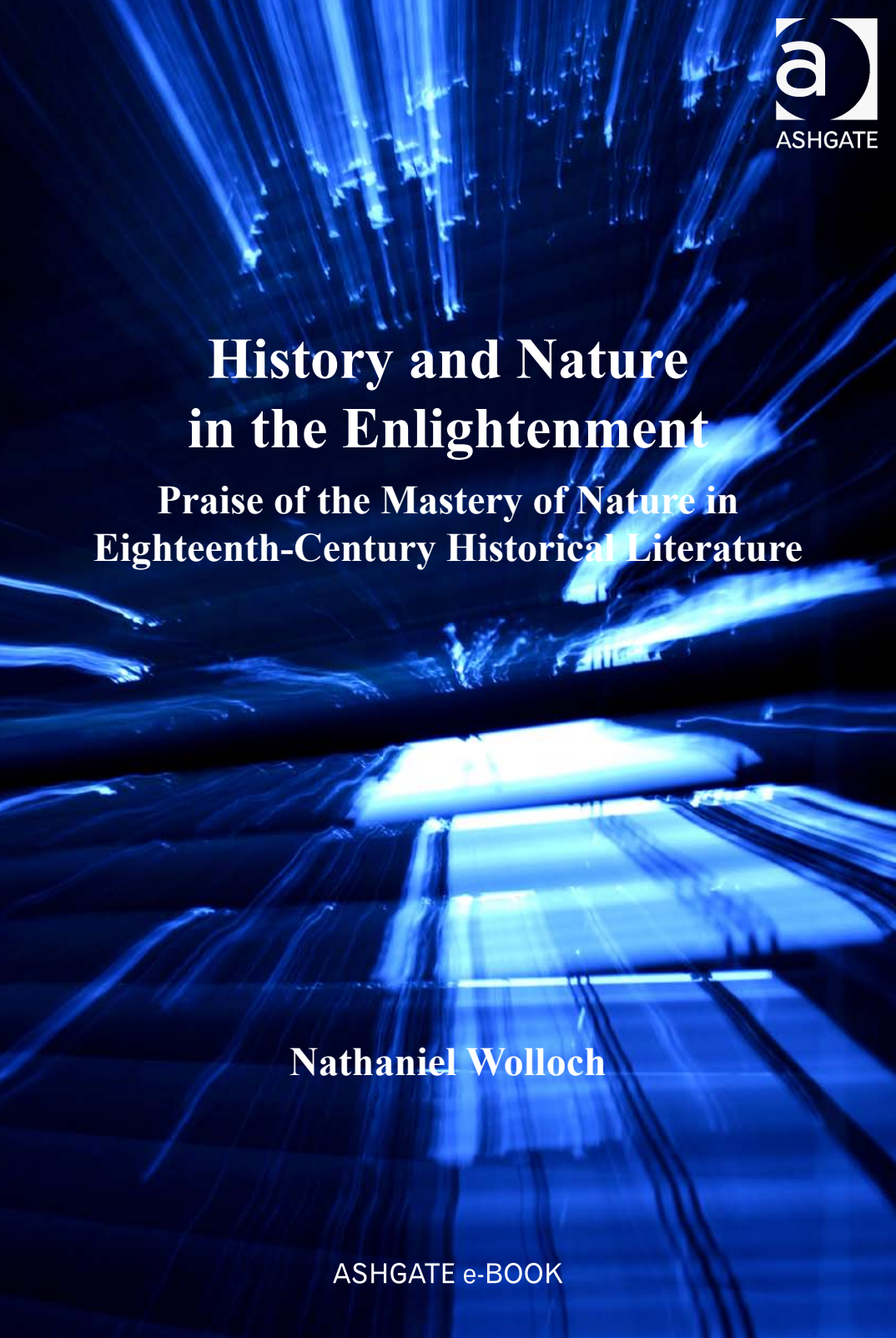

ASHGATE
History and Nature
in the Enlightenment
Praise of the Mastery of Nature in
Eighteenth-Century Historical Literature
Nathaniel Wolloch
ASHGATE e-BOOK

HISTORY AND NATURE IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT

In memory of my aunt Meira, my uncle David,
their granddaughter Shir and my grandparents

History and Nature in the Enlightenment

Praise of the Mastery of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Historical Literature

NATHANIEL WOLLOCH

ASHGATE

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Preface

This book is a study in intellectual history. It discusses some key ideas underlining the common Enlightenment interpretation of history, and their various earlier transformations throughout the history of historiography as this led to their crystallization in the eighteenth century. The main overarching idea examined in this study, as Enlightenment historians understood it, can be summarized as follows: the most essential precondition for the sustained progress of civilization, and the most enduring foundational achievement of human civilization in general, is the degree to which the control of nature, through cultivation, has been achieved. This is a complicated idea, a compound of several important notions. The four chapters of this book examine these more particular component ideas in logical sequence, beginning with the cosmological and intellectual underpinnings of the Enlightenment attitude toward nature; continuing with an elaboration of the eighteenth-century historiographical discussion of the human importance of cultivating nature; the theme of lack of such cultivation; and ending with Enlightenment notions of cultural regeneration.

Because of the multifarious nature of the discussion, a more detailed synopsis of the overall argument seems in order at the outset. The first chapter concentrates on several interrelated themes which underlined the anthropocentric cosmology of the Enlightenment. The notion of divine accommodation receives detailed attention, substantiating the religious outlook on nature in the history of historiography before the eighteenth century, with its relatively more secular approach. Next come discussions of early modern primitivism and its critique, and of the eighteenth-century distinct notions of savagery and barbarism. The chapter integrates these various themes and demonstrates how they influenced Enlightenment historiography's attitude toward nature. The second chapter outlines in detail the discussion of cultivating natural resources in Enlightenment historiography. More than the other chapters many aspects of this topic may initially seem familiar to scholars. Nevertheless, the specifically historiographical aspect of Enlightenment attitudes toward nature has received little scholarly attention, and this perspective sheds new light on seemingly familiar themes. The chapter begins with a discussion of the concept of civilization as it emerged in the eighteenth century, emphasizing the interpretation of Norbert Elias. The next section discusses varying attitudes toward the cultivation of nature throughout the history of historiography. Then comes a detailed discussion

of stadial theory as a central means by which eighteenth-century historians understood the importance of mastery of nature. Next follow discussions of climatic historiographical theories and of specific types of cultivating natural resources, namely agriculture and water. The chapter closes with a discussion of how Enlightenment historians interpreted levels of cultivation of nature in non-European civilizations. The third chapter deals with a relatively less familiar topic, the Enlightenment comprehension of cultural backwardness and the important role lack of cultivation of nature played in it. It begins with a discussion of the eighteenth-century appreciation of the virtues and limitations of primitive societies, with particular attention to the Ossianic poems. Next come examples of various historical cases of neglect of cultivation of nature as these were censoriously interpreted by Enlightenment historians. The case of the Tartars receives specific attention, as do Enlightenment discussions of the contact between the Roman Empire and the barbarians. Next comes a discussion of the changing role of religion in interpreting the challenges posed by nature, specifically natural disasters. The chapter closes with a detailed discussion of Gibbon's religious and political views and their connection with his interpretation of the cultivation of nature. The final chapter is the logical continuation of the previous ones, centering on how Enlightenment historians optimistically viewed periods of historical decline as starting-points for new historical progress. In doing so they emphasized the constitutive role of ineradicable rudimentary material culture based on the mastery of nature. The chapter discusses the Enlightenment interpretation of the consequences of contact between primitive and civilized societies, emphasizing the example of the Romans and the barbarians. Next come discussions of cyclical interpretations of history and of the law of unintended consequences. The latter is emphasized as one of the most important contributions of Enlightenment historiography, and as a central interpretative tool with which Enlightenment historians emphasized their optimistic belief in the ineradicability of civilization. Next comes a discussion of the inherent optimism of the Enlightenment interpretation of history. The chapter and the whole book conclude with a discussion of various interpretations of the fall of the Roman Empire. Although *prima facie* this topic might seem irrelevant to the central themes of the book, by this stage of the discussion its relevance becomes obvious and it serves as a proper conclusion to the whole argument of the book.

Throughout, the discussion connects the idea of cultivation of nature to mainstream religious, political and philosophical aspects of eighteenth-century culture. Edward Gibbon in particular receives constant attention, mainly in the last two chapters, since more than any other contemporary historian his writings evinced this complicated connection. In many ways he was not just the

greatest of Enlightenment historians but also the most philosophically typical. While this is not a book about Gibbon, discussing his work enables a workable framework for investigating the historiographical literature – classical, medieval, Renaissance and particularly eighteenth-century – which served as a common mine of sources for Enlightenment historians in general. Most of the sources discussed in this book were familiar to Gibbon, with the most prominent of the few exceptions being Vico and Herder (Gibbon did not know German and read only German works available in translations). It should however be noted that the intention here has not been to present a general discussion of any particular figure's work. Even Gibbon, who receives very elaborate consideration, is discussed only so far as this elucidates the history of the ideas which are the focus of this study. While many of the other eighteenth-century figures discussed are well-known to modern scholars, others will probably be much less familiar. It might have been useful to include more information on the latter, but such material is in many cases relatively scarce, at least as far as I was able to ascertain. Perhaps some scholars may consider it useful to find discussions, however brief, regarding some of these lesser-known figures. My intention was to present an overview of Enlightenment historiography in general, and concentrating only on major figures consequently seemed insufficient. The fact that most of the lesser-know figures discussed here were familiar to Gibbon, and some at least were highly-valued by him, supports such an approach in my opinion.

In this book we will be examining mainly eighteenth-century sources, but also many sources from prior eras. It is important to note that these will be considered from a double perspective. First, they will bear evidence on the development of various ideas throughout Western history. But second and more important, they will be examined in an attempt to comprehend the way Enlightenment historians read them. Thus for example, if a medieval work is examined it will serve as evidence for elucidating medieval ideas, but even more so for the possible meaning which it might have offered when read from an eighteenth-century point of view. These two outlooks were often very different. Since of course we ourselves are considering all of these sources from our own modern perspective, in the present study we will often be reading sources from a third-hand viewpoint. Some scholars of Enlightenment historiography may disagree with the amount of attention I have chosen to give to pre-eighteenth-century sources. In my opinion, however, we need to remember that Enlightenment historians were steeped in the literature of previous eras as much as in the literature of their own time. The various philosophical claims they made regarding history, and the manner in which they interpreted various themes, were often the result of their critical reading of such sources. Furthermore, precisely because, typically for Enlightenment literati, they were concerned in large measure with a critique

of medieval civilization, they devoted particular attention to medieval history. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* for example, as surprising as this may initially seem to those unfamiliar with this greatest of all works of Enlightenment historiography, was in many ways a study of medieval rather than of classical history. It therefore seems to me essential to closely examine medieval sources, as also classical and early modern ones, if we are truly to understand the outlook of eighteenth-century historians.

It is important to note how the word "nature" is construed in this study. Intellectual historians of the early modern era often understand by this word specifically human notions, whether this be natural law, or the "state of nature" as signifying human forms of social organization in natural surroundings. In the present study, however, we will be highlighting considerations of how human beings made use of nature itself *sui generis*. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, "nature" will be comprehended in this particular sense. There is no doubt that the Enlightenment "science of man" accorded particular attention to many topics we shall be discussing, and to others which we shall all but ignore. Among the latter we should particularly note the interrelated concepts of natural right and natural law as they purportedly began developing in the "state of nature." For early modern intellectuals, when one mentioned "nature" or the "state of nature," it was these and other social or cultural concepts, rather than the idea of nature per se, which were usually alluded to, and modern scholars have followed suit. Nevertheless, the idea of the "state of nature" in its more material aspects was also occasionally considered, particularly in the Enlightenment. This has not been sufficiently studied by scholars. We shall therefore depart from the more traditional emphasis on nature as an "inner" human quality, and concentrate rather on the human interaction with "outer" nature in itself. One could make a very valid case for attempting to discuss all of these notions together. Indeed, one of the most novel contributions of Enlightenment historiography was the attempt to discuss the various aspects of history in what we today would call an "interdisciplinary" manner. Yet in this case attempting such a study would result in what would be an unmanageable bulk of material, both quantitatively and qualitatively. It would necessitate dealing with a huge amount of scholarship which has been concerned with natural law continuously from the early modern era to our own time, and much of which I am unfamiliar with and unqualified to discuss. That would be no more than a flimsy excuse evincing scholarly inadequacy, if it were not for the fact that the topic of natural law is not really that germane for the purposes of the present study. I will allow myself to be cautiously optimistic in assuming that some scholars may regard the present study as a starting-point from which to attempt connecting these topics, and I have no doubt that there are a variety of ways to do so. But the topic under examination

here has been so neglected by scholars of the history of historiography that it deserves for once to play the leading role in a study claiming it as the main object of inquiry. Therefore, I have generally ignored the topic of natural law, as also of various other potentially interesting topics. To note just one more important example, we will not be discussing the history of technology per se, but only the philosophical notion of utilizing technology in order to cultivate nature, specifically as this notion was conceived in a historiographical sense. *Tout court*, this is not a conclusive study, not of its central themes, or of any others.

Any study claiming to deal with Enlightenment culture requires clarifying how it construes the term "Enlightenment." By this, different scholars these days offer very different definitions of varying types of Enlightenments, radical and moderate, early and late and along different thematic or national lines. In the present discussion I have attempted to take in all these meanings together, since each one offers a different relevant perspective on a multifarious historical cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, as will quickly become clear, we shall be concerned relatively more with what might be termed the Moderate Enlightenment, i.e. with the ideas which were more broadly accepted and less extreme in the eighteenth century, simply because these dominated the historiographical discourse at the time. I accept the emphasis which Jonathan Israel and other scholars have put on the importance of the Radical Enlightenment, and I agree that the radical ideas of the Enlightenment were indeed highly important and influential. Nevertheless, the focus of this study is primarily on more moderate ideas, which in my opinion were relatively more predominant in Enlightenment historiography than were radical notions. Most eighteenth-century historians, including Gibbon, were more moderate than is often assumed. Moreover, by our modern standards the emphasis they put on the cultivation of nature seems far from radical, indeed almost conservative. As for the main timeframe considered in this study, we will be relatively more concerned with the second half of the eighteenth century, and although we shall discuss authors from various nationalities, we shall emphasize in particular the French and Scottish Enlightenments (one should remember in this context that Gibbon was English, not Scottish, a difference which was more significant then than now). What enables this approach is the fact that there was, in my opinion, such a thing as the Enlightenment in general, despite all the many relevant and important variations. One might perceive many differences in eighteenth-century culture, but nonetheless there was one general predominant cultural phenomenon in that era which we usually term the Enlightenment. My approach to this issue is somewhat similar to that presented in John Robertson's *The Case for the Enlightenment*, although in my opinion the timeframe for the Enlightenment should be extended more broadly, from the end of the seventeenth century to the

beginning of the French Revolution. That is not to say that there were no changes throughout the intellectual history of this period, yet these were in most cases internal changes within the development of the Enlightenment. Historiography in particular evinced the common ground of *the* Enlightenment. By this, not surprisingly, we should understand the long-eighteenth-century culture of criticizing religious superstition, irrationality, illiteracy and political despotism. As we shall see, it also included other ideas as well, not least of which was that of the constitutive importance of the cultivation of nature. This idea received growing attention throughout the eighteenth century, and by the second half of the century became a central theme in historical literature.

There is no doubt that any discussion these days about the human interaction with nature is bound to remind one of the important new literature on this topic, and specifically of the significant insights of environmental history, to which I am no doubt in large measure indebted. Yet this is not a study in environmental history per se, although in many ways it is relevant to that field of inquiry. This book was primarily written as a study in eighteenth-century intellectual history, and pre-modern intellectual history is unjustifiably not usually considered as a central topic of environmental history, which has habitually, with only occasional exceptions, centered on "environmentalism" as a reaction to post-industrial civilization. The common tendency in environmental intellectual history scholarship to center on modern times is evident for example in one of the most important studies in the field, Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy*, which begins with the eighteenth century. Our discussion here treats the eighteenth century rather as a culminating point of historical developments. This is not meant as opposition to the predominant tendency evinced by Worster, but rather as a complement to it. While my intention here has not been to write a study confined to environmental history, this book can be seen as filling some of the lacuna in environmental history treatments of the intellectual history of the early modern era. Even if one accepts that from the eighteenth century it is possible to see the gradual rise of an "environmental" sensitivity, there remains the need of better and more fully documenting what preceded this new outlook. I for one am however more pessimistic. I am not sure that "environmentalism," though a modern term, denotes a truly predominant novel cultural phenomenon. Perhaps our own era is witnessing a positive change in this respect, but it seems to me too early to tell. In my opinion there is much more continuity than change in the history of Western attitudes toward nature from antiquity to our own time, particularly from an intellectual perspective. Moreover, there is a danger inherent in overemphasizing the influence of the common environmental-history perspective. Most work influenced by this perspective, including admittedly some of my own prior studies, tends to imply

a distinct "environmental" outlook, which traditionally has seen the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment as the chief culprits responsible for the abuse of nature by modern humanity. In the present study, however, I want to avoid as much as possible any kind of value judgment. I have attempted to discuss eighteenth-century historiographical ideas from their own perspective. Any sort of ethical outlook of whatever type is left to the discretion of the readers, and I could imagine how this study might be utilized to make very different ethical claims about the modern interaction with nature. That said, I do think that we should attempt to find a proper constructive middle-ground between extreme approaches to this issue. We have no perfect solutions to the environmental problems of our modern global world. The discussion presented in this book therefore shuns this political quagmire and attempts to be as objective as possible, even though complete objectivity is of course impossible. Readers can make of this discussion what they will, and hopefully, whatever their "environmental" outlooks, they will do so judiciously.

Anyone even remotely familiar with the history of ideas knows that topics which interest us from a modern perspective did not necessarily interest past intellectuals at all, to the same degree or in the same fashion. Therefore, historians of ideas often find themselves searching for pertinent evidence in seemingly unlikely places. What, for example, should incline us to think that the fall of the Roman Empire had anything to do with the extolling of the cultivation of nature? Consequently, historians of ideas often have to trace evidence from a wide variety of sources. Once this evidence accumulates, however, it often presents us with a new appreciation of how much ideas which we thought were distinctly modern were in fact of perennial interest in the past, even if not in the same degree, not with the same terminology or not in the same manner. For that reason this book is replete with quotations of sources, some quite extended. I have attempted to provide an appropriate framework for enabling a proper assessment of the meaning and significance of these sources. Moreover, it should be noted that the thematic ordering of the discussion, coupled with the above-noted constraint to seek evidence for certain ideas in a very variegated array of sources, often results in what at first sight might seem a disorderly discussion. Yet as the discussion constantly shifts from one figure to another, one source to another and seemingly one topic to another, if one remembers the overriding theme which is the focus of attention, then the logic of the debate should make things seem consistently clear and inter-connected. In short, this book in many ways maps out uncharted territory. It therefore suffers both from the advantages and the disadvantages of this type of inquiry – it offers more possibilities for originality, but at least as many opportunities for error.

Throughout, in discussing foreign-language sources, I have relied on English translations whenever possible. In some instances, either because such existing translations seemed to me inadequate for some reason, or because translations simply do not exist, I have used original editions. In all such cases, when translations are provided in the text they are my own, and the original versions can be found in the accompanying notes. In all quotations I have retained the vagaries of early modern spelling. There is no doubt that I am not up to the task of tracing the tremendous amount of sources which Gibbon and many of his erudite contemporaries studied. Yet I hope that I have been able to consider at least many of the more important of them. The use of pre-eighteenth-century sources is selective and governed by the attempt to use broadly representative texts, while the consideration of eighteenth-century sources is more systematic, though definitely not conclusive.

My use of secondary literature is even more selective. A few important studies should however be noted, since they form the background for any serious research on the topics here discussed, and the rather scanty number of references to them in the notes is not sufficient evidence of the significant influence they have had on this book. Regarding the history of attitudes toward nature Clarence J. Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* is likely to remain for a long time the most comprehensive and thorough discussion, and regarding a more limited geographical and temporal topic Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World* bears outstanding evidence of just how much material can be found on this topic for those diligent and meticulous enough to search properly. In the field of studies of Gibbon it is no surprise to note that J. G. A. Pocock's various volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* should be mentioned not just for their insights on Gibbon, but for their discussion of the history of historiography in general. I have found particularly productive Pocock's methodological use of Gibbon as a conduit through which to examine the history of historiography in general. Thematically, however, my approach is quite different from his. For Gibbon himself I have found David Womersley's interpretations, most importantly in *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, to be very pertinent and significant, and although they might not be shared by all scholars I consider them in general convincing. Modern scholarship produces such an endless stream of publications that any attempt to study any topic comprehensively, particularly an interdisciplinary one such as this study examines, is bound to fail. I have therefore devoted most of my efforts to discussing primary sources and have been much more selective in my use of secondary literature. This has no doubt resulted in many important omissions which are by and large unintentional.

I would like to thank several people for their generous assistance during the work on this book. David Womersley read the complete manuscript at a

relatively early stage, and provided some truly important remarks. At a later stage, and on short notice, Fania Oz-Salzberger and John Robertson read parts of the manuscript and provided significant observations. The anonymous reviewers of the manuscript were also very helpful. I am truly thankful to all these colleagues for their outstanding generosity. In some cases I have, however, been typically obstinate in retaining my own opinions on certain points despite being advised otherwise. It is therefore not just an ordinary obligation to note that I am solely responsible for all of the views, and any possible errors, to be found in this book. I would furthermore like to thank Emily Yates and all the team at Ashgate, who have been outstandingly professional and kind throughout the effort to bring this book to print. Thanks are due also to the Hermitage Museum for their kind consent to reproduce the cover illustration. My greatest debt, as always, is to my family, for their unending love and support.

Nathaniel Wolloch

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List of Abbreviations

BHN	Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, 36 vols (Paris, 1749-89).
DF	Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols (Harmondsworth, 1995).
GCH	Pietro Giannone, *The Civil History of the Kingdom of Naples*, trans. James Ogilvie, 2 vols (London, 1729-31).
GHG	Joseph de Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartares occidentaux*, 4 vols in 5 (Paris, 1756-58).
HHE	David Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols (Indianapolis, 1983 [based on the 1778 edition]).
HHGB	Robert Henry, *The History of Great Britain, from the Invasion of it by the Romans Under Julius Cæsar, Written on a New Plan*, 6 vols (London [vol. 5 also in Edinburgh], 1771-93).
MHAG	Johann Jacob Mascou [Mascov], *The History of the Ancient Germans, Including That of the Cimbri, Celtæ, Tentones, Alemanni, Saxons, and Other Ancient Northern Nations, Who Overthrew the Roman Empire, and Established that of the Germans, and Most of the Kingdoms of Europe*, trans. Tho. Lediard, 2 vols (London and Westminster, 1737-38).
MW	Edward Gibbon, *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq., with Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, ed. John, Lord Sheffield, 5 vols (London, 1814 [1815]).
OPHM	Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (London, 1800).
PBR	J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 4 vols so far (Cambridge, 1999-2005).
PPH	Guillaume-Thomas, Abbé de Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies... By the Abbé Raynal*, trans. J. O. Justamond, second edition, 6 vols (London, 1798; reprint New York, 1969).
RHA	William Robertson, *The History of America*, The Sixth Edition, 3 vols (London, 1792).

RHC William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles the V, with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, The Seventh Edition, Corrected, 4 vols (London, 1792).

RHDI William Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India*, The Second Edition (London, 1794).

SAI Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner and W. B. Todd, 2 vols (Oxford, 1979).

VNS Giambattista Vico, *New Science, Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations, Third Edition*, trans. David Marsh (Harmondsworth, 1999).

VOH Voltaire, *Oeuvres historiques*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris, 1957).

Chapter 1
Cosmology

Introductory Remarks

In his *History of England* David Hume related the story of King Canute, who when flattered by his courtiers' claims regarding his omnipotence, ordered his chair to be placed on the beach, and with the rising tide commanded the water to retire. When that did not happen,

> He [Canute] feigned to sit some time in expectation of their [the water's] submission; but when the sea still advanced towards him, and began to wash him with its billows, he turned to his courtiers, and remarked to them, that every creature in the universe was feeble and impotent, and that power resided with one Being alone, in whose hands were all the elements of nature; who could say to the ocean, *Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther*; and who could level with his nod the most towering piles of human pride and ambition.[1]

In relating this famous story Hume was obliquely alluding to one of the most perennial themes in the history of human culture – the relationship between humanity and nature. This relationship had a history of its own, and Hume and his contemporaries understood the moral of this story in quite a different manner than their medieval predecessors. Henry of Huntingdon, the twelfth-century source of the story, depicted Canute (or Cnute) as claiming that "there is no king worthy of the name save Him by whose will heaven, earth and sea obey eternal laws." After rising from his chair he never wore his crown again, but placed it on an image of the crucified Christ, "in eternal praise of God the great king."[2]

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[1] *HHE*, 1: 125. For Robert Henry's similar rendition of this story see *HHGB*, 2: 94.

[2] Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum, the History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford, 1996), 367-9. Gibbon was familiar with Henry of Huntingdon's work and probably also knew, through the work of Matthew Paris, Roger of Wendover's similar thirteenth-century version of the story, where Cnut was depicted claiming that the power to control nature belonged to "Him whose eternal laws the heaven, and earth, and sea, and all things that are therein, obey." See Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*, trans. J. A. Giles, 2 vols (London and New York, 1892-99), 1: 300. For the story in general see Lord Raglan, "Canute and the Waves," *Man*, 60 (1960), 7-8. The emphasis

The confrontation of humanity with the sea was not a new theme in historical literature. In the sixth century Procopius, in his *Secret History*, described how the Emperor Justinian invested large sums of money in building along the shore, in an attempt "to put constraint upon the incessant surge of the waves... being determined to compete with the wash of the sea, and, as it were, seeking to rival the strength of the sea by the sheer power of wealth."[3] This was of course in the critical vein predominant in the *Secret History*. But in the very different adulatory tone of his work *Buildings*, Procopius praised the construction by Justinian of breakwaters and sheltered harbors in the Bosporus, and in depicting the construction of the foundations of the defenses at Thermopylae, Procopius wrote that even the sea was unable "to forestall the most striking union of the most opposite elements, which are thus forced to yield to man's skill and to bow to his superior power."[4] The potency of the compliment was premised precisely on the common medieval recognition of the impotence of human power in the face of divine omnipotence, in this case specifically manifested in nature. The whole point of this adulatory laudation was in its realistic improbability, in the fact that human beings could not truly be superior to nature, although they could occasionally challenge it.

What Hume shared with his medieval predecessors was the idea that humanity, while possessing the power to subdue nature up to a certain point, ultimately had to yield primacy to nature's superior ascendancy. Here, however, the medieval and eighteenth-century outlooks parted ways. For Procopius, Henry of Huntingdon and people throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages in general, nature was first and foremost a manifestation of divine power. Procopius's fawning praise of Justinian was indeed based on the implication of overcoming divinely ordained natural forces. But conversely this was also the source for his probably more sincere criticism of Justinian's vain attempt to combat these divine

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put on Gibbon throughout the present discussion requires documenting his sources. Unless otherwise noted all sources mentioned here can be assumed to have been familiar to Gibbon. When such familiarity cannot be taken for granted one can find references in either Geoffrey Keynes, *The Library of Edward Gibbon, a Catalogue of his Books* (London, 1940), or in David Womersley's excellent bibliographical index in *DF*. For the sake of brevity these references will not be detailed. In a few cases other bibliographical references are given. In the small number of cases when Gibbon's familiarity with sources cannot be verified, this is mentioned either in the text or the notes. Vico and Herder are the most conspicuous examples of the latter. For a study of several aspects of Gibbon's thought relevant to the discussion presented here, see Nathaniel Wolloch, "Edward Gibbon's Cosmology," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 17 (2010), 165-77.

[3] *Procopius*, trans. H. B. Dewing, 7 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1914-40), 6: 93 (*Secret History*, viii.7-8).

[4] Ibid., 7: 93-5 (*Buildings*, I.xi.18-22), and 233-5 (IV.ii.11) respectively.

natural forces. While humanity had the power to control nature up to a certain point, it could never forget that any success in this endeavor was only due to divine forbearance. Overstepping this limit was an act of *vanitas*, of a distinctly religious sinfulness. This was precisely the reason that Henry of Huntingdon's Canute spoke of "Him by whose will heaven, earth and sea obey eternal laws." For the skeptical Hume, however, the source of nature's power was different. Like Henry of Huntingdon and Procopius he saw the human attempt to control the sea as a simile for condemning human pride and presumption. Yet in relating the potency of divine power, seemingly from the medieval perspective, Hume did not write, like Henry of Huntingdon, a straightforward commendation of God, but rather of "one Being alone, in whose hands were all the elements of nature." This "Being" for Hume was deistical nature rather than God in any traditional sense. God as a providential divinity intervening in every natural and human occurrence was unpalatable to Hume, as to many Enlightenment literati. While he did not rule out a certain type of divinity, this was according to the deistical view of a non-interventionist force which created a world operating according to fixed natural laws, here referred to by Hume as "the elements of nature." This type of world, although still beyond anything close to complete control, was much more amenable to human manipulation and mastery. There was no potential sacrilege involved. Nature as a dispassionate and objectively operating mechanism seemed a much more compliant mistress than its medieval image as an inscrutable divine manifestation had been.

In the present discussion we will be concerned with the way historians in ancient, medieval and primarily early modern times, viewed the attempts to control nature as these developed throughout history. *Grosso modo*, considerations of this topic changed from the classical perspective, which viewed nature as amenable to human control, to the more reverential point of view of the Middle Ages, and finally to the early modern, and specifically eighteenth-century, perspective, which emphasized in an un-paralleled manner the cultural and civilizing importance of cultivating natural resources. At the same time this increasing emphasis on the importance of commanding nature received growing attention from historians.[5] Enlightenment historians in particular

[5] For types of considerations of nature in eighteenth-century thought with which we will be less concerned such as natural law, human nature, natural religion etc., see for example Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background, Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (London, 1961); and for the seventeenth century, with much on artistic developments, see Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature, the Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 2006). For a broad overview see of course Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World, Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth, 1984). Also see the sections on early modern culture in Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

were well-aware of the many philosophical and scientific discussions of related issues, and these formed the background to their treatment of similar themes. Yet the historiographical perspective was less concerned with these different types of discourse, concentrating more on the narrative of human mastery of natural surroundings and on the significance of this mastery for establishing the basis for advanced civilization. Recognition of the import of this topic rapidly increased during the eighteenth century, and became emphatic and consistent in late Enlightenment historical literature in a manner unprecedented in Western historiography. Enlightenment historians therefore both mirrored and promoted the rising modern ethics eulogizing the command of nature as a prerequisite for the civilizing process. This became most evident in the work of Edward Gibbon, but also in that of many other contemporary historians.

More than forty years ago, in a famous article, Lynn White Jr. discussed the broad religious tradition of the human stewardship of nature as a divine sanction based on the opening chapters of the book of *Genesis*.[6] White's emphasis on biblical cosmology as the main source for the traditional Western anthropocentric outlook on nature has retained much of its authority, although it has been subjected to some important correctives. In particular, Peter Harrison has claimed that the biblical anthropocentric tradition became truly influential not in the Middle Ages but rather during the Scientific Revolution, which attempted through scientific progress to recover humanity's prelapsarian control of nature.[7] This interpretation can of course be extended to the Enlightenment, which continued the Scientific Revolution's project of mastering nature. Of perennial influence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was Francis Bacon's claim: "Just let man recover the right over nature which belongs to him by God's gift, and give it scope; right reason and sound religion will govern its use."[8] Humanity according to Bacon, who was expressing

(London, 1995). Other important studies are Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis, An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2006); and *The Moral Authority of Nature*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago and London, 2004). For the modern history of intellectual environmental ideas see Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy, a History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge, 1994).

[6] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-7.

[7] Peter Harrison, "Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature," *The Journal of Religion*, 79 (1999), 86-109. According to Harrison the early modern motivation to subdue nature was in fact in large measure motivated by a religious attempt to restore the natural world to its purported prelapsarian purity. See also idem, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, 1998), 206-8, 270.

[8] Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. and trans. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, 2000), 101.

a widely-accepted opinion, had lost by the Fall its right over nature, but could recover it by toil, which early modern intellectuals, in large measure following Bacon's lead, understood primarily to mean science, human invention and the resultant material advancement.[9] This was not a repudiation of the religious cosmological tradition but rather its metamorphosis into a new, even more potent ethic of utilizing nature. The secularizing process which European culture underwent throughout the early modern era was not equivalent, even during the Enlightenment, to a categorical denial of the traditional religious outlook. Rather, this outlook was transformed and subsumed within the more rational and scientific viewpoint of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it is this combination of religiosity and rationality which was evident in the outlook of such different figures as Bacon, Newton, Pascal, and later most of the important intellectuals of the Enlightenment, not least its historians.

One further important component in the development of the Western ethic of human mastery of nature was the classical tradition. Of course, this tradition was not monolithic, and the outlooks on nature of the Epicureans and the Stoics, for example, were very different. An anthropocentric cosmology, however, was clearly evident in classical culture. Aristotle, to mention one of the most influential historical conduits of the classical outlook, was very straightforward about the human singularity in the natural order.[10] Aristotle and Plato had been the main sources for the development of the theory of the Great Chain of Being, which became popular in the works of Alexander Pope and many others in the eighteenth century. According to this theory natural phenomena existed in a hierarchical order, with each creature including all the characteristics of the one just below it on the scale, plus a further one which made it more superior. This natural chain thus progressed from the most basic inanimate objects, through plants, ever more superior animals, and finally to human beings at the very

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[9] Ibid., 221. The modern environmental movement has habitually blamed the Scientific Revolution and Bacon in particular for the ethical deterioration of humanity's treatment of nature. In the present discussion we shall be avoiding any type of value judgments irrespective of their possible polemical merit. For a representative environmentally-motivated study of this sort combining erudite scholarship with emphatic ethical polemics see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature, Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, 1983), passim (164-91 for Bacon). A more objective reading of the Scientific Revolution's influence on attitudes toward nature can be found in Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore, Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1967), 471-97.

[10] See for example Aristotle, *History of Animals, Books VII-X*, trans. D. M. Balme (Loeb Classical Library, 1991), 56-67.

top of the scale.[11] While on rare occasions it was criticized, most notably by Voltaire, who adopted an anti-Platonic stance on this issue,[12] the Great Chain of Being was one of the clearest manifestations of the classical anthropocentric cosmology, particularly as it influenced Enlightenment philosophy. Gibbon was not particularly interested in this theory, but his basic acquiescence with it was evident in a passage in his memoirs where, while claiming that the joys of childhood, contrary to common opinion, were less than those of adulthood, he wrote that "A state of happiness arising only from the want of foresight and reflection shall never provoke my envy; such degenerate taste would tend to sink us in the scale of beings from a man to a child, a dog, and an oyster; till we had reached the confines of brute matter, which cannot suffer, because it cannot feel."[13] Gibbon knew that all his educated contemporaries would recognize the allusion.

Another historian who essentially adhered to the theory of the Great Chain of Being was Herder, who claimed that the more one rose in this scale the more the creatures' adaptability to various states increased. "Of all these changeable, modifiable, adaptable creatures, man is the most adaptable: the whole Earth is made for him; he for the whole Earth."[14] Peter Hanns Reill has claimed that in fact Herder did not agree with the Great Chain of Being theory, but developed a theory of a ladder of organization which included discontinuous changes and was actuated by constant natural permutations. In this ladder human beings were the most complex and hence the highest rung, yet the world was not created solely for them and each rung in the ladder had its own dignity and right to existence.[15]

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[11] On which of course see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being, a Study of the History of an Idea* (New York, 1960).

[12] See s.v. "Chaîne des êtres créés," in Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay, 2 vols (New York, 1962), 1: 161-3. Despite some appreciation Gibbon viewed Voltaire critically and in a well-known passage wrote: "In his way, Voltaire was a bigot, an intolerant bigot." See *DF*, ch. LXVII, vol. 3: p. 916 note 13 (all references to *DF* will be in this form). Nevertheless, there were some important influences, on which see Rolando Minuti, "Gibbon and the Asiatic Barbarians: Notes on the French Sources of *The Decline and Fall*," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 21-44.

[13] Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of my Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1966), 44. For the purposes of the present discussion it seemed unnecessary to use the full edition of Gibbon's various versions of his memoirs.

[14] *OPHM*, 11; and see also 107-31.

[15] Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 2005), 186-91. Reill claims that Buffon was also among those who disagreed with the Great Chain of Being theory. See ibid., 49-50, 164. Reill's important differentiation in this book between eighteenth-century mechanistic and vitalistic attitudes toward nature is less significant for

Such a ladder of organization, however, should be considered a variation on the Great Chain of Being, and thus as further evidence of its ubiquity in eighteenth-century philosophical discourses. Herder's anti-anthropocentrism, as we shall see, was also limited and generally in tune with the common Enlightenment view of human uniqueness. In general, what all this emphasized was the obvious anthropocentric conclusion that the classical cosmology underlying the theory of the Great Chain of Being implied. Coupled with the biblical tradition, these two constituted together extremely potent sources for the Western anthropocentric view of nature,[16] which was subsumed rather than replaced by the Scientific Revolution. For Gibbon, Herder and other Enlightenment historians, all this formed an ethos which materialized throughout history. In other words, the fact that humanity's control of nature gradually increased throughout history was a natural and moral process, justified by the natural order, whether one viewed this as divinely, or simply as materially, ordained. In discussing past eras and cultures Enlightenment historians consequently used the traditional anthropocentric cosmological outlook as a measure for judging various civilizations. The more a civilization manifested control of natural resources, the more it seemed culturally and morally superior. Depending on how much they asserted their place at the head of the material creation, human societies throughout history became culturally accomplished according to the Enlightenment outlook.

The logic behind the Great Chain of Being theory was often extended *mutatis mutandis* to the human social realm. Thus human beings were not considered as a homogeneous race but were differentiated among themselves, whether as societies or as individuals, from mere savages to the most prominently accomplished individuals and civilizations. Margaret Hodgen has noted how during the early modern era, culminating in the eighteenth century, the figure of the human savage was consigned a place in the chain of being, in an inferior human position. Commenting on the ideas propagated by the promoters of the moderns in the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, particularly in connection with the Scientific Revolution and the rise of a new historical awareness in the seventeenth century, she noted: "The temporalization of the chain of being, with the savage in his place between man and brute, thus came about as the result of the mingling of several ideas and movements of thought. All of them were historical; all implied change in the cultural activities of men rather than fixity; and all led to the theoretical substitution of progressive for degenerative change."

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our discussion, since both approaches were equally anthropocentric in their laudation of the human utilization of nature.

[16] For the compatibility of these two outlooks, which was not noted by Lovejoy, see Francis Oakley, "Lovejoy's Unexplored Option," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 231-45.

Thus, during the eighteenth century the formerly static concept of the chain of being gradually acquired a historical dimension implying development, which eventually in the following century led to the more express outlook of Darwinism.[17] We should keep these comments in mind as a propaedeutic to more detailed observations we will later make regarding the Enlightenment's conception of the cultural changes various human societies underwent. For Enlightenment historians many of these changes, on which the level of cultural attainment of societies depended, were connected to their relative control of natural resources. It was the command of nature which differentiated savage from civilized nations and affected the transition from one cultural level to another, whether in a progressive or regressive direction. This specifically historical conception of the importance of the cultivation of nature was one of the more original, and hitherto less recognized, contributions of Enlightenment historiography. Yet what remained firmly rooted throughout the Western tradition was the view of humanity as superior to the natural world in the cosmological order. From the distinctly historiographical perspective anthropocentric cosmology had to be asserted by the civilizing process. It had to lead to distinct material command of natural resources in order to become a potent civilizing force. Otherwise human beings betrayed their most singular natural attribute.

Divine Accommodation

There were other ways in which both the classical and the religious cosmologies influenced early modern thought. In particular, from a historiographical point of view there was the concept of divine accommodation. This is a modern term which has been studied in detail by Amos Funkenstein, signifying the concept of providential adjustment to the limits of human perception at various historical moments.[18] In classical, and even more so in medieval thought, the

[17] See Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1971), 386-477, 449 for the citation.

[18] The following discussion of divine accommodation is loosely based on Funkenstein's intricate and brilliant discussion, for which see Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, 1986). Although not addressing divine accommodation specifically, see also the discussion in Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven and London, 2004), 18-44. For the secularizing influence of the Scientific Revolution on historical writing see John Gascoigne, "'The Wisdom of the Egyptians' and the Secularisation of History in the Age of Newton," in *The Uses of Antiquity, The Scientific Revolution and the Classical Tradition*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Dordrecht, 1991), 171-212.

world was explained in religious terms, not in scientific ones. There did not yet exist the modern conception of a purely natural world operating according to clear scientifically formulated natural laws. Behind every natural phenomenon or historical occurrence was perceived a divine intent. This might operate in manifest divine intervention, but also in subtler ways more appropriately designated as divine accommodation, which underlay even the minutest natural phenomena. Divine accommodation was thus both the conception of divine influence on the operation of nature and history, but also an explanatory outlook which made the complex phenomena of the world comprehensible and meaningful to human beings. At times it seems that what are mentioned are simply cases of divine intervention. Yet the reason these should be considered as examples of divine accommodation, is that from the perspective of religiously-motivated historians, natural and historical occurrences, particularly unusual ones, seemed to have a meaning only if they were viewed as divinely ordained. By noting cases of divine intervention, historians therefore intended to convey meaning to events which otherwise seemed arbitrary. Therefore what at times seems like the simple narration of divine intervention, *deus ex machina*, should be seen as exemplifying divine accommodation. Relating cases of divine intervention became part of a specifically religious interpretation of history. Historical occurrences which otherwise might seem arbitrary became meaningful when viewed as divinely ordained. Almost all religious historiography up to the beginning of the eighteenth century evinced some level of reference to divine accommodation in this sense, to the view of history as divinely-ordained, specifically in Christian historiography. Only during the Enlightenment did this concept begin to significantly lose ground as an interpretative outlook. For our purposes it is important to highlight one particular historiographical manifestation of divine accommodation, namely the way historians from antiquity to the eighteenth century utilized it in order to explain the operations of nature, not least natural calamities which afflicted human beings. The impotence of human beings in the face of natural disasters was a topic continuously amenable to a divine-accommodation type of explanation.

Classical historiography was replete with references to portents and auguries, whether pagan, or at a later stage Christian. Nature for classical historians was habitually the voice of fortune. For example, Pliny the Elder, whose work was often consulted by Gibbon, noted regarding the routine inundations of the Tiber, particularly in Rome, that "in truth it is looked upon rather as a prophet of warning, its rise being always construed rather as a call to religion than as a threat of disaster."[19] Similarly, earthquakes were portentous and "the city of

[19] Pliny, *Natural History*, vols 1-2, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library, 1942-49), 2: 43.

Rome was never shaken without this being a premonition of something about to happen."[20] Pliny's was far from a credulous outlook. His view of religion was close to eighteenth-century deism, and he did not believe in astrology.[21] Yet he accepted the fact that certain natural phenomena had portentous qualities. While rainbows had no such quality, thunderbolts might possibly be invoked, and on an even more certain note Pliny claimed that comets and other astronomical phenomena could have portentous properties, although "All these things admit of no certain explanation; they are hidden away in the grandeur of nature."[22] Pliny's contemporary Josephus related how when an earthquake occurred during the war with the Arabs, encouraging them to invade Judea, Herod made a speech before the people asserting that God had caused this natural calamity in order to trap the Arabs. Herod then continued to claim: "Again, you needn't turn a hair at the upheavals of the physical world, or imagine that the earthquake is a warning of another disaster to come. These elemental disturbances are quite natural and do us no harm beyond the immediate damage. Plague, famine, and earth tremors may perhaps be foreshadowed by some slighter indication, but the actual calamities are too big to go beyond their own limits."[23] At first there seems to be an inconsistency here. Josephus presented two modes of perceiving nature, the one as divinely-ordained, the other as operating according to rational physical laws. This, however, was not necessarily incongruous in antiquity, when the more educated were relatively less prone to a religiously portentous view of natural phenomena, and Josephus seemed cognizant how such an outlook could be utilized to manipulate the uneducated masses. Yet he also exemplified how the more scientific outlook could play a similar role, calming the masses to believe that "this was as bad as it could get," from a simple natural perspective. In any event, Josephus repeatedly evinced a propensity to believe in prophecies and portents. This combination of a superstitious and a rational outlook on natural calamities was common in classical historiography, and remained so in late antiquity. In a similar vein Ammianus Marcellinus discussed the reasons for plagues and earthquakes, outlining in some detail various scientific theories accounting for such natural calamities. Yet Ammianus was a superstitious and credulous historian. Not surprisingly he noted the ignorance regarding what was the exact deity responsible for earthquakes. This ignorance accounted for that deity's not being mentioned in religious rites, in order not to perpetrate

[20] Ibid., 1: 331.

[21] Ibid., 1: 179-89.

[22] Ibid., 1: 235-9, 243-5 (for the quotation), 277-81, 287.

[23] Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, 1959), 71.

impieties.[24] As we shall see later, Ammianus was in other respects a more sophisticated historian, but on this point his outlook was more in tune with early medieval notions.

One of the most conspicuous examples of the interpretative problems associated with this cosmological outlook in classical historiography was Livy's constant detailed narrations of unusual natural occurrences which throughout Roman history were viewed, and religiously propitiated, as natural portents. Livy was not skeptical about mythological narrations of supernatural occurrences. Rather, he preserved the historical myths and yet exposed them as such by countering them with a rational explanation. He perhaps did not believe in ancient Roman myths as such, yet he did believe in their historical validity as animating the beliefs of the ancient Romans themselves.[25] Writing of the lack of credence in portents in his own time compared with earlier Roman history, he noted that "not only does my own mind, as I write of old-time matters, become in some way or other old-fashioned, but also a certain conscientious scruple keeps me from regarding what those very sagacious men of former times thought worthy of public concern as something unworthy to be reported in my history."[26] In various cases he seemed to reveal his rational approach to irregular natural phenomena. This was perhaps most evident near the very beginning of his work, when he related the story of the deification of Romulus. When some people thought that Romulus had been murdered by the senators, the more miraculous version obtained currency by the evidence of Proculus Julius, of which Livy noted: "It is wonderful what credence the people placed in that man's tale, and how the grief for the loss of Romulus, which the plebeians and the army felt, was quieted by the assurance of his immortality."[27] At a more general level Livy seemed aware that superstition could be utilized to keep people under social subjection. Writing of the search for the twelve tables and other legal records after the Sack of Rome in 390 B.C., he noted: "Some of these were made accessible even to the common people, but such as dealt with sacred rites were kept private by the pontiffs, chiefly that they might hold the minds of the populace in subjection through religious fears."[28] It is not difficult

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[24] *Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. John C. Rolfe, 3 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1935-39), 1: 345-9 (XVII.7.9-13), 487-9 (XIX.4.2-7).

[25] Joseph Mali, *Mythistory, the Making of a Modern Historiography*, (Chicago and London, 2003), 36-42.

[26] *Livy*, trans. B. O. Foster, Frank Gardner Moore, Evan T. Sage and Alfred C. Schlesinger, 14 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1919-52), 13: 45 (XLIII.xiii.1-3).

[27] Ibid., 1: 57-61 (I.xvi.1-8). For other cases evincing Livy's more rational approach to natural portents, see 2: 27 (III.viii.1); 6: 207 (XXIV.x.6); 7: 305 (XXVII.xxiii.2).

[28] Ibid., 3: 197 (VI.i.10-11).

to imagine how this passage was read during the Enlightenment. Adam Smith stated clearly that Livy did not really believe in religious omens and portents at a time when the social elite regarded "vulgar Religion" mainly as a political tool.[29] Yet one should be wary of attributing to Livy a cultural critique which was far from the eighteenth-century systematic battle with superstition. Ultimately, the vast majority of his many detailed accounts of what the Romans perceived as natural portents, and the religious rites associated with them, were factual and devoid of any implied, let alone explicit, social criticism. It is therefore unclear whether Livy was totally skeptical about any divine intervention in the natural world, or whether he simply thought that this intervention was occasionally utilized for political subjugation. Even assuming the most radical skepticism on his part, which was probably unlikely, his decision to depict Roman civilization's portentous attitude toward nature in a generally straightforward manner evinced just how common was this outlook in classical times.

During the early Middle Ages the belief in divine accommodation acquired an increasingly Christian color. Eusebius depicted the famine and pestilence during the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Maximin as a divine punishment, specifically because the tyrannical Maximin had boasted that his devotion to idols prevented such natural calamities. Eusebius implied that all this happened, among other things, in order to prove the fallacy of this claim. Eventually these disasters ended when God felt that there had been "sufficient chastisement," after which he returned being kind to all those who believed in Him.[30] According to St. Augustine God was the omnipotent creator of everything in the universe, from the meanest to the greatest. He was "the source of all that exists in nature, whatever its kind, whatsoever its value," and consequently also of humanity's singular rationality within all of the natural order. For St. Augustine earthly prosperity was unimportant compared with the bliss of Heaven, and therefore, in order to avoid the worshippers' wish for earthly dominions, God gave such earthly prosperity to both the good and the evil. Yet there was divine munificence and retribution in earthly matters, as evinced by the fate of the ancient Israelites,

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[29] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis, 1985), 109: "But that which is the peculiar excellency of Livy's Stile is the Grandeur and majesty which he maintains thro' the whole of his works and in which he excells all other historians tho' perhaps he is inferiour in many other respects. Tis probably to keep up this gravity, that he pays so much attention to the ceremonies of Religion and the omens and Portents, which he never omitts. For it is not to be supposed that he had any belief in them himself in an age when the vulgar Religion was altogether dissregarded except as a Politicall Institution by the wiser Sort."

[30] Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, 1965), 365-8.

who prospered in their wars, agriculture and all aspects of their lives, until they sinned against God, worshipped idols and eventually put Christ to death.[31] All this was replete with the Christian cosmological outlook according to which God manipulated nature with a constant eye to the behavior of human beings. It became a mainstay of medieval culture that an unusual natural phenomenon or calamity was never just that in itself. Nature was not an objective reality to be scrutinized in rational manner but a manifestation of divine will beyond human control or comprehension. The only way the medieval mind was capable of coping with this ever-present foreboding reality was in a symbolic fashion, which accorded a meaning to what otherwise, from a pre-scientific perspective, seemed arbitrary and incomprehensible. Hence the potency of divine accommodation as an apodictic expository tool.

The Christian form of divine accommodation was even more explicit than the pagan one, and in the early Middle Ages usually qualified as straightforward divine intervention. This was evident in the sixth century when Sidonius Apollinaris made explicit his belief that religious faith could actually stop natural disasters, and "that the incessant raging of fire could be quenched rather by the water of tears than by the water of rivers, and that the appalling shock of earthquakes could be arrested by firmness of faith."[32] Gregory of Tours was probably thinking of this passage when a short time later he depicted the natural calamities, or portents as he called them, which afflicted Vienne during the time of the Bishop Mamertus, the recipient of the aforementioned letter by Sidonius. Gregory accentuated Sidonius's language when he wrote that during this difficult time Vienne "was frequently shaken by earthquakes, and wild creatures, stags and wolves, entered the gates, wandering without fear through the whole city." Then, during the Easter Mass, the royal palace "was set ablaze by fire from heaven." The bishop prostrated himself before the altar and implored the divine mercy. His prayers were answered, and then "the river of his flowing tears extinguished the burning palace." The bishop then imposed a fast on the people and instituted rogations.[33] Gregory provided one of the most prominent examples of the early medieval superstitious inclination to believe in divine portents. His work

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[31] See St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1984), 196 (V.11), 176-77 (IV.33), 177-78 (IV.34), respectively. See also Theodor E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: the Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12 (1951), 346-74.

[32] Sidonius, *Poems and Letters*, trans. W. B. Anderson, 2 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1936-65), 2: 289-91 (*Letters*, VII.1.4-5).

[33] Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. O. M. Dalton, 2 vols (Oxford, 1967), 2: 74. See also Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800), Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), 189.

abounds in allusions to divinely ordained natural occurrences, where nature seems constantly to reverberate in a supernatural manner. According to Walter Goffart, Gregory tended usually to describe calamitous natural occurrences, and took positive and bountiful nature for granted. Gregory utilized such negative natural phenomena as prodigies, or for religious admonition. According to Goffart, "Whether flowing along its customary channels or on a rampage, nature [according to Gregory of Tours's outlook] was in God's direct care."[34]

A similar outlook was later evinced by Bede, who in his *Ecclesiastical History* repeatedly related stories of how saintly medieval figures were able, mainly through prayer, to control nature.[35] Bede outlined specifically the medieval view of how providential control of nature was meant to instruct humanity. He described how the seventh-century abbot and bishop Chad, who used to pray for the calming of storms, claimed that he did so "For the Lord moves the air, raises the winds, hurls the lightnings, and thunders forth from heaven so as to rouse the inhabitants of the world to fear Him, to call them to remember the future judgement in order that He may scatter their pride and confound their boldness by bringing to their minds that dread time when He will come in the clouds in great power and majesty, to judge the living and the dead, while the heavens and the earth are aflame." Thunder and similar natural occurrences were a "heavenly warning" which should lead people to implore divine mercy and to behave in such a manner that they became worthy to be spared by God and not to be struck down.[36]

Bede, Gregory of Tours and other early medieval historians demonstrated the contemporaneous tendency to give credence to divine accommodation, and even straightforward divine intervention, in the operations of nature. This was coupled with a sense in which human beings were powerless to deal with natural calamities. The only way to counter them was by faith. As the classical form of divine accommodation developed into the more extreme early medieval belief in direct and constant divine intervention, the need for developing more rational and scientific explanations for coping with nature all but disappeared, and it was only in the later Middle Ages that it began gradually to reappear. Approximately from the sixth century there no longer existed the cultural underpinnings which

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[34] Ibid., 163, 186-90. Goffart objects to the interpretation of Gregory as a figure symbolizing a low cultural point following the fall of Rome. According to Goffart, Gregory signaled cultural continuity and even novelty, yet not in a classical vein, but rather in a new Christian spirit. See ibid., 230-34.

[35] See Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, the Greater Chronicle, Bede's Letter to Egbert*, trans. Bertram Colgrave, Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford and New York, 1994), 82 (II.7), 135-7 (III.16-17), 193 (IV.13), 225-6 (IV.28), 236-7 (V.1).

[36] Ibid., 177 (IV.3).

a sophisticated rational scientific and philosophical outlook required, and the more scientific classical approaches to explaining the operation of nature became culturally peripheral. Medieval Christian literati made only selective use of classical scientific theories, specifically peripatetic philosophy. Medieval culture, however, did not normally require anything but a portentous consideration of nature.

Nevertheless, there were various levels of intensity in which this outlook manifested itself. Medieval culture still evinced occasional, if partial, vestiges of a relatively more rational approach to nature, and not everyone shared Gregory of Tours's uncritical outlook. An interesting case was Procopius, who became one of the most important sources for Gibbon's discussion of early medieval history. While depicting the great pestilence of 542 Procopius claimed that no explanation of "outlandish theories of natural philosophy" could account for the pestilence, since it attacked people of all sorts, in all geographical regions and all seasons, and therefore could not be causally explained in any clear fashion. "But for this calamity it is quite impossible either to express in words or to conceive in thought any explanation except indeed to refer it to God."[37] The very generality and variable course of the pestilence was a sign of its divine origin. Elsewhere Procopius depicted the inundations of the Nile, the earthquakes and the catching of a famous large whale near Byzantium, which all occurred in 548, claiming that some regarded these things as portents, but that as for himself he would "leave to others prophecies and explanations of marvels."[38] Throughout his works he repeatedly expressed similar wavering doubts regarding superstitious explanations of natural and historical occurrences, yet ultimately it was clear that he shared a superstitious belief in fortune and portents. While he was far from Gregory of Tours's or Bede's gullibility there was still more of a similarity than a difference in their view of nature.

The early medieval portentous view of nature remained evident not just in Christian, but also in pagan historiography, a prime example of which was the work of the Byzantine historian Zosimus. For example, he described how following the death of the emperor Valentinian there occurred natural disasters, mainly earthquakes, in Greece and Crete. Yet Athens and Attica were spared this disaster thanks to Nestorius the hierophant, who despite the contempt of the magistrates had managed secretly to act according to the admonition he saw in a dream, and honored Achilles with public sacrifices. He did so by hiding an image of Achilles under the statue of Athena in the Parthenon, so that when

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37 *Procopius*, 1: 451-3 (*History of the Wars*, II.xxii.1-5).

38 Ibid., 4: 405 (*History of the Wars*, VII.xxix.19).

he performed the customary sacrifices to Athena he also did so for Achilles.[39] Zosimus succinctly summarized his philosophical outlook when he claimed that "May everything turn out as the gods see fit."[40] At the outset of his work he stated his belief that human affairs were managed by some type of divine providence, according to how much human beings were spiritually worthy or unworthy to prosper. He claimed that what influenced human affairs was "the necessity of Fate, or revolutions of the stars, or the will of the gods." Zosimus therefore believed in a type of historical determinism, and his intention as a historian was to demonstrate the veracity of this outlook "from events themselves."[41] Walter Kaegi has depicted Zosimus as a pagan who believed in divine providence as an actuating force in history, was implicitly critical of Christianity, but was more directly concerned with the neglect of religious pagan rites.[42] Zosimus was a prime early example of medieval historians' attitude toward nature, and in this respect the pagan and the Christian outlooks were not that different. We should remind ourselves here that Gregory of Tours, Bede, Procopius, Zosimus, and other historians from all stages of the Middle Ages were meticulously studied by Enlightenment historians, not least by Gibbon. Read through eighteenth-century eyes, the medieval propensity to regard nature in a religious manner was construed and criticized as a historical phenomenon *sui generis*.

In the later Middle Ages the belief in divine accommodation remained influential, although outright depictions of divine intervention became gradually less common. Otto of Freising evinced his belief in divine intervention when he related, for example, how the earthquake in the time when Attila began his invasions ceased with the prayers of the bishop Proclus and the people, or how the flooding of the Tiber in the early eighth century ceased with the public litanies. He was however slightly more sophisticated in his view of the impact of providentially-ordained nature on human events, when he claimed that the comet which appeared in 1066 (Halley's Comet) effected the Norman

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[39] See Zosimus, *New History*, trans. Ronald T. Ridley (Canberra, 1990), 77-8 (IV.18); also 101 (V.6), and for further examples of Zosimus's portentous view of natural phenomena, and belief in the power of sculptured images of deities, 79 (IV.21), 112 (V.24), 121 (V.41).

[40] Ibid., 112 (V.24).

[41] Ibid., 1 (I.1).

[42] According to Kaegi, Zosimus regarded the decline of Rome as resulting from an impious attitude toward pagan rites, but found it difficult to reconcile this with the survival and prosperity of the Eastern empire and its capital Constantinople, which was also evidently divinely ordained by the pagan deities. See Walter Emil Kaegi, Jr, *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome* (Princeton, 1968), 99-145.

invasion.[43] This explanation might still be regarded as divine accommodation, yet it accorded more room for a natural phenomenon per se to affect human history. From a later perspective this might seem like an insignificant difference, but compared to the earlier view of divinely-ordained natural calamities which could begin or end in miraculous fashion, this was already a step toward a more rational approach. Other examples from the later Middle Ages could be given. Thus, in his *Life of Saint Louis* Jean de Joinville wrote of the recurrent seasonal floods of the Nile, that "Nobody knows how these floods arise, unless it is by God's will." But beyond this remark he centered on a rather realistic depiction of how the farmers worked the fields once the floods receded.[44] This was a case of a seemingly rational relation of physical natural occurrences and their human consequences, which superimposed divine accommodation almost as an afterthought. Medieval science was limited in its ability to explain such natural phenomena and resorted to divine accommodation whenever it lacked any rational explanation. Yet this was no longer the stark type of divine intervention common several centuries earlier. In the combination of divine and rational comprehension of the world the latter was slowly but surely gaining ground at the expense of the former. The image of an arbitrarily operating God who could overturn the very operations of nature was thus receding by the later Middle Ages. Nature still seemed to operate according to divine will, yet this operation was gradually perceived to follow plausible natural courses. These were not yet conceived as strict laws of nature, a conception of which would take a further half millennium to develop, yet the road in this direction seems to have begun approximately about the twelfth century.

A significant step in this changing cosmological outlook was taken during the Renaissance, when an empirical consideration of nature became increasingly more common. Petrarch's *Ascent of Mount Ventoux*, despite its religious overtones, was a watershed in the transition from the medieval-symbolical to the early-modern-empirical attitude toward nature. By ascending Mount Ventoux Petrarch exemplified, figuratively and literally, how the late medieval outlook came down to earth, back to the empirical consideration of nature which had been replaced in late antiquity by the Christian religious symbolical interpretation of nature. Now, however, the new empiricism was both more systematic, but also combined with a persistent Christian underpinning. There was therefore a strong religious element in Petrarch's depiction of this

[43] See Otto, Bishop of Freising, *The Two Cities, a Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 A.D.*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, ed. Austin P. Evans and Charles Knapp (New York, 1966), 310, 344, 400 respectively.

[44] Joinville and Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. Margaret R. B. Shaw (Harmondsworth, 1969), 212.

experience, which ostensibly made its symbolic spiritual significance outweigh its temporal human aspect. That in itself was a mainstay of medieval depictions of nature. What was new in Petrarch's account was the encounter, at the sheer physical level, with the tangible reality of nature, and the conquering of this reality by human endeavor, irrespective of whether this was outweighed by more significant spiritual challenges. The natural world in the early Renaissance reasserted its place in the European cultural experience.[45] Of course, divine accommodation and even straightforward divine intervention still retained a significant hold on people's minds during the Renaissance, as Raphael's frescoes in the *Stanza d'Eliodoro* so beautifully testified. A similar outlook was evident in Renaissance historiography. According to Luigi Guicciardini the Sack of Rome in 1527 was the result of the just wrath of God. Those who awaited divine salvation while still persisting in sloth and pusillanimity were mistaken in their expectations. Guicciardini seems to have believed in the natural portents which frightened Christians and foretold the impending disaster of the Sack of Rome. Yet Renaissance historiography was already far from the medieval view of divine accommodation and Guicciardini himself clearly exemplified this when, while depicting the Sack of Rome, he claimed that human beings and not fortune were often the causes of their own misery. This ambivalent attitude toward the providential influence in history was also shared by Luigi's more famous brother, the historian Francesco Guicciardini.[46] As Felix Gilbert has noted, Renaissance historiography retained a sense of the important influence of God and of fortune, but at the same time accorded an important role to human exertion and to history as a man-made process.[47] Machiavelli expressed this outlook when

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[45] See Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux," in *Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, trans. and ed. Mark Musa (Oxford and New York, 1985), 11-19. And see also the discussion in Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 419-21.

[46] See Luigi Guicciardini, *The Sack of Rome*, trans. and ed. James H. Mc Gregor (New York, 1993), 60, 62-3, 85-7, 106. For detailed remarks regarding Francesco's views on this issue see Mark Salber Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Manchester, 1977), 72-4, 136-44, 155-6; at 181-3, Phillips claims there was a mannerist element to the historiography of Francesco Guicciardini and Machiavelli, who both removed the moral element from history contrary to customary humanistic historiography. Writing of the historiographical outlook of Francesco Guicciardini, Eric Cochrane noted in his *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago and London, 1981), 299: "[I]ndividual men remained the sole agents of historical change. Portents were nothing but purely coincidental signs of what was about to happen, and what occasionally made them historically important was the prophetic quality that men, in their ignorance, attributed to them."

[47] Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini, Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, 1965), 217-18, 235. The Italian Renaissance humanist Poggio Bracciolini, who was greatly appreciated by Gibbon, and who we shall discuss further in

he wrote, attempting to maintain a role for the agency of human free will, "that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves." Fortune, which Machiavelli conceived as a woman, in this sense favored those who were active and coerced her, not those who resigned to her dictates.[48] Divine accommodation in the guise of fortune thus, according to Machiavelli, had a role to play in history, and not surprisingly he evinced a belief in portents and divinations which predicted imminent disasters.[49]

In the sixteenth century Jean Bodin, despite his belief in witchcraft, outlined another version of the Renaissance belief in a world governed by a combination of both human and divine wills. According to Bodin history was divided into three types – human, natural and divine. In natural history there were cause and effect unless these were checked by divine will, but "human history mostly flows from the will of mankind, which ever vacillates and has no objective." Therefore human actions were fraught with errors unless directed by the leadership of nature, and if need be by divine aid.[50] Bodin objected to depictions of prodigies which were plainly incredible, but he considered it preferable to err by superstition rather than by irreverence. False religion was preferable to no religion at all.[51] Nevertheless, ultimately Bodin tended more to a divine accommodation outlook rather than to a truly secular historiography. Thus, while outlining his theory of how changes in the condition of states, and of the world in general, occurred in multiples of certain numbers of years, he claimed that God was free from obeying these numerical laws, and indeed from obeying any of His own laws in general. "For since He himself ordains the laws of nature and has received dominion from no other than Himself, it is fitting that He should be released from His laws, and at different times should make

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the third chapter below, regarded fortune as mutable, but he also suggested it was not a blind arbitrary force but rather something which affected what human beings did with premeditation. At one point he even suggested that a Christian outlook prompted him to see fortune as a vain term coined by the stupidity of human beings, who ascribed their own faults to it. See Poggio Bracciolini, *Les Ruines de Rome, De Varietate Fortunae Livre I*, trans. Jean-Yves Boriaud, ed. Philippe Coarelli and Jean-Yves Boriaud (Paris, 1999), 48, 52, and more generally 46-64.

[48] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. George Bull (Harmondsworth, 1983), 130-33.

[49] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago and London, 1996), 113-14.

[50] Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, trans. and ed. Beatrice Reynolds (New York, 1969), 15-17.

[51] Ibid., 57-8.

different decisions about the same things."[52] This was of course a very different outlook than that of later eighteenth-century deism, which broadly claimed that God, once he had created the world as governed by uniform natural laws, was constrained Himself to follow these laws. Yet, as Anthony Grafton has noted, Bodin was an innovator in emphasizing the fact that history was concerned with humanly induced progress.[53]

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the constant intellectual and theological contentions which they fomented, kept alive an influential belief in divine accommodation which found ample expression in early modern historiography, particularly in the seventeenth century. The Jansenist historian Louis Sébastien le Nain de Tillemont, one of Gibbon's most important sources in writing *The Decline and Fall*, depicted how reports of the wealth and fertility of Spain attracted the Vandals and other barbarian tribes of the north to invade it in 409. He claimed that Spain deserved to be invaded because of its impudence and false doctors, and especially the preponderance of the Priscillians, who caused more harm than the worst enemies. Evincing his clear religious historiographical outlook, he claimed that the irruption of the barbarians was a very just decree ("un decret très juste") of God. The ravages thus calmed in 411 only when God inspired the barbarians with a preference for labor rather than war.[54] Tillemont similarly depicted the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, emphasizing that despite all the excesses committed, Alaric and his Visigoth soldiers respected the Christian inhabitants and particularly those who sought refuge in the church of St. Peter, the survivors from which were later able to rebuild the city. Tillemont claimed that in this fashion God chose to chastise and punish the Romans, and he regarded this acquiescence and respect for Jesus Christ on the part of the barbarians during the heat of plunder as a divine act.[55] There was however a clear difference between this type of divine-accommodation explanation and the earlier medieval outlook. While the latter conceived of God as directly intervening in the actual operations of phenomena, Tillemont's divine accommodation was more a matter of interpretation superimposed upon the rationally related historical narrative. Divine accommodation here truly shed its more extreme divine intervention aspect, and remained specifically

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[52] Ibid., 235-6.

[53] See Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007), 165-87.

[54] Louis Sébastien le Nain de Tillemont, *Histoire des Empereurs*, 6 vols (Bruxelles, 1732-49), 5: 254-5.

[55] Ibid., 5: 257-9. For Tillemont and his importance for Gibbon see David P. Jordan, "LeNain de Tillemont: Gibbon's 'Sure-Footed Mule'," *Church History*, 39 (1970), 483-502; idem, *Gibbon and His Roman Empire* (Urbana, 1971), 123-45; and also *PBR*, 3: 332-8.

an expository tool for according religious significance and moral instruction to history.[56] Even the most religious historians were therefore affected by the growing secularization of science during the seventeenth century, and religious interpretations were unremittingly marginalized during the following century.

One historiographical field in which divine accommodation retained a tenacious conceptual hold was universal history. This type of historical literature, relating with heavy reliance on the biblical outlook the story of the universe from the first day of creation, was unsurprisingly replete with references to divine accommodation and intervention. Even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries one could still find examples of the persistence of this type of literature, albeit in an increasingly more secular tone. One of the most important, influential and still deeply religious examples was Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's famous *Discourse on Universal History*. Bossuet claimed that after the deluge human beings gradually cultivated the land, achieving advancement in material culture, for example in hunting, agriculture and the use of metals. While certain things were invented others fell to oblivion, but there was overall cultural progress, particularly in places which were continually populated and which were close to where Noah settled. Religion however eventually deteriorated to false divinities, and this led to the calling of Abraham.[57] This type of outlook, still quite common in the seventeenth century, exemplified the traditional religious teleological historiography which habitually adhered to a view of material cultural progress, including the cultivation of natural resources, as divinely ordained. In this respect Bossuet evinced the persistence of divine accommodation as a historiographical explanatory tool. History might seem to progress in a rational and material fashion yet this was all ultimately part of the divine teleological plan.

Religious universal history, however, became increasingly less influential toward the end of the early modern era. Much more significant in the long run was the persistent growth of a more rational and secular historiography. One of the seventeenth century's most important historians, the Venetian Paolo Sarpi, remarked that immediately after the death of Zwingli and his friend Oecolampadius (who died of grief after the former's death in the Battle of Kappel), the Catholics associated their demise with divine providence, as a punishment for those who were the authors of discord in Switzerland. Sarpi, far

[56] Gibbon seemed aware of this. Regarding the earthquake in Constantinople in Theodosius's and Attila's time, and the manner in which Tillemont and "all the ecclesiastical writers" discussed it, he wrote: "In the hands of a popular preacher, an earthquake is an engine of admirable effect." See *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 303 note 21.

[57] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discourse on Universal History*, trans. Elborg Forster, ed. Orest Ranum (Chicago and London, 1976), 12. On Bossuet see *PBR*, 3: 327-31.

from an unbelieving Catholic, claimed in this context: "Surely, it is a pious and religious thought, to attribute the disposition of every event, to the Providence of God: but to determine to what end those events are directed, by that high Wisdom, is not far from presumption." This, claimed Sarpi, was testified by the subsequent progress of the Protestants in the "Cantons called Gospellers," despite Zwingli's death. People were wedded to their own opinions according to Sarpi, and this was the reason they thought that God loved them and favored them like they did themselves, and ultimately intervened in their favor.[58] This was a subtle criticism of divine accommodation, perhaps not a categorical one, but definitely of the more crude types of traditional historiographical interpretations.

During the second half of the seventeenth century the seeds of what modern scholarship has come to designate as the Radical Enlightenment were sown. The new type of skeptical thought about the historical veracity of the Bible and about miracles became a consistent theme in European philosophy, for example in Spinoza's influential *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which became one of the most famous and derided disseminators of this skepticism. This new application of rigorous rationality in examining ancient canonical traditions became increasingly more common during the eighteenth century, famously detailed in Hume's "Of Miracles." It questioned the very possibility of direct divine intervention in natural and human occurrences.[59] When it came to criticizing the belief in natural occurrences and calamities as divine portents, Pierre Bayle's *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* educated generations of Enlightenment intellectuals, not least Gibbon, who was very appreciative

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[58] Paolo Sarpi, *The History of the Council of Trent*, trans. Nathanael Brent (London, 1676), 57. And see also the remarks on the reactions to Luther's death at 140.

[59] For the work which most influenced the rise of the Radical Enlightenment see Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (Gebhardt Edition, 1925)*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden, 1989), where one can find, at 125, the following typical statement: "To what lengths will the folly of the multitude not carry them? They have no sound conception either of God or of Nature, they confuse God's decisions with human decisions, and they imagine Nature to be so limited that they believe man to be its chief part." For Hume's most famous contribution to this tradition see David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, 1999), 169-86. The issue of early modern unbelief is one of the most perennial topics in modern scholarship and we cannot here go into more detail, but for a good introductory collection of essays see *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford, 1992). For the Radical Enlightenment see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment, Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001); idem, *Enlightenment Contested, Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford, 2006); and for a different approach Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment, Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981).

of Bayle, to a thorough skepticism regarding the old divine-accommodation type of thinking.[60] Yet we should remember that the Radical Enlightenment by its very designation did not represent the mainstream of eighteenth-century European thought. More common was what might be termed the Moderate Enlightenment, which to speak of course in very generalizing terms, accepted the new type of skepticism only up to a certain point, but still maintained a fundamental adherence to an overall Christian outlook purged of superstition. It was precisely this outlook which made someone like Hume relatively exceptional in contrast with other Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals, most of whom were less prone to outright skepticism.[61]

The transition from seventeenth- to eighteenth-century historiography was gradual, based in large measure on a continuance of seventeenth-century erudition yet with a growing emphasis on a more philosophically critical outlook. One important result of this was that the receding explanatory role of divine accommodation notwithstanding, a religious moral outlook, at least of a general type, was by no means quick to disappear, particularly in the early eighteenth century.[62] The English historian Humphrey Prideaux, writing of the victory of the greatly outnumbered Greeks over the Persians and Carthaginians at the beginning of the fifth century B.C., observed "that whatsoever the pride of man may design, or the power of man think to effect, it is still the providence of God that governs

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[60] See Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. and ed. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany, 2000).

[61] For a good discussion of the providential element in eighteenth-century Scottish thought, which however somewhat over-emphasizes its importance in Enlightenment historiography, see David Allen, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment, Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh, 1993), 207-17. An almost opposite perspective is presented by David Spadafora who claims that the Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals believed in divine intervention even less than the English. See David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven and London, 1990), 309-10, 368-77. On the other hand, although centering mainly on theological rather than on historiographical literature, Spadafora notes in detail the preservation of the concept of divine accommodation and its influence on history in eighteenth-century British thought; see ibid., 85-132.

