

FATHERS, GRANDFATHERS,
AND GREATGRANDFATHERS OF HISTORY

All historians agree that Ranke is the father of modern historiography. It does not really matter whether we still believe that we are able to render, more or less faithfully, the past 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' (as it really was), or that we, with postmodernists like Ankersmit, are of the opinion that history is actually created by the historians themselves. Whichever position we take, it was Ranke who started it all. Therefore, he is the patron saint of our tribe.

However, there are still other 'fathers of history', for Herodotus as well as Thucydides are combating for this honour. It is an old tradition to call Herodotus the 'father of history', since, with his 'Historia', dating from about 435 B.C., he wrote the first great work of regular history. But the same title is also claimed by Thucydides who equally wrote a 'Historia'. I think most modern historiographers are still followers of David Hume who categorically declared : "The first page of Thucydides is the only beginning of all true history" *. A century later Eduard Meyer agreed with him when he said of this Greek historian : "He is just the incomparable and matchless teacher of history" **. Now, if Ranke is the father of modern history, these two Greeks are its grandfathers.

It is possible to pursue the genealogy somewhat further back still. The oldest discussion in Greek philosophy is that on the problem of the One and the Many. It must be stated beforehand that this problem has never found a solution. Everyone is acquainted with this problem, even if one has no philosophical education. Everywhere around us we see a multiplicity of things, of objects, plans, animals, human beings; this multiplicity is so great that we are in danger of becoming quite confused by it. Therefore we reduce this general multiplicity to smaller multitudes, and finally we range these under unities, one of the most comprising being 'the universe'.

The great question is whether we should argue downwards from the One to the Many, or upwards from the Many to the One? Do we operate inductively or deductively? I suppose that historians would spontaneously retort that they operate inductively, starting from the multitude of persons and events and arranging them under unitary headings. My opinion is that we should not be so cocksure about this.

For there is a very painful dilemma lurking behind this problem. If one of the two, either the One or the Many, is primary, does that mean that there is an higher reality inherent in it? Is the One more 'real' than the Many? Or the reverse? And if the One is primary and, in consequence, more real, is it the only reality then, and is

* Quoted by Hartmut Erbse, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Thukydides* (1961). Now in : *Thukydides*, Herausgeg. von Hans Herter. *Wege der Forschung*, Bd. XCVII. Darmstadt, 1968.

** Eduard Meyer, *Thukydides als Historiker*. *Forschungen zur alten Geschichte*, II. Bd, 369. Halle, 1889.

the Many only real in appearance? Or is, on the contrary, the Plurality is the real thing and the One no more than a mental concept, an idea, in short an intellectual make-shift, but no reality?

At first sight it may seem as though historians firmly opt for the Many, whereas philosophers on the whole are for the One. But beware! As proponents of the Many historians have an eminent philosopher on their side, nobody less than Aristotle. He reacted against the prevailing tendency in Presocratic and Platonic philosophy to give precedence to the One. This trend was forcefully started by Parmenides around 500 B.C.. This Eleate philosopher posited the One, which he called 'Being', as the only reality, while dubbing all the rest (including mankind and its history) as 'Seeming', or appearance. He did, of course, not mean that the pluriform world did not really exist but rather that it is not an object of philosophical thinking.

Plato modified this very radical proposition to some extent by introducing his Theory of Forms. Forms or Ideas are, so to speak, intermediate platforms between the One (which in Plato is the Good) and concrete objects. For instance, we know that something is red, because we have an (innate) idea of redness. Aristotle, although first a student and later a teacher in Plato's Academy, rejected the Theory of Forms out of hand, because his master had never been able to explain how the objects and their Forms were interrelated. He said that there was an intellectually unbridgeable gap, a 'chorismos', between Forms and objects. Which is tantamount to saying that there are no Forms. In this way Aristotle became the protagonist of coming-to-be, of the Many, of concrete things. In consequence we may think of him too as a 'father of history'. But to be exact, in the line of genealogy he is, meanwhile, history's 'greatgrandfather'.

