CHAPTER ONE

The Place of History in the Ancient World

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1 Preliminary Considerations

According to a generally accepted opinion, the discovery of history in the western world is owed to the Greeks. One must admit, however, that history did not enjoy a privileged position within Greek culture; rather, its role was marginal whether we compare the study of history with other intellectual activities or try to examine its presence in education and in school (see Momigliano 1983; Nicolai 1992; below, §4). To begin, we must clear up several ambiguities. First, our concept of history – by which I mean the concept of history developed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a consequence of the integration of narrative history and the study of antiquity (Momigliano 1950) – is profoundly different from that of the Greeks and the Romans: both have a diegetic aspect, since history, both for us and the ancients, is a narrative of facts. The means, however, by which a story is conveyed and the aims of the historians are different. At least up until Herodotus there is no interest in chronology, either absolute or relative (see Finley 1975: 15, 17–18; for archaic Greece one can speak rather of an extreme interest in genealogical sequences), and it took centuries before chronological systems were established for general use; by contrast, modern historiography, the child of a culture obsessed with the measurement of time, cannot avoid placing facts into a chronological grid. Second, the account of an ancient historian tends to absorb – and therefore to make disappear, in varying degrees in various epochs – every trace of documentation used by the author, while the modern historian by contrast searches to bring forth the facts from the documents. (For the use of documents see Biraschi et al. 2003; below, Ch. 4; the

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modern idolatry of the document, however, has also rightly been questioned: see, most recently, Canfora 2003: 9). The rhetoric of the document is directly opposed to the rhetoric of ancient historians, which derives from epic poetry and constructs the character (ethos) of the historian as the omniscient, or at least competent and authoritative, narrator (Marincola 1997). Third, the goal of an ancient historical account is never purely scientific and cognitive, but is always linked to creating paradigms, predominantly politico-militaristic or ethical ones (for the different goals that historians proposed for themselves from time to time see Finley 1975: 23). All of historiography’s paradigms had a paideutic end and in some sense a political end: to form a governing class, offering it analytical instruments and behavioral models (as in Thucydides); to put forward great personalities, positive or negative, as exempla, so as to fix the parameters of moral evaluation (as with Theopompus, Tacitus, and the biographical tradition); or to construct memory and collective identity (as in local historiography and ktiseis [foundation narratives]). (For historiography’s contribution to the construction of Greek identity see Cartledge 1997b.)

But ancient historiography is not a homogeneous whole, with a limited internal evolution. Under this label we in fact assemble authors and works that are extremely different (cf. the panorama of Latin historiography in Cizek 1985), sharing only the minimal common denominator of being a narration of events (Canfora 2003: 14). A further distinction must be made between history, understood as the whole of past events, and historiography, understood as a literary genre charged with the narration of events. Using this outline, one can say that the past (also including in this term the mythic past, brought in through the poetic tradition) has its own important place in Greek and Roman cultures, while the narration of the past, and above all the investigation into the past, occupy a much more modest place.

2 The Place of History and the Place of Historiography

Moses Finley (1975: 14) emphatically ruled out the possibility that epic poetry, whatever else it was, could be considered history. Greeks of any epoch would have expressed their perplexity at this statement or at least would have called for a debate. No Greek in fact ever held such an opinion. On the contrary, Thucydides, in the so-called “Archaeology” (1.2–19), sought to demonstrate the superiority of his argument and of his account with respect to the Iliad, and moreover, he compared the degree of reliability of Homer’s testimony with the much more accurate investigations that he himself had conducted on a history even more ancient than Homer’s (1.10, 1.21: see Nicolai 2001b). The fact that Thucydides dedicates one of the more demanding sections of his work to this confrontation with Homer and to the demonstration of the superior paradigmaticism of the Peloponnesian War vis-à-vis the Trojan War demonstrates that for Thucydides the most important touchstone in the Greek intellectual sphere was in fact Homer. And if it is true that in the light
of modern historiography (and also several tendencies in ancient historiography) epic cannot be defined as history, it is just as true that for centuries epic represented the only reliable record of the past that the Greeks had at their disposal, and that even after the invention of historiography, when one wanted to take a look at more ancient history, one could not do more than go back to epic poetry (Nicolai 2003a).

