A Concise History of HISTORY

Global Historiography from Antiquity to the Present

DANIEL WOOLF

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Queen's University, Ontario

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Preface and Conventions

This book is a revised and abridged version of my 2011 work entitled *A Global History of History* (*GHH*). That book aspired to a coverage of the history of historical thought and writing – and historical representation in non-alphabetic and oral forms – that was, if not encyclopedically comprehensive, at least global in intent. It was quite lengthy, and pitched at the graduate student/academic market. It appeared at nearly the same time as *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* (2011–12), a multivolume series under my general editorship, devoted to the same subject and similarly global in reach. Neither of these titles was especially suited to undergraduates in need of a more concise survey of the history of history – hence the present volume.

In the preface to *GHH* I wrote the following, which still serves adequately to explain the general aim in writing such a book:

> Many years of teaching courses on historiography, and the prescription of several different textbooks for the students in those courses, convinced me that a further work was needed ... There are several books covering very long time spans, and one or two with a global reach, but none in English, of which I am aware, that do both. A conviction that students ought to be exposed to the 'historical cultures' of other civilizations than their own has thus informed my choice of subject; a strong sense that there is a story to be told about the development of historical thought, historical writing and the modern historical discipline, and that it relates directly to some of the larger movements of world history (in particular the global engagement of different peoples and cultures over several millennia), provides the 'plot', if a work on historiography can be said to have a plot.

My overall perspective has not changed in the intervening time, though naturally my thinking about particular historians/historical thinkers and about the connections between historical cultures has, necessarily, evolved with further reading, especially of works that had not appeared by mid-2010 when *GHH* went to press (for example Frederick C. Beiser's comprehensive study of the origins and development of

German historicism, Dipesh Chakrabarty's intellectual biography of Indian historian Jadunath Sarkar, and several recent works on global history), or of which I was previously unaware. The process of abridgement has also been useful to me (though often quite challenging) in considering what aspects and examples to keep and which to jettison, and in revising or refining certain points made in the longer work. While the abridgement remains global in scope, it is by design less comprehensive than the former book, and some historical traditions discussed at some length in *GHH* have had to be left aside altogether, or mentioned only in passing. My hope is that those readers who have their curiosity whetted by this *Concise History* might be inclined to consult its bigger, older sibling for further detail.

However, this is not simply an abridgement. I have also taken the opportunity in the current book, which is about 60 per cent the length of *GHH*, to rearrange the contents of most chapters and to reorganize the whole. Thus, while a great many passages appear here verbatim and unchanged from the former work, there are many sections that have been rewritten in part or whole, and in particular the periods covered by particular chapters have been changed. The opening chapter on antiquity is the least changed, though shorter, but from that point on chapters from the earlier book have been combined, shrunk extensively, and, in several cases, rewritten with different periodization in mind. Thus the two early modern chapters of *GHH* have become one; the chapter on the eighteenth century now extends through the Revolutionary and Romantic periods up to the first decades of the nineteenth century; and the two *GHH* chapters on the nineteenth century have here become a single one extending from the second third of the century to the end of the Second World War. Most significantly, I have very heavily revised the last two chapters and added material on recent and prospective future developments in the field that a few readers of *GHH* felt had been given shorter shrift than I intended (though even here many sentences from the former book are repeated verbatim). This re-periodization has been intellectually helpful insofar as it has exposed some continuities and transitions that did not appear as clearly in the previous book, the chapter divisions of which were a little more conventional.

In the interest of remaining concise and accessible, I have also abandoned, with some regret, a few features of the former book that were well received, such as its specialized 'subject boxes' (sidebars on particular topics mentioned in passing in the main text), the extensive

Dates

A multitude of calendars have been used by various peoples in the course of the past five thousand years. Full compliance with the non-Eurocentric principles of this book would suggest that dates be recorded as the authors being described recorded them, for instance using the Hijri year of the Muslim calendar. However, this would be far more confusing than helpful. The compromise often used of Common Era (CE) or Before the Common Era (BCE) seems to me simply to replicate the conventional Western calendar under a different name. I have therefore, as in *GHH*, stuck with BC and AD.

Vital dates (where known) for most historians (and many who were not historians but nonetheless figure in the narrative) are provided in the main text. In some cases alternative dates are used either because of lack of agreement in scholarship as to a single date, or in some instances because the date itself is tied to a particular chronological scheme which itself is ambiguous. In the final chapters, certain vital dates have, sadly, had to be revised owing to the deaths of individuals still living when the first book went to press. Certain abbreviations for dates have been used:

b. = born, in the case of historians still living as of mid-2018.

c. = *circa*, approximate year where no firm year is known or agreed upon.

cent. = century or centuries.

d. = died, used where there is a firm death year (or approximate, in which case noted as 'd. *c.*').

est. = established, for instance, a journal or historical society.

fl. = *floruit*, that is 'flourished', generally used in relation to authors for whom birth and death dates are entirely unknown or highly obscure; indicates active period.

r. = reigned. When a monarch is noted, his or her regnal years, not years of birth and death, are noted in parentheses.

Acknowledgements

It is my pleasure to repeat here the acknowledgements I made in the *Global History of History* and to add a few more individuals who have either joined me on various historiographical projects going back to the early 1990s (when I first ventured outside my home turf of early modern England) or sharpened my thinking on particular issues. I thank in this respect Guido Abbattista, Michael Aung-Thwin, Donald Baker, Michael Bentley, Stefan Berger, Jeremy Black, the late Ernst Breisach, Adam Budd, Peter Burke, the late John Burrow, Fernando Cervantes, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Eileen Ka-May Cheng, Youssef Choueiri, William Connell, Antoon De Baets, Ewa Domańska, Richard Evans, Sarah Foot, Grant Hardy, Bruce Janacek, Donald R. Kelley, Newton Key, Tarif Khalidi, Ann Kumar, the late Joseph M. Levine, Fritz Levy, Chris Lorenz, Juan Maiguashca, Stuart Macintyre, Allan Megill, Matthias Middell, Mark Salber Phillips, J. G. A. Pocock, Attila Pók, José Rabasa, Anthony Reid, Chase Robinson, Jörn Rüsen, Dominic Sachsenmaier, Masayuki Sato, Zachary Sayre Schiffman, Axel Schneider, Baki Tezcan, Romila Thapar, Edoardo Tortarolo, Aviezer Tucker, Markus Völkel, Peer Vries and Q. Edward Wang. Many others have provided encouragement or assistance, such as my long-suffering team in the Principal's Office at Queen's University, who have tolerated with good grace my occasional absences for half-days or summertime weeks of writing. I will not mention them all, given the length of this list, but they, too, have my deepest appreciation.

Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press provided the impetus for *GHH* over a decade ago and more recently suggested this abridgement as a way of updating the original book and bringing it to a wider audience; I am grateful, too, for the press's anonymous readers for helpful feedback on the initial proposal and the penultimate text. Ian McIver supervised the publication process with a firm hand. Rose Bell, who copy-edited *GHH* in 2010, undertook the present book also. I am again grateful for her

meticulous attention to detail and helpful suggestions. Among my past doctoral students, I thank Dr Matthew Neufeld, Dr Sarah Brand, and Dr Jane Wong Yeang-Chui. Other graduate students assisted in other ways with the original book (including summarizing for me books in languages which I do not read), in particular (at the University of Alberta 2002–9) Tanya Henderson, Carolyn Salomons, Tony Maan and Nina Paulovicova. The experience of teaching historiography to many students at varying levels has added immeasurably to my sense of what I liked in other textbooks and what I did not, which was not always the same as what the students liked. Current Queen's University graduate students David White, Kimberley Bell, Virginia Vandenberg, Megan Kirby and Johanna Strong have provided excellent intellectual stimulation during my extended tour of duty in senior administration. Ian Hesketh, my former research associate at Queen's, and now at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, remains a close associate and fellow enthusiast for matters historiographical; apart from providing a few apposite references here and there (such as the passage from H. T. Buckle that opens Chapter 7), it is he who convinced me that in the present work I needed to pay more attention to 'Big History'. Attendance at a conference on historiography, philosophy and method at McMaster University in June 2018 organized by Sandra Lapointe occasioned some late rethinking of certain passages in Chapters 5 and 6, and I am grateful to attendees, especially Martin Kusch, Catarina Dutilh Novaes, Lydia Patton, Christopher Green and Michael Beaney for their papers and discussions.

My three adult children, Sarah, Samuel and David have always done a convincing job of feigning interest in historiography; in David's case, the interest must have been genuine since he spent a month providing a reading and extensive marking-up of *GHH* with a view to its abridgement. While I have not followed all his suggestions, this exercise proved invaluable in suggesting to me ways in which the original might be reduced and simplified without compromising its global reach. Both my late parents, Margaret and Cyril Woolf, took an interest in my work and this, regrettably, will be the first book I have produced that I shall not have the opportunity to share with them. Lastly, my wife, Julie Anne Gordon-Woolf, remains my greatest friend, life partner, supporter and affectionate critic.

On a final, and sad, note, two historiographers a generation my senior, who provided both role models and occasional criticism, have both died very recently. Hayden White, with whom I engaged at a few

international conferences over the past fifteen years, did not especially like my approach to the history of history, which is far removed from his, but ours was a respectful disagreement. While we did not know each other well, his works have been a significant influence on my own over the years. The late Georg Iggers, a historiographer of a very different bent who attended most of the same conferences, was a friend and close ally for twenty-five years in my conviction that historiography needed to be globalized; he was a frequent commentator on and supportive critic of my work. I dedicate the book in appreciation of these two late giants of historiography.

Introduction

The historian, before he begins to write history, is the product of history.

E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (p. 34)

'History' is written and read today because humans have the biological and neurological capacity to remember things and to frame relationships of a causal or symbolic nature around those things that have been remembered. It exists also because we are social creatures whose survival has been more or less dependent upon connections with other members of our species. Knowledge of the past in some form is common to all humans, though specifically *historical* knowledge (which reaches beyond personal yesterdays and current memory) may not be. In a widely read book entitled *The Writing of History*, the late French psychologist and philosopher Michel de Certeau (1925–86) observed that societies supply themselves with a present time through historical writing, progressively separating past from present and providing modernity with knowledge of a temporal and sometimes geographical 'other'. And it allows that other, discarded in earlier periods as an irrelevant or 'repressed' fragment, to return anew – sometimes without being invited.

However, the capacity to remember, and the curiosity to inquire into a reality no longer extant except in human-made or natural artefacts, are not sufficient on their own to create the conditions for history to be made. Humans are the only species capable of *both* forming long-term memories (beyond the simple recollection of how to perform tasks or how to find a particular familiar location) *and* of communicating. It is this latter function that permits the transmission of those memories, and other knowledge, to humans both contemporary and future. Written communication has been a significant technological enhancement to the preservation and communication of information over long distances or across long spans of time, but it is a relatively recent development, dating back at most a few millennia to the earliest

does it claim to outline, much less argue on behalf of, a set of 'historical methods' – except insofar as these are a recurring, and highly contested, element in discussions about how the past should be recovered and described. (An aside: I am not what the philosopher of historiography Aviezer Tucker would deem a 'historiographic esotericist' who believes one cannot teach proper methods and practices and that they must simply be acquired through experience. However, I will confess to finding works that self-describe as teaching historical methods – and in particular methods that exclude all other approaches – however comforting they may be to new students, naively mechanical. They also tend to be extraordinarily dry, rather like instruction books for fixing a particular car, or descriptions of a mining-smelting-refining operation.) The word 'historiography' has also been used, in some past cultures, as synonymous with history itself (the written genre). And we will have occasion to discuss not only historians (those who wrote works of history deemed significant because of the quality of their writing, the acuity of their perception, or sometimes simply their mastery of style and composition) but also historiographers, literary critics and, indeed, some philosophers of history, a few of whom wrote little or no actual history but had a deep impact on thinking either about the meaning of the past itself, or about the ways and means of representing it. This will be the case whether the writer or thinker in question originated in Europe, the Americas, Africa or Asia.

The previous sentence must be clearly understood at the outset. The 'West' neither invented nor enjoyed a monopoly on history. Nor has history been the closely guarded possession of history's high priesthood, academics working mainly in institutions of higher education. In fact, a multitude of different civilizations that have inhabited this planet have conceived of the past in different ways, formulated variable notions of its relationship to the present, and evolved distinctive terms – not always directly corresponding to those we use in English – to denote its representation. Past historical cultures must be taken on their own merits and judged by their own standards, not by the fairly narrow assumptions of modern professional historians. In short, we too should be wary of both a geographical and chronological parochialism. While many forms of history sprang up in isolation, they did not remain that way. Just as the history of the world is (in part) a story of encounters, conflicts and conquests among different peoples, so the history of history itself demonstrates that the different modes of knowing the

past have often come into contact with and demonstrably influenced one another. These encounters were relatively limited until the early modern period (discussed in Chapter 3) and their full implications were not realized before the nineteenth century, at which point, with the advantage of hindsight, it can seem as if all the various streams of historical thinking that the world has seen were either dammed up or diverted into the rather large lake of professional history built on European and especially Germanic academic practice which has ruled the past ever since. But this result was by no means inevitable, nor was it necessarily an intellectual 'conquest', since Western practices were often quite willingly adopted, even zealously pursued, by social reformers in other countries seeking an alternative to long-standing and, to them, restrictive and progress-retarding indigenous conventions of describing their own pasts.

While there can be no question that Western history has come to be the hegemonic model (at this time), it has in turn been influenced by its encounters with other forms of historical knowledge, even if only sharpening definitions of what history should and should not be by comparing it with an exotic but 'lesser' 'other'. Spanish historical writing of the sixteenth century certainly had a huge impact on how the past of the newly discovered Americas was written, but the early modern missionaries who wrote those histories had to adapt their writings to the sources available in native oral and pictographic practices. I will argue further on that these contacts, and this growing awareness of alternative modes of 'historicity' (which in this sense means the capacity and will to preserve or recover and represent aspects of the past), obliged Europeans to make some decisions about what *they* deemed 'within-scope' for true history, and to prioritize the written record of the past over the oral or pictographic. This prepared the ground for a hardening of European attitudes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the division of the world into those with history from those (apparently) without it. This in turn set the table for the achievement of Western dominance over history outlined below in Chapters 4 and 5. The book, in short, sketches the main world traditions of historical writing, and then the process whereby the European approach, which has generated its own self-policing 'discipline', achieved its hegemony, sometimes being adapted or altered better to mesh with very different cultures or competing ideologies (which themselves may be understood as differing beliefs about the

moral, economic and political status of the present with respect to either a wistfully remembered past or a dreamed-of future).

