
Historia: *Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe* edited by Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi

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In 1596, the Roman physician Andrea Bacci published a natural history of wines containing staggeringly detailed descriptions of ancient Roman dinner parties drawn from his extensive reading as well as ‘the authority... of various marble tombs’ [336]. Like his earlier works dealing with hot springs and the Tiber, this book seamlessly combined natural history, antiquarianism, and medicine; and ranged over many other subjects such as religious debates, the virtues of his patron, and present-day dining customs. And that was just for a start.

As this collection of essays shows so well, history in the 16th century was a polyvalent discipline; just how polyvalent is indicated by the polyhistor Johann Alsted’s 1615 description of history as ‘the knowledge of everything that is intelligible’ [223]. This volume of essays which runs the gamut from overarching narrative to careful case study in some ways replicates the diversity of its subject matter, namely, the varied career of *historia* from about 1400 to about 1800. Anthony Grafton and Donald Kelley’s essays, as well as the outstanding introduction by Gianna Pomata and Nancy Siraisi, provide the narrative, a story of the Renaissance rediscovery of history and its ascent both as a genre and as an epistemic tool. Especially in the 16th century, in histories of human *res gestae* as well as in natural histories and medical case histories, humanist scholars developed history into a mode of accurate description by means of both direct and indirect eyewitness. They also employed history as defined by Alsted, that is, to give an account of all known things. Conrad Gessner aimed to do just that in his *Historia animalium*, as Laurent Pinon’s excellent essay

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shows. Gessner sought to provide an exhaustive account of absolutely everything known (verified or not) about all animals in the world.

In examining the epistemic status of *historia*, Ian Maclean's essay (in tandem with the introduction) points out that *historia* in Herodotus and Hippocrates was used as inquiry both into natural phenomena and into human deeds. Aristotle narrowed this definition so that history became a stage of knowledge that inquired into the 'how' of things, an activity propaedeutic to the philosophical knowledge of final causes (the 'why' of things). History described and provided particulars, where *episteme* dealt in universals. Under this regime, *historia* could not attain to the knowledge of final causes, and it was thus considered a lesser form of knowledge, an attitude taken over in European intellectual history (although the earlier more expansive view of history never ceased entirely to exist). In the 15th and 16th centuries, the *artes historicae* came into their own as scholars explored how to write history in a classical style and re-discovered the pre-Aristotelian meanings of *historia*. In many cases, they took over Cicero's 'first law of history' [217] that accuracy was primary and distinguished history from rhetoric and poetry. This influenced the developing emphasis on description of particulars and the distrust of theory in some parts of the investigation of nature, and it coincided with an emphasis on autopsy and eyewitness in medicine and medical research into human and animal bodies. In the 17th and 18th centuries, however, in the age of the 'New Science', history and natural inquiry came to be seen as belonging to different spheres of knowledge and possessing very different epistemic values. As F. W. Bierling put it in the 18th century, 'The truths of history cannot easily be compared with those of the natural scientists' [228]. Donald Kelley's essay argues that Vico's *Scienza nova* tried to reverse this view, maintaining in self-conscious opposition to Descartes that

ideas lived in time; memory—individual and collective—was absolutely essential to true science; and imagination was not the threat that Bacon thought it posed but rather a creative and synthetic form of memory. Vico's conclusion, therefore, was that modern students should draw on the whole legacy of Western arts and sciences that embodied this memory. Descartes would purge classical literature and history from

his program of studies, while Vico made them not only foundational but also socially useful in ways that for Descartes were irrelevant. [231]

Vico's expansive view of history was carried forth in the work of Jules Michelet, when in 1825 he told his students

Science is one: languages, literature and history, mathematics and philosophy, and knowledges apparently most remote are actually joined, or rather form a system, of which we in our weakness [can only] consider as separate and successive parts. [234]

That the views of New Scientists prevailed over Vico's *Scienza nova* is manifest today in the disparity between public funding for science and the humanities.

The main motivating inspiration for this collection of essays is the oft-noted but hardly explored intersection between the methods of medicine and history in antiquity and the Renaissance, a point made early on by the great scholar Arnaldo Momigliano. Most of the essays in the volume provide case studies that make clear how deep yet varied this intersection actually was and how important those methods turned out to be for the 'New Science' of the investigation of nature. These essays demonstrate the way in which, between 1450 and 1650, history moved from an activity of compilation and direct observation to firsthand experience, always informed by 'a thick web of references to scholarly learning' [28], to an almost exclusive focus on the temporal rather than empirical by the early 18th century. As noted, only Vico worked against this. A similar hiving off of history from natural history occurred as well, as Brian Ogilvie discusses, with natural history remaining linked to an earlier moralizing natural theology. Gianna Pomata's and Nancy Siraisi's essays focus directly on the intersection of medicine and history, while Martin Muslow's and Peter Miller's essays explore the connections between empiricism and antiquarianism. Almost all essays deal with the ways in which the practice of *historia* developed techniques of observation and description, and the growth of a 'factual sensibility'. Chiara Crisciani's essay compellingly shows the development of a new epistemology growing out of the new position of court physician in the 15th century, who wrote both in Latin and the vernacular for a new audience, while Ann

Blair discusses how the practices of excerpting, compiling, and sorting that went into Theodor Zwinger's massive *Theatrum humanae vitae* of 1565–1586 may have helped develop this new epistemology.

All essays in the volume contribute signally to the examination of the important intersections between history, medicine, antiquarianism, humanist erudition, and the development of empiricism in the early modern period. This valuable set of essays should find a very wide audience among scholars in the humanities. We can only wish that the chasm between the Two Cultures could be bridged for a moment and this volume could carry its vital information about the beginnings of modern science over to the practitioners of the natural sciences.