On Aristotle's Historical Methods

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ARISTOTLE'S PHILOSOPHY is still studied with respect, even with reverence. His literary criticism continues to be the object of serious discussion. His writings on living things have found many admirers amongst modern biologists. Perhaps the most significant praise ever given to him as a scholar and scientist was written by Charles Darwin, who in 1882 declared: "From quotations I had seen, I had a high notion of Aristotle's merits, but I had not the most remote notion what a wonderful man he was. Linnaeus and Cuvier have been my two gods, though in very different ways, but they were mere schoolboys to old Aristotle."[1]

Very different has been the tenor of scholars' judgements on his historical writings. Many modern critics have thought him to be gravely deficient in historical sense, and some have denied that he was a historian at all. Even Wilamowitz, writing soon after the rediscovery of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, though he felt a deep admiration for Aristotle the man, said: "He has possibly lost something of his uncanny greatness, because he can no longer be esteemed a historian."[2]

Some recent opinions have been more severe. Aristotle's extensive work on Sparta preserved for posterity amongst other things the text of the Great Rhetra, one of the earliest constitutional documents from archaic Greece; but it is severely dismissed by E. N. Tigerstedt: "However uncertain," he says, "the result of the analysis of the sources of the Λακεδαιμονίων πολιτεία must be, one thing emerges quite clearly: Aristotle is no historian and he has little or no idea of historical criticism, a judgement which is confirmed by an examination of the corresponding parts of the *Politics*."[3] Tigerstedt specifically ob-

[1] C. Darwin to W. Ogle, 22 February 1882 (F. Darwin, ed. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* III [London 1888] 252).

[2] *Aristoteles und Athen* I (Berlin 1893) 373, noted by J. Day and M. Chambers, *Aristotle's History of Athenian Democracy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1962) 190.

[3] *The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity* I (Stockholm 1965) 286. Compare the remark of H. Bengston on *Ath.Pol. (Griechische Geschichte*[4] [Munich 1969] 105): "Das Werk läßt die Vorzüge des grossen Systematikers deutlich hervortreten; Historiker war Aristoteles nicht."

jects to Aristotle's combination of information from primary sources with antiquarian fables and political inventions. Another scholar has asserted: "As a historian, Aristotle was careless and opinionated, and the celebrated history of the Athenian constitution, which he or his students composed, is a farrago of misinformation and doctrinaire distortions."[4]

Such pronouncements reflect upon his work as a whole, not simply on his historical writing, if he applied his philosophical doctrines to a subject unsuited to them. A priori, however, he is not to be expected deliberately to distort his data by inappropriate methods or to demand results of greater precision than the evidence allows. For, as he says in the Ethics (EN 1094b23–27), it is the mark of an educated man to look for accuracy to the extent permitted by each kind of evidence. To demand mathematical proofs from a rhetorician would be as absurd as to accept merely persuasive arguments from a mathematician; and in the Politics (1328a19–21) he remarks that the degree of precision required in a philosophical argument is not as great as that needed in using the data of sense perception. For Aristotle, historical facts lack the generality of philosophical arguments; but, on the other hand, obviously they do not possess the immediacy of sense perception. They require their own method—that which had been called from the time of the Milesian philosophers ἱστορία—empirical investigation.

In this essay I have to do three things. First I shall show how Aristotle's historical studies are linked to his other work. Then some remarkable features of his use of evidence will be considered. Thirdly, I shall offer a brief estimate of him as a historian.

The corpus of matter to be drawn upon is large. There is the Constitution of the Athenians, of which the myth-historical part dealing with events before 600 B.C. is known only from fragments. Secondly, there are the historical examples deployed in the Politics; they are especially numerous in the empirical books IV, V and VI. Finally there are some two hundred and fifty fragments from the Constitutions, the Non-Greek Ways of Life (Νόμιμα Βαρβαρικά) and other related lost works. These once formed a vast body of evidence, comprising perhaps the largest single undertaking of historical research in antiquity; for of the

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[4] T. W. Africa, Science and the State in Greece and Rome (New York 1968) 99.

Constitutions alone Aristotle and his associates in the Lyceum had pre-
pared 158 by the time of his death.