That hegemony has not come without cost as some modern critics of the discipline have observed, a point we will revisit in later chapters. In particular, the enshrinement of historiographic authority within the academic community, while providing rigour and an almost factory-like system (our earlier mining-smelting-refining metaphor, now applied to people) for reproducing its scholarly progeny, can also be viewed as a constraint on creativity. It also introduces a buffer between author and reader unknown before the mid-nineteenth century. In *The Writing of History*, Certeau commented astutely on the chasm that has opened between historical authors and wider audiences, whereby the value of work is bestowed not by the reader at large (as it was in Europe's eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth) but by a peer-approval system whose criteria are often quite different from those of the lay person. The mere existence of this system (of which the present author is a product) both constrains historians from straying too far from the 'accrediting' rules of the discipline and inflicts *literal* discipline in the form of bad reviews, tenure denials and public embarrassment. At the same time, as professional historians and their students seek new angles, new approaches and something original to say about usually well-trodden ground (though almost always carefully within the academy's approved practices), the system guides them into a narrower and narrower field of view, often about subjects so minute, or too-often revisited, as to be of little interest beyond a minor subset of the profession.

This raises a further issue. As 'world history' and latterly 'global' history have gradually won both academic and curricular acceptance in recent times, it has become clear that the noblest plans for inclusiveness often run aground on the shoals of Eurocentrism. As the Palestinian cultural critic Edward Said once observed, the alleged universalism of various disciplinary fields, among which he includes historiography, is 'Eurocentric in the extreme, as if other literatures and societies had either an inferior or a transcended value', a loaded view which Said traced (not entirely accurately) to Enlightenment thought. One can avoid this trap by taking an attitude that treats each historical culture as unique and of value. But, on the other hand, if we simply recount a number of parallel histories of history, West and East, we risk losing perspective; we will miss both the 'big picture', *and* a sense of the

relative scale, significance and magnitude of different types of history. We will also jeopardize any hope of making meaningful generalizations and of finding similarities and connections. Here explicit comparison can help, together with attention to the ways in which historical cultures have been at least aware of one another for a very much longer time than they have interacted.

It is also worth remembering that although for the past two centuries historical traditions have been associated with particular nation-states, this was not always the case. In terms of political organization, the nation-state – which played a key part in the formation of 'modern' Western historical methods during the nineteenth century – is little more than a blip in the history of human society. Cities and empires (sometimes at the same time) were the dominant form of polity through most of human history; the latter were typically multi-ethnic and multilingual, leading to a degree of 'internal' interaction between cultures – the Mongol appropriation of both Chinese and Islamic forms of historical writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is but one example. Moreover, though founded on the basis of perceptions of shared pasts (and sometimes 'invented traditions'), nation-states themselves are scarcely more homogeneous than the empires from which they emerged, as a violent record of ethnic and racial persecution over the past hundred years illustrates. Given this, phrases such as 'French' historical writing (or English, Turkish, Chinese, etc) should not be understood in this book as always denoting the modern countries of these names, at least before the nineteenth century, and even then cannot be taken as monolithic essences.

The British historian J. H. Plumb (1911–2001) was certainly correct that ancient Chinese historicity was not that of the modern West (or, as we will see, even of post-nineteenth-century China), just as he was right to point to differences between the moral and didactic imperatives driving much 'Western' (a term used to denote Europe and its direct colonial offshoots) historiography from antiquity to 1800, and the less explicitly moralizing academic history that succeeded it. But does that mean that only modernity – and that in its European form – has produced 'real' history? This is among the issues which this book explores. Western historiography has repeatedly, and often defensively, fashioned itself, masking its internal insecurities and intellectual doubts, in response to other types of history that it encountered in the course of war, trade and other forms of contact. The great irony is that

this occidental form of knowledge, having built itself into something unlike its 'oriental' and supposedly 'ahistorical' counterparts, was by the nineteenth century sufficiently refined, confident in its methods and clear in its goals (themselves closely associated with Western economic and technological superiority) that it could march with comparative ease – and sometimes by invitation – into those parts of the world that previously entertained different notions of what the past was and how and why it should be remembered. And there is a second irony: even with the assistance of the most willing local admirers, European historical practices could not be grafted wholesale on to foreign societies any more than American-style democracy can be imposed today on countries with no democratic tradition. In some instances (for example the transference of Marxism, a system built on Western perceptions of the process of historical change, to China, with its very different relation to its own past), European forms required considerable modification or domestication in order to achieve broad acceptance. The rough fit and the compromises have been elided from the story of history as the twentieth century wrote it, along with most of the indigenous historical practices that they supplanted.

In an influential book, Dipesh Chakrabarty has called for the 'provincializing of Europe', noting that Europe has traditionally provided the scale against which the rest of the world is measured. That being said, it is difficult to make European historiography simply one among several approaches. As most postcolonial scholars would concede, and as later chapters of this book will contend, the European-descended Western form of historiography, complete with its academic and professional institutions, *has* achieved dominance over other forms of writing or thinking about the past. It has by and large pushed out of consideration more traditional, oral forms of history that were commonplace in earlier ages, and in the West since about 1600 history has been associated overwhelmingly with writing rather than speech, a by-product of increased lay literacy over the previous two centuries and of perceptions of the fundamental unreliability of the record where a system of writing did not exist. The fact of the elimination of alternative forms of perceiving and representing the past, seen by Said and other postcolonial scholars as an imposition of a Western system of knowledge and language on the colonized, holds true, ironically, even in circumstances where Western historical methods have been seized and turned as a weapon on the very political or social structures that

Rüsen, Jörn, *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate* (New York and Oxford, 2002)
Sachsenmaier, Dominic, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge, 2011)
Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London, 1978)
Schiffman, Zachary S., *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore, MD, 2011)
Tosh, John, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 3rd edn (London and New York, 2002)
Tucker, Aviezer, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge, 2004)
Wolf, Eric R., *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA, 1982)

Reference Books, Companions and Encyclopedias

Boia, Lucian (ed.), *Great Historians from Antiquity to 1800: An International Dictionary* (New York, 1989)
Great Historians of the Modern Age: An International Dictionary (New York, 1991)
Boyd, Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, 2 vols (London, 1999)
Munslow, Alun, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London and New York, 2000)
Tucker, Aviezer (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Malden, MA and Chichester, UK, 2009)
Woolf, Daniel R. (ed.), *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, 2 vols (New York, 1998)

Some Anthologies of Historical Writing[1]

Budd, Adam (ed.), *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources* (London, 2009)
Burns, Robert M. and Hugh Rayment-Pickard (eds), *Philosophies of History: From Enlightenment to Post-Modernity* (Oxford, 2000)

[1] This list includes only readings available in English given the target audience for the present book. It is also unavoidably Eurocentric, there being, as yet, no good collection of historiographical readings with a global range. Short extracts from some non-Western historiographic texts are included in the original book of which this is a revised abridgement, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge, 2011) but a full-scale anthology remains desirable.

