

TRUE HISTORY AND FALSE HISTORY IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY *

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Like all works of literature, works of history end up sooner or later with a readership quite different from that envisaged or hoped for by their authors. A subtle and polemical work such as *The Gallic War* of Caesar has become a standard text for teaching Latin in the early years of secondary education, as have the tender and sophisticated elegies of Tibullus and Propertius. In Italy, the unpopularity of 'The Betrothed' by A. Manzoni, a finely ironical and difficult but rewarding novel, is the result of the distaste or boredom experienced by children forced to read it at school.

A similar fate has dogged Thucydides. As T. P. Wiseman has recently emphasized,¹ Thucydides and Polybius, precisely because their historical method is close to our own, are regarded as the paradigms against which to judge ancient historical writing—quite wrongly. In fact they are untypical and exceptional; and one has moreover to ask to what extent they were even properly understood in antiquity. In a famous chapter near the beginning of his work (I. 22. 4), Thucydides proudly distances it from that of Herodotus, though without naming him: his own history is not designed for passing appreciation, but is to be of permanent value. Because human nature is always the same, a critical record of past events will present analogies and resemblances when compared with future developments. Knowledge of the past is thus useful, because it improves one's judgment and understanding and even suggests how to behave in situations in which one may find oneself.

Nowadays, we tend to be sceptical of the capacity of history or historical knowledge to teach us anything; but Thucydides, proud of his historical method, shared with many others in antiquity the view that knowledge of historical events was of practical educational value; he also believed, of course, that the narrative of these events should be innocent of any trace of the spectacular, designed to entertain the reader.

It is clear enough that Thucydides, a politician before he was a historian, regarded himself as writing for politicians like himself—men with their roots in the compact and integrated world of the Greek *polis*, within which the whole of their activity belonged, practical, economic, intellectual. The history of Thucydides, like the comedy of Aristophanes, is a product of the civilization of the *polis* of the late fifth century B.C. and its *raison d'être* disappeared with that civilization. With few exceptions, the methodological lessons of Thucydides were ignored in antiquity, to be picked up only in the modern world. In fact, the *History* of Thucydides is at once a narrative of certain historical events and a critical evaluation of those events. I do not know how many of the politicians of his day were in a position to follow Thucydides through the thickets of his analysis. Even when the work was read and studied with the intention of imitating its literary style and of learning from its moral outlook, the sheer difficulties of understanding were enormous. In the Age of Classicism, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, literary critic and historian, remarks in his treatise on Thucydides that 'the number of those who can understand Thucydides fully is limited, and even these cannot understand some passages without the help of a linguistic commentary' (*de Thuc.* 51).

In the end, the struggle for conceptual clarity and the concern for brevity succeeded in making the text of Thucydides obscure. More seriously, the decline and collapse of the political and cultural world of the *polis* in the course of the fourth century finally made it impossible, or almost impossible, to understand the political significance of the work—precisely the aspect to which Thucydides attached most importance. A marvellous piece of committed history writing soon became a simple example of historical narrative, more

* This paper was read as a Lady Margaret Lecture at Christ's College, Cambridge and to Professor Millar's seminar. I should like to thank the Master of Christ's College and Professor Millar for their invitations, Michael Crawford for the translation and the audiences on both occasions for their comments. I have added some indispensable annotation. In general, I owe an enormous debt to A. Momigliano and in particular to the reflections in 'Tradition and the

Classical Historian', *History and Theory* 11 (1972) 279-93 (= *Quinto Contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico*, I (1975) 14-31) and 'The Historians of the Classical World and their Audiences: some suggestions', *Annali Scuola Normale Pisa*, ser. III, 8 (1978) 59-75 (= *Sesto Contributo*, I (1980) 361-76).

¹ *Clio's Cosmetics. Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (1979) 149 ff. and passim.

difficult than earlier or later examples, but not different in kind. Yet in fact their methodologies and aims were quite different.

The *History* of Thucydides became one of a sequence of historical works, on the analogy of the Epic Cycle.² For, in order to provide a background for the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides outlined historical developments after the Persian Wars, in the course of which the Hellenic alliance led by Athens emerged as an Athenian empire. Thucydides hardly did this in order to provide a link with the *History* of Herodotus, for which he could have had no sympathy. Nonetheless, Thucydides was considered a continuator of Herodotus, with a change of style and of cultural context. In the same way, fourth century historians like Xenophon and Theopompus and even the author of the so-called Hellenica of Oxyrhynchus wrote histories which began where Thucydides broke off. Xenophon was an honest man, but an abyss lay between his historical understanding and that of Thucydides, whose work he set out to edit. Theopompus was a historian whose interests were predominantly cultural and who catered for tastes and interests which were close to those of the Hellenistic world. Put in position in such a sequence, Thucydides became a classic, with all that this implies in terms of use for educational purposes and as a model for the recovery of classical norms, moral as well as literary. Such a use was of course essentially an elite phenomenon, characteristic of conservative circles and not of 'popular' culture. Thucydides became part of a 'canon' of historians, the definition of which is attributed by H. I. Marrou to the School of Pergamum in the second century B.C.³ The problem, for whom a literary 'canon' was designed, in whose interests an author became a classic, involves the whole problem of the diffusion of culture in antiquity. It is enough in this context to say that the intention in creating a 'canon' of historians was to provide a continuous exposition of Greek history, while at the same time providing a sequence of literary models.

