconcinnities in Gibbon's managing of his digressions. He remarks that the account of the monastic movement (XXXVII) is 'purposely delayed', but does not explain why this should be, with an account that begins with St. Antony and proceeds into the fourth

and fifth centuries but is placed after the accession of Theodoric the Ostrogoth in 493. Perhaps the explanation lies in the second half of the chapter, on the conversion of the barbarians, but this does not really belong to it, and the effect is to delay an account that is clearly relevant to Gibbon's conception of the religious history of the fourth century. The description of the city of Rome and its society is offered in the context of the sieges of the city by Alaric in 408/10, but its material is taken explicitly (in the form of an extended translation) from Ammianus Marcellinus, whose account is contextually located quite differently, and begins with an explanation of the *eternity* of Rome (14.6.3ff.).

More significantly, the location of the digression on Roman law in the time of Justinian (XLIV) defers that important subject to the second part of Gibbon's 'engagement with the public', and means that Gibbon cannot give to it due recognition in its proper place, as a component of the liberties and rights of the Romans in earlier centuries. This is unfortunate, since most modern historians, like ancient ones, would look to the law as a restraint on the tyranny of those emperors in whose hands Gibbon laid much responsibility for the decline and fall of the Roman empire.[25] He obliquely concedes in its narrative context (the violent deaths of Papinian and Ulpian) the significance of the Classical jurists of the Severan period (I, pp. 156f., 175); a deeper reflection, based on the Digest of Justinian and its sources, might conclude that the temper of the Severan (and, indeed, the Tetrarchic) Age was as much juristic and militaristic.[26] And, for some reason, in his account of Roman law under Justinian, Gibbon pays hardly any attention to the earlier codification of Theodosius II, the subject of the scholarly work of Godefroy that was so much admired by him. In his *Memoirs* Gibbon described the Theodosian Code, with Godefroy's commentary, as 'a work of history, rather than of Jurisprudence' (ed. Bonnard, p. 147), which only increases one's surprise that he made so little reference to it in his account of Roman jurisprudence, and that this subject as a whole did not take its place as a central feature of the history of the Roman empire. It is indeed a paradox that in Gibbon's text one reads about the foundation of barbarian legal systems (in Chapter XXXVIII) before one reads about Roman law itself; and that, on a literal interpretation of Gibbon's words mentioned earlier, if he had failed to proceed beyond the first three Volumes of his history he would not have discussed the subject at all. It is one of the ways in which, as will be pursued below, Gibbon tended to follow the disposition of his sources. The Digest was edited under Justinian, so that is where, despite its massive relevance to the earlier period, he located the digression that grew out of it.

This is not the place for a systematic account of the ways in which

modern scholarship has superseded Gibbon's methods and conclusions. J. B. Bury's introduction to his edition has a review of how this stood at the very end of the nineteenth century, after a hundred years of scientific scholarship since Gibbon's time. By the end of the nineteenth century Gibbon's texts had largely been superseded by critical editions – though one would be hard pressed to find an occasion on which any conclusion drawn by him was vitiated by a false reading in a text, and Gibbon made more use than most modern scholars of the great commentaries of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century editors.[27] There is affection as well as irony in Gibbon's admiration of the great editor of the Greek patristic writer of the fourth century, John Chrysostom – Father Montfaucon, 'who, by the command of his Benedictine superiors, was compelled to execute the laborious edition of St. Chrysostom, in thirteen volumes in folio (Paris, 1738)' (II, p. 237 n. 1) – and of the learned Tillemont, 'who compiles the lives of the saints with incredible patience and religious accuracy. He has minutely searched the voluminous works of Chrysostom himself' (II, p. 252 n. 41)! This was the same Tillemont, 'whose inimitable accuracy', according to a famous phrase in the *Memoirs*, 'almost assumes the character of Genius' (ed. Bonnard, p. 147).

Gibbon knew nothing of the developed sciences of numismatics and epigraphy, and was unable to exploit these sources as modern historians use them, as the base of his method and to assert their independence of the literary texts;[28] for this, one needs the systematic collections, such as the *Corpus* of Latin inscriptions initiated by Mommsen and its Greek equivalents. Yet Gibbon knew how to illuminate his theme from this material as it then stood. He was aware that the 'majestic ruins that are still scattered over Italy and the provinces' were the products, not directly of imperial policy but of local munificence by the leading citizens of the empire, citing the inscription of the 'stupendous bridge at Alcantara' as proof that it was 'thrown over the Tagus by the contribution of a few Lusitanian communities', and quoting the tenth book of the letters of Pliny to show the competitive rivalries of local communities of Asia Minor (I, p. 71 with n. 65). The same passage and others show Gibbon's appreciation of the possibilities of archaeology, at least in terms of an awareness of the standing ruins and surviving artefacts of the Roman period – especially when one adds the reminder that the idea of writing *Decline and Fall* first came to his mind while reflecting on the ruins of Rome, and that his first idea was to write a history of the city rather than of the empire as such.[29] It is not irrelevant to add that the very year, 1764, of Gibbon's famous (though somewhat redrafted)[30] musings on the Capitol was that of the discovery of the Great Theatre at Pompeii. Nine years

