CAESAR'S CALENDAR

ANCIENT TIME AND THE BEGINNINGS OF HISTORY

DENIS FEENEY
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THE AXIS OF B.C./A.D.

It is a practically impossible mental exercise for readers of this book to imagine maneuvering themselves around historical time without the universalizing, supranational, and cross-cultural numerical axis of the dates in B.C. and A.D., or B.C.E. and C.E. These numerical dates seem to be written in nature, but they are based on a Christian era of year counting whose contingency and ideological significance are almost always invisible to virtually every European or American, except when we hesitate over whether to say B.C. or B.C.E.¹

The axis of time along a B.C./A.D. line is not one that has been in common use for very long. It was sometime in the first half of the sixth century C.E. that the monk Dionysius Exiguus came up with our now standard linchpin of Christ’s birth date, but his aim was to facilitate the calculation of Easter not to provide a convenient dating era, and the common use of the numerical dates generated by Dionysius's era is surprisingly recent, despite their apparently irresistible ease and utility.² It is true that the eighth-century Bede, for example, will provide A.D. dates, but they are not the backbone of his chronicling technique, which is fundamentally organized around regnal years. Bede’s A.D. dates are still felt to be orientations in divine time, from the incarnation of Christ, and are accordingly used for “ecclesiastical events, such as the death of an archbishop, or astronomical events, such as an eclipse or a comet”; they still require to be synchronized with other mundane time schemes and are not an historical absolute in themselves.³ Even for those who
use an A.D. date, it is not necessarily natural, as it may appear to us, to use the reverse dimension of B.C. Sir Walter Raleigh’s History of the World (1614) refers to the civil years of recent time with the familiar enumeration (though without the A.D. annotation); his history from the creation to 167 B.C.E., however, proceeds without a single B.C. date, using unspecific and relativizing dating schemes that are still essentially those of a universalizing pagan historian such as Pompeius Trogus.

Joseph Scaliger’s great work on chronology, De Emendatione Temporum (1583), devoted much space to the question of when Christ was born, but the birth of Christ, so far from being the key benchmark in temporal calculation, is not even included among the historical eras he lays down in book 5. As one sees from Scaliger’s practice, a major reason that B.C./A.D. dates were not automatically used as historical markers was that scholars could not agree on when Christ was born. Scaliger’s main predecessor in historical chronology, Paul Crusius, in his posthumously published Liber de Epochis of 1578, did not use B.C. and A.D. as his benchmark because he thought that the Gospels could not yield a verifiable date for Christ’s birth; instead, he used the Passion as one of his determinative eras, which he “arbitrarily” fixed at the date of “midnight preceding January 1 A.D. 33.”

The date of the incarnation was not simply a conventional peg in time to these Christian scholars, and the undecidability of the incarnation’s position in time as an event overrode the utility that would emerge once the era could be regarded as a convention rather than as an actual count from a verifiable happening. Only in 1627 did Domenicus Petavius, in his Opus De Doctrina Temporum, expound the B.C./A.D. system as a basis for a universal time line for scholars and historians, on the understanding that the reference point of the birth of Christ represented “not the actual event but an agreed upon point from which all real events could be dated.”

Even after Petavius’s work, history continued to be written without the numerical grid until the eighteenth century.

One aim of the present book is to make this apparently bizarre recalcitrance understandable by bringing to light the power and significance of the dating mentality that was surrendered in the transition to the universal numerical grid. It has long been conventional to condole with the Greeks and Romans for never really coming up with a usable numerical dating system. But this teleological view not only makes it hard for us to intuit how the ancients “coped,” as it were, without a numerical dating system, but, more importantly, obscures the positive dimension to the issue—what were the advantages and insights that accrued to their visions of history as a result of the chronological systems they did inhabit?

Our numerical C.E. dates are convenient enough in themselves, and they have
generated other numerically derived conceptual instruments for us to manipulate, especially the century and the decade. These units are, again, surprisingly recent. We have been thinking in centuries for only three and a half centuries, and in decades for only seven decades. Les Murray puts the century mentality a little late, but his wonderful poem on the subject, “The C19–20,” cries out for quotation:

The Nineteenth Century. The Twentieth Century.
There were never any others. No centuries before these.
Dante was not hailed in his time as an Authentic Fourteenth Century Voice. Nor did Cromwell thunder, After all, in the bowels of Christ, this is the Seventeenth Century!

With all their attendant dangers of facile periodization, their refinements of “long” and “short,” and their explanatory epithets of “German” or “American,” these units have become indispensable to our apprehension of the rhythms of time.

The centuries, decades, and individual numbered years make orientation in time so easy that we scarcely any more conceive of the process as orientation. The numerals provide a time line that appears independent of focalization. In addition, the Western calendar to which the numbered years are tied is likewise of such rigorous power that we consistently assume the existence of a comprehensive time grid whenever we are working with the past. The consequences have been well expressed by P.-J. Shaw:

A date is the symbol of a moment rather than the moment itself, and a calendar is a device for identifying a day, month, sometimes a year, distinct from a system of reckoning, which is a tool for computing the passage of time. But because the modern (Christian) calendar acts also as the modern system of reckoning and is universally acknowledged as such, the correspondence between day and date, between a moment and its given symbol, is so close that the two tend to be treated as identical. One consequence of this is that the artificial nature of that date becomes obscured; it assumes the privilege . . . of a universal law.

TIME WITHOUT B.C./A.D.

The situation was profoundly different for the Greeks and Romans, to a degree that is virtually impossible to recover in the imagination. In the ancient world each city had its own calendar and its own way of calibrating past time, usually through
lists of local magistrates, just as they each had had their own currencies, their own weights and measures, and their own religions. As recent disputes over harmonizing currencies or weights and measures have demonstrated, utility is not the only consideration at work in such matters, and modern societies have likewise shown considerable resistance to the harmonizing of time and calendars, as we shall see in chapter 5. Still, ancient societies did not face the uniquely modern challenges to time measurement that came with the ability to move quickly over space. Before rapid stage coaches and railways there was no need for anything but local time, and it was the squeezing of physical space by the increase of speed in connecting separate places that made the harmonization of time standards necessary, with the eventual apparatus of international time zones.

In the atomized time world of the ancient Mediterranean, expressing dates in a format that would make sense to inhabitants of more than one city presented an intellectual and organizational challenge of a high order, one that it took ancient scholars centuries to meet. The first two chapters will bear this point out in detail, but for now two brief examples may serve to illustrate the practical difficulties. A calendrical date was hard enough. When Plutarch gives a date for the battle of Plataea he says, “They fought this battle on the fourth of Boëdromion, according to the Athenians, but according to the Boeotians, on the twenty-seventh of the month Panemus” (Arist. 19.7). A year date presented its own problems of calibration. When Diodorus Siculus wishes to mark the beginning of “384 B.C.E.” he says, “At the conclusion of the year, in Athens Diotrephes was archon and in Rome the consuls elected were Lucius Valerius and Aulus Mallius, and the Eleians celebrated the ninety-ninth Olympiad, that in which Dicon of Syracuse won the footrace” (15.14.1). Comparable mechanisms are observable in all literate societies that have no universalizing numerical dating system but have chancelleries or historians who must make correlations outside the penumbra of their own state. A historian working in Asia who wanted to describe events in what we call 936 C.E. would be using the following synchronisms: “In China, Shi Jingtang destroyed the Latter Tang Dynasty and became Emperor Gaozu of the Latter Jin, inaugurating year one of the Tianfu (‘Heavenly Felicity’) Era. Meanwhile, Wang T’aeko unified the Korean peninsula under the Koryo Dynasty in his 19th regnal year. In Japan, in the sixth year of Jôhei (‘Consenting in Peace’) Era, under Emperor Suzaku, Kino Yoshihito and Fujiwara no Sumitomo fought pirates off the southwest coast of Japan. It was the 33rd year of the 60-year cycle of the zodiac: the Year of the Fiery Monkey.”

If you were a Greek or a Roman moving between the ambits of two or more states, it was impossible to have any kind of time frame in your head at all if you
could not handily correlate disparate people and events. At the end of this chapter, in the synchronistic chapter from the *Attic Nights* of the late second-century C.E. writer Aulus Gellius we shall see a sustained example of the kind of correlating work required of a Roman or Greek maneuvering through the past. Here I may illustrate the difficulties with the story Gellius tells to open his chapter, as a justification for the work he undertook in compiling his essay on synchronism (*NA* 17.21.1):

> Ut conspectum quendam aetatum antiquissimarum, item uirorum inlustrium qui in his aetatibus nati fuissent haberemus, ne in sermonibus forte inconspectum aliquid super aetate atque uita clariorum hominum temere diceremus, sicuti sophista ille ἀναπαυτής, qui publice nuper disserens Carneaden philosophum a rege Alexandro, Philippi filio, pecunia donatum et Panaetium Stoicum cum superiore Africano uixisse dixit . . .

