

# Calling Time on BC and AD

For more than a thousand years BC and AD have bisected our understanding of time. Should we keep them?

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It is obvious to say that the orthodox dating convention of Before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD), Latin for 'In the year of our Lord', are constructs which have framed the passing of our daily lives and how we record the events therein for more than 1,000 years. Yet BC and AD are odd for their abbreviation and lack of consistency; why is the former in English while the latter is Latin? The lack of a year zero per se is also a conundrum, with the flow of time from one epoch to another jumping from 1 BC to AD 1. This in turn creates some uncertainty over key dates; for example, was the turn of the recent millennium 1 January 2000 or 2001?

*The astronomical clock, Lyon, 17th century.  
Novapix/Bridgeman Images.*

This last oddity is explained by the origin of the dating system. Based on the belief that Christ's birth occurred 753 years after the foundation of Rome, the system was conceived in around AD 525 by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk from Tomis (modern-day Constanta, Romania), but was not used widely until 300 years later. In the sixth century the concept of 'zero' had not been introduced in Europe, although it had been established elsewhere. There is no zero in Roman numerals. Zero did not appear in the West until Arabic numerals made their way across Christendom in the early 13th century. More problematically, scholarly opinion has since determined that Jesus was probably born sometime between 6 BC and before the death of King Herod in 4 BC (Matthew 2; Luke 1:5).

Bede, the Anglo-Saxon historian, opted to use Dionysius' dating system in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in AD 731. Shortly after, Charlemagne encouraged the use of Anno Domini throughout the Carolingian Empire. For Bede, the use of the AD system was important because with it he could fit the conversion of the English people into a narrative of God's plan; for Charlemagne the use of AD reinforced the centrality of Christ in his empire: with it, Christ's name was reflected in a quotidian manner, namely in the way they recorded the passing of time and therefore their lives. The spread of the system across the empire is ultimately at the heart of its enduring dominance; it became particularly popular across Catholic Europe from the 11th to the 14th centuries. In around 1700, following Russia, Eastern Orthodox nations also implemented the AD system. It then found favour in the Republic of China which, although using its own Minguo Era system, chose to adopt the Western calendar in an international context.

Use of the term 'Before Christ' did not emerge until much later, partly owing to an inability to settle on a simple, universal phrase. Bede had experimented with 'the year before the incarnation of the Lord', and 'In the year before the birth of Christ' was used by the German monk Werner Rolevinck in his world history of 1474, but it was not until 1627 that ante Christum, 'Before Christ', first emerged in France, introduced by a Jesuit theologian called Denis Pétau. While AD was adopted in its Latin form relatively early, initially by Bede but also in legal and ecclesiastical documents in Latin, the period 'before Christ' was of limited interest to medieval lawyers or clergymen; 'before Christ' emerged in a post-Reformation, vernacular-speaking world, so it was more natural to adopt an English expression.

Alternatives have arisen over the centuries, including *vulgaris aerae*, or 'vulgar era', (c.1615), 'Christian era' (1652) and 'common era' (1708). While these often make no specific reference to the birth of Christ, they are nonetheless based on the same point of division as BC/AD. Most failed to gain widespread traction.

More recently, a subtle revision to the seemingly 'standard' (Western) dating system of BC/AD has emerged and is quietly replacing it. In contemporary historical discourse there has been an explicit move to rebrand BC/AD as Before Common Era (BCE) and Common Era (CE). These terms were first proposed in the early 18th century, in an English astronomy book by David Gregory, *The Elements of Astronomy, Physical and Geometrical* (1715). They reflect, perhaps, a post-enlightenment departure from the ubiquity of religion in society and nascent scientific thought and writing.

Why is all this important? In losing BC and AD, we would only stand to gain a relatively nondescript replacement in BCE/CE. What is a 'Common Era'? What can we expect from the period 'Before Common Era'? These phrases have simply piggybacked the existing conceptual dating framework and revised the wording with similar – but largely meaningless – terms. The point is evidently to offer more neutral dating terminology in an increasingly secular landscape. Indeed, the advantages of opting for terminology without reference to Christ appear to be that they comply precisely with a more temporal outlook, with all the potential benefits that can stem from that choice: to permit an interfaith use of the same calendar. Yet by so doing we are missing the point that, certainly in Western Europe, Anno Domini was precisely how letters, missives and chronicles opened and the year was recorded. It was the method of recording the vital dating information required by historians of those periods since the birth of Christ (i.e. the last 2,000 years). Where possible, historians ought to use language that reflects the terminology used by those who wrote the documents we use today to understand the past. We are mistaken in so casually rebranding the fundamentals of historical discourse without stopping to properly consider a meaningful alternative or to defend the existing approach.

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