

Gibbon on Islam¹

Garth Fowden

Gibbon's chapters on the Islamic world remain little read and less studied.

There are three reasons to regret this. First, it is perverse to ignore the views of a great historian on a matter that so preoccupies us. Secondly, by examining the origins and expansion of Islam in the context of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon raised the question whether Christendom – Latin, Greek and Oriental – can be regarded as the sole legatee of Antiquity. Thirdly, the whole enterprise foreshadows our current concern with global history. Few individual historians before or since Gibbon have felt confident to tell the story of both Romes Old and New, the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, and the kingdoms of the Islamic Commonwealth that sprouted on the ruins of the Abbasid state and beyond it in Turkish Central Asia, from the late ninth century onward. Yet only by addressing all these polities, and the peoples who constituted them, is it possible to write the history of Eurasia in such a way as to do justice to Asian as well as European perspectives.

Islam and late Antiquity

While all three of these considerations bring 'Gibbon on Islam' close to the concerns of the generally educated and politically aware public, the second of them also

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touches on a more academic debate, which began almost half a century ago, about the nature of late Antiquity. Does it make sense to study this period – as is still customary – primarily in terms of ‘the formation of Christendom’; or was late Antiquity formative of Islam as well? If it was, will not both Christianity and Islam gain from being studied in interaction with each other? And if this is so, what historical periodization best facilitates such cross-pollination? I have contributed to this debate, most recently with my book published in 2014 and entitled *Before and after Muḥammad: The First Millennium refocused*. Here I propose for study a millennium of crucial conceptual maturations, from the idea of Rome incarnated by Augustus and Christianized by Constantine, by way of the rabbinic phase in Judaism sparked by Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the classical crystallization and then Justinianic codification of Roman law, the Galenic synthesis of Greek medicine, the patristic efflorescence of Christianity, the harmonization of Plato and Aristotle in the philosophical schools especially of fifth- to sixth-century Alexandria, and finally the emergence of not only the Qur’ān but a whole distinctive, synthetic Islamicate culture, open to Jews and Christians as well, sometimes strikingly original, other times indebted to several or all of these earlier developments.

It was my realization that Gibbon had in certain respects anticipated this vision of more than one road exiting Antiquity, and not necessarily leading to or having anything at all to do with Rome on the Tiber, which led me to look closer at his chapters on Islam. My previous indifference put me in good company. I found Norman Baynes opining, according to Arnaldo Momigliano, that Gibbon is not worth reading

after 476.² As recently as 2012 the editor of *The Oxford handbook of late Antiquity* stated that *The decline and fall* confines itself to the Roman Mediterranean and excludes not only Islam but Asiatic Christianity too, though Gibbon devotes several pages to ‘Nestorian’ missions as remote as China.³ The same historian informs us that ‘the intra-Roman narrative of Gibbon has largely been abandoned in every quarter of the field’;⁴ yet in the pre-Islamic period alone Gibbon discusses, sometimes for an entire chapter, Persians, Germans, Huns, Goths, Germanic successor states, Slavs, Turks, Avars, Ethiopians, etc.⁵

² A. Momigliano, ‘Edward Gibbon fuori e dentro la cultura italiana’, in id., *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome, 1980), pp. 236-7.

³ S.F. Johnson, ‘Preface: On the uniqueness of late Antiquity’, in id., ed., *The Oxford handbook of late Antiquity* (New York, 2012), pp. xii-xiii, xv; cf. E. Gibbon, ed. D. Womersley, *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1994) [henceforth *DF*: references consist of the chapter number followed by volume and page in Womersley’s edition], 47: ii. 981-6.

⁴ Johnson, *Oxford handbook of late Antiquity*, p. xx.

⁵ In the same volume cf. R. Hoyland, ‘Early Islam as a late antique religion’, pp. 1054-5, dilating on the non-inclusive, non-longue durée ‘Gibbonesque model’.

Some earlier discussions of Gibbon on Islam may be noted here. G. Giarrizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea del settecento* (Naples, 1954), pp. 478-518, is disappointing. On B. Lewis, see below. J. Toner, *Homer’s Turk: How classics shaped ideas of the East* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), ch. 5 on ‘Gibbon’s Islam’, compiles an agreeable florilegium of quotations. For a few suggestive pages see A. Momigliano, ‘Eighteenth-century prelude to Mr. Gibbon’, in id., *Sesto contributo*, pp. 257-63, but also P. Ghosh, ‘The conception of Gibbon’s *History*’, in R. McKitterick and R. Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 294 n. 127. Ghosh well discusses, pp. 300-16, the structural problems of vols iv-vi (1788) and their ‘abjuration of a master narrative’ (p. 305) despite Gibbon’s own hope (51: iii. 239) that ‘the Arabs might not find in a single historian, so clear and comprehensive a narrative of their own exploits, as that which will be deduced in the ensuing sheets’. Otherwise, in a book whose stated aim (pp. 2 n. 5, 4) is to rescue *DF* vols iv-vi from neglect and take account of the Seljuks, Ottomans and Mongols (but not the Arabs!), only the Ottomans are in fact treated, idiosyncratically enough, by A. Bryer (see below). *Edward Gibbon and empire* does offer a template for future comparison between Gibbon’s account of Islam and the present state of scholarship; but his aspirations were as much literary as historical (hence R.G. Collingwood’s dismissal of J.B. Bury’s updated notes as ‘not unlike adding a saxophone obbligato to an Elizabethan madrigal’: *The idea of history* (Oxford, 1993²), p. 147). Rather than factual refurbishment, the present article aims at an assessment of Gibbon’s treatment of Islam in relation to Eurasian history, in the light of current interest in incorporating Islam in broader narratives.

D. Womersley’s analysis of the whole work, *The transformation of The decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1988), discusses Eastern Rome but not the Islamic empires, though note pp. 209-11 on Gibbon’s echoing of his account of Rome’s fall in his description of the Caliphate’s collapse (and his implicitly more ironical stance toward theories of historical causality). K. O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 170-71, opines that *DF* ‘coalesces around...the western Romans, the Byzantines, and the northern tribes...Other groups and hordes... - Persian, Arab, Mogul, and, finally, Ottoman - are illuminated as they intersect and impinge upon them.’ Gibbon’s own summary of *DF* (71: iii. 1084) is more segmented; but O’Brien insists (pp.

The question is, then, how a history of Muḥammad, his four immediate successors the 'rightly-guided' caliphs, and the Islamic empires – Umayyads, Abbasids, Seljuks, Mongols and Ottomans – arose out of a narrative dedicated to Rome's decline and fall. In the first thirty-eight chapters of his work, concluding with the 'General observations on the fall of the Roman Empire in the West' (in other words the three volumes published in 1776-81 that Baynes could actually bear to read), Gibbon traced the history of Rome from its Antonine Golden Age, by way of Constantine's foundation of a second, New Rome in the East, to Old Rome's sack by Alaric in 410 and the gradual transference of authority in the West to Germanic successor-states.

189-90) that, even when Gibbon is at his most eastern, he is implicitly describing the rise of modern Europe.

Positive assessments of Gibbon on Iran, steppe nomads and Ottomans: D. O. Morgan, 'Edward Gibbon and the East', *Iran* xxxiii (1995), pp. 85-92; M. Rogers, 'Gibbon, Edward', in E. Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (London etc., 1985-), x. 602-4, revised at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gibbon>; A. Bryer, 'Gibbon and the later Byzantine empires', in McKitterick and Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and empire*, pp. 107-13. Appreciation of Gibbon's perceptiveness and originality as an historian of Asia is woven into the entire fabric of J. Osterhammel's masterly *Die Entzauberung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2010²).

An antidote to ignorance of these chapters is separate publication: E. Gibbon and S. Ockley, *The Saracens: Their history, and the rise and fall of their empire* (The Chandos Classics, London, [1873]); E. Gibbon, trans. J. Sporschill, *Der Sieg des Islam* (Frankfurt am Main, 2003); id., trans. F. Guizot, *Mahomet et la naissance de l'islam* (Paris, 2011). Within months of their appearance in London, excerpts were translated by A.H.W. von Walterstern, 'Die Eroberung von Mekka', *Neue Literatur und Völkerkunde* ii-ii (1788) pp. 400-10, and C.G. Körner, 'Mahomet: Ein Fragment', *Der Teutsche Merkur*, April 1789, pp. 70-93, 217-42 (my thanks to Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus and Gustav Seibt for this information), though this should be seen in the context of widespread translation of English books in eighteenth-century Germany: R. McKitterick, 'Edward Gibbon and the early Middle Ages in eighteenth-century Europe', in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, pp. 169-70. For a pedantic and simple-minded assault on *DF* iv-vi, reprinted from the *English review*, see J. Whitaker, *Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, in vols. IV, V, and VI, quarto, reviewed* (London, 1791, 258 pp.): 'Mr. Gibbon seems to be equally happy, in any opportunity of shewing his infidelity, and in any occasion of exhibiting his lasciviousness' (p. 104, on ch. 50 on Islam).

Otherwise, there are but scattered allusions to the posterity of Gibbon on Islam. Goethe can only be shown to have perused a single volume of *DF*, but it is the one which contains chs 68 to 71: E. von Keudell, *Goethe als Benutzer der Weimarer Bibliothek: Ein Verzeichnis der von ihm entliehenen Werke* (Weimar, 1931), p. 79 no. 466. Richard and Cosima Wagner read together the chapter on Muḥammad: C. Wagner, eds. M. Gregor-Dellin and D. Mack, *Die Tagebücher* (Munich, 1982²), i. 964. Sir Sayajirao Gaekwad III, Maharaja of Baroda (1875-1939), compiled *From Caesar to Sultan: Being notes from Gibbon's Decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (London 1896). This Hindu prince's act of disrespect to George V at the Delhi Durbar of 1911 has been seen as presaging the fall of the Raj in India.

Three more volumes followed in 1788. The fourth starts conventionally in Ostrogothic Italy, but then for the reigns of Justin and Justinian in Constantinople tends to adopt an East Roman perspective, which facilitates an account of relations with Iran as well as Justinian's attempt to regain the West. This volume culminates with the titanic clash between Khusrau II and Heraclius, and a survey of theological controversies again heavily eastern in emphasis. The eastward drift would have surprised Gibbon's readers, for whom the expected sequel to the Roman Empire was not Rome's second, eastern millennium, but Merovingians, Carolingians and Popes.

The function of volume five of *Decline and fall* is to consolidate the eastern turn announced in volume four; but the alert reader of the first chapter, forty-eight, soon suspects East Rome is not the only destination. This is the sole chapter in the whole work unadorned by Gibbon's irresistible footnotes; and it offers no more than 'a rapid abstract' of 'the emperors who reigned at Constantinople during a period of six hundred years, from the days of Heraclius to the Latin conquest' in 1204.⁶ Our author is evidently gearing up for something more beguiling than these 'fleeting Caesars'.⁷

To justify neglecting Rome on the Tiber for alien, Greek Rome on the Bosphorus, Gibbon argues that 'the fate of the Byzantine monarchy is *passively* connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world.'⁸ By this he does not primarily intend – as is often understood – the successive

⁶ DF 48: iii. 25. Contrast R. Davenport-Hines and A. Sisman, eds., *One hundred letters from Hugh Trevor-Roper* (Oxford, 2014), p. 381, on 'Gibbon...who never forces the pace'.

⁷ DF 50: iii. 151.

