

# The Ruins



# The Ruins:

*Meditations on the Revolutions  
of Empires  
(with an Editor's Introduction)*

Edited by

Minchul Kim

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



The Ruins: Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires  
(with an Editor's Introduction)

Edited by Minchul Kim

Translated from the French: Volney, *Les ruines, ou Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (Paris: Desenne, 1791).

Based on the English translation: Volney, *The Ruins, or A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, 3rd edition (London: J. Johnson, 1796).

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Minchul Kim

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3060-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3060-7

# CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction to <i>The Ruins</i> .....	viii
Volney and <i>The Ruins</i>	
The Orient and the Future of Europe	
Lessons from the Rise and Fall of Ancient States	
Sources of Remedy	
Conclusion	
Editorial Note .....	xi
<b><i>The Ruins</i></b>	
Frontispiece .....	1
Preface .....	2
Invocation .....	3
Chapter I .....	5
The Journey	
Chapter II .....	7
The Reverie	
Chapter III .....	10
The Apparition	
Chapter IV .....	14
The Exposition	
Chapter V .....	18
Condition of Man in the Universe	
Chapter VI .....	20
The Primitive State of Man	

Chapter VII.....	22
Principles of Society	
Chapter VIII .....	24
Source of the Evils of Society	
Chapter IX .....	26
The Origin of Government and Laws	
Chapter X .....	28
General Causes of the Prosperity of Ancient States	
Chapter XI.....	32
General Causes of the Revolutions and Ruin of Ancient States	
Chapter XII.....	39
Lessons of the Past, Repeated in the Present	
Chapter XIII .....	49
Will the Human Race Improve?	
Chapter XIV .....	55
The Great Obstacle to Improvement	
Chapter XV.....	58
The New Century	
Chapter XVI .....	61
A Free and Legislating People	
Chapter XVII.....	63
Universal Basis of All Rights and Laws	
Chapter XVIII.....	65
Fear and Conspiracy of Tyrants	
Chapter XIX .....	67
General Assembly of Nations	

Chapter XX.....	71
The Search for Truth	
Chapter XXI .....	78
Problem of Religious Contradictions	
Chapter XXII.....	96
Origin and Genealogy of Religious Ideas	
Sect. I: Origin of the Idea of God: Worship of the Elements, and the Physical Powers of Nature	
Sect. II: Second System: Worship of the Stars, or Sabeism	
Sect. III: Third System: Worship of Symbols, or Idolatry	
Sect. IV: Fourth System: Worship of Two Principles, or Dualism	
Sect. V: Mystical or Moral Worship, or the System of a Future State	
Sect. VI: Sixth System: The Animated World, or Worship of the Universe under Different Emblems	
Sect. VII: Seventh System: Worship of the Soul of the World, that is, the Element of Fire, the Vital Principle of the Universe	
Sect. VIII: Eighth System: The World a Machine: Worship of the Demi-Ourgos, or Supreme Artificer	
Sect. IX: Religion of Moses, or Worship of the Soul of the World (Jupiter)	
Sect. X: Religion of Zoroaster	
Sect. XI: Budoism, or Religion of the Samanaei	
Sect. XII: Brahminism, or the Indian System	
Sect. XIII: Christianity, or the Allegorical Worship of the Sun, under the Cabalistic Names of Krishna or Christ, and Yês-Us or Jesus	
Chapter XXIII.....	127
Goal of All Religions the Same	
Chapter XXIV .....	134
Solution of the Problem of Contradictions	
Endnotes .....	139

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *THE RUINS*<sup>1</sup>

### Volney and *The Ruins*

One of the three great “matadors of philosophy”: this is how Volney was described in 1820, along with Antoine Destutt de Tracy and Étienne Pariset, by Stendhal.<sup>2</sup> Volney’s real name was Constantin-François de Chassebœuf; the pen name “Volney” was a combination of the first and last three letters respectively of Voltaire and Ferney.<sup>3</sup> One of the French intellectuals most immersed in history during the late eighteenth century, he wrote books that vividly show the hopes and worries of the period. Among these, *The Ruins: Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires* (1791) provides an invaluable window into the historical anxieties of intellectuals at the beginning of the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Volney was born in Craon (now in the Mayenne *département* in north-western France) on 3 February 1757 and died in Paris on 25 April 1820. He was a noted historian of antiquity under the Old Regime. By 1789 he was so well known that he felt it sufficient to sign his name merely as “Volney”—no “Chassebœuf,” no “de”—at the Tennis Court Oath.<sup>5</sup> During the Revolution he was a deputy to the Estates General and the National

---

<sup>1</sup> This introduction is a revised and expanded version of the editor’s article, “Volney and the French Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79, no. 2 (2018): 221–42. Copyright © by Journal of the History of Ideas, Volume 79, Number 2 (April 2018). He would like to thank the Journal of the History of Ideas for the permission to reproduce the article here. Many thanks are due to Nathan Alexander, Colin Kidd, and Richard Whatmore for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this Introduction. The editor may be contacted at [mkim1789@gmail.com](mailto:mkim1789@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney, 1757–1820: Contribution à l’histoire de l’orientalisme en France* (Beyrouth, 1951; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1980), ix. Citations refer to the Slatkine edition.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Kidd, *The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain’s Wars of Mythography, 1700–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 141.

<sup>4</sup> Volney, *Les ruines, ou Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (Paris: Desenne, 1791).

<sup>5</sup> Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, 168–69.



Constituent Assembly, a member of the French Academy, and a professor of history at the *École normale*.<sup>6</sup> When the *École* was shut down in 1795 and his professorial post was lost, he went to the United States with great expectations. He was received well at first by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, but as the political atmosphere of the United States turned distinctly anti-French under the presidency of John Adams and as the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed in Congress, he returned to France in 1798 gravely disappointed. Having participated in the political movements of the Genevan exiles in the 1780s and having worked closely with the Girondins before the Terror, since his return to France under the Second Directory he was associated with the *Idéologues*.<sup>7</sup>

*The Ruins* is often cited in studies of “Orientalism,” such as those of Urs App and Edward Said<sup>8</sup>; in studies of European travel literature, most notably those by Alexander Cook and David Denby<sup>9</sup>; and also in studies of other varied topics, including literature, rhetoric, and natural rights.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The *École normale* at this time had about 1,400 students who, after graduation, would be required to teach in schools throughout the *départements*. Alfred Mézières, Gustave Lanson, and George Perrot, *L'École Normale Supérieure: Son histoire et son évolution* (Champhol: Le Mono, 2016), 12. Also see *Pour une histoire de l'École normale supérieure: sources d'archives (1794–1993)*, ed. Pascale Hummel, Anne Lejeune, and David Peyceré (Paris: Rue d'Ulm, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> *Studies in the French Eighteenth Century: Presented to John Lough by Colleagues, Pupils, and Friends*, ed. John Lough, G. E. Rodmell, and Dudley Wilson (Durham: University of Durham, 1978), 80; Mouza Raskolnikoff, “Volney et les Idéologues: le refus de Rome,” *Revue historique* 267 (1982), 357–73; Pierre Serna, “In Search of the Atlantic Republic: 1660–1776–1799 in the Mirror,” in *Rethinking the Atlantic World: Europe and America in the Age of Democratic Revolutions*, ed. Manuela Albertone and Antonino de Francesco (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 260–2; Richard Whatmore, *Against War and Empire: Geneva, Britain, and France in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 224; Philippe Bourdin, “Construction et expérimentation d'une méthode historique: le Nouveau-Monde selon Volney,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 390 (2017): 99–128.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 440–79.

