

Fronto, Lucian and the Absence of Antonine History

During the decades from AD 120 to 180, it has often been remarked, critical contemporary historiography all but ceased to exist in the Greco-Roman world (Bowie 1970; Zimmerman 1999). In this paper, I examine the evidence of Fronto and Lucian and argue that for both men, history of contemporary events is possible, but extremely limited, because they see history as something from which they and their present world are radically detached, so that from their perspective the writer's own experience of contemporary life is not a valid subject for history-writing.

Fronto's *Principia Historiae* and Lucian's *How to Write History* both describe the writing of histories of the Parthian War fought by Lucius Verus in 162-65. They have usually been read as examples of how historiography in their period was overly influenced by rhetoric and panegyric (Cova 1970; Champlin 1980; Zecchini 1983; Strobel 1994; Poignault 2003). However, this explanation is not adequate, given the importance of rhetoric in the historiography of earlier periods. What is new in the Antonine era is the assertion that history as an ongoing narrative has come to an end with the full realization of the *pax romana*. This argument is a key premise for both Florus (1.praef.4-8) and Appian (praef. 7). Fronto and Lucian describe histories that, while they deal with contemporary times, present the war as an isolated event that is not related to any greater narrative or to the actual lives of the authors. Thus this apparently "recent" history is in fact no different in outlook or function than a history of events happening in the distant past. This perspective on the past is obviously very different from Tacitus, and equally so from that of Cassius Dio, who writes in the 220s or 230s.

For Fronto, the key evidence is the sections of the *Principia* (5-9; 14-18) that compare Verus to earlier generals, and the letter of Verus' to Fronto, in which he suggests that the latter write a history of the war, emphasizing its causes (*Ad Verum* 1.2). In the *Principia*, Verus' predecessors are conspicuously not linked into any continuous story leading down to the present, but are instead separately functioning *exempla* who are meant to emphasize Verus' personal characteristics rather than to explain his historical situation. Similarly, in soliciting a so-called "Pentecontaetia," Verus only alludes to Thucydides' wish to emphasize the importance of the Peloponnesian War at the expense of previous events, and is not concerned with placing himself in a larger story.

Lucian's treatise on history shares Fronto's detached perspective. He imagines historians writing self-contained war monographs similar to Fronto's, with no sense of ongoing narrative. He also uses Thucydides selectively: for Lucian, writing history as "a possession for all time" means taking a radically detached perspective on events, such that it does not matter whether either the audience or even the author are contemporaries of the events being described. This will be examined especially with reference to Lucian's peroration and his metaphor of history as a monument with a hidden signature (61-63).