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### **Gibbon among the Barbarians:**

In 1781, at the end of volumes II and III of *The Decline and Fall*, Gibbon delivered to the public his ‘General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West’. The previous 1,000 pages, advertised as ‘elegantly printed in quarto ... Price two guineas in boards’, swept the reader from the age of Constantine to that of King Arthur.<sup>1</sup> Here, Gibbon turned aside from the ‘simple and obvious’ story of the empire’s ruin to ask ‘with anxious curiosity’ whether Europe, ‘one great republic’, was threatened by the savage nations which had overthrown the Romans.<sup>2</sup> He bustled through how civilization had contracted barbarism to a narrow span, how (perhaps paradoxically) European division, and the vigorous competition it encouraged, was a source of strength, and arrived finally at the vast improvements in the military arts, which formed an impregnable barrier against any would be Attilas. He concluded, with that warm optimism frequently surprising in an historian of so much bloodshed and despotism, that ‘Europe is secure from any future irruption of barbarians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous’.<sup>3</sup> The advance of European civilization had constricted the number of awful things that could happen: there had been progress.<sup>4</sup>

Kings were not exempt from this general felicity and happy contraction of the range of historical outcomes, and Gibbon confidently asserted that the ‘smooth and solid temper of the modern world’ made it very unlikely that another Alexander would triumph, or another Darius fall.<sup>5</sup> One must imagine that the king of France, ‘the absolute monarch of an industrious, wealthy, and affectionate people’, was included amongst the number of these contented and secure sovereigns.<sup>6</sup> Quite a prediction to publish in 1788. The rumbles that began to emerge from Paris in 1789 did not at first repel Gibbon: on 22 July, just over a week after the storming of the Bastille, he posed the question to his friend Lord Sheffield, of whether the French had the moderation ‘to establish a good constitution’.<sup>7</sup> After that, however, his view of events rapidly soured, and by the end of the year Gibbon lamented the misuse by the French of their ‘glorious opportunity’, and noted that no Richelieu or Cromwell had emerged to restore or subvert the monarchy.<sup>8</sup> Gibbon’s letters to Lord Sheffield of the following years are thick with despair for France – ‘the state is dissolved, the nation is mad’ – and concern for England – ‘If this tremendous warning has no effect on the men of property in England ... you will deserve your fate’.<sup>9</sup> By 1792, historical possibility had begun to expand again: ‘You will allow me to be a tolerable historian, yet on a fair review of ancient and modern times I can find none that bear any affinity with the present’.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, as events began to move outside the happy

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<sup>1</sup> All references are to David Womersley’s edition (henceforth *D&F*), by volume and page number. The advertisement is quoted in J.E. Norton, *A Bibliography of the Works of Edward Gibbon* (London, 1940), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *D&F*, II, 509; 511.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 514.

<sup>4</sup> D. Womersley, *The Transformation of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 188-91.

<sup>5</sup> *D&F*, III, 84.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 637-8.

<sup>7</sup> All references to the letters of Gibbon are to J.E. Norton’s edition, giving the number of the volume and letter, III, 730.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 752.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 762, 803.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 804.

bounds of the *ancien régime*, the barbarians reappeared. Writing in 1793 to Lord Loughborough, who had recently been made Lord Chancellor, Gibbon rejoiced that the lawyer was ‘now armed in the common cause against the most dangerous fanatics that have ever invaded the peace of Europe – against the new Barbarians who labour to confound the order and happiness of society’.<sup>11</sup> The Tartars (as Gibbon called them) of Central Asia might be firmly pinned back by cannon and fortresses, but the barbarians were already within the gates of the great European republic; the irruption of savagery had come from the inside, from a city marked by ‘that inestimable art which softens and refines and embellishes the intercourse of social life’.<sup>12</sup>

Barbarians, it is clear, occupied a central place in Gibbon’s mind; they were crucial to his great historical project – ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’ – but also to the way he understood his own world, as a divining rod to identify its key features. The many-sidedness of barbarism, its endless manifestations and permutations, fascinated him, and retained the capacity to surprise him, to upend conclusions he had settled on long ago, to the end of his life.<sup>13</sup> They are announced on the very first page of Gibbon’s great work as ‘the barbarians of Germany and Scythia, the rude ancestors of the most polished nations of modern Europe’, and we meet the same tribes right at its close.<sup>14</sup> In between, a dazzling array of peoples passes before our eyes; their proclivities, their conquests, their own declines and falls, are assiduously examined. The first barbarians to intrude seriously on our attention arrive in Chapter VIII. Here, Gibbon has paused his narrative of the third century at the Secular Games held to celebrate the millennium of Rome’s foundation, and we are about to enter the ‘twenty years of shame and misfortune’ which lasted from 248 to 268: the heart of what is often called Rome’s ‘third century crisis’.<sup>15</sup> The barbarians are the cause of many of the catastrophes of that era, and Gibbon gives us a long digression in Chapters VIII and IX – his other two-chapter digression in volume I, is, significantly, on the history of Christianity – on the Persians and the Germans to help frame what follows. Chapter VIII has not attracted nearly as much attention as the one that follows, but Gibbon’s nuanced sketch of an oriental despotism is remarkable for the positive role he allowed to religion in Iranian society. Moreover, the very fact that the Persians are introduced as the ‘barbarians ... of the east’ deserves comment, for they were literate, urbanized, luxurious; indeed the inhabitants of Asia had been so for many ages.<sup>16</sup> They were barbarians only in the sense that they lived outside the boundaries of the Roman world. Gibbon’s definition of a barbarian is, then, basically classical. He was remarkably consistent in this, and described the Franks in the age of Charlemagne, or the Arabs in the tenth century, as ‘barbarians’, when they had advanced far in refinement from the condition of their rude ancestors.<sup>17</sup> What made a barbarian a barbarian was only their position relative to the perspective Gibbon had chosen for himself; their way of life or degree of civilization were not necessarily relevant to his calculations. This is all the more remarkable, for the late eighteenth century was intensely interested in stadial theories of the progress of society, in which peoples advanced from savagery to barbarism (the shepherd stage), and from there to agriculture, and ultimately to commerce. Gibbon was clearly influenced by these theories, and often used their language, but he was, as ever, the servant of no system, and his classicising conservatism is a quiet act of rebellion

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 831.