In order to have a kind of considered overview of very ancient eras, and correspondingly of the illustrious men who had been born in those eras, so as to avoid by chance blurting out in conversation some unconsidered remark about the era or life of men who are quite well known, as that uneducated sophist did who recently gave a public lecture in which he said that Carneades the philosopher had been given some money by king Alexander, the son of Philip, and that Panaetius the Stoic had been in the circle of the elder Africanus . . .

The elder Africanus in fact died when Panaetius was a baby, and it was Africanus Minor with whom Panaetius consorted, while Carneades visited Rome in what we call 155 B.C.E. Even a well-informed modern classicist might struggle to come up with this exact date for Carneades’ embassy, but most will be able to straddle the decade, or at least to have him pegged in the right century, and so will handily avoid correlating him with Alexander, who died in what we call 323 B.C.E. I am sure all our hearts go out to that poor sophist, but his blunders bring home how very difficult it is to keep historical events in their correct relative order without our universalizing cross-cultural and supranational numerical dating, which makes it easy for us to maneuver our way around the past, working with larger or smaller spreads of pattern distribution. If users of the B.C.E./C.E. grid were in the habit of making systematic synchronistic comparisons with the Islamic or Jewish calendars, we would know what it was like for the Greeks and Romans; but not many people in the West habitually do that. That is something they have to do. The time imperialism works in the favor of the users of the Christian time grid.
The ease and apparent naturalness of our dating system conspire to beguile us into overlooking the fact that all of the dates it generates are themselves ultimately synchronisms. The centuries-long work on constructing a coherent historical chronology on an axis of B.C.E./C.E. time has been absorbed and naturalized so thoroughly by all of us that we can take it completely for granted, and forget just how much synchronistic work our predecessors going back to the Renaissance had to do in order for us to be able to say something like “Xerxes invaded Greece in 480 B.C.E.” This project of domestication has brought incalculable benefits in terms of convenience and transferability, but it is one that students of antiquity should be regularly defamiliarizing, because we lose as much in historical understanding as we gain in convenience when we cloak our discrepant ancient data with the apparently scientific unified weave of the Julian calendar and the B.C./A.D. system.

EVERY DATE A SYNCHRONISM

Not just in terms of European history, but in terms of anything we call a “date,” it is the case that “every chronological statement is, in a sense, a synchronism,” grounded on the correlation of past events. Indeed, relativity has made it clear that there is no absolute time to be sought in science any more than in history; just as in history, the apparent absoluteness of physicists’ time is actually a matrix for connecting events: “Time and space . . . are not real extensions but only conceptual, mathematical devices that are used to situate events and measure the intervals between them.” The ability to synchronize, to construct relationships between events separated in time and space, underpins our apprehension of time at fundamental levels of cognition. Antonio Damasio, in his studies of brain function in patients with physical damage to various parts of the brain, has investigated patients who have lost their sense of past time, so that they have no sense of chronology: “How the brain assigns an event to a specific time and places that event in a chronological sequence—or in the case of my patient, fails to do so—is a mystery. We know only that both the memory of facts and the memory of spatial and temporal relationships between those facts are involved.” Marriages, bereavements, new jobs, new houses, births of children—these greeting-card moments appear to be the hooks by which we organize our apprehension of our lived “private” time, and these hooks are regularly attached to memorable events in the “public” sphere that provide comparatively fixed points of contact. Mark Twain’s comments on this dating function of the Civil War in the South are
famous: “The war is what a.d. is elsewhere: they date from it. All day long you hear things ‘placed’ as having happened since the waw; or du’in’ the waw; or befo’ the waw; or right aftah the waw; or ‘bout two yeahs or five yeahs or ten yeahs befo’ the waw or aftah the waw.”

One of my favorite modern examples is the ghastly moment in Joy in the Morning when Bertie Wooster comes within an ace of losing the brooch entrusted to him by Aunt Agatha to deliver to Florence Craye at Steeple Bumpleigh. If he had lost it, he says, “the thing would have marked an epoch. World-shaking events would have been referred to as having happened ‘about the time Bertie lost that brooch’ or ‘just after Bertie made such an idiot of himself over Florence’s birthday present’.”

The examples of Damasio, Twain, and Wodehouse can serve to remind us that b.c.e. and c.e. dates do not speak for themselves, even if it usually feels as if they do. The numbers are not just numbers. We may feel as if we orientate ourselves in European history since archaic Greece on an axis of pure numerals, but those numbers are charged with event-laden significance, and the emptiness of a merely numerical time grid comes home to someone like me as soon as I read a history of a country about whose past I am relatively ignorant, such as premodern China. If I open a book on China before 1500 c.e. I am immediately adrift in an ocean of digits, for the events that have generated those numbers have no instinctive significance to me. The only way the time lines of Asian history can come to make sense to a novice like me is after a process of immersion in the events, so that the numbers are more than numbers, or else, as I find in my case, precisely through a process of synchronism: the date of an event in Asian history may stick in my head if I can find a link with a contemporary event in European history, so that the number thereby becomes meaningful, and memorable.

If modern Westerners operate in this way, then it is even more the case that within a society without our b.c./a.d. axis people will almost inevitably organize their perception of past time by relation to a striking event, involving well-known people, shared in the memory of the peer community. An excellent early example from Greece is in Xenophanes, who asks at dinner, “How many years do you have, my good man? How old were you when the Mede came?” (in “546/5 B.C.E.”). What eventually comes to underpin the entire ancient project of organizing historical time is precisely the use of such canonical events as hooks from which intervals forwards or backwards could be counted; these intervals provided a way of dividing the past, giving a kind of map, making it possible to develop a sense of contours, large-scale and small-scale. The backbone to the scheme of Eratosthenes’ Chronographiae shows this very clearly. The first of Jacoby’s fragments
from this work shows a system of “x years from a to b” (“80 years from the fall of Troy to the return of the Heraclids,” and so on), until we finally get to Alexander’s death, roughly a hundred years before Eratosthenes; the death of Alexander is such a famous event that readers can construct their own links back to it, just as any reader of this book could construct his or her own links via family back to the time of the First World War.28

Any construction of the past that involved more than one community meant that you needed more than one column of events, and you needed a series of significant Aunt Agatha moments in each column, which could then be used as points of orientation for parallel synchronization. Cicero provides a fine example in a letter he wrote to Atticus on 19 March 45 B.C.E., requesting historical information, needed for background in his Academica, concerning the year “155 B.C.E.” (Att. 12.23.2 = Shackleton Bailey [1965–70] 262.2):

quibus consulibus Carneades et ea legatio Romam uenerit scriptum est in tuo annali. haec nunc quero, quae causa fuerit—de Oropo, opinor, sed certum nescio; et, si ita est, quae controuersiae. praeterea, qui eo tempore nobilis Epicureus fuerit Athenisque praefuerit hortis, qui etiam Athenis πολιτικοί fuerint illustres. quae te etiam ex Apollodori puto posse inuenire.

It is written in your Book of Annals in which consuls Carneades and that embassy came to Rome. What I now want to know is their business—Oropus I think it was, but I don’t know for certain; and if that is it, what were the points at issue. Furthermore, tell me of a notable Epicurean of the period, head of the Garden at Athens; also who were the leading Athenian politicians of the period. I think you can get the information from Apollodorus’ book among others.

First of all, it is worth pausing over the first two Latin words in this quotation, *quibus consulibus*. I have given the excellent translation of Shackleton Bailey, apart from the first sentence, where his version almost imperceptibly miscues Cicero’s Latin by domesticating it into the equivalent of what an English speaker would have said. “Your Annals give the year in which Carneades and that embassy came to Rome” is Shackleton Bailey’s version, and my own “in which consuls” definitely sounds unnatural in comparison, but this more literal phrasing brings out the way in which the Romans marked the year with the names of the two consuls, not with a number. Their phrasing is not straightforwardly a date, but an event—the holding of supreme power by so-and-so and so-and-so, in this case by
P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica and M. Claudius Marcellus, both for the second time. The Roman side of this time event, then, is anchored in Cicero’s mind with the names of the consuls, but at the end of the extract we see him asking for an Athenian equivalent, a prominent Epicurean and the leading Athenian politicians of the time, so that he can have a series of connecting points, bridges, to link up affairs at Athens with the names of the Roman consuls. For us, the bare “155” does virtually all the work of giving a sense of depth and relative location in time, but Cicero needs names to provide a peopled background that will give him some recognizable contours against which to measure the position of Carneades and his embassy.