The presence of an author in the 'canon' does not mean that he was widely used in schools or read in general, any more than does his presence in a library catalogue; the same argument applies to modern bibliographies, where many authors are more cited than read. In fact there is an example of a library catalogue from antiquity, from the Gymnasium of Tauromenium in the second century B.C., where it is clear that the historians listed—Callisthenes, Philistus, Fabius Pictor—are the result of a political choice and provide no evidence for literary taste.⁴

The point that must be emphasized, in any case, is that Thucydides was read in a political sense for a very short period and by very few people, in the latter case as the author himself expected. Thereafter, the work had few readers, as Dionysius remarked, though they seem to have been widely scattered, including some Greeks in Egypt—where, as M. P. Nilsson observed, people seem to have read a bit of everything.⁵

The same fate overtook Polybius, whose *History*, politically committed, grew from a reaction to the Roman acquisition of the hegemony of the Mediterranean in the second century B.C. The fate of the work of Polybius has always seemed to me even sadder than that of Thucydides. Polybius set out to analyse, with a historical method and a critical approach close to those of Thucydides, the causes of the Roman rise to power. He dealt with military and political institutions, he described land and sea battles using his own tactical and strategical experience, he was aware to a certain extent of economic factors; he criticized on good methodological grounds contemporary and earlier historians; above all, he understood, despite doubts and uncertainties, the lack of any real legitimation for Roman hegemony. But for whom was he committing to writing all these fundamental points? At the stage of the final redaction of the work, after 146 B.C., Carthage had disappeared from the face of the earth; the Hellenistic monarchies had been defeated or destroyed altogether; the *poleis* of classical Greece had been razed to the ground, like Corinth, or deprived of political importance, like Athens. Who was left in the Greek world to appreciate the historical and political lessons of Polybius? No-one. Polybius himself said that his type of history writing was aimed at specialist readers, hence few readers, while other genres—

² L. Canfora, 'Il "ciclo" storico,' *Belfagor* 26 (1971) 653-70.

³ *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'Antiquité* (1965) 245 ff., 405-406. Further bibliography in B. Virgilio, *Studi Classici e Orientali* 29 (1979) 133 n. 5.

⁴ G. Manganaro, *Parola del Passato* 29 (1974) 389-409, now in A. Alföldi, *Römische Frühgeschichte* (1977) 83-96.

⁵ M. P. Nilsson, *Die hellenistische Schule* (1955) 96.

genealogy, myth, foundations of cities—found greater favour, as being of greater interest and amusement (IX. 1).

Precisely because committed history writing is in the first instance the result of an urge of the historian himself, he is often aware that he is writing something at odds with the temper of the time. Livy, in his Preface, turned to an idealized past of Rome to find strength to face the tragedy of the present; but he knew that the interest or the curiosity of his contemporaries were directed towards the dramatic events of the Civil Wars (*praef.* 4).

Polybius found a few readers at Rome, his friend Scipio Aemilianus and his friends; then in the first century B.C. Cicero, whom he greatly influenced. He then served as a source or a model for other historians—Posidonius, Livy, Josephus, Zosimus—but their aims were radically different.

One could multiply examples, but the conclusion would, I think, always be the same. We are always inclined to exaggerate the cultural significance of 'elevated' history writing in antiquity, not only in the cases of Thucydides and Polybius. For we are still influenced by the importance for western culture of the rediscovery of classical Greek historiography in the fifteenth century, when it was translated into Latin and entered into European consciousness.⁶ As a result, we incline to suppose that it had a similar influence in antiquity, whether because of the fact of its survival, even if only in part, or because its interests are relatively close to our own and our methods are derived in large measure from it or because it has served (and to a certain extent still serves) as a foundation for our own culture. Classical Greek historiography did have some influence in antiquity, but in very restricted circles (even if these were of some political and historical importance) and in a way which was quite different from that envisaged by the authors themselves.

The fact is that political history, varying in skill and value, but always principally interested in political, constitutional and military affairs, always co-existed with other forms of history writing, aimed at a somewhat different public. I have already mentioned Polybius' sharp and proud awareness of his isolated position in relation to more popular and less committed historical genres. But the practice of reading a work in public probably goes back to Herodotus, whose History was also characterised by narrative description and was full of interesting facts about strange or unknown places, about customs alien to those of the Greeks. At the end of the fifth century B.C., a historian such as the court doctor Ctesias, who worked in and wrote on Persia, had lived outside the traditional political and cultural world of the Greek *polis* and catered for a taste for exotic and fantastic tales. The decline of the *polis* in the course of the fourth century B.C. meant the end of a culture which was centripetal and *dirigiste*, whose concern was the life and liberty of an exclusive city-state, which absorbed all the energy and interest of its citizens. Already in the second half of the fourth century, the history of Ephorus and Theopompus, who were followed in the next century by Timaeus, although it started from the same point of view as classical Greek historiography, went beyond mere political and military history. It picked up the wider interests of Herodotus, concerned itself with barbarian culture and became universal history.

The widening of geographical and cultural horizons which followed the Asiatic conquests of Alexander produced a profound shift in cultural interest, not least because new levels of society were now involved in political and historical processes; their influence was not only economic and social, but cultural also. And the cultural milieu which resulted was a far cry from the all-embracing culture of the classical *polis*. As a result, even Polybius, despite his methodological debt to Thucydides, has cultural interests which are much wider than those of his model, has a much more 'modern' approach, as E. A. Freeman correctly observed.⁷

In the Hellenistic period, changing cultural interests and the responses thereto of historians meant that historical research lost much of its political element and returned to traditional narrative forms, which had lost ground in the face of a developing historical criticism. The relationship between history and poetry goes back to earliest times and the origin of historical narrative is in a sense unintelligible without it; the poetry of Homer

⁶ A. Momigliano, 'Polybius' Reappearance in Western Europe', in *Polybe* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique xx) (1974)

347-72 (= *Sesto Contributo* 1, 103-23).

⁷ *History of Federal Government in Greece and Italy* (1893) 175 ff.

was always regarded as a historical text. At the end of the classical period and in the Hellenistic period, the mythical and legendary phases of Greek prehistory and protohistory, with their store of divine and heroic genealogies, which had been eliminated from Thucydides' history or used as evidence for purely human history, recovered a role and function in works of history. History writing turned once more to these elements in the Greek cultural heritage not in order to rationalize them, but in order to make use of anything which could be regarded as plausible or possible.⁸ The change must reflect a change in the tastes and interests of readers who belong to levels of society not previously of social or cultural significance.

We are in a world which is far removed from that of Thucydides or even Polybius. But only so can we understand why there now flourished a dramatic approach to history, which sought to involve the emotions of the reader; Polybius found it dangerous and insidious, and resisted it.

It is in this context that the novel develops, with its close links with local history and its proliferation of fantastic and exciting episodes. The subject matter of the earliest novels were historical or pseudo-historical persons, sometimes national heroes of the distant past, around whom myths and legends had clustered.⁹ The novel is thus a lesser form of history writing, which attracts its readers by its emphasis on the fantastic or the erotic, both elements which are present in so-called dramatic history. It has been remarked that the novel is a democratic genre.¹⁰ Rightly, and for two reasons: the protagonist is always a private individual and the genre caters for the taste of levels of society other than the élite of the classical *polis*.

