

historiography

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the writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods. The term historiography also refers to the theory and history of historical writing.

Modern historians aim to reconstruct a record of human activities and to achieve a more profound understanding of them. This conception of their task is quite recent, dating from the development in the late 18th and early 19th centuries of scientific history, cultivated largely by professional historians. It springs from an outlook that is very new in human experience: the assumption that the study of history is a natural, inevitable human activity. Before the late 18th century, historiography did not stand at the centre of any civilization. History was almost never an important part of regular education, and it never claimed to provide an interpretation of human life as a whole. This was more appropriately the function of religion, of philosophy, even perhaps of poetry and other imaginative literature.

History of historiography

Ancient historiography

Greco-Roman era

The older, pre-18th-century outlook has been particularly well studied in the historiography of the ancient Greeks and Romans. But, although two of the most important ancient historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, wrote as early as the 5th century BC, when recorded Greek historiography was only just beginning, they had few successors of comparable quality. It is a symptom of the relative lack of importance attached in antiquity to this type of activity.

Ancient history was a branch of literature. The most appreciated historians were the writers who, like Thucydides, were able to touch on universal human problems or who, like the Roman author Tacitus (died c. AD 120), wrote in a dramatic way about important events or who, at least, attracted readers by their excellent style and skill in composition. Many of the works that lacked some of these literary qualities failed to survive.

About 1,000 ancient Greeks wrote in antiquity on historical subjects, but most of these writers are mere names. Many of the losses appear

to have occurred in antiquity itself. Even historians of first rank have fared badly. Only in a few cases have complete texts of all their writings survived. Of the voluminous history of Polybius (covering originally the period 220-144 BC) only about one-third survives. Nearly half of Livy's Roman history (originally covering the period 753-9 BC) is lost. The text that remains is reasonably good only through the efforts of a group of Roman aristocrats who, in about AD 500, were trying to salvage the chief glories of Roman literature. A considerable part of Tacitus is missing, and the surviving portions of his *Annals* and *Histories* (originally AD 14-96) derive from two unique manuscripts.

Herodotus, whom the Roman statesman Cicero called "the father of history," came from the western coast of Asia Minor. The writers who preceded him were mainly Ionians from the Greek settlements in the same area. The origin of Greek historiography lies in the Ionian thought of the 6th century. The Ionian philosophers were doing something unprecedented: they were assuming that the universe is an intelligible whole and that through rational inquiries men might discover the general principles that govern it. Hecateus of Miletus, the most important Ionian predecessor of Herodotus, was applying the same critical spirit to the largely mythical Greek traditions when he wrote, early in the 5th century, "the stories of the Greeks are numerous and in my opinion ridiculous." Herodotus was more of a traditionalist, but he introduced his work as an "inquiry" (*historia*).

Egyptian and Babylonian historiography

A glance at the older historiography of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the other peoples of the ancient Near East will heighten one's appreciation of the novelty of the task undertaken by Herodotus. The kings of Egypt, of Babylonia and Assyria, and of the Hittites and the Persians all sought to preserve their glorious deeds for posterity in monumental inscriptions. The more important rulers also accumulated large archives, including both ordinary administrative documents and records specially commemorating their achievements. Some 20,000 clay tablets remain from the collections written for Ashurbanipal of Assyria (668-627 BC). Both in Egypt and in Babylonia lists of kings were kept in the temples, and these were sometimes supplemented by brief annals recording the principal events, though the hatred felt by certain rulers for their predecessors led to periodic destructions of older material. The exceptional meagreness of the narrative sources for Babylonian history before 747 BC seems due to the obliteration of the older annals by Nabonassar of Babylonia (ruled 747-734). Apart from changes in literary style, there was surprisingly little development over a period of more than 1,000 years in all these types of commemorative records. The inscriptions and temple records were

normally intended to perpetuate the glory of the gods in whose service these rulers had accomplished great deeds. The names and dates of dynasties and of particular rulers can be reconstructed fairly adequately with the aid of these sources, but one cannot expect much accurate information about particular events. Nor, with rare exceptions, were those who had access to this material interested in using it to write continuous histories.

Herodotus and his immediate Ionian predecessors shared a very novel outlook. Its distinctive features were a lively curiosity and a capacity to treat sources in a critical spirit. Boundless curiosity about people and their diverse customs is one of the most endearing traits of Herodotus. Like other Greeks from western Asia Minor, he was particularly stimulated by contacts with the great Persian Empire, which offered opportunities for reasonably secure travel. The resultant immense widening of historical perspective is illustrated by a story told by Herodotus about Hecateus. When the latter assured the Egyptian priests at Thebes that he could trace his descent through 16 generations, the Egyptians showed him evidence of the descent of their high priests through 345 generations. Herodotus was the first to link his geographic inquiries with true history. His descriptions of the barbarian world that confronted the Greeks provided an introduction to the epic of the successful Greek resistance to the Persians.

Ancient history and biography

The types of history written by the ancient Greeks and Romans influenced profoundly all subsequent historiography down to the 18th century. In order to interpret sympathetically this classical historiography, it is necessary to bear in mind the literary conventions that governed this branch of literature. The ancient Greeks distinguished between history and biography. The origin of both forms can be traced back to at least the 5th century BC, and the differences between them were observed throughout antiquity. The writer of history was supposed to aim at giving a true story, but the biographer was entitled to treat historical personages in a manner that resembled legend. There existed, of course, some exceptions. The lives of the early Roman emperors written by Suetonius in the 2nd century AD, while conforming to the traditional, topical arrangement of biographies, constitute an unusually valuable historical source, especially for Augustus, whose correspondence is repeatedly quoted. Yet another distinction was drawn between history and the study of "antiquities," to use a term employed by Varro (116-27 BC), perhaps the greatest of all the ancient Roman scholars. This distinction was already implicit in Aristotle's contemptuous dismissal of history (in his *Poetics*) as a branch of literature dealing with the particular rather than with things of general significance. The histories he condemned provided

chronological narratives of wars and political events. Aristotle and his disciples were engaged in several enterprises that they regarded as something quite different from history. For example, they embarked on the study of the constitutions of all the Greek states. Such work was to be based on systematic inquiries. The student of the “antiquities” tried to use a wider range of evidence than the sources normally consulted by the ancient historians, and he arranged his results systematically by topics.

