

INTRODUCTION: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Walter Pohl

This is the fourth of six volumes in a book series exploring constructions of identity in medieval historiography, from ancient and early Christian precedents to late medieval vernacular histories in Central and Eastern Europe.¹ They are a result of the ‘Visions of Community’ project funded by the Austrian Research Council FWF from 2011 to 2019.² The present volume extends the mainly European focus of the series to probe into a more global perspective, exploring the historiographic cultures of a number of different Eurasian macro-regions: China, Japan, Iran, South Arabia, Syria, Byzantium, Lotharingia, and Spain. Of course, this experimental crossing of disciplinary boundaries cannot do the vast range of Chinese or Islamic medieval historiography justice. Yet a broader, Eurasian perspective can contribute to a deeper understanding of the very different ways in which works of historiography could communicate, promote, and negotiate ‘visions of community’ and concepts of belonging. For historians of medieval Europe, there is a lot to learn

¹ Pohl and Wieser, eds, *Historiography and Identity*, I; Reimitz and Heydemann, eds, *Historiography and Identity*, II; Reimitz, Kramer, and Ward, eds, *Historiography and Identity*, III; Pohl, Borri, and Wieser, eds, *Historiography and Identity*, v; Rychterová, ed., *Historiography and Identity*, vi.

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from this wider context. A closer look at different historical cultures or ‘régimes d’historicité’ (F. Hartog) can defamiliarize the prevailing and rather linear narrative of the dialectic progress from classical through Christian/medieval and humanist writing of history to enlightened and modern historiography.³

By these efforts at broad comparison, we hope to change the views of European historiography, to assess in what ways early medieval Latin history writing differed from other cultures of memory, and to discover hitherto ignored undercurrents beneath familiar European patterns that we only notice because we can see the important role they played in other historiographic cultures.⁴ Furthermore, such decentring of European history can help to approach Asian historiography on its own terms, without using European developments as a benchmark. Crucially, however, the comparative perspective we propose here should not be taken to imply that there were unified Western, Islamic, or Chinese ‘cultures’ defined as different entities from the start, each with their intrinsic characteristics. On the contrary: the web of similarities and differences is more complex than simple cultural typologies could express, and there were several options for writing about the past in all Eurasian macro-regions.

Problems of Identity in Historiography

‘Historiography and identity’ is a difficult topic, although it may seem — or perhaps because it seems — fairly obvious.⁵ It has been amply demonstrated that highly selective representations of the past help a community to establish the significance of past and present events, and to have confidence in those of the future.⁶ What happened in history is contingent and constantly challenges our values and expectations.⁷ Powerful cultural codes are needed to pro-

³ Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité*.

⁴ A number of recent studies and handbooks have sought to contextualize European historiography within a global perspective, e.g. Feldherr and Hardy, eds, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, I; Foot and Robinson, eds, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, II; Rösen, Gottlob, and Mittag, eds, *Die Vielfalt der Kulturen*; Göller and Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken*; Schmidt-Glintzer, Mittag, and Rösen, eds, *Historical Truth*. I have not been able to consult the forthcoming collection Van Nuffelen and Van Hoof, eds, *Clavis historicorum antiquitatis posterioris*.

⁵ Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity — Methodological Perspectives’.

⁶ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*.

⁷ Cf. Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, pp. 426–29. Luhmann’s model is that social systems in general aim for a reduction of contingency by channelling expectations for human action. Identities can be a way in which such expectations become more reliable. He makes that point by differ-

vide reassuring explanations for these incoherent and often confusing chains of events. Identification and othering are basic strategies by which contingency can be reduced, and allegiances to social groups constructed and reaffirmed (or challenged). Jörn Rüsen, a leading German theorist of history, has maintained that ‘every historical narrative is related to identity’.⁸ According to him, ‘the representation of the past is a necessary medium of conceiving of oneself, of expressing and constructing one’s identity, and simultaneously, of forming the otherness of the others’. Some scholars may disagree with this twofold claim that historiography is necessarily related to identity, and identity necessarily relies on representations of the past. Yet it would be hard to argue that they had nothing to do with each other.

Efforts to root social identities of the present in a shared past are particularly important in overarching social groups that stretch far beyond face-to-face encounters. Histories dealing with peoples, polities, or large territories have emerged in several parts of the medieval world. They have often been defined as ‘national histories’, which, however, may imply unwelcome assumptions about the ‘national’ character of these large units.⁹ Indeed, to what extent histories emphasize the significance of the polity, of ruler(s) or their people(s), of a particular territory, or of religious institutions as constituting a particular supra-regional community varies greatly. The term ‘nation’ suggests a more stable union of these aspects than we should take for granted in the second half of the first millennium.¹⁰ What these histories have in common is that they transcend local communities, and adopt a wider-ranging narrative perspective. Events in the deep past or in far-away regions matter to the author and his readers. The connective structure established in these texts may be fictitious or reflect actual relations. In either case, it expresses the author’s efforts to bridge temporal and geographic distances, and to establish an overarching perspective that the text promotes (or, in rare cases, challenges). These are the type of works discussed in the present volume.

