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# The Question of Time: Artistic, Intellectual and Social Responses to Time in Medieval Europe

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## Introduction

*What is time? Who can explain this easily and briefly? Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words?*<sup>1</sup>

*-Augustine of Hippo*

The quest to understand and define time has long preoccupied man. The western social and intellectual tradition, from antiquity to modernity, is richly invested with innumerable attempts to do just that—to make sense, both theoretical and practical, of the enigma that is time.

While Augustine very famously struggled to arrive at some meaningful understanding of time, he stands as yet one of many great western intellectuals to have agonized over such a task. Well before Augustine, ancient Greek and Roman philosophers had proffered their own theories about the nature and form of time. Their theories gave way, during the medieval period in Europe, to revised theories of not only the nature of time but the appropriate application thereof.

Medieval Europeans inherited from antiquity a certain ambivalence towards time. It had long been associated with the goddess Fortuna, that fickle regulator of human affairs who blindly turned her wheel bringing both prosperity and disaster to men. Yet, individuals and organizations within medieval society moved beyond classical paradigms and developed unique responses to the force of time. Artists and intellectuals alike took on the subject of time, graphically and rhetorically exploring it in myriad ways. The Church concerned itself with time as well and attempted to regulate popular uses of time; through religious icons, Europeans found themselves instructed in the proper application of their time in order to fulfill their prescribed function within Christendom. Time was, furthermore, a commodity that brought the commercial sector of society profit and, consequently, hostility from the

Church. On a routine basis, Europeans from all walks of life experienced time in vastly different ways. In the fourteenth century, time acquired yet another dimension with the introduction of clocks. Still invested with many of its traditional attributes, time suddenly acquired a new reputation as a force that man could quantify and harness.

### **Time Artfully Wrought**

The subject of time was a perennial preoccupation of the medieval European *intelligentsia*. Literary and artistic evidence from the medieval period testify to an intense interest in defining, characterizing, personifying and illustrating not only time itself, but also time relative to the human experience.

Time, as it was represented in medieval art, was inextricably linked to the natural world. So, too, were medieval Europeans. Their world was a thoroughly agrarian one where the seasons, and their constituent months and days, dictated the routine activities and experiences of Europeans. Existing as they did with few comforts and limited strategies to combat the elements, medieval Europeans felt the heat of summer and the cold of winter with little temperance. The elapsing seasons determined which crops a medieval farmer would sow and reap, and the right moment to do so. For medieval Europeans, “the most important aspect to the passing of time appears to have been based on the changes of nature—the seasons on earth and the movement of the stars in the zodiac.”<sup>1</sup>

Medieval calendars and art reflect this preoccupation with the natural cycle of the seasons and the heavens and their implications for the daily activities of Europeans. Into stained glass windows and cathedral arches and upon the pages of manuscripts and prayer books, medieval artists glazed, carved and illustrated vivid images of Europeans performing activities that were formulaically tied to each month. These “occupations of the months” or “labors of the months” developed a standard iconography and were used by the Church to remind medieval mankind of his function and place in society.

Regardless of the artistic medium used to portray them, the labors most commonly reflect the activities and experiences of the peasantry. Depictions of the occupations show robust peasants acquiescently, sometimes even cheerfully, laboring as dutiful members of Christendom as they faithfully observe their place in society.

Where the labors were depicted, each of the twelve calendar months was tied to a specific activity. Whether illuminated on a calendar page or carved as a stone relief over a cathedral door, there developed a standard imagery, a conventional set of activities that allegorically represented the months. January was graphically depicted as a time of feasting by the nobility, and February as the time that peasants gathered and cut firewood and sought warmth by the fire; March was represented by peasants pruning vines in preparation for spring, and April by gathering flowers, lovers courting, and nobles hunting; May was visually connected to falconry and romantic interludes amongst the nobility, and June to peasants mowing the fields or shearing sheep; July was represented by peasants harvesting the fields under an oppressive sun, and August by threshing the recently gathered grain; September was shown as the time for peasants to tread grapes for wine, and October for sowing crops anew; November was visually connected to peasants shaking the acorns from trees as feed for their swine, and December to slaughtering animals to put up for the winter.

