THE THREE ‘ESSENTIALS’ OF HISTORY — SPACE, TIME, AND MAN

Master Hugo of Saint-Victor (†1141), probably a Saxon by birth, and a man held by his contemporaries in high esteem for his learning, wrote a treatise on history in about 1130. He saw history as ‘the basis of all knowledge’, and identified its three ‘essentials’ — the things which determined its nature — as space, time, and man. Space, time, and man are indeed in a formal sense the determining categories used by history as a branch of knowledge, and they were referred to as such both in the methodological considerations of J. G. Droysen (†1884) and in the Historian’s toolbox by A. von Brandt (†1977). Hugo of Saint-Victor admittedly regarded historia as allowing only a preliminary form of understanding, because it was based on the appearances of this world. It did not in itself allow men to perceive the real significance of an event in God’s plan for the salvation of the world; this could only be perceived by the mind from a higher plane.

To take an example, in 1080 Archbishop Wibert of Ravenna was elected as Pope Clement III in opposition to Gregory VII by the partisans of the German king Henry IV, an act which marked the beginning of a long schism. Provost Gerhoch of Reichersberg (†1169) wrote that ‘for many faithful and wise men’ this division of the church seemed like the fulfilment of the prophecy of the Book of Revelation that after a thousand years of peace the devil ‘must be loosed a little season’ (Revelation 20.3). ‘May the Lord remember his promise’, wrote Gerhoch, almost as if to remind God to stick to
his timetable, for the church had found itself in darkness for seventy years, and that was long enough for a ‘little time’. The attitude of mind evident here was widespread at the time. Space and time had another dimension, foreknown and foreordained by God; it was in this context that man as God’s creation had to see himself.

1 The medieval view of space, time, and man

(a) Space How was the world visualized at that time? The earth was thought of as lying in the middle of the universe, generally as a flat disk swimming on the universal sea. Antipodeans, cut off by this sea from the known inhabited world, could not exist, for if they had done they could not have been reached by God’s message of salvation. At the centre of the earth lay Jerusalem, the earthly counterpart to the city of God in heaven with its twelve gates; here the three continents met, Europe, Asia and Africa. World-maps of the high Middle Ages show the three continents surrounded by a circle. The top of the map does not show north, as on modern maps, but usually east; within the circle the continents are set out in the shape of a letter T, with Asia filling the whole of the top half of the map, and Europe and Africa filling the bottom left and right quarters respectively. This was derived from a statement by Augustine (†430) in his City of God that Africa and Europe together were as large as Asia, a view confirmed by the encyclopaedist Isidore of Seville (†636). Until the thirteenth century such maps were produced without any practical purpose – the intention of the cartographers was to enable the user to understand the progress of God’s plan for salvation, rather than to orientate himself on the basis of precise measurements. Questions like: where was Eden? or where did Christ take up his cross? were of far more importance than the mere location of a place or a region on the map.

The microcosm reflected the macrocosm. It was not just the inheritance of Pythagorean and neo-Platonic thought that led medieval intellectuals to see space as organized even in its smallest particles according to a harmonious and divinely ordained plan. The ‘significant’ measurement and the ‘significant’ number played a crucial role. Church architecture became a carrier of symbolic meaning: the cloisters of monasteries reflected the proportions of the Holy Sepulchre, whose size and shape were the object of much speculative interpretation. The measurements used in daily life were derived from man, God’s image: the ell, the foot; the pace and the
day’s journey as measurements of distance; the ploughman’s ‘daywork’ or ‘morning’ as measurements of area, and so on. Germanic law determined distance by reference to man’s senses: the distance on which one could still perceive the shining of a red shield or of a door-bolt, or hear a man’s shout. The dead, inhuman, normalized measure still lay in the future.

