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R. A. Markus

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## HISTORY: SACRED AND SECULAR

IF historiography is to be divided—as history used to be—into ‘periods’, the years of Saint Augustine’s episcopate would mark an important watershed among them. Little more than twenty years lie between the publication of the last great work of classical historiography, that of Ammianus Marcellinus, and the *Seven books of histories against the pagans* by Orosius. In 395, when Ammianus, in all probability, had just completed his work, Augustine became bishop of Hippo. Orosius, the Spanish priest who had found his way to Hippo in his flight from the barbarian upheavals in his home province, wrote his work at Augustine’s bidding, in the years 416–17. Ten books of his master’s great work of historical apologetics, the *City of God*, were by now completed. Ammianus was not much read during the middle ages; Orosius, though he found few imitators, became one of the standard textbooks. To contrast these two authors as ‘classical’ and ‘medieval’ or as ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ does not take us far. They share scarcely any assumptions about how history is to be written and what it is about. Ammianus wrote towards the end of a century of profound changes in the life of the Roman Empire, political, economic and social, as well as religious. The rate of change quickened towards the end of the century. A further crisis lay between the publication of his book and the writing of Orosius’s. These were the years following the death of Theodosius I, the years which saw the division of the Empire between his young sons and the political troubles attendant on the eclipse of imperial power. They were the years of the great barbarian break-through on the Rhine (406–7) and of the sacking of Rome by the Goths (410). Behind Ammianus lay the development of the Christian Empire between Constantine and Theodosius; behind Orosius the more recent crises of the early fifth century.

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Augustine's reflections on history owed much both to the development of Christian historiography during the fourth century, and to the challenge of his own troubled times. With Orosius he had little in common;<sup>1</sup> with Ammianus and the classical tradition of historiography even less. With this tradition he took care to dissociate himself expressly. In an early chapter of his *City of God*<sup>2</sup> he goes out of his way to say that he does not wish to enter the sphere of the historian: if he were to recount the details of the calamities that had afflicted Rome in the course of the Punic wars, he says, 'I too should become no more than a writer of history'. This was not his purpose; and throughout the fourth century, history conceived in this traditional sense had been the preserve of pagan writers.<sup>3</sup> It was pagans like Eutropius and Festus whom the Emperor Valens commissioned to prepare short summaries of the Roman past for a new class of reader to whom these were not familiar. Pagans also were responsible for works of more advanced historical enterprise, and for historical romance such as the *Historia Augusta*.<sup>4</sup> When, on rare occasions, such writers touched on the great religious issues of their day, they did so in cautious and reserved terms; or they took care to disguise their controversial intent. There was little about their work that could give offence to Christians, and their short epitomes of Roman history could without any difficulty be incorporated by Christian writers in their own works. History as traditionally practised and understood remained a pagan preserve. Its characteristic reticence and even neutrality in religious matters helped to avoid conflict between pagans and Christians in this sphere. The years after Theodosius brought with them new political crises, and, in their train, a new kind of polemical history. But the bitterness of theological controversy was absent from the

<sup>1</sup> On Orosius, cf. below, Ch. 7, pp. 161–2.<sup>2</sup> III, 18.1.<sup>3</sup> On this and what follows, see the brilliant study by Momigliano, 'Pagan and Christian historiography'.<sup>4</sup> An increasing consensus is taking shape on the dating of this to the later Theodosian or not too remote post-Theodosian years. Cf. most recently, Syme, *Ammianus and the Historia Augusta*. Its *Geschichtsapologetik* might be equally at home in the somewhat later setting to which it is assigned by Straub, *Heidnische Geschichtsapologetik*.

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atmosphere of fourth-century historiography. Pagan and Christian historians had almost entirely different interests, and there could be no conflict between them because their concerns met at scarcely any point.

