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III

JOHN MARINCOLA

THE ANXIETIES OF THE CONTEMPORARY HISTORIAN*

ABSTRACT

The prefaces of historians who write of contemporary events are often full of confidence in themselves (as competent and well-placed to narrate such events) and praise for their subject (as being great and important). There is evidence, however, to suggest that contemporary historians were all too aware of the limitations inherent in their attempts, and these ‘anxieties’ can be seen in occasional remarks by the historians themselves and by other authors in Antiquity. This paper looks at three areas in which the limitations of contemporary history were especially recognised – methodology, impartiality, and historical revisionism – and suggests that behind the bravado displayed by the historians, they were very much aware both of the difficulties attendant on writing contemporary history and of the slim odds of success that their efforts would result in an authoritative account.

The contemporary historian was a fixture of the cultural landscape of Greece and Rome from the time of Thucydides onwards.

* I am very grateful to Valérie Fromentin for the kind invitation to participate in the *Entretiens*, and to her and Pierre Ducrey for both facilitating my presence via Zoom and making me feel welcome at a distance of 5,000 miles. The paper has its origins in an invitation from Ursula Westwood to contribute to a conference at Oxford in 2017, and other versions thereafter were given at NYU, Stanford, and Yale Divinity School. My thanks as well to the participants at the Fondation Hardt, whose insightful observations have helped me to improve the paper in a number of places. For discussion on various points I am also indebted to Alexander Meeus and Tony Woodman. The errors and shortcomings that remain are mine. Translations are taken from MARINCOLA (2017), unless otherwise noted.

Through the centuries, even under regimes notably hostile to the free expression of ideas, the contemporary historian was to be found. From the remarks made by the historians themselves, we can see what they thought the advantages of their contemporary histories were: the events were great; they themselves were present and witnessed what happened; and they had the advantage of other eye-witnesses, when they did not see the events themselves. Such claims, usually at the outset of a history, project self-confidence and assuredness.¹ In this paper, however, I want to argue that from remarks in both the historians themselves and in other writers we can sense under the surface a recognition of the problematic nature of many of these claims, and that there were in fact a number of what we might call 'anxieties' associated particularly with the writing of contemporary history. This could be approached from a number of angles but here I will concentrate on three: methodology; the issue of bias; and historical revisionism.

1. Methodology

The contemporary historian's methodology was codified early on, largely under the influence of Thucydides. Thucydides does not praise the genre of contemporary history explicitly but indicates its superiority by the contrast he draws between the way one can write about ancient times and contemporary events. The distant past is the province of poets who exaggerate and magnify so as to make their subjects great, but such material cannot be tested because of the distance in time. One can make conjecture, based on probability and a sceptical handling of the evidence, but this is about all.² In writing of contemporary affairs, by contrast, one can see matters for oneself and/or inquire of eyewitnesses, whose accounts, if needed, can be compared. This

¹ Conventional claims in the historians: MARINCOLA (1997) 34-174.

² THUC. 1, 1, 3; 1, 9, 4; 1, 10, 3; 1, 20, 1; 1, 21, 1-6.

Thucydidean methodology – one’s own autopsy and inquiry of those present at events – becomes standard for all later contemporary historians,³ and forms the heart of their claims to reliability.⁴

There is no reason to disbelieve the majority of contemporary historians when they claim autopsy and reliable sources, but more than anyone they must have been aware of its limitations in all senses of the word. An examination of the contents of most contemporary histories shows a vast variety of locales, participants, and types of events (e.g., battle narratives, assemblies, strategy sessions, etc.) and even the most diligent historian could have been present at only a handful of such events. Where he could not be present, he would have to rely on the questioning of witnesses, and already in Thucydides the latter difficulty is recognised: he notes that eyewitnesses do not always tell the same story about the same events, and witnesses are limited by their memory and/or by their favouritism for one side or the other (1, 22, 3).⁵ Thucydides’ “solution”, he tells us, was to go through each detail in conformity with ἀκρίβεια, although what this technique actually entailed is never explained – and of course it must have differed in different cases.⁶ Nor was Thucydides himself unaware of autopsy’s limitations, since he had called attention to them in the “Archaeology” when he warned that examination someday hence of the ruins of Athens and Sparta would not necessarily give an accurate estimate of how great they had actually been (1, 10, 2-3).⁷

³ WOODMAN (1988a) 15 with 56 n. 83 points out that this methodology can already be seen in Homer: *Od.* 8, 489-491 (Odysseus to Demodocus, “as if you were there yourself or heard it from one who was”).

⁴ So much so that Lucian could easily parody it at the outset of his *True Histories* (1, 4): “I write about things that I neither saw nor experienced nor learnt from others”.

⁵ It is perhaps worth remarking that Thucydides mentions only favouritism (εὖνοια), not its opposite, whereas all other later historians mention favouritism and hostility and two sides of the same coin.

⁶ On ἀκρίβεια in general see FANTASIA (2007); on Thucydides in particular, SCHEPENS (1980) 113-133.

⁷ For historical revisionism see below, §3.

But a more important point is precisely the absence of any explanation by Thucydides of *how* he resolved conflicts in his sources: in this case he bequeathed to his successors no suggestions on what one might look for other than favouritism or faulty memory. Yet it seems clear that this is deliberate on Thucydides' part, for although he says in a general way that discovering the truth was "laborious" (ἐπιπόνως, 1, 22, 3), he does not wish to call attention to his decisions on each occasion but rather to have his audience experience the relatively smooth surface of the narrative. Whereas Herodotus had offered his audience source-citations by which they could themselves evaluate whether or not the 'speakers' of those citations might be making a self-interested defence of their actions, Thucydides has deliberately occluded the nature and extent of his sources in the service of an 'authoritative' narrative, one that must establish its authority not by citing or comparing the sources (i.e., the parts that make up the narrative) but by the relatively untroubled surface of the narrative.⁸

What is true for Thucydides is true for his followers: aside from complaints in general terms about the bias of their sources, they virtually never object to the testimony of eyewitnesses,⁹ perhaps because of what would have resulted if they had removed such a structure: no witnesses, no history. In other genres, however, we do see questioning of the reliability of the senses and of eyewitness accounts. The Presocratic philosophers had already discussed some pitfalls of sense-perception, and they were followed in this by Plato.¹⁰ In tragedy, Euripides can

⁸ On Thucydides' narrative manner, ROOD (2004) is an excellent overview.

⁹ An interesting exception is at TAC. *Hist.* 4, 81, 3, discussing the witnesses to Vespasian's "miracles" in Alexandria: *utrumque qui interfuere nunc quoque memorant, postquam nullum mendacio pretium*. Even here the narrator's disbelief is expressed in an implicit manner.

¹⁰ See, e.g., HERACLIT. 22 B 107 D-K = D33 L-M: "eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men who have souls that cannot understand the language"; PARM. F 7 D-K = D8 L-M: "heedless eye or echoing ear" (line 4); PL. *Phaed.* 65b: "do men find any truth in sight or hearing?", a sentiment attributed to οἱ ποιηταί. Discussion in LLOYD (1979) 129-146.

sometimes play with the well-known confidence of the messenger who tells the audience that he offers a reliable account because he was present and saw for himself, but this can be given various shadings, depending on the playwright's purposes.¹¹ In the *Electra*, for example, when Orestes asks how one could distinguish the noble man from the base, he suggests that one might look to conduct in war, but dismisses this by saying, "who could be a reliable witness when facing the enemy's spears?"¹² a remark that calls into question the kinds of testimonies that might be used to build up a battle narrative. This thought is expressed more fully by Theseus in the *Suppliants*, where the Athenian hero Theseus, in asking for a report from Adrastus on the seven heroes who have just lost their lives in the struggle before Thebes, offers him a cautionary word (840-856):

"And now Adrastus, I ask you: how was it that these men came to be such exemplars of courage? You have the skill, the knowledge: speak to our young Athenians here. For they saw¹³ the acts of bravery, beggaring description, by which these men were hoping to capture Thebes. One thing I will not ask you, in case I am thought ridiculous: which of the enemy each of them clashed with in battle, sustaining the deadly thrust of the spear. Such reports are worthless, doing no service to the teller or his listeners; how can

¹¹ On messenger speeches in tragedy in general see BARRETT (2002). For the restricted viewpoint of the messenger (which follows naturally from a first-person narrative in general) in Euripidean tragedy see DE JONG (1991); for ignorant narrators in tragedy, see SCODEL (2009).