Return to Table of Contents

earlier, in his French *Journal* of the tour of Switzerland which he undertook from 21 September to 20 October 1755, the eighteen-year-old Gibbon noted the ruins of Avenches in words curiously reminiscent of those of Ammianus Marcellinus, who was later to mean so much to the historian of the later Roman empire; 'a en juger par les ruines il a du avoir été fort grand et fort beau', he there wrote of a town that was 'bien plus considérable autrefois qu'il n'est aujourdhuy', mentioning columns, remains of walls, a small amphitheatre, and a bath-house mosaic discovered just four years earlier.[31]

Papyrology was a science of the future when Gibbon wrote, and indeed still was so when Bury added his survey of scholarly developments since Gibbon's day. The 'stately and populous city of Oxyrinchus' (as Gibbon spells it) does gain a single mention in his text, as a place of twelve churches, and of ten thousand female and twenty thousand male adherents of the monastic profession (IV, p. 60); but neither Gibbon nor anyone else could have anticipated the historical riches that lay hidden within this efflorescence of misguided piety. As for the technique of prosopography, that too lay beyond Gibbon's grasp as a developed method, but that he would have seen its possibilities is clear. In describing the proclamation of Pertinax after the death of Commodus, he set out in detail the earlier military career of the new emperor as 'expressive of the form of government and manners of his age' (I, p. 121 n. 45), and later, describing the late Roman state as established by Constantine, explicitly paralleled this (with cross-reference) with the career of a late Roman court official, Mallius Theodorus, as it is known from a poem of Claudian (I, p. 616 n. 121).[32] In the implications of these two passages lurk the unborn souls of the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* and the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* respectively.

As we saw earlier, a more rigorous use of the principles of source criticism might have saved Gibbon from the largely fictitious narrative, based on the *Historia Augusta*, which he provides of the history of the third century (from the reigns of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus to the immediate predecessors of Diocletian). If he had fully appreciated that the fifth-century historian Zosimus was in all essential respects an abbreviated paraphrase of the late fourth-century pagan historian Eunapius, he might have come up with an answer to the chronological problem of the conversion of Constantine, and his description of the luxury of the Romans in the time of Theodosius might have appeared to him as the propaganda that it is. This, to be sure, would have undermined what he here has to say about 'the progress of luxury amidst the misfortunes and terrors of a sinking nation'; especially since it is immediately followed by the dubious

judgment on the pusillanimous character of the soldiery derived from Vegetius that I mentioned earlier (II, p. 70).

On the other hand, where there are no relevant advances in technique since Gibbon's day, and where the sources he used can still be understood as he read them, his judgments are often still highly pertinent. To take just three examples, Gibbon's assessment of Constantine the Great is not only extraordinarily full and well documented but presents an emperor closer to the modern conception than some that have appeared in the meantime. His explicit appreciation of the impact upon the Goths of the invention of writing as the vehicle of their translated Bible has observations relevant to modern discussions of literacy and the role of a culture based on a book.[33] His judgment of the ascetic movement of the fourth and fifth centuries is as waspish as only Gibbon can be, but many will judge it closer to the truth than some of the neo-fundamentalist hagiography of our own time.

In general, and it can be a strength and a weakness, Gibbon tended to follow the grain of his literary sources. He did so consciously, relying on his judgment of their value. He thereby produces a marvellous account, derived from a famous fragment of Priscus, of a Byzantine embassy to the court of Attila the Hun, and his account of the history of the third quarter of the fourth century, from Constantius II to Valentinian and Valens, is constantly underpinned, not only by the information but by the judgment and correctives of Ammianus Marcellinus, whom he rightly admired. At the same time, his equally famous criticisms of Ammianus' literary style suggest an inference relevant to the way in which Gibbon conceived of the historical character of his subject.[34]

That Gibbon's concept of the decline and fall of the Roman empire was influenced by his judgment of the quality of its literary sources, is clear from what he wrote in the *Memoirs* of his early reading of Classical texts:

> The Classics, as low as Tacitus, the younger Pliny, and Juvenal, were my old and familiar companions. I insensibly plunged into the ocean of the Augustan History; and *in the descending series* I investigated, with my pen almost always in my hand, the original records, both Greek and Latin, from Dion Cassius to Ammianus Marcellinus, from the reign of Trajan to the last age of the Western Caesars (ed. Bonnard, p. 146f.).

We should not make too much in this passage, taken alone, of Gibbon's language of descent through the ages. People commonly use phrases like 'down to the present day' without, at least consciously, thinking of a process of decline (though they may also say 'up to the present day'). But other passages also suggest that Gibbon's concept of decline should be seen, less as a specifically studied analytical tool than as an *attitude*

embedded in his Classical culture and the use he made of it. I can illustrate this by citing three of Gibbon's opinions on literary and artistic movements of late antiquity, taking first his judgment on late Roman philosophy, especially the movement of the 'New Platonists':

> The *declining age of learning and of mankind* is marked, however, by the rise and rapid progress of the new Platonists. The school of Alexandria silenced those of Athens; and the ancient sects enrolled themselves under the banners of the more fashionable teachers, who recommended their system by the novelty of their method and the austerity of their manners. Several of these masters...were men of profound thought and intense application; but, by mistaking the true object of philosophy, their labours contributed much less to improve than to corrupt the human understanding (I, p. 398).

