

The Glorious Past: Entertainment, Example or History?

Levels of Twelfth-century Historical Culture

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Introduction

Around 1115, Guibert (1053-1124), abbot of Nogent in Northern France from 1104, composed an autobiography. He had already some extraordinary writings behind him, such as the description of the first Crusade (*Gesta Dei per Francos*), and he was about to compile a unique work discussing the doubtful origin of a number of relics. In the second book of the autobiography he writes about the great antiquity of Nogent as a place of worship. This is clear, he says, from the number of tombs around and in the church:

“These tombs are not arranged in the way we are used to, but rather with one person’s tomb in the centre and the others placed in a circle around it. Moreover, certain utensils are found in them the use of which is unknown to Christian times. The inevitable conclusion is that if the tombs are not pagan, then they are very early Christian, but made after the pagan fashion.¹

A second example of twelfth century interest in early Christian culture is found in Rome. Contemporary with Guibert’s career as abbot, the spiritual capital of Europe saw building activity unprecedented in Medieval times. The new munificence, mainly by popes and cardinals, found its outlet especially in restoring, rebuilding, and ornamenting old churches. According to art historians, this wave of building took on new forms immediately after 1122, when the Struggle of Investiture was formally concluded in Worms. The Concordate of Worms was seen as a great victory by the Papacy, and to

1. Guibert de Nogent, *Autobiographie* (ed. E.-R. Labande, Paris 1981) II,1: “Quia enim non in morem nostrorum ordo disponitur sepulchrorum, sed circulatim in modum carulae sepulchrum unius multa ambiunt, in quibus quaedam reperiuntur vasa, quorum causam nesciunt christiana tempora, non possumus aliud credere, nisi quod fuerunt gentilium, aut antiquissima christianorum, sed facta gentili more.”

express the triumphant mood a new use of architectural forms and reuse of antique materials developed. People in Rome were of course surrounded by structures that had stood for a millennium or more, and antique columns and the like were used for all kinds of purposes during the Medieval centuries. What was new in the churches from the 1120s and onwards was the nave as a triumphal colonnade with Ionic capitals and an architrave instead of the usual romanesque arches. This was no doubt inspired by a notion of what triumphal architecture looked like in the great Roman past, in particular in the two early imperial churches still in use, the Old St. Peter's and the Lateran.²

My third and final example is German, and dates from around 1150. In the important see of Trier, on the Mosel, a monk at the Benedictine abbey of St. Maximin added some notes into the margins of a book containing texts on ancient Roman history. Here he entered into a local debate on the life of his patron saint and on the early history of Trier. Among other things he wanted to prove that Christianity had not become extinct at any time in Trier (as some sources had it), and that St. Maximin was contemporary with the renowned St. Martin. His method in proving these points is a fascinating mixture of source studies, chronological computations, arguments from probability, and tampering with the evidence. Part of the argument about Christian continuity in Roman Trier runs like this:

The fact that Tetradius was baptized by Martin I explain by saying that his baptism was delayed for so long because that was the habit of those times. We find that this [late baptism] was also practised by Augustine, Ambrose and Martin himself. It still does not mean that the entire city was pagan.³

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2. I am relying on P.C. Claussen, 'Renovatio Romae. Erneuerungsphasen römischer Architektur im 11. und 12. Jahrhundert' pp. 87-125 in *Rom im hohen Mittelalter. Studien zu den Romvorstellungen und zur Rompolitik vom 10. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert* (ed. B. Schimmelpfennig & L. Schmutge, Sigmaringen 1992).
 3. L.B. Mortensen, 'Twelfth-century studies in Trier's Roman past. (Chronological discussions in Ms British Library, Addit. 19967)', *Cahiers de l'institut du moyen-âge grec et latin* 59 (1989) 297-322, § B 9 (p.319): "Sed quia Tetradius a Martino baptizatus est dicimus eius baptismum usque illuc sicut mos illius temporis erat distulisse quod et Augustinum et Ambrosium et ipsum Martinum inuenimus fecisse. Nec tamen totam ciuitatem paganam ideo extitisse." Another version of these chronological notes (without this particular passage) is edited with further comments by F. Dolbeau, 'Les hagiographes au travail: Collecte et traitement des documents écrits (IXe-XIe siècles). Avec annexe: Une discussion chronologique du XIIe siècle (edition de BHL

These three examples show twelfth-century concern about how things were done differently in early Christian times, i.e. some 800 years earlier. They probably do nicely if you want to rebut the commonplace view that men in the Middle Ages had no sense of historical change whatsoever. But that is, I believe, a cause already won.⁴ Perhaps they also give a hint of the richness of twelfth-century historical discourse, but my point here is also to use them as a kind of warning.

Quoted without a larger framework and some kind of systematic questioning they can do more harm than good. Single examples should not be allowed to bear the burden of proof of any positive statement on the Medieval attitude to the past, let alone to establish an historicism *avant la lettre*. Instead of such isolated flashes we should rather be looking at a specific theme in overview. In the first part of my paper I propose to focus on the glorification of certain “pasts” by Medieval scholars, more precisely by authors from the prolific twelfth century, during which historical literature, and studies in general, displayed a quantitative and qualitative flowering – usually referred to as the Twelfth-century Renaissance. Then, in the second part, I want to suggest different Medieval levels, or rather “modes”, of speaking about those pasts, viz. an entertaining, an exemplary, and an historical mode. I hope to show that a model somewhat along those lines is needed to do justice to the diversity of twelfth century historical discourse.

5824e)’, *Manuscrits hagiographiques et travail des hagiographes*. Ed. M. Heinzelmänn. Sigmaringen 1992, pp. 49-76 (Beihefte der Francia, Band 24).

4. Important papers dealing with this problem are: R.W. Southern, ‘Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 4. The Sense of the Past’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, vol. 23 (1973) 243-63; G. Constable, ‘Past and Present in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries. Perceptions of Time and Change’, *L’Europa dei secoli XI e XII fra novità e tradizione: Sviluppi di una cultura* (Miscelanea del Centro di studi medioevali 12), Milano 1989, 135-70. An entire volume is dedicated to *The Perception of the Past in the Twelfth Century*, ed. P. Magdalino, London 1992; there, the historiography of the period is treated by regions. A. Funkenstein, ‘Periodization and Self-Understanding in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times’, *Medievalia et humanistica* n.s. 5 (1974) 3-23, does not fulfill its promise for the Middle Ages. Vaughan, R. ‘The Past in the Middle Ages’, *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986) 1-14 represents a fresh, if somewhat overstated, approach to the Medieval interest in the past.

The glorious past

To glorify the past was one simple way of stating that it was fundamentally different. Broadly speaking I think two forces were at work here. One could be termed the “founding-fathers syndrome”, the other has to do with the status of ancient Rome in Medieval learning. Let us look at the founding fathers first.

At the end of the twelfth century the longest, most well researched, and stylistically most elaborate history of the Crusades was written by William, a prominent figure of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and archbishop of Tyre. In 23 books he traces the story from before the proclamation of the First Crusade by Urban II at the Council of Clermont-Ferrand in 1095 up to 1184. He probably died shortly after, and did not see the fall of Jerusalem in 1187. Recent scholarship has established that the first eight books, which deal with the first Crusade and the capture of Jerusalem in 1099, have a special narrative quality.⁵ It is somehow set apart from the remaining bulk which chronicles the more confusing story of the establishment and history of the Kingdom of Jerusalem up to William’s own time. A salient feature in the first eight books is the frequent intervention by God. Although phrases on divine protection and suchlike are not absent from later books, they have a much more mechanical ring to them. No one is the direct divine mouthpiece, as is Urban II at Clermont-Ferrand. Also, the history of the First Crusade is rather more white-washed than later periods where intrigue, deceit, and power struggle predominate. William is not as uncritical as to eulogize everything about the First Crusade, but the general picture is clear: the leaders, like Geoffrey of Boullion and Tancred of Hauteville, were larger than life. The popular support and the entire atmosphere was glowing with divine intensity. Things happened in those days which happen no more. There is hardly any doubt that William was sincere about the celestial origin of the institution of which he was a leading member: the Kingdom of Jerusalem. What he was a victim of was a mild case of the “founding-fathers-syndrome”, something which had struck a host of national historians before and has done so since.

