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## **Does anybody really know what time it is?**

**You might think it's 2005, but a maverick mathematician says it's actually 963**

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Time's arrow, historians like to say, flies in one direction only. Everything has its cause, rooted in what has come before. That makes chronology the spine of history, the plot line in the agreed-upon narrative that connects humanity with its past. Most historians don't believe that Jesus Christ was born 2,005 years ago this month, but they all accept that he lived around two millennia ago, and that his era was preceded by some ancient cultures and followed by others: the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages and successive modern eras. Just about everything we think we understand about how we got *here* from *there* is based on that sequence.

So scholars tend to sputter when confronted, as they are in *The Lost Millennium: History's Timetables Under Siege* (Knopf) by University of Victoria mathematician Florin Diacu, with the ideas of a maverick Russian mathematician named Anatoli Fomenko. Having reworked the astronomical calculations that underlie standard chronology, Fomenko argues that time is out of joint. History as commonly reckoned is about 1,000 years too long, contends the mathematician. Most of those centuries should be carved out of the Middle Ages, which barely existed as a bridge between the ancient and modern worlds: Christ, Greek warriors and medieval knights all lived at the same time. It's an understatement to call this idea revolutionary, although lunacy is the more common assessment from historians.

Fomenko's assault on standard chronology is based on his specialty, celestial mechanics, which allows scientists to track the movements of stars and planets over time. That, in turn, provides precise dates for ancient events associated with those movements, especially eclipses. There's nothing new in the method: for 500 years scholars have used astronomy to fix such dates as we do know -- but Fomenko's calculations have radically shifted some of them. None more so than in the case of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, one of the few events in Ancient Greek history that can be given an exact date. It thereby functions as the hook on which much Greek chronology hangs. The Athenian historian Thucydides mentions three eclipses in the first 18 years of the war, a sequence that scholars have traditionally placed from 431 to 413 BCE. But Fomenko shows that those eclipses could not have been as Thucydides describes them. According to the mathematician, the only 18-year span of eclipses matching the historian's account occurred from 1039 to 1057 CE, almost 15 centuries later.

Startling as that scenario is, Fomenko doesn't -- quite -- visualize pagan warriors, worshippers of Apollo and Zeus, slugging it out in Christian Greece 1,000 years after the birth of Jesus. That's because he also cast his eye over the three-hour eclipse that Gospel accounts place at the hour of Christ's death. Fomenko's conclusion? Jesus was crucified in 1075. Those two re-datings convinced Fomenko of his millennium shift hypothesis, and he began looking over the Middle Ages for proof the era never was. He found it, to *his* satisfaction at least, in lists of popes that he thinks include the same individuals repeatedly, and through equating medieval rulers like Charlemagne with their Roman predecessors.

Fomenko, a 50-year-old professor at Moscow State University, is clearly a driven man, and he and his followers are respectable mathematicians. But he's one crackpot historian. Consider a rhetorical question from Diacu, who makes a heroic effort in his book to tiptoe through this surreal minefield as a neutral. Since there was a brief eclipse in 33 CE, and another in 368 that was as lengthy as the Gospels claim (though otherwise different), as well as Fomenko's choice in 1075: which best provides a date for the Crucifixion?

Well, how about none of them? The mathematician, master of a sophisticated and precise science, demonstrates a jaw-dropping naïveté when it comes to the messy business of human history. That Fomenko can't find an eclipse to closely match the Gospels' before the 11th century may be a problem for those who take every word of Scripture literally. But it's not a difficulty for secular historians, who are more inclined to think the evangelists wrote about the sky darkening at the Crucifixion because that's what the sky *ought* to do when the Son of God dies. Similarly, when given two choices about Thucydides -- that he exaggerated in his description of the eclipses or that he was a contemporary of William the Conqueror -- historians of Ancient Greece will, every time, take option No. 1.

The time wars are dominated more by professional prejudice and plain ignorance than anything else. The mathematicians refuse to recognize that crunching the numbers correctly still won't make the Middle Ages disappear. There simply isn't enough *time* in a scenario that moves sharply from the ancient world to the modern age -- time for the present-day ethnicities and languages of Europe to emerge. That doesn't mean historians, who literally can't do Fomenko's math, should respond like one of Diacu's professors, who asks why established history should be overthrown simply to smooth out the wobbles in some geek's celestial calculations. It may well be that many supposedly fixed dates are not all that certain, and some sequences may need to be adjusted (if not by a millennium). A little humility might be less sensational, but it would look better on both sides: history's timetable is too vital to our understanding of ourselves to twist or ignore.

*Read an excerpt from The Lost Millennium at [www.macleans.ca/lost](http://www.macleans.ca/lost)*

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