Gibbon took a similarly negative view of the visual arts of late antiquity, as he saw them exemplified on the Arch of Constantine at Rome (*c.* 315) – a structure with which he will certainly have made himself familiar during his youthful visit to Rome. The arch, wrote Gibbon,

> still remains a melancholy proof of the *decline of the arts*, and a singular testimony of the meanest vanity. As it was not possible to find in the capital of the empire a sculptor who was capable of adorning that public monument, the arch of Trajan, without any respect either for his memory or the rules of propriety, was stripped of its most elegant figures. The difference of times and persons, of actions and characters, was totally disregarded. The Parthian captives appear prostrate at the feet of a prince who never carried his arms beyond the Euphrates; and curious antiquarians can still discover the head of Trajan on the trophies of Constantine. The new ornaments which it was necessary to introduce between the vacancies of ancient sculpture are executed in the rudest and most unskilful manner (I, p. 428).

As for the literary arts of late antiquity, the popularity of the poems of Ausonius seemed to Gibbon to 'condemn the taste of his age', one particular production being dismissed as a 'servile and insipid piece of flattery' (II, pp. 19f., nn. 1–2). In sharp contrast stands his judgment of Claudian, a poet of altogether more Classic virtues:

> In the *decline of arts and of empire*, a native of Egypt, who had received the education of a Greek, assumed, in a mature age, the familiar use and absolute command of the Latin language, soared above the heads of his feeble contemporaries, and placed himself, after an interval of three hundred years, among the poets of ancient Rome (II, pp. 163f.).

Gibbon omitted to remark, as he might have done, on the fact that both the greatest Latin poet and the greatest Latin historian of late Antiquity originated in the Greek east, Claudian from Alexandria and Ammianus Marcellinus from Syrian Antioch.[35] His preference for Claudian over other

late Classical poets was clearly because he most resembled the poets of the Silver Age.

Gibbon did not ask what positive aspects there might have been to the developments which he saw in late Classical philosophy, art, and poetry, nor did he wonder what changes in the sensitivities and self-perceptions of men might have taken place to explain these developments. In a fashion that has long survived Gibbon, late Roman culture was judged by the standards of an earlier period, and these standards were as much aesthetic as historical. Particularly telling are those recurring phrases shown here in italics, 'the *declining age of learning and of mankind*...', 'the *decline of arts and of empire*...'. If we may use them to judge by, Gibbon conceived the nature of the artistic and literary culture of a society as fundamental to an evaluation of that society in *all* its aspects, and saw the relationship between the two, the arts and society, as a very intimate one; if, indeed, he consciously distinguished them at all. He took a standpoint from which a judgment of the culture of late antiquity led him – as he might have said, insensibly – to a corresponding judgment of the decline of society and its government. Not surprisingly, it is in the fields of late Roman literary and artistic style, and of later Roman religion and philosophy, that some of the most interesting recent advances have been made, as historians have looked for more positive appreciations of what Gibbon, and many after him, perceived in such negative terms. The new ornaments added to the arch of Constantine may have been 'executed in the rudest and most unskilful manner'; but this cannot be said of the mosaics of Ravenna, which display some of the same stylistic characteristics and are composed with the most exquisite subtlety. It goes without saying that modern judgments of the arch of Constantine also are very unlike Gibbon's in their positive evaluations, even of those aspects of style that Gibbon found most offensive.[36]

In the last resort, it must be remembered that, although Gibbon's history was one of decline and fall, it was in the long term an optimistic work, because of its lessons for the present day. The effects of that great revolution, the fall of the Roman empire, were still felt in the world of Gibbon's day, but modern Europe, as he explained in the *General Observations* – drafted, as we have seen, before he had published any of *Decline and Fall* – was well placed to avoid the same fate. I will say no more about this judgment, true or false as it may be, except to illustrate the theme from one of Gibbon's characteristically precise footnotes, and to adduce a passage of his text. Describing the submission of the Alamanni to Clovis the Frank, Gibbon had occasion to mention the 'vestige of stately Vindonissa [that] may still be discovered in the fertile and populous valley

of the Aar' (II, p. 456). At this point a marginal note in one of Bury's square brackets adds '[Windisch]' to denote the spot at which the early Romans had established a legionary fortress, and at the foot of the page appears one of Gibbon's luminous notes:

> Within the ancient walls of Vindonissa, the castle of Habsburg, the abbey of Königsfeld, and the town of Bruck, have successively arisen. The philosophic traveller may compare the monuments of Roman conquest, of feudal or Austrian tyranny, of monkish superstition, and of industrious freedom. If he be truly a philosopher he will applaud the merit and happiness of his own times (II, p. 456 n. 23).[37]

In Chapter XXXIV on the wars of Attila with the Romans, Gibbon had described the unique resistance offered by 'the firmness of a single town', the obscure, in fact otherwise unknown, Azimus in Illyrian Thrace (II, pp. 309f.). Organising its own resistance, the town held out against Attila and induced him to make an agreement, even deceiving him when he asked for the return of captives, by asserting that they had already killed them. Delegating to the casuists the morality of this deception, Gibbon asserted that every soldier and every statesman 'must acknowledge that, if the race of the Azimuntines had been encouraged and multiplied, the Barbarians would have ceased to trample on the majesty of the empire' (II, p. 309). Here for Gibbon was a lesson for modern times – one for every 'soldier and statesman' – as it should have been for its own; a community whose sense of liberty had borne the weight of the 'stupendous fabric' of the political power of Rome, and expressed in action the spirit of industrious freedom.