In antiquity a writer of history was usually preoccupied at least as much with style as with content. A generation before Aristotle, the rules of rhetoric, as they might be applied to history, were fully elaborated by Isocrates, a teacher of rhetoric at Athens. Cicero tried (especially in his *De oratore*, 55 BC) to familiarize the Romans with these Isocratean precepts. History was to be written in a clear but solemn style, akin to fine oratory. The historian was to introduce all manner of literary embellishments but was also to stress the moral lessons of his story. At its worst this type of historiography could lead to serious misrepresentations of the past. Among the Roman historians, Livy (died AD 17) was an important practitioner of this kind of writing, which was particularly well suited to the patriotic myths that he was trying to immortalize, of a Rome that owed its magnificent destiny to the unique virtues of its citizens and the perfection of its antique institutions. Some outstanding historians, such as Polybius (2nd century BC) and Caesar (died 44 BC), eschewed these rhetorical precepts, but in all the ancient writers an important element of literary artifice was always present. This is one of the reasons why they offend modern standards, which demand absolute accuracy in the presentation of evidence. One of the most striking contrasts is the reluctance of the ancient historians to quote documents. Tacitus might rely heavily on the archives of the Roman Senate, but he never mentions his documentary sources. An inscription discovered at Lyons, France, preserves a speech delivered by the emperor Claudius to the Senate in AD 48, and it is clear that Tacitus utilized another version of the same text. His skill in using it is matched by the freedom with which he adapts it to suit his purpose.

Methods of Thucydides

The greatest and the most original achievement of the best Greek historians lay in their clear grasp of the need to distinguish truth from fiction and their conscious preoccupation with the methods of achieving this. This is admirably conveyed in a famous passage of Thucydides.

And with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions,

but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible. My conclusions have cost me some labour from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eye-witnesses, arising sometimes from deficient memory, sometimes from deficient impartiality.

His practice did not fully live up to this ideal, however. The greatest of his Greek successors, Polybius, is reasonably impartial, except in his treatment of some of the events in Greece. Among the Romans, the writing of history was chiefly the preserve of members of the senatorial class, who almost invariably had some personal axes to grind. But the correctness of the rules formulated by Thucydides was accepted, in principle, by most ancient historians.

Thucydides had deliberately restricted himself to the history of his own time, and many of the subsequent ancient historians did likewise. They could depend on their own experience or could question well-informed contemporaries. The surviving fragments of Livy relating to his own lifetime (64/59 BC-AD 17) are much more vivid and convincing than the earlier books of his history (surviving today only down to 167 BC). The tendency to prefer contemporary history was strengthened by the practical bent of many of these writers. Several ancient historians were men of action familiar with warfare and politics. Interested in history as a source of instruction for statesmen, they could write with authority only about wars and political transactions of their own time. Polybius, the exiled Achaean general and a great traveller, derides unpractical, sedentary historians such as Timaeus, who had been writing about the peoples of the western Mediterranean without stirring for 50 years from Athens.

The historians of antiquity were much less skillful in dealing with noncontemporary history, for which they relied on older historians. Where none was to be found, they felt lost, as Livy complains in the early portions of his Roman history. The modern recourse to non-narrative sources was alien to the habits of most ancient historians. They were usually incapable of doing this successfully, just as they were ill equipped to discuss critically the sources used by the older writers.

Herodotus chose for his theme the successful resistance of the Greeks against the Persians at the beginning of the 5th century BC. Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War, in which virtually all the Greek states became involved in the last decades of that century. These were limited subjects of obvious importance for

which it was possible to find ample evidence. The strength of the ancient historians lay precisely in imposing an interesting pattern on the events of a selected period, usually contemporary or fairly recent, for which they had manageable sources. The best of them could thereby achieve a sense of dramatic unity and produce literary masterpieces. The speeches that Thucydides invented for some of the main protagonists in his story are artistically the most satisfying parts of his work, and at times they even seem to recapture the spirit of what might have been said on these occasions. In a superb writer like Tacitus, whose political career had included long periods of frustration and insecurity, one does not look for impartiality or for scrupulous truthfulness but, rather, for fascinating insights into what the development of Roman imperial power from Augustus to Domitian (the period AD 14-96) meant to the proud, sophisticated Roman aristocracy for whom he was writing.

Classical study of “antiquities”

The study of “antiquities,” as opposed to narrative history, did not normally produce works of literary merit, and this is probably the main reason why most of them disappeared. One important group of such writings originated with Aristotle and his collaborators, writing in the third quarter of the 4th century BC. They were interested in both literary “antiquities” and in the systematic study of the constitutions of Greek states. They had described 158 different constitutions, though only their account of Athens now survives. A comparison of its two main parts illustrates the contrast between the deficiencies of ancient historiography and the impressive achievements of the antiquarian researchers. In the introductory, historical section, Aristotle was baffled by the problem of dealing with the fairly remote past. For each particular period he tried to follow some contemporary sources. The resultant juxtaposition of several writers differing widely in their political outlook produced an account full of contradictions. The second part, however, containing a systematic description of the Athenian constitution, is a masterpiece of shrewd analysis, as are the empirical portions of Aristotle's *Politics* (Books IV-VI), which are based on a wealth of concrete examples derived from the different Greek states.