⁸ DF 48: iii. 25; cf. 69: iii. 978. Gibbon regularly applies the adjective 'Byzantine' to a particular range of terms such as 'monarchy', 'court', 'palace', 'throne' or 'pontiff'; and there is an implied contrast with more honourable epithets, e.g. 'The subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans...' (48: iii. 24, and cf. 53: iii. 416). On the odd occasion the Byzantines get something right (e.g. win a battle), Gibbon will consider reverting to 'Romans': 52: iii.

appearance on the world stage of Franks, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Russians, Normans and other Latins,⁹ though he allots each of these peoples ‘the space to which it may be entitled by greatness or merit, or the degree of connection with the Roman world and the present age’.¹⁰ Rather, Gibbon has especially in mind the rise of Islam and the empires of the Arabs and then the Turks¹¹ – of whom he observes that ‘like Romulus, the founder of that martial people was suckled by a she-wolf’.¹²

Gibbon reassures his readers that, while ‘the excursive line may embrace the wilds of Arabia and Tartary’, still ‘the circle [of *The decline and fall*] will be ultimately reduced to the decreasing limit of the Roman monarchy’.¹³ Hence the great work’s coda offers a prospect of the ruins of Old Rome as the Renaissance dawns. It can even be argued that ‘the firm edifice of Roman power’ has been present throughout the excursus, an ‘absent centre’ implicitly contrasted to ‘the transient dynasties of Asia’, notably the ‘Arabian caliphs’ and the ‘Tartar khans’.¹⁴ To Gibbon the stylist, the artistic unity of his project was very dear. But it cannot disguise the radical historiographical

375, and cf. Av. Cameron, ‘Gibbon and Justinian’, in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, pp. 51-2.

⁹ Pace H. Trevor-Roper, ed. J. Robertson, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2010), p. 142: ‘the revolutions which, together, raised Europe from barbarism to civility’. Also O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, p. 185.

¹⁰ DF 48: iii. 26.

¹¹ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion* (Cambridge, 1999–2015), vi.507-8, correctly discerns the preponderance of Islam in Gibbon’s thoughts at this point. Cf. DF 50: iii. 151, on the rise of Islam as ‘one of the most memorable revolutions, which have impressed a new and lasting character on the nations of the globe’. That Byzantium implied the Caliphate is (as Pocock observes, vi.20, 27-8, 30-31, 37, 39, 46, 52, 58) already signaled by Gibbon’s use of ‘orientalizing’ vocabulary in his account of Constantine’s Asiatic despotism. This idea had a long posterity: A. al-Azmeh, *The emergence of Islam in late Antiquity: Allāh and his people* (Cambridge 2014) 94. There will be more to say (below, pp. 19-20) about Gibbon’s habit of comparing Rome with Islamic empires.

¹² DF 42: ii. 694; cf. 50: iii. 151, 64: iii. 791.

¹³ DF 48: iii. 25; cf. 48: iii. 26, 51: iii. 237.

¹⁴ Ghosh, in McKitterick and Quinault, eds., *Edward Gibbon and empire*, p. 309 (‘absent centre’), pp. 311–12; DF 2: i. 56; 65: iii. 859-60 for ‘the transient dynasties’, though they are here contrasted with the Ottomans not (as Ghosh perhaps implies) the Romans; and 2: i. 70: ‘If we turn our eyes towards the monarchies of Asia, we shall behold despotism in the centre, and weakness in the extremities...But the obedience of the Roman world was uniform, voluntary, and permanent.’

innovation here being proposed (with only very recent and partial precedents, to be mentioned shortly): no less than abandonment of the traditional Protestant as well as Catholic exclusive concern with Europe's roots in Greece, Rome, Judaea and the Papacy;¹⁵ and its replacement by a vision of two main highways leading away from Antiquity, the well-trodden Roman way, but also another starting from Greek Constantinople and leading to Arabic Damascus and Baghdad, whence one branch went to Toledo, Paris and Oxford, but others connected more directly to Cairo, Rayy, Konya and Istanbul, the capitals of what we may call the Islamic Commonwealth.¹⁶

'An universal history'

While Gibbon's treatment of East Rome from Heraclius to the Fourth Crusade is cursory, and his introduction of Islam in this context is a substantial innovation, still he underlines that his presentation of the Islamic empires is in the end an excursus. It remains organically connected or at least comparable to the history of Rome in its several manifestations. In this Gibbon diverges sharply from the closest model available to him, namely the lengthy account of Islam contained in *An universal history*.

¹⁵ On neglect of Islam by Catholic historians such as J.-B. Bossuet and A. Calmet (both familiar to Gibbon) see D. Venturino, 'Imposteur ou législateur? Le Mahomet des Lumières (vers 1750-1789)', in L. Châtellier, ed., *Religions en transition dans la seconde moitié du dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 244-6. Still today, versions of this doctrine exclude later Greek/East Roman Christianity as well as Islam, making Europe a specifically *Latin* Roman assimilation and synthesis of Hebraism, Hellenism, and Christianity: R. Brague, *Europe, la voie romaine* (Paris, 1999, revised ed. with 'Postface'), pp. 28-36, 46, 159-63; cf. F.G. Maier, *Die Verwandlung der Mittelmeerwelt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1968), p. 359. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, iv. 208, notes that excluding Spain from the traditional European master narrative removed any need to insert Islam. The same might be said of the Balkans, or exclusion of Andalusia from the Spanish *national* narrative: A.G. Sanjuán, 'La distorsión de al-Andalus en la memoria histórica española', *Intus-legere historia* vii (2013), pp. 61-76.

¹⁶ On the Islamic Commonwealth see G. Fowden, *Before and after Muhammad: The First Millennium refocused* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 114-16.

An Universal history, from the earliest account of time, which is now familiar to only a handful of scholars but in its day circulated throughout Europe and in America,¹⁷ was published in monthly twenty-page fascicles, adding up to sixty-four octavo volumes, as a popularizing commercial venture by a consortium of London printers and booksellers between 1736 and 1766, having been first advertised in 1729. It was translated into French, Dutch, Italian and German,¹⁸ and as a subscription-publishing success was trumped only by the *Encyclopédie*. The *Universal history* was divided into an ‘Antient Part’ starting from Creation, and a ‘Modern Part’. The prominent role of the Qur’ān translator George Sale (on whom more below) in the launching of the enterprise gave its early parts a sceptical, indeed agnostic spin, marshalling for example accounts of the Flood from various literatures, so that readers inclined to privilege the Biblical narrative were made aware that it was just one of many. But more orthodox Anglican approaches soon prevailed, not without acrimony.

The ‘Modern Part’ began with three volumes published in 1759 on the Arabs and Islam, ‘the established religion of three of the most potent empires now on earth’.¹⁹ The authors used Oriental sources not Greek or European writers. ‘The life of Mohammed’ in 273 pages, with which the work begins, is trumpeted as ‘the most complete and perfect piece of its kind that in any *European* language has ever yet

¹⁷ G. Ricuperati, ‘*Universal history*: Storia di un progetto europeo. Impostori, storici ed editori nella *Ancient part*’, *Studi settecenteschi* ii (1981), pp. 7-90; G. Abbattista, ‘The business of Paternoster Row: Towards a publishing history of the *Universal history* (1736-65)’, *Publishing history* xvii (1985), pp. 5-50; id., ‘The English *Universal history*: Publishing, authorship and historiography in an European project (1736-1790)’, *Storia della storiografia* xxxix (2001), pp. 100-05; T. Griggs, ‘Universal history from Counter-Reformation to Enlightenment’, *Modern intellectual history* iv (2007), pp. 228-37. The *Universal history* is available online at <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000436117>. The ‘Modern Part’ begins at vol. xxii.

¹⁸ Cf. G. Abbattista, ‘Un dibattito settecentesco sulla storia universale (Ricerche sulle traduzioni e sulla circolazione della *Universal history*)’, *Rivista storica italiana* ci (1989), pp. 614-95.

¹⁹ *Universal history, Modern Part*, i. 273

appeared.²⁰ Volume three concludes with Baghdad's fall to the Mongols. The next few volumes treat of the Seljuks, Mongols, and Safavids, before the series heads off into South and East Asia. The whole grandiose, exhausting narrative ends with the European colonization of America. Overall coverage has been estimated as 50% European nations and their overseas conquests (omitting British history, presumably as too well known, until the third edition of 1779-84), 23% Asia, 13% Africa, 10% America, and a mere hundred pages on the southern hemisphere.²¹ But in the present context what sticks out is that Muslim history and the sources for it were now for the first time included in 'universal' history as viewed from Europe (or rather London).²² The Preface to the last volume of the Modern Part (1766) looks back on the monumental work with pride, and singles out its account of the Muslim empires as an innovative treatment of a previously obscure subject.²³ But Islam is not truly integrated in the story. This atomistic approach is typical of the *Universal history*. Gibbon criticizes it with reference to the 'ancient' sequence in a footnote:

The authors of that unequal work have compiled the Sassanian dynasty with erudition and diligence: but it is a preposterous arrangement to divide the Roman and Oriental accounts into two distinct histories.²⁴

The problem of co-ordination afflicts any historical narrative based – like the *Universal history* – on division of labour.²⁵ Gibbon here flags the advantages of single authorship, capable of creating webs of cross-reference, even if it sacrifices critical philological

²⁰ *Universal history, Modern Part*, i. ii-iii.

²¹ Abbattista, *Publishing history* xvii (1985), p. 19.

²² *Universal history, Modern Part*, i. i. On reviews by Joseph de Guignes drawing attention to neglect of French scholarship, see Abbattista, *Rivista storica italiana* ci (1989), pp. 659-62.

²³ *Universal history, Modern Part*, xlv. ix-xiv.

²⁴ *DF 25*: i. 1010 n. 137.

²⁵ On rival versions within the *Universal history* as symptoms of both editorial strains and editorial guile (e.g. in undermining orthodoxies) see Griggs, *Modern intellectual history* iv (2007), pp. 234-6.

method based on knowledge of languages. For his own part, he admits ‘total ignorance of the Oriental tongues’.²⁶

Besides linguistic inadequacy, the aspiring universal historian was likely to be accused of general superficiality. This was Voltaire’s fate at Gibbon’s hands;²⁷ but his *Abrégé de l’histoire universelle depuis Charlemagne jusques à Charlequint* (1753), known from 1769 as *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations, et sur les principaux faits de l’histoire, depuis Charlemagne jusqu’à Louis XIII*, and much indebted to the *Universal history*, gave Gibbon further precedent for deploying Islam as a counterweight to Eurocentric historiography. The Avant-Propos sketches ‘les raisons pour lesquelles on commence cet essai par l’Orient’. The first five chapters address China, India and Iran, while the sixth and seventh turn to Islam. Voltaire sees no reason to start his account of Antiquity with its least developed region, and finally reaches Europe only in chapter eight. The prominence accorded Islam, ‘la plus grande et la plus prompte révolution que nous connoissons sur la terre’,²⁸ similarly relativizes Christianity. In short, ‘universal’ history with attention to Islam and a decentering, comparative perspective (or at least an ‘inklusive Europazentrik’²⁹) was by the mid-eighteenth century an approved alternative to the traditional, ecclesiastically inspired world view. But this approach to ‘universal’ history (it seems wise to retain the eighteenth-century term, though today we say ‘world’ or ‘global’ history, while Gibbon, Voltaire and even the *Universal history* are in practice

²⁶ DF 50: iii. 151 n. 1. R. Mankin expands the point, alluding to Gibbon’s lack of German: ‘he...never mastered any of the languages of the historic barbarians, with the possible exception of English’: R. Mankin and P. Craddock (eds), *Edward Gibbon, Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* (Oxford, 2010), p. 7.

²⁷ DF 51: iii. 252 n. 55: ‘Voltaire, who casts a keen and lively glance over the surface of history...’.

²⁸ Voltaire, ed. B. Bernard and others, *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire: Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* ii (Oxford, 2009), p. 97.

²⁹ Osterhammel, *Entzauberung Asiens*, p. 62, with reference to *An universal history*, and distinguished at 380 from the nineteenth century’s ‘exclusive Eurocentricity’.

mainly interested in Eurasia) had yet to find a single, forceful exponent combining vision with balance and erudition.³⁰ That was to be Gibbon's achievement.