Green, Anna and Kathleen Troup (eds), *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York and Manchester, 1999)
Hoefferle, Caroline (ed.), *The Essential Historiography Reader* (Saddle River, NJ, 2011)
Hughes-Warrington, Marnie (ed.), *Fifty Key Thinkers on History*, 3rd edn (Abingdon and New York, 2015)
Jenkins, Keith (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (London and New York, 1997)
Kelley, Donald R. (ed.), *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT, 1991)
Mazlish, Bruce and Akira Iriye (eds), *The Global History Reader* (New York, 2005)
Roberts, Geoffrey (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London and New York, 2001)
Stern, Fritz (ed.), *The Varieties of History* (New York, 1956)
Stunkel, Kenneth R. (ed.), *Fifty Key Works of History and Historiography* (Abingdon and New York, 2011)
Tosh, John (ed.), *Historians on History*, 3rd edn (London and New York, 2018)

A Select List of English-language Journals Containing Historiographic Articles[2]

American Historical Review (1895)
Comparative Studies in Society and History (1958)
Gender and History (1989)
*History in Africa: A Journal of Method** (1974–)
*Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History** (1978; successor to *Historical Methods Newsletter*)
*Historiography East and West** (2003–06)
History and Memory (1989)
*History and Theory** (1960)
*History in Africa** (1974)
History of Humanities (2016)
History Workshop Journal (1976)
Journal of Contemporary History (1966)
Journal of Interdisciplinary History (1970)
Journal of the History of Ideas (1940)

[2] Titles followed by an asterisk focus on Historiography, Historical Methodology, History of Historical Writing or Philosophy of History.

Past and Present (1952)
*Rethinking History** (1997)
Representations (1983)
Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society (1975)
Storia della storiografia/Histoire de l'Historiographie/History of Historiography/Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung (multilingual)* (1982)

MILESTONES

25th cent. BC Likely date of the Palermo stone stele fragment (early Egyptian historical record)
c. 22nd cent. BC Sumerian King List
10th cent. to *c.* late 7th cent. BC *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible)
704–681 BC *Eponymous Chronicle*
7th–6th cent. BC Neo-Babylonian Chronicle series
c. 480 BC *Spring and Autumn Annals*
c. 440 BC Herodotus' *Histories*
c. 400 BC *Zuozhuan*; Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*
mid-2nd cent. BC Polybius' *Histories*
c. 90 BC Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*
mid-1st cent. BC Sallust authors his histories
after 27 BC Livy writes his history of Rome, *From the Foundation of the City*
c. AD 90 Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews, Jewish War* and *Against Apion*
c. AD 105–117 Tacitus' *Annals* and *Histories*
c. AD 111 Ban Gu's and Ban Zhao's *Hanshu* establishes model for future single-dynasty 'Standard Histories'
c. AD 391 Ammianus Marcellinus' *Thirty-one Books of Deeds*

1 *The Earliest Forms of Historical Writing*

The Ancient Near East

The Near East was a complex, multilingual region extending from Egypt and what became the land of the Israelites, through the Levant, embracing Mesopotamia proper and the land of the Hittites in Anatolia and northern Syria. Within this region dwelled a number of very long-lived civilizations, and they did not recall or preserve their pasts in the same ways or consistently in the same types of record. The evidence is literally fragmentary, deriving as it does from inscriptions on steles, stone tablets or rocks, and writings on papyrus; a majority of these objects have not survived entirely intact. One looks in vain for 'history' as a concept, much less for works devoted to it. Lexical equivalents for either 'history' or 'historiography' are scarce in any language of the region, though the Hebrew words *tôledôt* ('genealogies') and *divrê hāyyāmîm* ('words of those days') might be considered approximate equivalents. Terminology is important, especially when sorting out what peoples in the past thought, and so is the nomenclature of categories – the Greeks in particular would take the generic divisions of history seriously, as would Renaissance humanists two millennia later. But it would be unwise to leap from the dearth of linguistic terms, or the absence of a literary genre, to the conclusion that 'there was no history back then'.

Arguments can certainly be made for a sense of the past in ancient Egypt, and in particular an effort to memorialize the successive dynasties of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Very few of the 'annals' recorded by the first pharaohs remain extant: an early specimen is the twenty-fifth-century 'Palermo stone', a fragmentary stele (so named for one of its portions, in Palermo, Sicily) inscribed with king lists from pre-dynastic times down to the mid-third millennium; and annals of the wars of a mid-second-millennium pharaoh, Thutmose III

selection from and collation of multiple earlier, non-narrative sources. Many went beyond simply relating former events, aspiring to provide advice, counsel or cautionary tales, a recurring theme through much of the global history of historical writing. A didactic purpose emerges from one of the best-known examples of early Mesopotamian historical writing, the Old Babylonian *Weidner Chronicle*, a propagandistic composition reaching back to the early third millennium but largely devoted to the Sargonic dynasty of Akkad in the twenty-fourth and twenty-third centuries. Surviving only in much later copies, this is one of the first historical works clearly designed to recover and preserve the past explicitly for the edification of present and future. Framed as a dialogue among divine beings, the *Weidner Chronicle* contrasts the godliness of Sargon of Akkad with the impiety of his grandson Naram-Sin to which the author attributes the fall of the Akkadian kingdom. The long-standing explanation of events through an alternating current of divine favour and punishment, a recurrent theme for many centuries, thus had an early start. It appears frequently throughout the travails of the children of Israel at the hands of foreign hosts depicted in the Hebrew Bible.

Jewish Historical Thought from the *Tanakh* to Josephus

Like most Near Eastern cultures, the ancient Israelites had a term for neither 'history' nor 'myth', and appear not to have held any strong belief about a distinction between the two. Somewhat exaggerated claims have been made for the uniqueness of the historical sense in the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible), to the point of viewing the Hebrews as the inventors of history in its post-Enlightenment sense – that is, a cumulative flow of events towards a divinely ordained conclusion. All of this has been complicated by the modern and considerably more sophisticated understanding of the sequence and chronology of sections in the *Tanakh*, now known to have been the work of several authors writing from the tenth to the sixth centuries BC. It was also once virtually taken for granted that the monotheistic religion of the Hebrews, and their belief in a covenant with a single God, gave them a distinctive and unrivalled sense of past, present and future, and of a linear direction to time that differs sharply from the cyclical vision evident elsewhere. Apart from the fact that one finds both a linear and cyclical sense of time in Greek and Roman writers this view has been

discredited by the unmistakable evidence in Hebrew writings of historical cycles, the most obvious one being that of alternating divine pleasure and displeasure with the chosen people, leading in this world to the repeated experience of slavery and liberation, captivity and freedom. It is also difficult to see how a distinctive Israelite/Jewish sense of history could have emerged in isolation, given the early contacts between the Israelites and the other peoples of the region.

The most unarguably 'historical' section of the *Tanakh*, in that it describes times, persons and events of whose existence we are reasonably confident because there is evidence for them in external sources, and in archaeological remains, was possibly the work of a single writer, the so-called Deuteronomistic Historian, and stretches from Deuteronomy (the last of the 'Five Books of Moses' or Torah) through 2 Kings, but even its reliability has been challenged. Recent scholarship has challenged the *historicity* of much of the *Tanakh* (that is, its basis in fact), without necessarily jettisoning the idea that one can find *historiography* (a deliberate effort to represent the past) within it, albeit a historiography never intended to capture literal truth, as opposed to a moral or religious truth deemed more important. In the early genealogies of Genesis and in the more chronological accounts of the Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, one finds both an effort to memorialize events accurately as a written record and a strong sense of the divine destiny of the Israelites as a chosen people, a linear progress through which runs a recurrent cycle of triumph and misery as God alternately elevates or punishes his children. This achievement is all the more striking given the later dearth of Jewish secular historical writing during the centuries between Flavius Josephus (*c.* AD 37 to *c.* 100) and the 1500s AD when Jews, still scattered across Eurasia, began to rediscover the formal study of the past.

