CHAPTER ONE

Histories, annals, myths

Aristotle said that all humans naturally desire knowledge.[1] But not all humans seem to register any particularly urgent need to expand knowledge or to test it, being often quite content, rather, with what passes as received wisdom or with what they are told to believe. Certainly not all have the same explicit or implicit ideas about what counts as knowledge and why, by what criteria, nor as to how to set about increasing it, if indeed they have the ambition to do so.

My target, in this book, is, precisely, what happened when individuals or groups came to have some such ambition, what factors then stimulated or inhibited systematic inquiry.[2] That is to formulate the question in very general terms, but there are, I believe, advantages in focussing on systematic inquiry as such, whatever the fields inquired into and with whatever success. We might be tempted to think of the fields in question as history, or natural philosophy, or medical research, or astronomy or astrology or technology or pure or applied mathematics.[3] But the premature use of those categories of ours is liable to prejudice *our* inquiry. The original investigators did not have *those* categories when they started out, nor even, often, when they finished. Instead of judging their inquiries from the point of view of where we might think they should be headed – 'science', for instance, in a word – we should assess them in the light of their original aims, ambitions, needs, in the contexts of the problems as they saw them.

The undertaking of systematic inquiry reflects one or more very basic human desires (Aristotle was right, for sure, thus far), to understand, to foresee, to explain, to control, the world, or other people. It also

[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980a21.
[2] I attempt no definition of what I mean by 'systematic', but what I have in mind will become clear as we proceed.
[3] This list is, of course, far from exhaustive: anthropology, psychology, geography are among other modern categories that have investigable equivalents in ancient societies.

requires a particular aim or concern with particular questions. But what do those concerns relate to? Whose interests are served? Who is charged with the investigating, and under what conditions, with what degrees of freedom or constraint? Who sets the agenda, and with what expectations concerning its implementation?

To answer those questions takes one to central issues to do with the values and belief systems of the societies or groups concerned. If inquiry is a response to a particular set of concerns, how far does it serve merely to confirm the positions of those who set the agenda? Under what conditions, and within what limits, can it lead to assumptions being revised? Inquiry may indeed be undertaken in order to legitimate the *status quo*. But the sponsorship of inquiry carries with it an element of risk, at least of unpredictability, insofar as its findings are not known in advance of the inquiry itself being conducted. One of the recurrent themes of these studies will be the unexpected nature of the results of investigations.

A second recurrent theme relates to the tension between what we may take as universal human cognitive ambitions (to understand, explain and so on) and their society-specific manifestations. The focus of my inquiry is on ancient civilisations, for that is where we can best study the inauguration of systematic inquiries. Although it is clearly beyond any single individual's competence to deal with the entire gamut of ancient societies – and for my part I shall concentrate here on Greece and China and to a lesser extent Mesopotamia – I would still insist on the need for a comparative approach, and that for two related reasons. First we need to be careful not to assume that the experience of any one ancient society provides the pattern for them all, let alone that there was any inevitability about the way in which the developments *must* have occurred. Secondly in order, precisely, to identify which features are general, which society-specific.

Among the questions I shall raise are: what techniques of prediction were developed, with what aims in view and with what results? How and in what respects were numbers seen as the key to understanding phenomena and systems accordingly elaborated in order to explore such a possibility? How far was systematic inquiry directed to the development of devices of practical utility, and stimulated by a sense of their desirability? To what extent did inquiry depend on developments in language – on the construction of a technical vocabulary – and lead in its turn to self-conscious reflections on language use? My final chapter will take stock of the different types of institutional framework within which systematic inquiry could and did develop, and the effects of those institutions on the investigators concerned and on the nature of the work they did.

But to start our inquiry into inquiry, where better to begin than with history itself, both in the modern sense of historiography, and in the earlier, more general one, of research, still traceable in our term 'natural history'? Evidently in relation to ancient civilisations we cannot assume there will be a category that corresponds to historiography as such. In practice, as we shall see, the relationship between what we might call historical writings and other disciplines, in Greece and China, exhibits certain differences that have an important bearing on what those writings were for.