<sup>12</sup> *D&F*, I, 724.

<sup>13</sup> See P. Ghosh, ‘Gibbon Observed’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991), for a defence of dating the ‘General Observations’ to 1772.

<sup>14</sup> *D&F*, I, 1; III, 1,084.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 253.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 213.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 26, 410-11.

against many contemporary speculations, something visible also in the easy equivalence of ‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’ in his pages, as so many of his peers tried to prise the terms apart.<sup>18</sup>

Gibbon was not the sort of historian, though, always to play by the rules he had set himself, and he was well aware of how the language of barbarism might be used to surprising effect. He was quite happy to describe the work of ‘the army of fanatics’ who in the age of the emperor Theodosius destroyed many temples as ‘the ravages of *those* barbarians’, the italics ramming home who the true savages were.<sup>19</sup> In a similar manner, Gibbon described Justinian as ‘born ... of an obscure race of Barbarians’, right at the head of his account of that emperor whom he despised; it comes in a sentence peppered with brackets and footnotes, almost as though Gibbon might smuggle it past the reader.<sup>20</sup> Nor does the perspective Gibbon had chosen for himself imply any automatic moral division between the civilized and the savage, something worth emphasising today, when many historians feel uncomfortable talking of ‘barbarians’, let alone ‘savages’, out of modern sensitivity to the word’s overtones. Gibbon’s sympathies were invariably determined by what the actors in his history did, rather than by who they were. If anything, he was more repulsed by the way that the Romans unfeelingly related their own savagery, than by their accounts of barbarian atrocities, which he often thought overheated. When he came to the execution of Radagaisus, the Gothic king who had invaded Italy in 405-6, he convicted Stilicho, *generalissimo* of the western Empire at the time, of ‘cold and deliberate cruelty’, and was so repulsed by the contemporary historian Orosius’ account of the events, that he declared that ‘the bloody actor is less detestable than the cool, unfeeling historian’.<sup>21</sup> On one memorable occasion Gibbon used the fate of some Saxons taken prisoner in the reign of Valentinian I (r. 364-375 A.D.) to highlight the contradiction between the polished disgust the Romans felt towards barbarians, and unfeeling brutality with which they treated them:

Some of the prisoners were saved from the edge of the sword, to shed their blood in the amphitheatre: and the orator Symmachus complains, that twenty-nine of those desperate savages, by strangling themselves with their own hands, had disappointed the amusement of the public. Yet the polite and philosophic citizens of Rome were impressed with the deepest horror, when they were informed, that the Saxons consecrated to the gods the tythe of their *human* spoil; and, that they ascertained by lot the objects of the barbarous sacrifices.<sup>22</sup>

Nor was his sympathy reserved for barbarians who were being brutalised: one of the most favourably sketched rulers in the whole work is Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths.<sup>23</sup> Both Alaric, whose army sacked Rome in 410, and Attila the Hun, ‘that formidable barbarian’, received much more subtle coverage than the reader might expect.<sup>24</sup> They are both described as ‘artful’, a capacious term in Gibbon, fit to describe Augustus, Diocletian, Constantine, Cyprian of Carthage, and Eusebius of Caesarea, and meaning (to adapt Carlyle) a transcendent capacity for taking pains, first of all.

Barbarian was not a term of condemnation in Gibbon, unless he wished it to be, nor was civilization (it should not need stating) always one of praise; relating Septimius Severus’ campaigns

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<sup>18</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Gibbon and the Shepherds: The Stages of Society in the *Decline and Fall*’, *History of European Ideas* 2 (1981), 193-202, and F. Furet, ‘Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon’s History’, G.W. Bowersock, J. Clive, S.R. Graubard (eds.) *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 159-66, are excellent on these questions.

<sup>19</sup> *D&F*, II, 81.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 557.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 147 and n. 82.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 996.

<sup>23</sup> On Theodoric e.g. *ibid.*, II, 547.

<sup>24</sup> For the quotation *Ibid.*, II, 294.

in Scotland, and provoked by the supposed poetry of Ossian, Gibbon contrasted the ‘freeborn warriors’ who resisted the emperor with ‘the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery’.<sup>25</sup> Quotations like these should not mislead, however, for Gibbon was no believer in the noble savage; in fact, throughout his work, Gibbon seems to have been exercised by the fear that he might be thought to have smoothed away a few too many of barbarism’s rough edges, and those who are said to have attributed to barbarians ‘the fairest attributes of peace and innocence’ were frequently the target of his irony, almost as though this was a prophylactic against criticism.<sup>26</sup> There were certainly those who thought Gibbon had been too sanguine in his account of the actions of some barbarians, and Horace Walpole mocked that in writing a history of the decline and fall of the British Empire, Gibbon ‘will not pen the character of Hyder Ali [sultan of Mysore] with so much complacency as that of Attila’.<sup>27</sup>