[62] The retention of certain religious elements of thought within the overall secularizing process during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is usually more familiar to scholars regarding the changes in the scientific realm brought about by the Scientific Revolution. The literature on this topic is vast, but for remarks which highlight this subject in a way pertinent to our own discussion see Gascoigne, "'The Wisdom of the Egyptians'"; and P. M. Heimann, "Voluntarism and Immanence: Conceptions of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 39 (1978), 271-83.

the world."[63] Interestingly, the "still" in "it is still the providence of God that governs the world" meant Prideaux was himself aware that this type of outlook was rapidly going out of fashion. Vague references to divine accommodation of this late type increasingly assumed the guise of moralizing castigation. Such religious anti-anthropocentric criticism of human pride was essentially a matter of arguing for the necessity of humility, and consequently calling for the amelioration of human conduct. It was thus essentially anthropocentric in its ultimate motivation and had nothing to do with criticizing the human superior position at the top of the Great Chain of Being. In this general moral sense the Enlightenment retained a certain distinct notion of religiosity, or at least certain remnants of the traditional religious world-view, although these increasingly gave way before a more straightforward anthropocentric advocacy of humanity's control of its destiny. Yet while divine accommodation eventually lost its explanatory power, a certain vague but significant sense in which religion was still ethically important was evident in most Enlightenment historiographical literature, even, as we shall see in later chapters, in Gibbon's work. Essentially, the Enlightenment dispensed only with those aspects of religion which seemed redolent with irrational superstition. The sense of human natural superiority and cosmological uniqueness was not shaken by this change, even though it was based to such a large degree on religious tradition.

The early Enlightenment mitigated religious outlook on human history and its relevancy to the human interaction with the natural world were influentially evinced by John Locke. Locke based his analysis of the human relationships of sovereignty and ownership of property on the biblical granting of human dominion of nature in *Genesis*. Yet he claimed that this did not mean a God-given immediate private sovereignty of one person rather than another.[64] This illustrated the sense in which any existent notion of divine accommodation became more generalized and amorphous. Locke regarded labor as what invested nature with an additional quality which made it useful to mankind, and also turned it into property belonging to the person who invested this labor. Yet one could appropriate to oneself only so much as one could make use of. "Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy." Locke thus did not perceive uncultivated nature as of any usefulness. "For I aske whether

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[63] Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations, from the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1851 [1716-18]), 1: 269. On Prideaux see P. M. Holt, "The Treatment of Arab History by Prideaux, Ockley and Sale," in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London, 1964), 290-302, at 290-94.

[64] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1970), 169-89 ("First Treatise," chs III-IV).

in the wild woods and uncultivated wast of America left to Nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres will yeild the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniencies of life as ten acres of equally fertile land doe in Devonshire where they are well cultivated?" The answer of course was negative. Locke viewed leaving nature in an uncultivated state as almost a sin, the more so as specific parts of nature were potentially fertile. A person who altered the products of nature by labor acquired a propriety in them. "But if they perished, in his Possession, without their due use; if the Fruits rotted, or the Venison putrefied, before he could spend it, he offended against the common Law of Nature."[65] The sense in which nothing should be left uncultivated, "spoiled or destroyed," seemed a moral stricture and in that sense derived its ethical empowerment from the religious cosmological outlook. But this general religious sense by no means meant any type of direct divine accommodation. Furthermore, Locke here outlined a view of human cosmological superiority as something which gained significance only when attaining concrete practical expression. In other words he viewed the human singularity in nature as a practically applied material process, as quite simply an inherently historical cultural phenomenon. Divine accommodation in early Enlightenment historiographical thought was in this way transformed from an expository mechanism for explaining past events, or at most advocating religious moral conduct, into a base from which to promote the recommendations of the Scientific Revolution to implement human cosmological superiority and turn it into tangible, material achievements.

Before considering the more secular manifestations of this new historiographical outlook it is important to emphasize that some of the most important eighteenth-century historians, particularly, but not only, in the first half of the century, still held on to modified and mitigated forms of divine accommodation explanations. Pietro Giannone, the famous historian of Naples, and far from an irrational Enlightenment historian, vividly depicted the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in December 1631, but also noted how the wind drove away the poisonous exhalations of the mountain after heaven was "pacified by the

[65] Ibid. 303-20 ("Second Treatise," ch. V); 308, 312, 312-13 respectively for the quotations. See also the remarks in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago and London, 1953), 248-9: "According to Locke, man and not nature, the work of man and not the gift of nature, is the origin of almost everything valuable: man owes almost everything valuable to his own efforts... The world in which human creativity seems to reign supreme is, in fact, the world which has replaced the rule of nature by the rule of convention. From now on, nature furnishes only the worthless materials as in themselves; the forms are supplied by man, by man's free creation... There are, therefore, no natural principles of understanding: all knowledge is acquired; all knowledge depends on labor and is labor."

publick Penances." Yet he also immediately continued and noted that the wars in Italy at that time constituted greater calamities than this natural phenomenon.[66] Perhaps Giannone thus implied that Providence was less inclined to intervene on behalf of human beings when they themselves, and not the forces of nature, caused their own misfortunes.

Universal history was not commonly written in the eighteenth century, yet still remained popular and influential to a certain extent in more orthodox circles. This was evident specifically in the not uncommon references to the biblical deluge as the starting-point for recorded history. Francisco Clavigero, the historian of Mexico, although usually a very realistic historian, retained a belief in the biblical narrative and the deluge.[67] More significant since he was an important influence on Gibbon was the French historian Antoine-Yves Goguet, whose generally rational history of the ancient world still retained a firm belief in the postdiluvian roots of history and in the veracity of biblical miracles even when these seemed contrary to natural laws.[68] Yet in contrast to earlier universal historiography these were not pervasive observations in Goguet's work, and in that sense Tamara Griggs's emphasis on him as a signal figure in the secularization of universal historiography in the early Enlightenment is correct.[69] During the Enlightenment there were both more secularly-minded historians, and others who still insisted on maintaining a relatively emphatic religious outlook. Among the latter Vico was the most intriguing and original figure. He constantly evinced a belief in divine accommodation. Indeed, he regarded the whole process of human history as ordained by divine providence. It was divine providence which initiated the transition from barbarism to civilization, since people began to create social order out of fear of the idea of divinity which providence aroused

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66 *GCH*, 2: 735.

67 Francisco Javier Clavigero , *The History of Mexico*, trans. Charles Cullen, 2 vols (London, 1787; reprint New York and London, 1979), 2: 212-13, 217, 246-7, and passim.

68 See Antoine-Yves Goguet, *The Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences, and their Progress among The most Ancient Nations*, trans. [Robert Henry?], 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1761; reprint New York, 1976), 1: xvi; 3: 288-99. Goguet has received growing attention in recent scholarship. For Pocock's discussion see *PBR*, 4: 37-64 and passim. Among other studies see for example Edna Lemay, "Histoire de l'antiquité et découverte du nouveau monde chez deux auteurs du XVIII^{e} siècle," *SVEC*, 153 (1976), 1313-28; Michael C. Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2007), 145-50, 153-5, 158; Nathaniel Wolloch, "'Facts, or Conjectures': Antoine-Yves Goguet's Historiography," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), 429-49; and Tamara Griggs, "Universal History from the Counter-Reformation to Enlightenment," *Modern Intellectual History*, 4 (2007), 219-47.

69 Ibid.

in them.[70] There was however a twist to this line of argument. Was it divine providence itself which directed the historical process or was it the fear of divine providence which did so? Vico, although somewhat enigmatic on this point, seemed to suggest that it was both things simultaneously. In this sense his was the most original perpetuation of a type of divine accommodation outlook in eighteenth-century historiography.[71] He both retained a version of the traditional outlook, but combined with the much more modern notion which regarded religion as a human social experience. History, according to this outlook, was a combination of both divine and human endeavor. Attempts to retain the role of divine providence in history became, however, much less common in the second half of the eighteenth century.

It seems almost unnecessary to emphasize the rational tone and lack of reference to divine accommodation in the works of the most prominent Enlightenment historians, primarily Voltaire, Hume, Robertson[72] and Gibbon. They all evinced a realistic approach to historiography and specifically to the human interaction with nature. In the eighteenth century the influence of natural phenomena, specifically disasters, on human beings, ceased to be amenable to divine-accommodation types of explanations. Instead they were considered as resulting from a combination of the workings of nature on the one hand, and the human responses to them on the other. The French historian of China, Joseph de Guignes, was one of the historians who took this new approach. While giving a detailed and stark depiction of the progress and ravages of the Black Death in the fourteenth century, and its advance from Asia to most of

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[70] *VNS*: 87, 127-8, 400, 457-8, 490-91, and passim. Vico exempted the ancient Jews from the divine historical plan and regarded them as the only postdiluvian nation not divinely ordained to recede back to savagery. See the discussion of this point in Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time, the History of the Earth & the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago and London, 1984), 246-50, 254-5.

[71] For Vico's ambivalent approach to providential intervention in history see Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford and New York, 1985), 61-8. See also the remarks in Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. R. G. Collingwood (New York, 1964), 112-21. The literature on Vico is unmanageably large, but for excellent general introductions to many of his historiographical ideas see Mali, *Mythistory*, 61-84; and John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment, Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005), 201-55.

[72] As we shall see, lack of reference to explicit divine accommodation did not mean relinquishing some type of rational conception of providence. For an interpretation of Robertson's outlook along this line emphasizing his combination of religiosity together with an enlightened, tolerant and pluralistic consideration of various religions, see Nicholas Phillipson, "Providence and Progress: an Introduction to the Historical Thought of William Robertson," in *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, ed. Stewart J. Brown (Cambridge, 1997), 55-73.

the known world and eventually to Europe, de Guignes claimed that the plague followed the commercial routes between nations. Therefore, he implied, it was as much a human as a natural phenomenon.[73] In any event, de Guignes did not resort to divine accommodation or retribution as an explanation of the plague, restricting himself to natural and social causes. A similar stance could be found in the work of the Scottish historian Robert Henry, whose example on this point is particularly interesting because he was probably the translator of Goguet, whose work greatly influenced his own *History of Great Britain*. In the beginning of this work Henry, like Goguet, adhered to a biblically-based postdiluvian historiography.[74] In contrast with Goguet, however, Henry, despite being a Doctor of Divinity, did not at any point resort to a belief in miracles. For example, he depicted the devastation and uncultivated state of agriculture and gardening in early medieval Britain, when famines were particularly common and severe. Yet he assigned all this to the imperfect state of agriculture following the departure of the Romans, without attributing any role to divine intervention.[75] Elsewhere, commenting on the great plague in England in 1198 and on the contemporary claims that only the monasteries were exempt from the ravages of the plague, Henry asserted that this was proof that the monks at that time enjoyed much better accommodation and more abundance of all things compared to other sections of the population.[76] A rational social explanation was here offered for this natural and historical occurrence, without any reference to divine causes. This essentially modern outlook, which famously colored Voltaire's musings on the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, became predominant in late Enlightenment historiographical thought.[77]

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[73] *GHG*, 4: 223-8. On de Guignes see Minuti, "Gibbon and the Asiatic Barbarians," 42-4; *PBR*, 4: 110-53; and J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Idol Fo: Chinese and Christian History in the Enlightenment," in *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews*, ed. David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel (Leiden, 1990), 15-34.

[74] *HHGB*, 1: 92, 103, 466.

[75] Ibid., 2: 520-21.

[76] Ibid., 3: 161. For an appreciative account of Henry's historiography see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment, Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000), 3-8, 15-16, 91-2, 151-2, 159, 162, 189, 270-71.

[77] See Voltaire, "The Lisbon Earthquake," trans. Tobias Smollett and others, in *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. Ben Ray Redman (New York, 1949), 556-69. Compare this to Rousseau's important letter to Voltaire from August 18, 1756, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), 232-46, where Rousseau was even more straightforward than Voltaire about the human responsibility for the consequences of the disaster in Lisbon; yet Rousseau's outlook was based on his primitivism, and most of the letter evinced disagreement with Voltaire and demonstrated Rousseau's pronounced religiosity. Another important example of the

A particularly interesting straightforward methodological discussion of this whole issue was offered by the Leipzig professor and early Enlightenment historian of the ancient Germans, Johann Jacob Mascov, another one of Gibbon's important but almost forgotten sources.[78] Mascov claimed that God sometimes intervened in the most important transactions. He made this remark while explaining the vagaries of fortune, mainly in the case of Belisarius. Yet this was not a typical remark for Mascov, and in any event was far from a claim of divine accommodation.[79] Much more importantly, he claimed that the moderns sought greater certainty in their historical knowledge than the ancients.

> Miracles, which were of Service to an ancient Historian, and an Elegance in the intermix'd Discourses [i.e. probably meaning older types of historiographical writing, before the eighteenth century, intermixed with religious exclamations], do not so much affect them [the moderns], as they are desirous to know every Circumstance, with great Accuracy, and to measure almost every Degree of Truth and probability. This is, in itself, a happy Difference; but, in Times [the early Middle Ages], so obscure as are here treated of, it makes the Narrative so much the more difficult.[80]

Regarding the subversions of many of the German nations in the sixth century, such as the Vandals, the Ostrogoths and the Gepidæ, Mascov claimed: "The Causes of such Revolutions are not to be sought for in the Stars, or accounted for from the Number of the Years. Evil Designs and evil Manners corrupt Kingdoms, as well as single Families. Where these get the upper Hand, we need not have Recourse to Comets, or expect miraculous Signs."[81] This secular historiographical approach was also evident in the long annotations at the end of the second volume of Mascov's work, which demonstrated his scholarly criticism

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rising modern attitude toward natural disasters was the Comte de Volney, who claimed that disasters such as famine, pestilence or war were not providentially ordained, but rather the results of human actions. Human beings were responsible for their situation. The laws of nature were constant, but human behavior was not, and was at times just and at other times unjust according to Volney's deistical outlook. See C. F. Volney, *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, trans. anon. (Exeter, 1823), 20-27, 38-40 and passim. Also see the lengthy criticism of religious divisions at 127-281.

78 For Mascov's importance for Gibbon and his attention to cultural and religious topics independently of Voltaire see James Westfall Thompson and Bernard J. Holm, *A History of Historical Writing*, 2 vols (New York, 1942), 2: 7, 80, 101. Also see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago and London, 1983), 203, 221.

79 *MHAG*, 2: 510.

80 Ibid., 2: xv.

81 Ibid., 2: 166.

regarding sources, combining erudition with an almost late Enlightenment philosophical outlook.[82]

As in so many other instances Gibbon, in his criticism of divine accommodation (again, the term itself is a modern one), summed up in masterly form the whole tradition of Enlightenment historiography. Writing of natural calamities, principally of the great plague of 250-265 A.D. which was aggravated by causes which seemed to him not all to be explicable, but were evidently natural, not supernatural, Gibbon wrote:

> Our habits of thinking so fondly connect the order of the universe with the fate of man, that this gloomy period of history [the third century in general] has been decorated with inundations, earthquakes, uncommon meteors, preternatural darkness, and a crowd of prodigies fictitious or exaggerated. But a long and general famine was a calamity of a more serious kind. It was the inevitable consequence of rapine and oppression, which extirpated the produce of the present, and the hope of future harvests. Famine is almost always followed by epidemical diseases, the effect of scanty and unwholesome food.[83]

This was not just a simple condemnation of divine accommodation. Gibbon here connected divine accommodation to the traditional cosmological view of humanity's superiority in the natural creation. It was anthropocentric cosmology which seemed to suggest the idea that humanity was paramount in the divine ordering of the world. Gibbon criticized this presumption, but not its underlying anthropocentrism. He did not share the primitivistic critique of human pride, and adhered in general to the anthropocentric cosmological outlook. Yet this did not by any means indicate either that this cosmological order had to be perceived in the traditional religious manner, or that belief in it meant that human pride in itself could not be criticized. This was precisely what Gibbon was alluding to in noting the fond connection of "the order of the universe with the fate of man." The clear implication was that belief in divine accommodation regarding the influence of natural phenomena on human beings was not just superstitious and intellectually foolish, but also morally vain. Moreover, in this passage Gibbon noted expressly how natural calamities were more the product of humanity than of nature, were aggravated more by improper human reaction

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[82] Ibid., 2: 187. For the decline of providential explanations in eighteenth-century German historiography (without special mention of either Mascov or Herder), see Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975), 127-8; this happened despite the relatively more religious outlook of contemporaneous German intellectuals compared to those in France, on which see 77, 198, and passim.

[83] *DF*, X, 1: 294.

than by the natural occurrences themselves. This connection between the measure of political and social progress and lack thereof, and the comparable nature of humanity's relationship with and control of nature, is crucial, and we shall return to it repeatedly in the following chapters. This theme was intimately connected to some of the most central motifs of *The Decline and Fall*, since Gibbon expressly regarded an overt resort to divine accommodation as a symptom of general cultural decline which ultimately impacted even military conduct. Such decline, specifically that of Rome, was expressly emphasized when compared with the more advanced civilization of eighteenth-century Europe. In other words, a truly advanced civilization combated natural calamities to the best of its abilities and did not simply resign itself to them as inevitable and irresistible divine punishment. All this was clearly expressed by Gibbon when he noted, regarding the great earthquakes of July 365 A.D.:

> This calamity, the report of which was magnified from one province to another, astonished and terrified the subjects of Rome; and their affrighted imagination enlarged the real extent of a momentary evil. They recollected the preceding earthquakes, which had subverted the cities of Palestine and Bithynia: they considered these alarming strokes as the prelude only of still more dreadful calamities, and their fearful vanity was disposed to confound the symptoms of a declining empire, and a sinking world. It was the fashion of the times, to attribute every remarkable event to the particular will of the Deity; the alterations of nature were connected, by an invisible chain, with the moral and metaphysical opinions of the human mind; and the most sagacious divines could distinguish, according to the colour of their respective prejudices, that the establishment of heresy tended to produce an earthquake; or that a deluge was the inevitable consequence of the progress of sin and error. Without presuming to discuss the truth or propriety of these lofty speculations, the historian may content himself with an observation, which seems to be justified by experience, that man has much more to fear from the passions of his fellow-creatures, than from the convulsions of the elements. The mischievous effects of an earthquake, or deluge, a hurricane, or the eruption of a volcano, bear a very inconsiderable proportion to the ordinary calamities of war; as they are now moderated by the prudence or humanity of the princes of Europe, who amuse their own leisure, and exercise the courage of their subjects, in the practice of the military art.[84]

[84] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1023-4. See also the lengthy discussion of the comets, earthquakes and plague in the age of Justinian, which emphasized naturalistic explanations, in *DF*, XLIII, 2: 770-77. Also relevant was Gibbon's discussion of the various reasons for the decline and destruction of Rome (the physical city itself, not the historical empire). Gibbon claimed that one of the prime reasons for this ruin was the effects of nature, emphasizing in particular fires

For Gibbon, as for most other late Enlightenment literati, a superstitious attitude toward the forces of nature was a symptom of a deeper cultural malaise. This cultural ailment encompassed a deep-seated political degeneracy which was both accompanied, and in large measure caused, by a lack of practical control of nature. Cultivating nature, in other words, meant also cultivating the human mind, and vice versa. Religious superstition in the form of a divine accommodation explanatory outlook on the forces of nature was thus in effect an admission of cultural decline.

The Enlightenment's outlook on religion, however, rarely resorted to a completely atheistic outlook. Most eighteenth-century literati, including such figures as Voltaire, Hume and Gibbon, evinced a skeptical or deistical philosophy rather than an atheistic one. Religion, although of course not superstition, was therefore not entirely excluded from the mainstream of Enlightenment philosophy. Yet most Enlightenment intellectuals relegated it to a subordinate role as a constructive force in society, and this pertained also to the lack of reliance on divine accommodation in Enlightenment historiography. Religion remained most important when it helped maintain social order or upheld public morality, when it affected practical and tangible results in the real world. A caustic expression of the eighteenth-century's ambivalent attitude toward religion, specifically toward its limited practical utility, came from Laurence Sterne. According to Tristram Shandy's father religion was an internal spring which counterbalanced evil, if only partially. Yet the power of religion did have its limits, as noted when Tristram's father cried: "Will that set my child's nose on?"[85]

There is no doubt that divine accommodation was a key element in Western historiography. It forms an important prism through which to comprehend the history of historiography in general. One could say that the more divine accommodation was perceived as potently active, as it was in medieval historiography, the more nature was conceived as divinely ordained and physically predominant and therefore as beyond human control. Conversely, the less role divine accommodation was accorded the more nature seemed to recede before human activity, as in late Enlightenment historiography. The respective outlook on this issue was a key underpinning foundation, defining varying considerations of the relationship between nature and human culture. For Enlightenment historians the story of the development of the human mastery of nature was therefore not just a tale of scientific and technological advancement,

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and inundations. Yet he discussed these natural calamities without any reference to religious notions. See *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1065-8.

[85] Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy, an Authoritative Text*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York and London, 1980), 202.

but also part of the general gradual human victory over religious superstition. The tale of the receding of divine accommodation from historical literature mirrored the rise of a more empirical and rational outlook throughout the early modern period. This not only meant a return to the more rational aspects of classical historiography. By the eighteenth century the veritable exclusion of any type of supernatural agency in history reflected a new and unprecedented reliance on a scientific attitude toward nature which had never before existed in Western culture.

When Enlightenment historians developed their new unmitigated rational perception of historical causation they were not just expressing the rise of the modern attitude toward commanding nature. They were adding a new dimension to this attitude, emphasizing the historical development over time of human civilization, directly reliant on humanity's control of nature. The clear implication was that if this narrative of controlling nature could be sufficiently substantiated, it clearly implied that human progress in the future, as well as the past, could be enhanced by augmenting this control. What with Bacon was still only a general perception of knowledge as power, detailed mainly in scientific terms, became in the next century a much more comprehensive cultural program eventually to be dubbed in our own era as the Enlightenment Project. Eulogizing the control of nature was essential to this program. Expressing this outlook in truly modern secular form, however, could not be achieved as long as divine accommodation retained even a modicum of serious influence. In this sense it was only in the second half of the eighteenth century that modern historiography was truly formed. To be sure, there were various exceptions to everything we have so far noted about eighteenth-century culture. Vestiges of religious perceptions remained evident in various cases of contemporaneous thought, and even occasionally in historical literature. Moreover, not all eighteenth-century intellectuals shared the same level of belief in the "Enlightenment Project" optimistic teleology of historical progress. Yet the predominant tenor of Enlightenment culture could not be mistaken, and served as the starting-point for the emergence of the modern rational view of history.

Primitivism and Its Critics

A "philosophical attitude" was particularly important for the eighteenth-century appreciation of historical literature, exemplified by the popularity of the ideal of *l'historien philosophe*. Enlightenment historians strove for a combination

of narrative, erudition and philosophy.[86] Erudition was a legacy primarily of seventeenth-century historiography, which Enlightenment historians combined with narrative and reflection. It was evident in the growing exactitude of scholarly footnotes and references which Gibbon in particular developed into a veritable art form.[87] "Art" here should be taken quite literally, since eighteenth-century historians and their readers expected historical literature to exemplify an engaging and captivating narrative style, indeed, to be as entertaining as fictional literature but with the added point of also being true. In that respect Enlightenment historiography was indeed an art form.[88] Yet ultimately it was the philosophical element more than erudition or narrative which was conceived as the defining element of Enlightenment historiography. By philosophy, in the historiographical context, contemporaries understood a critical attitude toward history, and primarily toward the adverse roles of religious superstition and political despotism as destructive forces in the development of human culture. Enlightenment historians therefore saw no problem with expressing their views on various "philosophical" issues. They regarded it as their duty not to remain silent in the face of seeming injustice or folly, and adopted an ostensibly judgmental approach quite different from that of later modern historians. William Robertson gave this outlook emphatic expression, making abundantly clear his aversion to "the vain parade[s] of erudition" which were valued in the seventeenth century.[89] When he discussed what he regarded as the barbaric lack of criticism on the part of the historians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, specifically in their failure to condemn frequent assassinations, he claimed that

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[86] See *PBR*, 2: passim; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method", in *Studies in Historiography* (London, 1966), 40-55; idem, "Eighteenth-Century Prelude to Mr. Gibbon," in *Sesto Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico*, 2 vols (Rome, 1980), 1: 249-63; Joseph M. Levine, *The Autonomy of History, Truth and Method from Erasmus to Gibbon* (Chicago and London, 1999), 123-5, 157-82. And see also Mark Salber Phillips, "Reconsiderations on History and Antiquarianism: Arnaldo Momigliano and the Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57 (1996), 297-316.

[87] See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote, a Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 94-121; and for Gibbon, 97-103, 168-9, 171, 182-8, 222, 224.

[88] For the importance of a literarily attractive narrative style in eighteenth-century historiography see J. B. Black, *The Art of History, a Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1926), 1-28 and passim.

[89] William Robertson, *The History of Scotland During the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI*, The Fourteenth Edition, 2 vols (London, 1794), 2: 251.

they lacked "that indignation which became an historian."[90] Therefore, while scrutinizing the general philosophical underpinnings of historical literature is always important in any study of the history of historiography, it is twice as important in investigating Enlightenment historiography.

So far we have been concerned with the interaction between humanity and nature at a general level, and primarily with how religion influenced the perception of this relationship. The reciprocal influence between nature and human culture was, however, also influenced by the nature of human societies, and in its turn defined these societies. Put differently, the nature of human cultures was shaped by their relationship with their natural surroundings at least as much as the type and extent of the changes wrought to the natural surroundings were a result of the characteristics of these human cultures operating on them. Nature and culture were in a constant state of reciprocal interaction. Yet human cultures greatly differed one from the other, and therefore the exact character of this interaction operated and manifested itself differently in diverse historical circumstances. The basic Enlightenment assumption of progress, and generally of the human propensity for cultural and moral amelioration, in itself implied that most human beings, whether as individuals or as societies, required improvement and were consequently, to varying degrees, "unenlightened." Enlightenment intellectuals had varying examples of such unenlightened human societies which they could discuss. One general group were of course the many new non-European human societies which the Age of Discoveries, still very much in force in the eighteenth century, constantly revealed to Western explorers and travelers. Yet even these were far from monolithic in European eyes, whether this was a matter of racial prejudice specifically against black-skinned Africans, or a differentiation between various levels of cultural attainment in the Americas, for example the advanced Central American cultures which the Spaniards encountered in the early sixteenth century, compared with the less advanced indigenous societies of North America. In a more historical vein came the awareness of the various "barbarian" nations which for many centuries had ravaged Europe with their devastating invasions. Historical literature from antiquity to the Enlightenment was replete with tales of such invaders, Scythians, Germans, Saracens, Huns, Tartars and so forth, not to mention their many sub-groups.[91] All these and

[90] Ibid., 1: 377-8. For Robertson's philosophy of history see e.g. Neil Hargraves, "The 'Progress of Ambition': Character, Narrative, and Philosophy in the Works of William Robertson," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 63 (2002), 261-82.

[91] The use of these ethnic terms was very fluid, almost as much as the constant military invasions and cultural intermingling with which they were connected. The term "Scythian" is a case in point, designating in general northern invaders of Europe. In antiquity this usually meant Germanic tribes; in late antiquity this meant the Huns; and in the Middle Ages this

more presented eighteenth-century historians with a cornucopia of varying human societies which they could choose to discuss, whether in themselves or in order to make any number of general philosophical arguments.

Yet one did not need to travel far in order to become aware of the various levels, or lack thereof, of cultural advancement. Gibbon had written how as an adolescent he had "read and meditated Locke upon the Understanding."[92] Like most eighteenth-century intellectuals he was very familiar with Locke's philosophy. It was toward the end of his famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that Locke had claimed that the greatest part of mankind lived in perpetual labor to attain the bare necessities of life, thus having no time for contemplation or for acquiring knowledge (although those who really desired so would find time for this despite such difficulties). He compared them to pack-horses.[93] This snobbish attitude was not unusual. It was a mainstay of the Enlightenment, when precisely those who saw themselves as combating ignorance and oppression also regarded themselves as an elite which was destined to guide the less sophisticated masses to enlightenment. Most of the leading Enlightenment historians such as Voltaire, Hume, Robertson and Gibbon, were heavily imbued with this elitist outlook. Gibbon in particular regarded his social status as an English gentleman as highly important, and shared this

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meant the Tartars, which themselves had earlier usually been synonymous with the Huns, but by the thirteenth century meant the Mongols. As for the Germans these were also a very varied group, the Goths, such as the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals and other tribes, as also the Burgundians, Franks and many other tribes which historians from antiquity to early modern times usually designated as separate nations, evincing very disparate levels of cultural attainment. Historians, in short, were traditionally quite sensitive to the multifariousness of human cultures. See in this context James William Johnson, "The Scythian: His Rise and Fall," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20 (1959), 250-57. Gibbon himself expressly noted, in *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1025 note 5: "In speaking of all, or any, of the northern shepherds of Europe, or Asia, I indifferently use the appellations of *Scythians*, or *Tartars*." François Pétis de la Croix, in his *The History of Genghizcan the Great, First Emperor of the Antient Moguls and Tartars*, trans. Penelope Aubin (London, 1722), 63, claimed that Scythia and Tartary were one and the same, and described how under Genghis Khan the Scythians gradually came to be referred to in general as Moguls or Tartars. Taking a very different view, John Pinkerton later made a very detailed argument against the confusion of the Scythians or Goths (synonymous according to him), with the very different Tartar people, in his *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths, Being an Introduction to the Ancient and Modern History of Europe* (London, 1787).

92 *Gibbon's Journal to January 28th, 1763, My Journal, I, II & III and Ephemerides*, ed. D. M. Low (London, 1929), 5 (written in 1761 regarding 1755).

93 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Fifth Edition, 1706* (London, 1706; reprint Bristol, 2003), 594-5 (bk. IV, ch. XX, §§ 2-3).

outlook with his friends in the famous Literary Club.[94] Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of Gibbon's friends at the club, claimed that man in his lowest state had only sensual pleasures. When at a later stage society became divided into ranks there were those who labored in order to support others. As a result, the superiority of this latter group, who were consequently free of toil, enabled them to develop intellectually.[95] Reynolds was far from exceptional in maintaining this justification of social stratification, which in his case influenced his famous authoritative aesthetics. For example, Reynolds claimed that the painter Salvator Rosa had a "peculiar cast of nature," and despite the fact that he lacked the elevation of the grand style, nevertheless had "that sort of dignity which belongs to savage and uncultivated nature."[96] Yet this was anything but an unreserved praise, and Reynolds throughout his discourses evinced a clear predilection for classical historical painting over profane iconography. The latter included much of Rosa's oeuvre, not least his proto-romantic landscape paintings. These paintings are sometimes considered as imbued with the Pathetic Fallacy, itself an attitude quite inimical to the more instrumental consideration of nature common in Enlightenment historiography.

Similar elitist exclamations were habitual among other important eighteenth-century figures, particularly, though not exclusively, the more politically conservative among them. Edmund Burke opposed giving governmental power to those occupied in lower professions. He asserted that they were entitled to consideration of their rights but not to receive any ruling power.[97] And according to William Robertson the lot of most of the human race was to labor mainly for subsistence, and they therefore lacked the ability for refined rational speculation.[98] There were, however, dissenting voices. One of the most important

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[94] For Gibbon's membership in the Literary Club, see D. M. Low, *Edward Gibbon 1737-1794* (London, 1937), 221-35; Pat Rogers, "Gibbon and the Decline and Growth of the Club," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 105-20.

[95] Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, Introduction by Robert R. Wark (London, 1969), 149-50 (Ninth Discourse).

[96] Ibid., 78 (Sixth Discourse).

[97] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1986), 138-9.

[98] *RHDI*, 303-4. For Robertson's view of the inferiority of the American Indians based on his use of stadial history, which necessitated regarding them as at a low stage of development, see Bruce P. Lenman, "'From Savage to Scot' via the French and the Spaniards: Principal Robertson's Spanish Sources," in *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire*, ed. Stewart J. Brown (Cambridge, 1997), 196-209.

of these was Adam Smith, who added a new chapter to the sixth and final edition of his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, fittingly titled "Of the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise and neglect persons of poor and mean condition."[99] One should recall that even Voltaire, eminently aware of his social standing, did not make do just with a detached theoretical advocacy of abstract notions of Enlightenment, but particularly in his later years consistently advocated and fought against specific cases of social oppression. Nevertheless, more radical democracy was still an outsider's persuasion throughout most of the eighteenth century, with Rousseau being the most noted exception. If anything, toward the end of the century there was a rigidifying of social and racial categories, as suggested by Dror Wahrman.[100]

Enlightenment elitism had important consequences for the historiographical investigation of the human interaction with nature. The key to this significance is evident for example in Reynolds's reference to "that sort of dignity which belongs to savage and uncultivated nature." Reality was dialectical, not one-sided, and what simple individuals and societies, whether they were savages or the vulgar European masses, lacked in intellectual and cultural refinement, they compensated for, at least occasionally, in a "sort of dignity." All this leads to the long European tradition of primitivism, with its obvious connection to the human relationship with nature.[101] Primitivism of course had deep roots in

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[99] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 2002), 72-7. The tension between liberal economics and moral sensitivity to the underprivileged was eminent in Smith's thought, and is occasionally termed in modern scholarship "the Adam Smith problem." For an introduction to this issue, and to Smith's ambivalent attitude toward primitivism and progress, see Maureen Harkin, "Adam Smith's Missing History: Primitives, Progress, and Problems of Genre," *ELH*, 72 (2005), 429-51. In fact scholars have long been aware of this problem. For an old but still interesting interpretation offering a conciliation of these tensions in his thought, claiming he advocated liberty first but within the bounds of respect for others, see Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London, 1902), 2: 319-23.

[100] According to Wahrman both climate, and even more culture (human beings as determining their condition, e.g. the four stages theory), were conceived as shaping racial differences. Yet toward the end of the eighteenth century in Britain, following the crisis of the American Revolution, such differences were conceived as much less mutable, although not yet according to a fixed racial outlook as in the mid-nineteenth century. See Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self, Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London, 2004), 83-126.

[101] The most detailed study of eighteenth-century primitivism remains Lois Whitney, *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1934), which also includes an important Foreword by Arthur O. Lovejoy. For a general introduction to some important aspects of the eighteenth-century consideration

classical philosophy. Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* in particular gave eloquent voice to this tradition, which was well-heard in the early modern era. Lucretius claimed that the universe, since it was endowed with many faults, was not made for human beings.[102] In contrast with other animals, humans were born into the world defenseless and had to constantly combat nature.[103] "Even the land that is left [seemingly for human use], nature would still cover with brambles by her own power, but that man's power resists, well accustomed to groan over the stout mattock for very life, and to cleave the soil with the pressure of the plough." Human efforts to cultivate nature were necessary, arduous and by no means sure of success.[104] Lucretius's approach was somewhat similar to the biblical admonition "by the sweat of thy brow" (*Genesis* 3:19), emphasizing the constant effort with which human beings had to force nature to yield them produce and sustenance. Yet while the religious view connected this human situation to divine command, the Epicurean outlook saw this as a natural condition and thus essentially as one that could be overcome, if only incompletely and with great effort. In a long passage Lucretius prefigured the conjectural history of the late Enlightenment, presenting a detailed depiction of the rise of human society and culture from its rude natural beginnings to the limits of high civilization. But he also included a cautionary and reproachful tone, warning of the greed of human beings which almost inevitably led to war.[105]

In an important sense early modern primitivism intersected with the contemporaneous and constant move toward a more empirical and rational outlook. Yet at the same time it transformed and subsumed, rather than discarded, the traditional religious cosmology. The raillery against human pride and vice has always been one of the perennial ethical themes of advanced human culture, the difference being in the forms in which it was expressed at different historical moments. For medieval people this meant a religious symbolism through which all human presumptuous endeavor assumed the guise of *vanitas*. This left little room for classical primitivism which had served a very similar moral purpose,

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of primitivism, see Peter France, "Primitivism and Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Scots," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 15 (1985), 64-79. For the claim that the general outlook of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was anti-primitivistic, but that in the eighteenth century primitivism was more common, see Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 354-85. This claim seems problematic, whether one notes the prominence and influence of Montaigne, or conversely the fact that primitivism has always been a minority opinion in the Western tradition.

[102] Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Loeb Classical Library, 1937), 97 (II.167-83), 351-7 (V.146-234).

[103] Ibid., 353-7 (V.195-234).

[104] Ibid., 355 (V.204-17).

[105] Ibid., 407-43 (V.925-1457).

but in a parallel pagan manner whose specifically religious outlook was less somber and pronounced. Yet from the Renaissance onwards classical primitivism received new impetus, not least from the discovery of human societies unknown to antiquity. The notions of good and evil were still predominantly religious in the traditional medieval sense, at least before the long eighteenth century. Yet throughout the early modern era the confluence of these traditional ethics and anthropocentric cosmology, together with the new scientific empiricism and the constant revelations about new worlds, presented philosophers with novel possibilities to express the need for humility and ethical amelioration. In this sense empiricism and primitivism were mutually compatible, indeed enforced each other, as illogical as this might seem at first glance. Truly thorough primitivism, however, was impossible in the modernizing atmosphere of the early modern era. Few truly advocated a complete and comprehensive "return to nature," which even Rousseau disclaimed. The issue was not whether civilization was good or bad. What was at stake was enhancing the good and debunking the bad as much as possible.

By their very humanity human beings were forced to be anthropocentric. Early modern primitivism was therefore a question of relative assessment of civilization, a matter of degree rather than kind. Furthermore, its connection with the general empiricism of the age (if the half millennium between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries can be thus generalized), meant that the various forms and degrees of cultivating nature, and of material culture in general, formed a key motif in the repertoire of discussing primitive societies, whether in laudatory or censorious terms. Thus, the various ways "savages" dressed or procured their sustenance were constantly addressed, and not just because one could not discuss their non-existent high artistic attainments. For an age which became increasingly prone to an empirical outlook, and this was particularly important from the Scientific Revolution onwards, the savages' measure of controlling their natural surroundings became a key aspect of assessing their cultural progress or lack thereof. The level of controlling nature became a litmus test for cultural progress. This progress was conceived as asymptotic. Ultimately, humanity was constrained to come up against a limit beyond which nature became inscrutable and unyielding. Realizing this limit to human potency always had a humbling moral effect. For the medieval mind this was a divinely ordained limit. For the early modern mind it was increasingly perceived as an empirical restriction and thus seemed less imposing.

Primitivism was neither an idyllic notion of a long-lost Golden Age nor a static concept. It was also not a simplistic advocacy for striving to change society in a specific "primitive" direction. It had many implications and historical meanings and should not be discussed as a simple notion of unpretentious

virtues. In Lucretius's early and very influential version it implied a harsh natural condition, but also the possibility of ameliorating this condition. In this respect it already had a historical dimension which it retained throughout its future permutations. Even in antiquity one could find historians who were aware of the primitivistic outlook, albeit not with Lucretius's sophistication. Tacitus evinced the more common idyllic concept of a primitive virtue when he claimed that in the early stages of human society there was no need of laws, since primeval man lived a life devoid of criminal passion or guilt at a time "when good was sought instinctively."[106] Pliny the Elder took a different approach. He claimed that "The first place [in nature] will rightly be assigned to man, for whose sake great Nature appears to have created all other things – though she asks a cruel price for all her generous gifts, making it hardly possible to judge whether she has been more a kind parent to man or more a harsh stepmother." This was immediately followed by a long list of primitivistic observations on human physical and instinctual inferiority to animals, and of the unique types of human vices.[107] Human beings were thus at the summit of natural creation, yet this entailed more harm than good, more misery than happiness. Such observations were to become the stock repertoire of early modern primitivism, which in contrast with its classical predecessor was also cognizant of the later types of medieval Christian moral admonition.

Eighteenth-century intellectuals were familiar with these early classical sources, and Lucretius and Pliny were part of any serious humanistic education. Yet it was in the early modern era that primitivism attained the specific form in which it was most familiar to Enlightenment intellectuals. Most influential in this respect was Michel de Montaigne, above all in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, where the essentially moralistic intent of early modern primitivism found its clearest expression. Montaigne wanted "to trample down human pride and arrogance, crushing them under our feet; I make men feel the emptiness, the vanity, the nothingness of Man, wrenching from their grasp the sickly arms of human reason, making them bow their heads and bite the dust before the authority and awe of the Divine Majesty, to whom alone belong knowledge and wisdom."[108] The religious element here was a fideistic one, Montaigne's way of overcoming his Pyrrhonistic doubts, and in that sense was not a truly defining element of his primitivism. This primitivism was also part of a comprehensive skepticism about much of the European intellectual and moral tradition, the

106 Tacitus, *The Histories and the Annals*, trans. Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson, 4 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1925-37), 2: 563 (*Annals* III.xxvi).

107 Pliny, *Natural History*, 2: 507-11.

108 Michel de Montaigne, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond," in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth, 1993), 500-501.

feeling of human worth being a particular butt of attack. *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* constantly and vituperatively criticized human pride and presumption, depicting human beings as the frailest of natural creatures. Their supposed superiority was solely based on divine grace, not on any intrinsic human worth. The seeming human rational advantage over the animals was more a source of woes than benefits, since man "has to pay a high price for this advantage – and he has little cause to boast about it, since it is the chief source of the woes which beset him: sin, sickness, irresolution, confusion and despair."[109] The aim of this ostensibly anti-anthropocentric and almost obstreperous vilification of human self-appraisal and pride was however ultimately anthropocentric – mainly to humble and thus ameliorate human conduct, since "only humility and submissiveness can produce a good man."[110] Montaigne throughout the *Apology* drove home the Pyrrhonistic derision of human knowledge, and ultimately based any kind of possible limited certainty in the world on his fideistic religious belief. Throughout, his primitivism, as extreme as it undoubtedly was, never really departed from the traditional anthropocentric concern for ameliorating the human condition. This was generally true of almost all examples of early modern primitivism, if anything becoming more explicit in the much more optimistic atmosphere of the Enlightenment. Montaigne's primitivism extended to the issue of the cultivation of nature, specifically in his other famous primitivistic essay, *On the Cannibals*, where he claimed that uncultivated nature was superior to cultivated nature. The uncultivated fruits found in the New World rivaled those found in Europe. "It is not sensible that artifice should be reverenced more than Nature, our great and powerful Mother. We have so overloaded the richness and beauty of her products by our own ingenuity that we have smothered her entirely. Yet wherever her pure light does shine, she wondrously shames our vain and frivolous enterprises."[111]

There were early modern cases of an even more straightforward raillery against human pride than Montaigne's. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, in the *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, a work which enjoyed considerable popularity throughout the eighteenth century, one could find the straightforward assertion that "The Christians seem to have too proud an opinion of themselves and set a greater value on Human Nature than suits with reason. They assert that all things

109 Ibid., 514.

110 Ibid., 543.

111 "On the Cannibals," in ibid., 228-41, at 231-2. In this essay, at 235-6, Montaigne claimed that savages were cruel but the Europeans were more so. See the discussion in David Quint, "A Reconsideration of Montaigne's *Des cannibales*," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill and London, 1995), 166-91.

were made for man and style him lord of his fellow creatures, as if God had given him an absolute dominion over the rest of His works, especially over the animal generations; and that all the birds of the air, beasts of the earth and fish of the sea were created only to serve his appetite and other necessities of life."[112] There were, however, very few people in early modern Europe who evinced such an extreme anti-anthropocentrism. Here it was not so much a matter of primitivism as an all-out attack of human worth. The anti-anthropocentric element in early modern primitivism was, again, usually motivated by the ultimately anthropocentric aim of human amelioration. Even in cases of more radical anti-anthropocentrism, such as in the *Turkish Spy*, a more thorough reading usually revealed this general anthropocentric intent.

Not all early modern criticism of human pride was directly related to primitivism. A particularly prominent example, well-known to Gibbon and other Enlightenment intellectuals, was provided by Blaise Pascal, whose raillery against human pride was an essentially religious one. Pascal regarded human beings as creatures situated between the infinitely small and the infinitely large elements of creation, which remained inscrutable for human comprehension and accessible only to God. "For, after all, what is man in nature? A nothing compared to the infinite, a whole compared to the nothing, a middle point between all and nothing, infinitely remote from an understanding of the extremes; the end of things and their principles are unattainably hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy." Human beings were thus incapable both of certain knowledge but also of complete ignorance, and this left the human desire for certainty unfulfilled. Therefore the best recourse was resignation to this intermediate existence, since there was no possibility of going any further. Human beings were "something," but "not everything."[113] What did constitute human singularity and dignity was the ability to think. "Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed." Therefore what people needed to strive for was to think well, since that was "the basic principle of morality."[114]

The reverberations of the primitivistic tradition in Gibbon's writings reveal the way Enlightenment historians imbued this tradition, centering on the actual

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[112] *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* [a selection], ed. Arthur J. Weitzman (London, 1970), 93. For the popularity of this work, and the complicated question of its authorship, see the editorial introduction in ibid., vii-xix; and Jean-Pierre Gaudier and Jean-Jacques Heirwegh, "Jean-Paul Marana, *L'Espion du Grand Seigneur* et l'histoire des idées", *Études sur le xviii^e siècle*, 8 (1981), 25-52. Adam Smith and Gibbon were among those who were definitely familiar with this work.

[113] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, 1987), 88-95 (no. 199).

[114] Ibid., 95 (no. 200).

historical material process of utilizing nature. Gibbon and his generation may have taken a cue from the primitivistic tradition regarding the connection between the level of cultivation of nature in a given society, and its ethical evaluation. Yet this evaluation was usually very different for Enlightenment historians. During his youthful tour of Italy, when strong winds prevented him and his companions to sail from Genoa, Gibbon wrote, half in jest and half in earnest, "that the projects of men are vain" ("Que les projets des hommes sont vains").[115] In later years, on rare occasions, Gibbon adopted a seeming anti-anthropocentrism which was rather in a pessimistic vein. While discussing the motion of the stars and their association with a feeling of infinity as a basis for a belief in a divine intelligence, he wrote that "their [the stars'] real or imaginary influence encourages the vain belief that the earth and its inhabitants are the object of their peculiar care."[116] By the eighteenth century the challenge posed by the Copernican Revolution to the traditional religious cosmological outlook had a truly subversive effect.[117] Gibbon, like all educated eighteenth-century British readers, would have read in *The Spectator* Joseph Addison musing, as he contemplated the immensity of the universe, how he "could not but reflect on that little insignificant Figure which" he "bore amidst the Immensity of God's Works," and "could not but look upon" himself "with secret Horror as a Being, that was not worth the smallest Regard" in the eyes of God. He "was afraid of being overlooked amidst the Immensity of Nature." Yet Addison found solace in God's omnipresence and omniscience. God could not "but regard every thing that has Being, especially such of his Creatures who fear they are not regarded by him," and "as it is impossible he should overlook any of his Creatures, so we may be confident that he regards, with an Eye of Mercy, those who endeavour to recommend themselves to his Notice, and in an unfeigned Humility of Heart think themselves unworthy that he should be mindful of them."[118] God was aware of all His creatures, but mainly of those who thought themselves unworthy of this consideration. In other words, Addison compelled his readers to regard themselves as unworthy of divine attention in order to receive that very attention. This paradoxical statement was, however, perfectly in tune with the tenor of early modern anti-anthropocentrism,

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115 *Gibbon's Journey from Geneva to Rome, His Journal from 20 April to 2 October 1764*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1961), 86.

116 *DF*, L, 3: 166.

117 For famous treatments of important aspects of this topic, see Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (New York and Evanston, 1964); Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore and London, 1994).

118 Joseph Addison, Richard Steele et al., *The Spectator*, ed. Gregory Smith, 4 vols (London and New York, 1966-67), 4: 279-83 (No. 565).

and indeed with the main current of Western primitivism. The main purport of such primitivism was almost always anthropocentric – to awaken humility and thus provoke an ethical amelioration. Any vestiges of primitivism which cropped up in eighteenth-century historical literature, Gibbon's writings included, were invariably tinged with this common sentiment.

The darker side of primitivism was famously exemplified in *Gulliver's Travels*. Modern studies of this important book have debated the level of actual misanthropy which actuated its argument,[119] yet there seems little doubt that the King of Brobdingnag was speaking for Swift, and aiming at the whole human race and not just ostensibly the English, when he exclaimed to Gulliver: "I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth."[120] Gibbon's irony, however, included a solidarity with the reader not found in Swift.[121] At least before the French Revolution and his last years, Gibbon retained an emphatic optimism about the overall development of human culture.

Most Enlightenment historians retained an overall confidence in the worth of the human race, and specifically in advanced human culture. A central measure for cultural advancement was considered to be the manner and extent in which a particular human society or nation had gained mastery over its natural surroundings. In this seemingly paradoxical manner the mainstream anthropocentrically-motivated primitivistic tradition served to buttress the traditional anthropocentric cosmology. In other words, what Enlightenment historiography took from the primitivistic tradition was the methodological consideration of human cultures according to their various relationships with their natural surroundings. Yet in the process the primitivistic tradition was emptied of its critical outlook and subverted into a philosophy which was quite un-primitivistic in its advocacy of continual utilization of natural resources. The various religious, classical, cosmological and primitivistic components of the Western tradition were combined in the Enlightenment in a way which recast and re-orientated all of them according to the new, pre-eminently optimistic, eighteenth-century belief in material and moral progress. According to the

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[119] See James L. Clifford, "Gulliver's Fourth Voyage, 'Hard' and 'Soft' Schools of Interpretation," in *Quick Springs of Sense, Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Larry S. Champion (Athens, 1974), 33-49.

[120] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels 1726*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1959), 132.

[121] Claude Rawson, "Gibbon, Swift and Irony," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 179-201. See also W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude, the Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford, 1987), 80-83, 91, 94-5.

common Enlightenment world-view human beings were in a superior position in the natural order as exemplified by the Great Chain of Being, but they were required to humbly remember their inferiority to divine providence, usually conceived in a deistical vein. It was then they achieved the moral outlook which enabled the difficult but rewarding process of tangible material and social progress, specifically as exemplified by commanding nature. This optimistic philosophy saw no sense in primitivism in itself.

The Baron d'Holbach, for example, one of the few Enlightenment philosophers to espouse a thoroughly atheistic outlook, claimed that human beings did not occupy a divinely-ordained privileged position in nature, a fact which was attested by their frailty.[122] Nevertheless, he opposed the primitivistic notion that savage nations were superior to modern ones; the latter, with all their faults, were preferable to past cultures. Overall, d'Holbach perceived a general progress in history, despite the failings of modern civilization.[123] Other contemporaries, most of who espoused deistical rather than atheistic views, were less reserved. David Hume claimed that a favorable opinion of human nature was much more advantageous than a mean one.[124] And Diderot was voicing the general Enlightenment outlook when he claimed: "Man is the unique point from which one must set out, and to which one must always return, if one desires to derive pleasure or interest from, or even to approach, the most barren issues and the driest details. Disregard my existence and the happiness of my fellow-creatures, what does the rest of nature matter to me?"[125] It is this perspective through which Hume and his generation viewed King Canute acknowledging his submission before the sea; not the medieval religious resignation of human

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[122] Paul-Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature, or Laws of the Moral and Physical World [with Notes by Diderot]*, trans. H. D. Robinson (New York, 1868; reprint New York, 1970), 46-7, 194-5.

[123] Paul-Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *Système social, ou principes naturels de la morale et de la politique, avec un examen de l'influence du gouvernement sur lés mœurs*, 3 vols in 1 (London, 1773; reprint Hildesheim and New York, 1969), 1: 200-218.

[124] David Hume, "Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 81. See also the reference to "that wretched and savage condition, which is commonly represented as the *state of nature*," in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford, 2000), 342.

[125] S.v. "Encyclopédie," in Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, ed. John Lough and Jacques Proust, in *Œuvres completes* (Paris, 1976), 213: "L'homme est le terme unique d'où il faut partir, & auquel il faut tout ramener, si l'on veut plaire, intéresser, toucher jusque dans les considérations les plus arides & les détails plus secs. Abstraction faite de mon existence & du bonheur de mes semblables, que m'importe le reste de la nature?"

impotence but on the contrary, a recognition of the limits of human power, yet also of the great room these limits left for taking control of nature, sea and all.

Primitivistic eulogy of the pristine innocence of savage societies had no room in this mainstream Enlightenment outlook. Cesare Beccaria claimed that in humanity's savage state there did not exist either happiness or equality but rather the beginnings of exploitation and enslavement.[126] This was also Vico's approach, one of the main aims of whose *New Science* was to claim in effect that primitive societies were not only inferior to more civilized ones, but also by implication that there was no way that a civilized society could make believe, as the pastoral genre liked to insinuate, that it was innocently primitive, any more than a primitive society could make a leap straight to a state of advancement. Interestingly enough though, Vico accorded more room to religion in this outlook than most Enlightenment historians and philosophers. He claimed that the Golden Age of the ancient pagan nations included a combination of religion and cruel savagery which evinced itself mainly in religious ritualistic human sacrifices. He emphasized this cruelty, claiming that "The only conclusion to draw from all this is the extreme vanity with which conceited scholars have previously affirmed the innocence of the Golden Age in the first pagan nations." Yet even the most brilliant nations had arisen from such primitive worship, and no nation had ever been founded on atheism. Vico implied that this was a necessary, or at least inevitable, stage of the development of culture, and such fanatical superstition also held in moral check these savage peoples.[127] He viewed the Greek heroes, of whom Homer's Achilles was a typical example, as having a limited intelligence but also a vast imagination and violent passions, and therefore "they were boorish, crude, harsh, savage, and arrogant." Like the "stubborn peasants" of his own time, Vico regarded these heroes as inconstant and having weak powers of reflection. Nevertheless, "This very lack of reflective power made heroic people [like Achilles] frank, sensitive, magnanimous, and generous."[128] Vico was fascinated with primitive societies, while nevertheless regarding them as inferior to civilized ones. Each stage in the cycle of human history had its merits, but those of the primitive stage were meager by comparison with advanced culture.

Gibbon's approach was, in a different way, equally antagonistic to the primitivistic tradition and to the concept of the noble savage, mainly in Rousseau's many renderings which were such an intellectual *cause célèbre* in the second half of

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126 Cesare, marchese di Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Richard Davies, with Virginia Cox and Richard Bellamy (Cambridge, 1995), 147.

127 *VNS*, 214-16, and see also 234-5.

128 Ibid., 318.

the eighteenth century. "O petty, vain man, show me thy power, I will show thee thy misery!" Rousseau had exclaimed following a scathing attack of the vanity of human ambition and of the human pursuit of excessive material affluence and grandeur.[129] But Gibbon was not troubled by the late-Enlightenment criticism of culture which Rousseau had to a large extent initiated,[130] and in any event both men were reciprocally unsympathetic to each other.[131] Gibbon shared this antipathy to Rousseau's philosophy with the Comte de Buffon. On this point as on many other issues, particularly those connected with the human mastery of nature, Buffon had a great influence on Gibbon. He was one of Gibbon's most favorite authors, and one cannot exaggerate the importance of this influence, which J. G. A. Pocock has justifiably acknowledged when claiming: "A door to the future was opened, in Gibbon's mind, by Buffon's decision to treat the human as an animal species like any other."[132]

Buffon, for whom Rousseau was "a philosopher, one of the proudest censors of our humanity" ("un Philosophe, l'un des plus fiers censeurs de notre humanité"),[133] had written emphatically: "Here is what in all ages certain austere philosophers [i.e. probably referring mainly to Rousseau], savage by temperament, have reproached regarding sociable man: emphasizing their own individual pride by humiliating the entire human race, they have outlined this picture [of the noble savage and corrupted civilization], which is worth only as a contrast, and perhaps since it is useful occasionally to present men with the fantasy of happiness."[134]

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[129] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise, Letters of Two Lovers who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Hanover and London, 1997), 447-8 (Part 5, Letter 2).

[130] See J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the World View of the Late Enlightenment," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History, Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), 143-56, esp. 147-8; and also Edoardo Tortarolo, "Natural Freedom in *The Decline and Fall*," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 165-78, esp. 169-73.

[131] Low, *Edward Gibbon*, 132, 137-40, 142-3, 148.

[132] *PBR*, 2: 362; and see also 4: 44. For Gibbon's repeated praises of Buffon, see e.g. *DF*, XL, 2: 593 note 99; L, 3: 154 note 11; LXXI, 3: 1068 note 17. Also see Low, *Edward Gibbon*, 26, 93, 132, 259. A slightly more critical appraisal of Buffon is found in "Index Expurgatorius," in *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia B. Craddock (Oxford, 1972), 121-6. Gibbon regarded natural history as "a science well adapted to the taste and capacity of children"; see Gibbon, *Memoirs*, 34. Yet this was as a commendation, and there is no doubt that Buffon's influence on him remained significant throughout his life.

[133] "Les Animaux carnassiers," in *BHN*, 7 (1758), 27.

[134] Ibid., 26: "Voilà ce que dans tous les temps certains philosophes austères, sauvages par tempérament, ont reproché à l'homme en société: rehaussant leur orgueil individuel par

Buffon, however, was not uncritical of the vices of modern culture. He claimed that what required a long effort to develop could be quickly destroyed, and saw more justification for the necessities which caused various barbarian invasions in history than for the harm perpetrated by the Spanish and English in their colonies. Cultural advancement depended on peace, quiet and time for repose, and modern humanity still had much room for progress in morals and positive science, while the arts of war and even amusement usually and regretfully received more attention.[135] Even savages were sociable creatures by their very humanity and lived at least in familial groups.[136] Unwittingly, Buffon was in partial agreement with Rousseau's view which actually did not extol humanity in the state of nature, but rather in an intermediate state between savagery and high culture, as Arthur O. Lovejoy long ago demonstrated.[137] Rousseau therefore also did not claim an unmitigated primivism, and he stated that humanity was in the best state of development when it was in the middle between the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man.[138] Yet neither Buffon nor Gibbon were aware of these niceties. Like most of their contemporaries they were struck more by Rousseau's attack of modern material corruption than by his sophisticated conjectural picture of primordial savagery.

The French *philosophes* were nevertheless more prone than their Scottish Enlightenment counterparts to adopt some possible type of primitivistic outlook. Most eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers were fervent promoters

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l'humiliation de l'espèce entière, ils ont exposé ce tableau, qui ne vaut que par le contraste, & peut-être parce qu'il est bon de présenter quelquefois aux hommes des chimères de bonheur." Also see Otis Fellows, "Buffon and Rousseau: Aspects of a Relationship," *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 184-96.

135 "Septième et dernière Époque, lorsque la Puissance de l'Homme a secondé celle de la Nature," in *BHN*, Supplément, 5 (1778), 230, 238-40, 253-4.

136 "Les Animaux carnassiers," in *BHN*, 7 (1758), 25-31.

137 See Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*," in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, 1961), 14-37.

138 Rousseau, *Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, 166 (from *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men or Second Discourse*). Lester Crocker has claimed that on the one hand Rousseau exemplified a cult of nature and opposition to progress, but on the other, while the *philosophes* saw nature as supplying laws and motives which advanced harmony, happiness and progress, for Rousseau on the contrary only human beings and a rational society afforded progress. This was in keeping with his political theories, since avoidance from sophistication furthered his aims, which was also the reason he preferred Sparta to Athens. See Lester G. Crocker, *Nature and Culture, Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 1963), 477-8. For the notion of progress among the *philosophes*, see Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 202-10. For the Enlightenment's view of progress based on rationality and science, see also the more general discussion in John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London, 1970), 190-211.

of the idea of progress in the purely scientific and commercial sense. The most important exception to this was Adam Ferguson's eulogy of barbaric virtue. This was not exactly in the vein of the typical primitivistic outlook, but it did present Gibbon and others with some similar intellectual difficulties. Gibbon corresponded with Ferguson and held him in high estimation, but he did have some significant reservations contending with his views, which he both criticized yet appreciated. J. G. A. Pocock has given much attention to Gibbon's opinions of Ferguson's ideas.[139] Ferguson subscribed to the four-stages theory of human cultural progression (hunting, shepherding, agriculture, commerce), yet in contrast to his fellow Scottish philosophers he saw something vital in barbaric energy, and emphasized the self-awareness of the individual which enabled either virtue or corruption. He commended rude nations without idealizing them. Savages were devoid both of the instruction of more civilized nations but also of their vices. The state of nature was a permanent condition. Human beings were by nature active beings in a condition of progress through art and invention, and essentially there was no difference between the progress of a savage or a philosopher. The modern efforts of human invention were but a continuation of the steps of human progress begun in the rudest and most savage stages of social development. There was an unbroken line which connected the most rudimentary efforts of human invention to higher culture, with its ultimately greater achievements.[140]

In the *Memoires litteraires de la Grande Bretagne*, the short-lived attempt by Gibbon and his friend Georges Deyverdun to publish a periodical review of English literature and culture for a continental readership, Gibbon published in 1768 a review of Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, which though mainly laudatory in tone included some significant criticism. He agreed with Ferguson on a variety of issues, such as the positive effects of war or the influence of climate on manners. Nevertheless, he disagreed with Ferguson's observation that savage societies, with less separation of professions, were more unified than civilized nations where the individual was less connected to society in general. In criticizing this point Gibbon implied censure of Rousseau's influence, although without mentioning him outright. Ferguson's emphasis of barbarian vigor was a

139 See *PBR*, 2: 330-57; 3: 399-416; and 4: 2, 5, and passim.

140 Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), 14-15, 74-105, 178-9. For the claim that Ferguson ascribed to the three-stage scheme of advancing culture (savage, barbarous and then civilized), see Lisa Hill, "Adam Ferguson and the Paradox of Progress and Decline," *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), 677-706, at 679. For a good general introduction to his thought, see Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment, Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1995), 89-129.

bit too much for Gibbon, who wrote: "The author [Ferguson] appears to me, in general, a bit too friendly toward the barbarous centuries."[141] Ultimately he was as opposed to Ferguson's view of savage virtue almost as much as to Rousseau's.[142]

This anti-primitivistic outlook had important consequences for Gibbon's evaluations of various savage societies in *The Decline and Fall*. For example, in discussing the ichthyophagi of ancient Arabia he claimed: "Fancy, or perhaps reason, may still suppose an extreme and absolute state of nature far below the level of these savages, who had acquired some arts and instruments."[143] "Pastoral" meant barbarian societies for Gibbon, not a Golden Age. Even the ancient Greeks had erred when they "celebrated, with simple credulity, the virtues of the pastoral life" of the Tartars, despite being aware of the latter's military might.[144] While discussing the devastation brought by the Tartar invasions in various ages Gibbon wrote: "On this occasion, as well as on many others, the sober historian is forcibly awakened from a pleasing vision, and is compelled, with some reluctance, to confess, that the pastoral manners, which have been adorned with the fairest attributes of peace and innocence, are much better adapted to the fierce and cruel habits of a military life."[145] Primitivism was a compelling dream, but the harsh historical realities dispelled it. In making these statements Gibbon was thinking both as a historian but also, no less important, as a self-conscious English gentleman. As a young man he had read in one of his most favorite books, the "great master"[146] Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, the dialogue between

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[141] *Memoires litteraires de la Grande Bretagne, Pour l'an 1767* [vol. 1 of 2], ed. Edward Gibbon and Georges Deyverdun (London, 1768), 45-74, esp. 54, 62-3, 66-72: "L'Auteur me paroit, en general, un peu trop ami des siècles barbares." The review may have been by Deyverdun, or a collaborative effort, but it seems well-suited both to Gibbon's style and outlook and is here treated as his. For various views on this issue, and generally on this journal which ultimately reached only two volumes, see Vernon Parker Helming, "Edward Gibbon and Georges Deyverdun, Collaborators in the *Memoires Litteraires de la Grande Bretagne*," *PMLA*, 47 (1932), 1028-49; J. E. Norton, *A Bibliography of the Works of Edward Gibbon* (New York, 1940), 11-16.

[142] See Peter Ghosh, "Gibbon's Timeless Verity: Nature and Neo-Classicism in the Late Enlightenment," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 125. For Gibbon's anti-primitivism, see also Patricia B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian 1772-1794* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 13-14; Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment, Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997), 200-201.

[143] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 515 note 10.

[144] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1033.

[145] *DF*, XXVI, 1:1025.

[146] *DF*, XXXII, 2: 242.

Tom Jones and the misanthropic Man of the Hill in which the latter excused his reclusive life on the grounds of human evils, claiming that of all creatures "man alone hath basely dishonoured his own nature." Jones agreed with the observation of human evils but did not accept it as a generalization, claiming that "nothing should be esteemed as characteristical of a species, but what is to be found among the best and most perfect individuals of that species."[147] This would have undoubtedly appealed to Gibbon's gentlemanly self-awareness, and by "the best and most perfect individuals" he would have comprehended the social and economic elite of culturally advanced Europe, not primitive savages or the barbarian German hordes which had overrun the Roman Empire.

In any event, the common Enlightenment optimistic outlook, unencumbered by knowledge of the later disasters of modern history, typically viewed the concept of a "state of nature" censoriously, and primitivists such as Rousseau who extolled it (being also ignorant of later modern totalitarian manipulations of ideals of contact with nature) remained before the age of Romanticism in the minority. Yet both viewpoints shared the common, essentially historicizing, eighteenth-century notion that the state of nature was the starting point for historical development. The primitivistic viewpoint saw this development as one of deterioration and corruption, while the predominant Enlightenment outlook viewed it in a completely opposite and positive manner. Both outlooks also agreed that the historical process beginning with the state of nature occurred in the material sphere, but also in other spheres such as jurisprudence, politics and other facets of high culture. All these cultural domains interconnected, although by definition a primitive culture was bound to be occupied initially mainly with material concerns and not with high culture. Enlightenment historians conceived of the former as a necessary precondition of the latter, and this was one of the most original contributions of eighteenth-century thought.

Savages and Barbarians

Like other early modern intellectuals Gibbon was constantly bombarded with an almost ceaseless stream of first-hand travelers' reports about the customs and habits of various non-Western societies, which had an important influence on historical literature. Donald Kelley has observed that the discovery of the New World broadened the historiographical discourse in the sixteenth century. In a sense the New World was "invented" more than "discovered." Kelley has further claimed that "In one fundamental respect the humanist vision of history was

147 Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (New York, 1950), 410-11.

transformed by the first encounters with the New World, and this was a new appreciation for the creative power of nature."[148] While Kelley seems to intend the comprehension of the wide extent of the natural world, one should include in this new vision the recognition by early modern Europeans of the need to control these new natural expanses. Nature had created the various savage primitive nations in Africa, Asia and the Americas. By their very primitiveness, however, these societies had left nature itself as an untapped source, which from an eighteenth-century perspective emphasized their lack of Enlightenment. They had failed to assert their position at the top of the Great Chain of Being by taking command of nature to advance human material and moral needs.

The encounter with non-Western societies had already begun to influence historiographical literature during the Renaissance. Francesco Guicciardini, not a sentimentalist by any stretch of the imagination, wrote about the then recent discovery of America by Columbus and about the local surroundings and inhabitants. These were fertile regions, and the inhabitants, except for some cannibals, were simple people not tormented by greed or ambition. Yet their ignorance and simplicity also meant that they were "thus not unlike tractable and mild animals, easy prey for whoever attacks them."[149] Innocent primitivism was perhaps morally commendable, but realistically could not last in the face of progress, with all its moral failings. Guicciardini also implied that the fertility and bounty of nature remained untapped without progress. Primitive nations were therefore weak, which seemed to override any moral advantages that came with such feebleness. Even though some of the American nations the Spaniards discovered were civilized, most of them were unwarlike and therefore easy prey. Guicciardini, a Renaissance realist about social issues as much, if not more, than Machiavelli, thus typically observed that innocence might be moral, but without power it was ineffectual and doomed to extinction.[150]

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[148] Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History, Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven and London, 1998), 156-61, esp. 158. Peter Burke has claimed that in fact a true interest in America only began in the seventeenth century and increased in the eighteenth century. See his "America and the Rewriting of World History," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill and London, 1995), 33-51. Europeans tended to view America through European eyes, particularly from a religious perspective. Yet during the eighteenth century, with the decline of religious thought, more attention was given to America in itself, though still less than to the Old World. On this see Sabine MacCormack, "Limits of Understanding, Perceptions of Greco-Roman and Amerindian Paganism in Early Modern Europe," 79-129 in the same volume.

[149] Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, trans. and ed. Sidney Alexander (Princeton, 1984), 179.

[150] Ibid., 180.

Europeans were in disagreement about the possible virtues of savage societies. In the eighteenth century a particularly straightforward condemnation of such societies came from Cornelius de Pauw, who claimed that the American Indians were lazy, cruel and lived a limited social life due to the harshness of their environment. According to de Pauw one could not really compare the relative happiness of savages with that of civilized people, because no person had ever truly experienced both.[151] An opposite outlook was presented by the Jesuit author Joseph François Lafitau, who was a pioneer in the methodical use of observations regarding primitive non-Western societies in order to elucidate the history of classical antiquity.[152] Lafitau claimed that the American Indians had many positive qualities such as honor, courage, a type of religion and manners, but also vices such as vindictiveness and sloth. Yet the lack of progress in their arts was not a reason for reproach, since it was connected to moderation and modest requirements.[153] The Indians were capable of extreme cruelty but also of intrepid courage which excelled that of the Europeans, whose abundance and gentleness of life only rendered them cowardly and soft.[154] This was an allusion to the popular eighteenth-century claim that less advanced societies were more manly and exhibited greater military valor than civilized nations. Nevertheless, most early modern literati generally ascribed to various levels of depreciation of non-European peoples, particularly those of the New World. The Abbé Dubos, one of the most influential early Enlightenment intellectuals and historians, gave this outlook a succinct and unambiguous expression, emphasizing specifically cultural and technological attainments:

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151 Cornelius de Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, 2 vols (London, 1770), 1: 112-16, 123-4, 127. For the considerable attention which de Pauw's views on America drew in the eighteenth century, see Henry Ward Church, "Corneille De Pauw, and the Controversy over His *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, *PMLA*, 51 (1936), 178-206.

152 There is no documentation of Gibbon's having been familiar with Lafitau's work, although given the latter's popularity such familiarity was more than likely. For Lafitau's, and later also Goguet's, utilization of such comparative historiographical methodology, see Lemay, "Histoire de l'antiquité et découverte du nouveau monde." For general appreciations of Lafitau, see Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man, the American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge, 1982), 198-209; MacCormack, "Limits of Understanding, Perceptions of Greco-Roman and Amerindian Paganism in Early Modern Europe," 108-14; Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 346-9, 369-70, 446.

153 Joseph François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, ed. and trans. William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, 2 vols (Toronto, 1974-77), 1: 88-91.

154 Ibid., 2: 158.

> 'Tis observable, that the Europeans, and those who are born on the coasts bordering upon Europe, have always been fitter than other people for arts and sciences, as well as political government. Wheresoever the Europeans have carried their arms, they have generally subdued the inhabitants. They have vanquished them when they were only ten to thirty, and very frequently when they have fought ten against a hundred. Without ascending so high as Alexander the Great and the Romans, let us recal to mind with what ease a handful of Spaniards and Portuguese, by the help of their industry and the arms they carried with them from Europe, subdued the two Indies. To alledge that the Indians would not have been so easily conquered, if they had been masters of the same military machines, the same arms and discipline as their conquerors, proves the superiority of genius in the Europeans, who had invented all those things, when the Asiatics and Americans had made no such discovery, tho' they had been continually at war with one another.[155]

European superiority here was a cultural one based more on historical attainments than anything else although, as we shall see, for Dubos there were physical determinants in the historical process itself. For Enlightenment historians in general, discussing the characteristics of primitive societies meant in large measure criticizing their lack of command of nature, irrespective of their moral qualities. Even assuming primitive societies were morally superior to corrupted Europeans, this superiority was void of any significance because without the material means to retain their way of life, such societies were condemned in the long run to lose their battle to maintain such pristine culture, and perhaps even to exist at all. For the Enlightenment, with its realistic and rational assessment of the human condition, and irrespective of its general optimism, morality without practicality was irrelevant. It was this premise which colored eighteenth-century perceptions of primitive civilizations.

Having just finished reading Hans Egede's book about Greenland, the young Gibbon wrote in his diary: "Nature there is horrible... Spotted with snow... Yes, man is naturally good! I say this of these Greenlanders, who know love surrounded by their frost, but make war only against the animals. They are lazy, thoughtless, without malice, and without virtue. The Iroquois who eat their prisoners have also laws, ideas, arts of which the others are destitute. Compared to the Greenlanders, he [this] is already civilized man. How I love to see nature!"[156]

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[155] Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols (London, 1748), 2: 115.

[156] *Le journal de Gibbon a Lausanne, 17 Août 1763 – 19 Avril 1764*, ed. Georges Bonnard (Lausanne, 1945), 154: "La nature y est affreuse... Point de neiges...Oui, l'homme est naturellement bon! J'en appelle à ces Grœnlandois, qui connoissent l'amour au milieu de

Humanity was neither simply the civilized epitome of nature nor a crude savage society on a par with other creatures. The process of civilization was complicated, replete with both "malice" and "virtue." Gibbon already at an early stage seems to have deduced from all this the conclusion that even if human progress entailed a loss of simple innocence, it was preferable to remaining in a state of savagery. Enlightenment historiography by its very definition, and prefiguring Hegel, assumed that any human society which was not subject to the historical process was inferior. What was at stake, what has come in modern times to be called the Enlightenment Project, was to make sure that this historical process was a progressive one, and to condemn any society which was either static or in process of regression. Progress meant the well-known Enlightenment battle with superstition and despotism, but also material progress based on scientific advancement and, what has not been emphasized enough, an assertion of the human mastery of natural resources. The Enlightenment advocated a self-aware and active humanity taking control of its own destiny, not waiting for salvation to come, *deus ex machina*, from either a providential or a monarchic direction. Hence the consistent Enlightenment advocacy of educating the human race.

It is interesting to see what Hans Egede himself had written about the Greenlanders. Egede, a Norwegian missionary who spent fifteen years in Greenland, depicted the locals as stupid and phlegmatic, but more for lack of education than due to inborn qualities. On the one hand they were simple and unclean, but on the other hand they were good-natured, had a simple virtuousness and did not harm the Europeans without provocation. Egede's depiction of them was mildly primitivistic in tone, yet emphasized their deficiency as pagans and the need to Christianize them.[157] This was a common observation regarding Greenlanders in the eighteenth century, when many of the Europeans who spent extended periods in that harsh region were missionaries. The missionary perspective, whether Catholic or Protestant, was by definition inclined to a favorable view of non-Europeans, as evinced also by Lafitau and Clavigero, both Jesuit missionaries. The Greenlanders according to Egede did not comprehend their miserable condition, and it was "a Matter which cannot be questioned, that, if you will make a Christian out of a mere Savage and wild Man, you must first make him a reasonable Man, and the next step will be easier."[158] It would be

leur[s] frimats, mais qui ne connoissent la guerre qu'envers les animaux. Ils sont paresseux, legers, sans malice, et sans vertûs. Les Iroquois qui mangent leurs prisonniers ont aussi des loix, des idées, des arts dont les autres sont destitués. Comparé au Grœnlandois, Il est deja homme civilisé. Que j'aime a voir la nature!"

157 Hans Egede, *A Description of Greenland*, trans. anon. (London, 1745), 121-8, 209-10, 213, 219-20.

158 Ibid., 211.

easier to Christianize the Greenlanders if they could gradually be brought to a more settled and useful life, different from their wandering existence. Egede also claimed that the shoreline regions of Greenland, with the help of settlement and cultivation, could regain their former fertility.[159] In typical moderate Enlightenment fashion he joined a religious outlook to a material observation on the utility of cultivating nature. It was the combination of both these elements which held the key to lifting the Greenlanders from savagery to culture, and it was this composite outlook which also appealed to Gibbon.

