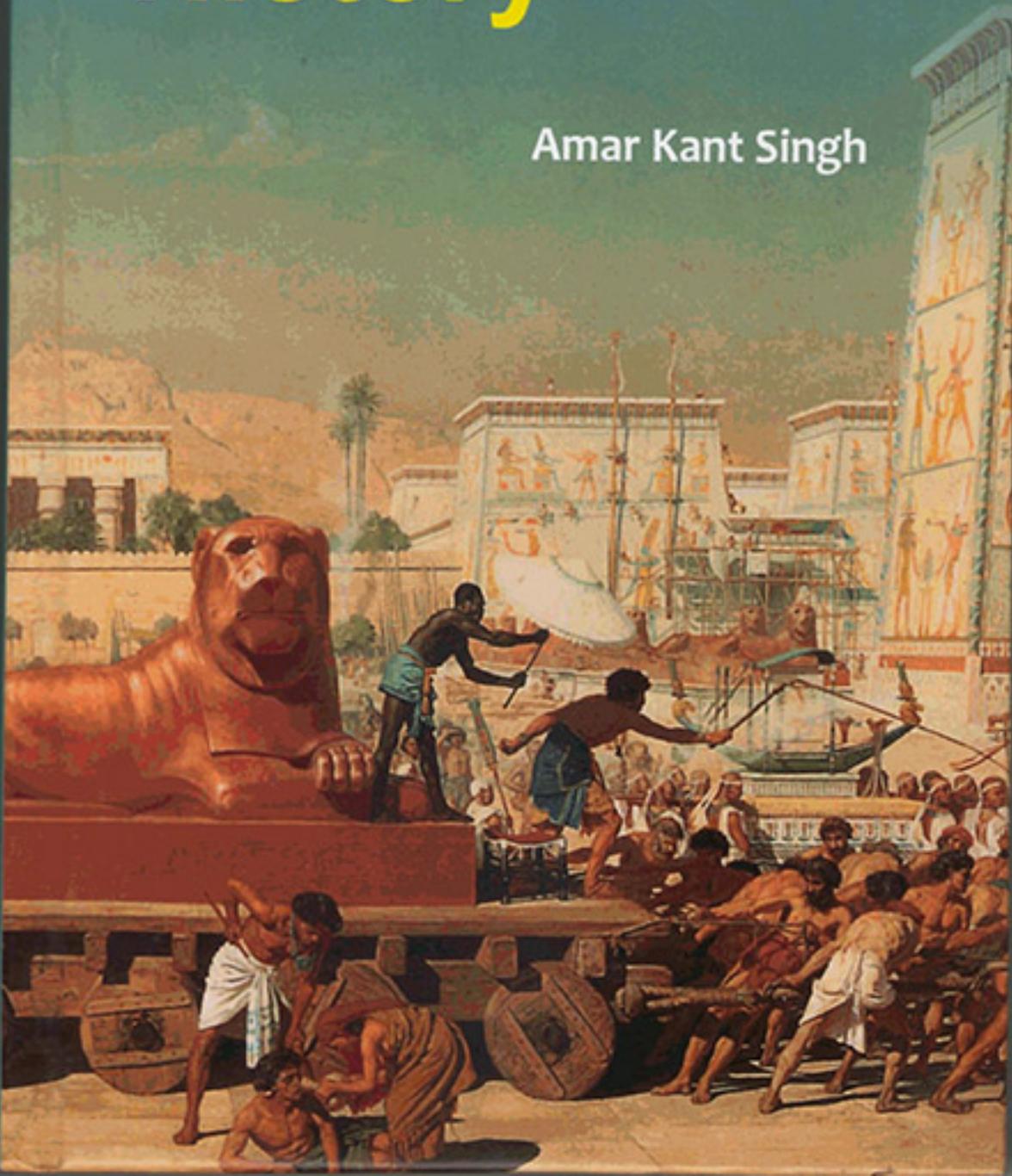


Research Methodology and Techniques in **History**

Amar Kant Singh



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HISTORY**

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Preface

Ancient influences have helped spawn variant interpretations of the nature of history which have evolved over the centuries and continue to change today. The modern study of history is wide-ranging, and includes the study of specific regions and the study of certain topical or thematical elements of historical investigation. Often history is taught as part of primary and secondary education, and the academic study of history is a major discipline in University studies. The process of learning and understanding the background and growth of a chosen field of study or profession can offer insight into organizational culture, current trends, and future possibilities. The historical method of research applies to all fields of study because it encompasses their: origins, growth, theories, personalities, crisis, etc. Both quantitative and qualitative variables can be used in the collection of historical information. There are a variety of places to obtain historical information. Primary Sources are the most sought after in historical research. Primary resources are first hand accounts of information.

Historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidence, including the evidence of archaeology, to research and then to write histories in the form of accounts of the past. The question of the nature, and even the possibility, of a sound historical method is raised in the philosophy of history as a question of epistemology. The study of historical method and of different ways of writing history is known as historiography. The present book provides a lively critical survey of methods for historical research at all levels. While historians have become increasingly sensitive to social and cultural theory since the 1980s, the actual methods by which research is carried out in History have been largely taken for granted. *Research Methods for History* encourages those researching the past to think creatively about the

wide range of methods currently in use, to understand how these methods are used and what historical insights they can provide. The book covers sources and methods that are well-established in History, such as archival research, together with those that are less widely known. The themes of the different chapters have been selected to reflect recent trends in the subject. Even with more established methods, however, the aim is to present new insights and perspectives and to open researchers' minds to new methodological possibilities. Key features International scope Encourages methodological comparison across time-periods. Encourages historians at all levels to think critically and creatively. Transferable methodological skills useful for Geography, Archaeology and Cultural Studies

'Research Methodology and Techniques in History' is a lively introduction to historical methodology, an overview of the techniques historians must master in order to reconstruct the past. Its focus on the basics of source criticism, rather than on how to find references or on the process of writing, makes it an invaluable guide for all students of history and for anyone who must extract meaning from written and unwritten sources.

—*Editor*

Chapter 1

Introduction

History is the study of the past, specifically how it relates to humans. It is an umbrella term that relates to past events as well as the discovery, collection, organisation, and presentation of information about these events. The term includes cosmic, geologic, and organic history, but is often generically implied to mean human history. Scholars who write about history are called historians. Events occurring prior to written record are considered prehistory.

History can also refer to the academic discipline which uses a narrative to examine and analyse a sequence of past events, and objectively determine the patterns of cause and effect that determine them. Historians sometimes debate the nature of history and its usefulness by discussing the study of the discipline as an end in itself and as a way of providing “perspective” on the problems of the present.

Stories common to a particular culture, but not supported by external sources (such as the tales surrounding King Arthur) are usually classified as cultural heritage or legends, because they do not support the “disinterested investigation” required of the discipline of history. Herodotus, a 5th-century BC Greek historian is considered within the Western tradition to be the “father of history”, and, along with his contemporary Thucydides, helped form the foundations for the modern study of human history.

Their work continues to be read today and the divide between the culture-focused Herodotus and the military-focused Thucydides remains a point of contention or approach in modern historical writing. In the Eastern tradition, a state chronicle the Spring and Autumn Annals was known to be compiled from as early as 722 BC although only 2nd century BC texts survived.

Ancient influences have helped spawn variant interpretations of the nature of history which have evolved over the centuries and continue to change today. The modern study of history is wide-ranging, and includes the study of specific regions and the study of certain topical or thematic elements of historical investigation. Often history is taught as part of primary and secondary education, and the academic study of history is a major discipline in University studies.

Etymology



Figure: *History by Frederick Dielman (1896)*

A derivation from *weid-* “know” or “see” is attested as “the reconstructed etymon *wid-tor* [“one who knows”] (compare to English *wit*) a suffixed zero-grade form of the PIE root *weid-* ‘see’ and so is related to Greek *eidénai*, to know”.

Ancient Greek $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}$ (*hístôr*) means “inquiry”, “knowledge from inquiry”, or “judge”. It was in that sense that Aristotle used the word in his $\text{Περὶ τῶν ζῴων ἱστορίαι}$ (*Perì Tà Zôa Çistoríai* “Inquiries about Animals”). The ancestor word $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}$ is attested early on in Homeric Hymns, Heraclitus, the Athenian ephebes’ oath, and in Boiotic inscriptions (in a legal sense, either “judge” or “witness”, or similar).

