UNIVERSAL HISTORY FROM COUNTER-REFORMATION TO ENLIGHTENMENT

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Historical scholarship often relies on intermittent adjustments rather than radical innovation. Through a close reading of three different universal histories published between 1690 and 1760, this essay argues that the secularization of world history in the age of Enlightenment was an incomplete and often unintended process. Nonetheless, one of the most significant changes in this period was the centering of universal history in Europe, a process that accompanied the desacralization of the story of man. Once human progress was embraced as a universal process, the story of the development of the arts and sciences gradually eclipsed the non-European cultures that had formerly played a central role in the Christian narrative of human history.

The closest equivalent we have today to what was once called universal history is world history. From William McNeill’s Rise of the West to Jared Diamond’s Guns, Germs, and Steel to the textbooks we use in our classrooms, world history is now a vital part of the general public’s understanding of history itself. What we call world history, however, is concerned with precisely those processes that ultimately defeated universal history. We begin our world histories with the Paleolithic era, not Genesis. We chart the rise of river-valley civilizations in Mesopotamia rather than describe the moral breakdown of society before the Deluge. We reconstruct commercial trade routes and the system of slavery rather than trace the migration of Noah’s descendents all over the globe. In our modern account of what gave rise to and shaped human societies, anthropology, geology, and biology have replaced the biblical narrative. But this is already a well-known story.¹

Or is it? The epic tale of modern science defeating sacred universal history does not capture the manifold and important changes that took place within

European universal history between 1500 and 1800. For one thing, there was an extraordinary range of universal history projects in the early modern period. From publishers’ syndicates to didactic epitomes and almanacs, from erudite “libraries” to the philosophic histories of the Enlightenment, universal history fulfilled a wide variety of intellectual, political, and cultural needs.  

This essay focuses on three universal histories published in the crucial decades between the seventeenth century and the eighteenth. The first was written by an ecclesiastical antiquary living in Rome. The second was a massive work cobbled together by a group of booksellers in Grub Street London. The third was written by a French lawyer who took the older erudite model of universal history and put it in service to an Enlightenment narrative of civilization and progress. In looking at three different examples of universal history in this period, coming from three very different contexts, I not only want to offer the genealogy of a genre that has—until recently—been consigned to the dustbin of historical scholarship. I also want to offer an alternative way of telling the story of secularization.

In his 1935 La Crise de la conscience européenne, Paul Hazard was the first to argue that a dramatic intellectual and philosophical transformation took place in Europe in the final decades of the seventeenth century. I would love to believe Hazard’s pithy formulation—“one day, the French people, almost to a man, were thinking like Bossuet. The day after, they were thinking like Voltaire.”  

Intellectual revolutions have an undeniable glamour, but change, especially in scholarship, comes more slowly than we might think. In fact, if we look at what happens to universal history between the seventeenth century and the eighteenth, between the waning of the Counter-Reformation and the beginning of the Enlightenment, we find no moment of dramatic rupture. What we find instead are local shifts and adjustments to a remarkably resilient genre. Recent historians of the Enlightenment have revived Hazard’s thesis, especially his view of secularization as a radical and deliberate program within European intellectual culture. No doubt this was true in certain cases, but we should not become too captivated by the idea of subversive rebellion as an engine of change.


The secularization of universal history in this period was incomplete and often inadvertent, but it was no less powerful in changing the way people regarded the history of the world. One of the most significant changes that occurred in the eighteenth century was the centering of universal history in Europe. Christian universal histories generally followed the Augustinian dictum that “times and events must be considered not from the standpoint of one place only, but by taking the whole world into account.” This need to take the whole world into account became vital once again during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries following the Reformation and the discovery of the New World, both of which challenged the exclusivity and unity of Western Christendom. Once Jesuit missionaries began sending reports and objects back home, Italian (as well as French and Dutch) world histories expanded beyond the traditional frame to include the peoples of China, Japan, India, and the Americas. However, once progress was embraced as a universal process in the eighteenth century and Europe became its epicenter, the story of the development of the arts and sciences eclipsed the non-European cultures that had formerly played a central role in the Christian narrative of human history. In other words, the centering of universal history in Europe went hand in hand with the desacralization of the story of man.

I. UNIVERSAL HISTORY IN COUNTER-REFORMATION ROME

Educated first by Jesuits and then by astronomers at the University of Padua, Francesco Bianchini (1662–1729) spent his entire life serving the papal court. As an astronomer, Bianchini wrote the first planetary description of Venus. As president of antiquities under Pope Clement XI, he was involved in many of the public and private archaeological excavations undertaken in the city. The

Säkularisierung der universalhistorischen Auffassung: zum Wandel des Geschichtsdenkens im 16. Und 17. Jahrhundert (Göttingen, 1960). Arno Seifert, less concerned with tracking the when of secularization than the what, has suggested a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between eighteenth-century philosophical history and sacred history. In his view, “philosophical” history did not set out to replace sacred history, but to offer a different way of knowing about human history. See A. Seifert, “Von der heiligen zur philosophischen Geschichte,” in Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 68 (1986), 81–118.


empirical ideal—the emphasis on observation, experiment and the testimony of the senses—was a central feature of Roman antiquarianism in the final decades of the seventeenth century and it was the combination of empirical and sacred research that led Bianchini to compose a new universal history. In the preface to his work, Bianchini traced the origins of universal history from Cicero to Augustine and Orosius: “The same desire to understand fully the entire system of the vast City, which is the earth, and the innumerable people who have dwelled there for fifty-seven centuries engages the minds and studies of our own age to undertake new summaries.”

Bianchini cast himself as a pilgrim retracing the steps of those who went before him. Yet he was also a pioneer. In writing a new summary, Bianchini hoped to provide a solution to historical Pyrrhonism, i.e. the philosophical skepticism regarding the proper sources for historical knowledge that permeated the Republic of Letters in the last decades of the seventeenth century.

Following Richard Simon’s critical and philological scrutiny of the Old Testament in 1678, the textual foundations of biblical history seemed far less secure and many late seventeenth-century scholars hastened to repair the inadvertent damage caused by his Histoire critique du Vieux Testament. The debate over the security of the Bible led to similar concerns about profane history and the stability of its evidence. At the French Académie des inscriptions, ancient Rome became the subject of a quarrel regarding the literary sources of ancient history and whether one could trust them. According to Chantal Grell, the threat of such skepticism inspired, in France at least, both a theoretical and a pragmatic

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8 Bianchini, La istoria universale provata con monumenti e figurata con simboli degli antichi (2nd edition, Rome, 1747), 9. This and other translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.


