CHAPTER 2

History in Ancient and Medieval Times

In view of historians' commitment to thinking about all aspects of human culture as having a history, it would seem natural that they would want to reconstruct the history of historical thinking itself, and indeed we have seen that one of the major ways in which the word "historiography" is used is to refer to the history of history, whether as a discipline or way of thinking, as a form or genre of literature, or as a profession. Curiously, history was written for several millennia before anyone first tried to write its own history, instead of treating history as just one of the many branches of literature. The history of historiography only emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, the period when, as we will see, the study of the past first came to be treated as a subject for academic research and teaching and when professional training for historians became organized in the pattern it still follows today.

Like every other aspect of the past, the development of history has looked different to historians, depending on the concerns of their own day. For much of the twentieth century, for example, the history of history was written as a story of progress, in the course of which historical thinking gradually freed itself from mythical and religious elements and adopted a scientific perspective. Historiographers working in this tradition saw the development of modern historical thinking as one of the great achievements of Western—that is, European and North American—civilization and paid little attention to the ways in which the past had been recorded in other parts of the world. In recent decades, however, there has been increased interest in alternative forms of history

that existed alongside the "scientific" history taught in universities, as well as in the history of non-European historical traditions. From this perspective, the different ways in which history has been written over the centuries have taken on a new interest. Rather than simply being outmoded approaches that have now been replaced by the "proper" way of doing history, they show us that there have always been multiple perspectives from which the past can be viewed and that, like so many aspects of human culture, the predominant ways of recording history have changed over time.

Herodotus and Thucydides

However hard they strive to escape from what now often seem to be unduly narrow definitions of history, works devoted to historiography still give a privileged position to two authors who lived in the Greek city-state of Athens during the fifth century before the Common Era, Herodotus and Thucydides. They inherited a tradition of concern about the preservation of the memory of the past. Greek mythology included the goddess Clio among the nine muses of the arts. She has remained a symbol of history ever since. Herodotus and Thucydides are the earliest authors whose written works of history have come down to us largely intact. Herodotus's *The Histories*, tells of the Greek defeat of a Persian invasion that took place when the historian was a young child, and Thucydides's *The Peloponnesian War*, recounts the disastrous failure of Athens's attempt to impose its power on the other Greek city-states, an attempt in which Thucydides himself had participated. These two historians' efforts to create a realistic way of describing past events were part of a broader striving to understand the world and represent it accurately that made the Athens of their day a center of cultural innovation. The lifespans of Herodotus and Thucydides overlapped with those of the philosophers Socrates and Plato, who raised questions about the nature of knowledge in general, and with those of the playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, whose dramas were distinguished by their psychological realism.

Herodotus and Thucydides were certainly not the first people to record information about historical events or to construct stories abou the past. Herodotus, who traveled throughout the Mediterranean worl of his day, noted that the Egyptians had kept records of their rulers goin back for many centuries and that the Persians had their own traditio of recording the past. Both he and Thucydides were intimately famili

with the poetic epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which told the story of the Trojan War, a conflict that had supposedly taken place many centuries earlier. Although the two Greek authors did not know it, members of other civilizations had also constructed historical narratives. In another part of the eastern Mediterranean, the Jews had preserved the story of their own origins and the deeds of their rulers, which would eventually be written down and incorporated into the Bible. At the other end of the Asian continent, in China, the philosopher and religious sage Confucius had insisted on the importance of remembering past events to draw lessons from them that would guide appropriate conduct in the present.

What made the works of Herodotus and Thucydides different from previous records and stories about the past was their attempt to define history as a distinct method of telling the story of the past, unique above all because of its devotion to discovering and transmitting the truth about bygone events. Herodotus and Thucydides had to define for themselves what history should take as its subject, what materials it should draw on, and what purposes it should be designed to achieve. Although Herodotus recorded the myths and legends of the Egyptians and Persians and noted that Greek beliefs in oracles often influenced their actions, both he and Thucydides defined history as the story of the thoughts and deeds of human beings; unlike Homer, they eliminated the gods from their explanation of events. Herodotus and Thucydides agreed that history should concern itself with exceptional events that affected the lives of whole societies, not with the lives of individuals, and indeed each of them claimed that the war he wrote about was the most important conflict the world had ever known.

The Greek word "istoria" that Herodotus used for his work can be translated as "inquiry," and Herodotus devoted a good part of his writing to recounting the travels he had undertaken to collect information about the various peoples involved in the Persian wars. Herodotus often indicated the sources of his information and critically evaluated them for his audience, telling them what he thought was true and what he considered doubtful. Thucydides said less about his sources, but he did promise readers that he had included only incidents that he had personally observed—in one passage, he soberly described a defeat for which he had been personally responsible and which had forced him to go into exile from Athens for many years—or that had been reported to him by reliable witnesses.

