ON THE AGES
OF THE WORLD
AND OF MAN
Introduction

The canon of Fulgentius the mythographer in R. Helm's edition (1898, pp. 129–79) includes a work named in two of the four surviving manuscripts as De etatibus (for aetatibus) mundi et hominis, a derivative compendium of Biblical and classical history in fourteen books or sections. The work was first printed, from an inferior copy, by P. Jacob Hummes (Paris, 1694; revised, 1696); portions were edited by A. Reifferscheid in Rheinisches Museum 23 (1868): 133 ff., and in his Anecdota Fulgentianum (Bratislava, 1883).

The best manuscript, Vatican Palatinus 886, dates from Lorsch of the ninth century; other copies range from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. Three later manuscripts assign the work to Fabius Claudius Gordianus Fulgentius, Claudius and Gordianus being family names of St. Fulgentius, bishop of Ruspe in North Africa, who died in 532–33. The identity of the bishop with the Fabius Planciades Fulgentius who wrote the Mythologies, the Content of Virgil, and the Explanation of Obsolete Words remains unproven, but the manuscripts in question are late enough to be a party to a confusion, of two separate writers named Fulgentius, kept distinct at least through Carolingian times. As may be seen from the version that follows, the prolix style and the habit of viscous moralizing are all too similar to those of the mythographic works. One conceit in particular, as already indicated in the general introduction, seems to be repeated or adapted, with the Muses confused for the Hesperides, from the opening of the Content of Virgil.

An elaborate prologue addresses an unnamed patron, for whom only a wish to complete a series of literary tasks, as in the Explanation, has persuaded the writer to undertake the labor. An apology for imperfections is mingled, as in the opening of the Mythologies, with complaints of living in a commercial age and with boasts of his ability to achieve high style, together with an involved explanation why, as a "device of poetry," he chooses to leave out one letter of the alphabet in turn from each section, that is, leave out all words and names containing that letter. To innate prolixity is thus added one further, very considerable hindrance to clarity, and the result is
Latin appallingly turgid, rhetorical, and periphrastic. The matter itself is an undistinguished summary of world history, drawn largely from the Bible, Eusebius of Caesarea (died ca. 340), and, especially for the later sections, the Historiae adversum paganos of the Iberian priest Orosius (died ca. 430). The work ends abruptly with a rapid review of the Roman emperors up to Valentinian III (died 455), leaving open the question, considered further below, whether the work is complete or not. The technique varies between distorting words by omitting the key letter (oc for hoc, Acab for Ahab, in section 8, from which H is left out), substituting for it an associated letter (Squitarum for Scit(h)arum in 3, lacking C), and the more difficult feat of doing without words or inflectional forms which would have included the banished letter (Adam, Satan, Cain, and Abel are not named in section 1, lacking A). The whole work amounts to no more than a model of misplaced ingenuity, a "black cloud of foolishness" as Fulgentius himself says, and even in the Middle Ages where such writings of display had their vogue, seems to have attracted few admirers or imitators.

With such a work, perhaps more so than even with the Mythologies, a translator of Fulgentius, if he is to give anything like a true picture of the "hideous rashness" of Fulgentius's style, has to resist the constant temptation of improving upon him, even of making him consistently coherent and intelligible, by straightening out his bizarre convolutions and simplifying his grotesque distortions. The motto or excuse must be, "Be Kent unmannerly when Lear is mad," for no standard phrasing, ancient or modern, can adequately convey the peculiarities of the original.

Some commentary and identification of details are provided in note form after each section below. It remains to say something of the alphabetical and numerical schemes employed by Fulgentius in the shaping of his work, with particular reference to his remarks at the close of the prologue and to the question whether or not we are dealing with a completed work.

In the prologue Fulgentius compares the Hebrew, Greek, Libyan, and Roman alphabets. By Hebrew he means the standard run of 22 letters, aleph to tau, as in the headings of Psalm 118 (119). His Greek also is the standard classical 24, alpha to omega, omitting earlier digamma (f), san (s), koppa (q), and xi (x), which soon fell into disuse as letter symbols. The Roman 22 referred to would be the modern alphabet with the omission of i, w, and y, and with u/v counting as one. By Libyan Fulgentius presumably means the classical Roman 22 with the addition of y, in use in the Latin writings of North Africa to which he subscribed. In adapting the alphabet for numer-
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als, he follows the traditional Greek system (in use by the third century B.C.), taking alpha to theta for 1–9, iota to koppa for 10–90, and rho to omega for 100–800, with the last one, omega, equal to 800. By episemon, for ἐπισεμον, "mark, symbol," he seems to mean the Greek system of diacritics (dots, strokes, accents, and other symbols) commonly used to distinguish numerals from letters. His ς for the Hebrew בּライブ (qoph, vau, pe in Roman order)—the koppa (κόππα), which fell into disuse as a Greek letter but was retained as a numeral standing for 90, and which gave rise to the Roman letter q.