Similarly, in another eighteenth-century missionary depiction of Greenland, David Crantz claimed that the character of the Greenlanders consisted "of simplicity without stupidity, and good sense uncultivated by the exercise of reason." With proper education they achieved intellectual attainments comparable to those of the Europeans.[160] The children in Greenland behaved appropriately, mainly toward their parents. Indeed, their character seemed "in most respects to form an exact opposite to that of children born in civilized countries, whose inward depravity becomes more and more developed as they advance in years."[161] Crantz's point of view was mildly primitivistic but also redolent with the religious outlook of the European missionaries, the description of whose activity was so prominent in his discussion of the history of Greenland. The indigenous population appeared amenable, after initial difficulties, to the missionaries' influence. Their apparent primitive innocence seemed a good vantage point from which to begin civilizing them in a Christian manner, without having first to overcome the vices of advanced European civilization, undoubtedly a more formidable foe than simple savage manners. It is in this sense that one should understand Crantz's observation that the Greenlanders "are savages without religion, and destitute of the very shadow of civil polity. They live as we may suppose the immediate descendants of Noah to have lived, before they learned to envy their fellow-mortals, and to rob each other of honour, property, freedom, and life."[162] Furthermore:

> If we take the term *savage* to imply a brutal, unsocial and cruel disposition, the Greenlanders are not entitled to the appellation. They are not untractable, wild, or barbarous; but a mild, quiet, and good-natured people. They live in a state of natural liberty without government, but in societies in some measure realizing the dreams of modern republicans... [They] may, comparatively speaking,

159 Ibid., 212, 217.

160 David Crantz, *The History of Greenland*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1820 [1767]), 1: 126.

161 Ibid., 1: 150.

162 Ibid., 1: 165.

> be called a happy people. Each follows the bent of his inclination, yet seldom injures his neighbour, except from motives of private revenge... Their lives, so hard and penurious in our eyes, are abundantly blessed with contentment... It is their poverty also which secures the permanency of their freedom. They have no treasures, like the Mexicans, to allure the hands of robbers, and have consequently to fear no wars, violence, or oppression, sleeping more peacefully in their lowly huts, than the great in their sumptuous palaces.[163]

Nevertheless, their virtue was mainly derived from self-love and from the need to depend on each other in their harsh environment. Their inclination to vice was as strong as with the rest of the human race, and evinced itself when they did not fear retaliation. Therefore they were capable of robbery, cruelty and murder. When they performed good acts it was more from an instinctive impulse than from rational reflection.[164] According to Crantz it was a mistake to perceive in the Greenlanders virtue independent of Christianity, a view which ran the risk of encouraging deism and atheism. In addition, even if the savages had a basic propensity for virtue, they lacked the rational ability to regulate their conduct according to fixed principles.[165] Crantz, like other missionaries, thus always attached a stipulation to his primitivism – savage people might be naturally predisposed to virtue, but they required the guidance of the Christian missionaries in order to achieve true morality.

A similar outlook was shared by many Europeans, including those who were not themselves churchmen. An intriguing example was the colorful James Adair, a deerskin trader who lived for many years in the North American regions of which he wrote, maintaining constant contacts with the Indian tribes.[166] Adair had a mixed though overall positive view of the American Indians; on the one hand they were rude and uncivilized but on the other also virtuous. Like many other commentators on the North American Indians he depicted in detail their extreme cruelty to war prisoners.[167] Yet he also claimed that they treated their religion in a more virtuous manner than the European missionaries in America, whom he regarded as corrupt, ignorant and harmful.[168] He praised the Indians' lack of covetousness regarding material wealth. Furthermore, he advocated turning them from savages to civilized Christians, claiming that they

163 Ibid., 1: 169-70.

164 Ibid., 1: 172-9.

165 Ibid., 1: 179-80.

166 For his life see the excellent editorial introduction in James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Tuscaloosa, 2005), 1-53.

167 Ibid., 382-91 and passim.

168 Ibid., 363-4.

were "ingenious, and capable of attaining all the liberal arts and sciences, under a proper cultivation."[169]

The missionary type of positive outlook on the American Indians received probably its most influential expression in eighteenth-century historiography in Clavigero's *History of Mexico*. This was not surprising for an author who was both a patriotic native Mexican and a Jesuit. Throughout his book Clavigero (also spelled Clavijero) was critical of those who regarded the American people and the continent in general as inferior to the nations and lands of the Old World. His criticism was aimed mainly at Cornelius de Pauw but also, more respectfully, at Robertson and Buffon.[170] Clavigero claimed that the Mexicans at the time of the Spanish conquest were in a more advanced state of civilization than some of the European nations in antiquity. Like any other nation their character was a combination of good and bad, the latter easily amenable to correction through proper education.[171] He complained of "the injustice done to the Americans by those who have considered them as animals of a different species, or as incapable of civilization or improvement."[172] The savage Americans had a mental potential equal to that of the Europeans, and given the opportunity and proper education they would attain equal cultural achievements.[173] The Mexicans and the Peruvians in particular, claimed Clavigero, in contrast to the other American inhabitants, had created culture, religion, agriculture, arts and commerce, even if these were not at a level equal to that of the Europeans.[174] Throughout his book he criticized the brutal human sacrifices of the Mexicans, yet nevertheless retained this overall positive view of their basic propensity to goodness, given the proper, Christian, incentive to moral and cultural improvement.

William Robertson, whose work on America Clavigero criticized, claimed, voicing the more moderate and mainstream outlook of the times, that when discussing the American savages one should avoid both denigrating them, or praising their simplicity in Rousseau's style.[175] According to Adam Smith the

169 Ibid., 408, and see also 418, 442.

170 On Clavigero see *PBR*, 4: 184, 204, 209-26.

171 Clavigero, *The History of Mexico*, 1: 79-82.

172 Ibid., 1: 133.

173 Ibid., 2: 352-3.

174 Ibid., 2: 363-4.

175 *RHA*, 2: 57-9. On Robertson's moderate discussion of the American Indians, see Thomas Preston Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing 1760-1830* (New York, 1966), 122, which at 103-26, also includes a general discussion of primitivism in late eighteenth-century historiography. On Robertson's view of America as inferior to Europe, see David Armitage, "The New World and British Historical Thought, from Richard Hakluyt to William Robertson," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill and London, 1995), 52-75, at 68-9. For many important

barbarians of Africa and the West Indies were less weak and defenseless than the savages of America since the former were shepherds while the latter, with the exception of the Mexicans and Peruvians, were only hunters, and therefore it was easier for the Europeans to displace them.[176] Smith was thinking here along the lines of the four-stages theory according to which hunters were more primitive than shepherds, although the latter were also still barbarians. For Smith this was by no means a matter of denigration, but simply a rational explanation of the cultural weakness and lack of material and social development of primitive societies. Voltaire was typically more unreserved when he claimed that the European savages of his own time, by which he meant the unenlightened multitudes in the villages and cities of Europe, were much less civilized than the proud nations of America who only pretended to be savages.[177]

For eighteenth-century intellectuals the terms "savage" and "barbarian" were often interchangeable, and yet occasionally also significantly different in meaning. Gibbon's use of these terms is a particularly important case in point. While he often used them interchangeably, there was a small but significant difference between them in many of his more meticulous discussions of less advanced societies. In general, the barbarians were those who had toppled the Roman Empire, while savages were mostly the inhabitants of other continents outside European history. To put it differently, barbarians were partially civilized savages. This was no small difference. Contrary to the savages, the barbarians were already on the road to civilization.[178] Like all Enlightenment historians Gibbon was well-acquainted with Tacitus's *Germania*, which made clear to everyone the cultural roots of those northern tribes who would ultimately form a key element of the future European civilized nations. Tacitus's work became the most influential depiction in Western historiography of praise for seemingly barbarian nations. This was not however a primitivistic appreciation. It was concerned with barbarians, not savages, and therefore with precisely those

observations on Robertson's consideration of the American Indians, see *PBR*, 4: 181-211 and passim.

176 *SAI*, 2: 634.

177 Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols (Paris, 1963), 1: 22-3 (from *La philosophie de l'histoire*).

178 See *PBR*, 3: 431n, and 4: 11-16, 331; and François Furet, "Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History," in *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, John Clive and Stephen R. Graubard (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1977), 159-66. For the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social-history type of stadial theory, which outlined human progress as moving from a savage stage, to a barbarian one and finally a civilized stage, see Frank Palmeri, "Conjectural History and the Origins of Sociology," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 37 (2008), 1-21, at 3-4, 6, 13, 15.

aspects of barbarian material and social life which could be considered as basically civilized, and therefore comparable, for better or worse, with corresponding phenomena in more advanced cultures. In the eighteenth century, as Clavigero's observations implied, a similar conceptual differentiation between savages and barbarians, even if not always utilizing this precise terminology, was applied to both Western and non-Western cultures.[179]

Montesquieu too had differentiated between savages and barbarians, claiming that the former were usually scattered people subsisting by hunting, while the latter were pastoral nations capable of uniting together.[180] Adam Smith, basing his observations on the distinctions of the four-stages theory, summed up the niceties of the problem better than any of his contemporaries:

> Among the northern nations which broke into Europe in <the> beginning of the 5th century, society was a step farther advanced than amongst the Americans at this day. They are still in the state of hunters, the most rude and barbarous of any, whereas the others were arrived at the state of shepherds, and had even some little agriculture. The step betwixt these two is of all others the greatest in the progression of society, for by it the notion of property is ext<end>ed beyond possession, to which it is in the former state confined. When this is once established, <it> is a matter of no great difficulty to extend this from one subject to another, from herds and flocks to the land itself. –They had therefore got a good way before the Americans; and government, which grows up with society, had of consequence acquired greater strength.[181]

These distinctions had much to do not just with social sophistication but also with the varying levels of material culture evinced by barbarians, in contrast with the more primitive savages. Subsistence, which was a central indicator of cultural progress according to the four-stages theory, was ultimately based on the level of utilization of nature. By "savages" Smith, Gibbon and their late Enlightenment

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[179] A precursor to eighteenth-century differentiations between barbarism and savagery was Bartolomé de Las Casas's differentiation between four types of barbarians: those who were inhumanly brutish; those generally cultured but lacking a written language; those strictly barbarian in their savage and unsocial lives, who were the worst kind of people, but a minority among humanity; and those who did not acknowledge Christ. See Bartolomé de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, trans. and ed. Stafford Poole (DeKalb, 1974), 25-54. Gibbon does not seem to have known this work. See also Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man*, 126-37.

[180] Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, 1990), 290-91.

[181] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis, 1982), 107.

generation would have been thinking primarily of the many early modern depictions of African and American indigenous populations. These, with very few exceptions (mainly the Mexicans and Peruvians), in contrast with the barbarian Germanic tribes, were almost devoid of culture. In this context Gibbon understood their lack of control of natural resources, and generally of material civilization, to be a key deficiency. Savage societies seemed much less prone to action in any historical sense. Gibbon observed that the more savage a nation was, the more it depended on instinct and not reason, and thus the less distinct it was from other nations. In other words, the more human societies were akin to animals the more their modes of life and social behavior were uniform and barbarous.[182] The implication seemed to be that savages, in an almost pre-Hegelian sense, did not have a history, or at least nothing more than what eighteenth-century early anthropological notions would have termed a "natural" history. In contrast, barbarians, since the time of Tacitus, if not as early as Herodotus, were long a part of the mainstream European historical narrative. This however did not by any means denote that barbarians were cultured societies. On the contrary. They were, admittedly, closer than savages to the level of civilization evinced by truly advanced nations. In contrast with savages they had already commenced the long and arduous process of attaining culture. Yet despite this partial advancement, they were still on a far lower rung in the climb toward civilization compared with truly advanced societies. Nevertheless, even if only in a limited sense, they were considered as having a history, an attribute which savages did not share in eighteenth-century estimation. Barbarians consequently received a much greater amount of attention in Enlightenment historiography than did savages. This attention was diametrically opposed to primitivism, specifically because it measured the barbarians' cultural achievements, as limited as these seemed, according to the yardstick of European historical progress, to which they, contrary to savages, were considered as entitled. As Tacitus influentially demonstrated for generations of historians, barbarians could occasionally even outstrip more advanced civilizations precisely in the latter's own fields of cultural endeavor.

In reading eighteenth-century sources one should constantly remain aware of this distinction between savagery and barbarism. While contemporaneous terminology was not always consistent and the two terms were often interchanged, the conceptual differentiation between these two levels of human cultural attainment was a very important and tangible one for the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung*. Joseph de Guignes claimed that the various Tartar nations, contrary to common perception, were not simply just barbarians but had many

[182] See the remarks in *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1025.

solid virtues.[183] The disorders caused by the European crusaders would make even the barbarian Turks blush.[184] De Guignes pondered the question why the Chinese empire survived while others, such as the Persian or Roman, did not. While the nations conquered by Rome simply waited for a chance to regain their liberty, only to subsequently accept the new barbarian conquerors, China was peopled after the deluge by a religious and peaceful nation. The Chinese always resisted any novelty as a danger, remaining loyal to their old way of life. When the Tartars conquered China they adopted the local laws and customs, and no change of government altered the original Chinese condition.[185] De Guignes implied that this situation also prevented progress. He perceived limits to Chinese and other ancient civilizations, even those seemingly most advanced. The stupendous projects erected by some of the ancient nations, which astounded even modern observers, such as those found in Egypt and China, were not evidence of progress but on the contrary, of rudeness and the infancy of arts. Modern European rulers were capable of similar accomplishments if they so desired, but only at the expense of a level of exploitation of their people which did not exist in Europe. In addition, advanced cultures disliked excess and overabundance, preferring simplicity and perfection, and in China, despite projects such as the great wall, nothing was perfected.[186]

In a not dissimilar vein Mascov was rather cautious about the virtues of the ancient Huns and implicitly of all barbarian nations when he claimed: "But, as Poverty, of itself, does not subdue the Passions, and we cannot, from the abject Manner, in which a Nation lives, draw an Inference of their Moderation; so the *Hunns*, in the Midst of their Penury, were but the more savage."[187] This was a departure from the Tacitean view of the Germanic tribes, which in the eighteenth century lost ground in the face of Enlightenment notions of material and moral advancement. These new cultural and political ideals advanced novel standards of measuring levels of civilizational progress. According to these, most human societies, from savages, through barbarians and including even many advanced European societies, left much to be required.

Paul Henry Mallet, whose *Northern Antiquities* enjoyed a lasting popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not least in Britain, asserted that initially all the European nations were similar to the American savages, wandering tribes without cities, agriculture or arts, and therefore, like the ancient northern tribes, living a savage life in quest of warfare. Only with the development of

183 *GHG*, 1 (part 1): vi-vii.
184 Ibid., 2: 14.
185 Ibid., 2: 90-93.
186 Ibid., 4: 209-10.
187 *MHAG*, 1: 339-40.

culture, industry, property, law and the arts, did the relish for peace and justice emerge, a process which was universally recurrent.[188] Mallet nevertheless regarded his contemporary Europe as culturally advanced and superior to that of the invading northern tribes, despite their military independent spirit.[189] One did not need, however, to discuss far-away savages or barbarians from the distant past in order to consider the lack of cultural sophistication. This could be found abundantly in Europe itself. When the European masses were considered, then Enlightenment intellectuals, unencumbered by physical or temporal distance, could contemplate what truly constituted cultural advancement, and this was primarily a firm material basis, by which the Enlightenment understood first and foremost a command of the natural environment. A very important case of the realization of this point was outlined by the French ecclesiastical historian the Abbé Claude Fleury, whom Gibbon greatly appreciated.[190] Fleury was critical of the denigration of agriculture in modern Europe, regarding it as the basis of high culture, and a noble employment, as it had been considered in antiquity. Indeed, an ignorance of antiquity was the cause of this denigration.[191]

> When one speaks of ploughmen and shepherds, they figure to themselves a parcel of clownish boors, that lead a slavish, miserable life, in poverty and contempt, without heart, without sense or education. They don't consider that what makes our country people commonly so wretched, is their being slaves to all the rest of mankind: since they work not only for their own maintenance, but to furnish necessaries for all those that live in a better manner. For it is the countryman that provides for the citizens, the officers of the courts of judicature and treasury, gentlemen, and ecclesiasticks: and whatever ways we make use of to turn money into provisions, or provisions into money, all will end in the fruits of the earth, and those animals that are supported by them. Yet when we compare all these different conditions together, we generally place those that work in the country, in the last rank: and most people set a greater value upon fat, idle citizens, that

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188 Paul Henry Mallet, *Northern Antiquities: or, a Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes, and Other Northern Nations*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1770), 1: 122-3.

189 Ibid., 1: 232-3, 252. On Mallet's primitivistic discussion of the ancient Scandinavians, and its influence in Britain, see Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing 1760-1830*, 106.

190 See e.g. *DF*, LXVI, 3: 865 note 1.

191 Abbé [Claude] Fleury, *A Short History of the Israelites, with an Account of their Manners, Customs, Laws, Polity and Religion*, trans. Ellis Farneworth (London, 1756), 28-39.

> are weak and lazy and good for nothing, because, being richer, they live more luxuriously and at their ease.[192]

There was a twist to Fleury's seeming primitivism. In fact it was not primitivism at all but the exact opposite. The working of the land was not an ideal unto itself. It was precisely what enabled attaining advanced culture, in the healthy and virtuous sense, which was what had happened in antiquity. There was "no necessity of having any recourse to Plato's commonwealth to find men of this condition; for so lived the greatest part of mankind near four thousand years."[193] The most conspicuous example was furnished by the ancient Romans, and their fondness of husbandry was precisely the reason for their physical and moral fortitude, which enabled them to conquer the whole world.[194] For Fleury what others might have construed as primitive life became, on the contrary, an essential prerequisite for high culture in the most healthy and admirable sense. His emphasis on agriculture was not fortuitous because, as we shall see, in the Enlightenment agriculture was habitually considered a particularly important cultural attainment. It was regarded as the quintessential step in humanity's attempt to command the forces of nature. Fleury thus helped set the tone for later Enlightenment historiography by emphasizing the interconnectedness of material and social progress.

A different renunciation of the primitivistic tradition came from Robert Henry. According to Henry, alongside the virtues of sincerity, plain-dealing and simplicity, the ancient Britons also evinced the vices of love of war, robbery, sloth and drunkenness.[195] He gave continued attention to the development of the arts, by which he meant both the fine arts but also the "necessary" ones, i.e. what in modern terms is approximately conceived as technology. In this context he also discussed agriculture. The level of progress in the arts thus construed was a key element of cultural progress. "A frugal parsimonious simplicity in their way of life, hath been commonly reckoned among the virtues of uncivilized nations, (who had made but little progress in the arts) and particularly of the ancient Britons. But this simplicity, in these circumstances, is not properly a virtue, as it is the effect of necessity, rather than of choice; and owing rather to their ignorance, than to their contempt of luxury."[196] The moment the ancient Britons became acquainted with luxury through their contact with the Romans, they appropriated the consequent customs. Henry claimed that on the one hand it

192 Ibid., 29-30.
193 Ibid., 31.
194 Ibid., 32-3.
195 *HHGB*, 1: 448-52.
196 Ibid., 1: 447.

was unnecessary to excessively praise the simplicity and virtue of the ancient Britons, since much of this was the result of lack of temptation. On the other hand, however, one had to avoid exaggerating their barbarity and violence, since this was more the result of lack of sufficient restraints of religion and government than of their actual nature. The character of nations was therefore in large measure the result of circumstances. Ancient Britain was not an Arcadia but neither was it a place of complete barbarism.[197] In his own way Henry exemplified the common late Enlightenment assertion that there were certain virtues which were apparent in less advanced societies, particularly in barbaric, not savage, ones. Rousseau was the most conspicuous exception to this observation, since he extolled partly civilized savages more than barbarians, who were usually conceived in the eighteenth century mainly as warrior societies. Primitive virtue, however, ultimately conceded pride of place to advanced civilization. This was both an inevitable and a positive outcome of the inherent progressive nature of history as seen through the mainstream Enlightenment outlook.

This became evident in the *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, authored by the Abbé Raynal and his collaborators, chiefly Diderot.[198] More than any other historical work of the late Enlightenment, Raynal's was replete with primitivistic statements. Even though they were culturally inferior, he regarded any maltreatment of simpler societies by Europeans as a moral travesty. For example, he conveyed primitivistic sentiments in his discussion of the Hottentots, descrying the cruelty of the Europeans toward them.[199] Regarding the dishonesty of European merchants he claimed that it was "not from what we find in the midst of forests, but from what we observe in the centre of polished societies, that we learn to despise and to mistrust mankind."[200] Regarding the virtue of the American natives on the arrival of Columbus he asserted: "Tell me, reader, whether these were civilized people landing among savages, or savages among civilized people?"[201] And the atrocities of the Spaniards in South America drew from him the exclamation: "O God! why did thou create man? Thou certainly didst know, that, for one instant on which thou shouldst be able to look upon thy work with complacency, thou shouldst turn thine eyes away from it a

197 Ibid., 1: 490-91.

198 It is impossible to enter here into the complicated issue of just who authored which portions of this important work. Many of the central philosophical claims it made, not least those discussed here, were at least representative of Diderot's outlook if not actually written by him. For the sake of simplicity we will throughout refer to the author as Raynal.

199 *PPH*, 1: 232-4.

200 Ibid., 3: 154.

201 Ibid., 2: 361.

hundred times!"[202] Raynal compared the state and happiness of savages with that of civilized societies, and seemed at times to actually prefer the state of nature to the social state. The savage was free from the wants of the civilized person, from the social evils of the cultured condition, as well as from the inequality and oppression from which most people suffered in advanced societies.[203] More than anything, the general intent of the work to descry the moral outrages in the colonies led to such observations, and to the statement: "How different is man in the state of nature from man corrupted by society! The latter amply deserves all the misfortunes he brings upon himself."[204] One should not, however, confuse Raynal's criticism of the outrages committed against defenseless savages, with an outright primitivistic preference for a savage mode of life. On the contrary, what was constantly implied in his work was that the Europeans, by committing such crimes, were acting contrary to the expectations which their cultural advancement, obviously morally deficient, initially suggested.

The consideration of primitive societies in Raynal's work was a complicated one. Perhaps this was partially due to the multiple authorship of the work. Yet the Enlightenment view of primitivism was inherently complex. Writing of the changes in the treatment of children in Europe, and the growth in such habits as breastfeeding and avoidance of swaddling clothes, Raynal noted:

> What can these innovations be attributed to, but to the consciousness that man cannot deviate imprudently from the laws of nature, without injury to his own happiness? In all future ages, the savages will advance by slow degrees towards the civilized state; and civilized nations will return towards their primitive state; from whence the philosopher will conclude, that there exists in the interval between these two states, a certain medium, in which the felicity of the human species is placed. But who is it that can find out this medium? and even if it were found, what authority would be capable of directing the steps of man to it, and to fix him there?[205]

The influence of Rousseau in this passage was clear, even if unacknowledged.[206] Raynal was here in one of his more despondent moments. Yet he nevertheless also implied, more optimistically, that the state of nature already contained the seeds of rudimentary civilization. It was perhaps tragic, yet the virtues of

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202 Ibid., 3: 2.

203 See the remarks in ibid., 5: 297-302.

204 Ibid., 3: 311. For other passages sympathetic to primitivism, see also 3: 272-5; and 6: 479.

205 Ibid., 3: 275.

206 See also similarly ibid., 5: 127.

primitive simplicity were untenable in the long run, not just because they could not withstand the unconscionable ravages of advanced societies, but also because they contained within themselves the seeds of their own dissolution in the historical process of cultural advancement. Therefore the serious philosopher had to try to make this transition, which was accelerated by contact with advanced cultures, as smooth and morally unobjectionable as possible. This outlook underlined Raynal's ideas on how to civilize the savages of Guiana.[207] In outlining these ideas, despite his sympathy for primitivism, he regarded culture as the inevitable lot of humanity, for better or worse. His aim was to cleanse the attainment of culture from its moral failings, not to deny it. Therefore his primitivism was a disillusioned one, much more realistic than Rousseau's, despite the latter's obvious influence. Ultimately, cultured society with all its defects was better than the savage state.[208] Unsurprisingly, Raynal was critical of any denigration of what he perceived as the natural dignity of humanity. Human beings had a basic propensity for improvement and a potential virtue which morality could develop.[209] Raynal's primitivism, in short, was anthropocentric, and in that sense in perfect line with the mainstream of early modern primitivism since Montaigne.

Nature and Culture

Cosmology, primitivism and historiography were all combined in the Enlightenment to present an ethics which regarded humanity as the apex of the natural world. Man was "the paragon of animals," primitivistic overtones notwithstanding. Human societies were bound by their very nature to a process of development from rude beginnings to ultimate high civilization. This process was firmly founded on transforming human superiority in the Great Chain of Being from an abstract concept to a material reality. The indebtedness of this progressive conception, which Enlightenment philosophers conceived in a purely secular manner devoid of divine accommodation, to traditional religious anthropocentric cosmology, was not fortuitous. In cleansing civilization from the evils of religious superstition eighteenth-century philosophers were not bent on discarding the biblical tradition *in toto*. On the contrary, most Enlightenment

207 Ibid., 4: 302-5.

208 Ibid., 6: 411-12.

209 Ibid., 6: 471-2. For Raynal's inconsistent yet ultimately predominant primitivism, see William R. Womack, "Eighteenth-Century Themes in the *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes* of Guillaume Raynal," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 96 (1972), 237-49.

literati fully accepted those aspects of the religious tradition which they did not conceive as dangerous to society. In that respect anthropocentric biblical cosmology was firmly in tune with the Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution had paved the way for transmuting this traditional cosmology into the Enlightenment ethics of mastery of nature. As Oliver Goldsmith, Gibbon's friend at the Literary Club, put it: "To subdue the earth to his own use was, and ought to be, the aim of man."[210]

A case in point where humanity's command over nature was easily comprehensible in practical terms was the domestication of animals. According to Robertson, "This command over the inferior creatures is one of the noblest prerogatives of man, and among the greatest efforts of his wisdom and power. Without this, his dominion is incomplete. He is a monarch, who has no subjects; a master, without servants, and must perform every operation by the strength of his own arm."[211] Gibbon considered animals as a natural resource meant for human benefit. Humanity's ability to cause animals with discordant natures such as the domestic dog and cat to live together was "proof of the empire of man over the animals."[212] Gibbon acknowledged that humanity's application of its cosmological supremacy in nature in practical material terms was an achievement that was perceptible at the earliest stages of transition from savagery to barbarism. In other words, it was an accomplishment which lay at the very foundation of the historical process. It is true he wrote that "The vague dominion, which MAN has assumed over the wild inhabitants of the earth, the air, and the waters, was confined to some fortunate individuals of the human species."[213] Yet this remark was made while describing the cultural regression in early medieval feudal France, when the attainments of Roman times were lost, the command of nature was disappearing and "Gaul was again overspread with woods; and the animals, who were reserved for the use, or pleasure, of the lord, might ravage, with impunity, the fields of his industrious vassals."[214]

This connection between material and social-political reality was typical for Enlightenment historiography. History for Gibbon and his generation was by its very nature dynamic, constantly ebbing and flowing, and therefore maintaining cultural progress was possible only at the price of constant vigilance. As we shall

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[210] Oliver Goldsmith, *A History of the Earth, and Animated Nature* (New York, 1825), 121.

[211] *RHA*, 2: 122-3. See also 1: 171; 2: 124-5; and the remarks in *RHDI*, 3-4, 400-402 note 53.

[212] See "Index Expurgatorius," in Craddock, *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, 125. Also see *DF*, L, 3: 154.

[213] *DF*, XXXVIII, 2: 481.

[214] Ibid.

see in the following chapters, the Enlightenment conceived progress as arduous and difficult. It was constantly amenable to regression and loss. Regaining it, once lost, even if this was possible by the very laws of history, was considered to be almost as difficult as initially attaining it. Eighteenth-century historians thus regarded the utilization of nature as an absolutely necessary aspect of culture. Almost every conceivable manner in which humanity seemed to ameliorate uncultivated nature received their praise. Hume, for example, praised the extirpation of wolves in England by hunting during the time of King Edgar.[215] He approved of cultivating as much land as possible, as was the Normans' habit after the conquest. Making do only with the immediately required land was equal in his opinion with barbarism and lack of cultivation.[216] Later notions regarding the finiteness of natural resources were totally inimical to the Enlightenment mind.

Most of these themes received an important and integrated evaluation by Herder. Following his consistent view of the geographical influence on culture and his philosophical claim for the maximum plenitude of natural phenomena, he maintained that nature aspired to create the greatest possible number and variety of creatures living in peace. But precisely for that reason there was a violent struggle among these various creatures, which created an equilibrium of powers which was the prerequisite for peace in the creation. This dialectic had an almost pre-Darwinian logic. It also served to explain humanity's control of nature, which was the result of natural constraints more than any biblical prerogative. Human beings learned from the animals themselves the necessary information which helped them gradually gain dominion over them, and they condensed within themselves all the knowledge necessary for the beginning of human culture.[217] Herder was sensitive to the fact that the animals did not just passively exist for the use of humanity. This underlined the effort that human beings had to exert in order to make their cosmological superiority materially significant. Herder noted: "The World, it is true, was given to man: but not to him alone, not to him first: animals in every element render his monarchy questionable. One species he must tame: with another he must long contend. Some escape his dominion: others wage with him eternal war. In short, every species extends its possession of the Earth in proportion to its capacity, cunning, strength, or courage."[218] In some measure this was primitivistic logic. Yet this was not straightforward primitivism. Human beings had to be humbly aware of their limited dominion over the natural world. Herder, however, did not advocate a true primitivistic voluntary abandonment of this dominion. On the contrary,

215 *HHE*, 1: 103.
216 Ibid., 1: 226.
217 *OPHM*, 35-8.
218 Ibid., 35.

even if humanity's mastery of nature was limited, attempting to implement it in the most comprehensive manner was conformable with the natural order.

Herder's anthropocentric conception of the human mastery of nature was essentially historical. This mastery became worthwhile only when put into practice in the long process of attaining civilization. The human domination of nature was essentially its own justification, but it was not based on any inevitable preordained philosophical or religious prerogative. Where the natural surroundings were favorable it was there for the taking. When human beings failed to do so there was not much importance to any potential human superiority. Nevertheless, without humanity and its dominion the earth would lack its "supreme ornament and crown,"[219] and, in accordance with his rationality and liberty, man was unique, "a son of God, a sovereign of the World."[220] Herder was not immune to biblical cosmology. He claimed that the idea of man's dominion over the earth, of his ability to live anywhere and of his being the vicegerent of God, was "the most ancient philosophy of the history of man."[221] In nature anything which was capable of existing did therefore exist. Man was at the head of the earthly creation thanks to his intelligence, which enabled comprehending the language of creation and made him an image of God.[222] Herder's religious allusions were perhaps more in tune with early Romanticism than the Enlightenment. Yet they were also a reverberation of the eighteenth-century's debt to the long Western tradition of religious cosmology, as transmitted in new form by the Scientific Revolution.

J. B. Bury, who among other things was of course one of the most important editors of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall*, long ago commented how in the Enlightenment man ceased to be the center of the world in the geocentric sense, yet remained the center of his own limited terrestrial world.[223] Essentially this observation described the process whereby the all-encompassing religious cosmological confidence of the Middle Ages had metamorphosed by the eighteenth century into the modern notion of human supremacy in the natural

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219 Ibid., 70.

220 Ibid., 89-94.

221 Ibid., 278.

222 Ibid., 463-5. For an overview of Herder's cosmology and historical philosophy, see Robert T. Clark, Jr., *Herder, His Life and Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 308-47. For his primitivism, see Eugene E. Reed, "Herder, Primitivism and the Age of Poetry," *Modern Language Review*, 60 (1965), 553-67. For the providential element in his historiography, see for example Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 219-26.

223 J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress, an Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (New York, 1955), 159-61.

order. This new cosmology was less universal and categorical, yet in practical material terms, because of its combination of religious and scientific outlooks, it was even more potent. Between the late Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, Western thought underwent a pervasive change in its conceptualization of the relationship between humanity and nature. The Enlightenment's distinctive contribution to this change was not, as has often been claimed, the simple realization of the importance of scientific and material progress, or of technological advances per se. It was not just a continuation and augmentation of the ideals of the Scientific Revolution. The eighteenth century added a new, specifically historiographical dimension, to the concept of the human mastery of nature. This mastery was perceived in a new way, as an essential component of the continual historical progress from barbarism to civilization. Enlightenment historians regarded the human command of nature as an inevitable and irresistible force. In their opinion this force, if managed properly, could not and was not to be resisted. On the contrary, it was the engine of progress, the very fuel of history. King Canute on the seashore had risen from his chair a bit too hastily.

Chapter 2
Cultivation

The Concept of Civilization

Some of Gibbon's most pertinent remarks on the cultivation of nature as a foundation of culture were made in the short essay which brought to a close the third volume of *The Decline and Fall*, titled "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West." He there depicted the overrunning of the Roman world by the northern barbarian tribes, "bold in arms, and impatient to ravish the fruits of industry."

> Such formidable emigrations no longer issue from the North; and the long repose, which has been imputed to the decrease of population, is the happy consequence of the progress of arts and agriculture. Instead of some rude villages, thinly scattered among its woods and morasses, Germany now produces a list of two thousand three hundred walled towns: the Christian kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, and Poland have been successively established; and the Hanse merchants, with the Teutonic knights, have extended their colonies along the coast of the Baltic, as far as the Gulf of Finland. From the Gulf of Finland to the Eastern Ocean, Russia now assumes the form of a powerful and civilised empire. The plough, the loom, and the forge are introduced on the banks of the Volga, the Oby, and the Lena; and the fiercest of the Tartar hords have been taught to tremble and obey. The reign of independent Barbarism is now contracted to a narrow span; and the remnant of Calmucks or Uzbeks, whose forces may be almost numbered, cannot seriously excite the apprehensions of the great republic of Europe.[1]

There were many inter-related notions here: the confrontation between barbarism and culture; the need for peace as a prerequisite of progress; and, significantly, the assertion of the human mastery of nature, and the transmutation of this mastery by technological innovation from a theoretical concept into practical material benefits. The cosmological outlook which Gibbon and other Enlightenment historians had imbued was transformed into intrinsically historiographical terms, into a tale of human progress, of the creation of advanced civilization

[1] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 512.

sustained by the constant process of increasing cultivation of nature. While they were not thinking in the emphatic material terms which would be developed in Marxist historiography the following century, in their own way eighteenth-century historians regarded material culture as the indispensable prerequisite for the development of advanced social and political attainments, usually designated at the time as "customs and manners." Material culture meant first and foremost the mastery of nature, the first and crucial step on the road from savagery to civilization.[2] It was obvious that when one took an initial view of an advanced civilization it was not agriculture or other forms of rudimentary material acquirements which drew attention, but rather high culture and such things as artistic accomplishments or political life. Yet scrutinizing such a civilization from a historical perspective, attempting to elucidate how it came into existence and what enabled its cultural superiority, presented a different picture. What Enlightenment historians discovered was that the initial step of taking control of nature was the indispensable basis for proceeding to any meaningful and lasting progress.

The notion of civilization requires further elucidation. Ever since Norbert Elias's classic study it has been clear that civilization is a process, not a static concept. Yet this realization did not begin with Elias, although its modern conceptualization did. Elias gave a telling description of the German differentiation, indicatively arising in the late eighteenth century, between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, both essentially subsumed under the English or French concepts of *Civilization*.[3] Essentially, the German *Zivilisation* referred to the courtly etiquette and mannered behavior of the aristocratic social elite, while *Kultur* indicated the more intellectual and spiritual refinement which the rising bourgeoisie perceived as their superior achievement. Elias's perception of this difference indicates the complexity of the term "civilization" in its general usage, even in non-German terminology. What exactly defines civilization? Is it material

[2] Historians have been increasingly interested in recent years in the various concepts of "savagery," "barbarism," "culture" and "civilization," which began receiving their modern range of meanings only in the second half of the eighteenth century. See e.g. Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man, the American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge, 1982), 15-26, 126-37, 162-8, 202, and 130-31, on the idea that without a written language barbarians cannot attain such things as controlling nature, producing science, accumulating knowledge or legislating laws. Also see idem, "The 'Defence of Civilization' in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory," *History of the Human Sciences*, 1 (1988), 33-45; Bruce Mazlish, "Civilization in a Historical and Global Perspective," *International Sociology*, 16 (2001), 293-300; Brett Bowden, "The Ideal of Civilisation: Its Origins and Socio-Political Character," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 7 (2004), 25-50.

[3] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 3-28.

and technological attainments? Spiritual and moral refinement? A combination of both? The answer seems to be the latter. But it is more than that. It is not just a combination of two disparate types of progress but rather an intertwining development, a general interdependent process in which a separate route of material or spiritual growth can only be perceived as an abstraction. In other words, separating these two strands of cultural change might be a hermeneutic necessity for comprehending reality, yet in reality itself it does not exist. This terminological discrimination was justified in Elias's discussion because of its emphatic connection with social and political developments, which in large measure, in the specifically German context, gave rise to this differentiation. Yet from the history-of-ideas perspective there is much less need of observing it. Moreover, it is particularly indicative that the whole concept of civilization in its modern reflexive sense emerged during the Enlightenment. It was from the start an essentially historical concept, a part of the general perception of the progressive nature of history according to the Enlightenment mind. Elias, writing of the appearance of the concept of civilization in France in the late eighteenth century, claimed (in an observation also applicable in general to the German *Kultur* concept), that for the rising middle class which propounded the new outlook "Civilization is not only a state, it is a process which must be taken further. That is the new element expressed in the term *civilisation*."[4] In short, the concept of civilization was an expression of the specifically historiographical outlook of the Enlightenment, and therefore it is particularly important to investigate how the historical literature of the period discussed it.

Any differentiation between various aspects or types of civilization arose only after the concept itself began to be elucidated in Western culture in its essentially modern self-conscious historiographical form. By the time intellectuals in the late eighteenth-century began actually to discuss the term "civilization" directly they had already been engaged throughout the century in investigating all its essential components. From the start one of the central of these components was the historical dimension, the notion that civilization was the outcome of specific historical conditions which matured over time. This was one of the most important contributions of Enlightenment historiography, hitherto underestimated in modern scholarship; not just the notion of cultural progress as essential to the rise of civilization, but the comprehension of the whole civilizing process in all its inter-related material and spiritual aspects. This

[4] Ibid., 39. See also the observation regarding the effect the self-consciousness of its civilization had on the later Western colonial culture, at 41: "Indeed, an essential phase of the civilizing process was concluded at exactly the time when the *consciousness* of civilization, the consciousness of the superiority of their own behavior and its embodiments in science, technology, or art began to spread over whole nations of the West."

included the acquirement of command of natural resources as an essential and constitutive element of the civilizing process. The importance of this element of the Enlightenment outlook was not yet fully realized even by Elias himself. In what follows we shall be concentrating on this under-studied aspect of Enlightenment historiographical thought. It is not my intention to suggest by this that one should exclude other aspects of the Enlightenment perception of historical progress, for example juridical, political or educational. Yet these have all received a large amount of attention over the years. Attitudes toward nature and toward the cultivation of natural resources have usually been addressed by scholars mainly from the perspective of the history of science or philosophy, rarely from that of the history of historiography, and it is essential to remedy this lacuna in order to better understand not just eighteenth-century historiography but the Enlightenment in general. While the concept of the civilizing process is thus a modern construction of Elias's, it refers, as he was himself well-aware, to a rising current of reflexive awareness in Western intellectual consciousness which became manifest in the Enlightenment. Discussing the role of the cultivation of nature in this emerging awareness thus broadens the understanding of both the eighteenth-century comprehension of civilization and culture, and the subsequent resultant modern concept of the civilizing process.

All this emphasizes the well-known optimistic propensity of most Enlightenment thought to perceive the need and possibility of historical progress.[5] Indeed, this modern notion of progress as a human endeavor, and devoid of almost any previous notion of divinely ordained teleology, was quite uncommon before the eighteenth century. Walter Goffart has claimed that the assumption that there exist levels of civilization which are traversed in a gradual evolutionary manner (thus offsetting civilization and barbarism), is a modern idea originating mainly in the Enlightenment, and foreign to classical antiquity. In antiquity "barbarian" was an appellation implying a difference which was not related to time, and could either continue indefinitely, or else be instantaneously bridged.[6]

We shall see the veracity of this observation in the following pages, but before doing so we should mention one more remark regarding the eighteenth-century view of material history, and its different outlook compared to that of subsequent Marxism. Enlightenment historians, particularly in the second half of the century, became increasingly aware of the importance of material development

[5] This notion is the basis for most of the ideas we shall be discussing in this chapter. For a few succinct introductory remarks, including a cursory treatment of the place of mastery of nature in Enlightenment historiography's conception of progress, see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago and London, 1983), 205-10.

[6] See Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800), Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), 211-12.

as a substratum of higher culture. Not for nothing have Scottish enlightenment philosophers in particular been considered harbingers of Marxism. Yet this point should not be over-stated. Enlightenment intellectuals still presented a more integrative approach to culture, and in this odd way were more modern than subsequent pure Marxism. In a very general manner they were anticipating the various post-Marxist approaches to the history of culture (whether these have accepted the essentials of Marxism or not). Modern historiography has come full circle in this respect and few today, even among Marxists, would adhere to a simple linear picture of material culture as the basis for the superstructure of higher culture. Enlightenment historiography had not yet made such a sharp distinction between them, yet it had already made enough of a differentiation to enable truly original perceptions regarding the development of human civilization in the broad integrative sense. Enlightenment historians were therefore working at a unique point in the development of historiographical thought, and when they discussed the human relationship with nature they embraced both its material and spiritual aspects. This ensured that their discussions of this topic, and specifically the issue of the human utilization of natural resources, assumed a broad and pervasive perspective. This had never occurred to such an extent in previous historiographical thought. Even modern studies, with their commonly more particularized approach, have rarely been able to recreate this all-embracing outlook of eighteenth-century historians.

Cultivation of Nature

To return to Gibbon's attitude toward this broad issue, he no doubt valued technological advancement, mainly of the fundamental kind such as agriculture.[7] Contrary to what is often claimed Gibbon was not impervious to the charms of nature. His travel journals and letters abounded in depictions of both urban and natural sceneries. For example, in a letter from Cornwall to his close friend Lord Sheffield he praised the local panorama, writing: "Blind as you accuse me of being to the beauties of Nature, I am wonderfully pleased with this country."[8] Writing years later to his stepmother Dorothea he expressed his love for the view

[7] See on this issue Patricia B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian 1772-1794* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 11. The claim that technology, particularly in comparison with high culture, was not of central importance to Gibbon's conception of civilization, made in Frank E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods* (Hanover and London, 1983), 81-2, 96-7, 103-4, does not seem tenable.

[8] *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols (London, 1956), 1: 376-7, written in 1773.

and the garden at his house in Lausanne.[9] Gibbon, however, was no poet, and he rarely examined nature without some allusion to historical, material or political considerations. While still a young man on his Italian Grand Tour he described the bad conditions he had observed in Naples, exclaiming: "The favors which nature has lavished upon that delicious country make one desire to see it the seat of an industrious a virtuous and a happy people."[10] Nature might be beautiful in itself, but it was even more so when it received the cultivating attention of civilized human beings. This was the reason that Gibbon evinced a consistent interest in both natural and human geography, as any reader of *The Decline and Fall* knows. As Lord Sheffield put it: "His attention to Geography had always been very great, and few were better informed in that science."[11] This interest in geography was displayed in the early *Nomina, Gentesque Antiquæ Italiæ* (also known as the *Recueil géographique*), the compilation of geographical information which Gibbon prepared in 1763 and 1764 before departing on his Italian Grand Tour.[12] Eventually, with few exceptions, he did not realize his intention of supplementing these many notes with his own first-hand observations and turning them into a finished work. They therefore remained more a collection of observations on geographical literature rather than an empirical effort. Yet ultimately this was the foundation for the many geographical observations in *The Decline and Fall*. Gibbon's interest in geography and nature as essential topics of historical research was thus already evident before he embarked on his Italian journey, and was preserved in the many bibliographical commentaries which served him in preparing the *Recueil géographique*. He recorded these commentaries in his journal where he wrote, envisaging how the ultimately unfinished work would look: "The productions of nature and art, as much as they are known to us from the ancients, the migrations of nations, their laws and their character. Among so many objects of such interest for a philosopher, I would seize all occasions that my subject would offer me, to study when and to

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9 Ibid., 3: 43, written in 1786.

10 Ibid., 1: 197, written to Stanier Porten in 1765.

11 *MW*, 3: vi. For Gibbon's geography, see Guido Abbattista, "Establishing the 'Order of Time and Place': 'Rational Geography', French Erudition and the Emplacement of History in Gibbon's Mind," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 45-72. For Gibbon's attitude toward nature, see also Peter Ghosh, "Gibbon's Timeless Verity: Nature and Neo-Classicism in the Late Enlightenment," in ibid., 120-63, esp. 121-30.

12 "Nomina, Gentesque Antiquæ Italiæ," in *MW*, 4: 157-326. Lord Sheffield published this work in rather jumbled order; see Patricia B. Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon, Gentleman of Letters* (Baltimore and London, 1982), 182-6.

which point the configuration of the land, the climate, the situation, influenced the manners of the inhabitants, and the events which affected them."[13]

Achieving high culture was an arduous process which only a small portion of humanity were able to accomplish. Gibbon the self-conscious English gentleman no doubt regarded such an outlook as congenial. Yet as a historian he recognized that the human mastery of nature was a huge historical undertaking spanning many generations and requiring the labor of countless thousands, only a handful of who were socially and intellectually superior. Robinson Crusoe viewed by a historian became a metaphor for the whole human endeavor to subdue the forces of nature. In historical reality this was the enterprise of collective human societies, not of individuals. To achieve a true command of its natural surroundings a society required a long period of collective effort which could not be taken for granted, and which seemed for Enlightenment intellectuals to have been truly achieved only in Western civilization, and even there only at certain historical moments.

The recognition by historians that the cultivation of nature was vital to civilization, though of unprecedented significance in the Enlightenment, was not new in historical literature. Historians had long tended to consider nature as a resource primarily intended for cultivation. Pliny the Elder, while patriotically extolling the merits of Italian nature, particularly in Campania, noted that "its many seas and harbours, and the bosom of its lands" offered "on all sides a welcome to commerce, the country itself eagerly running out into the seas as it were to aid mankind."[14] The implication, particularly read through eighteenth-century eyes, was clear – nature might do its part by affording the most advantageous starting-point for civilization, but human beings had to do the rest by cultivating these natural advantages. In *The Jewish War* Josephus described the Galilee, writing that "The whole area is excellent for crops or cattle and rich in forests of every kind, so that by its adaptability it invites even those least inclined to work on the land. Consequently every inch has been cultivated by the inhabitants and not a corner goes to waste."[15] What later romantic sensibilities fondly viewed as unspoiled nature, was according to this longstanding outlook simply waste.

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[13] *Le Journal de Gibbon à Lausanne, 17 Août 1763 – 19 Avril 1764*, ed. Georges Bonnard (Lausanne, 1945), 169: "Les productions de la nature et de l'art autant qu'elles nous sont connues par les anciens, les migrations des peuples, leurs loix et leur caractère. Parmi tant d'objets si interessans pour mon sujet me fourniroit de rechercher quand et jusqu'à quel point la configuration du pays, le climat, la situation ont influé sur les mœurs des habitans et sur les evenemens qui leur sont arrivés."

[14] Pliny, *Natural History*, vols 1-2, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library, 1942-49), 2: 33.

[15] Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, 1959), 376.

Most historians from antiquity to the Enlightenment would have agreed on this point with Pliny, Josephus and Gibbon, focusing their attention on how nature, properly cultivated, could ameliorate the lot of humanity and propel the civilizing process.

An abatement in this outlook occurred in the Middle Ages when a lack of cultivation, and generally of material comfort, was viewed as compatible with religious humility. From the point of view of divine accommodation every aspect of the world was divinely ordained and had an instructive significance, if only one knew how to interpret it. This was also applicable to uncultivated nature, which presented those sufficiently imbued with proper morality with the opportunity to exercise their humility, and demonstrate a reverential religiosity by making do with a minimal material existence. Such an outlook was displayed in the eleventh century by Adam of Bremen when he wrote about the inhabitants of Iceland who subsisted only by raising cattle in a place where no crops grew. Wood there was also very meager and therefore they grew up in underground caves, happy to share their roof, food and bed with the cattle. Nevertheless, according to Adam of Bremen, "Passing their lives thus in holy simplicity, because they seek nothing more than what nature affords, they can joyfully say with the Apostle: 'But having food, and wherewith to be covered, with these we are content.' [I Tim. 6:8.]. For instead of towns they have mountains and springs as their delights."[16] When cultivation of nature with all its attendant advantages did occur, the medieval outlook perceived this as the result primarily of divine agency, not human endeavor. To mention an early example, Bede related how Cuthbert, the seventh-century bishop of Lindisfarne, with the help of his faith, prayers and presence, turned Lindisfarne, against all odds, into a place worthy of human habitation. As a result, water was found in a place unfit for a well, and a crop of barley grew after the proper time for sowing.[17]

The medieval Christian outlook thus did not emphasize control of nature. Yet there were cases when at least an initial realization of the importance of cultivating nature began to appear in medieval historiography. Otto of Freising depicted the province of Pannonia (the Carpathians), describing how it abounded in rivers, streams, a variety of wild animals and how it was "known to be delightful because of the natural charm of the landscape and rich in its arable fields. It seems like the paradise of God, or the fair land of Egypt. For it has, as I have said, a most beautiful natural setting, but in consequence of the barbarous nature of

[16] Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York, 2002), 217.

[17] See Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, the Greater Chronicle, Bede's Letter to Egbert*, trans. Bertram Colgrave, Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford and New York, 1994), 225-6 (IV.28), and also 193 (IV.13).

its people it has only rarely the adornment of walls or houses."[18] In the Middle Ages there was therefore already some inclination to regard nature as requiring cultivation despite, or rather because, such cultivation had barely begun. While Otto, perceiving his physical surroundings, was aware of the need for cultivation, he was only able to conceive of a state of cultivation by contemplating the past. In the eighteenth-century, in contrast, historians could conceive of cultivation by simply looking around them, and unless they traveled outside Europe it was the state of lack of cultivation which required their imagination. Enlightenment historians had the possibility of taking a broader historical view of the Middle Ages than medieval historians were able to take of their own era. But from the eighteenth-century perspective it seemed clear that while medieval Europe was barbarous and uncultivated, it was precisely for that reason the starting point for the necessary process of cultivation which eventually created the enlightened eighteenth century.

During the intermediate period Renaissance historiography provided a particular perspective of its own which though influenced by the rising empiricist outlook and humanistic emphasis on the central place of humanity in nature, was still far from the outlook of the Enlightenment. According to Machiavelli the ancient republics had been accustomed to building new towns and cities in newly-conquered colonies, thus securing these areas and making them more populous. Such a policy was lacking in the Italy of his own time, which was therefore less populous in comparison with antiquity. Areas which were not initially healthy or productive when lacking a settlement policy similar to that of antiquity, were as a consequence quickly spoiled by a bad distribution of settled population. "And because nature cannot compensate for this disorder [lack of new towns and cities], it is necessary that industry compensate for it: for unhealthy countries become healthy by means of a multitude of men that seizes them at a stroke; they cleanse the earth by cultivation and purge the air with fires, things that nature could never provide." As an example Machiavelli noted how the settlement of Venice had turned it from a swampy and diseased place into a healthy one, and similarly how Pisa was transformed from a place with foul air to one which was populous and powerful.[19] He thus emphasized the need for a proper political order as a prerequisite for cultivating land. Francesco Guicciardini was thinking along similar lines when he depicted the state of Italy

[18] Otto of Freising and His Continuator, Rahewin, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, with Richard Emery (New York, 1966), 65-6. For Otto of Freising, see the discussion in *PBR*, 3: 98-126.

[19] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Princeton, 1988), 52-3. On Machiavelli, see also the remarks in *PBR*, 3: 203-35.

around 1490. It was then in a thriving state, peaceful and enjoying economic prosperity as well as having fertile fields, and all this was due first and foremost to the policy of Lorenzo de' Medici.[20] Therefore Guicciardini, if less emphatically than Machiavelli, regarded the quality of political policy as the precondition for either prosperity or the lack of prosperity.

On one level Machiavelli's and Guicciardini's observations were redolent of an almost Enlightenment vision of human civilization based on the mastery of nature. Yet on another level there was one important difference. They indeed observed how the improvement of an area depended on the amelioration of the natural surroundings. According to their interpretations, however, this came expressly after, and therefore as a consequence of, the political policy of settlement as a means for consolidating control of this or that territory. In this respect during the Renaissance, with all its classical emphasis of man as the measure of all things, the ethics of domination of nature was still not as developed as in the Enlightenment. By the eighteenth century the perspective had been reversed – the control of nature, and the arts and sciences in general, not political, military or governmental developments, were considered the basis for culture. In other words, Enlightenment historians, contrary to their predecessors, viewed material progress as a prerequisite for higher culture, not vice versa. In Enlightenment historiography the important and sustainable element of civilization was no longer viewed according to the traditional historical political and military narrative, but rather based on more general cultural developments, not least on the mastery of nature. This historiographical perspective was based on eighteenth-century anthropocentric cosmology which thanks to the Scientific Revolution was even more potent than its Renaissance predecessor.

This new perspective was also one of the main reasons for the broadening of historiographical horizons, which in the late Enlightenment emphasized in an unprecedented manner the need to study cultural, social and technological history.[21] Of course, these new historiographical genres were still only in their infancy in the eighteenth century, and traditional political and military historiography still ultimately received pride of place. Yet this consistent interest in new themes made a marked impression on historiographical philosophy. Enlightenment historians viewed the historical process as one in which utilizing natural resources preceded more sophisticated progress. No element of culture,

[20] Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, trans. and ed. Sidney Alexander (Princeton, 1984), 4.

[21] On which see primarily Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment, Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000). Among other treatments of this topic, see also Thomas Preston Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing 1760-1830* (New York, 1966), 12-19.

however, could in the long run suffice to maintain the progressive road to advanced civilization. Material, social, cultural and political attainments had all to be intertwined and mutually supportive in order to reach a truly civilized condition. Cultivating nature was a vital early stage in this development, but had to lead to and be accompanied by more sophisticated aspects of culture in order to maintain the civilizing process. It could not, however, be discarded once civilization was achieved. Denigrating or neglecting agriculture, for example, undermined even the most advanced civilization. It has long been recognized that Enlightenment philosophers such as Diderot and the *encyclopédists* extolled the importance of basic technologies and manual crafts, and even the political ramifications of this general outlook, which helped lead to the French Revolution, are commonly acknowledged. Yet the historiographical dimension of this broadening democratic Enlightenment *Weltanschauung* has not been sufficiently recognized. It emphasized the inter-related dependency of all aspects and levels of society and civilization.

This new emphatic interest in the significance of cultivating nature was apparent in the work of most Enlightenment historians. An important early case was the Italian Ludovico Muratori. His was an interesting philosophical outlook because in many ways he was a transitional figure connecting the seventeenth-century type of erudite scholarship with the new socially progressive outlook of the Enlightenment. He attempted to convince his readers to adopt his opinions, whether by historical writing, or if need be by rational or Catholic arguments. He approved of political progress and state care of the individual, and his writings helped promote both the reformation of Catholicism and civil improvements. He wanted historical writing to be accessible to the layman, and greatly influenced his Italian contemporaries in prompting them to think in a historical manner about their own problems.[22] Muratori was an early example of the Enlightenment "instrumental" view of historiography, and scholarship in general, as an instructional tool for enlightening humanity. Yet regarding the issue of cultivating nature there was still something of the Renaissance perspective in Muratori's outlook. He wrote about the gradual process of forest clearance in Europe in favor of the cultivation of fields, as this occurred between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century. He claimed that this clearing of forests, as well as such things as the influence on the flow of rivers and the cultivation of fields, all changed the face of Italy during this long period. Yet Muratori also observed that this arduous process began following the Lombard invasion in the sixth century, after which the Lombards gradually became part of the local population

[22] Eric Cochrane, "Muratori: the Vocation of a Historian," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 51 (1965), 153-72.

and Italy returned to thrive, including in such things as the cultivation of fields.[23] The difference here compared to later Enlightenment historians was small but not insignificant. For Muratori political and military conditions were still a clear prerequisite to material culture. He failed to accord the latter the constitutive importance which Gibbon and others in the second half of the century would concede, when the cultivation of nature was considered if not actually as a requirement of political amelioration, at least as something which developed in tandem with it. Even Montesquieu was more akin to Muratori in his outlook on this issue. He regarded the cultivation of land as "the greatest labor of men," but this labor could not be taken for granted and had to be encouraged by the legislators, in particular where a hot climate did not stimulate such effort.[24]

The different and more innovative outlook of the late Enlightenment was eloquently outlined by Robert Henry when he praised in resounding words the manner in which the arts enabled the control of nature and the improvement of human life. "By the help of art, mankind acquire a kind of dominion over nature, penetrate into the bowels of the earth, travel over the waves of the sea on the wings of the wind, and make all the elements subservient to their purposes." This made the consideration of the arts in the writing of history necessary, and Henry noted that "If this had been always done, the annals of mankind would have been more instructive and entertaining than they are."[25] This new historiographical emphasis on the importance of cultivating nature was particularly apparent in the work of Raynal. In an interesting passage he described how when the English arrived at Barbados they found it full of trees which they needed to clear in order to settle there. "It [Barbados] was found covered with such large and hard trees, that uncommon resolution and patience were required to fell them and root them up. The ground was soon cleared of this encumbrance, or stripped of this ornament; for it is doubtful whether nature does not decorate her work better than man, who alters every thing for himself alone."[26] There

[23] Ludovico Antonio Muratori, "De Italiæ Statu, Habitatorum Affluentia, Agrorum Cultu, Mutationa Civitatum, Felicitate ac Infelicitate, Temporibus Barbaricis. Dissertatio Vigesimaprima," in *Antiquitates Italicæ Medii Ævi* (Milan, 1739), 2: 147-228, at 149, 152, 153, 154.

[24] Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, 1990), 236-7. An interesting case in this context, among late Enlightenment thinkers, was the Comte de Volney, who implied that political deterioration led to decline in the cultivation of natural resources, rather than the other way around. See C. F. Volney, *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, trans. anon. (Exeter, 1823), 88.

[25] *HHGB*, 2: 377-8.

[26] *PPH*, 5: 17. See also the interesting mention by Robert Henry, in *HHGB*, 5: 517, of the fifteenth-century Scots who made a point of not fishing salmon out of season.

seemed to be a rare "environmental" concern here, but this was unusual, to say the least, for the eighteenth century. It was practically inconceivable in the early modern era that natural resources might be limited in any way. Nature seemed unbounded, and notions such as possible over-population would have sounded ludicrous to an age which regarded the size and growth of population as a key measure of progress.[27] Even Raynal himself did not normally depart from the general outlook of his generation on this issue, commenting "that mines [of gold] can be exhausted, and that the fisheries never are. Gold is not reproduced, but the fish are so incessantly."[28] Indeed, in a lengthy passage Raynal celebrated the cultivation of nature in resounding language which had traditionally been reserved for descriptions of military conquests, declaring: "O man! that art sometimes so pusillanimous and so little, how great dost thou appear in thy projects, and in thine actions; with two feeble levers of flesh, and assisted only by thine understanding, thou dost attack the whole system of nature, and dost subdue her! Thou bravest the conspiring elements, and dost reduce them to obedience!"[29]

The natural history writings of Buffon greatly influenced the whole generation of late Enlightenment historians. Buffon described in detail how human societies developed initially in order to defend against the forces of nature, and then gradually learned how to control these forces for their benefit, for example by the domestication of plants and animals, a science which progressed from early primitive agriculture to the advanced modern ability to produce new species.[30] Human beings gradually learned to control nature and although subordinated to it, by the eighteenth century they had approached the point of seconding its power. Human activity improved and perfected it, and "the entire face of nature today bears the imprint of man's power, which, although subordinated to that of nature, often has achieved more than her, or at least has seconded her so marvellously, that it is by the aid of our hands that she has been developed to her full potential, and that she has arrived by degrees to the point of perfection

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[27] An outlook best outlined in David Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 377-464. See on this topic Sylvana Tomaselli, "Moral Philosophy and Population Questions in Eighteenth Century Europe," *Population and Development Review*, 14, Supplement (1988), 7-29; Carol Blum, *Strength in Numbers, Population, Reproduction, and Power in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore and London, 2002).

[28] *PPH*, 5: 328.

[29] Ibid., 2: 477-8.

[30] "Septième et dernière Époque, lorsque la Puissance de l'Homme a secondé celle de la Nature," in *BHN*, Supplément, 5 (1778), 225-54, esp. 225-9, 236-8, 246-53.

and magnificence in which we see her today."[31] Here Buffon was making a key observation with important consequences for the specifically historical aspect of the human interaction with nature – initially it had been nature which shaped the constitution and development of human culture, but at some point, when human power equaled that of nature, the tables were turned and humanity was able to shape nature to its own requirements. Oliver Goldsmith, who was as appreciative as Gibbon was of Buffon, also followed the Frenchman's argument, perceiving how humanity had acquired the ability to not only overcome its natural surroundings but also to influence and alter them, specifically the plants and animals.[32]

This, however, required socially organized collaboration. Human beings according to Buffon might be mentally superior to animals, but their power resided above all in their social character, without which they could not rule nature.[33] He observed that "Man has searched for surety and peace in society, he has augmented his power and knowledge by uniting them with those of other men: this union is the best achievement of man, it is the wisest use of his reason. In effect his tranquility, his force, his grandeur, his command of the universe, all depend primarily on his ability to command and tame himself, to submit to and impose laws; man, in a word, is unique only thanks to his knowledge of uniting with his fellow men."[34] In a certain sense this was reminiscent of the Renaissance requirement of adequate political organization as a prerequisite for cultivating

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[31] Ibid., 236-7: "... la face entière de la Terre porte aujourd'hui l'empreinte de la puissance de l'homme, laquelle, quoique subordonnée à celle de la Nature, souvent a fait plus qu'elle, ou du moins l'a si merveilleusement secondée, que c'est à l'aide de nos mains qu'elle s'est développée dans toute son étendue, & qu'elle est arrivée par degrés au point de perfection & de magnificence où nous la voyons aujourd'hui."

[32] Oliver Goldsmith, *A History of the Earth, and Animated Nature* (New York, 1825), 121-2.

[33] "Discours sur la nature des Animaux," in *BHN*, 4 (1753), 22-3, 38-56, 67-70, 77-88, 96, 104-10.

[34] Ibid., 96: "... il [man] a cherché la sûreté & la paix dans la société, il y a porté ses forces & ses lumières pour les augmenter en les réunissant à celles des autres: cette réunion est de l'homme l'ouvrage le meilleur, c'est de sa raison l'usage le plus sage. En effet il n'est tranquille, il n'est fort, il n'est grand, il ne commande à l'Univers que parce qu'il a sû se commander à lui-même, se dompter, se soûmettre & s'imposer des loix; l'homme en un mot n'est homme que parce qu'il a sû se réunir à l'homme." On related aspects of Buffon's thought, see Jacques Roger, *Buffon, a Life in Natural History*, trans. Sarah Lucille Bonnefoi, ed. L. Pearce Williams (Ithaca and London, 1997), 228-67. For more on Buffon's influence, see Peter Hanns Reill, "Buffon and Historical Thought in Germany and Great Britain," in *Buffon 88, Actes du Colloque international pour le bicentenaire de la mort de Buffon (Paris, Montbard, Dijon, 14-22 juin 1988)*, ed. Michel Delsol (Paris, 1992), 667-79. See also idem, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 2005), 33-70.

nature, but only up to a point. Buffon was not specifically interested in actual advanced political institutions. What he meant to emphasize was the very beginnings of human social organization. If anything he was emphasizing the interdependence of natural and human history. Both gained by this relationship and developed and improved through it in a way which was otherwise impossible. In effect nature and humanity were worthless without each other.

Eighteenth-century historians learned a valuable lesson from Buffon, mainly from his direct correlation between a society's level of civilization and its degree of mastery of nature, the last comprising the true measure of being human. Humanity was part of the natural order, but the superior part, and the conquest of nature was maintained by force rather than by any divine gift. This was further illustration of the transmutation of traditional religious anthropocentric cosmology, through the Scientific Revolution, into the Enlightenment secular-scientific ethics of mastering nature. This process was buttressed by the praise of practical labor and popular wisdom at all cultural and social levels, which Diderot and the *encyclopédists* popularized throughout Europe. Diderot's outlook was evident in a passage in Raynal's work, similar in outlook to Buffon, which outlined the importance of social union in the immense historical undertaking of commanding nature.[35] Conquering nature was only possible for human beings as social creatures and constituted the origin, the advantage and the aim of human society. The confrontation with and overcoming of nature, and the assertion of human supremacy over the rest of the cosmological creation, constituted the origins of human culture. Without this initial step there would have been no history, no purpose to humanity, nothing to differentiate it from the rest of creation. Throughout, Raynal, Diderot or whoever made these observations, so representative of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, evinced a clear affinity with the ideas of Buffon.[36]

The Enlightenment's emphasis on the importance of cultivating nature was demonstrated in discussions of the influence the Roman Empire had on barbarian societies which came in contact with it. These discussions often included praise of various aspects of barbaric civilizations. This praise, however, never extended to the barbarians' cultivation of natural resources. Donald Kelley has depicted the ancient (primarily Tacitus) and medieval appreciation of the virtues and power of the barbarian Germanic tribes, particularly compared to the Romans.[37] In early modern times this appreciation was extended to include a diverse debate about the cultural interactions between the Romans and the barbarians. The

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35 *PPH*, 6: 138-9. For more on man as a social creature, see also 6: 224-5.

36 For praise of Buffon, see ibid., 6: 378.

37 Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History, Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven and London, 1998), 104-6.

Abbé Dubos claimed that the best means the Romans had employed between the third and fifth centuries to attain peace with the barbarians was to engage them in cultivating their land and raising livestock. The moment they had something to lose they became less enterprising and more circumspect. The Romans also benefited by thus having a better possibility of commerce, and a source for horses and livestock. They were pleased to see how the barbarians turned their iron weapons into tools of labor, filled their burned fields with harvests and peopled their marshes with herds.[38] Similarly, the Abbé de Mably claimed that the northern barbarians at first resisted the Roman attempts to force them into sedentary habitation and cultivation of the earth. Yet as a result of their contact and commerce with the Romans they eventually acquired new needs, and their subsistence could no longer be supplied by warfare. Therefore, they began employing their slaves in cultivating the earth, and forsook the forests and marshes in favor of sedentary habitation in fertile lands.[39] Both Dubos and Mably therefore regarded the cultivation of nature as the key to the Roman civilizing of the barbarians.

A similar outlook was developed in more detail by Mascov, who observed that the ancient Germans exhibited sincerity and hospitality but also rude qualities such as drunkenness. They were unacquainted with luxury in either their clothes or attire. "The bare Necessaries of Life were the Bounds of their Desires; and even their Cloathing at first, was no more than just what Nature required." The little they used they acquired by barter, till they learned the use of money from the Romans.[40] Nevertheless, while encountering and overcoming difficulties they gradually improved their skill in war and politics, their manners and customs changed, and finally they acquired religion and sciences.

> Ancient *Germany* is usually described as a raw, uncultivated Region, full of Bogs and Forests: But when they [the ancient Germans] had afterwards learned to cut down the Woods, to keep the Rivers within their Banks, and to draw out the Waters that had overflowed, and when the Country begun to be cultivated with greater Care, the former State of it appear'd to have been rather owing to the Negligence of the Inhabitants, than any Deficiency of the Country itself. Hence it is a difficult Matter, to know *Germany* at present, by the Descriptions *Cæsar* and *Tacitus* have given us of it; when we see how its Buildings are encreas'd; how well all foreign Plants thrive in the *German* Climate; how the Hills open and discover

[38] Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie françoise dans les Gaules*, 2 vols (Paris, 1742), 1: 165-6.

[39] Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Observations sur l'histoire de France*, 2 vols (Geneva, 1765), 1: 1-4, 11.

[40] *MHAG*, 1: 55-6.

> their inward Riches, and, how some of them, produce Plenty of Corn and Wine on their Surface.[41]

Similarly, Mascov observed that the ancient Huns had also gone through a civilizing process as a result of their contact with the Romans. They had caused great difficulties to the Roman Empire, "'till the present *Hungarians*, after having experienced the advantageous Change, which a better Soil and Climat, an Intercourse with civiliz'd Nations, and more particularly the *Christian* Religion, could produce in a Nation, became a Barrier to that Europe, which their Ancestors had so frequently laid waste."[42] Regarding the dispersion of the Gepidæ in the sixth century, Mascov claimed that "this gives us a fresh Instance, how easy a People, whose State is grounded merely on War, may be overthrown. That Constitution is more perfect and durable, where Religion, Polity, and Commerce induce every individual Person to take a Part in the Welfare of his Country."[43] Contact with the Romans had thus shortened the barbarians' route to civilization.

Herder's later view was both more complicated and pessimistic, and probably more historically accurate. He claimed that the ancient Germans had learned military discipline from the Roman Empire, and when the latter degenerated used this discipline to topple it. After their Christianization these German tribes became in their turn the defenders of Europe from the later invasions of the Huns, the Turks and other barbarians. The German tribes which remained longer in close proximity with the Romans were consequently more mild and polished than the remoter tribes. It was, however, this very military constitution acquired from the Romans, which prevented the Germans from wishing to labor in agriculture or in the sciences and arts, and made them prefer a vagrant existence. "In consequence Germany long remained a forest interspersed with pastures, marshes and morasses where the urus and elk, the now extirpated animals of the heroic ages of Germany, dwelled with the ancient German heroes."[44] All the European nations strove to retain barbaric customs, and their cultures were based on those of the Greeks, the Romans and the Arabs. It was only the Christian religion which enabled the spiritual conquest which the Romans had not attained, and paved the way for advanced civilization.[45]

This *Sturm und Drang* extolling of the influence of medieval Christianity was essentially redundant in Herder's argumentation here, since the cultural

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41 Ibid., 1: 53-4.
42 Ibid., 1: 340.
43 Ibid., 2: 527.
44 *OPHM*, 477-82.
45 Ibid., 489-90.

advancement he depicted seemed to be sufficiently explained by the social and natural forces he outlined, and specifically by his dialectical observations on the connection between military discipline and culture, which in themselves were also pre-romantic. For example, he observed how the Burgundians had turned into a gentler nation as a result of their contact with the Romans, suffering themselves to be settled in towns, and working in agriculture, arts and trade. They developed the province of Gaul which they received from the Romans, and would most probably have turned it into a thriving kingdom had this not been prevented by the plundering Franks.[46] In contrast to the Germans, the medieval Slavic nations had settled in permanent places and developed agriculture, mines and other arts and sciences. Yet they were more prone to be oppressed, and from the time of Charlemagne began to be subdued by the various German nations, finding themselves caught between the military suppression of the Germans on the one hand and the Tartars on the other. This resulted in their cultural decline, although given future peaceable conditions they would be able, according to Herder, to retain their cultural advancement. Therefore he deplored their lack of military establishments. He seemed to imply that although a martial national character might be detrimental to high culture in the short run, in the long run, given the appropriate natural surroundings, it was essential for the continued survival necessary for developing such culture.[47] Herder was glad that it was the Germans who had inherited the Roman world, but cautioned against using this as a barbaric and proud argument for claiming that other nations should be subservient to them. He claimed: "The barbarian lords it over those whom he has vanquished: the polished conqueror civilizes those whom he subdues."[48] Regrettably, not all those later influenced by Herder heeded this warning.

The contact between the Romans and the barbarians was akin in many ways to the early modern contact between European and non-European nations. Not all such nations were however uncivilized. China and the Orient enjoyed great vogue in the Enlightenment as an example often used in order to make uncomplimentary observations about the ills of European civilization, in the process of which factual exactitude was not always of paramount importance. Voltaire, a pioneer in this type of argumentation, claimed that fertile lands were those which were first peopled, policed and civilized. Therefore the beginnings of human civilization were in the ancient Orient, at a time when the peoples of Europe were still barbarians. The latter eventually owed their progress to time,

[46] Ibid., 539.
[47] Ibid., 482-4.
[48] Ibid., 489.

commerce and belated industry.[49] Voltaire, with all his emphasis in the *Essai sur les mœurs* on the importance of non-European history, was ultimately interested primarily in the long European civilizing process rather than in the seemingly quicker comparable process in the Orient, with which he was much less familiar. The particular details of the arduous civilizing process were important. "It was necessary to have smiths, carpenters, masons, and laborers, before a man was found with enough leisure to meditate. All manual arts undoubtedly preceded metaphysics by several ages."[50] Moreover, "it is daily industry, and the continual exercise of the multitude of arts, which makes a flourishing nation."[51] Most nations were created by the intermingling of various other nations. This created the need for a long period of time as a precondition for the civilizing process. "Polity and the arts are established with such difficulty, and the revolutions ruining this barely commenced edifice are so frequent, that it should be quite amazing, that most nations do not live like the Tartars."[52] When convenient, Voltaire could forget that the Tartars were also from the Orient and moreover shared a significant, albeit transitory, chapter in China's history.

Whether it was the Germanic barbarians, non-European savages or any other historical or ethnic example, Enlightenment intellectuals were deeply interested in the very first stages of human culture. By consensus these involved primarily coming to grips with the challenges of the natural environment. Between the two approaches symbolized by Rousseau's primitivism and Buffon's straightforward anthropocentrism, the latter no doubt held sway during the eighteenth century, before romantic sensibilities began to gain popularity. The mainstream Enlightenment outlook was summarized by Raynal in a passage which detailed at length the wild uncultivated state of America which the first Englishmen arriving there encountered. "But man appeared, and immediately changed the face of North America." Raynal continued to depict in detail how human beings, i.e. the Europeans, cultivated all the elements of nature in America and

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[49] Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols (Paris, 1963), 1: 197.

[50] Ibid., 1: 12 (from *La philosophie de l'histoire*): "Il a fallu des forgerons, des charpentiers, des maçons, des laboureurs, avant qu'il se trouvât un home qui eût assez de loisir pour méditer. Tous les arts de la main ont sans doute précédé la métaphysique de plusieurs siècles."

[51] *VOH*, 362 (from *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*): "...c'est l'industrie de tous les jours, et la multitude des arts continuellement exercés qui fait une nation florissante."

