

Computus and chronology in Anglo-Norman England

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Chapter 3. Computus and Chronology in Anglo-Norman England

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Anne Lawrence-Mathers

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Figure 1 in this chapter: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 3 14 fol. 132r
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Computus and Chronology in Anglo-Norman England

Anne Lawrence-Mathers

This essay examines the growing concern amongst computists and historians in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries as they grappled with what turned out to be an insoluble problem. The issue was that the information provided by the gospels as to the dating of the first Easter was, as Bede had already suggested, impossible to match with the information included in the Easter Tables of Dionysius Exiguus, upon which the Church calendar and the dating of major festivals were based. Several scholars attempted to find solutions to the problem, and one of the most influential was that propounded by Marianus Scottus, a computist and chronologer who wrote in Mainz in the late eleventh century.¹ Marianus's work was brought to England by another skilled computist, Robert, bishop of Hereford, who believed so strongly in Marianus's solution to this 'scandal' that he compiled a forceful exposition of its key points. This was known and studied in several English centres; yet, apart from John of Worcester, no chronicler in England or Normandy adopted Marianus's re-dating of the Christian era, and the problem was left to computists. There are, however, traces of the arguments posed and the solutions offered in the works of chroniclers from the leading centres of Anglo-Norman historical writing, as this paper will show.

A key witness is Orderic Vitalis, who visited England during the composition of his own wide-ranging *Ecclesiastical History*.² Book III of this work includes an account of the Norman conquest of England, reaching a dramatic and somewhat foreboding climax with the botched coronation of William in Westminster Abbey. This is followed by brief notices of the contemporary historians who covered William's career and chief battle. A longer space is given to John of Worcester, a monk whom Orderic observed at his chronological labours. These are described as 'adding to the chronicle of Marianus

¹ On Marianus see also in this volume L. Cleaver, 'Autograph History Books in the Twelfth Century' and G. Schmidt, 'A Saint Petersburg Manuscript of *Excerptio Roberti Herefordiensis de Chronica Mariani Scotti*'.

² On Orderic see also Cleaver, 'Autograph History Books in the Twelfth Century'.

Scottus' and providing a truthful account of the reigns of William and his sons, which was still in progress at the time of Orderic's visit (which is sadly not clearly dated).³ Orderic is well informed on Marianus, and describes him as a monk of Mainz, whose own chronological work followed in the footsteps of Eusebius of Caesarea and St Jerome. In other words, Marianus had undertaken the daunting task of continuing and revising the fundamental Christian historiographical work of Eusebius, as translated and enlarged by Jerome in the late fourth century.⁴ It was this Latin version whose synchronistic tables, or *Chronici canones*, constituted the fundamental skeleton upon which later, and usually more circumscribed, historical accounts were built. They provided not only a rapid overview of the rise and fall of ancient rulers and kingdoms, set alongside one another, but also an implicit demonstration of the triumph of Christianity as a world-historical phenomenon. They also offered a powerfully convincing grid of interlocking chronological reference points, in which regnal years for all the rulers covered were set against a column marking out the sequence of Olympiads (at four-year intervals) and the years from the birth of Abraham (at ten-year intervals). It was thus possible to check which kings and prophets of Israel were contemporary with which rulers amongst the Egyptians, the Medes, the Latins, the Athenians and (when appropriate) the Romans. It is noteworthy that the reader of this work would feel entirely at home with the chronological cross-referencing offered by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, which flaunted its scholarly credentials through noting, for instance, that Brutus founded his New Troy on the banks of the Thames at the time when Eli was ruling in Judea, the sons of Hector ruled in Troy and Aeneas Silvius ruled in Italy. He thus outdid Nennius, who had merely recorded that Brutus's reign was contemporary with the career of Eli and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant.⁵ The appearance of Julius Caesar as emperor of Rome is marked out by Eusebius-Jerome in some detail and placed at the year 1,969 from Abraham's birth and the first year of an Olympiad. This is a fundamental anchor point for history.

That Orderic was himself very well aware of the weight and complexity of the work involved in updating such a wide-ranging and canonical text is indicated by his comments on those of his own time who were making the attempt. Marianus Scottus is described as having dedicated his life at Mainz

³ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80), II, 186 and n. 1 (subsequently *Ecclesiastical History*).

⁴ On this see especially R. W. Burgess, *Studies in Eusebian and Post-Eusebian Chronography* (Stuttgart, 1999); R. W. Burgess, 'Jerome Explained: An Introduction to his *Chronicle* and a Guide to its Use', *Ancient History Bulletin* 16 (2002), 1–32.

⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. M. D. Reeve and trans. N. Wright (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 30–1; see also Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. L. Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 74, n.2.

to his chronological endeavours, drawing upon historians both ancient and modern as well as upon Eusebius and Jerome, before making his work available to those who were unable to undertake such a study themselves.⁶ As Orderic admiringly says, Marianus went right back to the Creation, and correlated all the books of the Old and New Testaments with Greek and Roman historians, setting out the years covered by rulers and consuls right down to the time of his own death. This was then not just an updating of Eusebius-Jerome but a major attempt at a new calculation of history. Such an initiative might appear prideful, if it were not clear that Marianus had full support at Mainz and, as Orderic goes on to explain, at Worcester.

John, monk of Worcester, was building upon Marianus's work, at the command of no less an authority than the saintly bishop of Worcester, Wulfstan II. Orderic is aware that John has added material to Marianus's chronicle, and that this extension is especially valuable for its account of the Franks, Germans, and other peoples as well as the Romans. He then tactfully refrains from comparing the two, simply affirming that both chronicles offer comprehensive coverage of the ancient rulers of the Hebrews, the Romans and the popes. The reader will also find (in John at least) lists of all the kings and bishops in England. Nor does the new work on world history end there. Orderic now also introduces the name of Sigebert of Gembloux, although calling him Engelbert in error and being less enthusiastic about his work. Sigebert's work is another contemporary effort at a new conspectus of history and chronology, which, according to Orderic, drew upon *his opusculis*.⁷ The phrase is unhelpfully vague, but suggests that the work of both Marianus and John was used, although Sigebert then omitted much of the information about Britain, choosing instead to include accounts of the Goths, Huns, Persians and 'other barbarian nations'.⁸ There is perhaps a slight hint of reservation here, although Orderic concludes by saying that he is happy to include these notices in his own work, in order to make these recent achievements better known to scholars, who can benefit from their great learning. Orderic has tracked one down in Worcester itself, and was shown the text of Sigebert at Cambrai.⁹ It is not clear whether he has seen the chronicle of Marianus separately, or only via the updated copy made at Worcester (or perhaps its exemplar). What is interesting is the strong implication that the laborious journeys to Cambrai and Worcester were linked to Orderic's research, and to his decision to convert his chronicle to an Ecclesiastical History which fully merited that title (as opposed to the 'narrative of the restoration of the abbey of Saint-Evroul' which Orderic undertook at the command of Abbot Roger).¹⁰

⁶ *Ecclesiastical History*, II, 186.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 188.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 188-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 130-1.

What is implied by this change of title and approach? The Prologue to Orderic's revised work goes on to suggest that reading the works of ancient and more recent historians led to a wish to add the story of 'the fortunes of the Christian people in this present time' to the cumulative history of 'the good and evil fortunes of mortal men' built up by eminent predecessors.¹¹ The suggestion is that Orderic has read widely in preparation for his task, but has concluded that his learning will never be sufficient for him to undertake more than a truthful and straightforward record of what he has seen or learnt from reliable contemporaries. Nevertheless, despite this modest disclaimer, the Prologue concludes with the statement that Orderic has decided to begin with 'the Beginning that has no beginning' – in other words with the Incarnation and the life of Christ.¹² This is not strictly required if the intention is to focus on providing an accurate and reliable account of the present time, but appears to be approved by the new abbot, Warin, and to be part of the new conception of the work as a contribution, however humble, to the overall history of the Christian people. The list of the illustrious predecessors is also interesting, since it combines those who have laid down the fundamental overviews of history (such as Moses, Daniel, Orosius and Eusebius) with those who have made more delimited contributions (Dares Phrygius, Pompeius Trogus and Paul the Deacon). Bede may perhaps count in both lists, if Orderic has read both his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (a possible model) and his *Chronica maiora* (which circulated both with his *De temporum ratione* and separately). No reason is given for the change of plan, but Orderic's mention in Book III of a visit to Cambrai, and a viewing there of the work of Sigebert of Gembloux, is suggestive. As Timothy Reuter has observed, Sigebert was one of a distinguished group of historians in the *regnum Teutonicum* who combined historical work with study of computus.¹³ This group included both Marianus Scottus and the almost-legendary figure of Hermannus Contractus, as well as authors of shorter studies and treatises. What they had in common was that they all made contributions to an ongoing debate on the problems and issues arising from detailed study of the 'Dionysian era' – that is, the system of dating years since the Incarnation of Christ.

The reasons for this growing concern and attention are the subject of debate; but it is relevant here that the argument, to which Bede had made a fundamental, early contribution, was taken up largely outside the regions which constituted the Anglo-Norman realm. The problems involved were both technical and impossible to resolve completely, due to the nature of the data which needed to be taken into account. It is no coincidence that the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., I, 132–3.

