

## THE GREEKS AND THEIR HISTORIES

In this concise but stimulating book on history and Greek culture, Hans-Joachim Gehrke continues to refine his work on ‘intentional history’, which he defines as a history in the self-understanding of social groups and communities – connected to a corresponding understanding of the other – which is important, even essential, for the collective identity, social cohesion, political behaviour, and cultural orientation of such units. In a series of four chapters, Gehrke illustrates how Greeks’ histories were consciously employed to help shape political and social realities. In particular, he argues that poets were initially the masters of the past, and that this dominance of the aesthetic in the view of the past led to an indissoluble amalgamation of myth and history and lasting tension between poetry and truth in the genre of historiography. The book reveals a more sophisticated picture of Greek historiography, its intellectual foundations, and its wider social-political contexts.

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# THE GREEKS AND THEIR HISTORIES

*Myth, History, and Society*

HANS-JOACHIM GEHRKE

*Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany*

*Translated by Raymond Geuss, University of Cambridge*



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## Foreword

Jonas Grethlein

Ranke famously declared that it is the task of the historian to reconstruct the past ‘how it actually was’ and he identified Thucydides as the ‘father of all true history’. Both his understanding of history and his esteem for Thucydides are representative of the nineteenth century, a century in which historiography blossomed into a leading discipline. The ideas of historicism soon came under fire – Nietzsche fiercely polemicised against the anaemia of antiquarianism while historians like Lamprecht challenged the inordinate focus on the political history of the state – but its premises were to have a lasting impact on approaches to antiquity and its relation to the past. For a long time, scholars concentrated on ancient historians, envisaging them as the predecessors of modern historians. If non-historiographic forms of memory came into view, they were considered chiefly as steps in a development that would ultimately lead to the emergence of historiography.<sup>1</sup>

The past decades, however, have seen a mounting interest in the various forms and media of memory. To give a few examples: Loraux (1981) examined funeral speeches as the semi-official history of Athens; Bowie (1986) made a case for historical elegy, which was corroborated by the discovery of the ‘New Simonides’; Chaniotis<sup>2</sup> investigated inscriptional records of the past; Alcock (2002) considered the role of ruins and other material remains; Higbie (2003) explored the commemorative function of votives in her study of the Lindian chronicle. Inquiries into the memory of particular events – for example, Jung (2006) on the battles of Marathon and Plataea and Luraghi (2008) on the construction of the Messenian past – also addressed a wide range of media.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Deichgräber, Karl (1952, 7–56); Gomme, A. W. (1954) *The Greek Attitude to Poetry and History*, Berkeley; Châtelet, François (1962) *La naissance de l'histoire*, Paris; Mazzarino, Santo (1966) *Il pensiero storico classico*, Rome.

<sup>2</sup> Chaniotis, Angelos (1988) *Historie und Historiker in den griechischen Inschriften*, Stuttgart.

Despite this widening of the scope, the privileging of historiography, explicit or implicit, has proven tenacious. It is tangible even in Boedeker's masterful and far-reaching survey of representations of the Persian War in the fifth century BC when she speaks of 'the paradox that historiography itself develops late in a city so rich in memorials of its great past deeds'.<sup>3</sup> Is it a paradox? Should we not rather ask why historiography emerged in an already crowded field of memory?

It is one of the merits of Gehrke's *The Greeks and Their Histories* that it provides a conceptual grid that allows us to examine various commemorative media in their own right as well as reassess historiography. Gehrke advances what he calls 'an etic perspective on an emic (intentional) state of affairs', that is, a reconstruction in our terms of how the Greeks viewed their past (and not the examination of the correctness of their memories). While the framework is thus set by Berger's and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge, which tackles the structures of plausibilities forged in a society, the broad focus is inspired by Halbwachs' concept of *mémoire collective* and its reception by Assmann. More specifically, Gehrke resuscitates the notion of 'intentional history', coined by the anthropologist Mühlmann (1938) in the analysis of ethnic identities and later made fruitful for the study of history by Wenskus (1961). 'Intentional history' signifies the memories of the past that help define the identity of a group. The heuristic value of this term is that it sidelines the question of whether ancient records of the past are reliable or not and instead addresses their significance and functions for the groups that remembered the past.