If Christians during the fourth century were content to leave history as generally understood to pagans, they were by no means uninterested in the past. From the beginning they based their faith on a particular group of historical events, in which they saw God's mighty acts for the salvation of men accomplished among his chosen people and brought to a consummation in Jesus Christ, who was born under Augustus and suffered under Pontius Pilate. They read and re-read the narratives of this redemption history as contained in the books which had slowly crystallised into the canon of the Bible. But they did not only read them, meditate on them, comment on them; they could scarcely avoid reflecting on the question: if the things told in these stories really happened, where did they fit into the past? Already Luke, especially, among the evangelists, had felt the need to give his narrative a firm anchorage in contemporary secular history. The need to make room for Abraham and Moses and the rest among Ninus, Hercules and the less remote figures of ancient history became more strongly felt as the contacts between Christianity and pagan culture grew more extensive. The Christian chronographers who catered for this need did so almost incidentally. Their concern had been, in the first place, to vindicate the claims of the biblical revelation to greater antiquity and thus to priority over the wisdom of the Greeks. In catering for this whim, they did, nevertheless, perform a task of wider significance. Their work made it possible to trace the contours of the biblical landscape on a historical map familiar to educated Romans. They thus introduced the pagan convert to Christianity to a redemptive history for which the history he learnt at school had no place; and at the same time they provided their Christian readers with a framework, derived from the redemptive history on which their faith was founded, into which they could fit other historical information as

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it became familiar to them. Both for the pagan convert to Christianity and for the uninstructed Christian, such works helped to map out the course of human history with the aid of the fixed points in the story of redemption. They compelled the pagan convert to 'enlarge his historical horizon'.<sup>1</sup> They introduced him, as well as the Christian believer, to universal history, and, at the same time, furnished the clues with the aid of which it could be read as bound up with man's destiny. This kind of chronography was well developed before the time of Eusebius,<sup>2</sup> but it can scarcely be called 'history'. It was a way of meeting a need for elementary Christian orientation in a predominantly pagan world, rather than of catering for a desire to know the past.

An interest in the past was not entirely lacking in Christian circles. The fourth century did see the development of a major new form of historiography, that of ecclesiastical history;<sup>3</sup> but Augustine was not very much more interested in this than in the kind of history that Ammianus and others had written for a pagan reading public. His attitude to ecclesiastical history was far from simple, and, as we shall see (especially in Ch. 2), it underwent profound changes. As for political and military history as it would have been understood among the sort of people who read Ammianus, this held little interest for Augustine. Until his own days, this kind of history could safely be left to its pagan practitioners. In the years following 410 Augustine became conscious of a need for a new kind of Christian historical apologetic. In 416 he commissioned Orosius, a refugee from Spain who had placed himself under Augustine's patronage, to carry out this task.

That Augustine himself did not consider it to be for him to carry out the work he assigned to Orosius can be explained in several ways. He was a busy bishop, in the centre of conflicts extending well beyond the bounds not only of his own diocese, but of the African Church of which he had rapidly become one

<sup>1</sup> I quote the phrase from Momigliano, 'Pagan and Christian historiography', 83. I lean heavily on his treatment of this topic on pp. 82–5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Von den Brincken, *Studien*, 43–60.

<sup>3</sup> I shall not discuss here the third *genre* enumerated by Momigliano, that of hagiography.

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of the acknowledged leaders. His complaints about the lack of time for study and writing, of the *episcopalis sarcina*, are a recurrent commonplace in his correspondence. But beyond such immediate reasons for his assigning the task to someone else, we may also discern obstacles to his performing it himself which lay deeper in his mind. Notwithstanding his realisation of a need for a new Christian historiography, his own attitudes to history were very like those of most fourth-century Christians. It is unlikely that he read Ammianus Marcellinus. History of this kind held little interest for him, and in so far as the pagan opposition with which he set himself to deal in the *City of God* had historical roots, they lay elsewhere. The sort of history Ammianus wrote had not even the distinction in his eyes of standing in need of refutation.

