
UNIT 5 GRECO-ROMAN TRADITIONS

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Many of you are probably aware that the term “History” is derived from a Greek word ‘istoria’ which means inquiry. The first known author who used the term to describe his work was Herodotus, often considered as the father of history. In many ways, the works of Herodotus and his successors have been regarded as a yardstick for measuring other compositions. As such, it becomes important for us to understand some of the features associated with these works. In this Unit you will learn about some of the historians in ancient Greece and Rome and the historical works written by them.

5.2 THE CONTEXTS OF HISTORY-WRITING

The four historians we have selected for study are amongst the best-known in antiquity: Herodotus and Thucydides, who wrote in Greek, and lived in the 5th century BCE (BCE means Before Common Era, also known as BC while CE means Common Era, also known as AD), and Livy and Tacitus, who lived during the Augustan era of the Roman empire (c. 1st century BCE - 1st century CE) and wrote in Latin. The 5th century BCE is often regarded as constituting a classical age in the history of Greece in general and Athens in particular, while the Augustan era is viewed as marking the heyday of the Roman empire.

The works of these historians can be located within these political and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, it is worth bearing in mind that there are no easy correlations between these contexts and the specific forms of historical investigation that emerged. We might expect that these histories were composed to justify, eulogise, or legitimate contemporary political changes. While this expectation is not belied entirely, it is also evident that Livy and Tacitus were highly critical of their contemporaries: these histories are not simply eulogistic but are marked by anxieties about the present.

Herodotus probably lived between c. 484-425 BCE. He was born in a Greek colony in Asia Minor, but travelled widely, through parts of West Asia, including Palestine and Babylon, North Africa, especially Egypt, through several islands in the Mediterranean Sea, and in mainland Greece. His writing is marked by a deep admiration for Athens, and in fact, his work can be understood at least in part as being an attempt to memorialise what he regarded as the historic victory of the Greeks over the Persians, a contest that he visualised as one between civilization and barbarism.

Thucydides' (c. 460-400 BCE) association with Athens was even closer. He was an Athenian, and served as a general (although a somewhat unsuccessful one) during the Peloponnesian war, a conflict between Athens and Sparta that lasted for about thirty years. This was a war in which most other Greek states were also embroiled, as supporters of one or the other. After his failure as a general, Thucydides was evidently exiled, and spent several years amongst the states that were hostile to Athens. His work reflects his rich experience in a variety of ways.

Herodotus and Thucydides were thus products of what has often been projected as the classical age in the history of Greece in general and of Athens in particular. We know from other sources that this was the age of philosophers such as Socrates, and of playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The works of the historians do not, however, directly reflect these cultural developments. What we find instead is a preoccupation, especially in Thucydides, with militaristic activities. In fact, if these histories are rich in detail, they are also marked by an extremely narrow focus. Indeed there are times when the present-day reader cannot help but wishing that these writers had devoted some of their considerable skills to a wider range of issues.

As we have seen, Livy and Tacitus were located very closely within the contexts of empire. The Roman empire was a unique institution. It spanned parts of three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa), and lasted for nearly five centuries. It was also remarkable for its ruling elite, membership of which was fairly flexible.

Livy (c. 64 BCE- 17CE) was a contemporary of the most famous imperial figure in Roman history, Augustus. However, he was not part of the senatorial elite, nor was he directly associated with politics. Yet, it is perhaps not accidental that he chose to write a monumental history of Rome, which ran into 142 books. Unfortunately, more than a hundred of these books were lost, and some survive only in summaries written by later authors. In its entirety, the work traced the history of Rome from its legendary origins to c. 9 BCE.

Tacitus (c. 55-119 CE) was closely associated with imperial administration, and a well-known orator. His *Annals* delineated the history of the Roman empire for about fifty years (between c. 14 and 65 CE). The work begins with the end of the reign of Augustus, and represents the concerns of the military/administrative elite, its preoccupations with questions of succession, and the role of the army in political affairs. What distinguishes his account is that, although he was an "insider", he was often critical of imperial policies and intrigues. In other words, his work suggests that the Roman elite was by no means a homogeneous entity.

We can perhaps suggest then, that while the concerns of these early historians were obviously shaped by their contemporary milieu, the connections between the context and the author were by no means simple or unilinear.