The argument so far produces an important result for our concern in the first two chapters, of investigating what is at stake in correlating dates in the time charts of Greece and the time charts of Rome. We are now in a position to see that correlating Greek and Roman dates means correlating Greek and Roman events. There is, in fact, no Greek or Latin word for “date.” An ancient date is an event—or, to be more precise, any date is a relationship between two or more events. As inhabitants of the B.C.E./C.E. grid, we simply cannot help thinking of ancient writers as working with dates, which to us are numbers. But they are not connecting numbers; they are connecting significant events and people. In so doing they are not placing events within a preexisting time frame; they are constructing a time frame within which the events have meaning. Again, the ultimate foundation of our modern chronological system is, likewise, the connecting of events, but that event-based substratum is always almost hidden from us by the apparent abstraction of the numbers within their own coherent framework, and this “absolute time” has an autonomy that can all too easily exempt us from the difficult but rewarding work in which the ancients were inescapably involved, of apprehending past time as a set of relationships between events, people, and places, or as parallel series—discrete or interpenetrating—of such relationships.

A number of important recent studies have shed light on the profound differences between our modern “absolute time” and their “relative time,” from Hunter (1982) to Wilcox (1987) and Shaw (2003). These scholars have made it easier for their successors to grasp the fact that ancient writers are not working with “dates” under another guise, but with relative frames of time that are always being reconstructed in each project, even if many of the anchoring points stay constant. Nonetheless, it remains an imaginative challenge of the first order to attempt to intuit how the Romans and Greeks were able to move around in past time without numerical coordinates. Once again, Cicero’s correspondence with Atticus pro-
vides an invaluable thought-experiment for anyone trying to develop such a sense, in the form of the many letters he wrote to Atticus in May and June 45 B.C.E., crammed with prosopographical chronological questions about the ten legates who went to Corinth after its capture in 146 B.C.E. As Cicero attempts to marshal the names with which Atticus supplies him, and to make sense of the relationships between them, we can see him using the mentality that a Roman aristocrat developed by growing up with the Leges Annales, the legislation that governed the minimum ages at which it was possible to stand for each of the magistracies. Cicero and his peers could monitor their position in time almost spatially—this is the sensation that Bettini has brought alive for us so memorably. Romans of the governing class developed a layered sense of their peer group, with some a little bit ahead, and some a little bit behind. This mentality emerges very clearly from Cicero’s *Brutus* and obviously provided a template for them to map back onto earlier generations, with an analogous sense of depth. What to us is a matter of numbers is to Cicero a matter of personal relationships—fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, junior and senior friends.

Without a universal, serial, and numerical system of chronology, then, hooked on a single agreed point, orientation was only possible with synchronization of different schemes of time, ones arranged by interval along vertebrae of significant events with their significant actors. As the examples from Cicero vividly illustrate, their historical consciousness is less abstracted than ours, for it is anchored in a series of connecting points that are marked by people and their deeds. Roman years did not have numbers; they had names, “taking their name from the consul” (*annos a consule nomen habentis*, Luc. 7. 441). The Romans’ time horizons are not plotted out with numbered milestones in a series but dotted with clusters of people in significant relationships with each other through memorable events. We now turn to an account of the basic instruments by which these clusters were organized, before investigating what the entailments of these instruments of organization could be.

**THE FIRST INSTRUMENTS OF GREEK SYNCHRONISM**

My focus is on the consequences of the Romans being fitted in to Greek time schemes, and a sketch of the Greek instruments of synchronism is therefore indispensable. The Greek networks to which the Romans were being accommodated were already old by the time the Romans encountered them. The Greek world
itself had many diverse calendars and civil years, with each state maintaining its own annual calendar, beginning at various points of the natural year, and marking the year in its own unique manner with the names of local officials. It was a pressing need in historiography to find ways of producing a coherent narrative that could integrate the different time frames of the different participants.

Classists regularly first encounter this issue when they get to the beginning of the second book of Thucydides, where the historian faces the problem of giving a Panhellenically comprehensible beginning point for the Archidamian War in "431 B.C.E." This is a passage that no discussion of synchronism ever omits (2.2.1):

Here Thucydides is no doubt using as his departure point the first Panhellenic work of synchrony in the Greek world, the work of Hellanicus of Lesbos on the priestesses of Hera at Argos. Hellanicus’s work was not strictly or systematically synchronistic in the manner of the later chronological works we shall be examining shortly, in that he did not give parallel series of eponymous officials for each year but attached “facts and events to a certain name and a certain year in the list of the priestesses of Hera at Argos, and add[ed] for the sake of convenience synchronisms with, or relations to, a great epochal event.” It was Thucydides’ initiative, in other words, to key in the names of the Spartan ephor and Athenian...
These three names are not straightforwardly dates, but a vital way of reinforcing his theme that this is a war, and a history, of Panhellenic importance. And they are only one element of a panoply of different time frames that Thucydides deploys here. The names are markers of an event that happens “in the fifteenth year” after another key event, to form part of a series that goes back to the Persian Wars; the incursion into Plataea is marked as happening “six months after the battle at Potidaea,” to form part of the small-scale chain of events that lead directly to the outbreak of war; the beginning of the war is given a framework within the phases of the natural year, so that the naturalness of his beginning point is insensibly reinforced (“just as spring was beginning”); finally, the decisive instant of the incursion itself is marked as a time of the natural day, keyed in to human rhythms (“around first sleep”).

One of the major problems for anyone wanting to use eponymous officials as the organizing principle of a narrative is that archons at Athens and ephors at Sparta did not take up office on the same day. Indeed, archons at Athens and ephors at Sparta did not necessarily take up office one precise civil year after their predecessors, let alone one precise lunar year of 314 days, let alone one precise solar year of 365¼ days. It is exactly this failure of civil demarcations and natural proceedings to mesh that leads Thucydides later in his work to forswear counting off from eponymous markers and to justify his practice of organizing his narrative by the natural succession of summers and winters, counting year by year from the first year of the war (5.20). In terms of an absolute chronology, of course, the summer/winter counting only works as a dating system if there is a fixed point provided as the departure, of the kind that Thucydides provides at the beginning of book 2. After any lapse of time, it is no use saying, “It lasted exactly ten years,” if you do not say ten years “from when.”

Our consideration of Thucydides brings home the fact that it was the writing of history, of both Panhellenic history and its offshoots in local history, that provided the original motivation for lining up the time schemes of the different states of Greece. The motivation did not come, as is sometimes claimed, from any “practical” need, such as dating documents, facilitating intercity diplomatic relations, or harmonizing intercity festivals. It is no coincidence, then, that the first person to compose a systematically Panhellenic work of synchronistic chronography was the historian Timaeus of Tauromenium (c. 350–c. 260 B.C.E.), who undertook this labor in order to lay the basis for his comprehensive history of Sicily and the Western Mediterranean. This person will play an important role in the argument of this book, for he is a major figure in the history of charting time in the Mediterra-
ranean, as a flamboyant exponent of the significant synchronism, and as a crucial influence upon the development of the Roman historiographical tradition. His technical work of synchronistic chronology lined up Olympian victors, priestesses of Hera at Argos, Athenian archons, and Spartan kings and ephors; he was, almost certainly, the man who made dating by Olympiads the norm in Greek historiography.

The main synchronizing works of Greek chronography that became canonical in Hellenistic times were produced by the great Alexandrian scholars Eratosthenes and Apollodorus. Eratosthenes, writing his *Chronographiae* toward the end of the third century B.C.E., with a terminus at the death of Alexander, roughly a century earlier, began his time lines with the fall of Troy, which he placed in “1184/3 B.C.E.,” a date that eventually came close to being canonical. He can only have established this mark by counting back in intervals from a fixed point in time, and this fixed point is most likely to have been the first celebration of the Olympic Games, which Eratosthenes placed in “776/5 B.C.E.” using a system he had laid out in a separate work on Olympian victors. The evidence for the *Chronographiae* is so thin that we cannot securely recover his techniques or working assumptions. It is certainly tempting to follow Wilcox and make a connection between the *Chronographiae* and Eratosthenes’ interests in mathematics and geography, so that he would be pursuing the same interests in quantifying and measuring time as he had pursued in measuring space with his invention of the meridian or in measuring the circumference of the earth. In chapter 3 we shall follow up the possibility that these demarcations in time, with Troy and the Olympic Games, had a significance in their own right, posting degrees of knowability about the past.

