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How old is the World? The Byzantine era κατὰ Ρωμαίους and its rivals.

The term *world era* (*ère mondiale*) means a calendar system, where the creation of the world is accepted as an epoch. This kind of chronology, which pretends to deal with the human history universally, is very convenient for historians, but occurs rather rarely in practical use, where so called “historical eras” are more usual (years of Seleucids, of Diocletian, of Sassanians, of the Hegira, etc.). Only two cultural traditions — Byzantine (Greek-Orthodox) and modern Jewish — have ventured to apply world eras for everyday calendar use.

Both traditions have their roots in the Bible, where a lot of chronological data is given for the period between Adam and the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, this event representing a synchronism between the Holy History of Scripture and the chronological calculations of the Hellenistic authors (e.g., the Canon of Claudius Ptolemy). The origins of all Christian eras go back to the chronological computations of the early Christian historians of the 2nd–4th centuries. But it is not easy to ascertain all the underlying principles of these calculations. When we deal with biblical and historical chronology, it becomes clear that the information here is insufficient for constructing any reliable world era. All we can get from the Septuagint is the coinciding of the epoch of Augustus and Christ with the 6th millennium after Adam. But there must be some other principles to determine exact dates. These principles were borrowed from theologians. The most appropriate time for Christ to be born was the very middle of the 6th millennium, because this period correlates with the 6th day of Creation, when Adam was created by God. Jesus Christ, the Incarnated God, became the new Adam and was born in the year 5500, as it is proved in the chronicles of Julius Africanus and Hippolytus of Rome (3rd c.). Another 500 years of the human history till the beginning of the “sabbatical” 7th thousand of years represent the eschatological perspective.

But as soon as this limit came near, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The intensification of the eschatological uneasiness was a subject of trouble for the Church hierarchs and state officials. It was remembered that Jesus Christ prohibited the discussion of times and dates (Acts 1:7), and that only God knows the time of the end (Mt 24:36). Furthermore, as it was found out by Eusebius of Caesarea († ca.339) and St Jerome († 419/20), the biblical chronology of Greek Bible (Septuagint) differed from that of the Hebrew Bible (Masorah) by more than 1700 years. So no calculation of the age of the world can be relied on. The world chronicle of Eusebius–Jerome, where no world era was in use, was very popular in the West. In the 7th c. Bede combined with its principles Augustine’s ideas, according to which every single

World's Age did not comprise 1000 years and the real duration of the last Age was concealed from human beings.¹ In such a way the theoretical foundation was laid for the invention and introduction of a new kind of era: from the Incarnation of Christ. This era was designed on the Easter computations of Dionysius Exiguus (early 6th c.), where the 1st year of the 532-year Easter cycle was the year 248 of Diocletian; the beginning of the previous cycle was chosen by Dionysius as the year of Incarnation (1 B.C.). Such a date is in disaccord with the date of Christ's Resurrection after 33 years of earthly life: Sunday, 3rd day after the Passover — which according to Dionysius' Easter table can correspond only to the years 31 and 42 A.D. And what is more, it precedes the date of the death of king Herod the Great in the year 4 B.C. In spite of these weak points, the era of Dionysius spread around Latin Europe and, in the course of time, throughout the whole world.

Meanwhile, in the Christian East the correspondence with the Easter computus was one of the main requirements for a chronological system. The problem was rather complicated, because it was found, that within the period of Christ's preaching — between the 15th and 18th years of Tiberius and around the cosmic year 5533 (25 and 45 years A.D., as a rough approximation) — in the commonly used 19-year Easter moon cycle, *there was no year* when the Passover (the first spring full moon, Nisan 14) would coincide with Friday and the traditional date of the Passion, March 25. Only two years were more or less suitable: the 13th and 5th years of Alexandrian Easter moon cycle. In the first, the Passover coincides with March 24, Saturday; in the second, with March 22, Thursday.

The second variant is used in the Alexandrian era, constructed by Annianus at the beginning of the 5th c. This system presents in a masterly sort of way the mystical coincidence of the three main dates of the world history: the beginning of Creation, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection of Christ. All these events happened, according to the Alexandrian chronology, on the 25th of March; furthermore, the first two events were separated by the period of exactly 5500 years; the first and the third one occurred on Sunday — the sacred day of the beginning of the Creation and its renovation through Christ. The striking mysticism of the Alexandrian era of Annianus (κόσμου ἔτη κατ' Ἀλεξανδροεῖς) made it popular in Byzantium, especially in monastic circles. Among its convinced supporters were such famous figures as St Maximos the Confessor (7th c.), chronologists George Syncellus and St Theophanes the Confessor (8th/9th c.). But this masterpiece of Christian symbolism had two serious weak points: historical inaccuracy (date of Resurrection — *anno mundi* 5533 = 42 (!) A.D.) and its contradiction to the chronology of the Gospel of St John (Crucifixion on Friday after the Passover).