Of all the Jews, it is Josephus who has given us the closest thing to a history in the classical sense. Josephus, who became a Roman citizen, had a foot in both the Jewish and the Roman-Hellenistic worlds, making him an early example of a phenomenon we will see repeatedly, a historian from one culture writing in the milieu and style of another. The Romanized Jew wrote his surviving histories in Greek. Among these, the *Antiquities of the Jews* has proved an invaluable source for the social, legal and religious customs of the Jews; and the *Jewish War* recounts conflicts between the Jews and their enemies, especially Rome, from the Seleucid capture of Jerusalem in 164 BC to the defeat of the

Judaean revolt (in which he had been a participant) during Josephus' own time. Both works make a case for the antiquity of the Jews, and for their capacity to live peaceably within Roman rule, the rebellions having been in his eyes the work of successive generations of fanatics. Elsewhere, Josephus criticized his Greek predecessors by way of defending the greater antiquity of Jewish tradition, announcing a feature which recurs in later ages, arguments over the relative age of institutions, nations, religions and even families.

Early Greek Historiography

The Greeks have figured prominently in histories of history with good reason, even if this has often occurred to the neglect of achievements of greater antiquity further east. The very word 'history' itself is of Greek origin, first used in connection with the study of the past by Herodotus of Halicarnassus. And it is with the Greeks that Europe began routinely to associate histories with named authors. While there are some anonymous Greek writings, we by and large know the identities of the authors of most extant works, even the many that are fragmentary. Indeed, in some cases, *all* we have is the name and the knowledge that the person at some point wrote a history, once familiar to contemporary or subsequent writers but since lost. Finally, the Greeks were the first to experiment with different historical forms, and quickly managed to transcend the rather confining structure of annals and chronicles without abandoning chronological writing.

The origins of Greek historical thinking lay, as with Mesopotamia, in epic poetry, in particular Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which portrayed the heroic Bronze Age deeds of the Achaeans in and following the Trojan War. They ascribed much of the action alternately to human emotion or to divine whim. With the earliest Greek prose historians, a few centuries further on, we have moved more fully into the realm of human actions, albeit punctuated by divine involvement and especially by the influence of an ineffable and unpredictable force that later ages have called 'fortune' but the Greeks referred to as *Tyche*. Greek contact with the Phoenicians, who in turn had had dealings with Mesopotamia and Egypt, probably resulted in the acquisition of alphabetic writing, and the Homeric epics, previously transmitted orally, were finally written down several centuries after they first were performed. The oldest prose historical writers are those that are known by the

collective name of 'logographers', most of whom were from Ionia, which lay on the borderland with Persia in the eastern-most reaches of the Greek 'known world' or *oecumene*. Their works were often a combination of what we would now distinguish as the mythical and the historical, drawing on epic as well as the annals of particular cities about which they wrote.

Over a relatively short span of two or three centuries, the Greeks explored the past through several different genres of writing. These included, in the order in which they are now thought to have developed, genealogy or mythography; ethnography (the study of particular foreign lands and their people's customs); contemporary history/history 'proper' or a continuous narrative of sequential events with their causal connections; chronography (a system of time-reckoning, principally according to years of officials); and horography (the year-by-year history of a particular city). And we, for the first time, know some of the authors of those texts by name. These include the mythographer Hesiod (*fl. c.* 700), whose *Works and Days* had introduced the notion of a succession of declining ages, and Hellanicus of Lesbos (*c.* 490–405), the founder of Greek chronographic writing, notable for his attention to the problem of reconciling multiple chronologies (something that would much occupy European scholars two millennia later). The Ionian writer Hecataeus of Miletus (*fl. c.* 500) is important first because in his *Periodos Ges* ('Circuit of the Earth') he established the ethnographic genre built on personal travel and eyewitness reports, and second, because in his *Genealogia* he set a precedent for later writers by establishing a serious distinction between the fictional and the factual. But it is in fifth-century Athens that one first encounters both the word *history* and the two historians whose works have survived largely intact and who are also known to us by name.

Herodotus and Thucydides

While it is wrong to credit Herodotus (*c.* 484 to *c.* 420 BC), a wandering exile from his native Halicarnassus, with 'inventing' history, he was the first to use the word *'ιστορια* (*historia*) in connection with the past, though unintentionally. The Greek verb from which this derives means 'to investigate'; Herodotus derived the noun *'ιστορια* to denote something like 'inquiries' or perhaps 'discoveries', without specific reference to past or present. Herodotus was at least as

interested in place as in time, his curiosity about the world owing much to Greek geographers and the genre of *periegesis*, geographic guidebooks of the sixth century. It may legitimately be said, too, that Herodotus invented the historian as a distinctive personality that can be read out of his own prose. His Greek predecessors, though not anonymous, remain obscure figures, but with Herodotus we have the first real example of a historian self-identifying, sometimes giving personal details and at other times intruding with his thoughts or judgments on particular events. This trend would continue with Thucydides and the later Greek historians, and by the time we get to Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the late first century BC, it is virtually an obligation of the historian to declare up-front his preferences, methods and biases – even his position with respect to previous historians.

Like Hecataeus before him, Herodotus did not limit his scope to events themselves; he paid attention to ethnographic issues, recording the customs and traditions of the Persians and other, non-Greek peoples. If he is the 'father' of history, it is of history in its more inclusive sense, which in our own day has swung heavily back into vogue with the rise of interest in the social and cultural past. Herodotus began his *Histories* with perhaps the most succinct and naively unpretentious statement of purpose imaginable; he wished to inquire as to why, in the decades just prior to his birth, the Greeks and the 'Barbarians' (a Greek term for non-Greek-speaking peoples which had yet to acquire its modern derogatory association) fought each other; and, following the epics from which he drew inspiration, he wanted both to celebrate and to ensure the survival of their achievements. The barbarians in question were the Persians under Darius I and his successor Xerxes, and as it happens it is to Herodotus' story that we owe much of our knowledge of the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty, and of its failed attempts to exert hegemony over the Greeks. The Hellas of Herodotus' own time – dominated by an Athens increasingly resented by its own empire and feared by its rival Sparta – had been built on the outcome of the Persian conflict. But – importantly – to explain the early fifth-century struggles, Herodotus realized that he had to look back even further in time, and his account proper begins with the ascent of Persia in the mid-sixth century.

Although too young to have witnessed any of these earlier happenings, Herodotus travelled widely, spoke to many witnesses or those who had information from witnesses, and set down the truth as he

praised as a 'scientific historian' who focused on 'causes' has been challenged, with Greek tragedy seen by some scholars as a powerful influence on his writing. In that vein, no feature of Thucydides' history has caused his defenders so much trouble as his practice of including supposedly genuine speeches at critical points in his narrative, a feature of historical writing that would have a long life over the next two millennia. In fact, Thucydides freely admits that he did not personally hear all of the speeches that he relates, and that his memory of those that he did hear is imperfect – he did not record them word for word; they are intended to represent the essence of what may have been said, not its literal words. The practice of including such speeches, possibly influenced by contemporary Greek tragedy, fulfilled an important role within a history, since words were deemed as significant and influential as deeds – in a sense, a famous and effective speech *was* a deed. The invented speech also provided an important narrative linkage between events, a device which the talented historian could use to enrich his account and transcend the boundaries of calendrical years. 'Speeches, so to speak, sum up events and hold the history together', the second-century historian Polybius would eventually comment; and the only ancient historian known to have avoided speeches entirely is Pompeius Trogus (*fl.* first century BC), so this seems a weak basis on which to criticize Thucydides.