Notes

[1] References to *Decline and Fall* are to volume and page of the magnificent edition in three volumes by David Womersley, with Introduction and Appendices (and Gibbon's own Index) (Harmondsworth, 1994). The widely available edition in seven volumes by J. B. Bury (1897–1901) is still useful for its historical corrections, and for its introductory discussion of the progress of historical method since Gibbon's time.

[2] It forms the riveting opening sentence of Peter Brown's Carl Newell Jackson Lectures, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (1978); 'I wish I had been one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus'!

[3] Womersley, III, p. 1093 (Bury, I, p. xxxv). See for Gibbon's second thoughts (and adducing the parallel of Tacitus), G. W. Bowersock, 'Gibbon on Civil War and Rebellion in the Decline of the Roman Empire', in *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 3, 1976), pp. 63–71, at 63.

[4] II, p. 508. In the text Polybius is referred to without name as a 'wiser Greek' and 'sage historian', but he is identified in a footnote.

[5] In Womersley's edition, Vol. I, p. 3; Bury, I, p. vii.

[6] Patricia B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian: 1772–1794* (1989), p. 8; for 1772, P. R. Ghosh, 'Gibbon's Dark Ages; some remarks on the genesis of the *Decline and Fall*', *JRS* 73 (1983), pp. 1–23, at 18–19. David Womersley presents the *Observations* as separate from Chapter XXXVIII, without chapter heading and with new note sequence.

[7] Craddock, p. 9.

[8] The division comes at Vol. II, p. 517 of Womersley's edition, complete with Gibbon's new title page and preface.

[9] Craddock, p. 13. The 'five voyages' of exploration take us down to 1776; similarly note 8 of the *Observations*, on the 'political situation' of the American colonies.

[10] R. Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*, p. 22 n. 3 (cited below, Chapter 3, n. 11).

[11] Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An essay on Tolstoy's view of history* (1953 and reprinted), p. 1.

[12] See however Simon Hornblower, *Thucydides* (1987), pp. 145f.

[13] Bowersock, p. 67. In going on however to hazard the guess that the explanation may 'once again have been Gibbon's great evil genius, Tacitus', Bowersock satisfactorily counts Tacitus among the hedgehogs.

[14] Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Gibbon's contribution to historical method', in *Studies in Historiography* (1966), pp. 40–55, at 49–50 [an article first published in 1954].

[15] o.c. pp. 63f.; the metaphors occur 'in contexts which rarely represent the historian's most profound thought', but rather show him in the grip of his own literary style.

[16] Womersley, I, p. 5; Bury, I, p. ix.

[17] In the spirit of Voltaire, I have mislaid this reference.

[18] See for example, R. MacMullen, *Soldier and Civilian in the Later Roman Empire* (1963); J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army, 31 BC–AD 235* (1984).

[19] Momigliano, o.c., p. 40.

[20] *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (1989), pp. 471-2.

[21] J. B. Bury, commenting on this passage in one of what Peter Brown calls his 'implacable square brackets' (III, p. 187 n. 128), cites the doubts of Otto Seeck on the dating of Vegetius, adding soberly that 'the work is by no means critical or trustworthy'. This is perfectly true, though on the question of dating, it happens that more recent scholarship has (on balance, rather than decisively) favoured Gibbon's view. See now N. P. Milner, *Vegetius: Epitome of Military Science* (2nd ed., 1996); pp. xxxi–xli on the author and time of writing.

[22] Cf. III, p. 239 (the last words of Chapter XXIX): 'In the eventful history of a reign of twenty-eight years, it will seldom be necessary to mention the name of the emperor Honorius'.

[23] Above, n. 14.

[24] Cf. Bury's discussion of the identity of the Hiong-Nou (*vel sim.*) of the Chinese sources, at Vol. III of his edition, pp. 493-4. Gibbon's discussion is in his Chapter XXVI (Womersley I, pp. 1035ff.; Bury, III, pp. 82ff.); *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, pp. 488 n. 26, 533 n. 95.

[25] *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, pp. 250–2.

[26] See Tony Honoré, *Emperors and Lawyers* (1981, 2nd ed., 1994).

[27] Cf. A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, p. vii; these editions are a 'mine of curious information'.

[28] See on this theme Momigliano, 'Ancient history and the antiquarian', in *Studies in Historiography*, pp. 1–39, at 13ff.

[29] *Memoirs*, ed. Bonnard, p. 136; 'But my original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the City, rather than of the Empire', etc.

[30] See Bonnard, pp. 304f. for the various drafts of this passage of the *Memoirs*.