I believe that it is not sufficient to search Homeric epic for historical information or for the elements that came to be considered characteristic of historical narration. Rather, it is appropriate to try to take another look at epic poetry, in order to see what a Greek found there in terms of an awareness of his own past and the construction of his own identity. A narration of past events that forms the identity of a people, whether at a collective level or at the level of a single city or single clan (gene), and that constitutes for that people the principle paradigmatic reference, cannot be ignored by those who seek to delineate the proper place of history and of historiography in the Greek and Roman world.

The first and most important indication of the strength of epic in Greek culture is the link that it created between the identity of the Greeks and “glorious deeds” (klea andron; Il. 9.189, 524; Od. 8.73) worthy of being saved from oblivion with song. In the Iliad Achilles, the hero par excellence, sings to Patroclus the glorious deeds of men (9.189), to show that Homeric heroes also had a past to sing and from which to take models. The paradigmatic value of klea andron is then continued by Phoenix (9.524), where he introduces an exemplary event. In the absence of political unity and also of a strong and unifying religion (such as, e.g., the monotheism of the Jews), the Greeks identified themselves in epic song, or, to be more precise, in their past, from which poetry had selected and transmitted the most memorable events. The Greeks also recognized that the poets had identified and in some ways founded their religion (Hdt. 2.53.2–3). That the Homeric poems are the book of Greek culture entails (and not as a secondary consequence) the utilization of a human past as a model and foundation of the present. The Iliad is not a sacred book like the Bible, and it does not recount the acts of a single hero, such as Gilgamesh, who searches for divine immortality, but recounts instead human events, with the gods as helpers or opponents.

For the public, epic recalled events distant in time: the bards knowingly archaized their works, both in language and in content, creating that inextricable mixture of past and present characteristic of every epic. One must strongly emphasize that this archaization, besides being a necessity of the genre and strengthening the exemplary force of an event, is a sign of the basic understanding of chronological distance from the events narrated. Furthermore, the stratified composition through the centuries introduced anachronisms and other blendings. To give a single example, the place names of the “Catalogue of Ships” (II. 2.484–779, with Visser 1997, who provides an ample bibliography) are the result of the desire for amplification, accumulating names upon names, and assigning them formulaic epithets that dignify even lesser-known localities; and, in the desire to antiquate, choosing names of cities that contained a veiled memory, or in some cases inventing one for the occasion. The resulting picture is not a description of Greece in the Mycenaean age or the archaic
age, but rather an indecipherable mixture upon which whole generations of ancient
and modern philology have been based. Nonetheless, for the Greeks the presence or
absence of a city in the Catalogue was a cause for pride or shame, and in certain cases
the verses of the Catalogue were used to solve political and territorial controversies.
Epic, in short, was an irreplaceable document, a type of historical archive, to be
consulted and at times to be interpolated or falsified, but always to be interpreted (for
the exegesis of epic poetry as a part of genealogy and historiography see Nicolai
2003a). One of the main supports for epic poetry was genealogy, which identified
characters connected to each other through means of the simple patronymic and
stabilized a series of relations with the heroes of preceding generations. The creation
of genealogical epics by Hesiod at both the divine (Theogony) and human (Catalogue
of Women) level indicates that the public had a specific interest in this kind of material.

It was precisely the immense awareness required by catalogue poetry that drove the
poet who composed the prologue to the “Catalogue of Ships” (Il. 2.484–493) to
confront the limited knowledge founded on kleos (reputation) with that of the
omniscient Muses, who are present and aware. The Muse, daughter of Mnemosyne
(Memory), is able to compensate for the limitations of the poet, who becomes
the latest ring of collective memory. Thanks to the Muse (Od. 8.488–491), Demo-
docus can sing the sufferings of the Achaeans and the capture of Troy, events at which
he had not been present, with such precision as to provoke the admiration and the
tears of Odysseus, who was a protagonist of the story (Od. 8.521–531). Epic,
therefore, is a product of the memory of a people, and at the same time an encyclo-
pedia and cultural book of that people (Rossi 1978, esp. 87–92). Historiography, heir
of epic poetry, will retain this goal of preserving memory (cf. Herodotus’ preface) and
also the goal of suggesting itself as a repertoire of dynamics and behaviors, in other
words of paradigms (especially, with Thucydides, politico-military paradigms: see his
famous formulation, 1.22.4).