These particular problems represent the principle concern of the Prologue of the so-called *Chronicon paschale*, composed about the year 630 by some representative of the Antiochian scholarly tradition.² The unknown author of this compilation suggested a new variant of the world era, where the Resurrection of Christ was dated much more

¹ Bede, *The Reckoning of Time*, introd., trans. and comm. F. Wallis (Liverpool, 1999).

² *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn, 1832); J. Beaucamp, R. Bondoux, J. Lefort, M.-Fr. Rouan, I. Sorlin, "Temps et histoire, I: Le Prologue de la Chronique Pascale," *Travaux et Mémoires* 7 (1979) 229–258.

correctly — March 25, Sunday, A.D. 31. This date is the next day after Passover, but the author of the Chronicle had corrected the Easter table and made it the 3rd day, just in accordance with St John's Gospel. For this improvement the new system had to pay by the loss of the mystical perfection: the year of Incarnation became 5507, not 5500; the date of March 25 ceased to be the first day of the world. As a kind of compensation the new era had received a "natural" argument for its correctness: the beginning of the astronomical cycles (March 21, 5509 B.C.) occurs in a year with no "solar epacts" (i.e. just after the bissextile leap, which is regarded as a result of disparity between solar and lunar movements).³

It is characteristic for the *Chronicon paschale*, that it contains no mention of the Alexandrian era at all. As far as we know from the treatise on the Easter of the emperor Heraclius (in fact written by Stephan of Alexandria ca. 623),⁴ the official 19-year Easter moon cycle was not the Alexandrian, but that invented by the Byzantine scholar, Iron of Constantinople.⁵ But we know about the high authority of the Alexandrian system from the treatise on the computus, written by St Maximos the Confessor in the spring of the last year of Heraclius, 641 A.D.⁶ This treatise abundantly praises the Alexandrian era and Easter cycle, regarded as the Church tradition *par excellence*.⁷ St Maximos argues with the partisans of an alternative computus, which he calls "multiplication on 5 and 6". We are not going to consider here the sophisticated details of this problem, but we shall emphasize the main feature of this non-Alexandrian computation: it rests not upon the Alexandrian, but upon a new chronological system, namely the Byzantine era.

We do not know who invented this era and when. It appears for the first time just between the end of the *Chronicon paschale* and St Maximos' treatise, in the work of a certain "monk and priest", Georgios (638/9 A.D.).⁸ He not only refers to the Byzantine era, but already regards it as the most convenient for the Easter computus. The treatise of Gergios is of primary importance because it is the earliest text where all three main variants of the world era are mentioned: the Alexandrian era, the era "with zero epacts" (i.e. of the *Chronicon paschale*), and the Byzantine one. He ascribes them to "ancient historians" (τῶν ἀρχαίων ἱστορικῶν), but himself shows no enthusiasm regarding to the problem of the exact age of the world. "Truly, — he says, — only the Creator of years and times ... knows the beginning, the middle and the end of years, and annual cycles, and movements of stars, and changes of turns, and alternations of times."⁹ However, he doesn't condemn attempts to find out the exact number of years after the Creation. Preoccupied with the Easter computus, Georgios says that the best of all and

³ The inner structure of the Chronicle was reconstructed by Venance Grumel in his polemic with the opinion of Eduard Schwartz (see: E. Schwartz, "Chronicon Paschale," *RE* III (1899) 2460–2477; V. Grumel, *La Chronologie* (Paris, 1958) 58–62). We accept Grumel's explanation, with some specifications.

⁴ [Heraclii imperatoris] Methodus, in: *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn, 1832) II, 210–219 (= *PG* XCII, 1123–1132); H. Usener, *De Stephano Alexandrino Commentatio* (Bonn, 1879).

⁵ Grumel. *Chronologie*, 100–101.

⁶ S. Maximi monachi et martyris Brevis enarratio christiani Paschatis, in: *PG* XIX, 1217–1280.

⁷ Ch. I, 12, 17, 32, 34 (col. 1229, 1233, 1249–1250, 1251–1252).

⁸ Fr. Diekamp, "Der Mönch und Presbyter Georgios, ein unbekannter Schriftsteller des 7. Jahrhunderts," *BZ* 9 (1900) 14–51.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 24.

the most popular is the era which counts 6147 years till the 29th year of Heraclius (639 A.D.). It is exactly what we call now the Byzantine era (*annus mundi* 1 = 5509/5508 B.C.). Georgios makes it clear that the main advantage of this era is the common starting point of the astronomical (lunar and solar) cycles and of the cycle of indictions, the usual dating system in Byzantium since 6th c. Indeed, if we count indicts back to the September of the year 5509 B.C., we find the beginning of the 1st year of indict. This is the most convincing hypothesis for the formation of the Byzantine era of the *Chronicon paschale*, with the beginning of the year shifted from the “natural” place in March, around the vernal equinox, to the month of September, which is the usual starting point of indictions.