5.3 THE OBJECTIVES OF HISTORY-WRITING

It is evident that history writing was undertaken with self-conscious deliberation, and with explicitly stated objectives. These could include preserving memories of what were regarded as great, spectacular, or simply important events. Almost inevitably, warfare and battles dominate the narrative. Yet, other goals are also explicitly and sometimes implicitly articulated. We find, for instance, that Herodotus was concerned with providing a narrative that was full, interesting, even fascinating, and included ethnographic accounts that often bordered on the realm of fantasy. His successors were generally more restrained, and, the Latin writers in particular adopt a solemn, moral tone. This has been regarded as a feature of the Augustan age, where the ruler visualised his role in terms of restoring pristine traditions, amongst other things.

Most of the writers state their objectives at the outset. For instance, Herodotus begins his work by declaring:

These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed (share) of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feud.

To an extent, this initial assertion is justified by some of his concluding remarks (Book IX, section 71): even while recording and celebrating the victories of the Greeks in general and the Athenians in particular, he recognises the heroism of the Persians as well as the Spartans.

It is evident that what was regarded as being worthy of memorialisation was a great war and its outcome. In a sense, this perspective was shared by Thucydides, whose account begins as follows:

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it. (Book I, section 1)

This focus on histories of warfare characterised the works of Livy and Tacitus as well. At one level, this may not seem surprising, given that the expansion of the Roman empire was inevitably marked by warfare, which was duly memorialised. What is perhaps more unexpected is the tone of moral concern that distinguishes these accounts. While we customarily regard the Augustan age as the heyday of Roman imperialism, it is interesting that these contemporary writers voice a sense of discomfort, and even agony at what was perceived to be a state of decline. Livy's prefatory statement is illuminating:

I invite the reader's attention to the much more serious consideration of the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the men and what the means, both in politics and war, by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded. I would then have him trace the process of our moral decline, to watch first the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices, nor face the remedies needed to cure them.

The preoccupation with military activities, in a somewhat different context, is evident in the work of Tacitus as well. Yet, Tacitus was not simply attempting to valorise marital heroes: he was also, if not more concerned with offering a critique of the contemporary situation:

My purpose is not to relate at length every motion, but only such as were conspicuous for excellence or notorious for infamy. This I regard as history's highest function, to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity as a terror to evil words and deeds. (*Annals*, Book III, section 65)

He was also acutely conscious that what he documented might seem insignificant:

Much of what I have related and shall have to relate, may perhaps, I am aware, seem petty trifles to record. But no one must compare my annals with the writings of those who have described Rome in old days. They told of great wars, of the storming of cities, of the defeat and capture of kings, or whenever they turned by preference to home affairs, they related, with a free

scope for digression, the strifes of consuls with tribunes, land and corn-laws, and the struggles between the commons and the aristocracy. My labours are circumscribed and inglorious; peace wholly unbroken or but slightly disturbed, dismal misery in the capital, an emperor careless about the enlargement of the empire, such is my theme. Still it will not be useless to study these at first sight trifling events out of which the movements of vast changes often take their rise. (*Annals* Book IV, section 32)

Both Livy and Tacitus regarded their works as educative. The former argued:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experiences plainly set out for all to see, and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings.

And Tacitus, more despondent, wrote:

So now, after a revolution, when Rome is nothing but the realm of a single despot, there must be good in carefully noting and recording this period, for it is but few who have the foresight to distinguish right from wrong or what is sound from what is hurtful, while most men learn wisdom from the fortunes of others. Still, though this is instructive, it gives very little pleasure. Descriptions of countries, the various incidents of battles, glorious deaths of great generals, enchain and refresh a reader's mind. I have to present in succession prosecutions, faithless friendships, the ruin of innocence, the same causes issuing in the same results, and I am everywhere confronted by a wearisome monotony in my subject matter.

The dreary weight of the present deterred such historians from venturing into the realm of the fantastic. This was in stark contrast to the work of Herodotus who was evidently fascinated by what he considered to be extraordinary, and took great pains to record these elements, even when he realised that it could strain one's credulity. His accounts of India, which he never visited, are especially marked by elements of fantasy, as for instance in his story about gold-digging ants (Book III, section 104,105).