But we must first pay attention to the even greater variety of ways in which the past is represented and used as a resource for understanding the present or as a guide for future action. It may or may not be the case that the past is thought of as a seamless whole, continuous with the present. Was past time like the present, inhabited by people like us? Or rather a time of gods or heroes, or in other ways importantly different from today's time? Does time, in any case, always run in the same direction? Many societies have contemplated reversals of time, or cycles that repeat themselves in general or even in every particular, as is reported for Eudemus in Greece, according to Simplicius (*In Ph.* 732.26). In India the sense of the immensity of the Kalpa cycle serves to underline the illusory nature of the present.[4] In many societies the calendar is divided into stretches of sacred and profane time that are experienced as qualitatively different.[5]

Whatever the perception of the flow of time may be, what the past is used for, and the ways in which it is recorded and accessed, may differ profoundly. Whatever myths may say about distant times, they are likely to have messages also for present conduct, laying down rules, explicitly or implicitly, about how things are and must be, and about the dire consequences of deviant behaviour. Those rules themselves, and the myths that convey them, may not be thought to have origins: or they may be thought to have come into being with the present dispensation, the way the world is now. But that does not diminish, but enhances, their authority, their power to express values, constrain, justify, legitimate.[6] Of course the relationship between myth and ritual, the role of myth as

[4] See Thapar 1996.

[5] Leach 1961 provides a good summary of this theme, elaborated earlier by Durkheim among others. The theme of the contrast between the 'time of the gods' and the 'time of humans' in Greek thought was the subject of a classic study by Vidal-Naquet, 1986 ch. 2 (the original French publication dates from 1960).

[6] Jewish accounts of the past, so it has been argued, provide a striking example of the use of such material to legitimate, in this case, the status of the Jews as the elect of god. See, for example, Murray 2000, and cf. Cartledge 1995 on the Greeks.

charter, the very question of how the category of myth is to be defined and whether there *is* a valid category to be used as a tool of analysis, are all hotly debated issues in modern scholarship. But it is enough, for my purposes, that sacred tales about the past often act as guides and constraints for present behaviour and understanding. The potential for change, once the past is scrutinised and researched, is obvious, although that scrutiny may merely serve to confirm what had been believed all along.

How those stories are transmitted raises, to be sure, a further fundamental issue. Once committed to a form of writing, their status changes, though that may be in a variety of far from straightforward ways. We do not need to agree with all of Goody's theses from his seminal work on literacy and orality to appreciate the force of some of the basic points that have emerged.[7] First it is clear that the contrast between literacy and orality is far from being an all-or-nothing affair. Some forms of graphic representation are found in societies that have no standard script. Degrees of fluency in reading and writing exhibit, importantly, wide fluctuations.

Secondly, each oral performance of a myth is a *re*telling, a *re*creation, and that is significant for what counts as the *same* myth. The *Myth of the Bagre*, which Goody transcribed among the LoDagaa, is, according to the LoDagaa themselves, always the same: it never varies. Yet it does. Some of his later transcriptions even contain references to Goody himself, sitting in the background with his tape-recorder.[8]

Nor, thirdly, should we assume that once a written version of a myth exists, that will spell the immediate demise of any version that does not conform to it. The Japanese *Heike Monogatari* shows that that does not always happen, for even after it was written down, two traditions, one to be read, one for oral performance, coexisted for more than 150 years.[9]

That takes me to a fourth, fundamental, point, the question of the nature of the criticisms to which an account, once written, is subject. Clearly if the written version is deemed to be the canonical one, that allows the possibility of checking an oral performance that relies purely on memory. But, as Goody recognises, other modes of criticism, including of the substance of an oral performance, are well attested in oral cultures.[10] Moreover while the existence of written versions opens up one avenue

[7] Goody's own position has evolved: compare Goody and Watt 1962–3 with Goody 1977, 1986, 1987 and 1997. Among the more prominent other contributors to the debate have been Havelock 1963, Vansina 1965 and 1985, Scribner and Cole 1981, Gentili and Paioni 1985, Detienne 1988, Kullmann and Althoff 1993, Street 1997 and Bottéro, Herrenschmidt and Vernant 1996.

