

# A Short Overview of the Development of Historiography in Church History: Part 1–From the Development of Language to the Renaissance

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## Abstract

In part 1 of the two articles on historiography in Church History, the reader is cursorily introduced to the field of historiography, its development that coincided with the development of language and the first written documents up to the end of the Renaissance. Part 2 discusses the modern, postmodern, and metamodern eras. Part 1 starts with a search for a suitable definition for historiography, adding philosophy to the argument to indicate its close relation to historiography and Church History. Only the most prominent and relevant proponents of each era are included in this historical literature review, which is done through document analysis. Although historiography forms part of all sciences, this research links the disciplines of theology, philosophy and history together by highlighting the overlaps that these subject areas have regarding historiographical development. It alerts to important principles of historiography used in research and practising in these disciplines that point towards opportunities for intern and multi-disciplinary interaction.

**Keywords:** Chinese Historiography; Greek Historiography; Roman Philosophy/Historiography; Medieval (Eastern/Western) Philosophy; Renaissance Philosophy/Historiography; Enlightenment (Modern) Philosophy/Historiography

## Introduction

History is often perceived as major events that happened in the past, like wars, natural disasters, and economic recessions. However, all that happens in the lives and environments of all people and places form part of history. Critical thinkers, curious people, and historians question narratives presented about the past and demand answers and explanations. How history is written and how and why events are remembered and



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interpreted in specific ways by different people from different perspectives and different eras is called historiography.

Historiography forms part of all sciences, and this makes it too broad a subject for discussion within the limits of an article or two. This is a concise overview and introductory discussion on the development of historiography linked to Church History, covering the different eras from the time that language and writing were first used to record events and express ideas up to the time of the Renaissance<sup>1</sup>.

Before diving into the historical developments, clarification on the meaning of the terms historiography, church history, and philosophy is sought, followed by a few notes on the development of language and writing as the first communication revolutions that inspired and caused the development of historiography.

This limited historical review highlights the chronological development, where possible, of the concepts and practical rules developed to interpret and understand past events from a theological perspective. It identifies some of the important perspectives, concepts and rules we, as theologians, philosophers and historians<sup>2</sup> are still using or should be using to search for answers to the *how* and *why* questions of life.

## Terminology

Darbo-Peschanski (2007, 27–28) detects a threefold view on historiography: First, it refers to historical consciousness. Second, historiography is a kind of knowledge. Third, historiography is a literary genre of written discourse. NMU (2024) explains ‘*how*’ historiography is done (emphasis added):

Historiography is the study of the history and methodology of history as a discipline. Briefly, it is the history of history. When you study historiography, you are not studying the past directly. *Instead, you are studying the changing interpretations of past events through historians’ eyes.* For example, instead of studying the First Crusade, you’d study the ways individual historians have interpreted the First Crusade.

Steven Knowlton (2023) alerts to ‘*why*’ historiography is important (emphasis added):

Historiography deals with the writing of history. In the broadest sense, it is the study of the history of history (as it is described by historians). Historiography has several facets, but for the purposes of a researcher trying to situate their work in the context of other historians’ work on a particular topic, the most useful thing is the historiographic essay

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1 This classification differs from other classifications (like Weber 1908), and the proponents of each era are chosen according to author perspectives. The current division is made on practical reasons only.

2 At the University of South Africa, the discipline of philosophy forms part of one of the theology departments. A lecturer from history assisted his colleague in church history with the curriculum strategy for the development of the honours programme in church history.

or review article that summarizes changing ideas about and approaches to the topic. *A really good historiographic essay will also address why historians' ideas have changed.*

Important reasons why perspectives on history change include the following: when new information becomes available, when different and new questions are asked or when new perspectives are gained by the passing of time and distance from the trauma of the event. Changes in society, culture and politics can also affect our perceptions and understanding of the past.

In Church History as an academic discipline, both the content and research methodology are constantly contested and challenged (Bradley and Muller 2016, 2). Gonzales (2002,18) is correct when he states that '[w]e have the freedom and necessity to write Church History all over again.' Kollman (2004, 342) regards Church History as both understanding the past on its own and understanding the past in light of the present, which underlines the ongoing relevance of Church History for 21st-century believers.

Church History can be described as a way of understanding life and giving meaning to life from a Christian perspective (cf. Le Roux 1993, 40) because it influences and links to more than just ecclesiastical issues. Law, politics, social work, art, culture, medicine, astronomy, economics, science, etc., have been influenced by Christianity during the past 2000 years. This is especially true in the Western world, where the Christian religion, civilisation, culture, and politics have walked hand in hand for centuries (cf. Hill 2005; Schmidt 2004; Sunshine 2009).

Closely related to historiography and Church History is philosophy. Pecorino (2000) gives an elaborate definition:

Philosophy is an activity of thought, a type of thinking. Philosophy is...the most critical and comprehensive manner of thinking which the human species has yet devised...and involves resolving confusion, unmasking assumptions, revealing presuppositions, distinguishing importance, testing positions, correcting distortions, looking for reasons, examining world-views and questioning conceptual frameworks...Philosophy as a process functions as an activity which responds to society's demand for wisdom, which is bringing together all that we know in order to obtain what we value. Viewed in this way Philosophy is part of the activity of human growth and thus an integral, essential part of the process of education...[having] as a common goal the development of the total intellect of a person, the realization of the human potential.