This work must have continued for a long time, simultaneously
with his other studies, and the writing of the *Politics* did not wait upon
the completion of the *Constitutions*. The latest event mentioned in the
Politics (1311b2) is the death of Philip, but that is only a *terminus post
quem* for the completion of the whole work. More significantly, the
Constitution of the Athenians was still being added to in the mid-320's,
late in Aristotle's life. The historical studies of Aristotle continued
alongside his other work; they began in the Academy—and it is pos-
sible that Plato's *Laws* includes historical data gathered by Aristotle;[5]
they were maintained in the Troad and in Lesbos, when progress was
made also with minute biological observation; and finally they were
prosecuted with greater intensity after the return to Athens in 335.
Since the tutorship of Alexander at Mieza can have been no sinecure,
and since facilities for historical research would have been limited in
that remote spot, it is not likely that work on the *Constitutions* ad-
vanced fast in that part of the Master's life.

We look firstly, then, at the connections between the *Constitutions*
and Aristotle's other studies. Facts, Aristotle believed, have intrinsic
interest and value. That is one of the reasons why he gathered them
so assiduously. But they are even more significant when, having been
sifted and ordered, they enable us to find explanations by looking for
causes. That is why he says in the *Historia Animalium* (491a7–14) that it
is his object to determine first the differences that exist between each
individual type of animal and the actual facts about all of them. "Then
we must try to discover the causes. This, after all, is the natural meth-
od of going about things—to look for causes only when we have at our
disposal definite facts about each item."

His expression here for the actual facts is τὰ cυμβαίνοντα, and parts
of the verb cυμβαίνειν are found again and again in his historical writ-
ings also.[6] When Aristotle means that some event occurred, he can
write simply cυνέβη, whether or not the cause of the event is ex-
plained. In his opinion, historical events, τὰ cυμβεβηκότα, no less than
detailed facts about living creatures, can be set in order. So the empiri-
cal *Historia Animalium* bears to Aristotle's more theoretical writings in

[5] F. Jacoby, *Atthis* (Oxford 1949) 386 n.51.
[6] For Aristotle's use of cυμβαίνειν see especially F. W. Gilliard, *Historia* 20 (1971) 433–35.

biology a relationship analogous to that of the *Constitutions* to the political theory in the *Politics*.

Once he had begun to collect facts he could immediately begin also to arrange them so as to look for causes. Therefore the writing of the *Politics* did not have to wait for the completion of the *Constitutions*. Aristotle ordered the facts in two ways. First, the data from each single city-state were arranged sequentially in a chronological scheme. When the sequence had been worked out he could look for significant changes in the political structure of the state. So, for instance, eleven changes are noticed in the Athenian polity (*Ath.Pol.* 41.2), and they occur within a period extending from the time of the primitive kingship to the restoration of the democracy in 403 B.C. The sequential method is mainly descriptive, but the second approach is more philosophical. It looks for causes of political change by comparing data from a number of cities, and its results are embodied in the *Politics*. The comparative method tries to find out why changes occur, and the changes considered will normally be from one constitutional form to another.

In the ancient lists of Aristotle's writings the *Constitutions* are classified either as single or as federal.[7] The arrangement is attested in the fragments, for there is mention of a *Federal Commonwealth of the Arkadians* (fr.483 Rose) and another of the Thessalians (fr.497 Rose). But there was also in the lists a classification into four constitutional forms: Democratic, Oligarchic, Tyrannical, Aristocratic.[8] A city-state might exhibit in the course of its history many forms, but Aristotle's classification of it depended on the polity in force at the time of writing. Athens therefore belongs firmly with democracy, and in the second part of the *Constitution of the Athenians* he expounds in great detail the contemporary functioning of the democratic state. The ancient library classification does not mention kingships because no Greek city-state in Aristotle's collection was still ruled by a monarch, and Macedon would not have been included with the Hellenic polities.

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[7] The most likely correction of the catalogue entry in Diog.Laert. 5.27 is that due to Bernays: πολιτεῖαι πόλεων δυοῖν δεούcαιν ρξ'. ⟨κοιναὶ⟩ καὶ ἴδια⟨ι⟩· δημοκρατικαί, ὀλιγαρχικαί, τυραννικαί, ἀριcτοκρατικαί. κατ' ἰδίαν I. Düring (*Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition* [Göteborg 1957] 50), κατ' εἴδη P. Moraux (*Les Listes anciennes des Ouvrages d'Aristote* [Louvain 1951] 131–32).

