

***THINKING, RECORDING, AND WRITING HISTORY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD***  
**EDITED BY KURT A. RAAFLAUB**

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Although the domain of inter-disciplinary research is becoming increasingly popular, producing a good piece of collaborative research has not become much easier than before. Even when the subject of an inter-disciplinary project looks innovative and inspiring, there is always a risk of creating yet another collection of generic essays that would either duplicate widely available information or, on the contrary, pursue the narrowly focused discourse of individual disciplines under the guise of an inter-disciplinary dialogue.

This scepticism quickly fades away, though, as one reads through the extremely diverse and insightful collection of essays edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub, an experienced Classicist who has recently initiated a book series “The Ancient World: Comparative Histories” to which the reviewed volume also belongs. The opposite dangers of excessive generality and disciplinary narrowness have been masterfully avoided by most of the nineteen contributors to the volume, and there are not many books that would provide so much insight and inspiration to scholars working on any region of the ancient world. The thematic scope of the volume is unprecedented, ranging from China to North America, and from Jain and Buddhist communities to the Hittites. Overall, the volume is a very impressive mosaic of analytical pieces that examine how ancient communities discovered the applications of writing and textuality for commemoration of the present and engagement with the past.

The subject of the volume is only very tentatively defined, and the contributors have different views on what constitutes “history” and “historiography”. This can be seen as a theoretical deficiency, but perhaps also as an advantage because the complicated question of the different ways of human interaction with the past is presented here in all of its dazzling and beautiful complexity. While some contributors offer their definitions of key terms building on the insight provided by their disciplines and sources, others prefer to operate with more abstract terms, such as “a narrative that depicts a past” proposed by Marc Zvi Brettler in his discussion of historical texts in the Hebrew Bible. However, even such broad definitions fail to encompass the full range of sources examined in the volume. For example, Jonas Grethlein calls for fuller appreciation of visual imagery and spatial perception in our understanding of how the ancient Greek envisioned the past, while Lisa Brooks presents an approach that makes it possible to “read” the “graphic texts” of North American traditions.

One could argue that the volume suffers from lacking a uniform theoretical framework. The opening essay by David Carr, despite being more theoretical than the rest of the volume, predominantly engages in the discussion of the contemporary understanding of history, and is not specifically concerned about the peculiarities of the ancient world. However, much valuable theoretical insight can be gained from individual contributions. As all contributors have expert understanding of their sources, their theoretical reflections, too, are firmly rooted in the primary source evidence.

The volume will help to shatter some misconceptions informed by the linear patterns of development of historical writing in the Classical world. In particular, Theo van den Hout and Robert Rollinger convincingly demonstrate how, in the Hittite kingdom and Teispid and Achaemenid Persia, certain texts that may appear to us as more objective and sophisticated are followed by much less elaborate textual reflections on the past, which did not coincide

with a decline of the state and society. Apparently the sophistication of such reflections is a complex phenomenon linked to a plethora of societal and political developments that cannot be explained in the simple terms of advancement and retardation. Finally, the contributions by Nicholas P. Carter, Lori Boornazian Diel and Lisa Brooks examine native American sources, providing wealth of beginner-friendly information that highlights both the distinctive features of the American traditions as well as the elements that are typologically very reminiscent of similar developments in different parts of Asia and the Mediterranean.

While the focus of the volume is predominantly on textual traditions developed within specific states, the volume includes two studies of textual traditions formed within religions. Jason Neelis provides an insightful overview of the conceptions of the past in Buddhist and Jain communities with their peculiar ways of embellishment of the past and linking it to particular geographic locations. In a similar vein, Eve-Marie Becker describes how early Christians gradually developed an idea of an “open-ended history” at a time when an independent historiographical tradition had not yet become a concern. Related to the approach of these two essays is the masterful study of Andrew Marsham, who traces the developments of textual genres dealing with the past in the Islamic realm, presenting it against a rich background of religious, political and societal developments.

Despite the wide spectrum of disciplinary perspectives, methodological approaches and personal styles, the volume reads very coherently, and one can imagine how much editorial effort was invested to ensure its uniformity. The essays are consistent in length, and the material is presented in a way that makes the volume instrumentally useful both as a teaching tool in survey courses on ancient history and historiography and as a reference source for scholars working on early textual sources of any tradition. A valuable feature shared by many essays in the volume is the systematic and sequential treatment of textual genres that deal with commemoration of contemporary and presentation of past events accompanied by the reconstruction of their production environments and audiences. Such information is extremely useful in any comparative enterprises, but it takes a full mastery of both the sources and secondary scholarship to present it in the form of concise and systematic summaries. Bibliographies accompanying the essays are more comprehensive in scope than one often sees in inter-disciplinary edited volumes, and many of the titles given there will definitely be interesting far beyond the corresponding disciplines.