Greek Historiography from the Fourth to the Second Centuries

With the declining autonomy and power of the independent Greek city-state, and the failure of Athenian democracy, the fourth and third centuries saw increasing numbers of prominent and colourful tyrants, mercenaries, warlords and monarchs, culminating in Alexander the Great. Historical writers reoriented their attention towards individuals and their achievements, and made more direct authorial commentary on their characters. The beginnings of another long tradition, the role of the historian as not only the reporter but also the 'judge' of past misdeeds, can be found in what remains of the highly oratorical work of Ephorus (*c.* 400 to *c.* 330 BC) and Theopompus (*c.* 380 to *c.* 315), both of whom were trained rhetoricians. The major fourth-century historian whose works survive largely intact, Xenophon (*c.* 431 to *c.* 352), described a particular event, the failed expedition in 401 of ten thousand Greek mercenaries (himself included) in service of a Persian

princeling seeking to overthrow his elder brother King Artaxerxes II, including his own leadership of the retreat back to Greece. A one-time student of the Athenian philosopher Socrates, Xenophon also authored the *Cyropaedia*, an idealized biography of the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great, imbuing a historical ruler with traits derived from philosophy rather than from historical evidence. With him, the long connection between didactic exemplarity and rhetorical life-writing may be said to have originated.

Of the Greek historians after Thucydides, perhaps none has won as high praise as Polybius (*c.* 200–118 BC), though this admiration did not materialize until the Renaissance, which admired his sober tone, his keen attention to identifying the causes of events and his emphasis on the practical lessons of the past. Though he influenced the Roman historian Livy, a great Latin stylist, Polybius' own fame never rested on the literary quality of his writing, which is rather dull compared with his fifth-century precursors. He wrote, as he put it – coining a phrase later ages would borrow – a 'pragmatic history'. It is he who first framed the convention (more implicit than explicit in Thucydides) that the ideal historian would be a man of experience, a *topos* repeated periodically from his time to the nineteenth century. And, more than any other extant Greek historian, he also interrupted his account in places to provide the reader with explicit statements on methodology, discussing the need for historians to weigh different accounts, and criticizing his predecessors by name. He paid greater attention than Thucydides to what we would now call the 'primary' sources of history, especially archives and inscriptions.

Like the Jew Josephus two centuries later, Polybius was at first a wartime captive and eventually a guest of the ascendant Romans; he, too, adapted enthusiastically to a Roman world. Sheer good luck brought him into contact with the Aemilii, architects of the Romans' triumph over their long-time foe, Carthage. Polybius admired what he saw, and it led him to think carefully about how world powers rise and fall. He articulated in the sixth book of his *Histories* a theory of predictable constitutional cycles (generally referred to as the *anakuklosis politeion*) among three pure and three corresponding perverted forms of government previously delineated by the Athenian philosopher Aristotle, and he postulated the stability of 'mixed' regimes consisting of all three pure forms. This was to prove a powerful tool of historical analysis in later centuries: according to Polybius, Rome owed

its greatness to its balancing of monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements, though even he evinced doubt that this balance could be maintained in perpetuity, worried by the democratic reforms that followed the final destruction of Carthage, the great external enemy, in 146 BC. Apart from Tacitus two centuries later, it is difficult to think of an ancient historian who has had as profound an influence on the course of later *political* thought – Polybius' ideas would be taken up by the Florentine politician and historian Machiavelli in the sixteenth century, by English republicans in the seventeenth and by Montesquieu and the framers of the American constitution in the eighteenth century.

Polybius' *Histories* recounted a cumulative process throughout the known world, leading to a particular destiny, the hegemony of the Roman republic. Polybius' account was in part comparative, and – most importantly – it was also interconnected. His term, *symploke*, for the connections between different states, allowed him to resolve the various threads of individual histories – not an easy task. Greek historians had traditionally dated events by years of civic officials; attention to precise chronology was of little interest to the vast majority – even Thucydides was normally content to describe an event as occurring within a particular season. The problem of multiple calendars and differing chronologies has from that day to this been among the things that the international historian has had to sort out before ever putting pen to paper. Polybius borrowed from earlier writers in organizing his material around Olympiads (the series of four-year cycles, commencing in 776, between Olympic games), in every book beginning with Italy and then branching out to other regions such as Sicily, Greece, Africa and even Asia and Egypt.

It is not simply the interconnectedness of his *Histories* that would give Polybius weight; his stress on the process of history towards the single goal or telos of Roman supremacy – driven there by a *Tyche* who assumes a role much less like random fortune than like a kind of deliberate fate – provided a model for much later Roman history. Ultimately it would feature prominently in the combination of Greek, Roman and Judaic views of the past that would characterize two millennia of Christian historical writing and, in its more secular variation, the liberal progressivist strand within modern historiography that the late Herbert Butterfield (1900–79) famously dubbed 'the Whig interpretation of history'. This is a formidable set of influences for a relatively minor Greek political figure who spent much of his life in exile.

Roman Historical Writing from Republic to Empire

By Polybius' time, the centre of power around the Mediterranean had shifted westward to Rome, whose influence was rapidly expanding beyond Italy into the rest of Europe, Northern Africa, and the Near East. By the early first century, it was not very difficult to predict where all this was heading and to spin accounts of history in the same direction, as Polybius had already done.

The survival rate among known texts of Roman historians has been as bad as or worse than that of the Greeks. Scant fragments remain of Aulus Cremutius Cordus, famous for being forced to commit suicide in AD 25 during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, perhaps for having treated Julius Caesar's assassins too even-handedly. Of others, such as Sallust, we have their relatively minor works but only fragments of their major ones; or, as with Livy and Tacitus, what we have is a body of work comprising much of what was written but missing significant sections.

Historiography started slowly in Rome: whereas in Greece it had followed epic, the greatest Latin epic, the *Aeneid*, was a late arrival, composed by Vergil in the first century BC, and thus at virtually the same time that Livy, the great historian of the republic, was writing his prose history. There were early verse efforts at a narrative of the city's early history, little of which remains. Apart from these, two major families or groups of history-writing survive from early Rome, both of which had Greek influences. The first, perhaps derived from Greek horography, consisted of records maintained by a civic and religious official, the *pontifex maximus*, and annually transferred to bronze inscriptions in the Forum. These *Annales maximi* were little more than records of the sequence of annually appointed major officials – consuls, praetors, etc. Apart from the pontifical records, funeral orations, public inscriptions, family records and accounts by other magistrates of their periods in office (*commentarii*) would also provide material for historians. The second major family includes Roman writers who may have written continuous prose and, at least at first, composed their works in Greek. This included Quintus Fabius Pictor (*fl.* 225 BC), little of whose history has, once again survived; Fabius is believed to have used a variety of sources ranging from earlier Greek writers to the *Annales maximi*, oral tradition, magistrate lists and chronicles kept by his own and other families.