It is more or less generally acknowledged that histories do not simply reflect past and present identities, but actually help to create, reaffirm, modify, and legitimize them, and to project them into the future. As G. E. R. Lloyd argues

entiating between various ‘Identifizierungs-Gesichtspunkte’ (identificational perspectives), but does not extend the argument to social identities.

⁸ Rüsen, ‘Einleitung’, pp. 27 and 23 (my translation).

⁹ Pohl, ‘Debating Ethnicity’.

¹⁰ Cf. Kersken, *Geschichtsschreibung*, criticizing the use of the term ‘nation’ for medieval Europe, but defending his use of ‘national history’ for the period.

in his epilogue to the first volume of *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, ‘The groups that the historian sees as the main agents in events are all constructs.’¹¹ However, it is less clear how exactly these efforts of construction can be traced in a given work of historiography, and to what extent the category of ‘identity’ is useful for doing that. I have explained why we use this controversial term in the title of this series in my contributions to the first and second volumes.¹² ‘An historian’s account of events will not be just in terms of individuals, but of groups’, as Lloyd puts it.¹³ Then as now, collective agency can either be ascribed to rulers or other representatives of the group, or to (mostly named) groupings. The difference is that in most premodern languages, states or institutions could hardly be endowed with agency.¹⁴ The cohesion of groups that assume agency in historical narratives can hardly be envisaged without any identification of the members with the group.¹⁵

In the approach chosen in the present series of volumes, ‘identity’ is used as a category that allows critical assessments of the cohesive (or disruptive) strategies of identification in texts. There may be other approaches, but the more they are based on an outright refutation of the concept of identity, the more they risk losing their heuristic potential. It is absolutely reasonable to argue that we should not take the unproblematic existence of the respective groups (Brubaker’s ‘groupness’) for granted, and to maintain that these are socially constructed.¹⁶ Yet that does not mean that such groups could not exist.¹⁷ If we exaggerate the flexibility, permeability, and malleability of social groupings, we cannot explain the considerable cohesion of some historical groups. Their composition might change, but their ‘identity’ persisted. Jews have maintained their ‘identity’ for thousands of years under adverse conditions, and in spite of the many different ways of being a Jew. We can also attribute that to a strong ‘sense of belonging’,

¹¹ Lloyd, ‘Epilogue’, p. 607.

¹² Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity — Methodological Perspectives’; Pohl, ‘Debating Ethnicity’.

¹³ Lloyd, ‘Epilogue’, p. 607.

¹⁴ Pohl, ‘Introduction: Strategies of Identification’.

¹⁵ Lloyd, ‘Epilogue’, p. 606.

¹⁶ Against ‘groupness’: Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*; abandon the term identity: Brubaker and Cooper, ‘Beyond “Identity”’. For a balanced critique of Brubaker, Jenkins, *Social Identity*, pp. 13–15.

¹⁷ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, argue that socially constructed or ‘imagined’ communities became real by these acts of construction and imagination. Pohl, ‘Introduction: Meanings of Community’.

which would perhaps remove some unwelcome overtones of the more complex term 'identity'. However, this would be at the cost of losing many levels of inquiry that 'identity' implies. An individual may have a sense of belonging to several groups, and to a different extent. On the level of the group, however, 'belonging' carries a strong binary meaning: somebody belongs to a group or not. Identities can be more complex; the term circumscribes a wide field of discourses and practices, hopes and memories that may inspire or subvert a sense of belonging. Identities may even continue to haunt you after you have lost your sense of belonging. For instance, Jewish identity is one of the richest and most-debated fields of complex identifications. Ultra-orthodox fundamentalists and radical Jewish intellectuals may both have a strong sense of belonging, but in itself that tells us little about their very different forms of identification as Jews, and about the ways in which concepts of Jewishness evolve and change.

