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GIBBON, EDWARD
Article by **John Michael Rogers**

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GIBBON, EDWARD (b.1737; d. 1794) and *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776-88) as it relates to Persia and the Iranian world. The military, diplomatic, and commercial relations of Persia and the later steppe nomads, especially the Saljuqs, the Mongols, and Tīmūr, with the East Roman/Byzantine empire are an essential component of Gibbon's celebrated history. The continued relevance of Gibbon's conclusions on these subjects is a tribute both to his critical judgment, which only rarely leads him into anachronism or error, and to the availability at the time of translations in European languages of a good many of the primary sources still used by modern scholars. It is, moreover, remarkable how few of his conclusions have been overturned by the findings of archaeology.

GIBBON'S SOURCES

For the history of Sasanian and Islamic Persia, Central Asia, and the Near East, Gibbon's principal debts are to Barthélemy d'Herbelot's remarkable compilation, the *Bibliothèque orientale*, as completed by Antoine Galland (Paris, 1697; cf. Laurens) and revised by Claude de Visdelou (Maastricht, 1776-82), and to histories of the Turks by Joseph de Guignes (*Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mongols et des autres Tartares occidentaux* , 4 vols., Paris, 1756-58) and Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (*L'Empire turc considéré dans son établissement et dans ses accroissements successifs,* Paris, 1772). Other translated works of which he made much use are the Bijapuri Ferešta's *Golšān-e ebrāhīmī* (part tr. by A. Dow in *History of Hindoostan*, London, 1786; see FEREŠTA, TĀRĪḴ-E); the *Šajarat al-tarākema* of Abu'l-Ḡāzī

Bahādor Khan (tr. Bentinck as *Histoire généalogique des Tatars*, Leiden, 1726); Rašīd-al-Dīn's *Jāmeʿ-al-tawārīḵ* (tr. in François Pétis de la Croix, *Histoire du grand Genghiscan*, Paris, 1710, Eng. tr. as *The History of Genghizcan the Great*, London, 1722); Šaraf-al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī's *Ẓafar-nama* (tr. Pétis de la Croix as *Histoire de Timur-Bec*, Paris, 1722); the *ʿAjāʿeb al-maqdūr* of Ebn ʿArabšāh in various translations, including that of Samuel Hendrik Manger (*Ahmedis Arabsiadae Vitae et rerum gestarum Timuri, qui vulgo Tamerlanes dicitur*, 2 vols., Leeuwarden, 1767-72); and Chinese histories, in particular, the *Yüanshi* ("stamped with the Chinese character of domestic accuracy and foreign ignorance") in Antoine Gaubil's *Histoire de Gentchiscan et de toute la dinastie des Mongous ses successeurs, conquerans de la Chine* (Paris, 1739). Through Pétis, Gibbon was also familiar with Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo's account of his embassy to Tīmūr.

This impressive collection of primary sources, even if Abu'l-Ḡazī's account of the Mongols is almost entirely legendary, is amplified by the testimony of contemporary European travelers such as Giovanni Ramusio, Richard Hakluyt, Simon Grynaeus, Pierre de Bergeron, and Melchisedech Thévenot, reinforced by specialist works of historical geography by, inter alios, James Rennell, Charles de Peyssonnel, and Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, from whose survey of the Tigris and the Euphrates (*L'Euphrate et le Tigre*, Paris, 1779) he drew a remarkably complete account of the Sasanian capital cities in Mesopotamia (cf. capital cities; ctesiphon).

Gibbon justly complains of the repetitiousness of the Roman-Byzantine, Sasanian, and ultimately Muslim military campaigns (see byzantine-iranian relations): "the same hostilities, undertaken without cause, prosecuted without glory, and terminated without effect," and of the persistent disingenuousness of their diplomacy (Book 8). Understandably, he takes refuge in stereotypes, of two different sors. First, following de Guignes (Paris, 1756-58) he conflates the unquestionably Iranian Scythians (Melyukhova) with all the later steppe nomads up to Tīmūr, as "Scythians or Tartars" (Book 26). This is, perhaps, not quite as cavalier as it sounds, for, as Peter Golden (1991) observes, the Scythians, Sarmatians, Aorsi, Alans and other Iranian tribes formed an important substratum in Turkic tribal confederations and were the undoubted source of many cultural borrowings. As for the Mongols, Gibbon was aware (Book 26; cf. Azade-Ayşe) of their interaction with the Turks, subjugating the Tartars, transforming them into the vanguard of their armies and ordering, by an edict of 1206, that all the conquered peoples, most of them Turks too, were

to take their name.

More serious are the distortions arising from Gibbon's conviction (Book 51) that, in the East, events, systems, and moral types perpetuate themselves and recur. The rulers of Persia, from the Sasanians to the Safavids, are, uniformly, depicted as absolute tyrants, treacherous, intolerant, bloody, and eunuch-ridden (Book 19), depraved by "luxury," and unrefined by any acquaintance with the Classics, which might "gradually have unlocked the fetters of Oriental despotism" (Book 52). Julian may have wantonly destroyed Sasanian palaces in Mesopotamia in 363 C. E., yet "a simple, naked statue, finished by the hand of a Grecian artist, is of more genuine value than all these rude and costly monuments of barbaric labour" (Book 24), an extreme of eurocentricity which in a lesser historian would have been fatal to Gibbon's credibility.