<sup>9</sup> David Denby, “Enlightenment Travel Accounts: Constantin de Volney,” in *Cross-Cultural Travel: Papers from the Royal Irish Academy Symposium on Literature and Travel*, ed. Jane Conroy (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 99–110; Alexander Cook, “Entre l'ancien et le nouveau monde: C. F. Volney et la politique des récits de voyages en France, 1782–1803,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 385 (2016): 87–107.

<sup>10</sup> Clifton Cherpak, “Volney's *Les ruines* and the Age of Rhetoric,” *Studies in Philology* 54, no. 1 (1957): 65–75; Michael Heffernan, “Historical Geographies of

Despite this diversity in interpretative angles—a natural result of the complexity of *The Ruins*—a reading of Volney focusing on his historical anxiety is lacking. I propose such a reading in this Introduction, a reading which may open a path to a richer understanding of the juncture between the eighteenth century and the French Revolution. In the existing studies, *The Ruins* is detached from the three crucial elements of its historical context: Enlightenment historiography, the French Revolution, and Volney's other related writings. Jean Gaulmier, still the premier authority on Volney, certainly captures the close relationship among his books published from 1787 to 1791. Nonetheless, Gaulmier does not read them in the light of eighteenth-century Europe's historical perspectives on the rise and fall of states, which is partly understandable given the imposing salience of Volney's political stance as a "Girondin" before and an "Idéologue" after the Thermidor. Volney is not typically considered in intellectual contexts that account for Enlightenment historiography. Guido Abbattista correctly argues that the importance and the complexity of this historiography have long been "underrated by interpretative traditions conditioned by Romanticism or idealism."<sup>11</sup> This omission of the context of Enlightenment historiography appears especially questionable when Jonathan Israel reduces Volney to an anti-Rousseauian proponent of a "Radical Enlightenment" characterized by secularism and political representation and to an unwavering revolutionary republican who opposed Maximilien Robespierre's "populism."<sup>12</sup>

---

the Future: Three Perspectives from France, 1750–1825," in *Geography and Enlightenment*, ed. David Livingstone and Charles Withers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 125–64; Sophie Lacroix, "Volney et le thème des ruines," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 1 (2007): 89–102; Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 195–97; Sanja Perovic, "Lyricist in Britain; Empiricist in France: Volney's Divided Legacy," in *Historical Writing in Britain, 1688–1830*, ed. Benjamin Dew and Fiona Price (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 127–44.

<sup>11</sup> Guido Abbattista, "The Historical Thought of the French *Philosophes*," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: 1400–1800*, vol. 3, ed. José Rabasa, Masayuki Sato, Edoardo Tortarolo, and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 406; Abbattista does not analyze Volney in this work.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). For criticism on Israel's binary categorization of the ideas behind the French Revolution, see Minchul Kim, "Book Review: *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the*

On the contrary, Volney's work should be read within the context of eighteenth-century European intellectuals' historical concerns about their society's future during emerging modernity. The focus of this Introduction is therefore not whether Volney was an "atheist" who spoke in the name of "reason" against religions or was "the precursor to the nineteenth-century historians and positivist sociologists."<sup>13</sup> The focus is placed instead on his "historical perspective"—how he viewed the past and the future of his own civilization. The somewhat naïve image of Volney as a progressive stadial historian and optimistic revolutionary can be replaced by an image of him as a worried republican steeped in the Enlightenment's historiographical tradition and engaged in the heroic attempt to find a way out of the menacing deadlocks of his age. The analysis will proceed chronologically, mainly from 1787 to 1791, a profoundly fruitful phase of his thought around the French Revolution. After the Terror, especially in *Lessons of History* (1795), Volney was immersed in a one-dimensional struggle against what he regarded as a dangerously inappropriate return of the Ancients—a new phase for Volney, the serious treatment of which is beyond the scope of this Introduction.<sup>14</sup>

## The Orient and the Future of Europe

Volney published *The Ruins* in August 1791. The book was a huge success: within ten years it went through three editions (1791, 1792, and 1799) and was translated into English, German, and Dutch.<sup>15</sup> It is also

---

*French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre*," *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 6 (2015): 825–30; David A. Bell, "A Very Different French Revolution," in *Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 205–13; Jeff Horn, "Book Review: *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre*," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 22, no. 5 (2017): 620–21.

<sup>13</sup> Gaulmier, *L'Idéologue Volney*, 207–29, 338–45.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, "The Historical Politics of Volney's *Leçons d'histoire* (1795)," *French Studies Bulletin* 39, no. 148 (2018): 43–7; Volney, *Leçons d'histoire prononcées à l'École normale, in Séances des Écoles normales* (Paris: Le Cercle social, 1799–1800), Seconde séance; Volney, *Leçons d'histoire prononcées à l'École normale, augmentées d'une leçon inédite et suivies du Discours de Lucien sur la manière d'écrire l'histoire* (Paris: Baudouin frères, 1826).

<sup>15</sup> Jed Buchwald and Diane Josefowicz, *The Zodiac of Paris: How an Improbable Controversy over an Ancient Egyptian Artifact Provoked a Modern Debate between Religion and Science* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 39.

“known to have been translated” into Arabic, though there is no surviving copy.<sup>16</sup> In the nineteenth century a Spanish translation was published while numerous French editions came out as well.<sup>17</sup> In England, according to E. P. Thompson, it was “the most influential [tract] . . . in Jacobin circles in the 1790s.”<sup>18</sup> In the United States, its influence was such that a couple at the end of the nineteenth century “chose to honour four illustrious infidels—Voltaire, Volney, Ingersoll, and Heston—in the first and middle names they picked for their two sons.”<sup>19</sup> The book stimulated many intellectuals during the Revolution and the early nineteenth century; the best known may have been Mary Shelley, who in *Frankenstein* made the beast overhear the reading of *The Ruins* and form his own complicated view of man.<sup>20</sup> The work belonged to historiography informed by the “Enlightened narrative” developed in the case of France through the seventeenth-century transition from humanist tradition to *histoire raisonnée*.<sup>21</sup> It needs to be read as a work born within the context of anxieties built into the eighteenth-century view of the history of European “civilization” and not, as Jean Gaulmier contends, as a “typical revolutionary profession” of faith in linear historical progress and human reason.<sup>22</sup> In the eighteenth century it was widely accepted that the feudal history of post-Roman Europe constituted a “Dark Age” to which the Moderns should avoid returning at all costs. The prospect of such a return was closely associated with notions of religious fanaticism, ferocious

---

<sup>16</sup> Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “The Enlightenment and the Orthodox World: Historiographical and Theoretical Challenges,” in *Enlightenment and Religion in the Orthodox World*, ed. Kitromilides (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Volney, *Las Ruinas, o Meditacion sobre las revoluciones de los imperios, Por C.-F. Volney ... Va anadida la ley natural. Nueva traduccion en castellano, de la ultima edicion del original frances por Don Josef Marchena*, 2a edicion (Burdeos: P. Beaume, 1822).