(b) Time Here too men sought to trace God’s plan. When was the world created? When will it come to an end? What stage is it at now? Ever since the cyclical view of world history current in antiquity had given way to the Christian linear view there had been repeated attempts to calculate the time of the beginning and end of the world, in spite of Augustine’s forcible reminder that Acts 1.7 had said ‘It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.’ The statement in the ninetieth Psalm that a thousand years are but a day in the sight of the Lord was often interpreted as meaning that the world would last for six millennia, corresponding to the week in which it had been created; the sixth and last aetas mundi was reckoned to have begun with the birth of Christ, a point used to reckon dates from the time of Bede (†735) onwards. At the end would come the Last Sabbath. But such chiliastic calculations seemed to many to be too crude and inaccurate, especially from the eleventh century on, when a whole series of world chronicles were compiled. A more sophisticated reckoning can be seen from the example of Marianus Scotus (†c. 1082). Marianus, an Irishman by birth with the name Maelbrigtz, had gone into exile ‘for the love of Christ’ and settled as an inclusus first in Fulda and then from 1069 in the cathedral at Mainz in a cell which he did not intend to leave before his death: a hermit as world chronicler. After studying many chronicles Marius produced his own calculations. According to the tradition of the fathers, Christ was crucified on 25 March and rose again on 27 March; these dates did not match with the dates of Easter given for AD 34 in any of the tables he had consulted. Consequently the usual date was erroneous. The date of the Creation had also been calculated wrongly. Sun and moon had both been created on the fourth day; this was by consequence the spring equinox, 21 March, and Easter in year 1 of the world fell on 25 March. The customary date for the Creation, 3952 BC, should be put back by 241 years and the dates reckoned AD were to be increased by twenty-five years.

Marius’ calculations were only one example among many; world chronicles were all intended as a precise description of the course of
world history on its way between the Creation and the Last Judgement. There were terrifying predictions of the end of the world: the French conciliar theologian Pierre d’Ailly, who died in 1420, reckoned that it would come in 1789, the date of the French Revolution, which was indeed to change the world. The year itself was often determined by reference to events of significance in the history of salvation. The chancery of the German kings and those of most bishoprics began the new year with Christmas Day, as was general in Europe in the early and high Middle Ages; the Annunciation (25 March) or Easter (as a movable feast a particularly awkward starting-point) were also used as the beginning of the year. The particular nature of the days throughout the year, the degree of their holiness, was carefully noted. Important acts of state, such as the election and coronation of kings, court cases, diplomatic negotiations, peace treaties, and general assemblies, were arranged to take place on especially holy days. H. M. Schaller has estimated that ‘at least ninety per cent of such acts took place on particularly holy days’, for example the feast of the Circumcision (1 January), Epiphany (6 January), Candlemas (2 February), Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. There were special mnemonic verses to assist in memorizing the list of holy days: the first half of January was compressed into the line Cisio Janus Epi sibi vendicat, which may be translated as ‘January claims for itself the Circumcision of the Lord, Epiphany.’ On Maundy Thursday the king, as a second Christ, washed the feet of twelve poor men – a custom followed by the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef I until 1916. On Good Friday one laid oneself in the grave in imitation of Christ. There was to be no fighting between Wednesday evening and early Monday, the period of Christ’s passion and resurrection. Many feast days were used to fix obligations and transactions: Michaelmas (29 September) and Martinmas (11 November) were favoured for the payment of rent, the ending of leases, the close of the accounting year or the dates of contracts. For things like blood-letting, bathing or travelling some days were particularly favourable, while ‘Egyptian’ (unfavourable) days were to be avoided. The day itself began liturgically on the previous evening with vigils (a fact still faintly commemorated in the term ‘Christmas Eve’); divine service was celebrated at sunrise, and the day ended at sunset. Day and night were each divided into twelve hours, whose length naturally varied with the time of year. There were normally only two mealtimes; during Lent there was often only one, and we not infrequently find a person taking a pious vow to eat only once a day for the rest of his
Space, time, and man

life. Besides such divisions the day was also organized according to the seven or eight canonical hours – these too were intended to commemorate and bring to mind significant events, the morning representing the resurrection, midday the crucifixion and evening the incarnation of Christ.