The purpose of his work, Herodotus wrote, was to ensure "that what human beings have done will not fade through the passage of time and . . . that the great and amazing actions of the Greeks and the barbarians will not lose their fame, and in particular the reason why they went to war against one another."[1] Of the importance of the Greek victory over the Persians he had no doubt: it had preserved the independence of the small Greek city-states and permitted the extraordinary development of Athenian democracy that had followed, until the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war that Thucydides would record (and during whose early years Herodotus himself died) put an end to the city's "golden age." Nevertheless, Herodotus treated the Greeks' Persian enemies with respect and attempted to explain the motives for their actions fairly; in his view, history's commitment to telling the truth required that it be something different from partisan propaganda. Herodotus's wide-ranging interest in human behavior led him to include, among other things, stories in which women played an active role; his method suggested that all aspects of human life could potentially be of historical interest.

Thucydides, a generation younger than Herodotus, was even more single-minded in his devotion to reconstructing a true story about the past. His criticism of storytellers who mixed fables with verifiable facts was probably aimed at his predecessor. Thucydides limited himself to writing about things that had taken place during his own day, asserting that these were the only events about which certain knowledge could be obtained, and he had no interest in the entertaining anecdotes that livened up Herodotus's work. Thucydides had no doubt, however, that the story of the great war between Athens and its rival Greek city-states, particularly Sparta, was a drama worth recording. Whereas Herodotus had told the heroic story of how the Greeks had successfully defended their freedom from a foreign enemy, Thucydides recounted the tragic tale of how internal conflicts and Athens's unbridled ambitions had brought disaster upon his native city. Readers ever since have taken *The Peloponnesian War* as a warning against the dangers that can befall a society that overestimates its own strength and allows its policies to be determined by irresponsible demagogues.

Thucydides limited the scope of his narrative more narrowly than Herodotus; with few exceptions, he wrote only about war and politics, thus excluding women from his story. His prose style was clear and precise, without rhetorical flourishes, and it continues to serve as a model

for serious history writing even today. On the other hand, however, he included in his narrative a number of speeches given by leading actors in his story, although he conceded that he had rarely been able to capture the actual words they had spoken. "My method has been," he wrote, "while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation."[2] In these speeches, such as the funeral oration in honor of soldiers killed in the war delivered by the Athenian leader Pericles, Thucydides allowed his characters to explain the motives for their actions. The speeches are among the most powerful passages in *The Peloponnesian War*, and Thucydides's example inspired many subsequent historians to resort to the same device, but such invented material later became seen as blurring the line between history and fiction. The elimination of imaginatively reconstructed speeches from historical narratives after the eighteenth century was one of the signs of an increasing separation between history and other forms of literature. When makers of historical films create dialogue for their characters, however, they can be seen as reviving one of Thucydides's practices.

The works of Herodotus and Thucydides provided important models for subsequent historians in the ancient Greek and Roman world and for their successors ever since. Largely forgotten during the Middle Ages, the books of Herodotus and Thucydides were rediscovered during the European Renaissance and have been recognized since as the foundations of the Western historiographical tradition. Along with their definition of the nature of history, the most important contribution the two men made to history was the fact that they put their narratives in writing. The preservation of their words on permanent materials—parchment or papyrus—meant that those words survived to influence readers long after their authors' deaths. Written historical accounts could also be reproduced in multiple copies, giving them the potential to reach a widely dispersed audience, and they could potentially be compared with other documents, opening a path to a more critical understanding of the challenges of recording events.

Herodotus has been praised as the first historian to single out the struggle for freedom as a central theme and also because of his wide-ranging interest in the cultures of the different peoples he wrote about; on the other hand, he was sometimes denounced as "the father of lies" because of the many tall tales he incorporated into his work. Thucydides's essentially tragic vision of human existence and his clear understanding

of how politics works also continue to speak to present-day readers, and his ruthless elimination of fables and anecdotes makes him a model for those who think history should stick strictly to facts about serious matters. Because Herodotus and Thucydides represent two different, but equally compelling, visions of how history should be written, present-day historians' reactions to their works are often a clear sign of what they consider most important in the writing of history. The authors of two important recent surveys of European historiography provide a good example of this. Ernst Breisach's references to Thucydides's "splendid narrative" and to the "magnificent unity of style and content" in his work leave little doubt about his preference. Donald R. Kelley, on the other hand, devotes nine pages to Herodotus's work, concluding that "its value is more appreciated than ever today," whereas he gives Thucydides only two pages, writing that he "had a much narrower conception of human thought and action" than his predecessor.[3] It is tempting to conclude that Thucydides appeals to more traditionalist scholars and Herodotus to those more open to innovation, but this is not always the case. The German historiographical theorist Reinhart Koselleck, for example, a major contributor to the "linguistic turn" that shook up history-writing in the 1970s, saw Thucydides as a forerunner of post-modernism because "he demonstrated that the gathering of facts is not identical with what is said or written about them."[4]

History-Writing in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

The Athenian city-state whose fortunes had been the subject of their works lost its primacy after the Peloponnesian War, but for several centuries after Herodotus and Thucydides, history-writing in the Mediterranean world remained a specialty of Greek intellectuals. A half-century after Thucydides's death, the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle offered one of the first and most influential characterizations of the nature of history and its relationship to other forms of thought. "The distinction between historian and poet is . . . that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars," Aristotle wrote.[5] Although Aristotle clearly considered poetry and, by implication, philosophy superior to history

because the latter was limited to the more or less accidental sequence of actual events, whereas the former dealt with general issues, his formulation did concede that history had a special connection to empirical truth that was missing in other genres of literature.

