

THE WESTERN TIME OF
ANCIENT HISTORY

*Historiographical Encounters with the
Greek and Roman Pasts*

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*Time and authority in the Chronicle of
Sulpicius Severus*

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‘Christianity,’ wrote a young Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘cannot dispense with the notion of men having parts in a cosmic drama.’¹ This was a drama that played out on the level of history – for it was a defining feature of Christianity that the claims it made were not only transcendental but also, importantly, historical.² It mattered for Christianity that Christ had been born at a specific historical moment, just as it mattered for Judaism – and ultimately for Christianity too – that the Jewish patriarchs had historically encountered and made covenants with their God. The structure of the Christian Bible itself makes this aspect plain: by taking over much of the Jewish tradition, the Christians were able to begin their authoritative account of the world with its creation, and to follow a privileged strand of history through the successes and travails of the Jews, so that even the books of the laws and the prophets, and of proverbs and psalms, were placed in a thoroughly historical context. The New Testament was bound equally tightly into this tradition, not only by an explicit grounding in a particular historical moment – as when Luke relates the birth of Christ to the reigns of Augustus and Herod – but also in the efforts of the New Testament writers to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the anticipated subject of Jewish messianic prophecies, not least by making him a descendant of the House of David.³ This kind of interpretation may be labelled ‘historical typology’: it was a method of identifying the significant correspondences between distinct historical events.⁴ History, for Christians, was therefore more than a narrative, more than a mere sequence of unconnected events. As in any good drama, these events possessed a deeper significance: they formed part of an underlying plot.

¹ MacIntyre 1971: 68. ² Croke 2001: 263: ‘Christianity was essentially a historical religion.’

³ Luke 1.5, 2:1–4; Matthew 1:1–17. For the rhetorical relationship between the Old and New Testaments, see Kermode 1968, Mortley 1996: 120 ff. and Kofsky 2000: 100 ff.

⁴ Williams 2008, with compatible definitions at Auerbach 1959; Charity 1966: 1–9 and Hollander 1977.

Thus it was the events of history, and the actions of individuals within that history, which above all justified the claims of Christianity.⁵ With such historical relationships at the heart of its understanding of the world, it should be no surprise that the advent of Christianity as a dominant force in the Roman Empire has been credited with prompting a reassessment of the classical approach to historiography. This was not, however, primarily evident in those historians (such as Ammianus Marcellinus) who continued to write in an avowedly classical tradition. Indeed, Arnaldo Momigliano found it remarkable that the same historians whose work – in his view – could be characterised as part of ‘the classical historiography of change’ nevertheless failed for the most part ‘to register the particular change represented by Christianity’.⁶ Yet as part of the same discussion he provided the beginnings of an answer: that ‘it was the violent, rather than the slow, change that the [classical] historian presented to his readers’.⁷ The emphasis was on immediate political upheavals – and where Christianity was implicated in these, it was indeed brought into such histories. Any broader, more gradual change in the progression of human history was overlooked, or even deliberately ignored. The Greeks and Romans, of course, were well aware of the passage of time and its effects; and antecedent events could be divided into ‘history’ (which stretched back as far as could be known) and ‘myth’ (which covered all that happened before that).⁸ Classical and classicising historians thus focused their attention on the events of the recent past, and placed the highest value on autopsy and on personal experience.

Christianity, by contrast, followed Judaism in making little or no distinction between knowable recent historical events and unknowable myth. As Momigliano points out, the Hebrew authors of Genesis ‘did not think it necessary to explain how they came to know the conversation between Eve and the serpent’.⁹ In broader terms, the Christian understanding of time focused less on understanding the contingent events of history than on its overall design: on the larger story which revealed ‘the continuous intervention of God in the world he had created’.¹⁰ With the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire, then, it might well be imagined that a new understanding of time came to the fore. Any such transition, however, was far from immediate. Certainly the earliest Christian histories – and, above all, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea – were innovative in a

⁵ As argued in Ricoeur 1952: 246–50.

⁶ Momigliano 1977a: 167, 165.

⁷ Momigliano 1977a: 173.

⁸ For this view of time in classical historiography – opposed to the idea that the Greeks conceived of time as a cycle – see Momigliano 1977b: 185–93.

⁹ Momigliano 1977b: 194. ¹⁰ Momigliano 1977b: 194.

great number of areas: for example, Eusebius challenged some of the most important conventions of classical historiography by transferring attention from the political manoeuvrings of the recent past to the development over the long term of a single institution, and in the process replaced the classical commitment to autopsy and to independent interpretation with an emphasis on quotations from authorities and 'the lavish use of documents'.¹¹ On this basis, Momigliano offered the *Ecclesiastical History* as a formative influence on modern, footnoted, non-contemporary history.¹² Nevertheless, in this work Eusebius continued to follow the lead of the classical tradition, if only because this particular story took place almost entirely within the world of the Roman Empire. The *Ecclesiastical History* reached back only into the relatively recent past. It recorded events that could equally have featured in any classical history, and merely refocused attention from the political centre to the formerly marginal Christian story. Here at least, Christian time did not replace classical time but was instead subsumed within it.