The paradigmatic and educative aim on the one hand removes ancient historiog-
raphy from its modern counterpart with its claim to be a science, while on the other
hand links history to other genres that had among their goals the construction of a
collective identity and the telling of paradigmatic events: I am referring particularly to
tragedy, but also to oratory, both epideictic, as it can be seen in the funeral oration
(see, above all, Loraux 1981), and deliberative. In the funeral oration Athens’ past
occupies a central position, but one searches in vain here for a serious reconstruction
of the city’s history; on the contrary, the history of this genre seems to reflect the
precept of Tisias and Gorgias (ap. Plat. Phaedr. 267b1), picked up by Isocrates: “to
go through ancient events in a new way and to speak in an old-fashioned manner of
recent events” (Paneg. 8, with Marincola 1997: 276–277; Nicolai 2004: 75–76,
129–131). The clear intent is to render the recent past paradigmatically by placing
it on the same level as that mythic past which time, distance, and the works of the
poets (including tragedy) had made exemplary.

The importance of paradigms derived from past history continued, in different
literary genres and various forms, the goals and in certain ways the criteria that
presided over the narrative choices of epic song. But alongside the exemplary history
of the tragedians and orators, other genres developed that had as their subject past
events: genealogies, which continued and interpreted the epos and had the aim of consolidating and organizing the memories of aristocratic clans (genealogies); various forms of local historiography, either strictly local or regional; antiquarianism, necessary to create and reinforce identity and the sense of belonging to a community; and works on the customs of foreign peoples, which exhibited and explained the “other.” All of these genres constituted a type of galaxy (rather difficult for us to decipher because of the loss of so many works) that was linked to other galaxies, such as the various genres of geographic literature which also gave space to genealogical, historical, and ethnographic concerns. None of these early genres that handled historical material possessed the paradigmatic force of epic or the capacity to involve a Panhellenic public. Therefore, it was not Hecataeus, indissolubly linked to epic and limited to genealogical material, who created a new literary genre directed towards the conservation of the historical memory of the Greeks (see Nicolai 1997): rather, it was Herodotus and Thucydides who confronted epic poetry and tried to substitute new models for those offered by Homer; both men responded to the needs of an age that sought more extended and reliable knowledge (Herodotus especially), to be utilized in particular for the formation of a governing class (Thucydides especially). Historiography is one of the products of this period that is often known as an age of sophists, and there is no doubt that Herodotus and Thucydides were strongly influenced by sophistic ideas; it is possible that they even considered themselves sophists. Certainly the methods by which Herodotus published his work were not very different from the recitations of Lysias or Protagoras that we know from Plato’s dialogues (Thomas 1993; Thomas 2000, esp. 258, 284). The historians shared with the sophists the goal of transmitting useful knowledge into political life, enough so that historiography was classified by Aristotle as a part of politics (Rhet. 1360a).

3 Historiography as a Literary Genre rather than a Science

It is commonly accepted that history was not included in the disciplines that moved towards exact knowledge, truth in the philosophical sense of the term, and that the results of historical research were part of doxa (opinion). This arrangement of history as foreign to philosophy was consolidated specifically in the great systematic philosophies of the fourth century and the Hellenistic age. The Greek and Roman philosophers did not dedicate themselves to historiography and did not elaborate historiographical theories (Finley 1975: 12). The sole exception is Posidonius, who also wrote history, but I would be very cautious before attributing to him (and by extension to Stoicism) a complete philosophy of history that incorporates the study of the past into a philosophical system (Pani 2001: 66 speaks of Posidonius’ systematic conception of history, but cf. Nicolai 2003b: 689–691). It was only with Christianity that history became a part of a vision of the world and the destiny of man: on the one hand, the faith founds itself on the historical veracity of the coming of Christ, of his death and resurrection, while, on the other hand, history had for the first time a goal
and an end, the second and definitive coming of Christ for the final judgment (from the enormous bibliography, Press 1982: 61–119 is useful for a terminological start). After Christianity imposed a theological conception onto history, many metaphysical and political philosophies elected history as their foundation and, as a consequence, many diverse philosophies of history were elaborated. But this perspective is completely foreign to Greco-Roman antiquity, just as the idea of history as a science is foreign. A view of history as a science is wrong in its assumptions because the historical event is not only in itself subject to doubt but above all not repeatable, according to the required principle of modern science, and it cannot be anachronistically projected onto classical antiquity in the search for a scientific method in historians such as Thucydides and Polybius: both in a way satisfy the standards of modern historiography for very different reasons. The only system which historiography was always part of was the literary system, and not only because historiography was labeled as literature. Herodotus and Thucydides, as we have been suggesting, were the first historians to confront epic and to introduce epic narrative techniques into their works (the most outstanding being the speeches given to various characters; below, Ch. 9).

