

# The New York Review of Books

## A Passion for the Past

Anthony Grafton

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*The Greeks and Greek Civilization*

Jacob Burckhardt, edited by Oswyn Murray, translated from the German by Sheila Stern  
St. Martin's, 449 pp., \$27.95; \$16.95 (paper)

*Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas*

Lionel Gossman  
University of Chicago Press, 608 pp., \$40.00

### 1.

In 1852, a youngish scholar from Basel, Jacob Burckhardt, inscribed a copy of his first substantial book, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, “with the greatest respect” to his teacher, Leopold von Ranke. The term Burckhardt wrote on the flyleaf—*hochachtungsvoll*—belonged to the German language’s ample repertoire of conventional salutations, but he used it with sincerity. In the 1840s he had studied history and art history in Berlin. As late as 1889, when Burckhardt followed a Basel custom and wrote the eulogy to be read aloud at his own memorial service, he eloquently recalled how he had “submitted two substantial pieces of work to Ranke’s seminar and received the great teacher’s approval as his reward.”<sup>1</sup>

Ranke, whose panoramic, colorful narrative histories of early modern European history had made him world-famous, showed mixed feelings as he examined his former student’s gift—a pioneering study in what would now be called the cultural history of late antiquity. The book aimed not to tell the story of Constantine’s life or to analyze his regime in detail, but to re-create the spiritual atmosphere of the age in which the Roman Empire became Christian. In a second note which Ranke entered under his student’s dedication, as a form of reply to it, he praised Burckhardt’s “noble treatment of art,” but complained that “he doesn’t go deeply enough into the historical questions.” In the end, he reflected, Burckhardt was simply “too clever.”<sup>2</sup> Burckhardt’s new form of history—which would eventually yield brilliant books on the Italian Renaissance and the culture of ancient Greece—both fascinated and irritated the *Altmeister* who had trained him.

Burckhardt’s formal homage and Ranke’s dusty answer—both written on the flyleaf of Ranke’s presentation copy, and concealed for decades by the date stamp slip pasted into the book by the Syracuse University Library, which houses Ranke’s books—epitomize a great debate about the nature and purpose of history. The German-speaking world of the nineteenth century was obsessed with the study of the past. In the decades leading up to 1800, the neat clockwork monarchies of the Holy Roman Empire were already throwing gears and missing strokes. Unemployed intellectuals and starving peasants threatened the stable, meticulously policed social order which state and city governments had maintained for generations. After 1789, in the era of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, the entire German world heaved and shook. The nature of the past—and the relation between past and present—became newly urgent.

Universities welcomed new forms of historical research and historical thought—from the seminars, where eager young men were initiated into the new critical methods of Ranke and Niebuhr, to the lecture halls, which resounded with versions of Hegel’s dialectic. Many hoped for a restoration of the happy pre-revolutionary past. But liberals also embraced the burden of history in many forms. Heavy sets of Ranke that weighed down the dark wood shelves in their glass-fronted bookcases. Heavier pastiches of Periclean Athens, Hanseatic Germany, Renaissance Florence, and Baroque Rome housed their universities, parliaments, and theaters. Even as industrial development reshaped European cities, as city governments threw down ancient walls, carved broad boulevards through old neighborhoods, and hurled elegantly spare steel-framed bridges across rivers, Germans and Austrians built and rebuilt the magnificent, sometimes wildly out-of-scale imitations of the old forms that still amaze—and sometimes appall—strollers on the Vienna Ringstrasse and the central and western

parts of Berlin.<sup>3</sup>

The German world's pervasive passion for the past did not create anything like a consensus about its meaning. Religious and national differences dictated radically different criteria of evaluation. Historians debated everything from the meaning of events to the nature of history itself. A string of research centers took shape, as princes and ministers tried to show that they too, like the rulers of Prussia, appreciated the new learning. These cultivated local styles, sometimes radically different from one another. Technical debates about historical method could become as intense as discussions motivated by ideology—especially when careers were involved, as they often were.

No island in the archipelago of universities and societies that stretched across the German-speaking world flowered with more striking and colorful forms of history than Basel, the Swiss city from which Burckhardt came to Berlin. And no nineteenth-century historical debates would prove more complex or remain more instructive, even now, than those that periodically flared between the historians of the Swiss city of printers, dyers, and makers of silk ribbons and those of the ancient Prussian garrison town which became, in the later nineteenth century, a vast metropolis.

