

1. Making Periodisation Possible

The Concept of the Course of Time (*Zeitverlaufsvorstellung*) in Historical Thinking

Jörn Rüsen

Levels of Time in Historical Thinking

Periodisation is a cognitive process by which the totality of history is divided into several parts.¹ This partition makes it easier to concretise the course of history and to concentrate on special issues of understanding the past. The periods we are familiar with from European history (like antiquity, the medieval period, early modern history, contemporary history etc.), are well established. From time to time these *Eurochronologies* have been criticised as outdated, or contested as inadequate for specific regional and historical circumstances: it is the purpose of this volume to address these issues in detail, as we describe how these established (European) periodisation schemes are still in use as concepts of historical thinking. Periodisation schemes somehow presuppose an idea of historical totality. But in contrast to the issue of periodisation itself, this question of the totality of history (which throughout this volume will be called *chronologies*), has not been a standard issue in the discourse of historical studies. This chapter attempts to analyze this pre-position of history as a temporal whole or a totality, as a logical system. I begin by considering the issue of time, since it is time that is central, whatever may be said about periodisation and history in general. Time is an essential element in historical thinking.² It is both a provocation and a challenge, as change happens inevitably and people have to come to terms with it. In many civilisations, the experience of change itself is therefore called ‘history.’ History

- 1 Cf. allusions to and a longish discussion of Orwell’s cynical references to this process in the epithet to the introduction and in the conclusion to this volume.
- 2 See Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Zeit deuten: Perspektiven—Epochen—Paradigmen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2003); Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Time and History: The Variety of Cultures* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Chun-Chieh Huang and John B. Henderson, ed., *Notions of Time in Chinese Historical Thinking* (Hongkong: Chinese University Press, 2006).

can thus be considered a cultural tool which enables people to find their place in the ongoing changes of both the world outside and within themselves. History tells them what happened in the past in such a way that they are given a future perspective for their lives and thus, they are able to place their personal activities and sufferings in the ongoing temporal processes of their world. History thus provides a meaningful relationship between the past, the present and the future. It presents the past as a chain of events leading to the present, while opening up a perspective of the future. By doing so it refers in different ways to time.

First, history evokes the experience of time in the present, mainly in the form of ‘contingency.’ Second, it refers to the ‘changes of the human world in the past.’ Third, it places the time of the present in ‘a comprehensive relationship with the past and the future,’ and fourth this serves the ‘future-directed intentions and expectations of human activity.’

In all four instances, time has specific ‘meaning.’³ It is more than just a relationship between what went on before and after, more than only a change of circumstance in human life and more than a simple chronicle of affairs. Historians need a chronological order, so that they can arrange the events of the past in a reasonable and comparable way. In our period of intensifying inter- and cross-cultural communication such an order is all the more important. At the very moment when events of the past are interrelated by means of a *chronologics*, or historical order, their physical placement in time becomes enriched by historical meaning. This meaning changes a simple chronological order into a perspective of development and provides it with an explanatory function.

I would like to address this fundamental qualification which time achieves as a frame for historical meaning. It is a logical presupposition of each historical cognition, including periodisation. But it is rarely expressed in the discourse of professional historians. It is a condition of possibility for their work, pre-given in the historical culture of their time and mainly reflected in the academic field of philosophy of history. In order to consider this problem I would like to propose a list of levels of time in historical thinking (in order of increasing abstraction):

1. *level of existential experience of time:*
before/after, changes, coming into life/passing away, contingency;
2. *level of experiencing temporal change:*
in the past; (like the process of modernisation);
3. *level of temporal perspectives:*
as frames for interpreting the chain of events in the past (like rise and fall; progress);

3 See Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Meaning and Representation in History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

4. *level of a comprehensive perspective on temporal changes in the past or of fundamental principles of meaning of temporal change:*
 this last level constitutes what I have called the *Zeitverlaufsvorstellung* (concept of the course of time).⁴

History as Unified Totality

History is usually presented as a series of singular changes which happened in the past (e.g. the history of the French Revolution etc.). This presentation uses time perspectives, which are constructed by general principles of meaning. The most fundamental and widely used principle is that of a general meaning of time in the human world.⁵ It defines history as a field of thinking, as a frame of reference, which includes all events which happened in the past. It integrates the evidence of the past into an encompassing dimension. It decides the selection of events as more or less important for historical knowledge; it decides the mode of explanation which combines different events and orders them in a meaningful, linear sequence which is teleological: changes in the past are given a direction at the end of which the present appears. Thus, chronology is transformed into history. It endows historical narration with a plot of temporal development which may serve as part of the temporal orientation for human life in the present. It makes the events of the past 'narratable' in their temporal succession and connection, and gives this connection an explanatory function.