Historiography is our main source for reconstructing the meaning and impact of social groups of all kinds in the distant past. We can only write histories dealing with the Franks, the Arabs, the Roman or the Chinese Empire on the basis of contemporary historical accounts. Source criticism and the history of historiography have addressed many aspects of the process of textual transmission in differentiated ways. Yet the ways in which medieval historical works have dealt with social identities have received relatively little attention. Much that has been said about Livy and Sima Qian as historians of the rise of imperial Rome and China, respectively, is in fact rather self-evident: they affirm, explain, and glorify these empires. To say that particular historians construct identities — of Romans, Franks, or Chinese — is an easy one-size-fits-all interpretation for a considerable range of historiographic strategies. It should not be taken as a sufficient answer. Identity as a heuristic concept is only productive if it keeps generating further questions, and helps us to uncover a text's internal tensions and contradictions, its subtle shifts and adaptations, and the multiplicity of voices and the internal diversity of large social groupings.

Modern historiography has tended to use the designations transmitted for peoples and other named social groupings of the past as containers for diverse evidence taken from written and material remains, and has taken the all-inclusive results for granted: 'the Romans' subdued Britain, built roads, produced high-quality *terra sigillata*, and used 'Roman law'. 'The Arabs' were converted to Islam, established the caliphate, subdued many peoples, built mosques, and advanced learning. History told like this can, to an extent, still offer valid narratives. But we need to be aware that this approach uses modern synthetic categories of 'Roman', 'Arab', 'Frankish', or 'Chinese' that are only more or less reliable reconstructions achieved by stretching different types of sources to make them

overlap. Categories such as these presume the existence of clear-cut collective actors in historiographic narratives — in contemporary historical scholarship just as they did in the past. Yet these categories do not necessarily correspond to the (same or different) terms used by historians at the time, and hardly give us any clues as to what ‘Frankishness’ or ‘Chineseness’ may have meant in the period under scrutiny, and how that changed.

For instance, a closer look at the term ‘Romanus’/‘Romani’ reveals that it was used rather rarely in ancient Roman historiography, and more frequently as an adjective than as a noun. Does that mean it was taken for granted, or, by contrast, that identification as ‘Romans’ was not as straightforward as we may think? Furthermore, the uses of the label ‘Romani’ were surprisingly varied. It could mean the inhabitants of the city of Rome, the functionaries of the state, the elites, the speakers of Latin, the citizens, the military, or vaguely defined compounds of some of these groups.¹⁸ In early Islam, ‘Arabs’ (hard to distinguish from an almost homonymous term denoting the Bedouin population of the desert) only seems to become widely attested as a category of self-identification in the Abbasid period, and its political significance becomes less salient again from the late ninth century CE onwards.¹⁹ The use of the term ‘Franks’ for the military elites of Gaul had some strong advocates amongst early medieval historians (for example, ‘Fredegar’ in the seventh, and early Carolingian authors in the eighth century), but Gregory of Tours in the late sixth century almost completely writes their name out of his history.²⁰ And our Western notion of ‘China’ as a monolithic historical entity for more than two thousand years is misleading as compared with the more complex terminology for the land, state, and people used by Chinese historians during the first millennium CE.²¹

Although that may sound counter-intuitive, the silences, ambiguities, and contradictions in historiographic texts do not mean that identities did not matter in them. On the contrary, hesitant or controversial identifications make looking at these texts from that angle more interesting. However, it does require reflection about the potential and the limits of the category of ‘identity’. There is no easy way to extrapolate from a text’s strategies and intentions to the extent to which it actually helped to establish a sense of identity in its readers.²²

¹⁸ Pohl, ‘Romanness’.

¹⁹ Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*.

²⁰ Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity*, pp. 52–65.

²¹ Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*.

²² Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity — Methodological Perspectives’; Pohl, ‘Debating Ethnicity’.

Cultural Memory, Truth, and Identity

Using the concept of ‘identity’ to frame questions and approaches to a trans-cultural comparison of historiography faces a number of potential obstacles. On a basic level, it is of course fairly easy to note that works of history reflected and contributed to constructions of identity. History is, as Jörn Rüsen maintains, ‘a universal cultural practice of re-presenting memories of the past’ (he uses the German word *Vergegenwärtigung*, literally ‘re-presentization’).²³ Identities are always particular, and so history can only be told from a specific perspective.²⁴ However, as Rüsen argues, such particular perspectives of identification also require an awareness of other identities and the ways in which they were different.²⁵ Identity presupposes difference. The way to incorporate identity and difference in a work of history is to link the text to an overarching master narrative, which is necessarily universal.²⁶ This poses a twofold methodological problem to those writing the history of historiography. Both medieval historical narratives and modern studies (at least until fairly recently) are ethnocentric: not by ignoring everything that is different, but by presenting one’s own order of things as the natural order, as the structure of the world at large.²⁷

The fusion of particular identity constructions and universal master narratives in historiography was not an innovation of the period studied in this volume, but the second half of the first millennium CE saw some key developments. In Europe and the Middle East, three elements laid the basis for the spread of this multi-level approach to history. First, the Hebrew Bible framed the history of Israel as a series of interventions of a universal God in human history — an ethnocentric universalism that was to have lasting impact. Second, Greek and

²³ Rüsen, ‘Einleitung’, p. 22: ‘Geschichte ist eine universelle kulturelle Praxis der erinnernden Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit’. The following is my summary of Rüsen’s argument. Translations are my own; I quote the German original in the footnotes, because this is an example where translation necessarily leads to a loss of differentiation.

