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GIBBON'S "AGE OF CONSTANTINE" AND THE FALL OF ROME

DAVID P. JORDAN

Gibbon lavished more space and energy — and experienced more frustration — on the age of Constantine than on any other period of Roman history. On his own testimony the composition of the *Decline and Fall* was incredibly smooth. Once he had fixed on a style — "the middle tone between a dull Chronicle and a Rhetorical declamation"[1] — he seldom suffered the painful drudgery of rewriting.[2] Only two sections of his great work presented difficulties: the chapters on Christianity (XV and XVI) were "reduced by three successive revisals from a large volume to their present size"[3] and those on the age of Constantine. Gibbon burned his first essay on Constantine, and commemorates that singular event in his *Memoirs:* "It is difficult to arrange with order and perspicuity the various transactions of the age of Constantine: and so much was I displeased with the first Essay, that I committed to the flames above fifty sheets."[4] This essay is an attempt to explain why "the historian of the Roman empire" found the chapters on the age of Constantine so difficult, how he solved the problem, and why his view of Rome demanded so idiosyncratic an interpretation of the first Christian emperor.

At least part of the frustration Gibbon experienced is that faced by any historian of this complex period. The smooth flow of Gibbon's narrative belies the difficulties, but an historian familiar with the period will appreciate his achievement. The problems presented by the third and fourth centuries of the Empire are intricate, complex, and demand competence in half a dozen disciplines. And it is fair to say that not only is the general interpretation of the age of Constantine open to debate even today, but almost

1. Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life,* edited from the manuscripts by Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1966), 155-156. Hereafter cited as *Memoirs.*

2. *Memoirs,* 159. Gibbon's description of composing the *Decline and Fall* orally while pacing back and forth in his study is familiar. The first three chapters were rewritten until Gibbon felt comfortable with his style; after this he suffered few delays. J. B. Bury, in his introduction to the ninth edition of the *Decline and Fall* (1925), has collected the variants between the first quarto edition of volume I (1776) and the second quarto edition of the same volume (1782). From these examples (see pp. xxxii-xxxviii) one can see how satisfied was Gibbon with his original version.

3. *Memoirs,* 156.

4. *Memoirs,* 159.

every major event and source is the subject of scholarly controversy.[5] The central figure of the age, the emperor Constantine, presents the first and perhaps the most difficult hurdle.

Much depends on the interpretation of Constantine's motives and character, and a considerable literature exists on the subject.[6] The emperor's writings (letters, edicts, and a sermon) have been partially preserved in the works of his contemporaries, especially in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* and his *Life of Constantine,* but there is some suspicion of forgery.[7] The historian must first decide which documents are genuine and which are not. He must then determine which are contemporary forgeries, and whether they are the work of Eusebius, or Athanasius, or the Christians in the imperial chancery. If they are later forgeries, he must decide if they date

5. The best introduction to the problems presented by the age of Constantine is Norman H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (London, 1930). This is the most complete discussion of the historiography of the period (up to 1929), and the extensive notes repay close study. More recent discussions, with elaborate bibliographical suggestions, are: E. Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire,* vol. I, transl. and ed. J-R. Palanque (Paris, 1959), esp. 95-130, and notes; volumes II and III of *Histoire de l'eglise depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours,* ed. A. Fliche and V. Martin; *De la fin du 2e siècle à la paix constantinienne* (Paris, 1935), by J. Lebreton and J. Zeiller, and *De la paix constantinienne à la mort de Théodose* (Paris, 1936), by P. de Labriolle, G. Bardy, and J-R. Palanque (see esp. the bibliographical essays for each chapter); André Piganiol, *Histoire de Rome,* in the "Clio" series (Paris, 1962), esp. 460-472 and bibliographical notes. A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284-602. A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey* (2 vols., Norman, Oklahoma) is the most recent general history embracing the age of Constantine.

6. In addition to the general works mentioned in the preceding note there are several biographies and monographs. The most famous of these is Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great,* transl. Moses Hadas (London, 1949). A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1948) is popular, but concise and accurate. The two English lives are: J. B. Firth, *Constantine the Great* (London, 1905) and G. P. Baker, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Revolution* (London, 1931). They contain little that is not in Jones's little book. Of the two French lives, J. Maurice, *Constantin le grand et l'origine de la civilisation chrétienne* (Paris, 1925), is a pious work written under the spiritual pressures of the author's experiences in the First World War; André Piganiol, *L'empereur Constantin* (Paris, 1932), is cleverly argued and sees Constantine's progressive Christianization as a manifestation of his urge toward a syncretic monotheism. L. Salvatorelli, *Constantino il Grande* (Rome, 1928) is in the same tradition as Piganiol, and is perhaps a better example of this view. More specialized studies are: Hermann Doerries, *Constantine and Religious Liberty,* transl. Roland H. Bainton (New Haven, 1960), and Andrew Alföldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome,* transl. Harold Mattingly (London, 1948). For more extensive bibliographical suggestions see the works mentioned in note 5 above, especially Baynes, *passim,* and Piganiol, *Histoire de Rome,* 479-480.

7. The authenticity of every document attributed to Constantine has been questioned. The literature on the subject is enormous, technical, and often abstruse. See the discussion in Baynes, 40-50 (note 18), and Piganiol, *Histoire de Rome,* 477-480. On the authenticity of the documents preserved by Eusebius in *De vita Constantini,* see A. H. M. Jones in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 5 (1954), 196-200.

from the reign of Constantius, or Valentinian, or even from the hand of fifth-century interpolators.

The works or the fragments of the Roman historians which have survived present similar difficulties. There are brief chapters in Aurelius Victor (*Historia abbreviata ab Augusto Octaviano usque ad consulatum decimum Constantii Augusti et Juliani Caesaris tertium*) and Eutropius (*Breviarium ab urbe condita*), and several other minor chroniclers of the fourth century. No narrative of the reign of Constantine exists earlier than that of Zosimus, who wrote in the fifth century and drew on Eunapius, who wrote at the end of the fourth. Both men were ardent pagans, and their picture of Constantine is very unfavorable. The fragments published in the so-called *Anonymus Valesianus* (in Latin), probably written in the fifth or sixth century, contain some useful details on the early years of the emperor's reign. There is also much information in the Latin Panegyrici delivered before Constantine at Court, but these must be read with more than a grain of salt. The two most famous and important sources are the bitter pamphlet of Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum,* and the works of Eusebius, especially his *Ecclesiastical History* and his *Life of Constantine*. The special difficulties presented by these works are discussed below.

Beginning in 312 there is the Theodosian Code, but this too presents difficulties to the historian. For the age of Constantine it is difficult to date confidently the recorded laws "and it is sometimes impossible to say whether a law belongs to the earlier part of Constantine's reign or to the latter part of that of Constantine II, nearly half a century later."[8] For the ecclesiastical history of the age the sources are extensive but present numerous difficulties.[9] Some idea of the complexity of the period and the available evidence is useful here. The Donatist schism, which destroyed the unity of the African Church, and the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council, are cases in point.

On Donatism there are valuable documents in the tenth book of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. These include imperial or episcopal letters, official edicts, reports or inquiries, and judicial acts. In addition there are the writings of the greatest of the Church Fathers, St. Augustine, who devoted his considerable energies to excoriating the Donatists.[10] The other major

8. Jones, *Later Roman Empire,* I, 78.

9. See the works mentioned in notes 5 and 6 above. In addition the following may be mentioned: P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne;* Volume IV, *Le donatisme* (Paris, 1912), and Volume V, *Saint Optat et les premiers écrivains donatistes* (Paris, 1920), are standard, as are the other volumes in Monceaux's important work; H. W. Gwatkin, *Studies of Arianism* (London, 1900), is an old but still good book; A. R. Burn, *The Council of Nicaea* (London, 1925), remains the best brief treatment.

