

EARLY CONCEPTS OF HISTORY

Homer

Our understanding of the writing of the human story begins, ironically, not with someone who is considered an historian; but with the Greek writer known as Homer.² His works, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are masterpieces of poetic narrative and character development. Homer takes the reader on an epic adventure with conflict ranging from grand military battles to a duel between two heroes. Although in our time Homer is thought of as primarily a poet and storyteller, his impact in shaping the beginning of what will become “history” cannot be underestimated. The ancient Greeks actually thought of him as an historian and his work was part of their cultural identity. The problem with looking at Homer as an historian, though, was that his work, though probably based on an actual war, was written primarily as a tale to edify, teach, and entertain his audience; not for the purpose of understanding what actually happened. The most important elements in Homer’s work were the presence of the gods and fate. The gods on Mount Olympus took an active interest in the affairs of humankind; but were, themselves, subject to the ambiguous and unchangeable forces of fate. On the eve of the climactic battle between Achilles, the hero of the Greeks and Hector, the Trojan prince, the god Achilles spoke out for his favorite only to be reminded of his powerlessness in the face of fate.

*And how could Hector have fled
The fates of death so long? ...
And brilliant Achilles shook his head at the armies...
The father Zeus held out his sacred golden scales:
In them he placed two fates of death that lays men low
one for Achilles, one for Hector breaker of horses
and gripping the beam mid-shaft the father raised it high
and down went Hector’s day of doom, dragging him down
to the strong house of death -- and god Apollo left him...³*

In Homer’s writing, human events became obscured by *fate*, the mysterious overriding power to determine those events. Homer’s writing is not an accounting of the affairs of human beings, it is a lesson on how we are pawns in greater affairs that are so far beyond our control that even appeals to the gods, or the gods themselves, cannot change the outcome. But Homer’s contribution to what will become “history” should not be underestimated. His intention was to gain a meaningful understanding from the affairs of a human story and it becomes the seed of what history writing will become centuries after his death.

Thales of Miletus (624-546 BC)

In the 6th century BC Thales from Miletus, a Greek colony in Asia Minor, contributed an important development in the creation of history as a distinctive way of understanding human affairs. Though a philosopher and not a historian, Thales’ teachings about the nature of the material world helped bring about a shift in Greek thought. In his travels throughout the Mediterranean, particularly Egypt, he attempted to understand the world around him in terms of

² Circa 8th century BC

³ *The Iliad* book XXII

what he could observe and explain. "All things are full of gods", he was reputed to have said, and while we cannot be certain exactly what he meant by that, we can be certain that he was not referring to Zeus and Apollo on Mount Olympus measuring out the fate of man.⁴ With an analytic approach to the material world and an attempt to explain the workings of nature rationally, Miletus ushered in a new era of thought: *the world can be understood by making rational connections between what could be materially observed*. Within two hundred and fifty years this rational approach to explaining the workings of nature reached thinkers attempting to explain the workings of human existence.⁵

Herodotus (484-425 BC)

Herodotus, a Greek storyteller, was born around 485 BC and did most of his research and public performances in the 450s through the 430s. There was a big difference between Herodotus and other storytellers; the stories he told were primarily rooted in researched fact. Herodotus was the first person who could be accurately referred to as an "historian." The word "history" comes from the Greek word *historia* meaning 'inquiry or investigation' and the "Histor" was the man who knew, the wise man who understood because he had conducted an investigation. Herodotus, therefore, has become known as the "Father of History". Herodotus' accounts of events among men took a significant turn and broke with Homeric tradition. In his writings the workings of fate and celestial intervention of the gods had a very minor role in how events unfolded/. His stories were mainly the result of inquiry and research; things he has observed or studied. Though not documented to the satisfaction of later standards, his stories were usually verifiable in some way. His only surviving work, *Histories*, (or *Inquiries*) begins with a statement of purpose:

*Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry, so that human achievements may not be forgotten in time, and great and marvelous deeds - some displayed by Greeks, some by barbarians - may not be without their glory; and especially to show why the two people fought each other.*⁶

Herodotus wrote primarily about Greco-Persian Wars (the story of the 300 Spartans comes from this writings), but in spite of his stated intention of recording "human achievements", Herodotus broke his own rules sometimes and recounted episodes beyond the reach of rationality. Included in his stories of political machinations and military exploits are outlandish tales such as that of Arion of Methymna who, after being forced to jump overboard from a Corinthian vessel while still at sea, managed to ride on a dolphin's back all the way to Taenarum and catch his would-be murders when they arrived.⁷ Such stories are integrated into Herodotus' work alongside accounts any rational person would be able to accept. Usually, no distinction between the credible and the incredible are made in *The Histories*.

