

Chapter 2

Decadence and Roman Historiography

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Decadence and historiography have an uneasy relationship. The word itself does not readily feel at home in historical accounts, but its definition, ‘the process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition’ (*OED*), can be situated far more comfortably as an idea connected to historical change. As Neville Morley explains, the idea of decadence ‘rests on a sense of difference between the past and the present, and a sense of meaning in that difference’ (Morley, 2005: 573). Decay supplies the difference and immorality the meaning. However, the word still poses problems. It is too metaphorical, too subjective, and too caught up with artistic and aesthetic movements. Instead, historians have preferred the term ‘decline’ as it can apparently be quantified in a way metaphorical decadence cannot. Graphs, for example, can show population change to support an argument for ‘decline’; ‘decadence’ does not easily sit as its synonym (Morley, 2005: 574–77). Yet, while retaining seemingly objective language, the reasons for the change can still be explained using the semantic field that defines decadence. In other words, historians can have it both ways; a discussion of decline can employ the rhetoric of immorality without having to use the offending word ‘decadence’ outright.

Of course, not all decline is related to decadence. Decline can be caused by a wide range of factors that have nothing whatsoever to do with morality or its lack. What’s more, the reverse is also true. Decadence can exist in a society without causing its deterioration on a grand scale. The question of whether or not to link decadence and historical decline in the story of Rome has, over many centuries, produced conflicting answers. Setting the tone in the late first century BCE by

following such predecessors as Sempronius Asellio and Sallust, Livy described an idealised past in order to draw a contrast with an immoral, inferior present. The culprit was *libido dominandi*, the lust for domination that led the Romans down the path of imperial expansion to wealth and luxury (Sallust, 2013: p. 33). Like Livy, Tacitus saw decline all around him. The imperial period, in contrast to the republic, ‘was thus an altered world, and of the old, unspoilt Roman character not a trace lingered’ (Tacitus, 1931: p. 249). There were pockets of respite, but the overall picture was one of an empire subject to the whims of a sovereign monarch, instead of one administered by a wise council of elders (i.e., the elected magistrates and the Roman senate).

Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus firmly fixed the relationship between decadence and historical decline for the transition of the Roman republic to the principate, but the problem for later historiographers was that Rome continued to stand under the emperors for another four centuries. As a result, the ‘fall’ of the Roman empire in the west—a series of attacks by barbarian tribes that took place during the fifth century CE—appeared to be a better candidate for the paradigm case of decline’s climax. Despite the range of explanations presented in late-antique accounts, by the end of the eighteenth century, it seemed indisputable that Rome declined and collapsed because of weakness caused by internal decadence. Not everyone could agree on where and when in Roman history to find that decadence, but it was definitely there somewhere. That was the case, at least, until the development of new methodologies changed the way in which historiography was practised. The rise of a scientific history in the nineteenth century complicated responses to Rome’s fall; on the one side, Bartold Georg Niebuhr and his followers promoted a providentialist view, and on the other Theodor Mommsen advocated a positivist approach, inspiring John Bagnell Bury to reject the relationship between decadence and decline

altogether. Thus, decadence fell out of favour with Roman historiographers—a situation that remains, broadly speaking, the case today.

i. Progress vs. Decline

The ‘fall’ of Rome has not always been straightforwardly connected with either decadence or decline.¹ In the immediate responses to the sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths in August 410, two dominant approaches emerged: that barbarians entering Rome for the first time since 390 BCE marked a catastrophe caused by decline (Zosimus), or that the sack was a relatively minor event and should not be over-dramatised (Augustine and Orosius). The choice of approach was not dictated by religion, *per se*. Jerome’s reaction from Bethlehem fits better with the pagan Zosimus’ than the Christian Augustine and Orosius’ (e.g. Jerome, 1893: p. 252). However, Orosius and Augustine engaged far more with the historical ideas of progress and decline in their extended works than Jerome in his short epistolary and prefatory statements. These historical ideas were shaped by their religion.

