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The Old Made New: Medieval Repurposing of Prophecies

In the middle ages there was intense interest in predictions about the future. This is not merely because there is a natural human desire to know what is going to happen next, so one can prepare for it. In the medieval period ideas about the future were framed within a specifically Christian context which believed history would culminate in Judgement Day. One of the peculiarities of medieval thinking about the future is therefore that it was conceived as a time which was simultaneously ‘unknown’, because it was yet to come, and ‘known’, because its endpoint at the Second Coming of Christ was foretold in the Bible.

Here I focus on the fact that many of the predictions popular in the middle ages were not novel creations but in fact had previously appeared in a different form in older texts but were then recycled into a new context. This reuse of “past” prophecy necessarily involved the reinterpretation of existing material. In short, it required the repurposing of this material. This repurposing can be observed across many different genres, from free-floating texts predicting the future to Books of the Bible. It applied regardless of whether such texts were written predominantly in predictive mode or with a more historical orientation.

In this paper I examine the ways in which prophecy was repurposed, chiefly in the period c.1050-1200 on the basis of a case study. I argue that the reinterpretation of older prophetic texts was not just about keeping them current. Instead, my paper treats their reuse as a window onto medieval approaches to time. The reception of both biblical and non-biblical prophetic texts required a particular type of reinterpretation: readers had to move narratives from one temporal context into another. In each case, as they repurposed their materials, readers had to find ways to connect anew with the future set out therein. How did they do this? This question is at the heart of the present discussion.

We must begin by defining some terms and concepts. Every period has its own way of understanding the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, that is, between historical time, current time, and times yet to occur. In the historiography the relationship between these three categories (or levels) of time is often called a “temporality”. The way a society approaches this relationship is then referred to as a “regime of temporality”. Although this latter phrase has been much-deployed recently in studies of time, unhelpfully, there does

not seem to be a single agreed definition of it.¹ Here I follow Jordheim who has reviewed current usages of the term and conceives it as a “set way of understanding and dealing with time according to which the relationship between the past, present, and future, and thus the direction, speed, and rhythm of history, can be defined”.² That is, regimes of temporality are ways of understanding time.

While I find Jordheim’s definition helpful, it is an umbrella term. Other scholars have offered their own particular examples of regimes of temporality tailored to the material they discuss. Unfortunately none of the regimes of temporality in the existing historiography fully capture the issues considered in this paper. For present purposes therefore I propose two other regimes which I shall refer to as the *chronological* regime of temporality and the *synchronous* regime of temporality.

In the chronological regime events are understood to have occurred in the past, are now completed and have no further ongoing significance. By contrast, the synchronous regime considers that past events may still be significant as symbols, metaphors, allegories or the prefiguration of later events. Under the synchronous regime, therefore, the significance of past events survives the passage of time. This contrasts with the chronological regime of temporality. Both regimes (and the distinction between them) are rooted in their approach to the reading and interpretation of texts. I will say more about this later. I have adopted these terms – the synchronous and the chronological – in order to emphasise the attitude of medieval readers to the temporal context of the events, persons, gestures etc. they consider.

As a way of discussing these regimes of temporality, below I explore the repurposing of two distinct types of material not normally considered together: firstly, Old Testament narratives about the Jewish prophets, and secondly, the anonymous Prophecy of the Tiburtine

¹ The term “regime of temporality” (or, often, synonymously the term “temporal regime”) developed around Francois Hartog’s notion of the “regime of historicity”. Hartog uses that phrase in his reflections on how history is experienced, conceived of, and written down in different time periods, see François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, transl. Saskia Brown (New York 2015), see pp.8-9 and p.106; originally published as François Hartog, *Regimes d’historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003). For further discussion of the term “regime of temporality” see Helge Jordheim, ‘Introduction: multiple times and the work of synchronization’, *Forum: Multiple Temporalities, History and Theory* 53 (2014), pp.498-518, see also n.3, below.

² Jordheim, ‘Introduction’, pp.499-501 (quoted from p.501) and p.509.

Sibyl, a prediction with roots in late antiquity. In this paper I juxtapose their reception in a common intellectual environment. The nature of that environment will emerge below.³

My approach offers a new way of examining free-floating predictive narratives: my primary concern is not so much with how predictive text functions as a vehicle to express social, political, and religious crises as with the broader conceptual toolkit with which medieval people approached free-floating prophecy. In particular, I want to explore the role played by the “set ways of understanding time” (that is, the ‘regimes of temporality’) that had formed in readers’ minds as a result of reading and interpreting scripture in other contexts.

