

# The Aristotelian concept of history

## Theory of history in Renaissance Europe and Sweden

Per Landgren

University of Göteborg, Göteborg, Sweden

### Abstract

The purpose of the present dissertation has been to investigate the establishment of history as a discipline, its content and function at Uppsala University in the beginning of the seventeenth century. A reading of Continental European and Swedish works on the theory of history however revealed an ignored concept of history. Coexisting alongside the chronological and sequential concept of history there was, namely, an atemporal concept of history that is here called the *Aristotelian concept of history*. By definition it refers to knowledge about particular things, *cognitio particularium*. The thesis argued in the dissertation is that the Aristotelian concept is a significant one that throws light on both the theoretical-historical discourse and its logical-deductive counterpart at the universities. The concept appears frequently in the relevant theoretical literature of the past and is of great importance for understanding the structure and methodology of science before and during the time of the scientific revolution. Nonetheless scholars concerned with the Renaissance have failed to recognize this fact, and it has made no tangible imprint on research about the "scientific revolution".

In contrast to this the present dissertation sets out to demonstrate the actual presence of the Aristotelian concept of history in past works associated with such central personalities and traditions as Melanchthon, Baudouin, Bodin, Keckermann, Vossius and several others. The structure of science as outlined by Francis Bacon and generations of researchers after him, for example Robert Boyle and Robert Hook, is highlighted as an exemplification of the Aristotelian division of two branches in e.g. natural philosophy, an inductive factual domain called history on the one hand, and a deductive one concerned with causes and scientific conclusions called science on the other hand.

When the dissertation focuses on Sweden it is on the organization of history teaching at Uppsala University in the beginning of the seventeenth century. In this case the character of the organization at hand is outlined against the background of Sweden viewed as a nation state with particular needs of employing educated persons to consolidate and exercise its power. The constitution of the university is analyzed with special reference to what it reveals concerning the teaching of history and the place and duties of professorships in that discipline. A number of hitherto unstudied tracts and books are taken up, among them a comprehensive theoretical-historical treatise written by professor Zacharias Humerus. The expectation on the part of the state was that history should be taught to help forge national identity, pride and cohesion. This was to be done by highlighting such traditions and episodes in the life of its own subjects that identified with the Goths of old. At the same time one finds the Aristotelian concept of history that did not endow history with the position or status of a discipline. Obviously this latter philosophically oriented concept of history went against the grain of the state's demands on the Swedish universities. It was not until the second half of the century however that the Aristotelian concept of history began to lose its significance in tandem with Aristotelianism's declining credibility. Teaching of sequential history began to dominate and the demand for up-to-date knowledge in modern languages and contemporary history implied a utilitarian adaptation of *studium historicum* for future statesmen and diplomats.

**Key words:** Aristotelian concept of history, atemporal history, sequential concept of history, history as discipline, natural history, knowledge of particulars, natural philosophy, scientific knowledge, Aristotelian theory of science, dual structure of science, loci-method, true induction, axiom, intellectual instrumental habitus.

**Correspondence:** p.landgren@telia.com

# Det aristoteliska historiebegreppet

Historieteori i renässansens Europa och Sverige

Per Landgren

Gothenburg Studies in the History of Science and Ideas

20



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET  
ACTA UNIVERSITATIS GOTHOBURGENSIS

Department of History of Ideas

and Theory of Science

University of Gothenburg

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i idé- och lärdomshistoria,  
som med tillstånd av humanistiska fakultetsnämnden vid Göteborgs universitet  
framlägges

till offentlig granskning lördagen den 6 december 2008 kl. 10 i Lilla hörsalen,  
Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg