
The Six Ages of the World

Introduction

Early medieval scholars were much concerned with time. While the need to keep track of the dating of Easter is frequently cited as the central driver of this preoccupation, computistical treatises address many other matters, some of which, such as the tides, have limited relevance to the liturgical calendar. It is therefore worth emphasizing additional motivations for the popularity of all sorts of compositions to do with time. The tides had a great deal of practical relevance, as water crossings and fishery depended on them; but scholarly discourses will often have been equally motivated by theoretical interests, such as theological concerns to do with the beginning and end of the world, as well as a pleasure in the definition of analytical categories.

Bede, a true polymath, wrote multiple computistical reference works in Latin in the early decades of the eighth century. Byrhtferth of Ramsey completed a bilingual textbook, the *Enchiridion*, in 1011, right around the time of the death of Ælfric of Eynsham, who had already written an OE résumé of one of Bede's computistical works as well as a *Hexameron*, an account of the six days of creation. Homilists and other theologians drew liberally on the typological potential of this mythical first week, which was seen as an opportunity to place one's own era in the finite flow of time. While a variety of

numbered sets of eras were in circulation, the six days of creation proved the most fruitful mold, not in the last place because it promised a day of rest to follow the “working week” of this world.

Manuscript

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 178, p. 458 (s. xi²)

Text

(1) On þisre worulde fruman god ælmihtig gesceop and geworhte on vi dagum ealle gesceafta, (2) and ðæs sefoðan dæges he gereste hine. (3) And on syx ylða is þeos woruld eac todæled, (4) and seo sefoðe belimpð to þære ecan reste.

(5) An yld is geteald of Adame to Noe; (6) oðer of Noe to Abrahame; (7) ðridde of Abrahame to Dauide; (8) feorðe of Dauide to þam myclan heregange; (9) fifte of þam heregange to Cristes gebyrdtiman; (10) sexte of ures drihtnes gebyrdtide to þam ende, þe God ana wat. (11) Sefoðe belimpð to þam towardan life.