Aristotle inspired in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC a great mass of philological and antiquarian research. The most important scholars were to be found in the new Hellenistic states, especially at Alexandria in Egypt and at Pergamum in Asia Minor. Among the surviving Hellenistic fragments, there are commentaries on Herodotus and Thucydides. The Hellenistic scholars were interested in many subjects connected with history and did pioneering work in chronology, geography, and topography. They were accustomed to using every kind of source and to quoting documents extensively. Their greatest Roman disciple was Varro, who tried to recover all the

vestiges of the old Roman society and to make a systematic survey of Roman life based on the evidence provided by language, literature, religion, and ancient customs. Most of his writings have been lost, but he supplied the conjectural (though incorrect) date of 753 BC for the foundation of Rome and knowledge of the probable boundaries between some of the groups whose union produced the city of Rome. Unfortunately, antiquarian researches of such penetrating nature were almost never applied in antiquity to the writing of narrative histories.

Early Christian era

The triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire during the 4th century assured the predominance of a type of historiography radically different from the works of the pagan Greek and Roman historians. Its origins were Jewish. The Jews were the only people of antiquity who had the supreme religious duty of remembering the past because their traditional histories commemorated the working out of God's plan for his chosen people. By contrast, no Greek ever heard his gods ordering him to remember. It was the duty of every Jew to be familiar with the Jewish sacred writings, which were ultimately gathered into what became the Old Testament. The writers of these biblical books only gave an authoritative version of what everybody was supposed to know, and they were only concerned with the selection of such facts as seemed relevant in interpreting God's purpose. In addition, the Jews also cherished unwritten traditions. To quote Josephus, a Jewish historian of the 1st century AD, "what had not been written down, was yet entrusted to the collective memory of the people of Israel and especially of its priests."

The Christians took over the Old Testament and added to it an additional body of sacred history. The writers of the four Gospels included in the New Testament were bearing witness to assured truths that the faithful ought to know, and no convincing reconstruction of historical facts is possible from these books of the New Testament. The only avowedly historical book in it is the Acts of the Apostles. The New Testament as a whole represents merely a selection from the early Christian writings. It includes only what conformed to the doctrine of the church when, later on, that doctrine became fixed in one form. Between the Acts of the Apostles, dating probably from the late 1st century, and the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea (died c. 340) and his contemporaries in the first quarter of the 4th century, there is an almost complete gap in Christian historiography.

For the Christian writers the story of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, represented the fulfillment of the prophecies that could be found in various parts of the Old Testament. The Jewish part of the

Bible also assured for Christianity the authority of a long antiquity. The history contained in the two parts of the Bible, now indissolubly linked together, became the only authentic record of God's revelation for mankind, dwarfing into insignificance all the records of other peoples and religious groups. The concept of a universal history had not been wholly unknown to the pagan world, but the Christians were the first to apply it effectively. Christian history had to be a universal history, though of a very peculiar sort, where only one sequence of privileged events, Jewish and Christian, deserved detailed record. The Christian claims must have seemed more extravagant to the pagans than even the Jewish ones. Thus Eusebius stated that the Christians were, in fact, born with the world, anticipating St. Augustine's vision of the city of God existing since the beginning of time.

In defending their religion against hostile critics, the early Christians were forced to fit some pagan history into their universal scheme. This was achieved by means of universal chronologies from the creation of the world to each writer's own time. The events of Jewish and Christian history were thus synchronized with the main dates of the pagan myth and history. Sextus Julius Africanus, who wrote in the early 3rd century, is the first Christian writer known to have attempted this feat. He allotted 6,000 years to the whole span of human history and placed the birth of Christ in the year 5500 from the creation of the world. This work provided the model for the more elaborate *Chronographia* (*Chronicle*) of Eusebius. It became the foundation for a long succession of Greek chronographies produced by Byzantine writers. A Latin adaptation by St. Jerome (died 419/420) was immensely influential in western Europe for more than 1,000 years. A modern scholar is filled with mingled admiration and despair at the ingenuity of Eusebius and of his more eminent successors and at the absurdity of many of their conclusions. But they did originate and impose on the world a unified scheme of universal chronology. The dating from the birth of Christ was introduced by Dionysius Exiguus, who wrote at Rome in the early 6th century, and it was successfully popularized in the 8th century by the English historian Bede.

The writing of history of their own time was not an essential task for the Christians of the 4th and 5th centuries. When they did so, they wrote primarily in defense of their religion against the pagan world or against rival Christian groups branded as heretical. All these histories belong to religious apologetics. They suffer from inevitable distortions in the choice of what should be mentioned and what must be suppressed, and they are often excessively unfair to outsiders and opponents. These faults were not uncommon among the classical historians, though the Christians were somewhat unusual in their extreme conviction that they alone must be right. A comparison

between the Christian historians and an outstanding pagan writer, such as Ammianus Marcellinus (second half of the 4th century), who was very ready to admire those Christians who merited it, brings out the intolerance and narrowness of outlook of his Christian contemporaries.

