

The Many Faces of the Past in Archaic and Classical Greece

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In his *Panegyric*, a speech dating from 380,¹ the Athenian orator Isocrates points out that no account has done justice to the deeds of the Greeks in the Persian Wars (4.82, trans. Norlin 1966):

So they produced in the persons of those who fought against the men from Asia men of such great valour that no one, either of the poets or of the sophists, has ever been able to speak in a manner worthy of their achievements.

It is striking whom Isocrates mentions as recorders of the Persian Wars. While we, for sure, would first think of Herodotus and his *Histories*, Isocrates names poets and sophists. It cannot be ruled out that Herodotus may be subsumed under the category of “sophists,” but the word primarily signifies orators such as Isocrates himself. Obviously, Isocrates considered poetic and rhetorical presentations of the past more prominent than historiographical accounts to which *we* would turn in the first place. In modern scholarship, the Greek historians have received much attention not only for their own sake, but also as predecessors of modern historiography. The privileging of historiography, together with a penchant for teleological models, has made it easy for modern scholars to disregard other forms of memory or to view them as deficient forerunners that would yield to Herodotus’s glorious discovery and finally to the peaks of Thucydides’ methodologically explicit account.²

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However, Isocrates’ statement reminds us not only that there were commemorative genres before historiography, but also that after the latter’s rise in the fifth century, far from replacing poetic and rhetorical accounts of the past, history was one commemorative genre among others and, perhaps, not even the most influential. In order to understand Greek historical thinking more fully, it is necessary to take into account other literary genres and media as well. The past in archaic and classical Greece had many faces. In this chapter, I will look at oral traditions (I), poetry (II), oratory (III), and art (IV), examine their scope as well as their idea of history, and try to relate the findings to narrative forms and contexts of performance and reception, thereby teasing out differences and charting the gravitational field of memory in archaic and classical Greece (circa 800–300). This survey of nonhistoriographical memory, which will necessarily be superficial and, so to speak, linger on the cosmetics of Klio, will be the basis upon which I shall suggest a new assessment of the rise of Greek historiography (V).³

I Oral Traditions

In a wider sense, much of the material discussed in this section could be labeled “oral tradition.” Writing was introduced at the beginning of the Archaic age around 800, but until the fourth century oral performances were the primary means of disseminating poetry as well as oratory.⁴ As important as I find it to heed the prominence of orality in ancient Greece, I will challenge the widespread idea that central features of memory in ancient Greece can be solely attributed to its mediality. For one, the neglect of chronology may not only be due to a lack of written sources, but also express a specific idea of history (Grethlein 2006a: 108–11).

In a narrower sense, I would like to apply the term “oral traditions” to tales and legends about the past that were handed down orally from generation to generation without having a metrical form (Thomas 1989). Needless to say, it is impossible for the scholar of any extinct culture to grasp such traditions directly. At the same time, their traces in Greek historiography and oratory testify to their importance. Herodotus frequently refers to local stories he has heard,⁵ Thucydides harshly criticizes his contemporaries for their uncritical belief in hearsay (1.20.1; 6.53.3), and many of the references to the past in fourth-century oratory are obviously based on orally transmitted knowledge.

It is likely that families, particularly among the aristocracy, played a major role in the transmission of oral traditions, for the past offered precious capital in their fight for social distinction.⁶ Accordingly, such traditions were tainted by bias and open to changes required by different contexts. It seems that for legitimizing purposes of Greek aristocrats, heroic ancestry was of particular importance.⁷ As in oral traditions of other cultures, we can observe a telescoping effect that links mythical time directly to recent events which go back only few generations and move with each generation (Thomas 1989: 155–95).

II Poetry

II.1 Epic

An important source for claims to heroic ancestry was Homeric epic, which had a seminal influence on Greek culture in general. It is hard nowadays to find scholars who believe or, at least, dare to argue publicly that Homer provides us with reliable data about a historical siege of Troy and the arduous return of a hero named Odysseus.⁸ The Greeks, on the other hand, did not doubt that Agamemnon, Achilles, and Helen had existed, and even Thucydides, hailed as the father of critical historiography, used the numbers in the Homeric “Catalogue of Ships” to make conjectures about the size of the Greek expedition (1.10.4). Together with several other epics of which only fragments have been preserved, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were open to criticism for poetic exaggerations but were nonetheless viewed as records of the archaic past. For the Greeks, myth was not so much opposed to history as forming their ancient past (Veyne 1983; Calame 1996).

Neither *Iliad* nor *Odyssey*, both products of oral traditions in the Archaic Age,⁹ allow us to date the events they narrate in relation to the epic present. References to this present are few and vague, as when the narrator states that the heroes lifted stones which nowadays men cannot move (*Il.* 5.302–4; 12.381–83; 12.445–49; 20.285–87). And yet, while the temporal distance remains undefined, this comparison indicates that the standards of the heroic time were significantly greater than those of the narrator’s present. Thus, although the epics do not describe the development from the heroic past to the present, history is obviously seen as involving a decline.¹⁰ The larger-than-life frame of the heroic world allowed the Greeks to use the epics as an archive for *exempla a maiore ad minus* (parallels between the larger, more eminent, and the lesser cases: Grethlein 2010a: 55–57 with examples).¹¹ Such an exemplary use of the epic past – of which we will encounter several instances in the following sections – establishes a link between past and present without paying attention to the sequence of events that led from the past to the present. Such disregard for the exact chronological relation between past and present is nicely illustrated by an *exemplum* within the *Iliad* when Phoenix places Meleager in the age of *palai* (“in ancient times,” *Il.* 9.527), although he was a contemporary of the heroes’ fathers (Grethlein 2006a: 56).