11 On this episode see H. J. Erasmus, The Origins of Rome in Historiography from Petrarch to Perizonius (Assen, 1962).
response. Philosophers tried to map out the theoretical conditions for historical knowledge while historians and scholars created practical rules and methods that allowed them to write a proper and certain history. Due to a new awareness of the burden of evidence, many historians tried to reconcile the technical source-criticism of *érudits* with the provocative theories of historical Pyrrhonists like Bayle in order to produce an elegant and true narrative of ancient history.¹²

There was, however, another way to combat historical skepticism and to secure the narrative of sacred history—and this involved the use of non-literary evidence. “Our century,” Bianchini writes,

> turns to marbles and manuscripts of every age and province in order to separate, even in the cases of minor importance, the true from the improbable, the certain from the doubtful, and truly, with great reason this is done . . . from the immense pyramids [obelisks] and mausoleums to the small remnants of bronze, every vestige preserves within itself the majesty of truth.¹³

Coins, monuments, and inscriptions were perceived as more reliable than the literary sources for ancient history, and for this reason the ancillary fields of numismatics, epigraphy, and diplomatics developed in the crucial decades around 1700. Using such material, Bianchini believed that he could stabilize the sacred past and secure it from doubt in a critical age.

For many of Bianchini’s contemporaries in the Republic of Letters, challenging the skeptics also required the reconciliation of biblical and profane chronologies, a project that had long engaged both Protestant and Catholic scholars, from Joseph Scaliger to Isaac Newton.¹⁴ Bianchini acknowledged that the various chronologies and ancient authors all contradicted each other, but he evaded the problem of reconciliation by separating profane history from sacred history on the basis of their separate forms of evidence, one divine, the other human: “On divine matters the sources are certain and present in the majesty of faith that shines forth.”¹⁵ Bianchini’s universal history thus followed the chronology of biblical events without using the Old and New Testaments as sources. The goal, he explained,

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¹³ Bianchini, *La istoria universale*, 32.

¹⁴ It was Scaliger who first insisted that the Bible and ancient histories should be used to corroborate each other, but most scholars did not accept the full independence of chronology as a tool for reconstructing the past. See A. T. Grafton, “Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline,” *History and Theory* 14, 2 (1975), 156–85.

was to treat only “the actions of men which have come to our attention . . . through monuments and writings not divinely inspired, but naturally formed by men when they consign their memories in marble, bronze, and in books.”

Since these human memories could only confirm what was found in the Bible, Bianchini set out to reveal the divine truth of sacred history that had been distorted by the profane testimony.

In revealing this underlying sacred history, Bianchini relied heavily on the Euhemerist literature of late antiquity, itself part of the allegorical tradition whose endurance Jean Seznec documented in his classic study of the pagan gods. Euhemerus, a skeptical Greek living in Sicily during the fourth and third centuries BC, argued that the gods of mythology were mortals who had been deified rather than actual divinities. By adopting Euhemerus’ argument, the early Christian fathers were able to bring the gods down to earth and thus account for the improbable and heretical elements of pagan myth. The Euhemerist method became, as Don Cameron Allen has remarked, “one of the numerous Christian obsessions of the Renaissance, an obsession that does not fade out even when the sun of the Enlightenment rises.”

In a chapter entitled “the age of iron, war and navigation,” Bianchini interrupts his survey of antediluvian navigation to introduce a new discovery, never before published, but which he believed was connected to the universal flood. In excavating among the ruins of a monument near Rome, workers discovered a hidden vase. As president of antiquities at the time, Bianchini was able to gain access to the excavation site and to hear the story of its recovery. The workers, in searching for treasure at the bottom of the vase, had accidentally broken it in half. Inside they found a wooden box filled with dirt and a whole cache of carved human figures and amulets (Figure 1).

Bianchini believed that the ancient vase and its contents were connected to the ancient cult of Deucalion. According to Greek mythology, Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha, were the sole survivors of a flood unleashed on Thessaly by Zeus. Warned by his father, Deucalion escaped in a chest and landed safely on Parnassus. As an ecclesiastical antiquary practicing the Euhemerist method, Bianchini looked for the latent historical truth behind the pagan myth and he interpreted this unearthed antiquity as indirect evidence for the Deluge as recounted in Genesis:

If it were permitted to imagine a use for this, I would say that [the pagans] filled the vase with water, which then swelled under the wooden base of the box. [The box] would then

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16 Bianchini, La istoria universale, 13.
rise slowly to the top and thus mimic the ark rising upon the flood’s water. Moreover, perhaps the pagan priests, accustomed to keeping those mysteries a vital secret, and equally accustomed to deceiving the common people with false marvels . . . made use of this hydrostatic machine [artificio della idrostatica] to present it as a miracle [prodigio] to the ignorant plebs. They thus formed the narrowness of the neck and the base of the box of such proportions, so the digger judged, the one fit through the other.\(^{19}\)

Bianchini knew from reading Lucian and other ancient writers that such vases or jars were commonly used as part of ancient religious ceremonies: “everyone can see,” Bianchini concluded, that the vase “pertains to the history of the flood, a cult superstition established by the heathens [ab Ethnicis] through annual sacrifices to Deucalion.”\(^{20}\) The skeptical claim that cynical “pagan priests” encouraged the popular superstitions of the common people could be found in the writings of Cicero and Plutarch, but it also served as the basis for Bernard de Fontenelle’s

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\(^{19}\) Bianchini, *La istoria universale*, 184. Scholars before Bianchini had noted that the universality of the biblical Flood could be supported by reference to other flood myths in missionary reports from Cuba, Mexico, and Peru. On the struggle to come up with ingenious solutions to the problems posed by a universal flood see Allen, *Legends of Noah*, 90–91.

\(^{20}\) Bianchini, *La istoria universale*, 183.
skeptical treatise *Histoire des oracles* (1687). Bianchini may have drawn from an additional source for his interpretation of these objects. In the mid-seventeenth century a new generation of Jesuit natural philosophers had set out to show that the magical wonders of the ancients were not supernatural and impious apparitions, but ingenious artificial machines. Their interest in hydraulic and pneumatic machines probably led Bianchini to take this “hydrostatic machine” seriously as an object of man-made trickery.\(^{21}\)

For Bianchini and his contemporaries, the Greek and Near Eastern myths of Deucalion were distorted versions of the Mosaic story of Noah; the ancients, unaware of the injunction against idolatry, had developed ceremonies to re-enact this key event of sacred history. Ancient artifacts like the Deucalion vase were thus embodiments of a flawed, but potent, human memory. In the engraving that accompanied the discussion, Bianchini artfully arranged the figures into a kind of Baroque tableau to show how it operated as a re-enactment of the Flood (Figure 1 above).\(^{22}\) In describing the artifact, he evokes the horror of the original event, focusing on the choreography of sacrifice and self-interest. Of the set of three figures in the lower right corner, Bianchini observes,

all but two cover their mouths, or else their mouths are covered by others, like the woman who raises herself on top of two men, wishing to escape the water with their help, and at the same time, to prevent the wave from penetrating and drowning them as they try to lift her to a more elevated spot.\(^{23}\)

The pathos and vividness of this description was meant to underscore the desperation of the doomed men and women—a fate to which Bianchini and his Catholic readers could not remain indifferent.

Bianchini’s painstaking analysis of the Deucalion vase conveys the enormous effort exerted by ecclesiastical scholars in Counter-Reformation Rome to stabilize the sacred foundations of universal history. However, as Bianchini was writing his universal history, the hermeneutic of Euhemerism was turning into a double-edged sword. “Ancient fables,” Bianchini writes, “are nothing other than histories, somewhat burdened with ambiguities and additions, yet not very difficult to


\(^{22}\) The image above is taken from the second edition (1747) and the engraver smoothed over some of the rough features of Bianchini’s own engraving in the original (and rare) 1697 edition.