In addition, an enormous paradoxographical literature reflects one of the central concerns of middle-brow culture in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.¹¹ An awareness of the miraculous and the fantastic were of course already present in Greek epic poetry, in part because the strange and the portentous were regarded as a way of introducing the divine into the world of men. Miracles and portents occur in Herodotus and Ctesias and figure largely in Theopompus, in the context of descriptions of foreign peoples. The scientific interests of Aristotle and Theophrastus necessarily involved the study of freaks and remarkable phenomena in the world of nature.

But it was only later that people took to noting for its own sake anything extraordinary or abnormal and hence interesting in the world of men. The extension of geographical knowledge after Alexander encouraged contact with distant peoples, to whom strange customs could be attributed, and with previously unknown countries, where stories of the most fantastic kind could be located. The result was the emergence of a literature which was specifically and explicitly paradoxographical; in some cases, for instance that of Callimachus, learned research was involved; but the result for the most part was a pseudo-historical literature, popular and escapist.

Its unifying characteristic was its acceptance without question of any available information; the problem of the truth or credibility of the phenomena or facts, which were presented, was simply not raised, since the question of truth was not present in the minds of readers.

The genre of literature which resulted, along with the exotic, the portentous, the abnormal, jumbled up myths, heroic legends, genuine historical and geographical data, scientific information. The result was a fascinating mosaic, which could always be further elaborated. The search for novelty encouraged ever more daring ventures: it was not for nothing that the first century A.D. mythographer and paradoxographer Ptolemy Chennos called his work 'A New History'.¹² It was even possible to resort to serious works of history in order to excerpt strange and fantastic details.

⁸ Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics*, 143 ff.

⁹ Plut., *De Is. et Osir.* 24, 360b; M. Braun, *History and Romance in Graeco-Oriental Literature* (1938).

¹⁰ E. Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (1967) 63.

¹¹ The texts are collected by A. Giannini, *Paradoxographorum Graecorum Reliquiae* (n.d. but 1967). See also id., 'Studi sulla paradossografia greca I.

Da Omero a Callimaco: motivi e forme del meraviglioso', *Rend. Ist. Lombardo, Cl. Lettere* 97 (1963) 247-66; 'II. Da Callimaco all'età imperiale: la letteratura paradossografica', *Acme* 17 (1964) 99-140. Ziegler, *RE*, s.v. Paradoxographoi, 1139 ff., remains fundamental.

¹² K.-H. Tomberg, *Die κωνή ιστορία des Ptolemaios Chennos* (1968).

None of our normal critical yardsticks is appropriate to such literature. Indeed, it already presented a problem to ancient writers on historiography. Its concern was not to distinguish the true from the false or to establish the cause, but to provide lively and highly-coloured pictures of milieus and situations, whose historicity was already accepted. Pseudo-historical or paradoxographical narrative was enriched with learned trivia, intended to ensure greater verisimilitude and hence win greater acceptance; such trivia also reflected the ever greater role played by antiquarian learning in education, as Marrou has pointed out.¹³ Antiquarian learning was understood as covering mythology, genealogical and heroic legends, geography and the material necessary for an understanding of Greek poetry. The 'history as fable' (*historia fabularis*) which diverted the emperor Tiberius (Suet., *Tib.* 70. 3) was linked to this kind of educational interest. The emperor was at his most serious when he was debating with his grammarian friends and discussing the name of the mother of Hecuba.

Sophisticated antiquarian learning and the citation of recondite sources conveyed to the reader an impression of scholarship, which was in many cases simply a further element of fantasy. The so-called *Lesser Parallel Lives*, handed down among the works of Plutarch, are a paradoxographical work, which cites sources existing only in the imagination of the author, along with the material actually presented;¹⁴ the same technique is liberally employed by the author (authors) of the *Historia Augusta*. This is the principal factor which distinguishes the work from the *Lives of the Caesars* of Suetonius, a learned work composed in imitation of precise literary models.

Writers on historiography in the Hellenistic and Roman periods found that within the vast field of historical literature they had to distinguish between true history and 'false' history, the latter constructed out of myths and genealogies, and finally 'history resembling true history', under which they classified comedy and mime.¹⁵ The problem was further complicated because it was an open question whether history was the province of grammarians or of rhetoricians, a distinction which was important in an educational context. What is relevant for our present purposes is that the tripartite division of historical literature reveals that there was in widespread circulation 'false' history; it must have had many adherents, if the necessity was felt in the course of a theoretical discussion to explain the approaches and characteristics of true history and 'false' history. It is also worth remarking that the theory I have outlined went on to assign to true history not only human actions located in time and space, but also the biographies of gods and heroes alongside those of famous men. In other words, divine history was accepted as a narrative of events.

Other texts confirm the extent of the diffusion of 'false' history. In the middle of the second century A.D., Lucian gave the title of 'A True History' to a utopian fantasy involving a journey to the moon; he found it necessary to remark ironically in his preface that he was going to tell stories, albeit possessed of verisimilitude and credibility; earlier poets, historians, philosophers, from Homer to Ctesias and Iambulus, had propounded similar falsehoods and been taken seriously.¹⁶ At about the same time, Aulus Gellius, browsing in the bookstalls in the harbour of Brindisi, found works of paradoxography, not works of history (*N.A.* ix. 4). In the middle of the fourth century A.D., the emperor Julian intended to lay down for his new pagan clergy a curriculum of reading of history of real events; by way of contrast he intended to ban the type of history which was full of fantasy and eroticism, what we should call novels.¹⁷

It is worth pausing to reflect on the scientific dress with which the historical literature I have been discussing often invested itself, specially at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. It is not simply a question of erudite citation of sources, but of the actual content of the narrative, closely concerned with the world of nature, animals, minerals, physics, geography. It seems clear that we have here something which reflects the scientific and technical progress made in the Hellenistic period between the fourth and the second cen-

¹³ *Histoire de l'éducation* 254; 409.

¹⁴ F. Jacoby, 'Die Überlieferung von Ps. Plutarchs Parallela Minora und die Schwindelautoren', *Mnemosyne*, ser. III, 8 (1940) 73-144.

