

Anne Eriksen

Commonplaces and simple truths: Ludvig Holberg's *Synopsis historiae universalis* (1733) and the tradition of textbooks

Bossuet wrote his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* for a truly singular pupil, the French *Dauphin*. During the early modern period, however, universal history was also a subject taught to students in far less unique positions. For them, the aim was not to learn how to rule, or to situate themselves as powerful leaders, but to acquire an understanding of the world as a whole and of that which created such a unity. Universal history became a textbook genre, more or less explicitly adapted for young readers. The size and volume of these books varied (as we will see), but their common denominator was a comparatively simple presentation and a corresponding lack of complex, erudite argument. The textbooks usually did not represent "cutting edge" historical research or philosophy. What makes them interesting is that they give excellent access to the simple truths, commonplaces and general ideas in early modern historical thinking and writing. They spell out basic premises and explain things that would be taken for granted in works addressing more advanced readers. In this way the textbooks do not merely represent a didactic tradition. They are valuable sources to how universal history was conceptualised and thought about more generally: What did universality mean when it came to history?

My case for investigating these issues – the commonplaces and simple truths of universal history – will be *Synopsis Historiae Universalis*, published in 1733 by the Norwegian playwright, philosopher and historian Ludvig Holberg. The book was written for the benefit of Holberg's own students at the University of Copenhagen, where he had held the Chair in history at the University of Copenhagen since 1730. From 1732 history had been included in the curricula for the final examination from the Latin schools as well as for admittance to the university. A textbook was required, and the professor took on the task of writing it.

The book is small in size and straightforward in its presentation. Its overall simplicity and lack of erudite elaboration may be one reason why universal history has received little scholarly attention. Holberg's extensive literary and philosophical production has gained him a lasting reputation as the leading Enlightenment author of Denmark-Norway. Among his historical works, *Dannemarks Riges Historie* (History of Denmark 1732–35), *Almindelig Kirkehistorie* (General Church History, 1738) and the early *Introduction til de europæiske Rigers Historier* (Introduction to the History of the European States, 1711) are traditionally

regarded as the most important. Beside these monumental works, the unassuming universal history has seemed a mere trifle.

My argument in this chapter will be that this simplicity is what makes Holberg's universal history interesting. It can be taken to present basic historical knowledge, truths that are held to be beyond dispute, and ideas that are little contested. Moreover, Holberg's work was not original. It situated itself in a long tradition, which is partly that of Christian universal history and partly that of *ars historica* or manuals on "how to read history". This line of books reaches centuries back, but also consists of works that were more contemporaneous with Holberg's own, and thus its competitors in the market for students' books. Finally, in its own right, Holberg's work both blended with tradition and contributed to shaping it. As a landmark of historical knowledge in the educational system, it was translated, adapted and reworked. This extensive use and reuse meant that the book would gradually merge with the tradition it stemmed from.

To discuss these points, my examination will be divided into three sections. The first explores the actual content and form of Holberg's universal history: How is history presented in this book, and what are its claims to universality? The second section will go into the older tradition that Holberg's work relates to. The aim is not to find exact models or inspirations for his work, but rather to consider the development of tradition in itself. To do so, some considerations on the concept of tradition itself will be required. The final section will study some of the reworkings, translations and changes that were made to Holberg's book. What happened to universal history, or to the universality of history, in this process?

THE UNIVERSALITY OF HISTORICAL PARTICULARS

History is a matter of particulars. This has been the case from the Aristotelian notion of *historia* to modern historical scholarship, even if the epistemological status and role of particulars have changed.¹ However, history represents a particular kind of particulars, lodged at the crossroads between time and place. On the one hand, this makes the particulars of history even more particular, because they are also local. They take place in one specific place at one particular moment in time. If they are moved or repeated, they will immediately change into new and other particulars. On the other hand, historical particulars are not merely tangibly situated on maps and in calendars, they also belong to space and time understood as

¹ See for instance Pomata and Siraisi, *Historia*, on the development of the Aristotelian notion.

general – or universal – dimensions. It is from this tension that the universality of history is forged, but what does that imply (cf. Inglebert 2014)?

The notion of *universality* has two dimensions: It might mean comprehensive and overall, or it might refer to significance, to obedience to higher or general laws. When it comes to *history*, this implies that the universal may be understood as a comprehensive, all-inclusive kind of history, aiming (at least theoretically) at presenting everything that has ever happened anywhere – a grand total of local and specific particulars. Voluminous and costly works of "world history", well-known from industrious nineteenth- and twentieth-century publishing houses catering for schools and public libraries, as well as for bourgeois homes, represent this kind of historical universality. Shifting the perspective, universal history may also be understood as a presentation of events that unfold according to some pre-existing plan or law, and obey certain principles that exist outside and above their own particularity. The most obvious examples here are eschatological history (the gradual unfolding of the Divine plan) or, in a more modern version, history as a narrative of continual progress. Understood as comprehensiveness, universal history becomes a matter of size, scope and quantity – hence the frequently very voluminous works. Understood as adherence to higher principles, it is rather about significance, systems and meanings. These two modes of universality correspondingly define the role of the historical particular in two different ways. When universal history is comprehensive, the mass of details or particulars will form a kind of seriality. Recounting universal history in all its details is then a matter of inventorying, accumulating and presenting a vast repertoire. When universal history is about significance, on the other hand, the particulars will acquire the role of signs or types. They are the specific, empirical expressions of the plan, law or system that history is about. The details embody the unfolding of the plan and are at the same time important clues to understand it.

In universal history, the two forms of universality are hardly ever totally separated. Actual historical works most often contain both. In theological, teleological universal history, as in the tradition from Eusebius, the two almost completely merge: What happens on earth is due to the will of God and part of the slow unfolding of His plan, including the most humble beings and incidents. A split between the two forms occurs when universal history moves away from theology. In the encyclopaedic world histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, seriality and an ambition of comprehensiveness may be said to rule. Here the details are not signs or clues to something above them, it is rather their sheer mass that makes history universal. Nonetheless, this shift is no simple and unilinear development away from eschatological significance toward secularization, seriality and comprehensiveness.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophy of history had its own versions of history as a narrative about signs and significance, as did for instance also nationalism and Marxism. Even here historical detail obtained its meaning because of its referential value and as a clue to higher laws or deeper principles. The dynamic interaction of comprehensiveness and significance can thus be regarded as a basic element in universal history.

HOLBERG'S UNIVERSAL HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF UNIVERSALITY

Synopsis Historiæ Universalis is a book of 208 pages. It starts with a brief introduction where the author explains the principles that he has let govern his work, and promises to publish an accompanying compendium of geography. This book appeared the same year and was mainly a reworking of Holger Jacobæus' *Compendium Geographicum* from 1693. The main text of the universal history starts with the question "Quid est Historia?", and goes on to answer that

History is the relation of things past, delivered with this view, that the remembrance of them may be preserved, and that we may be taught by example to be good and happy.²

After this follows a question concerning the difference between chronology and history proper: "Quomodo differt historia à Chronologia?" The answer is that

History, properly speaking, differs from chronology, as materials from the regular disposition of them. History gives the former, chronology the latter. The one contents itself with a plain narration of events, without fixing the exact times in which they happened, the other by certain marks and traces determines those times (Holberg 1758:45).

By means of questions and answers the text goes on to explain what are epochs and eras and from this moves to a presentation of the differences between solar and lunar cycles, their significance for chronology and the use of the intercalary days. Ending the first chapter is a remark on the difference between annals and history. The former merely recounts what has happened, the latter "is more general, and recites not only actions, but explains their causes and consequences" (Holberg 1758:54). A memoir is a summary of things as they occur, and when history is composed from them "it differs from them as much as the materials lime, wood, stone, differ from the buildings they compose" (Holberg 1758:54). The subsequent chapter presents the divisions of history. The first period of history goes from the Creation to the Deluge, and is called the uncertain, due to our weak knowledge of it. The second period stretches from the Deluge to the first Olympiad, and is called the fabulous because of the "many feigned stories" in it. The third period, which includes our own time, is called the

² Holberg, *An Introduction*, 45. All quotes in English are taken from the translation by G. Sharpe.

historical because the actions have been recorded by writers of true history. History can also be divided into the matter it concerns, in other words, civil, sacred, literary, artificial and miscellaneous (Holberg 1758:55).

From these introductory definitions and explanations, the book moves on to history itself. It starts with "ancient sacred history", which is divided into seven periods, and ends with Herod Agrippa. Then commences universal history proper, structured according to the four empires, which Holberg calls monarchies: The Assyrian, the Persian, the Grecian and the Roman. While the three first are done with in the course of a few pages, the fourth is allowed to fill the rest of the book. It is Holberg's point that the modern states whose histories he presents are the descendants of the last monarchy, the Roman. He relates the histories of Germany, Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Muscovy, Poland and the Turkish Empire. The histories of Sweden and Denmark are inserted after that of France, "though they were never subject to Rome" (Holberg 1758:185).

Large parts of the world are not included in this universal history. It is restricted to Europe and certain parts of Asia, which mainly are only treated in the section concerning ancient history. Even within Europe, states and regions are excluded. The Balkans, the Baltics and Switzerland are not represented. The Italian peninsula is absent after the fall of Rome. Finland, Norway, Ireland and Scotland are briefly mentioned as parts of Sweden, Denmark and Britain respectively. The Netherlands are part of Spain. The discovery of the West Indies by Columbus is briefly referred to in the history of Spanish monarchs:

In the reign of Ferdinand, the West Indies were discovered in 1494 (sic). The islands by Christopher Columbus, the continent by Americus Vesputius, after whom that country was called America (Holberg 1758:55).