[52] Ibid., 376: "La police et les arts s'établissent si difficilement, les révolutions ruinent si souvent l'édifice commencé, que si l'on doit s'étonner, c'est que la plupart des nations ne vivent pas en Tartares."

inhabited it, "and thus the New World, like the Old, became subject to man."[53] Significantly, this passage followed immediately after a detailed primitivistic discussion claiming that savages lived happier lives than most civilized people, who suffered from oppression and injustice. This implicitly meant that in a world with social justice cultivating nature became more morally justified. In any event, the cultivation of nature was unavoidable from a historical perspective. Despite the Rousseauist overtones of these observations, Raynal was much more of a realist than Rousseau, and as this passage made clear regarded nature, for better or worse, as "subject to man." Even for Rousseau there was no such thing as a pure and complete "state of nature."[54] Nature devoid of human cultivation was irrelevant from an eighteenth-century perspective. In the truly historical state of nature the natural world existed "for the benefit of all," not for any "one species of beings." But eventually history made one species, humanity, masters of all the others. For those who believed in the Great Chain of Being, without human command the earth seemed not only useless, but devoid of meaning. It acquired value only by serving human needs.

Stadial Theory

Eighteenth-century intellectuals did not however make due with general observations on the manner in which humanity began attaining its control over nature. Scottish Enlightenment savants in particular developed sophisticated theoretical approaches to this topic. Rousseau and Buffon attempted to explain the rise of human civilization. Yet the Scottish Enlightenment brought a more detailed and philosophically consistent method to this complicated topic. It was clear that the mastery of nature and the rise of human societies had a long and intimately connected history. The attempts to elucidate this history were eventually termed, in their Scottish Enlightenment form, "conjectural history." This was one of the most important intellectual enterprises of the second half of the eighteenth century, in essence an early form of theoretical anthropology which had a profound effect on the historiography of the period.[55] It was however

[53] *PPH*, 5: 302-3.

[54] For various interpretations of Rousseau's notion of a state of nature, see Christopher Kelly, "Rousseau's 'Peut-Etre': Reflections on the Status of the State of Nature," *Modern Intellectual History*, 3 (2006), 75-83.

[55] See Aaron Garrett, "Anthropology: the 'Original' of Human Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge, 2003), 79-93; H. M. Höpfl, "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of British Studies*, 17 (1978), 19-40; and Christopher J. Berry, *Social*

one specific type of conjectural history, which had existed in rudimentary form at least since the seventeenth century, that constituted the most important Scottish contribution to this field. This was the stadial theory of human social progress, which postulated that human societies developed invariably in several distinct stages. The number of stages varied according to the particular elaboration of this approach. The classic version, however, was the four-stages one claiming that human societies were initially reliant on hunting, from which they rose to shepherding, then to agriculture and finally to commerce. These were all modes of subsistence and therefore based on the cultivation of nature. Even the final complicated stage of commerce, when advanced societies achieved progress by trade, still relied in many ways on both old and new types of cultivating nature.[56]

The most concise and lucid outline of the four-stages theory came from Adam Smith.[57] He was of course astute enough to recognize that as a generalizing theory it was not always equally applicable to all historical situations. Some cultures, whether due to social or even more to climatic conditions, developed differently and to different degrees. For example, the Tartars and the Arabs, in contrast to the Greeks, lived in countries where nature debarred cultivation. In addition

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Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment (Edinburgh, 2001), 61-73. Discussions of a conjectural-history type became quite common in the late Enlightenment. For a further example see Volney, *The Ruins*, 41-5.

[56] For stadial theory, see *PBR*, 4: passim; Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976); Istvan Hont, "The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the 'Four-Stages Theory'," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge, 1987), 253-76; and Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 93-9. On the historical roots of conjectural history and stadial theory, beginning in the Bible and classical literature, see Roger L. Emerson, "Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers," *Historical Papers / Communications Historiques*, 19 (1984), 63-90. For the influence of conjectural history and stadial theory in the nineteenth century, see Frank Palmeri, "Conjectural History and the Origins of Sociology," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 37 (2008), 1-21. Also see Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1971), 459-515, who tends to exaggerate the lack of originality of Enlightenment conjectural history. Among Scottish philosophers Hume was the most prominent who did not ascribe to some form of stadialism, despite his emphasis on economic history, on which see David Wootton, "David Hume, 'the historian'," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge, 1993), 292-3. For an interesting discussion of how by the early eighteenth century early modern pastoral ideals and aesthetics were replaced by the material-economic stadial consideration of nature, which was inimical to pastoralism, see John A. Marino, "The State and the Shepherds in Pre-Enlightenment Naples," *The Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986), 125-42.

[57] See Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis, 1982), 14-16.

they suffered from transportation difficulties because of the rough terrains in which they lived which prevented the development of commerce, principally the trade in agricultural products. Therefore their arts were limited. By contrast, the Germanic tribes who had overrun the Roman Empire did have knowledge of agriculture and property in land. Ultimately the possibility of civilization rested on the foundation of a command of nature, but this required a nature which was amenable to cultivation.[58] "The soil must be improvable, otherwise there can be nothing from whence they might draw that which they should work up and improve. That must be the foundation of their labour and industry."[59] Smith also depicted a stadial outline of the changes in military capabilities and organization from stage to stage. The shepherding stage was thus depicted as the one with the most general military spirit disposed among the members of society. Stadial terminology even helped explain the development of judicature in relation to property (mainly regarding the hunting and shepherding stages).[60] Smith recognized that the four-stages theory was only fully realized in the best historical conditions. When that occurred, however, it became clear how nature in its proper "amenable" condition yielded to human manipulation, which once it established a control of this pliant type of nature was set on the clear, if long and arduous, road to high civilization.

William Robertson's use of the four-stages theory was expectedly less theoretically articulate, and more empirically based. The comparison of the people of America with those of Europe strengthened his belief in the essential similarity of all humanity, which meant that human societies all over the world were subject to stadial development.[61] Robertson regarded commerce as central to cultural progress.[62] This of course was in keeping with the stadial emphasis on commercial societies as the most advanced forms of civilization. While discussing the Jesuits, and despite his overall criticism of religious orders, Robertson praised their educational activity and specifically their work in Paraguay, where contrary to all those who came to the New World in order to plunder,

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58 Ibid., 223, 244.

59 Ibid., 223.

60 *SAI*, 2: 689-723. On Smith and stadial theory, see also *PBR*, 2: 309-29. On Smith as a historian in general see J. G. A. Pocock, "Adam Smith and History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 2006), 270-87.

61 See David Armitage, "The New World and British Historical Thought, from Richard Hakluyt to William Robertson," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill and London, 1995), 52-75, at 63-4. Armitage also notes, at 67, that with the discovery of America conjectural history did not have to remain conjectural any longer.

62 See for example the clear exposition of this theme in *RHDI*: 190-91.

enslave and destroy the natives, the Jesuits' aim was essentially humanitarian. They instructed and civilized the local savages. "They taught them to cultivate the ground, to rear tame animals, and to build houses. They brought them to live together in villages. They trained them to arts and manufactures. They made them taste the sweets of society, and accustomed them to the blessings of security and order."[63] In this manner the natives became the loyal subjects of the Jesuits, who ruled them with a gentle hand. The result was a common-sharing and ordered community. Robertson criticized the fact that the Jesuits did not teach the natives any European languages and thus secluded them from the Spaniards and Portuguese, and utilized them as a military force superior to those of both these nations.[64] Overall, however, they had a positive influence in helping these natives rapidly progress through the stadial process, which on their own they had barely been able to begin. Stadial theory emphatically underlined the historical discourse here.[65] It is true that the exact order was not meticulously adhered to in this passage, particularly in differentiating the shepherding and agriculture stages. Yet overall this was a clear example of the implementation of the stadial scheme for explaining a specific historical issue.

Gibbon was also influenced by the stadial theory. Occasionally, for example when discussing the history of the Arabs, he relied on the four-stages version.[66] Yet he usually preferred the two-stages version, most probably under Goguet's influence.[67] This simpler theory differentiated between primitive vagrant societies and more advanced sedentary ones. In essence it tended to consolidate the hunting and shepherding stages of the four-stages version, and of course also the agricultural and commercial stages. Above all it emphasized the

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[63] *RHC*, 3: 204.

[64] Ibid.

[65] For a different type of corrective than that presented here to Robertson's use of stadial interpretations, see Neil Hargraves, "Enterprise, Adventure and Industry: the Formation of 'Commercial Character' in William Robertson's *History of America*," *History of European Ideas*, 29 (2003), 33-54. Also see Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment, Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997), 132-6.

[66] *DF*, L, 3: 151-6. For the influence of stadial theory on Gibbon, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Shepherds: the Stages of Society in the *Decline and Fall*," *History of European Ideas*, 2 (1981), 193-202.

[67] See *PBR*, 4: 37-64 and passim; and Rolando Minuti, "Gibbon and the Asiatic Barbarians: Notes on the French Sources of *The Decline and Fall*," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 40-42. For Goguet's views, see Antoine-Yves Goguet, *The Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences, and their Progress among The most Ancient Nations*, trans. [Robert Henry?], 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1761; reprint New York, 1976), 1: 84-5, 277.

need for societies to have fixed settlement in order to become truly civilized. Gibbon's inclination toward this theory did not result in a simplification of his historiographical discussion, which remained throughout sensitive to the many nuances of the progress of material culture. Yet it did offer a clear conceptual differentiation between the initial and final stages of human history, between a savage (or barbaric), militaristic and nomadic existence, and a cultured, peaceful and social life, enabling a consistent cultivation of nature which in its turn gave rise to high culture and advanced social morality. For Gibbon nations were ultimately either barbarous or cultured, an observation which, as we shall see, lost many of its nuances and rigidified in his last years.[68] In an important passage his observations on the rise of the right of property, obviously influenced by Locke's ideas on the investment of labor, were combined with a stadial outlook on the initial stages of human material culture, manifested first and foremost by the cultivation of natural resources. In this oblique way the command of nature became the first step on the road to, or the veritable prerequisite of, social material relations and juridical culture.

> The original right of property can only be justified by the accident or merit of prior occupancy; and on this foundation it is wisely established by the philosophy of the civilians. The savage who hollows a tree, inserts a sharp stone into a wooden handle, or applies a string to an elastic branch, becomes in a state of nature the just proprietor of the canoe, the bow, or the hatchet. The materials were common to all, the new form, the produce of his time and simple industry, belongs solely to himself. His hungry brethren cannot, without a sense of their own injustice, extort from the hunter the game of the forest overtaken or slain by his personal strength and dexterity. If his provident care preserves and multiplies the tame animals,

[68] For examples of Gibbon's more two-stage types of stadial observations, see *DF*, IX, 1: 238-9 (property binds civilized peoples to their improved country); XXV, 1: 996-9 (depiction of the ancient Picts and Scots); XXVI, 1: 1027-9 (on the Tartars); L, 3: 156 (depicting the Arabs as sedentary, in contrast with the Scythians). At times it was unclear whether Gibbon was alluding to a two- or four-stage explanation, or to some hybrid one, but even then the basic stadial outlook was evident. For example, while depicting the medieval Bulgarians and Hungarians he did not really differentiate between the hunting and shepherding stages, adding to the basic description of the pastoral (shepherding) stage the observation "that to fishing as well as to the chace, the Hungarians were indebted for a part of their subsistence, and since they *seldom* cultivated the ground, they must, at least in their new settlements, have sometimes practised a slight and unskilful husbandry." See *DF*, LV, 3: 449. For a different and interesting perspective on Gibbon's view of pastoral societies, specifically the nomadic culture of the Tartars, see Owen Lattimore, "The Social History of Mongol Nomadism," in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (London, 1962), 328-43.

> whose nature is tractable to the arts of education, he acquires a perpetual title to the use and service of their numerous progeny, which derives its existence from him alone. If he incloses and cultivates a field for their sustenance and his own, a barren waste is converted into a fertile soil; the seed, the manure, the labour, create a new value, and the rewards of harvest are painfully earned by the fatigues of the revolving year. In the successive states of society, the hunter, the shepherd, the husbandman, may defend their possessions by two reasons which forcibly appeal to the feelings of the human mind: that whatever they enjoy is the fruit of their own industry; and, that every man who envies their felicity, may purchase similar acquisitions by the exercise of similar diligence. Such, in truth, may be the freedom and plenty of a small colony cast on a fruitful island. But the colony multiplies, while the space still continues the same: the common rights, the equal inheritance of mankind, are engrossed by the bold and crafty; each field and forest is circumscribed by the landmarks of a jealous master; and it is the peculiar praise of the Roman jurisprudence, that it asserts the claim of the first occupant to the wild animals of the earth, the air, and the waters. In the progress from primitive equity to final injustice, the steps are silent, the shades are almost imperceptible, and the absolute monopoly is guarded by positive laws and artificial reason.[69]

The road to civilization, once begun by taking the first step of cultivating nature, was inexorable and inevitable and included both positive and negative aspects intertwined together. Human invention resulted in ingenuity, which led to private property, inequality and injustice, and these necessitated the invention and imposition of laws. It is beyond our discussion to proceed further in investigating the juridical aspects of this passage. We should however note that such an outlook leaves very little room for Rousseau's notion of an intermediate virtuous society in between the absolute state of nature and advanced civilization. The mere beginnings of human utilization of the natural environment so amply depicted by Buffon, implied an almost immediate corruption by Rousseau's standards. Yet this was one of the most salient differences between Rousseau and mainstream Enlightenment thought. According to the common eighteenth-century perception, even when the more negative aspects of this historical process were perceived, as in the above passage by Gibbon, the source of moral depravity was located in human social relations, not in the initial act of cultivating nature. This at least was not far from Rousseau's criticism of human beings as the source for moral corruption. Yet he considered cultivating nature beyond a certain limit as facilitating this corruption, whereas most of his contemporaries took a diametrically opposed

[69] *DF*, XLIV, 2: 819-20.

view. They considered the increasing cultivation of nature one of the most essential requirements for progress in both material and moral terms.

A particularly interesting utilization of the stadial theory within a historical discussion came from Robert Henry. He depicted the Scottish Highlanders as "nations, or rather tribes," that "led a wandering unsettled life, strangers to agriculture, subsisting on their flocks and herds, on what they catched in hunting or got by plunder, and on the spontaneous productions of the earth." At the same time other Scottish nations possessing better countries, were in a more settled and advanced state of civilization.[70] Henry was therefore aware that the civilization process could not begin in unfavorable natural surroundings. Nevertheless, in a passage which outlined the stadial scheme in general, he allowed himself to write in more generalizing terms, commenting on how as human beings advanced beyond the hunting and pastoral stages they could no longer rely on their natural physical abilities, but needed to exercise their reason. "In this mankind have been remarkably successful; and, by the discovery and application of the mechanical powers, as they are called, they have been enabled to execute many great and useful works, which were naturally impossible to such feeble creatures, without the assistance of these powers."[71]

Henry was Goguet's English translator, and the influence of the latter was evident here since despite the four-stage outline, the main differentiation was between a vagrant and a sedentary existence. Henry distinguished between two types of arts, the necessary and the pleasing.[72] The most necessary was the procurement of sufficient food. There were very few societies which could subsist only on the productions of the earth without cultivation, and this too only in a miserable manner. The inhabitants of cold Britain were required very quickly to employ themselves in hunting, fishing and fowling, which were always the most serious employments of savage nations. At the same time others learned the more effectual method of food production, pasturage. "This art or way of life [pasturage] is peculiarly agreeable to a people emerging from the savage state, because it requires no great degree of labour and industry, to which they are averse, and gratifies their roaming unsettled disposition." Therefore this was the main means of subsistence in Britain before the Roman invasion. Moreover, "The next step from pasturage in every country hath been to agriculture. This most

[70] *HHGB*, 1: 191.

[71] Ibid., 1: 267-8.

[72] On the Scottish Enlightenment notions that historical progress began with the practical arts and then moved on to the fine arts, and that the basic practical arts which enabled the control of nature and formed the basis for culture did not disappear or decay, in contrast with the fine arts, see David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven and London, 1990), 284, 287-8.

useful of all arts, and the parent of so many others, was not wholly unknown in this island before the Roman invasion."[73] Varying stages of development were attained simultaneously in various parts of Britain, which meant that they were more a result of climatic and historical conditions than a temporal inevitable progression. The Romans encouraged the cultivation of land, and the result eventually was agricultural surplus for exportation.[74]

This was a prerequisite for commerce, the fourth stage, but the connection was not made explicit by Henry. Nevertheless, his consistent attention to commerce was evidence enough of the constitutive importance he accorded it, in perfect line with the mainstream of Enlightenment economical thought. Commerce was coeval with society and with the distinction of property. When people moved from hunting to a pastoral existence commerce grew, and was even more enhanced when they moved to an agricultural form of life, although it was then usually still at the level of barter. Initially such commerce was internal in nations, but with time it became international. "As the Britons improved in the knowledge of agriculture and the other arts, they provided themselves, by their own industry, with many things that they had formerly imported; and raised and prepared many more articles for exportation. By this means they brought and kept the balance of trade in their favour, which soon enabled them to pay all their debts, and, by degrees, enriched them with great sums of Roman money."[75] This meant that successful agriculture led eventually to commerce beyond barter, i.e. to money, the invention of which Henry regarded as particularly beneficial for the development of culture. Henry also perceived a connection between commerce and technological innovation, mainly the ability to transport produce by land or water.[76] "Commerce is no less necessary to the prosperity of particular states and kingdoms, and of the world in general, than the circulation of the blood to the health of the human body. As soon as any society is formed, in any country, under any form of government, commerce begins its operations, and circulates the natural productions of the earth."[77] Due to the Saxon depredations, the ancient Britons lost much of their agricultural knowledge acquired from the Romans, and were gradually dispelled from the areas most proper for cultivation. It was therefore not surprising that their posterity, confined to the Welsh mountains, were unskillful husbandmen and applied their efforts more to pasturage than to agriculture.[78] Henry here implied that the four-stages process could also revert

[73] *HHGB*, 1: 308-17. See also 2: 542.
[74] Ibid., 1: 313-14.
[75] Ibid., 1: 393, and see also 397-8.
[76] Ibid., 1: 414-15.
[77] Ibid., 2: 447.
[78] Ibid., 2: 383.

in a regressive direction. This recognition of the potentially ephemeral nature of progress was an important one, shared by most Enlightenment historians. Yet it also implied that given the right conditions, even relapsing societies could renew their cultural achievements.

Studies of the stadial scheme have usually described its development in early modern thought. Yet there were vestiges of similar outlooks long before, particularly in historical literature. Even Thucydides already made some relevant observations. He claimed that ancient Greece saw a continual series of migrations of different peoples as a result of invasions of weaker by stronger tribes, particularly when the former possessed fertile land. Thus it was poorly-soiled Attica of all places, which was stable and free from political disunity. It was inhabited continuously by the same people and became a refuge for those fleeing other areas, all which led it to grow and send out colonies to Ionia. Elsewhere the picture was very different, and the constant pressure of possible invasions meant that tribes were always ready to abandon their territories. The result was cultural and material backwardness. This precarious existence prevented the development of sustained agriculture or commerce, and led to a nomadic existence which made do with the production of necessities.[79] While Thucydides's was not yet a precise stadial outline in the Enlightenment sense, he demonstrated a clear recognition of the important difference between vagrant and sedentary cultures. Among later classical authors who made even more explicit stadial observations one might also note Varro, who utilized stadial terminology in describing the rise of material civilization.[80]

Classical historiography constituted of course the basic education for early modern historians, who were well-aware of such observations while they interpreted them through their own intellectual prism. For Gibbon this would have been particularly true regarding Ammianus Marcellinus, who more than any other classical historian evinced a consistent quasi-stadial outlook. Ammianus depicted the ancient Saracens as "ranging widely with the help of swift horses and slender camels in times of peace or of disorder. No man ever grasps a plough-handle or cultivates a tree, none seeks a living by tilling the soil, but they rove continually over wide and extensive tracts without a home, without fixed abodes or laws; they cannot long endure the same sky, nor does the sun of a single district ever content them."[81] Furthermore, "They all feed upon

[79] Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, 1972), 35-6 (I.2).

[80] Cato and Varro, *On Agriculture*, trans. W. D. Hooper and Harrison Boyd Ash (Loeb Classical Library, 1934), 313-15 (Varro, II.i.3-5), and also 175-7 (I.ii.12-16), 423-7 (III.i.1-8).

[81] *Ammianus Marcellinus*, trans. John C. Rolfe, 3 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1935-39), 1: 27 (XIV.4.3).

game and an abundance of milk, which is their main sustenance, on a variety of plants, as well as on such birds as they are able to take by fowling; and I have seen many of them who were wholly unacquainted with grain and wine."[82] Ammianus also depicted the various nations who lived around the Pontic (Black) Sea, among them the Achaei in the east who encountered enemies everywhere and therefore were forced to find a permanent home on the tops of perpetually snowy mountains, where the rigorous climate forced them to become robbers, turning them "beyond all measure savage."[83] On the other hand, among the other nations nearby were those in the Crimea, including Greek colonies in which "the inhabitants are quiet and peaceful, plying the plough and living on the products of the soil."[84] Then again one encountered the Scythian tribes to the north of the Black Sea. "Of these, only a small part live on the fruits of the earth; all the rest roam over desert wastes, which never knew plough nor seeds, but are rough from neglect and subject to frosts; and they feed after the foul manner of wild beasts."[85] Ammianus depicted the Scythian tribe of the Halani as savage vagrants who abstained from agriculture, enjoyed the natural fertility of their country "and care[d] nothing for using the plowshare."[86] The Halani were however slightly less savage than the Huns, whom Ammianus regarded as barbaric, unreasoning beasts.[87] "No one in their country ever plows a field or touches a plow-handle. They are without fixed abode, without hearth, or law, or settled mode of life, and keep roaming from place to place, like fugitives, accompanied by the wagons in which they live."[88] The connection here between vagrancy and lack of cultivating nature was explicit, and the emphasis on modes of subsistence was no doubt comprehended in the eighteenth century in a stadial manner. There was, however, a further point of significance in these repeated observations of Ammianus. Even more than his future eighteenth-century historian peers he made explicit the material basis of the stadial scheme, the fact that it was based on the cultivation of nature, without which the whole process of civilization could not even begin. Ammianus, comprehended through the eyes of eighteenth-century historians, adumbrated the essential significance of cultivating nature within stadial theory. He was one of the most philosophical of classical historians, and as such particularly appealed to Gibbon who made

[82] Ibid., 1: 29 (XIV.4.6).
[83] Ibid., 2: 229 (XXII.8.25).
[84] Ibid., 2: 231-3 (XXII.8.32).
[85] Ibid., 2: 237 (XXII.8.42).
[86] Ibid., 3: 391-3 (XXXI.2.18).
[87] Ibid., 3: 381-7 (XXXI.2.1-11).
[88] Ibid., 3: 385 (XXXI.2.10).

frequent use of him as a source in *The Decline and Fall*, occasionally criticizing him, but elsewhere eulogizing his importance.[89]

Ammianus's sophistication regarding this topic was quick to disappear in the Middle Ages. Unsurprisingly, medieval scholars, surrounded by a culture which had regressed, at times significantly, in its material and social attainments, were less prone to that self-confident mode of outlining a cultural-historical scheme from the vantage-point of those, both in antiquity and later the Enlightenment, who felt they were looking at history from a mountain-summit point of view.[90] Yet even in medieval historiography there were some signs of a similar type of thinking. The sixth-century historian Jordanes gave an example of this. He described the culture of a tribe called the Lesser Goths who lived in the Balkans. "They are a numerous people, but poor and unwarlike, rich in nothing save flocks of various kinds and pasture-lands for cattle and forests for wood. Their country is not fruitful in wheat and other sorts of grain. Some of them do not know that vineyards exist elsewhere and they buy their wine from neighboring countries. But most of them drink milk."[91] This was an implicit differentiation between shepherding and agricultural societies, but much less sophisticated than Ammianus's discussion. In the thirteenth century the travelers John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck gave detailed first-hand descriptions of the Tartar courts and people, in a very straightforward manner which was cognizant of the Tartars' achievements and power. Yet they both ultimately emphasized their savagery and cruelty and, what was important in light of subsequent early modern stadial theory, outlined many details describing these warlike people as a predominantly vagrant shepherding society.[92]

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[89] See for example *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1063 note 91. For a detailed discussion of Gibbon's appreciation, but also criticism, of Ammianus, claiming he was by far Gibbon's most important source in the composition of the second and third volumes of *The Decline and Fall*, see David Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1988), 169-81. For an introduction to Ammianus as a historian, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Lonely Historian Ammianus Marcellinus," in *Sesto Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico*, 2 vols (Rome, 1980), 1: 143-57.

[90] On historical distance see Mark Salber Phillips, "Distance and Historical Representation," *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004), 123-41.

[91] Jordanes, *The Gothic History*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow (Princeton, 1915), 128. On Jordanes as a more sophisticated historian than is usually assumed, see Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 20-111.

[92] See John of Plano Carpini, "History of the Mongols," trans. by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey, in *The Mongol Mission, Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, ed. Christopher Dawson (London and New York, 1955), 3-72; and William of Rubruck, "The Journey of William of

A more systematic treatment of this issue had to wait till early modern times. More than the detailed stadial theory itself, the basic two-stages differentiation between vagrant savages and sedentary civilizations predominated, particularly in the eighteenth century when the importance of the cultivation of land was often emphasized. According to Cornelius de Pauw the most savage, ferocious, solitary and unsocial societies were those of hunters, followed by fishermen, root and fruit gatherers and those living vagrant pastoral lives like the Tartars and the Arabs, who were in an intermediate stage between savagery and civilization. Yet the truly cultured societies were those of cultivators, because their lives were the least precarious and they had time to invent and to think.[93] Vestiges of a stadial approach were also observable in different form in the Jacobite historian Thomas Carte's discussion of the history of ancient pre-Roman Britain. He noted that in contrast with the local inhabitants, the members of the colonies from ancient Belgium who settled in the island were occupied in commerce and husbandry. "The ground was now tilled, and first yielded crops of wheat; for which it grew afterwards so famous in the *Roman* times... and by its natural fertility, properly improved, afforded sustenance enough for the great numbers of *Belgæ*, who, following the fortune of their countrymen, continually flocked over to partake in their settlements." This also led to enhancement of commerce, including with Gaul. "These colonies from *Belgium* had been used to live in society; not dispersed, like the *Brigantes*, in woods, for the sake of hunting, their chief employment as well as diversion; but in houses contiguous to each other, in towns and villages."[94] Once again this was the essential differentiation between vagrant and sedentary existence, which became increasingly common in the eighteenth century. In Carte's case this was not exactly a full-fledged stadial approach. When, however, similar observations were part of a more sophisticated and sustained outlook such as Gibbon's, they definitely qualified as such. This only really happened in the second half of the eighteenth century. Even Montesquieu had still not developed a sustained stadial outlook on history. He was aware of the sequence of the stadial scheme, particularly the first three

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Rubruck," trans. by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey, in ibid., 89-220. On Carpini and Rubruck, see Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 90-94, 102-4.

[93] Cornelius de Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, 2 vols (London, 1770), 1: 97-101.

[94] Thomas Carte, *A General History of England*, 4 vols (London, 1747-55), 1: 25. See also 1: 76: "The *Belgic* colonies, when they came over hither, first began to till the ground, to build houses substantial enough to last for a considerable time, as well as contiguous to each other, and to live together in towns and villages; setting the others an example which they did not care to follow." For Carte's notions regarding barbarism and progress, see *PBR*, 4: 65-78.

stages, but significantly, he tended to emphasize Roman greatness as based upon military virtue. Agriculture was looked upon favorably by the Romans, but not so commerce or artisanship, both which Montesquieu regarded as inimical to Roman culture in its finest moments.[95] Despite his influence on Gibbon's discussions of Roman history, Montesquieu's outlook was far from that of the later Enlightenment's more systematic stadialism.

In the first half of the century Vico was more modern in this respect, and in his own habitually unique way was conscious of the difference between civilized peoples and nomads. He equated civilization with the cultivation of land, followed by the creation of religion and the foundation of cities. The moment they discovered perennial springs, these "allowed the founders of civilization to end their brutish wanderings in search of water, and lose their nomadic habits by permanently settling on well-defined lands."[96] "Thus, at first there were forests, then cultivated fields and huts, next small houses and villages, thence cities, and at last academies and philosophers. This is the order of all progress from its first origins."[97] Homer's depiction of Achilles's shield demonstrated the order of development of human institutions, which began with the necessary arts such as agriculture and progressed to the useful trades such as herding, then to the arts of comfort such as urban architecture and finally to the arts of pleasure such as dancing.[98] In contrast with the common stadial scheme, Vico put agriculture before herding. He did not emphasize the importance of commerce, but he did claim that the violence of barbaric societies did not enable the trust on which commerce depended, and therefore resulted in people's thinking only of the bare necessities of life.[99] Probably Vico's greatest contribution to historiographical thought was his recognition that humanity was the creator of its own history. History might be providentially directed, but in the actual unfolding of the divine plan it was human beings who were left to create their own culture and history. Therefore, in cultivating nature they were producing a cultural creation which they could perceive in the most sensible manner. While he did not put it in these precise terms, what Vico implied was that the cultivation of nature by its very material tangibility presented human beings with their own creative

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95 Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, trans. and ed. David Lowenthal (New York and London, 1965), 27, 98-9, 137, 164-5.

96 *VNS*, 11-12.

97 Ibid., 15. See also 98-9: The order of human institutions was "first forests, then huts, next villages, later cities, and finally academies."

98 Ibid., 308-9.

99 Ibid., 470. For the claim that Vico did not utilize an economic consideration such as stadial theory, see Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford and New York, 1985), 59-60.

force, thus prompting the rise of higher culture and impelling the dynamics of the historical process.

A typically idiosyncratic utilization of the stadial theory was made by John Pinkerton, the eccentric Scottish scholar whom Gibbon befriended and considered as a possible partner in an unrealized joint venture of publishing ancient British historical documents. Pinkerton essentially utilized stadial terminology for un-stadial purposes concerned with political rather than with socio-economic historical development. He claimed that original German feudalism was a praiseworthy form of government which was only corrupted from about the tenth century. While criticizing both Montesquieu and Hume he noted that the English constitution, or something similar, already existed among the ancient Scythians (i.e. Germans according to his view), and was imported in this ancient form into England. He asserted that such a constitution was in accord with the pastoral stage of society when each man had a voice in the general council. At a later stage, when a variety of occupations were created, many were content with having representatives in government, yet the Germans at this stage had an aversion to city dwellers. In the third and last stage of this development the various occupations introduced trade, which led to the creation of cities with privileges, toward which the nobles felt an enmity. It was only from this stage, about the tenth century, that there arose a difference of interests between the lords and the commons.[100] Pinkerton thus implemented a quasi-stadial approach to political history, and this was part of his general racist outlook. This was uncommon for the time, although he did connect this quasi-stadialism at some level with social and economic development. When he did apply it to more typical material culture this too was in an uncommon manner. He claimed that the Scythians in remote antiquity were barbarians who were occupied in war and not arts, at a time when the Egyptians were the only nation not confined to a pastoral state, although a few Scythian nations already began practicing agriculture. In Egypt itself, so he claimed, agriculture was invented out of necessity because the country was unfit for hunting or pasturage.[101] This itself was however not truly a stadial approach, since genuine stadial theories regarded the historical development as progressing in order from one stage to the next,

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[100] See John Pinkerton, *A Dissertation on the Origin and Progress of the Scythians or Goths, Being an Introduction to the Ancient and Modern History of Europe* (London, 1787), 137, 140-42.

[101] Ibid., 27, 77. On Pinkerton see Hugh Trevor-Roper, "Gibbon's Last Project," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 405-19. On his racism see Silvia Sebastiani, "Race and Natural Characters in Eighteenth-Century Scotland: The Polygenetic Discourses of Kames and Pinkerton," *Cromohs*, 8 (2003).

without such leaps. At the very least, however, Pinkerton's example demonstrates how stadial approaches and terminology became common currency by the late eighteenth century.

To return to more typical variations of stadialism, Herder combined a recognition, no doubt influenced by the views of Montesquieu and Buffon, of the climatic effect on culture, together with a version of the four-stages theory. According to his outlook, geography was a distinct historical factor, and the different geographical situations of various areas "have been the directing lines or limits of the history of the World." Following their differing natural settings, in one area there necessarily developed a culture of hunters and therefore humanity in that place remained in a savage state. Yet a different area, more extended and mild, enabled the development of a shepherding culture. Still another area was amenable to agriculture, while a fourth area led to fishing, navigation and finally to trade. In some regions there never occurred changes, and in others these happened with time, but always subject to the natural setting. "The structure of our Earth, in its natural variety and diversity, rendered all these distinguishing periods and states of man unavoidable."[102] Nevertheless, Herder was wary of incautious broad generalizations regarding the effect of climate on cultures and nations. All one could do was examine particular regions climatically and then slowly deduce general inferences.[103]

Climate and Civilization

The idea that climate affected national characteristics and culture was an ancient one,[104] even if it was not developed in Fernand Braudel's modern comprehensive

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[102] *OPHM*, 18-19.

[103] Ibid., 172-7. Eighteenth-century German and Swiss historians emphasized the importance of commanding nature. They also perceived, mainly due to their reading of Montesquieu, climatic and geographical influences in history, particularly in the early stages of human social development. On these points, though without special attention to either Herder or Mascov, see Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975), 65-70, 133-6.

[104] Propounded, to mention just one example of an author often consulted by Gibbon, by Pliny the Elder, who noted how climate affected racial characteristics and culture. See Pliny, *Natural History*, 1: 321-3. The development of this theory from antiquity to the eighteenth century is amply discussed in Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore, Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1967), passim.

manner.[105] Of the pre-Enlightenment versions of this approach one should take note particularly of Jean Bodin's famous theory.[106] Outlining an argument often utilized in the Western tradition to explain the superiority of European culture, he claimed that the inhabitants of sterile zones tended to be more resourceful and inventive than those of fertile ones. In the latter, "because of this abundance of produce the inhabitants must devote themselves to agriculture, neglect military matters, cultivate peace, and languish in pleasure." Furthermore, "Those who dwell in fertile valleys... are devoted to luxury, in contrast to the disposition of those who inhabit sterile places. The latter are valiant soldiers in war, clever workers in peace, or diligently engage in trade. It was for this reason that the sterile Attic plain made the Athenians inventors of the arts."[107] Bodin's seeming lack of appreciation for agriculture in this passage was contrary to the later Enlightenment outlook, as was his condemnation of luxury, the dialectical positive influence of which, as we shall later see, was a popular topic in the eighteenth century. Yet there was a sense in which Bodin foreshadowed the Enlightenment view of humanity's command of nature as a crucial component of cultural progress. He noted that training could affect the nature of people. Therefore, despite the influence of the natural environment some societies advanced, while others regressed. "Was there ever a race so huge and savage which, when it had found leaders, was not carried forward along the path of civilization? What race once instructed in the most refined arts, but ceasing to cultivate the humanities, did not sink sometime into barbarity and savagery?"

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[105] Yet Braudel discussed aspects of the human interaction with nature which were not dissimilar to some of the early modern topics we are discussing here. See e.g. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols (New York, 1972-73), 1: 101-2, where he discussed the natural cycles which affected humanity in its interaction with nature, with periods of construction and deterioration, and an oscillation between such things as nomadism and transhumance, settlement and emigration, and cultivation of land and its neglect, and claimed that "these variations of the general relations between man and his environment combine with other fluctuations, the sometimes lasting but usually short-term movements of the economy. All these movements are superimposed on one another. They all govern the life of man, which is never simple. And man cannot build without founding his actions, consciously or not, on their ebb and flow. In other words, geographical observation of long-term movements guides us towards history's slowest processes."

[106] Specifically in the chapter "The Correct Evaluation of Histories," in Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, trans. and ed. Beatrice Reynolds (New York, 1969), 85-152, which discussed the influence of climate on human beings both physically and culturally. At ibid., 25, Bodin claimed that if there was an essential art for historians, then geography was such an art in the highest degree.

[107] Ibid., 141.

An example of the progress of an initially savage people was the Germans, and of a culture which declined because of lack of discipline was the Romans.[108]

In the eighteenth century the Abbé Dubos outlined a particularly detailed theory of the influence of climate – which for him was quintessentially influential through the quality of the air – on the development of culture, specifically the fine arts.[109] Among others, Montesquieu was particularly noted for presenting a climatic theory regarding the development of human culture. Yet not everyone accepted such an approach. The Baron d'Holbach, for example, opposed Montesquieu's claim for the influence of climate on culture, and instead regarded education, religion and government as more influential.[110] Voltaire and Hume also belittled Montesquieu's theory on this issue, which received more attention from historians such as Robertson and Gibbon.[111] Yet there were other eighteenth-century theories of a similar nature, some more sophisticated than Dubos's or Montesquieu's, of which Buffon's was the prime example. Buffon had claimed that control of nature required "active people in a happy climate" ("les hommes actifs dans un climat heureux"). It could not be taken for granted.[112] Despite his general admiration for Montesquieu, Gibbon was critical of his theory of the relations between climate and history in Asia.[113] Gibbon, so appreciative of Buffon, was influenced by the latter's more sophisticated climatic theory. Buffon's view of the environmental influence on culture was much broader than Montesquieu's, and in contrast to the latter he

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[108] Ibid., 145-6, and see also 299-302. For Bodin's climatic theory, see Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 275-83, 439-40; Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 434-47.

[109] Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols (London, 1748), 2: 107-234. See also Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 554-62.

[110] Paul-Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *Système social, ou principes naturels de la morale et de la politique, avec un examen de l'influence du gouvernement sur lés mœurs*, 3 vols in 1 (London, 1773; reprint Hildesheim and New York, 1969), 3: 1-4.

[111] See the remarks in J. B. Black, *The Art of History, a Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1926), 45-7, 85-6, 136-8. For Hume's opposition to the idea that climate and other physical causes such as food or air affected the "temper or genius" of human beings or the character of nations, see David Hume, "Of National Characters," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 197-215. In "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," 382, Hume claimed that a mild climate favored prosperity and a large population, yet virtue and wise institutions were more important. However, in the same essay, at 448-52, he seemed inconsistent when he agreed with the claim that the cultivation of land improved the climate.

[112] "Septième et dernière Époque," 228.

[113] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1029 note 11; also LVIII, 3: 612 note 139.

also considered humanity's capability to influence the environment, and not just to adapt to it.[114]

According to Buffon the climatic temperature of the world was gradually cooling, yet humanity could heat the temperature in certain regions by such things as deforestation (since plants caused cold humidity), the control of river flows, the population of new areas and the use of fire. Human beings could also cool a desert by planting forests, although this was much more difficult. The ratio between the number of people and domesticated animals, and between wild uncultivated vegetation, determined the temperature in any given geographical region.[115] What this meant, from the point of view of historians such as Gibbon, was an affirmation of the importance of commanding nature in order to advance in the civilizing process. Moreover, it also meant that humanity was not just subjected to the conditions imposed on it by nature. Given enough effort and physical and intellectual endeavor, human societies had the possibility of overcoming even very difficult initial natural conditions. Human cosmological supremacy, if asserted with enough force, could make nature yield to human exertion. There was almost nothing that human culture could not potentially attain if only it unremittingly took the proper steps on the road to civilization, a road which had to begin with the cultivation of natural resources.

Various eighteenth-century literati displayed recognition of this ability of humanity to influence nature and overcome it. Some no doubt were influenced by Buffon, while others may have arrived at it independently. None developed a more sophisticated scientific theorizing of this notion than Buffon himself, yet they did demonstrate how it could be utilized for different purposes than his own. Specifically, this singular human aptitude was considered from a historical perspective. By its very essence, the human ability to overcome nature was manifested over time, and therefore became a topic for historical investigation and interpretation. It was therefore no surprise that this topic was increasingly addressed by eighteenth-century intellectuals in ways which were not connected directly with purely scientific concerns. Cornelius de Pauw, for example, claimed that humanity had the ability to improve the climate by cultivating nature.[116] Paul Henry Mallet similarly observed that the clearing of forests and the cultivation of

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[114] For their respective climatic theories, see Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 565-81, 587-91, 655, 663-81, 704-5. On climate and the cultivation of nature see also E. C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden, French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago and London, 2000), 99-154.

[115] "Septième et dernière Époque," 240-46.

[116] Pauw , *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, 1: 25-6.

land raised the temperature and mitigated cold climates.[117] According to Raynal cultural progress was a result of the level of accord between the natural and the geographic situations of a society on the one hand, and its national character and conduct on the other. The natural situation was however invariable, and therefore prosperity depended upon society's cultural accommodation to this natural constant.[118] Unsurprisingly, given its multiple authorship, Raynal's work was not consistent on this point. Elsewhere, more akin to Buffon, it expressed belief in humanity's ability to actually ameliorate nature by clearing land, purifying the air and improving the climate.[119]

According to Robert Henry climate had a large influence on the constitution, temper and manners of countries.[120] Henry also evinced a logic similar to Buffon's regarding the reciprocal influences between humanity and nature. He observed how the Romans in Britain had engaged in deforestation and drying of marshes, initially for military reasons but in the long run with general positive consequences. The Romans "even rendered the very air and climate more serene and dry; and made this island [Britain], in all respects, a more pleasant and healthful residence than it had been in its natural and uncultivated state."[121] William Robertson also recognized the reciprocal influence of climate and culture when he claimed that "if ever the progress of culture and population shall mitigate the extreme rigour of the climate in the more northern districts of America, Hudson's Bay may become as subservient to commercial intercourse in that quarter of the globe as the Baltic is in Europe."[122] Robertson noted the importance of climate for determining cultural behavior. As much as a nation was ruder, it was more prone to the influence of climate. Generally, in more temperate climates one encountered more progress. Robertson was therefore not as prone as others to emphasize humanity's ability to improve nature, even if he accepted it in principle. Moreover, he did not even underline the influence of climate on culture. In his opinion there was no one single cause or principle,

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117 Paul Henry Mallet, *Northern Antiquities: or, a Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes, and Other Northern Nations*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1770), 1: 412-14.

118 *PPH*, 3: 263-4.

119 Ibid., 6: 97. For other passages on the connection between culture and climate, see 6: 393-4, and passim. For the important role of climate as influencing culture according to Raynal, see William R. Womack, "Eighteenth-Century Themes in the *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes* of Guillaume Raynal," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 96 (1972), 254-7.

120 *HHGB*, 1: 430.

121 Ibid., 1: 434.

122 *RHA*, 2: 6.

not even the climate, which alone explained the character of human beings. Moral and political causes had more influence than the climate, and therefore one occasionally found tribes in the torrid zone who were relatively advanced despite their natural surroundings.[123]

These observations by Robertson should serve as a reminder that Enlightenment historians remained constantly aware of the importance of political, military, religious, economic and other historical factors, not just the climate. Irrespective of the viewpoint of our discussion, eighteenth-century historiography, despite its broadening thematic horizons, still by and large concentrated on traditional historiographical narrative themes. Nevertheless, what made the emphasis on commanding nature in Enlightenment historiography important was the temporal factor. The implication of conjectural history, whether in the four-stages theory or any other version, was that the historical tale of human progress began in a savage, not in an advanced and politically-organized, state. There was a logic to history. Progress could not materialize out of nowhere. It had to be attained according to the laws of history, which necessitated a succession of consecutive steps with no shortcuts. This meant that the first thing that human beings had to do in order to emerge from savagery, assert their cosmological supremacy over nature and differentiate themselves from other animals, was to take command of their natural surroundings, which meant cultivating the fields and domesticating the animals around them. Any further progress, even in its most advanced cultural forms, was based on this foundation. Therefore, it was only by maintaining, and indeed deepening and extending, this command of nature, that any other types of more sophisticated cultural achievements could be maintained or improved.

The view of Enlightenment historians was always emphatically philosophical. The historical discourse was almost meaningless if it did not offer moral instruction on how to improve their own contemporary society and how to extend this progress to the unlimited future. The command of nature thus became a recognized essential foundation of culture which if neglected would undo any other type of progress, but if properly fostered and promoted would enhance to an immeasurable extent what has come to be known in modern terminology as the Enlightenment Project. Therefore, while eighteenth-century historians continued the traditional concern with political and military history, they simultaneously recognized that there was an earlier essential chapter in human history which had not been sufficiently considered by previous historians. Without this consideration history could not really offer the proper instruction for the future which Enlightenment historians saw as vital to their scholarly work.

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123 Ibid., 2: 225-30, and passim in this volume.

The future importance of commanding nature was directly addressed by Herder. Like others, he adhered to the view that climate influenced human culture, and he was more in tune with Buffon's than with Montesquieu's approach since he also emphasized the reciprocal influences between nature and humanity. Thinking of possible future developments he wrote:

> There is no question, but, as climate is a compound of powers and influences, to which both plants and animals contribute, and which every thing that has breath promotes in its reciprocating mutations, so man is placed in it as a sovereign of the Earth, to alter it by arts. Since he stole fire from Heaven, and rendered steel obedient to his hand; since he has made not only beasts, but his fellow men also, subservient to his will, and trained both them and plants to his purposes; he has contributed to the alteration of climate in various ways. Once Europe was a dark forest; and other regions, at present well cultivated, were the same. They are now exposed to the rays of the Sun; and the inhabitants themselves have changed with the climate. The face of Egypt would have been nothing more than the slime of the Nile, but for the art and policy of man. He has gained it from the flood; and both there, and in farther Asia, the living creation has adapted itself to the artificial climate. We may consider mankind, therefore, as a band of bold though diminutive giants, gradually descending from the mountains, to subjugate the earth, and change climates with their feeble arms. How far they are capable of going in this respect futurity will show.[124]

Gibbon too was greatly interested in the connection between nature and culture, the assumption that culture and climate were reciprocally influential, and specifically Buffon's laudatory depiction of humanity constantly improving on nature.[125] Already as a young man Gibbon, contemplating his future prospective intellectual and scholarly interests, began considering the historical significance of this issue. Writing in his journal he noted: "The productions of nature and art, as much as they are known to us from the ancients, the migrations of nations, their laws and their character. Among so many objects of such interest for a philosopher, I would seize all occasions that my subject would offer me, to study when and to which point the configuration of the land, the climate, the situation, influenced the manners of the inhabitants, and the events which affected

[124] *OPHM*, 176.

[125] The claim that climate and geography played a minor role in *The Decline and Fall*, in contrast with Montesquieu's approach, in Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven and London, 2004), 211, seems untenable.

them."[126] In this early entry from 1763 Gibbon already spelled out his interest in the connection between nature and culture which would become evident in his future work. The following year while visiting Florence on his Italian Grand Tour, he contemplated how the warm climate of the south had tended to civilize and soften the manners of the Germans who had arrived there as conquerors, and led them to religious conversion to Christianity.[127] In his ultimately aborted Swiss history he observed a connection between the harsh Swiss climate and the independent and democratic nature of its inhabitants, claiming that humanity was the salve of the climate.[128] Similar observations were later to appear in *The Decline and Fall*, for example when Gibbon considered the climate of ancient Germany and its influence on the character of the natives.[129] Furthermore, and here Buffon's influence was no doubt at play, Gibbon also noted that the climate of Germany and the fertility of its soil were improved by the many centuries of toil since the era of Charlemagne.[130]

Such observations were not reserved for the Europeans, and elsewhere Gibbon depicted the climate of Arabia as a mostly difficult and "dreary waste" which had important cultural implications.[131] The Arabian climate put distinct limits to the progress of its inhabitants. By its very intransigence the arid climate hardly enabled progress at all, in effect denying the inhabitants a history in the true sense in "a country, whose language and inhabitants have ever been the same."[132] In comparison with civilizations in other, better climates, the Arabs were totally underdeveloped. "The measure of population is regulated by the means of subsistence; and the inhabitants of this vast peninsula might be outnumbered by the subjects of a fertile and industrious province."[133] Occasionally

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126 *Le journal de Gibbon a Lausanne*, 169: "Les productions de la nature et de l'art autant qu'elles nous sont connues par les anciens, les migrations des peuples, leurs loix et leur caractère. Parmi tant d'objets si interessans pour un Philosophe, je saisirois toutes les occasions que mon sujet me fourniroit de rechercher quand et jusqu'à quel point la configuration du pays, le climat, la situation ont influé sur les mœurs des habitans et sur les evenemens qui leur sont arrivés."

127 *Gibbon's Journey from Geneva to Rome, His Journal from 20 April to 2 October 1764*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1961), 164; originally in French, but for an English translation of the same passage see *MW*, 3: 237.

128 "Introduction a l'histoire générale de la république des Suisses," in *MW*, 3: 239-330, at 251-2, 317. For this work, see Brian Norman, *The Influence of Switzerland on the Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford, 2002), 33-43, 88-110.

129 *DF*, IX, 1: 230-33.

130 *DF*, IX, 1: 238-9.

131 *DF*, L, 3: 151-6.

132 Ibid., 153.

133 Ibid., 154.

a wandering Arab might "appropriate the fruits of industry" by "rapine or exchange," but ultimately "a private citizen in Europe is in the possession of more solid and pleasing luxury than the proudest emir, who marches in the field at the head of ten thousand horse."[134] There was more than a measure of chauvinism in this outlook. Yet ultimately for Gibbon it was an inexorable fact that the Arabian climate was simply too harsh to enable human cultivation no matter who were its inhabitants.

Even Buffon had observed that it was more difficult to cool a desert than to heat a cold region. It was simpler no doubt to cut down forests than to plant them. In any event, Gibbon was not only aware of the influence of climate on culture, but due to Buffon also of the reverse influence. Culture was proportional to the control of nature. While discussing the pastoral manners of the Tartars Gibbon noted the influence of climate on national manners, implying that the more advanced a culture the less it was influenced by the climate and natural surroundings, and claiming that "the influence of food or climate, which, in a more improved state of society, is suspended, or subdued, by so many moral causes, most powerfully contributes to form, and to maintain, the national character of Barbarians."[135] Regarding the common assertion that the northern peoples were superior to those of the south he noted: "It is the triumph of cold over heat; which may however and has been surmounted by moral causes."[136] Admittedly it was occasionally difficult to "distinguish between the gifts of Nature and the rewards of Industry." Yet particularly when an uninviting climate was concerned, the efforts of human genius, stimulated at least in certain historical cases by such difficulties, became conspicuous. In this way Gibbon referred to the relative infertility and barrenness of Palestine, which in the past had been well-cultivated.[137] He immediately continued and noted similar "useful victories which have been atchieved by MAN" over natural obstacles in other countries, including contemporary eighteenth-century Wales which "has flourished under the influence of English freedom."[138]

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[134] Ibid., 156. On Gibbon's contempt for the Muslims, but also recognition of their military power, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), 59. Yet Gibbon and others in his time began a more serious study of Islam, albeit embedded in the paternalism of the Western view of the Arabs, as Said interprets it.

[135] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1025, and see also 1029.

[136] From Gibbon's marginalia to one of his copies of the *Decline and Fall*, in *DF*, 3: 1095.

[137] From "A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," in *DF*, 3: 1122-3.

[138] Ibid., 1123-4.

The influence of climate was important, but receded before civilization. The more advanced, sophisticated and politically progressive a society was, the more it exhibited a propensity to cultivate nature and to continuously broaden and intensify this cultivation. Essentially man was "the only animal which can live and multiply in every country from the equator to the poles."[139] This was precisely because he could adapt to the climate, whatever it was, and ultimately by cultivation even influence and mitigate it to a large extent. Nature and humanity were interdependent, but while nature, although inexorably more powerful, was constant, humanity was active and capable of autonomous action which could eventually change the climate. It was this propensity to action which qualified human beings to become more than animals, to undergo a sea change into distinctly active, historical creatures. Gibbon conceived history as an essentially dynamic form of human existence propelled by the basic fuel of cultivating nature. This emphasis on the inherent dynamism of history was almost pre-Hegelian in tenor. We can note in passing that in this light the claim made by Friedrich Meinecke and others that Gibbon, and indeed all Enlightenment historiography, was somehow less "historicist" than later modern, and specifically German, romantic historiography, seems in need of serious re-examination.[140]

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[139] *DF*, 1: 233 note 11.

[140] See Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism, the Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson, trans. revised by H. D. Schmidt (London, 1972). For similar critiques of Enlightenment historiography, see also R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1963), 76-93; Hayden White, *Metahistory, the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1973), 45-69. For a Victorian critique of Gibbon on similar lines, if without "historicist" terminology, see Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London, 1902), 1: 446-8. A more updated version of this outlook on Gibbon, yet generally appreciative regarding his methodological innovations, is presented in Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History, Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca and London, 1987), 15-16, 178-93. Levine seems more unreserved in his positive appraisal of Gibbon in his *The Autonomy of History, Truth and Method from Erasmus to Gibbon* (Chicago and London, 1999), 123-5, 157-82. Voltaire is subjected to a similar interpretation, though again without the use of the specific term "historicism," in Jerome Rosenthal, "Voltaire's Philosophy of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16 (1955), 151-78. For criticisms of the historicist view of Enlightenment historiography, see Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1-6; Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, esp. 347-9.

Agriculture

There were various types of cultivation of nature, depending on which natural elements were manipulated, being transformed as it were into natural resources. The most basic was agriculture, the cultivation of land.[141] Historically it was not the first form of utilizing nature, since hunting and shepherding preceded it. It was agriculture, however, which constituted the essential and formative step from nomadic to sedentary existence, and which in the long run offered the most essential and durable material substratum for further higher cultural progress. Furthermore, in Western historiography agriculture had long been associated with what modern terminology has come to call civic virtue. The quintessential example was Livy's account of how the representatives of the state found Cincinnatus at his farm when they came to call him to save Rome. "Whether bending over his spade as he dug a ditch, or ploughing, he was, at all events, as every body agrees, intent upon some rustic task," after which he put on his toga, wiped off the dust and sweat, and was hailed Dictator.[142] Eighteenth-century historians were intimately familiar with this traditional classicist portrayal of early Roman virtue, with its emphasis on civic and military glory and not on the acquiring of material affluence. Yet this attitude toward agriculture was not ultimately an Enlightenment outlook, and not just because Gibbon and his generation regarded agricultural labor as essentially the lot of the ignorant masses. For the Enlightenment, agriculture's importance lay not in its general moral probity but in its essential economic significance.

Many Enlightenment intellectuals were aware of agriculture's constitutive role from this distinctly material perspective. According to Adam Smith the improvement and cultivation of the country was the greatest of all public advantages.[143] Agriculture, not manufactures, was therefore the most efficient way a society could make use of its capital. In manufactures all of the productive labor was human, while in agriculture human industry put in motion the labor

[141] We are not concerned here with technological ways of cultivating nature per se. For some remarks on eighteenth-century improvements in such things as agriculture and the digging of canals, see Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 56-8. The significance of agriculture in eighteenth-century debates in the nascent field of political economy is discussed in John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment, Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge, 2005), 325-76 and passim.

[142] *Livy*, trans. B. O. Foster, Frank Gardner Moore, Evan T. Sage and Alfred C. Schlesinger, 14 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1919-52), 2: 89-91 (III.xxvi.7-10). Cato the Elder, the quintessential epitome of Roman republican severity, regarded the farming class as the one which produced the best men; see Cato and Varro, *On Agriculture*, 3 (from the introductory remarks to Cato's work).

[143] *SAI*, 1: 245.

of nature, hence the supreme productive value of agricultural toil. Agriculture, rather than increasing the fertility of nature, guided it in the direction most profitable for humanity. "Planting and tillage frequently regulate more than they animate the active fertility of nature; and after all their labour, a great part of the work always remains to be done by her."[144] Nature often produced a quarter and occasionally more than a third of the whole produce. What contributed to enhance the fertility of food-producing land also contributed to augment the value of more barren regions, since the surplus of food went into trade for other commodities, thus encouraging commerce. This, for example, was what had happened with the Spanish exchange of food for gold in South America. Thus, an abundance of food resulting from the improvement of land became important for economic growth.[145] Nevertheless, one of Smith's purposes in the *Wealth of Nations* was to criticize certain aspects of the political economy of the French physiocrats, specifically their assertion that the economy could be based exclusively on agriculture. Smith, who following the four-stages theory emphasized like most of his Scottish Enlightenment colleagues the importance of commerce as representing accomplished civilization, claimed that manufactures were definitely economically required as part of this more advanced commercial stage of progress. Yet agriculture and manufactures were not mutually exclusive, on the contrary. As Smith observed, agriculture and manufactures, or respectfully the labors of country and town, were in fact mutually enhancing. The town created markets for the country produce, worked the materials produced by agriculture and provided a more stable government for the whole country, essential for productive agriculture.[146] This was evinced by the commerce between European nations and their colonies. The mother country found a market in the colonies for its manufactures. The producers in the mother country thus developed and grew, and provided new markets for the agriculture of the colonies. Therefore, in contrast to what the physiocrats claimed, any preferment of agriculture over other employments was counter-productive.[147]

The physiocratic perspective can be gleaned from Turgot's views on cultural advancement. He asserted that "Barbarism makes all men equal." It was the starting point for all cultures, but due to varying circumstances such as

144 Ibid., 1: 363-4.

145 Ibid., 1: 192-3.

146 Ibid., 1: 408-12.

147 Ibid., 2: 609, 686. Smith's ideas on this point seem to have influenced Gibbon when he noted, in *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1082: "The first and most natural root of a great city, is the labour and populousness of the adjacent country, which supplies the materials of subsistence, of manufactures, and of foreign trade."

inequality in natural talents or many other reasons, various nations advanced at a different pace. Therefore Turgot, who ascribed to a version of stadial theory, claimed one could perceive throughout the world at the same time examples of all the gradations between barbarism and refinement.[148] What most contributed to differentiate between more and less advanced cultures was their level of cultivation of nature, primarily, and here Turgot evinced his physiocratic influences, their achievements in agriculture. It was tillage which increased the permanence of settlements. It enabled feeding more people than it employed, and others were thus left the possibility of occupying themselves in other fields which led to development of the arts, to the division of labor and ultimately to progress.[149] What had eventually helped Europe to overcome the long barbarism of the Middle Ages was among other things advancement in the mechanical arts. By this Turgot understood primarily medieval technology as it was applied to cultivating nature. "The arts are nothing but the utilisation of nature, and the practice of the arts is a succession of physical experiments which progressively unveil nature."[150] Ultimately, when it came to the importance of cultivating nature the differences between the physiocratic view and Smith's outlook was a relative one. In contrast to the physiocrats Smith emphasized the importance of cultivating nature, and agriculture in particular, as a necessary stage to more advanced forms of material production and technology. For the physiocrats the emphasis for a healthy form of economic progress was on agriculture itself. Yet both ultimately ascribed to the constitutive and inevitable cultural-historical role that agriculture had to play, and from a stadial perspective regarded it as crucial in making the decisive transition, emphasized by Goguet, Gibbon and many other Enlightenment intellectuals, from a vagrant to a sedentary existence.

Among others in the eighteenth century who praised agriculture was the Baron d'Holbach, who regarded the cultivation of land as the basis of a state, and more important than commerce, which actually traded mostly in unnecessary luxury commodities.[151] A somewhat quaint praise of the virtue of agricultural pursuits was presented in Marmontel's *Belisarius*, a work which enjoyed considerable popularity in the late Enlightenment, particularly because

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148 See "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind," in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, trans. and ed. Ronald L. Meek (Cambridge, 1973), 41-59, at 42-3. For his stadial approach see "On Universal History," in ibid., 65-9. There is no evidence that Gibbon was aware of Turgot's works, many of which were only published posthumously. But it is more than likely that he was familiar with the general physiocratic outlook.

149 Ibid., 43.

150 Ibid., 56.

151 Holbach, *Système social*, 3: 73-6.

of its plea for religious toleration. Marmontel, through the mouthpiece of his protagonist, claimed that there were three classes of society subsisting in a state of mutual aid and dependence – the husbandman, the artificer (i.e. manufacturer) and the statesman – who together acted in concert for the general good. It was true that the artificers worked at more delicate arts and therefore required more encouragement. Yet if preference was to be given to any one of these classes, "it must be to the husbandman, inasmuch as the support of life is the first great principal and desire of nature; the art, therefore, that nourishes man must be the first of arts." While agriculture did not arouse the greatest estimation it was a mistake to degrade it or hold it in contempt, and it was necessary for society to encourage the cultivators of the land since "The earth was ordained to supply the nurture of man, and to those who encrease its fertility, the first maintenance is due: this is justice to the husbandman."[152] Marmontel's Belisarius espoused a rather sentimental stoic outlook, associating agriculture with ancient Roman republican values. It was these ideals, similar to Livy's, which predominated throughout the novel much more than economic considerations, and in this respect Marmontel's outlook was very different from that of contemporaneous historians, whose praise of agriculture was first and foremost a material-historical one. Yet if nothing less, Marmontel's example emphasizes just how prevalent was the positive outlook on agriculture during the late Enlightenment.

The historiographical perspective was expectedly shared by Gibbon, who regarded agriculture as the basis for manufactures and commerce, noting as he discussed the improvements in this field in the Roman Empire, that "Agriculture is the foundation of manufactures; since the productions of nature are the materials of art."[153] In discussing the diet of the Tartars, who lived a pastoral existence based on pasturage, and according to the two-stages outlook were a vagrant society, Gibbon noted: "The corn, or even the rice, which constitutes the ordinary and wholesome food of a civilised people, can be obtained only by the patient toil of the husbandman. Some of the happy savages, who dwell between the tropics, are plentifully nourished by the liberality of nature; but in the climates of the North, a nation of shepherds is reduced to their flocks and herds."[154] This was more than a faint allusion to the theory of climatic influence on culture. It also implied the common claim that advanced civilizations tended to develop specifically in harsh natural surroundings which aroused human invention; this of course was what had happened to the ancient German barbarian ancestors of the modern Europeans. In contrast, according to the Enlightenment perspective,

[152] Jean-François Marmontel, *Belisarius*, trans. anon. (London, 1767), 140-42.

[153] *DF*, II, 1: 78-81. See also the depiction of the more positive aspects of Justinian's government, emphasizing the skillful application to agriculture, at XL, 2: 577-80.

[154] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1026.

the Tartars insisted on their pastoral existence and therefore, as devastating as was their impact on other nations in the short term, in the long run they practically disappeared from history as an independent creative culture. At the very first, and crucially constitutive, step of civilization – the move, based on agriculture, from a vagrant to a sedentary existence – they already failed. In contrast, those civilizations which were based on a more inherent and solid basis, primarily that of cultivating the land and thus affording the material requirements for long-term progress, expectedly achieved more durable historical achievements. Gibbon's depiction of ancient Assyria was a case in point.

> To the soil and climate of Assyria, nature had denied some of her choicest gifts, the vine, the olive, and the fig-tree; but the food which supports the life of man, and particularly wheat and barley, were produced with inexhaustible fertility; and the husbandman, who committed his seed to the earth, was frequently rewarded with an encrease of two, or even of three, hundred. The face of the country was interspersed with groves of innumerable palm-trees; and the diligent natives celebrated, either in verse or prose, the three hundred and sixty uses to which the trunk, the branches, the leaves, the juice, and the fruit, were skilfully applied. Several manufactures, especially those of leather and linen, employed the industry of a numerous people, and afforded valuable materials for foreign trade... Babylon had been converted into a royal park; but near the ruins of the ancient capital, new cities had successively arisen, and the populousness of the country was displayed in the multitude of towns and villages, which were built of bricks, dried in the sun, and strongly cemented with bitumen; the natural and peculiar production of the Babylonian soil.[155]

The exact succession of these phases of progress, although in this case not specifically according to the stadial plan, was important. At the very foundation of culture was the use of the land according to its specific local climatic qualities.

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[155] *DF*, XXIV, 1: 925-6. See also the similar description of Palmyra, which also makes the explicit connection between properly cultivated fertile natural surroundings and commerce, at XI, 1: 316-17: "Amid the barren deserts of Arabia, a few cultivated spots rise like islands out of the sandy ocean. Even the name of Tadmor, or Palmyra, by its signification in the Syriac as well as in the Latin language, denoted the multitude of palm trees which afforded shade and verdure to that temperate region. The air was pure, and the soil, watered by some invaluable springs, was capable of producing fruits as well as corn. A place possessed of such singular advantages, and situated at a convenient distance between the gulph of Persia and the Mediterranean, was soon frequented by the caravans which conveyed to the nations of Europe a considerable part of the rich commodities of India." It then became an "opulent" city and eventually a Roman colony, only to be ruined by Aurelian (XI, 1: 317-19).

A society which knew how to cultivate these in the proper and assiduous manner was bound to progress. Cultivating the land could even mean using it as building material, and it was this cultivation which enabled sedentary existence, populousness and political and cultural progress. Without agriculture civilization was impossible.

From his different perspective Vico too was acutely conscious of the importance of agriculture in the progress of nations. In describing the symbolic importance of the figure of the plough in the frontispiece illustration to his *New Science* he claimed that the Herculean founders of the first pagan nations became founders "because they subdued the world's first lands and placed them under cultivation." The plough also symbolized the fact that ploughed lands were the first altars of pagan antiquity. In other words, in Vico's historiographical scheme the cultivation of land was a vital material requirement for the creation of human society and religion. The control of agriculture by the Heroes led to their control of religious rites and thus to control of their associates. Eventually this also led to the creation of the first cities, which were all founded on cultivated lands.[156]

Agriculture was perhaps the most oft-cited aspect of cultivating nature in Enlightenment historiographical literature. It was viewed as the essential revolutionary breakthrough from vagrant barbarism to a settled state of human society amenable to progress. By its very fundamental nature in the historical process it was also irreversible, the most resistant to the vagaries of history. The historian of ancient agriculture Adam Dickson wrote:

> When agriculture in any country is brought to any degree of perfection, and farming reckoned an honourable employment, it becomes easy for those engaged in it, who either perform or direct its operations, to attain a proper knowledge of their business. They are bred to it from their infancy, and the knowledge and practices of the father are naturally communicated to the son. It was so amongst the Romans, and thus the knowledge of agriculture continued, long after industry in Italy had given way to that indolence that is the consequence of excessive luxury, and even after the farmers in the provinces were ruined by the rapacity and oppression of the governours.[157]

It was this outlook on agriculture which influenced Enlightenment considerations regarding the rise, decline and possible resurgence of civilizations. All of these historical phases were conceived as intimately concerned with agriculture and with cultivating nature in general. Essentially,

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156 *VNS*, 9-11, and see also 2-3, 27, 99, 235.

157 Adam Dickson, *The Husbandry of the Ancients*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1788), 1: 50.

for Enlightenment historians the command of nature was the most ineradicable foundational achievement of human civilization and withstood all but the most devastating vagaries of history.

Water

Alongside cultivation of the land came cultivation of other natural elements, primarily that of water. Gibbon was well-aware of this and was undoubtedly thinking of Buffon's emphasis on the control of rivers as one of the ways to warm the climate, when in a passage accompanied by a note referring to Buffon, and while depicting the attempts to curb the ravages of the Tiber in the time of Augustus, he claimed that "The servitude of rivers is the noblest and most important victory which man has obtained over the licentiousness of nature."[158] Classical literature from Herodotus onwards was replete with descriptions of the building projects of antiquity, many of which were concerned with water, from irrigation and canal building to raising aqueducts and other varied undertakings. The ability of the Roman armies to overcome water obstacles was considered a key element of their military might. Gibbon and his contemporaries were no doubt impressed by Julius Caesar's descriptions of how he constructed a bridge across the Rhine, or of how the Roman army dried a stream and thus impressed and frightened their enemies.[159] It was "the fertile province of Assyria," however, which afforded Gibbon the particular opportunity of eloquently rhapsodizing on the important effects of cultivating water sources.

> The whole country might have claimed the peculiar name of Mesopotamia; as the two rivers [the Euphrates and the Tigris], which are never more distant than fifty, approach, between Bagdad and Babylon, within twenty-five, miles of each other. A multitude of artificial canals, dug without much labour in a soft and yielding soil, connected the rivers, and intersected the plain, of Assyria. The uses of these artificial canals were various and important. They served to discharge the superfluous waters from one river into the other, at the season of their respective inundations. Subdividing themselves into smaller and smaller branches, they refreshed the dry lands, and supplied the deficiency of rain. They facilitated the

[158] *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1068, and note 17 (1067-8 in general regarding the continued battle with the ravages of the Tiber in Roman history). Gibbon had considered this topic much earlier; see "Nomina, Gentesque Antiquæ Italiæ," in *MW*, 4: 200-201. On the restoration of three of Rome's ancient aqueducts in the Renaissance, see *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1083-4.

[159] Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. H. J. Edwards (Loeb Classical Library, 1917), 201-3 and 575 respectively.

> intercourse of peace and commerce; and, as the dams could be speedily broke down, they armed the despair of the Assyrians with the means of opposing a sudden deluge to the progress of an invading army.[160]

This was in essence the picture of stadial progress in retrospect, from the vantage point of the end of the civilizing process. In this respect the various stages did not have to be pointed out since they were evident from the end result – an advanced civilization. The thread joining the stages of the process explicitly connected advanced activities such as warfare and commerce with the cultivation of natural resources. Buffon's conclusions were evident in the manner in which human societies when properly inclined could ameliorate the deficiencies of their natural surroundings such as "superfluous waters," "dry lands" and "deficiency of rain," by utilizing the more advantageous qualities of the very same climatic environment such as "soft and yielding soil," thus facilitating "the intercourse of peace and commerce." In other words, human culture had the potential ability to progress by pitting nature's various elements against each other for human benefit.

The Roman projects were the most conspicuous and oft-discussed examples of controlling water in Western historiography. The truly significant abilities of the Roman control of water were exhibited in peacetime projects. Julius Frontinus, who wrote of the Roman aqueducts for the maintenance of which he was responsible, claimed that the water conduits were "the best testimony to the greatness of the Roman Empire."[161] The care of the Emperor Nerva and of Frontinus himself in amending the working of the aqueducts improved the appearance of the city as well as the quality of its air, which till then was famously unwholesome.[162] Frontinus wrote: "With such an army of indispensable structures [the aqueducts of Rome] carrying so many waters, compare, if you will, the idle Pyramids or the useless, though famous, works of the Greeks!"[163] There was undoubtedly a parity of spirits between Frontinus's, and the ancient Romans' in general, practical outlook, and Gibbon's own "un-poetical" consideration and even asperity toward sentimental and seemingly irrational exemplifications of exuberance. The latter, particularly from an Enlightenment perspective, were usually considered evident in cases of religious enthusiasm and superstition. The pyramids as cultural and material relics of such superstition were also examples of impracticality, highlighted precisely because of their seeming magnificence.

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160 *DF*, XXIV, 1: 925.

161 Frontinus, *The Stratagems, and the Aqueducts of Rome*, trans. Charles E. Bennett and Clemens Herschel (Loeb Classical Library, 1925), 451.

162 Ibid., 417-19.

163 Ibid., 357-9.

For the Romans, as no doubt for Enlightenment historians, the Roman aqueducts, specifically because of their material and technological utility in mastering the forces of nature for human benefit, were much more worthy of commendation. This practical outlook continued throughout the history of Rome and into the early Byzantine era. Procopius in the adulatory *Buildings* depicted in glowingly laudatory terms the building projects of the Emperor Justinian, describing in detail construction works connected with water, such as the raising of aqueducts.[164] The fact that these water projects formed such a prominent part of Procopius's fawning praise of Justinian's reign in the *Buildings* was not fortuitous, and was a result of the broad appreciation of the control of water throughout antiquity.

This appreciation continued in later eras, not least in the eighteenth century, which was second only to classical culture itself in acknowledging the importance of controlling water. It was indicative that the medieval mind considered water as the symbolic barrier to Canute's kingly powers, but that both before and after the Middle Ages water was one of the prime natural elements utilized in the civilizing process. The English historian Humphrey Prideaux gave a detailed description of the Babylonian building projects during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, emphasizing the diverting of the waters of the Euphrates and the construction of canals and a lake as the most important testimony of this king's greatness. It was these same water constructions that Cyrus later used in order to inundate and destroy Babylon.[165] Giannone, displaying a similar concern while discussing a completely different historical topic, enthusiastically depicted the works that the famous sixteenth-century Viceroy of Naples, Pedro de Toledo, led to drain the stagnant waters surrounding the city, which were a major source of disease during the summer. In this way, with the help of the new Lagni Canal and the cultivation of the land around it, "*Naples* became the most healthful City in the World."[166] Montesquieu claimed that it was the labor of human beings that made the earth fitter for their abode. He commented: "We see rivers flowing where there were lakes and marshes, it is a good that nature did not make, but which is maintained by nature." Projects such as canals and irrigation long outlived the civilizations which produced them and were therefore a truly lasting amelioration of nature.[167] As this passage suggests, Montesquieu,

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164 *Procopius*, trans. H. B. Dewing, 7 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1914-40), 7: passim.

165 Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations, from the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1851 [1716-18]), 1: 112-17, 136-7.

166 *GCH*, 2: 540-41.

167 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 289.

although not to Buffon's extent, was not completely oblivious to humanity's ability to influence its natural surroundings and overcome them if necessary.

The water projects of the Romans were a source of interest in the eighteenth century for other historians besides Gibbon. Mascov related how when Drusus wanted to attack several German nations from the sea and found that the land route was closed, he opened for this purpose a canal between the Rhine and the IJssel so that his fleet would be able to pass to the South Sea. "This Channel from thence received the Name of *Fossa Drusi*, and serves to this Day, as a Monument, to shew, that the *Romans*, to extend their Power, could move the Boundaries which Nature had set to the Land and to the Water."[168] Robert Henry took a broader view when he recognized, as befitted a Scottish Enlightenment outlook, the connection between mastering the waves and establishing commerce. According to Henry,

> In the first stage of society, great rivers, lakes, and seas must have appeared insurmountable obstacles to all intercourse between those who inhabited their opposite banks and shores. But when mankind became a little better acquainted with their properties, and observed that many bodies, and particularly the largest trees, floated on their waters, and were carried along their streams with great rapidity and ease; they would by degrees change their opinion of them, and begin to entertain a notion, that they might be made the means of communication between one country and another.[169]

Henry then proceeded to describe the development of the technology of ship construction, all the while associating transportation with commercial abilities, thus linking mastery of nature with commerce and culture.