[31] *Journal de mon voyage dans quelques endroits de la Suisse, 1755*, edd. G. R. de Beer, G. A. Bonnard, and L. Junod, *Miscellanea Gibboniana* (Lausanne, 1952), p. 66; cf. Amm. Marc. 15.11.12; 'Aventicum, desertam quidem civitatem, sed non ignobilem quondam, ut aedificia semiruta nunc usque demonstrant'. The resemblance is coincidental, or due to the identity of subject-matter; the *Memoirs* place Gibbon's reading of Ammianus long after the composition of the *Journal* (see below). For the journey, Patricia B. Craddock, *Young Gibbon: Gentleman of letters* (1982), pp. 79–85.

[32] In another of his 'implacable square brackets', Bury adds at this point that 'Inscriptions supply us with more illustrations of official careers under the Constantinian monarchy. The career of Caelius Saturninus (C.I.L. 6, 1704) occasioned an important study by Mommsen', etc.

[33] II, pp. 432f.; 'They received, at the same time, the use of letters, so essential to a religion whose doctrines are contained in a sacred book, and, while they studied the divine truth, their minds were insensibly enlarged by the distant view of history, of nature, of the arts, and of society'; cf. I, pp. 223f., on the early Germans' ignorance of letters.

[34] I, p. 1073; 'It is not without the most sincere regret that I must now take leave of an accurate and faithful guide, who has composed the history of his own times without indulging the prejudices and passions which usually affect the mind of a contemporary', cf. p. 1067, n. 98; 'Zosimus, whom we are now reduced to cherish'. At 1063 n. 91 admiration for Ammianus is tempered by 'the vices of his style, the disorder and perplexity of his narrative'.

[35] At I, p. 1073 nn. 113–4, Gibbon touches in passing, but does not stress, Ammianus' origin in the Greek east. See my 'The origin of Ammianus', *CQ* n.s. 44 (1994), pp. 252–69, reclaiming his Antiochene roots.

[36] From this more recent work on the literary character of late Antiquity I cite just one book, for its freshness and sophistication, and for the positive adventure of its interpretation; Michael Roberts' *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and poetics in Late Antiquity* (1989); Chapter 3 is on 'Poetry and the Visual Arts'. Roberts begins his critique by assembling modern approbations of Gibbon's judgment of Ausonius, quoted above, and discusses the Arch of Constantine at pp. 91–2; on which see now R. Ross Holloway, *Constantine and Rome* (2004), Chap. II.

[37] The eighteen-year-old Gibbon (already a 'philosophic traveller'?) had visited Bruck (or Brugg) twice in the course of the tour of Switzerland of September–October 1755 mentioned in the *Memoirs* (ed. Bonnard, pp. 79–80) and described in the French *Journal* (above, n. 31). He will have passed it on the way from Aarau to Baden on 28 September, and he spent the night of 6 October there on the return journey (*Journal*, pp. 20f., 39).

Return to Table of Contents

2

POWER IN THE CLASSICAL WORLD
A three-cornered dialogue: Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, Tacitus

Historians will debate for ever, whether the Athenians deliberately provoked, or whether they merely failed to avert the war against Sparta and her allies, on which they embarked in 'the forty-eighth year of the priesthood of Chrysis in Argos, Aenesias being then ephor at Sparta and Pythodorus, archon of Athens, having then two months of his government to come' – Thucydides' expression for what we call the year 431 BCE (2.2.1).[1] It is however a matter of record that the war produced, in the end, the destruction of Athenian power and, in the process, one of the greatest of historians, who both described the events of the war, the decisions underlying them and the strokes of fortune that so often determined their outcome, and presents us with the moral and psychological framework within which we inescapably still judge it.[2]

A few years into his narrative, Thucydides told how in 427, not content with the defensive strategy advocated by Pericles at the outset of the war, the Athenians took the action overseas and sent a large force to Sicily. After two years of Athenian presence in their land, a conference of the Sicilians was held at Gela, an important city on the south coast of the island, to devise a collective response to the occupation. In his characteristic manner, Thucydides refers to the many speeches on all sides of the issue that were given by the delegates, before coming to what he presents as its major contribution. This was made by Hermocrates son of Hermon, a Syracusan, and a man of great influence among the Sicilians. Hermocrates built his case on a statement of the nature of power. He does not blame the strong for attacking the weak; that is a consequence of their strength. It is the weak who deserve blame, if they fail to unite and resist. For reasons that will appear later, the translation is that of Thomas Hobbes, published, some years after its date of composition, in 1628.[3] It is uncanny to hear the voice of Hobbes superimposed upon that of Thucydides:

> The Athenians, that covet and meditate these things, are to be pardoned. I blame not those that are willing to reign, but those that are most willing

Return to Table of Contents

> to be subject; for it is the nature of man everywhere to command such as give way and to be shy of such as assail. We are to blame that know this and do not provide accordingly and make it our first care of all to take good order against the common fear. Of which we should soon be delivered, if we could agree amongst ourselves (4.61; p. 263).