A more substantial challenge to classical conventions was issued in another of Eusebius' works: his *Chronicle*.¹³ There he dispensed with narrative altogether and presented a 'universal history' in tabular form, with events from classical history and from Scripture offered side by side for the sake of chronological comparison. The apologetic aim was to prove the antiquity – and indeed the priority – of the Christian and Jewish traditions. The two timescales were therefore ostensibly in competition; and yet by incorporating the two of them into a single representation Eusebius in fact brought them together. Thus the alternative classical and Christian models of time could be maintained in a permanent tension and could be seen simultaneously, with neither necessarily privileged over the other. Once again the classical model was not replaced but only supplemented; and conversely, in its juxtaposition with the Greek and Roman past Christianity was somewhat classicised. This useful compromise was not invented solely by Eusebius – for there were precedents in the works of Clement of Alexandria, Julius Africanus and Hippolytus of Rome – but it was Eusebius' system which would become the point of departure for subsequent authors, especially in the Latin West.¹⁴ Within fifty years, Jerome had translated the *Chronicle* and continued it down to 378 CE; later continuators of the same tradition include Prosper of Aquitaine, Hydatius and the anonymous Gallic chronicler of 452, along with the Byzantine Latin chronicle

¹¹ Momigliano 1963: 83, 85, 90–1. ¹² Momigliano 1963: 92.

¹³ Specifically, the second book of his *Chronicle*: see the comprehensive account in Burgess 1999.

¹⁴ Momigliano 1963: 83–7.

of Marcellinus.¹⁵ It would prove an acceptable model for representing the past at least until the Renaissance; and in recent years such chronicles have begun to be taken more seriously as interesting historiographical enterprises in their own right.¹⁶

Yet standing somewhat apart from this tradition is the so-called *Chronicle* (or *Sacred History*) written at the turn of the fifth century CE by the Gallic aristocrat and ascetic Sulpicius Severus.¹⁷ Although he quite clearly engages with the chronographical tradition of Eusebius and Jerome, Sulpicius offers in place of a table of dates and events a connected (if rather condensed) narrative account. He thus followed the earlier chronographers in bringing together the classical and Christian pasts; but instead of preserving them independent and intact, in splendid isolation from each other, he set out to integrate them into a single story. This then was far from a claim for the essential priority of one tradition over another – for although Christianity filled gaps in the classical past, so too could the classical tradition be used to supplement, or even correct, Christian history. What Sulpicius produced, then, was something of a hybrid: a work which in some ways resembled contemporary epitomes and *breviaria* and which made some attempt to conform to the literary and historical approaches of Tacitus and Sallust, but in which the presentation of the past is firmly Christian and is founded above all on the Christian scriptures.¹⁸

This might be recognised as a brave and deliberate attempt to resolve the incompatibility between the classical and Christian understandings of the past – to resolve, that is, the tensions preserved in the unwieldy tabular chronologies in which they were presently combined. In the process, however, Sulpicius drew attention to a problem inherent in the very idea of a Christian historiography. For Christians already possessed an authoritative – and indeed, unchallengeable – account of the past in the Bible itself. Moreover, the authority of the biblical account did not rest only in the events it recorded, but also in the very words that were used to

¹⁵ Muhlberger 1990; Croke 2001.

¹⁶ Aside from studies of individual chronicles, see Johnson 1962; von den Brincken 1969; Croke 1983; Burgess 1990 and Zecchini 2003.

¹⁷ Latin text (with new paragraphing, followed below) in de Senneville-Grave 1999, with an explanation of the naming issue at 11–12. All translations are my own except where noted.

¹⁸ For the connection with contemporary histories in general see Prete 1955: 9; the connection is noted but not explored in Momigliano 1963: 86–7. For the link to epitomes, see Costanza 1980; the introduction to the *Chronicle* is compared with that of Eutropius' *Breviarium* at Stancliffe 1983: 178–9; Zecchini 2003: 336 calls the work 'a cross between chronicle and compendium'. For Sulpicius as a 'Christian Sallust' or 'Christian Tacitus', see especially Fontaine 1975 and Tanner 1989, with additional references at Murru 1979: 962–3 and de Senneville-Grave 1999: 40–3. Jerome draws attention to his own use of Suetonius in the preface to his *Chronicle*.

record them. By taking on the attitude of a classical historian, and by seeking not only to incorporate secular history into the biblical story but to retell that story in his own words, Sulpicius was trespassing on territory that Christianity had conceded to the inspired authors of Scripture. In seeking to establish its own narrative authority, therefore, the *Chronicle* of Sulpicius Severus risked calling into question the authority of the Bible itself.

THE NATURE OF THE *CHRONICLE*

The innovative – indeed, experimental – nature of the *Chronicle* has frequently prevented it from being understood as a unified work. It does not fit easily into any familiar historiographical category, being ‘partly an epitome of the Old Testament, partly a chronicle in the tradition of Eusebius, and partly a more or less independent form of historiography based on individual use of sources’.¹⁹ In fact, the balance of the text throws by far the most weight on the Old Testament narrative, which takes up more than three-quarters of the work; then, following a sketch of events since the conclusion of the New Testament, a final section is devoted to an account of the Arian and Priscillianist controversies of the fourth century.²⁰ The awkward yoking together of these seemingly disparate elements has led a number of historians to separate them out, and to deal with a single aspect of the *Chronicle* in isolation from its context in the work as a whole. It has proved especially popular with those historians interested in the late-antique controversies to which Sulpicius was a contemporary witness, and the short final section has often been treated with little regard to the rest of the work (and very often as an adjunct instead to the author’s *Life of Martin*).²¹ Yet any attempt to understand the purpose and function of the *Chronicle* must look beyond these final few chapters, and recognise that they were deliberately placed in the shadow of a reconstruction of biblical history which starts at the very beginning.²²

Similarly, although the *Chronicle* is divided into two books, the fact that the division comes with the epitome of the Old Testament in full flow must frustrate any attempt to make that part of the project merely a preliminary to Sulpicius’ contemporary concerns. Nor can the work be divided into

¹⁹ Van Andel 1976: 7. ²⁰ de Senneville-Grave 1999: 20; Van Andel 1976: 3.