According to Adam Smith water-carriage opened a more extensive market, both national and international, than land-carriage. Therefore industry of every type began to improve first near the sea-shore or navigable rivers before it reached the inland. Egypt was the first among the Mediterranean countries in which agriculture and manufactures had been developed, in large part because the Lower Nile divided into canals which with a little art enabled access to the various parts of the country. A similar phenomenon could be observed in India with the Ganges, in the great rivers of China and in Holland with the Rhine and the Meuse. On the other hand rivers which did not split into canals did not benefit international commerce, for example the Danube or most of the African rivers. In Siberia and Tartary where the sea froze the rivers were too distant

168 *MHAG*, 1: 80.
169 *HHGB*, 1: 415.

from each other. Therefore "Tartary and Siberia, seem in all ages of the world to have been in the same barbarous and uncivilized state in which we find them at present."[170] Good roads, canals and navigable rivers, by diminishing the expense of carriage, encouraged cultivation of remote provinces, which were usually the most extensive areas of countries, and made their situation more similar to that of towns. "They are upon that account the greatest of all improvements."[171]

A similar outlook, again exemplifying the Scottish view connecting control of nature, navigation and the development of commerce, was presented by William Robertson who wrote: "The ocean, which surrounds the habitable earth, as well as the various arms of the sea which separate one region from another, though destined to facilitate the communication between distant countries, seem, at first view, to be formed to check the progress of man, and to mark the bounds of that portion of the globe to which nature had confined him." Only gradually through the efforts of successive generations did human beings learn to overcome at least some of the challenges of nature, and developed navigation, which ultimately encouraged commerce and culture.[172] The ancients believed that the world was divided into five zones. Of these, the two frigid zones in the poles and the torrid zone in the tropics were considered uninhabitable, and only the two temperate zones, forever divided by the torrid zone, were considered habitable.[173] Furthermore, in order for a continent to be favorable to commerce it required the "bounty of Nature" in the form of lakes, deep bays, inlets of the ocean or of course navigable rivers. Robertson claimed that Asia, Europe and America answered this requirement, but Africa was mainly "of one vast solid mass," and therefore "the greater part of it seems destined to remain forever uncivilized, and to be debarred from any active or enlarged communication with the rest of mankind."[174] Robertson's view of Africa was similar to Gibbon's view of Arabia. While there was a tinge of chauvinism involved, essentially he was claiming that the Africans faced inexorable natural obstacles which were simply too much for human culture to cope with. Obviously Robertson was not as confident as Raynal, let alone Buffon, regarding the human ability to control nature.

Impressive feats of controlling water were not just the province of Western civilizations. Clavigero praised the Mexicans' water projects. He described how after they had founded Mexico in the fourteenth century the Mexicans initially

170 *SAI*, 1: 32-6.

171 Ibid., 1: 163. On the useful works for distributing water in ancient Egypt and India, see also 2: 681-2.

172 *RHA*, 1: 2-3.

173 Ibid., 1: 32-3, and 358-61 note VIII.

174 Ibid., 2: 5-7.

lived a miserable existence in the middle of a lake. But they constructed palisades where the water was most shallow, as well as artificial islands for habitation and floating gardens made of bushes and mud, where they raised agricultural produce. They also fished and traded with other people living near the lake.[175] Clavigero also described the large dyke nine miles long and eleven cubits in breadth which the Mexicans had constructed to protect their city after a great inundation in the first half of the fifteenth century. Later even the Spaniards, despite two and a half centuries of effort, were not able to improve the efficiency of this dyke.[176] He praised the Mexican aqueducts, mainly the aqueduct of Chempoallan, although it was constructed after the arrival of the Spaniards and under the direction of a Mexican missionary. The Mexican building projects in general were praiseworthy because their architects did not build on solid ground and had to create islands for that purpose.[177] The technological control of water exhibited by the Mexicans caused Clavigero to exclaim: "But when urged by necessity, of what is not human industry capable?"[178]

Joseph de Guignes claimed that the Tartars and the Chinese were among the most ancient nations on earth. The Tartars found themselves in a secluded, mountainous and hostile natural environment which discouraged the development of arts and sciences, encouraged their fierce humor and left them to a pastoral existence.[179] On the other hand, "The Chinese who found everywhere rivers, fields fertile with grain and fruit trees, devoting themselves to agriculture, were obliged to arrest the impetuosity of rivers with dikes, and to dig canals in order to disperse the water or distribute it in a more advantageous manner: they cultivated the sciences, first the most necessary, then passing on to those which are only agreeable."[180] Water was a catalyst for culture. De Guignes presented the rule of Kublai Khan as an example of cultural development. Among the most significant aspects of his greatness was his support of the arts and sciences, and his attention to the cultivation of the land and the progress of manufactures

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175 Francisco Javier Clavigero, *The History of Mexico*, trans. Charles Cullen, 2 vols (London, 1787; reprint New York and London, 1979), 1: 123.

176 Ibid., 1: 180-81.

177 Ibid., 1: 419-21.

178 Ibid., 1: 123. For the Mexican constructions related to water, see also 1: 204, 375-6; 2: 73, 204, 383-4.

179 *GHG*, 1 (second part): 2-4.

180 Ibid., 1 (second part): 4: "Les Chinois qui trouverent par-tout des rivieres, des champs fertiles en grain & en arbres fruitiers, s'adonnerent à l'agriculture, furent obligés d'arrêter par des digues l'impétuosité des rivieres, des creuser des canaux pour en disperser les eaux ou les distribuer plus avantageusement: ils cultiverent les sciences, d'abord les plus nécessaires, & passerent ensuite à celles qui ne sont que d'agrément."

and commerce. Furthermore, among his most important projects, completed only by his successors, was the digging of a major canal.[181] Another example of an enlightened government fostering cultivation was that of the Mamluk sultan Al-Malik an-Nasir (Al-Nasir Muhammad). His rule was exceptional for an Egyptian despot because he did not devote himself only to self-aggrandizement at the expense of his people but genuinely cared for the amelioration and prosperity of the nation. Among this ruler's grand projects de Guignes gave prominent place to his digging of useful canals and irrigation works on the Nile, in Cairo and in Alexandria. During his rule Egypt flourished, completely sterile places became gardens, the land became fertile and was traversed by long and superb canals.[182]

Peter the Great's rule presented Voltaire with an excellent opportunity to address similar issues. He extolled the digging of canals by Peter in St. Petersburg, especially the Ladoga Canal.[183] "He [Peter the Great] had forced nature in everything, in his subjects, in himself, by land, and by water; but he forced it in order to embellish it. The arts, which he had transplanted with his own hands into a country till then savage, have, by being productive, rendered testimony to his genius, and immortalized his memory."[184] Elsewhere Voltaire wrote how Peter "traveled [throughout his country] like a legislator and a physician, examining nature everywhere, seeking to correct or perfect it, himself sounding the depths of rivers and oceans, arranging locks, visiting shipyards, causing mines to be dug, testing metals, ordering accurate maps to be drawn, in which he exerted his own hand."[185] Immediately following, Voltaire mentioned the founding of St. Petersburg, undoubtedly the greatest victory over the element of water that he could point to. Voltaire extolled the foundation of St. Petersburg in a place seemingly not intended for human habitation, where nature was forced everywhere and Peter was prompted to clear forests, drain marshes and generally fight the obstacles of nature.[186] Voltaire consistently praised Peter for taking

181 Ibid., 3: 139, 183.

182 Ibid., 4: 207-9.

183 *VOH*, 565-6 (from *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*).

184 Ibid., 597: "Il a forcé la nature en tout, dans ses sujets, dans lui-même, et sur la terre, et sur les eaux; mais il l'a forcée pour l'embellir. Les arts, qu'il a transplantés de ses mains dans des pays dont plusieurs alors étaient sauvages, ont, en fructifiant, rendu témoignage à son génie, et éternisé sa mémoire."

185 Ibid., 75 (from *Histoire de Charles XII*): "...il a voyagé en législateur et en physicien, examinant partout la nature, cherchant à la corriger ou à la perfectionner, sondant lui-même les profondeurs des fleuves et des mers, ordonnant des écluses, visitant des chantiers, faisant fouiller des mines, éprouvant les métaux, faisant lever des cartes exactes, et y travaillant de sa main."

186 Ibid., 125-6 (from *Histoire de Charles XII*). Note also the description of the canals constructed under Peter the Great, in *A General History of the Turks, Moguls, and Tatars,*

Russia out of backwardness and slavery to superstition, and instead cultivating the arts, sciences and commerce, all in a cold and hostile natural environment. Louis XIV, at least when it came to building projects, received similar eulogy. Voltaire praised Versailles and the works at the Louvre but regarded the Canal of Languedoc as the greatest, most glorious, useful and difficult of these projects.[187] Controlling water, once again, was particularly important from the Enlightenment's perspective. Elsewhere Voltaire claimed that what signalized modern Western nations from other nations past or present was first and foremost maritime expeditions.[188]

Raynal addressed one of the most impressive feats of human endeavor related to water, the reclamation of land, specifically as accomplished by the Dutch. Noting how the Dutch republican spirit had deteriorated and become corrupted by monetary interests, he depicted in detail their projects of controlling water, commenting on the original spirit which had given rise to Dutch greatness, and implying a connection between their material achievements and the attainment of their political liberty.[189] Dutch fame was first and foremost established not upon wars but upon the conquest of hostile natural resources and their taming for human needs. It was clear according to Raynal that the most durable achievements of humanity, and therefore those with the most pervasive cultural influence, were those based on the cultivation of nature. Moreover, the Dutch example proved that even when nature was not initially amenable to human cultivation, given enough effort and ingenuity it could yield to human domination. When this was accomplished, precisely because of the outstanding effort involved, the benefits accrued were particularly large. When the material foundation of culture was based on such a sound cultivation of nature, it came as no surprise that at the end of the historical process it led to enlightened political liberty, following which of course came the need to maintain these attainments, which was as difficult as establishing them in the first place.[190]

Vulgarly called the Tartars. Together with a Description of the Countries They Inhabit, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1729-30), 2: 680-82.

187 *VOH*, 971 (from *Le siècle de Louis XIV*).

188 Ibid., 1454 (from *Précis du siècle de Louis XV*).

189 *PPH*, 1: 293-4.

190 Raynal evinced a utilitarian attitude toward nature, although he did gradually also develop a sensitivity to the beauty and importance of unspoiled nature. See on this topic Womack, "Eighteenth-Century Themes in the *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes* of Guillaume Raynal," 249-59.

Non-Europeans

William Robertson, no doubt speaking for many of his generation, claimed that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the age of the great discoveries, was the watershed between the ancient and the modern worlds.[191] Eighteenth-century intellectuals were well aware of the confrontations between European and non-European civilizations which had been instituted by this great global revolution. They were sensitive to the many injustices which resulted from the imbalance of power between the indigenous peoples and the much superior European colonists, which the Enlightenment spirit wanted to ameliorate. They were, however, also constantly conscious of the many improvements which the Europeans brought along with them, which were at least initially best exemplified in the cultivation of nature, in addition to the Christianization of the locals. The fact that the locals themselves did not always enjoy the benefits of these improvements, mostly accomplished by their own manual labor, was another matter. Yet the Europeans could not conceive that any human society, given a choice, would opt for staying underdeveloped. Willful primitivism was not a serious option according to the mainstream Enlightenment outlook, even given important exceptions such as Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, Marmontel's sentimentalism in *The Incas* or Rousseau's philosophy. According to the predominant view, the Europeans were doing the indigenous peoples a favor by bringing them enlightenment. This was not just the outlook of missionaries or the more conscionable settlers, but also of many of the intellectuals who usually never left Europe and wrote about all this from second-hand reports. Particularly from the historiographical perspective, with its detailed conjectural-history theorizing about the progress of civilization, non-Europeans were offered by their conquerors a unique opportunity to take a shortcut. In effect, to think along stadial-theory lines, they now had the ability to jump directly from the savage vagrant hunting stage to a sedentary commercial existence. In theory at least this was a very commendable enlightened objective. Alongside recognition of the many abuses committed, which motivated for example Raynal's work, eighteenth-century scholars also recognized that at least some of the indigenous civilizations had attained very impressive cultural achievements, even if they were not a match for European might.

Raynal indeed was one of the most severe critics of European chauvinism, and one of the main ways in which he elaborated this criticism was emphasizing the cultural attainments of non-European civilizations, not least in the field of cultivating nature. The easiest way of doing so was of course to discuss civilizations

191 *RHDI*, 190-91.

which were not subjected to colonization and had attained cultural achievement independently of the Europeans. These could be taken either from historical past examples or from contemporaneous cases of advanced civilizations, both best illustrated by China, which was most often mentioned in the eighteenth century as an example of a religiously enlightened society. Yet Enlightenment historians found further reasons to commend Chinese civilization. Raynal approved of the fact that in China, instead of an abundance of gardens and parks, most of the land was devoted to agriculture and the cultivation of corn, which was the thing most serviceable to humanity.[192] The Chinese dried sections of the ocean and connected these new tracts of soil to the mainland. "To the action of the universe, the Chinese oppose the labours of industry; and while nations, the most celebrated in history, have, by the rage of conquest, increased the ravages which time is perpetually making upon this globe, they exert such efforts to retard the progress of universal devastation, as might appear supernatural, if they were not continual and evident."[193]

India presented a bleaker prospect. It enjoyed a mild climate, the most adapted to the human race and clearly inviting cultivation. If human beings could thrive and create culture in areas of inhospitable nature, "How easily might they not form themselves into societies in these delightful countries, where mankind, exempt from necessity, has nothing to pursue but pleasure; where, enjoying without labour or anxiety the choisest productions, and the most glorious prospect of the great scene of nature, they might justly assume the distinguishing title of Lords of the Creation!"[194] But this country, the finest on the face of the globe, instead of prospering was ravaged by the rage of conquest and the greed of traders, which its timorous inhabitants were incapable of arresting.[195] With all his idealism Raynal was a realist. He recognized that European colonization was there to stay, and what he strove for was ameliorating its wrongs for the benefit of both the indigenous peoples and the Europeans. Among his recommendations on this score came serious ideas about the improvement of the cultivation of nature. For example, he advised the French to get control of the settlement of Chatigan in Bengal which the British had forsaken because of the local earthquakes, commenting: "It is better to strive against nature than against men, and to be exposed to the shocks of the earth than to the insults of nations."[196] Control of nature, as difficult as it was, was nevertheless easier and more rewarding culturally than control of other human beings.

192 *PPH*, 1: 115-20.
193 Ibid., 1: 116-17.
194 Ibid., 1: 38.
195 Ibid., 1: 38-9.
196 Ibid., 2: 148.

Not all European activities in the colonies were negative. Like Robertson, Raynal praised the positive activity of the Jesuits in Paraguay and their kind attitude toward the native savages.[197] In general, if the Europeans behaved in a humane and enlightened manner in their contact with the less advanced nations whom they subdued, and assisted them on the way to progress instead of taking advantage of them, then the whole process of colonization became morally justified. One of the best ways of achieving this was by improving the utilization of natural resources. Raynal claimed specifically "that the civilized man, by changing the course of rivers, makes the earth subservient to his use. The fertility he imparts to the lands can only justify his conquests."[198] Discussing a more specific case, Raynal asserted that only by importing cultural and economic improvement could the European invasion of the West Indies be justified, and he continued immediately to note that the ability to conceive and plan the diversion of rivers for the sake of agricultural irrigation was an example of "the power of enlightened nations over nature itself."[199] In his typical anti-mercantilist vein Raynal claimed that if in the French West Indies the French government would adopt a more correct and considerate policy, then the local inhabitants would become the prime movers of prosperity, which in many ways would come about in the form of an improvement in the use of natural resources, especially water. In that way "Convenient roads will be opened on all sides, the morasses will be dried up, a bed will be digged for the torrents, that of the rivers will be repaired, and bridges will be constructed to secure the communications."[200]

There were examples of how the European conquerors had brought with them viable improvements of nature cultivation. Raynal observed that the British had found a hostile climate when they conquered the island of Bombay, but by draining the water in the area they had turned it into a comfortable and inviting place. He asserted that a lesson not sufficiently inculcated by the rulers of the world was that the only way to prevent emigration was to create a sufficiently mild climate which would prevent the wish to emigrate in the first place.[201] When control of nature and the climate became possible and was put into practice, this was almost inevitably bound to have good civic and economic consequences. Raynal noted the Dutch settlements in South America, in a

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197 Ibid., 3: 172-87, 280-83, 306-8. For considerations of the Jesuits' activities in Paraguay by Raynal and others, see Gregory Ludlow, "The Legacy of the Spanish Conquest of the New World in the *Histoire des deux Indes*: The Case of the Indigenous Peoples," *SVEC*, 2003:07, 215-32, esp. 224-7.

198 *PPH*, 4: 390-91.

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid., 4: 460.

201 Ibid., 1: 378.

region of "immense morasses [which] have never been passed by any thing but reptiles since the creation. The genius of man, prevailing over an ungrateful and rebellious soil, hath altered their primitive destination. It is in the midst of these stagnating, infectious, and muddy waters, that the spirit of liberty [i.e. the Dutch] hath formed three useful settlements, the most considerable of which is Surinam."[202] Despite all of his criticism Raynal did not ignore the positive side of European colonization, of which improvements in the cultivation of nature were one of the best consequences. Indigenous societies, even the most advanced among them, could simply not equal the Europeans in this field. Ultimately Raynal noted his belief that nature was a desolate desert till the appearance of human beings (i.e. those with the proper ability) who settled and altered it.[203]

Clavigero was even more emphatic in his appreciation of non-Europeans, specifically of course the Mexicans, than were Raynal or most other Enlightenment historians. He consistently regarded the arts and particularly agriculture as part of civil life, while nations living on hunting were in his opinion savage.[204] On this point he and Robertson would have agreed, but not on the aptitude of the Americans for agriculture and other types of work. According to Clavigero's estimation, in South America the Indians, not the Europeans, were those who worked at agriculture, shepherding, construction and manual labor.[205] According to Robertson, on the other hand, the original inhabitants of America, even the advanced civilization of Mexico, lacked the use of metals and the control of animals necessary for harnessing them to work in agriculture.[206] In other words, they lacked the control of nature necessary for progress. The use of animals was another important indicator of cultural progress, and while the savage Americans had not accomplished it, even the Tartars had made use of horses (here of course Robertson unfairly, or perhaps unintentionally, forgot to note the unavailability of these easily domesticated animals before the arrival of the Spaniards).[207] Robertson emphasized the fact that even in the most advanced cultures of America, those of Mexico and Peru, the use of domestic animals, such an important indicator of cultural progress, was limited mainly to the use of the llama.[208] Once the Spaniards arrived in America there was a rapid growth there in the number of imported domestic animals from Europe, some

202 Ibid., 4: 226-7. The other two settlements were Berbice and Essequibo.
203 Ibid., 6: 397-8.
204 Clavigero, *The History of Mexico*, 1: 86, 91, 93, 104, 375; 2: 230.
205 Ibid., 2: 339.
206 *RHDI*, 214.
207 *RHA*, 2: 122-5.
208 Ibid., 3: 12, 152-4, 217-18.

of them roaming free and procreating in huge numbers.[209] Even nature itself profited from the arrival of the Europeans. Yet Robertson did not think that their arrival, with all the improvements it brought in its wake, would avert the need for the indigenous population to go through a long civilizing process which could only be shortened up to a certain point. Commenting on the state of Mexico and Peru upon the arrival of the Spaniards, he wrote: "Even with all that command over nature which these [the use of metals and the domestication of animals] confer, many ages elapse, before industry becomes so regular as to render subsistence secure, before the arts which supply the wants and furnish the accommodations of life are brought to any considerable degree of perfection, and before any idea is conceived of various institutions requisite in a well-ordered society."[210]

Elsewhere he noted: "The effects of human ingenuity and labour are more extensive and considerable, than even our own vanity is apt at first to imagine. When we survey the face of the habitable globe, no small part of that fertility and beauty, which we ascribe to the hand of nature, is the work of man. His efforts, when continued through a succession of ages, change the appearance and improve the qualities of the earth."[211] Europe evinced signs of such cultivation, but America mostly did not. It had rivers which did not run in proper channels due to lack of industry, and this resulted in inundations and marshes instead of the cultivation of fertile land. In addition America had vast forests which had still not been cleared for agricultural cultivation. All this caused the Europeans who arrived there to regard America as a wilderness, which according to Robertson was the fault of its inhabitants.[212] The prospect for the future, however, was optimistic. Robertson claimed that the climate in the coastal areas of Chile was temperate and nature there was bountiful and fertile, but had not been taken advantage of because of the difficulty of approaching it by sea from Spain. Yet there were signs that this was about to improve, in which case "one may venture to foretel, that population, industry, and opulence will advance in this province with rapid progress."[213]

The Enlightenment historiographical view of the cultivation of nature emphatically regarded it as one of the keystones of advanced human culture. Without it the road to civilization could not be embarked upon. It was the first and absolutely indispensable step on the long road which eventually could lead to advanced civilization, with all of its sophisticated intellectual, moral

209 Ibid., 3: 311-12.
210 Ibid., 3: 153-4.
211 Ibid., 2: 14.
212 Ibid., 2: 14-16.
213 Ibid., 3: 236-9.

and political achievements. Yet at no stage could it be taken for granted. It had to be constantly maintained and improved. Otherwise, regression back to a more barbaric if not absolutely savage existence was an almost certain danger.

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Chapter 3
Rudeness

Some Primitive Virtues

While still a young man Edward Gibbon went with friends on a tour of Switzerland. In his journal of this early voyage Gibbon noted how he and his companions left Raperswyl and entered the canton of Schwyz.

> We soon noticed the difference there was between these two countries. Instead of this cheerful, peopled, and cultivated hill, we found ourselves in a country equally abandoned by art and by nature. Our road led us almost continually over unstable bridges, I should say over round poles which... could not hold anything. The slightest false step of a horse might tumble us into the precipices towards which we could not look without trembling. This road was lined with fir trees which by their thickness and their blackness raised the horror of perspective. If occasionally we could discover objects beyond this forest, it would only be to glimpse arid rocks and the huts of some miserable shepherds.[1]

Even at such an early age, for Gibbon "a country equally abandoned by art and by nature" formed a picture of horror, of the type of primitivism, savagery and barbarism which eighteenth-century elitist Enlightenment literati construed under the appellation "rude." This word had a more versatile set of meanings at the time than it does today. It was often used to describe, in oppositional fashion, those cultures and societies which were considered less advanced than modern

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[1] "Journal de mon voyage dans quelques endroits de la Suisse, 1755," in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, ed. Gavin R. de Beer, Georges A. Bonnard and Louis Junod (Lausanne, 1952), 27: "Nous nous appercumes bien-tot de la difference qu'il y avoit entre les deux pays. Au lieu de ce coteau riant, peuplé, et cultivé, nous nous trouvames dans un pays egalement abandonné par l'art et par la nature. Notre chemin nous conduisoit presque continuellement sur des ponts volants, je veux dire sur des Boudrons ronds et qui... ne tenoient a Rien. Le moindre faux-pas d'un cheval eut pu nous precipiter dans les precipices a coté que nous ne regardions qu'en tremblant. Ce chemin etoit bordé de Sapins qui par leur epaisseur et leur noirceur relevoient l'horreur de la perspective. Si quelque fois nous decouvrions des objects au dela de ce bois, ce n'etoit que pour entrevoir des Rochers arides et les cabanes de quelques miserables vachers." On this journal see Brian Norman, *The Influence of Switzerland on the Life and Writings of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford, 2002), 7-20.

eighteenth-century European civilization. These included past barbarian societies such as the Germanic hordes who had toppled the Roman Empire, as well as most of the peoples discovered overseas since the late fifteenth century. Even many Europeans fell under this rubric since the social elite, including the seemingly sensitive Enlightenment intellectuals, typically considered the underprivileged masses as distinctly deficient. This perception of inadequacy had clear moral and political dimensions. The social and intellectual elites regarded the masses not just as disgusting physically and behaviorally but as an actual menacing danger, and the revolutions late in the century only served to enhance this perception. It was one thing to advocate enlightenment for all mankind, but another thing altogether to live up to it in a practical everyday personal manner.

All of these overtones were commonly alluded to when contemporary scholars wrote about "rude" people. One should, however, remember that the Enlightenment outlook was essentially a historicizing one. In other words, it emphasized the dynamic nature of human culture, the fact that human societies, at least potentially, were all capable of undergoing a civilizing process. Rudeness was thus neither preordained nor insurmountable. Yet the more Enlightenment historians became preoccupied with progress and advanced civilizations, the more *ipso facto* were they constrained to address the corresponding notion of barbarism or rudeness, of the lack of progress. It was precisely the historiographical outlook which necessitated this, in contrast with other intellectual approaches, since a historical perception by its very nature implied that there was a connection between various stages of human development, as disparate as they might seem at first sight. Civilized societies had once been savage and savages might eventually become civilized. In particular, when Enlightenment scholars realized that civilized nations were perfectly capable of regressing back to a barbaric condition, it gave them an incentive to dwell on the various aspects of rudeness.

One point which needs to be noticed is the various "simple" virtues which were associated with rude societies. These included primitivistic perceptions but also, in particular, the laudation of the military virtues of barbarian societies such as the Germanic tribes. During the late Enlightenment this adulation, in a distinctly early romantic vein, was expressed in the Ossianic poems. It is not really important in this respect whether these were genuine or not, since in either case they reflected a highly influential perception of barbarian valor. This influence extended into modern times, at least till the calamities of the Second World War which stripped this mythical outlook of most of its aura. Enlightenment historians were aware of the possible historiographical potential

of these poems. Robert Henry unconditionally relied on them as sources.[2] Gibbon was more circumspect but nevertheless noted that "if we could, with safety, indulge the pleasing supposition, that Fingal lived, and that Ossian sung, the striking contrast of the situation and manners of the contending nations might amuse a philosophic mind. The parallel would be little to the advantage of the more civilized people [the Romans]... if... we contemplated the untutored Caledonions, glowing with the warm virtues of nature, and the degenerate Romans, polluted with the mean vices of wealth and slavery."[3] Yet under no circumstances should the importance of this outlook be exaggerated in relation to Enlightenment historiography. "The warm virtues of nature" were no compensation for the lack of the full array of civilization.

It was particularly the absence of high civilization, and of the ordered cultivation of nature, which was regarded as the source of the Ossianic poetic qualities. In this sense the specifically Scottish Enlightenment context of their publication, whether genuine or not, was particularly and ironically telling. The poems abound in depictions of nature, yet these are invariably of wild and romantic nature in rather pessimistic vein. Nature is depicted as the setting for military exploits, the chase, or gloomy thoughts, and rarely of happy ones. The opening lines of *Temora* are just one example of many: "The blue waves of Ullin roll in light. The green hills are covered with day. Trees shake their dusky heads in the breeze; and gray torrents pour their noisy streams.–Two green hills, with their aged oaks, surround a narrow plain. The blue course of the mountain-stream is there; Cairbar stands on its banks.–His spear supports the king..."[4] There is no mention of tilled fields or peaceful canals. Eighteenth-century scholars perceived this lack of advanced civilization as the direct source of the poetic qualities of the poems. It seemed that fiction allowed them to relax their habitual philosophical advocacy of material and social progress, and indulge in a fantasy world of tempestuous adventure. The fact that this world might have been historically true only added to the excitement, although like most romantic reveries this was safe armchair woolgathering.

James Macpherson himself, not surprisingly for an educated eighteenth-century Scot, alluded to stadial theory when he addressed the charm of the poems. He claimed that "The nobler passions of the mind never shoot forth more free and unrestrained than in these times we call barbarous. That irregular manner of life, and those manly pursuits from which barbarity takes its name, are highly favorable to a strength of mind unknown in polished times. In advanced society

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[2] *HHGB*, 1: passim.

[3] *DF*, VI, 1: 152.

[4] James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996), 148.

the characters of men are more uniform and disguised... An unsettled state, and those convulsions which attend it, is the proper field for an exalted character, and the exertion of great parts." The inhabitants of the barren "mountains and inaccessible parts of a country" such as the Scottish highlanders, were culturally pure and therefore were particularly able to create such poetry. "As they lived in a country only fit for pasture, they were free of that toil and business, which engross the attention of a commercial people." Their existence was a nomadic one, in contrast with those Scots who settled in the more fertile regions. "The inhabitants of the mountains, a roving and uncontrouled race of men, lived by feeding of cattle, and what they killed in hunting. Their employment did not fix them to one place. They removed from one heath to another, as suited best with their convenience or inclination."[5] Hugh Blair, probably the most prominent advocate of the authenticity and poetic quality of the Ossianic poems, was even more explicit.

> There are four great stages through which men successively pass in the progress of society. The first and earliest is the life of hunters; pasturage succeeds to this, as the ideas of property begin to take root; next agriculture; and lastly, commerce. Throughout Ossian's poems, we plainly find ourselves in the first of these periods of society; during which, hunting was the chief employment of men, and the principal method of their procuring subsistence. Pasturage was not indeed wholly unknown... but the allusions to herds and to cattle are not many; and of agriculture, we find no traces. No cities appear to have been built in the territories of Fingal. No arts are mentioned except that of navigation and of working in iron. Every thing presents to us the most simple and unimproved manners. At their feasts, the heroes prepared their own repast; they sat round the light of the burning oak; the wind lifted their locks, and whistled through their open halls. Whatever was beyond the necessaries of life was known to them only as the spoil of the Roman province.[6]

Lack of civilization was perceived as the source of heroic poetics. Yet Macpherson and Blair were no doubt aware that what made this observation so potent was precisely its discrepancy with the implications of the stadial outlook, which viewed historical progress as a positive process. The perception of these positive aspects of rudeness was intentionally limited to the artistic realm, and it is manifest how different this was from the scientific tendencies of the historiographical outlook

[5] Ibid., 205-7, from "A Dissertation," originally at the beginning of the second volume of the collection; see also 212-13.

[6] Ibid., 353, from his famous "A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian"; and see also the somewhat more critical observations at 383, 391.

of the late eighteenth century. While Gibbon has become appreciated in modern times more for his literary than purely scholarly qualities, in his own time he was admired for both. Contemporary historians such as Robert Henry and many others, who lacked stylistic charm, were still appreciated for their scholarship. The incongruity between the historiographical and the artistic outlooks was emphatic, not least in their disparate appreciations of rudeness. At a certain level, though not intentionally, there was a disingenuous aspect to this type of Ossianic poetics. It was an extolling of primitivism from the vantage-point of non-primitives. This of course was a common aspect of primitivism throughout the Western tradition. Another manifestation of it was pastoral art. Ever since antiquity the virtues of agricultural pursuits had received constant praise, yet this praise was usually made by sophisticated urban dwellers. Cicero no doubt voiced this cultural *Leitmotiv* when he extolled the pleasures of farming as an occupation for old age, but only after the exertions of earlier activity.[7]

In early modern Europe, it was specifically pastoral art which presented an outlet for the bucolic musings of the elite, in marked contrast with the true realities of pastoral existence. From Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* to the Rococo dream-world of Boucher and Marie Antoinette's *Petit hameau*, the seemingly idyllic proximity to nature of shepherds and farmers was imbued with qualities which were evidently imaginary. Even the relatively more realistic landscapes of English painters such as Gainsborough and Constable were not free from this approach. We cannot pursue here the many interesting artistic aspects of this topic. Still, what needs to be emphasized is the discrepancy, specifically in the late eighteenth century, between the artistic treatment of nature and the historiographical one. If anything, the fact that the romantic depictions of a simple, more "natural" and "pure" existence, were confined during the late Enlightenment mainly to literature and art, contrasted with the different censorious perception of barbarism in historical literature. It was not that barbarians lacked advantages compared with civilized and often corrupt societies. Nevertheless, the overall preference for advanced civilization constituted the more realistically-minded outlook of eighteenth-century historiography as opposed to art. The comparative consideration of barbarism and civilization, specifically in relation to cultivating natural resources, was often on the minds of Enlightenment historians. From their perspective the only possible advantages of a barbaric existence were those of a manly militarism combined with a love of liberty. Yet these were no compensation for the other aspects of such an existence, which even from a military point of view were unsatisfactory and doomed to failure in the long run.

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[7] Cicero, "On Old Age," in *Selected Works*, trans. and ed. Michael Grant (Harmondsworth, 1971), 233-8.

Without the full paraphernalia of civilization, partial advantages had only a transitory effect.

Examples of Primitive Neglect

A central dimension of the epithet "rude" was concerned with the lack of cultivation of nature, which rude societies almost invariably exhibited. Put simply, the Enlightenment considered a failure to cultivate nature as rude. Therefore, while this book is concerned with the eighteenth-century progressive idea of cultivating nature, it is absolutely imperative to take a close look at the obverse and less wholesome notion of rudeness, not just in passing in order to highlight the concept of cultivation, but in depth as a historiographical notion *sui generis*. Interest in this topic pervaded eighteenth-century historiography and received repeated and detailed attention, and we therefore have to follow suit in tracing its importance in Enlightenment thought. The idea of historical decline was repeatedly discussed in the eighteenth century, yet modern scholars have not been sufficiently aware of the importance of the notion of cultivating nature, or its absence, within this debate.[8] Enlightenment intellectuals repeatedly investigated themes concerned with barbarism and savagery, to an extent which at times seemed to suggest either an innate morbidity or a condescending chauvinism. At least with regard to historical literature, however, this interest was justified, because without a proper comprehension of cultural rudeness, a serious understanding of what the civilizing process required was impossible.

While discussing the spread of the Goths into the Ukraine in the third century Gibbon wrote:

> The plenty of game and fish, the innumerable bee-hives, deposited in the hollow of old trees, and in the cavities of rocks, and forming, even in that rude age, a valuable branch of commerce, the size of the cattle, the temperature of the air, the aptness of the soil for every species of grain, and the luxuriancy of the vegetation, all displayed the liberality of Nature, and tempted the industry of man. But the Goths withstood all these temptations, and still adhered to a life of idleness, of poverty, and of rapine.[9]

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[8] For an excellent overview of this topic, see Peter Burke, "Tradition and Experience: the Idea of Decline from Bruni to Gibbon," in *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, John Clive and Stephen R. Graubard (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1977), 87-102.

[9] *DF*, X, 1: 260.

It was the human assertion of its mastery of nature which opened the path to civilization, but this mastery lost all significance if it was not actively developed. Moreover, those who had the possibility of easily attaining such progress, whether because they had witnessed it in other nations or because their natural surroundings were readily amenable to cultivation, were doubly at fault if they resisted these temptations and opted willfully to remain barbarians. Humanity's cosmological supremacy was a burden as much as an asset. Ever since the biblical tradition had embedded this anthropocentric ethic in Western culture, it was interconnected with the admonition that human beings could not evade toil, and specifically agricultural toil "by the sweat of their brows," if they wanted to live a life of value. When the Scientific Revolution and later the Enlightenment transformed the anthropocentric cosmological tradition, this specifically religious outlook was supplanted to a large extent by a more rational approach which removed the notion of divine accommodation from any central role in explaining the world. Yet these religious overtones were so embedded in the Western psyche that they could not by any means be completely eradicated. Furthermore, the Enlightenment was not as anti-religious as is sometimes assumed. Therefore, even if this was not always emphatically stated, there was a distinct religious dimension to the eighteenth-century critical view of the reluctance of barbarians to engage in agricultural pursuits, and indeed to adopt all aspects of a sedentary civilized existence. The main criticism of the rude inclination of barbarians to resist the attractions of cultivating nature and living a more civilized life, was based on predominantly secular arguments. Yet this religious dimension, and not just because most barbarians and savages were not Christians, was almost always in the background of Enlightenment cultural criticism.

Gibbon was not the only historian to regard the Ukraine as an example of this outlook, as the scene of rude humanity's recalcitrant insistence to resist the temptations of civilization through cultivation of nature. The tone for this assessment of human cultural activity or lack thereof in the Ukraine was set in the seventeenth-century depiction of the country by the Sieur de Beauplan, which remained popular throughout the following century.[10] Beauplan, who worked for many years as a military engineer in the Ukraine, described the Cossacks as on the one hand courageous, resolute and lovers of their liberty, yet on the other hand as perfidious and drunkards (although sober when conducting warfare). They were proficient in a variety of occupations and arts ranging from metallurgical technologies to the spinning of cloth, as well as various agricultural

[10] Gibbon, in *DF*, LV, 3: 460 note 58, wrote of Beauplan: "[H]is descriptions are lively, his plans accurate, and, except the circumstance of fire-arms, we may read old Russians, for modern Cosacks."

pursuits. "They all understand tilling, sowing, reaping, making of bread, dressing of meal, brewing of beer... &c." Yet the Cossacks did not seem to be interested in doing anything beyond the momentary necessity. "There is no doubt but all of them in general are capable of all arts... they are all ingenious enough, but they go no further than what is necessary, and profitable, particularly in country affairs." "Country affairs" meant of course mainly agriculture, and the Cossacks' deficiency in this respect was accentuated by the natural fertility of their surroundings. "So they have meat and drink, they are satisfied."[11] This depiction by Beauplan makes clear that already at the beginning of the long eighteenth century the cultural appreciation of the importance of utilizing the advantages offered by natural surroundings was starting to crystallize. It is not difficult to imagine what Enlightenment historians would have made of this geographical example of cultural ineptness, and Gibbon was not the only one to do so. It seemed like the Ukraine, lying just outside the main European territory, became a constant reminder of how the human reaction to the natural surroundings was more important than anything nature in itself had to offer. For Enlightenment historians nature untouched was nature wasted. A rude people would not be able to lift themselves out of barbarity even under the best of circumstances, while a nation prone to civilization would proceed on the road to progress despite, and occasionally in direct response to, harsh natural conditions. From Gibbon's medieval Goths to Beauplan's seventeenth-century Cossacks there was really no change of any serious type among the nations occupying the Ukraine in any truly historical progressive sense. According to the Enlightenment, history devoid of cultivating nature was in fact not history at all, it was simply a static existence worthless in any significant cultural and moral sense.

Like Gibbon, Voltaire evinced this viewpoint when he noted that the north Ukraine was well-cultivated, but the south of the country, though blessed by nature and very fertile, was not cultivated due to bad government and fear of the depredations of the Tartars.[12] He claimed that the Ukrainians did not take advantage of the great fertility of their country. "Nature [in the Ukraine] exerts itself to make good for the people; but the people do not second nature's effort: living on fruits produced by a land as uncultivated as it is fertile, and living rather more by rapine, excessively fond of the most supreme good, liberty, yet however having been slaves by turns to Poland and Turkey."[13] The whole

[11] Guillaume le Vasseur Sieur de Beauplan, "A Description of Ukraine," trans. anon., in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 6 vols (London, 1744), 1: 445-81 (reprint New York, 1959), 448.

[12] *VOH*, 153 (from *Histoire de Charles XII*).

[13] Ibid., 364 (from *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*): "La nature s'efforce d'y faire du bien aux homes; mais les hommes n'y ont pas secondé la nature: vivant

gamut of the civilizing process was noted in this passage. Those who refused to cultivate their natural surroundings, thus vindicating their sense of freedom, were destined ultimately to lose this very freedom to other nations who had put in the effort to cultivate nature, and thus built their culture on solid foundations which ultimately bore political, economic and military fruit. For Voltaire and his contemporaries failing to do so was a form of sin, perhaps not sin in the strict religious sense but definitely according to the Enlightenment's novel version of social and cultural sin, which like its new scientific variant of anthropocentric cosmology was in large measure a transmutation of traditional religious notions. In similar vein, this time writing about Poland, Voltaire noted: "Thus this country, watered by many beautiful rivers, rich in pasturage, in salt mines, and covered with harvests, rests in poverty despite its abundance, because the people are slaves, and the nobles are proud and lazy."[14]

According to Joseph de Guignes the state of the Ukraine at the beginning of the eighteenth century under Polish rule was sorrowful compared to when it had been governed earlier by the Cossacks. Yet the Ukraine itself was naturally fertile. It was full of beautiful rivers, agreeable forests, various vegetables, plants, honey, game, fish and the largest domestic animals in Europe. "Nothing in this country is lacking in order to become one of the richest in Europe, but having communication with the sea."[15] Nothing of course except a proper government and culture, de Guignes seemed evidently to imply. Again this was a typical outlook for eighteenth-century historians who repeatedly found themselves discussing topics redolent of barbarism and lack of civilization, so inimical to their Enlightenment sensibility.

Historical themes of rude cultures were not lacking. This included of course truly savage societies. Of the ichthyophagi (fish-eaters) of ancient Arabia Gibbon wrote: "In this primitive and abject state, which ill deserves the name of society, the human brute, without arts or laws, almost without sense or language, is poorly distinguished from the rest of the animal creation."[16] Montesquieu

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des fruits que produit une terre aussi inculte que féconde, et vivant encore plus de rapines, amoureux à l'excès d'un bien préférable à tout, la liberté, et cependant ayant servi tour à tour la Pologne et la Turquie."

[14] Ibid., 94 (from *Histoire de Charles XII*): "Ainsi ce pays, arose des plus belles rivières, riche en pâturages, en mines de sel, et couvert de moissons, reste pauvre malgré son abondance, parce que le peuple est esclave, et que la noblesse est fière et oisive."

[15] *GHG*, 3: 536-7: "Il ne manque rien à ce pays pour être un des plus riches de l'Europe, que d'avoir communication avec la Mer." De Guignes took this description of the Ukraine almost verbatim from *A General History of the Turks, Moguls, and Tatars*, which we shall discuss below.

[16] *DF*, L, 3: 154.

observed that if savage countries were thinly populated and lacked the resources of large states this was because their inhabitants were opposed to work, and believed "that the only pursuits which are noble and deserve their attention are hunting and fishing."[17] Human beings were "like plants, which never grow well unless they are properly cultivated; in nations stricken by poverty the species suffers, and sometimes even degenerates."[18] Enlightenment literati did not have to resort to complete savagery in order to note the discrepancies between advanced civilization and the lack thereof. Even relatively advanced non-European societies were often perceived as inferior, whether in intellectual or material attainments.

One particular aspect of the latter was of course agriculture. The famous German traveler Carsten Niebuhr, whose description of Arabia was an important source for Gibbon's discussion of this region and its culture, noted the poor condition of agriculture in eighteenth-century Egypt: "Agriculture, the first and most important of all arts, is not in a very thriving condition here; at least, if we compare the present produce of the lands with what a country of such natural fertility might be brought, by cultivation, to produce." It was true that the Egyptian land produced abundant harvests, but this was due to its natural fertility and not to the "unhappy mode of government, and the misery of the husbandman," which could not "extinguish the natural fertility of the soil."[19] Writing of the Bedouins he claimed that "The genuine Arabs disdain husbandry, as an employment by which they would be degraded." Beyond a small amount of plowing and the use of domestic animals, of which some, like buffalo and cattle, were considered as demeaning to their possessors, the Bedouins, particularly their sheiks, viewed agricultural employment as degrading. "Among those tribes which apply to agriculture, the Schiechs at least live always in tents, and leave the culture of their grounds to their subjects, whose dwellings are wretched huts."[20] The implication was clear – a society which did not foster agriculture and did not accord it a dignified social status was constrained to remain in cultural inferiority.

The most obvious examples of cultural backwardness were presented by the many reports of savage societies discovered by Europeans during their overseas expansion, particularly in America, but also elsewhere. Raynal claimed that the

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[17] Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (Harmondsworth, 1973), 215-16 (Letter 120).

[18] Ibid., 220 (Letter 122).

[19] Carsten Niebuhr, *Travels through Arabia, and Other Countries in the East*, trans. Robert Heron, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1792), 1: 86-7.

[20] Ibid., 2: 159. On Niebuhr see Michael C. Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2007), 27-44.

New World when first discovered was "A vast continent, entirely uncultivated, human nature reduced to the mere animal state, fields without harvests, treasures without proprietors, societies without policy, and men without manners."[21] The problem with nature in various overseas countries throughout the globe was not with its potential, but with the inability of its inhabitants to take full advantage of the possibilities it offered. This was a human cultural and political problem, not one inherent in nature. Raynal observed how a feudal political system inhibited the cultural development that the country of Malacca afforded. "Nature had amply provided for the happiness of the Malays, by placing them in a mild, healthy climate... where the soil pours forth an abundance of delicious fruits to satisfy the wants of a savage life; and where it is capable of answering, by cultivation, all the necessary demands of society." But because of the despotic nature of the local government "This turbulent and oppressive scene gave rise to an universal savageness of manners. In vain did heaven and earth shower their blessings upon Malacca; these blessings only served to make its inhabitants ungrateful and unhappy."[22] It was better, Raynal implied, to live in natural surroundings which simply did not afford cultivation rather than to resist the possibility of achieving it in an inviting country, in which case this insistence on barbarism had a corrupting influence of its own.

The New World, the most pristine place Europeans encountered, offered the most glaring cases of cultural backwardness. James Adair, despite regarding the Indians as savage and prone to cruelty, usually had many praises for them. Yet when he depicted the area approximately of modern Alabama as the best and most fertile land he had ever seen in America, he claimed that the Indians because of "their situation" were unable to take advantage of the opportunities this land afforded. Adair further claimed that were the Europeans able to settle this land, in a short time they would have easily produced a greater and more varied yield of domestic animals and other products, which would have enriched them and their offspring as well as the naval commerce of Great Britain.[23] He called on Great Britain to cultivate the American continent since it could only profit by this, both materially and commercially, and he viewed leaving the American land in a state of lack of cultivation as a waste.[24]

Greenland offered a different perspective since it presented a challenge to any human beings attempting to gain a living in such harsh conditions. These conditions were a mitigating circumstance as even the Europeans acknowledged,

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[21] *PPH*, 2: 351.

[22] Ibid., 1: 102.

[23] James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Tuscaloosa, 2005), 296-7, and see also 359.

[24] Ibid., 435-46.

yet the end result was still a barbarous civilization. David Crantz, like other missionaries in Greenland, was very sympathetic to its inhabitants. He gave a detailed depiction of their society and manner of life, and in his opinion they were not totally devoid of culture. They had language, religion, social customs and basic technology. But throughout his discussion it was evident that Crantz regarded their demanding physical environment as a predominant influence on their lives and character, which were therefore inevitably rude and savage.[25] Their positive characteristics had developed despite, not because of, this harsh natural environment. Their barbarism from the Enlightenment perspective was a consequence of their not having reached that level of civilization which overcame nature and led to higher cultural advancement.

The New World was obviously one of the main topics which attracted William Robertson's attention, particularly in his *History of America*. Robertson wrote about the state of nature and of the living conditions in the West Indies in the first years of Spanish settlement there under the guidance of Columbus. He noted the fears of the Spaniards who began this settlement but still had not begun cultivating the land, claiming that "the diseases predominant in the torrid zone, and which rage chiefly in those uncultivated countries, where the hand of industry has not opened the woods, drained the marches, and confined the rivers within a certain channel, began to spread among them."[26] The lack of cultivating nature entailed diseases, suffering and lack of progress. Implicit in this passage was also the ability of humanity to convert nature from a hostile into an inviting habitation, but just like the locals this availed the Spaniards nothing so long as they had not had time to commence upon this process. "The labour and operations of man not only improve and embellish the earth, but render it more wholesome, and friendly to life. Where any region lies neglected and destitute of cultivation, the air stagnates in the woods, putrid exhalations arise from the waters; the surface of the earth, loaded with rank vegetation, feels not the purifying influence of the sun or of the wind; the malignity of the distempers natural to the climate increases, and new maladies no less noxious are engendered."[27] That was why the Spaniards encountered in America an unhealthy land ridden with many diseases. A further result of the uncultivated state of America, and its consequent natural inferiority, was the scarcity of its animal population and their inferior size and robustness compared with the animals in other continents. What was more widespread there was an uncommon

[25] David Crantz, *The History of Greenland*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1820 [1767]), 1: 123-220.

[26] *RHA*, 1: 173.

[27] Ibid., 2: 17.

proliferation of insects, reptiles and various noxious animals, all because of the scarcity of population and uncultivated condition of the continent.[28]

The Tartars

Historians had long had closer examples of cultural inferiority. These were often more barbarian than savage, which in a way was more condemnatory. Savages had essentially not reached the stage where they consciously chose not to adopt a peaceful and laborious existence, but barbarians did not have a similar excuse. Their choice to subsist by plunder and rapine and to resist the temptations of civilization was therefore particularly blameworthy. One of the most pronounced examples of this type of barbarity was provided by the Tartars. The seventeenth-century French orientalist François Pétis de la Croix, in his biography of Genghis Khan which was well-known to Gibbon, described the land known as Capschac, approximately southern and western Russia, and probably including parts of the Ukraine:

> This Country has but few Towns. Its Soil, if we except the great Desarts on the North Side, is excellent, abounding in all sorts of Grain, Pasturage and Cattel. A better Air cannot be found, nor better Water. The Women are handsomer there than in any other part of *Tartary*. The Men are courageous, and Lovers of War. They are divided into Tribes, many of which are at present composed of *Moguls* and *Turks*. The Towns being few, and the open Countries very large, every Tribe transport themselves frequently from one Place to another, seeking every Winter in the Southern Parts for Subsistence for themselves and Beasts, and in Summer visiting the Northern Parts of their Country.[29]

Despite the seventeenth-century initial roots of stadial interpretations which some scholars have noted, Pétis de la Croix did not take the opportunity here of making such observations. Moreover, writing in an overall positive tone of the Tartars, he did not see any special reason to criticize them for their lack of cultivating nature or vagrant lifestyle. In the following century, however,

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[28] Ibid., 18-23.

[29] François Pétis de la Croix, *The History of Genghizcan the Great, First Emperor of the Antient Moguls and Tartars*, trans. Penelope Aubin (London, 1722), 104. On Pétis de la Croix see Rolando Minuti, "Gibbon and the Asiatic Barbarians: Notes on the French Sources of *The Decline and Fall*," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 23-5.

such a passage read through the prism of Enlightenment historiography was utilized for different purposes. Gibbon and his generation in effect subverted Pétis de la Croix's point of view from a positive to a critical consideration of the Tartars. Indeed, a critical depiction of their lifestyle emphasizing their nomadic, warlike and cruel disposition, was already available in the seventeenth century in Beauplan's detailed treatment of this topic.[30]

This change of outlook became more pronounced early in the eighteenth century in the publication known as *A General History of the Turks, Moguls, and Tatars*, which was comprised of two volumes, the first a translation of *The Genealogical History of the Tatars* by the seventeenth-century Khan of Khowaresm, Abulghazi Bahadur Khan, and the second, particularly important for our purposes, the long geographical survey of Asia, *An Account of the Present State of the Northern Asia*, by the anonymous French translator of Abulghazi's work, appended seemingly as notes to the latter's work, which in the English edition owned by Gibbon included some further observations by the anonymous English translator of the French edition.[31] These two anonymous translators, particularly the French one, manifested the new early Enlightenment outlook which was much more critical of the Tartars than the not-much-earlier Pétis de la Croix. This work therefore affords a consideration of just how different the new cultural critique of the Enlightenment was, compared to the former century. The earlier perspective was doubly enhanced in Abulghazi's outlook, which also affords an opportunity of seeing how the Tartars themselves viewed those aspects of their culture which European historians later so criticized.

Abulghazi described the nomadic, whether military or pastoral, existence of the Tartars, without any note of reproach. He seemed to consider it equally commendable whether they chose any one of these options, or even occasionally advanced commerce. The latter had happened in the time of Genghis Khan when the merchants of neighboring countries felt secure enough to travel to his dominions, and he himself even sent traders and ambassadors of his own to Khowaresm, which resulted however in a war with this sultanate after the murder of these messengers.[32] Depicting some of the regions along the course of the river Amu (Amudarya, the ancient Oxus), which had exceedingly fertile soil and in which "all sorts of Fruit and Roots grew... in Perfection," Abulghazi immediately noted with equanimity the transhumant mode of life of the inhabitants.[33] Similarly, while depicting the various branches of the tribe of the Vigurs,

30 Beauplan, "A Description of Ukraine," 457-64.

31 *A General History of the Turks, Moguls, and Tatars, Vulgarly called the Tartars. Together with a Description of the Countries They Inhabit*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1729-30).

32 Ibid., 1: 100-103.

33 Ibid., 1: 235-6.

important allies of Genghis Khan, he described how some of them subsisted by cultivating the land and living in a town, others adopted a shepherding life and yet others continued the traditional life based on hunting and "conceiv'd so great a Hatred to that sort of Life which their Brethren had chosen, that it was a great Curse among them, to wish a Man to be reduc'd to live among Men who fed upon Beasts, eat their Meat dress'd, and chang'd Garb."[34]

For Abulghazi it was all the same what type of subsistence was adopted, though his constant concern with the various conquests of the Tartars and their descendants made clear what type of political and economic existence he preferred. The French translator of his work took a very different stance, constantly criticizing the lifestyle of the Tartars. He singled out the Muslim Tartars in particular more than the pagan ones, for their aversion to trade, noting that "they look on Traffick as an Occupation unworthy of them, they glory in spoiling as many Merchants as fall into their Hands, or hold them Ransom at so high a Price, that they never have an Inclination to return that way again." The inhabitants of some regions were more inclined to commerce, yet the lack of political unity similar to that achieved in the time of Genghis Khan prevented any real flourishing of trade.[35] This connection between political stability and material and economic progress, so important for Enlightenment historiography, was also perceptible in the Ukraine which thrived when political circumstances enabled it, and which the French translator of Abulghazi described as a particularly thriving and fertile region, in a passage which was basically plagiarized by de Guignes in his depiction of the Ukraine quoted above.[36] Similarly, despite all the advantages of the canals constructed in Russia by Peter the Great, these "would not fail to make Trade flourish there, if the Liberty which Commerce requires could agree with the Yoke of an arbitrary Government."[37]

The greatest contrast between a civilized form of life and a barbarian one was offered by the Tartars' mode of life. Thus certain provinces of Persia suffered greatly and lost much of their prosperity as a result of the inroads of "those terrible Neighbours" the Tartars.[38] The Tartars were simply not prone to the temptations of sedentary life. For example, the Crimea abounded "with all the Necessaries of Life, and all sorts of Fruits and Pulse thrive there to a Wonder; nevertheless the *Tatars* cultivate it their usual way; that is to say, as little as they can."[39] Abulghazi's translator repeatedly addressed this reluctance of the Tartars.

[34] Ibid., 1: 35.
[35] Ibid., 2: 412-13.
[36] Ibid., 2: 593-4; 587-96 in general.
[37] Ibid., 2: 682.
[38] Ibid., 2: 740-41, 745.
[39] Ibid., 2: 597.

Regarding the natural fertility of "Great Bucharia" he noted that it was "of very little use to the *Tatar* Inhabitants of this Country, who are naturally so lazy that they would rather go steal, pillage, rob and kill their Neighbours, than apply themselves to improve the Benefits Nature so liberally offers them."[40] What made these observations more potent was that the Tartars when they so wished were perfectly capable of cultivating their land. Thus, "As barbarous as the *Daghestan Tatars* are, they have nevertheless one very good Custom which they carefully observe, *viz.* that none among them shall marry till he has planted 100 Fruit Trees in a Place mark'd out; insomuch that one finds, every where throughout the Mountains of *Daghestan*, Forests of all sorts of Fruit Trees."[41] The reason for their slothfulness was a cultural one. Abulghazi's French translator was critical specifically of the Tartar mode of life described uncritically by Abulghazi himself. Writing of the barbarian existence of the pagan inhabitants of Siberia, a country which was naturally fertile and amenable, at least in certain regions, to very advantageous cultivation, the translator noted:

> They are so lazy, that they do not without Difficulty prevail upon themselves to make in the Summer their Provision of Fish for the Winter; and it is very rare to find any of them who think of the Year which is to come: All their Riches consist in Dogs and Rein Deer, which serve them instead of Horses. In this poor Condition they think themselves no less happy than the best furnish'd Nations, and when any one goes about to remonstrate to them that they live more like Beasts than Men; their usual answer is, That their Forefathers in all Times have lived after the same Fashion, and that they are resolved to do the same. That with regard to the present time, they see many of the *Russians*, who notwithstanding they almost toil themselves to death with Working, and pretend to be of a Religion all Divine, yet are more unhappy than themselves; and as for what concerns Futurity, as that is very uncertain, they leave it to the Disposal of the Creator.[42]

This was not just simple criticism of the rudeness of barbarians. Their backwardness was a matter of choice, not of ignorance of a different form of existence. Their adherence to their traditions was a historical determinant which prevented them from advancing beyond a certain nomadic subsistence, and made all their military might in the long run inferior to the more durable attainments of sedentary civilization. The difference between the outlooks of the seventeenth century and that of the early eighteenth century as exemplified

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40 Ibid., 2: 455, and see also the similar observations at 382-3, 446, 536, 572-4.

41 Ibid., 2: 615.

42 Ibid., 2: 630-31. For the natural fertility of Siberia, see 623-4.

by the translators of *A General History of the Turks, Moguls, and Tatars*, was thus very significant. Yet late Enlightenment historians went even further and systematized this cultural outlook, primarily in the more sophisticated versions of stadial theory. There is no doubt however that *A General History of the Turks, Moguls, and Tatars*, and particularly the second volume of geographical annotations, was an important source for late Enlightenment considerations of the Tartars, and indeed of barbarian nomadic societies in general. It was translated into several European languages and Gibbon made repeated use of it, noting that "The French and English editors of the Genealogical History of the tartars have subjoined a curious, though imperfect, description of their present state."[43]

According to Gibbon the Tartars were courageous but were "vagrant tribes of hunters and shepherds, whose indolence refuses to cultivate the earth, and whose restless spirit disdains the confinement of a sedentary life."[44] Essentially, the history of Tartar invasions and depredations of Europe and other regions gave every reason to view them as intransigent barbarians bent on their martial and pastoral *modus vivendi*. A prime example was the desolation left in the wake of their conquests in the thirteenth century, not least the example of Hungary as passionately recorded in the *Carmen Miserabile* by Rogerius of Apulia. Rogerius, a thirteenth-century monk who eventually became Archbishop of Split, described in this work the Mongol invasion of Hungary, and the utter destruction of the country following the Battle of Mohi (also known as the Battle of the Sajó River) in 1241, when the Tartar forces led by Batu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, annihilated the Hungarian army led by Béla IV. Rogerius depicted in detail the cruelty and desolation which the Tartars caused, and the indiscriminate manner in which they slaughtered the local inhabitants. He also gave attention to the ruin of material culture which inevitably ensued during this violent period. Following the Battle of Mohi the land and water were filled with bodies which were consumed by animals, although some bodies were in such a state that even the animals shunned them. Before they began looting, the Tartars were concerned only with slaughter to such an extent that even the booty, although only at first, did not interest them.[45] Following the battle the Tartars, while they intended to spend the winter in the area (which not much later they abruptly left), spared some of the inhabitants, at least as long as the

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[43] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 512 note 6.

[44] *DF*, XXVI, 1:1025.

[45] Rogerius von Torre Maggiore [Rogerius of Apulia], "Klagelied," trans. Hansgerd Göckenjan, in *Der Mongolensturm, Berichte von Augenzeugen und Zeitgenossen 1235-1250*, ed. Hansgerd Göckenjan and James R. Sweeney (Graz, 1985), 139-86, at 165-6.

latter gathered the harvest and worked in the vineyards.[46] After the Tartars suddenly decided to leave the area, Rogerius and his servant observed the state of the country from the top of a tree, and were impressed with its utterly desolate state. Among other things they saw how the gardens were filled with weeds and shrubs, although also with edible plants such as onions and raspberry, which supplied the famished population with some sustenance.[47] As a depiction of barbarism seen from an eighteenth-century perspective, Rogerius's account was particularly important since Gibbon regarded it as "the original narrative of a contemporary, an eye-witness, and a sufferer... the best picture that I have ever seen of all the circumstances of a Barbaric invasion."[48] Gibbon's own relation of the thirteenth-century Tartar invasion of Hungary, and Europe in general, was rather summary. Yet indicatively enough, and no doubt much under the impression of Rogerius's account, Gibbon noted that "Since the invasion of the Arabs in the eighth century, Europe had never been exposed to a similar calamity; and if the disciples of Mahomet would have oppressed her religion and liberty, it might be apprehended that the shepherds of Scythia would extinguish her cities, her arts, and all the institutions of civil society."[49]

This negative depiction of the Tartars did, however, leave one particular problem requiring consideration – that of the thriving empire of Kublai Khan. Marco Polo had of course outlined the most famous European depiction of this vast empire, replete with testimonies of its advanced centralized government radiating from Khan-balik (Peking), with its material, social, economic and general cultural attainments, all attesting to a very high degree of civilization. This included the cultivation of natural resources. "Among them no land is left idle that might be cultivated. Their beasts increase and multiply without end... So it is not difficult to understand why the population in these parts is so enormous and the means of life so plentiful."[50] This was answering the most essential eighteenth-century requisites for a healthy cultural basis, with the obvious resultant populousness. Yet this empire was short-lived and Enlightenment historians had to question why. According to de Guignes the moment the Tartars after the era of Kublai Khan and his successors left China, all the progress they had acquired there disappeared and they reverted back to their ancient rudeness.[51] This brief

[46] Ibid., 178.

[47] Ibid., 185-6.

[48] *DF*, LXIV, 3: 795 note 16.

[49] *DF*, LXIV, 3: 802-3.

[50] Marco Polo, *The Travels*, trans. and ed. Ronald Latham (Harmondsworth, 1958), 152, and, generally, 113-62 and passim.

[51] *GHG*, 3: 243-4. See also the discussions in *PBR*, 4: 110-53; and J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Idol Fo: Chinese and Christian History in the Enlightenment," in *Sceptics,*

period of high culture was evidently inimical to their nature, and vanished once the external example of the Chinese no longer exerted its influence. Voltaire claimed that the Tartars, despite all their centuries of vast conquests, were not interested in truly policing and governing these large territories, and were left in the sixteenth century with nothing but the knowledge that from their own country once issued the conquerors of the richest provinces of the earth.[52] Always censorious of the calamities of war, Voltaire was highly critical of the ancient adulation of the Germanic tribes in the style of Tacitus, or the adulation of the Tartars, whom he regarded as barbarians in comparison with the modern Russians who historically were their greatest victims.[53] It was however Gibbon who addressed this problem in the most insightful manner.[54] He depicted the rapid civilizing process the Tartars underwent in the thirteenth century when "the royal or *golden horde* exhibited the contrast of simplicity and greatness; of the roasted sheep and mare's milk which composed their banquets; and of a distribution in one day of five hundred wagons of gold and silver," which forced the submission of European and Asian rulers. Here Gibbon already implied the cultural dissonance at the heart of this rapid, too rapid, success – the discrepancy between military victories and true and lasting cultural attainments.

> The sons and grandsons of Zingis had been accustomed to the pastoral life; but the village of Caracorum was gradually ennobled by their election and residence. A change of manners is implied in the removal of Octai and Mangou from a tent to an house; and their example was imitated by the princes of their family and the great officers of the empire. Instead of boundless forest, the inclosure of a forest afforded the more indolent pleasures of the chace; their new habitations were decorated with painting and sculpture; their superfluous treasures were cast in fountains, and basons, and statues of massy silver; and the artists of China and Paris vied with each other in the service of the great khan.

Yet the Tartar capital was still small in comparison with European grandeur. The Tartars "might learn from their pastoral œconomy, that it is for the advantage of the shepherd to protect and propagate his flock," and therefore set their sights on China. Gibbon here made plain that it was a pastoral mentality and logic which propelled this vast conquest, not an inherent civilizing process. Nevertheless, initially under Mangu Khan and later to a greater extent under his brother and

Millenarians and Jews, ed. David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel (Leiden, 1990), 15-34.

52 Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols (Paris, 1963), 2: 400-401.

53 Ibid., 1: 51-2 (from *La philosophie de l'histoire*).

54 All the following quotations are taken from the discussion in *DF*, LXIV, 3: 804-7.

successor Kublai Khan, "a prince who had been educated in the manners of China," an era of peaceful progress ensued. This empire was however based in great measure on despotism, on "the numbers and servitude of the Chinese," who were left with "the empty names of philosophy, freedom, and filial obedience," thus not with the true incentives of political liberty.

> Under the reign of Cublai, letters and commerce, peace and justice, were restored; the great canal, of five hundred miles, was opened from Nankin to the capital; he fixed his residence in Pekin; and displayed in his court the magnificence of the greatest monarch of Asia. Yet this learned prince Declined from the pure and simple religion of his great ancestor; he sacrificed to the idol Fo; and his blind attachment to the lamas of Thibet and the bonzes of China provoked the censure of the disciples of Confucius. His successors polluted the palace with a crowd of eunuchs, physicians, and astrologers, while thirteen millions of their subjects were consumed in the provinces by famine. One hundred and forty years after the death of Zingis, his degenerate race, the dynasty of the Yuen, was expelled by a revolt of the native Chinese; and the Mogul emperors were lost in the oblivion of the desert.

The other branches of the Tartar kingdoms had by then shed the yoke of the Chinese Tartar Empire. "According to their respective situation they maintained the simplicity of the pastoral life, or assumed the luxury of the cities of Asia." In addition, they were prone to accept "a foreign worship," finally adopting Islam rather than Christianity and renouncing all ties "with the ancient Moguls, the idolaters of China."

The importance of this discussion cannot be exaggerated. Here was an opportunity for Gibbon to examine the universal theme not just of progress and the rise of civilizations and empires, but also of their decline and fall. Many significant themes were encapsulated in succinct form in Gibbon's consideration of the Chinese Tartar Empire. It afforded a much more manageable case study of these great historical themes than the complicated story of Rome's decline and fall, and there is no reason not to see the latter tale mirrored in the former, at least up to a point.[55] That said, Gibbon conceived the decline and fall of the Chinese Tartar Empire as inevitable, as a castle built in sand. It lacked the

[55] At *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 304, Gibbon wrote: "The Huns of Attila may, without injustice, be compared to the Moguls and Tartars, before their primitive manners were changed by religion and luxury; and the evidence of Oriental history may reflect some light on the short and imperfect annals of Rome." Gibbon here implied that the Moguls were unable in the long run to internalize the lessons of advanced civilization. They underwent a similar process of corruption like the Romans had undergone, only more quickly. Earlier, the Huns, implicitly,

proper foundations, which were first and foremost lack of the twin plights of political despotism and religious superstition, those perennial enemies of the Enlightenment. We shall have much to say below of Gibbon's connection between religion and politics, and the cultivation of natural resources. The Tartar example, in any case, presented this tale in simplified yet coherent form.

From its inception the Tartar Empire was based on despotism, and when this was coupled with superstition, famine was quick to follow. The Tartars may have been able to adopt the semblance of empire, yet this was foreign to their mental constitution. At heart they remained rude barbarians, and if anything they relinquished their simple virtues for the garb of progress which did not really fit them and was doomed to fail. In the process they lost both their ancient splendour and their transient glory and faded back to the desert from whence they came, leaving only a small historical trace. The difference between them and the Romans was that the latter's empire evolved organically and was thus a true civilization. It therefore underwent a much more complicated and protracted process of decline and fall. Yet the essential similarities, up to a point, could not be ignored. What predestined the Chinese Tartar Empire to failure were the laws of history which could not be abrogated. From an empirical point of view the manifestation of these laws could not be perceived with comparable clarity in the case of Rome, protracted and complicated as it was. Gibbon therefore nowhere directly suggested that Rome's decline and fall was similar to that of Tartar China. Yet the differences as much as the similarities between both historical examples reinforced the same Enlightenment cultural-historical philosophy.

The Romans and the Barbarians

The Tartars were far from the first barbarians to invade Europe. One of the perennial themes of European history was similar invasions, usually from the North, by a seemingly never-ending stream of barbarous hordes often known by the appellation of "Scythians," who depending on how far one went back in time, had successively meant various Germanic tribes, then Huns and finally the Tartars, to simplify a long list of extinct tribes and "nations" which it is now practically impossible to list and describe with any accuracy.[56] Classical historiography had also been greatly concerned with these invaders. The Greeks, themselves probably descendants of such invaders, were quick to describe them

had been unable even to reach the stage where they were confronted with this problem. For more on Gibbon's view of the Huns see below.

[56] See James William Johnson, "The Scythian: His Rise and Fall," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 20 (1959), 250-57.

and they appeared in Herodotus's rich ethnological panoply. He described how "Round the Black Sea... are to be found, if we except Scythia, the most uncivilized nations in the world. No one can claim that the rest have any of the arts of civilized life." The Scythians, however, had one proficiency, but this the most important one – self-preservation. The reason was that they relied neither on agriculture nor on permanent dwellings, but rather on the vagabond life of equestrian warriors feeding on cattle and thus easily overcoming invaders. "They have been helped in this by the nature of their country, and by the rivers which it contains, the land consisting of a rich and well-watered plain, with excellent pasture, and the rivers being almost as numerous as canals are in Egypt."[57] Read through an Enlightenment perspective this description would have acquired meanings which Herodotus had not intended. The stadial-theory outlook would have immediately recognized the difference between a vagabond and a sedentary existence. Moreover, the lack of necessity to combat nature here entailed a type of moral obligation. Failing to take advantage of this opportunity was not only a kind of sin for which the barbarians and the victims of their depredations paid. It also meant that the barbarians, in the opinion of Enlightenment historians, were in essence signing their own death-warrant, even if it would take centuries to come into effect. By refusing to embark on the road to civilization they were depriving themselves of a history in the full sense of the word.

In their own way Herodotus and other ancient historians were aware of this, if without the systematic framework of eighteenth-century philosophy. Julius Caesar had differentiated between the Germans and the Gauls. The former were less civilized and sedentary than the latter. "For agriculture they [the Germans] have no zeal, and the greater part of their food consists of milk, cheese, and flesh. No man has a definite quantity of land or estate of his own... [among other reasons because of] the fear that they may be tempted by continuous association [with one spot] to substitute agriculture for their warrior zeal." Another reason for this was to prevent inequality of wealth in society so that the common people would remain content.[58] Caesar was aware of the need for sedentary existence in order to begin the civilizing process primarily by embarking on agriculture, on the cultivation of nature. He also recognized that the barbarians were aware that they had this choice; some opted for this new life, others did not. Strabo, whose work Gibbon appreciated and extensively used, made a similar observation when he wrote of the German nations: "It is a common characteristic of all the peoples in this part of the world that they migrate with ease, because of the meagerness of their livelihood and because they do not till the soil or even store up food,

[57] Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth, 1968), 257.

[58] Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. H. J. Edwards (Loeb Classical Library, 1917), 347.

but live in small huts that are merely temporary structures; and they live for the most part off their flocks, as the Nomads do, so that, in imitation of the Nomads, they load their household belongings on their wagons and with their beasts turn withersoever they think best."[59]

Several centuries later there were still many similar examples of barbarism before the eyes of observers. Procopius, based on a fragment from the work of the fifth-century historian Priscus, described the Scrithiphini, one of the barbarian tribes who lived in Thule (Iceland or northern Scandinavia) and led a particularly barbaric existence. They lived "a kind of life akin to that of the beasts." This was apparent in all their habits and specifically in their mode of subsistence. They did not "derive anything edible from the earth. For they neither till the land themselves, nor do their women work it for them, but the women regularly join the men in hunting, which is their only pursuit." Game animals were abundant in the large forests surrounding them, and from these they derived their clothing and food.[60] From an eighteenth-century perspective this would have been understood as a life in the initial, hunting phase of stadial progression, but one willfully adhered to.

One of the themes which intrigued Enlightenment historians most was the opposition between the Roman Empire and the barbarian tribes which increasingly infringed on its borders, and ultimately of course toppled it. More than the military conflict they were interested in the clash of cultures, their mutual influences (but mainly that of the Romans on the barbarians) and generally in the insights that all this offered in the philosophical investigation of culture, morality and progress. Enlightenment historians recognized that the contact with the more advanced Romans was a defining experience for the barbarians, who reacted to it in intriguingly varied ways. These choices became most apparent after the fall of the empire, or rather during and after the long process of its decline and fall. Gibbon regarded the spirit of rivalry as a positive spur for progress. He claimed that what the Byzantines had lacked was the rivalry produced by contact with competing civilizations. "In all the pursuits of active and speculative life, the emulation of states and individuals is the most powerful spring of the efforts and improvement of mankind." The ancient Greeks, as well as the modern Europeans, enjoyed the proper mixture of local independence and competitive contact with their neighbors. The Romans

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[59] Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1917-32), 3: 157-8.

[60] *Procopius*, trans. H. B. Dewing, 7 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1914-40), 3: 419-21. For the relevant passage from this fragment see Priscus, [*History*], trans. R. C. Blockley, in idem, *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, 2 vols (Liverpool, 1981, 1983), 2: 222-377, at 375-7.

were in a less advantageous position, but still had the Greek example which they tried to emulate. Imperial Rome gradually deteriorated in this respect. But it was the Byzantines who were truly isolated, lacking the impetus provided by close contact and competition with other cultures. The kingdoms of medieval Europe did not supply this want, both because they themselves were in a far from advanced cultural situation, and because true contact between them and the East was lacking. "The conquerors of Europe were their [the Byzantines'] brethren in the Christian faith; but the speech of the Franks or Latins was unknown, their manners were rude, and they were rarely connected, in peace or war, with the successors of Heraclius." It was only the crusades which rekindled in Byzantium "a faint emulation of knowledge and military virtue."[61]

The Enlightenment had a very low opinion of medieval civilization. The eighteenth-century, to speak in generalizing terms, viewed the barbarian nations as those who gradually replaced the Romans as they became the conquerors of Europe. Ultimately the barbarians found themselves having to bear the heavy burden of government, which was much more difficult than that of conquest, and which the dark early Middle Ages suggested they were initially ill-equipped to bear. Some, though not all, refused to cultivate their natural surroundings, leaving this to the old native inhabitants. These had to try and maintain their culture in increasingly difficult conditions, surrounded by constant warfare and devoid of the protection of an established political order which their more fortunate ancestors had enjoyed. As we shall see in the next chapter, Enlightenment historians, particularly Gibbon, developed a nuanced outlook regarding the transition between the Roman and medieval civilizations. Nevertheless, medieval culture in itself was *grosso modo* viewed very censoriously in Enlightenment historiography, and the cultivation of nature or lack thereof played a vital role in this respect.

While addressing the state of Britain in pre- rather than post-Roman times, Thomas Carte's depiction of the lack of cultivation of nature in contemporaneous British societies was typical of the Enlightenment outlook on this aspect of barbarism. He claimed that before the arrival of the Romans "the greatest part of *Britain* lay uncultivated, covered with woods full of marshes undrained, and heaths over-run with ling and bushes; the *Old Britains* not understanding husbandry, and finding land enough to feed their cattle, which were all their substance, without being under any necessity of making improvements." The example of the more culturally advanced Belgian colonies did not arouse emulation among the local inhabitants. These persisted in their old pastoral type of existence based on transhumance, with very little urbanization.

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[61] See *DF*, LIII, 3: 421-2.

> This keeping of cattle, whose milk was the principal part of their sustenance, was the sole employment of all the common people among the *Britains*, except such as were retainers to the Gentlemen, and lived upon their demesnes: Thus they led a life not unlike that of the ancient *Nomades*; and being obliged to frequent removes, they lived like them under tents, which might easily be carried from one place to another, or else erected little cabins of the branches of trees, daubed over with mud to cover them, for the time they stayed in any quarter of a country.[62]

The stadial-type differentiation between nomadic and sedentary existence which lay at the bottom of this critique of barbarian existence was also evident in Carte's more common observations regarding the barbarian tribes which later ravaged the Roman Empire. All the Scythian and German nations in the time of the Emperor Gallienus joined forces "in order to attack those countries, where they expected to find the greatest, and the easiest booty. Different as they were in point of origin, they had all the same restless, turbulent, roving disposition; the same passion for plunder and rapine; the same fury for wasting, burning, and destroying every thing that was useful, beautiful, splendid, and magnificent in a country."[63]

Of course, a critical view of the barbarians did not exempt the Romans from censure, and Enlightenment historians were well-aware of the internal decay of the empire. The Abbé Dubos claimed that this decay began during the most glorious periods of imperial Roman history, even as early as the time of Augustus. Highlighting the cultivation of land as an element of this process of decay, he wrote:

> Numbers of people think that the arts and sciences perished under the ruins of that monarchy subverted and laid waste by the northern nations. They supposed therefore that the inundations of Barbarians, attended with the intire confusion of society in most of those places where they settled, deprived the conquered people of the proper conveniences, and even of the very desire to cultivate the polite arts. The arts, they say, could never subsist in a country whose cities were changed into fields, and their fields into deserts... This opinion is not less false, for its being so generally received... The arts and sciences were already degenerated and fallen into a state of decay, notwithstanding they had been cultivated with care, when those nations, the scourges of mankind, quitted the northern snows.[64]

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[62] Thomas Carte, *A General History of England*, 4 vols (London, 1747-55), 1: 76.

