

REVIEW

THE MANY FACES OF HISTORY

K. A. Raaflaub, ed., *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*. Malden, Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. Pp. xiv + 425. Hardback, £93.50/€126.30. ISBN: 978-1-118-41250-3.

How did ancient civilisations think about, record, and write their own histories? *Thinking, Recording and Writing History in the Ancient World*, edited by K. A. Raaflaub, focuses on broad cross-cultural comparisons of the ways in which ancient societies dealt with the past. It has appeared in *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* series at Wiley Blackwell, which has the ambition to shed light on common patterns and distinctive differences, as well as illustrating the remarkable variety of responses humankind has developed to meet common challenges.

The book is arranged in nineteen chapters, mostly revised versions of papers that were first presented at a workshop held under the auspices of the Program in Ancient Studies at Brown University in December 2008. The subject of History—in its widest sense, including both historical consciousness and historical writing—is approached in cultural contexts. As well as Raaflaub’s *Introduction* (1–5) and chapter 1 by D. Carr (6–18), which provides us with what one might define the ‘philosophical preface’ to the entire collection, the book includes contributions by S. W. Durrant on Early China (19–40), J. L. Fitzgerald on Ancient India (41–60), R. Thapar on Early North India (61–78), C. Oberländer on Ancient Japan (79–96), J. Neelis on Buddhist and Jain Macro-historical Narratives (97–116), T. Schneider on Ancient Egypt (117–43), P. Michalowsky on Ancient Mesopotamia (144–68), T. van den Hout on Hittite Society (169–86), R. Rollinger on Teispid and Achaemenid Persia (187–212), M. Z. Brettler on the Hebrew Bible (213–33), J. Grethlein on Archaic and Classical Greece (234–55), A. Mehl on Rome (256–75), E.-M. Becker on Early Christians (276–96), S. Papaioannou on Byzantium (297–313), A. Marsham on the Early and Medieval Islamic Middle East (314–39), N. P. Carter on the Maya people (340–71), L. B. Diel on the Aztecs (372–90), and L. Brooks on Native North American Nations (391–416). A general index rounds off the collection (417–25). As we see, and as is also pointed out by Raaflaub in his *Introduction* (3), this study involves societies which transcend the chronological limits usually chosen for ‘antiquity’, but whose historical thinking and writing are deeply rooted in ‘ancient’ tradition. Many cultural contexts, which are markedly different to each other, are examined; each of them also carries a number

of specific features and related problems, to which, naturally, each contributor has their own approach; the result is, however, very coherent and organic, and the reader is treated by both the contributors and the editor to a pleasant read.

This book—Raaflaub states—‘deliberately does not limit itself to historical writing but approaches the phenomenon of “narratives about the past” much more broadly, thus conveying to the reader some of the wealth of forms and means by which the past was preserved and used in the great variety of cultures that make up the world of ancient or early civilizations’ (3). Such a statement alone would suffice to show the variety of wide-ranging problems this book deals with; but the reader is also advised that these chapters deal with common questions, such as—to name but a few—‘What role did the past play in a society’s thought and imagination, its ritual and customs?’ ‘How was the past imagined, represented, and recorded?’ ‘What purposes did the preservation of memory or the recording of the past serve?’ (3–4). One will not blame this book if it does not provide an answer to all the questions one might ask. Perhaps someone will complain—and that is *not* the case with me—that the scholars involved in the project did not start from a shared definition of ‘history’ and ‘historiography’.¹ As a matter of fact, this is a very stimulating volume, whose merits go far beyond informing modern classicists—who are obviously more conversant with the Graeco-Roman world—about cultural contexts that are for the most part quite unusual to them, if not downright unfamiliar.

The reader can appreciate how the nineteenth-century approach to historical inquiry, which shapes our ‘western’ view of History, making the past the subject of disinterested description/analysis and aiming to reconstruct it ‘objectively’ (‘the past as it actually happened’), is very idiosyncratic, and therefore should not serve as a tool, neither for assessing ancient conceptions of History, nor for appreciating ancient approaches to the past. The idea that the past counts ‘as such’—somewhat canonical today—was not shared in ancient cultures, and should therefore be regarded as an exception, not as the norm. It was very usual in ancient societies to look at the past as a means of constructing the identity of a nation and/or a community (see e.g. Oberländer on Ancient Japan, Grethlein on Archaic and Classical Greece, Becker on Early Christians, Papaioannou on Byzantium), for legitimising or justifying present power and