[8] See Goody 1972 and Goody and Gandah 1981.

[9] See Butler 1966.

[10] See, for example, Phillips 1981 on Sijobang.

for criticism, it may close others off. Jonathan Parry has urged this point against Goody in relation to the status achieved by *sacred* texts in certain societies.[11] Holy scripture may invite ruminative reflection, meditation, learned commentary, yet be anything but open to sceptical, critical evaluation.

The main topic for our analysis may now be broached. Both China and Greece produced in some abundance, from around the fifth century BCE onwards, what we may provisionally call historical records, accounts that set out and comment on past events. The questions for us are: how was such writing used? On what basis were these accounts compiled? Who did the compiling? By what criteria was their work assessed? My aim is to investigate how the past came to be perceived as an important area of research and how that related to other inquiries.

We may begin with China. While much remains disputed about the earliest beginnings, a clear sequence of development can be traced, through extant texts of the Warring States period (i.e. before the unification in 221), culminating in the work most would identify as the first sustained Chinese general history, namely the *Shiji*. This was started by Sima Tan in the second century BCE and largely brought to completion by 90 BCE by his son, Sima Qian, about whom more in due course. But the *Shiji* drew on, even if it went beyond, earlier models, notably the tradition of the writing of annals, best exemplified, in early extant texts, by the *Chunqiu*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, together with the commentaries on them, such as the *Zuozhuan*. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* covers the reigns of the twelve Dukes of the state of Lu, from 722 to 491 BCE, and was often ascribed to Confucius himself (traditionally dated to 551–479), indeed was so already by Mencius in the fourth century.[12] But we have to be careful, since it is entirely uncertain what text Mencius read. As for the *Zuozhuan*, whether its original form was as a commentary is unclear, as also is its date: the compilation as we now have it is more likely to date to the very end of the fourth century BCE rather than to any earlier period.[13]

[11] Parry 1985. The point that literacy may not liberate, but foreclose liberation, was already made by Lévi-Strauss (1973, p. 299: 'the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery').

[12] Mencius III B 9.

[13] The date of the *Zuozhuan* is disputed. See, for example, Egan 1977, A. Cheng 1993, Brooks 1994 and Sivin 1995b IV 3. The value of this text as a historical source for the period it covers between the late eighth and the mid-fourth centuries BCE is also a matter of controversy. Brooks and Brooks 1998, p. 8, take a highly sceptical line. Pines 1997 is more optimistic about it containing reliable reports of the events it records. See Lloyd and Sivin 2002, p. 305 .

Both these texts purport to contain the records of events. In the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, these are set out season by season (hence the name), though this is done in the barest outline, with no connecting narrative. Births, marriages, deaths, the accession of rulers, victories, defeats, droughts, famines, floods, eclipses, are duly noted, but while the fortunes of Kings and states are recorded, this is without explicit interpretative comment. The *Annals* are a celebration of past deeds, rescuing them from oblivion: but they also contain lessons for the present, even if we are left largely to make our own connections and to infer the reasons for prosperity or decline.

In the *Zuozhuan*, by contrast, events are woven into a continuous, vivid narrative, with graphic portrayals of the characters of the chief persons involved – loyal or untrustworthy, upright or corrupt, cautious or foolhardy – interspersed with pithy judgements, some ascribed to Confucius by name, others just to an unnamed 'gentleman' (*junzi*). The story is punctuated by the praise or blame of the main agents.

