

NomosTextbook

Jörg Rüpke

Roman Historiography



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1 Introduction: Historical narrative

1.1 History and historiography

Human behaviour is action in the present, directed towards the future. Only occasionally do we remember – sometimes more, sometimes less – the past. We are touched by the resemblance of people, places, situations to a past event. We think about the differences between the present and the past; for example, sitting on a train surrounded by mobile phones, we may be struck by the memory of earlier times, when there were telephone boxes and calls were received on a neighbour's landline. Certain events regularly provoke such a glimpse into the past. Funerals certainly do, and sometimes graduation ceremonies. In Egypt, biographies and autobiographies were written on tombstones. Typically, conversations with the older generation (of which we – hopefully – will be a part) are more likely to result in 'history' than conversations with children. We historicise by accident or by design. Collectively, such an awareness of mutability is always present, even if it need not take the form of organised historiography. 'There is no human culture without the constitutive element of shared memory,' German historian Jörn Rüsen writes. 'By remembering, understanding and visualising the past, we understand life today and develop a future perspective for ourselves and the world. 'History' in this fundamental and anthropologically universal sense is the interpretive memory of a culture that the past serves as a means to orientate the group in the present.'

The quotation needs to be supplemented. First of all, the term 'culture' needs to be differentiated. I started from individual memories. The grandfather's story, the story he tells, is interesting because it is different from the story we learned at school. Whether we agree or disagree is less important. Family or ethnic groups, social movements or religious organisations tell different stories for whatever purpose. Others may or may not have a place in these stories; the set of stories may or may not overlap. There may be explicit or implicit guidance for the future. Such historical narratives are variously promoted by professionals in their historiographical endeavours, embodied in great monuments, inculcated through school lessons and even physical exercises, and finally repeated and appropriated in public speeches and rituals. And sometimes stories are retold that have long since become 'outdated'. Books and libraries lack the corrective effect of human memory and forgetfulness. They can spread stories that serve purposes long past, that no one wants to hear. The documents we deal with change their meaning and can suddenly appear in representations of the past that we never intended.

Academic history does not start from scratch. It is the work of people who have grown up in collective and individual memory. Even when academic history is critical and strives for clarification, greater accuracy or total revision, it is always critical of some things, not everything. It must situate its findings within its particular interest, which is necessarily a contemporary and often a socially relevant interest. It must place them in a larger picture which needs to be completed and given meaning. This meaning is usually provided by *topoi*, by commonplaces, by aspects that must be used in a story, and by tropes. The term *topoi*, 'places', comes from ancient rhetoric and refers to the usual places that must be referred

to 'in' the narrative of a court case or in a plea or political speech. Every story must have a beginning, even if everything changes. Every story has its heroes and heroines, even if the choice of protagonist is a judgement of today (or yesterday), not a fact. Historiography is also rhetorical, using all figurative ways of speaking and thinking, including metaphor and metonymy. To replace something with something else that is similar (metaphor) or usually associated with it (metonymy) is to introduce fictionality. And yet – and this is most important (and often lost in discussions of Hayden White's theses) – it is not about fiction for fiction's sake, but about fiction for the sake of coherence, for the sake of understanding, for the sake of explanation. It is about fictionality for the sake of orientation for the present and the future.

Within these limits, history can become a science, a 'historical science'. To make it more scientific, one could try to reduce the fictional elements. This was basically the strategy of historicism. Accepting historicity from every possible point of view made a non-contingent perspective impossible. Every point of view had to change – and thus become invalid in the next moment. This attitude led to extreme specialisation, professionalisation of methods and institutions, and an extreme division of labour. The alternative was to find a secure standpoint in a philosophical grounding of history, an option favoured by Joachim Wach, one of the founding figures of Religious Studies in Germany and (after emigrating during the Nazi regime) in the United States. But there is also a third way, which the Dutch historical theorist Frank Ankersmit has named. It must be recognised that history is not an empirical discipline. It refers to a reality and tries to base its statements on evidence and as many 'sources' as possible. But this evidence does not speak for itself without prior selection.