Thus, in the years of Heraclius the problem of counting of the years of the world became the issue of the day. The very poor state of historical sources for the period of Heraclius and his successors makes it difficult to trace the process of spreading of the new common era. But we can suppose that the process was rather intensive, because in the year 691 A.D. we find the Byzantine era in the Acts of the *Trullanum* Council (so-called *Synodos Quinisexta*).¹⁰ Just at the same time this era appears in epigraphical monuments.¹¹ Then, the March-style variant of this era was apparently used for dating of the *Ecloga*, March, ind. 9, a.m. 6248.¹² At the second half of the 7th c. the Byzantine era was known in the far West of the Europe, in Britain.¹³

After the defeat of Iconoclasm in 787, the fervent propaganda of the Alexandrian era in the monastic chronography of the late 8th – early 9th century (Nicephoros of Constantinople, Georgios Syncellus, Theophanes the Confessor) shook the positions of the Byzantine era. But its popularity was too strong. We find it again in the dating of the so called Letter of three Patriarchs to the emperor Theophilos (April, ind. 14, 6344 = 836 A.D.). At last, in 10th c. the Byzantine era reaches the official documents: Novels of A.D. 947, 962, 964, and most surely of the year A.D. 988 are dated in this way, as well as the Act of patriarch Nicholaos II Chrysobergos, A.D. 987.¹⁴

Byzantine chronicles of 10th c. and later show real chronological embarrassment. They combine quasi-Byzantine chronology with Alexandrian mystical symbolism (5500 years from Adam to Christ), disregarding the incompatibility of these two chronological systems. At the end of 11th century the leading Byzantine philosopher Michael Psellos, while answering the question about eras, confirms the accuracy of the common era and says, that the Resurrection has to be dated “according to the Evangelists” on March 25, 5539 (= 31 A.D.), and the Immaculate Conception to the year 5504 (= 5 B.C.). At the same time he tries to keep the traditional mystical number “5500” for the date of Christmas, claiming that it is almost the same as 5504.¹⁵

¹⁰ J. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Graz, 1960–1962^r) XII, 986.

¹¹ CIG IV 9350 (October 19, Sunday, ind. 7, a.m. 6202 = A.D. 693); 9352 (April 4, Friday, ind. 2, a.m. 6212 = A.D. 704).

¹² V. Grumel, “L’année du monde dans l’ère byzantine,” *Echos d’Orient* 34 (1935) 327–331.

¹³ *PL* XC, 598, 877 (Pseudo-Beda).

¹⁴ Grumel hesitates to call the dating of first three Novels certainly Byzantine, because the “proto-Byzantine” era of *Chronicon paschale* might give the same dates.

¹⁵ G. Redl, “La chronologie appliquée de Michel Psellos,” *Byzantion* 5 (1929 [1930]) 241–244.

Thus, we can see how the world era spread in Byzantium from 7th c. But why did it become so popular? After all, other Christian traditions — Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian — did not extend chronological speculations to the field of practical dating. Indeed, even in Byzantium there was no one reliable chronology of the world history. Even the dates of Christ's Birth and Resurrection were unreliable. But it didn't prevent increasing use of the world era in everyday practice. I suppose, that there were some reasons for propagation of the *anni mundi* counting from 7th to 10th century, when it became the official type of dating. Apart from the convenience of the Easter computus, the world era was the most effective "anti-millenarist" tool. After condemnation of the early Christian idea of 1000-year Kingdom of saints and Christ in the years 6000–7000, this conception, based on the words of the Apocalypsis of St John (Rev 20:1–7), was transformed into the ideology of the Christian Kingdom under heavenly rule of Christ and earthly rule of the emperor — and the saints.¹⁶ This period began with the Birth of God the Son in the Roman Empire of Augustus in the year 5500, then entered the phase of the triumphing Christianity — corresponding to the last 7th "sabbatical" century — about the year 6000¹⁷ and would last till the end of the world. It is remarkable that the world era became popular in the 7th c., when eschatological expectations became very intensive. Officially it appears for the first time in the Acts of the Council under Justinian II — the emperor, who proclaimed himself *servus Christi* und placed on the obverse side of his solidus Christ Pantocrator with the legend *Rex regnantium*.¹⁸ The Byzantine era, with its world's age manifestation, might have been a rather effective "remedy" against pessimistic views on the future of Empire in the 7th–10th centuries — several hundreds of years before the ominous year 7000 (A.D. 1492). But this reserve was being inevitably exhausted, and Byzantine history mysteriously confined itself within the period of the 7th "Lord's day"...

¹⁶ See P. Magdalino, "The Year 1000 in Byzantium," *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, P. Magdalino (ed.) (Leiden & Boston, 2003) 233–270, esp. 245–255.

¹⁷ Compare the similar idea of the chronology by Hesychius and John Malalas with the Resurrection in the year 6000.

¹⁸ J.D. Breckenridge, *The Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II* (New York, 1959).