The contest seems terribly uneven. On the one side stands a single town with a few professors and independent scholars, most of them resolute individualists who had few disciples. On the other rises the metropolis of Berlin, already a city with a great intellectual tradition. Basel University was an old but no longer a famous institution, dominated by the local elite which supplied many of its professors. It had a mere hundred or so students, almost all from local families. Berlin University—a brand-new establishment, designed by Wilhelm von Humboldt to foster scholarly and scientific research—boasted some two thousand students. They flocked like moths to the great luminaries like Ranke, coming not only from outside Prussia but from outside the German-speaking world. Nineteenth-century Basel produced modest learned societies, which sponsored the study and publication of historical sources. Berlin—which housed not only a university, but an older and equally famous Academy of Sciences—sprouted large-scale collective enterprises like the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*—entire institutes designed to gather, edit, and comment on the sources of ancient and medieval history. These employed numerous young researchers, developing what came to be called “science as heavy industry”—a new form of intellectual work that resembled, in some ways, the real heavy industries being developed by Borsig, Siemens, and others. In Basel vs. Berlin, a featherweight confronted the heavyweight champion of the international world of learning.

Amazingly, David managed at least a draw with Goliath. The great industrial enterprises of scholarship founded in Berlin have proved their value. The sources they gathered and edited remain essential for anyone working on ancient and medieval history, and their necessary activities continue today. But the Basel scholars, sitting on their little stools, created new perspectives for historians and for practitioners of other human sciences. To this day, we respect the great Berliners, Ranke and Theodor Mommsen. But we ask, and try to answer, Burckhardt's questions.

Lionel Gossman and Oswyn Murray—two very distinguished but very different scholars—have set out to reveal to English and American readers some of the new shapes of history that came into existence in nineteenth-century Basel. Gossman, an erudite comparatist and intellectual historian, has explored the development of historical research and writing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, producing insightful and elegant studies of Gibbon, Michelet, and the French antiquary La Curne de Sainte Palaye. He has now set the work of two great Basel scholars, Burckhardt and Johann Jacob Bachofen, into a richly detailed context. He reviews at length the city's economic, social, and cultural history, as well as the development of the historical disciplines his heroes practiced, and uses all of these factors to account for their achievements.

Murray, a pioneering student of Greek society and culture, has also done highly original work on the history of scholarship, in both the ancient and the modern world. Working in collaboration with the translator Sheila Stern, he has made available a partial but reliable translation of Burckhardt's last, unfinished masterpiece, *The Cultural History of Greece*. In his compact, well-informed introduction, Murray shows that the Basel scholar rethought Greek history from its foundations. He refused to envision the ancient Greeks in the terms of Neo-Hellenic orthodoxy which were repeated in lectures at every high school and embodied in the plaster Venus on every bourgeois mantelpiece. His imaginary Greece had no sunlit landscape in the style of Puvis de Chavannes, no population of cheerful nymphs and athletes. Burckhardt's Greeks were clear-eyed pessimists; they had understood “what it is to be human in the modern sense, and to live in the present without

hope for the future.” They had dedicated themselves to a lifetime of desperate competition, athletic and artistic, with all comers—though they knew that even the victories that brought an instantaneous fierce joy and won the celebratory poems of Pindar could not yield contentment, when “the whole of life” was concentrated “on a few seconds of terrible tension.” Burckhardt’s Greeks often resembled Nietzsche’s, as Murray shows; no wonder that the younger man greatly admired his older colleague when he began his own brief career as a professor of classical philology in 1869.

Bachofen and Burckhardt emerged, as Gossman makes clear, from the same small, protean group: Basel’s powerful urban elite, a group that remained immensely wealthy and powerful in the nineteenth century, but that saw its political control over the canton gradually slip away as Basel lost its hinterland and then became part of the new federal Switzerland. The tight little walled city which patrician councils had ruled with a watchmaker’s precision, regulating everything from sewage disposal to working hours, never lost its individuality, but gradually became a large industrial center with a wretched, disease-prone population.

The new railways thrust their way in, filling the quiet old city with their melancholy new noises and bringing Basel into close contact with relatively nearby foreign cities like Strasbourg and Tübingen—as well as with the more distant vortices of social and political change, Berlin and Paris. New markets yielded new wealth—but also enticed Basel industrialists to sell the techniques that had once been theirs alone and to move their factories outside the city. Harry Lime, in his famous speech in *The Third Man*, dismissed Switzerland as the country without a history, which had enjoyed peace for a thousand years and had accordingly produced only the cuckoo clock. In fact, the problem of historical change—the problem that thrust itself on the attention of German and Austrian historians when the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire demolished their old regimes—proved equally inescapable, on a lesser scale, for the Swiss.