Yet when the *Zuozhuan* sets down what purport to be the conversations of those agents going back more than 240 years, strict historicity has pretty clearly been subordinated to the dramatic needs of the narrative. It is true that the role of scribes or historians (*dashi*), as represented in the text,[14] includes the duty to record events as they happened, however unpopular that might make them in the eyes of those in power. Thus in the account of the assassination of Duke Zhuang of Qi by his chief minister, Cui Shu, we are told that first one historian and then two of his brothers recorded that 'Cui Shu killed his ruler', only for all three to be put to death one after another.[15] Another brother eventually got the entry into the record (and indeed the remark about the killing corresponds to one we find in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) and we are even told that there was someone else ready to come and make sure the entry was made. Clearly we are meant to be impressed by this example of the dedication of historians to the truth, even when this offended ministers. At the same time the falsification of records, precisely to suit those in positions of power, no doubt happened often enough.[16]

Moreover we cannot rule out the possibility that this very story owes its origin to the authors of the *Zuozhuan* inventing a suitably edifying

[14] On the original role of the *shi*[I] as chief ritualist in the period prior to the Warring States, see Cook 1995.

[15] Duke Xiang 25th Year, 1099: cf. Vandermeersch 1994, p. 105, Lewis 1999, p. 130.

[16] Huang Yi-long 2001, gives a detailed analysis both of cases where astronomical events are not recorded (because not politically or at least not symbolically acceptable) and – conversely – of others where phenomena are invented for the sake of the omens they convey.

framework for that entry in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. However, once the veracity of a record becomes a question, we can see that an important step has been taken – *away* from an account of the past (whether oral or written) that merely serves the purposes of celebration or legitimation (let alone of entertainment), *towards* one that may indeed continue to serve those purposes but recognises some obligation to *accuracy* and indeed derives its power from its ability to offer some justification for the claim to deliver that.

Sima Qian's project undoubtedly represents a far more sustained and self-critical attempt at an accurate universal history, although the points should not be exaggerated. On the one hand, a critical attitude towards his sources, and to what others believed, is evident in many passages. He corrects other accounts on matters of fact, such as chronology or geography (e.g. on the Kunlun mountains and the source of the Yellow River, e.g. *Shiji* 123: 3179.5ff). He explicitly disclaims knowledge of very early periods – of the times of Shennong (the supposed founder of agriculture) and before[17] – and he acknowledges that he has to leave gaps in his chronological tables. On the positive side, he claims to have access to archives from the imperial palace, he frequently refers to his own extensive travels, and he cites inscriptions, edicts and memorials apparently verbatim,[18] even though he also remarks that, with the Qin especially, much had been destroyed – and not just in the notorious episode of the burning of the books, ordered by Li Si, in 213 BCE.[19]

On the other hand, he starts his account with at least a token reference to the Yellow Emperor (supposed to have lived long before dynastic times) and like the *Zuozhuan*, the *Shiji* includes many quite imaginary conversations from early times. Sima Qian repeats such legends as that of Jian Di, the mother of Xie, the founder of the Yin, who became pregnant on swallowing an egg laid by a black bird. Again the Zhou dynasty is traced back to Jiang Yuan, who became pregnant after she had walked in the footsteps of a giant.[20]

Yet in that case, in the sequel, some undercutting occurs. The child Jiang Yuan bore was Hou Ji, Lord of the Millet, who in other early

[17] *Shiji* 129: 3253.5. He also expresses some doubts about stories about ghosts and spirits, though his denial of these is not unequivocal.

[18] For example, *Shiji* 130: 3296.1f. *Shiji* 121: 3115.5 claims that Confucius already used earlier records to create the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

[19] There are two main, but by no means identical, accounts of this in *Shiji* 6: 255.6ff and 87: 2546.11ff, cf. also 15:686. This became a favourite theme with those who set out to blacken the reputation of the Qin and we may suspect some exaggeration in the accounts of how far Li Si's proposals were implemented.

[20] *Shiji* 3: 91.1ff, 4: 111.1ff.

