PART II: CLASSICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY
INTRODUCTION

It is a common statement that Hellenistic historiography is ‘moralising’. This is often combined with statements to the effect that Hellenistic historiography is ‘rhetorical’ and less ‘serious’ or in some other way less worthy and less plain good than Classical historiography.¹ That what makes historiography ‘good’ is a matter of taste and changing values has been discussed in the Introduction to this book and will also be a topic for its Conclusion. In the present part we shall face the claim that ‘moralising’ is a phenomenon exclusively of Hellenistic historiography. Through an examination of the works of the three extant Classical historiographers – that is, Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon – I shall demonstrate that moral didacticism was a central concern of each author, and that their histories do, in fact, moralise. We shall see how the Classical works show forerunners of the types of moralising we have become familiar with from the Hellenistic histories, but also how they employ different moralising techniques of their own. We shall also consider what messages their moralising conveys. In the final chapter we shall then look at the fragments of three late Classical works of history, namely those of the Oxyrhynchus Historian, Ephorus and Theopompus, in order to get a sense of how the development from Classical to Hellenistic moral didacticism took place.

The three extant Classical historiographers will be discussed chronologically. In each chapter we begin with a look at the preface and programmatic passages in order to see what they say about the purpose of the work; then we proceed to examine the moralising techniques used and then the moral lessons offered by the work. Chapter 7 discusses what can be surmised about the moral didacticism of three late Classical historiographers from their preserved ‘fragments’ and what this might tell us about the development from Classical to Hellenistic moral didacticism.

No one could hope to take account of everything written about Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon in a single book, much less in a part of a book. I do not aim to give an overview of scholarship on any of these historiographers, or to reference every important or interesting monograph or article that discusses their works. I shall limit myself to referring, in the footnotes, to studies that have discussed in detail – but often under more reputable headings such as ‘philosophy’ or ‘political thought’ – some of the passages and phenomena that I identify as moral-didactic.