


EDWARD GIBBON'S *THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE* AND THE BYZANTINE STUDIES

 Hıdır Nezih BAMYACI*

ABSTRACT

Edward Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire is an iconic book which inspired many works in various disciplines like the fields of cinema and literature besides of being considered one of the masterpieces in the field of history writing. Gibbon also had a great impact on the field of Byzantine studies by negative image of Byzantine Empire that he portrayed in his book, and by many scholars he is named among those who are mainly responsible for nearly a century-long apathy towards Byzantine history. In this study, the negative impact of Gibbon's work on the field of Byzantine studies will be mentioned in detail, an effort will be made to reveal the framework of the author's negative view about Byzantine Empire by the medium of original text of the book, and the factors that shaped this negative view, the Enlightenment thought being in the first place, will be discussed.

Key Words: Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Byzantine studies, historiography, Enlightenment Age

Edward Gibbon'un *Roma İmparatorluğu'nun Gerileyişi ve Çöküşü Eseri ve Bizans Çalışmaları*

ÖZET

Edward Gibbon'un Roma İmparatorluğunun Gerileyişi ve Çöküşü adlı eseri tarih yazımı alanının başyapıtlarından biri olarak kabul edilmenin yanı sıra edebiyattan sinemaya pek çok alanda verilen eserlere de ilham kaynağı olmuş ikonik bir çalışmadır. Gibbon, eserinde Bizans İmparatorluğu ile alakalı çizmiş olduğu negatif portre ile Bizans çalışmaları alanı üzerinde de büyük bir etkide bulunmuş ve pek çok araştırmacı tarafından Bizans tarihine karşı neredeyse bir asır boyunca duyulan ilgisizliğin baş sorumlularından biri olarak gösterilmiştir. Bu çalışmada Gibbon'un eserinin Bizans çalışmaları alanı üzerinde bıraktığı olumsuz etkiye detaylı olarak değinilecek, eserin özgün metninden faydalanılarak yazarın Bizans İmparatorluğu ile alakalı olumsuz bakışının ana hatları ortaya koyulmaya çalışılacak ve başta Aydınlanma Çağı düşüncesi olmak üzere bu olumsuz bakışı şekillendiren faktörler ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edward Gibbon, *Roma İmparatorluğu'nun Gerileyişi ve Çöküşü*, Bizans çalışmaları, tarih yazımı, Aydınlanma Çağı

* Res. Assist., Bursa Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Science Department of History, Bursa / TÜRKİYE, nbamyaci@uludag.edu.tr

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Cite as / Atıf: Bamyacı, H. N. (2023). Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire* and The Byzantine studies. *Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences*, 24(44), 97-108. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21550/sosbilder.1123231>

Sending Date / Gönderim Tarihi: 30 May / Mayıs 2022

Acceptance Date / Kabul Tarihi: 24 August / Ağustos 2022

Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi
Uludağ University Faculty of Arts and Sciences Journal of Social Sciences
Cilt: 24 Sayı: 44 / Volume: 24 Issue: 44

Introduction

In addition to being one of the most important and most influential history books of all times, Edward Gibbon's (1737-1794) *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*¹ also had a great impact reaching far beyond the field of history and inspired many important works of art in the field of popular culture like Isaac Asimov's classic science fiction book series *Foundation* and Golden Globe winner and Academy Award nominee *The Fall of The Roman Empire*, directed by Anthony Mann in 1964. Name of Edward Gibbon and his major work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* are also quite familiar figures for any reader acquainted with Byzantine history. Most of the major works of the discipline of Byzantine history, especially ones written before nineteen-eighties, include at least a few passages in their introduction parts mentioning negative conception of Byzantine civilization created by the Enlightenment thinkers and especially by the work of Edward Gibbon, then the authors try to propose new perspectives which can be useful to rehabilitate the discipline from backwardness caused from the impact of Gibbon's work (Harris, 2005: 1). Aim of this study is to provide a general survey of the Byzantine historiography and, locating Gibbon in a historiographical framework, to contextualize and analyze nature and component of his antagonism with the Later Roman Empire which "killed Byzantine studies for nearly a century" (Kelly, 1997: 39). The first part, starting with a brief survey of emergence and development of the Byzantine studies until Gibbon's time, i.e. the age of Enlightenment, will continue with a summary of components belonging to the Enlightenment conception of Byzantium and personal tendencies and experiences which shaped Gibbon's idea of the Later Roman Empire. In later parts, basing on the original text of the book, Gibbon's view of the Later Roman Empire will be further examined under two main titles of Gibbon's Byzantium as an eastern-style despotism and as a Christian theocracy. The work will be concluded by providing a humble survey of some major works written in the second half of the twentieth century and trying to answer the questions of how Gibbon's perspective challenged by the later historians and what is the position of contemporary scholarship towards Gibbon's work, which is interestingly being criticized since its publication date until today, but also still being mentioned, venerated, and referred.