10. Monceaux, *Le donatisme,* indicates and analyzes the documents.

source is the *Contra Parmenianum* written around 367 A.D. by Optatus of Miletus. This work is apologetic and controversial, but is generally considered to have solid historical value.[11] There are also numerous minor writings and fragments, and some non-literary evidence.

The history of the Council of Nicaea is similarly full of difficulties. No documents other than the Creed, twenty disciplinary canons, and a letter to the bishops of Egypt, Pentapolis, and Libya (preserved in Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History*), and a list of the bishops present have survived. Three eye-witnesses wrote about the Council, but their evidence must be carefully sifted.[12] The fifth-century historians of the Council (Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Gelasius) are of varying and often dubious value.[13] In the sixth century tripartite histories of the Council were composed by combining Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret (in Latin by Cassiodorus; in Greek by Theodore the Lector). And this is not to mention such important episodes in the ecclesiastical history of the age as the Great Persecution and the extraordinarily complex history of Arianism. Even Gibbon, who had a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for absorbing details, complained of the inherent difficulties of the period. He wrote with characteristic wit: "I dived perhaps too deeply into the mud of the Arian controversy: and many days of reading, thinking, and writing were consumed in the pursuit of a phantom."[14]

These then are the technical difficulties Gibbon faced; his declared hostility to Christianity augmented these difficulties. But before discussing Gibbon's philosophical interpretation of the age, it is useful to see how he solved the problems of organization. In the chapters on the age of Constantine, Gibbon was forced to abandon the strict chronological arrangement he usually followed and adopt a less restrictive scheme.

With the sustained crisis of the third century the chronological arrangement that had served for the period from Commodus to Alexander Severus (180-235 A.D.) became almost useless. The increasing complexity of the Empire demanded a new organizing principle. Gibbon had to explain the

11. Optatus is accused of having falsified documents, as is almost every Christian writer (and not a few pagans) of the fourth century. See Monceaux, *Saint Optat,* for a full discussion.

12. 1) Eustathius of Antioch, but only a few lines of his work have survived; 2) St. Athanasius gives some information in *De decretis nicaenae synodi* and *Epistola ad Afros;* 3) Eusebius has the fullest account in his panegyric, *De vita Constantini.*

13. Socrates, a Constantinople advocate, wrote c. 440, and publishes some authentic documents. Sozomen, a Palestinian living in Constantinople, wrote c. 444, and has little that is not in Socrates. Theodoret, a Syrian bishop, wrote c. 450, and is an inferior historian. Gelasius of Cyzicus, wrote c. 475, but his work has been lost save for the first three books dealing with Constantine.

14. *Memoirs,* 159.

political reorganization of the state by Diocletian and the modifications imposed on the new system by Constantine. He had to describe the establishment of a new capital in the East, the result of a shift in gravity in the huge Empire. In addition there was a complicated series of civil wars (for a brief period Rome had six emperors), not to mention the foreign wars. There was also a new state religion; some indication of the complexities this created are described above. Rome was no longer the center of the empire, and the decline of the old city was accompanied by the decline of the senatorial nobility and the traditional machinery of political power in the West. Confronted by these complexities, Gibbon abandoned strict chronology and broke the age down into subjects or problems, each of which received a separate chapter:[15]

> The age of the great Constantine and his sons is filled with important events; but the historian must be impressed by their number unless he diligently separates from each other the scenes which are connected only by the order of time.[16]

First, he will "describe the political institutions which gave strength to the empire, before he proceeds to relate the wars and revolutions which hastened its decline."[17] Furthermore, the emergence of Christianity as the state religion demands that the historian "adopt the division, unknown to the ancients, of civil and ecclesiastical affairs: the victory of the Christians and their intestine discord will supply copious and distinct materials both for edification and for scandal."[18]

Gibbon is aware that this departure from chronology is unorthodox, and he consequently lectures his readers on how they are to react to interruptions in the narrative of events:

> . . . the interruption will be censured only by those . . . who are insensible to

15. The age of Constantine, for Gibbon, constitutes the period from Diocletian's accession (285) to the death of Athanasius (373). Gibbon devotes six complete chapters to this period, and major sections of three other chapters: chapter XIII (the reign of Diocletian); chapter XIV (from Diocletian's abdication to Constantine's victory over Licinius, 305-324); chapter XVII (foundation of Constantinople and Constantine's political system); chapter XVIII (character of Constantine, division of the Empire, death of Constantine); chapter XX (conversion of Constantine and its effects); chapter XXI (the major heresies). Chapter XV and XVI (the progress of Christianity) contain much material on the first Christian emperor, as do chapters XIX, XXII, and XXIII. No other period of Roman history receives so much attention.

16. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* edited by J. B. Bury (5th ed., 7 vols. London, 1909), XVII, 149. All references are to this edition, and are indicated by the chapter number (in Roman numerals), followed by the page number (arabic numerals), and in some instances by the footnote number (n. followed by an arabic numeral).

17. XVII, 149.

18. XVII, 149.

the importance of laws and manners, while they peruse, with eager curiosity, the transient intrigues of a court, or the accidental event of a battle.[19]

Gibbon thus again declares himself squarely in the traditions of Enlightenment historiography. He is a "philosophic" historian, not a mere annalist. "Laws and manners" will receive a prominent place in his work. Those who cavil are ignorant of history and will remain ignorant. The *Decline and Fall* was to be a history of Roman civilization in the new style created by Montesquieu, Hume, and Robertson. "Philosophical" history was, for Gibbon and his contemporaries, interpretative and significant history. And for a philosophic historian, the age of Constantine is a crucial era in the history of civilization. It is, for Gibbon, one of those ages when civilization changed its direction. The age of Constantine occupies a central position in the structure of the *Decline and Fall.* During the early decades of the fourth century Gibbon could already discern clearly the causes for the decline and fall of the Empire. It is this fact that accounts for the occasionally strident moral tone Gibbon adopts in these chapters, and the deliberate, even zealous, care he took in their composition.

Gibbon surveyed the Roman Empire from the eminence of eighteenth-century European civilization. He looked at Rome, as Christopher Dawson puts it, from one mountain peak to another. To the Whigs of eighteenth-century England — and apparently everyone was a Whig — the Romans were honorary Englishmen, the Senate a kind of embryo Parliament, and Roman culture an earlier form of Augustan humanism. Gibbon saw himself in the role of a later-day Roman censor, and much of the *Decline and Fall* is a catalog and an indictment of those Romans guilty of *lèse majesté* against the Empire.

