

The Traditional Forms of the “History of the Present” from Herodotus to Humanist Historians*

Gonzalo Pasamar

gpasamar@unizar.es

Professor

Universidad de Zaragoza

Calle de Pedro Cerbuna, 12

50009 - Zaragoza

Spain

Abstract

The present article revolves around the interest in contemporary history from ancient writers to humanist historians. Its objective, which forms part of a broader purpose devoted to elucidating the characteristics of the so-called History of the Present, is to examine the forms this interest has traditionally adopted. In this way, we put for consideration the following hypothesis: from classical historians onwards, the concern with contemporary history was always considered a hard and inevitable task to be undertaken, since it affected rulers and living people. Nevertheless, the long-standing doctrine of history as memory of events for centuries had prevented historians from facing paradoxes that result from the interest in contemporary past; in other words, how can historians confront the political uses, memories and demands of public opinion to deal with the recent past without jeopardizing historical truth?

Keywords

History of present time, *Historia magistra vitae*, Cultural memory.

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The "History of the Present" is one of the most visible "new histories" in the current panorama of historiography. To this trend neither reasons for an alleged lack of perspective to tackle recent facts, nor the nineteenth-century prejudice that confined the historian to establishing the basic facts of the past, have been convincing arguments to eschew the study of contemporary events. On the contrary, this has shifted from being considered a reference or fixed period, too close to claim the attention of historians, to being seen as one of variable extension simply interesting for being informed by the existence of living actors and witnesses (AROSTEGUI 2004, p. 101-107). However, as various authors have pointed out, the History of the Present, understood in this sense, is not exactly an invention of recent historians, given that interest in witnessing close events dates back to Antiquity (KOSELLECK 1988, p. 17-31). In this article, I shall discuss the following hypothesis: from classical historians onwards, the concern with contemporary history was always considered a hard and inevitable task to be undertaken, since it affected rulers and living people. Nevertheless, the long-standing doctrine of history as memory of events, which extends as far as the sixteenth century, for centuries prevented that task from being the subject of discussion. The rest of the hypothesis, which I have presented in other works (PASAMAR 2008, p. 147-169, PASAMAR 2010, p. 86-103), runs as follows: only with the emergence of history as a science and discipline, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the interest in narrating contemporary history to grapple with its main paradoxes, namely how can historians confront the political uses, memories and demands of public opinion to deal with the recent past without jeopardizing historical truth. Therefore, the rise of History of the Present as a field of research can be considered, in this way, as the response given by current historians to this traditional challenge.

Herodotus, Thucydides and oral tradition

The most ancient forms of contemporary history emerged through the priority given to oral tradition, memory and rhetoric that evolved in Greek society in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, and in the Roman world. As is well-known, the expression "history" in the Herodotean sense (*"ἱστορία"*) referred to the narration of *"logoi"* (stories) that Herodotus himself would have likely compiled at the end of his life to make the wars against the Persians known to his compatriots. With these stories, Herodotus intended to demonstrate that the Medean wars would have largely contributed to shaping Greek identity: albeit divided, the Greeks were capable of bravely resisting the conquest of the Persians, the most notorious of "barbarian nations", people whose customs were in stark contrast with Greek institutions. To that end, Herodotus composed a cohesive narrative for which he has traditionally merited the honor to be called "the father of History", the founder of Western historiography. Yet, to understand what represented Herodotus' work to contemporary Greek society (where written culture remained in the hands of a small elite), recent specialists have played down traditional interpretations, clearing the way for other perspectives.

One must start by observing that in his *Histories*, Herodotus by no means introduces himself as a historian in the proper sense of the word, except maybe at the beginning, when he justifies his work to prevent certain exploits from fading from memory. Rather he makes his presence felt with his broad curiosity, together with numerous observations, opinions, references to trips and visits to places, from which he makes descriptions of customs, geographical features, monuments and stories, relating what he regards more useful and relevant to narrative purposes, whether believable or not (MEISTER 1998, p. 24-25). Technically, Herodotus' *Histories* are not “contemporary history” strictly speaking. The Medean wars had been events that dated back at least two generations prior to the epoch of the author, and had ended in 479 BC when he was still practically a child. In total the *Histories* mirror an interval of time that ranges over 230 years (from about 700 BC to 479 BC), and half of the work is devoted to the period comprising the previous thirty years (501-480 BC), that is, the time of generations of parents and grandparents (CARBONELL 1985, p. 142-144). In this stretch of time closer to Herodotus' own epoch, the rhythm of narration is akin to that of earlier periods, and information is as detailed as that used by the author to refer to remote history. This precise reckoning and the assessment of the homogeneity of Herodotus' account largely coincide with what is held today by Herodotean studies, influenced by the research into memory and anthropology. According to anthropologists, oral tradition, the main function of which is to transmit “chains of testimonies”, also marks the limits of the use of memories in a time-span of about 150-200 years. From this standpoint, Herodotus' work still appears to be closer to that of a storyteller devoted to remembrance (and to amusement) than that of a historian concerned with the exact reference to his sources, their origins, or the account of political events of his own time (HARTOG 2003, p. 57-75; PÉREZ MARTÍN 2002, p. 126-127).