¹⁵ *Sex. Emp., Adv. Math.* I 253-5; 258-61 (reproducing arguments of Asclepiades of Myrleia): S. Mazzarino, *Il Pensiero Storico Classico*, I (1966)

486-494; for a different view. W. J. Slater, 'Asclepiades and History', *Greek Roman and Byzant. Studies* 13 (1972) 317-33. Cf. also *Rhet. ad Her.* I 12-16.

¹⁶ *Historia Vera* I 1-4.

¹⁷ *Epist.* 89, 301 b-c.

turies B.C. The effect of this progress may be seen in a remarkable flowering of scientific literature covering every field of human knowledge, including ethnography and anthropology. For whatever reason, the advent of Roman rule saw the end of the phenomenon.

The Hellenistic period is an age of contradictions. Initially science and reason co-existed with unreason and the love of the fantastic; in the end, the latter prevailed. In his justly famous book, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E. R. Dodds posed the problem of the contrast between reason and unreason in the third century B.C.¹⁸ His attention was directed above all to philosophical problems and to the decline of traditional religiosity; but an analogous approach is possible in the field of historiography. Elements of unreason are present not only in paradoxography, but also in history. Dodds rightly noted that the great age of Greek rationalism, between the fourth and third centuries, was not a period characterized by the widespread enjoyment of political liberty and that therefore one cannot attribute any check or discouragement to intellectual development to loss of liberty. It is rather a fear of the liberty which did exist in the open society of the Hellenistic period that provoked the irrational urges which we can observe and finally called in Fate as arbiter. It seems to me that this explanation captures important elements of the truth and can be linked to some further reflections. The end of the regime of the *polis* and of its integrated culture favoured the development of the rationalism of the fourth and third centuries. History understood as cultural history, as in the case of Theopompus, presupposes the passing of earlier schemata and an interest in a larger public with wider interests. The social basis of unreason is even wider, new levels of society outside the traditional governing classes. Rationalism and unreason are two aspects of freedom, cultural freedom from the trammels of the *polis*.

The novel, paradoxography, history as fable—all are different ways of dealing with reality, of describing it and explaining it, regarding it as essentially miraculous, but allowing it a scholarly aspect; in other words, they deliberately reject the intellectual methods which had been created to investigate it critically. Similarly with the decline of traditional religiosity; in both cases the move came from levels of society only recently absorbed and in both cases the change had far-reaching implications.

The classical revival of the Augustan period, which aimed to recover the classical aspect of Greek culture and rejected Hellenistic culture *en bloc*, can be regarded as in a certain sense a rationalist revival also; Dionysius of Halicarnassus was quite right to suppose that it was limited to the upper classes.¹⁹ The movement was an important one in terms of the history of culture and influenced the ruling class of the Roman Empire down to the fourth century A.D., but its impact outside that class was limited. It was Christianity which played the larger role in revitalizing the literary content and form of classical culture.

But at the same time Christianity admitted a substantial romantic and miraculous element into its hagiographical texts, particularly those of a popular nature aimed at a general public.²⁰ Miracles, of course, were intended to convince simple minds to follow the way of salvation and were an obvious form of propaganda; ²¹ at the same time, as Marrou has observed, the dimension of the invisible is a prominent motif in late antiquity.²² But it must also be remarked that the presence of the miraculous in the lives of Saints and in the Acts of the Martyrs provides further confirmation of the taste and the public attracted by this kind of material in pagan times.

After these general reflections, I should like to turn to two specific examples, which show how easy it was to pass from an ostensibly scientific approach to the fantastic and the miraculous and how shifting are the boundaries between high learning and popular forms of historical literature.

* * *

A typical field for the display of Hellenistic erudition was the writing of works on islands and their settlements. Even the great Callimachus wrote a work of this kind.²³ The reasons

¹⁸ *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) 245 ff.

¹⁹ *De ant. orat.* I 3, 1.

²⁰ R. Söder, *Die Apokryphen-Geschichte und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike* (1932).

²¹ L. Cracco Ruggini, in *La Storiografia ecclesiastica nella Tarda Antichità* (1980) 186 n. 51.

²² *Décadence romaine ou Antiquité tardive?* (1977).

²³ R. Pfeiffer, *Callimachus* I (1949) 339; 404 (fr. 580).

for the practice are complex. Basically, an island was always considered as a privileged location for the occurrence of natural phenomena, the emergence of unusual human situations, the development of the exotic and the miraculous. An example of this 'island' literature survives in the Fifth Book of the 'Historical Library' of Diodorus Siculus, a compiler of the age of Caesar, to whom we shall return; the book is entirely composed of histories of islands.

One can distinguish without too much difficulty the various components, or rather levels, of the ancient interest in islands. Observations of natural phenomena had from the beginning provoked scientific reflection, along with an interest in practical matters of navigation and geography. A logical consequence of this was that large-scale natural phenomena were regarded as factors in human history, not only because they conditioned human behaviour, but also because they were one of the elements which were associated with human behaviour, in curious and significant coincidence. They often marked the beginning of new phases of human existence. These concepts are even present in Thucydides (I. 23. 3), who noted the concatenation of great natural disasters in the period of the Peloponnesian War and their political effect. Sometimes an earthquake appears as a sign of war (II. 8. 3; III. 89. 2-5).

Polybius, under the influence of Stoic philosophy, noted how great natural disasters, such as floods, epidemics, dearths, can bring about the destruction of the human race and its achievements; this had actually happened in the past; and the result for the survivors was the beginning of a new historical cycle, with the development of civilization and hence of constitutional forms.²⁴ Plato had already expressed analogous ideas in the *Critias* (109d-110b), involving consideration of the cultural consequences of cataclysms: the few survivors lose their memory of earlier history and remember at the most their names, occupied as they are with the rebuilding of society. Reflection and historical reconstruction occur only later, at a time of repose and contentment, when the necessities of life have been obtained.

