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# UNIT 8 MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY – WESTERN

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## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the European Middle Ages *historia* and *chronica* were two terms used for sequencing and inscribing the past. According to a famous contemporary definition given by Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) *historia* was ‘*narratio rerum gestarum*’ (a narration of facts). If the term *historia* was used formally as a mere narrative of events, a deeper meaning came to be associated with it with the use of the expression *chronica* (chronicle), which gave to history a sense of ‘historiography’ or an explicable ‘chronicle’ of the past. These gave to history both a terminological coherence as well as a coherence of substance. Historiography was seen as that which linked the present to the past in an intellectual ‘representation’ of the past through the narrative contained in the *chronica*. Thus, from the beginning Christian historiographers were deeply concerned with the proper attribution of facts to their corresponding dates or times and to place them correctly within a continuous chronology.

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## 8.2 CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The oldest Christian histories were universal histories written for the simple purpose of satisfying the demand to integrate Biblical history (which was not at all clear in its temporal exactness) into an ancient chronology, involving a vast pre-Christian past and spread over various eras. Contemporary political developments in Europe, principally that of the formation of vast feudal lordships and monarchies also cast their shadows over the writing of history. Historiography, thus also became charged with the task of establishing a concurrence between these various Christian and secular traditions. Thus, Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327), while locating Christ as the centre of salvational history also used the new formations of political power as his reference points. Otto of Freising (c.1111-1158) composed his history of the world in 1146, usually called *The Two Cities*. Though he adopted a theological concept of history, he also concluded each book with a narrative of political change in history thereby indicating the transitoriness (*mutabilitas*) of the world. This fluid sense of chronological boundaries is also visible in the chronicles of the high Middle Ages. Here two chronological systems dominated: the incarnation era and the registering of reigns and pontificates, and numerous chroniclers strove to establish a factual as well as a narrative unity of these elements. This resulted in a belief in the natural changeability and the ephemeral nature of history as such, because all earthly things were ruled by time. For the medieval chroniclers, historical change was primarily a cycle of growth and decay of regents and kingdoms.

The medieval concept of the past thus was determined by an extremely peculiar, ambiguous, even paradoxical, mixture of belief in historical progression on the one hand and its immutability on the other, of an epochal change and at the same time a continuity of times and historical situations. In the final analysis, it lacked a sense of the truly historical characterisation of the past. However, owing to its emphasis on verifiability of the chronological arrangement, this understanding cannot be classified as being truly timeless, but in various ways it nevertheless lacked a sense of assigning a specific peculiarity to each passing epoch. The past was perceived as a (temporal) development corresponding to the *saeculum*, the earthly time, with an unchanging character and essence. This engendered a widespread tendency to order historical events according to their respective time which was in no way seen as contradictory to the opposing tendency to detach the subject matter of the same events from their chronological order. Regarding the medieval concept of the past, time was an essential part of earthly existence, yet at the same time it was a symbol of the eternal world. Historiographical thinking was combined with the theological needs of history. However, the fact that change occurred was also undeniable. Even in the Bible the coming and going of three world-empires had been described, and, since St Augustine (354–430) no one would deny the changes that had occurred or were going to occur in consequence of the advent of Christianity. Also, St Augustine had given a perfectly acceptable explanation for historical change. He had argued that only God had perfect ever-lasting stability, whereas change in the temporal world was the consequence of the very imperfection of human existence.

The Bible in the middle ages was seen not simply as a literal description of the unfolding of a Christian religion, but also as a chronicle of a succession of spiritual parts. The diverse texts of the Christian tradition were unified in the Bible, thus giving it a coherent history in a historiographical frame of reference which was blended with a unified system of symbolisms, so uniting history with tradition and representation. The acceptance of Catholicism strengthened this historical homogenisation, for one of its core elements was its character of being a universal religion which had little space for the particularist rules, norms and values of specific groups. The earliest Christian historical works were chronologies designed to link events from scripture with political events, and to create a universal history of humanity. Though the belief in the divine origin of the rulers militated against fundamental principles of Christian theological doctrine, the past was constituted by the narratives which were written down in the Holy Scriptures, and assigned no value to the particularistic traditions which were transmitted within political groups. Also, the Christian Church enforced the rule that believers in the Christian faith had to respect the Holy Scriptures as the ultimate source of both tradition as well as justice. Church history thus could now become universal history.