History is constantly in the making. Therefore, the need for thought (philosophy) on history and the understanding thereof, the influence of religion (church history) on everything that becomes history, and the evolving perspectives of historians regarding these thoughts and events (historiography) are relevant to academic work in all three of these disciplines.

## The Development and Eras of Historiography

The first and second communication revolutions – the development of language and writing – brought historiography to life. In addition to being remembered, events could be reported, interpreted and preserved for future generations. History took different forms amongst different peoples: the Chinese compiled ‘encyclopaedic, synchronic, and official historiography, while the Australian Aboriginal people collected ‘dreamings’ of past events, and African oral history ensured that the ‘voices and memories of people’<sup>3</sup> were kept alive (Hughes-Warrington 2005, 1).

When trying to identify and understand the development of the main streams of thought regarding historiography, it is not possible to isolate and pinpoint the different eras within set timeframes. Ideas and theories are constantly revisited, expanded, altered, and changed or opposed. Historiography is an ever-evolving science where ideas and perceptions, perspectives and interpretations often interlink, overlap or resurface and remodel decades or centuries apart. For example, Scepticism, which was developed by Xenophanes (570–475 BCE) in Ancient Greece, was later revived by Hume in the 18th century. The metaphysical work of the Pythagorean school later influenced Platonism and Cynicism. It also influenced theologians, scientists, music and poetry during the Middle Ages (The Basics of Philosophy 2024).

Historiography is mostly discussed by topic; therefore, the topics will be stated below together with their presumed dates or eras. In the discussion of the different eras of historiography, specific proponents and their approaches will be added where possible.

## Chinese Historiography

Some of the oldest traces of historiography are found in China. Liu Zhiji developed some important basic rules of historiography in his *Shitong* (*historical perspective*) in approximately 710 BCE and are still applicable to current historiography (Vann 2018). These include the critical use and validation of sources, the need to support arguments with substantial evidence, and the right to academic freedom (Vann 2018). These markers later all played a role in how Church History is practised. This was ‘the first comprehensive work on historical criticism in any language’ (Vann 2018).

Temple archivists were most probably China’s first historians whose work was characterised by a ‘growing emphasis on history as a repertoire of moral examples’ (Vann 2018). The work of Confucius (551–479 BCE), who gave history prestige in China, confirms that Chinese historical thought had an intense moralistic tendency (Vann 2018).

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3 This will be discussed in more detail in Part 2: A short overview of the Eras of Historiography in Church History. Part 2: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Metamodernity

The *Shiji* (*historical records*) appear to be the foundational text when referring to Chinese historiography. Sima Qian (*ca* 145–*ca* 86 BCE) compiled the text, covering the history of China up to the Han dynasty (206 BCE).

## Greek Historiography<sup>4</sup>

The Greek historians, called *logographoi*<sup>5</sup> (*logographers*), did not try to preserve and transfer traditional records but instead attempted to establish what actually happened (Woolf 2019, 21) – critical scholarship. Hecataeus of Miletus (*ca* 550–*ca* 476 BCE) was the most noted logographer (cf. Andolfi 2016, 91). He wrote *Genealogiae*, of which less than 40 fragments still remain. He was very critical of the oral tradition of the Greeks, and he wrote what he considered to be truth – ὥς μοι δοκεῖ ἀληθεία εἶναι – as it seems to me, it is true (*Genealogiae Fr 1–Andolfi 2016:92*) – *ca* 490 BCE.

From the works of Hecataeus and ‘Herodotus of Halicarnassus’ – as he referred to himself in his *Histories* 1, in the first paragraph (Herodotus 2013, 1), we detect a strong link between ancient ethnography (a part of anthropology, systematically studying individual cultures) and ancient historiography. The work of the *logographoi* was overshadowed by Herodotus (*ca* 484–*ca* 425 BCE), who is commonly known as the ‘father of history.’ In his *Histories* (Herodotus 2013), he reported on the *history* of the Greco-Persian Wars, which is the longest extant text of the ancient Greeks (Vann 2018). Herodotus’ approach was – just like the *logographoi* – both historical and anthropological.

Thucydides (*ca* 460–404 BCE), a contemporary, imitator and critique of Herodotus,<sup>6</sup> recounted the conflict between Athens and Sparta between 431 and 404 BCE in his seminal work titled *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (Thucydides 1950). Thucydides’ political and moral analysis of the wars between Athens and Sparta is currently still influencing international relations. Together, Herodotus and Thucydides ‘invented history’ (cf. Woolf 2019, 21; Constitutional Rights Foundation 2009). Herodotus was the first to use the term ‘history’ with the meaning of inquiry (Woolf 2019, 30), while Thucydides used the term to refer to recent and contemporary events (Woolf 2019, 30).

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4 According to Weber (1908:vii), the era between 600 and 400 BCE can be identified as the first period of Greek philosophy: The age of metaphysics proper, or philosophy of nature.

5 Vann (2018) explains the term: ‘Logography was the prose compilation of oral traditions relating to the origins of towns, peoples, and places. It combined geographical with cultural information.’

6 An example of a hidden criticism against Herodotus is found in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.1: ‘The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time’ (Thucydides 1950:15).