The earliest-known prose history written in Latin, which has not survived, was the *Origines*, by the fiercely xenophobic politician and protector of Roman virtue, Cato the Censor (234–149 BC), whose very choice of Latin was a protest against the Greek influences that he saw as dangerously corrupting. Even he, however, followed the Greek model of continuous prose, and borrowed other aspects of Greek historiography such as the inclusion of what might be called 'remarkable facts'. Non-annalistic prose history remained for some time largely in the hands of Romanized Greeks. The first-century works of Diodorus Siculus (*c.* 90–30 BC) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*c.* 60 to after 7 BC) have survived rather more completely than most. Diodorus was a Sicilian Greek who, like Herodotus four centuries earlier, had travelled widely prior to writing his *Bibliotheca historica*, a universal history in the manner of Polybius, of which roughly a third survives. The title 'Historical Library' was a reference to the number of earlier sources from which Diodorus drew his materials, which has often been a reason for dismissing this author as an unoriginal hack, though he would have understood himself instead as the culmination of a long stream of predecessors. 'Tradition', a critical aspect of the historical enterprise, was beginning to weigh more heavily upon historians' choice of subjects and their arrangement of materials. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in contrast, focused more exclusively on Rome, and the main point of his *Roman Antiquities* was to defend Roman influence over the Greek world. In it we see the triumph of the rhetorical and hortatory strain of history-writing first seen in the fourth century. It is Dionysius who coined the oft-repeated definition of history as 'philosophy teaching by example', and he continued the tradition of declaring, up-front, his own methods and preferences. Thus Dionysius would begin his *Roman Antiquities* with the following remarks:

> Although it is much against my will to indulge in the explanatory statements usually given in the prefaces to histories, yet I am obliged to prefix to this work some remarks concerning myself. In doing this it is neither my intention to dwell too long on my own praise, which I know would be distasteful to the reader, nor have I the purpose of censuring other historians ... but I shall only show the reasons that induced me to undertake this work and give an accounting of the sources from which I gained the knowledge of the things I am going to relate. (*Roman Antiquities* 1.1, trans. E. Cary)

time, the definitive account of the Roman republic. Written in a Latin that later ages regarded either as impeccably pure or overly florid, the history combined the annalistic approach, with its recording of the year's officers, and a continuous prose narrative. In a way, it turned the genre of local history almost by accident into a variant of universal history, since Rome, at its peak of international influence and on the verge of becoming an empire in governance as well as influence, now controlled most of the Mediterranean world.

The other, and perhaps more interesting, major first-century historian was the politician and soldier known to us as Sallust (Gaius Sallustius Crispus, 86–34 BC). Following an undistinguished spell as governor of the province of Africa Nova, Sallust returned to and penned two histories of particular events, the conspiracy of the patrician Catiline in the year 63 and an earlier war against the African king Jugurtha. (A longer work, the *Histories*, survives only in fragments.) A pessimistic critic of contemporary politics and values in the late Roman republic, Sallust became widely respected in subsequent centuries, his works providing a template for writing the history of a particular event. Sallust was (and declared himself to be) a disciple of Thucydides. He articulated the enduring thesis that republican decline could be traced directly to the destruction of Carthage, which had left the Romans masters of their universe, but prey to the twin corruptors avarice and ambition, their growing empire the playground for internecine strife. Sallust also took Polybius' semi-rational *Tyche* and turned it into the feminine, capricious *Fortuna*, thereby handing on this all-purpose explanatory mechanism to late antiquity and beyond.

Imperial Rome, commencing with the rule of Augustus Caesar following the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, also had its historians, among whom the most highly regarded was, and remains, Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (*c.* AD 56 to *c.* 117). Where Livy had written in a flowing rhetorical style, Tacitus seems closer to Sallust, whom he admired, or, more remotely, Polybius. Where Livy's work had been written with oral recitation in mind, Tacitus' was directed at the private reader. Long rhetorical flourishes were replaced in his writing by a terse, epigrammatic narrative, into which Tacitus intruded political *sententiae* that readers in a later age would find irresistible. His very name means 'silent', but Tacitus was in life a very skilful orator and eventually author himself of a treatise on rhetoric. His fame, however, has been built on a combination of apparently shrewd character

judgments and an ability to say much in few words: 'Tacitean' has even become an adjective to describe an entire style of writing.

Fortune has been kind to Tacitus, permitting the survival of most of his *Annals* and *Histories* through the Middle Ages (each in a single manuscript) during which time they were virtually unused, such was antipathy to a writer regarded as both pagan and hostile to Christianity. Like Sallust, Xenophon and Thucydides, Tacitus was a man of political and military experience, a senator who had advanced to very high office. In contrast to a much more prominent politician–historian, Caesar, he was able to effect an air of restrained neutrality, famously declaring that he wrote his works *sine ira et studio* (without anger, or, what we would now call an 'axe to grind'). And yet of Tacitus' political views there can be little doubt. For instance, his *Germania*, one of the most influential of all ancient texts, praised the rough, uncultured but unspoiled virtue of the German tribes, and later became a literary source and justification for German Protestants' revolt against Roman Catholicism in the sixteenth century, and eventually for German nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The western Roman Empire lingered on three full centuries after the death of Tacitus before a combination of 'barbarism and religion' (to quote Edward Gibbon, the eighteenth-century historian of Roman decline) laid it low. So far as the evolution of Western historical writing is concerned, the most important developments of the late antique period were the advent of Christianity and, from the reign of Constantine in the early fourth century, its establishment as the official religion of the empire; the increasing instability, as Tacitus had predicted, of an empire whose leaders ruled only so long as they had the support of the army; and the splitting of the increasingly unwieldy empire in the late third century into a western half (based at Rome) and an eastern (based at Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople), whence sprang the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire. Just as significant as any of these internal developments, however, was an external threat: the looming presence of a number of barbarian peoples in both east and west. These were the migratory tribes of Celts, Goths and Huns whose collective movements around Europe and Central Asia, known as the *Völkerwanderung*, would over the next several centuries encircle and infiltrate the empire. The Visigoths, one of these tribes, sacked Rome in AD 410 (precisely eight centuries after it had last been overrun, by the Gauls), and the last western Roman emperor was

deposed by another Gothic general in 476. The Visigoths, Ostrogoths and other peoples such as the Franks, Saxons, Jutes and Lombards would eventually set up a series of independent monarchies in what remained of the former Roman dominions in Europe.

It is hard to dispute the suggestion that most of the late antique pagan historians, such as Cassius Dio (*c.* AD 155 to after 229), or Lucius Florus (*fl.* early second century AD), an epitomizer of Livy (including, usefully, many of Livy's lost sections), are less interesting than their illustrious predecessors. But it is also true that several centuries of historiographers have seen them as small fish struggling in a rising Christian tide. In many cases we know very little about these authors and have only traces of their original works. The most notable exception to this rule is a soldier from Antioch named Ammianus Marcellinus (*c.* AD 325 to after 391). The first thirteen books of Ammianus' thirty-one-book history, the *Res Gestae Libri XXXI* ('Thirty-one Books of Deeds'), have not survived, though we know from his own comments that he began it where Tacitus' *Histories* had left off in the last decade of the first century. Ammianus is widely held to be the last of the great ancient historians of Rome, and one of the last European historians for some centuries to compose his history in the grand rhetorical style, complete with speeches and a dearth of dates beyond those indicated by his annalistic framework. Though a native Greek-speaker, Ammianus wrote in Latin, the last in a series of citizens of the empire like Polybius and Josephus who had fallen in love with Rome. It is Ammianus who first gave us, or at least popularized, the familiar designation of Rome herself as *urbs aeterna* (the eternal city). Later historians have valued his eyewitness account of the decline of the once-mighty Rome and his attention to economic and social as well as political causes of these drawn-out death throes. Ammianus' history is full of interesting information on the various parts of the empire and its peoples, and he is rather less unsympathetic to most of them than Tacitus, for example, had been to the Jews. He even includes scientific topics such as earthquakes and eclipses. Ammianus' attention to such matters is all the more remarkable and perhaps even unintended since he himself proclaimed that history should concentrate on the important and prominent events and ignore the trivial or commonplace, which should warn us that the announced intentions of historians, and the theories or protocols to which they purportedly subscribe, are as often as not violated in practice. Thus the last great western ancient historian

managed, after a fashion, to combine aspects of the approaches of both his fifth-century BC precursors, Herodotus and Thucydides.