For the Byzantine historian Zosimus (writing in the early sixth century but using Eunapius’ and Olympiodorus’ contemporary histories as his sources), Rome was in a deep state of decline.² Zosimus starts his *Historia Nova* with a quick summary of the fifth century BCE to the third century CE (dealt with in a mere eight paragraphs) before proceeding with a more detailed account of events up to 410. Two key ideas come from Zosimus’ history: that Rome’s decline began with the fall of the republic, and that the immorality of Christianity accelerated the process.

¹ The year 476 CE, the exile of Romulus Augustulus, is traditionally used to date the ‘fall’ of Rome in the west. However, Croke has shown that 476 was proposed as a turning point by Byzantines in the sixth century (1983: 103-19). For the period’s contemporaries, particularly those in the west, 410 is the more significant date.

² Eunapius’ history ends in 404, and Olympiodorus’ picks up in 407 (Liebeschuetz, 2003: pp. 206-18). Both these texts are now lost.

In his first idea, Zosimus was not alone. We have already seen Tacitus lamenting the end of an idealised republic as it slid into a degenerate monarchy. But, Zosimus' history placed this slide firmly in the context of the sack of Rome.³ He begins, 'the civil wars between Sulla and Marius and then between Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus destroyed the government, and abolishing the aristocracy, they chose Octavianus [Augustus] as sole ruler' (Zosimus, 1982: p. 2). For Zosimus, the principate was autocratic even when a good emperor reigned. When an immoderate man came to power, the growth of decline was rapid: '[If he] became a tyrant, throwing the government into confusion, overlooking crimes, selling justice and regarding subjects as slaves, then everything would prove that a ruler's power without restraint is a universal calamity' (pp. 2–3). Unsurprisingly, when decline tips over into fall, Zosimus blames an emperor (and not just for his Christianity): 'In plain terms, Constantine was the origin and beginning of the present destruction of empire' (p. 39).

Zosimus' second idea saw Christianity and its abuse act as indicators of decadence and deterioration. Here, he targets the monks:

They renounce lawful marriage and fill populous colleges of bachelors in cities and villages: they are useless for war or any other service to the state. Moreover, from that time to this, they have taken over most of the land and, under the pretext of giving everything to the poor, have reduced almost everyone else to beggary. (p. 111)

³ Fragments suggest that Olympiodorus did not condemn individuals on religious grounds alone (Liebeschuetz, 2003: p. 205).

The monks, by following their religious rules properly, flouted Roman convention regarding service to the state. Even worse, when they yielded to corruption, the land and power they commanded meant they caused all of Roman society to suffer. Again, the point is not that Zosimus came up with this idea (he did not; e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus, 1939: pp. 19–21), but that he introduced it into a context of decline and fall. This passage appears in the midst of the events of 403–404 as Zosimus recounts the build-up to a failed attempt to take Rome by the Goths and the Germans. In later centuries, Gibbon in particular found these arguments persuasive.

Orosius and Augustine saw things differently.⁴ Christians were already developing their own version of Roman history as seen through a religious lens. One noticeable difference was to pinpoint Augustus' reign, which saw the birth of Christ, as marking the beginning of an era of progress, not of decline. Christian historians such as Eusebius understood the imperial period as one of peace and prosperity, one that allowed the fledgling religion to flourish (Van Nuffelen, 2012: pp. 192-4). Progress culminated in Christianity's triumph under the emperor Constantine. The story is one of ascent into morality, not of descent into decadence (pp. 6-8, 191).

After Rome was sacked, Augustine and Orosius encountered a disturbing response from the people they met: Rome had incurred the wrath of its traditional gods by turning to Christianity (e.g. Augustine, 1972: pp. 44-5). In the months and years following August 410, Augustine developed his own theological response to the accusation in his sermons and philosophical tour de force, *City of God*. But he also wanted to refute the claim on historical grounds; this task he entrusted to his pupil Orosius who in 416–417 wrote *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*. Both agreed that corruption in Rome could be found long before the fall of

⁴ While Augustine did not write history, his views informed both Orosius and later historiography.

the republic and the rise of Augustus. However, their opinions on what happened after the birth of Christ diverge—Orosius saw a form of Eusebian-like progression, whereas Augustine refuted the need to take into account historical progress or decline on earth at all. What mattered was the individual's personal relationship to God.

