

# Apocalyptic Thought in Medieval German Historiography: Otto of Freising and Beyond

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## 8.1 Introduction

As for other European regions, apocalyptic imagery is abundantly rich during the Middle Ages in German theological writings, not to say in literature and the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> Consequently rich is the vast body of scholarly literature that has been produced on the subject during the last few years, with a notably increasing interest especially in the last few years after the second millennium.<sup>2</sup> The following paragraphs then will be limited to a comparatively narrow scope of such apocalyptic imagery.

At first sight, the apocalypse, as a distinct time in the future to come, does not count into the retrospective cognizance of historiography. At a second look, however, it is commonly agreed that large parts of medieval historiography are explicitly constructed or should at least be understood in terms of salvation history. From this perspective, future outlooks to its definite end seem more expected. Surprisingly then, more comprehensive or comparative studies of apocalyptic thought in German historiographical writings are few, with such notable exceptions as Martin Hauesler's 1979 dissertation and some articles on town chronicles from the later Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter will survey elements of apocalyptic thought in German historiography from the high and later Middle Ages. Given the intrinsic relation between salvation history and its realization in the apocalypse, the first works to comb through for more prominent expositions of apocalyptic imagery are world chronicles. The German exponents of this genre usually follow the scheme of the *sex aetates mundi*, the six ages of the world, which consequently

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- 1 In this respect, it might speak for itself that in the last decade there have been three exhibitions of medieval apocalyptic manuscripts and art works in Germany: Wurster (2006); Zöhl (2010).
  - 2 One might want to consult these more recent edited volumes: Schipper and Georg (2007); Brandes (2010); Delgado and Volker (2011); Riedel (2011).
  - 3 Hauesler (1980) and Eberhard (2006, 124–143); Krüger (1997, 79–101 (text) and 346–353 (notes)).

lead to the end of days.<sup>4</sup> One will find, however, that a surprising number of them do not attempt to picture this consequence in any greater detail – if at all. The same holds true for the more local historiographies from medieval towns which – for reasons of their often more annalistic composition<sup>5</sup> – also lack graphic depictions of the apocalypse as a distinct describable period but often give numerous hints at its coming.

For a first step then I shall characterize briefly each of the five German world chronicles that incorporate apocalyptic themes and sketch their respective treatment separately. For my next step I will attempt to draw some comparative lines between them to search for repeating patterns or thematic foci. I also will consider at this occasion single instances from the more scattered pieces in the above-mentioned local historiographies as well as some few hints from other German world chronicles that do not expand on the apocalypse at any greater length, for discussing them all separately would have impossibly enlarged this chapter and unnecessarily dispersed the perspective.

## 8.2 Otto of Freising, *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus*

The first capacious account of apocalyptic times in a book from the German-speaking lands that can doubtlessly be addressed as historiographical can be found in the world chronicle of Otto (ca. 1112–1158), bishop of Freising and uncle of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa.<sup>6</sup> His *Chronica* or *History of the Two Cities* has survived only in a revised version, which Otto sent to his nephew upon his request in 1157.<sup>7</sup> But according to his own report, he had written an earlier version “several years” (*aliquot annos*) ago. The resemblance of the two Augustinian ‘cities,’ the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas Dei*, is by no means exclusive to Otto,<sup>8</sup> and the chronicle’s actual title differs within the manuscript tradition. But Otto’s consequent application of Augustine’s idea stands without comparison.

4 For a brief overview see Dunphy (2010, 1527–1532). More details specifically on German world chronicles provides Tersch (1996).

5 The implications of different historiographic genres for their treatment of eschatological and apocalyptic thought Jos Decorte discusses lucidly. See Decorte (2002, 150–161).

6 For a general reconstruction of Otto’s historiographic approach see especially Goetz (1984).

7 All Latin texts are quoted from: Otto of Freising (1960), the English translation from: Otto of Freising (1928).

8 See Goetz (2007, 89–116), who characterizes four different modes of reception via exegetic, homiletic, systematic, and historiographic writings.