Typically, this comprehensive frame of time is linked to the idea of progress. Other examples for such frames are the concepts of continuity/discontinuity, development, evolution, decay, rise and fall. In the social sciences this comprehensive frame is translated into a theory of social or cultural evolution.⁶ In premodern times, one of the most influential time concepts of this universalistic dimension in the West was the idea of *Providentia Dei*, the Providence of God.

- 4 I have analyzed this level in my theory of history: Jörn Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*, trans. Diane Kerns & Katie Digan (New York: Berghahn, 2017), *passim*.
- 5 See Günter Dux, *Die Zeit in der Geschichte: Ihre Entwicklungslogik von Mythos zur Weltzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989).
- 6 Examples: Bernhard Giesen, *Die Entdinglichung des Sozialen: Eine evolutionstheoretische Perspektive auf die Postmoderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991); Bernhard Giesen, "On Axial Ages and other Thresholds between Epochs", in *Shaping a Humane World: Civilizations—Axial Times—Modernities—Humanisms*, ed. Oliver Kozlarek, Jörn Rüsen, and Ernst Wolff (Bielefeld: Transcript 2012), 95–110; Johann P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Axial Civilisations and World History* (Leiden: Brill 2005); Günter Dux, *Historico-genetic Theory of Culture: On the Processual Logic of Cultural Change* (Bielefeld: Transcript 2011).

It appears in very different forms: as a divine being, a metaphorical image, or a philosophy of history.⁷ The divine beings can be found in different cultural contexts: Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of history'⁸ is a prominent metaphor for this constitutive force shaping history as a meaningful phenomenon in the human world.⁹

There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [verweilen: a reference to Goethe's *Faust*], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.¹⁰

In this description, history appears as a unit, a whole or a totality of time, which mediates past, present, and future in a highly complex network of meaning (including meaninglessness). Time as the fundament of history can be represented in one single symbol or metaphor (indicating its unity). We find a lot of examples for this in early modern (European) history. 'Father Time' (a figure from antiquity, the God Chronos) is habitually shown running, on the wheel of fortune (Fig. 1).¹¹

7 See Jörn Rüsen, ed., *Zeit deuten: Perspektiven—Epochen—Paradigmen* (Bielefeld: Transcript 2003).

8 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften* I (part 2) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1991), 691–704, [Walter Benjamin, "Theses on History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1985)].

9 See Marion Kintzinger, "Der Engel der Geschichte: Gestaltungsformen historischen Denkens in der Frühen Neuzeit und bei Walter Benjamin," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 81 (1999): 149–172.

10 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," §9, accessed January 9, 2018, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>. The image referred to by Benjamin is Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), an oil transfer and watercolor on paper (31.8 × 24.2 cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, B87.0994 which can be accessed here: <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/199799>

11 The illustration shows a 16th century image of God Chronos to be found on the cover page of a book published by Giovanni Nanni and entitled *Berosi Chaldaei Sacerdotis Reliquorumque consimilis argumenti auctorum, De antiquitate Italiae, ac totius orbis, cum F. Ioan, Anny Viterbensis Theologi commentatione, et auxesi, ac verborum rerumque memorabilium indice plenissimo, tomus prior* (The first volume on the antiquity of Italy and the whole world, from the pen of the Chaldean priest Berosus and other authors on the same subject and with the commentary of