Writers like Tacitus are far more cautious in their accounts of the fabulous. This is evident, for instance, in his brief digression on the fabled phoenix (*Annals*, Book VI, section 28):

The bird called the phoenix, after a long succession of ages, appeared in Egypt and furnished the most learned men of that country and of Greece with abundant matter for the discussion of the marvellous phenomenon. It is my wish to make known all on which they agree with several things, questionable enough indeed, but not too absurd to be noticed. . . .As to the number of years it lives, there are various accounts. The general tradition says five hundred years. Some maintain that it is seen at intervals of fourteen hundred and sixty one years. . . .But all antiquity is of course obscure.

5.4 DEFINING AND DRAWING ON SOURCES

The question of authorities or sources is something that is addressed both explicitly and implicitly in some of the works that we are considering. Eyewitness observations were valued, but other sources of information, derived from tradition, religious centres, chronicles, interviews, and a range of documentary sources were tapped as well. The possibility of mutually conflicting versions was also recognized and strategies were evolved for resolving such situations. For instance, Herodotus, in discussing the history of the Persian ruler Cyrus states:

And herein I shall follow those Persian authorities whose object it appears to be not to magnify the exploits of Cyrus, but to relate the simple truth. I know besides three ways in which the story of Cyrus is told, all differing from my own narrative. (Book I, section 95)

The archives and traditions clustering around shrines were obviously important sources that were drawn upon. The classic example of this is provided by the shrine of Delphi, whose oracle was invariably consulted by rulers and states before any major event, e.g., going to battle. Herodotus records several of the predictions of the oracle, often couched in (perhaps deliberately) ambiguous language. He also details the offerings sent to the shrine on the successful completion of an enterprise.

Herodotus also provides the reader with first hand accounts, the result of his many travels. Here is his description of agriculture in Mesopotamia:

Of all the countries that we know there is none which is so fruitful in grain. It makes no pretension indeed of growing the fig, the olive, the vine, or any other tree of the kind; but in grain it is so fruitful as to yield commonly two hundred fold, and when the production is the greatest, even three-hundred fold. The blade of the wheat plant and barley plant is often four fingers in breadth. As for the millet and the sesame, I shall not say to what height they grow, though within my own knowledge; for I am not ignorant that what I have already written concerning the fruitfulness of Babylonia must seem incredible to those who have never visited the country.

First hand observation is also evident in the vivid description of forms of greeting practised by the Persians:

When they meet each other in the streets, you may know if the persons meeting are of equal rank by the following token: if they are, instead of speaking, they kiss each other on the lips. In the case where one is little inferior to the other, the kiss is given on the cheek; where the difference of rank is great, the inferior prostrates himself upon the ground. (Book I, section 134)

Occasionally, Herodotus drew on folk traditions. For instance, he cites a long conversation between Croesus, a king who was supposed to be incredibly wealthy, and Solon, one of the founding fathers of the Athenian constitution. Croesus, according to this story, is confident that he is the happiest person on earth, but Solon gently, but repeatedly demurs, saying that he could be declared to be the happiest only if his end was known. By this argument, only after his death could it be said that a man had lived a happy life.

Thucydides deliberates far more self-consciously on his sources and attitudes towards the past. He says:

The way that most men deal with traditions, even traditions of their own country, is to receive them all alike as they are delivered, without applying any critical test whatever. . . . So little pains do the vulgar take, accepting readily the first story that comes to hand.

In contrast, he considers his own procedure far more rigorous:

The conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied on. (Book I, section 20, 21).

A system of keeping annual records was evidently in existence in Rome for several centuries. These records, known as the *Annales Maximi*, were compiled and maintained by priests. They contained the names of magistrates who were

appointed each year, and chronicled what were regarded as important events. Apart from this, elite families had traditions of funerary orations, which were drawn on by later historians.

Perhaps because such traditions and the works of earlier historians such as Polybius could be drawn upon, Livy and Tacitus seem less overtly concerned about their sources. In the case of Tacitus, we find that his insider status vis-à-vis the ruling elite is virtually taken for granted. Nevertheless, there are occasional references to sources, both written and oral, (e.g. Book II, section 88) which he drew on to reconstruct his detailed history of events, including battles, intrigues, senatorial proceedings, building activities and populist measures, that he painstakingly plotted through his *Annals*, a year by year account of the empire. And like Thucydides, he makes a point about sifting through rumours about intrigues and murders in the imperial family, explicitly denying what he considers to be particularly outrageous speculation:

My objectisto request all into whose hands my work shall come, not to catch eagerly at wild and improbable rumours in preference to genuine history which has not been perverted into romance. (*Annals*, Book IV, section 11).