¹² *El.* 377-378: ἀλλ' εἰς ὅπλ' ἔλθων; τίς δὲ πρὸς λόγχην βλέπων | μάρτυς γένοιτ' ἂν ὅστις ἐστὶν ἀγαθός; Many modern editors follow WILAMOWITZ in deleting 373-379, but see DENNISTON (1939) 94-95; DONZELLI (1991) 113-117.

¹³ The MSS read εἶδον, either "I saw" or "they saw". COLLARD (1975) II.321 defends the latter, arguing that Theseus wants Adrastus to explain "how the heroes became so brave, not describe their deeds"; and in support of his interpretation, that is in fact what Adrastus does. But if it is the correct interpretation, then the words that follow, "One thing I will not ask ... beyond his own immediate danger" must be seen as a clarification of what Theseus does *not* want, and this reads somewhat disjointedly. One can see why MORWOOD (2007) 208 thinks a change from εἶδον to εἶδες would make good sense. The transposition of lines 844-845 to after 859, defended by KOVACS (1996) 93, would make Adrastus the one who says, "I saw", and would thus make for a close connection with historiographical methodology.

a man who is in battle, with volleys of spears flying before his eyes, give a reliable account of where courage has been shown? I could neither ask a question like this nor put any trust in those who presume to answer it. A man facing the enemy head on could barely see beyond his own immediate danger.”

Here Theseus points out the basic fact that a warrior’s perspective is limited, since he must give all his attention to the immediate matter at hand, i.e., fending off death. Theseus is not rejecting battle accounts *tout court*, but only those that claim a level of detail not likely to correspond to the actual conditions of the battlefield. It is not necessarily the case, of course, that Euripides has historians or historical accounts in mind in this passage; but the wariness expressed by Theseus concerning battle reports does find some echo in Thucydides’ comments before narrating the night battle at Epipolae, where he observes that even in the daytime individual soldiers hardly know what is happening beside them (7, 44, 1). As it happens, the Euripides passage is sometimes compared with Thucydides’ remarks, even though the narrative that follows, though generalised, has more or less the same assurance as elsewhere in Thucydides.¹⁴

From a much later period, Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* likewise takes aim at the claims proffered by historians (1-2):

“I wish to record what happened in heaven three days before the Ides of October in the new year, at the beginning of a most auspicious era. ... These things are true just as I state them. If anyone should ask how I know, first I shall not reply if I do not wish to do so. Who is going to compel me? ... If I do choose to respond, I shall say whatever comes into my mouth. Who ever demanded sworn witnesses from an historian?”

Though satirical, the reference to “sworn witnesses”¹⁵ shows that readers of historical works did not necessarily expect the material

¹⁴ As DOVER (1973) 28-29 points out, Thucydides has more or less the same level of narrative assurance in this particular episode as elsewhere. See further on this passage ROOD (2006) 237, 245 and HORNBLOWER (2011) 617-630.

¹⁵ The word translated as “sworn witnesses” is *iuratores*, “minor civil servants responsible for collecting the sworn returns of individuals taxable assets and other

to have the same truth value as testimony under oath, and perhaps too that much of what was written by historians was not based on any kind of witness.

To return to the historians. Polybius, as always, is the most explicit theoretician on historiographical issues, consistently expressing his belief in the superiority of contemporary history over all others. At one point he distinguishes three types of history, and assigns each to a particular kind of reader (9, 1, 2-4), claiming that he himself deals exclusively with "actions of peoples, cities, and dynasts", a kind of history that "attracts the statesman",¹⁶ and thereafter he emphasises the positive aspects of contemporary history (9, 2, 4-6):

"... first, because new events are constantly occurring and need new narratives (since the ancients could not narrate for us events in their future); second, because it is the most useful of all genres: this was so even in times before ours but it is especially the case in our time, when the arts and sciences have advanced to such a degree that those who love learning can deal scientifically, one might say, with any emergency that arises."

Yet even if Polybius thinks contemporary history superior, he does not think that all contemporary historians are equal. Quite the contrary: more than any other historian, Polybius makes the case that the good historian not only practises autopsy and inquiry on a grand scale, but also has experience in political and military affairs, an experience that is necessary because inquiry is not a straightforward matter (12, 26a, 6-10):

"... in inquiring about battles, it is necessary that those without experience will make serious errors. For how could such a person judge well about a battle, siege, or naval combat? How could such a person understand those who are giving detailed reports when he himself has no conception of such things? The inquirer

liabilities at a *census*": EDEN (1984) 64-65, who notes, however, that at PETRON. 118, 6 Eumolpus distinguishes history from poetry because in the former one expects *religiosae orationis sub testibus fides*.

¹⁶ For the chronological progression inherent in this distinction see MEISTER (1975) 45, n. 173.

contributes no less to the narrative than his informants, since the very recollection of the concomitant details guides the informant from point to point. For this reason the man without experience is not capable of properly judging those who were present, nor when present himself does he know what is happening, but even if he is present it is manifest that in a certain sense he is not really present.”

Now it may be the case that everything that Polybius says here is already nascent in Thucydides’ methodological remarks, but Polybius makes this kind of political and military experience an *explicit* precondition for the successful examination of eyewitnesses and thus for writing a successful contemporary history.¹⁷ Polybius does not always deserve the benefit of the doubt in his polemical passages, but I think that here, as a practising historian, he is aware of the pitfalls of believing autopsy and inquiry are straightforward and unproblematic matters. He is trying above all to distinguish himself as a ‘professional’ from the many other amateurs who claimed to write truthful history.¹⁸

The difficulties of discovering the events of history were only exacerbated by the challenges facing those who wrote about or under an autocrat. When Theopompus decided to orientate his history around Philip of Macedon, he needed to do the usual kinds of inquiry throughout the Greek world (and he seems to have boasted of this¹⁹), but the question of access to Philip and his court now also became important, for without such knowledge Theopompus could hardly claim to be reporting how and why Philip made particular decisions or took particular actions; yet if Theopompus did discuss this particular challenge, it has left no trace in the fragments of his work.

In imperial writers we do find explicit remarks about the difficulties of discovering the truth under autocracy. Tacitus notes that as imperial rule progressed, “truth was crushed in

¹⁷ On the importance of the historian’s experience, MARINCOLA (1997) 133–148; on experience in Polybius see now MOORE (2020).

¹⁸ For Polybius as a ‘professional’, see DEROW (1994).

¹⁹ DION. HAL. *Pomp.* 6, 1–3 = *FGrHist* 115 T 20a.

several ways, first by an ignorance of public affairs as if they were others' concerns" (*Hist.* 1, 1, 1) and at the death of Germanicus he observes "that all the greatest matters are ambiguous, inasmuch as some people hold any form of hearsay as confirmed, others turn truth into its converse, and each swells among posterity".²⁰

The most famous and most complete expression of these difficulties is found in Cassius Dio in a justly admired passage,²¹ at the point when he marks the crucial difference in the quality of his knowledge, now that he has left Republican history and is moving on to imperial history: here Dio notes that by contrast with the Republic, where there was a multiplicity of writers and public records, in the Empire from Augustus onwards decisions were made in private and by a select group; nor could such decisions when made public be tested in any way, the result being that "many things that do not occur are repeated over and over again, while much that in fact does happen is unknown, and everything so to speak is reported in a way other than how it actually occurred". (There is also the problem of the vastness of the Empire and the difficulties attendant on knowing about events occurring over such a wide geographical range.) Finally, he says that his procedure in what follows will be to give the 'public' version, whether true or not, adding something of his own conjecture where he feels competent based on his knowledge arising from what he read, heard, or saw for himself (53, 19, 1-6).

Tacitus and Dio, then, realise that the business of inquiry under the empire presented some unique difficulties. Their remarks, however, stand in stark contrast to those of Lucian on the topic of inquiry (*Hist. conscr.* 47):

"The events themselves must be gathered together not at random but with the historian making repeated enquiries about the

²⁰ TAC. *Ann.* 3, 19, 2 (trans. WOODMAN). Cf. the *arcana imperii* at *Hist.* 1, 4, 2 and *Ann.* 2, 36, 2, each slightly different in meaning, though both are relevant to the present topic. (I thank Alexander Meeus for calling the Tacitus passages to my attention.)

²¹ See KEMEZIS (2014) 95, n. 9 for a long list of appreciative scholars.

same matters, with industriousness and painstakingly; best of all he should be present and be an eyewitness of events, but if not, he should give his attention to those who tell of the events more impartially, and those whom one would reckon least likely either from favouritism or from enmity to add to or detract from events. And at that point let him be skilful at perceiving and putting together the more probable account.”