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 98–99. Thanks to Amy Westwell for providing me with this reference.

<sup>19</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 165. Thanks to Nathan G. Alexander for providing me with this reference.

<sup>20</sup> Wessel Krul, “Volney, Frankenstein, and the *Lessons of History*,” in *Revolutionary Histories: Cultural Crossings 1775–1875*, ed. Wil Verhoeven (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 26–28.

<sup>21</sup> Phyllis Leffler, “From Humanist to Enlightenment Historiography: A Case Study of François Eudes de Mézeray,” *French Historical Studies* 10, no. 3 (1978): 416–38.

<sup>22</sup> Gaulmier, *L'Idéologue Volney*, 201–38.

barbarism, democratic anarchy, agrarian laws, corruption, and often luxury. A great deal of recent research demonstrates that an intense historical anxiety surrounded these questions.<sup>23</sup> In addition to those who openly admired “polite” modernity like Voltaire, Montesquieu, David Hume, Adam Smith, and François-Jean de Chastellux, intellectuals more reserved about modern commercial society, such as Adam Ferguson, were also wary of any reprise of ancient history precisely because they feared that it could bring military government and imperial despotism.<sup>24</sup> Even such “Jacobins” as Robespierre, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, Bertrand Barère, and Jacques Nicolas Billaud-Varenne, who were tirelessly reproached by both their political enemies and posterity for allegedly having venerated the Romans, expressed their deep concerns for the prospect of military government and the loss of liberty.<sup>25</sup>

In this context *The Ruins* provided less a solution than an elaborate re-articulation of the problems with some hints at remedies. This becomes clearer when it is read in close relation not only to the more general historiography of the eighteenth century but also to Volney’s previous publications, *Travels in Syria and Egypt* (1787) and *Considerations on the*

---

<sup>23</sup> Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10; Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); István Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1–16; Whatmore, “Burke on Political Economy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. David Dwan and Christopher Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 80–91; Antoine Lilti, “La civilisation est-elle européenne? Ecrire l’histoire de l’Europe au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Penser l’Europe au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: commerce, civilisation, empire*, ed. Lilti and Céline Spector (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014), 139–66; Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> François-Jean de Chastellux, *De la félicité publique, ou Considérations sur le sort des hommes dans les différentes époques de l’histoire*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1772); Iain McDaniel, *Adam Ferguson in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Roman Past and Europe’s Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Kim, “Republicanism in the Age of Commerce and Revolutions: Barère’s Reading of Montesquieu,” *French History* 30, no. 3 (2016): 368–70.

*Current War between the Turks and the Russians* (1788).<sup>26</sup> He began writing *The Ruins* in the late 1780s, and it clearly bears the imprint of *Travels* and *Considerations*. The publication of *The Ruins* was only postponed due to his close participation in the pre-Revolutionary crisis. *L'esprit des journaux françois et étrangers* also underlined the continuity between *Travels* and *The Ruins*.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore necessary to look closely at *Travels* and *Considerations*, although they come from a significantly different political context, before delving into *The Ruins*. I will examine *Considerations* first, for it alludes to the historical setting in which *Travels* was written.

*Considerations* was a direct intervention into the Russo-Turkish War. Volney expressed deep concerns about the rise of the Turks: in his eyes the Ottoman rulers jeopardized both the liberty of the Turkish people and the commercial and polite modernity of Europe. On the one hand, this view was welcomed by some commentators as a persuasive insight.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, this stance provoked a refutation from Claude-Charles de Peyssonnel, the former French General Consul in İzmir and author of *L'anti-radoteur* (1785) and *Traité sur le commerce de la mer Noire* (1787).<sup>29</sup> In his *Examination* of Volney's *Considerations*, Peyssonnel argued that Volney had little knowledge of Turkey and that his suggestions for Russia and other European states to use force against it was dangerously misleading.<sup>30</sup> *Mercure de France* also intervened from Peyssonnel's side, dismissing Volney as one of the "subaltern polemical and political writers."<sup>31</sup>

Volney's contention was that the Ottomans were weakened by a long period of despotism and were showing "all the symptoms of decadence": their empire was "nothing more than an empty ghost" and its army was

---

<sup>26</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte, pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785*, 2 vols. (Paris: Volland, 1787). Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs* (Paris [printed "London" to evade censorship], 1788).

<sup>27</sup> *L'esprit des journaux françois et étrangers, par une société de gens de lettres* (Paris: Valade, 1793), 8:6.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Jean François de La Harpe to Count Andrei Petrovich Shuvalov, 1 April 1788 (*Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*).

<sup>29</sup> Claude-Charles de Peyssonnel, *L'anti-radoteur, ou Le petit philosophe moderne* (London: Emsley, 1785); Peyssonnel, *Traité sur le commerce de la mer Noire*, 2 vols (Paris: Cuchet, 1787).

<sup>30</sup> Peyssonnel, *Examen du livre intitulé Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs, par M. de Volney* (Amsterdam, 1788).

<sup>31</sup> *Mercure de France*, collected in *L'esprit des journaux françois et étrangers* (1788), 10:34–62.

“composed of peasants and vagabonds assembled in haste, led by unenlightened commanders.”<sup>32</sup> The Turks “lack population, culture, arts, commerce, . . . and military art.”<sup>33</sup> Volney was “assured of the fall of their Empire.”<sup>34</sup> As for Russia, he argued that since the reign of Peter the Great the country had been “marching to the opposite side of the Turkish Empire.” After immense reforms Russia had become a stronger state, and its “progress in civilization” would increase over time, as it had just commenced.<sup>35</sup> The weakness of the Ottomans did not assuage his fears; he worried that if they defeated the Russians, Europe would face grave danger. He argued, in light of the large amount of European trade with Asia, that it was better for France that the enlightened Russians, rather than the despotic Turks, “surround Asia.” France should renounce its policy of backing Turkey and side instead with Russia.<sup>36</sup> It was impossible to “conduct a rich commerce for a long time with a country that was ruining itself.”<sup>37</sup>

Volney saw deep-seated reasons for the Orient’s decline, and his *Travels* was obsessed with this problem.<sup>38</sup> He travelled to the East from 1783 to 1785 as part of a secret mission at the request of Vergennes.<sup>39</sup> *The Travels* was not just a travelogue but was, in a more important sense, a lengthy report of this journey, one closely related to France’s strategy concerning the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. *The Travels* was also directed toward the contemporary trade in books; it was a huge success among learned circles, and contemporaries were thrilled to read it.<sup>40</sup> Catherine II sent a medal decoration to Volney in honour of the work, which he accepted but later renounced in December 1791, saying he could not keep

---

<sup>32</sup> Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre*, 4–14.