This notion of Aristotle the protagonist of the Many being an ancestor of history has, however, some consequences that may become fatal to history writing. After all, Aristotle was a philosopher, not an historian (although there is much history of philosophy in his works). This means that he, like all other philosophers, shows a tendency to abstractions. To start with, the idea of the Many is in itself an abstraction; as such, it is at the same time opposed to and connected with the abstraction of all abstractions, the One. It is at least conceivable that this kinship with philosophy will push on historiography into the direction of abstractedness. Let us now see how Aristotle's fatherhood of history works out in the Histories of both Herodotus and Thucydides.

To the question what the subject-matter of Herodotus Histories is everyone with a smattering of grammar-school education will answer : the story of the great war between the Persians and the Greeks. This was already the idea in Antiquity : "He had only to appear and he was pointed out : 'That is that Herodotus who told the

tale of the Persian Wars in Ionic and celebrated our victories"¹ *. But in fact the Greek historian wrote his work on a much greater canvas than the period between 492 and 479 B.C. (Herodotus closes his relation with the crowning victory of the Greeks in the Battle of Mycale in 479 B.C.). The Battle of Marathon only takes place in the sixth of the nine books.

In the foregoing nearly two-thirds of the work we are given, amongst others, an enormously long description of Egypt, people and country, that occupies most of Book II, a report on the Scythians and still more northerly tribes in the first half of Book IV, and one on Cyrenaica (Libya) in the second half of the same book. In fact we are treated to a kind of general world-history. Of much that he described Herodotus had first-hand knowledge, for he had been travelling for years and had visited many countries, doubtless making extensive notes which he worked out later.

The author did not make haste to take up the story of the crowning subject of his Histories, the Persian Wars. It is undeniable that he often strayed very far from his path. There are long digressions, sometimes occupying a whole book, that show little or no connection with the main theme; there are also all sorts of short stories and anecdotes. It is only from the beginning of Book VII that is following a (approximately) straight course.

The basic unity of Herodotus' work is not to be found in its purely historical conception. Rather it is a cultural anthropology. Only too often Herodotus has been referred to as 'the father of history', an ascription that, in so far as modern historiography is concerned, would suit Thudycides much better. Shouldn't we call Herodotus the father of historical anthropology, or of anthropological history, the first also to carry out what is nowadays called 'field-work'? His inquisitive and empirical mind brought him far and wide because he wanted to observe the world himself. He certainly is the patron saint of the historian as a research worker.

This empirical standpoint is the guiding principle of his historiography. In his vast, almost panoramic survey of men and peoples, he depicts Greeks and barbarians alike with the same somewhat pessimistic humour. What is fundamental to Herodotus is the basic unity of mankind. The short narrative excursions that are so typical of the Histories reinforce in their own way this unitary concept. Particularly the first books are full of short stories that apparently have nothing to do with the main theme or even with the subsidiary themes. Everyone knows them: the brilliant story of King Croesus of Lydia, the story of the Egyptian treasure robbers, the story of Polycrates and the ring, and many others.

Have they been inserted only to serve as amusement? I don't think so. Their prime function is to stress the idea that history is about the many (and not about the Many). And if this does not add up to a coherent story, this is because history is not a really coherent thing. History, being the relation of human behaviour, can never be perfectly logical, because human beings do not behave in a purely logical

* Lucianus, Herodotus 2. Loeb Classical library 430, translation K. Kilburn.

fashion. Herodotus almost stated as much himself when he wrote : "Everything is possible in such a long time" *.

The short narratives have yet another function of their own. They constitute, as it were, an historical anthropology because they show how people handle history and how they react when they come into contact with historical personages and events. For the proper subject of the Histories is man, man as an historical being, 'in his acting and suffering, his life and his works, his knowledge and his abilities' **. It is for this reason that not a few women play an important part in the Histories, from the cold-blooded mother of the Egyptian thieves to the courageous Queen Artemisia who, as an admiral, fought in the Battle of Salamis. Although Herodotus the short-story writer is certainly not - and what a pity he isn't - the father of the modern historiographer, in this respect he is the father of the history teacher who still keeps up the art of story telling.

