

# World History Sacred and Profane: The Case of the Medieval Christian and Islamic World Chronicles

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Presently, world history is a topic increasingly in the spotlight. Current talk of a global village reflects the world-wide intertwining of commerce and communication, but contrasts oddly with the complex problems historians encounter when they write or theorize about world history. One of them, perhaps the central problem, is the obligation, spelled out by the term "world history" (rather than "the world's histories," that is, the histories of the many peoples of the world) to construct a unified account of it all in the face of the multitude of records of the past. That problem casts its spell over all world-history books, those that are little more than histories of various cultures and areas, held together primarily by bindery glue and tape, as well as those based on sophisticated world system theories. The problem has a paradoxical quality easily visible in its modern manifestation. The globalization of life vastly expands the body of data made available to scholars for their syntheses by critical methods and interpretive schemes. Yet the construction of a world history demands unifying structures and forces of a scope that strain the critical methods beyond their own logic. Hypotheses, daring and bordering on oversimplifications, need to be employed to escape the danger of suffocation by the overwhelming weight of data. To some modern historians the problems seem to be uniquely modern ones, when actually the current ones differ only in degrees and specifics from those earlier scholars experienced. The problems are inherent in the endeavor to write world history because it represents the most complex version

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of the task of all historians: to reconcile the past (memories), the present (the concerns of the immediate life), and the expectations for the future (implied by the former two) on the largest possible scale. Still, world historians persist against the odds and in the presence of many doubters. As support for their confidence they could point to a turn-of-the-century precedent, the widening of history's scope, when doubters considered the proponents of a New History that included all of life's aspects as "seized with a terrible craving for synthesis, to the detriment of analytical work."<sup>1</sup> Doubts did not deter the innovators then and do not now those who continue to respond to the call for the globalization of our vision of history. Their persistence is not only prompted by the logic of scholarship and current developments but also by the perennial existential urge to see the world and its history as a meaningful whole.

At this point, it may seem strange to suggest that we can learn something of relevance for the writing of modern world history from the medieval Christian and Muslim world chronicles created between 400 and 1400 CE.<sup>2</sup> We can do so if we put aside two prejudgments. First, that the chronicles' religious nature—with transcendent elements built into their very structure—prevents them from yielding much of value for a comparative study of the problems encountered in modern world-history writing; and second, that these world chronicles offered a mass of unrelated data, produced by both experience and fanciful imagination, but did not represent serious attempts at systematic interpretation. However, a good case can be made that medieval world chronicles provide more than data bases waiting to be critically sifted. They were ambitious systematic endeavors that, in different times and circumstances, followed the lure of world history and, in the process, encountered the types of complex problems familiar to modern counterparts.

Christian and Muslim world chronicles demonstrate the modern finding that at the bottom of every world history are unifying themes that alone make possible the mastery of the vast stores of diverse collective memories. Too often it has been thought that the medieval

1. The phrase is Henri Berr's, who spoke in defense of a synthetic history. See the programmatic statement for the *Revue de synthèse historique* as reprinted in Fritz Stern, ed. *Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present* (New York, 1956), p. 254.

2. The term "Christian world chroniclers" will refer to Greek and Latin world chroniclers until 450 CE and solely to Latin ones after that date. The term "Muslim world chroniclers" will connote most often the representatives of the golden period of Muslim world chronicle writing: al-Ya'qubī (d. between 911 and 922 CE), al-Tabarī (839-923 CE), al-Mas'ūdī (c. 890-956/7 CE), al-Maqqdisī (d. after 966 CE) and ad-Dinawarī (fl. 1006 CE).

world chronicles were a historiography *sui generis* because their unifying themes came from revelation, were rooted in the area of the sacred, and relied on forces and structures of a starkly different ontological nature. Yet, the distance to other world histories narrows once one observes how the medieval world chroniclers struggled to shape what was for them a vast body of data into a unified world history by means of unifying schemes. Indeed, these chroniclers had the additional task of accounting for the work of timeless forces in a time-bound world and for the connection of the world of perfection with human history. Even in that, the problems of modern world-history writing were foreshadowed: when they struggled to translate their large-scale principles of unity of *longue durée* into historical accounts of the world of contingency, when an ever-widening empirical knowledge of the world and ceaseless changes in the medium- and short-range contexts tested and revised their translations, and when in the end the initial translations lost much of their rationale, Christian and Islamic chroniclers, with their sacred core concept of unity intact, had to search for new translations. Those familiar with modern attempts to write world history will here easily recognize similarities: first, in the modern scholars' preference for explanatory patterns—structures and forces—that are abstract and nearly timeless; then, in the difficulties in reconciling them with the contingencies of the human world; and, finally, in the tension caused by the striving for the long-range interpretive whole in the face of the powerful pressures exerted by life's separate entities tied to short and medium time frames.