If anything, this represents an enormous step backwards.²²

We do not have a great deal of evidence under the Empire for interaction between a historian and someone in power who might provide information, but there are at least three passages of interest. The first is found in Josephus’ remarks in the *Life*, where he notes that his account of the Jewish War was approved by Titus and that King Agrippa promised to inform him of many things done in the war that were not generally known.²³ The second is the Emperor Lucius Verus writing to Fronto and promising him all sorts of materials to write up his campaigns against the Parthians, noting that these will allow Fronto to understand the reasons for what was done both by himself and his commanders: “I can bring you, as it were, right on the spot” (*Ad Ver. Imp.* 1, 2, 1-2). The third passage is found in Dio who says that the emperor Septimius Severus after his death appeared to Dio in a dream, bidding him come close “so that you might learn accurately and compose everything that was said or done”.²⁴ These scenarios differ in important ways, but what unites them is the sense that no contemporary history could be written under an autocrat without some sort of access to an inner circle. Yet such access brings its own difficulties, for it can call into question the historian’s independence and impartiality, a subject to which we next turn.

²² Lucian has in mind writers of war monographs – see KEMEZIS (2010) for an excellent discussion of this and other aspects of the essay – so this advice also takes no notice of the particular difficulties of battle narratives noted above.

²³ It is significant that we find this information not in the *War* itself but in the *Life*: see below, pp. 140-145.

²⁴ DIO CASS. 79 [78], 10, 1-2: ἵνα πάντα καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα καὶ τὰ γινόμενα καὶ μάθῃς ἀκριβῶς καὶ συγγράψῃς.

2. Bias and impartiality

In his advice about the historian's inquiry, as we saw, Lucian said that one should use those sources that one reckoned least likely to be speaking in a biased manner. In emphasising the more impartial account, Lucian highlights a second matter of importance for the contemporary historian, namely impartiality. I say "second" because of the order in which I am treating these, but there is no doubt that for ancient writers and readers their most consistent and persistent concern is with the impartiality of the historian. Remarks about bias and favouritism dwarf those of all other issues,²⁵ and A.J. Woodman has clearly demonstrated that a claim of impartiality by an ancient historian is functionally equivalent to a statement of veracity.²⁶

We saw above Thucydides' recognition that informants' favouritism was one factor that made it difficult to discern what had really happened, and one can see this issue, though less pronounced, also in Herodotus, who, before his narrative of the final battle of the Ionian Revolt at Lade in 494 BCE, expresses an inability to say which contingents performed bravely because "they all accuse one another" (6, 14, 1).²⁷ Indeed, one could argue that Herodotus' use of source-citations is done precisely so that readers can judge for themselves the veracity of the claims made by individuals and states which are clearly designed to advance their own interests.²⁸ In these cases, however, it is the historian speaking not of his own partiality but of that of his informants.

²⁵ AVENARIUS (1956) 46-54, 157-163 lists many of them.

²⁶ WOODMAN (1988a) *passim*. Note that whereas Lucian treats inquiry in a single paragraph, the issues of bias and impartiality appear in his essay from beginning to end.

²⁷ Here, by the way, we may see one of the reasons that Thucydides thought he needed to supply a narrative even where informants contradicted one another, and it may be the case that as he was writing contemporary history, he had a larger number of sources for the various events than Herodotus, writing at least a generation after his events, could find.

²⁸ It should be noted, however, that explicit source-citations are much rarer in Books VII-IX than in I-VI.

Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon neither speak of, nor make claims for, their own impartiality, and since this is a fully developed trope by the time of Polybius, we must assume that concern with the historian's own impartiality arose in the later 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, perhaps in connexion with the Alexander historians: the obviously laudatory reports sent back by some Greeks about Alexander (one thinks of Callisthenes) may, for the first time, have brought the issue of the historian's own partiality to the fore.²⁹

Praise and blame were a part of history from the outset, of course, as seen most clearly in Herodotus' preface with its concern for *kleos*. Thucydides eschews the direct link of historiography with praise of individuals, though he is full of praise for his subject, the war, indicating its greatness from the preface onwards, reinforcing it by magnification throughout,³⁰ which culminates in remarks at the conclusion of the Sicilian expedition where the campaign against Sicily is said to be "the greatest event in the war and, it seems to me, even of those Greek events we know from tradition ... most glorious to the victors and most ill-starred to the defeated" (7, 87, 5). For later writers and critics, however, praise and blame become something of an obsession, and ancient readers correspondingly were always on the lookout for anything in a history that might indicate either too much or too little praise and blame.

Since impartiality is a vast topic, I want to concentrate here mainly on the way it plays out for those writing contemporary history particularly under an autocrat.³¹ We can see traces of 'anxiety' in remarks such as Livy's in his preface that in treating ancient history "I shall be free of that care which can trouble the mind of a historian, even if it cannot deflect him from the truth" (*praef.* 5); that is, he is free of *cura* because he is, at least

²⁹ On bias, see, besides WOODMAN, see LUCE (1989) and MARINCOLA (1997) 158-174. Alexander Meeus reminds me that local history will also have played a role here.

³⁰ WOODMAN (1988a) 28-40.

³¹ LUCE (1989) 17 = (2011) 293 notes that assertions of impartiality are a feature only of those who write contemporary history.

for the present, writing non-contemporary history. Horace in describing Asinius Pollio's contemporary history warns the author forthrightly, "you take in hand a work full of dangerous chance" – there is danger both in the subject matter and for the author – and "you step over fires that lie hidden beneath the treacherous ash" – "treacherous" again here both in subject and for the author (*Carm.* 2, 1, 6-8). Likewise, Pliny when trying to decide whether he will write contemporary or non-contemporary history, asks himself, "Shall I treat recent events that have not been treated? Here offences are serious, gratitude slight" (*Ep.* 5, 8, 12). The offences are serious (*graves*) because they have to do with those in power. Historians, then, were keenly aware that contemporary history, in the natural course of things and if written honestly, could (and most likely would) offend those who might in turn harm the historian himself.³²

And it is not only contemporary history, strictly speaking, which could be dangerous: Tacitus' account of the trial of Cremutius Cordus shows the danger *in the present* of writing about recent past events, since contemporaries can be offended even when the history is not about them (*Ann.* 4, 33, 4):

"There is also the fact that writers of old rarely find a detractor, and it makes no difference to anyone if you praise Punic or Roman armies more floridly; by contrast, the descendants of many who were punished and disgraced in Tiberius' reign are still alive. And even if those families are now extinct, you will find people who, because of a similarity of character, think the evil deeds of others are being ascribed to themselves."

Now Cremutius' fault, as is well known, was to have praised Brutus and Cassius (*FRHist* 71 F 3), and it is clear that this is an issue precisely because Tiberius, the reigning emperor, remains implicated in those events even from a distance. No one could know in the early empire that the principate was going to endure as it did, and periodic calls then and later for the "restoration of the Republic" (whatever people imagined that to mean) show

³² This showed itself especially in hesitancy towards writing about any living emperor: see WOODMAN (1988b) 160 and Adam KEMEZIS in this volume.

the uncertainty of the political status quo, a status whose origins continued to be discussed and analysed – with the accompanying questions that such discussions might raise.