If we turn to the epic idea of history, the way in which human existence in time is envisaged, the prominence of contingency is striking. The plans of the heroes are frequently crossed by factors that are beyond their power, and in a war epic the consequences tend to be adverse and even, more often than not, lethal. The fragility of human life comes to the fore in “mishits,” a type-scene in which a hero aims at an opponent whom he misses while hitting and often killing another (Grethlein 2006a: 160). The *condicio heroica*, one could say, is an exacerbated version of the *condicio humana*. Unlike in the Judeo-Christian tradition, contingency is not resolved by a god who pursues a plan and thereby endows history with direction

and meaning; rather, since the decisions of the Olympian gods are more or less arbitrary, the so-called “Götterapparat” (“divine apparatus”) only has the effect of transferring contingency to a higher level and ultimately increasing its force.

The grip of contingency on the heroes is underscored by the narrative form of the epic.¹² Scholars have been baffled by the temporal complexity of the Homeric narrative which is full of anachronisms, leaps to the past or future of narrated time. In focusing on the “content of the form,” I suggest reading narrative time in epic poetry as an expression of its idea of history. In many cases, the device of foreshadowing serves to juxtapose the heroes’ expectations with the experiences they are going to make, thus forcefully underscoring the vanity of human expectations. To give a random example, when Hector is celebrating his victory over Patroclus and putting on Achilles’ armor which Patroclus had worn, Zeus remarks (17.200–3, trans. Lattimore 1951):

... Ah, poor wretch!
There is no thought of death in your mind now, and yet death stands
close beside you as you put on the immortal armour
of a surpassing man.

Here, it is a divine observer who unveils the vanity of human expectations; in other passages it is the narrator’s voice.¹³

Not only do the epic’s setting, plot, and narrative technique foreground human fragility but the heroes themselves reflect on it. In his encounter with Diomedes on the battlefield, for example, Glaucus compares men to leaves and then illustrates the force of contingency by narrating the life of his grandfather Bellerophon who had enjoyed much bliss and all of a sudden, for no reason, was ruined by the gods (Grethlein 2006a: 85–97; 2006b). Insight into the human condition is strongest in the case of the *Iliad*’s main hero, Achilles, who chooses imperishable glory at the price of an early death over a long life at home without fame (9.412–16).

Before I discuss the performative context of the epics, I would like to touch briefly upon other hexametric poetry, specifically Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. This is a didactic poem about agriculture in which various other genres are embedded. Of particular interest for the present investigation is a myth in which the narrator describes “man’s passage from an original paradise-state to his present misery” (West 1978: 172) through the succession of five races, four of which are named after metals – from gold to iron (106–201). The meaning of this myth, its function in the narrative, and its Near Eastern parallels have raised many questions which I cannot tackle here.¹⁴ Instead, I would like to emphasize two aspects that parallel the presentation of the past in Homer. First, it is striking that history is envisaged as a decline. The fourth race, consisting of the heroes who fought at Thebes and Troy, seems to be better than the preceding bronze race, but nonetheless the general tendency is one of decline reaching the bottom in the present race of iron men who have lost any sense of right and wrong and are afflicted by hardships of all

kinds. Second, just as in Homer this myth too distinguishes epochs, albeit without envisaging developments. The ages do not develop organically but start and end abruptly.

We do not have many sources that provide reliable data about performances of epic poetry in archaic Greece. Nonetheless, there is evidence that epic competitions formed a part of pan-Hellenic festivals.¹⁵ The bardic performances at banquets in Homer further suggest recitals of parts of the epics at symposia. While pan-Hellenic festivals were open to a mixed audience, the symposium was a crucial institution for aristocrats.¹⁶ Accordingly, scholars have seen the Homeric epics as an important tool for aristocratic assertions. And indeed, as I have already noted, nobles were wont to trace their lineages back to epic heroes.¹⁷ On the other hand, it is striking that the heroes, notably the Greek leader Agamemnon, are not unproblematic as models.¹⁸ While aristocrats may have tried to appropriate the cultural capital of the epic world, the poems could also be perceived as a reflection on political issues from a broader perspective.¹⁹

II.2 *Elegy*

In Greek elegy, we find a great variety of topics ranging from military exhortation to reflections on human fragility and erotic dalliances (e.g., West 1974; Fowler 1987). A few scholars, notably Ewen Bowie, had elaborated on the presentation of historical events in elegy, but it was not until 1992 (when a new fragment of Simonides on the battle of Plataea was published) that memory in elegy received its due attention.²⁰ By now, a majority of scholars seem to believe that there was a distinct group of elegies which narrated past events. Kowerski (2005: 63–73) and Sider (2006), on the other hand, have challenged the idea of a separate sub-genre of narrative elegy. They rightly point out the fragmentary state of our evidence and alert us to the possibility that references to the past formed part of elegies that also dealt with other matters. I find their arguments persuasive, particularly since many of the historical references in our fragments seem to be perfunctory and do not support the idea of extensive historical narratives.²¹

Nonetheless, memory in elegy deserves our attention. If we leave aside works of which we only have the titles, including Semonides' *Archaiologia Samiōn* (*The Early History of Samos*), Panyassis's *Ionian History* and Xenophanes' *ktisis* (foundation) poem, sizable fragments dealing with the past come, other than from Simonides, from two poets of the seventh century, Tyrtaeus and Mimnermus. Besides narrating the origin of the Spartan constitution (2, 4W), Tyrtaeus refers to conflicts about Messene (5–7W). Mimnermus tells events from Smyrna's history, its foundation (9W) as well as its fights with the Lydian king Gyges (13, 13a, 14W). From Simonides we have, in addition to the lengthy piece on the battle of Plataea, elegiac fragments on a sea-battle, probably Artemisium.²² Scanty though these fragments are, they permit some tentative conclusions about memory in elegy.