Gibbon's oriental education

A yet more dyspeptic animadversion on the *Universal history* than that already quoted may be found in Gibbon's last footnote to chapter fifty on the life of

Muḥammad:

The writers of the Modern Universal History...enjoyed the advantage of reading, and sometimes correcting, the Arabic texts; yet, notwithstanding their high-sounding boasts, I cannot find, after the conclusion of my work, that they have afforded me much (if any) additional information. The dull mass is not quickened by a spark of philosophy or taste: and the compilers indulge the criticism of acrimonious bigotry against Boulainvilliers, Sale, Gagnier, and all who have treated Mahomet with favour, or even justice.³¹

Gibbon here aligns himself with a tradition of more open-minded scholarship on Muḥammad than was to be found in the *Universal history*. For this not entirely conventional reading he had been prepared by (as he put it later in life) a 'blind and

³⁰ DF more than once censures Voltaire's reflex preference for Turks over Christians: 67: iii. 916 n. 13; 68: iii. 971 n. 84. The French Catholic theologian and Orientalist Eusèbe Renaudot (1646-1720), whom Gibbon congratulates for his 'rational scepticism' (51: iii. 285 n. 116), planned a history of the Muslim empires based on Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources, but more a collection of translations than a coherent narrative, and even that to be entrusted to a team of collaborators: J. M. Hussey, 'L'Abbé Eusèbe Renaudot', in E. Renaudot, *Liturgiarum orientalium collectio* (reprint, Farnborough, 1970), unnumbered pages at beginning of vol. 1. On unpublished documentation for this project see Alexander Bevilacqua's dissertation mentioned in n. 1.

³¹ DF 50: iii. 232 n. 187, and cf. 210 n. 149. Also J. Murray (ed.), *The autobiographies of Edward Gibbon* (London, 1897²) [hereafter *Autobiographies*], pp. 56, 120, and DF 25: i. 1010 n. 137 ('this unequal work/collection'). At 50: iii. 173 n. 65 Gibbon calls Sale 'half a Musulman'.

boyish taste for the pursuit of exotic history' contracted even before he went up to Oxford at the age of fourteen in 1752.³² The Muslim empires drew him especially:

Simon Ockley first opened my eyes, and I was led from one book to another till I had ranged round the circle of Oriental history. Before I was sixteen I had exhausted all that could be learned in English of the Arabs and Persians, the Tartars and Turks; and the same ardour urged me to guess at the French of d'Herbelot, and to construe the barbarous Latin of Pocock's Abulpharagius.³³

Together these two quotations evoke the main sources of Gibbon's oriental education. In surveying them, however briefly, we follow Gibbon's own unrealised plan for a seventh volume containing 'a critical account of the authors consulted during the progress of the whole work...susceptible of entertainment as well as information'.³⁴

Medieval certainties that Islam was derivative and immoral, and its prophet an impostor, prevailed well into the seventeenth century, even if Machiavelli (whom Gibbon read and esteemed) could hold that something of Roman virtue had been preserved by the 'Saracens' and Turks.³⁵ There were no printed Arabic Qur'āns, the Venice 1537/8 edition having sunk without trace – a single copy was recently rediscovered in a Venetian monastery.³⁶ Scholars had to search around for manuscripts. Nor were there complete translations direct from the Arabic, only Robert of Ketton's

³² *Autobiographies*, pp. 56–8, 79, 119–21, 224.

³³ *Autobiographies*, 58.

³⁴ *DF* i. 5, iii. 1185.

³⁵ N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* ii. pref. 2, trans. H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov, *Discourses on Livy* (Chicago, 1996), p. 124. I owe this reference to Alexander Bevilacqua.

³⁶ A. Nuovo, 'A lost Arabic Koran rediscovered', *The Library* xii (1990), 273–92. On the Venice 1547 translation, see P.M. Tommasino, *L'Alcorano di Macometto: Storia di un libro del Cinquecento europeo* (Bologna, 2013).

inadequate twelfth-century Latin paraphrase and Italian, German or Dutch versions based on it. That there was demand is proved by the several translations of André du Ryer's poor French version of 1647; while the Ottoman defeats at Vienna in 1683 and Buda in 1686 helped diminish Europeans' fear of the military and political threat while increasing access to copies of the Arabic Qur'ān.³⁷ But the world had to wait until 1698 for a printed Arabic text accompanied by a reliable Latin translation and an unrestrainedly polemical commentary, by Ludovico Marracci, professor of Arabic at the Sapienza in Rome.³⁸ Gibbon made some use of this.

Another factor in dispersing European ignorance of Islam had for some time been the Levant trade. As chaplain to the Levant Company at Aleppo from 1630, the Oxford Biblical scholar Edward Pococke (1604-91)³⁹ acquired 'more Arabic than the Mufti of Aleppo' as Gibbon put it,⁴⁰ and a library of manuscripts eventually bought by the Bodleian to reinforce Oriental holdings already strong from Bodley's day. In 1636 Pococke became Oxford's first Laudian Professor of Arabic. He showed unusual sympathy for Arabic culture and literature, not just combing it for Biblical gleanings. In his 'classic and original'⁴¹ *Specimen historiae arabum* (1650) he edited, translated and commented on extracts from an Arabic translation of the Christian Syriac historian

³⁷ A. Hamilton and F. Richard, *André du Ryer and Oriental studies in seventeenth-century France* (London, 2004), 91-2; N. Malcolm, 'The study of Islam in early modern Europe: Obstacles and missed opportunities', in P.N. Miller and F. Louis, eds., *Antiquarianism and intellectual life in Europe and China, 1500-1800* (Ann Arbor, 2012), 265-88. Also id., 'The 1649 English translation of the Koran: Its origins and significance', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* lxxv (2012), 261-95, and 'The 1649 Koran: A postscript', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* lxxvii (2014), 166-71, on the sharp antipathy to circulation of the Qur'ān in mid-seventeenth-century England, unless an 'antidote' were supplied.

³⁸ See now R. Tottoli, 'New light on the translation of the Qur'ān of Ludovico Marracci from his manuscripts recently discovered at the Order of the Mother of God in Rome', in A. Rippin and R. Tottoli, eds., *Books and written culture of the Islamic world: Studies presented to Claude Gilliot on the occasion of his 75th birthday* (Leiden, 2015), 91-130.

³⁹ G.J. Toomer, *Eastern wisdom and learning: The study of Arabic in seventeenth-century England* (Oxford, 1996); id., 'Pococke, Edward', in H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison, eds., *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004), xlv. 662-66.

⁴⁰ DF 51: iii. 239 n. 16, echoing S. Ockley, *The history of the Saracens 2* (London, 1718), xxxiii-xxxiv.

⁴¹ DF 50: iii. 154 n. 8.

Gregory Bar Hebraeus ('Abulpharagius', 1226-86), hardly any of the classic Muslim historians having yet been printed let alone translated. Pococke's pupil Humphrey Prideaux's dismissal of the *Specimen* as a 'jejune epitomee, containing no more than the bare bones of oriental history',⁴² indirectly acknowledged that collecting manuscripts and composing historical narratives based directly on their contents was inimical to the arrant prejudice of which Prideaux himself was to pen a prize specimen (*The true nature of imposture fully displayed in the life of Mahomet*, 1697). As will several times be noted in these pages, Pococke's influence spread wide.⁴³ But it might issue in sympathies too strong to publish, witness Henry Stubbe's *The originall and progress of Mahometanism*, not printed until 1911.⁴⁴ Stubbe (1632-76) saw the sixth-century imposition of Chalcedonian Christology as 'a kind of paganism' to which Islam directly responded; and he penned the first unabashedly favourable European account of Muḥammad from a Unitarian standpoint.⁴⁵ Gibbon (who did not know his book) would have approved his sense of the need for broad historical contextualization of Islam.

Pococke's contemporary, the Swiss Johann Heinrich Hottinger, published a *Historia orientalis* (1651) likewise based on Arabic sources, though Gibbon used him relatively little and assigned him, alongside Prideaux and Marracci, to the tribe of 'gross

⁴² Quoted by M. Feingold, 'Oriental studies', in N. Tyacke, ed., *The history of the University of Oxford iv: Seventeenth-century Oxford* (Oxford, 1997), 478.

⁴³ Note the Oxford-educated Lancelot Addison's *The first state of Mahumedism* (London, 1678), deploying Muslim sources and autopsy from his Moroccan travels to paint a fairer portrait of Muḥammad and cut out malicious Christian fables, but not used by Gibbon: W.J. Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment: Orientalism, religion and politics in England and its empire, 1648-1715* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 84-88.

⁴⁴ N. Matar, ed., *Henry Stubbe and the beginnings of Islam: The originall and progress of Mahometanism* (New York, 2014), esp. 102 for the phrase in the next sentence. On Stubbe's surprising resurrection by Muslims in British India see H. Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670-1840* (Baltimore, 2012), pp. 225-30.

⁴⁵ It is striking how indifferent Isaac Newton was to Muḥammad and Islam, despite his Arianism and obsession with prophecy: cf. R.S. Westfall, *Never at rest: A biography of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge, 1980), e.g. 821-30. Compare his nemesis Leibniz: G. Varani, 'Leibniz und der Islam: Die Betrachtung des Korans als erster Ansatz zu einer Kulturbegegnung im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert', *Studia Leibnitiana* xl (2008), pp. 48-71.

bigots'.⁴⁶ A much more important resource, which Gibbon bought as an undergraduate at Oxford, was Barthélemy d'Herbelot's 1060-page folio, the *Bibliothèque orientale*, published in 1697 with the assistance of Antoine Galland, the translator of the *Thousand and one nights*.⁴⁷ Galland had found in Istanbul and sent to Paris two manuscripts of Ḥājjī Khalīfa/Kātib Çelebi's (1609-57) *The uncovering of ideas (Kashf al-ẓunūn)*, an alphabetically arranged bibliographical dictionary compiled in Arabic in Istanbul from Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources.⁴⁸ D'Herbelot stripped (Gibbon's word) Ḥājjī Khalīfa for a European audience. He provided wide-ranging materials for the historian disposed to savour the Islamic world's diversity. At the same time he indulged the European penchant for exotic fantasy, which reached a high pitch in William Beckford's Arabo-Gothic novel *Vathek* published just two years before Gibbon's final volumes (it was Beckford who snapped up Gibbon's Lausanne library on his death). Though Gibbon too is not above teasing his readers' prurience with the pomp, profligacy and sadism of the Abbasid court,⁴⁹ *Vathek* and *Decline and fall* were as poles apart as their authors. Still, they both illustrate the range of public curiosity about the old caliphal world, and the role of scholars like d'Herbelot in nourishing it.⁵⁰

The problem with d'Herbelot was how to find and join up the wealth of information he provided under mostly Arabic headings alphabetically arranged (as in Ḥājjī Khalīfa too). Adriaan Reland (1676-1718), professor of Oriental languages at

⁴⁶ DF 50: iii. 210 n. 149; J. Loop, *Johann Heinrich Hottinger: Arabic and Islamic studies in the seventeenth century* (Oxford, 2013).

⁴⁷ N. Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford, 2009), 168-204; cf. J.E. Norton, ed., *The letters of Edward Gibbon* (London, 1956), i. 13, 25; DF 51: iii. 238 n. 15, 354 n. 75.

⁴⁸ G. Hagen, 'Kātib Çelebi', in C. Kafadar, H. Karateke and C. Fleischer, eds., *Historians of the Ottoman Empire* (2007), <http://www.ottomanhistorians.com/>.

⁴⁹ DF 52: iii. 365-6, 372-3.

⁵⁰ Osterhammel, *Entzauberung Asiens*, pp. 56-7: 'D'Herbelots Werk steht für eine Wahrnehmung nicht-europäischer Kulturen, die sich dem Drang zur Essentialisierung des Fremden...verweigert.'

Utrecht from 1701, was one of the first Europeans to attempt a systematic but also non-polemical description of Islam in his *De religione mohammedica* (1705).⁵¹ He declares his purpose to be not to defend Islam but to provide translated accounts by Muslims, in order to stop Christians making asses of themselves by their ignorant and mistaken attacks. Reland never left his native Netherlands, but ‘travelled over the East in his closet at Utrecht’ as Gibbon put it,⁵² while his influential book was translated into English, German, French, Dutch and Spanish, and eventually made it to the Index.