History is a discipline that deals with relationships between a present subject and a past object, both of which are changing, constantly shifting. The stories of history are representations determined by the criteria of interest and the historical socialisation of the historian, and they process those aspects of the historical object that come to light in a methodically controlled way. Their approach is determined by hermeneutic procedures such as generalisation or nomological approaches that attempt to find regularities, to formulate laws. In this way, the process of representation and the work on the past cannot be separated. Everyday history and academic history are not radically separate, even if they differ in the degree of reflexivity and the degree to which interests are made explicit. The latter is guaranteed by the ethos of meeting the standards of scholarship – at least as far as this is possible without losing its function as an orientation for the future. On this basis, a certain version of history, that is, a story, is not true or false, but there are good and better accounts of the past that compete in mutual critique.

Discussion of sources is closely linked to the historical-critical method. Based on the analysis of earlier historiographical works, its basic premise is not to judge the merits of these earlier texts – which are older and thus closer to the past being researched – according to their apparent plausibility or coherence. The crucial questions are Where does the knowledge in the text come from? And: What sources did the authors use? If these sources are still available, the obvious conse-

quence is to replace the use of later, secondary reports with the original surviving documents. If these are not available, one must at least consider the possibility of the existence of sources. Questions that lead to the assessment of this possibility are as follows: Could there have been male or female observers? Could they have passed on their observations? Could written documents, which span time and space more easily, have been created, preserved and made accessible? Are the monumental artefacts still visible or have they been reused long ago?

These considerations do not imply that contemporary documents are necessarily more reliable. The conjecture of a good historiographer can be much more reliable than the misunderstanding of an uninitiated contemporary observer or the invention of a committed participant. The core of the modern historical-critical method is to judge the value of a source not only by its mere plausibility, but to replace the question 'Does the account seem plausible?' with the question 'Could the author of the account have known about it at all?'

This approach to historical traditions is not only a tool of historical research since the 19th century. It is also part of a self-image of 'modernity' that looks for differences from earlier societies and, in this case, from older historiography. There is no doubt that many of today's accounts of Rome's early urban history are more appropriate to the events, perceptions and meanings of the actors of the time, and not simply different from the accounts of the period in Livy or Dionysius of Halicarnassus. But also in terms of their questions, their cognitive interests in other or simply more historical subjects, in long-term or short-term developments, in role models or counter-images, the representations of the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries differ. Local patriotism and nationalism, cosmopolitanism and critique of imperialism, attention to inequalities or the transfer of people and knowledge: all this leads to very different representations and varying proximity or distance to older histories.

Despite all attempts to outdo ancient historiography, even modern historiography is often not the first to use a source. Many texts and monuments have a long tradition of reproduction, reuse and reinterpretation; they are already part of a long tradition of European historiography, for example, and are framed by a 'canonised understanding of historical processes'. Moreover, most of the evidence we seek may be lost forever. For many periods we are dependent on much earlier historiography. In many societies or individual groups, processes of canonisation have not only made certain narratives fact, but also their interpretations. This also determines selection, for example, when the canonical Gospels and canonised New Testament letters are preferred to a much wider range of contemporary sources for reconstructing the early phase of many Christianities. Compared to the enormous amount of research on the historiography of the Tanakh and the Septuagint, the rabbinic texts have only recently begun to receive attention as historiographical literature. However, such 'sacred texts' do not only exist in the religious field, but especially in this field with its enormous temporal depth, reaching back to the beginnings and the immortal gods. Greek historiography is based on a rejection of such histories – and modern European historiography, trained on its model, has largely overlooked the importance of religion for the his-

toriography of Rome and the early historicisation of religion itself. This has also had consequences for the treatment of other, non-European or poetic (especially epic) forms of historiography.

Indeed, an intensive comparative study of historiography is overdue, and the study of certain interrelated sets of texts and spatially defined objects, such as Roman historiography, must be seen in such a perspective and not merely as a precursor, as part of the genealogy of 'our' historiography and historiography. An intensive self-reflection of historiography can already be found in the Mediterranean antiquity (there were others!) in prefaces or small treatises (e.g. in Lucian. In recent years it has been particularly intensified by the controversies surrounding New Historicism, the question of the fictional character of historiographical texts initiated by Hayden White, and the *histoire croisée* or entangled history. Nevertheless, there have been only sporadic attempts at comparative historiography, e.g. by Fritz-Heiner Mutschler or more recently John Baines, Henriette Blom, Yi Samuel Chen and Tim Rood for ancient Mediterranean and simultaneous Chinese historiography.