A severe case afflicted the Bohemian historian, Cosmas of Prague, in the beginning of the twelfth century. Cosmas was a high-ranking cleric in Prague, and wrote his patriotic history of Bohemia late in life, in the 1110s and ‘20s. In the beginning of the work we hear of the country’s eponymic

5. Edbury, P.W. & Rowe, J.G. *William of Tyre. Historian of the Latin East*. Cambridge 1988.

founding father Boemus. When he entered the uninhabited land, he cried out to his followers: “This is the land I have promised you, flowing with milk and honey” and a lot more in the same vein. Boemus’ speech is clearly patterned on expressions from two outstanding foundation legends: the promised land of the Old Testament and the Roman Empire to be founded by Aeneas’ coming to Italy, according to Vergil’s Aeneid. These were certainly the most prestigious frames of reference you could turn to in the twelfth century. But Cosmas does not stop there. He goes on to say:

Men of that time lived such virtuous, honest, simple, and admirably upright lives, they were so faithful and compassionate towards each other, they possessed such modesty, temperance, and continence that it would be very painful if anyone attempted to account for it at length, considering how modern men imitate the exact opposite qualities.⁶

He goes on to depict that golden age in detail. A page later he says:

No one knew the word ‘mine’, but from their mouths, hearts and works the word ‘ours’ resounded, just as in monastic life. There were no bars on stables, the doors did not close on the poor because no thieves and robbers or poor people existed. No offence was considered as grave as theft and robbery. They never experienced armed conflict with other people, and they only had arrows themselves for killing game. What next? Alas! Happy times yielded to the opposite, common values to egoistic ones.⁷

A golden age *tour de force* such as this one is extraordinary, but not unique, in Medieval historiography. Cosmas expands the passage by many verbal borrowings from classical Roman authors, and in general the ideas and ex-

6. Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Boemorum* I,3; ed. B. Bretholz (MGH Scriptores, n.s. 2, Berlin 1923 / München 1980): “Quorum autem morum, quam honestorum vel quante simplicitatis et quam ammirande probitatis tunc temporis fuerint homines quamque inter se fideles et in semetipos misericordes, cuius etiam modestie, sobrietatis, continentie, si quis his modernis hominibus valde contraria imitantibus pleno ore narrare temptaverit, in magnum deveniret fastidium.”

7. *Ibid.*: “Nec quisquam ‘meum’ dicere norat, sed ad instar monastice vite, quicquid habebant, ‘nostrum’ ore, corde et opere sonabant. Ad stabula non erant repagula, nec portam inopi claudebant, quia neque fur neque latro neque inops quisquam erat; nullum scelus apud eos furto gravius et latrocinio. Nullius gentis arma videre, tantummodo sagittas, et has propter feriendas feras, habuere. Quid plura? Proh dolor! Prospera in contraria, communia in propria cedunt.”

pressions about the Bohemian origins owe much to his concept about ancient Rome as something worthy of emulation. This interest for the Roman Empire as a fixed point of glory in the past Cosmas shared with numerous colleagues.

With this I have come to the second version of a glorious past. How clear were the notions about the long gone past of the Roman Empire, and how different was that past conceived to have been? For some, no doubt – such as ordinary people contemplating Roman ruins – everything was very vague. Scholars, however, even if not occupied with history, could not help facing some of the literary remains from pagan and Christian antiquity. Indeed, very many texts – probably the majority – copied during the twelfth century, were more than 600 years old. They constituted the foundation for any serious study of Latin language and literature, and, in turn, for Biblical and theological inquiries. The history of Rome was, of course, not taught as such in the schools, but given the status of the language of the Romans, and of old texts, it must have been hard to ignore the fact that a great Mediterranean empire once existed. This is not to say that Rome was glorified automatically in all respects, but it was at least a momentuous past ready to deliver language, stories, legends, models, examples etc. for contemporary use.