Then there was Simon Ockley (1679-1720), ‘an original in every sense’ says Gibbon, ‘sottish’ and ‘somewhat crazed’ according to others, though nobody questioned his Arabic.⁵³ Ockley became the Sir Thomas Adams’s Professor of Arabic at Cambridge in 1711. By then he had already published *The conquest of Syria, Persia, and Aegypt, by the Saracens...collected from the most authentick Arabic authors, especially manuscripts, not hitherto publish’d in any European language* (1708), later reprinted as volume one of his *History of the Saracens*. Chronic indebtedness saw him confined to the jail in Cambridge Castle, whence he indited the Introduction to volume two of his *History* (1718) acknowledging Pococke and d’Herbelot, and the unaccustomed liberty to work that he enjoys in prison.⁵⁴ Ockley merits a chapter in Isaac Disraeli’s *Calamities of authors* (1812); but his history was the first account of the conquests, and then of the

⁵¹ J. van Amersfoort, ‘Reland, (H)Adrianus’, in D. Nauta and others, eds., *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands Protestantisme* (Kampen, 1978-2006), v. 424-6; R. Minuti, ‘L’immagine dell’islam nel Settecento. Note sulla traduzione francese del *De religione Mohammedica* di Adriaan Reeland’, *Studi settecenteschi* xxv-xxvi (2005-06), pp. 23-45; J. I. Israel, *Enlightenment contested: Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 615-39, placing Reland, and just before him Pierre Bayle (also invoked by Gibbon: see below), at the head of his account of the ‘dissident complex of ideas about Islam’; A. Saviello, *Imaginationen des Islam: Bildliche Darstellungen des Propheten Mohammed im westeuropäischen Buchdruck bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 157-67.

⁵² DF 50: iii. 185 n. 101.

⁵³ *Autobiographies*, 58. On Ockley see A.J. Arberry, *Oriental essays: Portraits of seven scholars* (London, 1960) 11-47; P.M. Holt, ‘Ockley, Simon’, in *Oxford DNB*, xli. 428-30.

⁵⁴ Gibbon opines that it would have been better for the man and his country had he been ‘confined to the Bodleian library instead of the city jail [sic]’: DF 52: iii. 326 n. 7.

intestinal divisions down to ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705), that got the measure of these epic events. Like Pococke, he believed these deserved as much attention as the achievements of the Greeks and Romans⁵⁵ or, it would seem, the life of the Prophet himself, for which Ockley refers back to Prideaux. The *History* was based directly on the Arabic historians, though the greatest of these, al-Ṭabarī, remained largely inaccessible; while Ockley’s main source, which he imagined to be al-Wāqidī (d. 822), was a collection of legendary accounts falsely ascribed to him.⁵⁶ The *History* went through many editions, especially in the nineteenth century, was translated into several languages, and foreshadowed a more secular approach to Muslim history, one that Gibbon was to apply to the Prophet himself.

In a passage already quoted, Gibbon mentions ‘Boulainvilliers, Sale, Gagnier, and all who have treated Mahomet with favour, or even justice’. Henri de Boulainvilliers (1658-1722), a non-Arabist, is best known for his posthumous and widely translated *Vie de Mahomed* (1730), which took up Reland’s relatively generous estimate of the prophet, emphasizing his eloquent and rational arguments in behalf of the supreme being who had sent him – conqueror of empires and Spinozan deist avant la lettre – to punish the fractious Christians of the East and inspire enlightened modern Europeans.⁵⁷ De Boulainvilliers’s tendency to romance and heresy was rejected by Jean Gagnier (1670-1740), an ex-Catholic who became Lord Almoner’s Professor of Arabic at Oxford. In the Preface to his *Vie de Mahomet* (1732), Gagnier announced a

⁵⁵ On Pococke see the comments of Toomer, *Eastern wisdom*, 160-61. For Ockley see his *Conquest of Syria*, pp. ix, xvi. Also H. de Boulainvilliers, *Vie de Mahomed* (London, 1730), 6.

⁵⁶ S. Leder, ‘Al-Wāqidī’, in H.A.R. Gibb, J.H. Kramers, E. Lévi-Provençal, and J. Schacht, eds., *The encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden 1960–2009²), xi. 103.

⁵⁷ J.I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the making of modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001), 565-74, 702-03, emphasizes de Boulainvilliers’s Spinozism, but also his atypicality and the often clandestine circulation of his writings.

middle way between his compatriot's hero-worship and the sterile hostility of earlier writers. As for George Sale (1697-1736),⁵⁸ he was not a university man but practised as a solicitor, and may have learned Arabic with the assistance of two Syrian Christians he met in England,⁵⁹ which he never left (never mind Voltaire's fantastic notion that he had spent twenty-five years in Arabia⁶⁰). All three men worked for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge on its Arabic translation of the New Testament. Like Ockley, Sale lived in poverty; it was said that he 'too often wanted a change of linen'.⁶¹ Yet in his spare time he produced an English translation of *The Koran, commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed* (1734) that made the Muslim scripture more accessible than had Marracci's Latin. Sale's Qur'ān influenced not only Voltaire⁶² but also Lessing, while Thomas Jefferson owned a copy.⁶³ Its lengthy 'Preliminary discourse' indebted to Pococke, and its notes, show (mostly second-hand) acquaintance with the Arabic commentaries and provide a 'learned and rational' (Gibbon can hardly offer higher praise)⁶⁴ account of the origin, doctrines and sects of the Muslim religion. Sale does not seek (like Marracci) to refute Islam, but rather to establish its comparability with – indeed equivalence to – Judaism and Christianity, and Muḥammad's standing as the founder of a state and a successful lawgiver, not just a man of religion.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Ricuperati, *Studi settecenteschi* ii (1981), 13-30; A. Vrolijk, 'Sale, George', in *Oxford DNB* lviii. 685-7.

⁵⁹ A. Bevilacqua, 'The Qur'an translations of Marracci and Sale', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* lxxvi (2013), 102-03; cf. J. Fück, *Die arabischen Studien in Europa bis in den Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1955), 95-7; D. Weston, 'Negri, Solomon', *Oxford DNB* (2013), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/105274>.

⁶⁰ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, pp. 120 n. 6.

⁶¹ I. Disraeli, *Calamities of authors* (London, 1812) ii. 228 n. *.

⁶² Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, pp. 117 n. *, 147 n. *.

⁶³ D.A. Spellberg, *Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an: Islam and the Founders* (New York, 2013).

⁶⁴ *DF* 50: iii. 209 n. 147.

⁶⁵ Note especially Sale's Dedication. For a comparison with Marracci's unremittingly hostile, if erudite, commentary see Z. Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The politics of translation and the construction of Islam* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 10-80. Sale's Arabic references were often cribbed from Marracci,

As already noted, Sale also played a controversial role in the ‘Antient Part’ of the *Universal history* project (he was long dead by the time the volumes on the Arabs were written⁶⁶). Gibbon placed his ‘assiduous perusal’ of this work, ‘as the octavo Volumes successively appeared’, at the very origin of his interest in history.⁶⁷ Clogged with multifarious histories and exotic voyages, ill-informed about ‘the modern transactions of Europe’ but ‘familiarily conversant with the Arabian Caliphs, the Khans of Tartary, the outlying Empires...of China and Peru, and the dark and doubtful Dynasties of Assyria and Egypt’,⁶⁸ Gibbon’s youthful mind had perfectly reflected the *Universal history*, whose impact on provincial English society as well as the metropolis the future historian exemplifies. At Oxford he expressed a wish to study Arabic, but was discouraged.⁶⁹ Had his tutor, Dr Thomas Waldegrave of Magdalen, taken more care of his pupil’s Oriental enthusiasms, he might have followed in the footsteps of Pococke or Ockley. We may be sure he perused the Islamic volumes of the *Universal history* as soon as they appeared in 1759. Almost another three decades of reading was required to produce the deep as well as broad erudition that underpins Gibbon’s account of Islam. But as we shall see, that early imprint of ‘universalism’ remained in Gibbon even after *Decline and fall* was completed.

who in turn was indebted to Pococke: P.M. Holt, *Studies in the history of the Near East* (Abingdon, 1973), p. 57; Bevilacqua, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* lxxvi (2013), pp. 93-130.

⁶⁶ For which reason, plus the vituperation to which they subject him, it is unlikely he wrote them, *pace* Griggs, *Modern intellectual history* iv (2007), p. 230. Who did, is another question. The Oxford Orientalist John Swinton is one possibility: P.J. Marshall, ‘Oriental studies’, in L.S. Sutherland and L.G. Mitchell, eds., *The history of the University of Oxford v: The eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1986), p. 561 n. 1. Indeed Whitaker, *Gibbon’s History*, p. 101, roundly asserts this.

⁶⁷ *Autobiographies*, pp. 56–8, 79, 119-21, 224.

⁶⁸ *Autobiographies*, p. 224.

⁶⁹ *Autobiographies*, pp. 78-9.

With chapter fifty of the *Decline and fall* we finally embark on the 'excursive line' we have been promised – though never before confronted with in a Roman history – namely Gibbon's account of Arabia and the career of the Prophet Muḥammad, which precipitated 'one of the most memorable revolutions, which have impressed a new and lasting character on the nations of the globe'.⁷⁰ This is followed by a narrative of the Islamic empires down to the Ottomans, a total of seven whole chapters out of seventy-one (while several others narrate aspects of Islamic history which touch on the Christian world, such as the Crusades). This is not the place for running commentary; but a few general points must be made.

Gibbon starts with a flourish about how 'Mahomet, with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other, erected his throne on the ruins of Christianity and of Rome'.⁷¹ An Enlightenment point is being made here, in the tradition of Sale: Christian polemicists have it too easy when they dismiss Muḥammad as merely a pseudo-prophet. Yet one of the more frequently quoted items in the exiguous modern bibliography on this and the ensuing chapters, Bernard Lewis's brief essay 'Gibbon on Muḥammad', concludes with a pedantic scholium on precisely this remark:

"Mahomet," of course, is here used metonymically for the empire of the Caliphs. Even so, the statement is remarkably inaccurate. Both Christianity and Rome survived the advent of Islam; the Qur'ān did not become a book until some time after Muḥammad's death; only a left-handed swordsman could brandish both, since no Muslim would hold

⁷⁰ DF 50: iii. 151.

⁷¹ DF 50: iii. 151; likewise 50: iii. 227, on Ḥusayn.

the sacred book in the hand reserved for unclean purposes—and most important of all, there was a third choice, the payment of tribute and acceptance of Muslim rule.⁷²

Lewis here provides a text-book illustration, dubiously extenuated by its dash of lavatorial humour, of the Orientalist's fatuous omniscience (and obsession with Muḥammad's sword⁷³). One has only to compare the pious Egyptian historian al-Jabartī's unperturbed, indeed admiring, description of a French engraving of the Prophet in precisely the same pose, sword in one hand and Qur'ān in the other, which he saw when being shown round the library of the Institut d'Égypte in Cairo during the first brief phase of its existence in 1798-1801.⁷⁴ It is well to bear in mind that Muslim perceptions of such images may not always have coincided with those of non-Muslim 'experts'.

After this, chapter fifty moves straight into a 'description of Arabia and its inhabitants', not forgetting the essential camel.⁷⁵ There is nothing like this in the

⁷² B. Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York, 1993), p. 98. On 'Alī as a left-handed swordsman see DF 50: iii. 203. For a discussion of Gibbon on Muḥammad incomparably more sophisticated than Lewis's, see D. Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The historian and his reputation 1776-1815* (Oxford, 2002), ch. 4: 'Enthusiasm and imposture': Gibbon and Mahomet'.