Gibbon is outraged by what he sees in Constantine's empire. He thunders with all the authority of his massive erudition and magisterial style against effeminacy, superstition, religiosity, corruption, and degeneracy; and for these he held Constantine personally responsible. As the advocate of the pagan Antonine age, Gibbon never misses an opportunity to point out the fatal weaknesses in the new state, and to excoriate the first Christian emperor. The new capital, founded at Byzantium, is often regarded as the crowning political achievement of Constantine's reign, a stroke of genius that created the necessary preconditions for the survival of Rome in the East.[20] Gibbon considers it the work of a pusillanimous emperor willing to sacrifice the old Rome in order to erect a monument to his own glory. The separation of the military from the civil service — again considered a much needed reform — "relaxed the vigour of the state, while it secured the tran-

19. XVII, 168-169.

20. See for example, J. B. Bury, "Causes of the Survival of the Roman Empire in the East," *Selected Essays,* ed. Harold Temperley (Cambridge, 1930).

quility of the monarch."[21] Constantine's distinction between the *borderers,* or frontier troops, and the *palatines,* or garrison troops, fatally undermined the military discipline of the Empire. For Gibbon all these reforms are "the mortal wound which had been so rashly or so weakly inflicted by the hand of Constantine." They sapped the strength and vitality of the Empire "till the last moment of its dissolution."[22]

These judgments on Constantine's reforms are intemperate. His attack on the military reforms, for example, has little basis in fact. The charge is derived from Zosimus (no other ancient historian gives a similar interpretation), an avowed enemy of Constantine and an historian Gibbon pillories throughout the *Decline and Fall.* But in this particular case Zosimus' charge neatly dovetails into Gibbon's view of Constantine, and he reiterates it. As a recent historian of the period has pointed out: "this criticism is obviously the fruit of religious prejudice."[23] In fact, the reorganization of the army was an intelligent and necessary move: "The field army, for all Zosimus may say, remained a fine fighting force: it prolonged the struggle in the West for another century and a half, and saved the empire in the East."[24]

This minor point provides a good illustration of Gibbon's attitude toward Constantine. The charge that his military reforms weakened the Roman army rests solely on the testimony of Zosimus. Not only does Gibbon have little respect for Zosimus as an historian, but in almost any other circumstance he would be unwilling to follow a single, mediocre source. He contemptuously dismisses as pious nonsense much that is said in Constantine's favor by the early Christian writers. Yet their testimony is as trustworthy (or untrustworthy) as that of Zosimus. But in dealing with Constantine, Gibbon — consciously or unconsciously — suspends his customary hard-headedness. He accepts the biased testimony of Zosimus not because it is unimpeachable, but because it is damaging to Constantine. Constantine is on trial for *lèse majesté,* and Gibbon wants to secure a conviction. To this end he is willing to indulge in the techniques of a prosecuting attorney, which are fine in the court room but difficult to justify in history.

Gibbon's view of the age of Constantine rests ultimately on his philosophic assumptions; and his antagonism to Christianity, which is far more complex than most commentators think, is a major ingredient in this philosophy. Gibbon was especially sensitive to religion. The only two sections of the *Decline and Fall* that required extensive rewriting were the chapters on Christianity and those on the age of Constantine. They are closely related,

21. XVII, 187.
22. XVII, 188.
23. Jones, *Later Roman Empire,* I, 100.
24. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe,* 184.

for the author's purpose was the same. Gibbon was, when he wrote these chapters, "attached to the old Pagan establishment."[25] He was convinced that the growth of Christianity was a principal cause of Rome's fall. Obviously so important a series of events as the conversion of the Roman emperor and the subsequent establishment of Christianity as the state religion called for the most careful treatment. In addition, despite his numerous declarations of Enlightenment detachment and impartiality, Gibbon was compulsively attracted to the study of religion, especially in its pathological forms, fanaticism and enthusiasm. No reader of the *Decline and Fall* can fail to be struck by the bitterness evident in his accounts of religious fanaticism, or the utter glee with which he describes the excesses (especially sexual) of the early monks. And it is useful to recall that his favorite author was Pascal, the most brilliant religious apologist of the seventeenth century. Gibbon read the *Provincial Letters* "almost every year . . . with new pleasure."[26] Placid indifference, the detachment Gibbon recommended to all who would call themselves philosophers, he himself lacked in all discussions of religion, let alone fanaticism and religious enthusiasm. He would have us believe that he viewed religion with philosophic indifference. But philosophic indifference could hardly generate the passion that informs his treatment of Christianity and Constantine.

Gibbon was acutely aware of the fact that even in an age of enlightenment the majority of mankind — even Whig mankind — held tenaciously to their religious superstitions. The age of Constantine was especially important for Gibbon because it marked the official establishment of Christianity in Europe, and Christianity was being hotly debated in the Enlightenment. The chapters on the Trinitarian controversy or Monasticism, those *tours de force* of wit and erudition, might amuse or offend a learned reader, but they could scarcely be expected to stir the passions of the majority of men. They were the cause of several obscure pamphlets from outraged Anglican divines, but that is all. The age of Constantine, however, was more basic, even to the benevolent Anglican Church: it was contemporary history. The conversion of Constantine was not a matter for theological hair-splitting or recondite learning. It involved the triumph of Christianity, the palpable proof of God's providence. Even those latitudinarian divines who graciously and elegantly refused to squabble over which miracles were true and which false, even these men drew the line at assailing the sincerity of Constantine's conversion. The issue had more than antiquarian significance, and Gibbon recognized this:

25. Gibbon to Lord Sheffield, 5 February 1791; *The Letters of Edward Gibbon,* ed. J. E. Norton (3 vols., London, 1956), III, 216.

26. *Memoirs,* 79.

> The victories and the civil policy of Constantine no longer influence the state of Europe; but a considerable portion of the globe still retains the impression which it received from the conversion of that monarch; and the ecclesiastical institutions of his reign are still connected, by an indissoluable chain, with the opinions, the passions, and the interests of the present generation.[27]

This is why Gibbon took special pains in the composition of these chapters. For example, there is in his treatment of the age of Constantine, a passionate attention to detail. In the earlier and later parts of the *Decline and Fall,* Gibbon was usually content to concentrate on his narrative line. He sought to present the contours of Roman history rather than monographic details.[28] But in the chapters on Constantine there is more precision: "The successive steps of the elevation of Constantine, from his first assuming the purple at York to the resignation of Licinius at Nicodemia, have been related with some minuteness and precision."[29] This minuteness and precision is the result of Gibbon's awareness of the contemporary implications of the age and the probability that his critics would delight in catching him out in errors of fact. It is also a result of the importance that the age of Constantine had for Gibbon as one of the crucial causes of Rome's fall.

Constantine absorbed Gibbon's attention as did few other men in Roman history. He is not one of the emperors Gibbon admired: he is one of the villains of the piece. But Gibbon saw in the career of Constantine a microcosm of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. In his treatment of Constantine Gibbon sought to paint the fate of Rome in miniature. The analysis of Constantine's character is one of the most ambitious in the *Decline and Fall.* For Gibbon, Constantine's early career recapitulates the history of the Empire before the fourth century: his later career is a study in the decay and degeneracy which would eventually destroy Rome. The young Constantine was a model prince: vital, talented, full of promise. His young manhood represents the partial fulfillment of this promise. But in his old age — an old age disgraced by religious fanaticism and dark and bloody deeds — Constantine reveals his true character, sacrifices his brilliant reputation, and fatally weakens the Empire in a mad rush after personal glory.

Gibbon heightens the tragedy of Constantine's career by painting his early exploits in glowing colors. But after the defeat of Licinius (324) Constantine sinks rapidly into degeneracy, and the decline of the Empire quickens with

27. XX, 306.

28. David Hume, after reading the first volume, wrote Gibbon that he found the work "concise and superficial." Gibbon acknowledged the validity of the criticism (*Memoirs,* 156).

29. XIV, 441.

each successive reign. The legacy of Constantine is the slow but effective poison of moral corruption, institutionalized in the Christian Church and the new constitutions of the state. Both of which are, in Gibbon's view, inextricably tied together. So well did he do his work that even Julian the Apostate, one of Gibbon's heroes and a noble Roman, could not save Rome by returning her to the good old ways.

