

# The UNESCO COURIER



INTERVIEW WITH  
Frédéric Rossif

*in  
pursuit  
of  
the past*

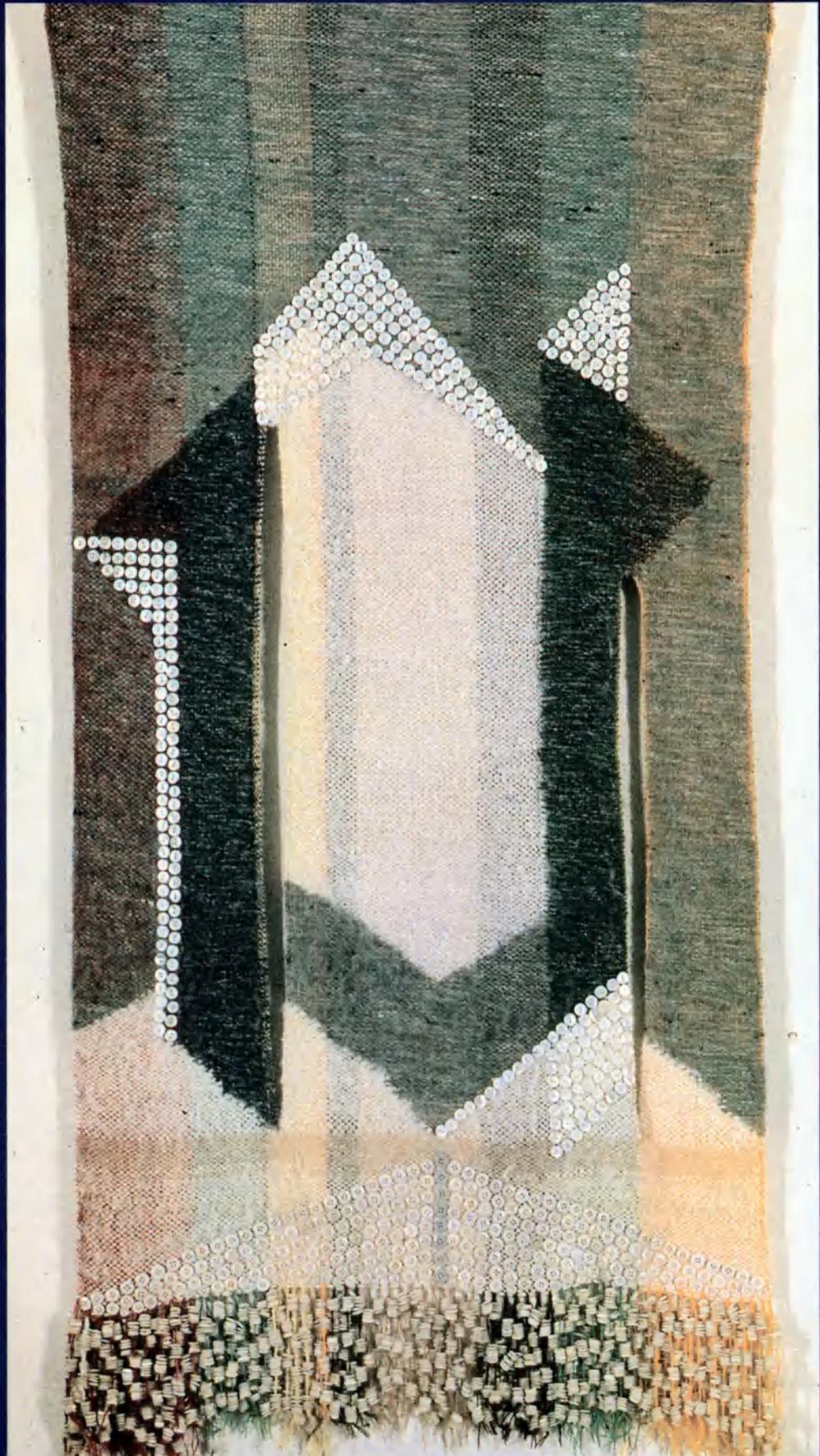
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HISTORY  
AND MEMORY

MARCH 1990  
15 French francs

# encounters

We invite readers to send us photographs to be considered for publication in this feature. Your photo should show a painting, a sculpture, piece of architecture or any other subject which seems to be an example of cross-fertilization between cultures. Alternatively, you could send us pictures of two works from different cultural backgrounds in which you see some striking connection or resemblance. Please add a short caption to all photographs.



## Graphic liaison

1982, tapestry of wool, synthetic fibres and pearl buttons, 85 x 178 cm by Marie and Pierre Dionne

The head of a man wearing a tricorn hat is depicted in this tapestry executed on a traditional Quebec loom by two Quebec artists. The use of pearl buttons was inspired by the lavishly decorated costumes traditionally worn by the "pearly kings" and "pearly queens" of the East End of London.



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Cover: The obelisks of Queen Hatshepsut and Pharaoh Tuthmosis I caught in golden sunlight at Karnak, the great architectural complex of ancient Egypt.

Back cover: Confucius and his disciples. (17th-century Korean painting.)

François Hartog, historian and director of studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, was special consultant for this issue.

Today there are no more unexplored continents, unknown seas or mysterious islands. But while we can overcome the physical barriers to exploration, the barriers of mutual ignorance between different peoples and cultures have in many cases still not been dismantled.

A modern Ulysses can voyage to the ends of the earth. But a different kind of Odyssey now beckons—an exploration of the world's many cultural landscapes, the ways of life of its different peoples and their outlook on the world in which they live.

It is such an Odyssey that the *Unesco Courier* proposes to you, its readers. Each month contributors of different nationalities provide from different cultural and professional standpoints an authoritative treatment of a theme of universal interest. The compass guiding this journey through the world's cultural landscapes is respect for the dignity of man everywhere.

# Frédéric Rossif

*You have travelled the world and met all kinds of people. In the light of your own varied experience would you draw any general conclusions about human destiny?*

— I would be inclined to say that man is a nomad in search of love.... In the brief struggle which is our life on Earth, faced with the immensity of time, we are engaged in a search. We go round an assault course looking for oases—not oases to rest in but oases where we can try to be happy. What is so special about the desert is that it offers us mirages but is indifferent to our existence. We carry on in pursuit of the mirage, further and further, and the mirage is still there to tantalize us. At the end, the very end, we reach the mirage, which for some is paradise; for others, eternal peace; for yet others, death. The path of life is marked by a few moments of love, oases of happiness in this heedless desert. The important thing is to ask the questions, not to know the answers.

In the West people go along with the motto of William of Orange: “There is no need for hope to embark on a task nor for success to persevere.” A fine sentiment, but I prefer the motto of the Zulu warriors, which is: “If you advance you die. If you retreat you die. So why retreat?” I wholeheartedly agree with this. Why should we abase ourselves, submit to humiliation, obey tyrants, if the same death lies in wait for all of us?

*You take your bearings from different cultures. Do you feel that you belong nowhere in particular?*

— My own oases are very different from one another. I have always sought other types of wisdom, other outlooks. I live in the West, but I do not want to be exclusively Western. It’s like being exclusively left-wing or right-wing, succumbing to what Ortega

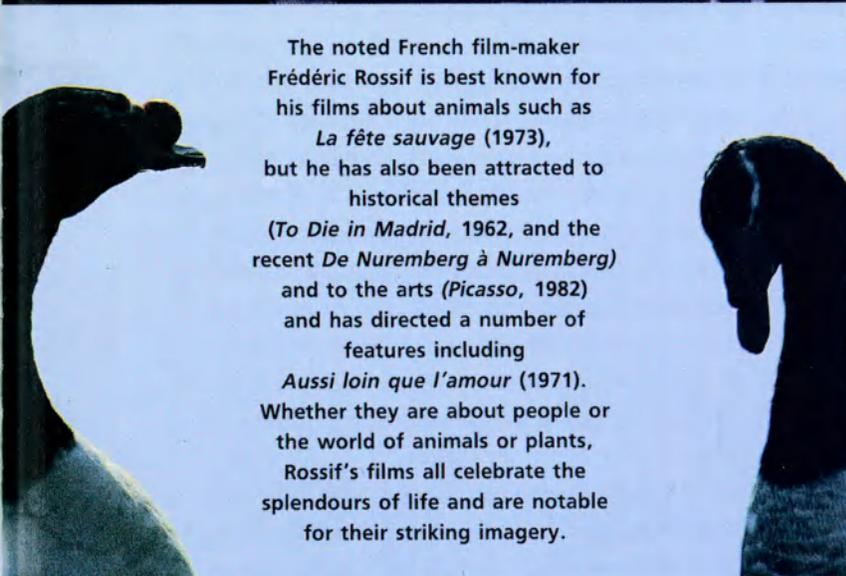
y Gasset called moral hemiplegia. Being only a Westerner means succumbing to poetic hemiplegia. A person who knows Rimbaud but not the Vedas has failed to see three or four of the seven colours of the rainbow. The Vedas have given me a glimpse of a kind of wisdom that has room for dreams. Listen to this image: “In the evening, after the battle, the multi-coloured butterflies alight on dead heroes and sleeping conquerors alike.” What could be more profound and delicate than this image of passing time? It could also be understood in the following way. The multi-coloured butterflies live for one day, but they have been on Earth for 80 million years. It is not the butterflies that are ephemeral, but human beings. Butterflies think they are eternal because, for 80 million years, whenever a butterfly has died it has already, through an act of love, produced the next generation...

*You speak of life, love and death as if you have actually faced death yourself...*

— It happened in Iran, while I was making my film *Opéras sauvages*. We were following wolves. There are superb wolves in the mountains on the borders of Iran and Iraq. We had sighted a wolf with its mate and cubs and we were tailing them in a helicopter. The male slowed down to encourage us to keep following him and let the she-wolf and the cubs get away. I said: “Let’s play the game and help him.” So we followed him and let the she-wolf and the cubs escape. It is typical of the wolf to sacrifice itself in order to save others. Wolves are timid and courageous animals. Then our wolf suddenly turned round. The helicopter turned to follow it and struck the mountainside. The engine misfired. For a few seconds, we were very frightened. Fear must release certain chemicals in the



The noted French film-maker Frédéric Rossif is best known for his films about animals such as *La fête sauvage* (1973), but he has also been attracted to historical themes (*To Die in Madrid*, 1962, and the recent *De Nuremberg à Nuremberg*) and to the arts (*Picasso*, 1982) and has directed a number of features including *Aussi loin que l'amour* (1971). Whether they are about people or the world of animals or plants, Rossif's films all celebrate the splendours of life and are notable for their striking imagery.



brain which, when they merge, have a strange effect.... During those few seconds I saw my whole life unfold before me with extraordinary slowness and precision. My perception of time was different.

*Death, not to mention multi-coloured butterflies, was the subject of one of your best-known films, To Die in Madrid.*

— *To Die in Madrid* was a long time ago. The film was strongly criticized when it came out. By the extreme right, of course, but also by the extreme left. By all those who see life in black and white terms and are blind to the fact that in the worst of scoundrels there may be a glimmer of poetry if only you know how to grasp it at the right moment. Fortunately, the truth of life is multi-coloured. The subtlety and contrasts of historical situations are such that history never resembles an ideology.

*Things aren't only black and white, it's true, but in some of your films there is certainly a great deal of black.*

— We must try to find an explanation for the blackest of situations. When depicting the rise of nazism, for example, you have to show the terrifying rate of inflation—a loaf of bread that cost thousands of millions of marks. The humiliation too. Dostoyevsky said, "Those who suffer terribly do terrible things." If you take no notice of accumulated humiliation, it is impossible to understand the emergence of nazism or, in our time, the problem of terrorism. Humiliation is one reason why people stop caring about their lives. Not only do they agree to risk their lives, they no longer care. Humiliation is the impalpable structure that for centuries has prevented the peoples of East and West from meeting. 5



This historic photo of Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill was used in Frédéric Rossif's documentary *Pourquoi l'Amérique?* (1970).

*A great film could be made about the history of that humiliation. But how would it be received, on either side of the impalpable frontier?*

— One never knows what time it is on the invisible clock of history, one never knows what time it is in the matter of public taste. On his deathbed at the age of a hundred, the French scientist and man of letters Bertrand le Bovier de Fontenelle put it differently. To someone who asked him if he felt any pain, he replied: "None, except the pain of being alive. I feel a great difficulty in existing." It was Fontenelle who observed that in a theatre 999 persons of average intelligence are cumulatively more intelligent than a single genius because they all "pull together" in order to understand. He had felt the vast increase in the capacity for feeling and understanding of a group of people assembled together. He had perceived the mystery of collective intelligence by virtue of which each individual has a better grasp of the nuances of a play because one person's love merges into that of another, because one person's emotion releases a tumult in another person's breast. This sense of a collective identity may find expression in more questionable gatherings. At the time of the Crusades in France, there was a great orator by the name of Bernard, Saint Bernard. He spoke in Latin; people didn't understand what he said. They set off all the same, for an empty tomb.

In the 1950s, when President Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt spoke for hours before a microphone, people didn't understand all he said. Yet his metallic voice gave out a strange vibration, a music which was wafted by the desert wind, contained all the sonorities of the Arabic language, and spurred the Arabs to go off and

liberate another empty tomb. This form of collective understanding may assume mythological and dramatic proportions.

*Coming back to your main field of interest, what developments are we likely to see in the audiovisual media in the next few years?*

— In the coming decade cinema and television will be concerned with feeling and memory, they will be looking at civilizations, at stories of people. They will present inspired actors who will speak of us simply, from the heart. They will draw on the sensibility of trees and animals, on a life-oriented culture which, for centuries, for millennia, has been all around us. Programmes centred on feeling and memory will increasingly get higher audience ratings than those based on an "American model" which is on its way out.

*What is this "American model"?*

— In television, the American model is the kind of programme that's a mixture of the variety show and the game show, where the crassest kind of mass appeal is linked with the prospect of winning prizes, the kind of show that tries to appeal to a public that is assumed to be greedy and mindless. Another example is *Dallas*. Needy people, in some cases dying of hunger, are shown the unimaginable adventures of unimaginable millionaires. But in my opinion this kind of stuff has no future, even in the United States. The depravities of the heroes of *Dallas* no longer interest anyone.

Underlying this model is the idea that "this is what the public wants, let's give it to them". Since people aren't interested in dreams, let's keep dreams

out of it, anything to keep them glued to their sets. But now people have learnt to dream again. And this famous American model is slowly collapsing. It was the Americans themselves who were the first to realize this, for the people who run the media in the United States are smart. They understood before anyone else that this model had had its day and that they would have to come up with something different from the standard cops and robbers story with a car chase, a naked woman and a few spectacular stunts. That's all over now. These images and situations are so familiar that they no longer hold people's attention.

*What are the Americans doing to sort out this problem?*

— They are going back to the intellect, to another kind of consensus. They want to go back to Alexandre Dumas, Walter Scott, Shakespeare. They are suddenly realizing that the world has grown older and is rediscovering its poetry. The heart of the world is beginning to age, it's like a ripe fruit, it's sweeter and more poetic...

*Did Spielberg and Lucas blaze the trail towards this new consensus?*

— Yes, they were the trailblazers. *Star Wars* is a film of great beauty containing images worthy of a surrealist painting. Spielberg and Lucas were the first film-makers to understand the power of legend and myth. There must once have been a time when human beings and animals knew how to communicate with each other. In all religions, pagan as well as monotheistic or Buddhist, the ultimate dream, the only myth they have in common, is that of the earthly paradise, a place where humans, animals and the elements speak to each other, the idea of a world of communication and peace.

*Is that what you were looking for in your films about animals?*

— In my films about animals I was looking for the meaning of something once said by the French

philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard which made a profound impression on me and which I have been repeating since I started making films: "Animals are our oldest dream companions." Before man stood upright, before he started thinking, he lived in the permanent and direct company of animals. Animals were the earliest models for his cave paintings, his earliest totemic emblems. They were the source of his fears, his joys, his dreams; for tens of thousands of years his only music was the singing of birds.

*For you communication seems to be synonymous with poetry...*

— It is becoming increasingly necessary to communicate dreams, to communicate a sense of immanence. But it must be said at once that this can only be achieved in a democracy. Democracy, as Winston Churchill said, is the worst system there is, with the exception of all the others. Communication in a democracy is the worst form of communication, but there is really no other way. Simply because of the necessary dialectic of yes and no, of provocation and response, which allows us to find the golden mean, the right proportion of light and shade.

*Democracy, fortunately, has recently been making great strides. At the expense of ideology. Communication, in the broad sense, will be strengthened. What about culture?*

— One might even say that the age of ideologies is drawing to a close and the age of cultures is beginning...in the sense that through freedom, which is emerging from its ideological shackles, the deeply rooted cultures of every country will at last be able to find expression. Look at what's happening with democratization in the Soviet Union, for instance. At last all the buried cultural energies of that huge country are being released: novels, poetry, music, religion too. Culture needs this concert of instruments to create the extraordinary sounds of human memory and human intelligence.





*Aren't you afraid of contradictions, tensions, even of outbursts of aggression?*

— Creative people always swim against the tide. They never knuckle under. Why not? Because they foresee what is going to happen and the people around them see nothing. A great creator is also a prophet. A prophet is someone who remembers, who has total recall of the future because he knows the past. But once again, for the renaissance of universal memory there is only one place, only one agora—democracy.

*You mean worldwide?*

— Of course. In the northern hemisphere it's already happening. In the South, it is bound to happen before too long. Everywhere democracy will put an end to fear, smash inhibitions, give free rein to all kinds of provocation, all kinds of poetry. It will at last allow people to dream, and to die, freely.

*How do you answer those who think that your head is in the clouds of poetry and dreams, and your feet are not on the ground, in a world of suffering, upheaval and drama?*

— No one is more realistic than the poet. In 1936 Paul Eluard wrote: "The Earth is blue like an orange." Everyone laughed. When the first American spaceship, *Pioneer*, photographed the Earth, people saw that it did indeed look like a blue orange. Eluard had anticipated *Pioneer*. Poets are the only realists. They go straight to the heart of the matter.

That reminds me of an interview I had with Mao Zedong. The last question I asked him was: "Mr. Chairman, do you think that communism has a future in China?" His reply was no. The scene was

the great hall in the Palace of the Emperors, in the Forbidden City, full of huge armchairs covered with white drapes. Behind Mao Zedong were Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai. When Mao gave his answer Lin Biao looked startled, but Zhou Enlai didn't turn a hair—a sign of the difference between the two men.

Then Mao went on: "What are 250 or 300 years to us here in China? Barely a third of the T'ang period.... The T'ang ruled China for a thousand years." Mao's reply was subtle and beautiful. I think that what he meant was this: for you, a Westerner, what is the political horizon? The next election? For us, the political horizon is three centuries...

And I said to myself, what an extraordinary contribution to world history and culture and to a real understanding of people and things liberated China will be able to offer us, finding inspiration simultaneously in the sayings of Confucius, the Tao, the ancient Chinese poets, Sun Yat Sen and Mao Zedong... This major branch of world history, largely isolated from the rest of humanity for 5,000 years, will extend its influence in our direction, offering us its memory like a priceless lost treasure, at last regained...