Though Bachofen and Burckhardt both came from elite families, their circumstances differed widely: Bachofen was a very rich man, born in a magnificent baroque villa, while Burckhardt came from a modest branch of two rich clans. Both, however, benefited from the excellent education made available to small numbers of boys at the Gymnasium and the Pädagogium—a remarkable institution where university teachers gave courses to boys in their late teens. Both were inspired by their émigré teachers, onetime liberals and radicals from Italy and Germany. And both felt drawn to pursue their interests at that magnetically attractive center of the academic universe, Berlin, where Bachofen studied the history of law with Friedrich Karl von Savigny and Burckhardt studied history, art history, and classical philology with Ranke, Franz Kugler, and August Böckh.

The two Baselters were both captivated by the Biedermeier Berlin of the 1830s and 1840s. The famous salons offered as much entertainment as the bitter, envious professors, who deliberately scheduled their courses to conflict with one another. Burckhardt described his round of lectures, parties, and visits in charming, vivid letters, etching sharp portraits of the good and the great from the worm’s-eye perspective of the student (as Gossman points out, both men’s letters are masterpieces of observation, taste, and style in themselves—splendid products of a lost European culture). He found Berlin’s lively society more sophisticated and more welcoming than that of their native city. In Basel, he was confined to a narrow social round and confronted constantly by the gossip of locals who learned nothing and forgot nothing. In Berlin, Burckhardt could call on brilliant writers like Bettina von Arnim, watch young ladies act out great historical paintings in charades—or simply enjoy the anonymity that Basel denied him. More important, both men could find inspiration in the new historical method they encountered in lecture halls and seminars.

For Bachofen, the new German historical school of law came as a revelation. His teacher, Savigny, who worked in close collaboration with Jacob Grimm and other Romantic scholars, argued that every system of law developed in a specific, concrete setting, in response to the needs and desires of a particular nation, at a particular state of development. One could not hope to explicate Roman law, much less to work out which segments of it could still be applied constructively in modern Germany, without studying how both Roman and German law had originally taken shape. Bachofen threw himself into this new branch of scholarship, following it from Berlin to Göttingen. Eventually he became more historical than the historicists, and insisted that past legal codes must be studied only from a historical point of view, with no reference to their modern application—as “a part of ancient rather than modern life, a fragment of classical philology, a product of conditions that had long sunk into oblivion.”<sup>4</sup>

Burckhardt, by contrast, felt himself called to explore several fields, including the history of the Near East. He made

himself an expert on medieval history and on the history of art and architecture. For a long time, he anticipated with resignation that he would have to specialize: “Given the vast expansion of scholarship,” he wrote with a young man’s regret, “you must confine yourself to some area and do this well: otherwise you will simply shatter.”<sup>5</sup> But he always knew that he meant to write readable history, not the indigestibly pedantic monographs that the professionals turned out. And he soon decided that what interested him most was not any of the special fields he had flirted with, but “cultural history” as a whole. For him, he wryly commented, “the background is the main thing.” Cultural history, which concentrated not on royal policies and decisive battles but on beliefs, rituals, and institutions, could recreate this as conventional history could not.<sup>6</sup>

Like Bachofen, Burckhardt decided that his kind of history would appreciate the past for what it really was. Modern historians claimed, in theory, that the historian must treat every period and every nation as equal before God, and try to understand each in its own terms. At the same time, however, Ranke and many of his followers treated the rise of Prussia and the other modern nation-states in the last three centuries as a special, providentially directed story—perhaps, indeed, the culmination to world history. This was, of course, what rulers and court officials wanted to hear.

Burckhardt, the citizen of Basel, condemned the scholars who confused the history of Germany (or any other nation) with History itself. Their errors revealed something worse than incompetence: corruption. Burckhardt insisted on his deep respect for Ranke the teacher and thinker. But he sharply criticized Ranke’s truckling to rank and power, in society and in his historical works. Ranke, he wrote:

was once alone at the house of Bettina [von Arnim]. The topic of the subjection of Poland came up in the conversation, Bettina was naturally full of indignation against Russia and Ranke agreed with her ideas absolutely. A little later he was at Bettina’s again, at a big party. An important Russian diplomat started a conversation with him, in the course of which Ranke described the conduct of the Poles as revolutionary and monstrous.

Von Arnim, rolling her eyes, exclaimed “Pfui”—and Ranke left the house as soon as he could, ashamed.<sup>7</sup> From early on, Burckhardt knew that he had to create a new form of historical writing—even if he himself had no firm idea of what that would entail—because he knew he could not simply chart the triumphs of the winners in the Great Game and applaud them.