The problem of reported speeches in Thucydides is familiar to all his readers, and every possible point of view has been defended. We should begin with the claim that is laid before us by the author himself. As Thucydides explains very near the beginning of his history (1.22.1), it was difficult for himself, or anyone else who may have heard them, to recall the precise words that were used in the many speeches that were made in their particular circumstances. The problem is addressed by Thucydides in his declaration that he would try to convey what was likely to have been said on any occasion, keeping as close as possible to its actual sense.[4] This formulation is perhaps most helpful in relation to what it excludes. Thucydides means that, unlike his predecessors (and most of his successors), he did not just make up his speeches without any regard for their actual circumstances. This is in itself a noteworthy claim considering the practice of his predecessors, but still leaves considerable scope for constructive invention.[5] Some readers of Thucydides would put a high estimate upon his ability to recover the actual words used on specific occasions; whether or not this is so in general, I suspect in this case that what we are hearing from Hermocrates is Thucydides' judgment of what he should have said, in his particular circumstances, rather than a direct report of what he actually did say. However, an acquaintance with modern political discourse will suggest there need be little difference between what an orator might actually say and what a intelligent commentator might assume him to have said, the perceived needs of the situation, and of the audience, being common ground between them; political speeches rarely depend on surprise for their effect. Similar comments on the nature of power are found elsewhere, notably in the 'Melian Dialogue' at the end of Book Five of the history, in which the Athenian delegates to the island spell out the consequences if Melos, a Spartan colony, refuses to leave the Peloponnesian and join the Athenian alliance.[6] Among much else, the Athenians are made to say to the Melians (again Hobbes):

> For of the Gods we think according to the common opinion; and of men that for certain by necessity of nature they will everywhere reign over such as they be too strong for. Neither did we make this law nor are we the first that use it [once] made; but as we found it, and shall leave it to posterity for ever, so also we use it, knowing that you likewise, and others that should have the same power which we have, would do the same (5.105; p. 368).

Apart from its unusual form as a dramatic dialogue, which recreates the character of contemporary philosophical discourse at Athens,[7] it seems fairly clear that this debate is invented by Thucydides. Indeed he gives a hint of this, in describing how the Melians refused to allow the Athenians to address their assembly but had them deliver their message 'before the magistrates and the few' (5.84.3). This avoidance of the public allows the Athenian delegates to suggest to the Melians the dialogue form (rather than a formal exchange of speeches in the assembly), providing a context for which no-one would expect the actual words of the debate to be known.[8] It is conceivable, of course, that Thucydides might have tracked down Athenian, or even Melian, participants in the discussion and so acquired an account of it, but a more economical explanation is that he composed it as appropriate to the occasion – or to the outcome, for which its appropriateness is beyond question. Melos surrendered to the Athenian siege, upon which the Athenians 'slew all men of military age, made slaves of the women and children and inhabited the place with a colony sent thither afterwards of five hundred men of their own' (5.111; p. 372). It is a dreadful moment in the history, and critical in the economy of Thucydides' work.[9] Turning the page, we come up immediately against the second, Great Sicilian Campaign of 415, which in its defeat led ultimately to the destruction of the Athenian Empire. And before long, turning our gaze to Sicily, there again is Hermocrates of Syracuse, telling the leaders of the faction-ridden Sicilian cities what he had told them twelve years earlier; to save themselves from the Athenians, they must unite.

What makes this more than merely an apt remark for its circumstances but a real moment of truth, is the way in which Hermocrates now puts the Athenian threat in a wider context. He refers in his address to the general failure of ambitious campaigns overseas, where he cannot but mean the great Persian invasion of 480:

> For in truth there have been few great fleets, whether of Grecians or barbarians, sent far from home that have not prospered ill (6.33; p. 396)

– a point to which he returns more explicitly just a few (real or imagined) moments later:

> If for want of necessaries in a strange territory they chance to miscarry, the honour of it will be left to us against whom they bend their councils, though the greatest cause of their overthrow should consist in their own errors. Which was also the case of these very Athenians, who raised themselves by the misfortune of the Medes…; And that the same shall now happen to us is not without probability (6.33; p. 397).

The Athenians had in the Melian dialogue just made the claim attributed to them by Hermocrates, using the classic technique of *praeteritio*, passing

over while mentioning what you do not intend to say. In any case they do not expect to be believed in saying it:

> We therefore will not, for our parts, with fair pretences, as, that having defeated the Medes, our reign is therefore lawful, or that we come against you for injury done, make a long discourse without being believed... (5.89; p. 365).

To understand the ironic power of this claim, we must look back 65 years from the dramatic date of the Melian dialogue, to the story of the Persian expedition of Xerxes narrated by Thucydides' older contemporary, Herodotus. Though not actually offered as examples by him, these two great historians are a paradigm of Isaiah Berlin's legendary contrast, described in Chapter 1 in connection with Gibbon, between the Fox and the Hedgehog.[10] As between Herodotus and Thucydides, it is obvious which is the fox, 'knowing many things', and which the hedgehog, 'knowing one big thing'. Thucydides wrote a work of particular intensity and concentration on one big theme, Greeks at war with Greeks, and, in its extreme form, at civil war in their own cities.[11] Herodotus presented the wars of Greeks against Persians as a multi-ethnic conflict of cultures, allowing him to range in his narrative over the entire known world, Greek and 'barbarian' – Egypt, Scythia, Mesopotamia and far beyond, it is all there in digressions from his narrative.[12] If, in the course of reading about the background for the invasion of Xerxes, you want to learn about the gold-digging ants of India, 'as big as foxes but not as big as dogs', and how to steal the gold from them, this is where you go (3.102–5). Thucydides would not have told us this, but we should not be misled, for Herodotus' is a profoundly serious work with a moral purpose, in which the author presented the Persian War and its outcome in the context of the great themes of despotism and freedom, expressed in the strengths and weaknesses of different political cultures.