\(^{23}\) Bianchini, *La istoria universale*, 181.
expurgate.” This Euhemerist approach to pagan rites and beliefs ironically opened the floodgates to a wider desacralization. We can already see hints of this in Bianchini’s rational treatment of the Deucalion vase as an artifact embodying imperfect memories and all-too-human motives. Those who later set out to revive Christian Euhemerism as a critical tool for historical scholarship were not interested in shoring up the Christian faith. By the time that Bernard de Fontenelle wrote his eulogy to Bianchini in 1730, Bianchini’s own Euhemerist reading of ancient mythology seemed (to him) strikingly modern and critical:

According to Bianchini, it was not at all the kidnapping of Helen that came between the Greeks and the Trojans: it was the navigation of the Aegean Sea and the Euxine bridge, a much more reasonable and interesting subject; and the war did not end with the taking of Troy, but with a commercial treaty . . . but from there, the author finds himself driven to a more surprising paradox, which is that the Iliad is really history allegorized in an Eastern manner. These gods, so often blamed on Homer . . . are fully justified with one word: they are not gods, but men and nations . . .

The search for social or political explanations of ancient myth was characteristic of the early Enlightenment scholarship at the Académie des inscriptions, evident in Antoine Banier’s *Historical Explanation of Fables* (1710), in which Banier chastised the seventeenth-century Jesuit antiquaries for forcing parallels between the biblical literature and pagan fables in the name of sacred history. Euhemerism appealed to scholars in the royal academy because they preferred a history in which human interests and passions were at work over one controlled by divine providence. They thus embraced the deflationary gesture at the heart of this interpretative practice. They celebrated the prosaic and “natural” causes over the fantastic claims of the mythologies and allegories. An ancient Greek writer thus provided both early Christian writers and modern doubters with a flexible hermeneutic. Ironically, Bianchini’s work proved congenial to the French critical scholars even though his commitment to discussing only the “actions of men . . . not divinely inspired” was a strategy for protecting sacred history.

Even though Euhemerism tended to strip the veil from pagan rites and myth, it also authorized antiquaries to take seriously the beliefs of non-Christian peoples precisely because those beliefs were critical to showing the universality of Christian history. Rome was the clearing-house for material coming in from all parts of the globe at the same time that it contained within itself the antiquities

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24 Ibid., “al Discreto Lettore”; added emphasis.
26 This work was first published in the collected memoirs of the French royal academy, but it was better known in the third edition. See Antoine Banier, *La Mythologie et les fables expliquées par l’histoire*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1738–1740).
of pagan Greece and Rome. The evidence of belief coming from China, Japan, Brazil, and Mexico allowed Bianchini and others to show that the traditions recounted in the Bible were known to all people. Yet these were not proofs in the modern sense. They served as the passive and accidental traces of universal history, what Francis Bacon had called the “surviving tablets from a tragic shipwreck.” This “shipwreck” vision of historical time not only prescribed a method of interpretation; it endowed the universal historian with a particular responsibility toward the world. Bianchini’s ecclesiastical engagement with the evidence coming from China, Japan, and the Americas was informed by his larger mission of “taking the whole world in account.”

A few years after writing his universal history, Bianchini rejected the invitation by the medieval scholar Ludovico Muratori to revive Italy’s intellectual culture in the wake of competing nations:

I cannot agree . . . that we should enter into a Literary League of nation against nation . . . or that we should start an intellectual quarrel over learned matters with northerners, or with those beyond the sea, or with the Indians or Chinese, just as we ought not to enter our own age into a rivalry with our antecedents or with future generations. Be they from beyond the Alps, from our own age, or centuries past, I welcome them all with the same sentiment of obligation and affection.  

As part of the larger intellectual absorption of pagan culture, Augustine had converted the Ciceronian ideal citizen into a Christian model of human action. For Bianchini, universal history upheld this idea of man as “a citizen of the world . . . born to extend himself and to converse with every century by means of his intellect even though, as a physical being, he must limit himself to life among his neighbors and contemporaries.” This Augustinian cosmopolitanism worked well in defining the moral obligations of the Catholic scholar and it also offered ecclesiastical antiquaries like Bianchini a compelling framework for their historical erudition. What happens to this model of universal history when we move from Catholic officialdom to Grub Street London and Enlightenment Paris?

II. UNIVERSAL HISTORY IN GRUB STREET LONDON

Unlike Bianchini’s universal history, which was written for an ecclesiastical audience and dedicated to a local cardinal, An Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time to the Present (1736–1768) was a publisher’s syndicate—that is, it was put together by a group of booksellers and printers who hired editors to oversee a compendia of histories written by different authors. It was a work

supported by subscription, serialized, and intended to make money. By the
time the work was completed it extended to sixty-six volumes and included the
histories of all the ancient and modern peoples known to Europeans at the time.
The work was issued in monthly installments, which were soon translated into
French, Dutch, Italian, and German. It was the most widely circulated subscriber-
supported publication in the eighteenth century with the sole exception of the *Encyclopédie*. It became known on the Continent as “the English universal
history.”

The audience for the English work was fundamentally different from that
of Bianchini’s history. Bianchini wrote for an intimate local community of
Roman antiquaries and ecclesiastical authorities. The English compilation was
written for a buying public whose judgment was critical to their success. Indeed,
the consistent foregrounding of this universal history as a commercial and
collaborative enterprise, involving diverse authors, subscribers, and proprietors,
makes the English universal history unique. The second obvious difference
has to do with the use of sources. Whereas Bianchini approached the profane
as emblematic of the sacred, the English historians joined together the sacred
and profane in one chronology. The ancient part proceeds from the creation of
the world, includes all the biblical events of the Old Testament and ends with
ancient history of the Indians and the Chinese and what could be known about
the earliest inhabitants of America. The modern part begins with Mohammed
and ends with the European colonizing of the Americas. However, despite these
differences, both Bianchini and the English authors shared a commitment to
include all known peoples within the same history.

The prime mover behind the universal history was the Orientalist George Sale
(1697–1736). Sale came from a merchant family in London. He was a solicitor
by profession, but he devoted most of his life to studying Arabic. In 1726 the
Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge—a group famous for its
publishing house—hired Sale to correct a translation of the New Testament into
Arabic. In 1734, for the same society, he published the first accurate translation
of the Koran into English, a translation that expressed far more sympathy for

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29 The universal history was divided into an “ancient” and “modern” part. The ancient part
was first published in seven volumes between 1736 and 1744. A pirated version from Dublin
spurred the publishers to offer a second edition in octavo of the ancient part in twenty
volumes (1747–8). The final edition of forty-four volumes combined the second edition
of the ancient part with the first edition of the modern part (1759–68). This is the edition
I consulted.