The word entered the English language in 1390 with the meaning of “relation of incidents, story”. In Middle English, the meaning was “story” in general.

The restriction to the meaning “record of past events” arose in the late 15th century. It was still in the Greek sense that Francis Bacon used the term in the late 16th century, when he wrote about “Natural History”. For him, *historia* was “the knowledge of objects determined by space and time”, that sort of knowledge provided by memory (while science was provided by reason, and poetry was provided by fantasy).

In an expression of the linguistic synthetic vs. analytic/isolating dichotomy, English like Chinese (òS vs. Ìk) now designates separate words for human history and storytelling in general. In modern German, French, and most Germanic and Romance languages, which are solidly synthetic and highly inflected, the same word is still used to mean both “history” and “story”.

The adjective *historical* is attested from 1661, and *historic* from 1669.

Historian in the sense of a “researcher of history” is attested from 1531. In all European languages, the substantive “history” is still used to mean both “what happened with men”, and “the scholarly study of the happened”, the latter sense sometimes distinguished with a capital letter, “History”, or the word *historiography*.

Description

Historians write in the context of their own time, and with due regard to the current dominant ideas of how to interpret the past, and sometimes write to provide lessons for their own society. In the words of Benedetto Croce, “All history is contemporary history”. History is facilitated by the formation of a ‘true discourse of past’ through the production of narrative and analysis of past events relating to the human race. The modern discipline of history is dedicated to the institutional production of this discourse.

All events that are remembered and preserved in some authentic form constitute the historical record. The task of historical discourse is to identify the sources which can most usefully contribute to the production of accurate accounts of past. Therefore, the constitution of the historian’s archive is a result of circumscribing a more general archive by invalidating the usage of certain texts and documents (by falsifying their claims to represent the ‘true past’).

The study of history has sometimes been classified as part of the humanities and at other times as part of the social sciences. It can also be seen as a bridge between those two broad areas, incorporating methodologies from both. Some individual historians strongly support one or the other classification. In the 20th century, French historian Fernand Braudel revolutionized the study of history, by using such outside disciplines as economics, anthropology, and geography in the study of global history.

Traditionally, historians have recorded events of the past, either in writing or by passing on an oral tradition, and have attempted to

answer historical questions through the study of written documents and oral accounts. From the beginning, historians have also used such sources as monuments, inscriptions, and pictures. In general, the sources of historical knowledge can be separated into three categories: what is written, what is said, and what is physically preserved, and historians often consult all three. But writing is the marker that separates history from what comes before.

Archaeology is a discipline that is especially helpful in dealing with buried sites and objects, which, once unearthed, contribute to the study of history. But archaeology rarely stands alone. It uses narrative sources to complement its discoveries. However, archaeology is constituted by a range of methodologies and approaches which are independent from history; that is to say, archaeology does not “fill the gaps” within textual sources. Indeed, Historical Archaeology is a specific branch of archaeology, often contrasting its conclusions against those of contemporary textual sources. For example, Mark Leone, the excavator and interpreter of historical Annapolis, Maryland, USA has sought to understand the contradiction between textual documents and the material record, demonstrating the possession of slaves and the inequalities of wealth apparent via the study of the total historical environment, despite the ideology of “liberty” inherent in written documents at this time.

There are varieties of ways in which history can be organised, including chronologically, culturally, territorially, and thematically. These divisions are not mutually exclusive, and significant overlaps are often present, as in “The International Women’s Movement in an Age of Transition, 1830–1975.” It is possible for historians to concern themselves with both the very specific and the very general, although the modern trend has been toward specialization. The area called Big History resists this specialization, and searches for universal patterns or trends. History has often been studied with some practical or theoretical aim, but also may be studied out of simple intellectual curiosity.