¹³ T. Reuter, 'Past, Present and No Future in the Twelfth-Century *Regnum Teutonicum*', in *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. P. Magdalino (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 15–36.

centres in which new calculations of world-history were undertaken were also those in which scientific studies of astronomy and of the associated science of time-reckoning were equally making advances. Reuter's survey of historical writing in the Empire demonstrates clearly the number of contributors to this flourishing group of universal chronicles, all distinguished by an attempt to set out the history of the world. The most ambitious, who included Marianus, began with the Creation, whilst others (who were to be followed by Orderic) started more modestly with the birth of Christ.¹⁴

However, even beginning with the Incarnation rather than the Creation did not entirely avoid problems of chronology. As mentioned above, the long-established work of Eusebius and Jerome had set out a highly influential grid of synchronicities; and into this system, dates in the new *anno Domini* mode propounded in the sixth century by Dionysius Exiguus had been added. Bede's historical and computistical works had made major contributions to this process, even though his *Chronica maiora* calculated dates solely since the creation of the world. The novelty of the *Chronica maiora* was in the clarity with which Bede laid out his arguments for very precise dates for the beginning of earthly time and for each of the Ages of This World. Time began with the creation of the luminaries whose circuits marked it out in measurable units, and Bede argued that the day on which the luminaries were made, specified in Genesis as the fourth day of the Creation, would be the vernal equinox.¹⁵ The argument was logical; but it was unhelpful both that the precise calendar date of this equinox was a matter of disagreement, and that the precession of the equinoxes was producing an increasing discrepancy between the official dates and the observable, solar phenomenon. To make matters worse, the timing of the vernal equinox was also a key factor in the calculation of the date of Easter each year, since it had to be correlated with an agreed lunar calendar if the correct full Moon was to be lined up with the correct Sunday. If the scandal of rival dates for Easter, which had caused disruption in early Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, were to be avoided, then the system upon which the calculations were based needed to be universally accepted; and this would be greatly strengthened if the theological requirements were also satisfied. It is this interlocking of astronomical, calendrical and theological analysis which brought the study of history and of computus together; and it was the growing awareness of problems in need of resolution which made this a subject to which those with the requisite knowledge felt drawn to contribute.

It is necessary to give some account of what was at stake in this argument, if the decisions of Anglo-Norman historians are to be fully understood. This is not the place for a detailed history of the computus or the calendar; but

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁵ Bede, *The Reckoning of Time*, trans. F. Wallis (Liverpool, 1999), pp. 24–8, 158–9.

since Bede's work was both widely read and highly authoritative within the Anglo-Norman realm, it provides a helpful point of reference. Bede himself stated that he wrote his longer work on time and the calendar to satisfy twin demands: on the one hand for detail on the calculation of Easter; and on the other to provide more information on 'the nature, course and end of time'.¹⁶ Bede was, as is well known, an enthusiast for Dionysius's new dating system, and it was the authoritative status of *De temporum ratione* which helped guarantee its success. Throughout the work Bede links together the different levels and modes of time, from the calculation of the units which make it up, to the methods involved in constructing a calendar, and on to the structures of historical time. He is respectful towards the chronographical work of Eusebius, and yet critical of the latter's inconsistency in using different translations of the Bible unpredictably and without comment. The consistent use of the best Latin version is crucial for Bede, given that calculations of key periods of historical time depend upon this. Moreover, the Bible provides the authority upon which Bede relies in observing that some periods of time, such as the week, have divine sanction, whilst others, such as months, are merely a matter of human custom (since they do not accord exactly with the movements of either the Moon or the Sun).¹⁷ Still more complex is the matter of the dating of the first day on which time existed, which is linked to the truest date for the vernal equinox. Bede argues that a combination of biblical data and astronomical calculation establishes that the most satisfactory date for the equinox is 21 March (12 kal. April), which would thus be the date of the fourth day of the world; and yet only the divisions of the zodiac accord with this date even in theory. Neither the calendar year, nor any individual month, begin at the equinox, although for Bede this is the point at which not only the zodiac but also the 'great year' measured by the courses of the planets begin and end.¹⁸

Linked to the correct construction of the calendar and the correct calculation of Easter is the still more problematic issue of the dating of the first Easter, which Bede discusses at some length, whilst also linking it to the nineteen-year cycles used in constructing Easter tables.¹⁹ Dionysius's role in establishing the current situation is made very clear when Bede states that it was he who argued for dating the new, Christian era by the years of the Incarnation rather than by the regnal years of a pagan Roman emperor, and further that it was Dionysius who enshrined AD 532 as the first year of his newly calculated, updated Easter cycle. This was slightly cumbersome in its effects, since a full, computistical Great Cycle coincidentally consists of 532 years. The reason for this has nothing to do with the date of Dionysius's work,

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 24–8.