(c) Man Medieval anthropology was inexhaustible and full of contradictions. On the one hand man was God’s image, on the other hand he was all too much a sinner; a perfected natural creation and yet subject to desires which prevented him from leading a holy life. The cardinal deacon Lothar of Segni – later to become pope as Innocent III – wrote in 1194–5 a treatise ‘On the misery of the human condition’ (De miseria humanae conditionis), a work which in spite of its frequent lapses into banality dealt with a subject of burning importance for contemporaries and found a wide reception: nearly five hundred manuscripts have survived. Lothar dealt with three aspects of the misery of human fate: birth, life and death. ‘Why did I crawl forth from my mother’s womb, that I might see such poverty and misery, and live my days in shame?’ is the opening question, taken from the prophet Jeremiah, and Lothar added a whole series of depressing illustrations – the stars were created from fire, wind from air, fishes from water, but God made beasts and man from earth, ‘dirt’. Man is born as a living proof of a previous act of lust and sin, nourished in his mother’s womb by poisonous juices which produce rabies in dogs. Naked we come into the world, naked we leave it, and life becomes shorter and shorter: at the beginning of time men lived to ninety and more, nowadays only a few reach sixty and only a very few seventy. This tone is continued for nearly a hundred chapters, and at the end Lothar lists the punishments in the world beyond: ‘Brimstone and glowing fire for all eternity’. It was indeed a terrible predicament: no sooner had a child been born than care had to be taken to have it baptized, for if it should die unbaptized it would be damned. Care had to be taken with the baptism as well: an exorcist (the third grade of the four minor orders, one of the preparatory stages for anyone who became a priest) had to exert himself to ensure that evil spirits did not disturb the baptism or even succeed in rendering it invalid. The salvation of man’s soul was in constant danger. What happened if simoniacal priests, men who had received their orders in return for payment, bestowed the sacraments? What happened if one unknowingly had contact with excommunicates, which could bring automatic excommunication as a consequence? If a layman made a gift to
monks, could he be certain that they would really take care of his salvation? True, it was said of the monastery of Cluny that its prayers could free sinners from purgatory, but was that true of one’s own foundation? Perpetual anxiety about one’s own salvation could give life a gloomy seriousness; but had Christ himself ever laughed? ‘We read that Christ wept on three occasions, but never that He laughed, He who said “Woe to you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep”’: so wrote Petrus Cantor around 1170. One could quote hundreds of similar statements; both monastic rules and moral treatises regard laughter as a defect in human nature, and if not forbidden, then certainly not encouraged.

Many people of the high Middle Ages must have felt severe pressures and impossible expectations as a consequence of their view of space, time and their own nature. There were any number of regulations governing the righteous way of life in existence before the mid eleventh century, but they were not necessarily taken very seriously; the reform movement produced a new seriousness, a disturbing discussion about the appropriateness of received ideas of order and righteousness to the Christian way of life. First, however, we must leave medieval anthropology and examine the realities of space, time and man in the period.

2 Space, time, man: facts and findings

(a) Space The landscape of central Europe looked very different in the period between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries from the way it does now. We should remind ourselves at the beginning of any description that the people of those times did not share our enthusiasm for nature or the protection of the environment. True, men lived from nature, which had to be protected as a source of the necessities of life; but the wood which overgrew clearings again, the water which flowed where it wished, and the weather which determined harvests and famines all gave nature the aspect of something mysterious and uncontrollable.