*Perhaps in conclusion you would like to say something about the cultural magazine that you are preparing for television with the Unesco Courier.*

— Yes. We've been thinking about doing this programme for years, but so far we haven't been able to do it, because life's like that—made up of successful partnerships, illusory loves and lost opportunities, or opportunities that we think are lost but which, in reality, were simply not there because the time was not ripe. Now the time is ripe.

The programme, whose French version we have decided to call *Le Divan de Schéhérazade*, after Shahrazad, the girl in *Thousand and One Nights* who miraculously holds the sultan spellbound by telling him stories, should meet an urgent need. With multicultural themes, reports from all over the world, interviews with creators and scientists, treasures from the world's libraries and museums all forming part of a single heritage, all the wonders of the world brought together and woven into a single tapestry, I hope our programme will respond to a desire for a combination of imagination and information, for an exciting voyage across the continents of culture and the oceans of knowledge. This is just the kind of television programme for tomorrow that should be available today.

Basically, we're producing this magazine programme because we feel the time is ripe for it, that public opinion—something that no one has ever been able to define and yet something that defines us all—

is ready. We don't know why, but we are convinced that there is a need for this kind of television. The signs are everywhere, primarily in the rise of democratic hopes which are increasingly calling for a creativity freed from contempt for others and based on respect for all.

*Today bridges are waiting to be built between East and West, but also between North and South, between societies of European culture and all other societies...*

— Those are the bridges for which there is the greatest need. Our programme must help to add to their number, providing a platform for poets everywhere, an amplifier for the drums that will beat out the rhythms of African and Asian music to which Westerners will respond.... The secret is not to present the creative act in isolation but to show it in a context, to link it to what sheds light on it. If for example we want to present Indonesian culture to a European audience, we'll start by showing the faces of Indonesians amidst colours they are particularly fond of; then an aerial view of the Indonesian countryside, divided into tiny plots—an abstract pattern. Next we'll go into the temple of Borobudur, an unprecedented example of a Buddhist sanctuary rescued and restored at great expense by a Muslim people. Finally, we'll play Indonesian gamelan music. By this time Europeans will have no difficulty in following the subtle rhythms of this music, which is among the most beautiful in

the world. If it is played to a European audience unprepared, they will be taken aback. Our aim is thus to restore to cultural phenomena their natural poetic aura and thereby make them immediately accessible to everyone.

To take another example: the whirling dervishes, who live in the mountains between Iran and Iraq. If you show the dervishes without any form of introduction, dancing until they reach a state of trance, the average viewer will be shocked. But if you start by showing them as they are, if you go into their tents, if you show slow motion shots of storks flying in the sky, if you then take to the mountains and follow a wolf which finds the path to the sanctuary where the dervishes have begun to sing, if you explain that the word dervish means poor, and if finally the viewer sees, in a succession of static shots, the dervishes reproduce the movement of the storks, then they'll be perceived and accepted in another way. We are presenters, go-betweeners. Each culture needs mediation vis-à-vis others. We must offer the cultures of the South this mediation vis-à-vis the cultures of the North. And vice versa.

The miracle of Shahrazad reminds us that language is made for communicating to the children of human beings the dreams of others. That's the important thing and that's what we shall be trying to do together—for viewers all over the world. For them we shall become the shapers of dreams that will usher in the third millennium. ■





**A**LL societies have a past, but not all of them have evaluated their past in the same way, nor used the same procedures to recall it. The kind of questions people ask about former times have been—and still are—stimulated by happenings in their own society. Attitudes towards memory itself have varied widely in different civilizations, depending on social structures and power systems, on whether or not writing was used, on the nature of the dominant religion, on relationships with time and death, and on many other factors.

The conventions of modern historiography are so widely accepted today that we take them for granted and find it hard to appreciate that there are many other possible approaches to the past. Not all societies have, for example, organized their recollections chronologically.

Modern historiography seems to be experiencing something of a boom. Not only are the stories of kings and princes, peoples and nations still being told and retold, but virtually every group and institution seems to want its history to be written. Another widespread modern trend is the fashion for “instant history”. Once upon a time the historian did not begin to piece together the historical record until events had fallen into some kind of perspective. Today however television and the other mass media present their audience with history as it is being made, lessening the distance between the headlines and the history books and blurring boundaries between the newsworthy and the historical.

At the same time there is a growing and sometimes obsessive concern with earlier modes of perceiving history, with reconstructing the past from memories that are fading or have been suppressed—memories preserved in speech or writing, memories of Auschwitz or the Gulag, above all memories of the victims of history. Memory itself is becoming a subject for historical investigation.

When they began to explore the ramifications of man’s relations with the past, the Editors of the *Unesco Courier* soon realized that it would be impossible to do justice to such a vast subject in a single issue. Here, then, is the first of two successive numbers on aspects of world historiography past and present. Its theme is “History and Memory”, the process whereby historians have tried to conquer time and save the past from oblivion.

“Allegory of History writing under the direction of Minerva”. Detail of a painting by Charles Joseph Natoire (1700-1777).

*Different conceptions of time have prevailed in different cultures, and although history and memory are indissociable their relations have not always been straightforward*

# Memory



# and time

BY FRANÇOIS HARTOG



*Construction of the Tower of Babel.* (16th-century Flemish painting).

ACCORDING to the French anthropologist Louis Dumont, “when we talk about history we do not think only of an absolute or relative chronology but also of a chain of causality, or rather a series of significant changes. We live in history in the sense that we perceive how people, societies and civilizations develop in time. We almost go so far as to believe, contrary to most societies, that only change has a meaning, and not permanence.”<sup>1</sup>

This conception of time as a vector and factor of progress dates back to the age of the European Enlightenment. It is a transposition into secular terms of a Christian concept in which the key events are the Creation, the Incarnation and the End of Time. Its fullest expression may be found in Hegel’s philosophy of history and in Marx’s historical materialism. It maintains that truth is not enshrined in a holy book but in history, the true story of what the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder called “the human soul through the ages and among the nations”. In history the (at least potential) immortality of humanity is revealed.

In the practice of history, time is an instrument and chronology is the supreme principle of classification. Anachronism is the worst of sins.

There are however other forms of relationship with time, other versions of time, governed not by the law of chronological succession but by principles of accumulation, superimposition, imitation, coexistence and reabsorption.

## Memorizing the Vedas

In Brahmanic India, for example, memory is not concerned with a chain of recollections organized chronologically, and, as the French Sanskrit scholar Charles Malamoud has pointed out, the idea of a “world of memory” does not exist. “Far from giving shape to a biography,” Malamoud has written, “memories cause the outline of a person to become blurred and open-ended,” to the point that he or she may say, “if I master the right techniques, and especially if I gain the necessary merits, I shall be able to recall my former lives”.

Alongside this “ordinary” memory, given over to recollection, there is another kind of memory, consciously trained, tightly controlled and wholly dedicated to memorization. This kind of memory is used to learn by heart the sacred text of the Vedas, which, even though they were committed to writing by the third century BC at the latest, are primarily transmitted orally. Employing a series of sophisticated techniques which result in the “disarticulation” of the text, the Brahmans gradually “incorporate” it into the person of the pupil. The text must be recited faultlessly. It is both sinful and ritually disastrous to make a mistake. By the end of this rigorous preparation, the text has become separated from its context and has acquired a timeless quality.

This way of cultivating memory is poles apart from the Western approach to history; it reflects a different conception of time, memory and historicity.

### The keys to immortality

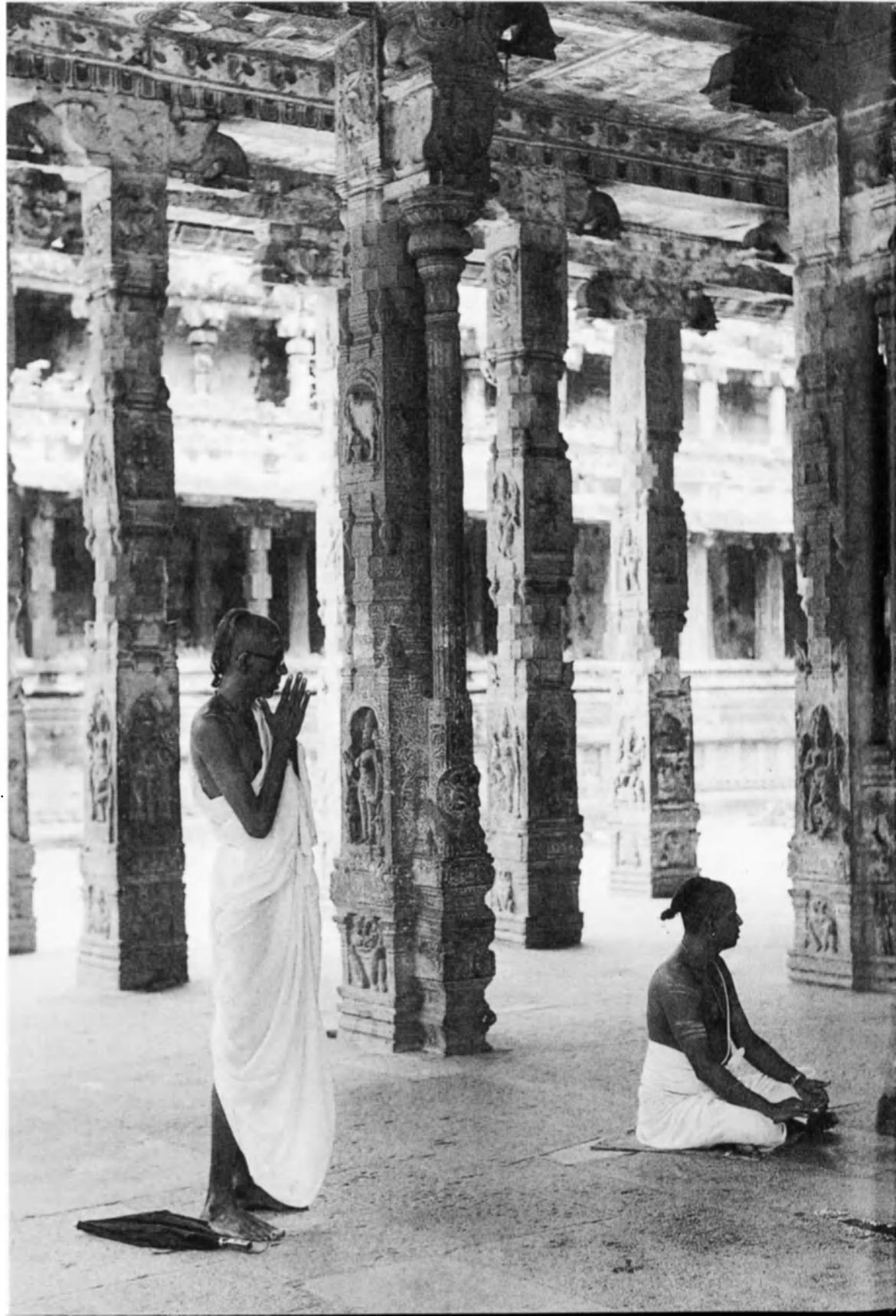
Herodotus, the father of Western history, opens his *Histories* with an assertion of his desire to preserve the traces of human activity from oblivion. Faced with the immutability of nature and the immortality of the gods, the historian describes these highly ephemeral traces orally

and preserves them in writing. The successor of the epic poet, he claims to hold the keys to immortality.

Although history and memory are indissociable, the relations between them have been complex, changing and marked by conflict. Thucydides was convinced that only the history of the present can be "scientific" and believed that the historical record is established largely in spite of memory, which is always unreliable. His nineteenth-century counterparts were also anxious to separate history and memory, but on the grounds that ideally history is the past and only the past: history ends where memory begins.



A Vishnuite Brahman, his forehead adorned with sacred texts. Right, Brahmans at prayer in the Siva temple at Chidambaram, southern India.



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Recently, however, memory has invaded the realm of history, and both concepts must now be reconsidered. How, in the case of the extermination of the Jews by the nazis—the Shoah—can the imperatives of memory be reconciled with the demands of historiography? Formerly considered to be impure, memory is becoming part of the stuff of history: there is now a history of memory.

## The memory of a people

The injunction to “remember”—in Hebrew *Zakhor*—often occurs in the Bible and in Judaism. Israel is continually ordered not to forget, not to submit to oblivion. *Zakhor* is also the title of a book by Yosef Yerushalmi, which takes this imperative of remembrance as the starting-point of a study of the Jews’ relationship with their past. It is true that the Bible is a sacred, written text, but it is first and foremost a revealed text, like the Vedas. And like the Vedas, the Torah<sup>2</sup> must be studied, learnt, memorized.

But the relationship of the Jews to their holy Book is quite different from that of the Brahmans to the Vedas. There is no attempt to disarticulate the written text and remove it from its context. For the Jews the important thing is what happened and how it happened, starting with divine revelation. Revelation is history and, since the banishment from Paradise, primeval time has become transformed into historical time. The Bible story, which is historical in its basic structure, is bound to be the record of the march of time and of humanity: the memory of history and the memory of human beings.

But in this case the obligation to remember does not give rise to any curiosity about the past as such, nor to the idea expressed by Herodotus that it is important to save from oblivion the *erga*, the noteworthy traces of human activity. The only past that matters consists of God’s interventions in history and the human reactions they provoked.

Although the Jews never ceased to heed the injunction to remember, there came a time when they stopped writing history. Perhaps it was then that the need to remember became even more important than before. Memory and history, which until then had been joined together, seemed to part company. Rabbinic literature, after the Bible, has no historiographic dimension.

It has been said that the watershed was the synod at Jamnia (c. 100 AD), which fixed the Jewish canon of the Bible. The figure of the contemporary Jewish priest and historian Flavius Josephus may appear as the exception that proves the rule for it was not until centuries later that another Jew declared himself to be a historian. And yet, Yerushalmi believes, it would be wrong to think that the rabbis were uninterested in history. On the contrary, he believes that it is easier to understand their attitude if we accept that they

were totally immersed in history. Besides relating history as it had come to pass, the Bible also presents the fabric of all present and future history. Its meaning is clear; everything else is of no more than incidental interest, not really worth bothering about.

Only this purpose of history, or at least of the writing of history, is important here. It raises a number of difficult questions, including the following. What is the link between history and place, in this case the Temple in Jerusalem? Once the Second Temple had been destroyed, was it (still) possible for the Jews to write history? Flavius Josephus, for example, stressed the link



A copy of the Torah preserved in the synagogue of old Cairo.

between the writing of history and the Temple, which alone gave countenance and authority to the historian.

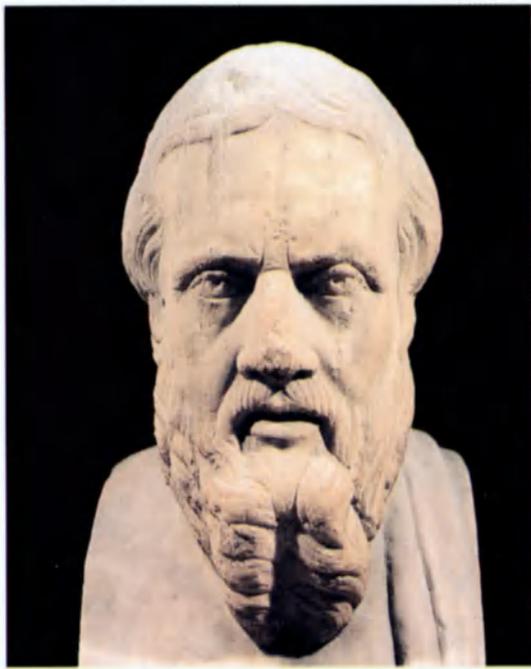
The rabbinic academy founded by Yochanan ben Zakkai at Jamnia after the destruction of the Temple was “a place of memory” but not a workshop for historians. The point was admirably made by Freud in 1938 when he wrote, “The political woes of the Jewish people taught them to appreciate the value of the only property left to them, their Scriptures. Immediately after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Titus, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai sought permission to open the first school for the teaching of the Torah, at Jamnia. From that time onwards, Holy Scripture and spiritual interest kept the Diaspora together.” ■

1. *La civilisation indienne et nous*, Armand Colin publishers, Paris, 1964.

2. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible. *Editor*

# Herodotus

## Roving reporter of the Ancient World



BY CARMINE  
AMPOLO

**H**ERODOTUS of Halicarnassus, his *Researches* are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples... that the great deeds of men may not be forgotten... whether Greeks or foreigners: and especially, the causes of the war between them.”\*

In this introduction to his *Histories*, Herodotus (c. 490-425 BC) provides us with perhaps the earliest definition of the historian’s aims and concerns. Some sixty years earlier, his precursor Hecataeus of Miletus, who had sought to inquire rationally into the mythical legends of the Greeks, explained his intentions in the following terms: “Thus speaks Hecataeus of Miletus: I write these things inasmuch as I consider them to be truthful; in fact, the legends of the Greeks are numerous and, to my mind, ridiculous.” In this tetchy assertion of the author’s role we can already see the two requirements of historiography in the Hellenic world: it must be written and it must be truthful.

With Herodotus the tone changes. He does not seek to give his own personal interpretation of what he relates, and usually he compares the different versions of stories he has collected. He

\* Quotations from *Herodotus: The Histories*, translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin Classics, 1954.

wants to talk about his researches, tell of his inquiries. History as he understands it is at once the gathering of information and the recounting of a story. He thus inaugurated the two main trends in Greek historiography for centuries to come. Sometimes one would be given prominence, sometimes the other, but the prime imperative was always truthfulness, even in the case of historians who attached very great importance to narrative.