Gibbon's Constantine is similar to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: a man of splendid parts who degenerates into a somber tyrant in old age. Constantine is neither saint nor hero. He is a semi-literate barbarian, not different in kind from the Illyrian princes of the third century who "restored the empire, without restoring the sciences." He is a gifted man, "enriched by nature with her choicest endowments"[30] but he deserves the epithet "Great" only with regard to the rough and ready virtues of the military camp and the battlefield. He is, for Gibbon, one of the great soldiers of the Empire, not one of its great statesmen.

Constantine began life with every advantage. He was tall, majestic looking, and graceful. He was strong, active, and adept in all the military arts. He was chaste and temperate, and delighted "in the social intercourse of familiar conversation." He was courteous and liberal, and gained the confidence and admiration of all those close to him. Although semi-literate, he esteemed learning and protected the arts and sciences (despite the fact that he was devoid of taste).[31] He was a devoted and indefatigable civil servant. He had the "magnanimity to conceive, and patience to execute, the most arduous designs, without being checked either by the prejudices of education or by the clamours of the multitude." In the field he displayed the talents "of a consummate general" and "to his abilities, rather than to his fortune, we may ascribe the signal victories which he obtained over the foreign and domestic foes of the republic."[32] He was, or rather might have been, an ideal prince.

In building up his portrait of Constantine Gibbon used a technique familiar to the religious controversialists of the seventeenth century. In that age of confessional rancor, character assassination and vilification were the accepted modes of debate. The destruction of a man's arguments meant, in practice, the destruction of his character. The Calvinist polemicists early developed the habit of drawing the virtues of an historical character from his enemies, and his vices from his friends. In this way they sought to convict confessional foes out of their own mouths and at the same time have the appearance of objectivity. This technique was much used, and indeed perfected, by Pierre

30. XVIII, 215.

31. XIV, 425: "The triumphal arch of Constantine still remains a melancholy proof of the decline of the arts, and a singular testimony of the meanest vanity."

32. XVIII, 215.

Bayle, perhaps the finest polemical writer of the age. Bayle was a particular favorite of Gibbon, and he is one of the few men whose panegyric Gibbon inserted in his *Memoirs*.[33] It is not unlikely that Gibbon learned this technique from the Huguenot Bayle. At any rate, Gibbon consistently disarms his potential critics by using this device. For example in the following general statement where Gibbon explains that he was drawn Constantine's virtues from the enemies of the first Christian emperor:

> The virtues of Constantine are collected for the most part from Eutropius and the younger Victor, two sincere pagans, who wrote after the extinction of his family. Even Zosimus and the *Emperor* Julian acknowledge his personal courage and military achievements.[34]

Despite Constantine's exceptional promise and capacity — even on the testimony of his pagan enemies — he had a tragic flaw. "He loved glory, as the reward, perhaps as the motive, of his labours."[35] The "boundless ambition, which, from the moment of his accepting the purple at York, appears as the ruling passion of his soul" is the key to his character and leads, inevitably, to his decline.[36] This view is remarkably close to that adopted by Jacob Burckhardt in *The Age of Constantine the Great*. In the Preface to the first edition Burckhardt graciously acknowledges his debt to Gibbon. Although the two men see the essence of Constantine's character as "boundless ambition," in other respects their interpretations diverge. For Burckhardt Constantine is a nineteenth-century rationalist, indeed even a free-thinker, and he dismisses any evidence to the contrary. Thus does he begin the famous chapter on Constantine and the Church:

> Attempts have often been made to penetrate into the religious consciousness of Constantine and to construct a hypothetical picture of changes in his religious convictions. Such efforts are futile. In a genius driven without surcease by ambition and lust for power there can be no question of Christianity and paganism, of conscious religiosity or irreligiosity; such a man is essentially

33. For Gibbon's comments on Bayle see *Memoirs*, 63-65. He says, in part, of Bayle's skepticism and genius for argument: "A calm and lofty spectator of the Religious tempest, the Philosopher of Rotterdam condemned with equal firmness the persecution of Lewis XIV; and the Republican maxims of the Calvinists; their vain prophecies and the intolerant bigotry which sometimes vexed his solitary retreat. In reviewing the controversies of the times, he turned against each other, the arguments of the disputants: successively wielding the arms of the Catholics and protestants, he proves that neither the way of authority, nor the way of examination can afford the multitude any test of Religious truth; and dextrously concludes, that custom and education must be the sole grounds of popular belief."

34. XVIII, 216, n.2.

35. XVIII, 215.

36. XVIII, 215.

unreligious, even if he pictures himself standing in the midst of a churchly community.[37]

As will be argued below, Gibbon's Constantine, despite certain similarities, is quite different from the man envisioned by Burckhardt.

Gibbon was remarkably subtle and sensitive in his analysis of character, but he did accept, in general, the psychological premises of his age. He saw, with other men of enlightenment, human nature as static and permanent. Applied to the study of history this doctrine meant that the same causes would produce the same effects throughout all time and in all societies. It also meant that the same passions, identified by the ancients and clearly understood by the Renaissance and the *Grand Siècle,* had always and would always motivate human behavior. Thus history was not the study of the evolution of human nature: that was the given, the known. History was the study of how and in what ways this human nature responded to different circumstances. The doctrine of human nature accepted by the Enlightenment also implied that a man's character could not change. His psychological makeup remained static from birth to death. Change is only apparent, not real. The passage of time or the changing circumstances of life might reveal a man's true character, and this true character might be different from that usually attributed to an individual, but this must not be construed as change. It is, rather, exposure of what was there all along.

When Gibbon came to consider the character of the emperor Constantine, he accepted the truth of these psychological doctrines. Once he had isolated and analyzed the spring of Constantine's character — "boundless ambition" — he had only to demonstrate how this ambition dictated the emperor's actions and how, as Constantine grew older, his true character was revealed. Thus Constantine's early years, when he acquired a reputation for benevolence and appeared to contemporaries as a good man, are only a period when he successfully masked his "boundless ambition." Constantine was, in Gibbon's view, always ambitious, but the peculiarities of his early history forced him, or taught him, to dissemble his true nature. Constantine's youth and early manhood were a theatrical representation. Constantine was a hypocrite, and his true nature was exposed to public view and to history only after he achieved sole dominance of the Roman Empire.

It is important for Gibbon's purposes, and essential for his philosophy, that Constantine's duplicity be firmly established. His interpretation of Con-

37. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great,* transl. Moses Hadas (London, 1949), 280. Burckhardt's view of Constantine's character thus prejudges the case. He is unwilling to admit the validity of any evidence which might alter his interpretation. For Burckhardt the supreme misfortune of Constantine is that his memory has been preserved by the most repulsive of all the panegyrists, Eusebius. Burckhardt dismisses Eusebius (272) as "the first thoroughly dishonest historian of antiquity."

stantine's motives (especially his motives for conversion to Christianity) rests on his ability to prove that everything the emperor did was for personal glory and necessary to satisfy his "boundless ambition."

Constantine is on trial before the bar of history. Gibbon, the advocate of pagan Rome, is anxious to secure a conviction. If it can be demonstrated that Constantine's conversion to Christianity — the very antithesis of Roman civilization in Gibbon's view — was no more than a cynical, callous political move, dictated by overweening ambition, then the emperor is guilty of *lèse majesté* against Rome. And it follows from Gibbon's psychological assumptions that only a wicked man, a dissembler and a hypocrite, could have taken such a step, and taken it when he did. Only a man whose lust for power corroded the private and civic virtues of a Roman citizen could become a Christian and convert the Empire. As Gibbon unfolds the life of Constantine, it becomes clear that all his actions are the result of personal ambition. And the pious explanation of Constantine's conversion, that of Eusebius and Lactantius, is no more than a fiction.