Erich Auerbach was among the first scholars to emphasise that the techniques of reading and interpreting scripture were so culturally pervasive that they “often enter[ed] into the medieval view of everyday reality”⁴. He did much to unpick the cultural influence of exegesis in his seminal paper ‘Figura’.⁵ Yet, despite this work’s immense contribution to our understanding of Judeo-Christian temporal concepts and structures, regrettably, it is often absent from the bibliographies of subsequent studies devoted to “Time”.⁶ It has much to tell

³ This approach also departs from current studies of medieval reworkings of the Tiburtina (and its extensive manuscript transmission), which, although they acknowledge the impact of the liturgy, concentrate not on regimes of temporality but on the role of memory in shaping medieval approaches to the text, see Anke Holdenried, *The Sibyl and Her Scribes* (Aldershot 2006), pp.111-126.

⁴ Erich Auerbach, ‘Figura’, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, transl. Ralph Mannheim (Minneapolis, 1984), pp.11-237, here at p.61, originally published in German: Erich Auerbach, ‘Figura’, *Archivum Romanicum* XXII (1938), also reprinted in Erich Auerbach, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern 1967), pp. 55-92 although in this paper I cite the English translation. For ‘Figura’s’ continued importance, see Friedrich Balke, Hanna Engelmeier (eds), *Mimesis und Figura. Mit einer Neuauflage des “Figura”-Aufsatzes von Erich Auerbach* (Paderborn 2016) and Erich Auerbach, *Time, History, and Literature. Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, ed. and with an introduction by James I. Porter; translated by Jane O. Newman (Princeton 2013; paperback 2016).

⁵ For an appreciation of Auerbach’s impact see Seth Lerer (ed.), *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach* (Stanford 1996).

⁶ See, for example, Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest 2008), Nancy D. Munn, ‘The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992), 93-123 (with “Notes on the future” on pp.112-pp.116), and Burke, ‘Reflections’. Auerbach’s work is absent, too, from Koselleck’s seminal study of the history of time in which the analysis of language alongside that of philological and hermeneutical paradigms and practices plays a key part, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the*

us, though, about foundational epistemological experiences with prophecy in the medieval world. This is because Auerbach stressed in particular the technique of reading the Old Testament *figuratively*, that is, as a foretelling of real people and events in the Gospel. For example, he stated that “the naming of Joshua-Jesus is a *Realprophetie* or ‘phenomenal prophecy’ or prefiguration of the future saviour.”⁷ In using the term *Realprophetie* Auerbach talks about the figural realism of the Old Testament whereby a real (i.e. historical) event, person, object, or gesture in it prefigures another, later one which is also a historical reality. This approach rested on the belief that all history was merely a component part of the greater history of salvation.

This belief made it difficult for the Bible’s interpreters to distinguish its phases by applying the categories of “past”, “present” and “future” to scripture. As Auerbach noted, Bible hermeneutics reflects this: according to its rules, events and people in the Bible could be read either literally (as historical occurrences), or allegorically. The allegorical approach treats the whole Bible as a kind of hyper-extended metaphor (or collection of metaphors) whose placement along the chronological continuum was not important per se because everything referred either back or forward to something else. In terms purely of exegetical technique, the allegorical approach in turn could be subdivided further, so Old Testament events could be viewed typologically (as prefigurations of other events and people, typically those to appear in the New Testament) or by allegorising them further (to give them some other spiritual sense). A scriptural passage, therefore, might be given either a literal reading, as a straightforward narrative of an event that had occurred in the past but that had no further significance (placing it in my terms in the chronological regime of temporality), or a typological/allegorical reading, giving the episode some continuing contemporary or future meaning (in my terms, putting it in the synchronous regime of temporality). Note, in medieval terminology this allegorical or metaphorical approach was called a ‘spiritual

Semantics of Historical Time, transl. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (Columbia 2004), first published in German as Reinhardt Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik Geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt 1979).

⁷Auerbach, ‘Figura’, p.29. Auerbach’s translator, Ralph Mannheim, translated the German word “Realprophetie” as “phenomenal prophecy”, a somewhat curious choice. I assume that it is not meant in the sense of “remarkable, outstanding”, but is related to the term “phenomenon”, that is, meaning “fact” or “occurrence” (and perhaps to the philosophical term “phenomenological”), see Auerbach, ‘Figura’, pp.29-34.

understanding' of scripture.⁸ For the purposes of this paper, allegorical, typological and figural exegetical approaches are treated the same. There are differences between these approaches and in other circumstances they may have different meanings and be applied in different ways, but not in the context of my argument here.⁹

For now I merely note that the Old Testament pre-figurings, which Auerbach called 'figurae' or 'types' found later fulfillment and hence meaning in the Gospel. Nevertheless this new meaning was only provisional: as Auerbach reminds the reader "ultimately 'figures' are "tentative forms of something eternal and timeless"¹⁰. In this sense they demand a metaphorical, allegorical, or figural/typological rather than a literal interpretation. Consequently these modes of interpretation embody a flexible attitude to the temporal concepts "past", "present" and "future" since for the purposes of textual interpretation all can be understood as being simultaneously significant (in my terms, putting them in the synchronous regime of temporality).