The history of each state is presented chronologically, with a focus on the reigning monarchs and emperors. When years are given, they mostly concern the end of a reign. In some cases, as with Capetian kings of France and with ancient history, this results in mere lists of names of kings. However, in his efforts to present even literary and what might be called cultural matters Holberg has also included information that he himself calls "curious" (Holberg 1758:preface). These are various types of anecdotes and commentaries that fill in the bare facts. When Henry Barbarossa goes to Rome to beg the Pope's forgiveness, he is presented to have done so barefooted and in a coarse woollen coat, in mid-winter. When Henry VI receives the imperial diadem, he is said to have kicked it off again with his foot to show his imperial power and disdain of the Pope (Holberg 1758:188–189). About his own country, Norway, which in this period was part of Denmark, Holberg writes that the country

...is barren and for the most part uncultivated, but then there is a great growth of such merchandize as is proper for exportation. Amongst these are principally enumerated fish, timber, whale-blubber, pitch and such like. Norway is also rich in mines of silver, copper and iron. There are therefore more markets in Norway than in Denmark (Holberg 1758:309).

For ancient history, precise information is generally scarce, but the reader is told that

The Antediluvian fathers are thought to have been ignorant of arts and letters, but without doubt, considering the length of their lives they must have excelled in the knowledge of nature and agriculture (Holberg 1758:59).

This observation is the answer given to the question "Quid in literis et artibus notatu dignum in hac periodo?" The entire book is structured in a series of questions and answers, giving it the well-known form of a catechism. Even when the answers are long, the framing question gives them a character of definitions or final statements.

In the preface, Holberg comments on his ideas for the book and the choices he has made to make it work pedagogically. This largely concerns the form of the presentation. According to Holberg, most previous authors of historical textbooks have been "too anxious to preserve the order of time, confounded everything but chronology, and nothing more than the memory of their readers." His own choice of using questions and answers is motivated by a wish "to assist the memory of young persons" (Holberg 1758: preface). His division of history into sacred and profane, political and literary, and the general summaries at the end of each chapter are other pedagogical aspects, as is also the inventive use of small and larger letters. The most basic information, the series of emperors and kings, is set in large letters. The younger students (the Latin school boys) should concentrate on this. For the more advanced students, who will be examined in history when entering the university, the additional and "curious" information is added in a smaller font.

The most fundamental of all these pedagogical choices, however, is Holberg's use of the model of the four monarchies. Based on the narrative about the king's dream and the prophet's interpretation in the book of Daniel (Daniel 2:31–34), the idea of the four kingdoms had been constitutive to eschatological universal history for centuries. With it, the history of all the great powers of the world was not merely set into one coherent pattern, but also subordinated to the overall Divine plan. From the twelfth century the model acquired increased political meaning. Otto of Freising (1114–58) set forth the idea that the last of the four kingdoms – traditionally acknowledged to be that of Rome – had its direct continuation in the Holy Roman Empire of his own time (Reid 1981:116). During the Protestant Reformation this idea of *translatio imperii* gained in significance. Luther, Melancton, Calvin

and other reformers all put considerable energy into interpreting the Book of Daniel. The first Protestant to make use of the four kingdoms as a frame for historical writing was probably Johannes Carion (1499–1538). His chronicle of the world (1552) was translated into a number of vernacular languages and remained hugely popular well into the seventeenth century. It was nonetheless the work of Phillip Melancton, largely based on Carion, that fully established what W.S. Reid has called "the imperial interpretation" of the Book of Daniel (Reid 1981:121). This reading of the Book of Daniel not only secured northern Europe a religious authority vis-à-vis the Pope, but it also situated the region within the frames of God's plan. Along the way, it also changed the terminology. The four "kingdoms" described by Daniel became "empires" when the model was taken to include not only Rome but also the Holy Roman Empire of early modern Europe.

In the early eighteenth century the idea of the four empires of world history was on the verge of becoming obsolete. It had been severely criticised by Jean Bodin in his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* ("Method for the Easy Comprehension of History", 1566), where he devoted an entire chapter to the refutation of those who postulate four monarchies and the golden age." Later scholars have seen the use of this model as the main weakness of Holberg's book (probably also motivating their own lack of interest in it). In her investigation of Holberg's reasons for using it despite its obvious reduction of the world to a selection of European states, Karen Skovgaard-Petersen has argued that the model made it possible for Holberg to concentrate on what he himself emphasised as the most important aspect of history: "the most significant changes that every state has been subjected to, their growth and decline, the commencement of the literary arts and military discipline and their transference from one realm to another".³ This quotation is taken from Holberg's essay on history in general. However, an argument that is both more specific and somewhat different can be found in the universal history itself. The use of the four monarchies as a structuring model is an answer, Holberg writes, to the confusing masses of information that history actually holds. It is *convenient* to present history in this way because it wrings all history together like that of one single nation, and discards everything that does not belong to the chosen model (Holberg 1758:preface). He returns to the argument on several occasions throughout the book. Convenience is emphatically the main reason. A history based on the four monarchies will aid the scholars' memory and "not oblige him to read incoherent, desultory paragraphs." In this

³ Skovgaard-Petersen, "At tale", 218. "...de fornemste Forandringer, enhver Stat har været underkasted, deres Tilvæxt og Aftagelse, Boglige-Konsters og Krigs Disciplines Begyndelse og Forflyttelse fra et Rige til et andet" (Quoted from Holberg 1735, fol. b2r = Betænkning over Historie, Dannemarks Riges Historie bd 3, translated here)

way history *may* hang together and *appear* as one thing (Holberg 1758:55, italics added). To avoid perplexing and confounding the memory of young students, Holberg also declares his intention to "act like a ship in a storm, and throw overboard some of the goods rather than be cast away" (Holberg 1758:85). The new textbook was to be approved for use by the Head of the university, and in his letter accompanying his manuscript, Holberg repeats the argument: Reducing world history to the four monarchies is the didactic strategy that he has chosen (cf. Bruun 1872:31).