In truth, Gibbon’s attitude to the barbarians was ambiguous, and nowhere is the fineness with which he could balance a problem on better display than in Chapter IX where he sketches ‘Ancient Germany’ from the Rhine to Estonia, and from the Danube to Norway.<sup>28</sup> Here, there is a singular literary pleasure: Tacitus rewritten by Gibbon, who sometimes engaged in a paraphrase of the Roman author, albeit not always a faithful one.<sup>29</sup> Not all contemporaries liked the effect that Tacitus had had on Gibbon’s style, and the Scottish historian William Robertson commented with relief on volumes II and III of *D&F* that there was in them ‘less of that quaintness’ into which Gibbon’s love of the Roman author had occasionally seduced him.<sup>30</sup> Still, the overall result is remarkable, and more complex than derivation from Tacitus might imply. The Germans were illiterate, and therefore did not have a history in the true sense of the word, and were incapable of progress in the arts or sciences.<sup>31</sup> They were short of iron, mostly unfamiliar with the use of money, and without these (the ‘universal incitement’ and the ‘most powerful instrument’ of human progress) it was hard to imagine how they might ever cease to be barbarous.<sup>32</sup> Like all savage peoples, they were indolent, and careless of the future.<sup>33</sup> Because of this, they gloried in bloodshed, for it was the only thing which could cure the self-doubt which their indolence brought on (as Pocock has remarked, Gibbon appears to have discovered Angst in its homeland).<sup>34</sup> In the intervals of peace, they were drunk for drunkenness dulled their sense, and often prompted them to happy violence, whether by the slaughter of their own kin, or by encouraging them to invade the Roman Empire in pursuit of the wine they craved.<sup>35</sup>

Gibbon paused in this sketch of savagery to discuss the question of how numerous the ancient Germans were, and to refute the idea, a lively issue at the time, that somehow the fecund northern nations had been more populous in antiquity than they were subsequently. The influence of Robertson, and of Hume – ‘that fattest of Epicurus’ hogs’ as Gibbon called him (the unkind might regard this a case of pot calling the kettle black, but comparisons to animals are generally positive in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 152.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 1025.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to William Mason, 25 April 1781: XXIX, *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence with William Mason II*, p. 136. All references to Walpole’s correspondence are from *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* ed. W.S. Lewis, giving the volume number, title, and page.

<sup>28</sup> *D&F*, I, 230.

<sup>29</sup> Womersley, pp. 84-7.

<sup>30</sup> *MW*, II, CXLIX, p. 249.

<sup>31</sup> *D&F*, I, 234.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 236-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 237.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 237. J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist’, *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> *D&F*, I, 238.

Gibbon's writing) – is clear and self-confessed.<sup>36</sup> The paragraphs on population serve as a hinge in the chapter, moving us from the vices and unpleasantness of Germanic life, to its surprising advantage. The Germans were poor and illiterate, yet precisely because of this they were free. Now this was not the kind of freedom that a polished man (and Gibbon was well aware of the limited social roles women could occupy in his own age) in a free state might enjoy, but Gibbon brought out beautifully how property and intellectual sophistication could make a society more civilized, but also function as tools of oppression.<sup>37</sup> The Roman (or we might surmise, the eighteenth-century European) had possessions which could be taken from him to compel his obedience, he had desires which could convince him that despotism was for his own good.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the drunken, violent German had none of these, and could freely assert that manly virtue indispensable to liberty. He could do this in the assemblies: the 'rude but liberal outline of political society' with which the Germans made do.<sup>39</sup> This was a precarious liberty, for it was bound up with the very forces which might tear it apart, and it was constantly to be feared at one of these gatherings that a drunken faction might use weapons to enforce their will.<sup>40</sup> Gibbon concluded by noting that the magistrates, such as they were, of German society had the power to redistribute landed property every year, but not to imprison someone: 'A people thus jealous of their persons, and careless of their possessions, must have been totally destitute of industry and the arts, but animated with a high sense of honour and independence'.<sup>41</sup> This portrait had crucial implications for how one wrote history, whose proper subjects were war and public administration (a view which Gibbon, whose fascination was almost boundless, often honoured in the breach). In a prosperous, commercial monarchy, where millions might pursue 'their useful occupations in peace and obscurity' (obscurity is generally a positive quality in Gibbon), the historian could fix his eye, on the court, the capital, and the camps. But in the free anarchy of a barbarous republic, almost every man was a political actor, and history might become, insensibly, a total account of a society, for every part of it was relevant.<sup>42</sup>

The terms in which Gibbon analyses Germanic society are clearly indebted to stadial theory and to the ideas of the civic humanists. To simplify greatly, the humanists thought that virtue was to be found in a republic of free, active, and independent citizens, who bore arms for their country, and were thus admitted to the government of their simple and agrarian polity. Virtue would characterise not only their individual behaviour but the whole state; yet virtue had its price, for the armed and virtuous republic could not but conquer, and conquest led to luxury, luxury to dissipation, and dissipation to despotism, all things which commerce and cities might bring in their wake. Paradoxically then, history might swing in great cycles, in which there were no promised lands, only times when decay had not yet thoroughly set in.<sup>43</sup> Here, however, Gibbon implied that the virtue of the Germans was not that virtuous – if anything, it was rather terrifying – and he also suggested, at least in passing, that it was hard to see how the Germans might ever ascend from their original state, how they might ever climb the rungs of the stadial ladder. The only thing more terrifying than a history where decline is inevitable is perhaps one where there can never be any advance from savagery. Yet at the same time, Gibbon hinted that the Germans had advanced; after all, he opened the

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<sup>36</sup> *Letters*, I, 227.