<sup>33</sup> Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre*, 25–26.

<sup>35</sup> Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre*, 37–40, 51–54; Marc Belissa, *La Russie mise en Lumières: représentations et débats autour de la Russie dans la France du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Kimé, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre*, 41–43, 67–78.

<sup>37</sup> Volney, *Considérations sur la guerre*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Also see Julian Robinson, “The Impact of the Orient on European Thought, 1770–1850,” *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (1987): 102–33; Nathaniel Wolloch, “Joseph de Guignes and Enlightenment Notions of Material Progress,” *Intellectual History Review* 21, no. 4 (2011): 435–48.

<sup>39</sup> Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, 43–63.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Marie Julie de Fumeron de La Berlière to Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 21 May 1787 (*Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*); Letter from Marguerite Favre to Pierre Moulton, 5 January 1790 (*Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*).

it when the Empress was overtly protecting the *émigrés*.<sup>41</sup> *The Travels* was a comprehensive work of social anthropology, a detailed and elegant critique of civilizations. A contemporary review remarked on the striking difference between *The Travels* and Claude-Étienne Savary's *Letters on Egypt*: the novelty of approach demonstrated by *The Travels* was well noted.<sup>42</sup> Volney did not describe his itinerary or his adventures but instead painstakingly recorded the climate, soil, population, customs, government, revenue, religion, and military of the nations in the lands of Egypt and Syria—evidence that leads us to conclude, with Gaulmier, that the work was at once both a report to Vergennes and a public intervention in the debate on France's strategy regarding the East.<sup>43</sup> Despite taking the form of travel literature in the title and the preface, the primary goal of *The Travels* was to prove the Turks' inability to regenerate their despotic polity and to show the potential danger were they ever to return to power on the eastern front of Europe.

In a set of depictions and arguments inspired by Montesquieuan political sociology, Volney tried to discern the correct set of relations among nature, mode of subsistence, government, war, and liberty. He made it clear that the Orient had the wrong set, and that to marvel at the Orient was just as absurd as to revere Greek and Roman antiquity. For him the Orient was a fallen civilization—a cautionary example, not a model to follow, and certainly not an ideal diplomatic partner.

Volney began *The Travels* by discussing the Mamluks, Druze, Greeks, and Turks; he tried to demonstrate that their customs and manners were closely related to their respective geographical positions, topography,

---

<sup>41</sup> *Le Moniteur*, December 5, 1791, "Lettre de M. Volney à M. le baron de Grimm, chargé d'affaires de S. M. l'impératrice des Russies [*sic*]," December 4, 1791; Stephen Prickett, *Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition: Backing into the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 90.

<sup>42</sup> *Journal de Paris*, May 8, 1787 (Paris: Quillau, 1787), 553–54; *L'esprit des journaux françois et étrangers* (1787), 9:91–115; Claude-Étienne Savary, *Lettres sur l'Égypte, où l'on offre le parallèle des mœurs anciennes et modernes de ses habitans, où l'on décrit l'état, le commerce, l'agriculture, le gouvernement du pays, & la descente de S. Louis à Damiette, tirée de Joinville & des auteurs Arabes: avec des cartes géographiques*, 3 vols (Paris: Onfroi, 1785–1786); Savary, *Letters on Egypt, with a parallel between the manners of its ancient and modern inhabitants, the present State, the Commerce, the Agriculture, and Government of that Country; and an account of the descent of St. Lewis at Damietta, extracted from Joinville, and Arabian authors: illustrated with maps, by Mr. Savary, Author of the Life of Mahomet, and Translator of the Coran*, 2 vols (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, Pater-Noster-Row, 1786).

<sup>43</sup> Gaulmier, *L'Idéologue Volney*, 43–63.



agriculture, governments, and religions. One example of such observations is that of the Druze who lived in the high mountains and deep valleys. They barely had the techniques or arms of infantry or cavalry, and their conduct of war was therefore that of the guerrillas “completely different from the European armies.” They never fought in the open fields but instead made use of their familiarity with the mountains. As a close-knit community of a small religious sect with a strong sense of unity among themselves, they had a straightforward and harsh moral standard that focused on the conducts of honour, such that any offence was immediately answered by swords and guns. This custom was not as “barbarous” as it seemed at first glance, Volney noted, since it had “the merit of supplementing the regular justice” which was severely “uncertain and slow” in the mountains. They saw themselves as superior to other subjects of the Turkish government: they were different in that they “lived in the security of property and life” and the “peasants were better off.” This had a population growth effect: Volney attributed their relatively high population density to their “liberty.” Their religion had taught them the principle of “hospitality” that “the God was liberal and magnificent, and all men were brothers.” They even attracted some Christian families to settle in the mountains of Lebanon, received well by the Maronites and the Druze. The Christians added to the “number of farmers, consumers, and allies,” the importance of which could not be underestimated, but they also caused a stir by “indiscreet and meddling zeal.”<sup>44</sup>

Volney categorically rejected Montesquieu’s thesis about the decisive influence of climate and argued that the true reason for the inertia of the people and the birth of despotism had to lay elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> The wars of the Assyrians, the empires of the Persians, and the Parthians’ rivalry with Rome were sufficient counterexamples to Montesquieu’s thesis that hot climates generated inertia. “Even the Jews who, having only a small state, never ceased to fight the powerful empires for a thousand years” lived under a hot climate. “If men of these nations were inert, what is activity! ... if they were active, where is the influence of climate?”<sup>46</sup>

Volney searched around for an alternative explanation. How could one account for the sight of the “modern Greeks so much degraded amidst the ruins of Sparta and Athens” when it certainly could not be “alleged that the climate has changed?” Even if it could, the changes to climate would

---

<sup>44</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:62–70.

<sup>45</sup> Also see Richard Spavin, *Les climats du pouvoir: rhétorique et politique chez Bodin, Montesquieu et Rousseau* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:424–25.

have occurred irregularly, rendering it unreliable as an explicative factor.<sup>47</sup> The Egyptian people worked surprisingly well under blazing heat and preserved a great energy manifested in daily labour.<sup>48</sup> The sun did not make a population lazy: rich soil did. But much more crucial than the natural quality of land and abundance of food were the “social institutions called government and religion.”<sup>49</sup> The downfall of the once prosperous and industrious ancient states was, Volney argued, the result not of the climate but of religion and the cupidity of rulers. His most arresting account of the effects of religion on social customs and manners was given in regard to the Muslims who were “raised with the prejudices of fatalism” and were “firmly persuaded that all was predestined.” They thus felt a “resignation equipped to deal with the good and the bad alike.” This made them endure with “resignation” the endless “misfortune” imposed by the Sultans—unlike the Greeks, who craved ever more blessings from their capricious gods. Some religions, on his account, could thus easily suffocate the spirit of liberty.<sup>50</sup>

Even more important than religion was the character of the political regime: government was always the “radical source” of problems.<sup>51</sup> Where the rulers had all the land, where the despot regarded his territory and population as his private possession, where the inheritance of individual property was prohibited, “where the cultivator could not enjoy the fruit of his labour,” and “where there was no security in the use” of property, there would be neither agriculture nor industry. Such was “the condition of Egypt.”<sup>52</sup> Syria was not much different, for the governor of each province held absolute power as a representative of the sultan and yet was prevented by short-term rotations from effectively becoming king of the region; every governor would reap the riches of the province without implementing long-term measures that would only benefit his successor. Governors would often go through the streets and kill any well-off man and confiscate his property: everyone concealed property and laboured no more than required for the absolute necessities. The “arbitrary power of the Sultan” was a double-edged sword that struck “agriculture, arts, commerce, population, i.e. everything which constitutes the power of the

---

<sup>47</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:424–26.