Chinese texts is treated as a divine figure in charge of grain with a number of not merely human exploits to his name.[21] In Sima Qian's version, he was appointed by Emperor Shun to take charge of agriculture to save people from starvation, but his successes there are put down to his hard work and skill, rather than to any miraculous powers he might have. This gives a more naturalistic twist to the story, though Sima Qian does not go as far as some Greek writers might have done, in such circumstances, by explicitly dismissing traditional tales as absurd.[22] In particular, he does not bring to that task a concept that corresponds to *muthos* in the pejorative sense of fiction (not its only sense, as we shall see in a moment). Indeed he does not have a category that approximates to that at all, not even the term that was introduced into Chinese, but only much later, to cover some senses of 'myth', namely *shenhua*, literally spirit talk.

But the *Shiji* is not *just* history, nor its author just a historian, and both points are important. The work is organised in five main sections. First there are the 'Basic Annals', the accounts of the main dynasties from their foundation to their fall. These are followed, secondly, by chronological tables. Then comes a third section, a group of treatises, dealing with the calendar and astronomy, waterways, agriculture, music and ritual. The fourth section contains the memoirs of the 'hereditary families', but includes the biographies of Confucius and some other prominent figures. Finally a group of seventy chapters ('traditions', *zhuan*) contains biographies of statesmen, scholars and others, often paired or grouped together to illustrate particular types, and including chapters devoted to 'assassin retainers', 'money makers' and 'jesters'. This last section draws out certain general lessons from the fluctuating fortunes of historical figures otherwise anchored in the narrative account. But it is the third section, the treatises, above all, that incorporates material that goes far beyond what *we* normally expect in historical writing.

Yet the inclusion of that material is entirely appropriate, given first Sima Qian's own official position and secondly the overall aim of the work, where it will be helpful to compare it with other types of writing that are in no way historiographical but that share the *Shiji*'s ambition to convey information on matters of importance for government. First, as to the office that first Sima Tan and then Sima Qian himself occupied: Sima Qian refers to his father as *taishi gong*, and he quotes his father as claiming

[21] For example *Shijing* Mao 245, *Sheng min*.

[22] See, for example, below on Hecataeus. This is not to deny that Chinese historians repeatedly criticise one another. Already Ban Gu's evaluation of Sima Qian contains negative as well as positive points, *Hanshu* 62: 2737.1ff, 8, 2738.2ff, and hostile judgements recur in later commentators.

that members of their family had been *taishi* for generations.[23] On his father's death, he became *taishi ling*, or *taishi gong*, in turn, though that did not last. He fell out with the Emperor Wu Di because he defended the conduct of Li Ling, the officer who had commanded a disastrous expedition against the Xiong Nu, the barbarians often identified with the Hun. Sima Qian was arrested and would have been executed, but for the fact that he chose the humiliation of castration instead, precisely in order to be able to complete his father' work. Yet the story does not end there. Remarkably, according to the evidence in Ban Gu's history of the Han, the *Hanshu* (written about 80 CE), Sima Qian once again held office even after his disgrace, though not as *taishi*, but as *zhong shu ling* ('Secretariat Director', in Hucker's translation), in which role, indeed, according to Ban Gu again, he even won considerable honour.[24]

But what were the duties of the *taishi*? (For present purposes, I shall not go into the question of the differences between this and the other two titles, *taishi gong* and *taishi ling*, also used of Sima Qian[25].) English translations vary confusingly between Grand Scribe, Grand Historian or Grand Historiographer, Grand Astrologer, even Astronomer Royal.[26] When we encounter individuals with that title or, what seems the equivalent, *dashi*, whether in the *Shiji* or the *Zuozhuan*, we find them undertaking a variety of roles. These certainly included acting as the recorder of events (as we have seen in the story about Cui Shu's assassination that I mentioned from the *Zuozhuan*). But they were also consulted on ritual matters and they carried out divinations or interpreted those conducted by others and omens and prodigies generally.

It so happens that the predominant modes of divination associated with such figures in the *Zuozhuan* are those based on turtle shells and milfoil, rather than on the interpretation of astronomical signs or portents. However, there is no discontinuity between the divinatory and the astronomical interests of the *taishi*, as is apparent also from what we are told of Sima Tan's own training.[27] That included studies in astronomy as well as

[23] *Shiji* 130: 3295.2ff. Upholding the family's reputation was evidently an important motivation for Sima Qian's work. See Nylan 1998–9, who mounts a powerful case for the role of piety and of considerations of religious propriety in Sima Qian's thought.

