



Mythistory: The Making of a Modern Historiography

Joseph Mali

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Ever since Herodotus declared in *Histories* that to preserve the memories of the great achievements of the Greeks and other nations he would count on their own stories, historians have debated whether and how they should deal with myth. Most have sided with Thucydides, who denounced myth as "unscientific" and banished it from historiography.

In *Mythistory*, Joseph Mali revives this oldest controversy in historiography. Contesting the conventional opposition between myth and history, Mali advocates instead for a historiography that reconciles the two and recognizes the crucial role that myth plays in the construction of personal and communal identities. The task of historiography, he argues, is to illuminate, not eliminate, these fictions by showing how they have passed into and shaped historical reality. Drawing on the works of modern theorists and artists of myth such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, Joyce and Eliot, Mali redefines modern historiography and relates it to the older notion and tradition of "mythistory."

Tracing the origins and transformations of this historiographical tradition from the ancient world to the modern, Mali shows how Livy and Machiavelli sought to recover true history from uncertain myth-and how Vico and Michelet then reversed this pattern of inquiry, seeking instead to recover a deeper and truer myth from uncertain history. In the heart of *Mythistory*, Mali turns his attention to four thinkers who rediscovered myth in and for modern cultural history: Jacob Burckhardt, Aby Warburg, Ernst Kantorowicz, and Walter Benjamin. His elaboration of the different biographical and historiographical routes by which all four sought to account for the persistence and significance of myth in Western civilization opens up new perspectives for an alternative intellectual history of modernity-one that may better explain the proliferation of mythic imageries of redemption in our secular, all too secular, times.

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