Taking a leaf from Gibbon: appraising Byzantium

'In the revolution of ten centuries, not a single discovery was made to exalt the dignity or promote the happiness of mankind.' The Editors trailed this celebrated assessment from Chapter 53 of Gibbon's Decline and Fall *before scholars representing contrasting perspectives. The following responses were received.*

ANDREW LOUTH

One is tempted to counter Gibbon by thinking of examples to the contrary, and that would not be difficult to do: there immediately springs to mind the example of hospitals, which can be traced in Byzantium from the fourth century to the Fall of Constantinople. These were places where the sick and dying could be cared for, and medical understanding advanced and practised for the benefit of a wider range of human suffering than was the case in Western Europe even in Gibbon's time. But to do that would be to accept Gibbon's criteria of value: ever-increasing discoveries, more information, for the benefit of humanity. Such criteria would have meant little to the Byzantines, and rather than our applying inappropriate criteria to them, it is perhaps more instructive for us to seek to understand their own criteria of value. Byzantines made new discoveries, but were not deeply impressed by them. This is not surprising when one realizes that St John Damascene described the Incarnation of Christ as 'the newest of all new things, the only new thing under the sun' (the last three words recall the refrain of Ecclesiastes, and need to be given their full force). Those who pursued the 'inner wisdom' of the Byzantines – monks and ascetics primarily, but also, we may suppose, devout Christians seeking to follow Christ in a whole-hearted way – were not looking for any new things, but rather endeavouring to deepen their understanding of this one 'new thing'. The spiritual wisdom they elaborated – from the Scriptures, from the tradition of classical philosophy, especially Plato (even though any explicit study of Plato was consigned to the 'outer wisdom'), and from the experience of ascetics in deserts and caves, in caves in the mountains and on pillars reaching up into the sky, and in

communities where they served one another and those outside, perhaps also in the hidden (though not undemanding) asceticism of family life and secular avocations (though of this we hear little) – this spiritual wisdom is perhaps the greatest legacy that the Byzantines have bequeathed to those who have come after them. Under the Ottomans, the monks of Mount Athos sought to distil this wisdom, and the most influential selection from this tradition, known as the *Philokalia*, compiled by St Makarios of Corinth and St Nikodimos the Hagiorite, was published in 1782 in Venice. It soon achieved popularity in Orthodox countries, and in this century, through translations (the English translation is now almost complete), the *Philokalia* has found readers among Christians of the West; and even non-Christians, who, surrounded by 'new things' of the modern world, yet find in themselves a hunger that the wisdom of the Byzantines seems able to meet. Gibbon would doubtless be surprised that an extensive selection of Byzantine ascetical theology, published when he was at work on *The Decline and Fall*, should be so eagerly read two centuries later (one recalls his quip on the homilies of Antiochus, a Sabaïte monk: 'still extant, if what no one reads may be said to be extant'), but he would also be surprised at how little faith still survives two centuries later in the ideals of the Enlightenment. The wisdom of the Byzantines, something that Gibbon scarcely perceived, is proving itself more enduring that his, and his contemporaries', enthusiasm for novelty.

JOHN HALDON

Gibbon was, no less than any of us, a product of his times, and so in one sense there is little point in taking issue with a pronouncement so firmly determined by the values and moral prejudices of the Enlightenment, more particularly in the form expressed by Gibbon: he was keenly aware of the 'progressive' nature of English parliamentary governance and English distaste for a Church independent of the secular authority, and he stood at the threshold of one of the most revolutionary socio-economic transformations in human history, the industrial revolution. Progress was not yet the ideological symbol of western European imperialism which it was to become during the first half of the nineteenth century, yet it was certainly a concept with which Gibbon was quite familiar. Yet the civilization he dismissed so brutally had a notion of time