Gibbon accomplishes his anatomizing of Constantine's character by concentrating on the emperor's early years, spent at the court of Diocletian. These years were a school of duplicity for the future emperor. At Diocletian's court — he became a virtual prisoner when Galerius was raised to Augustus in 305 A.D. — surrounded by enemies and jealous courtiers, Constantine learned the arts of dissimulation and deception at an early age. In this hostile atmosphere "he had learned to command his own passions, to encounter those of his equals, and to depend for his present safety and future greatness on the prudence and firmness of his personal conduct."[38] When he escaped from Galerius' court to join his dying father in Britain, he was a master of duplicity. And what had originally been a stratagem necessary for survival became, with the years, an unconscious habit. Hypocrisy is the essence of Constantine's character: only Augustus and Constantine are consistently referred to as "artful" in the *Decline and Fall.*

The next period in Constantine's life, his reign in Gaul (306-312) "seems to have been the most innocent and even virtuous period of his life."[39] "Seems" is the operative word here. During these years the emperor successfully masked his "boundless ambition," using the techniques learned at the court of Diocletian. He appeared to his contemporaries the man most worthy to rule the empire, and doubtless the undisguised tyranny of his rivals served to enhance Constantine's reputation.[40] He had, and seemingly deserved, the

38. XVIII, 226.

39. XIV, 412.

40. The complicated politics of this period, when Rome had six emperors, is outside the scope of this essay. See volume XII of the *Cambridge Ancient History,* chapters

reputation of a benevolent despot. But at the end of this period, when he embarked on the series of civil wars that would eventually bring him sole possession of the Empire, a hint of his true character is revealed. With the civil wars began the middle period of his career, from 312 to 324 (from the war against Maxentius to the final defeat of Licinius). During this period the virtues of benevolence, tolerance, and limited ambition were swept away by the impetuous demands of Constantine's lust for power and glory. It is precisely during this period that his military genius is most evident. In the long series of civil wars Constantine established his claim to military greatness, while sacrificing his reputation as a magnanimous and humane ruler: "Had Constantine fallen on the banks of the Tiber, or even in the plains of Hadrianople, such is the character [of the young ruler of Gaul] which, with a few exceptions, he might have transmitted to posterity."[41] But he achieved his dream of universal empire and "the conclusion of his reign . . . degraded him from the rank which he had acquired among the most deserving of the Roman princes."[42]

The victory over Licinius made Constantine sole ruler of the Roman world, "thirty-seven years after Diocletian had divided his power and provinces with his associate Maximian."[43] With his victory there vanished every necessity of disguising his passions and his true character. Slowly he let slip his duplicity. He degenerated into "a cruel and dissolute monarch, corrupted by his fortune, or raised by conquest above the necessity of dissimulation."[44] The last fourteen years of his reign "was a period of apparent splendour rather than of real prosperity; and the old age of Constantine was disgraced by the opposite yet reconcilable vices of rapaciousness and prodigality."[45] He now indulged his long denied passions. He adopted and elaborated the ceremonial extravagance of his predecessor, and Gibbon sneeringly comments that the new system of government "might have been mistaken for a splendid theatre, filled with players of every character and degree, who repeated the language and imitated the passions, of their original model."[46] Under Constantine the oriental pomp introduced by Diocletian "assumed an air of softness and effeminacy."[47] The aged emperor appeared in false hair "of various colours," an elaborate diadem, "a profusion of gems and pearls, of collars and bracelets, and a variegated flowing robe of silk, most

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XIX and XX for a full account. The cruelty and crudity of Constantine's rivals is apparent here, as in the sources.

41. XVIII, 216.
42. XVIII, 216.
43. XIV, 441.
44. XVIII, 216.
45. XVIII, 216.
46. XVII, 170.
47. XVIII, 217.

curiously embroidered with flowers of gold."[48] Such prodigalities could scarcely be excused by the youth and folly of Elagabalus; how account for them in the aged Roman veteran?

Gibbon admired the "manly virtues" of the old Romans. The frugal habits of Marcus Aurelius, and Alexander Severus, and Julian the Apostate are reverently commemorated in the *Decline and Fall.* The old Roman virtues were an outward sign of moral fortitude: oriental pomp and circumstance were an outward sign of inner corruption. Constantine's devotion to such absurd ceremonial is both a sign and a cause of decadence. Such superficial and costly luxury could not fail but take its toll on the character and the mind of the emperor: "A mind thus relaxed by prosperity and indulgence was incapable of rising to that magnanimity which disdains suspicion and dares to forgive."[49] It is precisely during this period of peace, security, moral turpitude, and oriental despotism that Constantine was converted to Christianity.

In any account of the age of Constantine it is crucial to fix precisely the date at which the emperor became a Christian. On this fact will hinge much of one's interpretation of the age. This is no easy task.[50] It is absolutely essential for Gibbon's view that Constantine be converted during his period of moral decay, that is, after 324. An earlier conversion would mitigate Gibbon's

48. XVIII, 217.

49. XVIII, 217.

50. There is an extensive literature on this problem (see notes 5 and 6 above for an outline). With regard to the date of Constantine's conversion, there are three schools of interpretation, and each of these rest ultimately on assumptions about Constantine's character, or rather how the historian discerns Constantine as a man. 1) Those who deny the sincerity of Constantine's conversion and argue that it was motivated by purely political considerations are willing to accept an early conversion, but they reject the pious motives given by the Christian writers Lactantius and Eusebius. Among the champions of this view are: H. Grégoire, "La 'conversion' de Constantin," *Revue de l'université de Bruxelles* 36 (1930-31), 231-272; and subsequently argued in *Byzantion,* 6 (1932), 645-661; 13 (1938), 561-583; and 14 (1939), 341-351. Burckhardt, H. von Schoenebeck, and E. Schwartz also hold this view. 2) Those who admit the sincerity of Constantine's conversion, but argue that he turned to Christianity late in life, and only after adopting several pagan cults (among them the worship of the sun, hence the persistence of *Sol Invictus* on the emperor's coins) in his quest for a syncretic monotheism. The most persuasive defenders of this thesis are L. Salvatorelli, *Constantino il Grande* (Rome, 1928) and André Piganiol, *L'empereur Constantin* (Paris, 1932). 3) Those who insist upon the reality and the sincerity of Constantine's conversion in 312, accepting the date and the testimony of Eusebius, if not all his miraculous details. Norman H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (London, 1930); the *Cambridge Ancient History,* XII, (1939) — Baynes is responsible for the relevant chapters of this volume — and A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (London, 1948), are the leading exponents of this view. For a discussion of the state of the problem see Baynes, *passim,* Piganiol, *Histoire de Rome,* 479-480 and E. Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire,* I, 460-462.

argument that self-interest motivated all Constantine's acts, in addition to depriving him of the ironic implications of a conversion to Christianity during a period of moral degeneracy. A late conversion strengthens Gibbon's argument that Constantine acted as a hypocrite: he took the step of becoming a Christian only when he was assured of political power and security. His power put him out of the reach of criticism and in no way affected his hegemony of the empire. An earlier conversion, before his final victory over Licinius, would have been the action of a religious fanatic (and Gibbon refuses to see Constantine in this light), and would have seriously compromised his chances of ruling the entire empire. If Constantine is to be one of the major destroyers of Roman civilization, it is important for Gibbon that the connection between moral decay and Christianity be established. There is some evidence supporting a conversion after 324, but the evidence for an earlier conversion (around 312) is much stronger. Gibbon's first task is to destroy the validity of this tradition and the evidence on which it rests.

