Histos 6 (2012) 380–3

BOOK REVIEW

Konrad Heldmann, Sine ira et studio: *Das Subjektivitätsprinzip der römischen Geschichtsschreibung und das Selbstverständnis antiker Historiker*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2011. Pp. 128. ISBN 978-3-406-61494-1. Paper, €49.95.

In this quite small and very readable book, Konrad Heldmann (= H.), the retired chair of Latin Literature at Kiel University, argues with fair success for what he calls the 'Subjektivitätsprinzip' as an important part of Roman historiography: that is, the deliberate presentation of the events from the personal point of view of the individual writer. He understands this tendency as a further contribution to the 'sense of otherness' of the ancient historians in relation to their modern counterparts often expressed during recent decades.[1] In doing so, his focus is on Tacitus as the most obvious example of this tendency. This emphasis also explains the title chosen by H. for his study: despite the still proverbial assertion of writing history *sine ira et studio*, Tacitus never aimed at an objective description in our sense of the word (and H. shows that such a broad claim is not covered by the Latin words anyway). On the contrary, Tacitus–like other Roman historians, but not necessarily Greek ones–deliberately wrote history, in order to express his personal opinion on past events ('Meinungs- und Thesenliteratur') and in order to exert influence on current affairs ('Politik mit anderen Mitteln': p. 19).[2] These general remarks are to be found in the introduction (pp. 11–19), which ends with a useful outline of the further structure of the book.

The first, markedly shorter of the two main chapters ('Geschichtsschreibung als literarisches Kunstwerk', pp. 20–43) takes another proverbial

[1] Cf. p. 9: 'Im Mittelpunkt der hier vorgelegten Arbeit steht die Überzeugung, dass die Geschichtsschreibung der Römer einem heutigen Leser völlig fremd ist (viel fremder noch als die der Griechen) und in mancher Hinsicht auch so anstößig, dass es geboten ist, auf jeden Versuch einer Vermittlung mit heutigen Vorstellungen von Geschichtsschreibung zu verzichten und statt dessen eine möglichst umfassende Bestimmung des uns Fremden zu geben.'

[2] Cf. pp. 14–15: 'Die These, die im Mittelpunkt der folgenden Überlegungen steht, lautet, dass dem Historiker Tacitus ein Anspruch auf Unvoreingenommenheit oder gar Objektivität nicht nur völlig fremd ist, sondern dass er ganz im Gegenteil das Grundprinzip einer bewusst subjektiven Darstellung der Geschichte verfolgt und dieses Grundprinzip mit der Formulierung *sine ira et studio* klar und bündig auf den Begriff gebracht hat. Ich nenne dies das Subjektivitätsprinzip.'

expression as its starting point, this time Horace's famous *aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae*. Under this heading, H. discusses what ancient writers actually mean by *delectare* in a historiographic text: contrary again to modern expectations, they are seldom talking about the attractions of the content, but almost exclusively about the literary quality of the work. He further develops this point by looking at ancient remarks on the historian's diction (pp. 27–32), on the coherence and plausibility of the 'plot' presented (pp. 32–38), and on the selection of the events described with regard to the *delectatio* of the reader (pp. 38–43). What perhaps looks a side step at first glance contributes to the overall argument (among others) insofar as these considerations shed light on another area of difference between ancient and modern historians and thus prepare the ground for the main chapter.

This second chapter is significantly longer and carries the burden of the argument (pp. 45–120). The title, 'Die Relativierung der Wahrheit und das Engagement für die Wirklichkeit', already contains a key point in highly compressed form which will be explained in the first subchapter ('Die Wahrheit des Historikers und die historische Wirklichkeit'; pp. 46–66): After briefly discussing the opinions put forward by Hellenistic historians (above all Polybius), H. stresses the problem of the right translation of the Latin word *veritas*, in German often rendered with 'truth' ('Wahrheit'), but also signifying 'reality' ('Wirklichkeit'). And this second meaning is, according to him, much more relevant to the debate on historiography in ancient Rome, since it is more appropriate to highlight the close parallels to the representation of 'reality' as practised in contemporary rhetoric.