I

The sometimes cited advantage—that the Christian and Muslim world chroniclers worked on the basis of a certainty about the truth and that the unity of the world derived from the revealed core accounts of the origin of the world and the human condition—did not spare them the challenges secular world historians would face. When these chroniclers had to translate the divinely-given unity of both the world and the human race into categories of historical understanding, they moved into the world of conceptualization, where human cognition could be enlightened by faith but not by direct divine guidance. There they had to show the presence of the sacred, perfect and timeless, in a world marked by the divisions of space and the ceaseless flux of time and inhabited by imperfect human beings. Even their definition of the word "world," at their time always referring only to a segment of the

globe, would cause difficulties. Nevertheless, that restricted world provided a sufficiently diverse reality to force chroniclers to struggle with the question of how to interweave peoples, regions and periods to reflect the revealed unity of the created world. To see the world's multitude of phenomena as a cipher for the unity vouchsafed by divine revelation was one thing, to actually decipher it another. Modern world historians, whether of the sequence of culture or the world-as-a-system type, also treat the world of diversity as a cipher for an underlying unity to be identified.

In both Christian and Muslim world chronicles, the certainty of unity, derived from the sacred core accounts, led to the assertion that the world began with Creation and would end at a divinely appointed time. The span of time in between—the space of history—was in both cases sharply divided by a supreme historical event: in one case by the life and work of Jesus as Christ and in the other by that of Mohammed as the final Prophet. Because the divine intervention had in both cases a record in mundane history, the chroniclers had a seemingly clear guide for deciphering the divine intentions for the human race and translating them into the language of the mundane world. Both revelatory events were recorded in narratives—the New Testament on the one side and the Koran and *hadith* (meaning the Tradition, that is, the record of actions and pronouncements of the Prophet in the canonical forms elaborated during a three-centuries long process) on the other. In their work chroniclers had to make sure that their historical accounts were instructed by the unadulterated authority of the sacred core accounts. Therefore, Christian chroniclers would forever be alert to the use of the correct biblical text. Muslim chroniclers took pains to create chain-like links of trustworthy transmitters reaching back to the Prophet and his companions (*isnād* or the Law of Tradition). The chroniclers were spared the modern problem of linking data and interpretation made so intractable by the perceived gulf between fact and value. However, they shared with their modern counterparts the awareness of the incompleteness of human knowledge, although, in their case, it was prompted by the ontological difference between the sacred and the mundane. Error was not the inevitable consequence of subjectivity but the incompleteness of human knowledge as the consequence of the Fall. That awareness became the key for explaining and tolerating the eventual differences found in historical accounts—each of them based on the sacred core accounts. It also made plausible and legitimate the ever-new attempts to comprehend world history through different conceptual schemes. Thus, while the writing of world chronicles was not like the writing of modern world histories,

a venture in the discovery of order for the masses of collective memories, but the elaboration of a known basic scheme, that elaboration shared many basic problems with the venture of discovery. Medieval world chroniclers found their own challenge to discovery because the sacred core accounts of the world proved insufficiently specific for creating historical accounts of the mundane world.

Both groups of chroniclers relied for their works on the Old Testament narratives about the Creation of the cosmos by an all-powerful, all-knowing and just God, whose Providence subsequently guided the world and its history. They also found the Fall—the separation of human beings from the perfection of God by a deliberate act of disobedience—the key for the imperfections of the human world. However, their different paths demonstrated the importance of the substance and form of the unifying themes for the world histories resulting from them. Thus, the differences in the presentation of the Old Testament cosmological account would prove significant in the historiographical translation of that account. In the Christian version the chronological order is more dominant than in its Muslim counterpart. In the Koran, the elements of Creation, Fall and God's power and justice appear embedded and scattered in stories which disregard a strict chronological order. Muslim chroniclers took their cue from that and presented a much more detailed account of the Creation, with lengthy narratives about such aspects as the locus of God's residence, his throne and the exact sequence of Creation for all creatures. Meant to satisfy the curiosity of believers and to strengthen their faith, versions of the stories were set side by side with only a few implied judgments on them (except for those elements contained in the Koran). That approach offered Muslim chroniclers, for example, space for the elaboration on geographical matters, a fascination typical of Arab culture. In the account of the pre-Islamic period, large sections of al-Tabarī's and al-Mas'ūdī's chronicles are dedicated to the descriptions and explanations of such features of the earth as oceans, rivers, mountains, soils and climates, often with speculations on how they affected the prosperity and power of states. Such manifestations of an autonomous mundane world created by an empirical spirit included, in al-Mas'ūdī's case, even speculation on the special suitability of the desert regions for revealed religions. Counterparts to that in Christian world chronicles were much sparser in number. After Orosius's fifth-century *Historia adversus Paganos*, which dealt with natural and geographical phenomena mainly in the context of catastrophes, only the tenth-century *Chronicon Albeldense sive Emilianense* included a substantial treatment of the earth

and its features. In the latter, its Iberian context hints at possible Islamic influences.<sup>3</sup>

Until the late Middle Ages, Christian world chronicles, with their more rigorous linear pattern, displayed a *series temporum* pattern (organized predominantly by temporal stages), while the world chronicles of their Muslim counterparts allowed for more broadly descriptive elements, with less concern for stages reflective of sacred history in the *imago mundi* pattern.<sup>4</sup> The difference was no mere matter of style, but one of historical logic. It reflected the second parts of the foundational accounts: the presence and work of Jesus as the Christ and of Mohammed as the last Prophet. In Christian chronicles history became the great drama of redemption by God's entrance into history and his sacrificial death. Time was transformed into the space in which the drama was played out and every passing year represented a relentless step toward the end. While, in principle, the Muslim interpretation of the course of the world did not differ, it reflected the fact that Mohammed appeared as the last authoritative prophet rather than as the redeemer. Muslim world chronicles portrayed him as the Prophet to whom God revealed, at the end of a series of assertions and reassertions of the sacred law, the last and definitive *shar'iah* (sacred law). World history was still a drama but one involving the struggle to make right belief prevail over false ones. There was room for much that in a medieval Christian account would be seen as digressive, secondary speculations on the internal working of the world. The different approaches also marked the Christian and Muslim chroniclers' accounts of the past prior to Jesus and Mohammed.