Not that Herodotus' great art is accepted gratefully and gracefully by his modern counterparts. Quite the contrary! Some scholars speak somewhat condescendingly of this first great historian. The art of history writing, they say, was not yet highly developed, Herodotus was lacking in critical sense, he was too eager to relate what he had seen and heard on his travels at the cost of the proper subject. One is thus confronted with the picture of a good-natured tattler.

Jacoby deprecatingly spoke of 'disdain of the historical facts'; Herodotus, he says, "was still far away from the ideal of historiography". He does nothing else, Jacoby adds, than string together disconnected details in an artful way ***. Decades later Pohlenz declared that Herodotus inserted a great deal of material into his main text that, in a modern work, we would find in notes, excursions, and appendixes ****. It was inevitable that a student put this question to Sir John Myres : "Sir, if Herodotus is such a fool as they say, why do we read him for Greats?" *****. Herodotus' critics prefer Thucydides to him. It must be admitted, however, that in the last decades a slow but steady rehabilitation of Herodotus is taking place. But before we turn to Thucydides' Histories, a word must be said about Herodotus' real successor, Xenophon.

Historians use to look down on Xenophon (ca. 430-350 B.C.), an Athenian with strong Spartan leanings. Nowadays he seems only good enough to provide grammar-school youngsters with their first smattering of Greek in his 'Anabasis'.

* Her. 5.9.

** Friedrich Focke, *Herodot als Historiker* (1927), p. 35. In : *Herodot. Eine Auswahl aus der neueren Forschung*. Herausg. Walter Marg. Wege der Forschung. Bd. XXVI. Darmstadt, 1965.

*** Jacoby s.v. 'Herodotos' in *PW Suppl.* II, 483/484.

**** Max Pohlenz, *Herodot. Der erste Geschichtsschreiber des Abendlandes*. Darmstadt, 1961 (1937 1), p. 85.

***** John Linton Myres, *Herodotus. Father of History*. Oxford, 1953, p. V. 'Greats' is the B.A. examination.

He was not a professional historian but a general who became rightly famous for conducting an army of Greek mercenaries across the highlands of Anatolia to the Black Sea coast, after the disastrous Battle of Cunaxa in 401 B.C. The *Anabasis* is the lively report of this 'March of the Ten Thousand'. But he was also a country nobleman who wrote on a lot of subjects, three books on Socrates, writings about hunting and equestrian sports, on the education of princes, on the management of the family and the estate, on politics and on economy.

Finally, in the leisure of his beautiful property south of Olympia, he wrote his historical book, the *Hellenica*, which is often seen as a sequel to Thucydides' *Histories*. It covers the period from 411 to 362 B.C. The *Hellenica* have been amply criticized and not wholly unjustly. The first two books are said to be a hastily strung together hotchpotch of notes, and his chronology is inaccurate. He omits too much, and he is exaggeratedly interested in trivialities to the detriment of what is really important.

But there are redeeming features to compensate for these defects. Like Herodotus, Xenophon was a great traveller. He had met men and women in all walks of life and in many countries, he had borne great responsibilities, he knew Persian politics intimately, and also understood what was going on in the Peloponnese. And he was not the prey of hero-worship, like Thucydides with his unreserved admiration of Pericles. Finally, he was one of the few Greeks who were not anti-barbarian.

What Xenophon has in common with the true historian is that he has no power of invention but, instead, a strong gift of imagination. Imagine that scene in 405 B.C., when the Spartans, having captured Athens, start tearing down the walls of that city, accompanied by flute-playing girls as though it were a festive occasion. Xenophon scathingly adds that the Spartans thought that "this day was the beginning of freedom for Greece" *. He is a pastmaster of such pithy expressions: "Helots, freedmen, lesser Spartiates, and perioeci ..., they would be glad to eat them (the Spartans) raw" **.