<sup>37</sup> *D&F*, I, 170 on social roles for women. On women in enlightenment historiography see K. O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), chapter III, especially pp. 130-6 on 'Gothic' women.

<sup>38</sup> *D&F*, I, 239.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 240.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 241.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 242.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 252.

<sup>43</sup> As these ideas apply to Gibbon, Pocock, 'Between Machiavelli and Hume' is an accurate and faithful guide.

chapter by stating that ‘the most civilized nations of modern Europe issued from the woods of Germany, and in the rude institutions of those barbarians we may still distinguish the original principles of our present laws and manners’, so progress must have been made.<sup>44</sup> His reading of what made Germanic society what it was is resolutely institutional and almost everything in his description of their lives is something over which the Germans have control; yet this does not offer much hope. He gave a leading role to the Germans’ habit of dividing the arable lands amongst themselves afresh each year. This prevented that great eighteenth-century notion ‘improvement’ from taking place, and thus they remained poor, indolent because they were poor, violent and drunken because they were indolent, and free because they were all of these.

The Germans thus occupied a precarious space in Gibbon’s world; they fitted awkwardly into the systems contemporaries had constructed and suggested disconcerting things about the shape of history. Not only was it unclear whether the Germans could advance through the stages of society, it was not entirely certain to which stage they belonged. Gibbon’s Germans have sometimes been simply assimilated to the shepherd stage of human development; John Pocock has brilliantly elucidated how depicting them as savage shepherds allowed Gibbon to associate more closely the agricultural and commercial stages of civilization, and thus do away entirely with any idea of a Germanic agrarian golden age, a vision that was popular on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>45</sup> Such an assimilation has the effect of creating one vast barbarous continuum from the Rhine to the verges of China, ceaselessly interacting with and impinging on the civilized world. Yet it is not quite as simple as that. Gibbon never calls the Germans shepherds in Chapter IX, he never says that they have flocks (unlike the Scythians and Sarmatians), and he is clear that they live in forests, not on the open steppe. Whilst Gibbon does downplay the role of agriculture in Germanic society, it is always present in his thought, running quietly through it, not least in the emphasis on the effect on the Germans of repeated land divisions. As a result of this, we are firmly warned not to expect improvements in agriculture from the Germans, but it is implicit in the warning that they already till the earth. They only extracted a small quantity of corn, yet that had enormous importance, for it was from this that they made the beer that was so significant both for their society and their aggression.

When Gibbon turned to the nomadic nations, we see further subtleties amongst the shepherds. In Chapter IX he had declared that having summarised the ‘manners of Germany ... As the ancient, or as new tribes successively present themselves in the series of this history, we shall concisely mention their origin, their situation, and their particular character’; the manners of the barbarians had been covered, and he would not repeat them.<sup>46</sup> Yet in Chapter XXVI, almost the first thing Gibbon did was to provide a detailed and incisive account of the life and history of the pastoral nations down to the Hunnic victories over the Goths north of the Danube in the 370s.<sup>47</sup> There is a tacit admission here that the manners of the Germans and of the Tartars are so different as to require separate treatment. Consideration of what made pastoral nations something separate prompted Gibbon to one of his most interesting remarks about human societies: ‘The different characters that mark the civilised nations of the globe may be ascribed to the use, and the abuse, of reason, which so variously shapes and so artificially composes, the manners and opinions of an European, or a Chinese’. Yet, as we consider the more savage parts of mankind, we find that they have ‘a stronger resemblance to themselves and to each other’, because the ‘influence of food and climate, which, in a more improved state of society,

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<sup>44</sup> *D&F*, I, 230.

<sup>45</sup> Pocock, ‘Gibbon and the Shepherds’, esp. p. 199.

<sup>46</sup> *D&F*, I, 251.

<sup>47</sup> *D&F*, I, 1025-1044. On the historiographical background to this Eurasian history see part II of Pocock, *B&R* IV.

is suspended, or subdued, by so many moral causes, most powerfully contributes to form, and to maintain, the national character of barbarians'.<sup>48</sup> Thus a social history of the nomads must be very different from one of a polite and commercial people; it must think hard about the effect of diet, about the nature of the climate, and about the consequences of this pastoral life for social organisation and behaviour.

These were exactly the problems which Gibbon proceeded to examine, but we are a long way here from his account of the Germans, whose manner of life was not so shaped by climate and whose food he did not choose to consider in detail. This new social history also produced some curious facts for contemporary theorists. In a passage drawing heavily on civic humanist ideas, Gibbon sketches the paradox of Greco-Roman civilization: in its age of rustic simplicity the warlike people were scattered over the country and it took time to gather them for war. The progress of commerce slowly gathered the citizens into the walls of towns, and this made it easy but useless to assemble them for war, for 'the arts which adorn and improve the state of civil society corrupt the habits of the military life'. The manners of the nomads seemed to solve this paradox, for they were constantly assembled, but in a camp which primed them for war; somehow they had escaped the civic humanist treadmill.<sup>49</sup> Nothing quite like this had been written before in English and William Robertson wrote to Gibbon: 'Your chapter concerning the pastoral nations is admirable; and, though I hold myself to be a tolerably good historian, a great part of it was new to me'.<sup>50</sup> This was no mean praise from an historian whose *History of America* (1777) had dealt extensively with the problems of savagery and progress.

