

HISTORY

The times, they are a-changin'

By ALLAN LEVINE

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The Lost Millennium:

History's Timetables Under Siege

By Florin Diacu

Knopf Canada, 309 pages, \$35

If you think you are about to celebrate the start of 2006, think again. The year might well be 942 -- or perhaps it's 1006. Who knows for sure? Because according to the so-called new chronology, our traditional dating system is likely out by approximately a millennium, give or take a few hundred years.

As University of Victoria mathematician Florin Diacu explains in the intriguing, yet often complicated, *The Lost Millennium*, the early Middle Ages or Dark Age (476 to 1000 AD) never actually occurred. This alleged error began in the late 1500s when the current chronology was more or less first established -- using astronomy, ancient documents and much later, archeological discoveries -- and has been perpetuated ever since.

Consequently, every major era from the Egyptians onward has been misdated. Followers of the new chronology believe, for example, that Christ was not crucified in 33AD, as is commonly accepted, but that in line with intricate astronomical calculations, this likely happened around 1075.

There have been legitimate disputes about history's timeline for centuries, especially in the biblical and ancient worlds. Many recent books (including *The Bible Unearthed*, a 2001 work by Israeli scholars Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman) challenge widely held beliefs about the existence of Abraham and the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt. Similar questions have been raised about the exact chronology of ancient Greece and Rome.

Nonetheless, many, if not a majority, of historians would argue that the new chronology theory is far-fetched and more appropriate as the plot for a new Dan Brown conspiracy novel. Diacu, however, set out to explore this controversy with an open mind. It began as a hobby and distraction from his mathematical work. Eventually he became so immersed in this quest that he decided to describe his intellectual journey in this book.

His account is at its best when he wrestles with the many contradictions of both the accepted and revisionist chronologies; it is less successful, at least for the average reader, when he wades into celestial mechanics with a dizzying discussion of eclipses, astronomical calculations and algebraic formulas.

Much of the book focuses around the controversial theories and speculations of Anatoly Fomenko, a 60-year-old Russian professor of mathematics and the guru of new chronology. Depending on your point of view, he is either a brilliant scholar

or a crank who should have stuck to teaching geometry and calculus. Diacu tends to give Fomenko the benefit of the doubt, although he is forced, albeit reluctantly, to conclude that many of Fomenko's outlandish chronology theories do not hold up to serious scrutiny. Nor does he accept Fomenko's rejection of sound scientific dating techniques such as radiocarbon testing.

Fomenko has followed in the path of such mathematicians as Isaac Newton in the 1720s and Nicolai Morozov, a Russian scholar of the early 20th century, among others, who raised significant questions about accepted chronology. Like them, he studied astronomical charts, records of solar and lunar eclipses, and ancient horoscopes and writings to arrive at his sweeping conclusions that the history of civilization probably begins in about 800 AD.

Consider the Peloponnesian War, for instance, one of Fomenko's chief starting points. Waged between the Greek city states of Sparta and Athens, the military campaign is believed to have begun in 431 BC and lasted for nearly three decades. Much of our knowledge of the battle derives from the writings of Thucydides, a Greek historian who lived through the war and recorded its major events. References by Thucydides to a series of eclipses led Fomenko, after painstaking research and calculations, to determine that the war actually started more than a millennium later, around 1039 AD.

Such forward time-shifting leads to a multitude of other problems, as Diacu repeatedly points out. Not the least of them is dealing with documented records of popes and European rulers who lived during these periods. These anomalies are explained away by Fomenko, utilizing an array of questionable research methodology, the zaniest of which may be "parallelism." Dynasties are said to have overlapped and erroneously chronicled so that, for instance, popes Miltiades (310-14) and Boniface II (530-32) were apparently the same person. Or, the Roman Emperor Theodosius II (408-50) was in truth the great Carolingian king Charlemagne (768-814), recognized as the founder of both France and Germany. Diacu admits that this analysis is less than convincing -- an overly generous assessment.

There is no disputing Diacu's contention that mathematical equations and celestial mechanics can improve our understanding of the past and history's timetables. But it is difficult not to be dismissive of Fomenko and other proponents of the new chronology. Even if you are as accommodating as Diacu and are prepared at an intellectual level to disregard every fact -- dubious or not -- that centuries of historical scholarship has taught, the arguments in favour of abandoning our current dating system for a revolutionary revised one require a mammoth leap of faith. Hence, if it's all the same, celebrating the New Year as 2006 according to the Western calendar still seems to make the most sense -- for the time being.

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