Unlike Sallust or Livy, Augustine and Orosius saw decadence right from the foundation of Rome. Romulus was a prime example; he committed fratricide to become Rome's first king, and then instigated the abduction of Sabine women to provide wives for Roman men. Neither of these acts were 'moral' or 'just' (Orosius, 2010: p. 78; Augustine, 1972: p. 66). More importantly, Romulus' corruption infected the rest of the city: '[the crime] certainly should have been avenged, and therefore the whole community was guilty, because the whole community took no heed of it. And that was worse than fratricide; it was patricide' (Augustine, 1972: p. 94). Corruption continued to colour Rome's history as the kingdom gave way to the republic. Augustine uses Cicero's *De Republica* to show that the Romans (or, at least, Cicero) knew what the ideal republic was but could not achieve it (pp. 72-5). Condemning the Roman republic was not problematic for Augustine and Orosius because their framework for history was vastly different from, say, that of Zosimus. The point to which they built was the birth of Christ, not the sack of Rome. In other words, the traditional model of morality giving way to immorality (Livy, Tacitus, Zosimus, etc.) was discarded. Before Christianity, corruption was constant; regal and republican Rome had no high point from which to decline and, until the incarnation, no way to improve.

At this point, the two authors separate. Orosius took the view that Christianity brought overall progress. For him, the empire since the reign of Augustus and the arrival of Christ had certainly improved, and while war and strife continued to occur, they lasted for a shorter time

than before (Orosius, 2010: pp. 322, 327). Emperors could still be tyrants and Christians might face periods of persecution, but there was an attitude of moral advancement brought about by the church that the sack of Rome could not halt. In fact, the city had never been in any real danger as Alaric, the Gothic king who led the siege, was a Christian himself. Instead of causing death and destruction *in toto*, the barbarians helped believers to escape, punishing only heathens (Van Nuffelen, 2012: pp. 182–84). Indeed, the barbarians even made better masters, offering ‘freedom in poverty’ rather than ‘trouble and taxation under Rome’ (Orosius, 2010: p. 407). In Orosius’ account, progress could continue so long as the empire remained Christian. If Christianity were abandoned, Rome would fall (p. 54). But that was not what had happened in 410.

Where Orosius advocates historical progress, Augustine explains the futility of focusing on the earthly city at all. Since the incarnation, Christ had acted as a mediator for Christians to gain access to the heavenly city (Augustine, 1972: pp. 443-44). Everything other than the individual’s relationship with God was secondary: ‘in the one history of the world there is [for Augustine] so little that counts: creation, fall, redemption, judgement, that is all’ (Bittner, 1998: p. 356). In the story of the earthly city, there can be nothing but sin, and redemption is an existential, not a historical process (Pocock, 2003: p. 104). This perspective accounts for Augustine’s somewhat abrupt message to his congregation in Carthage following the sack: ‘But the retort is made to me: “It is manifest that God did not spare the city.” My answer is: “No, it is not at all manifest to me”’ (Augustine, 1955: p. 57). He reminds them of God’s destruction of Sodom, from which no one escaped alive. From Rome, on the other hand, many escaped and later returned (p. 57). Any Christian who did die was better off at peace in heaven (Augustine 1994: pp. 207-8). Since Rome still stood, sweeping notions of progress, decadence, and decline did not

resonate with Augustine—only whether or not the individual person knew the wisdom of God (Clark, 2014: 35-52).