If we investigate the history of historiography as the history of a literary genre we find at the outset the problem of deciding what should be included and what excluded. Traditionally, modern histories of historiography concentrate on the great authors and on the two main lines, one inaugurated by Herodotus, the other by Thucydides (Strasburger 1975; Momigliano 1990: 29–53). All the rest are either relegated to forerunners (as in the overvaluation of Hecataeus’ alleged rationalism) or placed in the indistinct limbo of minor historiography (including, to hint at only a few kinds, local and regional historiography, antiquarianism, monography, and biography). This outlook is wrong in two aspects: what has survived is due to the tastes of the public in several crucial ages and to the fortuitous chances of destruction; the number of authors and works belonging to so-called minor historiography is an indication of their success with the public, in many cases limited in terms of time and place, but an indication nonetheless of a more complex and varied reality (Gabba 1981; Schepens forthcoming). And what is the border separating historiography from genealogy, from ktiseis, from antiquarian periégéseis and even from the narrations to which we give the modern name of novels, such as the works under the names of Dictys of Crete and Dares of Phrygia from the Trojan saga, or those on the fortunes of Alexander the Great? One cannot deny that these narratives have some historiographic characteristics (Canfora 2003: 15; on the boundary between historiography and novel see Treu 1984; below, Ch. 56). The typical answer is that the difference lies in method, but this seems an ambiguous response leaving wide swaths of uncertainty. Another possible response could come from examining the expectations and reactions of the public, trying to understand what was considered authentic and authoritative narration, but in this case too the results are not secure. Let us only consider the fact that for ancient history the poets were considered repositories of tradition, and this is true not only for Homer and the archaic poets but also for relatively recent poets: Strabo cites Callimachus and Euphorion, putting them on the same level as Homer and Aeschylus; the scholiasts compare Lycophron with Homer on the number of
ships sent to Troy. Citation of poets in controversial cases had the validity of testimony rendered at a trial, and the poets were often cited as a source of international law. In this case as well, the key lies in detecting what ancient conceptions of historical truth were, and how much these overlap with modern conceptions. If modern historiography tends to be more or less aware of an absolute truth (which can be the foundation of philosophical thought) or a scientific truth (which is independent of any subjectivity), the truth of ancient historians generally rested upon the impartiality and honesty of the historian, viz. on subjective and relative values (Woodman 1988: 83, 197ff.; cf. Vercruysse 1984 on the importance of the subjective aspect in historiography and on the care in confronting truth and lies). Next to the truth of the authoritative historian exists another recognized truth, the paradigmatic truth of traditional narrations and history used by orators (for the exemplary value of traditions handed down by poets see Cic. Leg. 1.3–4, with Nicolai 2001a). But if these are the main ancient conceptions of the true historian, it is evident that neither the criterion of method nor that of public reaction to the authority of the narrations can be used with any hope of success. The only possibility is to leave open the borders of the historiographical genre, distinguishing from time to time the goals of individual authors and judging their works not in terms of a canon, either Thucydidean or modern as it may be, but in the context that produced them and that they served.

4 The Study of the Past: Historiography in the Ancient School-System

In the ancient school-system, history was not an autonomous discipline (Momigliano 1987a: 161–162), but consciousness of the past did enter into various subjects and at different moments in the curriculum. The reading of historians could be required of students either at the stage of grammatical (primary) or rhetorical (secondary) instruction. In contrast to modern schools, in which history is a construct around which the contents of many disciplines (literature, art, philosophy) come to be included, in ancient schools a normative (synchronic) scheme prevailed over a historical-evolutionary (diachronic) one. The main foundation of teaching was imitation, and paradigms were the fundamental didactic tool; in the case of grammar and rhetoric, they were the works of the great authors: Homer and the tragedians in the first rank, but also Thucydides, Plato, Isocrates, and Demosthenes for the Greeks; Vergil, Sallust, Terence, and Cicero at Rome. These paradigmatic texts were both formal models and vehicles for ethical content, and they were rich in paradigms taken from past history. These paradigms in turn worked to integrate and reinforce ethical judgment and norms, gaining a depth that they did not possess by themselves.