[24] *Hanshu* 62: 2725.1. In contrast to Hucker 1985, p. 193, Bielenstein 1980, p. 212, glosses the *zhong shu ling* as 'Prefect of the Palace Writers'.

[25] All three expressions are used not just of Sima Tan but also of Sima Qian, even though the *gong* added in *taishi gong* is honorific, not the title of an office.

[26] See, for example, Needham 1959 xlv, cf. Watson 1961 (Grand Historian), Hulsewé 1993, Queen 1996, Hardy 1999 (Grand Astrologer), Dawson 1994 (Grand Historiographer), Nienhauser 1994a (Grand Scribe).

[27] *Shiji* 130: 3288.1ff.

in the classic divinatory text, the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*. As a recorder of events, a *taishi* would certainly be concerned with the calendar (though not necessarily, to be sure, with calendar reform) and as a diviner he might well be called upon to interpret signs from heaven. When one of the later dynastic histories, the *Hou Hanshu* (25: 3572.1 ff), comes to define the duties of the *taishi ling*, it specifies (1) being in charge of the calendar and ephemerides, (2) choosing auspicious dates and times for state business, sacrifices, funerals, weddings and so on, and (3) recording propitious and baneful omens as they occur.

Since a *taishi* would be expected to be learned in astronomy and ritual, the inclusion of treatises on those subjects in the *Shiji* makes good sense. But what about the essays on agriculture, or on aspects of music, such as acoustics, that go beyond ceremonial? Here we have to look further afield for precursors or models, to works such as the *Lüshi chunqiu*, and *Huainanzi*, compendia that offer comprehensive advice to rulers.

The first of these, the *Lüshi chunqiu*, was compiled under the direction of Lü Buwei (before 237 BCE), who was minister to the man who eventually became the first Qin Emperor, Qin Shi Huang Di, although Lü fell from grace before the unification of China was complete. The text he was responsible for compiling contains advice not just on how rulers, ministers and others should conduct themselves, but on music, medicine, agriculture and on the nature of the basic principles at work in the universe, in other words cosmology. Similarly from the second century BCE, the *Huainanzi* (put together under the auspices of Liu An, King of Huainan) set itself an ambitious programme encompassing pretty much the whole of useful knowledge.[28]

The *Shiji* itself does not, to be sure, have the pretensions to comprehensiveness that we find in such works. Yet the addition of the treatises was no

[28] A third such comprehensive treatise, the *Chunqiu fanlu*, should also be mentioned. This was attributed to Dong Zhongshu, a famous memorialist and statesman who lived from 179 to 104 BCE. It too, however, was a compilation, and how much of the text we have was composed by Dong Zhongshu himself is controversial, see Arbuckle 1989, 1991, Queen 1996. On the one hand Sima Qian evidently knew and admired Dong Zhongshu, including a short biography of him in which he praised his honesty and learning (*Shiji* 121: 3128.5 and 8). More importantly, in the final chapter of the *Shiji* 130: 3297.1 ff, when Sima Qian defends his own practice as a historian, under hostile questioning from Hu Sui, he cites with approval Dong Zhongshu's interpretation of Confucius' role as that of 'giving instruction in the business of a ruler', where the best way of doing so, as Confucius himself is cited as saying, is by 'illustrating this through the depth and clarity of events'. (This is important testimony that Sima Qian represented himself as following Confucius' model in his own book, even though he enters a disclaimer, saying that he did not *make* a work as Confucius did, but merely *transmitted* a record of past affairs: 3299.1–3300.1.) On the other hand, neither of these chapters in the *Shiji* cites the *Chunqiu fanlu* as such, which is never mentioned explicitly in the *Shiji*, even though the commentators take as an allusion to it a remark at 14: 510.5, that Dong Zhongshu 'extended' the *Springs and Autumns*.