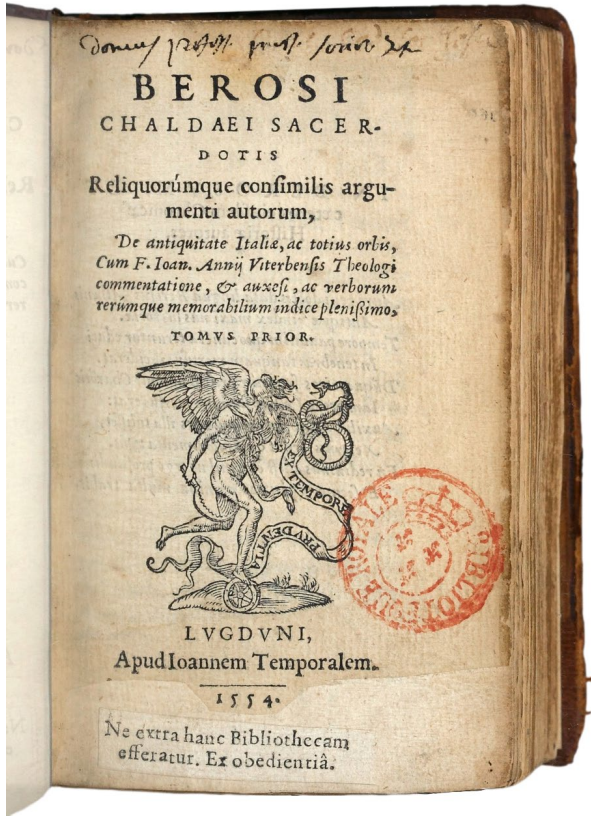


Figure 1 God Chronos
in a sixteenth-century forgery
by Giovanni Nanni.

In his left hand he holds the snake Uroboros. This snake—traditionally shown biting its own tail—stands for the cyclical concept of time as continual repetition. As an element in linear history, however, this circle remains open, and history as a narrative is based on a linear course of time. The wild loose hair on top of Father Time’s head symbolises chance (one has to be able to catch it). In his right hand Chronos holds a sickle. Originally, he was the God of Harvest, but the sickle’s meaning was reduced over time and now refers to his task of ‘cutting time’ into single moments, thus bringing about the fugacity of time.

The idea of a divine “Father Time” reappears frequently, throughout history and in different parts of the world. In ancient Egypt, for example, it is the god of

the theologian Giovanni Annio [i.e. Nanni] from Viterbo, enlarged and with a comprehensive index of names and noteworthy things) Lyon 1554, fol. 2r. Here, Nanni claims to have edited and commented (but really forged) lost texts by Berossus (4/3c BCE). The illustration appears and is discussed in Marion Kintzinger, *Chronos und Historia: Studien zur Titelblattikonographie historiographischer Werke vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 272, fig. 53.

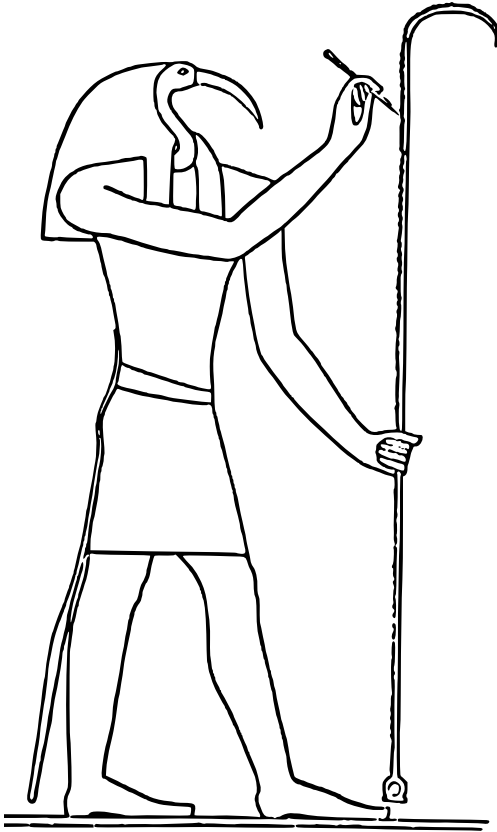


Figure 2 An Egyptian Father Time: Thot, the god of counting time and of the calendar.

the moon who dictates the phases of lunar time. The inscription to a typical image (Fig. 2) reads: “Thot writes for a king the year of his reign on the palm-leaf signifying ‘year.’” In a woodcut by Swiss artist Georg Sickinger (1558–1631), we see Father Time passing on his lore to his daughter, Truth (Fig. 3), an image which has been discussed for the epochal relativity involved in this visual metaphor.¹² A Frontispiece (Fig. 4) by Joseph-François Lafiteau (1681–1746), on the other hand, an anthropologist and missionary in French Canada, is informed by the *Mœurs des sauvages américains* whom he studied and inscribed: “Father time tells history about the beginning and end of human history as a frame of understanding the new world of America.”¹³

12 For the importance of this visual metaphor both for history and historicism, see Louis Roux, “Veritas Filia Temporis,” *XVII–XVIII: Revue de la Société d’études anglo-américaines des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* 68 (2011): 11–28.