In rhetorical theory one finds articulated norms for the use of the historical exemplum in oratory, and one encounters various exempla taken from historiography, in particular through description (ekphrasis). Attempts to classify historiography within oratorical genres that have their place in the epideictic or deliberative genres are not lacking. Ancient rhetoric, as has been argued, tended to encompass all the
literary genres and to draw models and exempla from all genres, both poetry and prose. Historiography also came to be taken as a stylistic model for orators, whether because of the presence of direct speeches or because it was a narrative and descriptive genre (Nicolai 1992: 61–83). The imitation of Thucydides on the part of orators was the object of a lively debate in the first century BCE that involved both Greek and Roman rhetors. The constant presence of examples taken from historiography in rhetorical treatises is a confirmation of the firm position of historiography in the literary system next to traditional poetic genres (primarily epic and tragedy, but also lyric, elegy, iambus, and comedy) and prose (oratory and philosophy). The existence also of a canon of Greek historians, which arose and developed to indicate excellent authors worthy of imitation, is another confirmation of the place of the genre.

Grammar as a skill (techne) was born much later than rhetoric and shaped its own space; in defining itself, it often overlapped with the field of rhetoric. This could happen because of the non-institutionalized character of ancient schools and the absence of rigid walls between the disciplines. One of the institutionalized tasks of grammar was the “narration of histories” (historion apodosis, historiarum enarratio), or rather the explanation of the contents of the narrative in texts chosen for commentary. In the case of poetic texts, the grammarians above all concerned themselves with clarifying the references to mythical material but in several cases also had to confront recent history, as, for example, in historical tragedies (such as Aeschylus’ Persians) and, in much greater measure, comedies. The scholia to tragedy show scant concern with the identification of true or presumed allusions to contemporary facts and characters (a staple, of course, of modern scholarship). The only case of identification of a contemporary character, even in dubious form, that was adumbrated in a tragic role was that of the demagogue in Euripides’ Orestes, which, according to the scholiasts, alluded to Cleophon (schol. Eur. Or. 903, 904). In other cases one cannot speak of allusion or allegory, but rather of analogical reference: for example, when the scholiasts on the Andromache point out that Euripides is reviling the Spartans because of the ongoing war, it is the Spartan Menelaus, present on stage, who refers to the unreliability of the Spartans (schol. Eur. Andr. 445). Thus tragedy worked on the analogical plane of exemplarity, not the allegorical one of allusion. But the grammarians also occupied themselves with explaining the prose texts of historians, orators, and philosophers. By the second century BCE, Aristarchus composed a “commentary” (hupomnêma) on Herodotus (P. Amh. II.12) and the oldest nucleus of the scholia to Thucydides was written (Luschnat 1954–1955). In commenting on historians the grammarians did not concern themselves with method, and only rarely criticized historical choices. They worked to complete and make understandable the narrative content, not necessarily to evaluate their reliability. In grammatical theory there existed a classification of the historical part (historikon meros) of grammar, that derived from the rhetorical theory of diêgêsis, but this classification placed on the same level – that of “true narratives” – the events of gods, heroes, and illustrious men, narratives of places and times, and narratives concerning deeds (Asclepiades of Myrlea ap. Sext. Emp. Math. 1.252–253; see Rispoli 1988; Nicolai 1992: 195–197). In the view of grammarians, therefore, historiography was not an exclusive location of truth that had to be reconstructed with a rigorous method of investigation, but rather
was a genre that, like epic poetry and tragedy, did not indulge in the seductions of what was incredible or impossible by nature, as did genealogies (which were classified under “false narratives”), and did not invent plausible events attributable to fantastic characters, as did comedy and mime.