It is also clear that contemporary historians were subject to all sorts of pressure from their own contemporaries, as seen in Cicero's famous letter to Lucceius, with its request to "neglect the laws of history" (*Fam.* 5, 12, 3) so as to write a more encomiastic history of Cicero's deeds. Cicero, of course, even at the peak of his political fortunes, could hardly have compelled Lucceius to write such a work, still less when he was in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes. But this was not the case when the person applying the pressure was an emperor. Lucius Verus' desire to have Fronto write up an account of Verus' deeds makes it very clear that the emperor sees the putative historian as having an important role to play and that – even more importantly – he expects that his deeds will be portrayed in a thoroughly encomiastic manner: "my accomplishments, of whatever kind, are only as great as they actually are; they will, however, *seem* as great as you wish them to seem" (*Ad Ver. Imp.* 1, 2, 3). Nor, again, was the pressure limited to the powerful: Pliny asks his friend Tacitus to find a place in his history for an occurrence that he thinks will win him future fame, and in words somewhat similar to Verus' says that "these matters, such as they are, you will make better known, more distinguished, more important", even though he adds that Tacitus need not exceed the truth (*Ep.* 7, 33, 10). Pliny also tells of a recitation in which an historian of a *uerissimus liber* (neither the historian nor his interlocutors are named) was approached during one of his recitations by the friends of someone whose deeds the historian was about to narrate. They begged the historian not to read the remaining parts, and he complied, though he did not alter his text. It need hardly be added that the person whose deeds were to be related was someone in power.³³

So the historian, even before he set out to write, was already aware that contemporary history had special challenges and

³³ *Ep.* 9, 27. SYME (1958) I.120 detects a possible reference to Tacitus.

hurdles to be overcome. And he must surely have known that, added to this, it was common for later historians to criticise their predecessors who had written contemporary history: indeed, if we are to judge by their later critics, contemporary historians of Sicilian tyrants or Macedonian kings or Roman emperors were consistently portrayed as *least* well placed to write the histories of their eras; later writers suggest that the attitude of contemporaries towards those in power was so compromised as to demand an entirely new history. One sees this particularly well in the preface to Tacitus' *Annals* (1, 1, 2-3):

"The affairs of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero were falsified because of fear while they were alive, and, after they had died, were compiled with hatreds still fresh. My plan, therefore, is to record a few things concerning Augustus, and matters concerning the end of his reign, and then the principate of Tiberius, and the rest, without anger or partisanship, the reasons for which I keep far off."³⁴

The proximity of contemporary historians to the events they narrate is itself the problem, since they are assumed to be under the sway of their subjects either because of flattery or its opposite.

The perils of partiality were obvious. But of course, to write under an autocrat one needed, as noted above, *some* access to the corridors of power, and this entailed one of the most serious dilemmas faced by the contemporary historian: if he is to know what happened, the historian needs access to those in power; but that very access will ensure that your readers look especially closely for indications of partiality. And again, you cannot try to over-compensate by writing a relentlessly negative account, for that too would set off alarms in the minds of more perceptive readers (Tac. *Hist.* 1, 1, 2):

"Yet whereas you would easily discount a writer's self-interest, disparagement and spite are listened to with ready ears: naturally,

³⁴ Naturally, this particular preface strikes a rhetorical pose – notice that all historians must fall into one category or the other – and is not to be read as an objective analysis by Tacitus of his predecessors' strengths and weaknesses: MARINCOLA (1999).

since obsequiousness incurs a shameful charge of servitude, while malice gives a false impression of freedom of speech.”

So there seems to be no way out: a flattering account can be discounted, but then so can a critical account.³⁵

The contemporary historian would also have been well aware of this, of course, but it would not have left him with many choices. Various ‘solutions’ to this problem were tried. One might, for example, simply “pass over” a particularly fraught time-period, as the emperor Claudius seems to have done, starting with Caesar’s assassination but then beginning again with the ending of the civil wars.³⁶ This, however, would deprive the historian of actually being an historian! Another ‘solution’ that we hear of several times under the Empire is that of deferred publication, the author explicitly stating that his work or certain parts of it would be published only later, and this as a way of “proving” that his work was impartial and would bring him no benefit in the present: the heading of Book 121 of the Livian *periochae* state that the book “is said to have been published after the death of Augustus”.³⁷ Seneca tells us that Titus Labienus, though famous for his frankness, once rolled up a scroll while he was reading his history and said, “What I pass over here will be read after my death”.³⁸ And Pliny the Elder says that his contemporary history is finished and finalised, but has been given to his heir to publish after his death, “lest my life be

³⁵ And the detection of such bias was particularly dangerous for a historian’s credibility since, if we are to believe Polybius (though perhaps here we should not take him too much at his word), the detection of bias anywhere was enough to invalidate the entire work (12, 25a, 1-2): “Whenever one or two falsehoods are discovered in treatises and this is deliberate, then it is clear that nothing said by such authors is reliable or certain.”

³⁶ SUET. *Claud.* 41, 2 = *FRHist* 75 T 1: *et transit ad inferiora tempora, coepitque a pace civili.*

³⁷ LIV. *Per.* 121: *qui editus post excessum Augusti dicitur*; *dicitur* suggests that Livy did not state this explicitly. On the problems of the authenticity of this heading see JAL (1984) I.cxx-cxxi. Tony Woodman points out to me that this heading applies only to Book 121, although scholars often assume that it referred to Books 121-142.

³⁸ LABIENUS, *FRHist* 62 T 2 = SEN. *Controv.* 10, pr. 4-8.

judged to have conceded anything to ambition".³⁹ Here too it should be obvious that deferred publication was not a solution that all would find congenial, since one of the reasons historians wrote history was to win glory for themselves as well as their subjects.⁴⁰

Indeed, so far as we can tell, the issue of bias was never resolved, and imputations of, and defences against, the charge of partiality were simply part and parcel of the historian's craft as practised in Antiquity. One possible avenue of amelioration was seen (not surprisingly) by Polybius, who early in his work, and following on from his criticisms of the bias of Fabius Pictor and Philinus in their accounts of the First Punic War, says that when someone "takes up the character appropriate to history" he must (1, 14, 5-8)

"often speak well of his enemies and adorn them with the greatest praises, when the events demand this, while he must often reproach and reprove severely those closest to him, whenever their failure of conduct deserve such treatment ... In history one must keep some distance from the actors, and instead apply to the deeds themselves the opinions and judgements that are appropriate."

From this we might deduce that the best possible way for a history to win credence was by offering praise and blame regularly, and not always for the same characters. But given that contestation was in the life-blood of the ancients, and that history was an important place where that contestation played out, it seems unlikely that any account could be free from the criticism that it was biased.⁴¹ To put it another way, a reader determined to find grounds for condemning a history as biased would almost always have found something to use.⁴²

³⁹ PLIN. *NH praef.* 20 = *FRHist* 80 T 5: *ne quid ambitioni dedisse uita iudicaretur.*

⁴⁰ See MARINCOLA (1997) 57-62.

⁴¹ And as is well known, all of Polybius' teachings on the need for impartiality go out the window when he comes to speak of the Aetolian League: on Polybius' prejudice against the Aetolians see MENDELS (1984-1986).

⁴² A particularly egregious example is Dionysius of Halicarnassus' statement that Thucydides portrayed the Athenians in his history in a negative light because they had sent him into exile: *Pomp.* 3, 15.

Before moving on to the final issue, that of historical revisionism, I want to come back to the Josephus passage mentioned above. We are singularly fortunate in having two accounts of how Josephus wrote up his history of the war between the Romans and the Jews, namely, in the preface of the *War* itself and in some remarks made in the later *Life*, the apologetic treatise appended to his *Jewish Antiquities*.⁴³ Comparison of the two allows us to see some of the issues surrounding both inquiry and bias that will have faced virtually every historian writing in the Empire.

In the preface to the *Jewish War* itself, we find a number of traditional motifs: the war between the Jews and Romans was the greatest of all time; its previous chroniclers did not do it justice because they cared little for accuracy or were blinded by partiality; and so Josephus, who was present at these events, has set himself the task of writing an account (1, 1-3). Josephus also offers a praise of contemporary history, branding those who write of earlier events as inferior in sense and judgement because those writers fail to realise that “each of those writers of old gave their efforts to writing events of their own time, where their presence at events would make their narrative vivid, and lying was shameful since one was writing amongst those who knew” (1, 13-14). He thus sees a two-fold benefit in contemporary history, the ability to write vividly,⁴⁴ and a contemporary audience that will hold the writer to standards of truth and honesty.⁴⁵ This second observation – that one could hardly lie amongst those who knew – is an argument that one often finds and continues to be employed by modern scholars who will often note that this or that author could not possibly be

⁴³ For full discussion of the *Life* passages with references to previous bibliography see MASON (2001) 135-150; also of value is the brief discussion in LUCE (1989) 26 = (2011) 305-306.

⁴⁴ Josephus may be thinking of Polybius' claim in his attack on Timaeus (12, 25g, 2) that only a man of experience and a contemporary can write a narrative that is full of *enargeia*.

⁴⁵ HDN. 1, 1, 3 (ὕπὸ νεαρῶν δὲ τῶν ἐν τευχισμένοις μνήμῃ) may be hinting at this notion.

lying (especially if speaking in public) because he would be caught out and shamed. I have never myself found this very persuasive, since even in our own age, when we have all sorts of ways of recording what has happened, people will deny (sometimes persistently) what can easily be shown to be true. Still less for Antiquity, where word-of-mouth and witness' reliability will have counted for much more, does it make sense to assert that contemporaries *had* to tell the truth.⁴⁶ But it's a useful argument that Josephus needs and to which he will return. Josephus ends the preface with renewed praise of contemporary history, criticism of the Greeks for their lack of truthfulness, and a re-assertion of his own efforts and honesty (1, 15-16). In many ways this preface is an excellent exemplar of the kinds of claims made by historians writing contemporary history.