Behind Herodotus' narrative, recent specialists have discovered a diligent work of compilation of sources, most of them taken from oral tradition. Apart from news from Homer and storytellers, lists of Egyptians kings, and several inscriptions and maps, the bulk of the sources Herodotus used to transmit information is composed of family memories, mainland political traditions (e.g. those from Delphi's priests), and a great many stories of Egyptians, Persians, etc. coming from these countries (LURAGHI 2001, p. 138-160). Because of his work as a storyteller, Herodotus never needed to expound on those sources. His *Histories*, aimed as they were at a Greek audience who enjoyed “*logoi*” or stories of their forefathers, were barely concerned with reliability of contents, nor were they interested in being given an overview of the present. Not only did Herodotus address an audience unconcerned with the origins of such information; people who heard him did not likely take too much interest in knowing whether he had been an eyewitness of the facts he related. As specialists point out, Herodotus preferred to give priority to the heard, even to hearsay, rather than to the seen as an eyewitness. His role as an eyewitness is mostly confined to describing monuments and geographical features. At various moments, when he suspects a story is a fable or considers it difficult to believe, he makes excuses

by asserting, "My rule in this history is that I record what is said by all as I have heard it" (HERODOTUS OF HALICARNASSUS 2010, book 2, p. 123).

The requirements introduced by Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* are proof that the writing of history had swiftly evolved since the time when Herodotus composed his *Histories*, about three decades earlier; or it is possible that in the Greek society of the fifth century BC, different ways of conceiving historiography already coexisted. Thucydides' work presents strictly contemporary events for the author, who, as himself asserts, was dedicated to compiling them after losing favor because of the Athenian defeat at Amphipolis (422 BC), a momentous event in the civil wars he describes (431-404 BC) (THUCYDIDES 1998, v. 2, p. 391-397). Remote history, the so-called Archaeology contained in the Proem, only concerns Thucydides insofar as he may demonstrate that the Peloponnesian war is the most important fight waged up to that time, and is the only one that merits being chosen to the detriment of other possible histories. This interest in recent events, absent in Herodotus, helps Thucydides clearly distinguish between expounding "*logoi*", supported by the heard (and hearsay), and narrating contemporary events relying on his work of inquiry as an eyewitness (THUCYDIDES 1991, v. 1, p. 39). Furthermore, specialists have long emphasized Thucydides' use of written materials. News from logographers, storytellers and historians such as Herodotus, Hellanicus of Lesbos and Philistos of Syracuse – these, coeval with Thucydides – several treaties of peace, in addition to charts and inscriptions, likely compose the bulk of these sources (GOMME 2001-2002, v. 1, pp. 29-41). However, Thucydides himself admits the importance given to audience in Greek society by asserting, for example, that "it may well be that the absence of the fabulous from my narrative will seem less pleasing to the ear" (THUCYDIDES 1991, v. 1, p. 39-41).

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Yet, apart from his interest as an eyewitness, there is another aspect that clearly separates Thucydides' *History* from the work of logographers and storytellers: his ability to give a political purpose to the narrative. In his *Histories*, through the topic of enslavement, Herodotus had already warned his audience of the consequences of disunity for Greek people, who were caught by the Persian invasion. But servitude, although important, is a topic blended into many others, and Herodotus only clearly mentions it about ten times. Once again, Thucydides, who lived the period of the Athenian hegemony and was a witness of temptations to subjugate other city-states, is much more forthright. He takes up the story where Herodotus had interrupted it – with the capture of Sestos by the Athenians (479 BC) (THUCYDIDES 1991, v. 1, p. 149-151) – and echoes the Herodotean distinction, probably the norm in his epoch, between "Greeks" and "Barbarians". However, he does not hesitate to assure his readers and audiences that contemporary civil wars were events that were even more significant than the Median wars themselves, because "the Peloponnesian war was protracted to a great length and in the course of its disasters befell Hellas [Greece] the like of which had never occurred in any equal space of time" (THUCYDIDES 1991, v. 1, p. 41). For Thucydides, Athenian imperialism had resulted in a still more pitiful loss of freedom than that caused by the Persians, servitude much

more terrible because of the huge reverberations resounding in current times. The writing of contemporary history in Thucydides thus clearly surpassed the simple function of fixing memory through the mere record and the tradition of storytellers. If keeping memories was such an important task, this was because it enabled similar changes to be predicted for the future, thereby advancing the Cicero’s subsequent dictum: “*Historia magistra vitae*”.