I shall now attempt to sort out some channels through which knowledge about Rome flowed. Let us begin with one of the few major works dealing with the Roman Empire which was not written in Latin. I am here referring to the Middle High German *Kaiserchronik*. It is a rhymed chronicle telling the history of the Roman empire in more than 17.000 lines of poetry, amounting to more than 300 pages in the modern standard edition. The author is unknown, but he was no doubt a native of the large Bavarian trading centre, and imperial residence, Regensburg. It has been suggested that his audience was the burghers of the town rather than clerics and aristocrats.⁸ After a few preliminaries the chronicle opens the story with Julius Caesar and through biographies and various digressions reaches up to the author's times. The last events described took place in 1147. The narrative concen-

8. C. Gellinek, *Die Deutsche Kaiserchronik. Erzähltechnik und Kritik*, Frankfurt am Main 1971, p.17. My information builds on this and on E.F. Ohly, *Sage und Legende in der Kaiserchronik. Untersuchungen über Quellen und Aufbau der Dichtung*, Darmstadt 1968 (1st ed.: Münster 1940), the survey by E. Nellman in vol. 5:856-57 of *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, München 1991, and the edition by E. Schröder MGH, *Deutsche Chroniken 1,1: Die Kaiserchronik eines Regensburger geistlichen* (Hannover 1892 / München 1984).

trates on the older Roman Empire, whereas the later “Medieval” one beginning with Charlemagne is treated cursorily in the last sixth of the work.

The impression the *Kaiserchronik* wants to leave with its audience is one of good and bad rulers in an exotic, intriguing world of a distant but important empire. Everything is oversized compared to contemporary history, the setting as well as the moral qualities of rulers. A bad emperor of Nero’s caliber is summoned to Hell, and the heroes, such as Trajan, Constantine and Theodosius get their rewards in Heaven. In the prologue to the chronicle it is promised that no vain fables are going to be told here, and a certain level of chronological precision is indicated at the end of each reign, when the duration in years and months are enumerated. But the *Kaiserchronik* lists only 32 emperors from Caesar to Charlemagne, falling rather short of other Medieval or modern counts. In addition, four of the emperors are unhistorical. Worse still, the chronology is in shambles: after Julian the Apostate (4th cent.) follows Heraclius (7th cent.), Justinian (6th cent.) and Theodosius II (5th cent.). Also, the continuity of the empire is subjected to an unusual interpretation. After the unhistorical Dietrich there followed a long interregnum where the imperial crown rested on the alter of St. Peter’s in Rome, more or less waiting for Charlemagne to come along. Another peculiarity of the work is that stories about saints and other legends are attached to the narratives concerning many emperors, e.g. that of Veronica to Tiberius, St. Lawrence to Decius etc.

Now, let us turn to a much more scholarly presentation of Roman history. I have picked out Hugh of St. Victor’s *Chronica* from about 1130,⁹ but other texts in the chronological tradition would have given the same picture. Hugh became the best known theologian and scriptural exegete in the early twelfth century, and he also wrote this one historical reference work. It is written as a tool for Biblical studies and contains lists of personal and geographical names mainly from the Old Testament. However, secular history is not overlooked, and especially Roman and Frankish rulers receive attention – again an indication of the importance of ancient Rome in Medieval scholarship. The Roman emperors are listed twice, once on their own and once in a column that runs parallel with a list of popes. The succession of emperors

9. The work has not yet been edited in full. For a recent survey and an edition of the secular history parts: L.B. Mortensen, “Hugh of St. Victor on Secular History. A preliminary edition of chapters from his *Chronica*.”, *Cahiers de l’Institut du moyen-âge grec et latin* 62 (1992) 3-30.

and the duration of each reign are presented in a manner not despicable by modern standards, and there are no flights of fancy. The facts are there, detailed and very correct.