¹⁹ Ibid., chapter 47, pp. 126–30.

but is rather the result of taking the nineteen-year cycle as the best unit with which to resolve the unequal lunar and solar calendars (necessary if the solar equinoxes and full Moons were to be kept in correlation) and then multiplying by seven to allow for the days of the week, and again by four to allow for leap years. After this period, as Bede says, ‘the whole luni-solar sequence, going back to its beginning, revolves along the same track’, repeating all its details.²⁰ For this reason, the computistical details of the year AD 533 should also be those of the year of the Incarnation (AD 1). This has the further effect of meaning that the data for the year of the Crucifixion should also be capable of correlation with the Easter cycle. The key information brought together by Bede, from the Bible and an impressive set of patristic sources, establishes that the Crucifixion took place when Christ was in his thirty-fourth year. It was also on a Friday, and tied to the dating of Passover, which linked it to the full Moon (and, according to patristic authorities, to the vernal equinox). Moreover, the leading doctors of the Church accepted that its date in the Julian calendar was 25 March, although there was some space for disagreement, since Theophilus of Caesarea gave a slightly earlier date. Finally, its date in Roman regnal years could also be established, since John the Baptist began to teach in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, making this the earliest year in which he could have baptized Christ. Unfortunately, this amounts to too much information, as Bede goes on to make tactfully but inescapably clear. The computistical details for the year of the Crucifixion and for AD 566 should be the same, given the information set out above. Thus, as Bede says, you should find what you are looking for in Dionysius’s Easter Tables at the year corresponding to the 566th year of the Incarnation – and if you do, you should give thanks to God.²¹ What Bede does not spell out directly is that you will in fact be disappointed.

This was a problem upon which Bede chose not to dwell; and subsequent experts on the computus who noted it tended to make varying suggestions for its resolution, since it did not have an easy answer. A bold suggestion was made by Abbo of Fleury at the end of the tenth century. Abbo observed that all the correct details for the Passion could be found in the year accepted as AD 12, and thus proposed a recalculation of the Christian era.²² Whether Abbo propounded any version of his theories whilst teaching at Ramsey in England is not clear; but he was certainly not alone in recognizing that this year fulfilled the requirements discussed above.²³ However, neither Abbo nor most of the computists involved in this debate sought to reconcile the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²² For details and discussion see C. P. E. Nothaft, *Dating the Passion: The Life of Jesus and the Emergence of Scientific Chronology (200–1600)* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 104–6.

²³ A fuller account of Abbo’s thought on this subject is given by P. Verbist, ‘Abbon de Fleury et l’ère chrétienne vers l’an mil: un esprit critique vis-à-vis d’une tradition erronée’, in *Abbon de Fleury*, ed. B. Obrist (Paris, 2004), pp. 61–93.

proposed new dating fully with the Christian version of history. It was clear that, if the Crucifixion took place twenty-two years earlier than traditionally accepted, then the same must apply to the Incarnation; but the reconciliation of this with all the other dating formulae provided by the Bible, Eusebius, Dionysius and the other authorities posed a formidable obstacle. The honour for tackling and solving this problem goes to Marianus, whose work was deservedly respected in the early twelfth century.²⁴ Moreover, his new version of world history was, as Orderic testified, brought into Anglo-Norman England and enthusiastically adopted at Worcester. This seems to have been the result of the strong support given to it by Robert the Lotharingian, bishop of Hereford from 1079 to 1095.²⁵ It was almost certainly Robert who brought a copy of Marianus's treatise and chronicle into England (which may survive in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero C V). The close friendship between Robert and Wulfstan of Worcester, described by William of Malmesbury, explains Wulfstan's instruction that the Worcester chronicle should be based upon Marianus's work.²⁶ It may have been through contacts at Hereford and Worcester that William of Malmesbury himself came to know and appreciate Marianus's work. Certainly, a diffusion in the Anglo-Norman realm spreading out from Hereford and Worcester would explain why the enthusiastic reader of histories, Orderic, appears to have encountered Marianus in the 'Worcester edition' rather than in Normandy.

Further evidence for the importance of Robert of Hereford in particular comes from the growing study of Robert's own achievements as a computist and chronographer.²⁷ Gleb Schmidt's research has found no fewer than eleven surviving copies or fragments of Robert's treatise on dating and on the work of Marianus, most of these originating in England.²⁸ Moreover, whilst the provenance of several is uncertain, two have been identified as Worcester products (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 1 9; and London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius E IV). It is certain that one (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 3 14) was made for Malmesbury; and William of Malmesbury himself recorded

²⁴ C. P. E. Nothaft, 'An Eleventh-Century Chronologer at Work: Marianus Scottus and the Quest for the Missing Twenty-Two Years', *Speculum* 88 (2013), 457–82.

²⁵ J. Barrow, 'Robert the Lotharingian (d. 1095)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17026> (accessed 11 July 2016).

²⁶ William of Malmesbury, 'Life of Wulfstan', in *William of Malmesbury; Saints' Lives*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom and R. M. Thomson (Oxford, 2002), pp. 7–155, esp. 140–5; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum: The History of the English Bishops*, ed. and trans. M. Winterbottom with R. M. Thomson, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2007), II, 458–60.