In that ancient world both groups of world chroniclers encountered most starkly the task of all world historians to unify the diverse. They faced a world of great ethnic and cultural diversity that stood in sharp contrast to the stipulated original unity of the human race in Adam and Eve. Yet, when it came to account for the division of the original unity (*diamerismos*, Greek for division), the world chroniclers had what modern world historians lacked: two explanations. The confusion of tongues

3. Orosius, *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. I.W. Raymond (New York, 1936), I, 2. Another likely influence for the *Chronicon Albeldense sive Emilianense* is the extensive treatment of the world and its phenomena by Isidore of Seville, found in the *Etymologiarum sive Originum* Libr. XX, W.M. Lindsay, ed. (Oxford, 1911), especially libri xii-xvi.

4. In the distinction of the two types, I follow the one made by Anna Dorothee von den Brincken in, *Studien zur lateinischen Weltchronistik bis in das Zeitalter Ottos von Freising* (Düsseldorf, 1957).

during the building of the Tower of Babel was used to explain for the world's different languages (their total was thought to be seventy-two).<sup>5</sup> The more decisive part of the narrative came to be the subsequent division of the earth among the three sons of Noah (Shem, Ham, Japheth) and their descendants. The tracing of the unity of all nations through genealogical lines to these sons and, from them, back through Noah to Adam made manifest the enduring unity of all empires and *regna*.<sup>6</sup>

The patriarchal line tied together the many national and ethnic developmental lines, but in the presentation of the line different preferences became visible. The Arab esteem for genealogy showed in the careful and extensive tracing of blood lines and also in the quasi-genealogical manner of the citing of authorities for the material narrated. Another difference appeared in the degree to which the *diamerismos* was acknowledged and treated. Muslim chroniclers reached well beyond the standard people of the Mediterranean and the Fertile Crescent into the areas of Central Asia, China, India and even Tibet.<sup>7</sup> Christian world chroniclers limited their observations to a less radically diverse world.

The already noted absence of a relentless drive to temporal fulfillment allowed Muslim chroniclers a more leisurely exploration of the affairs of the many peoples; this resulted in much more than annotated lists of rulers. Both al-Tabari and al-Mas'udi paused to tell about interesting personalities, episodes, buildings (especially temples) and curiosities. Most surprising were the rather accurate and often lengthy sketches of the religions of India (Hinduism, Buddhism), Zoroastrianism, and—quite extensively—Christianity. The rather objective comparative treatment of other religions (except for a hostile note on the dualistic religion of Mani) followed the principle that relating a fact did not mean approval. In the case of the other biblical religions, the Koran, by mentioning them, even encouraged dealing with them. Limitations

5. Genesis 11:1-8 describes the linguistic "confounding" although the number 72 for the languages is not part of it. That number came most likely from Jewish tradition. It appears earliest in Hippolytus, *Chronographus* (II. *Liber Generationis*), in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi* 9, p. 96 (I, 55).

6. Genesis 10: 1-32. The Muslim chroniclers made the relatively brief account much more extensive.

7. See al-Mas'udi on Turks and China, *Les Prairies d'or*, trans. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1962-1965), 1:119-129, [311-315].

on relating the Christian doctrines occur only occasionally.<sup>8</sup> On their part, Christian chroniclers dealt mainly with the Christian heresies and only tardily with Muslim history. The latter appeared mostly in brief notes on "Saracen" conquests (especially of Christian territory) and the succession of Arab rulers. Only with the eleventh-century chronicler Sigebert of Gembloux did the notes become more extensive. But the generally hostile tone in Christian accounts resulted not solely from the on-going conflicts between Muslims and Christians, but also from a time sequence. Islam, being of later origin, could integrate Jesus as a prophet and thus "integrate" his religion. Christianity had no such option. Islam remained a dangerous rejection of the Christian faith. Accordingly, Sigebert's brief characterization of Mohammed's life was thoroughly hostile, noting a questionable family background and implying that his revelation experiences were the result of epileptic seizures.<sup>9</sup>

So far, the unitary past had guaranteed the essential unity of the human experience. World histories written on that basis have usually been called "traditional." Yet, the Christian and Muslim chronicles did not fit that definition because they used the future as the second element for establishing the unity of the human race and thus blunting the apparent *diamerismos*. In doing so, they relied for conceptual mastery not so much on Scriptures as the logic of history, rationally constructed. The world chroniclers discerned that the central events of Jesus as the Christ and Mohammed as the last Prophet gave the ancient past a direction toward the future. Christian scholars began to see the pre-Incarnation past not only as the period of the original unity's dissolution but also as one of the *praeparatio evangelica*. Similarly, Muslim chroniclers

8. Mas'udī, to avoid giving details from the Gospels about Christ, Mary and Joseph, stated that "let [us] pass over them in silence since neither God [in the Koran] nor our Prophet speaks of them." Mas'udī, *Prairies*, 1:52 [121].

