

As in all cultures, the will of the gods and their influence in shaping the history of man waned as the historians sculpted the history of their people. Looking at the works of Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides provides a path to view this evolution. What began as timeless poetry became a chronology of events acted upon by man against man. Homer, more poet than historian, spoke with a voice that described the fortunes of war as decided by the will of fickle gods. Herodotus began to secularize history yet the will of the gods remained within his commentary. Thucydides saw a world in which men decided their fates through action. The works of these three men of the same culture show how historians can differ and how they can borrow from one another while at the same time providing a unique voice. The decline of deity controlled history in ancient Greece becomes evident when analyzing the evolution of commentary from Homer to Herodotus and Thucydides.

History begins and ends as a story. The poetry of that story can define readership and the validity of its purpose. There are histories that entertain and those that inform. On rare occasion there are those that provide both. Homer spoke of the fall of Troy and the aftermath of the conflict in his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The oldest known written versions of Homer's songs of gods and feats of men date to the sixth century B.C.; while the works themselves are much older. Homer's history is one of gods and monsters where the hero is at the mercy of the will of whatever deity he has offended or who protects him. Homer composed his works for a Greek audience about Greek affairs. Even the Trojans spoke Greek. Those who experienced the telling of the *Iliad* knew not from which century the deeds had occurred. But, as Breisach explains, heroic deeds and ideals themselves are timeless. "Only the unheroic, the stuff of everyday, is under the yoke of continuous time."¹ Homer painted a world of great men and great actions

¹ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 7.

dodging the interference of the gods and their all too human desires. As Greek history evolved so did its desire to define not just the actions of man, but when those actions occurred and the true nature of why they occurred beyond the will of the gods.

Greek historians searched for a pattern to behavior. “The Greeks always quoted individual past events as motives for consolidation or inducement to action.”² Searching for motives for the actions of men, Herodotus attributed more to mortals than gods. Although the gods were still present in his works, “there is also in Herodotus the simple notion that men make mistakes and start wars when they should not.”³ What is found in Herodotus is a history in which the actions of men and the chronology of those events become more defined, yet not exact. His travels throughout the ancient world provided a more universal view of history and he gained much knowledge from those the Greeks considered barbarians. Herodotus explored the history not just of the great heroes, but of a wider variety of men. He mentioned that those once great in times past became small and those in his time once small became great. “Since I know that human prosperity never continues steadfast in the same place, I shall mention both equally.”⁴ Herodotus also provides a glimpse into the responsibilities of the historian. “I however am bound to report that which is reported, though I am not bound altogether to believe it.”⁵ Herodotus did not exclude the gods totally, but he began to shape the nature of how men made those decisions. He spoke often of the consultation that the leaders made with the Oracle at Delphi before decisions were made. He treated the barbarians with respect and presented both sides of the action versus simple propaganda promoting Greeks against an uncivilized foe. His experiences with the world outside of Greece allowed for a truer history to be presented. By analyzing both

² Arnaldo Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Histiography* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 171.

³ Momigliano, 187.

⁴ Herodotus, Book 1, 5.

⁵ Herodotus Book 7, 152.

sides of a conflict and understanding more than just one culture, Herodotus captured a more objective course of events and inspired future historians towards the same endeavor. He did so while limiting the need to ascribe the credit for the actions of men to the will of the gods.

Unlike Homer and Herodotus, Thucydides wrote history in a purer scientific method. Thucydides sought to distance his works from the works of Homer and Herodotus. Less a story teller, Thucydides developed a more exact chronology of the events he recorded. Where Herodotus is called ‘the father of history,’ Thucydides is surely the father of modern historians. His secular design of the actions of men inspire still today as an objective representation of historiography. Removing the will of the gods, he speaks of men repeating the mistakes of the past in future generations. Thucydides provides rational explanations for attitudes and actions of war. “And if both sides nourished the boldest hopes and put forth their utmost strength for war, this was only natural. Zeal is always at the height at the commencement of an undertaking; and on this particular occasion Peloponnese and Athens were both full of young men whose inexperience made them eager to take up arms, while the rest of Hellas stood straining with excitement at the conflict of its leading cities.”⁶ Nowhere in this description of impending hostilities is there the mention of a scorned goddess or offended god. While not as poetic as Homer or cosmopolitan as Herodotus, Thucydides fathered a factual and direct approach toward the history of his people. Breisach discussed Thucydides approach to the pantheon of the Greeks influence on worldly matters. “He granted that those persons who shape human destinies are often guided by a belief in gods, oracles, or divinations, although he did not approve of such guidance.”⁷ Yet, that did not mean Thucydides ignored the temptation to mark seminal events with natural anomalies, such as earthquakes and comets. Thucydides presents as secular a world

⁶ Thucydides, Book 2, Chapter VI.

⁷ Breisach, 14-15.

as possible for the times. His work shows the maturity of Greece and the philosophical movements that were occurring during the years of his writing. Simply attributing the will of men to the whim of gods was no longer the only option for the Hellenes.

The will of the gods lessened in Greek histories as the progress of time evolved through the ages and works from Homer to Herodotus and Thucydides. With the Homeric poetry, the Greeks enjoyed an aristocratic age of history that spoke of gleaming greatness. With the coming of Herodotus and Thucydides, that greatness remained, but became more about the will of men and their abilities to define their own path, their own history, without the disruptions of angry, meddling gods and monsters at every turn. Each phase of history, each culture's historians have struggled with the level of divine intervention and man's place in charting his own path. It is from these early authors of history that is found the blueprint to how man becomes his own master and forges his own will. The cyclic nature of history that Thucydides warns of is unavoidable. Historiography shows that man begins with the assumption that fate is out of his control, but eventually grows to understand the reality that man creates history for good or for bad.

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