## Pre-Socratic Philosophy

Thales of Miletus<sup>7</sup> (ca 624–ca 548 BCE), an ancient Greek philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer, was the forerunner of the thinkers of this era who developed schools with independent and original thoughts (Mark 2020). The era ended before Socrates of Athens (470–399 BCE) brought significant change.

Thales initiated ‘ancient Greek philosophy.’ He diverted mythological thinking into rational and logical thinking (Espínola 2023). ‘This transformation is known as the transition from *mythos* to *logos* and is considered the beginning of Western philosophy.’ Espínola (2023). One of the main drives was to inquire into the matter from which everything has originated, called the Ἀρχή – *First Cause* (Mark 2020). Thales’ conclusion was that water should be the *First Cause* because it could assume different forms like ice, liquid, and steam.<sup>8</sup> The Milesian scholars are often also described as philosophers of nature because they described nature in terms of methodologically observable entities. This tagged their work as one of the first attempts to link philosophy with science (The Basics of Philosophy 2024).

The 6th century BCE brought more major philosophical developments, like the Pythagorean school by Pythagoras of Samos (ca 570–ca 490 BCE). For Pythagoras, philosophy was a way of life and not only a search for answers to existential questions like the origin of the earth (Adigüzel, Aykaç, and Görmez 2023, 1200). He believed in transmigration (the theory that the human soul can transition between individuals and even animals) and therefore introduced the practising of vegetarianism for religious, ascetic, and ethical reasons, but most of all because a human soul could be in an animal at any given moment (cf. Adigüzel et al. 2023, 1200; Walters and Postma 1999, 12). Pythagoras is also regarded as the creator of acoustics, proposing that mathematics and music are closely linked as they have the same goal in life (Bibby 2003, 14). The Pythagorean school, which is still associated with high school mathematics, is also remembered for valuing women as equal to men (Pellò 2018).<sup>9</sup>

Parmenides (late 6th – mid 5th century BCE) from Elea founded his school in the early 5th century BCE in Elea, with key members like Zeno of Elea and Melissus of Samos (Parmenides 2017; McAvoy 2016). Over against the Platonic metaphysics, this school argued that motion is an illusion, based on Parmenides’ *great tautology*: ‘It is necessary

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7 He was known as one of the seven Sages (οἱ ἑπτὰ σοφοί – the seven wise men) of Greece. They were philosophers, statesmen, and law-givers with much wisdom. Although there is no agreement on who Sages 5 and 6 were, Plato’s version of the seven Sages is given here. In his *Protagoras* 7, Plato named the seven Sages: ‘Such were Thales of Miletus, and Pittacus of Mytilene, and Bias of Priene, and our own Solon, and Cleobulus of Lindus, and Myson of Cheneae; and seventh in the catalogue of wise men was the Lacedaemonian Chilo’ (Plato 1956:46).

8 Anaximander (610-546 BCE) opposed this axiom of Thales, stating that the Ἀρχή was ‘a cosmic force of creative energy constantly making, destroying, and remaking the observable world’ called the Ἄπειρον (the boundless – Mark 2020).

9 Pellò dedicated her entire thesis to this subject.

to think and say that Being is and not-being is not' (Dechene 2011, 3–4). Dechene gives a 'logical' argument for Parmenides' claim: '[I]f motion was possible then when Being is here, it is not there, but will be there, and not here, sometime in the future; but this implies that Being can change to/from not-being, which is inconceivable.' The method that the school used was known as *reductio ad absurdum* (*argumentum ad absurdum*). This argument claims to be true by indicating that its opposite is absurd and, therefore, cannot be true (Parmenides 2017).

Leucippus (480–420 BCE) and his student Democritus (460–370 BCE) are regarded as the ancient Greek philosophers who have founded 'atomism' (Berryman 2023), although documents to verify this no longer exist. According to Diogenes Laërtius 9.2, Leucippus was a student of Zeno of Elea (Laërtius 1895, 388). In his work, *Great World System*, Leucippus included a plethora of philosophical theories originating from the school of Avdera (Beloukas and Diamantis 2010, 111). He started with his atomic theory against Parmenides' notion of 'One,' being the only entity that is living and that makes everything else live. According to Leucippus, 'being "is not one, but is infinite in numbers of beings, and invisible" and "movement is eternal." He calls "atoms" the "minimal bodies," that "they cannot be divided because of their size" and that "movement is necessary for all things, beings and non-beings, it is invisible things"' (Beloukas and Diamantis 2010, 112). Leucippus was presumably the first to discover that all physical objects consist of atoms and void.

Protagoras of Abdera<sup>10</sup> (490–430 BCE) was a prominent sophist during the 5th century BCE, as he was developing argumentative techniques (Bonazzi 2020). Protagoras made three claims: 1) 'Man is the measure of all things' – which could be interpreted as the first step to relativism (Bonazzi 2020, 2) that a human can make the 'worse (or weaker) argument appear the better (or stronger);' and 3) that it is not a foregone conclusion that the gods exist (Poster n.d.). Together with Gorgias, Hippias, and Prodicus, they were known as the Older Sophists (Poster n.d.), who were sophisticated in rhetoric and other subjects.