Eusebius was the earliest and the most important of the Christian historians of the 4th century. He is quite frank about the practical and apologetic aims of his *Historia ecclesiastica* (written 312-324; *Ecclesiastical History*) designed to show how, through a long series of acts of Divine Providence, a Christian empire was finally brought into existence by Constantine. He admits that "we shall introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful first to ourselves and afterward, to posterity." This work, like his other historical writings, is a mixture of devout fiction and invaluable detail. But there is plenty of the latter in *Ecclesiastical History*. Contrary to the usual practice of the ancient historians, Eusebius tries to specify his sources, and he quotes from them extensively in order to document as fully as possible the developments that resulted in the triumph of Christianity. He provided in this respect a valuable model for his medieval successors. The most astonishing thing about Eusebius was his capacity to handle his sources critically, in matters where it seemed permissible to do so. In one passage of his *Chronicle* he sets aside the authority of St. Paul in favour of a piece of evidence contained in the Book of Judges. In later patristic literature nothing similar is found.

Biography, as it was habitually written in antiquity, could be readily adapted to Christian purposes. St. Jerome modelled himself on Suetonius in compiling the lives of 135 Christian writers (written in 392) as a way of demonstrating the high level of culture attained by his coreligionists. The ancient biographers had freely mingled fact with fiction for the edification of their readers and could be readily imitated by the writers of the lives of Christian saints. The life of St. Anthony of Egypt by St. Athanasius (mid-4th century) set the pattern for this most popular type of medieval literature.

St. Augustine, the greatest of the Latin Church Fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries, was certainly not concerned with writing of history in any ordinary sense of the term. In his *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*) he might invoke historical evidence to demonstrate the utter degradation of all the non-Christian societies, and he encouraged his pupil Orosius to develop this theme more fully in the latter's *Historiarum libri VII adversus paganos* (*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, to 417). Nearly 200 manuscripts of Orosius have survived, testifying to the immense popularity of his work in the Middle Ages. Augustine's greatest influence on historiography lay in

his main message. His vision of the divine and the earthly cities confronting each other dominated the outlook of all the medieval Christian thinkers and profoundly affected their treatment of history. Within that divine plan for the world, purely secular history seemed an insignificant thing.

Early China

The preservation of some records of historical events can be traced in China to at least the early part of the 1st millennium BC. Confucius (551-479 BC) was credited, rightly or wrongly, in the later Chinese tradition with editing the annals of his native state of Lu. But the appearance of the first works fully deserving the name of histories resulted from the unification of China under a single ruler in 221 BC. The first such work to survive, the *Shih chi* ("Historical Records"), dates from c. 85 BC. Its author, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, is quite justifiably called the father of Chinese historiography. His history exhibits many of the main features of the later Chinese official histories as they continued to be written down to the deposition of the last Chinese imperial dynasty in 1911. Within this fairly unified tradition, China produced a mass of historical writings unequalled by any other country before modern times. Until the late 19th century, Japanese historiography formed an offshoot of this tradition.

Chinese scholars showed an interest in the history of China from the earliest times. According to the Chinese conception, history makes sense only if it can furnish practical directives for action or supply correct information upon which action can wisely be based. All the schools of Chinese thought quoted the lessons of history. Confucius, with his stress on the moral content of these lessons, formed part of this universal belief in the value of history. One of the duties inculcated by him was the scrupulous transmission of authentic records. When, some centuries after his death, the unified Imperial state began to recruit its bureaucracy among the Confucian scholars, the recording of all the necessary information and the careful preservation of records became one of the main functions of the Chinese government, both centrally and locally. A long series of official histories and of records connected with them has survived from the time of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) onward. From then on, the great bulk of Chinese history was written by bureaucrats for bureaucrats. From a practical point of view this immense body of historical writings fulfilled a very useful purpose. Such histories were bound to be highly stereotyped and restricted in content to what interested the higher officialdom. It is easy to condemn it by modern Western standards for its excessive preoccupation with concrete details and inability to produce works of wider synthesis. But this Chinese tradition did gradually evolve in the direction of greater rationality and subtlety. Its scope widened as the sphere of government expanded. Furthermore, within this tradition there

appeared from time to time writers of genius, men of bold critical spirit, genuine historical insight, and overriding integrity. One of the greatest was Liu Chih-chi (661-721), the writer of the *Shih t'ung*, the first thorough treatise in Chinese, or any other language, on historical method, which also constituted in effect a history of Chinese historiography. He had a successor in Ssu-ma Kuang (1019-86), the author of the first fairly comprehensive general history of China (covering the years 403 BC-AD 959). In the 17th century a remarkable group of historical scholars virtually founded a school of critical Chinese philology. None of these writers succeeded in radically transforming Chinese historiography, but they created an increasingly sophisticated and critical tradition. Their successors in the 20th century assimilated some valuable features of modern Western historiography.

Medieval historiography

Europe from the 5th to the 11th century

The period stretching from the 5th to the 11th century was a time of very profound cultural decline in regions that had once constituted the western half of the Roman Empire. Almost all the inhabitants of these provinces again became illiterate. There are long periods for which there are virtually no narrative sources, and the bulk of surviving historical writings consists merely of meagre factual annals. Virtually all the writers were ecclesiastics, in marked contrast to the Byzantine lands, where a strong tradition of lay historiography persisted throughout the Middle Ages. The annalists and chroniclers of the West were predominantly monks, and their lack of experience of the secular world outside their cloisters made them into blinkered and unpractical historians. This was true even of Bede, an Anglo-Saxon monk, who was by far the greatest historian of the early Middle Ages.