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### 8.3 CHANGING CONCEPT OF TIME AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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A conscious concept of time was an essential element in every historiographical work of the middle ages. From the deep interpenetration which existed between theology and history in the middle ages, ‘time’ became purely ‘temporal’ (that is, an inseparable condition of earthly existence) because it was directly connected with creation and the essence of having been created by the Creator. Thus, it was situated in opposition to eternity, which, as God’s ‘time’, was timeless and unmoving. This temporality of earthly time was described in the early twelfth century as ‘a shadow of eternity; it has begun with the world and will end with the world’. Such a clear separation between God’s ‘time’ and temporal ‘time’ was crucial in developing the notions of chronology, as a measurable sequence of the passage of time in history. Even more important was the methodological relationship — time was henceforth a necessary constitutive element of historiography. In the prologue

of his chronicle, Hugh of Saint Victor (c.1096-1142) named three particular ‘circumstances’ of historical facts : ‘The knowledge of facts particularly depends on three aspects: the persons (*personae*) by whom they have been done, the places (*loca*) where they have been done, and the times (*tempora*) when they have been done. To this can be added the notion of ‘action’ (*negotium*). A typical medieval narrative was determined by these four elements. Therefore place, time, and history formed not only the contents of medieval encyclopaedias, but that some chronicles started with ‘time tables’ or even with theoretical discussions on time. In medieval perception, chronicles were seen as *rerum gestarum* (narration of facts) and, consequently, *series temporum* (sequence of time).

According to the contemporary perceptions, there were five specific reckonings of historical time which delimited the subject of history from other genres:

- 1) By the choice of its facts, in the sense that any author had to choose those which were worth remembering (*memorabilia*), and this made historiography distinct;
- 2) By claiming to recollect the truth (the real facts), it was distinguished from fiction;
- 3) By its examination of the past and, especially, the ‘origins’ (*origines*), it was separated from the prophecies about the future (which nevertheless were also regarded);
- 4) By its intention to hand down the corpus of known facts of the past to posterity (*memoriae commendare*), it was constituted as historiography;
- 5) By its specific manner of representation, the chronological order, it acquired its proper character.

It is significant that this sense of time developed quite early in the west European traditions of history-writing. One of the principal moving spirits behind this novel reckoning of time and its historiographical significance was ‘the Venerable’ Bede (672-735). Once again, the root of this shift lay in the attempts to historicise the Bible. Remarkably, Bede, who had used the word *chronica* as the title for his previous writings on the Biblical traditions, in 731 in entitling his work ‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People’, chose the conventional word *historia* in order to denote his synthetic way of commemorating the past. In doing so Bede was drawing from a pre-Christian tradition, from Latin where the word *historia* had meant a secular account of the past compiled from a variety of sources and describing events of the human world set apart from the divine world. However, Bede expanded the range of the meaning of *historia* by adding a single major qualifying attribute which was to be the cornerstone of medieval European historiography, namely, that his *historia* was to be an ecclesiastical one, thus, integrating the account of the history of the Church into the universalism represented in Biblical traditions. This last purpose of history was always to be forefront in his mind, at least alongside the need to be accurate of which he was so conscious. Additionally, he became the first historian to use the AD, that is, from Christ’s birth, chronology and in doing so set the standard for historiographical time reckoning in Europe. This method was adapted into general use through the popularity of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the two works on chronology. This also enabled him to date the change from Roman universal rule over Britain to the establishment of local rulers through a chronology that was not tied to the Roman administrative institutions but focused on Christ. At a more fundamental level, Bede tried to weigh the relative evidential value of the several sources available to him, thereby initiating a quiet methodological departure from the group-centred oral traditions of contemporary historical thinking. Orally transmitted traditions had retained their validity and authenticity without fundamental change by virtue of being handed down from generation to generation in particularist groups. In contrast, Bede, like the historians

of late Antiquity, committed himself to the writing and publication of a text which he expected to be communicated through reading and copying and whose reception, by virtue of these communicative techniques, would no longer be confined to one particularist group.

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## 8.4 HISTORIANS AND THEIR WORKS

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As in antiquity, the best medieval works were accounts of contemporary history by men who had participated in the events that they were describing. It is, however, very significant that some of the writers that are prized most highly today survive in only very few manuscripts and were presumably not appreciated by most of their contemporaries. One such work was the *Historia Pontificalis* ('Pontifical History') covering the period 1148-52, of John of Salisbury (circa 1115-1180), one of the most accomplished scholars of his age, who was writing about the period when he was in the papal service. In 12th-century Europe secular history writing emerged, shown in the work of Geoffroi de Villehardouin (circa 1160-1213), and the chronicles of Jean sire de Joinville (1224-1317), Jean Froissart, and Philippe de Comines (1445-1509) in successive centuries.