Byzantine Studies Until the End of the Enlightenment

The first author who appreciated Byzantine history for its own sake and generally accepted as the founding father of the discipline of the Byzantine studies is Hieronymus Wolf (1516-1580) who published *Chronicle of John Zonaras*, *History of Niketas Choniates*, and parts of Nikephorus Gregoras' *History*. By endeavours of humanists of the age whose interest in Byzantine civilization was stimulated by political and ecclesiastical interests like problem of struggle against the Ottoman Turks, the movement of union among the Catholics, and Protestant sympathy to anti-papal Byzantium, the Byzantine studies flourished further in Europe after Wolf. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the rise of important Byzantinists like German scholars Wilhelm Holzman, David Hoeschel and Johannes Leunclavius, French Jesuit Denis Petavius, Dutch scholars B. Vulkanius and Johannes Meursius, and Italian and Greek scholars like Nikolaus Alemannus and Leo Allatius (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 2).

In the mid-seventeenth century, France took the leading role in the Byzantine studies. Under patronage of Louis XIV, printing house of the Louvre began to publish a series of Byzantine historians' works and the first of a complete edition of Byzantine historical sources was also produced, which was going to be edited and reprinted under the names of *Venice Corpus* and *Bonn Corpus* (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 2-4).

¹ Originally published between 1776-1788 in six volumes.

In the eighteenth century the Byzantine studies which enjoyed two centuries of smooth development faced a major set back by the rise of the Enlightenment movement which undoubtedly had remarkable effects on Gibbon's perception of Byzantine civilization. The Enlightenment thinkers, because of their rationalism, admiration of reason, philosophical outlook, and religious scepticism, were tended to disgrace the whole medieval period. For the image of Byzantine civilization was generally symbolized with conservatism and religiosity, Byzantium was further subjected to criticisms of the Enlightenment as a darker part of the dark ages (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 4-5). According to the Enlightenment thinkers, Byzantine society was a society with no developments of its own, but remained fossilized and unchanging in a world which was destined to change, progress, and reach the Renaissance and the age of reason. According to the Enlightenment mind, as a civilization lacking two important dynamics like change and progress, Byzantines had no contribution to the world, and history of Near East and Europe were totally separate and free of any Byzantine influence (Browning, 1992: xi). As an outcome of this perspective, the Enlightenment thinkers' descriptions of Byzantine civilization were generally full of negative judgements. For instance, according to Voltaire, Byzantine history is "a worthless collection of orations and miracles". Another important figure of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu, names Byzantine period as "only a tragic epilogue to the glory of Rome" and "a tissue of rebellions, insurrections, and treachery" in his *The Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans* (Browning, 1992: xi). For Charles Lebeau, as he describes in his *Histoire du Bas Empire*, Byzantine history was "a thousand years of decline of the Roman Empire". Naturally, Gibbon's ideas were not free from world view and values of the thinkers who dominated the age's rationale. In accordance with the perception of the major figures of the Enlightenment, Gibbon describes Byzantine history as "the triumph of barbarism and religion" (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 5).

Beside the intellectual atmosphere, developments in political and religious spheres also shaped the Enlightenment thinkers' view of Byzantium, including Gibbon. Charles Lebeau's narration about the qualities of Byzantine emperors in which he employs negative terms frequently also reflects the political tension just before the French Revolution and, in fact, is a reaction against the French absolutism (Kazhdan & Constable, 1982: 10). Additionally, revolutionary spirit of France's ideology analyzing religion by an anticlerical and secular approach and sustaining a Protestant suspicion towards mystery and priesthood also nourished pejorative sentiment of the Enlightenment thinkers regarding Byzantium (Young, 2000: 850). In England, another centre of the Enlightenment, the political atmosphere of the age also contributed Byzantine dislike as well. According to David P. Jordan, for the Whigs of the eighteenth century England, including Gibbon, the Romans were honorary Englishmen, the senate was a kind of an embryo parliament, and Roman culture was an earlier form of Augustan humanism. Thus, in his study Gibbon assumed a position judging all the Byzantine emperors, starting from Constantine I, for the crimes they committed against the empire of those honorary Englishmen by introducing effeminacy, superstition, religiosity, corruption, and degeneracy into the Roman world (Jordan, 1969: 76).