The later Greek historians had much to write about, including the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE and the breakup of his empire after his death. In the meantime, the city-state of Rome was rising in importance; by the beginning of the second century BCE, after its victory over its North Africa rival Carthage, it was clearly the strongest power in the Mediterranean, and it soon began to exert direct influence in the Greek world. Although the Romans took pride in their military superiority over the Greeks, they admired Greek cultural achievements, including their sophisticated tradition of historical writing. The first important work on the history of Rome, that of Polybius, was written in the middle of the second century BCE by a Greek who had been deported to Rome because of his family's opposition to Roman authority and who wrote about the Roman past in his own language.

Polybius and his successors, of whom the most important, Livy and Tacitus, wrote in Latin, inherited the models of history forged by Herodotus and Thucydides, but they faced some new challenges of their own. To explain Rome's rise to greatness over a period of several centuries, they had to collect and evaluate sources from the distant past. They were able to draw on some documents, such as the texts of laws from earlier periods, but they all recognized the difficulty of separating truth from legend. Herodotus and Thucydides had dealt with the history of one small city-state; the historians of Rome had to widen their scope to the whole of the known world. Among other things, this required them to attempt to reconcile the different chronologies of Rome, where dates were counted from the supposed founding of the city and, for more recent times, according to the names of the annually elected officials called consuls, and the various Greek city-states, where the most widely used system was based on the records of the Olympiads, the athletic contests held every four years. In our world, accustomed to calculating dates according to the now almost universally accepted calendar based on the birth of Jesus (BC and AD or, more recently, BCE and CE), it is hard to imagine how difficult it was for earlier historians to match up dates originally handed down in different systems.

Polybius's history, although it emphasized the rise of Rome, strove to cover the whole of the known world of his day. "By far the greater

number of historians concern themselves with isolated wars and the incidents that accompany them: while as to a general and comprehensive scheme of events, their date, origin, and catastrophe, no one as far as I know has undertaken to examine it," he wrote.[6] His successors, who concentrated more exclusively on Roman history, invented the genre of the national history, the story of a single political community over an extended period of time. From Polybius onward, historians of Rome were drawn to the question of the causes of that state's extraordinary success, and then, especially after the Roman Republic was replaced by the one-man rule of emperors, beginning with Augustus in 27 BCE, to the reasons for its decline. "What is really educational and beneficial to students of history is the clear view of the causes of events, and the consequent power of choosing the better policy in a particular case," Polybius wrote, making an argument for the usefulness of history that continues to be advanced today.[7] Polybius's argument that all forms of government inevitably tend to degenerate, but that the combination of elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy in the Roman Republic's constitution had made it more resistant to decline than any of its rivals, provided a framework for the understanding of political history that had immense influence on politics and history-writing in the European world, especially in the centuries from the Renaissance to the era of the French Revolution.

Polybius wrote while the power of the Eternal City was still rising. As the Roman state continued to expand and as its domestic conflicts became more serious, conservative critics blamed its troubles on the abandonment of its historic institutions. Unable to revive the past, these so-called antiquarians nevertheless contributed to the refinement of historical methods by developing better methods for interpreting evidence from the distant past, such as old laws and inscriptions. A century after Polybius, Livy's massive history of Rome, which was completed during the troubled years leading to the collapse of the Republic in the first century BCE and of which only a fraction now survives, drew a contrast between the simplicity, patriotism, and honesty of the early Romans and what he saw as the corruption of his own day. Livy was acutely aware of the problem of writing the history of events such as the founding of Rome that had taken place centuries before his own lifetime, a challenge quite different from what Herodotus and Thucydides had done. The early parts of his history, he wrote, dealt with "matters obscure, as well by reason of their very great antiquity, like objects which from

their great distance are scarcely perceptible, as also because in those times the use of letters, the only faithful guardian of the memory of events, was inconsiderable and rare."[8] Livy's lifetime overlapped with that of Julius Caesar, whose *Gallic Wars* recounted his conquest of a vast new territory for Rome. Caesar's work, with its famous opening line, "All Gaul is divided into three parts," established a precedent for memoirs written by military and political leaders to describe their own accomplishments. Caesar portrayed himself as a thoughtful and humane leader, devoted to the interests of Rome rather than his own ambitions. Like many later imperial conquerors, he claimed that his occupation of foreign lands brought benefits for their inhabitants. Although political memoirs are always suspect of bias in favor of their authors, they remain, to the present day, a major form of writing about the past. Unlike historians, memoirists can claim to have participated directly in the events they describe and to offer readers insights into their thinking. Even as they question memoirs' one-sidedness, historians cannot neglect their value as sources.

