**history/历史(Lì Shǐ)**

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| European Perspective | François Hartog | 17 Feb 2022 |

**HISTORY IN THE WEST: THE FIRST CHOICES**

In order to sketch a comparative frame, I shall focus this short presentation on what I call the very first choices in matters of history and historical writing. In Western culture, Greece has often been presented as the land of many beginnings. Was not Herodotus dubbed the “father of history”? Even if we all know that history and its writing did not begin in Greece, but further to the east, and much earlier[[1]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn1).

In Egypt, where continuity is so crucial, the royal lists go back to the end of the fourth millenium B.C.E. The Egyptians started by inscribing pictograms on wooden and ivory tablets; then, later, their compilations on papyrus were at the origins of the first annals. The annals kept the records of the prominent deeds of the kings (or at least of what was viewed as important to record at that time). But, perhaps the most striking feature of Egyptian civilization, is its autochtony (to use a Greek notion). As far as they looked back toward the past, the Egyptians didn’t see anybody but themselves and the gods. And, as is well known, their monuments have something unique : instead of expressing an interest in the past, they exhibit a desire for eternity, but a material one or a petrified one, which contrasts sharply with the Greek epic and its celebration of an “immortal glory”[[2]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn2).

In Mesopotamia, at the end of the third millennia B.C.E, the monarchy of Akkade was the first to unite the country under its authority and to enlist scribes to write its history, thereby legitimating its power in the present. This historiography was a royal history (only kings made history), a monumental one (making itself visible especially through enormous inscriptions) and an exclusive one (held in the hands of a caste of intellectuals, masters of writing)[[3]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn3).

To the East also, the sacred books of the ancient Hebrews were always fundamentally considered as history. However, although the Bible is all the way through inhabited by the demands of remembrance, it never displays any curiosity for the past as such. The principle danger would be to forget the ancestors’ experiences and no longer believe in their truth. Israel “receives the order to become a dynasty of priest and a holy nation: nowhere is it suggested that it would become a nation of historians”[[4]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn4).

What place can we then assign the Greeks?  These people who have never been visited by Revelation and who did not know the imperatives or duty of remembrance.  Housed in their narrow settlements on the border of the Orient are they not actually “late-comers” who managed to pass themselves off as “first comers”? It must be said that they, themselves, never claimed to be first in historiography: Herodotus never proclaimed himself the first inventor of history.

They were indeed late-comers. Since they only discovered or rediscovered writing relatively recently (during the eighth century B.C.E.) by adopting the Syro-Phenician alphabet. And it would take them another three centuries or so before they would begin to write their first histories**.** But the Greek world knew neither the text as revelation nor writing as a preserve for a caste of specialists (as was still the case in the Mycenian kingdoms).

Epistemologically, the Greeks always privileged seeing (over hearing) as the mode of knowledge. To see, to see by oneself and to know were one and the same thing. Ontologically, their presence in the world made no question for them: it was self-evident. To be present, to be there, to see and to know all go together for the Greeks[[5]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn5).

**Divination and History**

Let’s go back, for a moment, to Mesopotamia at the end of the second millennia. Without pausing over the first model of monumental and royal historiography whose methods are as incontestable as they are simple, I would like to focus briefly on an exchange which seems to have linked divination and history.  There, divination played an important role in decision making.  How did the soothsayers work?  They accumulated, classified oracles, made lists, compiled cases and created real libraries[[6]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6).  The soothsayer was guided by an ideal of exhaustivity (to collect all the examples), and he was always looking for precedents. The way he works is comparable to the way a judge works. In other words, divination, before to be a science of the future, is first of all a science of the past.

A series of oracles were found at Mari (a great palace in Syria) dating from the beginning of the second millennia that modern researchers dubbed “historical oracles”. Why historical ? Instead of employing the canonical modality – “If the liver of the animal (sacrificed, a sheep) is thus, it is a sign that the king *will take* (in the future) the town in such a way” -, the oracle says “If the liver of the animal is thus, it is a sign that the king *has taken* (already) the town in such a way (a very precise one).” This passage from the future to the perfect tense is truly surprising, even more so since the events to which they refer are thought (by the moderns) to have actually taken place. That is why some assyriologists have wanted to see in such oracles the very beginnings of Mesopotamian historiography:  first divination then history (if you leave out the first half of the oracle dealing with the liver)[[7]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn7). Some sinologists held the same view in regard to Chinese historiography (from divination to historiography)[[8]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn8).