²¹ See for example Burrus 1995: 134–8; Stancliffe 1983 is mainly interested in the relationship between Sulpicius and Martin, but provides a valuable (if brief) discussion of the *Chronicle* at 174–82.

²² Thus Bertrand 2001: 467; Sulpicius differs from Eusebius in beginning with the Creation rather than with Abraham.

two sections, with one devoted to a kind of 'sacred history' and the other not.²³ Instead, the narrative of the Old Testament is continued through the use of secular historians down to the time of Christ, with the reader referred elsewhere for the events of his life and the acts of the apostles; and the history resumes with Herod's successors and without even a paragraph break.²⁴ There is no significant difference stated or implied between biblical events and those of the postbiblical era: indeed, an opportunity has surely been missed to draw a pointed contrast between Jewish and Christian histories, or between biblical and postbiblical history.²⁵ Sulpicius' model of history did not depend on any temporal rupture, dividing historical time irrevocably at the Incarnation or at the end of the canonical scriptures. There is no sense that the advent of Christianity 'inaugurated a whole new epoch of divine-human interaction'.²⁶ Rather, Sulpicius seems entirely unperturbed by the passing of the biblical age. He persists throughout with his stated intention, simply 'to provide the sequence of events'.²⁷ The challenge must therefore be to approach the *Chronicle* on its own terms, as precisely what it seems to be: a single, connected narrative from the beginning of the world to the present day.²⁸

This is entirely in keeping with the breezy unconcern with which he describes this project in the preface to the work: 'it seemed to me not out of place that, after I had run through the sacred history down to the crucifixion of Christ, and the doings of the Apostles, I should add an account of events which subsequently took place'.²⁹ He does take care to acknowledge that he has used secular sources to establish precise dates for the events of the Old Testament and, where necessary, to correct errors on these matters in the text.³⁰ This, however, was to do little more than to follow the example of Eusebius and Jerome: Eusebius had referred in his own preface to the variant chronologies that arose in the biblical texts, and Jerome was careful to blame potential disagreements on the negligence of copyists rather than authors.³¹ Sulpicius, indeed, brings very little in the way of secular history

²³ Murru 1979: 972. ²⁴ *Chron.* 2.27.

²⁵ Murru 1979: 973; Van Andel 1976: 55 refers to 'the division of the *Chronicle*' into the history of Israel and the history of the church, but this does not accord with any textual divide, and arguably not with Sulpicius' references to 'historia sacra' and subsequent 'gesta' in *Chron.* pref.2.

²⁶ Robbins 2007: II, based on Hooker 1986 and Badiou 2003. ²⁷ *Chron.* 2.7.3.

²⁸ An alternative approach to the *Chronicle* has frequently been to see it in terms of an eschatological claim: thus Prete 1958; Vaesen 1988; Weber 1997: 30-41 and de Senneville-Grave 1999: 51-4. My intention here is not to dismiss these arguments, but merely to focus attention on a different aspect of the *Chronicle*.

²⁹ *Chron.* pref.2, trans. A. Roberts 1894. ³⁰ *Chron.* pref.2.

³¹ Jerome, *Chronicle* pref.; Sulpicius similarly blames copyists for an error in biblical chronology at *Chron.* I.39.1.

into his summary of the Old Testament, limiting himself to lists of kings and to occasional dates, such as that of the Battle of Marathon.³² That event is used to locate the biblical history being recounted in its proper relation to Herodotus, and also both to the foundation of Rome and to Sulpicius' end-point in the consulship of Stilicho of 400 CE.³³ Aside from these few interventions intended to fix the chronological frame, however, Sulpicius departs only rarely from the events of the Old Testament and hardly ever from the history of Israel.³⁴ His universal history of the biblical age is not a parallel history of multiple civilisations: it is a single thread picked out and shown in relief against a broader historical background.³⁵

The fact that Sulpicius set out to provide a single narrative thus meant that – up to the end of the New Testament, at least – secular sources were required only for dating and, occasionally, for historical context.³⁶ Even this minimal recourse to secular history, however, seems to have caused Sulpicius some concern. At one point, confronted with a particularly knotty problem of biblical chronology, he even seems to comment on the absurdity of his self-imposed task. The difficulty is identifying the Persian king under whom the biblical Judith lived.³⁷ Sulpicius offers his own explanation – that the king impossibly called 'Nebuchadnezzar' was in fact the Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus – and he credits his knowledge to his research in secular histories.³⁸ That these secular writers (*scriptores saecularium litterarum*) should have failed to record the story of Judith, or certain other stories from the holy books (*sacris uoluminibus*), should not be surprising:

[for] the spirit of God veiled that history so that, untainted by any corrupt mouth or by any mingling of falsehood with truth, it might be confined wholly within its own mysteries (*mysteria*). Kept apart from worldly concerns and revealed only by sacred voices (*sacris . . . uocibus*), it was right that it should not be mingled with the rest as if on an equal footing. Indeed it would have been most improper for it to be mixed up with other histories dealing with different subjects or having different aims.³⁹

Sulpicius thus defends the separation of sacred and secular histories in a way that must cast doubt upon his own project. His own practice is, if not to reintegrate the two traditions, then at least to bring them into close

³² Van Andel 1976: 60; Bertrand 2001: 464; Zecchini 2003: 336; *Chron.* 2.9.3.

³³ *Chron.* 2.9.3; Bertrand 2001: 464–5. ³⁴ Zecchini 2003: 336.

³⁵ Zecchini 2003: 336, drawing a contrast with the work of Orosius.

³⁶ The relatively rare authorial interventions in which Sulpicius deals with these matters are tabulated at Murru 1979: 968–71.

