

## Classical Historiography

HST 300  
Fall 2009  
Professor Lavender

## Readings:

- Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* (selections)
- Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (selections)
- Tacitus, *The Annals* (selections)

## Classical Historiography

- What is the classical period?
- Greek and Roman classical historians – the first we call “historians”
  - Before historians, there are storytellers, bards, poets, singers....
  - What is the difference between a storyteller and a historian?
- **SO: What makes Herodotus (or Thucydides or Tacitus) an historian as opposed to a storyteller?**

## The Historian's Craft

- Only very rarely can historians record events they themselves have witnessed
- so historical facts can only be known through intermediary sources:
  - testimony from living witnesses;
  - narrative records,
    - previous histories,
    - memoirs,
    - letters, and
    - imaginative literature;
  - the legal and financial records of courts, legislatures, religious institutions, or businesses;
  - and the unwritten information derived from the physical remains of past civilizations,
    - architecture,
    - arts and crafts,
    - burial grounds, and
    - cultivated land.

## The Historian's Craft

- These sources must be deciphered and interpreted
  - But evidence is not the same things as fact
  - evidence may be biased or mistaken,
  - fragmentary, or
  - nearly unintelligible after long periods of cultural or linguistic change.
- So historians must use CRAFT to assess evidence in order to FIND facts within the evidence.

## So:

- This craft – searching inside evidence to find facts – makes an historian an *historian* instead of a mere storyteller.

## I: Classical Historiography

- Historiography in the West originated with the ancient Greeks,
  - the standards and interests of the Greek historians dominated historical study and writing for centuries.

## A. Greek Historiography

- 1. Herodotus
  - Cicero nicknamed him the “father of history”
    - (but also called “The Father of Lies”)
  - in 5th century BCE wrote his famous account of the Persian Wars.
    - The Athenians (the dominant cultural and political force in Greece in 5th and 4th centuries BCE) saw their wars against Persia as their greatest and character-defining moment
      - (included the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE)

## A. Greek Historiography (2)

- 2. Thucydides
  - Wrote classic study of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta soon after Herodotus’s *Persian Wars*.

## Identity of Greek Historiography

- recorded contemporary or near-contemporary events
  - in prose narratives of striking style,
  - depending as much as possible on eyewitness or other reliable testimony for evidence.
- Concentrated on war, constitutional history, and the character of political leaders
  - to create pictures of human societies in times of crisis or change.

## Style

- Herodotus’s and Thucydides’s styles became the definition of historical work for generations that followed
  - especially in assuming state and political life was the most important human creation
- No specialized training was considered necessary for historians
  - The historian’s education was that of any cultivated man:
    - careful reading of general literature,
    - the study of rhetoric, the art of fluent and persuasive use of language that dominated ancient higher education.
  - The ideal historian:
    - combined rigorous truthfulness and freedom from bias
    - with the gift of clear expression.

## Focus

- Greek Classical Historiography focused on
  - Historical moments which defined Greek cultural identity (Persian Wars, intra-Greek struggles between Athenians and other Greeks)
  - Roman history, politics, and military success (Polybius, 2nd BCE)
  - Jewish history in Greece and Rome (Flavius Josephus, 1st BCE)
  - Biographies of great Greeks and Romans as examples of morality (Plutach, 1st BCE)

## B. Roman Historiography

- Roman historians were so in awe of Greek historiography that the first Roman histories were all written in Greek (even when the authors were Latin-speaking Romans)
  - Cato the Elder wrote the first Roman history in Latin
    - and others then wrote in Latin.
  - Roman history was shaped by Cato's focus on ethics and psychology (and rhetorical elegance)
    - Tacitus is the peak expression of this Roman style.

## II: Classical Historians

- Herodotus
- Thucydides &
- Tacitus
  - in some detail

## A: Background – Herodotus

- Herodotus of Halicarnassus
  - Greek historian who lived in the 5th century BC (484 BCE-ca. 425 BCE).
- Most known for writing *The Histories*
  - collection of stories on different places and people he learned about through his travels.
  - *The Histories* include the conflict between Greece and Persia.

## Herodotus's Pre-History

- Little known about his early life, but
  - he was exiled from Halicarnassus
    - after his involvement in an unsuccessful putsch against the ruling dynasty,
    - and he withdrew to the island of Samos.
- He seems never to have returned to Halicarnassus
  - though in his *Histories* he appears proud of native city
  - and its queen, Artemisia.

## Herodotus in Exile

- During this period of exile he undertook the journeys he describes in *The Histories*.
  - to Egypt as far south as the first cataract of the Nile,
  - to Babylon,
  - to Ukraine,
  - and to Italy and Sicily.
- Herodotus mentions an interview with an informant in Sparta,
  - almost certainly he lived for a period in Athens.

## Herodotus in Athens

- In Athens, he mined the oral traditions of the prominent families,
  - esp. Pericles's maternal family.
- But Athenians did not accept foreigners as citizens
  - when Athens sponsored the colony of Thurii in the instep of Italy in 444 BC,
    - Herodotus became a colonist.
    - Whether he died in Thurii or not is uncertain.