**B**oth scholars traveled for some years before settling in Basel. Both began to teach, and at this point their personal paths diverged. When Bachofen found himself subjected to public insults for accepting his chair as a privilege owed to his patrician birth, he resigned it. In fact, he became a kind of hermit. Though he served as a judge, he lived for his travels, about which he wrote splendidly, and his scholarship. Burckhardt, by contrast, found that teaching was his vocation. After some years of insecurity and a short period of lecturing in Zürich, a more open city with a more cosmopolitan university, he settled into life as a teacher in Basel. He regularly lectured for ten and more hours a week, normally without using notes.

True, Nietzsche remarked in 1870 that he himself was “the only one of [Burckhardt’s] sixty hearers who understands his profound train of thought with all its strange circumlocutions and abrupt breaks wherever the subject fringes on the problematical.” Still, Burckhardt attracted large audiences to courses that ranged from the history of Renaissance and Baroque art to that of Greek civilization. Yet he too became a hermit of a sort. Even when he became famous, he refused to give lectures or attend academic conferences outside Basel—a concession to scientific communication that even Bachofen made. When a Berlin professor turned up, in 1872, to offer Burckhardt Ranke’s chair in Berlin, with a very large salary, he immediately declined to move, and did his best to pretend that the whole event had never taken place.

## 2.

Burckhardt and Bachofen knew each other well for a time, and Bachofen actually drafted, in his capacity as one of the university’s curators, the offer letter that brought Burckhardt to Basel. Eventually their relations changed, from a warm friendship in the early years to antipathy—at least on Bachofen’s part. Yet in some ways they developed in strikingly similar ways, as Gossman carefully shows. Both were appalled by the growth of large, harsh nation-states—like the Swiss Federation and the France of the July Monarchy. Both were horrified by the new age of mass politics that followed 1848. Burckhardt, who had himself worked as a journalist in his youth, withdrew from public life as it became increasingly

savage and combative. Both found themselves, in the end, inspired by a somewhat idealistic vision of old Basel—which both, in different ways, held up as an alternative to the new world they saw around them. Both worked appallingly hard, with an asceticism that reminds one of Max Weber. Bachofen rose at 4:00 AM every day, Burckhardt lectured endlessly, and both men scratched away their lives making excerpts, thousands of pages long, from the primary sources they preferred to any modern scholar’s Deep Thoughts.

Bachofen turned his attention, as a scholar, above all to what he called Mother Right (*Mutterrecht*). The term, almost impossible to translate, stands for the primitive state of matriarchy in which, he believed, the Greeks had originally lived. Drawing not just on information about laws, but also on myths, traditions, and material artifacts, Bachofen set out to recreate the original Greek social order. Before the world described by classical Greek literature came into existence, he argued—the world of cities, constitutions, and armies, dominated by male aristocrats—another world, now forgotten, had flourished. Women, not men, had dominated society. Matrilineal descent had determined family membership, maternal rights had dominated the legal system, and chthonic female gods, like the Furies, had ruled the moral order. Dig down beneath the sources and you find the Mothers. Bachofen recognized that this dark, forgotten society had had to make way for the Greek politics and the classical civilization that Neo-Hellenists revered. But the maternal order was transformed, not obliterated, in the course of this revolution—as the Furies, in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, were integrated into the new order of justice created by Athena, not eliminated from it.

Bachofen was immensely erudite—a “citation-chewer” (*Zitatenfresser*) in the best German style, who loaded his most ambitious works with a vast apparatus of evidence and quotations.<sup>8</sup> But he insisted that he did not belong to the community of German scholars. He denounced the critical method—“source criticism”—of Barthold Georg Niebuhr, who had demolished the Romans’ myths about their city’s founding by interpreting them not as genuine traditions about past beliefs and practices but as a reflection of social conflicts obscured by time and oral transmission. Even more fiercely, he denounced the Roman history of Theodor Mommsen, which he saw as a gross anachronism, a celebration of the new German state, its statesmen dressed up in period costumes but speaking an anachronistic language and striking implausible poses, like the Hollywood Romans of the 1950s. And he himself was greeted by scholarly German readers, for the most part, with silence, incomprehension, or scorn. They could not understand how someone as learned as Bachofen could deliberately set aside the results of source criticism in favor of simply listening to, and believing in, the stories the Greeks and Romans had told about themselves.<sup>2</sup> Only in the years around 1870, as Fustel de Coulanges, Lewis Henry Morgan, and others re-thought the development of ancient societies, attributing a central role to forms of kinship, did Bachofen’s insights slowly begin to find application—though his rich, complex German proved intractable to some who would otherwise have been his natural allies and disciples.