9. Of Sigebert of Gembloux's thirty-one entries on Islamic history, (besides the hostile biographical sketch of Mohammed) eight concerned Arab conquests and the others were notations on rulers and ruling years; on Mohammed, *Sigeberti Gemblanensis Chronica*, Year 630, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores* 6, p. 323. Before that, the earliest mention of the Arabs came in Fredegar's chronicle as *agareni* or *sarraceni*; see *Chronicon quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri iv cum continuationibus*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 2, p. 153-154 (66), 162 (81), and 177 (*continuationes*, 20), and in *Chronicon universale*-741, Year Septuaginta 5927, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores* 13, p. 19 (pt. 1/1). Eventually the remarks became rather standardized with most of them featuring the siege of Constantinople under Leo III and the victory of Charles Martell, in 732, at Tours over an invading Muslim army.



found the course of ancient past directed by a telos toward Mohammed.<sup>10</sup> Muslim chronicles, with their keen appreciation for the discerned body of wisdom in pre-Islamic cultures, hinted at the concept of an eternal wisdom akin to the one perceived by Christians.

This reorientation toward the future was reinforced by the expectation of the desired, but also dreaded event: the end of the world. For history, it meant to put the future's influence at least on a par with that of the past and thus create a balanced whole—a feature also prominent in modern world histories. Christian and Muslim historians, therefore, would adamantly oppose those who suggested an eternal world.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, they would take an interest in calculating the duration of the world. Early Christian chroniclers (Sextus Julius Africanus and Hippolytus) felt an urgency to do so since the chiliasts with their expectations of an imminent Parousia had to be contradicted. Their equating of the six days of Creation with six thousand years (each divine day being the same as 1000 world years) played a significant role. Muslim chroniclers took a more detached view of the issue. Al-Tabarī arrived at a total of 14,000 years for the world's duration, 7,000 of which were used in Creation and 7,000 afterwards.<sup>12</sup> In an entirely different vein, al-Mas'ūdī introduced a novel element, hinting at times at a "running down" of the cosmos caused by the diminution of the available matter. Both groups also engaged in figuring the time that had elapsed since the beginning of the world or the period of Abraham. They soon found their calculations beset by problems; the adding of the patriarchs' life spans from different versions of venerated texts yielded different figures.<sup>13</sup> But despite its technical difficulties, the world years scheme

10. There were the testimonies of people in the period of the "interval" between Jesus and Mohammed who foresaw the importance of Mohammed (Mas'ūdī, *Prairies*, 1: 53-62 [122-151]). In a wider sense the preparation of Mohammed was signified by the sages of the ancient nations, who labored on the body of wisdom that—according to Mas'ūdī—grew regardless of the rise and fall of empires.

11. Christian rejections came in Q. Julius Hilarianus, *Chronologia sive libellus de duratione mundi* and Honorius Augustodunensis, *Summa totius, de omnimoda historia* (for both see Brincken, *Die lateinische Weltchronistik*, p. 58, n. 46 and p. 217). For Muslim chroniclers, al-Tabarī, *The History of al-Tabarī* (Albany, NY, 1985-), 1:171-194 [7-25] on the createdness of time and Mas'ūdī in his many passages on time.

12. As is usual for al-Tabarī, he gave various calculations, but he himself adheres to the 7000 years of which 6500 had passed at the birth of Mohammed (*History of al-Tabarī*, 1:182-184 [14-16]).

13. Christian chroniclers differed on the Incarnation date expressed in world years: Sextus Julius Africanus 5500, Eusebius 5198 and the Venerable Bede 3952. Muslim chroniclers did the same for the Hegira: al-Tabarī 6500 (according to Ibn 'Abbas and Abu

did testify to the unity of world history as a one-time linear development leading from the Creation to the Apocalypse.<sup>14</sup>

But the translations of the primordial accounts into historiographical schemes for the ancient past did not yet resolve the problem of giving unity to world history. When Christian and Muslim world chroniclers aligned the past with the future, they had to acknowledge that the years of the Incarnation (or Passion) and the Hegira were markers that divided history into two parts. They had succeeded in transforming the first part, leading to those central events, into a period of preparation thus giving the preceding millennia a rationale. They now had to do the same for the second part. It, too, came to be a preparatory period—one for the end of the world. Its purpose, the full realization of the divine promise, was more acutely felt by Christian chroniclers, who spoke of the “fulfillment of time” and tried to demonstrate the process in an increasing convergence of the diverse national histories. The actual working out of the grand historical interpretation—one truly encompassing the whole of history from Creation to Apocalypse—needed new conceptual means by which to integrate the myriad phenomena of the post-Incarnation and post-Prophetic world into the overall historical scheme. This necessity produced the concept of an historical agent, working on behalf of God’s plan, as well as a scheme for the proper organization of time reflective of sacred history.