Contemporary history in the Roman era

From the outset, the record of events (through lists, *Commentarii*, *Annales Maximi*, *elogia*, etc.) occupied a noteworthy place in Roman historiography. However, the writing and remembering of the past was never confined to a simple recording of events. As in classical Greece, to Romans both historiography and memory were also associated with rhetoric (taking part in this art) – and through it, with the possibility of addressing audiences interested in politics, moral and contemporary military feats, or of pleasing people who sought amusement. Lucian of Samosata, for instance, in his treatise on *The Way to Write History* (AD 166), the only work of this genre surviving from Antiquity, not only considers history as a written activity but still sees it as an account of events to be heard. Following Ciceronian premises to avoid eulogy, Lucian recommends the historian to write not for the “vulgar majority”, “who applaud till they crack their voices”, but rather for that “critical perhaps hypercritical audience (...) whom no slip can escape” (LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA 1905, book 2, p. 114).

Yet, this kind of reflections was by no means new to the Roman world. Rhetoricians had long been associating memory with historiography, and had considerations on the relationship between history and memory dating back to Greek philosophers. Decades after Thucydides – whom Lucian’s treatise explicitly quotes – had composed his *History*, Aristotle wrote on the place history and memory should occupy in the process of knowledge. To the philosopher of Stagira, remembering was a psych activity through which images of things are brought to mind, but the way in which rhetoricians and poets organized these images, and their purposes, clearly differed from that of historians. This difference is pointed out in the well-known passage where Aristotle asserts that history is a realm that is inferior to poetry, because if poetry expresses what may happen, history is confined to saying what this or that personage did (ARISTÓTELES 1974, p. 157-158). In this way, Aristotle presents the process of thinking and writing history divided into two strands that are to maintain ambiguous and complex relations for centuries. On the one hand, it is what is written by the historian, who is seen as a mere recorder of events; on the other, it is what is encouraged by the “rhetorician-cum-poet”, who, owing to their alleged acquaintanceship with human life, is authorized to draw moral lessons from past experiences to enlighten present and, above all, future generations (COLEMAN 1992, p. 15-38).

In the Roman world it was Cicero who summarized the requirements rhetoricians should observe to make good use of history, turning his considerations into paramount “rules of history” up to the Renaissance epoch. As in other

Roman writers, in Cicero the most important feature of the relationship between history and memory was the possibility of placing the art of mnemotechnics at the service of orators, for whom the evocation of the past was a crucial tool to boost eloquence and therefore to persuade the audience (CODOÑER 1995, p. 22 ff.). According to Cicero's conception of rhetoric, historiography had mainly to be reckoned as an "oratorical work" by eminent individuals who had achieved renown in their political and military careers and who, on their retirement or in their leisure time, were able to rescue – by fixing them in their speeches – great events from oblivion because of their experience as public men (CICERÓN 1989, p. 169-171). In *De Oratore* (55 BC), Cicero refers to those events as being "important and worthy of memory", whose treatment "is to eschew the least shadow of love and hatred". But such a task should not only be confined to preventing events from fading away. The writer or the orator, Cicero continues, "must know the preparations, after the execution, then the result" of such events. More specifically: he has "to show not only what is said or done, but also the way in which is said or done"; and as for the result, "to develop the causes exactly, emphasizing the part corresponding to chance, astuteness and rashness" (CICÉRON 1966, p. 63). In practice, this need to elucidate causes was only followed as long as these could aid the orator to better communicate with his audience, since the idea of cause itself had limited importance for Roman historians.

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However, as deduced from Cicero's passages, the constricting Aristotelian position on historians was not followed literally because of the importance conferred on moral and eloquence. In the Roman world, a good deal of interest in history stemmed from provincial middle classes' tastes at the end of the Republic, and during the Augustan and subsequent epochs. As the most important Roman historians witnessed, these social strata enjoyed evoking deeds of great figures and military feats, where they could allegedly draw moral lessons and achieve amusement. In his treatises, Cicero exalts Greek historians and differentiates the mere annals from a "history of higher tone" characterized by embellishment and utility for the orator. Yet for political and cultural reasons, this kind of historiography was mainly devoted to keeping the memory of certain contemporary events alive.