Once the Republic had been replaced by the empire, after the reign of Augustus, Tacitus's eloquent denunciations of the corrupt and tyrannical rule of the emperors reinforced the idea that the duty of a historian was to use the past to demonstrate the shortcomings of his own day. Tacitus's terse style, expressing complex thoughts in just a few words, as in his description of the effects of Roman conquests—"they make a desert and call it peace"—was to inspire many imitators over the centuries. The contrast he drew between the decadent Romans of the empire and the simple lives of the freedom-loving Germans who defeated Augustus's legions in 9 CE would later serve to shape historical depictions of the "barbarians" who eventually overran Rome. An important contemporary of Tacitus was Plutarch, often considered the inventor of the genre of biography, one of the close relatives of history. His *Parallel Lives*, in which the life stories of notable figures from Greek and Roman history were paired together to reinforce moral lessons, demonstrated the literary power of this genre. Whether biography constitutes a form of history or whether biographers' tendency to concentrate on their subjects' lives at the expense of context inevitably leads them to exaggerate individual agency have been debated ever since. The fact that educated Europeans, from the time of the Romans onward, were more likely to read Latin than Greek meant that for many centuries, Livy, Tacitus, and Plutarch were better known and more influential as historical models than Herodotus or Thucydides.

By the end of the second century CE, Greek and Roman authors had created an extensive tradition of historical writing and even a tradition of critical writing about historical methodology. Roman authors such as the famous orator Cicero and the theorist of rhetoric Quintilian wrote about the functions of history and the proper way to compose it, and Plutarch wrote a scathing denunciation of Herodotus's biases and inaccuracies. A Greek writer, Lucian of Samosata (c. 125 CE–200 CE), produced a longer work, *How to Write History*, that shows that ancient historians had already considered many of the issues that continue to preoccupy historians today. According to Lucian, the historian should be "fearless, incorruptible, free . . . an impartial judge . . . independent, subject to no sovereign, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts." History should be well written, but it should "keep its feet on the ground" rather than "being swept down into poetry's wild enthusiasm." The historian should only start to write after "much laborious and painstaking investigation" and careful note-taking. "Above all, let him bring a mind like a mirror, clear, gleaming-bright, accurately centered, displaying the shape of things just as he receives them, free from distortion, false coloring, and misrepresentation," Lucian advised.[9]

By Lucian of Samosata's day, the sophisticated tradition of historical writing created in Athens and expanded by historians of Rome had already endured for nearly six hundred years. It constituted a significant aspect of the culture of classical world. Starting in the era of the Renaissance, the historians of antiquity would inspire a "modern" history that attributed the causes of events to human agency or impersonal forces, rather than to the will of an omnipotent divinity; their works would also serve as examples of literary elegance. As much as they admired the historians of the ancient world, however, the historians of later centuries who took them as models failed to understand some major aspects of the ancient world's approach to the recording of the past. The Greek and Roman historians were not modern rationalists: they lived in a world that believed in various supernatural powers and took omens seriously. They also wrote for a limited audience. Although the written word allowed their works to be reproduced and to survive their authors, manuscripts were expensive and their circulation was far more limited than that of historical works written after the invention of printing would be. Although the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, and their successors loom large in our understanding of historical thought, whatever most of the population of the ancient world knew about history was largely transmitted through other

means, such as public monuments and oral tradition. Written history was the preserve of a small, cultivated elite.

The Origins of Chinese Historiography

While important forms of history-writing were developing in the Greek and Roman world, another distinctive historical tradition took shape in China. The name of the great sage Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BCE, somewhat earlier than Herodotus, is associated with the *Chunqiu* or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a chronicle of several centuries of events in one Chinese kingdom. Later authors added commentaries to the rather dry account in the original work, emphasizing the moral lessons to be learned from the events it related. In the second century BCE, when history-writing was flourishing in the Roman world, Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE) compiled the most influential work of early Chinese history, one that shaped historical writing there for many centuries. Just as the Roman historians had been inspired by that state's success in imposing its rule on the whole of the world they knew, Sima Qian's *Shiji* was a response to the unification of China under the Han dynasty after 206 BCE. Sima Qian's father had begun a history of China, from its origins onward, and Sima Qian was determined to complete this project after his father's death. Few other historians have made such a personal sacrifice to be able to devote themselves to their craft: arrested for political reasons and forced to choose between an honorable death or the humiliating punishment of castration, Sima Qian accepted the latter. "I could not accept dying, if that meant that the high points of my writing were going to be lost to posterity," he wrote to a friend, although he knew that the disgrace he had suffered meant that his work would only be appreciated long after his death.[10]