Comparative historiography becomes particularly urgent, however, if historiography is not understood as an academic discipline tied to specific institutions. Rather, it is a cultural practice of storytelling, of historical narratives with their far-reaching functions for identity formation and orientation. Rüsen rightly sought a strict methodological basis for comparison and found it in a definition of history as an anthropological universal with specific mental processes and forms of meaning generation. All societies share this way of dealing with a memory that goes beyond the individual memory of one's own lifetime. They also shared it with each other: In the circum-Mediterranean region there has been an intensive exchange, a mutual perception of written texts as well as oral narrative practices since the early advanced civilisations. The same is true of Asian-European exchanges since Hellenism. These interconnections contribute to the great phenomenological similarities between many practices of historiography. In this book, this can only be hinted at occasionally.

1.2 Remembrance, history and memory

In recent years, memory has become an important tool in the study of the past. This began with the metaphorical transfer of physiological and psychological mnemonics (memory) to social processes (remembrance) initiated by Maurice Halbwachs a century ago. If the concept of the historical 'example' contains a rhetorical invitation, 'memory' refers to complex processes of association, temporal marking, individual appropriation and selective social recall. How does this relate to history?

'History' and 'memory' are closely related concepts. They are in constant tension with each other and interact with each other rather than moving in clearly demarcated territories. We can see them as analytical tools that allow a different view of the same field of cultural processes and products. Memory and its memories include 'relations to the past that are anchored in human consciousness' (G.

Cubitt). Conversely, memory refers to those parts of knowledge that contain a self-reflexive knowledge of the past temporal circumstances of the sedimentation of this knowledge. Such a focus on the individual production of knowledge is by no means exclusive. The challenge of thinking more broadly about memory lies in exploring the complex relationships between three issues. First, the ways in which individuals remember the past that is part of their personal experience. The second is the ways in which they define or experience their social engagement. The third is the ways in which representations and understandings of a social or collective past emerge within the larger society. Since intersubjectivity is crucial to any form of memory, we speak of memory culture.

From this perspective, history is only one form of social memory – if, with Paul Ricoeur, we understand it narrowly as a discursive, mostly narrative reconstruction of the past. This form of social memory, however, should not be seen as a fixed object. Written histories offer individual perspectives on the past that are merely alternative versions, not the 'truth' about the past. Any such story has to deal with individual and collective memory. It gains plausibility and acceptance from such memories. And yet it must engage with them critically. Whether implicitly or explicitly, narrative history is a critical endeavour, competitive and perhaps even openly argumentative. It is undoubtedly this dialectical relationship with memory that distinguishes it from mythic narrative, which is otherwise close to social memory in form and function – and often even in its material. In the European tradition, history has invented itself by attempting to challenge the mythical narrative. From the beginning, this has not always been done in a very plausible way: The best example is Thucydides' digression on Minos and the Trojan War in his Introduction (1.3–12). All this has consequences: Individual memory is always formed in a pluralistic world of memories and histories.

Even more than history, the concept of knowledge reflects the medial form of what is known and its systematisation through the transformation of information into fields of knowledge or even systems of knowledge. Like history, I assume that knowledge is justified not so much by its relation to truth as by its subjective and social status as a justifiable belief. Under the conditions of a scriptographic society, in which even written knowledge is copied exclusively by hand, such knowledge, which must be constantly reproduced, is precarious: it is always threatened with extinction and susceptible to social constraints. At the same time, the mastery of knowledge is a powerful instrument for structuring social relations and maintaining power. The availability of knowledge about the past, the claim to possess it, is important for ancient historiography. Roman historiography began in the circle of the political elite, the magistrates and senators, and only slowly extended beyond them – often only to specialists in the court clientele of the Roman rulers of the Republican or Imperial periods. Intended for reading rather than public recitation (although there were some), it appealed to a wide audience. It was therefore also political literature because it so often criticised the actions of generals and emperors. This opened the door to criticism as well. Probably only oracular sayings, which claimed to be divine judgments on the past and the future, were burned in Rome more often than historiographical works.

1.3 Historical narrative

Historical data can be presented in lists, such as the Roman consular *fasti*, or in social history statistics. But it is the narrative, the story, that gives meaning to time. Only history told is history. In this sense, historical epics are more history than many chronicles. But even sparse lists or isolated reliefs depicting actions can be narrated, or even designed to be narrated. Over the last three decades, narratological analyses have changed our understanding of (not only) ancient historiography, both with regard to the texts and their production, and with regard to their listeners or readers. It is therefore not the foundations of narratology, but the resulting approaches to historiography that require a broader presentation.

