

# **Historiography**

**Historiography** is the study of the history and methodology of the discipline of history.

The term *historiography* also denotes a body of historical work on a specialized topic. Scholars discuss historiography topically – such as the “historiography of Catholicism,” the “historiography of early Islam,” or the “historiography of China” – as well as specific approaches and genres, such as political history and social history. Beginning in the nineteenth century, at the ascent of academic history, a corpus of historiography literature developed.

The research interests of historians change over time, and in recent decades there has been a shift away from traditional diplomatic, economic and political history toward newer approaches, especially social and cultural studies. From 1975 to 1995, the proportion of professors of history in American universities identifying with social history rose from 31% to 41%, while the proportion of political historians fell from 40% to 30%.<sup>[1]</sup> In the history departments of British universities in 2007, of the 5723 faculty members, 1644 (29%) identified themselves with social history while political history came next with 1425 (25%).<sup>[2]</sup>

## **Defining historiography**

Furay and Salevouris (1988) define historiography as "the study of the way history has been and is written — the history of historical writing... When you study 'historiography' you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians."<sup>[3]</sup>

## **Narrative**

According to Lawrence Stone, narrative has traditionally been the main rhetorical device used by historians. In 1979, at a time when the new Social History was demanding a social-science model of analysis, Stone detected a move back toward the narrative. Stone defined narrative as follows: it is organized chronologically; it is focused on a single coherent story; it is descriptive rather than analytical; it is concerned with people not abstract circumstances; and it deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical. He reported that, "More and more of the 'new historians' are now trying to discover what was going on inside people's heads in the past, and what it was like to live in the past, questions which inevitably lead back to the use of narrative."<sup>[4]</sup>

## **Questions studied**

Some of the common questions of historiography are:

1. Reliability of the sources used, in terms of authorship, credibility of the author, and the authenticity or corruption of the text. (See also source criticism).

2. Historiographical tradition or framework. Every historian uses one (or more) historiographical traditions, for example Marxist, Annales School, "total history", or political history.
3. Moral issues, guilt assignment, and praise assignment
4. Revisionism versus orthodox interpretations
5. Historical metanarratives

## **The history of written history**

Understanding the past appears to be a universal human need, and the telling of history has emerged independently in civilisations around the world. What constitutes history is a philosophical question (see philosophy of history). The earliest chronologies date back to Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, though no historical writers in these early civilizations were known by name. For the purposes of this article, history is taken to mean written history recorded in a narrative format for the purpose of informing future generations about events.

### **Hellenic world**

The earliest known systematic historical thought in the Western world emerged in ancient Greece, a development which would be an important influence on the writing of history elsewhere around the Mediterranean region. Greek historians greatly contributed to the development of historical methodology. The earliest known critical historical works were *The Histories*, composed by Herodotus of Halicarnassus (484 BC–ca.425 BC) who later became known as the 'father of history' (Cicero). Herodotus attempted to distinguish between more and less reliable accounts, and personally conducted research by travelling extensively, giving written accounts of various Mediterranean cultures. Although Herodotus' overall emphasis lay on the actions and characters of men, he also attributed an important role to divinity in the determination of historical events.

The generation following Herodotus witnessed a spate of local histories of the individual city-states (*poleis*), written by the first of the local historians who employed the written archives of city and sanctuary. Dionysius of Halicarnassus characterized these historians as the forerunners of Thucydides,<sup>[5]</sup> and these local histories continued to be written into Late Antiquity, as long as the city-states survived. Two early figures stand out: Hippias of Elis, who produced the lists of winners in the Olympic Games that provided the basic chronological framework as long as the pagan classical tradition lasted, and Hellanicus of Lesbos, who compiled more than two dozen histories from civic records, all of them now lost.

Thucydides largely eliminated divine causality in his account of the war between Athens and Sparta, establishing a rationalistic element which set a precedent for subsequent Western historical writings. He was also the first to distinguish between cause and immediate origins of an event, while his successor Xenophon (ca. 431–355 BC) introduced autobiographical elements and character studies in his *Anabasis*.

The proverbial Philippic attacks of the Athenian orator Demosthenes (384–322 BC) on Philip II of Macedon marked the height of ancient political agitation. The now lost history of Alexander's campaigns by the diadoch Ptolemy I (367–283 BC) may represent the first historical work composed by a ruler. Polybius (ca. 203–120 BC) wrote on the rise of Rome to world prominence, and attempted to harmonize the Greek and Roman points of view.