Hugh's arid lists invited expanders. A prominent one was Richard of St. Victor who compiled a sort of encyclopedia in the 1150s, usually referred to as *Liber excerptionum*. It is a much larger volume than Hugh's and enhances the lists by larger bits of narrative prose. The result is not historical writing, but a more complete tool for Biblical studies. Again secular history intrudes rather more than you would expect for a simple frame of reference for ecclesiastical history, and again the focus tends to be on Roman and, at the end, Frankish history. In the beginning of the sixth book Richard uses two pages to give us the full glory of the reign of Augustus. In contrast to the *Kaiserchronik* we find here quite a lot of information which is also given in modern textbooks. We hear of the civil wars, of the recovery of the standards lost to the Parthians by Crassus, of the subjection of numerous peoples, of the Augustan peace. Significant space is given to the Nativity of Christ and Herod's subsequent atrocities. Towards the end we return to secular matters and are told of the flourishing of letters. Richard gives a slightly inflated list of golden age authors, in as much as he adds Terence and Sallust to the usual Virgil, Horace, and Livy. The piece ends with a flattering description of Augustus' character and a quotation of his proud words "I found a city of stone, I left one of marble".¹⁰

The reign of Constantine, some 300 years later, was nearly as impressive: The pagan temples were to be torn down, churches to be built, Constantinople was founded and the western provinces were handed over to the apostles Peter and Paul. The emperor's mother Helen, found the true cross in Jerusalem, the arch-heretic Arius was condemned at the Synod of Niceae. "Constantine always supported scholarly studies, but especially that of literature".¹¹

Augustus and Constantine were traditional high points of Roman civilization. But Richard is careful to mention many later "culture builders". Theodosius the Great extirpated the old beliefs completely, and in his reign flourished the great Biblical scholar Jerome. From Justinian's reign in the sixth century he singles out the father of western monastic life Benedict, and the

10. Richard of St. Victor, *Liber excerptionum* (ed. J. Chatillon, Paris 1958 (Textes philosophiques du moyen âge 5) I,6,2.

11. *Ibid.* I,8,1: "Nutrivit preterea semper bonas artes, sed precipue studia litterarum".

important scholars Priscian and Arator are named (both were well-known in the twelfth century). Richard even stresses the Carolingian “renaissance” of the ninth century. Charlemagne is a great builder and almsgiver and in his reign lived St. Egidius (Giles). The reigns of Louis the Pious and his sons were distinguished by scholars as Theodulf of Orléans and Rhabanus Maurus.

Now, someone might object, my glorious Roman past seems to be endangered. Even if there were outstanding periods in antiquity, the gradual growth of Christian culture implies a progress towards Richard’s own time. Many rulers, saints and scholars are mentioned from the period between Constantine and the twelfth century, obviously as a way of indicating when various lasting religious and scholarly achievements took place. So there is a reverse movement here, not downhill from a glorious past, but rather through glorious periods of the past towards the even greater cultural sum of the present. That is not said by Richard in those words, but the idea may not have been strange to him: a self-confident “renaissance” feeling can be found in other twelfth-century texts. But that view was conditioned exactly by a reuse of a glorious past, and more often than not this implied reference to ancient Roman glory. The famous twelfth century dictum “we are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants” illustrates well this combination of reverence for the Roman past and belief in own powers. The danger is only apparent. We can translate neither the looking back nor the growing self-esteem into modern terms of cultural optimism or pessimism. Modern discussions about past, present, and future culture do not carry such a heavy weight of tradition as did the twelfth century one.

With the above examples we are rather faced with another problem: How are we to account for the enormous difference between the approach of the *Kaiserchronik* and that of Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, between neglect of and respect for old sources? It can hardly be explained in terms of vernacular vs. Latin culture nor as extraordinary sloppiness on the part of the *Kaiserchronik*. Such legendary history with vague chronology was not uncommon, either in Latin or in other vernacular works.¹² To indicate an answer to this question, I come now to the more analytical part of my paper.

