

REVIEW

SITUATING UNIVERSAL HISTORY

Peter Liddel and Andrew Fear, edd., *Historiae Mundi: Studies in Universal History*. London: Duckworth, 2010. Pp. ix + 244. Hardcover, £64.00. ISBN 978-0-7156-3833-0.

Note: The Table of Contents for this volume appears at the end of the review.

The appearance of a volume of essays devoted to the subject of universal history will doubtless please many in the fields of Classics and ancient historiography. The steady growth of interest in this and related areas over the last several decades has made a broad study something of a necessity for the purposes of synthesising prior research and outlining paths of future study. While the fifteen essays of *Historiae Mundi* lack the kinds of cohesiveness and dialogue ideally suited for this purpose, they do offer a broad perspective.¹ Drawn chiefly from the proceedings of an international conference held at the University of Manchester in June 2007, ‘Universal Historiography in Antiquity and Beyond’, the essays cover a wide set of themes and interpretive approaches, ranging from the familiar (e.g., particular studies of Polybius and Diodorus of Sicily) to the less conventional (e.g., universalism in epic poetry and in ancient economic thought). The focus is predominately upon Greece and Rome, but matters of reception are considered as well, that is, the afterlife of universal history in late antique Europe, in medieval Islam, and in the modern West. There are conspicuous omissions—no paper devoted to Ephorus or Posidonius, for instance—but these are not critical.² As the editors themselves point out, the purpose of the essays is not to provide an exhaustive treatment, but rather to open up new areas of inquiry by considering forms of ‘historical universalism’ beyond its conventional sources in prose historical writing (pp. 2–3). Particular contributions examine coins and inscriptions, as well as texts in theology, philosophy, and epic poetry. Taken as a whole, the collection offers a wide-ranging survey that will be useful for situating universal historiography in its diverse intellectual historical contexts, and for rethinking some of the rigid catego-

¹ Other collections relevant to the theme of universal history include Aigner Foresti et al. (1998) and Bearzot et al. (2001).

² On universalism in Ephorus, see now Parmeggiani (2011) 709–30.

ries that have tended to guide modern debate. In what follows, I will outline some of the key contributions to the collection along these lines, though I must omit certain essays for reasons of space. Detailed summaries of all the articles may be found in the Introduction to the volume.

The opening essay, by Peter Liddel, examines universalism in the context of the discourse on constitutions in Greece. In a survey of epigraphical and literary texts, Liddel points out the regular emphasis on political revolution in public discourse in the *polis*. This concentration forms both the basis for historical memory, he suggests, and, in diplomatic contexts, a means for understanding regime change in the general sense, in the Greek world and beyond. In the contexts of historiography and philosophy, this discourse was picked up and theorised more explicitly over time, furnishing models of constitutional development meant to hold universally. While raising important questions about the foundations of historical memory in the *polis*, the essay serves to remind us that universality need not always entail comprehensiveness; it may concern generalisation as well. This observation is vital to understanding historians' engagement with the theme, which is often grounded in language that evokes the discourse on general knowledge in philosophy and science: e.g., αἱ κοινὰ πράξεις (Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70 TT 10, 11), ἡ καθόλου τῶν πράξεων ἱστορία (Pol. 8.2.6).³

François Hartog's paper focuses on Polybius, considering the historian's universalism as a reflection of practical concerns shaping the historical field. Polybius' familiar conception of history as a great convergence of events derives from the strong emphasis on vision in claims to historical authority, Hartog suggests; the synoptic view of events in the *Histories* thus reflects standard concerns for autopsy in that context. Surveying the various ways synopticism is conceptualised in the text, Hartog draws attention in particular to Polybius' engagement with contemporary dramatic theory, which provides the basis for theorising the interdependency of affairs. He goes on to suggest that this indicates a strong engagement with Aristotle, whose notorious critique of history in the *Poetics* is often taken to reject any meaningful link of this kind.⁴

Clemence Schultze examines conceptions of time in Velleius Paterculus. Beginning with the historian's characteristic *brevitas*, she asks to what extent the narrow dimensions of his writing—a history of Rome from the Trojan War to Tiberius in just two books—may be said to reflect a more universal perspective. Focusing on description of the remote past in the work, Schultze suggests ways Velleius' use of synchronism, allusion, and selective

³ A useful survey of the discourse on universals in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and others appears in Sorabji (2006).

⁴ On this issue, see also Williams (2007).

omission creates an image of world history centred on the future Roman state. For instance, by linking the founding of Carthage to Caranus' arrival in Macedonia, Velleius not only evokes the spectacular events of the 150s and 140s BCE; he also absorbs early Libya into a distinctively Roman narrative. This complements the broader discourse of power in the Principate, Schultze suggests, bringing even the foreign terrain of remote time under Roman control.