The Chaldean priest Berossus (fl. 3rd century)<sup>[clarification needed]</sup> composed a Greek-language *History of Babylonia* for the Seleucid king Antiochus I, combining Hellenistic methods of historiography and Mesopotamian accounts to form a unique composite. Reports exist of other near-eastern histories, such as that of the Phoenician historian Sanchuniathon; but he is considered semi-legendary and writings attributed to him are fragmentary, known only through the later historians Philo of Byblos and Eusebius, who asserted that he wrote before even the Trojan war.

## China

In China, the *Classic of History* is one of the Five Classics of Chinese classic texts and one of the earliest narratives of China. The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the official chronicle of the State of Lu covering the period from 722 BCE to 481 BCE, is among the earliest surviving Chinese historical texts to be arranged on annalistic principles. It is traditionally attributed to Confucius. The *Zuo Zhuan*, attributed to Zuo Qiuming in the 5th century BCE, is the earliest Chinese work of narrative history and covers the period from 722 BCE to 468 BCE. *Zhan Guo Ce* was a renowned ancient Chinese historical compilation of sporadic materials on the Warring States Period compiled between the 3rd and 1st centuries BCE.

Sima Qian (around 100 BCE) was the first in China to lay the groundwork for professional historical writing. His written work was the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian), a monumental lifelong achievement in literature. Its scope extends as far back as the 16th century BCE, and it includes many treatises on specific subjects and individual biographies of prominent people, and also explores the lives and deeds of commoners, both contemporary and those of previous eras. His work influenced every subsequent author of history in China, including the prestigious Ban family of the Eastern Han Dynasty era.

Traditionalist Chinese historiography describes history in terms of dynastic cycles. In this view, each new dynasty is founded by a morally righteous founder. Over time, the dynasty becomes morally corrupt and dissolute. Eventually, the dynasty becomes so weak as to allow its replacement by a new dynasty.

## Roman world

The Romans adopted the Greek tradition, becoming the first European people to write history in a non-Greek language<sup>[citation needed]</sup>. While early Roman works were still written in Greek, the *Origines*, composed by the Roman statesman Cato the Elder (234–149 BC), was written in Latin, in a conscious effort to counteract Greek cultural influence. It marked the beginning of Latin historical writings. Hailed for its lucid style, Julius Caesar's (100 BC–44 BC) *Bellum Gallicum* may represent the earliest autobiographical war coverage.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

The politician and orator Cicero (106–43 BC) introduced rhetorical elements in his political writings.

Strabo (63 BC–c. AD 24) was an important exponent of the Greco-Roman tradition of combining geography with history, presenting a descriptive history of peoples and places known to his era. Livy (59 BC–AD 17) records the rise of Rome from city-state to world dominion. His speculation about what would have happened if Alexander the Great had marched against Rome represents the first known instance of alternate history.<sup>[6]</sup>

Biography, although popular throughout antiquity, was introduced as a branch of history by the works of Plutarch (c. 46–127) and Suetonius (c. 69–after 130) who described the deeds and characters of ancient personalities, stressing their human side. Tacitus (c.56–c.117) denounces Roman immorality by praising German virtues, elaborating on the *topos* of the Noble savage.

## **Christendom**

The growth of Christianity and its enhanced status in the Roman Empire after Constantine I led to the development of a distinct Christian historiography, influenced by both Christian theology and the nature of the Bible, encompassing new areas of study and views of history. The central role of the Bible in Christianity is reflected in the preference of Christian historians for written sources, compared to the classical historians' preference for oral sources and is also reflected in the inclusion of politically unimportant people. Christian historians also focused on development of religion and society. This can be seen in the extensive inclusion of written sources in the *Ecclesiastical History* written by Eusebius of Caesarea around 324 and in the subjects it covers.<sup>[7]</sup> Christian theology considered time as linear, progressing according to divine plan. As God's plan encompassed everyone, Christian histories in this period had a universal approach. For example, Christian writers often included summaries of important historical events prior to the period covered by the work.<sup>[8]</sup>

Writing history was popular among Christian monks and clergy in the Middle Ages. They wrote about the history of Jesus Christ, that of the Church and that of their patrons, the dynastic history of the local rulers. In the Early Middle Ages historical writing often took the form of annals or chronicles recording events year by year, but this style tended to hamper the analysis of events and causes.<sup>[9]</sup> An example of this type of writing is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, which were the work of several different writers: it was started during the reign of Alfred the Great in the late 9th century, but one copy was still being updated in 1154. Some writers in the period did construct a more narrative form of history. These included Gregory of Tours, and more successfully Bede who wrote both secular and ecclesiastical history and is known for writing the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.<sup>[7]</sup>

During the Renaissance, history was written about states or nations. The study of history changed during the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Voltaire described the history of certain ages that he considered important, rather than describing events in chronological

order. History became an independent discipline. It was not called *philosophia historiae* anymore, but merely history (*historia*).