If we turn to the remarks in the *Life*, we find not a contradiction to what Josephus says in the preface of the *War*, but an entire side to his work that finds no expression in the *War*'s preface, but must yet have come into play for virtually every contemporary historian writing during the Empire, or indeed under any autocracy. These remarks take us behind the scenes, so to speak, and reveal the kinds of conditions and constraints under which many contemporary historians will have operated.

The occasion for revisiting his account of the *War* is Josephus' defence against a rival account, that of Justus of Tiberias.⁴⁷ Josephus begins by asserting that his account is true, and expresses this in the usual terms (*Vita* 336-339):

"Since I have come to this point in my narrative, I wish to say a few things to Justus, the very one who has written an account of these events, as well as to the rest who promise to write history but have little regard for the truth and who, because of either hatred or favour, are not ashamed of falsehood. Such writers are

⁴⁶ Relevant here too is WOODMAN's discussion of the 'bi-focal' capacity of the ancients: "The Greeks and Romans were capable of accepting reality and the representation thereof each on its own terms, no matter how much the latter 'misrepresented' (as we see it) the former": (1988a) 14.

⁴⁷ On Justus see RAJAK (1973); BLOCH (2012).

similar to those who compose false documents when making contracts, but unlike those men such writers fear no punishment, and so they despise the truth. Justus, for example, when he attempted to compose an account of the events having to do with these matters, did not tell the truth even about his own country. And so now I, who have had these falsehoods told about me, am compelled to defend myself, and I shall speak on matters about which up to this point I have been silent. And no one should be surprised that I did not make any revelations about this long ago. It is necessary that one who writes history must tell the truth, but one should not reproach people's wicked acts bitterly, and not because of any favouritism towards them but rather on account of one's own moderation."

Josephus' claim to have written without favour is, of course, a common one, while his reference to the absence of bitterness and to his own 'moderation' might be an attempt to align himself with Polybius' emphasis (12, 14, 3-7) that a historian must not indulge in bitter accusation, and that he must be measured in his criticism, not dealing out what people really deserve but rather what is in accord with the dignity of history.

Josephus next suggests that Justus was neither an eyewitness himself nor an inquirer of any who were (*Vita* 357-358):

"I am amazed at your shamelessness at daring to say that your account is better than all others who have treated this topic, even though you do not know what happened in Galilee (for at that time you were in Berytus with the king) nor did you follow closely all the things that the Romans suffered or did to us in the siege at Jotapata, nor were you able to learn all the things that I accomplished through my own agency during the siege, since everyone who might have informed you perished in the siege. ... But perhaps you will say that you have written accurately about what happened at Jerusalem. And how is that possible? You neither happened to be present during the war nor did you read the memoranda of Caesar. Here is the strongest proof: you have written an account which contradicts Caesar's memoranda."

Now, in addition to not being present or not having learnt from people who were, Justus is faulted for not having read the *commentarii* of Vespasian. Josephus here appeals to a special

source, something not uncommon in classical historiography,⁴⁸ and indeed, by employing it here, Josephus can claim that this allows him insight into the man's (and thus Rome's) motivations and purposes. The special source "guarantees" the claims made by the historian – but only up to a point.

What follows next is criticism of Justus for withholding his account until after the deaths of the commanders (*Vita* 359-360):

"And if you are confident that your account is the best of all, why did you not publish your work when Vespasian and Titus, the emperors who took charge of the war, were still alive, and while King Agrippa and his family, people with the highest degree of Greek culture, were still living? You had your account written already twenty years before and no doubt I suppose that you were going to obtain evidence of your accuracy from those who knew. But as it is, you have been emboldened because those men are no longer with us and you do not think that you can be refuted."

Josephus here reverts to something he said in the preface to the *War*, namely that contemporaries are more reliable because if they do not tell the truth, they will be caught out. Yet this claim goes against all of the remarks that we saw above which suggest that contemporaries are not reliable because they are too close to the subjects of their history. In that context, deferred publication, as we saw, was advanced as a guarantee of reliability, a strategy of the historian by which he can remove himself from being seen as an immediate beneficiary at the hands of the men he writes about. Josephus here must take a different tack, and he thus allies himself even more closely with the protagonists of his work in what follows (*Vita* 361-367):

"I was not at all frightened about my own account in the way that you were, but I gave my books to the commanders themselves, when the deeds were almost still in view, because I was conscious that I had taken care to hand down the truth, nor was I disappointed in my expectation that I would receive evidence of this. I immediately gave my history to many others, some of whom had been present in the war, such as King Agrippa and

⁴⁸ See MARINCOLA (1997) 99-117 *passim*.

some of his relatives. The emperor Titus wanted the knowledge of these events to be handed down to mankind from my books alone, and so having inscribed them with his own hand, he ordered that they be published. In addition, King Agrippa wrote sixty-two letters, testifying that I had handed down the truth. Two of them I include here, and from them you may, if you wish, know what he has written: 'King Agrippa sends greetings to his dearest Josephus. I went through your book with the greatest pleasure, and you seemed to me to have taken much greater care over your accuracy than others who have written about these matters. Send me the remaining volumes. Farewell.' 'King Agrippa sends greetings to his dearest Josephus. From what you have written you seem to need no instruction in how we might all learn of events from the beginning. When you meet me, however, I myself shall inform you of many things that are not known.' And when my history was completed, then in truth and without trying to flatter me (for he was not like that) and without speaking ironically (as you, of course, will claim, but he was far from such maliciousness), he testified to the truth of my account, as did all the others who have read my history."

Having decided that the appeal to authority figures was the best way to prove the accuracy of his account, Josephus then follows this to its logical conclusion. Such an appeal to the truthfulness of a king is not as ridiculous as it may appear. One can see it in Arrian's remark at the outset of his *Anabasis*, that he has followed Ptolemy's account not only because he campaigned with Alexander but because "he was a king and it would have been more disgraceful for him to tell falsehoods than for any other" (*praef.* 2). The reasoning may seem strange to us but from the Hellenistic period onwards, the ideal king was thought to embody human virtues to the highest degree, and, being conscious of his status, he would take pains to maintain that in the eyes of his subjects.⁴⁹

But the main issue is to note the difference in how Josephus presented himself in the preface to the *Jewish War* and how he does so here in the *Life*. If he had access to the *commentarii* of the emperor, and if he gave his history to emperor and king

⁴⁹ See BOSWORTH (1980) 43.

to validate, why is there no mention of this in the preface of the *Jewish War* itself? The answer, of course, is not because there was no rival account when it was published,⁵⁰ but rather because he was well aware there that the historian cannot portray himself as so closely allied with the subjects of his history without immediately being suspected of being their wholehearted supporters and of writing at their behest. Given that he criticises the bias of previous historians in the preface, he can hardly allow himself to raise suspicion in the mind of his audience by noting at this juncture that he has been in communication with, and has the approval of, those in power. To portray himself as free and fair-minded, he must make it appear as if he has relied solely on his own efforts, those traditionally claimed by the contemporary historian: autopsy, participation, inquiry. But the comparison of these two accounts shows a more complicated and problematic situation where competing goods – the desire to appear reliable and the desire to write an authoritative history – are constantly in play.⁵¹

3. The meaning of history

Let us turn finally to a common trope employed by the contemporary historian, the claim that the magnitude of the events in his own lifetime demanded that those events be written up, a claim that goes back ultimately to Thucydides' famous opening sentence (1, 1, 1):

“Thucydides of Athens composed the war of the Peloponnesians and Athenians, how they fought against each other, beginning as

⁵⁰ Josephus actually says there were false histories of the events before his own: *BJ* 1, 1.

⁵¹ There are obvious similarities with Dio's dream of Septimius Severus (above, p. 132) who promises him accurate information. In Dio's case, however, we do not know how he portrayed any special information about Severus in the actual narrative, nor is it easy to imagine how a dream could validate a particular piece of information; perhaps the dream was meant to validate only in a general way what the reader would find in the ensuing narrative.

soon as the war broke out, and expecting that it would be a great war and more worthy of account than those which had gone before ...”

The greatest war of all, he claims, and he does so even though he recognised that the perspectives of contemporaries were not reliable (1, 21, 2):

“As for this war, although those taking part in a war always think their present war is the greatest but once they have concluded the war, they again marvel at ancient events, nonetheless an examination that proceeds from the events themselves will show that it was much greater than the wars that preceded it.”