Much longer than the works of Herodotus or Thucydides, Sima Qian's *Shiji* was more like an encyclopedia than a coherent historical narrative. "I have cast a universal net to gather together all the old traditions of the world that were scattered and lost," he wrote.[11] Along with an account of the various dynasties that had ruled parts of China for the previous two thousand years, Sima Qian included a remarkable set of chronological tables, a vast collection of miscellaneous information, and biographies of important historical figures. Like Herodotus, Sima Qian included all aspects of human life in his collection and recognized the role that women had often played in history. He was not concerned

to rigidly separate legends about the past from documentable facts, and it was sometimes possible to draw contradictory conclusions from the different sections of his work. More explicitly than the early Greek and Roman historians, Sima Qian commented on the lessons to be drawn from historical episodes, in passages beginning with the words "the Grand Historian says." He did not lay down simple rules and was always sensitive to the fact that differing circumstances might dictate different courses of action, but he left no doubt of his conviction that the past was the best guide for action in the present. Sima Qian's hope that his writing would survive him was fulfilled: the *Shiji* became a model for the long tradition of Chinese historical writing.

History, Judaism, and Christianity

In the Western world, the tradition of historical writing created by the Greeks and Romans faced a new challenge with the rise of the new faith of Christianity. Once Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, following the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 CE, historians developed a new vision of the past, closely linked to Christian teachings about the world's future. Greek and Roman historians had rarely asked themselves whether the overall course of human history was leading in a particular direction. Herodotus and Thucydides, whose works dealt with relatively short spans of time, did not consider the question. Polybius's theory of the inevitable degeneration of political systems suggested a history consisting of repeated cycles in which one dominant state would rise and then decline, to be replaced by another. By contrast, the Jewish Bible, whose historical books had been written down roughly in the era in which Herodotus and Thucydides had been active and which Christians incorporated as part of their own scriptures, offered a different vision of history. According to the Bible, God had created the world at a specific moment in time, and the events in human history were all part of a divine plan that would lead, according to the Jews, to the coming of the Messiah or, as Christians reinterpreted the divine message, to the second coming of Jesus. In either case, history in this framework had a clear plot line, beginning with Adam, the first man, and leading, after various catastrophes caused by human resistance to God's will, to redemption and the end of the world. In their thinking about history, Christian authors were heavily influenced by the prophetic passages in the Bible and especially by the prophecy in

the Book of Daniel that the world would be dominated by a succession of four empires before the end of days. Although there was some disagreement about the identity of the first three empires, there was general agreement that the Roman Empire should be counted as the fourth and that there would be no successor to it before the divinely foretold end of history.

Having incorporated this linear vision of history and the account of their first centuries of existence into their holy books, Jewish thinkers largely lost interest in further developments in history. The one important Jewish historian to take up history-writing on the Greek and Roman model, Josephus, was considered a traitor by most of his fellow Jews because he had abandoned the Jewish cause after the unsuccessful Jewish revolt against Roman rule in Palestine in 67–70 CE. Josephus's books introduced Roman readers to the Jewish past. In a demonstration of how later events can give a centuries-old work of history a new meaning, after the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948, his history of the unsuccessful Jewish revolt, and particularly his description of the one Jewish extremist group's suicidal defense of the mountaintop fortress of Masada against the Romans, became part of a new national myth. Soldiers being sworn into the Israeli armed forces take their oath to defend the country at the ruins of Masada.

Although Josephus proved to be the last important writer of Jewish history for many centuries, Christian authors developed an important historical tradition that grew to dominate the European world for more than a millennium. Once Christians abandoned their original hope for the imminent return of Jesus and resigned themselves to the fact that history would continue for a period of unknown duration, however, they began to confront the problem of integrating their own history into the larger historical framework they had inherited from the Bible and from the Greeks and Romans. Eusebius, who lived at the time of Constantine, shaped the pattern of Christian history for centuries afterward. For Eusebius, and for all the Christian historians who followed him, the purpose of history was to show the working out of God's plan for humanity. Whereas the historians of ancient Greece and Rome had explained events in terms of human actions or the structures of governments, Eusebius attributed them to divine providence. The military victories achieved by Constantine and his forces, for example, came about because "God proved their ally in the most wonderful manner."[12] Eusebius took over the account of the creation of the world from the

Jewish Bible and joined it to the story of the spread of the Christian faith from the time of Jesus onward. Eusebius devoted considerable attention to chronology, attempting to show that the Jewish tradition was older and therefore more reliable than that of the Greeks. His *History of the Church* was a highly polemical defense of orthodox Christian doctrine, as it had been defined at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, a meeting of theologians in which Eusebius participated. In contrast to the pre-Christian historians of the Greek and Roman world, Eusebius did not pretend to impartiality, but, on the other hand, to buttress his arguments, he made more use of direct citations from his sources—the theological arguments of his predecessors—than they had and provided a model for what would nowadays be called intellectual history.