³⁷ *Chron.* 2.14.1–2. Similar problems continued to vex chronographers down to early modern times: see for example Grafton 1975: 160–1.

³⁸ Prete 1955: 57–8; de Senneville-Grave 1999: 407. ³⁹ *Chron.* 2.14.3.

collaboration – and not always to the detriment of the secular account. He is quite prepared to jettison the biblical tradition when he considers it unreliable.⁴⁰

For some this is evidence that Sulpicius adopted a ‘praiseworthy’ attitude to the writing of history that was owed to classical historiography.⁴¹ His willingness to disregard the Bible has been taken to demonstrate his ‘open-mindedness’, and to reveal a ‘limited, but real, historical ability’ not apparent in some of his other writings.⁴² On this reading, Sulpicius would emerge as an author for whom ‘the historical value of the Old Testament remains unimpaired’ despite his determination to provide the occasional important correction.⁴³ He was explicitly committed to the historicity of the scriptures, but approached them from a ‘literary-historical’ viewpoint which acknowledged that errors could arise in recording or transmission and required emendation by an appropriate expert.⁴⁴ Such apparent praise of Sulpicius, however, can shade too easily into a dismissal of his work as betraying an unsophisticated understanding of history and of the Bible – as if, deliberately or otherwise, he were setting out to reduce the richness of the scriptures to a flat and excessively reasonable account of the past as just one damn thing after another.⁴⁵

There is a real distinction at stake here, and one that Sulpicius does seem to countenance. In the preface and elsewhere in the *Chronicle*, he allows for a distinction between the *gesta* (or *rerum ordo*) which he intends to narrate and the *diuinarum rerum mysteria* which are to be sought elsewhere.⁴⁶ His understanding of the Bible can therefore be seen to involve at least two levels: a *historia simplex* which consists of only the recounting of *res gestae* – although neither phrase appears in the *Chronicle* itself – and the frequent appearance of *mysteria* with meanings which ‘were only discernible to the wise’.⁴⁷ Sulpicius claims to aspire only to the first. That *historia* for him was indeed frequently a matter of classical *res gestae* is clear from his tendentious comment on the reigns of two kings from the book of Judges: ‘it being a time of peace, they did nothing that history records’.⁴⁸ Similarly, he goes on to note the existence of *mysteria* at certain moments in his narrative – in

⁴⁰ Stancliffe 1983: 175–7, 181. ⁴¹ Stancliffe 1983: 177.

⁴² Stancliffe 1983: 181; Murru 1979: 971 also notes that Sulpicius gives the impression of ‘objectivity’.

⁴³ Van Andel 1976: 61. ⁴⁴ Stancliffe 1983: 41; cf. Prete 1955: 58–61.

⁴⁵ Stancliffe 1983: 180: ‘Everything that is frightening and irrational is softened, if not ironed out altogether. And he will give a *reason* for why the raven sent out by Noah did not return to the Ark. . . .’

⁴⁶ Van Andel 1976: 8; *Chron.* pref.2 (*gesta*), pref.3 (*mysteria*) and 2.7.3 (*rerum tantum ordinem*).

⁴⁷ Sulpicius occasionally uses the word *historia* without qualification (e.g. at *Chron.* 1.19.1 and 1.25.3); the terms given here are proposed by Van Andel 1976: 68, and followed by Stancliffe 1983: 41 (quoted).

⁴⁸ *Chron.* 1.25.7; Stancliffe 1983: 179; a fuller account of the reigns is given in Judges 12:11–15.

the very first chapter he identifies the murder of an anonymous young man as 'a fact which is thought by the wise to have presaged a future mystery', and a few chapters later mentions the *mysterium* involved in the renaming of Abraham and Sarah – but adds that these are matters which 'it is not for this work to explain'.⁴⁹ Sulpicius might therefore seem to conform to the stereotype of the chronographer: wholly uninterested in speculating about meanings, and 'less concerned with the sense of his facts than he was with their existence'.⁵⁰

The distinction that Sulpicius outlined between sacred and secular history might then be taken at face value. Given his prominent use of secular authors – and the apparently seamless transition between the Bible and the postbiblical world in the second book of his *Chronicle* – he would seem to be condemned by his own proscriptions. If supplementing the scriptures with such non-Biblical material was indeed to compromise the unique character of the sacred writings, it would follow that the *Chronicle* as a whole was irredeemably secular. It could have value in the same way as any other secular history – so that, for example, it might continue to serve as a source of moral exempla – but it could never aspire to the status of sacred history.⁵¹ At first sight this seems to be accepted by Sulpicius: certainly in his preface he is careful to acknowledge the importance of the biblical text, and to express the hope that the work will not tempt his readers to neglect the holy scriptures.⁵² His *Chronicle* is presented as a reminder and not a replacement – as Sulpicius confirms elsewhere, referring readers to the book of Daniel or to the New Testament for the authoritative account he does not claim to provide.⁵³ Biblical history was the domain of the *sacrae uoces*, the inspired authors of Scripture, among whom Sulpicius does not number himself: for 'concerning those things that I have summarised from the holy books, I do not wish to appear before my readers as their author'.⁵⁴ Instead, it seems, he restricts himself to that *historia simplex* which invites and requires no deeper interpretation.

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

Yet authority – and interpretative authority in particular – is not to be disposed of so easily. That Sulpicius felt it necessary to raise the point in the preface suggests that he was conscious of the risk he was taking; that his work might establish him as a rival to the scriptural authors. And arguably

⁴⁹ *Chron.* 1.1.1, 1.5.1; Van Andel 1976: 62. ⁵⁰ Johnson 1962: 125.