Burckhardt also brought lost worlds back to life. He reinvented the Renaissance, which, he argued, involved not only the rediscovery of ancient texts and disciplines—the act of recuperation that gave the period its name—but also the creation of an integral new culture. Culture, for Burckhardt, naturally included what one might now call “high culture”—art, literature, and philosophy. At times—as in his late lectures on history—it referred to what he saw as one of the shaping forces in world history, which existed in continual interplay with the state and religion.

But it also embraced the whole world of small-*c* culture that interests modern anthropologists: beliefs and forms of behavior, burial customs and ways of eating. All of these—Burckhardt argued at his most ambitious—were governed by the same spirit, which expressed itself with endless creativity in an infinite number of social and cultural forms: “Every period of civilization which forms a complete and consistent whole,” he proclaimed, “not only manifests itself in political life, in religion, art, and science, but also sets its characteristic stamp on social life.” He proceeded to demonstrate that the spirit of the Renaissance produced not only great poems and works of art, but new fashions in everything from public festivals to female clothing and cosmetics to interior decoration. In Italy, he argued, the life of luxury became a work of art in itself: soft beds and fine marquetry bespoke not just a desire for splendor, but a fine sense of what was beautiful that existed in no other country.

Where Bachofen evoked a dark old world of feelings and beliefs, one that had necessarily been supplanted by the full civilization of ancient Greece, Burckhardt in his work on the Renaissance celebrated a bright new world: one in which men ceased, for the first time in centuries, to dream. Released into a new, individual existence, men came to understand both their own, subjective inner selves and the outer world of nature and society in modern, realistic terms, as suddenly as if—as

he put it in a famous passage—a veil that had separated them from reality had suddenly dissolved into the air. Burckhardt tended, if anything, to underemphasize the traditional elements that continued to play vital roles in Renaissance society and culture—as many a medievalist would point out querulously in the decades to come. But he had his reasons for doing so. For he saw modernity as destructive: an immensely powerful force which uprooted and demolished traditions.

The rise of realism in conduct and the rediscovery of classical and secular morality, for example, had had a solvent effect on traditional beliefs, which had done immense damage to society—as the careers of the Renaissance tyrants, which Burckhardt illustrated with glowing, fearsome anecdotes of remorseless murder, clearly showed. The creation of a modern culture required the destruction of many things that had been of value. And even the beautifully coherent civilization of the Renaissance was ultimately, and necessarily, so weakened by the same forces that brought it into being that hostile forces could destroy it. Culture, then, was both a complex, fragile web of practices and beliefs and a living organism that was born, grew to maturity, and became old—an idea that Burckhardt did not so much formulate as exemplify in his histories, in countless subtle ways. Ranke, for all his insight into the history of whole societies, did not anticipate his pupil's brilliant, wide-ranging effort to see history whole. No wonder that he emphasized his reservations in the comment that he entered in *The Age of Constantine the Great*.

Burckhardt's complex, provocative book became a Rorschach blot for historians. It sparked dozens of divergent readings—many of them profoundly hostile—in the decades to come. But it established the Renaissance as an independent field of historical study. Despite all criticisms, it won its author the academic distinctions that escaped Bachofen, including membership in the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and, on the twenty-five-year jubilee of his election, the gift of a succulent Göttingen sausage from a learned well-wisher. Even in Berlin, Burckhardt was recognized as the historian whose stylistic and intellectual achievements, if not his methods, made him Ranke's natural successor.

Burckhardt, however, deliberately adopted a persona radically different from Ranke's. He absolutely refused to take any advantage of his new-found fame, and let younger scholars bring out new annotated editions of his book on the Renaissance and his even more popular guide to Italian art, the *Cicerone*. Burckhardt noted, with ironic pleasure, that his younger editors died off one by one, while he lived on. In late middle age, when he moved into new territory—the cultural history of Greece—he insisted that he did so only in order to lecture to his Basel students, and turned away the inquiries that soon arrived from German publishers. He continued to teach his heavy schedule until almost the end of his life. German professors boasted of their vast libraries and hours in the archive, wooed princes and students, lusted after courtly patronage and titles—and did in their rivals by writing polemics and playing scholarly politics. Burckhardt insisted on his amateur status, claimed that he merely bumbled along as a scholar, and mocked the seriousness and pomposity of those who wanted to crush the flowers he raised from unpromising historical soil.