12. Geoffrey of Viterbo’s world histories from the 1180s are made more digestible by insertions of poetry and legendary materials much in the same vein.

Entertainment, Example or History?

Any theory about the view of the past in any society, I think, should be met with at least these two questions:

1. What are the institutions for the study of the past?
2. What is the communicative framework of historical discourse (media, traditions, writers, story-tellers, receivers)?

The first question is easily answered as regards the twelfth century, and indeed the Middle Ages as a whole: none. History was not a school topic, it was neither a *scientia* nor an *ars*. It was, in the well-chosen words of Bernard Guenée, “a secondary intellectual activity”.¹³ Historical texts *were* used for linguistic and moral training in the schools – though not widely – but the study of the past was never a field in itself, with its own programme and curriculum. This contrasts clearly with the situation in the later Renaissance. In the course of the sixteenth century it was hotly debated whether history was a particular field of study or not. This debate actually reflected the fact that it was about to develop an identity of its own. In the same period we see the first extensive theoretical discussions, the first professors of history, the first instances of an avalanche of writings on the history of this or that phenomenon, e.g. the history of language, the history of law etc.¹⁴ Nothing of that in the Middle Ages.

The answer to the second question, about the communicative situation of historical discourse, is too large, too interesting and too well documented for me to answer at all, or, I guess for anyone else within a short space of time. For the present purpose I have found it useful to analyse the situation by the triad given in my title: Entertainment, example, and history. The combination of these headings is not taken directly from one or more twelfth-century texts, but the concepts are not entirely anachronistic. The first two should cause no trouble. Medieval historians often talk about their work as being entertaining and useful. The usefulness invariably turns out to be the exemplary, moral value of lessons taught by the past. This is an extremely important aspect of Medieval historical writing, but I am not going to elaborate on it here, as it has been duly stressed by many others.

13. *Histoire et culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris 1980, passim.

14. D.R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship. Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance*. New York 1970.

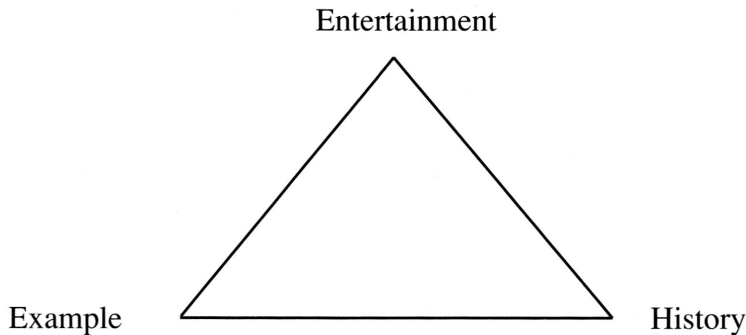
The third term, ‘history’, is less straightforward. I am not thinking of the Medieval Latin *historia*, which was used mainly in two ways: either it was a technical term in Biblical studies, meaning ‘literal interpretation’, or it was used about historiography in the straightforward sense of a ‘piece of historical writing’. For my part, I am using it in the modern sense of ‘historical research’, provided, of course, that one forgets all modern critical standards. When we look at works like Hugh’s *Chronicle*, Richard of St Victor’s *Excerpts*, and numerous others, it becomes clear that there was a trend of historical writing which did not respond directly to such otherwise respectable goals as praising one’s native country, one’s ecclesiastical institution, the present ruler, a certain political or ecclesiastical ideology etc. It was concerned more with the rules of historical discourse itself: how to reconcile computations and opinions of authoritative fathers like Orosius, Jerome, Isidore, Bede *i.a.* Often, of course, there was an “external” reason for those inquiries – as in the case of the anonymous monk of Trier quoted above who, by means of tricky calculation, probably wanted to enhance the importance of his patron saint. But the length these authors go to can hardly be explained entirely in terms of such an ulterior motive. They could certainly have settled for less elaboration of chronology, biographical data on long gone rulers etc. I think they got carried away by historical research itself, and it is on this element of historical writing I here bestow the term “history”. Properly researched “history” gave authority to the work, and it also gave satisfaction to the historian who had bothered to dig up so much knowledge about the past. This curiosity for the past in its own right probably elicited a certain uneasiness now and then; at least it seems to have done so for Hugh of Fleury who — in his *Historia ecclesiastica* covering all ancient history up to 855 — is at pains to explain his efforts in elaborating ancient history beyond what seemed strictly necessary from an ideological point of view:

Some people, however, think that it is superfluous to treat ecclesiastical history according to the chronology of kings and emperors. But it is not contrary to reverence of the church or to the true doctrine. For writing the history of the incarnation of the Lord, Luke the evangelist himself mentions, in the beginning of his holy gospel, the king of the Jewish people Herod. He says “In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zeheriah, of the division of Abijah”,¹⁵ and

15. Luke 1,5 (revised standard version).

shortly after that “in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled”.¹⁶ Caesar Octavian is mentioned once more because what is less known to people should be confirmed and corroborated by that which is spread through fame. This procedure is to be found in numerous other religious authors writing on sacred history. Because those events (*res geste*) which are not distinguished by the certainty of royal or other chronology can not be taken as history (*historia*), but must count as empty tales (*aniles fabulas*).¹⁷

Here, in fact, we are close to the suggested meaning of ‘history’ in the triad:



16. Luke 2,1 (revised standard version).

17. Hugh of Fleury, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, prologue to book three. The text is not edited, but I translate from the quotation from ms Paris, Mazarine 2013 f. 69v made by M. Paulmier-Foucart, ‘La compilation dans le Speculum historiale de Vincent de Beauvais: le cas Hugues de Fleury’ in *L’Historiographie médiévale en Europe* (ed. J.-P. Genet), Paris 1988, 51-66, p.54 n.13: “Sunt tamen nonnulli quibus videtur fore superfluum cum secundum tempora regum vel imperatorum ecclesiastice pertractantur hystorie. Sed non est contra religionem ecclesiasticam aut autenticam disciplinam. Lucas nempe evangelista cum dominice incarnationis texeret hystoriam Herodis regis iudaice gentis in ipso sui sancti evangelii principio intulit mentionem. ‘Fuit’, inquit, ‘in diebus Herodis regis Iudee sacerdos quidam nomine Zacharias de vice Abia’. Itemque post pauca, ‘Exiit edictum a Cesare Augusto ut describeretur universus orbis’, Cesaris Octaviani faciens iterum mentionem quatinus illa que minus erant hominibus nota ab his que pene apud omnes celebri fama ferebantur, confirmarentur et corroborentur. Quod et multi alii religiosi divinarum tractatores hystoriarum fecisse leguntur. Ille quippe res geste que nulla regum ac temporum certitudine commendantur non pro hystoria recipiuntur, sed inter aniles fabulas deputantur.”

Each of the three angles in the triangle represents one extreme of the driving motivation and of the composition of an historical text. They are by no means exclusive – in fact they are often all present in the same work. My claim is rather that any Medieval text concerned with the past takes as point of departure at least one of these angles. If, for instance, we did not have ‘entertainment’ and ‘example’ in the model, we could not account for the *Kaiserchronik*, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s popular History of British kings etc., if we did not have ‘history’ we could not account for the chronological literature and for numerous parts of the narrative one. In many fine works we find a balanced representation of the three aspects. Take William of Tyre’s voluminous History of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. He made it entertaining to a certain audience by writing in an exquisite Latin style and by striving for exciting narrative. That his work should serve an exemplary purpose as well was evident. He would scold bad rulers, praise good ones and – as pointed out – lend people and events of the original movement, only 90 years earlier, a certain divine air. But the desire to be entertaining and to exhibit good examples would actually have been much better served by a slender 200-page volume than by the 900 pages he came up with. William had been researching for a long time, he had immersed himself in the material with the result that he did not want to tell exhilarating and moral stories only. He wanted to write as fully as his sources let him about concrete events and persons of the past, in the correct chronological and geographical framework. He was writing history.