and change which was in many senses the reverse of Enlightenment ideas, for 'progress' in Byzantium meant the recovery and return to a former, and better, state of affairs, one in which the Roman empire was the undisputed single empire, guarded by God, and endowed with the sacred mission of bringing the whole world into the ecumene of Orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, and perhaps because of the intellectual programme implicit in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, it is clear that there were many aspects of Byzantine culture and historical development which Gibbon either ignored or was ideologically unable to recognize. Quite apart from the visual achievements promoted by Byzantine ecclesiastical and monastic life, which have largely determined the form and content of Orthodox Christian architecture and decorative programmes throughout the Balkans (and wherever Orthodox Balkan people have emigrated), the sophisticated theology of thinkers such as Maximos Homologetes or Symeon the New Theologian have marked important moments in the development of medieval European thought, however much Gibbon may have wished to dismiss them . (In fact, of course, when he actually came to discuss orthodox Christian theology, he didn't.) More pragmatically, and perhaps much more humbly, Byzantine military architecture exerted a crucial influence on the development of western European fortifications, with consequent implications for the course of western European warfare and politics. And at the most humble level of all, there is evidence to suggest that it was from the Byzantine armies in Italy in the tenth century that Norman mercenaries adopted their famous kite-shaped shield, such an essential element of the panoply which carried them to victory in Italy and Sicily, and also England, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and influenced the political history of those regions so dramatically.

In terms of literature and scholarship as well as politics, it was to Byzantine authors and texts that Renaissance scholars and leaders turned when they wanted to find out about, first, the Ottomans and how to deal with them and, later, in the context of increasing national self-awareness, the pre-Renaissance and early medieval antecedents of their own lands – in Italy in particular, for example, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the value of both Procopius and Agathias was 'discovered'. The same goes for a number of other Byzantine writers.

Although it was the Islamic world as well as Byzantium which served to

transmit the classical heritage to the Renaissance and Enlightenment West, there is no doubt that it was through collections of Byzantine manuscripts and books, moved through various owners or dealers as both gifts and sales, that many texts were preserved, edited and recovered for further study, thus influencing directly the evolution and content of modern classical scholarship. But in addition, it is important to emphasize that, through a complex process of selection of texts and motifs, this classical heritage was reworked and came also indirectly to influence the cultural capital and the moral programme of the ruling élites of the great imperial powers, particularly Great Britain, during the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, it still plays a powerful role. The ultimate irony is perhaps that Gibbon was himself a product of this very reworking of a cultural heritage – part of which derived from a source he clearly found quite abhorrent.

RUTH WEBB

Generalizations as sweeping as this one are usually easy to undermine. But the quotation points to a wider issue: the ideas underlying the judgement of Byzantine civilization here and in the rest of Chapter 53 of *The Decline and Fall*. I am not entirely sure what precise philosophical ideas were evoked for Gibbon and his readers by the words 'happiness' or 'dignity' – or 'mankind', come to that (earlier on in the chapter the ban on concubinage is described as an obstacle to 'happiness' in the private sphere, which leaves me none the wiser) – but the general sentiment is all too clear and only too familiar. Despite the quantity of scholarship on society, art and texts which tries to understand and explain the values and ideas of the thousand-year empire dismissed by Gibbon, it is still possible to hear similar judgements on the Byzantine achievement, even at respectable academic conferences. The absence of Byzantium from studies of various aspects of the Western tradition is perhaps more pernicious still, bad publicity being better than no publicity. Overt criticism can be countered, but complete silence is a more formidable adversary. In this respect, it is Gibbon's emphasis on 'discovery', with its implications of originality and progress, which is perhaps the most significant aspect of this quotation.

In the surrounding paragraphs of Chapter 53, Gibbon, inspired by the 'honest' narrative of Liudprand of Cremona, paints a grim picture of

Byzantine civilization and culture . The Byzantines are depicted as a servile people whose rulers are equally enslaved to the tired rituals of the court. While we owe them some gratitude for the preservation of Greek literature, they squandered their classical heritage. In Gibbon's own words, the Byzantine élite 'held in their lifeless hands the riches of their fathers. . . they read, they praised, they compiled, but their languid souls seemed alike incapable of thought or action.' Of Byzantine rhetorical writings Gibbon complains that 'in every page our taste and reason are wounded by the choice of gigantic and obsolete words, a stiff and intricate phraseology.' His complaint need not be quoted in full because its contents are familiar, and the long life of this type of assessment of Byzantine literature suggests that Gibbon's achievement here was more to give expression to deep-seated prejudices by no means confined to the pages of *The Decline and Fall.* Certainly, Gibbon's distrust of the rhetoric which underpinned high-style Byzantine literature, combined with an orientalist disdain for the shifty foreigners who indulge in it, is commonplace in Anglo-Saxon literary criticism of the past two centuries – despite the fact that many habits of conversation in English are eerily prefigured in the ancient treatises *On Figured Speeches* which taught Roman and Byzantine readers how to say one thing while meaning another.