²⁴ Rüsen, ‘Einleitung’, p. 26: ‘Da jede historische Erzählung auf Identität bezogen ist und Identität immer partikular ist, rückt die Vergangenheit historisch grundsätzlich in eine Perspektive.’

²⁵ Rüsen, ‘Einleitung’, p. 23: ‘Historische Erzählungen präsentieren nicht nur die eigene kulturelle Identität, sondern sie beschreiben zugleich auch die Differenz zu den anderen und deren Anderssein.’

²⁶ Rüsen, ‘Einleitung’, p. 23: ‘Meistererzählungen sind immer Universalgeschichten.’

²⁷ Rüsen, ‘Einleitung’, p. 24 (taking the Bible and the Popol Vuh as examples): ‘Beide sind universal, weltumspannend, indem sie die je eigene, religiös fundierte Lebensordnung als Struktur der Welt im Ganzen, als Ordnung des Kosmos präsentieren.’

Hellenistic 'ethnographic' historiography established the model of an outward-looking civilization that systematically collected knowledge about foreigners and their past.²⁸ Hellenistic 'auto-ethnography' in the works of the Egyptian Manetho, the Babylonian Berossus, and the Jew Flavius Josephus adopted this model to establish a respectable position for one's own people within a hegemonic alien discourse.²⁹ And third, the spectacular success of the Abrahamic religions relied on the canonical assumption that universal truth had been revealed to particular and therefore privileged recipients, who assumed the responsibility to spread it across the world.

The Christian appropriation of the Jewish message of a divine revelation, and the claim that it should be universally propagated, created a new aggregate of discourses of identity which incorporated multiple narratives of the past to bolster the claims of particular groups in the present. Western, Byzantine, Syriac, and Islamic historiography made use of this master narrative of universal history.³⁰ Large-scale universal chronicles were, of course, only one historiographic genre among others, but with their strong basis in biblical history they offered a frame for other types of historiographical narrative, from local history to sacred biography.³¹ And whereas Western historiography from the eighteenth century onwards strove to shed its roots in divine revelation, it retained its sense of universal mission. The West established its universal hegemony through a dynamic master narrative of historical progress, superior civilization, and colonial expansionism. In China, the motif of superior civilization had already been a core element of historiography in the beginning of the imperial period over two thousand years ago. Whereas a similar Roman sense of cultural superiority then gave way to a Christian world view, Chinese narratives of the past were never subsumed into transcendental narratives of universal religion (in particular, Buddhism). Instead, the master narrative of Chinese history was geared towards an idealized Confucian frame of empire and moral rule. It seems that the Christian construction of universal history created a sense of a wider mission that also survived its modern secularization, while Chinese historiography remained solidly anchored in its imperial frame.

This results in two related problems for our comparison of the historiographies of different macro-regions. On the one hand, we have to deal with the

²⁸ Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote*; Almagor and Skinner, eds, *Ancient Ethnography*.

²⁹ Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*; Dench, 'The Scope of Ancient Ethnography'; see also below.

³⁰ Marsham, 'Universal Histories'.

³¹ Deliyannis, *Historiography*.

particular identity constructions in medieval histories and assess the role of universalist master narratives in shaping historiographic projects altogether.³² On the other hand, we have to be aware of the problems with our own universal categories of historiography, and of the particular perspectives that they imply. Still, abandoning these universal pretensions at the very moment that the world has become overwhelmingly (and in some respects, disquietingly) global would mean renouncing the potential to critically address the overall picture. ‘Provincializing Europe’ should not mean provincializing scholarship.³³ How, then, do we create a non-ethnocentric perspective that can accommodate cultural difference?³⁴ The risk in doing comparative research on historiography is that our sources tend to reaffirm the ethnocentric universalism of the modern scholarly tradition. A cautious empiricism that simply takes note of commonalities and differences in the ways in which identities were being negotiated in our sources is a valid approach, but not an end in itself. Such positivism in history always risks approaching the past without awareness of all the assumptions and theoretical models that the historian brings to it and has come to take for granted.³⁵ The sources do not simply speak for themselves — and even less so if we compare different macro-regions. ‘Every comparison requires an organizing parameter.’³⁶ This surely holds true if the question is in what way works of history constructed, reaffirmed, or undermined identities — a term and concept that was not part of the mindset of historians a thousand years ago or more.