To start with, unlike Homeric epic that follows a pan-Hellenic perspective, most elegies focus on the past of a single polis.²³ It further seems that, while epic focuses on a heroic past, elegy deals primarily with a more recent past all the way to contemporary history. However, this thesis needs at least two qualifications. First, there were also epics on contemporary history such as a poem on the Persian Wars by Choerilus of Samos. At the same time, some of Archilochus's fragments illustrate that elegy could also tackle mythical subjects.²⁴ Nonetheless, it seems safe to claim that epic concentrated on the heroic past and elegy was a genre more apt to focus on recent history. Second, as recent as the events may have been, elegy tends to cast them in a heroic register. This is most striking in the case of Simonides fr. 11W which first mentions the glory of Achilles and then invokes the Muse to assist the poet in also bestowing glory on the Greeks who fought at Plataea. What may have happened less than a couple of years ago thus appears in an epic light.

In Homer, we saw, the heroic past is not chronologically linked to the present. Elegy too disregards chronology when it directly juxtaposes recent and historical events or presents them in the same mold. I suggest that the heroization of recent events not only serves purposes of praise and glorification but also underscores their exemplary value. In the *Iliad*, Phoenix locates Meleager in the ancient time of *palai* (9.527–28: above) and Nestor calls his contemporaries much greater than present men (1.259–74). Both passages distance the recent past from the present in order to increase the authority of the examples they adduce. In the same vein, the presentation of recent events as heroic in elegy allows drawing conclusions *a maiore ad minus*.

Let me finally turn to the context of performance. There is evidence for the performance of elegies at public festivals but the main context for their circulation will have been the symposium.²⁵ Given the aristocratic background of the symposium, the prominence of the polis in elegies is striking and attests to the pressure on aristocrats to pursue their desire for distinction within the frame of the polis.²⁶ The construction of a common past seems to have been an important element for the cohesion of polis-communities. At the same time, Alcaeus's poems, though not elegiac, illustrate that the past could also be used for partisan interests (Grethlein 2010a: 72). Both for the community and individuals, the past constituted important capital.

II.3 *Tragedy*

Contingency dominates the epic idea of history; it is also prominent in elegy even if the fragmentary state of the extant evidence makes it hard to decide whether reflections on human fragility are linked to narratives about the past (Grethlein 2010a: 59–62). Obviously, though, another prominent commemorative genre, tragedy, shares with epic the emphasis on the changeability of human fortune. Despite the different media of presentation, a similar narrative technique marks the futility of human planning. Just as Homeric prolepses alert the audience to experiences which

will disappoint the characters' expectations, tragic irony plays with the audience's superior knowledge. When, for example, Oedipus commits himself to clarifying the murder of Laius with the words "I fight in his defence as if for my father" (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 397), the dramatic irony sharply contrasts his deficient knowledge with the audience's insights.²⁷

The mythical subjects also align the tragedians with Homer. There is only one fully preserved historical tragedy, Aeschylus's *Persians*, that deals with the battle of Salamis.²⁸ Epic vocabulary, epic catalogues, and a bard-like messenger give the recent event a heroic patina.²⁹ This distancing of the recent past throws into relief the relevance of "heroic vagueness" (the setting in a remote past) for tragedy, while paralleling the same tendency in elegy. As in elegy, though in a different way, the presentation of the past as heroic not only distances it from the present but also reinforces its exemplary value. Many have elaborated on tragedy as a genre that negotiates questions of concern to the polis.³⁰ Of course, the larger-than-life frame of tragedy also permits conclusions *a maiore ad minus* but it seems equally, if not more important that, just as the generic polyphony allows tragedy to raise questions without giving clear-cut answers, the heroic world creates the distance in which controversial issues can be safely negotiated.³¹

By the same token, if we follow Aristotle (for example, *Rhetoric* 1386a24–6), the feeling of pity and fear, if it is to be effective, also requires some similarity with, or proximity to, the tragic heroes. The fact that myths had no fixed form allowed the tragedians to shape their own versions so as to render them significant to their present audiences. They also made their plays resonate with the audience through what Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (1989: 136) has called "zooming-devices," that is, words and concepts that were alien to the heroic cosmos but stemmed from the world of the audience and thereby "had the effect of bringing the world of the play nearer, pushing the audience into relating their experiences and assumptions directly to the play." For example, in his *Orestes* Euripides has the title hero stay in Argos after the murder of his mother. The political instability and the attacks of the enraged mob depicted in the play are reminiscent of the political situation, including fierce conflicts between oligarchs and democrats, prevailing in Athens at the time (409?). Contemporary parallels are reinforced by the word "comradeship" (*hetaireia*) with which the friendship between Orestes and Pylades is characterized (1072, 1079). *Hetaireia* is extremely rare in tragedy – these are its only occurrences in the entire extant work of Euripides;³² hence its use in the context of a struggle between the *jeunesse dorée* and the people is striking and would not have failed to evoke the contemporary clubs of young, often subversive aristocrats. These and other "zooming-devices" permit an exemplary use of the past without explicitly juxtaposing it with the present. Such indirect allusions to the present suffice to establish the past as a foil which sheds light on the world of the audience through contrast, similarity, or refraction.