[63] Ibid., 1: 161-2.

[64] Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols (London, 1748), 2: 141-3.

This did not exempt the barbarians themselves from criticism. Indeed, it took for granted their cultural inferiority. Yet it did place the onus of cultural decay first and foremost on the Romans themselves, who had failed in maintaining their civilized attainments. More often than not, however, Enlightenment historians tended to be more straightforward in their condemnation of the barbarians and their failure to retain or emulate the Roman example in its more advanced form.

According to Pietro Giannone the ancient Romans had not engaged in and indeed had despised hunting, because Rome was surrounded by villages and gardens and hunting required traveling large distances; in addition they preferred pastimes such as gladiatorial battles. On the other hand the northern German tribes who conquered Europe from the Romans despised pastoral and agricultural pastimes and preferred hunting. They

> lived in Countries covered with Woods, where there was neither Corn, nor Wine, nor good Fruit; so that they were forced to live upon the Game they could catch, as the Savages of the cold Countries of *Armenia* continue to do. After they had passed the *Rhine*, and been settled in a better Climate, they were willing to reap the Benefit of Agriculture, Arts, and Commerce, but they could not apply themselves to them. They left these Professions to the *Romans*, whom they had subdued, and follow'd their own Customs; and as they neglected Agriculture, so they extolled Hunting.[65]

Giannone noted that he was here relying on the Abbé Fleury. Fleury in the passage referred to by Giannone was critical of a derogatory attitude toward agricultural pursuits, which he considered as the basis and prerequisite for advanced and virtuous culture such as that of antiquity, and not least of the ancient Romans.[66]

> Let us then frankly own that our contempt of husbandry is not founded upon any solid reason: since this occupation is no way inconsistent with courage, or any other virtue that is necessary either in peace or war, or even with true politeness. Whence then does it proceed? I will endeavour to shew the real cause. It comes only from use, and the old customs of our own country. The Franks, and other people of Germany lived in countries that were covered with forests: they had neither corn nor wine, nor any good fruits. So that they were obliged to live by hunting, as the savages still do in the cold countries of America. After they had crossed the Rhine, and settled on better lands, they were ready enough to take

[65] *GCH*, 2: 181.

[66] Abbé [Claude] Fleury, *A Short History of the Israelites, with an Account of their Manners, Customs, Laws, Polity and Religion*, trans. Ellis Farneworth (London, 1756), 28-39.

> the advantages that result from agriculture, arts, and trade: but would not apply *themselves* to any of them. They left this occupation to the Romans whom they had subdued, and continued in their ancient ignorance, which time seemed to have made venerable; and entailed such an idea of nobility upon it, as we have still much ado to get the better of.[67]

Instead of agriculture the ancient Franks and Germans preferred hunting, which became the general employment of the European nobility. Yet considered in a true light the customs of the ancients seemed more reasonable, agriculture was at least as profitable as hunting "and oxen and sheep are at least as useful for our support as dogs and horses."[68] We should note that Fleury and Giannone, familiar today mainly to scholars, were very popular authors in the eighteenth century. Gibbon in particular was greatly appreciative of both.[69]

Robert Henry gave a similar interpretation of what occurred in a different scene, Britain, where the conquest of the Romans had brought with it culture and progress but where their departure in the fifth century, while more voluntary than in Italy, followed by the arrival of the Saxons, entailed similar problems to those of the south. Henry depicted the state of ancient Britain in the interim between this departure of the Romans and the appearance of the Saxons. The Romans had left it in a good material and economic situation, but until the Saxons arrived the Britons found themselves subject to the control of many petty tyrants and continued incursions of the Scots and Picts.

> Great numbers of the inhabitants, driven to despair by so many miseries, neglected to plow and sow their lands, forsook their houses, and roaming up and down in the woods, led a savage kind of life, on the spontaneous productions of the earth, and what they could catch in hunting. To crown the whole, this neglect of agriculture naturally produced a famine, which was followed by a pestilence; and these two dreadful scourges put an end at once to the lives and sufferings of great multitudes of the unhappy Britons.[70]

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[67] Ibid., 33-4.

[68] Ibid., 34-5.

[69] For praise of both, see e.g. *DF*, XX, 1: 759 note 111. Giannone, including his influence on Gibbon, is discussed in Hugh Trevor-Roper, "Pietro Giannone and Great Britain," *The Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), 657-75; John Robertson, "Gibbon and Giannone," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 3-19; *PBR*, 2: 29-71.

[70] *HHGB*, 1: 85-6.

The only good result of all this was that the Scots and Picts, finding little left to plunder and fearing infection, ceased their incursions for several years. "Encouraged by this unexpected return of tranquility, the Britons issued from their lurking-places, repaired their houses, and applied to agriculture. Their lands, meeting with friendly seasons, after so many years of rest, produced all kinds of grain in a degree of abundance hitherto unknown; and the late famine was succeeded by the greatest affluence and plenty of all things." The Britons, however, plunged into intemperance and debauchery, and the northern enemies hearing of the new plenty, renewed their incursions and "reduced the Britons almost to the same distress from which they had so lately emerged." All this ended only with the invitation the Britons made the Saxons to enter northern Britain.[71]

Back in Italy the history of recurring invasions continued, and the Italians like the Britons found themselves oscillating between periods of calm and of turbulence, which made a consistent effort to cultivate nature extremely difficult. Ludovico Muratori wrote of the devastation in Italy during the Lombard invasion at the end of the sixth century, the waste of the cities and fields and the harm done to the inhabitants.[72] He was also aware that the state of lack of cultivation into which Italy was plunged continued for several centuries. He noted that Italy around the tenth century was still mostly forest.[73] Medieval Italy was overridden by wolves and bears, and monasteries were built in the midst of mountains, forests and marshes.[74] In the time of the early medieval barbarians even the castles were only covered with chaff roofs.[75] There were only small numbers of inhabitants in forested and marshy areas. During strong rainfalls the plains were inundated by water and mud and sediment piled up even in hilly areas.[76] Muratori remarked how the river sediments in a city such as ancient Modena gradually over the generations raised the height of whole areas, and what once was conceived as a small stream eventually created the high ground on which buildings were constructed in the eighteenth century.[77] This however was not something that medieval Modenese could have enjoyed. They were left

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71 Ibid.

72 Ludovico Antonio Muratori, "De Italiæ Statu, Habitatorum Affluentia, Agrorum Cultu, Mutationa Civitatum, Felicitate ac Infelicitate, Temporibus Barbaricis. Dissertatio Vigesimaprima," in *Antiquitates Italicæ Medii Ævi* (Milan, 1739), 2: 147-228, at 148.

73 Ibid., 150.

74 Ibid., 163.

75 Ibid., 166.

76 Ibid., 165.

77 Ibid., 179-80.

to deal with the forces of nature which for lack of cultivation caused havoc, and by proper care might have been averted.

Adam Smith expectedly noted the effect of this general historical process on commerce. According to Smith poor countries essentially were capable of attaining agricultural production almost as much as rich countries, but not so in the field of manufactures.[78] Nevertheless, agricultural work demanded more effort and intelligence than urban manufactures.[79] Smith depicted the centuries-long confusion which was occasioned by the overrunning of the Roman Empire by the Germans and Scythians. "The rapine and violence which the barbarians exercised against the antient inhabitants, interrupted the commerce between the towns and the country. The towns were deserted, and the country was left uncultivated, and the western provinces of Europe, which had enjoyed a considerable degree of opulence under the Roman empire, sunk into the lowest state of poverty and barbarism."[80] The lands were divided among the chiefs and main leaders of the barbarians, subsequently to be inherited for generations according to primogeniture. This had an adverse effect on the cultivation of the land both because of the lack of incentive for the proprietors, and because of the lack of motivation of the tenants or slaves who worked the land. This situation was still ostensible in many places in Smith's own time.[81] Another adverse effect of the barbarian invasions was due to their prolonged nature. Regular wars damaged only that type of wealth dependent on commerce. But the solid improvements of agriculture could be ruined only by the violent convulsions occasioned by the depredations of barbarian nations during one or two centuries, such as those that brought down the Western Roman Empire.[82]

The cultural and material devastation wrought by the barbarians on the once thriving territories of Europe was a perennial theme in Enlightenment historiography. No other historical occurrence offered such opportunities for discussing the disparities between civilization and barbarism. It highlighted all those themes so dear to the Enlightenment in its efforts to decry the effects of religious superstition, tyrannical politics and lack of material culture, including the cultivation of land. These were inseparable issues for eighteenth-century historians. As for early medieval Italy, they did not tire of descrying its woes. William Robertson depicted the state of Italy after the fall of the Roman Empire, the invasions of the barbarian tribes and the ensuing general devastation:

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78 *SAI*, 1: 16-17.
79 Ibid., 1: 143-4.
80 Ibid., 1: 381-2.
81 Ibid., 1: 382-9.
82 Ibid., 1: 427.

> But the state in which Italy appears to have been, during several ages after the barbarous nations settled in it, is the most decisive proof of the cruelty as well as the extent of their devastations. Whenever any country is thinly inhabited, trees and shrubs spring up in the uncultivated fields, and, spreading by degrees, form large forests; by the overflowing of rivers, and the stagnating of waters, other parts of it are converted into lakes and marshes. Ancient Italy, which the Romans rendered the seat of elegance and luxury, was cultivated to the highest pitch. But so effectually did the devastations of the barbarians destroy all the effects of Roman industry and cultivation, that in the eighth century a considerable part of Italy appears to have been covered with forests and marshes of great extent.[83]

According to Robertson the desolation in other parts of Europe was similar. Raynal claimed that after the fall of the Roman Empire and the invasions of the barbarian tribes "The nations of Europe, thus plunged a second time, by slavery and despair, into that state of insensibility and indolence, which must for many ages have been the primary state of the human race, derived little advantage from the fertility of their soil; and their industry was exhausted in the employments of a savage life. Tracts of country, at no great distance, were to them of as little importance, as if they had not existed."[84]

Eventually of course, and even though it took an excruciatingly long time, the medieval barbarians slowly embarked on their own civilizing process, as eighteenth-century intellectuals almost reluctantly conceded. Depicting the Normans in the ninth century Voltaire noted: "These too numerous savages, having nothing to cultivate but ungrateful lands, lacking manufactures, and deprived of arts, sought only to remove far from their lands of origin. Brigandage and piracy were necessary for them like carnage for ferocious beasts."[85] King Rollo was the only one among the Normans who ceased to be barbarous because he sought a fixed establishment.[86] Voltaire was not disposed to acknowledge any type of "barbarian virtue," and the lack of material sedentary culture was a particularly significant aspect of the medieval barbarism which he abhorred. Hume addressed the same idea in more precise terms:

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[83] *RHC*, 1: 243 note 5.

[84] *PPH*, 1: 9.

[85] Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, 1: 385: "Ces sauvages trop nombreux, n'ayant à cultiver que des terres ingrates, manquant de manufactures, et privés des arts, ne cherchaient qu'à se répandre loin de leur patrie. Le brigandage et la piraterie leur étaient nécessaires, comme le carnage aux bêtes féroces."

[86] Ibid., 1: 389.

> The barbarians, who subdued the Roman empire, though they settled in the conquered countries, yet being accustomed to a rude uncultivated life, found a part only of the land sufficient to supply all their wants; and they were not tempted to seize extensive possessions, which they knew neither how to cultivate nor enjoy. But the Normans and other foreigners, who followed the standard of William [the Conqueror], while they made the vanquished kingdom the seat of government, were yet so far advanced in arts as to be acquainted with the advantages of a large property; and having totally subdued the natives, they pushed the rights of conquest (very extensive in the eyes of avarice and ambition, however narrow in those of reason) to the utmost extremity against them [the Anglo-Saxons].[87]

Hume was critical of the subjection of the Anglo-Saxons by the Normans and of the latter's greed. But he approved of their will to cultivate as much land as possible. Eventually this seemed a case of beneficial unintended consequences.

One of the most interesting examples of a discussion of barbarian culture in *The Decline and Fall* was that of Attila and the Huns. On the one hand Gibbon viewed them as quintessential barbarians, writing that "If a line of separation were drawn between the civilized and the savage climates of the globe; between the inhabitants of cities, who cultivated the earth, and the hunters and shepherds, who dwelt in tents, Attila might aspire to the title of supreme and sole monarch of the Barbarians."[88] The Huns had "the insolent demands of the Barbarians, who had acquired an eager appetite for the luxuries of civilized life." This, despite the fact that they "had formed their encampments within the limits of modern Hungary, in a fertile country, which liberally supplied the wants of a nation of hunters and shepherds."[89] This seemed quite a damning picture, painting the Huns as barbarians who were only interested in the material luxuries of civilized nations, not in true cultural progress. Yet while Gibbon consistently emphasized their barbarity, he was willing to concede them at least some cultural attainments.

Of course, this did not mitigate the general portrayal of the barbarity of the Huns, which was particularly deplorable because they seemed totally unwilling to take advantage of the opportunity for emulation that contact with more advanced civilizations afforded them. "In all the invasions of the civilized empires of the South, the Scythian shepherds have been uniformly actuated by a savage and destructive spirit." The restraints of war were based on the principles of knowledge of the benefits of a moderate use of conquest, and apprehension of

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87 *HHE*, 1: 226.

88 *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 298.

89 *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 294-5.

retaliation by the enemy. "But these considerations of hope and fear are almost unknown in the pastoral state of nations." The Huns were ignorant of how to take advantage of the knowledge of their Roman captives. "In the hands of a wise legislator, such an industrious colony [Roman captives] might have contributed to diffuse, through the deserts of Scythia, the rudiments of the useful and ornamental arts." But under Attila they were randomly dispersed. "The estimate of their respective value was formed by the simple judgment of unenlightened, and unprejudiced, Barbarians." Gibbon noted that they respected ministers of all religions, including the Christian missionaries. But "The pastoral tribes, who were ignorant of the distinction of landed property, must have disregarded the use, as well as the abuse, of civil jurisprudence." Furthermore, "The mechanic arts were encouraged and esteemed, as they tended to satisfy the wants of the Huns."[90] Gibbon was slightly inconsistent here. On the one hand the Huns did not take sufficient advantage of the Romans' knowledge. But on the other hand they were religiously tolerant, and regarding the "mechanic arts" they encouraged the Romans and learned from them. Gibbon also implied that when the Huns did not learn from Roman jurisprudence, they avoided both its advantages and its abuse. Yet overall Gibbon seemed aware that without law, despite its disadvantages, there was no exit from a barbaric state.

Gibbon relied heavily on Priscus's famous account of his visit to the Huns' camp as a member of the Roman embassy to Attila. Priscus had related a conversation he had at the camp with a Greek who among the Huns had become, from a slave, a free man with a family. The latter criticized the deterioration of law in the empire. Priscus, disagreeing with him, defended the laws of the empire and managed to partially convince him, so that the former slave agreed that Roman law was in itself good, but unlike in the past, was being neglected.[91] In relating the same passage Gibbon seemed more in agreement with the former slave than with Priscus, thus in effect subverting the intent of the author. Gibbon used this opportunity to comment on how Roman law had become distorted, unjust and corrupt in the declining empire, with its various vices.[92] Even more interesting was Gibbon's version of Priscus's account of how the members of the Roman embassy had enjoyed the hospitality of the Huns and received abundant provisions from them.[93] Gibbon took the opportunity and inserted, in a note, philosophical ruminations in Enlightenment spirit which were not mentioned by Priscus, writing that "The Huns themselves still continued to despise the labours of agriculture: they abused the privilege of a victorious nation; and the Goths,

90 *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 303-6.
91 Priscus, [*History*], 267-73.
92 *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 306-7.
93 Priscus, [*History*], 261-3.

their industrious subjects who cultivated the earth, dreaded their neighbourhood, like that of so many ravenous wolves."[94] Ultimately, their hospitality, tolerance and not insignificant material attainments notwithstanding, the Huns were steadfast barbarians in Gibbon's eyes, in contrast with other barbarian tribes who had taken the opportunity of contact with their more advanced Roman subjects to emulate cultural progress. Not least among the reasons for this condemnation was, not surprisingly, the Huns' unwillingness to engage in agriculture.

Gibbon outlined a not dissimilar line of arguments while detailing one of his common condemnations of feudalism. While discussing the character of the medieval Franks, he noted both their courage, hardiness and loyalty, but also their lack of an orderly government. "In the disorder of the tenth and eleventh centuries, every peasant was a soldier, and every village a fortification; each wood or valley was a scene of murder and rapine." Such disorder was inevitably bound up with neglect of the cultivation of nature. "In the days of feudal anarchy, the instruments of agriculture and art were converted into the weapons of bloodshed: the peaceful occupations of civil and ecclesiastical society were abolished or corrupted; and the bishop who exchanged his mitre for an helmet, was more forcibly urged by the manners of the times than by the obligation of his tenure." Feudal society was detrimental to most aspects of cultural progress, whether social, judicial or material.[95]

The situation of Europe generally of course improved from the "revival of letters," as the Renaissance was often termed in the early modern era, and as Enlightenment historians were fond of emphasizing. Yet they were well-aware that at every twist and turn barbarism was ready to lift its ugly head. Culture was not only to be attained but also to be constantly maintained, which was at least as difficult. History gave ample examples of what happened when the price of vigilance was not paid, and Enlightenment historians were quick to emphasize the connection between bad politics and bad culture. Robert Henry writing of fifteenth-century agriculture, claimed that although it was "the most necessary and useful of all arts, [it] could not flourish or be much improved, when those who cultivated the soil were little better than slaves, and laboured not so much for themselves, as for their haughty masters, who, in general, treated them with little kindness, and less respect." The simple medieval peasants were constrained to work or fight under the feudal system, and laws were made to compel them to follow unprofitable agricultural labor. This however was to little effect, and

[94] *DF*, XXXIV, 2: 313, note 42.

[95] *DF*, LIII, 3: 412.

the result was the important fifteenth-century revolution of inclosing lands and converting them from cultivation to pasturage.[96]

Giannone depicted the state of Sicily in the middle of the fourteenth century under the rule of the young and short-lived Don Lewis (Louis the Child):

> [T]he Affairs of *Sicily* grew daily worse and worse; for by the Weakness of the young king *Don Lewis*, the Quarrels among the *Sicilians* increasing, and all the Barons and People of the Island being divided, the Tillage of the Fields was neglected, which is the principal Revenue of that Kingdom; in like manner all other Traffick was laid aside, and nothing but Robberies, Burnings, and Slaughter were minded: Hence proceeded Indigence and Misery to the whole Island, as well as Poverty and Weakness to the King, the People being not only unable to pay the extraordinary Subsidies, but even the wonted and ordinary.[97]

Similar despondency also happened in much later times, even if it was not as widespread or common as in the Middle Ages. Giannone depicted the declining state of Spain during the reign of Philip II. This was due to several reasons, including the debts incurred in order to finance his many wars, the de-peopling of Spain by the stream of emigrants to the colonies in the Indies, the unfitness of the Spaniards to draw commerce to their cities and ports and, significantly, "the little Care they took of Agriculture, insomuch, that though their Fields were both spacious and fertile, yet, through the Scarcity of Husbandmen, and Laziness, they were not sufficiently cultivated."[98]

Religion and Recalcitrant Nature

How did medieval historians view the same issues from their own closer perspective? In fact the lack of cultivation of nature seemed to them too of vital significance. Paul the Deacon depicted the great pestilence in the province of Liguria, probably in 566, writing in vivid terms of how the cultivation of nature was abandoned and "the world [was] brought back to its ancient silence."[99] Already in the early Middle Ages came recognition of the control of nature as

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96 *HHGB*, 5: 446-8.

97 *GCH*, 2: 242.

98 Ibid., 2: 671.

99 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke, ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia, 1974), 57-8. See also the comments in Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800), Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), 389-90.

a sign of culture (or the mutual lack thereof). Moreover, in this predominantly agrarian era nature was a near and tangible presence in people's lives. Paul the Deacon was well-appreciated by Gibbon, not least because of his relatively realistic perspective compared to other medieval historians.[100] Yet even here there was not lacking a certain supernatural element, "a trumpet as of warriors," as a background for the betrayal as it were of nature. This religious ingredient was more evident when Paul wrote of Gregory I's death: "There was then a very cold winter and the vines died in nearly every place. Also the crops failed, partly destroyed by mice and partly smitten by the blight. And indeed the world was then bound to suffer from famine and drought when, upon the departure of so great a leader, a lack of spiritual nourishment and the dryness of thirst attacked the souls of men."[101] Nature thus echoed the divine presence in human affairs. Poignantly, the level of cultivating nature could become a measure for the state of culture even at such a seemingly "dark" stage of European history. Later a similar outlook was evinced by Otto of Freising, who after depicting the natural bounty of the province of Pannonia (the Carpatians) noted: "But as it has suffered frequent inroads of the barbarians, it is not surprising that the province remains crude and uncultured in customs and in speech." Furthermore, "One seems justified in blaming fortune, or rather in marveling at divine patience that has exposed so delightful a land to such – I will not say men, but caricatures of men [the invading Hungarians from Scythia]."[102]

Even in Renaissance historiography despite its more realistic outlook, divine accommodation occasionally reappeared. Machiavelli, while depicting the great storm which ravaged and strew devastation in Tuscany in 1456, claimed that God thus refreshed among people the memory of His power. He wanted, however, to warn rather than to punish Tuscany, hence the tempest only caused partial damage when it did not afflict the center of any densely populated city.[103] Yet Renaissance historiography often regarded human will as a determining factor in history equal to divine intervention or to fortune. Jean Bodin could allocate a prime reason for barbarism in the distance from culture, claiming that the reason various barbaric peoples were cruel and uncivilized was "for the farther one is from human culture, that is, from the nature of men, the nearer he approaches to the likeness of beasts, which, since they are lacking in reason, are

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100 See *DF*, XLV, 2: 849 note 8.

101 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, 172. Also Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 400-401.

102 Otto of Freising and His Continuator, Rahewin, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, with Richard Emery (New York, 1966), 66.

103 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Princeton, 1988), 269-71.

unable to restrain their wrath and appetites."[104] Such an observation answered most of the later eighteenth-century requirements of rudeness.

Taking into account the religiously motivated intellectual debates which influenced ecclesiastical historiography in the seventeenth century, it was not surprising that a divine accommodation outlook continued to appear. Prominent in this respect was le Nain de Tillemont. For example, he regarded the invasion of Spain by the barbarian tribes at the beginning of the fifth century as divine punishment for the inhabitants' religious iniquities.[105] Similarly the Sack of Rome in 410 was a divine chastisement of the Romans, mitigated only by the respect for Christians on the part of the invader Alaric, itself also divinely inspired.[106] Elsewhere Tillemont depicted Attila as the divine scourge sent by God to purify the elect by temporal suffering, later punishing the instruments of this scourge with eternal tortures.[107] Tillemont regarded the great famine and plague which attacked Constantinople in 446 as divine punishment for the sins of its inhabitants. On a slightly different note, immediately following this passage he depicted the great earthquake which ravaged the entire eastern Mediterranean in 447, devastating not just Constantinople but many other areas as well.[108] Here he untypically did not evoke any divine intent, perhaps because he found it difficult to justify such an act regarding so many countries and cities. When a choice had to be made whether to retain the notion of divine omnipotence or that of divine benevolence the latter seemed more important.

The whole religious outlook on the "rebellion" of nature changed significantly in eighteenth-century historiography. According to Voltaire the new evils which arose in Europe in 1755 after the relatively quiet years since the end of the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748, "seemed to be announced" ("semblèrent être annoncés") by the earthquakes which shook the Mediterranean world, most notably in Lisbon.[109] But "announced" here was metaphorical, no longer the language of divine accommodation. This was a continuation of Voltaire's terse

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[104] Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, trans. and ed. Beatrice Reynolds (New York, 1969), 99. But Bodin also observed that human societies could regain their lost cultural progress. In a version of a very common theme in early modern historiography, he claimed that people in the postdiluvian Golden and Silver Ages "were scattered like beasts in the fields and the woods." They lived by force and crime, till gradually they returned from this barbaric state to the refinement of society. See ibid., 298.

[105] Louis Sébastien le Nain de Tillemont, *Histoire des Empereurs*, 6 vols (Bruxelles, 1732-49), 5: 254-5.

[106] Ibid., 5: 257-9.

[107] Ibid., 6: 57.

[108] Ibid., 6: 45-6.

[109] *VOH*, 1476 (from *Précis du siècle de Louis XV*).

dismissal of Leibniz's optimistic philosophy in the earlier famous poem on the same natural catastrophe. Voltaire was unwilling to accept any justification for human suffering on such a magnitude and famously depicted such acquiescence as ridiculous Panglossianism. The idea that any kind of purposeful divine intent was behind such natural occurrences seemed to him almost unworthy of refutation. This was precisely the type of religious superstition which was utilized in order to manipulate the masses, and which became the main butt of Enlightenment criticism throughout the eighteenth century. This was also the opinion of the Abbé de Mably, who condemned the ecclesiastics of Charlemagne's era for threatening those who refused to pay them taxes with making their fields sterile. Mably particularly censured the ecclesiastics' use of the figure of the Devil in their favor, as a force that would punish the people by causing famine and striking their fields with afflictions if they refused to pay taxes.[110] Raynal, while discussing the superstitions of the Mexicans during the war with Cortez, claimed that calamitous natural disasters such as the crashing of meteorites, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, gave rise to superstitious beliefs such as predictions based upon the state of the stars. Such natural calamities could cause inundations, or the replacement of one tract of land by another.[111] They "excite and keep up terror in the minds of men. This terror has been diffused, and received the sanction of every system of superstition."[112]

In *The Decline and Fall* there was ample awareness of the influence of natural calamities on human events, for example the earthquakes in the era of Justinian.[113] Yet ultimately according to Gibbon humanity, not nature, was its own worst enemy. This was evident when he wrote, regarding the religious apprehensions awakened by the earthquake in the time of Valentinian and Valens, when the fall of the Western Empire was imminent: "[M]an has much more to fear from the passions of his fellow-creatures, than from the convulsions of the elements. The mischievous effects of an earthquake, or deluge, a hurricane, or the eruption of a volcano, bear a very inconsiderable proportion to the ordinary calamities of war."[114] If people failed to command the forces of nature this was first and foremost their own failure. Natural catastrophes were only exigent circumstances in the normally pliant natural surroundings, which human beings were obliged to overcome and harness for their own advantage if they wanted to rise from barbarism to civilization. Sloth was the enemy of culture. While there was a point

[110] Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Observations sur l'histoire de France*, 2 vols (Geneva, 1765), 1: 150-52.

[111] *PPH*, 2: 379-81.

[112] Ibid., 380.

[113] *DF*, XLIII, 2: 772-4.

[114] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1024.

from which humanity was truly left to the mercy of the elements and nobody could arrest an earthquake (since divine intervention was no longer expected), there was still much that could be done to mitigate significantly the ravages of such disasters, as eighteenth-century intellectuals like Voltaire, keenly aware of the neglect that had exacerbated the disaster in Lisbon, were constantly pointing out.

The punishment of natural calamities was not a divine one, but in large measure it became a human one. When human societies failed to control nature they were ineluctably consigning themselves to rude barbarity. Evincing his stadially-based appreciation of the importance of agriculture, Gibbon noted that the ancient Germans subsisted more by hunting and pasturage than by agriculture, not to mention more sophisticated technology such as that afforded by advanced metallurgy. "A small quantity of corn was the only produce exacted from the earth: the use of orchards or artificial meadows was unknown to the Germans; nor can we expect any improvements in agriculture from a people, whose property every year experienced a general change by a new division of the arable lands, and who, in that strange operation, avoided disputes, by suffering a great part of their territory to lie waste and without tillage."[115] Social and political retardation were thus intertwined with material backwardness, both mutually affective. Gibbon connected material and moral decline. He emphatically negated a very uncomplimentary notion of rude barbarism with primitivistic conceptions of the purity of a pastoral Golden Age. In effect, using stadial terminology he claimed that without cultivating nature human civilization was hardly possible, and human beings were little more than unreasonable animals. The whole gamut of these ideas was evident in the introductory remarks to his discussion of the pastoral manners of the Tartars:

> The different characters that mark the civilized nations of the globe, may be ascribed to the use, and the abuse, of reason; which so variously shapes, and so artificially composes, the manners and opinions of an European, or a Chinese. But the operation of instinct is more sure and simple than that of reason: it is much easier to ascertain the appetites of a quadruped, than the speculations of a philosopher; and the savage tribes of mankind, as they approach nearer to the condition of animals, preserve a stronger resemblance to themselves and to each other. The uniform stability of their manners, is the natural consequence of the imperfection of their faculties. Reduced to a similar situation, their wants, their

[115] *DF*, IX, 1: 236. For the claim that Gibbon subverted Tacitus's praise of the ancient Germans into a belittling view, which asserted that Rome fell not because of their activities but primarily because of internal decay, see David Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1988), 80-88. See also the important discussion at *PBR*, 4: 79-96.

> desires, their enjoyments, still continue the same; and the influence of food or climate, which, in a more improved state of society, is suspended, or subdued, by so many moral causes, most powerfully contributes to form, and to maintain, the national character of Barbarians. In every age, the immense plains of Scythia, or Tartary, have been inhabited by vagrant tribes of hunters and shepherds, whose indolence refuses to cultivate the earth, and whose restless spirit disdains the confinement of a sedentary life. In every age, the Scythians, and Tartars, have been renowned for their invincible courage, and rapid conquests. The thrones of Asia have been repeatedly overturned by the shepherds of the North; and their arms have spread terror and devastation over the most fertile and warlike countries of Europe. On this occasion, as well as on many others, the sober historian is forcibly awakened from a pleasing vision; and is compelled, with some reluctance, to confess, that the pastoral manners, which have been adorned with the fairest attributes of peace and innocence, are much better adapted to the fierce and cruel habits of a military life.[116]

The influence of the natural environment, though important, receded before civilization.[117] "Moral causes" was a significant designation. For Gibbon and his contemporaries the opposition between barbarism and culture had clear religious overtones. Even those like Gibbon who were not particularly religious did not deny the tradition of divine sanction of nature for humanity. Gibbon's exceptional intellectual qualities notwithstanding, philosophically he was in tune with the mainstream eighteenth-century conservative approach to ethical, philosophical and social issues. He belonged more to the Moderate, not the Radical Enlightenment.

Some Further Remarks about Gibbon

The nature of Gibbon's religious opinions has remained for many years a source of debate among scholars. Since the seventeenth century Protestantism in particular had inculcated the need for a rational scientific investigation of nature.[118] Gibbon absorbed the religious overtones of the requirement to

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[116] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1025. The extolling of the manly and free qualities of the barbarian warriors was no recompense for material and cultural rudeness in the Enlightenment outlook.

[117] See in this context also *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1029.

[118] There is a large literature on this topic. See for example Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World, Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth, 1984), esp. 78-80. For another approach to the difference between Catholic and Protestant attitudes toward nature, see Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature, the Green and the Real in the Late*

command nature which united, more than separated, Protestant and Catholic scientists and philosophers. Gibbon's depiction of humanity's command of nature was intimately connected to the religious and political topics to which he devoted more attention. His was an integrated outlook and he viewed material, religious, social and political factors as thoroughly interconnected. Therefore, without giving at least some attention to these topics we cannot truly understand his attitude toward material culture and toward the historical view of the cultivation of nature in general. Gibbon's attitude toward politics and religion has received a large amount of scholarly attention, and we will therefore only be considering those aspects of these topics which are necessary for the present discussion.

The exact nature of his religious views has remained the central problem in studies of Gibbon, and no definite explanation has resolved it. It would seem that any notion of Gibbon as an atheist in the totally unbelieving rendering of the term is unfounded. In early modern Europe the designation "atheistic" was leveled at anyone or anything which seemed religiously unpalatable from any number of points of view. Even among the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century Paris there were very few atheists in the truly non-believing sense of the term.[119] Shelby T. McCloy's old depiction of Gibbon as a religious agnostic favoring toleration and an unostentatious religion generally still rings true.[120] But it does not explain Gibbon's constant and conflicting religious tergiversations throughout his life. These have resulted in a wide variety of scholarly interpretations ranging from considering him as moderately religious to absolutely skeptical, if not actually an atheist.[121] Scholars such as J. G. A. Pocock and Patricia B. Craddock have

Renaissance (Philadelphia, 2006), 151-5, 167-9, 249-50. Such differences, however, should not be over-emphasized. Any list of prominent early modern scientists is likely to yield an equal number of Protestant and Catholic figures.

[119] See Alan Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie, an Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, 1976). There is no room here for an extended list chosen from the extremely large literature on early modern non-belief, but an excellent bibliographical overview of studies up to the early 1990s is available in David Wootton, "New Histories of Atheism," in *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Hunter and David Wootton (Oxford, 1992), 13-53.

[120] Shelby T. McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity* (New York, 1933), 13-48.

[121] For a short overview of various interpretations of Gibbon's consideration of religion, and its role in the fall of the Roman Empire, see *PBR*, 2: 377-8. To give only a few examples from the varied literature on this topic, for Gibbon as essentially religious see Paul Turnbull, "The 'Supposed Infidelity' of Edward Gibbon," *The Historical Journal*, 5 (1982), 23-41. For Gibbon as anti-religious but not devoid of religious sentiment see David Wootton, "Narrative, Irony, and Faith in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of

claimed that following the French Revolution Gibbon, who considered Hume and himself as skeptics, not atheists, regretted his contribution to the weakening of religion, since this contributed to moral laxity and ultimately aided the revolution. According specifically to Pocock, Gibbon may have resented that in the aftermath of the revolution he was classified with Voltaire as one of the authors of the crisis, and therefore depicted himself in his memoirs as more of a religious conformist than he really was.[122] David Womersley has emphasized Gibbon's quest for literary fame as a central motivation behind his seeming religious prevarication. Motivated by this desire and wishing to control it once he won it, his attitude toward religion was initially provocative but later became defensive once the desired attention he had won became hostile. He was constantly worried over his reputation, and this was the reason why he took the religious criticism leveled at the first volume of *The Decline and Fall* into consideration and developed a subtler discussion of religion in the following volumes.[123]

There is no doubt that Gibbon was more opposed to superstition, to the abuse of religion, than to Christianity in general.[124] He was well aware that religion could not be denied its importance in human affairs. This was evident in his statement: "The use and abuse of religion are feeble to stem, they are strong and irresistible to impel, the stream of national manners."[125] Occasionally he opposed Christianity in general, specifically as a contributing force to the fall of the Roman Empire.[126] He was particularly critical toward religion in his youth. More than a decade before the publication of the first volume of *The Decline and Fall* he observed that "A Freethinker may be rational or wild, superficial or profound – However the road is open before him, & his sight clear."[127]

John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 203-34. For Gibbon as a religious skeptic see B. W. Young, "'Scepticism in Excess': Gibbon and Eighteenth-Century Christianity," *The Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), 179-99.

[122] See Patricia B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian 1772-1794* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 171-2; *PBR*, 1: 28, 250-53; J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Primitive Church," in *History, Religion, and Culture, British Intellectual History 1750-1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (Cambridge, 2000), 48-68.

[123] David Womersley, "Gibbon's Religious Character," in *History, Religion, and Culture, British Intellectual History 1750-1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (Cambridge, 2000), 69-88, esp. 88; and of course, his *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City', the Historian and his Reputation 1776-1815* (Oxford, 2002).

[124] *DF*, XXXVIII, 2: 489. See J. G. A. Pocock, "Superstition and Enthusiasm in Gibbon's History of Religion," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 8 (1982), 83-94.

[125] *DF*, LVIII, 3: 567.

[126] *DF*, XLIX, 3: 86.

[127] "Hints," in *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia B. Craddock (Oxford, 1972), 92.

What exactly he saw clearly was not really apparent since earlier Gibbon was already vacillating in his attitude toward religion, and this not even counting his temporary Catholic conversion. Thus he wrote approvingly regarding the notion of a power superior to humanity.[128] He noted that "The poverty of human language, and the obscurity of human ideas, makes it difficult to speak worthily of THE GREAT FIRST CAUSE."[129] In his memoirs he related how in time he subsided to a placid indifference toward the religious criticisms of *The Decline and Fall*.[130] On the other hand, recalling his visits to Paris, he noted: "nor could I approve the intolerant zeal of the philosophers and Encyclopædists the friends of d'Olbach [*sic*] and Helvetius: they laughed at the skepticism of Hume, preached the tenets of Atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt."[131] During his 1763 visit to Paris, however, he actually seemed happily oblivious to such issues.[132] Ascertaining what were his precise views on religion is therefore difficult. Yet his general *Weltanschauung* suggested a relatively conservative religious and political stance.

In *The Decline and Fall* he found positive things to say about Christianity, and religion in general, in their unabused forms. He claimed that the barbarians by being Christianized learned cultivation, literacy and a historical sense, and this enabled the creation of a Christian and European unified entity separate from the rest of the world.[133] Elsewhere he implied that the proscription of gladiatorial battles, beginning with the Emperor Honorius in the fifth century, was a positive influence of Christianity.[134] And while discussing the Reformation he claimed in effect to be religious, not a deist.[135] Most surprisingly to those bent on the image of the impious Gibbon were positive references to Christianity which were made, of all places, in the famous fifteenth chapter. These concerned primarily Christianity's influence on public morals, such as saving the lives of

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[128] Edward Gibbon, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature and An Essay on the Study of Literature*, with Introduction by John Valdimir Price (Dublin, 1777 [the French edition] and London, 1764 [the English translation]; reprint London, 1994), chapter LXV, 104, of the French edition.

[129] From "Critical Observations on the Design of the Sixth Book of the Æneid," in *English Essays*, 146-7.

[130] Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of my Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1966), 159-60.

[131] Ibid., 127.

[132] See "Le séjour de Gibbon a Paris du 28 Janvier au 9 Mai 1763," in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, 93-107.

[133] *DF*, XXXVII, 2: 432-3. See also Harold L. Bond, *The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford, 1960), 36-7.

[134] *DF*, XXX, 2: 138-9; XXXI, 2: 185.

[135] *DF*, LIV, 3: 437-9.

babies exposed to death and then raising them or, by its view of the afterlife, giving comfort to the poor who constituted most of the early Christian community.[136]

Gibbon therefore seems to have vacillated regarding his religious beliefs. He was a lukewarm skeptic more concerned with his public image than with adhering to any higher philosophical truth. This did not prevent him from criticizing religious abuses, but neither did it make him an atheist. When the religious outlook did not necessitate any clash with Enlightenment ethics then the intellectual task became even easier. This was precisely what happened regarding his views on the cultivation of nature. As Gibbon's work demonstrated, what had happened in the field of science during the Scientific Revolution was paralleled a century later in the field of historical scholarship. Seventeenth-century scientists had retained the traditional anthropocentric cosmology, transforming it into part of the new rational-scientific philosophy. The Enlightenment historians' insistence on the importance of cultivating nature as a measure of cultural accomplishment, and their obvious agreement with the view that nature was meant for human use, were proof that they too accepted this religious legacy. Inadvertently, despite their habitual criticism of religious abuses, they were helping to maintain one of the most important elements of the religious tradition. From relatively lukewarm skeptics such as Gibbon to stricter critics of religion such as Hume or Raynal, most historians adhered to the same viewpoint.

Gibbon's complicated attitude toward religion clearly influenced his observations regarding material culture. This became clear as early as 1755. Immediately continuing the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter from the journal of his youthful tour of Switzerland, while relating the rude state of the canton of Schwyz, Gibbon tried to comprehend its attraction for monks attempting to build places of pilgrimage, remarking:

> To begin with I could not understand how the monks who built this Hermitage [probably meaning the Benedictine abbey of Einsiedeln] had been able to establish a place which they wanted to render famous and where they wanted to attract the world, in a place as savage as the access to it is difficult. But I was no longer amazed by it, when I had reflected about the spirit of the century when this [place of] pilgrimage was established. As for those regarding the evangelical virtues as beneath them only wanting those duties which fatigue and mortify the body without enlightening the spirit or purifying the heart, this difficulty, these dangers would be so many powerful recommendations. Besides which these religious gentlemen, good politicians (if ever there were any) and well-knowing

136 *DF*, XV, 1: 475-8, 493, 494, 510-11.

> human nature, they knew what effect all these horrors, these precipices, the darkness of these forests naturally produce on an already credulous spirit, in filling it with saintly veneration for a place that he had gone to visit, and dispose him to piously swallow everything he would hear there. They knew why the pagan priests had placed the parties of there most holy and most mysterious cult, in the thick of dens and forests. Indeed, it requires a spirit, well-fortified by good philosophy, to not feel there a certain anxiousness, a certain – (in English I would say Awe) better felt, than defined. Such is the face of prejudice and so great the power of our imagination.[137]

Lack of cultivation of nature seemed well-suited for medieval monks as a tool for embedding their religiously superstitious outlook among the laity and for augmenting their privileged social position. In a similar vein, several years later Gibbon also observed that the clearing of forests could lead to the abolition of superstitious beliefs connected with them.[138] Had this been the sum total of his observations on this issue there might have been some grounds for claiming that he regarded the religious outlook as inimical to the idea of cultivating nature. Yet Gibbon was more sophisticated and he recognized that even medieval monasticism could not be so simplistically analyzed. Religion could also positively influence the cultivation of nature. In medieval Germany and Switzerland, while the aristocracy were immersed in warfare and destruction, priests were busy drying marshes, clearing forests and cultivating land, in this way creating the

[137] "Journal de mon voyage dans quelques endroits de la Suisse, 1755," 27-8: "Au commencement je ne pouvois pas comprendre comment les moines auteurs de cet Hermitage eussent pu etablir un endroit qu'ils vouloient rendre fameux et ou ils vouloient attirer du monde, dans un lieu aussi sauvage et d'un acces aussi difficile. Mais je m'en ettonnai plus lorsque j'eus reflechi sur le genie du siecle quand ce pelerinage s'est etabli. A des Gens qui regardant les vertus Evangeliques comme au dessous d'eux ne vouloient que de ces devoirs qui fatiguent et mortifient le corps sans eclairer l'Esprit ou epurer le Cœur, cette difficulté, ces dangers etoient autant de recommendations puissantes. Outre que ces Messieurs les religieux, bons Politiques (s'il y en fut jamais) conno[i]ssoient bien la nature humaine, ils savoient quel effet toutes ces horreur, ces precipices, le somber de ces bois produisent naturellement sur un esprit deja credule, en le remplissant d'un sainte veneration pour l'endroit qu'il alloit visiter et le disposer a avaler pieusement tout ce qu'il y entendroit. Ils se souvenoient pourquoi les Pretres Payens avoient placé les parties de leur culte les plus sacréés et les plus mysterieuses, dans le fond des antres et des bois. En effet il faut un esprit, bien ferré a Glace par la bonne Philosophie pour n'y pas sentir un certain tremoussement, un certain – (en Anglois je dirois Awe) mieux senti, que defini. Tel est la force du prejugé et si grand le pouvoir de notre imagination."

[138] "Nomina, Gentesque Antiquæ Italiæ," in *MW*, 4: 263-4.

rudiments of more democratic societies in a process where "industry... marches behind liberty" ("l'industrie... marche à la suite de la liberté").[139]

Gibbon took up this theme again in *The Decline and Fall*. He gave credit to priests for mitigating some of the oppressive and destructive consequences of early medieval feudalism. "The authority of the priests operated in the darker ages as a salutary antidote: they prevented the total extinction of letters, mitigated the fierceness of the times, sheltered the poor and defenceless, and preserved or revived the peace and order of civil society."[140] Elsewhere, while discussing the institution of monastic life in late antiquity, and despite all his criticism, he was willing to accord the monks occasional reserved praise. This pertained to some at least of their scholarly pursuits, and, not least, regarding their manual labor. "The garden, and fields, which the industry of the monks had often rescued from the forest or the morass, were diligently cultivated by their hands. They performed, without reluctance, the menial offices of slaves and domestics." The monks in Egypt in particular were content with humble manual work, the superfluous products of which enabled trading for the wants of the community. "But the necessity of manual labour was insensibly superseded." The monks eventually succumbed to greed. "[T]heir discipline was corrupted by prosperity: they gradually assumed the pride of wealth, and at last indulged the luxury of expense." As long as this accumulation of wealth was dedicated to the community and the building of "durable habitations" it might be excused. Yet many "degenerate monks" forgot their original vocation, "and scandalously abused the riches which had been acquired by the austere virtues of their founders." Gibbon could not help himself here, noting: "Their natural descent, from such painful and dangerous virtue, to the common vices of humanity, will not, perhaps, excite much grief or indignation in the mind of a philosopher."[141]

Other Enlightenment historians, if not often, also made similar observations. The Abbé Fleury claimed that the rising churches and monasteries were occasionally too eager to employ themselves in temporal and material issues and in an attempt to enrich themselves. Yet this could occasionally also have beneficial results. "The Monks in *Germany* were useful even in temporal matters, for by their hand-labour they began to grub up vast Forests, which cover'd all the Country, and by their Industry and good Management, the Lands were cultivated, the *Boors* who inhabited them increased, the Monasteries produced

139 "Introduction a l'histoire générale de la république des Suisses," in *MW*, 3: 148-9.

140 *DF*, LXI, 3: 728.

141 *DF*, XXXVII, 2: 422-4.

great Towns, and their Dependences grew up into Provinces."[142] Turgot also noted that Christianity had spread culture in the Middle Ages.[143]

Robert Henry seemed even more aware of this complicated matter. His critique of monasticism was typically consistent for a Protestant Enlightenment intellectual. He criticized medieval monks as useless, and monkish culture in general as irrational, encouraging superstition and damaging to the populousness of lands and to the martial spirit of the Britons.[144] In exaggerating their attempts to enhance the natural chastity of the Anglo-Saxons regarding marriage, sex and adultery, the ecclesiastics only encouraged vices; by attempting to preserve virginity they ruined chastity.[145] Medieval Christianity, however, also had some good cultural effects. Christianization positively affected the ancient Anglo-Saxons and helped abate the furious spirit and quest of violent death of the ancient Danes.[146] Christianity fought divination and encouraged the already pre-existing hospitality of the Anglo-Saxons, since medieval monasteries served as public houses for lodging travelers.[147] Henry also noted that the monks who arrived with the Norman conquest of Britain greatly improved the state of agriculture, "the most useful of all arts." They cultivated their lands with great care and worked with their own hands in the fields, and even Thomas à Becket after becoming Archbishop of Canterbury used to engage in such work.[148] Like most Enlightenment intellectuals Henry was critical of the abuse of religion, but not of religion itself. He constantly railed against the damaging effects of "the unsatiable avarice, and boundless ambition, of the court of Rome," criticizing such things as monastic orders, scholastic theology and particularly the attempts of the medieval church and popes to impose their will on the civil governments. The mischief Britain suffered from this ended only with the severance of its ties with Rome.[149]

The Enlightenment was highly critical of religious abuse, but did not forsake the notion that religion in unabused form was a positive cultural influence. While the more radical among Enlightenment intellectuals displayed daring and modern democratic notions, it was their more moderate contemporaries,

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142 Claude Fleury, *Discourses on Ecclesiastical History*, trans. anon. (London, 1721), 201.

143 See "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind," in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, trans. and ed. Ronald L. Meek (Cambridge, 1973), 53.

144 *HHGB*, 1: 150-51; 2: 200-201, 226-7, 525-36, 546-8.

145 Ibid., 2: 552-3.

146 Ibid., 2: 317-18, 542.

147 Ibid., 2: 550-51.

148 Ibid., 3: 449-50.

149 Ibid., 4: 302-3, 312-15, 330, 421-2, and passim, particularly in this volume, but also in various places in the other volumes.

much less severe in their criticism of religion, who enjoyed a greater popularity throughout the century itself. This mainstream Enlightenment attitude toward religion remained, and even deepened, in the historiography of the following century. Leopold von Ranke noted that "it is impossible to conceive a nation worthy of the name, or entitled to be called, in any sense, great, whose political existence is not constantly elevated and guided by religious ideas."[150] By Ranke's time and due in large measure to the efforts of his eighteenth-century historian predecessors, it was no longer necessary to emphasize that he was referring to unabused religion. His emphasis on the connection between religion and politics was also, however, far from new. For centuries, including in the eighteenth century, religion had often been considered as a tool for keeping the masses in moral check. This was also one of the main reasons that moderate Enlightenment philosophers and historians dreaded the idea of an atheistic society seemingly devoid of moral restraints for the uneducated public. All this has long been acknowledged in modern scholarship. What has been less recognized is that the idea of mastering nature also had a part to play in this connection between religion and politics. More than any other eighteenth-century historian Gibbon exemplified this complicated gamut of ideas.

The connection between culture, religion and politics was not fortuitous, but on the contrary, was an inherent quality of Gibbon's *Weltanschauung*. His moderate views on religion, particularly in *The Decline and Fall*, were in plain view for those willing to see, but try as he might he could not control the rapidly growing myth of his apostasy. If this was initially actuated by a desire to rectify his public image, the onslaught of the French Revolution initiated a sincere conservative political impulse in the already sick historian, who literally saw the revolution on his Swiss doorstep. David Womersley has presented a convincing interpretation of the politically-conservative Gibbon anxious about his religious image but also earnestly concerned about the dramatic times. He saw the revolution as a lost opportunity, and worried about the impending downfall of the social order he and his privileged peers had taken for granted. He was also appalled by the erasure of the separation of public and private life caused by the revolution, which intruded on the comfortable existence he had relied on in his aging years.[151] Like many intellectuals both before and after his own time,

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[150] Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Reformation in Germany*, trans. Sarah Austin, ed. Robert A. Johnson (London and New York, 1905), 1.

[151] David Womersley, "Gibbon's Unfinished History: the French Revolution and English Political Vocabularies," *The Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), 63-89; idem, "Gibbon's *Memoirs*: Autobiography in Time of Revolution," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 347-404. See also the expanded versions of

Gibbon forgot that the ideas which he propagated in his work could end up facilitating outcomes quite contrary to his own expectations. As Leslie Stephen put it in his discussion of Gibbon: "Insects who are eating out the heart of an old tree are not generally gratified, it may be supposed, by the crash and thunder of the fall."[152] Hayden White has claimed that "the forces of democracy that were emerging during the time [the eighteenth century] appeared as reprehensible and as frightening to the *philosophes* as did the forces of aristocracy and privilege which they had originally opposed, because in the very way they construed reality, they could not believe in the possibility of a genuine *transformation* of anything – society, culture, or themselves."[153] The extent of White's criticism of the Enlightenment seems exaggerated. Eighteenth-century historians were more than aware of a variety of changes inherent in the historical process. Nevertheless, on one point White is correct, and that is the inherently conservative element in the political outlook of most Enlightenment historians. While they no doubt strove for a change in human conduct and society, they in no way advocated any major democratic upheaval, as Gibbon's case amply proves.

Gibbon seems to have gone through a gradual process of intellectually and morally growing political conservatism, if anything even more straightforward and sincere than in the corresponding, and closely related, religious realm. In his early *Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne* he seemed a forthright, if cautious, democrat.[154] Evincing a contempt for royalty which was common among the English upper classes before Louis XVI's execution, in 1764 he wrote in his journal of the royalty he had met or seen, that he "viewed them with as much indifference as the most insignificant petit bourgeois" ("les ai vus avec autant d'indifference que le plus petit bourgeois").[155] Yet by 1779 the rather inactive

these essays, in Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, 175-206 and 207-40 respectively, and also 241-332. For an earlier assessment, see Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 67-70.

[152] Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London, 1902), 1: 448. Stephen depicted Gibbon as a conservative skeptic unintentionally co-operating with revolutionaries, who interpreted his work differently than he intended; see ibid., 1: 446-54.

[153] Hayden White, *Metahistory, the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1973), 68.

[154] See "La lettre de Gibbon sur le gouvernement de Berne", in *Miscellanea Gibboniana*, 123-41. Toward the end of the letter Gibbon was apprehensive lest resistance to political authority, even if essentially justified, might lead to anarchy and then to despotism. For this work, see Norman, *Influence of Switzerland*, 21-32.

[155] *Gibbon's Journey from Geneva to Rome, His Journal from 20 April to 2 October 1764*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1961), 222-3. See also Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, 201-2.

M.P., no doubt worried over the events across the Atlantic, willingly wrote the *Mémoire Justificatif*, an official state paper composed at the request of government ministers, criticizing the French assistance to the American rebels.[156] A decade later this conservatism was solidified by the events in France, and Gibbon was writing in his letters about "the blackest daemon in hell, the daemon of democracy,"[157] and about "England, the sole great refuge of mankind against the opposite mischiefs of despotism and democracy."[158] On another occasion, while criticizing the revolution, Gibbon referred to the parliamentary debate on slavery conducted at the time in England, claiming that he himself would probably have opposed slavery, adding however: "But in this rage against slavery, in the numerous petitions against the Slave trade was there no leaven of new democratical principles, no wild ideas of the rights and natural equality of man? It is these I fear."[159]

Gibbon was not the only Enlightenment historian who viewed despotism and democracy as "opposite mischiefs." Hume criticized the dissolution of authority and government after Charles I's execution. "The bands of society were every where loosened; and the irregular passions of men were encouraged by speculative principles, still more unsocial and irregular."[160] Censoriously depicting the dissolution of parliament by Cromwell in 1653, he wrote: "By recent, as well as all ancient example, it was become evident, that illegal violence, with whatever pretences it may be covered, and whatever object it may pursue, must inevitably end at last in the arbitrary and despotic government of a single person."[161] Hume's criticism of the puritans was comparable to Gibbon's of the French revolutionaries. Both historians did not equate enlightenment with democracy.

In several of his personal letters Gibbon's raillery against the revolution reached a particularly high pitch. It was in these that his views on human dignity within the natural order were intertwined with his political opinions. They demonstrate how his philosophical, ethical, religious, political and ultimately scholarly and historiographical ways of thinking all converged. Writing to Lord Sheffield in December 1789 he remarked that the French had missed

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156 *Mémoire Justificatif pour servir de Réponse à l'Exposé des Motifs de la Conduite du Roi de France relativement à l'Angleterre*, in *MW*, 5: 1-34.

157 *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols (London, 1956), 3: 288, to Lady Elizabeth Foster, in November 1792.

158 Ibid., 3: 307, to Lord Sheffield, December 14, 1792 and January 1, 1793 (here from the 1793 part).

159 Ibid., 3: 257-58, to Lord Sheffield, in May 1792.

160 *HHE*, 6: 3-4.

161 Ibid., 6: 53-4.

an opportunity to adopt a monarchical system similar to the English, and the Assembly at Paris was "a set of wild Visionaries… who gravely debate and dream about the establishment of a pure and perfect democracy of five and twenty millions, the virtues of the golden age and the primitive rights and equality of mankind which would lead in fair reasoning to an equal partition of lands and money."[162] This was more than a vague allusion to Rousseau, and Gibbon was in fact doing to the latter what his own critics were doing to him, i.e. blaming him for contributing to the revolution. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that the earnestly horrified Gibbon was so vehement, in fact trying to distance himself from any implication in the events in both the public eye and in his own mind. In 1792 he wrote to his stepmother that France, where he had so enjoyed visiting, had now become "that inhospitable land, in which a people of slaves is suddenly become a nation of tyrants and cannibals."[163] "Cannibals," which meant not even barbarians but savages, became a common appellation for the revolutionaries in Gibbon's late letters, and this was no accident. By toppling the very epitome of enlightened European society the revolutionaries were doing the unimaginable, they were demolishing from within what Gibbon had considered barely imperiled from without.

Gibbon's closest friend Lord Sheffield, with whom he constantly corresponded during these dramatic years, shared to a large extent his views on the revolution. Sheffield, who opposed for as long as possible the abolition of slavery, was if anything even more anti-religious and anti-French than Gibbon, although he was probably relatively less of an actual anti-revolutionary than the historian.[164] In his letters to Gibbon he repeatedly railed against the French, depicting the Jacobins as "execrable animals" who "should be extirpated," and wishing "the whole world to declare against them [the French], and run them down as pestiferous wolves."[165] In a letter from July 1791 from Paris, where the Sheffield family had just attended the discussions at the Assembly regarding the attempted flight of the royal family, Sheffield wrote: "It does not seem to be their [the deliberators at the assembly] genius to do more than Fishwomen, to scratch and tear one or two to pieces in a cattish fury… The word *enragé* does not half describe a French Democrate."[166] In another letter from January 1792

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162 *Letters*, 3: 184.

163 Ibid., 3: 265-6.

164 Womersley, *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, 199-200, 216-26, 232-40. For Sheffield's views on slavery, to the gradual abolition of which he eventually acquiesced, see *Private Letters of Edward Gibbon (1753-1794)*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, 2 vols (London, 1896), 2: 238-9, 245, 294-5.

165 Ibid., 2: 307, 321 respectively; see also 253-4, for Sheffield's anti-democratic views.

166 Ibid., 2: 258-9.

Sheffield related a story told by the French author Lally-Tollendal to George III, about how the French Revolution reminded Gibbon of a print he saw as a child, depicting "a pig roasting a cook" ("un cochon faisant rôtir un Cuisinier"). Whether Gibbon remembered having told this story is unclear, but it seems to have redounded to his credit, as the king evidently found it very funny.[167]

Edmund Burke had mentioned Lally-Tollendal's use of cannibalistic terminology to depict the French revolutionaries.[168] In comparing the English with the French, Burke himself wrote: "We are not the converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire; Helvetius has made no progress amongst us. Atheists are not our preachers; madmen are not our lawgivers... and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality... We fear God; we look up with awe to kings... with reverence to priests... because all other feelings are false and spurious, and tend to corrupt our minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to render us unfit for rational liberty."[169] Like Gibbon, Burke of course also went through a conservative reaction in his ideological response to the revolution. The similarity of their invective terminology was not fortuitous, and Burke wrote of the "cannibal appetites" of the violent mobs who were led by the leaders of the revolution to persecute priests.[170] In the following century Thomas Carlyle also vehemently used the term "cannibalism" in discussing the excesses of the French revolutionaries.[171]

The beastly metaphors depicting the French revolutionaries shared by Gibbon, Sheffield and others, are significant indicators of a cultural viewpoint which might easily be overlooked by modern readers. In the pre-Darwinian eighteenth century the theory of the Great Chain of Being was an intellectual mainstay of all educated persons, whether they agreed with it or not (and most irrespective of Voltaire did agree). Therefore, such metaphorical language carried overtones which have disappeared with time. "Cannibals" in this sense were more than just savages, they were cosmological criminals attempting to subvert

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167 Ibid., 2: 285.

168 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1986), 166-8. See 384-5 for the editorial biographical remark on Trophime Gérard, Marquis de Lally-Tollendal, who was initially a revolutionary but became appalled with the revolution and left France voluntarily.

169 Ibid., 181-3.

170 Ibid., 249. For Burke's fear of cultural regression, see Luke Gibbons, "'Subtilized into Savages': Edmund Burke, Progress, and Primitivism," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100 (2001), 83-109.

171 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution, a History*, ed. K. J. Fielding and David Sorensen, 2 vols in 1 (Oxford and New York, 1989), 1: 57, 373; 2: 376.

the superiority of human dignity within the order of creation. The "inhuman" aspect of cannibalism in this respect was largely based on what seemed an infringement of singular human dignity within the animal creation (the fact that most animals were not cannibalistic was conveniently overlooked). This made the metaphorical use of the appellation "cannibals," and of related beastly metaphors, particularly vehement when applied to the revolutionaries. In trying to overturn the social order, the revolutionaries were not just committing a political crime, they were literally operating against the natural order. The cosmological hierarchical chain did not simply advance from lower life forms to humanity, it also continued and operated within the human race itself. For the intellectual elites of the Enlightenment it was a pre-ordained natural social order that put them above the inferior masses. Hence the fundamental democratic challenge that the revolution presented, a challenge which Gibbon, Burke and Sheffield were unwilling to meet.

All this sheds new light on the development of Gibbon's views on the cultivation of nature, which were intimately related to his religious and political conservatism. This conservatism, contrary to some interpretations of his intellectual development, was inherent to his philosophical and moral outlook throughout his whole life, and the revolution simply augmented what had never really disappeared. This does not mean that we should dismiss the anti-religious and democratic elements in Gibbon's writings as fallacious, simply a façade meant to attract readership and literary fame, although to some extent this was probably the case. Yet any advanced opinions that he might have held were discarded once reality forced him to retreat to a reactionary response, to what were his more ingrained moral and political notions. All this had a profound influence on Gibbon's historical scholarship and one should read all his writings, particularly *The Decline and Fall*, with the whole gamut of his intellectual development constantly in sight.

In his last important work, *The Antiquities of the House of Brunswick*, Gibbon, in a critical note of the injustices of feudalism, discussed the uncultivated and neglected state of much of the Italian territories under the rule of Albert-Azo II, Marquis of Este, during the barbarous eleventh century at a time when agriculture, the economy and the marquis's income were all damaged by continuous warfare.

> The mischievous growth of vegetation, the frequent inundations of the rivers were no longer checked by the vigilance of labour; the face of the country was again covered with forests and morasses; of the vast domains which acknowledged Azo for their lord, the far greater part was abandoned to the wild beasts of the field and a much smaller portion was reduced to the state of constant and productive

> husbandry. An adequate rent may be obtained from the skill and substance of a free tenant who fertilizes a grateful soil, and enjoys the security and benefit of a long lease. But faint is the hope and scanty is the produce of those harvests, which are raised by the reluctant toil of peasants and slaves condemned to a bare subsistence, and careless of the interest of a rapacious master.[172]

This was seemingly a criticism of corrupted Western society, not barbarians, but then despotism and democracy were "opposite mischiefs," diseases in cultured advancement gone awry. They led to a reversion to barbarism, to a state where nature became "mischievous" rather than "grateful," the moment it did not receive the care it required. Most of the important points Gibbon had learned from Buffon about humanity's cultivation and mastery of nature, the control of rivers, deforestation and the various branches of husbandry, were mentioned in this passage. Nature reciprocated the political neglect by reverting to its wild and unruly state. When writing this passage Gibbon was probably thinking of the revolutionary Frenchmen, who seemed to have reversed the natural tide of history. All the components of his philosophical world view thus came together – cosmology, religion, politics and an embattled Enlightenment philosophy which Gibbon toward the end of his life probably struggled to maintain. Yet he did not live to outline a distinct solution to this intellectual and moral problem which a whole generation of late Enlightenment intellectuals were forced to face. Following the traumas of modern history it was succeeded by what was later termed "the dialectic of the Enlightenment."

The emphasis on commanding nature was an important part of the generally conservative outlook of the moderate mainstream Enlightenment. While the religious and political aspects of the growing conservatism of Gibbon and others following the revolution might seem, even if unjustifiably, in dissonance with their former outlook, their view of nature had been consistent throughout. This was further proof of how inherent this notion was to European cultural history. The importance of gaining mastery of nature received a growing emphasis in tandem with the civilizing process which it sustained, and in the early modern era became a consciously articulated cultural philosophy. Throughout all the upheavals of history, from antiquity to the Enlightenment and beyond, this idea, whatever one might think of it, retained its potent hold on people's minds and underlined the cultural and material development of civilization. Therefore, there seemed to be more to the narrative of the decline and fall of Rome than

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172 "Antiquities of the House of Brunswick," in *English Essays*, 523-4. David Womersley has argued that Gibbon probably discontinued working on this work during the revolution, from fear that it would be misinterpreted as espousing politically radical ideals. See Womersley, "Gibbon's Unfinished History"; also *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'*, 175-206.

the acknowledged religious, political, economic and military factors depicted by Gibbon and other Enlightenment historians such as Montesquieu in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*. In *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon also accorded a crucial role to the decline of cultivation of nature in the long tale of the dissolution of the Roman Empire.

Thus, he noted how the deterioration of agriculture from the first to the fifth century affected all levels of society, from the plebeians, through the mechanics, to the senators, who all alike suffered from this situation. Writing of the period immediately after the fall of the empire in the fifth century, and broadly surveying this long process of decline, in effect a regressive stadial process, Gibbon noted: "Since the age of Tiberius, the decay of agriculture had been felt in Italy... In the division and the decline of the empire, the tributary harvests of Egypt and Africa were withdrawn; the numbers of the inhabitants continually diminished with the means of subsistence; and the country was exhausted by the irretrievable losses of war, famine, and pestilence... the decline of the arts reduced the industrious mechanic to idleness and want."[173] Elsewhere he depicted the dismal state of Rome under the Lombards in the seventh century, including the bad state of the cultivation of nature. The attacks of the Lombards created a general unrest. "Such incessant alarms must annihilate the pleasures and interrupt the labours of a rural life; and the Campagna of Rome was speedily reduced to the state of a dreary wilderness, in which the land is barren, the waters are impure, and the air is infectious." The control of water also declined, and the perennial battle with the inundations of the Tiber became a losing one in which no divine assistance seemed forthcoming. "In a season of excessive rains, the Tyber swelled above its banks, and rushed with irresistible violence into the vallies of the seven hills. A pestilential disease arose from the stagnation of the deluge, and so rapid was the contagion, that fourscore persons expired in an hour in the midst of a solemn procession, which implored the mercy of heaven."[174] Religious, political and material corruption all operated together in a fine-tuned "solemn procession" of cultural decline.

Gibbon had initially been interested in describing the decline of the city of Rome itself, from which eventually grew the vast canvas of *The Decline and Fall*. Others, such as the Abbé Dubos, were aware of the decrepit physical state of modern eighteenth-century Rome, not least its sewage system.[175] In returning

[173] *DF*, XXXVI, 2: 409.

[174] *DF*, XLV, 2: 872-3.

[175] Dubos noted the deterioration of the Roman sewage system, and specifically the stopping-up of many ancient cloacæ over the ages, with the ensuing abundance of stagnant water, all which caused pestilential hazards, particularly during the heat of the dog-days. See Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, 2: 206-8.

to his original theme in the last chapter of *The Decline and Fall* Gibbon acknowledged how even in Renaissance Europe, without the proper care of an uncorrupt political government, the human cultivation of nature could rapidly deteriorate. Writing of Renaissance Rome he observed: "The first and most natural root of a great city, is the labour and populousness of the adjacent country, which supplies the materials of subsistence, of manufactures, and of foreign trade. But the greater part of the Campagna of Rome is reduced to a dreary and desolate wilderness: the overgrown estates of the princes and the clergy are cultivated by the lazy hands of indigent and hopeless vassals; and the scanty harvests are confined or exported for the benefit of a monopoly."[176]

This pessimistic outlook became more than a scholarly exercise for Gibbon and other Enlightenment intellectuals following the French Revolution. It progressed in increasingly romantic fashion in response to the scenes of the Napoleonic era which Gibbon did not live to see. Yet this despondency could not deface the pervasive optimistic outlook of the Enlightenment in general, which was of course later put to much severer tests in the twentieth century. Goya might radically change his artistic style in a very pessimistic direction, and Beethoven on the eve of developing his increasingly romantic style might lividly efface his dedication of the *Eroica* to Napoleon when the latter crowned himself emperor, yet these dramatic transformations did not invalidate their earlier, more classically optimistic creations. Indeed even their pessimism, like that of the later romantic era in general, was pervaded by a deep humanism imbued with the Enlightenment ideals on which they were raised. Both Goya and Beethoven were of course responding to their own personal crises, exasperated by their deafness and consequent social seclusion, which also coincided with the dramatic historical events. Gibbon too responded intellectually in a pessimistic vein to these dramatic times which began in earnest just a year after he finished writing his *magnum opus*. Yet in contrast to the painter and composer he did not live to give this growing pessimism ample expression. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, there was a fundamental difference between the outlooks of late Enlightenment art and historiography, the former being much more receptive to early romantic musings on nature. It is doubtful given the amount of work involved that like Beethoven and Goya, Gibbon in a hypothetical later work would have outdone his earlier achievements. Significantly, this was not just a matter of labor but also of a difference in perspective between historians and artists.

The ethical outlook which propelled the many years of work on *The Decline and Fall*, and indeed the work of most other Enlightenment historians,

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176 *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1082-3.

presented too much of an intellectual investment to be easily discarded. To this day the debate on the "dialectic of the Enlightenment" continues to rage, and its roots can be perceived in the dramatic late eighteenth century when the comparison between barbarism and civilization began assuming its modern form. It is therefore far from surprising that the most prominent Enlightenment historians, even those who lived long enough after the beginning of the French Revolution to make the attempt, did not fundamentally question the moral worldview so impressively outlined in the pages of *The Decline and Fall*, and in those of the other masterpieces of late Enlightenment historiography by Hume, Robertson, Raynal and Voltaire. Such a change of perspective was reserved for later generations, whose experience of the revolution was early and formative, not one which came as a surprise at the end of long intellectual careers promoting a worldview which seemed to have disappointed when it was finally put into practice.

The Enlightenment worldview was emphatically optimistic. The picture of the declining Roman Empire notwithstanding, Gibbon, like his contemporaries, was constantly aware that from the desolate scenes of the fall of the empire and subsequent medieval barbarism had ultimately arisen the advanced culture of eighteenth-century Europe. Humanity might obliterate *almost* every aspect of civilization, but not all of it, and specifically not its most basic material acquirements constituted by the cultivation of nature. These by their very rudimentary quality were the most sedulous and insuppressible elements of culture. It was nature itself which assured this, since it was greater than any human effort to either cultivate or desolate it. Western historiography had long been aware of this fact. Livy had given this recognition ample voice when he related Camillus's speech after the victory over the Gauls following the latter's sack of Rome in 390 B.C. The second founder of the city urged the Romans not to abandon the ravaged city in favor of Veii, evoking the rustic virtues of Rome's founders, but also its excellent natural qualities inviting cultivation.[177] Livy no doubt agreed with Camillus, as did Enlightenment historians. The latter, not least Gibbon, were also able to contrast the Romans' response to this early calamity with that eight and nine centuries later. The same natural surroundings occasioned very different responses from the same civilization when it was on the rise, compared with its state of late decay. Roman history thus presented the varying options open to human societies in their attempts to embark upon cultural progress. It seemed glaringly obvious, particularly to the Enlightenment mind as it contemplated Livy, that a proper response to the

[177] *Livy*, trans. B. O. Foster, Frank Gardner Moore, Evan T. Sage and Alfred C. Schlesinger, 14 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1919-52), 3: 183-5 (V.liii.8-liv.5).

advantages offered by natural surroundings was essential for achieving such progress, as well as maintaining it in the long run. Gibbon acknowledged his belief in the importance of nature for embarking on the civilizing process when he claimed, regarding the desolation left in Europe by the warring Goths in 378-379, that not even these wars could exhaust the resources of nature.

> Could it even be supposed, that a large tract of country had been left without cultivation, and without inhabitants, the consequences might not have been so fatal to the inferior productions of animated nature. The useful and feeble animals, which are nourished by the hand of man, might suffer and perish if they were deprived of his protection: but the beasts of the forest, his enemies, or his victims, would multiply in the free and undisturbed possession of their solitary domain. The various tribes that people the air, or the waters, are still less connected with the fate of the human species; and it is highly probable, that the fish of the Danube would have felt more terror and distress, from the approach of a voracious pike, than from the hostile inroad of a Gothic army.[178]

The Italian renaissance humanist Poggio Bracciolini regarded Rome as the most prominent historical example of the mutability of fortune. His overview of the decrepit state of the historical Roman monuments in the city in the fifteenth century, when monuments were still being demolished to produce lime, was greatly appreciated by Gibbon, and figured prominently in the last chapter of *The Decline and Fall*.[179] Poggio described how the ancient Roman aqueducts which had been depicted by Frontinus were mostly destroyed. The Forum had become a sanctuary for swine and cattle, and the Comitium a vegetable garden.[180] There is little doubt that Poggio's account was one of the prime examples for Gibbon of what rude neglect of culture could lead to. Yet it also seems clear that in regard to the city of Rome, as to the Roman Empire and indeed to the history of civilization in general, Gibbon, in essentially optimistic eighteenth-century fashion, did not accept the possibility that even the most dismal cases of historical rudeness and devastation could completely eradicate human civilization.

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[178] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1068-9. As with the issue of populousness, Enlightenment intellectuals would have found the notion of a limited capacity of nature to absorb human influence almost incomprehensible.

[179] Poggio Bracciolini, *Les Ruines de Rome, De Varietate Fortunae Livre I*, trans. Jean-Yves Boriaud, ed. Philippe Coarelli and Jean-Yves Boriaud (Paris, 1999), 10-46, esp. 12-14, 24, 46-8 and passim. See Gibbon's discussion in *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1062-5.

[180] Poggio Bracciolini, *Les Ruines de Rome*, 30-32, 38. Poggio discovered a copy of Frontinus's work on the Roman aqueducts.

Gibbon had finished writing *The Decline and Fall* just before the outbreak of the revolution in France. It was more than symbolic that despite its seemingly sad theme this work, so representative of Enlightenment historiography's general philosophical outlook, still maintained an overall optimism. According to this philosophical outlook, at certain historical moments rudeness might gain the upper hand, but in the long run a healthy human civilization, with the proper material foundations based on a thorough command of nature, would always be able to recuperate and achieve unprecedented progress. We have seen how eighteenth-century historians viewed what happened when the cultivation of nature was not upheld. It now remains to consider how they discussed the ways in which this lost cultivation, and fallen civilizations in general, could be revitalized.

Chapter 4
Barbarism Civilized

Preliminary Remarks

The eighteenth century was essentially an optimistic era. Its wars relative to those of the preceding and the following centuries were less destructive. New advances in theoretical and applied sciences, and toward the end of the century the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, gave a distinct impression that civilization was tangibly advancing. More than anything, the sense that a rational reforming spirit had taken over people's minds created a sense of social and moral improvement. If the world was still fraught with misery and disasters there was a feeling that it was worth fighting for and that good would eventually overcome evil. Hence even a relative pessimist like Voltaire felt justified in voicing his cry – *écrasez l'infâme*. While they were aware of, and indeed abhorred, the possibility that progress was impermanent and that society might revert to a state of renewed barbarism, Enlightenment historians could not but think that in some way a fallen civilization would eventually be revitalized, indeed was bound to do so. The question was less if, and more how, this would come about. One of the most common *leitmotivs* in eighteenth-century discussions of this issue was the emphasis on the cultivation of nature as a fundamental aspect of any possible cultural renewal. In many cases the ability to cultivate natural resources was considered pervasive to such an extent that it could never be completely obliterated. According to the Enlightenment outlook, once humanity asserted its place in the natural order no amount of inter-human political turmoil could completely and *permanently* annihilate this most constitutive of achievements. Eighteenth-century historians, particularly Gibbon, emphasized this point when they considered the broad history of human civilization.