¹ As well as Carr’s chapter, many of the contributors deal with the definition of ‘history’ and ‘historiography’. See for example Schneider (118–21, endorsing at 121 Huizinga’s definition of ‘written history’ as ‘the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past’); Brettler (215: history is ‘a narrative that depicts a past’); Papaioannou (297: ‘I understand history to be the transformation of the past into narratives, images, and ritual: a past objectified, defining identities and cultural habits, and, at once, a subjective past, remembered, adopted, rejected, or forgotten’); Carter (340: ‘If we think of history as a critical inquiry into what happened in the past by methods including interviews with eyewitnesses and recourse to archival sources, interpreted in the context of generalizing theories about the human condition and a naturalistic model of causality ...’).

contemporary politics (see, for example, Durrant on Early China, Oberländer on Ancient Japan, van den Hout on Hittites, Rollinger on Persia); the past could be viewed as a flexible object, which was to be manipulated quite systematically (see Diel on the Aztecs); it was often conceived as a source of paradigms of moral conduct (see e.g. Durrant on Early China, Neelis on Buddhist and Jain Macrohistorical Narratives, Mehl on Rome, Papaioannou on Byzantium, Marsham on the Early and Medieval Islamic Middle East); it could be viewed, more generally, as exemplary (Grethlein on Archaic and Classical Greece). The overall picture is one of a multi-faceted and very complex idea of History, covering not only a wide range of aims, but also a number of means of transmitting knowledge about the past (see e.g. Papaioannou on the flexibility of the very term *historia* in Byzantium). Today we are used to conceiving History as the subject of ‘history books’ written by professionals called ‘historians’; in Antiquity there was the ability to conceive ‘History by historians’ as well as ‘History without historians’. Knowledge of the past was accessible not only by reading books, but also, for example, by taking part in rituals, through which the past was linked to both the present and the future. In this volume, the existence of both a sense of history and a serious concern about the past is convincingly restated for cultural contexts which have long been believed, on the basis of the standard western view, to be lacking in any historical consciousness (see, for example, Fitzgerald and Thapar on Ancient India; cf. Schneider on Ancient Egypt).

This collection undoubtedly shows the limitations and inability of the western-positivistic approach to embrace and understand the full meaning of History as it appears to have been sensed and experienced by ancient societies. Furthermore, as is the case with books that are very rich in content, this collection allows the reader to move freely from chapter to chapter and to freely discover subtle analogies and differences between contexts. The following are a few examples. One may parallel—with due caution—the scribes in Japan with the first Roman historians of the late third century BC. The former wrote the *Nihon shoki* (‘Chronicles of Japan’) in the eighth century CE, and were mostly immigrants from China who wrote in Chinese to spread knowledge among a Chinese audience about Japan’s past from its beginnings, in the very age when Japan was emerging in a Chinese-centred system of international relations in Asia. The latter were from Rome, but wrote in Greek to spread knowledge among a Greek audience about Rome’s past from its beginnings, in the very age Rome was emerging in a Hellenistic-centred system of international relations in the Mediterranean. In both cases, the definition of the identity of a new power was at stake.

One may compare Chinese historians and Greek historians by noting their common tendency to criticise their predecessors and their common care for *oikonomia* as a means of properly representing the past; but one may also appreciate, by contrast, how the care for the validity of sources and the stress on

freedom in judgement—to the point of attacking the most widespread opinions—were peculiar to Greek historians. One may also notice the diverging conceptions of time from context to context: for example, the idea of a linear development in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, in which events indeed have a direction (from Creation to the Last Day), as suggested by religious texts; or the impressively timeless, static conception of the Persians in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, as suggested by the Achaemenid royal inscriptions (since the Persians believed that they had forged the largest empire in world history and that they had reached the boundaries of the inhabited world, they also believed that history itself had reached its end and the notion of development was cut off, everything becoming a matter of ‘order’ and ‘disorder’); or indeed the Greek idea of contingency and change, which was so strong that it challenged the very notion of development. And so on.

Raaflaub rightly emphasises that only recently have classicists become more conscious of the wealth of forms of dealing with the past that were different from historiography and pervaded Greek and Roman societies; furthermore, he emphasises that rarely have classicists taken advantage of the heuristic potential inherent in making comparisons with other civilisations. It is hoped that a comparative approach is taken more firmly, and we are invited to look at a wider context. Indeed this is not merely a heuristic opportunity, but a methodological need, which today also involves students of ancient Greco-Roman historiography, since the traditional picture of the evolution of Greek historical writing from the Classical to the Hellenistic age is now, in our very day, the subject of extensive revision.

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