This attitude first arose within the narrow confines of Bible study but soon became a widely applicable habit of mind. It also, as Auerbach noted, "provide[d] the medieval interpretation of history with its general foundation".¹¹ Other scholars have considered this relationship between figural/typological interpretation and forms of history writing in the middle ages.¹² Here I shall consider the pervasive cultural influence of exegesis in relation to a different genre, that of non-scriptural prophecy. I shall do this by asking how patterns in reader responses to one example of this genre (the Sibylla Tiburtina) map onto the regimes of

⁸ See, for example, 'per mysterium spiritalis intellectu' and 'per spiritalem intellegentiam', n.17 below.

⁹ In this essay I use the conjoined form *typological/allegorical* because 'in figural interpretation one thing stands for another, since one thing represents and signifies the other, [so] figural interpretation is "allegorical" in the widest sense', see Auerbach, 'Figura', pp.53-4. However, Auerbach also observes, sometimes typology and allegory can be treated as different because while typology is anchored in concrete events, allegories are often ethical or mythical interpretations which may not be historical and are not historically anchored in concrete events (whether past, present, or future).

¹⁰Auerbach, 'Figura', p.59.

¹¹Auerbach, 'Figura', pp.60-61.

¹²See for example, Susan Boynton, *Shaping A Monastic Identity. Liturgy and History at the Imperial Abbey of Farfa, 1000-1125* (Ithaca 2006) and Gabrielle Spiegel, 'Structures of Time in Medieval Historiography', *The Medieval History Journal* 19/1 (2016), pp.21-33.

temporality connected to biblical exegesis. My particular interest lies here with the chronological and synchronous regimes associated with the interpretation of Auerbach's *Realprophetie* (that is, with the Old Testament: it provided the vast majority of *Realprophetie* in the Bible).¹³

In order to approach the reception and repurposing of biblical texts I begin with a letter of spiritual advice written by Peter Damian in 1069.¹⁴ Since later I shall turn to the Sibyl, note that this letter is almost contemporary with the earliest surviving manuscript of the Prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl, dated 1047.¹⁵ In the letter Peter Damian presents an allegorical treatment of the Old Testament Exodus narrative, that is, of the journey of the Hebrew people out of Egypt led by Moses and Aaron. Peter's focus is on the people's 42 rest-stops in the desert which he allegorises as so many stages in the interior transformation of a monk striving towards spiritual perfection.¹⁶

Peter championed the view that Exodus had an ongoing significance, giving us an excellent example of the repurposing of scripture based on the belief that it represented a *Realprophetie*, that is, he took an allegorical approach. He looked upon the Exodus narrative as

“totally fulfilled for us through the mystery that underlies our spiritual understanding. For whatever then occurred visibly, is adapted to our need

¹³ Other important strands in the study of time in the medieval period cannot be considered here, for example, ‘social time’, e.g. Barbara Adam, *Time* (Cambridge 2004), Peter Burke, ‘Reflections on the cultural history of time’, *Viator* 35 (2004), pp.616-626; ‘measuring time’: Arno Borst, *The Ordering of Time*, transl. Andrew Winnard (Chicago 1990), also Sacha Stern, *Time and Process in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford 2003); ‘time and creation’: Richard Dales, *Medieval Discussions of the Eternity of the World* (Leiden 1989).

¹⁴ Peter Damian, letter 160, for Latin text see Kurt Reindel (ed.) *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani. Teil 4. Nr.151-180* (Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Epistolae: 2, Die Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit; 4) (Munich 1993), pp.100-134; English translation Owen J. Blum and Irvn M. Resnick (transl), *Peter Damian. Letters 151-180* [The Fathers of the Medieval Church. Mediaeval Continuation] (Washington 2005), pp.103-130.

¹⁵ See Anke Holdenried, ‘Christian Moral Decline: A New Context for the Sibylla Tiburtina (Ms Escorial &I.3)’, in Wolfram Brandes, Felicitas Schmieder, and Rebekka Voß (eds), *Peoples of the Apocalypse. Eschatological Beliefs and Political Scenarios* [Millennium Studies 63] (De Gruyter 2016), pp.321-336.

¹⁶See Exodus 12.35-17.2; the 42 rest-stops have their source in Numbers 33.3-48. Peter's exegesis of them relies on Jerome, Letter 78, see Blum, *Letters*, p. 110, n.32.

by **allegorical interpretation** [emphasis added], as the age long past is made to serve us at the present time. [...]. We too came forth from the ordeal of Egyptian servitude, and strive to enter the promised land by many stages, that is, by varied advancement in virtue.”¹⁷

Peter’s statement that Old Testament events are ‘made to serve us at the present time’ implies that even as time passed events remained significant (at least at the metaphorical level); they remained ‘in play’, that is, they could have a *current* meaning regardless of when they occurred in the past. Events such as the Flood, Exodus, the Babylonian Exile etc. were all equally current – that is, although separated from each other and from the moment Peter wrote by periods of time of varying length, from his perspective all were now simultaneously significant regardless of when they occurred in the past. This is why I have dubbed this approach the synchronous regime of temporality: all these events, people, objects and so forth had (and continued to have) simultaneous significance.