The concept of a special historical agent of the sacred had been inherent in the Jewish Covenant. It re-emerged in the Christian chronicles with the assertion that the Roman Empire was the suitable agent. After centuries of opposition and persecution, the Constantinian compromise made possible the view of the Roman Empire as God’s instrument. The historiographical justification of that concept came not from the long-standing assertion of the *Roma aeterna*, but the ancient vision of history as the sequence of four empires. Its acceptance was sanctioned biblically by the narrative of Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue, made of various metals and clay, that in the end was shattered by a boulder.<sup>15</sup> Daniel’s interpretation stipulated a sequence of four empires as the course of world history. Through the mediation of Orosius’s *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, the scheme found easy entry into subsequent Christian chronicles. In Orosius’s version Rome was the last of the empires, with

Tha’labah al-Kushani) and Mas’udi 6126 years.

14. Mas’udi, *Prairies*, 1:64-65 [154].

15. Daniel 2: 28-45

a life span equal to that of the first one, Babylon. That many medieval Christian chroniclers accepted Orosius's view was less important than the fact that it proved ultimately untenable as the key for ordering mundane history in terms of sacred history. Over the centuries the historiographical efficacy of the four empire scheme underwent steady decline under the pressure of a contradictory reality. Early on, Isidore of Seville rejected it and maintained that the Church alone could be the historical agent. Then, in the face of renewed use of the four empire scheme by those who saw the Holy Roman Empire as Rome's successor (800), the ninth-century chroniclers Frechulf of Lisieux and Regino of Prüm asserted that the end of the Roman Empire had occurred in 476 CE, with a new period beginning then. On the other hand, in his *De duabus civitatibus* the proimperial Otto of Freising (twelfth century) reaffirmed the four empires scheme, primarily for its apocalyptic implications and its suggestion that power and knowledge had migrated westward.<sup>16</sup> It later retained a faint presence, mainly in German works.<sup>17</sup> In the end the Church would remain the sole agent of continuity and unity, no longer intertwined with a universal empire but with a multitude of states.

Although Islamic chroniclers knew of the empire scheme, they made no use of it because it did not fit the Islamic historical context.<sup>18</sup> During the great age of Muslim world chronicle writing in the ninth and tenth centuries, it was still plausible to see the Arabs as the main instrument for carrying out God's plan. Thus, the problems inherent in the concept of a special divine agent in history became those connected with the caliphate. Caliphs were to carry on the prophetic task, that is, to perform Mohammed's role as the models, teachers and guides of proper conduct in matters of this and the next world. The problems with the Alids, already visible in al-Mas'udī's chronicle, made it soon apparent how difficult it would be to maintain an uncontested line of caliphal succession.<sup>19</sup>

16. Otto of Freising, *The Two Cities; a Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 A.D.*, trans. Charles C. Mierow (New York, 1928), pp. 185 and 400-401 (ii, 27 and vi, 36).

17. See Johann Philippi Sleidanus, *De quatuor summis imperii* (Strasbourg, 1556).

18. During the tenth century Orosius's work was translated into Arabic and was definitely known to Ibn Khaldūn.

19. The most important hints come in sections concerning Ali's assassination, the subsequent division of views on legitimacy and the lack of respect for the spiritual authority of some of the rulers. See al-Mas'udī's titling of only one of the Umayyads as caliph ('Umar b. 'Abd al-Aziz), *Prairies*, 1:17 [31].

The second interpretive concept for demonstrating the divinely planned unity of history in the complex diversity of the mundane world after Christ and Mohammed was an organization of time with an inherent logic of unity. A model, with a seemingly biblical sanction, presented itself in the six world eras, modeled on the six days of Creation. The sixth age was ushered in by Jesus as the Christ and Mohammed as the last Prophet. For the first five periods both groups of world chroniclers could use various patriarchs, prophets and biblical events as the dividing points between ages. Christian chroniclers produced a large variety of such schemes. Al-Tabarī and al-Mas'ūdī discussed the six ages, but did not apply them.<sup>20</sup> By the eleventh century the view of six thousand years as the limit for the duration of the world, derived from equating each of the Creation days to thousand mundane years, had suffered a steep decline. Muslim chroniclers simply mentioned it and Christian chroniclers gave it an ever less exuberant affirmation in the measure to which the sixth age lengthened and its ordering according to the sacred tradition became more difficult. Christian chronicles were missing the agent, whose work could have been the grand instrument for sacred history in the puzzling mundane world. In Muslim chronicles that problem surfaced in the deteriorating unity between caliphate and royal authority. The annalistic order used in the world chronicles for the period after the death of Mohammed had still reflected a clear line of authority until the end of the Abbassid dynasty. But with the increasing decentralization of political power in the Islamic world the unitary line was lost.

The problem of linking Creation, Revelation and the end of the world to the mundane dimensions of time accounted for the attention paid to chronology. Muslim chroniclers reported with meticulous care the chronological schemes of the many peoples with whom they dealt. Inspired by some questions about time raised in the Koran, they even asked the fundamental question what the term "time" signified. The answer, given in the lengthy and detailed stories of God's creative powers, defined time as part of the created world and not as a dimension independent of it.<sup>21</sup> Christian chronology was marked by

20. Thus, in the *History of al-Tabarī*, 1:371 [200-201], the author discusses the world eras, tracing the scheme to Muslim sages (al-Zuhri and al-Sha'bi), who got it from the Jews. The specific scheme he mentioned divides the pre-Islamic era as follows: Adam/Noah/Flood/Fire of Abraham/Joseph/Moses/Solomon/Jesus/the Messenger of God, Mohammed.