The point to draw from these contrasts is not that Gibbon thought the Germans were definitively not shepherds, for at times he clearly refers to them as such.<sup>51</sup> Rather, it is that he had a more flexible and more interesting conception of what that might mean: a barbarian was not simply a barbarian, the term could cover a multitude of things. Similarly, the pastoral nomads, uniform as their manners might be, did not fit easily into attempts to reduce human societies to a simple pattern and easy progression. Gibbon's point was that if there was a ladder of civilization, then its rungs were decidedly uneven; it was in the strange juxtapositions this produced that some of the most interesting historical facts lay.

If we turn from Gibbon's barbarians in their eighteenth-century context, to how they appear in the light of modern research, one fact stands out: Gibbon anticipates many of the most important conclusions historians have reached in the last fifty years about barbarian identity. Recent scholars have often emphasised the fluidity, the overlapping and contingent nature of barbarian ethnicity, and have played with the concept of ethnogenesis, the way that an agglomeration of barbarians might be melded and grow into a people. This historiography is consciously in opposition to occasionally pernicious views held in the early and mid-twentieth century, about the fixity of barbarian ethnic identity. These ideas led, for instance, to archaeologists such as Gustav Kossina intervening in debates about where Germany's frontiers should lie, trying to work out whether certain potsherds or toponyms were inherently Germanic or obviously Slavic (he hoped to influence the Versailles Conference, and its decisions on where national boundaries should fall). Another scholar, Franz Petri, was appointed officer for cultural politics in Belgium and had helpfully argued before 1939 that much of Belgium should be in Germany. Hitler was apparently convinced that the German-speaking inhabitants of the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 1025.

<sup>49</sup> *D&F*, I, 1028.

<sup>50</sup> *MW*, II, CXLIX, p. 250.

<sup>51</sup> *D&F*, II, 298-9 for instance.

South Tyrol, who in 1940 voted to join Germany, should be moved to the Crimea, for they were obviously Goths, and in late antiquity, that was where the Goths had lived.<sup>52</sup>

Gibbon would have found all this bizarre and repellent. He *was* convinced that modern societies produced rather firm identities: they were ‘fixed and permanent societies’, their inhabitants were connected by laws and government, and bound to their soil by arts and agriculture. But the barbarians were not like that at all. They were ‘voluntary and fluctuating associations of soldiers’, merely aggregated individuals. The inhabitants of a territory might be changed by emigration or invasion; a new tribal name might emerge from the confederation of two groups, and its dissolution might at length restore some long-forgotten titles. A conquered people might be named by their conquerors. Most perceptively of all, Gibbon writes of how volunteers might flock to the standard of a leader: his camp would become their country, and some common name would be applied to them.<sup>53</sup> He was well aware, that this process might also take place on Roman territory with deserters and slaves supplying the raw material.<sup>54</sup> This gave Gibbon a welcome flexibility when it came to thinking about barbarian invaders in late antiquity. He was quite content to see Alboin lead the ‘Lombard’ invasion of Italy, at the head of a motley host of former Romans, Gepids, Bulgarians, Sarmatians, Bavarians, and Saxons.<sup>55</sup> Similar processes might equally form new peoples on the steppe.<sup>56</sup> When it came to the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England, he was careful to note that Frisians, Rugians, Prussians, ‘and some adventurous Huns’, had been ‘insensibly blended’ with the more famous Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.<sup>57</sup> He had earlier described the formation of the Saxons, and his sentiments, if not his words, are strikingly modern:

The various troops of pirates and adventurers, who fought under the same standard, were insensibly united in a permanent society, at first of rapine, and afterwards, of government. A military confederation was gradually moulded into a national body, by the gentle operation of marriage and consanguinity; and the adjacent tribes, who solicited the alliance, accepted the name and laws of the Saxons.<sup>58</sup>

Given all this, it was hardly surprising, Gibbon concluded, that the Romans struggled to keep track of the groups, got names wrong, or used antiquated terms; their ethnography tried to describe as a static picture something that changed all the time.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note in this regard, that Gibbon was urged by Lord Hardwicke to include a map of the ‘progress and native seat of the northern hives’ in the second edition of volumes II and III, but demurred as ‘The Map which your lordship recommends would be useful, but it must be adapted to a single moment, and that moment would not be easily fixed, any more than the precise limits of the wandering Barbarians’.<sup>60</sup> Barbarian society was too fluid to pin names on maps and hope for the best.

Chapter XXVI is far from the last sustained attention that Gibbon gives to the barbarians. They thread their way, naturally enough, through his account of the end of the Roman Empire in the

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<sup>52</sup> For a brilliant introduction to these ideas and their development, see I.N. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013); pp. 245-67 for the early and mid-twentieth century, and pp. 299-302, and 312-15 for more recent views.

<sup>53</sup> *D&F*, I, 251.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 280-1.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 851.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 1031.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 495-6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 995.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 251.