In addition to sharing the same values and living in the same era, scholars dealing with the relationship between Gibbon and the Enlightenment thinkers also mention direct effects of some major figures of the Enlightenment era on Gibbon. For example, Gibbon sends his draft of *History of Switzerland* to David Hume, whom he names as "the great David Hume, that truly great man", demanding that he must burn the draft if it does not meet his approval. In another letter of him, Gibbon also describes Hume as "an oracle to be obeyed with rational devotion" and states that imitating Hume is a delight for him (Wootton, 1994: 82). Furthermore, P.R. Ghosh, another important scholar focusing on history writing of Gibbon, draws attention to

Rousseau's effect on Gibbon's perspective. Luxury is one of the major components that constitute Gibbon's criticism of Byzantine civilization and he claims that luxury is morally vicious, and greed towards luxury causes social injustice and collapse. According to Ghosh, Gibbon's perspective of luxury is epitomized from Rousseau's work of *Discourse on Inequality* and Gibbon puts Rousseau's ideas in to his narration directly (Ghosh, 1991: 137). Other celebrated figures of the Enlightenment were also frequently referred by Gibbon. According to the statistics presented by Machin's study, Montesquieu, whom Gibbon admires greatly for his study and references of Roman history, is referred in fifty-one occasions in Gibbon's work. Voltaire, who influenced philosophy, history writing, and ironic discourse of Gibbon, follows Montesquieu being referred forty-one times in *the Decline and Fall* (Machin, 1939: 86).

Although, while writing his major work Gibbon was heavily influenced by perspective, values, and political concerns of his age, there are also some major differences making Gibbon peculiar among the Enlightenment historians. Unlike the Enlightenment intellectuals like Voltaire or Montesquieu he does not try to discover the universal laws which determined the fate of societies, or does not argue inevitable cycle of imperial powers deciding who will rise or fall. Rather, Gibbon's aim was to reach the account of order of historical events which occurred as an outcome of complex inter-relationships of individuals and institutions which are, according to his mind, decisive for fate of a society (Kelly, 1997: 41). For his historical causation was based on internal factors, according to his mind the origin of the Roman decay too was unquestionably internal (Ghosh, 1991: 148). Gibbon thinks that the Roman Empire reached its ideal form in the period of late republic, in which the civilization reached a perfect equilibrium among its institutions by its geographical domination, democratic rule, militarist outlook, and religious scepticism. In the late empire the equilibrium spoiled by replacement of domination with submergence, democracy with despotism, militarism with pacifism, and scepticism with superstition (Gruman, 1960: 82-85). According to Gibbon, after these internal developments, even a total annihilation of all the barbarian conquerors threatening the empire externally would not rescue the empire from a total destruction (Ghosh, 1991: 148). As it is mentioned before, all the components of this process which, according to Gibbon's idea, led the empire to collapse and constituted his negative picture of Byzantine civilization can be examined under two main titles.

Gibbon's Byzantium as an Eastern-Style Despotism

Abovementioned transformation which, according to Gibbon, led the empire to decline starts to infect the Roman Empire under reigns of Diocletian (r. 284-305) and Constantine I (r. 324-337) who are with almost no exception accepted as founding fathers of the Byzantine Empire by the scholars. Four processes which orientalised Rome and turned the empire into a despotic rule can be extracted from narration of Gibbon. These are political and administrative corruption, change in human manners, intellectual decline, and ceasing of military virtues among the Romans. Political and administrative corruption begins with Constantine I, when he "divided whatever is united", in other words, when he split institutions of the Roman state into smaller units for the purpose of making them more obedient (Gibbon, 1940a: 540). Under conditions of "civil and religious slavery" human manners of the Romans were altered and they ceased to favour honour and independence over their mere survival (Gibbon, 1940a: 381, 514). Suppression of the tyrants resulted with a visible decline in all fields of intellectual activity which manifested in absence of great masters in any discipline of study and lack of creativity in architecture, painting, sculpture, poetry and history (Gibbon, 1940a: 339-340). Lastly, replacement of the republic's dutiful citizen army with barbarian military units and "effeminate troops of Asia" extinguished military virtues of the Romans (Gibbon, 1940a: 541, 580, 953)

For Gibbon who admired republican era as the golden age of Rome, despotism starts growing just after this period. Augustus (r. 27 B.C.- 14 A.D.) who disfigured democratic forms is the first ring of the chain of despotism. Then, Septimus Severus (r. 193-211) who disdained the democratic government and disturbed the administration by giving praetorian prefects supreme authority over the city moves the process forward. By Diocletian, who nourished the despotism even more by introducing the Asiatic pomp and heavy taxation to support it, the last ring is added to the chain which was to drive the empire to the inevitable destruction (Baker, 1980: 35). Although reign of Augustus' is a period in which growth of despotism is accelerated in Rome for Gibbon, he believes that rulers of this era were still subjected to laws "sanctified" by the senate. However, under the rule of Diocletian "the great council of nation" was replaced by ministers of emperors and the people lost all their touch with the control of legislative and executive powers of the emperors becoming slaves who were desperately subjected to will of their "Dominus" (Gibbon, 1940a: 329-330). While Diocletian was practically severing all ties of the senate and the People with political power, he also destroyed the symbolic language of equality by introducing "stately magnificence of the Persian court" to Rome. As evidence for this claim Gibbon mentions replacement of humble purple imperial robe with eastern fashion diadems, ornaments, gems, and silk and golden clothes (Gibbon, 1940a: 331). According to Gibbon, as the ancient dignities like consuls who were supposed to represent will of people distanced from the actual power, they started to focus on enjoying their privileges for their duties are now reduced in number as their authority decreased. By these changes in administration, the process of putting the Romans under the yoke of servitude was completed (Gibbon, 1940a: 525).