Augustine could, on occasion, undertake sustained historical research, as he did, for instance, in the course of supplementing Optatus's dossier on the history of the Donatist schism by his own enquiries. But this is exceptional in his work, and in any case it scarcely amounts to an interest in history for its own sake. It is part of a running debate, in which the history of relatively recent times was among the issues at stake. Augustine could show meticulous care in accumulating relevant material from official archives when this served his purpose. In general, however, this kind of work was foreign to his interests. It is in the educational scheme drawn up in his *De doctrina christiana* that he came most closely to grips with the place that history ought to occupy in the Christian curriculum of studies. Like other educational disciplines, history gains admission to the Christian round of studies in so far—and only in so far—as it can serve as an aid to the understanding of the scriptures.<sup>1</sup> The whole educational programme of the *De doctrina christiana* is narrowly conceived. We may concede that its narrowness is linked with a clear vision of purpose, a vision lacking from much of the contemporary educational tradition. It is, nevertheless, almost inhumanly rigid in its determination to outlaw any field of study which does not contribute to an

<sup>1</sup> II, 27.42–28.44.

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'understanding of the faith'. Whatever its merits,<sup>1</sup> this exclusive orientation to the *intellectus fidei* did not encourage the study of history as it would have been understood by most of Augustine's contemporaries. It is not difficult to guess what kind of history Augustine had in mind when he considered its usefulness to the understanding of the scriptures. It was certainly not the kind of history which Ammianus had just completed. This, like its classical model, the work of Tacitus, and the other classics of Greek and Roman historiography, would have had little or no contribution to make to an understanding of the biblical revelation. The kind of history Augustine must have had in mind was primarily that of the Christian chronographers, and especially Jerome's extended translation of Eusebius's work in this *genre*. It is clearly to works of this type he is referring when he speaks of their helping us to date the events of the redemption history 'by Olympiads and the names of the Consuls'. Information of this kind could extend the range of our knowledge by being collated with scriptural data, or it could serve to determine claims to priority among Greek philosophers and Hebrew prophets. These are precisely the purposes served by Christian chronography. Its compilers may thus usefully draw on extra-biblical material such as can be learnt *puerili eruditione* outside the Church. The secular history contained in Book XVIII of the *City of God*, itself no more than a perfunctory repetition of the material from the handful of sources utilised in it by Augustine, falls entirely within the scope defined in the *De doctrina christiana*. The narratives of secular history are coordinated with the sequence of the biblical history; some attempt is made—following, of course, Eusebius and Jerome—to anchor the biblical story in the general history of antiquity. Even in this book, as we shall see, Augustine shows much creative originality; but it does not lie in his use of historical material. In this sphere he was an heir to the pioneers and the fourth-century masters of the craft. His interest in extra-biblical history, like theirs, had

<sup>1</sup> An eloquent and persuasive defence of its value and originality is to be found in Marrou, *Saint Augustin*, 352–6.

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arisen from the need to think of world history as including the biblical history, and it remained confined within this perspective. This incorporation of biblical in world history certainly had a part to play in leading Augustine to meditate, supremely among Christian thinkers, on the unity of world history; but not counting, for the present, his theological interpretation of the historical process, he was following well-trodden paths.<sup>1</sup> Behind his remarks on 'history' it is easy to discern the familiar outlines of Christian chronography in the fourth century. There is no mention of or allusion to ecclesiastical history in this passage of the *De doctrina christiana*. The complexities of Augustine's attitude to this subject will engage our attention in due course.

The distinction between the *historia gentium* taught outside the Church, of which he speaks in the *De doctrina christiana*, and the history contained in the scriptures, the *temporaliter praeterita . . . quae pro salute gessit . . . aeternitas divinae providentiae*, as he puts it elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> is an inherited commonplace. It is simply the distinction between the biblical redemption history and all other history, and was familiar to any Christian, even of the less well-educated kind. Augustine took it over as it stood. In the course of time, however, he devoted much thought to the theological grounds for this distinction.