30 Guido Abbattista, “The Business of Paternoster Row: Towards a Publishing History of the
Universal History (1736–1765),” *Publishing History* 17 (1985), 5–49, 7. Also Daniel Woolf,
“Marketing History,” in *idem*, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge,
the religion of Islam than the society could tolerate.\textsuperscript{31} Given Sale’s familiarity with both Arabic literature and European writings on Islam, he was the perfect choice for the publishers to take over the editing of the Universal History. It was most likely Sale who insisted on compiling the history of the Persians, Arabs, and Turks from indigenous sources: “it seems altogether unreasonable to take the history of the Persians, Arabians, Turks, &c from the Greek, or other European authors, as to compile the European history out of the Oriental.”\textsuperscript{32} Although the booksellers insisted that the universal history was the work of a “society of learned gentlemen,” for the first three volumes this “society” consisted solely of George Sale and his amanuensis pushing out twenty sheets of history per month.

The second editor of the Universal History has an even more unusual story. “George Psalmanazar” (1679–1763) was a French Catholic at birth. He was educated by Dominicans and Jesuits, the last of whom instilled in him an incurable craving for public attention. As a young man, Psalmanazar lived the life of a vagabond, adopting the identity and passport of a persecuted Irish Catholic, then changing to that of a native of Formosa (modern-day Taiwan). In this last imposture, Psalmanazar was inspired by his Jesuit education, despite having learned very little in detail about the East. With the booksellers at his heels, however, Psalmanazar wrote up a description of his native land based on an earlier Dutch missionary report of the island, and he deliberately courted controversy by claiming that Formosans were Japanese rather than Chinese. At one point Psalmanazar convinced a number of English bishops that he had been baptized first by Protestant missionaries and then abducted by Jesuits. This story so endeared him to the Anglicans that he was set to work translating their own catechism into “Formosan.”\textsuperscript{33} Psalmanazar’s published description of Formosa

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\item Proposals by the proprietors of the work for printing by subscription in twenty volumes octavo an Universal History . . . (London, 1746), 8–9. The original proposal for the first edition was published in the Monthly Chronicle in 1729.
\item Robert DeMaria Jr., “George Psalmanazar,” in Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 45 (London, 2004). Psalmanazar’s Formosan writings include An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island Subject to the Emperor of Japan (London, 1704); A Dialogue between a Japonese and a Formosan, about some Points of the Religion of the Time (London, 1707); and An Enquiry into the Objections against George Psalmanaazaar of Formosa (London, 1710).
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in 1704 drew on the conventions of seventeenth-century travel writing and the antiquarian literature on ancient peoples. The woodcut illustrations provided by Psalmanazar (for example, showing the currency of the Formosans and one of their temples in Figure 2) appealed to a new public of readers who sought
up-to-the-minute information about the unknown world. Psalmanazar’s imposture, in other words, proved to be magnificent training for writing a universal history.

As his imposture was being slowly dismantled, Psalmanazar wisely turned to studying the Hebrew language and immersing himself in the diverse community of Jews in London. In 1730 Psalmanazar began working as a contributor and editor of the universal-history project, focusing in particular on Jewish history, although he also penned the ancient histories of Gaul, Scythia, Germany, Spain, and Greece. Given that Psalmanazar was the author of both the Jewish history and the history of nations that suffered Roman conquest, he was in all likelihood the editor who advocated writing a distinct and full history of each nation within universal history, “by which means the lesser monarchies and states are freed from the historical bondage of the greater, in which they are generally involved by authors.”

In the life of both Sale and Psalmanazar, philological study gave rise to a historical commitment. Just as Sale’s interest in the Arabic language led
him to take a keen interest in the history of Islam, Psalmanazar’s study of Hebrew led him to champion the history of the ancient Jews.

The third significant contributor to the universal history was also an accused impostor, although he (unlike Psalmanazar) never came clean in print. Archibald Bower (1686–1766) was a Scottish journalist and editor of two review periodicals, the Historia Litteraria (1730–34) and the Monthly Review (in which he aggressively promoted the universal history). In England, Bower claimed to be a former Jesuit who had fled Italy after witnessing the terrible effects of a papal inquisition. He went on to write an anti-Catholic and heavily plagiarized history of the popes. For the universal-history project Bower contributed six volumes on ancient Roman history—much to the annoyance of Psalmanazar, who accused him of swallowing “up all the unhappy nations that fell into those conquerors clutches without distinction.”

What do these biographies tell us? First, they tell us that the editors and authors of the English universal history were men who had a shifting and ambivalent allegiance to the confessional lines established during the Reformation. The dizzying change in religious identities, particularly in the case of Bower and Psalmanazar, distinguishes these men from the utterly orthodox Bianchini. Second, the passion for ancient languages of Arabic and Hebrew led Sale and Psalmanazar away from Rome’s centrality in both sacred and secular history, which in turn stimulated a new way of thinking about universal history. Their attention to the world beyond Greece and Rome echoed the Christian cosmopolitanism of late antiquity. It was Orosius, after all, who first expressed interest in the story of Rome’s conquered nations, and in this he followed Augustine’s sympathy for the victims of empire.

Third, all three of these men were immersed in the commercial world of book publishing and journalism. In fact, we could go so far as to say that what seems like “relativism” (the balancing of all views) was partly connected to the demands of the Grub Street printing world itself in which many authors contributed to a patchwork of piecemeal histories. The demands of commerce and a concern for

36 Psalmanazar, Memoirs of **** commonly known by the name of George Psalmanazar; a Reputed Native of Formosa Written by Himself (London, 1764), 311.
37 Daniel Woolf, in “Marketing History,” describes Sale’s universal history as not much different from the huge Elizabethan chronicles of Holinshed: “it is as if Wren or Vanbrugh were closely following the model of a Tudor manor house.” It is a great analogy, but Woolf ignores the new historical interests that inspired Sale’s and Psalmanazar’s attempts to improve on older universal histories. What he calls their “postmodern sensitivity to eurocentrism” was not postmodern at all—it was the consequence of a full immersion in the early modern scholarship of both Hebrew and Arabic literature.
the readers’ interests shaped the English universal history in ways that Bianchini could not have imagined. Finally, it makes a difference that we have moved from Rome to London. The production of a universal history written by a Catholic official at the epicenter of the Counter-Reformation was necessarily going to be different from a Grub Street project written by men with eclectic interests, disengaged from any profession, and writing on an island riven by theologically rooted politics.