So far there is reasonable clarity. It is more difficult to follow Fulgentius's arithmetic in the closing sentences of his prologue. If digamma (for 6) and koppa (for 90) are included in the classical Greek alphabet, the twenty-second symbol, phi, stands numerically for 500, the figure Fulgentius assigns to the twenty-second and last Roman letter, z. If the multiplier twelve is used, as he proposes without giving a reason, 6000 (presumably years) becomes the "age of the existing world," a round figure for the traditional (Septuagint) reckoning of years from Adam to the birth of Christ, and 276 (12 times 23) the days, that is, nine months of thirty days each and six additional days, representing approximately the span of human conception to birth. Possibly twelve is introduced because it happens that 12 times 23 and the sum of the series $1 + 2 + 3 + \ldots + 23$ both come to 276. Even so, it is hard to see why he continues with twelve, how twelve times twelve can represent "the span of human life," or how this figure of 144 may be reconciled with the twenty-three periods or lustra, regularly five-year periods in classical usage, i.e., 115, also assigned to the "activities and lives of men" in the next sentence. At one place in the Bible, Gen. 6:2, we find "His days shall be an hundred and twenty years," close enough to 115, but had this been in Fulgentius's mind one would have expected twenty-three sections in his work rather than the existing fourteen; and fourteen lustra of five years better suits the more usual and more realistic estimate of the human span by the Psalmist, 90 (91):10, threescore years and ten.

Here an additional complication arises. Although in the surviving manuscripts the main part of the work consists of only fourteen sections, which leave out in turn the letters a through o (disregarding j), two copies introduce the work as running "from a to z," and specify twenty-three books, and two copies conclude: "Here ends the fourteenth book of Fulgentius, lacking 0," then "Here begins the fifteenth book, lacking P"; on the other hand, what is now the penultimate section, 13, states that the deeds of the Roman
emperors are to be reserved for a final section (postremo loco), as in fact is the case. A variety of explanations seems possible. Either the full work continued through the expected twenty-three sections, and no copy survives of the last nine, which would presumably have dealt with either Fulgentius's own age or the end of the world and the state of heaven; or, as seems most probable, Fulgentius grew tired of his device and ended prematurely without explanation, much as he does in his other writings; or he came to a halt with the letter ο because it was the equivalent of omega, the final letter of Greek; or his final allusion, to the emperor Valentinian III, more or less coincides with the close of his source-text, book 7 of Orosius.

In the prologue to the work Fulgentius also announces, what is perhaps implicit in its title, that he is to follow a "harmonious distribution" in equating "the separate ages of the world and those of mankind," that is, in reproducing the traditional division of time from the Creation into seven ages and in assigning to each age a corresponding period in the normal progress of the individual from birth to senility and the grave. That his working out of this scheme is characteristically confused and lacking in thoroughness may be seen by comparing it to such a clear statement of the tradition as is found in Bede's treatise De temporum ratione, chapter 46, written in the year 725. Bede distinguishes eight ages of the world—six covering the period from the Creation to the present; then two more after universal death, an age "of repose" in the "eternal sabbath," and the ultimate time of the "blessed Resurrection" and the "heavenly life" through eternity. The first age, from Adam to Noah, corresponds to man's infancy before speech (in-fans); the second, from Noah to Abraham, man's childhood wherein the faculty of speech is acquired; the third, Abraham to David, man's youth when he "begins to propagate his kind"; the fourth, David to the Babylonian captivity, man's maturity when he acquires the ability to govern; the fifth, Babylon to the birth of Christ, man's old age and its misfortunes; and the sixth, the Christian era, representing senility and eventual death. Bede also establishes the parallel between seven ages of the world and the seven days of Creation, and works out the total years to the end of the sixth age, Christ's birth, as 3952 according to the "Hebrew" version (i.e., Jerome's Vulgate) of the Old Testament or 3530 according to the Greek Septuagint.

Fulgentius has some notion of a comparable system, though he does not adhere to it with complete consistency. Of his fourteen sections, 1-6 each specifies a numbered age of the world and mostly gives a passing hint of a corresponding stage in man's individual life: section 1, dealing with
Adam and his sons, is the age of innocence and birth; 2, from Enoch to Noah, mentions the follies of boyhood and links the Flood to the catechumen preparing for baptism and the chrism of confirmation; 3, mainly to do with the tower of Babel or Babylon, alludes to youth which is both full of pride and eager for education; 4, on Abraham, speaks of marriage and the acquiring of wisdom; 5, on Jacob, refers to the offspring of marriage and the acquiring of possessions; and 6, on Moses, mentions man's reaching maturity. Sections 7–9 continue the record of Old Testament Jewish history to the birth of Christ, but instead of giving a numbered age of the world seem to be following a numbered set of years for the lifetime of the individual, apparently based on a system of fives, the sixth age of the world specified in section 6 now becoming in 7 the equivalent of a man's years from age 30 to 35 (a reckoning by lustra or five-year periods has been rather puzzlingly hinted at in the prologue). Thus, section 7, dealing with Samuel, begins with a man's "reasoned course of existence" at 30 and ends with a reference to his affairs at 35. No more is made of this in 8, which deals with the period of the kings of Israel, notably Saul, David, and Solomon; but 9, an attempt to cover the remaining Old Testament history, specifically the Macabees, Judith, and Esther, brings back a reference to man when he is past 40 years old. In the remainder of the work, sections 10–14, both the numbering of ages of the world and this belated numbering of an individual's life span seem to be forgotten, and Fulgentius's efforts are concentrated on bringing to an approximately contemporary date both Biblical and Gentile history. Thus, section 10 reproduces the hostile tradition of Alexander the Great; 11 covers incidents in early Roman history; 12 gives highlights from the Gospel narratives; 13 deals similarly with the Acts of the Apostles and scraps from Eusebius's version of early church history; and 14 runs through the Roman emperors as far as Valentinian III, who died in 435 A.D. In ending with a section 14, Fulgentius may still, though he does not mention it, have in mind his five-year scheme, since five times fourteen would produce the traditional human span of the Psalmist. Similarly his round-figure calculation of 6000 years from the creation of the world which he makes in the prologue may be a rough echo of the more sophisticated traditional span which, for instance, Bede calculated from the Septuagint.