Some fourteen years after his conversion to Christianity Augustine wrote a memorable account of the process that had led to it. In a famous chapter of the *Confessions* he recounts his passage from the intellectual world of neo-Platonism to Christianity. It had been easy, in the heady atmosphere of Milan in the mid 380s, to pass from the world of Plotinus and Porphyry to that of Saint Paul and the Fourth Gospel. Looking back upon his reading of the 'books of the Platonists', Augustine could, in retrospect, see many of the central doctrines of Christianity contained in them. There, he tells us,<sup>3</sup> he had read of God and his Word and of the human soul, which, though not itself the Light,

<sup>1</sup> This seems to be overlooked by Marrou, who devotes some pregnant paragraphs to this topic: *Saint Augustin*, 466–7.

<sup>2</sup> *De agone chr.* 13.15.

<sup>3</sup> *Conf.* VII, 9.13–14.

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gave testimony to it; there he had read of the unchangeable eternity of God and his Son. But he had not read in these books that the Word became flesh and dwelt among men. The events of the Incarnation and the earthly life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the beliefs which defined the gulf between Christianity and the *praeparatio evangelica* in the works of the philosophers. Even the 'Platonists', the *praecipui gentium philosophi*,<sup>1</sup> had not been able to anticipate these truths in their teaching. The reason for this failure is that these truths were contingent, historical facts and as such were inaccessible to the abstract, general method of argumentation appropriate to philosophy. They belong to the 'course of changing things and the fabric of temporal history'<sup>2</sup> on which the philosopher cannot but be silent: this is the province of the historian and the prophet. Augustine's sense of a gulf fixed between Christianity and pagan philosophy grew sharper with age and episcopal office. With it grew the stress he came to lay on the historical and eschatological elements in Christian teaching.<sup>3</sup> But there is no reason to call in doubt his appreciation, even at the time of his conversion, of the essential historical substance of the Christian Gospel. As early as in his *De vera religione*, written in Africa soon after his return, he could assert unambiguously that the head and substance of the Christian religion was contained in 'the history and prophecy of the temporal dispensations of divine providence for the salvation of the human race';<sup>4</sup> and there is much about the place of reason and of authority in Christian teaching in his earliest dialogues which points in the same direction.<sup>5</sup> He knew that the claim to truth of Christian teaching stood or fell with the historicity of the events on which it rests.

<sup>1</sup> *De Trin.* XIII, 19.24. This is the central theme of *De civ. Dei* VIII.

<sup>2</sup> *De Trin.* IV, 16.21. In *De agone christiano* 13.15 Augustine says that the faith of the Church refers both to eternity and to *temporalia praeterita et futura quae pro salute hominum gessit et gestura est aeternitas divinae providentiae*. Cf. *ibid.* 16.19. Augustine had to widen his conception of *scientia* to accommodate the *cognitio historica* to which the *temporaliter gesta* of the redemption history are known; cf. *De Trin.* XIII, 1.2.

<sup>3</sup> For one aspect of Augustine's thought which illustrates this generalisation cf. Markus, 'Alienatio'.

<sup>4</sup> 7.13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse*, 73 f., 303 f.



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There was, then, a privileged strand of history in which Augustine could not, as a Christian, fail to take an interest. This was the biblical narrative of God's saving work among his chosen people, the promise and preparation in the Old Testament and the fulfilment in the New. This privileged strand of history commanded Augustine's assent as a matter of faith. For the Christian, the biblical books supersede all other authorities. They provide a yardstick, endowed with divine authority, whereby to measure all other beliefs.<sup>1</sup> For the people of God, the biblical authors are 'their philosophers, that is, their lovers of wisdom, they are their wise men, their theologians, their prophets, they are their teachers of righteousness and of holiness'.<sup>2</sup> This is an example of the kind of transposition of pagan language into the Christian vocabulary of which Augustine was notoriously fond. It served him well in his rhetorical exploitation of the contrast between Christians, their works and their institutions, and their pagan counterparts.<sup>3</sup> In an early letter Augustine had spoken of the pagans' *historia sacra*.<sup>4</sup> Here, the expression refers to the pagan myths about the gods. It is by no means impossible that when he used the phrase in reference to the Christian scriptures<sup>5</sup> Augustine was indulging his liking for this kind of transposition in the interests of a more dramatic confrontation. We shall follow Augustine in adopting the phrase 'sacred history' to distinguish the biblical narratives from other, 'secular', historical narratives. The distinction is thoroughly Augustinian, even though the expression 'secular history' does not form part of his vocabulary.