⁵¹ Thus Van Andel 1976: 68–9; Prete 1955: 119–21. ⁵² *Chron.* pref.3.

⁵³ *Chron.* pref.3; *Chron.* 2.7.3, 2.27.2. ⁵⁴ *Chron.* pref.3; cf. Weber 1997: 104–5.

it was a problem inherent in the very nature of his project. Thus although he refused to provide an exegesis of the names of Abraham and Sarah, for example, this served to exclude only one of the various approaches to the interpretation of Scripture. Sulpicius is denying any place in his work to allegorical interpretation: and indeed, the one exception to this is his comment on the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, where the interpretation is not his own but the (historical) explanation provided by the prophet Daniel.⁵⁵ Sulpicius, admittedly, makes use of his own chronographical knowledge to confirm the truth of the interpretation – identifying the empires whose rise and fall the prophet had correctly predicted.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, if this kind of allegorical interpretation is otherwise foreign to the *Chronicle*, this is not to say that the history recorded by Sulpicius was confined to the literal meaning. For the Bible was understood to be bound together not only by the allegorical and prophetic relationship between the Old and New Testaments, but also by that ‘historical typology’ which operated almost entirely on the level of narrative.⁵⁷ This was not a relationship between historical events and the timeless truths they symbolised; nor was it a matter of words and images that could be given historical significance. Rather, it was the belief that ‘something real and historical’ could correspond to something else equally ‘real and historical’: that meaning could be found in the recognisable relationship between distinct historical events.⁵⁸

Thus although in his *Chronicle* he restricted himself to the narration of historical events, Sulpicius nevertheless left room for *mysteria* – and their implications – to emerge. The selection and arrangement of events is of course an inescapable part of any historical account, but Sulpicius was clearly aware of the meanings that could be derived from the correspondences that emerged: he had evidently read the work of Hilary of Poitiers on the subject, for instance, and can be found alluding to certain of his interpretations.⁵⁹ Similarly, there are a number of occasions on which Sulpicius selected and presented historical events in the light of their typological significance. He narrates Old Testament stories in the light of their future fulfilment in the New, as when Moses in killing an Egyptian is said to have ‘delivered his brother from injury’, using terms derived from

⁵⁵ *Chron.* 2.2–3; Daniel 2:31–45.

⁵⁶ *Chron.* 2.3.1. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream would become a central image for chronographers, at least as late as the Reformation: see Grafton 2003: 222.

⁵⁷ The terminology used here is thus different from that employed at Van Andel 1976: 62 and at Bertrand 2001: 458; my distinction between allegory and typology is founded on the discussions in Auerbach 1959; Charity 1966 and Fabiny 1992.

⁵⁸ Auerbach 1959: 29; cf. Hollander 1977: 6ff.

⁵⁹ Thus Van Andel 1976: 62ff.; see also de Senneville-Grave 1999: 54–6.

Stephen's association of Moses and Christ as spurned prophets in the Acts of the Apostles.⁶⁰ In much the same way, David's evasion of any punishment for his numbering of the tribes is narrated by Sulpicius in terms which give disproportionate credit to David's apparent willingness to die for his people – a departure from the Old Testament version – and which borrows a phrase from 2 Corinthians in order to highlight the typological parallel with Christ.⁶¹ His account of the intervention of Deborah makes this mode of interpretation more explicit, with Sulpicius directly admitting that she 'was sent forth as a type of the church'; in addition she evidently anticipates the gospels, representing another instrument of divine salvation rejected (initially, at least) by the people of Israel.⁶² This, then, is biblical typology in its most traditional form: the demonstration through the scriptural narrative of 'history's relation to its fulfilment in Christ'.⁶³

Yet for Sulpicius this typological approach was not limited to the Bible – for it has already been noted that he refused to draw any firm line between the end of the biblical account and the subsequent history of the postbiblical world. Precisely the same kind of connections are made between situations in the scriptures and in the Roman Empire. On a broad level, parallels have been recognised between Sulpicius' portrayal of the predicament of the Jews under foreign potentates and his account of the persecution of the Christians under the Roman Empire.⁶⁴ But as with the scriptures, these connections are frequently confirmed on the level of historical and linguistic detail. The biblical narrative is remodelled to bring it in line with the conventions of postbiblical history: as when the virtues and vices of biblical kings are related in terms borrowed from Sallust, who also provides the prevailing moral attitude.⁶⁵ Moreover, it is suggested that certain postbiblical events were re-enactments of their biblical predecessors. Thus in the story of Esther, her opponent Haman excoriates the Jews in words directly taken from Tacitus; and in the same phrase he applies to them Pliny's dismissal of the persecuted Christians as followers of a 'depraved superstition'.⁶⁶ These allusions have a point, in that they emphasise the historical relationship that underlay the two persecutions. That it was

⁶⁰ *Chron.* 1.12.2; Acts 7:24; Van Andel 1976: 19.

⁶¹ *Chron.* 1.37.3; 2 Samuel 24:16–17; Van Andel 1976: 21; de Senneville-Grave 1999: 378. The phrase *unum pro omnibus* is borrowed by Sulpicius from 2 Corinthians 5:14.

⁶² Judges 4; *Chron.* 1.23.3; see Van Andel 1976: 64–5. This is the only appearance of the word *typus* in the *Chronicle*, although the term *figura* is also used twice: see Van Andel 1976: 63ff.

⁶³ Charity 1966: 5. ⁶⁴ Murru 1979: 973; Van Andel 1976: 76ff.