Orosius and Augustine's arguments commanded great authority in the Middle Ages, when their works were at their most popular point (Formisano, 2013: p. 153). Instead of an empire that fell, medieval writers understood the events of the fifth century in retrospect as a transfer of power (*translatio imperii*) by way of the papacy from the western Romans to the eastern Romans (the Greeks) to the Franks (Pocock, 2003: p. 99). Otto von Freising's *Chronicle or History of the Two Cities* (1143–1147, revised 1157) provides an example of such a view. To reinforce continuity, Otto contends that the Romans and the Franks shared a common ancestor, the Trojans (Von Freising, 1928: p. 309, n. 5). Also, like Augustine, Otto is not concerned with the concept of historical decline. At the end of book four (which takes the reader up to roughly 476), a turning point has certainly been reached—a diminished Rome hands over power to a rising Francia—but this is a mere distraction that draws attention away from contemplating the heavenly city (pp. 320-21). Rome did not succumb to decadence, as sin was always a feature of the earthly city, but rather the empire came to the end of its natural lifespan, as Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Macedonia had done before (pp. 318, 151).

ii. Embedding Decadence and Decline

Orosius' and Augustine's impact was not to last. Humanists and enlightenment thinkers saw little value in a version of history focused through a Christian lens. For historians like Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo, *translatio imperii* did not work because the continuation of the church was not sufficient to show progression from one state to the next. Moreover, Renaissance Italy saw a renewed interest in the nature of Rome's government as many of its historiographers came from the small, republican states that were formed following the collapse of the medieval empire.

Thus, in works such as Biondo's *Decades of History from the Decline of the Roman Empire* (1438–1452), decline and fall resurfaced. Biondo retells the familiar story: 'it is no wonder that Rome, [...] pride increasing with power and vices overcoming wealth, should have been torn by civil wars, and at last in about its seven hundredth year bowed to the lordship of a single Caesar' (Pocock, 2003: p. 189).

Decadence was not truly embedded, however, until enlightenment historians and philosophers began to explore in detail the species of decline that caused Rome's fall. Chief amongst these were Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Gibbon. The Frenchmen were the pioneers of philosophic history; a history not caught up in facts and footnotes, but one that considered larger questions of civilisation and humanity through, for example, religion, law, and trade (Momigliano, 1954: 452-3). Voltaire pursued these themes in his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations* (1756) and Montesquieu in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and of their Decline* (1734, rev. 1748) and *Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Gibbon used their works extensively.

Fighting against the apologetic Christian history and the triumphalism of his predecessors (Volpilhac-Auger, 2009: p. 143), Voltaire locates Roman decadence not in the reigns of emperors, even the worst emperors, but in the corruption of Christianity. Taking Nero's punishment of innocent Christians falsely accused of setting fire to Rome as an example, he mutates Tacitus' criticism of the emperor's extreme cruelty into a reason to vindicate Nero (Tacitus, 1937: p. 285; Voltaire, 2009: pp. 166, 504). The Jews and the people of Rome threw the blame onto the Christians, and Nero, who did not set the fire either, acted only as required in order to keep the peace. Instead, for Voltaire decadence lies in a church allowed to grow in relative peace, that has lapsed into complacency and corruption. He refutes the seriousness of the

pagan persecutions (pointing out that the Christian persecutions of each other were far more ferocious), and accuses Christians of descending into *le luxe, la mollesse, l'avarice* [luxury, effeminacy, avarice] (Voltaire, 2009: p. 175). Voltaire singles out Rome's first Christian emperor as directly responsible for the fall (unlike Zosimus, because of his Christianity): 'De savoir s'il [Constantin] fut cause de la ruine de l'empire, c'est une recherche digne de votre esprit. Il paraît évident qu'il fit la décadence de Rome' [To know if [Constantine] was to blame for the fall of the empire is a worthwhile pursuit. It seems clear that he caused the decline of Rome] (p. 204; editors' translation). As Rome falls, Voltaire continues to emphasise the religion's decadence: 'C'est qu'il y a de déplorable, c'est qu'à peine la religion chrétienne fut sur le trône, que la sainteté en fut profanée par des chrétiens qui se livrèrent à la soif de la vengeance, lors même que leur triomphe devait leur inspirer l'esprit de paix' [What is so deplorable is that, no sooner had the Christian religion taken up the throne than its sanctity was profaned by Christians who set about quenching their thirst for vengeance, even though their triumph should have imbued them with a spirit of peace.] (p. 205; editors' translation).