Even the history of Rome *Ab Urbe Condita* by Livy (a model for the national histories emerging during the Renaissance period) was intended to show and remember recent events. Livy's History deals with events that range over more than seven hundred years, a narrative where the first book covers 240 years, and books II-V, 120 years. But to tell the story of the most recent 100 years (167-9 BC), the author devoted a total of 92 books, all of them lost, which is more than half of the 142 books that comprise the entire work (MELLOR 1999, p. 53-55). This is also the reason why Tacitus, for instance, takes care to distinguish the *Annales*, written to refer to a period prior to Emperor August, from the *Historiae*. His Histories, written around AD 104 (most of them also lost), spanned a recent living period, beginning with the "year of four emperors" (AD 69), after Nero's suicide, and ending with the Reign of Domitian (AD 96) – a period in which, according to surviving information, Tacitus had lost favor. Yet,

Tacitus could not simply start with a naked account of events. At the beginning of his *Histories*, after admitting he began his political career in the latter period, he is bound to also declare that this career was not to prevent him from speaking “without love and hatred” (TÁCITO 2006, book 1, 1; DAMON 2003, v. 1, p. 1-31). Beyond the difference between “annals” and “histories”, which does not seem to affect style in this case, Tacitus cannot help overlooking the fact that narrating contemporary history spelt trouble with his audience and merited further considerations. Another example to prove that narrating contemporary events was reckoned to be a perilous, although inevitable, activity is illustrated by the poet Horace. Thus, in one of the *Odes* devoted to a friend, the writer of tragedies Gaius Asinius Pollio, Horace encourages his friend to continue preparing a history of the war between Caesar and Pompey (a History that has been lost). But he also warns him that “it is a work full of dangerous ups and downs” in which “you move amid fires covered up by deceptive ashes” (HORACIO FLACO 2005, p. 18-19).

It is nevertheless interesting to observe that the most important Roman historians avoided writing history while they were on duty. This may be considered as a statement of impartiality, but also as a sign that historical knowledge, far from the modern concept of accuracy, had rather to do to with the importance of public life and memory. Sallust summarized it in a well-known passage of his *Conspiracy of Catilina*, where he explained that “I was confirmed in this resolution [to write a ‘history of the Roman people’] by the fact that my mind was free from hope, and fear, and partisanship” (SALUSTIO CRISPO 1995, p. 9; WOODMAN 1988, p. 74). This passage also makes it possible to understand why the relationship between history and politics remained largely ambiguous in the ancient world. Since political institutions were not directly concerned with encouraging historiography as a rhetoric and dramatic genre, the interest shown by rhetoricians never served to elucidate the status of political history. Its invention, albeit stimulated by Tacitean influence, is a feature that rather belongs to the modern world. Most ancient writers associated historiography with the need to construct moral patterns, by choosing deeds and figures as “*exempla*”, and by regarding history as “*magistra vitae*”, a master of life. But there was never a unique criterion to develop this premise. While Polybius, for instance, wrote that “the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of History”, other authors were content to mainly read history “for my own amusement”, as Antonius, one of the characters in *De Oratore*, admits (POLIBIUS 1979, v. 1, p. 3; CICÉRON 1966, v. 2, p. 30).

On the other hand, behind the tendency to consider lives and events as “*exempla*”, also lies another characteristic that is no less important: an idea of time in which the modern concept of progress is absent, the main feature of that tendency being the impossibility of representing the idea of long-term change. As a modern specialist has explained taking the analysis of a single episode from the *Annals* of Tacitus, this historian is not interested in reconstructing the background where figures and deeds take place, even less the economic causes (AUERBACH 1996, p. 44-46). However, this feature, rather than seen as

a shortcoming, should be considered as a paramount aspect inherent in ancient historians, derived from their sense of time and change. It was about a conception of the passing of time, different from the modern concept of change, where the expectations of future, in one way, are confined to expressing the mere concern for the past. It is true that, as Momigliano asserts, ancient historians were not simply defenders of tradition, concerned as they were with moral patterns and “*exempla*” (MOMIGLIANO 1972, p. 279-293). But they definitively lacked any idea of progress. Such conception dates back to Greek historians, as proved in Thucydides, who, surpassing the mere recording of facts, had proposed his History for “whoever shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or similar way” (THUCYDIDES 1991, v. 1, p. 39). The fortune of this way of representing time during the early modern age is witnessed, for instance, by Renaissance writers, who followed the principle of “*similitudo temporum*” (similarity of times) in their works.

Memories, chronicles and histories in the Middle-Ages

During the Middle-Ages the importance of memory for the historical account not only remained in existence, but rather increased its primacy and diversified. The poetic and rhetorical use of the past invented by the Greeks and Romans by no means disappeared despite the fact that since the fourth century, with Christian historiography, the writing of history was increasingly sheltered in monasteries and abbeys. But the narration of histories and the record of deeds were guided by new necessities and topics. Moreover, themes and genres from Christianity, particularly ecclesiastic history, were endowed with an edifying purpose and evangelical message provided with a long-standing commemorative character; or remained in the service of both the ecclesiastic and the temporal power. Only Byzantine writers kept untouched the tradition of secular historiography handed down by classical historians. In the sixth century, Procopius of Caesarea, who fought side by side with General Belisarius the wars of Emperor Justinian against the Persians, Vandals and Ostrogoths from 527 onward, to recover the Roman Empire, wrote, for example, a *History of the Wars* (circa AD 550-51) followed by a *Secret History* (circa 551). He conceived them both as a “living testimony”, as a record of “*historiae sui temporis*” for future generations, in the Greek-Roman way (PROCOPIO DE CESAREA 2000, 33-36; PROCOPIO DE CAESAREA [b] 2000, 143-146).

