

The Creation of Historical Time in Greece and Rome:  
Afterthoughts on *Caesar's Calendar*, and Forethoughts

I am very grateful for the opportunity for reflection and reassessment provided by my invitation to take part in the USC History Seminar. This 'think-piece' is intended to accompany Chapter 3 of *Caesar's Calendar* ('Transitions from Myth into History I: The foundations of the city'). In that chapter I argued for the importance of time-consciousness in the establishment of the new discipline of historiography in Greece, arguing that the first historian, Herodotus, self-consciously used chronological stratification not just to mark out the subject-matter of the new genre, but to help constitute its epistemological mode; I then took the foundation of the city of Rome as a test case for what could be at stake in using chronological demarcation within history, arguing that the act of deciding where to locate Rome's beginnings in time had profound ideological and cultural entailments. I hope that members of the seminar will understand if I do not abandon all the claims I made in a book that came out just over a year ago; but I would like to take stock of objections already made against the arguments of Chapter 3, rethink some of the issues, and consider what future research on the role of chronology at the beginning of Roman historiography might look like in the light of this rethinking. I apologise in advance for the unavoidably frequent use of Gibbon's 'odious pronoun'.

I.

My argument about the innovations of Herodotus in constructing his new discourse focused strongly on this origin-moment and gave a misleading impression about the tendencies in history-writing in the ancient world after him. I should have been much more clear about how different

the issues were that faced the first-generation historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, as opposed to their successors. Herodotus and Thucydides created a space for historical method in demarcating a time zone in which weighing and assessing testimony was possible, shutting out earlier times as inaccessible to this type of scrutiny; in writing on recent or virtually contemporary events, they did not face their successors' problem of chronology, of fitting their narrative into a matrix of time. The 'creation of historical time' in Herodotus and Thucydides was a negative process more than a positive one. Their procedure enabled them to carve out a new kind of authority, but it did not involve the systematic creation of a chronological system (even though Herodotus had done a great deal of work on comparative time systems in order to get his various *logoi* to hang together; this work was for the most part buried, not presented as part of the end-product in itself). As the work of systematic synchronistic chronology developed through the Hellenistic period in the conscious creation of a shared chronological space for Greeks, to accompany the consolidation of the *oikoumene*, later historians did have to take stock of the problem of how much of this consolidated past time to incorporate into their work. They had various demarcation points, and Troy was by no means the only one, as some reviewers of *Caesar's Calendar* appear to think I was claiming (esp. T.P. Wiseman in *London Review of Books*, 18 October 2007). Still, I can see how this impression might have been created, and I should have stressed more that the pivotal importance of Troy as a demarcating point in this regard was more important to the Romans, for whom Troy was the mother city, than it was to most Greeks (apart from Eratosthenes and his followers).

Again, I should have made it more clear that these issues of dividing up strata of time by degrees of 'knowability' (what we might call 'historicity') were ones that exercised only a subsection of ancient scholars:

this mattered to historians in the Herodotean tradition and to chronographers in the Eratosthenic tradition, but antiquarians of all kinds, local historians and chronographers in particular, had no pressing interest in such questions. I made this point on p.80, but I should have more explicitly argued the point, since so many scholars continue to talk about what ‘the Romans’ or ‘the Greeks’ thought about any given topic—including time—when it is always vital to respect the generic specificity of any ancient argument in context. It is bad method to lump together the testimony of an antiquarian such as Varro and an historian such as Livy (both from the first century BCE): they have different agendas and different discursive strategies for processing the databank of the past. The issues are very similar to what we see in historians’ treatment of myth and divine agency, which Herodotus likewise excluded from the realm of what the historian can vouch for. Livy, for example, says in his Preface to his History that the report of the Romans’ descent from Mars is something that ‘the peoples of the earth should tolerate with as much equanimity as they tolerate the empire’. He knows that these myths are indispensable to the authority of the Roman empire, but he also knows that vouching for them in his own right would undermine his own authority: the acceptance of the myths is incumbent upon an indulgent Roman posterity and a compliant group of subjects, and Livy does not wish to identify himself with either category. It matters crucially to him, then, to maintain the differences between his genre and those in which such myths are at home. Otherwise he will not be able to sustain the persona necessary to enforce the practical utility that he hopes will come from his history’s didactic and moral power. None of these considerations applies to an antiquarian like Varro, and Livy’s motivations for refusing to set any store by dates around the time of the foundation of the city are likewise part of his larger historical project in ways that are irrelevant to Varro.