⁷³ Cf. L. Marracci, *Prodromus ad refutationem Alcorani* (Rome, 1691), p. 124 ('Mahumetum gladio suo jugulare pro mea virili conatus sum'); F.E. Boysen, *Der Koran* (Halle, 1775²), Vorrede 22 ('in der einen Hand muß er ein göttliches Buch, und in der andern ein Schwert führen').

⁷⁴ al-Jabartī (d. 1825/26), *Tāwīkh muddat al-Faransīs bi-Miṣr*, ed. and trans. S. Moreh, *Al-Jabartī's chronicle of the first seven months of the French occupation of Egypt* (Leiden, 1975), pp. ٩١, 116. Al-Jabartī had probably been shown the magnificent elephant folio of [Ignatius] M[ouradgēa] d'Ohsson's *Tableau général de l'Empire Othoman* 1 (Paris 1787), whose frontispiece depiction of the Prophet by Jean-Michel Moreau is accompanied by an explanatory note: 'D'une main il tient le sabre, et de l'autre les feuilles du *Cour'ann* [on which he gazes with adoration]; instrumens avec lesquels il subjugea les esprits et propagea sa doctrine.' (My thanks to Christiane Gruber for facilitating this identification; and cf. Saviello, *Imaginationen des Islam*, pp. 258-63, 352). Gibbon could have been inspired by the same image, since he refers elsewhere to another illustration in vol. i of the 1787 edition: DF 68: iii. 970 n. 81 ('a work of less use, perhaps, than magnificence').

⁷⁵ DF 50: iii. 155 n. 13 ('Mahomet...does not even mention the camel') convicts its author of repeated inattention to Sale's translation. He is followed though by Borges in his famous essay 'The Argentine writer and tradition'.

Universal history, while Sale's account of Arabia is largely from ancient literary sources. Gibbon's benefits from a deeper acquaintance with modern travellers, including accounts made available in his own day, especially those of Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815), a German mathematician who joined the expedition to Arabia and Yemen by way of Egypt and the Nile organized by King Frederick V of Denmark in 1761.⁷⁶ By the time Niebuhr reached Bombay he was the only survivor. He returned home through Iran, Iraq, Syria and Constantinople, and published his travel narratives during the 1770s. Gibbon's own experience of travel was not heroic. Typically of a generation that still thought Europe ended at Naples, he got no further than the 'most brilliant Carnival...balls, Operas Assemblies and dinners' and 'the most ridiculous farce of Majesty' at the Bourbon court.⁷⁷ But he was attentive to the contribution to historical understanding as well as literary entertainment that could be made by the periegetes. So much so, that when Niebuhr provides what appears to be the earliest reference in European literature to the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, Gibbon is alert to add a suggestive comparison with Musaylima, Muḥammad's rival and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's fellow Najdi.⁷⁸

Other notable sources, for Islamic lands, were Jean Chardin and Constantin-François Chasseboeuf, comte de Volney. Jean Chardin (1643-1712) was a Huguenot jeweller who ended up living in London as court jeweller, since his religion barred his

⁷⁶ J. Wiesehöfer and S. Conermann, eds., *Carsten Niebuhr (1713-1815) und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart, 2002).

⁷⁷ Norton, ed., *Letters of Edward Gibbon*, i. 191. Gibbon was introduced to the King of Naples by Sir William Hamilton, who had arrived the previous year, 1764. The excavations in the buried Vesuvian cities were just then capturing the imagination of Europe and – thanks not least to Hamilton's zeal – opening whole new horizons of antiquarianism: A. Schnapp, 'Antiquarian studies in Naples at the end of the eighteenth century. From comparative archaeology to comparative religion', in G. Imbruglia, ed., *Naples in the eighteenth century: The birth and death of a nation state* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 155-58. We may assume that this was not without effect on Gibbon.

⁷⁸ DF 51: iii. 234 n. 1; G. Bonacina, *The Wahhabis seen through European eyes (1772-1830): Deists and Puritans of Islam* (Leiden, 2015), pp. 29-30.

prospects in France.⁷⁹ In the 1660s and 1670s he explored Iran on business and out of curiosity. He learnt Persian, and published *Voyages...en Perse* (1686-1711; a fuller edition in 1735; standard edition 1811), full of judicious insight and still today esteemed as a source on Safavid society. ‘The jeweller, Chardin, had the eyes of a philosopher’, says Gibbon.⁸⁰ He was ‘not inclin’d to talke Wonders’, opined John Evelyn, who helped him write his memoirs.⁸¹ As for de Volney (1757-1820), he was a French traveller who cast a jaundiced eye on Islam but a discerning one on its territories, in his *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte* published in 1787, just in time for Gibbon to praise his judiciousness in his last three volumes of 1788 – references sometimes added after the text was ready for the printer.⁸²

Gibbon occasionally amuses himself by contradicting conventional disparagement of the Arabs derived from Greek and Latin sources, to facilitate reference – sometimes in provocative vein – to the overarching narrative of Rome and Christianity. He dwells for example on their personal freedom and their willingness to permit even a woman – Zenobia – to rule over them. Indeed,

the grandfather of Mahomet, and his lineal ancestors...reigned, like Pericles at Athens, or the Medici at Florence, by the opinion of their wisdom and integrity.⁸³

The classical analogy is quickly qualified; but Gibbon goes on to make of the early caliphate almost an ideal polity:

⁷⁹ J. Emerson, ‘Chardin, Sir John’, in Yarshater, ed., *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, v. 369-77, revised at <http://iranicaonline.org/articles/chardin-sir-john>; D. Van der Cruysse, *Chardin le Persan* (Paris, 1998).

⁸⁰ *DF* 50: iii. 185 n. 101.

⁸¹ A. Eurich, ‘Chardin, Sir John’, *Oxford DNB*, xi. 90-91.

⁸² N. Hafid-Martin, *Volney* (Paris, 1999) (bibliography); *DF* iii. 1185-6.

⁸³ *DF* 50: iii. 160-61.

The first caliphs indulged the bold and familiar language of their subjects: they ascended the pulpit to persuade and edify the congregation; nor was it before the seat of empire was removed to the Tigris, that the Abbassides adopted the proud and pompous ceremonial of the Persian and Byzantine courts.⁸⁴

These qualities were derived from the personal example of the Prophet himself.

Where hostile commentators like Marracci or the *Universal history* regularly brand Muhammad an ‘impostor’, Gibbon achieves a subtler though still not uncritical style. About the Prophet’s supposed descent from Ishmael, he observes: ‘At Mecca, I would not dispute its authenticity; at Lausanne, I will venture to observe...’.⁸⁵ As for Muhammad’s teachings, Gibbon’s assessment is expressed in implicit – and sometimes explicit – comparison with Christianity, the subject of the notoriously negative chapters fifteen and sixteen.

Gibbon sees Islam as compounded ‘of an eternal truth, and a necessary fiction, THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD, AND THAT MAHOMET IS THE APOSTLE OF GOD’.⁸⁶ And he is not unaware that this translates into rejection of Trinity and Incarnation:

In the Author of the universe, [the Prophet’s] rational enthusiasm confessed and adored an infinite and eternal being, without form or place, without issue or similitude...existing by the necessity of his own nature, and deriving from himself all moral and intellectual perfection...A philosophic theist might subscribe the popular creed of

⁸⁴ DF 50: iii. 162.

⁸⁵ DF 50: iii. 172 n. 64.

⁸⁶ DF 50: iii. 176.

the Mahometans; a creed too sublime perhaps for our present faculties...The first principle of reason and revelation was confirmed by the voice of Mahomet: his proselytes, from India to Morocco, are distinguished by the name of *Unitarians*; and the danger of idolatry has been prevented by the interdiction of images.⁸⁷

Needless to say, this philosophic, rational (as Gibbon repeatedly emphasizes⁸⁸) and Unitarian religion of seventh-century Arabia is intended to be of some interest to 1780s Englishmen. Samuel Johnson asserted that Gibbon had in his youth been a ‘Mahometan’, so improbably that he alerts one to other possible meanings of the word, one of which was ‘Unitarian’. Gibbon calls Islam Unitarian in several passages.⁸⁹ In so doing, he is not just repeating a commonplace about Islam and tapping into the sympathy shown for it by radical Protestant anti-Trinitarians/Socinians/Unitarians from the later sixteenth century onward.⁹⁰ He is also, more specifically, taking sides in the vivid quarrel between orthodox Trinitarians and Unitarians that split the Anglican Church just when he was writing.⁹¹ Nevertheless, times were changing. In ambiguous language at the end of chapter fifty-four he acknowledges that Unitarianism is the ripest fruit of that liberty of conscience the Reformation had ushered in, and warns against underestimating its strength. But he also expresses alarm at the boundless licence of those who shake the pillars of revelation – the date on the title page is after all 1788!⁹²

⁸⁷ DF 50: iii. 178.

⁸⁸ DF 50: iii. 177–8, 184, 187, 190, 192, 212, 230, 51: iii. 316. De Boulainvilliers, *Vie de Mahomed*, used by Gibbon, had also esteemed Muḥammad’s rationality.

⁸⁹ DF 50: iii. 178, 191, 57: 3.550, etc.

⁹⁰ Giarrizzo, *Edward Gibbon e la cultura europea*, pp. 486–8; M. Mulsow, ‘Socinianism, Islam and the radical uses of Arabic scholarship’, *Al-qantara* xxxi (2010), pp. 549–86; Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment*.

⁹¹ Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’*, pp. 147–72.

⁹² Cf. J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Edward Gibbon in history: Aspects of the text in *The History of the Decline*

In the seventh-century context, though, what Gibbon is pointing out is that Islam was not so much an innovation, nor purely an imposture; rather it was a response to a conjuncture in the history of the Church at which Christianity's inherent intellectual implausibility had become impossible to hide or mend.⁹³ As Gibbon has it,⁹⁴ seventh-century Christianity had degenerated into superstition and idolatry thanks to a priesthood devoted to the 'sacrifice' of the mass, to 'visible splendour of worship' and in particular to 'visible idol(s)' aimed at 'the senses and imagination of man' rather than 'the intellectual image of the Deity', and to a doctrine of Christ whose wilful paradoxes were thrown into relief by 'the honours of the prophet (which) have never transgressed the measure of human virtue'. Consequently, 'metaphysical questions on the attributes of God, and the liberty of man...have never engaged the passions of the [Muslim] people or disturbed the tranquillity of the state' – a view which cannot command unqualified assent, though strictly theological definitions (as distinct from such matters as the succession to the Prophet) were indeed much less divisive in Islam than Christianity. In short, the story of Islam is continuous with that of the early Church. If we do not fully take the measure of the Christological problems thrown up by patristic Christianity, we will neither understand to what extent the Church had 'disgraced the simplicity of the gospel', nor grasp the power of this 'degradation', as Gibbon puts it, to call into being not just new heresies, but a whole new religion. Ecclesiastical authority was not incapable of grasping the gravity of the situation. Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople from 610 until 638, and a Syrian, sought to bridge the divisions with his monothelete doctrine of two natures in Christ (for adherents of

and Fall of the Roman Empire', G.B. Peterson, ed., *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* xi (Salt Lake City, 1990), p. 345: 'The diagnosis of reason as potentially fanatic is a constant theme from beginning to end of the *Decline und Fall*.'

⁹³ Ockley had taken the same line: *Conquest of Syria*, pp. ix-x.

⁹⁴ *DF* 50: iii. 185, 230-31; 51: iii. 316; 57: iii. 531.

the Council of Chalcedon) but only one will (for miaphysite opponents of Chalcedon, as Sergius himself had originally been).⁹⁵ Another theology of unity was being proposed by Muḥammad in precisely the same years and in explicit response to Christian controversies. Sergius's ideas, despite being less radical, were still rejected as heresy – which is how some Christian observers saw Islam too, well into the eighth century.