## Herodotus's Profession

- He became a *logios* (that is, a reciter of prose *logoi* or stories)
  - his subject matter was tales of battles,
  - other historical incidents,
  - and the marvels of foreign lands.
- As a *logios*, toured Greek cities and the major religious and athletic festivals,
  - offered performances for pay.

## Herodotus & Peloponnesian War

- In 431 BC, the Peloponnesian War broke out between Athens and Sparta.
  - Divided the Greek world
  - and made it dangerous for non-Athenian and non-Spartan Greeks who were torn between the two
- This inspired Herodotus to write the *Histories*
  - a continuous narrative centered on the theme of Persia's imperial progress,
- which Athens and Sparta **as allies** had brought to a halt.

## *The Histories*

- Published between 430 BC and 424 BC
  - divided by later editors into nine books, named after the Muses.
- The first six books deal with the growth of the Persian Empire.
  - Begin with an account of the first Asian monarch to conquer Greek city-states and exact tribute, Croesus of Lydia.
- Croesus lost his kingdom to Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire.

## *The Histories* (2)

- The first six books end with the defeat of the Persians in 490 BC at the Battle of Marathon
  - which was the first setback to their imperial progress.
- The last three books of *The Histories*
  - describe the attempt of Persian king Xerxes ten years later to avenge the Persian defeat at Marathon
    - and absorb Greece into the Persian Empire.
- *The Histories* end with the year 479 BC,
  - when the Persian invaders were wiped out at the Battle of Plataea
  - and the frontier of the Persian Empire receded to the Aegean coastline of Asia Minor.

## Herodotus's Craft

- Starting point for his story is mythology
  - indeed, this is the *logios's* touch
- But later, he draws on oral histories from those involved to recreate the events
- When uncertain of the accuracy or truth of a particular event
  - Herodotus would report the most prominent historical accounts
  - and then opine as to which he believed was accurate and why.

## Looking at Herodotus

- Herodotus, Selections from *The Persian Wars* (430 BCE - 424 BCE)



## B: Background – Thucydides

- Thucydides
  - Greek historian who lived between 460 and 455 BCE–circa 400 BCE
- Author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*,
  - which recounts the first 21 years of the 5th century BCE 27-year war between Sparta and Athens.

## Thucydides's Pre-History

- Almost all we know about Thucydides's life comes from his own *History of the Peloponnesian War*.
- Father was Olorus of Thrace
  - man of influence and wealth.
  - owned gold mines
- Thucydides's ancestors were Athenian statesmen
  - leaders of old aristocracy supplanted by the Radical Democrats.
- Thucydides had two homes: in Athens and in Thrace.
  - His family connections meant that he KNEW the men who shaped the history he wrote about.
- Thus he became a kind of Athenian court historian

## Thucydides & Peloponnesian War

- Probably in his twenties when the Peloponnesian War began in 431 BCE.
  - Contracted the plague that ravaged Athens between 430 and 427 BC, killing Pericles in 429 BC, along with thousands of other Athenians.
- In 424 BC he was appointed *strategos* (general), and given command of a squadron of seven ships.
  - But he failed to prevent the fall of Amphipolis to Sparta
    - and thus, he wrote,
      - “It was also my fate to be an exile from my country for twenty years after my command at Amphipolis; and being present with both parties, and more especially with the Peloponnesians by reason of my exile, I had leisure to observe affairs somewhat particularly.”

## Thucydides in Exile

- As an exile, he could travel freely among the Peloponnesian allies
  - so got war from the perspective of both sides.
  - this was his period of research.
- His *History of the Peloponnesian War* grew out of this experience.
  - but ends before the war does
    - breaks off in the middle of the year 411 BC
- Most probably Thucydides died while still writing (perhaps murdered, according to Pausanias; but this is disputed).

## *History of the Peloponnesian War*

- Thucydides generally regarded as one of the first “true” historians.
- Unlike Herodotus
  - who included rumors and references to myths and the gods in his writing
  - Thucydides:
    - consulted written documents and
    - interviewed participants in the events that he records.
    - was the first historian who strove for complete objectivity.
    - ALSO:
      - He focused on historic causation
- The first “scientific” approach to history.

## But Thucydides is also a CLASSICAL historian

- He is making “literature”
  - see in his inclusion of lengthy speeches
  - and in his juxtaposition of themes
  - Pericles's funeral speech
    - includes an impassioned moral defense of democracy, heaping honor on the dead:
      - “The whole earth is the sepulchre of famous men; they are honoured not only by columns and inscriptions in their own land, but in foreign nations on memorials graven not on stone but in the hearts and minds of men.
    - attributed to Pericles, but Thucydides in fact composed it

## Pericles's Funeral Oration

- and then Thucydides casts it in deliberate contrast to the account of the plague in Athens which immediately follows it:
  - "Though many lay unburied, birds and beasts would not touch them, or died after tasting them.... The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water. The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane. All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many from want of the proper appliances, through so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless sepulchres: sometimes getting the start of those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger's pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off."

