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Assignment One, Book Review: *Historiography: Ancient, medieval, and modern* By Ernst Breisach., University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Historiography is the study of how history is written and of written histories.¹ While this topic has a long time-span dating from the ancient Greeks to the modern day there is little academic exploration documenting its beginnings, transitions, and continuity to the present day. Breisach's work is therefore a welcome tome of work for student and non-student alike. This review desires to lay out the key arguments of Breisach's work with the intention of highlighting its usefulness for fellow students and curious readers.

His work aims to better inform discussions on the nature of history, define the dimensions of the "so called crisis of history," kindle enthusiasm and respect, and even lead more people to read the work of past historians (pg. XIV, Preface).² This arose out of a desire to explore why the West has been so interested in its past and produced such a wide array of texts addressing this. Breisach admits himself that his youthful desire for "clear and ready answers" has since been pushed aside by "a sense of awe for the complexity of the problem and the perplexing realisation that

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/historiography> [Accessed 03/11/2021 @ 15:16pm]

² This desire to kindle enthusiasm for the subject of history leads the author to mention a vast number of historians, not all of whom the reader may be familiar with unless they are armed with a prior knowledge of ancient sources.

history has no satisfactory account of its own history in English or any other language” (Preface, pg. xiii).

Ernst Breisach is professor emeritus of history at Western Michigan University. He has authored several books, with a particular focus on the study of historiography. His published works preceding this account include *American Progressive History: An Experiment in Modernization* (1993) and *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath* (2003). With a keen and demonstratable interest in the study of how the past is interpreted and written Breisach is an excellent source of knowledge for the modern historiographer.

The work comprises a vast tome, beginning with three chapters on Greek Historiography, followed by a further three on Roman Historiography including works written during the Republican and Augustan eras. The next three chapters focus on Christian Historiography. After introducing the classical sources, Breisach moves onto discussions of Historiography's turning points³ moving onto the Modernisation of Traditional Historiography which then develops into the analysis of the 18th century, 20th century and the national responses of Britain, Germany and America. The next six chapters address the role of the historian before addressing the period of the two world wars and their aftermath. The concluding chapter addresses recent historiography, looking at the challenges faced by modern historians. To ease reference by the audience, Breisach placed all his notes and bibliographic entries to

³ The Renaissance and The Reformation

the rear of his work, however he chose not to include references to ancient sources such as Herodotus or Tacitus as they are easily found in libraries or universities.⁴ Breisach provides commentary on the earliest historiographical authors discussing not only their aims but also the writing styles they utilised. Of Dionysius of Halicarnassus⁵, Timagenes⁶, Nicolaus of Damascus⁷, and Diodorus Siculus⁸ he writes that none of them gained major popularity as “their prose ranged from unexciting to dull” (pg. 62.) In discussing Roman historiography, he writes that it “remained consistently focused on the story of Rome, a city and state more and more viewed as eternal.” (pg. 66-67)⁹ Breisach provides an interesting commentary on the intention of historians in composing their works. He provides a useful comparison between the historian and the biographer, placing side by side works by

⁴ This decision does place a barrier of entry to readers who either do not have access to academic resources through financial or social difficulties.

⁵ Flourished c. 20 BCE [<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dionysius-of-Halicarnassus>, accessed 22/11/2021]

⁶ Arrived in Rome 55 BCE

[<https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-6458>] [accessed 22/11/2021]

⁷ Flourished 1st century BCE [<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicholas-of-Damascus>, accessed 22/11/2021]

⁸ Flourished 1st century BCE [<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diodorus-Siculus>, accessed 22/11/2021]

⁹ For a wider discussion of the eternal Rome read Pratt, Kenneth J. "Rome as eternal." *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1965): 25-44.

Nepos¹⁰, Suetonius¹¹, and Plutarch¹² (pg. 70-71). In addressing Roman historiography, he compares those historians who looked back at a romantic past versus those, like Sallust¹³ who addressed internal struggles and their effect on Rome.¹⁴

A strength of his work is the way in which Breisach formats each section under an italicised heading that allows the reader to easily find topics they are interested in such as '*The Monastic Chronicle: imperfect mirror of sacred history*' (pg. 126). In laying out the mindset of Medieval chroniclers he phrases their search for truth through history as: "chroniclers were concerned with the accuracy of their accounts, they worried even more about being truthful in the sense of avoiding evil and choosing good." (pg. 127)

The tables used by the author are clear and concise, for example the table shown on page 129 describing the major parts of the Medieval Chronicle is a useful tool for students focusing on the earliest Christian writers and the subsequent section

¹⁰ Born c. 110 BCE—died c. 24 BCE

[HTTPS://WWW.BRITANNICA.COM/BIOGRAPHY/CORNELIUS-NEPOS](https://www.britannica.com/biography/cornelius-nepos) [ACCESSED 03/12/2021]

¹¹ born 69 CE, probably in Rome, died after 122 CE.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Suetonius> [accessed 03/12/2021]

¹² Born 46 CE in Boeotia, died around 119 CE

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plutarch> [accessed 03/12/2021]

¹³ Born 86 BCE, died 35/34 BCE. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sallust> [Accessed 03/12/2021]

¹⁴ This argument lays the ground for later, modern approaches to historiography which attempt to look for causes, motivations and consequences in events.

explaining the reduction in the Biblical-Patristic - The segment of Medieval writing according to Breisach that told most clearly of the human encounter with the divine (Pg 128), is a fascinating insight into the development of Medieval writing.

On the writing of Crusade historiography, Breisach's language is eloquent but easily understood. He addresses the various complexities presented by the subject matter explaining how the cultural identity behind each author, clearly effects their biases within the text. For example, the attitude of Medieval authors towards their eastern neighbors the Byzantines particularly when described by Norman sources (Pg 134).

On the other hand, an editorial decision by Breisach to place all references, dates, and author lifespans in the "detailed table of contents and index." (Preface, xiv.) means that the reader must move between the content they are reading and the contents and index if they wish to seek clarification on a point, or to learn the time in which an author worked. However, what this decision does mean is that the writing succeeds in meeting Breisach's desire for a narrative exploration of "the role history and historians have played in the various societies and phases of Western culture." (Preface, xiv). On this note, Lester Stephens writing a review of the text posits how an explanation of the role of peripheral cultures to the West, the history of science and the role of popular culture would help to broaden our understanding.¹⁵

This work will serve as an excellent tool of reference for the student of historiography. Other reviews of this edition have provided glowing recommendations. While the work has some flaws for the beginner; in the editorial decision to not reference the classical works and the assumption that the reader has

¹⁵ Stephens, Lester D, 'ERNST BREISACH. "Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern" (Book Review)', *The American Historical Review* (Washington, etc: American Historical Association, etc, 1984), 1038–

prior knowledge, the tome does provide a welcome sense of narrative through charting the story of the study of history through the ages.