⁶⁵ *Chron.* 1.23.1: 'ut semper fieri rebus secundis solet, morum disciplinaeque immemor'. For more on these reminiscences of Sallust, see Van Andel 1976: 69–74, and de Senneville-Grave 1999: 40.

⁶⁶ *Chron.* 2.13.2; Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.3–4; Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.96.8. Van Andel 1976: 57, followed by de Senneville-Grave 1999: 406, also suggests a connection with Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44 on the Christians.

possible to recognise such a pattern in history implied the presence of a divine Author – and one present not only in the authoritative past recorded in the scriptures. Rather, the characteristic patterning of the Bible was extended to the secular tradition, incorporating them both within the ‘unified network of narrative and imagery’ that best expressed the unity of sacred history.⁶⁷

The presence of historical typology in the *Chronicle* can therefore hardly be dismissed as incidental, or as something included by Sulpicius ‘almost against his will’.⁶⁸ It is certainly clear that Sulpicius was willing to see even his own time in terms of the authoritative past, as when he models his portrait of the heretic Priscillian on Sallust’s description of Catiline.⁶⁹ Perhaps more revealing, however, is the apparent parallel between Martin of Tours and the prophet Jeremiah. The imprisonment of Jeremiah has long been suggested as a model for the treatment of Martin, who in a like manner offered unwelcome advice to his king, the Emperor Maximus.⁷⁰ Certainly it is possible to see a connection between the bishops advising Maximus (in the trial of Priscillian) and the priests (*sacerdotes*) who act as Zedekiah’s advisers.⁷¹ Sulpicius, however, seems to have in mind a more complex association of figures: for there is a more general resemblance between Jeremiah and Martin in the image of a prophet rejected by ecclesiastical and secular authorities; and this model applies not only to these two but also, of course, to Christ. Such an association seems particularly strong in the account of Jeremiah, thrown into prison by the king:

Before long he [Zedekiah] regretted this cruel action; but being opposed by the leaders of the Jews (whose custom it had been from the beginning to persecute the righteous), he did not dare to release the innocent man.⁷²

Such a description may also have applied to Maximus, but it clearly applied to Pontius Pilate; and Sulpicius in his aside draws attention to a familiar course that events were taking. This same impression is furthered as Sulpicius goes beyond the biblical account to explain that Jeremiah was subsequently cast into an empty cistern ‘so that he might not die an ordinary death’.⁷³ If Jeremiah is the model for Martin, then both men are also to be connected with Christ.⁷⁴ The Old Testament here is united with

⁶⁷ Frye 1982: xvii. ⁶⁸ Van Andel 1976: 68.

⁶⁹ *Chron.* 2.46.2; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 5.1–5. For details, see Fontaine 1975; Van Andel 1976: 72–4; Burrus 1995: 135–7.

⁷⁰ *Chron.* 1.53; Jeremiah 37–8; *Chron.* 2.50: references at Van Andel 1976: 107–8.

⁷¹ Prete 1955: 65; Van Andel 1976: 108. ⁷² *Chron.* 1.53.2; Van Andel 1976: 138.

⁷³ *Chron.* 1.53.2; cf. Jeremiah 38:6. ⁷⁴ Bertrand 2001: 464.

contemporary secular history in terms of their common relationship with the all-important New Testament narrative.

The very importance of the New Testament might therefore provide an explanation of its omission from the *Chronicle*. It was not the point at which Sulpicius chose to divide the work; but the structural parallels might allow us to recognise its place in the design. For the story of the imprisonment of Jeremiah, with its foreshadowing of the gospel story, is narrated in the final chapter of the first book of the *Chronicle*. The first mention of Martin, introduced by Sulpicius as 'a man plainly worthy to be ranked with the apostles', appears in the penultimate chapter of the second book, with the death of Priscillian concluding the work.⁷⁵ Each of the two sections, that is, culminates in an allusion to the events of the New Testament – which remains, if not the literal centre of the book, then the axis on which its history turns. Thus when Sulpicius arrives in his chronological sequence at the birth of Christ and the acts of the apostles, he is careful to place the moment in relation to both Jewish history (through Herod) and Roman history (through Stilicho); but he excuses the lack of a narrative by his reluctance to detract from the dignity of events.⁷⁶ That he was rather less scrupulous with regard to the Old Testament only emphasises the extent to which the New Testament is a special case. It was not that the New Testament authors were more inspired than their Old Testament counterparts, but that the events related in the New Testament were not strictly historical but transcended history. The Incarnation and the events surrounding it could not be given any further meaning: rather, they were themselves the meaning that underlay all of the significant events recorded in the *Chronicle*.

This might allow a more positive reading of Sulpicius' statement in his preface, that he wishes the *Chronicle* to serve as nothing more than a reminder of things already familiar.⁷⁷ This can be seen as more than self-deprecation, and as pointing instead to the apologetic purpose of the work. Sulpicius was not setting out simply to summarise the scriptures; nor did he understand the Incarnation as the final act of a story of spiritual progress, or as a definitive moment of transition which marked off an obsolete past from an enlightened present.⁷⁸ Similarly, that he confined himself to what he considered the facts is not to say that he stripped his history of meaning

⁷⁵ *Chron.* 2.50.1; other such biblical images of Martin in the works of Sulpicius are discussed at Stancliffe 1983: 187–8.

⁷⁶ *Chron.* 2.27.1; see also the remarks of Prete 1955: 55–6 and Zecchini 2003: 336 on the implications of the dating methods here.