Because the English universal history was a collaborative venture, there is no unity or consistency from one author to another. Traces of the behind-the-scenes disputes are still detectable in the history itself. George Sale’s preoccupation with Arabic literature often conflicted with Psalmanazar’s devotion to the Hebrew and led them to stress very different aspects of universal history. When asked by the publishers to pick up where Sale left off, Psalmanazar let it be known that he bitterly resented Sale’s disparaging remarks about Moses and the Old Testament in the first volume. In that volume Sale had offered a comprehensive account of the creation of the world, but instead of privileging the Mosaic story, he went through every known theory of the earth’s creation that he could gather, relying on a mix of ancient historians and modern missionary reports, both Catholic and Protestant. Sale began with the ancient Greeks, Phoenicians, and Egyptians before moving on to the cosmogonies of the Indians, modern Persians, Chinese, and even Siamese. Sale even included the atheistic and (to his contemporaries) shocking theories of Spinoza only to offer a brief orthodox refutation at the end. Sale concluded this first chapter where he was supposed to begin it, with what he called “the only authentic and genuine history of the creation”—the book of Moses. Although Sale claimed that the biblical account of creation carries “with it all the marks of truth and probability,” he had already set up his reader to perceive the Mosaic account as simply one among many by crowding it in with a series of other more exotic cosmogonies. Sale presented each account of the origin of the world as a theoretically sophisticated philosophical doctrine, in comparison with which the story of Genesis appeared simple-minded.38

Psalmanazar, by this time a passionate student of Hebrew and reformed impostor, attacked Sale’s “free-thinking” interpretation of Moses (“he had no great regard for the Old Testament,” Psalmanazar noted in his later memoirs39). He demanded of the publishers that they allow him to refute Sale with his own version of Moses in the next volume of the universal history. The booksellers consented, but they urged him “not [to] be righteous overmuch.” The polemics that drove the Reformation were no longer welcome and while Psalmanazar was willing to sacrifice the narrative thread of the whole universal history in

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38 Ancient Universal History (hereafter AUH), 1: 72.
39 Psalmanazar, Memoirs, 297.
order to assert his interpretation, the publishers had other interests to serve. When Psalmanazar later urged the same publishers to fix the contradictions between the first two volumes and his third volume (including the use of different chronologies), they refused, saying they could not afford to reissue new and improved versions solely “for the sake of uniformity.”

The Reformation had generated endless disputes about the most minute details of sacred history, which placed a burden on historians dedicated to telling the whole story. Both Sale and Psalmanazar were thus compelled to chase all kinds of learned controversies down to their frayed ends and frequently weigh in with their own judgments. Let me give one example that offers a comparison with Bianchini. As Don Cameron Allen has shown, the Flood was a great engine of historical and linguistic research during the early modern period. By 1730 writers of universal histories had a wealth of literature and images to draw from when they reached this event. George Sale, in particular, had access to all the English literature on the natural history of the earth, from Burnet to Whiston to Keil. As with his story of Creation, Sale offered his reader an encyclopedic run-down of everything that had ever been said about the universal Flood and Noah’s Ark. When it came to telling the story of the Flood, Sale rehearsed a series of questions and explanations offered by both Protestant and Catholic scholars over the course of the past two centuries regarding the details of this world-historical event.

How big was the Ark and how could it fit so many animals? What wood was it made out of? Where was it built? How did the animals found in the West Indies and Brazil make it into the Ark? How did they get to America once the Flood was over? Where did the Ark come to rest? To this last question Sale devotes an entire chapter. He begins by discussing the divergent opinions about the location of Mt Ararat, including what the Armenians and the Turks had to say about their own mountains. He then compares their stories with the reports of Protestant and Catholic travelers to the Levant. While Sale admits that “the Armenian monks tell a thousand idle stories concerning the ark,” he is not prepared to credit the travelers’ tales either. Sale mentions one French Protestant who described his wearying climb up Mt Ararat. Once at the top, the Frenchman observed that the mountain was devoid of all people and that the air at the summit was miserable, but Sale reproduced in his footnotes the report of a Dutch traveler who claimed to have met a Catholic hermit living on the summit. Contrary to the French report, the Dutch traveler insisted that the air was purer and more temperate than anywhere else. The hermit had even told him that it had not rained and the wind had not blown in twenty-five years and he gave him a cross, made out of Ark-wood, along with a certificate proving its authenticity. Sale called the Dutch

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40 Ibid, 300.
report a “sham” and he tentatively endorsed the more prosaic French account before moving on to the birth of Abraham.\textsuperscript{42}

The questions that the English universal history posed about the events of biblical history were not in themselves new, but they no longer seemed theologically imperative—or rather, the new interests and ethics of the publishing syndicate and the general public trumped the older confessional concerns. Sale’s and Psalmanazar’s agnostic position on many critical points was a method for sifting opposing testimonies and opinions in order to provide their readers with the evidentiary basis to make up their own minds. For all his behind-the-scenes objections, Psalmanazar upheld the value of such criticism in the pages of the universal history. “Whether they or we best stand the test,” he writes, “must be left to the judgment of the reader.”\textsuperscript{43} The frank admission that historians dealt with opinion rather than ultimate truth was a nod to the legacy of Pyrrhonism rather than a commercial strategy for winning subscribers. Yet the needs of the publishing world were also at work, especially in the inclusion of up-to-the-minute stories and new information from missionaries, diplomats and merchants—“all the best the republic of literature can furnish,” as Sale put it.\textsuperscript{44}

Indeed, the travel literature on India, Africa, and China seemed to be driving the English universal history, squeezing the biblical story into a thin slice of a much larger and much more diverse pie. Yet, even for these Grub Street writers, universal history was a framework that still mattered. From the Brahmins and the Chinese in the East to the inhabitants of Brazil and the West Indies, all still belonged to one Christian chronology of events beginning with the creation of the world.

The “modern” part of the English universal history, published between 1759 and 1768, was a different book. In 1758 the new editors proposed that this part of the history would relate the rise and progress of the European nations. Without explicitly acknowledging the profound shift, the editors envisioned the move from ancient to modern history as a move from the sacred to the secular. According to the editors, the “revival of science in the western world” was the key to


\textsuperscript{44} There was an explosion of travel publications in England and on the Continent during this period with much translation work being done rapidly. The 1708 English translation of Bellegarde’s \textit{General History of all Voyages and Travels} (which focused primarily on the New World) was outdated by the time the Churchill brothers printed their \textit{Voyages and Travels} in 1732, a work that consisted of six volumes of descriptive and illustrated reports from China, Japan, the Congo, Brazil, Egypt, Ceylon, and Madagascar. For a bibliography of travel literature in this period, or at least the kind that ended up in the libraries of the philosophes, see Michel Duchet, \textit{Anthropologie et Histoire au Siècle des Lumières} (Paris, 1971), 485–519.
civilization as well as the major cause of European mastery across the globe. The “wild unpolished spirit of liberty,” advertised by the 1758 editors as the motor force of the modern universal history, was entirely absent in the earlier proposal for the ancient history.\textsuperscript{45} While the editors seem to strike an equitable balance between Europe and the rest of the world, their actual focus is the effect of Europe’s power on Asia, Africa, and America. Three separate volumes trace European settlements in both the East and West Indies in order to show “why Europe is so much preferable to the rest of the quarters of the globe” and the five volumes that focus on the history of the Americas trace the impact of European trade on the New World.\textsuperscript{46}

In the midst of the Seven Years War, the English universal history became the perfect vehicle for championing the “commercial intercourse . . . from one quarter of the terraqueous globe to the other.”\textsuperscript{47} What connected ancient and modern history, according to these new editors, was the astonishing development of overseas trade, knowledge of which constituted “the true political key by which a variety of mysterious events are opened.”\textsuperscript{48} Yet the ancient and modern halves of this history had actually been severed rather than united; a universal history that reported all the theories of how Noah’s Ark was constructed did not pave the way for the story of modern progress and global commercial power. Preserving the biblical framework while offering a secular account of modern Europe demanded a reworking of universal history. Antoine-Yves Goguet’s \textit{De l’origine des loix, des arts, et des sciences, et de leurs progrès chez les anciens peuples} (1758) offered such a solution.