²⁷ A. Cordoliani, 'L'activité computistique de Robert, évêque de Hereford', in *Mélanges offerts à René Crozet*, ed. P. Gallais and Y. T. Rion, 2 vols. (Poitiers, 1966), I, 333–40; G. Schmidt, 'Le récit sur le recensement de 1086 et la tradition manuscrite de l'*Excerptio Roberti de Chronica Mariani*', in *Le Sens du temps. The Sense of Time*, ed. P. Bourgain and J.-Y. Tilliette (Geneva, 2017), pp. 221–34.

²⁸ See also Schmidt, 'A Saint Petersburg Manuscript of *Excerptio Roberti Herefordensis de Chronica Mariani Scotti*' in this volume.

his support for Marianus's work as promulgated by Robert.²⁹ Durham seems to have been an important 'early adopter' of Robert's work, since two copies from the first half of the twelfth century, each containing a different version of the treatise, can both be linked to Durham by their script and illumination (these are now Durham, Cathedral Library, MS Hunter 100, and Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 85). Also possibly a Durham product, from the mid twelfth century, is the computistical collection now Cambridge, St John's College, MS I.15. This contains a version of Robert's treatise, as Nothhaft has pointed out, on pages 338–41 (although here it is silently incorporated into a range of computistical material).³⁰ This manuscript belonged by the late Middle Ages to the Carmelites of London (not founded until the middle of the thirteenth century) but its minor initials appear to be those of Durham. Moreover, Michael Gullick has argued that it was Symeon of Durham who copied part of Robert's treatise in Hunter 100, as well as entering annalistic notes for the Great Cycle of 532–1063 in the margins of the Easter tables in Hunter 85.³¹ The evidence is thus very strong for knowledge of the arguments of Marianus and Robert on the part of historians and computists at three of the main English centres at which chronicles were being composed in the early twelfth century. The question which thus arises is that of the influence which these revolutionary theories exerted on the chronicles themselves.

Given the popularity of Robert's treatise at Durham, and Symeon of Durham's involvement in its copying, it is perhaps surprising that Symeon's own *Libellus de Exordio* bears no discernible trace of influence from Marianus or Robert. Dates are expressed in the standard Dionysian form, without comment; and dating formulae, whilst frequently long and complex, refer mostly to local events and reigns. There is no echo of Orderic's aim to place his 'local ecclesiastical history' within the framework of a wider view of the history of the Christian people. Even the account of Bede, which is as full and favourable as would be expected, barely mentions his works on time or his *Chronica maiora* except as part of a copy of Bede's own list of his works.³² It thus appears that the interest in computus and time-reckoning at Durham was confined to medical, astronomical and, perhaps, liturgical studies rather than being taken up in historical work. This is in extreme contrast, of course, to the situation at Worcester, where Marianus's work was thoroughly accepted. As noted above, the Worcester chronicle was based upon Marianus's own

²⁹ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1998–9), I, c.292; A. Lawrence-Mathers, 'William of Malmesbury and the Chronological Controversy', in *Discovering William of Malmesbury*, ed. R. Thomson, E. Dolmans and E. Winkler (Woodbridge, 2017), pp. 93–106.

³⁰ Nothhaft's identification of Robert's text in St John's MS I.15 is mentioned by Gleb Schmidt in 'Le récit sur le récénsément'.

³¹ *LDE*, p. xlvi and nn. 139–41.

³² *Ibid.* pp. 40–3, 58–9, 64–7, 66–9.

composition, and for its early books was in effect a copy of that work. This is not to deny the amount of work which John and Florence of Worcester, and their assistants, put into the checking and revision of Marianus's lists of rulers and popes, nor the care which went into the editing and layout of their lists of bishops and kings in English territories. All this appears to have occupied a considerable period of time, and its results can be seen in the surviving, partly-autograph copy of John of Worcester's *Chronicon ex chronicis* which is now Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 157.³³ However, the value placed upon Marianus's work is demonstrated by the adoption of the revised dating system for *anni Domini*, which is placed alongside the more familiar dates of the established system. The well-known, fully-illustrated account of Henry I's dreams provides a case in point. On page 382 is the description of the king's first two dreams, as recounted by his physician, Grimbold. At the top of the page are the two rival dates: MCLII (the date according to Marianus) placed where a reader begins to view the page, on the left, and written in red; and MCXXX (the standard dating) in a less prominent position at the top right, and in black.