Again, it would be possible to counter Gibbon's dismissal of Byzantine literature as stale and imitative by citing examples of sophisticated and innovative literature, some of which is immediately accessible to modern audiences. But it is the way Byzantium is depicted within a wider narrative of progress which is most interesting and demands to be challenged. Politics and literature are inextricably intertwined in Gibbon's image: empire produces intellectual slaves, 'a succession of patient disciples'. His aesthetic and political allegiances are manifest in his unflattering comparison of Byzantine authors with their classical models. In the background, in both domains, lurks the impossible ideal of democratic Athens, the 'first of nations' and, for Gibbon, ancestor of Enlightenment Europe. In politics as in literature, Byzantium can only represent an aberration, a wrong turning on the march of progress, and one which left no mark on European culture.

Such narratives of literary and cultural development, which present modern Europe and ancient Greece as a continuum, and cut out the embarrassing bit in the middle, are alive and well. Only has only to turn to the

lists in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* to find plenty of classical works which passed through the 'lifeless hands' of Byzantine scholars (and even some Greek authors of the Roman period), but not one Byzantine work. Bloom's criteria for canonicity suggest two reasons for this absence: the lack of 'sublimity' in these works (a criterion reminiscent of Gibbon's 'taste') and their lack of influence on subsequent generations of writers.

The historical and aesthetic reasons for the latter failure need a careful study, which would show, I think, that some works of Byzantine literature (for example, the early novel) did have some impact on European literature. But my purpose in introducing Bloom is not to argue that any particular Byzantine text should figure in such lists, but to suggest that an awareness of Byzantium might transform the process of list-making. Underlying Gibbon's assessment is a close identification with what are assumed to be the values of ancient Greece (democracy, genius, and the availability of concubines), just as certain unchanging assumptions about the nature and unity of the 'sublime' and 'genius' inform Bloom's list. But Byzantine scholars and rhetoricians, and the very existence of those 'ten centuries', interrupt this cosy communion with antiquity with a stark reminder that we stand at a distance of over two thousand years from classical antiquity, and that we owe the literary artefacts we possess to a succession of very different cultures, whose priorities were manifestly not the same as ours. At the simplest level, the fact that our knowledge of ancient drama depends for the most part on the selections made by ancient schoolmasters and their Byzantine successors suggests that 'taste' and 'sublimity' are not in themselves sufficient to guarantee survival. More importantly, trying to understand the different canons of taste used by another culture can give us a certain critical distance from any easy assumptions about what constitutes 'genius', or even 'literature'.

The works of what Gibbon calls 'the numerous tribes of scholiasts and critics' of the Greek Middle Ages are, whether we like it or not, an intrinsic part of the Western Canon. A simple awareness of the Byzantine presence in our past therefore has much to contribute to our understanding of how we approach antiquity itself. Its presence is a constant reminder of a distance that has to be abolished, an uncomfortable hint that, if these numerous tribes lie between us and the ancient Greeks, then perhaps we might not feel quite as at home with Pericles and Euripides as we like to think. Maybe we might even find that we would have to more to say to Tzetzes or Planudes.

Gibbon himself, of course, can hardly be accused of ignoring Byzantium; even if, in his conception of culture, the Byzantines simply cannot win – if they imitate, they are lacking in inspiration and genius; if they follow their own literary tastes, they commit monstrous aberrations. But Gibbon does write Byzantium into a large-scale narrative of the West, albeit in the role of decadent villain. What is more, he perhaps protests too much about the deficiencies of the Byzantine orators who are 'most eloquent in their own conceit'. Gibbon's own tendency to let his eloquence run away with him is evident in the quotation we are discussing. And a comparison of his account of the capture of Hagia Sophia by the Ottomans with Doukas' version shows that Gibbon found at least some of the productions of Byzantine rhetoric worthy of imitation and thus of stealthy introduction into English literature. Against this background, Gibbon's hyperbole suggests a rather more complex attitude towards Byzantine civilization.

JOHN LOWDEN

> My visits, however superficial, to the cabinet of medals and the public libraries [in Paris] opened a new field of enquiry, and the view of so many Manuscripts . . . induced me to consult . . . the *Palaeographia* of Montfaucon. I studied the theory, without attaining to practise the art: nor should I complain of the intricacy of Greek abbreviations and Gothic alphabets since every day, in a familiar language, I am at a loss to decipher the Hieroglyphics of a female note.