Montesquieu's views did not follow Voltaire's; the former mentions Christianity rarely (Montesquieu, 1965: pp. 175-6). Montesquieu's main concerns were to warn those in power against despotism (1965: p. 94; 1989: pp. 28-9) and to warn his own country against the sort of imperial expansion that caused Rome to decline and fall (Rahe, 2011: 134; 2005: 75). In *Considerations*, he contemplates the various indicators of Rome's decay: citizenship rights following the social war, inadequate provision of laws, moral corruption, and overuse of auxiliary troops. But all these indicators hinge on one overarching problem: 'an empire founded by arms needs to be sustained by arms' (Montesquieu, 1965: p. 170). While the cruel antics of despotic emperors facilitated Rome's laxity—Caligula, Nero, Commodus, and Caracalla were all mad

populists with a love of luxury and bloodshed—their real contribution to decline was to beat down civil power to such an extent that no emperor was in the position to control the military that controlled the empire (1965: pp. 137, 139). Here Montesquieu echoes Tacitus: following the death of Nero, the ‘secret of empire’—that real power lay with the military outside of Rome—was revealed (Tacitus, 1925: p. 9).⁵

Empire is the key theme for Montesquieu. For a while, Rome maintained greatness through prudence and audacity in war, and through impeccable statecraft (Montesquieu, 1965: pp. 33-41). However, as time passed and men’s ambitions grew, rapid expansion began to yield unforeseen consequences. Rome started to lose *l’esprit de citoyens* [the citizen spirit], ‘a single love of liberty, a single hatred of tyranny’ (p. 92). Among the soldiers, long years spent on military campaigns resulted in loyalty to their general, the man who allowed them to plunder, above their city (pp. 74, 91). In Rome itself, the populace had become disparate and distracted through the extension of citizenship to subjugated people. The people ‘no longer saw Rome with the same eyes, [...] the same love of country’ (p. 93; De Senarclens, 2003: pp. 161-5). Rome’s decline was caused not by its wealth or a love of luxury (Montesquieu, 1965: p. 98), but by a crisis of identity caused by diversity.⁶ Here Montesquieu departs from the ancient evidence; usually, imperial expansion caused decay through the extreme spending of vast riches and individuals’ unhealthy desire for empire (Lintott, 1972: 626-38). In fact, Tacitus suggests the opposite to Montesquieu’s thesis: luxury had long been the ruin of Rome’s traditional families, whereas men coming to Rome from Italian towns and the provinces had not yet been corrupted by Rome’s luxurious ways, and actively rejected such immoral practices (Tacitus, 1931: p. 611).

⁵ Montesquieu used a range of classical writers (Livy, Sallust, Appian, Vegetius, etc.), but Tacitus seems to be the most influential for both his ideas and his form (Volpilhac-Augier, 1985).

⁶ Montesquieu’s ‘problem’ of diversity is a consistent theme across his works (Courtney, 1988: pp. 61-81).

Montesquieu, on the other hand, used Rome to deliver a lesson in the shortcomings of universal monarchy to such monarchs as Louis XIV, who dreamt of conquest (Rahe, 2005: 89). The world did not share universal values; even if luxury could be tamed, the same regional and cultural differences that brought down Rome would bring down any aspiring successor. Montesquieu's decadence via diversity coloured decline and fall in a very different hue.

All this gave Edward Gibbon much food for thought. Like Voltaire and Montesquieu, he saw value in the philosophic method, but was not willing to sacrifice facts and footnotes in the way of (particularly) Voltaire. Gibbon knew through and through the ancient sources available to him, and he had sympathy for the approach of the older generation of antiquarians (Momigliano, 1954: 452). Thus, his multi-volume *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789), covering the period from the reign of Commodus (180–192) to the siege of Constantinople (1453), contained elements of both philosophic and traditional history. As Gibbon's methodology was broad, so his results were wide-ranging. Like Voltaire, he contemplated Christianity's effects, and like Montesquieu, he lamented the expansion of empire at all costs.