### The art of storytelling

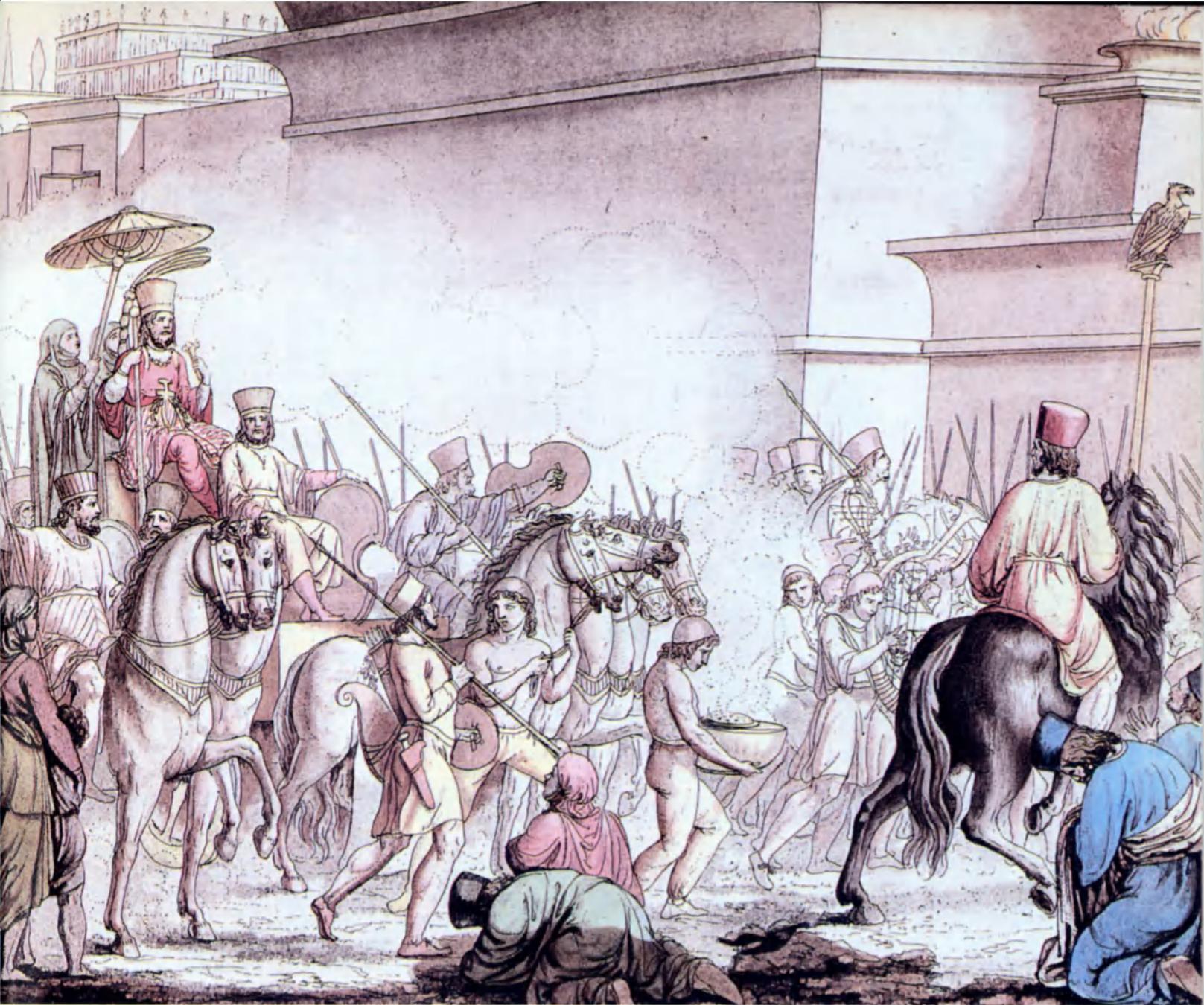
When Herodotus describes his work as an “exposition of his researches, the narration of an inquiry”, these ambivalent terms must be taken to mean both the oral transmission of a story and its written formulation. The blending of oral and written styles in the *Histories* can be explained by the fact that Herodotus would give public readings of the various stories (*logoi*) making up his work. This is confirmed by the allusions in the text to audience reaction, and by the circular structure of the writing.



Above left, bust of Herodotus.

Above, “The pomp and ceremony of King Cyrus in Babylon” (Anonymous engraving, 1820).

CARMINE AMPOLO, of Italy, teaches Greek history at the University of Pisa. He has carried out research on the origins of ancient Rome, on Greek politics and society, and on the relationship between myth and history. Among his published works are *La città antica* (1980; “The Ancient City”) and, with M. Manfredini, *Le vite di Teseo et di Romolo* (1988; “The Lives of Theseus and Romulus”).



This practice had a marked effect on the composition of the work, which may seem to be something of a patchwork, with its countless digressions that sometimes fit into one another like Chinese boxes or Russian dolls. More a painter than a sculptor, Herodotus excels in the art of storytelling and possesses the gift of entralling his audience, whether listener or reader, by his descriptions of a detail, an episode or an individual.

He often tells a story which he has heard at second or third hand. For example, after describing the victory of the Athenians over the Persians at Marathon, he tells what happened to the Athenian soldier Epizelos, who lost his sight while fighting in the battle, though nothing had hit him: "I am told that in speaking about what happened to him he used to say that he fancied he was opposed by a man of great stature in heavy armour, whose beard overshadowed his shield; but the phantom passed him by, and killed the man at his side." It would be a mistake to see this as Herodotus directly reporting what he has heard, but rather as an example of the mirror play

that is a common feature of the *Histories*: Epizelos tells his story, others repeat it, Herodotus hears it and tells it in his turn.

This is not simply a taste for the fantastic or the marvellous, for which Herodotus is so often criticized, but a delight in intriguing and surprising his audience. He is able to arouse people's curiosity because his own is so great. He is interested in all kinds of out-of-the-way details, the customs of each people and all the wonders of the world, whether events, inventions or monuments like the pyramids of Egypt, the labyrinth above Lake Moeris and the walls of Babylon. In his quest for knowledge, Herodotus would travel and make inquiries of those who might have information about the countries visited—scholars, priests or people whose names are not recorded: "I learn by inquiry."

The reason for this passion for research emerges clearly in the introduction to the *Histories*: it is the historian's task to combat time, to preserve what he considers to be memorable. In the Greek cities and sanctuaries there were already "memorizers" (*mnemones*) responsible for



Above, combat between Greeks and Barbarians. Detail of a marble frieze from the Nereid monument (c. 400 BC) of Xanthus, Asia Minor, now in the British Museum, London.

recollecting and recording divine and human occurrences. But the historian's concerns are much loftier than the purely administrative, legal and religious functions of the *mnemones*. All the illustrious deeds and labours (*erga*) that he relates must retain their *kleos*, their aura of glory, their renown. In some ways Herodotus seems to carry on where the epic poets left off. They recounted the deeds of heroes, the historian recounts the deeds of men.

The insatiable curiosity shown by Herodotus in his investigations and travels considerably broadened the scope of written history, which ceased to consist solely of myths, genealogical lists and ethno-historical material relating to particular peoples or communities. Although he wanted to preserve as much as possible, he had to select which of the facts to save. For the historian who takes as his subject "great and marvellous actions", not everything is memorable.

Herodotus was aware of the amount of space given in his *Histories* to the long parentheses of the storyteller. On one occasion he even confesses: "I need not apologize for the digression—it has been my plan throughout this work." To understand this attitude, we should not use modern criteria nor even refer to later Greek authors whose works, which were designed exclusively to be read, seem to be better constructed. In a work addressed primarily to listeners and only subsequently to readers, not only the form but the choice of material were determined by the

exigencies of spoken communication. It is not enough for details to be historically revealing or admirable; they must also be entertaining and, whether glorious or despicable, arouse the curiosity of the narrator and strike a chord in the minds of his audience.

### An investigator at work

What was Herodotus' raw material? Much of the *Histories* records the history and customs of peoples incorporated in the Persian empire (or those of peoples like the Scythians which were unsuccessfully fought by the empire) as well as facts about the Greek cities in the sixth and fifth centuries BC. The culmination is confrontation between the Greeks and the Persians, which accounts for less than half the work.

Herodotus does not speak of a single people, nor even of a single Greek city, nor of Greece in its entirety. He erects no barriers, shows no scorn. He does not really differentiate between the Greeks and other peoples, the "Barbarians". Born at a time which, under the influence of the Sophists, saw the development of cultural relativism, and originating from a region at the meeting-point of East and West, he showed curiosity, consideration and even respect for other cultures.

He nevertheless viewed them through Greek eyes. In keeping with a typically Hellenic way of seeing the foreigner as a reversed image of



oneself, he depicted the behaviour of other peoples as the antithesis of that of the Greeks. Among the “strange practices” of the Egyptians, for example, he mentions that “women attend market and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving.... Men in Egypt carry loads on their heads, women on their shoulders....” His enumeration of their differences ends as follows: “In writing or calculating, instead of going, like the Greeks, from left to right, the Egyptians go from right to left—and obstinately maintain that theirs is the dexterous method, ours being left-handed and awkward.”

This comparative method can be seen as a way of classifying and hence of understanding. But Herodotus also observes similarities, which he scrupulously notes, as in the case of the Spartans. Customs on the death of a king, he reports, “are the same in Sparta as in Asia”, and “the Spartans resemble the Egyptians in that they make certain callings hereditary: town-criers (heralds), flute-players and cooks are all, respectively, sons of fathers who followed the same profession.”

Although he does not go as far as Thucydides in saying that the Greeks lived formerly in the same way as the Barbarians today, and although he maintains a distance between the two worlds, he does not regard them as two monolithic blocks, one of which is in certain respects inferior to the other or culturally backward. Different though they may be, he acknowledges the many qualities of the Barbarians, considering, for example, that the Greek gods have Egyptian origins, that Egyptian civilization is older than that of the Greeks, and that the Persians have numerous virtues.

The *Histories* end with a revealing anecdote.

To convince his people not to attempt to settle in more fertile lands, the Persian King Cyrus the Great declares to his troops that “soft countries breed soft men”, pointing out that the Greeks have preferred to keep their freedom on a harsh land rather than to be slaves cultivating fertile plains for others. It is thus a Persian sovereign who enunciates a truth applying chiefly to the Greeks. Herodotus also sets among the Persians a discussion on the best form of government—democracy, oligarchy or monarchy. They are foreigners, enemies, but not completely different. They could even, in theory at least, be like the Greeks, in the same way that the Greeks in some respects resemble them.

Herodotus does not try to describe a series of mythical or historical events since their origins or even from one of the traditional milestones in Greek history, as other historians were to do after him. His field of study—the Median wars and the events that led up to them—covers a fairly recent period. That which is remote in time is left to poets and genealogists. He displays the same attitude towards Egypt, distinguishing what he has witnessed personally from the information he has collected from the Egyptians. If he consults Persian, Phoenician or Egyptian scholars about mythical episodes, such as the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War, it is mainly in order to retrace and understand the causes of the Median wars.

In choosing as his area of investigation recent history of which he could have direct knowledge, Herodotus had a decisive influence on the development of historiography. Thucydides, half a generation younger, would go even further than his great predecessor, directing his gaze to current events. ■

Scenes from the siege of Troy are shown below on two parts of a white limestone bas-relief from the ancient site of Trysa in Turkey. (4th century BC. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.)



# Thucydides

## A dramatic vision of stirring events

WE know next to nothing about Thucydides apart from the little he chose to say about himself in the one work he wrote but did not complete, the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He was born around 455 BC into a rich, aristocratic Athenian family with valuable foreign connections. The anti-Persian Aegean empire of Athens was at the height of its power, based on a warfleet of 170-oared triremes, and its democratic system of government was newly radicalized by the reforms associated with Pericles. Empire, democracy, Pericles: these were the three axes around which Thucydides rotated his charged account of the war between Athens and Sparta (431-404 BC, although his narrative breaks off in mid-sentence in the summer of 411).

He was himself a participant in this conflict of ideologies and military armaments, but no ordinary one. In 424 BC he was elected general (*strategos*) by the democratic assembly of Athenian citizens, only to be forced into exile that same year for a failure that was not his sole responsibility. He remained in exile for the remainder of the war, profiting, he claimed, from his ability to see things more from the other, Spartan side. But for all his vaunted objectivity, it is difficult not to read his exalted praise of the statesmanlike Pericles and his correspondingly bitter condemnation of the folly of the Athenian masses and their “demagogue” leaders as a commentary on his own political fate as well as that of Athens.

Thucydides wanted his *History* to be and to be seen as “a possession for all time”. There are two reasons why that wish has so far been granted. First, as the title of his work subtly implies, Thucydides’ vision of the conflict has achieved a unique authority. For from the Spartan point of view it was of course the “Athenian” war, the war against Athens and her imperial allies and subjects. By no means everyone shared Thucydides’ emphatic opinions that it was the Spartans who started it and that there was a single, twenty-seven-

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BY PAUL  
CARTLEDGE

year war as opposed to two ten-year bouts of fighting interrupted by seven years of admittedly troubled peace. Yet such is the power of his rhetoric that it is difficult now to see not only the Spartan-Athenian military conflict but the entire second half of the fifth century BC, the so-called golden age of Periclean Athens, in any but Thucydidean terms.

Secondly, there are the speeches and debates in the *History*, based no doubt in most cases on reliable information as to what was actually said or at least what were the main lines of argument, but invariably written up by Thucydides with all the force of his remarkable intellect and inimitable style. Massive controversy still prevails over the precise relationship between these Thucydidean creations and their supposed originals, and over their intended functions within the structure of the work. None has generated more heat than the “Melian Dialogue”, Thucydides’ version of the negotiations conducted *in camera* between the Athenian high command and the oligarchic government of the Aegean island-state of Melos in 416-415 BC. Since he could not possibly have known exactly how the negotiations went, and since the issue was not in itself of the greatest historical significance, I suggest that it is here that the “scientific historian” in Thucydides most clearly gives way to the moralist, political theorist and tragic prose-poet.

What was the lesson of permanent utility that Thucydides hoped to teach by this (to us) utterly alien dramatic expository device? In my judgement it is that human beings, when organized within states, do not act towards other states in accordance with the moral standards they normally recognize within their own communities, but in accordance with their collective self-interest as perceived chiefly in terms of security, prestige and economic advantage. In which of the world’s potential flashpoints today does that iron law not hold good? Thucydides will be with us for some time yet. ■

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History c. 1300-362 B.C.*  
(Routledge & Kegan Paul,  
London, 1979) and *Agésilao*  
(Duckworth, London, 1987).

Detail of an Attic terracotta  
bowl in the black-figure  
style, signed by  
the potter  
Nikosthenes,  
c. 520-510 BC.





# China: the emperor's all-seeing eye

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BY HUO DATONG

Above, Cang Jie, legendary inventor of Chinese characters, as depicted in a 17th-century painting. Right, the emperor Xuan Di. Detail from a scroll of portraits, *The Thirteen Emperors*, attributed to Yan Liben (7th century AD).

TRADITION has it that the first Chinese historian was a man called Cang Jie. An official in the service of the legendary founder of the Chinese Empire, the “Yellow Emperor” Huang Di (third millennium BC), he is said to have invented the *shu*, or ideogram, and thus made possible the writing of history. The ideogram for the word *shu* is, in fact, a representation of a hand and a bamboo writing tablet.

From the beginning, historians were all-powerful, mysterious figures. Astrologers and geomancers, they ensured the proper application of the pronouncements of the oracles, kept an eye on



## Sima Qian father of Chinese history

**S**IMA QIAN (145-86 BC), the founder of Chinese historiography, succeeded his father in the post of Grand Historian at the court of the emperor Wudi of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC-9 AD). His masterwork, the *Shiji* ("Historical Records"), was written over a period of some twenty years. Its 130 chapters, comprising almost 528,000 Chinese characters, cover 24 centuries of history from the reign of the first emperor to the beginning of the first century BC.

It is organized according to a five-part plan, with separate sections for dynastic annals (*Benji*); annals of noble families (*Shijia*); genealogical tables (*Biao*); monographs (*Shu*) on various aspects of government such as ritual, astronomy, the calendar, the economy, geography, or hydraulic projects; and biographies (*Liezhuan*) of a variety of famous individuals including politicians, scholars, strategists, writers, officials, knights, doctors, astrologers and merchants.

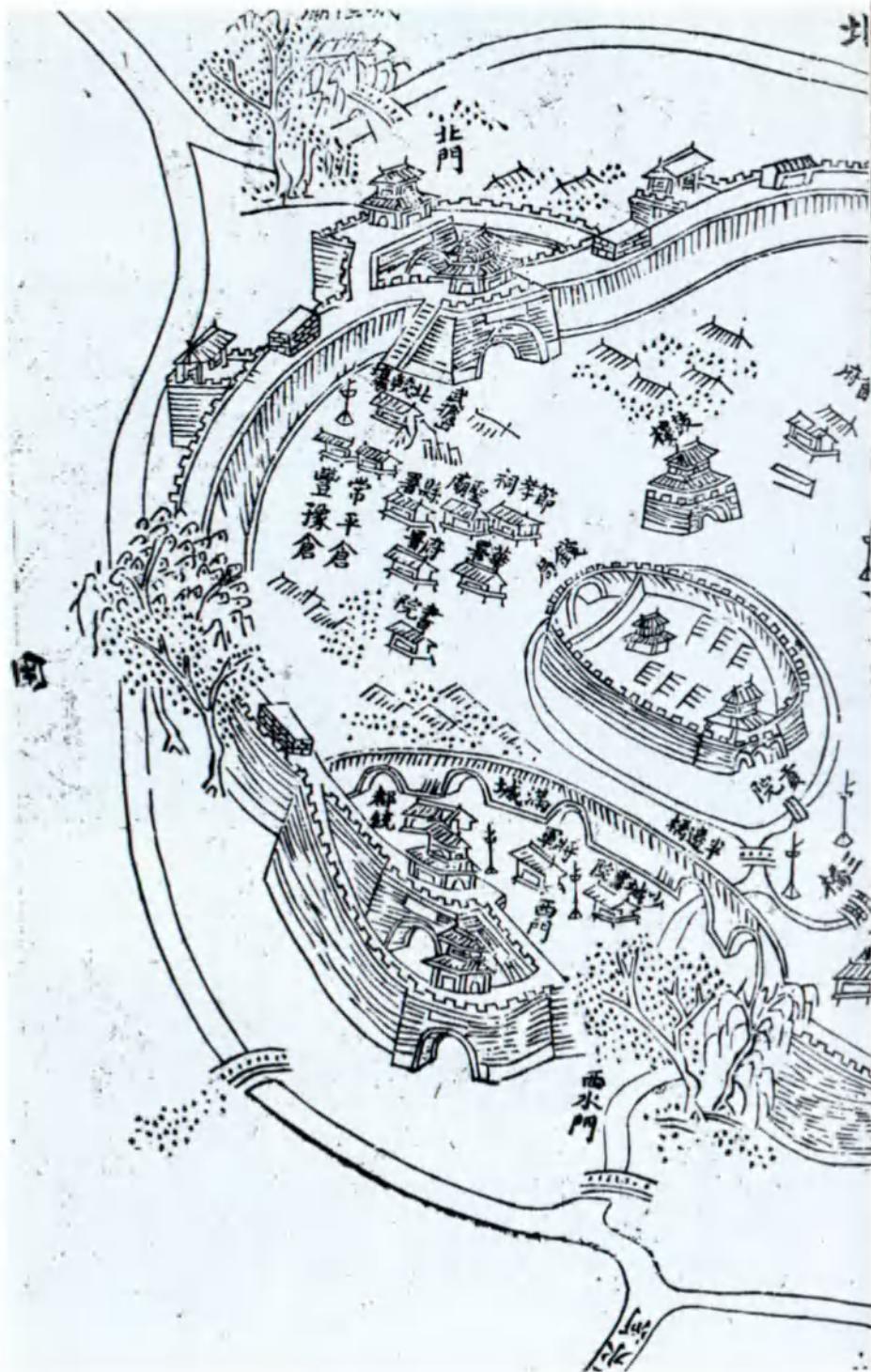
Sima Qian's biographies, which take up 70 chapters, marked a new departure in historiography. To a general history of the reigns of successive Sons of Heaven (dynastic emperors) and an account of actual events, he added the histories of individuals as representatives of different social and professional groups.