We will begin with the question of the functions of history for the present, which arises from the anthropological approach. According to Rüsen, there are four orientation needs to which history provides an answer. It does this in four types, which do not have to be mutually exclusive in a concrete narrative.

Firstly, the traditional narrative, a narrative that allows us to understand the present as an unbroken continuation of the past. The past is not problematic, we simply live in an extension of the past and have few problems with ourselves. We just reassure ourselves that things are right the way they are.

The second type can be described as exemplary storytelling. Here, too, the past as such is not problematic, but our present has become problematic, at least in certain respects. These are concrete problems for which answers are sought from history. The approach here is to attribute a model character to certain events in history. Yet, in contrast to traditional storytelling, these are reflected upon to such an extent and the difference between past and present is perceived as so great that it is not simply history that serves as a model, but rules derived and generalised from it.

In the third level, critical narration, the past also becomes problematic. Here, the role model character of certain events in the past is called into question by deliberately removing it from the events. The role model is thus changed by criticism, downgraded in its exemplary nature, depotentiated.

The last form of storytelling, fourthly, could be described as genetic storytelling. One tells how something new happened in the past. From this vary fact the legitimisation can be drawn to also allow for new and deviating developments in the present. The legitimacy of development is in change itself. It is in the nature of people, constellations, and institutions that they change.

Regarding the Hellenistic period (in the broadest sense), Doron Mendels has proposed a detailed typology of historiographical strategies and societies' attitudes to historiography. This takes into account that historiography is certainly not the only form of received narrative but narratives of the past (and especially of one's own) are a very successful and therefore important part of the field. Mendels proposes to distinguish between 'societies that are "stuck" in their past, so to speak' (Sparta, Rome), 'groups of people who constantly and consciously play with the past and *manipulate* their memories' (Greek intellectuals, kings of

Commagene, Book of Jubilees), and finally ‘those people, groups and movements that primarily look forwards and not backwards’ (e.g. 1 Maccabees; 133–4).

For Hellenistic literature, Mendels identifies two basic ‘modes of dealing with the past in antiquity’: the blanket adoption of past material on the one hand and the manipulation of past material and deliberate change on the other. For the latter, he distinguishes eleven types:

- 1) the refilling of accepted cultural or chronological frames from the past;
- 2) the manipulative use of historical figures or
- 3) of time by mixing past and present;
- 4) the projection of a present feature into the past or
- 5) the projection of one past onto another;
- 6) more radically, the ‘pure invention of past data’ or less radically
- 7) translation. Other types are
- 8) the contamination of an accepted past tradition by an older or more recent second past,
- 9) the representation of the entire ‘past as a linear sequence of carefully selected key events’,
- 10) ‘a synoptic approach to the past’ to combine different pasts of divided societies and finally
- 11) the ‘fragmentation of the past in public’ in the form of exempla and many other forms of very condensed partial accounts.

Mendel’s account is primarily intended to show the limits and the statistically very limited role of historiography in ancient societies, of which the rabbinic movement was only one example. However, the relevance of this result is limited by the fact that he implicitly ascribes to the concept of historical truth the status of a metahistorical yardstick that denounces the majority of ancient historiography and historical memory. However, historical truth is not simply a given and is valid only in comparison to a certain representation. Such truth is the measure rod of the competition between successive representations; such truth is the aim of any better representation when standards are changing.

In terms of form and function, and sometimes even content, myth and historiography often overlap in Hebrew-Greek-Roman antiquity. This is what makes the concept of narrative so important for understanding historiography, which does not simply depict ‘how it was’ (Droysen). Although in Rome one of the most important sources of historical memory and knowledge was drama, not epic or prosaic narrative. Mendels’ considerations help to sharpen our approach in other respects as well. Ultimately, he assumes that historiography is usually based on a group and its positions of power. Michel de Certeau’s analysis of historiography has shed light on different, even contradictory processes and emphasised the historian and his appropriation and shaping of history in the three perspectives of the (social and topographical) place of the writer, the practices of writing and

the modes of representation of history. The social space in which historiography served communication must not be lost sight of.

1.4 Characteristics of the narrative

The analytical tools for narrative presented here are drawn from the literary critic and cultural historian Albrecht Koschorke's attempt to formulate a general theory of narrative. Although his theory is neither coherent nor complete, his interest in the workings of narrative in a cultural context characterised by its complexity, hybridity and fluidity addresses many features that are not prominent or widespread in classical narratological theory. His list includes eight different 'elementary operations' of narrative, that is, strategies for producing what is accepted as narrative, but I select only those that are of interest in the present context.