### III. UNIVERSAL HISTORY IN ENLIGHTENMENT PARIS

It is with the Enlightenment that the story of the triumph of European civilization first intersects with universal history.\textsuperscript{49} Goguet’s work was published after the early historical writings of Voltaire and Turgot but before the full-blown philosophical histories of progress that emerged in both Scotland and France during the 1760s and 1770s. It was one of several attempts in the 1740s and

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Proposals for the Publishing of the Modern Part of the Universal History} (London, 1758), 15–16. For a detailed study of the modern part of this history see Guido Abbattista, \textit{Commercio, colonie e impero alla vigilia della Rivoluzione americana: John Campbell pubblicista e storico nell’Inghilterra del sec. XVIII} (Firenze, 1990).

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{The Modern Part of an Universal History}, vol. 30 (London, 1759), 170.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 189.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 190–91.

\textsuperscript{49} On the “rise of Europe” thesis in Enlightenment history as a deliberate response to the political, commercial, and religious wars of the past see Karen O’Brien, \textit{Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon} (Cambridge, 1997).
1750s to chart the historical development of the human mind (*l’esprit humain*), a philosophical project that created a new universal narrative not derived from sacred history: “the history of laws, arts, and sciences,” Goguet notes at the beginning, “is the history, properly speaking, of the human mind.” What makes Goguet’s account unique is his reorientation of universal history away from chronology toward a stadial history in order to show the progress of human culture and society from a particular point in time; it also marks the first attempt to merge academic scholarship with the Enlightenment’s *esprit systematique*.

We know less about Goguet (1716–1758) than we do about Bianchini and the English authors. Son of a wealthy lawyer, Goguet followed suit as a counselor in the Parliament of Paris. He died of smallpox unexpectedly the same year that his work was published. Goguet owed much to his close friend and silent collaborator, Alexandre Conrad FUGÈRE (1721–58). Fugère was a mathematician, a counselor in the Cour des aides, and editor of the *Journal des Savants*, a learned periodical devoted to reporting new discoveries in the arts and sciences. Although Goguet could be described as a lesser luminary of the Enlightenment (he had no gift for irony), his work was remarkably popular and had a discernible impact on the Scottish historians, who were the first to read the 1761 English translation.

Unlike Bianchini and the Grub Street writers, who still lived on the frontier of doubt, Goguet was confident about what historical scholarship could achieve. “Man,” he writes, “is not condemned to the cheerless necessity of fluctuating in uncertainty about the principal facts which history and tradition have passed down to us.”

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53 Three French editions of Goguet’s work were printed in the eighteenth century and translations soon followed in Italian (Lucca, 1761, and Naples, 1762), German (1760–62), and Spanish (1791–4). See Alfred Cohn’s introduction to the reprint of the 1761 Edinburgh edition: *The Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences, and their Progress among the Most Ancient Nations* (New York, c. 1976).
54 Goguet, *De l’Origine des loix*, 1: preface, xxix.
famous quarrel of the ancients and moderns while his focus on the progress of society appealed to the new secular interests of the French parliamentary courts and the royal academies. Like his contemporary, Edward Gibbon, Goguet was an avid reader of the proceedings of the Académie des inscriptions, whose members set about recovering the full knowledge of arts and sciences in antiquity. Goguet put this categorizing and secular erudition to work in a universal history that championed modern society over the ancient, polite culture over the primitive, and law over custom.

The French academies are as important a context for Goguet as the publishing world of London was for the works of Sale and Psalmanazar. The academy was the site of the new science and the new literary culture. It makes sense, then, that they were also the institutions most concerned with tracing the progress of knowledge. The French quarrel of ancients and moderns itself served as a way of legitimizing the academies’ role as the new arbiters of distinction. Moreover, the royal academies provided a secular space for scholars to develop their knowledge outside of the Church and the court. When Goguet argued that hereditary professions in the ancient world were incompatible with the development of talent and knowledge, he was championing the values of his own world. Social emulation, ambition, freedom to choose one’s profession, being useful to others—these were the virtues of French robin society and they guided Goguet’s judgment of what was valuable in the past.

Despite his devotion to scholarship, Goguet had also learned from the philosophes. In introducing a panoramic vision into the universal narrative, Goguet—like Turgot and Voltaire before him—followed the didactic humanism of Bossuet, who had urged the dauphin to sit back and watch the “grand spectacle” of centuries passing before his eyes. Voltaire wrote his Essai sur les moeurs in order to dispute Bossuet’s view of history, but he retained the bishop’s sweeping rhetorical narrative and belief in progress: “Let us then survey this globe together.

For the staying power of the quarrel well into the eighteenth century see Joseph Levine, “Edward Gibbon and the Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns,” in idem, Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography (Ithaca, 1987), chap. 7. The political agenda of French parliamentary historians in the 1750s may have informed Goguet’s project even though he was not writing French history. See K. M. Baker, “Controlling French History: The Ideological Arsenal of Jacob-Nicolas Moreau,” in idem, Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge, 1990), chap. 3.

On the scholarship of this academy see Lionel Gossman, Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment: The World and Work of La Curne Saint-Palaye (Baltimore, 1968).

Goguet, De l’Origine des loix, 3: bk I, 32–3.

Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Discours sur l’histoire universelle . . . pour expliquer la suite de la religion & les changements des empires (Paris, 1681), preface. On Bossuet’s unintended contribution to philosophic history see Meek, Social Science and the Ignoble Savage, 23–5.
Let us see in what state it then was and consider it in the same order as it seems to have been civilized, that is, proceeding from the eastern nations to our own.”

Goguet aspired to a similar style: “Let us pass on to more general and more interesting subjects; let us consider the peoples under a new perspective; let us examine what followed the establishment of societies, concerning the arts, sciences, commerce, and navigation.”

Rather than write a universal history from Creation to the present day, Goguet begins with mankind just after the Flood and ends his history at the time of the Persians under Cyrus. This was the period, according to Goguet, when “the principles and manner of thought . . . so essential to the preservation and happiness of society were, if we may say so, still in rough draft.” More importantly, he organized each of his three volumes around a series of social institutions, each of which depended on the other for its emergence: law and government, arts and manufactures, science, commerce and navigation, the military arts, and finally, manners and customs. The focus on social institutions and the commitment to the grand panorama or the “general point of view” were characteristic of French Enlightenment historians for whom the search for underlying processes led to a new definition of the universal in universal history.