The shifting viewpoints that Thucydides here details seem to work against the interests of the contemporary historian, since people always return to *ta archaia* once the war which they are fighting is over. There was, of course, good reason for them to do so, since for the Greeks *ta archaia* comprised the time period when the great heroes and demi-gods walked the earth and performed their incomparable actions. Historian after historian, beginning with Herodotus, makes comparisons between his own war and the Trojan War,⁵² and for a very good reason: to most Greeks, the Trojan War had been the greatest war because of the incomparable heroes who took part in it, and if you believed (as many did) that humanity had declined since that great era, it was hard to imagine how any war fought by mere mortals today could match it. This fascination with the past helps to explain why historians, even in Lucian’s time, continued to compare their contemporary commanders to Agamemnon and Achilles (*Hist. conscr.* 8, 15).

Thucydides’ assurances based on notions of size and greatness start the whole trend in historians of magnification of the deeds, a familiar feature usually found in prefaces and elsewhere.⁵³ Historians will sometimes portray contemporary events as unique

⁵² On the importance in historiography of the Trojan War and Homer’s account of it, see NICOLAI in this volume.

⁵³ MARINCOLA (1997) 34-43.

in some way (Sallust in the *Catiline*), or as especially full of wars, dangers, slaughters, and so forth (Tacitus' *Histories*, Herodian) or as the culmination of the history that preceded them (Velleius).⁵⁴

Yet in making such claims, contemporary historians take an enormous risk, since future generations looking back might very well revise the verdict offered by the historian or even completely disparage his subject. Thucydides' "greatest war ever" is omitted by Polybius in his catalogue of earlier empires, and he can spare only half a sentence for the Spartan hegemony following the war.⁵⁵ The fact that Thucydides continued to be read and emulated, indeed even his status as the greatest historian in Antiquity, had nothing to do with the later evaluation of the Peloponnesian War itself. The contemporary historian must, therefore, *hope* that the events as they appear to him at the time will seem the same to those who come after. In this sense it is worth going back a moment to Thucydides' opening sentence (1, 1, 1) where he says that he began writing up the war as soon as it broke out, "expecting" (ἐλπίζας) that it would be great and more worthy of account than all those that had gone before. The Greek verb ἐλπίζω covers a spectrum of meanings in English ranging from "expect" to "hope", and this helps to remind us that every contemporary historian had to bring equal parts expectation and hope to the writing of his history.

For one of the greatest threats to the contemporary historian's enterprise is historical revisionism, the fact that history moves on and that what *seems* to be a great and amazing enterprise today

⁵⁴ SALL. *Cat.* 1, 4, 4 speaks of the "newness and the danger of the crime" of Catiline and his fellow conspirators; Tacitus claims that his *Histories* embrace numerous changes of fortune, battles, seditions (*Hist.* 1, 2, 1 - 1, 3, 2); Herodian asserts that the 49-year span of his history contained more successions to the throne, more changes of fortune, more disturbances and destructions than the previous 200 years from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius (1, 1, 4-5).

⁵⁵ POLYB. 1, 2, 2-3. Thucydides had similarly discounted Herodotus' "greatest expedition ever" (7, 20) by conceding its greatness but by claiming that it was of short duration and amounted to only two land and two sea battles (1, 23, 1).

will be seen by tomorrow's readers to be nothing of the sort. I don't mean here exactly what Thucydides was talking about: he seems to suggest that it is the experience of being in a war that causes contemporaries to overestimate temporarily its greatness, and in any case he says that when the war is over people look *backwards* to events of old. My point is that future events must always cast the great events of the past in a different light, and the onward march of time may very well render the 'great' events of the past not so great in retrospect. What the contemporary historian lacks above all – and what he can never have – is the *perspective* afforded by time.⁵⁶ This is one reason why historians sometimes change the end-point of their histories, because later actions cause a reinterpretation of earlier events. I think there is little doubt, however he himself portrays it, that Polybius was motivated to extend the end-point of his history by the events that took place in Greece in 146 and thereafter. He could not look at the Roman enterprise in the same way once Carthage and Corinth had been razed. One can, then, move the goalposts, so to say, and look at events from a new perspective.⁵⁷ One might also recognise the movement of time by constructing an 'open' ending which suggests that the present cannot but affect the future, even if the effect cannot yet be known.⁵⁸

One alternative to making great claims about one's subject matter, although not a particularly frequent one, is to portray oneself as the chronicler of contemporary events without claiming that the events themselves are the greatest of all time, or sometimes even great at all. There are glimpses of this in Dio's history, perhaps most famously after he has narrated a particularly

⁵⁶ It is something that Agatha Christie's Mr Quin understands very well: "The contemporary historian never writes such a true history as the historian of a later generation. It is a question of getting the true perspective, of seeing things in proportion. If you like to call it so, it is, like everything else, a question of relativity": CHRISTIE (1930).

⁵⁷ For Dio's changes to the terminus of his history see Valérie FROMENTIN in this volume.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., the 'open' ending of Sallust's *Catiline* (60, 8-9); further discussion at MARINCOLA (2005) 302-304.

comic encounter of Commodus in the arena, when that emperor slew a hundred bears by throwing javelins from the safety of the railings (73, 18, 3-4):

“No one should think that I am defiling the lofty nature of history by narrating these events. Ordinarily I would not have written such things, but since this was done by the Emperor, and I was present, saw, heard, and discussed the events, I thought it was right to conceal none of it, but to record for future generations all these things as if they were great and indispensable events. The rest of the deeds that occurred in my lifetime I shall take particular care over and treat in greater detail than previous events, because I was present at them, and because I know of no one as capable of writing an account worthy of record as I.”

Here the magnitude of the events is replaced with the presence of the chronicler, who says, in effect, “I was there, I saw it, it concerned the emperor, therefore it should be recorded; I shall leave to others – i.e., my future audience – what to make of it”.⁵⁹ One can, of course, see this as already inherent in Xenophon’s *Hellenica*, where there is no claim that the events to be narrated are the greatest ever, and where the historian at the end recognises that he has come to the end without making any particular sense of the events, and that someone else may take up the call to history thereafter (*Hell.* 7, 5, 27).

But there is another way to address the issue of changing perspectives, again pioneered by Thucydides. In claiming utility for his history, he suggests a type of “recurrence” of events (1, 22, 4):

“And in the hearing perhaps the lack of a mythic element will seem less pleasurable; but if all those who wish to examine the clarity of events – both those that occurred and those that will occur at some time or another in the same or similar ways in accordance with human nature – will judge this useful, that will be sufficient.”

⁵⁹ Space precludes a discussion of memoirs (ὑπομνήματα, *commentarii*) which are contemporary but have a limited perspective (that of the author) and are not, or do not present themselves as, history proper.

This claim, which is allied to, but independent of, his belief about the greatness of the war, is, one might say, 'Thucydides' 'insurance policy', his hedge against the future in which it might very well be the case that the Peloponnesian War is revealed to be rather less great than Thucydides claimed for it in his own time. Even if the war itself was not the greatest, Thucydides' work can be used by his audience to understand eternal truths about human society, for what he records will be of value so long as human beings behave in the same way as they did in his own time. He here recognises an important problem, and shows that the contemporary historian can address the changes of perspective that may occur as a result of the passage of time by providing a 'universal' aspect to his work.

The lesson was not lost on later historians, though they took a somewhat different turn. Beginning with Xenophon, and largely under his influence, later historians claim a kind of 'universality' for their histories by giving their attention to the study of character and by developing a consistent concern (which can be explicit or implicit) with exemplarity.⁶⁰ By the time of Diodorus, history has become a storehouse of *exempla* (1, 1, 1 - 1, 2, 4), and it is these that give consistent value to a history, for even if certain claims about the greatness of a war or of a particular moment will no longer be true in the future, the examination of character and the recommendation of *exempla*, both positive and negative, become an important way of addressing the challenge of changing perspectives that result from the transitory nature of men and their actions – just as for Thucydides, the 'universals' which occur as the result of human nature (e.g., self-interest, the striving for power, the conflict between honour and utility) guarantee the value of his history, regardless of the 'greatness' of the Peloponnesian War.

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⁶⁰ On *exempla* in historiography see FORNARA (1983) 108-120, with WALBANK (1985) 211; POWNALL (2004) *passim*.