All history, sacred and secular, has its origin in God's creation of the world.<sup>6</sup> The full exposition of the faith (*plena narratio*)

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *De civ. Dei*, xviii, 40: *nos vero in nostrae religionis historia, fulti auctoritate divina...; nostra religionis historia* is the Bible. Cf. *ibid.* xi, 3 on the *eminentissima auctoritas* of the scriptures, and xii, 10.2 (= 11 in D & K) on its use as a criterion for selecting the least discordant account among the pagan 'fables' masquerading as true accounts of antiquity; cf. *De Trin.* iii, 11.22: *auctoritas divinarum scripturarum unde mens nostra deviare non debet...*

<sup>2</sup> *De civ. Dei*, xviii, 41.3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kamlah's remarks on Augustine's fondness for referring to the Church's institutions etc. as 'ours' in contrast with their Roman counterparts as 'theirs'.—*Christentum und Geschichtlichkeit*, 167–8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ep.* 17.1.

<sup>5</sup> *De civ. Dei*, xv, 8.1.

<sup>6</sup> On this subject I may refer to the excellent discussion by Wachtel, *Beiträge*, Ch. 4.

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which he recommends to the deacon Deogratias is to embrace the whole story from the creation to the present state of the Church.<sup>1</sup> The creation is the beginning of all things. Time itself only came into being with the creation of temporal things.<sup>2</sup> In a strict sense, however, man's condition between the creation and Adam's fall, though temporal, can be described as not fully historical. But for man's primal sin and fall from the condition of grace there would have been no need for God's saving work. Nor would man's existence in that state, had he continued in it, have been fully historical. Both sacred history in particular and history itself as experienced by men arise from this primal tragedy. This is the source of the 'river of human history',<sup>3</sup> the *series calamitatis*,<sup>4</sup> the *res humana* which flows like a river.<sup>5</sup> Allusions to the impermanence of human things and the transitoriness of human achievement in the *ordo rerum labentium*<sup>6</sup> are scattered through Augustine's writings. The image of the river of human history is sometimes replaced by that of the bitter sea, 'with the depths of curiosity, the swelling of pride and the restless tossing of instability'.<sup>7</sup> History in the full sense, as the troubled past of the human race, is the consequence of a world plunged into the ambivalence of time;<sup>8</sup> time as the vehicle of sin and tragedy as well as the medium of redemption. History in general, the troubled careers of men, societies and their institutions, as well as sacred history, the unfolding of God's plan for healing man's fallen condition, both arise from this primordial strain in the human situation. Temporality itself is involved in being created; but temporality falls short of historicity. Historicity is the mark of a world in which there is *nihil solidum, nihil stabile*.<sup>9</sup> Man therefore creates a historical situation for himself in the very same act in

<sup>1</sup> *De cat. rud.* 3.5. On this I shall have more to say below, Ch. 2.

<sup>2</sup> The most complete treatment of this is in *Conf.* xi. On it, see the analysis in Markus, 'Marius Victorinus and Augustine', 376–9 and *idem*, 'Augustine', 94–5.

<sup>3</sup> *De Trin.* iv, 16.21.

<sup>4</sup> *De civ. Dei*, xiii, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Sermo* 25.6.

<sup>6</sup> *Enarr. in Ps.* 65.11.

<sup>7</sup> *Conf.* xiii, 20.28; cf. *Enarr. in Ps.* 65.11, where the sea- and river-imagery are brought together. On this cf. Rondet, 'Le symbolisme de la mer'.

<sup>8</sup> The allusion is, of course, to the title of Marrou's *L'ambivalence du temps de l'histoire chez saint Augustin*.

<sup>9</sup> *De civ. Dei*, xx, 3.