In focusing on the demarcation between what is susceptible to historical treatment and what is not, I can now see that I fudged the issue of ‘likeness’, of whether—above and beyond any issues of knowability—there might have been some kind of difference between human nature in the deep past and now: the editors of *London Review of Books* unerringly chose for the title of Wiseman’s review a phrase of mine he quoted, ‘when demigods walked the earth’. In various poetic traditions there is a developed interest in this problem, but historians work with a principle of constant nature—at least until Diodorus Siculus in the late first century BCE. In general, I wish I had been able to see the excellent discussion of Suzanne Saïd, ‘Myth and historiography’, in J. Marincola (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* (2007), I.76-88; she addresses this issue on pp. 79-80.

## II.

In discussing the problem of how to date the foundation of the city of Rome, it is once again important to register how differently the issue is framed by different genres or authors. Livy, for example, takes his Herodotean brief so seriously that he does not give a date in any form for the foundation of the city. He adheres firmly to an annalistic tradition according to which the clock of Roman time only begins when the Kings are expelled and the Republic is established (in ‘509 BCE’), inaugurating the list of paired consular names by which Roman time is measured. Everything in Roman history before the Republic is bracketed off in Book One of Livy, so that one book out of the original 142 contains something like 675 of the 1900 years covered in the history as a whole. There are no dates in that first book, because as far as Livy was concerned it wasn’t ‘real’ history, in that it wasn’t part of real time, proper Roman time. Other historians did, however,

debate intensively the problem of when in historical time the city had its beginning, regularly working on the assumption that the city's foundation was somehow keyed in to the beginning moments of historical time, especially around the First Olympiad ('776 BCE').

In my discussion of the 'discovery' in the third century BCE of an historical foundation date for Rome, I took for granted, and left unexamined and undiscussed, certain important issues that I would like to address now. In particular, I made no real argument for my assertion that Romans in the early to mid third century BCE would not have had any date for the foundation of the city, and this assumption has been called into question by another reviewer, Katharina Volk (*Classical Philology* 103 (2008), 200-5). As she puts it (p.203), in 300 BCE Romans could count back to the foundation of the Republic, and 'if they went this far, they might have counted back even further'. Again, if Romans had been telling the story of Romulus and Remus for a long time before it got written down in a history book, 'one wonder[s] why they would never have asked themselves when the events related in this story might have taken place'. Finally, as a related point, she asks why I assumed that Timaeus of Tauromenium, who first downdated the foundation from the time of Troy to '814/13 BCE', did not do so on the basis of any information from Romans, given that he does seem to have had a remarkable degree of access to information from people in Rome and Latium about local matters (principally concerning cult, on the basis of the surviving evidence); as she says, I suggested that Timaeus might have produced his new Roman date by synchronising Rome's foundation with a new Carthaginian foundation date he had learnt from Carthaginian informants, and she asks: 'Why not the other way around?'

These are good questions, and it's been interesting for me to try to disinter why I instinctively took the issues the way I did. I can see that I

was working with ways of thinking about framing past time that I was taking for granted, and did not enunciate as I should have. Basically, it seems to me that we need to denaturalise the assumption that it is ‘normal’ to assign dates to past events. Assigning dates does not take place except within specific cultural forms, and in this light it is worth asking what kinds of needs and practices would have provided a context for Romans to date the foundation of the city before historiography. I’m not at all sure that they necessarily had any such needs and practices. This is not a question of denying the Romans of c. 300 BCE an interest in their past or a rich inheritance concerning their ancestors. The Rome of 300 BCE is tantalisingly just over our real historical horizon in all kind of ways, but we know enough about it to know that it was a highly sophisticated and developed society, with a complex array of commemorative practices (principally the funeral oration, family and triumphal monuments, lists of magistrates). But the crucial question is whether these commemorative practices could have been such as to have generated an interest in fixing the foundation of the city within time.

I took it for granted—too readily, and without argumentation—that such an interest had to be part of a developed historiographical tradition that had no purchase in Rome at that period, so that it was a Greek outsider, Timaeus, who first felt the need to make a mark in time for the city’s origin. This assumption needs more justification. I reasoned that in synchronising the foundation to the same year as that of Carthage, ‘814/13’, Timaeus might have been making it all up, or responding to something he’d learnt from Carthaginians. We should never underestimate the Greeks’ ability to make things up and to work from their own templates without interest in the views of the ‘natives’. If he had been talking to Carthaginians, at least, he would have been talking to people whose culture had a tradition of kingly annals

from their metropolis of Tyre, and it is very easy to imagine that a Carthaginian could have told Timaeus how long he thought his city had been in existence: whether or not their date of c. '814' is correct (and modern archaeologists think it is more or less correct), there is a cultural practice in place in Carthage which makes it possible for them to generate this kind of information (or 'information'). If Timaeus had wanted to make up a date, then he also had good tools to work with, and he will have used a fall-of-Troy date to work from, as so many people did when generating foundation dates for Rome: he dated the fall of Troy to '1334/3', and thirteen 40-year generations from this date takes us to '814/3'.