However, Worcester and its chroniclers stood alone in this espousal of the 'scientific' dating system worked out by Marianus and promulgated by Robert of Hereford. The explanation for this is probably that supplied by William of Malmesbury. It appears to have been William's own decision to have Robert's epitome of Marianus's computistical and chronological arguments copied into the collection of computistical texts produced for Malmesbury under his direction. This manuscript is now Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 3 14, and its palaeographical features have been described and discussed by Rodney Thomson.³⁴ What is relevant for this paper is that the tables for a Great Cycle of 532 years entered into the central section of this same manuscript are not the standard ones as calculated by Bede, but rather those of Marianus Scottus.³⁵ Still more surprisingly, the marginal annotations to these tables show clear support for Marianus's recalculation of history. For instance, a note on folio 132r identifies the year of the Incarnation at the location chosen by Marianus, not that of Dionysius (Fig. 1). In case there were any doubt, this is described as the true year of the Incarnation 'according to the Gospel'. William's support for Marianus is thus evident; and yet William did not adopt the new dating system in his historical or hagiographical works. Instead, William provides an account of Marianus's work as part of

³³ High quality digitized images of the whole manuscript can be viewed at <http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=corpus&manuscript=ms157> (accessed 12 July 2016). The tables presenting information on Anglo-Saxon England are at pages 39–53.

³⁴ See R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 83–5.

³⁵ This was observed by W. Stevenson, 'A Contemporary Description of the Domesday Survey', *EHR* 22 (1907), 72–84.

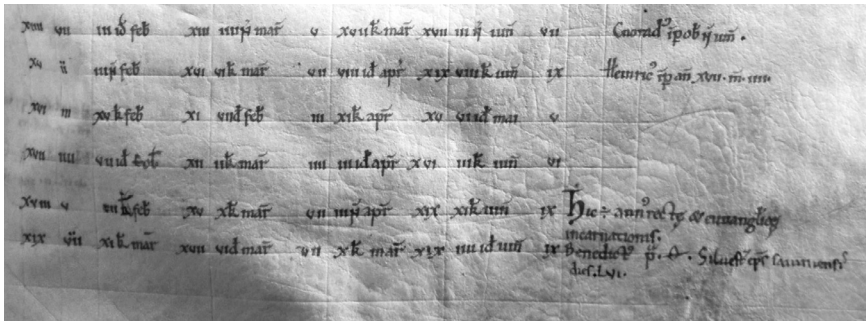


Fig. 1. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 3 14 fol. 132r.

his exposition of the learning of Robert of Hereford. Marianus is described as having noticed and criticized the discrepancy between the cycles of Dionysius and the ‘evangelical truth’, and as having been inspired by this to recalculate history from its beginning, adding into it the twenty-two missing years. William is critical of Marianus’s style as an historian; and correspondingly welcomes the contribution of Robert, who not only brought Marianus’s book to England but also prepared a short version of its key points, making them clearer and more convincing.³⁶ Fittingly, it is in the more political narrative of the *Gesta Regum* that William gives his explanation for the failure of Marianus’s revisionism, despite its application of ‘evangelical truth’. Scholars and writers, says William, ignore or condemn as mere novelties new discoveries, however true, unless they are supported by powerful patrons. Thus knowledge is at the mercy of patronage.³⁷

In this, William’s judgement was proved correct, and the example of the Worcester chronicle remained an isolated one. However, this does not mean that the arguments themselves, especially as propounded by Robert of Hereford, were weak. Moreover, the close interdependence of computus, chronology and chronicle in this period is of interest in itself. This makes it important to look at the case outlined by Robert and the terms in which it was made. The treatise has not been edited, but the capitula given in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 1 9, the Worcester version of the text, demonstrate the nature of the problems covered. Its very first chapter is headed *De variis relationibus et diversis opinionibus ex resurrectione domini* (‘Concerning the varying accounts and diverse opinions relating to the resurrection of the Lord’). This is followed by a summary of the evidence of the gospels

³⁶ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum*, I, c.146.1.

³⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, I, 292.1. For further discussion see Lawrence-Mathers, ‘William of Malmesbury and the Chronological Controversy’, pp. 93–106.

concerning the dating of the Passion, and then by discussion of Eusebius and Jerome. From this, we move to the work of Dionysius and the evidence against him, before being taken through the evidence for the true date of the Passion, and its relation to the Incarnation. The technicalities of regnal years, indictions and luni-solar cycles, are all covered, and special attention is given to the place of the Passion in geographical space as well as time. This was something in which the Worcester chroniclers and illuminators appear to have been specially interested, from the evidence of the unique, 'typographical' miniature of the Crucifixion added, with an accompanying text, on page 77b of Corpus MS 157, after a copy of Bede's *De locis sanctis*, inserted into the Worcester compilation at this point.³⁸ For believers this was a matter of great importance; and its subordination to custom and patronage must have been deeply depressing.