Chinese Historiography from Earliest Times to the Han Dynasty

History in antiquity was never the sole possession, or even the creation, of the peoples of Europe and the Near East. No civilization in the world has consistently and continuously placed as high a priority on the recording and understanding of its past as the Chinese. Convention and their invention of the word 'history' has placed the Greeks earlier in the present narrative, but we could just as easily have begun much farther east. As in Mesopotamia, the earliest forms of what became historical writing started as record-keeping, but with a much clearer tie to the past. The 'oracle bones' (inscribed fragments of bone or shell first unearthed in the late nineteenth century) which are the earliest extant source for the ancient Shang dynasty (*c.* 1600 to *c.* 1046 BC), appear to have been created in direct response to the royal family's veneration of ancestors, and contain direct petitions to or communications with them; their closest analogue may be the omen-texts of the contemporary Assyrians.

Exact analogies between Chinese and classical European historiography should be drawn within an awareness of their fundamental differences. Though it changed its meaning after Herodotus' initial use, there is relatively little ambiguity about what the Greek word *'ιστορια* denotes. In Chinese, the word *shi* is not unambiguously the word for defining either history or its author. One should also not underestimate the profound differences posed by the complexities of writing in a logographic system such as Chinese. Apart from their enormous reverence for tradition, one reason that scholars, from a very early stage, paid tireless attention to the verification of sources (and often deliberately eliminated inferior versions) is that the opportunities for a scribe to misunderstand what he was copying were considerably greater given the ambiguity of particular logograms.

Moreover, certain fundamental mental assumptions were quite different. Most European thought until relatively recent times has seen time as corrosive, and change as an inevitable but overwhelmingly bad thing. The earliest Chinese philosophers, for all their intense reverence of tradition, saw time, rather like the Polybian

Tyche, as an agent of change rather than a vessel in which change occurred, and they valued change as progressive and maturing rather than corrosive or regressive. The upheavals attending the transitions from one dynasty to the next were not so much the mark of failure as of the loss of the prime justification for rule, the 'Mandate of Heaven' (*tianming*). Chronology, to which Chinese historians paid careful attention, was also conceived of very differently, based on frequently changed era names (the practice used in many Asian countries until the twentieth century) rather than the single chronology *ab orbe condita* (from the creation of the world), *ab urbe condita* (from the founding of the city) or, especially since the seventeenth century, BC and AD – this accounts for the rather earlier development in China than in Europe of synchronous chronological tables. The Chinese also conceived of the various genres of history in ways we would find surprising: where 'annals' in the European tradition have usually been regarded as the most rudimentary form of historical record, traditional Chinese historiography regarded the annal as the highest form, the distillation of knowledge from other sources. One modern authority on ancient Chinese historical writing, Grant Hardy, has argued that the modern preference since the Renaissance (very much emulating Thucydides and Tacitus) for the single-voiced omniscient narrator and an internally self-consistent story fits ill with the multiple voices and often competing accounts of a single event included by the greatest of ancient Chinese historians, Sima Qian, in his *Shiji*.

Western historiography places a high value upon the independence of the historian from outside interference, though that arm's-length relationship has been ideal rather than fact in most circumstances. Official history, courtly history and other variants have traditionally not fared well in the estimation of modern Euro-American historiographers, for whom autonomy and freedom from influence is highly valued. In China, history was almost from the beginning connected with governance and eventually with the ruling dynasty of the day – yet Chinese historians saw no fundamental contradiction between this and their duty to record the truth, often at great personal risk. Indeed, it has been plausibly argued that the lack of a counterpart to the absolute truth of revealed religion in Christian Europe permitted the Chinese to invest the past itself with the equivalent quality of

through complete knowledge and attendance to ritual propriety. Given this conception of the orderly movement of events, Chinese historians acquired very early the understanding that history could provide a pool of examples with which to guide moral and especially political life. According to one account, Confucius believed that his own reputation would rest on his success as a historian. His reported declaration that his principles were better demonstrated by the examples of 'actual affairs' than in 'theoretical words' may be the first articulation of that superior exemplarity of history keenly advocated by European historians from Dionysius of Halicarnassus through the eighteenth century (and just as hotly denied by a number of philosophers and poets from Aristotle onward).

Other philosophical schools departed from the dominant Confucianism, and the range of opinions on the process of historical change is considerably more varied than anything in the West during antiquity or the Middle Ages. The Daoists, for instance, pursuing harmony with nature and retreat from a world of cyclical but unpredictable change, did not accept that history had any discernible pattern or didactic value. The Mohists (followers of Mozi) and the Legalists saw discernible patterns of progress, though the latter, adherents of a totalitarian philosophy adopted by the brutal Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), asserted that such progress, enforced by state control over naturally evil individuals, made the past largely irrelevant. After the Qin unification of various 'Warring States' into a single empire, their first emperor ordered an infamous book-burning and mass execution of scholars, virtually eliminating records of the subordinated kingdoms.

The succeeding Han dynasty took power for most of the next four centuries, in the course of which Confucianism became the dominant philosophical and educational system. The most important early figure in Chinese historical thought and writing emerged in this world of a consolidated *Zhongguo* (literally, the 'Middle Kingdom', the Chinese name for their own country). Sima Qian (145–86 BC) is the first Chinese historian about whom we know a considerable amount, both because he himself made no pretence at anonymity and included a detailed genealogy of his own family back to legendary times, and because a first-century AD historian, Ban Gu, wrote a biography of his famous predecessor. Sima Qian did not originally intend to take up scholarship but felt an obligation to continue a work already

begun by his father, Sima Tan, who had himself occupied the apparently hereditary office of *taishi* (variously translated as grand astrologer, grand scribe, or sometimes grand historian) held by his family since the Zhou dynasty. By about 90 BC, having voluntarily suffered the humiliation of castration for causing offence to the emperor (rather than committing suicide, which would have prevented him completing his history), Sima Qian had composed the *Shiji* ('Records of the Grand Historian').

The *Shiji* was divided into five major sections, each of which became a foundational model for future genres of Chinese historical writing. The first section of twelve chapters, 'Basic Annals' (*benji*), provides an account of the major dynasties in series, from rise to fall; the second is a set of ten chapters of chronological tables (*biao*); the third holds eight chapters of 'treatises' (*shu*) on branches of knowledge from astronomy and the calendar through agriculture, literature and music; the fourth includes thirty chapters on the great 'hereditary houses' (*shijia*) along with biographies of famed sages like Confucius; and finally, the fifth section contains seventy biographical 'arrayed traditions' or 'transmissions' (*liezhuan*) on statesmen, scholars and other categories, often paired (as the Greek biographer Plutarch would later do) to illustrate a character type. At the end of most of his chapters, rather like the author of the fourth-century *Zuozhuan*, Sima offers up a comment upon the history just recounted. This, too, is not unlike classical European practice with the exception that the Chinese, as noted above, signal their authorial interventions much more clearly: Sima Qian's little digressions are prefaced 'The Grand Historian says . . . ', but as with most Chinese historians and the Greeks he makes free use of invented speeches, some of them admittedly copied from earlier works. The chronological tables, where some of Sima's most original writing occurs, were a particularly brilliant innovation, presenting a great deal of disparate data in grid format, and with synchronous dating – no mean feat given the earlier Qin destruction of the chronicles of rival kingdoms – and signifying a recognition that there could, indeed, be a universal set of dates shared between different realms and transcending particular dynasties.

This unusual and original organization had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, Sima Qian did not need to interrupt the narrative of an event in one section to explain who a particular person was, since they were probably discussed elsewhere in one of the other