By Eusebius's day, the Roman Empire had become divided into a western half, governed from Rome, and an eastern Byzantine Empire whose capital, Constantinople, is now the city of Istanbul in Turkey. The Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire survived until it was captured by the Turks in 1453 and produced a significant historical tradition, including such notable works as Procopius's scathing portrait of corruption at the imperial court in the sixth century CE and the empress Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* (c. 1148 CE), one of the few historical works written by a woman author, in the twelfth century. In the western half of Europe, however, knowledge of the Greek language disappeared, cutting historians off from the traditions that continued to influence Byzantine writers, and changing political conditions created new challenges to historical writing. The sack of the city of Rome by the Goths in 410 CE raised serious questions about the notion that God would protect the empire until the end of the world. The great theologian Augustine, in his masterwork *The City of God*, provided a theoretical response to this problem: he argued that the world exists on two levels, a "city of man" in which evil, caused by sinful human beings, may appear to triumph and a "city of God," in which divine justice prevails. History, in the Augustinian schema, takes place on the human level, although God determines its course, and its catastrophes do not invalidate the promise of eventual salvation for the faithful. Indeed, the sufferings of human history serve a higher purpose by preparing humanity for its eventual redemption.

Augustine's teaching implied that earthly history is ultimately not as important as events in the city of God. Nevertheless, by acknowledging that human actions can be secondary causes of historical events, Augustine provided some justification for the study of the subject in its

own right. Augustine did not write any historical works himself, but he did help invent another important form of writing about the past. His *Confessions*, in which he related the story of his own life, is usually considered the first example of autobiography. As Augustine's work showed, an autobiographer, unlike a biographer, could give a history of his inner thoughts and feelings as well as the things he had done. In modern times, historians have sometimes tried to show that they, too, can probe the subjective dimensions of human experience; a number of them have also followed Augustine's example and written personal histories of their own lives.

History in the Middle Ages

From the time of the Renaissance in the 1400s until recently, the kinds of history written in Europe during the Middle Ages were usually regarded as an unfortunate detour on the path leading from the works of the Greek and Roman historians to the more critical history of modern times. In 1895, Lord Acton, one of the great promoters of "scientific" historical scholarship in Britain, allowed that the Middle Ages "possessed good writers of contemporary narrative," but complained that they "were careless and impatient of older fact. They became content to be deceived, to live in a twilight of fiction."[13] More recent scholars of historiography have shown more understanding of the motives of medieval history writers. They adapted history to a new framework, dominated by religious belief, but they still saw themselves as serving the cause of truth. Their purpose, however, was to present truths that would convince their readers of appropriate moral and religious lessons. What the medievalist Walter Goffart wrote of the early medieval historian Gregory of Tours applies to most of those historians who lived in the Middle Ages: "Gregory's goal was pastoral, and contemporary history was his means of persuasion."[14]

Among the consequences of the disintegration of the western Roman Empire was a decline in the number of those who received the kind of education that would allow them to become historians. Without knowledge of the Greek language, it was impossible to read the works of authors such as Herodotus and Thucydides, and almost the only people still capable of reading and writing in Latin were the members of the clergy. Their ranks would provide almost all of the authors of history for the next several centuries. The breakup of the empire deprived these writers of the familiar framework that had guided their predecessors

since the time of Polybius. Instead of a universal empire whose fate affected the whole known world, they now had to deal with the histories of separate kingdoms ruled by "barbarians" whose ancestors had lived outside the boundaries of Rome. Medieval historians often began their works with a summary of world history, drawn from the Bible and Roman sources, and they often tried to connect their countrymen to this universal past by claiming that they were descended either from offspring of the Biblical Noah or from figures from antiquity: both British and French authors claimed that their nations had been founded by survivors of the Trojan War. In this way, medieval historians linked their local histories of their own region and of the "barbarian" peoples who had supplanted the Romans to the broader picture of the past they had inherited from the culture of antiquity. Gregory of Tours's *History of the Franks*, written in the sixth century CE, was the first chronicle of the region that would eventually become the nation of France, for example, and told the story of how the Frankish chieftain Clovis had created a unified kingdom. Gregory of Tours was more interested, however, in religious questions and the history of the church; in his eyes, the most significant of Clovis's acts was his conversion to Christianity.