So it is easy to conceive of practices in Greek historiography or Carthaginian recording that could have generated a date for Carthage or for Rome, for Timaeus then to synchronise. But we are much more in the dark if, in response to Volk's question about why Timaeus couldn't have got his date from a Roman informant, we ask what kind of practices early third century Rome might have had which would motivate a foundation date for the city. I still think they didn't *need* a date for the story of Romulus and Remus, any more than medieval tellers of the story of King Arthur needed a date for him: it is by no means natural or inevitable that people telling such stories should 'ask... themselves when the events related in this story might have taken place.' Once one has denaturalised the assumption that stories of this kind automatically carry dates with them, then the burden of proof is on those who think that a Rome before historiography could have had the motivation to have a date for the foundation. We also need to ask *how* they would they have done it. I can't imagine how any Roman in 300 BCE would have, independently, counted down from a Greek Troy date in the way Timaeus and others did. In principle, they might have counted back from a date for the foundation of the Republic, which it appears they *did*

have in place by 300 BCE; but I am still convinced that De Cazanove was right to argue that the eventual tradition about the length of the monarchy was not the result of counting back from the start of the Republic but of counting down from the fall of Troy (*Caesar's Calendar*, p.90).

What is so different about a date for the foundation of the Republic and a date for the foundation of the city? Why am I content to see it as plausible that the Romans of 300 BCE had the former and not the latter? As far as I can see, there are institutions in place in Rome in 300 BCE which can motivate tracking time from the expulsion of the kings, the establishment of an eponymous magistracy and the founding of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Lists of eponymous magistrates are part of Greek culture which the Romans had enthusiastically embraced from the early Republic, along with written laws in the market place, a census, hoplite army, etc.: they could be used for counting back if anyone was so inclined. We should be cautious about accepting the murky tradition that a nail was banged into the temple of Jupiter every year: but if this did happen, then it certainly enabled counting back in time to the temple's foundation, which according to tradition happened in Year One of the Republic. Actually, I now think that I too happily accepted this tradition, and we should also be chary of reaching too many conclusions from the story of how Flavius 'dated' his religious dedication in 304 BCE by inscribing that his act took place 'in the 204<sup>th</sup> year after the dedication of the Capitoline temple [of Jupiter]'. Flavius was an iconoclastic figure who launched a revolution in civic time by putting up an annotated public calendar for the first time, and he could well have been initiating rather than following a tradition with this Capitoline era. Needless to say, none of these arguments about conditions in Rome in 300 BCE imply anything at all about the *accuracy* of the traditions concerning Year One of the Republic. All I'm concerned with is whether or

not there were institutions and practices in place which would make the tracking of time from this foundational moment a doable and desirable thing in 300 BCE, and I think we are on pretty safe ground in saying that there were.

I find it much harder to conceive of the kind of protocols in this cultural moment that would make finding a city-foundation date a doable and desirable thing. I'll keep thinking about this, and welcome any suggestions or corrections, but at the moment I do think we need to look to historiography for this motivation. Fixing cities' origins in time is what Hellenistic historians and chronographers did, and were doing all over the Greek world in the third century. Rome was not part of this particular matrix, so far as I can see, before Timaeus' intervention around 270 BCE, and no Roman took part in the historiographical project before 210 BCE or so, when Fabius Pictor wrote a history of the city, in Greek. Once again, we need to denaturalise our assumptions, and remind ourselves that history is not just a matter of writing down what people are saying anyway, but has its own transformational power as a tool of thought and as a system of representation. The creation of a historiography in Rome and about Rome was the result of specific circumstances in Italy and Magna Graecia at a specific time, as Romans and Greeks came to terms with the Romans' conquest of the Western half of the Greek world. The creation of a tradition about the Roman past is collaborative work, involving both Greek and Roman historians and poets, and at every turn in the ongoing collaboration the Greek and Roman writers are reacting to contemporary events, for work on origins and the past is always contemporary in motivation. Early Roman historians were engaged in an enquiry which reflected on the intriguing status of the Romans as simultaneously part of and not part of the Greek world, civilized yet non-Hellenic, comparable to Greek norms yet ultimately

independent of them. This is the context in which the technologies of historiography become urgent, in providing a matrix of time which can connect the Roman and the Greek past in significant ways.

I am still left wondering what kind of material about the past was in circulation in 'pre-historical' Rome, what kind of time dimension it had, and what kind of mediation went on as this material became part of Grecising historiography. These are all questions for future research. One would need to examine the traditions about the lists of magistrates, the kind of chronologies that might have been preserved in family trees, and the ways in which relations with other states were charted. I look forward to the investigation.