In the next section ('Römische Geschichtsschreibung als Gestaltung der Vergangenheit', pp. 66–75), H. points out that writing history in ancient Rome was mainly about shaping the past or rather the *memoria* of selected past events in the way the individual writer (or the social group he is a part of) intended.[3] This makes an important difference not only with regard to Greek historiography, but also to the usual distinction between writing history on the one hand and keeping memory alive on the other hand described as recurring element of most societies by Jan Assmann and others.[4] This section is followed by a brief digression dealing with the proems of Sallust's *Catiline* and Tacitus' *Agricola*, arguing that they are composed as general introductions to the historical oeuvre of both writers (pp. 75–77).

[3] Cf. p. 67: 'Die Deutung ist das primäre Ziel und die Darstellung im wesentlichen nur eine Funktion der Deutung, der Deutung durch den jeweiligen Historiker. Für diese Einheit steht der Begriff *memoria*.'

[4] Cf. J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich 1992).

The next section (pp. 77–86) takes up the phrase 'Geschichtsschreibung als Meinungs- und Thesenliteratur' already used by H. in the introduction to describe Roman historiography. It elaborates this idea by taking a closer look especially at the historical monographs written by Sallust and Tacitus. Sallust's *Catiline* offers a good example of this, as he starts his work by making the assertion that this *coniuratio* was a very dangerous (and thus memorable) event and then proceeds to prove his hypothesis in the account that follows, using every literary and rhetorical device available to him. H. places this way of making an assertion and proving it afterwards in the context of the exchange of opinions known to contemporary readers from a wide range of other situations (reaching from debates in the senate to the schools of rhetoric).

The penultimate subchapter ('Tacitus über die kaiserzeitliche Historiographie seit Actium, über sein eigenes Geschichtswerk und das Subjektivitätsprinzip'; pp. 86–104) finally leads us back to Tacitus and offers a close reading of the proem to his *Histories* (referring repeatedly to that of the *Agricola* as a general introduction to his oeuvre; see above), dealing – among others – with the much-debated *inscitia rei publicae* during the imperial period; with Tacitus' relation to his predecessors and with his handling of the problems of his own biography with regard to the credibility of his account of the Flavian dynasty.

In the last section ('Geschichtsschreibung als Politik mit anderen Mitteln'; pp. 105–20), H. looks at the communicative situation and compares that of writing of history in Rome to that of delivering a deliberative speech in the senate.[5] This function had been inherent to Roman historiography from its beginning in the Republic, but is continued even across the change to the principate, as H. shows on the basis of Tacitus' writings from the *Agricola* to the *Annales*. Thereafter, we already come upon a concise but up-to-date bibliography (pp. 121–4) and an *index locorum* (pp. 125–8).

There is no conclusion given, but neither is one lacking, since H. has named his hypothesis right at the start and argued conclusively for it afterwards, thus creating a fine example of 'Thesenliteratur' himself. His general point, especially his emphasis on ancient historiography being alien from its modern counterpart in regard to the objectivity that we can legitimately expect, is very convincing. Looking at his arguments in more detail, it becomes apparent that his examples are mainly taken from Sallust and Tacitus, so

[5] Cf. p. 106: 'Beteiligte Personen sind der Autor des Geschichtswerkes und seine Adressaten. Dass römische Historiker, die dem Senatorenstand angehören, sich mit ihren Werken in erster Linie an ihre Mitsenatoren wenden, ist unumstritten. Folglich ist die Kommunikationssituation im Prinzip die gleiche wie bei einer im Senat gehaltenen deliberativen Rede.'

that his results are perhaps not applicable in exactly the same way even to all Roman historians (as H. himself admits, rightly pointing to the diversity of the ancient historiography in its entirety). Yet H. did not aim at writing a comprehensive study on every piece of history written in antiquity. This would have required a much more extensive volume, whereas one of the merits of this book is that it has something substantial to say on a topic relevant to every (ancient) historical work in a reasonable number of pages. The attractive task of putting to the proof the results achieved by H. on the basis of other writers of history from antiquity is left to the reader – of whom this book should find many!

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