Comment:
Little Denis's Invention

There would be no millennium, at the end of this year, but for 'Little Denis' — Dionysius Exiguus — as he called himself, out of humility, so they say. He is the one who invented the 'Christian Era'. A Scythian monk, about whom little is known except that he eventually came to Rome and was dead by *circa* 556, as it became by his reckoning. He assembled a great deal of canon law: material which remained indispensable well into the Middle Ages. He also translated a fair amount of Greek patristic writing into Latin. His main claim to fame, however, is that, commissioned by the Pope to reorganize the liturgical calendar, he decided to take the 248th year from the accession of the Emperor Diocletian as the year 532 'from the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Amazingly, he very nearly got it right. Jesus of Nazareth, scholars now think, was probably born in 4 BC, on Dionysius's dating.

Dating systems mostly all originate in a religious event. In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, for example, dates are reckoned from the creation of the world, 6 October 3761 BC, as it would be for Christians. Muslims, on the other hand, start from the flight of the Prophet to Mecca, AD 622 as we should say. The chronological systems of the ancient religions of the East are different again, sometimes with much older origins in the dark backward and abysm of mythological time.

All but universal television, however, ensures that most of the world's inhabitants, whatever their religion and however remote their place of residence, have no choice but to celebrate the Christian millennium. There will also be world-wide interest in whether computers crash, electronic devices go wild, aircraft drop out of the sky, banks collapse, and other such apocalyptic events occur, all because, in Little Denis's system, we shall move from 1999 to 2000.

Few men have left their mark so decisively on history. In Little Denis's case, we may say, the dating system that he invented has effectively defined how the course of history itself is now generally conceived.

It took centuries for dating events *Anno Domini* to take hold. The idea of calculating dates *Before Christ* did not appear until the middle of the seventeenth century, as modern ways of writing history developed.

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Famously, it was only in the sixteenth century that scientists detected the miscalculation that put the solar year eleven days behind the calendar. In 1583, in a further demonstration of papal responsibility for defining time, Pope Gregory XIII decreed that 4 October that year should be followed by 15 October. It took over a century for this papal revision of time to be accepted in Protestant countries. In 1752, for example, when the Gregorian calendar was introduced into the United Kingdom, there were anti-papal riots, allegedly on the grounds that the Pope had robbed people of eleven days of their lives. For that matter, in Orthodox countries, there are still problems about calculating liturgical dates, though not all due to the Gregorian revision.

It is not so much the move from 1999 to 2000 that is so crucial. In any case, according to the Royal Greenwich Observatory, the third millennium starts on 1 January 2001 — not that anyone dancing in the Dome, or waiting for computers to crash, will be paying much heed to that (surely correct!) definition. Much more worryingly, in the Christian sacred sites, where thousands plan to congregate, in Rome and in Jerusalem, fire precautions and hospital facilities will be tested to the utmost. In remote hillsides, in the deserts of Arizona and the Holy Land, millennarian enthusiasts will be preparing for the End. No doubt some expect angels, or anyway aliens from outer space, to come for them. In once-Presbyterian Edinburgh, the city centre will be locked into a ticket-only week-long street party. In every city and town in the Western world, and everywhere else that Western television reaches, the third millennium of the Christian Era will be celebrated with unprecedented fervour — bonfires, bishops' prayers, pagan and sacred festivities, apocalyptic ecstasies and alcoholic excesses.

But the crucial thing is whether systems will cope with the shift from 99 to 00 on the computers that now keep the world going round. There is little serious doubt that they will, even if many of us will have a slight thrill as midnight passes and we watch the news. For the rest, it would surely amaze that sixth-century monk to know how much his invention of the Christian Era determines our world's sense of history and the passing of time, more so than ever, in the computer age.

F.K.

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