There was good authority for Peter’s view: the Apostle Paul said the events of the Exodus befell the Jews “as figures” so that Christians should not lust after evil things.¹⁸ But Peter Damian was also well aware that not everyone shared his view of the story of the Jews in the desert. Elsewhere in his letter he mentions ‘querulous person[s]’, as well as “some people who are ignorant of God’s plan”. Peter does not identify them.¹⁹ Whoever they were, though, regarding their views, Peter expresses the concern that

¹⁷ Reindel, *Briefe* (Teil 4), pp. 104-5: [Notandum autem quoniam omnis ille discursus et quicquid illic gestum hystorialiter legitur,] totum in nobis **per mysterium spiritualis intellectus** impletur. Quod enim tunc visibilter gestum est, nobis **per spiritalem intellegentiam** congruit, nostro tempori vetus illud saeculum militavit. Haec enim, ut ait apostolus, in figura contingebant illis. Nos enim de fornace Aegypticae servitutis egredimur, et terram repromissionis ingredi per plurima mansionum loca, hoc est per per diversa virtutum incrementa conamur, transl. by Blum, *Letters*, p. 107 [9] who renders the two very similar phrases ‘spiritalis intellectus’ and ‘spiritalem intellegentiam’ by two very different English phrases (‘spiritual understanding’ and ‘allegorical interpretation’). On this point I agree with the translator since application of ‘spiritalis intelligentia’ involves allegory, see Frans van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible* (Cambridge 2014), pp.114-15.

¹⁸ Cor 10:6 (Vulgate): haec autem in figura facta sunt nostri ut non simus concupiscentes malorum sicut et illi concupierunt. This passage had also been noted in Peter’s source (Jerome’s letter 78, see below, n.19).

¹⁹ See Blum, *Letters*, p. 107 [8]. Reindel, *Briefe* (Teil 4), p.104: Agrrediar ergo, frater mi, si tibi onerosum non est, mansionum illarum figuras summatim ac succincte perstringere, et quod ex dictis patrum indagare potuerim, compendiosis verbis breviter annotare, ut

“ [the] people who are ignorant of God’s plan argue that it is frivolous and superfluous to read the account of these rest stops in the church [i.e. the Exodus account of the wandering in the desert]. For they are of the opinion that knowing or reading about this matter serves no useful purpose whatsoever, thinking that [Old Testament] history narrated only what has happened, and that this event has now passed away with age, and that today it should have no further interest for us.”²⁰

Peter Damian here reports an instance where the past was perceived in terms of separateness and discontinuity. In Peter’s letter this particular perception of the past as a time cut off from the present implies the use of the technique of literal exegesis whose purpose is to recover the historical meaning of the text (the “Old Testament [...] narrates what has happened”²¹). We cannot say with certainty whether the perception came first (so that the choice of exegetical technique reflects it) or vice versa (that is, that the application of literal exegesis resulted in a sense of discontinuity and separateness from the past). Whatever the case, together this perception of separateness from the past and the literal exegetical technique fit into what I referred to above as the “chronological” regime of temporality.

Ironically, in order to clarify my understanding of the chronological regime of temporality I can only offer a metaphorical explanation of the term, although in my defence, I note that Lynn Hunt has commented:

“Time [...] requires metaphor. It flows like a river, accelerates like an engine, flies like a winged chariot, freezes like instant ice, stands still like a heart between beats, [...]. Without the metaphors [...] the fourth dimension would be exceedingly difficult to grasp. Linguists have noted that it is virtually impossible to talk about time without invoking motion (wiggling skirts, engines, chariots, arrows) and spatial content (short, long)”²²

querelosus quispiam ex gustu micarum labentium colligat, quam nectareis dapibus pleni ferculi mensa redundat. On those who are ignorant of God’s plan, see n.20, below. Note that Peter’s source (Jerome, Letter 78) makes no mention of such querulous persons, nor of their approach to the Old Testament, so this must be Peter Damian’s observation about his own time, see *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, ed. Isidorus Hilberg, 3 v. (New York: Johnson, 1970, repr.1910-18), ep.78.

²⁰ See Blum, *Letters*, p. 106 [7]. Reindel, *Briefe* (Teil 4), p.103. [...] cum nonnulli divinae rationis ignari frivolum conquerantur atque superfluum, ut in aecclesia legatur istarum descriptio mansionum. Arbitrantur enim haec scire vel legere nil penitus utilitatis afferre, putantes quod rem tantummodo gestam narret hystoria, et hanc cum ipsa tunc vetustate transisse, neque nunc ad nostram aliquatinus notitiam pertinere.