In an age when the Grand Historian of the court was still an astrologer responsible for the calendar, Sima Qian's approach was that of a modern historian. Following in the footsteps of Confucius, the compiler of "Spring and Autumn Annals", he built his work on painstaking research and the selection and criticism of documents.

In order to be worthy of the task ahead, he began to study classical texts from the age of ten. When he was twenty he left his study and set out on a long journey through the provinces where he struck up friendships with notable personalities, investigated famous sites and made contact with great scholars.

In this way he prepared the ground for the writing of his monumental work. The remarkable style and acute perception of the *Shiji* soon made it the model against which all subsequent dynastic histories would be judged. Later historians would adopt the ideal method as defined by Sima Qian: "to analyse in depth the relationship between the universe and the human, and to grasp the meaning of historical change in order to form one's own doctrine."

HUO DATONG ■



everything that the sovereign and his ministers did, and presided over investiture ceremonies and the worship of the ancestral heaven and earth spirits.

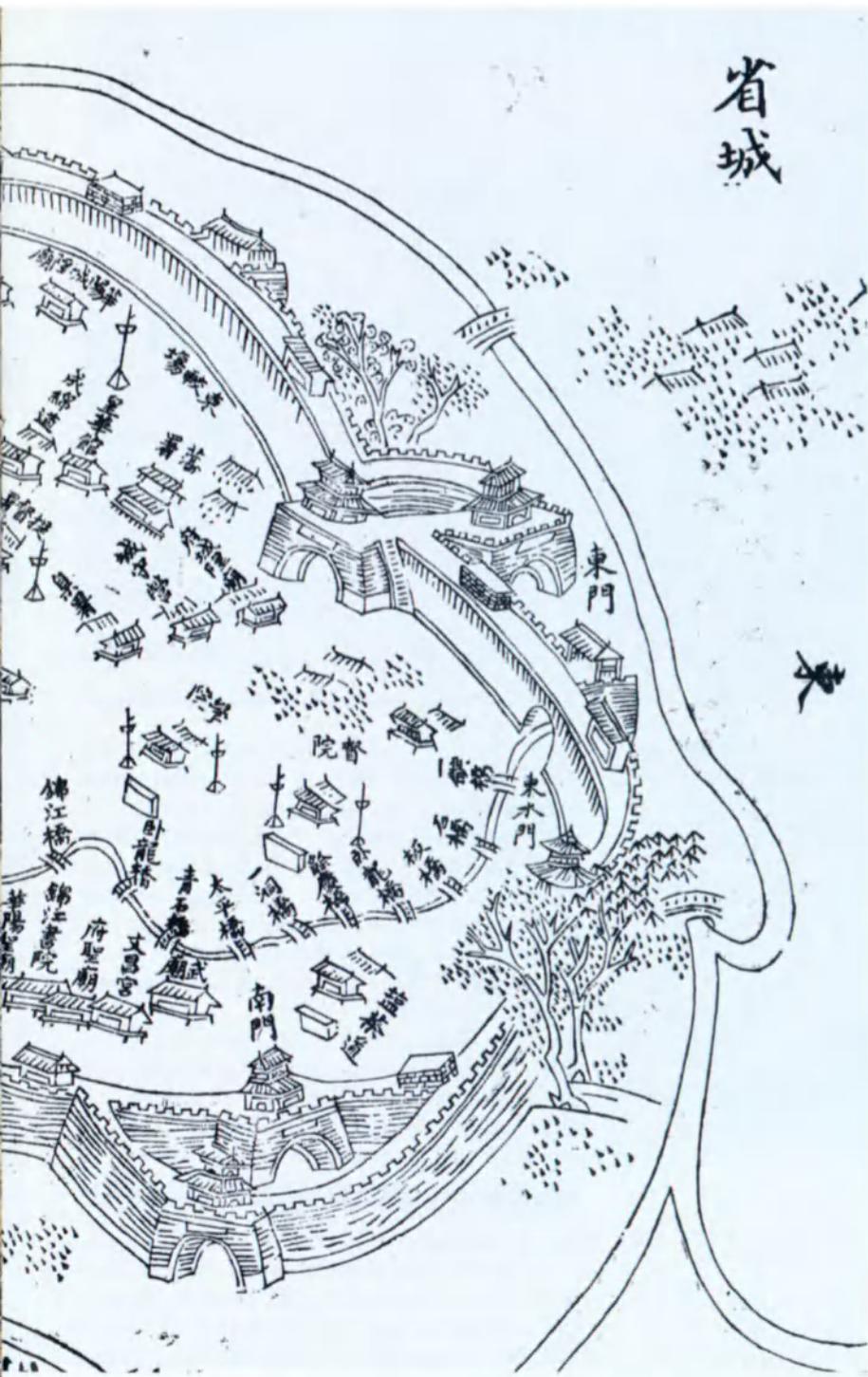
Every time an audience was given at the palace, two historians, one on each side of the sovereign, noted down his words and deeds. From these daily records emerged two great historical works: a treatise, the *Shangsu*, or "Speeches of the Preceding Monarchs", and a chronicle, the *Chunqiu*, or "Spring and Autumn Annals".

History was also closely linked with philosophy. As a historian, Laozi (sixth-fifth century BC), the father of Taoism, was responsible for maintaining the archives of the Chou dynasty. The philosopher and thinker Confucius (551-479 BC) is traditionally believed to have compiled the annals of the kingdom of Lu. The commentary on this work, the *Zuozhuan*,

or "Tradition of Zuo" by the blind historian Zuo Qiuming, has become a classic of Chinese literature.

The man generally considered to be the father of Chinese history, however, was Sima Qian (145-86 BC), Grand Historian at the court of the famous Han emperor Wudi (141-87 BC). His *Shiji*, or "Historical Records", about half of which consists of biographies, brought a new look to the traditional vision of history by giving pride of place to individual, human activity (see box this page). This model was followed by all subsequent dynastic histories, including the renowned *Hanshu*, or "History of the Han", written by Ban Gu (32-92 AD) and members of his family.

The *Shitong*, or "Treatise on History", written by Liu Zhiji (661-721 AD), historian to the Wu empress Zetian, was the first treatise on historical



method. The author demanded three qualities of the budding historian—literary talent, knowledge and a critical mind. He identified six schools of historical thought and classified all historical works under two main headings—chronicles and biographies.

Another work of synthesis was the *Zizhe tongjian*, or “Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government”, by Sima Guang (1019-1086). This vast selection from source chronicles consists of 295 chapters and spans over 1,300 years of history, going up to the middle of the tenth century AD. It is actually a collective work. Sima Guang’s three main collaborators, themselves celebrated historians, gathered the greatest number of documents possible from official and private libraries and then classified them under theme headings and in chronological order. Sima Guang made the final selection,

taking as his criterion of choice from the enormous range of material available those items that he considered would provide the information most useful to a sovereign.

During the troubled political times of the Northern and Southern dynasties (222-598 AD), the function of the Grand Historian of the court was limited to astrology and the calendar. These were secretary/historians who simply recorded the deeds of the emperors.

### The Historiography Office

In the seventh century, the early T’ang emperors were keenly interested in the idea that history could be an “instructive mirror”, and the reign of emperor Tai Zong (626-649) saw the establishment of the

Above, Tai Zong, second emperor of the T’ang dynasty (7th century AD). Stylized portrait on silk by an anonymous artist of the Qing period (17th-20th century).

Above left, plan of the town of Chengdu, capital of the Shu dynasty at the time of the Three Kingdoms (3rd century) and today the capital of Sichuan Province in central China.



The legendary meeting of Confucius and Lao-Tzu (Laozi) is shown in this 19th-century Chinese drawing.

*Shiguan*, or Historiography Office, whose prime task was the compilation of dynastic histories. This task was entrusted to specially appointed civil servants and no longer to hereditary historians. The emperor almost always maintained firm control over the Office, for which the heads of the great ministries acted as principal editors.

This process of bureaucratization was to have decisive consequences. The historians became less independent with regard to anything concerning politics and public opinion. The director of this vast collective enterprise, in addition to being a good historian, had also to be a first class administrator, qualities rarely to be found in combination in a single individual. The work was divided up in such a way that the historians tended to get lost in a sea of documents. Finally, they were recruited from the ranks of the literati regardless of whether or not they had any aptitude as historians and this tended to put the stamp of official approval on the traditional blurring of the boundaries between literature and history.

In view of the mediocrity of the output from the imperial Historiography Office, parallel dynastic histories began to appear. From the time of the T'ang to that of the Yuan dynasty (1277-1367), the centre of historiographical interest shifted. Works of a new kind appeared, such as the *Tongdian*, the first general history of institutions, by Du You, the *Tongzhi*, or "General Monographs", by Zheng Qiao (1104-1162), and the *Wenxian tongkao*, or "General Critique of Documents", by Ma Duanlin (1254?-?). These were veritable "encyclopaedias" containing sections on a variety of subjects such as economics, politics, teaching, religions, customs and even language.

During the transition between the Ming and the Qing dynasties (1644-1911), Huang Zongxi (1609-1695) published his *Mingru Xue'an*, or "Treatise on the Doctrines of the Ming Confucian Schools", the first in-depth study of the history of doctrines and

of the great thinkers. The *Dushi fangyu jiyao*, by Gu Zuyu (1624-1680), analysed the interconnection between history and its geographical setting.

Under the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the *Wenshi tongyi*, or "General Significance of History and Literature", by Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801), extended the concept of history to every field and drew a distinction between works that were doctrinally inspired and those that were purely informative.

The Manchu emperors, especially Kangxi (1662-1722) and Qianlong (1736-1795), attached great importance to the compilation of histories. A historiographic bureau traced the history of the recently overthrown Ming dynasty, producing 336 volumes over a period of 81 years. Other bureaux drafted the history of the reigning dynasty, the history of the nation or that of the emperor's daily life.

The latter type of document is a mine of information for the modern historian. From the moment the emperor leaves his apartment to hold his first audience, a complete record is made of everything he does, what clothes he is wearing and even what food he eats. The observations noted down would have been condensed and completed by the staff of the administrative archives and published under the following emperor under the title *Shilu*, or "Authentic Documents".

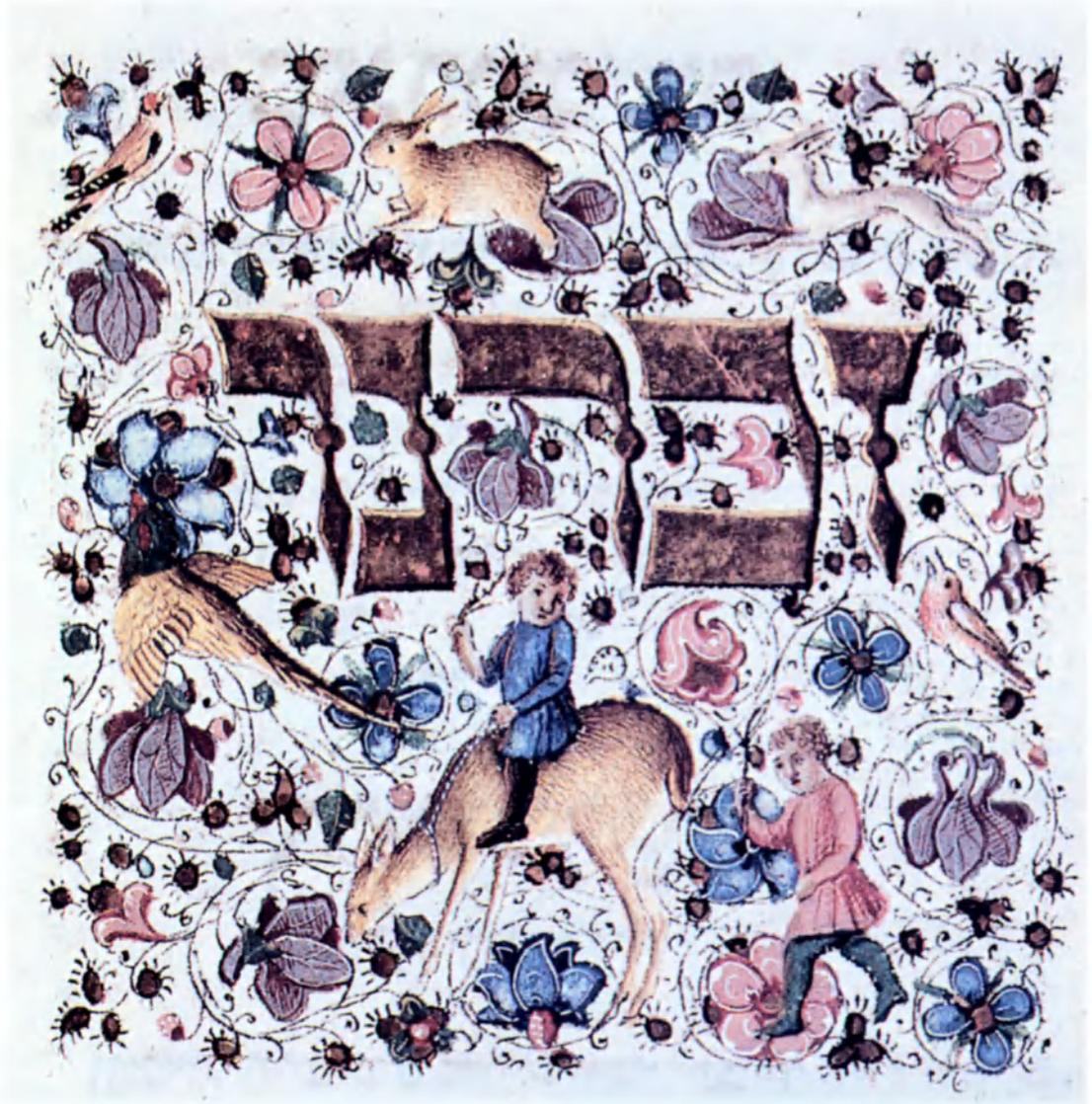
Large compilations were also made of both ancient and modern texts, such as the *Gujin tushu jicheng* and the *Siku quanshu*, in which over 3,000 works were reproduced. Another vast labour initiated by the emperors was the compilation throughout all China of monographs on local geography, ethnography and archaeology.

The role of the official historian reached its pinnacle during the reign of Qianlong. With the decline of the Manchu dynasty, most Chinese historiographical traditions disappeared. The *Qingshigao*, "Draft Official History of the Qing Dynasty", is their swan song. ■

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# 'Remember..'

*The Jews  
and their past*



BY LIONEL KOCHAN

The first word of the prayer beginning "Remember us unto Life..." is depicted in this detail of a Hebrew illuminated manuscript from northern Italy (c. 1450-1470).

**S**HORTLY before his death Moses besought his people not to neglect their past: "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask thy father, and he will show thee, thy elders, and they will tell thee" (*Deuteronomy*, 32:7).

Despite this exhortation, the study of the past and the practice of historiography did not flourish among the Jews. In the late 70s of the Common Era (AD), the Jewish priest and historian Flavius Josephus published his narrative of the Jewish war against Rome and, twenty years later, his general history *The Antiquities of the Jews*. But it was not until a millennium and a half later, towards the end of the sixteenth century, that genuine historiography emerged among the Jews with the "History of the Kings of France and the Kings of the Ottoman Empire" by Rabbi Joseph Ha-Cohen (1496-1578), who hailed his new departure in these terms: "Within the whole gate of my people there has not yet arisen an historian in Israel like Josephus...they ceased, the

writers of memorials, they ceased, until I arose, even I, Joseph."

How can the fifteen-century interval between the time of Josephus and Joseph Ha-Cohen be explained? The question is all the more pertinent because the Jews, after all, are popularly regarded as the people of history par excellence. Their foundation document, the Hebrew Bible, takes the form of a national history; and their conception of God is that of a being whose prime concern is on two levels, the personal and the historical.

## The presence of the past

But this is precisely where the difficulty lies. We are dealing here with a conception of the past not as a movement away from a fixed point but as something enduring, an ever-present reality which is nourished by the rhythmic lunar calendar of the Jews and the regular cycle of their festivals, most

of which commemorate the events of the past and maintain them in the present. The Haggadah text, for example, read each year at the Passover festival to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, contains the injunction “in each and every generation let each person regard himself as though he had come forth out of Egypt”.

The importance attached to the past and the continued presence of that past explain Jews’ relative lack of interest in their post-biblical history. All possible historical interest is already exhausted by the Scriptures, which explain where the Jews originated, where they stand in the present and where they are going. The historical framework of the Jews is predetermined by the fact that, in a certain sense, their history is already written—the divine revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai has promised them a part of central importance in the future of the world in that, through Israel, “shall all families of the earth be blessed” (*Genesis*, 12:3). Israel already knows its end. No matter what suffering and trials may be experienced, it is part of the very order of the world that Israel will enjoy its messianic reward. Furthermore, if these historical models are as dominant as Scripture and the Talmud (the Jewish compendium of law, lore and commentary) sought to make them, then it is difficult to see how subsequent history could seem meaningful and worthy of record. It could add nothing of substance to what has already been made manifest. Origins, future and finality have already been disposed of.

Broadly speaking, except for chronicles and martyrologies, this outlook was dominant until the

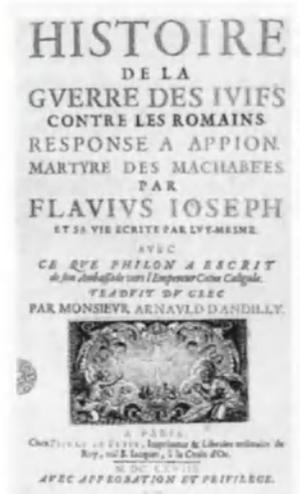


Above, illustration from a 10th-century Mozarabic Bible depicting one of the 10 plagues of Egypt. The waters of the Nile are shown transformed into blood.

Left, carved ivory head of a Jewish woman, (9th-8th century BC).



late sixteenth century. Examples of Jewish historical writing roughly contemporary with the pioneering work of Joseph Ha-Cohen include Rabbi Solomon ibn Verga’s *Shevet Yehuda* (“Sceptre of Judah”), first published in Turkey around 1554; Abraham Zacuto’s *Sefer Yubasin* (“Book of Genealogies”, 1504); Gedaliah ibn Yahya’s *Shalshelet Ha-Kabbalah* (“Chain of Tradition”, Venice, 1587); and David Gans’ *Zemach David* (“Sprig of David”, Prague, 1592). Belonging to a different category but historically of the first importance is Azariah dei Rossi’s *Me’or Enayim* (“Light of the Eyes”, Mantua, 1573). Whereas Zacuto and ibn Yahya were concerned with producing a more or less coherent account of Jewish history mainly in terms of rabbinical



tradition, dei Rossi wrote on specific themes such as the Judeo-Hellenistic writings of Philo of Alexandria (which had been consistently neglected by the rabbis), the source of the Septuagint,<sup>1</sup> the relatively late origin of the Hebrew calendar, the historical value of folklore and allegory. Rossi also stood out from his Jewish contemporaries by virtue of his much greater degree of familiarity with non-Jewish sources—classical, medieval and Renaissance.

