Summary Article: history
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in its broadest sense, is the story of humanity's past. It also refers to the recording of that past. The diverse sources of history include books, newspapers, printed documents, personal papers, and other archival records, artifacts, and oral accounts. Historians use this material to form coherent narratives and uncover linked sequences and patterns in past events. Most histories are concerned with causality, that is, why certain outcomes happened as they did, and how they are linked to earlier events.

Origins of Historical Writing

In preliterate societies, the accounts of the past are related orally, and many cultures have produced intricate and sophisticated oral histories. African peoples have long relied on oral histories to learn about their past. Starting with the medieval Islamic kingdoms of Africa some of these oral chronicles were recorded in Arabic, and sub-Saharan Africa developed its own written histories. In the 1550s the Popol Vuh, an elaborate account of the history and mythology of the Quiché people in Mexico, was recorded in Spanish.

In the older civilizations, as in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China, historical records appear immediately after the appearance of writing, for conquering kings wished to record their triumphs for all posterity. There was also some interest in the remote past, particularly genealogical interest in the glorification of royal ancestors and their achievements. There appears early, too, a strain of religious interest in showing the lessons of history, religious and ethical. Thus the early historical sections of the Bible are concerned with the manifestation of God's will in the events of human existence, while they show the same genealogical interests as the king lists of other peoples.

Western Historiography

Greek and Roman Historiography

It was not until the time of the Greeks that historiography, the writing of organic history, emerged. The compilations of the logographoi in the 6th cent. B.C. were organized records. It is with some justice, however, that Herodotus is considered the first historian, because in his work appears the conscious desire to record all the significant and noteworthy circumstances surrounding a set of events and motivating the actions of people in those events. Herodotus was remarkable, too, for the scope of his interests; he recorded myths, described customs, and made speculations. He used much unverified information, however, and failed to differentiate clearly between fact and fable.

The second great Greek historian, Thucydides, was of a different stamp. In writing the history of the Peloponnesian War he limited himself to matters of state and war; he tried to establish chronology and facts with some exactitude, avoiding the digressions of Herodotus; though his attempt at writing a factual and impartial history was not entirely successful, he wrote a grave work, conveying the lessons he drew from his story. The third of the great Greek historians, Xenophon, was more devoted to the purely storytelling aspects of history.

The influence of Thucydides was early in the ascendant, and the two important Greek historians of the
Roman period, Polybius and Dio Cassius, more or less modeled themselves on that master. The Roman historian Livy was more of a teller of tales, and he invoked the intervention of the gods to explain cause and effect. The great commentaries of Julius Caesar were more like inspired reporting than pure history writing, and the personal element in them was strong. Tacitus followed more or less the pattern of Thucydides but with a brooding moral interest in the decay of Roman society.

**Medieval Historiography**

The concern with separating fact from fiction and legend often disappeared in medieval historiography. Medieval works tended to divide into two types of histories. One was the universal history, which found some inspiration in St. Augustine’s *City of God*; it was outstandingly illustrated by Paulus Orosius and continued by such lesser men as Isidore of Seville. The other was the chronicle, ranging from the crude and simple annals of local monasteries to more orderly and organized accounts such as those of Saxo Grammaticus, Otto of Freising, Roger of Wendover, and Matthew of Paris. The two forms were not infrequently mixed. Attempts at broader histories of peoples, such as the history of the Goths by Cassiodorus (preserved only in the compendium of Jordanes) and the history of the Franks by Gregory of Tours, were early and had few successors. The chronicles tended to be parochial. Since learning was restricted to the church, the chroniclers were generally biased in favor of the church, and often they were little concerned with politics and secular rule. Among the better medieval histories was Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, an early model in a branch of historiography that has been of great importance. The biographical or semibiographical accounts of knightly deeds in the Crusades gave rise to the critical history of William of Tyre.

Contact with Byzantines and Muslims broadened history writing by showing the Westerners other points of view. Byzantine historians had also early fallen into the writing of chronicles, although the greater unity of the Byzantine Empire and the persistence of a unified culture gave somewhat more literary quality to the Byzantine works, from Procopius through Anna Comnena to the 13th-century writings of George Acropolita and the Acominatus brothers. Medieval Islamic historians such as al-Tabari and al-Masudi wrote histories of great scope, often employing sophisticated methods to separate fact from fable. But by far the greatest medieval Arabic historian was Ibn Khaldun, who created an early version of sociological history to account for the rise and decline of cities and civilizations. In 12th-century Europe secular history writing emerged, shown in the work of Geoffroi de Villehardouin, and the chronicles of Jean, sire de Joinville, Jean Froissart, and Philippe de Comines in successive centuries.

**Renaissance Historiography**

The humanism of the Renaissance revolutionized historiography, for it placed emphasis on textual criticism and on a critical attitude toward documents and sources. Men such as Petrarch, Lorenzo Valla, Marsilius of Padua, and Juan Luis Vives did much to produce a more critical attitude toward the past. Revival of classical learning immediately affected historians, and in one sense Niccolo Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini followed in the steps of Greek and Roman historians, although their work was original and immediate. Both the Reformation and the Catholic Reformation furthered historical scholarship, as both sides used the past to support their religious views. Critical methods in history were forwarded in the 16th and 17th cent. by the writings of Jean Bodin and Jean Mabillon, and great critical collections of sources were begun (e.g., the *Acta sanctorum*), while antiquaries everywhere discovered, questioned, and emended old texts. The way was prepared for the beginning of modern history.
**History in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries**

The historians of the Enlightenment wrote broad accounts of social and cultural epochs. Voltaire cultivated the wider, universal view of history, stressing its social and moral aspects. The attempt to get back to the fundamental natural bases of human development was implicit in the *Esprit des lois* of Montesquieu. The 18th cent. saw, too, the great attempt made by Giovanni Battista Vico to synchronize history into meaningful general patterns. From England came the masterful work of Edward Gibbon, combining erudition with the philosophical concerns of the 18th cent. on the rise and decline of civilization.

