CHAPTER TEN

LATIN HISTORIOGRAPHY: JEROME, OROSIUS
AND THE WESTERN CHRONICLES

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1. Introduction: Jerome

By the beginning of the fifth century Latin historiography is almost exclusively Christian. The first historical work of the century are the Chronica of Sulpicius Severus (403), and after this there develop two different approaches to the writing of history. The first is that of the chronicle, which goes down to Hydatius and beyond, the second, which alone can be called historiography in the strict sense, culminates in Orosius and is practically limited to Africa.¹ The origin of both these approaches is to be found in the historical writings of Jerome, both in what he wrote and in what he planned to write, and thus it is convenient to start with him, twenty years before the fifth century.

When Jerome wrote and published his Chronicon in 380,² he had just returned from the cultural and intellectual climate of Rome, when Damasus was pope (366–384). Damasus planned a new specifically Christian interpretation of history, not hostile to the pagan version, but parallel and alternative to it. Evidence of this is provided by the epigrammata Damasiana, eulogies of Christian martyrs, which are to Church history what Augustan eulogies of the Forum are to the history of Rome. To this trend also belong the Latin translations of the Jewish War of Josephus by the pseudo-Hegesippus, who was perhaps the converted Jew Isaac, and of the Life of Antony (Athanasius’ authorship has now become uncertain) translated by Euagrius of Antioch. It was also thought necessary to bring up to

¹ Here belong also the Gallo-Romans Sulpicius Alexander and Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus: cf. infra § 4.
² Thus F. Cavallera, Saint Jérôme (Paris, 1922), I, 63–69.
date the Latin version of the *Chronicon* of Hippolytus, which had been continued to 334 and was incorporated in the work of the so-called Chronographer of 354.\(^3\)

Jerome involved himself in this task after he went to the East in 373 and came across the *Chronicon* of Eusebius, which was decidedly superior to that of Hippolytus. It was not, however, merely a matter of translation. Jerome added to Eusebius details of Roman history and culture, mainly deriving from Suetonius, and then continued Eusebius from 326 to the battle of Adrianople in 378. For this continuation Jerome used, in addition to personal recollections, several written sources. One was certainly Eutropius, another may have been Aurelius Victor; the tradition contained in the *Enmannsche Kaisergeschichte* is also a possibility, and the *Consularia Constantinopolitana* in the recension of 370\(^4\) was almost certainly consulted. Thus, on the one hand Jerome maintained the chronicle method, which up to that time had been the Christian method *par excellence*, and, on the other, went beyond it with his secular annotations, both in cultural and political terms which he drew without prejudice on the pagan sources.

Eusebius-Jerome was the model for the whole of western chronography from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages proper, precisely because it was not a bare chronicle of religious and ecclesiastical events. Its schematic arrangement offered a fairly accurate and complete account of human history from Abraham onwards.

In the preface to the *Chronicon*, however, which was written when he had finished the work, Jerome showed that he was aware of the limits of this type of chronography, even in the new guise that he had given it. Indeed, he recognized that contemporary history, the history of the barbarian invasions after 378, would need to be treated *latioris historiae stilo*, with a more ample exposition and in grander prose. Here is the project for a work in the classical historiographical tradition, which aims at bridging the gap between pagan and Christian historiography: Christians, too, can and should write about contemporary history, the dramatic vicissitudes of the Empire, which is now their Empire.

From 380 to 390 Jerome wavered between this project and another

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