- The narrative reduction creates schemata. By omitting details, simplifying complex events and finally assigning names and applying stereotypical characteristics of the latter to the actual object, narrative schemes are developed that can be identified on a more general level than the individual stories. Such schemes help to follow and memorise stories. They increase the degree of connectivity of the concrete story and the possibility of relating it to other stories. The transfer of the narrative schemata of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into Virgil's *Aeneid* made it possible to integrate local Italian traditions. The Passion of Jesus could serve as a model for the martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch or Polycarp of Smyrna.
- Redundancy and variation generate consensus and attention. It is the reduction into schemata that initiates processes of generalisation and the expansion of the audience for whom the story could be relevant. De-differentiation creates consensus across the boundaries of groups and interests. At the same time, the ability to articulate oneself in the communicative space of a society depends on one's own will and ability to distance oneself from such narrative generalisations. Experts question general narratives, even if their potential to change collective knowledge is rather limited. In ancient literature, striking summaries, whether within larger narratives or as a separate genre (epitomes, *periochae*), secured and created consensus, to the point where (in a dialectical movement) group-related statements demanded precise formulations in order to include or exclude. In the Corpus Caesarianum, individual authors are very keen to justify Caesar's position in such an ideological sense.
- Diversification does not usually mean that variants are simply produced at will. Due to their history and their participation in various schemes, narratives are characterised by a repertoire of details that can come into play in a concrete story, including the strange, the trivial, the offbeat. This applies in particular to those narratives that attained canonical status in antiquity, be it the biblical story of the *Tanakh* or Livy's *Roman History*. The late antique commentaries on Virgil, Servius and Macrobius, show the possibilities of interpreting a complex text that is distant in time. Writing, if not already a means of production, fulfils the need for details and enables their transmission.

- Providing a narrative sequence with a beginning and an end is one of the most effective instruments for constructing conflicts in order to point to justice achieved or deferred. Such sequences imply laws and contain invitations to imitate the protagonists. The interplay between the order of the dramaturgical framework and the complication and resolution of conflicts provided by the narrative sequence, the scenes and the peripetias creates the entertainment effect of narratives, which encourages their prolongation and repetition. I have already referred to the Gospels, the Martyrology and other hagiographical materials for the imaginary possibility of following the patterns of narrative sequences. Stories of tyrannicide, such as the rape, suicide and revenge for Lucretia that led to the expulsion of the last Roman king, Tarquinius Superbus, offered the same quality. Careful framing isolates the underlying conflict or moral deficit and the perspective that the act offers.
- The weak motivation or causal overdetermination generated by the narrative involves the listener in active participation and encourages appropriation by very different individuals. As cognitive studies have shown, it is particularly the irritation generated by minimally counterintuitive contexts that makes the story more memorable. Typically, the narrative is motivated by the attribution of agency, either to human or superhuman actors, creating an 'over-coherence'. The successful (and subversive) explanations vary greatly from culture to culture. For antiquity, the full range of aitiological narrative must be recalled. The plausibility of a strange combination of elements in contemporary ritual or topography is 'explained' by emplotment. However, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, in poets such as Callimachus or Ovid, aetiology can take on a ludic character. Sometimes several aetiologies emphasise the author's distance from his narratives (or sometimes only from his arguments). Prodigies or *omina* in general provide a powerful tool for overdetermining narratives without in every case emphasising historicity. In Roman historiography, even Tacitus' analytical or Caesar's factual historical narratives contain such elements.
- Although not necessarily present in the narrated story (which would be homo- or intra-diegetic) or not even explicitly present in the narrative (which would at least be hetero- or extra-diegetic), the narrator or, more precisely, the position of the narrator is of great importance for the reception of the narrated text. A first-person narrator seems to be a guarantor of authenticity but can be attacked as a (merely) particular point of view. In contrast, the omniscient, impersonal narrator seems to produce an unfiltered truth, without age or origin, especially when narrating scenes that no human narrator could have witnessed. Her or his point of view and her or his narrative style would include or exclude the recipients, would determine the 'we' and the 'good'. Asymmetrical oppositions such as Hellenes and Barbarians do not allow us to decide in favour of the Other, who is described as homogeneous and clearly delineated, creating the mirror image of an internal homogeneity within the We-group and suppressing internal differences. Obviously, these are very different consequences of the positioning of the narrator. The range of the narrator's presence is enormous. The way in which Sallustius imposes himself on his readers differs markedly from the self-conscious observer Hirtius in his

continuation of Caesar's *commentarii* or the completely implicit narrator of the Gospel of Mark, who limits himself to summaries and occasional explanations.

