Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages

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Introduction

My general context for a consideration of perceptions of the past in the early middle ages is the migration of ideas by written as well as by oral means within early medieval culture. Any examination of the exchange of ideas by written means, however, has to take into account the currency of particular methods and genres of writing and attitudes towards them. Thus within my general interest in literacy, and in the role of texts in the exertion of cultural influence, I have become particularly concerned with historiography. One outcome of this interest is my recent book on history and memory in the Carolingian world. In this, my focus was the writing and reading of history in the Frankish kingdoms in the eighth and ninth centuries. I considered what is meant by history books, the Franks’ knowledge of historical texts, and the ways in which the Franks constructed and understood their past. Although my study was by no means comprehensive, it became clear from the texts I examined that for the Franks an understanding of the past worked at several levels and was manifested to them in
a number of different textual contexts. A sense of the past could express both local, and much more general, cultural affiliations and identities.

Within the general theme of perceptions of the past in the early middle ages, therefore, a sense of time and chronology played a crucial role in both local and more general cultural affinities. With the notion of perceptions, moreover, I am conflating the German *Geschichtsbild*, or concept of history, and *Geschichtsbewußtsein*, or historical consciousness, which Franz-Josef Schmale has done so much to elucidate. I am also drawing on the observations made by Paul Magdalino that “the perception of the past included, but is not identical with, the writing and reading of history” and that it is also more than memory, “for it embraces the recognition that a thing remembered is past and not part of an undifferentiated eternal present.” I should also like to emphasize the importance of my choice of the plural “perceptions” rather than the composite “perception.” As a methodological principle it is necessary for historians to look at the particular and the individual in order to establish how feasible or valid generalization might be. In the case of perceptions of the past, this is especially crucial, but we need nevertheless to explore the extent to which a variety of perceptions may be interdependent.

I shall focus on the areas incorporated into the Frankish realm by the Carolingian family in the eighth and ninth centuries. A major justification for this is the extraordinary concentration of new text production and older text reproduction in this area and period that has to be accounted for, and whose influence is still being investigated and established.

Historical writing in its many manifestations in late antiquity and the early middle ages was once regarded merely as a potential, if dubious, source for facts. Historical texts which drew on earlier sources were regarded as too derivative to be of value, unless by chance they yielded a piece of information not in their sources. A classic statement of such an attitude is provided by the second edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*: “In general it may be said that all these works take on real historical value only as they approach periods contemporary with or immediately preceding those of their own writers.” Anyone who uses the folio volumes of the MGH Scriptores, the quarto-format Auctores Antiquissimi, and the octavo-format Scriptores rerum germanicarum in usum scholarum will be familiar with the editorial practice of printing any sections of text regarded as derived from an earlier source in small print, if they are included at all, and thereby signalling that they can simply be ignored (fig. 1). Even new information provided
Fig. 1. “Original” and “borrowed” text in an MGH edition: an example from the Liber historiae francorum, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH Scriptores rerum merovingicarum 2 (Hannover, 1888), p. 250
by early medieval writers has been assessed grudgingly, as if tainted by the author’s general dependence on other written texts. Many older studies of historical writing, with displays of great erudition and virtuosity, identified the sources on which historical writers drew, emphasized whatever usefulness the text might possess as a source of independent information, and validated this information in relation to other sources. But they stopped there, their work done, at least to their authors’ satisfaction.

As many, though not all, historians have realized more recently, of course, establishing on what sources a particular writer drew is only the first and essential step in assessing the implications of the selection, rearrangement, incorporation, and new emphases accorded those same sources in their new contexts. Yet I wish in this book to go one step farther even than this. The entire text of each history needs to be assessed, for it is this that can best offer insights into the intellectual world of the early medieval historical writers and compilers and their perspective on, and knowledge of, the past. The text created can help us to understand the motives for the selection of particular themes and information. It can reveal the consequent varying perceptions of the past.

Further, the use of other sources witnesses to what I have referred to elsewhere as “communication with the past” and what Joyce Hill has recently described as “intertextual dialogue.” The mode of composition depended on textual interaction. It created a frame of reference that was effective in varying degrees, depending on the prior knowledge of the reader. It reflects, as we shall see, particular attitudes towards what that past offered in terms of authority. Thus I am not so much concerned with the old issue of what was drawn from past texts, or even the newer concern of how past texts were drawn on. My concern is more why those texts in particular were selected, what new texts they create, and the implications of the ways in which particular texts provided a solid foundation for an understanding of the past in the early middle ages.

