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# The Practice of History

## The Lelantine War

To the modern visitor the Lelantine plain might seem an unlikely setting for a conflict of epic dimensions. Flanking the southern coast of the island of Euboea, just across from the mainland regions of Attica and Boeotia, the plain is today dotted with holiday villas and summer homes as well as the odd physical remnant of the area's earlier importance for the brick-making industry, but its economy – now, as in antiquity – is dominated by the cultivation of cereals, olives, figs, and vines. The ancient cities of Chalcis and Eretria, like their modern namesakes, lay at either end of the plain, twenty-four kilometers apart. Relations between the two were initially cordial enough: according to Strabo (5.4.9), Pithecusae, on the Italian island of Ischia, was a joint foundation of Eretrians and Chalcidians, probably in the second quarter of the eighth century. But both cities had expanding populations that they needed to feed and in the final decades of the eighth century the two came to blows over possession of the plain that lay between them.

The aristocrats of Euboea were renowned for their horsemanship and for their skill with the spear. Both Aristotle (*Pol.* 4.3.2) and Plutarch (*Mor.* 760e–761b) refer to cavalry engagements, but the Archaic poet Archilochus (fr. 3) implies that the warriors also fought on foot and at close quarters with swords, rather than relying upon slings and bows. Indeed, Strabo (10.1.12) claims to have seen an inscription, set up in the sanctuary of Artemis at Amarynthos (eight kilometers east of Eretria), which recorded the original decision to ban the use

of long-range weapons such as slings, bows, or javelins. It was a war, then, conducted according to a chivalric code we normally attribute to medieval knights.

Those who sacrificed their lives for their cities were treated like heroes. Around 720, an anonymous Eretrian warrior was accorded funerary honors that parallel closely the Homeric description of Patroclus' funeral in the *Iliad*. The warrior's ashes had been wrapped in a cloth along with jewelry and a gold and serpentine scarab, then placed in a bronze cauldron, covered by a larger bronze vessel, and buried on the western perimeter of the settlement, next to the road that led to Chalcis. With the cinerary urn were buried swords and spearheads, which denoted the deceased's martial prowess, and a bronze staff or "scepter," dating to the Late Bronze Age, whose antique status probably served to express the authority he had formerly held in his home community. Charred bones indicate that animals – including a horse, to judge from an equine tooth – were sacrificed at the site of the grave, probably on the occasion of the funeral. Over the next generation, six further cremations of adults (presumably members of the same family) were placed in an arc around the first, while slightly to the west were situated the inhumation burials of youths, arranged in two parallel rows. In both cases, the funerary rites differ from those that were then in vogue in the city's main necropolis by the sea. In the Harbor Cemetery, the corpses of infants had been stuffed into pots whereas at the West Gate they had been afforded the more dignified facility of a pit grave, accompanied by toys and miniature vases, and whereas adults in the Harbor Cemetery were also cremated, their ashes were not placed in cinerary urns nor were their burials accompanied by costly grave goods. After the last burial, ca. 680, a triangular limestone monument was constructed above the cremation burials and from the deposits of ash, carbonized wood, animal bones, drinking cups, and figurines found in the immediate vicinity, we can assume that ritual meals continued to take place in honor of the dead here until the fifth century.

Chalcis had its war heroes too. The poet Hesiod (*WD* 654–5) recounts how he had once crossed over from Boeotia to Chalcis to attend the funeral contests held in honor of "wise" Amphidamas and won a tripod for a song he had composed. Plutarch (*Mor.* 153f) adds that many famous poets attended these funerary games and that Amphidamas "inflicted many ills upon the Eretrians and fell in the battles for the Lelantine plain." Elsewhere (760e–761b), he tells of horsemen from Thessaly, the great upland plain of northern-central Greece, who had been summoned by the Chalcidians, fearful of the Eretrian cavalry's superiority. Their general, Kleomakhos, was killed in the fighting and was granted the signal honor of being buried in the agora of Chalcis, his tomb marked by a tall pillar.

The war was no purely local affair. According to Thucydides (1.15), the entire Greek world was divided in alliance with one or other of the two protagonists in a collective effort that would not be seen again until the great wars of the fifth century (Figure 1.1). Herodotus (5.99) mentions a war between Eretria and Chalcis in which Miletus, the most important Ionian foundation on the coast of Asia Minor, had taken the side of Eretria and Miletos' island neighbor,

| Eretria | Chalcis |
|---|---|
| Miletus | Samos |
| Megara | Corinth and colonies (Corcyra, Syracuse) |
| Boeotia | Thessaly |
| Aegina | Athens |
| Argos | Sparta and colonies (Melos, Thera, Taras, Cyrene) |
| Chios | Erythrae |
| Mytilene | Chalcidian colonies (Naxos, Catana, Leontini, Zancle, Rhegium, Cumae) |

