

**GREEK HISTORICAL WRITING,
AND APOLLO: TWO LECTURES
DELIVERED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OXFORD, JUNE 3
AND 4, 1908**

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ULRICH VON WILAMOWITZ -MOELLENDORFF & GILBERT MURRAY

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GREEK HISTORICAL WRITING

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TWO LECTURES DELIVERED BEFORE
THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

JUNE 3 AND 4, 1908

BY

ULRICH VON WILAMOWITZ-MOELLENDORFF

(TRANSLATION BY GILBERT MURRAY)

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ON GREEK HISTORICAL WRITING

WHEN I was trying to accustom myself to the thought of appearing for a few days in this unfamiliar world, I took it as a good omen that Magdalen College offered me hospitality; for a very famous Magdalen man has been an intimate friend of mine since my first years as a student. It is now forty years since I first acquired for my library, as my first book of learning in the English language, Edward Gibbon's immortal history. And now that I am here to expound to you my thoughts about the growth and the nature of historical writing in Greece, I gladly make Gibbon my starting-point.

Of course his work is admirable. Of course no Greek produced anything like it. And yet, if we apply to it the canon of historical research which the nineteenth century brought into vogue, it can only be called a work of research in the same qualified sense as the works of the ancients. Gibbon was no researcher in the strict sense. He made no inquiry into sources; he arrived at no new fact or datum. Despite all the labour he spent in reading his original authorities, despite all the freedom of his judgement, he walked in a prescribed path and he accepted a tradition. Without the laborious compilations which were achieved in the age of 'poly-history', without, for instance, the unsurpassable industry and learning of Tillemont, Gibbon's work would be unthinkable. What he does is, in essential, to give the traditional material shape by his literary art, and illuminate it with the enlightened intelligence of a man of

the world who has assimilated all the culture of France and England. Different as is the temperament of the sarcastic unbeliever—'Gibbon's sneer,' as Lord Byron says—from the gentle piety of the Delphic priest, his method may be compared with that of Plutarch, whose *Lives* formed the favourite reading of the centuries between the Renaissance and the French Revolution. Plutarch also possessed great erudition; but he owes the material of his narrative entirely to the historians and the Alexandrian compilers; what he adds of his own is, apart from his charming presentation, only the criticism of a moralist and the political temper of the age of Trajan. Of course Plutarch was scarcely a historian, even in the ancient sense of the word. Yet even that fact has only been gradually recognized through the labours of the nineteenth century. To the Romans, Livy was without hesitation the historian *κατ' ἐξοχήν*. The history of the Republic was to them the same thing as Livy's narrative of it. In fact, what he says of his own feelings, and how his heart swells in writing of the ancient greatness of Rome which he depicts, holds good of his readers too. But the emotion is produced by the literary art of the rhetor and the tone of Augustan romanticism in which he writes. He accepted the tradition as he found it, and shaped it in this spirit not only without research but without any feeling for what we call historical truth.

We must always bear in mind that the ancients were even further from a genuine science of history than from a genuine science of nature. In that field where the eternal mistress, Nature, was always present, men succeeded much earlier in rising above the ancient limitations. The method of historical research which we regard as an imperative duty is scarcely a century old. Isolated

individuals may have risen to its level before that, in both ancient and modern times ; but the general rule remains. And yet, even while we set ourselves to prove this from the development of historical writing in Greece, the first thing is to recognize that all our historical writing rests on foundations laid by the Greeks, as absolutely as does all our natural science.

Let us content ourselves with a hasty glance over the rest of the world. India shows us an Aryan people inferior to none in intellectual gifts, which, nevertheless, has remained altogether without history. At one moment, when Buddha, the founder of a new religion, gave the impulse, and his followers sought to preserve the incidents of his life, it seemed as if historical literature must come into being. But Buddha, too, soon entered into the realm of dateless myth. We need not doubt that the Teutons would have proved their ability to advance from the lays which contained their historical memories to real history ; but they did so in close dependence on the ancient tradition, which provided them not only with a fixed system of chronology in Jerome, but also with a universal history, if only in Orosius. Your great Bede belongs entirely to this line of development. And when in Germany individual men, like Otto von Freisingen, really set themselves to depict contemporary history, they did so often in curiously close dependence on Sallust or Josephus. In Byzantium the thread of the tradition is unbroken ; there Herodotus and Thucydides were never lost to remembrance. Thousands of years before the Greeks, it is true, Egypt and Mesopotamia possessed records which amounted to a kind of chronicle, but the decisive step to a real historical literature seems never to have been taken there. The Old Testament, on the other hand, in many narratives—for instance in

those of the reigns of David or Ahab, and earlier in the wonderful story of Abimelech in the *Book of Judges*—contains descriptions of a truth and fullness which no Greek has surpassed. It is possible enough that other Semites possessed some similar faculty. We find it in the Arabs immediately after Mohammed. The rebellion which cost the life of Othman, the third successor of the Prophet, is described to us more vividly than the murder of Caesar. And yet all the ancient Semites are lacking in exactly that quality through which the Greeks made the writing of history into a conscious art. They have historical writing, but they have no historian.