By the middle of the 5th century BCE, Empedocles of Acragas (*ca* 492–432 BCE) framed a philosophical programme which he compiled in hexameter verse. In this programme, he produced his theory indicating the four classical elements, earth, air, fire, and water, complemented by two active principles – love and strife (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy 2020a). This was a response to the theory held by Parmenides, while it accepted both religion and magical practices – constantly 'moving between *mythos* and *logos*, religion and science' (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy 2020a; original emphasis).

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10 Weber (1908:viii) avers that Protagoras started the second period of Greek philosophy, which was the age of criticism or philosophy of the mind.

## Ancient Philosophy

The most influential Greek philosopher whose method of asking questions to stimulate critical thinking and argumentative dialogue was Socrates. After his first tutor, Anaxagoras' condemnation,<sup>11</sup> he became a student of Archelaus (Laërtius 2.3 1895, 64), who was a rhetorician (Laërtius 2.5 1895, 64). Socrates is regarded as the founding father of Western philosophy (History.com Editors 2023a). His questioning style became an educational technique known as the Socratic Method (History.com Editors 2023a). Socrates did not author any books or make notes. We learn about his teachings from his followers and contemporaries, such as Plato, who was one of his students. Socrates had a huge influence on Plato, leading him to devote his life to looking for virtue and a noble character. After Socrates' death, Plato studied mathematics with the Pythagoreans in Italy (Biography 2023a).

The father of rationalism is Plato. Rationalism is a philosophy where unaided reason takes centre stage to justify knowledge. Reason has, therefore, replaced the experience of sense as a source of knowledge. This viewpoint has already started with the Eleatics<sup>12</sup> and got major support from Platonism (Oxford Reference 2024).

Plato was born in 428/427 and died in 348/347 BCE. In his book *Rival Lovers*<sup>13</sup> 132a, Plato indicated that his educator was Dionysius (Cooper 1997, 619). He studied painting and wrote poetry before he began to philosophise in the Academy in Athens (which he founded)<sup>14</sup> and then in the garden near Colonus (Laërtius 3.6–8 1895, 114). When he was 20 years old, he became a student of Socrates, and after the latter's death, Cratylus, the student of Heraclitus, became his tutor. Later, he became the tutor of Aristotle (Biography 2023a).

Plato's life can be divided into three periods: During the first period, just after Socrates' death, he travelled (399–387 BCE) and shared his tutor's philosophy with others. The second period saw him writing about justice, courage, and wisdom, specifically writing his popular *The Republic* (Zöller 2015; Plato 2002). The third period of Plato's life is characterised by his own metaphysical ideas. In his *Theory of forms*, he regarded reason as the main source of knowledge (Banach 2006, 1). In his *The Republic* 5, Plato already argued that humans do not see abstract things but only particular things (Plato 2002, 306). According to Plato, 'the world of ideas is the only constant [while] the perceived world through our senses is deceptive and changeable' (Biography 2023a). Plato's

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<sup>11</sup> The trial of Anaxagoras was due to his political and religious beliefs. He was a protégé of Pericles who was a general and political leader in Athens. His materialistic beliefs and teachings were not in line with the common views of his time. For example, he claimed that the heavenly bodies consisted of fiery masses of rock as they whirled around the earth (History.com Editors 2023a).

<sup>12</sup> Being situated in Elea/Velia in Italy, these scholars belonged to a pre-Socratic philosophical school, flourishing during the 5th century BCE and grounded on radical monism (Starkey and Calogero 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, most scholars agree that Plato was not the author of this book (Cooper 1997:vi).

<sup>14</sup> This was 'one of the first institutions of higher learning in the Western world' (Biography 2023a).



philosophical arguments were written in dialectic form, where Socrates was in conversation with his interlocutors, convincing them to adopt a better point of view (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2020c).

Laërtius 3.19 (1895, 122) (credibly or incredibly) attributes numerous innovations to Plato. He claims that Plato was the first to utilise the analytical method of investigation and authored books in dialogue form. He was also the first philosopher to contradict Lysias (cf. Plato's *Phaedrus*, which is a dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, mostly referring to Lysias – Thompson 1868). Plato examined the subject of grammatical knowledge scientifically. He also talked about antipodes (direct opposites), elements, dialectics and actions (ποιήματα), oblong numbers, and plane surfaces in philosophy. Moreover, important for theologians, it was Plato who spoke about God's providence.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the most outstanding of Plato's students, turned from his tutor and the way Plato followed Socrates because he was more empirically minded than them (Laërtius 5.4 1895, 181). He founded the Peripatetic (from περιπατέω – *walk about*) school of philosophy in 335 BCE in the Lyceum in Athens. At first, he *walked about* with his students in a promenade in the Lyceum while he discussed philosophic subjects with them. However, when the number of his students grew, he seated them in the Lyceum (Laërtius 5.4 1895, 181).

Aristotle is called the father of Western logic as he designed a formal method of reasoning (Humphries n.d.). He argued that 'the deductive validity of any argument can be determined by its structure rather than its content' (Humphries n.d.). Humphries (n.d.) adds:

In his metaphysics, he claims that there must be a separate and unchanging being that is the source of all other beings. In his ethics, he holds that it is only by becoming excellent that one could achieve eudaimonia, a sort of happiness or blessedness that constitutes the best kind of human life.