While there is some deviation from these depictions of time, the labors of the months are represented with striking consistency. Many of these images are found in Books of Hours, elaborately illustrated and illuminated prayer books privately commissioned by affluent families. A typical Book of Hours was, in itself, a work that was primarily concerned with time. It contained a calendar of saints' days and prayers to be recited at various times of the day.<sup>2</sup>

Churches and cathedrals were an equally common locus for these depictions of the labors. There, the occupations of the months were typically carved in a circular formation and were intended to serve as religious icons, as didactic tools of the Church to instruct and remind Europeans of their function in society:

Their circular arrangement, as on the archivolts of buildings or curling around jamb portals, provided the worshipper with an easy-to-consult calendar with every church visit and also gave a wider meaning of the circle of life and the place of God and man in such a structure. They were religious symbols that used an immediate and forceful iconography, largely drawn from the surrounding natural world but intended to convey the meaning of man's place in the order of life and eternity.<sup>3</sup>

Through the depiction of the labors, the Church capitalized on time and used it as a backdrop against which to instruct its constituents.

Where depictions of the labors are found, with their invocation of the natural cycling of time to reinforce man's natural function in society, depictions of the signs of the zodiac are often found as well. Like the labors of the months, these signs relied upon standardized imagery, in this case drawn from paradigms established in antiquity. Centuries before these signs were literally carved in stone in Europe's great cathedrals, Greek astronomers had divided the universe into twelve sections or constellations. Many of these constellations were named after or associated with an animal, hence the term zodiac, from the Greek *zoon*, "animal."<sup>4</sup>

The twelve signs of the zodiac, throughout antiquity and into the medieval period and beyond, used standard motifs and imagery familiar to most (e.g., Aquarius, January 20-February 18, represented by a man or woman pouring out water from a vase; Taurus, April 20-May 20, by the bull; Cancer, June 21-July 22, by the crab; etc.). Closely associated with the zodiac was the notion that the sign under which an individual was born, or even the dominance of any of the zodiacal constellations at any point in time, influenced one's personality, "mood and body."<sup>5</sup>

The Church used the signs of the zodiac in the same way that it relied upon the imagery of the occupations of the months. The zodiacal signs were employed as tools of religious instruction and often ran physically alongside the

labors. The zodiac linked man's place in medieval Christendom with a greater order, in this case the inevitable cycling of the constellations themselves. Inherently implied was the notion that man was powerless to stop the movements of the heavens; as the year ran its cyclical course, and each constellation prevailed in turn, man could not impede the progress of time. The only option that he had was to put that time to the productive and prescribed uses depicted in the labors.

### **Time and the Medieval Intellect**

The signs of the zodiac were not just a useful didactic tool of the Church. They were credited with influencing personal attributes and fortunes. Likewise, medieval Europeans referenced the movements of the planets to account for the fate of humans. Throughout the Middle Ages, Europeans based their understanding of the universe on the second century model offered by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy. Drawing on the model of the cosmos developed in antiquity, Ptolemy had posited that the Earth was fixed at the center of the universe. According to the Ptolemaic view, seven spheres or planets orbited the Earth: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Each planet had a luminous body within that gave off light and provided observable evidence of its existence. Beyond the outermost planet (Saturn) was the *Stellatum*, a vast sea of fixed stars, and beyond that lay the enigmatic *Primum Mobile* ("First Movable"), a sphere that contained no luminous body and, consequently, gave "no evidence of itself to [man's] senses."<sup>6</sup> The *Primum Mobile* was believed to produce a force that acted upon and animated all of the other planets.