The reign of Constantine I was a period in which thing were getting only worse for Gibbon's mind. The Roman administration further corrupted by "fall of the law", which was a "noble art had once preserved as the sacred inheritance of the patricians", "in hands of freed men and plebeians" who were "cunning rather than skilled and exercised a sordid and pernicious trade" (Gibbon, 1940a: 536). Furthermore, Constantine I damages the purity of administration even more by giving legal sanction to the ecclesiastical order, and bestowing honours of consulship on the "barbarians" (Gibbon, 1940a: 538-543).

Following just after the reign of Constantine I, another factor completing picture of Byzantium as an eastern-style despotism in Gibbon's mind appears in the Roman world, and this is participation of eunuchs who were "abhorred as monstrous retinue of an Egyptian Queen" and "unhappy beings, production of oriental jealousy and despotism" to familial life of the emperors and administration of state and military as "masters of arts of flattery and intrigue" (Gibbon, 1940a: 598-599).

According to Gibbon, in addition to the merits inflicted on administration of the empire by aforementioned transformation into an eastern-style despotism, human values of the Roman people were also infected from it. The Asiatic pomp and pride adopted by Diocletian add an air of softness and effeminacy in personality of Constantine I and under reigns of him and his successors Roman virtues like simplicity modesty, freedom, and living an honourable and independent life replaced with eastern vanity as Roman people lived under despotic rulers who practiced their power arbitrarily being surrounded with "titled slaves" and glorified by solemn ceremonies like a divinity (Gibbon, 1940a: 341, 381, 521-522, 562).

Under eastern-style Byzantine despotism, which "had proved very unfavourable to genius and even to learning", intellectual productivity and artistic capacity of the Roman Empire were also weakened severely in the eyes of Gibbon (Gibbon, 1940a: 339). State of painting and sculpture is in decay, architecture is "directed by a few general and even mechanic

rules”, in faculties of law and physics no celebrated masters appear, “the voice of poetry is silent”, and “history is reduced to a dry and confused abridgments”. Arts, losing their liberal spirit survive only in the pay service of the emperors “who encouraged not any art except those which contributed to the gratification of their pride or defence of their power” (Gibbon, 1940a: 339-340). The triumphal arch of Constantine I, which still stands as a representative of this age’s art, is a “melancholic” proof for the decline in the arts and “a singular testimony of the meanest vanity” according to Gibbon. This monument, which was originally erected in the honour of emperor Trajan, was converted by some later changes to a monument dedicated to the victory of Constantine I. And this conversion is an evidence for Gibbon proving absence of any sculpture in the empire who might be capable of adorning a public monument (Gibbon, 1940a: 366).

Gibbon, who as a great admirer of military virtues does not hesitate to note in his journal that “the captain of the Hampshire grenadiers has not been useless to the historian of the Roman empire” although he was recruited in reserve units and has not been in the battle field for even a second during his three and a half years of military service (Oliver, 1971: 260), attributes a vital importance to the republican Roman military system of citizen army for the balance of military and civilian powers in the empire (Gruman, 1960: 81). Thus, changes in the military structure military of the Later Roman Empire are conceived by Gibbon as a process in which the Roman army got corrupted, barbarized, and orientalised, and the Roman people got pacified and lost their military virtues as long as they got alienated from the military ranks. According to Gibbon, introducing a new military formation Constantine I starts the destruction process of the Roman army by dividing forces in to two main groups as palace troops and border troops. After this division, Gibbon claims, being a paid army and getting privileged over the rest of the imperial troops soldiers of the palace army started to enjoy vices of civil life spending their time in luxuries of baths and theatres for they were called to duty only in case of emergencies. This corruption results with transformation of the Roman forces in to an Asiatic monarch’s army as they lost their simplicity which was the distinguishing element of the Roman military forces in the ages of freedom and glory (Gibbon, 1940a: 538-540). The situation of the empire which was now depending on “effeminate troops of Asia” (Gibbon, 1940a: 580) gets more and more fatal as “degenerate” successors of Theodosius I (r.379-395) cease to appear in person at the lead of their armies (Gibbon, 1940a: 645) and “doubtful swords of Barbarians” who were integrated to the empire as *Foederati*, i.e., military allies, get more and more important for the defence of the empire (Gibbon, 1940a: 953). The ultimate result for Gibbon is “extinguishment of the military flame in the minds of the Romans” (Gibbon, 1940a: 953) who were once proudly assuming military duty as free citizens of the republic, but now are “timid and luxurious inhabitants of a declining empire” with no enthusiasm regarding military deeds unless they have hopes for profit or threatened by punishments (Gibbon, 1940a: 541). According to Gibbon, after these transformations the Roman administration starts to apply “weak and wicked maxims” to sustain its mere existence by organizing banquets “prepared with all the pomp and sensuality of the East” and eliminating its opponents in these occasions with intrigues and political assassinations which are “violating laws of nations and sacred rights of hospitality inhumanly” (Gibbon, 1940a: 890).