On one side of the conflict, Xerxes is a great despot, and he enjoys the benefits of autocracy. Through his vassals he can assemble a huge army and submit it to his command, he can terrify his enemy by the sheer scale of his preparations – but he suffers from the corresponding weaknesses of the despot, arrogance and lack of proportion. Herodotus shows us well-chosen episodes in support of this conception, describing how Xerxes, lord of the elements, built a bridge of boats over the Hellespont for the passage of his army and flogged the insubordinate waves when a storm destroyed it; how he excavated a canal through the isthmus of Mt. Athos to shorten the distance of travel for his navy; how before advancing on the Greeks, he counted his army to show its size – much exaggerated both

by rumour and by the method of counting, but the purpose of the exercise was as much to instill fear as to make strategic calculations. Later, he set up a throne to view the battle of Salamis and put soldiers on an island in the bay to kill shipwrecked Greeks as they sought safety – but it was the Persians themselves who were killed by the Greeks when the battle was lost, before the Great King's astonished eyes. Xerxes had never contemplated the possibility of failure; he demonstrated the pride of a tyrant, exposed in Greek terms in what seems to be accepted as the earliest extant Greek tragedy, the *Persians* of Aeschylus. Its author was among those who fought at Salamis for the freedom of the Greeks.[13]

For, on their side, the Greeks have the benefits of self-government and freedom – they were fighting for their own way of life, not for the prestige of a despotic master – but they too suffer from corresponding disadvantages. They feel passionate loyalty to their communities, but these are their individual cities, not the Hellenic cause at large. It took the foresight of Themistocles to use the threat of war with Athens' local enemy, Aegina, to build a fleet large enough to resist the Persian onslaught, just as it took his cunning to hold the Greek forces together to fight at Salamis when they threatened to disperse. In describing Themistocles, Thucydides produced a paradigm of the Athenian politician, insightful and resourceful, quick to see what was needed and able to explain it:

> By his natural prudence, without the help of instruction before or after, he was both of extempore matters upon short deliberation the best discerner and also of what for the most part would be their issue the best conjecturer... Also he foresaw, no man better, what was best or worst in any case that was doubtful. And (to say all in a few words) this man, by the natural goodness of his wit and quickness of deliberation, was the ablest of all men to tell what was fit to be done upon a sudden (1.138; p. 79).

It was thanks to their heroic role in the Persian Wars, that the Athenians could say to the assembly of Sicilian cities held in 415 what they had almost refrained from saying to the Melians; 'We took upon us our dominion over [the allies], both as worthy of the same, in that we brought the greatest fleet and promptest courage to the service of the Grecians, whereas they, with like promptness in favour of the Medes, did us hurt; and also as being desirous to procure ourselves a strength against the Peloponnesians' (6.83; p. 425). Defending himself when the people turned against him after the Great Plague of 430, Pericles had said to the Athenians, that they should not imagine that they could give up their power, 'for already your government is in the nature of a tyranny, which [it might seem] unjust for you to have acquired [but would be] unsafe to lay down' (2.63; p. 124), but

he also declared, in an earlier passage, that the Athenians had made a better and morally superior use of their situation than others would have:

> Those men are worthy of commendation who following the natural inclination of man in desiring rule over others are juster than for their own power they need. And therefore if another had our power, we think it would best make appear our own moderation (1.76; pp. 44–5).

The ironies are obvious, and have long been appreciated. In 480 Athens saved Greece, but in 427 and 415, having built up an empire of Greek subjects on the 'fair pretence' of pursuing war with Persia, she is the aggressor against other Greek states.[14] In 415 the city prepared a great fleet to go to Sicily, supposedly to 'liberate' the Greek cities from the power of Syracuse but really to conquer the island for themselves. Thucydides describes the Athenian fleet as it set sail, in a display of splendour reminiscent, even, of Herodotus' description of the army of Xerxes. After describing the competition of contributors that made each ship the finest that could be afforded, he goes on:

> After they were all aboard, and all things laid in that they meant to carry with them, silence was commanded by the trumpet; and after the wine had been carried about the whole army, and all, as well the generals as the soldiers, had drunk a health to the voyage, they made their prayers, such as by the law were appointed for before their taking sea, not in every galley apart, but all together, the herald pronouncing them. And the company from the shore, both of the city and whosoever else wished them well, prayed with them. And when they had sung the Paean and ended the health, they put forth to sea; and having at first gone out in a long file, galley after galley, they went a vie [racing] by Aegina (6.32; p. 395).