History and Prehistory

The history of the world is the memory of the past experience of *Homo sapiens sapiens* around the world, as that experience has been preserved, largely in written records. By “prehistory”, historians mean the recovery of knowledge of the past in an area where no written records exist, or where the writing of a culture is not understood. By studying painting, drawings, carvings, and other artifacts, some

information can be recovered even in the absence of a written record. Since the 20th century, the study of prehistory is considered essential to avoid history's implicit exclusion of certain civilizations, such as those of Sub-Saharan Africa and pre-Columbian America. Historians in the West have been criticized for focusing disproportionately on the Western world. In 1961, British historian E. H. Carr wrote:

The line of demarcation between prehistoric and historical times is crossed when people cease to live only in the present, and become consciously interested both in their past and in their future. History begins with the handing down of tradition; and tradition means the carrying of the habits and lessons of the past into the future. Records of the past begin to be kept for the benefit of future generations.

This definition includes within the scope of history the strong interests of peoples, such as Australian Aboriginals and New Zealand Māori in the past, and the oral records maintained and transmitted to succeeding generations, even before their contact with European civilization.

Historiography

Historiography has a number of related meanings. Firstly, it can refer to how history has been produced: the story of the development of methodology and practices (for example, the move from short-term biographical narrative towards long-term thematic analysis). Secondly, it can refer to what has been produced: a specific body of historical writing (for example, “medieval historiography during the 1960s” means “Works of medieval history written during the 1960s”). Thirdly, it may refer to why history is produced: the Philosophy of history. As a meta-level analysis of descriptions of the past, this third conception can relate to the first two in that the analysis usually focuses on the narratives, interpretations, worldview, use of evidence, or method of presentation of other historians. Professional historians also debate the question of whether history can be taught as a single coherent narrative or a series of competing narratives.

Philosophy of History

History's philosophical questions

- What is the proper unit for the study of the human past—the individual? The polis? The civilization? The culture? Or the nation state?
- Are there broad patterns and progress? Are there cycles? Is human history random and devoid of any meaning?

Philosophy of history is a branch of philosophy concerning the eventual significance, if any, of human history. Furthermore, it speculates as to a possible teleological end to its development—that is, it asks if there is a design, purpose, directive principle, or finality in the processes of human history. Philosophy of history should not be confused with historiography, which is the study of history as an academic discipline, and thus concerns its methods and practices, and its development as a discipline over time. Nor should philosophy of history be confused with the history of philosophy, which is the study of the development of philosophical ideas through time.

Historical Methods

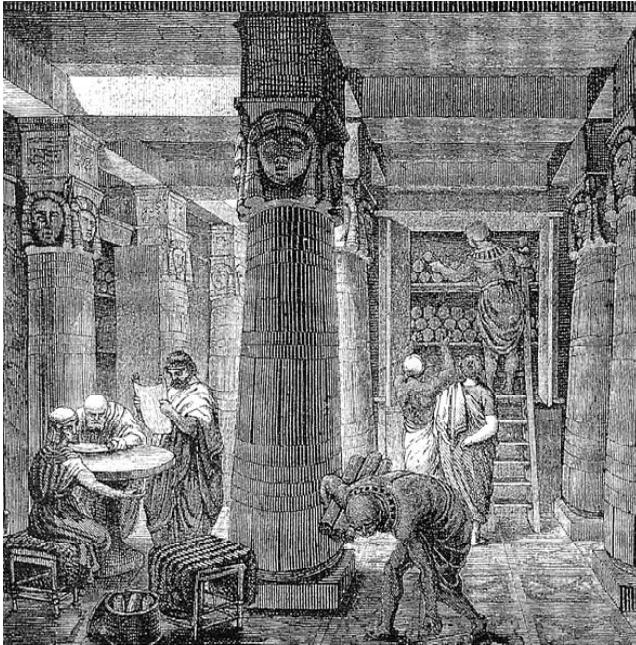


Figure: A depiction of the ancient Library of Alexandria

Historical method basics

The following questions are used by historians in modern work.

1. *When was the source, written or unwritten, produced (date)?*
2. *Where was it produced (localization)?*
3. *By whom was it produced (authorship)?*
4. *From what pre-existing material was it produced (analysis)?*
5. *In what original form was it produced (integrity)?*
6. *What is the evidential value of its contents (credibility)?*

The first four are known as higher criticism; the fifth, lower criticism; and, together, external criticism. *The sixth and final inquiry* about a source is called internal criticism.

The historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidence to research and then to write history.