As for the steppe nomads, drawing as much on 17th and 18th century topographers and travelers, like Jean Chardin (q.v.), Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Carsten Niebuhr, Jean François Gerbillon and John Bell of Antermony, as on the primary sources, Gibbon presents them as recurrently insubordinate and inherently savage, and even cites with some sympathy Jean-Jacques Rousseau's contention that meat-eating conduces to savagery. Though nomad rulers were rarely absolute, they too could be corrupted by luxury (Book 57). His paradigm here is Attila (Books 26, 34), whose personal power, aims and achievements, following de Guignes, and possibly Jordanes' *Getica* too (Mierow), he exaggerates (Sinor, 1990a). In fact, for the greater part of their history nomadic confederations have been pacific and often effectively subordinated by settled states. Superfluous steppe populations were regularly exported as soldiers to neighboring sedentarized nations, but despite this safety valve confederations were often short-lived or rendered impotent by internal conflicts (Golden, 1991). Nevertheless, many of Gibbon's parallels are suggestive. The contempt of Attila's Huns for agriculture, which they left to the Goths, he compares both to the Mongols under Čengīz Khan and to the Uzbeks of his time, the "lazy and rapacious sovereigns of the Sarts and Tadgics"; he also illuminatingly uses Mongol Karakorum (Book 64) to flesh out the bare description of Attila's headquarters (Book 34). Moreover, in concluding that the Saljuqs, in sedentarizing and assuming the role of protectors of the ʿAbbasid Caliphate, irreconcilably alienated themselves from their Oğuz subjects, he is in complete accord with Golden's recent study of Saljuq-Oğuz relations (1990). His account of the assimilation of the Yüan in China (Book 64) is also perceptive; the Mongols were an army, not a people, and they were too

few to have any decisive effect on Chinese culture.

Persia proper first assumes a major role in Gibbon's history with the defeat of the Parthians, "an obscure tribe of Scythian origin," when "after an ancient period of fables, and a long interval of darkness, the modern histories of Persia begin to assume an air of truth with the dynasty of the Sassanides" (Book 8). The monarchs to whom he gives the greatest importance are, of course, those who impinged most strongly on the Eastern empire—Ardašīr I, Šāpūr I and II, Ḵosrow I Anōšīravān, and Ḵosrow II Parvēz. Interestingly, he does not spare the two Ḵosrows. Of the former he concludes, "Whatever might be the provocations of Chosroes he abused the confidence of treaties; and the just reproaches of dissimulation and falsehood could only be concealed by the lustre of his victories." The latter, whose prosecution of the war against Heraclius "revealed the true character of the barbarian," he also blames for the weakening of the Sasanian and the Byzantine monarchies which left them open to the inroads of Islam.

Strangely, in striking contrast to his emphasis upon heresy and the development of Christianity in Byzantium, religion does not figure prominently in Gibbon's history of the East. Though he gives an account of Ardašīr I's restoration of Zoroastrianism ending "the long servitude of Persian under the Macedonian yoke (when) the nations of Europe and Asia had mutually adopted and corrupted each other's superstition," it is typically cursory. Manicheism (Book 27) he treats entirely as a Christian heresy—understandably, considering the theme of his work, but typically minimizing its effects in Sasanian and Sogdian Iran and Central Asia and in heresy (*zandaqa*) in Eastern Islam. His account of ʿAlī and the Shiʿites is presented in political, not religious, terms (Book 50), and although he notes that some later Persian dynasties were Shiʿite, the development of Shiʿite theology is ignored. Similarly, in the decline of the ʿAbbasid Caliphate from al-Moʿtaṣem (d. 218/833) onwards, he gives most importance to political and geographical factors, such as the "weight and magnificence" of their empire; their despotism [sc. absolutism], which was, however, unable to prevent the independence of the Saffarids, the Taherids and the Samanids in the East; administrative incompetence and corruption; and the disturbances caused by the ʿAbbasids' Turkish troops. The effects of the Muʿtazilites are ignored, the Qarmatians get a mere mention, and we do not even learn of the Buyids' allegiance to Shiʿism.

Gibbon espoused the popular myth of the introduction of silk into Byzantium

in the reign of Justinian but percipiently observes (Book 60) that had it been printing which had been introduced from China to the West at this time, the consequences would have been much more momentous. In this respect, the dearth of Eastern sources led Gibbon to underplay the Sogdians' bold attempt to collar the Eastern silk trade all the way from China to Byzantium (cf. Sinor, 1990b). A Sogdian commercial delegation to the Sasanians some time before 568 was unsuccessful, and a subsequent delegation from the Turk Qaghanate was poisoned. This led to a direct approach to Byzantium, in the form of a mission to Justin II in 568: The common hostility of Byzantines and Turks to the Avars led to a Byzantine embassy to the Türks with the returning party in 569, and a further four embassies to them.

Gibbon's widely ranging survey of the Mongols is impressively comprehensive, but in the light of recent detailed work on Mongol history it may fairly be regarded as out of date. Timurid historiography is still a quagmire (Woods). This makes the justice of Gibbon's reasoned judgment of Tīmūr (Book 65), however, particularly striking, particularly when, as he admitted, the *Ẓafar-nāma* of Šaraf-al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī, even with qualifications by Ebn ʿArabšāh ("his bitters may correct the luscious sweets of Sherefeddin") is so partial to Tīmūr as to be less history than propaganda: "Perhaps we shall conclude that the Mogul emperor was rather the scourge than the benefactor of mankind." It is difficult to fault, moreover, Gibbon's judgment of the *Institutes*, the *Tūzūkāt* (or *Malfūẓāt*)-*i tīmūrī*, in the authenticity of which he was half-inclined to believe, as "the specious idea of a perfect monarchy."

The defects of *The Decline and Fall* as a history of Persia and the East are obvious. Nevertheless it may still be read with profit, both as evidence for 18th century Orientalist scholarship and for the often surprisingly modern light Gibbon throws upon events.

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