The most important of these early medieval national histories, written around 735 CE, was Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which founded the tradition of British history. More than Gregory of Tours, Bede understood that he was writing the history of a distinct national group, the English, that was not descended from the Romans and that the history of the spread of the Christian faith in England, his principal topic, was inseparable from the political history of the various rulers in the island who had promoted that process. Bede was unusual among medieval historians in his scrupulous concern for accuracy and his acknowledgment of his sources. He was the first historian to adopt the practice of dating events from the time of the birth of Jesus, creating the division of time into "BC" (before Christ) and "AD" (*anno Domini* or "year of our Lord"), a practice that would not be widely imitated for several centuries after his death. Bede's clearly written work ended with the successful unification of the church in the British Isles and reflected a confidence in the future of his country, a confidence that his successors would struggle to maintain in the face of the Viking invasions and other disasters in subsequent centuries.

After Pope Leo III crowned the Frankish ruler Charlemagne as emperor in Rome in 800 CE, historians in the West, ignoring the claims of

the Byzantine Empire, argued that the legacy of the Roman Empire had been passed or "translated" to him and his successors and that the world was still in the age of the fourth empire predicted in the Biblical prophecy of Daniel. Charlemagne's vast empire, which had included most of present-day France, Germany, and northern Italy, split apart after his death, but a succession of German rulers claimed the title of Holy Roman Emperor, and historians, such as Otto of Freising, who lived in the twelfth century, could still confidently write that it would last "until the end of the ages." Despite the development of traditions of national history, exemplified by Bede's work, this imperial framework continued to dominate historical thinking. Among other things, it kept medieval historians from recognizing clearly the differences between the society in which they lived and that of the classical world that had preceded it.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was a well-thought-out narrative leading to a clear ending point. The form of history-writing most associated with the Middle Ages, however, were annals and chronicles, in which events were recorded in the sequence in which they happened, without any attempt to connect them to each other. A typical entry from a medieval chronicle, for the year 1239, tells us that "William Raleigh was elected Bishop of Norwich on 10th April. That horrible race of men known as the Tartars, which had once come swarming from remote fastnesses and overrun the face of the earth, laid waste Hungary and the neighboring territories. On 18th June Eleanor, queen of England, gave birth to her eldest son Edward."[15] Such accounts were often compiled, sometimes over the course of several centuries, by the monks of particular monasteries, meaning that they had multiple authors rather than reflecting the thoughts of a single writer, as Bede's history did. Their laconic entries were not necessarily unbiased: chronicles kept in a particular monastery often reflected the influence of local rulers who protected the institution. Annals and chronicles often recorded valuable historical information, and modern historians regularly use them as sources, but unlike the historical works of antiquity, they had few literary qualities and made no attempt to explain the causes of the events they described, leaving it to readers to make sense of them.

History in the Chinese and Islamic Worlds

Whereas history-writing in Western Europe in the early Middle Ages was mostly confined to monasteries and usually seemed to have lost the

sophistication it had achieved in the ancient world, the narrating of the past flourished in other parts of the world. In China, the rulers of the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE) created an official History Bureau, charged with recording the events of their reign. For the Tang and the dynasties that succeeded them, history-writing served important political functions, especially that of demonstrating that the preceding rulers they replaced had lost "the mandate of heaven" and deserved to be overthrown. The Tang's successors, the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), continued to support history-writing, and this period also saw the development of a sophisticated critique of historical methods that would not be equaled in Europe for another four centuries. The eleventh-century authors Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang argued for the importance of evidence from archeology and inscriptions as a way of verifying claims made in written sources and for the superiority of older sources, written closer to the time of past events, over more recent compilations.

Another tradition of history-writing took shape in the Islamic world, beginning with accounts of the life of Muhammad and the early Muslim conquests during the seventh century. Muslims dated events according to their own calendar, beginning in 622 CE, the date of the *hijra*, Muhammad's departure from Mecca to Medina. Concerned with preserving the precise words of Muhammad, Muslim scholars paid unusual attention to the details of how sayings attributed to him had been transmitted. They were familiar with the tradition of Greco-Roman history and with the Jewish and Christian scriptures and drew on these sources for their chronicles of the pre-Islamic past; whether evidence from non-Islamic sources could be cited for later periods was a subject of controversy. In the late Middle Ages, the Tunisian-born scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) produced a systematic critique of historical thought that was far more probing than anything written in the European west until the era of the Renaissance. Ibn Khaldun analyzed the reasons why historians might give erroneous accounts of the past, including "partisanship toward a creed or opinion," "over-confidence in one's sources," a failure to understand a source's true meaning, "the inability rightly to place an event in its real context," and the desire to please those for whom one was writing. The most important source of error, he asserted, was "the ignorance of the laws governing the transformations of human society." Human behavior, Ibn Khaldun argued, was sufficiently consistent so that historians, drawing on their own experience, could "distinguish what is naturally possible from what is impossible" when dealing with the past.[16]