<sup>48</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1:184–85.

<sup>49</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:432.

<sup>50</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:450–51. Volney did not consider Islam to be particularly worse than Christianity, but this was not yet explicitly dealt with in *Travels*; he would later write on it in detail in *The Ruins*.

<sup>51</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:417.

<sup>52</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1:171–72.

state, i.e. the power of the Sultan himself.”<sup>53</sup>

*The Travels*, written to provide an argument against the French alliance with Turkey and involvement in Egypt, turned out to be the seedbed of *The Ruins* and its search for an escape route from the collapse of states and civilizations. Under despotism, Volney thought, agriculture and industry were stifled by military conquests and the luxuries of commerce. Criticizing what he considered to be a short-sighted question by the French merchants as to why the people in Egypt were ungrateful to the fallen Mamluk leader Ali Bey Al-Kabir, he contended that

Just like everywhere else, in Egypt the people’s judgment is dictated by the interest of subsistence; whether they love or hate, blame or applause the government depends on this question. This manner of judging is neither blind nor unjust. In vain may the people be told that the honour of the empire, the glory of the nation, the encouragement of commerce, and the improvement of fine arts require such and such measures. The necessity of living comes before everything; and when the multitude lack bread, they have at least a right to refuse to praise and admire. What did it matter to the Egyptian people that Ali Bey had conquered the Sidon, Mecca, and Syria, if these conquests only worsened, instead of bettering, their fate? The war expenses increased their tax burden. The expedition against Mecca alone cost 26,000,000 livres. The exportation of corn for the army’s use added to the monopoly of some favoured merchants caused a famine which desolated the country during the whole of 1770 and 1771. So, ... when the inhabitants of Cairo and the peasants in the villages were starving to death, were they wrong to murmur against Ali Bey? Were they wrong to blame the commerce with India, if all its advantages were concentrated in a few hands? When Ali spent 225,000 livres in the useless handle of a *kandjar*, even though jewellers extolled his magnificence, ... had not the people the right to detest his luxury? This liberality which his courtiers called virtue, were not the people, at whose expense it was exercised, right to call it a vice?<sup>54</sup>

With this stern censure of Ali Bey’s conquests and “magnificence,” Volney had his own country’s Grand Siècle and the warring eighteenth-century Europeans in mind. Further on in *The Ruins* he sarcastically invoked the “lakes dug up in the dry ground” to denounce the extravagance of Versailles.<sup>55</sup> In his view, Europe should not imitate Egyptian commerce, where the lowly people had no spending power and the rich spent fortunes on the “finished luxury goods”; this hardly

---

<sup>53</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:345–48.

<sup>54</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1:128–29.

<sup>55</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 70.

contributed to “the riches of Egypt and the benefit of the nation.”<sup>56</sup> Luxury-based commerce was detrimental to industry. For Volney liberty was not an abstract moral value but a concrete engine of growth in population, agriculture, and commerce. *The Travels* demonstrated that these could not be considered in isolation.

Volney lamented the steep fall of the “blacks” of Egypt. They, who had once given “arts, sciences, and even language” to Europe, were now Europeans’ slaves considered as not having “the same intelligence as white men,” and their slavery was, outrageously, justified by the so-called “friends of liberty and humanity.”<sup>57</sup> His distress was evident throughout the work: “if formerly the states of Asia enjoyed this magnificence, who can assure us that those of Europe will not one day suffer the same reverse?” If Egypt and Syria could fall from their zenith of civilization to such indolence and inertia observable in the eighteenth century, then Europe was no exception to the danger of its own decline.<sup>58</sup>

*The Considerations* and *The Travels* thus demonstrate the centrality of Volney’s anxiety about the fall of modern Europe. He nevertheless had reasons for optimism: he found his worry to be “yet more useful” in that it forced the European states to reconsider their future with a view toward potential dangers. There lay the “merit of history,” namely that “by remembering the past, it lets the present era anticipate the costly fruits of experience.” And this “goal of history” was better approached by travel, he argued, because the observer was “better able than the posthumous historian to grasp the facts in their totality, unknot their relations, explain the causes, in a word analyse the whole working of the complicated political machine.” Building on this ambitious connection between travel and history, at the end of *Travels*, he set himself the task of writing a work that would instruct European governments on how to avoid the fate of Turkey and demonstrate “how the abuse of authority, by bringing about the misery of individuals, becomes ruinous to the power of a state.”<sup>59</sup> I shall now turn to *The Ruins*.

## Lessons from the Rise and Fall of Ancient States

The dialectic of prosperity and decline received a more focused treatment in *The Ruins*. Though co-conceived with *The Travels*, by the

---

<sup>56</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1:191.

<sup>57</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1:76–77.

<sup>58</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:456.

<sup>59</sup> Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 2:456–58.

time of first publication in 1791 it appeared as unmistakably “revolutionary,” invoking the “virtuous dogma of equality” and presenting the narrator as the “solitary lover of liberty.”<sup>60</sup> Between 1788 and 1791, Volney was immersed in the events of the French Revolution. In the pre-Revolution crisis of 1788 he published a pamphlet arguing for an “entirely free” election on the basis of suffrage “equally balanced from *corps* to *corps*, from individual to individual.” Opposing the claims of the nobility, he contended that “the Estates General must represent the Nation in the most extended sense,” though this did not mean acknowledging the competence to those “unfree and living in direct dependence of someone else, such as all men in service, soldiers, sailors, domestic servants, and mercenaries.”<sup>61</sup> Volney was a celebrated figure by the time he reached Versailles as a deputy of the Third Estate. His lodgings were frequented by deputies and he befriended Lanjuinais and Le Chapelier.<sup>62</sup> Jacques-Pierre Brissot also remarked that he was close to Volney.<sup>63</sup> The royalist pamphleteer Galart de Montjoie listed Volney among the leaders of the nascent Breton Club with “Sieyès, Mirabeau, Barnave, and Pétion.”<sup>64</sup> After more than a year of turbulent politics, he ceased to actively participate in the debates of the Constituent Assembly and concentrated on writing *The Ruins* in the winter of 1790–1791. Gaulmier’s suggestion that he was then a typical “man of 1789” who liked neither the “illusions” of “the Girondin” or the “audacity” of “the Jacobin” is inaccurate, since in 1790 these were not yet distinct groups.<sup>65</sup>

In *The Ruins*, Volney argued that since nature has made all men equal with “the same organs, sensations, and wants, it has thereby declared that it has given to everyone the same right to make use of its treasures, and that all men are equal in the order of nature.” This equality assured that each man was created to become free, “independent of each other.”<sup>66</sup> Equality came first, and liberty was “derived” as a consequence. He pointed out that the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* had made a mistake by reversing this order, but also added that it was not a

---

<sup>60</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, vii–xii.