Above all, great natural disasters on land and at sea were a reality with which the Greeks had to live. Numerous and elaborate theories in the field of seismology were early elaborated, linked of course to ideas of geography. The two principal theories were the pneumatic and the Neptunic. Aristotle actually regarded the origin of earthquakes as lying in the weather. Popular beliefs linked these strange phenomena with the world of the gods and used them to interpret myths and legends.²⁵

Within the field of Hellenistic historiography, historians and antiquarians such as Demetrius of Callatis and Demetrius of Scepsis drew up lists of all earthquakes which had occurred in Greek lands and changes which had resulted from volcanic activity.²⁶ The geographer Strabo, our principal source for Greek geographical science, is careful to note that among the consequences on volcanic activity on land and at sea is the emergence of islands in the sea and the submersion of continents, of which some elements remain as islands. Even Attica was what remained of a submerged continent, according to Plato (*Critias* 111a-b). In other cases, the separation of portions of land from a continent forms islands; or, on the other hand, islands have become promontories.²⁷ The Lipari Islands, in particular, lent themselves to accounts of this kind, which often went far beyond what was credible (Strabo v. 4. 9 = Timaeus 566 F 58).

The most remarkable cases of volcanic activity in historical times were the brief emergence in 197 B.C. of an island in the Aegean Sea between Thera and Therasia (Strabo I. 3. 17) and in 46 B.C. of the island Theia (Pliny, *N.H.* II 202). But the most celebrated cases of all were the supposed emergences of the islands of Delos and Rhodes. The birth of Rhodes was already the theme of some famous verses in the Seventh Olympian Ode of Pindar (VII. 50 ff.).

Simply for scientific reasons, then, an island was something worthy of particular attention. The transition to the field of human history was easy. It was supposed that on an island it was easier to realize a *rapport* between man and nature; and I should like to

²⁴ Polyb. VI 5. 5-6.

²⁵ Capelle, *RE* Suppl. IV, s.v. Erdbebenforschung, 344-74.

²⁶ Strabo I 3. 17 (Demetrius Scepsis); 20 (Demetrius Call. = *FGrHist* 85 F 6).

²⁷ E.g. Strabo I 3. 10; 3. 16 ff.; VI I. 6; 2. 10-11. Strabo adopts the views of Posidonius.

remind you that Rousseau, in his 'Discours sur l'origine et les fondamens de l'inegalité parmi les hommes',²⁸ echoing remarks made in antiquity, held that it was precisely on islands, formed as a result of great natural disasters, that languages had been born, as a result of the compulsion on the survivors to create a life in common in a restricted space; the development of human societies followed. I remind you also that Caesar placed the origin of the religion of the Druids in the British Isles, whence it passed to the continent.²⁹

Furthermore, in the history of archaic Greece, centred on the Aegean Sea, the islands had had an obvious practical significance: routes across the sea passed by them, and they were, with their harbours and springs of fresh water, indispensable stages in any voyage. In a geo-political context, the control of the islands is the fundamental aspect of any thalassocracy, whether it is that of Minos, Agamemnon or the Athenians, or that of the Etruscans in the west.³⁰ Plato held that the expansion of the state of Atlantis occurred via the control of the islands of the Mediterranean, from Egypt to Etruria (*Critias* 114c). The theme became a cliché: in the second century A.D., the Alexandrian historian Appian used Roman control over the islands of the Mediterranean to prove the superiority of the Roman Empire over all earlier empires.³¹

In the context of the political history of Athens, her resemblance to an island became an essential characteristic of her imperialism, discussed in connection with the problem of the food-supply and the grain-trade. Athens was at the centre of the world and at the point where all routes by land and sea met, by reason of her geographical position as isolated as if she were an island. These concepts are to be found expressed with great clarity in the pamphlet on the Constitution of Athens by the so-called Old Oligarch, in the *Critias* of Plato and by Xenophon in his account of the finances of Athens. For Plato, the island of Atlantis combined self-sufficiency with a position at the centre of the trade routes of the world (*Critias* 114d-e). Being in the centre of the world and of its climatic structure of course also affected the character of a people and its constitutional arrangements.³²

As far as islands are concerned, it is worth remembering that the Old Oligarch based an entire argument on the advantage for a *polis* in being an island.³³ It can dominate the sea and at the same time be secure from enemy attack; betrayal is impossible because one would not know to what enemy one could open the gates; civil war was thus impossible. The tragic civil strife on Corcyra of course disproved this line of reasoning; but political and military analysis of the advantages of a *polis* on an island remained important. Such a *polis* is regarded as politically independent and naturally protected, a centre of imperial activity, which can get what it wants from where it wants. On this view, to be an island in the sea was regarded as providing a source of wealth and power and as conducing to correct relations with other states.

Plato, on the other hand, and later Cicero (*Laws* IV. 705a; *de re pub.* II. 4) held the opposite view, that contact with the sea led to moral decline and racial mixture: with foreign goods come foreign ideas, which corrupt and confuse. But even in this context, the sea is still the means of contact; this view is as old as travel by sea and maritime trade, as old as attempts at maritime hegemony.

The view of the sea as a divisive factor is equally old.³⁴ It has its roots in the primitive idea of water as an element which serves to divide one thing from another, a religious notion which developed into a juridical concept. Implicit in this view is the concept of an island as something apart, untouched by corruption. It was characteristic of Greek historical and geographical thought at all stages to concern itself with ideal races far from our world; to such races, both in the past and in the present, were attributed experiments in approaches to the problems of human existence, of society, of government. It made little difference whether the accounts of such experiments were wholly utopian or had a basis in reality. It is not surprising that strange phenomena, whether natural or human, tended to be located on islands, distant, inaccessible, apart. The island is the characteristic element in paradoxographical literature; in this, human action is linked with the occurrence of natural phenomena; together, they become objects of speculation and subjects of fantasizing

²⁸ *Oeuvres complètes* III, 168-9 (Ed. Pleiade).

²⁹ *Caes., de bell. Gall.* VI 13, 11-12.

³⁰ *Thuc.* I. 4; 7. 2; 9. 3-4; 15. 1; *Diod.* v 13. 4.

³¹ *Hist. Roma. Praef.* 16-18.

³² *Xenoph., Poroi* I 6-7.

³³ *Ps. Xenoph.* II 14-16.

³⁴ R. v. Scheliha, *Die Wassergrenze im Altertum* (1931).

narrative. Here again, rational and scientific discourse become embroiled with the fantastic, the novelistic, the strange, the miraculous. To see this, one only has to consider how many of the episodes in the pseudo-Aristotelian essay, 'On marvellous things heard', are set on islands.