Kant observed that while 'intuitions without concepts are blind', 'thoughts without content are empty'. The richness of the material that Gehrke unfolds before the eyes of the reader is another merit of *The Greeks and Their Histories*. Bringing together sources that belong to the domains of different disciplines, he discusses inscriptions as well as oral traditions, examines pictorial records of the past together with poetry and oratory, and is sensitive to the importance of rituals. The numerous examples presented in the course of his study provide compelling evidence for the agonistic structure of Greek memory, for its deep roots in specific contexts and the close entwinement of the past with the present. Gehrke's familiarity with the full range of sources and his impressive command of scholarship yield a unique survey of the important functions that the past served in ancient Greece and the multitude of forms in which it was evoked.

<sup>3</sup> Boedeker, Deborah (1988) *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens*, Cambridge, MA, 185–6.

Gehrke's book also substantiates a key hope attached to the series Classical Scholarship in Translation. The series aims not only to make the books selected for translation better known in the anglophone world but also to give readers access to the traditions to which the books are indebted. Gehrke's thinking, for example, is influenced by his mentor Heuß and his interest in how the Greeks envisaged the world. He also draws on other works that have received little attention in anglophone scholarship, for example, Prinz's (1979) investigation of ancient Greek foundation myths and the articles of Strasburger (1982/1990) on memory and historiography. Of course, new questions have surfaced, and new approaches have been ushered in, but, for example, Strasburger's reassessment of Hellenistic historiography and his argument that the experiential accounts by Agatharchides and others, instead of being a deterioration of methodological standards, need to be taken seriously as a form of mimesis, still read fresh.

The argument of Gehrke itself illustrates the boundaries between national traditions of scholarship. In the second half of the book, Gehrke turns to historiography, which he also considers as a form of intentional history, without, however, ignoring what distinguishes the reports of Herodotus & Co. from other forms of memory. One of the links between historiographic and non-historiographic memory on which Gehrke elaborates is rhetoric. Given the salience of rhetoric in the ancient world, this emphasis is not surprising, but it is noteworthy that Gehrke does not reference the works of Woodman, which, while being discussed controversially, were key for directing the focus of anglophone scholars on the rhetorical nature of ancient historiography. The comparison is illuminating – Woodman pushes his argument far, contending 'that there is no theoretical basis whatsoever for the view that classical historiography resembles its namesake. Historiography was regarded by the ancients as not essentially different from poetry: each was a branch of rhetoric, and therefore historiography, like poetry, employs the concepts associated with, and relies upon the expectations generated by, a rhetorical genre.'<sup>4</sup> Gehrke, on the other hand, does not see rhetoric and truth necessarily at loggerheads – he sees, of course, the danger of neglecting the truth in order to dazzle the reader, but, aware of the close relation between experience and narrative, he notes that narrative is an indispensable means of representing the past and its careful crafting has the capacity of making it present to readers.

<sup>4</sup> Woodman, A. J. (1988) *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, London, x.



It is also interesting to compare the different angles: whereas Woodman starts with a close reading of Thucydides' methodological reflections and then goes on to discuss Cicero's comments on history, Gehrke zooms in on Isocrates and the influence he is said to have had on Ephorus and Theopompus. Isocrates is not an author with whom many classicists sympathise, but Gehrke takes him seriously and aligns his meditations on truth and representation with those of Thucydides. I wonder if the prominence of Isocrates in Gehrke's argument is incidental. Gehrke calls Isokrates 'a great teacher and educator', a label that several generations of students and scholars would unhesitatingly assign to Gehrke himself. I also suspect that Isocrates' pragmatism resonates with Gehrke, who, besides his illustrious scholarly career, was also active in the highest circles of academic politics in Germany, for example as a member of the senate of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and as the president of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