The end of the century also brought the budding of archaeology out of antiquarianism and of philology out of classical scholarship. These two sciences were essential to the development, in the 19th cent., of critical objective history as an academic discipline. The father of the new objective school was the great Leopold von Ranke. His efforts and those of his successors, notably Theodor Mommsen, Johann Gustav Droysen, and Heinrich von Treitschke, established canons of criticism and historical methods. This German school made history writing into a profession and founded the formal academic study of history, though they fell short of their ideal of writing about the past “as it actually happened.” In France, modern academic history began with Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges. It was continued by such men as Ernest Lavisse, Charles Seignobos, and Achille Luchaire, who were among those who turned history into a wide study.

In the 19th cent. the history of the nation state became the dominant form of history writing. Among the more prominent romantic national historians were Thomas B. Macaulay in England, and Jules Michelet in France. In the United States, romantic historians, such as George Bancroft, William H. Prescott, John L. Motley, and Francis Parkman were followed by such brilliant and questioning men as Henry Adams.

The broader interest in the philosophy of history had not died, and the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had created a school of idealistic historians. Other philosophical views were reflected in general theories, some of the later figures being Oswald Spengler, Benedetto Croce, and Arnold Toynbee. The theories of Karl Marx not only set in motion a continuing series of interpretations of history from the Marxist economic point of view but also affected historians of all other schools. The progressive school of U.S. historians, such as Frederick J. Turner, emphasized social and economic factors in explaining historical development, as did the “new history” of James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard. The trend was toward broader social and economic history.

**History in the Twentieth Century**

The trend toward broader social and economic history continued in the 20th cent. Anthropology and sociology contributed new ideas to history and opened the way to the history of cultures in the round (related to, but different from, such theories of spiritual cultural history as that of Karl Lamprecht). Modern psychology also began to be applied to the interpretation of history, and the growth of technological society stimulated some historians' concern with the development of science. The constant growth of the body of critical professional historiography led in the 20th cent. to historical research in extraordinary detail, stimulated by the techniques of Sir Lewis Namier. Perhaps in reaction to this increasing emphasis, G. M. Trevelyan reasserted the principle of history as an art as well as a scientific study.

The adherents of the “new social history” sought to replace the previous emphasis of most historians
on political history with a range of social and economic concerns. The most influential social historians have been members of the French Annales school, such as Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, who focused primarily on medieval and early modern European history. Another influential group of historians, including Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, and Herbert Gutman, who were influenced by Marxist class analysis, wrote histories of working people and the popular classes. Other social historians have explored the history of those who formerly were largely ignored, such as women and minorities. The study of social history was also reinforced by the development of computer analysis of historical materials. The quantitative analysis made possible by computers seemed to allow detailed study of far broader areas than had been possible for the historian using traditional methods. In recent years some of the most successful and popular historians—such as Eric Foner, Simon Schama, and Jonathan Spence—have found innovative ways of integrating the older concerns of national political histories with the new methods of social history.

**Eastern Historiography**

In Asia the writing of history was concerned with the recording of events, chiefly as chronicles, annals, or archives.

**China**

In China by the middle of the Chou dynasty, histories of the royal house and of the various states (notably the *Shu Ching*, or *Document of History*, and the *Annals of Lu* by Confucius) were being compiled. Ssu-ma Ch'ien (d. c.87 B.C.) wrote the first general history of China; his work was the model for later dynastic histories. He was followed in the 1st cent. A.D. by Pan Ku, compiler of the *History of the Former Han*. Under the T'ang dynasty, imperial commissions completed or compiled eight standard histories to fill in the period from the Three Kingdoms. A pioneer collection of early inscriptions was made, and Ssu-ma Kuang wrote (1066–84) an integrated history of China from 403 B.C. to A.D. 959. The Manchu rulers were noted for fraudulent histories glorifying their past. Critical treatment of Chinese history was forwarded in the late 19th and early 20th cent. with the work of Kang Youwei, Wang Xian Qian, and Wang Guowei.

**Japan**

Japan's early tradition of historiography was derived from China. About the 3d cent. A.D. the Japanese began to keep imperial archives, and an accurate chronology was developed by the early 6th cent. The *Kojiki* (early 8th cent.) purported to be a history of the royal line since mythological times. It was supplemented by the more detailed *Nihonshiki*, which was continued to the end of the 9th cent. by five official histories. In the 17th cent. Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628–1701) started to compile a history of Japan modeled on the Chinese dynastic histories; supplements appeared until 1906. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) was the leading figure in a movement to revive Shinto and imperial prestige; his commentary on the *Kojiki* was completed in 1798.

**India**

Surviving Indian records date from the 6th cent. B.C., when anthologies were being made from older collections. Genealogies of native rulers appeared in the *Puranas*. However, the writing of history was not highly developed in India; the principal products were the *artha*, or handbooks on politics and practical life. In the 7th cent. the work of Hsüan-tsang gave much valuable information about India. Arab works on India, notably that of Al-Biruni of Khiva, began to appear in the 10th cent.; notable later Muslim historians were Firishta and Khafi Khan.
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