In this picture, choosing the four monarchies approach is a practical move, devoid of any deeper meaning and chosen solely for pedagogical reasons. It is matter of form and of mnemonics.

What kind of universal history is this? What is universal about Holberg's universal history? There are obvious tensions between universality as comprehensiveness and universality as significance. The use of Latin lifts history out of its local context and into the world of scholars and "erudites". The consequent use of questions and answers that makes history appear as an inventory of definitions also turns it into a set of universally valid statements. And finally, the insistence that history is "the relation of things past, delivered with this view, that the remembrance of them may be preserved, and that we may be taught by example to be good and happy" also situates the book safely within the tradition of pragmatic history. The idea of history as *magistra vitae* – the teacher of life – is based on the understanding that its particularities are concrete expressions of virtues and vices that do not change, examples of good and evil deeds whose implications stretch beyond their immediate settings (Jensen 2003; Olden-Jørgensen 2015). In one way or another all these factors relate to the understanding of universal history as a matter of significance. The numerous particulars of history carry meaning because they point to something beyond and above themselves.

However, the notion of universality as comprehensiveness is also strongly present in the book. It covers a very large span of time, actually the entire time of the world from the Creation and to the author's present day. Building on the chronology presented in the book, this should be a total of 5683 years. The oft-repeated worry about the enormous mass of details and particulars that history actually consists of also bears witness to an understanding of historical universality as extreme comprehensiveness. The metaphor of a ship in a storm is frequently evoked. Holberg desires not to follow other history writers into the "troubled ocean" of particulars, but seeks to avoid the shipwreck that this ocean so often has caused (Holberg 1758:preface). It is to fight off this threat that he chooses to "throw the goods overboard" (Holberg 1758:85). Notwithstanding the sudden transformation of historical

particulars from stormy waves to the goods on-board the ship that sails them, there can be no doubt that universal history in this argument is a matter of quantity, and that its challenge to the author concerns coherence.

It is as an answer to this problem that Holberg introduces the four monarchies. With its origin in the Old Testament, this narrative was fundamentally eschatological, and had, as has already pointed out, been the core of teleological universal history. As such, it has also been understood as speaking the most profound religious truth. It is the very epitome of universality as significance. To Holberg, it is nothing of this. The four monarchies constitute a practical device, one that he needs for pedagogical reasons, but also because history *has no meaning*. History does not hang together. It has no obvious direction or goal. It does not lead anywhere but to the constant cycles of growth and declines of states and monarchies and the consequent shifting of power between them. Due to the sheer quantity of particulars, complete comprehensiveness is a virtual impossibility. Overall significance, on the other hand, does not exist. Holberg settles for an easy narrative. The four monarchies supply him with the means to an effective employment of particulars. In this context, Holberg's choice of the word monarchy rather than empire also gains significance. As pointed out above, "empire" came to substitute "kingdom" in Lutheran historiography as part of the idea of *translatio imperii*. The term served to strengthen the political argument inherent in this idea in a way that "kingdom" or "monarchy" could not as easily do. With his consequent use of the word monarchy, Holberg skipped this tradition of Lutheran historiography, trying to liberate the model from its usual political connotations. He nonetheless invoked the implications inherent in the original biblical narrative. The tension between historical universality as comprehensiveness and as significance thus dominates Holberg's efforts to compose a readable universal history, and the somewhat paradoxical solution is that the idea that most forcibly has embodied universality as significance is adopted to handle the challenges created by universality as comprehensiveness.

TRADITION AT WORK

While universal history can be defined as a genre, I also argue that it is fruitful to see it as a tradition. Tradition can be understood as designating specific cultural goods and expressions – texts, knowledge, practices, forms – that are transferred over time and "passed down" from generation to generation. In early modern Europe, universal history can clearly be said to represent such a corpus of texts and knowledge. From a cultural-theory perspective, however, tradition can also be defined as a specific kind of cultural *process*. It takes place over time, it includes the *transmission* of cultural goods (but is not identical with it) and refers to or draws

on the *past* and imbues it with some kind of *authority*. Tradition as process can be defined as the normative workings of the past in the present. It tends towards cultural stability – real or claimed (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Eriksen 1994; Bauman 2004). Analytically, it is nonetheless important that the process of transmission most often also comprises reworkings, elaboration, invention and negotiation. Tradition also creates change. Seeing universal history as tradition in this way, not only as *a* tradition, enables one to shift from studying the uniqueness of a canonical text to an interest in patterns, variations and slow changes. It means exploring cultural forces and processes rather than examining the workings of single intellects, and looking at networks, interaction and circulation rather than individuals.