So how can we approach our topic? There would be many angles from which we could hope to find answers. In the present volume, our focus is limited to exploring ‘texts which consistently represent supraregional communities and identities’ written across Eurasia more than a thousand years ago. The issues we address include: ‘What role do ethnic, political, territorial, or religious identifications play in a text? What is the shape of the “entangled identities” that the text proposes, and which other options for identification are present in it?’³⁷ In

³² Goetz, ‘On the Universality’; Campopiano and Bainton, eds, *Universal Chronicles*.

³³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

³⁴ For a critical and balanced overview of the problem of addressing the ‘Global Middle Ages’, see Holmes and Standen, ‘Introduction’, and the other chapters in the same volume; Belich and others, *The Prospect of Global History*.

³⁵ Cf. Veyne, *Writing History*.

³⁶ Rösen, ‘Theoretische Zugänge’.

³⁷ Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity — Methodological Perspectives’, pp. 10–11.

particular, I would like to emphasize two lines of comparison that emerge from the individual chapters of this book.

The first issue is the relationship between particular identifications and distinctions on the one hand, and the master narratives and wider frames that structure the work on the other. How were identities placed within a 'larger social whole'?³⁸ In some cases, the Christian, Islamic, or imperial framing of a text's 'strategies of identification' is pretty obvious. Yet the case studies in this volume show that there was in fact a number of ways in which particular identities and differences could be accommodated within a shared matrix. Straightforward positive affirmation (for instance, 'we' are God's people or the only legitimate empire) was not the only option. The 'larger social whole' could also be pictured as 'the empire as it once was', 'the Islamic *umma* as it should have been', 'the true Christian society we have to fight for', or 'the catastrophic turmoil we have to face for salvation history to reach its ultimate goal'. Such constructions of identity are not always explicit, but implied through a particular employment, narrative strategies, or half-hidden remarks.

The second issue is how narratives of identity seek to establish their claim to truth. Narratives have to achieve some degree of plausibility and consensus to meet their audience's expectations of a valid account of the past. History is a 'realm of intended truth', as Averil Cameron put it.³⁹ Jörn Rüsen has maintained that 'strategies of self-identification and of interpreting the world in historical narratives always contain methodological features for making their presentation and interpretation of the past plausible.'⁴⁰ Authors can derive claims for the truth of their accounts of particular events from their narrative's universal framing. The universal grounding of these strategies of truth not only makes it possible to affirm one's own identity, but also to integrate multiple perspectives and identities, and thus acknowledge their validity.⁴¹ Thus universal framing does not require simply accepting that all perspectives are equally true. Claims for truth are a common feature in all historiographic cultures and thus make them comparable. Yet they are complex, multiple, and relational, and can be

³⁸ See Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity*, pp. 1–24.

³⁹ Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, p. 118.

⁴⁰ Rüsen, 'Einleitung', p. 25: 'Deshalb enthalten die Strategien der Selbstverständigung und der Weltdeutung durch historisches Erzählen stets methodische Elemente, mit denen diese Präsentation und Deutung der Vergangenheit plausibel gemacht werden.'

⁴¹ Rüsen, 'Einleitung', p. 28: 'Wahrheit befähigt die Menschen, die ihre Identität in einer bestimmten historischen Perspektive ausdrücken, eine oder mehrere andere Perspektiven zu akzeptieren, in denen andere Menschen ihre unterschiedliche Identität zu Ausdruck bringen.'

based on a great variety of strategies of truth — from the ‘truth effect’ largely achieved by repetition⁴² to truth claims based on circumstantial information⁴³ and complex rhetorical strategies.⁴⁴

Ancient and early medieval authors reflected much about truth in history, or at least used certain topoi to assert the truthfulness of their accounts. They were aware of the problem of convincing their audience of their veracity. Gregory of Tours quoted Sallust: ‘arduum videtur res gestas scribere’, it seems hard to write a history of events — because a critical view of historical actors risked being attributed merely to the author’s malevolence.⁴⁵ We may have many reasons to doubt that any medieval historian actually wrote the truth and nothing but the truth. Yet the ancient and medieval claim to write an accurate *narratio rerum gestarum* was not just based on literary devices intended to enhance the credibility of a text. It was rooted in fundamental social codes that established how truth could be found, as well as how and when claims to truth could be called into question.⁴⁶ Ancient and medieval authors were also aware that truth and what we call identity were related. As an example, I would like to present one of the strongest statements on how truth could be guaranteed in a historiographic community that we have from the first millennium CE. It combined Jewish and Hellenistic traditions of historiography in a unique set of methods to assert the truth of a narrative about the past.