It is also necessary to examine the common understanding of medieval historiography as narrative representations of the past, for in some of the texts I shall be looking at in the course of this book, the narrative elements are subordinate to other considerations. Indeed, there is a danger in current understandings of medieval historiography of allowing what is understood about the historical writing of the high middle ages, that is, the period from the later eleventh to the thirteenth century, to provide a benchmark for, or to represent, all medieval his-
This certainly does not work for late antiquity and the earlier middle ages. A case in point is the Chronicon of Eusebius-Jerome, at whose influence I shall look in the first chapter, and thus at the implications of the reception and composition of so-called universal history in the ninth and early tenth centuries. The way in which such “universal histories” were composed, and the various perceptions of the past they reflect, raise two further questions which I shall then explore in the remaining two chapters, namely, Carolingian perceptions of the Roman past and eighth- and ninth-century perceptions of the local past in the Frankish realm within the wider contexts of Christian and national history.
Let me begin with beginnings, from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of St John respectively:

In the beginning God made heaven and earth.
*In principio creavit deus caelum et terram.*
(Gn 1:1)

and

In the beginning was the word.
*In principio erat verbum.*
(Jn 1:1)

Early Christian thinkers associated these two beginnings. Athanasius (296–373), in his tract on the Incarnation, for example, wrote:

But as we proceed in our exposition of the Incarnation of the word, we must first speak about the Creation of the universe and its creator, God, so that in this way we may consider as fitting that its renewal was effected by the Word who created it in the beginning.¹

Origen (185–254) also, in his *Homiliae in Genesim* (Homilies on Genesis), stated:
In the beginning therefore, that is, in his Word, God made heaven and earth, as the evangelist John also says at the beginning of his Gospel, in the beginning was the word.2

So too, Jerome (345–420), creator by both correction and translation of much of the Vulgate Bible, spelt out the connection between the first words of the Book of Genesis and of Saint John’s Gospel.4 In his tractate Libri Hebraicarum Quaestionum in Genesim (Hebrew Questions on Genesis), a work written between 391 and 393 and designed to communicate Jewish scholarship both on its own terms and in the form of investigations of Hebrew teachings, he commented that the connection could be applied to Christ more in respect of its intention than following its literal translation: to Christ who is proved to be founder of heaven and earth both at the very front of Genesis which is the head of all the books and also at the beginning of John the Evangelist’s work.

Quite apart from the parallelism in Christian thinking about the Creation and Fall, Adam and Christ, Eve and Mary, the two Biblical phrases about “the beginning” express an essentially Christian understanding both of the physical creation of the world in time, and of divine eternity in the past and future. The beginning of history had both a practical and a spiritual dimension. Patristic and early medieval commentators on Genesis and Saint John’s Gospel, whether from a literal or an allegorical point of view, presented interpretations of the creation of the world and Christ as the Word which were propagated in the schools and among scholars. They were also communicated to the general population by means of the liturgical readings at Easter and Pentecost (Gn 1) and Christmas (Jn 1).6

Given the Franks’ deep engagement with the past it is hardly surprising that there was such a wide interest in the Carolingian period in commentaries on Genesis and the other historical books of the Bible.7 Indeed, it is no accident that so many Carolingian commentaries on both Genesis and Saint John’s Gospel were produced, not least Eriugena’s Periphyseon (De divisione naturae, or The divi-
sion of nature). In particular, the literal exposition of Genesis attributed to Wigbod and the commentary on Saint John by Alcuin are closely associated with the court circle of Charlemagne.

I should like to suggest that these two phrases from the Vulgate, expressing in effect an understanding of human and divine time, provide the fundamental underlay for perceptions of the past in the early medieval west. It was not simply that these “in principio” phrases were, with the story of Adam and the Fall, among the most familiar to every Christian from their liturgical repetition at Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost and thus part of every Christian’s understanding of the world. This liturgical repetition of Biblical narrative and Gospel story created a fundamental orientation of attitude and perspective as well as being common currency. The beginnings of Genesis and Saint John’s Gospel, which themselves begin crucial historical narratives of the fortunes of the Jews and of Christ’s birth, ministry, and passion, serve to highlight the theme of the precise role played by the historical writing contained in the Old and New Testaments in forming perceptions of the past in the early middle ages, especially in the Frankish kingdoms of the eighth and ninth centuries.