The only point that I retain here is that the *two* *disciplines*, divination and historiography, seem to have shared or inhabited (peacefully enough) the same intellectual space. Surely, they could be and were practiced by the same intellectuals.  For the Mesopotamian king, he came in search of assistance and the oracle helped him make a decision. For the specialist consulted, the scribe, to take note of an “historical” oracle, to transcribe it and to study it, meant to add a new oracular configuration to his lists and, thereby, increase his stock of precedents.

We could extend this investigation to ancient Rome through an examination of the famous*Annales maximi*, which are all the more famous for having disappeared.  Each year the *pontifex maximus* was suppposed to write a “chronicle” (*tabula*) that he hung on the front of his house.  Cicero interprets this transcription as the very beginning, albeit clumsy and unrefined, of Roman historiography.  In a re-examination of this vexed question, it was suggested that this document, delivered at the end of each year, must have functioned as a kind of report on the state of the relations between the city and its gods[[9]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn9).  It was left to the *pontifex maximus* to compile it in his capacity to “retain on his *tabula* the memory of events”. He played the role of a master of time. What *events*?  What is an *event*? Victories, defeats, calamities, omens: they were collected and registered, not for themselves, but as signs that allowed for the keeping of records of piety.  Particularly important in this regard were the omens: first, one has to decide whether something (strange, extraordinary) is or is not an omen, and if the answer is yes, then what will be the appropriate answer (how to “expiate” it). To do the job, the *pontifex* too needs archives and has to look for precedent.

This compilation could rightly be called an “official” history or a “religious” history of Rome. But it is worth noticing that the temporality at work here is a civic or political one. The report has to be written every year for the new consuls, addressing the following questions :  Where do we stand with the gods?  Have we done what was necessary?  What should we do?  The pontifex is, as I said, a man of the archives guided by research into precedent (most particularly concerning omens) but his main concern is with the present.  Each year he furnishes the new consuls with a report on the City’s religious situation.

Very different were the first choices of the Greek city. Divination was certainly present and collections of oracles did exist.  But, what was historiography for the Greeks, and later would become for the moderns in the West “history” took a different path. This historiography presupposed the epic. Herodotus wished to rival Homer and what he became, ultimately, was Herodotus.

**The Epic as Generative Matrix**

In Greece, all begins with the epic. With it, through it, the Trojan War, which for ten years pitted the Acheans against the Trojans, became the “axial” event situated at the edge of history. At first it was only a Greek event, then a Roman one, and finally a Western one. Today, the Trojan war is disputed and even denied, but it was for centuries a shared point of reference[[10]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn10).  Thucydides saw it as the first enterprise of any scope undertaken “together” by the Greeks.  In fact, it is what constituted them as “Greeks”. Retrospectively, the Persian Wars (5th B.C.E.) transformed the Trojans into Barbarians (an unknown denomination by Homer) and the Achean expedition in a first and decisive victory over Asia. Five centuries later, Virgil will rediscover for the Romans the very beginning of their history in the ashes of Troy and in the exile of Aeneas.  And, nineteen century later, G.W.F. Hegel will still celebrate the Trojan War as the victory of Europe over what he called “the asiatic principle”.