Gibbon’s Byzantium as a Christian Theocracy

Gibbon’s account of spread and practice of Christianity in the Later Roman Empire made him subject of severe criticism from his contemporaries who accused him of inaccuracy, disloyalty, dishonesty, carelessness, heterodoxy, bias, irrationality, or hyper-rationality (Noonkester, 1990: 409). Gibbon’s antagonism toward Christianity in the Later Roman Empire and even resulted with appearance of new censored editions of his book, from which passages

containing “irreligious and immoral tendencies” omitted in order to make the book appropriate for use of “families and young persons” (Kelly, 1997: 46), although Gibbon’s account of Christianity actually offers no more than a survey of the eighteenth century arguments against religion (Wootton, 1994: 99). All the components of Gibbon’s conflict with Christianity can be grouped under two main titles. Reaction to rise of rise of irrational thinking and superstition, and protestant discourse against institutionalized church and its tradition.

Gibbon describes the ancient world’s religious attitude as a state of harmony and toleration which made it possible that “Romans and Barbarians adored the same visible or invisible powers of the universe” and “even the most different and even hostile nations embraced or at least respected each other’s’ superstitions” (Gibbon, 1940a: 383). However, by its “narrow and unsocial spirit” deriving from Jewish religion, Christianity injects into this system of “love and harmony” notions unknown to the ancient world like “rigid sentiments” and a “spirit of bitterness” (Gibbon, 1940a: 383, 406). According to Gibbon, by the fear of committing to any sin, the Roman people started to avoid any kind of entertainment, left circuses and theatres, and even abandoned the friendships under the influence of Christianity (Gibbon, 1940a: 396). Furthermore, the Christians who were turned into “unfeeling candidates for heaven” by being injected with the same zeal and fear, isolated themselves from joys of any kind of taste, smell, profane harmony of sounds, and “the most finished products of human art” (Gibbon, 1940a: 413). Gibbon also claims that in addition to this decay in arts, Christianity also destroyed the philosophy by condemning teachings of “the wisest and most virtuous of pagans” on account of their “ignorance or disbelief of the divine truth” (Gibbon, 1940a: 406). As one may notice, Gibbon’s criticism is directed to social and intellectual implications of the rise and practice of Christianity, and it does not contain any judgement condemning matters of the Christian religion or show any sympathy directly related to religious doctrines of paganism. The same way of thinking can also be observed in Gibbon’s narration about Julian (r. 361-363) who was the first and the only pagan emperor of the Byzantine Empire, and credited by Gibbon the most among the all Byzantine emperors. Gibbon’s sympathy with Julian has nothing to do with the emperor’s fate in pagan belief. The actual reason that makes Julian the most beloved emperor of Gibbon is his perception of Julian as the all ancient wisdom and virtues incarnate in a single person. Julian is praised as a ruler in a “humane and philosophical temper” and whose ruling principles are directed to bring peace and happiness to his people (Gibbon, 1940a: 631-632).

Rest of Gibbon’s critiques about Christianity of the Later Roman Empire show an obvious parallelism with basic arguments of Protestant doctrine. He admires the early Christians and claims that the corruption was derived from the later development of the church (Gibbon, 1940a: 417, 441, 424). He dislikes institutionalized hierarchal church on account of separation between layman and clergy (Gibbon, 1940a: 657-658). He is biased against monastic life and condemns veneration of personal cults, saints, and relics (Gibbon, 1940b: 66). Gibbon’s criticism is severe about violation of secular life by the monarchs who takes advantage of institutionalized ecclesiastical order’s support and these views indicate influence of the Protestant point of view on Gibbon’s understanding of correct form of religion which according to his mind should not attempt to abolish unalienable rights of human nature (Gibbon, 1940a: 640-641).