As far as a “modern” approach to history is concerned, ibn Verga’s “Sceptre of Judah” is notable for its naturalistic interpretation. The principal theme is the suffering and persecution undergone by the Jews, which ibn Verga had

himself experienced as one of those expelled from Spain. Characteristic of his work is the effort to understand this and similar sufferings not solely in terms of divine providence and punishment but in terms of the interaction of historical forces and the conduct of the Jews themselves. “The exile persists for natural reasons,” he wrote, “because of religious hatred and the desire of the [Spanish] ruler to subject everyone to his faith and belief.” But he felt that the Jews had also to some extent brought their suffering on themselves through their arrogance, their segregation, and their false oaths.

The Jewish historians of the sixteenth century had no immediate successors. The atmosphere of

Above, title page of a 1668 French edition of “History of the Jewish War against the Romans” by Flavius Josephus.



Page of a Hebrew Bible illuminated by Joseph Sarfati at Cervera, Spain, 1299.

the Enlightenment, with its quest for universal values and development, was in any case averse to concentration on the particular. In the late eighteenth century the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the foremost representative of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskala) confessed that "I always yawn when I must read something historical". On the other hand, it was precisely at this period that a knowledge of Jewish history and of the Jewish past came to be regarded as indispensable to the "new Jew" that the Haskala sought to produce. At this time the only suitable work available was the French Huguenot Jacques Basnage's five-volume *L'histoire et la religion des Juifs* ("History and Religion of the Jews", 1706-1711). But a proposal to translate it into German came to nothing.

### The science of Judaism

The whole context of Jewish intellectual life in western Europe was transformed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The study of the Jewish past for its own sake now came to the fore. A precursor of the new movement was Isaac Markus Jost, whose "History of the Jews" was based on the need "to mediate between synagogue and world culture", that is to bring Jewish culture and general history into harmony with one another. But Jost's work, important though it was, fell into

eclipse compared with the achievement of the movement known as Wissenschaft des Judentums (the Science of Judaism), founded by a group of young German-Jewish intellectuals centred on Berlin and its university. Their manifesto, set forth in 1822, proclaimed the need for the "scientific" treatment of Judaism aimed at "the systematic unfolding and re-presentation of its object in its whole sweep, for its own sake and not for any ulterior purpose... unfolding Judaism in accordance with its essence... without any preconceived opinion and not concerned in the final result".

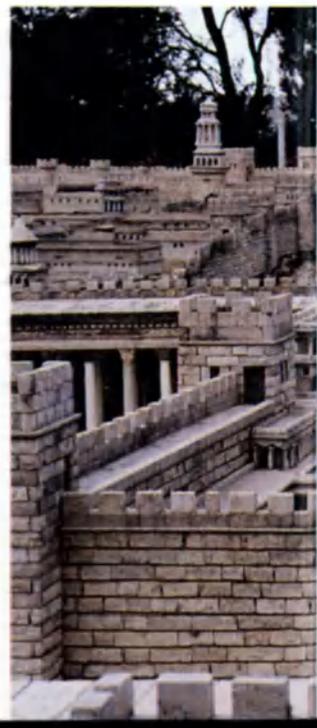
The work of the German-Jewish historian Leopold Zunz (1794-1886) perhaps best embodies this ideal. A graduate of the universities of Berlin and Halle, he saw the Jewish past in terms of a literature that best expressed the spirit of Judaism. Thus he devoted his researches mainly to the history of the sermons and liturgies of Judaism, synagogal poetry, and to important biographical studies, notably of Azariah dei Rossi.

Although Zunz had no immediate disciples, his work had a great deal to do with the expansion of Jewish historical learning that marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Different viewpoints certainly emerged from this research but the ideal of the objective scholar, as determined by the Science of Judaism, remained paramount.

This development did not take place without much adverse criticism, however. The Italian-Jewish scholar Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865) argued that, in pursuit of objectivity, the practitioners of the science had forsaken their Jewish commitment—that they investigated Israel's past as others investigated the past of Assyria, Egypt, Babylon or Persia and that the Jewish ideal of the unity of idea and act would thereby be undermined.

This argument was further articulated in the work of Nachman Krochmal of Galicia (1785-1840). He saw in historicism the most serious challenge to Judaism. How could the unchanging and eternal word of God be reconciled with the evidence provided by history of human intervention in the transmission of the divine teaching? But to deny this reality, Krochmal also argued, would be to reveal the backwardness of Jewish scholarship in the eyes of the younger generation and thus disillusion them with Judaism altogether.

These controversies notwithstanding, Jewish



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historiography seems to have contributed greatly to the assertion of Jewish self-confidence and awareness.

Once the historical revolution had been fully assimilated, works of outstanding importance were produced in Germany by Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891), in Russia by Simon Dubnow (1860-1941), and in the United States by Salo Baron (1895-1989). Each of them attempted a “universal” history of the Jewish people, which each conceived within a different framework of understanding.

Graetz, a graduate of the universities of Breslau and Jena, saw Judaism as having both a spiritual and a political dimension. He divided Jewish history into a political era which ended with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BC; a second period, mainly religious in character, which lasted until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD; and the

third epoch of dispersion which was one of deepening self-consciousness leading to a “religious state-constitution”. The multi-volumed “History of the Jews from Oldest Times to the Present”<sup>2</sup> that Graetz published between 1853 and 1876 did not entirely match this pattern but it remains a magisterial accomplishment for its period.

Dubnow’s major work, a ten-volume “World History of the Jewish People” (first published in German, 1925-1929, and since translated into several languages<sup>3</sup>), rejected what he saw as the spiritual interpretation of Jewish history of Zunz or Graetz in favour of a sociological emphasis that concentrated on the structure of Jewish autonomy in the various centres of the Diaspora. He saw the dynamic centres of Jewish life moving from Palestine to Babylon and then to Spain, medieval France and Germany, Poland and Lithuania. These were all “substitutes for state forms”, Dubnow argued, which had however enabled the Jews to preserve their uniqueness and their nationhood without succumbing to the demands of land and territory.

Baron’s monumental *Social and Religious History of the Jews* (3 volumes, 1937; 2nd edition, 18 volumes, 1952-1983) lacks the overall pattern that Graetz and Dubnow sought to give to their work but is far better documented and has benefited from the flowering of a century’s research. Baron dismisses what he terms “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history” with its emphasis on persecution and suffering in favour of a view that asserts Jewish national self-definition, both in the dispersion and in the Land of Israel. Baron’s forte was his analytic gift and ability to marshal a quantity of secondary material.

Apart from these comprehensive works, knowledge of the Jewish past has been enriched and transformed by a multiplicity of more specialized works. Many of these have been written in Hebrew by historians from the universities of Israel; others, written in a variety of languages, have emanated from the United States and Europe.

1. The earliest (3rd-2nd century BC) extant Greek translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew.
2. A condensed English version was published as *History of the Jews*, 6 vols., 1891-1898.
3. Published in English as *History of the Jews*, 5 vols., 1967-1973. Editor

Illustrations on this page evoke the 3 main periods of Jewish history as seen by the German scholar Heinrich Graetz. Below, the story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. (Detail from an early 16th century tapestry). Below left, model of Jerusalem as it was before the destruction of the Second Temple. Left, Calleja de las Flores (“Alley of Flowers”) in the Jewish quarter of Córdoba, Spain.



BY FRIEDRICH WILHELM GRAF

# Christianity and history

THE relationship between the Christian faith and history is the central problem of modern theology. Ever since the Enlightenment theologians have tried to reconcile Christianity's long-standing claim to be the truth with modern knowledge about the historical relativity of all human experience and thought.

This enterprise has proved increasingly difficult. In the eighteenth century, Gotthold Lessing, a leading figure of the German *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment), spoke of the "wide and horrendous gulf" that lies between modern man and Christianity in its original form. In the following century this gulf became even wider. Philosophers, theologians and historians understood that all historical reality is specific and relative and that in history there are no absolute norms valid for all individuals and for all periods. But does not Christianity say that Jesus Christ occupies an absolute position in history? Should it not claim to be absolutely true and necessary for everyone, irrespective of place and time? The more thinking that has been done about the essence of the Christian faith and the specific nature of historical reality, the wider the gap between faith and history has become.

Central to the Christian faith, as to all religions, is the worship of God. In the traditional





language of Western philosophy and theology, strongly marked by the world view of the ancient Greeks and particularly by Aristotelian metaphysics, God is also referred to as “the Absolute”. He is thought of as a boundless creative power, conditioned by nothing and eternal, the Creator of the cosmos and then of man, who is a creature of a higher order. God the Creator is seen as the possessor of unlimited sovereignty; He is infinitely superior to His creatures. In Western metaphysics the opposition between God and the world, between transcendence and immanence, between eternity and time, is fundamental. The Absolute is absolute precisely because the finite, the world and humanity do not impinge upon it. Conversely, this created world, the historical world of the finite and the relative, is envisioned as permanently dependent on the Absolute and as deriving its consistency from God alone.

The more God is portrayed as transcendent, as superior to the world, the more faith is regarded as a withdrawal from the relative, as a drawing away from history. For mankind, faith thus consists in placing one’s trust in the Absolute. But as the Absolute is timeless, eternal, turning to God is tantamount to turning away from the world and setting oneself at a distance from the finite realm.

The Christian mystics in particular believed that when people pray they are immersed in eternity and withdraw from history, thereby becoming aware of their true, eternal purpose. Viewed in this light, Christian piety always implies a devaluation of history, of the world of relative values.

### The concept of history in the early Church

It was from this standpoint that the theologians of the early Church considered the history of humanity and Church history. They reformulated various conceptions of God’s sovereignty over world history as found in the Jewish tradition (the Old Testament of the Christians) and in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament.

The apostle Paul thus gave a theological interpretation to history according to which there is a close link between the creation of the world and the redemption of humanity. In this scheme of things Jesus Christ has a central position: He is the absolute centre of the history of the world, giving meaning and purpose to all human action. Universal history began with the creative act of God. But sin upset the divine order and the world slid into chaos, as demonstrated in particular by the historical disasters visited upon the people of Israel and described in the Old Testament. In

The mosaic in the dome of Genesis in St. Mark’s Basilica, Venice (early 13th century).

Jesus Christ, a new age of salvation began. Paul describes this salvation in historical images: it means the abolition of natural conflict between man and woman, the end of enmity between peoples, the liberation of slaves from servitude to their masters and the rebirth of all human beings, truly freed at last.

Paul's interpretation can thus be defined as a history of salvation: all human history is directed towards the return of Jesus Christ or the attainment of salvation in Him. Paul has a teleological view of history: its goal is the attainment by all human beings of the salvation already offered by God to humanity through Christ.

For this reason, the Church in his view is at the centre of history. It is the institution that brings us the news of salvation in Christ. Through its action we draw nearer to the end-purpose of history according to God, the return of Christ and the establishment of His universal kingdom of peace. Seen from this standpoint, the history of the world and the political history of states are without importance. Only the action of the Church is decisive for true progress towards the kingdom of God.

The early Christians lived in the faith that Christ would soon return and accomplish the final salvation of history. Accordingly, the theologians of the early Church did not at first pay much attention to the details of Church history. It was only through the persecution of the Christians by the Roman empire and the subsequent triumph of Christianity over the empire, expressed symbolically by the baptism of Constantine in 337 AD, that the history of the Church became an important subject of theological reflection.

A first synthesis of the history of the expansion of Christianity is provided by the early fourth-century historian and theologian Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Ecclesiastical History* is still a document of capital importance. The way in which Eusebius links specific events in Church history to an all-embracing theological interpretation of universal history served for centuries as an example for the Catholic historians of the Church.

His interpretation was particularly decisive in two respects. First, the history of the Church begins with the birth and works of Jesus of Nazareth. The whole of Jewish and non-Christian history until then were but God's preparation for this event essential to the salvation of humankind. The pre-Christian religions are seen as preparing the way for the reception of Christ's message. In fact, Christianity was not a new religion but eternal religion, which, before Christ, had not been wholly revealed. Judaism and Greek religion are not considered as "foreign religions" but as forms of an unrealized Christianity. History before the coming of Christ is also in this account integrated into the history of the Church.

Secondly, Eusebius sees the history of the

world and the Church as a constant struggle between Good and Evil, God and the Devil. The function of history is to record the continual struggle between the good, who remain faithful to God and His Church, and the bad, who follow Satan and oppose the Church. He is profoundly convinced that God will come to the assistance of His Church in all its struggles against external enemies, but also and especially against heretics, and that divine truth will prevail. The history of the Church is seen by Eusebius as that of an ever-growing power, which he attributes to the greater proximity of the kingdom of God. Church history thus becomes the axis of universal history.



The sixteenth-century leaders of the Reformation, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, radically challenged the Catholic vision of the Church as an increasingly powerful, triumphant institution. The Reformation grew out of a movement of protest against the established Church. Against the authority of the Pope and the priests' dominion over souls, it invoked "a Christian's freedom" (Luther). Human salvation lay not in the Church but in the word of God alone, which was accessible to everyone through the Holy Scriptures. For the reformers, "a Christian's freedom" meant that less value was attached to the Church. The institution of the Church took second place to the pious individual.

This theological restriction placed on the Church meant at the same time that greater recognition was accorded to the intrinsic value of the world. True Christian faith was exemplified not in a separate pious existence, sealed off from worldly concerns, but in the actual circumstances of life, where human beings had been set by God. In the eyes of the reformers, living according to one's faith meant above all saying "yes" to the

*The Preaching of St. Paul*, by Luca di Tomme, an artist of the Siena school (Italy, 14th century).

world; it meant being actively and enthusiastically involved in the world.

The reformers also profoundly changed prevailing attitudes to the history of the Church. The institution was criticized. Its history, as written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Protestant historians, was intended to legitimize and bolster the rights of Protestantism against the authoritarian nature of the Church of Rome. Eusebius' history of triumph was replaced by an account of the internal decomposition of the Church. The more powerful it had grown, the more it had become detached from the true faith. The distinction made by Eusebius between bearers of authority and heretics, between good Christians and enemies of God, was overturned: in many cases it was the ecclesiastical authorities that were the enemies of Christ. In the history of the Church a central role was now assigned to the pious who had transmitted the fundamental truths of Christianity.

Under the influence of the Reformation, the history of the Church became a medium for a scientific and critical appraisal of the received tradition of the Church. Not only were historians critical of its attempted domination, but they were also increasingly sceptical about the sources invoked by the Church in an effort to legitimize its power and to base the supremacy of the Pope's authority upon that of the emperor. This criticism had an ideological colouring. The concern was to release the ordinary Christian from a state of false servitude vis-à-vis the Church. Through such criticism and through intensive exegesis of the Holy Gospels, the Protestant history of the Church paved the way for modern historical and critical investigation, which took root during the Enlightenment and continued to develop in the nineteenth century.

### The absolute nature of Christianity and the history of religions

The Enlightenment marked a radical break in the interpretation of Christianity and of its history. During the period of European expansion, when the pull of other countries and cultures was being felt, Western intellectuals discovered a multiplicity of religions and religious traditions of which they had previously been unaware. They had to recognize that, from the point of view of history, Christianity was but one religion among others. At first they continued to claim, dogmatically, that Christianity alone was the true religion, all the others being false forms of religious consciousness or at least incomplete representations of the truth as compared to that of Christianity.

However as European intellectuals became more interested in the history of the non-Christian religions, the more clearly they perceived numerous affinities and mutual influences



between Christianity and other religions. From then on they had to interpret the history of Christianity with reference to the universal history of religions. What consequences does this attitude have for Christianity's long-established claim to possess the truth? Should not a modern historian refute the idea that the Christian message is valid for all human beings?

This question was a particular source of conflict in German Protestantism, starting in the eighteenth century. Philosophers and theologians associated with what was known as German idealism—Schleiermacher, Schelling and Hegel for instance—attempted to meet the challenge of the

Bust of Christ, detail from the ceiling of the Commodilla catacomb, Rome (mid-4th century). Below left, *Heaven and Hell*, painting of the Bolognese school, 15th century.



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new critical approach to history by interpreting Christianity as “the absolute religion”. Christianity was thus reincorporated into a universal history of religions without the abandonment of its traditional claim to hold the truth. On the one hand, Christianity was but one religion among others and had to be understood as a specific historical instance of a universal phenomenon—religion. On the other, it stood out from all the others insofar as it was only in Christianity that the universal goal of all religion—the reconciliation of God and mankind—had been fully achieved.

Once a universal concept of religion had been established, supposedly embracing all the forms of religion that had so far emerged in the history of humanity, these were shown to be linked to one another in accordance with a historical process based on the principles of evolution. The history of religions, ranging back from primitive religions, through natural religions all the way to culture-religions, was thus seen as a process whose ultimate aim was the effective realization of the universal essence of religion.

This evolutionist way of thinking was widespread throughout nineteenth-century Europe, where Christianity was regarded as the highest form of culture-religion, like the religion of freedom or of the personality. It was identified, more or less directly, with the universal concept of religion. The success of this interpretation was due to the fact that it enabled historical and critical account to be taken of the multiplicity of religions without in any way renouncing Christianity’s claim to superiority. This model could thus serve to justify Western imperialism.

Since the nineteenth century, however, the rapid advance of knowledge in the history of religions has put paid to the idealistic presupposition that the course of history is determined by an unchanging transcendental reason. The more that historians have recognized the specificity of individual religions, the more they have abandoned attempts to understand the history of religions as a single evolutionary process and to encompass all religions in the same concept. The idealistic belief in the basic oneness of the many religions gave way to a pluralistic vision of history in which the main focus of attention was no longer their alleged sameness but their individuality.

A truly critical approach to the science of history meant then that the concept of “absolute religion” had to be discarded as a dogmatic or, in other words, ahistorical notion. The implications for the Christian religion were keenly debated in the early years of this century, in Europe and the United States.

The German theologian Ernst Troeltsch, a liberal Protestant, played an important role in this debate. In a famous lecture published in 1902, entitled *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, Troeltsch abandoned the concept of “absolute religion”. He assigned a “relative supreme value” to Christianity while recognizing that this could not be demonstrated by a strictly historical method. He did not dispute that Christianity claimed to represent the truth, but for him there was only one truth, which found expression in countless forms of religion.

Below, portrait of Martin Luther by the German painter and engraver Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553).

Below right, a portrait of John Calvin made by a student during a lecture.



Facing page, illustration of a Persian town from a 16th-century manuscript of the *Itinerary*, a description of the campaigns of the Ottoman sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (1494-1566).

# The master-chronologers of Islam

BY ABDESSELAM CHEDDADI



THE most striking feature of Islamic historical writing or *tarikḥ* is its sheer volume. Only a small part of it has so far been published and new texts are continually being discovered. From the second half of the first century of the Hegira (late seventh century AD) to the thirteenth century (nineteenth century AD) the writing of Islamic history continued almost without a break wherever the Islamic faith was professed. The language used was primarily Arabic, but there were also writings in Persian, Turkish and Malay. Although essentially written by Muslims, it also attracted Christian authors, especially in Egypt and Syria.