Odysseus’s journey is now nearly finished. His companions are dead, he is treated as a guest of honour at the court of the Phaeacians. During the feast given by their king, Odysseus asks the bard Demodocus to sing the famous episode of the Wooden horse[[11]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn11). In this scene in which the hero is placed in front of the bard who sings of his own adventure, Hannah Arendt saw the beginning, poetically speaking at least, of the category of history.  “What had been sheer occurrences now became *history*”, she wrote[[12]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn12).  Indeed, we witness the first telling of the event (which constitutes it as such): the first making of history. With this peculiarity: the very presence of Odysseus proves that “it” really took place.  This is an unprecedented configuration, or even an anomaly, since in the epic, the truth of the bard’s words depended completely and only on the authority of the Muse—both inspiration and guarantor. Going even further, Hannah Arendt saw this scene as paradigmatic for history and poetry because “the reconciliation with reality, *catharsis* (purification), which according to Aristotle was the essence of tragedy, and, according to Hegel, was the ultimate purpose of history, came about through the tears of remembrance”[[13]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn13).

“Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices…” was the inaugural pact of the epic. The Muse, daughter of Memory and source of inspiration, was the guarantor of the poet’s song. With the first history, the realm of the oral world is over. Prose has replaced verse; writing dominates; the Muse has disappeared. In its place a new world and a new narrative economy emerge: “What Herodotus the Halicarnassian has learned by inquiry is set forth (the exposition of his *historiê*…” In the service of no particular power, with his very first words he begins to define and claim the narrative form which begins with the use of his own name. He is the author of his account (*logos*) and it is this account that establishes his authority. The paradox lies in the fact that, at the same time, this newly claimed authority has yet to be fully constructed. Such a narrative strategy, characteristic of this moment in Greek intellectual history, marks a break with the eastern historiographers. If the Greeks were inventors of anything, they invented the historian rather than the history. Such a mode of self affirmation and writing was far from a purely historiographical phenomena. To the contrary they are markers, or even the signature of this period of intellectual history (6th-5th century B.C.E.) which witnessed the rise of “egotism” among artists, philosophers, doctors[[14]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn14).

This new form of discourse and this singular figure did not emerge from a vacuum. Herodotus undertook for the Persian wars what Homer had done for the Trojan war. To write history means to begin with a conflict and tell the story of a great war on both sides and by fixing the “origins”. In contrast to the Bible which tells a continuous story from the beginning of time, the first Greek historians fixed a point of departure and limited themselves to recounting a specific sets of events[[15]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn15).

Like the bard, the historian deals with memory, oblivion, and death. The bard of old was a master of glory (*kleos*), a dispenser of immortal encomia to the heroes who died gloriously in war. Herodotus sought only to ensure that the traces of the deeds of men, the monuments that they produced, would not disappear, would not cease to be recounted and celebrated. If the historian refers continually to the epic, he makes more modest claims than the bard[[16]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn16). It is as if he knew that the ancient promise of immortality could never again be uttered except as a negative: as a promise to delay oblivion. Similarly, where the bard’s area of expertise covered “the deeds of heroes and gods”, the historian limits himself to the “deeds of man”, in a time which is itself defined as “the time of man”. He adds one principle of selection: to choose that which is great and elicits astonishment. Thus he gives himself a means of measuring difference in events and of ordering multiplicity in the world.

The emblematic word, *historia,*little by little took hold (although Thucydides, for his part, took pains never to use it). It is an abstract word, formed from the verb *historein*, to inquire. To inquire, in all the meaning of the word, to go and see by oneself. It expresses more a state of mind and an approach than a specific field. It is a word belonging to that moment of the Greek intellectual history. *Historia* is derived from *histôr*, which is related to *idein*, to see, and *oida,* I know. Thus the *histôr*is present in the epic where he appears several times, but not as an eye-witness, only as an arbiter, or better yet a guarantor in a context of quarrel: he has never seen for himself what is at stakes.

Herodotus is neither bard nor even *histôr*: he *historei*, investigates. He does not possess the natural authority of the *histôr* nor does he benefit from the divine vision of the bard. He has only *historia*, a certain form of inquiry which is the first step in his historiographical practice. Produced as a substitute, *historia* operates in a way analogous to the omniscient vision of the Muse, who knows because her divined nature allowed her « to be present everywhere ».  The historian, acting on no authority but his own, intends from now on to “go forward with his account, and speak of small and great cities alike. For many states that were once great have now become small”[[17]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn17).

