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WRITING BEYOND TIME: THE DURABILITY OF HISTORICAL TEXTS

When we think in terms of the durability of historical texts, some works instantly come to mind: Herodotus's, Thucydides's, and Polybius's war narratives, Plutarch's comparative biographies, Eusebius's ecclesiastical history, Augustine's City of God, Jean Froissart's chronicles, Francesco Guicciardini's history of Florence, Edward Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Jules Michelet's History of France, Leopold von Ranke's History of the Reformation, Jacob Burckhardt's The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, Johan Huizinga's The Waning of the Middle Ages, Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean, and Edward Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class, among others. Historians instantly perceive them as durable texts, part of a canon of history and historiography. Surrounded as we are by the exaltation of innovation over tradition, and assuming the challenging concept of "writing as historical practice" proposed by the editor of this issue; In this article I examine the conditions that might be considered necessary for historical writing to achieve durability, propose what conditions of creation and reception enabled this longevity, justify why these and other historical texts have the potential for durability, and discuss what practical lessons we might obtain from this inquiry. I begin by making some distinctions among the three related concepts of durability, the classic, and the canon, and try to establish the specific conditions of the durability of historical texts, focusing on the effect of contemporaneity and the connections between the concepts of durability and the practical past.

Keywords: historical texts, durability, effect of contemporaneity, practical past, classic, canon

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