The conventional astronomical wisdom of medieval Europeans, as they inherited it from antiquity, was that each of the seven planets "controlled" a specific day of the week<sup>7</sup> (e.g., the sun controlled Sunday; the moon, Monday; Mars, Tuesday; Mercury, Wednesday). Furthermore, because the ancients had associated each planet with a specific god, the planets were all believed to have unique intrinsic qualities and personalities that resembled those of their associated god. These personalities manifested themselves in the days of the

week. Consequently, the day of the week on which one was born was believed to influence one's temperament (consider the rhyme, "Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace...").

The Ptolemaic model further considered each planet to "dominate" in the year in which it completed its orbit around the Earth. Just as each planet influenced one day of the week, the character of the dominant planet produced certain predictable outcomes. For instance, when Saturn (*Infortuna Major*, "The Greater Infortunate") dominated, "fatal accidents, pestilence, treacheries, and ill luck in general" were certain to occur.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when Jupiter (*Fortuna Major*, "The Greater Fortune") dominated, one might expect "halcyon days and prosperity" because of Jupiter's association with abundance and generosity.<sup>9</sup>

According to the Ptolemaic model, as these planets orbited the Earth, each dominating in turn, they influenced the affairs and experiences of humans. In this respect, then, time was the great determiner of human fortune, not simply in its own right, but because of the shifting planetary alignments that it facilitated. "Time could either be evil in its adverse effects on mankind or beneficial in the riches it brought."<sup>10</sup> Of all of the imagery of the Middle Ages, none more vividly depicts this notion of time as bringing shifting outcomes than that of the wheel of fortune. Popularized (although not invented) by the sixth-century politician and philosopher Boethius, the wheel of fortune was considered to be the cruel device of the goddess Fortune, herself:

With domineering hand she moves the turning wheel,  
 Like currents in a treacherous bay swept to and fro:  
 Her ruthless will has just deposed once fearful kings  
 While trustless still, from low she lifts a conquered head;  
 No cries of misery she hears, no tears she heeds,  
 But steely hearted laughs at groans her deeds have wrung.  
 Such is the game she plays, and so she tests her strength;  
 Of mighty power she makes parade when one short hour

Sees happiness from utter desolation grow.”<sup>11</sup>

Boethius further personifies Fortune as an ever-changing and capricious force:

Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn my wheel in its ever changing circle, filled with joy as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top.<sup>12</sup>

Dante Alighieri, writing eight centuries later, invoked Boethius’ imagery in his *Inferno*. As Dante’s pilgrim travels through Inferno with the great Roman poet Virgil, he questions Virgil about Fortune. Virgil explains to the pilgrim that when God created the universe, in order to make sure that “earthly splendors” were justly distributed, he appointed Fortune as

... a general minister and leader  
who would at times change the vain goods  
from people to people and from one blood to another,  
beyond human cunning to prevent it.  
Therefore one people rules and another  
languishes, following [Fortune’s] judgment,  
which is hidden like the serpent in the grass.<sup>13</sup>

Virgil further explains that although Fortune is a force “often cursed,” she ignores man’s acrimony. She remains “blessed” and happy as she “gladly turns her sphere and delights in blessing.”<sup>14</sup> There is, once again, an unmistakable inevitability to the operation of Fortune as portrayed by Dante. She is divinely commissioned to both enrich and deplete man.

With his depiction of Fortune, Dante was articulating, in the fourteenth century, imagery that Boethius had vivified in the sixth century. Likewise, Boethius had appropriated the concept of Fortune and her turning wheel from his own, classical, antecedents. This intellectual chain of transmission from

antiquity to the medieval period illustrates what was an important dimension to the medieval intellectual tradition: continuity of thought. Medieval scholars drew heavily upon the concerns and conclusions of those who had preceded them, maintaining a constant dialogue that connected the great scholars of the ancient Greek and Roman world to the scholastics of thirteenth-century Europe. One of the consistent intellectual challenges to medieval European scholars was the subject of time. Throughout the medieval period, there was a sustained effort among western intellectuals to accurately “define exactly what time meant to the medieval world,” primarily in its “Christian significance.”<sup>15</sup>