²¹ See above, n.19.

²² Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest 2008), p.1.

- so perhaps the addition of another metaphor to the stock may be of value. Where I refer to the “chronological” regime of temporality I have in mind a particular linear conception of time, defined by its forward-looking direction of gaze. In other words, this regime requires that time is imagined as a river, or, as I prefer to think of it, like the mechanism of a ratchet (a tool which can be turned in only one direction, but not the other).²³

By analogy, in the “chronological” regime of temporality the “present” is seen as one click in a continuous series of clicks on time’s ratchet, which is capable of moving only forward towards the future, with no possibility of a backward motion. This “ratchet” view characterises the chronological regime of temporality. It implies that both “present” and “future” time are sharply separated from the “past”. This is the view of time taken by the querulous persons to whom Peter Damian refers. He castigates their position as ‘insane’ and ‘nonsense’.²⁴

This criticism of the chronological regime of temporality, and hence of the literal exegetical technique, necessarily implies a passionate endorsement of its opposite, the typological/allegorical mode of interpretation and hence of the synchronous regime of temporality. This is no surprise since modern scholarship generally considers this mode to have been culturally pervasive in the middle ages; indeed, the synchronous regime of temporality which flows from the allegorical mode (and which blurs the distinction between the temporal categories of “past”, “present”, and “future” because the significance of past events survives) is seen as the default setting of medieval culture. Peter Damian’s observations, however, remind us that although he preferred the synchronous regime of temporality there was another one, which he rejected, the chronological regime of temporality. As an aside, note, too Peter’s letter also shows that medieval individuals clearly possessed the mental tools to think in a manner which contemporary scholars have labelled as

²³ Both images (river and ratchet) imply forward motion, but the image of the flowing waters of a river makes it harder to isolate and locate specific moments, i.e. to pinpoint the “present”.

²⁴Reindel, *Briefe* (Teil 4), p.103-4: Sed si suptiliter ipsa scripturae verba perpendimus, quam extremae dementiae sit hoc dicere, luce clarius invenimus [...] . Et quis hoc audeat dicere, immo quis temerario praesumat ore garrere, ut quod Domino iubente conscribitur, nil utilitatis, nulla conferat emolumenta salutis?

“modern” but which medieval scholars simply called “ignorant”.²⁵ This challenges the way “modern” temporalities are conceived and labelled. However, further discussion of this lies outside the scope of this essay. Returning to the issue at hand, recall that although he disapproved of it, Peter did at least recognize the existence of alternative ways of interpreting the Exodus narrative with different temporal perspectives on past events.

I now turn from the repurposing of a scriptural text considered to be prophetic (Exodus) to approaches to a non-scriptural predictive text. Often the very *raison d’être* of such texts (that is, to illuminate the future) depended on how they used the temporal spectrum of past, present, and future. This is certainly true in the case of a Christian eschatological narrative we know today as the Sibylla Tiburtina. Before I attend to the temporal structures embedded in the work some summary comments on its dissemination and evolution are required. Anyone seeking to understand this has to unravel roughly five centuries of textual history in order to unpick its fourth-century core from the medieval text preserved in the earliest eleventh-century manuscript, a time span providing ample opportunity for the deposition of different layers of amendments.²⁶ For example, at least four Latin versions survive. This shows that the reuse of prophecy was not merely - in the worst sense - mechanistic re-copying. Rather, as the text migrated from the Eastern part of the Empire to the medieval West, “the future” which it describes was reinterpreted to apply to other people and other situations. In the Tiburtina’s literary history between c. 400 and 1050 we can therefore observe a constant repurposing of the prophecy by anonymous redactors.²⁷ This in turn required the application of regimes of temporality, that is, of the set ways of understanding and dealing with time which served to define the direction of history and the relationship between the past, the present, and future.

²⁵ See Peter Damain cited above, n.20. The sharp separation of the present from the past which characterises the chronological regime of temporality is often regarded as the defining feature which marks a distinctively “modern” understanding of time; see for example, Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*. For further discussion of the label “modern” in relation to temporality see Spiegel, ‘Structures’ and Jordheim, ‘Introduction’, esp. p.506.

²⁶ See Holdenried, *Sibyl*, pp.131-146 and, for a specialist discussion of the Tiburtina’s pre-manuscript history (c.400-1000), see my “Many Hands Without Design: the Making of a Medieval Prophetic Text”, *The Mediaeval Journal* 4/1 (2014), pp. 23-42. See Holdenried, *Sibyl*, p.231 for a full bibliography of printed editions of the Sibylla Tiburtina.