## **Islamic world**

Muslim historical writings first began to develop in the 7th century, with the reconstruction of the Prophet Muhammad's life in the centuries following his death. With numerous conflicting narratives regarding Muhammad and his companions from various sources, it was necessary to verify which sources were more reliable. In order to evaluate these sources, various methodologies were developed, such as the "science of biography", "science of hadith" and "Isnad" (chain of transmission). These methodologies were later applied to other historical figures in the Islamic civilization. Famous historians in this tradition include Urwah (d. 712), Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 728), Ibn Ishaq (d. 761), al-Waqidi (745–822), Ibn Hisham (d. 834), Muhammad al-Bukhari (810–870) and Ibn Hajar (1372–1449).

Historians of the medieval Islamic world also developed an interest in world history. The historian Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838–923) is known for writing a detailed and comprehensive chronicle of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern history in his *History of the Prophets and Kings* in 915. Until the 10th century, history most often meant political and military history, but this was not so with Persian historian Biruni (973–1048). In his *Kitab fi Tahqiq ma l'il-Hind* (*Researches on India*) he did not record political and military history in any detail, but wrote more on India's cultural, scientific, social and religious history. He expanded on his idea of history in another work, *The Chronology of the Ancient Nations*.<sup>[10]</sup> Biruni is considered the father of Indology for his detailed studies on Indian history.<sup>[11]</sup>

Archaeology in the Middle East began with the study of the ancient Near East by Muslim historians in the medieval Islamic world who developed an interest in learning about pre-Islamic cultures. In particular, they most often concentrated on the archaeology and history of pre-Islamic Arabia, Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. In Egyptology, the first known attempts at deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs were made in Islamic Egypt by Dhul-Nun al-Misri and Ibn Wahshiyya in the 9th century, who were able to at least partly understand what was written in the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, by relating them to the contemporary Coptic language used by Coptic priests in their time.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Muslim historians such as Abu al-Hassan al-Hamadani of Yemen (d. 945), Abdul Latif al-Baghdadi (1162–1231) and Al-Idrisi of Egypt (d. 1251) developed elaborate archaeological methods which they employed in their excavations and research of ancient archaeological sites.<sup>[12]</sup>

Islamic historical writing eventually culminated in the works of the Arab Muslim historian and historiographer Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who published his historiographical studies in the *Muqaddimah* (translated as *Prolegomena*) and *Kitab al-I'bar* (*Book of Advice*).<sup>[13]</sup> Among many other things, his *Muqaddimah* laid the groundwork for the observation of the roles of the state, in history,<sup>[14]</sup> and he discussed the rise and fall of civilizations. He also developed a method for the study of history, and is thus considered to be the founder of Arab historiography,<sup>[15][16][17]</sup> or the "father of the philosophy of history".<sup>[18]</sup> In the preface to the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun warned of seven mistakes that

he thought historians often committed. In this criticism, he approached the past as strange and in need of interpretation. The originality of Ibn Khaldun was to claim that the cultural differences of another age must govern the evaluation of relevant historical material, to distinguish the principles according to which it might be possible to attempt the evaluation, and lastly, to consider the need for experience, in addition to rational principles, in order to assess a culture of the past. Ibn Khaldun often criticized "idle superstition and uncritical acceptance of historical data." As a result, he introduced a method to the study of history, which was considered something "new to his age", and he often referred to it as his "new science", now associated with historiography.<sup>[19]</sup> The *Muqaddimah* is also the earliest known work to critically examine military history, criticizing certain accounts of historical battles that appear to be exaggerated, and takes military logistics into account when questioning the exaggerated sizes of historical armies reported in earlier sources.<sup>[20]</sup>

## **Modern era**

Modern historiography emerged in 19th century German universities, where Leopold von Ranke was especially influential. Sources had to be hard, not speculations and rationalizations. His credo was to write history the way it was. He insisted on primary sources with proven authenticity. Hegel and Marx introduced the concept of spirit and dialectical materialism, respectively, into the study of world historical development. Former historians had focused on cyclical events of the rise and decline of rulers and nations. Process of nationalization of history, as part of national revivals in 19<sup>th</sup> century, resulted with separation of "one's own" history from common universal history by such way of perceiving, understanding and treating the past that constructed history as history of a nation.<sup>[21]</sup> A new discipline, sociology, emerged in the late 19th century and analyzed and compared these perspectives on a larger scale.