A second important feature of Islamic historiography is its very great diversity. It comprises forms and genres ranging from vast universal or general histories and monographs to annals, dynastic and genealogical tables or lists divided into *tabaqat* (classes), as well as biographical dictionaries and local histories. It also covers many fields: religious, political, administrative and social life; scientific, literary and artistic activities; schools of thought and ideological trends; travel, the topography of cities, monuments; natural disasters, famines, epidemics....

The historians who worked in this tradition were also curious about non-Islamic civilizations, western and northern Europe, India, China, the Far East and Africa. They were interested in any information relating to man, his relations with his social and cultural environment and his relations with God. Ibn Khaldun (see page 39) noted that they wrote just as much for the "crowds" and for "simple folk" as for "kings" and "the great". This view of history as universal in scope and the attempt to reach a wide audience prefigured modern approaches to the subject.

### A grasp of time

A further point of similarity with modern historiography lay in the importance attached very early on to time and to chronology. From the first to the fourth century of the Hegira (seventh-tenth century AD) a vast amount of knowledge about time was amassed in Islamic culture. Drawing on earlier Arab tradition, it incorporated Persian, Indian, Greek and Egyptian material and also leaned on the work of astronomers and geographers. The masterly conspectus achieved by al-Biruni in the first half of the fifth/eleventh century is impressive for its tone of objectivity. It represents the most extensive and most rigorous survey of knowledge about time that we possess up to the modern era.

Muslim historians benefited greatly from this knowledge. From the second/eighth century onwards it gradually became common practice to give dates, to follow a chronological order and

to provide tables. For most of the facts reported by historians it became a virtually absolute rule to note the year, month and day when they occurred. This contrasts with medieval historiography in the West where it was not until the eleventh century AD that a unified chronological system began to be widely accepted and where, as late as the fourteenth century, the chronology of the main historical events was still uncertain.

### Originality and limitations

The originality, but also the limitations of Islamic historiography lie in its conception of historical information (*khobar*). *Khobar* means the fact, the event, as incorporated into discourse, related in a "story". The historian does not deal in raw facts. He starts from a given which is the story





Above, manuscript page from a collection of prose and verse biographies of Sufi saints, written by Hosayn Bayqarah (1469-1506), the last of the Timurid sovereigns of Persia.

Left, illustration from a Turkish manuscript recording a journey (1605-1606).

Right, page from a 12th-century Arabic manuscript describing the customs of China and India.

considering the emergence, evolution and decline of vast human groups such as the Arabs, Berbers, Persians and the *Rum* (Greeks, Romans and Byzantines) added a new dimension to this vision.

### Three major periods

The first major period of Islamic historiography, which extends up to the third century of the Hegira, is crowned by at-Tabari's chronicle *Tarikh ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*) (see page 38). A calendar based on the Hegira soon came to be adopted generally. The *isnad* method, whereby the names of those who transmitted information from generation to generation are cited, was first developed for the purposes of the religious sciences and then applied to the biography of the Prophet, to stories of the Muslim conquests and gradually to all kinds of stories.

The earliest historical writing appeared and sometimes crystallized in a number of genres, including *maghazi* and *sira* (the biography and deeds of the Prophet), *futuh* (Muslim conquests), *ahdath* (major political events), *akhbar al-awa'il* (stories of pre-Islamic kings and nations), *ayyam al-'arab* (stories of the Arab past), *ansab*, *ma'athir* and *mathalib* (genealogies, exploits and failures); biographies of scholars, lists of teachers, political and administrative chronicles, history of the Umayyad and 'Abassid dynasties, and collections of secretaries' letters. It gradually became the usual practice to date facts and events precisely and to follow a chronological order.

Numerous compendiums were published,

as reported by written or oral tradition, or by a living witness (who may be the historian himself). His most important task is therefore to authenticate or validate stories by subjecting accounts and channels of transmission to critical scrutiny. The historian does not seek to discover or establish facts but to gather, classify and organize information while making sure of its validity. The intrinsic truth of stories was a relatively minor concern until Ibn Khaldun, who based historical criticism on knowledge of the laws of *'umran* (the human order, society).

Bound to accept traditional sources, often down to the finest detail, the historian could incorporate them into a wide variety of genres or organize them at will within more or less voluminous compilations, but he could not formulate them in his own way, reconstruct them or recast them according to his own perspective.

In Islamic historiography then, the past is not reconstructed as it was by some Greek historians, nor is there any theological history as there was in the Christian Middle Ages. This accounts for its widely acknowledged impartiality and also for its stationary conception of time, which contains in itself no potential for change or progress but simply gives external order to a sequence of events. It was Ibn Khaldun again who, in



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## At-Tabari

**A**T-TABARI (839-923) did not invent Islamic historiography but he is its most illustrious figure. His *Tarikh ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (*History of Prophets and Kings*) long served as a model. This chronicle, which relates the history of the Islamic world year by year in the first three centuries of the Hegira, was continued by later authors, and many abridged versions and adaptations were made of its account of the pre-Islamic period. It was incorporated in other general surveys such as Ibn al-Athir's *al-Kamil* (*The Complete History*) in the thirteenth century AD and Ibn Kathir's *al-Bidayah wa an-nihayah* (*The Beginning and the End*) in the following century.

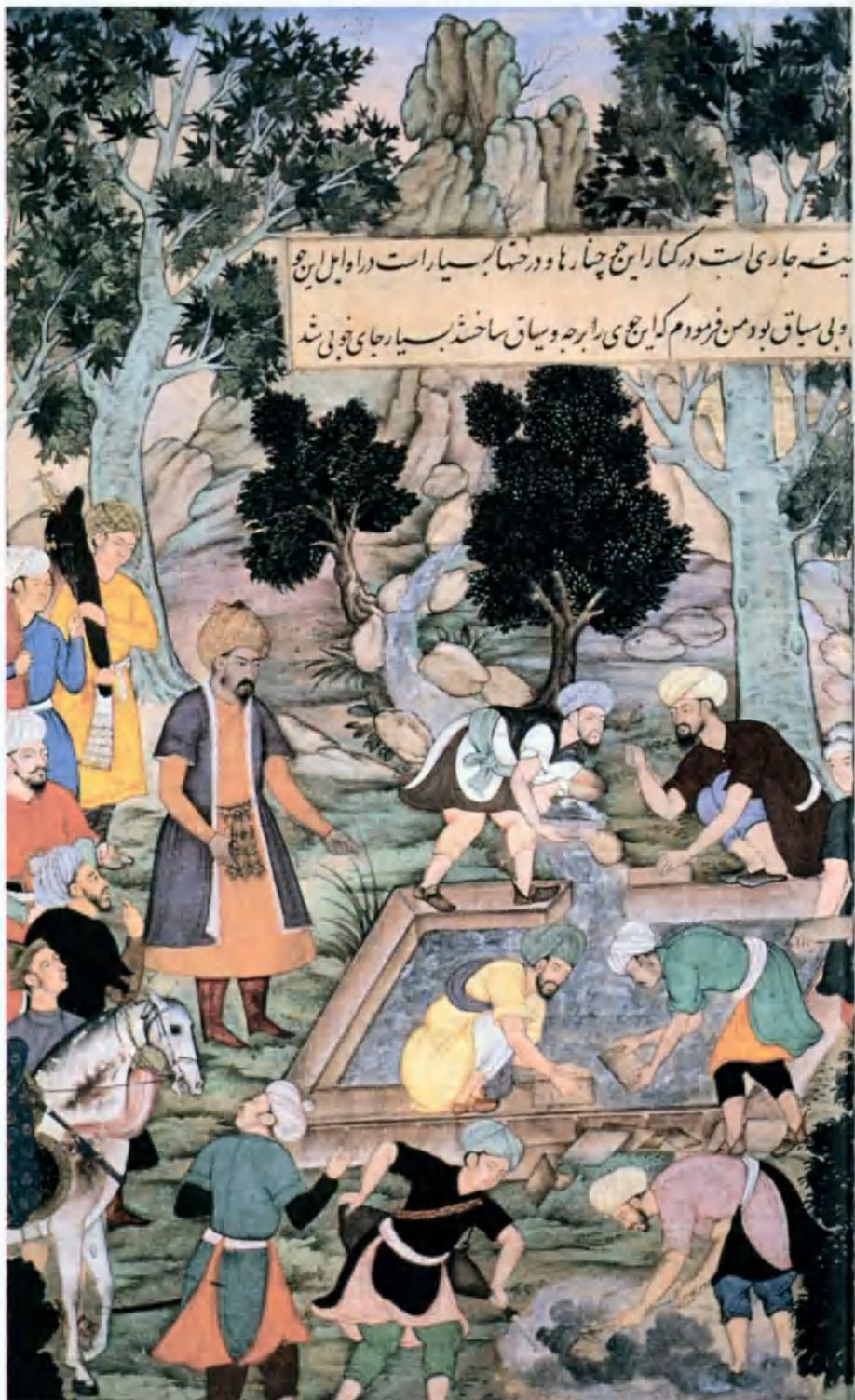
At-Tabari was trained as a jurist, traditionalist and historian. For close on thirty years he journeyed through the cities and countries of the Middle East in a quest for knowledge which took him to the greatest scholars of his time. He was interested not only in history, Qur'anic exegesis and the traditions of the Prophet, but also in grammar, ethics, mathematics and medicine. His fame also rests on his monumental *Tafsir*, or commentary on the Qur'an.

His *History*, which is the culmination of a process which can be traced back to the first century of the Hegira, is guided by a constant concern to show how each item of information has been passed down through an unbroken line, which is subjected to critical scrutiny. He applied a strict chronological order to the raw material of history, and gave a more ample and finished form to the universal history sketched out by ad-Dinawari in his *Akhbar at-Tiwal* (*The Long Stories*) and by al-Ya 'qubi in his *Tarikh*.

At-Tabari's *Tarikh ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk* is described as a history of the world from the Creation up to the author's own time. In fact, as he explains in his preface, it is first and foremost a history of the relations between God and His creatures, whether of obedience and gratitude or of rebelliousness and revolt. Its main protagonists, after Iblis/Satan and Adam and his sons, are the prophets and kings. Biblical history is included, and neither Graeco-Roman and Byzantine history nor Persian history is neglected.

It is an irreplaceable mine of information. The author cites his sources for each fact reported and in many cases reproduces the accounts in which they are mentioned, thereby giving us access to early materials that are now lost. In the words of the historian Franz Rosenthal, at-Tabari in his *History* demonstrates "the scrupulousness and untiring inspiration of the theologian, the precision and love of order of the jurist and the perspicacity of the politician versed in law".

ABDESSELAM CHEDDADI ■



such as al-Waqidi's *Maghazi*, Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, Ibn Sa 'd's *Tabaqat*, ad-Dinawari's *Akhbar at-tiwal*, al-Baladhuri's *Ansab al-ashrai* and al-Ya 'qubi's *Tarikh*. Together this constituted a vast historical literature, relatively little of which has survived but whose existence is attested by the titles listed in subsequent bibliographies, like Ibn an-Nadim's *Fihrist*, completed in 377 of the Hegira (998 AD).

The second period, known as the classical period, is marked both by the accentuation of these various tendencies with, however, some slackening of the *isnad* method, and by the emer-

gence of new genres. After at-Tabari, but less influential than he, al-Masudi composed the *Golden Meadows*, another universalist history.

From the fourth century of the Hegira onwards the writing of history became a more or less official activity involving greater use of national or provincial archives. This period was notable for the work of a line of historians starting with Hassan Ibn Thabit Ibn Sinan as-Sabi and, later, Miskawayh's *Tajarib al-umam* (*History of the Buyid Dynasty*), continued in the following century by Abu Shuja'.

The history of cities developed into a major

## Ibn Khaldun

**I**BN KHALDUN was one of the greatest historians and thinkers of all time. He wrote a long autobiography thanks to which we are familiar with the details of his life. Born in Tunis in 1332, he came from a line of senior government officials and scholars of Andalusian origin, descended from ancient Yemeni Arab stock. He received a thorough religious, literary and scientific education at the hands of the most eminent scholars in the Maghrib. During his adolescence Ifriqiya was conquered by the Marinid king Abu al-Hasan, who entered Tunis in 1348. The following year his father and mother were carried away by the Black Death. In 1352 he went to Fez where he stayed for some ten years and served as private secretary to the sultan Abu Salim. But neither there nor in Granada, to which he travelled in 1362, nor later in Bejaia or Tlemcen, did he manage to lead a stable life or to achieve his political ideal. He did however acquire detailed knowledge of court life and the workings of the state and observed the world of the Arab and Berber tribes.

In 1375, at the age of forty-three, he withdrew from public life in order to devote himself to science. In the castle of Ibn Salamah, near Freneda in Algeria, he wrote the first version of the *Muqaddimah* (*Introduction to History*). The need for more extensive documentation forced him to leave his refuge. He returned to Tunis where he taught and completed the first version of the *Kitab al-'Ibar*, his monumental history of the world. But, fearing the intrigues of his enemies, he left the Maghrib for good in 1384 and settled in Egypt. In Cairo he was given an introduction to the Mamluk ruler as-Zahir Barquq and took on teaching and judicial duties, while continuing to work on his voluminous opus. Five years before his death in 1406, during the siege of Damascus, he met the Mongol Timur, of whom he left a striking portrait.

Ibn Khaldun's concerns were primarily those of a historian. Wishing to give a comprehensive account of his age which might serve as a model for future historians, dissatisfied with traditional methods of authenticating and verifying facts, he formulated a theory of society on which all his historiography was to be based. In the *Muqaddimah* he laid the foundations of what would today be called anthropology. Here we can give no more than a glimpse of the rich fund of concepts he brought into play.

Central to his theory of society is the concept of *'umran*. For lack of a more adequate term, this can be translated as "civilization", but only if this word is stripped of any connotation of an opposition between "advanced" societies and "primitive" societies. A more

radical concept, based on the religious idea of the Creation, *'umran* designates the fact of human life, the human order in general. Fundamentally equal and free, human beings are God's creatures, and as such are the rulers of the Earth, but they differ from one another by virtue of their living conditions, which are themselves determined by geographic and climatic conditions. The term also denotes the forms of social life or, in a more restrictive sense, urban life with its dense concentration of humanity, contrasting with life in mountain or desert regions.

In *'umran* Ibn Khaldun distinguishes two states, which are at the same time the two main stages in human evolution. *Badawah*, the original agro-pastoral phase, close to nature, satisfying only the barest needs, yields to *hadarah*, the complex urban stage which gives rise to surpluses, in which society fulfils itself and achieves its purpose. It is the fate of *'umran* to oscillate in accordance with an implacable law between these two poles.

For Ibn Khaldun, *mulk* (power) was the basic factor responsible for social and historical dynamics. As a source of the highest prestige, it is the goal of all human aspiration and desire, spurring men to action. Precarious by nature, it passes from one group to another, from one nation to another. As a means of distributing economic surpluses and structuring society, it has a pivotal role in the transition from *badawah* to *hadarah*. Around this central principle of social life Ibn Khaldun structured his history. In studying the Arabs and Berbers he concerned himself with those nations that successively held power. His narrative traces the rise of political groups from their Bedouin status to the heights of power, and their subsequent downfall.

These concepts tie in with many others, which include, in the social sphere, cohesion (*'asabiyah*), kinship (*nasab*), protection (*walah, istinah*), honour (*nu 'ra*); in the political sphere, constraint (*ikrah*), coercion (*Qahr*), domination (*ghalab* or *taghallub*), prestige (*jah*); and in the economic sphere, means of subsistence (*ma 'ash*), gain or profit (*kasb*), value (*qimah*) and work (*a 'mal*).

The concepts he employs, the laws governing the functioning of Arab-Berber society which he identifies, and the bird's-eye view that he provides of many aspects of Islamic history, are still indispensable tools of anthropological and historical research into Islamic society. Far from being superseded, this rigorous, coherent set of theories continues to be a mine of scientific knowledge for modern researchers.

ABDESSELAM CHEDDADI ■



Above, page from a vellum manuscript dated 1733 of Ibn Khaldun's *Introduction to History*.

Left, illustration from the autobiography of Babur (1483-1530), the founder of the Mughal empire of northern India.

genre. Many works were produced, the best known of which is al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's *History of Baghdad*. Biographical dictionaries relating to religious and intellectual life became more sophisticated and more numerous. They included lists of poets and other specialists, directories of scholars belonging to different juridico-religious schools, catalogues of writers and lives of saints. In the various regions of the Islamic empire a thriving historiographical tradition thus took root.

In the mid-fifth century of the Hegira political upheavals in the Islamic world were not

without an effect on historiography. A third period began, marked by an ebb in production until the mid-sixth century. Syria then came to the fore for a while with historians like Ibn at-Tayyi, Ibn Abi ad-Dam and Ibn an-Nazif, who wrote universal histories, followed soon after by Ibn al-Athir, the author of *al-Kamil* (*The Complete History*). Then it was the turn of Egypt to produce major historians such as Ibn Hajar, al-Maqrizi, al-'Ayni, Ibn Tighribirdi, as-Sakhawi and as-Suyuti. The same period saw the birth in the Maghrib of Ibn Khaldun whose pioneering work was admired in his time but who had no successors. ■

# African history finds its voice

BY BOGUMIL JEWSIEWICKI  
AND V. Y. MUDIMBE



Above, a *griot* (poet, musician and story-teller) of the Senufo people, Côte d'Ivoire. Opposite page, young visitors in the museum at Jos, Nigeria.

**E**VEN relatively recently, the history of black Africa existed for non-Africans only in the form of writings by the European conquerors. Today it has become a discipline in its own right. No one would now dare claim, as scholars were still doing at the middle of this century, that although Africa may have a past, it does not have a history because written evidence is lacking. These scholars believed that the societies of black Africa had no grasp of time, a "technical" incapacity which was bound to marginalize even further a continent which, according to Hegel, was not a historical part of the world.

This exclusion from Judeo-Christian historicity, which, like monotheism, set itself up as the universal norm of reason, profoundly influenced the thinking of Western-educated African intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s who struggled in the name of African dignity for what they had been expressly denied: the right to universality, and hence the recognition of the African contribution to humanity. A growing awareness of African achievements in the arts was accompanied by a realization that the continent had a history which implied a factual reconstruction of the African past.

African intellectuals drew much of their inspiration from the blacks of the diaspora who, in their fight for the recognition of their own humanity, had devoted themselves to a search for antiquities relating to blacks in the West. They were essentially trying to establish the legitimacy of black humanity within the concept of culture formulated by the thinkers of the Enlightenment on the basis of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian ideas. This combat was bound to expose the falsity of the Hegelian philosophy of history.