5.5 STYLE

The authors under consideration evidently wrote for an elite, literate audience, although some of their compositions may have been disseminated orally as well. Virtually every sentence was carefully crafted, with consummate skill that often survives even in translations. Thucydides appears to be most self-conscious in this respect. He assumes a tone of deliberate solemnity and warns the reader:

Assuredly they will not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet displaying the exaggerations of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense. (Book I, section 21)

This solemn tone was often combined with exemplary precision. Perhaps the most outstanding instance of this is provided by Thucydides' graphic description of the plague that hit Athens during the second year of the war. Here is how he delineated the symptoms:

people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath. (Book II, section 49)

His depiction of the implications of the long-drawn conflict is also incisive:

In peace and prosperity, states and individuals have better sentiments, because they do not find themselves confronted with imperious necessities; but war takes away the easy supply of daily wants, and so proves a rough master, that brings most men's characters to a level with their fortunes. (Book III, section 82)

And yet, he incorporates speeches, characterised by Finley (1987:13) as "the most interesting and seductive section" of the text. It is intriguing to read what Thucydides himself declares about these:

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for

word in one's memory, *so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what was really said.* (italics ours, Book I, section 22).

An example can perhaps serve to clarify how such speeches were used by the author. This excerpt is from a speech attributed to the Corinthians who apparently tried to win the support of the Spartans against the Athenians. Thucydides uses this opportunity to insert a eulogy of Athenian character:

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterised by swiftness alike in conception and execution; you (i.e. the Spartans) have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention, and when forced to act you never go far enough. . . .Further, there is promptitude on their side against procrastination on yours, they are never at home, you are never from it: for they hope by their absence to extend their acquisitions, you fear by your advance to endanger what you have left behind. (Book I, section 70)

Succinct descriptions mark the work of Livy as well. Here is an instance from his description of the conflict between the common people and the senators (c. 494-493 BCE):

Great was the panic in the city, and through mutual fear all was in suspense. The people left in the city dreaded the violence of the senators; the senators dreaded the people remaining in the city. . . .

And Tacitus provides us with a graphic summary in his *Histories* when he proclaims (Book 1, section 2)

I am entering on the history of a period rich in disasters, frightful in its wars, torn by civil strife, and even in peace full of horrors.

5.6 UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL EVENTS AND PROCESSES

The most apparent concern of these early historians was with providing a detailed narrative of what they regarded as central events. Rarely do they pause in their relentless sequencing of events to speculate on the whys. Events are carefully located in space and time, but beyond that, there is little obvious reflection on why a particular course of events occurred. Yet, it is possible to discern the perspectives that shaped the narrative. On the one hand, beyond the immediate milieu and its political exigencies, the authors worked with a range of ideas that were probably shared by most literate men of their times. These included, in some instances, an acceptance of fate, which was often interwoven with an acceptance of the validity of omens as indices of future events. Others worked with a notion of a long term steady decline in human fortunes from a golden past. But, in yet other instances, we find an implicit if not explicit recognition of the importance of the human agent. Occasionally, the framing arguments are provided by an acknowledgement of the fickleness of human fortune, a fairly commonplace sentiment. Consider, for instance, this statement of Herodotus:

For the cities which were formerly great have most of them become insignificant; and such as are at present powerful, were weak in the olden time. I shall therefore discourse equally of both, convinced that human happiness never continues long in one stay. (Book I, Section 5)

Related to this is a belief in omens and signs. Herodotus declares categorically:

It mostly happens that there is some warning when great misfortunes are about to befall a state or nation. . . .(Book VI, section 27)

In fact, omens and their implications are strewn across the pages of his narrative. We will cite just one example, a prodigy that was evidently seen by the troops of the Persian ruler Xerxes as he marched towards Greece.

a mare brought forth a hare. Hereby it was shown plainly enough, that Xerxes would lead forth his host against Greece with mighty pomp and splendour, but, in order to reach again the spot from which he set out, would have to run for his life. (Book VII, section 57)