On the other hand, as in the Greek and Roman models, in Christian historiography emphasis on the simple antiquity of institutions, both ecclesiastic and secular, was never sufficient resort for their legitimization. It was hugely important, too, in that there was a need to remember such institutions and therefore the possibility of relating the story up until one’s own time. It is true that, unlike ancient models, Christian historiography was connected with theological and eschatological patterns from the doctrine of the Bible and Fathers of the Church. However, this concern with eschatology did not prevent authors from being concerned with their own epoch, as it did not deter them from

denouncing contemporary prosecutions, recording calamities, or complaining of social decay. The founder of ecclesiastical history, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, for instance, devoted five of the ten books that make up his History (ended circa AD 323), a history dating back to the Apostles, to the preceding one hundred and fifty years. In that period, he targeted “contemporary events [the last thirty years] (that) merited being told in a special way”, since “one of the most necessary things was to hand them down to those who will come after us” (EUSÈBE DE CÉSARÉE 1993, v. 3, book 8, p. 3). With this interest in recent events, Eusebius attempted to explain that the Edict of Milan (AD 313) had brought a great opportunity, a turning point, for the Christian Church.

But universal history was only one possible topic among others. Once Eusebius’s model of ecclesiastical history was established, other writers could devote their histories to commemorating local church communities, with their respective saints, giving them a political tinge and expressing certain political purposes depending on the interests defended by their abbots and abbeys. The medieval genre of ecclesiastical history became thus the spotlight for authors who attempted to retain memory by writing on new themes in keeping with new times: the lives of saints and abbots, the history of the spread of Christianity in a single region or kingdom, the histories of bishops, records of natural phenomena, including the calamities, and deeds of the ruling dynasties, etc. The *Decem libros historiarum* (AD 594) by Bishop Gregory of Tours is, for instance, a record of miracles, persecutions, lives of saints, and heresies befallen to the Merovingian Kingdom used in pastoral activity and compiled to prevent them from falling into oblivion. Six of its ten books are devoted in a pessimistic tone to their own time (GOFFART 2005, p. 112-127). And the most important inheritor of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, *A history of the English Church and People* (circa AD 731) by the Venerable Bede, is a narrative, which stands out because of its learning, of the setting-up of the Anglo-Saxon Church and the Kingdom of Northumbria, whose contemporary events are regretted by the author because of the civil wars and the “worldly character” of the monasteries. The purpose of the work, which was composed around AD 731 at the monastery of Jarrow, is to combine moral edification with commemoration (BEDE 1968, p. 33-35; GOFFART 2005, p. 240-328; GRANSDEN 1974, p. 13-28).

Despite the long-standing interest in telling stories, the heritage of classical writers was not the cultural aspect that concerned medieval historians the most. The strong development of written culture in the monastic world and the urgency to legitimize the rising monarchies, successors of the Roman Empire, brought new needs to fix the accounts of events, and to seek suitable ways of doing it. Not surprisingly, medieval intellectuals found in chronicles the most common way to establish memories, which turned this genre into the most popular form of historiography for centuries (BREISACH 1994, p. 103). Yet, specialists have observed that the importance given to history as a memory of events (local, national or extended to all, that is, universal Christianity) led medieval authors to use the terms “chronicle” (and implicitly “annals”, in reference to the Greek-Roman genre of the same name) and “history” in a much more ambiguous way

than one might imagine. According to Guenée, this distinction, more than being related to topics, geographical frameworks, and time and its extension (that is, a period framed by the story), was rather linked with the objective of the historical work itself. In this way, the term “chronicle” was to be destined for centuries to characterize the genre of historiography itself, that is, the writing of history as such, and the term “history” was to make its way, in the plural (histories), largely as a reference to the events themselves (GUENÉE 1973, p. 1003).