The most dramatic indication of this is that it is the Creation which is the beginning point of most late antique and early medieval chronicles. All but two of the thirty-two major “world chronicles” written between the third and the tenth centuries within a Christian milieu, and tabulated by Dorothea von den Brincken, start with the Creation. The exceptions are the chronicle of Eusebius and its continuation by Jerome (which von den Brincken counts as two). The six days of Creation and the forming of Adam in God’s image, the Fall, the formation of human society outside paradise and the struggle for survival in a world where sin and crime spread, the punishment for human wickedness in the form of the Flood, the rainbow and God’s covenant with Noah, and, lastly, the break-up of human solidarity into diverse peoples symbolized by the Tower of Babel, are included in most Christian histories, even if only in very brief and allusive form. Orosius in his Historiarum adversus paganos libri septem (Seven books of history against the pagans), written ca. 430, provides the fullest explanation of why he started at the beginning (though, like many historians since, he rather exaggerates the novelty of what he is doing as well as the extent of alternative practice):

Nearly all writers of history (Greek as well as Latin) who have perpetuated in their various works the deeds of kings and peoples for the sake of form-
ing an enduring record have commenced their histories with Ninus, the son
of Belus and king of the Assyrians. Indeed, these historians with their very
limited insight would have us believe that the origin of the world and the cre-
ation of man was without beginning; yet they definitely state that kingdoms
and wars began with Ninus, as if forsooth the human race had existed up to
that time in the manner of beasts and then, as though shaken and aroused,
it awoke for the first time to a wisdom previously unknown to it. For my part,
however, I have determined to date the beginning of man’s misery from the
beginning of his sin . . . From Adam, the first man, to Ninus . . . in whose
time Abraham was born, 3,184 years have elapsed, a period that all historians
have either disregarded or have not known.

I. Et quoniam omnes propemodum tam apud Graecos quam apud Latinos stu-
dosi ad scribendum viri, qui res gestas regum populorumque ob diuturnam
memoriam uerbis propagauerunt, initium scribendi a Nino Beli filio, rege Assyri-
orum fecere.

II. qui cum opinione caeca mundi originem creaturamque hominum sine initio
credi uelint, coepisse tamen ab hoc regna bellaque definiunt

III. quasi vero eatenus humanum genus ritu pecudum uixerit et tunc primum ue-
luti ad nouam prudentiam concussum suscitatumque uigilarit

IV. ego initium miseriae hominum ab initio peccati hominis docere institui, pau-
cis dumtaxat isdemque breuiter deliberatis

V. Sunt autem ab Adam primo homine usque ad Ninum “magnum” ut dicunt
regem, quando natus est Abraham, anni IIICLXXXIII qui ab omnibus historio-
graphis vel omissi vel ignorati sunt.12

Orosius enhanced and reinforced his beginning with the Creation with his
famous geographical description of the world created; his approach had its
followers.13 Yet the Chronicon of Eusebius translated by Jerome, the most influen-
tial “world history” of all, started at the point Orosius so strongly criticized, that
is, with the divided world into which Abraham was born among the Chaldeans in
the reign of Ninus. So, incidentally, did the Old English version of Orosius, though
this did at least include Orosius’s geographical chapter.14 The account that fol-
lows in Eusebius-Jerome’s Chronicon is essentially that of the fortunes of the He-
brews.15 Jerome, however, at the end of his continuation to Eusebius’s Chronicon,
which covers the years from 327 to 378, provides the following summary of the
chronology in reverse. This includes a reckoning from Adam, and complements

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the brief sketch of the descent of man from Adam and the peoples of the world from the three sons of Noah in Jerome’s prefatory material before Eusebius’s *canones* begin. Thus Jerome wanted his readers to think in terms of the history of the world from the Creation:

All the years down to the sixth consulship of Valens and the second of the Emperor Valentinian are reckoned here.