## Quotations

- "The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding, go out to meet it."
- "The society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting by fools."

## Reading Thucydides

- Selections from *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (431 BCE)



Thucydides (Mosaic at the Altes Museum, Berlin, Germany.)

## C: Background – Tacitus

- Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus
- Roman orator, lawyer, and senator (ca. 56–ca. 117)
- considered one of antiquity's greatest historians.
- major works: *The Annals* and the *Histories*
  - subject the history of the Roman Empire's first century, from the death of the emperor Augustus in 14 A.D. to the death of the emperor Domitian in 96 A.D.

## Tacitus's Pre-History

- Tacitus's Biography:
  - most information comes from hints in his own work and the work of his friend and admirer, Pliny the Younger
- Tacitus was born in 56 or 57 to an equestrian family;
  - he was from the provinces, probably northern Italy, Gallia Narbonensis, or Hispania.
  - exact place and date of birth are not made explicit.
    - and name not even certain (Gaius as well as Publius used).
- His father was probably the Cornelius Tacitus who was procurator of Belgica and Germania.

## Tacitus's Education

- As a young man he studied rhetoric in Rome as preparation for a career in law and politics;
  - and became well-known as a lawyer and orator
- His skill in public speaking gave a marked irony to his cognomen Tacitus ('silent').

## Tacitus in Roman Service

- Served in the provinces from ca. 89 to ca. 93
  - perhaps in command of a legion,
  - perhaps in a civilian post.
- Survived Domitian's reign of terror (93–96)
  - and served as a senator
  - and started writing his minor works
- Briefly appeared in public again in 100
  - as the successful prosecutor of Marius Priscus (proconsul of Africa) for corruption.

## Tacitus in Private and Public

- After prosecution of Marius Priscus
  - Tacitus withdrew from public life to work on his histories
    - *The Histories*,
    - then the *Annals*.
  - Together, they form a continuous narrative of the era
    - from the death of Augustus (14)
    - to the death of Domitian (96).
- Returned to public life after they were done
  - served in the highest civilian governorship (Roman province of Asia in Western Anatolia) in 112 or 113.
- Sometime between 116 and 125, he died.

## *The Histories*

- Cover the period that started with the civil wars of the Year of Four Emperors and ended with the despotism of the Flavians.
  - Only the first four books and twenty-six chapters of the fifth book have survived, covering the year 69 and the first part of 70.
  - Work is believed to have continued up to the death of Domitian on September 18, 96.
- The fifth book contains (as prelude to the account of Titus's suppression of the Great Jewish Revolt) short ethnographic survey of the ancient Jews
  - an invaluable record of the educated Romans' attitude towards that people
  - Possibly the "first ethnography"

## *The Annals*

- Tacitus's final work
  - covering the period from the death of Augustus Caesar in the year 14.
- He wrote at least sixteen books, but books 7-10 and parts of books 5, 6, 11 and 16 are missing.
  - Book 6 ends with the death of Tiberius and
  - Books 7-12 presumably covered the reigns of Caligula and Claudius.
  - The remaining books cover the reign of Nero, perhaps until his death in June 68 or until the end of that year, to connect with the *Histories*.
  - The second half of book 16 is missing (ending with the events of the year 66).

## Tacitus's Method

- Tacitus was able to consult the official sources of the Roman state:
  - The *acta senatus* (the minutes of the session of the Senate) and
  - The *acta diurna populi Romani* (a collection of the acts of the government and news of the court and capital).
- He could read the collections of speeches by some emperors, such as Tiberius and Claudius.

## Tacitus as Historian

- Generally a scrupulous historian
  - Cites some of his sources directly, among them Pliny the Elder
- And known for his simple literary style
  - (especially in contrast to some of his contemporaries, like Plutarch).

### Tacitus on His Own Approach to History (*Annals* I, 1)

- *inde consilium mihi [...] tradere [...] sine ira et studio, quorum causas procul habeo.*
- “Hence my purpose is to relate [...] without either bitterness or partiality, from any motives to which I am far removed.”

### Tacitus’s Focus

- Main concern: balance of power between the Roman Senate and the Roman Emperors.
  - also in documenting the necessity for having the sympathy of the army to get to power or stay in power as Emperor.
- Overall, he strongly argues against tyranny, corruption, and decadence
- And focuses on the psyches and inner motivations of the historical figures

### Reading Tacitus

- Selections from *The Annals* (109 ACE)



### Classical Historians Together

- General Concerns:
  - State formation, “national” identity, nature of power, what makes a good leader
    - Think here of the audience for their writings
- Interesting Parallel:
  - Outsider-ness
    - Herodotus the Halicarnassian exile and later Thuriian colonist, concerned over the division of Greek unity
    - Thucydides the Thracian hinterlander and part-time Athenian exile, concerned about Athenian supremacy and proving own loyalty
    - Tacitus the provincial-born Northerner from Hispania, documenting the importance of the provinces and the army’s support

### Next Time:

- Historiography in the Middle Ages and Renaissance
- (Procopius, Eusebius, Augustine, Khaldun, Machiavelli, Bodin)