Gibbon's "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West" have often been considered one of the less satisfactory chapters of *The Decline and Fall*, mainly because they seem inferior to the rest of the book in intellectual and scholarly rigor. A further important reason for their depreciation is that their emphasis on the dangers of a possible renewed barbarian attack on European civilization, rather than on its potential for internal decay, seems

from a modern perspective inadequate.[1] Despite coming at the end of the first half of Gibbon's great history they were in all likelihood written in 1773 or 1774, before *The Decline and Fall* itself. Although they were probably revised for publication in 1781, this might serve as an excuse for their depreciation.[2]

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[1] This point is clearly made in Harold L. Bond, *The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford, 1960), 162-4.

[2] On the "General Observations" in general, see *PBR*, 2: 392-6; J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the World View of the Late Enlightenment," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History, Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), 143-56; Patricia B. Craddock, *Edward Gibbon, Luminous Historian 1772-1794* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 8-14, 159. The most important and appreciative study of the "General Observations" is P. R. Ghosh, "Gibbon Observed," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 81 (1991), 132-56; and see also the same author's "Gibbon's Dark Ages: Some Remarks on the Genesis of the Decline and Fall," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 73 (1983), 1-23, esp. 18-19. For emphasis on the optimism of the "General Observations" see John Matthews, "Gibbon and the Later Roman Empire: Causes and Circumstances," in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge, 1997), 12-33. For some examples of varying considerations of the "General Observations," see *PBR*, 4: passim.; J. G. A. Pocock, "Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist and Philosophical Historian," in *Edward Gibbon and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, John Clive and Stephen R. Graubard (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1977), 103-20; Stephen R. Graubard, "Edward Gibbon: Contraria Sunt Complementa," in ibid., 121-37, esp. 132-5 (the "General Observations" Gibbon's "least successful chapter," abounding "in pompous inanities, many of which are almost wholly beside the point."); David Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1988), 182-91; Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment, Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997), 172-4, 192, 200-201; Roy Porter, *Edward Gibbon: Making History* (London, 1988), 135-57 (in general discussion of historical progress according to Gibbon); David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven and London, 1990), 223-4 (emphasizes, perhaps slightly too much, Gibbon's optimism about progress); Frank E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods* (Hanover and London, 1983), 93-101; J. B. Black, *The Art of History, a Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1926), 167-9, 172-3; David P. Jordan, *Gibbon and His Roman Empire* (Urbana, 1971), 70-74; Martine Watson Brownley, "Gibbon's Artistic and Historical Scope in the Decline and Fall," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 42 (1981), 629-42. A not surprising criticism of Gibbon can be found in Arnold J. Toynbee, "A Critique of Gibbon's General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West," in *A Study of History*, vol. 9 (London, 1954), 741-57. For criticism of Toynbee's attitude toward Gibbon and the Enlightenment (not necessarily regarding the "General Observations"), see H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The Idea of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," in *The Age of the Enlightenment, Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman*, ed. W. H. Barber et al. (Edinburgh and London, 1967), 413-30, at 415-17. W. B. Carnochan, *Gibbon's Solitude, the Inward World of the Historian* (Stanford, 1987), 51-78, claims that more than anywhere else in his entire oeuvre, Gibbon in the "General Observations" assumed a philosophical

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Gibbon was not the most profound thinker when he attempted to write in a broadly philosophical vein rather than in a strictly historical one, it is important to investigate the "General Observations" in order to clarify his general *Weltanschauung*. The fact that this text seems less an exhibition of Gibbon's genius should not detract from the core importance of the ideas it outlines. These constitute an invaluable key to his overall philosophical and ethical views on history and culture, which were nowhere else in his oeuvre expressed in such a direct and clear manner.

In the "General Observations" Gibbon claimed that society could progress by the efforts of individual genius or those of organized and skilled public activity, yet

> Fortunately for mankind, the most useful, or, at least, more necessary arts, can be performed without superior talents, or national subordination; without the powers of *one*, or the union of *many*. Each village, each family, each individual, must always possess both ability and inclination, to perpetuate the use of fire and of metals; the propagation and service of domestic animals; the methods of hunting and fishing; the rudiments of navigation; the imperfect cultivation of corn, or other nutritive grain; and the simple practice of the mechanic trades. Private genius and public industry may be extirpated; but these hardy plants survive the tempest, and strike an everlasting root into the most unfavourable soil.[3]

True cultural advancement, particularly its material infrastructure, was irreversible and permeable. Europe was "secure from any future irruption of Barbarians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous. Their gradual advances in the science of war would always be accompanied, as we may learn from the example of Russia, with a proportionable improvement in the arts of peace and civil policy; and they themselves must deserve a place among the polished nations whom they subdue."[4]

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rather than strictly historical vein, developing a panoramic and overtly judgmental polemic. Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism, the Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson, trans. revised by H. D. Schmidt (London, 1972), 186-92, presented a discussion of Gibbon, including unique criticism of the "General Observations," centering on their propagation of the Enlightenment notion that culture and political liberty belonged together, and despotism was inimical to culture. Meinecke also emphasized Gibbon's approbation of monarchism, and the fact that in Gibbon's work the feeling of destiny receded before moral judgments.

[3] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 515-16.

[4] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 514-15. On this passage, see the remarks in Rolando Minuti, "Gibbon and the Asiatic Barbarians: Notes on the French Sources of *The Decline and Fall*," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*,

One of the most perennial topics in Enlightenment historiography was the discussion of clashes between barbarian societies and civilized ones. What happened in such collisions? Did civilization always prevail? Or barbarism? And if there was no persistent answer to this query, as seemed the case, was there any kind of historical necessity that influenced how these clashes developed? It was the last of these questions which drew the most diverse responses from Enlightenment historians. Whatever the relevant themes they discussed, such as the barbarian invasions which toppled the Roman Empire, they seem to have regarded this type of cultural confrontation as a key to the evaluation of what constituted civilization in the truly durable sense. This turned out to be the cultivation of natural resources.

Gibbon perceived the primitive Goths as free and courageous and the Romans as civilized yet corrupt, but this did not by any means imply that civilization *had to be* corrupt.[5] In the early *Du gouvernement féodal, surtout en France*, while comparing savages with cultured nations he remarked that the former loved perils and combat, while the modern soldier did not and demanded recompense. All savages were warriors, loved glory and their country, satisfied their ferocity and hoped for loot. They defended their families and homes just because they loved them. This spirit, common in Africa and Asia, was softened by the climate, the merging of nations and by state revolutions. No nation of barbarians, however, planned for the future or composed general systems of manners.[6] In the *Decline and Fall* Gibbon later claimed that those virtues which barbarians had were simply incompatible with high culture, "and the arts which adorn and improve the state of civil society, corrupt the habits of the military life."[7] As the "General Observations" put it, "before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous."[8] Gibbon agreed with Adam Ferguson that despite their good qualities and military valor rude nations always in the long run yielded to the superior arts and discipline of more civilized nations.[9] The whole point of this

355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 31-4.

[5] See the remarks in *PBR*, 3: 262-3.

[6] "Du gouvernement féodal, surtout en France," in *MW*, 3: 189. On this work, see Patricia B. Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon, Gentleman of Letters* (Baltimore and London, 1982), 245-6.

[7] *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1028.

[8] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 514. The same idea was obvious in Gibbon's earlier assertion that the Arabs, initially barbarians, conquered Persia, but after three hundred years were civilized by its arts. See "Mémoire sur la monarchie des Mèdes," in *MW*, 3: 75.

[9] Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), 93-4, 104-5.

line of thought was that this was a positive development, not just an inevitable one. Despite their good qualities barbarians, with their nomadic, slothful and militaristic life, relinquished what was most unique in humanity, its ability to rise above its seemingly insurmountable natural surroundings and subordinate them to its own will.

In *The History of the Saracens*, a work which Gibbon read avidly in his youth, Simon Ockley claimed that when the Saracens began their conquests "everything beyond their own bounds was new to them, and their achievements were no less matter of surprise to themselves than to their neighbours."[10] But to most Enlightenment historians these achievements would have been anything but surprising. Ockley's view was naïve. The Enlightenment consideration of the decline and resurgence of civilizations was much more dialectical, perceiving progress, in even the most dismal historical situations, as inevitable; and the basis for such progress was first and foremost, temporally and in point of importance, the control and utilization of nature.

The Enlightenment outlook, however, did not usually assert that progress was permanent. In particular, the historiographical point of view inferred the opposite. For that reason, more than any other type of eighteenth-century intellectuals, historians were wary regarding the need to maintain and uphold progress. This sense of inherent instability in history was of course an old one. Herodotus had claimed that "in this world nobody remains prosperous for long."[11] Eighteenth-century historians were aware that progress was laboriously attained but easily destroyed. Ludovico Muratori had remarked about the devastation in Italy caused by the Lombard invasion at the end of the sixth century, and particularly regarding the waste of the cities and fields and the harm done to the inhabitants, that what was easily destroyed was repaired only with difficulty.[12] Muratori observed the state of culture and the cultivation of nature, for example the production of wool, in his own times compared with the much less advanced Middle Ages. Yet he also noted that in the late Middle Ages, approximately in the twelfth century, there began a cultural awakening in Italy which resulted in the draining of swamps and the cultivation of land. He claimed: "Truly, where either peace rekindled among the people the possible advantages, or the cupidity aroused by valuable things removed the sloth from

[10] Simon Ockley, *The History of the Saracens* (London, 1847), xxi. On Ockley see P. M. Holt, "The Treatment of Arab History by Prideaux, Ockley and Sale," in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London, 1964), 290-302, at 295-8.

[11] Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth, 1968), 15.

[12] Ludovico Antonio Muratori, "De Italiæ Statu, Habitatorum Affluentia, Agrorum Cultu, Mutationa Civitatum, Felicitate ac Infelicitate, Temporibus Barbaricis. Dissertatio Vigesimaprima," in *Antiquitates Italicæ Medii Ævi* (Milan, 1739), 2: 147-228, at 148.

their breasts, by degrees the woods began to be destroyed and eradicated, and the stalks planted, from whence after some time the stagnant marshy waters were removed. Indeed, among such people concord and industry awakened, so that vagrant streams were surrounded by mounds of earth, and channels little by little drained the water, and the sedges, and the formerly marshy earth."[13] Cultural progress was slow, but when it combined a healthy social order with a proper cultivation of nature it was almost inevitable.[14]

There were occasions when lack of proper measures or the wrong historical conditions resulted in the veritable irremediable destruction of a whole civilization. Gibbon noted of the ruin of Palmyra by Aurelian, who later allowed the inhabitants to rebuild the city: "But it is easier to destroy than to restore. The seat of commerce, of arts, and of Zenobia, gradually sunk into an obscure town, a trifling fortress, and at length a miserable village. The present citizens of Palmyra, consisting of thirty or forty families, have erected their mud cottages within the spacious court of a magnificent temple."[15] This should, however, not be considered as a morbid contemplation of decay or ruin in later romantic fashion. On the contrary, the whole point of the optimistic Enlightenment outlook was that the benefits of fertile natural surroundings, which seemed imperishable, could always be used anew for a regeneration of culture, given the proper cultivation and of course the suitable social and political impetus. For Gibbon the ruins of Palmyra were therefore a warning. At the same time he in effect claimed that what they represented historically could and should be avoided. Gibbon and other Enlightenment historians preferred to dwell on the alternative option of the possibility of cultural regeneration, based specifically on cultivating the advantages offered by nature. Cultural growth of the durable kind was by its very nature slow, but therein resided its worth. That was the reason it had taken so many generations for Europe to recover from the barbarian invasions, but when it did so it became the epitome of human

[13] Ibid., 180: "Verùm ubi aut pacis commode animos Populis fecere, aut augendæ rei cupiditas segnitiem ex eorum pectore amovit, sensim Nemora exscindi & eradicari cœpta sunt, & coli loca, unde tamdem, abscesserant stagnantes aquæ. Immo èo hominum Concordia ac industria crevit, ut vagantes fluvios aggeribus arctarent, fossisque deductis paullatim siccarent ulvosam antea palustremque tellurem."

[14] On Muratori's tendency to perceive progress as a slow and gradual process, emphasizing the history of civilization, including especially technology, in an almost modern style of material and social history, see Susan Nicassio, "Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750)," in *Medieval Scholarship, Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline, Volume 1: History*, ed. Helen Damico and Joseph B. Zavadil (New York and London, 1995), 33-45, esp. 41-2.

[15] *DF*, XI, 1: 319. In the very last chapter of *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1064, Gibbon noted that "all that is human must retrograde if it do not advance."

civilizations. When Enlightenment historians discussed themes of this type this perennial point of view was constantly on their minds. The Enlightenment habitually measured other civilizations from a chauvinistic sense of eighteenth-century European superiority.

A similar outlook on the value of properly based cultural progress was common among eighteenth-century historians. According to the Abbé de Mably cultural progress was by its very nature extremely slow and often interrupted.[16] Johann Jacob Mascov, writing of the subversions of many German nations in the sixth century, mainly the Vandals, the Ostrogoths and the Gepidæ, claimed: "Some of these Kingdoms were wholly founded on Wars and the Courage of the people. Valour may reduce Countries and Dominions, and the Conquerors may, by their Experience, for a Time, maintain them; but Religion and wholesom Laws, Manners, Arts and Sciences must have their Share in establishing a constant Duration. A State, whose Basis is the Constitution of a whole Nation, rises gradually like a Pyramid, and stands the more firmly: And tho' the Prince be overcome, the Country recovers of itself."[17] Enlightenment philosophers recognized that promoting culture was often facilitated by contact between nations with different levels of advancement. Turgot noted that in the past, when civilized nations conquered or were conquered by barbarians, a cultural contact occurred which gradually caused barbarism to retreat.[18] Similarly according to Robert Henry, the general cultural changes which happened when one nation was conquered by another were revolutionary, great and sudden, but when one nation settled for an extended time in the same place the changes were slow and almost imperceptible, yet at the same time real and eventually conspicuous.[19]

Samuel Kliger has outlined the various attitudes toward the Goths in early modern England, both the criticism of the Gothic ideal but mainly the notions, not least political, which emphasized the ancient Germans as manly, free and chivalrous, in large part due to their cold climate and in contrast to the degenerate Romans in the south. Tacitus's *Germania* was of course a seminal source for these notions, which also emphasized the Germanic roots of the modern British political quest for liberty. Much of the modern notion of political freedom based on military might came from this source, and as Kliger seems

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[16] Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Observations sur l'histoire de France*, 2 vols (Geneva, 1765), 1: 164. For Mably's rather pessimistic views on progress, see Jean Dagen, *L'histoire de l'esprit humain dans la pensée française de Fontenelle a Condorcet* (n.p., 1977), 553-8.

[17] *MHAG*, 2: 166.

[18] "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind," in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, trans. and ed. Ronald L. Meek (Cambridge, 1973), 41-59, at 47.

[19] *HHGB*, 5: 529-30.

well-aware, also led to the atrocities of Nazism.[20] Yet during the early modern era this danger was not foreseen and the seeming virtue of the Germanic barbarians was often extolled. Enlightenment intellectuals in particular were aware that this was a limited virtue which came at the expense of the more important virtues of humanity and culture. The true challenge was trying to maintain all these virtues simultaneously. Raynal was well-aware of this when he claimed that the people of southern Asia were the first to unite into societies, and thus the earliest exposed to despotism. "There is no nation, which, as it becomes civilized, does not lose something of its virtue, courage and independence."[21] He further noted that emigration was the prime reason that races commingled and created new human races either improved or degenerated. "It would be difficult to produce one single instance of a nation, since the creation of the world, that has either extended or enriched itself, during a long interval of tranquillity, by the progress of industry alone, or by the mere resources of population. Nature, which makes vultures and doves, creates also that ferocious band, that is one day to rush upon the peaceful society which has been formed in its neighbourhood, or which it may meet with in its wandering incursions."[22] Emigration was usually excited by the bareness of soil and a disagreeable natural environment. That was why savage nations plundered their more peaceful neighbors. "It is in the same manner [like an eagle its prey] that the savage treats his civilized neighbour; and his plunder would be perpetual, if nature had not placed between the inhabitant of one region and that of another, between the man of the mountain, and the man

[20] Samuel Kliger, *The Goths in England, a Study in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Thought* (New York, 1972). Many nations in the early modern era claimed to descend from ancient "barbaric" nations, not just the Germans and Swedes, but also the Spanish and others. See Kristoffer Neville, "Gothicism and Early Modern Historical Ethnography," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70 (2009), 213-34. Walter Goffart has criticized much of the modern scholarship regarding the roots of the German people. He has claimed that Nazism discredited an important field of study, which was in any event fraught with troubles not just because of Nazism. See Walter Goffart, "Two Notes on Germanic Antiquity Today," in *Barbarians, Maps, and Historiography, Studies on the Early Medieval West* (Farnham and Burlington, 2009), 1-22. Perhaps the study of the barbaric origins of various European nations, in particular the Germans, has been unjustifiably abused. But even if so, the fact that it was amenable to such manipulation in the first place, should serve as a warning to scholars that this type of topic should be discussed with caution. In my opinion assuming an ivory tower academic "objective" attitude regarding this topic, given the lessons of recent history, is simply irresponsible, to say the least.

[21] *PPH*, 2: 323.

[22] Ibid., 2: 171.

who dwells in the valley or among the fens, the same barrier that separates the different species of animals."[23]

The Romans and the Barbarians

The most conspicuous case for observing this type of clash was between the late Roman Empire and the invading barbarian tribes. The contact between them was recurrent for centuries, with various outcomes. Initially there were more cases of barbarians being civilized as a result. But in time there were more and more cases where the Romans, becoming more decadent and corrupt, literally lost ground. This whole process was of course very complicated, and no historian even in modern times has presented a decisive explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire. Yet almost all interpretations, particularly in the eighteenth century, emphasized in some fashion the role which this contact between the Romans and the barbarians played in this grand occurrence. The main point of discussion was which side exerted a stronger cultural influence.

Already in antiquity this became apparent. Julius Caesar claimed that when the Gauls became familiar with the luxurious Roman lifestyle this gradually accustomed them to defeat, and therefore they lacked the valor of the Germans.[24] Strabo gave this outlook an even more forceful expression when he claimed in stoic vein that at least some of the barbarians were more virtuous than others. Writing of the Greek perception of the Scythians as a law-abiding nation who ate cheese made of mare's milk, he noted that "our mode of life has spread its change for the worse to almost all peoples, introducing amongst them luxury and sensual pleasures and, to satisfy these vices, base artifices that lead to innumerable acts of greed."[25] We shall have more to say below regarding criticism of luxury, but it was plain that Strabo made the observation, which became so contentious in early modern times, that the barbarians and specifically the German tribes exemplified a compound of savagery with an important sense of political liberty, which he regarded as corrupted by contact with the Romans. Several centuries later Procopius presented a different outlook on this topic. He described the nation of the Tzani who lived south of the Caucasus as an independent people without rulers, living as savages in a country covered with forests without cultivating land. Procopius implied a connection between the Tzani's savagery and their independence. They were unskilled in agriculture, and lived in a hilly country

[23] Ibid., 2: 172.

[24] Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. H. J. Edwards (Loeb Classical Library, 1917), 351.

[25] Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1917-32), 3: 199.

itself not easily amenable to cultivation. In addition the region was immersed in endless winter and snow. "For this reason the Tzani in ancient times used to live in independence." But in the time of the Emperor Justinian they were vanquished and immediately yielded to Byzantine rule, "preferring the toilless servitude to the dangerous liberty." They became Christians, allies of Byzantium, "and they altered their manner of life to a milder way."[26]

Classical literature was the bread and butter of historiographical education in the early modern era, and served as a starting-point for the many discussions of this topic composed by Enlightenment historians. Pietro Giannone, like Gibbon after him, seemed to precede Henri Pirenne in his sensitivity to the fact that the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages in particular was a slower and less abrupt process than sometimes perceived.[27] According to Giannone the tribes who overran the Roman Empire were indeed barbarians, yet deserved to be commended both for their many virtues and because they respected and retained the Roman laws.

> Therefore the Reader must not expect, that being to treat... of the *Goths*, *Longobards*, and *Normans*, who have all the same Origin, I ought, as many have done, to treat them as inhuman, fierce, and cruel, and to term their Laws impious, unjust, and rude, as they are, for the most part, reported by our Writers. In the Exploits of their Princes, Piety, Justice, and Temperance will shine no less than Fortitude and Magnanimity; and their Laws and Customs, altho' they cannot be compar'd to those of the ancient *Romans*, ought not however to be thought to come short of those of later Times, while the Empire was declining, when the Condition of a *Roman* became more vile and abject, than that of those who were reputed *Barbarians* and *Strangers*.[28]

What did however suffer decline was the cultivation of nature. Paul Henry Mallet noted that the spirit of freedom of the northern invading tribes was connected primarily to a lack of development of nature. "They were free, because they inhabited an uncultivated country, rude forests and mountains; and liberty is

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[26] *Procopius*, trans. H. B. Dewing, 7 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1914-40), 7: 205-7 (*Buildings*, III.vi.1-7).

[27] In this context see the remarks in Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven and London, 2004), 215-16; and more importantly Glen W. Bowersock, "The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 49 (1996), 29-43. See below for more on this topic.

[28] *GCH*, 1: 115-16. See also 272-3, for the Longobards as humane and not barbarous during their reign in Italy.

the sole treasure of an indigent people: for a poor country excites no avidity, and he who possesses little, defends it easily... They were free, because hunters and shepherds, who wander about in woods through inclination or necessity, are not so easily oppressed as the timorous inhabitants of inclosed towns."[29] Mallet's view implied a dialectical outlook connecting culture and possessions with a price, i.e. the lack of freedom resulting from the worry over material possessions. Yet this was still preferable to lack of progress, material as well as spiritual, despite the independent spirit the latter afforded. Nevertheless, again dialectically, this very spirit of independence as a consequence of lack of material prosperity was the starting point of cultivation, of the acquirement of material progress, following an almost inexorable historical logic. This point of view was variably common in the Enlightenment; progress, even in the most dismal eras of history, always seemed imminent. Even in the midst of disaster the Enlightenment typically preferred to notice a hopeful outcome. According to Mallet himself the northern tribes which invaded Rome brought with them a spirit of independence, and of a rural and military life which had already begun to decline in the Roman Empire itself. The Gothic government was the ultimate source of the eighteenth-century European spirit of honor and resistance to slavery. This unconquerable spirit compensated for the calamities these invasions initially brought to Europe.[30] This was a typical Enlightenment view of the positive side of the barbarian savage spirit. It entailed dialectically seeing the low point of the invasions as the starting point for cultural recovery.[31]

Another related historical motif was the civilizing influence that the Romans themselves had on the barbarians at an earlier stage, when Rome was still culturally in its prime. According to Robert Henry the Romans, as they did in all their provinces, greatly encouraged agriculture in Britain. Thus they rendered their conquest more valuable, encouraging this further by imposing tributes of corn. The settlement of Roman veterans served as an example how to engage in agriculture, and "the Romans, by their power, policy, and example, so effectually reconciled the Britons to the cultivation of their lands, that in a little time this island became one of the most plentiful provinces of the empire, and not only produced a sufficient quantity of corn for the support of its own inhabitants and the Roman troops, but afforded every year a very great surplus for exportation."[32] Moreover, "the Romans practiced themselves, and instructed

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[29] Paul Henry Mallet, *Northern Antiquities: or, a Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes, and Other Northern Nations*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1770), 1: 163-4.

[30] Ibid., 1: li-liv, 162-6.

[31] See the various important observations in the fourth volume of *PBR*.

[32] *HHGB*, 1: 313-14.

their British subjects in all the branches of agriculture, and in every art which was then known in the world, for making the earth yield her most precious gifts in the greatest abundance, for the support and comfort of human life."[33] Under the Romans Britain thrived more than in any period in the following thousand years. In this context, and emphasizing particularly agriculture, Henry exclaimed: "So beneficial, in some respects, it may sometimes prove to a people who are but just emerging from the savage state, to be brought under the dominion of a more enlightened nation, when that nation hath the wisdom and humanity to protect, to polish, and instruct, instead of destroying, the people whom it hath subdued!"[34] The Romans also brought architecture and city construction to Britain, which encouraged permanent dwelling. But this disappeared after the Roman period, mainly during the ensuing invasions.[35] "That long succession of miseries in which they were involved by the Scots, Picts, and Saxons, deprived them of the many useful arts which they had learned from their former masters, and lodged them once more in forests, dens, and caves, like their savage ancestors."[36] The ancient Britons were simply unable to sustain cultural progress on their own.

Hume claimed that the Roman Empire reached its apogee in the time of Augustus and then gradually declined. The most backward subsequent historical era was approximately the eleventh century, after which there began a gradual advancement, both cultural and economic. According to Hume there was a continual oscillation in history between cultural advancement and decline. "But there is a point of depression, as well as of exaltation, from which human affairs naturally return in a contrary direction, and beyond which they seldom pass either in their advancement or decline."[37] The Danes and other northern nations which invaded Europe in the Middle Ages gradually learned agriculture, found certain subsistence in their homes and were not tempted any more to neglect their industry in order to seek a precarious livelihood by pillage and rapine of their neighbors.[38] This was the same type of outlook which Gibbon slightly later referred to in his phrase "before they can conquer they must cease to be barbarous." While discussing the Norman Conquest Hume claimed that previously the Anglo-Saxons were a "military and turbulent people, so averse to commerce and the arts, and so little enured to industry."[39] Their cities appeared

33 Ibid., 1: 315.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 1: 317-23.
36 Ibid., 1: 323.
37 *HHE*, 2: 519-20.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 1: 166.

"by Domesday-book to have been at the conquest little better than villages... the arts in general were much less advanced in England than in France."[40] "The conquest put the people in a situation of receiving slowly, from abroad, the rudiments of science and cultivation, and of correcting their rough and licentious manners."[41] The process of cultural progress was a long one, but if based on the proper foundations was bound to succeed. Hume claimed that from the time of Henry VIII to the eighteenth century there was a great improvement in morals. "And this improvement has been chiefly owing to the encrease of industry and of the arts, which have given maintenance, and, what is also of equal importance, occupation, to the lower classes."[42] We can here note the common observation that Hume perceived a uniformity of human nature. Duncan Forbes has qualified this claim, noting how Hume was sensitive to the varying historical manifestations of the uniform elements of human nature.[43]

William Robertson viewed the feudal age as devoid both of the simplicity and virtues of preceding primitive nations and of the progress of succeeding eras. This led to a discussion, expressly indebted to Hume, of the oscillation between regression and progress in history.[44] Robertson claimed that in Luther's age the passions were more unrestrained and culture was rude.[45] "In passing judgment upon the characters of men, we ought to try them by the principles and maxims of their own age, not by those of another. For, although virtue and vice are at all times the same, manners and customs vary continually."[46] This methodological claim to objectivity was not as obvious or acceptable for eighteenth-century scholars as it is today. But it no doubt predisposed Robertson to perceive at least some virtues among barbaric nations. These virtues nevertheless left much room for amelioration, which contact with the Romans facilitated. Yet the constant stream of invading hordes meant that after the fall of the empire new invading tribes appeared which lacked its civilizing influence. When the Roman

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40 Ibid., 1: 170.

41 Ibid., 1: 185.

42 Ibid., 3: 329. See also the remarks on the progress and increase in population since the time of Elizabeth I, in 4: 378-9. For the claim that Hume did not regard history as providing grounds for a belief in providence, or in the inevitability of progress, see David Wootton, "David Hume, 'the historian'," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge, 1993), 281-312, esp. 295. For more on Hume's historiography, see *PBR*, 2: 163-257; O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, 56-92.

43 See Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975), 102-21. See also the discussion in Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 20-38, esp. 32-3.

44 *RHC*, 1: 23-6.

45 Ibid., 3: 312.

46 Ibid., 313. On the same topic, see *RHDI*, 192.

Empire fell and Europe was overwhelmed by the barbarian nations, much of "the arts, sciences, inventions and discoveries of the Romans" disappeared, and Europe was peopled by uncivilized tribes lacking arts or regular government. "Europe, when occupied by such inhabitants, may be said to have returned to a second infancy, and had to begin anew its career in improvement, science, and civility."[47] The whole point, however, was that they did begin anew. Robertson here implied a historical principle of cultural amelioration or regeneration. The barbarians, particularly when afforded the proper influence, were prone to civilization. For example, Robertson depicted the ancient Germans as simple and rude, devoid of agriculture and sufficient government. Yet he claimed that a comparison of the descriptions of Caesar with, more than a century later, those of Tacitus, demonstrated how contact with the Romans had during that time effected a cultural amelioration among the Germans.[48] "The Suiones were so much improved that they began to be corrupted."[49]

According to Robertson the development of human beings in society was similar under similar natural conditions. It was only in advanced stages of civilization that greater differences arose between them. Therefore he claimed it was no wonder that there was a similarity between the savages of America and those formerly in Europe. Attempts such as those by Lafitau to prove an affinity between these various races of people were fruitless.[50] Robertson, however, was somewhat inconsistent when he later claimed that the European barbarians, the Scythians and the Germans, were much more civilized than the rude nations of America, and therefore the authors in antiquity were not able to observe a situation of real lack of culture and civilization.[51] One of the main reasons which Robertson gave for claiming that the savage Americans did not descend originally from the ancient Western peoples, was the fact that nations never forgot completely elements of culture and the arts.

> For, although the elegant and refined arts may decline or perish, amidst the violent shocks of those revolutions and disasters to which nations are exposed, the necessary arts of life, when once they have been introduced among any people, are never lost. None of the vicissitudes in human affairs affect these, and they continue to be practiced as long as the race of men exists. If ever the use of iron had been known to the savages of America, or to their progenitors, if ever they had employed a plough, a loom, or a forge, the utility of those inventions would

47 *RHA*, 1: 36. See also 1: 40.
48 *RHC*, 1: 245-54 note 6.
49 Ibid., 250.
50 *RHA*, 2: 30-33.
51 Ibid., 2: 50-51.

> have preserved them, and it is impossible that they should have been abandoned or forgotten.[52]

This passage from the *History of America* was published a few years after, and no doubt was indebted to, Gibbon's remark in the "General Observations" regarding the long process of cultural amelioration between the fall of the Roman Empire and the eighteenth century, thanks to "the happy consequence of the progress of arts and agriculture." Gibbon had noted that by his own time "The plough, the loom, and the forge are introduced on the banks of the Volga, the Oby, and the Lena; and the fiercest of the Tartar hords have been taught to tremble and obey."[53] Like Gibbon, Robertson asserted that there was something almost infectious about progress, particularly basic material progress based upon cultivating nature. This was so fundamental and lasting that it was practically impossible to eradicate or forget. While presenting another argument in favor of his assertion that the people of America and Europe had developed independently of each other, Robertson noted that there were not originally domestic animals of European origin in America. "Whenever any people have experienced the advantages which men enjoy, by their dominion over the inferior animals, they can neither subsist without the nourishment which these afford, nor carry on any considerable operation independent of their ministry and labour."[54] There developed a dependency on material progress which ensured its preservation – once it existed it could not be completely lost.

According to Raynal "The fate of small states is to be extended, and of large ones to be dismembered."[55] "In all future ages, the savages will advance by slow degrees towards the civilized state; and civilized nations will return towards their primitive state."[56] There was a medium between these two states which was the most felicitous for humanity, but in Raynal's view it seemed elusive both to perceive and to attain. These were Rousseauist notions, but contrary to Rousseau, Raynal was less optimistic about the possibility of achieving this type of intermediate state of semi-primitivism. Furthermore, there had been periods in history when warlike people had conquered enlightened nations which were already in decline, with the result that the latter adapted themselves to the barbaric conquerors rather than vice versa.[57] For Raynal the most arduous task was not to raise a country from a state of barbarism or to keep it in a state of glory, but

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52 Ibid., 2: 34.

53 *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 512.

54 *RHA*, 2: 35-6.

55 *PPH*, 4: 271.

56 Ibid., 3: 275.

57 Ibid., 6: 451-2.

rather to check the rapidity of its decline.[58] The decline itself seemed inevitable. Yet even so, Raynal remained a typical Enlightenment optimist regarding the persistence of culture, which once attained could never be totally obliterated. Commenting on the college that Franklin established in Philadelphia in 1749 he noted: "If ever despotism, superstition, or war, should plunge Europe again into that state of barbarism out of which philosophy and the arts have extricated it, the sacred fire will be kept alive in Philadelphia, and come from thence to enlighten the world."[59]

Earlier in the century Giannone, evincing a similar optimism while discussing the ignorant state of medieval scholarship, claimed that "tho' Learning and History have been eclips'd, yet the World was never quite destitute of Men of good Parts; for Nature is a punctual Observer of her own Laws, and has distributed Endowments with an impartial Hand."[60] There was no total destruction of culture, and even in periods of decline there were those who did their best to preserve it. Giannone, however, was less interested in the material basis for high culture than the late Enlightenment, and preferred consistently to concentrate on high culture, on religion, philosophy, history and especially jurisprudence. Some years later another great Italian Enlightenment figure, Cesare Beccaria, claimed that a return to a savage state was in all circumstances impossible. Therefore it was better to advance as quickly as ever, even if the final goal of equality and happiness remained distant. Humanity was constrained, one could say, to progress or perish. "The impossibility of our ever returning to one of the extremes of our nature, makes it the more imperative that we should progress as rapidly and smoothly as possible towards the other, that is to say, to the highest civilisation."[61]

Cyclical Interpretations of History

All these types of observations implied a possible cyclical pattern in history, an idea which was long familiar in European historiography.[62] Probably the

[58] Ibid., 5: 185.

[59] Ibid., 6: 24.

[60] *GCH*, 1: 575.

[61] Cesare, marchese di Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Richard Davies, with Virginia Cox and Richard Bellamy (Cambridge, 1995), 147.

[62] Although it was not equally accepted by all historians. Hume for example seems to have tended at least occasionally toward a different approach when he claimed that the arts and sciences, once they achieved perfection in a certain state, from that moment necessarily

most famous theory of this type, very well-known to Gibbon and other early modern historians, was Polybius's thesis of the cycle of political revolutions from monarchy, through tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, mob-rule and back to monarchy. This was an inevitable law of nature, a constant recurring process of the history of human societies. In Polybius's view even the most prosperous civilizations were inevitably subject to decay.[63] It is interesting to note what constituted the point of decline which he perceived as the beginning of this ever-recurring cycle, and which included the lack of order and culture which created monarchy, the first natural form of government. This ebbing point was precisely the lack of a physical control of nature "owing to floods, famines, failure of crops or other such causes."[64]

The predominantly teleological outlook which pervaded medieval Christian historiography, which regarded all history as progressing toward the Last Judgement, all but precluded any significant cyclical interpretation of history.[65] In the Renaissance, however, the classical cyclical outlook re-emerged in new form. Luigi Guicciardini claimed that Rome demonstrated the recurring process of history, of a rise in prominence followed by decline and finally ruin.[66] Human affairs ultimately always reached the lowest rung of misery from which there was no further decline and then, moved by virtue, began to rise again till they reached the highest point, then again began declining and so on *ad infinitum*. According to Guicciardini this cycle could not be avoided, although it was possible to extend the period of happiness in states which preserved virtue and unity and

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began declining and seldom or never revived in the same nation where they had formerly thrived. See David Hume, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 111-37, at 135-7; and also Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, 315. Yet Hume was inconsistent on this point. See his oscillation theory noted above, as well as the remarks in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 377-8, where he perceived processes of decay and revival in history. For typically brilliant though rather critical observations on cyclical historiographical theories, see R. G. Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins (Austin, 1965), 57-89.

[63] Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton, 6 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 3: 271-89 (VI.3.1-9.14), 397-9 (VI.57.1-10). See the discussion in *PBR*, 3: 32-5. For Gibbon's use of Polybius, see also Ghosh, "Gibbon Observed," 137.

[64] Polybius, *The Histories*, 3: 277-8 (VI.5.5-9).

[65] See for example the remarks on St. Augustine's criticism of cyclical theories of history, in Theodor E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: the Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12 (1951), 354-6.

[66] Luigi Guicciardini, *The Sack of Rome*, trans. and ed. James H. Mc Gregor (New York, 1993), 3.

where people fought their own battles.[67] Yet the end result was always the same. "[H]uman undertakings tend to oscillate between one extreme and the other; and ultimately nothing changes but names and places."[68] Similarly, Machiavelli claimed that when the world became full of inhabitants "and human astuteness and malignity have gone as far as they can go," it was natural and even necessary that it be purged by plague, famine or inundation, after which the remaining human beings, few and beaten, could again become better.[69] Jean Bodin later claimed that it was a law of nature that things went in a circle. Episodes in human life often recurred in cycles, and therefore the study of history enabled the acquirement of prudence.[70]

Recognition of the cyclical nature of history abounded particularly in Enlightenment historiography.[71] Giannone early in the eighteenth century perceived a cyclical pattern in history, claiming that "it is the usual Fate of the Affairs of this World, that whenever they are arrived at the highest Pitch, that very Exaltation is the beginning of their Fall."[72] Robert Henry later wrote: "There seems to have been a succession of light and darkness in the intellectual as well as in the material world. How bright, for example, was the sunshine of the Augustan age? and how profound the darkness of that long night which succeeded the fall of the Western empire?" Yet Henry immediately continued to make the claim that the history of learning in late medieval Britain evinced

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[67] Ibid., 63.

[68] Ibid., 3.

[69] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago and London, 1996), 138-40. Mark Salber Phillips has claimed that Francesco Guicciardini was less prone than Machiavelli to perceive repetition in history, and emphasized more the singularity of historical situations and eras. He even discerned a certain almost imperceptible teleological element in history. See his *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Manchester, 1977), 86-7, 141-4, 155-6.

[70] Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, trans. and ed. Beatrice Reynolds (New York, 1969), 17, 302. Bodin's theory that changes in the world tended to occur in multiples of certain numbers of years, was of course a cyclical type of theory, for which see ibid., 223-36.

[71] For example, of course, as we saw above, in Hume's cultural oscillation type of interpretation, on which see Ryu Susato, "Hume's Oscillating Civilization Theory," *History of European Ideas*, 32 (2006), 263-77. On the eighteenth-century notion of cycles in history, see the remarks in Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 14-15, 41-3, 296-7, 273-4. Yet Spadafora rightly notes that the predominant notion at the time was that of progress, and it became increasingly dominant during the eighteenth century. See ibid., 18 and passim.

[72] *GCH*, 2: 225.

a gradual improvement. In other words, history did not progress or regress in a linear manner but rather in a cyclical one.[73]

The Abbé Dubos's theory of climatic influence on the history of culture had an alternating, though not strictly cyclical or oscillating, aspect to it. Dubos noted that there was an inscrutable element to this physical aspect of culture. Changes in the physical environment, particularly the quality of the air, no doubt influenced the history of civilization in various ways, and broadly speaking, without the proper physical conditions cultural progress was impossible. Yet such favorable conditions did not guarantee success, and there was no clear logic to such historical processes beyond this general observation. Therefore Dubos, exemplifying an early form of *Zeitgeist* approach, claimed that what one found in history was essentially alterations of cultural thriving and decay among certain societies and in certain cultural fields (he was interested mostly in the fine arts, but this was essentially a general observation). "People of all countries illustrious for feats of arms, have grown effeminate and pusillanimous, after having been transplanted into lands, whose climate softens the native inhabitants."[74] Yet even though the climatic influence was "stronger than that of origin and blood," the latter was also important. This meant that there was an element of constancy in history, but also that this did not preclude progress and decline among the same people despite their persistent cultural characteristics. The Germans, who had remained broadly the same culturally since the time Tacitus described them, were a case in point. Germany was indeed in a very different and more cultivated state in modern times compared with antiquity. Nevertheless, "the genius and character of the old Germans" was perceivable in that of the modern Germans. "Thus we find in every respect the ancient people in the modern, tho' the latter profess a different religion, and are governed by different maxims."[75]

In many instances Enlightenment literati perceived a spiral quality to the cyclical process. In other words, the alteration between regression and progression was not one of simple *da capo* recurrence but included a small but eventually significant accumulation of cultural achievements. Turgot claimed that "the human race, considered over the period since its origin, appears to the eye of a philosopher as one vast whole, which itself, like each individual, has its infancy and its advancement." Natural phenomena existed in an invariable cyclical process but human beings, on the contrary, had a history. Despite periods of progression and regression there was a general progress among humanity in general, which was occasionally transferred from one country to another.

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[73] *HHGB*, 4: 413.

[74] Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols (London, 1748), 2: 198.

[75] Ibid., 2: 197.

Despite wars and vices there existed an overall gradual process of enlightenment. "Finally commercial and political ties unite all parts of the globe, and the whole human race, through alternate periods of rest and unrest, of weal and woe, goes on advancing, although at a slow pace, towards greater perfection."[76] The Comte de Volney also presented a type of cyclical interpretation of history with an ascending spiral direction, although not systematically or clearly. He observed a general positive direction in history despite the recurrence of the fall of specific states. The overall direction of historical development was one of improvement, impelled by the growing facility of the propagation of ideas, particularly since the invention of printing. Volney prophesied a future of world unity and peace, even if this was to take a long time in realizing. Political despotism and religious superstition were to be fought by the aid of reason in order to advance this vision of equality and liberty.[77]

Raynal was also aware of a cyclical pattern, though he tended to emphasize the phase of cultural decline more than that of regeneration, noting that "All civilized people have been savages; and all savages, left to their natural impulse, were destined to become civilized."[78] He immediately continued and gave a short depiction of how human societies developed from rudimentary social foundations, through wars, to the creation of monarchism and despotism on the ruins of which democracy grew, together with an enlightened rule based on "the empire of the laws." Yet this blissful state was only temporary since it was a law of nature that human cultures moved in a "periodical motion," a recurring cycle of prosperity and decline.[79] "[A]ll [countries], more or less frequently, follow a regular circle of misfortunes and prosperities, of liberty and slavery, of morals and corruption, of knowledge and ignorance, of splendour and weakness; they will all go through the several points of this fatal horizon. The law of nature, which requires that all societies should gravitate towards despotism and dissolution, that empires should arise and be annihilated, will not be suspended for any one of them."[80] Thus, after a harangue berating the Dutch for having been morally corrupted, and letting themselves be ruled by a hereditary monarchy which might become prone to despotism, Raynal claimed that "the destiny of every commercial nation is to be rich, effeminate, corrupt, and subdued."[81] While he

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[76] *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, 41.

[77] C. F. Volney, *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, trans. anon. (Exeter, 1823), 93-104, also 111-16 and passim.

[78] *PPH*, 6: 227.

[79] Ibid., 6: 227-8, and also 238.

[80] Ibid., 6: 228.

[81] Ibid., 1: 291-7, esp. 297. See also 1: 371, for the decline of Goa from prosperity, through corruption, to devastation.

consistently commended commerce as the apex of culture, he seemed aware of an inexorable cultural-historical vicious cycle of ascent and decline.

Probably the most original eighteenth-century cyclical interpretation of history was Vico's famous *corsi e ricorsi*.[82] He claimed that nations advanced always from an Age of Gods when people believed they were ruled by divine government, to an Age of Heroes when heroes ruled as an aristocracy, and finally to an Age of Men when there was recognition of the equality of human nature, and when first democracy and then monarchy, the two forms of human government, were established. Each age had its own types of cultures and languages and its own types of civil natures. Societies developed from aristocracies to democracies and then monarchies, while a mixed constitution, although beneficial, was rare. Once societies advanced beyond the aristocratic stage, a reversion back to it was usually impossible, and they alternated between democracies and monarchies, with the latter according to Vico being the best form of government assuring freedom. This general pattern of human development was divinely ordained and uniform throughout history.[83] Vico observed that in contrast to other nations such as Carthage, Capua and Numantia, Rome had advanced in a just pace which was not accelerated by climatic, economic or other forces. Rome thus went through every civil form of a state – aristocratic, democratic and monarchic. When this divinely ordained course of national development ran its course in the fullest and most perfect manner, it had the most beneficial results.[84] This unified pattern of historical development was an "ideal eternal history" comprising birth, growth, maturity, decline and fall, corresponding to the development of the nature of nations which was "first cruel, then severe, next generous, later delicate, and finally dissolute."[85] This "ideal eternal history" was a cyclical one, and "the resurgence of nations entails the recurrence of human institutions."[86] Vico commented at length on "the medieval return of barbarism," which included a return to a divine age and then an age of heroes, a process which began with the barbarian invasions.[87] He claimed explicitly that he was using the first barbarism of classical antiquity in order to shed light on

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[82] Isaiah Berlin claimed that Vico's cyclical theory was in fact spiral, since each cycle included the memories of its predecessor. This *corsi e ricorsi* approach was, according to Berlin, the least interesting, plausible and original of Vico's ideas, yet also the most famous of them. See Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment, Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2000), 85.

[83] *VNS*, 21-2, 25, 86-7, 101, 395-6, 440-43, 476-7 and passim.

[84] Ibid., 477-8.

[85] Ibid., 98-9, and also 129, 154.

[86] Ibid., 461.

[87] Ibid., 461-80.

the second barbarism of the Middle Ages, which was even more obscure than classical barbarism.[88]

The cultivation of nature had an important part to play in this process. Vico outlined the way societies ultimately declined, fell and resurged. When a democracy became corrupt, if the people did not accept a monarch or were conquered by another nation, they ultimately found themselves embroiled in civil wars, and then "providence causes their obstinate factional strife and desperate civil wars to turn their cities into forests and their forests into human lairs." This type of barbarism was malicious and calculative and as such was even worse and more savage than the ancient primitive barbarism, which was more generous and less ignoble than the deliberate savagery of decadent nations. Long centuries of this second barbarism ultimately "wear down the evil schemes of malicious minds... When providence administers this extreme remedy to people who practice calculated malice, they are stunned and stupefied, and are no longer sensible to comforts, luxuries, pleasures, and ostentation, but only to the basic necessities of life." Eventually the few survivors become sociable and return to the primitive simplicity of early peoples. They then naturally become religious, truthful and faithful, and then providence revives the basis for a renewed development.[89] Vico claimed emphatically that his whole cyclical philosophy of history was providentially ordained, and as such was always the same and not a matter of chance or fate.[90] This was the most modern version of a divine accommodation theory, but devoid of a teleological element.

A different approach, and one that Gibbon was particularly familiar with, was that of Adam Ferguson. In *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* Ferguson regarded the essence and singularity of humanity in its propensity for constant change and progress as a species, not just as individuals.[91]

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[88] Ibid., 471.

[89] Ibid., 488-9.

[90] Ibid., 490-91. According to Donald Verene, Vico's first barbarism was a barbarism of sense at the beginning of culture (the time of poetic wisdom), while the final barbarism was a barbarism of reflection, and the return to the beginning of the course could only be achieved with the help of providence. See Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca and London, 1981), 193-221. For different perspectives, see Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton, 1985), 245-54; Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, 189-202; and Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago and London, 1983), 210-13, who at 213-14 also discusses Montesquieu's cyclical approach.

[91] Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), 7-16.

> We speak of art as distinguished from nature; but art itself is natural to man. He is in some measure the artificer of his own frame, as well as his fortune, and is destined, from the first age of his being, to invent and contrive. He applies the same talents to a variety of purposes, and acts nearly the same part in very different scenes. He would be always improving on his subject, and he carries this intention where-ever he moves, through the streets of the populous city, or the wilds of the forest.[92]

Man was an active being whenever and wherever he existed. "If we are asked therefore, Where the state of nature is to be found? we may answer, it is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Cape of Good Hope, or the Straits of Magellan." The differentiation between natural and unnatural was indeterminate. In Ferguson's philosophy there was not really a state of nature but only various manifestations or stages of the same uniform and unceasing human activity.[93] "The latest efforts of human invention are but a continuation of certain devices which were practiced in the earliest ages of the world, and in the rudest state of mankind. What the savage projects, or observes, in the forest, are the steps which led nations, more advanced, from the architecture of the cottage to that of the palace, and conducted the human mind from the perceptions of sense, to the general conclusions of science." No culture could revert to absolute barbarism because absolute barbarism did not exist. Or rather, barbarism and culture were two sides of the same coin.[94] This was not exactly a cyclical outlook, but it did imply the idea that no progress or decline were absolute, and therefore cultural regeneration was the way of nature.[95] Gibbon agreed with Ferguson's criticism of the decadence resulting from material luxury, which could lead to despotism. But he criticized Ferguson's hope that dispossessed nations of slaves would rebuild free societies, which he regarded as historically unfounded.[96]

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92 Ibid., 12.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 14.

95 For a slightly different interpretation, claiming that Ferguson's historiography was not cyclical but linear and providentially progressive, stressing human perfectibility, see Lisa Hill, "Adam Ferguson and the Paradox of Progress and Decline," *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), 677-706, esp. 688-91, 703.

96 Gibbon's most detailed consideration of Ferguson's work was published in *Memoires litteraires de la Grande Bretagne, Pour l'an 1767* [vol. 1 of 2], ed. Edward Gibbon and Georges Deyverdun (London, 1768), 45-74.

The Law of Unintended Consequences

This, however, was several years before he began working in earnest on *The Decline and Fall*,[97] where he adopted another approach, much closer to Ferguson's and others' cyclical outlook. This was best expressed in Gibbon's summary observation regarding the barbarian tribes – "before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous." In order to truly comprehend how eighteenth-century literati understood such a phrase we need to take a closer look at one of the truly original intellectual contributions of the Enlightenment, the law of unintended consequences, and specifically at how Enlightenment historians utilized this dialectical outlook. Amos Funkenstein has outlined how from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries there developed a perception of history which was not just simply narrative. At least from Bernard de Mandeville and Vico if not earlier, through Adam Smith's invisible hand to Hegel's cunning of reason and on to Marx, this new concept of how history operated displaced the medieval conception of divine accommodation, of constant direct divine intervention in history.[98] This type of thinking was not truly expressed in emphatic form before the Enlightenment, which in this way in typical optimistic fashion offered an explanation of the evils of the world as operating eventually toward a greater good. This was not simply the Leibnizean assertion of the best of all possible worlds, but a logical explanation of how exactly evil acts and occurrences were transformed by the operations of society and history into eventually unintended good results.[99]

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[97] Ibid., 69-72; and *PBR*, 2: 352-5.

[98] See Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, 1986), 202-13.

[99] One can note here J. G. A. Pocock's observations on the paradoxical connection between ideas of progress and decline and the notion that cultural progress led to the corruption of virtue in early modern thought. Pocock also notes that Gibbon believed that economic virtues, based in large measure on agriculture, could overcome this cultural danger, yet Gibbon did not fully develop this idea. See Pocock, "Between Machiavelli and Hume: Gibbon as Civic Humanist and Philosophical Historian." For the law of unintended consequences, see also Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2001), 39-47; and David Allen, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment, Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh, 1993), 207-17, who emphasizes the providential element in this type of historiographical thought. For the connection between the law of unintended consequences and conjectural history and stadial theory, see Craig Smith, "The Scottish Enlightenment, Unintended Consequences and the Science of Man," *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, 7 (2009), 9-28. On a broader level, and specifically on the economic context, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests, Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977).

Renaissance historiography still adhered to a more linear type of interpretation of cultural progress which often emphasized the civic humanist conception of civic virtue (*virtù*). This was apparent in Leonardo Bruni's view of progress.[100] Typical of the Renaissance humanist outlook, he differentiated sharply between virtue and vice and left almost no room for their dialectical intermingling, claiming: "It is a fact of human nature that, when the way lies open to greatness and honors, people are ready to better themselves; when that way is blocked, they become lifeless and do nothing." For example, when the Etruscans lost their empire to the Romans their virtue became entirely enfeebled.[101] Bruni was primarily concerned with political culture and was not particularly sensitive to the historical role of cultivation of nature. Thus it was political changes which brought about the fall of Rome, which had begun declining the moment the republic fell and the age of the emperors began (a common notion in the civic humanist historiographical outlook and in considerations of Roman history in general). "For liberty gave way before the imperial name, and when liberty departed, so did virtue."[102] Bruni was however aware of the importance of economic forces, and specifically commerce. He claimed that Florence following

[100] The classic study which first established the modern consideration of civic humanism, and also the importance of Bruni in this tradition, is of course Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance, Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, revised one-volume edition (Princeton, 1966). For more on Bruni see *PBR*, 3: 153-78, which presents a sophisticated reading of his view of the decline of Rome as enabling the rise and independent prosperity of other Italian cities, notably Florence.

[101] Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, trans. and ed. James Hankins, 3 vols (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2001-2007), 1: 49.

[102] Ibid., 1: 51. I am not claiming here that Renaissance historians were unappreciative of the importance of cultivating nature. Indeed, in the second chapter above we saw that Machiavelli was aware of this importance. Nor am I claiming that there was always a dialectic element to Enlightenment historiography's appreciation of cultivating nature. Nevertheless, what consideration of Bruni makes clear is that both a tendency to dialectical interpretation, and an emphasis of the importance of cultivating nature, whether separately, or interpretatively connected, were both much more important in the eighteenth century than in the Renaissance. When Bruni described various barbarian nations he depicted them as vagrant invaders searching for new lands, but he went no further in exploring their manners or modes of subsistence. See ibid., 1: 69 (description of the Huns), 73-5 (the Vandals), 81 (the Lombards). In his history of the Italian war of the sixth century he stuck to military matters to an even greater extent. See [Leonardo Bruni], *The Historie of Leonard Aretine, Concerning the Warres Betwene the Imperialles and the Gothes for the Possession of Italy*, trans. Arthur Goldyng (London, 1563). Gibbon claimed this work was plagiarized from Procopius, and he regarded Bruni as "worthless"; see *DF*, XL, 2: 562 note 14; LXVI, 3: 901 note 98. For Bruni's historiography as primarily concerned with politics as a human activity, see Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago and London, 1981), 5.

its establishment in Roman times thrived thanks to the frugality of its inhabitants and their avoidance of luxury and prodigality, as well as to their relinquishing their expansionist aspirations in view of Roman might. Rome at the time drew all the commerce to itself, and only when it began declining were other cities able to prosper to a greater extent.[103] Thus, Bruni's linear separation of virtue and vice received an almost topographical dimension, and they did not interact either at the same time or in the same place.

Machiavelli's outlook was more dialectical and he claimed "that letters come after arms and that, in provinces and cities, captains arise before philosophers."[104] Yet this was not the law of unintended consequences but rather part of a cyclical interpretation according to which history moved from virtue, which created quiet, which in its turn created leisure, which then caused disorder, which led to ruin, from which order was born, and then virtue, from which arose glory and good fortune and so on. In history there was a constant oscillation from good to bad and vice versa. There was a dialectical element in this historical interpretation, yet not as sophisticated as later in the Enlightenment. This was less a notion of progress and more a depiction of the recurrent motion of the wheel of fortune. Machiavelli, however, was sensitive enough dialectically to see the troubles of the Italy of his times as a possible opportunity for a capable new prince, since "in order to discover the worth of an Italian spirit, Italy had to be brought to her present extremity."[105] Yet this was still not the law of unintended consequences in the later Enlightenment conception. Ultimately Machiavelli was here alluding, albeit in dialectical terms, to the desolation of Italy as an opportunity for *virtù*, in the civic humanist sense primarily of military and political action, to play its part in history. The Enlightenment saw the possible beneficial consequences of war in a very different light. Interestingly, Machiavelli also utilized a dialectical perspective in considering, from a political point of view, the issue of cultivation of nature. He noted that the claim that it was preferable to settle a naturally sterile region because this forced people to be industrious rather than idle, would have been true if people had not been prone to command others and not make due with their own material portions. Since, however, such a human proclivity did in fact exist, it was better to settle fertile regions since then a city could expand due to the surrounding plenty, defend against attacks and crush

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103 Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, 1: 17-19.

104 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Princeton, 1988), 185.

105 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. George Bull (Harmondsworth, 1983), 134.

those who opposed its greatness. As for sloth, the law was left to combat it and the idle became soldiers.[106]

In the seventeenth century le Nain de Tillemont claimed that the fifth-century Britons were not just victims of foreign enemies but also of their own intestine wars, which reduced them to living on the fruits of hunting in forests and mountainous caverns. When the ravages of the northern barbarians, mainly the Scotts and Picts, ceased, the Britons had the liberty to cultivate the land, which produced an unprecedented fecundity. Yet the people abused the grace which gave them this plenty. Then "abundance produced debauchery, and debauchery all the crimes which ordinarily follow it" ("L'abondance produicit la débauche, & la débauche tous les crimes qui la suivent d'ordinaire"). The main crimes which resulted consisted of hatred for the truth and its defenders and indifference to what pleased God. Even the clergy were infected with the sins of drunkenness, querulousness and lack of discernment between truth and falsehood. God punished them for all this, mainly with a horrible plague, as well as the rumor of a repeated incursion of barbarians from the north, the latter leading to the Britons inviting the Saxons to help protect England in exchange for lands on the island. The Saxons, Angles and Jutes, who heard from their friends of the fertility of England, flocked there. In that manner divine justice punished the sins of the Britons, since those they called to their defense quickly turned from protectors to a new terror. The new invaders eventually even joined with the Picts whom they were supposed to combat, and together they attacked and slaughtered the Britons. Only in the battle of Bath did the unhoped-for divine succor help the Britons defeat the barbarians and win at least a temporary liberty.[107] This was precisely the type of historical occurrences which led in the following century to dialectical historiographical interpretations. But Tillemont, still under the thrall of divine accommodation, regarded luxury as an evil leading to bad consequences and all this as a divine sanction, not an analyzable rational historical process.

Even in the early Enlightenment the new type of thinking took time to develop. No less an audacious thinker than Pierre Bayle could still claim in a very undialectical manner that a sin was equally bad irrespective of the level of damage it caused or whether it unintentionally led to good results, because the level of sin was the result of its being divinely prohibited irrespective of its results.[108] Simon Ockley asserted that the beginning of the history of kingdoms

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[106] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 8-9.

[107] Louis Sébastien le Nain de Tillemont, *Histoire des Empereurs*, 6 vols (Bruxelles, 1732-49), 6: 189-91.

[108] See Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. and ed. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany, 2000), 207-8. One cannot however rule out that this was one of those

and empires was usually obscure because then people were mainly occupied with war, and it was only when government became well-established that learning could begin to develop.[109] Ockley was mainly an almost naive narrator of battles and dramatic scenes, who no doubt served as an excellent example of the narrative element of historiography for the young Gibbon. Yet his philosophical approach was unsophisticated. Humphrey Prideaux, a somewhat more serious thinker but still old-fashioned, claimed while discussing Alexander the Great that war-mongering kings had throughout history caused only harm and devastation. He censured the tendency of historians to concentrate on such figures as their most celebrated heroes, while the true heroes were those who fought out of sheer necessity to defend their countries, not to mention those who advanced peace and prosperity.[110] War was simply bad, as was material decadence, and Rome for example degenerated and was undone as a result of opulence and luxury.[111] The Abbé Vertot voiced the common assertion that luxury was incompatible with military virtue when he noted that "the Customs of the [early medieval] *Franks* and *Germans*, which we may possibly imagine to be wild and savage... generally tend to form the greatest Virtues: It was on the Strength of this Simplicity and Rudeness of Manners, that the Original *Frenchmen* conquer'd the greatest Part of *Europe*, which their more polite Successors lost afterwards by their Ease and Luxury."[112] Thomas Carte simply asserted that luxury was "The dishonour of human reason, the corrupter of virtue, and the bane of all states generally infected with it."[113]

Even Pietro Giannone, no doubt a much superior early Enlightenment historian, was similar to Ockley, Prideaux and Carte in this respect. According to Giannone vice created the need for laws and education, and "there is not much Injustice, and many Vices, because there be many Laws, but there are many Laws because there are many Vices."[114] While comparing Naples of the fourteenth to that of the eighteenth century Giannone perceived a transition

instances where Bayle, the ever-elusive Pyrrhonist, was catering to his more religious readers. Elsewhere he did note that small causes occasionally determined large historical occurrences. See ibid., 258-60.

109 Simon Ockley, *The History of the Saracens* (London, 1847), xix.

110 Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations, from the Declension of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the Time of Christ*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1851 [1716-18]), 1: 544-5.

111 Ibid., 2: 319.

112 Abbé de Vertot [René Aubert de Vertot d'Auberf], "A Dissertation, Designed to Trace the Original of the French, by a Parallel of Their Manners with Those of the Germans," in *Vertot's Miscellanies*, trans. John Henley (London, 1723), 1-51, at 47.

113 Thomas Carte, *A General History of England*, 4 vols (London, 1747-55), 1: 73.

114 *GCH*, 1: 35-6.

from a society with more military virtue to one more immersed in a life of luxury, implying that the latter was not positive, "But leaving it to the Judgment of the Readers, whether it be more commendable in Men to give their Minds to Arms and Horses, and to the severe and toilsome Exercise of War, or to Ease and Luxury."[115] He was simply unwilling to see any good resulting from vice. A similar and more explicit approach was evinced in the late Enlightenment by the Baron d'Holbach, who in many other respects was among the more daring of contemporaneous thinkers. Holbach saw no advantages to war, and regarded it as a totally destructive phenomenon. He regarded luxury also as a negative phenomenon, and did not accept claims for its advantages, even though it was the natural result of the progression of human needs and desires. He perceived that simple people were content with satisfying the natural necessities of life, while opulence was the result of jealousy excited by wanting to emulate the riches of others.[116]

The most prominent exponent of this type of outlook in the mainstream of Enlightenment thought was of course Voltaire, who consistently regarded war as something harmful which caused only distress both for the victors and the vanquished. No economic benefits came from war. The consequent need to tax the people only resulted in their concealing their riches and thus in stopping the circulation of money and commerce.[117] Voltaire's friend Marmontel gave the late Enlightenment anti-luxury position eloquent voice in his famous *Belisarius*, which thoroughly derided the corrupting influence of luxury.[118] Yet this novel was written in an extremely stoic vein almost necessitating such an outlook, which was very different from that of contemporaneous historiography. We should also note that praising such a thing as luxury was not necessarily related to a dialectical logic. The Abbé Dubos praised the economic prosperity and thriving state of the Venetian republic yet did so in a straightforward manner, claiming that "it was the Product of a Discreet and Judicious Expence, and of a real and solid Opulency, possess'd by a wise People; who never thought of enjoying Riches till once they had heap'd them up, and who could show Frugality in the greatest Magnificence."[119] As long as economic prosperity, even excessive,

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115 Ibid., 2: 277-8.

116 Paul-Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *Système social, ou principes naturels de la morale et de la politique, avec un examen de l'influence du gouvernement sur lés mœurs*, 3 vols in 1 (London, 1773; reprint Hildesheim and New York, 1969), 2: 112-25; 3: 62-71.

117 *VOH*, 989 (from *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*). Voltaire's works are of course replete with similar pronouncements.

118 Jean-François Marmontel, *Belisarius*, trans. anon. (London, 1767), 160-78.

119 Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *The History of the League Made at Cambray*, trans. R. F. [*sic*] (London, 1712), 4. A more critical view of luxury was implied by Dubos when he noted,

was coupled with the restraints of frugality, it was not immoral. Were it not for the Catholic perspective of this outlook, one might almost be reminded of Max Weber's thesis regarding capitalism and Protestantism. The late Enlightenment historiographical perspective was, however, of a different bent.

Such a different, specifically historiographical, current of thought, had in fact long perceived a connection between vice and progress.[120] Tacitus had noted how the Britons and Gauls had lost their courage and liberty when peace ushered in indolence.[121] Strabo as we have already noted took a very similar view. This type of interpretation implicitly noted the connection between the military spirit of the barbarians and their adherence to political freedom, a connection which became common in the early modern era. While it was not yet an example of truly dialectical thinking on Tacitus's and Strabo's part, such classical observations were precisely the type of historical examples of the unintended connection between vice and progress which Enlightenment historians emphasized. We should not however overstate the role this type of thinking had in antiquity itself. Strabo's perspective on luxury, for example, was primarily a stoic one. Livy too regarded luxury, specifically under Asian influence, as a vice which by his time had undermined the early Roman military virtue.[122]

A similar view was taken by Pliny the Elder, who in an interesting discussion perceived the connection between the cultivation of nature and the vice of luxury. Nature was "ever fertile for man's benefit," yet man nevertheless abused her gifts. "For what luxuries and for what outrageous uses does she not subserve

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in the context of his climatic theory of culture, that different nations were physically inclined in divergent ways to particular virtues and vices. See Dubos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, 2: 190, where he also wrote: "Wheresoever luxury is introduced, it has always a subserviency to the predominant inclination of the nation that falls into extravagance. According to the different taste of countries, people are ruined either by sumptuous buildings, or magnificent equipages, or by keeping nice and delicate tables, or in fine by downright excess of eating and drinking. A Spanish grandee squanders his money in intrigues and gallantry: but a Polish palatine's profusion consists in wine and brandy." The Comte de Volney observed how self-interest motivated human history for better or worse, but he depicted greed and ignorance as causes for despotism and cultural decline. See Volney, *The Ruins*, 46, 89-93 and passim.

120 See Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History, Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven and London, 1998), 256, on the recognition of historians from ancient to modern times, of the connection between luxury and wealth, and civilization.

121 Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, trans. M. Hutton et al. (Loeb Classical Library, 1970), 47-9 (*Agricola*, 11.4).

122 *Livy*, trans. B. O. Foster, Frank Gardner Moore, Evan T. Sage and Alfred C. Schlesinger, 14 vols (Loeb Classical Library, 1919-52), 3: 443 (VII.xxv.9); 6: 11-13 (XXIII. iv.4-6); 11: 219 (XXXIX.i.3), 235-7 (XXXIX.vi.7-9).

mankind!... Water, iron, wood, fire, stone, growing crops, are employed to torture her at all hours, and much more to make her minister to our luxuries than our sustenance... [W]e drag out her entrails, we seek a jewel merely to be worn upon a finger! How many hands are worn away with toil that a single knuckle may shine resplendent!" Yet nature was still kind to human beings, and after all the crimes, slaughter and warfare engendered by wealth, "when at length our madness has been finally discharged, she draws herself as a veil, and hides even the crimes of mortals."[123] There was something almost modern in this perceived connection between the abuse of nature and political and social evils, a connection which has rarely been observed in such direct fashion before modern times. The notion that there could be something corrupting in the abuse of humanity's use of nature was almost diametrically opposed to the mainstream of Enlightenment thought. It has had to wait till the modern environmental crisis to receive a truly potent formulation which even Pliny, who did not claim that nature herself was in danger from human intervention, could not have foreseen. Yet the straightforward condemnation of luxury was far from the more dialectical and sophisticated outlook which many Enlightenment literati developed.

In the eighteenth century, in contrast with earlier times, vices were consistently interpreted dialectically as positive promoters of progress. Luxury and war were the two main topics which figured in such discussions. Montesquieu had depicted luxury as one of the key corrupting influences in Rome's history, responsible for the Epicurean corrosion of the more traditional and stoic virtues which had underlined Roman greatness.[124] He regarded luxury as a detrimental social factor. It produced the expectation of success which was relative among the members of society, and therefore created a general distress, lack of harmony between needs and means and lack of equality.[125] On the other hand it was precisely this view of luxury which drove Montesquieu to a dialectical outlook, if not exactly to the law of unintended consequences. He observed that in countries which had a mountainous and more difficult natural setting people tended to have more of a spirit of liberty and a more moderate government because they were less exposed to conquest. Furthermore, countries were not cultivated in proportion to their fertility but in proportion to their liberty, and the fertile regions were those most

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123 Pliny, *Natural History*, vols 1-2, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library, 1942-49), 1: 289-95.

124 Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, trans. and ed. David Lowenthal (New York and London, 1965), 40-41, 61-2, 97-100. Yet see 150, for the claim that luxury was not bad in itself but only when there were circumstances which emphasized physical necessities.

125 Charles-Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, 1990), 96-7.

often deserted or invaded, while the less fertile ones usually produced the greater peoples. "The Barrenness of the land makes men industrious, sober, inured to work, courageous, and fit for war; they must procure for themselves what the terrain refuses them. The fertility of a country gives, along with ease, softness and a certain love for the preservation of life."[126] In other words, like Tacitus long before him but in more explicit terms, Montesquieu did not regard luxury as a positive thing, but he did regard the lack of luxury as not negative. From adversity arose good because of the exertion to overcome this adversity. From good arose bad consequences because of negligence in maintaining cultural accomplishments. This was a lukewarm cyclical dialectic, but from this it was a small though significant step to assert that from the pursuit of luxury itself, which was always perceived as *sui generis* an evil vice, could result unintended good consequences.

This interpretation of the pursuit of luxury, clearly evincing the law of unintended consequences, was first made famous, indeed infamous, in the first quarter of the eighteenth century in Mandeville's view of "private vices, public benefits" outlined in his *Fable of the Bees*.[127] But it was only toward the middle of the century that it began to be conspicuous in historiographical literature. David Hume noted that in the time of Elizabeth I the nobles gradually acquired a taste for elegant luxury and built large and sumptuous edifices, which it was reasonable to think promoted the arts and industry.[128] He approvingly marked the decline of the habit of engaging retainers, which resulted from Henry VII's legislation against this common phenomenon. Yet Hume also claimed that what led to the decline of this pernicious custom more than legislation was "the encrease of the arts," since at this time the nobles, instead of vying with each other in the number and boldness of their retainers, gradually acquired a more civilized species of emulation by competing in the richness and splendor of their houses and tables. At the same time the common people, now no longer maintained in vicious idleness by their superiors, were forced to learn a calling or industry and thus became more useful to themselves and to others. "And it must be acknowledged,

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126 Ibid., 286-7.

127 For the important eighteenth-century debate concerning luxury, see Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury, a Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994), 126-76; and John Sekora, *Luxury, the Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smolett* (Baltimore and London, 1977), 63-131. Sekora depicts how luxury in eighteenth-century Britain was initially conceived as a vice peculiar to the lower social orders, but during the second half of the century was increasingly defended from an economic perspective, which also raised a concern for social justice. For the debate and its continuation in the following century, see also Jeremy Jennings, "The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68 (2007), 79-105.

128 *HHE*, 4: 383.

in spite of those who declaim so violently against refinement in the arts, or what they are pleased to call luxury, that, as much as an industrious tradesman is both a better man and a better citizen than one of those idle retainers, who formerly depended on the great families; so much is the life of a modern nobleman more laudable than that of an ancient baron."[129] In his essay *Of Refinement in the Arts*, originally titled *Of Luxury*, Hume elaborated his theory of the social usefulness and necessity of moderate luxury. In rude nations the arts were neglected and all efforts were devoted to agriculture, with society being divided into tyrannical vassals and oppressed tenants. Yet when luxury encouraged commerce and industry, the farmers, by a proper cultivation of the land, became rich and the merchants acquired political authority which in their hands became the basis of liberty.[130] The law of unintended consequences, when it worked in the proper manner, reinforced the mutual interdependence between material and ethical culture, between the cultivation of nature and political liberty.

In this way Hume's approach was strictly opposed to the traditional religious *vanitas* criticism of material luxury. He specifically addressed the importance of the basic art of agriculture as an underpinning of the general economic welfare of society, in a reciprocal process whereby more advanced forms of material affluence depended on agriculture but also in their turn enforced and improved its practitioners. Indicatively enough, much of his essay *Of Commerce* was devoted to elaborating this dialectical point and outlining the positive aspects of the human wish for luxury. There he claimed that in certain historical cases improvements in the mechanical arts of agriculture created a superfluity, which instead of maintaining traders and manufacturers to answer the needs of luxury made them available for military service for the good of the state. This presented a contrast between the greatness of the state and the happiness of the private citizen, which was what had happened in ancient Sparta and Rome. Hume, however, regarded such a policy as inapplicable in modern nations. In these, when manufacture and the mechanical arts were not developed, agricultural laborers had no incentive to produce beyond a basic level, which resulted in the prevalence of indolence and in a limited cultivation of the land. Eventually this also resulted in limited military abilities. On the other hand, when agricultural labor was improved the resultant superfluity enabled the development of manufactures and eventually a better military.[131]

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[129] Ibid., 3: 76-7.

[130] David Hume, "Of Refinement in the Arts," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 268-80, esp. 277-8.

[131] David Hume, "Of Commerce," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, 253-67, esp. 260-61. In "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," 419-20, he claimed that agriculture was important, but could not thrive in the long term without trade and manufactures.

Despite Hume's doubts regarding the climatic influence on culture, when he approached this topic from a similar unintended-consequences perspective he seemed more inclined to accept it up to a point, specifically regarding the rather common notion that a harsh physical environment spurred cultural improvement. He noted that in states which had a mild climate and rich soil, farmers lacked the incentive to improve their forms of labor and governments did not encourage it. But in countries such as England (in contrast with France, Italy or Spain), where the soil was coarse, there was a greater need for more developed methods of cultivation. Therefore, it was specifically in such countries with less inviting natural surroundings that one found greater cultural advancement and less poverty. For similar reasons, in a milder climate there was less need of clothing and housing, yet this in turn removed "in part, that necessity, which is the great spur to industry and invention."[132]

Raynal evinced a more ambivalent attitude toward this issue. He exemplified the traditional view of want giving rise to industry, when he noted that the Phoenicians were constrained to become dependent on navigation, "Happy in possessing so few natural advantages, since the want of these awakened that spirit of invention and industry, which is the parent of arts and opulence!"[133] He consistently regarded luxury itself as destructive of virtue.[134] Yet he also extolled luxury as nourishing commerce.[135] Herder presented a more sophisticated dialectical evaluation of the influence of luxury on culture. He claimed that the luxury which the Italians learned from the crusades encouraged the pursuance of arts and manufactures in the Italian cities and even agriculture, which was developed there earlier than in the rest of medieval Europe. This thriving situation led to order, private property and submission to the laws. The same spirit, however, led to the decay of the republics and to party dissention in all of Italy, followed by war and oppression. The spirit of luxury and the arts had also banished the military spirit as well as faith and probity, and therefore city after city in Italy fell victim to local or foreign tyrants. It was only a spirit of moderation which protected Venice, "the distributor of this pleasing poison," from such ruin. But luckily, according to Herder in one of his more romantic moments, most of Europe at that time was not similarly disposed to the spirit of luxury, which was opposed by the ideals of chivalry which scorned self-interest

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132 "Of Commerce," 266-7. For Hume's views on agriculture and commerce, see Alan Macfarlane, "David Hume and the Political Economy of Agrarian Civilization," *History of European Ideas*, 27 (2001), 79-91.

133 *PPH*, 1: 4.