The workings of the past in the present may be part of more or less explicit strategies, as is the case in the heritage industry and other forms of historic revivalism or "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Far more often, though, the past is at work in ways that are more fundamental, less visible and less directed towards specific goals. The normal use of language is perhaps the best example of this ubiquitous and powerful force of tradition. Utterances consisting solely of neologisms are simply incomprehensible. They do not make sense. Communication is based on the fact that (most of) the terms and phrases involved already have a shared and known meaning that has been passed down to us.

It should be noted, however, that tradition also – and very frequently – includes the reworking of what has been handed down. Once again, this sometimes takes the shape of a conscious strategy: Presenting novelties in the guise of well-known forms supported by established authority. The idea of Tradition as it was developed by the Catholic church during the Counter-Reformation is an example of this, as is also the introduction of numerous new devotions and saints during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Eriksen and Stensvold 2002). More often, again, this is a matter of less instrumental processes. Even the "singer of tales" who most eagerly protests his or her faithfulness to an oral tradition will invariably confer changes upon it.⁴ It should be noted, nonetheless, that the processes of communication or transmission have more to them than just the degrees of change – intended or not. Richard Bauman has pointed out that tradition is "a discursive and interpretive achievement, the active creation of a connection linking current discourse to past discourse" (Bauman 2004:147). He describes this activity in terms of mediation from a source to a target, "processes and routines in which recontextualization is deliberately managed [and] conventionally regimented"

⁴ See for instance the now classical investigations of Albert Lord and Walter Ong.

(Bauman 2004:130). The effect of these carefully staged reiterations is an enactment of authority:

The mediator's replication of the source utterance, by preserving its integrity and displaying special care in its reproduction, amounts to an act of discursive submission, the subordination of present discourse to discourse that emanates from the past. Moreover, I would suggest, submission to the *form* of the source utterance has a concomitant effect on the *rhetorical power* of the text: upholding the integrity of the form opens the way to acceptance of the validity of the message (Bauman 2004:153).

Holberg's universal history represents tradition in both the meanings discussed above. It obviously situates itself in the corpus or chain of texts that is the broad tradition of Western universal history. In the present context, its place in a historical line of handbooks, instructions and historical methods is particularly relevant. These were books of history, but they were also works that aimed at instructing students and scholars in how to *read* history. At the same time, the understanding of tradition as a specific type of cultural process will provide insights into the adjustments, negotiations and innovations that occurred, and that have made each publication of Holberg's book represent something more vital than just links in a historical chain. What happened to universal history – or the universality of history – during this process?

In his investigation of the Humanist genre of *ars historica*, Anthony Grafton has explored how during the latter half of the sixteenth century intellectuals and political theorists like Jean Bodin, François Baudouin, Francesco Patrizi and Rainer Reineck developed and systematized "an art cast as a guide not to writing, but to reading history, and one that offered an Adriadne thread through the frightening, demon-haunted labyrinths of historical writing, ancient and modern, trustworthy and falsified, that every learned man must explore" (Grafton 2007:26). Correspondingly, Grafton has discussed how this art, so fashionable and promising during its initial period, collapsed during the seventeenth century and was all but forgotten by the late eighteenth century (Grafton 2007:189). It is fundamental to Grafton's investigation that the Humanist *ars historica* consisted of methods to read, interpret and understand history as correctly as possible. This was an erudite task, but it also had important political aspects. History meant narratives of public affairs, it was made and written by powerful men centrally situated in political life. Hence, for instance, the most common observations about the reliability of a document or utterance concerned the position, political allegiances and morals of the person who had produced it.

Its focus on the *study* of history implied that the *artes historicae* had didactic dimensions that enabled it to live on in pedagogical programs long after its original

intellectual energy had petered out. It could be transformed into rules and regulations, methods and instructions and cultivated for purely pedagogical reasons. In her overview of historical-method literature from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Astrid Witschi-Bernz has pointed out that an interest in the pedagogical task of teaching history led the number of study means and systems to grow considerably during the eighteenth century, which saw the publication of a large number of handbooks, dissertations and manuals. These books can easily be seen as the logical extensions of the older *artes historicae*. Particularly influential works were the *Méthode pour Étudier L'Histoire* by Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy (1713) and *Handbuch der Universalhistorie* by Johann Chr. Gatterer (1764). Both appeared in numerous editions, and Lenglet's work was also translated into English, German and Italian. Many of these books shared approximately the same structure: "a combination of a few pages on 'theory' (a discussion of the goals, the means and limitations on reading and writing good history, the obstacles); sections treating the auxiliary sciences; and finally a summary of universal history" (Witschi-Bernz 1972:81).

The use of questions and answers in historical textbooks and manuals is said to date back to Abbé Fleury's *Cathécisme historique* from 1683. Witschi-Bernz sees the historical catechisms as examples of seventeenth-century pedagogical theory put into practice. She presents the pedagogical "obsession" with mnemotechnic procedures as a reason for the lack of innovation in the historical manuals: "The catechisms and mnemotechnics were both part of the rhetorical tradition and complemented each other". Historical catechisms nonetheless tended to gradually fall out of use during the eighteenth century (Witschi-Bernz 1972:82–83).

