

The Evolution of Historiography in the Greek Civilization By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.

“Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another...”

Homer, The Iliad I

In his book *Physics and Politics*, Walter Bagehot wrote that civilization began because of a military advantage and that progress is promoted by the competitive test of constant war. While most modern historians believe that the origin of civilization is much more complex than this purely military interpretation, the ancient Greeks wrote heroic epics about wars, their gods and the consequences. Over one thousand years before the beginning of the Christian era, a Greek expeditionary force laid siege to the city of Troy. Homer's epic account of this siege in the *Iliad* gives a graphic picture of warfare in the classical world. His *Odyssey* deals with the hero's return, his travels, and man's natural curiosity. Early Greek historiography began with the Homeric Epics that were passed from generation to generation by *bards*, poets who would present them orally. From these beginnings, the Greek writers created the concept of history, influencing generations that followed.

History as a Word and Homer

The English word "history" is a transliteration of the Latin word *historia*, itself a transliteration of the Greek word *ιστορία*, originating from an ancient word meaning to a judge, arbiter, umpire, or referee. Homer's *Iliad* describes the wonders Hephaestus created on the shield he made for Thetis' son Achilles. On this great shield he fashioned the earth, heavens, sea, and stars, and on the earth two cities. In the one city, people gathered in the agora because there was a dispute in progress between two men over the blood-price of a slain man. Similarly, during the funeral games for Patroclus, Ajax and Idomeneus get into a dispute over who is leading in the chariot race and Idomeneus challenges Ajax. In both passages the arbiter is one who adjudicates a difference of opinions between two parties at the request of the parties themselves. More precisely, he decides a case in which conflicting accounts are given by the disputants about something distinct from but of interest to both of them. The dispute, or the subject of it, is also of great emotional impact upon its audience and the community, in which it occurs. This story begins to define the role of the writer of history.

The Homeric epics were for the people of centuries past sources of inspiration and pride. "The ancient Greeks found them endlessly fascinating, edifying, and particularly useful for the education of the young. The Romans traced their origin to the Trojans, and so did other people in their quest for prestige," writes Ernst Breisach in *Historiography*. As late as four hundred years ago, some English and French scholars pointed with pride to their peoples' Trojan lineage. Some of the earliest creations of Greek literature are the Homeric poems. They were enormously influential on the way in which the Greeks of the archaic and classical periods understood the world in which they lived. As those after Homer wrote of gods, heroes, deeds, suffering, and glories, they created the heroic epic. Homer's is an upper-class history. Merchants, craftsmen, and peasants play little part in the actions of his stories. "The past showed only heroic deeds performed in connection with isolated great

events, and the future could only be foretold by oracles and portents. Notwithstanding the enduring enthusiasm for Homer, the dominance of heroic history could not last.”

Hesiod to Xanthus and Hellanicus

After 800 B.C the Greek world changed considerably with the emergence of the city-state. Hesiod of Ascra, a contemporary of Homer, had suggested a different view of the past. According to Breisach, “In his *Theogony* Hesiod affirmed a collective human past and divided it into five ages: the Golden Age, in which people lived like gods, without care, suffering, and chores, and in which they died peacefully without aging; the Silver Age, when life was marked by utmost cruelty and unbridled love of war, and people revolted against all things divine and met an early death; the Age of Bronze, which was peopled by a race or extraordinary physical strength and vigor that destroyed itself by incessant warfare; the Age of Heroes, filled with noble humans and half-gods, who, unfortunately, also destroyed themselves in war, one of them being Homer’s Trojan War; and the Iron Age, the time of Hesiod and common man, which offered little but misery, injustice, a general lack of benevolence, aging, and death.”

At about 500 B.C. the Greek inquiry into the geography and people of the region was written by who many call the first known Greek historian, Hecataeus of Miletus. He offered descriptions of the Greeks exploration of the coastal areas of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. In his *Periegesis*, he described and organized what the Greeks thought of as worldly space. Hecataeus attempted to link the age of humans, in his *Genealogies*, with the so far mythical age by constructing an unbroken sequence of identified generations for that long interval. In the fifth century B.C. Xanthus recorded the past of his people up to the downfall of their King Croesus. Later in the century, Hellanicus of Lesbos used a generation count as a chronological tool in his *Troica* and, based on it, placed the fall of Troy in a year equivalent to about 1240 B.C. In his *Attic History* Hellanicus proposed a new tool for dating events. He suggested using lists of officeholders kept by cities and temples.

Hecataeus, Thucydides, and Xenophon

In Herodotus’ *Histories* the stated purpose was “that the great deeds of men not be forgotten...whether Greeks or foreigners.” Herodotus tried to provide an accurate representation of the events he portrayed. While gods and goddesses retained a prominent position in his work, he relied on numerous sources to document his work and was cautious in describing what would have been previously thought of as the work of gods. Herodotus has been given the title of ‘the Father of History,’ for his method of recording events and for delving deeper into the underlying meaning of events. According to Thucydides though, the gods never directly influenced the course of human events.

Herodotus and Thucydides differed not only in the wars they dealt with but also in their approaches. Herodotus concluded his account with the story of the Great Persian War. His broad cultural history ended with a celebration of the Greek city-states, especially Athens. Thucydides described the Peloponnesian War only up to 411 B.C. His history set a dramatic account against the broad account of Herodotus. Taking up where Thucydides left off in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Xenophon created *Hellenica*, covering the time period of 411 – 362 B.C. Far from the subject matter of other Greek historical works, his *Anabasis* is seen as a collective biography of people whose fate made no difference to the course of history.

Polybius and Arrian

As the Roman Empire began to rise, Greek historians continued to have influence. One of these late Greek historians was Polybius who wrote the *Histories*, which were constructed around the theme of Rome's rise to power. Never content with just describing an event, he asked why the event occurred. It was Polybius who defined "the historian's task as explanation."

In Conclusion, evolving from the epic tradition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the Greeks created the very concept of history. Born of people's natural curiosity Greek historiography evolved into a sophisticated method that became the story of the human world. The writing of history came of age with the ancient Greeks and influenced the ways in which history has been written since.

Bibliography

Breisach, Ernst. *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Hornblower, Simon. *Greek Historiography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Press, Gerald A. *Development of the Idea of History in Antiquity*. Toronto: McGill University Press, 1982.

Preston, Richard. Roland, Alex. Wise, Sydney. *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and its Interrelationship with Western Society*. Mason: Wadsworth, 2005.

Rich, John. Shipley, Graham, Ed. *War and Society in the Greek World*. New York: Routledge Press, 1993.

Selincourt, Aubre de. *The World of Herodotus*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982.

Copyright © 2008 Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.