It might seem unnecessary to be reminded that the Greek and Roman historians came from the schools of grammarians and rhetors: the formation of the historian was the same as that of the orator and there was no specific preparation for the writing of history. A recent work on *progymnasmata* (the preliminary exercises practiced in the schools) has surmised that the presentation of facts by historians was influenced by the practice of creating narration (*dīgēma*), description (*ekphrasis*), panegyric (*enkōmion*), and so on (Gibson 2004; cf. esp. 124–125, where he underlines that “Modes of discourse . . . are modes of thought”). That such an influence existed is very likely, but this does not necessarily lead to a vision of ancient historiography as integrally submissive to the demands and techniques of rhetoric and almost indistinguishable from the fictitious oratory of declamation on historical themes. To recognize the presence of models and narrative techniques that derive from rhetoric is instead valuable when analyzing the works of historians and distinguishing various levels of elaboration (see, e.g., Comber 1997 on Tacitus). It requires, in short, overcoming a dichotomy: on the one side are scholars of rhetoric and literature, who emphasize the distortions of history inspired by the rhetorical texture of narration, and who can conclude by even considering ancient historiography as a genre of invented narrative (see, e.g., Wiseman 1979; Woodman 1988; of this tendency I welcome only a few positions: the idea of truth as impartiality; and the need for submitting historiographical texts to an attentive rhetorical and literary analysis); on the other side are militant historians, who defend the reliability and accuracy of their ancient predecessors (see, in different ways, Pritchett 1993; Porciani 1997; Bosworth 2003; Rhodes 1994 is one of the most balanced defenses). It must be realized that both are correct: ancient historians use the forms taken from the schools of rhetoric, but their works should not be considered unreliable testimonies because of this. The Greeks and Romans were very clear about the difference between an oration and a historical work. A famous passage of Cicero’s *Brutus* (42: “since indeed it is conceded to orators to lie in history, so that they might say something more pointedly”) shows Atticus giving a lesson to Cicero himself, pointing out the difference not so much between oratory and historiography as between the orator who can lie even when writing a historical work (Cleitarchus, Stratocles, Cicero himself, who prefers the “dramatic” version of Coriolanus’ death) and the historian (Thucydides, Atticus) who holds to the facts (see Nicolai 1992: 86–87). It is precisely belonging to the literary system that guarantees that ancient historians had, in different forms and measures according to the genres and epochs, an awareness of the role of historiography and the duties of the historian.

Cicero, in his totalizing conception of rhetoric, declares that history is not treated in specific sections within rhetorical treatises (*De Or.* 2.64; cf. 2.62; Nicolai 1992: 95–96). He brings forward, however, a conception of rhetoric that is not technical, intending not so much to fill the gap as to demonstrate that the orator must master every situation and all the literary genres. The only link between the teachings of
rhetoric and historical method can be found in the type of oratory that seems farthest from historiography: judicial oratory. In fact the testing of instruments of proof and the evaluation of clues and testimonies practiced in the courts certainly influenced many ancient historians, beginning with Thucydides (Butti de Lima 1996; Porciani 1997: 143ff., esp. 144 n. 173; Ginzburg 2000). The analogy between the historian and the orator who supplies his own partial (in both senses of the word) reconstruction of the facts contains in itself an obvious danger: just as the orator needs to convince the judge that his reconstruction, and only his, is the truth, so the historian must present himself as a convincing and authoritative narrator, being able to put into the background those facts that do not fit into his reconstruction. This danger is not exclusive, however, to rhetorically dominated cultures, such as Greece and Rome, but is also very strong in our own culture dominated by science and technology; the rhetoric of words is often replaced by rhetorics that are less glaring but more insidious: those of documents, statistics, and numbers.

If we ask ourselves which works of history entered into the teaching of grammarians and orators, we have to respond with a preliminary question: why did grammarians and orators look to historiography? An elementary necessity was that of providing models for literary language: Herodotus responded to this need for Ionic Greek, Thucydides and Xenophon for Attic, and the great Latin historians Sallust and Livy for Latin. A second necessity, specific to the grammarians, was that of the *historiarum enarratio*: to explain Aristophanes it was necessary to turn to Thucydides and Athenian local historians, and the same occurred with orators whose historical references were integrated and clarified through historiography. A third necessity was to have available a repertoire of *exempla* to introduce in support of appropriate arguments. If a complete reading of historical works that were always growing larger (from Polybius’ 40 books to Livy’s 142) required too much time, one could turn to the didactic poems, such as the four-book *Chronica* of Apollodorus of Athens (2nd c. BCE). In the first century BCE, brief usage manuals appeared for the schools of rhetoric. Cicero (*Orat.* 120) praises his friend Atticus “who has gathered together in one book the memory of seven hundred years, with the dates preserved and noted, and passing over nothing of importance.” Similar summaries were made by Atcius Philologus for Sallust (Suet. *Gramm.* 10), by Cornelius Nepos and Varro, not to mention epitomes made of Polybius, Sallust, and Livy (Plut. *Brut.* 4.8; Stat. *Silv.* 4.7.53–56; Mart. 14.190). Even more directly used were collections of *exempla*, such as that of Valerius Maximus, who says in his preface that he has collected memorable facts and sayings “so that those wishing to gather examples may be spared a lengthy search.” One can hypothesize that didactic poems and brief manuals were the only systematic narrations of history that regularly entered into ancient schools from the second century BCE. In fact, it is difficult to think that students of rhetoric read a complete “historical cycle” (on this concept see Canfora 1971) or even a universal history, such as that of Ephorus, or an ample *Historical Library* such as that by Diodorus in 40 books. Obviously the first and the third needs (models of style and a repertoire of *exempla*) concerned either teachers or students, the second (historians as sources for *historiarum enarratio*) dealt with grammarians only, who transmitted to their students the results of their research.
The historians, therefore, entered into ancient schools primarily as models of style; students were not introduced to local historians nor, thanks to the Atticism of the first century BCE, to the Hellenistic historians. (Local history was transmitted in appropriate recitations, akroaseis, such as those of the grammarian Ti. Claudius Anteros, mentioned in an inscription of 127 CE from Labraunda in Caria: Crampa 1972: 134–137.) A unique situation resulted: the narration of Greek history stops, generally, around the fourth century BCE (Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Ephorus, and Theopompos, to whom at times Anaximenes and Callisthenes were added); Timaeus and Polybius appear occasionally in the canon of historians (the first in Cic. De Or. 2.58, the second in the Byzantine canons). The Roman student could know his country’s history through Sallust and Livy, and later through Tacitus. Polybius was a historian who was very popular, especially in Rome, but his simple and poor style doomed him (D. Hal. Comp. 4, II.20–21 U-R), and soon epitomes and then collections of excerpta appeared. A knowledge of all of Livy was precluded due above all to the size of his work: direct readings were limited to a few books; for the rest, one used epitomes not very different from the summaries (periochae) of his work that have come down to us.