134 Ibid., 1: 112; 6: 213, 264; and passim.

135 Ibid., 6: 95.

and eulogized glory, thus checking the spirit of commerce.[136] In other words, luxury could promote civilization but in excess could lead to its dissolution. Yet Herder's preference for chivalry at the expense of commerce was in contrast with the more seemingly mundane economic thinking of the mainstream late Enlightenment.[137] His was a more pessimistic pre-romantic outlook. As Isaiah Berlin perceived, Herder did not believe in the idea of general human progress. Progress (*Fortgang*) did exist, but according to Herder's pluralistic approach this was the progress of each nation and culture in its own terms, and it was impossible to discuss general historical progress which was perceptible only to God.[138]

The most interesting theme in relation to which the law of unintended consequences appeared in Enlightenment historiography was associated with the interpretation of the consequences of war.[139] The Enlightenment of course was adamantly opposed to the evils of war, yet it could also perceive a way in which it unintentionally promoted good consequences. To modern sensibilities this might seem initially almost incomprehensible. It is the source, for example, of the modern criticism of Gibbon's "General Observations" as evincing a lack of recognition of the potential of European culture to implode, to develop the sinister dialectic of the Enlightenment. Yet we should remember that eighteenth-century people perceived themselves as only finally emerging from medieval barbarism, and they could not predict the ruinous nature of modern warfare.

Early recognition of the possible positive influence of warfare began in antiquity. Thucydides depicted how the Corinthians, in their speech to the Spartans as they attempted to convince them to fight the Athenians, claimed that the latter were more modern than the Spartans, since "When a city can live in peace and quiet, no doubt the old-established ways are best: but when one is constantly being faced by new problems, one has also to be capable of approaching them in an original way."[140] The context here was the Corinthians' attempt to convince the Spartans to combat the Athenians, who were generally claimed to be more active than the Spartans and thus as unwilling to make do with the *status quo*.[141] Athenian power was based on cultural, political and

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136 *OPHM*, 604-5.

137 Regarding Herder's type of unintended-consequences thinking, see the remarks on his Leibnizian approach to conflict and destructive forces, in F. M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (Oxford, 1967), 134-8.

138 Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, 215-18, 237.

139 For a different treatment of this issue, see Bruce Buchan, "Enlightened Histories: Civilization, War and the Scottish Enlightenment," *The European Legacy*, 10 (2005), 177-92.

140 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, 1972), 76-7 (I.71).

141 See generally ibid., 75-7 (I.69-71).

military activeness, the implication being that the Spartans too needed to be more active in order to help resist the Athenians. While this was not an outright claim for the positive cultural consequences of war, the underlining assumption was similar.

In the eighteenth century this assertion became explicit. According to Antoine-Yves Goguet warfare promoted cultural advancement despite its obviously very negative immediate consequences. The will to plunder and make war contributed to the development of such things as navigation and commerce, which were therefore developed in civilized nations, with their more advanced forms of warfare and consequently superior technology.[142]

> When we reflect on the various evils which flow from war, we cannot but look upon it as one of the most terrible calamities that afflict mankind. Yet we must acknowledge, that much good has resulted from this great evil... The calamities which conquests and revolutions had occasioned, disappeared; but the blessings which they had produced, remained. Ingenious and active spirits, encouraged by the repose which they enjoyed, devoted themselves to study. It was in the bosom of great empires, the arts were invented, and the sciences had their birth.[143]

Robert Henry claimed that knowledge of the art of war was vital for societies since without it, and without the skill and courage needed for self-defense, there was no way of retaining cultural advancement. This exactly was what had happened to the unwarlike Britons after the departure of the Romans, despite the fact that like most ancient nations they were more warlike in an earlier stage of their development before the Roman invasion.[144] After the Roman invasion the ancient Britons lost their military prowess at the encouragement of Roman policy. Only subsequently did they discover that all of the advancement in other arts could not compensate for the loss of the national spirit and of the ability for self-defense.[145] "The truth is, that nothing can be more difficult than to keep a sufficient portion of the gallant and martial spirit alive in a people softened by long tranquility, and keenly engaged in peaceful pursuits of any kind: nor can any thing be more dangerous than to suffer that spirit to be extinguished. To this both the ancient Britons and the Anglo-Saxons owed all their miseries

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142 Antoine-Yves Goguet, *The Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences, and their Progress among The most Ancient Nations*, trans. [Robert Henry?], 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1761; reprint New York, 1976), 1: 302, 314-15, 317-18.

143 Ibid., 1: 326.

144 *HHGB*, 1: 335-6.

145 Ibid., 1: 345.

and disgraces."[146] The modern British were indebted for their free form of government to the keen love of liberty of their remote Anglo-Saxon ancestors.[147] This was the common claim for the barbarian spirit of liberty. Henry, however, evincing his Scottish Enlightenment emphasis on commerce, did not regard the military spirit as simply necessary for defense. In his view victories and military conquests were unhelpful and even harmful, if they did not enhance navigation and trade.[148]

Hume vacillated between condemnation of war almost in Voltaire's style, to a similar dialectical approach. Regarding the rule of Charles V the Wise in France he claimed: "The events of his reign, compared with those of the preceding, are a proof, how little reason kingdoms have to value themselves on their victories, or to be humbled by their defeats; which in reality ought to be ascribed chiefly to the good or bad conduct of their rulers, and are of little moment towards determining national characters and manners."[149] Elsewhere Hume was explicitly critical of war, claiming that warlike virtues such as the love of fame promoted glory but not public felicity.[150] Yet he could also take a very different approach. He observed that Edward III's army which invaded France in 1346, although at first quite successful during the invasion, was nevertheless in a relatively unfit condition. Hume then noted that "we are led to entertain a very mean idea of the military force of those ages, which, being ignorant of every other art, had not properly cultivated the art of war itself, the sole object of general attention."[151] Hume viewed war and militarism critically, and yet the capacity to conduct war was an indication of the level of cultivation of a culture and an age. This was the sense in which Hume and his generation referred to "the art of war," to the economic and technological advantages which war seemed to foster. Hume claimed that during the battle of Crecy the first significant use in Europe of the recent invention of artillery was made. Regarding the use of artillery Hume claimed that "though it seemed contrived for the destruction of mankind, and the overthrow of empire, [it] has in the issue rendered battles less bloody, and has given greater stability to civil societies. Nations, by its means, have been brought more to a level: Conquests have become less frequent and rapid: Success in war has been reduced nearly to be a matter of calculation:

146 Ibid., 2: 536.
147 Ibid., 2: 533.
148 Ibid., 5: 496.
149 *HHE*, 2: 262.
150 Ibid., 5: 50-51.
151 Ibid., 2: 226.

And any nation, overmatched by its enemies, either yields to their demands, or secures itself by alliances against their violence and invasion."[152]

The eighteenth-century British debate on the possible need of a standing army drew from Adam Smith the statement that a well-regulated standing army was necessary for a civilized nation requiring defense against barbarian armies. An advanced nation could not afford to let more than a small fraction of its manufacturing population to relinquish their productive occupations in favor of warfare, without this entailing a significant economic price. A standing army was also an efficient tool for subduing and civilizing barbarian countries.[153] Smith noted that the invention of fire-arms, because of their expensive cost, gave a clear military advantage to opulent and civilized nations. In ancient times rich civilized countries had trouble defending against poor and barbarian nations, but in the modern era this situation was reversed. Therefore, "The invention of fire-arms, an invention which at first sight appears to be so pernicious, is certainly favourable both to the permanency and to the extension of civilization."[154] The art of war for Hume and Smith thus had a double advantage, it both fostered technological innovation and economic benefits, and in addition these in their turn made war less destructive and more "civilized" and thus promoted peace. Looking at what the "progress" in warfare led to in the following centuries makes such an outlook seem irresponsible. Yet it should be perceived as a measure of the eighteenth century's optimism. Enlightenment intellectuals never claimed that war should be fostered in order to achieve progress. What they were asserting was that the inevitability of war necessitated certain developments which led to a variety of positive consequences. These consequences might ultimately in the future lead to the abolition of war itself, or at least to a diminution of its destructiveness. In this of course they were simply wrong, but that is retrospective wisdom.

Nevertheless, the uneasiness and prevarication on this point were a measure of the fact that even in the Enlightenment itself there was a sense in which this optimism was perhaps exaggerated. Raynal did not see anything good resulting from war.[155] Yet he was also aware of the dialectic involved when he noted that "Carthage fell in the contest [with Rome], because riches produce an opposite effect to poverty, since they extinguish courage, and bring on a dislike to military exertions."[156] Yet Rome itself ultimately lost by the fall of her great opponent. It was Cato the Elder who in fact destroyed the Roman Republic since by destroying Carthage he denied her a rival. Similarly, Venice retained its power

152 Ibid., 2: 230.
153 *SAI*, 2: 705-8.
154 Ibid., 2: 708.
155 *PPH*, 3: 486; 6: 317-33, 354, 368-9.
156 Ibid., 1: 5.

because of the constant rivals at her gates. Without an exterior threat a republic developed inner dissensions. "Peace and security are necessary for monarchies; agitation and a formidable enemy for republics."[157] Observing how war could obliquely also lead to economic advantages, Raynal noted how the conquest of China by the Tartars had caused many Chinese to flee to Formosa, bringing with them their industry and commerce. "Thus it is that torrents enrich the vallies with the stores they carry down from the desolated mountains."[158]

Probably no other eighteenth-century historian consistently utilized the law of unintended consequences more than William Robertson.[159] Early in his intellectual career he observed: "By enslaving the world... they [the Romans] civilized it; and, while they oppressed mankind, they united them together."[160] The Romans, however, by subduing the world lost their own freedom (by which Robertson meant the fall of the republic).[161] The tendency to see the ultimate unintended positive consequences of even some of the most abhorrent cases of human conduct was a measure of Robertson's Enlightenment optimism. This tendency was coupled with a rational Protestant religiosity replacing divine accommodation almost imperceptibly with the law of unintended consequences, which became divinely sanctioned only in the most general sense. Regarding Henry VIII Robertson noted: "But the vices of this prince were more beneficial to mankind, than the virtues of others."[162] His rapaciousness and tyranny helped oppress the ancient nobility and fortified the commons, and consequently liberty, while his other passions helped topple popish superstition and assisted the beginnings of religious freedom.[163] Robertson was thinking along similar lines when he noted that the fierce zeal with which the house of Guise in France, and

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157 Ibid., 6: 209.

158 Ibid., 1: 186.

159 See Daniele Francesconi, "William Robertson on Historical Causation and Unintended Consequences," *Cromohs*, 4 (1999). For an important introduction to Robertson's general approach to historical causation, see D. J. Womersley, "The Historical Writings of William Robertson," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47 (1986), 497-506. Also see O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, 93-166.

160 William Robertson, "The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ's Appearance, and its Connection with the Success of his Religion, Considered. A Sermon, Preached before the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, at the Anniversary Meeting in the High Church of Edinburgh, on Monday January 6. 1755." The Sixth Edition (Edinburgh, 1791), in *The History of America Books IX and X.* (1796), and *The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ's Appearance* (1791) (reprint London, 1996), 15.

161 Ibid., 22.

162 William Robertson, *The History of Scotland During the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI*, The Fourteenth Edition, 2 vols (London, 1794), 1: 121.

163 Ibid., 1: 121-2.

Mary queen of England, opposed the Reformation, had become instrumental in furthering the cause of the Scottish Reformation.[164]

Similar logic was applied by Robertson to a variety of topics. The relation of the (ultimately unconcluded) challenge to a duel which Francis I made to Charles V led him to a historical and philosophical digression on dueling. He regarded this as a destructive custom unjustified by any principle of reason and unknown in antiquity, "Though at the same time it must be admitted, that, to this absurd custom, we must ascribe in some degree the extraordinary gentleness and complaisance of modern manners, and that respectful attention of one man to another, which, at present, render the social intercourses of life far more agreeable and decent, than among the most civilized nations of antiquity."[165] The reason for this was mainly the chivalric ceremoniousness connected with dueling. Writing of the Treaty of Passau (1552) following the victory of the rebel Protestants under Maurice of Saxony in their war with the imperial forces, Robertson observed how because of the diplomatic intricacies of that era Maurice turned from a seeming enemy of the Reformation to one of its champions, just as the French King Henry II who persecuted the Huguenots, co-operated with Maurice against Charles V and in favor of the German Protestants. In this context Robertson observed, evincing his very vague notion that the law of unintended consequences was in fact divine accommodation (without using these modern designations of course): "So wonderfully doth the wisdom of God superintend and regulate the caprice of human passions, and render them subservient towards the accomplishment of his own purposes."[166]

Robertson analyzed aspects of material progress in a similar fashion. He observed that the mild climate and fertile land of ancient Egypt made commerce unnecessary and thus led to avoidance of contact with strangers, while the Phoenicians, devoid of a large or fertile land, were forced to develop a commercial spirit in order to thrive.[167] Thus, what initially seemed as disadvantages ultimately led to positive developments, and vice versa. Robertson noted that the Roman trade with India was a result of luxury not necessity, and this distinguished them from other nations with simpler manners, which did not have either the need or ability to require products such as spices, precious stones or silk.[168] Ultimately the same demand for luxury gradually developed among the barbarian nations

164 Ibid., 1: 139.
165 *RHC*, 3: 15-16.
166 Ibid., 4: 92-4.
167 *RHDI*, 6-10.
168 Ibid., 63-4, 124, 127.

which overran the Roman Empire.[169] Later the requirement of oriental luxuries encouraged the Europeans and the Muslims in the Middle Ages to develop commerce between them despite their religious and cultural animosities.[170] Even the crusades which initially alienated the two cultures eventually led to the strengthening of commerce, mainly with the Italian city-states, as well as to better relations between Muslims and Europeans who lived in the Orient.[171] It was only the discovery of America and of the sailing route beyond the Cape of Good Hope which ended this commercial boom, mainly for the Venetians.[172] Robertson did not usually emphasize the beneficial consequences of war, yet at least in one case he did so when he claimed that the Inca of Peru, in contrast with the Mexicans, lacked a military fighting spirit and were easily conquered. Robertson emphasized how this was connected with cultural feebleness and lifeless inaction, and considered it a political debility.[173]

Enlightenment historians occasionally discussed the law of unintended consequences (again, without referring to this modern term itself), in more direct philosophical manner. Hume claimed that everything bad in society also had a good side. Thus, even the monasteries which were annulled in the time of Edward VI had their positive aspects. The monks were more indulgent landlords than the nobles who received the monastic lands, they were a sure resource for the poor, and despite the fact that their hospitality encouraged sloth and obstructed the increase of public riches, it provided the wants and necessities of the indigent. Regardless of the fact that there was scarce any institution less favorable to the interests of humanity than monks and friars, it still retained these positive aspects.[174] On the same topic Hume noted: "There is no abuse so great, in civil society, as not to be attended with a variety of beneficial consequences; and in the beginnings of reformation, the loss of these advantages is always felt very sensibly, while the benefit, resulting from the change, is the slow effect of time, and is seldom perceived by the bulk of a nation."[175] Generally reflecting on the age of the Stewarts, he claimed that "Governments too steady and uniform, as

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169 Ibid., 203. For more on how needs and acquired appetites encouraged invention and industry, see *RHA*, 2: 96-7.

170 *RHDI*, 130-31.

171 Ibid., 135-49.

172 Ibid., 166. For more on the encouragement of commerce and the love of oriental luxury goods which the crusades enabled, see *RHA*, 1: 42-4.

173 Ibid., 3: 225-6.

174 *HHE*, 3: 368-9.

175 Ibid., 3: 368. See also ibid., 5: 300-306, 328, where Hume, as elsewhere when he discussed the English civil war, was clearly censorious of the Puritans and yet remained appreciative of their contribution to civil liberty.

they are seldom free, so are they, in the judgment of some, attended with another sensible inconvenience: They abate the active powers of men; depress courage, invention, and genius; and produce an universal lethargy in the people. Though this opinion may be just, the fluctuation and contest, it must be allowed, of the English government were, during these reigns, much too violent both for the repose and safety of the people."[176] In other words there was a golden mean of cultural negativity. Too much vice and violence was actively destructive, but too little was destructive by remissness. Culturally and politically Hume aimed at a *via media* between indolence and activity, lethargic and industrious government, peace and war. "But extremes of all kinds are to be avoided; and though no one will ever please either faction by moderate opinions, it is there we are most likely to meet with truth and certainty."[177] This was one of those instances where Hume was representative of the main currents of contemporary thought. This outlook on such things as the possible advantages arising from war was very different from Adam Ferguson's musings in praise of martial activism.[178]

Earlier in the century Vico had also evinced recognition of the law of unintended consequences. He claimed that the ancient Roman patricians had treated the unfortunate plebeians cruelly. In the early stage of their history the Romans had not yet grasped the notion of common good. Regarding Roman virtue at this early stage Vico claimed, in almost Mandevillian language, "that such public virtue was merely the good use to which providence turned grievous, filthy, and savage private vices."[179] Furthermore, "to preserve the human race on the earth, providence uses people's limited goals as a means of attaining greater ones."[180] Human beings had free volition to turn their passions into virtues, but because of their weakness of will they required the assistance of divine providence, which operated in a legislative manner. Legislation considered people as they were and attempted to direct the vices of ferocity, avarice and ambition in order to create armies, trade and courts. In that way legislation turned these vices into

176 Ibid., 6: 530-31.

177 Ibid., 6: 533-4. See also David Hume, "Of the Middle Station of Life," in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1987), 545-51.

178 For which see e.g. Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 47-8. For Hume's approach to the law of unintended consequences and to historical causation in general, see Daniele Francesconi, "The Language of Historical Causation in David Hume's *History of England*," *Cromohs*, 6 (2001). For a different approach, emphasizing Hume's view that progress was more dependent on government than on the law of unintended consequences (without mentioning the latter concept), see Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, 308-23. For some general remarks on the law of unintended consequences in Scottish historiography, see Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 310-11.

179 *VNS*, 26.

180 Ibid., 489-90.

civil happiness, but again, only with the help of divine providence. "For out of the passions of people intent on their personal advantage, which might cause them to live as wild and solitary beasts, it makes civil institutions which keep them within human society."[181] Like Robertson later and in even more emphatic form, Vico's version of the law of unintended consequences was a modern reincarnation of divine accommodation.

Similarly, a providential direction seemed to be responsible for the pervasiveness of the law of unintended consequences in Turgot's version. Indeed, Turgot emphasized not just the existence of unintended consequences but also the actual need for this phenomenon without which progress seemed to be severely limited. When reason and justice reached an advanced stage too early this created cultural immobilization in a state of mediocrity, which was what had happened in China. A state of imperfection was necessary in order to remain in a dynamic condition which enabled progress. Therefore evils and conflicts eventually led to progress and were, moreover, necessary for attaining it.[182] This combination of dialectics with cultural chauvinism was almost proto-Hegelian.

From our modern perspective there was another major problem with this whole outlook. The Eurocentric view which Robertson for example represented, regarded the people of India as capable of cultural progress up to a certain point but not beyond it.[183] In order to advance beyond this point Robertson, like Turgot and other eighteenth-century intellectuals, in effect claimed that certain seemingly detrimental phenomena were required precisely because of their unintended beneficial consequences. This might be viewed as a central reason for the later criticism of the Enlightenment Project, since this seemed to suggest that without such evil origins progress became impossible. From a (post-)modern perspective the question seems to be to what extremes, if at all, should this dialectic be allowed to proceed. This, however, is a complication of outcomes which were evidently beyond the vision of Enlightenment historians, at least in their exuberant confidence before the events of the French Revolution. It highlights the Enlightenment as an age which dreamt the lost dream of progress that modern humanity has seemed intent on spoiling. One might claim that

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[181] Ibid., 78. For the law of unintended consequences in Vico's work, see Peter Burke, *Vico* (Oxford and New York, 1985), 60-63; Amos Funkenstein, "Natural Science and Social Theory: Hobbes, Spinoza, and Vico," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene (Baltimore and London, 1976), 187-212, at 210-11; Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. R. G. Collingwood (New York, 1964), 120-21.

[182] "On Universal History," in *Turgot on Progress, Sociology and Economics*, 70-72.

[183] See the remarks on the immutability resulting from the Indian caste system, in *RHDI*, 230-36.

what separates post-modern critics of the Enlightenment Project from the more optimistic intellectuals who in our own day insist on its viability, is their varying opinions on whether or not this dream is still a potentially realizable blueprint for human progress.

The ethical dilemmas implied by this whole topic were clearly evinced in the writings of Gibbon, and particularly in his changing outlook before and during the French Revolution. Gibbon ostensibly sided with William Law's criticism of Bernard Mandeville's doctrine of "private vices public benefits" as a licentious doctrine adverse to morality and religion.[184] But this was toward the end of his life when he was working on his memoirs and was becoming increasingly preoccupied with his posthumous public image. Earlier while composing the "General Observations," and almost contemporaneously with the outlining of the invisible hand concept by his friend Adam Smith, Gibbon was still allowing his ambiguous irony to remain unhampered in his view of the cultural benefits of war, particularly in its advanced scientific manifestations.[185]

It was Smith who more than any other Enlightenment philosopher recognized the ethical problems inherent in the law of unintended consequences. This is ironic since from a modern perspective the invisible hand has become the most famous popular formulation of the law of unintended consequences. Yet the invisible hand was not in fact particularly prominent in his writings and was in fact Smith's more cautious version of Mandeville's philosophy. In contrast to Mandeville he was much more a proponent of the notion of virtue as a viable concept in itself. This ambivalence in Smith's philosophy, occasionally referred to as "the Adam Smith problem," was particularly evident in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which presented a very ambivalent discussion and criticism of the morality of Mandeville's philosophy. Smith almost reluctantly admitted that it had a truthful element which explained its influence, but it was clear that he was aware of the potential such a theory had for enhancing immorality.[186] This problem also applied to the issue of cultivation of nature. Smith claimed that "The pleasures of wealth and greatness" were a deception, but it was this deception which prompted human progress, including the sciences and arts "which have

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184 Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of my Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1966), 22.

185 For various aspects of this issue in Gibbon, see Frank E. Manuel, *The Changing of the Gods* (Hanover and London, 1983), 96-9; and Claude Rawson, "Gibbon, Swift and Irony," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 179-201, at 191-4.

186 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 2002), 363-71. For Mandeville's influence on eighteenth-century Scottish thought see O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, 148-51.

entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth. The earth by these labours of mankind has been obliged to redouble her natural fertility, and to maintain a greater multitude of inhabitants." Smith continued and gave one of his most explicit endorsements of a free economy, including one of his few specific mentions of the "invisible hand," claiming that the attempts of great landlords to appropriate the products of their fields were necessarily unsuccessful, and the large quantity of produce which resulted from this whole process was bound to reach and improve the lot of all humanity.[187]

Gibbon was probably familiar with Smith's discussion of these issues, and following the outbreak of the French Revolution this was one of the topics on which he seemed to change his mind. Yet in *The Decline and Fall* he was still clearly unconcerned with this problem. As any reader of *The Decline and Fall* knows, it is pervaded throughout with Gibbon's dualistic ambivalent statements, the perennial "ands," "buts" and "ors" which in fact underscored a consistent dialectical outlook on the working forces of history. Already in the very first paragraph of the work when Gibbon discussed Rome at its height in the second century A.D., he stated that the "peaceful inhabitants [of the provinces] enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury."[188] This was only a prelude to things to come, a first of many dialectical observations. Style and content, literary flourish and dialectical historical perceptions were united by Gibbon. In his unique way he customarily presented the *summa* of central attributes of Enlightenment historiographical philosophy. The law of unintended consequences in the strict sense was less conspicuous in Gibbon's work than in Robertson's. But it was still quite apparent, as was a general tendency to think in consistently dialectical terms.

Gibbon became aware of the operation of the law of unintended consequences and of its moral ambiguity early in his intellectual development.[189] In 1764 he enthusiastically wrote to his father shortly after arriving in Rome: "I am convinced there never never existed such a nation and I hope for the happiness of mankind that there never will again."[190] He was already aware of the ethical price of cultural advancement, whether it was based on military conquest or on other cultural forces which a priori were morally questionable. He noted that

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187 Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 214-16.

188 *DF*, I, 1: 31.

189 See in this context the remarks on Gibbon's ambivalent attitude toward luxury, in Ghosh, "Gibbon Observed," 137.

190 *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols (London, 1956), 1: 184.

luxury might be a vice, yet in the imperfect state of human society only this could enable a just division of property, remunerating laborers with some of the payment for their efforts.[191] Luxury however was "always fatal except to an industrious people."[192] It could be a positive stimulus for cultural progress, but when it was only indulged in became simply a vice. Regarding the occasional establishment of despotism in victorious Tartar nations, Gibbon noted that "the successful shepherds of the North have submitted to the confinement of arts, of laws, and of cities; and the introduction of luxury, after destroying the freedom of the people, has undermined the foundations of the throne."[193] They ceased to be savages when conquered, yet paid the price of loss of freedom, one of their few positive characteristics according to Gibbon. The real challenge which the barbarians failed was reconciling their new cultural advancement together with their old martial spirit. This was one of the greatest challenges any culture could face, and it required a military spirit which was developed on the basis of advanced culture, not prior to it. Yet as the example of the Roman Empire demonstrated, no civilization could stand up to this challenge indefinitely. What was durable was the cultural advancement of humanity as a whole, not any specific national manifestation of it.

In the "General Observations" Gibbon asserted that in the relative peace enjoyed by modern Europe, "the progress of knowledge and industry is accelerated by the emulation of so many active rivals."[194] Even war could have its advantages, and the barbarians, though strong and courageous, lacked "the resources of military art." Like his contemporaries Gibbon saw possible unintended advantages which war could promote. War, but only modern war founded on scientific inventions, could despite its obvious deleterious nature also encourage cultural advancement. "The military art has been changed by the invention of gunpowder; which enables man to command the two most powerful agents of nature, air and fire. Mathematics, chymistry, mechanics, architecture, have been applied to the service of war... Historians [Gibbon cited Voltaire in the accompanying note] may indignantly observe, that the preparations of a siege would found and maintain a flourishing colony."[195] Ultimately however Gibbon viewed peace as the basic requirement for long-term prosperity. He probably

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191 *DF*, II, 1: 80-81.

192 *DF*, XLII, 2: 697.

193 *DF*, XXVI, 1: 1032. See also *DF*, LII, 3: 346, for the adverse effects of the luxury of the Arabian caliphs.

194 *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 513.

195 *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 514. See also the remark on the moderation of the calamities of war in more modern times "by the prudence or humanity of the princes of Europe," at XXVI, 1: 1024.

inculcated from Buffon the latter's opinion that humanity lost its power over the natural world when it indulged in ruinous wars.[196] Gibbon was skeptical about the claim that the wars of the crusades helped advance civilization, although he did note that the crusades had helped reduce feudal oppression by weakening the feudal lords.[197] Elsewhere, again regarding the invention of gunpowder, he claimed: "If we contrast the rapid progress of this mischievous discovery with the slow and laborious advances of reason, science, and the arts of peace, a philosopher, according to his temper, will laugh or weep at the folly of mankind."[198] Later it was the French Revolution more than anything else which challenged Gibbon's and the whole generation of the late Enlightenment's confidence in the over-riding force of cultural progress as manifested, even in times of adversity, by the law of unintended consequences.

It is clear from this whole discussion that the law of unintended consequences was conceived in late Enlightenment historiography as a central mechanism in the way historical progress operated. Hegel's cunning of reason had a significant ancestry. According to the optimistic eighteenth-century view, even a fallen civilization was bound to eventually revive, or at least become the starting-point for the rise of another civilization in one form or other. The whole discussion above of the law of unintended consequences makes it possible to appreciate the potency and underlining manifest logic, from an eighteenth-century perspective, of Gibbon's very significant assertion that Europe was "secure from any future irruption of Barbarians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous." For contemporary readers who had become so accustomed to dialectical thinking this was not an unusual statement. On the contrary, it was the most logical thing one could expect. In the "General Observations" Gibbon was concerned among other things with the possible future danger to Europe from barbarian irruptions. One source of comfort was the possibility of refuge in America. Nevertheless, writing before the French Revolution Gibbon, confident about the fortitude of European civilization, did not really think this would be necessary. As history had taught him, the law of unintended consequences would operate on future barbarians as it had done on the barbarians of the past. They could only truly conquer a more advanced civilization by internalizing the cultural achievements of that civilization. In other words, in the long run military conquest receded before cultural conquest and barbarians, by conquering other

196 On which see "De la Nature. Première Vue," in *BHN*, 12 (1764): i-xvi.

197 *DF*, LXI, 3: 728.

198 *DF*, LXV, 3: 863. On gunpowder see also the remarks in Roy S. Wolper, "The Rhetoric of Gunpowder and the Idea of Progress," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31 (1970), 589-98; and Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975), 156-7, 259.

more advanced but less martial nations, were unintentionally promoting their own dissolution and beginning the process which would lead them eventually to relinquishing their own culture in favor of that of their temporary victims.

Before concluding this discussion of the law of unintended consequences, since it is so central for the purposes of our discussion, let us examine it from a slightly different perspective. Albert O. Hirschman has noted that the symmetrically opposite notion to unintended consequences, which indeed can be intricately connected with it, is that of intended consequences of purposeful actions. The latter, precisely because of their failure to materialize and the associated disappointment, are often even more difficult to detect than unintended consequences, which at least tangibly exist.[199] In this light the Enlightenment emphasis on unintended consequences can be seen as leading to a purposeful prescriptive philosophy: the unintended consequences, once their possibility is realized, become intended. In other words, the Enlightenment outlined "intended unintended consequences." This is precisely how Enlightenment historians understood all those historical developments which though *initially* in an unintended manner, had nevertheless led to positive consequences. In this sense, one of the main goals of the Enlightenment was the attempt to turn unintended consequences into intended ones.

Regarding the cultivation of nature as the basis for material progress, the Enlightenment viewpoint often followed this line of thought. Mastery of nature as a prime ingredient of the civilizing process could not be obviated. Therefore attempts at destructing any given civilization were bound to leave an ineradicable material-cultural residue which *mutatis mutandis* necessarily initiated the rise of a new civilization. The latter would also eventually reach its apogee, decline and ultimately disappear, but again not without trace, initiating a new cycle, and so on *ad infinitum*. Whether or not there was a spiral quality to this process was open to debate, but its essential characteristics were ubiquitous in Enlightenment philosophy. Furthermore, regarding the initial stages of material progress by mastery of nature, human societies seemed similar everywhere and only diverged in later stages of development. Therefore it seemed to the Enlightenment mind that generalizations about this fundamental stage of historical processes were justified, even if they could only be conjectural. History enabled a better comprehension of which aspects of civilization needed to be either fostered or eradicated, which unintended consequences needed to become intended ones, and which, whether intended or unintended, had to be eliminated. History provided the empirical proofs for the validity of conjectural stadial theory which substantiated this outlook.

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199 Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 130-31.

This whole topic was one of the main points where eighteenth-century philosophy and history met in the most typical and intentional manner and created *histoire philosophique*. The inherent optimism of historians, at least before the Terror (not to mention before the moral challenges resulting from the subsequent calamities of modern history), could not but predispose them to see even the most dismal epochs in history as starting points for inevitable progress. Therefore, to note the most ubiquitous example available in the eighteenth century, the barbarians who replaced the Roman Empire ineluctably ushered in the beginning of their own civilizing process (which in any event, as we have already seen, began long before with their first contacts with the Romans). This was the most lasting legacy of their "conquest," their most important long-term and distinctly unintended *uti possidetis*. They may not have realized it at the time, but the moment they came in contact with the Romans, let alone took over their empire, they had unwittingly launched their own, at least initially *unintended*, transformation into civilized societies. This is the full sense in which we should understand Gibbon's phrase "before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous," and the cultivation of nature played a seminal role in this context.

The full intention of Gibbon's phrase also encompassed the notion that this was a gradual process, not an abrupt one. Barbarians as such could not remain long-term victors, as the ephemeral nature of the Tartar conquests attested. By the time the various barbarian tribes had, as it were, conquered Rome, Roman civilization had already to a large extent conquered them from within. In the large view of history this was what true progress, of all of human civilization in general, meant. Progress, whether intended, unintended, or "intentionally unintended," was inevitable, and its most rudimentary torchbearer was the basic ineradicable human mastery of nature.

Cautious Enlightenment Optimism

Understanding the central role which the law of unintended consequences played in eighteenth-century historiographical thought is vital for comprehending how Enlightenment historians conceived the notion of cultural rise or resurgence. An essentially dialectical logic pervaded late Enlightenment thought and made the idea of complete annihilation of civilization seem impossible, literally contrary to the laws of history. For Enlightenment historians the "decline and fall" of civilizations was by its very definition the starting-point for new cultural revival. Neither high civilization nor barbarism were permanent conditions. The only thing permanent was a fluctuation between them, but this oscillation had a positive spiral quality which meant that a general progressive motion underlined

this slow motion of human history. For our purposes it is important to note that for Enlightenment historians what constituted the basis for this progress, what remained ineradicable throughout history, were the basic civilizational achievements founded on the control and cultivation of nature. It was the mastery of nature which safeguarded civilization even in the most dismal periods of history. It was this mastery which was the most sustainable and therefore vital aspect of human civilization. As long as it was maintained then human progress remained possible, even if at times it seemed that cultural regression was prevailing. Without it human beings lost their unique advantage over the rest of nature and ceased to be human in a truly meaningful singular sense.

It was in Gibbon's work more than in that of any other eighteenth-century historian that the cultivation of nature became the central component of the law of unintended consequences as it operated in promoting cultural progress. In other words, to "cease to be barbarous" meant more than anything else to begin the civilizing process from its very foundation, from the assertion of human mastery over nature by its cultivation. This was the first thing that barbarians learned from the more advanced nations which they conquered. Their very conquests opened them the way to make the transition from nomadic to sedentary societies. In the wake of the revolution the "General Observations" seemed at first glance like a naive echo from a distant past nearly two decades earlier. The picture of a Europe fortified against any possible Tartar invasion, whose only real enemies were the "savage nations of the globe... the common enemies of civilised society" and which could, in the unlikely event of a barbarian invasion, remove "the remains of civilised society" in thousands of vessels to America, seemed almost irrelevant after 1789.[200] It is difficult to conceive of the late and exasperated historian writing of "Europe as one great republic" which might still experience internal fluctuations of power, "but these partial events cannot essentially injure our general state of happiness, the system of arts, and laws, and manners, which so advantageously distinguish, above the rest of mankind, the Europeans and their colonies."[201]

The fear of barbarian invasions was unsurprisingly perennial in European history. Joseph de Guignes depicted the last irruption of the barbarians under Tamerlane as "a rapid torrent which inundated a vast stretch of land in a short time... and which came... to ravage Asia and the confines of Europe."[202] De Guignes portrayed the ravages of the Tartars as a recurrent historical event. Each time the barbarians devastated progressive cultures throughout the world

200 See *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 511, 513, respectively.

201 *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 511.

202 *GHG*, 4: 1: "un torrent rapide qui inonda une vaste étendue de pays en peu tems... & qui va... ravager l'Asie & les confins de l'Europe."

in places such as China, India and Europe, these eventually recovered, only to be attacked anew in a repeating historical cycle.[203] Other scholars expressed a distinct worry over the possibility of invasion of Europe. Raynal perceived the threat of a Tartar or even African invasion as still possible.[204] When the Comte de Volney returned from his travels in the Levant he was struck by the contrast between the desolate condition of the Turkish realm and the thriving and cultivated state of France. But then he reminded himself that the Asian countries he had seen desolate and barbarous were once flourishing and populous, and therefore Europe stood the chance of one day experiencing the same reverse. For Volney travels and history were useful because they offered lessons which might enable anticipating such a costly outcome.[205] Voltaire had observed how barbarians, when they came in contact with the superior culture and specifically the religion of the people they conquered, ultimately adopted that culture rather than extirpated it, as the examples of the barbarian tribes of the fifth century, the Normans in the ninth century and the Turks who conquered the empire of the caliphs demonstrated.[206] On the other hand Voltaire was more pessimistic when he wrote of the Burgundians, the Goths and the Franks, who invaded Gaul and brought only devastation in their wake. They lacked the impulse to ameliorate their civilization following the Roman model because instead of being improved by contact with the people they conquered when they crossed the Rhine, they rather rendered the latter savage like themselves. The seeming cultural improvement in the age of Charlemagne was therefore only a passing phenomenon.[207] Voltaire's relatively pessimistic outlook compared to his contemporaries led him here to refute, or rather to obvert, the logic of the law of unintended consequences.[208]

In similar vein Johann Jacob Mascov claimed that the German kings of the fifth century were superior to the Roman Emperor Honorius. "If it should be objected, that they were yet, in some Measure, savage and ungovernable, I reply,

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203 Ibid., 4: 337-8.

204 *PPH*, 6: 459-60.

205 C.-F. Volney, *Travels through Syria and Egypt*, trans. anon., 2 vols (London, 1787), 2: 497-500. See also Volney, *The Ruins*, 17-27.

206 Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols (Paris, 1963), 1: 389.

207 Ibid., 1: 338.

208 For Voltaire's pessimism and the inconsistency in his thought, see Henry Vyverberg, *Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 170-88. See also the remarks in J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian* (Oxford, 1970), 122-8; and for further insight into Voltaire's historiography, *PBR*, 2: 72-159; O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, 21-55.

that so many Vices, then unknown to the *Germans*, were in Vogue among the *Romans*, that it would not be an improper Question, which of the two Nations were properly the *Barbarians*?" The Romans occasionally ridiculed the customs of their new kings yet ultimately they were inferior to them. And after initial apprehensions the provinces themselves were content with the revolution in government.[209] Mascov claimed that the fall of the Roman Empire was "subservient to the Views of Heaven," but this was really only lip service to the idea of divine accommodation. The reasons for this were historically clear. The growing debility of the Romans was coupled with the fighting abilities of the Germans, and by the fifth century the latter were more virtuous than the former, hence the joy of the conquered peoples at their new government.[210] Attila was an example of the fact that the founders of kingdoms did not acquire their dominance only by the sword. Some of the characteristics Attila exhibited such as his personal parsimony, sparks of natural religion, and when he so desired, promotion of peace and justice, were more impressive in a Scythian hero, being a production of nature and not, as with the ancient Greeks and Romans, a product of careful education. Of course Attila was first and foremost a devastator of countries. Yet a mere barbarian, Mascov implied, could not topple an Empire.[211] The criticism of the Goths as destroyers of the Roman civilization was too severe. Much of the loss of the remains of ancient Rome was the effect of time. The Goths were indeed barbarians, yet the Saracens were more worthy of criticism for their destructiveness.[212] Mascov's outlook was no doubt influenced by the common positive view of the barbarian feeling of liberty and martial spirit. Yet he was also aware that empires did not fall of themselves to barbarians but first became internally corrupted.

Later a similar outlook was no doubt connected to Gibbon's view of the dangers in a revolutionary Europe. These dangers were internal and thus unavoidable, hence his pessimism toward the end of his life. The only source of solace, already implicit in the "General Observations," was the fact that European civilization was continuing to progress with renewed vigor across the Atlantic. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of this consoling fact was presented by Robert Henry two years before the American Revolution, in a passage which combined some of the most central mainstream components of Enlightenment historiographical and cultural philosophy – material progress and cultivation of nature, the danger of regression of the four-stages process and a latent religiosity about "manners." According to Henry,

209 *MHAG*, 1: 461-2.
210 Ibid., 1: 603-5.
211 Ibid., 1: 497.
212 Ibid., 2: 283.

> The honour and happiness of nations, as well as of particular persons, depend more on their manners than on their situation and circumstances. An active, brave, intelligent, and virtuous people, cannot be contemptible in any condition, nor unhappy in any habitable climate. Such a people, if they do not change their manners, will soon improve their circumstances, and convert the most unhospitable deserts, if they are not naturally incapable of vegetation, into pleasant and fertile fields, crouded with inhabitants, and adorned with cities, towns, and villages. We need look no further than our own American colonies for the most agreeable and convincing evidence of the truth of this assertion. Those countries which were, not very long ago, covered with almost impenetrable forests, the haunts of wild beasts and naked savages, are now become fertile, rich, and populous provinces, and are daily improving in all these particulars. On the other hand, nations corrupted by long and great prosperity, become luxurious, effeminate, and licentious in their manners, are objects of contempt and pity in the most flourishing circumstances. Restless, peevish, and discontented, amidst the greatest affluence, insatiable in their avarice, unbounded in their ambition, they are on the brink of ruin, when they seem to have attained the pinnacle of human grandeur. History affords too many examples of mighty nations, whose destruction hath been occasioned by the corruption of their manners, and who have been ruined by their own follies and vices, rather than by the arms of their enemies.[213]

This optimism was of course challenged after the beginning of the French Revolution and the rapidly worrying events which followed. We do not have evidence of how Henry viewed this challenge but as we have seen, it weighed heavily on Gibbon's mind as on that of many of his contemporaries, shattering their confidence in the values of the Enlightenment. Yet in a way they should not have been surprised, and historians in particular should have known that no culture, including their own, was immune from corruption and decline. What was particularly hard to swallow was the sense in which the revolution was a lost opportunity, a chance to implement all those grand optimistic ideals which the eighteenth century had enthusiastically fostered and which seemed to be betrayed by the revolutionaries themselves. Even a realistic and cynical scholar such as Gibbon was not immune to the very human reaction that perhaps all cultures were inevitably prone to dissolution, but that surely it could not happen to his own civilization.

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[213] *HHGB*, 2: 517-18. On the Scottish Enlightenment view that the practical arts which enabled control of nature and formed the basis of culture did not decay or disappear, in contrast with the fine arts, see Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 284, 287-8.

All this would seem to justify those modern scholars who have tended to belittle the quality and importance of the "General Observations" which from a post-revolutionary perspective, let alone a modern one, seemed unjustifiably optimistic, and moreover were not in accordance with Gibbon's own outlook toward the end of his life. Yet the inclination to dismiss the "General Observations" must be resisted. There is no reason to discount his reflections there just because Gibbon in his later years (just for argument's sake since he never expressly indicated this), or we from our modern perspective, might regard them as irrelevant. A similar exercise could be applied to almost any historical source which might seem ill-adapted from a later perspective. Moreover, there is sufficient reason rather to emphasize the importance of the "General Observations." Here was Gibbon setting out his general world view on the verge of beginning his vast project, and about seven or eight years later when he published the "General Observations" in their final form in 1781 he still felt that this view was relevant. He had just completed the first half of *The Decline and Fall* and was not yet sure whether he would undertake the study of all those topics of the later volumes with which he felt less secure from an erudite perspective. It was therefore the historian of the Western Empire taking into consideration that this might be the last accord in his *magnum opus* and motivated by his constant eye to fame and posterity, who made the conscious decision to provisionally end the work with the "General Observations." Of course, one might claim that for this very reason he was frivolously catering to his reading public and trying to leave them with an optimistic mood after an undoubtedly troubling literary journey. Yet to dismiss Gibbon as insouciant to such a degree to his own work seems exaggerated, and there is just as much reason to claim that he was here in his most exuberant and philosophically secure vein.

In fact Gibbon did not dismiss the possibility that his optimism about the future might be misplaced, although he was still thinking about external, not internal, perils. In case his speculations about the veritable impossibility of a future barbarian destruction of Europe were fallacious, he suggested

> a more humble source of comfort and hope. The discoveries of ancient and modern navigators, and the domestic history, or tradition, of the most enlightened nations, represent the *human savage*, naked both in mind and body, and destitute of laws, of arts, of ideas, and almost of language. From this abject condition, perhaps the primitive and universal state of man he has gradually arisen to command the animals, to fertilise the earth, to traverse the ocean, and to measure the heavens. His progress in the improvement and exercise of his mental and corporeal faculties has been irregular and various; infinitely slow in the beginning, and increasing by degrees with redoubled velocity: ages of laborious ascent have been followed by

> a moment of rapid downfal; and the several climates of the globe have felt the vicissitudes of light and darkness. Yet the experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes, and diminish our apprehensions: we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may safely be presumed, that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.[214]

If there was room for optimism it was based first and foremost not on religion or politics despite their importance, but on the material cultural underpinning of civilization, on the human command of nature, which was irreversible unless the impossible might happen and nature itself would dramatically change. There is no reason to assume that Gibbon relinquished this basic optimism even in the face of the "moment of rapid downfal" he was experiencing several years later. Perhaps in the end he was not that far from Adam Ferguson's notion of the impossibility of complete annihilation of culture, even if for Gibbon such an idea would not have included a romantic praise of the virtues of barbarism.

Closer to his heart would have been his friend Lord Sheffield's words written in a letter to the historian from July 1792, where Sheffield expressed his worries regarding the possibility that the revolutionary ideas would spread to England. Yet he claimed that even if this should happen, the ensuing devastation "might be repaired, and at the end of a couple of centuries it is possible that Science, the fine Arts, and the politeness and gentleness of Society, might again have been brought to the point at which they now are. Perhaps you may recollect that on the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire a greater number of centuries were necessary for restoration. I really believe there is nothing exaggerated in this speculation."[215] Sheffield was therefore willing to make the connection which Gibbon did not expressly elaborate but no doubt agreed with, between all those basic components of their Moderate Enlightenment world-view – a belief in material progress, political conservatism and a latent, if slight religiosity – and the moral ideas underlying *The Decline and Fall*. Despite all the pessimism of those last years both men did not relinquish a basic Enlightenment confidence in humanity's ability to eventually overcome any adversity. The notion that there were fundamental aspects of civilization which were ineradicable was common in the Enlightenment. Hume for example noted:

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214 *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 515.

215 *Private Letters of Edward Gibbon (1753-1794)*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, 2 vols (London, 1896), 2: 304. We should note that Gibbon was aware that almost immediately following the fall of the Western Empire cultural revival became possible, as evidenced by his depiction of the renewal of agriculture in Italy under Theodoric. See *DF*, XXXIX, 2: 545.

> The arts of luxury, and much more the liberal arts, which depend on a refined taste or sentiment, are easily lost; because they are always relished by a few only, whose leisure, fortune, and genius fit them for such amusements. But what is profitable to every mortal, and in common life, when once discovered, can scarcely fall into oblivion, but by the total subversion of society, and by such furious inundations of barbarous invaders, as obliterate all memory of former arts and civility. Imitation also is apt to transport these coarser and more useful arts from one climate to another, and make them precede the refined arts in their progress; though perhaps they sprang after them in their first rise and propagation.[216]

Gibbon's even more optimistic contemporary Condorcet, who died only a few weeks after the Englishman, retained his optimism to the last, indeed much on account of rather than in the face of historical circumstances. Condorcet too regarded a new Tartar invasion as the only, and basically impossible, danger to civilization. Once all humanity would unite, the advance of the savage nations would be inevitable and swift, since the means for progress will already have been perfected by the Europeans for the benefit of other societies.[217] Gibbon of course was not able to read Condorcet's confident vision of the future, and the assertion that despite past injustices the various savage nations in the colonies would ultimately profit from their contact with the Europeans.[218] Condorcet's implication was clear – the only alternative to civilization was ultimate extinction. Humanity was constrained either to tame nature scientifically or to be annihilated by it.

There was another important context in which these words were written. Enlightenment intellectuals were well-aware that the obligation to bring enlightenment to the masses was not only confined to the population of Europe, but also to those many savage peoples whom overseas expansion had made subject to European control. In this context an important contribution of Enlightenment historiography was to outline what happened when

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[216] Hume, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," 124-5. In "Of Refinement in the Arts," 273, he wrote, addressing the importance of material culture as the basis of civilization: "Laws, order, police, discipline; these can never be carried to any degree of perfection, before human reason has refined itself by exercise, and by an application to the more vulgar arts, at least, of commerce and manufacture. Can we expect, that a government will be well modeled by a people, who know not how to make a spinning-wheel, or to employ a loom to advantage?" It is passages like this which remind one why the Scottish Enlightenment, albeit with notable differences, is often considered a precursor of Marxism. But one should of course be careful not to overstate the similarities.

[217] Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. June Barraclough (London, 1955), 177-9.

[218] Ibid., 177.

barbarian and civilized cultures came into contact with one another. We have already considered some of the implications of this topic, but what needs to be emphasized further is that for eighteenth-century scholars it was almost a necessity to present this type of contact as leading eventually to positive results, unintended or not. In fact it seemed best that these consequences would be planned, and one can observe here one of the arguments for "civilizing" non-European nations which reached new levels of abuse in the modern age. Norbert Elias depicted both how the European self-conscious concept of civilization arose during the late eighteenth century but also how, particularly after the first stages of the French Revolution, it became a part of the self-justification of colonialism.[219] Yet for Enlightenment intellectuals spreading civilization still seemed a viable goal without which European expansion lost any moral validity. In this respect they were not so different from the missionaries who actually tried to implement such a positive influence in deeds and not just words. Yet it was the historians' unique contribution to utilize historical examples, specifically the contact between Rome and the barbarians, in order to elucidate possible future outcomes and indeed unabashedly to learn lessons from history.[220]

Condorcet's emphasis on the civilizing outcome of such types of contact was therefore less original than might initially seem. According to the Abbé Dubos the constant contact between the Romans and the Franks during the many years they lived in proximity on both sides of the Rhine ultimately civilized the

[219] See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 41: "Unlike the situation when the concept was formed, from now on [the close of the eighteenth century] nations consider the *process* of civilization as completed within their own societies; they see themselves as bearers of an existing or finished civilization to others, as standard-bearers of expanding civilization. Of the whole preceding process of civilization nothing remains in their consciousness except a vague residue. Its outcome is taken simply as an expression of their own higher gifts; the fact that, and the question of how, in the course of many centuries, civilized behavior has been attained is of no interest. And the consciousness of their own superiority, the consciousness of this "civilization," from now on serves at least those nations which have become colonial conquerors, and therefore a kind of upper class to large sections of the non-European world, as a justification of their rule, to the same degree that earlier the ancestors of the concept of civilization, *politesse* and *civilité*, had served the courtly-aristocratic upper class as a justification of theirs." See also the remarks at 460-65, 509-10. Also, on Elias's view that the civilizing process is likely to continue until sometime in the distant future a peaceful unified world civilization is achieved, see 332, 460, 514-17, 523-4. With all the many differences between Elias's methodology and historical-sociological perspective and that of the eighteenth-century, in a general sense his optimism is a continuance of the Enlightenment outlook.

[220] It is this approach which has traditionally led to one of the main elements of the "historicist" criticism of Enlightenment historiography, which we have already noted in the second chapter.

latter. It was impossible for two nations to come into contact for two centuries, one being civilized and the other not, without the savage nation becoming also civilized, unless it was one of those unhappy people whom the intemperate climate in which they lived seemed to condemn to an invincible stupidity. Yet the climate on both sides of the Rhine was quite similar. Therefore the contact between the Franks and the Romans, even if occasionally confined to war and the exchange of hostages, could not but eventually lead the former to be civilized.[221] According to Montesquieu conquerors had the moral obligation to improve the state of the conquered, which by definition had to be defective in order for them to have been vanquished in the first place. As the Spanish conduct in Mexico demonstrated, however, conquerors could regrettably act in the exact opposite manner than a moral one.[222]

Voltaire, while commenting on the European wars in the colonies, was less optimistic than Condorcet would later be and did not regard the Europeans as exemplars for the locals, claiming: "The Indians, whom we obliged by force and wiles to receive our establishments, and the Americans, whose continents we stained with their blood, and then stolen from them, regard us as the enemies of human nature, who run to the ends of the earth in order to slit their throats, and then to destroy each other."[223] Raynal too shared this criticism of the European conduct in the colonies. He was, indeed, its most vociferous eighteenth-century critic. Yet he also recognized the more optimistic outcome that with proper attention could result from these initial evils. America might ultimately command the Old World and become the asylum of oppressed Europeans. "But it is necessary that this change should be preceded by conspiracies, commotions, and calamities; and that a hard and laborious education should predispose their [the savage Americans'] minds both to act and to suffer."[224] Raynal called upon the American Creoles to abandon their corrupt lives based on exploitation of slaves and to come to Europe to learn there the weaknesses, vices as well as the remains of ancient valuable manners which still survived, so that Europe, which had criminally ruined America, should become the source of its regeneration.[225] More than Gibbon and Condorcet, Raynal recognized the danger that was

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221 Jean-Baptiste Dubos, *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie françoise dans les Gaules*, 2 vols (Paris, 1742), 1: 178.

222 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 142.

223 *VOH*, 784 (from *Le siècle de Louis XIV*): "Les Indiens, que nous avons obligés par force et par adresse à recevoir nos établissements, et les Américains, dont nous avons ensanglanté et ravi le continent, nous regardent comme des ennemis de la nature humaine, qui accourent du bout du monde pour les égorger, et pour se détruire ensuite eux-mêmes."

224 *PPH*, 4: 158.

225 Ibid. See the remarks in Dagen, *L'histoire de l'esprit humain*, 558-64.

presented not from invasions of tribes into Europe but from within European culture itself. This was a more modern approach which Gibbon and others after 1789 also began to share. Voltaire, again, had been pessimistic all along, but without seeing the light at the end of the tunnel in such a distinct manner as Raynal did.

Nevertheless, all these debates were perennially Eurocentric in outlook. Rarely in mainstream Enlightenment thought was there a clear preference for non-Western civilizations. Even Rousseau's primitivism extolled a "state of nature" which in fact already embraced a basic human culture, including the cultivation of nature. In any event such early romantic philosophies as those of Rousseau and Ferguson were not representative of the mainstream Enlightenment *Weltanschauung*. More typical were those who simply regarded Europeans as superior to all other peoples and civilizations. Even Vico claimed that in his own time "a perfect form of civilization seems to have spread itself throughout the nations." By this he meant Europe with its monarchic governments and Christian culture. While there were remnants of barbarism both outside and within Europe, mainly in the cold north, this was due primarily to fantastic and fierce religions or to climatic conditions. Yet at least in Europe it was probable that these places would ultimately progress and become advanced monarchies, which Vico regarded as the best type of governments.[226]

It is not uninstructive to cast a short glance at the permutation of this very common outlook in the historiography of the following century. In discussing the superiority of Western civilization, Leopold von Ranke claimed that the West had enjoyed unbroken progress till the eve of the Reformation. Although it had been agitated by wars, unlike the East it did not suffer foreign invasions, "nor had there been any of those intestine convulsions which shake the foundations of a society in an early and progressive stage of civilization."[227] This was evidence of a European cultural confidence more emphatic than anything in Gibbon's "General Observations." Therefore the modern criticism of Gibbon's outlook might, *if* accepted, be even more relevant in Ranke's case, specifically regarding the lack of recognition of the possibility that European civilization might deteriorate internally. Indicatively enough even J. B. Bury claimed that the idea of progress developed and reached its apogee in the nineteenth century.[228] Meinecke, Collingwood, White and other "historicist" critics of Enlightenment

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226 *VNS*, 478-80.

227 Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Reformation in Germany*, trans. Sarah Austin, ed. Robert A. Johnson (London and New York, 1905), 114. See also 577, for more on the superiority of Western civilization.

228 J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress, an Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (New York, 1955), passim.

historiography have traditionally claimed that eighteenth-century historians were too "subjective" and overly caught up in their own cultural outlook. Yet this is always the case in every age. If anything, Eurocentric chauvinism in both early modern and modern times remained relatively consistent.

To return to Gibbon and Enlightenment historians in general, we should remember that the most important indicator for basic human progress remained for them the cultivation of natural resources. It was this that barbarian and savage societies always learned first from contact with more superior cultures, and it was the level of attainment in this field more than in any other that made European civilization superior to other civilizations, whether these were invading tribes from the East or newly discovered savages in the New World. For the Enlightenment the most imperishable achievement of humanity was its conquest of its natural surroundings. In the very last paragraph of the "General Observations" Gibbon noted that the barbarians may have destroyed the Roman Empire, but they could not revert it back to a state of lack of cultivation and cannibalism. "Since the first discovery of the arts, war, commerce, and religious zeal have diffused, among the savages of the Old and New World, these inestimable gifts: they have been successively propagated; they can never be lost. We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion, that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race."[229] A veritable Enlightenment Project. "Perhaps the virtue" became a rude awakening toward the end of the historian's life. Yet this did not mean abandoning the basic belief in the moral worth of cultural advancement, in the harnessing of nature for humanity's benefit. Gibbon was not left time to work out for himself and for posterity his solution to this problem, and there is some injustice in hampering the completeness of his best work by insisting on judging it in the face of circumstances which he barely had time to comprehend. Perhaps his retreat into conservatism was a reaction of intellectual embarrassment.

Did the Roman Empire Really Fall?

Before closing our discussion we need to address one last topic. As any reader of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall* knows, after going through the pleasurable but arduous task of reading through this whole lengthy text one is left with the feeling that the most important question it seemed posed to answer – why did the Roman Empire decline and fall? – did not really receive a conclusive reply. In a certain sense there was nothing here beyond the customary observations

[229] *DF*, "General Observations," 2: 515-16.

made by Montesquieu and others about the Empire which became too big for its own good, allowed the barbarians into its midst, became decadent and then fell.[230] Gibbon refuted none of these assertions. The old thesis according to which Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* was a kind of blueprint for Gibbon's work is in large measure correct. Montesquieu had emphasized not just Rome's immoderate size but also the deterioration of its ancient virtues and the influence of Christianity as causes for its decline. Adhering to his customary view of strict historical causation, he depicted the decline and fall of Rome as tangible events which one could accurately pinpoint chronologically.[231]

Gibbon's approach was however distinctly different. The mere size of his narrative suggested that history was not such a coherent phenomenon. The historian's task, attempting to find a clear meaning in the mass of intricate details which such a vast "occurrence" as the "decline and fall" of Rome presented, ultimately implied that such coherence was impossible. If Rome did indeed decline (as seemed obvious) and fall (which was much less clear) then it was difficult to pinpoint exactly how and when this had happened. This was more than a small difference between the perspective of Montesquieu, and

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[230] On which see e.g. Ghosh, "Gibbon's Dark Ages," 17. For Montesquieu's outlook in *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, and its difference from Gibbon's outlook, see Womersley, *The Transformation of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 9-19 and passim, and 16, for the claim made since St. Augustine that Rome fell because of its immoderate size. See also Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, passim.

[231] For his views on the laws of history, see Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, 26, 169. Michael C. Carhart has claimed that the preoccupation with the question why Rome fell was particularly significant during the second half of the eighteenth century, and began with Montesquieu; see his *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2007), 205-6, and 193-221 on the late Enlightenment discussion of cultural decline in general. Another important eighteenth-century scholar who was greatly appreciated by Gibbon, and who adhered to a rather conventional interpretation of the fall of the Western Empire, was the geographer Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, who wrote that "Her [the Western Empire's] fall made no noise, it was unable to cause a surprise; it was the last sigh of a body, which had been deprived of all its resorts by a long malady." See [Jean Baptiste Bourguignon] d'Anville, *États formés en Europe après la chute de l'empire romain en Occident* (Paris, 1771), 1-10, the quotation at 9: "Sa chute ne fit aucun bruit, elle ne pouvoit causer de surprise; ce fut le dernier soupir d'un corps, qu'une longue maladie avoit privé de tous ses resorts." On d'Anville see also Guido Abbattista, "Establishing the 'Order of Time and Place': 'Rational Geography', French Erudition and the Emplacement of History in Gibbon's Mind," in *Edward Gibbon, Bicentenary Essays, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 355, ed. David Womersley, with the assistance of John Burrow and John Pocock (Oxford, 1997), 45-72.

indeed most of Western historiography before the eighteenth century, and that of several other Enlightenment historians. The new, more circumspect and sophisticated approach, was already evident, as we saw above, in the outlooks of Pietro Giannone and the Abbé Dubos. For Gibbon and his generation this not only meant the loss of a reassuringly clear historical narrative, but also conversely the opening up of new interpretative possibilities. If Rome never actually fell this meant that advanced civilization in general could never be completely eradicated. It was this new realization which emphasized the historical importance of commanding nature. Whether the new "flexible" outlook on Roman history, and history in general, preceded this emphasis on cultivating nature or vice versa is difficult to determine, and it seems that they developed simultaneously and interdependently. But in any event it is clear that by the second half of the eighteenth century a more modern historiographical approach had emerged.

While early medieval history and interpretations of the end of the Western Empire per se is not our topic, it seems essential to take a closer look at some further aspects of this issue, which has attracted the notice of historians since the eighteenth century, and has drawn increasing attention in recent years.[232] There has been a growing tendency among many modern scholars to discern more of a continuity than a break in the transition from Roman to early medieval history. Brian Croke has claimed that the view of 476 as the end of the Western Empire began not in the West itself but in sixth-century Byzantium. In the West both Odoacer and Theodoric respected the senate, and in any event the Gothic government gave way to the reinstatement of Byzantine imperial government in Italy.[233] The most influential modern interpretation of this topic has been of course that of Henri Pirenne's *Mohammed and Charlemagne*.[234] But some scholars recently have tended to look for the continuity between Roman and medieval

[232] For a review of the debates, from the Middle Ages to modern times, regarding the transition between the Roman Empire and the barbarians' culture, see Bryce Lyon, *The Origins of the Middle Ages, Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon* (New York, 1972). For a more recent review, from Dubos and Gibbon to modern times, see Ian Wood, "Barbarians, Historians, and the Construction of National Identities," *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 1 (2008), 61-81.

[233] See Brian Croke, "A. D. 476: The Manufacture of a Turning Point," *Chiron*, 13 (1983), 81-119.

[234] Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. Bernard Miall (Cleveland and New York, 1965). Bernard S. Bachrach, "Pirenne and Charlemagne," in *After Rome's Fall, Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History, Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto, 1998), 214-31, has noted that as a result of Pirenne's influence scholars tend to refer to the states which replaced the Western Empire not as barbarian tribal polities, but rather as Romano-German kingdoms. Bachrach himself has differed from Pirenne, and has claimed that the roots of Charlemagne's policy were in the late Roman Empire, and not a response to the Muslim conquests.

history even earlier, in effect perceiving a continuity from the late Empire to early "barbarian" civilization. This outlook has necessitated a reconsideration of just how "barbarous" early medieval culture really was. Walter Goffart has noted that the barbarians and the Romans were not in continual conflict. The former were drawn into the Roman world where the latter retained their supremacy. The Romans were replaced by the barbarians only gradually without the Roman Empire itself ever being repudiated, even though at some stage it did disappear. Goffart has claimed that "Whether the Empire stood or fell is the wrong question. What matters is that Rome was never repudiated. The future sustained and carried forward what it stood for in religion, law, administration, literacy, and language."[235]

This outlook has also influenced recent re-evaluations of Gibbon's consideration of this issue, even though some scholars have tended in general to retain the traditional view of Gibbon as a prime proponent of the theory of the fall of the Western Empire.[236] Others however have taken a different view. Glen W. Bowersock has claimed that "The fall of Rome is no longer needed, and like the writing on a faded papyrus, it no longer speaks to us... it probably did not speak to him [Gibbon] either. He had learned too much."[237] John Matthews has discussed the various aspects of "decline and fall" in Gibbon's writings, claiming that for Gibbon this was not a unified topic but rather a variegated one. According to his interpretation, "although Gibbon's history was one of decline and fall, it was in the very long term [i.e. stretching from antiquity to the eighteenth century] an optimistic work."[238] In order to demonstrate that Gibbon's concept of "decline and fall" was not particularly well-defined, Matthews quotes Gibbon's autobiographical statement: "So flexible is the title of my own history that the final era might be fixed at my own choice: and I long hesitated whether I

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[235] See Walter Goffart, "Rome's Final Conquest: The Barbarians," *History Compass*, 6 (2008), 855-83 (872 for the quotation). To Goffart's list of cultural continuities one should also add the cultivation of nature.

[236] Goffart has interpreted Gibbon's view of the invasions of the Germanic tribes as leading to the fall of Rome, with special reference to the beginning of chapter IX of *DF* on the Germans. See ibid., 873, note 7. On the other hand, though, at 871 Goffart has discussed Gibbon's view of the barbarian danger in the eighteenth century, mentioning Gibbon's passage "before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous." According to Goffart, this indeed is what happened toward the end of the Roman Empire. A few decades ago Bryce Lyon depicted Gibbon as representing the traditional interpretation of the fall of the Western Empire, with Henri Pirenne as the most influential proponent of a different interpretation. See Lyon, *The Origins of the Middle Ages*.

[237] Bowersock, "The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome," 43.

[238] See Matthews, "Gibbon and the Later Roman Empire," 32. Not surprisingly, Matthews gives much attention to the "General Observations" in his discussion.

should be content with the three Volumes, the fall of the Western Empire, which fulfilled my first engagement with the public."[239]

Indeed, the best place to try and comprehend Gibbon's views is in his own writings, even though no clearly unambiguous solution can be found even there. Gibbon began considering the conundrum of Rome's "decline and fall" well before composing *The Decline and Fall* (his famous claim to have conceived the design for the work while visiting the ruins of the Roman Capitol in 1764 cannot be trusted as completely veracious). In the early work *Du gouvernement féodal, surtout en France*, composed probably around 1765-70, Gibbon wrote:

> Among all empires, that of the Romans arose the slowest and maintained itself for the longest time. Here simultaneously are the cause and the effect. Each subjugated province had already been prepared to lose itself under the name of Roman. The other monarchies were established and enfeebled with the same rapidity. The life of their founder marked the period of their grandeur, often that of their existence. Conquests are able to gather a hundred diverse nations, only time and the laws are able to unite them; and this harmony, this correspondence among distant parts of a vast empire demanded knowledge and institutions that Charlemagne's century was unable either to imagine or to support.[240]

The notion of *translatio imperii*, so essential to comprehending the continuity or lack thereof between the Roman Empire and its successors, be they the Byzantines, the various barbarian tribes, or later the Holy Roman Empire, encapsulates the elusiveness of this continuity.[241] At times Gibbon seemed indeed to see a clear break between the fall of the Western Empire and its various self-proclaimed

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239 Ibid., 15. For the original quotation see Gibbon, *Memoirs*, 164.

240 From *Du gouvernement féodal, surtout en France*, in *MW*, 3: 194-5: "De tous les empires, celui des Romains s'est élevé le plus lentement et s'est soutenu le plus longtems. Voilà à la fois la cause et l'effet. Chaque province subjuguée étoit déjà préparée à se perdre dans le nom Romain. Les autres monarchies se sont établies et se sont affoiblies avec la même rapidité. La vie de leur fondateur a marqué la période de leur grandeur, souvent celle de leur existence. Les conquêtes peuvent rassembler cent nations diverses, le tems seul et les loix peuvent les unir; et cette harmonie, cette correspondance des parties éloignées d'un vaste empire exigeoit des lumières et des institutions que le siècle de Charlemagne ne pouvoit ni imaginer ni supporter." Gibbon's rather critical view of Charlemagne continued in *The Decline and Fall*; see *DF*, XLIX, 3: 124-7. Ian Wood, "Gibbon and the Merovingians," in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge, 1997), 117-36, claims that in *Du gouvernement féodal, surtout en France*, Gibbon probably first juxtaposed the terms decline and fall.

241 For the history of debates regarding the notion of *translatio imperii* see *PBR*, 3: passim.

inheritors, in effect denying a true *translatio imperii*. Thus for example he discussed the contempt of the European emperors following Charlemagne, for the claim of the Byzantines to be the continuators of the Roman Empire, and to be regarded as Romans and not as Greeks. He noted ironically that "these haughty Barbarians asserted, with some justice, their superior claim to the language and dominion of Rome." Yet Gibbon implied that being superior to the Byzantines in this respect was not a particularly noteworthy achievement. "Whatsoever changes had been introduced by the lapse of ages, they alleged a lineal and unbroken succession from Augustus and Constantine; and, in the lowest period of degeneracy and decay, the name of ROMANS adhered to the last fragments of the empire of Constantinople."[242] Elsewhere Gibbon seemed adamant that by the mid-fifth century Rome's internal decay was so incontrovertible that even without external pressure it was doomed. "If all the Barbarian conquerors had been annihilated in the same hour, their total destruction would not have restored the empire of the West: and if Rome still survived, she survived the loss of freedom, of virtue, and of honour."[243]

At other times, however, his outlook was rather different. In the very last chapter of *The Decline and Fall* he claimed that the Goths and Vandals had no deliberate intention to topple the Roman Empire and establish their own civilization on its ruins. "[I]n simple truth, the northern conquerors were neither sufficiently savage, nor sufficiently refined, to entertain such aspiring ideas of destruction and revenge." On the contrary, these nations of shepherds were integrated in the imperial armies, and learned the empire's language, discipline and weaknesses, "and, though incapable of emulating, they were more inclined to admire, than to abolish, the arts and studies of a brighter period."[244] By this stage we should not be surprised to discover that the continuation, or at least attempted emulation, of Roman civilization, extended also to the cultivation of nature. This was evident when Gibbon, in an earlier chapter of *The Decline and Fall*, discussed the conquest of North Africa by the Vandals in the fifth century. Africa was thriving then. "A simple reflection will impress every thinking mind with the clearest idea of fertility and cultivation: the country was extremely populous; the inhabitants reserved a considerable subsistence for their own use; and the annual exportation, particularly of wheat, was so regular and plentiful, that Africa deserved the name of the common granary of Rome and of mankind." Then the Vandals invaded, bringing with them the obvious destruction of war. Gibbon, however, claimed that the Vandals' "destructive rage has perhaps been

242 *DF*, LIII, 3: 416.
243 *DF*, XXXV, 2: 356.
244 *DF*, LXXI, 3: 1068-9.

exaggerated by popular animosity, religious zeal, and extravagant declamation." In particular, he expressed his doubts regarding the Vandals having destroyed the very material wealth of the country on which they themselves depended. "Yet I shall not easily be persuaded, that it was the common practice of the Vandals to extirpate the olives, and other fruit-trees, of a country where they intended to settle: nor can I believe that it was a usual stratagem to slaughter great numbers of their prisoners before the walls of a besieged city, for the sole purpose of infecting the air, and producing a pestilence, of which they themselves must have been the first victims."[245]

Ultimately, any attempt to decipher a straightforward interpretation on Gibbon's part is futile, since he was simply inconsistent, and did not have a clear philosophy of history or view of the end of the Western Empire. This type of *prima facie* seeming inconsistency was, however, not uncommon in the eighteenth century, because the Enlightenment was essentially averse to *l'esprit des systèmes*. Gibbon's "system," assuming there was one beyond his observance of his self-imposed scholarly standards, was a not very original adherence to a generally moderate and conservative version of the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung*. This meant criticizing superstition and despotism, but without seeking atheism or complete democracy, and in particular, without advancing any type of straightforward explicit interpretation of history. Moreover, the increasing tendency of the Enlightenment to observe dialectical logic in the historical process opened up new ways of considering the decline and fall of Rome. Of course, one could quite easily muster a lot of evidence for the traditional view of Gibbon's claim that Rome "fell" because of internal corruption, external barbarian pressure, and the enfeebling influence of Christianity. Yet as we have seen, culling the pages of a lengthy work such as *The Decline and Fall* can easily produce evidence to the contrary.

Gibbon seemed to have realized that such complicated historical occurrences did not have simple causes or developments. He in effect claimed that there was no other possible course than for the Roman Empire to finally "decline and fall" no matter how protracted that process was. As he and other historians before, during and after the Enlightenment were constantly aware, nothing in history was permanent and even the most superior civilizations were bound to disappear. Yet in reality there was no historical moment in which one could pronounce a clear depiction of disappearance. History was a fluid and dynamic process epitomized by Enlightenment historiography's growing awareness, in a very modern vein, of the continuing pushes and pulls of the dialectical historical process. From such an outlook any definition of disappearance was in essence an abstraction,

[245] *DF*, XXXIII, 2: 284.

almost a literary construct, created in order to provide the historical narrative with a proper denouement. In that sense the observer of history was aware that the Roman Empire "declined and fell" since evidently it no longer existed in the eighteenth century. When exactly this disappearing act had been consummated in the preceding thirteen centuries was however anything but clear.

As noted above, Gibbon's dialectical bent constantly found expression in the pairing of words, creating phrases which at times appeared incongruous at first, but actually shed light on the nature of human inconsistency. From the very first paragraph of the first chapter of *The Decline and Fall* and throughout the work, readers encountered such phrases, for example the description of how the inhabitants of the Roman provinces "enjoyed and abused" their prosperity.[246] The phrase "decline and fall" is admittedly not incongruous but rather tautological. Among Gibbon's many phrases it has, however, become the most famous, so much so that people tend to use it uncritically. The Roman Empire had indeed declined and fell, yet at no precise moment was it actually, discernibly and completely fallen in the full cultural sense. It had left more than a trace in the sand, something durable and pervasively influential in Western culture which had a lasting and significant impact. This legacy was not just an achievement of the Romans alone. Their culture had assumed the lead in summing up human civilization's achievements of millennia, and in that sense the Roman Empire was a torch bearer and an augmenter of this ongoing march of civilization. From the perspective of the law of unintended consequences the fall of Rome by its very definition, and in the process of its own consummation, was the beginning of the subsequent culture of its conquerors who at the same time became its heirs. The Middle Ages did not replace Roman civilization but continued it in changed garb.

From the "moment" of its "fall" to our own times, many Western people have continued to regard themselves as the heirs and continuators of Roman civilization, and indeed of ancient Western civilization in general. In this sense Rome has never fallen. The increasing late Enlightenment dialectical mode of historical thought had ceased to accept simple causal explanations. When Gibbon wrote of the barbarians – "before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous" – he was therefore not making a clear causal statement. What he really meant was that in the long process of conquering the slowly declining Roman world the barbarians were gradually civilized by that very world itself. They were as much conquered by it as vice versa. They were its continuators, not its destroyers.

246 *DF*, I, 1: 31.

For this process of cultural transformation and continuity to succeed there had to be something fundamental and durable which withstood the ravages of the most dramatic and violent wars and revolutions. There had to be a basic element of civilization which was ineradicable. Enlightenment historians contributed to historiographical literature the "pleasing conclusion" that this civilizing force did indeed exist. It was humanity's overcoming and ultimate control of nature. The necessity to overcome nature was what had prompted human beings to become social creatures in the first place, to begin to have a history. Without it the further stages of human development could never have been accomplished. An advanced civilization by its very definition was based on a firm relationship with its natural surroundings. It was no mere chance that Gibbon, in the first sentence of the first chapter of *The Decline and Fall*, described the Roman Empire in its heyday as comprehending "the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind."[247]

"The fairest part of the earth" meant that the Romans, compared to other civilizations, were in an advantageous position in terms of their ability to utilize natural resources to enhance their cultural progress, and ultimately also to advance their command of other nations. In this sense the tale of the "decline and fall" of Rome was not just a political, military and social-cultural story, but also that of the gradual loss of advanced material control of natural resources. I am not suggesting for a moment that Gibbon's, and other Enlightenment historians', emphasis of the mastery of nature, surpassed in importance their concern with political, military, economic, religious and other historical topics. But I am claiming that they accorded it substantial significance, and that modern scholars studying the Enlightenment have hitherto failed to sufficiently notice this. Realization of the cultural significance of the control of nature was gradual throughout the Enlightenment, but in the second half of the eighteenth century an *accelerando e crescendo* of recognition of its constitutive importance made it a common feature of historiographical discussions of the essence of the civilizing process. As the century drew to a close and so much of its optimism seemed challenged, this idea remained as potent as ever.

247 Ibid.

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