From the fifteenth year of Tiberius and the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, 351 years. From the second year of Darius, king of Persia at which time the temple was restored 899 years. From the first Olympiad in which age Isaiah was prophesying among the Hebrews, 1,155 years. From Solomon and the first construction of the temple, 1,411 years. From the downfall of Troy, at which time Samson was among the Hebrews, 1,561 years. From Moses and Cecrops the first king of Attica, 1,890 years. From Abraham and the reign of Ninus and Semiramis, 2,395 years.

All the list from Abraham down to the time written above which contains 2,395 years. From the Flood, moreover, to Abraham, the years are estimated to be 942 years. From Adam to the Flood, 2,242 years. From Adam down to the fourteenth year of Valens, that is, to his sixth consulship and the second of Valentinian, all the years that elapsed were 5,579 years.

*Colliguntur omnes anni usque in consulatum Valentis. VI. et Valentiniani iunioris iterum Augusti:*

 a XV Tiberii anno et praedicatione domini nostri Iesu Christi anni CCCLI
 a secundo anno Darii regis Persarum quo tempore templum Hierosolymis instauratum est anni DCCCCVIII
 ab olympiade prima qua actate apud Hebraeos Isaias prophetabat anni MCLV
 a Solomone et prima aedificatione templi anni MCCCCXI
 a captivate Troiae quo tempore Sampson apud Hebraeos erat anni MDLXI
 a Moyse et Cecrope primo rege Atticae anni MDCCCCC
 ab Abraham et regno Ninii et Semiramidis anni IICCCCCV

*Continet omnis canon ab Abraham usque ad tempus supra scriptum ann. MMC-CCXVC*

 a diluvio autem usque ad Abraham supputantur anni DCCCCXLII

*Et ab Adam usque ad diluvium anni IICCCXLII*

*Fiant ab Adam usque ad XIII Valentis annum, id est usque ad consulatum eius VI et Valentiniani iterum omnes anni VDLXXVIII*
Jerome also explained in his preface that he had added “certain things which appeared to us to have been allowed to slip, particularly in the Roman history, which Eusebius, the author of this book, as it seems to me only glanced at; not so much because of ignorance, for he was a learned man as because, writing in Greek, he thought them of slight importance to his countrymen” (et nonnulla quae mihi intermissa videbantur adieci, in Romana maxime historia, quam Eusebius huius conditor libri, non tam ignorasse ut eruditus sed ut Graece scribens parum suis necessariam perstrinxisse mihi videtur).17

A further principle of organization introduced by some authors was that of the Six Ages, most clearly explained by Bede in chapter 66 of his De temporum ratione (On the reckoning of time) and again harking back to the first verses of Genesis:

We have mentioned a few things about the Six Ages of this world, and about the Seventh and Eighth [Ages] of peace and heavenly life above (chapter 10), by way of comparison to the first week, in which the world was adorned. Here I shall discuss the same subject somewhat more extensively, comparing it to the ages of man, whom the philosophers are accustomed to call “microcosm” in Greek, that is, “small universe”. The First Age of this world, then, is from Adam to Noah, containing 1,656 years according to the Hebrew truth and 2,242 according to the Septuagint and ten generations according to both versions . . .

The Second Age from Noah to Abraham comprises ten generations and 292 years according to the Hebrew authority, but according to the Septuagint 272 years and eleven generations . . .

The Third from Abraham to David, contains fourteen generations and 942 years according to both authorities . . .

The Fourth, from David up to the exile to Babylon has 473 years according to the Hebrew truth, twelve more according to the Septuagint, and seventeen generations according to both texts. . . . From this age—youth, so to speak—the era of the kings began among the people of God, for this age in man is normally apt for governing a kingdom.

The Fifth Age—maturity if you will—from the exile into Babylon until the coming of our Lord and Saviour in the flesh, extends for fourteen generations and 589 years . . .

The Sixth Age, which is now in progress, is not fixed according to any sequence of generations or times, but like senility this [Age] will come to an end in the death of the whole world.
By a happy death, everyone will overcome these Ages of the world and when they have been received into the Seventh Age of perennial Sabbath, they look forward to the Eighth Age of the blessed Resurrection, in which they will reign forever with the Lord.

De sex huius mundi aetatibus ac septima vel octava quietis vitaeque caelestis et supra in comparatione primae ebdomadis, in qua mundus ornatus est, aliquanta perstrinxismus, et nunc in comparatione aevi unus hominis, qui microcosmos Grecae a philosophis, hoc est minor mundus solet nuncupari, de eisdem aliquanto latius exponemus.

