

point better than abstract argument. If a Rwandese source tells us that a certain king conquered a certain country, what does this statement mean? It may mean that a cattle raid was carried out in enemy territory and was highly successful; or that the chief or king of the enemy country was deposed or killed, and his territory annexed, in theory, by Rwanda, while local government was left as it was; or it may mean that the conquered chief remained in power, but recognized the suzerainty of the king of Rwanda. Or yet again, it may mean that the king of Rwanda occupied the country, incorporated it as part of the states over which he ruled, and replaced the administration from top to bottom. Any one of these possibilities could be inferred from the statement, and this is still leaving out of account the subsidiary question as to whether the measures taken were temporary or final. That stating the problem in this way is not merely the sign of a Byzantine finicalness is shown by the following factual example from Rwanda. A certain King Ndararasa conquered Gisaka, a country bordering on Rwanda. This meant in effect that he carried out several raids there with the intention not only of bringing back cattle, but also of demonstrating the military power of the enemy and disorganizing his government—a project in which he succeeded. His grandson, Mutara Rwogera, also ‘conquered’ the same country and succeeded in killing or exiling all the various chiefs who ruled there, thus ending the country’s existence as an autonomous state. But it was his successor Rwabugiri who first founded administrative centres there of the kind found in Rwanda, and who appointed Rwandese to high government posts. In 1901 Rwabugiri’s son was faced with a rebellion there, and it was not until this ended in 1903 that all the native chiefs and sub-chiefs were deprived of their rights, and the entire administration was taken over.

Thus every historian is obliged to interpret the sources he is dealing with. He does not and cannot have an unlimited knowledge of history, and there is usually more than one interpretation possible of the facts at his disposal. In addition, the historian adds something of his own to these facts, namely, his own particular flair, which is something more akin to art than to science. The only concession to history as a scientific discipline he can

make here is to ensure that he discloses what his sources are, so that his readers will be informed as to the reasons for the choice he has made in his interpretations of the texts.

Interpretation is a choice between several possible hypotheses, and the good historian is the one who chooses the hypothesis that is most likely to be true. In practice it can never have more than a likelihood of truth, because the past has gone for good and all, and the possibility of first-hand observation of past events is forever excluded. History is no more than a calculation of probabilities. This is true not only as far as the interpretation of documents is concerned, but for all the operations of historical methodology, and above all for the most important ones. How shall one decide whether a statement is an error, or a lie, or a ‘veracious’? Each of the three hypotheses has a varying degree of probability, and the historian will choose the most probable one. Or if, in comparing two texts, resemblances between them are found, the historian must judge whether the resemblances imply that the texts have a common origin or not. Here again, what he does is to assess possibilities and weigh probabilities. Historical science is a science of probabilities.¹ Nor is it the only science of this kind. A large number of present-day scientific disciplines make use of the concept of chance and of probability.

From what has been said, it follows that there is no such thing as ‘absolute historical truth’, and no one can formulate an ‘unchanging law of history’ on the basis of our knowledge of the past. The truth always remains beyond our grasp, and we can only arrive at some approximation to it. We can refine our interpretations, accumulate so many probabilities that they almost amount to certainty, and yet still not arrive at ‘the truth’. We can never hope to understand everything, and indeed do not even understand all that we experience personally. We cannot arrive at a full understanding of the past because the past is something outside our experience, something that is other. It has been said that it is possible to describe historical events because history is a science which deals with mankind, to which we ourselves belong, whereas a scientific description of bees does not make sense, since we cannot imagine what it is like to be a bee. This is true. But it is also true that we cannot understand the past because the men who lived then were