Whatever explanation is accepted for the differences between chronicle and history, the predominance of the former would demonstrate that the account of events set in chronological order had become an essential task by the Middle-Ages. Apart from recording events, some medieval authors even went so far as to evoke classical tradition and the fathers of Christian historiography, and to offer narratives with poetic license and figures of speech in order to facilitate memory and dramatization. This was the case of well-known authors such as the Venerable Bede, William of Poitiers, William of Malmesbury, Matthew Paris, Vincent de Beauvais and Otto of Freising. These writers, with a lifelong learning and a knowledge of Greek-Roman historians, went beyond the task of mere chroniclers and were well aware of it (in some cases they also wrote chronicles.) They were the ones that most merited the name of “*historiographus*”, a word of little use during the Middle-Ages (GUENÉE 1980, p. 44-45). But the need to fix the memory of events giving access to information as much as possible was the foremost element of medieval historiography; hence the great leeway chroniclers enjoyed with their works. Chronicles could register natural phenomena, record successions and genealogies of kings, their deeds, lives of saints and bishops, and even heroic poems. Furthermore, chronicles could be “living” and become a collective endeavor, to which different authors were to contribute with their style and intentions, and adopt the form of annals in some passages, or show theological purposes in others; and even assign “*marginalia*”, that is, blank spaces to add new information (GRANSDEN 1974, p. 30, 40 *passim.*). Yet, as much for chronicles and as for their “underlying” histories, the account of contemporary events was of capital importance.

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In fact, to medieval authors the memory of events in chronicles and other genres was to identify itself with the events themselves, without giving leeway of any kind for any abstraction similar to modern historiographic concepts. Hence the meaning of the expression “*historiae sui temporis*” (histories of one’s own time), histories which converged to form a historiographic genre during the Renaissance but which had their roots in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages: i.e. accounts of memorable events – coeval with the events themselves (“*historiae*”) – which were presumed to have a close correspondence with their memory. Nor did the existence of written and oral sources suppose any contradiction to medieval authors. If the true historian could not lie, as Cicero’s dictum said in reference to the way that orators used history, then only writing – because letters (“*litterae*”) represented experiences obtained through the sense – could guarantee that memory was retained (COLEMAN 1992, p. 280-285). Only through writing, could witnesses be fixed; but in addition to Cicero, medieval

writers could also resort to the Bible. Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologies* (AD 627-630), had asserted, for example, “Things to be seen can be narrated with no falsehood”, or “This discipline [history] joins grammar because letters are to entrust what is worthy of memory”. When subsequently talking about the types of history, Isidore uses a twofold criterion: on the one hand, the length of time, so that he divides historiography into “*Ephemeris*” (one day), “*Kalendaria*” (one month), and “*Annales*” (one year); on the other hand, the presence of an eyewitness, so that he calls “annals” the simple record of events of the past, and keeps the word “history” to refer to those accounts seen. It is obvious that “history” and “annals” were regarded as different approaches to dealing with the same challenge: the need to prevent memorable events from fading away (ISIDORO DE SEVILLA 1982, v. 1, p. 41-44).

To show interest in contemporary memory and in its ways of recording it, medieval authors used various expressions: “*nostrum seculum*”, “*nostrum tempus*”, “*nostra aetas*”, “*aetas present*”, etc. (GUENÉE 1980, p. 81). It is even possible to observe terms such as “*novus*” or “*novella*” in some historiographic titles. The monk Eadmer, who was hugely influenced by Bede, wrote, for example, a *Historia Novorum in Anglia*, between 1095 and 1123, and William of Malmesbury, who considered himself as Bede’s successor, a *Historia Novella* at the end of his life (he died in 1143), a work which he left unfinished. The *Historia Novella* is a record of contemporary civil wars, where the author, who was influenced by classical historians, decides to adopt the form of annals and ignore the literary embellishments that he had used in his former works (GRANSDEN 1974, p. 139, 172-83). Yet, as these works demonstrate, the aforementioned terms lacked chronological precision and referred to the importance of keeping memory of one’s own time. The adjective “*modernus*”, which in Medieval Latin was in frequent use, has a similar imprecise meaning, tantamount to “belonging to one’s own time” (MARAVALL 1986, p. 199 ff). The first time where the term “*modernitas*” refers to a fixed interval of time is to be found in the work of Walter Map at the end of the twelfth century. Map, a court satirist writer, who was very familiar with the classical tradition, confined the “*modernitas*” to one century in a passage, from *Courtiers’ Trifles* (1181-92), that has drawn the attention of specialists: “The century which has passed I call modern times”, because “of all of whose notable events the memory is fresh and clear enough” (MAP 1983, p. 122-25).

Yet, as Map’s text shows, the word “*modernitas*”, more than being a category describing an epoch proper, is a term used to refer to a span where close memory predominates. In fact, despite the interest in contemporary history shown by the authors, the “present” was never considered to be an autonomous period during the Middle-Ages, as it was not for Greek-Roman historians either. Among Christian historians, this situation intensified because of the importance of the so-called doctrine of “four monarchies”, or “*translatio imperii*” as it was also known. Inspired by the idea of solidarity of the ages of the world and by the Book of the Prophet Daniel, this doctrine was to constitute the basis for the most important attempts to establish chronologies of universal history during the Middle-Ages.