Apollodorus, writing about a century after Eratosthenes, composed his *Chronica* in four books, in iambic verse. He followed Eratosthenes in beginning with the fall of Troy and extended his time frame down to his own time, in the 140s B.C.E. The possible significance of Troy as a starting point may be perceived in the book divisions Apollodorus imposed on the material of his first two books. His first book went from the fall of Troy to the Persian Wars, and the second book continued to the death of Alexander: the divisions themselves show an attempt to construct significant frames of time, in which the seesawing altercation between Greeks and barbarians could be discerned as the governing pattern of history. Apollodorus’s purview did not restrict itself to kings and battles; he also charted the development of philosophical schools and poetic traditions. He attempted to link succeeding generations, depending usually on his rule of thumb of the ἀκμή (peak), the idea that someone reaches their intellectual or creative peak at the age.
of forty. Apollodorus, by birth an Athenian, used Athenian archonships as the
backbone of his scheme, no doubt in large part because it was much easier to get
an Athenian date of “in the archonship of so-and-so” into iambic verse than the
cumbersome numerals of the Olympiads: anyone who has tried to write Greek
iambics will know that “epi/ep’ so-and-so [in the genitive]” scans a lot more eas-
ily than ‘in the third year of the seventeenth Olympiad.’

The Athenocentric backbone of the work, however, is not just a question of prosody; we shall follow
the Athenocentric centripetal momentum of the Hellenistic chronographical tradi-
tion throughout the rest of this chapter, and in chapter 2, we shall see how much it
matters that the real unifying thread in Apollodorus’s work was Athens.

A number of other chronological works could claim our attention before we
reach the transition point where the first Roman begins working in this tradition. Here I note only one, the Chronica
of Castor of Rhodes, written sometime soon after 61 B.C.E. This work appears immediately before the first Roman works of
synchronistic chronography, and it is of special importance because it for the first
time takes the crucial step of bringing the kingdoms of Asia into the synchronistic
frame of the Hellenized world.

THE FIRST INSTRUMENTS
OF ROMAN SYNCHRONISM

Synchronizations between Rome and Greece ultimately depend upon these intra-
Hellenic systems of synchronization. As we shall see throughout, Roman-Greek
synchronizations are inextricable from the Hellenized world’s attempts to accom-
modate the Romans, and they form an indispensable part of Roman historical con-
sciousness from the start. At the very beginning of the Roman historiographical
tradition we find the Romans using parallelism in time as a mechanism for finding
material when it was necessary to plug the gaps in reconstructing early Roman his-
tory. Pais first documented this favored technique a century ago, showing how, for
example, the story of the catastrophe of the three hundred Fabii at the battle of the
Cremera in 477 B.C.E. was calqued upon the catastrophe of the three hundred
Spartans at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. There is far more to such a procedure than
merely casting around for handy stopgap material, for the first practitioners of this
kind of synchronization must have been intent on demonstrating that early Roman
history ranked in dignity with the history of Greece and was entitled to the vener-
ability of proper historiographical treatment.

It has long been debated whether any of these parallelisms may perhaps be
rooted in actuality rather than in retrospective creation. The work of Wiseman shows an interesting movement from one pole to the other. In his recent paper on the ideology of Liber in the early and middle Republic, he no longer argues, as he did twenty years before, that the later Romans simply used synchronism to plug gaps in the stretches of early Roman history that they knew nothing about; rather, he argues that there may well have been in fact genuine links between the worlds of Greece and Rome at that time, specifically between the ideology of the early Republic and of contemporary democratic Athens. According to tradition, the expulsion of the Athenian tyrants and the establishment of the Roman Republic happened at more or less the same time: is the Roman ideology of freedom from tyranny in the Athenian mode an actual trace of contemporary interpretation or the creation of later retrospective historiography? In 1979 Wiseman would say that the connections are the result of retrospective gap-plugging, whereas in 2000 Wiseman would be much more inclined to the view that the connections represent a real link made by the Romans sometime around 500 B.C.E. This example shows how hard it can be for us as well as them to draw the line between the significant link and the adventitious or coincidental. Both we and they must always be asking what actually makes synchronism not just technically useful or contingently convenient or thought-provokingly piquant, but historically or ideologically significant.

It is only in the age of Cicero that we meet the first Roman writer of chronography, the first person systematically to bring Roman events within the framework of Greek chronographic scholarship. The man responsible was Cornelius Nepos, who is hailed by Catullus in his dedicatory poem as the one who “alone/first of Italians dared to unfold the whole of past time in three rolls, learned ones, by Jupiter, and full of hard work” (ausus es unus Italorum/omne aevum tribus explicare cartis/doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis, 1.5–7). The date of Nepos’s Chronica will therefore fall somewhere in the mid-50s B.C.E.

Nepos synchronized events and persons in Greek and Roman history, lining up the Greek poet Archilochus, for example, with the reign of the Roman king Tullus Hostilius. His project aimed at “a public perplexed by how Homer, Archilochus, and the Olympic Games might fit into a chronological scheme that they could themselves comprehend.” A key fixed point of reference for Nepos was the foundation of the city of Rome, which he followed Polybius in assigning to the second year of the seventh Olympiad, “751/0 B.C.E.” Among the fragments of the work, we may see him using the foundation as an interval marker, giving an ölqūth for Homer of 160 years before the foundation of the city, or marking the birth of Alexander the Great in the 38th year after the foundation of Rome, with the names
of the consuls of the year. The best way to get some idea of what the Chronica may have looked like is perhaps to read the first book of Velleius Paterculus. Here one finds extensive use of all the paraphernalia of chronological scholarship: interval counting (“in the eightieth year after the capture of Troy,” 1.2.1); positioning of important literary figures (Homer, 1.5; Hesiod, 1.7.1); the memorable digression on the clustering of talent at circumscribed periods (1.16–17); significant synchronisms (Carthage and the Macedonian monarchy founded at the same time, 1.6.4–5); counting back from the time of writing (1.8.1; 1.8.4; 1.12.3); dating by Olympiads (1.8.4).

The correlation of Greek and Roman years that Nepos is constructing is much harder to achieve than it looks, not least because the basic unit of the year is a variable one. A Roman consular year looks as if it is a secure unit, running, like our year, from the beginning of January to the end of December, but in fact the consuls had only regularly taken up office on 1 January from 153 B.C.E.; between that date and 222 B.C.E. they had taken up office on March 15, and before 222 the consuls took up and left office at any point in the seasonal year, depending on campaigning exigencies. The consular year, then, is a fuzzy chronological unit, not corresponding necessarily with the civil calendrical year. Further, if Nepos is counting from the foundation of the city, he is strictly counting from 21 April, the anniversary of Romulus’s founding of Rome on the feast of the Parilia, not from January, or March. When he turns to correlate any of these years with a Greek year, he is faced with problems that will now be familiar to the reader, for the years of the various Greek states did not overlap, beginning now in summer, for example, as in Athens, or in autumn, as in Macedonia or Achaea. The only Panhellenic chronological unit available to scholars or historians was the Olympian year, but this ran from midsummer to midsummer, bisecting the campaigning season together with the corresponding Roman consular year. How aware Nepos was of the problems, and how successfully he solved them, we cannot now ascertain.

One can develop a sense of the problems facing ancient chronographers and historians by imagining how a modern Nepos might express a date if we lived in a counterfactual world without an internationally agreed calendar and numerical dating system. The D-day invasion would no longer be dated to 6 June 1944. First of all, the event would be marked as coming after an interval of so many years from an earlier important event, as part of the interval-spacing mechanism—let us say, thirty years after the outbreak of the previous war. The actual day would have a different notation in the different calendars of Britain, Germany, and the United
States, and the year might be expressed as the fifth year of the war (counting from the equivalent of 3 September 1939), the fifth year of the premiership of Winston Churchill (from 10 May 1940), the eighth year of King George VI (from 11 December 1936), the twelfth year of Adolf Hitler (from 30 January 1933), the fourth year of the third presidential term of Franklin D. Roosevelt (from 20 January 1941), the 168th year of the republic of the United States (from the Declaration of Independence in 1776). This counterfactual example brings home, once again, how what for us are numerical expressions are for the Romans and Greeks patterns of intervals and clusters of individuals and institutions.