<sup>61</sup> Volney, *Des conditions nécessaires à la légalité des États-Généraux* (Rennes, 1788), 15–19.

<sup>62</sup> Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, 159–60.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques-Pierre Brissot, *Mémoires de Brissot*, 2 vols. (Paris: Ladvocat, 1830), 2:321.

<sup>64</sup> Galart de Montjoie, *Histoire de la conjuration de Maximilien Robespierre*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Maret, 1796), 53.

<sup>65</sup> Gaulmier, *L’Idéologue Volney*, 192–95.

<sup>66</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 138–40.

serious defect at a time when the “science of the rights of man” had just been envisioned.<sup>67</sup> This view was radical enough to be picked up and castigated. A certain Jouvin, for example, said it was something “only demagogues adopt.”<sup>68</sup>

*The Ruins*, however, was not merely a manifesto of revolutionary confidence. It contained at its core a rich meditation on historical anxiety. As epitomized in the titles of the tenth and eleventh chapters, respectively “General causes of the prosperity of ancient states” and “General causes of the revolutions and ruin of ancient states,” *The Ruins* attempted to present a kind of global history that went beyond the familiar realms of Greece and Rome by taking account of the rise and fall of the once “powerful cities of Tyre, Sidon, Ashkelon, Gaza, and Beirut.”<sup>69</sup> This geographical scope of Gibbonian flavour was closely linked to the universalist claims of the French Revolution. Volney later complained in 1795 that “our classics of Europe only ever spoke of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Jews”; he further associated it with the spirit of “ferocious egotism” of the classical city-states that had sanctioned “the hatred of every other people under the name of patriotism.”<sup>70</sup> The constitution of Sparta, being “a regulation worthy of the monks of La Trappe,” had “condemned a nation of thirty thousand people never to increase in population or territory.” The Greeks and the Romans who formed “a number of small and semi-barbarous states, poor and piratical, divided, and enemies by birth and by prejudice” should not be regarded as composing the totality of the “antiquity.”<sup>71</sup>

The Catholic writer Étienne Jondot vehemently criticized this point.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 348n3.

<sup>68</sup> Jouvin, *Examen d'un écrit intitulé, Les ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires, par Mr. Volney, député à l'Assemblée Nationale de France de 1789 ou Traité sur l'Égalité, la Liberté & la prétendue Souveraineté du Peuple dans les Monarchies, avec une dissertation sur Joseph, Historien Juif*. (London: Le Boussonnier & Co., 1799), v.

<sup>69</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 29.

<sup>70</sup> Volney, *Leçons d'histoire*. Quotations from this work are from the English translation: *Lectures on History* (London: James Watson, 1831), 6. Volney was not radically against the trend of his days, since, according to Chantal Grell, just before the Revolution more than forty per cent of the new historical essays in the *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* were about Eastern antiquity, i.e. China, India, Egypt and Assyria. Chantal Grell, *L'histoire entre érudition et philosophie: étude sur la connaissance historique à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1993), 94–95.

<sup>71</sup> Volney, *Lectures on History*, 85–86.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques-Paul Migne, *Nouvelle encyclopédie théologique* (Paris: Migne, 1851), 2:905–906.

Finding no nation in Asia and pre-Roman Europe which merited a place in “universal history,” Jondot insisted that only those influenced by the Greeks and the Romans came to be “civilized” and should be the proper subjects of such.<sup>73</sup> But for Volney classical examples, especially that of Rome, were just as much failed cases as were the fallen states of the Orient. As for the Romans, “such a quick passage from their republican despotism to their profound servility under the emperors” indicated that they were not worth imitating. The solution to the vicissitudes of time had to be sought elsewhere.<sup>74</sup> He claimed that the history of Western antiquity had to be expanded to include the East so that the search for the “general” causes of decline could be effectively substantiated. In a more generalized and abstract fashion than in *The Travels*, and in a more direct conversation with preceding Enlightenment histories, *The Ruins* tried to make sense of the complex relations that liberty had with religion and government.<sup>75</sup>

In the opening pages of *The Ruins* the narrator revisits the itineraries of *The Travels*, finding “fields abandoned, villages deserted, and cities in ruins.”<sup>76</sup> He sits among the tombstones and monuments—an unmistakable allusion to Edward Gibbon’s trip to Rome in 1764 where he first thought of writing *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* “among the ruins of the Capitol”<sup>77</sup>—wondering what made once opulent empires turn to dust.<sup>78</sup> Then, when the “*Génie* of the tombs and ruins” appears before the narrator, he puts forth the vital questions: “By what causes do empires rise and fall? From what causes are prosperity and misfortunes of nations born? Finally, on what principles should peace of

---

<sup>73</sup> Étienne Jondot, *Observations critiques sur les Leçons d’histoire du cen Volney: Ouvrage dans lequel est indiquée une nouvelle méthode d’apprendre l’Histoire et d’en saisir le véritable esprit; suivi d’un chapitre contre l’athéisme* (Paris: Migneret, 1799–1800).

<sup>74</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 342, note m.

<sup>75</sup> Although in *The Ruins* Volney focused on antiquity unlike his respected Voltaire who had deliberately focused “on modern history as opposed to ancient history,” it must be noted that *The Ruins* was not a work of history *per se* and that Volney was later to argue for the primacy of modern history in his *Lessons of History*. For Voltaire, see J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire: Historian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); John Leigh, *Voltaire: A Sense of History* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004); and Pierre Force, “Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History,” *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009), 457–84.

<sup>76</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vols. 4–6 (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1788), 6:646.

<sup>78</sup> Also see Sabrina Ferri, *Ruins Past: Modernity in Italy, 1744–1836* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2015).

societies and happiness of man be established?" The Genius generously promises to "reveal the wisdom of tombstones and the science of centuries": thus begins Volney's conjecture on measures to prevent the fall of empires.<sup>79</sup> This speculation illuminates the problems underlying the political thought of the French revolutionaries. The history of empires mattered because it was inextricably associated with the contemporary prospect for liberty, a point that was not overlooked by the revolutionaries. In October 1791, for example, *La Feuille villageoise* commented that *The Ruins*, "inspired by the highest philosophy and the vastest erudition, . . . merits to be presented [not only to the National Assembly as it had been but also] to the entire world." If Young and Hervey had written a "moral lesson" on the vanished cities, the journal remarked, Volney was the first to write a "political lesson" using the same background. This commendation was followed by a long summary of *The Ruins*, concentrating on its narrative of the vicissitude of governments.<sup>80</sup>

In his discussion of the ills that destroyed governments and civilizations, Volney presented a set of straightforward measures to prevent history from repeating itself. Taxation had to be rationally designed and levied through representation. Property had to be broadly distributed so that the citizens would retain their interests in the preservation of the state. Responsibility of government, transparency of administration, and abolition of aristocratic privileges were necessary to shorten the distance between the governors and the governed. Society had to be "enlightened" to avert "fanaticism." Volney promoted a single system of law with the bitter reproach that tyrants elaborated the "science of oppression" by making laws that severely punished the deeds of the ruled, while condoning structural injustice that served the ruler in the name of legal justice.<sup>81</sup> This list of remedies reads like a credo of the republican majority in the revolutionary decade and shows that the French Revolution was in part a response to deep-seated concerns of the eighteenth century heretofore insufficiently stressed by historians.