[8] See n.7 *supra* and compare *Rhet.* A8 (1365b28–29): here the four constitutional forms are said to be democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, monarchy; but the last is subdivided later into kingship and tyranny (1366a1–2).

Aristotle was fascinated by the sequence of political changes in states. At first he thought that a regular progression could be seen, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1160b10–17) he has in mind a diagram such as this:

KINGSHIP
|
| ARISTOCRACY
| | 'POLITY' *or* TIMOCRACY
| | |
TYRANNY   OLIGARCHY   DEMOCRACY
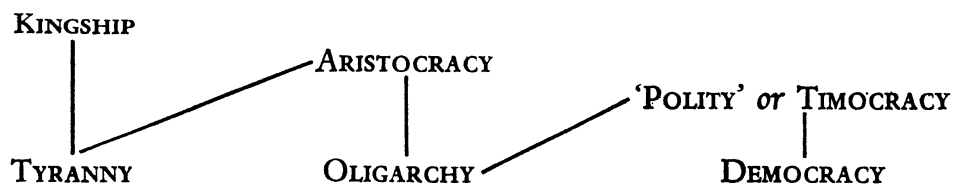
The uprights represent the distance in merit between each pair of opposites and the supposed historical progression is from left to right.[9] This is the nearest Aristotle comes to the notion of historical inevitability in constitutional development. Each of the 'correct' forms—kingship, aristocracy, and the 'polity' of warrior citizens—has its opposite deflection (παρέκβαϲιϲ), and the difference in merit is greatest between kingship and tyranny, least between 'polity' and democracy.

Aristotle returns to the idea of deflection in the *Politics* (3.7, 1279a22–b10), but with more empirical evidence to hand he abandons the elaborate theoretical structure. Tyranny, he says (1316a29–31), may, for example, change into a different kind of tyranny as it did in Sikyon; or a tyranny may change into an oligarchy, as happened at Chalkis (1316a31–32); or, as in Syracuse, into a democracy (1316a32–33); or into aristocracy (1316a33–34), as in Sparta and Carthage (sometimes Aristotle seems almost to consider the Carthaginians with their remarkable constitution as though they were honorary Hellenes). The possible permutations in political development are many, and Aristotle notes a large number, showing, for instance, that oligarchy may change into tyranny, as at Leontinoi, Gela, Rhegion and in other western states (1316a34–39).

Let us now return to the sequential ordering of data. We notice, first, that Aristotle's narrative tends to exclude value judgements from the *Constitutions* (though there are exceptions: for example, the clinically descriptive tone is absent when he mentions Kleon and other demagogues [*Ath.Pol.* 28.3]). Secondly, there is no sign that the narrative has been adapted to suit Aristotle's philosophical precon-

[9] Richard Shute, *History of the Aristotelian Writings* (Oxford 1888) 41.

ceptions: it often reflects the interest or even the bias of his sources, but that is another matter. I emphasize this last point because it has been argued that Aristotle the philosophical biologist wrote the *Constitution of the Athenians* with a teleological scheme in mind. By emphasizing some facts and by playing down others as merely contingent, it is claimed, Aristotle tried to show how the state of Athens by nature achieved its true *telos*, radical democracy.[10]

But this is to misapply Aristotle's teleology. The state exists by nature and has a *telos*—the morally best life for its citizens; but a state may pass through any number of changes, in no predetermined order, and no constitution will be more natural than another. The sequence of change is therefore quite different from the way in which an insect achieves the *telos* of its genesis in the regular sequence of change from grub to chrysalis to insect (*Gen.An.* 733b13–16). If Athens had achieved its true nature in radical democracy, then a change from democracy to another constitutional form would be against nature. But all that Aristotle would say of such a change, I think, is that it would be an event of constitutional significance, a political μεταβολή.