- Finally, narrative is a strategy for stimulating affect and engaging with the social dynamics of a group, for engaging with the diversity of a polycentric culture as a game as well as a form of communication that transcends the boundaries of a given situation. As Koschorke notes, it is the possibility of only partially participating in a narrative that enables the formation of large groups. For the formation of larger blocs of 'Hellenists' and 'Christians' in the fourth century, this flexibility offered by the (now and for quite some time) different canons was of great importance.

The readership of ancient historical narratives was not the world, but a small number of people in geographically dispersed networks rather than localised groups. We rarely have explicit evidence of such readers. It is rather the texts themselves that we have to scrutinise for their implicit and intended readers, or the texts and contexts that we have to scrutinise for their 'integrated readers' or 'connected readers' (Rüpke).

Looking at a traditional text in isolation is often misleading. It is a retelling of a story and also an invitation to a future retelling. Similarly, a letter is not only the narration of a story to a distant addressee but can in many cases also be an invitation to a retelling. It is thus involved in the construction and deconstruction of schemata as well as in the maintenance of old or the creation of new knowledge.

The formation of a network depends both on the consensus on which the use of schemata and shared traditions can be built and on the boundaries of the relevant contexts for the we and the past of the text. Such a We is not simply given, but is maintained and created through constant communication. The degree of explicitness and exclusivity can vary greatly depending on the choice of theme, the self-definition of the implicit or explicit narrator, the choice of literary convention (the genre is itself a way of speaking linked to a particular social context) or the given judgements. The implicit reader of fables is less narrowly defined than the implicit reader of a historical narrative. The long history and wide distribution of fables are proof of this.

How can the credibility of a text be increased in such a context? Awkward, that is, minimally counterintuitive elements increase the memorability, if not the credibility, of a narrative, as explained above. The possibilities for authors to authenticate their stories are limited. Determining the coherence of a text is also part of the process of negotiating the coherence of culture. The notion of culture that I assume in my argument does not encompass a fixed system of norms and knowledge against which a narrative could be measured. Rather, the narrative engages with a previous discourse of norms and knowledge and reproduces, modifies or unsettles previous consensual, hegemonic or contradictory positions. Strategies of authentication can therefore be observed, but their effectiveness is difficult to assess. Extra-textual references strengthen the verifiability and probability of a narrative, but the plausibility of a narrative claiming to be historical is achieved by the internal coherence of the story told as much as by its external

coherence with common knowledge and grand narratives. Therefore, giving the correct name of an author, the orthonym, is neither a necessary nor a necessarily successful strategy. Attributing the text to another or even a fictitious author, pseudepigraphy and pseudonym, are important mimetic strategies that claim the authority of the form and content of the narrative rather than the personal authority of the author. Images of authorship and norms of authorship are also linked to changing networks and times.

1.5 Historiography and its alternatives

How and where was history told in Roman antiquity and how did its recipients come together? Historiography in the narrower sense did not take place everywhere where history was told. In antiquity, for example, the main competitor in the telling of history(ies) and thus the main competitor of historiography is drama, especially in the form of tragedy. Examples of clearly historical material among the surviving Greek plays include Aeschylus' *Persians*, which deals with the victory of the Greeks over the Persians at Salamis. In Roman times, there is a whole group of texts known as *fabulae praetextae*, which deal with historical material from the Roman past. The term *praetexta* is derived from the *toga praetexta*. This 'pre-woven toga' is a toga with a purple stripe; Roman officials wore them. These are dramas that a) tell of Romans and b) are set on a political level and do not take place in a lower social milieu like comedies. Although no complete texts from the Republic have survived, individual titles have: The *Ambracia* by the poet Ennius, a drama about the capture of a Greek city at the beginning of the second century BC; *Decius*, a drama by Accius, tells the story of a Roman general who killed himself in battle at the beginning of the third century BC. Then there is the only surviving *praetexta* from the Neronian or shortly post-Neronian period, the *praetexta Octavia*, which tells the story of the conflict between Nero and his wife and stepsister Octavia.