²⁷ This reframing took various forms, some of which we can only reconstruct hypothetically since the surviving manuscript evidence is all post-1047, see Holdenried, ‘Many Hands’.

To better understand the relationship between medieval regimes of temporalities and the Tiburtina let us consider the text's temporal structure first. As one of its framing devices the narrative is structured as a world-chronicle presenting a narration of historical events spread over the course of nine ages, or, in the text's own terminology, *generationes*.²⁸ This historical narration starts with events in ancient Rome, includes an account of the birth and passion of Christ, then narrates (more or less chronologically) the deeds of various kings and emperors, and finally ends with a description of Judgement Day at the End of the World when Christ returns. Summarily, the historical narration included in the Tiburtina mentions secular and sacred events in ancient Rome, the rulers of Egypt, the *rex grecorum*, and Lombard, Carolingian, Ottonian, and Hohenstaufen rulers, and also, still within historical time (albeit a historical time yet to come), a last ruler who will defend mankind against Antichrist before abdicating at Christ's second coming.

In the Tiburtina, then, time is understood as a series of real, concrete events occurring across the temporal trajectory of past, present, and future. The text also describes a universal future for all mankind which culminates in Christ's return and the End of the World. On a meta-level this narrative thus expresses the dominant idea of the medieval period, that the flow of time was identical with the history of salvation which would come to an end with Judgement Day. The text's location within this meta-timeframe is reinforced by the associations of the very striking and memorable acrostic poem which concludes the Tiburtina's narrative. The acrostic depicts Judgement Day, a subject matter which puts the poem into the meta-time-frame since it describes the culmination of salvation history. However, this was not the poem's only context, because these acrostic verses also had a life separate from the rest of the Tiburtina as part of the readings from the Christmas liturgy. I will return to this below.

For now, let us note that the temporal interpretation of the Tiburtina was not static. As the Tiburtina circulated it had to be constantly interpreted afresh because the events it "predicted" constantly failed to occur. As mentioned above, this reinterpretation was expressed by amendments to the text itself. These revisions give an insight into this process of reinterpretation. For current purposes, this is best illustrated by the Tiburtina's regnal list, a

²⁸ The Tiburtina's terminology here also mimics genealogical ways of ordering time, see for example William Gallois, *Time, Religion and History* (Harlow 2007), pp.110-121.

sequence of rulers which culminated in the Last Emperor, destined to fight Antichrist. Earlier scholars often assumed that the text's king list was constantly updated so as to suggest that the Tiburtina's prophecies were always on the verge of fulfilment. However, to judge by the text's surviving textual variations (including headings, and marginalia), many of its scribes and readers were ambivalent about whether to regard the prophecy as being about the past, about the present, or about the future. In particular, reactions to the text were very seldom shaped by the expectation that a current ruler would fulfil the role of a last Emperor as predicted in the Tiburtina. I have found little evidence that anticipation of this particular part of the events of the future generated changes to the narrative. However, the king list virtually ceased to be updated in manuscripts after the twelfth century. From that point on it seems that the text was no longer read as if the text's expectation of a last ruler would be realised imminently in the "now".²⁹

Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, given that we are dealing with a seemingly predictive narrative, my study of the Tiburtina and its medieval audience has revealed the impact of *memory* on the interpretation of the work. Rather than taking it as a cue to think about the role a secular ruler would play in the future (as modern scholars have often wrongly assumed),³⁰ the Tiburtina's medieval scribes and readers repeatedly recalled that the acrostic poem which concludes its narrative was the *Vos inquam* homily from the Christmas liturgy. The significance of this from a temporal perspective is that *Vos inquam* was not about the future. It was an excerpt from a sermon which adduces evidence from Jewish and pagan prophets that Christ really was the Messiah. In other words, it provides non-Christian authority about the authenticity of the Incarnation – a historical event.³¹ Thus a backward-looking approach to the Tiburtina was at least as common as a forward-looking "prophetic" one.

In this regard it is striking that the text continued to be copied frequently into the fifteenth century, long after the regnal list fossilised c.1200. If, as seems likely, during this last part of its life, the text was still being given some sort of future-facing interpretation, that

²⁹ As is all too rarely acknowledged, a future application (i.e. updating of the regnal list) is also rare in the period *before* 1200, see Holdenried, *Sibyl*, pp.20-22 and pp.41-52.

³⁰ Holdenried, *Sibyl*, pp.13-30.