The words are those of Edward Gibbon (who else?) in his posthumously published, but carefully crafted and studiously revised, *Memoirs*.[1] He is writing about his stay in Paris in 1763-4, before he began work on his great *History*. What is the present-day reader, palaeographer or not, to make of such a passage? Gibbon was famous for his wide reading, amassed a large library, and consulted and referred to many further books that he did not possess in writing the *History*, but Montfaucon's *Palaeographia Greca* (Paris 1708) was not amongst them.[2] Although Gibbon's irony is notorious, in the present case the implication of the statement in his *Memoirs* appears to be unambiguous: he 'viewed' Greek (and doubtless Latin) manuscripts, but they played no

significant part in the conception and writing of his *History*. (We shall return briefly to the question of coins and medals below.) Indeed, taken in context, his mention of the problems of dealing with manuscript material appears as little more than the necessary preamble to a misogynistic witticism. Anyone persuaded of the value of manuscripts as indispensable historical sources (not to mention those holding divergent views of the position of women) is deeply alienated by such a passage. Can Gibbon's *History* still be a text that such a historian should take seriously?

Gibbon was aware, of course, that the written heritage of (ancient) Greece had been preserved for posterity through those centuries of which he was writing in the form of manuscripts. Occasionally this transmission is alluded to. He notes in connection with the sack of Constantinople in 1204, for example, that 'the literature of the Greeks had almost centered in the metropolis, and, without computing the extent of our loss, we may drop a tear over the libraries that have perished in the triple fire.'[3] This loss he regrets along with the wanton destruction of such antique statuary as had been preserved in the city up to that time (while laying most of the blame for the latter with the city's inhabitants). All this, however, is conventional and entirely to be expected, given the nature of the event and the historical sources available. More surprising is his comment on Pope Innocent III's fierce condemnation of the crusaders for the violation of noble matrons and holy nuns in the sack of the city. Gibbon states: 'it is certain that the capital of the East contained a stock of venal or willing beauty sufficient to satiate the desires of twenty thousand pilgrims.'[4] Gibbon certainly did not intend to shed a tear over what we might now call the human tragedy of the event. The attitude implied by such a remark can hardly be excused as either wit or irony.

It is intrusive asides such as this that give the *History* its special character, perhaps help to ensure its continuing popularity for an English-speaking readership, and at the same time help to make it, for the historian of the visual, such an unhelpful source even when the visual is itself at issue. To take a specific example, Haskell has noted how Gibbon used Robert Adam's magnificently illustrated *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia* (London 1764) in Chapter 13 of the *History*, but chose to belittle it (without the knowledge that a trip to Split would have provided) on the basis of a judgement expressed in Abate Fortis' *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (Venice 1774). In Gibbon's words: 'There is room to suspect that the elegance

of [Adam's] designs and engraving has somewhat flattered the object which it was their purpose to represent.'[5] Such an ill-founded assertion should alert the modern reader to Gibbon's prejudices.

More bizarre than his treatment of the palace at Split, however, because more central to the conception of the entire history of which he was writing, is the observation with which Gibbon chose to conclude his description of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople. The quite lengthy narrative depends on a mélange of sources: Procopius, Agathias, Paul the Silentiary, Evagrius, Ps.-Codinus, an anonymous account (from the *Patria*), Du Cange, Gyllius, and Grelot.[6] These Gibbon translates or paraphrases. But he concludes thus: 'A magnificent temple is a laudable monument of taste and religion, and the enthusiast who entered the dome of St. Sophia might be tempted to suppose that it was the residence, or even the workmanship of the Deity. Yet how dull is the artifice, how insignificant the labour, if it be compared with the formation of the vilest insect that crawls upon the face of the temple!'[7] This might pass for wit, is certainly memorable, reveals much about Gibbon – but what does it tell us about the church of Hagia Sophia?

Gibbon, of course, had not visited Istanbul, but even if he had it is very doubtful that he would have integrated evidence from its buildings in his *History*.[8] The monuments of sites that were accessible to him, or which he is known to have visited (such as Venice), play no more conspicuous a role (the one exception, perhaps, is the Arch of Constantine at Rome, but even here he follows his written sources closely).[9] When he mentions the mosaic of Theodora at S. Vitale in Ravenna, for example, it is on the basis of a note in the edition of Procopius' *Secret History* by Alemannus, not on the basis of any personal insight.[10] On the whole issue of images and iconoclasm, so central to an understanding of these centuries, Gibbon is at his most elusive. He feels able to dismiss all such images as 'faintly and flatly delineated by monkish artists in the last degeneracy of taste and genius'.[11] An extraordinary anachronism is apparent in a note on the same page: '"Your scandalous figures stand quite out from the canvass: they are as bad as a group of statues!" It was thus that the ignorance and bigotry of the Greek priest applauded the pictures of Titian, which he had ordered, and refused to accept.'[12] The source of this remark is unclear, and its relevance, except within a general polemic against early Christian and Byzantine art, is hard to follow.

