A lack of chronological awareness – and a lack of a sense of ‘wheness’ generally – is one of the most immediately striking aspects of medieval historical writing, particularly before the twelfth century. It is true that a number of the very early Christian historians exhibit a great concern for chronology, but their concern is a very different thing from the modern desire to place events within a framework of abstract and objective time. In the fourth century we find Eusebius of Caesarea attempting ‘to compose a universal history where all events were brought within a single chronological framework’. 1 In the seventh century Isadore of Seville succeeded in inventing the single universal chronology, by which all events are dated from the birth of Christ, and in the eighth century Bede did much to popularise this system. 2 Not only did he sprinkle dates liberally throughout the text of his *Ecclesiastical History*, but he also appended ‘a chronological summary of the whole book’. 3 What all these writers have in common is the desire to establish a single pattern in human history; a pattern directed by God, with the birth of Christ at its centre. 4 The effort is thus not made with any idea of there being an intrinsic usefulness in relating events to one another in time. Rather, it represents an attempt to discover patterns in the dates that reveal the direction of an extra-human force: it is no accident that the events narrated by medieval chronologers and historians are so often in temporal units of three, seven or forty – numbers that were considered to be invested with mystical significance. 5 Beyond such ends as these, chronology is not recognised as having an important function. Although Bede and others saw an incidental purpose in providing ‘an aid to the memory’ 6, the motivation to maintain a habit of thinking chronologically in a broad variety of contexts was lacking. So much so, indeed, that James William Johnson can claim that:

The single outstanding effort of medieval chronologers to depart from Biblical exegesis and deal with the phenomena of their own time was related to their theories of the origins of the Goths and

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D. LePan, *The Cognitive Revolution in Western Culture* © Don LePan 1989
Huns. Even in this instance they were largely adapting the theories of Genesis to prove the validity of Jewish chronology once more.\textsuperscript{7}

The following passages from Einhard and William of Malmesbury are entirely typical of the writing of early medieval historians in their lack of references either to dates or to precise temporal duration:

After this the Saxon war ended in a settlement as lasting as the struggle had been protracted.\textsuperscript{8}

For Robert, born of middling parentage in Normandy, that is, neither very low nor very high, went, a few years before William's arrival in England, with fifteen knights, into Apulia. To remedy the narrowness of his own circumstances by entering into the service of that inactive race of people. Not many years elapsed ere, by the stupendous grace of God, he reduced the whole country under his power.\textsuperscript{9}

In a similar fashion, as Alexander Murray points out, 'many so-called Lives of saints do not even give the year when the saint was born or dies'.\textsuperscript{10} Murray sees the omission of dates in so much of early medieval writing as part of a broader pattern in which numbers generally tended to be omitted by medieval writers:

When we turn away from hagiography to less conservative literary forms the numberlessness of pre-1200 literature is more directly revealing. Annals apart, a shortage of year numbers remained quite a common feature in historiography generally, hardy relic of a time before Bede the computator launched his chronology on the world. And year-numbers are only one of the many types of number – quantity, distance, price, age – which elude long stretches of early medieval literature.\textsuperscript{11}

Though our concern here is with time rather than number, there can be little doubt that an inability or discomfort in dealing with number and an inability or discomfort in dealing with abstract objective time can only reinforce each other.

The extent to which early medieval efforts to combine history and chronology differ both in degree and in kind from those of our