

What is historiography?

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What is historiography? Historiography is the study of the historians, their writings and the time they lived. To really understand a prior historian, a historian needs to study the history of historiography. According to Breisach, “ The task of historians of historiography...is to trace the ways in which people in Western culture have reflected on the past and what these reflections have told them about human life as it passes continuously from past to present to future.”

The tradition of history has been traced back to Ancient Greece where history was first recorded. Before the city-states developed, some men wrote a pre-cursor to modern history. Men like, “ Hecataeus of Miletus who strained so hard to shape the geography of his world according to rational concepts.” From fragments of his work, there is evidence to show Hecataeus tried to connect the humans to the mythical age through the generations by his Genealogies. At last, it leads to two Ancient Greek historians who wrote very different styles about war and were contemporaries. Herodotus and Thucydides whose work has made a lasting impact and sent ripples through the field of modern history. Both men are still influencing modern historians.

Before an examination of Herodotus and Thucydides may occur, the scholar needs to trace the history of the emerging Ancient Greece culture. In the beginning of Ancient Greece’s development, the bards were the story tellers. Their stories were originally in the traditions of the heroic epics. The heroic epics had the common characteristic of respect for the past and were about the gods and the heroes who struggled and were victorious in particular events.

The Homeric epic elaborated on the heroic epic with the addition of the hexameter. The hexameter was used to make the story telling more somber. In this tradition, the bards were able to adapt the story to the audience. Also, the stories were not about the everyday common man, but stories for the common man to enjoy about the elite. The bards would pass the stories down from generation to generation.

Eventually someone wrote down an epic Homer articulated called the Iliad. Out of this tradition, Hesiod created his Theogony where he described five ages. The Golden Age was the beginning where men lived like gods, and the Iron Age is the end where he lived and men were doomed to destruction. When the Ancient Greeks formed into city-states, they tried to develop a connection with the past by creating a type of chronology.

One of the first was Hecataeus of Miletus. According to Breisach, he tried to shape his world's geography by rational ideas and by making a genealogy which would connect the mythical age with the present age. Later Lydian Xanthus in the 5th Century wrote a history about his people up to King Croesus. He tied his history to particular natural disasters such as earthquakes. Out of these traditions, Herodotus and Thucydides wrote their histories.

Why is Herodotus called the “father of history”? He has been called the “father of history” for several reasons. One reason is Herodotus wrote what many consider the first modern history. Another according to Momigliano, he was the first to create an analytical history of the Persian War and the first to use ethnographical and constitutional history to analyze the causes and

outcomes of a war. Herodotus' Histories were composed in 440 B. C. and were a nine volume series about the Persian War.

Also, Herodotus included the barbarians, people outside of Greece. He called them barbarians since when he heard them speak, it sounded to him like “ba, ba, ba” He did not think of barbarians in the modern definition of the word as people who raped and pillaged villages. Another reason he is called the father of history is the methods he used. He would use inquiry which Momigliano dubbed “ Herodotean inquiry”, and it included the ethnography, constitutional research, and war history. The Herodotean inquiry would include using two methods most of the time. He would also use the constitutional research method separately at times.

The final reason Herodotus is the father of history is the rule he introduced for historians to use. It is that historians must explain the events they would write about. Next, Herodotus wrote in his Histories about the purpose of his creation. He said, “ In this book, the result of my inquiries into history, I hope to do two things: to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of the Asiatic peoples: secondly, more particularly, to show how the two races came into conflict.” Herodotus had traveled and met people from Persia and many other places. He would write about the common man, his customs and traditions, and the constitutions of the different governments. He would be called the father of cultural history by later generations. Furthermore, he was respectful of the different people groups and their customs.

After Herodotus had completed his Histories, Thucydides penned his History of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B. C. His purpose is, “ But if anyone desires to examine the clear truth about the events that have taken place, and about those which are likely to take place in the future- in the order of human things, they will resemble what has occurred- and pronounce what I have written to be useful, I shall be content.” Next Thucydides’ The History of the Peloponnesian War was about the common man in the city-states. He focused his work on the political and military. His work was based on eye-witness accounts, because he believed it was more accurate.

Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides did not discuss the cultural elements of history. His work was centered on the action of the military and the government. He showed how the two were interrelated with each other. Also, he clinically analyzed and dissected the military and the statesmen, and he would show the lessons he gleaned from his research with his readers. He was different from Herodotus, because he turned his research into more of a narrative about Ancient Greece since he was not concerned about the outside world.

Next Thucydides’ methodology was only writing what he considered essential for the history. Also, he introduced to the field of history a triggering event. For example, he expressed his belief of Sparta and Athens interfering with a dispute between Corinth and Corcyra over another country which was caused by the growth of Athenian power. The Athenian power caused the Lacadaemonians to feel threatened, so they reacted by fighting the others which is the triggering event for the Peloponnesian War.

Finally, both Herodotus and Thucydides are still influencing today's historians with their historiography. In 2001, Lebow wrote a paper called "Thucydides the Constructionist." He argued Thucydides is both a realist and a constructionist. He ends his article with this warning that materialists who are usually realists have a shallow interpretation of Thucydides and as constructionists they need to deliberately avoid the same mistakes.

Also, Bury wrote about Herodotus. He writes, "... Herodotus gives us panoramic views of the Hellenic civilisation of the sixth century, and describes the culture of all the Eastern people who directly or indirectly come within range. Lastly Forbes wrote, "Thucydides on the Causes of Athenian Imperialism." His focus is on Thucydides' history of the Athenians and the rise and fall of their power. He traced Thucydides journey through the Athenian history to point out that human values affect the cultures and the civilizations which may flourish depending on the human values as they ebb and flow.

Thus, Herodotus and Thucydides were products of the Ancient Greece culture. Their work is still influencing modern historian who study them. Lastly, Momigliano sums it up succinctly with this, "Modern history-writing has been by choice a continuous confrontations with the Greek originals and with what the Romans made of their models."