The “*historiae ipsius temporis*” of humanist historians

The aforementioned eschatological thesis not only had staunch supporters during medieval times but it persisted during the Renaissance. Protestant writers, such as Abraham Bucholcerus and Philip Melancton, following in the steps of Luther, who had already written on the topic, worked hard to develop an apocalyptic literature devoted to establishing chronologies to demonstrate the temporal compression they perceived in their own time, and the imminence of the “*finem mundi*” (VEGA RAMOS 1974, p. 79-106). And yet, the search for new turning points to help examine the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had necessarily resulted in the abandonment, even in the criticism, of that medieval idea. The refutation of the thesis of “four monarchies”, undertaken by Jean Bodin in Chapter 7 of his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566), is well-known since it was the first of a long range of criticisms that reached their heyday during the eighteenth century (BODIN 1944, p. 291-302).

Beyond doctrinal debates, humanist historians were the first to establish certain bases of the modern “History of the Present”, thanks to their special interest in the “*historiae ipsius temporis*” – events coeval with the historian’s own time – which became a genre where traditional conceptions of contemporary history blended with new topics. Aided by the boost given to rhetoric, these humanist writers regarded history as a new literary genre (MERINO JEREZ 2007, p. 27-65) and, as privileged beholders – close to popes and monarchs – of the enormous changes brought about by the founding of modern empires, by discoveries, and by religious wars, they defended the fact that historiography provided comparisons and examples that philosophy and poetry did not (COTRONEO 1971, p. 184-190). Because of such interest, in the second half of the sixteenth century there began to emerge the so-called “perfect history”, an expression referring to the humanist paradigm of history, which, according to Francis Bacon’s later classification in *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum* (1623), included “lives”, “relations”, and “histories of time” – the latter, considered as “the most complete and absolute kind of history” (BACON 1974, p. 72-73). In practice, the latter gave priority to the writer’s own time, resulting in the aforementioned “*historiae ipsius temporis*”, a genre subjected to intense public argument, in which political, national, European, and – because of their interest in Discoveries and extra-European Empires – universal aspects coexisted.

As the main sixteenth-century models demonstrated, that is, the *Historiarum sui temporis* by Paolo Giovio (Florence, 1550, 1552), and the *Storia d’Italia* by Francesco Guicciardini (Florence 1561, 1564), such forms of history became as well known as they were controversial. The fall of the House of Medici in Florence in 1494 and the resulting republican government had aroused unexpected concern with the history of the city. Machiavelli’s later work, his *Istorie Fiorentine* (1520-25), turn out to be a well-known product from this wider trend. Commissioned by Cardinal Guilio of Medici, Machiavelli used the work to approach the Medicis, who had returned to the government of the city in 1512. Logically the *Istorie* ends with the expulsion from Florence, in 1494, of the famous family (GILBERT 1974, p. 203-218, 226-240). Guicciardini’s

History, written in twenty books between 1537 and 1539, would become a much more controversial book because of the closeness to the facts it describes. Guicciardini wrote when he retired as governor and commander-in-chief of the Papal territories, covering the period from 1494 to the death in 1534 of Clement VII, for whom he had been working for many years. Furthermore, it was a history of Italy, but with a focus on the “regions beyond the mountains”, which included the main European monarchies and references to Discoveries. Still more ambitious was Giovio’s universal history, comprising forty-four books, some of them lost, which covered the periods from 1494 to 1498 and from 1513 to 1544. He was engaged in this task, as a defender of the Emperor, from practically all his public life, between 1515 and 1552, the year of his death. However, the political stimulus was, in both cases, the same: namely the notion that 1494 (when Charles VII of France’s troops occupied Florence) was “the most unhappy year for Italy” (GUICCIARDINI 1984, p. 32), and marked a turning point both for Italian cities and territorial States, and for Europe, giving way to the so-called epoch of “*la calamitá*” (COCHRANE 1981, p. 163-197).