It is clear from the evidence discussed so far that Robert of Hereford's espousal of Marianus's work had a real impact in leading centres of historical work in Anglo-Norman England, even though it ultimately failed to take hold. Through Orderic, at least, the work of Marianus was also known in Normandy, although here it had even less impact. In the Norman part of the Anglo-Norman realm it was the work of Sigebert which was much better known, especially through the work of Robert of Torigni. Robert began his historical composition at Bec, starting with a revision of the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* begun by William of Jumièges. Robert's rise to become abbot of Mont Saint-Michel (1154–86) did not put an end to his scholarly work, and it was during this later period that he too undertook the composition of an ambitious updating of world history. Robert made the eminently tactful decision to build upon Sigebert's work, and to be entirely explicit about his use of key predecessors. In this way he avoided becoming embroiled in the chronological arguments and theories being debated in England and the Empire whilst basing his own work upon unimpeachable authorities. That Robert's reputation as a good judge of historical work was already becoming established whilst he was at Bec is suggested by the weight given by Henry of Huntingdon to Robert's acceptance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'translation' of that supposedly long-lost bombshell, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*.³⁹ Robert's espousal of Sigebert's work would thus carry weight. It also had the effect of strengthening the establishment of a canonical construction of world history. Sigebert himself had accepted the work of Eusebius and Jerome, and began his own chronological work

³⁸ For discussion of this miniature and its location see A. Lawrence-Mathers, 'John of Worcester and the Science of History', *JMH* 39, 3 (2013), 255–74.

³⁹ On this see C. N. L. Brooke, 'The Archbishops of St David's, Llandaff and Caerleon-on-Usk', in *Studies in the Early British Church*, ed. N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 201–42 (p. 231). For a different view see A. Lawrence-Mathers, *The True History of Merlin the Magician* (New Haven and London, 2012), pp. 30–2.

only at 381.⁴⁰ This perhaps recommended his work to that careful scholar John of Salisbury, who also drew upon it.⁴¹ Robert of Torigni's level of skill or interest in computus is unclear; but John of Salisbury was well aware of current developments in the liberal arts, of which computus formed part, and Sigebert of Gembloux was expert in the subject. He was the author of a treatise in the form of a dialogue, the *Liber decennalis*.⁴² This could only have given further authority to his world history, since it demonstrated at some length that he was fully expert on the state of the argument concerning the dating of the Christian era.

Sigebert's handling of the problem achieved the difficult task of combining informed criticism of the problems caused by Dionysius's Easter tables with clearly-handled evidence for continuing to use Dionysius's dates. An important part of the process is the stress placed by Sigebert on the weight of authority behind the accepted dating, and a criticism (even though placed in the mouth of the Pupil rather than the Master) of the 'novelty' embraced by those who argue for a complete re-dating.⁴³ This approach makes it possible that Sigebert may have been one of the scholars criticized by William of Malmesbury for recognizing the problem so trenchantly set out by Marianus and Robert, but rejecting their solution on the grounds that it was a novelty and had insufficient support from patrons. One thing which the treatise makes abundantly clear is that Sigebert had researched carefully on the subject, and paid special attention to the issue of the Easter debate. Book III of the *Liber decennalis* is devoted to a thorough exposition of the points at issue, the testimony of the gospels (especially that of John), and the stance taken by a series of patristic authors. It opens with a seemingly artless question from the Pupil as to the variant date for the first Easter given by Theophilus of Caesarea.⁴⁴ The Master responds that this is an issue on which the authority and established practice of the Church must carry most weight, and that it is firmly established that the Crucifixion took place on a Friday, 8 kal. April, luna XV, and that the Resurrection followed on Sunday, 6 kal. April, luna XVII. However, this leads into the question of the historical year in which these events took place, and here the Master acknowledges the important work of Marianus, who is described as a chronographer of commendable erudition and life. Marianus is here placed foremost amongst those who have written about the 'errors' of Dionysius; and the power of his case is

⁴⁰ See 'Sigiberti Gemblacensis chronica cum continuationibus', ed. L. C. Bethmann, in *MGHSS* (Hannover, 1844), VI, 268–474.

⁴¹ M. Chibnall, 'John of Salisbury as Historian', *Studies in Church History, Subsidia* 3 (1994), 169–77.

⁴² 'Sigebert von Gembloux; Liber Decennalis', ed. J. Wiesenbach, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Quellen zur Geistgeschichte des Mittelalters XII* (Weimar, 1986).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

demonstrated by a long quotation from his work.⁴⁵ Oddly, Sigebert avers that Marianus argued for a re-dating by twenty-one years rather than the actual twenty-two; he also suggests that Marianus is not alone in this. Sigebert gives no immediate judgement of his own, but instead provides further material from Cassiodorus, Victorius of Aquitaine and, at length, Augustine. The latter's testimony, in the *City of God*, as to the regnal year and the consulate involved, closes this section even though it does not, in fact, entirely settle the problem.