All the historians of this period were seriously affected by the cultural decline around them. They were having to write in part for a more uncultured audience. Sulpicius Severus, probably the best Western historian of the early 5th century, still intended his *Chronica* (to 403) for educated Roman Christians, but his life of St. Martin of Tours is a piece of medieval hagiography. This model could inspire lives full of folklore and miracle, from which the real human personalities of the saints were almost wholly absent. The same duality of purpose is a notable feature of Bede's voluminous writings. He explicitly recognized that he must adapt himself to his audience when he explained that he was writing in a simple Latin style so that he might be more easily understood by his Anglo-Saxon readers. There is a marked contrast of tone between his theological and his historical writings. As a theologian, Bede follows Eusebius and the earlier Church Fathers in not exaggerating the frequency of miracles

and in believing that they were most common in the earliest days of Christianity. But Bede's lives of the English saints and his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*), covering chiefly the years 597-731, are full of miracles and visions. There is one or other on almost every page. It is possible that some of these incidents were included by Bede because he thought that his readers expected mentions of these familiar, traditional stories.

In preparing his historical works, Bede not only took great care to assemble the widest possible collection of sources but also tells the reader what he is using. In dedicating his *Ecclesiastical History* to King Ceolwulf of Northumbria, he requests that

in order to remove all occasions of doubt about those things I have written, either in your mind or in the minds of any others who listen to or read this history, I will make it my business to state briefly from what sources I have gained my information.

An impressive list follows, including mentions of documents copied for him by friends at Rome, Canterbury, and other places. Like Eusebius, on whom Bede modelled himself, he quotes some of the documents integrally. Bede's methods of securing and recording information are so similar to the practices of modern historians and the judicious tone of his writing is so impressive that the reader is almost taken in into treating him as if he were a modern scholar. But Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was written as a work of edification in order to strengthen the faith of his readers in Divine Providence, through which, as he saw it, his Anglo-Saxon countrymen had been converted to Christianity. All matters not connected with his main theme are ignored. Bede's handling of evidence on subjects that he regarded as embarrassing inspires mistrust. But these are small matters in comparison with the enormous mass of information that he alone has preserved and the encouragement that Bede continued to give for many centuries to the writing of history.

The influence of Bede and other Anglo-Saxon scholars was greatly felt during the later 8th and the 9th centuries in the Frankish kingdom, where under Charlemagne and his successor, Louis the Pious, there was a modest revival of historical writing. Besides the annals kept at various monasteries, which tended to convey information in a manner that suited the Frankish rulers, there were a few more ambitious ventures. The important *Historia Langobardorum* (*History of the Lombards*), written c. 774-785 by Paulus Diaconus, or Paul the Deacon, was the work of one of the best educated men of the time. Nithard, a grandson of Charlemagne, left an invaluable narrative of the disintegration of the Carolingian

state during his lifetime. The work that exerted the greatest influence on the medieval writers of biographies was Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* (written c. 830-833; *Life of Charlemagne*). The author was a leading official and a close companion of Charles, and his work was naturally intended as a eulogy of the great king. Einhard says that Charlemagne retreated safely from Spain, returning with his army safe and sound, except that on a ridge of the Pyrenees, on the way home, he happened to experience some small effects of Gascon perfidy. Nobody would gather from this that the Franks had narrowly escaped a major disaster. Einhard was merely echoing the story told in the semiofficial contemporary annals. Another source of distortion was Einhard's use of a classical model, the *Lives of the Caesars* by Suetonius. The subject headings under which he described Charles and even the very words used were partly borrowed from the lives of Roman emperors, but his Charlemagne is probably in essentials an authentic and credible portrait.

If bulk alone is to be taken as a criterion, annals were the main product of medieval historiography. The annalist merely sets down the most important events of the current year. In the case of the earliest medieval annals, the events were often noted down in Easter tables, in the blank spaces between the dates calculated for the forthcoming Easters. Such paschal annals would be extremely brief. When, as often happened, annals came to be written down in separate manuscripts, distinct from the Easter tables, there was room for the expansion of individual entries. In either case, the resultant annals cannot be regarded as history since the events are necessarily recorded in isolation. But they preserve in a right order the essential facts, which could be rearranged into a continuous narrative. Such a narrative, if it still followed the chronological arrangement of its various annalistic sources, should properly be termed a chronicle.

Medieval historians show little awareness of the process of historical change. They were unable to imagine that any earlier age was substantially different from their own. The unawareness of the meaning of anachronism helps to explain the strange wanderings of medieval annals and chronicles. If a religious community wanted to acquire a historical narrative, it copied some work that happened to be most readily accessible. A continuation might then be added at the manuscript's new abode, and, later on, this composite version might be copied and further altered by a succession of other writers. Hence there are at least six main versions of the annals known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. They all derive from the annals kept down to 892 at Winchester, the West Saxon capital. Thereafter, copies were acquired by religious centres in the most diverse parts of England, and one manuscript was being kept up to date at the abbey of Peterborough as late as 1154. An extreme case of wanderings is

represented by the annals of the cathedral church of Cracow, the medieval Polish capital. The first section is based on Orosius, the next comprises annals beginning with the death of Bede and containing notices of Frankish and German events, while the Polish section starts with the conversion of Poland to Christianity (965-966) and ends in the 13th century.

Europe from the 12th to the 14th century

Historians are accustomed to regarding the late 11th and 12th centuries as an age of intensified progress in culture and learning; this development, however, did not greatly affect historiography. There was a modest revival of interest in some of the ancient Latin writers, but would-be historians were unsure which ancient models they ought to imitate. A whole series of attempts was made to apply to other races the theme in Virgil's *Aeneid* of a noble group of people guided by the gods toward a splendid destiny. The first essential step was to establish the descent of one's nation from the ancient Trojans and then to trace subsequent history through a series of heroic conquests. The most ambitious of these writings was the *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), by Geoffrey of Monmouth (died 1155), which attempted to establish for the Celts a historical destiny greater than any other. Although some, even contemporary, readers were not deceived by the work, and William of Newburgh, one of the best English historians of the 12th century, denounced it as a tissue of absurdities, many seriously accepted it as history.

