

## On the Subject of Roman History

Source: Dion. Hal. RA 1.1–8. Translated by Earnest Cary. In *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*. Loeb classical library. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1937.

*Dionysius began his history of Rome with an assertion that such an endeavor was a worthy one.*

Although it is much against my will to indulge in the explanatory statements usually given in the prefaces to histories, yet I am obliged to prefix to this work some remarks concerning myself. In doing this it is neither my intention to dwell too long on my own praise, which I know would be distasteful to the reader, nor have I the purpose of censuring other historians, as Anaximenes and Theopompus<sup>1</sup> did in the prefaces to their histories, but I shall only show the reasons that induced me to undertake this work and give an accounting of the sources from which I gained the knowledge of the things that I am going to relate.

For I am convinced that all who propose to leave such monuments of their minds to posterity as time shall not involve in one common ruin with their bodies, and particularly those who write histories, in which we have the right to assume that Truth, the source of both prudence and wisdom, is enshrined, ought, first of all, to make choice of noble and lofty subjects and such as will be of great utility to their readers, and then, with great care and pains, to provide themselves with the proper equipment for the treatment of their subject.

For those who base historical works upon deeds inglorious or evil or unworthy of serious study, either because they crave to come to the knowledge of men and to get a name of some sort or other, or because they desire to display the wealth of their rhetoric, are neither admired by posterity for their fame nor praised for their eloquence; rather, they leave this opinion in the minds of all who take up their histories, that they themselves admired lives which were of a piece with the writings they published, since it is a just and a general opinion that a man's words are the images of his mind.

Those, on the other hand, who, while making choice of the best subjects, are careless and indolent in compiling their narratives out of such reports as chance to come to their ears gain no praise by reason of that choice; for we do not deem it fitting that the histories of renowned cities and of men who have held supreme power should be written in an offhand or negligent manner. As I believe these considerations to be necessary and of the first importance to historians and as I have taken great care to observe them both, I have felt unwilling either to omit mention of them or to give it any other place than in the preface to my work.

That I have indeed made choice of a subject noble, lofty and useful to many will not, I think, require any lengthy argument, at least for those who are not utterly unacquainted with universal history. For if anyone turns his attention to the successive supremacies both of cities and of nations, as accounts of them have been handed down from times past, and then, surveying them severally and comparing them together, wishes to determine which of them obtained the widest dominion and both in peace and war performed the most brilliant achievements, he will find that the supremacy of the Romans has far surpassed all those that are recorded from earlier times, not only in the extent of its dominion and in the splendor of its achievements—which no account has as yet worthily celebrated—but also in the length of time during which it has endured down to our day.

For the empire of the Assyrians, ancient as it was and running back to legendary times, held sway over only a small part of Asia. That of the Medes, after overthrowing the Assyrian empire and obtaining a still wider dominion, did not hold it long, but was overthrown in the fourth generation.<sup>2</sup> The Persians, who conquered the Medes, did, indeed, finally become masters of almost all Asia; but when they attacked the nations of Europe also, they did not reduce many of them to submission, and they continued in power not much above two hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

The Macedonian dominion, which overthrew the might of the Persians, did, in the extent of its sway, exceed all its predecessors, yet even it did not flourish long, but after Alexander's death began to decline; for it was immediately partitioned among many commanders from the time of the Diadochi,<sup>4</sup> and although after their time it was able to go on to the second or third generation, yet it was weakened by its own dissensions and at the last destroyed by the Romans.<sup>5</sup>

But even the Macedonian power did not subjugate every country and every sea; for it neither conquered Libya, with the exception of the small portion bordering on Egypt, nor subdued all Europe, but in the North advanced only as far as Thrace and in the West down to the Adriatic Sea.

Thus we see that the most famous of the earlier supremacies of which history has given us any account, after attaining to so great vigor and might, were overthrown. As for the Greek powers, it is not fitting to compare them to those just mentioned, since they gained neither magnitude of empire nor duration of eminence equal to theirs.

For the Athenians ruled only the sea coast, during the space of sixty-eight years,<sup>6</sup> nor did their sway extend even over all

<sup>1</sup> Anaximenes of Lampsacus wrote a history of Greece (down to the battle of Mantinea) and a history of Philip of Macedon; also an epic on Alexander. Theopompus in his *Hellenica* continued the history of Thucydides from 411 down to the battle of Cnidus in 394; his *Philippica*, in 58 books, treated not only of Philip but of contemporary events elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> In 550 BCE, in the reign of Astyages, the fourth Median king.

<sup>3</sup> 550–330 BCE.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. "Successors," the term applied to the generals of Alexander who divided his empire among themselves after his death.

<sup>5</sup> By the overthrow of Perseus in 168, or possibly by the defeat of Philip V in 197, followed by that of Antiochus in 190.

<sup>6</sup> From ca. 472 to 404.

that, but only to the part between the Euxine and the Pamphylian seas, when their naval supremacy was at its height. The Lacedaemonians, when masters of the Peloponnesus and the rest of Greece, advanced their rule as far as Macedonia, but were checked by the Thebans before they had held it quite thirty years.<sup>7</sup>

But Rome rules every country that is not inaccessible or uninhabited, and she is mistress of every sea, not only of that which lies inside the Pillars of Hercules but also of the Ocean, except that part of it which is not navigable;<sup>8</sup> she is the first and the only State recorded in all time that ever made the risings and the settings of the sun the boundaries of her dominion. Nor has her supremacy been of short duration, but more lasting than that of any other commonwealth or kingdom.

For from the very beginning, immediately after her founding, she began to draw to herself the neighboring nations, which were both numerous and warlike, and continually advanced, subjugating every rival. And it is now seven hundred and forty-five years from her foundation down to the consulship of Claudius Nero, consul for the second time, and of

Calpurnius Piso, who were chosen in the one hundred and ninety-third Olympiad.<sup>9</sup>

From the time that she mastered the whole of Italy she was emboldened to aspire to govern all mankind, and after driving from off the sea the Carthaginians, whose maritime strength was superior to that of all others, and subduing Macedonia, which until then was reputed to be the most powerful nation on land, she no longer had as rival any nation either barbarian or Greek; and it is now in my day already the seventh generation<sup>10</sup> that she has continued to hold sway over every region of the world, and there is no nation, as I may say, that disputes her universal dominion or protests against being ruled by her.

However, to prove my statement that I have neither made choice of the most trivial of subjects nor proposed to treat of mean and insignificant deeds, but am undertaking to write not only about the most illustrious city but also about brilliant achievements to whose like no man could point, I know not what more I need say.

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<sup>7</sup> This statement is puzzling, since the period actually extended from the surrender of Athens in 404 to the battle of Leuctra in 371. The text may be corrupt.

<sup>8</sup> Dionysius may have had in mind Pytheas' report of a *πεπηγυῖα Θάλασσα* (a sea filled with floating ice?) in the far north. From Eratosthenes we learn also that that other early navigator, the Carthaginian Hanno, who sailed far south along the west coast of Africa, was finally forced by many difficulties (of what sort we are not told) to turn back.

<sup>9</sup> Nero and Piso were consuls in 7 BCE. This was the year 745 of the City according to Dionysius, who assigns its founding to the year 751.

<sup>10</sup> This would normally mean six full generations plus part of another. If Dionysius was counting from the battle of Pydna (168), he must have reckoned a generation here at less than twenty-eight years (his usual estimate); but he may have felt that the Macedonian power was broken at Cynoscephalae (197).