States do not exist by nature because they are teleologically determined but because, whatever their constitutional form may be, they are composed of natural parts. The natural association of man and wife forms the household. The association of households, slaves and all, forms the village. The villages together form the city-state (*Pol.* 1.2, 1252a24–b31); and the state may be naturally a monarchy or an aristocracy or a timocracy—or, less happily, a tyranny, oligarchy or democracy.

It is true that in the *Politics* he compares the state with a living body, and that a living creature has a *telos*. He says that when the symmetry of a body's parts is upset because one member becomes too large or influential, the body is changed in shape or ruined altogether. Likewise, he continues, if one part of the state imperceptibly grows too large in relation to another there will be a revolution. This happened, for example, at Tarentum when the nobility were killed off in a war. The populace became disproportionately influential and a democracy took over. But this is the nearest he comes in the *Politics* to enforcing the biological analogy, and the comparison is not pressed far (1302b33–1303a25).

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[10] Day and Chambers, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) especially ch. iii and vii.

Work on the *Constitutions* had already made significant progress—enough to permit the search for causes—when Aristotle wrote the introductory prospectus for the *Politics* at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[11] He says that he will discuss the opinions of those who have treated the subject well already. This he does in Book II, chapters 1 to 8. Then he will discuss what things preserve city-state constitutions and what destroy them, and why some states are well governed and others badly. He explains that he will make use of "the collected constitutions" in examining these constitutional changes, but this does not mean the use of all 158, as we have seen. When he wrote the prospectus he simply was confident of having enough evidence to ensure that the political theory would be grounded in empirical fact. Many of the data concerned Sparta, Crete and Carthage, and much preliminary work had been done on them earlier in the Academy. These initial studies help to explain both the prominence of the three states in the *Laws* of Plato and the extended treatment of them in a relatively early part of the *Politics*, Book II, chapters 9 to 12. Finally the prospectus promises a discussion of an ideal state, and this is provided in the last two books of the *Politics*. It is true that Aristotle gives much more in the *Politics* than the prospectus outlines, but from the prospectus we see how important a function the *Constitutions* have in the linking of the *Ethics* with the *Politics*.

Next we have to consider examples of Aristotle's use of evidence. His chief problem was lack of documentary material. Even for Athens he is forced to draw on local synthetic histories when he cannot make use of a contemporary source of prime authority such as the political poetry of Solon. Yet Athens was the most literate of Greek city-states. How much more difficult therefore was Aristotle's task when he came to study the local histories of remote places such as Leukas[12] or simple groupings such as the Opountian Lokrians.[13] His chief need was to collect facts, and so his method was jackdaw-like—assemble now, sort later. Sometimes the passion to gather seems a little too strong. We could wish, perhaps, that he had let go the spurious "Constitution of Drakon" added by himself or a pupil to the Athenian treatise (*Ath.Pol.* 4 and 41.2) at so late a stage that it could not be included in the numbered sequence of changes. But nevertheless the

[11] 1181b12–23, and see W. D. Ross, *Aristotelis Politica* (Oxford 1957) viii–ix.
[12] fr.546 Rose, *Pol.* 1266b22.
[13] fr.560–64 Rose, *Pol.* 1287a8.

jackdaw technique was most effective, enabling him to assemble a large stock of evidence that would otherwise have been lost. So he extracts historical facts from lyric poetry. He can relate folklore to the physical topography of a place. He ties proverbs to their local contexts. Such systematic antiquarianism was enormously painstaking, and it yielded sound results.

As he and his pupils collected material for the *Historia Animalium* from hunters and fishermen, so for the *Constitutions*, analogously, magistrates and men of affairs, priests and poets, in fact experienced people generally, could be interviewed. The principle in such enquiries he explained as follows in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1143b11–14): "the unproved statements and opinions of experienced and elderly people and of sensible men must be given as much attention as those for which they offer proof. They see correctly because experience has given them an eye for things."

Aristotle's scholarly eye looked for the truth in books and documents, but also far beyond the written word. His use of proverbs is characteristic of his skill in extracting historical fact from pre-literary or non-literary evidence in oral tradition. Here is a typical example. In his Ionian researches he came across a saying 'The Darkness by the Oak'. What, he would have asked, was the darkness and where was the oak ? Ionian lore, supplemented perhaps by a study of a local historian, such as Euagon of Samos, who had written about a century earlier than Aristotle, yielded the following explanation (fr.576 Rose).