To sum up, then. I have tried to outline here some of the challenges faced by contemporary historians. Some of these were specific to the individual historian's circumstances (e.g., does he write under an autocracy?) while others were attendant on the nature of contemporary history itself: the difficulties of inquiry given the physical realities of the ancient world, and the unreliability of eyewitness testimony; the knowledge that contemporaries were regularly subject to, and accused of, being partisan, whether for or against; the lack of the long perspective, and the inability to predict how contemporary events would fit into future events. The contemporary historian takes a risk that his chronicle of the events of his own time will be of value: he may assert it confidently, like Thucydides, or somewhat more diffidently, like Dio. Yet as we have seen, even in asserting the value of his history, the contemporary historian must have been aware of the slim odds of success, and of the enormous difficulty of writing an authoritative account, much less of composing a possession for all time.

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DISCUSSION

N. Luraghi: In *The Beauty and the Sorrow*, a book that came out for the centennial of the outbreak of the First World War, Peter Englund put together a collection of short biographical sketches of men and women who participated in the war in different capacities, and from different countries, based on diaries they left behind. One of the characters is a Hungarian hussar called Pál Kelemes; commenting on his entry for August 25th, 1914 Englund writes: “Like everyone else involved, he has only a very hazy picture of what has actually happened and it will be years before anyone pulls together all the various impressions into a narrative called the Battle of Lemberg”. Englund may or may not have been thinking of the famous impressions of Fabrice del Dongo the evening of the battle of Waterloo, as described by Stendhal in *La Chartreuse de Parme*. In any case, the attention to the limits of the eyewitness’ perspective that both texts express is a typical feature of 19th-century historical thought, expressed for instance in Droysen’s *Historik*. This is usually seen as the result of a paradigm shift that culminated around the middle of the 18th century, when the old idea of historical knowledge and historiographical practice, in which the truthfulness of a narrative was essentially measured in terms of the physical distance, in space and time, of the narrator from the events themselves, was replaced by the notion of temporal distance as a facilitating factor for historical understanding, that offered the historian a vantage point from which whole epochs could be apprehended and explained. I had the impression that your contribution would tend to undermine the notion of a paradigm shift, suggesting instead that the ancient preference for eyewitness or quasi-eyewitness accounts should be seen, already in Antiquity, as one end of a spectrum, while distance

and perspective was the other end, and both could be mobilised as sources of authority for (ancient) historians. Am I understanding correctly your line of argument?

J. Marincola: You are. I would add, however, that what I am arguing here would contribute to *diminishing* the distance between what ancient historians and 19th-century historians were doing but not *eliminating* that distance. For the latter, as you say, the purpose was greater historical understanding, whereas for the former the purposes are less historical and more rhetorical. We would probably not say that Tacitus' purpose in the *Annals* was to understand the specific historical circumstances of Tiberius' rule, still less that Dionysius of Halicarnassus' history was an attempt to understand early Rome. (There were, of course, complicated reasons for this, having to do with both ancient society and ancient literature, which I have discussed elsewhere.) What I do think, however, is that a number of ancient writers (including historians) realised that there were not only practical but intellectual disadvantages to writing in the moment and (correspondingly) certain advantages when considering historical events in the perspective afforded by temporal distance. They exploited these to the extent that they could, even if they could not approach the kind of consciousness that we find in Droysen.

V. Fromentin: Je trouve très suggestive votre idée selon laquelle l'autorité de l'historien contemporain n'est pas fondée, comme celle de l'historien des périodes plus anciennes, sur la mention et la critique de ses sources, mais au contraire sur la production d'un récit lisse et univoque des événements, qui occulte la question de son information, autoptique ou autre (sa nature, son étendue, sa fiabilité). C'est évident chez Thucydide et vérifiable aussi, quoique à des degrés divers, chez Diodore, Appien et Cassius Dion dans les sections contemporaines de leurs histoires respectives. Mais l'historien contemporain chez lequel, me semble-t-il, cette "narrative assurance" se manifeste le plus

est Hérodien, qui s'efface entièrement derrière un récit d'un bout à l'autre univoque et sans aspérités. Pensez-vous qu'on puisse expliquer cette spécificité par une imitation délibérée de Thucydide ?

J. Marincola: Yes, I think that is a very important part of Herodian's narrative *persona*. We can see from Lucian's *How to Write History* that although imitation of Thucydides was rampant in the imperial era, this imitation was often merely formal in nature, when it was not outright appropriation, like the historian who took over Thucydides' description of the plague outright (15). We would know a great deal more, of course, if we had more of the kinds of contemporary history that Herodian wrote, that is, of a specific period of time; the only other one remotely comparable is Xenophon's *Hellenica*, which, with its anonymous narrator, may also have been an influence on Herodian. It is significant, I think, that modern scholars have little sense of Herodian's life, social status, and even his nationality: the text becomes foremost and the author himself seems to recede. Even Herodian's two statements of autopsy (1, 15, 4; 3, 8, 10; cf. 3, 1, 7 for implied autopsy) are somewhat generic, noting things that 'we' saw at the games of Commodus and Severus (respectively). Even Polybius, the most unreticent of historians, who has no compunction about interrupting his narrative to explain this or that, does not in the contemporary portions (or at least so far as we can tell) tell us what the sources for individual events were. Here, as seems to be the 'rule' in contemporary history, one must simply rely on the author's competence.

B. Bleckmann: Ich möchte auf die von Agatha Christie Mr Quin in den Mund gelegte Äußerungen zur Zeitgeschichte eingehen: Der zeitgenössische Historiker schreibt niemals eine so wahre Geschichte, wie diejenigen, die aus dem Rückblick und dem späteren Verlauf der Geschichte eine richtige Einordnung und Bewertung vornehmen können. Das ist zutreffend, andererseits

hat die Nachwelt keinen wirklichen Eindruck von einer Epoche, die sie nicht selbst miterlebt hat, und ist daher zu einer echten *enargeia*-Darstellung nicht in der Lage. Der ideale Historiker wäre also derjenige, der einerseits die Epoche, die er beschreibt, miterlebt hat, sie andererseits aber schon aus einer gewissen Distanz beurteilen kann. Das Optimum zeitgeschichtlicher Beschreibung könnte man also bei denjenigen als gegeben sehen, die im hohen Alter Zeitgeschichte verfassen.

J. Marincola: Yes, these are excellent points, and I did not discuss some of the benefits of contemporary history, of which one is, as you say, the ability to convey, as a contemporary, what was actually going on at the time in a narrative containing *enargeia*. Another is that the first historian to write up a series of events creates, as it were, the framework for all later accounts, and in this way gets to shape the tradition in a way that non-contemporary historians rarely can. Later historians can argue about the causes of the Peloponnesian War or the actions of the antagonists, but they do so always in the shadow (and framework!) of Thucydides. The portrait of the ideal historian that you sketch – a contemporary, but one with distance and writing in old age – seems hard to imagine in the classical world, not because the circumstances would never have arisen, but rather because the historian was never a ‘professional’ in our sense, and was almost always intensely involved in the events of his time: Ronald Syme’s remark, made at these *Entretiens* sixty-five years ago, that the Roman historian in retirement “fought again the old battles of Forum and Curia” may be somewhat exaggerated but it contains the basic truth that for the Greeks and Romans critical distance may have been especially difficult for contemporary historians to achieve.

A.M. Kemezis: Thank you for a paper that has covered so many important topics, but in particular for drawing my attention to two passages of Dio that I’ve worked on separately but never looked at together. The first is from Book 53, where he

talks about how even biased contemporary histories of the same events can be useful to later authors, which seems like a very candid account of the procedure that Tacitus must have used but not spoken about (though granted Dio considers the procedure valid only for the Republic), and then in Book 73 when he talks about his own experience as an eyewitness writing with different, more relaxed critical standards than previously. My question then is, are we seeing here an acknowledgement that the roles of contemporary and non-contemporary historian are different and complementary, and that the contemporary historian writes in some measure as a resource for later authors? We see later authors like Arrian talk this way about contemporary sources, but it seems very unusual for a contemporary author to be explicit in this way. And then further, should we look for places in other authors where this idea is implicitly acknowledged or resisted (i.e., a contemporary author tries to ensure that their work will remain definitive rather than be superseded by later efforts)?

J. Marincola: These are good questions, though it is hard to know the answers. When Dio, for example, narrates the events at which he was present, even if he thinks them ‘unworthy’ of history, is he expecting that later writers will be able to make better sense than he of what is going on in his world? Or is he writing for later senators to instruct them in the ways of dealing with difficult or dangerous emperors? Possibly both, though I would incline more to the second than the first. Writers of ὑπομνήματα or *commentarii* may have suggested that their works could be the foundation for a more adorned history – there are indications that this is how later writers saw them – but here again we are hampered by the loss of all of them except Caesar’s – which, it seems pretty certain, were not typical.