However, the careful way in which Aristotle recorded and observed phenomena and the fact that he argued that knowledge primarily originates from sensory experiences did not make him the methodological empiricist that many scholars tend to think (cf. Humphries n.d.).

Aristotle wrote extensively – approximately 200 documents. These documents contained politics, rhetoric and reasoning, psychology, science, and ethics, many being written in the form of dialogues but also as records of scientific observations, and some

were systematic works. Based on the *Histories* Book 5 of Eumelus (only fragments are extant), Laërtius 5.7 (1895, 183) states that Aristotle died after he drank aconite.<sup>15</sup>

Zeno of Citium (*ca* 334–262 BCE) was the founder of the Stoic school in Athens.<sup>16</sup> He was a student of Crates, who was a Cynic, and also attended the Megarian school of Stilpo (McAvoy 2016, 2). He was allegedly also a student of Xenocrates and Polemo (Laërtius 7.3 1895, 259). According to Laërtius 7.4 (1895, 260), he wrote more than 20 works. His Stoic philosophy claimed that the *Logos* (Universal Reason) ‘was the greatest good in life and living in accordance with reason was the purpose of human life’ (Mark 2011). Zeno also argued that virtue is the only good and the path to happiness (Mark 2011).

Philo of Alexandria, also known as Philo Judaeus or Philo the Jew (15/10 BCE–45/50 CE), was born within the Roman era as a Hellenised Jew. He was thus exposed to three diverse cultures, although his work displayed more of a Hellenistic trend mixed with a Jewish undertone, which typifies him as a Hellenised Jewish philosopher. He combined his two cultures (Roman excluded), attempting to justify Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy in a speculative and philosophical way. According to Hillar (n.d.), ‘Philo produced a synthesis of both traditions developing concepts for future Hellenistic interpretation of messianic Hebrew thought, especially by Clement of Alexandria, Christian Apologists like Athenagoras, Theophilus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen. He may have influenced Paul, his contemporary, and perhaps the authors of the Gospel of John.’

Philo’s books can be classified under three categories: 1) Books that paraphrase Moses’ biblical texts (e.g., *On Abraham*<sup>17</sup> and *Allegorical interpretation* [Allegory of the Law]<sup>18</sup>); 2) Philosophical treatises (e.g., *Every good man is free*<sup>19</sup> and *On the eternity of the world*<sup>20</sup>); and 3) *historical-apologetic works called Hypothesica of which only two fragments are extant* (Cohn, Reiter, and Khazarzar 1915). *What stood out in Philo’s works is his allegorical interpretation, especially in the books of the Bible.*

## The Roman Era

The Greek philosophical trends continued to expand and develop even under Roman rule. Many Roman historians were influenced by Greek historians, like Titus Livius, better known as Livy (59 BCE–17 CE) and Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56–120 CE),

<sup>15</sup> The general view is that he died in Chalcis after he has contracted a disease of the digestive organs (Biography 2023b).

<sup>16</sup> The name ‘Stoicism’ originated from the place where Zeno gave his classes: On the Painted Porch (*Stoa Poikile*) in Athens’ marketplace.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Birnbaum and Dillon 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Loeb 1981.

<sup>19</sup> *Quod omnis probus liber sit* (Loeb 1985).

<sup>20</sup> *De aeternitate mundi* (Loeb 1985).

who were greatly influenced by the Greek historians Herodotus (484–425 BCE) and Thucydides (460–400 BCE). However, they also developed in their own ways. Livy, for instance, discussed the ‘Roman history from a moral standpoint’ in his *Second Punic Wars* (Sorek 2012, 106). In this era, fables and myths<sup>21</sup> played a significant role as most of the Roman history was transferred by means of oral tradition, challenging the historians to distinguish truth from fiction (Schoeller 2024).

## Roman Philosophy

Plotinus (204–270 CE) is regarded to be the father of Neoplatonism<sup>22</sup> (Moore n.d.). Influenced by Plato’s works, he established a spiritual cosmology comprising of the One, the Intelligence, and the Soul. He argued that all existence emanates from the creative union of these three Beings (Moore n.d.) – for him, this was serious enough to contemplate. He then took intellectual contemplation and raised it to the level of a productive principle, claiming that ‘it is by virtue of contemplation that all existents are said to be united as a single, all-pervasive reality’ (Moore n.d.). In his *Aenead* 5.3.5, Plotinus elaborated much on contemplation (Plotinus 1984, 85, 87, 89).

## Roman Historiography

Polybius of Megalopolis (220–146 BCE), living after Zeno but before Philo, was in the same way influenced by Greek historiography as the Romans were influenced by the Greek culture. However, he fitted it within his own temperament (Vann 2018). Although Polybius was a Greek, writing his documents in Greek, he was the first historian to supply his readers with ‘key insights into the development of the Roman state’ (Vann 2018), also enlightening the Roman society with issues that they were hardly cognisant of. In his *Histories* 1.1 (Polybius 2010, 3), Polybius, in the form of a question, informed the Roman society about the short time it took the Romans to take over the entire known world:

After all, is there anyone on earth who is so narrow-minded or uninquisitive that he could fail to want to know how and thanks to what kind of political system almost the entire known world was conquered and brought under a single empire, the empire of the Romans, in less than fifty-three years – an unprecedented event?