Although Gibbon made no use of the possibilities of a history deriving

evidence from the visual, he was not himself completely insensitive to its power, as is clear from the celebrated concluding passage of his *History* in which he described its genesis: 'It was among the ruins of the Capitol that I first conceived the idea. . .'[13] The significance Gibbon attached to this passage can be judged by its various drafts in his *Memoirs*.[14] In the third draft he wrote: 'In my Journal the place and moment of conception are recorded: the fifteenth of October 1764, in the close of the evening, as I sat musing in the Church of the Zoccolanti or Franciscan fryars, while they were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Capitol. But my original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the city, rather than the Empire. . .'[15] The first printed text of the *Memoirs*, based on the fifth manuscript draft, is closer to the wording in the *History*: 'It was at Rome, on the 15th of October [1764], as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed fryars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind. But my original plan was circumscribed to the decay of the city rather than the empire. . .'[16] Note how in the later draft (as in the *History*) the author is no longer in the church, but amidst the ruins.[17] It was clearly of great importance to Gibbon that this image of the author as genius receiving inspiration be formulated exactly right. What must seem to a modern reader ironical, given Gibbon's views, is the pervasive proto-Romantic atmosphere of the scene: we have not just one religion at work on the author's mental processes but two (Christianity and the gods of antiquity); we have not just one religious building involved but two (the Temple of Jupiter and the church of the Franciscans [S. Maria in Aracoeli]); the scene is lit not by the strong sun of midday, but by a soft and mysterious evening light (it is vespers); music is in the air, and not just any music but male voices (the friars) in traditional chant; the author is deep in thought amidst the ruins. So strong is the image conveyed that we can readily imagine it as a painting entitled, perhaps, 'Gibbon on the Capitol'.[18] But at the same time we can acknowledge the quintessentially literary mode in which this image is conjured up.

Has Gibbon then nothing to offer the art historian? Haskell has sought to rescue him from the art-historical obloquy in which he has generally been placed.[19] He has emphasized how Gibbon was sensitive to the visual arts, and while in Florence, for example, made fourteen visits to the Uffizi. Yet it has to be admitted that the particular character of Gibbon's visual sensitivity vis-à-vis the *History*, as outlined by Haskell, concerns the possible use of portraits

(for example of emperors) as indicators of an individual's moral qualities. It was in this frame of mind that Gibbon presumably viewed the collections of coins and medals in Paris (as in the passage cited above). Gibbon became sceptical of the value of such an approach, however, and so omitted this type of art-historical 'evidence'. The other crucial point to recall in Gibbon's defence is that he lacked predecessors on whom he could have confidently based his own writing had he wished to exploit the art-historical evidence. There was no Winckelmann for the centuries in question.[20]

On a more positive note, Haskell has pointed out that Gibbon did have a highly influential follower amongst the pioneers of art history, namely Seroux d'Agincourt, whose posthumously published multi-volume *Histoire de l'Art par les Monumens, depuis sa décadence au IVe siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVIe* (Paris 1823) owes much of its formulation to Gibbon's *History*. We can note that one reason why Seroux's publication is no longer consulted (or reprinted) today, whereas Gibbon's is, concerns the nature of the material and its reproduction (with attendant costs), and the differences between writing narrative history and writing and exemplifying a history of art. It is tempting to say that Seroux turned colourful artworks into lifeless engravings, whereas Gibbon turned lifeless writings into colourful prose.

To an art historian the phrase 'decline and fall' can never be merely a metaphor. Events at the end of the twentieth century are a constant reminder of this. Natural and man-made disasters (warlike or not) continue to take their depressing toll on the visual record of the past. It is literally true that we know more and more about less and less. I suggest that the model represented by Gibbon and his *History* is one that art historians do well to continue to treat with scepticism. To read Gibbon today is to be forcibly reminded of our good fortune in not living in the eighteenth century. Gibbon systematically 'exalted the dignity and promoted the happiness' of only one of the protagonists of his *History*: its author.