The Christian version of Constantine's conversion is compounded from the accounts of Eusebius and Lactantius.[51] Before the battle of the Milvian Bridge, the tradition runs, the emperor saw a vision in the sky. This vision was repeated in a dream on the night before the battle, and the emperor was ordered to place the sign — the Labarum — on his banner and fight Maxentius under the protection and the aid of the Christian God. Gibbon sets out to destroy this famous story, and his attack is an outstanding example of Enlightenment philosophy applied to historical criticism. First he attacks the validity of both the vision and the dream:

> I shall endeavour to form a just estimate of the *standard,* the *dream,* and the *celestial sign;* by separating the historical, the natural, and the marvellous parts of this extraordinary story, which, in the composition of a specious argument, have been artfully confounded in one splendid and brittle mass.[52]

But before exorcising the miraculous from history, Gibbon first questions the reliability of the sources, Eusebius and Lactantius. Gibbon disliked both men: they were religious enthusiasts and second-rate historians. For him their testimony was automatically suspect. The account given by Lactantius is brief and gives only Constantine's dream on the eve of battle.[53] Gibbon dismisses his testimony with contempt: "Some considerations might perhaps incline a scep-

51. The version of Lactantius is in *De mortibus persecutorum,* xlviii, 5. Eusebius' testimony comes from *De vita Constantini,* i, 28-30; but he also has vague indications of the conversion in his *Ecclesiastical History,* IX, ix, 10. Philostorgus gives a narrative of a vision similar to that reported by Eusebius, but seen in the night-time (*Fragm.* 6).

52. XX, 317.

53. Lactantius' account (*De mortibus persecutorum,* xlviii, 5) says that the emperor was warned in his sleep to carve upon his shield "the heavenly sign from God" and he did as commanded.

tical mind to suspect the judgment or the veracity of the rhetorician, whose pen, either from zeal or interest, was devoted to the cause of the prevailing faction."[54] Lactantius' account was published "at Nicomedia about three years after the Roman victory" and the interval of "a thousand miles, and a thousand days" allows "ample latitude for the invention of declaimers, the credulity of party, and the tacit approbation of the emperor himself."[55] Besides, Gibbon argues, why accept a miraculous explanation when a reasonable one is available, and probably true (certainly psychologically cogent):

> Whilst his anxiety for the approaching day, which must decide the fate of the empire, was suspended by a short and interrupted slumber, the venerable form of Christ, and the well-known symbol of his religion, might forcibly offer themselves to the active fancy of a prince.[56]

Having dismissed Lactantius, he turns to Eusebius. There is no circumstantial account of the miracle in the *Ecclesiastical History* — which fact Gibbon emphasizes to score another debater's point — but the fullest account of the episode is in Eusebius' *De vita Constantini*.[57] Gibbon opens his attack on Eusebius with a general statement on miracles:

> The philosopher, who with calm suspicion examines the dreams and omens, the miracles and prodigies, of profane, or even of ecclesiastical history, will probably conclude that, if the eyes of the spectators have sometimes been deceived by fraud, the understanding of the readers has much more frequently been insulted by fiction.[58]

All accounts of miraculous events must be distrusted, but those from the pen of a polemicist like Eusebius are especially suspect:

> Eusebius himself [in his account of the Great Persecution], indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace, of religion. Such an acknowledgement will naturally excite a suspicion that a writer who has so openly violated one of the fundamental laws of history has not paid a very strict regard to the observance of the others; and the suspicion will derive additional credit from the character of Eusebius, which was less tinctured with credulity, and more practiced in the arts of court, than that of almost any of his contemporaries.[59]

54. XX, 320.
55. XX, 321.
56. XX, 321.
57. Eusebius reports that before the battle, in the presence of the whole army, Constantine had a vision of a shining cross in the sky with the words "In this sign thou shalt conquer." On the next night, in a dream, he was ordered to copy this sign on his banner. On the morrow these apparitions were explained to him by Christian priests, and a standard was made in accordance with the divine command (*De vita Constantini*, i, 28-30).
58. XX, 322.
59. XVI, 144-145. It is perhaps interesting to note that, unlike many modern critics,

The reports of miracles are suspect on several grounds, and the occurrence of miracles is emphatically rejected. Gibbon triumphantly concludes that the entire episode is a fraud, deliberately perpetrated by the emperor and the Christian party. Eusebius' circumstantial account is a "Christian fable" approved by Constantine and written down some twenty-six years after the event.[60] For proof Gibbon mentions the embarrassing fact that there is no mention of this remarkable episode in Eusebius' earlier work: "The silence of the same Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, is deeply felt by those advocates for the miracle who are not absolutely callous."[61] He drives home the point by arguing that "the advocates for the vision of Constantine are unable to produce a single testimony from the Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries." In their voluminous writings they repeatedly celebrate "the triumph of the church and of Constantine" and "these venerable men had not any dislike of a miracle."[62] And, finally, it would have been a simple matter to verify the truth of the episode by including the testimony of "so many living witnesses [Constantine's soldiers], who must have been spectators of this stupendous miracle." Such information about "the precise circumstances of time and place, which always serve to detect falsehood or establish truth" would have placed Eusebius' account beyond criticism.[63] Instead he preferred "a very singular testimony, that of the deceased Constantine, who, many years after the event, in the freedom of conversation, had related to him this extraordinary incident of his own life."[64] The only authority for the story is the emperor's solemn oath; and that cannot be verified.[65] The episode is a fraud, and "maintained an honourable place in the legend of superstition" till "the bold and sagacious spirit of criticism presumed to depreciate the triumph, and to arraign the truth of the first Christian emperor."[66]

Thus does Gibbon dissect the tradition of Constantine's conversion follow-

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Gibbon never suggests forgery in any of the documents relating to Constantine or his age. His usual method, evident here, is to accept or reject the sources solely on the basis of his extraordinary "feel" for Roman history, or his discernment of the character of the author in question. Although Gibbon could often characterize a document with great shrewdness he lacked the elaborate critical apparatus for explaining why he had selected one account over another.

60. XX, 323.

61. XX, 323, n.48.

62. XX, 324, n.52.

63. As a further critical dig at the defenders of Eusebius' marvellous account, Gibbon gleefully reports that "the pious Tillemont . . . rejects with a sigh the useful Acts of Artemius, a veteran and a martyr, who attests as an eye-witness the vision of Constantine" (XX, 324-325, n.50). Even an apologist and a fanatic cannot find evidence to support Eusebius' account.

64. XX, 324.

65. XX, 324.

66. XX, 324.

ing a miracle in 312. Not only has he removed the miraculous from history, but he has damaged the reputations of Lactantius and Eusebius, he has showed the hypocrisy of the emperor and thus re-enforced his reading of Constantine's character, and he has postponed the conversion till a later date. Gibbon now returns to his narrative. Having exploded the legend of a conversion in 312 it remains for Gibbon to explain when and why Constantine became a Christian.

Constantine was a superstitious man,[67] interested in mystery religions and intrigued by magic. In addition, the emperor was by temperament chaste and austere in his early years. Christianity, with its awful mysteries and its moral fervor, appealed to Constantine. As an added attraction, Christianity offered the promise of eternal salvation. But Gibbon is not satisfied to establish an inclination toward Christianity. He wants to prove that the conversion was a self-conscious, deliberate act, dictated by self-interest.

Gibbon's Constantine is neither a disillusioned skeptic nor a freethinker (the favorite explanations of the nineteenth century). He is, as one might expect, an eighteenth-century politician. Gibbon, in his function as creator, makes his characters after his own image. Constantine is endowed with reason, and the function of reason is to allow a man to calculate what is in his best interests. Like all men, Constantine is ruled by passions, but his reason makes him aware of these passions and enables him to control them, or at least to turn them to his advantage. Gibbon's Constantine was converted to Christianity only after weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the move. He desired the Empire, and he was willing to do whatever was necessary to secure it.