What did Germany look like at that time? The inhabitants on the North Sea and Baltic coasts adopted a largely passive attitude to the power of the sea. Storms led to floods and changes in the coastline: the islands at the mouths of the Scheldt and Rhine became smaller, and many disappeared; the estuary of the lower Meuse and the Bay of Biesboch only came into existence in 1421, an event which caused the destruction of seventy villages. Around 1200 Texel, Vlieland
and Wieringen became separated from the mainland, and the large island of Borkum was divided up into a number of islets. Dyke-building, checked and endangered by floods, had been in progress since Carolingian times, but it was not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the bulk of the marshes were protected by dykes, in contrast to the great rivers, whose banks had been built up much earlier, partly in order to provide roads and towpaths. The dyking of the Weser marshes is well recorded: it was begun in the early twelfth century, and by 1181 the whole of the northeastern half was enclosed and under cultivation, followed in 1201 by the south-western half. The Baltic coast suffered very little alteration in this period, in contrast to the regions bordering on the North Sea. South of the marshy regions around the North Sea lay a broad stretch of sandy heathland and moorland; here lay the great oak forests of what was later to become the Lüneburg Heath, and here also lay the centre for the colonizing activities of numerous monasteries. South again there was a band of sandy and loamy soil with centres of settlement around Brunswick, Hildesheim and Hanover. Here as elsewhere in Germany a more intensive cultivation set in around the turn of the eleventh to the twelfth century, organized and spurred on by a more intensive exploitation of rights of lordship. Clearance was practised so extensively that it had to be forbidden in some areas as early as the thirteenth century.

The woods which were turned into arable land consisted almost entirely of deciduous trees. If a statistical survey of the oldest place-names is to be trusted, then it is clear that deciduous woods were far more common than coniferous ones: 6,115 of the oldest German place-names have elements referring to deciduous trees, but only 790 indicate conifers. The most widespread deciduous tree was the beech. Apart from the Harz Mountains and the Thuringian and Bohemian Forests, the Alps and the Black Forest there were scarcely any coniferous woods: such trees were regarded as ‘unfruitful’ (arbores non fructiferae) and consequently as less valuable. Wood was only a by-product of forest cultivation: isolated trees were cut down as necessary here and there, and reafforestation was almost never practised. The woodland was much more important as grazing for livestock, especially for pigs, but also, where meadows were scarce, for oxen, horses, and goats. Trees which produced fodder, like oak, beech, and wild fruit trees, were specially protected. The value and the size of a wood was measured not according to how much wood lay in it but according to the number
of animals – usually pigs – it could provide with nourishment during the fattening season and during winter.

(b) Time It was not only in the context of the history of salvation that men calculated time; in the study of astronomy, a part of the quadrivium, men learnt and improved the scientific calculation of time. Sundials were in use from the early Middle Ages on, and from the tenth century the astrolabe – an instrument invented in antiquity which allowed the accurate measurement of the positions of the stars – was used for precise calculations of time. Throughout the Middle Ages water-clocks were used to reckon the divisions of the day, and there was a guild of clockmakers in Cologne as early as 1183. Clocks with clockwork are first found in the thirteenth century. The monastic life demanded a careful observance and observation of the division of the day; the earliest sundials (like the earliest real clocks) were installed in monasteries and priories, though the simpler method of judging the time of day according to the length of one’s shadow was never forgotten, and there were elaborate tables to assist in this. In each monastery a monk was deputed to keep watch over the time. When he rang the prayer-bell at two in the morning he had reckoned the time from the beginning of night (the time when stars had first become visible) by singing a certain number of psalms: the number varied according to the seasons. In the high Middle Ages this primitive method of calculating time was often replaced by machinery.

The great experts in time-reckoning of the Middle Ages used divisions of time ranging from the century (saeculum) to the unit of time which could not be divided further (atomus). Between these lay the lustrum (five years), annus (year), mensis (month), hebdomada (week), dies (day), hora (hour), quadrans (quarter of an hour), minutum (minute), momentum (the period of time in which one can discern that time has moved on) and ostentum (the time needed to take something in with the eyes). The smallest unit of time was the ictus oculi (‘a twinkling of an eye’), which was equated with the atomus. Ratios were established: the ostentum consisted of 370 atoms, the hour of 22,360. The ‘human time’ of the Middle Ages, according to J. Leclercq, was ‘measured by the rhythms of nature and the liturgy, and favoured an attitude of expectation and longing’.

The connection between time and the seasonal rhythms of nature was felt much more strongly in these centuries without much technical protection than it is today. Tempestas was both a storm or tempest and time:
Space, time, and man

Lo, the awaited
and beloved
spring brings forth its joys once more.

