For long the distinction of having fixed the beginning of the Christian era has been accredited to Dionysius Exiguus, a native of Scythia, who lived as a monk in Rome from about the beginning of the sixth century until about 540. In 525 he prepared an Easter table which, so far as its first 19 years (513–531) are concerned, is simply a copy of the last 19 years of the 95-year Easter table commonly attributed to Cyril of Alexandria. The particulars given for its remaining 95 years (532–626) come from Dionysius himself, but they were determined in accordance with the principles of the Cyrillan table, and they are arranged under the same rubrics except that in place of anni diocletiani there are given anni Dni nri Iβv Xπi. For making this change Dionysius gives the following reason in his letter prefatory to his table addressed to an otherwise unknown bishop Petronius: 'I have not wished to preserve in my cycles the memory of one who was ungodly and a persecutor, but rather have chosen to denote the times from the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.' The first year in Dionysius’ own part of the table is the 248th of the era of Diocletian, and it is entered as the year Dxxxix of our Lord Jesus Christ. The particulars—epact, indiction, etc.—given for it show that it is the year 532 of our present era.

It used to be thought that in fixing the epoch of his era Dionysius proceeded as follows. Knowing that Augustus had died in 767 a.u.c., he reckoned that the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius comprised a part of 783 a.u.c. Gathering from Lk. iii. 23 that Jesus was entering upon the thirtieth year of his age at the commencement of his ministry, he counted back twenty-nine years and so equated

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1 That it is his is now much disputed.
2 Migne, P.L. lxvii, 20.
754 a.u.c. to A.D. 1. In recent times it has been maintained that Dionysius proceeded in a somewhat different way. According to Oppert he shared the belief of many of his contemporaries that the resurrection had taken place on 25 March, and his table showed him that Easter Sunday would fall on that date in the year 279 of the era of Diocletian (A.D. 563). Adopting the 532-year cycle he inferred that the first Easter Sunday must have been 25 March 784 a.u.c. (A.D. 31). Since further he held that Jesus at his death was thirty years of age, he made the year 279 of the era of Diocletian the year 563 (=532+31) of his own era, and consequently made the first in his own part of the table, the 248th of the era of Diocletian, A.D. 532.

But in recent times it has also been maintained in certain quarters that Dionysius did not reach his conclusion by computation, that he did not understand and did not employ the 532-year Easter table, and that already in his time the date of our Lord's birth given by him was historical at least to some. It has also been suggested that the Christian era was introduced by Hippolytus, that it was first used in the East, and that Dionysius merely popularized it in the West.

Particulars regarding the date of our Lord's birth are found in the Commentary on Daniel by Hippolytus, in both his chronological works, the Canon and the Chronicle, and also in an old Slavonic fragment derived professedly from a work by him on the Revelation of John. The purpose of the present study is to examine these particulars and then to inquire whether he can in fact have introduced our present era and whether he has been shown to have done so.

4 So C. W. Jones, Bedae Opera de Temporibus (1943), p. 70. Jones notes that in the list of consuls given by the chronographer of 354, under Caesar and Paulus, the consuls of A.D. 1, there is the note: Hoc cons. dominus Jesus Christus natus est VIII Kal. Ian. d. Ven. luna XV; but this note may well be a later insertion. With regard to this list of consuls Mommsen, Chronica minora I (= Mon. Germ. hist. Auct. antiquiss. IX), p. 56, writes: 'Ipsi fasti longe emendatissimi sunt qui ad nos pervenerunt'.
5 So e.g. W. H. P. Hatch, An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts, p. 19. What Hatch writes there is apparently based on the article by Blake referred to below.