Hence it is that Herodotus is the father of history. How does he begin? '*This is Herodotus' account of what he has learnt by inquiry*'—of his '*Historiá*.' His personality ultimately conditions what he describes. True, he announces his purpose, '*that Time may not destroy the remembrance of great deeds*'; and his main theme, '*the strife between barbarians and Greeks*.' But he proposes '*to wander through small and great cities in full knowledge that the lot of man has no permanence*'. Thus he leads us all over the world so far as he has seen it. There is nothing about the West, while he has made inquiries far and wide about the North and South. He delights also in reporting what he has been told; but that too is something that he has 'found out'. Even what he has taken from the written tradition has the same subjective air. In his rejection of all chronology he consciously sets himself in opposition to the impersonal chronicles, which he must have known. The political convictions of a determined democrat, the strange combination of *deisidaimonia* and rashness of criticism, imprints a subjective stamp on everything, except where the mere gossip lets himself go in sheer enjoyment of a good story.

The same subjectivity had already, in a few dry words, been recognized by Hecataeus as his guiding principle. But, as far as we know, he only narrated the heroic history. Certainly what Herodotus has to tell about Miletus points to a plain traditional chronicle of that place, nothing more; and his account of the Ionian revolt does not come at all from Milesian information. Geography, indeed, in the wide sense which the Greeks always attached to the word, as comprising an abundance of historical material, owes its origin to the great commercial town of Miletus, just as Natural Science does; and in this particular Herodotus is deeply indebted to Hecataeus. Nay, he has made considerable steps backward compared with him. But no Ionian can dispute with Herodotus the name of 'Father of History'.

Nevertheless, we must not put his image alone in the sanctuary which the 'Hero-founder' of history really deserves; what belongs there is the double herm of the Naples Museum, which combines with Herodotus Thucydides. The one was a Halicarnassian of Carian and Dorian blood, of Ionian culture, and Athenian sympathies; the other a half Thracian. Evidently, it is culture, not race, that is decisive. Herodotus and Thucydides combined: two men who complement one another, but as opposites! The younger was fully conscious of this and made it clear in the superscription of his History: *Thucydides of Athens has described the war of the Peloponnesians and Athenians because he foresaw its incomparable importance*. Subjectivity is there sure enough; the writer's own insight motives his choice of material, but this material has also its independent significance. The chronicler records that which happens because it happens; he is, as it were, only a medium through which events fix themselves in writing. Hero-

dotus tells what he can and will ; what he tells and how he tells it, depends upon his personality. Thucydides reviews the mass of events and chooses by his own insight the part that is worthy of recital. This part he undertakes to describe while it is actually happening ; he works to that end and what lies outside his theme does not interest him. Now this is a really scientific procedure, and the first two were not. Thucydides also speaks of his methods and his sources. His purpose is by no means purely historical ; he explains that he writes for the instruction of the statesmen of the future, nay, he himself, when he began to write, expected to pursue practical politics, and though this hope was not fulfilled, he never quite throws off the statesman. Again and again one is fain to compare him with Machiavelli. I need not waste words upon the great qualities of his work ; his clearness and keenness of judgement never fail him, not even when he treats the events of the past. He enjoys destroying an historical fable by documentary evidence. Still, his *Archæologia* does not give an impression of personal research ; it gives only a rational criticism of accepted tradition. We may not ask for more ; but also we should not discover more in it.

The influence of such a work must have been powerful. It is said that the minister of Dionysius the First, Philistos, wrote a great work in the style of Thucydides ; but we know no details. Xenophon, however, a man very susceptible to stimulus from other minds, not only attempted to complete the torso of Thucydides in his own style, but actually did in the *Hellenica* write Thucydidean history, so far as he was able. We see indeed that he is not master of his material, but is everywhere hemmed in by the limits of his personal investigations and the still narrower limits of his judgement ; but he