The method and prestige of these books can help us understand the possibilities and limits of this kind of historiography. The works still retain elements of the long-standing idea of contemporary history. Giovio conceives his work as a set of “histories” or contemporary records. The use of the expression “histories” in the plural, referring to events themselves, was still in common use in the sixteenth century. On the other hand, Guicciardini introduced his History as being intended to avoid oblivion, as traditional historians did. Furthermore, from a formal point of view, both Giovio and Guicciardini were predominantly followers of Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*, and their concern with chronology divided into years is still reminiscent of the genre of chronicles. In fact, the moment when chronicles became national in scope, as a part of propaganda devoted to defending chancelleries, was the sixteenth century, a golden age for chroniclers, authors in the service of monarchs, popes and other patrons, who had turned into humanist writers (TATE 1995, p. 27-46; GRANSDEN 1982, p. 429-453; PASAMAR 2010, p. 14-30). However, Giovio and Guicciardini’s Histories – and their ensuing reputation – had also some interesting features that were moving closer to modern historiography. In both cases, Livy’s model played a modern function to help represent national narratives and concern with the establishment of political patterns (POCOCK 1975, p. 186-199). As far as Guicciardini is concerned, this used an unparalleled number of official documents (the archives of the Florentine Counsel of the Ten), for which he was warmly applauded (BODIN 1944, p. 73-74; RIDOLFI 1968, p. 258). And Giovio, on his turn, took his most important information from interviews with relevant figures, following the model of Thucydides, whom he admired. This circumstance was to accentuate a widespread fame of the venal writer in Giovio, a reputation also fuelled by his provocative attitude to contemporary personalities, with whom he would meet to ask for money in return for favorable treatment in his writings, an unusual behavior in the sixteenth-century historians and chroniclers (ZIMMERMANN 1995, p. 225 ff, 264-265). Yet Guicciardini did not escape from

being considered partial either: Florentine historians, for instance, reproached him for claiming the credit for many decisions that had saved Florence in difficult situations, and Venetian historians felt deeply humiliated by the submission to Emperor Maximilian, expressed in a speech and exposed in a book, supposedly delivered by the ambassador Giovanni Giustiniani; nor did they find it amusing that the Florentine historian described a Venice acting apart from the rest of Italy (LUCIANI 1936, p. 55-68, 83-93). In fact, both Giovio and Guicciardini were involved, without having wished it, in the early scene of national stereotypes, favored by the emerging national identities.

But difficulties in preparing a contemporary narrative – following Ciceronian premises – that could satisfy different points of view increased during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as civil wars spread across Europe. Meanwhile, the “civil war” was becoming a central idea by means of which the sufferings and experience of fanatical religious struggles were precipitated (KOSELLECK 2004, p. 47). The best example of such trouble was the publication, in 1604, of the first books of the *Historiarum sui temporis* by the historian, poet and president of the Parliament of Paris, Jacques-Auguste De Thou. This monumental narrative of the wars of religion, which begins with the death of Francis I in 1547, is the foremost History produced by French Humanism. It is very significant that the completion of the work, comprising 138 books, was postponed as the controversy increased. First De Thou chose 1601, and then 1612, but finally the work remained unfinished, only going as far as the year 1607. He wrote this work in two periods, 1593 to 1603, and then 1612 to 1617, the year of his death (KINSER 1966, p. 80-85). He combined this activity with his work as magistrate and diplomat in defense of the rights of King Henry IV (DE THOU 2004, p. 217-255, *passim.*). As a confidant of this monarch, De Thou had participated in the most important political events that led to the ending of the French religious wars, especially the negotiations with the Huguenots and the writing of the Edict of Nantes (1598). The idea of narrating such events had arisen in his youth, strongly influenced by the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre of Parisian Huguenots (DE THOU 2004, p. 31-34). In his History, De Thou is particularly careful to claim impartiality, and in the Preface of the 1617 edition he dedicates an Ode entitled “*La Vérité*” to the new King Louis XIII. It even seems that he wrote the work in Latin to emphasize the idea of objectivity, following Cicero’s premises. In fact, De Thou’s History attempts to convey the idea that “*la patrie*”, symbolized in the laws issued by the monarchy, must be a safeguard against the violence of factions (DUBOIS 1977, p. 173-174). However, both his Catholicism and his claims of impartiality were to no avail, at least in his own epoch: because of his criticism of violence against the Huguenots, the first edition of the book was branded heretical by the Pope, and condemned by the Roman curia in 1610.

When De Thou published his *History*, the “histories of time” were being displaced by the so-called “accounts” and “particular histories” – according to Bacon’s aforementioned classification –, narratives less ambitious and politically more effective, which frequently focused on the topic of civil wars and

represented the most important seventeenth-century contemporary histories. Their authors, such as for example, the Paduan historian Arrigo Caterino Davila, the English Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, who was a confidant of Charles I, and the Portuguese Francisco Manuel de Melo, who went along with the troops of the Spanish monarch Philip IV to suffocate the Catalan uprising in 1640, were privileged witnesses of deeds they recounted. However, the most important feature of their Histories was their “Tacitism”, that is, their concern with politics and propaganda (ANTÓN MARTÍNEZ 1992). In a period, such as the Baroque, when reputation was hugely important for chancelleries – with political topics such as the importance of persuasion and dissimulation – the possibility of going deeply into the causes and mechanisms of power had become crucial. But Tacitism also presented the beginning of the end of the traditional genre of “*historiae sui temporis*”. With the Enlightenment, it is hardly surprising that the traditional uses of contemporary history were to be sidestepped, once the time of the foundation of history as scientific knowledge had come.

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