During a frontier war the islanders of Samos and the men of Priene on the Asiatic mainland nearby inflicted moderate damage on each other, but in a great battle the Prienians killed one thousand Samians. Later in the seventh year after that (this expression points to the use of a local historian or chronicle) the two sides fought a battle at the place called Oak-Tree and the Prienians lost their bravest and leading citizens. On this occasion Bias of Priene (one of the Seven Wise Men) went on an embassy to Samos from his city and greatly distinguished himself; he was renowned as a pleader and evidently obtained favourable terms for his stricken fellow-citizens. But the Prienian women, as a result of their loss and the piteous state to which they had been reduced, adopted as an oath for their most important concerns "The Darkness by the Oak," because their sons, fathers and husbands had been killed there. Aristotle could work out from this story where the Oak grew (somewhere on the Mykale peninsula on the main-

land); he could state what the most likely date of the battle was (comparing it, if need be, with the biographical data of the Seven Wise Men, in whom, for philosophical as well as historical reasons, he was deeply interested);[14] he could ask how long the effects of the losses were felt and he could enquire whether the proverb was still current in his own day. The tale involves chronology, topography, folklore. To Aristotle these are all branches of *historia*, the systematic enquiry into facts and events (τὰ cυμβεβηκότα) past and present.

One may regret that Aristotle did not live in an age of scientific excavation, because he possessed in full measure the true archaeologist's ability to make inferences from physical objects. Sometimes archaeology and proverbial lore could be combined, as when he explained (fr.513 Rose) the proverb 'The Corcyrean Whip' by describing the monstrously long, ivory-handled whips used in Corcyra. He explained that civil disorders made the whips necessary and would have mentioned the circumstances in which they were used.[15] His archaeological sense also appears in his treatment of numismatic evidence. He discussed, for example, the use of spits as primitive currency (frs.481, 580 Rose); he tried to explain why axes were represented on the coins of Tenedos;[16] and he showed the reason (fr.568 Rose) why there were hares on the coins of Rhegion (because the tyrant Anaxilas of Rhegion had introduced hares to Sicily). Taken singly such details in the fragments may seem trivial; but they are the elements of history, and Aristotle collected them in their hundreds in a resolute programme for the recording of Hellenic and also non-Greek life in all its variety.

The archaeological method was very versatile. It could, for example, be turned towards the historical criticism of Homer, whom Aristotle regarded as a source of the first importance. A notable instance of this technique is his discussion of the problem, why did Achilles drag Hektor around the tomb of Patroklos, thus breaking with established custom in so abusing the corpse? Aristotle pointed out that it was still the practice to drag corpses around tombs in Thessaly, the homeland of Achilles. The hero therefore was complying with an ancient rule, obsolete in the rest of the Greek world but still observed in Thessaly (fr.166 Rose).

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[14] Περὶ φιλοcοφίαc frs. 3 and 4 (*Aristotelis Fragmenta Selecta*, ed. Ross [Oxford 1955] 74).

[15] *Cf.* Thuc. 4.47.3 (on Corcyra): μαcτιγοφόροι τε παριόντεc ἐπετάχυνον τῆc ὁδοῦ τοὺc cχολαίτερον προϊόνταc.

[16] fr.593 Rose; Herakleides Lembos, *Exc.Pol.* 24 (p.22 Dilts).

The same archaeological method explained another puzzling practice of the heroes. Why, readers of Homer asked, did the Achaeans sleep on the ground with their spears stuck upright with the spiked butt-ends downwards beside them? Would not a spear fall over, hit the others and wake the sleepers? Aristotle was able to point to the barbarians of Illyria who, in his own time, stood their spears in the ground in this way. Homer's mention of the practice, therefore, is authentic: so, Aristotle remarks (fr.160 Rose, *Poet.* 1461a1–4), one may say not that it is better than the truth, but that the fact was so at the time. Aristotle's comparative criticism of Homer, in short, yielded significant historical results.