Other authors, such as Thucydides, noted spectacular occurrences without comment. For instance, he mentions the eruption of the volcanic Mount Etna, in Sicily, but makes no attempt to correlate this with contemporary events. (Book III, section 116) Divine wrath is also occasionally invoked. Livy for instance records (Book IX, sections 29-30) how a man named Appius instructed public slaves to perform certain ritual functions. He adds:

The result is wonderful to relate and should make people scrupulous of disturbing the established modes of religious solemnities: for though there were at that time twelve branches of the Potitian family (to which Appius belonged), containing thirty grown up persons, yet they were every one, together with their offspring, cut off within the year; so that the name of the Potiti became extinct, while the censor Appius also was, by the unrelenting wrath of the gods, some years after deprived of his sight.

Yet, we would be mistaken to dismiss these authors as simply superstitious. The human agent, with all his/her failings and triumphs, is also duly acknowledged. Herodotus, for instance, recognized that the Athenian attempt to resist the Persian invasion by creating a formidable fleet was critical. He argues that if the Athenians had opted for peace instead, the rest of Greece would have come under Persian control sooner or later. He writes:

If then a man should now say that the Athenians were the saviours of Greece, he would not exceed the truth. For they truly held the scales; and whichever side they espoused must have carried the day. . . .and so, next to the gods, they repulsed the invader.

As interesting is Thucydides' assessment of the past (Book II, section 2). He argued that fertile lands were more open to invasion, that Attica (the state of which Athens was the capital) was free from invasions owing to the poverty of its soil, and that hence people from other states came here to seek refuge.

At another level, his explanation of the Peloponnesian war is both succinct and telling:

The real cause I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon (the state of which Sparta was the capital), made war inevitable (Book I, section 23).

Tacitus rarely allows himself to move beyond the nitty-gritty of the chronicle to speculate on larger issues. On one of these rare occasions (*Annals* Book III, section 26) he delineated the origins of legal systems from a state of pristine harmony:

Mankind in the earliest age lived for a time without a single vicious impulse, without shame or guilt, and, consequently, without punishment and restraints.

Rewards were not needed when everything right was pursued on its own merits; and as men desired nothing against morality, they were debarred from nothing by fear. When however they began to throw off equality, and ambition and violence usurped the place of self-control and modesty, despotisms grew up and became perpetual among many nations. Some from the beginning, or when tired of kings, preferred codes of laws.

And elsewhere (*Annals*, Book VI, section 22) he speculates on fate and its influence on human fortunes:

Indeed, among the wisest of the ancients and among their disciples you will find conflicting theories, many holding the conviction that heaven does not concern itself with the beginning or the end of our life; or, in short, with mankind at all; and that therefore sorrows are continually the lot of the good, happiness of the wicked; while others, on the contrary, believe that, though there is a harmony between fate and events, yet it is not dependent on wandering stars, but on primary elements, and on a combination of natural causes. Still, they leave us the capacity of choosing our life, maintaining that, the choice once made, there is a fixed sequence of events.

5.7 SUMMARY

It is perhaps this **recognition of humanity as a critical element** that accounts for the enduring legacy of these early historians. We may find their focus narrow, and their concerns **parochial**. Yet, they provide us with some of the earliest instances of raising and addressing questions of **authenticity and plausibility**. They also grapple with possible historical explanations. We may differ with them on specific grounds, but their quest remains part of the historian's endeavour even after centuries.

5.8 EXERCISES

- 1) You must have already read the Unit 3 on 'Objectivity and Interpretation' in Block 1. Where would you place the histories written by Herodotus and Thucydides on the scale of objectivity?
- 2) What were the aims of the historians discussed in this Unit for writing history?
- 3) Write a note on the style adopted by these historians in their histories.

5.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

A.H. M. Jones (ed.), *A History of Rome through the Fifth Century* Selected Documents, vol. 1 (The Republic) and vol. 2 (The Empire) (New York, Harper and Row, 1968-70)

George Rawlinson (tr), *The History of Herodotus* (the translation originally published during 1858-60)

Richard Crawley (tr), *Thucydides: The History of the Peloponnesian War* (the translation in 1910, reprinted in 1952)

Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (tr), *The Annals and the Histories of Tacitus* (Modern Library, 2003)

M.I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (London, Penguin, 1985)