**Figure 1.1**   The alliances that have been proposed for Eretria and Chalcis in the Lelantine War

Samos, that of Chalcis. Other allies can only be assigned to sides on evidence that is more circumstantial. Given that Corinthian settlers are supposed to have expelled Eretrians from Corcyra (the modern island of Corfu) in 733 (Plutarch, *Mor.* 293b), that Megarian colonists are said to have been driven out of Sicilian Leontini by Chalcidians five years later (Thucydides 6.4), and that the hostility between Corinth and its neighbor, Megara, was proverbial, one can assume that Megara was allied with Eretria and Corinth with Chalcis. Thessaly, as we have seen, came to the aid of Chalcis, which might suggest that Thessaly's neighbor and enemy, Boeotia, was on the side of Eretria, along with the island of Aegina, which claimed a special relationship with Boeotia (Herodotus 5.80) and had itself engaged in hostilities with Samos (3.59). The Peloponnesian city of Argos, an ally of Aegina (5.86) and an enemy of Corinth, probably sided with Eretria while Argos' enemy Sparta, which had been assisted by Samos during the Messenian War (3.47), would have favored Chalcis, as would Aegina's enemy Athens. Since Mytilene on the island of Lesbos contested control of the Hellespontine city of Sigeum with Athens (5.95), it is unlikely to have fought alongside Athens on the side of Chalcis, and Miletus' ancient alliance with the island of Chios against the Ionian city of Erythrae (1.18) may allow us to assign Chios to the Eretrian contingent and Erythrae to the Chalcidian. Finally, it is to be expected that "colonial" foundations would have taken the side of their mother-cities: thus Chalcis is likely to have been supported by her own colonies in the west (Naxos, Catana, Leontini, and Zancle on Sicily, Rhegium and Cumae on the Italian mainland), as well as by the Corinthian colonies of Corcyra and Syracuse and the Spartan colonies of Melos, Thera, Taras, and Cyrene.

History does not record the outcome of the conflict. It is possible that hostilities continued intermittently for some considerable time because Archilochus (fr. 3), conventionally assigned to the middle of the seventh century, appears to imply a resumption of combat in his own day while verses attributed to the Megarian poet Theognis (891–4) protest that "the fine vineyards of Lelanton are being shorn" and assign the blame to the descendants of Cypselus, who seized power at Corinth around the middle of the seventh century. There are, however, hints that Eretria fared worse than Chalcis. Firstly, the site of Lefkandi, which is situated on the coast between Chalcis and Eretria and had been a

flourishing and wealthy community in the eleventh and tenth centuries, appears to have been destroyed around 700. Strabo (9.2.6) makes a distinction between an Old Eretria and a Modern Eretria, and given that Lefkandi begins to go into decline ca. 825 – that is, at about the same time that Eretria develops as a center of settlement – it has been argued that Lefkandi had been Old Eretria and that it was a casualty of Chalcidian action towards the end of the eighth century. Secondly, the cooperation between Eretria and Chalcis in overseas ventures came to an abrupt end in the last third of the eighth century. The Chalcidians who had settled Pithecusae are said to have transferred to the Italian mainland where they founded Cumae (Livy 8.22.6), but for the remainder of the century it is Chalcis rather than Eretria that continues to play a pivotal role in such western ventures. A Delphic oracle (*Palatine Anthology* 14.73), perhaps dating to the seventh century, lavishes praise on "the men who drink the water of holy Arethousa" (a spring near Chalcis) and the land that Athens confiscated from Chalcis in 506 BCE lay in the Lelantine plain (Aelian, *HM* 6.1).

The foregoing sketch would appear to offer an impressive demonstration of how historians can assemble fragments of evidence from various literary authors and combine them with the findings of archaeologists to draw a vivid picture of past events – no mean achievement for a period in which literacy was still in its infancy and for which contemporary documentation is practically nonexistent. Unfortunately, this whole reconstruction is probably little more than a modern historian's fantasy, cobbled together from isolated pieces of information that, both singly and in combination, command little confidence.

## The Lelantine War Deconstructed

To begin with, the authors whose notices are culled to generate this composite picture span a period of some nine centuries – roughly the same amount of time as from the Battle of Hastings to the present day. The poems of Hesiod, Archilochus, and Theognis probably date to the seventh century (though see below); Herodotus and Thucydides were writing in the later fifth century, Aristotle in the middle of the fourth, Livy towards the end of the first century, Strabo around the turn of the Common Era, Plutarch at the turn of the second century CE, and Aelian at the beginning of the third (see the Glossary of Literary Sources). The testimony of late authors is less weighty if they are merely deriving their information from that of the earlier authors we possess rather than from an independent tradition. While it is unlikely that Thucydides was reckless enough to base his belief in the universal "Panhellenic" nature of the war on Herodotus' notice that Miletus had once fought with Eretria against Chalcis and Samos, Plutarch's description of the poetic contests at the funeral of Amphidamas stands a good chance of representing an elaboration on the testimony of Hesiod, who never actually mentions the Lelantine War.