The French Annales School radically changed the focus of historical research in France during the 20th century. Fernand Braudel wanted history to become more scientific and less subjective, and demanded more quantitative evidence. Furthermore, he introduced a socio-economic and geographic framework to historical questions. Other French historians, like Philippe Ariès and Michel Foucault, described the history of everyday topics such as death and sexuality. Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis pioneered the genre of historical writing sometimes known as "microhistory," which attempted to understand the mentalities and decisions of individuals - mostly peasants - within their limited milieu using contracts, court documents and oral histories.

## **Foundation of important historical journals**

The historical journal, a forum where academic historians could exchange ideas and publish newly discovered information, came into being in the 19th century. The early journals were similar to those for the physical sciences, and were seen as a means for history to become more professional. Journals also helped historians to establish various historiographical approaches, the most notable example of which was *Annales. Économies. Sociétés. Civilisations.*, a publication instrumental in establishing the Annales School.

Some historical journals are as follows:

- 1840 *Historisk tidsskrift* (Denmark)
- 1859 *Historische Zeitschrift* (Germany)
- 1866 *Archivum historicum*, later *Historiallinen arkisto* (Finland, published in Finnish)
- 1867 *Századok* (Hungary)
- 1871 *Historisk tidsskrift* (Norway)
- 1876 *Revue Historique* (France)
- 1881 *Historisk tidskrift* (Sweden)
- 1886 *English Historical Review* (UK)
- 1895 *American Historical Review* (USA)
- 1914 *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (renamed in 1964 the *Journal of American History*) (USA)
- 1916 *The Journal of Negro History*
- 1916 *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* (Finland, published in Swedish)
- 1918 *Hispanic American historical review*
- 1928 *Scandia* (Sweden)
- 1929 *Annales. Économies. Sociétés. Civilisations*
- 1952 *Past & present: a journal of historical studies* (Great Britain)
- 1953 *Vierteljahrsshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (Germany)
- 1956 *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (Nigeria)
- 1960 *Journal of African History* (Cambridge)
- 1960 *Technology and culture: the international quarterly of the Society for the History of Technology* (USA)
- 1975 *Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Zeitschrift für historische Sozialwissenschaft* (Germany)
- 1976 *Journal of Family History*
- 1982 *Storia della Storiografia — History of Historiography — Histoire de l'Historiographie — Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung*<sup>[22]</sup>

- 1982 *Subaltern Studies* (Oxford University Press)
- 1986 *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, new title since 2003: *Sozial.Geschichte. Zeitschrift für historische Analyse des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Germany)
- 1990 *Gender and history*
- 1990 *L'Homme. Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*<sup>[23]</sup> (Austria)
- 1990 *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* (ÖZG)<sup>[24]</sup>
- 1992 *Women's History Review*
- 1993 *Historische Anthropologie*<sup>[25]</sup>

## Approaches to history

The question of how a historian approaches historical events is one of the most important questions within historiography. It is commonly recognised by historians that, in themselves, individual historical facts dealing with names, dates and places are not particularly meaningful. Such facts will only become useful when assembled with other historical evidence, and the process of assembling this evidence is understood as a particular historiographical approach.

The most influential historiographical approaches are:

- Comparative history
- Cultural history
- Diplomatic history
- Economic history
- Environmental history, a relatively new field
- Ethnohistory
- Family history
- Intellectual History and History of ideas
- Local History and Microhistory
- Marxist historiography and Historical materialism
- Military history, including naval and air
- Oral history
- Political history

- Public history, especially museums and historic preservation
- History of Religion and Church History; the history of theology is usually handled under Theology
- Quantitative history, Cliometrics (in economic history); Prosopography using statistics to study biographies
- Social history and History from below; along with the French version the Annales School
- Women's history and Gender history
- World history and Universal history

## **Related fields**

Important related fields include:

- Genealogy
- Numismatics
- Paleography
- Pseudohistory, that is false history

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