Prima est ergo mundi huius aetas ab Adam usque ad Noe, continens, annos iuxta Hebraicam veritatem mille DCLVI, iuxta LXX interpretetes IICCXLII, generationes iuxta utramque editionem numero X . . .

Secunda aetas a Noe usque ad Abraham generationes iuxta Hebraicam auctoritatem complexa X, annos autem CCXCI, porro iuxta LXX interpretetes ann. CCLXXII, generationes vero XI . . .

Tertia ab Abraham usque ad David generationes iuxta utramque auctoritatem XIII, annos vero DCCCLXXII conplectens . . .

Quarta a David usque ad transmigrationem Babylonis, habens annos iuxta Hebraicam veritatem CCCCLXXXIII, iuxta LXX translationem XII amplius, generationes iuxta utramque codices XVII . . .

A qua velut iuvenali aetate in populo dei regum tempora coeperunt, haec namque in hominibus aetas apta gubernando solet existere regno.

Quinta quasi senilis aetas a transmigratione Babylonis usque in adventum domini salvatoris in carnem, generationibus et ipsa XIII, porro annis DLXXXVIII extenta . . .

Sexta, que nunc agitur, aetas, nulla generationum vel temporum serie certa, sed ut aetas decrepita ipsa totius saeculi morte consumenda.

Has erumnosas plenasque laboribus mundi aetates quiue felici morte vicerunt; septima iam sabbati perennis aetate suscepti, octavam beatae resurrectionis aetatem, in qua semper cum domino regent, exspectant. 18

Von den Brincken’s seminal study of the group of texts lumped together as the genre Weltchronik (world chronicle) argued that universal history was sacred history, that histories which traced the rise and fall of empires from the time of Abraham were by implication directed conceptually towards the Last Judgement and the working out of God’s providence in time. Brian Croke, moreover, has demonstrated in his discussion of Count Marcellinus’s chronicle how the nar-
rative presents the Roman empire as part of universal history. In Count Mar-
cellinus’s text, non-Roman nations were integrated into the political entity at
the centre of which was the church, whose doctrinal unity and integrity were
stressed.19 Yet von den Brincken herself also pointed out that many historians
in the middle ages sought to identify or define the position of their own times in
relation to this larger scheme of events. Many of those who have studied the
Chronicon of Eusebius-Jerome have commented on the achievement of the history
in demonstrating how local or national history could be placed in the context of
God’s time and how patterns emerge in such a way that the detail is less impor-
tant.20 Yet they have also seen it primarily as a story of four “universal empires”—
Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Roman—each succeeding the other in world domi-
nance. This is far too simplistic, for it merely focusses on the framework within
which the detail is offered.

Eusebius-Jerome did not tell the Hebrew story alone, for the fortunes of
Jews and Christians are intertwined with the histories of the Assyrians, Persians,
Greeks, Romans, and others. Eusebius set the pattern of secular involvement by
demonstrating the intertwining of the fortunes of secular rulers with religious
events and ideas. To see these histories solely, or even primarily, as schematic sa-
cred history is to underestimate them. The Chronicon is not just about the suc-
cession of empires. In this curious and disjointed text, chronological tables are
constructed from Abraham to the twentieth year of the reign of the emperor
Constantine I. Olympiads are cited alongside the years since Abraham by way
of chronological orientation, as are, where appropriate, the regnal years of kings,
judges, archons, and emperors. Columns are provided, at first spread across two-
page openings and afterwards confined to one page once the story becomes con-
cerned mostly with the area ruled by the Romans. These columns are separately
labelled and even on occasion colour-coded in the earliest manuscripts to indicate
events under the headings of Medes, Persians, Athenians, Romans, Hebrews, and
Macedonians. One or two columns are filled with notes of events and other col-
umns are taken up with the various dates, such as the the career of Moses, the
reign of Jereboam in Israel, the birth of Romulus and Remus, and the founding of
Rome, of Nicomedia, and of Byzantium (later Constantinople).21 The importance
of Eusebius’s synchronization of world history needs to be emphasized, for the
juxtapositions, such as the fall of Troy and the downfall of Samson, or the careers
of Homer and Solomon, or Deborah and King Midas, in the various pasts Euse-
bius documented are to be understood fully only in relation to Christian history.22

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