Thucydides concedes that his account of the Peloponnesian War 'will seem less entertaining; but if those, who wish to view *to saphes* of the things which took place and of those which one day, given human nature, are destined to take place again in more or less the same fashion, should judge my work useful, that will be enough' (1.22.4). Woodman (1988: 23–8) contests that *to saphes* here means 'complete accuracy' (Lesky) or 'the truth' (Dover) and instead ties it to the rhetorical category of *enargeia* – Thucydides lays claim not to truthfulness but to graphic quality. Gehrke also discusses the vivid presentation to which ancient historians aspired, but he does not see it necessarily conflict with the goal of truthfulness. I suspect that he would hear both sides in Thucydides' reference to *to saphes*.

Gehrke's own prose is vivid and vigorous. He not only exposes his theory in an unassuming and direct manner, making his claims tangible through examples, but also writes in an unusually engaging style. Thanks to the translation of the philosopher Raymond Geuss, his meditation on the significance of history in ancient Greece can now also be appreciated by anglophone readers. Whether they raise their eyebrows when they encounter some positions – for example that the impact of the shift from orality to literacy should not be overestimated – or wish to extend Gehrke's approach to the Imperial period, which is not addressed but has become one of the foci of (not only) anglophone scholarship – *The Greeks and Their Histories* is bound to enrich the ongoing discussion about the 'grip of the past' in ancient Greece.

## *Preface to the German Edition*

This book is an interim report on work-in-progress, in the sense that in it I try to give a preliminary summing up of the results of the reflections on history that have engaged me for many decades. This has been a collaborative venture of research, teaching, and conversation, involving many other scholars, which has been conducted in a wide variety of formats, some rather informal but some more strictly institutionalised. I have derived much inspiration from the other participants in this process.

I think here especially of the Graduate Collegium ‘Ancient Presents and Their Pasts’, initiated by Volker Michael Strocka in Freiburg, the Special Research Programme ‘Identities and Alterities’, which I planned, organised, and moderated for a period of time (also in Freiburg), and the European Network for the Study of Ancient Greek History, which provided an especially congenial and multi-faceted milieu for work in this area and constantly threw up new ideas for further research. It was in the context of the European Network that, together with Lyn Foxhall (Leicester) and Nino Luraghi (Princeton), I was able to organise a conference specifically focused on the topic of intentional history.

One high point in the history of my reflections on this subject was the very fruitful academic year I spent in 2012/2013 as Professor for the Cultural History of the Ancient World at the Munich Centre for Ancient Worlds (MZAW) at the University there. In my seminars with doctoral candidates, and also in numerous conversations I had with students and colleagues from Munich and elsewhere, I found myself reaching out to make connections that I would otherwise have found it hard to envisage.

The series of public lectures I was invited to give in Munich on the topic of ‘History as an element in (ancient) culture’ provided an opportunity to formulate my views, to see them subjected to discussion, and to develop them further in the light of criticism. After several further rounds of criticism by colleagues in Munich and revisions which, I hope, have made them more substantial and better grounded, these lectures finally

took the form of this opusculum. The small difference between the title of these lectures and that of the book, and the greater length and level of annotation of the latter, indicate the changes that have taken place between the time of the original lectures and this written version. It was precisely the intellectual richness of the environment in Munich that allowed me to impose my problems and concerns on many of my conversational partners and thus to remain focused on the ancient world. I did not, consequently, get as far in treating this history as I had originally planned. I succumbed once again to the fascination of the study of this period and hope the reader can feel something of that fascination in the text.

My special thanks then go to the colleagues at the Munich Centre for the Study of Ancient Worlds (MZAW), who were kind enough to accept me as one of their own for a while, and who then made my time there so marvellously pleasant and productive. I would also like to thank the doctoral students in my two seminars, whose seminar presentations and contributions to the discussion, often as a response to things I said, gave me more food for thought than they probably realised. 'Off to new frontiers' was the inscription on the card that accompanied the gift which they very generously presented to me on the occasion of my leaving.