NOTES

1 Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. G.A. Bonnard (London 1966) 131; also cited by D.P. Jordan, *Gibbon and his Roman Empire* (Urbana 1971) 63.

2 G. Keynes, *The Library of Edward Gibbon* (2nd edn., Godalming 1980). See also the indexes to Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London 1776-88), ed. David Womersley (3 vols, Harmondsworth 1994), cited hereafter as *DF*.

3 *DF*, ed. Womersley, III, 697.

4 *DF*, ed. Womersley, III, 691.
5 F. Haskell, 'Gibbon and the History of Art', *Daedalus* (*Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), 105.3 (1976) 217-30, esp. 222. (Note that Gibbon owned the books of Adam and Fortis: see Keynes, *Library*.) Haskell has reworked the same material more recently in his *History and its Images* (New Haven 1993) 191-3.
6 Averil Cameron, 'Gibbon and Justinian', in R. McKitterick and R. Quinault (eds), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge 1997) 34-52, esp. 46-7 (on Gibbon's use of Procopius' *Buildings*), and 50 (on Hagia Sophia).
7 *DF*, ed. Womersley, II, 597-98.
8 It is notable that in the second edition of Gibbon's *History* by J.B. Bury (London 1909-14), illustrations were added to all seven volumes on the choice of O.M. Dalton, but no explanation or justification of their presence was felt necessary.
9 On the Arch of Constantine see *DF* I, 428. Some discussion in J. Matthews, 'Gibbon and the later Roman Empire: causes and circumstances', *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, 12-33, esp. 29-31.
10 *DF*, ed. Womersley, II, 564.
11 *DF*, ed. Womersley, III, 91.
12 Loc.cit, n. 14.
13 *DF*, ed. Womersley, III, 1085.
14 These drafts are also discussed in J. Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco 1987) 29-30.
15 *Memoirs*, ed. Bonnard, 136.
16 *The Memoirs of the Life of Edward Gibbon*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill (London 1900) 167.
17 A useful study of Gibbon's attitude to the church is provided by D. Womersley, 'Gibbon and the "Watchmen of the Holy City": revision and religion in *Decline and Fall*', in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, 190-216.
18 Note that the engraving of Gibbon by John Hall, dated 1 February 1780, after the famous 50 guinea portrait by Reynolds (of 1778-79), represents below a bearded philosopher contemplating the ruins of the Colosseum. It was used as frontispiece for the later volumes of the *History*, starting with vol. III. See in general terms the remarks of R. McKitterick, 'Gibbon and the Early Middle Ages in eighteenth-century Europe,' in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, 162-89, esp. 172-4.
19 Haskell, *History and Its Images*, 186-200. See also in general terms A. Hoxie, 'Mutations in Art,' in Lynn White, Jr (ed.), *The Transformation of the Roman World: Gibbon's Problem after Two Centuries* (Berkeley 1966) 266-90.
20 Gibbon owned Winckelmann in French translation: *Histoire de l'art chez les anciens*, (Amsterdam 1766); *Histoire de l'art de l'antiquité*, (Leipzig 1781): see Keynes, *Library*.

DAVID WOMERSLEY

Eye-catching quotations which apparently take no prisoners have shaped the common view that Gibbon was merely repelled by Byzantium. An equally frequent *point d'appui* for such a view is the outspoken judgement which launches Chapter 48:

> At every step. as we sink deeper in the decline and fall of the

> Eastern empire, the annals of each succeeding reign would impose a more ungrateful and melancholy task. These annals must continue to repeat a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery.[1]

Theological bickering, artistic bankruptcy, military imbecility, and elaborate but ineffective administration, which in the end handed over eastern Europe to the irreligious despotism of the Turks: such, it is contended, was Gibbon's verdict on Byzantium.

Against which one might enter two caveats. First, *The Decline and Fall* devotes more space to Byzantium than it does to Rome. Second, when Gibbon alludes to the 'tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery' which is the history of Byzantium, he does so in the course of explaining to the reader how, notwithstanding the 'dead uniformity of abject vices' presented by the inhabitants of the Eastern empire, he will so arrange his narrative as to bring out the genuine historical significance of that phase of the empire's existence. For according to Gibbon 'the Byzantine monarchy is *passively* connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world.'[2] What is meant by that '*passively*', which Gibbon brandished beneath our eyes when he had recourse – as he did so rarely – to italics? Once we have grasped some of its significance, the quotation which serves as rubric for these contributions will seem neither the most final, nor the most profound, of Gibbon's comments on Byzantium.