Conclusion

Let me try to summarize my stance on how learned men in the twelfth century understood the past. We should, I think, resist the temptation to harmonize various Medieval modes of talking and writing about the past. The *Kaiserchronik* and Hugh of St. Victor’s *Chronica* can not be brought into one simple formula. Historical discourse had several focal points, several audiences, several traditions. This is in principle no different from today, although the diversity and specialization of modern historical discourse – ranging from children’s books through TV-series to archeological reports – is staggering, seen from a Medieval perspective.

Keeping this *caveat* in mind, I would nonetheless venture to say something general about the twelfth-century perception of the long gone, and mostly glorious past: there was a fundamental difference between then and

now. But it was, by modern standards, a very simple one of before and after: before and after the birth of the Christ, before and after the foundation of this monastery or of that nation. There were no tricky or complex developments involving many-sided factors. It was strictly drum-and-trumpet history where the explanatory schemes were all moral, political or military. Moreover, we see that it mattered much where in the triangle between entertainment, example, and history an author chose to put his emphasis. If the exemplary aspect was all-important, the past naturally tended to look like the present; if entertainment was most important, the past would be colourful and strange, but also very vague as past. If, on the other hand, a real interest in past events and their proper sequence was at hand, hard chronological facts and lots of “irrelevant” details would predominate. In some sense that gave an historical perspective. Vergil was not some great poet from the vague past, he was an Augustan poet living exactly so long ago, having such and such contemporaries, and composing his revered poems in the most glorious period of mankind. It did not go beyond that, however. Although the times of Augustus, of Constantine, and of Charlemagne were outstanding, the past was still described in an historical discourse that — to our taste — is one-dimensional, inasmuch as these rulers could be staged as moral patterns for contemporaries.

In judging the anachronisms and fictions of many a Medieval historian, one is often referred to the Medieval “mind” or “mode of interpretation” and other neat abstractions. Let us not forget the importance of the practical circumstances of the exchange of information. The “childish” inventions of Medieval historians were laughed at a century ago by our historicist forerunners. Their joy in demasking a supposedly uncritical tradition has meanwhile turned into a stark anachronism itself. How has this come about? Like the Medievals, the historicists had an excuse in their practical circumstances: their goal was to transfer reliable bits of information from Medieval chronicles into modern books containing a new kind of historical discourse. They were not so far away from a period when the only available history of, say, the Crusades, was a work like William of Tyre’s *History*. They simply could not afford to stay aloof and to abstain from harsh judgments on Medieval historians. Once their work with the sources was done, they wrote modern works of reference on the Crusades and on everything else. We can now lean comfortably back and do more justice to Medieval historiography, because we have lots of good modern alternatives to draw the basic narrative from.

We should condone our Medieval predecessors in the same practical

terms. Living as they did before the printing press, their tools of reference were necessarily modest, faulty, and hard to come by. Each book was unique, no copy of a text could be trusted completely, no ways of checking existing literature were around. Much effort had to be used to reproduce old knowledge, simply in order to have it available. Under these circumstances their chronological efforts were admirable.

The hardships of a learned culture based on the handwritten book was one important stumbling block on the road to a greater emphasis on the differences between past and present. Another was the absence of institutionalized history. Without the status and means of a science, history had no incentives to develop sociological, economical or other modern approaches.

But in the twelfth century the general human tendency to glorify the past did assert itself. Also there was a special tendency to fix the mind on the ancient Roman Empire, which was acknowledged, so to speak, as the common founding father of all European nations. In those two ways the past was seen as something different. How different, we cannot say unless we take into account what kind of historical discourse we are dealing with, and that, I am afraid, leaves us with more than one answer.