³¹ This connection left a significant impact on the text's manuscript tradition in the form of marginal annotations and amendments to the text, see Holdenried, *Sibyl*, especially pp.111-130.

interpretation cannot have understood the work as a political prophecy since the rulers indicated in the king list as potential Last Emperors were all now long dead. Indeed, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, post-1200, if not before, the surviving manuscript evidence suggests the prophecy had a different forward-looking interpretation (at least sometimes). This second future-oriented interpretation maintained the text's expectation of a Last Judgement but transformed its eschatological message from a universal one into an essentially personal meaning which did not require contemporary political relevance.³²

In the terms I have been discussing in this paper we can therefore observe a change in the way the text was used, away from a literal interpretation of its historico-prophetic content (the Last Emperor narrative) towards an approach shaped by the broader cultural tradition of reading biblical *Realprophetie* allegorically. Below I shall view this change through the prism of medieval regimes of temporality to explore how this shift may have been influenced by mental habits for dealing with time which were the natural by-products of the application of certain techniques of exegesis.

There were two chief means for the Tiburtina's audience to come to understand the rules of scriptural interpretation. One was direct study of the Bible, the other was to learn exegetical techniques from the liturgy. During the divine office, extracts from scripture are recited or sung, together with commentaries, that is, with extracts from actual works of exegesis.³³ Commenting specifically on the lessons of Matins, it has been noted that they

“represent the forms of biblical commentary and theological discourse that monks heard and read most frequently and at greatest length. While hagiographical lessons offered monks models of behaviour for the monks to contemplate and emulate, exegetical lessons provided examples of interpretation and homiletic techniques.”³⁴

In short those participating in the divine office could learn from the liturgy how to approach the interpretation of text and also as a result, for current purposes, how to understand time. Note, too, that the quotation above is about the lessons of Matins, and that the acrostic poem from the Tiburtina was itself one of those very lessons. It would seem natural for participants in the liturgy to associate such a text with the exegetical lessons that also accompanied it in the rest of the divine office.

³² Holdenried, *Sibyl*, pp.93-108.

³³ Boynton, *Farfa*, pp.64-65.

³⁴ Boynton, *Farfa*, pp.65-67.

Thus, in addition to study of the Bible, the liturgy could be another important conduit for the transmission of regimes of temporality based on exegetical techniques, in our case the literal/historical technique and the typological/allegorical technique discussed above with reference to Peter Damian's letter.³⁵ In the liturgy, the typological/allegorical technique was particularly prominent because the divine office presents the faithful with interpretations of the broader meaning Christ's life and of other sacred events within the history of salvation. As noted earlier, a typological/allegorical reading of a scriptural passage gave an episode some continuing contemporary or future meaning; this produced a multi-layered sense of time which "blur[red] the distinction between the distant past [...] and the present experience of liturgical time and commemoration"³⁶. Different categories of time (past, present, future) thus co-existed in the liturgy without being perceived as necessarily separate or distinct from one another. As noted above, this perception of time is the key ingredient of the synchronous regime of temporality and it was not limited to the confines of the divine office. As Boynton has illustrated with reference to Gregory of Catino (c.1060-1135), a monastic historian and near-contemporary of Peter Damian (d.1072), these temporal structures of the liturgy (which rested on exegetical techniques) could shape an individual's thinking. This opens up new avenues for thinking about the post-1200 phase in the history of the Tiburtina's repurposing. As mentioned above, in this phase the regnal list was no longer updated to include contemporary rulers. This implies that the Tiburtina's scribes were no longer much interested in this part of the text; the text had ceased to relate to the political future.

How does the emergence of such seeming indifference to the prophecy fit the chronological and synchronous regimes of temporality of the medieval period? A sideways glance at Peter Damian's letter is instructive here. Peter Damian reports a reading of the events in the Old Testament as having "passed away with age" and as serving "no useful purpose whatsoever"; he blames this on ignorance of the rules of allegorical bible

³⁵ Note, here I only consider the liturgy's role in transmitting exegetical works and techniques (and their attendant regimes of temporality). Of course the liturgy was also itself the subject of exegetical works about the divine office which thus developed ideas about time. This lies outside the scope of the present discussion, but see, for example, Miriam Czock, 'Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft – Konstruktion von Zeit zwischen Heilsgeschichte und Offenbarung. Liturgieexegese um 800 bei Hrabanus Maurus, Amalarius von Metz und Walafrid Strabo, in Miriam Czock, Anja Rathmann-Lutz (ed.), *ZeitenWelten: Zur Verschränkung von Weltdeutung und Zeitwahrnehmung, 750-1350* (Köln 2016), pp.113-134.

³⁶ Boynton, *Farfa*, p.37.

interpretation. Without allegory there is a sense of discontinuity between past and present. The Tiburtina, of course, is not a scriptural narrative. It is also a descriptive, not allusive narrative. On no front does it therefore invite an allegorising approach. If anything, it discourages it: the text's only figurative element, the dream of the nine suns which become progressively more bloodstained, is already presented together with its interpretation, that is, the text states that the nine suns represent the nine *generationes* of mankind. This cuts short any attempts to discover hidden meanings. The text positively demands a historical/literal approach. Yet this was not how it was approached, at least after c.1200.