The symposium as performative context makes elegy's focus on polis history striking. The contents of tragedy, on the other hand, tend to be distanced from Athens – rather than in Athens, the plots usually are located in Thebes, Argos, Mycenae, or

Troy – but the place of performance still reveals the polis' grip on the past. There are hints that tragedies were reperformed at smaller festivals outside Athens (Easterling 1994; Taplin 1999), and after 386 reperformances in Athens were permitted, but otherwise tragedies were composed for single performances at public festivals, notably the Great Dionysia (Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 57–125; Parke 1977: 125–36; Goldhill 1990). They were embedded in a net of other poetic performances and rituals through which the polis of Athens celebrated itself (for example, citizens whose activities had greatly benefited the community were honored publicly). The plays' performative context thus underscores the distancing effect of contingency. Not only do disasters take place in Thebes or in Argos, but the merciless rule of contingency at these places contrasts with the regularity and continuity established by the rituals of the Great Dionysia (Grethlein 2010a: 96–97).

Before I turn to memory in oratory, I will briefly try to pull some strings together. We have seen that in poetic accounts of the past contingency and human fragility loom large. It is also striking that the past is rarely connected to the present by a sequence of historical developments. Instead, an exemplary use of the past dominates that, regardless of temporal distances, directly – whether implicitly or explicitly – juxtaposes past and present. These patterns in the use of memory can be found in other poetic genres as well. Even if I cannot discuss this here in detail, I will at least mention the case of the epinician. In Pindar's highly stylized praise of athletic victors, human fragility is foregrounded while mythical narratives are evoked as foils to the present (Grethlein 2010a: 19–46).

These features, I think, are linked to one another. Contingency makes it hard to construe developments. Where chance rules, it is impossible for history to have a direction. The widespread assumption that the Greeks did not know change is therefore misleading. For instance, in a classic study Boman (1968) contrasts the static view of time in Greek culture with the dynamic time concept in the Hebrew tradition. Yet in Greek thinking changeability is so prominent that it challenges the notion of development. It further destabilizes actions and identities. The view of the past as exemplary constitutes an attempt to balance the rule of contingency (Grethlein 2006a: 108–12). The direct juxtaposition of different events presupposes some degree of regularity – otherwise a comparison would not be possible. Moreover, a past that is presented as greater than the present can serve as a model for the latter. Mythical and historical examples thus inspire actions and counteract the destabilizing force of contingency. Seen from this perspective, the neglect of chronology is not necessarily the consequence of an oral culture; rather, it may be owed to an idea of history that emphasizes the exemplary use of the past and pits it against contingency.

III Oratory

Although, with few exceptions, all extant Greek speeches stem from the fourth century and later, it is safe to assume that oratory had also played an important role before (Kennedy 1963; Cole 1991; Schiappa 1999). The ideal epic hero was

“a speaker of words and a doer of actions” (*Il.* 9.443; Martin 1989; Roisman 2007). The institutionalization of the polis that made eloquence an important asset can be traced back to Homer (Raaflaub 1993). Eventually, in the Athenian democracy the art of speaking became so crucial that, as Plato illustrates, criticism of democracy often took the form of a critique of rhetoric (Yunis 1996; Ober 1998).

In the assembly and law-courts speakers frequently buttressed their arguments with examples from the past.³³ While in poetry the authority of myth is felt so strongly that even recent events are envisaged in “heroic vagueness,” the Attic orators preferred recent history. For instance, when Demosthenes searches for evidence that Athens’ freedom and power depend on its navy, he offers two pairs of examples. First, he caps a reference to the Persian Wars with the comment, “Well, but that is ancient history. Take something that you have all seen” (22.14), and mentions as a more recent case the assistance provided to the Euboeans in 357. With a similar phrase, he then turns from the Peloponnesian War to the last war with the Spartans in the 370s: “And why should one discuss ancient history?” (22.15). This example suggests that the often-noted neglect of myths in oratory is due less to a rigid divide between myth and history than to a gradual distinction between recent and remote events. While it is noteworthy that Demosthenes actually bothers to mention what he considers ancient history, this and further passages reveal that in general recent examples had greater persuasive force than ancient ones.³⁴

The comparison of poetry with oratory alerts us to the relevance of the context for uses of memory. The remoteness of the heroic world made it well suited to negotiate issues of identity and moral conduct in the elevated settings of the symposium and public ceremonies, but it was disadvantageous for the pragmatic interactions in the everyday world of the assembly and the law-courts.

Orators regularly bent the truth to make history suit their argumentative needs.³⁵ Their practice not only involved questionable interpretations but also changes of chronology and the invention of events. Of course, such historical blunders could not go against common knowledge for this would have undermined the argument, but it seems that orators were granted a certain degree of freedom in molding the past as needed by their case. Isocrates, for example, not only gives different versions of the Athenians’ mythical intervention on behalf of Adrastus and the Argives – in the *Panegyric* a battle is necessary (4.54–56), while in the *Panathenaic Oration* the conflict is resolved peacefully (12.168–71) – but he even admits the contradiction and explains it in terms of suitability for his differing arguments (12.172–74). The freedom to adjust the presentation of the past to the needs of the here and now makes it a useful argumentative tool in the hands of the orators, just as it allows the tragedians to render their traditional subjects relevant to their audiences.