With a few exceptions, the ablest minds of the 12th century were attracted into enterprises that ignored history; they were more concerned with systematization of thought and with philosophical speculations. One of the exceptions was Otto, bishop of Freising, in Bavaria. He was a grandson of the Holy Roman emperor Henry IV. He received the best education that his age could give, but he was also briefly a Cistercian monk during the most austere period of that order's history. Otto was torn between conflicting impulses to seek the city of God as the only reality and yet to hope for the progress of the German empire. Out of this conflict came his first work, *Chronica* (*The Two Cities*), a chronicle of world history to 1146, perhaps the most profound medieval attempt at a Christian philosophy of history. As Otto himself confessed, it was composed "in bitterness of spirit . . . in the manner of tragedy." The election in 1152 of his nephew and friend Frederick Barbarossa, as emperor, filled Otto with a new elation. The excellence of his second work, *Gesta Friderici I imperatoris* (*The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*), derives in a considerable measure from a quality rare in medieval historians, a sense of optimistic belief in the value of writing history because it might become a record of human progress. *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* contains a penetrating analysis of the problems

encountered by the German rulers in trying to rule the precociously urbanized Italian society.

As in antiquity, the best medieval works were accounts of contemporary history by men who had participated in the events that they were describing. It is, however, very significant that some of the writers that are prized most highly today survive in only very few manuscripts and were presumably not appreciated by most of their contemporaries. One such work was the *Historia pontificalis* ("Pontifical History") covering the period 1148-52, of John of Salisbury, one of the most accomplished scholars of his age, who was writing about the period when he was in the papal service. Another instance of undeserved neglect is furnished by the *Liber de regno Siciliae* ("Book of the Kingdom of Sicily") covering the period 1154-69, written by an anonymous member of the Sicilian court.

Unlike the ancient historians, the medieval writers of contemporary history had no inhibitions about extensively quoting official documents. In England, a succession of writers preserved a large quantity of such texts. Roger of Hoveden was, in the last quarter of the 12th century, treated by the English kings as a kind of court historian. He preserved valuable legal and administrative records with which he was familiar through his activities as a royal official and justice. Matthew Paris, the most important English monastic historian of the 13th century, was highly regarded by King Henry III and had excellent sources of information. He left behind a collection of transcripts of royal and ecclesiastical documents that today fills a large printed volume. Some writers made their chronicles into an anthology of official records, thinly connected by the author's brief comments. Such is the chronicle of Robert of Avesbury, consisting mainly of the military dispatches of King Edward III and other interesting documents to 1356. Another variant of the same method was for a wholly mediocre chronicle to incorporate exciting pieces of eyewitness narratives by other writers. A dull English monastic product of the late 14th century, the *Anonimale Chronicle*, includes a narrative of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which is one of the most dramatic and interesting eyewitness accounts to be found in medieval historiography.

The most popular histories of the 13th and 14th centuries were encyclopaedic compilations giving all the important facts neatly arranged under the dates of popes, emperors, and other rulers. There were even more ambitious ventures aiming at summarizing all the important facts from all the different branches of human activity. The Dominican Order, created at the beginning of the 13th century, was especially concerned with producing such aids for the dissemination of useful knowledge. The best known of these Dominican works is the immense *Speculum historiale* ("Mirror of

History”), by Vincent of Beauvais, written under the patronage of King Louis IX of France. It is a compilation made up of excerpts from many authors.

The 13th and 14th centuries were not a period of any fundamental innovations in the techniques and nature of historiography, but there was a growing diversity of types of historical writing. Very detailed, chatty narratives multiplied, often badly organized and inaccurate, but conveying the authentic atmosphere of the times and vividly portraying leading personalities. Such were the St. Albans chronicles of Matthew Paris (to 1259), the reminiscences of Joinville about St. Louis during the Seventh Crusade (1248-54), the Lombard chronicle of Fra Salimbene (to 1287), or the vast history of the first part of the Hundred Years' War written in the second half of the 14th century by Froissart. Memoirs and histories written in vernacular languages, such as those of Joinville and Froissart, came to be quite common. Laymen began to write histories. Some were great men, like Geoffroi de Villehardouin, one of the leaders of the Fourth Crusade (which captured Constantinople 1202-04), of which he wrote an account. Important urban chronicles began to appear, such as the Florentine chronicle of Giovanni Villani, with its invaluable statistics of Florentine population and activities around 1338. The extraordinary personality of St. Francis, who died in 1226, inspired lives of him more convincingly human than any previous medieval biographies of saints.

The Humanist historians of the 15th century tried to make a deliberate break with the tradition of medieval historiography. By their insistence on a more coherent arrangement of subject matter, by their superior critical outlook, and, above all, by their much more accurate awareness of the process of historical change, they had introduced innovations of fundamental importance. In part they owed their grasp of these new possibilities to the influence of Byzantine scholars. In historiography, as in other matters, the new humanistic scholarship was a joint product of Western and Byzantine traditions.

Byzantine historiography

During the millennium that elapsed between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West in the 5th century AD and the Italian Renaissance of the 15th century, in no part of Europe did the writers of history consistently maintain as high a standard of achievement as in the Byzantine Empire. Parts of the 7th and the 8th centuries form lengthy gaps in the record of Byzantine historiography, but this seems mainly to be the result of subsequent losses of manuscripts. When, in the middle of the 9th century, Photius, future patriarch of Constantinople, compiled a record of some 280 books that he had read, he mentioned works of 33 Greek historians, dating mostly from

the late Roman Empire and the Byzantine period, 20 of which are now lost. But, among the Byzantines of the 7th and 8th centuries, there was certainly no parallel to the Dark Ages in western Europe.