When Gibbon mentions about the early Christians, he generally speaks positively and respectfully. He describes them as a group of people with an “admirable fervour” and he claims that they have virtues similar to virtues of the first Romans (Gibbon, 1940a: 414, 474). However, beliefs of the first Christians lose their “native purity” in the course of the following centuries and come into contact with “error and corruption” (Gibbon, 1940a: 382-383). By the

end of the third century, particularly under reign of Diocletian the church starts to lose its internal purity as well (Gibbon, 1940a: 441). The church is now “in hands less pure than those of the apostles” and new members of the church who replaced former Christians, for whom business and pleasures of the world were meaningless, were eager to get their share of executive and arbitrary power and large properties hold by the church. This process, according to Gibbon, concludes with expansion of Episcopal authority “over this and over another world”, and as members of this hierarchy get both spiritually and economically more powerful, distinction of laity and clergy emerged which had been unknown to Greeks and Romans (Gibbon, 1940a: 417-424).

Gibbon believes that the church got even more corrupted by emergence of monks and foundation of monastic orders. He considers the monks as hypocritical traders pretending as the only instrument of charity and promoting themselves as the steward of the poor on the one hand, and consuming wealth of the nation by receiving lavish alms and recommending expensive visits to the holy places on the other (Gibbon, 1940a: 865).

“Pure and perfect simplicity of the Christian model” had also been corrupted “in the long period of twelve hundred years which elapsed between reign of Constantine I and the Reformation of Luther” by introduction of worship of saints and relics which Gibbon considers as a popular mythology intended to restore the reign of polytheism (Gibbon, 1940b: 66-69).

Lastly, Gibbon exposes his reaction to violation of secular rule by monarchs who benefit from their control over the ecclesiastical organ and its support. His criticism is explicit especially in his narration on Constantine I who, according to Gibbon, provided future tyrants with a universal model of abusing religion and undermining the foundations of moral virtue (Gibbon, 1940a: 654). Gibbon claims that Constantine I converted to Christianity for purely political reasons and his real intention was to arm himself with an ecclesiastical sword assuming the role of the protector of Christianity (Gibbon, 1940a: 650). So, he and his successors assumed leadership in ecclesiastical matters of Christianity as secular arm of the church and took economic and political advantages by confiscating private properties on account of paganism or heresy and expand the borders of the empire relying on the religious connections (Gibbon, 1940a: 547, 887).

Although Gibbon’s faith was described by scholars in various ways as an atheist, a deist, or a detached Christian and his conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism and his re-conversion to Protestantism blurred the picture of his religious attitude, it is difficult to place him among atheists and extreme sceptics who may question validity of Christian doctrine (Young, 2000: 179). Gibbon’s narration on Byzantine Christianity is actually a reflection of a man of the Enlightenment’s grief causing from decay of philosophic rationalism. For all Anglo-French Enlightenment men, decay of philosophic rationalism also meant fall of the ancient politics that they imagined as their place of origin. His criticism of Byzantine Christianity can also be taken as a reaction of a critical post-Reformation era Christian against corruption of religion by institutionalized church and temporal interests of former monarchs (Pocock, 1977: 289).

Conclusion

After later phase of the Enlightenment, in the nineteenth century, by the influence of historians like Leopold von Ranke and Theodor Mommsen who dispelled the legend of a thousand years of decline, the Byzantine studies rapidly flourished in leading countries of Europe. Works of Karl Krumbacher (1856-1909) in Germany, V. G. Vasiljevski (1838-1899) in Russia, and J B. Bury (1861-1927) in England stimulated the Byzantine studies.

Beginning of the twentieth century witnessed development of the discipline in Balkan countries like Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania most of which considered Byzantine history as a part of their own national past. From the end of the World War II to the present day, by an increasing number of academic journals and particular contributions from people and countries which had special links with the Byzantine Empire such as Italians, Persians, Arabs, Turks, and South Slavs the discipline achieved to base itself on a firm ground enriched by a considerable number of research centres and numerous periodicals totally devoted to the Byzantine studies or other journals adding more and more topics related to Byzantium in to their scope (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 6-21).

If one revisits major critiques of Gibbon related to Byzantium with a comparative approach under the light of contemporary scholarship in order to see what are the main shifts in the perspectives of scholar dealing with the Later Roman Empire, may come to the conclusion that the actual changes derive from a developing awareness of the scholars about the plurality of the truth provided by the sources and a growing emphasize on the changes the Byzantine civilization had been through in the course of its one millennium long history. For example, while Gibbon was constructing his narration about time and deeds of Constantine I, he totally relies on account of Zozimus, who was a pagan and naturally critical toward the Christians' champion Constantine I and he does not give any room for accounts of other contemporaries of Constantine I like Eusebius who would offer a more credible picture of the emperor (Jordan, 1969: 76-77). Similarly, while he was describing conversion of Constantine I as an act of political opportunism, he actually picks up the narration he likes. Contemporary scholarship, on the other hand, is tended to give a full account of possible explanations about the conversion provided by a variety of sources (Jones, 1948: 79-102; Bleckmann, 2006: 14-29). Gibbon's narration about Christian intolerance towards pagans also bears such a defect. Although it is true that pagans were put through some certain persecutions in the fourth century, there are also accounts narrating that in the same century pagan temples survived in most of the major cities of the empire and these were visited not only by pagans but also by the Christians (Brown, 1971: 103). Gibbon's image of Byzantine emperors as absolute rulers providing a universal model to all monarchs, is also challenged by contemporary scholarship on the bases of absence of any constitutional security for reign of any ruler in Byzantium and openness of the Byzantine throne to everyone regardless of noble birth, wealth, or personal background, which limited the rulers' freedom of arbitrary act for they were obliged to sustain a continuous consent of clergy, people, and army to secure their position (Kazhdan & Constable, 1982: 144-145).