In this quotation, he contrasted the Roman character to the Greeks, indicating that the former was superior because of good statesmanship, public spirit, and the moderated way in which they treated people whom they had defeated.

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21 Read Miano (2016) on the historiography of myths in the Roman era.

22 The term ‘Neoplatonism’ was only coined in the 19th century, although it refers to the interpretation of the Platonic philosophy by Plotinus that developed into the Platonic Academy which was shut down in 529 CE by emperor Justinian.

Livy was one of the greatest Roman historians, experiencing the republic during its last days and the principate that was established by Augustus who was the first Roman emperor (Vann 2018). His work *Roman history* (Lincoln 1876) of which very little is extant, depicts the time from the establishment of the city up to Augustus' rule. With this, he wanted to memorialise the early history of Rome.

Another influential Roman historian was Tacitus (56 CE–120CE). His two great works are the *Annals* (covering the time between 14 and 68 – Owen and Gildenhard 2013) and *Histories*, covering the time between the 'year of the four emperors' (69 CE) and Domitian's death (Vann 2018). Like the ancient Chinese, the Romans had a high regard for their ancestors, and they also expected history to provide moral lessons (Vann 2018). Tacitus had an excellent command of writing and roughly pioneered psychological theories on the character of people (Vann 2018).

Following the trends first brought to the table by the Greek historian Polybius, who wrote universal and progressive history, the major contribution to historiography by the Romans was the way they shaped history into the 'cumulative story of world events' (Woolf 2011, 46) around the strong sense of divine destiny regarding Rome and the Roman Empire. In addition, the Romans included a teleological and progressive element in historiography to make history more purposeful and providential (Woolf 2011, 46). Eventually, this Roman historiography was linked up with eschatological elements of Jewish thought through the works of Josephus that constructed a bridge between these two worlds to provide the basis on which Christian historiography was built. Procopius of Caesarea (c.500 to c. 554), a Greek historian who became the most important Roman historian of the 6th century (during emperor Justinian's wars), made a distinction 'between sacred and profane history to which several centuries of future historians would adhere' (Woolf 2011, 79).

## The Early Christian Era

The outstanding historian during this time was Eusebius Pamphilus, the bishop of Caesarea (ca. 260–339). Apart from being one of the greatest church historians of all time, he was also an apologist, exegete, controversialist, and encomiast (Louth 2016, 49). No other historian had such a big influence on the development and writing of Church (ecclesial) History than Eusebius (Sterk 2023, 643). In his *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1, Sozomen refers to Eusebius as 'a man intimately acquainted with the Sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Greek poets and historians' (Sozomen and Philostorgius 1855, 10), and in *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.15, 'a man of considerable learning' (Sozomen and Philostorgius 1855, 37). He wrote his *magnum opus*, *Historia ecclesiastica*, between 312 and 324. This work is regarded as the 'first important work of Christian history since the Acts of the Apostles' (Vann 2018). In his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Eusebius referred much to Josephus: In *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.3, he described Josephus as the 'most celebrated of Hebrew historians' (Schaff 1885, 130), displaying the importance of quotes to previous and important/seminal works. Despite

his lack of objectivity and accuracy, this work earned him the title ‘father of Church History.’

## Medieval Era

This era, also called the *Middle Ages* or *Dark Ages*, covers the time from the collapse of the Roman civilisation in 476 CE to 1400 or 1450 in Europe, with the start of the Renaissance (History.com Editors 2023b). It marks the rise of Islam and the Crusades by the end of the 11th century. This era is also important for Christian thought ‘both in terms of its intellectual developments and the impacts of these developments on the subsequent periods in the church history’ (Thamrindinata 2020, 15). Bede (672/3–735), an English monk and scholar, diligently informed his readers about the sources he used for his writings. He not only acknowledged those from whom he got his information but also disclosed the sources from which his informants got their knowledge (Woolf 2011, 87). The intellectual developments can be seen in the foundation of many universities in places like Oxford and Cambridge, as well as Bologna, Paris, and Heidelberg, where scientific studies of theology, known as scholasticism, blossomed (Thamrindinata 2020, 15). Scholasticism managed to 1) shed more light on the relation between faith and reason; 2) uncover the methods of theological inquiry, focusing on the link between logical analyses and linguistics; and 3) elaborate on the core doctrines of Christianity (Thamrindinata 2020, 15).

## Medieval (Eastern) Philosophy

Two major contributors from Eastern philosophy impacted historiography. The greatest contribution made by Ali al-Husayn ibn Sina (970–1037) (Ibn Sina for short, also known as Avicenna) was in medicine, but he is also known for a range of other contributions, including in philosophy and religion. He could be regarded as the most prolific philosopher in the Islamic tradition in the pre-modern era (Rizvi n.d.). He mostly expressed his metaphysics in Aristotelian terms. Rizvi (n.d.) adds: ‘The quest to understand being *qua* being subsumes the philosophical notion of God.’