Gibbon's most famous epigram seemingly sums up his thoughts about Rome's decline and fall; his project describes 'the triumph of Barbarism and religion' (Gibbon, 1909–1914: vol. vii, p. 321).⁷ However, enemy invasion by barbarians is the result, not the cause, of decline. Rome was already deteriorating when the barbarians turned their attention to the borders (vol. i, p. 210). Regarding religion, Gibbon expands on Zosimus' views, but with a sympathetic twist that would not be found in the works of Voltaire. Christianity practised properly had an indirect role in decline because it flouted Roman values. Bishops with the best of intentions 'preached doctrines of patience and pusillanimity', but this meant 'the last remains of the military spirit

⁷ Gibbon takes this phrase from Voltaire (2009: p. 212).

were buried in the cloister' (vol. iv, p. 175). Just as serious were the theological squabbles of religious factions that distracted emperors who should have been focusing on the army.⁸ But here is the twist: Christianity's role in decline is tempered by its ability to improve society. For example, as a 'pure and humble religion', primitive Christianity helped to curb otherwise rampant Roman luxury (vol. ii, p. 1; vol. iv, p. 81). However, this tempering effect was not to last as centuries of abuse stripped the religion of its primitivism: 'Prosperity had relaxed the nerves of discipline. Fraud, envy, and malice prevailed in every congregation' (vol. ii, pp. 125-6). When Christians gain power, the effects of abuse are acutely felt. Describing Theodosius' demolition of pagan temples (c. 381 CE), Gibbon compares zealous Christians to barbarians:

But, in almost every province of the Roman world, an army of [Christian] fanatics, without authority and without discipline, invaded peaceful inhabitants; and the ruin of the fairest structures of antiquity still displays the ravages of *those* Barbarians, who alone had time and inclination to execute such laborious destruction. (vol. iii, p. 209)

Yet, while Gibbon's notion of decadence certainly includes Christianity, in the grand scheme of his work it plays a relatively small part when compared to other indicators of immorality.⁹

The far larger part of the story of decadence in Gibbon's *History* is familiar from Montesquieu's: the expansion of empire. To Gibbon it was 'simple and obvious' that 'prosperity

⁸ However, Gibbon does concede that the barbarians' adoption of Christianity also served to mollify them (vol. iv, p. 175).

⁹ Gibbon's depiction of Christianity is both the most famous and the most misunderstood part of his work (Womersley, 1997: pp. 190-216; Pocock, 2000: pp. 48-68).

ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and [...] the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight' (vol. iv, pp. 173-4). The Romans simply were not strong enough to stand up to the onslaught of riches and luxury that empire afforded them. Individual emperors did not help (for example, Commodus, Septimius Severus, Constantine) but, as Gibbon set the scene for Alaric's invasion of Rome, he returned to the laxity of Roman society as a whole. This is where Gibbon and Montesquieu part ways. *La diversité* in the peoples who made up society was not to blame for the weakening of the military and citizen spirit, but outright luxury was. Far more than his French predecessors, Gibbon returned to the Roman sources, in particular to Sallust's claim that the end of Rome's wars with Carthage paved the way for luxury and idleness even amongst the city's greatest men (Sallust, 2013: pp. 259-61). Gibbon compares the 'heroes who had repulsed the arms of Hannibal' to the late-republican 'opulent nobles of an immense capital, who were never excited by the pursuit of military glory, and seldom engaged in the occupations of civil government, [and] naturally resigned their leisure to the business and amusements of private life' (Gibbon, 1909–1914: vol. iii, pp. 306, 310). The Romans corrupted themselves with an *a priori* desire for luxury that could be realised as Rome's size and wealth multiplied. For Gibbon, the Romans themselves bore the brunt of the blame for the decadence that caused decline and fall, not the Christian or provincial 'other'. His meaning was clear: using Rome as an example, Gibbon advocated a cautious approach to imperialism (one at odds with his contemporaries) as his own (British) empire continued to form colonies and strive towards expansion (Black, 1995: 457).