Nor is it likely that Thucydides invented out of thin air a tradition about widespread participation in a Lelantine War. He mentions this early war in order

to justify his contention that the Peloponnesian War of 431–404 was the greatest upheaval to have ever affected the Greek world, notwithstanding the great military campaigns of the past. The Lelantine War stands in the same relationship to the Peloponnesian War as the Trojan War does to the Persian War: the former are wars among Greeks while the latter are wars between Greeks and their eastern neighbors, but in each set the more recent war is greater in scope than the former. Clearly, the rhetoric here could not have been effective unless Thucydides' readership was already familiar with a story in which Eretria and Chalcis had been joined by many allies in their war against each other. Yet the existence of a tradition that predates Thucydides does not guarantee its authenticity. It is surely not insignificant that none of our earlier literary sources implies a broader conflict. Furthermore, Thucydides compares the Lelantine War with the Trojan War and while some historians and archaeologists might be prepared to accept that a genuine Mycenaean raid on the Anatolian coast underlies the elaborated traditions about the Trojan War, few believe that the conflict was as epic or as global as myth and epic remembered. Why should the Lelantine War have been any different? In fact, the impressive roster of alliances hypothesized above is built on scattered notices about alliances and hostilities that were anything but contemporary: the Corinthian expulsion of Eretrians from Corcyra is supposed to have taken place in 733 but the alliance between Argos and Aegina dates to around 500, some seven generations later. Are we to believe that Greeks in the Archaic period were so consistent in their loyalties? And how seriously, in any case, should we take such notices? The Eretrian settlement on Corcyra is mentioned only by Plutarch and has, up to now, received absolutely no corroboration from archaeological investigations on the island.

Plutarch is also our only source for the intervention of Thessaly on the side of Chalcis. This testimony is not incompatible with Thucydides' picture of a broader conflict, but neither is it exactly an exhaustive endorsement of the grand alliances that he suggests. In fact, there is a good chance that Plutarch's information derives not from a tradition that was also known to Thucydides but from a story attached to a monument at Chalcis – namely, the column that supposedly marked the tomb of the Thessalian hero Kleomakhos in the agora. Whether or not the tomb really contained the remains of a warrior who fell in the Lelantine War is as unverifiable for us as it was for Plutarch. Monuments may create, as much as perpetuate, social memory.

Similarly, it is far from apparent that Herodotus, in his description of the alliance between Eretria and Miletus against Chalcis and Samos, has in mind the more global conflict recorded by Thucydides. The earlier alliance is mentioned in order to explain why the Eretrians joined the Athenians in providing support to the Ionians of East Greece on the occasion of the latter's revolt in 499: "they did not campaign with them out of any goodwill towards the Athenians but rather to pay back a debt owed to the Milesians, for the Milesians had earlier joined the Eretrians in waging the war against the Chalcidians, on exactly the same occasion as the Samians helped the Chalcidians against the Eretrians and Milesians" (5.99). The wording appears to leave little scope for

the participation of additional combatants, but neither can we exclude the possibility that the earlier, undated alliance was invented to justify Eretrian intervention at the beginning of the fifth century. As for Aristotle, it is difficult to maintain that his reference to a cavalry war between Eretria and Chalcis is derived from Archilochus, whose mention of the use of swords clearly implies an infantry engagement. He could be following an independent source but it is more likely that he has made the inference on the basis of the names given to the elite classes at Eretria and Chalcis – the *Hippeis* (horsemen) and *Hippobotai* (horse-rearers) respectively. From there, the idea that the war had involved both cavalry and infantry could have passed to Plutarch, for whom Aristotle was often an important authority.