⁷⁷ *Chron.* 2.27.2; pref.3. ⁷⁸ Cf. Stancliffe 1983: 180; Murru 1979: 973.

and *mysteria*.⁷⁹ Rather, Sulpicius sought to demonstrate how all Jewish and Christian history could be related to its fulfilment in the New Testament. The events recounted in the *Chronicle* were arranged by their author to form an 'intelligible pattern' in which 'the historical life of Christ' represented 'one of the chief preordained features'.⁸⁰ This was precisely the message of historical typology, which looked for meaning in events as well as in words, and which allowed history to be understood as 'the theatre of God's hidden purposes'.⁸¹ Sulpicius had merely extended this argument to include non-biblical history – all of which was to be situated, in time and in meaning, in relation to New Testament events. Thus despite his acknowledgement of the lasting authority of the biblical account, the inclusion of postbiblical history in the *Chronicle* did not necessarily render the whole narrative meaningless. Rather, it took seriously the Christian claim regarding the historicity of the Incarnation, placing it firmly in ordinary historical time; and implicitly making the grander claim that 'all history . . . is sacred once God acts within it'.⁸²

Sulpicius thus proposed an essential unity not only between the Old and New Testaments, but also between biblical history and the history of his own day. This was perhaps an important implication of the chronicle form itself, which through the influence of Jerome in particular had already 'made it possible to fit local history into the context of God's time'.⁸³ The consequences for Sulpicius, however, were more obvious than for a chronographer such as Eusebius or Jerome, who were content to record discrete events without placing them in a narrative frame. In departing from that tradition by offering his readers a narrative account instead of a tabular chronology, Sulpicius provided his own grand Christian narrative, taking his lead from the scriptures not only in content but also in form. Thus the *Chronicle*, like the Bible, offered a guide to 'the unmistakable pattern of divine intervention in history'.⁸⁴ These 'supernatural interventions' are often related in 'a very matter-of-fact way'; but the aim for Sulpicius was not to dazzle his readers with miracles, but to demonstrate how these interventions combined to reveal a meaningful pattern in history.⁸⁵ He set out to present the essential events in the history and prehistory of Christianity, and to demonstrate the interconnectedness of all these events whether before or after the key historical moment of the Incarnation. His

⁷⁹ Cf. Van Andel 1976: 68ff., followed by Stancliffe 1983: 43, 180.

⁸⁰ Collingwood 1946: 50, on this as a general characteristic of Christian chronicles.

⁸¹ Markus 1986: 40; for this as a theme of the *Chronicle*, see Weber 1997: 44ff.

⁸² Charity 1966: 164. ⁸³ Croke 1983: 126; cf. Collingwood 1946: 50–1.

⁸⁴ Momigliano 1963: 82. ⁸⁵ Stancliffe 1983: 181; cf. Prete 1955: 74–5.

universal history was therefore unavoidably a new sacred history.⁸⁶ Rather than dividing history at the Incarnation, Sulpicius united history around it. Similarly, 'secular' and Christian events were no longer presented along parallel timelines, but were all encompassed within a single, unified model of Christian time.

The recombination of biblical and secular events into a single historical narrative, however, inevitably raised the problem of Sulpicius' own authority. In yoking together the two traditions, he could easily be accused of reducing the events of the Bible to the level of mere chronology; alternatively, his *Chronicle* might seem to be usurping the place of the scriptures.⁸⁷ Either way, he was implicitly establishing himself as an authority on the canonical Christian past – and so risked setting himself up in competition with the authorised version. The outstanding authority of the scriptures, after all, lay in the fact that their authors had been inspired: not only in regard to the accuracy of their account, but more importantly in their selection and presentation of the most significant events. Augustine understood the biblical author to be distinguished in precisely this way: he was set apart by 'his judgement, his interpretation of [events] in terms of the pattern of redemptive history into which divine inspiration vouchsafes him insight'.⁸⁸ In offering his own account of the pattern of biblical and Christian history, Sulpicius thus found himself trespassing on the domain of the *sacrae uoces*. It is clear enough that he resisted this interpretation: he insists that his abridgement – as is said of every abridgement – was meant to supplement and not replace its original. All the same, his readers were here offered a pocket handbook which could tell them more conveniently what they needed to know. Indeed, for all his modesty, Sulpicius might with justice be credited with an even grander achievement: for by cutting away the extraneous detail, Sulpicius was able to reveal more clearly the overarching pattern of sacred history.⁸⁹ Interested readers are referred to the Bible for more detail on individual events: but what Sulpicius preserves is the essential narrative of Christian history. For if Scripture remained the 'key to all mysteries', Sulpicius had nevertheless exposed its underlying plan.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ McKitterick 2006: 13, attributing the point to Dorothea von den Brincken. Cf. also Ricoeur 1952: 251: 'The Christian interpretation of history is . . . a hope that profane history is also part of that meaning which is revealed in sacred history, that in the final analysis there is only one history, that all history is sacred.'

⁸⁷ Bertrand 2001: 462. ⁸⁸ Markus 1996: 14.

⁸⁹ Thus Momigliano 1963: 85: Christian chronicles 'showed concern with the pattern of history rather than with the detail'.

⁹⁰ *Chron.* pref.3: 'uniuersa diuinarum rerum mysteria non nisi ex ipsis fontibus hauriri querent'.