Historical contextualization aside, though, how are we to understand the psychology of so complex, charismatic and unique an individual? Earlier writers had roundly denounced him as an impostor. But what if one were to suppose some development, and some self-contradiction? In a single mighty paragraph full of perceptiveness and imagination, echoing both Sale and his admirer Voltaire, Gibbon broaches the question 'whether the title of enthusiast or impostor more properly belongs to that extraordinary man'.⁹⁶ Though the conventional view is that volumes five and six 'lack the literary intensity and tonal control of the rest',⁹⁷ Gibbon's most recent editor dissents:

As his handling of the subject of Islam and Mahomet demonstrate(s), in the final instalment of *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon's mastery of historical art had reached a new level of technical refinement and

⁹⁵ J. L. van Dielen, *Geschichte der Patriarchen von Sergios I. bis Johannes VI. (610-715)* (Amsterdam, 1972), pp. 1-56.

⁹⁶ *DF* 50: iii. 212-14. With the quotations that follow, compare Sale's Dedication, on Muḥammad as the founder of a state and a successful lawgiver, not just a man of religion; p. 39 on his mixture of 'ambition', 'conscience' and 'warm imagination'; p. 49 on his transition from 'passiveness and moderation' to conviction that God allowed him to attack his enemies. Also Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, p. 123: 'Mahomet comme tous les enthousiastes, violemment frappé de ses idées, les débita d'abord de bonne foi, les fortifia par des rêveries, se trompa lui-même en trompant les autres, et appuya enfin par des fourberies nécessaires une doctrine qu'il croyait bonne.' On the dangers of decontextualizing Gibbon and overestimating his originality see B.W. Young, 'Preludes and postludes to Gibbon: Variations on an impromptu by J.G.A. Pocock', *History of European ideas* 35 (2009), pp. 418-32.

⁹⁷ O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, pp. 168.

subtlety. He had become the writer of his wishes.⁹⁸

Until the age of forty, Gibbon argues, Muḥammad lived unnoticed, while acquiring from conversations with Jews and Christians a sense of the unity of God and the prospects of salvation for his idolatrous fellow-Meccans.

The energy of a mind incessantly bent on the same object, would convert a general obligation into a particular call; the warm suggestions of the understanding or the fancy, would be felt as the inspirations of heaven...

So Gibbon reasons; and a little further on he observes:

From enthusiasm to imposture, the step is perilous and slippery: the daemon of Socrates affords a memorable instance, how a wise man may deceive himself, how a good man may deceive others...

Adversaries may present themselves; he may forgive them. But will he not 'lawfully hate the enemies of God'? 'The injustice of Mecca, and the choice of Medina, transformed the citizen into a prince, the humble preacher into the leader of armies'. To govern, and to propagate the faith, he was obliged

to comply in some measure with the prejudices and passions of his followers...The use of fraud and perfidy, of cruelty and injustice, were often subservient to the propagation of the faith...By the repetition of such acts, the character of Mahomet must have been gradually

⁹⁸ Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, pp. 169-72, 175-6. Cf. Osterhammel, *Entzauberung Asiens*, p. 267: 'Wie Gibbon...im Wechselspiel von Offenbarung und Politik den Islam entstehen sah, ist eines der feinsinnigsten Beispiele universalhistorischer Analyse, die je geschrieben wurden. Vielleicht keine andere Figur der Geschichte wird in *Decline and Fall* so sorgfältig interpretiert wie der Gründer jener Weltreligion...'

stained...Of his last years, ambition was the ruling passion; and a politician will suspect, that he secretly smiled (the victorious impostor!) at the enthusiasm of his youth and the credulity of his proselytes.

Gibbon had already made a similar point about Constantine, another case of ‘the intrusion of inassimilable action and character’ into ‘linear chronology’:

In an age of religious fervour, the most artful statesmen are observed to feel some part of the enthusiasm which they inspire; and the most orthodox saints assume the dangerous privilege of defending the cause of truth by the arms of deceit and falsehood.⁹⁹

We may also recall Athanasius’s demonstration of ‘the force of a single mind, when it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object’, and his ‘superiority of character and abilities, which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy’.¹⁰⁰

That ‘smile of pity and indulgence (for) the various errors of the vulgar’¹⁰¹ – which occasionally becomes a smile of ‘contempt’ – occurs rather often in Gibbon. He had known, after all, his own youthful moment of enthusiasm, which led him to the bosom of the Roman Church – and thence in double quick time to Lausanne, and a Protestant re-education. He may also have had in mind the Puritan sectaries of the

⁹⁹ DF 20: i. 743. Cf. C. Roberts, *Edward Gibbon and the shape of history* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 25-32, comparing Gibbon’s deployment of ‘sequential multiplicity’ rather than unifying characterization to make sense of shifting and extreme personalities such as Constantine (cf. DF 18: i. 643), Julian and Muḥammad; and p. 47, for the ‘inassimilable action’ quotation.

¹⁰⁰ DF 21: i. 796.

¹⁰¹ DF 2: i. 59.

previous century.¹⁰² Muḥammad cannot be exonerated from the stigma of imposture; but it is a deception, or an abuse,¹⁰³ to which he succumbs gradually, under pressure of events, and forgivably or at least understandably. Once more there echoes here Sale's view that the deceptions practised by Muḥammad the Prophet are extenuated by the achievements of Muḥammad the prince and lawgiver.¹⁰⁴

The sources Gibbon had to go on for this powerful psycho-portrait¹⁰⁵ were late, principally the Syrian Ayyubid prince and man of letters Abū 'l-Fidā' (d. 1331), whose universal history Gagnier partially translated into Latin and used as the basis for his *La vie de Mahomet*. He also had on his desk two other French biographies by de Boulainvilliers and Claude-Étienne Savary (1782-83); two French dictionary articles published in the same year, 1697, namely d'Herbelot's and the one by Pierre Bayle, 'the sceptic of Rotterdam', in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, though neither impressed the historian much;¹⁰⁶ also (despite their 'gross bigotry'¹⁰⁷) Marracci's Latin Qur'ān commentary and Prideaux's *True nature of imposture*. The Qur'ān he knew in Sale's very creditable version with abundant scholia. But Gibbon lacked the caution that becomes the scholar who uses translations. He allows that the ignorant, devout Arabian may be impressed, but not 'the European infidel'. He permits himself the easy sneer: 'If the composition of the Koran exceed the faculties of a man, to what superior intelligence

¹⁰² T.-M. Jallais, 'Gibbon et la pierre noire de l'islam: Quelques remarques sur le chapitre L de *The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*', in C. D'Haussy, ed., *Quand religions et confessions se regardent: Troisième colloque, Strasbourg, septembre 1997* (Paris, 1998), pp. 175-7.

¹⁰³ DF 50: iii. 215: 'Mahomet...abused the claims of a prophet'.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Venturino, in Châtellier (ed.), *Religions en transition*, pp. 243-62.

¹⁰⁵ Enumerated at DF 50: iii. 190 n. 111, and cf. 232 n. 187, quoted above, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ D'Herbelot: DF 50: iii. 190 n. 111. Bayle: DF 25: i. 974 n. 45, and 50: iii. 190 n. 110: 'In the article of Mahomet, Bayle has shewn how indifferently wit and philosophy supply the absence of genuine information.'

¹⁰⁷ DF 50: iii. 210 n. 149; also 185 n. 101.

should we ascribe the Iliad of Homer or the Philippics of Demosthenes?’¹⁰⁸ It was not just that he had no Arabic, while being aware that ‘our education in the Greek and Latin schools may have fixed in our minds a standard of exclusive taste’.¹⁰⁹ He also lacked any but the haziest idea of the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry to which the Qur’ān must be compared, and which he pronounced (after perusing a few English translations by his friend Sir William Jones) ‘obscure and obsolete’, and over-rated by Jones.¹¹⁰ Contrast Goethe’s intense and sensitive study of pre-Islamic and other Arabic and Persian poetry, and of the Arabic language.¹¹¹ Given his awareness of how carefully cultivated style can captivate the reader, Gibbon might have reflected more on the Qur’ān’s reception and impact, and by no means only among ignorant Arabs. As he himself remarks, ‘it is not the propagation but the permanency of his religion that deserves our wonder’.¹¹²

The Caliphate and the later Muslim empires

Chapter fifty carries the story on into the early decades of Umayyad rule in Damascus. It is the tale of how was ‘divulged the dangerous secret, that the Arabian caliphs might be created elsewhere than in the city of the prophet’.¹¹³ The self-conscious borrowing of Tacitus’s phrase about the Year of the Four Emperors, after Nero’s suicide, reminds us of the comparative history of empires Gibbon has constantly in mind.¹¹⁴ There was that contrast already noted between ‘the firm edifice of Roman

¹⁰⁸ DF 50. iii. 181-2.

¹⁰⁹ DF 52: iii. 353.

¹¹⁰ DF 50: iii. 165 n. 41; 52: iii. 353 n. 71.

¹¹¹ K. Mommsen, *Goethe und die arabische Welt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1989²), esp. pp. 31-156; note his enthusiasm for Jones’s work (pp. 38-9, 52-3).

¹¹² DF 50: iii. 230.

¹¹³ DF 50: iii. 225; cf. Tacitus, *Histories*, i. 4.

¹¹⁴ On Gibbon’s comparisons of Rome with the Islamic empires see Womersley, *Transformation*, pp. 209-11; Roberts, *Edward Gibbon* 120-24.

power' and 'the transient dynasties of Asia'. And in the conclusion to chapter fifty-one, where Gibbon describes the extent of the Umayyad Caliphate, he remarks:

We should vainly seek the indissoluble union and easy obedience that pervaded the government of Augustus and the Antonines; but the progress of the Mahometan religion diffused over this ample space a general resemblance of manners and opinions.¹¹⁵

Gibbon's concern with comparison also shows in the way he weights his account of the Arab campaigns in chapter fifty-one, 'dispatching', as he puts it, 'with brevity the remote and less interesting conquests of the East, and reserving a fuller narrative for those domestic countries, which had been included within the pale of the Roman empire'.¹¹⁶ If there is here the faint shadow of an 'intra-Roman narrative', it is purely in order to facilitate comparison with the Caliphate; while the history of the empires which succeeded the Abbasids will lead us into regions very remote from those trodden by Roman legions.

From Muḥammad's death and the beginning of the conquests down to the reign of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685-705), Gibbon could 'abridge'¹¹⁷ Ockley. For the later Umayyads and Abbasids (chapter fifty-two) he relied on such extracts from Arabic historians as had been translated into Latin, French or English, notably Bar Hebraeus and Abū 'l-Fidā'. He also had at his elbow the *Universal history*. The precise extent of his debt remains to be determined, but it is a fact that the *Universal history* had already covered the story on which Gibbon embarked in chapters fifty-two and fifty-

¹¹⁵ DF 51: iii. 322.

¹¹⁶ DF 51: iii. 237. On the same page, note the comparison of the Arabs' campaigns in every direction with the Republic's policy of one war at a time.

¹¹⁷ DF 50: iii. 227 n. 179.

seven, taking in the growing power of Turkish mercenaries under the ninth- and tenth-century Abbasids ('So uniform are the mischiefs of military despotism, that I seem to repeat the story of the praetorians of Rome'¹¹⁸), and eventually issuing in what amounted to a new transference of power, this time away from the Arabs, and sealed by the Seljuk Tughril Beg's conquest of Baghdad in 1055. In 1071, Alp Arslan triumphed over the East Roman emperor at Manzikert. 'In this fatal day', writes Gibbon,

the Asiatic provinces of Rome were irretrievably sacrificed...Since the first conquests of the caliphs, the establishment of the Turks in Anatolia...was the most deplorable loss which the church and empire had sustained.¹¹⁹

Gibbon takes the story of the Turkic peoples up again in chapter sixty-four, recounting the rise of Chingiz Khan and his Mongols; their termination of the Abbasid Caliphate by the conquest of Baghdad in 1258; and then the ascent of the Ottomans.