In short, like Bachofen, Burckhardt rejected Berlin for Basel. He would not emulate, or even accept, the authority of those he called the *viri eruditissimi*—the professors at the German universities. They insisted that one must always use the latest critical edition of a text, cite all the technical secondary literature, read all the inscriptions and papyri that might offer evidence about such subjects as competitiveness in ancient Greece. Above all, the objective scholar must always wield the bright new tools of source criticism which Niebuhr and others had forged. Confronted with a bright tapestry of myth and fact, like Herodotus' account of the Persian wars or Livy's history of Rome, the philologist should not appreciate it but unpick it, reducing it to its original yarns by showing that the apparently coherent text was really a loose fabric of brightly colored stories, drawn by a late compiler from lost and often unreliable early sources. Burckhardt, aware that no single scholar could study all of Greek history in the intensive, critical way seen as vital by the *viri eruditissimi*, also knew something more significant: that the scholar who worked this way would miss vital aspects of the culture he hoped to capture.

The scholar must not handle ancient texts violently, tearing them into their tiny original shreds, but gently, trying to release their original flavor and texture. Many nineteenth-century scholars particularly disliked Herodotus, whom they dismissed as gullible, overimaginative, and unselective. Burckhardt used him constantly. Herodotus reported that the Athenian Hippocleides danced wildly in the course of a competition for the hand of Cleisthenes' daughter Agariste, even standing on his head and kicking his legs—to the point that he lost the contest. Even then he replied merely, "Hippocleides doesn't care."<sup>10</sup> Colorful anecdotes like this had brought the historian a reputation for inventiveness—even dishonesty.

Burckhardt, however, saw the matter very differently. The fact that this story circulated in itself revealed something about Athenians' willingness to violate norms of noble conduct that other Greeks carefully observed. Cultural history sought to work out "what manner of people these were, what they wished for, thought, perceived and were capable of." Even an untrue anecdote could reveal genuine Greek desires, attitudes, and mental habits—in Schopenhauer's terms, Greek ways of "representing" the world. "Desires and assumptions are, then, as important as events."

In fact, Burckhardt argued, "the inner core of bygone humanity" often emerged involuntarily from the sources, which "betray their secrets unconsciously and even, paradoxically, through fictitious elaborations." For it was in such lurking places that one could uncover what was most typical of a past culture. Far from recommending the cold-eyed scrutiny of the source critic, Burckhardt admitted that this form of interpretation was necessarily subjective: "In the course of reading, every word the researcher happens upon may seem either insignificant or vitally interesting, and this will depend on current mood and state of alertness or fatigue, and especially on the degree of maturity that the research has arrived at."

The historian had to learn over time, by rereading and rereading, to detect the truth beneath the apparently false or trivial, the original social fact beneath the late anecdote. Only patience and "an attentive ear," not "strenuous effort," could make the monuments speak. No formal protocols could describe what interpretation of this form required—a lesson not lost on one of Burckhardt's most admiring readers, Sigmund Freud, who copied out part of this passage and drew on it in formulating his own concept of "evenly suspended attention."<sup>11</sup>

Burckhardt's cultural history of Greece was pronounced dead on arrival by one of the very greatest German historical scholars of the time, the Berlin professor Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, who claimed that "from the standpoint of real scholarship it did not exist."<sup>12</sup> But over time it proved as stimulating, and in part as prophetic, as *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Burckhardt's formal meditations on history and his systematic efforts to trace the interaction of larger cultural and political systems with individual creativity would continue to be read and actively discussed—never more so, perhaps, than in recent years, when so many historians and theorists have attempted to treat cultures as systems which limit or deny individual agency.

Basel—the old-fashioned neoclassical city which resisted change—spawned radically new ways of thinking about the past. Members of an old elite and citizens of a small state, unconstrained by the need to rise in the Prussian civil service, Bachofen and Burckhardt could go their own ways. Bored by Basel's endless repetitive round of sociability, they were also protected from worse things than a series of dull Swiss Sundays—like the temptations of power which turned so many German professors into cheap dates for ministers, uncritical mouthpieces for the war pieties of 1870 and 1914. They wrote for the muses and their intimates, and in Burckhardt's case for Basel students. Burckhardt, in fact, saw his method of doing history as especially appropriate for a teacher, most of whose students would not become professional scholars. It enabled him to cultivate their sensibilities, to teach them how to read their way appreciatively into other worlds, rather than to train them in skills they would never have occasion to apply.

### 3.

Gossman's perspective, in this book, is essentially urban and local, in the style of Carl Schorske. His work actually began, many years ago, as a collaboration with Schorske, and like the historian of Vienna, he emphasizes the many ways in which Basel formed its historians. As an enclave, one of Europe's few city-states, it could harbor "untimely" ideas—like the firm belief, shared by Bachofen and Burckhardt, that *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, was a far finer goal than power. Basel could thus preserve and cultivate German ideals which had become unseasonable in their land of origin.