iii. Detaching Decadence

Gibbon's work was not lacking in impact. Upon publication of the first volume, he faced substantial criticism for his views on Christianity, and earned himself the label 'the infidel writer'

(Anon., 1863: 504). However, his work was also the standard against which all other histories of Rome for at least the following century were judged. Charles Merivale was so conscious of Gibbon's achievement that he finished his *History of the Romans* (1850–1862) at the point at which Gibbon started, the end of Marcus Aurelius' reign. That said, one of the most substantial criticisms levelled against Gibbon remains his weakness in source criticism; he generally took the accounts of ancient writers at face value (Momigliano, 1954: 450-1). Further, through no fault of his own, Gibbon did not have access to the numerous catalogues of archaeological inscriptions that would be edited and published in the centuries after his death. New sources and a new era produced a modern type of professional historian who made extensive use of material evidence and rejected plot-driven narrative. Thus, Gibbon's history became the primary target for the next 'scientific' generation.

As Linda Dowling has shown, scientific historians eventually came to reject the idea of decline via decadence (1985: 599-60). But it took some time to arrive at this conclusion. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the German historian Niebuhr's *Römische Geschichte* (1812, rev. 1827–1832) explored the history of Rome from its earliest period to the republic. Niebuhr was highly and widely praised for his sophisticated source criticism (in particular, of Livy's history), but he still composed the sort of providentialist story reminiscent of Gibbon. By showing that Rome's earliest period could be understood historically (instead of as a series of myths), the city could enjoy a 'youth' before its maturity and old age (Dowling, 1985: 586). Niebuhr readily adopted the language of decline: 'At the close of the time which I purpose to embrace [the Augustan period], the nation resolves itself into a fermenting mass, in which the form, now that the soul has abandoned it, daily becomes more indistinct and decays' (Niebuhr, 1828: p. 1). Niebuhr had some influential followers, including Thomas Arnold, Charles Merivale,

Charles Kingsley, and Thomas Hodgkin. As the century progressed, their teleological accounts clashed against the (supposedly) ‘colourless’ and systematic history of the young Mommsen (Dowling, 1985: 594).¹⁰

Mommsen held himself to extremely high standards and refused to write a ‘story’ of Rome that produced an uncomplicated plot. However, the clash with Niebuhr and his followers ends there; Mommsen shows us that the scientific method did not necessarily demand the exclusion of decadence and decline. As Demandt summarises, ‘he saw nothing in [late antiquity] beyond overthrow, failure, decadence [*Zerfall*] and protracted death-throes’ (1996: p. 10). Mommsen’s willingness to take the long view of Rome’s decline is evident from his review of the state of affairs after the death of the dictator Sulla (78 BCE):

The sun of freedom with all its endless store of blessings was constantly drawing nearer to its setting, and the twilight was settling over the very world that was still so brilliant. It was no accidental catastrophe which patriotism and genius might have warded off; it was ancient social evils – at the bottom of all, the ruin of the middle class by the slave proletariat – that brought destruction on the Roman commonwealth. (Mommsen, 1867: vol. iii, p. 394)

‘Social evils’ capture the language of decadence but, as the republic falls, Mommsen suggests there might still be hope for recovery:

¹⁰ There is, however, much to recommend Mommsen’s prose (Mattenklott, 2005: pp. 163-80, esp. pp. 176-7).

[S]uch calm considerations do not mould history; it is not reason, it is passion alone, that builds for the future. The Romans had just to wait and to see how long their commonwealth would continue unable to live and unable to die, and whether it would ultimately find its master and, so far as might be possible, its regenerator, in a man of mighty gifts, or would collapse in misery and weakness. (vol. iii, p. 394)

His question is rhetorical; collapse in misery and weakness is, of course, the answer.