Most dramas deal with mythical material. But how has the relationship between myth and historiography been defined? A myth is a story, a narrative, simply an 'utterance'. The Greek concept of history shaped first the Latin and then the modern reception of the word. What were these writers and thinkers of the fifth and fourth centuries thinking about? In his *Poetics*, Aristotle was simply thinking about the content, the plot of such stories. Herodotus and Thucydides, the fathers of European historiography, narrowed the term to distinguish their own writing from the writing of myths. 'Myth' and 'history' became opposites. This meant that a myth was not yet a fairy tale, but a story whose historical accuracy could not be verified. Where other information was lacking, people could refer to such stories, but were careful not to claim that this was actually the case.

Plato pursued a different line. He contrasted the 'myth' with the 'logos'. This contrast may also sound sharper today than it was back then. A 'logos' or several 'logoi' were also initially statements, representations, in some cases even stories. This could also refer to gods or religious things, such as the meaning of rituals. But here too, as with the historians, there was an interest group that sought to

redefine its own activities with the help of this term. For pre-Socratic philosophy, *logos* had already become a catchword for argumentation, for rational argument. If you wanted to argue with myths, on the other hand, you had to interpret them. Otherwise, they were simply stories without any rationally verifiable truth content. Some later authors of oratorical manuals went even further and associated the unverifiable with the improbable. Myths were therefore untrustworthy stories.

Nevertheless, they were spread. Our understanding of myth must be based on this dissemination through storytelling. Myths are traditional tales. They were told again and again because they had meaning for both the teller and the listener. The characteristics ‘meaningful’ and ‘narrative’ allow us to understand narratives in many cultures – especially in cultures that do not know the word ‘myth’ – as ‘myths’ and thus make them comparable with each other. Both elements refer to each other: the meaningfulness leads to repetition, to the passing on of the narrative. The traditional, i.e. familiar narrative can be used to repeatedly illustrate new facts or illuminate problems. It is charged with meaning. In societies with no or limited written language, this is a prerequisite for the survival of narratives. However, if writing is not only available for accounts and king lists, but also for myths, even narratives that have lost their current meaning or were only significant for a few original addressees can survive. Later readers were then faced with the task of deciphering old meanings or inventing new ones.

This draws attention to the content. Almost anything could be made the subject of mythical tales. An overview of the Greek myths reveals several focal points. The creation of the world (cosmogony) and the gods (theogony) was one of them. The texts we have on this subject are very different in character. Around the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the seventh century BC, Hesiod attempted to create a system. This was as complex as it was vague. This left room for further designs that could serve different purposes, including the question of how humans could also become gods. In comparison with ancient oriental creation myths, the imagination of Greek myths remained within a rather narrow framework for a long time. Philosophical texts tended to fill this gap, pondering the creation of the world from fire alone or four elements, from atoms or the divine mind.

Biographies of the gods do not play a major role either. Relationships and birth-places were important. Local patriotism played an important role here. Ancient philosophers made fun of the multitude of birthplaces of Zeus; the fact that the Cretans were able to show not only the birth cave but also the tomb was irritating to those who took the concept of the ‘immortal’ to its logical conclusion.

The bulk of Greek myths focussed on the time of the Trojan War and the generations immediately preceding it – in an unclear chronology. It was the intervention of the gods in the human world and the ascent of humans into the world of the gods that attracted the greatest interest. Major warlike events such as the march of the Seven against Thebes or the ten-year campaign of the Achaeans against the Trojans provided space for a multitude of actors and stories. As a mobilisation of the whole of Greece, these myths made it possible to integrate different places

and tribes as well as numerous gods and goddesses into the stories and thus coordinate them.

Founding myths of cities, such as the Telephus myth for Pergamon (with its monumental depiction in the Pergamon Altar) formed a further layer. They were linked to the other narrative circles via the gods and heroes involved but were primarily aimed at the individual place and helped its inhabitants to a worthy place in the Greek world. Just as the myths of the Hellenic world, consisting of countless cities ('poleis') but sharing one language, many narrative traditions and great festivals – such as the Olympic Games – differed from the myths of the ancient oriental empires (and city states), the subjects of Roman myths differed from the Greek ones. They concentrate much more than the latter on the history and immediate prehistory of the city of Rome and Latium.