## Collecting and comparing a mass of oral and written data

The Senegalese thinker Cheikh Anta Diop issued a Hegelian riposte when he put forward the theory that the origins of the West can be traced to pharaonic Egypt, which was essentially a black civilization. Like several other leading African intellectuals of that period, Diop was astonishingly faithful to Hegel. The pioneers of the academic

history of black Africa, Ade Ajayi and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, have depicted colonialism as a "parenthesis" in African history, a kind of descent into hell which is fit only for oblivion. They see the future of Africa as rooted in a glorious past, traced back to pharaonic Egypt by Cheikh Anta Diop, and to a less distant pre-colonial period, by Ki-Zerbo and Ajayi.

The concept of *négritude* formulated by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor led the West and the world at large to a recognition of black African cultures, in the wake of which historians set out to demonstrate the historicity of African societies. Tensions arose between academic historians of Africa and those such as Cheikh Anta Diop who had a philosophical perception of the past, but they all believed that writing on the past should be dovetailed into a political philosophy for the present. Academic historians saw this philosophy in terms of nation-states. Diop and the historians of the diaspora dreamt of a unitary state.

In the three decades between 1950 and 1980, African history became established as an academic discipline and gave privileged treatment to the state as a historical subject. Today there are two basic works in the field, Unesco's *General History of Africa* and the *Cambridge History of Africa*. In a single generation, academic knowledge of Africa has become part of the story of humanity. There has been a far-reaching effort to collect and translate oral testimony relating to the past of hundreds of African societies and to compare this information with written data from Western and Islamic cultures. As a result and thanks to the development of archaeology, linguistics and new technical facilities, and to the imagination and rigour of researchers faced with the chronological fluctuations of the oral tradition, we now possess an immense amount of factual information about the African past.

Good popular works have also been produced, notably those written in French by I. Kake and E. M'Bokolo, while Unesco is planning to publish an abridged version of the *General History of Africa* and to have it translated into African languages. However, as a general rule the results of academic research have still not been





Excavations at Jénné in Mali, on the site of an ancient trading centre.

incorporated into the teaching of history in Africa, a situation aggravated by the crisis of book publishing and distribution there.

### Close collaboration between historians, anthropologists and linguists

The use of oral traditions, while not exclusive to African historiography, has given this form of evidence academic legitimacy and contributed to the development of a methodology in which the historian Jan Vansina was and still is a pioneer. Analysis of these traditions, right from the start, required historians, anthropologists and linguists to work closely together. It tended to reduce compartmentalization between these disciplines and led a number of researchers to accept the anthropological concept of the “ethnographic present”. The result was the creation of an artificial division of the African past, with colonialization as the watershed. Precolonial history was presented as the crucible of authentic African experience and colonial history was neglected or treated as an interlude of acculturation and domination. From the concept of the “ethnographic present” there also grew the idea, today no longer current, that black Africa was a living museum of human evolution.

The notion that oral traditions are not worthy of attention, or even that they only existed in the colonial period, is false and possibly dangerous. It is akin to the equally erroneous idea that African societies completely lost control over their destiny during the colonial period. Such thinking has given rise to the myth that the urbanized African is a cultural misfit and only the “traditional” rural African is a true African. This and other myths have had a profound effect on the scientific study of African history. Academic institutions and individual scholars have written accounts of the traditions of African states and the courts of important chiefs. A sense of urgency has invariably pushed them towards

the oldest tradition because, as the saying goes, “Whenever an old man dies, a library disappears”.

There was thus a tendency to give prominence to the documentary aspect of orally transmitted history. But efforts to legitimize oral traditions as archival documents have obscured the fact that they are also pieces of historical discourse in their own right. West African *griots* or “traditionalists” at the courts of precolonial African kingdoms were, above all, historians.

The 1960s saw a transformation in African historical studies as classical methods of critical examination of sources were adapted to the analysis of oral data. The need to prove to a largely sceptical world that the concept of African history was valid won credence for the idea that the oral mode of preserving information, provided that the continuity of political structures guarantees its transmission, can be as faithful to the facts as the written word.

Historians of Africa today take a strong interest in social and—a recent development—intellectual history. They are paying closer attention to “micro-history”. Through their efforts we are learning to respect and value the continuous record of the past which African societies have always kept. Actually, Africans have been writing their history for centuries, ever since Islamic culture gave them the Arabic alphabet, an instrument adopted by scholars who became integrated into the life and culture of Sahelian Africa.

There, as elsewhere in the continent, Africans speak, sing, dramatize (through dance, poetry, puppet theatre), sculpt and paint their history. Like other peoples, they have always had a grasp of their past. Their historical narratives which respect the facts are set in an explanatory and aesthetic framework which makes sense of the past and links it to the present and the future. In this way a useful, authentic and credible discourse has come into being and found its place in world history.

Let us accept the contribution of black “humanity” to the making of our common history. Egypt was not only an African civilization, it was a black civilization, as early humanity seems also to have been. St. Augustine, like many later scholars, belonged to the culture of a racially mixed population. It is now possible to bring a more balanced viewpoint to bear on African history and the historiography of African societies.

We now know that academic history, which until recently glorified the written word on which it was based, is not the only valid method. Oral history also has its own time-honoured criteria and forms of logic for interpreting the past. Why then should we feel obliged to value it merely as archive material awaiting the scrutiny of the modern historian? ■

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# USSR: filling in the blank spaces

BY VLADLEN SIROTKIN

**I**N the USSR, whole periods of Soviet and world history alike have been entirely ignored. The events that took place during them have not even been falsified; they have simply been left out of the history books. Old Bolsheviks such as Bukharin, Zinoviev, Trotsky and many others who were executed have been erased from the historical record. This is why floods of biographies are being published today. The Stalinist version of industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture has been thrown into the wastepaper basket. As a result, we have had to do away with history examinations for want of new textbooks. Instead of the history of the Communist Party, scientific communism and the political economy of socialism, we are teaching the social and political history of the twentieth century.

New textbooks are being written. One team is preparing a textbook entitled "Essays on the History of the Party", while another is working on a history of the Soviet Union. I am myself contributing material on France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Belgium to a new universal history.

The world of historians is changing rapidly. At one end of the spectrum you have long-established teachers who are resisting, at least at the intellectual level. At the other you have young researchers, university teachers and leftists who tend to be outside the mainstream. Then there are those of us in the forty-five to fifty age-group. We are trying to get things moving.

Take the French Revolution, for example. Until five years ago, the period of the Terror was the main focus of study. Revolution without terror was not revolution—that was how terrorism was justified. With the exception of Robespierre, the leaders of the Revolution were not studied. Last year, on the occasion of the bi-



centenary, we managed to improve matters. Some of the gaps were filled in with the publication of books which examine objectively all aspects of the Revolution, and of the English and American Revolutions. I wrote several articles in which I made comparisons between these three revolutions and the October Revolution.

In the past many words and names, such as "convergence", "gulag", "Academician Sakharov" and so on, were regarded as taboo for political rather than historical reasons. We now talk of them freely and differing views are expressed. The façade of uniformity has disappeared and given way to diversity of opinion and democracy. Everything has changed in the last five years.

Naturally, there are still conservative forces that are trying to slow down the momentum of change but in the university—I am a university

Top, members of the Soviet government saluting the May Day parade in Red Square, Moscow, 1929. Nikolai Bukharin is at far left. Above, some recent articles about Trotsky that have appeared in the Soviet press.



Members of the praesidium of the first Congress of Soviets in 1922. Top left, Grigori Zinoviev.

teacher—things are changing at a tremendous pace. We are engaged in the twofold task of teaching and research, and university students are pushing for change. This is a widespread movement.

### 'You are historians. It is up to you to decide.'

We are now free to publish, but this has only been the case for the last two years, which explains why there are no new textbooks yet. On the other hand, floods of articles are appearing in the daily newspapers and weeklies and in some—but not all—of the historical journals. Some of these journals are still waiting for orders or instructions from the Central Committee. But the Central Committee is silent. President Mikhail Gorbachev has said: "No orders. You are historians. It is up to you to decide."

In order to fill the gaps in the archives, books that were once banned must be used. In our country, these are what are known as "special archives", "special libraries" or "special documentation". We are now publishing everything, absolutely everything. For instance, I have published a major document on Trotsky and Trotskyism in the weekly paper *Smen* ("Change"), and, in a daily newspaper for secondary-school teachers, a long illustrated article on Stolypin, the leading reformer in the early years of the century, who wanted to reform agriculture and was assassinated by the conservative faction. Thanks to the photos illustrating the article, people "saw" Stolypin for the first time.

If we are to give a true and comprehensive historical picture, we must use all the archival and other sources. The problem is how to overcome the resistance of old-fashioned archivists and hardened bureaucrats who are trying to slow the movement down. But contrary to what is often thought, the archives are not closed and you can go and ask for what you need. Officially, every-



Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin (1862-1911).

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thing is accessible, even the Party archives. In fact, our archives are now full of Americans and Japanese. There is a major film archive near Moscow and I can view films there all day long without any hindrance. I have travelled abroad freely. I have worked in archives in Italy, France and Belgium, and this year I shall be going to the United States.

I am not in favour of immediately writing history that would be valid for everybody. We need time and we have to proceed a step at a time. To return to the French Revolution, on the occasion of the bicentenary we published a book in which one-third of the authors were French. We followed the principle already adopted in the recently published "Dictionary of Glasnost",\* in which there were two authors—one Soviet and one French—for each chapter. Scientific criteria are being applied and ideology is taking a back seat. But how should a scientific history be written? Some issues have ideological implications or political consequences.

I certainly do not regard the historian's task as that of providing explanations but rather of revealing everything that really happened. For the moment it cannot be said that we have a really scientific history. But we are moving in that direction. When I was a student in Moscow, I did not boast that I was in the Faculty of Arts. I even claimed to be a future engineer or physicist. But now the time for historians has come. We are interviewed by Soviet and foreign television, newspapers and radio. I must have given at least a hundred interviews to newspapers all over the world.

For a long time the communists elsewhere in the world, and especially in the Third World, were satisfied with the official version of Soviet history. That is why they are bewildered by the current changes. We were a model for them, the image of the earthly paradise. That image is false. In fact, it began to be questioned over thirty years ago at the time of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Nikita S. Khrushchev's report on Stalin. We are now open-minded, we can discuss and we are endeavouring to present the facts. These comrades are not used to it.

People in the communist movement are not familiar with the plurality of ideas which in my opinion prevailed in Lenin's time. The habit of discussion was lost from Stalin's time onwards. As a result, whole sectors of the population in the Soviet Union are extremely bewildered by the present situation. On a trip to the Soviet Far East I found that people did not understand what was going on in Moscow or Leningrad. Make no mistake. It will take a long time for these things to be understood. ■

\* *50 idées qui ébranlent le monde. Dictionnaire de la glasnost* ("50 Ideas That are Shaking the World. A Dictionary of Glasnost"). Edited and with a preface by Yuri Afanassiev and Marc Ferro. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1989.

● ● ●  
**Astronomical achievements**

Scientists will be busy for many years analysing the data sent back to Earth by the American Voyager 2 spacecraft when it flew close to Neptune in August 1989 after a 12-year, 4.5 billion km journey. Voyager revealed 6 new moons and 3 previously unknown rings around Neptune, the last known outpost of the solar system and the spacecraft's final planetary objective before heading out into the galaxy. Another achievement by American astronomers in 1989 was the discovery of the oldest and most distant cosmic body ever found, a quasar about 14 billion years old.

● ● ●  
**Climatic change and disease**

Climatic warming, which many scientists believe is occurring as a result of the greenhouse effect, may encourage the spread of certain diseases while at the same time affecting the human body's ability to fight them, according to participants in a Conference on Global Atmospheric Change and Public Health held in Washington, D.C., last December. One specialist predicted that a warmer climate may allow disease-carrying parasites to extend their range. Another pointed out that ultraviolet radiation, which increases when the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere is depleted, may modify the immune system as well as being a cause of some forms of cancer.

● ● ●  
**"Compassion fatigue"**

Doctors, social workers and therapists in the USA have a new name for a condition they say is draining their ranks: "compassion fatigue". "As many as 20 per cent of caregiving professionals suffer such burnout," claimed Dr. Lyle Miller, head of the Boston Biobehavioral Institute, at a recent conference of US National Associations of Social Workers. Victims are those who take on too heavy a load of other people's burdens, leaving little time or energy for themselves. They become disillusioned and depressed and may develop headaches, backaches, irritability and other symptoms of fatigue.

● ● ●  
**Cockroach's soft spot**

Chemists at Washington University, St. Louis, USA, have made a discovery which may eventually lead to the development of new methods of exterminating cockroaches. Using a technique known as nuclear magnetic resonance imaging, they located the point where the chemicals which make the insect's shell are produced. Researchers hope to build on the discovery by developing an inhibiting agent to prevent the shell from being formed.

● ● ●  
**Karnak on computer**

Using extremely powerful computers and a programme developed by the French electricity board to regulate nuclear power plants, researchers at the Franco-Egyptian Centre, Karnak,

have reconstituted on screen one of the most complex sites of ancient Egypt. The Karnak Centre, founded in 1967, links the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the Egyptian Antiquities Service.

● ● ●  
**Pioneer of abstract art**

A retrospective of the work of the Czech-born artist Frank Kupka (1871-1957), recently held in the Museum of Modern Art, Paris, was made possible by loans from the Národní Galerie in Prague. Kupka, whose work blends vibrant use of colour with geometric composition, studied in Prague, Vienna and Paris, where he settled. A pioneer of abstract painting, he was one of the first completely non-representational artists, producing hallucinatory canvases like *Printemps cosmique* ("Cosmic Spring"). He also illustrated *The Earth and Its Inhabitants* (19 vol., 1878-1894) by the French geographer Elisée Reclus.

● ● ●  
**African environment threatened**

The African Development Bank, the continent's main lending agency, has warned that in tropical Africa deforestation caused by clearing land for agriculture is destroying some 225,000 hectares of dense and productive forest each year. Another 635,000 hectares of forest are also being felled each year for the production of hardwood or veneers, exposing the topsoil and causing a shortage of

firewood. The Bank also drew attention to the problems of water scarcity and polluted groundwater from overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, as well as to water and air pollution in urban areas where almost 32 per cent of Africa's population now live.

● ● ●  
**Africa's ancient metallurgists**

Research recently carried out by the British Museum and the University of Toronto has shed new light on the bronzes from Benin which constitute one of the finest ancient art forms of Africa. It has been established that the bronzes were manufactured locally using copper, lead and tin. Meanwhile, in Rwanda (Central Africa) archaeologists have unearthed metal furnaces dating back to the 8th century, two centuries after iron-smelting techniques are known to have been used in West Africa.

● ● ●  
**The frontiers of biology**

Japan will initially supply 90 per cent of the funding for the Strasbourg-based International Human Frontier Scientific Programme (HFSP) which has been launched to promote basic research into complex mechanisms of living organisms, in particular brain and gene function, and to make the results generally available. The programme was proposed by the Japanese government at the summit meeting of the 7 leading industrialized countries held at Venice in 1987.



## OFF THE RECORD AN ARCHIVIST'S NIGHTMARE

BY MICHEL MELOT

INTENT on wresting a secret from the real world, the hero of the film *Blow-Up* repeatedly enlarges a detail in a photograph. The title of the film is a play on words: when the man blows up the image, he explodes it. Finally all that can be seen is a myriad of silver nitrate particles. In a similar vein, the writer Jorge Luis Borges went even further when he imagined a group of geographers doing their best to produce the most accurate possible map of their country. Ultimately this meant reproducing it exactly as it was, on a scale of one to one.

Although it is clear that what the geographers project is crazy, and the situation is so implausible that no reader could believe for a second that the story is true, hardly anybody seems surprised that historians should harbour the same utopian ambitions.

According to one definition, the

purpose of modern archives is the collection, conservation and classification of "all the documents produced in the functioning of an institution", and the provision of access to them. Imagine! The kilometre of shelf space becomes the true yardstick of History.

Every day 5,000 different periodicals arrive at the French national library, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Nobody has ever calculated the probability of a copy of one of these periodicals some day being consulted—the figures would probably be too cruel. "Sacrilège!" cry the librarians, thereby revealing that they are engaged in a sacred enterprise. And the absurd stock reply to critics is, "Even if, there is only a chance in a billion that a future historian might want to consult a single one of these documents, that document should be preserved".

The "future historian" is the

hypocritical pretext for all our fantasies about historicity, the scapegoat for our present anxieties. Is it really because of this hypothetical figure that we shoulder this impossible task, this remorseless unending business of collection and classification? In doing so we enter the nightmare world of *total* conservation, of History as a kind of protected species, of the reconstitution of Time past.

The issue is not that the quantity of documents is growing exponentially, but what criterion should be used to decide which ones to preserve. After swallowing our amazement at the legal definition of archives, so comprehensive as to be self-defeating, let's look at the astonishing system of legal deposit, whereby national libraries receive, by legal right, one free copy of each book, periodical and other printed matter produced in the country. Forget

about books. They take up little space and if, as everyone wants, a few thousand more curators are recruited, the problem will soon be solved.

But take posters. Every advertising poster displayed in France is subject to legal deposit. Consider just those that are featured nationwide. Since they are produced in large format, they generally arrive at the Bibliothèque Nationale in sixteen pieces, each one folded in four. Vast quantities of them are delivered and nobody even bothers to unfold them any more, which is just as well since they would be sure to get damaged owing to the poor quality of the paper. But even if these posters were catalogued, it would be impossible to give the public access to them (what kind of table or shelving would be needed to lay out flat a poster meant to be seen on the side of a building?) and, in any case, the paper on which

they are printed is perishable. As a result, they are condemned to remain in their folded state until they decompose.

And yet the posters pile up at the Bibliothèque Nationale. I know. I have piled them myself, meticulously and with a heavy heart, often wondering why I was doing it. I have been haunted by another nightmare

that the man was openly infringing copyright law, I wondered whether his customers should not be compelled to go and deposit copies of their shirts at the national library, which happened to be just round the corner.

I don't intend to ignore the problem of the preservation of software. You may think that nothing is

keeping records for historians is only an excuse to justify our mania for conservation, what possible use can be found for these heaps of objects?

Here again the answer is simpler than it might appear. There are only two reasons why most people visit the public record office. They go there either to consult the register of births, marriages and deaths in order

our survival hinges on the production of objects, which we have made the basis of our community life, we pretend to believe that our knowledge also hinges on them. This accounts for the religious fear inspired by the idea that they might be allowed to disappear, suggesting a kind of ancestor worship in which catalogues and inventories serve as the litany.

I have become aware that the passion for conservation is growing. Far from declining into insignificance as it has become more and more ridiculous and frenzied, the conservation principle has on the contrary gained in strength, as can be seen in the burgeoning of ecomuseums and nature parks, the use made of private archives, the protection of sites and entire cities and the growth of museums of every kind. The amount of satisfaction that this has generated is proportional to the regret expressed at the wholesale destruction of other objects, due not so much to wars as to rampant urbanization, the industrialization of rural areas, the re-allocation of land, the building of motorways, the harnessing of energy sources, and so on.