Another feature of medieval historical writing in Europe was that it seemed perennially poised at the crossroads between eschatological aspirations of a universal Christendom and the objective conditions of the real world. It was this conflict which forced another remarkable contemporary chronicler, Bishop Otto of Freising (c. 1112-58), half brother to the then reigning King Conrad III, to present a rather gloomy narrative of human history from the expulsion from paradise up to his own times. The *History of the Two Cities*, sometimes also referred to as *Chronica*, provided an account of history in seven books, to which Otto added a speculative eighth book on the future of the City of God when there would be no history. Otto completed his work in 1146, the year in which the abortive Second Crusade began and in which he, his nephew and the future Emperor Frederick, as well as King Conrad, took part. Otto's narrative abounded with laments about the volatility of empires which he felt to be increasing during his own time. This feeling led Otto to believe that he and his contemporaries were living at the end of times; with the end of the world as the most fundamental of all changes approaching. And although he credited human actors with some degree of freedom of promoting or resisting change, he insisted that transitoriness had been divinely ordained and was therefore an unalterable quality of human existence. In this way, chronology itself became a means of demonstrating the changeability of the past and the conditions of life in the present before the coming of the City of God.

In this fashion, world history came to be established as a computable, finite, yet unstable entity under the control of change in the historiographical traditions of medieval Europe. But, this view of world history soon came under stress. Two factors caused the stress: first, there was the manifestly continuous existence of the world despite the eschatological belief that the predicted end of the world was close; and second, there was the reception in the Occident, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of the Aristotelian concept of time as an endless process. The first factor was enhanced by the use of the AD chronology itself, which helped to deal historiographically with the institutional discontinuities of the Roman Empire. Hence it was ultimately in conflict with the eschatological belief in the finiteness of the existence of the world as an earthly city. The Aristotelian definition of time, came to be reintroduced in the Occident through the Arab translations of Aristotle's original works from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. According to the Aristotelian concept, time was regarded as the mover of all things, elevated above all other divine creations. In consequence of the spread of this concept of time, it became difficult to conceive existence without time, even beyond Judgement Day. In other words, if time

was prior to everything else, existence became inconceivable outside of or beyond time and thinking about a world without change became subject to fairy tales and mere speculation.

Memory was an important repository of historical traditions in medieval Europe. In this the cult of saints and the veneration of ancestors occupied a very important place. The earliest political groups in early medieval Europe emphasised tradition in their commemoration of the past. In many of these political groups, rulers were involved in the process of passing on to future generations the inherited traditions which contained norms of behaviour as well as conventional group-related attitudes and perceptions. Therefore oral narratives were and were believed to contain records of the past, whose reliability and authenticity was to be confirmed by the social status of the person narrating them. Therefore these traditions could transmit sanctioned rules, norms and values which, in turn, authoritatively shaped the attitudes and perceptions of the group members. Gradually however, there was a shift towards the use of a wider variety of sources.

This was visible in the works of Otto who sought to adapt to his own time the various chronological frameworks which he found in his sources. From the Bible, he took the chronology of the world ages for the early parts of his work; from Orosius (d. 417) he borrowed the chronology of the foundation of Rome and the arguments through which the coming into existence, spreading and continuity of the Christian religion could be linked with the Roman Empire. But it was from Bede that Otto received the idea of counting the years after the birth of Christ, so that he could continue his narrative beyond the fifth-century institutional crisis of the Roman Empire. As he himself wrote: ‘in order to remove all occasions of doubt about those things I have written, either in your mind or in the minds of any others who listen to or read this history, I will make it my business to state briefly from what sources I have gained my information’. This attitude became remarkably diffused among historians. Unlike the historians of antiquity, the medieval writers had no inhibitions about extensively quoting from official documents. In England, legal and administrative records were used extensively by contemporary historians, like Roger of Hoveden, who made their chronicles into an anthology of official records, thinly connected by the authors’ brief comments.