It is not difficult to fit Holberg into the general patterns described here. His universal history largely conformed to the structure presented by Witschi-Bernz, with its initial "theory" and the subsequent synopsis of universal history. The auxiliary sciences are largely restricted to the remarks on chronology and the accompanying geographical compendium. However, Holberg's work can also be read into a more immediate context. Karen Skovgaard-Petersen has compared it to Johann Hübner's *Kurtze Fragen aus der Politischen Historia* from 1696, which is a work that Holberg himself often referred to (Skovgaard-Petersen 2012:219). According to Witschi-Bernz, Hübner was among the most influential imitators of Abbé Fleury. The popularity of Fleury's historical catechism in Denmark-Norway has been well documented (Witschi-Bernz 1972:81; Dahl 2010). Hübner's *Kurtze Fragen* was a huge work in ten volumes, and Holberg criticised him for being far too elaborate, not least when it came to presenting details about small and obscure countries or duchies. References to Hübner also appear in one of Holberg's comedies and can hardly be read as flattery (Skovgaard-Petersen

2012:219). There are nonetheless considerable similarities between the two works. On a formal level, this concerns above all the use of questions and answers. When it comes to the content, and the underlying idea of history, Skovgaard-Petersen points to the authors' use of the idea of the four monarchies. They both structure their work according to this model, and point out that they do so to make history appear as a unity, not for any reasons relating to the model's deep eschatological significance. Their wording of the arrangement is also similar, both compare the connections that are created by the model to a chain. However, Skovgaard-Petersen downplays the pragmatic and pedagogical motivations that Holberg explicitly confesses to, and argues instead that the histories created by this method reflect the authors' concern with "the continuity of secular power" (Skovgaard-Petersen 2012:222).

When Holberg's universal history appeared in 1733, Hübner's well-established and bestselling work was a main competitor in the market for historical text books. A more recent work was Johann Heinrich Zopf's *Grundlegung der Universal-Historie* from 1729, also written for pedagogical purposes. Through numerous editions this book remained influential in German schools throughout the eighteenth century. A Danish translation appeared in 1752. With its 455 pages, Zopf's universal history was smaller than Hübner's, but far larger than that of Holberg. The format of questions and answers was kept even here, but in a different arrangement. The last 70 pages of Zopf's work consist of a "historical examination". Following a short introduction on the pedagogical use of them, long lists of questions relating to the different historical periods and themes are presented. The first ones concern the definition of history and the value of historical knowledge. The paragraphs in the main texts are all shaped as short, definitory answers to these questions. Perhaps more important is the fact that Zopf's universal history does not follow the model of the four monarchies. After the sacred history (the Old and New Testaments) it continues directly to the Roman, and from there into modern European history.

This quite densely populated landscape of textbooks on universal history supplied Holberg with a repertoire of forms and meanings to choose from, but also gave him the material to re-combine and re-interpret. Doing so, he can be said to have engaged in a mediating activity "in which recontextualization is deliberately managed [and] conventionally regimented", and where "submission to the *form* of the source utterance has a concomitant effect on the *rhetorical power* of the text" (Bauman 2004:130). Holberg does not boast of having created something new or original. He very explicitly refers to the problems encountered by former authors of universal histories and presents his own plans for avoiding the well-known shipwreck caused by masses of unruly details. He likewise calls upon a series

of well-established commonplaces of historical writings: The exemplarity of history, the four monarchies and the importance of biblical chronology to creating historical order.

Tradition here supplies resources for Holberg to draw from, both concerning the actual content of history and when establishing the authority of his own work. Through his deliberate management of these resources Holberg created a work where teachers would recognise the "usual stuff" of history. Students who memorised its passages without too much questioning would pass their exams. The book would work, it would have the authority needed for a textbook. In this way, Holberg did more than just pass on a tradition understood as a certain content and a specific kind of text. His reiteration of the tropes and themes also represented a reworking. Long regarded by scholars as the book's major flaw, the use of the four monarchies is among the elements that gain new meaning from this perspective. Rather than representing an unthinking recycling of an outdated idea, Holberg's use of it can be seen as the creative refiguration of a traditional resource invested with strong authority. His use of history as a collection of examples reflects the same process. Mark Salber Phillips has argued that the idea of history as *magistra vitae* was enormously expanded in the eighteenth century. Traditionally restricted to lessons fit for the education of princes and the ruling elite, historical examples has largely been about political and military exploits. A new bourgeois public, leading other kinds of life and developing a new competence as "sympathetic readers" demanded histories that bore more directly upon their own lives and experiences and that enabled new modes of reader identification (Phillips 2000). In Holberg, the insistence on including literary and cultural history at the end of each chapter can be seen as a response to this.

REWORKINGS

The tradition did not end with Holberg. He rather seems to have boosted it. The book came in reprints, reworkings and translations. It moved into new contexts where it came to reflect new interests and concerns. With the circulation, the book itself changed and blended into the tradition that it grew from. It became in its own right a "source utterance", to use Bauman's term. It was mediated and replicated by agents who sought to preserve and build on its authority and uphold its integrity, but also to *use* this when "linking current discourse to past discourse" to establish their own authority (Bauman 2004:147).