Similar concerns govern Jackie Elliott's study of Ennius' *Annales*, which examines the manipulation of time in the poet's methods of description. Regular parallels with Homer and Herodotus and thematic concentration on Republican society and institutions evoke an idealised world that situates the action of the poem transhistorically between the heroic (Greek) past and Ennius' contemporary Rome. Elliott concentrates in particular on the use of flashback, simile, and anachronism in the poem, which, she claims, evoke a sense of historical continuity that complicates the common view of Ennius' relationship with the annalistic tradition, and indicates a more universal outlook than is generally recognised. These observations are accompanied by useful theoretical discussion which underlines the inherent limitations governing universalism in literary contexts.

Tim Cornell examines universal history in early Roman historiography. While it is clear that early Roman writers concerned themselves primarily with the affairs of Italy and Sicily, Cornell argues that this concentration was situated against a wider ecumenical background—much in the way that contemporary Greek writers sought to incorporate western Mediterranean affairs through accounts of aetiology, ethnographic survey, and stories of *nostos*. Similar approaches appear in the fragments of Fabius Pictor, Cn. Gellius, and Cato the Elder, Cornell claims, which indicates both a stronger interaction with the Greek tradition than is typically supposed, as well as a more universal historical perspective. The argument is accompanied by useful methodological observations emphasising the inherent localism of much universal historiography in Greece and Rome.

Liv Mariah Yarrow's paper examines universal conceptions of space in the late Republic. In a survey of numismatic and literary sources, Yarrow points out the regular link in first-century BCE political discourse between Rome and the world at large. Coin issues from the period in particular juxtapose the genius of Rome with formulaic symbols for the *oikoumenê*, such as the rudder, the cornucopia, and especially the globe. This pattern, Yarrow claims, parallels figurative language in contemporary oratory (e.g., the *urbs-orbis* pun), and together with it reflects a growing emphasis on Rome as the source of worldwide integration. Special attention is given to the symbol of the globe, a trope of Hellenistic cosmology repurposed to conceptualise worldly power. The essay reminds us that representations of space are not

value-neutral, but complement external configurations of power. Moreover, by incorporating analysis of objects, Yarrow calls attention the fact that the tropes of description on which historians such as Polybius and Diodorus of Sicily relied belonged to a wider cultural imaginary.

A similar theme appears in Marta García Morcillo's essay on Strabo's *Geography*, which considers the treatment of economic and cultural historical questions in the Italian and Sicilian sections of the work. Strabo's attention to commercial and demographic change in Italy and Sicily presupposes the (Augustan) themes of progress and decline, García Morcillo argues. She points out how episodes of economic growth and urban development are connected thematically and set against the broader narrative of political unification. Along with observations on the persistence of local cultural traditions, the account forms a coherent historical portrait of the Augustan vision of prosperity, unity, and plurality. While Strabo's relationship with Augustan imperial ideology is in many respects well understood, García Morcillo's essay provides an important illustration of how it is expressed and realised through the narrative features of the text.

Strabo also forms the subject of Johannes Engels' article, which provides a synopsis of the lost *Historika Hypomnēmata*, going over what can be told of its contents, its reception, and its relationship to the historiographical tradition more broadly. The essay adheres to conventional themes (e.g., *translatio imperii*, the chronological and spatial scope of the work), but also raises more particular questions, such as what can be known of the work's organisation and methodological foundations. The suggestion, for instance, that the title, *ὑπομνήματα*, is connected to other areas of Hellenistic technical writing has important implications for understanding changing conceptions of the form and function of historical texts in the period.

The final five essays of the volume consider universal history in late antiquity and beyond, with emphasis on philosophical historical questions in the Christian, Islamic, and modern secular traditions. Andrew Fear's essay examines conceptions of time in Orosius. He argues that the Spanish historian played a major role in the reception of the classical past in early Christian thought by addressing the apparent incompatibility between linear and cyclical time. While this perhaps assumes too neat a division between pagan and Christian perceptions of time—Polybius, for instance, exhibits both linear and cyclical models—the essay provides an important illustration of how this tension was negotiated.⁵ Particular emphasis is placed on how Orosius' innovation entailed reinterpreting the classical past in light of the grand nar-

⁵ On cyclical and linear time in Polybius, see Petzold (1977). More recent discussion of the issue of incompatibility in ancient conceptions of time, with references to useful theoretical treatments, is Clarke (2007) 7–27.

rative of revelation. Fear suggests in closing that this ultimately opened the way for modern progressive conceptions of history.

Peter Van Nuffelen's essay also focuses on the Christian tradition. Challenging the common view that the Christian theological perspective required a universal historical outlook, Van Nuffelen claims that the writers of church histories and world chronicles never produced universal history in the proper sense. Though broad in scope, such works considered the periods of the remote past only from an apologetic perspective, and typically did not extend geographic coverage evenly. Van Nuffelen thus suggests that the tradition was for the most part only 'potentially' universal (p. 165), in the sense that though Christian historiography was motivated by a universal outlook in the theological sense, this was seldom realised in practice.