In the conjectural history of *The Ruins*, states were small and weak when initially formed. They therefore had to treat their citizens as free individuals: man without liberty was man without fatherland, and he could not be counted on to defend the state from foreign invasion since he had no interest in its survival. If oppressed, people could leave and "establish

---

<sup>79</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 24–25.

<sup>80</sup> *La Feuille villageoise*, adressée chaque semaine à toutes les communes de la république pour les instruire des lois, des événements, des découvertes qui intéressent tout citoyen, October 6, 1791 (Paris: Desenne, 1791), 3:27.

<sup>81</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 73.



their independence in the open land.” Thus the liberty that man had enjoyed in the state of nature was not lost at this stage. In these small states the tactic of divide and rule did not work because communication was easy and confusion of interests rarely occurred. Egalitarian distribution of property checked slavery and despotism: “everybody had property, so nobody needed to sell himself, and the despot could not find mercenaries to recruit.” This combination of military and economic relations directly supported the well-being of citizens and their common interest in the preservation of the state. The continuity between *The Travels* and *The Ruins* is clear: in *The Travels*, Volney had associated the wide distribution of property with liberty for the people and security for the state, finding the causes of the frailty of Asian states in the concentration of property in the hands of despots and their courtiers.<sup>82</sup>

Thriving commercial centres were the fruits of property, liberty, and geographical good fortune: thus “the accumulated riches of India and of Europe successively raised the splendour of a hundred metropolises on the banks of the Nile and the Mediterranean, of the Tigris and the Euphrates.” While this could foster material overabundance, because the people had straightforward manners and liberty reigned at this stage of historical development, the surplus was wisely invested in such public works as “the wells of Tyre, the dykes of the Euphrates, the underground pipes of Media, . . . and the aqueducts of Palmyra.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, in this historical assessment, liberty was compatible with commerce. Moreover, the former prevented the corruption of the latter. Volney argued that the coexistence of frugality and superfluity was possible if the inhabitants enjoyed liberty and security. Under such conditions they could fully deploy their faculties for individual and common goals—tantamount to making “social institutions conform to the true laws of nature.” Immense public works did not overburden the state or suffocate liberty, since they were “the products of equal and common cooperation of the forces of passionate and free individuals.” This stood in stark contrast to public works such as pyramids built in profoundly unequal and despotic states that arose after this happy state of affairs. Liberty was incompatible with luxury.<sup>84</sup>

Luxury entailed the most hideous and fruitless labour: hunting parks, gardens, lakes, and palaces were unmistakable signs of such labour. A Fénelonian voice is clearly heard in these parts of *The Ruins*, condemning

---

<sup>82</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 56–59; Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, 1:171–72 and 2:345–48.

<sup>83</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 59–61.

<sup>84</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 60–61.

luxury as the evil that destroyed prosperous and virtuous states. Voluminous extravagance ruined Egypt, Volney argued, and the resources spent in building three pyramids in Giza would have been much better spent in building a large canal near Alexandria.<sup>85</sup> The vital question of modern political economy was whether commerce-generated luxury could be compatible with virtue and stability. Figures no less diverse than René Aubert de Vertot, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Smith, Ferguson, and Hume were deeply troubled by this.<sup>86</sup> Like Rousseau and Smith, Volney endorsed the thesis that luxury had brought down Rome and the feudal states.<sup>87</sup>

Such considerations led him to further explore the sources of decline. He moved on to the part of history in which “audacious and fierce cupidity”—the cause of violence and the delay of progress in the “savage and barbarous state” of man—corrupted the laws, institutions, and governments of advanced societies, leading to their destruction. When the strong began to enslave the weak, when inequality of force, which was nothing more than the “accident of nature,” was mistaken to be the law of nature, the slavery of individuals was bred, inevitably leading to the slavery of nations.<sup>88</sup> With this, Volney countered the ancient philosophers including Plato and Aristotle who had argued in favour of the inherent inequality of men. Volney thought that their view had the effect of endorsing the “right of the strongest,” which was the source of the ancient West’s misfortune: endless wars and slavery among the “Gauls, Romans,

<sup>85</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 343, note o.

<sup>86</sup> Till Wahnbaeck, *Luxury and Public Happiness: Political Economy in the Italian Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Jeremy Jennings, “The Debate about Luxury in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 1 (2007): 79–105; Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> In 1793 Volney asserted that luxury made men crave for more, consequently losing “individual virtues” and then even the “social virtue” that was “justice.” Frugal men needed less and thus had more to exchange for commerce, bringing prosperity to “home and abroad.” Volney, *La loi naturelle, ou catéchisme du citoyen français* (Paris: Sallior, 1793), 97–101. Sonenscher regards this work as a belated sequel to *The Ruins*, its “second part.” Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes*, 370. Lacroix also suggests the link between the two works. Lacroix, “Volney et le thème des ruines,” 95. For Rousseau and Smith, see Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*.

<sup>88</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 62–63.

and Athenians.” From inequality and corruption arose despotism.<sup>89</sup>

### Sources of Remedy

While the verdict was not the end goal, it did provide the cure. If the loss of liberty and the fall of empires were associated, and if they were repeated throughout history, then precisely how could the symptoms of the process be recognized and treated? The central assumptions of his moral view were reflected in Volney’s detailed account of the steps through which despotism had progressed in the fallen empires: within social relations man becomes ambitious; power corrupts man; cupidity is the fountain of tyranny. The working mechanism of ambition, cupidity, and corruption depended on the combination of political, economic, cultural, and military institutions. Each problem was associated with other symptoms, and the totality of their relations to the political sphere provided the basis for the elaboration of remedies.

Volney found the source of decline to be rooted in the empowerment of the aristocratic minority and the degradation of the weak majority into slavery, both on domestic and international levels. He argued, significantly, that the force of vicious historical cycles had been working beneath the rise and fall of empires. His view reversed the order of Polybius’s circle, who thought that the cycle of constitutions could never be stopped, that all politics would eventually decay and initiate the next cycle, and that the cycle began with despotism and ran to kingship, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally to ochlocracy.<sup>90</sup> But for Volney it was the other way around: starting from democracy and moving to aristocracy and then to monarchy. No single system could suffice to prevent the fall of states.