I have long since asserted my claim [he reminds us] to introduce the nations, the immediate or remote authors of the fall of the Roman empire; nor can I refuse myself to those events, which, from their uncommon magnitude, will interest a philosophic mind in the history of blood.¹²⁰

On the same page Gibbon reminds us how 'the rise and progress of the Ottomans...are connected with the most important scenes of modern history', but also with 'the great eruption of the Moguls and Tartars' and, much earlier in his narrative, of Attila's Huns.

¹¹⁸ DF 52: iii. 366.

¹¹⁹ DF 57: iii. 538, 546.

¹²⁰ DF 64: iii. 791.

He might have mentioned the Arabs too. The impact of these ‘pastoral nations’ on settled societies is one of his great themes, and his melding of history and ethnography a major part of what made *The decline and fall* so novel.¹²¹ The comparative history of empires embraces the desert as well as the sown. And the story was not yet over in Gibbon’s day: indeed, ‘we may enquire with anxious curiosity, whether Europe is still threatened with a repetition of those calamities’.¹²² Tamerlane’s conquests are detailed in chapter sixty-five, not least for the blow they dealt to Ottoman expansion. Chapters sixty-seven and sixty-eight narrate the Ottomans’ recovery and, finally, the fall of Constantinople to Mehmet II in 1453. The last three chapters of *The decline and fall* revert to Old Rome on the Tiber, and its fortunes between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries.

That Gibbon saw fit to provide this detailed narrative of the later Muslim empires provokes some reflection on how *The decline and fall* tends, as it unfolds – and thanks especially to its Islamic and Asiatic focus – toward a more universal, or global, view of history. This both highlights Gibbon’s originality in his own day, and helps locate him in relation to the scholarly priorities of the twenty-first century.

Toward universal/global history

For artistic reasons, and to remain true to his title, Gibbon qualifies his Islamic and Asiatic focus as an excursive line, and returns at the end of the work to its starting point in Rome, once of the Caesars and now of the Popes but also of Cola di Rienzi and his populist politics, a harbinger (or so it was felt in later times) of things to come. At the end Gibbon allows his European readership (and himself) the satisfaction that

¹²¹ Osterhammel, *Entzauberung Asiens*, pp. 264-7.

¹²² DF, ‘General observations’: ii. 511-12 (here the Arabs are included).

they are the true heirs of Antiquity, whatever the travails it went through in its decline or however torturous the road they have followed to their destination. This more Eurocentric Gibbon of the first three volumes and the last three chapters is the one who has mainly been read up to our own day. Yet the excursus makes clear there had been – and indeed remained – alternative routes out of Antiquity.

The task Gibbon sets himself, of delineating the fall of the New Rome as well as the Old, carries him well past the classic age of Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries and obliges him, while recognizing Abbasid decline,¹²³ to appreciate the virtues and achievements of the Turks, first Seljuks, then Mongols, finally Ottomans. This imbues his account of the Islamic empires with an impetus absent from many later ones. These rarely adopted so broad a canvas either in space or in time. They were much more the victim of linguistic specialism (Arabic, Persian or Turkish) and general academic professionalization than was Gibbon, a gentleman scholar happily ignorant of all Oriental tongues. And the huge increase in availability and awareness, since Gibbon's day, of Arabic literature has led to so great a fascination with the Golden Age of ninth- to tenth-century Baghdad, that the sequel tends to be classified as 'decline' even when the military expansion, political might and economic wealth of the later empires is obvious. This fits all too well with the decline-and-fall model we have Gibbon to thank for. But Gibbon was less its victim than we are. On the one hand, prejudices inculcated by the prestige of Greek and Latin prevented him getting so excited about the cultural achievements of the Abbasid age (about which anyway he was ill informed) as to see the sequel in terms of major decline.¹²⁴ On the other hand, he lived at a time when educated Europeans might be knowledgeable about Asia and appreciate its historical

¹²³ DF 52: iii. 372-4.

¹²⁴ DF 52: iii. 352-3.

originality and sometimes even its contemporary vigour, but just before the industrial, military and colonial expansion of the nineteenth century – and the racism stoked by the Greek uprising of 1821 and its Turkophobe apologists – encouraged an arrogance that made it hard to take Asia (or, perhaps, Gibbon on Islam) seriously any more.¹²⁵

Gibbon perceived the territories of ‘Eslamiah (as we say Christendom)’ – he found the term in d’Herbelot – to be still, in his day, at their maximal extent: ‘the losses in Spain have been overbalanced by the conquests in India, Tartary, and the European Turkey’.¹²⁶ One of the achievements of post-colonial historiography and the project to provincialize Europe has been to get away from decline-oriented assumptions about the Islamic empires and highlight their endurance, and colonialism’s distinctly peripheral impact, until the mid-eighteenth or even early nineteenth¹²⁷ century.

Growing attention to the later Ottomans, the Safavids and Mughals, and the Qajars, has in turn facilitated the opening up of historical research in a more truly global perspective.¹²⁸ There are signs that Gibbon, besides setting an example for study of both the earlier and (by implication) the later Islamic empires, was also toward the end of his life developing a view of his subject that anticipated this global, or at least Eurasian, perspective.

After the last volume was published in 1788, Gibbon went back to the first page of volume 1, where he had defined his purpose as ‘to deduce the most important circumstances of its [Rome’s] decline and fall; a revolution which will ever be

¹²⁵ Osterhammel, *Entzauberung Asiens*, pp. 12-13, 20-21, 35-7, 52-3, 55, 376-82.

¹²⁶ *DF* 51: iii. 322 n. 219; cf. B. d’Herbelot, *Bibliothèque orientale ou Dictionnaire universel* (Paris, 1697), 325b (‘Eslamiah’ is Gibbon’s misreading of d’Herbelot’s ‘Eslamiat’).

¹²⁷ Osterhammel, *Entzauberung Asiens*, p. 22.

¹²⁸ See for example M.G.S. Hodgson, *The venture of Islam: Conscience and history in a world civilization* (Chicago, 1974) iii, esp. pp. 3–15; J. Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The rise and fall of global empires 1400-2000* (London 2007); S.F. Dale, *The Muslim empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (Cambridge 2010).

remembered, and is still felt by the nations of the earth.’ He took out his pen and in the margin of his copy rephrased his objective as ‘to prosecute the decline and fall of the Empire of Rome: of whose language, Religion and laws the impression will be long preserved in our own, and the neighbouring countries of Europe.’ And having in this way shifted his emphasis away from ‘wars, and the administration of public affairs,...the principal subjects of history’, as he had once believed, toward the durability of culture, and from the whole world to Europe alone as the field of Rome’s influence, he added an ‘NB’ to himself: ‘Have Asia and Africa, from Japan to Morocco, any feeling or memory of the Roman Empire?’¹²⁹ Without underestimating the extent to which *The decline and fall* already enlarges European into Eurasian history,¹³⁰ one appreciates that in this note Gibbon is moving on, not denying Rome but relativizing her, and at the same time slightly shifting emphasis away from her politico-military demise.

A few isolated voices have suspected the full implications of *The decline and fall*’s ‘bikontinentales Megadrama’. The phrase comes from Jürgen Osterhammel’s *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats* (2001), in which Gibbon’s discussion of

¹²⁹ DF 9: i. 252; iii. 1094.

¹³⁰ Cf. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, i. 3–4, 113. Note also Gibbon’s undated ‘Outlines of the history of the world’, ed. P.B. Craddock, *The English essays of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 163–98; cf. J.G.A. Pocock, ‘The “Outlines of the history of the world”’, in A.T. Grafton and J.H.M. Salmon, eds., *Historians and ideologues* (Rochester, NY, 2001), pp. 211–30. In this twenty-folio draft, Gibbon mechanically divides his material by century from 800 to 1500, sketching developments in ‘the more civilized part of the Globe...divided between the Christians and the Mahometans’ – these are the first words of his text. Even more provocative is his transition to the thirteenth century: ‘We may now contemplate two of the greatest powers, that have ever given laws to Mankind; the one founded on force, the other on opinion: I mean the Tartar Conquerors, and the Roman Pontifs.’ Despite an undeniable weighting of the ‘Outlines’ toward Europe, and in particular the proto-national polities of France and England, there is no mistaking Gibbon’s conviction that the history of the Islamic empires is an inalienable part of world history.

With Gibbon’s reference to Tartar and ecclesiastical law, compare (DF 64: iii. 793 and n. 6) his unfavourable comparison of ‘the Catholic inquisitors of Europe’ with Chingiz Khan’s ‘pure theism and perfect toleration’, which anticipated that of Locke. As part of DF’s context if not influence, note Edmund Burke’s constitutionalist assessment (that very same year, 1788) of Chingiz Khan and Tamerlane against Warren Hastings’s misrule of India, and royal arbitrariness generally: Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment*, pp. 96–110, 124–5.

Islam is recognized in passing.¹³¹ Arnaldo Momigliano went so far as to suggest that we might compare the ‘elation at the widening of the intellectual horizon’ conveyed by Gibbon’s ‘great picture of the medieval world west of India’, in which Islam dominated the view, with the consequences of ‘the opening up of the American and the Asiatic worlds to English enterprise’.¹³² But work on Gibbon still focuses on the fall of the western Roman Empire and the origins of Europe, therefore on the first half of *The decline and fall* to the exclusion of the second. We are still roughly where we were in the nineteenth century. Our understanding of Gibbon’s intellectual environment has admittedly been extended by John Pocock’s *Barbarism and religion*. The title of this work in six emulative volumes echoes Gibbon’s full realization and admission, but only as he was about to lay down his pen, that his project was no longer just about ‘decline and fall’: instead it had turned into an account of ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’.¹³³ The immediate context of Gibbon’s phrase in fact concerns only the role of ‘the Goths and the Christians’ in ‘the ruin of ancient Rome’, specifically the city of that name. Given its position at the end of the work, it is understandable that Pocock

¹³¹ J. Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats: Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich* (Göttingen, 2001), pp. 76, 101, 135-6.

¹³² Momigliano, in id., *Sesto contributo*, pp. 262-3. G. Stroumsa has recently discussed the eye-opening impact of the discovery of America on early modern European study of religion, and compared Europe’s reaction to Amerindian religions with its medieval incomprehension of Islam: *A new science: The discovery of religion in the age of reason* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010) ch. i, esp. pp. 19-20. In his first published book, Gibbon had fantasized about discovering a whole Iroquois literature, which might offer a unique encounter with the human mind in circumstances Europeans had never experienced, and governed by utterly contrary manners and religious opinions: *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* (London, 1761), pp. 61-2, §47 (ed. Mankin and Craddock p. 122, and cf. p. 275, trans. Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, i. 230). John Gibbon – whose great-grandnephew Edward proudly but wrongly believed himself to be (J. Gawthorp, ‘A history of Edward Gibbon’s six autobiographical manuscripts’, *British Library journal* xxv (1999), p. 188) – claimed to have found rudiments of heraldry in the war paints of Virginian Indians, and drew the surprising conclusion ‘that Heraldry was ingrafted *naturally* into the sense of humane race’: *Autobiographies*, pp. 8, 213, 368.