I am not aware of any historian who suggests that his own work can or will or should be quarried by later writers, though it’s hard to imagine that they were not aware that it could be. You are correct that Arrian talks this way about his contemporary

sources, but it seems difficult to believe that Ptolemy or Aristobulus in their histories suggested that what they wrote was anything other than the 'true' or 'accurate' history of Alexander. As to whether historians tried to ensure that their works would be definitive, I can't think of particular passages other than the most famous and influential, of course, Thucydides' claim for his work as a *κτῆμα ἐς αἰεί*. Yet even here, it is worthwhile to note how he phrases this claim: "it has been composed as" (*ξύγκειται*) rather than "it will be". Lucian in his essay on history suggests that it must be left to future generations to determine whether a history survives or not: that seems to be the point of the closing simile (62), where Sostratos, the constructor of the lighthouse of Alexandria, does his work honestly and well, but his name is discovered only in the future long after he and his contemporaries are gone.

R. Nicolai: Anzitutto grazie per la splendida relazione. Quella che propongo è soltanto una piccola nota, su una questione marginale rispetto al tema della relazione, ma che mi interessa molto. Si tratta di una formulazione su quelli che i Greci definivano *ta archaia*: "for the Greeks *ta archaia* comprised the time period when the great heroes and demi-gods walked the earth and performed their incomparable actions". In realtà i confini tra le varie epoche erano piuttosto fluidi; la tripartizione tucididea di 1, 1 mira a isolare il periodo contemporaneo, quello in cui si è svolta la guerra più grande rispetto alle vicende precedenti (*τὰ ... πρὸ αὐτῶν καὶ τὰ ἔτι παλαιότερα*); simile è la tripartizione di 2, 36, dove però si mette in risalto l'apporto della generazione precedente e di quella attuale, contrapposte a un lungo periodo antico (*ἱ πρόγονοι*). Tuttavia definire un fatto come antico dipende da vari motivi, tra cui la presenza di testimoni oculari: questo risulta evidente nell'*Edipo re* di Sofocle, dove l'assassino di Laio è presentato come un fatto antico (103-104 *ἦν ἡμῖν, ὦναξ, Λαῖός ποθ' ἡγεμὼν / γῆς τῆσδε, πρὶν σὲ τήνδ' ἀπευθύνειν πόλιν*), perché, in un primo tempo, non si trovavano testimoni (293 *ἤκουσα καὶ γὰρ. τὸν δ'*

ἰδόντ' οὐδεὶς ὀρᾷ). Un tema di ricerca interessante credo che possa essere la percezione, la rappresentazione e la periodizzazione del tempo passato. Qual è la tua opinione in proposito?

J. Marincola: I agree wholeheartedly that study of these terms would repay careful investigation. You are quite right that τὰ ἀρχαῖα and τὰ παλαιά do not contain in themselves indications of a fixed time, but rather are dependent on context and can be employed by a speaker to make particular points. This might be connected as well with the historical revisionism that I discussed in the last part of my paper, and the terms could be employed as a way of characterising a past action or era, whether positively or negatively. This is something that I will need to think more about.

E.-M. Becker: Thank you for a stimulating paper. I would like to pose a question regarding Josephus' concept of history-writing as *Zeitgeschichte*. There are obvious interconnections between Josephus and Thucydides, especially in the preface to the *War*. What about Josephus and Polybius? Except for Gruen, Eckstein, and Cohen, not much work has been done on that interconnection. You yourself mention two motifs Josephus might have taken up from Polybius and which might have informed Josephus' outline: (1) Josephus might have learnt from Polybius how to attack competitors (see Polybius and Timaeus); and (2) he might be inspired by Polybius regarding the demand that the "good historian will practice autopsy and inquiry on a grand scale" as you say with reference to 12, 26a, 6-10. Could this motif possibly explain why Josephus is eager – in the *War* but also in the *Vita* – to emphasise his active involvement in the military events (in Galilee)? Could we, accordingly, speak of an 'additive concept' of history-writing as developed by Josephus, based on the usage of various historiographical principles (esp. Thucydides and Polybius, but also Dionysius of Halicarnassus)? And finally: could the way in which Josephus possibly interconnects his writing to Polybius' very motif of personal

experience further illuminate how *Zeitgeschichtsschreibung* appears to be an (individual) 'practice'?

J. Marincola: These are all good questions, and especially relevant to Josephus, where your notion of 'additive concept' is particularly apt. Because he works in two traditions, the Jewish one and the Greco-Roman one, Josephus is a historian for whom interdisciplinary study can yield rich results: one needs to know both traditions to understand him fully. But even in the Greco-Roman one, Josephus' approach is additive. Josephus writes both contemporary and non-contemporary history. For the former he adopts the method and *personae* of Thucydides and Polybius, emphasising autopsy and participation, while for his non-contemporary history, he adopts the persona, above all, of Dionysius, arguing, like his predecessor, that his work is based on early sources and treats material abridged or omitted by earlier writers (*AJ* 1, 5; 1, 10-14 ~ *Ant. Rom.* 1, 4, 1; 1, 7, 1-3). As for the attack on competitors, one sees that particularly well in the *Life*, but it is more generalised and less pronounced in the *War*, so in this sense Polybius is more a presence in the background. I think there is something to be said for the writing of contemporary history as an individual practice, or at least the historian is at pains to present it that way. Unlike the writing of a non-contemporary, where one was expected to use one's predecessors and to cite them on a more or less regular basis, in contemporary history the historian presents himself as the pioneer, even when (as must surely have been the case) he was using the works of other contemporaries.

H. Inglebert: Dans le domaine de la géographie (également retenue par Jacoby comme faisant partie du genre historique), il existe une tradition de critique des témoignages selon la dignité sociale que l'on peut accorder aux témoins : on peut croire Mégasthène, qui était ambassadeur, sur l'Inde ; on peut croire Jules César, qui était général, sur les Gaules ; mais on se méfiera de Pythéas, qui était commerçant, donc suspecté de

mentir, sur l'Atlantique (mais Marin de Tyr et Ptolémée acceptèrent les informations de Maes Titianos sur le voyage de commerçants romains en Chine). Existe-t-il des remarques équivalentes des historiens sur la critique des témoignages recueillis, en dehors bien entendu de l'empereur-témoin et garant suprême de la vérité que l'on retrouve dans la *Vie* de Flavius Josèphe, dans le *Panegyrique* latin de 311 à propos de l'apparition d'Apollon à Constantin et de la *Vie de Constantin* d'Eusèbe à propos de l'apparition de la Croix dans le ciel, trois textes qui ne relèvent pas du genre littéraire de l'histoire ? En particulier, y aurait-il un traitement différencié des témoignages entre Strabon géographe et Strabon historien ? Et ceci peut-il s'expliquer par le fait que l'autorité de l'historien serait fondée sur l'autopsie, ce qui minimise l'importance des autres témoins, et celle du géographe sur l'acribie, puisqu'on ne lui demande pas de visiter le monde pour le décrire, mais de savoir porter un jugement selon le *logos* sur les informations qu'il recueille ?

J. Marincola: Thank you for bringing in geography, since by considering another genre, one can sometimes see distinctive features by comparison, and geography is obviously relevant to historiography, certainly at least for someone such as Polybius. His criticism of Pytheas' social status is connected with his belief that because Pytheas was a private citizen and a poor man, it was not credible that he should have travelled such great distances (34, 5, 7). This is not to say that social snobbery is absent from historiography, though it is usually expressed by inverse means, i.e., the historian asserts his own social standing as a way of guaranteeing his reliability. What I find especially interesting in your remarks is the way in which geographers need have no hesitation in accepting the authority of important individuals: might it be because there, unlike in history, it is not a question of constructing a flattering or vituperative portrait? As to possible differences between Strabo's history and his geography, the preface of the latter suggests that both were written for a similar audience and in a similar way (1, 1, 22-23;

C13-14), and even in the geography one finds Strabo criticising Megasthenes' account of India as untrustworthy (2, 1, 9; C70), and noting that writers have falsified geography in order to flatter Alexander (1, 2, 35; C43). Your final point is an important one, because it highlights that unlike other areas of study in Antiquity, which were more collaborative and could build on the accomplishments of predecessors, history, especially contemporary history, remained the work of individuals who were eager to present their work as largely their own.