5 Historiography’s Audience

The use of historical works in grammatical and rhetorical schools allows us to pinpoint the main recipients of historical works among the social classes that had access to instruction. However, this apparently obvious formulation must be integrated and made more precise. First, the logoi of Herodotus were meant for public readings, in which a fairly heterogeneous public that was not necessarily very cultured could participate. The practice of public readings of historians continues for the whole of antiquity (Chaniotis 1988: 365–382) and is attested for the Middle Ages as well. Historical works were never school books in the modern sense: as we have seen, they could be utilized in different phases of instruction and for distinct tasks, but, with few exceptions (I refer to the didactic poems and synthetic manuals mentioned above, p. 22), were not conceived as a help for teaching. Those who had received the regular grammatical and rhetorical instruction could read historiography, but the reasons that impelled them to do so were very different. Polybius offers a possible picture of the potential public of historiography, based on their tastes and experiences (9.1.2–5, Paton tr., with modifications):

I am not unaware that my work, owing to the uniformity of its composition, has a certain severity and will suit the taste and gain the approval of only one class of reader. For nearly all other writers, or at least most of them, by dealing with every branch of history, attract many kinds of people to the perusal of their works. The genealogical side appeals to those who are fond of a story, and the account of colonies (apoikiai), the foundations of cities (ktiseis) and their ties of kinship (suggeneiai), such as we find, for instance, in Ephorus, attracts the curious and lovers of recondite material, but accounts of the doings (praxeis) of nations, cities, and rulers attracts the political man (politikos). As I have confined my
attention strictly to these last matters and as my whole work treats of nothing else, it is, as I say, adapted only to one sort of audience, and reading it will have no attraction for the majority of people.

Polybius explains and updates Thucydides’ general formulation (1.22.4: “in the hearing, the lack of a mythic element will perhaps seem less pleasurable”) about the lack of success that he foresaw with regard to the public, and briefly delineates the sociology of the readers of history: the reader eager for stories is attracted by genealogies, the curious one by apoikiai, ktiseis, and suggeneiai, the one who deals with politics by praxeis. The reader defined as politikos is the one who wants to participate in public life or at least wants to understand the mechanics of it. His passion is not just a simple passion for fascinating reading or the curiosity of local history; rather, it is the matter of a reader who searches for utility, who does not look too much for elegance of style, who asks the historian to contribute to his formation as a citizen – all in all, a man of power. The portrait delineated by Polybius corresponds more to his ideal reader, to the public to whom the author wishes to address himself, than to a specific public. Interesting nonetheless is the schematic distinction between historians who deal with various topics in order to win over readers, and the almost completely isolated historian who concentrates on praxeis. We find ourselves before a customary binary opposition between pleasure (delectatio) and utility (utilitas), part of the programmatic remarks of Thucydides and one of the constants not only of historiographical theory, but also of ancient literature more generally. Polybius recognizes his relative isolation, but far from lamenting it, he embraces it: his aspiration is to emulate Thucydides, the great model whom he only once mentions in the surviving books.