Some few years after Nepos’s Chronica, at the end of the year 47 B.C.E., Cicero’s friend Atticus published his Liber Annalis (Book of Years). To correlate with the Roman consuls, Atticus (the nickname of course means “Athenian”) used the archons of his adopted city of Athens as the backbone of his work, so that the real unifying thread of the Greek side of his comparison was Athens. In this respect, he is a continuator of the Athenian Apollodorus, with similar interests in Athenian philosophical and literary history, and we shall see the importance of this Athenocentric focus recurring as a theme later in this chapter, especially with Aulus Gellius, and in chapter 2. For the composer of synchronisms, it is not a neutral process to choose which events and protagonists in one culture are going to be lined up against which events and protagonists in another culture; even more, as we see with Atticus, it is not a neutral process to choose which cultures are going to be lined up against each other in the first place. We may talk casually about synchronisms between Greece and Rome, but there is no Greek time against which to plot Roman time. Roman time is unified, as the time of one city, but Greek time is not: there is only Athenian time or Spartan time or Syracusan or Argive. It is always vital to ask which perspective on Greek time is being adopted at any moment, through which calendrical or historical tradition the idea of Greek time is being focalized, and what motivates the choice of the dates that are going to be used as hooks on either side. In the case of Atticus we see how his domicile and his cultural interests must be motivating the selection of Athens as the counterweight to Rome in the construction of a shared Greek and Roman past.

Atticus’s book was soon superseded by what became the canonical Roman chronographic work, the De Gente Populi Romani of the polymath Varro, completed probably in 43 B.C.E. It was Varro, very probably, who defined the date for the foundation of the city of Rome that came closer to canonical status than any other, the third year of the sixth Olympiad, “754/3 B.C.E.”
SIMILE, SYNKRISIS, AND SYNCHRONISM

As we observe these Roman authors making connections between Greek and Roman persons and events, it becomes clear that the project of Roman-Greek synchronism is part of the larger project of comparison between Rome and Greece—and that immense exercise in comparison, or synkrisis, that we label as Roman Hellenization. It is telling that two of the first Roman chronographers, Nepos and Varro, also wrote biographical series of lives of famous Romans and Greeks, as a kind of analogue to this synchronism project. The urge to compare and contrast Roman and Greek finds expression in synchronistic chronography and in synkritic biography. Nepos’s arrangement of the Lives shows this most clearly. His lives were not paired one by one, as was Plutarch’s way a century later; rather, in each category (generals, historians, and so on), a book of foreign lives came first, followed by a book of Roman ones. By chance, Nepos’s words survive from the end of his book On Famous Generals of Foreign Nations (De Excellentibus Ducibus Exterarum Gentium). They make the comparative nature of the project quite explicit (Hann. 13.4):

\[\text{Sed nos tempus est huius libri facere finem et Romanorum explicare imperatores, quo facilius, collatis utrorumque factis, qui uiri praeferendi sint posit iudicari.}\]

But it is time to make an end of this book and to unfold the commanders of the Romans, so that, by comparing the deeds of each, judgment may more easily be passed on which men should be put first.

From this comparative perspective, “synchronisms are the application of similes to history.” As we shall see repeatedly, the simile-like nature of synchronism is one that repays taking very seriously. Just as a simile may stress difference as much as likeness, opening up areas of disjunction as much as closeness, so too the project of synchronism—as with any dimension of “Roman Hellenization”—may bring disparity and difference into focus as much as similarity. The instruments of synchronism are not simply helpful lists of scholarly fact. The chronographies are frames of exclusion as well as inclusion, with their own strategies and ideologies. It is very telling, for example, that neither Apollodorus nor Eratosthenes mentioned—that is, gave a synchronic date for—the foundation of Rome, and that they only started to take notice of Roman events at all when they arrived at the
invasion of Italy by the Greek king Pyrrhus, when Roman affairs are directly involved with those of mainland Greece, in the person of a descendant of Achilles. This is an example of, as it were, a "reverse simile," a simile that operates by focusing on difference and unlikeness. By this approach, the Romans are denied the "likeness" of synchronicity, not being allowed to be part of civilized time until the latest possible moment. They are stuck in what Fabian’s study of anthropologists’ constructions of time calls an “allochrony,” an “other-time,” a temporal space that is qualitatively unlike “ours,” in being static, early, undeveloped. From the perspective of an Apollodorus, the Roman past is isolated and unintegrated, not involved with Greece’s past, and not participating in the movement of progressive historical time.

Once again, the modern Western digits can make it easier for us in many contexts to conceive of dates as somehow “there,” with time in different cultures being inherently shared in a sense, by virtue of being plottable on the same numerical axis. The ancients’ mechanisms for synchronism, on the other hand, bring the process of selection to the fore, so that one may remain continually aware of whether the shared quality of time is being asserted or denied. If we had more evidence, it might be possible to be more confident that the synchronistic projects of Nepos, Atticus, and Varro were working against the Greek perspective of an Apollodorus, and striving to establish a pattern of “likeness,” in response to the enormous pressure exerted by Hellenism, following the pattern whereby “a superior culture persuades an inferior that to be significant its past must be interdependent with its own.” Certainly Nepos’s biographical project is one that operates comparison on the “likeness” model, stressing that “Greek and Roman subjects are placed together on a level,” as Rawson puts it; his Chronica may well have worked in analogous fashion, showing that Greek and Roman events could likewise be “placed together on a level.”

A CICERONIAN TEST CASE: FROM “LIKE” TO “UNLIKE”

The intellectual career of Cicero vividly illustrates how much difference could be made to a Roman’s perception of the past by a refocalizing of synchronistic perspective, one that in his case involves a movement from the mode of “like” to the mode of “unlike.” His attitude to the chronological relationship between Roman and Greek culture undergoes a definite shift in 47/6 B.C.E., and at the beginning of the Brutus (13-16) he explicitly attributes his new interest in chronology and liter-
ary history to the experience of reading the Liber Annalis of his friend Atticus. It is by no means the case that his great dialogues before this date, De Oratore (55 B.C.E.) and De Republica (51 B.C.E.), are ill informed or unlearned—on the contrary, they reveal a remarkable level of scholarly knowledge about Greek and Roman history, embedded in a secure chronological framework. Nor should we attribute all the changes we discern in the later dialogues, especially Brutus (46 B.C.E.), to the impact of reading one book; Cicero had been reading continuously in the intervening years, and even after reading Atticus’s Liber Annalis he did not rely solely upon it for all chronological information. Nonetheless, a new intellectual excitement about the issues of chronology reveals itself in the Brutus; in particular, there is a new perspective on the question of how to synchronize the historical developments of Greek and Roman culture, and this new perspective is one that it makes sense to see coming from the experience of reading Atticus’s book, as Cicero tells us it did.

In the masterpieces of the 50s, Cicero’s use of transcultural parallels between Greece and Rome is very different from what we see later in the Brutus. Cicero’s main interest is in “likeness” across the cultures, rather than disjunction. In the earlier works there is a constant seeking of parallels between the cultural development of Greece and Rome, together with a use of chronological analogy that seems practically unhistorical in comparison with what we shall see in the Brutus. One of the most striking cases in the De Republica can be seen in his discussion of the apotheosis of Romulus (2.18–19). Here the speaker, Scipio, argues that we should believe in the apotheosis as a fact, not a fable, since Romulus did not live in a rude age, but less than six hundred years earlier, at a time of letters, “when Greece was already full of poets and musicians, and there was less belief in fables unless they were about old events” (cum iam plena Graecia poetarum et musicorum esset minorque fabulis nisi de ueteribus rebus haberetur fides). As Zetzel puts it, “the argument is that even the earliest period of Roman history was contemporary with (and therefore took part in) a high level of culture in Greece.”

In the Brutus, a different sensibility is in view, one that is far more interested in the “unlikeness” that is generated by the act of comparing the chronologies of the two cultures. Looking at Atticus’s synchronisms opened Cicero’s eyes, it appears, and at the beginning of the Brutus he praises and acknowledges his friend’s accomplishment (13–16). The comparison of the time schemes seems to have brought home in detail just how different the two societies were in their intellectual and literary development. In particular, Cicero is now very struck by the fact that Greece has a literature from the beginning, whereas Rome only develops one late, a mere
two centuries before the date of Cicero’s last dialogues. This novel perspective is not one that Cicero finds it automatically convenient to work with, and there are some slightly confused passages in the Brutus that owe their complexity to Cicero’s attempts to adapt familiar material to this new framework.