If the inquiry (thus defined) both evokes the wisdom of the bard and breaks with it, Herodotus also appeals to a second register of knowledge (that we have already met) the divinatory one. Herodotus *historei* but he also *sêmainei*. He investigates and he shows, reveals, signifies. *Sêmainein* is used for someone who sees what others do not or could not see, and makes his report. The verb specifically designates oracular knowledge[[18]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn18). Since the epic, the seer, who knows the present, future and also the past, is portrayed as a man of knowledge. Epimenides of Crete, a famous soothsayer, was reputed to have applied his divination skills not to what ought to be, but to what, having already happened, still remained obscure. Divination, here too, is a science of the past. We are also reminded of Heraclitus’ formula, according to which the oracle neither speaks nor hides, but “means” (*sêmainei*)[[19]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn19).

In the prologue, precisely at the very moment when Herodotus speaks for the first time saying “I,” he “signifies” (*sêmainei*). Drawing on his own personal knowledge, he reveals, designates who first took offensive action against the Greeks, Croesus, the king of Lydia. The first to subjugate the Greeks, Croesus is designated as “responsible”, or “guilty” (*aitios*).  Through this investigation and designation, Herodotus is certainly not a seer, but he arrogates to himself a type of oracular authority. So, even if it is in a very different way from what we saw before in Mesopotamia, divination and history with Herodotus have still something in common.

The two verbs*historein*, *sêmainein* are two cross-road verbs where ancient and contemporary knowledge come together and intertwine, as attested in an unique way by the work of Herodotus himself. They are two intellectual tools by which to “see clearly,” further, beyond the visible, in space or time; they characterize and shape the intellectual style of the first historian. Neither bard nor soothsayer but in-between, he became Herodotus: a father of history. After him, a long serie of new choices were made, leading finally to the formation of a new time, the modern one, and a new concept of history: History, with capital H, History as an all-encompassing process, which has been, until recently, the major belief of the Western world.

[[1]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref1) François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus, The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History,*translated by J. Lloyd, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988. *Evidence de l’histoire, Ce que voient les historiens,*Paris, 2005, p. 21-42.

[[2]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref2) Jan Assmann, *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis*, *Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich, 1997, p. 169-174.

[[3]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref3) Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Chroniques mésopotamiennes*, Paris, 1993.

[[4]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref4) Yosef H. Yerushalmi, Zakhor, *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, University of Washington Press, 1982.

[[5]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref5) Rémi Brague, *Aristote et la question du monde*, Paris, 1988, p. 28; J. Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena*, Gods and Men in the *Odyssey*, Princeton, 1983 p. 12, 13.

[[6]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref6) Jean Bottero, “Symptômes, signes, écriture” in J.-P. Vernant éd., *Divination et Rationalité*, Paris, 1974, p. 70-86.

[[7]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref7) Glassner, *op. cit*. p. 26-28.

[[8]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref8) Léon Vandermeersch, “L’imaginaire divinatoire dans l’histoire en Chine”, in M. Detienne ed., *Transcrire les mythologies*, Paris, 1994, p. 103-113.

[[9]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref9) John Scheid, “Le temps de la cité et l’histoire des prêtres”, in *Transcrire les mythologies*, Paris, 1994, p. 149-158.

[[10]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref10) See, for example, Moses I.Finley, “Lost: the Trojan War”, *Aspects of Antiquity*, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 31-42.

[[11]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref11) Homer, *Odyssey,* 8, 487-520.

[[12]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref12) Hannah. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, New York, the Viking Press, 1954, p. 45.

[[13]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref13) Arendt, *Ibid*., p. 45.

[[14]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref14) Geoffrey Lloyd, *The Revolution of Wisdom,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.

[[15]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref15) Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, Berkeley, 1990, p. 18 sq.

[[16]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref16) Herodotus, *Histories,*I, 1

[[17]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref17) Herodotus, *Histories,*1, 5.

[[18]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref18) Marcel Detienne, *Apollon le couteau à la main*, Paris, 1998, p. 138 sq.

[[19]](https://forum.centmillemilliards.com/2021/04/24/history/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftnref19) Heraclitus, fragments 93.