The Byzantine historians were heirs to the combined traditions of classical Greek writing, of the subsequent Hellenistic historiography, and of the Christian historical writing of the 4th century. Few ancient Latin historians were ever translated into Greek, and their influence on the Byzantines was, therefore, very slight. The older classical Greek historians provided the Byzantines with their cherished models of language and style. Like all educated Byzantines, the historians continued for a millennium to write in a literary language that soon became unintelligible to the vast majority of their compatriots. Hence, from the 6th century onward, there appeared, side by side with the learned historiography, a succession of popular chronicles written in the ordinary language. Most of these popular writings form—in their prejudice, ignorance, and crudity—a startling contrast to the works of the more eminent classicizing historians, but they do provide valuable glimpses of the sort of hagiographical history, more religious myth than sober fact, that ordinary Byzantines apparently wanted to read.

Herodotus and Thucydides were frequently invoked by Byzantine historians as models of fine prose. The influence of these two writers on the substance of what was written usually remained slight and superficial, however. The only Byzantine writers who seriously modelled themselves on these two oldest Greek historians wrote during the 15th century. The earlier Byzantine historians owed most to Polybius and to the Greek biographer Plutarch (died c. AD 119), the two Hellenistic writers who had the greatest influence on Byzantine notions of how history and historical biography should be written.

Like Polybius, the majority of Byzantine historians, including most of the best ones, preferred to write about their own times; and within these limits they produced some real masterpieces. Unlike the majority of the ancient historians, Polybius had included much autobiographical detail, and his influence reinforced the readiness of the Byzantine historians to talk about themselves, thus providing abundant information about several of these authors. Their histories are likely to be one-sided and full of details about what interested them, while remaining silent about a great mass of other contemporary happenings. They are frequently gossipy and patently prejudiced, inspiring much less confidence than the austere, impartial writings of authors such as Thucydides. This is one of the main reasons why the Byzantine historians have often been excessively underestimated by modern readers. The bulk of the Byzantine contemporary histories were written by statesmen, high

officials, and prelates—men with access to important information. They have to be used critically and cautiously but can be immensely valuable.

Priscus of Panium (c. 450), a member of a Byzantine embassy to Attila's camp, is the best source of information about that terrible king of the Huns and his followers. A century later, the reconquest of Vandal Africa and of Ostrogothic Italy by the emperor Justinian was the main theme of the *History of the Wars* of Procopius, a leading civilian adviser of Belisarius, the Byzantine commander. Subsequently, Procopius also wrote a *Historia arcana* (*Secret History*), containing a horrible indictment of the activities of Justinian and Belisarius. Many of his details about the corruption at court and the oppressive nature of the government may be substantially correct. In the 11th century Michael Psellus, who wrote a history of his own times, was a leading Byzantine scholar and official, for a time even the chief adviser of emperors. His *Chronographia* is concerned almost entirely with the happenings at the Byzantine court and is one of the most gossipy and amusing narratives ever written on such a subject. His psychological insight and his lively and subtle style delighted the educated Byzantines. Anna Comnena, the daughter and biographer of the emperor Alexius I, greatly admired Psellus. Her own *Alexiad* is a much less fascinating work, but the recovery of the Byzantine power under her father provided her with an important theme.

The last, increasingly disastrous, centuries of Byzantine history are recorded by a series of scholarly and interesting historians. Nicetas Choniates, a high imperial official, provides a surprisingly balanced eyewitness account of the siege and capture of Constantinople by the forces of the Fourth Crusade (1202-04). George Acropolites, a leading adviser of the Greek emperors of Nicaea, carries the story from 1203 to the recapture of Constantinople by the Byzantines in 1261. The later 13th and 14th centuries are covered by a succession of writers deeply immersed in contemporary theological disputations. Perhaps the most readable of all Byzantine histories is the largely autobiographical work of the leading politician and emperor John VI (reigned 1347 to 1354), written after his deposition during his years of enforced retirement in a monastery. George Sphrantzes, a close friend of the last emperor, Constantine XI, included in his history an eyewitness account of the siege and capture of Constantinople by Mehmed II in 1453. Two of Sphrantzes' contemporaries chose to write primarily about the Turks. Their methods place them among Renaissance historians. Laonicos Chalcocondyles wrote (in about 1464) an account of the rise of the Turkish state. He did so in the manner of Herodotus, with long digressions on various neighbouring nations. A little later, Critobulos of Imbros, in his account of the Turkish conquest of Constantinople,

made Mehmed II his chief hero and modelled his history on Thucydides.

The study of what might be called “historical antiquities” was not much cultivated by Byzantine scholars. The most notable exception was the emperor Constantine VII, but only some fragments of his voluminous collections have survived (dating from about 940 to 959). They include a very interesting account of the various peoples with whom the Byzantines had to deal. Such ancient Greek literature as still survives, including that of all the historians, was preserved by the Byzantine scholars. When, around the year 1400, the teaching of Greek was introduced into Italian universities by Byzantine scholars, they brought also their superior techniques of literary scholarship, transforming thereby the study of Latin authors as well as introducing into western Europe the treasures of Greek literature. One result was the emergence of the new Renaissance historiography.