Among the fragments there are many references to τρυφή as a cause of revolution.[17] The word can mean softness, luxury, wantonness or simply a failure of discipline. An extreme example of change caused by luxury was the defeat of that most luxurious of cities, Sybaris, by her neighbour Kroton. A story about an incident in the war shows that Aristotle's account of Sybaris (fr.583 Rose) must have been amusing to read. The Sybarites had taught their horses to dance at their feasts to the music of pipers. The Krotoniates, knowing this, had the dance tune played by pipers in their army when the Sybarite cavalry faced them in battle, and when the horses heard the music they danced and then ran over to the Krotoniate side with their riders still on their backs. A similar tale had been told about the cavalry of Kardia in a war with the Thracian Bisaltai,[18] but evidently Aristotle, who knew a good story when he heard or read one, did not disdain to amuse his readers; and he must have had good reason for connecting the story with Sybaris, not with Kardia. Plutarch, himself an accomplished exponent of narrative technique, praises Aristotle's *Foundations and Constitutions* (as he calls them) for their readability and the pleasure they give.[19] His estimate is amply confirmed by the style of the verbatim fragments. Here, for example, is Aristotle's account of how a Phokaian colonist at Massalia married a Gaulish princess (fr.549 Rose):

"Phokaians of Ionia in the course of their trading founded Massalia.

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[17] See also *Pol.* 1310a22–25: "In oligarchies the sons of the rulers are brought up in ease (οἱ τῶν ἀρχόντων υἱοὶ τρυφῶσιν), and the sons of the poor, being trained and hardened to toil, are both more willing and better able to cause a revolution."

[18] Charon of Lampsakos, *FGrHist* 262 F 1.

[19] *Non posse suav.* 1093b–c. On Plutarch's use of the *Politeiai* see P. A. Stadter, *Plutarch's Historical Methods* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1965) 130–32.

Now Euxenos, a Phokaian, was a guest-friend of the king, whose name was Nanos. It so happened that Euxenos, who arrived as Nanos was arranging the marriage of his daughter, was invited by him to the betrothal feast. The wedding was arranged in the following way: after the meal the girl had to bring in a bowl of mixed wine and give it to the suitor she preferred. He to whom she gave it was to be the bridegroom. So the girl, whose name was Petta, came in and, whether by accident or some design, she offered the bowl to Euxenos. When that happened her father decided that the giving of the bowl had been divinely ordained. Euxenos therefore took her to wife and changed her name to Aristoxene; and there is to this day a family descended from her in Massalia called Protiadai, Protos having been the son of Euxenos and Aristoxene." The story is a typical example of the way in which Aristotle drew on family tradition in reconstructing the early history of a city state.

We turn now to the third of the tasks set at the beginning. How are we to estimate Aristotle as a historian? Part of the difficulty here is that Aristotle himself has been supposed to think history of little value. In the *Poetics* he says that poetry is a more serious and more philosophical subject than history.[20] History, being concerned with particulars, is not a theoretical science. But Aristotle here does not despise history;[21] he classifies it low in the hierarchy of seriousness, but he would be the last to assert that the study of particulars is without value. If it were of so little merit, he would not have directed so much energy to the *Constitutions* or to the minute observations in the *Historia Animalium*. For he worked in the opposite direction from Plato, towards the principles, not away from them. He advances from the facts to the theory and from the seen to the unseen; he believes that to ignore the data of sense (or indeed the data of any enquiry) is a sickness of the intellect, such as the logicians suffer who assert that there is no such thing as motion (*Phys.* 253a32–35). Facts, perception, detailed observation are the building blocks of his universe, and they have an intrinsic value.

[20] 1451b5–7, διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει.

[21] For a different interpretation of the passage in the *Poetics*, and for Aristotle as a 'paradigmatic' historian, compare M. I. Finley, *The Ancestral Constitution* (Cambridge 1971) 40–41. For Aristotle's distinction between ἱστορία of particular facts and ἐπιστήμη of general principles, see P. Louis, *RevPhil* 29 (1955) 39–44.

