Ideas of Time in Historical Scholarship in a Pre-Printing Era

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In the fourth chapter of *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong discusses the psychological effects on human beings of the onset of literacy and of the predominance of written records over oral records. He states that the onset of writing not only affected the practical aspects of life, but also caused many changes in human thought and perception, influencing not only how humans thought about themselves, but also how they understood the world around them. Ong argues that once the written word became highly visible, specifically through the medium of print, people began to pay more attention to questions of time-- to fix the present firmly in relation to the past, and to fix the hours of the day in relation to one another. In short, Ong argues that the computational systems we now use for telling time, from hours in the day to days in the year, have been brought about by the development of print and its increased usage.

He writes:

“Before writing was deeply interiorized by print, people did not feel themselves situated every moment of their lives in abstract computed time of any sort…. In a culture with no newspapers or other currently dated material to impinge on consciousness, what would be the point for most people in knowing the current calendar year? The abstract calendar number would relate to nothing in real life. Most persons did not know and never even tried to discover in what calendar year they had been born.”

In *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* Elizabeth Eisenstein adds to this theory, stating that after the invention of printing, “[t]he fixing of precise dates for the Creation or for the Second Coming occupied the very same talents that developed

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new astronomical tables and map-projection techniques.” Eisenstein argues that the advent of printing and its ability to disseminate knowledge to a wide audience, both more numerous and more geographically removed from the author than had been seen during the days of manuscripts, inspired a drive to make available a greater volume of knowledge.

Ong also writes, “It appears unlikely that most persons in medieval or even Renaissance western Europe would ordinarily have been aware of the number of the current calendar year—from the birth of Christ or any other point in the past…. Indecision concerning what point to compute from attested the trivialities of the issue.” Yet, while it is clear that a relatively abstract division of time such as we employ today, e.g. that of dividing days into a period from one midnight to another, is a construct of the modern, industrial age, it is not entirely the case that medieval persons lacked methods for defining time, or that time in the medieval era went by unrecorded. Nor is it entirely the case that points of historical computation were considered trivial by scholars and authors of historical works.

One has only to examine such medieval works of history as Gregory of Tours’ *History of the Franks*, from the 6th century, the 8th century work by Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and the *Royal Frankish Annals*, composed during the 8th and 9th centuries by several authors, to determine that, in fact, points of historical computation were of great significance, especially to those who wished to chronicle Christian history. Furthermore, it can also be seen that systems of dating were relied upon by these authors to place their works in historical context, and to record the events of

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their time for posterity. Thus, while Ong’s theory can be said to be largely supported by
textual evidence from the medieval period, it is also the case that Ong somewhat
exaggerates the differences in perceptions of time between the medieval period and the
printing age.

Firstly, let us examine Ong’s theory that “before writing was deeply interiorized
by print, people did not feel themselves situated every moment of their lives in abstract
computed time of any sort.” During the Middle Ages, time was calculated by the church
calendar, and sometimes even by the calendar used by the Romans. Days of the year were
declared as a particular saint’s day, or other holy day or church holiday, such as Christmas
and Easter, with Easter being especially important to medieval Christians. Furthermore,
the day itself was broken up into hours, where “hours” refers to the prayers and services
that monks performed every hour in their monastery—Prime, Tierce, Sext, None, etc. These hours were often used as a point of reference even for those who were not in a
monastery, and Books of Hours were widely employed, among the upper classes at least,
for devotionals during the day, which would necessitate some organization of the day
along those lines. It is unlikely, of course, that those who labored in the fields or at other
work during the day spared much thought for the division of hours, and for rural
communities the division of seasons and crop cycles were probably of greater concern.
However, the church calendar and holidays would be known to every community, as
these were of great significance in medieval Europe.

3 Ong, 96.
4 Ong, 96.
However, while the church’s divisions of time are artificial, they are not entirely abstract, being based on specific functions performed at a given time every day, rather than being numbered from an arbitrary point on a clock. Furthermore, they were not calculated as exactly as our modern computations; Easter, for example, was on a lunar calendar, as it still is today, and even the “Hours” set forth by St. Benedict were arranged according to when the sun rose and set. Furthermore, calculations for such important occasions as Easter often differed from one geographical region to the next, and monks in Ireland might celebrate Easter on a different day than did monks in Rome, and the calculations for the Paschal calendar were a source of contention between the church in Rome and the church in Constantinople. So, while it is the case that medieval persons, or at least, the upper classes and clergy, did recognize and follow a specific system of measuring time, it is also the case that this was neither standardized nor widespread, as it is in the modern era. It is clear therefore that Ong is justified in asserting that printed materials such as newspapers did have a distinct social impact, encouraging a standardization of time by their dissemination throughout society.