In an essay on Hegel, Allegra de Laurentiis examines the philosopher's concept of universal history as it relates to the modern state system. For Hegel the process by which human communities emerged from isolation from one another and the resulting tension this produced in their multiple claims to sovereignty generated wholly new possibilities of human understanding. Only this knowledge, embodied in the concept of philosophical universal history, permitted genuine self-determination in Hegel's eyes. The view underscores not only the privileged epistemological position of modernity, but also the unique role of universal history in the philosopher's concept of human progress. In closing, de Laurentiis draws comparisons with Aristotle, who also saw the end of history as manifested in the emergence of a particular kind of society, but differed from Hegel crucially in grounding that process in nature rather than history (or historical knowledge).

Turning to the Islamic tradition, Marco Di Branco asks to what extent the practice of universal history can help to clarify larger questions of cultural interaction in the Arab world. Beginning with the issue of the origins of Arabic historiography—the paper opens with a concise synopsis of the recent debate—Di Branco claims that Arabic writers faced with the problem of the secular past found important models of practice in the Byzantine tradition. Byzantine world chronicles, such as John Malalas' *Chronographia*, for example, exhibit distinctive features of narrative structure and source integration that will have been useful in this context. Di Branco hypothesises that this exchange was mediated in part through Syriac texts, and suggests ways that this possibility can help to nuance reductive modern accounts of continuity between medieval Islam and Byzantium.

Taken together, the essays in *Historiae Mundi* cover much ground that will be useful for situating universal history in its various intellectual and cultural contexts. I suspect that the collection will be of the greatest use to those unacquainted with any of the different periods treated in it, or to newcomers

seeking to expand their knowledge beyond the most familiar figures in universal history.

If there is a drawback to the kind of comparative perspective appearing in the essays, it is the at times rigid generic view of universal history that it seems to entail. While there is clearly a strong effort on the part of all contributors to expand how we study universal history, in practice this occasionally involves stricter assumptions about genre than are perhaps warranted. On the one hand, scholars have identified the limits to which modern conceptions of genre are appropriate for ancient historiography, and have noted in particular the problems with the idea of a separate genre of universal history in antiquity.⁶ On the other hand, such perspectives also encourage overly schematic views, such as that reflected in Van Nuffelen's distinction between 'actual' and potential forms of universal history (pp. 166–7); or in Engels' suggestion that universal history entered a period of 'crisis' in the time after Strabo (p. 80). While it seems clear enough what both mean—i.e., that there is need to recognise the formal differences distinguishing the more voluminous and more systematic universal histories of the Hellenistic and early Imperial periods—the formulation of this point is at times too categorical. A strong view of decline, for instance, takes for granted that the practice of universal history was sufficiently persistent and regular in its supposed high period, which does not appear to have been the case given the great difference of perspective separating the work of, say, Nicolaus of Damascus from that of Polybius. Moreover it assumes that those practices thought to have replaced universal history in late antiquity (i.e. the production of *breviaria* and epitomes) did not themselves bear some comparable intellectual and social function. The latter assumption in particular is worth rethinking in light of recent research outlining the positive contribution of such activities to the continuation of the historiographical tradition.⁷

Highlights of the volume include the concentration running through many of the essays on the local foundations of universal history. Cornell, Schultze, Yarrow, and Elliott all emphasise how universality in the Roman tradition reflects particular conditions characterising the city as a culture of learning, whether in the Augustan and Tiberian eras, for instance, or in the imagined community constituted by literary Hellenism in the Republic. In all cases, the issue is not comprehensiveness in the strict sense, but rather

⁶ The generic view of universal history owes much to modern acceptance of Jacoby's views on the development of Greek historiography, on which see, for instance, Marincola (2001) 1–3; cf. id. (1999). On the relative modernity of the category of universal history, see Desideri (2001).

⁷ A useful re-evaluation of *breviaria* and epitomes in late antiquity, with bibliography, may be found in Banchich (2007).

how the historical subject is integrated and unified in accordance with local concerns and local horizons of meaning. Something similar might be said of Liddel's study of Greek constitutional theory, which links universal conceptions of human society to local experience in the *polis*, or of Di Branco's and de Laurentiis' remarks on local factors governing universalism in medieval Islam and in nineteenth-century Europe. Apart from helping to historicise the practice of universal history, such approaches have the benefit of moving beyond restrictive questions of scope in favour of more dynamic issues concerning the relation between historical universalism and other forms of local knowledge.⁸ Future consideration of such questions now stands to benefit from a growing body of research in Classics devoted to the expansion and systematisation of knowledge in related areas of intellectual activity.⁹

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⁸ An especially interesting treatment of this issue, oddly not cited by any of the authors in the volume, is Vattuone (1998).

⁹ See, for instance, König and Whitmarsh (2007). Also relevant is the interesting article by Most (2011).

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