Next to be considered is the work of Bede, and chapter 47 of *De temporum ratione* is summarized and quoted at length, in the course of which the testimony of Theophilus is rejected. Leaving no stone unturned, the text then takes up the closely-related problem of Christ's age at the time of the Crucifixion. Once again, neither Sigebert himself nor his character, the Master, is so bold as to venture an individual opinion. The procedure is, once again, to line up authorities and their testimonies, although special emphasis is placed on the decisions of Eusebius and Jerome, and their (qualified) support for placing the Crucifixion in the eighteenth year of Tiberius.⁴⁶ What is not mentioned here is that Marianus's rediscovery of the 'lost' years had dealt with this evidence and rendered it unproblematic. Instead, the further issues involved in correlating these regnal years, *anni Domini* and the Year of the World or *annus mundi* is next tackled. At this point the reader has sympathy for the Pupil, who is moved to criticize those who want to rock the boat of established chronography at this late date. The Master's response is characteristically judicious.⁴⁷ He is clear that Dionysius's tables cannot be reconciled with the gospel evidence as they stand, but he is also critical of those who wish to adjust the accepted date without understanding what is involved. Moreover, the Church is correct to avoid undermining the trust of the people for the sake of anything which does not actually go against the faith itself. Thus authority prevails, and the concluding section of the book, and of the treatise itself, returns to less controversial matters.

All this makes the decision of Orderic Vitalis as to the dating of world history in his own work all the more interesting. As has been seen, Robert of Hereford did much to spread knowledge of Marianus's work in Anglo-Norman England, even though he was ultimately unsuccessful. In Normandy, the influential Robert of Torigni chose instead to follow Sigebert and his judicious support for authority. Orderic, having studied (at least briefly) the works of both Marianus and Sigebert, and having travelled to both Cambrai and Worcester in the process, finally settled on his own path. He decided to write a history of ecclesiastical affairs and of the fortunes of Christians in modern times, and to begin accordingly with the Incarnation and the life of

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 259.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 270–1.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 283.

Christ.⁴⁸ This immediately distinguished Orderic from both Sigebert (who began where Eusebius and Jerome left off) and Marianus, and he refers to neither in the early part of his expanded work, even though it was written late in his career. However, this does not mean that Orderic avoided making known his own decisions as to the dating of Christ's life. The Nativity is dated to 25 December, in the forty-second year of Augustus, the third year of the 193rd Olympiad, the 752nd from the foundation of Rome, and the year 3,952 of the World, according to the 'Hebrew truth'.⁴⁹ He thus follows Bede in contradicting Eusebius's count, although he does not say so. Matters of chronology return in later chapters of Book I, when the thorny problems of dating the ministry and then the Crucifixion arise. Here Orderic follows the route suggested by Sigebert, in staying with dating by the regnal year of Tiberius, whilst citing details from a range of sources; and he is equally cautious when it comes to calculating Christ's age at the Passion, although he does suggest that this took place within three years of his baptism.

Most thorny of all was the dating of the Last Supper and Crucifixion, for which so many contradictory pieces of information were recorded. Chapter Sixteen contains the account of the former, and Orderic stays with his established procedure of strict adherence to the gospels. It is dated by the simple statement that it took place 'on the first day of the feast of unleavened bread' and in the evening.⁵⁰ Still more strikingly, the narrative of the Passion and Resurrection, which is detailed and relies carefully upon Augustine's resolution of the gospel accounts, avoids all dating and computistical information, except for the isolated statement that the Resurrection was discovered as it began to dawn on the first day of the week.⁵¹ The emphasis on established authority continues in Chapter Twenty-two, when Orderic recapitulates his procedure in Book I, and then offers chronological information to link the gospel narrative to world histories. The authorities whom he names for this are Eusebius, Jerome, Orosius, Isidore and Bede. No more modern names are given.⁵² Moreover, Orderic follows Bede's *Chronica maiora* not only in the details given of matters such as imperial reigns but also in not providing *anno Domini* dates. It is only in Chapter Twenty-four that this changes, when Orderic records that he is venturing into times not covered by Bede or by Paul the Deacon. The date at which Bede's history of the English stopped is given as 734 *ab incarnatione domini* without any qualification, and it is thus clear that no controversial 'novelty' is going to be followed.⁵³ It is therefore hardly

⁴⁸ *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 130–1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 134–5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵¹ For a translation of the full text (not given by Chibnall) see *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*, trans. T. Forester, 4 vols. (London, 1853–6), I, 60–3, 73–9.

⁵² *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 150.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

surprising that Marjorie Chibnall finds a series of correlations in Orderic's account of more recent times with the chronicle of Sigebert. Orderic then, whilst showing his independence and his conscientious research, settled on the side of established authority, as argued for by Sigebert and espoused by Robert of Torigni. The combination of entrenched power (both ecclesiastical and secular) cited by William of Malmesbury, and the potential threat to the authority of the Church and the faith of the people propounded by Sigebert of Gembloux, outweighed the 'scientific' arguments of the computists and chronographers as far as the writing of history in the Anglo-Norman realm was concerned.