Guardians of the Past: A Case from the Ancient Mediterranean

Towards the end of the first century CE, Flavius Josephus wrote his treatise *Against Apion*.⁴⁷ It represents a point of intersection of several currents of historiography in the ancient Mediterranean world. Yosef ben Mattityahou, as his Jewish name was, had been a commander in the Jewish War of 69/70, but had been captured and subsequently switched to the Roman side. He then wrote an

⁴² Béna, Carreras, and Terrier, ‘L’effet de vérité induit par la répétition’.

⁴³ ‘Enargeia’: Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces*.

⁴⁴ Kempshall, *Rhetoric*, pp. 350–427.

⁴⁵ Sallust, *Catilina*, III; Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, ed. by Krusch and Levison, iv.13, p. 145; cf. Reimitz, ‘Genre and Identity’.

⁴⁶ Kempshall, *Rhetoric*, pp. 354–55. See also Foucault, *L’ordre du discours*.

⁴⁷ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, particularly the section 1.7.24–1.8.43, pp. 24–32, with extensive commentary; or Flavius Josèphe, *Contre Apion*, ed. by Reinach and trans. by Blum. Excerpts of the text in Hartog, ed., *L’Histoire*, pp. 240–55. See also Pohl, ‘Historiography and Identity — Methodological Perspectives’.

account in Greek of the Jewish War and a history of the Jews, *Jewish Antiquities* (finished in 93 CE), to defend his own role in the war and the position of the defeated Jews in the Hellenistic world.⁴⁸ His work drew some harsh criticism, both from the Jewish priesthood condemning the renegade, and from Helleno-Egyptians who criticized Josephus for making false claims about the Jews as the most ancient people in the world.

The introductory sections of *Against Apion*, then, both refute anti-Semitic arguments and try to appease Jewish critics by a sustained defence of the Jewish historical tradition.⁴⁹ It is a remarkable piece of reflection about ways of attaining truth in historical writing.⁵⁰ The points are first rehearsed in the negative, claiming that the Greeks could not possibly realize their own requirements for writing true history. Then, Josephus argues that, by contrast, the Jewish tradition ensures a trustworthy account of the past.⁵¹ He uses the following arguments:

1. Priests as guardians of historical memory: The Jews have entrusted the keeping of records to priests. Josephus argued that this had been general practice in the ancient Near East: 'Among both the Egyptians and Babylonians, from extremely early times, the priests [...] were entrusted with taking care over the records and conducted philosophical enquiry on that basis.'⁵²
2. Ancient literacy, archival practice, and the use of documents: Again, this had been, according to Josephus, fairly widespread in the Near East. The Jewish priests guarded archives in which documents had been kept since time immemorial. 'The greatest proof of precision is this: our chief-priests for the last 2000 years are listed in the records by name, in line of descent from father to son.'⁵³ This, Josephus emphasizes, had been different in Greece. For the early history of the Greeks, 'no-one would be able to produce any record [...], preserved either in temples or on public monuments.'⁵⁴

⁴⁸ For an analysis of the methods applied in Josephus's works, see Villalba i Varneda, *The Historical Method of Flavius Josephus*, esp. pp. 242–89.

⁴⁹ Cohen, 'History and Historiography', p. 11; Rajak, 'The *Against Apion*'; Rajak, *Josephus*.

⁵⁰ Rajak, 'Josephus and the "Archaeology" of the Jews'; Rajak, *Josephus*; Cohen, 'History and Historiography'; Edmondson, Mason, and Rives, eds, *Flavius Josephus*; Barclay, 'Judaean Historiography'.

⁵¹ For an analysis in the vein of postcolonialism, see Barclay, 'Judaean Historiography', pp. 39–42.

⁵² Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.6.28, p. 23.

⁵³ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.7.36, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.2.12, p. 15.

Elsewhere he writes, ‘From the outset the Greeks did not bother to create public records of contemporary events.’⁵⁵ Jewish history, by contrast, was not based on myths, but on documents. In this way, Josephus diligently tapped into earlier Roman polemic against vain and mendacious Greeks, ‘mendacia Graecae vanitatis.’⁵⁶ The Romans also maintained that their early annals were firmly based on the archives of the *pontifices maximi*.⁵⁷

3. Ethnic purity as a precondition for undiluted historical memory: ‘They [the Jewish priests] took great care that the priestly stock should remain unalloyed and pure (*amiktoi kai katharoi*); ‘for anyone who takes a share in the priesthood must father children by a woman from the same nation (*homoethnous gynaikos*) [...] he should examine her pedigree, procuring her genealogy from the archives and supplying many witnesses.’⁵⁸ The ancient genealogical records ensured ethnic purity, which in turn guaranteed the reliability of the records.
4. Divine truth transmitted unchanged: The Jews derived their knowledge of the past from sacred books, written first by Moses and subsequently by the prophets as his successors.