Before I turn to commemoration in art, it is worth mentioning a particular speech genre, the Athenian funeral oration (Loraux 1986a). Some time after the Persian Wars, the Athenians began giving the war dead of each year a public burial in the Kerameikos Cemetery. Part of the ceremony was a speech delivered by an outstanding public figure. The preserved funeral orations all follow, more or less, a common structure and feature a run through Athens’ history from the beginnings

to the present. It seems that the nearly annual repetition led to the establishment of a somewhat fixed catalogue of ancestral achievements, including notably the fight against the Amazons, the support offered the Argives (after the defeat of the “Seven against Thebes”) and the children of Heracles, and Athenian exploits during the Persian Wars. Defeats, on the other hand, are glossed over. In the words of the funeral speakers, Athenian history appears as an uninterrupted chain of great deeds. The blurring of boundaries between recent and mythical past parallels the casting in epic light of recent events that is typical of elegy.³⁶ Thus, on the one hand, the preference for the recent past distinguishes deliberative speeches from poetic accounts; on the other, as the funeral speeches illustrate, memory in oratory and poetry shares important features.

IV Art

A survey of artistic presentations of the past in archaic and classical Greece is beyond the scope of this paper but I will draw attention to some striking parallels to the use of memory in literary sources. To start with, the poets’ preference for mythical over historical subjects is paralleled in vase-paintings as well as in monuments. That being said, the fifth century saw a large number of artistic presentations of recent events.³⁷ For example, according to Pausanias (1.15.1–3), two of the paintings in the “Painted Stoa,” constructed around 460, showed the recent battles of Marathon and Oinoe.³⁸ Interestingly, in our present context, the other walls featured two mythical battles, the conquest of Troy and the Amazonomachy. Thus, just as in literary presentations, mythical and recent past were juxtaposed. In the same vein, inscriptions on a monument in the Agora, erected after the battle of Eion in Thrace (475), praise the recent achievement in parallel with the Athenian participation in the siege of Troy.³⁹ On the Acropolis, the pediment of the temple of Athena Nike, built in the 420s, represented the battle between gods and giants and a mythical battle, perhaps against the Amazons, whereas the friezes, according to the interpretation of most archaeologists, illustrate historical themes, probably a battle of the Persian Wars and a later battle among Greeks (Hölscher 1973: 91–8; Castriota 1992: 179–80).

Yet it has also been argued that the temple’s north and west friezes refer to the Trojan War (Felten 1984: 127–29). The ambiguity permitting such controversies highlights the fact that historical and mythical battles were cast in the same register. Similar observations can be made with respect to vase paintings. For example, a scene on a cup of the Brygos-painter in Oxford, dating from the first third of the fifth century, has been interpreted as representing both the theft of the Palladion by Odysseus and Diomedes and the Greek raid on the Persian camp at Plataea.⁴⁰ Just as poets and orators epicize the recent past, the painters use the same register to depict mythical and contemporary warfare. Perhaps, in some cases attempts to clarify the reference fail to do justice to a polyvalent semantic which makes different references possible and thereby invites the spectator to compare historical with mythical events.⁴¹

The frequency of examples relating to representations of the Persian Wars seems to support the thesis that it is this extraordinary event that caused the blurring of the boundaries between recent and mythical history. I do not deny that the Persian Wars provided material that was conducive to, and even seemed to provoke, heroization, and yet it is important that the distancing of recent events is not limited to this case, but clearly is a general mode of memory in ancient Greece. We have seen that in the *Iliad* what has taken place only one generation ago appears as belonging to another world, and that Tyrtaeus and Mimnermus epicize history. Epinician poetry affords another interesting example: in Bacchylides 5, a historical event, the life of Croesus, fills the place of myth and is evoked to shed light on the praise of the victor. These poems, just like artistic representations of the past, illustrate a mode of memory that remembers events without paying attention to their temporal context.

V The Rise of Greek Historiography

Recent work has significantly enhanced our understanding of the rise of Greek historiography by contextualizing Herodotus in his time. The “father of history” has been viewed in the context of the contemporary scientific revolution, he has been read against the backdrop of the politics of his own day, and his relations with oral traditions have been elucidated.⁴² In a final step, I will now offer a fresh assessment of Herodotus and also Thucydides by contextualizing them in the field of memory. Since the first historians invented history only in the sense that they launched a new genre to describe and interpret it, it is fruitful to view them in the tension between innovation and tradition with regard to other commemorative genres and media.

The explicit and implicit critique of poetry and oratory we find in both Herodotus and Thucydides signals that they are off to a new start (Grethlein 2010a: 151–86, 206–39). And indeed, several aspects distinguish their approach to the past from earlier ones. First, a critical method that applies principles of contemporary science and legal procedures marks an important innovation.⁴³ Second, whereas poetry and oratory were primarily composed for oral performance, the *Histories* are written works.⁴⁴ Third, we have seen that in other media the past tends to be in the grip of the polis. Herodotus and Thucydides, on the other hand, follow Homer in their pan-Hellenic perspective. Fourth, against the poets’ preference for the mythical past, the two historians choose recent history, Thucydides even contemporary events.