13 See Joseph-François Lafiteau, *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (Paris: 1724), fol. 2r, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/lafiteau1724bd1/0005>



Figure 3 Father Time and his Daughter—Truth: Georg Sickingers' *Veritas Filia Temporis*, ca. 1600.

A modern allegory of history as a comprehensive time unit is contained in the mast-head of the *Herald Tribune* (1877–2013):¹⁴ in the center, it uses three symbols of time, the hourglass, Father Time, and a clock. Surrounding these, the premodern period is evoked by showing signs of agricultural work and Greek pillars on the left, while the modern period appears characterised by emblems of industry and technology (smokestacks, and large bridges) on the right. Modern about this allegory is the clear distinction between past, present and future—and the asymmetrical relationship of time dimensions in history.¹⁵

14 See e.g., the *International Herald Tribune*, Published with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (Paris: No. 26.509, April 6–7, 1968), 1, <https://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/files/2013/2898/7100/international-herald-tribune-martin-luther-king.pdf> or <https://seeklogo.com/vector-logo/66374/herald-tribune>

15 Reinhart Koselleck, “*Historia Vitae Magistra*,” in *Futures past*, Reinhart Koselleck (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1985), 21–38.



Figure 4 "Rethinking Barbarian Time": Frontispiece by Joseph-Francois Lafiteau's (1681-1746) *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*, 1724.

Four Types of Time Comprehension in History

The multitude and divergence of possible representations of time in history can be listed according to a general typology of meaning construction in history. I see four different types of strategies, developed elsewhere, that provide temporal change with historical meaning. These will be described in the typology below.¹⁶ The typology offered here does not concentrate on the literary or narrative form of historical writing. It focuses instead on systematically identifying those aspects that determine the interpretation of the human past in a specific *chronologies*. The four types suggested here are intended to cover a broad, if not the entire spectrum of historical representations of the past. They are conceived as *ideal types*, single components of meaning defining in history. They are deliberately abstracted from concrete phenomena and developed as ‘pure’ narrative structures of meaning. As logical components of the formation of historical meaning, they are effective and verifiable in concrete forms of historical culture. However, they seldom or never appear clearly or distinctly in concrete phenomena. The practical applicability of this typology lies, instead, in helping us recognise and discern specific structures of meaning and their guiding principles for historiographic narratives, and even for historical thinking or *chronologies* in general. Its analytical value lies in its clear logical difference and in the scope of possibilities in its complex system of relationships. The four typified ways to actualize the human past in the structural meaning of narrative for the sake of cultural orientation that will be described here, are the ‘traditional,’ the ‘exemplary,’ the ‘genetic’ and the ‘critical.’ A ‘traditional’ narrative represents history in such a way that its primary meaning (one that provides significance and practical orientation) is presented as staying the same over time. Historical meaning here attains the form of an intertemporal eternity: that which perseveres in the world and which continuously reappears in the shifting winds of time as perpetual meaning, an enduring concept for the ordering of human life.

Historical representations that follow this logic serve to confirm and reinforce this continuity—Özlem Çaykent, in her insightful contribution on Armenian and Turkish textbooks, shows how this *chronologies* is successfully used to build a cultural memory of nationhood and unity. The dominant notion of the course of time in ‘traditional narrative’ is that of continuity through the ages. Histories that follow this ‘traditional narrative’ are mediated by continually reproducing an agreement with the validity of its universalised origins. All the changes that might occur in the temporal happenings of the human world are fixed in the permanence of one normative and paradigmatic event.

16 Rösen, *Evidence and Meaning*, 161. I follow the text in an abridged form. See also: Jörn Rösen, “Narrative Competence: The Ontogeny of Historical and Moral Consciousness,” in *History: Narration—Interpretation—Orientation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 21–39.