Constantine did not fall victim to religious enthusiasm brought on by a miracle. He fell victim to the insidious arts of Lactantius and Eusebius, his own inclinations toward mystery religions, and a series of political calculations which convinced him that a new religion would support his new dynasty and new state. Constantine was seduced, but as in all seductions he allowed himself to be seduced. Lactantius and Eusebius became the trusted advisers and friends of the emperor. They insinuated themselves into his confidence and poured into his ear Christian propaganda. Just as Gibbon himself had been seduced by the Catholic literature he read at Oxford, Constantine was seduced by his evil but shrewd advisers:

> Lactantius, who has adorned the precepts of the Gospel with the eloquence of Cicero, and Eusebius, who has consecrated the learning and philosophy of the Greeks to the service of religion, were both received into the friendship and familiarity of their sovereign; and those able ministers of controversy could

67. XX, 308-309.

patiently watch the soft and yielding moments of persuasion, and dextrously apply the arguments which were the best adapted to his character and understanding.[68]

An enlightened man need not be surprised "that the mind of an unlettered soldier should have yielded to the weight of evidence which, in a more enlightened age, has satisfied or subdued the reason of a Grotius, a Pascal, or a Locke."[69] It would have been superfluous to add, "and a Gibbon."

Constantine was ready, indeed anxious, to be seduced. He had calculated the numerous practical advantages of conversion. The Church was rich and powerful, and had drawn to itself much of the brains and energy of the Empire. The non-Christians were largely inert, like the nobility, or poor and uneducated. The intellectual vigor of the Christians is patent in the third century, especially in the second half. The emperors had, from Decius on, irregularly fought the new faith, and then gradually attached Christians to the government. Gibbon is careful to point out that although the Christians represented a distinct minority in the Empire, they were dedicated men who stood out from their degenerate contemporaries:

In the beginning of the fourth century the Christians still bore a very inadequate proportion of the inhabitants of the empire; but among a degenerate people, who viewed the change of masters with the indifference of slaves, the spirit and union of a religious party might assist the popular leader to whose service, from a principle of conscience, they had devoted their lives and fortunes.[70]

In a footnote he re-enforces his point:

In the beginning of the last century the Papists in England were only a *thirtieth,* and the Protestants of France only a *fifteenth,* part of the respective nations, to whom their spirit and power were a constant object of apprehension.[71]

Constantine was not unaware of these advantages, and as he came ever closer to the realization of his dreams, his attitudes toward Christianity underwent a change. Until 312, when the civil wars began, he had no need to change his religion. He himself was satisfied with a vague paganism and he tolerated Christianity. But with his fight against Maxentius and the exposure of his true character, a new religion became both appealing and useful:

Personal interest is often the standard of our belief, as well as of our practice; and the same motives of temporal advantage which might influence the public conduct and professions of Constantine would insensibly dispose his mind to embrace a religion so propitious to his fame and fortunes.[72]

68. XX, 326.
69. XX, 326.
70. XX, 316.
71. XX, 316, n.23.
72. XX, 325.

The emperor was flattered to consider himself the chosen representative of the Christian God, and his advisers did nothing to discourage this view. Whatever happened on the night before the battle of the Milvian Bridge — and it certainly was not a miracle — Constantine decided to fight as the representative of the Christian God against his pagan rival. This was the first tentative step. Victory under the banner of Christianity convinced Constantine that the new religion might be not only politically expedient, but potent as well:

> His vanity was gratified by the flattering assurance that *he* had been chosen by Heaven to reign over the earth; success had justified his divine title to the throne, and that title was founded on the truth of the Christian revelation.[73]

The political uses to which Christianity might be put presented no problem for Constantine. At least since Augustus' establishment of the Empire, and probably earlier, religion had been considered an integral part of state policy, and the emperor traditionally was the head of the state religion. As Gibbon delightfully puts it: "The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful." It was clear to Constantine that paganism was everywhere in decay, and "the cause of virtue derived very feeble support from the influence of the Pagan superstition."[74] Under these circumstances

> a prudent magistrate might observe with pleasure the progress of a religion, which diffused among the people a pure, benevolent, and universal system of ethics, adapted to every duty and every condition of life; recommended as the will and reason of the Supreme Deity, and enforced by the sanction of eternal rewards or punishments.[75]

Christianity proved irresistible to Constantine. His vanity was flattered, his political purposes were furthered, and he had no doubt that he could control Christianity. He was well aware "that the care of religion was the right as well as the duty of the civil magistrate"[76] and Gibbon's Constantine makes little distinction between paganism and Christianity. In fact, the control of the new religion might prove easier than the regulation of a moribund paganism. Christianity emphasized obedience:

> But the Christians, when they deprecated the wrath of Diocletian, or solicited the favour of Constantine, could allege, with truth and confidence, that they

73. XX, 325.
74. XX, 312.
75. XX, 312.
76. XX, 333.

held the principle of passive obedience, and that, in the space of three centuries, their conduct had always been conformable to their principles.[77]

The emperor's most important consideration at the end of the civil wars was peace, and his dynasty was new and lacked solid support. The principles of Christianity were admirably suited to his needs: "The throne of the emperors would be established on a firm and permanent basis, if all their subjects, embracing the Christian doctrine, should learn to suffer and obey."[78]

Gibbon has thus far made a very strong case, and his conclusion that Constantine "used the altars of the church as a convenient footstool to the throne of the empire"[79] — although he makes a half-hearted attempt to shrug off this sinister interpretation — follows logically from his argument. But he has not yet established the date of Constantine's conversion. If his reading of Constantine's character is correct and if the emperor's duplicity is to remain constant throughout his life, then Gibbon must place the conversion after 312. Constantine had no need to be converted before that date, and for Gibbon he had no need to be converted until he had secured the empire. Any intemperate move before 324 might jeopardize his career. In addition, Constantine's career after 324 is punctuated by bloody deeds and characterized by moral degeneracy. He is finally, in these last years of supreme power, revealed to history as a tyrant. His conversion to Christianity in the midst of his crimes and moral corruption gives to Gibbon's argument the touch of irony so far lacking.

Why, asks Gibbon, did Constantine receive baptism only on his deathbed? Because, he answers, he was not a religious enthusiast but a crafty politician and a man terrified about the fate of his soul. Despite the outraged cries of the Church Fathers, baptism just before death was common in the early Church: "by the delay of their baptism, they could venture freely to indulge their passions in the enjoyments of this world, while they still retained in their hands the means of a sure and easy absolution."[80] Imagine the appeal this expedient had for an emperor consumed by ambition and willing to pursue his goals "through the dark and bloody paths of war and policy." For Constantine baptism *in extremis* was more than an attraction: it was a necessity. After his victory over Licinius "he abandoned himself, without moderation, to the abuse of his fortune."[81] Success had removed the need for dissimulation and the emperor's true character stood nakedly exposed. In 326 he murdered his son, Crispus, and soon afterwards, his wife, Fausta: "he could no longer be ignorant that the church was possessed of an infallible

77. XX, 314.
78. XX, 314.
79. XX, 325.
80. XX, 329.
81. XX, 329.

remedy."[82] Constantine's Christianity was a rough-and-ready, pragmatic faith. Theological subtleties were wasted on his semi-literate mind: "The sublime theory of the gospel had made a much fainter impression on the heart than on the understanding of Constantine himself."[83] Whatever political advantages conversion to Christianity offered, the crimes and tyranny of his last years finally decided the issue. Constantine was baptized on his deathbed to "remove the temptation and the danger of a relapse" and in this act he declared to the public and to posterity the true and insidious nature of his conversion to Christianity.