As a model of the good society, Basel did even more. Basel inspired Bachofen with his belief in the value of industry, his understanding of the Roman clan, and his ferocious resistance to the new German histories of the ancient world, which denied the religious and traditional elements in Greek and Roman society. Basel filled Burckhardt with the respect for a cultivated mercantile elite which lights up his account of the Florentine Renaissance and with appreciation for Venice's proud sense of isolation and independence—even if his understanding for the ancient Greeks' complete dedication to their cities derived in part from his sense of what Basel had lost. Bachofen and Burckhardt not only rejected Berlin; they embraced their native city, with all its faults. Basel, finally, continued to attract brilliant outsiders to the German world, one of whom—Nietzsche—developed his own thought about history in a rich, tormented dialogue with Burckhardt. Gossman

actually closes his work with a brief, pointed discussion of Nietzsche and Franz Overbeck.

Questions remain—especially about what Bachofen and Burckhardt learned outside their homeland. Drawing on a wonderful short book by Felix Gilbert,<sup>13</sup> Gossman points out, as others have, that “cultural history” of a sort existed in the Germany of the 1830s and 1840s. Karl Dietrich Hüllmann, for example, gave courses on cultural history at Bonn, where Burckhardt studied. In them, and in his six volumes on the social life of medieval towns, Hüllmann set out to reveal the life of “the lower classes,” which previous historians had ignored. He dealt with a vast range of topics, from the history of dress and drinking habits to the guilds—all topics which would reappear in Burckhardt, though treated from a radically different point of view. Gossman also notes that Voltaire and other *philosophes*, a century before Burckhardt, had already insisted that historians should not concern themselves with sterile questions about dates and facts. They examined the development of civilization and tried to explain why certain periods—like the age of Louis XIV—saw it flourish so luxuriantly. And their essayistic, pointed, “oppositional form” of history-writing survived into the nineteenth century—especially in France and England. Burckhardt owed something of his ability to impose form on the sprawling materials of cultural history to his Enlightenment and Romantic predecessors, as he acknowledged more than once.

Curiously, however, Gossman says little about an earlier form of historical scholarship, antiquarianism, which flourished from the fifteenth century onward, and on which he has written marvelously in the past. Antiquarians, following ancient precedent, systematically studied rituals, practices, and institutions. They collected inscriptions, compared them with literary texts, and compiled studies of the ancients’ funeral customs, cuisine, military affairs, and religions.<sup>14</sup> Normal historians composed powerful narratives of dynasties and wars; antiquaries patiently tracked the ancients into both the temple and the brothel. Historians emphasized continuity, arguing that the heroic ancients could still serve as models for modern young men. Antiquaries detected ruptures in the fabric of tradition. They pointed out that ancient views on kinship, incest, capital punishment, and many other questions had differed radically from modern ones. Some antiquarians seem to have stepped from the pages of Thomas Love Peacock. They compiled the vast unreadable folios, stuffed with undigested quotations, that brought their discipline its modern reputation for unmitigated dullness. But others wrote challenging histories of Persian fire worship and Roman military techniques, which shocked and fascinated contemporary readers.

Antiquarians sometimes combined varied interests in an effort to show that ancient beliefs and practices in many fields were components of a single, coherent political, social, and religious order. They were inspired, to some extent, by ambitious polymaths like Christopher Mylaeus, John Barclay, and Francis Bacon. These men hoped to improve the intellectual world they lived and worked in by reconstructing what they called the “literary history” (*historia litteraria*) of mankind. Each nation and epoch, they held, had had particular institutions and even a “genius” or spirit of its own, which determined the interests of writers, artists, and philosophers. Close study of these could enable one to understand why natural philosophy, for example, had flourished in some periods and not in others.<sup>15</sup> When Winckelmann and Herder spun their seductive, glittering visions of Greek culture in dazzling, accessible German prose, they drew on a rich range of precedents immured in the Latin of the scholarly tradition.

In the lively eighteenth-century universities of Halle and Göttingen, these insights and methods were pursued further. Friedrich August Wolf insisted in his influential lectures at Halle and in a brilliant manifesto that he brought out in 1807 that the scholar who knew Greek and Roman literature and antiquities and studied them in the proper, synthetic way could recreate “human nature in antiquity.” Nineteenth-century teachers of Greek history—like Burckhardt’s teacher Böckh—built on these foundations when they tried, in their courses and writings, to show how all the Greek customs and institutions they studied reflected the same shaping spirit. Encyclopedic scholarship could stimulate a synthetic imagination to grasp the ancient world as a whole—or at least, as Böckh put it, to grasp what the ancients themselves had grasped, to understand their ideas, desires, and beliefs—which were sometimes disconcerting. Throughout the nineteenth century, ancient historians, philologists, archaeologists, and social scientists struggled over the remains of the antiquarian tradition, which they appropriated and updated in diverse ways.