The Late Middle Ages in Europe

The Crusades, a series of attempts by warriors from Western Europe, beginning in 1095, to capture and defend the Christian holy sites in Palestine from the Muslims who had conquered the area in the seventh century, provided the inspiration for a number of historical works in Europe and in the Islamic world as well. "Never, I believe, has a more glorious subject been given to historians of warfare," one author wrote.[17] Most of the European historical accounts of the Crusades portrayed them as heroic endeavors to defend the true faith, but more sober chroniclers found themselves compelled to admit that the expeditions were poorly organized, that instead of coming together in a spirit of religious unity, the participants were often divided along national lines, and that they sometimes massacred innocent victims. The greatest of the historians of the Crusades, Geoffrey de Villehardouin, found himself recording one of the most controversial of the Crusaders' actions, their attack on the capital of the Christian Byzantine Empire in 1204, carried out at the behest of the government of Venice, which hoped to profit from the looting of the city. As they departed for the First Crusade in 1096, German warriors began their campaign against infidels by exterminating the Jewish communities in several cities along the Rhine River. The Jewish chronicler who recorded the effort of the Jews in Mainz to defend themselves and their decision to commit collective suicide when they saw that they were about to be overwhelmed and forced to abjure their faith provided a rare example for this period of history written from the perspective of victims rather than conquerors.[18] His work founded a specifically Jewish tradition, sometimes called "lachrymose history," emphasizing the sufferings of an oppressed minority group, that has found its most important modern expression in the history of the Holocaust.

The dryness of medieval annals and chronicles may help explain the popularity of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, written around 1130, which provided the earliest written version of the legend of King Arthur, his wife Guinevere, and his loyal knights. These stories were probably Geoffrey of Monmouth's own inventions, but the mythical past that he created was far livelier than that found in the period's chronicles. Even at the time, critics denounced Geoffrey of Monmouth's stories as "mendacious fictions, invented to gratify the curiosity of the undiscerning," but this did nothing to diminish their success.[19] Subsequent authors elaborated on the Arthurian legends,

fashioning the warlord of Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative into a model for the values of chivalry that developed in the later Middle Ages and making this fictional ruler better known than any of the actual figures of medieval British history. Another largely legendary account of past events that enjoyed a wide readership in the Middle Ages was Jacobus de Voragine's collection of stories about the lives of Christian saints, the *Golden Legend*, compiled around 1260 CE. These stories, filled with miraculous elements, emphasized the close involvement of God in human affairs. They inspired many works of art and clearly had a strong appeal to medieval audiences, who were less concerned with their literal truth than with their edifying religious message.

By the time the Arthurian tales and the *Golden Legend* were written down, a new and more complex society was developing in Western Europe, and the ability to read and write was no longer confined to monasteries. The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw the establishment of the first universities, which provided education not only for future clergy but also for laymen who wanted to become lawyers or doctors. History, however, was not part of university studies and would not become so for many centuries. More important for the practice of history was the growth of cities, a product of medieval society's increasing prosperity. The merchants and guildsmen of these urban communities fought against church authorities and feudal lords to establish their right to govern themselves, and in the process, they also became historical subjects in their own right, who assumed that the events in which they had participated deserved to be recorded.

Urban chronicles, often written by laymen, were especially common in Germany and Italy, with their powerful and competitive city-states; the tradition of local history in the Tuscan city of Florence would strongly influence the two most famous history writers of the Renaissance period, Machiavelli and Guicciardini. Whereas chronicles of monasteries and kings had emphasized religious issues and wars, urban histories were more inclusive, recording the concerns and actions of local officials and guildsmen and noting events such as crimes and fires. These medieval city chronicles can be considered the first examples of social history. At the other extreme from these local compilations were "universal" chronicles that attempted to include the history of the entire known world. In view of the difficulty of obtaining accurate information on so broad a subject, these universal chronicles were often highly inaccurate, but they reflected a desire to achieve a vision of history that took in at least the

whole of Christiandom and provided a framework for understanding narrower national and local events. In France, Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405 CE) argued that a truly comprehensive history ought to include the deeds of women as well as men, but her appeal had little impact until many centuries later.

By the 1400s, the approaches to history that developed over the course of what later generations would call "the Middle Ages," especially the recounting of events in a religious perspective and the emphasis on chronicle in preference to analytical narrative, had been part of European culture for almost a thousand years. Talented writers continued to throw themselves into the production of such narratives, and they still found receptive audiences. Jean Froissart, who recorded many of the episodes of the Hundred Years' War between England and France, was proud to state that he "had labored at this history thirty-seven years," and he insisted that "the greatest pleasure I have ever had, was to make every possible inquiry, in regard to what was passing in the world, and then write down all that I had learnt."[20] Aware of the importance of truthfulness in the composing of history, he explained how his close connections with leading political figures of the time had enabled him to observe events firsthand and claimed that his dedication to accuracy was shown by his inclusion of incidents that cast his own patrons in an unfavorable light. Neither Froissart nor his readers anticipated that his style of historical writing would soon come to seem more dated and less relevant to the understanding of the past than the works of the Greek and Roman historians who had lived more than a thousand years before him.

Notes

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