If Thucydides is more often admired for his philosophical penetration than for his narrative vividness, this is a mistake, for in such writing we can appreciate Plutarch's famous judgment, quoted by Hobbes in the Introduction to his translation, that Thucydides 'maketh his auditor a spectator. For he setteth his reader in the assemblies of the people and in the senate, at their debating; in the streets, at their seditions; and in the field, at their battles' (p. xxii). We also see the ironies. The Persian Wars had made Athens a naval power and enabled her to rule allied cities, to suppress them if they revolted and to control them, in Pericles' words, 'like a tyrant'. It was through fear of Athens' power that, in Thucydides' own analysis (1.23.6), Sparta went to war against her; the Athenians threatened everybody, and the Spartans dared not risk the dissolution of their own League (led, for example, by Corinth). Now, having held off Sparta and her allies, this 'democratic tyrant' is going to war against Syracuse – another democracy. Having liberated the Hellenes from the Persians, the Athenians

have inherited the role of Xerxes in building up an empire and attacking Sicily like a despot – and they will come to grief through similar weaknesses of despotism. Even the sea battle in the Great Harbour of Syracuse, seen in this light, evokes Salamis.[15]

But the cycle does not end here, for the drive to accumulate power and express it in domination over others is not just an Athenian weakness; it is inherent in human nature. Thucydides reported the Athenians' own accusation, expressed to the Sicilian congress of 415, that Syracuse too only wanted to subdue the rest of Sicily to her will (6.85). On one level, this is a practical application by the Athenians of the time-honoured principle, 'divide and rule'. For Thucydides, it is more than this; the power of states and their almost biological imperative towards aggrandisement is a universal factor in human behaviour. Not just Persia, or Athens, but all states are liable, in their foreign relations, to resemble tyrannies, and will do so even if they are democracies at home.

If Herodotus is the anthropologist, viewing all cultures with an open curiosity, tolerant and undogmatic in his judgments, understanding that different cultures, as well as different individuals, may see the world differently, Thucydides is the creator of a new genre in historical writing, owing much to the character of philosophical discussion in Athens of which we get an echo in the losing arguments of some of Plato's dialogues – harsh in logic and opportunistic, interested in power rather than justice, possessing an unsentimental realism about human nature.[16] It is a style of political reflection picked up by some Roman writers, notably Sallust and Tacitus, and if Thucydides' Melian Dialogue has shown us one 'moment of truth' in the consideration of power, there is another, though it will turn out rather to be a moment of dissimulation, in Tacitus.

Thucydides chose the Sicilian campaign as the context for a digression on the end of tyranny at Athens in the late 6th century. Now, the fall of the Athenian tyranny, as it happens, was almost exactly contemporaneous with the end of kingship at Rome, if that is correctly located in 509 BCE. For Romans of a later time, this was an immensely important moment. Monarchy was replaced by Republican (that is to say aristocratic) government, kings were replaced by consuls as symbols of liberty, and as guarantees that kings would not return. This is all expressed in concentrated form in the preface, indeed in the first two clauses, of Tacitus' *Annals*, written in the early second century:

> Urbem Romam a principio reges habuere; libertatem et consulatum L. Brutus instituit ('In the beginning the city of Rome was ruled by kings. Liberty and the consulship were established by L. Brutus').[17]

Passing over the interesting facts that the first of these Latin clauses can be made to scan as a hexameter verse, and that 'habuere' is an archaic form of the Classical 'habuerunt' (both phenomena suggesting an archaic, poetic and religious tradition of historical writing), we observe how Tacitus goes on to show that the Roman Republic was not a time of tranquil political liberty but of disorder and rivalry, in which competing interests fought for power and no form of government lasted for long, until in the end, power came back to monarchy. This happened when Octavian (later Augustus) put an end to the civil wars, suppressing his enemies and winning over the soldiers by gifts, the people by food, seducing all by the blessings of peace, before imposing his own powers upon the Roman state, supported by those who had the most to gain from it; all this from the first chapter of the *Annales*.

The culmination of this process was the meeting of the senate on 13 January 27 BCE, when Augustus[18] returned his powers to that body, yielded to the demand that he receive them back, and suggested a division of power in which he would retain that portion of empire containing the newly reorganised armies (also, it is fair to say, the hard work of establishing peace in freshly conquered provinces). But Tacitus did not choose this as his starting point. Instead, he began his *Annals* 'from the death of the deified Augustus' ('ab excessu divi Augusti'), a choice that enabled him to avoid passing judgment directly on Augustus' truly colossal but morally ambiguous achievement. Using the occasion of Augustus' funeral in 14 CE, Tacitus proceeds indirectly, putting opposing views, favourable and unfavourable, into the mouths of the crowd in imagined conversations – no pretence here that the historian was recording the precise words that had been said! – Tacitus so contrives it that the favourable view of Augustus is concisely expressed, the unfavourable following at greater length, with instances of bad conduct designed to leave the worse impression. The real moment of truth followed this, in the meeting of the senate on September 17, when the position of Tiberius as Augustus' successor was confirmed. As Tacitus saw, it was the entry into power of a successor that would really show the system to be established – and provide the last moment when it might be effectively challenged.[19]

It will now appear why I am using the translation of Thucydides by Thomas Hobbes, rather than any of the more modern, and undoubtedly more exact translations that exist. About a decade before the publication of his Thucydides translation in 1628 (as we saw, it was written some years before this), Hobbes was the author of a substantial little monograph, entitled *Discourse on the Beginning of Tacitus*. It is a sentence-by-sentence commentary on the first four chapters of the Annals (less than three pages