It is clear in practice how we approach our own writings. Although such a long time has now passed, no-one has dared to add, to take away, or to alter anything; and it is innate in every Judean, right from birth, to regard them as decrees of God, to remain faithful to them and, if necessary, gladly to die on their behalf.⁵⁹

According to Josephus, belief in God and respect for Scripture are innate and thus guaranteed by the ethnic community.

5. Greek historical methodology: In spite of this emphatic claim to all the strengths of a canonical priestly memory, Josephus’s polemic owes much to his Hellenistic erudition. His *Jewish Antiquities* belong to a genre of Hellenistic appropriations of ‘alien wisdom’, as Arnaldo Momigliano has called it.⁶⁰ Or were they ‘auto-ethnographies’ that ‘flipped’ the Greek tradition, as

⁵⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.4.20, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Pliny, *Historia naturalis*, xxviii.112; Barclay, *Against Apion*, pp. 8–10 (cited under Flavius Josephus).

⁵⁷ Frier, *Libri annales pontificum maximorum*; Barclay, *Against Apion*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.7.30–31, p. 25. See Rajak, ‘Ethnic Identities’.

⁵⁹ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.8.42, pp. 31–32.

⁶⁰ Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*.

Emma Dench has argued?⁶¹ Centuries before, Berossus had written in Greek about Babylonian history, and Manetho about the history of Egypt. Josephus criticizes the latter's anti-Jewish sentiment, and to him we owe the only surviving direct quotes from Manetho's lost work. The method employed by Josephus as well as his claims to factual history are also in accord with the standards of classical historiography: Barclay lists these as 'accuracy, eyewitness evidence, impartiality, reliable sources, facts versus rhetoric.'⁶² Josephus even claims that in his work he had been more heedful of the methods of Greek and Roman historiography than the Greeks themselves.

6. Consensus instead of debate: Josephus accuses Greek historians of only paying lip-service to their lofty principles: 'those who hastily set about writing did not bother about the truth — although they were always quick to make this their promise — but displayed their literary prowess,' working 'on the basis of their individual conjectures about events.'⁶³ The Greeks have an innumerable multitude of books, but they deliberately contradict each other. Historical truth, according to Josephus, cannot emerge from a polyphony of opinions, but only from consensus.

Many of the criteria on Josephus's list could also appear elsewhere in discussions about historical method, ancient and modern. What is striking in the context of the topic of this volume is how closely he links truth about the past to identity, both ethnic and religious. Safeguarding their past is what has ensured the survival of the Jews through all the adversities that they have encountered. Ethnic purity is decisive for the social status of a priesthood entrusted with guarding the foundational memories of the people. They preserve the records of divine intervention at decisive moments of Jewish history, such as the exodus myth, re-enacted in ritual and codified in the sacred books.⁶⁴ This conjunction of history and identity is a consistent model in which Jewish identity is both based on and guarantees historical truth. It is interesting to note, although unsurprising, that the kingdom or the land play little role in Josephus's argument — the Jewish kingdom had disappeared, and the people had to survive in diaspora and under Roman rule. The assertion of identity now had to be based on historical memory. This link is rarely expressed as clearly and directly as here, in a fun-

⁶¹ Dench, 'The Scope of Ancient Ethnography,' p. 260.

⁶² Barclay, *Against Apion*, p. 9.

⁶³ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. by Barclay, 1.5.24, p. 21, and 1.3.15, pp. 17–18.

⁶⁴ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*.

damental crisis of Jewish identity after the destruction of the Second Temple. Yet this very explicit model may help to assess strategies for the preservation of historical memory in other contexts, mainly in the other Abrahamic religions, perhaps also beyond them.

Many ancient societies had sought to monopolize control over the past in a priesthood considered religiously and sometimes ethnically 'pure'. The social logic of Greek and Roman historiography was fundamentally different.⁶⁵ It is remarkable that neither Christians nor Muslims, who owed so much to the Jewish tradition, ever enforced a 'closed circuit' of historical memory similar to the one described by Josephus. They would have had the institutional means to establish a controlled institutional flow, including a specialized elite of guardians of memory entrusted with routine record-keeping, with the preservation and interpretation of foundational prophetic texts and narratives, and with processing these 'phantoms of remembrance' for use in the present and the future.⁶⁶ Biblical *historia* remained a key point of reference and a standard model for the interpretation of past and present throughout the European Middle Ages.⁶⁷ This rooted Christian history writing firmly in the teleological frame of a history of salvation, which also provided a basis for judging the events of the past and the present. Yet their interpretation remained open. For instance, were the 'barbarian invasions' signs of God's wrath, or of the imminent apocalypse? An educated elite of Christian priests and monks monitored theological knowledge and liturgical practice, but not historical truth.