In contrast, the second type, the ‘exemplary’ formation of meaning in historical narrative, opens up the horizon of experience in historical thinking and turns all its accumulated experience and evidence into a pillar for orientation in the present. The ‘exemplary narrative’ of history which elsewhere in this volume has been described as *chronotype*—the tripartite division of historical time into Ancient-Medieval-Modern, for example, which is discussed in a number of contributions in this volume—approaches history as a plethora of events or situations that, despite their spatial and temporal diversity, present concrete cases that demonstrate the ‘general rules of human activity with timeless validity.’ Here, time is not immobilised in an inner-temporal fashion of eternity as is the case with ‘traditional’ narrative. Instead, each event (or series of events) acquires a model-like timeless quality. History functions as a teacher for life (*historia vitae magistra*).¹⁷ The contingent nature of time in actual historical events gains its meaning because these events reveal principles that drive action regardless of differences in time or place. In the framework of this exemplary form of narrative, historical thinking unfolds its power of judgement, where history teaches us to generate general principles regarding the human organisation of life from separate, isolated or individual events. We can apply these principles to concrete cases of actual events occurring around us in real time (which is what happens, for example, when one speaks of ‘the Medieval’ in India or in the Islamic world).¹⁸ In this type of *chronologics*, history facilitates a specific type of agency. From the perspective of timelessly valid rules of engagement, the events of the past span across space and time into diverse processes and activities. In a metaphorical sense, we could say that an ‘exemplary narrative spatialises time as meaning,’ in the case of a historical, event that leaves the narrowness of a predefined universal order and grounds human action in general rules through reflexive insights. As with the ‘traditional narrative,’ the ‘exemplary narrative’ immobilises time, but it does so at a higher level of ‘timeless and accepted insights.’

The logic behind the ‘genetic narrative,’ on the other hand, is based on the idea that ‘change creates or makes meaning.’ The events of the past in their temporal movement no longer appear within the confines of fixed practical principles of human interaction. Rather, they establish a dynamic process of transformation that takes the edge off change in the human world and shakes off the eternal value of accepted norms. Change itself becomes the proper human way of life. The past appears as change that relates our own way of life to previous ones in such a way that change can be seen as an opportunity. The relevant notion of the course of time here is one of ‘development,’ in which the changes occurring in human lives are understood as a dynamic by which continuity is achieved. Genetic historical narratives are based on

17 Cicero, *De oratore* II, 36.

18 See the contributions in this volume by Moshfegh and Maurya, for example.

the idea that differences in time that orientate human action towards future situations have not been predefined by the past. The relationship between the experience of the past and the expectations for the future, however, is asymmetrical. In summary, we can say that in the ‘genetic narrative, time is temporalised as meaning.’

The fourth type of historical narrative that I have identified here is the ‘critical narrative.’ It has a special status. It asserts itself as a negation of the other three narratives. Critical narrative deconstructs culturally predetermined ‘traditional,’ ‘exemplary’ and ‘genetic’ interpretive patterns (we see examples for this, clearly, in the subaltern historical discourses discussed in Milinda Banerjee’s chapter, as well as in the work of Marshall G. S. Hodgson discussed by Michael Geyer, for example). The ‘critical narrative’ focuses on events that challenge established historical orientations. Its relevant notion of the passing of time is one of ‘disruption, discontinuity’ and ‘contradiction.’ In this *chronologies*, the structure of meaning of a history is characterised through (negative) interpretation or assessment of the past (see Table 1).

Table 1 Four Types of Forming Historical Meaning

Type	Concept for the Passing of Time	Time as Meaning
Traditional	Continuity through change	Time is immortalised as meaning
Exemplary	Timeless validity of rules of human life that encompass temporally different ways of life	Time is spatialised as meaning
Genetic	Interested in developments in which ways of life change in order to remain dynamic	Time is temporalised as meaning
Critical	Focuses on disruptions, discontinuity, contradictions	Time is critically assessed as meaning

Why is the consideration of this philosophical issue of the temporal whole of history useful for the work of the professional historians? There are at least three arguments in favor of such a reflection:

1. Against an increasingly widespread fragmentation of historical knowledge, this kind of typology integrates the manifold fields and forms of experience of the human past.

2. Against the neglect of evidence in most parts of meta-history today, this typology is intended to bring back the importance of experience and evidence into historical thinking.
3. Against the domination of one or another type of *chronologies*, the narration of time, chronology itself, and the *chronotopes* it engenders, must be enriched by fundamental principles of the meaning of time, in order to avoid that the interrelation between the manifold, multifaceted and radically different representations of the past will not become (or remain) arbitrary.
4. Each of the types suggested here focuses on a specific idea of the meaning of time and accordingly a specific concept of the course of time in history.