However, the discrepancy between other historians and nonhistoriographic use of memory seems to have been less marked. Remains of local historians who wrote at the end of the fifth and in the fourth century are lamentably scanty, but in a recent monograph Clarke (2008) has made a strong case that these historians, besides taking the perspective of a single polis and not exerting much critical care, gave mythical history much space and disseminated their works in oral performances.⁴⁵

Even if we stick with Herodotus and Thucydides, it is obvious that they share much common ground with the very genres against which they define their new approach to the past. Human fragility and contingency that are at the core of epic and tragedy figure prominently in the works of both historians. Herodotus even underscores this idea of history with a similar narrative technique that, through anachronisms, juxtaposes expectations and experiences of characters and thereby establishes tragic irony (Chiasson 2003). Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides has no space in his *History* for divine interventions but he nonetheless foregrounds chance, failures, and suffering in a way strongly reminiscent of poetic memory. In particular, scholars have been struck by the presentation of the Sicilian expedition in a tragic mold.⁴⁶

I have argued that the exemplary use of the past is an attempt to counteract contingency by establishing regularity and providing models for action. Herodotus and Thucydides parallel poets and orators in using this antidote, albeit in a distinct way.⁴⁷ In Herodotus’s *Histories*, a view of the past as exemplary is constituted by the repeated pattern of the rise and fall of empires which is underscored by smaller patterns such as warnings by wise advisors, hubristic laughing, or the crossing of geographical boundaries.⁴⁸ This perspective is not limited to the past but, as scholars have amply demonstrated in the last two decades, a series of prolepses at the end of the *Histories* evokes the later rise of Athens. Readers are thereby prompted to think of contemporaneous intra-Hellenic conflicts against the backdrop of the Persian Wars (e.g., Raaflaub 1987; Stadter 1992; Moles 1996). It may not have been Herodotus’s sole purpose to warn the Athenians, but he obviously thought that his account could teach his contemporaries a lesson or two.

It is much more difficult to discern patterns in Thucydides’ *History* (Grethlein 2010a: 254–68). At the same time, Thucydides explicitly announces the usefulness of his work for those “who will wish to look at the plain truth about both past events and those that at some future time, in accordance with human nature, will recur again in similar or comparable ways” (1.22.4). Although this passage has been interpreted controversially (Grethlein 2010a: 210–11), it reveals that Thucydides has an essentialist view of history and assumes that certain structures are and will be repeated. His methodical rigor is not owed to a positivist objectivism, but aims at providing his readers with reliable insights for a better understanding of the present and a more accurate assessment of the future.

This exemplary view of the past distinguishes Herodotus and Thucydides from modern historians. Reinhart Koselleck has argued (1979: 38–66) that the maxim of “history as a teacher for life” (*historia magistra vitae*) lost its value around 1800 CE; while he may have underestimated the general desire to learn from the past, few professional historians would view history in this way today. On the other hand, the exemplary use of the past aligns Herodotus and Thucydides with other media of memory in ancient Greece. Yet an important distinction remains: while poets and orators mostly draw on the exemplary mode of memory to glorify recent or present events and to legitimize claims, Herodotus and Thucydides rather use them for critical purposes. They evoke the past as a foil which throws into relief problems and deficiencies in the present (Grethlein 2006c: 505).

Overall, then, as innovative as the new genre launched by Herodotus and Thucydides is, it nonetheless relies on an idea of history that is similar to other commemorative genres. My survey has shown that different media and genres offered distinct approaches to the past in various contexts and narrative forms. At the same time, a perfunctory and generalizing comparison with modern historical attitudes reveals that all these approaches circle around a common gravitational center (Grethlein 2010a: 281–90). While the focus on “developments” undermines the use of history as a teacher in the modern age, in ancient Greek memory the exemplary view of history serves to create some stability against the detrimental force of contingency.

I am far from claiming that the idea of “development,” so dear to us, was alien to the Archaic and Classical Ages. Already Hesiod’s *Theogony* uses the form of a catalog to lay out the history of the gods, from initial chaos to the just rule of the Olympian gods. As the extant fragments of his *Ehoiai* illustrate, other archaic poems and, by the sixth century, works in prose presented genealogies of heroes (Thomas 1989: 173–94; Fowler 2000). In addition to genealogies, especially in the fifth century some texts envisage human history as a development and some, including the famous *Ode to Man* in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, even imply the notion of progress. However, it is not until the “Axial Time” around 1800 CE that the concept of development starts to dominate historical thinking and that the past becomes a “foreign country.” This new approach finds its expression in the coining of the term “history” in the singular that signifies the past and present as an organic process (Koselleck 1975: 647–58). It is not without significance that the ancient Greeks did not know a comparable term.

Let me end by putting up for discussion a label which I derive from literary theory. In his treatise, *Laokoon*, Lessing offers a brilliant comparison of narrative with pictorial presentations (1962: VI 7–187 [1766]). While pictures are more or less static, narratives are sequential. They unfold actions that take place in time and themselves proceed in time. On the other hand, Joseph Frank has shown that a sequential understanding falls short in the case of many modern poems and novels.⁴⁹ Works by such authors as Mallarmé, Flaubert, or Barnes require a look at the whole which transcends sequence. For this phenomenon which seems characteristic of modern literature but can also be discovered in earlier texts, Frank coined the term “spatial form.” I think that Frank’s notion of spatiality can help us grasp an essential aspect of Greek memory. Not only in artistic but also in narrative presentations we have noticed the tendency not to envisage the sequence which leads from the past to the present but to juxtapose various events with one another, regardless of temporal differences. The Greeks were not incapable of conceptualizing sequences from the past to the present but it seems that a spatial view of the past, one that regards simultaneously past and present without considering the development from the former to the latter, was more prominent. The Greeks were in the grip of the past, as van Groningen (1953) has it, but this past, in historiography as well as in other media, was in the firm grip of the present.