21. The best example is found in *History of al-Tabarī*, 1:171-183 [7-14] and 1:186-187 [18-19].

its intended purpose. While that chronology took much of its material from ancient chronological tables, Eusebius constructed these tables as synchronous chronological lines with a clearly apologetic purpose. The lines symbolizing the histories of the ancient peoples faded one after the other until only the Roman and Christian lines were left—a graphic image of sacred history in its mundane counterpart. However, only a few medieval chroniclers took up the scheme (such as Sigebert of Gembloux). The work to obtain exact dates of the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, the dating of pre-Incarnation years and the compilation of Easter tables would consume much of the effort of Christian chronologers. That retained chronology was a vital ingredient in theology and technically useful to historians, but it did not assist them in their struggles with the organization of the sixth age of history.

## II

For centuries and despite complex problems, the stock of interpretive concepts used in Christian and Muslim world chronicles had proven adequate to the task. That meant the sacred core accounts, as elaborated by Christian theologians and by Muslim scholars, found a systematic and detailed expression in historiography. Chroniclers could cope with the strains that had all along beset the reconciliation of the mundane world's diversity with the unity of sacred history. After 1000 CE, however, the strains acquired a strength that tested traditional historiographical schemes of interpretation to the breaking point. In both Latin Christian and Muslim areas the new and formidable pressure originated in changes in the cultural context. Al-Mas'udī already had noted the decisive impact of the growth of urban culture. Later, Ibn Khaldūn credited urbanization with making possible a higher form of civilization, indeed considered it as a goal built into human history.<sup>22</sup> Latin Christendom experienced the close connections among greater population density, urbanization and changes in civilization. Historiographically, that meant the erosion of the institutional basis of the medieval world chronicle—the monasticism of the contemplative orders. Politically the area stabilized not into one Christian political entity, but into a welter of kingdoms and principalities with the Holy Roman Empire remaining no more than a symbol of unity. In the Islamic area the grand unity of the Arab empire and its firm link with the

22. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. and abridged by N. J. Dawood (Princeton, 1967), p. 285 [4, 18].

caliphate were replaced by a far-flung Islamic world lacking a clear center. Both Christian and Muslim world chroniclers also faced an ever-widening experiential knowledge, in particular of other cultures and peoples. The sheer quantitative weight of the new information proved to be overwhelming. Twentieth-century observers may well smile at Ibn Khaldūn's claim that his work was an "exhaustive history of the world," but the problem of synthesis was nonetheless real.<sup>23</sup>

There was also the paradoxical situation that the more successful the Christian and Muslim religions were in fulfilling the premise of universality by expanding, the more difficult became the task of converting the grand sacred principles of unity into an effective historiographical unity of large numbers of peoples with their own collective memories. It was the religious counterpart to the problems confronted by modern world historians with the relentless widening of the scope of history.

The first traditional unifying concept to feel the impact was the historical agent of sacred history. In the new context neither the Arabs nor the Romans were any longer available for the role. In Latin Christianity the Church emerged gradually as the sole carrier of the sacred aspect of history, a development historiographically visible in the growing prominence of ecclesiastical history. Later, this reliance on ecclesiastical history would detract from the cause of a world history seen as sacred history. Ecclesiastical history would lose gradually its close intertwining with mundane history and become the history of one particular institution among others. In the Muslim world the agency of the sacred constituted by the unity of royal authority and caliphate became at best tentative. Al-Mas'ūdī had already noted the blurring of the clear caliphal line. Nearly 400 years later, the situation had changed so much that Ibn Khaldūn could construct a full-fledged theory on the changes of the sacred agent as reflected in the connection between the caliphate and royal authority. According to him, the caliphate began without reliance on royal authority, but became subordinate to it owing to the lack of true spiritual authority of the caliphs and rulers. For Ibn Khaldūn this happened because of the diminishing sense of solidarity (*'asabiyyah*, group consciousness) among the Arabs. With the caliphs reduced to blessing the existing royal authority, Muslim historiography lost its unifying agent on behalf of sacred history.<sup>24</sup>

23. *Ibid.*, p. 9 [Foreword].

24. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, pp. 154-166, [23-26].

Equally beset by difficulties was the scheme of the six world ages. Chroniclers confronted the multitude of nations—an intensified *diamerismos*—still without any scheme of periodization that compared in clarity and religious authority to that available for the first five eras (from Abraham to Jesus or Mohammed). In the Christian chronicles one could also observe a slow receding of concern for the first five ages. Accounts of them became shorter and eventually were even omitted, not because of disbelief or criticism, but because of the presumption that they were well enough known, the lack of possibility to add to them, and the demand for space by the mass of material concerning the sixth age. Thus, for example, Orderic Vitalis, whose devotion could not be doubted, began his *Ecclesiastical History* with the Incarnation.<sup>25</sup> While the abbreviations or omissions did not signal a rejection of the sacred dimension, they did diminish significantly the direct presence of that dimension in mundane history.