All of these types are effective in historical thinking in very different constellations and interrelationships, as this volume illustrates. From a universal historical perspective, the 'traditional' type is the oldest and the most fundamental, while the 'genetical' type is the latest and most topical one, characterising modernity in historical thinking. It is an open question whether the radical changes we are witnessing today, in terms of global connectedness on the one hand and in terms of communication media ranging from holy scriptures to the new electronic media, on the other, will bring about a radically new type of logic in historical thinking, one that not only denies the idea of 'exemplary narratives' which, for the moment, are still more often than not *Eurochronologies*, but one which enables them to become critical narratives which will create a new *chronologies*. We will have to wait and see.

Problems of Periodisation Today

Currently, history writing is faced with a number of radical challenges which cast doubt on established chronologies and ideas of time. Time as such is only addressed in a criticism of the western concept of chronology, since it refers to a Christian measurement.¹⁹ But this criticism is not very convincing, since the original Christian meaning has faded away, and the meaningless counting of numbers has remained. Chronology is more useful when its contents lose meaning. Another problem is a growing post-ism, placing the work of the humanities into a post-position, i.e. the present is addressed only as a time after another time. This post-ism indicates a loss of confidence in the course of

19 See Masayuki Sato, "Comparative Ideas of Chronology," *History and Theory* 30 (1991): 275–301; Masayuki Sato, "Time, Chronology, and Periodisation in History," in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* 23, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 15686–15692.

history. Indeed, particularly for the western intelligentsia, the future is not a space for hope, but is, on the contrary, anticipated as a time of possible catastrophe. Finding no place for one's own presence in the course of time has consequences for historical thinking. The past is losing its meaning; meaning appears only as a construction, which is no longer rooted in evidence but only estimated as an invention of the historians.

This loss of an evidential basis for historians presents a challenge for the theory of history. It has to reflect the temporality of human life and its cultural output in a new way, looking for meaning in the anthropological and existential foundations of cultural orientation. Another challenge to historical thinking as it has developed in Europe and the 'West,' is the postcolonial criticism of traditional representations of non-western cultures. Facing the need for a new orientation vis-à-vis the power of globalisation, we need a new universal idea of time, which covers the multitude and diversity of human life forms in space and time. To develop such an idea we could use our knowledge of anthropological universals, existential dimensions of human life and the evolution of human culture in its various manifestations. The guideline in this new approach to the meaning of historical time could be our common understanding of what it means to be a human being. If we historicised this meaning, we may be led to 'the idea of time as a process of humanising humans.' This again would commit historical thinking to a new humanistic approach to historical experience and recognise it as a self-awareness of humanity.²⁰

20 See Jörn Rüsen, "Humanism: Anthropology—Axial Ages—Modernities," in *Shaping a Humane World: Civilizations—Axial Times—Humanisms*, ed. Oliver Kozlarek, Jörn Rüsen, and Ernst Wolff (Bielefeld: Transcript 2011), 55–79.

Figures

Fig. 1 Giovanni Nanni, *Berosi Chaldaei Sacerdotis Reliquorumque consimilis argumenti autorum, De antiquitate Italiae, ac totius orbis, cum F. Ioan, Anny Viterbensis Theologi commentatione, et auxesi, ac verborum rerumque memorabilium indice plenissimo, tomus prior* (The first volume on the antiquity of Italy and the whole world, from the pen of the Chaldean priest Berosus and other authors on the same subject and with the commentary of the theologian Giovanni Annio [i.e. Nanni] from Viterbo, enlarged and with a comprehensive index of names and noteworthy things), Lyon: 1554, fol. 2r, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NUMM-8702824.

Fig. 2 Günther Roeder, *Ägyptische Mythologie. Mythen und Legenden* (Egyptian Mythology: Myths and Legends), Düsseldorf, Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 1998, 39, fig. 6.

Fig. 3 Georg Sickinger, *Veritas Filia Temporis* (Truth, Daughter of Time), ca. 1600, drawing, black chalk on paper, 19,3 × 31,4 cm, Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen, Graphische Sammlung, B 1032, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bvb:29-bvo41447158-9>

Fig. 4 Joseph-Francois Lafiteau, Frontispiece to *Mœurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (The manners of the American savages as compared to those of the earliest times), Paris, 1724, fol. 2r, <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/lafitau1724bdi/0005>