It might be thought that we are on firmer ground with those poets who are supposedly contemporary with the events they describe: Hesiod, Archilochus, and Theognis. Yet, here too we encounter difficulties. In most standard works of reference, Hesiod is dated to around 700, but how is this date derived? It relies in part on certain stylistic and thematic correspondences between the Hesiodic poems and the epics of Homer – though the dating of Homer and the relative chronological relationship between Homer and Hesiod are hotly contested by scholars (see pp. 23–4) – but it is also based on the assumption that Hesiod was a contemporary of the Lelantine War! Such circular reasoning cannot command much faith, especially since it is not Hesiod but Plutarch who associates Amphidamas with the Lelantine War. Archilochus is conventionally dated to the middle of the seventh century. One of his poems describes a total solar eclipse which is probably to be associated with that calculated as having occurred on April 6, 648, while one of his addressees, a certain Glaukos, son of Leptinos, is mentioned in a late seventh-century inscription found in the agora of Thasos, Archilochus' adopted home. Some literary scholars are, however, dubious that Archaic poetry can be read so autobiographically and consider such works to be the products of a cumulative synthesis of a city's poetic traditions which is continuously recreated over several generations and attached to the name of an original poet of almost heroic status. The fragmentary poems attributed to Archilochus were probably performed at the hero shrine established to the poet on his native island of Paros towards the end of the sixth century. Some elements of the *oeuvre* may well date back to the mid-seventh century but others could be a good deal later. This is even clearer in the case of the poetry ascribed to Theognis: the repetition of entire verses, the inclusion of couplets ascribed by other sources to poets such as Solon or Mimnermus, and the fact that some verses seem to refer to events of the seventh century while others allude to events that cannot predate the fifth century all give us reason to suspect that the *Theognidea* is more of a compendium of Archaic Greek poetry than the work of a single author.

There is a concrete quality to archaeological evidence that sometimes encourages us to believe that it can provide "scientific" confirmation or refutation of inferences made on the basis of literary texts. This is, unfortunately, a little optimistic. While it is essential that historians examine both the material and

the literary records, the understandable urge to associate material items with textual correlates runs the risk of committing what Anthony Snodgrass has called the "positivist fallacy" – that is, of automatically equating what is archaeologically visible with what is historically significant. We need to remember that, just as only a tiny fraction of the texts that were known in antiquity has survived to the present day, so too the evidence that is studied by archaeologists represents only a minute proportion of the totality of human behavior in the past. The recovery of such material depends upon whether it was consciously or unconsciously disposed of at a particular moment in the past, whether it has been subject to degradation over several centuries or is instead imperishable, whether it has been located and retrieved by the archaeologist, and whether it has been correctly classified and identified, let alone interpreted. The burials that were subsequently honored by the West Gate at Eretria may be those of warriors who died defending their city in the Lelantine War, but they could just as easily be associated with the thousands of episodes of Eretrian history of which we know absolutely nothing.

A more particular consideration holds in the case of Lefkandi. The assumption that settlement at the site ceased ca. 700 is based on the original excavators' observation that a house, situated on the eastern slopes of the headland, was destroyed and abandoned towards the end of the Late Geometric pottery phase; further to the west, another structure seems to have been abandoned at the same time, though there are no indications there of a destruction. But since only a tiny proportion of the settlement at Lefkandi has been excavated and since sixth-century pottery has also been reported, even if its exact context is unclear, it is entirely possible that the so-called "destruction" of the site was merely a local conflagration and that other, unexcavated parts of the settlement continued to be occupied into the seventh century. Indeed, this is precisely what preliminary results of renewed investigation at the site of Lefkandi-Xeropolis, begun in 2003, now appear to suggest. Nor is it at all certain that Lefkandi should be identified with Strabo's Old Eretria. Elsewhere (10.1.10), the geographer seems to imply that Old Eretria was simply a quarter of Modern Eretria.

Finally, even if we were to take all this evidence at face value, there is a conspicuous lack of chronological synchronisms. The first warrior burial at the West Gate of Eretria dates to ca. 720, probably around two decades before the house at Lefkandi was destroyed. Archaeological dating is never, of course, precise and it is possible that the burial (and consequently the destruction) could be ten or fifteen years earlier – around the time, say, of the alleged expulsions of Eretrians from Corcyra and of Megarians from Chalcidian Leontini. The testimony of Hesiod could fit this early date – if we accept that Amphidamas was connected with the war and suppose that Hesiod attended his funeral games very early on in his career – but there are no compelling literary grounds for precluding a lower date in the early seventh century. The testimony of Archilochus, however, drags us down to the middle of the seventh century, while the reference to the descendants of Cypselus by the author of the *Theognidea* takes us into the second half of the seventh century, if not the beginning of the sixth.

If this was a war waged continuously over a century and a half, it is remarkable that its lengthy duration was not commented upon by ancient authors. Perhaps ancient authors confused a series of separate encounters between Eretria and Chalcis, aided occasionally by an outside ally. Or perhaps a relatively unspectacular confrontation of unknown date between the two cities was invested with more heroic dimensions and a more global outreach for the purposes of glorifying the victor. In short, we do not know when – or even whether – the Lelantine War occurred.

That sort of agnostic confession can often strike either the student who is new to history or the interested general reader as deeply unsatisfying, if not frustrating. Many come to the study of history in order to "know" the past and to deal in facts and certainties, not hypotheses and revisionist critiques. The reaction is entirely understandable but it rests, I would suggest, on a rather narrow understanding of what history is.