Augustine of Hippo, the great fifth-century bishop and theologian, was one of the earliest western intellectuals to consider time in its Christian context. In his *Confessions*, Augustine devoted an entire Book to the subject of time, a force that refused to yield its secrets easily to Augustine. He also considered the conundrum of time in his *City of God*, among other works. While trying to coax the truth out of this elusive subject, Augustine arrived at a number of conclusions about time. Those most relevant to this discussion are the following: first, Augustine concluded that the world “was definitely created in time and will come to an end in another definite moment in time, a moment known to God alone.” Furthermore, history (as a product of time) was, to Augustine, the work of God, a “one directional, teleological process, directed towards one goal—salvation.”<sup>17</sup>

Augustine’s conclusions about time marked a sharp departure from the classical past. The prevailing notion of time in the ancient Greek and Roman world had been that time was cyclical. In the eighth century B.C., the Greek poet Hesiod had identified five ages of man in his *Works and Days*. According to Hesiod’s model, mankind was degenerating as time progressed. Nearly eight centuries later, the Roman poet Ovid echoed Hesiod in his *Metamorphoses* where he described four, not five, ages of man. Ovid’s model, like that of Hesiod, identified a gradual social deterioration with each of these chronological stages. In general terms, the classical understanding of time, relative to the

human experience, was that “life progressed in an endless series of cycles that pointed to no particular end and served no particular purpose.”<sup>18</sup>

Augustine’s rejection of such a nihilistic view of history and man’s purpose shaped the medieval perception of time for centuries to come. One of Augustine’s enduring intellectual contributions to the western perception of time was the notion that time “began with God” and was “dominated by Him.”<sup>19</sup> Augustinian theology sternly warned against attempting to determine events like the second coming of Christ and the apocalypse, speculations about which surfaced periodically throughout the Middle Ages. These things were for God, alone, to know. Time, and what it revealed about God’s plan for mankind, was the purview of God.

### **The Social Implications of Time**

The conventional belief that time was God’s property held far-reaching implications. For those in society’s commercial sector, there were some incredibly practical consequences to this theological stance. When trade began to revitalize in the High Middle Ages, the long-held belief that time belonged to God created tension between merchants and the Church. What lay at the heart of this tension was the concern with the merchant’s ability to charge interest on credit. Such profit “implied a mortgage on time, which was supposed to belong to God alone.”<sup>20</sup> Charging compound interest was, in fact, equated to usury because these merchants were essentially (and scandalously) profiting from a product that was God’s—time.<sup>21</sup>

Time had other very practical implications for medieval European society at large. Time governed what people were advised to eat. The prevailing wisdom was that specific foods needed to be consumed in combination with others “to temper each food’s own humoral qualities, and it required attention to the hot, cold, moist and dry qualities of the ‘sondry sesons the year.’”<sup>22</sup> In his *Nun’s Priest Tale*, Chaucer gives voice to the common belief that a diet that did not carefully balance humors contributed to a wide range of maladies from bad dreams to fever. In one passage of the tale, Chanticleer (a rooster) finds himself

admonished by his wife, Pertelote (a hen), to “beware those humors that are hot...when the sun’s in the ascendant.”<sup>23</sup>

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* provide yet another striking example of the primacy of time in regulating the affairs of medieval Europeans. The “General Prologue” to the *Tales* opens with lines that connect the season of pilgrimage in Europe to Springtime:

When April, with his showers sweet with fruit  
The drought of March has pierced unto the root...  
And many little birds make melody  
That sleep through all the night with open eye  
So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage  
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage....<sup>24</sup>

As part of this season of pilgrimage, Europeans from various walks of life would work their way to holy places and shrines throughout Europe. The most ambitious might even journey to the Holy Land itself. Chaucer’s language is a striking reminder that medieval Europeans were at once both intensely connected to the Church and to the Earth: both were masterful at imposing order through their respective liturgical and seasonal cycles.