The universal history was reprinted twice during its first year.⁵ The Latin version continued to be published in Copenhagen, and appeared in 1736, 1744, 1749, 1753, 1754, 1761, 1767, 1769 and 1771. Latin editions were also published in Frankfurt (1753), and the Netherlands (Leeuwarden, 1770). A Latin manuscript version from Iceland, published in 1770 for use in the school of Skálholt, also exists. The first translation into another language seems to have been the English edition by G. Sharpe, published in London in 1755. The text reappeared in London in 1758 and 1787 (revised by W. Radcliffe), and was also published in Dublin in 1760, 1784 and 1795. The earliest version in the German language is from 1766, the book then reappeared in German in 1771, 1777 and 1783. A Dutch translation appeared in Amsterdam in 1779 and a Russian one was published in 1766 and again in 1808. The only Danish translation is from 1757. Its title announces that the translation was partly done by Holberg himself, but has been completed by Nicolai Jonge, who was also the man behind the Latin versions after Holberg's death in 1754.

As a general rule, the book tended to grow and the number of pages to increase when translations and new editions were published. Typographical reasons cannot be excluded, but the most interesting increases are due to the dedications and prefaces that were added to the original. The dedications situated the book in new networks of patronage and protection, while the prefaces presented the work, its original author and explanations of the intentions behind the new version or edition. Most often, these prefaces were written by the translator, in some cases by the publisher. They often called upon the authority of Holberg but the prefaces also served at the same time to establish the authority of the translator, who might use the occasion to explain how he had improved, corrected or adapted the work in order to enhance its qualities and make it fit for renewed use. The title of the German editions claims that history has been updated to the present time – "bis auf jetzige Zeit." For the Latin version that appeared in Leeuwarden in 1770, also at the initiative of the Danish Nicolai Jonge, an appendix on "historiæ patriæ", composed by Tiberius de Baar, was added. As the Netherlands barely was mentioned in Holberg's original, this move clearly intended to make the book more useful – and marketable – in a Dutch context. This version also included Holberg's *Compendium Geographicum*, which originally had been published separately.

The most extreme expansion can be found in Jonge's Danish translation with its 590 pages of text. The book included the geographical compendium and the histories of most of the countries were considerably enlarged, not least those of Sweden and Denmark. Despite the

⁵ For complete overviews of editions and translations, see Bruun 1872 and Ehrencron-Müller 1933:220ff .

fact the Jonge declared to have followed the exact model set up by Holberg, a number of significant changes were introduced, presented and warmly defended in the preface by Abraham Kall, who was a professor in history and dean at the University of Copenhagen. According to him, the major weakness of Holberg's original work was the far too elaborate presentation of the four monarchies and its consequences for the presentation of modern European history. To solve these problems in the new edition, the four monarchies were reduced to a passage inserted between the histories of the Old and the New Testaments. Separate histories of Prussia and the Netherlands were added at the end of the book.

The English translation by Gregory Sharpe yet again offered different solutions and reflected other concerns. Sharpe did not break up the structure provided by the four monarchies, but inserted a considerably expanded version of the history of Britain. The second edition of his translation (1758) also included Holberg's geography. The same edition dropped the questions of the original text, and the answers were drawn together – "as they were of no real use", thus producing a running text instead of the catechism (Holberg 1758, editor's preface). This development can also be seen in other editions: Questions and answers gradually disappeared, together with the use of different fonts to distinguish basic facts from the more "curious" details (Ehrencron-Müller 1933:232–233).

For the 1784 edition of Sharpe's translation a history of Ireland had been added at the end of the book – a design that located Ireland far from England and very close to Turkey. The most explicit expressions of Sharpe's concerns and interests are nonetheless to be found in the numerous notes – "historical, chronological and critical" as the title says – that he added. Sharpe, a theologian and a fellow of the Royal Society as well as the Society of Antiquarians, was an Oriental linguist and a collector of manuscripts and prints. He published widely on classical and religious matters and was, as his notes demonstrate, deeply interested in the chronological system and calculations of Isaac Newton. His expressed concern in the reworking of Holberg was to "make the chronology exact". Among the available systems for doing so he preferred Newton's because it was "founded not upon large conjectural numbers, but upon astronomical observations, the genealogies of families and the mean ration of men's lives, as they succeed by generations, or in succession to one another by the eldest sons or otherwise" (Holberg 1758, editor's preface). Even if Newton was not the first to try to develop a reliable chronology, his method for calculations allows his chronology to "stand upon as firm a basis as his *Principia*" (Holberg 1758, editor's preface). The notes consist partly of quite elaborate discussions on chronology, partly of corrections to names and dates in the text and partly of added information. The latter type can be found throughout the book, the two

former are concentrated in the sections on sacred and ancient history. From this we learn for instance that Cleopatra was "lewd and inconstant" (Holberg 1758, editor's note p. 109), the dot-vowels in Hebrew are loaned from Arabic (Holberg 1758, editor's note p. 78) and that the observable "disturbances of the globe" may not be fully explained by the Deluge alone (Holberg 1758, editor's note p. 61). Sharpe's commentaries turned the originally simple textbook into an elaborate work of scholarship, more or less directly referring to current issues of debate in the Republic of Letters: The origins of language, the age of the world and the literal truth of the Biblical texts.