While Mommsen's long-awaited volume of Roman imperial history remained unfinished upon his death in 1903, the discovery and publication of his students' lecture notes by Alexander and Barbara Demandt now give us a re-constructed version of views. As Mommsen turns his attention to Alaric, the Goths, and the early fifth century, he says:

We can similarly observe how the Goths – for example, in the administration of justice, or the levying of taxes – simply worked according to Roman models. They fell victim to the same fate as all uncivilized peoples who conquer civilized Empires, and which to a certain extent the Romans themselves succumbed to in relation to the Greeks. The warm baths, the villas, the good food, luxury in general, as well as the poetry and rhetoric, the science and art, all affected them – they became Romanized. (Mommsen, 1996: p. 494)

Despite his advocacy of the scientific method, Mommsen could not bring himself to revise the history of Roman decadence and decline (Demandt, 1995: 24-39). Influencing his decision was his view that history had a pedagogical purpose: 'History [...] is not a toy, but a serious matter,

and the history of that period [Diocletian and the tetrarchy], in particular, is of the greatest importance for the immediate present' (Mommsen, 1996: p. 368). As a member of the Prussian parliament (1873–1879) and of the Reichstag (1881–1884) during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm I (the man who had founded the German empire) Mommsen, like Gibbon, urged his contemporaries to take heed of Rome's example.

Bury was more willing to change the script. In direct contrast to Mommsen, he refused to write a history that would allow British imperialists to continue to find lessons in the Roman past: 'Historical parallels are almost always superficial, and, like classical quotations, useful to embellish an oration, not to determine a policy' (Bury, 1896: 645). Bury sums up neatly the historiographical advances and pitfalls of his age, '[I]t was not till the scientific period began that laxity in representing facts came to be branded as criminal. [...] But a stricter standard of truth and new methods for the purpose of ascertaining truth were not enough to detach history from her old moorings' (1903: p. 7). In his *Later Roman Empire* (1889, rev. 1923), he identified 'a series of contingent events', and not inevitable 'general causes', as the explanation for the empire's 'gradual collapse' (Bury, 1923: vol. i, p. 311). The contingent events were: the movement of the Huns into the empire, which occurred independently of Roman strength or weakness; the death of Valens at Hadrianople (378); the death of Theodosius I (395); and finally that Theodosius' son and heir was a 'feeble-minded boy'. None of these events, says Bury, had anything to do with the condition of empire, moral or otherwise (vol. i, p. 311). That is not to say that Bury did not see immorality in ancient Rome, he just did not consider such practices as Nero's orgies and Domitian's dinners as symptoms of decay. In other words, Romans did indulge in bouts of excess, but this had absolutely nothing to do with why the western Roman empire fell (Bury, 1896: 645). As far as decadence was concerned, Bury's was a triumph of the scientific method.

All that remains is to consider where things stand in the present day. Decline, fall, and the 410 sack of Rome are still the subjects of considerable debate (Van Nuffelen, 2015: 322-29).

However, the argument is no longer about where to find decay, but whether we should see the events of the fifth century as 'fall' at all. Historians led by Peter Brown's *World of Late Antiquity* have seen the later Roman empire as a period of transition rather than collapse. Walter Goffart (2006), for example, maintained that the so-called invasion of Rome should be understood in terms of migration and that most Germanic tribes simply integrated themselves into an already changing Roman world. Not all agree with this school of thought, but even those who do not still keep decadence at a distance from decline. In 2005, Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins both dedicated books to the case for decline and fall, but neither were tempted to identify any sort of moral decay as the cause (Heather, 2005: pp. xii-xiii; Ward-Perkins, 2005: pp. 179-83).

Decadence, once so firmly entrenched as a species of decline, no longer occupies a place in the history of its paradigm case. Perhaps the relationship of decadence with history is approaching a decisive fall of its own.