## What Is History?

The English word "history" has two principal meanings. In the first place it is commonly used as a synonym for "the past." When we talk about "great men and women in history," we are referring to individuals whose deeds and achievements took place in the past: the "historic streetcars" of San Francisco are antique vehicles from around the world that have been preserved and pressed back into service; and when we say that someone or something "is history," we mean that they no longer possess any relevance in the present. A subsidiary definition of this first meaning of history involves the notion of progress or development in the past – histories of art, for instance, are concerned with studying the art of the past but generally seek to trace the evolution of artistic themes and styles over time. The second meaning of "history" indicates the *study* of the past – a definition that is closest to the etymological derivation of the word (from the Greek *historia*, meaning "inquiry"). In this case, the term denotes the act, or practice, of study rather than its object. In English, the distinction between these two meanings is not always clear-cut. When, for example, we say that "history teaches us that the denial of national or ethnic self-determination is likely to provoke separatist movements," we are stating that the *study* of the past suggests to us that this is a likely consequence but we are also implying that *the past itself* presents documented examples whose lessons we should heed. This definitional ambiguity arises from a widespread assumption that the practice of history is simply to "unearth" the past – in other words, that the past is capable of speaking for itself, provided that the historian rescues it from oblivion and assists in giving it a voice. In this sense, "history as practice" is dependent upon, and derivative of, "history as the past."

That interpretation of history was challenged in 1961 by Edward Hallett Carr in a book entitled *What is History?* – a revised version of the George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures that he had delivered earlier that year at the University of

Cambridge. A former civil servant with the British Foreign Office, editorial writer for the London *Times*, professor of politics, and author of the fourteen-volume *History of Soviet Russia*, Carr defined history as "a continuous interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (1987: 30). His definition of a historical fact, however, was anything but conventional for his day. Attacking what he characterized as a "nineteenth-century fetishism of facts" – represented above all by the German historian Leopold von Ranke's insistence that the historian's task was to show "how it actually was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), as well as the positivist tendency to draw conclusions from facts (i.e. the "inductive method") and the British empiricist tradition which posited a sharp distinction between subject and object, Carr argued that not all facts in the past are historical facts and that it is the historian who decides which facts should be considered significant and in what order of significance they should be ranked. In short, it was ridiculous to imagine that there existed any objective historical facts "out there," independent of the interpretation of the historian.

At first sight, Carr would seem to have been giving priority to the practice of history over the establishment of what actually happened in the past and, indeed, he is sometimes regarded as a relativist – as someone, that is, who believes that every truth claim or historical interpretation possesses equal validity. As such, his work is often contrasted to that of his conservative contemporary Geoffrey Elton (the son of the classicist Victor Ehrenberg), who argued that the subject matter of history was events themselves rather than the evidence for them that the historian needs to interpret. In reality, however, Carr did believe in an objective truth and his efforts to challenge the self-evident nature of historical facts were actually attempts to discredit earlier "liberal" histories against which, as a Marxist, he was ideologically predisposed. For Carr, an "objective" history could not be divined from events of the past alone but only from understanding them in a broader perspective that comprehended the evolutionary progress of history and could make sense of past actions and events through reference to the future directions that history would take. In other words, a superior history depended upon the historical skill of the practitioner but this was itself a function of the historian's ability to mediate between the events of the past and the emerging goals of the future.

Like the English "history," the German word *Geschichte* describes both the past and the study of the past, but it can also mean a "story," "tale," or "fable," and this triple meaning of "history as the past," "history as practice," and "history as narrative" is also inherent in the French word *histoire*, the Italian *storia*, and the Modern Greek *istoría*. To Anglophones this inability to distinguish between "factual" and "fictional" accounts can appear decidedly odd, even if the English word "history" was also once used in the same sense. This third meaning of history "as narrative" is one that has, in recent decades, been championed by the American theorist Hayden White.

For White the past is vanished and can never be represented mimetically or in its totality in any historical account. All that remains of it are fragmentary

"traces" which are normally themselves already textualized (i.e. represented in narrative form in documents or other records). These isolated traces, or what White calls the "unprocessed historical record," have no meaning in themselves – they tell no story. What the historian does is, firstly, to arrange them into a chronological sequence or "chronicle"; secondly, to shape the chronicle into a story with a beginning, middle, and end; and, thirdly, to transform the story into a narrative by means of a series of standard devices. These devices include the ideological stance that the historian adopts (conservative; liberal; radical; anarchist), the mode of argument employed (organicist; contextualist; mechanistic; formist), and the specific type of emplotment chosen (comedy; satire; tragedy; romance). White believes, however, that the choice between these various options is not entirely contingent; rather, it is linguistically predetermined by the "trope," or rhetorical mode of representation, in which the historian writes (metaphor; metonymy; synecdoche; irony). The historical text is, therefore, primarily a literary artifact – the techniques by which it is produced vary little, if at all, from those employed by novelists – and this is because the historian needs to code what is essentially unfamiliar (the traces of the past) in a literary form that is both familiar to, and recognizable by, an audience. The traces or "facts" may be "discovered" by the historian, but the narrative created from them is largely imagined and invented, and this means that moral or aesthetic considerations, rather than issues of evidence, are the only criteria available for judging the relative merits of different interpretations or visions of history.