<sup>60</sup> *MW*, II, CLII, p. 255; *Letters*, II, 518.



west, and through the vicissitudes of the Byzantine world, which had all of the virtues Gibbon disliked and none of the vices he admired. Occasionally, Gibbon broke from his narrative to give more sustained attention to the barbaric world. In chapter XLII he circled the borders of the eastern empire, picking out the barbarians perched over it, and in chapter LV he turned to the Bulgarians, Hungarians, and Russians: ‘Their names are uncouth, their origins doubtful, their actions obscure, their superstition was blind, their valour brutal, and the uniformity of their public and private lives was neither softened by innocence nor refined by policy’.<sup>61</sup> In chapter LVII he would discuss the Turks, and in LXIV the Mongols. Some of his most sustained attention was devoted to the Arabs and the empire, reaching from India to Spain, they created. When reading the last three volumes of *D&F*, Horace Walpole lauded Gibbon’s efforts, remarking, with an unusual collocation, that ‘Mahomet and the popes were gentlemen and good company’.<sup>62</sup>

We might turn, however, to some rather less admired portions of Gibbon’s work: the consideration he gave to the barbarians as their kingdoms took shape on the ruins of the western empire. He arrived at this barbaric world in the latter half of chapter XXXVII, and in chapters XXXVIII and XXXIX which covered, respectively: the conversion of the barbarians; the kingdoms of the Franks, Visigoths, and Anglo-Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries; and the kingdom of the Ostrogoths in Italy.<sup>63</sup> At the time of their publication, this part of his history was greeted with little enthusiasm. William Robertson rather awkwardly remarked in a letter to Gibbon which was otherwise fulsome in its praise, that ‘The last chapter in your work [XXXVIII] is the only one with which I am not entirely satisfied’.<sup>64</sup> Horace Walpole expressed himself with characteristically greater vigour bemoaning ‘a deluge of Alans, Huns, Goths, Ostrogoths, and Visigoths, who with the same features and characters are to be described in different terms, without any essential variety, and he is to bring you acquainted with them when you wish them all at the bottom of the Red Sea’.<sup>65</sup> We must hope that no word of this judgement ever got back to Gibbon, for Walpole had (as Gibbon saw it) insulted his work on a previous occasion. Then, Gibbon ‘coloured; all his round features squeezed themselves into sharp angles; he screwed up his button-mouth, and rapping his snuff box, said, “It had never been put together before”’. Walpole had taken this in his stride, and gone on in his letter to the Reverend William Mason to complain of Gibbon’s vanity, ‘even about his ridiculous face’, and his ‘flattery to the Scots that would choke anything but Scots’. They were soon reconciled.<sup>66</sup>

If anything, the judgement of those who specialise in the history of the barbarian kingdoms has been harsher than the negative opinion of contemporaries. Gibbon has been accused of a ‘deep-seated antagonism to barbarians’ and he has been arraigned for his view that the Lombard invaders of Italy in 568 were a clearly identifiable people.<sup>67</sup> His ‘assessment of the emergent barbarian successor states in the context of decline had an unfortunate effect on English scholarship on the European early Middle Ages’; he had ‘a lack of sympathy with the early Middle Ages and random selectivity among the wealth of scholarship on the early medieval period available to him, both in principle and actually in his library’.<sup>68</sup> Ian Wood, a scholar with deep sympathy for and vast knowledge of past

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<sup>61</sup> *D&F*, III, 440.

<sup>62</sup> To Thomas Barrett, 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1788: XLII, *Horace Walpole’s Miscellaneous Correspondence* III, p. 221.

<sup>63</sup> On these see Pocock’s volume *Barbarism and Religion* VI, *Barbarism: Triumph in the West*.

<sup>64</sup> *MW*, II, CXLIX, p. 250.

<sup>65</sup> To the Rev. William Mason, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 1781: XXIX, *Mason* II, p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> To the Rev. William Mason, 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1781, and 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1781: XXIX, *Mason* II, pp. 98, 106.

<sup>67</sup> T.S. Brown, ‘Gibbon, Hodgkin and the Invaders of Italy’, in R. McKitterick, R. Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 143, 156.

<sup>68</sup> R. McKitterick, ‘Edward Gibbon and the early Middle Ages in eighteenth-century Europe’, *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, pp. 162, 166.

practitioners of early medieval history, has felt moved to say that Gibbon expected his sources to be reliable quarries for facts, and has accused him of following the sixth-century historian Gregory of Tours 'blindly'.<sup>69</sup> One excellent recent history of the Roman West from 376 to 568 mentions Gibbon only once, and that is to blame him for a mistake which he did not in fact make.<sup>70</sup> Hostility to Gibbon's work on the barbarian kingdoms is not totally uniform – Peter Brown, one of the most influential post-war historians of the period, has called his portrait of the era one 'of unexpected warmth' in a brilliant essay on the cultural life of the fifth and sixth centuries – but it is widespread.<sup>71</sup>

These criticisms, fixing as they do on specific things Gibbon got wrong, areas he neglected, or topics he misconstrued, are one thing, betraying as they do acquaintance with some of what he wrote. Gibbon was certainly capable of error, and he was vulnerable to forged documents in otherwise reliable collections.<sup>72</sup> Other historians, however, seem to be put off from investigating him at all. Some are perhaps disturbed by the style, often so jarring in what can now appear a po-faced subject: when Gibbon tells us that the Visigothic clergy 'always recommended, and sometimes practised, the duty of allegiance', it is easy to gravely dismiss his judgement as unserious (for all that the statement is true). Others seem to be put off by the mere title of his great work, as though to say that we now study late antiquity and have no time for decline and fall (scathing references to 'the decline and fall paradigm' often seem to be motivated by this); perhaps they fear that Gibbon's work is nothing more than a simple story, spun out over thousands of pages, in which barbarous barbarians attack and abuse decadent Romans. Fortunately, it is not. Other scholars of the early Middle Ages do pay attention to Gibbon, but they start by choosing a topic, looking at how he deals with it, finding mistakes, turns of phrase that now make readers uncomfortable, or subjects which have become central to the study of a period, but in which Gibbon was uninterested. Faced with such evidence they invariably arrive at an unfavourable estimate of his work. Yet their conclusions are almost guaranteed by their method. Gibbon did not pretend to cover all the things that now preoccupy historians; he had his own aims and targets, and he had, moreover, to be ruthlessly disciplined in what he did and did not cover, lest the six weighty volumes of his work swell even more. To judge him by a standard he never meant to meet seems unduly harsh.<sup>73</sup>