His theory of existence was central to the resolution of two problems or questions of his time. First, certain theologians like al-Ash‘ari did not accept the possibility of secondary causality. They regarded ‘God as the sole agent and actor in all that unfolded’ (Rizvi n.d.). Avicenna’s metaphysics claimed that human secondary causality exists. Second was the unsolved age-old question: If God is good, how can evil exist? According to Avicenna, ‘particular evils in this world are accidental consequences of good’ (natural evils), not dissolving the problem of moral evils or even ‘horrendous’ evils (Rizvi n.d.). Avicenna merged rational philosophy with Islamic theology, also trying to merge ancient Greek philosophy with the idea of God as the creator of everything (Philosophers.co.uk 2012), which had a huge influence on Western philosophies.

Avicenna's contemporary, Ibn al-Haytham (965–1040), was also a polymath, and he is known as the father of modern optics. His most important contribution to methodology and science was his use of experiments as a norm for proof.

## Medieval (Western) Philosophy

Scholasticism and asceticism dominated the Western medieval world. Christian monastic schools that developed into early European universities gave birth to scholastic thought that attempted to organise philosophical questions and then present them with logical answers.

St Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4–1109) is a good example of a scholastic dialectic. He was tutored by Lanfranc of Pavia, who was regarded as an excellent logician (Leinsle 2010, 79). His method of learning focused on dialectical reasoning to gain knowledge and resolve contradictions. In this way, he taught his students to become philosophers (Thamrindinata 2020, 18). Although he is known as the 'father of scholasticism' (Leinsle 2010, 79) based on his treatise *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (cf. Barth 1960), the highlight of medieval Christian theology and philosophy came from Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (discussed below).

St. Francis (Francesco) of Assisi (1181/2–1226) founded the Ordo Fratrum Minorum (Franciscan order of the Friars Minor), the Poor Clares, as well as the lay Third Order (Cunningham and Brady 2023). Because of his leadership in the movement against evangelical poverty, he got the nickname Poverello (*poor little man*) (Cunningham and Brady 2023; Smit n.d.). His vision was to imitate Jesus and his lifestyle, living in self-denial and abstinence to advance spiritual and moral purity. His asceticism was the way in which he was obedient to God (Smit n.d.).

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) can be regarded as the most important person regarding theology and philosophy in 13th-century Europe – '[b]etween antiquity and modernity' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2022). The documents that he wrote are almost fully extant and can be classified into five categories: 1) comprehensive theological treatises like his *Summa Theologiae* (Freddoso 2023) and *Summa contra gentiles* (Kenny 1955–1957); 2) disputes like his *Questions on truth* (Mulligan 1952); 3) short documents (*opuscula*) like his *On being and essence* (Bobik 2016); 4) biblical commentaries; and 5) commentaries on philosophical texts like those of Aristotle (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2022).

Aquinas' treatises are mostly written in a scholastic style, where a question is posed, referring to the topic in discussion. This is followed by a few arguments that represent the opposite of Aquinas' view, followed by some arguments to the contrary. Thereafter, Aquinas presents his own views.

## The Renaissance Era

Some scholars downgrade this era, depicting it as an era of pessimism combined with a nostalgia for classical antiquity, while others regard it as an upheaval of culture, art, and economy (History.com Editors 2023c). This era most probably started in Florence (Italy)<sup>23</sup> during the 14th century and acted as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the modern era (History.com Editors 2023c). During the 15th century, it spread to France and western and northern Europe. Important events served as stimuli: 1) the fall of Constantinople (1453) to the Ottoman Turks, marking the end of the Byzantine Empire; 2) the discovery of the New World (1492) which marked the age of exploration; 3) the Protestant Reformation; 4) Johannes Gutenberg's printing press (1440) (History.com Editors 2023c) allowing better and quicker communication; and 5) the restoration of the study of classical Greek and philosophy in Italy and Northern Europe. Sadullaev (2021, 365) correctly claims that this era 'gave birth to the titans of philosophical and literary thought and imagination.' Educational reform and a change in artistic style were soon evident. This trend reached England in the 16th century. It ended by the early 17th century.

The Renaissance is mostly known for its foundation of humanism. Classical humanism<sup>24</sup> was a cultural movement claiming that a person is the centre of their own world. The early humanist authors were Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). They focused on traditional Greek and Roman culture and values, thereby renewing its use during the Renaissance (History.com Editors 2023c). The most famous representatives of this era – in chronological order of birth – are Dante (1265–1321) who was an Italian philosopher and a writer *cum* poet; Giotto (1266–1337), an Italian painter who realistically depicted human emotions in such a way that it influenced many artists after him; Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400), an English author *cum* poet; Donatello (1386–1466) who was an Italian sculptor; Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510) who was a famous Italian painter; Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), an Italian artist (painting the Mona Lisa and the Last Supper), an architect, and inventor; Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) from the Netherlands, 'who defined the humanist movement in Northern Europe' and also translated the Greek New Testament (History.com Editors 2023c); Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) who was an Italian diplomat and philosopher; Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543); Michelangelo (1475–1564), an Italian sculptor, painter, and architect; Raphael (1483–1520) who was an Italian artist, best known for his painting of the Madonna; Titian (1488–1576), also a famous painter; William Tyndale (1494–1536) who translated the Bible into English and died on the stake for it; William Byrd (1539/40–1623) was an English composer who was famous for his religious organ music; William Shakespeare (1564–1616) who is still regarded as England's 'national poet;' Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was an Italian astronomer, as well as a physicist and engineer. With his telescopes, he observed Jupiter's moons and Saturn's rings. He claimed that the sun was the centre of our solar system; Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

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23 This included the Medici family in Florence who ignited this movement (History.com Editors 2023c).

