

Historiography

Content

The Greek term “history” means “inquiry.” Thus it originally applied to many types of research, but gradually came to refer only to the study of the past. Ancient Hellenistic histories narrate events worthy of mention, often through the deeds or *praxeis* of prominent individuals. Legitimate sources included most importantly the historian’s own eyewitness account, as well as interviews with eyewitnesses, the collection of popular traditions, descriptions of the places where things happened (which required travel), and the perusal of records written by eyewitnesses.

The historian usually began by writing out a sketch of the events, then inserted secondary material (speeches, dramatic episodes, digressions) and finally arranged the collected material in a systematic way (chronologically, topically). S/he generally worked with one source at a time, but could embellish or expand where necessary. Under the influence of the rhetorical schools, historians were often more concerned about plausibility than truth, in part because they had limited access to the events they narrated.

Ancient historiographers describe five types of historiography:

1. genealogy or mythography
2. travel descriptions (geography and ethnography)
3. local history (horography, annalistic writing)
4. chronography (chronicles)
5. history

Ancient historiography was an eclectic discipline, combining forms and techniques from the rhetorical handbooks (e.g., speeches, hyperbole, antitheses), diplomatic correspondence (edicts, letters, decrees), ancient romance novels (shipwreck scenes, miraculous last-minute escapes), ethnography (e.g., descriptions of foreign peoples), and biography (miraculous birth narratives).

Form

Histories could be arranged chronologically or topically. Types that lent themselves to the chronological approach were local history, chronography, and political and military history. Types that were more often topically arranged were genealogy, mythology, ethnology, and geography.

Israelite historiography (Torah, the Deuteronomistic History, the Chronistic History) is chronologically arranged at the level of books, paratactically arranged within books (events are often juxtaposed rather than unified in theme), and focused on the experience of Israel in its land. Hellenistic Jewish historiography (1–2 Maccabees, Josephus) is sometimes topically arranged.

Function

Greco-Roman history served three purposes: to be truthful, useful, and entertaining. The usefulness of history referred to its capacity for generating insight that could be applied in future situations. Israelite historiography was also hortatory, encouraging its audience to ethical behavior.

For Further Practice

Torah Genesis–Numbers	The Deuteronomistic History Deuteronomy–2 Kings	The Chronistic History 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah
Josephus <i>Antiquities, The Jewish Wars</i>	Acts of the Apostles	(Various early Christian authors) Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles
Eusebius <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>	Herodotus <i>Histories</i>	Callisthenes <i>Acts of Alexander</i>
Sosylus <i>Acts of Hannibal</i>	Xenophon <i>Education of Cyrus</i> 1.2.16	Thucydides <i>The Peloponnesian War</i>
Dionysius of Halicarnassus <i>Roman Antiquities</i>	Diodorus Siculus <i>The Bibliotheca historica</i>	Livy <i>History of Rome</i>
Sallust <i>Catiline</i>	Polybius <i>History</i>	Dio Cassius <i>Roman History</i>