Another distinctive feature in Herodotus' work are his universal interests and curiosities. Everything he saw or heard about appealed to him as an item that deserved explanation to his listeners. Herodotus himself said, "My History has sought out digressions from the beginning."

⁴ Gaarder 32

⁵ Drake 8-30-06

⁶ Herodotus 3

⁷ Herodotus 11

Whether it is an entire book dedicated to explanations of foreign cultures or a paragraph dropped into the middle of a narrative describing, "...that a male Persian is never buried until the body has been torn by a bird or dog...", Herodotus narrative contains an endless stream of digressions and tidbits of interest bearing, often, only a peripheral relationship to the main story.⁸

ESTABLISHING A NEW DISCIPLINE

Thucydides (460-395 BC)

Thucydides was an Athenian born around 460 BC and most certainly knew of the work of Herodotus. His service in the Athenian army gave him first-hand knowledge of many events he wrote about in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* and in writing that book he changed the course of Western history writing not only for his own time, but for the next seven hundred years. In fact, his analytical approach ultimately made a permanent change to the writing of history and the title "Father of History" might be better suited to him rather than Herodotus. With Thucydides there was no intervention from otherworldly forces. He rejected the "inclusive approach" of Herodotus, with its wide range of interest and detail. Thucydides introduced a new kind of historical writing, narrowly focused, exclusive, and based solely on observable evidence. There are clear differences in each of their works, and they are evident in a direct comparison. If we assume the translation from the ancient Greek is a reliable vehicle for their styles, both authors have distinct tones in their writing, exploit different literary methods, content, use of sources, and information to illustrate their stories and themes. The two most striking features of Thucydides writing compared to Herodotus, though, are the absolute absence of any reference to spiritual causes of events and the direct line of narrative free of all references not directly contributing to actions and consequences.

The "Thucydidean Revolution" created the rational historian interested in politics, economics, war, and how influential men shape the course of events. Thucydides introduction to *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is peppered with phrases such as, "...all the evidence leads me to conclude..." and "...it seems to me..." and "...if we look at the evidence..." It is clear from the beginning, Thucydides is writing with a much stricter line of inquiry than Herodotus did and with him; the break with Homer was complete. No longer would there be fanciful references to the intervention of the gods in human affairs. The writing of history, for Thucydides, was based only on what men could observe, record and prove. In fact, Thucydides was probably referring directly to his counterpart Herodotus when he wrote,

In investigating past history, and in forming the conclusions which I have formed, it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition. People are inclined to accept all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way... However, I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the conclusions I have reached from the evidence which I have put forward. It is better evidence than that of the poets, who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or of the prose chroniclers who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology.

⁸ Herodotus 64

We may claim instead to have used only the plainest evidence and to have reached conclusions which are reasonable accurate, considering that we have been dealing with ancient history.⁹