Let us look again for a moment at utopias. A utopia can be regarded as the result of the assertion of spontaneity as against reason. Thus nature, which renders up its fruits without the necessity of human labour, allows men to live in a state of nature, without any particular social organization, and makes trade unnecessary. Alternatively, a utopia can be regarded as the result of a social organization perfected by reason, as opposed to the normal world, which is corrupted by contact between communities. An island as home of a utopia is in both cases outside history and anti-historical.

An idealized and fantasized construct of this kind picks up and gives prominence to the idealistic constitutional arrangements propounded by philosophers. Naturally, utopias imagined in various periods reflect the concerns of those periods. The island of Scheria in the *Odyssey*, with its peaceful and well-ordered government, can be regarded as the first Greek utopia: 'We live isolated in the stormy sea; no mortal is in contact with us' (*Odyssey* VI. 204 ff.). It is significant that the generous welcome accorded to the shipwrecked Odysseus brought misfortune to the Phaeacians. The Platonic myth of Atlantis projects into a distant past a model derived from historical Greek and Athenian society, with some admixture of Persian and oriental elements.³⁵ Attempts to locate the island, supposed to have disappeared in a cataclysm along with the early *polis* of Athens, are one example of the close links between myth and scientific thought in the Hellenistic period.

That period, indeed, saw a proliferation of utopias, in which primitivist longings, already present in fourth century history writing, are combined with philosophical theories and egalitarian leanings.³⁶ It seems reasonable to argue that they arise in response to social crises of the period; and they offer an account of a Golden Age, located on distant islands, dressed up to suit contemporary taste.

At the beginning of the third century B.C., Euhemerus located on the island of Panchaia in the Indian Ocean a society which was highly structured into three classes and under the control of priests.³⁷ There may be some reference to contemporary Egyptian society; but it is more important to observe that the island is self-sufficient and that there is no private property. Elements of reality are furnished by the fact that the inhabitants were in part Cretan by origin, a fact allegedly demonstrated by an inscription recording the story of Ouranos and Zeus.

The utopia of Iambulus belongs to the middle of the third century B.C.; it is localized on the round island of the Sun, on the equator and one of an archipelago of seven. Full of scientific allusions, the utopia insists on life in a state of nature and on the importance of education; the organization of society and the distribution of land are based on egalitarian principles. In consequence, life on the island is one of bliss, surrounded by strange and symbolic animals. The inhabitants of the island are completely isolated from the rest of the world, but welcome strangers, only driving them away if they turn out to be incapable of reaching their own level of perfection.³⁸

Perhaps in the middle of the second century B.C., Dionysius Skytobrachion, following in the traces of Plato and Euhemerus, described in the course of a mythographical and romantic work two utopias—one in the west, an island called Hesperia in the lake of Tritonis, beyond the Columns of Hercules, inhabited and ruled by the Amazons; the other Nysa, a city on an island in a river, where Dionysus was supposed to have been brought up.³⁹

In works of this kind, it is not only that the highly coloured narrative catered to the tastes and cultural interests of readers; the construction of ideal societies was a response to

³⁵ P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Athènes et l'Atlantide. Structure et signification d'un mythe platonicien', *Revue Etudes Grecques* 77 (1964) 420-44.

³⁶ Cl. Mossé, 'Les utopies égalitaires à l'époque hellénistique', *Revue Hist.* 241 (1969) 297-308; J. Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World*, (1975) 73 ff.; 104 ff.; 122 ff.; L. Bertelli, 'Il modello della società rurale nell'utopia greca', in *Studi*

sull'utopia raccolti da L. Firpo (1977) 5-30.

³⁷ Diod. VI 1 (*FGrHist* 63 F 2); 41-6 (*FGrHist* 63 F 3). H. Braunert, 'Die heilige Insel des Euhemerus in der Diodor-Überlieferung', *Rh. Museum* 108 (1965) 255-68.

³⁸ Diod. II 55-60.

³⁹ Diod. III 53. 4-6 (*FGrHist* 32 F 7); 68. 5-69. 4 (*FGrHist* 32 F 8).

the social ambitions of the same readers, although it remains uncertain whether it was the utopia of Iambulus which provided ideological backing for the insurrection of Aristonicus, at Pergamum in 132 B.C.⁴⁰

All these Hellenistic utopian narratives, embellished with the highlights and purple patches of paradoxography, were regarded as historical texts. Euhemerus, Iambulus and Dionysius Skytobrachion are all known to us because their works were used in the 'Historical Library' of Diodorus Siculus. This work further included a utopian account of the Hyperboreans who lived on a large island off Gaul, as compiled by Hecataeus of Abdera at the end of the fourth century B.C.⁴¹ It is precisely works of this kind to which Lucian referred when he criticized the extravagant fantasies which were regarded as 'true history'.

The inclusion of utopias as if they were real societies by Diodorus, in the middle of the first century B.C., is significant. Wholly detached from the real world, these utopias were just as plausible and possible for the vast majority of their readers, who read novels as if they were history and who longed to escape from the present to an egalitarian dream-world. Diodorus is right to insist on the fact that such narratives deserve to be called history (v. 41. 4; 42. 4).

Accounts of island utopias in Diodorus stand side by side with social and political observations on some of the historical islands described in Book v.⁴² Thus, once upon a time, a communist regime existed on the Lipari Islands (v. 9-10); the inhabitants of Corsica are praised for their civilisation and humanity (v. 14), the Sardinians for their love of liberty; the inhabitants of the Balearic islands for their rejection of gold and silver in order not to be corrupted and for their peculiar marriage rites (v. 17-18).

Through Ennius, the philosophy and political outlook of Euhemerus had penetrated Roman society. It is not surprising, then, that a learned senator of the period before Sulla, Manilius(?), the author of the first Roman work of paradoxography, managed to speak quite seriously of the city of the Sun on the island of Panchaia and of Phoenice in Araby.⁴³ I should like to remind you in this context of another famous Roman politician, who was the author of a substantial work of antiquarian curiosity with a scientific bent, probably called *Admiranda*. The man is C. Licinius Mucianus, thrice consul, who acted as king-maker for Vespasian.⁴⁴

Returning to the first century B.C., the Roman general Sertorius, a younger contemporary of the senator who wrote on paradoxography, apparently hoped to escape from the tyranny of his enemies and from the horrors of civil war by fleeing to the Isles of the Blest, beyond the Columns of Hercules. Some sailors had actually described them to him, with their gentle and healthy climate and their luxuriant growth of edible fruits.⁴⁵ The desperate desire to escape from the tragic reality of the present and to recover a Golden Age recurs in Horace's famous Sixteenth Epode: written in the spring of 38 B.C., during the wars of the age of revolution, it comes only shortly after the Fourth Eclogue of Vergil, which belongs to 40 B.C. and is likewise dominated by longing to return to a Golden Age.⁴⁶

Escapism in the face of civil war may have replaced the egalitarian aspirations of the Hellenistic utopias, which Diodorus was including in his work as Vergil and Horace were writing; but we are evidently in the same spiritual and cultural milieu.