Some of the characteristics Gibbon attributed to Byzantium like active participation of eunuchs to politics, apathy toward the classical culture, decay of military virtues, leadership of emperors in ecclesiastical affairs, and low level of socialization, causing from religious fear and collapse of public life, can be considered as valid considerations only to a certain degree. Gibbon fails to notice changes in these characteristics in the course of Byzantine history. Eunuchs, for example, after holding some certain power until the eleventh and twelfth centuries, were totally excluded from power (Kazhdan & Epstein, 1985: 67-70). It is also correct that intellectual activities related to the ancient classics and higher education based on models of ancient culture almost came to an end during some periods of Byzantine history, after the crisis caused by the first Islamic conquest in particular. However, the eighth and ninth centuries witness re-emergence of an effort in Byzantium to study, preserve and reproduce the Greek classics (Mango, 2002: 214-217). Moreover, after the eleventh and twelfth centuries the interest in classics goes further and Byzantines start to investigate the classics with a critical eye, and they even adopt the inheritance of the ancient culture as their own starting to call themselves

Greeks, a term they formerly despised as a synonym for a pagan or an idolater (Kazhdan & Epstein, 1985: 133-166). Military virtues, for which Gibbon claims that Byzantines always had a distaste, also get popular and credible in Byzantine culture in the same period of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As military aristocracy becomes more and more important for political life of the empire in these centuries, their values also get culturally predominant. As a result, military virtues and symbols find more room in visual and literary arts of the period, and even western style chivalric tournaments become a favourite spectacle of Byzantine court culture (Kazhdan & Epstein, 1985: 15, 18-19). Control of Byzantine emperors over the church, a notion termed as *Caesaropapism*, is also an aspect of the Byzantine Empire which was weakened after the sixth century (Geanakoplos, 1966a: 55-84). Especially after the iconoclastic controversies (730-787, 814-842), as a result of which Byzantine emperors learned that they "could not permanently force upon their people a theology that the people disliked" notion of *Caesaropapism* almost totally disappears (Runciman, 1979: 76). Some scholars of Byzantine ecclesiastical history draw attention to the fact that between the eight and eleventh centuries the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical authorities follows quite a different path, and some patriarchs even claim that their authority is greater than the emperors', because while the priests have authority over immortal souls of the believers, the rulers only have authority over their temporal and corruptible bodies (Dagron, 2003: 223-248). Lastly, it can be said that compared to public life of the ancient Roman and Greek societies, Byzantine society sustained rather an unsocial life limited to nuclear family for a significant period of time being afraid of the evil embedded in social interactions as Gibbon thought. However, this also changes by the thirteenth century and Byzantines society starts to adopt a new, social, and rather worldly pattern of behaviour (Kazhdan & Constable, 1982: 26-27).

After all, in spite of all the defects deriving from the perspective of Gibbon, his *Decline and Fall* is still a respected and frequently referred work in the field of Byzantine studies. Especially Gibbon's intense concern for factual truth and precise chronology makes his work a great encyclopaedic source offering to readers a gigantic bulk of information about Byzantine history, even the perspective it offers is no more accepted as valid (Ghosh, 1991: 132). Furthermore, his account of Byzantine history, despite all his biases, is welcomed as a pioneering work which filled a gap in the eighteenth century historiography caused from absence of any theologian well equipped in history writing and of any historians having enough qualities in theology (Young, 2000: 195). Gibbon's work as a genuine ecclesiastical history also outlives the eighteenth century and it is still considered as a valuable account of religious developments in Byzantium (Ostrogorsky, 1969: 5). For these qualities mentioned above Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, though it has always been problematic since its publication, is still ranked among masterpieces of history writing and its author is still being named among the greatest Byzantinists by contemporary scholars (Geanakoplos, 1966b: 170; Treadgold, 1997, xvii).