We should recall that Gibbon's treatment of Byzantium began, not with the fall of the Empire to the West at the end of volume three, but much earlier, at the beginning of his second volume, when he recounted Constantine's founding of his new capital. Constantinople is introduced to us (as is no other city in *The Decline and Fall*) by a short dissertation on its geographical situation, illustrated by a specially commissioned map showing the Propontis and, in an inset pane, a plan of the city itself drawn on a smaller scale. Gibbon's interest in the new geography of his day was profound and serious;[3] but nowhere else in *The Decline and Fall* did he assume the mantle of the pure geographer so openly. His description embodied the insight that this place above all others was suited to be a focus of commerce:

> But when the passages of the Streights were thrown open for trade, they alternately admitted the natural and artificial riches of

> the north and south, of the Euxine and of the Mediterranean. Whatever rude commodities were collected in the forests of Germany and Scythia, as far as the sources of the Tanais and the Borysthenes; whatsoever was manufactured by the skill of Europe or Asia; the corn of Egypt, and the gems and spices of the farthest India, were brought by the varying winds into the port of Constantinople, which, for many ages, attracted the commerce of the ancient world.[4]

By 1781 Gibbon had emancipated himself from his youthful thraldom to Montesquieu. Nevertheless, the prominence he gave to considerations of geography when introducing Constantinople to his readership was a Montesquieuan emphasis on the causal influence of environment. It was inevitable, so Gibbon intimates, that these people would become traders rather than conquerors. Evolving national character was always destined to chafe against the imperial role which history had allotted to them.

I have written elsewhere about Gibbon's exploitation of what he saw as Byzantium's slowness to understand its own nature, and of its cleaving to values which were in conflict with its strengths.[5] Byzantium, more than Rome, was the matrix of the commercial society within which Gibbon wrote and thrived. This was an insight full of difficulty for the historian, whose taste in literature and architecture was drawn to Roman models. But it was not an insight which Gibbon tried to evade, as his account of the dispersal of Greek learning reveals:

> . . . the restoration of the Greek letters in Italy was prosecuted by a series of emigrants, who were destitute of fortune, and endowed with learning, or at least with language. From the terror or oppression of the Turkish arms, the natives of Thessalonica and Constantinople escaped to a land of freedom, curiosity, and wealth . . . In the shipwreck of the Byzantine libraries, each fugitive seized a fragment of treasure, a copy of some author, who, without his industry, might have perished: the transcripts were multiplied by an assiduous, and sometimes an elegant pen; and the text was corrected and explained by their own comments, or those of the older scholiasts.[6]

'Without his industry': it is surely an odd phrase to apply to an unpremeditated and momentary act of seizure, but it serves to underline how the transmission of 'the celestial dew' of classical culture from Greece to Italy in the fifteenth century depended on the commerce of Byzantium. As Gibbon later said of the Medicis, 'a cargo of Indian spices and Greek books was often imported in the same vessel.'[7] The humanist culture within which Byzantium was routinely denounced could not have come into existence without that industrious, but (in Gibbon's terms) uncreative, civilization. This was not the least important aspect of Byzantium's 'passiveness': that its most derided aspects made the historical suture which entailed its own neglect.

Gibbon was fascinated by Byzantium. But fascination does not preclude disgust, and requires from its objects intellectual challenge, even affront. Byzantium provoked *The Decline and Fall*'s most profound acts of historical imagination, and its most artful strokes of narrative organization. Pacing beneath his *berceau* in the moonlight on 27 June 1787, Gibbon might, in that moment of intense self-awareness, have glimpsed that the work he had just completed itself discountenanced the vehement simplicity of our rubric.

NOTES

1 Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. D. Womersley (3 vols, Harmondsworth 1994), III. 23.
2 *DF*, III. 25 (Gibbon's italics).
3 G. Abbattista, 'Establishing the "order of time and place": "rational geography, French erudition and the emplacement of history in Gibbon's mind' in D. Womersley (ed.), *Edward Gibbon: Bicentenary Essays* (Oxford 1997) 45-72.
4 *DF*, I. 592.
5 D. Womersley, 'Gibbon and classical example: the age of Justinian in the *Decline and Fall*', *British Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 19.1 (1996) 17-31.
6 *DF*, III. 902, 904-5.
7 *DF*, III. 907.