I would like to return the sentiment. I am very grateful to the following helpful members of the staff of the Centre: Isabella Wiegand, Sandra Zerbin, and Nicole Schüler. They seemed always to have time to provide assistance, even of the most varied kind, not to mention the interesting conversations that often ensued (with or without coffee, which, as far as I could tell, never seemed to run out). My time at the MZAW had one further, and highly gratifying, result: In June 2013 and January 2014, two workshops took place in Freiburg on 'Ancient Historiography and Conceptions of the Past'. The participants in these two workshops were chiefly younger scholars from Munich and Freiburg, but also from many much more far-flung places. This led to the founding of the 'International Network historiai'.

Portions of the following text have been presented on different occasions in various places: in 2010, at a meeting of the contributors to the Protestant–Catholic commentary on the New Testament in Frankfurt; in Heidelberg, at an event to celebrate Tonio Hölscher; in 2012, at the Princeton Department of Classics; in Vienna, at a conference organised by Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz for the Research Group 'Visions of Community'; at the Free University of Berlin, in the context of a Colloquium of the Excellence Cluster TOPOI; and, in 2013, at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. May I take this opportunity to thank

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all those who invited me to speak and all those who helped me with tips, references, and suggestions in the various discussions. Finally, the production of the book has gone remarkably smoothly. Christian Kunze contributed to illustrations, and Serena Pirrotta (in addition to the other members of the de Gruyter team) were ideal editors. My thanks to them all.

## *Preface*

It came as something of a surprise to me when the slim volume containing some guest lectures I gave at the University of Munich during the academic year 2012/2013 was received with such enthusiasm. The attempt that I made in these lectures to place Greek historiography in the wider context of the ways in which ancient society in general conceived of the past was a bit of an experiment for me, and so I was extremely pleased when readers seemed to think that I was on the right track. I take this to be a confirmation of the potential fruitfulness of this line of enquiry. That is one of the reasons I am especially glad that this *opusculum* will now appear in English and, consequently, be more easily accessible to an international readership. I have taken the opportunity provided by the translation to correct a few accidental oversights in the text and to take account of some of the recent literature.

I have several people to thank for organising the translation and for the way in which it was carried out. In the first instance, I should like to thank the editors of the new Cambridge University Press series ‘Classical Scholarship in Translation’, Renaud Gagné and Jonas Grethlein, who originally took the initiative for this project and pursued it with great energy. I must thank Jonas Grethlein for writing a Foreword to this work, and I must also thank Raymond Geuss, who worked assiduously to produce a brilliant translation of my sometimes rebarbative German text. The intense exchanges with him, which went far beyond the discussion of specific formulations and verbal nuances, were a particular intellectual pleasure, especially during a winter in which a pandemic was raging.

Mark Marsh-Hunn, who has been such a great help to me in so many ways during the past few years, displayed his usual precision and conscientiousness in reading the proofs and especially in making the index. Two editors of Cambridge University Press oversaw the editorial and production sides of the publication, Michael Sharp and Katie Idle, as well as Adam

Bell of Ambb Editorial, and it was a great relief for me to know that this meant that the work was in the best possible hands.

Finally, I wish to thank the officers of the Gerda Henkel Foundation, who authorised a substantial grant that made possible the translation and publication of the book.

I am very grateful to these people and to all those who helped to bring the book to publication. I hope that their efforts have not been in vain.

## *Note on Abbreviations*

The abbreviations are used according to: *Der Neue Pauly (DNP): Enzyklopädie der Antike*. Edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, vol. I, Stuttgart 1996 (English version: *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*. Edited by Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, and Christine F. Salazar, vol. I, Leiden 2002; New Pauly Online <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/brill-s-new-pauly>).