It is more profitable to try and meet Gibbon on his own terms, to work with what he was interested in and see where it took him. If we do this, his chapters on the barbarian kingdoms emerge as brilliant and subtle examinations of post-imperial politics and society. They are certainly essayistic, darting from topic to topic, but it must be kept in mind that Gibbon's project was a history of the Roman Empire, and he wrote about anything else only insofar as it impinged on that. His curiosity sometimes got the better of him, but he always dragged himself back to the declining circuit of the Roman world. Chapter XXXVII is an excellent place to see this, and a good one to start for those who are interested in late antiquity, but deterred by the idea of decline and fall. They might be surprised to find here an account of the rise of western Christendom (to use the title of one of Peter Brown's books). In two perspicuous pages, Gibbon sketched how Christianity gave the barbarians letters to read the Scriptures which 'insensibly enlarged' their minds. The reading of translations made clergy curious about the original texts, and they were dragged beyond these to the Fathers of the Church, and from them, often by the thinnest of threads, to works of classical literature. In a remarkable

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<sup>69</sup> I.N. Wood, 'Gibbon and the Merovingians', *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, p. 122.

<sup>70</sup> G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 211 n.121, Gibbon never claims the frozen Rhine is anything other than a hypothesis (*D&F*, II, 149).

<sup>71</sup> P. Brown, 'Gibbon's Views on Culture and Society in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries', *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, pp. 37-52.

<sup>72</sup> Wood, 'Gibbon and the Merovingians', pp. 120-1 for some examples.

<sup>73</sup> cf. P. Brown, pp. 37-8 for sage comment.

concession, Gibbon even admitted that the barbarians might have learnt ‘justice from the law, and mercy from the gospel’. The barbarians were bound to each other and to the Romans by the bonds of Holy Communion, and the bishops were gradually admitted to the councils of kings and assemblies of free men. The gentle upward spiral which Gibbon traces here, then begins to quicken, and in the Latin Church, ‘the most corrupt state of Christianity’, we might be surprised to learn that there were the seeds of that great republic of Europe of which Gibbon was so fond: ‘The perpetual correspondence of the Latin clergy, the frequent pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem, and the growing authority of the popes, cemented the union of the Christian republic, and gradually produced the similar manners and common jurisprudence which have distinguished from the rest of mankind the independent, and even hostile, nations of modern Europe’.<sup>74</sup>

If we turn to chapter XXXVIII, there are more good things in store. This chapter was mostly devoted to the Franks; it was underpinned by a century of remarkable French scholarship. By 1767, eleven volumes of the *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, a collection of source material to A.D. 1060, had been published. More than that, in France an entire way of arguing about the present by close attention to the Frankish past had evolved, one memorably analysed in Foucault’s lectures, ‘Society Must be Defended’, at the Collège de France in 1975-6.<sup>75</sup> Gibbon had first dealt with this argument – ‘the bold paradoxes of the Comte de Boulainvilliers’, ‘the adroit sophisms of the Abbé Du Bos’, ‘The President Montesquieu, always brilliant, always profound’, and the Abbé Mably who (somewhat deflatingly) ‘has given us on this topic a useful and well written work’ – in his essay *Du gouvernement féodal*, written in 1768.<sup>76</sup> To simplify greatly, and without wishing to suggest a one-for-one relationship between views of history, political predilections, and background, people who believed that the Franks had conquered Gaul and enslaved the inhabitants, tended also to believe in the rights and privileges of the nobility, a limited monarchy, the power of the *parlements*, and to be angry about things like the *intendants*, and suspicious about the Third Estate. Such people likely had a general belief, not always actuated in practice, that war was good and glorious, and were probably nobles, not always very prominent ones. If they believed on the other hand, that the Frankish kings had acquired dominion over most of Gaul by treaty, with its inhabitants, or with the Roman government, then they were likely to believe that the nobles did not have privileges, to be sceptical of the power of the *parlements*, to be monarchist, though perhaps not always hugely enthusiastic ones, or to believe in the importance of the Third Estate, and to be from a *bourgeois* background.<sup>77</sup> None of this meant that scholars who more or less agreed politically did not attack each other, nor is it meant to suggest that scholarly matters were of secondary importance, *merely* a way of fighting about the state of France.

There is an occasional tendency to see Gibbon as in some sense derivative of these scholars; the implication is that there is little in him that is not in them. This is not an unreasonable accusation provided one is prepared to take these disputants as one school of thought. Many of their positions were contradictory and, on a question like whether the Roman inhabitants of Gaul had all been enslaved by the conquering Franks or were protected by treaties struck with their new kings, to take a middle line was more argumentative than it might seem, for it was to advance a new proposition, as

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<sup>74</sup> *D&F*, III, 432-3.

<sup>75</sup> M. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-6*, M. Bertani, A. Fontana (eds.), D. Macey (trans.) (London, 2003).