Mention White's interpretation of history has been enthusiastically endorsed by postmodernist scholars, dissatisfied with what they consider the uncritical certainties and epistemological *naiveté* of more traditional historians. Keith Jenkins, for example, argues that no history – or historian – is ideologically disinterested or neutral, that all histories are compiled from the standpoint of the present, that all histories are imagined rather than discovered, that no history can truly correspond to the actuality of a now absent past, and that all history is really historiography – the product of the historian rather than of the past. Unsurprisingly, such interpretations have also provoked an equally trenchant reaction from more traditional historians who resent what they see as the encroachment upon their discipline by literary critics and social theorists. Books with titles such as *Telling the Truth About History*, *In Defense of History*, and *The Killing of History* seek – with varying degrees of sobriety – to defend cherished notions such as truth, objective knowledge, and disinterested science against what is dubbed the agnosticism, relativism, and nihilism of postmodernist scholars.

Ironically, the radically different interpretations of both the postmodernists and the traditionalists are the product of the same "emplotment" of how history has been studied. That is to say, for both parties the three definitions of history outlined above are often regarded as three different chronological stages in the philosophy of history. First there was the straightforward view of history "as the past," as espoused by Ranke; then, greater emphasis was placed on the subjective interpretation of the historian – a move associated in British scholarship with

the name of Carr, though the American historians Charles Beard and Carl Becker had made similar pronouncements before the First World War; and finally, the practice of history was divorced from the past by stressing the imaginative and fictive nature of historical writing. For postmodernists, the basic story is one of an emancipation from the tyranny of the past, whereas for traditionalists it is a flight of fantasy away from common-sense realities. Yet, as we have already seen, in many languages the word for history denotes all three meanings simultaneously, and if we take this tripartite definition more seriously then the central tenets of the postmodernist critique are considerably less radical than their proponents pretend but also potentially more illuminating than many traditionalists are prepared to concede.

## History as Literature

Let us consider the late fifth-century Athenian historian Thucydides. Long regarded as the father of "scientific" history, Thucydides is perhaps studied less by ancient historians today than he was a generation or two ago, though he is currently enjoying considerable popularity among more philologically-minded scholars, who have justly drawn attention to the highly accomplished literary qualities of his work. The account of the disastrous Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 is a case in point. Apart from the fact that this particular episode is very deliberately emplotted as a tragedy, whose squalid outcome is poignantly counterposed to the pomp and optimism surrounding its inception, Thucydides' account consciously employs echoes taken from his predecessor Herodotus' description of the Persian invasion of Greece in 480. For example, Herodotus (7.44) tells how, upon reaching the Hellespont, the Persian king Xerxes presided over a race between the ships in his fleet; in Thucydides (6.32.2), the Athenian ships race each other as far as the island of Aegina. According to Herodotus (8.75), the Athenian general Themistocles forced the naval battle in the straits of Salamis by sending a secret message to the Persian command, advising them to attack before the Greeks abandoned their station. Thucydides (7.73) recounts how the Syracusan statesman Hermocrates prevented the defeated Athenians from escaping by having his men pretend to befriend them and warn them not to retreat immediately because the roads were being guarded. Even Thucydides' description (7.70–71) of the naval battle in the Great Harbor of Syracuse echoes the chaotic and crowded conditions that characterize Herodotus' portrayal of the Battle of Salamis (8.84–96). This is no act of plagiarism: by deliberately evoking the account of Herodotus – an account that would certainly have been familiar to his readership – Thucydides was in a sense comparing the imperialist designs of Athens with those of the Persian Empire earlier; and everybody knew how that campaign had ended.

Such literary devices are certainly not limited to the description of the Sicilian Expedition. Thucydides crafts the speeches which he presents in such a way as to reveal the character of those who are made to utter them. Thus, the sober

and cautious speech of the Spartan king Archidamus (1.80–85) is designed to reflect the dilatory – not to say sluggish – tendencies that the Athenians attributed to the Spartans, while the confession of the Spartan ephor Sthenelaidas that he could not understand "those long speeches of the Athenians" (1.86) illustrates the Spartans' proverbial economy with words (the word "laconic" derives from the Greek word *Lakôn*, meaning "Spartan"). Furthermore, certain events are anticipated, deferred, or juxtaposed outside their strict chronological occurrence for the purposes of providing a more contoured account of the war. Pericles, for example, is made to utter his final speech one year before his death from the plague in order to have him safely off the stage prior to the entrance of Cleon, the demagogic politician whom Thucydides compares unfavorably to Pericles. Yet does this recognition of Thucydides' literary artistry provide sufficient grounds for denying that the events which Thucydides describes ever happened? When we are faced with divergences between Thucydides' account and other testimony – be it the contemporary evidence of comic satirists such as Aristophanes, the public inscriptions that the Athenian democracy set up, or the later history of Diodorus of Sicily – are the criteria on which we make our ultimate judgment really only moral or aesthetic?