Yet Goguet depended on earlier universal histories that in no way resembled his own. In composing a new history of primitive society, Goguet made selective use of Francesco Bianchini’s evidence and arguments. Essentially he recast Bianchini’s ecclesiastical material within an overtly secular framework. For example, in his chapter on the Silver Age—the period in which emerged the first arts of agriculture, astronomy, and arithmetic—Bianchini had drawn much of his own material from contemporary Jesuit scholarship. He reproduced an engraving of an abacus taken from the groundbreaking Chinese history, the *Sinicæ Historiæ*, published by the Austrian Jesuit Martino Martini in 1658, and he also reproduced an image of an Egyptian obelisk originally published in Athanasius Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegypticus* (1652–4). Goguet omitted the Chinese abacus, but reproduced the obelisk in his own work, and he took

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61 Ibid, 3: Recapitulation, 420.
the time to praise Bianchini for explaining the mathematical function of these antiquities.\textsuperscript{64}

In Bianchini’s history these ancient instruments allowed him to reconstruct the totality of human knowledge preserved after the universal Flood. Thinking about the historical consequences of the Flood meant thinking about the nature of oblivion and memory with respect to human knowledge. For Bianchini, the Chinese abacus and the Egyptian obelisk revealed that the methods of calculating both quantity and time were universal across all ancient cultures, and they were certainly older and more widespread than the Greco-Roman literary sources suggested.\textsuperscript{65} For Goguet, by contrast, these ancient objects were interesting because they formed part of the progressive development of the sciences themselves; they represented a singular feat of precocious ingenuity on the part of a given culture (“there are several sciences, which, everything considered, have not made such rapid progress”).\textsuperscript{66}

Unlike Bianchini, who asserted that “we ought not to enter our own age into a rivalry with our antecedents or with future generations,” Goguet emphasized the fundamental differences between ancients and moderns. For example, he reminded his readers that oracles no longer dictated human action as they once did in ancient Greece:

all of these acts belong to a way of thinking that we do not know anymore in our own age. In this consists the most essential and most remarkable difference of the genius of former nations and those of this time. Today, among the peoples of Europe, political policy and military power are the only means that the ambitious can employ.\textsuperscript{67}

For Goguet, as for Fontenelle and others in the academies, the central dividing line between ancients and moderns was no longer Christianity, but a way of thinking and reasoning about the empirical world, which they believed to be exclusive to European nations even if universal in theory.

Goguet’s Origin of Laws thus departed from older universal histories in two fundamental ways. First, like many French Enlightenment writers, he changed the status of the Bible as a source. Goguet based his chronology on the sacred history of the Hebrews. The first volume ends with the death of Jacob, the second with the establishment of monarchy among the Israelites, and the final volume

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Goguet64} Goguet, De l’Origine des loix, 1: bk III, 458–461.
\bibitem{Bianchini65} Bianchini, La istoria universale, 115–16.
\bibitem{Goguet66} Goguet, De l’Origine des loix, 1: bk III, 464. Bianchini was vastly more informed about the mathematical and physical sciences than Goguet and he obviously thought them capable of improving, but he did not use these sciences as a criterion for constructing a hierarchy of cultures or epochs. For Bianchini there was the added problem of accounting for the value of post-diluvian knowledge given the divine punishment of man and the world.
\bibitem{Goguet67} Goguet, De l’Origine des loix, 2: bk I, 109–10; added emphasis.
\end{thebibliography}
ends with the Israelites’ return from Babylonian captivity. However, Goguet never relates these events—they serve merely as an expedient framework. All universal histories, he explains, must adopt some “common standard.” Goguet thus chose the scaffolding of sacred history because it offered a continuous narration from the beginning of the world—and it was the one most familiar to his readers. “In order to form a clear and systematic idea of universal history,” he writes, “one has to choose one particular [chronology] which can serve as a common measure for comparing and connecting with others.”

In Goguet’s hands biblical chronology became a convenient shell for tracing “the first steps of human understanding.” Determining “the genius, the manners, and turn of mind, of the various nations of the world” was far from Bianchini’s goal of reinforcing the foundation of sacred history. Moreover, by choosing to begin not with Creation, but with the “first ages” after the Flood, Goguet made sure that the workings of God in the world and in the history of mankind took a backseat to the story of how humans established and perfected laws, arts, and sciences over time. In his narrative, the universal Flood becomes unmoored from the larger story of divine judgment. It serves instead as ground zero for civilization (“ne doit-on pas en effet regarder la terre comme renouvelée depuis cet événement?”). For Goguet, omitting the flood meant omitting the story of a God who threatened mankind’s very existence. As an advocate for mankind, not God, Goguet turned universal history into a secular history of culture and society.

The questions that Goguet puts to ancient cultures are in some ways stranger than the questions George Sale offered regarding Noah’s Ark. What was the prevailing genius among the Phoenicians? What kind of conversations did the Egyptians cultivate in society? Did they know the art of making sauces and ragout? In fact, the oddest moment is when Goguet ransacks his way through Genesis looking for evidence of cookery and domestic furniture among the ancient Hebrews. By reading about how Abraham lived, Goguet believed he could determine whether, for example, interior decorating had yet developed (it had not). The washing of strangers’ feet after a long day in dusty sandals was a crude sign of hospitality—but a sign nonetheless. In the writings of the French

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68 Ibid., 1: preface, x.
Enlightenment the Bible became an index of how primitive ancient culture was before the pendulum and the telescope.

One of the most interesting aspects of Goguet’s preoccupation with civilization is that, for the first time, women enter universal history: “the little regard and respect for this sex has at all times characterized the barbarians,” Goguet writes.\(^71\) Goguet went on to inform his readers that “mistresses of the family” worked in the kitchens back then. Rebecca prepared a dish for Isaac and Sarah baked bread, which Abraham promptly gave to the angels. For French Enlightenment writers, women were fundamental agents of civilization. Montesquieu had tied the inequality of women to despotism in his *Persian Letters* and Turgot insisted that “among the ancient peoples women never had any rights in the marriage relation.”\(^72\) Yet just as women stepped in through the front door of universal history, the newly discovered peoples of Africa, East Asia, and the Americas stepped out through the back. And this is the second way in which Goguet fundamentally altered the formula of universal history that had guided earlier writers. Not only did he change the meaning of the Bible in the interests of writing a cultural history, but he also centered the teleology of his universal history in Europe, and in particular in Greece (“to which all Europe owes the origin of its laws, its art, and sciences”\(^73\)).

Goguet boldly states at the outset that he is interested only in “our first teachers and preceptors”—that is, only those cultures that passed on to Europe the arts of civilization—so China’s history is demoted by Goguet in favor of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians: “We have learned almost nothing from China. We have known them only for a few centuries.”\(^74\) It is important to recall that this dismissal of China comes a century after the discovery of Chinese chronology and after countless attempts—such as Bianchini’s own universal history—to integrate this ancient non-Christian civilization into the Judeo-Christian framework. Although what counted as part of the ancient world was now restricted, Goguet assumed that his history could still speak of human society in universal terms. The return to the geography of the Near East, Greece, and Rome in search of man’s origins did not mean that Goguet ignored the rest of the world. In fact, Goguet relied a great deal on the same reports of missionaries and travelers as the Grub Street editors, but their strenuous inclusiveness did not appeal to him. Goguet made use of the descriptions of Indians, Brazilians,
and Africans solely to bolster his claims about the primitive nature of ancient society.