Pilgrimage to holy sites was one of the few activities experienced universally in European society. There was a great diversity of daily occupations to which medieval Europeans dedicated their time, and these occupations were not necessarily engaged in by choice. By the High Middle Ages, the majority of Western Europeans fell into one of three social orders—the peasantry, the nobility, and the clergy—with each expected to perform a specific function within society.<sup>25</sup> This was one of the greatest determining factors for the ways in which individuals organized and experienced time in medieval Europe.

The medieval rural-dwelling peasantry, whose lot it was to provide for society’s material needs through their labor, dedicated the majority of their time to farming and to providing additional services to the nobleman on whose

manor they lived (either as free or enserfed peasants). These people, according to Pelagius, a thirteenth-century cleric, were very closely connected to the earth. So closely connected were they that “even as they plow and dig the earth all day long, so they become altogether earthy; they lick the earth, they eat the earth, they speak of earth...”<sup>26</sup> Europe’s rural peasantry experienced time through seasonal transitions because of this close association with the earth and with farming. Their regular observance of Christian holidays and saint’s days recurring, as they did, every year at the same time, further informed their understanding and experience of time.

Urban-dwelling peasants would have experienced time in a different manner. Although his would also have been a life devoted to labor, the urban peasant of medieval Europe would not have shared his rural counterpart’s intense connection to the earth. Many of those who lived in towns developed specialized trades to which they devoted their time. There, one’s daily allocation of time became more a response to market demands and less a response to the cycle of the seasons with its predictable planting and harvesting of crops. However, like their rural counterparts, urban-dwelling peasants were still bound by the same regular cycle of religious holidays and saint’s days.

Members of the nobility related to time in a wholly different manner than the peasantry (whether rural or urban). These individuals, according to the medieval scheme, were the defenders of Church and realm. Consequently, their days were devoted to military training and combat, administering estates, hunts and tournaments. They also found ample opportunities to enjoy great feasts and banquets where they would be entertained by jesters and regaled with tales of great and chivalric heroes.

Members of the clergy were charged with the important responsibility of providing for the spiritual needs of society. Many within this social order lived within monasteries organized according to the Rule of St. Benedict. These monasteries were, by nature, outstanding regulators of time. Seven times a day, at regular intervals, monks were called to gather and recite the daily prayers or

offices. Regular periods of work and rest were also structured into the life of those living under Benedict's Rule.

## **Conclusion**

The dawn of the fourteenth century in Europe brought new and unforeseen dimensions to the ways in which Europeans experienced time. Within the first half of the century, Europeans endured a cataclysmic famine, the inauguration of the Hundred Years' War, and the rapacious Black Death. Many feared that the end of days had come. They were not entirely wrong. The fourteenth century, with its hyperbolic tragedy and misery, was an important turning point in time for Europe. Although a century of hardship, it was also a century whose developments challenged Europe's social order and provided some social advancement for the peasantry. It was, further, the century during which Europeans would finally be able to regulate and harness time thanks to new clock-making technology.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Europeans employed a number of strategies to measure time. They had inherited the technology behind water clocks and sundials from antiquity. They used these instruments in addition to hourglasses and candles calibrated to burn at a specific rate to measure and mark time. Beginning as early as the fifth century, churches and monasteries throughout Europe began adding bells to their edifices. The bells announced the arrival of morning, afternoon, and evening prayer times. For many Europeans, this was the first occasion in which they found their time directed not by the length of the day, but by the ringing of a bell. Beyond the mere introduction of bells to mark regular intervals in the day, the Church was invaluable in providing structure to time with its regular cycles of liturgy, holidays, and saints' days.

In the first half of the fourteenth century, astronomical and mechanical clocks were introduced in Europe. This new technology was, by all accounts, one of mankind's greatest achievements, "comparable to movable type in its revolutionary implications for cultural values, technological change, social and

political organization, and personality.”<sup>27</sup> For the first time, not only could the task of charting celestial movements be delegated to a machine (however unreliable some of the early models were), but time, itself, could be measured in fairly precise and consistent values. The solution employed for centuries in Europe had been to divide both daytime and nighttime into twelve hours, regardless of season and latitude. The length of hours and days would now be standardized.