We cannot, of course, hope to recapitulate the past "in its totality": the context against which we frame individual events is to a certain degree imagined. In this respect, however, the past is no different from the present – our perception of both is subjective and partial (in both senses of the word) – but these are not sufficient grounds for resigning ourselves to ignorance. In fact, White himself is not as averse to the idea of historical facts as are some of his acolytes. At a conference, held at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1990, he acknowledged that outright acceptance of his view that the grounds for distinguishing between alternative historical accounts were moral and aesthetic rather than epistemological could feasibly lend credibility to revisionist histories that denied the reality of the Holocaust. He therefore conceded that in some – though not all – cases, the type of emplotment available to the historian might actually be limited by the "real" facts, though this concession obviously undermined the view that history is entirely reducible to its narrative representation. To be fair, despite his emphasis on the literary strategies through which historical accounts are crafted, White had never denied the reality of the historical traces that the historian discovers and has even suggested that "responsibility to the rules of evidence" can help the reader "distinguish between good and bad historiography" (Canary and Kozicki 1978: 59). That is clearly not the view of other postmodernist scholars such as Jenkins, who argues that "there is a range of methods without any agreed criteria for choosing" (2003: 15).

## Method and Theory

In his enumeration of feminist, *Annaliste*, neo-Marxist, structuralist, and post-structuralist "methods," Jenkins reveals a basic inability to distinguish between

method and theory. Theory is essentially an explanatory tool that is applied to sets of data in order to make them comprehensible. Often, theories are generated from circumstances, situations, and contexts that are independent of the data-sets to which they are applied. The explanatory function of theory inevitably endows it with a "presentist" quality – meaning that the theories historians select tend to echo contemporary concerns (e.g. feminism; postcolonialism; queer theory) while theories employed by earlier generations can fairly swiftly appear to become outmoded (e.g. classical Marxism). The type of theory selected will inevitably influence the form of interpretation and mode of argumentation employed but it will also determine which facts are considered relevant for the current purpose of the study. Thus a Marxist history will obviously focus more on issues of class and class conflict while a structuralist history will concern itself more with myths, rituals, and mentalities. To the extent that different theories pursue different interests by means of different interpretive strategies, there are no epistemological grounds for choosing between them. However, any theory that felt itself entirely unconstrained by such historical facts as have survived would rightly be condemned as either insufficient or misrepresentative. For example, a feminist history that ignored facts unrelated to women, not because they were irrelevant to the case but precisely because they contradicted it, would be far inferior to one that sought to take account of the awkward counterexamples. In these cases, it is not the theory that has been violated, but the "rules of evidence," the "critical standard" – in short, the historical method.

Perhaps I can illustrate what I mean with a musical example. A mute manuscript is given audible musical form by a pianist in the course of a recital. The pianist decides what to play – be it Mozart, Rachmaninov, or Gershwin – and the talented pianist will give his or her own interpretive expression to the musical notation on the page in order to communicate with his or her audience. At the end of the day, though, there is a correct way to play the piano (striking the keys sequentially) and an incorrect way (e.g. taking a chainsaw to it). No doubt the latter makes for an interesting artistic expression, but only the senselessly wealthy or acutely tone-deaf would pay money night after night and still pretend they were listening to a pianist. By the same token, any literary critic who espouses a particular postmodernist theory but refuses to believe in, let alone practice, historical method cannot seriously expect to be regarded as a historian.

Jenkins is right to say that there is no single definitive method but this is not – or should not be – a function of which theory a historian decides to employ but rather of the nature of the surviving historical evidence. Tchaikovsky's music can be played on any number of instruments, but a violin is not played in the same way as a piano, a flute, or a glockenspiel. Carr noted that he was sometimes tempted to envy the competence of his colleagues who wrote ancient or medieval history, but then consoled himself with the thought "that they are so competent mainly because they are so ignorant of their subject" (1987: 14). The remark was obviously not intended as a compliment but it nevertheless

underscores the important point that the study of modern or contemporary history, which enjoins its practitioners to scour new or insufficiently known archival materials, requires an entirely different method from that needed to study ancient history, where the written documentation is scant (and consequently familiar to a larger number of scholars) and where there is generally greater recourse to non-written, material evidence. And this is especially true of the Archaic period of Greek history, where such written testimony as exists is largely the product of later periods.