Thus Aristotle's historical researches were not intended simply to provide data for constructing theory in the *Politics* nor are they merely antiquarian: he wrote systematic narrative histories, including with them a vast amount of detail interesting for its own sake. The two levels of study, the theoretical and the minutely empirical, are movingly explained in the *De Partibus Animalium*. Contrasting astronomy with biology he says: "Both departments, however, have their special charm. The scanty conceptions to which we can attain of celestial things give us, from their excellence, more pleasure than all our knowledge of the world in which we live; just as a half-glimpse of persons that we love is more delightful than a leisurely view of other things, whatever their number and dimensions. On the other hand, in certitude and in completeness our knowledge of terrestrial things has the advantage. Moreover, their greater nearness and affinity to us balances somewhat the loftier interest of the heavenly things that are the objects of the higher philosophy."[22] Here Aristotle pleads for the study of things eternal and things corruptible, to the exclusion of neither class, and he goes on to say that he will not ignore any animal however ignoble, for the study of even the meanest of animals gives to the philosophical mind immeasurable joys.

In the same spirit Aristotle studied the details of history, systematically and with a passionate desire to obtain a coherent view of each city's development. Even legend must be sifted, and his use of it, no less than his study of documents, is informed by a search for intelligibility. Proverbs are, he says, relics of ancient philosophy which through their brevity and wit have survived the catastrophes of the past.[23] They must be studied and preserved therefore. Myth also conveys deep truths of its own kind. A modern historian may ignore legend and myth, but Aristotle was convinced of their value as evidence.

He was critically aware of this tendency in himself, and wrote in a letter ὅσῳ γὰρ αὐτίτης καὶ μονώτης εἰμί, φιλομυθότερος γέγονα (fr.668 Rose).[24] The lover of myth, he says, is in a sense a philosopher,

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[22] 644b32–645a4, tr. by William Ogle and discussed by Sir David Ross in "The Development of Aristotle's Thought" (*Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century*, edd. I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen [Göteborg 1960] 14–16).

[23] Περὶ φιλοσοφίας fr.8 Ross. A work devoted to proverbs, Παροιμίαι α΄, is mentioned in the ancient lists of Aristotle's writings (Diog.Laert. 5.26).

[24] Here φιλομυθότερος is stated in *LSJ* to be the comparative of φιλόμυθος, 'more talkative'.

and he believed that the philosophical historian can enter into the thinking of earlier generations through their myths; so traditions about gods and heroes are proper objects of historical study. We may not agree, but to understand the ancients sympathetically we have to allow to them the elements of their own world picture. Otherwise we cannot hope to share their thoughts, nor can we judge them fairly. Aristotle's motivation towards historical scholarship is obvious: in the *Protrepticus* (fr.5 Ross) he writes of the pure pleasure of sitting down to work, μεθ' ἡδονῆς ἡ προσεδρεία γίγνεται. The expression is characteristic, as Düring has well said, "of his love of a scholar's labours and of persevering assiduity."[25] The assiduity resulted in the 158 *Constitutions* and much more of a historical character besides. We can hardly deny to one so strongly motivated towards historical writing the right to be called a historian.

The strongest impression left by an examination of the historical fragments is not, however, of the sympathetic treatment of myth, legend and oral lore generally: it is of the sheer weight of matter systematically assembled—in Oncken's words, "der überaus reichhaltigen Fundgrube authentischer Thatsachen, die Aristoteles gesammelte hatte."[26] Aristotle the historian gathered data as thoroughly as did Aristotle the biologist. He classified them with the systematic rigour of a philosopher and logician. He interpreted them, in the *Constitutions* and in the *Politics*, with the humane insight of a Hellene proud of his people's past. Aristotle may not have been a great historian, but he was a profound, perceptive and vastly erudite investigator of antiquity. To assert that he was not a historian at all is, quite clearly, mistaken.[27]

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But it means 'fonder of myth', as in *Metaph.* 982b18–19 (διὸ καὶ ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφός πώς ἐστιν· ὁ γὰρ μῦθος σύγκειται ἐκ θαυμασίων): see Ross on *Metaph. loc.cit.*

[25] "Aristotle the Scholar," in *Arctos* I (Festschrift Edwin Linkomies, Helsinki 1954) 68.

[26] *Die Staatslehre des Aristoteles* II (repr. Aalen 1964) 527.

[27] This is the text of a discourse delivered before the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin on St Valentine's Day, 1972. I have added some notes. My thanks are due to Dr R. M. Errington for helpful discussion of several points.