Roman Historiography

Introduction

Both Herodotus and Thucydides believed in the importance of empirical data in their works; though, it would be their choice in rhetoric that would differentiate them from one another. Herodotus “combined empirical research with epic and set it all in prose…” (Sorek, p. 28). While “Thucydides sought in his great life’s work to tell the truth…He was above all analytical, deducing general truths and rationales from contemporary actions and events, very much in keeping with the modern notion of what an ‘historian’ should aim to do” (Sorek, p. 30). These two different approaches to historiographical writing would go on to influence Roman historians, like Livy (who appeared to have preferred Herodotus’s approach) and Tacitus (who seems to have taken Thucydides’ approach on in his own writing), as they began their search for the historical truth.

Roman historians faced a major challenge as their worked on their writings since most of the Roman history was transmitted through oral traditions, or oral histories. The lower classes of Roman society would not have been able to read and write as they would not have had the money or ability to receive the education to do so. But going back to oral histories, as these stories have been passed down from generation to generation, the facts would have been combined with the myths that surrounded them. Roman historians would not have had our modern techniques in order to determine what sources were more accurate than others. One of the biggest critiques on Herodotus is his over use of myth/fables in his writing. Oral histories not only expressed the Roman historians limited number of written sources at their disposal but also the complication of having the determine what is fact and what is myth in this account.

It is important to keep in mind that Roman Historiography would have been something that remained limited to the upper classes of Roman society as “written history was the preserve of a small, cultivated elite” (Popkin, p. 35). During the time of the Roman Empire, only the elite would have had the access to upper levels of education and would have also possessed the ability to read and write as they were the ruling class of the empire. The fact that historical writing remained a privilege of the upper class might allude to the propagandist tendencies and the nationalist approach that Roman historians can be characterized for using. The ruling class would want to maintain their power and what better way than by connecting themselves to the history and development of the Roman Empire itself.

As this essay moves forward, it is important to remember the influences of past historians, understanding that they would not have had the same analytical approaches specifically towards the determination of a source’s credibility, and that Roman historical writing remained a practice of the upper class. All of these aspects impacted Roman Historiography in their own ways, some reaching far beyond the time of the Romans. This essay will focus on Roman historiography in terms of national histories and religion, as both held importance in Roman history.

National Histories

The Romans are known for their military expeditions that would expand their empire’s borders and their influence. It would be the historians that followed Polybius who wrote his history with the intent “to cover the whole known world of his day” (Popkin, p. 31), that would officially create the genre of national histories. National histories can be defined as “the story of a single political community over an extended period of time” (Popkin, p. 32). In terms of the Romans, this would be the emphasis of the events of the past in relation to the Roman Empire’s current success. The goal of national histories, at the time, of the Romans placed importance upon themselves in relation to the rest of the world. The world the Romans lived in resembled their success as they were one of, if not the most, powerful empire in Antiquity; which was something they wanted to convey through their histories. “They were proud of their traditions – what had begun as family memories became over the centuries a collective national mystique” (Mellor, p. xvi). The Romans wanted to remain true to their past, in their present and by writing national histories, they kept their ancestors and their actions alive. (However, it can be argued that the use of national histories was the Roman version of propaganda since the histories written by their historians praised their culture and success and rarely, did it outside of that practice… - this idea is a still a work in progress at this time!)

Julius Caesar is better known for his military successes than for his contribution to Roman Historiography. Two of his most notable works are the *The Civil War*, in which he describes and details his conflict against Pompey the Great, and the *Gallic Wars*, which details his military campaigns in the Germanic lands across the Rhine. Both of these works can be seen as national histories since all of the success his acquired throughout his life was always in respect to the empire. Susan Sorek, in *Ancient Historians A Student Handbook*, argues that both of these works were written as propaganda that not only emphasized Caesar himself but also the success of the empire (p. 93-96). He wanted to explain why his military expeditions were necessary and why the people should remain supportive of these causes. (still working on the analysis of this argument and how it impacted Roman Historiography)