Early in the Brutus, at the climax of his brief survey of Greek oratory, Cicero even goes so far as gracefully to act out the impact Atticus’s book is having on him. The passage begins with Cicero carefully stressing the different comparative chronologies of Greece and Rome, in the manner he has been recently rethinking. Solon and Pisistratus are early by Roman chronology, he says, but late by Greek (or, as he vividly puts it, old men by Roman reckoning, just teenagers by Greek: at hi quidem, ut populi Romani aetas est, senes, ut Atheniensium saecula numerantur, adulescentes debent uideri, 39). After going back in time to Homer momentarily (40), Cicero returns to his chronology and mentions the key figure in the generation after Pisistratus, namely Themistocles. Here again he is at pains to stress his new apprehension of the difference in comparative chronologies, for Themistocles is a piece of hoary antiquity to the Romans, but not so very old to Athenians, living at a developed period of Greek history, and a primitive state of Roman (41): for, he says, the Volscian war in which Coriolanus was involved occurred at the same time as the Persian Wars. At this point, having made his careful disjunctive chronological point, Cicero swerves into a piece of adventitious synchronism of the “bad old” kind: Coriolanus and Themistocles did not just happen to live at the same time; they even had similar fortunes (similisque fortuna clarorum virorum, 41). Cicero sketches the parallels of their careers, concluding with the claim that they both committed suicide, whereupon he turns to Atticus and acknowledges that this is not the version of Coriolanus’s death to be found in Atticus’s book (42). Atticus, the expert, proceeds to correct and mock the spurious parallelisms created by this kind of history, ending with a dig at Cicero’s wish to make Coriolanus a second Themistocles (alter Themistocles, 43). Cicero accepts the correction (44) and promises to be more cautious in his historical treatment for the rest of the dialogue—as indeed he is, carefully avoiding such synchronistic parallels between Greece and Rome from then on. The implied compliment to Atticus’s education of his friend is very striking, and Cicero has gone out of his way to stage this example of how he has been instructed in the use and abuse of parallelism and synchronization.

What might it have been about Atticus’s book that particularly seized Cicero’s attention and brought home to him a different sense of the chronological relationship between the two cultures? Habinek suggests that Atticus’s “work must have been more condensed and exhibited better layout than Nepos’s did.” Cicero’s
language in praise of the book certainly stresses its utility and seems to do so in terms of its physical appearance. Atticus asks him, “What did that book have that could have been so new or so useful to you?” (sed quid tandem habuit liber iste quod tibi aut nouum aut tanto usui posset esse? Brut. 14). Cicero responds (15):

Ille uero et noua, inquam, mihi quidem multa et eam utilitatem quam requirebam, ut explicatis ordinibus temporum uno in conspectu omnia uiderem.

“It really had many things that were new to me,” I replied, “and it gave me that usefulness that I was looking for, namely that, with the ranks of times deployed, with one overview I could see everything.”

The utility resides in the way you could see everything at once, as a result of the fact that the “orders of the times” were “explicated” in one view (explicatis ordini-bus temporum). My translation above (“with the ranks of times deployed”) brings out one possible metaphor, a military one: instead of being in a single array, the “times” have been “deployed out into lines or columns.” Possibly, then, Atticus’s book was arranged in parallel columns, with Greek events, organized around Athenian archons, on one side, and Roman, organized around consuls, on the other. It may have been this novel and useful physical layout that gripped Cicero, as it made the act of synchronous comparison so easy and brought home to him the disparate relationship in event and achievement between the two columns. One can imagine Cicero scanning the book for information about literary culture: on the Greek side, Archilochus—on the Roman side . . . a gap; on the Greek side, Demosthenes—on the Roman side . . . And so on, all the way down to 240 B.C.E., where finally there is a literary entry for the Roman column, for the first time, when a tragedy is staged in Rome, over 160 years after the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides. This possibility is a lot to conjure from the trace of a metaphor, but it would help explain the impact of the book on someone who already had a good acquaintance with synchronistic scholarship, in the form of Nepos’s Chronica.

THE CHRISTIAN SYNCHRONISTIC CHRONOGRAPHERS

If Atticus’s book did have an arrangement in columns, it was almost certainly the first synchronistic work to do so. But the book had little impact after Cicero, and the
true credit for the columnar arrangement belongs to the Christian bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Chronicle* we may briefly consider here, as the culmination of the tradition I have been sketching, before we turn to the test case of Aulus Gellius.

The first edition of Eusebius’s *Chronicle* appeared around 300 C.E., comprising a *Chronographia*, setting out “all his sources and the raw information that he derived from them,” and the *Chronological Tables* (Χρονικοὶ κανόνες, *Chronici Canones*), “the synthesis and tabulation of the raw material in the *Chronographia.*” All of this has been lost, but we have surviving Jerome’s *Chronicle*, completed in 381 C.E., in which he not only translated the second, major part, the *Chronici Canones*, from Greek into Latin but also continued the work down to the very recent past, ending with the battle of Adrianople in 378. Jerome preserved the columnar layout very faithfully, and his work enables us to appreciate the extraordinary innovation in design represented by Eusebius’s parallel time lines.

These works are part of a long-standing Christian project of synchronizing the new sacred history with the old profane history of the pagans and the old sacred history of the Jews so as to create a new truly universal human history, the plan of God for salvation, one that was regularly interpreted as part of various end-time obsessions. In this tradition the pagan time lines confront and finally succumb to the much greater antiquity of the Hebrew and Eastern tradition, in a classic example of what Zerubavel calls “out-past-ing.” The greater antiquity of the East had been an issue for the Greeks ever since Hecataeus of Miletus, sometime around 500 B.C.E., had bragged to an Egyptian priest that his lineage went back a whole sixteen generations to Heracles, and the priest had beckoned him around the corner and shown him the statues of 345 successive high priests, going back 11,340 years.

In Eusebius and Jerome you could see this out-past-ing graphically embodied, with pages of Hebrew and Asiatic history before any significant events in Greece, or any events at all in Italy. The reader could follow the teleological direction of human history in a series of parallel columns lined up in chronological unison across the page. These columns presented the major monarchies and civilizations of the world, and as you went through the book you would see their number collapsing and shrinking through the theme of the succession of empires. On an early page (see figure 1), you would see in parallel the time line of the Medes, the Hebrew kingdoms of Judah and Israel, the Athenians, the Romans (or, before the foundation of Rome, the Latins of Alba Longa), the Macedonians, the Lydians, and the Egyptians. To accommodate all these columns, a full double spread was necessary, covering both pages of the codex. Each column counts off regnal years of each individual monarchy; the far left-hand column gives the Olympiads, marking
them off every four years. The big underlined numbers in the left column, marked off every ten years, are the years from the birth of Abraham in “2016 b.c.e.,” the Christianizing year that really counts as the anchor; accordingly, the second year of the third Olympiad for the Greeks is 1,250 years from the birth of Abraham. It goes without saying that the b.c.e. dates in the far right-hand column are the addition of the modern editor, Rudolf Helm.

As you made your way through the book of history, one column after another would disappear as it was absorbed by the power of another column. By the time Jerome arrives at 281 b.c.e., with Antiochus Soter taking over Syria and Asia, there are only four columns on each page, and Jerome can fit all of them onto one page of the codex, without a double spread. The last pages showing four columns cover the years 106–93 b.c.e. (see figure 2). On each of these pages, left and right, one

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**Figure 1.**
Jerome’s *Chronicle* for the years 773–757 b.c.e., showing eight time columns spreading over both pages of the codex. Helm 1936, 87.
sees the same four columns: (i) the kings of Alexandria, the Macedonian inheritors of the Egyptian pharaohs, (ii) the Romans, (iii) the Seleucid kings of Syria and Asia, the inheritors of the various Asiatic kingdoms, and (iv) the Jews. At the bottom right of the last page, under “93 B.C.E.,” is the announcement of the end of the kingdom of the Seleucids: *Syriae et Asiae regnum defecit* (“The kingdom of Syria and Asia ended”). Accordingly, for the years 48–45 B.C.E. (see figure 3), there are only three time lines, those of the Romans, the Alexandrians, and the Jews. The year 48 B.C.E. is marked as the first regnal year of Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor: *Romanorum primus Caius Iulius Caesar*; and from now on the Roman column is counted off in terms of the emperors’ regnal years. In 30 B.C.E., the Alexandrian column disappears with Augustus’s conquest of Ptolemaic Egypt, leaving only two columns, those of the Romans and the Jews, as for the years 27–24 B.C.E.
In 70 C.E. the Jewish column disappears with Titus’s capture of Jerusalem, so that for the years 73–78 C.E., there is only one column on each page, Romanorum, the column of Roman time. Now there is only one time line left for the whole of the known world, the time line of the Roman Empire, which was to be perfected into a Christian empire in the lifetime of the original author, Eusebius. This is, as it were, a graphic inverse image of the way that the early Roman annalistic tradition mushrooms as it assimilates more and more of the world, so that the year-by-year history of a single city becomes a way of narrating the history of the entire world.