Perhaps, as Peter Damian's letter suggests, the literal/historical approach brings with it a sense of discontinuity from the past, or as he puts it, the sense "that this event has now passed away with age, and that today it should have no further interest for us". Conceivably it was this sense of discontinuity which weakened the impulse among the Tiburtina's scribes to connect the past with the present and the future, that is, it weakened the very impulse needed to keep the list of rulers in the Tiburtina up-to-date. As the surviving Tiburtina manuscripts show this impulse faded drastically towards the end of the twelfth-century.

Why did this happen at that time? One can only speculate, but it is striking that from the late eleventh-century there had been a marked resurgence of interest in literal readings of the Bible, and by the mid-twelfth-century the practice had been taken up by the Paris schools.³⁷ Allowing for a small time lag so these new idea could percolate down to local scribes, this is just the moment when the Tiburtina's regnal list ceased to be updated. The fact that the fossilisation of the regnal list and new departures in exegesis occurred very roughly at the same time has never been noted before. Whether this change in exegetical preference did indeed spill over into approaches to the Tiburtina remains unknowable but the possibility that it may have done so is well worth considering and might explain this, one of the most noteworthy changes in the text's development.

The Tiburtina's textual link with the liturgy also embedded it in another temporal structure. As Boynton explains, "the structure of the liturgy [...] links widely separate events [...], constructing a perception of time as multilayered simultaneity rather than linear progression"³⁸. In short, we have here the synchronous regime of temporality with its blurring

³⁷ This involved, for example, scholars such as Andrew of St Victor (d.1175), see van Liere, *Introduction*, pp.130-139.

³⁸ Boynton, *Farfa*, p.36.

of the boundaries between past, present, and future. This permitted readers to connect, as present-day individuals, to the now distant events of Christ's life and His resurrection which the Tiburtina describes; it invited readers to reflect on the significance of these events (especially of Christ's death) for their own salvation. Again, the Tiburtina's surviving manuscript evidence suggests that readers adopted precisely such a reading repeatedly over the course of its literary life. They recognised in the Tiburtina the Gospel story of Christ's birth, death and resurrection and then, on the basis of habits of mind fostered by the liturgy's commemoration of Christ, in reading it these readers reflected on their own chances of salvation on Judgement Day, dramatically depicted by the Tiburtina's concluding acrostic.³⁹

Quite naturally when doing this they adopted the synchronous regime of temporality, and read the Tiburtina on the basis that, as Peter Damian expressed it in another context, "whatever then occurred visibly, is adapted to our need by allegorical interpretation, as the age long past is made to serve us at the present time."

In sum, the way the Tiburtina's prediction of the future was received by its audience (mostly monastic/clerical) reveals the operation of two different regimes of temporality: the chronological and the synchronous regimes. Both were rooted in the hermeneutic rules of scriptural exegesis but could also be applied to the genre of non-scriptural prophecy. This point is important because Peter Damian's letter is a discussion *about* Old Testament texts whereas the changes to the non-scriptural Sibylla Tiburtina are changes *to the text itself*. Despite this difference, both sets of reactions represent reader responses, albeit in different forms, and show readers applying the same two regimes of temporality (synchronous and chronological) across different types of prophetic material.

This is significant because in the middle ages reading any prophecy involved using a complex set of ideas about the organisation of three levels of time (past, present, and future) and their position in relation to each other. The material discussed in this paper suggests that the way these relationships were understood might vary from reader to reader, but only within limited parameters. This is because the normative rules for understanding time in the middle ages arose from the exegetical techniques adopted by readers when interpreting a text. Readers thus had only a limited set of options from which to choose. If they chose to adopt

³⁹ Holdenried, *Sibyl*, pp.93-108.

the synchronous regime, the prophecy was repurposed by treating it as a metaphor and thus rendering it atemporal, that is, timelessly applicable across past, present, and future. If they chose the chronological regime, on the other hand, then, like the ratchet, they repurposed the prophecy by shunting it forward in time in order to keep it current, lest, as Peter Damian's querulous persons said, it became redundant. Note, although I refer here to a reader's "choice", that may not have always been a conscious decision, but rather part of an almost unthinking approach to textual interpretation and everything that flowed from that.⁴⁰

Lastly, note that the consequence of a reader's choice of regime of temporality sometimes has surprising effects. For example, as I have argued, the chronological regime could render the past separate and detached from the present, deserving only indifference from the reader. This is often considered a "modern" perspective. Somewhat ironically then, it was precisely the regime of temporality with the most obvious connection to the act of updating prophecy which may have also discouraged such a response.

⁴⁰ As an example of this, see John V. Fleming, 'Prophecy and Exegesis in the Visio Attributed to Joachim of Fiore', in Julia E. Wannemacher (ed.), *Joachim of Fiore and the Influence of Inspiration. Essays in Memory of Marjorie E. Reeves (1905-2003)*, p.82.

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