In his overview of all these versions and reworkings, the librarian Christian Bruun has shown that practically all of them kept Holberg's name in the title of the book, even when the contents were dramatically changed or shortened (Bruun 1872). As a philosopher, historian and playwright, Holberg was well-known in Denmark-Norway and in Germany, and his name on the title page spoke for itself. Bruun found that even compilations and literary works which made use of Holberg's work as a source could draw on his name in this way. The preface to the Dutch translation for its part declares that "the author" is very well-known both in his fatherland and in other countries, which recommends the book for use even in the Netherlands (Bruun 1872:109–110). For Gregory Sharpe in his introduction to the English translation, the situation was different. Holberg's work was not much known in this part of the world, and according to Sharpe it was the high quality of the book, not the reputation of its author, that made him recommend it. Sharpe's preface to his translation ends with a short presentation of Holberg and his other works.

Comparing the details of prefaces, title pages and editions, Bruun has been able to examine how Holberg's name, and the authority it carried, was used in marketing the book. His major example is the Nicolai Jonge editions. Inviting subscriptions for the Danish edition in 1757, Jonge declared that not a few of his compatriots had for a long time nurtured the desire for this "exceedingly useful book by our celebrated baron Holberg" to be available in Danish (Bruun 1872:93). When the book appeared, its preface contained similar arguments, combined with Jonge's praise of his own work. As pointed out above, and emphasised by Bruun, this consisted of very considerable additions, so much as to more or less obliterate Holberg's small and tightly structured composition. Bruun's conclusion is that the use of Holberg's name on the title page was little more than a marketing strategy (Bruun 1872:92). It probably also reflected that Jonge had learned his lesson.

In 1761 he had published a Latin edition of Holberg's book without giving the name of the original author. Quite to the contrary, he had composed a preface declaring that the book

was compiled "from a variety of sources". Bruun nonetheless argues that the book in reality was a reworking of Holberg (Bruun 1872:84). It cannot have been too successful. Two years later, in 1763, the printer advertised it "for the same price as that of Holberg's universal history", and added that no pupil who might want Holberg's book would be disappointed by that of Jonge. In 1767, Jonge himself made use of the unsold sheets to launch a new book. The title this time was *Ludovici Holbergii Synopsis Historiæ Universalis...*

UNIVERSAL DISSOLUTION

What effect did the reworkings of Holberg's text have? The overarching answer is that they dissolved universality, though in different ways and apparently without any intention of doing so. While Holberg's understanding of the universality of history lay in the bickering between comprehensiveness and significance, the translations and reworkings definitely took a turn toward the former, but without actually achieving it. The reduction of the four monarchies from a historical structure to a historical epoch weakened the structural integrity of the work. The histories of more countries and regions were added, but Asia, Africa and the Americas were never included. The result is largely more specific descriptions of European regions, states and nations in all their respective particularities. In this respect Europe "grew", but never appeared as a unity. The inclusion of different national histories went hand in hand with the translations into vernacular, which for its part worked to remove the text from the international community of Latin-speaking students and scholars and settled it in local, national contexts, further enhancing the dissolution of universal history into national particulars.

The gradual removal of the original questions and the abandonment of the catechism format that can be seen in both the German and English versions implied a transformation into a running narrative, but it also deprived the work of its original aspect of presenting universally valid statements. The adding of discussions and arguments contributed further to this dissolution of unity. While Holberg's original questions had worked as a pedagogical device and given him the occasion to present clear definitions and statements, the new questions and discussions, mostly added in notes, not only broke up the lay-out of each page, but also served the very opposite function. They demonstrated the insecurity of historical knowledge. Even if a man like Sharpe vehemently presented his own solutions to the problems he was discussing, as well as to those he discovered in Holberg's text, his answers did not contribute to universality and uniformity, but rather to the impression that nearly everything historical can be questioned, argued and answered in different ways.

The editions and translations of Holberg's book added detail to detail, discussion to discussion and region to region, but the globe never became whole. This became even more conspicuous in the editions that also included the geographical compendium. Here all the four continents were described, and far more countries were presented. The books make it strikingly clear that universal history is both smaller and far more muddled than the geography of the world. Historical universality thus dissolved into particulars. Linguistically, structurally and pedagogically the tight composition of the original work was eclipsed in national, historical and antiquarian details. One reason why this was possible may be the aspect of universality as significance never was part of the deeper structure of Holberg's book. He had himself reduced its defining aspects to pedagogical devices and declared that history had no intrinsic meaning. In this way his short and precise presentation laid itself open to be invaded by the particulars of universal history understood as comprehensiveness, but as yet without the idea of coherence. In the reworkings, the particulars of the universal have been liberated from the pattern of the four empires, but not structured by ideas of other historical processes that connect them, nor of concepts of unified temporality or spatiality.

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