Burckhardt encountered these renewed methods in Böckh’s classroom at Berlin and in Böckh’s great book on the public economy of Athens, where he read that the Greeks “were unhappier than most people believe.” He met them again in Karl Friedrich Hermann’s handbook of Greek antiquities (1831), a book to which he referred regularly, and where he read that the ancient Greek state had allotted no freedom at all to the individual.<sup>16</sup> The full secret history of Burckhardt’s cultural history remains to be written—and may involve more of what he studied in Berlin, and learned from earlier traditions of

scholarship, than experience of Basel. Bachofen, a preeminently lonely figure, and one who shared the antiquaries' obsession with ancient tombs and medieval documents, remains in some ways even more mysterious.

Yet Gossman and Murray have brought these issues out in a lively, accessible, and helpful way. Their books will be godsend to students and general readers. Both of them, moreover, suggest something vital—and a little frightening—about history in our own time. A brand of history—mostly Anglo-American, though a good many of its creators hail from other countries and traditions—has once more attained almost hegemonic status. It is studied, translated, emulated, attacked around the world. Pretty much everyone seems to believe that the histories taking shape in these designated centers deserve translation into multiple languages and discussion at seminars and conferences around the world. The case of Basel suggests that even now, young scholars in small cities and small states, on the periphery of the established world of learning, may be creating histories that don't look like anything turned out by the big university presses—and that will be read when the respectable histories are covered with the dust of decades. Perhaps they are already sending presentation copies of the real new history of the twenty-first century, suitably inscribed, to their former teachers. The story of what Berlin regarded as the cultural killer Bs, Bachofen, Burckhardt, and Basel, offers a helpful corrective against the self-satisfaction to which professors of history, like other mortals, are all too prone.<sup>17</sup>

1 Jacob Burckhardt, "Lebensrückschau," *Die Kunst der Betrachtung*, edited by H. Ritter (Cologne: DuMont, 1997), p. 16. ↵

2 Ranke's copy is now in the Syracuse University Library, Ra937.08 B94. ↵

3 See Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History* (Princeton University Press, 1998). ↵

4 Johann Jacob Bachofen, "My Life in Retrospect," *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 5. ↵

5 Jacob Burckhardt, *Briefe*, edited by Max Burckhardt, Vol. 1 (Basel: Schwabe, 1949), p. 132. ↵

6 Burckhardt, *Briefe*, Vol. 1, p. 196. ↵

7 Burckhardt, *Briefe*, Vol. 1, p. 160. ↵

8 Unfortunately, a fair number of Bachofen's references were secondhand, taken over from others, typographical errors and all. On his scholarly practices see the magnificent essay of Thomas Gelzer, "Die Bachofen-Briefe," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, Vol. 19 (1965), pp. 777–869. ↵

9 Gossman has treated this side of the story in considerable detail in an earlier monograph, *Orpheus Philologus: Bachofen versus Mommsen on the Study of Antiquity*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 73, Part 5 (1983); see the review by Arnaldo Momigliano, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 57 (1985), pp. 328–330, reprinted in Momigliano, *Ottavo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1987), pp. 409–413. ↵

10 Burckhardt, p. 205, from Herodotus. Characteristically, in note 126, p. 395, Burckhardt remarks: "Where did Herodotus have it from? Athens, one would think, but for the objective view of Athenian frivolity it provides." ↵

11 Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, *Back to Freud's Texts*, translated by Philip Slotkin (Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 100–101, pp. 266–267. ↵

12 See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Introduction to the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* by Jacob Burckhardt," *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 295–305 at 304–305, note 4. ↵

13 Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 46–48. ↵

14 See the classic study by Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 13 (1950), pp. 285–315; further literature is listed in Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Harvard University Press, 1997). Important recent studies include Francis Haskell, *History and its Images* (Yale University Press, 1993), Ingo Herklotz, *Cassiano Dal Pozzo und die Archäologie des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hirmer, 1999), and Peter Miller, *Peiresc's Europe* (Yale University Press, 2000). Gossman's own *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968) is a classic study in this tradition. ↵

15 See Erich Hassinger, *Empirisch-rationaler Historismus*, second edition (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 1994); Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Topica universalis* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983); Martin Gierl, *Pietismus und Aufklärung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997). ↵

16 See Momigliano, "Introduction to the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* by Jacob Burckhardt." ↵

17 Many thanks to Barbara Hahn, Wilfried Nippel, and Greg Lyon for advice and criticism. ↵