Herodotus of Halicarnassus (484 BC – ca.425 BC) has generally been acclaimed as the “father of history”. However, his contemporary Thucydides (ca. 460 BC – ca. 400 BC) is credited with having first approached history with a well-developed historical method in his work the History of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides, unlike Herodotus, regarded history as being the product of the choices and actions of human beings, and looked at cause and effect, rather than as the result of divine intervention. In his historical method, Thucydides emphasized chronology, a neutral point of view, and that the human world was the result of the actions of human beings. Greek historians also viewed history as cyclical, with events regularly recurring.

There were historical traditions and sophisticated use of historical method in ancient and medieval China. The groundwork for professional historiography in East Asia was established by the Han Dynasty court historian known as Sima Qian (145–90 BC), author of the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian). For the quality of his written work, Sima Qian is posthumously known as the Father of Chinese Historiography. Chinese historians of subsequent dynastic periods in China used his *Shiji* as the official format for historical texts, as well as for biographical literature.

Saint Augustine was influential in Christian and Western thought at the beginning of the medieval period. Through the Medieval and Renaissance periods, history was often studied through a sacred or religious perspective. Around 1800, German philosopher and historian Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel brought philosophy and a more secular approach in historical study.

In the preface to his book, the *Muqaddimah* (1377), the Arab historian and early sociologist, Ibn Khaldun, warned of seven mistakes that he thought that historians regularly committed. In this criticism, he approached the past as strange and in need of interpretation. The originality of Ibn Khaldun was to claim that the cultural difference of another age must govern the evaluation of relevant historical material, to distinguish the principles according to which it might be possible to attempt the evaluation, and lastly, to feel the need for

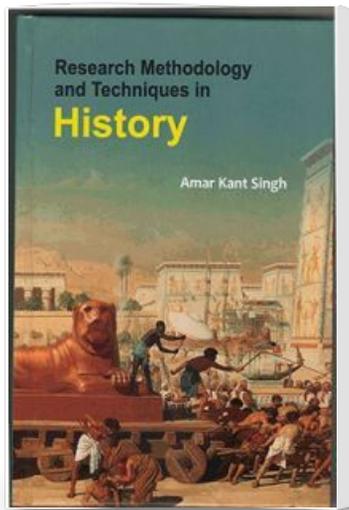
experience, in addition to rational principles, in order to assess a culture of the past. Ibn Khaldun often criticized “idle superstition and uncritical acceptance of historical data.” As a result, he introduced a scientific method to the study of history, and he often referred to it as his “new science”. His historical method also laid the groundwork for the observation of the role of state, communication, propaganda and systematic bias in history, and he is thus considered to be the “father of historiography” or the “father of the philosophy of history”.

In the West historians developed modern methods of historiography in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in France and Germany. The 19th-century historian with greatest influence on methods was Leopold von Ranke in Germany.

In the 20th century, academic historians focused less on epic nationalistic narratives, which often tended to glorify the nation or great men, to more objective and complex analyses of social and intellectual forces. A major trend of historical methodology in the 20th century was a tendency to treat history more as a social science rather than as an art, which traditionally had been the case. Some of the leading advocates of history as a social science were a diverse collection of scholars which included Fernand Braudel, E. H. Carr, Fritz Fischer, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Bruce Trigger, Marc Bloch, Karl Dietrich Bracher, Peter Gay, Robert Fogel, Lucien Febvre and Lawrence Stone. Many of the advocates of history as a social science were or are noted for their multi-disciplinary approach. Braudel combined history with geography, Bracher history with political science, Fogel history with economics, Gay history with psychology, Trigger history with archaeology while Wehler, Bloch, Fischer, Stone, Febvre and Le Roy Ladurie have in varying and differing ways amalgamated history with sociology, geography, anthropology, and economics. More recently, the field of digital history has begun to address ways of using computer technology to pose new questions to historical data and generate digital scholarship.

In opposition to the claims of history as a social science, historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper, John Lukacs, Donald Creighton, Gertrude Himmelfarb and Gerhard Ritter argued that the key to the historians’ work was the power of the imagination, and hence contended that history should be understood as an art. French historians associated with the Annales School introduced quantitative history, using raw data to track the lives of typical individuals, and were prominent in the establishment of cultural history (cf. *histoire des mentalités*). Intellectual historians such as Herbert Butterfield, Ernst Nolte and

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