One major problem with medieval European historical writing was its perception of history as primarily as a chronological progression.. Historical changes were seen in political rise and decline or in change of rulership, possibly complemented by spatial displacement of the centres of power, and historical events were installed in their precise temporal frame. But these changes were not estimated, interpreted, or explained according to their respective historical situations, as structural changes, changes in contemporary attitudes, or, even in the historical conditions. Owing to a linear concept of time, the authors recognized an irretrievability of history, but they did not acknowledge a thorough alteration through the coming of new epochs. Therefore, they completely lacked any sense of ‘alternative pasts’ or of the historical peculiarity of each epoch. The twelfth century, as a modern historian has remarked, the twelfth century was not simply concerned with ‘the pastness of the past’ but with ‘its timeless edification’. The past and the present were thus fused in one continuous narrative.

One danger of regarding the past with the eyes of the present to such a degree easily was that of anachronism. For instance, Charlemagne was not only presented as a martial Frankish emperor but also as a knight and a crusader. In the account of Caesars (ostensible) conquest of ‘Germany’ the Roman camps (*castella*) became medieval castles, the legionaries (*milites*) were turned into knights, the magistrates into *ministerials*, and the Germanic peoples became Germans.

The unawareness of the meaning of anachronism helps to explain the strange wanderings of medieval annals and chronicles. If a religious community wanted to acquire a historical narrative, it copied some work that happened to be most readily accessible. A continuation might then be added at the manuscript's new abode, and, later on, this composite version might be copied and further altered by a succession of other writers. Hence there are at least six main versions of the annals known as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. They all derive from the annals kept down to 892 at Winchester, the West Saxon capital. The tendency to link the present time with the period of the Roman Empire and to emphasise a continuity indicates a characteristic feature of the concept (or consciousness) of history in the high Middle Ages that seems to contradict the tendency to determine and record precise historic dates. On the one hand, the authors acknowledged and noted change and development, and they distinguished between epochs or phases in history; on the other hand, their perceptions of the events were imbued with an astounding sense of 'timelessness' that ignored a real difference in the epochal character insofar as this went beyond the political succession of power, reign, and kingdoms. On the contrary, it allowed events that were long past to be applied directly to the present.

Contact with Byzantines and Muslims broadened history writing by showing Westerners other points of view. Byzantine historians also extensively used the genre of writing history in the form of chronicles, although the greater unity of the Byzantine Empire and the persistence of a unified culture gave a somewhat more literary quality to the Byzantine works. Medieval Islamic historians such as al-Tabari and al-Masudi wrote histories of great scope, often employing sophisticated methods to separate fact from fable. But by far the greatest medieval Arabic historian was Ibn Khaldun, who created an early version of sociological history to account for the rise and decline of cities and civilisations. In the course of the fifteenth century, commemorating the past as the changing history of the world became more directly intertwined with the geographical, specifically maritime, exploration of the world in the quest for the seaway to India or the hypothetical southern continent which was thought to connect Africa with Asia. The extending recognition by Europeans of the pluralism of continents on the surface of the earth made an oddity of the conventional medieval world picture and the medieval way of counting years and commemorating the past.

Though the bases of Western historiographical tradition continued to be classical antiquity and Christianity, the later Middle Ages received that deposit, transmitted it with a wider variety of sources and in a strictly chronological frame. It also adapted it to wider influences which were touching the shores of Europe from outside. Therefore the criticism which has sometimes been levelled that medieval historians showed little awareness of the process of historical change and that they were unable to imagine that any earlier age was substantially different from their own seems inappropriate.

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## 8.5 SUMMARY

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In the foregoing account we have discussed the beginnings and development of historiographical tradition in medieval western world. In medieval Europe, the writing of history began with church histories. These histories had a concept of time which was changeless because it was the divine time. Gradually, however, there was a change in the concept of time. Influenced by the pre-Christian tradition of history-writing, the historians began to think of time in more temporal terms, as a measurable sequence. This change in thinking made possible the use of chronology to write history. Contacts with other regions such as the Byzantine and the Arab world brought different influences from which also the medieval European historiography benefited.

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## 8.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) Discuss the changing concept of time during the middle ages in the West. How did it influence the writing of history?
- 2) Write a note on Christian historiography.
- 3) Write a note on some important historians and their works in medieval Europe.

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## 8.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Donald R. Kelley, *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 1991).

R.G.Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946).

Beryl Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages* (London, 1974).

Denys Hay, *Annalists and Historians : Western Historiography from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1977).