Gibbon has no solid tradition for postponing Constantine's conversion.[84] There is some perplexity produced by the "discordant authorities" but it "is derived from the behaviour of Constantine himself."[85] But for Gibbon all perplexity vanishes once the character of Constantine is rightly understood. Once the emperor is seen as a man consumed by a lust for power and a "boundless ambition" his actions (including the date of his conversion) and his motives become transparent. Gibbon's reading of Constantine's character, outlined above, allows no other interpretation than a late, insincere conversion.

Modern commentators have seen the question of Constantine's conversion, or rather progressive Christianization, as more complex than Gibbon's subtle psychological view. Part of the reason for a differing interpretation of the emperor, and indeed of the whole fourth century, is an abundance of evidence unavailable to Gibbon. Gibbon worked, by inclination and often by necessity, largely from printed literary sources. Numismatics, and epigraphy, and archaeology, and art history were all in their infancy in the eighteenth century. The evidence from coins, for example, is both extensive and complicated for the age of Constantine. Gibbon was familiar with all the best numismatic scholarship of his day, but the materials then available were relatively meager.[86] And it is worth noting that those modern scholars who argue for a progressive Christianization culminating in Constantine's final baptism — Salvatorelli and Piganiol particularly — make extensive use of numismatic evidence. The fact that the *Sol Invictus,* a pagan but monotheistic cult-figure, continues to appear on Constantine's coinage long after

82. XX, 329.

83. XX, 329.

84. The pagan Zosimus places the conversion in Rome in 326 (*Hist.* II, xxix), and attributes it to the influence of an Egyptian who went from Spain to Rome subsequent to the murders of Crispus and Fausta. So obviously unacceptable is this legend that Gibbon does not deign to discuss its possibilities, let alone rest his case on so mediocre an authority.

85. XX, 307.

86. Even the most important numismatic work of the age, Joseph-Hilar Echkel's study of imperial coinage, was published in 1792-98, after Gibbon had completed the *Decline and Fall.*

312 is interpreted to mean that Constantine reached Christianity through a series of monotheistic, syncretic, pagan cults. Christianity thus becomes only the final resting place for this sun-worshipping emperor who sought a monotheistic religion for himself and his new state.

Lacking the extensive collections and sophisticated techniques for interpreting numismatic evidence, Gibbon relied upon his remarkably keen "feeling" for the Roman character, his psychological assumptions, and the larger concerns dictated by his moral vision of Roman civilization. He does not set a precise date for the conversion, but he rejects any date prior to 324. He favors 324-326, with a definitive public declaration coming on Constantine's deathbed. Around this time the pagan symbolism begins to disappear from the imperial coinage; this is the period of Constantine's famous circular letter[87] exhorting his subjects to "imitate, without delay, the example of their sovereign, and to embrace the divine truth of Christianity."[88] In 325 the emperor presided over the first ecumenical council; he proscribed the pagan gods in his new capital soon afterwards, and he secured Christian tutors for his sons. These facts, coupled with the political and personal reasons for Constantine's conversion, satisfy Gibbon, and he rests his case. He has achieved his purpose: he has reduced the conversion to political expediency aided by seduction and moral corruption; he has blackened the name of the first Christian emperor; and he has suggested that Constantine's crimes and political reforms, both of which hastened the fall of Rome, occurred *after* he was a Christian.

Here it is useful to make a few comments on Gibbon's methods. His treatment of the age of Constantine was selected as an example of how the historian created his distinctive view of Roman history, how he fused his materials into a brilliant indictment of Christianity, and how he saw Rome's fall in moral terms. Gibbon's ability to construct a complex and elaborate argument is obvious; but it must be born in mind that he achieved his magic without any distortion of the facts. There are remarkably few errors of fact in his account of the age of Constantine — or for that matter throughout the *Decline and Fall*.[89] Gibbon does not do violence to the evidence, but he so

87. The letter is given by Eusebius in a Greek translation in *De vita Constantini.*

88. XX, 315.

89. The most curious error is Gibbon's account of the Gothic War of 331 (XVIII, 230). Gibbon reports that in the first encounter with the enemy Constantine "had the mortification of seeing his troops fly before an inconsiderable detachment of the Barbarians, who pursued them to the edge of their fortified camp and obliged him to consult his safety by a precipitate and ignominious retreat." There exists absolutely no evidence for this alleged defeat. Bury gently reprimands Gibbon (note 44): "There seems to be no evidence for this defeat of Constantine. It is a curious error of Gibbon." Others are less charitable.

arranges it that the reader is led, almost imperceptibly, to grant the validity of his interpretation. The age of Constantine is a particularly good example of the "historian of the Roman empire" at work, for, as suggested earlier, Gibbon saw in Constantine's career a microcosm of Rome's fall. Thus does he characterize the age:

> The same timid policy, of dividing whatever is united, of reducing whatever is eminent, of dreading every active power, and expecting that the most feeble will prove the most obedient, seems to pervade the institutions of several princes, and particularly those of Constantine.[90]

This is essentially a moral view, and when Gibbon comes to deal specifically with the reasons for Rome's fall, he constantly reiterates that it was moral corruption, expressed in feebleness of purpose, lack of civic responsibility, other-worldliness, and rampant venality of officials, which destroyed Rome. And Constantine is one of the great creators of Rome's moral decadence. Gibbon never tires of pointing out that it was the work of a *Christian* emperor which hastened the fall of the empire: "The religion of Constantine achieved, in less than a century, the final conquest of the Roman empire; but the victors themselves were insensibly subdued by the arts of their vanquished rivals."[91] In the character of the emperor as well as in the history of the age can be seen the disgusting pattern of corruption and decline caused by Christianity: "As he [Constantine] gradually advanced in the knowledge of truth, he proportionably declined in the practice of virtue."[92]

This is the thesis Gibbon set out to prove. It appears that he began with his superb constructive vision of the Roman Empire as a civilization destroyed by "Christianity and barbarism," which in turn brought to birth the civilization of modern Europe. This is what Carlyle called the beautiful bridge Gibbon built joining the ancient and modern worlds. This vision he then articulated in the chapters of the *Decline and Fall.* His attitudes and assumptions, as has been said so many times, were those of the best minds of his age. Enlightenment philosophy determined what he wanted to say, or rather what was significant and hence worth saying. The philosophy of the age, which Gibbon embraced with few modifications, gave him the confidence and the technique to criticize the past, and thus interpret it for his contemporaries. From the historians of the previous century — the great ecclesiastical historians, the Bollandists, the Maurists, Tillemont, and Muratori — he took what his own age could not provide, an extraordinarily extensive and remarkably accurate collection of data. This erudition, when filtered through the selective sieve of Enlightenment philosophy, and expressed with

90. XVII, 189.
91. XVIII, 227.
92. XX, 329.

consummate art, is Gibbon's historical method.[93] This combination of Enlightenment, erudition, and art characterizes Gibbon's treatment of the age of Constantine, as it does the whole of the *Decline and Fall*. The narrative of the age of Constantine remains a *tour de force* of the historian's craft, and perhaps in no other section of the *Decline and Fall* is the superb technique and art of "the historian of the Roman empire" so generously displayed.

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93. The suggestion is A. Momigliano's in "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method," *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome, 1955), 195-211 (reprinted in *Studies in Historiography* [London, 1966], 40-55).