24 The term 'classical' is used here to distinguish it from modern humanism (cf. Sinclair 2016).

was an English philosopher; René Descartes (1596–1650) was a French philosopher and mathematician. He was called the ‘father of modern philosophy,’ being famous for his words, ‘I think; therefore I am;’<sup>25</sup> John Milton (1608–1674) was an English poet and historian (History.com Editors 2023c).

The Renaissance ended in turmoil. The Italian wars involving Italy, Spain, and France, together with the economic decline due to shifted trade routes and the religious conflict, added the final blow. The Catholic Church, through the Counter-Reformation, censored ‘Protestant Reformation’ art and the Council of Trent (1545), almost anathematising humanism and anti-Catholic views.

## Renaissance Philosophy

Francesco Petrarca,<sup>26</sup> better known as Petrarch (1304–1374), was the first to write as a Renaissance humanist (Voigt 1859, 81). He argued that humankind could have value and agency through critical thinking, rationalism, and empiricism. The Latin expression *Ad fontes* (back to the sources) brought a renewed interest in classic Greek and Latin sources (cf. Sinclair 2016), upon which the Protestant Reformation was later built. According to Tracy (1987:252), humanism contributed specific ideas and philosophies, like *Ad Fontes*, to positively shape Renaissance Christianity. *Ad Fontes* stimulated a return to the original sources of the Bible (Hebrew and Greek, and not the ‘faulty’ Latin translations) in order to derive orthodox doctrine from these (Sinclair 2016). As most of the interpretations were based on allegory, the new nominalist approach (a kind of philosophy rejecting the abstract) (Parsons 2008) was more focused on a literal interpretation (Major 1970:27).

During the Renaissance, rationalism and empiricism were developed against ideologies like superstition and callousness. Two important philosophers were Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes – Ferencik (2021), who regard them as the ‘founders of modern philosophy’ and the introducers of empiricism, especially Bacon. Bacon redesigned the scientific method and laid the foundation for the split between science and philosophy, and science and theology. Descartes was a French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher regarded by many scholars as the most influential philosopher of the 17th century (Brereton 2024). Over against the Scholastic Aristotelianism, he invented the mind-body dualism (Watson 2023). The growing status of science was accompanied by increased scepticism (methodical doubt) and relativism, which gave birth to historical criticism by the 17th century (Watson 2023).

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25 In his own language: ‘Je pense, donc je suis’ or as it was translated in Latin: *Cogito, ergo sum* (Watson 2023).

26 This Italian scholar was also a poet (Whitfield 2024).



## Renaissance Historiography

According to Acciarino (2022, 162), ‘Renaissance antiquarianism can be defined as a cultural phenomenon aiming at interpreting the past by cross-referencing heterogeneous sources thanks to accumulation and collection.’ Antiquarianism is an interest in antiquities, containing information and objects of the past which are still applicable today. Arnaldo Momigliano correctly refers to Antiquarianism as the establishment of the foundation of current history based on original sources (Momigliano 1950, 297).

Flavio Biondo (1392–1463) was a Renaissance humanist whose historical work earned him the title of ‘father/founder of archaeology’ (Ashworth 2021). He was also the first historian to divide history into the traditional eras of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern. Since the Protestant Reformation, historiography has developed with leaps and bounds. Martin Luther emphasised the importance of returning to the original sources, and when Protestant universities started to mushroom, history became part of the curriculum, although it was taught as a subdivision of the theology or law until the second half of the 18th century (Anderson and Collins n.d.).

Together with other jurists like Jean Bodin, Francois Baudouin (1520–1573), formed part of the *mos gallicus jura docendi* (*French method of teaching law*) (Mori 2022, 159). Baudouin, the ‘disciple’ of Andrea Alciato, and also a contemporary of Luther, began to record and explain historical events in terms of causality (reason and consequences) (Mori 2022, 160). He also emphasised the use of primary sources and eye-witness reports (Mori 2022, 174).

## Conclusion

Looking from a historiographical *cum* philosophical and theological point of view, it is clear that generations do not adopt as much as they adapt. The close link between history, philosophy and theology that existed throughout the eras of historiographic development can promote cooperation between these disciplines towards new pathways in the development of historiography.

Currently, church historiography is still founded upon developments from all the eras discussed above. From ancient Chinese historiography, historians still value the critical use and validation of sources, the need to support arguments with sound evidence and the right to academic freedom. Church historians also value moral examples. Greek history and philosophy inspired and caused modern historiography to value rational, logical and argumentative thinking, critical scholarship, constant questioning, and stoicism. The Roman era contributed to the development of universal and progressive history, linked to a sense of divine destiny and teleology and the distinction between sacred and profane history. The medieval times expanded historiography with scholastic, asceticism, the debate about good versus evil, and experiments as a norm for proof. The Renaissance philosophers brought further development by adding critical thinking, empiricism and *ad fontes* on which the Protestant Reformation was built, while

Renaissance historiography added archaeology, causality, the importance of primary sources and the division of the past into different eras. Developments over thousands of years inspired, caused and built historiographical guidelines that are still used in Church history, philosophy and history disciplines.

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