Muslim historiography

Muslim historiography appears to have originally developed independently of European influences. Until the 19th century Muslim writers only very seldom consulted Christian sources and almost never noted events in Christian countries. Fortunately, they displayed at times more curiosity about the non-Muslim peoples of Asia. The first and best history of the Mongol conquests in the first half of the 13th century was the work of a Persian, Joveyni. On a visit to Mongolia in 1252-53, he was able to consult the recently compiled, earliest Mongol narrative (*Secret History of the Mongols*).

The origins of Arabic historiography still remain obscure because of the gap between the legendary traditions of pre-Islamic Arabia before the start of the Muslim era (AD 622) and the sophisticated and fairly exact chronicles that began to appear in the later 8th and 9th centuries. But while the detailed stages of this development still await reconstruction, the main influences shaping the early Muslim historiography are clear enough. As in the case of the ancient Jews, it was created and perpetuated by religion. Muhammad (died 632) regarded himself as a successor to a long series of Jewish and Christian prophets, and he made Islam a religion with a strong sense of history. The Qur'an, Islam's holy book, is full of warnings derived from the lessons of history.

Teachings of Muhammad not included in the Qur'an came to be regarded after his death as authoritative tradition left behind by him. All his sayings and actions were therefore carefully treasured and ultimately came to form, in combination with the Qur'an, the foundation for the body of Muslim law (Shari'ah), common to all Islamic communities. These traditions (Hadith) were transmitted

orally for several generations, until they were written down in the 8th and 9th centuries. The resultant collections were only partly historical, as myths and inventions crept into them. The scholars who were engaged in preserving and verifying these traditions were chiefly preoccupied with organizing them into legal and theological systems, and they were frequently hostile to the historians. The earliest authoritative life of Muḥammad, written by Ibn Isḥāq (died 768), was attacked by a leading exponent of the legal "traditionist" learning. This confirms the independence of the historical scholars from the theological and legal interests. But both groups shared some common materials, and the strict rules evolved by the legal "traditionists" for recording their sources and tracing a continuous chain of authoritative transmitters of the traditions encouraged similar exact habits in the Muslim historians. The resultant histories were often pedantic, full of unrelated facts, and deficient in reflective comment, though there are some astonishing exceptions, such as the writings of Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406). But the better Muslim historians scrupulously quoted their authorities and tried to be truthful. This was particularly true of the "classical" school of historians, who were writing at the centre of the 'Abbasid caliphate in Iraq in the 9th and 10th centuries. Aṭ-Ṭabarī (died 923), the most authoritative of them all, wrote his "History of Prophets and Kings" as a supplement to his earlier commentary on the Qur'an, and subsequent Muslim historians were content to follow his reconstruction of the early Islamic history. The Syrian and Iraqi historiography of the 12th and early 13th centuries is at least as valuable as the Western historical writing of this period, and sometimes it is clearly better.

To orthodox Muslims, the development of the Islamic community represented a continuous manifestation of God's purpose. Consequently, the recording of the religious progress of the Islamic society continued to be sacred duty. One of the original features of Muslim historiography is the large amount of attention devoted to the lives of devout men and of scholars. To many Muslim historians, these spiritual and intellectual activities were of much greater importance than the doings of princes and warriors. One of the peculiarities of Muslim historiography was the liking for encyclopaedic dictionaries of famous men. The earliest of these were devoted to the Companions of Muḥammad and to the early transmitters of the Muslim traditions. For a thousand years extremely diverse types of biographical collections have continued to appear in the Muslim world. Those devoted to religious scholars attained a particularly wide diffusion. Saladin (Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn), who took Jerusalem from the crusaders in 1187 and later opposed the Third Crusade, offered to the Muslim writers the particularly congenial subject of a ruler dominated by a sense of religious duty. A particularly fine example of medieval Muslim historiography is the biography of Saladin by Baha' ad-Dīn (died 1234), which gives an

exceptional insight into Saladin's motives for many of his critical decisions.

But the greatest Arab historian and one of the most penetrating thinkers about historiography in any time or place was undoubtedly Ibn Khaldūn. The introduction (*al-Muqaddimah*) to his *Kitāb al-'ibar*, a universal history (begun in 1375), is, in A.J. Toynbee's judgment (1934), "the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind." Ibn Khaldūn had absorbed all the learning accessible to a Muslim of his time. He was a master of religious learning, an outstanding judge, a writer on logic. He turned a subtle and most disciplined mind to historiography in order to explain his personal tragedy. He had served a succession of rulers in Islamic Spain and the Maghrib (Northwest Africa) as a general, a politician, and even once as a chief minister, and his activities had always ended in disaster. In order to explain what had gone wrong, he sought to achieve a correct understanding of the forces that governed the societies known to him. He concluded that political stability had become impossible in his native Maghrib, because over centuries economic prosperity had declined excessively and the forces of lawlessness had become too strong.

As a detailed chronicler of events Ibn Khaldūn is not always exact, but, like contemporary historians, he knew how to reconstruct correctly the main trends over several centuries. His ability to formulate general laws that govern the fate of societies and to establish rules for the criticism of sources provided him with an intelligent framework for the correct reconstruction of past history.

Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah* has survived in at least a score of manuscripts, but he has had no effective influence on Muslim historiography until recently; after his time, as before, the writing of history continued to be a normal feature of Muslim civilization in the more advanced Islamic societies. In several countries, notably in parts of India, the first works that deserve the name of history appeared only after the Muslim conquest or the conversion to Islam. After the 12th century Arabic ceased to be the main language of Muslim historiography. Distinguished histories were written in Persian in the 13th century, and subsequently Turkish and other vernaculars came to be used by historians in different parts of the Islamic world. But, in its isolation from non-Muslim influences and its traditional interests, Islamic historiography underwent no intrinsic change until the 19th century, when it began to be affected by the impact of modern Western civilization.

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