Abbreviations

ABSA	<i>Annual of the British School at Athens</i>
AJPh	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
ASNP	<i>Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, classe di lettere e filosofia</i>
CIAnt	<i>Classical Antiquity</i>
CPh	<i>Classical Philology</i>
FGE	Page 1981
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
ICS	<i>Illinois Classical Studies</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
PCPhS	<i>Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society</i>
QS	<i>Quaderni di storia</i>
RE	Pauly et al. 1893–1980
RHR	<i>Revue de l'histoire des religions</i>
TAPhA	<i>Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association</i>
W	West 1992
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

Notes

- 1 All dates are BCE unless indicated otherwise.
- 2 Cf. Snell 1952; Strasburger 1972 on Homer; Steinmetz 1969 on elegy. For new approaches to memory before and besides historiography, see Loraux 1986a (funeral orations); Thomas 1989 (oral traditions); Alcock 2002 (archaeology); Higbie 2003 (Lindian chronicle); Grethlein 2006a (Homer). Boedeker 1998 presents an important survey of memory of the Persian Wars; for a penetrating analysis of divergent polis memories, see Yates 2009.
- 3 For a full examination of the past in fifth-century Greek literature and the rise of Greek historiography, see Grethlein 2010a.
- 4 On literacy and orality in ancient Greece, see, for example, Havelock 1982; 1986; Thomas 1989. On books and reading in classical Greece, see Kenyon 1951; Turner 1952; and, specifically for Herodotus’s *Histories*, Flory 1980.
- 5 The importance of oral sources for Herodotus is stressed by Jacoby 1913; Aly 1969. Murray 1987 applied anthropological insights, particularly by Vansina 1965, to oral history. For further explorations of this aspect, see the contributions in Luraghi 2001.
- 6 Cf. Finley 1975: 28; Jacoby 1913: 413 on family traditions as sources of Herodotus. See also Bethe 1935; Thomas 1989: 95–154.
- 7 See Thomas 1989: 107–8 who observes that in democratic Athens recent history became more important.
- 8 See, however, Latacz 2004 who, inspired by new excavations in Hisarlik, finds much information about the Trojan War in the *Iliad*. For a critique of his claims, see Ulf 2003; Grethlein 2010b.

- 9 Both mode and time of the composition of the Homeric epics are highly controversial. Whereas many German scholars emphasize the role of writing (e.g., Kullmann 1985; Latacz 1996), Anglo-American classicists tend to follow the tradition of Parry 1971 and Lord 2000 and stress the orality of composition and tradition (e.g., Janko 1982; Nagy 1996). By the same token, the dates suggested for the fixation vary greatly. That being said, it is widely agreed that the epics at least rest on an oral tradition and many scholars see the eighth and seventh centuries as a decisive stage in the fixation of the epics' text.
- 10 For a qualification of this decline model, see Grethlein 2006a: 53–58.
- 11 In Grethlein 2006a: 322–3, I argue that, in a few self-referential passages, the *Iliad* itself envisages its use as an *exemplum*.
- 12 Cf. Grethlein 2006a: 205–57. On differences between *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see Grethlein 2012.
- 13 By the same token, contingency is underscored by analepses in which the narrator or characters look back to expectations that have just been disappointed: Grethlein 2006a: 240.
- 14 See, for example, Vernant 1960; Nagy 1979: 151–73; Most 1997; Currie 2012.
- 15 The Panathenaea are the most prominent case, see Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 102 and Davison 1955: 7 with further sources. See also Hdt. 5.67, providing evidence for rhapsodic contests at Sicyon in the sixth century. On Panionian recitations on Delos, see Thuc. 3.104. On epic performances in general, see the discussion by Kirk 1962: 274–81; also Nagy 1996; Collins 2001.
- 16 The literature on the symposium is vast. See, for example, Murray 1990; Slater 1991; Schmitt Pantel 1992.
- 17 See Morris 1988: 757; West 1978 at Hesiod, *Works and Days* 106–201. For a later example, see the examination of the Philaid genealogy by Thomas 1989: 161–73; Möller 1996: 21–25.
- 18 On the ambiguity of Agamemnon as a model, see Grethlein 2006c: 495–96.
- 19 Raaflaub 1993: 46–59; Hammer 2002. See also Grethlein 2010b: 130–1.
- 20 Besides Bowie 1986, 2001, 2010, see also Steinmetz 1969; Lasserre 1976. Parsons 1992 provided the first edition of the “new Simonides,” followed immediately by West 1992: II. 118–20. For interpretations, see the contributions in Boedeker and Sider 2001; Kowerski 2005.
- 21 For a survey of the length of historical narratives in extant fragments, see the appendix in Grethlein 2010a: 291–96.
- 22 For a discussion of these fragments and their attribution, see Rutherford 2001: 35–37.
- 23 This is obviously true for Tyrtaeus and Mimnermus, and although most scholars ascribe to Simonides' Plataea elegy a pan-Hellenic perspective, I find the focus on Sparta in the long fragment 11W noteworthy; see also Burzacchini 1995: 23–26; Aloni 2001: 102–4.
- 24 See, besides Archilochus fr. 286–89W (apparently from an elegy on Heracles), P. Oxy. 4708 (also attributed to Archilochus) with more than 20 consecutive lines on a mythical theme, the repulse of the Achaean army by Telephus. It seems likely, however, that the mythical narrative was embedded in the elegy as an *exemplum*. Obbink 2006: 8.
- 25 Here I disagree with Bowie 1986 who suggests that public festivals were the major occasion for the recital of narrative elegies.
- 26 See, however, Irwin 2005: 49 who contextualizes exhortatory elegy in the symposium and emphasizes its use for purposes of social distinction.