Although what we read is factual and evidenced based, Thucydides was neither a journalist nor a subscriber to the twentieth century American educational experience of “history as a list of things to memorize”. Thucydides method was that of attempting to interpret the meaning of events and specific guiding principles to help him do so. He was not interested, as Herodotus was, in the garb of a different culture, or their traditions, or daily routines that may have differed from the people of Athens. He was interested in what he claimed were the only things that mattered: war, politics, and leadership. For Thucydides, all other concerns came from a true understanding of the events surrounding those topics. For example, his evaluations for military leadership came from his analytical questions: How many men did a leader have? Did he understand long they could be supplied in the field? Did he know how well led they were? In this new and radical rendering of history there were clear benefits to anyone who sought to understand the reasons for the outcomes of human events. Thucydides believed that the power in recording history from an evidence-based methodology was that the true events of the past could prove educational. History’s lessons provided moral instruction, insights into human nature, ways to understand likely outcomes when certain conditions existed, and clues as to what characteristics a young man should develop for his life to have greatness. The true nature of human decisions could be clearly displayed and their consequences could be understood with this rational approach. Thucydides dedication to this truth is apparent in his analysis of events. He did not want things of a subjective spiritual nature to cloud the truth of history. To Thucydides since the gods and the spiritual world were unobservable, they were unknowable and therefore had no place in the historian’s analysis.¹⁰ In a sense, Thucydides shut the door between earth and Mount Olympus called for writers to stay on earth and not venture beyond it as they attempted to understand its affairs.

FROM GREECE TO ROME

Polybius (200-118 BC)

A Greek statesman and historian, Polybius lived over two hundred years after Thucydides. It was in his lifetime (201-120 BC) that Greece declined and Rome ascended to become the dominant military and political state of the region. He migrated to Rome, as many other Greeks did, and accompanied Publius Scipio, a Roman general, on his military campaigns against Carthage. Polybius became a sort of historiographical “bridge” because he practiced the Thucydidean method of writing history: observation, verification of facts, and critical reasoning in his analysis. His *Rise of the Roman Empire* transferred this discipline of writing history from Greece to Rome, and ensured its continued practice for many generations to come. In the opening sentences of his book, his debt to Thucydides is clear.

If earlier chroniclers of human affairs had failed to bear witness in praise of history, it might perhaps have been necessary for me to urge all readers to seek out and pay special attention to writings such as these; for certainly mankind possesses no better guide to conduct than the knowledge of the past....the study of history is once an education in the truest sense and a training

⁹ Thucydides 2

¹⁰ Drake 9-8-06

*for a political career, ...the most infallible, indeed the only method of learning how to bear with dignity the vicissitudes of Fortune is to be reminded of the disasters of others...can there be anyone so completely absorbed in the study of other subjects of contemplation that he could find any task more important than to acquire this knowledge?*¹¹

Tacitus (56-117 AD)

The Annals of Imperial Rome is the most famous work of Tacitus and it shows the Thucydidean method of writing history in full bloom. Although he knew that perfect objectivity was impossible to practice, Tacitus set out to write about first century Rome, "without indignation or partisanship". He emphasized the importance of *attempting* to be objective in order to bring as much truth as possible to the process of interpreting events and writing about them.¹² He wrote in a very straightforward style and seldom stepped back from the chronological narrative to contextualize events in the larger framework of the times. In spite of this, his concerns are apparent. Tacitus cared about the moral foundation that his beloved Rome appeared to be losing. For him, the function of history took on a sense of urgency as he tried to show through his writings the glories of the past as well as the behaviors that brought about decay and destruction. Tacitus was very clear about his judgment of Nero's character and the disastrous effects he would have on Rome when, upon murdering his mother, Agrippina, he entered the city and "...plunged into the wildest improprieties, which vestiges of respect for his mother had hitherto not indeed repressed, but at least impeded."¹³

In Tacitus we see history not only as a strict methodology for recording events of the past, but also as a political tool for shaping the future. Tacitus hoped to use the lessons of first century Rome to save the crumbling moral structure of his own time and remind his fellow citizens of the values and deeds that had made Rome great in the first place.

HISTORY WRITING CHANGES COURSE

St. Augustine (354-430 AD)

Aurelius Augustinus was born in Roman North Africa. After a young adulthood filled with frivolity and "carnal corruptions of the soul," he became a Christian and formed a small monastic community where he began to write philosophical and scholarly dialogues. At the age of thirty-seven he was ordained a priest in the north African city of Hippo (present day Annaba, Algeria) and gained notoriety for public debates with scholars from different religions and philosophies.¹⁴ Augustine drew history into his thought as no other philosopher before him had. He asserted, contrary to historians before him, that earthly affairs moved in a purposeful, linear manner according to the providence of the omnipotent God of the Bible and by doing so, revolutionized the writing of history for the next thousand years. He claimed, "*Divine foresight directs the history of mankind from Adam to the end of time as if it were the story of one man who gradually develops*