The considerably lesser status of the world ages in the Muslim world chronicles made the problem less significant. Nevertheless, after the dissolution of the union between the caliphate and royal authority, Muslim historiography also began to lack a unifying scheme linked directly to the mundane world. The abandonment of the annalistic order in the chronicles was in large part due to the difficulties experienced by a history that still had a sacred story to tell but had lost a leading line upon which to fasten. One can reasonably argue that the weakening of the unifying scheme for world chronicles contributed to the confusion and qualitative decline of the writing of Muslim world history after 1000 CE noted by Ibn Khaldūn. He observed that after al-Tabarī, ad-Dinawarī and al-Mas'ūdī, the chronicles lacked innovations, produced uncritical and dull accounts and presented much information with little explanation.

The lack of ordering schemes—persuasive links to the revealed explanatory accounts of the world—could not continue for long without evoking some responses. Old schemes, of course, were still available and used even in some of the chronicles after 1000 CE. The barren list chronicles with added stories and annotations experienced a revival in the Latin West, since these world chronicles were popular with the mendicant orders for their usefulness for preaching. Innovators even tried to breathe new life into older schemes. In Latin Christendom, attempts were made to pattern the history of the world according to tripartite schemes like the Trinity or the *vaticinium eliae*. They relied on

25. Ordericus Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*, trans. T. Forester (London, 1853; New York, 1968), I, 5-83.

the idea that world history proceeded in three steps, each characterized by a greater perfection of the collective mind set or spirit: Joachim of Fiore's ages of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit or Hugh of St. Victor's period of natural law, written law and time of grace. Yet these works were really theologies of histories rather than world chronicles. That is, they usually connected the sacred development with the mundane context in the most general fashion.

Still other innovations testified to the weight that the unmastered and growing material of mundane history had acquired. In both Christian and Muslim areas the readiness grew to find ordering schemes for world history that did not fasten onto passages of the Bible and the Koran but onto accumulated experiential knowledge. That did not mean a world history based on the denial of the revealed core knowledge, only a changed linkage to it. Christian and Muslim chroniclers alike affirmed the divine governance of the world as strongly as ever. Ibn Khaldūn formulated the new view in a manner that, if it had been known there, would even have been acceptable in the Latin West. Human beings as the special, though fallible, creations by God acted under divine guidance as His agents. Such a view of God's economy in the governance of the world gave human history a greater autonomy; it also made available to historians a much wider field for theorizing and interpreting. Left would be a more generalized awareness of Divine Providence working in hidden ways and made visible directly in the occasional occurrence of unexpected, if not miraculous, events.

When coping with the dissolution of what once had been seen as a unitary development, Christian and Muslim world chroniclers, despite their noticeable differences, found their awareness of the *diamerismos* alleviated by the still affirmed unity of the past and the promised unity in the future. For the future development of Christian historiography, however, one particular innovation would become important. Faced with an unmanageable mass of material on mundane history, chroniclers came to expect help from a clearer systematization of knowledge or the disciplines dealing with it. One major thrust led to a search for categories of historical understanding and explanation. For building a synthesis, historians endeavored not so much to analyze epistemological processes (the still unimpaired certainty about truth and truth finding made that superfluous), but attempted to find general categories of phenomena and their interrelations. Thus, Hugh of St. Victor (1094-1141) relied on the categories of time, persons and places (*loca*) to bring some order to historical accounts. However, he defined the respective roles of history and theology in a manner that made history a clear auxiliary discipline, thereby relieving it of the need to find more than *exempla*



illustrating theological teachings. Ranulph Higden (c.1280-c.1363/64) suggested a veritable compendium of old organizational schemes (world empires, ages and chronologies) and new ones (such as types of religion and history-makers).

Among Muslims, the issue of clarifying the status of history involved the clear delineation of history and sacred knowledge (derived from the Koran and *hadīth* or Tradition). In reporting on the ancient past the devout Muslim chronicler was keenly aware of the border between sacred tradition and human investigation. But in historical reports there always was material that posed questions of credibility and the proper methods to answer them. Al-Tabarī, al-Maḡdisī and ad-Dinawarī remained fairly traditional in their approaches. Nevertheless, when it mattered and seemed proper, al-Tabarī checked the dating of patristic personalities (especially Abraham) fastidiously against other chronologies and used linguistic analysis to authenticate the identity of rulers.<sup>26</sup> But only occasionally would he have recourse to the specific rules of reason. Al-Mas'ūdī was more venturesome. The historian, as al-Mas'ūdī put it, had to sort important and trustworthy from trivial and suspect material. He compared the situation to that of "a woodman working in the midst of the darkness of the night," who has difficulties distinguishing good from bad timber.<sup>27</sup> When it came to natural phenomena, such as the study of the oceans, al-Mas'ūdī stressed the role of direct observation. And when he found a particularly suspect story, he listed reason, sensory experience (eyewitness) and experiential knowledge as means of verification.<sup>28</sup> The approach was conscious of mediation between *hadīth* with its inner criteria and *isnād* and relied upon reason and experience for matters outside of the *hadīth*. Of course, where the Koran spoke all investigation found its critical limits. Thus, al-Mas'ūdī would pass over important material of a sensitive nature because neither the Koran nor the Prophet had spoken on it.