Islamic historiography relied on chains of authorities, *isnād*, derived from Islamic law and the sayings of the prophet. Yet that became a method to arrange a multiplicity of voices from the past and not to establish a consensual historiography.⁶⁸ Only Chinese historiography developed the model of an official elite with the privilege of preserving the past, and attempting to establish centralized control of its documentation, although without the strong ethnic and transcendental flavour found in Josephus's text. However, even if Josephus's model was thus not recreated in any of the historiographies under scrutiny in the present volume, *Against Apion* with its amalgam of history, identity, and truth can nevertheless be useful to assess in which direction historiography did, and did not develop in different cultures of memory.

⁶⁵ Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations*. Social logic: Spiegel, 'History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text'.

⁶⁶ Cf. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*.

⁶⁷ De Jong, ed., *The Bible and Politics*.

⁶⁸ See my conclusion, in this volume.

Although Josephus argued in favour of consensus and was critical of historical debates, *Against Apion* also contains sophisticated reflections on the role and methods of historiography. The Greek word *historia* originally meant ‘research’, and the Greek approach to the past also implied a critical assessment of the aims and methods of historiography. Comparing ancient and medieval prologues to historical works, Justin Lake has argued that the focus on the historian’s research fades out in Late Antiquity, and is reduced to mere *topoi* and classical references in many early medieval works.⁶⁹ Many other studies, however, have demonstrated that early medieval writers of history were more aware of what they were doing than previously assumed.⁷⁰ As Helmut Reimitz has emphasized, the critical approach to earlier histories in the Carolingian period was an integral part of the reform efforts of the time.⁷¹ Walahfrid Strabo (d. 849), presented by Richard Corradini in the third volume of this series, provides an example of self-reflectivity and epistemological interest in the role of history.⁷² In Song dynasty China, around 1000 CE, the ‘emergence of a self-conscious historical sensibility’ can be observed, later defined as *shiping*, ‘the weighing of history, historical critique.’⁷³ Around the same time in Baghdad, in the early tenth century, al-Ṭabarī provided a short methodological introduction to his *History*, explaining why he preferred to rely on ‘informants and transmitters’ rather than ‘rational arguments.’⁷⁴ This is followed by a section discussing ‘what is time.’⁷⁵ The intensity of such reflections obviously varied within and between historiographical traditions. Yet we should not simply regard the writing of history in the second half of the first millennium as ‘dark age historiography’.

The present volume will address several constellations in which social context, identities, and the search for truth about the past came into conjunction. Both Christian and Islamic perceptions of the past owed much to Jewish precedent and to classical erudition. In other Asian macro-regions, different constellations unfolded. Historiography in the narrow sense — of texts written for a qualified public, kept, copied, and distributed to promote histori-

⁶⁹ Lake, trans., *Prologues to Ancient and Medieval History*, pp. xvii–xviii; his point about the disappearance of a literary public in the early Middle Ages is somewhat exaggerated.

⁷⁰ The classical statement is Goffart, *Narrators*. See also Reimitz, ‘Genre and Identity’.

⁷¹ Reimitz, ‘Carolingian Approaches to History and Identity’.

⁷² Corradini, ‘Approaches to History’.

⁷³ Hartman and DeBlasi, ‘The Growth’, p. 28; Göller and Mittag, *Geschichtsdenken*, pp. 68–69.

⁷⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *History*, trans. by Rosenthal, I, 170–71.

⁷⁵ al-Ṭabarī, *History*, trans. by Rosenthal, I, 171–72.

cal knowledge — was not the only way in which cultural memory could be transmitted, and each cultural sphere relied on a variety of strategies of remembrance.⁷⁶ Therefore, the aim should not be to create coherent cultural models of Chinese, Islamic, or Indian historiography.⁷⁷ Instead, the individual chapters seek to reveal the variety of approaches to the writing of history that developed in Eurasia during this period. In the concluding chapter, I will sum up the case studies presented in the chapters, and discuss some lines of comparison.

⁷⁶ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*.

⁷⁷ In a 'culturalist' sense, cf. al-Azmeh, 'Geschichte'.

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