---

<sup>89</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 340–41, note 1.

<sup>90</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, ed. Brian McGing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6:3–10; James Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 24–29; Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3: *The First Decline and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32–34; McGing, *Polybius’ Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 170–74. It could also be said that Polybius was contradicting himself, because he seemed to stress the stability of the mixed constitution at one place and deny its infallibility at another. But this could be seen as mutually reconcilable. See Kurt von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity: A Critical Analysis of Polybius’ Political Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 83–90.

Volney began his search on the domestic level, mediated by the history of governments. Early states dissolved when discord destroyed their social contracts, allowing for the rise of “anarchy,” employed here as a synonym of “democracy.” He thought that when citizens constituted a democratic government to protect their liberty, some of the appointed agents would use the means at their disposal to build factions and foment divisions among the people, all for the sake of greater power and perpetual office: these were “the inconveniences of democracy.”<sup>91</sup> Democracy came *after*, not *with*, early small states and was a political form already deprived of felicity and liberty. The democratic experience of the Greeks earned nothing but blame from Volney, as eighteenth-century common sense would have held. Understood in its eighteenth-century sense, “democracy” was in the margins throughout the age of Enlightenment both as an idea and as a political force. The small states as much as the large states perceived democracy as an outmoded legacy of antiquity leading to anarchy and despotism, inapplicable not least because it was undesirable in the modern commercial world.<sup>92</sup> A typical verdict was that since the people were “ignorant, capricious, fickle and untrustworthy” they would “almost always follow passion and abandon themselves to the first impressions.” In a “popular or democratic government” liberty would become “a licence,” ceasing to be a “true liberty which consists in doing what the laws permit.”<sup>93</sup> Volney’s critical view of democracy demonstrates the fallacy of regarding him, as in Jonathan Israel’s work, as “the revolutionary democratic vanguard.”<sup>94</sup>

At a democracy’s zenith, “aristocracy” was formed through the establishment of privileges. But under this system “the state was tormented by the passions of the great and the rich.” Elsewhere, under theocracy, the “weakness of the human soul” empowered the clergy, who

---

<sup>91</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 64–65.

<sup>92</sup> Mogens Herman Hansen, “The Tradition of the Athenian Democracy, AD 1750–1990,” *Greece & Rome* 39, no. 1 (1992): 14–30; Pierre Rosanvallon, “L’histoire du mot démocratie à l’époque moderne,” in *Situations de la démocratie*, ed. Marcel Gauchet, Pierre Manent, and Rosanvallon (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 11–29; James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1; Wilfried Nippel, *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>93</sup> Alexandre-Auguste de Campagne, *Principes d’un bon gouvernement, ou Réflexions morales et politiques, tendantes à procurer le bonheur de l’homme et celui des sociétés politiques*, 2 vols (Berlin: G. L. Winter, 1768), vol. 2, 169–70.

<sup>94</sup> Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas*, 29.

gave false oracles in exchange for sacrifices and tributes, and “the states were tormented by the passions of priests.” When a nation decided at some point to give power to a single person, monarchy was formed. Such concentration of power, however, was not necessarily the result of a legitimate consent, since it often happened through the tumultuous process of dissension and factional struggles.<sup>95</sup> The monarch would employ a vile political machine:

Observing the spirit of egotism that divided mankind, the ambitious adroitly fomented this spirit. He flattered the vanity of one, excited the jealousy of another, favoured the avarice of a third, enflamed the resentment of a fourth, and irritated the passions of all. By opposing interests or prejudices, he sowed the seeds of divisions and hatred. He promised to the poor the spoil of the rich, to the rich the subjugation of the poor; threatened this man by that, one class by another; and isolating the citizens by distrust, he formed his own strength out of their weakness, and imposed on them the yoke of opinion, the knots of which they tied with their own hands. By means of the army he extorted contributions; by the contributions he disposed of the army; by the corresponding play of money and places, he bound all the people with a chain that was not to be broken, and the states which they composed fell into the slow decay of despotism.<sup>96</sup>

Kings could not be trusted; monarchy was not the solution to maintaining free states, either. No regime seemed able to avoid decline. When faced with this dilemma, Volney did not opt for a mixed government; he did not reflect extensively on it, since the crucial question for him seemed to lie elsewhere. To Volney, the same degenerative mechanism was at play in all forms of government, because man was everywhere an animal of passions: “an eternal circle of vicissitudes sprang from an eternal circle of passions.”<sup>97</sup> Taming passions and fostering reason became vital for preserving liberty.

On the international level, victory and conquest brought misfortune: the winners were not “rendered happier.” Rather, their condition became “instead more upsetting and more miserable day by day,” because liberty disappeared as states grew larger.<sup>98</sup> Provinces were united to form a kingdom, and kingdoms an empire. In the growth of states, Volney identified two adverse effects of peace and liberty. First, the balance of

---

<sup>95</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 65–66.

<sup>96</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 67.

<sup>97</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 67.

<sup>98</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 68–69.

power was broken as some states grew larger and some did not. Second, the empire that triumphed over its small neighbours could not maintain strength in proportion to its expanded conquest because large states needed complex administration that fostered secret conduct, which in turn resulted in corruption. In large states, as the high officials governed by “violence and fraud,” the people saw them as “public enemies” and the “harmony between the governors and the governed was lost.”<sup>99</sup>

Volney explained how regaining peace and liberty was not easy once states fell into war and despotism. Despots tried to harness great developments of power within and beyond the nation lest they be opposed. As taxes increased to feed the despot's taste for luxury and glory, the poor had to abandon the land and sell it to the rich. The ancient empires thus became populated with wealthy men who feared the people. The number of citizens who took interest in the defence of the state greatly decreased, and mercenaries had to be recruited. Divided against one another while supporting their own governments' vice, these nations enfeebled themselves and one another because the true power of the state invariably languished as liberty waned.<sup>100</sup>

This “historical” reading illuminates the fact that, for Volney, the domestic and the international were inseparable: perpetual slavery and war went together while human ignorance and passion faced with stupefied awe such despotic products of forced labour as the pyramids or the gardens of Versailles. When strong neighbouring nations finally invaded, empires fell, anarchy returned, and the cycles of history started anew.

Standing on the shoulders of the Enlightenment historians who regarded medieval and Christian “darkness” with regret and contempt,<sup>101</sup> Volney thought that religion made the problem more severe by seizing upon two weak points of humans' passions: fear and hope. The hell-fearing religious man “oppressed his senses and hated his life; self-denying and anti-social morality plunged the nations into the inertia of death.”<sup>102</sup> For hope:

Because the provident Nature endowed the heart of man with an inexhaustible hope, when his desires for happiness were miscarried on this

---

<sup>99</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 68–72.

<sup>100</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 70–72.

<sup>101</sup> Chastellux, Giannone, Voltaire, Hume, and Rousseau are but a few examples of numerous intellectuals in the Enlightenment who held this position. The best illustration is found in Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2: *Narratives of Civil Government*.

<sup>102</sup> Volney, *Les ruines*, 74–75.