Fulgentius is perhaps more consistent, and more in accord with his individual moralistic attitude, in his interpretation of world history and his sense of its continuing applicability to man's ethics and behavior. He is, in fact, constantly in search of evidence to justify the ways of God to man, to estab-
lish parallels and analogies between the past and present ways of man, to stress how inscrutable are God's purposes, and to detect those apparent injustices in God's decrees which can be made to show how both human nature and divine justice are unchanging. In what is essentially the moralist's approach, and one very close to the approach of the allegorizer which he exhibits elsewhere in his expositions, he is concerned to stretch any usable detail to make it fit his ethical formulas. One must add that he also has the habit, common to much medieval writing on such themes, of lingering over details of lust and sexual misdemeanor in a pose of righteous indignation.


2. For the tradition of so-called lipogrammatic writings, exploiting the omission of one or more letters as a formal mannerism, one of Addison's types of "false wit," see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, transl. W. R. Trask (New York, 1953), pp. 282-83, who cites examples from the poems of Lasus, the teacher of Pindar (6th century B.C.), through the *Iliad* of Nestor of Lavanda (flourished ca. 200 A.D.) and the *Odyssey* of Tryphiodorus the Egyptian (5th century A.D.), to late manifestations in the work of Peter Riga (ca. 1200) and 17th-century Spanish romances. More specifically, one thinks of the Pindaric ode without the letter sigma, and the five novels by Lope de Vega (died 1635), each lacking a different vowel. Fulgentius himself, in the prologue below, refers to the twenty-four books of the poet Xenophon, "with one letter left out of each book, an admirable work to which all of us involved with it have rightly given preeminence." Unfortunately this looks like a further piece of faked evidence, taking a famous name and inventing a work to go with it, on the same lines as some of the authorities manufactured in the *Mythologies* and the *Explanation* of the two Xenophons known in Greek literature—the famous historian of the 4th century B.C., and the author of the novel *Ephesiaca*, Xenophon of Ephesus who flourished in the 2d or 3d century A.D.—neither is on record as having produced lipogrammatic work.

3. Such Fulgentianisms as turgid syntax, strained wordplays, frequent use of exclamations, and moralizing phrases reminiscent of the Bible in the hand of tropological expositors reappear, to name but one instance, as stylistic features of the *De excidio Britanniae* by the priest Gildas, who died ca. 570.

4. That is, the Libyan cursive alphabet of 22 (rather than 23) letters (witness the passage introduced by Plautus in his *Poenulus*, act 5), or else early Numidian, an offshoot of Punic or Carthaginian, the writing used by the ancestors of the Berbers and the progenitor of the Tamachek writing still in use among the Tuareg of northwest Africa; see D. Diringer, *Writing*, Ancient Peoples and Places (New York, 1962), 25:124, 132.

5. As in Isidore, *Etymologiae* 5.37.2.

6. The notion of 120 years as a human lifetime is not peculiar to Fulgentius:
Curtius (1953), p. 253, finds it in Tacitus, De oratoribus 17, and Arnobius, Adversus nationes 2.71; add Lactantius, Divine Institutes 2.12.

7. Edited by T. Mommsen, Bedae chronica maiora, chronica minora, Monumenta Germaniae historica, auctores antiquissimi, 13.2 (Berlin, 1895), pp. 247—48; English translations by C. W. Jones, Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England (Ithaca, 1947), pp. 23—24, with a discussion, pp. 22—27; and by J. Campbell, Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People and other Selections (New York, 1968), pp. 395—96. For the tradition involved, see also C. W. Jones, Bedae opera de temporibus (Cambridge, Mass., 1943). The division of the ancient world into six ages is found in Augustine, whence Isidore of Seville (Etym. 5.38.1—6) and later medieval writers; Lactantius, Divine Inst. 7.14, specifies six ages each of one thousand years, a notion derived ultimately from II Pet. 3.7—8.