AULUS GELLIUS’S SYNCHRONISTIC
CHAPTER: A PARADIGM CASE

These Christian developments would have astounded and dismayed our cheerful pedant Gellius, who would have heard of Christians and perhaps even seen some,
but who could have had no conception that his world would be turned upside down by these people within five generations. I now turn finally to him, to pick out briefly some of the most important ways in which the synchronistic mentality could work for the pagans. Gellius’s essay is sometimes derided as an inconsequential magpie jumble of disparate synchronisms, but he knows his traditions, and his collection shows a series of valuable intuitions about what is at stake in this apparently mechanical exercise.

At the very beginning of the essay, Gellius says that his subject is “the times when those Greeks and Romans flourished who were famous and conspicuous either for talent or for political power (uel ingenio uel imperio nobiles insignesque), between the founding of Rome and the Second Punic War” (NA 17.21.1). We are reminded that the programme of Apollodorus and his followers included what we would call literary and intellectual history as well as political and military. It is this larger cultural dimension of the synchronism project that provides the main explanation for why Gellius stops where he does. He says he will stop with the Second
Punic War ("218–201 B.C.E."), but he carries on for a hundred years past this declared terminus, ending with the death of the poet Lucilius. It is in keeping with his usual carefully cultivated air of amateurism that he should meander on past his announced end point, just as he throws in the dates of Homer and Hesiod at the beginning with apparent artlessness (3), even though they predate his starting point of the foundation of Rome. But the transgression is very pointed, for, by carrying on to Lucilius, Gellius is able to end the essay with a catalogue of Roman literary figures (Cato, Plautus, Ennius, Caecilius, Terence, Pacuvius, Accius, and Lucilius, 46–49). He feels able to conclude the essay, in other words, only when he has reached a point in time where Rome has established some kind of record in the domain of literature, and this is plausible only a long time after the Hannibalic War.112

An insistent theme of the entire essay is the late arrival of literature, or of any kind of intellectual culture, in Rome. Gellius derives this perspective above all
from Cicero, who seems to have come to this recognition, never quite apprehended by him in this way before, via his perusal of Atticus’s *Liber Annalis* in the winter of 47/6 B.C.E. All the way through, Gellius subtly highlights a consistent disparity between the early entries on the Greek literary and cultural side and the gap on the Roman side. Early on (10), he tells us that at the time when Aeschylus was flourishing, the Romans were instituting the offices of tribune and aedile. When Empedocles was eminent in natural philosophy, the Romans were drawing up the Twelve Tables (15). The Greek period that boasted Sophocles, Euripides, Hippocrates, Democritus, and Socrates, has as a counterpart in Rome the good old Roman story of a father mercilessly executing his son for disobeying military orders (17–18). The synchronism of the philosophers Epicurus and Zeno with the stern censorship of Fabricius and Aemilius Papus (38–39) clearly plays to a traditional Roman pattern, whereby the Greeks rely on philosophers to tell them how to behave, while the Romans have authoritative father-figures who enforce the *mos*
Synchronizing Times I: Greece and Rome

When Gellius, shortly afterwards (42), finally arrives at the beginning of Roman literature, in “240 B.C.E.,” he puts enormous stress on how late this was in comparison to Greece:

primus omnium L. Livius poeta fabulas docere Romae coepit post Sophoclis et Euripidis mortem annis plius fere centum et sexaginta, post Menandri annis circiter quinquaginta duobus.

The poet Lucius Livius was the very first to produce plays at Rome, more than 160 years after the death of Sophocles and Euripides, and about 52 years after the death of Menander.

This dating is not a synchronism; it is an anti-synchronism, highlighting just how drastically the two cultures were not in harmony with each other. This is a textbook example of the phenomenon that Zerubavel calls “inflating the divide between periods”—in 241 Rome has not got a literature; in 239, it has.114 Gellius

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might have stopped soon after, with the first literary figures of Rome, but it is significant that he carries on until he reaches Accius and Lucilius at the end of the essay. Only with them is there not simply a literary tradition in Rome but a literary-critical tradition as well: Accius was, if anything, more famous as a scholar and literary historian than as a tragic poet, and Lucilius is noted here by Gellius not just as a poet, but as a critic of the poetry of his predecessors (*clarior . . . in poematis eorum obrectandis*, 49). In other words, Gellius stops when the Romans have established the foundations not only of a literature but of a literary history, with the attendant apparatus of literary scholarship inherited from their contemporaries and predecessors in Alexandria. This is the moment when it has achieved some kind of parity with Greece in the realm of culture—or at least can be represented by a partisan Roman, with some kind of plausibility, as having achieved parity.

It is this same cultural perspective that accounts for the fact that none of the Romans mentioned after the end of the Second Punic War (46 to the close of the essay) is mentioned in a political or imperial context: all of them are literary. Even the great Cato figures in this list as an *orator* (47), that is, in his capacity as the inventor of Latin prose, rather than as consul, censor, or imperator. This eclipse of the political or imperial dimension in Gellius’s scamper through people after the end of the Second Punic War is most revealing. Throughout the essay he has been charting the synchronism of Greek and Roman political and imperial developments, and now, once the war against Hannibal has been won, he stops doing this.

The one mention of a political nature is the embassy of Athenian philosophers to Rome in 155 B.C.E. (48), where we see the Greek philosophical tradition at the disposal of the Roman state. The key point, of course, is one that emerges obliquely from this citation of the embassy of philosophers: Greece is now completely under the thumb of Rome following Rome’s destruction of Greek military strength after the Hannibalic War, and Greek knowledge is now harnessed to Roman power. The project of synchronism carries with it implicitly the theme of *translatio imperii*, the transference of empire; Gellius’s choice of this cut-off date is a kind of anticipation of Eusebius’s visual demonstration of *translatio imperii* with his dwindling columns. At the end of Gellius’s essay, the Greek “column,” as it were, drops off, and the Roman “column” is the only one remaining.

Before this climax, however, for much of the essay one has the impression that Gellius’s synchronisms are working to establish the idea that Rome was for centuries as belated and backward in the imperial realm as in the cultural. The synchronisms highlight the idea that while Greek states were performing heroic deeds at the center of the world stage, the Romans were engaged in minor brawls in the
The mechanics of synchronism bring out this theme in a particularly effective way, because we are kept waiting for a long time before we actually see the worlds of Greece and Rome directly impinging on one another. Again, these dates are not “just” dates: they are events. Centuries of Greek and Roman events have to go by before they start overlapping in a more than merely temporal sense, before the parallelism of event dating becomes a genuine parallelism of events, overlapping in place as well as time. The key moment for Gellius is the war with Pyrrhus, which appears also to have been the moment when the Greek scholars Eratosthenes and Apollodorus started taking account of Roman events, or dates. This is another of Zerubavel’s moments of “inflated divide”—before Pyrrhus, no contact with Greece; after Pyrrhus, Greece and Rome in tandem.

The way that Gellius focalizes his synchronisms bears out the crucially significant power of the Pyrrhus intersection. The first major part of Gellius’s essay, before the invasion of Pyrrhus (37), is, so to speak, focalized through Greece, whereas the second major part, starting with the invasion of Pyrrhus, is focalized through Rome. By this I mean that the chapter begins with a pattern of mentioning Greek dates or events and then goes across to Rome: Gellius does not say, “When Romulus founded the city, what was happening in Greece?” but “When Solon was active in Greece, what was happening in Rome?” (4). But after the war with Pyrrhus he switches and starts giving Roman dates first, sometimes in both the ab urbe condita and consular form, and then goes across to Greece. This pattern is not absolutely watertight, since in the first part, before the war with Pyrrhus, there are strings of synchronisms that are formally tied to the ab urbe condita hook (9, 19, 28); but even in these sections, the focalization is heavily on Greek events, with glances across to Rome. After the war with Pyrrhus, the switch is complete: the Roman focalization becomes preponderant, the default mode of the comparison.