But the political organisations of Rome and Greece did not have a monopoly on myth production. Increasingly, religious groups emerged, bringing with them and producing new myths: Jews, with a narrative world that had long been fixed in writing; followers of the goddess Isis, who imported texts from the Egypt of the pharaohs and the Hellenistic Ptolemies and retold them; followers of Mithras with tales that combined Persian motifs with philosophical speculation; Christians, finally, who told stories of a recently executed Jew from Syria-Palestine and, with this pattern in mind, ever new stories of persecuted people almost in their own presence.

When myths can be located so close to the present, a simple but common distinction becomes obsolete. Myth is not simply the unattainable prehistory or prehistory. But how should we draw the line and determine the relationship between myth and history? For the Greeks, the end of mythical time is not an internal characteristic of myths. The boundary is determined from the outside: How far does the new form of human reflection on the past, namely historiography, manage to return? The Trojan War, whose historicity was beyond doubt in antiquity, ultimately forms the dividing line. Herodotus placed it eight centuries before his time, i.e. in the middle of the thirteenth century BC, while Eratosthenes, a researcher of the third century BC, dated it to 1184/3 – the same Eratosthenes who also secured the chronology of the Olympiads.

Obviously, the choice of this date is arbitrary, not least determined by the desire to treat the Greek presence and rule on the coast of Asia Minor as a historical fact. In fact, the available records offered hardly any possibility of bridging the 'dark centuries' until the formation and rapid expansion of the Greek cities from the eighth century onwards; only modern archaeology and linguistics know more about the extent of actual continuity. The theory formulated by Hesiod that the mighty battles of the Trojan War marked the end of the Age of Heroes also spoke in favour of the time chosen. For Greek myths, the events leading up to the Trojan War play a central role, with humans, heroes and gods acting in close contact with each other.

The chronological scheme cannot be applied to Roman myths. Where we can see Roman chronologies from the second century BC onwards, these always

presuppose Greek chronologies. The dating of the foundation of Rome is based on the fall of Troy and is therefore a date of Greek history. This plays no role in the separation of mythology and history; while at the end of the first century BC the Augustan historian Livy expresses scepticism about the foundation stories, his Greek contemporary Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who also wrote in Rome, elaborates on this period in great detail. A few centuries later, Christian-Jewish historians succeeded in tracing a historical chronology of the world back to Abraham or even to creation. However, all these chronologies have one thing in common: they reckon with a very short time until the creation of the world, a few millennia before our own time. This clearly distinguishes them from the enormous time periods of Asian conceptions of history.

The divide between myth and history in the ancient world is not one of principle, but one of degree. For some historians, the mythical period preceded the historical one, and there is no certainty about the former. In the introduction to his *History of Rome*, Livy distinguishes the period when Rome was not even conceivable and the immediate prehistory of Rome from the actual history of the city. But it is merely a problem of tradition that fictions rather than documents exist for these periods. For the early historical period of the city, too, it must be accepted that it gains in grandeur through the inclusion of gods.

But the problem goes further. Even if Roman historiography accepted the traditional narratives about the time after the foundation as historical (and we followed them until the beginning of the 19th century): Critical historiography would hardly get beyond the late fourth century BC. Much of what is told about the period between the later calculated foundation date of 753 BC and the beginning of written records and protocols at the end of the fourth century is fiction. It is episodes from this period that are cited by Roman orators, both in the popular assembly and in court. It is episodes from this era that make up the self-image of what it means to be Roman. And it is episodes from this era that illustrate the fundamental functioning of the successive Roman republics – one can hardly speak of a republic in view of the multiple massive constitutional upheavals.

Myths and classical historiography primarily share the characteristic that they are narratives. Narratives bring people and events together, allowing events to emerge from the actions of people. Narration creates time, creates a sequence of actions and events that distinguish between before and after. As a rule, myths and historiography do not tell stories from a first-person perspective. The omniscient narrator knows what brings the different actors together and stands above things. This creates distance and authority. The historical narrator also wants to tell a smooth story, a believable and beautiful one. He invents speeches as they might have been delivered. Only rarely does he discuss alternatives – but so do critical myth-tellers such as Callimachus and Ovid. Only the historiography of Bishop Eusebius extensively quotes and discusses documents and the identity of letter writers. So one difference remains above all: historiography recognises omens, but people have to act for themselves. No god can do that for them. In myth, it is the gods who act.