- 27 See, for example, Pucci 1992: 79–80 and, on tragic irony in Sophocles, Kirkwood 1958: 247–87.
- 28 We also know the names of two other tragedies, *Miletou Halōsis* (*The Conquest of Miletus*) and *Phoenissae*, both by Phrynichus, that staged events of the Persian Wars. On historical tragedies, see Castellani 1986; Hall 1996: 7–9.
- 29 See Grethlein 2010a: 75–79. For an interpretation of *Persae* as a reflection on tragic memory, see Grethlein 2007.
- 30 See, for example, the contributions in Winkler and Zeitlin 1990; Sommerstein et al. 1993; Pelling 1997.
- 31 Zeitlin 1990 explores the significance of Thebes and Argos as places of “the other.” Croally 1994: 40–41 emphasizes the different levels at which the tragic action is distanced from the audience.
- 32 The only other use of the word in the extant corpus of tragedy occurs in Sophocles, *Ajax* 683.
- 33 On the use of the past in oratory, see Jost 1936; Schmitz-Kahlmann 1939; Pearson 1941; Perlman 1961; Nouhaud 1982; Loraux 1986a; Worthington 1994; Gotteland 2001; Clarke 2008: 245–303.
- 34 Nouhaud 1982: 12–23. See also Clarke 2008: 252–74 for a comparison of the references to the past in Demosthenes, Aeschines, and Isocrates. However, as Worthington 1994: 113 points out, nearly all of our evidence from the classical period comes from Athens, and since Athens had its greatest political successes in the fifth century, it may have been natural to refer to the recent past.
- 35 See, for example, Perlman 1961; Missiou 1992: 59–60 with further literature in n. 6.
- 36 The ensuing difficulty to distinguish between individual epochs comes to the fore in phrases such as “those, who are lying here.” Not only are these phrases applied indiscriminately to Athenians who died in mythical and recent wars, but time and again the reference is ambiguous: Grethlein 2010a: 115.
- 37 For depictions of historical events in classical Greece, see Hölscher 1973, 1998; also Francis 1990 and Castriota 1992 on official art.
- 38 Pausanias's testimony has been questioned, since the latter battle, between Athenians and Argives, is not mentioned by ancient historians: Jeffery 1965: 50–1; Francis and Vickers 1985. Hölscher 1973: 68–70 defends Pausanias; see also Castriota 1992: 76–89.
- 39 Simonides 40 (a) FGE = Aeschines 3.183 ff. See Plutarch, *Cimon* 7.6 and Demosthenes 20.112 on the herms and the inscriptions. For bibliog., see Hölkeskamp 2001: 348 n. 104; for the semantics of the monument's placement in the northwestern corner of the Agora, Hölscher 1998: 166–67.
- 40 Beazley 1963: 399; Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1911.615 from Cerveteri, augmented by fig. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 1973.175.2. Both interpretations are suggested by Herford 1914. While Beazley 1963: 31 is inclined to favor the mythical interpretation, other scholars have suggested yet another contemporary scene, the rise of the spirits of two warriors of Marathon that are going to protect Greece against the Persians; cf. Barrett and Vickers 1978: 17–18; Kron 1999: 65–66.
- 41 Cf. Giuliani 2003: 282–83 who argues for abandoning the dichotomy “Mythos – Alltag” in the interpretation of Greek vase paintings.
- 42 On Herodotus and contemporary science, see Lateiner 1986; Thomas 2000; Raaflaub 2002; on Herodotus and the politics of his day, cf. Raaflaub 1987; Stadter 1992; Moles 1996; on Herodotus and oral traditions, see the contributions in Luraghi 2001.

- 43 On Herodotus and science, see n. 42 above; on this aspect in Thucydides: Cochrane 1929; Weidauer 1954; Thomas 2006; on the influence of forensic practice on both: for example, de Lima 1996.
- 44 It may be noted, however, that Herodotus seems to have presented his work also in oral presentations; see Thomas 2000. On Thucydides' emphasis on the medium of his work, see Loraux 1986b; Edmunds 1993; Morrison 2004.
- 45 For divergent polis memories of the Persian Wars, see Yates 2009.
- 46 Cornford 1907; Stahl 2003: 173–222. Macleod 1983 argues that Thucydides is not so much indebted to tragedy as to epic.
- 47 Here I would like to add a nuance to Boedeker's assessment of the rise of Greek historiography (1998). She suggests that Herodotus's and Thucydides' innovation consisted in "showing not a timeless world full of paradigms and analogies, but rather a time-bound picture of development, inconsistency, and change" (202). Of course, the *Histories* are narratives and thereby sequential. At the same time, however, an important aspect of these works is a paradigmatic use of history which aligns them with other nonlinear presentations of the past. For a fuller treatment of Herodotus's and Thucydides' exemplary use of the past, see Grethlein 2011. On the prominence of a paradigmatic presentation of the past in ancient historiography in general, see Raaflaub 2010.
- 48 See Immerwahr 1966 on the overall structure of the *Histories*; Lateiner 1977; Flory 1978 on laughing; Bischoff 1932; Lattimore 1939 on the wise advisor; Lateiner 1989: 126–44 on boundaries.
- 49 Frank 1963; for discussions of his approach, see Smitten and Daghistany 1981.

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