Conditions in America “when it was discovered,” Goguet writes, “can tell us much about the ancient world after the Flood.”\(^{75}\) Jesuit missionaries and ecclesiastical antiquaries had already perfected comparisons between the ancient Europeans and the modern-day Peruvians, Senegalese, and other subjects of travel literature. In 1700 the Jesuit Noel Alexandre published a book comparing Chinese customs with those of the Greek and Romans, and four years later de la Créquinière published a study of the “conformity” between the East Indians and the ancient Jews. Goguet read these works, but his most noticeable source was the Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau, who made the comparison between contemporary Americans and ancients the central subject of his work \emph{La Vie et les moeurs des sauvages américains comparée aux moeurs des premiers temps} (1724–32).\(^ {76} \) Goguet reoriented the comparative method as Lafitau practiced it. The Jesuit had examined New World customs in order to show that, contrary to what the skeptics said about these people, they were not lost to God; rather, “religion played a part in everything” they did.\(^ {77} \) For Lafitau, the savages of the New World constituted the “dark matter” of biblical chronology. They had to be brought back into the original fold and made familiar to Christian Europeans back home. What Goguet did was make use of Lafitau’s findings while ignoring his missionary aims.

Goguet rejected above all Lafitau’s noble vision of ancient primitivism. Lafitau had wanted to anchor the American Indians in the divine, which he saw as the matrix of civilized life. For this reason the hospitality of the Iroquois and Huron could be presented as evidence for their innate virtue. For Goguet, however, civilization was an end in itself. Man may have been good once everywhere, but after the Flood all bets were off. Hospitality, for Goguet, was thus a reciprocal custom borne out of necessity and self-love. Manners and customs allowed the universal historian to track the general stages of Enlightenment and “where proof is lacking,” Goguet writes, “savage nations provide comparative evidence.” His

\(^{75}\) Goguet, \emph{De l’Origine des loix}, 1: preface, xxx–xxxi. Here Goguet was repeating what Locke and others had claimed earlier. On the America-as-origins thesis see Meek, \emph{Social Science and the Ignoble Savage}, chap. 2.


\(^{77}\) Lafitau, \emph{Customs of the American Indians}, 37.
passage on the uses of soap (for Freud the marker of civilization) allows us to see this comparative method at work:

The savages of America make a kind of soap water with certain fruits, which they use to wash their cotton beds and other material. Icelandic women make lye of ashes and urine. The Persians employ boles and marls . . . all these methods might have been practiced in primitive times. The necessities of life are pretty much the same for all mankind: nature provides just about the same resources in all climates. It is the art of making use of these that distinguishes polite nations from the barbarians and savages.78

In enlisting the contemporary inhabitants of Africa, Asia, and America as “proxies” for the primitive ages of man (not to mention the marginal savages of Europe), Goguet removed these people from a continuous chronology that began with God’s Creation. Yet this may not be as terrible as it sounds. By centering universal history on the emergence of human culture, and in adopting a philosophic mode in which change happens “by slow and almost imperceptible degrees,” Goguet freed everyone from chronology—if only to tie them to a new stake.79 The Hebrews, Egyptians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, and Greeks now stood as disconnected peoples against whom Goguet could measure the progress of the arts and sciences over time. Unlike both Bianchini and the Grub Street authors, Goguet put the massive panorama of the pre-historic past on display in order to show that, before the rise of the Greeks, all nations were “without shape, barbarous, gross, and vicious.”80 For Goguet and others after him, universal history was the only genre that could properly tell the epic story of what Schiller later called “man’s progress out of barbarism,” and yet the only thing to be learned from the remote past was how far Goguet and his readers had come.

IV. CONCLUSION

If we learn anything from these three works, it is that what happened to universal history is not a linear story in the history of ideas. While Bianchini’s history grew out of the Counter-Reformation and Rome’s unique culture of the encyclopedic and Baroque, the English universal history owed much to the newer Protestant missions in the East, the eclectic interests of its authors, and the phenomenal publishing center that was London. The modern part of this same history, by contrast, was shaped by the new economic theories of Montesquieu and Hume. Goguet’s work, by contrast, reflected the new historical concerns of French Enlightenment writers as well as the social and intellectual cross-fertilization between royal academies and the parliamentary court. It would be

79 Ibid., 1: preface, x.
80 Ibid., 3: Recapitulation, 424.
difficult to tell a straight story of what happened to universal history in Europe without taking into account all of these contexts.

What does the study of universal history tell us about the elusive process we call secularization? The move from an account of remote peoples linked together through a shared biblical origin to a secular narrative of the arts and sciences certainly marks the end of an extraordinary synthesis. Yet this transformation was itself uneven and one often finds the orthodox and unorthodox jostling side by side in the same work. Bianchini’s use of material evidence and his historical reading of ancient myths struck many of his contemporaries as enlightened and rational contributions to ancient history, yet both were in service to the Church. His attention to “monuments and writings not divinely inspired” was supposed to prop up the truth of sacred history, but it also provided future historians with material for their philosophical histories of civilization. In the hands of the English editors universal history became a container for polemical arguments about the Bible, but when it pushed into the modern era it became a placeholder for national histories before nationalism as well as an apology for European dominion. Yet both were bound into a single edition.

Even Goguet’s “philosophic” history of civilization rested uneasily upon the foundations of biblical history. His ethnographic method (the concern with documenting the customs, habits, and artifacts of nations scattered across different parts of the world) was itself perfected by ecclesiastical antiquaries guided by a providential vision of history. It was not easy for Goguet simultaneously to adopt and dismiss this heritage. He provided foldout biblical chronologies while proposing a stadial theory of human societies. He listed the precise year in which “God command[ed] homicide to be punished with death” while affirming (like Mandeville) the dynamism of war and human passion.81 In short, the enlightened historian of the human mind clung to the framework of biblical history while bleaching it of all its theological ink.82

Universal history—as a genre—could accommodate the vastly different perspectives of Bianchini, the English authors, and even Goguet because it still rested on a universal framework. World history as we find it today is no longer anchored in the universal. More recently, it has lost its center and this decentering

81 Ibid., 1: bk V, 666–7. According to Goguet commerce depended on navigation, which itself was spurred by restless and violent conquerors in search of booty. War, while terrible, nonetheless brings diverse people into contact with each other and leads to a greater understanding of politics. War also stimulates the need for defense such that great empires eventually learn how to eradicate such violence and thereby create the conditions for arts and sciences.

82 On the enduring and productive framework of biblical ethnology well into the nineteenth century see Thomas R. Trautmann, “The Mosaic Ethnology of Asiatick Jones,” in idem, Aryans and British India (Berkeley, CA, 1997), chap. 2.
was done in response to the European-progress histories launched in the 1750s. What is most striking about the desacralization of universal history in Goguet as well as in the modern part of the English history is that non-European peoples were consigned to a supporting role in the rise of Europe. If we compare our world histories with those before the English global history of commerce and the French philosophic history of the human mind, we find a universal history that did not yet privilege the West, but it could be even-handed only under the umbrella of sacred erudition. We may smile at the early efforts of scholars to reconcile all the known peoples within a common framework of biblical time, but they had an advantage we can only envy, even if it is one we can no longer imitate.\footnote{On the need for a new kind of world history today see Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age,” \textit{American Historical Review}, 100, 4 (1995), 1034–60.}