Whereas some historians reproach Xenophon with his fancy for the 'trivial', we might also say that he had a far keener eye for what is human than Thucydides and those who admire him. In his work, human beings, although often unhappy and helpless victims of the course of events, do not simply become the exponents of 'higher forces'. This is graphically brought out by the following story.

Somewhere in Armenia the army of mercenaries occupy a village; their sudden arrival terrifies the inhabitants. But Xenophon sets the chieftain at ease: he assures them that he will not be deprived of his children; his men will pay handsomely for the services of the villagers. Greatly relieved the headman shows the soldiers where the 'wine' lay - a remarkably heady kind of barley beer which

* Hell. 2.2.23.

** Hell.3.3.6.

becomes the occasion for an extremely merry evening for the soldiers. The next day the men could not pass any house with being invited in to eat and, still more, to drink to their hearts' delight. In the next village the soldiers were merry-making and feasting without pause, with wreaths of hay wound around their heads *.

Compared to the works of Herodotus and Xenophon, Thudycides' Histories is a very stern and humourless book. In it the author, an Athenian who lived from ca. 460 to ca. 400 B.C., describes the great war between Athens and Sparta till 411 B.C., where he left it unfinished. On his first page he categorically states that in his book the legendary and phantastical element will not occur. This probably means that he did not intend to insert narratives à la Herodotus, his predecessor, whom he never mentions by name. This means that a large part of human experience will be left out. He did not like 'short stories'.

Women are absent. Thudycides is the father of purely male history, of the kind Jane Austen found so boring : "... and hardly women at all, it is very tiresome" **. Not that the men are treated so much better! All counted only twelve persons are described in a somewhat more detailed way, six Athenians and six Spartans. Only five of them are provided with personal characteristics : Pericles and Cleon, Alcibiades and Nicias (opposite pairs), and Brasidas (the only Spartan). This, however, does not mean that elaborate portraits are sketched of these five persons, not even of Pericles. Of his life we hear nothing at all; the name of Aspasia, his gifted friend, is not once cited. There is not one of Herodotus' brilliant vignettes.

Of the daily life in Athens in this war period, not a word! There is no Socrates, no Euripides, no mention of the arts. Thucydides also proved utterly disinterested in economics. There is only one thing that captivates and fascinates him : power politics. His is an enormously concentrated and 'condensed' work; of all that is humanly possible only one theme remains : the struggle for the hegemony in Greece between Athens and Sparta. Striving for power obviously is the essence of human nature.

These Histories are profoundly 'abstrahized'. Human persons are nearly entirely absent; instead collectives take the floor. Those who are speaking or even those who are acting are 'the Thebans, the Samians, the Peloponnesians'. In the famous and horrifying dialogue between the representatives of Athens and Melos not one name is mentioned; it is always 'the Athenians' and 'the Melians' who are speaking as if they formed speaking-choruses. Here we detect the abstrahized 'Many' (with a capital) of Aristotle. Often such abstractions assume an hypostatical character; they are tending to leading their own life, irrespective of men and events. In particular this applies to concepts of power and inevitability.

Where this may lead us is shown by De Romilly when she speaks of "the severity of an infallible mechanism enabling (us) to perceive, under the individual

* Anab. 4.5.24-33.

** Catherine Morland in 'Northanger Abbey' (1818).

actions, the existence of tendencies, of reasons, of connections, that become deeper and deeper and more and more at a distance; their probability gets ever more abstract and more independent of circumstances and persons" *. And what is the consequence of this? "This belief in impersonal forces that is characteristic for Thucydides" carries with it the danger that one "threatens to lose contact with the authentic reality of the life of history" **. In Thucydides we observe the separation between history and life, which is also one between history and man.

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* Jacqueline de Romilly, Thucydide, La Guerre du Péloponnèse. Livre 1. Collection Budé. Paris, 1968 4 (1953 1), p. 51.

** Kurt von Fritz, Griechische Geschichtsschreibung I, p. 529/530.