

Cyclicism and Early Christian Historiography: Mapping the Past in Orosius' *Historiae*

The Spanish presbyter Paulus Orosius' compendious *Historiae adversus paganos* (418) is unquestionably one of the most ambitious and influential histories of the Latin West to come out of late antiquity. Either implicitly or explicitly, critics have often disparaged the *Historiae* as a thinly-veiled piece of theological commentary instead of a work of genuine history (Fend 1989; Chesnut 1992; Tanner 1998). At the opposite pole, a minority of scholars have lauded the author of the *Historiae* as the true founder of Christian historiography and a progenitor of the Christian philosophy of history as a divinely orchestrated, linear sequence of events (Fear 2010b; Harding 2014). According to these scholars, the *Historiae* represents a clean break with classical historiography and particularly with 'pagan' suppositions about time and history. Both of these views tend to overlook or misconstrue Orosius' interaction with and debt to classical historiography.

I propose an alternative reading of Orosius' philosophy of history which recognizes the multifaceted character of his 'mapping' of the past and which accounts for the influence of both classical historiography and Christian theology on his thought. Orosius does not conceive of history as an unbroken linear narrative of progress, as some scholars have concluded (Fear 2005; Schildgen 2014). On the contrary, even while adhering to a metahistorical framework based on sacred history, he constructs the past using the twin categories of cyclic repetition and confluence or convergence. On the one hand, Orosius propounds an epochal division of history based on four world-historical events (1.1.14) and places the Incarnation on a central axis dividing history into two ages (e.g., 2.18.5). On the other hand, a close reading of the *Historiae* strongly suggests that fundamental patterns of cyclic repetition and confluence transcend the epochal division of history into *Christiana tempora* and *praeterita tempora* (1.1.10; 3.2.9;

2.6.14; 6.14.1). Far from “a reversion to pagan theories of cyclical history” (Fear 2010a 85n72), the persistent theme of cyclical repetition in the *Historiae* coalesces seamlessly with a Christian insistence on a divine providential orchestration of all events. Orosius does not present us with a simple linear conception of the past but with a more kaleidoscopic model, not far distant from that of ancient Greek historians who “envisage history as a space in which plupast, past, present and future mirror one another” (Grethlein and Krebs 2012: 7). Hence, Orosius’ metahistorical vision suggests a more nuanced picture of the ways in which early Christian historians melded traditional methods of dating and traditional outlooks on time with a Christian narrative of history.

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