Furthermore, Ong attests that persons in the era before printing were largely unaware of the calendar year, or in fixing a reference point for calculating the years. While it is probably the case that the illiterate did not concern themselves with such things, those who were literate, such as church scholars and historians, or court scribes and bureaucrats did consider such dating to be important. And in fact, the Royal Frankish Annals, the official court records kept by several different scribes during and after the
reign of Charlemagne, kept a very precise system of dating, with each entry dated according to the calendar year in which it occurred.\textsuperscript{6} 

However, it is true that medieval historians had no standard system of dating, and that the systems used during the Middle Ages were often incorrect or contradictory. Bede in his \textit{Ecclesiastical History of the English People} uses a variety of systems within his work alone, dating things sometimes “after the founding of Rome”\textsuperscript{7} or also “[i]n the year of our Lord’s Incarnation”.\textsuperscript{8} Gregory of Tours, in \textit{History of the Franks} often uses an entirely different system of dating, referring to things either by their proximity to major events, or by the reign of the current ruler, such as “Euric, king of the Goths, in the 14th year of his reign”\textsuperscript{9} or dating by a church ruler, as “after the death of bishop Eustochius in the 17th year of his episcopate”.\textsuperscript{10} Though such scholars as St. Jerome and Orosius had worked to establish a more standardized system of dating, it was many years before that would come to pass. The advent of printing did away with one of the primary obstacles to such a standardized dating system by providing scholars with copies of many different historical sources that could be examined, collated, and checked for errors, allowing the body of historical literature to be studied as a whole for the first time.

Lastly, a point which both Ong and Eisenstein raise is that of a source for the computation of historical dates. Both assert that concern with fixing the dates of the birth of Christ for use as dating results from the spread of print. However, this point was extremely important for medieval scholars, and determining the history of Christianity

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\footnote{Ibid., 49}
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was of supreme important to the clergy. Gregory of Tours begins his history with the beginning of the world, as set forth in Genesis, continuing with what he considers to be the major events from the Bible and world history, up to the death of St. Martin of Tours, where he begins the local history of the Franks. He concludes the first chapter of his work with “Now from the suffering of the Lord to the passing of Saint Martin, 412 years are included. Here ends the first book containing 5597 years which are reckoned from the beginning of the world to the death of the Holy Bishop Martin.”

Although his calculations may not have been precisely or scientifically concerned, and may have conflicted with the calculations that other historians were using, nonetheless Gregory makes an attempt to connect his own time with history and provide an unbroken chronology from the beginning of the world to his own time. So we can see that historians, even in the age before print, were concerned with chronology, and with situating themselves, their works, and the lives of those around them in time, in relation to the past. Furthermore, they were concerned with determining the precise dates of such important Christian events as the birth of Christ and the Crucifixion.

Therefore, by examining historical literature from a pre-printing era, we can see evidence for the theories put forward by Walter J. Ong, and supported by Elizabeth Eisenstein, concerning the effect of printing on the human consciousness. It can been seen that in the medieval period, before the development of printing, concern with abstract notions of time and chronology were important to a small segment of the educated and literate, but not widespread throughout society. However, it cannot be said that medieval persons were ignorant or unaware of the idea of chronology, nor can it be

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10 Ibid., II, 14.
11 Ibid. I, 48.
said that medieval scholars did not make an effort to situate themselves in time, relative to the past. Notions of division of time, from hours in the day to days in the year are found in medieval literature, as are calculations of important historical dates.

However, the development and proliferation of printing did greatly change this mode of thought, both by encouraging development of literacy and the dissemination of literacy, which resulted in a greater need for standardizations of calculations of time, as people from removed geographical areas began to communicate with each other through the medium of printed works. Furthermore, the advent of printing made possible a level of fact-finding and correcting that had not been possible in the days of manuscript culture. Thus, it is easy to see the effects that printing had on both historical scholarship and on human perception of time and that, while print was not responsible for the introduction of these concepts to human consciousness, it did nevertheless have a great impact on the study of chronology, providing both a greater need for such computations of time as well as an increased capacity for consistent and scholarly thought.