Before that crucial turning point with Pyrrhus, and as if to throw its stunningly unexpected outcome into relief, the Romans are consistently represented as small players in the great game of Mediterranean history. Just after mentioning “that famous battle of Marathon” (pugnam illam inclutam Marathoniam, 9), Gellius mentions Coriolanus, who, he says, “turned traitor to the Republic, and joined the Volscians, who were then our enemies” (qui tum hostes erant, 10). All the work here is done by the disjunction between the glamorous language surrounding Marathon and the bare “then” (tum) that marks the status of the Volsci as quondam enemies: the implication is that the Persian Wars were a world-historical clash of empires, whereas the Volsci, by implied contrast, were all the Romans then had to cope with, a day’s ride away from the city of Rome. A little later Gellius sets up a
similar contrast, between, on the one hand, the mighty Peloponnesian War on Greek soil, immortalized by Thucydides (bellum... in terra Graecia maximum Peloponnesiacum, quod Thucydidis memoriae mandauit), and, on the other hand, the names of the now vanished peoples who were “at that time,” tunc, the enemies of Rome, the Fidenates and the Aequi (16–17). Soon after the end of the Peloponnesian War, Rome comes within a whisker of being rubbed off the map altogether, before it has impinged on history at all, when the Gauls capture Rome apart from the Capitol (22).

The most interesting case is found in sections 32–33, where we get a developed discussion of Alexander—not the Alexander, Alexander the Great, but his namesake and uncle, Alexander Molossus, the king of Epirus. This “other” Alexander invades Italy at just the same time that his namesake and nephew is invading Asia, about fifty years before Pyrrhus, and here Gellius gives us a tantalizing glimpse of what might have been: if Alexander Molossus had not first been killed in a skirmish in South Italy, he might actually have been the one to bring Rome into the orbit of world history by carrying out his plan of attacking Rome, whose reputation was just then beginning to be known abroad (iam enim fama uirtutis felicitatisque Romanae apud exteras gentes enitescere inceptabat, 33). But before he could make this happen, priusquam bellum faceret, before he could make the events of Greece and Rome overlap for the first time, he just happened to die. The achievement of bringing the two time schemes together was left to another nephew of Alexander Molossus, Pyrrhus. But immediately before Gellius mentions that event, he reinforces once more his theme of Rome as a comparatively minor player in the world events of this period, by stressing that within two years of the death of Alexander the Great, Rome was still being forced into humiliating defeats by the Samnites (36).

Although synchronism would initially appear to be an exercise in correspondence, Gellius’s chapter shows how it can be an exercise in disparity. The synchronism lens consistently brings into focus just how disparate and various the developments of these empires were. The synchronism lens may also create a heightened awareness of the contingency of historical developments and interactions. This is especially clear from the cases of the Gallic sack and the premature death of Alexander Molossus. The Romans could well never have recovered from the destruction of their city, in which case they would never have figured in what the Greeks considered world history;122 likewise, we will never know what might have happened if Alexander Molossus had gone north and encountered the juvenile Roman Empire at the time that his namesake and relative was demolishing the
Persian empire. “What if?” history is relatively rare in the ancient world; the most famous example of it is precisely Livy’s digression on what would have happened if the other, Great, Alexander had turned west after his conquest of the East (9.17–19). Gellius’s little essay offers its readers the opportunity to do some “What if?” thinking for themselves, and by reminding readers that the Romans were still being defeated by Samnites years after Alexander invaded Asia, he would appear to be going against Livy’s verdict that the Romans would have beaten him if he had turned west.

So far in our analysis our emphasis has been on Gellius’s interest in the mode of “unlikeness,” but any act of comparison also highlights likeness, and it is clear that some of his synchronisms invite us to think about the parallel development of Rome and various of the Greek states, especially Athens. The focus on likeness is particularly clear in the area of constitutional and political matters, where developments in Roman and Greek constitutional history are sometimes linked. The first of these parallels is one still keenly discussed in modern scholarship, that between the end of tyranny in Athens and the establishment of the Roman Republic. In fact, this parallel is so famous that Gellius doesn’t explicitly mention the Roman half of it when he mentions the end of the tyranny at Athens (7); but it is very hard to believe that we are not meant to fill in the gap ourselves, when he has just mentioned the name of the last Roman king in the same sentence (6), and then moves on to the murder of Hipparchus by Harmodius and Aristogeiton with the words isdemque temporibus (“and at the same period”). A more overt parallel in constitutional history comes soon after, when extreme democracy in action ends the careers of both Miltiades and Coriolanus (9–10). A vital epochal year in Mediterranean history comes when the year “404 B.C.E.” shows the reintroduction of the military tribunate at Rome, the imposition of the thirty tyrants by Sparta upon Athens, and the beginning of the tyranny of Dionysius in Syracuse (19).

In the next chapter we shall follow up the Sicilian and Athenian connection, for the mention of Syracuse here in connection with Rome and Athens is highly significant; it was from the Sicilians that the Romans first learned to play this game of establishing significant correspondences with the mainland of Greece proper. And, just as was the case with the Sicilians, we shall see that when the Romans concentrated on aligning themselves in a parallel column against Greece, the real comparandum was Athens. This tendency is strongly evident in Gellius, practically every one of whose artists or philosophers is Athenian or based in Athens, while the major Greek political and military events down to the battle of Chaeronea, when the Athenian empire was destroyed by Philip, are Athenian. It is a telling
illustration of Gellius’s Athenian focalization that the battle of Chaeronea itself is described as the battle where Philip conquered the Athenians (30). This is scarcely an obvious way to describe the opposing sides—in leaving out the Thebans, this perspective is like describing El Alamein as the battle where Montgomery defeated the Italians. Gellius is careful to mark the end of the Spartan empire (26) and of the Persian empire (34), thus revealing his interest in the theme of succession of empires; but the dominant interest throughout is in the Athenians. The last Greeks mentioned in the whole essay are the heads of the philosophical schools at Athens sent by the people of Athens on an embassy to Rome (48).

Gellius’s essay is the tip of a large Athenocentric iceberg, which the next chapter will explore in more detail. A history of synchronism in the Mediterranean from the invasion of Xerxes onwards must also be a history of Athenocentrism in the Mediterranean. Gellius’s little essay alerts us to this point, as it alerts us to the importance of the Sicilian connection and to the theme of succession of empire. Above all, by illustrating how synchronization is a tool for thinking about cross-cultural interaction, highlighting difference as much as similarity in the process, Gellius’s essay shows that working with synchronization is fundamental to the understanding of Roman Hellenization. It is not possible to think systematically about Roman Hellenization without some kind of picture of the differing historical development of the Greek and Roman cultures, and that is a picture that can be gained only by sustained attention to synchronization. Synchronism becomes another window onto the comparison mentality, and to its fundamental role in Roman culture. Even in Greek culture this mentality eventually becomes inescapable, as we see most dramatically with Plutarch’s Parallel Lives, a century before Gellius, in which the Greek past is presented “as half of a diptych, face-to-face with, and mirroring, the Roman past,” creating a fictitious “partnership of equals” for the evolving Empire. The fundamental mind-set of the synchronizer is a comparative one, operating on events as if constructing gigantic similes, manipulating tenors and vehicles on an enormous scale, using the comparison trope to highlight sameness or difference, not between Hector and a lion or Gorgythion and a poppy, but between Syracuse and Athens, Rome and Greece.

Even as Gellius’s essay reminds us of the indispensable importance of the comparative exercise of synchronism, it brings home how much harder the operation of synchronism was for the ancients, and how much more out in the open the process of alignment was. While we can use our universal numerical dating system as a synchronomesh to make the differentially whirling gears of all dating systems interlock without any graunching, their synchronistic gearboxes had no such smooth-
ing devices. The process of making the systems mesh together was one that the Romans and Greeks could never internalize as natural or overlook, and the work they had to do to make the systems mesh was such that it provoked many other kinds of work in addition to the merely chronological—although it is becoming clear that we can never talk about the merely chronological.

The Romans had to begin their side of this synchronistic project by making sense of the contours of the past through media that had been devised for Greek cities and empires. Eventually the Romans forced themselves into a position where they were partners in Greek time, sharers of a synchronized past history, one that conferred status on them as the only other full player on the Mediterranean stage, the only other culture that was really “like” Greece. Quite how they did this, how the comparison worked to maintain difference as well as likeness, and what was at stake for them at various stages in the developing story, will be the subject of the next chapter.