In their early attempts to find the proper means for understanding or explaining history through observing mundane history, Muslim world chroniclers enjoyed initially a double advantage: the generally wider leeway they had always exercised in exploring the natural and historical world and the appearance of an outstanding historian who brought this approach to an innovative fruition, Ibn Khaldūn. It became important that he felt no need to strive for a doctrinally sound linearity of history.

26. *History of al-Tabarī*, 2:1 [201].

27. Al-Mas'ūdī, *Prairies*, 2:454 [1205].

28. *Ibid.*, 1:214, [570].

Thus, when Ibn Khaldūn dealt with the expectations for the future, he referred simply to the human attempts at forecasting, leaving the expectations of an end of history to such vague phrases as "the other world." As for the duration of the world, he remarked only that the prediction of its end five hundred years after the coming of Islam had proven wrong.

Ibn Khaldūn's importance, a rather singular one even in the Muslim world, rested on his attempt to give mundane history a theoretical foundation that recognized both divine and human activity in history. Al-Mas'ūdī had already classified phenomena into necessary, impossible and possible ones with the last offering a field for which reason was the appropriate investigative tool. Reason was effective because of the presence of regularities in mundane history that carried out the divine plan for history without "capricious" interferences.

The focus of historical investigation became the rise and fall of states. Al-Mas'ūdī had linked these to the maintenance of justice and of the proper relationship between kingship and religion. His remarks on the fate of states provided the basis for a full-fledged theory. At its base was an epistemology with three types of reason (a discerning, experimental and speculative intellect) and an emphasis on experience and logical consistency. Ibn Khaldūn found a fixed pattern to the rise and fall of states: the strength of group solidarity (*'asabiyyah*) determined the power and prosperity of a state and its subsequent decline. The pattern, although divinely planned, became a causal or structural one (Ibn Khaldūn called it "the inner meaning of history") elaborated on at length.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it supplied the explanatory scheme of historical change in general, which prompted a vast enlargement of speculations on the influence of the physical environment on human history, together with new self-regulating patterns for mundane history.<sup>30</sup>

### III

By the fourteenth century the reformulation of Christian and Muslim world-history writing was well underway. The relationship between the core of sacred knowledge and the now more autonomous mundane world had become extremely complex. Yet, the temptation to see this

29. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, p. 5 [Foreword].

30. See the influence of climate on power in al-Mas'ūdī, *Prairies*, 1:144-45 [395], and on the human condition and character, Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, pp. 58-69 [Third and Fourth Preliminary Discussions].

process as an early stage of the secularization process—understood in terms of a rejection of the sacred—simplifies matters beyond recognition. None of the historians who chronicled the past doubted the world as a divine creation, God's sovereignty over it and the centrality of Jesus and Mohammed. Ibn Khaldūn himself acknowledged divine sovereignty over history and guidance for the historian in prayerful passages and numerous appellations to God.<sup>31</sup> The shift in historiographical interpretation occurred within the traditional paradigm and was treated as the problem of how to relate sacred core accounts to mundane history in a new and appropriate manner. However, although the sacred core account was not doubted, large segments of its translation into terms of mundane history became ineffective under the impact of the severe tension that beset the relationship between unifying concepts and the new overwhelming diversity. In the subsequent centuries Latin Christianity would see many attempts to restore more than general links between the core account and the accounts of mundane history. It became clear that medieval historians, although they could rely on unifying concepts with strong theological foundations, found the construction of concepts that would tame the diversity of the past and present world a formidable task. And their concepts, too, showed only a temporary match with reality before losing their interpretive authority. In the case of the medieval chroniclers the process of conceptualization differed from the modern situation by the presence of the ontological gradient from the sacred to the mundane and by a slower pace of change in comparison to our time. However, the central problem of world history has remained the same: in order to discern and demonstrate the unity of the world, historians must use concepts that are general enough to encompass the whole human experience but remain meaningful and instructive in a multitude of contexts of smaller range. In addition, the unity of time has to be established by a credible link between past, present and the expected future. The fate of medieval world chroniclers, too, is instructive. In the end the world chroniclers had to realize that their translation of the sacred core into historiographical schemes did not possess the authority of the sacred core itself. Their conceptual solutions could not close the ontological gap. Modern world historians have experienced an equivalent gap between their core of truth—be it a set of truth-yielding methods or functional or structural explanations—and the specifics of

31. See Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, for the initial praise of God, p. 3, the wish to glorify God in his work, p. 9, and the many express recognitions of divine wisdom and power throughout the book.

the past human life. Yet they, too, have continued to follow the call for a unified history of the human past, this time not vouchsafed by revelation but by fragmentary empirical insights that point to a unified history, such as anthropological stipulations of a unitary human descent, the diversity-bridging insights into human DNA, and, not least, the historical trend toward a unified globe. And, across the centuries, medieval and modern historians have experienced promptings by the sense of the whole, manifest in the quest for a meaning to collective and individual human experience as an undeniable feature of human life. The understanding that the key problems of world-history writing are inherent in the endeavor of world history itself should caution historians against quick solutions built on simplistic theories or the abandonment of the endeavor as futile. The former leads to harsh disillusionments and the latter contradicts a centuries-old quest rooted in human existence itself.