As mentioned above, many aspects of Gibbon's image of Byzantium were challenged and still continue being so by many contemporary researchers. His judgemental and incriminating attitude toward some historical figures like Constantine I or his too obvious sympathy towards some other figures like Emperor Julian can be considered as a violation of scholarly neutrality by standards of today. His attribution of derogatory meanings to terms like effeminacy, Oriental, or Asiatic can be disturbing or even shocking with regard to contemporary concerns of political correctness. However, all these qualities which can be considered as shortcomings at first sight can also be taken as invaluable materials for history of history writing that reveal how political, religious or even personal affiliations have been shaping approaches and methods of historians throughout centuries in many fields of studies including Roman and Byzantine.

When it is taken into consideration that how Britain was actually peripheral for the ancient Roman world, Gibbon's deep self-identification with the Romans as an Englishman and his strong distaste of anything Byzantine, i.e. anti-Roman, provide an explicit demonstration of how Roman identity is deeply rooted in European culture and why Byzantine history was neglected for too long as its antithesis.

Despite all the problematic aspects of it, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is still read, enjoyed, republished and reargued thanks to its informative value, its grandeur, and mastery of its author. It is also still so popular for it meets a need shared by both scholars and general readers. The need it meets is the need for authoritative and comprehensive narratives that are lately considered as old-fashioned, outdated, and overshadowed by popularity of micro history, analytical studies, or collective books consisting of chapters written by authors specialized in a single field of study. The narratives provide the reader with a materialized picture of events and personas. The picture provided by them may not necessarily be correct or complete, yet it can meet the need for a base on which many alterations, additions and corrections can be made via more advanced and specialized studies. In the field of Byzantine studies, whether it be for educational or scholarly purposes, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is still one of the best options to meet the need for a comprehensive narrative, a need otherwise to be met by no other means better than items of popular culture such as movies, TV series, documentaries or historical fictions.

Information Note

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

References

- Baker, S. (1979-1980). Evil, primitivism, and progress in Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall'. *Modern Language Studies*, 10(1), 32-42.
- Bleckmann, B. (2006). Sources for the history of Constantine. In N. Lenski (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to The Age of Constantine* (pp. 14-32), Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P. (1971). *The world of late antiquity*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovic Inc.
- Browning, R. (1992). *The Byzantine Empire*. The Catholic University of America Press.
- Dagron, G. (2003). *Emperor and priest: The imperial office in Byzantium*. Cambridge University Press.
- Geanakoplos, D. J. (1966a). *Byzantine east and Latin west: Two worlds of Christendom in middle ages and Renaissance*. Blackwell.
- Geanakoplos, D. J. (1966b). Edward Gibbon and Byzantine ecclesiastical history. *Church History*, 35(2), 170-185.
- Ghosh, P. R. (1991). Gibbon observed. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, (81), 132-156.
- Gibbon, E. (1940). *The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*. 1-2, The Modern Library.
- Gruman, G. J. (1960). 'Balance' and 'excess' as Gibbon's explanation of the decline and fall. *History and Theory*, 1(1), 75-85.
- Harris, J. (2005). Introduction. In J. Harris (Ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Byzantine History* (pp. 1-6), Palgrave Macmillan.

- Jones, A. H. M. (1948). *Constantine and the conversion of Europe*. Hodder & Stoughton Limited.
- Jordan, D. P. (1969). Gibbon's 'Age of Constantine' and the fall of Rome. *History and Theory*, 8(1), 71-96.
- Kazhdan, A. & Constable, G. (1982). *People and power in Byzantium: An introduction to modern Byzantine studies*. Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies.
- Kazhdan, A. & Epstein, A. W. (1985). *Change in Byzantine culture in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*. University of California Press.
- Kelly, C. (1997). A grand tour: Reading Edward Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall'. *Greece & Rome*, 44(1), 39-58.
- Machin, W. J. (1939). Gibbon's debt to contemporary scholarship. *The Review of English Studies*, 15(57), 84-88.
- Mango, C. (2002). The revival of learning. In C. Mango (Ed.), *The Oxford History of Byzantium* (pp. 214-229), Oxford University Press.
- Noonkester, M. C. (1990). Gibbon and the clergy: Private virtues, public vices. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 83(4), 399-414.
- Oliver, D. M. (1971). The character of an historian: Edward Gibbon. *ELH*, 38(2), 254-273.
- Ostrogorsky, G. (1969). *History of the Byzantine state*. Rutgers University Press.
- Pocock, J. G. A. (1977). Gibbon's Decline and Fall and world view of the late Enlightenment. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 10(3), 287-303.
- Runciman, S. (1979). *Byzantine theocracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Treadgold, W. (1997). *A History of the Byzantine state and society*. Stanford University Press.
- Wootton, D. (1994). Narrative, irony, and faith in Gibbon's Decline and Fall. *History and Theory*, 33(4), 77-105.
- Young, B. W. (2000). Religious history and the eighteenth-century historian. *The Historical Journal*, 43(3), 849-868.