Europeans embraced the new technology of the mechanical clock rapidly. Between 1371 and 1380, “nearly eighty European cities added public clocks to their urban amenities, the highest point of a surge that continued until about 1410.”<sup>28</sup> Time suddenly acquired an absolute form: it could now be standardized and regulated. We might easily imagine the various ways in which this new standardized version of time was to be employed—to support a burgeoning merchant economy; to assist European rulers in administering their territories; to organize religious, professional or social convocations. Yet, time also acquired a new abstract dimension as well: no longer was time strictly tied to the visual reference points of day and night or changing seasons. As its gears turned, the mechanical clock facilitated a new consciousness, divorcing time of its primordial connection to nature. Although medieval Europeans would continue to credit time with the power to influence fortune through its coordination with celestial cycles, medieval man now acquired a new awareness of his cosmic potential. God was no longer the sole custodian of time. He was now joined in His mastery of time by His creation, as medieval Europeans continued their quest to understand and define that most ineffable force of all—time.

## NOTES

- 1 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford’s World Classics, 2008), 230.
- 2 For an outstanding visual example of a Book of Hours, see the British Library’s online virtual catalog at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/golf/accessible/introduction.html>. This particular link takes the viewer to the “Golf Manuscript” with its ornate calendar depicting the labors of the months. To peruse a broader collection of Books of Hours, visit the British Library’s Home link at [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk) and conduct a general search.

- 3 Colum Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World: Occupations of the Months and Signs of the Zodiac in the Index of Christian Art* (Princeton: Pennsylvania University Press, 2007), 1.
- 4 Ibid, lix.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 96.
- 7 Ptolemy's model rested upon wisdom acquired from the ancients. Ancient civilizations, from Sumer to Rome, identified the seven planets enshrined in Ptolemy's model, and associated each of these with a god based on the qualitative resemblance of one to the other. According to David Ewing Duncan, the tradition of assigning each day of the week to a god/planet originated ca. 700 B.C. with the Babylonians. David Ewing Duncan, *Calendar: Humanity's Epic Struggle to Determine a True and Accurate Year* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 45.
- 8 Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 105-6.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World*, xlix.
- 11 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 24.
- 12 Ibid, 25.
- 13 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Tom Simone (MA: Focus Publishing, 2007), VII.78-84.
- 14 Ibid, VII.96.
- 15 Hourihane, *Time in the Medieval World*, xlix.
- 16 Theodor Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (June 1951), 354.
- 17 Ibid. Here, Mommsen has cited E. Frank, "The Role of History in Christian Thought," *The Duke Divinity School Bulletin* (1949), XIV, 74.
- 18 Clifford R. Backman, *The Worlds of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 45.
- 19 Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 30.
- 20 Ibid, 29.
- 21 Ibid, 30.
- 22 Nancy Mason Bradbury and Carolyn P. Collette, "Changing Times: The Mechanical Clock in Late Medieval Literature," *The Chaucer Review* 43, no. 4 (2009), 366. Quote from Chaucer's General Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*, (GP, I 347).
- 23 Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," *Canterbury Tales*, trans. Theodore Morrison, VII.2955-2958.
- 24 Chaucer, "General Prologue," 1-12 (excerpted), from *Selected Canterbury Tales*, ed. Candace Ward (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994).
- 25 This formula was first introduced in the eleventh century by Adalbero, Bishop of Laon, France. While many disagree with his division of society, it is a useful scheme when discussing the unique social experiences of Europeans from various classes of society.
- 26 As cited in Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1996), 223.
- 27 David S. Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 6.

- <sup>28</sup> Bradbury and Collette, "Changing Times," 353. Here, Bradbury and Collette have cited data presented in Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (1992; repr. Chicago, 1996), 160.