The idealization of human societies, perfect in their internal organization and their relationship with nature, was not limited to the construction of utopias. During the reign of Claudius, an embassy came to Rome from the King of Ceylon, where a Roman had by chance arrived.⁴⁷ Pliny, who records the event (*N.H.* vi. 84-91), was probably a witness. The forms of a utopia are presented anchored to a historical reality, which is distant, but nonetheless concrete; into the historical account there are insinuated implausible notices on the longevity of the inhabitants. The absence of slavery goes along—alas—with the fact

⁴⁰ For a discussion see F. Bömer, *Untersuchungen über die Religion der Sklaven in Griechenland und Rom* III (1961) 396-415 (Ak. Wiss. Mainz, Geistes- und Sozialwiss. Kl. 1961, Nr. 4).

⁴¹ Diod. II 47 (*FGvHist* 264 F 7); cf. Aelian., *Nat. Anim.* 11, 1 (*FGvHist* 264 F 12).

⁴² R. v. Pöhlmann, *Geschichte der Sozialen Frage und des Sozialismus in der antiken Welt*, 1³, 36 ff.

⁴³ Plin. *N.H.* x 4; Mommsen, *Ges. Schr.* VII 72-6.

⁴⁴ Peter, *HRR* II, cxxx-cxxxii; 101-107; Kappelmacher, *RE* s.v. Licinius, nr. 116, 440-5.

⁴⁵ Plut., *Sert.* VIII 2-5, IX 1.

⁴⁶ Ed. Fraenkel, *Horace* (1966) 52 ff.

⁴⁷ C. G. Starr, 'The Roman Emperor and the King of Ceylon', *Class. Phil.* 51 (1956) 27-30 (= *Essays in Ancient History* (1979) 258-261).

that even in Ceylon gold and silver are valued, despite their being contrary to nature ; and there are riches in the form of jewels and marbles. But there are no lawsuits and hence justice reigns without the presence of judicial organization. Some scholars have supposed that the elective nature of the monarchy and the absence of dynastic continuity feature in intentional opposition to the Roman Empire. But it is more likely that the whole portrayal of the island and its society, featuring prominently the exotic and the isolated, is in opposition to Roman society. It is easy to think of other examples of peoples more directly in contact with the Roman Empire whose portrayal serves to highlight in a negative and hostile sense the Roman world ; Germany as described by Tacitus is a case in point.

I should like to turn now to my second example. The materials of which paradoxographies were composed derive for the most part from local histories. The principal aim of these was to note and record the peculiarities and characteristic features of particular places and individuals. The origin of much of the content of Greek novels has been rightly seen as lying in the raw material of local history. In the light of what I have said, it is readily intelligible that the Hellenistic period saw an enormous development of local history. This observation on the development of local history leads one to consider another type of historical literature, which serves to demonstrate once again just how vague the boundaries were between the erudition which was real and was the preserve of a cultivated elite, and a popular version, full of legendary material.

Much Greek (and to a lesser extent Roman) historical tradition was always tied to cults and places of cult. Transmission of knowledge in such cases was ensured by priests and temple attendants, in the Greco-Roman world as well as in the east. It has long been observed that the priests cited by Herodotus as his informants for anecdotes and other material on Egyptian history were more likely temple attendants or temple guides—one thinks of the guide who translated for Herodotus a hieroglyphic inscription ; the translation had, however, clearly been invented (II. 125). Temple traditions in Egypt are related to statues, monuments, inscriptions, cult places in general, ritual. Historical information as such tends to be anecdotal and often scandalous, particularly if it refers to the private life of the kings. Priests, who give the appearance of being learned, in fact retail fables, oddities and portents. Sacerdotal tradition in fact is really popularizing, and its market is popular.

From the little we know of the Greeks who wrote on religious matters, the situation was not different in Greece.⁴⁸ Originally, sacred literature must have had a practical function and a limited circulation : information on ceremonies and rites was collected in order to be handed on within the priestly circle ; archives of often secret documents were created. Later, such archives acquired a literary form : accounts of religious law were published ; the historical origin of rituals and ceremonies, oblations and mysteries, was expounded ; professional exegetes produced works with a religious content. In the Hellenistic period, the tendency to publish arcane knowledge became stronger and the resulting literature often had a paradoxographical character. There was a growing interest in local cults ; specialized works were compiled on cults, temples, rituals, including any relevant legends or myths. Local patriotism fostered rivalry between cities—their mysteries, their oracles, the names of their gods all forming subjects for monographs.

In all this, along with temple archives, inscriptions, monuments, statues, literary texts were all used as sources. The material collected was used heavily by the Alexandrian poets and then by the compilers of guide-books. The greatest guide-book writer of the Hellenistic age, Polemon of Ilion, wrote dozens of books of this kind, on Greek cities, Italian cities, Sicilian cities and on Carthage. We can form some idea of the form and content of his work from the guide-book of Pausanias, who in the second century A.D. wrote a guide-book to Greece : ⁴⁹ we are accustomed to read it as a text-book on ancient art-history, but it is in fact a guide-book for tourists.

In works of this kind, obscure learning, the interpretation of an inscription or the minute description of a monument, co-exists with records of miracles and portents, with legends and myths. Pausanias often refers to local expounders of sacred lore, usually to

⁴⁸ A. Tresp, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Kultschriftsteller* (1914) (RVV xv, 1).