Like many other Greek historians, Polybius was an exile, a man who held important positions, but when he writes his work, he is far distant from active political life. That many historians were concerned with the experience of exile was already noticed by Plutarch (Exil. 14, 605C), although over time the conditions under which historians worked changed (cf. Porciani 1997: viii: “After Thucydides the historians appear very integrated in the political and cultural texture of Greece”; cf. also Porciani 2001b: 25, 33–35). The Roman historians, although with few exceptions (Cato, Tacitus) part of the governing class, did not occupy political offices of the first rank (for the republican age see La Penna 1978: 43–104). Some dedicated themselves to historiography after abandoning active politics (Sallust, Asinius Pollio). Distance favors critical analysis, and, in some cases, one could think that historiography was felt as a sort of continuation of politics by other means (so Syme 1958b; Porciani 1997: viii): the political man who failed in action ennobles himself by becoming an educator of the ruling class and creating for himself an authoritative role. The principate radicalized the historian’s position: some took sides with the emperors, falling at times into encomium (Velleius Paterculus), while others opposed them in the name of republican ideals (Titus Labienus, Cremutius Cordus), and the greatest historian of this period, Tacitus, tried to get to the roots of the empire by taking an increasingly pessimistic position. The censorship exercised by the government towards these authors is a new aspect of the ancient link between historiography and politics.
The position taken by historians in their confrontation with the power of the empire introduces another key theme, that of their relation to political power. The habitual attitude of the ancient historian was of keeping a certain distance from the events he narrated, and this contributed to the construction of his character as impartial and authoritative. However, there were many different positions: some historians (like Callisthenes and Ptolemy, the first historians of Alexander, who accompanied him in his enterprise) were involved personally in the events they narrated; others dedicated themselves to the genre of commentarii, supplying a partial version of the story focused on the author/protagonist; still others, like the historians of the opposition in the Imperial Age, exalted the ancient tyrannicides, such as Brutus and Cassius, and the martyrs who fell in defense of republican freedom. With these historians, unfortunately lost, history becomes in some way a testimony that keeps memory alive and shapes conscience. The term memoria, in fact, recurs with insistence in the prologue of Tacitus’ Agricola. The surviving historian (3.2: “we are the survivors not only of others but also of ourselves”) denounces the effects of Domitian’s oppression, of which only the memory survives (2.3: “we would have lost memory itself together with our voice, if it had been as much in our power to forget as to be silent”), and concludes (3.3):

Yet it will not be an unpleasant task to compose, even in an uncouth and rough style, the memory of our past slavery and a testimony of our present blessings. In the meantime this book, dedicated to the honor of my father-in-law Agricola, will be praised or perhaps excused as a profession of piety.

The role of historiography acquires a profound ethical dimension that is not limited to traditional moral judgment, but in difficult times takes for itself the task of preserving and transmitting memory. The historian is witness of the virtus of Agricola and it is his own pietas that is the most intimate justification for the work he has undertaken. One can see that same appeal to the function of history as testimony in the authors of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, who, at just about the same time, founded a religious doctrine based on the memory of events and of Jesus’ teaching that moved beyond history towards transcendence.

FURTHER READING

The problem of locating historical knowledge and the historiographic genre in Greek and Roman culture is studied, sometimes superficially, in the main histories of ancient historiography. Generally in these investigations, the link between historiography and contemporary society gains more attention in the Roman world than in the Greek one: a noticeable example is Mazzarino 1965–1966: II.59–117. A synthesis is proposed in Porciani 2001b, which is attentive, above all, to the controversial relationship between history and rhetoric, a relationship that conditions the evaluation of the entire phenomenon of ancient historiography. Porciani follows and deepens the line traced by Momigliano 1975d, 1983, 1985, and in many of the studies collected in his Contributi. Finley 1965 is fundamental for the entire
theme of myth and history. Marincola 1997 examines the critical question of the construc-
tion of authority for the historian. For the problem of the genres of historiography, their
contents and their conventions, see Gabba 1981 and Marincola 1999. For the position of
history in rhetorical and grammatical theory and the school use of historiography see Nicolai
1992. For methods of publication and the interaction between the historian and the public
see Porciani 1997 and Thomas 2000, together with the classic study of Momigliano 1978.
For the relation between historians and political powers in both republican and imperial
Rome see La Penna 1978: 43–104 and Syme 1958a and 1958b. Chaniotis 1988 collects and
expertly annotates the epigraphic documentation on the social position of the historian and
his activities.