Livy, who did not have any military or political experience as Julius Caesar did, wrote his works with the emphasis still on the empire, but “looked to Roman history from a moral standpoint” (Sorek, p. 106). He attempted to understand the impact of morals or even the lack of morals had on the success of the empire. Livy would talk about other cultures that surrounded the Romans, such as the Carthaginians, but only to make the distinction of the superiority of the Romans to those who are not (Sorek, p. 108-109). Again, it appears that the approach of national histories allowed Livy to distinguish the Romans for those surrounding them. Could this be considered propaganda? Sure, it can, as it paints the Romans in a brighter light, whether or not the Romans were actually superior to those around them.

Both Livy and Julius Caesar take on this national history format in order to convey the greatness of the empire. No matter if the historian focused on the military history or the complete history of the empire, both historians have a superior/propagandist tone that attempts to illuminate the Romans in a brighter light. The emphasis the Romans placed upon themselves and their own history is evident throughout their writing.

Roman Religion, Christianity, and Historiography

It is not unknown that Roman religion was polytheist one, or a religion believing that more than one God is present. Their gods/goddesses include Jupiter (better known as Zeus in Greek Mythology), Venus (or Aphrodite), and Mars (or Ares). The Romans believed that every aspect of their lives, their actions, and their successes were dependent upon the happiness of their gods. They believed that the gods and goddesses played a significant role in the course of their lives and the life of the empire. However, Roman religion can be divided into two categories: the private and the public. The private aspect of their religion included ancestral worship and worship of their favorite/patron deity whereas the public aspect of their religion were the bigger, communal ceremonies that everyone would be present and participating at (which may or may not have included animal sacrifice and the Imperial Cult).

Considering how important and central their religion was to the Romans, it can be surprising that it is not one of the focused themes in their historical writings. Ammianus Marcellinus was a Roman historian that lived from 350-395 CE and maintained his traditional form of Roman Religion. Christianity was legalized by Constantine in 313 CE and by the time of Ammianus, it was widespread across the empire. While it is unclear in his work on the true feelings he felt towards Christians and Christianity as he never completely goes into the discussion of religion, it is present in his works. As he remained true to his religious traditions, he also stayed true to Roman Historiographical traditions – which meant not placing an importance on the societies, people, and ideas that fall outside of the Roman sense of the topic – by describing Christians as being “intrusive” to his historical focus (Hunt, p. 193). They were not a primary focus of his writing, nor did he want them to be but living under Christian emperors would make it a subject of discussion for him. Although, Hunt argued in his essay, that Ammianus might not have had a problem with Christianity itself, but its intrusive nature in the political realm of the empire. But did the Romans hold their own religion close to them in all matters as well, including politics?

We may never know Ammianus’s complete feelings towards Christians and their new religious movement, he does discuss it and through his writing, the clash between the two different approaches to religion towards the end of the empire illuminates the Romans emphasis on their traditions and themselves.

Conclusion

Roman Historiography had been influenced by the writings and styles of Herodotus and Thucydides, but had developed within its own way. The emphasis on the empire and its successes is apparent through multiple historian’s writings and something that is characteristically Roman at this time. They wrote about the world in the way they understood it: with them being at the center. The creation of the national history genre allowed them to write their history with a complete focus on the Empire, its successes, and those who brought those successes home. This genre of historical writing will extend well past the life of the Romans, as Hitler and other historic figures will use this genre for the same goal that the Romans used it: propaganda. Julius Caesar and Livy’s works highlight the emphasis on the superiority of the Romans, although, they are done is very different ways. Ammianus Marcellius’s writings also fit into this model as the Roman traditions were stuck to, even in the discussion of religion.

Roman historiography will extend into future generations of historical writing as Roman historians would provide new models of writing, new focuses on historical material, and new genres, such as national histories, that will be used throughout the time that follows.