In other words we seem to be gaining on the roundabouts what we are losing on the swings. We worship and wish to preserve some objects, just as we destroy for economic reasons other objects which themselves tend to destroy landscapes, ways of life and beliefs. The life cycle of objects is becoming shorter with the increasingly rapid rotation of stocks, which is designed to encourage consumption. Some believe that the life-span of a hundred-storey skyscraper should not exceed ten years. How can we accept this built-in obsolescence when we take such extravagant measures to preserve an old mantelpiece for posterity? ■

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higher council on libraries.  
Between 1983 and 1989 he was  
director of the public library at the  
Georges Pompidou Centre  
in Paris.



image: why not collect advertisements painted directly on walls, moulded in polystyrene or printed on sheet metal? Why only posters? The answer is simple. You can fold posters in four and pile them up, but you can't do that with sheet metal. Admittedly, that's all you *can* do with posters, but at least you've done your best.

Please don't think I'm exaggerating, or making fun of French officialdom. I have visited the Lenin Library, the Library of Congress and the National Diet Library in Tokyo and everywhere I have asked: "What do you do with your posters?" And everywhere I have been given the same answer: "We pile them up."

When we have solved the problem of posters and photographs, what about photocopies and desktop publishing? The other day I came across a street trader who was selling phials of a liquid that could transfer any printed image (especially scenes from comic strips) onto any surface (especially T-shirts). Besides noting

simpler to file than magnetic tape or floppy disks. Quite true. However, as well as the floppy disks you really should preserve the computer on which they can be used. There is an unfortunate tendency for computer hardware to be superseded very quickly. Why not change the law on legal deposit so as to make it compulsory for computer manufacturers to deposit all their models and keep them in working order forever?

And what about the new technologies? What about digital photographs that are transmitted electronically, and fourth-generation printers whose typographical skills are part of the program that directs the laser beam?

Why this madness? There must be a patch of firm ground somewhere in this morass. Let us, for example, ask what we actually do preserve, since clearly we do not preserve everything. The answer is that we preserve only objects. Any object is liable to be preserved and only objects can be preserved. Since

to determine kinship, or to consult the land register in order to determine ownership. Only archives of this kind seem to have much importance in the life of the community. This is proved by the fact that, when revolutions break out, one of the first things revolutionaries do is go to the record office to burn property deeds. Between revolutions, the archives that remain interest few but historians.

How did the "utilitarian" function of conservation, which explains the revolutionaries' love of bonfires, yield to a sacred or "cultural" function in the service of historiography?

The origin of the idea of preserving objects can be traced back to the worship of relics, to the regalia which attested to the legitimacy of royal power, and to property deeds in general. Have objects become the "regalia" of a society that produces objects, a new form of relic adapted to democratic market economies which find an overall legitimation in these symbolic tokens? Believing that

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF TAHA HUSSEIN

BY CHARBEL DAGHER

ONE day, not long ago, I stood with Moenis outside a Left Bank Paris hotel just off the Boulevard Saint-Michel. It was the centenary year of the birth of Moenis' father, Taha Hussein, one of the pioneers of modern Arabic literature. We were retracing the footsteps of the great Egyptian writer, who had lived in Paris in the early years of the century. First stop was the Hôtel Beauvoir, where Taha Hussein had stayed during his student days.

I asked Moenis to pose so that I could photograph him in front of each of the two windows which flank the door of the hotel. How, I wondered, could we capture an image of the man who had lived there in those far-off days? Imagine my surprise later, when the photos had been developed and I saw that someone had written the three letters TAH on the wall of the hotel, while elsewhere in the photo the elongated shadow of the bespectacled face of his son seemed to be another hint that the memory of the young student had not entirely faded.

But before beginning our stroll through Paris in search of Taha Hussein let us first make a detour via Montpellier, where he arrived with a bursary from the Egyptian government shortly before the First World War. Why Montpellier? I wondered.

"Perhaps because it was a provincial city," Moenis suggested, "and the students might have had less to distract them from their work there than in Paris. Perhaps someone thought that Egyptian students would feel more at home in Montpellier than in Paris because it was nearer to the Mediterranean. I never asked him. My father was trying to improve his French. He had already learned the rudiments of the language at the University of Cairo, where there was some kind of a course in French studies."

It was in Montpellier during the First World War that Taha Hussein met Suzanne Brisseau, whose family had moved there from Paris to escape the bombing. Suzanne had been preparing to take the entrance exam for the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles*, then



located in the Paris suburb of Sèvres, but had had to interrupt her studies when the family moved to Montpellier.

"Since my father was blind," Moenis went on as we stood outside the Hôtel Beauvoir, "he needed someone to help him with his French and to read to him. So he put an advertisement in a local paper. Suzanne applied for the job. However, she did more than read to him. She accompanied him to his lectures at the Montpellier Arts Faculty, and later, when they were both in Paris, she would walk hand in hand with him from his lodgings to the Sorbonne."

Moenis and I set off along the route the young couple had taken all

those years ago. A few metres off the Boulevard Saint-Michel, they often stopped in front of a statue honouring two nineteenth-century chemists, Pierre-Joseph Pelletier and Joseph Bienaimé Caventou, who had done pioneering work in the struggle against tropical diseases. Today the bronze statue has disappeared but a stone monument is still there, adorned with medallions honouring the two scientists. The route they took passes by what is now the Egyptian Cultural Centre.

Taha Hussein and Suzanne Brisseau wished to marry. As we continued our stroll, Moenis described the obstacles to the match and the surprising way in which they were overcome.

"My mother's family was horrified," he said, "at the thought that their daughter should marry an Egyptian student who was not only poor and Muslim but blind as well. My mother refused to yield. It was one of her uncles, a priest who was extremely intelligent and highly cultivated, who took the decisive step. At my grandmother's request he asked for an hour alone with my father. They went for a walk, my great-uncle holding my father's arm, and talked of this and that. When they returned, the priest said to his sister: 'Don't worry! Instead of opposing this marriage I think you should be delighted. This young man is a genius.' Suzanne already knew this. They were married on 2 August 1917."

Within five years, the student with dark glasses had won a bachelor's degree and a higher diploma (on Tacitus), passed the highly competitive *agrégation* examination for university teachers and been awarded a doctorate for his work on the fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldun. He had mastered Greek and Latin. Taha Hussein professed a boundless admiration for his two teachers, the distinguished Hellenist Gustave Bloch and the historian Charles Seignobos. He also attended lectures by Henri Bergson at the Collège de France, by the sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and the Orientalist Louis Massignon, for whom he had great respect.

He met Louis Aragon, Jules Romains and above all André Gide. His first encounter with Gide took place in Cairo just after the war and initiated a correspondence between the two writers. Their admiration was mutual: Hussein translated Gide's *Prométhée mal enchaîné* (1899) and *Thésée* (1946) into Arabic, while Gide wrote a preface for the French translation of Taha Hussein's great autobiographical novel *al-Ayyam* ("The Days").

But of all the French writers he knew, it was Etienne with whom he had the longest and deepest relationship. When he was Rector of the University of Alexandria in the early

1940s, Taha Hussein asked Etienne, then in the United States, to head the university's department of French studies. Etienne arrived in Egypt in 1944 and stayed four years. They remained close friends until Taha Hussein's death in 1973.

After returning to Egypt to become a university teacher, a famous writer, and a government minister, Taha Hussein often visited France—Paris, or for holidays in the Alps, the Massif Central or the Pyrenees.

"He loved France dearly. He loved the French mind, not the earthy, gaulish side. The verve of the chansonniers and their political allusions amused him. I often went with him to a bistrot for a drink and he delighted in listening to the talk going on around him. He had a marvellous sense of fun and was easily moved to laughter. He had a typically Egyptian laugh! At home we always spoke French. My mother never really learned Arabic. She spoke it sufficiently well to go shopping and to handle the situations of everyday life.

I think my father was happy to speak French at home. He wrote articles and lectures in French, but less from personal inclination than in response to requests. Arabic was the language in which he thought and felt. It was only later that he transferred his ideas and feelings into other languages."

Like Hussein Fawzi (1905-1988), whose wife, also French, kept an antique shop in Paris, like Kamel Hussein and Tawfiq al-Hakim, and like many other less illustrious Egyptian intellectuals, Taha Hussein followed the path opened by Tahtawi (1801-1873), the writer who came to France to study in 1830, one of the first Egyptians to do so.

In Egypt, then under British domination, the cultural ideal was French. Taha Hussein took inspiration from this ideal, notably by developing Sainte-Beuve's critical method and the art of the short novel as practised by Maupassant. This profoundly non-conformist man turned his blindness and humble social origins to good account. For him, writing was a form of self-fulfilment.

But this special link with a country and its culture almost came to an end in 1956. Taha Hussein never forgave the French for their military intervention at Suez. Not that his political opinions were naive or simplistic. He had always been an uncompromising critic of French colonialism. But invading Egypt was for him unpardonable.

"Let's stop there, if you don't mind," Moenis said suddenly. "There's always a certain complicity between a father and his daughter, between a mother and her son. We were no exception. My father loved me very much, I know. There was never any conflict between us. There might have been one had I aspired to play a role in Arab literature. But I have never claimed to be able to write in Arabic, especially since my father was a man named Taha Hussein."

The last rays of the setting sun bathed the city. The fading colours spread out like an artist's palette, in contrasts of light and shade.

Our walk was over. ■

The three volumes that comprise Taha Hussein's autobiography have been translated into English as:

*An Egyptian Childhood*, translated by E H Paxton. Heinemann Educational, London/Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C., 1932, new edition 1981.

*The Stream of Days: a student at the Azhar*, translated by Hilary Wayment Longman, London & New York, 1943, 1948.

*A Passage to France*, translated by Kenneth Craig E J Brill Ltd, Leiden, Netherlands, 1976

Other works by Taha Hussein published in English:

*The Future of Culture in Egypt*, translated by Sidney Glazer. American Council of Learned Societies, Washington, D.C., 1954/ reprinted by Octagon Books, New York, 1975.

*The Call of the Curlew*, translated by A B As-Safi. E J Brill Ltd, Leiden, Netherlands, 1980

**CHARBEL DAGHER**  
is a Lebanese writer and journalist. He has translated Rimbaud's correspondence into Arabic (1986) and has published many other works including a study of modern Arabic poetry, *Poétique arabe moderne* (1988), and a collection of poetry, *Miettes du blanc* (1981).

O U T L O O K

## HOW YOUNG PEOPLE SEE UNESCO TODAY

Thirty young people from twenty-three countries took part in a seminar on Unesco and its work held at Unesco's Paris HQ from 2 to 13 October 1989 (see box page 50). We publish here extracts from a letter which they wrote to the Director-General of Unesco, Mr. Federico Mayor.



These two weeks have given us the chance to learn much about Unesco. There is no doubt that our work in the different youth organizations to which we belong will benefit greatly. At the end of this seminar we should like to draw in broad outline our picture of Unesco as it is today.

**An intergovernmental organization.** By definition, Unesco brings together a large number of states and provides a forum for dialogue and the exchange of ideas and information with a view to carrying out the objectives defined in its Constitution. But inherent in the very diversity of Unesco's objectives and constituency there is a risk that a bureaucracy may emerge and come between the different parties involved. We feel that there is the danger of a breakdown in communication between the populations of the member states and the Unesco

secretariat. We therefore think it essential that the Organization should maintain close contact with its grass roots.

**Neutrality.** Unesco cannot intervene directly in the affairs of member states in order to achieve its aims. But we feel that this neutrality should not prevent the Organization from protesting when it is evident that the ideals which it defends are not being respected by a member state. To maintain its credibility, particularly in the eyes of oppressed populations, Unesco must continue to point the way towards a just and humane society, independent of the vicissitudes of world politics.

**The commitment of member states.** The resolutions taken within Unesco do not always seem to be applied by member states. We should like to see the member states as enthusiastic and<sup>1</sup>involved as the

Unesco secretariat, and especially that they should be active in the promotion and teaching of human rights. We should like a more effective follow-up and a more stringent evaluation of the action taken by member states in connection with programmes drawn up by Unesco experts.

**A very ambitious programme.** An extremely wide range of tasks is assigned to Unesco by its Constitution and the Organization's programmes are very comprehensive. There is a danger that resources will be spread too thinly. Some of us would prefer Unesco to concentrate its efforts more, while others think that all Unesco's tasks are important and that none should be abandoned. In any case greater efficiency should be sought, for example by strengthening co-operation with non-governmental organizations, a potential source of energy which is far from negligible.

**Youth.** Unesco is an international organization which gives a hearing to

young people. But most young people are unaware of the existence of an international secretariat which is interested in their activities. We should like young people of all countries to have access to more information about those Unesco activities which concern them. We should also like to see regular contact between Unesco and young people. Finally, we should like to see the development of structures within which young people can take part in regional, national and international activities. Unesco should encourage the development of a social conscience among young people of all countries, so that they will consider themselves to be citizens of the world.

**Information.** Unesco has a very important role to play in the dissemination of information. We should like to see a greater media coverage of Unesco's many activities so as to familiarize the public with the ideals of the Organization. This public information effort should be carried out

both in the developing countries and in the industrialized countries, as the latter seem to us to be relatively unaware of Unesco and its work. We also feel that the wealth of documentation produced by Unesco experts could be more widely distributed. People in all parts of the world should have access to it.

Finally, we realize that carrying out such a complex task is bound to be difficult. However, we believe that the task is worthwhile and full of promise. We all believe in it and undertake to further it through our work with the young people whom we represent. We wish to assure you that we sincerely appreciate the opportunity to take part in this seminar, and should like to thank all the Unesco staff who have given us a warm and friendly welcome.

On behalf of the participants:  
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## The way ahead together

The young people who attended the seminar are youth leaders, members of Unesco Clubs, or participants in Unesco's Associated Schools Project, or in youth activities within the National Commissions for Unesco. They came from 23 countries: (Europe) Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Fed. Rep. of Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, USSR, Yugoslavia; (Africa) Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Togo, Uganda, Zaire; (Latin America) Colombia, Haiti, Uruguay; (Arab states) Tunisia.

### Unesco Clubs

are groups of people of all ages and from a variety of professional backgrounds who share Unesco's ideals, endeavour to make them known, and associate themselves with Unesco by taking part in activities inspired by the Organization's work. The movement to which they belong has gradually spread throughout the world. In 1989 there were more than 3,500 Unesco Clubs in over 100 countries.

### Unesco's Associated Schools Project

aims to promote international co-operation and peace, human rights and fundamental freedoms through in-school education. It is a unique and valuable mechanism for experiment and innovation in educating tomorrow's citizens. The result of a joint effort by Unesco, National Commissions for Unesco and ministries of education, the Project involves teachers, students and others who work together to help young people understand that, in an interdependent world, countries and peoples must learn to understand each other and work together for a better future for humanity. In 1989, some 2,300 educational institutions in 98 countries were involved in the Project.

### National Commissions for Unesco,

created by member states in order to co-operate with Unesco, are organizations of government representatives and various groups with an interest in the problems of education, science, culture and communication. Advisory, liaison, information and executive bodies, they make an important contribution to the planning and execution of Unesco's work. During the last decade, National Commissions have carried out and publicized the results of a wide range of studies and surveys, and have organized many symposia and meetings related to Unesco programmes.



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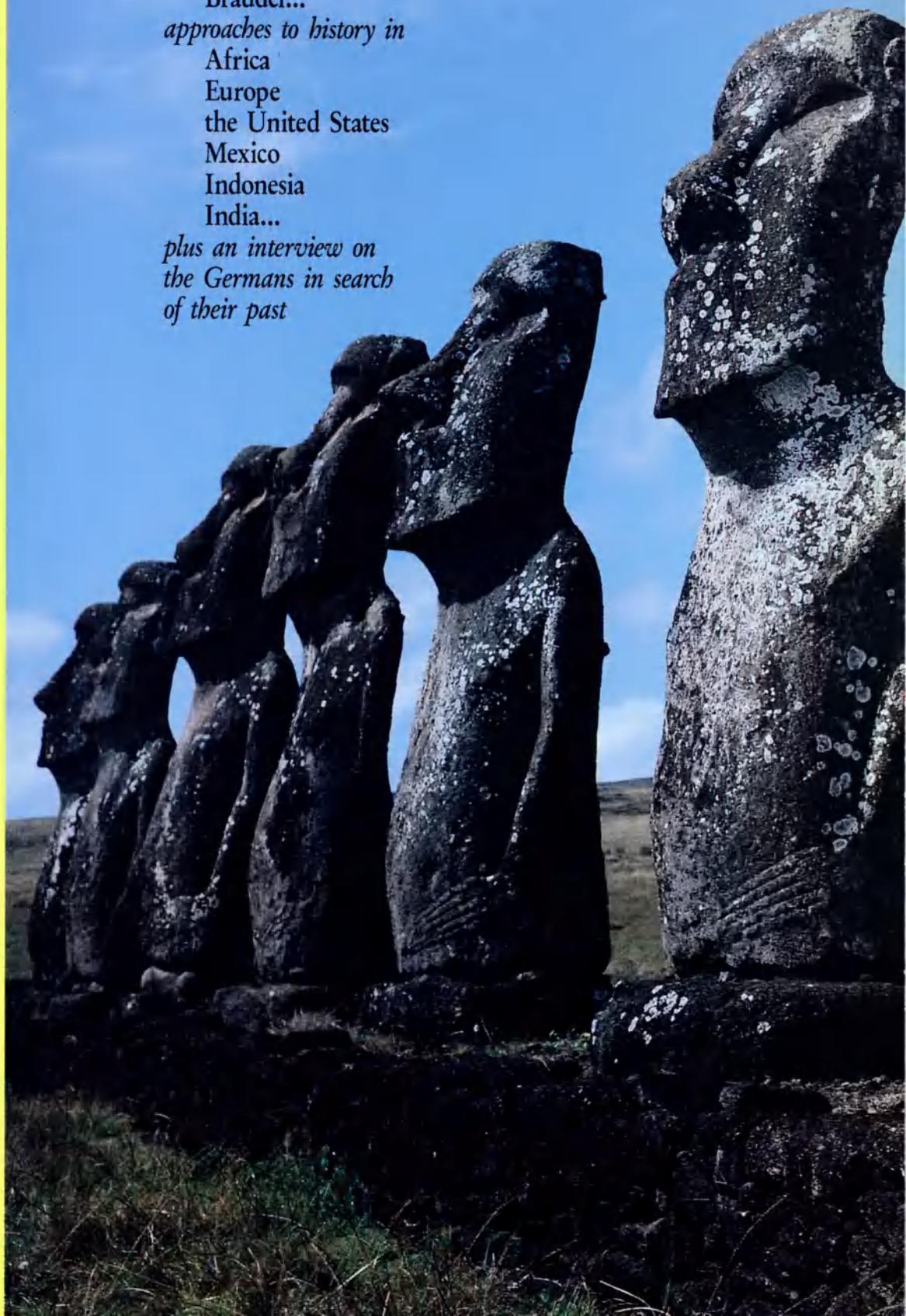
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