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### *Rhedi to Usbek in Paris*

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During my stay in Europe, I am reading the ancient and modern historians. I compare all the times ; I enjoy seeing them go by, so to speak, in front of me, and especially pause my mind on those great changes that have made some eras so different from others, and the earth so unlike itself.

You have perhaps not noticed something that causes me surprise every day. Why is the world so sparsely populated in comparison to what it once was ? [1] How could nature have lost the prodigious fecundity of the earliest times ? Could it be already in its old age, and could it be falling from exhaustion ?

I spent more than a year in Italy, where I saw only the remains of that ancient Italy that was once so famous. Although everyone lives in the cities, they are entirely desolate and underpopulated ; it seems they still subsist only to mark the place where once were those powerful cities of which history has spoken so much.

There are people who maintain that the city of Rome alone once contained more people than the largest kingdom in Europe has today ; one Roman citizen might have had ten or even twenty thousand slaves, not counting those who worked in the country houses ; and as they numbered four or five hundred thousand citizens, one cannot set the number of inhabitants without the imagination rebelling.

Once there were powerful kingdoms in Sicily, and numerous peoples who have since disappeared ; that island has nothing considerable left except its volcanos.

Greece is so empty that it contains not the hundredth part of its former inhabitants.

Spain, once so well filled, has nothing but uninhabited countryside to show today, [2] and France is nothing compared to the ancient Gaul of which Caesar speaks.

The northern countries are greatly diminished, and its peoples are far from the necessity they once saw of dividing up and sending away like swarm colonies and entire nations to seek new abodes.

Poland and Turkey in Europe have hardly any people left.

You could not find in America the two-hundredth part of the men who once made up such great empires there. [3]

Asia is hardly better off. The Asia minor that contained so many powerful monarchies and such a prodigious number of large cities now has no more than two or three. With respect to greater Asia, the part that is under Turkish rule is not better filled ; and as for the part that is under the domination of our kings, if we compare it to the flourishing state it once was in, we will see that it has but a small portion of the inhabitants who were countless there in the times of men like Xerxes and Darius.

As for the small states which surround these great empires, they are really abandoned : such are the kingdoms of Imeretia, Circassia, and Guria. All these princes with their vast states count scarcely fifty thousand subjects.

Egypt has been no less depleted than the other countries.

In short, I range over the earth and find nothing but decay ; it is as if I were seeing it emerging from the ravages of plague and famine.

Africa has always been so unknown that we cannot speak of it with as much precision as other parts of the world ; but to focus only on the coasts of the Mediterranean, which have always been known, we see that it has enormously declined from what it was when it was a Roman province. Today its princes are so weak that they are the smallest powers in the world. [4]

After a calculation as exact as it can be in these sorts of things, I have found that there is scarcely on the earth the fiftieth part of the men who were there in Caesar's time. What is surprising is that it is losing population by the day ; and if that continues, in ten centuries it will be nothing but a desert.

That, my dear Usbek, is the most terrible catastrophe that ever occurred in the world ; but it has scarcely been noticed, because it came about gradually, and over the course of many centuries : which points to an inner vice, a unknown and hidden poison, a languorous disease that afflicts the human race.

*Venice this 10th day of the moon of Rhegeb 1718*

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[1] The source of the depopulation myth was the calculations put forth by Isaac Vossius in *De antiquae Romae et aliarum quarundam urbium magnitudine*, in *Variarum observationum liber* (London : Robert Scott, 1685), of which Pierre Bayle gave a detailed account in *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in January 1685, judging his estimations excessive (OD, I, 212-215). David Hume was to show in his essay "Of the populousness of ancient nations" that the calculations of Vossius were exaggerated and Montesquieu's conclusions uncertain. Recent calculations show a growth of the French population from 21.5 million in 1690 to 23.8 million in 1730 (Dupâquier, vol. II, p. 65) ; Europe in the same interval went from 120 to 174 million, with an annual growth rate of 4%. But Montesquieu, like most of his contemporaries, was obsessed by the idea that the world was losing steam.

[2] See letter 75.

[3] Leitmotiv of all the denunciators of Spanish and Portuguese colonization, following the *Relación de las Indias* (1542) of Las Casas. The immense depopulation of the Americas following the arrival of the Europeans was owing more to microbes than to weapons.

[4] See letter 42.