This book is concerned primarily with the practice of history, and especially with method. It assumes that there is a past which we can access, however incompletely, from historical traces and it accepts that the writing of history is a literary pursuit that requires a certain amount of imagination, though all interpretation – however imaginative – is to some degree constrained, or at least framed, by the available historical evidence. The fundamental question that I wish to ask is not so much "what happened?" in the Archaic period of Greek history but rather "how do we know what (we think) happened?" Ideally, of course, one would wish for answers to both questions, but it has long been recognized that the evidence we have at our disposal for Archaic Greece is insufficient to support the sort of political–military or event-driven narratives that can be written about later periods where the documentation is fuller.

On the other hand, the evidence is more amenable to the treatment of longer-term social, economic, and cultural processes. One conclusion to emerge from the chapters that follow is that an attachment to place was a more significant basis of cohesion in the earliest protohistorical communities than has previously been recognized and that this was probably a longer-term legacy of Late Bronze Age administrative organization that survived in spite of – or perhaps precisely because of – the unsettled conditions of the intervening Dark Age. Conversely, the communities that emerged from the Dark Age were relatively underdeveloped in terms of social complexity and seem not to have possessed the level of organization that is attributed to them by those later literary accounts that tell of colonial ventures in the eighth century. Instead, it is not until well into the seventh century that contemporary poetry and the earliest inscribed laws attest to the transition from a "ranked" society, in which local communities coalesced around charismatic chieftains, to a stratified society in which a true aristocratic ruling class emerged. A direct consequence of this was a more politicized consciousness among non-elite members of the community, though it is only towards the end of the Archaic period that this political consciousness was translated into action – and then only in certain cities such as Athens.

Throughout much of the Archaic period, a relatively small elite class, whose membership was recruited according to landholding and descent (the primary mechanism for the transmission of property), enacted the most important decisions within a political community which was predominantly composed of peasant landholders; beneath these were dependent laborers, serfs, and chattel slaves. Economic opportunities overseas offered new sources of wealth and, although these were initially exploited largely by aristocrats, by the sixth century

there had emerged a new class of non-agricultural producers who demanded a social and political status concomitant with their wealth. Long-distance trade becomes more visible, while an examination of settlement patterns and land use suggests an intensification of agricultural practices aimed at producing a surplus for market exchange. These developments fostered, and were facilitated by, the invention of coinage, which also allowed city-states to make public expenditures on a greater scale than ever before and to invest more in monumentalizing urban centers. It is these more processual developments, rather than individual events, that the combined testimony of contemporary but fragmentary literature, inscriptions, and archaeology is best able to illuminate.

Needless to say, the historian hopes to understand the past better. It would obviously be satisfying if we could establish once and for all whether, when, and how the Lelantine War was fought, but what I hope to demonstrate in the pages that follow is that actually "doing" history, regardless of the results obtained, is also a worthwhile pursuit in itself. The practice of history is often compared with the act of translation. The fact that one is able to translate at all would suggest that the past is not entirely incommensurable or incomprehensible to the present; the fact that one needs to translate, however, underpins the fundamental differences between past and present. The historian's task is not simply to uncover the past in its own terms (even if this were possible). Instead, the historian must make sense of the past in terms that carry meaning in the present. In the act of translation there are often words, phrases, and concepts which are not directly translatable into another language and which reveal both the expressive nuances and the limitations of the respective languages. So, too, the practice of history, aside from yielding valuable information about the past, can impel us to become more self-aware about the assumptions, priorities, and values that our own society holds to be self-evident.

## FURTHER READING

Lelantine War: Parker 1997. Eretria: Bérard 1970. Lefkandi: Popham, Sackett, and Themelis 1980.

Discussion of Archaic poetry: V. Cobb-Stevens, T. J. Figueira, and G. Nagy, "Introduction," in Figueira and Nagy 1985, 1–8. "Positivist fallacy": Snodgrass 1987: 37–8.

Theories of history: Carr 1987; Elton 1967; Jenkins 1995, 2003; White 1973; "The historical text as literary artifact," in Canary and Kozicki 1978, 41–72; "Historical emplotment and the problem of truth," in Friedländer 1992, 37–53. Reactions: Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 1994; Windschuttle 1996; Evans 1999.

Thucydides: Connor 1984; Hornblower 1987; "Narratology and narrative techniques in Thucydides," in Hornblower 1994, 131–66.

Good recent treatments of Archaic Greece: Snodgrass 1980; Murray 1993; Mitchell and Rhodes 1997; Fisher and van Wees 1998; Osborne 2009; Raaflaub and van Wees 2009.