THE CHRONICLE AND CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

In this sense, the *Chronicle* of Sulpicius Severus paved the way for medieval historiography, which set for itself 'the task of discovering and expounding [the] objective or divine plan' in history.⁹¹ Sulpicius brought secular history into agreement with the scriptures not only on the level of chronological detail, but also with regard to its theological purpose and meaning. The result – though no doubt unintentional – was to undermine the status of the Bible as sufficient in itself. This was a problem for Augustine, who essentially wanted interpretation to look like interpretation, and who sought to keep a clear distinction between what could be known for certain and what was merely an educated guess.⁹² In the *City of God* he thus distinguished ordinary historical writing from the 'immediate divine authority' inherent in:

that Scripture which, not by the chance impulses of mortal minds but manifestly by the guiding power of supreme providence, stands above the literature of all peoples and, excelling in divine authority, has subordinated to itself every kind of human ingenuity.⁹³

Augustine's view would come to be the orthodox understanding of the status of Scripture in the west. It was highly visible, for example, in the works of Cassiodorus, for whom the style, form and content of the scriptures were to be considered 'precise and wholly without fault', and could not be transferred or summarised into an alternative secular account: for 'what is in the scriptures unshakeably true often becomes uncertain elsewhere'.⁹⁴ Indeed, 'his preferred term' for the canonical scriptures as a whole acknowledged their unique and separate nature: they were 'the divine authority' (*auctoritas diuina*).⁹⁵

The preservation of this distinction in the medieval west might go to show 'that even more necessary than the prophets – true and false – who would claim to discern God's hand in events . . . is the prophet who will remind his Church that outside the narrow bounds of the scriptures no one is authorised to proclaim what God is up to'.⁹⁶ And yet these prophets – and this reminder – were needed because the claim would continue to be made: for Christian authors before and after Augustine were consistently willing

⁹¹ Collingwood 1946: 53; see also the remarks of Croke 2001: 166–9.

⁹² For a more thorough account of the views of Augustine with regard to sacred history, see Markus 1988: ch. I and appendix A, with a brief summary at Markus 1990: 87–9.

⁹³ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* II.1, quoted in Vessey and Pollmann 1999: 8.

⁹⁴ Cassiodorus, *Explanatio in Psalmos* pref.15 (tr. Walsh), quoted at Vessey 2004: 31.

⁹⁵ Vessey 2004: 45; an example at Cassiodorus, *Instituta* 12. ⁹⁶ Markus 1990: 88.

to elide this distinction. Simply by writing a new history of the biblical and Christian era, contemporary authors were able to set themselves up as authorities on the Christian past. They were able not only to redescribe the facts but also, as part of the process, to divine and thus define their proper significance. The effect was to place contemporary historians in the tradition of the Old Testament authors or the evangelists; and to claim for themselves something of the authority of a prophet or an apostle.⁹⁷ If Christian history did then represent a shift from the conventions of classical historiography, it was in many cases only at the level of rhetoric. The obtrusive authorial persona of a Sallust or a Tacitus was replaced by a modesty which attributed the arrangement of events to divine agency, and which affected to reduce the historian to the level of a scribe or mere chronographer.⁹⁸ At the same time, however, the credibility of Christian historians continued to depend on their skill in discerning the proper interpretations of events. Their histories could only be a success if they were able to show that they had got it *right*. Their own narrative authority continued to matter.

In his *Chronicle*, therefore, Sulpicius resolved one difficulty at the cost of creating another. By writing a Christian history which engaged directly with classical models, but which required him, in effect, to rewrite long sections of the Bible in his own words, he necessarily drew attention to the conflict between his own narrative voice and the authoritative voice of Scripture. Sulpicius may have claimed in his preface to be deferring to the authority of the biblical authors, but his actual practice makes clear that he took final responsibility for the disposition of events in his history – that it was, in the end, his own account. His apparent acknowledgement of the authority of Scripture amounted to the significantly different claim that, with the biblical authors as his guide, his own authority could be similarly trusted. He was neither seeking to replace the inspired authors of Scripture nor leaving the field to them alone: rather, he was associating himself in their enterprise.

For all his modesty, and for all his apparent objectivity, Sulpicius remains a conspicuous presence in the text.⁹⁹ He is explicitly engaged in the task of making a story out of a 'mere chronicle'; and indeed, it is possible to doubt

⁹⁷ For this argument in more detail, see Krueger 2004: 15–32 and Williams 2008.

⁹⁸ Murru 1979: 976–7 thus defines Sulpicius' approach in the *Chronicle* in terms of *humilitas*; for this modesty as primarily a rhetorical stance, see Prete 1955: 19–20. See also Richardson 1965: 65 for a medieval rhetoric in which history was only 'something to be received' and 'not something to be enquired into by curious minds'.

⁹⁹ Prete 1955: 124.

whether any such category of mere chronicle could exist without implying a narrative framework or some kind of recognisable 'emplotment'.¹⁰⁰ This is largely to reiterate a point already well made by Moses Finley, who in reducing historical narrative to its essential components might almost have been thinking of Sulpicius and his *Chronicle*:

The barest bones of any historical narrative, the events selected and arranged in a temporal sequence, imply a value judgment (or judgments). The study and writing of history, in short, is a form of ideology.¹⁰¹

Sulpicius was well aware that his account of events might be taken as a challenge to the authority of the scriptures: but his bravura display of modesty and deference failed to disguise that he had gone ahead all the same. A similar contradiction would bedevil Christian historiography long after its understanding of time had triumphed in the later medieval west; and it was perhaps never adequately resolved. A belief in the absolute authority of the Bible had to be balanced against the authority and the critical independence of the individual historian; and a safe course therefore had to be steered between excessive credulity and an unacceptable *lèse-majesté*. The *Chronicle* of Sulpicius Severus was a rare attempt in antiquity to combine orthodox Christian belief with a firm commitment to the historian's task. It may be no surprise that it found few imitators.

¹⁰⁰ White 1978: 83; see also his discussion of possible categories of 'naïve' and 'sentimental' chronicles at 90–3. For even the simplest chronicle form imposing its own narratives and interpretations, see especially Croke 2001: 3–5 and McKitterick 2006: 18–19.

¹⁰¹ Finley 1985: 4.