¹³³ DF 71: iii. 1068; Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, i. 2-3: ‘During the twelve or more years in which he wrote six volumes with a span of thirteen centuries, ‘decline and fall’ became ‘the triumph of barbarism and religion’, and the *Decline and Fall* became many things both within and exceeding his original intentions.’ Pocock’s suppression of the phrase’s first half in the series title is redeemed in the titles of volumes 5 (*Religion: The first triumph*) and 6 (*Barbarism: Triumph in the West*).

chooses, in the very first pages of his first volume, to extend its application beyond the collapse of the Roman West to the continuing history of East Rome and the Islamic world. If we imagine, though, that this huge development is to be part of Pocock's brief, we are mistaken. What was getting more and more obvious in his earlier volumes,¹³⁴ Pocock formally stated in the Envoi to his fifth volume (2010) and confirms in his just-published sixth (2015), namely that he accepts the conventional judgment that *The decline and fall* climaxes with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and the end of its 'grand narrative', while he regards the three 1788 volumes as 'radically different histories' lacking a grand narrative; 'it is far from certain that Gibbon resolved on ways of dealing with them, or that European historiography...offered him the means of doing so...[T]he volumes of 1788 seem best left to separate treatment and very likely to other hands'.¹³⁵ Pocock leaves untold half the story as Gibbon divides it up, or four fifths of it chronologically. There is an extremely rich tradition of Gibbon scholarship even without Pocock; and with Pocock, our appreciation of the historian of western Rome's decline and fall has been decisively deepened. But one of Pocock's achievements has been to make the almost total dearth of work on Gibbon and Islam even more painfully apparent, while obscuring the extent of European scholarship on

¹³⁴ E.g. *Barbarism and religion*, i. 3, iii. 1: Gibbon's eastward turn is 'the strangest of his decisions'. Also i. 2, on Gibbon's trajectory from the Germanic successor states 'in whose barbarism may be found the seeds of European liberty' to 'the less rewarding question of with what (if anything) Slav and Turkish barbarians have replaced the empire in the east'. See also, in similar vein, i. 304; ii. 4, 121 ('alien'), 303 ('great difficulty'), 371, 373-4 ('deeply problematic'), 379-80, 390, 393-4, 402; iv. 230.

¹³⁵ Pocock, *Barbarism and religion*, v. 385-6, and cf. 374; vi. 4-9, 19, 335, 339, 371, 374, 415-16, 438, 455, 492, 501-9. Ghosh's explaining where Gibbon went wrong (above, n. 5) is more interesting than Pocock's lamenting it; but neither tackles the eastward turn. Pocock even offers the canard that Gibbon could not have written the history of the Ottoman Empire after 1453 because its relations with 'the Holy Roman Empire modernized by its Kaiser, [and] the Third Rome of Muscovy modernized by its Tsar' would have obliged him to recognize that 'Caesar was not dead, and empire had not declined': in Peterson (ed.), *Tanner Lectures*, xi. 314. He characteristically ignores the fact that Süleyman the Magnificent was in many respects Justinian updated.

the Muslim world that had already accumulated before Gibbon's day.¹³⁶

Decline?

If part of the global turn has been new appreciation of the vigour of the later Islamic empires, which Gibbon anticipated, another part of it is a more nuanced view of the decline of empires generally. Gibbon gradually became aware of the trap he had set himself, with his immense narrative of East Rome's 'one thousand and fifty-eight years...of premature and perpetual decay' from 395 to 1453, as he put it already in chapter 32.¹³⁷ He had started out to write a tragedy, or at least a lament for the loss of Rome's republican virtue; but along the way he was seduced by the intrinsic interest and dynamism of his materials. The historian in him gained ground on the man of letters.¹³⁸ His heirs, rather than face the whole second millennium of Rome – and into its third – under the sign of decline, rebranded it 'Byzantium' with its own distinctive rises and falls.¹³⁹ As Norman Baynes wryly observed: 'An empire to endure a death agony of a thousand years must possess considerable powers of recuperation.'¹⁴⁰ It has gradually been appreciated that, as a hermeneutic tool, 'decline' becomes more useless the further it is stretched out over time. Among Islamologists, the habit of setting up the classical Islam of ninth- to tenth-century Baghdad by making it a Golden Age, and then writing off the next millennium of Muslim history as 'decline', is now seen to

¹³⁶ For example, the *Universal history* is almost totally ignored in Pocock's investigation of the ecology within which *DF* came to be: *Barbarism and religion*, i, 10, 29-30.

¹³⁷ *DF* 32: ii, 237.

¹³⁸ Not the chronicler on the rhetor, as he deprecatingly describes the tension in *Autobiographies*, p. 308. See the sensitive comments of P. Ghosh, 'Gibbon's Dark Ages: Some remarks on the genesis of the *Decline and fall*', *Journal of Roman studies* lxxiii (1983), p. 5 n. 24, to which I am indebted.

¹³⁹ J.K.J. Thomson, *Decline in history: The European experience* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 63-96. On Gibbon's use of the term 'Byzantine' see above, n. 8.

¹⁴⁰ N. Baynes, *The Byzantine Empire* (London, 1925), p. 7. Cf. Momigliano, in id., *Sesto contributo*, p. 236: 'Ciò che piuttosto è curioso, perché contraddittorio, è che questa decadenza è statica. Questo impero che non muore mai...sembra resistere a tutte le facezie di Gibbon'; and P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), p. 251: 'Se représenter Byzance comme immuable pendant onze siècles serait tomber dans le piège qu'elle a elle-même tendu.'

convey a colonialist subtext ripe for more incisive exposure than it has yet received, as Thomas Bauer recently pointed out, at the same time proposing that historians pay greater attention to what he calls the ‘post-formative period’ of Islam, starting with the Seljuks.¹⁴¹ Ottomanists likewise have come to reject the old view that the second half of Ottoman history, from 1600 onward, was an unremitting story of decline. Instead they prefer ‘to analyse the notion of decline, to study this concept as a phenomenon in intellectual history, and thereby to limit its wholesale and tendentious application.’¹⁴²

If the field of late Antiquity has recently seen a recrudescence of ‘decline’ analyses, against the optimistic, transformational account offered notably by Peter Brown,¹⁴³ this is the result of focusing on a relatively short late Antiquity ending in the fifth-century Latin West. Things look quite different if we switch to the Islamic horizon and broader geographical frame of the First Millennium project I mentioned earlier, which preserves the specificity and impetus of the interaction between late Antiquity

¹⁴¹ T. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin, 2011), pp. 21-2, 53, 58-9, 161, 296-7. There is also the secularists’ insistence that Islam declined after the abandonment of rationalism, at the latest after Ibn Rushd (d. 1198): S. Wild, ‘Islamic Enlightenment and the paradox of Averroes’, *Die Welt des Islams* xxxvi (1996), pp. 379-90.

¹⁴² S. Faroqhi, ‘In search of Ottoman history’, in H. Berktay and S. Faroqhi, eds., *New approaches to state and peasant in Ottoman history* (London, 1992), pp. 232-3; cf. A. Mikhail and C.M. Philliou, ‘The Ottoman Empire and the imperial turn’, *Comparative studies in society and history* liv (2012), pp. 725-34. On Ottoman decline or at least uninventiveness as a Eurocentric construct, see C. Finkel, ‘The treacherous cleverness of hindsight’: Myths of Ottoman decay’, in G. MacLean, ed., *Re-orienting the Renaissance: Cultural exchanges with the East* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 148-74; J. Goody, *The theft of history* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 99-118; Malcolm, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* lxxv (2012), pp. 289-90 (Ottoman decline and collapse as a precondition, in seventeenth-century thought, of the Millennium).

¹⁴³ E.g. J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Decline and fall of the Roman city* (Oxford, 2001); B. Ward-Perkins, *The fall of Rome and the end of civilization* (Oxford, 2005) (answered by P. Brown, *The rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (revised ed., Chichester, 2013), pp. xxx-xxxii). None of this is to deny that there is such a thing as congenital weakness. Cf. R. Matthee, *Persia in crisis: Safavid decline and the fall of Isfahan* (London, 2012), p. xxvii: ‘In today’s academic climate, skeptical about (non-Western) decline and especially averse to decline as a moral category, one is almost forced to reject this type of interpretation out of hand and to focus on manifestations of continued vitality in the form of artistic expression, religious disputation, or overlooked provincial initiative. But to do so [in the case of the Safavids] would be to ignore the many unmistakable signs of trouble.’

and Islam, while allowing for the opening Gibbon made to Second Millennium developments as well. In conclusion, though, it is only fair to ask: did Gibbon perceive Islam too as a phenomenon of decline?

There is no single answer to this question. Gibbon sees the religion of Islam as admirably rational compared to Christianity, which Rome had adopted with such mixed consequences. It also possessed what one might call a moral impetus that permitted it to overturn rational expectations. Gibbon gives the example of how in the Roman army 'a just preference was given to the climates of the North over those of the South', but then adds, in another of his manuscript marginalia: 'It is the triumph of cold over heat; which may however and has been surmounted by moral causes.'¹⁴⁴ The quondam captain in the Hampshire grenadiers and historian of Rome's wars had since immersed himself in the rise of Islam, and drawn from the spectacular Arab conquests (coming from the south) conclusions cultural and 'moral' as well as military, with distinct implications for Eurocentric (northern) perspectives on history. Even when finally the Arabs' 'enthusiasm' decayed, and 'they insensibly lost the freeborn and martial virtues of the desert', the hardy and valorous northerners who supplanted them were Turks not Europeans.¹⁴⁵

But Islam too is in the end tyranny and imposture. This may not emerge so clearly if we look at it in the context of medieval Christianity. For Gibbon, the acid test is how it compares with the ancient Greeks and their modern European heirs. The nearest Gibbon comes to a confession of personal faith is in chapter fifty-two where he

¹⁴⁴ DF 1: i. 39; iii. 1095.

¹⁴⁵ DF 52: iii. 365.

discusses the cultural achievements of the Abbasids. After complaining of the Arabs' indifference to Greek literature, poetry and historiography, he continues with an important passage already quoted in part:

Our education in the Greek and Latin schools may have fixed in our minds a standard of exclusive taste; and I am not forward to condemn the literature and judgment of nations, of whose language I am ignorant. Yet I *know* that the classics have much to teach, and I *believe* that the Orientals have much to learn: the temperate dignity of style, the graceful proportions of art, the forms of visible and intellectual beauty...The influence of truth and reason is of a less ambiguous complexion. The philosophers of Athens and Rome enjoyed the blessings, and asserted the rights, of civil and religious freedom. Their moral and political writings might have gradually unlocked the fetters of Eastern despotism, diffused a liberal spirit of enquiry and toleration, and encouraged the Arabian sages to suspect that their caliph was a tyrant and their prophet an impostor.¹⁴⁶

This 'liberal spirit of enquiry' cannot be fostered by the unaided efforts of philosophers. It requires also a spirit of 'emulation' between culturally similar yet independent states, such as existed in ancient Greece but also, Gibbon thought, in the Europe of his own day – both to be contrasted with the self-satisfied slumbers of

¹⁴⁶ DF 52: iii. 353 (and cf. Roberts, *Edward Gibbon*, pp. 12-13, on the tension between conviction and ambiguity in Gibbon's sparing use of italics). Compare 48: iii. 24: 'The territories of Athens, Sparta, and their allies, do not exceed a moderate province of France or England: but after the trophies of Salamis and Plataea, they expand in our fancy to the gigantic size of Asia, which had been trampled under the feet of the glorious Greeks.'

Byzantium.¹⁴⁷ As for the Caliphate, it is now recognized that Abbasid decline gave birth to a commonwealth of prosperous, populous and competing states, which merits comparison with both ancient Greece and Enlightenment Europe. But here, Gibbon's translated sources and the secondary scholarship failed him,¹⁴⁸ and he does little to evoke the world of Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ghazālī, or even of Maimonides – hence his underestimate of the impact of Greek ethical and political thought on the Arabs. His is, in the end, a political history of Islam, and the philosophers, his natural allies, remain in the shadows. If he were writing today, their insistence on pursuing rational enquiry while taking account of the scriptures would perhaps have made him less in awe of that 'fixed... standard of exclusive taste' imposed by the Greeks and Romans. And the result would almost certainly have been a still more generous estimate of Islam than that which he published, just ten years before Napoleon's invasion of Egypt pushed relations between Europe and the Muslim world into a new phase.

University of Cambridge

GARTH FOWDEN

¹⁴⁷ DF 53: iii. 421.

¹⁴⁸ On the exiguous sources available to Gibbon (Pococke, J.J. Brucker) see H. Daiber, 'The reception of Islamic philosophy at Oxford in the 17th century: The Pococks' (father and son) contribution to the understanding of Islamic philosophy in Europe', in C.E. Butterworth and B.A. Kessel, eds., *The introduction of Arabic philosophy into Europe* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 68-73.