So the Carmina Burana show the longing for spring. The change of the seasons was felt keenly, so that one could say that fifteen seasons had passed in order to indicate that nearly four years had passed.

The climate associated with the seasons is subject to long-term fluctuations: periods of damp and cool weather are followed by warmer and drier phases. The famous winter of 1076–7, when the German king Henry IV crossed the Mont Cenis pass to Italy at the beginning of January together with his wife and his two-year-old son, lay in a period of cool and damp weather lasting from 1014 to 1089. In that year the great rivers of Europe were frozen over from Martinmas (11 November) until well into April: the Rhône, Rhine, Elbe, Danube, Weichsel, Po and even Tiber were said to have been ‘impassable to ships, but passable for men, horses, donkeys and carts as if it had been solid ground’. Time and seasons meant heat and cold, dearth and plenty: an accurate timepiece would not have given much useful information.

(c) Man Those who visit museums and armouries frequently remark to one another that the men of the middle Middle Ages must have been smaller than they are today, judging by their armour. Although physical anthropologists have tended to neglect questions of body size in their study of medieval skeletal remains – the distinctions between racial and ethnic groups depend rather on skull measurements, on the relationship between the length and width of the skull – we can make a few generalizations. It is generally agreed that the people of the period of the barbarian invasions were quite large, and that the average body size had dropped considerably by the end of the Middle Ages. This process had not gone very far by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, to judge by the results of excavations. A number of reasons have been put forward to explain the decline: plague and other epidemic diseases; increased urbanization, which meant living in cramped quarters and surrounded by dark unhygienic alleys. It is also noteworthy that the shape of skulls tended to alter along with body size: 'During the period from the early Middle Ages to the modern era we observe that skull-length declines, but skull-width and the height of the cranium increase', according to E. C. Büchi. It should be borne in mind, however, that the size of excavated skeletons is not necessarily typical of the
population as a whole, since there is an unusually high number of members of the upper class among them, and these were generally taller than the masses. The Salian kings Henry IV and Henry V, for example, were very tall men, both around 5 ft 11 in. The grave of a high aristocratic family in Komburg (near Schwäbisch Hall) held human skeletons of around 5 ft 8 in.; in another grave in the family church at Öhringen there was a male skeleton of 5 ft 10 in., and so on. The non-aristocratic population was probably noticeably smaller than this.

An average expectation of life of just over thirty years has been calculated for the population of central Europe in the period from the tenth to the twelfth century. Here too there were substantial differences between different groups. If we take the German kings from Henry I (†936) to Henry VI (†1197), none of whom fell in battle or died an accidental death (apart from Barbarossa, who drowned at the age of sixty-eight), we can calculate an average age at death of not quite fifty. What lowered the average was the very high infant mortality in all classes, and the generally low expectation of life of the lower classes, who were exhausted by heavy physical labour and particularly exposed to sickness and natural disasters. As in life, so in their death they remained anonymous, without gravestones or records of their names in the *libri memoriales*. The best chance of finding out their expectation of life is the investigation of skeletal remains, and if we use the data from some one hundred cemeteries which have been excavated north of the Alps, ignoring differences of time, climate and geography, we arrive at the following statistics. The majority of those who died were aged between fourteen and twenty (30.1% of males; 24.8% of females) or between twenty and forty (28.4% of males; 23.2% of females). Only one in four lived to be over forty. In spite of this low expectation of life, the maximum life-span was much the same as it is now: if nothing intervened, men could reach very high ages, as in the case of the popes Lucius III (1181–5) and Celestine III (1191–8), both of whom died around the age of ninety. Women were worse off than men throughout the Middle Ages; apart from frequent births, which were often fatal for mothers, women were weakened by heavy work in the fields and very susceptible to illnesses, especially to tuberculosis of the lungs, which seems to have been endemic.

The numerous infant deaths seem to have kept the average family size down, though here again there will have been class differences. Documents from Fulda reveal the existence of 196 married couples with 518 children – an average of 2.6 per marriage. The ratio of