<sup>76</sup> *MW*, III, p. 183; P. Ghosh, ‘Gibbon’s Dark Ages’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983), p. 10 for the date. By the time he came to write *D&F*, Gibbon was very interested in Montesquieu’s chapters in *De l’esprit des lois* on the Franks, particularly books XXVIII, XXX, and XXXI, though Mably’s influence was also very important, see Wood, ‘Gibbon and the Merovingians’, pp. 128-32.

<sup>77</sup> Indispensable for these debates is Wood, *Modern Origins*, Chapters II and III, pp. 19-51.

Gibbon was aware.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the charge ignores what Gibbon himself said about what he was doing in Frankish history: he did not claim to have a radically new approach, but described himself as ‘An impartial stranger, instructed by their discoveries, their disputes, and even their faults’.<sup>79</sup> What Gibbon did was attempt to digest the work of these disputatious antiquaries, adding his own distinctive judgements; he approached the topic not as someone who was already implicated in political arguments in France, but simply because he was interested. In some sense, the historiography just sketched is a Gibbonian construct; it is his use of it that lends it an elegant coherence.

What he did with their work was to give a remarkable account, part narrative, part ethnography, of the Frankish kingdom. To recapitulate all its subtleties would be a long work indeed, but two rather different facets might be brought out. On basic matters of interpretation, Gibbon showed razor-sharp judgement. The French antiquarians were inclined to believe that someone’s name allowed one to tell if they were Frankish or Roman, but Gibbon had already noticed a Roman Gundulf and a barbarian Claudius in the pages of Gregory of Tours, and was rightly sceptical.<sup>80</sup> Gibbon also has what remains the most economical account of the gradual process by which many of the people inhabiting what is roughly modern France came to be called Franks. At the start of the period, the overwhelming majority were Romans. The Franks, the *barbari*, were a small group, speaking a Germanic language, who did, it is true, often run the place. Into the eighth century, we find people, especially in southern France, describing themselves as Romans. Yet at some stage this identifier went missing entirely; so complete was its disappearance that one early-medieval reader of a work of Frankish history inserted a marginal comment to the story of Clovis, explaining that he had killed all the Romans who lived in Gaul, and that in those times the Franks had learnt the Latin language from the Romans (how they managed to do both is not made clear).<sup>81</sup> There are analogies here with ideas, still occasionally resuscitated, that there are no Britons in England because the Anglo-Saxons killed them all, or drove them out; ideas of which Gibbon was very sceptical.<sup>82</sup> Confronted by this problem, in a few remarkable lines Gibbon sketches how a regime of legal pluralism, where different groups, identified by national markers, had different law codes and rights, might gradually resolve the tangle of identities, and the way that the rapid adoption of Christianity and Latin by the conquerors, might ‘by the intercourse of social and sacred communion’ eradicate the distinctions of the conquest.<sup>83</sup>

Chapters XXXVII-XXXIX come at the hinge of Gibbon’s massive work, bridging the perilous gap between its two halves. By their position, and by their content, with its mixture of the Christian, the barbarians, and the Christian barbarians, they remind us of the final, and greatest role the barbarians played in Gibbon’s historical imagination. Throughout they have been seen in a multitude of roles, allowing Gibbon to devise new ways of writing social history, to probe the future of his own society, and to pose difficult questions for contemporaries inclined to parse the world by social theories. They had subverted the Roman state, and Gibbon saw no contradiction between a vision of the fall in which the empire collapsed under the weight of its own massive fabric, and one in which ravenous barbarians smashed through its boundaries and rent it apart; he was, to use the terms

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<sup>78</sup> *D&F*, II, 487.

<sup>79</sup> *D&F*, II, 472, n. 64 – the epithets bestowed on the four Frenchmen there recall those in *Du gouvernement*.

<sup>80</sup> *D&F*, II, 488, n. 113.

<sup>81</sup> The comment can be found in translation in E. James, *Europe’s Barbarians, AD 200-600* (Harlow, 2009), p. 121.

<sup>82</sup> *D&F*, II, 502.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 473-4, and 489 (for the quotation).

of recent debate, both a 'mover' and a 'shaker'.<sup>84</sup> After all that, these chapters at the end of volume III and the start of volume IV remind us that to Gibbon the barbarians were the connectors of the ancient and the modern worlds, and that it was they, in conjunction with Christianity, who had created the Europe that he lived in: Constantine's 'victorious religion broke the violence of the fall, and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors'.<sup>85</sup> It had taken ten centuries, of anarchy and ignorance, of blindness and servitude, as Gibbon had called them, to polish the 'fierce giants of the north'; but he did not doubt that 'The most civilised nations of modern Europe issued from the woods of Germany'.<sup>86</sup> The barbarians had transformed Europe, and in a sense they had transformed Edward Gibbon; when he had mused on the steps of the Capitol, it had been the decline and fall of the *city* which had preoccupied him.<sup>87</sup> Yet from those famous steps, Gibbon was led, somewhat haltingly at first, but with greater and greater confidence, into the world of the barbarians, as he found that they impinged more and more on the history of the city. As he circled away from Rome, they drew him to distant places, first to the forests of Germany, and ultimately to the verges of China; they transformed what was meant to be an account of the decline and fall of the city, into a magnificent exploration of the late Roman millennium. Gibbon, it seems, has much to teach us about the barbarians, and the barbarians not a little to say about Gibbon.

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<sup>84</sup> G. Halsall, 'Movers and Shakers: the Barbarians and the Fall of Rome', *Early Medieval Europe* 8.1 (1999), pp. 131-145.

<sup>85</sup> *D&F*, II, 510.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 230.

<sup>87</sup> J. Murray (ed.), *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* (London, 1897), Memoir E, p. 302.