¹¹ Polybius 41

¹² Tacitus 35

¹³ Tacitus 319

¹⁴ Pomerleau 63-65

from childhood to old age" ¹⁵ The effect of his influence was to fundamentally change the rational approach that Thucydides pioneered eight hundred years before him. For St. Augustine, the unseen spiritual world was just as important as the observable material world. He opened up the "door" that Thucydides had closed and called for writers to consider the spiritual purposes behind earthly events. There was a big difference, though. This time the spiritual being on the other side of the metaphorical door was not the Zeus or Apollo on Mount Olympus, but the God of the Bible and Christianity.

St. Augustine argued that every earthly event had a purpose and that purpose was the final destination of human souls in union with God. He believed that all human history is a struggle between the "Kingdom of God" and the "Kingdom of the World": spiritual realities versus earthly concerns that obscure those realities from realization. This "Kingdom of God" was attained not through rational or material means, but through the mystery of faith. For St. Augustine the only compasses for morality were the Scriptures and the rational capacity that God granted man to understand them.

The whole family of God, most high and most true, has therefore a consolation of its own - a consolation which cannot deceive, and which has in it a surer hope than the tottering and falling affairs of the earth can afford. They will not refuse the discipline of this temporal life, in which they are schooled for life eternal; nor will they lament their experience of it, for the good things of earth they use as pilgrims who are not detained by them and its ills either prove or improve them. ¹⁶

How history was written and the purpose for which it was written, took a dramatic turn due to the influence of St. Augustine. In light of this dramatic injection of spiritual concerns into the consciousness of subsequent writers, a new emphasis emerged in historical analysis. With the need for moral direction met by the Bible and the knowledge supplied by faith that the human soul is awaiting perfection in heaven, history's emphasis of analysis of the acts of military leaders and their consequences looked pale and insignificant. St. Augustine's approach to writing took hold as Christianity grew in influence and established itself as the primary religion of Western civilization. Chroniclers of history decided that their primary task was to understand the meaning of human affairs in the eternal story of God and mankind and to avoid investing in an understanding of things only temporarily here on earth.

St. Augustine's essential critique was that historians had been asking the wrong questions since the time of Thucydides. He called for history to become fundamentally *teleological*.¹⁷ He claimed that, "Why did things happen the way they did?" or, "How did this man's choices make the circumstance turn out thus?", were inadequate questions. He called for historians to ask, "What purpose do events serve in light of mankind's journey towards the City of God?"

His influence is clear seven hundred years later in Geoffroy de Villehardouin's *The Conquest of Constantinople* written in the 12th century. In many ways Villehardouin's account of a military campaign resembles something that Tacitus may have written, but a fundamental difference can be found in such statements as, "By God's will the Greeks were routed, and our men began to

¹⁵ Gaarder 179

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *The Political Writings*, 53

¹⁷ the explanation of phenomena by the *purpose they serve* rather than by what caused them

cut them down and kill them.”¹⁸ Historical interpretation simply became a matter of recording events and bringing meaning to them in light of explaining God’s guiding will and favor in human affairs. This new paradigm harkened back to Homer’s “open door” between the earthly and spiritual realms.

For Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Tacitus history was a way for men to make sense of the world and their place in it. Concern with issues of character, honor, selflessness, and leadership became paramount and a rational approach was the only option. Thucydides contribution of banishing the extraterrestrial from the historian’s consideration established how history would develop for centuries to follow. Augustine’s revolution ushered in an era of historical interpretation dominated by an outlook demanding God’s role not only be considered, but understood ultimately in terms of His will and the fate of human salvation. With the advent of the Renaissance, almost one thousand years after Augustine, an analytical and rationalistic approach to interpreting the meaning of events returned. As the secrets of the classical world re-emerge in several disciplines through the humanistic movements in the Italian Renaissance, Thucydides model of observing and writing was reasserted. Although the Augustinian view is not unknown among historians, it is Thucydides the model that dominates modern history writing even today.

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¹⁸ Joinville 116