⁴⁹ G. Pasquali, 'Die schriftstellerische Form des Pausanias', *Hermes* 48 (1913) 161-223.

local histories or accounts of particular monuments, but sometimes to temple attendants and to guide-books deliberately prepared for visitors.⁵⁰

This kind of literature, directly linked with temples, priests and temple-attendants, seems not to have existed in the Roman world. The reason is presumably the lack of any kind of separate priestly class and the different role of the temple in the civic structure of the Roman world. Nonetheless, attendants will certainly have provided information to visitors, factual and legendary. The attendant of the Temple of Tellus at Rome, who was the host to Varro and his friends during the dialogue which forms the *De Re Rustica*, was no doubt a person of education.⁵¹

Already in the Republican period, there were guide-books of Rome, not to mention the descriptions of Rome and her monuments contained in the works of Varro. It was J. Heurgon who identified the Cincius cited by Livy, for the custom of marking the passage of the year by hammering a nail into the wall of the Capitoline temple, with the author of a guide-book of Rome, or at least of the Capitol, called *Mystagoga*.⁵² Cincius, like Polemon, explained the meaning of inscriptions and probably compared them with analogous Etruscan examples. He will also no doubt have described ancient monuments and retailed legends and anecdotes relating to them. It also looks as if some kind of description of the monuments to be seen along the Tiber has been used for the dictionary of the Augustan scholar Verrius Flaccus, whose work survives in that of Festus.⁵³

It is more to the point to observe how material of this kind infiltrated into history proper. In the first two books of Livy, legendary or historical events are in a certain sense validated by reference to monuments, in particular statues, still visible in the time of Livy or his sources.⁵⁴ Such references were intended to guarantee the historicity or at least the credibility of the legend or event in question. The problem is instructive from a methodological point of view. It seems clear that monuments, statues, toponyms, whose significance was for various reasons unclear, were at first invested with fantastic meanings of different kinds, but always related to legendary episodes or episodes of earliest Roman history; this took place in the context of an antiquarian and guide-book tradition aiming to explain and expound the monuments involved. In a complete reversal of roles, the monuments then became the documents which guaranteed the historicity or credibility of the legends or stories which had grown up.

Even better examples of this kind of literary product, a mixture of antiquarianism and the legendary or miraculous, may be found in the guide-books to Rome of the Christian period.⁵⁵ The guide-books were mostly for pilgrims and, then as now, were regularly altered and up-dated. They constitute an entire literary genre of substantial proportions.⁵⁶ In principle, the Christian pilgrim took the guide-books with him as he visited the great basilicas and the places sanctified by the blood of the martyrs. But as time went on, things changed and interest in earlier pagan monuments grew. The best-known and most widely used of these texts was the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, of which a number of editions are known. The original text probably goes back to the middle of the twelfth century, but it is based on a complex series of earlier sources and pagan models.⁵⁷ Accounts of episodes in pagan history, attached to Christian monuments, are clear evidence of admiration for antiquity, even if pagan Rome derives its *raison d'être* from the new Christian Rome. There is a powerful feeling of continuity: pagan historical tradition is invoked, naturally in a much altered form, to explain monuments, statues, tombs. Events of Roman history make their appearance. Monuments and buildings attributed to Octavianus Augustus have a special place. It seems clear that behind the work lies an unbroken tradition of local history and of topo-

⁵⁰ E.g. I 41. 2 and V 10. 7. Cf. S. Reinach, *Daremberg-Saglio, Dict. Ant.* II, 885-6, s.v. *Exegetai*.

⁵¹ *De re rust.* I 2. 1; II. 12; 69. 2-3.

⁵² Liv. VII 3. 5-7; J. Heurgon, 'L. Cincius et la loi du clavis annalis', *Athenaeum* 42 (1964) 432-7.

⁵³ F. Bona, *Contributo allo studio della composizione del 'de verborum significatu' de Verrio Flacco* (1964) 125.

⁵⁴ E.g.: I 25. 14; 26. 13-15; 36. 5; 48. 6-7; II 10. 12; 13. 5; 13. 11; 14. 9; 40. 12; 41. 10-11.

⁵⁵ The principal texts are in R. Valentini and G. Zuechetti, *Codice Topografico della Città di Roma* II

(1942); III (1946); this volume contains at 93 ff. the earliest edition of the *Mirabilia*.

⁵⁶ For the development of this literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: D. Hay, *Annalists and Historians* (1974) 135.

⁵⁷ P. E. Schramm, *Kaiser, Rom und Renovatio* II (1929) 45-6; 105-11; Valentini-Zucchetti, *Codice Topografico* III, 3 ff.; A. Weissthanner, 'Mittelalterliche Rompilgerführer. Zur Überlieferung der *Mirabilia* und der *Indulgentiae urbis Romae*', *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 49 (1954) 39-64.

graphical guide-books. Here again, we find the combination of antiquarian tone with mythological content.

Outside Rome, also, there was a local literature, dealing with churches or monasteries and their traditions or with the famous tombs of saints or kings. This literature again combined accounts of real events and people with stories of miracles which had taken place at the sites in question. We are still in the middle of an essentially pagan tradition.

If local literature of this kind is subsumed into mainstream history, the miraculous becomes an essential element of the historical narrative. There is, I think, no better example than the 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People' of the Venerable Bede. It is explicitly based on native chronicles of churches and monasteries and on lives of saints. There has been much discussion of the role of the miraculous in the work of Bede;⁵⁸ but in my view it is to be explained in terms of the Greek and Roman cultural traditions which I have attempted to characterize. It is not a question of historical method or of the credulity of Bede. Traditional models explain the function which this element had in his narrative: it attested to a genuine faith, linked to places of cult and to the tombs of saints; and it showed the diffusion of belief among the people, as evidenced by hundreds of works of local history and spiritual edification. It was in fact Bede's duty to record this material, as it had been recorded by the works which were his models. All he is doing is to transfer it from its local setting and include it within the general historical and religious patrimony of his people and bring it to the attention of a much larger public. Its function in support of belief is the same. It was certainly not Bede's duty to subject the material to an analysis such as Thucydides would have undertaken, and nor should we use on Bede critical approaches which are irrelevant to his work.

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⁵⁸ J. T. Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles in "The Ecclesiastical History"', *Traditio* 31 (1975) 328-35; B. Ward, 'Miracles and History. A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories used by

Bede', in G. Bonnet (ed.), *Famulus Christi* (1976) 70-6; B. Colgrave, in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by B. C. and R. A. B. Mynors (1979) xxxiv-xxxvi.